Harmonising - Verb

by dunedinparsley, turibasil

Summary

Alanna and Thom Trebond are twins, children of noted scholar Alan Trebond, gingers, YouTubers, musicians, and very angry about social injustice. They are, in fact, separate people, despite public confusion.

https://8tracks.com/dunedinparsley/harmonising-verb is the playlist of this fic.

AS OF 25/11/18 this fic has been abandoned. Chapters 13-28 are notes, individual scenes, scenes only featuring dialogue, or explanation as to what otherwise would have been written. Thanks for all of your support over the years.
Prelude

The screen flickered to life, the tell-tale crack and shake of a hand-held camera bringing a face into the light. A young woman with gold-red hair and grey, almost violet eyes, who looked more asleep than awake, filled up the screen.

“Well, hi.” She broke into a yawn, covering her mouth and sweeping her fringe back off her forehead. “So, it’s five a.m., I’m Alanna Trebond, here with my brother Thom.”

She turned the camera to show her brother at the wheel, who looked just as tired as she did. He grunted in response and she turned the camera back to herself. “As you can see, we're both bright-eyed and... bushy-tailed... ready for the day ahead. Please note the sarcasm. But anyway, we are on our way to VidCon!”

“Well, we're on our way to the airport.” Thom interjected. The camera swivelled, and he smiled for a moment.

“Well, we're on our way to get coffee because you're about to crash the car if you don't get any caffeine in you,” she said. “Thom can't function without caffeine.”

“It's true. I'm a wreck.”

“Note that he's had three cups of tea this morning already.”

“But what she doesn't tell you is that she's had three cups of tea and a cup of instant coffee.” Thom's lips turned up a little.

Alanna tutted. “Moving on. As I mentioned, we're on our way to VidCon. As most of you know, we're not really important enough to have our own panel or performance time or anything, but you know, we'll be around. We'll only be there for the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth, but we'll be busking when we're not watching other people talk.”

Thom turned his head slightly as they came up to a red light. “Tell them about the thing.”

“The thing?” Thom raised his eyebrows. “Oh, the thing! Yes. Okay. So we'll be busking, as we usually do, and we have a pretty tried and tested setlist. We want to change it up a bit. So, the deal is this: if you're going to be at the Con, or if you have a friend or something there, tweet us--”

“Because we're totally cool like that.”

“So totally awesome. But yeah, tweet us with a song you want us to do within the next twelve hours, so we have enough time to learn it. And then, at the Con, come find us and tell us the song, and hopefully we'll have learned it, and you can sing it with us.”

“Or just watch us and know that we learned – or tried to learn – it just for you.”

“Just a sec, I need to move this camera.” There was another shuffle, the screen spinning until the camera was settled on the dashboard, including both of the twins in the shot. “Beautiful. Anyway. Get tweeting, I guess?”

Thom snorted. “You're so enthusiastic, Alanna.”
“Shut it, I'm tired.”

“We were up until eleven double checking tickets and accommodation, and we got up at four. Be glad we're narcissistic enough to want your validation.” Thom was smiling even through his scolding. He yawned and covered his mouth with one hand.

Alanna nodded along. “Be so glad. Send us money and caffeine. And chocolate. And a new loop pedal.”

“Also any children you can find. Preferably dead.”

“Thom, you're a horrible person.”

“I know.”

“He doesn't actually want dead children, so please don't kill anyone, or kidnap a body, or anything remotely illegal.”

“Does it count as kidnapping if they're already dead?” Thom asked as he pulled into a crowded parking lot. “Okay, we're getting caffineated. Bye, guys, we'll see you soon!”

“Bye!” Alanna echoed. There was a click, and the screen went blank.

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**Take Me To Church – Hozier cover - Conté**

June 13  
by ContéOfficial

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**OFFICIAL ALBUM ANNOUNCEMENT**

June 22  
by ContéOfficial

“Welcome to California, the local time is eight thirteen a.m., and it's currently sixty-four degrees Fahrenheit outside. Thank you for travelling with us, we hope to see you again soon!”

It was only a three hour flight, and both slept through, but on the other side both Thom and Alanna were exhausted. Thom had made the decision to wait until their return to get his shot, for his vocal stability's sake, but he still felt the slow burn and itch of dysphoria build from his chest through his body. Three weeks and three days could not be all that different from three weeks, but there was a terror that couldn't quite be abated by logic.

“I feel like most people think we're substantially more agreeable than we are,” Thom said. He kept his face soft, but stayed close to Alanna's side – and her biceps.
“I dunno, we're agreeable enough. We're just bitter, sarcastic millenials who aren't aware of their privilege. Haven't you heard?”

“How dare you? We're the societally aware upper class, we may as well be middle class.” They both laughed, a familiar joke breaking the tension and fear of a new city. They came to a stop at the taxi strip outside. Alanna yawned, Thom placing a hand on her shoulder, “Do you want to sleep once we're at the hotel?” he asked. “I can cope with arranging the music, if you organise transport later in the day.”

“What? Thom hailed a taxi in silence, and helped Alanna unload their bags and guitars. The familiar tension in her shoulders and tiredness in her voice sparked something akin to protectiveness in him, and for all his apathy he wouldn't continue to allow her to do all the work for them. She seemed to have unlimited resources of energy, but it was often less 'energy' than 'stubbornness', although she would never admit to it.

He gave instructions to the driver and took his turn with the luggage as they went through the tedious process of getting into the hotel. Alanna only took the time to splash her face with water before collapsing on the bed, asleep.

Thom showered, arched his shoulders back and heard the crack of joints and muscles working themselves back into place. He began compiling a list of things that had to be done before the morning, and they both wanted to see the city. It had been a big decision to allow requests so close to the day for two who were so ardently perfectionists, but Alanna stated her faith in his capacity for arranging pieces for their voices, and they both knew (although for modesty's sake, may not admit it) that their harmonies were near to perfect after so long. They worked for it, of course, but they had begun singing together at five – fifteen years feigned natural talent.

He sat with his guitar, his phone, and a growing sense of pressure, on the edge of his bed. “Be nice to yourself,” Alanna mumbled from the other side of the room. “You promised.”

“Go back to sleep.” She grumbled for a moment, then did just as she was told.

@LIONS Band please please please do 'rather be' with cool harmonies and stuff?
@LIONS Band anything by adam lambert would be perfect for u two
@LIONS Band Dude Looks Like a Lady might be appropriate for Thom. :P
@LIONS Band uptown funk
@LIONS Band oops i did it again by britney spears
@LIONS Band Thom's voice would be perfect for 'Take Me To Church'.
@LIONS Band you've already played it before, but give me love by ed sheeran
@LIONS Band defying gravity from wicked!!!
@LIONS Band take me to church by hozier
@LIONS Band I Want to Break Free by Queen please???
LIONSBand tweeted: Thom here! Setlist confirmed. Couldn't do everything sorry, there are so many of you. See attached photo.

[setlist vidcon.jpg]

LIONSBand tweeted: Also, no-one believed me when I said Alanna sleeps like a loser/starfish. For your viewing pleasure.

[nerd.jpg]

LIONSBand tweeted: Thom fails to mention that he can fall asleep anywhere. In any position. Look at this arsehole, circa 2014.

[piano ft. actual two year old.jpg]

“Will Jon be coming to visit this Summer?” Thom asked, as he stabbed at a lettuce leaf. It was a sinner lettuce leaf, not cooperating with his fork.

Alanna kept chewing, but shook her head. “He's got a new girlfriend. Thayet – do you remember her?”

“Oh yeah. Really pretty and slightly terrifying?”

“That's the one. But he's going to Canada with her to meet her grandparents, then coming back in time for Roald's campaign season. I mean, the central primaries in the major states. He can't give all of his time, and Roald doesn't want him to.”

Thom raised an eyebrow. “Isn't he playing the whole ‘family centric, provide for all’ card, though? Wouldn't having his son around help with that?”

“He wants Jon to appear competent without him. He's still determined that Jon will run once he's thirty-five.” Alanna kept her voice low and head slightly ducked. Even though they were rarely approached publicly, it still felt invasive. They had wanted the night to see the sights of Southern California, as their days would be dominated by the Convention. They had been in the state before, with their father, but that was hardly a cultural experience. They had spent most of their time in hotel rooms while he lectured at various universities.

“The day Jonathan is President is the day I move to Australia, change my name, and become an anarchist against the machine of America,” Thom said, deadpan. Alanna raised an incredulous brow. “Oh, and I'll adopt a small troupe of orphans and train them as assassins.”

“You don't hate him that much.”

“Are you sure?”

Alanna scoffed, “Anyway, Jon didn't see any point in staying in the country since he's not working, not needed by his father, and his cousin is touring too sporadically to plan properly with him.”

“His cousin?” Thom flitted through Jonathan's family tree in his head (only memorised for Alanna), but failed to find a first cousin. Several uncles, and estranged alcoholic second cousins,
corrupted by politics, but no cousins.

“Roger, he's a musician. He uses 'Conté' as a performance-name.”

“The incredibly attractive one that we agreed is kissable?” Alanna choked on her food, coughing as she struggled to swallow. Her eyes watered, but she laughed nonetheless.

“I think 'kissable' was your term, brother dear. But yes, that's him. Apparently Roald asked him, very politely mind you, to change his stage name because of interference with the presidential campaign, and after a fifteen minute conversation Roald was prepared to advertise him at press conferences and use him as promotional material. He's pretty incredible, apparently. At just about everything.” She paused and refilled both their glasses. “He sounds annoying.”

Thom chuckled and nodded. “Yes, but he's kissable nonetheless.” He felt a small pool of discomfort grow in his stomach, shame and dissonance and want for something more than just his sister.

“Can't you find someone to kiss who isn't Jon's cousin? Seduce some poor fan under the guise of celebrity angst.” She touched his hand, drummed her fingertips over his knuckles.

“No thanks, I'd rather not kiss a potential kidnapper.”

“Oh, come on, like anyone in Jon's family is incapable of kidnap.”

“I'll toast to that.”

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**Coming Out**

**June 23** by ContéVlog

*Before my album is released, I just wanted to clarify something.*

Alanna thrived in the heat, but Thom began to complain as soon as it hit sixty-five. They left the hotel at seven, having to get their authorisation badges for performance and set up in some corridor or other. There was an open mic, and some panels interested Alanna, but overall Thom's preference was to stay away from the major crowds and stay with his guitar.

Before nine, they had been approached fifteen individual times to sing, sign people's backpacks and wallets, or simply converse. Young women were the main constituents of their fans, but a transgender boy, reportedly barely fourteen, was talking in the hushed tone of someone trying to deepen their voice. “What's the crowd like here, compared to your usual busking community?”

Thom glanced at Alanna, who nodded for him to reply. “It's larger than usual. It's a different setting, though. When we busk, we're generally strangers, but here we're YouTubers. Our success busking was completely overwhelming, more-so really than our success as YouTubers.” He paused and thumbed out a bass-line on his guitar, almost unconsciously. “I mean, mildly attractive twins who can hold something like a tune are bound to gain some following, but as buskers we were just two annoying kids serenading strangers. That's the confidence booster for us, I think.”

“Yeah, definitely,” Alanna said, nodding. “We love it when people, like you, approach us and
know who we are, and want to talk to us. It's pretty incredible. But in some ways it feels like you guys are more friends, or acquaintances, who have to listen to us, and when we busk we're going out on a limb.”

“Alanna talks about feminism a lot, and as a practitioner her self defence videos are pretty popular, so there are so many different points of appeal. People want to talk to me about gender – well, both of us, really.” Thom laughed a little. “So, that was a very long way of saying 'it's more personal, and nicer'.”

“Thank you so much.” The boy paused, as if not quite sure how to continue. “Would it be okay if-” He inhaled sharply. “Could I get a photo with you?”

“Yeah, of course. Both of us, or--”

“Just you. If that's okay.”

Thom passed his guitar to Alanna and set a hand on the boy's waist, smiling brightly for the photo. “Thank you for coming to talk to us, it's been lovely.”

“N-no, thank you so much for coming. And talking to me.” He hurried away, and Thom sighed heavily.

“Do you want to go to that panel? The feminist one? And I'll just do my solo set.”

Alanna nodded and ruffled his hair. “Thanks. Look after yourself, okay? There are security guards in the next room, and--”

“I know. Go away. You're ruining my vibe.” She scoffed and handed him his guitar.

“'Gay Broadway villain, coming soon to a convention near you'.”

“Fuck off.” He grinned while she walked away.

LIONSBand tweeted: Gay Broadway Villain and Bitter Disney Princess, coming soon to a doomed plane near you. Or,VidCon. You know, either way.

[selfie #9001.jpg]

The last C major of 'Stay With Me' rang out, and Thom took a long drink from his water bottle. He glanced to Alanna, who was standing to the side, talking seriously to a girl who wanted to be a police officer. He was starting to feel claustrophobic in the heat and his little corridor, still he adjusted his face into a smile as yet another person approached him. “Hi.”

“Hello,” he said. An impending sense of doom took him over, and he kept drinking.

“Um, my name's Sarah. I asked you to learn 'Take Me to Church', by Hozier, and it was on your setlist.”

He nodded with another put-on smile. “Yes, indeed it is. Do you want to sing it with me, or just
watch?"

"Which key have you got it in?"

"Oh, person who knows music." He went through the chords, as quickly as he could. "Up a semitone from the original, F minor. I arranged it for me – I'm a tenor - and potentially Alanna, who's a--"

"Mezzo soprano, I know." She thought it over, and his dislike of her grew. He didn't know her at all, yet she annoyed him. A mix of self-entitlement and condescension was all it took for Thom to put substantially less effort into being nice.

"If I start, you can just come in if you feel comfortable to. Is that okay?" She gave a curt nod. It was a fairly simple progression, nothing unusual, but he was getting to the point of dysphoria and agitation that he was nervous. Still, he wouldn't let it get to him, hit each high note and tolerated her sub-par harmonies. He could swear that Alanna was laughing at him, even as she leaned against the wall next to him. A small crowd was gathered, as it had with the rest of the day, and a few of them joined in at the chorus. That was a sweet something, and he relaxed a little.

As soon as he was done some of the crowd moved in, clapping and congratulating him. Sarah frowned. "I hope you liked it. I know it was a bit rough." Feigned modesty was all the manners he could muster.

"Not bad. But your arrangement isn't as cohesive as Roger Conté's, let alone the original."

"That's incredibly rude," one girl said. Thom stepped back, and Alanna put a hand on the small of his back. "Honestly, that's so presumptuous of you, who do you think you are? You're not an authority here. 'Lions' are privileging us by being here, let alone by taking requests."

"Hey, fuc-- leave him be," Alanna said. Her 'teacher' tone was in effect, and the group stilled. "That was incredibly rude, and I'd thank you to leave my brother be. But I'll pass on your compliments to Roger next time I see him." Thom bit his lower lip to hide his smile. "I'm sorry, I think I know you from somewhere," she said to the girl who had come to their defence, "Have we met?"

She flushed a deep pink, and nodded. "I emailed you about three months ago about where self defence in the name of practicality and self defence in the name of fear cross over, and how intersectiona--"

"Kel Mindelan!"

Sarah stepped out of the crowd as Kel and Alanna shook hands, paused, and hugged one another. Thom excused himself, handed his guitar to Alanna, and vanished into the bathroom. He splashed his face with water until his hair was dripping wet and his temperature had dropped a little. There were only a few hours left, and he prayed that they would be slightly less eventful.
“Alanna.” Thom nudged his dozing sister, and she sat up with a start. They were seated on a couch in a little restaurant, both exhausted and starving as they waited for their food. They had only broken free of the crowds when Thom’s nose had started bleeding with the heat, and Alanna insisted they leave.

“Hm?”

“Is it okay if I post something that may have backlash?” He paused. “On my tumblr, not the band page.”

Alanna gnawed on her lower lip. “What is this ‘something’? I mean, yes, but I’d like to know what I’m signing up for.”

“Roger Conté is the topic of the day, it seems. He came out this morning and I’m just really in the mood to argue with idiots.”


“Bi, apparently.” He pulled out his phone with a long-suffering sigh. “But according to... Alexis Ash, ’bisexuality is just a cover-up for being gay, and trying to maintain some normality. Either that, or it’s a publicity stunt before his album comes out.’” He scoffed, and Alanna choked on a laugh.

“The height of modern intellect. But really, Thom, are you sure you want to defend a Conté? It
might ruin your rep.”

“It's irrelevant – he's just a relevant public figure, who is being treated in a manner that I can't approve of. Anyway, he's the only kissable one of them.”

Alanna clutched a hand to her heart, “And now he's admitted you've got a chance, Thom, is it wedding bells I hear?” He punched her arm. “Oh happy days, your dowry will not be wasted! Your mother and I are so proud.”

Their waiter came with their food, and both spared a quick 'thank you' before going back to their bickering. “Shut up, Miss 'I'm not ready to commit, but I'll come home to you whenever you need my comfort, Georgie'.”

“Do you call him 'Georgie' to his face?” Alanna snapped back. She ran her finger over her mashed potato and smeared it on Thom's cheek.

He gaped slightly. “We are not having a food fight about your boyfriend, in a restaurant.” Still, he slapped Alanna's cheek in faux-fondness, covering her face in tomato sauce.

“He's not-- oh, shut up, brother.”

They giggled their way through the exhaustion of the rest of the night, before getting back to the hotel and promptly collapsing on their beds, fast asleep.

thomtrebond.tumblr.com

24th June, 0500

Regarding Conté

*If you're under sixteen/eighteen, read on with the knowledge that this piece contains swearing and references to people being fucking arseholes.

“I hate everyone.”

“Same.”

“We are never posting another video again.”

“Under any circumstances.”

“Our fans are insane.”

“We didn't ask for this, did we?”

“I'm moving to England. Or Denmark. Anywhere cold.”

“I really do hate everyone.” Alanna nodded and yawned, cracking her neck in the process. “We're
never doing that again,” she said at last. “Want to come back next year?”

Thom laughed and pushed the heels of his hands into his eyes. “Yeah. Yeah, I think so.” Their plane had been delayed by two hours, and although neither were particularly fussed, they were exhausted. “Today was better than yesterday.”

“Yeah? Even with that transphobic fuckface?”

“Does your mother know you swear like that?” Alanna pulled a disgusted face. “Yeah, even with him. It was a bit quieter, and the... environment was better.”

“I didn't think so, funnily enough. I know you weren't feeling too well on Wednesday, but I thought people were more... cooperative. It was a nicer group.”

“You're just saying that because you got to meet Kel.”

“Would you blame me? She's incredible. She's fourteen, and she's already--” Thom's phone buzzed, and he fumbled to pull it out of his pocket. “--a black belt in chito ryu, socio-politically more aware than ninety-nine percent of the population, and has a life goal of setting up a society for education on domestic violence, and self-defence for women and racial minorities. She's a token child.”

8.23
**From: Jonathan Conté**

*Thom, my cousin would like to know if I may give him your phone number to discuss an article you wrote. May I?*

“If she weren't a minor I would say you're perfect for each other,” he said dryly. “A powerhouse couple.” Thom's stomach felt as if it were stuck in his pelvis, and full of small, vicious butterflies.

8.24
**To: Jonathan Conté**

*You may.*

8.26
**From: Unknown number**

*Hi Thom, it's Roger. I'm sorry to contact you via Jon but I'm not a huge fan of social media. Thank you for your article re. my coming out. I know it wasn't just about me, but it was kind, and has had a positive effect on me and through my fanbase. I also believe that it has taken some of the sting from the backlash, I'm sorry to say. I hope that you haven't been treated badly because of it.*

*However, I wanted to ask if you would be willing for me to publish part of your article as an official statement. I would credit you, of course, but your incisiveness would have a much stronger affect than my niceties. I was inclined to be less apologetic in coming out, but I am careful to represent my family well. Thank you for your time, I hope that VidCon was enjoyable.*

Alanna was still talking rapid-fire on Kel and her work, and Thom kept only half his attention on her. He was momentarily unnerved, felt alarm bells ring from a smooth-talker; 'niceties' summarising Roger's fashion perfectly. There was no obligation in contact with him past politeness, he reminded himself, and the politics of the Conté family could be navigated. Alanna had proven that.
To: Roger Conté

Hey, Roger. It's not an issue, I appreciate the contact – social media can get tiring. I'm glad that you have no issue with the post; I only thought in hindsight that I should have asked your consent. I'm fairly used to bigoted people spouting nonsense, it's not a problem, particularly if it's drawn away some of the toxicity of the public away from you. You're welcome to quote it in whatever way you like. I expect that you have very high standards cast on you; it can't be easy to conform with them when you seem to have such an unapologetic view on LGBT+ issues (reading between the lines with phrases such as 'heteronormativity' floating around). So yes, please publish as you will, and I hope that your experience of coming out hasn't been too negative so far.

He rubbed his temples and covered his chest with an arm. Alanna had stopped talking somewhere along the way, and the tension in his shoulders felt like a threat. He really didn't like communication outside of face to face contact, read threats under apostrophes and words strung together with an artful style almost exclusive to the upper-class socialites. “Alanna?” She hummed. He turned to see her properly, and she too had her head against the wall, with her eyes shut.

“Remember when we went to stay with Jonathan on his estate, two years ago, and Roald was so nervous about me being seen with Jon?”

“Yeah. It was stupid.”

“It was rational, considered. You know that.” She opened her eyes and sat up a little. “Our father was a professor of sociology and political anthropology, we both well know that it was justified.” She paused and nodded, let him speak. “I'm not one to particularly care if my goals and actions affect people or their politics, but do you believe it was irresponsible of me to write on this whole Roger thing? I just... we're not celebrities, but we feel the effects of celebrity, don't we? And I just...”

Alanna ran a hand through her hair and stifled a yawn. “You're scared hat you've endangered yourself, us, and the LGBT+ community as a whole, not just Roger. Right?” He gave a short nod.

“Politics is not a safe game for queer people, nor is celebrity, and the Conté family is not only a family of politics, but of true celebrity.”

“I am a good spokesperson for queer issues, I know that. But I'm nervous. And the fact of the matter is that we both analyse people, extensively, yet there's still no decisive way of finding safety.”

“Let's get coffee.” Alanna stood, Thom groaning, but following suit. “What's he like? Is he threatening? I've very rarely seen you so focussed on a communique with someone in a non-academic context.”

“He's measured. Everything he said was manoeuvred and phrased into neutrality and politeness, in the way that says that he is both aware of the risks of his own existence, but confident in his capacity to manipulate society around him.”

“Don't you have that confidence?”

“I don't have friends, Alanna. I have confidence in my capacity, I could be a socialite and a man of pleasantry if I wished, as you could, too.”

She nodded with a wicked grin. “I'd be a great man of pleasantry.”
He snorted, “Fuck you.” Before she could continue, he pressed on, “I can handle formal interaction and academic contexts, but I don't think I have as much practical experience in handling potentially delicate situations as you do. Because, as I was saying, I don't have friends.”

“No, you have professors you're particularly fond of. And me.”

“And do you think it was unwise of me to open this door in writing that article?”

“I think every social interaction is a risk. I think it's never safe, even just having friends, and you are already at such high risk because of your media presence. The Conté family is strict, and honestly, arseholes in a lot of ways, but they're careful. They know what they're doing. If I disapprove, it's not my place to say, because you make your choices as an individual, even if we're unified. Considering Jon, I doubt there is anything more risky than your usual in what you've said about and to Roger.” She took a breath, hesitated. “But that wasn't your point, was it?”

They stopped in line for coffee, and Thom stuck his hands in his pockets. She raised an eyebrow. “I may write papers on anthropology, the human condition and interaction with ease, Alanna, but I have the natural social capacity of a monkey. The past two days have only reconfirmed that.”

They both broke into grins. “Or a cat. Definitely a cat, actually.” She meowed at him and he glared.

“Incapable of standard displays of affection, hedonistic, and ready to draw blood at any given time?”

“Precisely. And clearly in need of friends. Tell me again just how pretty Roger is.”

Thom rolled his eyes with a hot blush, and stepped forward to the counter, “Standard long black with three sugars, large caramel frapuccino, please.” The barista fumbled with the register, and Thom allowed himself a smirk. “You are a disgusting hipster, sister.”

“Shut up, monkey.”

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8.43
From: Roger Conté
Look, honestly, as soon as I came out I knew that nothing said was going to be attached to consent, and in the grand scheme of things, you've done me a favour. I appreciate that, thank you. Please don't feel obligated to deal with my affairs though, if anyone speaks to you (as I'm sure they will), refer them to me. However, it is kind of you. I try to view the expectations cast on me as a positive thing; it's a sign of my privilege. It can be stifling – as I'm sure you understand, your family is a well-respected one, your father, an academic, in particular. I'm coping okay, thanks for your concern. It's mainly slurs and criticisms, and they're what I've prepared for. I haven't received any threats, etc. as I understand many have. Please do tell me if I can do something to thank you.

8.52
To: Roger Conté
I will look after myself as I can, but I would like to provide support to any other LGBT+ figures I can. I'm surprised that you know of my father, but yes. My sister and I are quite aware of the obligations of being well-respected. You are handling everything very well, if you don't mind me saying. You owe me nothing, but please don't allow a sense of obligation to prevent you from
asking anything of me.

9.01
From: Roger Conté
Thom Trebond, are you implying a friendship?

9.02
To: Roger Conté
Roger Conté, does your reading between the lines say something more about my intent or yours?

9.02
To: Roger Conté
Past my sarcasm, yes, I suppose I am.

9.03
From: Roger Conté
Pleased to make your acquaintance, then. Hopefully someday I'll be able to meet you and not just hear of you and Alanna from my cousin.

9.05
To: Roger Conté
I'd like that. :)
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Alanna has feelings, Thom pretends he doesn't want to.

Trigger warnings for reference to homophobic slurs, discussion of gender dysphoria, and a non-detailed hate crime.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alanna watched Thom as he slept. She generally could not sleep while airborne, too nauseous and anxious to drift off. Thom could sleep anywhere, she thought, though she knew it wasn't quite true. He was curled around himself, arms crossed over his chest and a frown painted on his skin. He was sunburned, although just a little, and she felt her face to check if she was, too. It was a hesitant gesture, after so many years of being so separate, so non-identical, she sometimes felt that she should reflect her twin's every expression and movement.

Alanna was not, in fact, burned, and glancing in the window she saw that she looked closer to ashen than burned. Her nausea did not suit her well. She wondered what Thom thought suited him – colours, expressions, fabrics. She never wanted to ask, never wanted to share too much, not to further link them. Despite her fights for him, despite loving him more than anything, she still felt a divide that didn't quite feel breachable – and she didn't want to. He was always the cautious one. She the brave. He, one whole inch taller, darker yet more gentle. Her, small and fiery, more ready to fight than to hide. Despite all difference, they were synchronised, far more so than most twins, and it felt dangerous to cross a line into being too similar, too familiar. They were separate, and they both knew it, but they were viewed as a unit, a singularity. That was more scary than being his opposite, somehow.

She touched his shoulder very gently, barely touched him, and he mumbled and slumped further down the seat.

LIONSBand tweeted: Revisiting our 'rise to fame', here's Royals, once again. Thanks to Marissa for filming this, and thanks to all of you!
[link]

KnightlyGinger tweeted: I've got to say you're all a bit exhausting! Thanks so much for coming out, everyone, it was an awesome few days.

HesitantGinger tweeted: I got sunburned for you lot. Be grateful.
[colour coordination.jpg]
RogerConte tweeted: Thanks @HesitantGinger, I appreciate your support. (Cough, you need to sing with me sometime.)

HesitantGinger tweeted: @RogerConte There's a very long story here, but let's sing 'Take Me To Church', and we'll consider it even.

verity3102x tweeted: #rogerconte #thomtrebond tbh im already shipping it.

Alanna woke at eight the following morning, despite the overwhelming urge to hibernate. Thom had gone back to his own house, despite getting home at four, but he had the privilege of a less structured study system, and a vastly different set of anxieties. She sat in the grass outside, watched the clouds shift, and tried to not think. Her nursemaid and the matriarchal influence in her life, Maude, had repeated to her from the age of six that despite her 'great talent and potential', none of it would ever be worth anything if she treated the world as if it were on fire. Alanna still wasn't entirely sure of Maude's intent in saying this, but she still adopted meditation quite young in the hopes that it would fulfil Maude's expectations.

Her cat, Faithful, jumped into her lap, disrupting her contemplations with a furious purr. “Did you miss me?” she asked, and he looked up at her (eyes almost more violet than her own) as if to say 'what do you think, idiot?'.

She shifted, rolled her shoulders back and Faithful settled himself on her shoulder as she got breakfast for the two of them. Her house was closer to immaculate in cleanliness than she ever would have expected from herself, and for a moment she felt the urge to throw her coffee grounds against the pastel blue walls.

Alanna's television was switched on, her guitar was tuned, and her cat was fed, before she settled down on the couch with her laptop and text books providing a fortress from the outside world. Faithful was perfectly comfortable spending days at a time outside, but he purred ferociously sitting on the cushions above her head, occasionally clawing at her hair just to let her know that he was still very much there.

Why criminology appealed to her she was only part sure. Her father was surely an influence, gender studies were an influence, yet she had no intention to pursue profiling, law, psychology, or law enforcement. She merely loved the study, felt that it was worth knowing. She glanced up at the television at exactly nine a.m., seeing a familiar set of faces and groaning at the headline.

'The American Peacekeeper?!!'

9.03
To: Jonathan Conté
I swear to all the deities above that if your father says 'peace' one more time on national television I will assassinate him myself.

9.04
From: Jonathan Conté
but Alanna dearest! he merely wishes to cease the foul warfare that takes place on our fair planet everyday.
From: Jonathan Conté
same tbh. i swear though if the media would stop emasculating him that would be awesome. 'ah yes, let's not kill people. That's a girly thing to say.'.

To: Jonathan Conté
Getting your preach on in the White House, love?

From: Jonathan Conté
You know me. Once i'm back from canada.

From: Jonathan Conté
i miss you, Alanna.

To: Jonathan Conté
I miss you, too. But don't tell anyone, they'll revoke our mancards.

From: Jonathan Conté
heavens forbid!!!!!!!!!

"Alanna," Thom let her name hang on the air. "Please go grocery shopping. For me. Your dearest brother."

"No."

"A 'yes' would be deeply appreciated."

"You need to get your shot. You do my grocery shopping and yours."

Thom chuckled and stared up at the ceiling. The galaxy covered the grey paint, blues and pinks and purples, but instead of all stars, the larger points of light made out Bach's first cello concerto, albeit in a rather disjointed manner. "But Alanna, I'm so oppressed and dysphoric, I can barely cope."

"You are the singularly laziest person I've ever met. I've been studying since nine."

"Yes, because we somehow managed to perfectly split our twin genetics so that you got all of the positive traits and I got none of them. Hence, you have to work for me."

"Nice try. Get out of bed. Check your twitter feed. Listen to the 'Bare' soundtrack. Don't look at the politics of today. And do your grocery shopping. I'll get my own."

"Disgusting, you're a horrible sibling."

"It's true. Do we need to record anything today?"
“Post con vlog, and we wanted to do and arrangement of 'Youth', right?”

“Alright. I'll come around at six and then you can make me dinner for being your favourite sibling.”

“My only sibling.”

“Bye, Thom.”

“Bye, Alanna.”

Thom did as told, shifted himself out of bed, showered, and checked his twitter feed. The absolute chaos of the internet provided very little interest, but it fed his ego nonetheless. A quick glance at twitter and tumblr provided enough impetus to check Roger's tag without guilt or question. People were primarily supportive, but the vulgarity and violence set his heart pounding. He recalled Sam Smith coming out as gay and the hours he had spent pacing as more and more people forced themselves into the man's life. He couldn't stand it.

He'd taken up running to avoid the weight gain that so many trans men experienced coming onto testosterone, just as he'd turned sixteen, but it had become so habitual it was a form of stress management. He found that if he wore all black, scowled, and kept his earphones in, no-one would interact with him past a wave, which suited him just fine. It was a warm day, but he could manage. Since he'd had top surgery, dropped the binder, he'd been able to cope better with heat. After a particularly difficult Summer wearing a full-length triple-layered binder at fourteen he had become next to phobic of the heat. Being binder-free felt like being let out of prison. He tried hard not to think when he was running, and it usually worked, but there was a buzz between his ears of slur to slur to slur to threat.

His coming out was worse. Of course it was. He was not just gay, but trans. People said things he couldn't have even imagined, and even though his fan-base was quite strong, the population of what felt like the entire internet took it upon itself to try to kill him with criticism. It didn't really effect him. He was scared, though. Justifiably so, apparently, as he and Alanna had been attacked getting off a plane at Washington in April. Thom got himself a fracture in his right arm and a cut down the side of his face, Alanna got several bruises, but more importantly three punches into the attackers' faces. It could have been worse, but it was so much worse than he had guessed.

It was fine. Of course it was, in the end. His voice kept getting stronger and his fanbase shifted from musical theatre fans to LGBT+ supporters and those who only became aware of him because of a brief headline of 'TREBOND TWINS ATTACKED IN WASHINGTON'.

A fierce protectiveness that was previously limited to Alanna had spread, just a little, to the rest of the LGBT+ community. It had surprised him. He'd always known discrimination was bad, that others had it worse. But he'd never felt the need to defend others. Roger wasn't the first, but somehow it felt more intimate, more personal. It was terrifying.

Thom looped back to his home just as it hit two o'clock. Another shower only led to him staring at himself with more curiosity than aggression. He was starkly sunburned, but still pale. His nose and eyes were small, not disproportionately so, just enough that it was noticeable. His lips were pink, well-formed. There was clear stubble forming a beard. He was male – he knew that. He sometimes wondered how others viewed his appearance. He looked far different from Alanna mid-hormone therapy, yet neither of them could look at each other as if they weren't near-to genetically
identical. Alanna had the advantage of being a tad more extroverted, holding strong relationships. She'd had boyfriends, and girlfriends, let alone friends.

He refused to read anything to do with his appearance, he couldn't stand the risk of further dysphoria being forced on him. He was sure that his colours were more prominent than the dissonance between perception and reality of his gender. His hair drew the most eyes. His own eyes were the result of what was surely inbreeding some generations back, entirely grey but for small streaks of blue. They did look almost purple, as much as he hated to admit it.

He didn't need to be attractive. He didn't want to be. He just wanted to pass as male, be enough to be appreciated. Alanna was pretty. Stocky and a bit plain, but pretty. He wasn't handsome. He wasn't pretty though, either. Maybe that was for the best. He could just be plain.

He towelled himself down, examined the scars on his chest. They were healing well, pink and a tad raised. He was lucky that his breasts had been small, key-hole scars were all that remained. He let out an exasperated sigh and pulled his shirt on.

His phone buzzed on his bedside table, almost making him jump. He had three texts, and bit his lip in a futile fight against his anxiety.

1.30

From: REMINDER
Thom Trebond, you have an appointment at the TransHealth clinic at 3.30 today. Please call this number if you need to reschedule.

1.43
From: Roger Conté
You can't tease, Thom, I do need to know the story behind 'Take Me to Church' being your song choice. Not that I'm protesting, merely curious.

2.18
From: Jonathan Conté
my cousin thinks you're hilarious. idk who he's been twitter stalking but i somehow feel it's not you.

2.19
From: Jonathan Conté
You've never spoken about Thom, only Alanna – however, I thought you said that Alanna was the witty one.' don't break my cousin's poor fragile heart, thom.

2.19
From: Jonathan Conté
'Jonathan, I swear I will try to drown you in the swimming pool again if you pass this on'. isn't he a charmer?

Thom sat down on the edge of his bed and stared up at the galaxy above him. Jonathan had the habit of talking to him even when he didn't respond – and certainly didn't want to be spoken to. He knew that Jon disliked him, and Jon knew that Thom disliked him. They tolerated each other, for Alanna's sake. Thom felt that if he tried to be nice Jon would only find him more distasteful, yet still thought that texting and multimedia were the means to any ends – which included driving Thom mad.

2.20
To: Jonathan Conté

Out of the two of you, you're surely the most charming, Jon. I mean honestly, your complimentary manner, your respect for people's space, boundaries and requests... I'm swooning as we speak.

He didn't want to text Roger back too quickly, he wanted to think it through. Alanna was perfectly clear in her faith in him, and her belief that he should develop external relationships, but he wasn't. He was perfectly happy isolating himself. He had what he needed, he had the skills he wanted. But he wanted to speak to Roger, he wanted to know him.

He felt buzz after buzz of Jon's texts, but he focussed his attention on responding to Roger.

2.23
To: Roger Conté

It's not that interesting, don't get your hopes up.

2.24
To: Roger Conté

So for VidCon Alanna and I took requests for songs at ridiculously short notice. I was requested to do 'Take Me to Church', and so did – I made an arrangement one semitone up from the original, with obvious harmonies if Alanna wished to join me. It was pretty close to the original, but heavier on the bassline and a little faster.

2.25
To: Roger Conté

Now, the girl who requested it came up near to the end of the day, incredibly rude, performed subpar harmonies with me, then informed me that it wasn't great, and nowhere near to the quality of the original, and 'let alone as cohesive as Conté's'. It was just rather rude and I'm incredibly vain, so I'm perfectly willing to use your offer of singing with me as a flip-off for her. Sorry, my intentions entirely unpure. Your arrangement is much nicer though, I'll admit. Please drown Jonathan in the pool if you get the chance. Life would be much easier for everyone.

He didn't know quite how his anxiety had gotten so bad, but his heart raced anyway. He found his anxiety in general, but particularly his social anxiety, worsened the further apart he got his shot – he was fine usually, but he was four days past schedule. Whether it was because of an actual physiological cause or just being a creature of habit, he didn't know.

Thom fumbled his way through everyday life. He could absorb himself in academics and in music, but it was a recent skill in living alone that he could schedule his housework and replenishing of groceries. He considered getting a cat, but when he came into the pet store and saw the vast quantities of little creatures that had just as many needs as he did, he backed out quickly. Bringing Alanna's cat treats was enough.

2.39
From: Roger Conté

No, that's entirely interesting. Also despicably rude, but oh well. We can't actually 'eat the rude' now, can we? It would be lovely to sing that song with you. I hadn't listened to you or Alanna before, you're both very skilled. You're the primary instrumentalist in most of your music, aren't you?

I will most certainly be drowning Jon in the pool. My apologies.
To: Roger Conté
There's are lines I won't cross morally, and that includes eating the rude – if only because I'm more rude than I should be. You're not obligated to sing with me, but thank you – if it's convenient at some point it would be excellent. Congratulations on your album, by the way.
Yes, I am. Alanna plays guitar, flute, and cello. I play everything else (as well as the aforementioned) unless we need someone on drums or horns, in which case we hire someone. No need for an apology, especially if it leads to some form of pain on Jon’s part.

From: Roger Conté
Thank you. I'm excited, it's been a long-time coming.
That's quite an impressive set. I assume that you were trained at the academy attached to the Corus School?
I'll strangle him as soon as he gets back from Canada, I assure you.

To: Roger Conté
Yes, as well as in a preliminary fashion at various schools as children. You?
Excellent.

From: Roger Conté
I studied at Corus, but that was mainly instrumental. Theory and vocals were independent study and private tutoring.

To: Roger Conté
How is the war on bisexuality going for you, by the way?

From: Roger Conté
'It's a shame his parents are dead to tell him it's a phase.'

From: Roger Conté
'Honestly with a face like his it's not surprising that he'd fuck anything.'

From: Roger Conté
There's an article on how I contracted HIV from Gary (who is Jon's cousin, although on the other side, so mine by proxy, and engaged) and coming out as bi is just a lead up to an announcement. I think it's beautifully constructed.

From: Roger Conté
And my personal favourites: 'fuck faggets takign over music' and 'someone bash his dick in before its 2 late'.
3.54
To: Roger Conté
Excuse me, I just fell over in the middle of a grocery aisle, and I'm not sure if it was prompted by laughter or astonishment.

3.55
To: Roger Conté
I think my favourite when I came out was 'but you already look like a guy? y r u overcomplicating ur life?' Note that I had been on testosterone for about two and a half years at that point.

3.56
To: Roger Conté
Are you okay with it all?

3.59
From: Roger Conté
I'm finding it pretty hilarious, honestly. I care about people, or I'd like to think I do, but I have never brought myself to care about others' opinions. It's a little disconcerting, that's all. Just enough humour to get me through three days of travelling. I'm doing a series of 'secret' shows, going from East to West through the Southern states, and my crew seem to be writing a roleplay on all of the people that are going to call me a sinner, and how each of them will protect my honour.

4.03
To: Roger Conté
That's quite endearing, actually. Enjoy Texas. Let me know if they bring back rotten tomatoes and raw potatoes for those of us who sin.

4.19
From: Roger Conté
Absolutely. I've found the highlight of the day, I think. There's an article on all of the LGBT people surrounding my uncle and conspiracies led by underground workers in Russia. To be fair, it's parody, but still the list is impressive – very extensive.

4.40
To: Roger Conté
Do I get a mention?

4.46
From: Roger Conté
It was something along the lines of 'Thom Trebond, making the White House uncomfortable and the press even more invasive/confused since 2012.'

4.59
To: Roger Conté
Ha, life goals achieved.

Alanna studied through to one thirty, then felt an agitated rush. The assessment wasn't due until September, she was learning nothing new, in the long-term it did nothing. She made herself lunch,
ate as slowly as she could, then sighed and decided it was time to call George. She was tired of playing out their distance, avoiding the fact that she missed him.

“Hey.” She smiled and felt a gentle warmth flood through her.

“Hi, George. Are you at work?”

“Shift starts at five, I'm free as a bird. Does this mean you're talking to me now?”

“If you want to be spoken to.”

Faithful jumped up onto the kitchen bench and meowed loudly.

“I think it's the cat that I want to speak to. Hi, Faithful.” The cat let out another long meow and began to purr. “Yes, Alanna. I want to be spoken to.” Alanna touched his head, running her fingers down his spine.

“Can I buy you a drink?” Faithful bit her finger, and she poked his stomach with the one nail she kept long. She felt she deserved it when he latched onto her arm with both claws and teeth.

“When and where, love?”

She knocked Faithful off the bench carefully, and he continued to yowl his protest. “That coffee place you like. The Dancing Bird?”

“The Dancing Dove. I can be there in half an hour.”

“I'll show up early. Get dirty looks from people thinking I've been stood up.”

“Am I coming in to save the day, or laugh at your awkward smiling when the barkeep hits on you again?”

“Whatever you like.”

“Bring the cat.”

“You wish.”

“See you, Alanna.”

Alanna swore as soon as she heard the dialtone. “Faithful, why do I like people?” She crouched down and petted his head. “I'm sorry I knocked you over. You make much more sense than most.” She picked him up and kissed his fur. “Are you going to judge me if I put on a dress?”

He meowed. “Yeah, you're justified.”

She showed up ten minutes early, as promised, wearing an olive green sundress and with her hair as stylised as it could be, considering its length. She felt silly, yet recited to herself what Thayet had said to her the day after she and Jonathan had gotten together.

'Alanna, the day that I learned that my high heels are combat boots and satin and silk make excellent weapons was the same day that I took up martial arts. To be strong in yourself, you have
to accept all of yourself. And that includes the bits that want to be pretty, and the bits that want to wear combat boots. Then blend together your prettiness and your combat boots, and that's when you will be beautiful. To yourself. Then it's your choice.'

Of course Thayet was a walking, talking goddess, but she was an unrelenting feminist, and a powerful individual – a powerful woman. Alanna trusted her quite implicitly.

"Hey, darlin'." George was so tall. She somehow always forgot. "You look nice."

He sat across from her with an ease she envied. "So do you."

He grinned, the corners of his eyes crinkling up. "It's been a while."

"Yeah." She didn't quite know what to say, and offered her hand to him. His fingers slotted in with hers like keys and locks, and she felt guilt drown everything else out.

"I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too." He kissed her knuckles and examined the ring on her thumb, emblazoned with a bright lion. "One of the baristas hit on me."

"Do I need to fight for your love?" Before she could respond he put her hand down. "I really should touch up that ring. Jon commissioned it at short notice, but it's no excuse for low quality."

"I like my ring."

"I'm better at detail work now." He ran his thumb over the rough pads of her fingers and up against her veins. She pulled away, very slightly. "Sorry."

"It's okay. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. For everything."

"You don't have to be. I get it. I'm a twenty-five year old, black high school drop out who does metalwork for a living. I get it."

"No, you don't! That's not it at all, George. What the fuck? Do I really--"

The waiter guilty of hitting on her came back with a vaguely perturbed look on his face. "Can I help you two today?"

George spoke, gave her the chance to breathe. "Chai tea, please. Large." He glanced at her. "And a hot chocolate for this one."

"Nothing to eat?"

"No, I think we're good. Thanks."

Alanna fought tears and gripped his hand. "Would I judge someone, anyone in that way? Is that what you think of me?"

"If anyone were justified in it, it would be you." His face was moulded into a blank mask, and no matter how hard she tried she couldn't read him.
“But it's not the case. It's not, George.”

“I can't keep playing guesswork with you, love.” Her heart clenched, because God he knew how to make things hurt. “You gotta tell me what's going on. One minute you seem happy next I haven't seen you in a month and I hear you're screwing the guy from the music shop. Can't say it didn't hurt pretty fuckin' bad. You can sleep with whoever you want but I like to know where I stand with you.”

“I don't want to be with anyone else. At all. Just you, George.”

“Then what happened?”

“You make me feel vulnerable, George, that's what happened. Jon can toss me to the damned wolves and Thom can lock me out for months and I still don't feel-- vulnerable. Or scared. Not like with you. I want to be with you, I think about you all the time. And you're my best friend. And I'm sorry, and I don't know what to say to make this better.”

George shrugged and leaned back, hands behind his head. Her hand felt empty and cold. “Is that all there is?”

“I don't know, George. What do you want to hear?”

“Jon's partner. Thayet. She had nothing to do with it?”

Her eyes burned and she bit the skin of her mouth away until there was blood between her teeth. “It hurt, George. I can't say I wasn't being self-pitying and wanting to hide from the fact that no matter how much he loves me he could never have considered me... worthy. But you knew that. It's passed now, George. It hurt, it's passed.”

“This still hurts, 'Lanna. I know I've never been the most formal guy, but I was pretty sure we were... together.”

“I wasn't sure,” she said, voice small. The waiter returned with their drinks, and she tried to swallow out her feelings immediately.

He nodded and let out a long held breath. “Then we're okay, I think.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I think so. What do you think?”

“I think so.”

“We got to do it proper this time. I don't want... I can't do this again, Alanna. You need to talk to me. Trust me. I'm not goin' to hurt you, nor go anywhere.”

“I won't, either.” George took a long drink from his cup and looked at her like he was dissecting her bit by bit.

“I've missed you, little lioness.” Alanna gave him a shaky smile, amazed by her own relief. “Can I touch up your ring? Please, I'm embarrassed.”

She chuckled and nodded, “Just because you asked so nicely.”
Alanna Trebond is in a relationship with George Cooper

Thom Trebond: Wow, what a surprise, I never would have guessed!

Thom Trebond: I mean honestly, I thought you two were Purely Platonic friends, pals being pals, buddies, bros. Never would I have thought that you are, in fact, head over heels, disgustingly romantically involved!

Thom Trebond: Someone alert the authorities, this is breaking news!

Jonathan Conté: I told my dad, does he count?
Jonathan Conté: He says congrats by the way, Alanna.

Thom Trebond: Tell him to win the election, else no, his congratulations are not worthy.

Jonathan Conté: You motivate him everyday, Thom.

Alanna let herself in, and was greeted by the overwhelming smell of pasta sauce and Thom blasting 'Take Me to Church' through the house. She dropped her bag on the couch and watched him from the doorway as he sang and cooked. After the second repeat of the song, the novelty of her brother fulfilling several rom-com stereotypes he would have sworn hatred of wore off and she coughed loudly. “I could have cut in with a killer harmony, but I’m hungry,” she announced. He splattered tomato sauce on himself, turned the music off, turned it to full volume, turned it down, then turned it off again, all the while swearing ferociously.

“Hi, Alanna.” He yanked his shirt off his head and threw it in the sink, turned off the stove, and tried to catch his breath.

Her eyes and a twitch in her lips betrayed her laughter, and she giggled through, “Hi, Thom.”

“How's your boyfriend?” he asked. He ran hot water over the shirt, and swore once more. “Prepare your answer, I'll be right back.”

She turned the stove back on, put on the pasta, and stirred the sauce as he first went to the laundry and scrubbed the sauce off, put it in the machine, then stomped up stairs with an annoyed vigour to get a new one. “Okay, yes, how is your boyfriend?” He pushed her away from the stove and took over. “Get the garlic bread.”

“Purely platonic, a mere pal, apparently,” she said dryly. Thom laughed brighter than she had heard in weeks. “He's good. He's really good.”

“You cleared everything up?”

She frowned as she got out plates and presented them to him. “There was nothing wrong in the first place.” He met her eyes with a cocked eyebrow.
“I’m distant, not oblivious, Alanna.”

“Yes, fine, everything’s fine. I cried and he stole my ring.”

“Stole it?” Thom gave her a full plate and snapped his fingers at the dining table. She sat herself down and watched him skip between movement and movement until he was seated, too.

“He’s decided that it needs to be touched up.”

“Well, that’s fair enough.” He placed his phone on the table. “Pick a song.”

They ended up listening to Florence and the Machine, but in silence as they ate. “Do you still want to do an arrangement of ’Youth’?” Thom asked. “I didn't think to ask what you were thinking instrumentally, anyway, so I learned the guitar part.”

“Actually, can we look at something else? D’you know 'Key and Lock', by Savannah Jeffreys?”

“I don’t think so.” He pushed his plate to the side and took his phone into his hands. “No ’Youth’? If this is workable, I mean.”

“It’s up to you. If you think you can contribute something to this one, it would be nice. But we’ve talked about ’Youth' before.”

“This one?” he asked, absent minded as the song drifted through his speakers.

“Yes.”

“Yeah, we can do this. What were you thinking though?”

“Lower harmony in the chorus, maybe with a recorded harmony on top. If you want to do a violin part, that could be good.”

Thom nodded and stood. “Finish eating. Repeat it when it turns off.” He went through to their music room, sat at the piano. Within minutes he was playing it through perfectly. “Can we bring it up two semitones?” he yelled out to her.

She came and sat beside him on the piano stool to hum the melody. “No, it'll be too high.”

“No it won’t. Give me the phone.” He fumbled for a moment, still playing the left-hand part, and turned the song off. “Just a sec, listen.” He shifted it up and refound his rhythm, “My hand fits in yours like a key and a lock--”

He nudged her and she took over. “I’ll meet you after school at three o’clock.”

“See, it's fine,” he said, as she kept singing. Within an hour they had put together a coherent piece, harmonies, violin, and piano part all recorded.

“Keep going,” he ordered as he started the track once more. She nodded, but as she came through the chorus he began singing over her.

“If you're in love, then you're the lucky ones--” She grinned and they continued in that fashion,
melding the two songs together, Alanna modifying the track as required and Thom working through the instrumental lines to their voices, because they weren't the same, they weren't two sides of a coin. But they were good together. They knew that.

**LIONSBand tweeted:** New song tomorrow! Or later today, more appropriately.
[key-and-lock-youth-preview.mp4]

@LIONSBand: SCREAMING

@LIONSBand: omg you haven't done a mash up since wherever you will go/hallelujah this is heaven

@LIONSBand: i'm from new zealand and i'm staying up for this. Omg.

**LIONSBand tweeted:** So here’s our latest mashup: Youth, by Daughter, and Key and Lock, by Savannah Jeffreys. Hope you like it!

**LIONSBand tweeted:** Marriage equality has been legalised in all fifty states. About damn time.

**HesitantGinger tweeted:** Well, at least I can get married now. ??? idk about the appeal, but I'm glad for all the couples now getting hitched.

**KnightlyGinger tweeted:** Ignore @HesitantGinger, he cried.

**RogerConte tweeted:** History has been made today. Congratulations to all the couples now able to marry in all fifty states.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading. :) There are thousands (almost 30,000 at this point) of words to be edited, and filler scenes to be written, but I imagine another chapter will be up well within two weeks. Chapter three just needs to be edited.

Songs referenced:

Take Me to Church, by Hozier: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYSVMgRr6pw
Youth, by Daughter https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2QT5eGHCJdE
Key and Lock, by Savannah Jeffreys https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIOJyZ-
Hallelujah, by Leonard Cohen, performed by Rufus Wainwright: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBo-n_17XU0
Wherever You Will Go, by the Calling, performed by Charlene Soraia, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DChHEf0lpEE
Bach's Cello Concerto #1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGQLXRTI3Z0
Chapter Summary

Trigger warnings: discussion of the end of a past manipulative/abusive relationship, references to substance use.

And just a general warning for me being a nerd about hormone replacement therapy and music.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

10.18
To: Jonathan Conté
May I call you, or are you busy?

10.19
From: Jonathan Conté
just one sec. is alanna okay?

10.20
To: Jonathan Conté
She's fine. It's just me.

Thom was seated at the piano, running through scales when his phone rang. “How can I help you, my man?” Jon had the type of voice that for all intents and purposes was incredibly calming, fully capable of command. For Thom it was merely irritating.

He struck a dissonant E minor. “I was just wondering if I could get some advice regarding Gary and Raoul's upcoming nuptials. I've just received my invitation.”

“Invitations are not something you're not familiar with?”

“No. Nor are weddings. I imagine this will be a rather formal affair?”

“The whole shebang. What do you want to know? Alanna and I'll be there, but you like having stuff under control, I know.” Thom bristled. He did not know. What a vast simplification of a broad problem.

Still, he grounded himself and answered as calmly as he could, with the thought that Gary and Raoul were nice. Not really his friends, but they were good people. “A non-online version of the dress code, the people that will be there, appropriate interactions with the grooms and their surrounds, what sort of gift to bring, which celebrations I should be there for, how many days I should book in a hotel, and should I be hiring a really hot actor to play my date lest I be looked upon as a peasant? I assume you and Alanna are in the wedding parties?”
“Whoa, tiger. Okay, starting at the top. Get a pen or something, some of this is important. Thanks for checking with me and not the internet. This is a pretty big deal, particularly for Gary. Now, the thing is that this is a love-prompted marriage, but it’s also a field-day for the press. This is the first marriage between a gay couple in the inner-political family, the guest list has been limited to those trusted to make a good impression. So...”

A quarter of an hour later, Thom had compressed the etiquette of being a ‘rebellious youngster’ at what sounded like a celebration of conformity into twenty-three dot-points, and felt thoroughly scandalised when Jon concluded on, “Basically, be polite, punctual, as pleasant and straight as possible, and put to use the etiquette your father was so fond of.”

“I feel there is a plethora of ironic jokes and thesis statements in saying to be straight at a gay wedding.” Thom touched the keys softly enough to barely make a sound, but found himself running through songs he hadn't played in years. It was almost disorienting; they were songs he was sure he would have forgotten.

“I know, right? It's just a thing of 'be gay, but not too gay'. If you want to bring a male date, that's fine, it's just like, be incredibly chaste.”

“That answers my question. I'm hiring a hot actor and we're making out in the pews.”

Jon groaned. “Please, no, Gary and Raoul will cry.”

“Fine, fine. No hot actor.” Thom paused very slightly, and stopped playing. "Thank you, though, Jon, I do appreciate it. I know we're not close, and--”

Jon cut him off. “Aren't we?”

“No.”

“Why not?” He could just hear the Cheshire grin in Jon's voice.

“You dislike me, and I find you irritating.”

“For such well-raised children, you and Alanna are just rude. I don't dislike you, Thom. You dislike me. I find you irritating. I want to be closer to you, if only for Alanna's sake, completely disregarding any personal interest I have in you, yet every time I attempt to get to know you or speak to you, you rebuff me. So, don't hang up, let's talk about this. Now.”

“Fine. What do you find irritating?”

“You're self-isolating, which makes others vastly uncomfortable. You don't interact with anyone if you have any choice, and it's just really rude, you've hurt and offended a substantial number of people in the time that I've known you.” Thom wasn't exactly surprised to hear Jon speak like that, but he stilled entirely, and braced himself, because despite all of his kindness, Jon knew how to cause pain.

"Instead of using your vast capacity for communication and interaction to do some good in the world, you limit yourself to taking in the information you want and keeping it. You're an incredible musician and you advocate well for people online, and fuck knows I think that's more important than speaking on a podium. But Thom, you don't view anyone else as quite human.” Thom bit his
lip and felt a small flutter in his chest, an urge to interrupt taking him over. "You distance yourself so much that, even when you speak on LGBT+ issues, you're treating life as a hypothetical that only matters because you live in it. Long story short, you're self-centred and rude. Your turn." It was true, but it hurt enough that Thom was fully prepared to fire back as hard as he could.

“You're a self-satisfied politician-in-the-making, who overextends himself in the thought that you can actually save the world. You treat people as disposable in your grand concept of 'humanity'. You act as if you are the final authority on any given issue.”

He paused and breathed and tried not to get too angry with the fact that Jon was still always framing himself like a hero, like he could do no wrong. They weren't friends, he didn't have to be kind. “And when you dumped Alanna, she cried for three weeks. I don't mean sniffling and eating ice-cream in her underwear while watching romantic comedies, I mean chest aching, throat raw, skin dry, couldn't sleep, choosing not to eat. And after that you acted as if she were the villain, all the while maintaining the image of her being your best friend. Smiling and joking and ignoring the fact that you broke her heart. She wore baggy clothes for a year and hid all of the mirrors in our house because she felt like her body wasn't a part of her any more, like you'd taken it, like you owned her. You sleep with anyone that takes your fancy yet put yourself on a high-horse about 'really' knowing people, hence excusing yourself. You invalidate people's truth because you've decided that your cause is more worthy.” He breathed for the first time, and felt a little bit of regret. Not really for himself, but for Alanna. And he knew that that must have hurt Jon, but the man had asked for it. Asked for the truth. "And your pop culture references are horrific," he added in, just for good measure.

There were twenty-three seconds of silence, only maintained by both of them breathing. “Right then. Can we fix this?”

Thom's stomach dropped a little, and the guilt that had been planted blossomed. “Why do you want to?”

“Because it would make Alanna happy. I want that for her, Thom, always. She deserves more than I could ever give.” Jon's voice cracked on her name, and Thom clenched his fingers in on themselves. He was not cruel, just honest. Honesty can not, rationally, hurt anyone if they were in control. "But also because you need some fucking friends, and I think that you and I could be good friends. You seem like you could be cool. Why don't you want to fix it?” But oh, it hurt.

“I don't need friends! And if you hurt her again I need to be able to punch you without giving a shit about you.”

“Which implies that you see a potential for a friendship, the fact that you could give a shit! I'm never hurting her like that ever again, Thom." Jon let his name come into its fullness, fill up the space between them. "You can kill me if I do, I wouldn't care. Fuck, I'd kill myself. But if that's all that's keeping you from fucking growing up and developing a friendship, then you're being childish.” He resisted the temptation to scream. "And I know Alanna wouldn't approve of you limiting yourself out of some misogynistic possessive-protective thing.”

“It's not-- look, you wouldn't understand. You had two loving parents and everyone in the world looks out for you. We never had anything like that. We look after each other.” His argument sounded weak, but fuck it if he was going to give in to Jonathan.

“And she can look after herself. She loves you, dude, if she needs you she'll tell you, or you'll know. But you can't use her as an excuse for you being entirely asocial. Be cautious, be wary, be
protective, but stop victimising yourself – and her. I've seen you be happy, Thom, it does happen. You just don't let it.”

“Yes. It's pointless. Happiness is just an excuse for a lack of productivity. 'I'm going to take a day off pursuing something that matters so I can be happy'.”

“Don't feed me that. You have feelings, Thom, and you get lonely as much as anyone else.”

“No, I--”

“I want to be your friend. As would Raoul, and Gary, and George, as does Roger. He doesn't make friends easily. He pretends that happiness is an isolated concept from other people, too.”

“So what?”

“So can't you just... try out not being such a wuss?”

Thom snorted loudly. “Wow, your pitch for friendship surely is an effective one. Calling me a wuss.” He fully considered hanging up.

“I have never met anyone so isolated – by choice, at that.” He stood up and started pacing, trying to swallow his pride, to think of Alanna, and her happiness in his own. “You bullshit your way through any social event, because you're scared of having feelings.”

“See, this is what I was talking about.”

“Thom. I've seen you cry. I've seen you jealous. I've seen you protective. And I've seen you happy, and it's something you liked. Can't you just try out my hypothesis that having more people in your day-to-day life will improve your life quality?” Thom didn't respond. He was sick of Jon's bullshit, but there was a modicum of truth in what he said. If he could take it from himself, procrastinate and hide, then he could damn well take it from Jon. "Thom?"

Thom swallowed, hard. “A scientific exploration in which you make assumptions and I attempt to fulfil them in the hopes that they're effective?”

Jon let out a breathless little laugh. “If you want to put it like that. Friends, Thom. Friends.” He sounded joyous, and oh fuck, maybe this was why Alanna was a little bit in love with him. Oh fuck.

“Fine, friends. Are we going to get coffee and paint each other's nails?” he asked, and expected to hear Jon laugh once more.

“Yes. I'm back in September.” He had not expected that.

“I was joking--”

“Bye, Thom! See you in a few months. Text me.”

Thom stared at his carpet in absolute astonishment. He was shocked beyond his own belief to see tears fall from his eyes to the floor. He wiped at them furiously, and tried to blank out the relief and the joy. Just let it hurt. If only for vindictiveness's sake.
9.47
From: Jonathan Conté
i love you, alanna

9.47
From: Jonathan Conté
i love you so much

9.47
From: Jonathan Conté
i love you so much it sort of hurts a little bit and i owe you my life and everything that i am

9.52
To: Jonathan Conté
I love you, too, Jon. Why are you drunk? It's not even noon.

9.53
From: Jonathan Conté
i'm not drunk i just love you and you're my best friend.

9.54
To: Jonathan Conté
What do you want? Why are you blackmailing me with affection?

9.55
From: Jonathan Conté
i just really really love you

9.57
To: Jonathan Conté
k.

9.56
To: Thayet Wilima
Is Jon drunk?

10.03
From: Thayet Wilima
No, he just looks sort of sad – potentially high. He was on the phone with your brother about half an hour ago. They were talking about weddings. I sort of zoned out.

10.04
To: Thayet Wilima
Right. If he's high, give him a banana, it'll make him feel slightly more grounded. If he's sad, then ask him something about the flaws of the Constitution. Alternatively put on Adele.

10.10
From: Thayet Wilima
You're a bit of a lifesaver. He had started crying like hell, then I asked him about self-defence laws. He's talking my ear off, but you know, at least he's not crying.
10.11
To: Thayet Wilima
Try the banana.

10.12
From: Thayet Wilima
Thanks, babe. I'll see you in a few weeks. :)

10.05
To: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)
Don't make Jon cry. I know he can be an arse, but whatever it is it's not helping by making him upset. Fuck Thom just don't be an arse. Particularly if you're doing that misogynistic protective act of 'I'll kill you if you touch her' because I won't stand for it.

10.08
From: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)
No, no, we're friends now. We yelled at each other. Now we're friends. Be happy for us.

10.10
To: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)
what the fuck
what the fuck ?????????

10.11
From: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)
Yeah, we realised that we hate each other and aired our differences, then we decided to be grown ups and be nice to each other. We're getting coffee when he comes to visit.

10.12
From: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)
Also any protective act is to do with the fact that you're a self-sacrificing over-worker who doesn't look after herself. I starkly recall you threatening to push one of my peers off a cliff, and you've never even met her.

10.15
To: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)
Sorry I called you a misogynist. Don't make Jon cry. Congrats on having a whole TWO friends.

10.15
From: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)
Got it. Don't be passive aggressive.

10.35
To: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)
'We guilt tripped each other for a while. I'm going to paint his nails though. ' -Jon
'No, go back to the guilt-tripping.' -Me
'Nah, it's fine, we're being responsible adults. We both love you. We both think we're both irritating. I think I'll seduce him or something. It'll be good.' -Jon

I hung up on him. What the everloving fuck.

10.37
From: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)
Come now, sister, don't oppress us just because we're going to have nice nails.

10.37
To: Jonathan Conté
If you get a violet or blue polish, I'll get a nice gold. One without tacky bits of glitter. Shimmery, maybe?

10.43
From: Jonathan Conté
WHAT, NO????!!!! the tacky bits of glitter are the best!! they're the whole point.

10.45
To: Jonathan Conté
Fine, I'll get nail glitter as well. In red, silver, gold, green and blue. Just to cover all grounds (is this how friends work?).

10.45
From: Jonathan Conté
babe <3 <3 <3 <3 (baaabe <3)

Thom Trebond : Jonathan Conté has requested to list you as 'In a Relationship'.

Accept/Deny

11.32
To: Jonathan Conté
Nice try. Seduction techniques 0/10.

George was a good kisser. Alanna had kissed a good six people in her life, four of them more than once, and was quite determined that George was the best of them. Maybe it was coincidence, as he was the one kissing her at that moment, but she was still rather sure that he was the best. He was gentle, but he was there - entirely present. "Your new song," he said, his nose brushing hers, "was really lovely."
She smiled and kissed him again, shutting the door behind her with her foot. "Thanks."

"You and Thom are really talented." She ignored him, and took his hand. Together they drifted into the kitchen, where Faithful woke from his doze with a long wail. He took five long bounds and jumped, dug his claws into George's thigh in a very feline embrace.

George's eyes widened, but he removed the cat from his leg and lifted him so they were face to face. "Hey, Faithful. Howya doing?" Faithful purred and rubbed his cheek against George's. "This is the only reason I talk to you," he said to Alanna. "You've got one cute cat."

"Fair enough, honestly. Coffee?"

"Yeah, thanks."

George sat with Faithful on the edge of her kitchen bench, allowing the cat to sit on his shoulders - eventually he fell down the front of George's shirt, and was indignant in his stillness on George's lap from that point on.

Alanna didn't like the domesticity of their scene. She always felt that domesticity, like long-term relationships, would take something out of its constituents. Emotional vulnerability was one thing, but in the long-term, in such an absolute fashion, could only lead to pain. If you give someone part of your heart, or of yourself, any bad things that happen consequently can't be questioned, she thought. George was the only person who could even make her consider 'settling down'. Even Jon couldn't have, in the end. They would have hated each other.

George was warm. His hands felt like they fit hers. She still didn't want to give herself away to him.

"Thom's really talented," she said. They were curled around each other on her couch, 'Doctor Who' playing in the background. George moved with a type of liquid nature that seemed out of place, considering how close to sleep he had been. He paused the program with a most peculiar look on his face.

She didn't want to be looking at him, and kept her head down against his chest. He played with the light curls on the back of her neck. "As are you."

"Yes," she said, with little thought. His hands drifted over the top of her spine and massaged her shoulders. "But I think that he might... care substantially more than I do." She winced.

"About... you? As twins?" Alanna sat up quickly, only just avoiding hitting George's chin with her head. He just stroked the hair from her forehead, and she realised that she hadn't felt brave enough to tell anyone before.

"No! God no. About music. I just..."

"It's not your passion." George pulled her closer, just lightly enough that she could resist if she wanted. She didn't. Her forehead fell to his shoulder, and she could feel the worn cotton like it was a sedative. "And it is his."

"It is his," she echoed. "He keeps trying to... focus himself on anthropology, says he'll do something in politics. He's deluding himself, though, and he knows it. In the back of his head.
Music is his start point and his end point. He's talented in other areas, fuck, he could do whatever he wanted in terms of academics without... thinking. But he won't." She could hear George's heartbeat. It sort of hurt, that he was close. She couldn't quite tell why. Thom was close - but she didn't feel vulnerable with Thom. "He'll try to be 'logical', but the only logical thing for him is to pursue something that he can actually... feel joy with. And I feel like shit, because I can't be there with him in that. He likes being able to argue politics and flash his degree at people, but that's a game for him. It doesn't mean anything."

"Maybe he's not ready to admit that to himself. He's twenty, not fifty. He has time."

"But I think he'd freak out, if I... drew back." George was technically right, but Thom was fragile, sometimes. He needed someone there, in the moment, with him. Twitter just wouldn't cut it for him, all he had was her. He was tough and stubborn and self-isolating, but he was human.

"Do you want to stop doing music?"

"No. No, I don't. I love it. But it's not my passion, I don't want to pursue it. I won't find a career that I can be content with in music. It's... the self-defence stuff. The social justice. That's what makes me happy."

"And he wants you to be happy. Despite not being fifty, he's a big boy. He can look after himself - even if it's without you. Not being a twin act may be disappointing, but he's talented, and it's not like you'd be dumping him." She snorted, the muscles in his neck tensed as he laughed. "You just want to pursue something else in a more prominent way."

"I don't want to hurt him."

"Do you love him?"

"Of course. Yes."

"Will you stand by him, as his sister?"

"Yes."

"He doesn't need protecting. You can be your own person, without looking after him." It should have sounded patronising, but George had a habit of stating things already thought, just so they would make a little more sense.

"I am my own person," she said. George was cool charm and wit, but never superficial. He was never superficial. He was just with other people, in any given moment. He was more with her. Maybe even always. He thought about her as an individual, as a part of the bigger picture. His own bigger picture.

"God knows I know it. I just mean that you can stand, on your own, and he can, too. It doesn't mean you've abandoned each other, doesn't mean you can't spend time, doesn't mean you can't keep doin' music. And none of this means you have to go up to him and say 'I'm dumping you'." He paused and curled her hair around his fingers. "Or... sing a number from 'Chicago' until he cries. Just be honest. And take your time." Her laugh felt more like a sob than it should have, but she smiled as she shook on his shoulder.
"Okay," she whispered.

Alanna was quiet for a minute, and George put the show back on. She stayed still, and didn't even think of moving away from him, even when his arms enclosed her. "In about six months, or a year, or something, I'm going to tell you I love you," she said. His hand was still in her hair, but shaking. She smiled. "And I want you to know that I'll mean it. But you're my best friend. And I want to be with you."

"Okay." She leaned up and kissed him.

"Maybe 'okay' will be our--" He hit her over the head with a cushion.

to: Kel Mindelan

from: Alanna Trebond

re. Self Defence in the Name of Self Defence

Hey, Kel,

I'd just like to reiterate how incredible it was to meet you at VidCon. It's such an honour that you see me as an inspiration - which is exactly why I'm contacting you. I feel, at twenty, like fourteen year old me would have her arse kicked on sexism and gender politics grounds. You have an understanding of gender, self defence, martial arts, and intersectionality that is actually going to change the world. I want to be part of that.

You spoke about setting up a centre, and eventually an organisation for education and training for minorities in self defence. I am of the age, and I have the funding, resources, contacts, and time to accommodate for that. If you (and your parents) are willing and able, I would like to work on such a project with you. Your concepts and knowledge are so important, and I don't want to disregard the fact that this was your idea first. You of course don't have to, but I had to ask.

I hope you're well. :)
Alanna.

12.05 From: Roger Conté
May I ask what transitioning as a vocalist was like?

12.07 To: Roger Conté
What would you like to know?

12.08 From: Roger Conté
Whatever you're willing to tell.

12.09
To: Roger Conté

It may be easier to call you. May I?

Thom's phone rang shrill, startling him despite his music and lights both being on. "Hi, Roger." He fumbled to turn off the speakers and fought down butterflies.

"Hey, Thom. How are you tonight?"

"I'm well, thank you. And you?"

"I'm well. Absolutely sick of touring, but your company is keeping me at least a little sane, albeit virtually." Roger's voice was even better when natural, not recorded, not scripted. Thom felt thick sand filter into his stomach for no sensible reason.

"I'm glad to be of assistance." Roger laughed, and it crackled through the phone. "Where are you now?"

"We're coming into Arizona now. Sand, everywhere. The occasional tree."

"Sounds enticing." He made his way upstairs, turning lights off as he went. It was late. Probably impractically late, but it wasn't like he had to go anywhere.

"Oh yes. Every time we stop for fuel or food my body-guard has been getting to as high ground as possible and yelling as loudly as he can to see how far it can echo."

"Destination?"

"Flagstaff. It's a large enough venue for the travel to be worth it."

"It's easier than flying?"

"Too much equipment, too big a crew, financially irresponsible. I'm not famous enough for venues to provide staff, nor to validate catching a plane filled with instruments every two days." Thom lay down cross-ways on his bed, once again stared at the ceiling. "I assure you, I wish it was different."

"I'm sorry." There was a short pause, and Thom could just hear Roger's breath. "And sorry again, I got off track. What would you like to know?" He didn't want Roger to be a creepy invasive fetishiser, but he didn't seem like that. Thom's gauge for bullshit was fairly well tuned, and so far Roger's level of bullshit was just that he seemed far too nice. He could just hang up, if necessary. It would be a shame, Roger's voice was drug-like, but he had no proper choice. He had standards for the few social endeavours he pursued, and he would not let them fall.

"I was just curious about your range, in particular. I haven't heard of many trans vocalists before. You're clearly a tenor, but your range is expansive - and strong. Is that... normal?" Cautious. Not shy, just polite.

"Well, I don't think there's a clear line of 'normal'. HRT - hormone replacement therapy - is too new in terms of effectiveness, and there are too few trans people recording their transitions in terms of vocals. It's harder for transgender women, particularly those who start once they're through with puberty." Roger hummed acknowledgement. "I was lucky, I started just before I turned seventeen. I also have the privilege of having been trained for all of my life, in both classical and contemporary vocals. I was a very strong soprano, high C - C6, to low F - F3."
Roger whistled. "Almost three octaves."

"Yeah. My teachers all urged me to pursue opera or classical musical theatre because of my larynx and my control. Really not my cup of tea. Personally I just feel I'm very stubborn, physical predisposition be damned. My range was bound to change, anyway. But yes, after forging my father's signature a few dozen times I got in with an endocrinologist and a psychiatrist specialising in transition, and despite having never treated a transgender vocalist before, their opinion was that I should start on a very low dose. I was rather impatient, but it paid off. Do you know much about HRT?"

"No, I'm sorry to say."

"Basically it is a rather stark process, in most. Even a quarter of an hour after the t-shot or gel you'll be able to feel differences internally, and every week counts in term of voice. The physical is a bit slower - muscle shifting, bone structure, etc.. I started at the lowest possible dose, and stayed there for the first three months. I basically hired out my singing teacher - despite being in the middle of the SATs and in the middle of a long-distance degree, and I worked with her an hour every day, even if it was just on speech, until I'd passed the six month mark, at which point we went back to normal timing. I got a shot every three weeks, and each two weeks my voice would generally shift down a full semitone. Towards the end of each cycle it would get a little higher again. There were some very awkward voice breaks. If reincarnation is a thing, I'm dying before I go through another puberty, I swear. I ran scales between classes just trying to get a hold of it, because my larynx got much longer and thicker. I mean, did you have voice breaks in puberty?"

"Oh god, I went from 'choir-boy' levels of boy soprano to baritenor. Yes." Thom's eyes had closed, and he settled back onto his cushions. He didn't really need to think. It was just history. He wanted to monitor his words, make himself sound a little more soft, but he couldn't bring himself to. He doubted Roger would appreciate it, anyway. Just because he was someone new didn't mean that Thom needed to change his entire behavioural pattern, no matter how attractive said new person was.

"It was pretty similar to most pubescent and adolescent boys' experience, as far as I can tell. The one thing that really worried me was keeping my tone, and my power. Trans men, typically, take on a very distinct tone, almost like we still have some of the pubescent raspiness of a kid whose voice is still breaking. The seminal aspect was continuing to sing. I had lost an octave and a half, and only gained one, between three and eight months in. After a year and a half my range stabilised and developed further. My range sits from A#3 to D#5, including my falsetto. My higher register is light, and I switch into mixed above the A, falsetto from the C."

"Did you ever feel like you couldn't sing? Or like you'd lost it entirely?" Roger's voice was scratchy, and Thom smiled. He turned on his side, and examined his bookshelf. It was rather bland, in the grand scheme of things. Most of his academic texts were in his study, and he didn't hold much of a passion for romance or crime. History, classics, music theory, the occasional fantasy novel.

"In between the second month and twelfth month, yeah," he admitted. "My tone was really bad. It was thin and inconsistent, and even though I had pitch control I didn't have much of a pitch to control."

"You were depressed?"
Thom, somehow, wasn't surprised that Roger had known that. However, he was surprised that he didn't care. "Yeah. Yeah, it was pretty bad. I'm a good instrumentalist, but I'm a vocalist, first and foremost. I'm stubborn. I persisted. I still have trouble with my tone. But I'm working on it."

"So you've maintained close to a three octave range, to what is basically post-transition. Wow."

"You sound a tad disbelieving."

"It's hard to believe."

Thom smirked and sat up, rolling his shoulders back, stretching his free hand. "Just a moment, let me warm up."

"You don't have to--"

"That was a challenge, if ever I've heard one." He made his way downstairs, turning the lights on as he went.

"Well." Roger was about to feign innocence, but seemed to swallow his own words.

"Don't pretend, Roger," he said, fumbling with the tap and glass. He wasn't nervous. Not really. He simply intended to perform at maximum capacity. "Do you want to listen to me warm up, or should I hang up and call you back?" His piano keys felt cool and perfect.

"I'll join in, if you'd feel more comfortable."

"Go ahead."

"Eat your words, Conté."

"Gladly. Wow. You're quite something."

"You kept up."

"I'm not used to having to. Where did you put 'Take Me to Church', range-wise?"

"Are we arranging a number at one in morning?"

"Why not?"

"One up. Yours was two down?"

"Yeah. Let's try in the original - it will work for two male vocalists."

"How awake are you?"

"Enough. And you?"

"Enough."

"What are your preferences for harmonies?"
"I'm not fussed, as long as you don't try to cram too many in."

"And is the D# your absolute highest?"

"The highest that's practical. Why?"

"Oh, never mind. It wouldn't work in this song - if you could hold the F we could go a three octave unison."

"That would actually be incredible. Pointless. But incredible. I'll work on it. But yes, not for this song."

Roger's laugh was thick, it felt like it could overwhelm him, and Thom realised with a shiver that this was infatuation. A crush. Not just 'I sort of want to set your body in marble and then touch your cheekbones', or 'I want to lick your abs', or 'please hold that note for three hours straight so I can memorise it' but a person. A real person. Someone he cared about and liked and butterflies hurt.

Roger had said something, and Thom had entirely missed it. "--but switching the genre may be impractical considering how iconic the song is."

"We don't have to switch the genre, per se, but changing the chord voicings around a little - maybe something tying in the rock influences? Bring in a driving bassline, have a cello counterpoint towards the end of some phrases, dead-note the guitar and bass on the pre-chorus."

"Oh, I like you. Yes. That sounds perfect."

HesitantGinger tweeted: And @RogerConte 's quote of the night is... 'but his harmonies are shit and I wouldn't trust him in the White House.'

JonathanConte tweeted: @HesitantGinger @RogerConte </3 tag me next time.

RogerConte tweeted: @HesitantGinger 's QOTN: 'My sexual and romantic orientations are both caught up in E minor chord voicings.'

JonathanConte tweeted: @HesitantGinger @RogerConte There's no way that's about me and I'm sort of offended.

Phone call ended at: 03.34, July 15

Chapter End Notes

Songs mentioned, yet again, were just 'Take Me to Church' by Hozier.
Also, I should probably say that I'm not American, and I don't quite know why I have written this in the USA, but any flaws just let me know and I'll fix it up. I am a trans guy, but pre-testosterone, so anything said above is based on talking to other trans guys and YouTube progressions etc..

Thanks for reading. :)

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Alanna can't sit still for more than five minutes. Thom has a crush, and it's nonsense. Buri, Thayet, and Myles enter.

trigger warning: brief mentions of domestic violence.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thom woke to his door banging open and hitting the wall. Of course, he didn't realise that was what woke him until he remembered that dragons were not real, and The Beatles were not, in fact, dragons.

He kept his eyes closed. From the light filtering through his blinds, it was at least noon, and from the banging on his staircase Alanna was still a horrible person. "Thom, it's two in the afternoon." She flicked the lights on, and he glared up at a galaxy of classical music.

She sat on the edge of his bed and he turned his gaze to her. "I was up late." She rolled her eyes and pinched the tip of his nose.

"Doing what?"

Thom yawned and sat up. He very pointedly checked his phone and took a long drink from his glass of water before saying, "Arranging a number with Roger. We got rather into it and didn't hang up until three thirty."

"That sounds like your idea of a perfect date." Alanna took it upon herself to pick through his wardrobe and toss clothes back at him. He caught each one, but aside from that didn't move. She had a love bite on the peak of her shoulder, and he felt entirely unmockable.

"Shut up, sister, we were singing. I was recording the instrume--"

"Three thirty in the morning, Thom. You like sleep." He nodded and got to his feet. He faced his mirror like an opponent, but not quite so venomously as he looked at Alanna. He looked sleep deprived, and his hair desperately needed washing.

"I got eleven hours."

"The most impractical hours."

"They're perfect hours," he retorted. He examined the shadows under his eyes.
"You're so smitten with this guy, it's gross." He didn't comment, just pulled his t-shirt off and pursed his lips. "Oh my god, are you actually smitten? Thom!"

"I need to shower."

"Yes, you do, but you have a crush."

He basically ran into the bathroom, her laugh mocking him all the way.

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Alanna had made him breakfast, but he was tempted to ignore it considering how self-satisfied she looked. "He's really really pretty, isn't he, Thom? I bet you've written his name in love hearts in your journal." Thom threw a salt shaker at her, which she caught effortlessly.

"Your hickey's are showing," he said, stuffing his mouth full of burned bacon in the hopes that she might leave him alone.

"I'm proud of my sex life, but does this mean you might actually get one?"

"It was a phone call." Thom threw the pepper shaker at her while she wasn't looking (eyes closed with her laughter), and it hit her chest with a satisfying thud. However, as she just kept giggling, the satisfaction was only momentary.

"How long were you on the phone?" He ate his toast and ignored her. "Did he serenade you? Did you talk about the politics of today and realise that you're soul-mates? Did he cure you of your misanthropy? Did you cure his?" He looked around for something else to throw at her, and at the conclusion that he would either cause too much pain or too little, merely flipped her off.

"We talked about transitioning as a vocalist, then sang for three hours straight with intermittent conversation on Jonathan, pop culture and the relevance of it societally, and I may have flirted, but so badly it probably just came off as being socially inept. That's it!"

"You're quite good at social contact, Thom, it just terrifies and exhausts you." He rolled his eyes. She hooked her phone into the speakers, Keane taking over the house. "What's Roger like?" Thom mulled it over for quite a time. He found it peculiar that he had never even met the man. Perhaps his blushing was tied to something more like a celebrity crush - yet he had never experienced one of those, either.

"Had your fun now?"

Alanna chuckled and ran a hand through his hair. He smiled, just a little. "Not quite yet, you're still blushing." Thom jerked away from her and slapped her treacherous hands. She cackled, wicked witch she was.

He got to his feet and placed his hands on his hips, glaring down at Alanna. "And you're still looking at me like I've admitted that sometimes I like to think of dead babies while wanking. I didn't mock you this much when you had crushes!" He paced around the kitchen with his shoulders firmly back. He didn't like this whole 'feelings' thing, and he was tired. Still, he felt warmth in a most peculiar fashion, one he could only liken to the feeling of a really satisfying key change half way through a song. It was so different from the fierce affection that he felt when he looked at
Alanna.

"I didn't have crushes! I had Jon."

"You once expressed that Raoul was a 'giant cat', and that his 'eyes are really beautiful', and you constantly wanted to play with his hair. That's a crush."

Alanna sulked, switching songs in entire dissatisfaction. "Not really."

"You drew his face onto one of the school napkins and got three days of detention," he reminded her. "It smeared your permanent record, yet again."

She started to tidy the kitchen, pretending to not notice how little Thom had eaten. There was a thin line between him not eating because her cooking was generally so poor, and because his head was so heavily in some academic or emotional cloud that he couldn't eat. "Oh my god. I forgot about that." She decided to buy him chocolate. Chocolate made everything better. He looked at her expectantly, and she remembered she had lost her train of thought. "Yeah, okay. You did mock me!"

Thom raised an eyebrow and set up the dishwasher, a tad appalled at how messy he had let the place get. Domestic work was a skill-set not quite complete, despite being a far better cook than Alanna. She had that look on her face that said she was scheming something louder than an actual battle plan could have. "No, I didn't. I asked why you liked him, because he wasn't even attractive. Which I retracted, two years ago, when I realised that people have the capacity to be attractive."

She snorted. "You implied disapproval."

"I did disapprove. I mean honestly. You had friends, that was bad enough, let alone a boyfriend. And it just didn't make sense. Even then Gary and Raoul had been giving each other longing gazes."

"They really were. I have the impression that they've been as close to in love as they could be since they were six, when they met, and--"

Thom's phone buzzed on the tabletop, making the ceramic shake slightly. She took it before he could dry his hands and unlocked it while he yelped his protests. "'May I suggest adding an extra beat to the cello line before the chorus? Thank you for speaking with me last night. It was nice'. Thom grabbed it back from her, with an identical scowl to the one she held moments before. "Jon says he doesn't talk to people past cordiality." She was torturing him, her eyes glinting with sickening smile. "Three early-morning hours, inappropriate jokes, according to twitter. Sounds serious."

Thom cradled his phone to his chest. "Fuck off. I'm talented. I'm excellent. My vocals are to die for. That's all."

"While all this is true--" He cuffed her over the ear. "Thom, you've never had a crush before. Have you?"

He groaned. "No. It hurts. I hate it." He kept his eyes off her, scraping food into the bin, and opening the window. He hadn't been outside in several days, wind was a surprise. Thom stuck his head out the window, breath heavy.
"Aw. Baby brother."

"I'm older than you." He turned back to her, with a little more of a smile. "I killed someone before you were even born."

Alanna snorted and disconnected her phone, foot bouncing up and down. "You know using that line as a diversionary shock tactic only worked until we were seven."

"But that means I have to come up with something new. Kill someone new, I don't know, Alanna, I need to shock you with something."

Alanna ignored him. "Have you got butterflies and everything?"

Thom nodded. "And the sand feeling." He looked nervous, like he was saying something odd, and Alanna felt fondness flood her. "Do you get that feeling? Like massive amounts of sand just slowly pouring into your stomach."

"That's just hardcore butterflies. I think it goes flies, butterflies, sand, wasps, hornets. Then sharks," she said, nodding all the while.

"When did you get sharks?" A look of distaste had settled on Thom's face.

"When Jon started joking about kissing me. I almost threw up, actually. I mean, it hasn't happened since then, but just a warning."

"'Don't throw up in partner's mouth'. Cool, thanks, wouldn't have guessed that one." Alanna smacked him, and when he slapped back they made a mutual, non-verbal agreement to not start yet another slap-war. They never ended well for anyone.

There was peaceful silence for a little while, while Thom texted Roger. Alanna had that same scheming look on her face. Her degree wasn't engaging, music wasn't the same any more. Thom was constant, and she could help him. He was struggling. After the attack his self-esteem had fell back to pre-testosterone levels of severity, and he seemed even more indecisive about his own self-identity than ever.

"You know I thought I was aromantic and asexual, for ages," Thom said, breaking her concentration.

"Yeah, I know. I think it was tied up in self esteem stuff."

"Really? I think it's because I perceived most people as... unworthy."

Alanna hummed. "Partially, I suppose. However, you always said no-one would want to be around you. You wanted to go off an live in... Iceland, I think it was." He ducked his head and nodded. "It wasn't just self-esteem, but that was part of it. Are you... how are you... feeling?"

"Alanna. I will slap you. It's a mere infatuation. I'm not re-evaluating myself as a human being."

"You've made friends with Jon," she pointed out. "It's timing is--"

"Just bad timing."
"Your ice is melting, Elsa, be careful."

"Oh my god. Let it the fuck go, Alanna!"

**LIONSBand tweeted:** We gave in. We hate ourselves. Here's our cover of 'Do You Want to Build a Snowman?'

[Link]

**HesitantGinger** retweeted **LIONSBand**: [link] I don't know whether to say 'at least make us a meme', or 'make us a meme and I'll never forgive you'.

Thayet kept her phone in her pocket at all times, and the only times she didn't automatically pick up were when she was in a meeting, or asleep - and even then she often did anyway. Alanna knew this well, despite only having known her a year, didn't like to abuse the privilege of knowing her and knowing her commitment. Despite this she fought to remind herself that Thayet was her friend, and they cared deeply for each other - communication should be an option for both of them. She realised that she hadn't quite included herself in that 'both'.

"Hey, babe."

Alanna felt her muscles loosen a little, warmth filling her. Thayet was a token of all that was good and true in the world. "Hey, Thayet. How are you?"

"I'm really well, thank you." Alanna could hear the smile in her voice. "Oh, before you say what needs to be said, I just wanted to check that it's okay for Jon and I to stop in for a few weeks in August and September. We'll stay in a hotel, but he misses you - as do I."

'Why am I scared of being inadequate?' Alanna asked herself. She was good at the things she did in her life. She adored her friends, they adored her. She breathed in and pushed the thought process out, smiling. "Of course. You're always welcome."

"I know he wants to spend some time with Thom, too." Alanna's eyebrows automatically raised. Thom had mentioned something about time with Jon, but nothing solid. "You and he spend too much time together. He gets that look that you do of 'I've got a plan', and he can't think of anything else." Thayet's voice was full of laughter, the heady voice others applied in attempts to come across as charismatic natural with her.

"And that's on Thom? That can't be good."

"I'm quite concerned. However, Jon's learned how to paint nails, so I can't say I'm not benefiting." Alanna pictured Jon collecting nail polishing and fumbling only to end up with deep red fingers, and laughed. "Sorry, that was entirely off-topic. How are you doing?"

Alanna swallowed sudden butterflies. "I'm good. I mean... I'm considering dropping out of uni. Or deferring."

"I... that was sudden."
"Not really. I'm not learning anything." A small lie, she told herself. It was nothing of use.

"Do you know what you'll do?"

"Sort of. I... do you have time?"

"Yep."

"I'm starting an NGO for women who want to learn self-defence, globally. Or... that's the plan. I mean, a generalised feminist ideology, education on domestic abuse and saying 'no' for younger women - kids." She could hear Thayet's breathing, and felt her nerves grow. It wasn't stupid. It was an excellent idea. She could make it work. "But self-defence lessons, including verbal self-defence, including in the workplace, including teaching men respect. I've been in commune with the daughter of the Ambassador to Japan, Keladry Mindelan. It was her idea. There's already a thousand and one organisations with 'no means no' in their tag-line, but no-one talks about what it means to say 'no', and what to do if you can't. She's fourteen, but she wants to be involved - her father is on board with her participation, they're excited at the concept of her being part of a philanthropic organisation she could co-own or inherit in the future. Her mother is a civil lawyer, and she's willing to help. My connection to Jonathan and his experience with public relations, a bachelors in sociology, Thom's anthropology and my father's legacy, and more importantly his money means that I can... make this work."

Thayet was silent for a long while. "Just a second." There was a sound of rapid footsteps on wood. "Buri! Buri, come 'ere!"

A new voice entered, dulled out. "What can I do for you, majesty?"

Thayet's voice, too, was dulled. Alanna could imagine the two of them standing side by side, Thayet holding the phone between them. "Stop moping, that's what you can do. Alanna, can you recap all of that for Buri? Is that okay?" Alanna recited the plan for Buri, who was quiet until she was passionate, always strong.

"See? Go back to America, Buri," Thayet said. "Isn't it exactly what you were looking for?"

A long silence, then a yelp. "Don't pinch me! My only experience is in the martial arts themselves, Alanna, not politics. I didn't even graduate high-school."

Alanna shook her head, frustrated by the casual self-deprecation that she knew so well. "Buri, I've seen you fight, you're superb. I'd love to get you on board. I mean, it's going to take... a while. Years, even. Sponsors, spokespeople, an actual plan, setting up events, setting up an esteem... but you can be involved wherever you want." She paused, thought on something Thayet had said, about Buri and the responsibility and guilt inflicted on her and her young self-esteem. "It would be an honour, actually."

She heard a little intake of breath. "Alanna, I'm a little bit in love with you."

She grinned. "I'm a little bit in love with you, too." That was true.

"I'm kicking you out, Buri, I don't need you to depress yourself stuck to my side. Go see Alanna. Jon and I will be coming in a few weeks anyway."
"You need--"

"I don't need a bodyguard, babydoll. Come on, it's perfect."

Alanna cut in, those infuriating nerves joined by excitement in her stomach. "Come on, Buri. Please. I don't want any more men involved before I get some women on hand - and a diverse range, at that. This needs to be a team effort. I want you on my team. I want both of you, but you can provide things that neither Thayet or I can provide."

"Because I'm brown and poor?"

Alanna winced, but that was the truth of the matter. "Yes - but also because you were explicitly trained in defence. And you've seen one of the most severe types of domestic violence first-hand. You're very no-nonsense."

"I'm a little bit in love with you," Buri repeated. Buri's voice was higher than Thayet's, Alanna realised, but the growl she applied made it seem much lower. It couldn't be good for her vocal cords.

"I'm in love with you, Buri, there's nothing little about it." Overt affection wasn't quite her thing, but the two times she had met Buri she had felt a close tie to her, an automatic spark of humour and trust. "Come on, you can stay at my place and we can rant about losing our platonic significant others then save the world." Thayet sighed. "You two are so sad. Neither Jon or I are that great."


They all laughed, and Alanna could hear Thayet tutting. "Look, book plane tickets, and I'll meet you at the airport," she said.

"Will I actually be of use?"

"Yes! Fuck yes! For fucking fuck's sake, Buri, yes, you will, we've established mutual love, come help me."

Thayet and Buri dissolved into laughter again, and Alanna thought that Buri may have been crying. Perhaps that was emotional projection. "Am I a matchmaker? Do you have a partner, Alanna?" Thayet asked, ever diplomatic.

Alanna felt warmth fill her up, from head to stomach, as she thought of George, full of laughter and flowing thought and gentleness. "Yes. I'm sorry."

In a mocking tone, Thayet began, "Buri, do you--?"

"Fuck off." Alanna snorted.

"Isn't she charming? You two will work something out."

"We'll ship Kel in, too, if she's permitted. Make it a feminist party. Bruise each other."
Thayet hummed as Buri chuckled. "Don't make me jealous now."

Alanna could see metaphorical lights popping up before her eyes as the idea of Buri getting off a plane to work on her NGO hit her with the reality of possibilities. "And I'll see if Veralidaine and Onua want to be involved. Onua is older than us, and Daine is a trans woman of colour - they're both invested in the fight against domestic violence." Thayet was making little whimpering sounds as Buri continued to giggle nervously, excitedly.

"Now you're torturing her, Alanna," Buri said.

"Oh, I know. I'll see if we can get Lianne in on it, too." Alanna heard Jon yelling out to Thayet, and she smiled for his antics. "Thayet, tell Jon to call me. I miss his stupid voice."

"I do nothing for you any more, Trebond."

Buri waited until Thayet had stopped whimpering to say. "She's sulking. I'll text you."

"Okay. See you, loves."

"See you. Thank you so much, Alanna."

"Any time."

"See you, traitor."

"Bye, Thayet."

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Pulled - The Addams Family Musical - Thom Trebond

July 17 by HesitantGinger

6.10
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Gaaaaaaaaaaay.

6.13
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Very observant.

6.15
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa.

6.15
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
He's got you pulled in a new direction and you think you like it, huh?

6.16
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
It's a really nice song. What did you think of it?

6.17
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
You handled the key changes fairly well but you had a note that wasn't quite 'right' in the second verse, but that may just be the way you applied vibrato. You know me, I prefer things more clear-cut.

I reiterate: gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay.

6.18
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Thanks, I'll look at it.
Is my behaviour really so changed?

6.19
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Yes. You have a CRUSH Thom, a CRUSH.

6.20
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
I'm aware, I've admitted this.

6.23
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
How is he?

6.24
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
He's good. Complaining about his drummer wanting to use a back-beat in every song.

My behaviour isn't THAT changed.

6.26
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
You bought new clothes, for the first time since you were nineteen.

6.27
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Because most of my clothes are torn and I deserve nice things in life.

6.31
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
You have:
bought new clothes of high quality

started listening to peppy and upbeat music, which is so out of character for you that I thought you had been possessed

started cooking more
used twitter less and actually USED UP your phone credit
extended your morning run and started doing the stretches I have told you to
gone back to playing guitar just as much as piano
cut your hair

6.34
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
You have put far too much effort into this. I'm ignoring you.

6.35
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
It's all true.

6.45
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Oh come on we're twins, aren't we supposed to talk about boys? Adolescence was no fun, you're spoiling my fun.

6.52
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Spoil-sport.

6.54
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
All of those things constitute as self-care.

6.54
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Would it be so bad for me to want to look different? I pass now, I can do what I want with my body.

6.55
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
And would it be so bad to want to look vaguely attractive?

6.57
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
No, Thom. It wouldn't. You look very nice, I'm sure Roger would 10/10 approve.

7.00
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Wow, Alanna, thank you for your holistic response to the situation. Post a selfie on instagram and I will, too, and I swear I'll get more likes than you.

7.01
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
And you call me petty!

7.01
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Alanna had made a check-list of eighteen things she needed to do within two weeks, and having done groceries, bought an inordinate amount of chocolate for Thom, spoken to Buri (flying in on Friday), spoken to Onua and Daine (flying in on the Monday after and Wednesday, respectively), recalculated her financial plan for the next two years, and spoken to the deans of her universities, long-distance and in person, she was left with eleven, only two of which she was dreading. Even with VidCon, the attack in Washington, everything with George, she felt she had been lazy for too long.

Myles's house was like something out of a fairy-tale, all deep red brick and vines framing the windows. His library was larger than his bedroom, and it was the 'entrance hall' to his space. His housemaid brought her to his study, which hosted a portrait of she, Thom, Jonathan, Alex, Raoul, and Gary sitting around him holding the trophy for the international debate competition.

She was warm. So warm, it filled her up from toe to head. She tried to think of herself as a stubborn, emotionally withdrawn person with complete control, but she felt so deeply, and she loved Myles and her friends so, so much. 'I really should have picked up on the whole feelings thing when I was crying my way through adolescence,' she thought.

Miles was sitting at his desk with a glass of brandy in hand, brow furrowed at some ancient Latin text. "Professor Olau?"

"Alanna!" He just avoided spilling his brandy as he got to his feet. He enveloped her in his arms, and as always he smelled of very old paper and very expensive alcohol. He stepped back a little and cupped her face in his hands. "Good god, child, it's been too long. Your hair has grown." He tilted her head from side to side, and she grinned at him. "You don't have to call me Professor any more, you know. You are my next of kin."

She shook her head and his hands fell to her shoulders. "It just feels disrespectful." She followed his eyes as he traced her head to toe, as if for injury. He smiled in that knowing way of his at the sight of her in a dress.

"It's nice to see you out of black," he said. She smiled and pulled back a little to examine him in turn. He seemed to have stopped aging at fifty-five ('thanks to all the wine'), despite his sixty-three years.

"How are you?"

"I'm well. I'm very tired. But I'm well. What can I do for you today?" He ushered her towards the desk, fumbling to bring her a chair.

She didn't sit, she knew his time was pressured. In all truth she had just wanted to see him, if only for a few moments. "I, um... a few things."


Alanna laughed and shook her head, although she knew full well he would probably give her all of them at once if she asked. "No, I'm okay." She sat and almost tore her dress as she fumbled with flaring it around her legs. "Thank you." He examined her for a long while, taking intermittent sips of brandy. She held his gaze although there was no challenge to do so.
"What's troubling you?" he asked at last.

"Well, not so much 'troubling’ as... making me think. It's not something I do enough."

He chortled. "While I believe you are highly intelligent, beyond almost anyone I have ever met--" She blushed. "--you are very impulsive on occasion. What has captured your brilliant mind?"

"I have begun the process of setting up a non-governmental organisation against the roots of domestic violence." From there she reiterated all that she had planned before, presented him with her timeline, her plans, her personnel, and showed him all of the paperwork she thought she might need.

His brow was heavily furrowed by the time she was done, and he had been taking notes the entire time. "You have done incredibly well," he said, and her cheeks tinted deep red.

"Only thanks to your guidance, Sir."

"Alanna." That was a strict tone if Alanna had ever heard one, one she had rarely heard from him.

"Yes, Sir?"

A stern-set mouth and jutted jaw melted into a smile, as if he had been hiding a marvelous joke, and said, "Please call me 'Myles'."

She exhaled, glad to not be reprimanded. "Okay," she whispered.

"Now, we need to start on funding, because while I appreciate that you are wealthy I don't like the concept of investment into an NGO that isn't grounded by financial insurance..." She grinned.

Chapter End Notes

Songs mentioned:
Do You Want to Build a Snowman?, from Frozen: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-zXT5bIBM0
Pulled, from the Addams Family Musical: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQU19DNYQLs

and hey, here is a playlist of all the songs in the fic so far - we'll keep updating it as time goes on. https://8tracks.com/dunedinparsley/harmonising-verb

Thank you so much for reading so far, the positive reception has been so nice, and I've flailed a lot. And there is George next chapter! Lots of George.

Thank you all again.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Daine, Numair, Buri, and Rispah enter stage left. Multi-day business meetings, and no-one really knows what flirting or boundaries are.

Trigger warnings for aggression, sexual references, brief references to sexual assault (not towards any named character), and transphobia.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thom sat with his legs parted, overtly masculine, still a compulsive motion in public. He brought them a little closer together as soon as he realised, and stared at the paper on his lap. Despite no real interest in medicine he did wish that he had the skill-set to interpret medical reports. "My blood's okay then?" he asked, cautious as he was.

"Perfect, but for your iron. Any surgery involving blood-loss should really be preceded by iron being stable. I would suggest packing in some spinach and red meat, and it will clear it right up - you shouldn't need supplements, but you have another check up in October." Doctor Rosethorn flipped through his file with a furrowed brow. She was in a constant state of appraisal, and she of course knew too much of him.

Thom had been seeing her for years, but somehow she had only gotten more anxious as he aged. She was the one who treated his bruised ribs, damaged from binding, gave him the paperwork to start taking testosterone, lied for him to bypass his father's negligence. He felt she should be less anxious, but he supposed that he was a long-term object of study. She wanted him to do well.

"Are you still exercising regularly?" she asked.

He nodded. "I've been running for about half an hour every morning, and my sister has given me some basic strength training exercises." She pointed to the scales, with her eyes still on his papers.

"And you're still posting music online?" Thom looked up at her as he unlaced his shoes and took off his belt. He was strangely aware of his own body, even of the little scar on the inside of his arm from the surgery to repair the bone.

"Of course I am. One hundred and twenty-seven." Rosethorn jotted the number down on her notepad and scrutinised each of his body parts in turn.

"That hasn't been too high stress? You haven't received any threats of violence or... pressure?"

Thom shrugged. "Threats are fine, I ignore them. They've dulled down now. If you mean pressure to... improve myself or over-exert myself, then no. I'm very well loved online, and most of the pressure on me is from myself." She opened her mouth to speak again, but he cut her off. "I'm still in uni, which is going well. I've managed to only attend one of every ten lectures for the past months, which suits me fine. I'm still topping my class."
"Still arguing with teachers?"

He grinned. "Always." She seemed pleased, but he could never quite tell with her. "Alanna and I are still close. She's... wanting to branch away from music and go into self-defence," he admitted. "She's worried that it will upset me that she doesn't want to pursue what I do - although she would never admit it."

"And have you developed any more relationships?"

He told her about befriending Jonathan, which made her grin, and about his contact with Roger, and she gave him a knowing look that made him blush. "I'm going to dinner with Alanna and George tonight," he concluded. "George is Alanna's boyfriend. He's a metal-worker."

"That will be good - do be nice to him. Now, Thom, for once I actually have another patient waiting--"

"Another trans person?" he asked. Despite the potential to meet other trans people online, or join social groups, he felt that it took too much effort for an unclear pay-off. The idea of another person in the next room over, someone just like him, maybe a trans guy, maybe a musician, was exhilarating. Meeting Alanna's friend Daine had been close to magic, let alone a trans man.

"At a transgender health clinic?" Rosethorn's eyes sparkled. "Wow, very perceptive, Thom." He scoffed, red-cheeked. It was primarily a research clinic. "Yes, a young transgender boy. You can't speak to him, he's under sixteen. But before we finish, I do need to ask if you're quite sure about this operation." He held back a sigh. "You can draw out, at any time, but fertility isn't something to be taken lightly. No, don't interrupt. I understand wanting to get rid of any 'female' parts, and you've had this plan for years, but the fact is that you're very different now, at twenty-one, than you were at sixteen and seventeen. If you think there's any chance you might want to bear children... I think you should explore it, even if it's just having your eggs frozen. I know it's not something you think you want, but I don't want you being distraught in fifteen years time that you can't have children of your own."

Thom did up his shoe laces, kept his eyes on the floor, said what he had said one hundred times over: "I don't want children of my own, Doctor. I don't want children. My own life is more than enough for me, and not having a uterus and all the risks associated with raised androgens and testosterone with a uterus--" She winced. "--is far more important to me that a potential version of myself decades in the future who wants a child."

"Please think on it." He knew he wouldn't, but he nodded and shook her hand.

Alanna was surrounded by piles of textbooks and history books, curled up on George's couch. They had been shopping for most of the day, for books and gemstones, and getting the excessive amounts of paperwork from the local Council to start a formal organisation. George was in front of the stove, humming off-key to the radio.

"George, how did you start your group?" Alanna asked, peering up from under her pile of books. George froze, Katy Perry's voice taking over the apartment. She sighed. "Oh come on, love, I'm not going to call it a 'gang'. And I'm not stupid."

He wiped his hands clean, meticulous and slow. His brow was furrowed, his muscles were tight,
tension like knots visible in his neck. "I know you're not... I just... 'group.'" George tried to laugh, but he was too tense for it to sound anything but strained. He came and sat opposite her on the edge of his coffee-table, legs stretched out, cheeks a little flushed. "Hm. Okay. It was Little and me, at first. Ma was in the middle of her breast cancer, I was sixteen. She was dying, I couldn't find a job, she wasn't granted welfare - I wonder why," he said, sarcasm in every note. He tugged on his thick curls and indicated his dark skin at her questioning look.

Alanna moved her books to the floor, and pulled him onto the couch beside her. He kept his distance, though, and remained tense. She put a hand between his shoulder blades and he smiled, kissed her cheek. "So... Little mentioned some fucked, corrupt cop attached to his father, and said it would be easy to knick some cash. So... well, long-story short, I got the money. Ma got proper treatment. We saw the outrage in that administrative circle and so we repeated the task a few times, started renting a flat each, and... well, his friends and my friends were curious. I'm good with liars. I always know when there's something more than what they're saying, so we got some proper people we trust." He took three deep breaths and met her gaze. His eyes had settled back to their cool standard, gold and green threads of light on brown spreading out from his pupils."Set it up from there."

She pushed his hair back from his eyes, and kissed the tip of his nose. She tried to keep her voice soft, joking, and said, "And when did you become the crime lord you are today?"

George got to his feet and went back to the stove, motion back to fluidity. "Well..." He mulled it over. Alanna didn't know how he had gotten the impression that she would judge him, thought herself better than him, but it was an ongoing issue that managed to break her heart. If anything, she felt unworthy of him. "I finally got my own computer, that helped," he said at last. "I developed a cypher with my cousin Rispah, who is a mathematics genius. I... you're going to laugh."

It was so matter-of-fact that Alanna didn't even question saying, "Yes."

He winced, but his eyes were crinkled up to his temples. "We called it 'the Robin Hood Initiative'."

The laughter swelled in her stomach, and though she tried to hold it back the sweet innocence of such a silly name warmed her. *What a ridiculous family,* she thought as tears trickled down her cheeks and her stomach muscles ached.

George was watching her with a cocked eyebrow, an incredulous look on his face that hid a grin. "You did say I would laugh," she said through her last giggles.

He let out a long *huff* of breath. "We think of it as a *redistribution* of funds." He took the lid off his pot. "Come here, taste this."

Alanna groaned, but did as told. She was tired, but she would do a great many things for George's cooking. "And why do they call you 'highness'?" she asked. "More salt."

"You think *salt* needs more salt." She stuck her tongue out at him.

"Well, apart from that it's perfect, *highness.*" George kissed her head, and (obligingly) tipped a little more salt in.

"They call me the King of the Thieves." He held back the pride from his voice, but only just.

He kept stirring his rice as she swore at him, and the 'ridiculous nature of the upstanding criminals
of society'. She boosted herself up onto his bench, and was at least close to on eye-level with him as she grumbled. He distracted her with another spoonful of food, which he refused to add more salt to.

George filled her in on the nature of his organisation, and what it meant to be a leader. She remained seated on the kitchen bench as they argued about who was more charismatic out of the two of them, and whether 'crime' was a social construct alone or merged with an inherent moral dissonance, and if so, was George the criminal of human morality, or were those he stole from?

That was what Thom entered to, a bottle of wine in one hand and his phone in the other. He ignored their conversation as they ignored him until he had sent a long series of text messages. At that, he tucked the phone into his pocket, placed the wine down next to Alanna, and coughed loudly.

"Good evening," he said, "I brought wine." George didn't turn away from the stove, but he was smiling. Alanna went to ruffle Thom's hair, but he slapped her hand before it reached him. In turn she jabbed his nose with a fingernail.

"Thank you, Thom." He glanced back to see Thom. His face was a little flushed, and he was dressed far more nicely than George had ever seen him. He was wearing a buttoned shirt, a deep navy, that hugged his hips and sides, showed off how slim he was while adding breadth to his shoulders. His jeans were clearly new, too. "How are you?" he asked, as he continued to examine Thom's new attire. His hair was different, his shoulders back, and there was a glimmer of something proud in his eyes that had been gone for months - since his arm was broken, in fact. George, so used to hiding his emotions, knew he didn't have to, but he was aware that he had a hundred questions to ask that he was sure wouldn't be answered.

"I'm good," Thom said. His phone buzzed against his thigh, and his hand flinched towards it, but he focussed himself on George. "And you?"

"Good, good. Food isn't ready yet, sorry, but sit down." George indicated the couch, and as the twins settled themselves he poured them each a glass of wine. "Alanna tells me you have a boyfriend."

"Alanna's a filthy liar," Thom snapped. The woman in question smirked, sipping her wine. His phone buzzed twice more in rapid succession, and his cheeks got hot and red again.

"Who is texting you then, Thom?" Alanna asked, and watched George splay himself across his old armchair, legs off the edge.

Hiding his red face, Thom did open his phone (each text, of course, from Roger), and snapped right back at her. "Your mother, fuck off." George chuckled. Even bickering they grinned at each other. They could match each others' rhythms so well. Even if they weren't near-to identical they had a dynamic like heart rate and blood pressure as soon as they shared a space.

"Roger is very attractive," he chimed in. Thom looked up at him, his chin tilted up, jaw set just a little differently than Alanna's. He was really quite pretty. Not feminine, not quite, but not handsome in the usual way. His hair and eye colour alone made him attractive. Of course, George had never found him personally attractive, as he found Alanna, but it would be silly to deny their resemblance. "And he looks like he'd be really nice, too, but..."

Thom filled in the words for him. "He's a bit of an arse, really. He hides it well, but he's manipulative. Shallow." His eyes were back on his phone, though Alanna was just twitching to take
it from him.

"It's good that you know it," said George.

Thom just scoffed. "I'm infatuated, not stupid."

"But I mean, he looks like he'd give really good head, even if he's a bit of an arse."

Thom's cheeks turned crimson, and Alanna kicked George's knee with a half-smile. "Thank you, George, I appreciate your insight." Alanna pulled the phone out of Thom's hand and shoved it down the front of her shirt. He cried out indignantly, but went back to the slow sips of his wine. He limited himself to one standard drink a week (always cautious), due to his liver and being on testosterone, so savoured it when he did drink.

"I'm just putting it out there."

Alanna paused in her chuckling to ask, "Are you queer, George?"

The three of them stilled, in silence for two long seconds. "I-- yes, of course I am." George's eyes had widened, the very image of bewilderment.

"Since when?" Alanna got to her feet, a hand on her hip. He tugged her down onto his lap so that she was on eye level with him, and Thom averted his gaze, but kept listening.

"Birth, probably," he said. He pushed her fringe back out of her eyes, but she looked on with indignation.

"I didn't know that!"

George rolled his eyes and shuffled around so that she was more comfortable, settled over his knees. "Well, I don't think most women enjoy being told about how much you like men mid-relationship."

"I'd be down for that," Alanna said.

"So are you bi?" Thom asked, braving a look up at them. They were far too cute for a pair of rather stubborn, very powerful individuals, and it made his stomach churn with sibling-disgust.

"I like the label 'queer'. It's broad enough to not limit. I'm primarily male-attracted--"

Thom made a high pitched noise, caught between a yell and a snort. "And you went for her anyway!" He poked at his own face before gesticulating towards hers. "That's just rude."

"Sorry, darlin', you aren't my type." Both twins raised their eyebrows, a very much identical look of distaste on their faces. "Well... interpersonally." Alanna's brows relaxed, but Thom just huffed again and crossed his arms. "As I was saying, primarily male-attracted. I got a four point five on the Kinsey scale, but I don't put much stock in it."

Alanna shook her head and kissed him swiftly. "We're both queer. That's so nice." She kissed him again, and he hummed through a smile.

"Your rice is burning," said Thom, examining his fingernails.
"No, it's not," George said, just as Thom's phone vibrated in Alanna's shirt. She yelped and almost threw the thing across the room. There was a scuffle as Thom grabbed it from her and clutched it to his chest protectively. George was laughing at the both of them, and Alanna settled back against his rumbling chest. Thom's nose was buried back in his phone. "But yeah, let me know how Roger is in bed."

Thom's hands were shaking, and even past his phone his face and his ears were bright red. "Why are you so invested in this?" His voice shook, too. Alanna was shaking with barely restrained giggles.

"He's hot, Thom!"

"I-- we're not even--"

"Aw, you're such a virgin."

"I hate the both of you."

Despite Thom's hatred and intermittent bouts of bickering about Roger and whether or not he would be 'a giver or a taker' they did have a nice evening. Alanna got rather drunk and told Thom about how much she loved him, and even if she became a vigilante against domestic violence he hoped that he would let her harmonise with him. He sighed, nodded, and stroked her hair as she sung the entire soundtrack of High School Musical. George, of course, analysed them quite thoroughly, then posted photographs to facebook.

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**7.00**

To: Roger Conté

*I thought you might appreciate an email that I was just sent by one of my peers. I've forwarded it to you, but here's the highlight: 'A truly functioning communist society would make both euthanasia and universal lobotomy necessities'.*

---

**7.03**

From: Roger Conté

*My dear Thom, you may have the most peculiar life I've ever known. What was that in response to?*

---

**7.08**

To: Roger Conté

*I argued with one of my lecturers about euthanasia and extending life expectancies - she, claiming that the prolonging of life is only reasonable considering the developing technology, and death is to be avoided at all costs blah blah blah, me arguing that death is not the worst fate one can suffer, and often a life of severe chronic illness or the effects of age are far crueler than death. If a life is prolonged for the sake of a prolonged life it is a waste of thought, energy, and space. I don't quite remember bringing up communism but apparently I did. He's agreeing with me, albeit incompetently and without tact.*

---

**9.39**

From: Roger Conté

*As said: weirdest life I've ever known. We're going to have to disagree on that, though. Prolonging (workable) adult life and decreasing the number of births would mean a more functional society. But hey, I'm coming into Idaho next week. Do you want to record 'Take Me To Church'?*
To: Roger Conté

And meet. Meeting would be nice. Some promised arguments on ethics. Yes, of course. I'd love that.

From: Roger Conté

Cool. :)

Buri kissed Alanna when she got off the plane, and it was all Alanna could do to pull her into a hug. She knew as well as Buri did that were circumstances different, with George, with Thayet, with Jon, they would likely be together. They worked well together regardless, a neat balance of similarity and difference, propping each other up. "Thank you for coming," Alanna said at last.

Buri looked tearful, despite her rough demeanour, and she tossed her braids back over her shoulders with a sniff. "Thank you for... letting me."

Alanna didn't know what to say, and shrugged. "Come on, we have a world to change." Arms around each other, each with a suitcase in hand, they went back to Alanna's car and promptly began a scattered conversation about the days ahead of them and ten years ahead of them, and Alanna fell back from the moment of mourning for the hypothetical relationship she may have had with Buri to present tense. She thought over their similarities - the one that jumped to mind was that while they were both bisexual Buri would never enter a long-term relationship with a man, as a political statement, whereas Alanna felt her political statements could be best made with the right person, whoever that may be, beside her. There were too many battlefields for her to fight in all at once. She could take them one by one - even if one of them was paperwork.

KnightlyGinger tweeted: Hey friends, I'm stepping back from music for an indefinite amount of time to work on a new project. That doesn't mean I'm giving it up [1/4]

KnightlyGinger tweeted: entirely but I'm working on something that means a hell of a lot to me. I will still work with @HesitantGinger when he needs me for [2/4]

KnightlyGinger tweeted: @LIONSBand and he of course will keep posting music (incessantly), but don't expect music from me any time soon. Self defence videos will now be once monthly, not fortnightly. Annoying tweets will likely be just as frequent. Thank you all for your support. <3 [3/4]

KnightlyGinger tweeted: be once monthly, not fortnightly. Annoying tweets will likely be just as frequent. Thank you all for your support. <3 [4/4]

From: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)

Were those tweets physically painful to write?

From: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)

Yes.
From: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)
List the reasons before they grow into poison and you start crying.

From: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)

1. I don't like feeling that I owe anyone, even my fanbase, anything. However I have a crushing sense of responsibility and I feel that I am letting them down.
2. I'm scared I'm misplacing my efforts for a variety of reasons, notably that this organisation may not succeed.
3. I don't want to give up music, and I know I'm not, but twitter has this weird sense of finality to it.
4. Buri and I have had a weird few hours in which we have revisited every emotion we've ever felt towards each other. Oh, and she kissed me when she got off the plane. We both know I'm with George and that's pretty final but we don't quite know how to talk to each other yet.
5. I'm scared of change and this is a big one.
6. I love you a lot and I think I'm letting you down and limiting you.
7. I love you a lot and you have bigger and better things to be pursuing than a youtube channel with me. And you can do all of them on your own.
8. They were very sweetly phrased and I am not very sweet.

To: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)
And you don't have to respond to any of that.

From: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)
1. I fully recommend following my lead and not giving a shit about anyone but me and you.
2. You're Alanna Trebond, Lioness and Knight of the Realm of Corus, you can do anything.
3. I'll show up in your bathroom while you're showering and sing the entirety of RENT until you join in if I think you haven't sung recently. You know I will.
4. Kissing you was wrong of her. Keep it professional. And get George in.
5. Refer to point 3.
6. Fuck off.
7. Fuck off.
8. They weren't that sweet, your rep's not gone.
9. I love you.

To: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)
1. I failed with that as soon as I met Jon. There's no going back.
3. Thanks.
4. I know. George is coming over after work tonight. I already told him she kissed me. He said he understood.
8. They hurt, Thom. There was a loveheart and everything.
9. I love you. You should come over before Daine and Numair get here.
Veralidaine and Numair showed up the next day, to Alanna and Buri standing in front of a wall covered in post-it notes. Both of them looked sleep deprived, and there was a strong smell of fancy coffee mixed with the bitter stench of instant coffee.

Numair quickly established that the notes on the wall were colour coded: names were pink, each marked with purpose - funding, promotion, potential legal representatives, designers, public relations workers, icons, and those killed or severely affected in domestic violence situations. Blue were goals. Yellow were potential dates for the openings of defence centres, and offices. Orange were stumbling blocks. Purple were campaign possibilities.

In all honesty Numair had just come off a production of 'Les Miserables' and Daine was taking a gap year before going into university, they wanted a break. Both of them knew the importance of Alanna's cause, and were ready to commit themselves to it, but Numair's power was in his voice, in the way he spoke to people on a stage (or occasionally through social media), his charisma. He didn't know how much use he could be, but he would be it, and he would do whatever Daine needed of him.

She was uncertain about what she wanted to do with her life, but Alanna was like a glowing icon of what it meant to be a well-rounded, powerful woman - and she had never once questioned that Daine was a woman. She was only two years older than Daine, but Alanna represented something true: pride in her womanhood, but more importantly, pride in herself. She had seen Alanna's vulnerability as time went on, brief flashes of fear, but Alanna fought. She was a warrior with a woman's pride flag on her shield, and Daine would kill for that type of pride.

The two of them stood in the doorway to the living room watching the two women shuffling around the post-it notes. Behind them was a massive pile of books, and when Alanna took a red pen to the wall itself, the books yelled, "Alanna!"

"Oh fucking shit and fuck."

The pile of books sighed and fell apart before their eyes. Thom's head peaked out from behind the books, and it was he that noticed Daine and Numair. "You have visitors, Alanna." He pushed the books away from him, one by one, and stood. He didn't look quite as sleep deprived as the other two, but there were ink smudges on his face and he looked disenchanted with the books around him, let alone everything else.

"Daine, Numair!" Alanna embraced both of them, red pen still in hand. "How are you both? Thank you for coming."

"I-I'm good," Numair said. "We let ourselves in. I hope that's okay."

"Of course it is. How are you, Daine?"

Daine's cheeks got a little red and she was shaky. "I'm good. Thank you for having us."

Thom stepped out from the books and hugged each of them with a traditional Broadway kiss on each cheek for Numair, and a shy little bob of the head for Daine. She still made him nervous, even though he knew that he made her nervous, too. "Thank you for coming."

"Thom, I saw your cover of 'Pulled', it was incredible. Every time you sing something from a show I want to whisk you away to New York with me," Numair said. "We could do a wonderful Les Mis, I'm just putting that out there."
As Buri was introduced to Daine, Numair and Thom occupied the couch and began talking, rapid-fire, about their musical lives. Alanna sighed, and continued writing on the wall.

Once George and his cousin Rispah had arrived over the next days it was apparent that Alanna's house was too small. Numair and Thom had gone back to Thom's house to his piano and surround speakers, leaving Buri and Alanna in the middle of a heated phone conference with an education officer about appropriate self defence for ten to sixteen year olds, and Daine going through their post-it notes with a silver pen (differentiating from Alanna's red in its corrective purposes). She wasn't always proud but she was quite confident in her analytical skills, particularly when it came to being realistic.

Somewhere between Alanna knocking over her coffee machine in showing Buri a throw and Daine spraining her wrist when she fell over some books Alanna decided that they had to relocate to Thom's place, which was substantially larger than her own, and had whiteboards. She didn't have whiteboards!

So, two days, two all-nighters, four calls with four lawyers, three calls with local councils, two calls with Jon, and five take-out orders later they agreed to a recess from the whole affair. They took turns in Thom's shower ("didn't you book hotel rooms?" he asked to no response), and he and Alanna made a proper breakfast, rather than leftovers. He pushed her to the side of the kitchen, out of earshot of Daine and Numair (feeding each other fruit salad), much to her indignation. "What?" she asked.

"Don't snap at me. You've brought five people into my house uninvited," he snapped. He poked her forehead, and she scowled.

"You have more space than me. It's important to--"

"It's an important cause, yes, yes, that's fine, don't try to guilt trip me," Alanna lowered her eyes in a sweet mockery of guilt. "This is a nice thing! I'm telling you a nice thing because we're siblings! Even when we're working! And I don't have friends so you have to listen to me."

Her eyes sparkled, maybe with sleep deprivation, but maybe because of the rambling and blush on his cheeks. She flailed her hands to hurry up as he rambled, sparing a glance to Daine and Numair, who were entirely oblivious to them.

"Roger's coming into Idaho on Thursday." His whisper was cut off by the choke of his excitement. Alanna giggled.

"You're meeting up with him?"

He nodded vigorously. "Yeah, we're going to... do music. And argue ethics. He's been referencing me on social media, and we've texted each other everyday, and we-- I think we're--"

"Flirting?" she offered as he stumbled through his words. She hugged him just to silence him, stroking his hair. They were uncomfortably cramped up against the cupboard, but he let his body and tension fall against her.

"No, but-- almost flirting. Half-flirting." Thom was shaking, and she kept giggling. She had forgotten all about Roger as soon as Buri had arrived, and she realised that her head-over-heels
brother had indeed had his head buried in his phone for the past days whenever he wasn't working.

"'Half-flirting' is flirting, Thom," she told him in a solemn tone. Thom could see Daine and Numair stealing glances towards them, and pulled himself away with a dignified sniff.

"I'm probably misreading it all, anyway." Alanna shook her head. "But I... I'm really excited to meet him."

"You are so ridiculous." He raised an eyebrow, and went back to cutting fruit and making porridge. "I'm really glad he's coming, Thom. And he is very attractive," she admitted, and stole a strawberry.

He dropped his knife and yanked his phone out of his jeans to present her with a photograph of him. "He sent this to me this morning as a 'look how horrid I look without coffee in me' photo, and-" Thom poked at the picture of Roger's face, as if offended.

"So pretty." Alanna nodded and took the phone from Thom, scrolling through his messages. He didn't bother protesting, knew she would win out in the end. "He is flirting with you. I'm about eighty percent sure."

"To be fair, you are incompetent when it comes to flirting," he reminded her.

"Thank you, Thom, that's kind of you." She kept scrolling. "However, I think that references to Sondheim's 'Losing My Mind' and texts from all hours of the day do imply a little bit more than just friendly attachment."

Daine had vanished while the twins weren't looking, and Numair had come to join them. He coughed and asked, "Are you talking about Roger?" Thom's cheeks went impossibly red. He hated having people in his house. Numair was likely his favourite person in the house, though, and they had worked on several good songs before the rest of them came along, so he fought the urge to snap at him. "He's a nice guy, I like him. We sang together at a tribute concert at the White House a few years ago. Can I have some more strawberries?" Thom scowled and handed a box over to him. "Your voices would be perfect together, now that I think of it."

"My voice is perfect with everyone's," Thom grumbled. He fumbled with his phone when Alanna gave it back to him to turn on some music, but not before double checking that she hadn't done anything embarrassing. It seemed unlikely, however she somehow managed to surprise him, occasionally. But no, she had made a copy of one of Roger's selfies and drawn on devil horns and a French moustache. She grinned at him. He slapped her hand reaching for another strawberry.

"Yes, it is, but he's--"

Thom cut him off, "Let's stop talking about Roger and talk about the sickening sexual assault rates in this country."

"Wow, you're cheery."

Thom stabbed an apple. "Always."

That day was spent on edge, by everyone. Something about seven highly-motivated people being in a house together, with no true 'adult' supervision led to sleepless nights and raised voices and
hoarse throats, even in the friendly moments. Thom had taken his guitar up to his bedroom only to be snapped at for bothering the group. Even if it wasn't his house, he would have kept playing, but just because it was he played louder, and wrote an accompanying vocal line on the fly.

While within an hour people were laughing about it he was on the edge of kicking them all out, and yelling at Alanna, he looked at her and his heart ached. She was fighting. She was always a fighter, in a classroom, with their father, with enemies, with friends. She fought. She threw herself into everything she did, which led to varied levels of over-exertion, but always one level. Alanna was fighting for her cause, her productivity, and in a silent sort of way, against Buriram. There was a crackling tension between them, and while Numair put it down to them being too similar but too different, Thom knew it was far more complex than that, and from the way George kept his arm neatly around Alanna's shoulders, they knew it, too.

Everywhere was couples. Thom sat with Rispah when he could, George's good-humoured thirty-something cousin, who knew so much about mathematics and computer sciences that she was kicked out of all of her classes for 'bullying the teachers'. They bonded, needless to say. It turned out that she had a bit of a crush on Roger, and that became both a bonding point and an impetus for Thom to ignore her. That was one of the moments that Buri broke, by falling from the rhythm of conversation with a little too much pain in her voice, a little too loudly.

"But-- it defeats the whole learning experience. It needs to be a safe space for girls." Thom, Rispah, and George stilled entirely, each in a different way. George leaned forward but his eyes honed themselves on a broader view of the room. His hand, resting on Alanna's knee, stilled in its rotations. Rispah leaned back, her hands curled into fists on her lap ('what even happened to their family?' Thom asked himself), eyes locked onto her key players: Alanna and Buri. Thom froze entirely, but for his roving eyes.

Daine and Numair both had pens in hand, and while Numair kept writing with a furrowed brow, Daine was looking at Buri like she'd never seen tears before, though Thom well-knew that she had.

"Well, maybe we should look at different aspects of the organi--" Alanna said, voice drawn back into cautiousness.

"But this needs to be a unified effort, else it will become a male-dominated space, and unsafe for women, which is against the whole point," Buri said, quite promptly. She glared at Alanna, and was met in kind.

"No, because it needs to be an overall safe-space. In an optimal environment anyone needs to develop the understanding and skills of--" Alanna tried to keep her voice steady, but Thom could see the red rising up the back of her neck and ears.

"Men don't need those skills. Men need to be told to sit down and shut up when women need to learn, need to speak, to be heard." While Thom would usually be thinking through all of the potential ways he could win out in this argument, what Alanna would say, what Buri would say, he was too tired and too aware of the gendered nature of the discussion.

"We can't expect men to learn a skill-set of respect without being taught." George's hand went back to it's slow motion on Alanna's thigh, but she pushed him off. Thom sighed, and considered making a run for it with his violin, but it was too late. The room seemed too still to check his phone, let alone move. "While in several generations time it would be nice to think that we'll all be born with an inherent skill-set of respect, of basic decency, society hasn't given most of us the education, the socialisation, to develop one! It has to be taught, even if it's non-optimal."
"While I respect the need for men to be given equal opportunity to women, the fact is that men have all the opportunity, the opportunity to educate themselves, women have no opportunity provided to us, from day one, and as soon as men are included in seminars tailor-made to stop the forced subservience of women, we will have lost." Alanna raised an eyebrow, something akin to a grimace on her face. "Yes, I know what 'subservient' means, don't give me that look."

"Buri, you can't honestly believe that. Toxic masculinity--"

"Doesn't have such a high death or rape rate as the fact that four in every five women is sexually assaulted or degraded at some point in her life, arguably five of every five, and three women a day are murdered by a former or current intimate partner." Buri got to her feet, hands on the edge of the table. Alanna paralleled her immediately.

Numair finally looked up, as if he had just been broken from a deep sleep. "Okay, both of you--"

Buri whipped around to face him with fire in her eyes. "Don't you fucking dare, you're proving my point exactly." She looked back to Alanna, gesticulating wildly at Numair. "Even having him and George here makes this space the wrong one for setting up an anti-misogynistic organisation. I refuse to be spoken down to and a topic that's not yours to speak on, Numair."

Alanna paused for a moment, and Thom felt an impending sense of doom set in his stomach. Alanna pausing was somehow more dangerous than working incessantly. "And I note that you don't mention Thom." Alanna said, voice low. He resisted the urge to slap her.

"Don't pick fights--" he began, only for Buri to cut him off. He didn't want to slap her, but yelling seemed just fine.

"No, I don't, because Thom actually gets the bullshit of being shoved to the side, objectified, taken advantage of, looked down on, ordered around, from birth, let alone mid and post puberty, so yes, he joins the girls' team--" He felt his heart race, and it was more like his brain and his emotions fell to the earth before him than his stomach. "--and Daine should stay out of that."

"Don't group me with women, Buri, I'm not at all okay with that." His voice was gravelly, raw, and she didn't look at him.

"Don't call Daine--" Numair began, but Buri spoke over him,

"Numair and George never will. And don't pull the racism card, I'm just as dark as you two, and you're still both not women, so you fundamentally do not understand sexism."

"Buri, come on. I agree with you, but we all need to--" Rispah tried, she really did, but Buri and Alanna were like magnets and electricity, fire and air, there was no way to get a word in edgewise.

"How dare you? You come into Thom's space - my space - and misgender him, with an assumption of authority based on excluding men, who need just as much education as women." Thom got to his feet and grabbed Alanna, digging his fingers into her palm, only to be pushed backwards. George put a hand on Thom's shoulder, which he shoved off. He walked to the door and threw it open, and the only people who paid attention were the ones he didn't want.

"Oh, shut up, Alanna, this isn't about Thom," Buri said. Well, at least he agreed with that. "And it certainly isn't about pandering to men. I respect your sentiment of justice, but what we need is
equality. Then comes justice. Men don't need anything just yet. They go to the back of the fucking priority line right now." Her voice was too loud, too strong, and though he didn't think it was possible the two women looked ready to throw punches. It was too much.

"You talk about people talking down to you and somehow manage to talk down to everyone who--"

"Alanna, Buri, get the fuck out of my house!" he yelled.

No-one moved for a long while.

Numair was half reaching for Daine, whose jaw was set and eyes over-bright, but she shook her head, the first to leave. Buri laughed a brief, disbelieving laugh and left right behind her.

George put an arm around Alanna and she pushed him off, glaring at Thom as if it were somehow his fault that she was misusing him and his home. "I mean it, get out of my house right now, I'm not okay with this taking place here any more." Alanna, too, looked like slapping him, but she picked up her bag and stormed out, crackling like lightning.

Rispah kissed the top of George's head and left with a nod to Thom, who scowled. Her passivity did nothing.

"I'm going home. Do you want to come?" George asked Numair, with his eyes on Thom, as if to apologise for staying back. Thom nodded tersely in recognition and began to tidy the house, switching on all of the lights, shoving things indiscriminately into the trash.

Numair nodded and began to collect his and Daine's things. "Thank you."

"Are you okay, Thom?" George put a hand on his shoulder, and he fought his urge to flinch away again.

"I'm fine. I'm just tired. While I appreciate all of you, and all of your points of view, this is my home, and I refuse to be misgendered and used as ammunition in an argument that I shouldn't even be involved in." George nodded and patted his back. "Thanks, George. Stay away from Alanna for a few hours." He laughed and ran a hand over his eyes, nodding vigorously.

Numair stacked all of the used dishes into the sink. "I might book a conference room once everyone has made nice again," he said. "Business shouldn't take place in anyone's home."

Thom refused to look at either of them. He was too vulnerable, felt too much like the girl of the room in one of the first situations he had actually been in with exclusively other men. "It might take a while to make nice," he said through the lump in his throat.

Together Numair and George opened all the windows and put the fans on, despite not having asked him, and stacked all of the paper's into subject order as Numair spoke. "Onua will be here tomorrow, she'll knock all of us together. Should we... I don't know, step back? All three of us?"

Numair and George did step back, in front of him, both looking guilty. They had just put him in charge, and his heart-rate slowed a little.

He rubbed his temples and nodded with a heavy exhalation. "I think that while you, George, provide valuable insight into actually speaking to a community, and you, Numair, have excellent concepts, it may be best until they've actually locked their ideology in place." He looked around
his house, which had only ever had two people in it before, looking dishevelled and in heavy need of vacuuming. He should never have allowed them into his home at such short notice when he was so uncomfortable with it, when they had so little of a 'plan'. It was an important enterprise, but not in his home. "We don't quite have a place yet. And I'd still like you to leave."

12.08
From: Roger Conté
Hey, call me when convenient.

Once George and Numair were gone he slumped down against the wall with his face in his hands. He and Alanna didn't fight, really. They squabbled, they bickered, they occasionally disagreed, but she never used him, she was never not his support person. He just wanted a distraction, something to draw him out of his chest and his own head.

He tuned his violin with the utmost care. He hadn't played enough, despite the violin, a Gliga Vasile, being his most treasured possession, his preference instrumentally. Piano was easier to work around for vocals, and beautiful and challenging and pure, but nothing quite compared to the pressure through his chin, his collarbone, his shoulder, the slide and burn of the strings on calloused fingertips. While Paganini was in his reach, and he did love to brag on his concertos, Vivaldi was his one true love of string composers.

Alanna never could quite understand his love of Vivaldi, nor of the violin, no matter how competent she was with strings. Vivaldi was his. He felt protective over the centuries-dead man, over the open crescendos, the fearless opening bars, the fall into soft notes balanced on the tips of quick fingers, the moments of silence between movements to the break into the next, the way the rain fell in Winter and the fires raged in Summer.

He was lucky to be a vocalist: he could not tire of the Four Seasons as so many violinists had. He could still feel the reverberations of centuries old beauty, alongside the vibrations down into his torso to his legs and feet, in his perfectly silent sanctuary of music. It was enough, the clean white walls, the perfect carpet, the way the notes moved.

Thom still cried that night, hot, heavy tears on his cheeks and lips. Something had broken. With Alanna? Because of Jon? Because of Roger? Because of the people in his home? All four? With himself, even, he felt there was something wrong, or at least, something foreign coiling in him. Everything felt hyper-sensitive, his emotions were sharp stabs through his body. He double-checked all of the paperwork - his last testosterone shot was the same as it always was, down to the preservative, so it couldn't be that. His body felt raw in the same way his first testosterone shots had prompted. He was aware of his movements, his freckles, the deposits of fat on his stomach and thighs, the bits of skin pulling away from his callouses, the slope of his nose between his eyes.

Doctor Rosethorn had been amazed to find that he wasn't showing signs of post-traumatic stress after the attack in Washington, but he remembered that he never was good at talking about his feelings. He might have cut something off. Maybe it was time for it to come back. He didn't like it though. Looking back at his twitter, his text messages, his essays, there was a shift in his language, particularly his emotive language, from January to February, and again since VidCon. He hated it. It was bullshit. The burning of his tears and the tremble in his heart-rate as Idina Menzel's voice soared through his speakers cancelled each other out, and he fell asleep tired and drained, but at least he slept.

The next morning he woke just as tired, and even more vexed, but he went for his run and took his
shower, and went back to his violin. His touch softened, movements became less jerky on its strings. He played until his fingers were sore, with the firm knowledge that he had learned this on his own, and he could apply the same principal to the rest of his life, Alanna be damned.

**HesitantGinger tweeted:** New song today! I don't know what to call it so I'm just going with 'Ballad to Antonio Vivaldi'.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Songs mentioned:

- Losing My Mind, by Stephen Sondheim: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoZVxPTvGp4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoZVxPTvGp4)

Thank you for reading this, and thank you all so much for your comments. <3
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Alanna and Thom angst and prove a genetic predisposition to stubbornness and poor dispute resolution.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings: brief mention of a past suicide, brief anti-Black racism.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ballad to Antonio Vivaldi/Callouses - Thom Trebond

July 23rd by HesitantGinger

The shrill ringing of his phone brought Thom out of the reverie of a series of essays that, while he had started reading them for Alanna, enchanted him with the prose of a novel, and the cold history of the development of the American legal system. He had moved his spare key so that Alanna couldn't find it, and had turned her number to 'silent' on his phone. There were only so many people who called him besides her, and he only just managed to not spill his coffee in reaching for his phone. It was, indeed, Roger, and he remembered-- "Shit! I didn't respond to your text. I'm sorry."

"That's a lovely opening line." Roger's laugh was vibrant, and Thom's cheeks went back to their strawberry pink. "But no, it's okay. You sound busy, so I just wanted to ask you if you would be willing to be an opening act for the two shows in Idaho."

Thom had been hoping that Roger would ask him just that, but he hadn't wanted to get his hopes too high. "That would be... really cool, actually. Thank you."

"I'll get my agent to send through a contract. It's pretty simple, but a precaution I've been told never to take risks with." Thom nodded to himself and jotted down on a piece of scrap paper to differentiate between his and Alanna's tax file and social security numbers. His stomach churned - he was still listed as female on most of his papers. The hysterectomy would leave him viable to be marked as 'male', at last, but it felt too late.

He shook himself out of it. "Of course. What should I prepare?"

"A fifteen minute set, preferably original songs."

Again, he jotted down a list of songs he could use, reminding himself to look at Roger's setlist. "Done. Thanks, man."

"A pleasure. Thank you."
He bit the inside of his mouth, and said, "It'll be... good to meet you." Such a simple statement left his heart racing, but he had wanted to say a hell of a lot more. It was so fucking illogical. He had never met the man, didn't really know him, but the affection he felt was flooding through him, to the way he thought and played and went about his day.

"You, too," Roger said, and his voice was softer, dropped just a little. He chuckled before he said, "I'm still holding out on a promise for a conversation on the ethics of cannibalism."

Thom laughed, and his throat unclenched. "I don't like to think that there are 'winners' in conversations, but after three years with a lecturer who did all of his major projects on cannibalism, I think that I can hold up my end. Why did you mention cannibalism initially?" he asked. It had been a very odd sort of conversation starter.

"Oh, you referenced Hannibal Lecter on twitter. That line of 'eat the rude' was one of my uncle's catchphrases when Jon and I were growing up. I... appreciated it, on the show, despite not being particularly invested in it."

Thom snorted in an entirely undignified way. "Oh, that makes so much sense for Roald."

"He's impeccable, in terms of manners, and enforced the same on those around him." There was a level of whine in Roger's voice, that spoke of time sent to a naughty corner, bed without dessert, slapped hands, harsher words than a child could understand. Roger's parents were dead, Thom remembered. Roald was the head of his childhood household.

"To be fair, I think it's familial," Thom said, just before his pause became awkward. "Jon can be an arse, but he's always polite about it."

"True. I-- oh!" There was a scuffle and echoing voices. "I have to go, we haven't done the tech run yet. I'll text you," he said, words tenser, more clipped than they were before. Thom wondered if their conversation had been private before.

"Okay. I hope the show goes well."

Roger paused, and Thom imagined (for he knew there was no way he could know) that he was smiling. "Thanks. See you."

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**The Special Two - Missy Higgins cover - Alanna Trebond**
July 24 by KnightlyGinger

*I guess I lied about new music, but this'll be the last for a long while.*

Alanna was slouching over the edge of the front desk of the hotel Kel's parents had considered most appropriate, and though she wasn't 'glowering', per se, the staff looked disconcerted nonetheless. She was in charge of triple checking everything, and while she thought children were over policed, she took the trust that Kel's parents had put in her seriously.

George had his back against the counter, arms crossed over his chest. He tugged absent-mindedly at a curl that kept falling into his eyes. It was too damned hot for long hair, he decided.

Alanna let out an irritated sigh. The desk worker paused in her typing long enough to glare. "If you
"He's not answering his phone." He raised an eyebrow, and she jutted her chin. "I don't want to give him the satisfaction of begging; I hurt him, but I was justified, and he knows it." That stubborn chin of hers shook slightly, and George touched her shoulder.

"No, he doesn't." He pushed her hair back from her forehead. "And you know it. You used him as ammunition in a way that wasn't even relevant. You could have brought up your father hitting him, but you used his minority status instead."

"I posted a song to say 'sorry!'"

George coughed and straightened his back, "'Blaine, I sang you a song to express my apology'," he said in a lofty tone.

"'Regrets'," Alanna murmured, voice small.

"What?"

"The line. It's 'regrets', not 'apology'."

George snorted. "Way to divert, darlin'." She chuckled and kissed his knuckles on her shoulder. "Just talk to him. Harass him or he'll never leave the house again, and he's pale enough already."

She nodded and looked at him, really looked, and went a deep red at the look on his face, the kind of soft and unbreakable devotion that poems were written about.

She was beyond relieved when the clerk said, "So, an unlisted booking for two weeks under the name Keladry Mindelan, access to Ilane and Piers Mindelan, and Alanna Trebond. Her room's just under two security cameras, and everything but the bar is open to her. You get called if she's not back every night by midnight, unless you inform us otherwise."

"Great, thank you." Details about key cards and booking times were exchanged, the clerk made a vaguely perturbed comment about how odd all of their names were, and Alanna text Ilane and Piers with a flutter of excitement in her chest. She couldn't quite believe that they had trusted her with their child, but they knew the Conté family and of her father, and from her conversations with both of them, Kel spoke about her incessantly. It was as terrifying as it was flattering. She still didn't feel quite 'role model' worthy.

It was too hot, really, to have George's arm around her, but she couldn't bring herself to push him off. He knew her too well, too intimately, and she couldn't cope with the way that he scared her and comforted her. Unlike Jon, who felt like slotting back into a puzzle piece, George was foreign and beautiful and just perfect enough, crime lord or not.

She was so lost in thought that she didn't notice the man approaching them, furrowed brow and hands slightly forward as if in a peace offering. George's fingers curled into her waist, face perfectly blank. "Excuse me, miss." That was a bad start, in her books. She eyed the man. Thirties or early forties, blonde curls, cargo shorts and t-shirt. She or George could take him in a fight, but he wasn't aggressive - that bothered her even more, he might be asking for her time or her thoughts, effort. "Miss, I'm so sorry, but is he bothering you?"

George almost laughed. She could feel it, it was the vindictive, horrified-but-not-surprised laugh that had long ago become his response to racism. "You're disgusting," she said. "Oh my god, is it... just talked to him--"
because he's a foot taller than me, because his eyes are hazel, or because his shirt's white? What's your reasoning?" She almost felt bad for the man as he spluttered. Almost. "Try questioning your racist ideologies and looking at crime rates relating to race, and apologise to him."

His apology came out like splinters, he was red-faced with rage and shame, and she was vindictively pleased when George lowered his head and fluttered his eyelashes, said nothing. She tugged his hand and they turned the other way. He broke down giggling. "It's good to know I have you to defend my honour."

"I'm going to kick someone's arse," she said determinedly. "How dare he?"

"There's smoke coming out of your ears." He tried to keep a straight face, but his lip was quirking. She kicked his ankle and he cackled. "Let's get milkshakes and talk about Thom." She groaned, but nodded, and kissed his shoulder all the same.

Conté

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia

This article is about the model and singer Roger Conté. For the former President of the United States see Jason Conté Sr., for the presidential candidate see Roald Conté, for the former Minister of Foreign Affairs see Jason Conté Jr., for the social media icon and son of Roald Conté, Jonathan Conté, youth worker and fashion designer Lianne Conté, and past politicians of the same name see Conté Family.

Roger Jason Elias Conté (born 17th February 1990, age 25), better known by his mononymous stage name Conté, is an American model, singer and songwriter.

He was born and raised in Washington DC, by uncle Roald Conté alongside cousin Jonathan Conté, and has been touring since 2014. He has a substantial fan-following on YouTube, and has released three EPs since 2010. Three songs, notably 'Tainted' (2013), came to number one on American music charts. His first album, Conté, is due for release on the 23rd of October, 2015. The first single 'Portrait' (July 5th) currently holds the number one spot on American, British, and Australian charts.

He received his bachelor's degree in Political Sciences from Yale University in 2010, and achieved the highest mark of his graduating year. He is openly bisexual.

Early life

Conté was born on the 17th of February, 1990, to Jason and Joanna (nee Fletcher) Conté. His mother died during the birthing process, due to blood clotting. His father took his own life (see: Suicide of Jason Conté) when Roger was three years old, citing the grief of losing his wife in his suicide note. Roald, his father's brother, adopted him, alongside wife Lianne. Their son, Jonathan, was born soon after Roger's adoption, and they were raised as brothers in the Conté mansion in Washington DC.

Thom felt too guilty to continue reading. He had once heard Jonathan say to Gary 'friends don't read friend's Wikipedia pages', and he felt that it was for fair reason. He liked information, liked
knowing things. He didn't understand hiding accessible information. But he couldn't bring himself to scroll down any further.

However, out of curiosity, he examined his own - 'his' was shared with Alanna. Somehow that seemed brutally offensive - they also cited her as the older twin, entirely falsely, and referenced him at various points with his old name. He edited it himself, but didn't have the energy to make his own page.

He spent the rest of the day ignoring Alanna's texts and perfecting a set-list for Roger's show. He didn't want to stress too much, but fifteen minutes had to be refined - his own hour, two hours, could be loose, not fit together. Those fifteen minutes had to be right. He didn't know what was appropriate. Roger's setlists were highly varied, (or so hours on YouTube told him) big ballads and upbeat pop numbers alike. He felt like his songwriting was still like a framework - which was ridiculous, because his compositions were incredible, his lyrics were decent, but he felt there was too much movement, style-wise. He didn't like the confinement that genres could force on artists, but he knew he wasn't marketable just yet.

The brief discussions he had undertaken with agents, managers, even booking venues, they wanted him to have something apart from string instruments in alternative pop/rock to be his trademark. They wanted him to have love songs.

He didn't 'do' love songs. He didn't have a love interest to be singing about, and unlike Sara Bareilles he had no irony left in him. He had an angsty break-up song written on Alanna's behalf, more anger than love, and 'Too Far', a hypothetical exploration of being in love with someone. He was never fond of it, but it made his fans incredibly happy.

Roger opened with 'Priorities' or 'Golden' most of the time. Upbeat, a tad existential, turning to love songs directed to someone of ambiguous gender, floating from there. If he matched the fragile passion of 'Golden', even if Roger went with 'Priorities', he would be showing a great craftsmanship on stage.

He was scribbling on a piece of tattered paper, a list forming:

1. Skin
2. Rooftop
3. Force of Hand
4. 

**Outgoing call: Roger Conté**

"Thom, hi--"

"Roger, what's wrong with this song?"

"It's too low. Bring it up a tone, and the chorus will soar rather than fall flat."

"Cool, thanks."

**Call ended**

"Fuck." Thom dropped his capo.
"Sorry, that was rude." He didn't think Roger minded 'rude', not really, not from him, but he felt a spark of guilt all the same.

Roger chuckled, "A bit."

Thom felt his cheeks go red, and thought about Alanna - how dare she share his face? - and just how marked her blushing was. "I trust you won't eat me for it." He tried to mimic Roger's tone, the implied laughter when he wasn't laughing. He was so caught up in that laugh that he didn't quite realise the innuendo until it was too late, and he was chuckling shyly, too.

"I suppose I can make an exception to the rule." He said it like it was a deep hardship, but Thom could hear his smile. He didn't know that could happen.

"How are you?"

"I'm well, thank you. What's that song called?" Wasn't it rude to not ask how someone was in turn? Was there a hand-book of rudeness? Thom needed it, if there was. But no, he was sick of acting like someone else, like someone who cared about such things.

His tongue almost stumbled saying, "'Too Far'."

"'Closer than too far'... it's pretty, I like it. You should call it 'Closer Than Far', though. Or... 'Closer Than Too Far Away', but that's a bit of a mouthful."

"Coming from the man who brought us 'I Told You We Were Magicians'."

He could hear people in the background laughing, and thought about those massive tour buses. He didn't think he could deal with that many people living with him. Roger scoffed. "It flows better. Are you playing 'Closer Than Far' as my opening?"

"Yes. Thanks for naming my song. Does this D-minor fit?" He played the chord barred, glared at his capo on the floor. "And I know this fight is a loss to begin with..."

"It fits, but maybe... touch the bass F before switching to the G. Did you write it to parallel 'Golden'?"

Thom's stomach turned and his cheeks were so hot. "You wish. I wrote it years ago. But... I'm reworking it with the awareness of both 'Golden' and 'Priorities'."

"It's good. The lyrics are... very..."

"Naive, childish, bad. Yes, I know." He hadn't meant to play it to Roger, it just happened.

"They're naive, yes. Some of the rhymes are childish. Send the words and a recording to me?"

"Yeah, sure." There was a beat of silence, and he felt like Roger's voice was caught, reverberating in his ears.

"Hey, let's make a deal." Thom hummed. "I'll write a song for your voice, write one for mine."
Thom let there be silence. Sometimes Jon said things that were perfectly innocuous, but couldn't be denied. Roald did it sometimes, too. It was like their words were reaching, and claiming whoever they spoke to. Apparently, it was genetic. "This is a test of worth," he said. He knew it was true.

"You..." Was that anger? Frustration? Amusement?

"Don't care for subtlety," Thom finished for him.

Again the other man laughed like it was the only thing he wanted to do. "Well, yes, it is."

"Well, at least you're honest. Challenge accepted. Time limit?"

"We'll both have songs ready for each other when we meet."

Thom liked this challenge. "You've become my tool of procrastination with essays, thank you."

"Honestly I'm sort of amazed that I even graduated. I did everything the night before it was due." It was a lie, Thom was sure of it, at least in part. Picking liar from truth-teller was the only decent skill his father had taught him.

"And you came top of your year group."

"Top of any year group in three years," Roger corrected him gently, but there was a clear edge of pride. There should have been - even Thom hadn't succeeded that highly.

"You're the ultimate procrastination success story."

"True. You kno--"

"Sorry, someone's at the door - I'll call you tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Have a good night."

"You, too."

Thom's door made impressively loud crashing noises. He couldn't say it was a drawing attraction of the building, but it sure did contribute to his appreciation of the place. "Fuck off, Alanna." Her name sounded really nice with a banging door. They went hand in hand, really, discord and Alanna.

"Stop being a brat and talk to me." He had his back to the door, but he stayed there. He didn't like fighting with Alanna, every time it felt like he was seeing in double vision and he couldn't pick out what was real. That was over-attachment with a neglectful parent, he supposed.

"What an inspired line."

"Your petulant brattiness is about as inspired as a rewrite of Hamlet, let me in, Thom." He sighed and opened the door. He knew that she was sick of the comparison, but she was a Joan of Arc, small and righteous and looking on the verge of bursting into flames most of the time. The sun behind her golden hair didn't help. She shoved past him. "Thank you." She stormed through to the
kitchen, where a bag of chocolate still lay. "Have you eaten at all in the past week?"

He scowled and boosted himself up on the edge of the kitchen counter. Alanna was making use of his coffee machine. It was fair enough, considering how rarely he used it, but it was still annoying. "You know I have. I think you have something to say."

"Have you eaten a vegetable, at all?"

"I ate broccoli the other night, as you'll recall."

"Meat?"

"No."

"Protein?"

"I ate seed bread with peanut butter. You were saying?"

"Peanut butter and bread are not adequate protein sources." The only person he knew more stubborn than himself was Alanna. At least he had learned the art of raising an eyebrow. He was considering learning make-up things just to emphasise his eyebrows, as Alanna and Daine did. "Fine! Fine, Thom, I'm sorry."

"What for?" he asked, and she almost broke the mug slamming it down on the counter.

"For using your home without content, and misusing your minority status in an argument that had nothing to do with said minority status." She looked ready to swallow her tongue.

"Did you rehearse that or just echo George?"

"Fuck off, Thom, can't you just-- get over it?"

"No!" He swung himself over to the other side of the counter, dropped to his feet, drew his shoulders back. When she had shoes on he wasn't really taller than her, but he liked to pretend. "It was wrong! What happened to your self-righteous, Gryffindor bullshit?" Sometimes their arguments ran on autopilot. He was fully aware that he was three quarters of the way to forgiving her, but he wanted the satisfaction of winning, or more, of her not winning.

Alanna stepped out of his way. "Shove your sass up your arse, Thom, I'm sorry. I was angry. I had a point." She was rifling through his fridge with distaste, the tension in her arms giving away that it was more of a distraction than a real search for milk.

"I was not part of that point, nor should Daine have been. Daine's inclusion should have been sign for the conversation to stop, not for me to be made ammunition in a half-lust half-competitive bullshit storm!"

"'Bullshit storm', what a genius you are." He scoffed. "Thom! I've said 'sorry'! I'll buy you more chocolate, will that help?"

The coffee machine started beeping. He glared at it, in the abstract hope that it would shut up. "I haven't eaten any of the chocolate, so no. 'Sorry' isn't good enough until you acknowledge that it was wrong."
"I'm sorry that you're hurt!" She slammed the fridge shut, milk in hand. She somehow managed to make it look like a mighty weapon, a statement of power. He was too used to it to care and took it from her with a heavy exhalation. It was out of date by a week.

"You're shit at this," he said lightly, and threw the milk in the bin. She groaned, and stared at him until he met her gaze.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, okay?"

There was a long silence, interrupted only with the coffee machine beeping. "You're not a Gryffindor," Thom said, and that was all he could muster. "You're too committed to the end product. That's a Slytherin trait."

"I'd say I'm a Hufflepuff, but--"

"Hard working and loyal, sure, but Hufflepuff just isn't dramatic enough. You're either Slytherin or Gryffindor." He tossed her a frozen box of milk and switched off the coffee machine. "You've got ambition and determination, and courage and bravery. They cross over too much."

"I look better in red and gold," she said, "so I'll stick with that." They went through Thom's fridge, throwing out everything that had passed its use-by date, then Alanna took great satisfaction in buying him dinner.

(They decided that Thom was a Slytherin or a Ravenclaw, and that Alanna was anything but a Ravenclaw. It took several hours, with no real conclusion.)

0 6.08
From: Roger Conté
Make the bridge acapella, or hit the wood of the guitar on the beat.

07.13
From: Roger Conté
Replace 'and if you'll comply I swear I will try my best to make this work out right' with 'if you'll take my hand I swear I will fight to be with you, be with me tonight'
You're taking out the force of 'comply' and putting it to a less aggressive use. 'Work out right' is as we discussed, childish.

10 .03
To: Roger Conté
I think it's a sign of trust that I've given you Too Far, tbqh. Thanks. It has such an odd history for me that I've been unable to modify it for good, no matter how many times I try.

11 .31
From: Roger Conté
'tbqh'. The first abbreviation you use with me and it's got an extra word in it.

11.32
To: Roger Conté
I of course have to set myself apart from the masses. Thoughts? [too far / closer than far.mp3]

12.11
From: Roger Conté
Much, much better. Bass and drums? You don't drum, do you?

12.12
To: Roger Conté
No, I don't. I'll hire someone.

RogerConte tweeted: I'm sure this counts as blackmail of some sort but @HesitantGinger has a song coming out called 'Closer Than Far', you'll all love it.

@RogerConte He ships it almost as much as we do, lbr
@RogerConte WHAT TYPE OF BLACKMAIL WHAT?
@RogerConte omg long-distance relationship song? omg omg omg

@RogerConte ...does he mean 'Too Far'? Which Thom posted two years ago? Conte, you're officially a fake fan.

12.14
To: Roger Conté
You're so obnoxious even I am impressed.

12.15
From: Roger Conté
<3 <3
You can use my drummer if you'd like.

Thom made a face that Alanna would have labelled as his 'scheming' face, but he would (more accurately) call it his 'considering how to exercise the hypotheticals of knowledge and possibility' face, but he did respect that it was a tad wordy. He didn't like the pink tinge that dominated his cheeks when he talked to Roger. He didn't like butterflies. He didn't like his stuttering heart. In the same stroke, he liked the way he felt awake when he talked to Roger. The pink and the fluttering bodily sensations were powerless pains, but the way he felt when Roger said his name or praised him, or just spoke about something they both knew, it was like a new part of his brain waking up.

He'd watched romcoms, seen every season of Glee, heard every tacky love song and even some untacky ones, read most of Shakespeare's collected works, was rather fond of Jane Eyre, but he never understood - judged the lovers, most of the time, and their irrational decisions. He could put himself in a vaguely romantic headspace when he needed to cover a love song, sure, but it wasn't the same as knowing. No-one ever told him about feeling tapped in, like an excellent lecture but with feelings. Maybe it was friendship, maybe. He didn't think so.

God, the people online were already shipping he and Roger and they'd never met. It repulsed him, the invasion, but on the other hand he couldn't unthink Alanna grumbling about flirting and that
Roger was *flirting with him*. Did he even want to be flirted with, if it meant his racing heart kept racing and he stumbled in his speech? Particularly by someone like Roger, just as deeply fragmented and manipulative as he was whole and brilliant?

12.19  
**To:** Roger Conté  
*That's a few weeks away and I'm impatient, but thanks.*

12.20  
**From:** Roger Conté  
*It's next week.*

12.21  
**To:** Roger Conté  
*Fuck.*

12.23  
**To:** Roger Conté  
*Sorry, I was entirely aware of that, I'm just bad with the concept of time.*

12.37  
**From:** Roger Conté  
*All good. It'll be good to meet you. I'm astonished by how many times we almost-did but just-didn't.*

12.39  
**To:** Roger Conté  
*It's bizarre, right? What would you do if I called the song 'Too Far'? 'Closer than far' as a lyric only appears twice, it seems disingenuous.*

12.42  
**From:** Roger Conté  
*'Closer than too far away' = clunky  
'Too Far' = gives no idea of what the song is about  
'Closer Than Far' = delicate with an implication of a love song*

12.43  
**To:** Roger Conté  
*I'll think on it. And yes, using your drummer would be good. Thanks. I'm going to sleep, but I'll talk to you later.*

12.43  
**From:** Roger Conté  
*Have a good night.*

---

*Outgoing call: Alanna Trebond*

"Thom, what's wrong?"
"It's not that late. I just wanted you to know that your cover of 'The Special Two' was flawed and I loved it."

"Fuck off, Thom."

"Fuck yourself, Alanna."

Call ended

When George woke it was with Faithful on his chest and a significant lack of Alanna. Faithful was warm and his chest was rumbling, violet eyes half-closed. There was sunlight through the blinds, but only just. Alanna's side of the bed was cold. He knew she'd be nearby, he just liked waking up to her. Liked seeing her half-asleep, hair a mess and voice scratchy with the remnants of dreams. "Where's your lady, Faithful?" Faithful said nothing, but there was a yell of 'fucking hell!' from out the window.

The cat fell from George's chest with an indignant meow, but he didn't have time to scratch the man as he had already shoved aside the blinds, opened the window, and dropped and rolled to the ground outside. "Why the fuck can he do that like it's normal?" A small headrush disoriented George, but that was certainly Buri's voice. And indeed, once his head stopped spinning, Alanna and Buri stood side-by-side in tank tops and sweat, both out of breath.

"Poverty, institutionalised racism, a moral compass. The latter leading to a life of questionable legality," Alanna said. She smiled at George, and she almost looked shy. Buri looked tense, but she smiled anyway. "Sorry, love, I didn't want to wake you unnecessarily."

"How long have you been down here?" he asked.

"Two hours?" Alanna asked Buri, who nodded and hummed. "You didn't break anything, then?" There was laughter in her voice as she pointed to her window.

"No, but I think I owe Faithful an apology and some fish." Alanna snorted and embraced him quickly, sweaty as she was. He kissed her hair. She had made it clear things were okay with Buri, and the other woman had already gone back to stretching. "I'm going to go make breakfast." He paused for a moment. "And coffee."

"We'll be in in just a minute. I'd love coffee."

"Alanna's teaching me this throw--!"

"Oh yeah, George, help me demonstrate!"

George told himself to accept the oncoming pain without protest.

Buri was in the shower upstairs, George chopping potatoes while Alanna scrolled through her
twitter feed. "So... what happened with Buri?" Alanna cocked an eyebrow without raising her head. "Come on, I think I'm allowed to know."

"She showed up at five at the front door in training gear and we pummelled each other for a while. Now we're fine."

"And?"

"'And' nothing. There's only so much that either of us could say, so all we said was that we're going to realign our mission statement once Keladry is here, and next time we'll negotiate on more than an hour's sleep." George handed her a steaming mug of coffee, but she put it straight on the table. "I'm keeping you, okay?" Alanna said. She tangled her fingers through his hair, and pulled him down to kiss him. His hands framed her face and neck neatly, his callouses made her skin tingle. She smiled against his cheeks as she said, "But you really need to work on your reflexes, you're so out of shape." He groaned and went back to making breakfast as she cackled.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I'm sorry about the long wait; both Basil and I have had exams. Hopefully it was worth the wait.

Come talk to us on tumblr - I'm thomtrebond.tumblr.com and Basil is coverrudelyblown.tumblr.com

Songs mentioned:
The Special Two, by Missy Higgins https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tp3WOpo7Jus

Closer Than Far is an actual existing original song (what a shock), which I'll record and post at some point because it does have some plot relevance.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Kel's here, and it's for the best.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

07.13
To: ICE 1 - Alanna Trebond

Why 'The Special Two'?

07.30
From: ICE 1 - Alanna Trebond

You've always wanted me to do that song.

07.31
To: ICE 1 - Alanna Trebond

No, ---I--- always wanted to do that song. How dare you imply that I'm NOT the fuck up sibling?

07.34
From: ICE 1 - Alanna Trebond

Oh. I fucked up hence was the fuck up sibling? Plus she's an incredible woman. Women artists are sort of my thing as you'll recall.

07.38
To: ICE 1 - Alanna Trebond

Yes, I recall. Please note that I am the fuck up sibling.

07.42
From: ICE 1 - Alanna Trebond

Can't we both be the fuck up sibling? I don't want the responsibility of not being the fuck up.

07.45
To: ICE 1 - Alanna Trebond

No.

Incoming call: Roger Conté

"Roger, it's three in the morning. Are you okay?" The galaxy on his ceiling cast a soft light over
his room, but the light still felt too strong. He wanted to sleep. He had stayed up late with an assignment the night before, then stayed up even later that night with score in front of him at the piano. He had found that he couldn’t listen to music much, he needed to write and keep writing until he had no choice but to sleep.

"Shit, it's three? I'm so sorry, I'll--" Thom knew, though he didn’t know how, that Roger well-knew the time. He breathed through his teeth, and balanced his butterflies and his annoyance. He sat up against the headboard and rested his phone on his knee, and he could just see himself in the mirror on the other side of the room. He didn’t like himself very much.

His response was awkwardly delayed, and he knew it, but it was almost four. "No, it's okay. What's wrong?"

Roger’s breath stuttered, and his voice fell in both pitch and volume. What a terrifyingly close voice he had. "Nothing, I just-- wanted to tell you that someone in the audience asked me to play one of your songs tonight." Thom’s brow furrowed.

"Really? I'm not as famous as you. Which one?"

Roger chuckled. He could hear the vestige of a party or the some-such in the background, and the idea that he could be someone’s half-drunk call made him dizzy. "'Five a.m.'."

"That's... odd."

"I'm sorry in advance if I got any of the lyrics wrong."

Thom fought a yawn, but his smile hurt his cheeks. "You actually knew it?"

"I... yeah. I bought all of your singles when we started talking. 'Five a.m.' is sort of my shower song." Thom was still pissed at being woken, but god, that voice could render him into a blushing mess whether at three p.m. or three a.m.. "I hope that’s okay."

"I-- sorry, yeah, of course. I was just surprised. Thank you.” He paused to gather his thoughts. A losing battle. “Really, thank you. I'll be interested to see what you did with it."

"Not much. Guitar, a tone down. I do love the song." Thom yawned, embarrassingly loudly, and Roger chuckled. "Sleep well, Thom."

He settled himself back under his blankets. "Sleep well, Roger."

3.59
From: Roger Conté

Your Idaho-boy accent is stronger when you’re tired. Sorry again, but can’t say I regret it.

8.03
To: Roger Conté

You fuck right off, East Coaster.

8.06
From: Roger Conté
Alanna was awake at six the day that Kel was to arrive. George had raised an eyebrow at her when she asked ‘Should I put child gates on the stairs? Do I need to cover the knives?’ While she did neither, she did almost everything but. She was beyond aware that Kel was competent, and unprecedented in her maturity, but she’d never had anyone in her care, let alone someone who was still, legally, a child. She didn’t understand how this girl could mean so much to her. She was incredible, yes, and she adored Alanna, yes, but there were lots of girls like that. Maybe it was the ways that she was different to Alanna, yet they were a united front. Raised with the beliefs that Alanna defiled and then fought for – the intersectional feminism that was functional directly and in the long term. Kel breathed in impurity and breathed out liberation, and all the while she stayed gentle.

Maybe Alanna just liked her, but she had an overwhelming capacity for reading into things. She looked at Thom sometimes and wondered how he managed to remain passive. Sure, he was altruistic, and in theory an activist, but he didn’t care for focusing on social justice. How he progressed that way alongside her, especially as a trans man, she didn’t know. She wasn’t sure she wanted Kel and Thom to meet – which was ridiculous, of course they would, and of course it would be a good thing, but it felt like an overlap of clashing colours, like they couldn’t quite exist in the same universe.

She didn’t know if George should be there when Kel first came over. The mess of the meeting at Thom’s house made the concept of having anything to do with this damned organisation in a home terrifying. She and Buri did make it up, but everything felt vulnerable – breakable. Everything was new and she really had no idea what she was doing. Ilane had asked in a perfectly well-meaning email who their solicitor was. She promptly acquired one, and said solicitor confirmed that Alanna had no idea what she was doing. Kel was the core of everything.

And so, Alanna, sipping at a frapuccino and checking her watch everything thirteen seconds or so, stood waiting for Kel’s plane. She had sorted all of the schematics and notes and plans into folders, made copies of everything, and distributed them to all involved – including Onua, who had arrived the day before - as well as keeping three in the room which she’d booked out indefinitely at some obnoxious highrise building. She so wanted Kel to approve.

Kel was dressed in an olive green dress, the same colour as her backpack. She was so bloody tall. She looked drowsy, but Alanna noted that the size of both her eyes and eyelashes gave her that tendency. Alanna didn’t want to make a fuss of herself, didn’t know if she should hug her. Kel gave her a shy smile, but said nothing as she came to her side.

“Hi, how was your trip?” Alanna was tripping over her tongue.

“Good, thank you.” Kel didn’t look awkward. In fact, she looked perfectly calm and grounded, and
Alanna had no idea what to do with that. She gesticulated vaguely at the baggage pick-up, and they walked together in silence. She gave Kel the opportunity to stop her, but was pleased to be able to take her bag for her. Something she could do.

They walked well together. Alanna wasn’t sure if Kel was slowing herself down to keep pace with Alanna’s tiny blood legs or not, but they kept good time. “So, we’ve booked out a room in some fancy office building, but when it’s not all of us my house is base of operations.”

“Who makes up ‘we’? Sorry, I should know, but--”

“Oh! No, no, I should have told you. Well, my right hand woman is Buriram Tourakam, who… well, you might have heard of her.” Kel gave a small nod, but Alanna chose to clarify anyway. In Kel’s shoes she would probably pretend to know. “Her family was from Myanmar, and served the Wilima family, which leads to our next member, Thayet Wilima, the daughter of Kalasin Wilima, who was… coerced into a marriage with an American gang member, and famously killed herself publicly fifteen years ago. Buri’s family sacrificed themselves to give Kalasin the opportunity to make her death mean something, rather being just another covered up gang suicide.” She kept a close eye on Kel – her brow was wrinkled, but she didn’t seem distressed. Just meditative. “It’s a miracle that both of the girls survived. Thayet’s in Canada with her paternal grandparents, who are, surprisingly, not evil and actually quite endearing in that ‘doddering old people’ way. We’ve only got her through phone, but she’s still very much present. You’ll really like Buri. If you’re intimidated by Thayet just remember that all she wants in life is a pet monkey.” She elbowed Kel, smiled up at her. It still helped her, really. Kel did grin. “There’s my brother, Thom.” She didn’t bother with an explanation, and she was both horrified and amused to see Kel’s cheeks go pink. “Onua Chamtong, trained as a cop, promptly gave it up to work in security for women’s shelters and the such. She already likes you, and you’ll like her. She’s an incredible woman. Veralidaine Sarrasri, an immigration rights advocate, and a trans woman noteworthy in law reform.” She paused, “Your Dad knows her, I think.”

“Yeah,” said Kel. “I’ve seen her before. She’s cool.”

“We’ve also got her husband, Numair Salmalin, who… well, he’s a brilliant advocate but he’s primarily a musical theatre actor. I’m not sure if he’s… committed to it apart from supporting us.” She grinned as they got into an elevator. “He’s a good boy, knows when it’s not his place to speak. As is my partner, George, who keeps me level-headed.”

Kel’s lip twitched. “Is he the one who made a pun about you being described as a ‘tomboy’, when the whole point is that you are neither Thom or a boy?”

She chuckled and nodded, hoisting Kel’s suitcase up over her shoulder. It was almost as tall as she was. “That’s him. He’s a bit of a loser, I’ll warn you.”

When they finally got back to Alanna’s house, after dropping off Kel’s bags at the hotel, and an intermittently awkward car trip, Kel came to the firm conclusion that whether or not George was a loser, he was beautiful nonetheless. Alanna wondered how his ego didn’t explode with Kel, Daine (who was married) and god-knows who else infatuated with him, but she found it endearing nonetheless, Kel barely managing to avert her gaze from his most charming smile.

“Oh! Before I forget, I got you something.” She took a rectangular box from her windowsill and presented it to Kel. She murmured a thank you as she pushed aside the tissue paper. An olive green shirt, the same as her dress, with the words ‘this is what a feminist looks like’ printed on the front. She looked up with a curious kind of awe in her eyes. “It’s all ethically sourced, all proceeds to a
chain of women’s homes,” Alanna said with a smile. “I saw your protestations on twitter a while ago,” she admitted.

“Thank you.” Kel hugged it to her chest. She wasn’t quite smiling, but there was a dusting of colour over her cheeks.

“Well, uh, Buri, Daine, and Onua are waiting for us, I just thought you should see my house. You ready?”

“Yeah.”

12.10
To: Roger Conté

If I give up sociology/being an academic arsehole at the end of this year do you think it’s worth pursuing music further?

12.32
From: Roger Conté

Why did I read that in the tone of a particularly existential tumblr post?

12.36
To: Roger Conté

I AM a particularly existential tumblr post. Also please don’t take that question seriously I’m just freaking the fuck out in true tumblr fashion.

12.37
From: Roger Conté

In the little time I’ve known you I’ve been impressed by your intelligence and comprehensive analysis of thought in and of itself, let alone anything else. Quite honestly, though, I feel that you’ve got what you can out of guided education. I sure had by the end of my first degree, let alone a second. Even in music I think that getting a degree would drive you mad. I think you’re more than capable of pursuing music full time.

And here you’ve gone and told me not to take it seriously.

12.38
To: Roger Conté

Now I’m just embarrassed.

12.40
From: Roger Conté

Don’t be. What happened?

12.42
To: Roger Conté
Nothing in particular. I got a new loop pedal and realised I pretty much don’t give a shit about academics without it just being cramping as many concepts in as close a space as possible with unnecessarily rare words for the sake of vanity or pettiness.

12.44
From: Roger Conté

Isn’t that what most academia is?

I’m a relatively successful artist and I still have arguments and competition (thanks to you, I admit), and not without academic merit, either.

12.45
From: Roger Conté

And I can’t imagine you ever not discussing social justice.

12.50
To: Roger Conté

Well, thank you, Roger. You’ve been my tumblr sounding board for today, congratulations, as a prize you get the knowledge that you’ve cleaned up some of the convoluted mess in my brain.

12.56
From: Roger Conté

An elegant prize. My band says ‘hi’ by the way. On that note I have to go but I’ve got to talk to you about this guitarist I just found out about, so I’ll text you soon.

01.00
To: Roger Conté

Hi to your band, and break a leg.

“What do you think?”

Buri, Daine, Onua, and Alanna had their eyes on Kel (t-shirt donned over her dress). She wasn’t quite sure how she felt about it, and she wasn’t sure if she was being asked for an honest opinion. To be fair, though, she was in a room with four women who probably hadn’t told a lie to save someone’s feelings in their lives.

Her stomach hurt. Alanna looked at her so softly, so openly. Alanna wasn’t soft or open, that was quite obvious. “This isn’t… what we talked about.” Stillness. Daine and Onua gestured for her to continue, but Alanna and Buri matched each other in focus of gaze. “We started talking about how self defence is weaponised as a phrase – minorities don’t want to access it, even when they can, because it frames them as taking on a violent standpoint in life.” Onua made a soft noise in her throat, nodded. It was comforting. “We went ‘how do we create a centre for self-defence that is accessible, that incorporates education while not making it an aggressive system?’ And then we went ‘well, actually, this is inherently about aggression, but people don’t want to be seen as receptive to it’. This… maybe that’s only starting point, but this is so… much.”

She pulled some of the pages towards her and scanned them. “This and this here - contradictory. I feel like there have been far more people around the table than the five of us, and it means it’s the
invert of what we talked about. There are too many people.” She looked at the highlighted words, refused to meet anyone’s eyes, only looked straight ahead when she looked up. “This is a revolution laid out in a ten step plan. What we talked about was… the moments of a revolution laid out in individual affected. That’s all there ever is, the downtrodden, the small. It’s all very well to get up on a podium and make speeches, but that doesn’t matter when street violence against minority groups is getting worse, more frequent, more fatal – more excusable, in some ways.” She braved a glance to Daine who nodded. “The podiums don’t mean anything without the… what’s that phrase? Um… green--?” She did not look at Alanna.

“Grassroots,” said Onua.

“Yeah.” She looked at her hands, curled together. Words she didn’t know scattered the pages, and she was sure that she recognised Thom’s handwriting scribbled in the borders. Alanna’s writing was clear in bright red.

Onua, Buri and Daine were looking to Alanna, who was looking at Kel with a look too complex to analyse. “Do you like any of it?” she asked at last.

Kel met Alanna’s gaze. There was no anger or accusation there, just questions. Kel adored her even more in that second. “A lot of it – almost all of it, but it’s just-- there is no grassroots level here at all. There’s nothing that is getting on the level of the downtrodden who don’t have the opportunities we’ve been given, or have fought for, and saying ‘here’s what can be done, here are your stepping stones’.” She shuffled the papers absent mindedly. “All we can provide as outsiders are stepping stones, and we have none here.”

“I like her,” Onua said. “This one’s good.” Kel beamed at Onua, who seemed to see how scared she was. A conspiratorial wink felt like a blessing.

“Well let’s--” Alanna jumped to her feet, collected all of the paper on the desk and shoved it into a cupboard. “--shelve that. We can return to it later.” Buri got to her feet. She had invested in a roll of brown butcher’s paper, and in one smooth motion rolled it over the length of the table. Everyone laughed at her self-satisfied expression. “You’ve been waiting to do that, haven’t you?”

“Oh yes.” She tossed a packet of pens at Kel, who caught it perfectly. “Draw in green, just for serendipity’s sake.”

And so they started again.

“Lioness, I think we’re done for the day,” said Buri, with a gentle cuff over the back of her head. It had gotten dark so quickly.

Alanna looked ready to argue, but smiled instead. “Fine. I’m starving, anyway.”


“Good.” Her smile was broad enough to hurt.

“Are you happy with what we’ve done today?” Alanna asked her as she locked things in cupboards and rolled up the brown paper, now coated from corner to corner. “Honestly, I mean.”

“I’m very happy.”
“What does everyone want for dinner?” Buri asked as she helped Daine into her coat – Daine managed to look only slightly indignant balanced with her pleasure. She was still angry with Buri. “We can’t go back to Alanna’s, I don’t want food poisoning.”

“Don’t be fucking rude, you little shit.”

Daine clasped a hand over her mouth with a gasp. “Are you allowed to swear in front of Kel?”

Bright red, Alanna stuttered, “Oh fuck-- shit-- sorry, Kel, I--”

“Fuck off, Alanna,” said Kel, as lightly as she could.

There was a harmony of ‘oooh’ s. “Baby has claws!”

Kel found Onua’s arm around her waist. “Come on, protector of the small. What do you want for dinner?”

Mouth full of bread, Buri looked at Onua sharply. “Something you said.”

“I’ve said a great many things, swallow your food.”

Daine giggled, a tiny bit tipsy. Kel had been near to silent for most of the night, watching and smiling.

Buri did as she was told, for once. “You said something to Kel earlier tonight. You called her… protector of the small?” Alanna suddenly looked very engaged, her knife and fork placed carelessly on the tablecloth.

“Yeah.”

“That sounds like a cool organisation. ‘Protector of the Small’.”

There are silences of agreement, of something clicking into place, and this was one of them. “What do you think, Protector of the Small?” Onua asked Kel, who was struggling not to feel embarrassed.

“I like it a lot,” she admitted.

In turn each woman raised her glass and proffered it to Kel. “To the Protector of the Small!”

“The woman and the organisation,” said Alanna. Kel hid her expression by going back to eating while the others clink ed their glasses.

04.00
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)

How’s it going?
08.16
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)

Really really good. Kel is brilliant. I think we’re going to institute a ‘no men’ policy until later though

12.03
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)

That’s great. Also fair enough.

12.30
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)

Why are you still awake?

12.33
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)

Why are you?

12.40
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)

You’re such a douche. I’m watching horrible rom coms with George.

12.41
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)

I’m composing, leave me be. Give George my best.

12.43
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)

And if you’re not fucking careful you’ll DEcompose. Are you eating?
George snorted and sends the same.

12.50
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)

Now that was just a bad joke. Goodnight, loser.

12.51
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)

Goodnight, loser.

01.12
To: Roger Conté

Major or minor?

01.14
From: Roger Conté
To: Roger Conté

Instrumental or bridge?

From: Roger Conté

Instrumental.

Sharp or flat?

From: Roger Conté

Sharp.

Acapella or acoustic?

From: Roger Conté

Acapella.

Do you want to hear it?

From: Roger Conté

No. Do you?

From: Roger Conté

No.

Alanna wasn’t as observant as people thought she was, but she put the effort of observance into Keladry Mindelan. She still didn’t know Kel, but everything about her shaped a woman Alanna wanted to see change the world. “Are you okay?” she asked. Her voice cracked, they hadn’t spoken in a while.

Kel’s voice was scratchy, too, so much of their talking her voice. “Huh?” She turned to the side on
Alanna’s couch. It had been a long day, and her eyes were heavy with tiredness. She refused Alanna’s offer to take her back to the hotel, of course.

“Are you okay?”

A soft noise escaped Kel’s throat, and she smiled. “Yes, more than. Why?”

Alanna curled up on her side of the couch, knees up. Her hands were covered in a rainbow of ink. “You… when we first met at VidCon, you seemed more…” she struggled to find the right word, “enthused,” which was entirely the wrong word, but Kel seemed to make do.

She hugged her knees to her chest. “I think you met my brother, Conal.” Alanna hummed. “He said he hadn’t seen me so openly enthusiastic since I was in kindergarten. I just…” She went bright red and pushed her face into her knees. The older woman didn’t quite know what to do, and so just watched. “Argh, I’ve never admitted a crush to anyone but I feel like this is worse than that.” Kel laughed into her knees, and a smile fell to Alanna’s face. She’d never admitted a crush to anyone, more stumbled vaguely into a romantic pursuit. A twinge of discomfort poisoned her stomach. “I don’t know what I’d be without you, Alanna.” Kel mumbled, peeking out at Alanna from behind her hands from behind her knees. “I… I saw your first video when I was eight, and I was being bullied because I wanted to play ‘boy’s sports’, and learn to fight. Of course I learned with my brothers, and I was good, but I wasn’t allowed to get better, because every teacher I went to didn’t want me to succeed like they wanted the boys to, although my parents were supportive. So I learned from you instead.”

Alanna winced. “Oh god.”

Kel, to her credit, nodded, head reappearing from behind her knees and hands. “You just… I disagree with some of your earlier videos, at least now. But you gave me a very young female role model who wanted to be strong regardless of gender. And as you’ve aged you’ve brought the fact that you’re a woman to the forefront. You’re… I’m not an emotive person. But you’re… really important to me.”

Alanna really, really, did not know what to say. “That does sound tougher than admitting a crush.” Kel giggled, her shoulders untensing. “Can I hug you?”

“Yeah.”

Alanna clambered over the couch to wrap her arms around Kel, stroking her hair gently. “Thanks,” she whispered on her ear. She let go, but stayed close, forcing herself to keep eye contact. “I watched all of your videos after that tweet. You’re incredible, Kel.” This was certainly, had to be worse than admitting a crush. It brought a thrill of butterflies and anxiety to her stomach. They both laughed for no precise ‘reason’, more for the sake of making sound. “And now, we’ve crossed well past the border line of ‘feelings’ territory and we’re both wildly uncomfortable, so let’s scour the media for intersectionality.”

Alanna put an arm around Kel’s shoulders anyway. She had very little chill in her, and Kel seemed to have just enough to ground the both of them. George, of course, fucked up the entire situation by photographing them watching ‘Hit the Floor’ with the caption ‘Netflix and chill’ programmed into Alanna’s phone. He made up for it by making hot chocolate and curling up at Alanna’s side – Kel’s heart fluttered when he asked them both whether he could do so.

Alanna pretended to ignore the tension in George’s neck and the shadows under his eyes as he
texted ‘his people’. That was all they were, to her, but he looked a wreck – not something George often did. Kel stumbled up to bed at midnight, and Alanna’s heart ached with affection when she called the hotel to explain Kel’s absence. George was deeply asleep on her shoulder, hadn’t moved at all with Kel’s leaving or the phone call or Alanna’s slow untangling from him. “George. George, love.” He mumbled something illegible and tugged her closer. She pushed him back and shook his shoulder. He looked up at her through drowsy eyes. “Let’s get to bed, love.”

“You called me ‘love’, lioness,” George said as he fumbled to his feet, hands in hers.

She pinched the tip of his nose. “And if you mock me it will never happen again.” She got onto the tips of her toes and kissed him gently. He smiled onto her mouth.

“Evil woman.” Their path up to Alanna’s bedroom was oddly slow, switching off lights, neatening couch cushions, of all things. They both bothered with pyjamas, but only because of Kel. George was also quite fond of Alanna’s pink, frilled nightshirt, that no-one could actually remember acquiring for her. Her love for it evolved from defiant irony to begrudging, fluffy affection.

George was usually awake well past when she was, on his phone or head in a notebook, but his head fell to her chest, arms lay resigned over her torso and behind her head. “What’s going on, George?” She stroked back his curls. He used to keep his hair in dreads, and she wasn’t quite sure whether he had let his hair grow out deliberately after shaving it, or just couldn’t be bothered to do anything with it. He reshuffled them entirely, in one soft motion they were face to face.

“Can I tell you another time?” he whispered. She stroked his cheek, and his hand on her back mimicked hers.

“Will you tell me?”

He chuckled, a deep, warm sound. He kissed her nose. “You untrustful thing. Yes.” He tugged her close. “Goodnight--”

“What happened to your eye?” she blurted out.

She flushed red, with such an obvious answer, which he promptly provided. “It met an over enthusiastic fist.” He didn’t allow her to glare, merely dragged his thumb over her wrinkled brow. “Sleep, lioness. I love you.” She kissed the side of his hand.

“Sleep well, love.”
songs were added today - what a shock.

Anyway, find Parsley at thomtrebond.tumblr.com and basil at coverrudelyblown.tumblr.com ('if you want to ask questions and have immediate responses, or fairly immediate'. Contrary to Basil's belief I do respond to things, 'it takes months, though!!!!!!!!')

Happy holidays.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Roger's here. Unlike with Kel, no-one's quite sure if it's for the best.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thom got odd looks in the grocery store. He didn’t give a fuck. He had been pacing back and forth down the gluten free aisle for almost fifteen minutes, and it was eleven at night. Somehow all of his anxiety about Roger coming had manifested in a rush, as he looked around at things made of almond meal and rice instead of flour. He was sure Roger would be coming to his house at some point, but didn’t know if he would have to cook or if they would eat at all. Roger had briefly mentioned that he was gluten free, and considering that he was a pretty, skinny pop icon it was quite possible gluten did nothing but displace him in the global zeitgeist. Just in case, though.

He had cleaned his house. Standing in his bedroom, topless and beardless, he glared at himself in the mirror. He was the same stocky, undefined body he always had been, but scarred. Freckles where the sun had never touched skin. A thin line of hair below his bellybutton. Scars an inch under each of his nipples, a scar down the crook of his elbow from the metal plates. The mirror had become the conduit to all of his doubt, and Roger was the cathexis. He was the prompt to everything that had changed in Thom’s life, no matter how much he denied it.

He wanted to be wanted, and it burned. It hurt so deeply he felt like he could barely breathe. Adolescence gave him no friendships, let alone relationships, and his butterflies were trying to catch up. He felt like a child, and he wasn’t even sure if he’d felt like a child when he was a child. He hadn’t liked people. He’d liked Alanna. He liked his piano and his music. He liked himself, in the abstract, not that there was much depth to a ‘him’.

He tore down the galaxy from the ceiling and thought over every person and post that had ever said ‘don’t change yourself for the perception of others’, but he questioned whether people changed themselves for anything but perception of others. The paint was a warm grey. It was fine. Bach and the galaxy existed outside of his ceiling, and he’d always known it was a childish thing to own. Glowing stars on a ceiling.

He didn’t expect Roger to come into his room. There was no reason for him to do so, but tearing down the galaxy felt like a statement of intent towards change. He hated it, and the lack of light jarred him. He went downstairs, back to his piano. Roger’s song, not yet named, was sitting in three drafts on the stool. Three different keys, eight verses.

He fell asleep on his couch with a pen in hand.

He woke up with ink on his chest and up his arms and realised he didn’t know who he was.

Thom didn’t bother knocking, or even fully opening the door, just letting it slam behind him.
"Alanna I got up at four in the morning and ate two blocks of chocolate and now I have acne and I'm sleep deprived and I’m freaking out." Alanna didn’t get up from the table. She appraised him,
and he could feel the demand of ‘say please if you want something’ swelling under her tongue.

"I liked you so much more when you were asocial,” she said at last. His heart dropped. "Oh my god, I'm kidding, sit the fuck down." She stood and took him by the arm, gently shoving him onto her couch. His breathing was unsteady. The look on his face scared her.

"I need coffee,” he said after a minute’s silence, Alanna still crouched at his feet.

She shook her head, stood up. Thom didn’t look at her. "No, you do not, it will make you jittery, then you will crash, and risk more acne.” She knew that. She didn’t know the way that Thom wasn’t looking at her, the detached look on his face. "Two blocks?” she asked, incredulous.

A spark flashed in his eyes. "I was nervous. You bought it!"

Alanna knew that tone, and she tutted. "To be consumed over a long period of time!” She sighed, exasperated. "Go shower. I know you showered last night, go shower, and use the green bottle on your face." He looked a little more like himself again, eyes on her. "Is that what you're wearing?"

"No."

"Good."

Thom wasn’t breathing properly when he got out of the shower. Alanna sat him down on the couch, hands on his shoulders. The sleeves of her shirt brushed over the sides of his face, and he flinched from it. "Breathe." A harsh, ugly sound came from his throat. His chest wasn’t moving, he gulped but couldn’t swallow. Alanna dropped to her knees in front of him again and placed her hands on his knees, as she always did. He couldn’t move, but for his shoulders shaking violently. "Thom, if you're actually having a panic attack about this you need to not go." Hot, stinging tears trickled down his cheeks. Alanna squeezed his right knee, grasped his shoulder. "Thom. Thom, babe, look at me. I need you to look at me."

His chest seemed to convulse, he gasped. He looked down at her. She forgot sometimes, how purple their eyes were. Tears made them brighter.

"I've never gone for coffee with anyone,” he whispered.

She rubbed circles into his shoulder. She hadn’t seen him like that in years. "I know. I know.” She sat with him for a moment, then got up to get him a glass of water. She forced him to drink. His chest was still jolting, inconstant in its motion. "Deep breaths." She snapped her fingers, sixty beats per minute. She made her breath audible, until he was breathing in time. "Good. You haven't got a binder on, have you?” It was a nervous habit Thom had almost forgotten about. For months and months after surgery he couldn’t bear not having his binder on. He panicked without it, he wanted it then, but he shook his head.

Alanna sighed. "I'm making tea."

He didn’t move until she placed a mug in his hands and sat beside him. "It's been a long time since that happened." His voice was rough. Alanna leaned against him, and he put his free arm around her. They used to lean on each other, without hesitance. He didn’t know when it had changed, but his chest rattled with a deep breath of relief.
"Is it about him, or is it about you, and your previously non-existent social life?" Alanna asked. Sometimes Thom was the grown up one of the two of them, the one who understood paperwork and formalwear, but there he sat, cold and shaking. She didn’t know what to do.

He drank half the cup in one long gulp. His tone of voice stuttered and smoothed as he spoke. "Both. Mainly me, though."

"It's in an open, public space. You can leave at any time. You know your boundaries, you can enforce them." A jolting nod. "You'll be okay, Thom. It's hard, but you'll be okay. Just... fuck, I don't want to say 'be yourself', but... say what you think. Don't change yourself for him." He tensed further, and she wondered what he’d done. It wasn’t the time to ask. “Be polite – in the sense of reservation. Ease off on the politeness after a little while."

"I know what to do. In theory."

"All you can do is do it, then." She detached herself from him and took the empty mug from his hands. He was perfectly still as she pulled a small container of concealer and a small brush from her shirt pocket. "Tilt your head up. Try not to get water on this if you wash your face, it'll fade and smudge. You look fine, though." He nodded. "How much sleep did you get?"

"Two hours, maybe." His hands had curled into fists, shame in the tension of his arms. She touched his knuckles. He never thought someone was on his side, forgot he was human. Maybe that was the problem.

"You'll be okay. Kel will be here soon, but you can read on the couch or something if you want."

He groaned and pushed his hair back. "No, I'll... I'll go home."

"Have you eaten?"

"No."

"Eat." She paused. “And send me a photo of your outfit at least half an hour before you leave." He chuckled and nodded. His eyes were starting to look like his again, the look on his face less foreign. "You spent so long suppressing your feelings about clothes and aesthetics that you've come out the other side a judgemental critic."

Her middle finger was shoved in his face. "It's useful, you can't deny it." With silence and stillness for just a second, Thom’s breath hitched again. She grabbed his shoulder, a harsh reminder of his body. "You need to breathe. Thom. It's the only way anyone gets through anything."

"I'm sick of being told to breathe."

"I know, but this isn't some hippy bullshit, you are literally stopping yourself breathing. You need to breathe." She tried to find a bargaining chip. “Or you'll hurt your voice. Look, I'm only a few minutes away. If he's an arsehole you don't have to tolerate it. You shouldn't. Get up and leave. If you're worried about him with trans stuff, get up and leave. If you're getting too tired to cope you can say that, you owe him nothing, you owe society nothing."

"You're good at this." He was almost begrudging, but not quite.

"I just jumped into this whole social thing at fourteen instead of twenty-one." The sun was getting high enough for it to filter through her blinds, dying the white walls golden. Their hair glimmered. "You hate not knowing what to do. You know so much though, and that's all talking is. Things you
know exchanged with what someone else knows, batted back and forth." He looked almost 
humorously confused, and she put an arm around him once more, pulled him close. "And it might 
go really well. You've texted, you've had calls. It's just like that. But the same stands if it's going 
really well: you're allowed to do what is best for you. You'll be okay, Thom. You two get along 
really well - that could transfer over to now." He nodded, head on her shoulder. They sat like that 
for a while.

Alanna didn’t like sitting still. Nor did Thom, really, except when he was hurting. But it was nice. 
The room got warmer, and Faithful came and sat at Thom’s feet, only to promptly fall asleep.

When Thom began to drop off she jostled him and swore at him, an effective mix. He grumbled 
something inflammatory. “Thom, is this a date?” she asked hesitantly.

He shook his head, his hair tickling her nose. She sneezed, Faithful yowling his protests. "I don't 
think so. We're just... meeting."

Alanna coughed, then sang: "The morning ends, I think about you, I'm with my friends, I think 
about you'. Sondheim, Thom, Sondheim's 'Losing My Mind'." Thom hid his face in his hands, 
pulling away from her. His cheeks were bright red.

"I don't know him. I don't know if I like him. If he thinks it's a date, well... we'll see, I suppose."

Her stomach churned. "Look after yourself,” she said. It was all she could reasonably do, there was 
nothing that marked Roger as dangerous, as bad. It was just a twisting dissonance about the man he 
was. She wanted to grab Thom by the shoulder and tell him to stay put, not to meet Roger. She 
didn’t know why. But she couldn’t.

Thom laughed weakly, stood up and stretched. "I always do, you know that." Faithful meowed up 
at him until he picked him up and kissed the top of his head. The cat purred and headbutted his 
chin. It had taken so long for them to like each other, and it was still a begrudging love on both 
sides.

"You don't.” Her phone was in her hand, but she watched him anyway. "You're a self-destructive 
over-worker without proper social defence mechanisms."

“Wow, thanks--”

The doorbell rang.

“That'll be Kel. Do you want to go out the back?”

"No, I'll... I'll meet her.” He put Faithful down on the couch. The cat pawed at him half-heartedly, 
but Alanna looked fiercely uncomfortable. Her back was too straight. “But you don’t want me to.” 
She opened her mouth twice, her jaw making more noise than any words. He sighed heavily. 
“Yeah, okay.” His eyes had been dry, but they burned again.

“Thom--”

He shrugged and tucked his wallet, fallen on the couch, back into his pocket. It meant avoiding 
Alanna’s gaze. “No, I get it.” He didn’t, but he decided he didn’t care. “Thanks for--” He waved 
his hand vaguely, and left. He didn’t wait to hear Alanna greet Kel.

Thom jolted when someone spoke his name. He still felt half-asleep. He got to his feet, met by a 
false smile and inquisitive eyes. "Roger will be just a second." The man was only a little taller than
Thom, and an automatic feeling of distrust filled him when they made eye contact.

They made small talk. Apparently the man was called Alex, and he was Roger’s ‘bodyguard/PA/whatever Roger needs’. The hotel lobby was uncomfortably hot, and Thom hadn’t known what to expect – it only got worse, the more time went on. He hated waiting. He knew it was rude, glancing at the corridor that led to the suites, but he wasn’t there for Alex. He didn’t know what he was there for at all.

His chest hurt. He missed the warmth of infatuation, he was too tired to feel it, though it burned in muted excitement. The anxious pound of his heart and hitch of his breath made his crush seem villainous, not beautiful.

His name was said very differently, the second time. Thom forgot Alex had ever existed, that anything did.

Roger was so impeccably beautiful.

Thom’s mouth felt hot and sticky, but he still took the required steps to meet Roger, smile. "Roger, hi."

Roger had to stand back to be able to look at Thom properly, he was so tall. He had dressed more casually than Thom expected, navy t-shirt and black jeans. The shirt was too big, and sloped off his shoulder. “I... it’s nice to meet you.” It wasn’t clear who proffered their hand first, but they shook hands, Roger’s fingers long enough to wrap around his wrist.

He averted his gaze and laughed. "It's nice to meet you."

Roger’s laugh was deep and flowing, no clear line between it and his words. "You've met Alex?" Thom looked at Alex, though it was hard to take his eyes off of Roger. He looked uncomfortable. Thom felt strangely vindicated.

"Yes, it seems we were already distantly acquainted."

Alex smiled at Roger like he was perfect, and it was thoroughly disconcerting, watching Roger’s face not change at all between the two of them as Alex spoke. He was fiercely protective of Roger, even though his face and voice were blank. He seemed to want to plan Roger’s movements minute to minute, which Roger laughed away with grace.

"Thom, please just call the police if something happens, no matter how small. I’m not taking any risks with his safety, and I’d rather be with him at all times, but the Conté name can clear up anything." Thom was at Roger’s side, hands shaking, but he nodded and mumbled something affirmative.

"Don't be so fractious,” Roger said, on the verge of annoyance.

Alex looked appropriately reprimanded. "See you this evening." He gave a half salute and stuck his hands in his pockets before walking away, scowling in his body language if not his face.

Thom was overtly aware of the pain of breathing.

The next three hours were spent huddled in the corner of a little cafe with flushed faces. No-one dared reprimand them when they sang (albeit as quietly as they could), but there had been some annoyed looks, so relocating to Thom's house had seemed a natural progression. He fumbled with the keys, and he could feel Roger’s eyes on the back of his hands. There were still ink stains on his
fingers, he couldn’t scrub them off.

“Well, welcome to my house,” he said. There was nothing of the sort that he’d ever had to say before. “Bathroom’s upstairs on the left, kitchen’s straight ahead, piano is slightly closer and straight ahead.”

“That’s the important thing.” Roger was warm and he walked so close. Thom wanted to memorise the curve of his shoulders and the callouses of his hands, wanted to freeze his voice in an echo chamber of amber to reverberate again and again. His stomach hurt. “Is this my song?”

“Yeah, um-- be careful--” It was too late, the three scores scattered to the ground. They both swore, collecting pages. They ended up on the piano stool, pages out of order. “There are three separate songs, based around the same motif.”

“You don’t think that’s cheating?” There was laughter in Roger’s eyes.

Thom cocked an eyebrow. “I didn’t know there were rules.” He presented the first to Roger. There were scratched words and changes between lines. “They’re all the same chorus, same instrumentation. Just different verses, different keys. Nothing too monstrous.”

“‘Faust’,,” murmured Roger. “Interesting.” He met Thom’s gaze and his lip quirked. “Which one should I start with?”

“That one.” Thom stood back, at the end of the piano. “Keep the pulse loose until the chorus.”

Roger’s hands flexed over the piano, Conté family ring on his left middle finger, glinting slightly. He hummed the melody, thumbed through the pages. “If you give me your fixation I swear I’ll be gentle. Turn the page on, the light on, the papercuts are bleeding, and I’ll never let it go, I’ll never let this go. There’s nothing like apathy to heal something broken, and I’ve been broken open. Don’t let this go, don’t let this go.”

Roger handled the leap with grace, high note into stacatto piano notes under his falsetto and his belts. “Pretty,” he said. “I like it.”

Thom frowned. “You are so vastly underwhelmed I’m disappointed in myself.” The other man shook his head, thumbing through the pages once more.

“I’m not underwhelmed by your writing, I just feel it’s not hard enough.” He paused, and met Thom’s eyes with laughter in his eyes. “I was expecting to be in tears.”

Thom cocked an eyebrow. “Now I’m concerned about my song.” A hah, more exhalation than laughter escaped Roger’s lips. “Okay, try this one.” The next score was examined. “It’s higher.”

Roger’s voice was as near to perfect as a human voice could be, Thom felt more connected to his voice than he felt to the person. It was odd, because he adored Roger, too, he could feel it. It ached. He was still dizzy with just meeting him, rather sure the lack of sleep was all that was keeping him going – running on autopilot. “This one’s more you,” Roger said. He had allowed for a beat of silence when he finished.

“Is that a good thing?”

“Well, I like you.” Roger was so deliberate in his gaze, in his smiles. There was so much weight behind the words, like they were pre-destined. Thom didn’t even notice him taking the last score from his hands. “I’ll try this one, out of curiosity if nothing else.”
Thom barely heard it. He could feel his heartbeat. “The first one is a pop ballad, the second one is the closing number of act one of a musical, and this is a folk story song,” Roger said, laughter in his voice.

“Am I worthy?” He tried to be conspiratorial. He also wasn’t sure if it worked, particularly as Roger responded with absolute sincerity,

“More than.” Roger fumbled with his messenger bag, and presented Thom with a neatly bound score, preserved in a plastic sleeve. “Here.”

“‘Butterflies of Chaos Theory’. Sounds like fun.” Thom flipped through it, hummed a vague outline of the melody. He remained, leaning on the side of the piano. “A beaten wing brings a hurricane, and I’m not sure where you lie. If my heart races do you feel the earth shake? If my hands shake would you take them? Haven’t you heard the stories about tsunamis? Your voice quakes, half asleep, and I’m a breaking wave. This is not what we planned, poison heat, so don’t let me burn any more. Don’t let me burn.” The rest of the song was blurred, stumbling over some of the notes. Sight reading, acapella, was harder than with piano or guitar. No mistake could be covered.

Roger watched him, almost unblinking. It wasn’t the colour of his eyes, calamitous blue, or how handsome he was, but the way that he looked at Thom that made him blush. “What do you think?”

“Plain. Lovely, but plain.” He kept as straight a face as possible while Roger gaped, then let himself fall into laughter.

“You little shit.”

He couldn’t quite stop laughing, the look on Roger’s face. “I like it. It’s good, Roger. I was just expecting… a lot of melisma, honestly.”

“That’s my voice, not yours.” He looked slighted, but on firmer footing. “Come on, let’s do ‘Take Me to Church’.”

“Oh! Cool, okay, here--”

Roger was always smiling. Even when expressing something calling for anything but a smile, his lips quirked up, and it was almost like a throne. The curves of his mouth built his empire, just as much as the folds of his vocals held it steady, and Thom found it beautifully serendipitous.

He really was sleep deprived.

“Are you saying you didn’t even attend class through your two senior years, and you still did what you did?” Roger took up most of the couch, arms spread over its length. Thom sat in the corner feeling comfortably small, cup of tea in hand.

“Well… maybe seventy percent of the time I went to class. Sometimes I couldn’t use Alanna as an excuse, that was the main stumbling block. My teachers barely realised I was on T until just before our exams.”

“In Corus that is an achievement.”

They didn’t say anything, for a little while. Thom was tiring, he was struggling to stay awake, let alone alert. He pinched his thigh, hard. “Hey, what Alex said about calling the police if anything happened. Has that been your life, post-coming out? Expecting violence?”
Roger looked intently into his mug. Thom still didn’t know if he liked Roger’s games of niceties, prettier truths, pretty lies. He wasn’t even sure if he was reading him right. “Hm, sort of.” He turned the mug in his hands. “I have guards, I have Alex. The Conté family has people online twenty-four seven looking for threats of violence and riots planned, I’m included in that. Most of what I have experienced is via twitter, not really the end of the world, and quite frankly I don’t give a fuck what’s thought of me.”

Thom scoffed. “That’s the biggest lie you’ve ever told me.”

“I don’t give a fuck what’s thought of my sexuality,” Roger amended. Also not true, but Thom supposed it was theoretically possible.

“A little better.”

“Anyway. I don’t want fear to cripple me. I’d rather take risks, and stick with the moral choice of coming out, than hiding from anything.”

“I’m the opposite.”

“What--?”

Thom cut Roger’s question off, “I found out about violent hate crimes the hard way.”

“DC, right?” He put his cup down on the coffee table and turned himself in, facing Thom directly.

“DC,” Thom echoed. He tilted his arm towards Roger, almost unconsciously, and the scar grading down from his elbow seemed deeper in tone than usual, white sleeve and white skin.

Roger’s hands were harsh with callouses, not just on his fingertips but his palms. They were strong hands, lifting amplifiers and hauling rope. The signature callouses of a guitar player were almost ticklish, applied so lightly. It didn’t hurt. The arm twinged, sometimes, but it didn’t hurt. Roger touching it certainly didn’t, but Thom still couldn’t take breath. “Well, just another reason I shouldn’t go to Jonathan’s social events,” he said shakily.

“I’m so sorry.” The pressure increased for just a second, then his hand was gone.

Thom drew in breath, knew it sounded like it wasn’t fine, but-- “No, it’s fine.”

Roger stayed closer than before. “Causing scandal in your calamities fashion.” That was conspiratorial, and his mind raced to catch up. He felt minutes behind the conversation.

“Was that a Whitlam reference?”

Roger scoffed. “Of course it was.” He downed the rest of his tea, and Thom’s cheeks hurt with grinning.

“Oh god, it’s slightly unrelated, but have you read ‘De Profundis’, by Oscar Wild--?”

“What kind of a question is that?”

From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
How’s Roger?
Alanna let herself in. Thom stood with his arms crossed at the door to the living room. “Are you pissed at me?” she demanded.

He didn’t miss a beat, cocking an eyebrow. “The real question is ‘are you pissed at you’? Sometimes when people are hurting they project their low self esteem onto their loved-ones—”

“You’re an arse.” She shoved past him – he barely tried to stop her, was slow in turning around.

“Which books did you want?”

She saw Roger on the couch, clearly absorbed in one of Thom’s scores. “Um, mainly novels—” she said slowly. He cut her off,

“In the study.” She glared at him. He sighed and gestured vaguely to the couch. “This is Roger. Roger, my sister Alanna.” Roger looked up as if he hadn’t been paying close attention to them. He smiled and raised a hand, but made no move to stand.

“A pleasure.”

Alanna was bristling. Thom wasn’t looking at her. He was ashamed and hurt and he wanted Alanna out of his house. “Likewise,” she said at last.

“Thom’s told me about your NGO, congratulations. It sounds inspiring.”

“Well, we’re still scaffolding, really.” She spoke carefully, measured, like she was refraining from snapping. She bumped her elbow to Thom’s side. “Your study, you said?”

“Yeah. Don’t take anything of mine, I’ll know,” he said, though he knew she wouldn’t. They weren’t ‘readers’ in that way.

She was already half way up the stairs when she yelled down, “You’re such a fucking Disney villain.”
He fought a smile. “Thank you, dear,” Thom shouted back.

Roger seemed curious more than anything, and put down his pile of paper. “I’ve always wanted to be a Disney villain,” he said after a moment. “Dr. Facillier was my aesthetic icon for years.” A laugh broke from Thom’s throat. He sat back down with his feet under him, and he realised he felt comfortable with Roger. He had been talking, Thom had zoned out-- “Thinking on it, you’ve even got the purple eyes.” He looked down, self conscious. They weren’t purple, and he didn’t want Roger looking at him that way. He couldn’t think straight. “I thought it was a myth. They’re not contacts?” There was a gentle wonder in Roger’s voice, and Thom forced his head clear.

“I can’t be bothered to wear my reading glasses, do you really think I have the stamina to put contact lenses in every single day?” he asked, deliberately snide. “They’re my eyes. Alanna’s, too, as you’ll see when she comes back down.” He braved a look into Roger’s eyes. “Yours aren’t exactly the most natural shade of blue.”

He laughed, those unnatural blue eyes crinkling in the corners. “Not quite, no.”

Thom asked something that had been bothering him for days. “Why ‘Orange’? Why not blue or gold or silver?”

“Orange is mine.” His words were tart. “Not Jon’s, not the family’s. Mine. The first suit I wore was orange, my mother designed it for me before I was born. I wore orange in my first photoshoot. People don’t use orange, excepting Ed Sheeran’s ‘Plus’. I wanted something that was mine.” Thom nodded. He understood the issue. “Why ‘Lions’?” Roger asked, after he had stopped looking like he could bite.

“Because George, Alanna’s partner, and Jon started calling her ‘Lioness’ at the same time, having never met, for entirely different reasons. Within the same twenty-four hours, quite literally.” Roger raised an eyebrow, appropriately surprised. “The rearing lion became her sign, they made a ring for her. I was just tugged along for the ride.”

Alanna dropped the pile of books in between them on the couch. “Plus when your hair is long you look like you have a mane. Especially when your beard’s out of control.” He scowled up at her, and she ruffled his hair.

“That so wasn’t part of the decision.”

She shrugged. “Still.” She looked at Roger while Thom shuffled through the books she had brought down. She couldn’t find a valid reason to hate the man, not with the little she knew, but she hated everything about him from his perfectly tied back hair to his shiny red shoes.

Thom was oblivious. “Why were they here?” he asked, thumbing through the pages.

Alanna pulled her eyes off Roger. “Good question. Jon must have book four, or maybe Raoul...”

“No no, Francis. Remember? He used them with his sophomores.”

“I didn’t know you paid attention to Francis.”

“Neither did I.” She snorted and ruffled his hair again, roughly, and he slapped her hand. Roger was chuckling far too much. “Fuck off, loser.”

“See you soon?” She felt guilty, and he relished in it. He waited a moment to respond, let her hurt.

“Yeah, sure. See you.”
Alanna coughed and gathered up the books, sparing Roger a forced smile. He, of course, beamed. “Nice meeting you.”

She had to swallow several expletives. “You, too.” Thom went back to speaking to Roger before she was out the door, and was quite self-satisfied about the whole affair.

It was eight, and Roger was sitting on his kitchen bench while he glared into his pantry. “You have Coeliac?” Roger asked. Thom didn’t look at him to hide his blush. The gluten free products were all shoved in haphazardly, clearly new additions.

“No, but you do.” He tried to sound casual as he pulled out a packet of pasta.

“So you do care.” Thom turned around, and Roger yet again made him blush just by the way he was looking at him. He shrugged.

“And here I was trying to remain cool and aloof.”

“You’re cool.” Thom scoffed. “The ‘aloof’ needs some work.” Roger crossed his legs, and leaned forward, elbows on his knees. Thom bumped into the pantry door in an attempt to step back. Breathing was hard enough. He tried to laugh it off.

“I’m an accommodating host, what can I say?” He busied himself with ingredients. He needed to sleep. They’d achieved so much, and he’d had a good time, but he was tired, and he was struggling to keep talking.

“Well, if you’re in an accommodating mood, may I ask a favour?” Thom wanted to say ‘no’. The day was big enough.

“You may.”

“Can I borrow your kitchen tomorrow morning?” Thom paused. He couldn’t have predicted that. He bit his tongue and nodded slowly.

“Um… sure.” He turned his head to see Roger looking a little abashed, and his stomach felt warm. He was rather sure friends weren’t supposed to blush this much, but he was struck by the fact that he had a friend. Asking favours, joking, light touches. It was different, face to face.

Time was lagging, and he just caught Roger’s indignant, “Do you know when I last got to make breakfast not in a microwave?”

“Well, feel free to avail yourself of my kitchen,” he said, trying to sound more awake.

“Thanks.”
“Sure.” Roger let him cook, and the silence was comforting. It was probably rude to be so quiet, but he didn’t give a shit. Just moving around pots and pans was cacophonous enough. Roger was probably scrolling through twitter or the somesuch.

They talked about musicals as they ate, Roger still on the bench, Thom leaning on the fridge. Their ‘goodnight’ was on the doorstep, Roger waiting for a cab. The wind was cool, and it was sort of beautiful. Roger definitely was. Even half-asleep Thom knew that. “So, we’ll film tomorrow, and you’ll... make breakfast.” Roger chuckled and pushed his fringe back from his cheek. It was wavy when it wasn’t tied up. The lights of the houses across the road were all blurry, the air smelled of summer, and it was surreal and bright.

“And if there’s time you can meet my band.” Thom had forgotten about the prospect of meeting other people. It was horrid. He managed a forced smile.

“Sounds good.” The cab pulled up at the kerb, and he felt a very odd mix of relief and longing. Roger, standing at the bottom of the steps, looked up at him and smiled like he was the only person in the world. He smiled back, and felt just the same.

“It’s good to meet you, Thom.”

“You, too, Roger.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for sticking around despite the waits between chapters. It’s incredible, and your reviews mean the world to us.

And finally, the second-main character appears!

Yet again, the only song mentioned is ‘Losing My Mind’, by Stephen Sondheim. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoZVxPTvGp4
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Roger and Thom break the internet, Thom has too many feelings, Alanna isn't quite sure what to do about any of it but for the urge to kiss George on the nose (she does).

Content warning for alcohol consumption.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

HesitantGinger tweeted: Burning questions? Vaguely heated inquiries? I sure have a treat for you. #askconteandthom is the place, until noon is the time.

RogerConte tweeted: @HesitantGinger and I are taking questions! Use #askconteandthom and keep an eye on Thom’s YouTube.

The screen was black, but for a line of light in the centre, expanding 'til two blurry figures were shown.

"If we switched heights you could announce me and I could just bounce up, jack-in-a-box, and no-one would see a thing."

“You little shit. You've started your first video with me by insulting me.” Thom gestured rather rudely towards Roger Conté’s face as he spoke, and following his fingertip the title grew,

Q + A, feat. Conté

Roger was leaning back, laughing. Thom’s arms were crossed and his eyebrows raised, with his laptop balanced on his knees. “You can’t say it’s not true.” Roger wore a soft lilac jumper, long sleeved and sloping off his shoulder. Thom wore all black, and they looked like two sides of a coin, light to dark, dark to light.

"So, welcome to my fifth official Q and A, with Roger – AKA Conté - who has come into my home and automatically started insulting me."

Roger’s look of innocence was a caricature, made for the camera. "Hey, I brought gin, you can't be angry at me."

"True, he did bring gin." Thom reached over the arm of the couch and took an excessively large bottle of gin. "Just in case something like last time--" The screen filled up with twitter posts, each surfacing with a little pop! The questions were all focused on his sex life, surgery, some on the colour of his pubic hair, and all frankly invasive. "--happens again, and I actually need to drink to
"Hopefully we won't get that far. But a few hours ago we sent out a request on twitter and tumblr for you all to send us questions, and tag them with 'askConteandThom', and so now we'll do our best to respond to as many of them as possible." Thom tried not to smile at Roger's charismatic facade of sweetness. He even looked younger, as if getting to the level of most of Thom's audience.

Thom pushed the laptop towards Roger, so it balanced on both their laps. He cradled the bottle of gin close to his chest. "Alright... you get first pick."

Roger's eyebrows scrunch together as he leaned in. "Okay... 'how was your day been so far?'"

"My day has been good, so far. We had pancakes for breakfast, which automatically makes for a stand out day. They were really good pancakes."

"Thank you," Roger said. "Yes, it's been a good day. We've been recording some songs and arguing about what it means to be a pop musician."

"Spoiler warning: Roger is one of them." Roger elbowed Thom in the side, but he was grinning. "And if your questions are as creatively rude as last time, we might get incredibly drunk on gin, so I'm sure that will be an experience."

"I mean, getting drunk on gin could be an... experience," Roger said, gently nudging Thom. Thom promptly glowered at him and said,

"You're a clever man, Mr. Conté, but I'm hesitant to believe you in this."

"Optimism, Thom!" Thom ducked his head before the moment of them looking at one another and not the camera stretched too far.

"Overrated."

The next question fell to the screen. "Okay... 'how do you deal with people who hate you?'"

Roger chuckled, shaking his head. "Generally I ignore them. I mean, there's a difference between criticism and hating someone, I listen to criticism, but if someone hates me they are really not worth my time."

Thom shook his head, too, but quite differently from Roger. Roger’s vaguely disappointed dismissal of the affair was met with Thom’s quiet, burning hurt. There was a glint in his eye. "Hm, no, now that's too logical for me. I get really bitter, write angry songs about them, then get really popular from my bitter songs. Thanks, guys, nice try."

"That's good, too. I mean, Taylor Swift’s made a career out of it." Roger's hand rested for a moment on Thom's leg as he pulled the laptop closer. "'Why are gingers better than other people?'"

"Or you're just really really pretty." Thom ducked his head again, laughing a little. He’d never been so animated in one of his videos, and even with Alanna hadn’t really sat so close.
"Aw. Well, I'm sticking with the genetic superiority theory, but yes, that, too." As he scrolled through the tag Roger’s eyes traced the lines of his face, lips slightly open in their smile. "How did you meet each other?" They shared a look. "Well, I wrote that article about you coming out, and so you got my number from Jon."

"We only met in person yesterday, but yeah, Thom's article was the pivot point."

"I kept him amused while travelling through the deserts of the South. Oh god, tell them about the conspiracy theory article?"

“What--? Oh!” Roger launched into an in depth explanation of the queer affairs of the Conté family, voices and all. Thom put a hand on his arm to stop a mimicry of Jon, only to perform it himself, even more mocking than Roger would have been. He received a vaguely appalled, vaguely approving look for it.

“’Have you seen Buffy the Vampire Slayer? If so, which character would you be?’”

“I’d be Spike.”

“You’d be Glory on a good day.”

“Ouch. Who would you be?”

“Oz.”

“You’d be Willow on a good day.”

“I’m a Willow aiming to be an Oz, and you’re a fashion-victim God with great hair aiming for a lovable bastard with crap hair?”

“It’ll do. Is Alanna a Buffy?”

“She hates everyone far too much for that. Maybe. But if she’s Buffy I’m Dawn and I just can’t deal with that. I love Dawn, but I’ve done puberty twice now and hers was something else.”

“You’ve suffered so much.”

Thom looked him dead in the eye. “Yes.”

It continued like that for five minutes, silly banter to a handful of serious questions, until Roger indicated one question. It popped up on the screen. “What’s this about?”

so thom, u have a tall pretty baritenor. hint hint.

Thom’s lips parted slightly, then he smiled. "At some point or other I got rather upset about not being in the musical Bare, and sent out some screams into the void. I knew it was going to come back to haunt me."

Roger cocked a brow. "What's Bare?"

Thom’s eyes widened, his lips parted slightly. He was silent for a long moment. "Oh, Roger."


"I've never heard you sound so sad," Roger said, leaning down a little so he was closer to Thom’s eye-level.

Thom nodded, and spoke quickly, "It's a ground-breaking musical composed by the late Damon Intrabartolo, written by Jon Hartmere Junior. It's about two high-achieving gay boys at a Catholic boarding school, in their Senior year, and-- you know what? Can we just watch it?" He gesticulated wildly the whole time, a rare display of excitement. Roger was biting his lower lip, holding back laughter - whether at Thom’s enthusiasm or the situation as a whole it wasn’t clear - shoulders shaking a little all the same.

"Sounds good."

The screen cut to black, then returned, the light hitting them on a different angle, a little more golden. Roger’s lilac jumper discarded, revealing a royal blue t-shirt. He looked deep in thought. Thom had his knees to his chest, sitting on an angle to face Roger. He looked vaguely vindictive.

"Okay, so we're back. Roger, thoughts?"

Roger took his time responding, turning the ring on his middle finger. The Conté sapphire glinted in the afternoon light. "I... don't know how I hadn't heard of it before. I'm..."

"In pain?" Thom smiled.

"Something like that."

"Do you need the gin?"

"I... yes."

Thom leaned over Roger to get him the bottle of gin, uncapped it with a loud pop!, and handed it to him without a glass or method of dilution. Roger glanced at him, and downed two large mouthfuls. The screen cut to black for a moment again, and then Roger was cradling the gin against his chest. He hadn't drunk any more of it, but still looked down at it fondly.

"Which was your favourite song?" Thom asked, laughter in his voice.

Roger hummed quietly. "'No Voice' was beautifully composed, as was 'Epiphany'. I don't think I can deal with confronting 'Once Upon a Time' or 'Role of a Lifetime' right now."

Thom nodded and pulled his laptop back onto his lap. "Understood. I think he needs a while to recover; no Bare covers today. Okay, next question. Roger, what's it like being at an intersection between pop culture and politics?"

He put the gin to the side, straightened his back. "They're sort of the same.” He bit his lip. “And I mean that in the most respectful manner possible, to both pop culture icons and politicians. I mean, one is viewed as unworthy or to the side of 'reality', but the fact is that in everyday life people are more likely to tune in when they hear Adele's voice than a politician's.” He laughed a little, and Thom nodded. “I think my uncle finds it difficult, sometimes, having me as an active member of the family alongside being a musician in the public eye. There are elements of so called 'tackiness' in every pop musician's career, issues of sexualisation, the tie-in with fashion and make-up, my own sexuality... it implies very little, but anything is ammunition in the political environment.” He paused and scowled, just a moment of harshness. “And it’s just the same in the music industry. I'm not too bothered with it, but I try to be respectful to both industries.”

"And tying in with that: 'what's it like going from modelling to music professionally?'"
"A lot less fake smiling, more recognition in public. Freedom with colour schemes." Roger angled the laptop towards him, but didn’t really move it, so he was leaning in close against Thom. Their arms were pressed together. “Okay, what is it like performing on your own when you're usually with Alanna?” He barely moved away at all; he probably felt Thom’s intake of breath in the half-inch between them. It was a tad exasperated, but his smile was fond.

"People think we're very codependent because we got popular together, but we do have quite separate lives. To answer the question, it’s fine. It's a different experience, just as performing solo is for anyone used to ensemble work."

Roger nodded. “Understandable,” he said. “Okay, now…” The question popped up on the screen as he spoke it. “What’s your favourite song of the year so far?”

Thom groaned and stretched his arms out above his head. “I’m so shit at these questions.” When his arm fell to the back of the couch it balanced neatly behind Roger’s head, disrupting his hair a little. “Um… you know what, let’s go with ‘Take Me to Church’.”

“Yeah, probably ‘Take Me to Church’, in terms of Top Forty.”

“Which is a convenient way to wind this up, because we've got a cover of 'Take Me to Church' on my channel, and Elton John's 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road' on Roger’s.” They faced each other fully for just a moment, both smiling broadly, before Thom turned back to the camera. “Thank you all for watching, and thank you for joining me, Roger Conté.” He moved just a little closer, just an angle’s change, as he spoke, eyes shining as Roger grinned in turn.

"A pleasure, thank you so much for having me."

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@HesitantGinger your FALSETTO in tmtc is fucking SINFUL

@RogerConte Take me now, tbh????

#HesitantGinger #RogerConte y’all are talking about TMTC, but GYBR ??? oh my god my gay heart

@RogerConte @HesitantGinger I… didn’t know how gay I was until seeing your ‘Take Me to Church’.

HesitantGinger: That’s the goal, honestly.

Playing a cello and a guitar at the same time was not really, well, ever intended to be, but Thom’s efforts were valiant. He switched instrument to instrument as the looped chords played back through his speakers. Roger chuckled on the couch. He was sprawled over it like he owned it, laptop on his knees. “D’you want a hand there?”

“Have you picked up the strumming pattern?”

Roger recited it perfectly, pushing the laptop to the side. Thom was torn between frustration and adoration, with Roger looking down at him, hair in his eyes and slight smirk on his face. He sighed
and fumbled with the cello, almost tripping as he attempted to lay it down on the piano stool. The guitar strap had been tied around his neck, too long for him, and he fumbled aimlessly with it, the other man watching. Roger hummed, clearly frustrated with Thom’s slow process, and slid his hands to Thom’s shoulders and chest, on the knotted strap of the guitar to take it from him. Thom flinched backwards, wrapping his arms around himself even as the guitar - now in Roger’s hands - hit the side of his head.

Roger’s confusion wasn’t voiced, but he put the guitar down carefully, silently. Thom flushed with shame. “I-- sorry. Don’t touch me there.” He tried to unclench his arm from his chest. He couldn’t.

“I’m sorry,” Roger said, though he sounded more intrigued than apologetic. He stayed still, didn’t move on. It was a clear request for explanation. Thom hated him so much.

“It’s dysphoria. You know the word?” Talking hurt. His throat ached.

“Yeah.”

Thom moved the cello to the couch, and sat down on the piano stool, pointedly not meeting Roger’s gaze as he spoke. “It’s been bad recently, and my chest is a... sore spot.”

“Sorry,” Roger repeated, abandoning the silence of his curiousity. “Can you explain your dysphoria to me? Or... how medically transitioning changes that?” He didn’t wait for Thom to answer. “I understand in theory, but... as phonetically ironic as it may be, the concept is dissonant to me.”

Thom sighed heavily and ran his hands through his hair. He was silent for a long time, the pain of gripping his hair grounding him. He didn’t owe Roger this. He wanted to give it to him, but it ached. He didn’t want to talk about dysphoria, he didn’t want to tell Roger anything while the phantom touch on his chest continued to ache.

Roger used silence so, so beautifully. Thom broke.

"Just, um... sit with me. Here.” Roger was warm against his side. He sat so close that Thom could feel his breathing. “Pick a chord that you like. Not a triad. Develop that as your One into... a four chord progression.” Roger’s C nine evolved into a pretty pattern, alternating blocked chords and arpeggios. Thom let him play it through twice. He wanted to lean on Roger, but he couldn’t. He fought it. "Now... make it as dissonant as you can. Make it sting your ears," he ordered. Roger’s brow furrowed, but slowly he did so. It wasn’t natural for him. Thom hadn’t realised before how very pleasing all of Roger’s chord progressions were, even when they were violent. It made it easier to strengthen his voice as he said, "That's your chords now, that's what you've got to work with. Build up the rest of a song using that." Roger did as told. Again, Thom let him play the progression through twice. “In theory this is a nice enough song. The Five chord, in particular, would be perfectly nice executed properly, but that’s not the case. You have four dissonant chords that lead nowhere but dissonance, so no matter how technically competent your playing is, you will always be tainted by that dissonance. Now, um... may I?” His hands covered Roger’s, for just a moment, and their sides pressed closer. He took over, played the progression once, then began to change them, note by note. "So, starting testosterone for me was like... reshuffling the notes into a consonant sound, bit by bit.” They were back to Roger’s original four chords. “It makes composition a hell of a lot easier.” He tried to laugh, but it was more like a breath.

"It's a good metaphor,” Roger said quietly. He covered one of Thom’s hands on the piano with his own, ending the progression back at Five. His hand was so much larger than Thom’s, the knuckles so perfectly pronounced, the skin of his fingertips worn into callouses. “Thank you, Thom.” His eyes were steady, and Thom’s breath hitched. Panic swelled in his stomach, his chest, joining the
butterflies and warmth. He lowered his head.

"Sure." He was glad Roger read him well, removed his hand.

"Do you want to go out? I mean... we should get really, really drunk."

Say no, say no, say no, he chanted to himself. He didn’t want to. He couldn’t get drunk, he couldn’t drink. But Roger was smiling so softly, and he didn’t stand a chance. "I... sure."

Alex was a creep. Thom didn’t know how he knew, but he did. There was nothing wrong with him, but as Thom sat at the bar he considered that he had never felt so uncomfortable. He was stirring the umbrella around his glass of lemonade slowly, methodically. Alex was drinking water from a bottle that he’d tucked into his jacket.

Thom felt out of place to the point where he couldn’t think about people. He analysed the music instead, that place which he always returned to. Most of it was practically the same, it became boring very quickly. He didn’t dance. Roger had changed at the hotel, showing more skin than Thom thought he even had, his hair down, his eyes lined. He looked like he belonged in amongst the throng of bodies.

Alex spoke for the first time since they’d come in. "He tries to 'dress down' and it doesn't work. Makes it worse, actually."

"'It'?” Thom asked.

"The attention he's paid. He could wear a potato sack and everyone in this club would want to fuck him."

He looked at Alex. Alex did not look at him. "Do you?"

"No. Do you?" Alex looked at him.

Thom turned away, blushing from his chest up to the tips of his ears. He tried to stop his heart beating, if only for a second. "We'll see." It was the best he could do. Alex knew. That was clear. He sipped on his lemonade, looking back to Roger. He was dancing with a large, well-muscled man, shaved head and tattoos. He hated to stereotype, but still nudged Alex with his elbow.

Alex followed his gaze. His smile disconcerted Thom. "He's dancing with his bassist, it's okay. Not a stranger.” Despite all plans Thom had not met any of Roger’s band. Roger had been so impatient to get to the club that he simply told Alex to tell them to be there. Thom was sure that they should be rehearsing right now.

Alex seemed to read his silence. “That's Wes. Over there is Gillian, he's second guitar. Michaela is first guitar, she's here somewhere. Andy's piano, and Bella's drums, but I don't think they came."

"And your crew?" Thom asked. The song changed.

"They're in their own sleeper. They don't like to come out with him, they do their own thing most of the time. The more people there are, the more attention is on him. It amazes me that he's not recognised more than he is. Everyone wants to look at him, no-one realises who he is." Thom wondered if Alex had lied, when he said that he didn’t want to fuck Roger. It was more than that, he thought, looking at Alex looking at Roger. It was intense, even if it wasn’t sexual.

"How poetic,” he said dryly. “I'm sure that will change once the album's out."
Alex hummed, taking out his water bottle once more. Thom thought it was self-centred to think that he needed a private drink, but he supposed that the bodyguard to a Conté should be more cautious than most. "He's cramming in as much freedom as he can. His manager wants him to calm down, step back. We all get sick of the sleepers though."

"I can imagine. Which countries have you been to, now?" Small talk was not natural. He didn’t care if Alex knew that he wasn’t comfortable.

"New Zealand and Australia, most recently. Canada, England several times, Germany, France, Japan… I think that’s it. He’s taking a break mid next year, but then straight back to international touring." Thom didn’t bother answering. He glared at his lemonade, and considered that the song playing would be far better suited by a deeper bass line. It wasn’t tinny, per se, but it didn’t seem appropriate to the context. People still seemed to be dancing. "Oh," said Alex, in a dead tone.

Thom looked around quickly, but Alex hadn’t gotten to his feet, so he didn’t either.

He had never understood the expression of a heart dropping before.

Roger was on the far wall, kissing another man. His hands were knotted in the man’s hair, and travelling down his waist to his arse. Thom felt like he was going to throw up.

"Gillian?" he asked, trying to keep his voice straight. He tried to amuse himself by thinking how badly he’d failed at being straight in the past. It didn’t work.

Alex nodded. "Seemingly so." He tucked his water bottle into his jacket, and got to his feet. "I’m going to get a little closer to them, keep them out of trouble. Nice chat."

Thom buried his face in his hands, just for a moment. He turned back to the bar. He was not an easy crier, and he felt no tears. He wished he did, though. He would rather the humiliation of public sobs than the dull, throbbing pain in his chest.

He started as the bartender spoke to him. "I’m sure at least thirty people here would be willing to dance with you, and at least ten to fuck you if you put yourself on the floor." He knew it was supposed to be kind, but it felt more like a threat. Still, he tried to smile.

"Thanks."

The man cracked the lid of another can of lemonade. "Boyfriend?" he asked, gesticulating vaguely in Roger’s direction. Thom wanted to scream.

"No, just a friend," he said. That felt disingenuous, too. He didn’t even know Roger. He just wanted those hands, to drown in his voice. His glass was refilled, another cherry skewered on another umbrella. "Thanks," he whispered.

He tried to focus on the song, recapture his train of thought. The bass could be deeper, it would suit the environment more, but the throng of people moved as if in a deliberate syncopation. The vocalist had the typical pop-punk tone, a high tenor. It was distorted in the remix, of course, but Thom found the tone, the accent, interesting. He tried to re-remix the song in his head. His instinct was of course cellos, the deeper bassline.

He finally caught the hook line.

*If you had a day, would you give me a moment?*


Would you allow our play to leave no bone unbroken?

He spared a glance at Roger and Gillian, tangled against the wall, tipped the bartender, and left.

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03.08

To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)

I feel like you don’t want me to meet Kel because I’m the side of you that you’re ashamed of.

I’m sick of being angry at you, and I’m sick of being the bad one.

---

Incoming call: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)

“I love you, eternally, and forever, without limit. I could not be more proud of you, Thom. I hate you sometimes and you hate me sometimes and some of the worst parts of me I see reflected in you. It doesn’t mean that I don’t love you with my entire being.” Thom let out a choked sob. “Thom? Babe, what’s happening?”

“When did you start calling me ‘babe’?”

“It’s easier to infantilise you with affection than a significant other. Also platonic and familial petnames are underrated as a form of affection.” There were no tears. Just breathlessness. “You are not the bad one, Thom. Neither of us are.” Thom didn’t speak. He could hear Faithful purring in the background. “Thom, what’s happened?”

“I woke you up.”

“Nah. Someone broke George’s arm, I’m waiting for him to fall asleep from the pain killers before I do.”

“Is he okay?”

“He’ll be fine. I’ll explain another time. Thom. Tell me what happened.”

“I’ll explain another time.”

“You’re an arsehole. Can you get to sleep?”

“Yeah.”

“I love you, Thom Trebond. Don’t… we’ll talk soon, okay?”

“Okay.”

Thom missed the galaxy on his ceiling. He stayed under the blankets well past noon, doing nothing in particular. He felt so entirely lost he could barely breathe. He ignored Alanna’s texts. Alex texted him to say Roger would be at his place by three, and he didn’t know how to tell Alex and Roger both to fuck off.
There was nothing that defined him. He liked music. He was good at it – brilliant, really. He loved
Alanna. He liked praise. He didn’t know what there was, past that. He had felt for just a day like
he could wrap his identity around his infatuation with Roger fucking Conté, and he understood,
abruptly, violently, how people got lost in love, in romance, in sex. Roger owed him nothing. He
owed Roger nothing. It didn’t mean it didn’t hurt. It didn’t mean he couldn’t still distantly feel
Roger’s hand over his and the piano beneath them.

He answered the door in his pyjamas. He’d showered when he got home, and he’d brushed his
teeth that morning, but he hadn’t combed his hair or anything past that.

“Hey.” Roger was wearing violet and grey again. Of course he was.

"Hey." The silence rang out. They were standing at the door to the living room, not quite settled.
"Sorry I left last night, I was tired." It was technically true.

Roger shook his head and went past the doorway, leaning against the piano as he spoke. "No, it's
fine. You got home okay?" His concern seemed rote, more than anything.

"Yeah." Again, silence. Roger didn’t need to look down at him when they were standing so far
apart. It made it a little easier to talk to him plainly. "Are you and Gillian together?" he blurted out.

Roger’s face fell, a mix of confusion, and – for just a second – something akin to pity. "No. No, not
at all. It's just one of those things - convenient, you know?"

Thom did not, in fact, know. "Yeah, totally." He looked down at his hands. “So, um, we should
work on whatever we’re doing for your shows. I’ll run through my solo numbers, then… ‘Take Me
to Church’, ‘Goodbye Yellow Brick Road’, and--”

“I wrote a number. Based on the motif of ‘Butterflies of Chaos Theory’, but with a full
instrumentation and for two voices.”

“Right, okay.” Thom began to unpack instruments as he and Roger talked. Roger didn’t allow his
smile or pleasantries to falter, but there were little changes in their interactions. Thom slowly fell
back into an ease with him, but he tried to brace himself, distance himself from the man laughing at
his piano.

Alanna came by at five to find the two of them side by side on the couch, both with their legs
crossed under them, laptops in hand. Roger smiled up at her briefly, Thom gesticulated vaguely in
her direction. "What are you two... doing?"

"Proving a point,” Thom mumbled. "Essays."

She waited for further elaboration, and when it didn’t come, prompted, "What are your essays
about?"

"Interplay between use of social media and success,” Roger said, only just taking his eyes off the
screen to glance at her.

"Also cultural violence,” Thom added.

Roger stretched out his hands and made eye contact with Alanna for just a moment. "And we're
editing each others' cannibalism essays." His eyes were back down, fingers on the keys.

She looked at them in utter amazement, to the instruments scattered around, sheet music lying over
the floor, Thom still in his pyjamas. "I--"

Thom cut her off. "We're both rusty. Peer editing is never bad. And my cannibalism essay is in French, so that stretches both of us."

"I--"

"Give me ten minutes. There's food in the kitchen."

She sighed, exasperated, but did as told. She made herself tea and tried not to think about George. Her heart ached just with the idea of him. Buri and Kel were spending the day at an aquatics centre, and so she had sat with George and his 'privy council', George in his sling and rainbow of bruises, and tried not to scream with her anger. It was more dangerous than a gang, almost, because they were the intersection between vigilantes and true criminals. George, beautiful George, was so moral and so intelligent, and somehow it meant that the truly criminal side of things happened anyway.

She snapped at Thom as soon as they came into the kitchen. "Was French really necessary?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Yes. I've not practised." He stole a sip of her tea.

"And I'm fluent, slightly more proficient than Thom," Roger said as he took an apple from the fridge. Alanna hated every single inch of him. She hated him even more for how many inches made him up.

"Huh," she managed to get out.

"Did you take French?" he asked, pretty smile and fluttering eyelashes.

"No, German. We began language studies at eight."

Thom was making himself a cup of tea as he spoke. "We were given different subjects so we couldn't make any more trouble, and so between us we would cope in different countries. Tea, Roger?" Roger nodded, and Thom continued. "Alanna was given German because she was supposedly the more masculine one, and I was the soft, fluffy, feminine one." His smirk was almost vicious.

Roger did something that, in any other person, would have been considered an undignified snort. "That's... really?"

Thom rolled his eyes and nodded. "Really. Let's just say I fucked over our teachers and carers. I'm not actually transgender at all, I'm just rebelling against childhood expectations," he said hurriedly, his hands punctuating his words and his earnest expression. He tossed Alanna a bar of chocolate. She both loved and hated that he knew precisely what she needed. "I've also got conversational Italian, and Latin theory," he said to Roger, and indicated for Alanna to continue.

"And I've got Latin theory and conversational Portuguese. And of course we've both got a bit of French and German."

Roger swallowed a mouthful of apple. "French, fair Latin, and conversational Portuguese. Did you get Professor Sheering?" he asked. His 'thank you' to Thom for his cup of tea was conveyed in a wink, and Thom went red. He busied himself in the cupboard.

"For first year, yes, then Professor Wesley," said Alanna, trying not to growl at Roger. She hated him so much, and he was just the icing on a horrible day.
"What a horrible man."

Alanna rolled her shoulder back, took a mouthful of tea. She shook her head. "No, I liked him. He was down to Earth."

"Despicably rude, though."

"I would rather rude than slimy like Sheering." Roger cocked a brow at her aggression. "Thom, in that subject line, took Italian," she said hurriedly. She didn’t want to force her conflicts on Thom.

"I faked stupidity as to have no attention paid to me, then perfected my assessment tasks and exams. My teachers all hated me.” He grinned and put an arm around his sister’s waist. “I blamed Alanna.”

"To be fair, I blamed you whenever I fucked up,” she admitted, in turn putting her arm around his shoulders. She bet that Roger was just itching to post a photo of the wonder-twins to Instagram, with that slimy fucking attitude of his.

“To be entirely fair though, it was probably my fault.” He paused. “Actually, no, you blamed me after pushing a guy down a staircase.”

“But then Jon took responsibility—"

“But you still didn’t get in trouble, Ms. ‘I wasn’t even in that wing’!”

They bickered for a while, and drank each other in. Roger became superfluous, a pretty prop. He seemed content with it, though, watching them. The twins had a brilliant way of forgiving one another. They were each others’ oases, and even at their most tumultuous moments or worst fights, they didn’t quiet give up on each other. They couldn’t, really.

Alanna took vindictive relish in Thom ignoring Roger for her.

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rogerconte posted to vine:

"So, formally, putting it on the record: Alanna and Thom Trebond, if you were to meet Fred and George Weasley, what would you do?"

" Fight them, " they said in unison.

Chapter End Notes

Most of the editing of this chapter was just one or both of us shrieking 'VINTAGE' at all the reminders that this fic started in 2015. How weird is that?

Now, first thing's first: congratulations to Basil for finishing school! They are an absolute badarse, did so well, and are v. clever, and if you want to see how brilliant
they are ask them about the Rapa Nui people and lack of historical evidence for cannibalism (whether they can answer in French or not is only a matter of time).

Some of you may have noticed a few chapters ago the single word 'noice' scattered through the chapter, and please just know that the 'noice's are always there, just erased when we catch them. Note from Basil: the noice's are always me, editing away (but not that well bc I left them in) - now, back to Parsley

Thank everyone so so much for reading, and I (Parsley) will be responding to all of your comments tonight. We hope you're well.

This is a further note from Basil (cowriter, and used to be mehui): Parsley is super nice, thank you very much - and if you want to hear how smart he is, just ask him about the pop-punk vocal tone - apparently it's a real (and fascinating) thing :) P: look the affects of falsetto vocal fry are hardcore, okay?

this is a further note from Parsley, innocent that I am: as always, the playlist is here https://8tracks.com/dunedinparsley/harmonising-verb
and the songs mentioned are:
(as per usual) Take Me to Church, by Hozier: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVjiKRlfKpI
Goodbye Yellow Brick Road, by Elton John: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZ3Bb4UsXhU
17 Crimes, by AFI - the ThankYouX remix: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hgtWD95qoLk
responding to accidentally deleted comments

Chapter by dunedinparsley

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Because I am so smart and went 'hey Basil, we need to delete the placeholder chapter saying we're on hiatus, yeah?', I've deleted all of your amazingly kind comments. I was rubbing my greedy, arthritics hands together ready to reply to things I'd seen in my email account, and they weren't there! So I'm very sorry, it was the opposite of my intent.

(@ao3 pls don't delete me for this not being a chapter. Disclaimer: Basil has not edited this, all spelling errors are my own and entirely my own and should be called out as such.)

So, uh, I shan't reply to all of you directly unless you've asked a question, but thank you all so much for your support. I can't speak for Basil but the 'good luck's and 'congratulations' mean the absolute world, and I appreciate it so so much. To answer the main implied things: testosterone is going well. It's annoying at times, frustrating, slower than I'd like - but marvellous. I really couldn't be happier with it - though, for transparency's sake, my vocal transition isn't going quite so well as Thom's! Funny story, though, I met a young trans man who fit Thom's pre-Testosterone vocal profile perfectly (classically trained lyric soprano, very strong larynx, fixated on his voice while transitioning), and his voice now, four years into T, is heartbreakingly beautiful - he sounds almost exactly what I imagined Thom to sound like. So hey, at least my technical vocal calculations were sort of right? (Basil is not transitioning in case there was some unclarity there.) However, the academic year for both of us went stressfully, but well all the same. We haven't got our marks back but Basil writes far, far more critical edits than they did pre-exam period, so I think that's a good sign.

(If you'd like to be removed from this please just let me know. I wasn't sure how better to manage this situation.)

Erif_of_Taloma

lulla_lunekjaer

aedifica

isnt_it_pretty

argentum477

You're all absolutely amazing, thanks so much.

and to tempetepapillion:

Thank you so much for that comment, and I'm so glad that this fic has had a positive affect on you. And while it shouldn't be surprising, because Tamora Pierce is amazing, it's really nice to hear a cisgender heterosexual boy enjoying POTS so much! As a writer giving people insight into others' experiences is paramount to me, particularly LGBT+ and women's ones. I'm not woman-identifying, but I do my best to portray women as well as I can as a queer trans man. On the
discussion of portraying women: Kel. Thank you for reading on even though she isn't the main character. I've always wanted to write more on her, but I've never felt I can write her properly! She's so complex and so entirely the opposite of what I usually write - but I do enjoy writing her, and there will be more in future. In the meantime for Kel fic, if you haven't already read them I'd really recommend:

'The Sensible Ones' by LittleMissGriff, which is Alanna and Kel being hilarious badasses;

'Legacy', by Margo_Kim;

'Intervals', by mari4242;

'Talking Treason', by Ankhiale, which is Thom and Kel and angst, a very good mix, and part of a beautiful series called 'What a Flicker Brings' (I reread this series often, and just... am blown away every time.);

The entire 'Miss Atomic Bomb' series by chash, mainly Alanna, but an amazing portrayal of most Tortall characters (some stuff about Daine and Numair is iff but like, same with many of the major couples in the canon universes), including my babe Thom (who finally gets a nice boyfriend). It's very queer, and very woman-centric, if you'd like to continue reading along those lines.

Chapter End Notes

songs featured:
(soundtrack of my life) 'I'm a Mess', by Ed Sheeran: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-t2CR9qZRj0
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Profanities are uttered, George is half-asleep, Alanna’s pissed off, and Thom and Roger are like, at LEAST a little bit gay.

Content warnings for an offhanded mention to marijuana, a brief medical discussion, and briefly discussed violence against Black American people.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alanna and Thom both liked Gillian. He had an even filthier vocabulary of swear-words than Alanna, and he made George chuckle with his anecdotes about foster care and Julliard and the ways they went hand in hand. Thom tried not to look at the hickey just below his hem-line. He didn’t want to hate him.

Most of the band was in Thom’s living room, not something he particularly appreciated, but they seemed to work in formation, compressed space. Alanna and George were in the kitchen, talking quietly. He didn’t quite know why they were there, but he appreciated it nonetheless. The strangers in his house made him feel more vulnerable than he liked. Again, he stayed in his pyjamas, and it simplified the whole process. None of the band seemed to have personalities, per se, just archetypes. They stayed under Roger’s subtle control.

They considered trading out Thom with Michaela or Gillian on guitar, or Andy on piano, but it was too much of a headache. He was happier having his solo numbers and duets, leaving it at that. Roger annotated sheet music so frequently that they had to instate a ‘pencils only’ rule, and Thom learned quickly not to take edits as a stab at his pride. Roger wanted everything to be so pristine it could have driven Thom mad. Roger left little room for unattractive dissonance, silences that weren’t choreographed, a strumming pattern that wasn’t the same every time.

When they stopped for lunch they went into the backyard with their pizza, again Alanna and George seeming out of place, but still determined to remain. Alanna murmured in Thom’s ear that she’d have to leave at three, but that she wanted George to stay. He could hear in her voice that he wasn’t supposed to ask ‘why?’.

Roger didn’t eat much, spending time responding to tweets and taking far too many numbers of photos. He took one photo of George, and was glared at so viciously that he put his hands up in surrender. He still didn’t delete it.

It was warm, and the grass was vibrant green. It was picturesque. Thom couldn’t look at the sky, it was too bright, so instead looked at the trees in the next block over. They were pretty. The light that filtered downwards cast patterns on the ground, and Roger’s pale skin seemed to move with the leaves. Thom couldn’t stop looking at him.

“What will you be wearing, Thomas?” asked Bella, through a mouthful of pizza.

“I’m not a Thomas,” he said, quite legitimately taken aback. “I’m a Thom.”
“What a concept,” said Alanna. He flipped her off. She mouthed ‘Thomas’ at him, earning a swift punch to the shoulder.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, “I hadn’t thought about it.”

Andy and Gillian chuckled. “I’m surprised that His Highness hasn’t spoken to you about it already.”

“He has a dress code.”

Thom raised an eyebrow at Roger. He shrugged, leaning back on his hands. “If we aren’t colour coordinated how can we play in the same key?” he asked, all wide, earnest eyes.

“If everyone wears black then you’re always colour coordinated,” Thom replied. At that moment he was, however, wearing green. He decided to ignore this.

“I like him,” said Wes. “He’s got my philosophy.”

“It’s a flawed philosophy,” Roger informed him. He untied his hair, slipped the band over his wrist. “But yes, that is something we’ll need to work out. I want to see you in a properly tailored suit.”

Alanna snorted water out of her nose. George kissed her cheek and looked so thoroughly smitten that Thom almost wanted to throw up. “Thanks, Alanna. I appreciate your faith.” She stuck her tongue out while trying to suppress her coughs. The band was laughing at her, so in sync it felt rehearsed. I have a suit,” he informed Roger. “I had it tailored for Gary and Raoul’s wedding.”

Roger shook his head and started typing frantically, even as he spoke. “Absolutely not. Listen, if this lot are in black and burned umber and I’m in orange and black, you can wear like… a nice muted purple, maybe a mauve, and it’ll work.” He glanced at Thom, and flitted his fingers up through from the roots of Thom’s hair to its tips, examining the colour. Thom laughed helplessly.

“Assessment, doctor?”

Roger paused. “You’ll do.”

Thom scoffed just as Alanna did. “Thanks.”

“Gil, can you see him in the… the Alan Taylor jacket with the red panel, but in lilac?”

Gillian hummed, and finished his mouthful carefully. “Yeah, but a closed in front. The… what was it, lace? Wouldn’t suit him the whole way ‘round, particularly if you wear the black and orange Gucci.” Roger nodded, continuing to type. Fluidly, he lay down across the grass, his head falling neatly in Thom’s lap.

Thom was glad he was sunburned.

He didn’t want to breathe, lest he disrupt Roger. Roger was treating it like it was nothing. Thom kept his legs inhumanly still, felt each and every turn of Roger’s neck as he flipped through page after page of reference photos.

He tuned back into the conversation only when Gillian spoke his name. “Thom, what’s your waist measurement?”
“How the fuck--?”

“Around twenty-eight,” Alanna said. “His hip-waist ratio isn’t standard sizing, let alone his height, so have fun working on a time limit.” George was kissing the side of her neck. It wasn’t sexual, it wasn’t anything scandalous. It was gentle and casual, and her hand on his waist looked like it belonged there.

“What’s his hip?” Roger asked. Thom could feel the vibrations of his speech in his legs. It was bizarre and beautiful. He tried to focus on Alanna, but there was a strand of hair out of place with the rest, displaced over Roger’s ear.

“Oh, twenty-nine I think?” he heard Alanna say. He looked at her. She was smiling, all too knowingly. He swallowed.

“Why do you know this?”

“Because you’re useless,” she said promptly.

Roger snorted. “Sibling arguments are universal, it seems.”

“You don’t have any siblings.”

“I have Jon,” he said, pausing in his typing. He looked up at Thom. He wanted to run his thumb over Roger’s brow, take all the tension he saw away from him. He wanted to feel the crease between his lips and his nose, see if he would bleed upon touching his cheekbones, his chin. “He’s enough.” He looked back at his phone. “We’ll take your measurements properly in a bit.”

“I get no say in this, do I?” Thom asked. He didn’t like most of the things flashing over Roger’s screen.

“You can say when the measuring tape feels too tight.”

“No,” Bella provided. “Welcome to life on Roger’s stage. I don’t think I picked anything currently in my wardrobe. He even bought me a bra, once.”

“It has drums on it, it was your birthday,” Roger said, playing offended.

“Still.”

Gillian, Wes and Michaela talked, and George napped at Alanna’s side. Alanna watched Thom and Roger.

Thom carefully tucked the renegade strand of hair behind Roger’s ear. Roger’s lips turned up into a smile, and Thom took that as prompt enough to run his fingers through his hair. It was incredibly soft, no split-ends, no changes in texture. In the summer light it seemed more brown than black, even an illusion of red. Thom tried to imagine Roger with his own hair, and bit the inside of his lip as not to laugh. He saw Andy take a photograph from the corner of his eye. He wondered how he looked, if he looked as stupid and clumsy as he felt, if his fingers were as broad as they seemed in Roger’s hair.

Alanna photographed them, too. He felt so naked, with her watching. He supposed that was how she felt with Kel: both Roger and Kel were such entirely separate aspects of the twins’ lives. Roger didn’t belong with Alanna. Thom didn’t belong with Kel.

“So...” Roger’s voice was a little scratchy, from the overuse of his voice in rehearsal to the contrast
of silence. “Imagine this as the back of a blazer, but a similar colour to your eyes – a little darker, maybe. At the front it would look like this, with trousers like these with a different finish, and these shoes.” He flicked between the images carefully, keeping his head still as to not disrupt Thom’s hands.

“The extent of my understanding of clothes is limited to the fact that I like the colour black and little else,” Thom admitted. It was a simplification, but the words Roger and Gillian had thrown around meant nothing to him, and they knew it. “It sounds nice, though.”

“Cool. Well, my designer will send the draft to a tailor he knows in the inner-city. It should be here on Wednesday.”

Thom’s most vicious swearing was a mere echo of Alanna’s, but it still made the band cackle. “Fucking-- ah shit.”

“Welcome to celebrity, baby,” said Bella, laughing still. “You’ll get used to it after a while. I mean… no, you won’t, but you won’t be quite so shocked.”

“We should get back to practice, yeah?” said Andy.

It was a neat process, each of them taking rubbish inside and putting the backyard back precisely as it was. Roger did nothing, taking his time standing up. He offered his hand to Thom. His fingertips fell over Thom’s pulse, and he hoped that Roger couldn’t feel it.

The other man didn’t let go of his wrist as he pushed Thom’s hair back from his forehead, smoothing it behind his ear. He didn’t say anything, just gave him a one-sided smile and went back inside.

“Thom,” said Alanna. He turned back to her. George was still asleep. Thom didn’t want to know what was happening with George. He could see enough of it, and it terrified him. “I need to head off. You’ll keep an eye on George?” The man didn’t even stir. If his chest wasn’t rising and falling Thom could have believed he was dead.

“I… yeah, of course.” Alanna wouldn’t ask it of him if there was a danger to it. “He can sleep in my room, if he wants to… not be out here.”

“That would be… good. Thanks.” She drifted a hand over the side of George’s bruised neck. "Being in a room with Roger is exhausting." She tried to smile, but it didn’t work. Thom had no idea how she was juggling all that she was.

"Yes, but so is being in a room with Jon,” he said, trying to lift her mood. She just scowled.

"It's genetic, yes, they're both very charismatic and good, but with Jon he doesn't try to pull the spotlight, he just sort of... glows, and you want to look at him and listen to him because he's charismatic and beautiful and pure and good. And disgustingly pretty.” She paused for breath. “With Roger it's the pretty thing and wanting everyone to love him. I bet he's manipulative as fuck.”

"Like Roald isn't manipulative as fuck,” Thom said. He didn’t disagree with Alanna, not at all, but it wasn’t like the other Contés were any different. It just manifested differently.

"Roald is a teddy bear." George turned a little on his side, further revealing the bruising on his neck. Someone had tried to strangle him. They’d very nearly succeeded.

Trying to keep talking was hard, with George there. "He's still manipulative as fuck. I think you and
Jon have unresolved issues,” he added, though he knew it not to be true. One day Alanna and Jon would be the standard for friendship, and world peace would be achieved. He was envious.

Alanna argued exactly as he knew she would, he could almost tune it out. He looked at his feet, at his pyjama pants. It was easier than looking at George. "They're fully resolved. We’re in love with each other, platonically, and occasionally we talk about it, so that the rest of the time we can bicker and save the world." He could hear the smile in her voice. There was a fraying thread on the knee of his pants. Roger’s head had been there, his hands had been tangled in Roger’s hair. His stomach turned. "We’re not talking about Jon! How do you not have a headache from Roger’s fucking--attention seeking, charismatic bullshit? The same bullshit that got me in trouble with Jon in the first place?"

"He's not that bad. If you just go with it it's fine. I'm also more extroverted than you." He looked up at her. Her brow was furrowed and she was biting the inside of her lip, distorting the contour of her skin. "Don't deny it, I'm just more bitter and think people are worthless."

"And I'm righteous and love everyone but hate talking to them, yes, I know." She sighed, went back to petting George’s hair. He leaned in to her, ever so gently. Thom couldn’t imagine being in so much pain, or being so drugged up, that he could sleep like that.

"Why do you dislike him so?" he asked. The heat was making him drowsy. His words slurred.

"I don't trust him,” Alanna said, clearly, plainly. Nothing tainted her words. "And you adore him."

He shrugged and tried to think straight, to not fixate on the way light had changed the shades of Roger’s hair. "I haven't had friends before, Alanna, it's not... surprising." He still didn’t feel that ‘friends’ was a good word for it, nor had he stopped feeling like he was going to vomit every time he thought about Roger and Gillian together.

Alanna retracted her hand from George, and knotted her fingers together in her lap. She mulled her words over before speaking them. "You're infatuated."

He knew it was true. Still, he shrugged. "I'm just... learning, and enjoying myself. I'm allowed to do that.” He thought of Roger’s hands on his wrist, his cheek. “And he likes me."

Alanna groaned. "He does." She rubbed the heels of her hands into her eyes as she spoke, but Thom could just picture her expression. "Oh god, he does. I'm not ready for you to have a boyfriend." She looked imploring.

He didn’t know if he was ready to have a boyfriend either. "Let's not jump too far ahead."

"Your proteans are giving me a headache." He doubted that that was even close the cause of her headache. She touched George like he was a flower petal, a leaf, something so beautiful and breakable that there was no moral choice but to be gentle. She was reverent in her affections.

"Fuck off with your pseudo-science body language,” he said, trying to laugh. When she glared at him he realised that this was a grave mistake.

"He tilts his chin downwards whenever he looks at you, and if you're on eye level lowers his lids slightly, both of these to imply the proximity of intimacy. You, on the other hand, tilt your head to the side and quirk the left side of your mouth, as someone in on a private joke might, familiarity making interaction more likely to progress romantically faster. He touches your elbow or upper arm if you join a conversation, and you bump his shoulder in turn, both of these in silence – silent physical interaction, too, showing care without words or activation of certain aspects of the brain.
You let your shirt collar fall if he’s standing or sitting in front of you if you’re wearing a t-shirt, to show your collarbones, which is a typical and inherently sexual motion, whether intended or not, meant to give view to your bones."

Thom hid his blushing face in his hands. "How are you so bad with your own relationships?" The words were so muffled that they probably sounded like something else entirely, but Alanna understood.

"It’s harder to think about myself." She looked down at George. “George. George, love.” Her hand on his cheek was a little firmer. He groaned. “Wake up for just a minute, love, there’s a bed upstairs.”

He looked grey. Thom wasn’t sure if that was blood loss or pain or exhaustion or all three, but it was terrifying, in George. Alanna took George upstairs and hugged Thom quickly. “I’m running late. I’ll pick him up later tonight. Don’t let him leave, okay?”

“Okay.” He kissed her forehead. “He’ll be okay.”

“Of course he will,” she said. She said it like she believed it.

He sighed heavily before rejoining the others. “Sorry, sibling talk...” he said. Roger raised an eyebrow. He wasn’t sure if that was disapproval or curiosity, but he didn’t focus on it. His sunburned skin felt even hotter whenever Roger met his gaze, or touched his elbow, let their hands brush, put a hand on his shoulder. All of the aforementioned became more and more frequent, and Thom barely questioned it later that night when everyone else was gone (George in Alanna’s arms, the others to the hotel) and Roger yet again put his head in his lap. He wasn’t used to his own body, let alone anyone else’s, but it was terrifying and addictive. He was leaning against the couch, Roger with him. They talked about presentations of gender and listened to Simon and Garfunkel. He plaited Roger’s hair loosely. He and Alanna used to plait their hair everyday, and had mastered imitating each other. Sometimes he thought the only thing he missed about pre-transition was the perfect alibi of a truly identical twin.

“Are you looking forward to performing?” Roger asked him. His eyes were closed. Thom was methodically unworking each plait only to retie it.

“Yeah,” he said. He tried to find the right words to express his experience, the not quite ‘looking forward’, but ‘positive inevitability’. He was tongue-tied. “How large is the venue?” he asked instead.

“One thousand two hundred, I think.”


“Have you ever played in front of that many people before?”

“I performed at Corus, and on TV for a couple of… Christmas concerts, stuff like that. I guess not.”

“You’ll be good.” Roger hummed along to ‘Canticle’ for a moment, then asked, “When did you perform at Corus?”

“End of year stuff, mainly. For assessment tasks. Did you?”

“Of course I did. I’m sort of surprised you never saw me.”
“I attended three assemblies in my entire time at Corus. Sorry.” He ended the plait, and ran his fingers through lock by lock to undo it. He was sure Roger would tell him if he didn’t like it. The repetition, the softness, was calming him.

“You missed the epic saga of my voice breaking,” Roger said with a little laugh. “Probably for the best.” He opened his eyes, smiled up at Thom.

“Whereas my voice breaking is documented forever on the internet.”

“It was more gradual than a cisgender boys’, I think?”

“Oh yeah, definitely. I still had some very, very awkward moments.” The CD came to an end.

“You can hook your phone up to the bluetooth, if you want,” he said.

“No, I should head back to the hotel.” Thom tried not to let his disappointment show. “Get to the end of this braid and tie it up? I’ll have curls tomorrow, it’ll be great.” Thom chuckled and set back to work, not so loosely this time. Roger offered him a hair-tie. He fumbled with it, but when Roger sat up it was with a neat plait, fringe still falling in his eyes and driving Thom mad.

He pulled Thom to his feet. Thom ducked his head, pretending to yawn. “I have a medical appointment tomorrow, but you can come by after that, if you want. Or we could go look at the venue.”

Roger scowled at him. “No, no, you ruin it if you see the venue too early. When’s your appointment?” He did his boots back up as he spoke. Thom realised that he’d grown accustomed to Roger’s presence on his couch over only days.

“ Noon.”

Roger tucked his fringe back, clipped it back with a bobby pin. Thom almost loathed him for it. “I’ll come at two?” Thom nodded. Roger drifted towards the door, turned with a brilliant smile. “Goodnight, Thom.”

“Goodnight, Roger.”

He hid his face in his hands, stomach churning with butterflies and heart leaping. Crushes were the worst.

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**HesitantGinger tweeted:** Guess who can’t sleep? It’s this guy. So, I have three three am gifts for you.

**HesitantGinger tweeted:** [link] I recorded this ages ago, never posted it. Timing.

**HesitantGinger tweeted:** ‘Duet partners’ are fake and unnecessary. I filmed this a while ago. [link]

**HesitantGinger tweeted:** [link] I wrote and recorded this tonight in my pjyamas. Have fun gifing my bed-head, tumblr.
Asleep – The Smiths – Thom Trebond Cover

_Sing me to sleep_

_Oh, sing me to sleep_

_I’m tired and I_

_I want to go to bed_

The Word of Your Body – Spring Awakening – Thom Trebond Cover

_Oh, I’m gonna be wounded_

_Oh, I’m gonna be your wound_

_Oh, I’m gonna bruise you_

_Oh, you’re gonna be my bruise_

Ready – Thom Trebond

_I’m not ready to be ready_

_Triple-time, I’ll run for you_

_If you’ll run for me_

_HesitantGinger tweeted:_ Whoever said I wasn’t a nice person toez needs to reassess.

_jonathanconte tweeted: @HesitantGinger_ who could ever think you’re not nice?

_HesitantGinger tweeted: @jonathanconte_ Go the fuck to sleep, Jonathan.

_jonathanconte tweeted: @HesitantGinger_ my kind, considerate friend. so kind and considerate of you.

“You, Thom, are still iron deficient,” Doctor Rosethorn said, tapping him on the head with her clipboard. “However, your vitamin C and D levels have risen.”

“I’ve gone outside more,” he said, glaring at his hands. He hadn’t slept until six, up at nine.
“Well, that’s something. I’m going to give you a prescription for an iron supplement, and you need to take it. I know you don’t like pills, but that’s too bad.” He groaned. “I am not letting you have that surgery iron deficient with a potential bleeding disorder, not when your mother had aplastic anaemia.” He groaned again. “For such an overachiever you are very complacent.”

His head snapped up. It sort of hurt. “I’ve been telling you this since I was fifteen! The only reason I am not entirely lazy is Alanna dragging me out of bed.”

“How is she?”

“Stressed. But fine.”

She used silence to make him uncomfortable. She knew how to look at him to make him squirm. “Are you second-guessing the hysterectomy?” She tried to hide her laughter when Thom swore at her, long and vulgar. “This is why you need the iron.”

“Fine.”

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12.47
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
The doctor is bullying me into taking iron supplements. I hate pills. Can’t your health people fix it? Exercises or something?

1.37
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
To be fair the last time someone in our family with anaemia had their uterus poked at it didn’t go very well for her. And no.

1.39
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Ouch.

1.42
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
George would like me to add that with the way you were looking at Roger yesterday you should get used to swallowing anyway.

1.45
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
I already hit him, but I hope you like dropped your phone or fell over or something.

1.56
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
I’m going to kill both of you.

1.57
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
What did you do?

2.01
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Knocked over a shelf of library books.

2.02
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
You just won me ten bucks. Thanks.

2.03
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Go fuck yourself.

2.05
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
<3 <3 <3

2.10
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Can George and I come by again?

2.11
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
How dangerous is it?

2.13
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
His people will keep lookouts. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.

2.16
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
This is really serious.

2.16
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Yeah.

2.17
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Can he get out of it? Whatever it is?

2.18
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
He’s trying. That’s half the problem. Can we come? You’ll be safe, and he’s safer at yours than mine, even. I’d ask Miles but he’s got duty of care civil responsibility etc.

2.19
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Of course. If you get me killed I’m fucking haunting you, though.

2.20
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Like dearest god-mama?

2.21
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Worse, I promise.

2.25
From: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
Deal. See you in like an hour or two? We’re with Kel and POTS. She’s better with the lawyer than I am tbh, and I think she and Buri are soulmates.

2.28
To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)
I hope you know you sound like a drug ring.
Thom felt stronger after his shot – clearer. He was never sure if it was psychosomatic or not, considering how long he’d been on it, but it pleased him nonetheless. He was at the piano singing when Roger let himself in, wearing metallic gold pants and a deep red crop top. Thom wasn’t sure whether he was supposed to be intrigued, weirded out or turned on, so found himself stuck neatly in the middle of them. Roger’s curls were going to drive him mad. Roger sat silently beside him, watched him play. He clapped when Thom finished. “What was that?”

“‘Ten a.m., Gare du Nord’, by Keaton Henson.” Thom went back to the progression, fingers just brushing the keys. “My arrangement, anyway. It’s originally played on an electric guitar, or a twelve-string acoustic.” Roger played the bass notes to Thom’s high, and he realised that no matter what the song was they were tumbling, quick and together, inevitable and beautiful, towards something. “Can you play a twelve-string?” he asked.

“Yeah. You?”

“I’ve never tried. Every time I look at a new instrument my hands start to hurt.” He laughed, though it was true. He wondered if Roger’s knuckles would have been so prominent if not for their vigorous (mis)use.

“Well, your old age will be full of arthritis anyway, I’m sure, as will mine, so we may as well go down with a bang.” Roger nudged one of Thom’s hands up an octave. His nails were freshly painted glossy black. “Let’s...” He lifted each of Thom’s fingers into place, though they both knew it would have been quicker just to order him in place.

Thom desperately wanted to kiss him. He didn’t know what it would be like. He couldn’t remember his first kiss. He was drunk at the time, after all. There was nothing logical about kissing. It was terrifying, the wish to be held, to be grounded. Roger’s eyelashes fanned out, long across his cheeks. His lips were perfectly smooth and unbitten. Thom forced himself to pay attention to the chord. “Then go... to the sixth.”

He tried not to let his shuddering exhale be heard as Roger let go of his hand, back at the lower octaves.

“We’re not finishing this today.”

“Yes, we are. We’re just taking a break. I wanted to show you something; where’s your Fender?”

“If you break my strings, Roger Conté, I swear to god you’re restringing it.”

“Have some faith!”

“In you? No.”

“You wound me.”

“You’re beyond wounding.”
"You're relentless."

"Thanks."

Roger's crop top and high-waisted pants showed off his hipbones and his ribs and so much skin, yet somehow it was his hands that were distracting Thom from the music. "I feel like incorporating another B string will strengthen the sound," Roger was saying.

"Are you sure it won't take any of the clarity away?" he said, only just quickly enough. Roger was tapping his nails against what had become the B string.

"To the contrary." He swung around on the stool, keeping careful hands on the guitar. "So... imagine this as the cello line." He played it lightly, and Thom committed it to memory. That, he could do. "The drum line as it was..." They continued like that until Roger seated himself on the arm of the couch and played the song through for him. ‘Iris’ was a musical phenomenon, and for the first time since he had spoken to Roger, Thom found that he hadn't done it justice, at all. He couldn't quite figure out what was wrong.

Roger put the guitar to the side as Thom watched him in silence. He looked content, but not quite on the line of self-satisfaction that he so often stood on, planting flags and looking so goddamned pretty. Thom considered him thoroughly, and sat down on the couch. Roger crossed his legs under him, faced Thom. He said nothing as Thom gnawed away on the skin of his inner lip.

Thom mimicked Roger's pose, legs under him, hands crossed. Thom pursed his lips for a moment, and spoke: "Look, the thing with Johnny Rzeznik is that he isn't a superb vocalist. He can be pitchy, his tone and technique are questionable, even without his smoking habit." Pause. Breath. "But I'd take him over Josh Groban any day, because I can feel his music. He's feeling something. Or at least he's tricking the world into thinking he is. Right now, you're not." He dropped his head a little, so he didn't have to look Roger in the eye. The mid-afternoon light drifted into the room like paint, dying everything gold. "I can't feel it, Roger." He forced himself to look up, if only for a second. He was rushing his words, he knew, but he had to explain. "And I know I'm not emotionally adept, fuck, I'm not emotionally competent, but this is something I know." He gestured around the room, the four guitars, the cello, the piano, boxes upon boxes of sheet music. He was sure of what he said. It was still easier to hide his face, look down. "And the beauty of your voice, and the intricacy and power of your arrangement is irrelevant. Because 'Iris' is about being so vulnerable that you can hardly believe you're not broken, not dead already, but..." He was going too far. He could feel the words flooding under his tongue, push at his soft palate, harass his teeth. Thom liked the truth when it wasn’t about feelings. They burst from his lips gently, vulnerably, reverently. "But being so in love, so madly, insanely in love, that you can fight. For him." He quickly added, "Her. That person. You believe that they can... they can feel you somehow. And they'll know you."

Thom’s cheeks were too hot, his air too thin. He could feel Roger’s eyes on him. He’d never spoken like that before in his life. He almost expected a scolding, to be told off, but looking up, Roger's skin was as flushed as his own, and he was biting his lip like only models were trained to, just as contemplative and intent as ever.

The quiet was soft and heady, and Thom couldn't quite calibrate his breath to his body, the air was too thin to breathe. "God, you're something," Roger whispered. Thom laughed, and it hurt his throat, mouth too dry. Roger shifted forward in one fluid motion, and pushed the strand of Thom’s hair that brushed his cheek back behind his ear. Thom was shaking, and Roger's thumb stroked his cheek gently.
He was sure he must be asleep, at least half asleep, somehow dreaming. He set a hand on Roger’s waist, as much to make it real as to pull Roger close.

The door opened, and Alanna and George's laughter snapped them out of it. Roger basically fell back into his previous recline on the arm of the couch, an easy grin on his face. Thom's mouth was sticky, but he started talking as naturally as he could. Time was lagging a little, and he could still feel a phantom hand running through his hair.

"It's a cliché, sure, but it's clichéd for a reason. Just the same as 'Wonderwall'. 'Wonderwall' is a beautiful song, and it captures so much more than a lot of the indie, underground, 'no-one has ever heard this, so clearly it's superior' songs. And I've never heard either of those songs covered successfully. Ever. They're iconic for a reason."

George’s bruises had only gotten darker. He was wearing green, and it at least made his irises brighter, detracted from the bruising. "Is he giving you the 'Wonderwall' rant?" Alanna asked, carefully helping George into the armchair. George gave her an exasperated, adoring look.

Roger nodded. "Yep. George, I meant to ask the other day, but it was a large crowd… what happened?"

Alanna could have been armed with both a sword and a gun and not looked so terrifying. Roger didn’t seem to notice. Thom knew that he did. What a life to lead, to not be afraid of Alanna Trebond.

George pulled Alanna down into his lap, though it must have caused him pain. “I’m a member of my university’s black student union. I guess I was a tad too black one day, went downhill from there.” He was the best liar Thom had ever met. Alanna was probably hiding her face in his neck as to not give anything away. He stroked her hair. They had gone from distant to inseparable, and George’s vulnerability only strengthened it.

Alanna repositioned herself, legs over the edge of the chair.

“That’s appalling, I’m so sorry.” Roger was almost as good at George. He, of course, suspected the lie. “Police, or-- sorry, I’m being invasive. Which university are you at?”

“Just the local one. I’m in my final year of a computer sciences degree.” Rispah was a comp-sci teacher, Thom recalled. George was a superb actor. The reality of his bruises, his breaks, hadn’t quite hit Thom before. He knew George was in something heavy, and if he wasn’t the leader of a gang or a group or a something, he was high up. He didn’t want Alanna in that. He didn’t want himself, his home, in that.

Roger and George chatted away, and Thom went back to the piano, returning to what they’d been working on before. From the way Alanna was looking at George, so vulnerable and so protective, he never, ever wanted to kiss anyone.

Thom was sitting at Roger’s feet, guitar in hands. Roger was running his fingers through Thom’s hair absentmindedly, in a heated text conversation with his manager. “I’m heading off,” said Alanna, seemingly abruptly. It was exactly fifteen minutes before the hour.

Roger looked up from his phone, a rare pause in his texting. “May I ask why George isn’t coming with you?”

“One of our board members won’t accept men in the space,” Alanna said as she did up her shoes. She looked at Roger with barely-concealed suspicion. “George, you’ll just sleep upstairs, yeah?”
she asked. He had just come out of the kitchen, holding three cups of coffee.

“I’m not an invalid,” he reminded her gently, putting the coffee down.

“I know, but you’re in pain.” She leaned up on the tips of her toes to kiss him. “Thom, bully him. I’m sure you can figure out something.” He grunted vaguely in acknowledgement, downing a mouthful of coffee. That had been the rest of his day since about four: a vague grunt, fuelled only by caffeine and adrenaline.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you so much for reading. Please do take a moment of your time to enhance your experience of this fic, and imagine Basil (think… post-punk archaeology lecturer in high heels) cooing at George, and swearing violently at Roger.

The songs featured were:
Asleep, by The Smiths
The Word of Your Body, from Spring Awakening
10 am Gare du Nord, by Keaton Henson
Iris, by The Goo Goo Dolls
Hi everyone! I’m sorry it’s taken so long to write this – it’s been a bit of a chaotic time for both of us. We wanted to state outright that we are not going to be continuing this fic. There are several reasons, which will be listed below, but as for what’s next, I will be posting all of the incomplete chapters and scenes, and will gladly answer any plot questions you have. The reality is that this fic has never really meant to follow a typical plot structure – there was to be no climax and conclusion, it was literally following Thom through to his death (2068 of liver cancer – last words sarcastic @ one of his nephews) in progressively more spaced out time.

It’s been an amazing experience writing this, and thank you all so so much for your support. We’ve been so blessed by all of you, and it’s been an amazing process.

The key thing is honestly that we have both moved on. I started this in 2014, and Basil made it all happen in 2015. We are in entirely different stages of life than we were, and our writing styles, values, and creative goals have moved hugely. My writing has gotten so much better since I started this fic, and reading the opening chapters is an endearing look at my younger self, but I am a different writer now than when it started. This fic was a defining stage of life for me, with over 200000 words written in drafts, and in service to myself, I need to let it go. It is a hugely demanding project for me and for Basil, and it’s not fair to continue it without the passion and commitment that it needs. We also just don’t have the time to collaboratively write such a large piece – Basil works and studies full time, and I study full time and work casually (mostly in writing). I am also working on an original manuscript in very early talks with a publishing house, and while I have other projects that I’ll be continuing, H-V is just too much to try continue while attempting to write professionally.

Writing Thom as a trans guy was the stimulus for the whole piece, and while I put as much effort in as possible to write his medical transition as realistically as possible, as I embarked on my transition, talking to other trans guys simultaneously, I realise how many mistakes I made in my writing – and it feels too big to go back and fix now. While I’d love to be a wonderfully objective author, I’ve also had a difficult medical transition, and have had more problems than most - it's made it painful to write Thom's, particularly as his was so easy.

It may seem insignificant, but a big reason this fic became so overwhelming is that American politics has become so much more convoluted and horrific than I was ever expecting – and please note that we’re both Australian. While the Conte family were meant to parallel, policy-wise, Obama, with a Clinton-equivalent afterwards (so a future that was moving in the progressive direction, not just in the citizens, but through to the top levels of government), it is impossible to write a fic that has tenets in politics and media when it’s so impossible to track either now. This fic is still set in 2015 – when Vine was still alive! ‘Take Me to Church’ was still in the charts! No-one outside of America knew who Donald Trump was! It is simply too difficult to replot it all based around what’s actually happening, and feels disingenuous to continue without doing so. Simultaneously, the way trans people have become part of pop culture (still horrible, but improving) is not something I could have predicted or can work around. There is still no trans pop star, sadly, but there will be someday soon, I’m sure. The way the world has dichotomised in terms of social justice has made orienting this fic's universe difficult.

And a super small petty thing that I hate myself for is that Roger is canonically described as having a higher voice than Thom, and I got that entirely wrong! And I’ve written like, full arrangements for songs they sing working under the assumption of Roger as a baritone, when he very much isn’t – Alanna comments a few times on how high his voice is compared to other men.
@ing my past self for poor research. @ing Tamora Pierce for queer-coding like, maybe four characters (Thom, Roger, Buri, Myles) even if accidentally and killing two of them, particularly Roger as a bi man. However, as stands for anyone who was curious, Roger’s vocal profile is similar to Brendon Urie’s. Thom’s is similar to Michael Arden and Jeremy Jordan, but slightly more ‘light’ in the way that trans guys’ voices often are. Alanna’s is akin to Regina Spektor’s, with the same level of agility, but a fair bit lower and with a somewhat ‘dirtier’ tone, and as she ages and sings less, her voice lowers and her vibrato is less controlled.

A bigger thing is also that I feel uncomfortable writing Roger as a genuine love interest – a life long, sincere love, without any regard for the depth of his abuses of Thom in canon. This fic is a waxing love poem trying to make sure Thom of Trebond has a happy life, but it feels wrong to me to try to make it a healthy relationship, and feels too big and disingenuous to the goal (Make Thom Happy) to try write a more dangerous Roger and unhealthy relationship.

So yes that’s where we’re at at the moment. Thank you all again, and I hope you enjoy these (very unedited, written between 2015-2018) drafts.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

edited for the most part and the last full 'chapter'!!

content warnings for talk of parent death; strong dysphoria because of physical boundaries being crossed - implied manipulation and willful knowledge of crossing boundaries

“You’re late,” said Daine, lightly. It wasn’t an accusation, but something just below it.

“Sorry,” Alanna mumbled, setting her notes down. “I was with George.” Buri’s gaze bothered her. “How are you all?”

“Good,” was the general chorus, Kel adding,

“Professor Olau is going to come in to talk to us soon. He’s willing to sponsor us for the core foundation, as you said, and he’s already contacting some of the people he thinks will help out. Your idea about the university societies was brilliant, we already have three HR departments interested.” Alanna grinned. Kel was entirely self-reliant, she knew, but Alanna had been guilty for the lack of time she had given Kel since George was hurt. She was clearly handling it all well.

“That’s great. Anything else?”

“No,” Buri said. “Daine is setting up data collection amongst trans women who have experienced abuse.” Alanna wondered if they’d spoken. Buri wasn’t transphobic, but what she’d said to Daine had been. “You haven’t missed that much. What’s going on, Lioness?”

Alanna impulsively went to touch her ring. George hadn’t finished fixing it yet. “It’s not my place to say,” she said, clearly. “But I’ll be here full time again now. I’ve palmed George off on Thom, so I’m sure they’ll keep each other safe.”

“How’s Conté?” Kel asked.

“Pretty, but otherwise disgusting.” She glanced at Daine, who had quite suddenly gone red. “You like him!”

“If he’s pretty she’s got a crush on him,” Buri said with a vaguely exasperated sigh. “Anyway, moving on. Kel and I were talking about maintaining the balance of grassroots values on a broader scale.”

The afternoon and night went well. Alanna found out that Numair had left without her even knowing, and realised Daine had got a haircut. She itched to return to George, and if her mind flitted away from him guilt overtook her.

She was glad for the team of women with her. They had something, and they were doing the right thing, tedious as it was.

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She and Buri walked Kel back to the hotel, Daine already gone off to hers. As soon as Kel was safe inside it was clear that Buri was drowsy from the work. Alanna remembered her panic at leaving Thayet, and the way she threw herself into the organisation made so much more sense. She wondered if Buri thought about Thayet every waking moment. Buri was content with silence. She adored that about her. There was no need for space to be filled with words. “How’s Thayet?” she asked at last. She should know, really. Contact was hard.

“She’s good. She’s... she likes Canada. She’s the top of all of her classes, and because she’s a vulgar overachiever she makes it seem like it’s nothing. She’s started wearing lots of green. She seems to think that’s noteworthy.” Buri scoffed, but affection was written in the curve of her lips.

“Hearing about her mother is hard. She thinks it’s her duty to know everything about her, about the abuse she suffered.” Buri examined the street, waiting for the walkers’ light to go green.

“You don’t?”

“I want to understand why, and how to stop it. Why our mothers died. I can’t... I barely remember my Mother, and I’m happy that way. It hurts to think about her. What I need to think about is everything she stood for.” The light turned green. Alanna didn’t know what to say. “How did your parents die?”

Alanna didn’t like talking about her parents. Maybe Buri didn’t either. “My father had bowel cancer when we were seventeen. He ignored all of his symptoms until it was too late. My mother died giving birth to us. She had some sort of bleeding disorder.”

“Huh,” said Buri. That was all.

Alanna hadn’t felt so relaxed in days, walking in silence. The world was so much, but the city was quiet at night. Idaho hardly held the party cities of America, and she was beyond grateful for it.

“D’you wanna race?” Buri asked.

“Nah.” Buri nodded like she’d expected that.

Thom had gone back to George’s place with him, and promised to wait until Alanna got back. She didn’t know what to do. That hurt more than broken bones or public shaming or anything. She had only just started learning what George’s job entailed. Her head was spinning, trying to memorise names and concepts and crimes.

George was the owner and founder of the Robin Hood Initiative, renamed the Rogues, but over the years people had decided that George was incompetent, too soft, so challenged him. George’s team was strong, George was strong – it had never worked until now. Alanna could only assume this whole situation was, at least in part, because of her. He was trying so hard to retreat, to get out of the system. Guilt washed through her, and she tried to swallow it down.

“Is George okay?” Buri asked. It sounded like she had to force it out.

“No,” Alanna whispered. She hadn’t noticed the tears. She let them fall. Then forced them to stop. “This is your stop, yeah?” she asked, indicating the side entrance to the hotel. She would have usually taken Buri to the front, but that felt so far away.

“Yeah.” Buri turned so she was in front of her. “Do you need to talk?” she said - or maybe she snapped.
“No.” Buri put a finger under Alanna’s chin. She was infinitely gentle, lifting her head to eye-level. Alanna had always imagined something like that would feel aggressive, invasive, but Buri made it feel like support. Buri assessed her, dark eyes following the path Alanna’s tears traced over her chin.

“Don’t apologise if you need to be late.” She said nothing else, dropping her hand. “We’re ahead of schedule, and even though Kel’s going home soon her parents are on board.” Buri shoved her hands in her pockets, rolled her shoulders uncomfortably. “See you tomorrow?”

Alanna’s throat felt thick, but she managed to get out, “Yeah. Thanks, Buri.”

The walk to George’s was hard. Lifting her feet, moving, that was fine, but the idea of people and interaction horrified her.

Alanna didn’t know how to deal with love. Letting in her brother’s love was hard enough. Jon, her best friend, once lover, beautiful George. Buri felt it so deeply from the second they met, and it wasn’t like Alanna hadn’t adored her – she still adored her. But a one night stand in her eyes wasn’t a one night stand in Buri’s eyes, and that was a mess. A beautiful, chaotic mess.

Her phone buzzed with a text from Jon composed entirely of smiley faces. She sort of wanted to call him, but she didn’t like talking when she was crying. Thom opened the door to George’s apartment, looking tired but happy. He frowned upon seeing her, immediately took her into his arms.

She didn’t shove him away for a good minute. “Get off, loser,” she mumbled, knowing he would understand it as a ‘thank you’.

“I missed you too, Alanna,” he said, tugging her inside. George was on the phone, looking too tired to be stressed. “He’s okay,” he told her. “How was the meeting?”

“Good.” She stumbled into George’s room and got changed into her nightclothes. Splashing her face with water eased the ache in her head. Thom was standing precisely where she had left him. She came and put an arm around his waist, leaned against him. “Daine has a crush on Roger.”

“Gross,” Thom said, thumb stroking circles into her waist through her shirt.

“That was my thought.” Alanna responded. She turned her gaze to George, the first time she had dared to since she walked in the door. George’s bruises had plateaued in their colour changes, and he looked less tense, finally relaxing into his own couch. “Who is he talking to?”

“Littlefinger,” Thom said. “Or… that’s what I’ve picked up.” She was losing the callouses on her fingers, she realised, feeling Thom’s. “He slept for a little while. I redressed the bandages on his stomach.”

“I do love you, Thom,” Alanna said, barely audible. “Even if we’re fighting more than usual or changing faster… I love you.” He looked a bit confused, but tugged her closer.

“I love you, too. Always.” He sighed. “I think the, um, from what I remember of first aid training his ribs are going to need further care.”

“Oh, I know,” she said with an exasperated sigh. “He can’t keep going to doctors with injuries like this. He cycles through all the local ones, so they don’t suspect too much when he comes back. How he is, though… he can’t have any attention drawn to him, and heavens forbid from the police. His Mum is a nurse, though. She’s done… what she can.”
“Don’t tell me what’s happening,” he said. At her startled look, he continued, “I’d be at more risk and I’d be putting you two at more risk, because let’s be real: if I’m tortured, I will hold back no information.” She laughed and elbowed him in the side.

George was saying his goodbyes to Littlefinger, and Thom took it as a clear queue to leave.

“Take some vitamin C, and drink some peppermint tea.” Thom was scrolling through his phone. A little colour drifted over his cheeks. “You’re getting a cold,” he informed her, matter of factly. She snorted, but then realised that he was right. Her throat was scratchy, quite aside from her tears – and colds made her more emotional. “See? I’m great,” he said proudly, pulling his keys out and tossing them from finger to finger.

“Thanks,” she said, a tad awed. She remembered then that she would have known had he been getting a cold, too. “Has Roger kissed you yet?” she asked.

“Has he gone down on you yet?” asked George, only grinning a little. Thom threw a box of tissues at him, which he caught perfectly.

“No, he has not.”

Alanna curled up at George’s side on the couch, coughing as she asked, “Have you kissed him?”

Thom rolled his eyes. “No, I have not. See you two soon.” He was halfway down the corridor when he yelled through the wall, “Take vitamin C!”

Alanna chuckled, and got to her feet.

***

The suit fitting was uncomfortable. His proportions weren’t that unusual, he knew, but he supposed that the tailor was used to picture-perfect models like Roger. He kept making vaguely transphobic comments, littered with the strong, strong indication that he should lose weight – not something he had ever heard before. He sent a picture to Roger, upon his request, only for Roger to call the tailor and say that the finish on the pants was wrong and the shade of mauve was too blue, and would look appalling next to Roger and his band. Mentally, Thom filed the paperwork to drop out while the tailor worked. It felt inevitable.

He was dismissed with the suit, three shirts, and two trousers. Roger seemed pleased with the tailor’s final result, and Thom could admit that it was nice. It didn’t mean that his skin didn’t crawl. The man’s fingers had jabbed right into his hipbones as he slung the measuring tape around him. His hips were still too broad. Not from fat or muscle, no, but the bones can’t move, even with hormones. Pelvis, hips, hands… always slightly off. Then there was his chest, fingers and tapes just under the scars, over the (fake, very expensive) nipples, and on the small rise of muscle that always made him sick. The tailor was, undoubtedly, doing all the right things, but Thom felt sick. Thom didn’t like packing, didn’t need a bulge between his legs, but when there was a measuring tape there he wished he did.

The days leading up to their performances weren’t quite so relaxed, nor as pleasant, as the ones before. He didn’t mind the focus on the work, it was certainly less confusing, but it was still a stark contrast. Roger put such effort into his tenderness. He wasn’t slow to criticise, and that included Thom, but the casual affection didn’t change with the emphasis on the shows. There wasn’t a lot to do, their three songs and the one song that the band was playing with Thom, but it was so compressed, so intense. The band were like echoes of Roger, truly, they followed him faithfully and took his instructions. Not one stepped out of that which Roger permitted.
Alanna did have a cold. She had taken vitamin C, but it wasn’t enough to ward it off. She didn’t handle illness well. She suffered and persisted, she refused to slow down and she wasn’t afraid to complain. She seemed to be enjoying her time with Daine, Buri, and Kel. They were a power quartet, that was apparent, and Thom found himself fantasising about Alanna as a CEO in a finely tailored suit throwing conferences and galas, and tried not to giggle. What a mess of contradictions she was.

After practice, he found himself with Roger’s chin on the top of his head and his arms laced loosely around his waist Thom had no idea what to do, and so he did nothing.

“How’d you get so short?” Roger mumbled after a while, the vibrations of his words rumbling through Thom’s chest.

“How’d you get so tall?” Thom asked, trying to keep his voice light. It broke anyway. Roger chuckled. His arms were too hot around Thom’s waist, but he didn’t want to pull away. “Is there an occasion for this embrace?”

Roger let him go and turned him around, looked down at him with gently prying eyes. Thom’s breath hitched. “Do you protest this embrace?”

“I question,” Thom corrected cautiously. Tentatively, he pulled Roger in by the front of his shirt and hugged him. He wasn’t sure if it was a bad thing, but he suspected he had never felt so small. He could hear Roger’s heartbeat, and Roger’s hands were heavy and beautiful on his back.

One of Roger’s hands slid up on Thom’s waist, the Roger ruined the moment entirely by picking Thom up around the waist and throwing him over his shoulder. Thom froze down to his bone marrow, couldn’t breathe properly for how desperately he needed to yell. He managed to choke out, “Put me down!” Roger chuckled as he carried Thom out the door.

The band had been disrupted by Thom’s breathless yelps and Roger’s laughter, and both Bella and Wes were filming the exchange, cackling. It was almost comforting, other people seeing him, seeing the situation and laughing. It was fine, he just needed to breathe a little and he could slip down Roger’s front--“What are you doing to him, Roger?” asked Gillian. Thom was learning that no matter how hard he thrashed, tried to get down, Roger would hold on.

“Using his size against him,” Roger said.

Thom wondered in some absent part of his mind whether actually being tall would be as anxiety-inducing as being held - perfectly safely! - up so high. His chest ached where it was pressed into Roger’s shoulder, though there surely wasn’t enough force for it to truly cause pain.

Andy was guffawing, beating his hands into Bella’s chest. She was shaking with laughter. “We’re going to dinner,” Roger said, striding towards the elevator. As the doors pinged open Roger let Thom slide to the ground.

Roger was immediately met with a series of curses that would have made Alanna proud. Thom used up all of his limited breath cursing Roger Conte in the most vulgar ways he could, ending breathless and demanding,

“Why the fuck was that necessary?”

“Because I thought it would be funny.” Roger paused. “It was.”
Thom was silent. He felt his heart race and felt Roger’s continued proximity and he desperately wished he knew how to feel.

“We’re going to dinner,” Roger repeated, and tugged on Thom’s hand, as if somehow that would regain his sense of stability. Thom didn’t quite realise until they were in the car that the band wasn’t with them. He was so stuck inside his own body, in the bare skin that Roger had touched and the expanse of his torso, entirely pressed against him. He didn’t know if this was how touch was supposed to feel.

Roger was chattering away comfortably and Thom decided he was never hugging anyone who had the capacity to pick him up ever again. Or maybe just anyone.

As Roger hadn’t forewarned him that they were going out Thom hadn’t changed or brought his wallet or emotionally prepared for being surrounded by people in public. Roger neatly took a corner table, though, where Thom could look around to assess the space if he so wished. He saw Alex sitting a few tables away, and almost wanted to scream. He was rather sure that Alex was overstating both Roger’s and his own importance. It was Idaho, he supposed, and a gun was more common than a watch.

The night was nice, he could almost admit. He didn’t like being out in public like that, but Roger had a great capacity for making the world seem smaller.

“Were you actually upset that I picked you up?” Roger’s smile was a quiet smile, and his eyebrows furrowed in. It wasn’t really concern, so much as curiosity with a tinge of concern. Add roger being a manipulative DICK here xoxo

Thom resisted the urge to say ‘fuck you’ again. “The sentimentalist in me is disappointed that I hugged you, defying all of my usual practices, only for you to fuck that over. The other part of me is disgusted and outraged by your fucking dirty play that I can’t get you back for.” He took a sip of his wine. It was already making him lightheaded.

“You could always trip me over without me ever seeing or suspecting.” Roger’s eyes sparkled.

“You suck.”

“If I’m feeling nice,” Roger quipped.

Thom really, really hated Roger Conté. He took another sip of wine. “At least I know that when I inevitably fall off stage you have the capacity to catch me, even if you don’t.”

“That’s not an inevitability,” Roger said, eyebrows furrowed neatly. He had caught Roger plucking them one morning. It looked painful. “Come on Thom, you’ll be great.”

“Of course I will, that’s not the problem.”

“You’ve never heard of modesty, have you?”

“That’s an odd word,” Thom said, parting his lips, widening his eyes. “What’s its etymology? French?”

“Middle French,” Roger said with a laugh.

“I see no point in pretending I’m not good at what I do. It’s actively impolite, as far as the limited social skills I have can tell me, because it’s lying by omission, if not actively lying.” Roger was, ever daintily, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “And you well know how good you are.” Roger
smiled, and promptly hid it behind a napkin. “There we go. I’ll be great. You’ll be great. We’ll colour coordinate and be in the same key.”

Roger grinned.

Roger got the bill and Thom thought nothing of it until hours later. He wondered if it was a date and he just hadn’t noticed, and was very relieved that he noticed earlier, as it would have ruined everything. He slept heavily, warm and groggy with the effects of the wine.

***

The next day was a blur of travel and tech runs. Kel and Daine would be in the audience, he knew, but Alanna wouldn’t – her cold was slowing her down, and she had extra work to do. George had said he might come until some more death threats were crammed in his letterbox, but he wished them the best of luck. Thom’s voice felt odd. He supposed it was nerves, or maybe Alanna’s cold trying to catch him up.

Roger backstage could only be called ‘succinct’. He was polite, firm, and to the point with all involved. Thom was relieved - formality, for once, brought comfort. They were early for every stage in the process, they had what Thom considered to be too much time before actually performing. Thom’s suit really felt too hot for Summer. Or was it Autumn already? He could never remember the changing seasons. He envied the band in their ever-so-slightly lighter clothes.

Roger appraised him head to toe, nodded slightly, then snapped his fingers in the band’s general direction. “Gillian, Thom’s makeup,” he ordered.

Gillian was on his feet in seconds, makeup bag in hand. “Wait, what--?” Thom was pushed into a hardback chair. He was so very sick of being touched.

“We warned you.” Gillian sat opposite him and assessed his cautious look. “Don’t worry, it won’t hurt.” He started pulling products out of his bag, comparing them to Thom’s skin. “Sorry if this like, prompts dysphoria or anything. That’s the word, right?” he asked. Thom was infuriated by his ignorance and fond of his caution all in one.

“It’s fine. And yeah, that’s the word.” Gillian hummed, and started on Thom’s face. He’d never had so much makeup on before. Gillian had mumbled something about being glad that Roger and Thom were ‘the same disgusting shade of pale’.

“Are you happy with the changes we’ve made to your songs?” he asked, a hand on the back of Thom’s head as he did something to Thom’s eyebrows. He felt claustrophobic.

He answered as honestly as he could. “Not entirely. I like control. I also like learning. It’s a hard mix, and with Roger… I may be just as good as him, but he’s more experienced.”

Gillian laughed, doing something to Thom’s temples. The process was confusing. “He’s so impressed with you. I mean, honestly, if I didn’t know him better I’d say he was intimidated.”

Thom’s stomach warmed at the thought. “Intimidating Roger Conté. What a dream.”

“Eyes shut,” Gillian ordered. “You’re a bit unreal. You’re just as good a guitarist as me, and I went to Julliard.” ooh someone’s jealous Eyeliner wasn’t painful, but heavens it was uncomfortable, and he wouldn’t have thought he needed it. It distracted him from the compliments. “You’re probably a better pianist than Andy, who went to the Canadian academy, and you’re almost as good a vocalist as Roger.”
“What I lack in height I compensate for in over-compensation,” Thom said absently.

Gillian snorted. It made Thom smile, albeit begrudgingly. “Well, it would make sense. Congratulations, anyway.”

“Thanks.”

“You can open your eyes.” Gillian’s face was further away than before. He was packing things away, pulling out hair products. “You don’t hate me.”

“Why would I?” Thom asked. He knew why. He wanted to hear Gil’s explanation.

“If anyone has a claim to Roger right now it’s you. He never fixates on people. He fixates on concepts, songs. Not people. And I defied that claim.”

It was a vulgar concept, thought Thom, trying to push down the sense of validation. “I don’t think people have claim over other people. It’s not my place.”

Gillian ran his hands, covered in some sweet-smelling product, through from the roots of Thom’s hair. “Good of you. Sorry, I sort of expected you to hate me.”

He supposed he had no prior experience to know if he was a jealous ‘boyfriend’ but it was odd. He didn’t hate people easily. “As said: I have no claim to Roger, he’s given me no indication that he wants me to have any.”

“Bullshit. He’s given you every indication.” The other man almost glared at him. “Alright, you’re done.” He spun Thom around on the chair to face the mirror. He looked like a smoothed over, enhanced version of himself. He looked glossed over and sharply defined. He almost looked handsome, he realised. “He has given you indication, Thomas.”

He didn’t know how to respond to that and cried, “My name isn’t Thomas!”

“Thomas, five minute call!” called Michaela. He hadn’t realised how much time had passed. He wanted to hold his instruments, but they were already on stage, perfectly polished and positioned. There were photos online of the stage already, beautifully lit and in high definition.

He mumbled, “I hate the lot of you,” making his way towards the wing. Wes grabbed him and kissed the side of his head gruffly.

“We hate you, too, Thomas,” he said fondly. Thom still loathed his tattoos.

“Fuck you.” His smile was comically broad.

“Break someone’s leg,” Roger said, laughter in his eyes, “Thomas.”

“Why are we friends?” Thom asked, so clearly rhetorical that Roger just laughed and indicated the door to him. cute

***

“Good evening Boise!” Thom was out of breath, just finished ‘Skin’. “How are y’all tonight?” The scream in response was thrilling. “I don’t think that counts as a response. I’m gonna assume you’re good, yeah?” Another scream. He brought the capo up to three. “This is a song called ‘Rooftop’.” It was probably his most well known song, and the cheers showed it. He hadn’t really paid attention to the advertisements for the concert, but the amount of people that screamed along in the
chorus proved he’d pulled a good proportion of his own audience. His heart was racing faster than he knew it could.

He settled down at the piano for ‘Force of Hand’, He wondered absently in the second verse whether makeup like his would sweat off. He doubted it, but it still worried him.

He stood again, slinging his guitar over his neck as quickly as he could to reach the microphone in time. He could see the band. “Please welcome Andy, Bella, Gillian, Michaela, and Wes, the Conté band!” The yells were beyond raucous, and the band seemed accustomed to it, celebrities in their own right. “This is called ‘Closer Than Far’.”

They went from ‘Closer Than Far’ down a tone, Wes, Bella and Andy setting out the chord progression and beat of ‘Take Me to Church’. A quiet roar came from the crowd. They knew. His lips were close to the mic, and he could see Roger ready to come on. He was stunning in black and orange. “I need you all to put your hands together for Conté!”

The rest of the numbers were a blur, a beautiful, loud blur. Roger made musical flirting seem like the easiest thing in the world, and Thom stumbled along with his competence in harmonies. Roger was breathtaking. Live on his couch was one thing, live on stage was another. He was a force in and of himself, both giving and taking energy from all around. Thom wanted to drown in him.

Stepping off stage hurt, he wanted to stay, he wanted more duets and more solos. The cheers he got almost made up for it. Watching from backstage was interesting. He hadn’t been in that position before. Something changed in the performers’ presence. He supposed he should watch more live music.

Every time Roger caught his eye he wanted to hide his face and make high pitched noises. He couldn’t deal with it. He needed to kiss Roger like he needed to breathe, and he was too scared to do so. He supposed it was poetic. He had a history of stopping himself breathing.

***

Roger lifted him off his feet and spun him around in a hug. He laughed that time, and held on tight. “You were brilliant,” he said, pushing Thom’s hair back from his sweaty forehead.

“You were breath-taking,” Thom said, and Roger hugged him again.

“Thomas, you were brilliant!” called Michaela, hugging him from behind. “You pulled through, ginger.”

“Did you not expect me to?” he asked, words muffled on Roger’s chest. He stunk of sweat and guitar polish.

“I dunno, but I wasn’t expecting that.” She tugged him around. His body felt unreal. “Selfie time!” The photos went on forever. He didn’t like that part so much. People were already posting videos, and he knew he’d be analysing them for days.

Roger was holding his hand. He didn’t quite know how that had happened. He was swinging their hands between them lightly as he talked to the band and the crew backstage, watching as they packed up their stuff. The heel of his hand fit neatly in the curve of Thom’s wrist. Gillian smiled when he noticed, and Thom could have run away with embarrassment.

After showering and changing they all went out for dinner, Roger keeping hold of Thom’s hand, sitting close to him. He placed a light kiss on Thom’s cheek halfway through, and Thom tentatively kissed Roger’s knuckles. He felt like everything had been building up to those touches. He didn’t
even reprimand the band for calling him ‘Thomas’.

It was a crushing and bizarre realisation that Roger would be leaving the next morning. Three in the morning, in fact. Thom wanted to tangle himself into Roger, hold on for as long as he could. They all ended up sitting in a park, almost midnight. Thom was leaning on Roger, Roger’s arm around him. Thom hummed quietly, and wondered if Roger could feel it, as well as hear it. The summer air was tolerable in temperature and clean in its quality. “What are you singing?” Roger asked, breath hot against his ear.

“‘Latch’,” Thom said. He was hardly aware that the band was there, despite the racket they were making. Alex was giving them disapproving looks for their tipsy merrymaking. “By Sam Smith,” he added, unnecessarily. “Now I’ve got you in my space I won’t let go of you.”

Roger joined him, “I’ve got you shackled in my embrace, I’m latching on to you.” He thought, absently, that if he were living in a movie this is where they’d kiss, passionate and without boundaries, ignoring those around them. Instead they kept singing, diverting into pretty little harmonies, all the while in each others’ embrace.

“Why aren’t you drinking?” he asked Roger. His voice was scratchy, getting heavy with tiredness.

“You don’t like it.” Thom didn’t bother protesting, just tangled his hand in with Roger’s. He didn’t know what he was doing. “I’m happy like this.” He lifted their joint hands to his lips, kissed their knuckles. Thom thought he might just be dying. “Are you happy?”

Thom wasn’t lying when he said, “Very.”

***

They were back at the hotel by two, Thom seeing Bella’s undergarments flying into her suitcase. They weren’t always perfectly organised, it seemed. Roger’s stuff was already in their bus, but he was on the phone with his manager, who didn’t seem to mind being awoken at four am. Thom supposed he wouldn’t mind, either. He considered texting Alanna about the generalised situation, but that seemed like a violation of something vulnerable, something still not-quite true.

The band all hugged him goodbye, with choruses of ‘see you, Thomas!’, and promptly ‘fuck you too, Thomas!’. Alex gave him a curt nod. He didn’t seem to want to leave Roger and Thom together, but Roger must have given direction, because Alex slipped into the van.

"Thank you, Thom." Roger’s hand was hot on Thom’s forearm. The wind was cool, and the contrast was beautiful. He placed a single fingertip under Thom’s chin, bent down and brushed his lips over Thom’s, for a brief, gentle moment. He was frozen with the warmth of Roger's breath and the burn of his cheeks. “I’ll see you soon.” He squeezed Thom’s wrist and bumped their noses together lightly.

Thom only just managed to say ‘see you’ when Roger was already stepping up into the bus. He turned and winked. And then they were gone. Thom went back into the hotel lobby. He imagined that the staff must assume that he was staying there, from the amount of time he’d been around, because they didn’t ask him to leave. He sat with his head in his hands, breathing heavily. His lips burned. He wished he’d held on for just a second longer.

He called a cab, too tired to walk, and too tired to go upstairs, fell asleep on his couch.
Chapter 14

Chapter by dunedinparsley

Chapter Notes

unedited

content warnings: sickness (flu)


#HesitantGinger #ThomTrebond let me drown in your voice

#ThomTrebond actually upstaged #Conte tonight. Look, you can say what you want from videos, but I was there. He was perfect.

#ThomTrebond and #Conte have THE MOST chemistry I have ever seen. Stage and sexual. #ThomTrebond #Conte so….. what’s their ship name? #Conte needs to choose a better publicity stunt because right now he’s going from vagina to vagina.

#ThomTrebond was rocking that Alan Taylor

#HesitantGinger is crushing on #Conte u take my word for it

#ThomTrebond #Conte look…. look……. my gay trans heart is not okay

I know there are a lot of jokes about Conte and Trebond, but as a trans guy I’ve never seen myself so positively represented in [1/3]

the media and celebrity. Jeff Miller and Alexander Jasper Jay are great and all but Thom’s a celebrity and on the rise, because of, AND [2/3]

despite, being trans. He’s musically brilliant, he’s attractive, and the media seems to be taking him seriously. That’s important to me. [3/3]

HesitantGinger retweeted this
HesitantGinger tweeted: Thank you, but on that note ‘Worth Fighting For’ is one of my favourite songs so go check that out. [link]

ConteOfficial retweeted this

***

01.07
To: Roger Conté

Thanks for sharing that song. Which state are you in now?
02.04
From: Roger Conté

No problem. It’s pretty. I love the puns. Minnesota, right now. Waiting for the buses to catch up from the plane.

02.07
To: Roger Conté

I assume you’ll want a debrief of all the things I could have done better at some point?

02.13
From: Roger Conté

‘Debrief’ implies a long list. You were really good, Thom. Just a couple of things we could improve before you perform with me next. I’ll call you later, though?

02.14
To: Roger Conté

Yeah, sure.

***

“How’d it go?” asked Alanna. “The girls say you were incredible.” Thom didn’t respond, just sat down, heavily, on her couch. She patted his head, and supposed he would talk when he was ready. Buri sat on the kitchen bench, eating cereal like it was the only good thing left in the world. She’d had a phone call with Thayet that seemed to upset her more than calmed her. She had asked Alanna if she had any cereal that would induce diabetes she could have for lunch. Alanna tried not to laugh or disapprove.

She came back to the couch with a cup of coffee, and shoved her feet onto Thom’s lap. He barely reacted. “The internet’s in love with you,” she said, scrolling through twitter absentmindedly. “I still get band notifications for milestones, and oh my god.” He nodded. “Did he kiss you?” He nodded. “Is he gone?” He nodded. “Sorry.” He nodded. She didn’t want to feel relieved, but she did. It wouldn’t last forever, Thom was attached to Roger now, but she was relieved anyway. He could ground himself, steady himself. “Was it good?” she asked, out of care for Thom more than anything.

He blushed bright red. “I… he… I didn’t know I could feel… like this.” She patted his shoulder.

“Doesn’t it suck?”

He nodded. “Oh my god, it sucks.” He took Alanna’s hand from his shoulder, examined her newly fixed ring. “That’s nice,” he said. It was gold again, the lines better defined, tiny amethysts glinting in the lioness’s eyes. She nodded. “How’s George?”

“A bit better, I think.” She said nothing else. He was tapping his hand methodically on his knee to some inaudible beat. “Sorry I didn’t come.”
“’S fine,” he mumbled. She wasn’t quite sure if he was actually hurt. There hadn’t been many situations where she hadn’t been there to support him – or needed to support him, for that matter. She’d sort of fucked up the last time, she thought. “I would have been more nervous if you were there, I think.”

“Makes sense.” She coughed, hard, into her elbow.

“Have you been looking after yourself?”

“Of course she hasn’t,” said Buri through a mouthful of rainbow sugar. She perched on the arm of the chair next to Thom. “She stole one of George’s jumpers, thinking we wouldn’t notice, despite it drowning her, though.” Alanna glared at her. Buri stuck her blue tongue out.

Thom glared. “If I don’t need to sing I don’t need to look after my voice.”

“It’s not just your voice, it’s your health.”

“Oh Thom, you do care!” He tickled her feet until she kicked him.

“How was kissing Roger Cont-ee?” asked Buri, deliberately mispronouncing his name. He groaned. “Daine’s crushing on the both of you right now. It’s gross.”

“Isn’t she married?” Thom asked.

“She made it quite clear to Numair that she would never hide the fact that she finds other people attractive, and so he promptly informed her that he wouldn’t either,” Alanna said. “It’s nice, actually. I mean, George was high on painkillers and told me that Roger was ungodly in his hotness,” she said with a scowl. “That doesn’t change with relationships, I guess.”

“Gross,” Thom mumbled.

“Do you have a relationship?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. He didn’t allow for further questioning, asking, “How’s the organisation?”

“Good. Really good. Everything’s moving quickly, we’ve got a good collection of people and venues. We’ll have five fully functioning centres up by March next year, if everything goes ahead as planned.”

“Congratulations.” He paused. “So we’re both uni drop outs, Alanna.”

“You dropped out?”

“You dropped out!”

“Oh my god, Thom.” She glared at him. “What the fuck?”

“I don’t care about it any more. I mean, I… I’ve said I’ll leave at the end of the academic year. So I’m not a drop out yet.”

“Why?”
“Because I don’t care any more. I just… can’t be fucked with it.”

“How articulate.” She kept glaring. He glared back. “So what are you doing instead?”

“Music, I guess.” She groaned and kicked him again. He threatened to bite her feet like he did when they were young, and she promptly pushed him off the couch. Buri’s laughter was silent until she dropped her cereal and started swearing again.

***

HesitantGinger tweeted: Guess who gave me a fucking cold? @KnightlyGinger, that’s who. No new music for a while, sorry everyone.
KnightlyGinger tweeted: @HesitantGinger it’s your fault for licking me, you arse.

HesitantGinger tweeted: @KnightlyGinger I wouldn’t have had to lick you if you weren’t fucking tickling me.
KnightlyGinger tweeted: @HesitantGinger Go back to bed, Thom, your swearing is just improper.
HesitantGinger tweeted: @KnightlyGinger You suck.

KnightlyGinger tweeted: @HesitantGinger <3

#siblinggoals

are these two even real??????

***

05.07
From: Jonathan Conté
we still on for coffee and painting each others’ nails? i bought polish

05.10
To: Jonathan Conté
I haven’t bought the glitter yet, but yes. I’ve never painted nails before, so if you die it’s not my fault.

05.15
From: Jonathan Conté
your optimism amazes me. it’s cool, i haven’t either. congrats on your show with rog, i hear you were great.

05.18
To: Jonathan Conté
Thanks, Jon. Can we talk later? I think Alanna’s cold has taken to me as a flu, I’m going to sleep.
05.19
From: Jonathan Conté
of course, man. look after yourself. see you hella soon!

05.19
From: Jonathan Conté
hella is aave isn’t it? i’m still so bad with appropriation of language, sorry.

05.23
To: Jonathan Conté
Correct. Nicely corrected, though. ttyl Jon

05.25
From: Jonathan Conté
did I just get an abbreviation from Thom Trebond???? oh happy days!!

***

Incoming call: Roger Conté

“Hello?” Talking hurt.

“Thom? Hi, were you asleep?”


“I was just following up on our earlier discussion of things to change next time.” Thom coughed violently, tried to aim it away from the mouthpiece. Roger didn’t stop talking. “First of all,” there was a smile in his voice, “you said ‘y’all’, now I know you’re from Idaho, but Thom Trebond that was not expected.”

Thom laughed, and it burned. He wanted Roger to ask if he was okay, or to hang up, or both. “Sorry.”

“It was cute, don’t worry. Tumblr’s blowing up.” Moving his arm to get his water bottle was more painful than he thought should be legal. “Just unexpected.” Thom didn’t respond as he drank his water. Roger’s commentary didn’t really require response, just a quiet ‘yeah’ or ‘okay’ intermittently. “That all good?”

“Yeah,” Thom said, trying not to feel hurt. Sickness made him vulnerable, and Roger was glossing over all of their affections. “Yeah, of course. When will the next time we perform be?”

“I’m… not sure. I mean, you’re developing a large fanbase in your own right. I’d love to see you in some of the Eastern states.”

“When will you be there?”
“Oh, about a month and a half? Yeah, a month and a half. Oh, Dakota would suit you, too.”

“Okay.”

“Well, we’ll stay in touch, yeah?”

“Okay.”

“G’night, Idahoboy.”

“Goodnight, East coaster,” Thom said, smiling a little. His coughing was violent. He only just made it to the bin in time to throw up, and he almost cried from that alone. He hated the vulnerability of being sick, let alone Roger’s weirdness. Swallowing a handful of pills stung brutally, and he lay on the cold bathroom tile until they kicked in. He stumbled downstairs back to the piano. His hands shook as he notated. He’d record, usually, but he couldn’t sing. The cramps in his hands meant he could barely play, but he refused to give himself over to a fucking monster flu. He had chosen music. He was dropping out, he was performing with Roger and on his own. He’d go back to performing every Sunday. He had to stick with it. He cried angry, sticky tears that burned his eyes intermittently, just because of the sickness. There was no reason to cry, he knew, and he remembered being pre-t, and how easily both he and Alanna cried. It was odd, he hadn’t realised before.

He was pretty much in bed for a week and a half, missing Kel and Onua’s departures and not greeting Jon and Thayet like intended. Alanna checked on him once and made him eat, and rubbed his back when he threw it back up again, but he was otherwise alone. He wrote a note on the fridge to disinfect the piano when he recovered. He was happy with the work he was producing, though he wasn’t sure he would be when he recovered. He desperately wanted Roger to text or call or tweet him or something. He missed him, and he was confused. Roger’s behaviour wasn’t consistent, particularly considering how they’d been in contact before he’d been in Idaho. He wanted to hold Roger’s hand again. He was sick and disgusting and didn’t want to be in his own skin, but it was an irrational desire defying all others.

The wrong Conté came to his door, bearing an over-stuffed makeup bag. He still had a runny nose and a nasty headache, but he was otherwise okay. He hadn’t seen Jon since his birthday party in Washington, when Alanna and he were attacked. His loathing for Jon was a shaking echo, annoyance more than anger, and brief surges of affection. Jon worked so hard, although Thom questioned exactly what it was he worked for.

He’d brought Thom a Canadian magazine on trans issues along with a pure wool trans pride scarf, and Thom had no idea how to react to that, so shoved Jon onto the couch and started painting his nails. Despite both having looked at various Buzzfeed tutorials they were both quite bad at it.

Thayet, Buri, and Alanna came over later, and Thom had to reassess the meaning of life upon seeing Thayet. He’d only met her the once, and he’d been too pissed off at that point to pay her any attention. She was a deity, she had to be. She glowed. She had a brilliant sense of humour, too, and did not pander to Jon. She and Buri fixed their nails with a roll of her eyes, and Alanna watched, amazed as the boys were. The amount of photos posted online were probably blasphemous.

Thom checked his phone waiting for Roger to text, but it never happened. He almost wanted to ask Jon about it, but it would hurt his pride just a bit too much. He and Jon disagreed in ways that drove Alanna to silence, watching them argue. Thom didn’t understand Jon’s place in life. He had
said to Alanna that he hated people but was good at talking to them and that she loved people but hated talking to them. Jon loved them and was very, very good at talking to them. Thayet listened, and all of her words were perfectly considered. Buri crackled like lightning every time she disagreed with someone, even in passing, and anyone disagreeing with Thayet was sin in her eyes.

Thom sort of wished he had more normal friends.

Jon demanded that he write him a love song, and while Thom tried very hard to take it seriously at first it quickly devolved into a mess of puns and half-veiled insults. Roger’s assertion that Jon was shit at harmonies was confirmed, no matter how hard he tried. Eventually they all left him be, and he cautiously looked back into managers, producers. What with Roger and being sick he hadn’t really thought on the future, on the choice of dropping out being a clear statement of pursuing music alone. He didn’t think he was being cocky by saying most labels would take him with little question at this point. He had the money, the image, and the stubbornness to be picky.

He didn’t like Roger’s label. It was dominated by stereotypically handsome cisgender, heterosexual men who were played as love interests to the entire world. Despite being consistently good musically he didn’t want that. He also didn’t want the bigotry rumoured to be so active within it. It felt odd, looking at professional music opportunities without Alanna. She probably still sang in the shower, but apart from that she’d given music up with little reticence. It was weird, more than painful. She sort of fell and stumbled into music, he supposed, and stayed there because it fit in with the rest of her life, and when it stopped fitting, she stopped. Very pragmatic, he supposed.

***

08.18
To: Roger Conté
I’ve sent all the paperwork signing the rights for ‘Faust’ to you to your lawyer. I don’t know if you wanted them, but I thought I may as well.

08.20
From: Roger Conté
No, that’s great. Thanks. I’ll send through ‘Butterflies’ for you. :)

08.28
To: Roger Conté
Where are you now?

08.32
From: Roger Conté
Indiana. Two shows here, then going through to Canada. I hear you and Jon learned how to paint nails.

08.35
To: Roger Conté
What are the dates you wanted me? I’m not sure if I’d consider myself educated, really. Both of us have damaged pride. It amused Thayet, at least.

08.45
From: Roger Conté
I’ll have Alex or someone send all the paperwork through. :) It’s a hard skill. As much as I hate that it’s hurt your pride I’m glad it’s chipped away at Jon’s.

08.50
To: Roger Conté
Chipping away at Jon’s pride is all that can be done. It’s a losing battle.

I’m meeting up with a label tomorrow afternoon. Thought you’d want to know.

08.55
From: Roger Conté
It’s lovely that you share my beliefs.

That’s great! Which one?

08.57
To: Roger Conté
‘City OF’. They seemed to fit my MO best.

09.50
From: Roger Conté
Good choice. Let me know how it goes.

09.54
To: Roger Conté
Shall do. :) 

***

Whether City OF was a good choice or not was a matter of opinion, but it took all of Thom’s stubbornness and ambition not to get up and walk out. They had liked his resume, all of his work, actually, that he’d had huge amounts of experience and strong links in the industry, but the first question they asked when he sat down with them, his musical history laid out before them, was ‘which ones are about being trans?’. Obediently he pointed them out.

‘So are you straight? Gay?’ He told them.

‘Do you have a boyfriend?’. He didn’t quite know what to say, so said ‘no’.

‘Would you be willing to talk to one of our stylists, makeup artists, and surgeons about your surgery scars? You do have them, don’t you?’. He informed them that that seemed very inappropriate, but that he would be willing to if a circumstance arose when it was relevant. They didn’t seem to like that.

‘What’s the nature of your relationship with Roger Conté?’ He said that they were friends, and their onstage chemistry was just convenient. They looked doubtful.

‘How are you in front of cameras?’ Good, he said, and admitted that he wasn’t used to stage makeup or stage etiquette yet, and they appreciated his honesty, apparently. They said they would give him a coach and a publicist and a makeup artist and of course a wardrobe curator. He just
nodded along.

Despite all of their questioning they didn’t seem to question that they were taking him on. They invited him to bring his lawyer to another meeting to discuss the terms of a contract. He went to the nearest coffee shop and ordered a quadruple shot. Hours later he hated himself for it, but he was rather sure it was the only thing that stopped him from dying, or something similar.

***

02.57
To: Roger Conté
Signed, sealed, delivered:

Developing promotional material, introducing me to the public eye, creating a full team and part-time band – now through to February
First single out – February
EP out – May
Pre album material from June through to December
Album out – December

06.30
From: Roger Conté
If you’re signed, sealed, delivered, are you mine?
That sounds perfect. Congratulations.

06.40
To: Roger Conté
You know the answer to that.

06.48
From: Roger Conté
Tell me anyway.

08.15
To: Roger Conté
Yes.

08.17
From: Roger Conté
Good.
Chapter 15

Chapter by dunedinparsley

Chapter Notes

content warning: weight loss and beauty standards, sexual flirting, post-traumatic flashbacks to parental abuse,

Alanna missed Kel. She was technically of an age where with a little bit of clever beurocracy she could be pulled out of school, but Alanna didn’t want that. Far more importantly, Kel and her family didn’t, either. Buri and Thayet were beautiful, and the three of them worked together brilliantly. Occasionally Daine was present, and she was fierce and righteous and intersectional, but she had left to go back to work. Occasionally Rispah would join them, and as was appropriate to her skillset, she picked out logistical errors without lifting a finger. Occasionally Onua was with them, and she was an anchor to reality. The three of them, though, and an absent Kel, were the core of the operation. She still spent every night and as much time as she could with George, almost healed but still at risk, but Protector of the Small was giving her life meaning like she’d forgotten it could have.

Part of her felt bad for ignoring Thom’s attempts at contact, given his successes, but his successes were what made it clear that he was okay on his own. He still occasionally just sat on her couch, neither of them speaking. That was their favourite type of contact, they both thought. That became less frequent, though, as she and her girls went where they needed to go to change things. It seemed wrong to her to upon their first centre in New York, but the population density and crime rates demanded that. Idaho was hardly a metropolis. It was a thrilling moment seeing plaques go up, sticking fliers on lamp posts. They talked to women’s health clinics and shelters, pre existing centres for self-defence. All of their staff – they had staff! - were women, and they tried to pull from different paths of life and different disciplines of self defence and martial arts.

It wasn’t a balance automatically struck of making their premise passive enough to invite people in. Women seemed so terrified of participating in self defence classes as it made them seem aggressive or afraid or in a position to be assaulted. Husbands and brothers and fathers didn’t like it. Their female friends didn’t like it for many of the same reasons. Alanna had known that, but on a surface level more than anything. Upper class, white, cis girl, she reminded herself, you don’t know their lives. It was infuriating, though, and she hated herself for her annoyance at the women, as well as those around them. She was waiting for the moment when one of the women or girls could say ‘I brought a friend’. That was a goal.

Every session was part seminar/Q and A, part physical. The structure was a work in progress, and the talking took time. Finding the hours women were most likely to have off was a pain in the arse, and they didn’t have their own venue yet – shared community halls and gyms – so they couldn’t be running ‘all day’, as such.

It was fiercely embarrassing when people asked if she was ‘the twin’, not because of any connection with Thom, of course, but because she was more famous for her music than her self defence work. She fought the urge to delete her music from online, leave only her self defence
videos. She would regret it, she knew.

George was still in Idaho, or Montana, or Wyoming. She had begged him to come with her, but he said that New York was dangerous at the best of times, and if he was ever going to get out he needed to last a year without any further complications. ‘His people’ were really only ten close friends, by that point, all still willing to give George their lives. He told her that she had to trust him. He text her every day, and she stopped worrying too much, after a while.

Jon was in and out of New York and DC, spending time with the ever-studious Gary and Raoul. A gap academic year had served him well, and he got back into the swing of things with ease. The three of them were those obnoxious ‘one hundred percent on everything’ students, it was already clear. Being with Jon was like being with a king, or maybe a god. Everything about him was grounding. He was beautiful and intelligent, he breathed like everything was going to be okay. She couldn’t wait for him to be president. He’d never thought of anything else. He came from a family of politicians and presidents, but he was a commander since birth. She’d follow him to hell and back, and the amazing thing was that he would follow her, too. His support to the organisation was invaluable. Every moment with Jon was a new experience, a new life. When she rambled to George about it one night a flash of guilt overtook her, but he just said he was glad – that it sounded like a peaceful position to be in, with Jon. Thayet and Buri, having overheard the conversation, laughed at her and told her she was full of nonsense. Thayet later whispered in her ear that she agreed, and wasn’t it weird? She was so smitten with Jon it was ridiculous and heartwarming. He was just as smitten with her, and the mutual nature of their respect gave Alanna hope for the world. She tried not to think about Roger. His very existence made her uncomfortable, and Thom wasn’t well equipped to navigate people. She tried not to think about it.

Kel seeing the first centre actually made Alanna’s heart melt. She didn’t know she had so much affection in her. Kel wasn’t emotive, but she was reverent. She wasn’t uncritical or unrealistic, she wasn’t overwhelmed, but she treated everything as hope and opportunity. Even when making suggestions and changes she was simply building up, not focusing on what was wrong. She was the most practical person Alanna had ever met, and with Buri and Onua around that was really something.

Things were moving quickly, and it was stressful, sure, her muscles ached almost as much as her head did, even though she wasn’t working in person full time, but everything seemed to be falling neatly into the places they should be. She’d never had that experience before. She liked it a lot.

***

Thom lost weight, at the request of the label, and Doctor Rosethorn glared at him so viciously he almost hid under her desk. “My iron levels have gone up,” he said. He’d never sounded so weak.

“You’re still below average.”

“But they are up!” he said. She kept glaring at him. “I’ve been signed to a label, and they--”

“Thom, you are underweight.”

“And in industry eyes I’m still chubby,” he said, trying to hold her gaze.

“I don’t care.” She knew him well enough to know he wasn’t budging. She sighed. “Fine. Fine. Do you still go on runs? Do the strength exercises Alanna gave you?” He nodded. “What is the primary constituent of your diet?” He shrugged. He didn’t know. “Don’t allow yourself to become
malnourished. If you maintain your physical fitness, vitamin levels, iron levels, and nutrition, your weight won’t hurt you.” He nodded. “I’m serious, Thom, if you’re going to be touring all over the world and doing photo shoots and all that nonsense I’m very happy for you, and I’m very proud of you, but you need to eat, you need to exercise, you need to continue not drinking or smoking.”

“Okay.”

“Are you willing to learn to self-inject, or will you find a doctor wherever you go?”

“I’ll find a doctor,” he said. The concept of self injection was affronting.

“If you want to just say ‘testosterone deficient male’, rather than trans with other doctors, that would be fine and achieve the same end. It also means--”

“No risk,” he said, smiling slightly. “Yeah.”

“Will you be here for your surgery?”

He scoffed. “Of course I will. I doubt I’ll even be leaving the state until January. They wanted me to lose weight and grow out my hair and start a moisturising routine and develop a new wardrobe before even announcing that they have me.” He scoffed again, crossing his legs. It was ridiculous.

“And I thought medicine was stressful. How’s Alanna?”

“No idea.” She raised an eyebrow. “No, I have no idea. She’s in New York. If I ask a specific question she’ll answer, but ‘how are you?’s are met with silence.” He shrugged, tried not to feel bitter. “She’s busy saving the world.”

“When will she be back?”

“I think she’s back mid September for her adoptive father’s birthday. Myles,” he added at the Doctor’s inquisitive look.

“And he’s not yours?”

“I have one family member. She has like… five or something.” He cut her off before she could speak, “I don’t want to talk about that.” They went back to the medical side of things, he got the shot, and went to uni for his third-last in-person lecture ever.

Wandering into the unisex bathroom he found one of his classmates snogging a TA, and so glared at the doors - ‘men’s’ and ‘women’s’. He didn’t like packing, but he passed too well to go into the women’s. There was no law against using the cubicles, he supposed. Such a simple act still made his stomach turn, heart race. He hadn’t thought he’d still be scared by that point in his life. He was sick of being scared, and he knew that it would only get worse with fame. Even then more and more frequently people were coming up to him in the street for photographs or autographs. He had stopped wearing his pyjamas grocery shopping for this reason only, and then again, only because his new-found publicist told him to. He had busked in a local park almost every Sunday for years, and suddenly his audiences were tripling.

Roger was a thrumming heat in his heart, always ready to resurface the second he stopped focussing on something else. He was affectionate and warm, but since the signed, sealed, delivered fiasco (as Thom had come to call it) he hadn’t made anything clear romantically. So Thom wrote
songs about it, and felt that that was best for all involved. He wasn’t allowed to be so active on YouTube, and it bothered him, because it wouldn’t be until March when he released a single from the EP. He was still allowed to post covers (‘not too frequently!’), and snippets of new songs on other social media sites, but nothing full. It was a different kind of validation, the response to that music, than what he was receiving.

Uni was weird. Third year drop out. He felt like he shouldn’t even be doing it any more, not wait until January, but he knew he’d lose structure if he didn’t have it, and there were lecturers coming in that he otherwise wouldn’t be able to hear speak. It was such a different part of his life. He didn’t care any less about the topics, but the way academia was structured bothered him more and more. He found it weird that his boyfriend – were they boyfriends? No, but they were Something. - had a poliisci degree, it didn’t seem right. Roger had just left it there, in his academic repertoire, nothing about music. Thom supposed that he had a masters in anthropology that would probably come to no conventional use. Roger’s family was built around politics, so he supposed it was second nature for him. It wasn’t a contingency plan. Roger didn’t believe in contingency plans, because he was a self-confident overachiever. Thom’s contingency plan consisted of buying a house in the middle of nowhere and living with his instruments and no human contact. He didn’t know if his plan or Roger’s lack of was worse. Talking to his team of people made his contingency plan seem so much more attractive.

He wanted people worldwide to know his music. He wanted people to sing along at the top of their lungs and post shitty covers to YouTube, and post incredible covers, and he wanted his music to mean something to some poor kid in a rural town who didn’t know it was okay to be queer. Most of all, he just wanted his music to be heard. Anything else was just a plus. He didn’t know if it was worth all of the fuss he was going through, but he supposed it was the easiest means to a goal.

***

08.24
From: Roger Conté

How’s City OF going?

08.30
To: Roger Conté

I’m sure that they’d consider this consorting with the enemy. Alright, I suppose. I feel like they’re trying to induce twelve self-esteem issues a day, but we’re getting there.

08.34
From: Roger Conté

I promise not to tell Stevie all their secrets. However, I heard through the grapevine that you refused to take your top off for them – something they consider very bizarre.

08.38
To: Roger Conté

Thanks, I appreciate it. Well, I posed to them whether they would ask a cis female artist that so openly in front of her lawyer and they shut up. My lawyer, however, laughed for a good twenty seconds until I pinched her.
08.42
To: Roger Conté
The nice thing about being me is that I’m talented enough that they’ve realised they don’t HAVE to fetishise me being trans. It’s great.

***

ConteOfficial tweeted: The nice thing about being me is that I’m talented enough that they’ve realised they don’t HAVE to fetishise me being trans. -Thom Trebond
HesitantGinger retweeted this
HesitantGinger tweeted: @ConteOfficial Look, I’m just being honest.

***

08.50
From: Roger Conté
The question is if I asked you to take your top off would you?

09.00
To: Roger Conté
I will say to you as I said to them: if a situation arises where it would be appropriate for me to take my top off, absolutely.

09.04
From: Roger Conté
I’m sure something will come up.

I’m glad that they’re backing away from the trans stuff.

09.07
To: Roger Conté
Yes, I’m sure. Would you take your top off for me?

Oh no, they’re not backing off, they’re just giving equal focus to me being a brilliant musician as to me being an Alive trans person.

09.10
From: Roger Conté
Of course. I wouldn’t even wait for a situation to arise where it would be appropriate.

Gloomy way of looking at it.

09.11
To: Roger Conté
Realistic way of looking at it. Tell the band I saw this trash can full of children’s toy recorders today and I thought fondly of them?

[Image]

09.15
From: Roger Conté

And I quote ‘that’s you, Thomas’.

09.19
To: Roger Conté
Did they kidnap a baby to get that picture? Did they just happen to have a pink piano lying around? Also its eyes are brown, they’ve fucked up, clearly.

09.25
From: Roger Conté

That’s Bella’s little sister, Rebecca. The piano came with the venue. Rebecca would like to know if you actually have purple eyes.

09.30
To: Roger Conté

That’s an odd set of circumstances. She can decide for herself.

[Image]

09.32
From: Roger Conté

She says they’d be nicer if they were pink. I would like to register that I hate children.

09.37
To: Roger Conté

Tell her all eyes would be nicer pink, but that it implies albinism which is quite often joined with various medical issues that are more debilitating than pink eyes are great.

Ooh, Roger, displaying animosity. What a scandal.

09.40
From: Roger Conté

Bella won’t let me as she said that will scare her. I don’t get how that’s scary, but I guess I have no authority here. I tolerate children but for heaven’s sake they make no sense.

09.43
From: Roger Conté

You feel out of control. This is thoroughly entertaining. I’ve text Gil, he’s sending me videos of you with her.

09.45
Thom hid his red face in his pillow and giggled. Or maybe he shrieked. He wasn’t quite sure. Either way he made a very embarrassing noise that he couldn’t seem to control. He was light headed and had butterflies and he wanted to be with Roger so badly he thought he could sob. One part of him strongly objected to being infantilised in the name ‘pet’, part of him loathed that he couldn’t flirt as competently as Roger, but most of him was a mess of the clarity that Roger liked him. Roger was flirting both romantically and sexually and ‘pet’ was a horrible nickname but something about the concept of being Roger’s made his heart ache.

He was so sick of the whole infatuation thing. He wanted to have control of his feelings again. He wanted to kiss Roger. He wanted there to be a situation where it would be perfectly appropriate for him to be topless. He wanted Roger to be topless. He wanted Roger to be okay with him being topless.

A memory slapped him across the cheek, back handed and firm. A wedding ring from a dead wife cut Thom’s nose.

His butterflies had stopped.

He hadn’t thought about his father in a long time.

Carefully, slowly, he stripped, shoving his clothes into the basket without care. The water was probably going to burn him. The racing of his heart was different than the minutes before. He let his forehead rest on the ceramic. He did not want to unbox his father. He did not want to think about dead people, when everything was done, there was nothing to be fixed or changed. He scrubbed himself clean, meticulous in using the products his stupid fucking stylist had assigned to him. He did not need to think about his relationship with his father – or more, his lack of one – to live a happy life. His father was blood, and nothing more. Thom could count, with fingers and toes, the amount of times he could remember his father speaking to him.

He got out of the shower, skin bright red, and started planning Christmas presents for Coram and Maude, the people who had actually raised them. Not that he particularly liked them, but he appreciated their efforts. Maude had taught him all she knew of piano before he was even four, and had learned from him when he started proper lessons. It was an admirable thing to do. His hands shook a little, preordering flowers and wine and leather goods for the two of them, months in advance. His hands shook and shook and shook.
Voicemail from Alanna Trebond

“Hey, sorry I didn’t pick up. It’s like midnight over there, isn’t it? Shit. Sorry. Hope this didn’t wake you. Um... I hope everything’s alright. Call back, okay?”

***

“Did our father ever hit you?”

“What?”

“Did... did Dad ever hit you?”

“No. No, he didn’t.”

“Oh.”

“Thom, did he hit you?”

“Didn’t you know?”

“Thom, what the fuck?”

“Look, you didn’t pick up, the moment’s passed. Go to sleep. You’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

“Do I?”

“You’re meeting with that CEO guy. Go to bed, Alanna--”

“Dad hit you?”

“Yes, he fucking hit me!”

“How many times? Thom, how many times?”

“Leave it, Alanna. I thought you knew. I thought this was... an unspoken thing, we were both hit and never talk about it, but the moment’s passed, and--”

“When?”

“Go to bed, Alanna!”

“Thom, please--”
“Just… leave it, Alanna.”

“Thom… I’m so sorry.”

“Bye, Alanna.”

“I’ll see you in September, okay?”

“Fine.”

“Get some rest, Thom.”

Thom got back in the shower and sat there until the water ran cold.

***

Foreigner Bodies – Thom Trebond
by HesitantGinger

All that’s left are these foreigner bodies
Don’t touch, I beg you
I won’t touch, don’t let me
All that’s left are opaque shells
All that’s left are these foreigner bodies

***

“Thom,” said Camille, who was one of the agents he could choose from – ‘of course, it’s all your choice!’, who seemed to think she had already been chosen. “That’s an original song, isn’t it?” He didn’t bother with a response. He needed to polish his shoes. They were black, but an off-black from his jeans. She didn’t seem deterred by his silence. “Well, you know what we discussed, we don’t want you posting original songs until your EP is being advertised--”

“If you look at the work of Ed Sheeran, Damien Rice--”

“You are not Damien Rice,” she reminded him, looking pitying.

He raised an eyebrow. “No, I’m different. I’m also better.” He held her in eye contact, trying to make her back off without being an arsehole. “I can’t stop posting music. I write a song a week, on a slow week. I perform a new setlist every Sunday busking. I would have posted six original songs by now. I agreed to slow down, in general, and I have. But I refuse to entirely rebrand myself while my fanbase still doesn’t know I’ve been signed.” She sighed, like somehow that would make him change his mind. “I didn’t sign my right away to do that,” he reminded her. “I’ve been fine on my own until now, and I’m not going to be collared by the label.”

“You don’t need to be a rebel in the industry.”

“I’m not being a rebel, I’m standing up for myself. This isn’t how I work. I’ve done everything requested of me. I’ve lost all the weight you’ve wanted, I’ve reshaped my wardrobe and personal hygiene, I’ve cooperated with the band assigned to me.” He looked back down at his shoes. “If it needs to be released at a later date it’s going to be a drastically different song. You may have noticed the recording quality was much lower than usual, and the arrangement wasn’t as complex –
I set it up that way deliberately.”

She sighed again. “It was very emotional.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll speak to the others, and… you won’t back down on this, I suppose?”

“No.”

“Okay.”

Thom called the head of his ‘case’, as they were calling it, and informed her that he wanted Si as his manager, not Camille. She seemed surprised. Si was the harshest of the lot of them, she said, and he said that was why he wanted him. She seemed to approve of that.

Si provided incredible structure. He approved of Thom’s ardent decision to keep posting music, and approved of the fact that he had accommodated for the label’s rights to his music in the recording quality. He didn’t like Thom, Thom was quite sure, and he viewed him as arrogant. He was used to that. Thom wasn’t sure if he liked Si, or even respected him, but he felt that he was the only one he could learn from.

Roger’s disapproval was a veiled thing, but it was present – he was sure of it. He couldn’t find a record of the two of them having history, but Roger’s reserve spoke in volume. Ever since telling Roger about Si he’d felt more reserved about the man. He thought that he should look at the situation more objectively, but Roger’s approval was a valuable thing that Thom respected. He noted that Si was the only one of the managers who hadn’t commented on Thom’s interactions with Roger.

He hated himself for wasting time on the thought process, but it invaded and invaded. His thoughts of Roger seemed more bittersweet, more fragile. The reality that he wasn’t with Thom, that there was no promise but for a handful of concerts and probably no more than sex, in Roger’s eyes. And Thom didn’t want that. He did. He wanted all of it, he wanted more than he could say, but he didn’t want just Roger’s fleeting affections and sex. He wasn’t quite a playboy, but it was well known that he didn’t do relationships in any conventional sense. Thom didn’t know if he could handle that. He decided, as decision was key to reality, he thought, that he didn’t care, and that he would deal with whatever came and be content with it. It wasn’t one hundred percent effective, but it was something.
Dear Thom,

I would like to invite you to my sixty-fifth birthday party, to be held on the eighth of September. A formal invitation is attached with all other details; this is just an additional note for you. I know that we will never share the bond that I am honoured to share with your sister, but you are always welcome in my home — serendipitous, I suppose, being your landlord. You isolated yourself throughout your school years for understandable reasons, you didn’t form connections, but I beg that as you embark on what I know will be an incredible career, that you do not forget your — dare I say it? - your family, your identity. You are an intelligent, passionate young man that I would be very pleased to know better than I do.

Warm regards,
Myles Olau.

***

Thom tore the note in half, then swore viciously, then sticky-taped it back together again. He ate his breakfast glaring at it.

***

Dear Professor Olau,

I will be pleased to attend your birthday celebration.

Kind regards,
Thom Trebond.

***

12.04
To: Alanna Trebond
What should I get Myles for his birthday?

03.05
From: Alanna Trebond
I struggle enough myself, you’re alone on this. You’re actually coming?
To: Alanna Trebond
Yes, appalling I know.

From: Alanna Trebond
A change, that’s for sure.

To: Alanna Trebond
I’ll wear a tie and be nice and everything.

From: Alanna Trebond
I will believe it when I see it.

***

Photoshoots were blatantly uncomfortable. He didn’t know if there was a point where they were supposed to not be. He’d hated school photos, that was bad enough, let alone this cramped studio over-bright and over commercial. He didn’t want to be ‘the face of’ anything but himself, but apparently it was an excellent statement of self-importance. Some fashion brand he didn’t understand was whisking him in and out of clothes and touching up make up and ‘elevating’ his hair.

The wardrobe designers seemed to have found it novel tailoring clothes for a man of his height and proportions. They were very accepting of him as a man, which was surprising, but they seemed overly enthused about it. He supposed there would be headlines ‘otherwise standard fashion brand takes on a trans person as if he’s actually a person’.

He was glad for it, no matter how unpleasant it was. It was good publicity, and Si had suggested he do it for free to set himself up an image in the industry, so they insisted to give him the clothes he wore. That had been Si’s plan, apparently, as he kept Thom in his last outfit and took an excessive number of photographs to post online with no context for his fans. It was fun, seeing them chase information and speculate. It made him smile. The lack of progress in terms of actual music was a pain. They’d start in October. He supposed it meant he should use September to be free, but nothing felt quite free. One of his lecturers asked for his autograph. It was a blurring of circumstance that he didn’t appreciate.

From: Roger Conté
Loving the new look.

To: Roger Conté
I had a makeover montage.

From: Roger Conté
Suits you well. By the way, I think I've emotionally recovered enough to cover a piece from bare.

01.26
To: Roger Conté
Are you sure?

01.27
From: Roger Conté
Yeah. I mean, as recovered as one can be.

01.28
To: Roger Conté
Which song are you thinking?

01.28
From: Roger Conté
I don't know - what do you think?

01.29
To: Roger Conté
'Once Upon a Time', maybe. Or 'All Grown Up' if you're willing to be a pregnant girl.

01.30
From: Roger Conté
I was thinking a duet.

01.33
From: Roger Conté
If you would like, of course.

01.34
To: Roger Conté
Yes, I would like. If we had an ensemble 'You and I' would work - or we could just do a lot of editing. 'bare' itself would be nice.
01.35
From: Roger Conté

I think 'bare' is perfect.

01.36
To: Roger Conté

I can talk to some of my contacts in NY if you want to record on tour or we can wait.

01.38
From: Roger Conté

I have the next week off, after the ninth. We could do it then.

01.39
From: Roger Conté

This is me inviting myself into your home.

01.42
To: Roger Conté

Ha, okay. That sounds good.

01.43
From: Roger Conté

I can come in on the tenth, if that works for you. I can either catch the plane that gets in at nine p.m., or that gets in at three-thirty that morning.

01.51
To: Roger Conté

I'm fine either way. I'll meet you at the airport, we can go straight back to my place.

02.00
From: Roger Conté

I've booked the three thirty. It'll need to be a private airport since I'm not bringing Alex.
To: Roger Conté
That’s fine, just tell me where. Are you seriously only visiting me after my make over montage?
Shallow, Conté, shallow.

02.07
From: Roger Conté
Well, it’s how the story goes, doesn’t it? You should have learned your lesson from Taylor Swift’s
epic cinematic masterpiece ‘You Belong With Me’.

0 2. 0 9
To : Roger Conté
So naive of me.

0 2.11
From : Roger Conté
It’s your own fault, really.

I’ll text you with details. See you soon.

0 2.13

To: Roger Conté
See you soon.

***

“Myles.” The smile on his face made her warm.

“Alanna,” he said, taking her into his arms. He looked like part of the fairy tale that was his home,
deep red wool, smelling like flowers. “Hello, sweetheart.” She tried not to tear up, but it wasn’t
working. She kept hugging him to hide it.

“Happy birthday,” she said, pulling back. He kept his hands on hers. He didn’t look much older.
She knew that wasn’t how birthdays worked, but Myles seemed to be ageless. He looked no
different than when she’d met him.

“Thank you,” he said, and stroked her hair back. “You’ve been doing some incredible work.
Honestly, Alanna, congratulations.” She shook her head.

“I couldn’t have done it without your help, Myles.”

“Nonsense. Come inside, it’s too cold out here for old men like me.” It was small talk as he led her
through to the kitchen. The clock was perfectly on eight. They were lucky, both early risers. When
they were at Corus they fell into a tradition of walking around the grounds before the sun was even
up, not always saying anything, just walking. Alanna had cried with Myles more often than she
liked to think on.

A man was sitting at the kitchen table, reading something on a tablet, mug of coffee in hand. He
was wearing a dressing gown, and looked still half-asleep. “Oh, I’m sorry.” She blushed bright red
and turned to face Myles. “I didn’t know you had company.”

The man looked up at her and smiled. He had lovely green eyes, and he looked kind. "Oh, not at all, I should have mentioned," said Myles. “I'm sorry - this is Baird Queenscove." Baird stood and offered his hand to her. She shook it, trying for a smile as warm as his own.

"Alanna Trebond. A pleasure to meet you."

Baird chuckled and dropped her hand. He inclined his head. "It's an honour - Myles speaks of you very highly." Alanna’s face got even hotter, and she slid her hands into the pockets of her dress.

She tried hard to resist it, but the words came out before she could stop them. "Myles, are you gay?" She winced and closed her eyes.

Both men were laughing. Myles grabbed her shoulder and shook her lightly. "Oh heavens, child, I thought you knew."

She shook her head, covered her mouth with a hand. "I'm so sorry, that was rude." She wouldn’t care that it was rude if it wasn’t Myles and Myles’s boyfriend.

Myles was just shaking his head, chuckling as he went over to the stove. "No, I thought you knew. Come, we've got French toast." He poured her a cup of coffee. She took it, grateful just for something to do with her hands. Myles made coffee like no-one in the world, she was quite sure.

"I'm not bothering you?" she asked, mug just apart from her lips.

"Not at all."

She looked at Baird. She would probably be embarrassed every time she saw him for the rest of her life. "Mr. Queenscove?"

"No, of course not. Call me 'Baird'." He indicated the chair next to him. She sat feeling awkward and out of place, so focussed on drinking her coffee.

“When did your plane get in?” Myles asked.

“Four. I slept for a couple of hours then came straight here,” she said. “I wasn’t sure when you wanted me, I know I promised to help--”

“Honestly there isn’t much left to do. If you want to head home and rest a little more--”

“No, of course not. Anything you need, just tell me.” She was rambling, she knew it, her words were all sticky on her tongue. “You deserve a perfect party.” Myles sat beside her and kissed her forehead.

“Thank you, Alanna.” After eating she relaxed a little, and found she very much liked Baird, who had a brilliant, albeit subtle, sense of humour, and seemed to adore Myles. As someone who also adored Myles she appreciated this greatly.

***
thomtrebond posted to instagram

I feel like I’m not qualified to wear McQueen yet. Are there levels for these things? Do I need to get x fashion points, y fame points, z etiquette points? If so I’m fucked, but here we are. #alexandermcqueen #thomtrebond

o h my... gay heart...
dat vogue face tho
our boy is rising up in the world
You forgot ‘v gay points’.
Fuck the points, you’re lookin hot.

There is no point to being trans if you’re gay, and he’s flaunting both of them.

Oh fuck off bigot

Classy response! I have the right to state the truth.

I’m not straight but like, for this boy? maybe

#transitiongoals
he could go through life passing as a cis guy, and he chooses not to, and that’s the most powerful thing in the world ???? like he’s changing lives just by making instagram posts of him looking really frickin hot
#reallivetransadult

***

Alanna went back home at four thirty to change for the night, and she actually looked around her house. It still felt like home, and she sort of wanted to fall onto her couch and never leave, but it also felt distant, like it wasn’t quite allowed to be hers any more. Faithful was with Thayet in New York, and she supposed that she hadn’t been without him for years. He was a part of her home.

She pulled her dress on carefully, and was grateful Faithful wasn’t there. He would have torn it. She wasn’t horrible at things stereotypically feminine, but it was foreign ground to her in some ways. Having her shoulders mostly bare, wearing stockings – it just wasn’t in her day to day behaviour. She enjoyed it, though, and Buri had taught her how to pin-curl her hair. Neither of them had the patience or fearlessness for long hair, she thought, like Thayet did.

She was trying not to think about Thom. She should have gone to him, rather than Myles, but she was putting it off and putting it off. Their father was neglectful and cruel, and a prideful idiot, but she didn’t think he was abusive. Thom hadn’t told her how many times he was assaulted. Had he been taking it for years so Alanna didn’t have to? Was that even logistically possible, time wise?

She checked his social media accounts, then, as if that would tell her. She had made a point of listening to all of his songs, even if she wasn’t paying attention to Twitter or Facebook or Instagram. They had accidentally colour coordinated, she realised with a smile, both in dark red and black. He looked different, and she wasn’t sure if that was a filter or actual changes. It was scary, to think of seeing him again. She would rather see him now than in six months time, she rationalised, as she fumbled with her earrings. She didn’t know why he was coming. Maybe he was trying harder with Myles now – he had always respected Myles’s affection for her, but never really paid any care to the man himself. What had changed in that regard she had no idea.
George let himself in, and she shrieked when he tickled her neck. “You arse,” she said, prodding him in the chest. He chuckled and picked her up to kiss her. She could have melted against him. He looked better than she had seen him in years. There were scars, but he looked less strained. He was wearing a neat black suit, and they looked picturesque in the mirror. She hated it as much as she loved it. “Why are you dressed up?” she asked.

“It’s Myles’s birthday,” he said. “Or have you just got a date I don’t know about?” His face was silent amusement as she spluttered. “Myles and I are pals now, if you hadn’t heard.”

“I thought you were exaggerating,” she said, getting on the tips of her toes to kiss him again. She should have spent the day with him, not Thom, not Myles, with George, because they had to leave and all she wanted to do was kiss him forever.

He pulled away with soft kisses to her cheeks and forehead. “Myles has me on a new track in life,” he said. “Making an honest man out of me.” He chuckled as Alanna rolled her eyes. “You ready to go?”

“Why did you have to come now?” She knew she was whining. She didn’t care. “I’ve missed you.”

“Just to get you hot and bothered, clearly.” She groaned and stomped upstairs to get her bag. Walking in heels was the worst thing invented. She drove, and George didn’t ask her questions about the organisation, but about stupid, minuscule things that only he knew she cared about or he was the only one who would ask.

Myles’s house was warm brick and huge trees, and it seemed to be diving ahead into Autumn in front of the rest of the state. There were lights scattered around the property, golden lanterns. Standing on the first step up to the doorway, Alanna took George’s hands and kissed him gently. “I love you,” she said, breath drifting over George’s lips. He gathered her in his arms and twirled her around in his arms, rendering her breathless with laughter. “I won’t love you so much if you tear this dress,” she told him when he put her back down on the step. She straightened it carefully, trying not to let him see her blushing face.

“I love you, Lioness.” George took her hand and kissed her knuckles. “Come on.”

***

Thom had come in the front door, which was what was requested on the invitation, but Alanna was clearly above the rule. He felt too grown up for his skin, a glass of non alcoholic red wine in hand, wearing a red and black suit, in a room of people much older and less saturated in pop culture than he. He hadn’t seen Myles yet, but met who he guessed was Myles’s partner, considering his ease and interaction with the staff. The house was so much larger than it looked from the outside. It was beautiful. He was impatient to see Roger. Less than twelve hours until his plane landed.

Alanna was like a warrior and a princess all in one, George a graceful shadow beside her. She was wearing the same shade of red as him. He didn’t expect it to hurt when she hugged him. Not physically, but a tugging longing, all of the missing her that he’d pushed back. She poked his stomach, and the first thing she said was, “I’m the skinny twin, you arsehole.”

“Move over, Regina George,” he said, clutching her face in his hands. “You look all grown up and beautiful,” he said quietly, so only she could hear. She slapped his hands away, but she smiled.
“You too. Things change fast, huh?” She straightened his collar. “McQueen.” She said the name like it was a god’s. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Neither did I,” he admitted. “George!” George came back into the light from the bookshelf where he’d been pretending not to be listening. “How are you?”

“I’m good,” said George, forever laughter in his eyes. “How are you, Mister Celebrity?”

“Not quite a celebrity yet,” Thom said dryly. “You look better. Where have you been?” Thom stepped back so he wouldn’t have to crane his neck to look at him.

George’s arm fell around Alanna’s shoulders. “Here, often. Myles seems to have taken a liking to me, I’ve been doing some work for him.” Alanna looked a tad confused, just as Thom felt, but Myles entered the room and everything else fell into irrelevance. He was a brilliant host, and while he liked the quiet, liked his close friends, he seemed to revel in the excitement of the night, the amounts of people. Baird stayed close to him, and their adoration for each other was endearing.

Thom faked social competence, but he still text Roger every half hour or so. Selfies next to old bookshelves seemed to be Roger’s aesthetic kink, so Thom indulged him. Myles was very firm in placing Alanna and Thom next to him on one side at the dining table, Baird on the other. He was thorough in engaging both of them in conversation, and it meant that they could talk, too. Thom couldn’t deny Myles’s brilliance. He spouted knowledge like some breathed out oxygen. The way Alanna looked at him made Thom envious. It made his cheek sting in a phantom of years-old pain.

Thom presented Myles with his gift carefully, and although he would deny it, he was making it clear that he had tried. Alanna smirked from behind her glass of lemonade. “I thought you might already have this, I wasn’t sure, but--”

“Thom, this is a first edition,” Myles said, reverent as he opened the browned pages up, let them float back to one another. The deep blue sleeve of the book was the same colour as his shirt, and his smile was overwhelming in its sincerity. “How ever did you find it?” he asked. Thom preened himself internally.

“Perseverance.” He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “I… happy birthday?” He said it like a question, and he winced.

Myles was just a little taller than him. It was a nice change. “Thank you, Thom.” He shook Thom’s hand in a gentle way, unlike anyone before. There was nothing about power in it. Thom liked that. Myles slipped the book back into its case and handed it to one of the waiters with murmured instruction, who nodded and left with grace. Myles turned on his heel so he was facing the majority of the crowd. “Now, I feel it’s irrational to have two incredibly gifted musicians in my midst and not have them play for us!”

Alanna choked on her lemonade. George slapped her back, and Thom stepped so he was standing at her side. “You should have seen this coming,” he hissed on her ear. She shook her head.

“I haven’t sung in months!” she said.

“Too bad, I’m not doing this without you.” Myles was rambling on their positive attributes or the suchlike, and Thom pointed at the piano gently. “‘Piano Man’? Then ‘Your Song’ if we need an encore,” he asked.
“It’s too high--”

“No, it’s not, you say that every time. Just… do a tongue trill until the song actually starts.” Obediently she started a tongue trill, looking far more frightened than appropriate. George had the good sense not to say anything, just taking Alanna’s drink for her.

“Alanna, Thom?” Myles gestured towards them. “Would you do us the honour?”

Thom played the shy and gratified character, but nodded to Myles. He led them towards the piano. The twins imagined that they looked like they’d prepared, colour coordination and all. He trusted Alanna not to fuck up. He offered her a hand, and though she glared at him, she used it to boost herself up to sit on the edge of the piano. She crossed her ankles as a last-minute thought, forever forgetting that she was wearing a dress.

Thom waited for her nod before setting his hands to the keys. All of Alanna’s nerves aside they were perfect. ‘Piano Man’ had been in their repertoire since they were thirteen, and Alanna fell into the music so naturally. Thom didn’t want to lose her, though he knew that he was, and she wasn’t his to lose. She grinned down at him, and he gestured to her politely amidst the applause. The intricate density of her voice changed the high notes in ways that Thom’s voice never could.

‘Your Song’ went well, but as was polite, as soon as they finished they stepped away from the piano, took small bows. Myles winked at her as he applauded, as if he knew how stressful it had been for her and had relished every minute of it. She resisted the urge to stick her tongue out at him. It had been wonderful. She had forgotten how her voice worked with Thom’s. He was already on his phone, undoubtedly telling Roger or his manager or Instagram about it. She stole it from him and got to the other side of the room in one neat motion, and because he was playing polite he couldn’t even shout about it.

10.30
From: Roger Conté
I’m on my way to the airport. Everything good? It’ll be really good to see you, Thom.

Thom prodded the backs of her knees, coming from behind so she didn’t see him, and grabbed his phone back while she was trying not to squawk.

10.40
Roger Conté
I’ll be there. :)

“You brat,” she said, trying to rub the backs of her knees without disrupting the damn dress. He stuck his tongue out at her. “You sound good. Your voice is stronger.”

“I’m brilliant,” he said, taking two glasses of lemonade and handing one to her. She drank half of it before looking at him seriously and asking,

“Roger’s coming?”

He considered her. “Yes. He’s staying with me for a week.” His face broke into a broad grin and he tapped the tip of her nose. “How’s New York? Have you seen anything live yet?” She had always begged her privacy from him, so with reticence played along. George came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. He didn’t say anything, just listened to them speak and held her. Her
hands fitted neatly on top of his.

***

11.03
To: Roger Conté

Roger I'm thinking about kissing you

11.04
From: Roger Conté

Then you should.

***

“You two should come by again soon,” Myles said. They were at the back door, all huddled from the rain. He was a little bit drunk, and George was holding him up. “And I’ll see you on the weekend, won’t I?”

George nodded and helped Myles righten himself up. “Of course.”

“I would have loved to see you two as children,” he said, almost in a whisper. “Though you are still children, really.”

Thom didn’t know how to handle the sentiment, and so allowed Alanna to say her ‘goodbye’s, kissing him on the cheek and promising that she’d come by soon. Thom made the hard choice to hug Myles ‘goodbye’. It was odd, and warm, and Myles smelled too much like wine for his liking, but like his handshake Myles seemed to be holding no preconceptions, no expectations, just the reality of two people having their arms around one another. It was good, he decided.

Myles waved them off, and though they’d arrived in different cars, Alanna and Thom got in the back of Thom’s car, George going to Alanna’s, without it being spoken. They weren’t going to drive, but they needed a second more. “If you stop singing I swear to god I’ll haunt you,” Thom said, breaking a not so much ‘tense’ as ‘uncertain’ silence.

“After the terror of that, I promise I won’t stop,” she said, and she meant it. “We’re good together.”

“You figure this out now,” he said, and a twinge of bitterness tainted his voice. Alanna pulled the straps of her dress off. There were dark indentations in her skin where they had been. She rubbed at one of them self-consciously.

“We will always be good together, Thom, and we will also always be good alone.”

“I’m not ready for us to be,” he whispered.

“I’m not either,” she said. She meant it. “But we’ve made our choices and we’re happy with them. So you can’t be angry at me for not being with you on this. We both knew we were in limbo, Thom, something was gonna change, and I just...” She looked at him through the gaps in her
fingers. She had smudged her eyeliner, and she wasn’t even crying yet. “Please don’t hate me.”

He didn’t say anything, just rested his face in his hands, glaring at the floor of the car. “I could never hate you,” he said. “I hate not being your number one.”

“You still are--”

“Don’t lie to me, Alanna Trebond, never once have you succeeded, although you’ve tried.”

“We’re states apart, if not for that--”

“I’m not angry at you! I’m hurting, but I’m not angry. You’re allowed to live your own life, and I never want to limit that. It just hurts.” He didn’t look at her, but put a hand on her knee. “And that’s okay.”

She sniffled, tears running down her nose and her hands and her lap. “Dad hit you,” she whispered.

“And don’t fucking let that inform your decision making,” he snapped. “Nor your feelings. We’re fucked up, fine, but you are a strong, beautiful woman who will change the world, with or without me. And I’ll make music, with or without you.” Her hand covered his on her knee. Her hands were still larger than his, encapsulating and over-hot. “But you always have me, okay?”

“Okay.” She shuffled closer to him, and they pressed their foreheads together, children once more, maybe one last time. “Please tell me about Dad hitting you.” He flinched back. “I need to know, Thom.”

“No, you don’t.” He ignored the buzz of a new text message. She squeezed his hand. It almost hurt. “Fine. We were sixteen. You were staying with Jon over the Summer, I went back home.” Unspoken was ‘I wasn’t allowed to come so you went without me’. “I’d started testosterone and changes had become visible, and certainly audible.” Unspoken was ‘I was depressed and fragile’. “You remember his views on trans people.” They only knew because of papers he had written, not words spoken to them.

“Maude was around, Coram wasn’t. She was lovely, she didn’t pry about how I got the hormones, and she bullied Dad into having ‘morning tea’ with me.” Unspoken was the cajoling and begging, ‘she’s your child, Alan! She’s grown up and you haven’t seen her in years’. “It took two weeks to get to that point.” He didn’t listen to Maude, until he felt it infringed on his work.

“He took one look at me, and I said ‘hi, Dad’, and he slapped me so hard I fell over and hit my head against a wall.” Unspoken, that Thom had cried out, that his head was swollen for weeks afterwards. “When I stood up, he hit me again, and his wedding ring cut the side of my nose.” The tears hadn’t come yet, they wouldn’t for a long time, he had wondered in a flash what his mother would have done. “He put his hands on my chest and he shoved me against the wall.” He did not say that Alan had grabbed his unbound breasts, dug his fingers in, before throwing him. It didn’t need to be spoken. Alanna knew. She imagined Thom scrubbing his skin raw, going weeks without taking off his binder. She could practically see him slumped at the wall, nose bleeding, disbelieving tears slipping down his nose. Maude coming along later and barely looking at him as she cleaned the cut, put cream on his bruising cheeks. She would have begged him not to tell.

Thom had said it all in a dark monotone, emotion slipping through only to be clipped away. “He didn’t say anything.” Alanna was sobbing quietly, head back in her hands. He sniffed and pushed his hair back. He tried to sound indifferent when he said, “That was the last time I saw him.”
“I’m so sorry, Thom.” She gripped onto his hand, but she couldn’t meet his eye. “I didn’t know. I didn’t know--”

“I didn’t tell you,” he said. “That’s on me.”

“Only once? You swear, only once?”

“I swear.” She stroked his hair fervently, like somehow it could unwrite history. Her hands would smell of hair product, he thought absently. He was trying to hold his tears in, but they spilled in streams. “I thought… I didn’t want to not know if he had hit you, too.” She shook her head, held onto his. “I’ve fucked up your night, haven’t I?” Thom said, trying to laugh. There were tears on his lips. “You should be fucking George right now, not crying with me over a dead man.”

“You’re fucking rude, and I...” She wiped the tears away from under his eyes with her thumbs. It hurt, the force of it, but she needed to. She needed to feel like she was some way in control, so Thom let her. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t know if you still loved him.”

“I never loved him,” she spat out.

“We both loved him. He just didn’t love us.” She touched the sides of his nose, wondering where the ring had cut. Serendipitous and ironic, she thought. He had hated them for their mother’s death, wore their wedding rings until he died, and she had died to give birth to them. “It’s okay, Alanna.”

“Why were you thinking about it that day? That’s not like you.” He told her the embarrassing story of talking to Roger, thinking about bodies and how bodies worked, and how the memory had cut through everything, his skin had crawled for twenty-four hours afterwards, he couldn’t sleep. Worry was written in the creases of her brow. “Would Roger hurt you?”

Thom pushed his hair back, tried to wipe his tears on his trousers, not wanting to ruin the shirt. “Oh, I’m sure he’ll hurt me, but he won’t hit me.”

“Then why is he coming here?”

“Because I know the risks and I want him anyway. I... I think about him all the time, I just... if he breaks my heart, at least it’ll be good artistic material. And... I’m twenty-one, and I’ve never... held someone’s hand,” he said, then let out an embarrassed groan. “That’s so childish, fuck.”

“No, it’s not.” Alanna frowned, and ruffled through her bag for tissues. They both blew their noses and wiped their eyes. “That’s...” He was looking at it far more rationally than she had thought. She didn’t like it, but she supposed it wasn’t her place to. “That’s brave,” she said at last. “I hope it goes well.”

“Me too,” Thom said, through freshly wet eyes and a lump in his throat. “Ah, fuck, I’m going to have to change, now.”

“Nah. Hang out the clothes, shower, redo your hair, put them back on – in that order. You’ll be fine.” They both laughed a little. “You in McQueen and me in Chanel,” she said. “Who’d have thought?” At his inquisitive look she said, “It was Thayet’s, but it’s the wrong proportions for her, so she gave it to me. It’s still the wrong proportions for me, but at least it’s only shoulders as a
“That looks worse than binding,” he said, pointing at the marks from the straps.

“At least it’s not my ribs.” She shrugged, wiped her eyes on the heel of her hand again. “I should...” She gestured vaguely to ‘outside’, to George.

“Of course.” Thom opened the door. He got out before her, and hugged her tight. “Thanks, Alanna,” he whispered on her ear.

“I’ll be here for two weeks, so... text me and we’ll work something out.” He nodded. “Seriously, if you let them air for a while you’ll be fine.” She tugged on his sleeve. “Very handsome,” she said, trying not to laugh.

“Very scandalous,” he said, laughing and poking her bare collarbones. “Goodnight, Alanna.” She rolled her eyes and went back to her car. He waited for her to get in. She called out from the window,

“Goodnight, Thom!”

“Get home safe,” called George, in a tone that made Thom want to roll his eyes and hug George at the same time. He hated endearing people. They sucked.
Chapter 17

Chapter by dunedinparsley

Chapter Summary

content warning: some topless kissing

this is the point in the drafts where dialogue and prose aren't coexisting all the time - I hope it all makes sense anyway

Thom's legs jittered, his head on his hands. The plane was running late due to storms. He was getting cold with sleep deprivation, and his mouth felt dirty even though he had brushed his teeth no less than four times. The radio was on, the repetitive drone of top forty pop hits keeping him grounded enough to breathe.

He had followed Alanna’s instructions about the clothes, switching his pants out for the ones from the photoshoot, replacing the blazer with a black peacoat. He thought it hilarious and pathetic that the whole point was that he was trying to look like he hadn’t even thought about it, come straight from Myles’s party, and yet he hadn’t cared about his attire more in his life. He wanted to match Roger like they matched in their music. He didn’t think it worked. He ran a hand through his hair. He hadn’t put product in it, hadn’t tied it back, let it fall to its full length. He hadn’t done that since the label. It was nice. He’d missed it.

He ended up buying a crappy airport toothbrush-toothpaste kit and continuing with his routine of furiously scrubbing away non-existent plaque. Ten minutes. He wandered to the airport’s pretentious and tiny cafe, bought a hot chocolate. Five minutes. His breathing couldn't be helped, pacing back and forth, getting glares from onlookers. Three minutes.

"Passengers will begin to disembark."

His hands shook. He tossed away his cardboard cup, ran a hand through his hair. He counted backwards from fifty and kept his eyes on the flight gate. Children of celebrities and politicians, half asleep or far too awake stumbled through with flight attendants to the arms of security guards and parents and grandparents. Old rich people who thought themselves too good to fly with too many other people. Business people in rumpled suits. It was a small cohort. It seemed massive, waiting.

Roger's hair was loose, falling in little curls over his forehead into his eyes, just brushing his shoulders. He looked drowsy, soft, and he didn't see Thom at first. He pushed his hair back and looked around the space, still for just a moment.

"Roger," Thom said, his own voice startling him. Roger turned with the type of smile that made him seem like he was shining. Three steps for both of them (though Roger's steps were far larger than his own) brought them close enough for him to know that Roger was warm, radiating heat. "I'm still thinking about kissing you," he admitted, leaning up a little to examine Roger's expression. He was smiling, with an ink smudge and a pink tinge to his cheeks.
"A thought that persistent is certainly worth a trial." Roger smelled like expensive cologne and aeroplane steriliser and his hand was hot on Thom's waist. The chattering voices and the radio and machines beeping all turned into a dull roar, but his heartbeat sounded like hammers, and Roger's breath was sweet. He was on the tips of his toes, but Roger leaned down just a little, looking into his eyes like he was trying to figure out a hard equation. It could only have been seconds, but Roger's stubble scratched and his hand clenched on the back of Thom's shirt, and Thom fumbled to settle one hand on Roger's hip to hold himself steady, and he felt like hundreds of little motions led up to tilting his head and kissing him.

Roger's lips were soft, and Thom's body hadn't quite managed to tell his brain that they were actually kissing. That Roger was right there, and holding him as if he'd been waiting for a very long time to do so.

His brain caught up. He stumbled, unbalanced on the tips of his toes. Roger chuckled, and he was so close he could feel the vibration travel through Roger's chest and into his own. His cheeks flushed, but he didn't quite have time to be embarrassed, because Roger settled a hand on his jaw and ran his thumb over Thom's cheek. "A worthy trial?" he asked.

Thom couldn't quite find the right words, his mouth felt numb and tingling at the same time. "It may require further exploration," he said at last. Roger pulled him into a hug, and Thom could only smile with his cheek on Roger's chest. "We should... get out of here."

"Yeah. We should."

Holding Roger's hand was on the side of awkward because of their heights, but he couldn't think of doing anything else. "How was your flight?"

"Uneventful. The storms were unpleasant. I couldn't sleep." They approached the conveyor belt with a shared tiredness, Roger yawning intermittently. Thom saw Roger's suitcase just before it went back into rotation, grabbing it at the cost of breaking contact with Roger.

Roger kissed him as he turned, chastely, just for a moment. Unspoken, Thom kept hold of the suitcase, their walk to the car cold, their feet hitting the cement with echoes that travelled around the walls.

Roger scrolled through Thom's MP3 player until he settled on putting it on shuffle, and set a hand on the console, tantalisingly close to Thom's own. He slipped his fingers through Roger's, and smiled when Roger's thumb circled the back of his hand. "Thank you, Thom."

"Thank you for coming. I know you didn't have to." Roger just smiled and squeezed Thom's hand. He fell asleep before they got back to Thom's house, and Thom had an overwhelming guilt when he woke him up, but as soon as Roger was upstairs, shoes and shirt discarded, he forgot anything quite so rational.

Roger was sitting on the edge of the bed, his hair was a controlled mess, and he looked starkly pale with so much skin exposed.

"Come here." It was an order that didn't sound like one, because Roger's voice was soft, gravelly
with sleep. Thom's legs shook a little but he pushed himself from the doorway to stand directly in front of Roger. Thom barely registered his hands being taken before he stumbled onto Roger's lap. He was embarrassed by the breath that escaped him as Roger's hands took pride of place on his hips, his waist, finally settling on the small of his back. He felt too present, too aware of his own body.

"Roger..."

One of Roger's hands travelled up his spine, around his ribs, to his shoulders. He pushed the coat from Thom's back, easing it down his arms until it fell to the floor. Thom was shaking, and he was burning with embarrassment as a cross between a whimper and an exhalation escaped him.

"It's okay, Thom." Roger trailed a fingertip up Thom's jugular, as if assessing the accessibility of his blood. He couldn't help tilting his head, and Roger's hand cupped the side of his throat. "You're okay." He was hyper aware of his stubble, that it must be scratching Roger. He stayed as still as he could, but not before lacing his arms around Roger's neck.

Their breath mingled, and Thom ran his fingers through Roger's hair. His lips were smooth, a little damp, and they made the skin of Thom's cheeks, his forehead, the crease between his nose and lips, all burn. Roger was someone who knew how to kiss, knew to catch Thom's upper lip between his just as he pressed his thumb against his jawbone, knew to lick the centre of the seam of his mouth, to bite his lower lip when he gasped.

Thom wasn't quite so knowledgeable, just following Roger's motion, carding his fingers through Roger's hair and trying not to scratch him. His thighs were aching, balanced over the edges of Roger's own, and heat flooding through his body, but he could feel Roger pulling away. The kisses on his neck were slow, open-mouthed, accompanied by a hand pulling gently at his hair.

Roger's hand had slipped up under his shirt at some point that he couldn't quite recall, and each finger fell back and forth in its own pattern. It was like his spine was a piano. "I won't sleep for long."

"You can. It's late, we don't have to wake up for anything." Thom got up very carefully as not to fall, missing his warmth automatically. He wasn't ready for the sharing the bed, the waking up together, but he so didn't want to leave. His lips buzzed. "I'll see you in the morning. Well. Later in the morning."

Roger kissed him once more, just until his legs shook again, until it made him want to stay.
"Goodnight, Thom."

"Goodnight," Thom whispered, all his breath coming out in the word.

***

04.47

To: Alanna Trebond (ICE 1)

you know the series of ‘things worse than butterflies’ you told me about a while ago? Well, sharks hurt.
He sat on his doorstep, still in his pyjamas. The street seemed sleepy in the post-rain light. "I'm taking up smoking," he said as soon as Alanna picked up.

"Look, of all the things I expected you could say, that's not one of them." He smiled, and ran a fingertip over his lower lip as he spoke.

"I just really want a cigarette right now. I've never had one. But I want one." He remembered the others smoking in high school, and the smell, and how horrible it was. It wasn’t what he’d expected.

"Oh yeah, there’s that sexual stress response chemical thing," she said contemplatively. He spluttered. "Basically, no, you don't. How's Roger?" She sounded like she’d been awake for hours, despite all jet lag.

Thom’s stomach burned. "He's asleep."

"And how was kissing him?"

"Um." He had no idea what else he could say. He didn’t know the words for kissing Roger Conté.

"Is that bad or good?" He groaned. "Good, then. Are the sharks gone?" She was very business-like about the whole affair. Thom felt like a puddle, held up only by the door.

"They’ve sort of gotten to the point of violent wasps. We were half asleep and I just… I don't know what it meant. To him."
“Well, considering he made a choice to fly half way across the country to see you with very apparent romantic overtones, I’d say that it was thoroughly pre-planned, and his intent matched yours.”

He groaned again. He put his phone on his knees so he didn’t have to hold it. The rain was starting up again. "Alanna. He's so beautiful."

Alanna started saying something then cut herself off. “Oh, morning, love.”

“Who is it?” asked George.

“It’s Thom.”

“Hi, Thom,” said George through a yawn. “I did demand you tell me how he is in bed.”

Thom let his head fall back on the door. “Well, he’s currently asleep in bed, if that answers the demand.”

“I doubt Thom rushed from being shy about holding hands to intercourse in twelve hours,” Alanna said.

Thom raised an eyebrow, and heard one of them ruffling around in a cupboard, ceramics banging together. “I dunno, he’s a risk-taker at the oddest times,” George countered.

“I’m right here.”

“So you’re in a perfect position to set the record straight,” said George. There was a loud bang, one of them putting down a mug. “I mean, ‘straight’ not being the best word.”

“You’re queerer than me, George, don’t pretend otherwise. We kissed for a while. That’s all.” He could almost see George through his half-suppressed chuckles.

“Are you comfortable with him?” Alanna asked. A man walking his dog glared at Thom as if he was doing something scandalous. He shook himself to answer Alanna,

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s nice.” He paused for a moment. “My stomach hurts.”

“That should fade away after like, I dunno, a few days.” The thought of his butterflies lasting for days was an appalling one. He didn’t want to keep blushing and stuttering and tripping on his own feet.

“Why is your stomach sore?” George asked.

“Sharks,” Thom said, at the same time as Alanna said,

“Sharks.” There was a silence that was probably a raised eyebrow from George to Alanna. “Like butterflies but far, far worse. All consuming, painful, violent butterflies that display both nerves and care. George winced. Thom.”

“Damn right.” There was a running tap and teaspoons, but no talking for a little while. “Alanna, why do you hate him so much? Don’t think I haven’t noticed your outright animosity.”
She waited, collecting her words. Thom knew that she was fighting herself away from saying something crude or abrupt. “I just… don’t trust him. He’s… slimy. I can’t assess anything about him, there’s no clarity to his identity but that he’s supposedly perfect.”

George hummed his agreement, and added, “He comes into a room and assesses everyone in it and their relationships to each other and their relationships to him in that context. He is never just in a space, he is always planning something, assessing something.”

“Young.”

“Well… I…”

“You don’t care, do you?” George asked, tone too complex for Thom to understand.

He answered honestly, “No. I don’t think I do.”

“Be careful, Thom.” His back straightened though he remained leaning over.

“I don’t need you to pity me, George.”

“It’s not pity. It’s a warning. Be cautious.”

“Why did I even call you, Alanna?” He was smiling. She probably knew that.

“Because you sure as hell weren’t calling Jon about this and you have only so many friends.”

“Makes sense. Okay. I’m gonna go make breakfast. Have a good day.”

“You, too. Tell me… how it goes.”

“Shall do. Bye, George.”

“Bye, Thom.”

***

Roger had put on a shirt, and was tying his hair back, still standing on the staircase. "Morning,” he said with a sleepy smile.

Thom approached him carefully, not quite sure what to expect. "Morning.” Roger stepped down and kissed him until his heart raced and his knees were weak. "Morning," Thom repeated as Roger pulled back, and the man chuckled, kissed the corner of his mouth. He was too aware of his own body and his own existence and Roger’s presence in his home. He hid his face in Roger's chest (hoping that it came across as a hug rather than an attempt at finding sanctuary), and felt the worn cotton, soft on his cheek. "How did you sleep?” he asked, words muffled.

Roger stroked his hair, so natural in the motion Thom could have believed they’d been doing this for years. "Well. And you?”
"Good." He felt small, thought of Alanna's stature against George's, and how safe she must feel but how vulnerable, and how fragile she looked. "Are you hungry?" He pulled back just enough so he could look up at Roger’s face. “I... didn't go grocery shopping yesterday, I don't know if I have anyth--"

"Let's go out."

"I-- like a date?"

"Like a date."

Thom blushed, turned his head away. "I-- cool."

"Oh my god, you're adorable." Roger tilted his head up and kissed him, hands pushing up the sides of his shirt. Thom's hands instinctively curled into the fabric of Roger's shirt as his skin turned to goose-bumps. He felt so small, and too hot, but Roger's fingers rested against the base of his spine, and his stomach turned with butterflies and he didn't even have to fight to get the fear from his mind.

***

They detached themselves from each other eventually, Thom going to shower in an attempt to hide how out of breath he was. Kissing was so peculiar. His lips felt like they were buzzing. Logically, putting an open mouth on someone else's shouldn't be pleasurable at all, but he was covered in goose-bumps and felt warm and like his heart was going to race out of his chest - which again, in theory, shouldn't be pleasant either, he thought. He dressed in the bathroom, dried his hair, brushed his teeth again. Roger entered the bathroom just as he left, both of them trapped in the doorframe. Eye contact was somehow worse than the whole kissing nonsense.

***

“When did you last get your shot?”

“Two weeks ago. Why?”

“Pitch.”

“I’m not a science experiment.”

“This is.” Roger kissed his cheek and rendered him useless.

***

“But you need to understand that you can not ethically equate sexuality to drug abuse--”

“What has ethics got to do with it?”

“Everything! If our generation’s LGBT+ media is defined by one arrogant, cishet man’s fetishisation, then--”

“We can only go up from there.”
“But if our standard is so low people take it as a queue to just go down, and not in any nice way.”

***

“You were crying last night.”

“Yeah, I had to break up with my boyfriend before you came. It was a mess, some cruel words were exchanged.”

“Should I be fearing for my safety?”

“Oh, absolutely. It’s Idaho, he’s got a gun.”

“I don’t know if you’re worth being shot.”

“Too bad, you’re stuck with me now.”

***

“Following up from your earlier impoliteness, as you would say it: I’ve been on T for too long for that type of change. I won’t be hitting any new notes, even for you.”

“What a betrayal.”

“What ever can I do to make it up to you?”

“Hm. Is that raincheckable, Mr. Trebond?”

“Considering you’ve been so agreeable, I suppose we’ve struck a deal, Mr. Conté.”

***

“You sang at Myles’s birthday party.”

“It was impromptu. I’m surprised you weren’t invited.”

“Oh, I was. The timing wasn’t workable. Does Alanna always deviate to Sixths when she’s improvving?”

“It’s a chronic issue. At least we’re both good at it, now.”

“You fucked up in the bridge of ‘Your Song’.”

“I did not!”

“You completely ruined--”

“Don’t say it.”

“--the chord progression’s integrity!”
“That was an artistic choice!”

“It was a bad one!”

***

“Kiss me?”

“Always.”

***

2.37

From: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)

I didn’t really expect my first date to be 15% hand holding, 15% coffee 20% hiding from people and 50% conversations about queer representation in early 2000s media.

2.40

To: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)

Thom that’s sort of adorable, though it pains me to say it. How are you feeling?

2.42

From: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)

I have been promoted to boyfriend. I’m slightly overwhelmed.

2.42

From: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)

And by ‘slightly’ I mean ‘on the verge of screaming’.

2.43

To: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)

Baby brother. <3

2.45

From: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)

Older than you, murderer, taller than you. What do you do with a boyfriend? Do you feed it? Pet it? Bring it treats? Will it scratch me like Faithful?
To: Thom Trebond (ICE 1)

Pretty much. That and the occasional nap. It shouldn't scratch you. If it does, scratch back very hard and send it to the pound.
"Fucking fight me!"

George glanced over Alanna’s shoulder to an email. "Alanna, he can’t hear you."

"He’s a fucking sinner, George, you have no fucking idea, there is no precedent for--" George kissed her swiftly. She kissed him in turn, tugged him down onto the couch. She was still scowling.

“You’re having time off, remember?” he said against her lips. The callouses on his hands from metalwork made her skin turn to goosebumps, and he dragged his hand through her hair, down her neck, settling on the small of her back.

“What have you been doing with Myles?” she asked after a little silence. He raised an eyebrow, and he went to make one of his beautifully formed lies, so she cut him off: “Oh, come on George, don’t look at me like that. Myles is the diplomat that the president goes to when he has no other choice because he’s so ashamed that he can’t figure out how Myles works. There’s a link there, your work and his.”

George looked quite chuffed. Alanna smacked his hand very lightly, and he stopped preening, instead meeting her eye to eye. “I’m being very law abiding.” She gave no response. “I haven’t been punched since July.”

“It’s only September! Most people don’t get punched all that often.” Neither of them mentioned the bruises she had on her from her work. They were different than the type George had.

“It’s comin’ close to a record for me.” She looked down at her hands. She felt far too vulnerable for her want for George’s safety. Protecting one another was always how they had worked, but never once limiting each other. She didn’t want to cross the line, but she couldn’t bare the thought of George being hurt. “You’re morally upstanding, Alanna, but I am good at this, and Myles is a brilliant man.”

“Don’t fall back into it, George.” She touched the scar at the base of his neck, curving into his shoulder. “We’ll employ you, you can speak to young men--” She was desperate.

“I don’t want to, Alanna. That’s not me.” She exhaled, glared at him. She knew it was true. “Trust me. Trust Myles. Neither of us are rash.”
Gruffly, she ran her hands through his hair, a silent concession. His lip quirked. “Come train with me. Your upper arm strength has gone down.”

“And you’ve stopped holding yourself properly,” he retorted. They both smiled, and Alanna tried to remember that this was how they’d built up their relationship, with solidarity, support, not with fear. George did the same.

***

alanna-trebond.tumblr.com

'Teenage Dream' - Glee Cast ft. Roger Conté and Thom Trebond

*Don’t tell them I posted this. However, you should tell Darren Criss they’re his biggest fans.*

***

"Take it down!"

"What?"

"The video, take it down!"

"Alright, fine. What, are you worried people will see you acting like a human for once?"

"You had no right to post that."

"Ah, yes, the omnipresent concept of ‘right’. He's my brother and I *thought* you wanted me to be your friend. Or did I mishear that under your insidious bullshit?"

"Just take it down!"

"It's gone! God, fucking chill, you dick! You didn't even touch him, there is nothing in this that implies that you're together."

"Bullshit."

"It's *gone*, Roger. It was only up for five minutes, I didn't tag you or anything so just-- have some fucking chill. "And question your already questionable morality if you're hiding a queer relationship after coming out of the closet in the name of fame."

"None of that is any of your *fucking* business, Alanna."

(Alanna has called Jon and has suggested that Roger is using Thom, and that he is a generally bad person)

“That’s silly, Alanna.”

“It’s not. Jon. Jon, listen to me, please--”
“Alanna, I know that you have issues with Roger, and that’s understandable. He stands for a lot of things that you don’t, but he’s a good man, okay? He won’t hurt Thom, he won’t hurt you.”

“Why don’t you listen to me?”

“I always do, and you’re usually right! But Roger’s like my brother. I know him, and anything you’re interpreting as a danger sign is probably just his coping mechanisms – same as with anyone.”

“I know danger signs when I see them.”

“Alanna. Talk to him. It’ll be fine. Really, I’m sure--”

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” Roger picked Thom up from his waist as if he weighed nothing. “You okay?” Thom just nodded as Roger backed him into the wall. His legs wrapped, almost instinctively, loosely around Roger’s. He wanted to hold onto something, but he felt frozen. Roger’s eyes were darker in the odd light, and he seemed to be waiting for Thom to act, to speak.

“Roger,” Thom whispered. That was all there was. Roger kissed him slowly, like he was trying to break Thom open and see his insides. Thom grasped onto his shoulders, weak-legged and hot and so vulnerable he felt like he could shatter at any given moment. Roger’s body was holding up Thom’s, so a hand lifted up his shirt, the other gripping the side of his neck. Thom was lost against Roger. His skin burned, he wasn’t sure where one ended and the other began.

He was distantly terrified. He could hardly breathe between kisses, hardly move but for desperately clinging to the man. Roger’s hips fit so perfectly against his own. He didn’t want to breathe if it meant stopping this.

***

"Alanna."

"What do you want?"

"You know how you persist that you're the older twin? Which makes you the mature and responsible one?"

"I wouldn't go that far. But yes."

"And you know how our father was an arse and he persisted that I murdered our mother?"

"Yes."

"It now falls to you to give me The Talk."
"Oh fuck. Thom."

"This is more uncomfortable for me than you."

"I think it's pretty close."

"There's only so much I'm willing to Google. I've spent too much time around politicians to think that the government isn't going through my search history."

"We had sex ed in school! You know about sex!"

"You took all of my sex ed classes and in return I did all of your English homework! I know the basics of this... stuff... but there are hardly resource pamphlets for trans guys or twenty-one year olds who have only ever kissed strangers and fell off a stage and got a concussion when propositioned for sex!"

"No. No, this is fine. I just... on one level you are the grown-up one. "Thom, we've had plenty of awkward conversations. Sit down."

"I'm sorry."

"Shut up." "What has... prompted this?"

"Well." "Um." "Roger and I were kissing, and... and I... I don't know, Alanna, I've never been in a relationship before. I don't know the... protocol."

"There isn't any. Not really. Continue."

"We were kissing, and I think he was... hard... and... fuck. Alanna. I just don't know what the protocol is! Or what you're supposed to say! Or do!"

"He didn't hurt you in any sense of the word?"

"No, not at all. I... um. He was kissing my neck, and he was, um, pushing against me."

"Grinding."

"Yes, that."

"And?"

"I..."

"You came?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, sweet virgin." "Was he unpleasant about it? Thom, you do masturbate, I know you do."

"Yes, I do. I don't think he... knew."

"Did he?"
"I don't think so. His phone rang a few minutes after that."

"I think you'd know if he had."

"I don't know how to talk about anything relating to sex."

"It's hard to talk about. You know the basic mechanisms of sex, Thom; what is it you want to know?"

"How to talk about it. I'm struggling to talk to you, let alone him."

"And as a trans guy you feel it will be more difficult for you because your body is different from most?"

"Yeah."

"On one level you have to make sex more... normal, but on another level, you need to unsexualise it. You need to go 'yes, this is normal, we're together, lots of people have sex or alternatives to sex, why is it a big deal?', but at the same time you have to go 'this is just like... talking about maths'."  "Everyone was a virgin at some point, stay quiet. Sex becomes easier to initiate and communicate about as time goes on and the more partners you have. I think it's fairly clear that both of you are... sexually attracted to each other. That clears up part of it. The fact that you're in a relationship helps."

"But how am I supposed to say 'I have never had sex before and I'm scared that if you put your penis anywhere near my vagina my man-card will be revoked'?"

"You could just say that." "You also don't have to have penetrative sex, you know. People are intimate in a lot of other ways."

"But I don't... know what I want, with him. I... I like kissing him. And... the other stuff. But I guess that he's going to want... more. And I think I do. But I don't know... what. And how to talk about it! I'm good at talking! I talk too much! I talk about politics with ease! I can talk about existentialism and fatalism! But--"

"Thom. Stop freaking out. You're okay." "There's no deadline. You don't have to do anything with him. No-one ever has to, and we've built up this pressure around the term 'virgin' that implies once you've actually had sex suddenly every thing's clear, you know how to communicate, you're an expert, and until then you're worthless. While I respect the sentiment of virginity not meaning anything societally everyone has a first time for everything they've ever done, and everything is different circumstance to circumstance."

"But what if I'm... wrong?"

"If he is going to judge you if you're not an automatic pro at sex then he's not worth this thought process. And if you're judging yourself for not knowing how to have sex without any communication then you're just stupid." "There are no sexual encounters without communication, Thom, it's not an inherent skill. No-one is born with the talent of deep-throating or stripping someone with one hand." "You need to make it clear that you've not had sex before. Give him the room to talk to you about it. If you say 'I've never had sex, and I don't know how I want to approach this relationship, physically, particularly because I'm trans', give him room to say 'okay,
cool, well, how about we talk about what you don't want? And in the meantime, I don't like doing x, y, or z'. It needs to be both ways. If you give him the room to be honest with you it will be easier for you."

"But he's... beautiful, and has had sexual partners, and I sort of forget how to talk when he kisses me."

"Don't talk about it while he's kissing you. Or at least not at first. Sit down, like I said, more clinically, and go 'okay, here's an issue'. If he's had any kind of non-one-night-stand relationship, he'll have hopefully had that conversation." "I can't promise that it's going to be perfect, and not-awkward, and you're going to come to a mutual conclusion, but it's better than just hoping for the best." "Buy condoms well in advance, even if you end up never using them. Get latex free ones, again, just in case. And if he says he doesn't like them, make it very clear that you won't fuck him if he doesn't use one. And I personally think it's a conspiracy theory, but it doesn't matter which sets of genitals are getting involved, you need lube."

"I'm nervous."

"That's normal. But if you actually feel scared, or you can't say 'stop' or 'pause' or 'slow down', then break it off. Or at least wait until you feel safe to do so. Don't give a blow-job if you're going to perform the next day. Get an STI test, and get him to, as well, as early on as possible. I don't know what the... science is with trans men, but if you have vaginally penetrative sex it's always best to urinate within ten minutes after you're done, just so you don't risk a UTI."

"I don't think I want to do that yet. I haven't had a period in years, but just... until I've had the hysterectomy."

"And if he doesn't understand that punch him in the face. Or get me to. I'm totally happy to punch him in the face."

(George enters)

"Hey, George."

"Thom. What's happened, is something wrong?"

"I'm giving Thom The Talk, that's why he looks like he's dying."

"Thanks, Alanna, your respect for my privacy is appreciated."

"Oh, nice. Do you need pamphlets?"

"I don't need pamphlets."

"George, give him advice, I'm out."

"If a guy doesn't pay enough attention to your clock - clit and cock, I'm a fucking genius - just knee him in the gut. Try to avoid the balls."

"Thank you, George, that's insightful."
George @ Alanna: "Have you talked about lube?"

Alanna: "I've talked about lube."

George: "They sell glow in the dark lube at the chemist."

Thom: "That's not really a standard part of The Talk, I'm sorry, you've been eliminated from the show."

Alanna: "I thought this was your first version of The Talk."

Thom: "I'm sure that glow in the dark lube isn't standard. "How much pain is standard?"

Alanna: "Pain?" "There shouldn't be pain, not in the way that you mean. Soreness, yes, discomfort, yes, sharp jabs of pain, but not the debilitating type you're thinking."

Thom: "But isn't penetration—"

George: "Baby, have you ever fingered yourself?" "Vaginal or anal, penetration shouldn't hurt enough to limit your motion, or to feel anywhere near intolerable, whoever is receiving isn't there as a receptacle for cock, they're a sexual partner."

Thom: "I know that, but--"

Alanna: "It's a myth of the patriarchy that says the first time you're penetrated it should hurt like all hell. If you're relaxed enough, prepped enough, you'll be uncomfortable, sore for the next day, but not in severe pain. Some people lose blood. I did, as a physical reference point, and a substantial amount. Jon wasn't particularly careful, though, it's not a surprise. I still bleed sometimes. But testosterone will have changed your body, it'll be different than mine now, I guess."

George: "If there's more pain than say... a moderate bruise healing, as another reference point, then some thing's wrong. It's a different kind of pain anally than vaginally, as I understand it, but the bruise metaphor is generally a good one."

Alanna: "And nothing should happen before fingering."
content warning: a couple talking about sexual boundaries; semi-explicit sex scene

this is also where there are plot inconsistencies coming through - thom is still talking about being enrolled in university as in an earlier version of the narrative he stayed to finish his degree.

(Thom and Roger have shared a bed for the first time but there has been no sexual contact. Alanna has been feeling unethical about not telling Thom how much of a piece of crap Roger is.)

There was a silent agreement made to doze when they realised they were both awake. Roger's head was tucked into the crook of Thom's shoulder, arms loosely wrapped around him. Roger's hair was soft, and smelled like coconut oil. A laugh grew in his chest, the cliché of his beautiful boyfriend with coconut oil in his hair prompting a warmth he couldn't quite explain. Roger hummed like a question mark, eyes opening just a little to look up at Thom, who kissed his forehead. "Morning," Roger said, voice scratchy with sleep.

"Morning." The bed was huge for Thom on his own, but with Roger it was cramped, and his back slotted in against the wall.

Roger stretched out a little, and the blankets fell away. It was cold in the open air, and Thom fumbled to pull the blankets back up. There were a series of awkward laughs and jerky motions as Roger pulled Thom and the blankets on top of him. They were quiet for a long time, breathing each others' air and fumbling into a position comfortable for both of them. "Did you know your eyes look almost purple when your pupils are blown?" Thom asked, voice cracking. He was tracing the lines of Roger’s face with his hands, as gentle as he knew to be.

“Your eyes are purple no matter your pupils,” Roger reminded him, kissing his fingertips as they drifted over his lips. “I feel like it shouldn't surprise you.” Thom laughed quietly, pushing Roger’s hair back. It flared around his head like a dark cloud.

“You know you’re beautiful.” Thom’s words were murmured just a few inches from Roger’s face. His hair was like a curtain. Roger didn’t break eye contact. He didn’t nod. He didn’t need to – it wasn’t a question, it was a fact. Thom kissed each of his cheeks, then his lips, their skin clinging to one another’s naturally. “You are beautiful,” Thom said. It didn’t need to be said. He wanted to say it, though, so he did, and Roger kissed him in thanks.

(Time over the day has passed)
"I don't... want to have vaginally penetrative sex, at least until after my hysterectomy."

"Okay."

"I'm sure there are some great jokes in there somewhere but I still sort of want to hide under the table."

"Your comfort and consent are what's most important, Thom. I'm not going to dump you for that."

"Thanks."

"I've never had sex, or... anything, with a trans guy before. And it can't be the same across the board, for all trans guys. It's important that you talk to me, I'll listen. Of course I will."

"Okay." "I've never had sex. At all. Or... anything."

"At all?"

"I got really drunk at a gay bar once and kissed a guy for two very uncomfortable minutes. That's it."

"Are you okay with what we're doing?"

"I'd tell you if I wasn't." "Are you okay with what we're doing?"

"Yes." "I don't want to do anything wrong by you."

"You won't. I just... wanted to talk about it, rather than... assume, and fuck something up."

"I like you, Thom," Roger said. "I don't think you'll fuck something up. We're good. We're really good."

"Yeah. Yeah we are."

"What do you think you are comfortable with?"

"I... I don't know. Can you tell me what you're comfortable with, and we can work from there?"

"I'm fine with most things. I... I like intimacy, I like sex. I'm not solely invested in penetration, vaginal or anal, but I like both. I have no prominent fetishes or kinks, but I'm inclined to being quite dominant."

"I don't... I don't think I have any issue with anything anal, and in the long term I think... vaginal penetration will be fine. It's just the dysphoria that makes the concept confronting. I... what do you..." Thom hid his face in his hands, then looked up at the ceiling, before centreing his gaze on Roger. "What do you expect my body to be like?"

"I have no strong expectations. I have surmised you've had top surgery, so scars on your chest. You're thin, so probably prominent ribs and hipbones. I'm not going to have an issue with your genitalia, Thom."
"I... really?"

"I'm pretty sure." "How are you feeling?"

"Terrified."

"We don't have to... anything you don't want to, Thom. Petrifying anxiety isn't my idea of a fun night, nor should it be yours."

"I want to... I just..."

"Breathe." Roger pulled his hands away from his face and kissed him gently.

"I'm being a child, I'm sorry."

"No, you're being a virgin; there's a substantial difference. Everything we do, there was a first time for it. First times are scary." "You opened this conversation, which I appreciate, because I would have anyway. It's good to talk through this, Thom, without shame." "And anything you don't want to do we won't." "And... I don't want to be pitying, or condescending, but in my understanding of gender dysphoria it seems like a huge conversation to have under taken." "We're good, okay? We're good."

"We're good," Thom confirmed. Roger kissed him, hands resting on his cheeks, thumbs gentle in rotations over his jaw. Thom smiled against his lips.

***

Having turned on the heater Roger had no reason to put his shirt back on. Thom laughed at him, in a t-shirt and his underpants and a blanket on the couch, recited paragraph after paragraph of 'The Picture of Dorian Gray'. Thom had textbooks in lap, and did indeed try to study when he could pull his eyes from Roger. He seemed part of the house, pale skin and dark hair, sharp bones and a resonant voice that seemed to converse with itself in its tone, back and forth through the house.

"There is too much of myself in the thing, Harry! Too much of myself!" Roger proclaimed, his eyes glimmering.

"Poets are not so scrupulous as you are!" Thom called back, putting on his haughtiest expression. "They know how useful passion is for publication. Nowadays a broken heart will run to many editions." Roger clambered onto the couch beside him, tossed the books aside, until he was pressed against the armrest.

"I hate them for it. An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life in them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography." Thom's breath had been pulled from his chest, replaced by Roger's breath ghosting over his face. His hands took their place on Roger's hips, holding his gaze as best he could. "We have lost the abstract sense of beauty. Some day I will show the world what it is; and for that reason the world shall never see my portrait of Dorian Gray."

"I think you are wrong, Basil," Thom recited. He fought his way into memory, into the countless rereads of the novel, but Roger was before him, indeed like a portrait, too perfect and too strong in
"But I won't argue with you," he said, trying to draw back, to tease. Roger's lips quirked upwards. "It is only the intellectually lost that ever argue. Tell me, is Dorian Grey very fond of you?"

"He likes me. I know he likes me." Roger dropped all pretence and kissed him with unforgivable heat. The blanket was gone from between them in moments, Roger's hands between his thighs in seconds.

Thom could only follow the motion of Roger's hands, his eyes not once leaving Roger's. He tried to bite back the sounds he could feel building in his throat, his stomach, but Roger's hands seemed to know his body, pulled helpless moans and gasps from him. "No-one's around," Roger breathed against his lips. "No-one can hear you." Thom hid his face in Roger's shoulder. His cheeks were hot, but not quite like the skin of Roger's throat, the burn of his hands on him. "No-one can hear you but me, Thom." He let out a soft moan, and Roger pulled him closer, kissed his shoulder, sucked a deep, dark hickey into his flesh, until he cried out, shaking and limp-limbed.

Roger kissed his throat slowly and gently, open-mouthed, as Thom's shaking slowed. "Definitely not a cactus," Roger whispered, and it took a long moment for Thom to realise what he was talking about. He chuckled and carded his hands through Roger's hair. Roger rested his weight against Thom, who kissed him with all the care he could. He was embarrassed with the sweat on his hands, but Roger reciprocated in kind.

Thom undid Roger's jeans with some difficulty, but they were eventually discarded to the end of the couch. Roger sucked on Thom's fingers, and somehow managed to make it seem not at all disgusting, instead leaving him red and shaky again. He fumbled, intermittently asking 'is this okay?'. Roger guided him, giggling with Thom's uncertainty, kissing him as if there were nothing in the world he'd rather do. Roger's heart fluttered under his skin; Thom could feel it even from his lower ribs. He understood in a rush the order to make noise, be heard, as Roger's lips parted to soft moans and gasps.

They lay together on the couch, blanket brought over them. Thom knew that it really should feel unpleasant, dried sweat and all, but he couldn't bear the thought of moving. Roger kept murmuring Oscar Wilde quotes, interjected with kisses to Thom's throat or collarbones. His fingers danced over his torso, hips to ribs to scars. Thom didn't mind, really, the way his scars were being touched, noticed. He didn't feel terrified to be naked, either. There were moments, yes, but he wanted to keep Roger close, wanted passion, wanted the experience of his body being his friend, not foe.

Roger was too tall for the couch, and they were horribly cramped, but they were warm and had found a space that worked for both of them. "Is that your goal? Live on, in youth and beauty, forever?" Thom asked, voice scratchy.

"Hm. Not... not that simply. I want to... know everything I can about that which I'm interested in, and be able to employ it. I want to... influence people, have them listen to me. I think I'm relevant. I know I'm attractive. I want to stay that way for as long as I can, without turning to the unhealthy prolonging or enhancing of life that would now come to botox, faked suicides ala 'Velvet Goldmine', and being one hundred and ten years old with nothing to say or do that's new, not a magicked portrait. As you know, I think extending life is important, but not at the cost of practicality." Roger kissed his collarbone, before bruising it. Thom hummed, kept his hands in Roger's hair.

"We should shower," he said.
"I'll stay here for a bit," Roger said. "I'm warm. But you go."

Thom brought him a glass of water with a kiss to his cheek. Roger gripped his hand and kissed his lips.

(Thom has a shower and comes back to the piano while Roger showers)

"Hey, can you come here for a minute? Sing this?"

"Which sound?"

"'Ah' will do nicely."

Thom fumbled with the loop pedal and the keyboard, but had his violin in hand in seconds. "There'd be a cello under here," he said, again interjecting an arpeggiated chord on the piano in a pause of the violin. "Functioning almost like a walking bass line." "Can you go up the octave?" Roger scowled and nodded. "Change into an 'e'." "Keep going on 'e' as I come in."

"How long have you been working on that?"

"Since you were in the shower," Thom said.

"I... don't like you."

"Thank you, I'll take that as high praise. Criticisms?"

"I don't like the change in tempo. I think it needs to stay steady. I assume the piano part wouldn't be blocked?"

"No, I need more hands than I have."

(many hours of composition later)

"I think we just orchestrated 'The Picture of Dorian Grey'," Roger said. "What time is it?"

"Almost ten." "I... don't think I've ever been this productive in my life."

"I doubt that. But it's not productivity until you've cleaned up."

"Stop being responsible, it's an appalling trait." "What do you want for dinner?"

"I don't mind."

"I'll see what I have...." "We can go out, if you'd like. It's getting a bit late, though." Roger hugged him from behind. His face got hot, but he tried to think through it, ignore him. "Do you want to just order something?"
Roger nodded, the motion transferring oddly into Thom’s body.

Thom was curled around himself on the couch, typing rapid-fire. "Babe, what's the area of study pertaining to the psychological effect of music?"

"Isn't it just 'music psychology'?"

"Huh. There should be a more formal title."

"If you're only referring to it briefly that should be fine." "Are your citations in--?"

"A sick, twisted conglomeration of APA and Harvard? Yes." "Working out in-text is tedious, to say the least." Roger pulled the laptop onto his knees, leaning against Thom. "My professor is finicky."

"Which unit is this for?"

"Study of popular culture's endless chain of influence with society."

"Hence your strong feelings about Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

“Oh, those are always there, just below the surface.”

"Fix this paragraph."

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's two sentences and half a page. Some of the nominal groups are a bit..."

"Superfluous?" "Yes, sir."

"Thanks, babe." Thom only then realised what he'd said, and blushed a furious pink.

***

rogerconte posted to instagram

[image]

#jesuschristsuperstar

not a question i ever thought id need to ask but WHOSE THIGHS ARE THOSE ON ROGERS?

those are some thoroughly tangled limbs

@deliaeldorne is that you?

no way, delia's legs are much finer

i don't think so, she's muscley

those are male legs. @thomtrebond is my best bet

it might be @jonathanconte?
they're COUSINS??????!

yes and we've seen them hug and like cuddle before now, why not? they're family

This is 'will he won't he' with @thomtrebond AND @deliaeldorne AND @alextirragen. It's a publicity thing, don't kid yourselves.

Those legs are too broad to be Delia's.

Roger has a show in KY in two days, and Thom's in Idaho. Delia's in LA, Jon's in DC, Roger's crew is probably with him - near KY.

***

"You're such an arse," Thom mumbled against Roger's throat. "You'll be trending within two hours."

"Damn right."

"Clever." "Do you want some help?"

***

thomtrebond posted to instagram

[image]
Is this where the kids these days would say '#aesthetic'?

that's the same wallpaper as the photo @rogerconte just posted!!

yeah, along with every second house in the country.

aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh what is their ship name i need to knooooooow this is too muccccccccccccccccceech

I think people are going with Rhom, Conbond, or Trente?

those are all equally horrible and wonderful.

     I KNOW, it's so bad. Some people are calling them 'lilac' which is sort of cute, but too vague.

     that's their eye colours oh my god.

this is the most cliche date ever known to man.

That's Thom's house, I can say that much. You can see it in most of his videos. idk about Roger's post, it's too unclear. Like the lights are off and the screen's colour is more dominant than the natural lighting or wallpaper.
(Thom is going on tour with Roger. Alanna is trying to convince him, very gently, not to go.)

"I'll be back soon. You're busy, anyway. It'll be fine."

"I'm worried about you."

"I'll be singing. And I'll be fine."

"He's... he's got a bigger fanbase than you, a lot of people will know. And know that you're trans."

"Unlike us he has a personal bodyguard and full security teams."

"Are you two going to... come out together?"

"Not right now, no. Things are still... new. We're focussing on the music."

"He's using you." "Thom, Thom, you know he is."

"Even if he is there's nothing I can do about it that isn't detrimental. My following has increased substantially, I've written some incredible music with him. I've... felt better about my body, and being trans with another person. I'm learning a lot, musically, socially. We edit each others' essays, Alanna. I don't want to..."

"Fuck. I don't want to hold you back. Even really from him. I want you to be okay, be safe."

"I am."

"You're taking things so, so fast with him."

"I am."

"Has he been respecting you in terms of sex?"
"Yeah. We talked for a long while. We've... done stuff. Nothing... serious, I guess."

"Everything is serious when it comes to intimacy."

"Then yes, we've been horribly intimate, ripped down to our very souls and bones by each others' burning passion."

"You're horrible." "Break a leg. I guess."

"Once more, with feeling!"

"Break a leg!" "Also break his if necessary."

"Absolutely."

"And cover the hickeys that're under your ear, and on your neck, if you want to maintain any pretence."

"They're that obvious?"

"Invest in a mirror and some concealer. Make sure it matches the skin of your neck, not your hand, and blend it, even if it's just with a fingertip." "We're pale, Thom, hickeys are like red flags." "Don't forget to keep your back straight. Don't strain for the E, it's not worth it. If you try for an E minor on the seventh fret don't let the middle strings mute."

"You're wonderful. Good luck."

"Good luck."

(Thom and Roger are touring together. Roger has just wrapped the cord of his microphone around Thom's neck mid-performance - he seems to have been trying to trip Thom up in some way, or make him react negatively, over the course of the tour.)

While there were awkward exchanges, missed notes, there was never a moment with Alanna where he didn't know what to do. The cord wasn't tight, it didn't hurt, but it was hot and heavy on his shoulders. The only thing interfering with his playing was the disorientation itself, not the cord. He tried to breathe away from the mic, but Roger pulled the cord ever so slightly so that he had no choice but to look up at him. Roger was smirking, and his knees went weak.

He was quick unwinding the cord for the chorus, and Thom's hands shook as he turned back from the instrumental to chords.

(Roger is seemingly pissed at Thom. He asks Bella about it.)

"Is he pissed at me, or--?"
"You're matching him on stage, he's not used to that." "He likes you. I don't think he realised quite how good you are on stage, though."

"Huh."

(After the tour, from October 17th through December there is no contact between Roger and Thom - Thom's pretty devastated, but working hard on his own stuff anyway. A week before Thom's hysterectomy, a registrar at the hospital leaks the fact that he's having a hysterectomy to the press. Thom decides to sue him. Alanna is furious at him.)

"Thom, you're suing a med student. He didn't know any better."

"Yes, he did. He was functioning under a medical code of conduct that he shouldn't even need, to know that he shouldn't release patient's information to the press for financial gain."

"You're suing him for far more than he made."

"I don't care."

"He's been fired!"

"Good!"

"You don't need money, what are you thinking, Thom? Is this punishment?"

"That's precisely what it is. I'm punishing him, the law is punishing him, because he committed a crime, he did something wrong. So yes, I'm punishing him."

"You're ruining his life."

"I don't want my personal details floating around the internet, he didn't have any consideration for me."

"He's basically a child!"

"What am I, an old man? I'm twenty-one, he's twenty-six. I'm under his power, he held power over me, he abused it."

"It's a piece of paper, people assumed you'd had or were going to have a hysterectomy anyway."

"It's the principal of the thing! People can guess all they'd like, but it was more than just my name and 'getting a hysterectomy' on that piece of paper. Not only is it a violation of medical practices everywhere, it's a sign of institutional disrespect for trans people, and for people who put themselves in the public eye. I don't owe anyone anything."

"That's why you isolate yourself, yeah, I know, so you don't risk collateral damage and having to owe someone anything."
"I do not owe the world my medical information, and that boy does not deserve my mercy or forgiveness."

"What has it changed?"

"I feel vulnerable, Alanna. People are shoving their heads into my medical history, I've had to hire personal security for the hospital because people are planning to either come give me flowers and kisses on the cheek or a swift hate crime." "Look, can we not fight right now? I'm going to give all of the money to LGBT+ organisations, it's not personal gain but for my pride."

"Fine." "Look, I've got to go. I'll be there when you get out of surgery, the hospital has my details. But... I'll be there. I'll buy ice cream."

"I love you."

"I love you, too, loser."

(Thom has surgery - it goes fine, he's pretty blissed out about it.)

26th december

11.12

From: Roger Conté

How are you doing?

11.15

To: Roger Conté

i'm so high. pain killers are really great. i don't have a uterus. it's nice.

01.30

From: Roger Conté

I'm glad. When will you be released?

01.32

To: Roger Conté

two days. then i have to be on a drip for three. are you okay?
01.33

From: Roger Conté

I'm well, thank you. I'm in a recess from a meeting to get a contract for three more albums. A little tedious.

01.34

To: Roger Conté

you don't ask how i am unless some thing's wrong.

01.35

From: Roger Conté

You just got out of surgery, don't be silly.

01.36

To: Roger Conté

okay.

(4th january - Alanna is furious that Roger asked Thom to perform despite still being in recovery.)

01.32

To: Roger Conté

He is still attached to a drip and limping, Roger, I don't give a fuck what's good for your ticket sales, he's not performing.

01.32

From: Roger Conté
He can speak for himself.

01.34

To: Roger Conté

Yes, but you seem to want to rid him of that right too. He is too unwell. If you have any care for him at all you won't ask that he does this.

01.36

From: Roger Conté

Thanks, Alanna, your insight is astounding. You clearly know our relationship and his work drive so well.

01.40

To: Roger Conté

Get over yourself.
(Roger is being interviewed on a radio program.)

"How has your uncle reacted to your coming out?"

"Very kindly, and very graciously. He already knew. He was my father-figure growing up, after all. He's very much neutral about issues of gender and sexuality, and very respectful. Each individual's life is their life."

"There's been so much hate speech used against you, but so much of a positive response, too. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. I can't say I respect those who are homophobic or biphobic, but I've seen so much kindness come from me coming out."

"Thom? Oh, no, no. He's a lovely, lovely kid, but no. We're not together."

"Really?"

"Really."

"I mean, apart from his jumping to your defence on social media haven't you spent the past few months intermittently staying with him?"

"No, we've collaborated a few times. We're friends. As said, lovely kid, not..."

"Your type?"

"Quite."

"That stunt in Dakota was quite something."

"Well, we're performers. I don't think that my performances always reflect the truth of the matter. And that's just the way it is as a performer, part of you will always have to be a character."
really happy that Thom has had more focus granted to him since performing with me. He was really... underappreciated, considering just how incredible he is. Look, 'stunts' like the one in Dakota are part of performing, building a story, and sometimes stories interweave with reality. Not always."

"Is there someone special in your life?"

"Well, that would be telling."

"Male or female?" "Conté has just shrugged very, very casually folks, so I think that's a good place to end. Roger Conté, thank you so much for coming and talking to us, and congratulations on coming out."

"Thank you so much for having me."

***

(Thom has yet to hear about the interview. He and Alanna have been fighting about basic ethical things, particularly around cheating and human responsibility to each other. Alanna has stormed out, calling Thom selfish and uncaring.)

01.41
From: Roger Conté

Are you going to be okay to perform on the sixteenth?

02.50
To: Roger Conté

Yes, of course.

04.04
From: Roger Conté

I'll send through the contract. 5 am, Ready, and Take Me to Church - all good?

04.06
To: Roger Conté

Sure.

04.36
From: Roger Conté

I'll take the piano, you on guitar?

04.38
To: Roger Conté

I would rather take the piano, if that's okay. Standing still hurts.

04.39
From: Roger Conté

Okay.

***

ameliaconte tweeted: roger says he and thom aren't dating. :( [link]

***

ROGER CONTÉ DENIES RUMOURS OF RELATIONSHIP WITH THOM TREBOND

***

aliatrebond tweeted: @ameliaconte it seemed so certain?? i’m so disappointed.

***

conté and eldorne, very, very together!

'Home Away From Home' star Delia Eldorne and Roger Conté caught mid-kiss!

***

ameliaconte tweeted: i think they are though. i think everything with delia eldorne is a stunt. thom DID just get out of surgery and he's unwell.

***

RECENTLY BISEXUAL ROGER CONTÉ STEPS INTO RELATIONSHIP WITH DELIA ELDORNE???
@ameliaconte @aliatrebond: i don't think they can deny it?? at all??

@ameliaconte: i think roger cheated on thom tbqh? it seems more than likely considering who he is.

@aliatrebond @ameliaconte: you guys are the reason real couples are scared to come out. they're not your property.

ameliaconte tweeted: everyone saying roger cheated: that's ridiculous, he's spoken about against infidelity sooo much.

(Thom finds out about both the interview and Roger's infidelity via Twitter. Delia also messages Thom privately being actively transphobic and invasive about his sex life with Roger.)

12.12
From: Roger Conté

I'm sorry, Thom.

04.15
From: Roger Conté

Don't ignore me. I'm sorry. If you want to end it then fine, but please don't ignore me.

04.17
To: Roger Conté

I don't want to end it. I also don't want to talk to you right now.

04.19
To: Roger Conté

Please tell me if there are any changes in the plan for the concert on the sixteenth. I've sent the signed contract through to Alex.

04.20
From: Roger Conté

Okay.

04.21
To: Roger Conté

I would appreciate it if you don't speak about me on air again. Or to Alex or Eldorne, for that matter. And we're not doing 'Ready'. Put in 'Yellow Brick Road' instead.

04.23
From: Roger Conté

I didn't speak to Delia, Thom.

04.24
To: Roger Conté

The rest of it?

04.27
From: Roger Conté

Fine.

***

(Alanna has showed up at Thom's place with a lot of ice cream in hand. Thom opens the door looking like hell.)

"What? Come to tell me I deserved it?"

"I wanted to say I'm sorry! And I'm sorry about Roger, too."

"Yeah, well, you love being right, don't you?"

"Not like this."

"Just leave me alone."

"Stop being a brat." "Let's watch Glee."

(They eat lots of ice cream and watch Glee.)

Alanna: "What is it with Contés and Delia?"
Thom: "She is gorgeous, they're gorgeous."

"Yes, but she's also the scum of the earth. "At least now we can both be bitter about her. Sit in the corner and watch her flirt with Roald, her next victim, gossip about how tacky her dress is."

"So our style. "Is this genetic? Both of our boyfriends nicked, by the same girl."

"I don't think 'boyfriend' is an applicable term."

"You were together."

"I... yeah, I guess. We were friends, plus sex, plus... weird emotions."

"You talked about getting married."

"You heard that?"

"Yeah. I didn't want to bring it up."

"Oh my god. "We were seventeen and eighteen, we didn't mean--"

"You meant it. "You were going to get married, as soon as possible, and save the world together. Maybe kids, in at least ten years. Right?"

"Right. "We still want to save the world together. "I love him, so much. So, so much."

"I know. "He dumped you for Delia?"

"It was complex. He had been fucking Delia since she, you, and I were fifteen, and she's... enticing. It was only that year that they weren't on and off again - with sex, I mean. I... I think he cast some expectation on me regarding study, just before he graduated, that I would be... be his 'high school girlfriend', and horribly pine. It started as a joke, but he started getting possessive around George, and around anyone he hadn't approved of. I told him I wasn't his property. He... took that as that I had stopped wanting that future with him, and promptly invited Delia into his bed. It ended pretty quickly."

"Did you punch him?"

"No, I don't believe that's the right response. It sounds cathartic, but it's abuse, it's wrong. I..."

"Why are you still friends with him?"

"Because we were kids. He didn't mean to imply he owned me, of course he didn't. He was scared of losing me. Because we still love each other. If... if either of us came up to the other and went, 'I would like to marry you, and spend the rest of my life with you', the other would... likely say 'yes'. Even if it meant hurting George, or Thayet. We don't need to, though, we're going to... going to save the world together. We're... fuck, I don't like this word, it's vulgar, but we're soulmates. And by that, I mean we will fight for each other a thousand times over, and be happy to do so."

"Gross. "How did you reconcile? How do I not know this?"
"You had started T, you were caught up in uni and school. Let's be honest, we both were. I don't think anyone knows all that. I didn't talk about it. I just cried a lot."

"It was horrific."

"Well, he graduated, he started uni... his Mum got sick, do you recall? Pneumonia. He text me one night, something really inane, I think it was like, 'I saw a ginger getting kicked today and thought of you', with a startling lack of abbreviations, and... we were fine. We talked about it almost a year later. We both admitted to being flawed."

"But mainly him. He's the one who fucked up."

"True." "Do you want more ice cream?"

"Yes. God yes."

“Alanna?”

“Yeah?”

“When... Jon and I were yelling at each other a few months back, I told him that when you two broke up you cried for weeks. I said to him that it wasn’t the cute crying, sitting around in your underwear eating ice-cream and watching rom-coms. It was the gut-wrenching, debilitating crying that makes your throat ache for weeks.” “This is an underwear and eating ice-cream break up.”

“Damn right.”

***

**Water Under the Bridge – Adele cover - Conté**

January 10 by ContéOfficial

***

*(Thom goes and busks for the first time since before meeting Roger. He considers hooking up with one of his fans out of spite, and decides against it because of his dysphoria.)*

**Thom Trebond – Don’t/Cry Me A River**

**01/10/16 – Thom Trebond Full Set**

**Closer Than Far – Thom Trebond live**

**Thom Trebond performs Stutter by Darren Criss**
Don’t/Cry Me a River Thom Trebond

Thom Trebond – Don’t/Cry Me a River LIVE

Thom Trebond: Heaven on Their Minds

***

#ThomTrebond does anyone else get the impression he’s sort of… really pissed off?
REALLY pissed off.
#HesitantGinger just dropped the ultimate break up playlist. thanks babe feel better soon

#ThomTrebond just slapped #RogerConte in the face and it’s my favourite thing in the entire world
the fucking SASS

@y’all if you honestly think Conte didn’t cheat on Thom you’re fooling yourself. [link] [link] [link]

@HESITANTGINGER SAVAGE AF

***

11th January

(Alanna and Thom)

"You're trending on twitter."

"Really? Why?"

"The 'Don't'-‘Cry Me a River' mash-up. At least five people have posted videos. People are praising
the musicality, the audience participation, and the emotional power, then in the corner there are
those wondering if it was fixated on Roger."

"Huh. Cool." "I only did a half hour."

"Yes, when you shouldn't have done any."

"I missed two. I always do Sundays. And I missed so many last year."

"I'm sure you and your fans will live."

"But Alanna, I have such poor self-esteem..."

"About gender, and basically nothing else."

"Sometimes I just wish I could hide away from the world..."

"Here, have a self esteem boost. Online, in your house, basically alone, I will note. 'Despite
impeccable technique and a beautiful voice Thom Trebond has seemed almost emotionally stunted,
like he can't feel what he's singing - in love songs or break up songs, in particular. Which fits, in a
man vastly overqualified for his age – his voice was always beautiful.' Skipping over that part...
'Finally, his musicality is matched by his emotion. Absolute chills. The audience participation,
"I was motivated beforehand, thank you."

"But now that you've broken up with him, you've had the--"  

"I haven't. Broken up with him."

"What?"

"Don't, Alanna."

"Thom, he—"

"You cheated on George with Coram. Don't even try to frame it otherwise. I don't give you relationship advice, please... don't."

'Despite impeccable technique and a beautiful voice Thom Trebond has seemed on the verge of emotionally stunted, like he can't quite feel what he's singing - in contemporary love songs or break up songs, in particular. Which fits, in a man vastly overqualified for his age – his voice was always beautiful. Last year he toured with Roger Conté, and is set to tour again - somewhere along that trip a passionate, emotionally raw, adult Thom Trebond came out from under the woodworks.

Disregarding any rumours of a relationship with Conté, Trebond has come into his own. Finally, his perfect musicality is matched by his emotion. Absolute chills. The audience participation, considering being in a park, is unbelievable, and his voice carried so well, even through the highest notes and the breathless ones.

My say? Watch out for Thom Trebond.'

06.19
To: Roger Conté
Alanna will be performing with me for my first number.

06.45
From: Roger Conté
An extra person isn't in your contract.

07.13
To: Roger Conté
We will show up, she's not asking for payment, this isn't a question. You are sold out because of
me, I am bringing her in.

07.19
From: Roger Conté

This isn't your show, you can't make that call.

07.23
To: Roger Conté

I just did.

Three missed calls from: Alexander Tirragen
Seven missed calls from: Roger Conté

08.26
To: Roger Conté

'You and Alanna are incredibly talented. Your voices work perfectly together.' - you, not two months ago. It's one song, I have five, you have twenty, get over yourself.

08.29
From: Roger Conté

You don't call the shots here. Just talk to me.

08.31
To: Roger Conté

Didn't I just say that I already have? That contract specifies nothing, it says 'act', she is under my insurance, and you have no protest against her performing, you just don't like that I can make my own decisions and have my own power.

Three missed calls from: Roger Conté

(As he has recovered, Thom arranges and announces his first solo concerts, deliberately choosing dates that cross over with dates Roger is performing.)

THOM TREBOND: LIVE UNDERGROUND

Transgender musician Thom Trebond has announced his premiere live shows: two concerts in Idaho, and two in New York.

Idaho: 23rd and 24th of January (for more details go here)
New York: 16th and 18th February (for more details go here)
(Outside the venue before the show they are doing together, Roger and Thom automatically start yelling at each other as soon as they're in private.)

Roger: "You're such a bitch, shows on all of my nights--!"

Thom: "If you ever use that word against anyone again, I swear to god I will ruin you, Roger." "I have my own life, and a hell of a lot of artists have shows on those nights. They were the first openings in each venue. I'm just as good as you, I'm not on tour, these are one-offs. I'm allowed to do my own music."

"You don't have to start rumours and stab me in the back!"

"You cheated on me, Roger! I trusted you, I let you into my life and my music and body, if you want back-stabbing look at yourself!"

"If my leaving you would prompt some contentedness, then you--"

"Shut up, Roger!" "Stop with the petty, 'innocent' mind-games. I know your shit better than that, I'm on pain killers that work as depressants, I'm in substantial amounts of pain, and I need to stay as calm as fucking possible for this performance, which I repeat, sold out as soon as I signed on! Just leave it."

It was like a switch flicked, Roger's shoulders untensed, he looked smaller, his sneer shifted with a wrinkled brow and soft fall of his lips. It was anger turning to heartache, and Thom was both impressed and infuriated with how smooth a transition it was. It was too quick, it wasn't real. He knew it. He imagined Alanna telling him off about falling for it - it was motivating.

"Please stay, after our numbers, Thom, we need to talk."

"And I need to go home and sleep."

"Please, Thom."

"Fine."

(Mid concert)

"That was an original song of ours called 'Dorian', and it will be coming out on iTunes on the first of February! Thom will be back right on this stage next weekend, for two shows, so either talk to the staff here or go to his website before tickets run out." (wow roger passive aggressive)

(Backstage, conversing with Alex, Thom is clearly in a lot of pain, but is still watching Roger perform.)
"Do you want some weed?"

"What?"

"Usually when performers are in pain they go with weed at a really low dosage."

"The term 'dosage' only applies when there's an actual medical measurement we're following."

"He deserves good treatment."

"I'm not doing this right now, Alex. And definitely not with you." "He fired Gillian because he cheated on me?"

"Yep." "Didn't want to upset you."

"Didn't want me to upset him, more like."

"He likes you, it's an honour. Why don't you get that?"

"It's not 'an honour' to be liked by someone. It's a basic, repetitive fact of life, whether rare for an individual or not. I owe him nothing based on the care he holds for me, Alex, I owe you just as little."

( The last song of Roger's set, very clearly aimed towards Thom. if I were cooler I would have just written a song, but if we're being honest it's just 'Everything You Are' by Ed Sheeran. It's piano and a full band rather than acoustic guitar though. Thom is moved. )

“And I’ve never played this before, so you’re the first audience to ever hear ‘You Are’. ”

“Goodnight, Boise!”

Thom leaned against the wall and watched Roger interacting with his crew, packing away equipment for several minutes. The crew, of course, did the work, as he shared moments or minutes with each of them, warm smile on his face. Each of them seemed to want him to stay with them. Still, they filtered away until Roger stood centre-stage, looking to Thom.

“Is this you trying out a 'Glee' moment?” he asked.

Roger shrugged. “Do you need a 'Glee' moment right now?” He glanced up and met Thom's gaze. His eyeliner had finally smudged. “I somehow feel that our situation requires a little more delicacy than Ryan Murphy would give us.” With that he took the three strides necessary to cross the stage, and took Thom up into his arms, hugged him tight.

Thom, on the tips of his toes, clutched at the back of Roger's disgustinglly sweaty shirt, tried to tear Roger's body heat from him and give him some fragment of the fierce affection – fierce hurt - coursing through him. His abdomen ached viciously, codeine aside, but he tried to lock the pain
away, into the box with padlocks that he liked so much.

Roger kissed his cheek very softly, his thumb just grazing the left side of Thom's jaw. “I'm sorry, Thom.”

Thom didn't quite know if he was supposed to speak. Roger held him by his waist, limited his motion, but he felt like he was held by his bone marrow, not his shirt. He was burning, and his recalcitrant heart rate couldn't be helped by breath. “I didn't mean to hurt you. I hope you know that.”

The pain-killers and the pain, and the sleep deprivation and the emotional hurt left a veil over his every motion and word. Everything felt thick, like emotion was nothing more than a dark cloud, ready with lightning.

“I hoped so.” Thom pulled back, stared out at the empty chairs and tables. They were just not-touching and his anger bubbled over without the compression of Roger's arms around him. “But you can't-- you can’t just sing at me and hope that I forgive you whenever you inevitably indulge in your own vanity and disregard the fact that other people have feelings, you pretentious douchebag! Honestly, there's a difference between plausible deniability and insulting and dishonouring me and the other people you've used to imply an image that your fans and the mass media will sell and approve of. I know that we both value media privacy and we haven't been together for all that long, but all you care about is yourself, your publicity. You have no idea what it means to feel used, do you? Don't act like you do, because we both know you're manipulative as the next celebrity, and I still trusted you with my doubt. I suppose that proves your skillset perfectly.”

He took a deep breath in, another, another, and sought for his own pulse in his wrist. “I'm different from the others, aren't I?” he asked, flushed as he heard his voice crack. He started shaking as Roger touched his shoulders and turned him around, but he didn't fight it. He was struck yet again by how beautiful Roger was, bitten lips and bright eyes and mussed hair. “I'm not going to let you use me, Roger, I'm not falling for it--”

“Of course you're different, Thom. Don't be stupid, you know better. I'm sorry, alright? I want to make it up to you, just... tell me how, Thom.” His breath shuddered, and Thom's eyes widened when he realised Roger was actually fighting tears. He'd never seen Roger fake crying, even verge on it. “I'm scared, too, Thom, okay! I've never felt so strongly about anyone as I do you. You know I didn't-- cheat, not in any way that matters, not in any non-physical way, and contrary to your belief, I know it was wrong anyway. I knew it would hurt you and I did it anyway.” Thom watched a single tear drop and stayed perfectly still. “I'm sorry, Thom.”

“Yeah.” Thom coughed a little and ducked his head, rubbed his eyes. “I know.” He took one of Roger's hands and kissed his knuckles gently, one at a time if only to stall, to collect his thoughts. Roger's skin was warm, and he looked more disoriented than Thom had ever seen him. “I... forgive you. I think. But you've got to... stop playing around. Flirt with me, not the press.” Roger chuckled and pushed his fingers through the gaps of Thom's, held them fixed until their skin was paled. “Deal?”

“Deal.” He pulled Thom close, crushing their hands between their chests. Thom clutched onto Roger's shirt.

Thom's heart had finally stopped hurting with its beating, and his eyes were finally dry, though Roger's weren't. His back was still sweaty, and there were probably staff members loitering, but
Thom still kissed his neck and his jaw up to his lips. Roger's hands flitted up the back of his shirt, explored his spine and his ribs and touched him like he was marble. Thom's kisses travelled to his neck, feet too tired to stay on the tips of his toes. "I need to get back home, Roger. Do you want to come?"

Roger nodded in silence and wiped his eyes. Thom had the impression he was not a man accustomed to crying. As they left Roger kept touching Thom like it was coincidence, but frequently and fervently enough that it seemed like he was trying to hold on.

"It was a really beautiful song, Roger," Thom said as they got in the car. His voice sounded scratchy, he had never spoken so harshly as he had to Roger, and the dissonant pain below his stomach was worsening.

Roger chuckled, and kissed his forehead. "A tad bit of bias?"

Thom scoffed and turned the ignition. "You changed the chord voicings with each chorus, you loser."

"You just got a serenade, take what you're given. I mean, honestly, Thom." They laughed together, Thom shocked by how deeply relieved he was to have Roger back with him.

"What I've got is a morally questionable boyfriend who should hold his damned tongue." "And if you call that a serenade your standards are incredibly low."

***

(Back at Thom's place. Roger is trying to be all cutesy.)

"Just... instead of yelling. Can we talk about this?" "I want to be... a cool kid, and say I don't care, and that your personal connection to me isn't as important as your artistic, musical one. But I'd be lying. You think I'm a fucking child and that my feelings are excessive and that I should grow up, I'd imagine. Fine, but just... I don't want to continue blaming myself for this. Because I... I like you, Roger. And not just your voice. You. Even though you're egotistical, manipulative, take joy out of manipulating people's suffering for your own gain, I like you. And I--"

Roger kissed him sweetly, arm looped around his waist. "I like you a lot, Thom."

"No, I-- look. Graphs. I have graphs, Roger." "As I imagine you did, too. "Here's the search frequency of your name or variations on for the past year. Your album announcement. You coming out. You interacted with me publicly here, here, and here. Here's our videos. Here's the show in Dakota." "Now, here's Delia's. A steady incline to peak here - and the next day... you cross over, and you reach an all-time high." "But here's mine. I'm not quite on the same level as you, but near to Delia. I haven't suffered, publicity-wise, nor musically. And we can... you and I. We can work something out."

"I hadn't seen my graph, actually." "I-- sorry, shit. Yeah. We can, Thom. I mean... I know everything's... still new, but we work incredibly well together. I think we fit." "And I don't want to hurt you." "I just..."

"I know. It was a stupid plan."

"It was." "But really, which points were these?"
"So, that was me asking you to sing 'Take Me to Church'. This was our first selfie. The night you posted a picture of our legs on Instagram. Here's the show in Dakota - the mic cord around my neck. Here's the day that Roald used 'Darling' in one of his press conferences." "Roger."

"Yeah?"

"Was I a stunt?" "I know I'm not now. But was I? Was I... planned out?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"It wasn't that simple. My manager and I wanted a public relationship or rumours about a relationship with someone male. When I came out and you came to my defence it seemed perfect, and when I realised Jon knew you... I knew you would be professional, you went to Corus, so smart. Everything about you said you could keep up with me, or close to it, and... you're talented. Preternaturally talented. You're also really controversial." "I thought if I asked you might accept being a publicity stunt anyway, it served you well as is, but then when we actually spoke I realised I liked you enough to see how it played out." "It was quickly obvious that you were interested in me, so..." "Then when my crew got a tip-off about Delia winning we knew she was about to get a boost in the public eye, and we were in the same city. There wasn't enough about you and me for people to prove we were together, or say I cheated on you, while still sparking interest." "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. "Are we going to come out?"

"At some point, I think so. Now wouldn't be good, though, too many rumours anyway. I persist it was inappropriate for you to... the concerts and the 'Don't' mashup..."

"I persist it was inappropriate for you to not tell me all of the aforementioned and to sleep with Delia and badmouth me in the press." "I'm forgiving you, but I'm not excusing you, and it still hurts, but it's not worth dumping you."

"So we're okay?"

"We're okay. Can... I need to get some sleep. You can stay down here, if--"

"Sleep's probably a good idea."

"I'm going to shower. I'll be right back." (Roger joins him in the shower. Thom assumes he's trying to initiate sex.) "Roger. I can't... for a few months. The wound is too new."

"That's okay. We don't have to." "May I wash your hair?"

"Thank you." "Roger, don't ever call me a 'bitch' again. Or anyone."

"Okay. I just-- I was angry."

"Find a new word. You're articulate, show it." "I never got the appeal of showering with someone before."
"Hm. It's nice. Your eyes are very purple under this light."

"They're not--" Thom groaned. "Fine. They're a little purple."

"Have you had genetic tests done?"

"No. No, we just accept it." "Do you want me to wash your hair?"

"It might be a little difficult, height wise." "Let's get to bed."

(Once settled in bed, Roger asks:)

"How are you feeling?"

"Headache," Thom mumbled.

"How is the pain from the surgery going?"

"It's... okay. Improving. Still bad."

"Does it feel good to have it done?"

"Yeah. And all of my paperwork has been changed now, which is good. I was born in Montana, not Idaho, so I can legally have my sex changed now. Idaho is... conservative."

"Hm."

"Does it change your view of me?"

"No." "What's going to be most comfortable for you here?"

"Um... just... I'll see. It should be fine." "Fuck, I'm tired."

"Get to sleep. I have to leave at four thirty or so, I've set an alarm. But it's been good seeing you."

"Hm. You, too." "I'm glad I didn't break up with you."

"I'm glad you didn't break up with me, too."

"I didn't consider it all that seriously."

"Good." "You make me very happy, Thom."

"Good. I want to."

"Sleep well."

"Hm. You, too."
Thom woke when Roger slipped out of bed. It was still dark outside, and Thom mumbled something along the lines of 'fuck you, get back in bed', though it was probably more akin to a long groan. He struggled to break out of sleep just to see Roger pulling on a t-shirt. “D'you need me to drive you?” Thom sat up, wiping his eyes. Even half-asleep he was painfully aware of how long it would be until he saw Roger again.

Roger cupped Thom's face in his palm and kissed his forehead down to his lips. “I've called a cab. Go back to sleep, Thom.” Thom kneeled up and hugged his boyfriend a little too tightly.

“Okay.” They kissed for several long minutes until a taxi horn blared downstairs. “I'll miss you.”

“I'll text you.” Roger kissed him one last time, impossibly softly, and left him. Thom lay back with an arm over his face, and was asleep once more before a minute had passed.

***

Thom woke several hours later as the sun rose. He let in a sharp breath and exhaled too slowly trying not to get sad about Roger leaving. It was never going to be an expansive amount of time, but even the entirety of yesterday would have been something more. He rolled over and reached out for his phone, but instead knocked it off his bedside table. He groaned and leaned down, but it wasn't his phone that had fallen, but a small black box with a piece of paper folded on top of it.

-Thom -

This was my grandfather's. It's fourteen carat rose gold, I believe, inset with moonstone. Please wear it. If it doesn't fit then tell me, I will resize it.

I'll see you in a month. I'll miss you.

-Roger

Thom placed the paper on his bedside with shaky hands and opened the box. It was a ring, small and clearly old, but polished to a shine. The band was slim, detailed in cursive lines, building up into two overlapping threads of metal which held in a circular stone. He fumbled to turn on his lamp to examine it in further detail, his hands finally steady. It was a pale grey, but as the light bounced off its rotating frame it shone pale blues and greens and purples. It was too tight on his middle finger, not quite making it to the base of his finger, and he quite clearly registered the connotation of wearing the ring on his ring finger. It was an engagement or wedding ring, although a very old one. It was ridiculous to fret about such a thing, it was just a gift, just a symbol. Still, he pushed it down each knuckle, very slowly, until it settled on his hand. It was a little too big. Just a little. But it suited him.

07.05

To: Roger Conté
It's a little big. I'll get George to resize it. Thank you.

07.08

From: Roger Conté
I'll resize it myself, thank you very much. Wear it around your neck until I can.

07.10
To: Roger Conté

Yes, Sir.

07.21
From: Roger Conté

Can I post this photo of us from last night?

[image]

07.23
To: Roger Conté

Yes, of course.

07.25
To: Roger Conté

Take this as a formal retraction of my request to not speak about or refer to me to others. Assuming you're not going back to badmouthing me.

08.30
From: Roger Conté

Thanks. I wouldn't call that 'badmouthing'. But your point is taken.

09.15
To: Roger Conté

I am neither a child nor was I irrelevant before our collaboration. And as far as I can tell I am very much your type.
Incoming call: Roger Conté

"You're my type. I like gingers. I like people who are smaller than me. I like people who are smart enough to keep up with me. I like your hands."

"Nice to hear your voice."

"You were a little irrelevant. You were on the border of not being irrelevant. You are younger than me."

"By five years. Don't patronise, now. How big is your PR/management team?"

"I-- what?"

"I figure it's not just your agent, Alex, and crew."

"If you put them all in a room... maybe fifteen of significance. However many runners and guards I need, but that's venue dependent. Why?"

"Stop playing the innocent, small-time artist. As I said: you're a pop star. Go back to telling me how much you like me."

"You're absurd and unique. Talented, a prodigy. Your collarbones are nice. Hickeys stand out like paint on you, they're hard to cover and you have to think about them to cover them."

"You'll do. Sorry I... no, I'm not sorry, I'm angry, but oh well. The sentiment is there."

"It's okay. Can I go back to dirty talking you?"

"That was barely dirty. And no, I shan't participate."

"Why?"

"I want you here, that's the whole point. You're very much not here."

"My voice is there."

"Your voice isn't great at finishing what it starts."

"Do you not masturbate at all?"

"Sometimes. Not so much post-surgery. Particularly when my boyfriend is being embarrassing."

"It's not embarrassing, or shameful."

"I'm not ashamed, I'm just... not into it. I want to be with you. I listen to your songs and don't jerk off, funnily enough."
"I love that that's your first thought."

"I'm sure I could find a sect of tumblr for you if that's the response you want."

"Gross, Thom, gross."

"I promise you can jerk me off next time we see each other and we won't even have to have you singing about Delia playing in the background."

"Which song..?"

"Oh. Isn't 'Green' about her?"

"No. No, a high school boyfriend, whose eyes were actually hazel."

"And whose gender did not correlate with she-her pronouns."

"I'm a victim of the industry as much as you. I didn't even hit the safety peak of '09 and '10, with Adam Lambert, we're only becoming more conservative in the industry, despite all facades. God, you're a bit of a buzz kill."

"Thank you, dear. It's a nice song, by the way."

"How did you find it? It was never released."

"As I said: tumblr."

"Aw, baby."

"Shut up, you arse. I figured if you had old music or old lovers or old essays published online I may as well know about it."

"What would I find if I looked for you?"

"Angry posts about representation in media, the occasional angsty song lyrics over pictures of clouds, a couple of essays that only fanatics read, the transition that somehow everyone ignored of Thom and Alanna Trebond being both one and two people and one of them slowly dropping several octaves. A lot of weird fanart, don't go too far."

"Anything weird of me?"

"A lot of people drawing you nude. Most of them are naively unrealistic about both your abdominal muscles and your genitals, but most of them are under-eighteen, I suppose. Some photo edits of you kissing my cheek, conveniently cropping out Thayet."

"Charming."

"I must be so disappointing as a boyfriend. You were probably expecting a Rocky Horror esque lack of discomfort with all things sexual and instead you get me, snarky virgin."
"I'd love to see you in a corset and heels."

"Find me a production of Rocky Horror and we'll both go all out."

"You're wonderful. Okay?"

"You're wonderful, too."

"Are you blushing?" "It's nothing sexual, don't fret, I just want to know."

"Yes. Yes, I am. Now fuck off. Or fuck yourself. Or both."

"I think I'm a bit addicted to you."

"Oh, go jerk off, Roger."

***

rogerconte posted to instagram

[image]

My lips on your skin
leave bruises like bullet wounds
and I think I'm addicted to you

That is one INTENSE chord progression omg

by 'intense' do you mean implicative of prince's 'kiss'? i see a law suit coming :P

we don't even know how it sounds yet!!!!!!!
Look I know it's a tired argument, but Delia, Thom, or Alex?

Look at the hickeys on this girl a few months ago! [link]

hahaha look at thom's collarbone [link]

deaf silence while waiting for someone to contribute something for Alex. ..........no? cause there's
not even a chance

***

12.08

To: Roger Conté

That's musical jerking off, I don't feel it counts. And hey, you should cover Rufus Wainwright some
time.

12.08

From: Roger Conté
It totally counts. Which era?

12.08

To: Roger Conté
I was thinking All Days Are Nights. Anything of his would work though.

12.08

From: Roger Conté
My voice is much smoother than his. How would I approach it? I know you, at least, would be personally offended if I fucked up a cover of one of his.

12.09

To: Roger Conté
Just keep it light. Try ‘What Would I Do With a Rose?’ or ‘Les Feux D'Artifice T'Appellent’. I have some faith, I promise.

12.11

To: Roger Conté
And get an STI test.

12.14

From: Roger Conté
I'll work on ‘What Would I Do With a Rose?’. And maybe ‘Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk’. All of my sexual partners are clean, I was tested last June.

12.15

From: Roger Conté
Rude, by the way.

12.18

To: Roger Conté
I don't care, get tested again. I'm going to the clinic this afternoon.

12.19

From: Roger Conté
Fine. It'll be a few days, but I'll let you know.

12.22

To: Roger Conté
And ask a doctor about your headaches.
From: Roger Conté
'Hey babe, I think you might have an STI. Also be of well health.' You are such a romantic.

12.27

From: Roger Conté

What can I say? I'm a natural.
Chapter 22

Chapter by dunedinparsley

Chapter Summary

from this point everything is linear but won't necessarily be very cohesive - there'll be some fully formed scenes and plot arcs (more alanna later), but mainly just snippets. everyone's pretty famous now. hopefully it all makes some sense?? please comment and let me know if not, and I'll fill in any gaps as best I can.

Chapter Notes

content warning: semi explicit sexual content

“Gillian, hi, it’s Thom.”

“Hey, Thom. What can I help you with?”

“I hear Roger fired you thinking it would make me like him again.”

“Something like that.”

“Want a job?”

“Huh?”

“In my band. Do you want the first guitar position?”

“I… um, yeah, that would be great. That would be really great. Are you sure?”

“I know how good you are, and we already know we work well together.”

“But…”

“Roger’s an idiot. He’s cruel and he’s selfish, and treats others like objects. I am some of those things, not all. I’m not angry at you.”

“I knew you two were together.”

“Oh.”

“I didn’t know how serious it was. I just… it’s been the pattern.”

“Well, the offer stands. If you want first guitar – unless I’m playing first, you’ll go back to second
“That’s incredible. Thanks, man. Thanks.” “This is really good of you, Thomas.”

“No, it’s not. You were an arsehole for sleeping with Roger despite knowing he was with me, but the responsibility was his, not yours. You don’t deserve to be outlawed from the industry because of him not knowing how to talk about his feelings.”

“Are you still together?”

“Yeah. Yeah, we are.”

“Are you happy with that?”

“Yeah.”

“I...”

“Don’t talk about Roger unless I bring him up, please.”

“Okay.”

(A radio interview)

“So Thom, you’ve picked up Gillian Westborough to your band, months after his departure from Conté’s.”

“I have.”

“Odd set of circumstances, ey?”

“No, not really. We worked together on tour with Roger, and you know, jamming back stage everyone demonstrates a different skillset. Gil was Julliard trained as a classical guitarist, and he’s a brilliant pop guitarist, but the classical side of things will tie in perfectly with a lot of my music in a way that it doesn’t with Roger’s.”

“Was there any drama there?”

“Not at all – as said, learning each others’ music styles backstage, Roger has the same experiences we do, so it was perfectly amicable. And him being him, he had a thousand people waiting, and I got a classical guitarist, and Gillian got an opportunity to show his area of expertise.”

“No conflict at all?”

“Ask Roger and his band, ask Gil. We’re all really happy.”
To: Roger Conté

*I wanted to kiss you at the airport.*

12.13

From: Roger Conté

*Why didn't you?*

12.15

To: Roger Conté

*couldn't reach your stupid face.*

12.16

From: Roger Conté

*You like my stupid face.*

12.17

From: Roger Conté

*Let's come out. Properly.*

12.17

To: Roger Conté

*Really?*

12.18

From: Roger Conté

*Yeah. You could have reached my stupid face if you thought it was okay to do so.*

12.20

To: Roger Conté

*I don't know, Roger, you're pretty tall.*
From: Roger Conté

Is that a 'yes, I consent to becoming the queer poster couple of the year'?

To: Roger Conté

I'm trans, you're pretty, we're looking at at least a decade of queer fame.

From: Roger Conté

You sure know how to charm a guy.

From: Roger Conté

What can I say? I've had so much practice.

***

(Roger's birthday)

Thom had given him a ring, and he mocked himself for being unoriginal. There were no family heirlooms to pass down, but silver inset with sapphire. It was simple, but Roger couldn't hide how pleased he was. He was even more pleased with the chain nestled beneath it. "I know we're coming out, but if you don't want... to wear it as a ring, risk it being seen as an engagement ring, then you can...wear it around your neck. If you want to, or wear it at all, I--" Roger kissed him silly, distracted from the pile of gifts, which were primarily books, but topped with a dainty gold circlet, almost floral, that Roger tried not to smile too broadly at. "It's the mix between glam rock, Victorian era royalty and a statement of authority that you've been missing. It's symbolic, I think it was meant as a display, but--" Roger taught him how to braid hair to settle the crown on his head.

"I'm never taking this off." "Thank you, Thom." "Come on, the band is downstairs, let's make music."

"Why does no-one talk about how great kissing is?" Thom breathed against his lips.

"Maybe you've not been listening." "Come on, love."

ameliaconte.tumblr.com
SO I JUST MET THOM AND ROGER

there's a slightly longer story though, so you're going to have to wait for the photos and quotes. (unless you're on my snapchat. in which case you've seen them) because these boys are SO SO TOGETHER. and i don't mean 'they looked at each other so clearly they're banging.' but, read on, dear followers.

so aliatrebond and i were on our fifteen year bff-iversary dinner at one of the swankiest restaurants we could find. it's this lovely dark, wood and glass, VERY ROMANTIC place that does special dietary menus.

we were even wearing our imitation suits from the 'ORANGE' underground shows, like, this was fate. living up to our urls 10/10. but anyway, we're sitting at one of the outer tables, because we're not incredibly fancy and i think the waiters could tell that. we looked around during our entrée, trying not to be too obvious, and alia spots them first, sitting right near the back against the wall. there was no way it wasn't them. thom is wearing this really sweet button-down and jumper combo, and his hair is falling in his eyes, and absolutely clean shaven, and roger's got his hair in a bun with a blue ribbon (omg omg omg) and he's wearing this suit but with no tie and a really pale lilac shirt, and they look pretty deeply engaged in their conversation.

we didn't want to disturb them while they were eating, or be those 'creepy' fans and we didn't want to draw attention, so we just ate and turned our chairs a bit so we could keep our eyes on them. it's pretty empty at this point, it's like eleven at night (when it was cheapest to reserve seats) so most people have left. i think roger noticed us at one point but i'm not quite sure, he's got the type of gaze that means he could be looking at you or at the space-time continuum itself. but once it hits about eleven fifteen they're on their main course, and thom is looking a bit upset, and roger (who's sitting on the outside of the table) reaches across and takes thom's hand. very slowly and very deliberately, like, pushing his fingers through the gaps of thom's and holding still before putting their hands down on the table. thom like chuckles a little bit and runs a hand through his hair, and we THINK he called roger a bastard, but he still kissed roger's knuckles and went back to eating.

so we're freaking out. but we also want to enjoy our meal so we do that, and they're running maybe ten minutes ahead of us. and then, when they hit dessert, they fulfil a poor fangirl's dreams. roger got a little bit of his ice cream (which i also had, it was incredible) on one of those dainty little teaspoons and offered it to thom, and thom was sort of blushy and shy, and then thom did the same with his chocolate pudding thing (? ? ?), and once their plates had been taken away and they were drinking their wine, thom took roger's hand and was playing with his fingers - like bending them and touching each of his knuckles and stuff, and roger looked so blissed out. like maybe a tiny bit tipsy. maybe. and he took thom's left hand and then we noticed something (that you will see later). thom is wearing a ring on his left ring finger. it's a fucking engagement ring. like, look at it. it's an
so anyway thom ended up paying, and our theory that roger was tipsy was probably right because he was a little unsteady and thom put an arm around him as they were aiming to leave. so we're freaking out and we've turned our phones on, because we might never see them again, and so we stand up shakily and get weird looks from the waiters and the two other couples still there and we go up to them, and thom looks so protective. like i know he's like a foot shorter than roger, but it does not matter, he would fight you for him. we introduce ourselves really nervously. it went like this:

Me: mr. conte?
Alia: mr. trebond?? i'm so sorry just, could we, oh my god, we're such big fans
Thom: *smiles a bit and offers his hand to each of us*
Alia: *starts crying*
Roger: oh my god, is that the suit i wore on the tour? did you make that? that's so incredible! (he sort of felt the lapel and the fabric and then gave alia a hug while she cried even harder)

Me: (i started crying, too) thom i just wanted to tell you, you saved my life, and i love your music so much. you're such an inspiration, and i just, thank you so much. oh my god, i'm sorry, i'm a wreck.

Thom: no, no, thank you so much. i'm so, so honoured to hear you say that. what are your names?

(so alia is under roger's arm and he GAVE HER A HANDKERCHIEF, actual disney prince)
Alia: i'm alia
Me: and i'm amelia
Roger: it's lovely to meet you both. is it coincidence that you're wearing these outfits tonight?
Alia: it's entirely coincidence. it's our fifteen year best friend anniversary and we just-- oh my god we must look like such losers.
Roger: no, it's such an honour that you've even made these, wow.
Thom: congratulations on your anniversary. *he notices that i'm crying* can i hug? is a hug okay?
Me: yes, hug very much okay.

(everyone laughs and thom is SO SHORT oh my god, he's like my height, but he gave me a really nice hug and like stroked my hair? like he did with alanna in this video, we all sort of end up in a group hug for a minute, and i don't think the waiters have ever glared so hard)

Alia: could we get some photos? i'm so sorry, this is so cheesy.
Roger: please don't apologise. no more apologies. i can't speak for thom--
Thom: *rolls his eyes* really? i hadn't noticed
Roger: *shushes thom* i can't speak for thom, but part of the joy of music and performing is getting to meet people like you guys. so please no more apologies.

Thom: of course you can, basically. hey, just a sec. *he pulls his phone out and like stumbles a little bit, and roger puts a hand on his arm, and we get a VERY good look at his ring* i have a complex, i need to go first.

Roger: *laughs*

Alia: oh my god i'm so sorry i forgot, happy birthday for last week, roger!

Roger: oh gosh. no. i'm getting old. moving on. selfie time.

(so we take selfies on thom's phone, then we take selfies on my phone, then alia's, and roger takes a photo of alia and i. we're both trying not to have cry-faces, but we couldn't help it)

Roger: can i post this on twitter? would that be weird?

Alia: no. no, go ahead, that would be fine.

Me: can we post these online? we don't want to--

Roger: of course, that's fine.

Thom: aw, guys. thank you so much.

Me: thank you so much for talking to us, we know it's like, super-rude.

Roger: nonsense. thank you so much, girls. congratulations on your anniversary.

Thom: and your suits really are incredible.

Alia: *sobbing*

Me: *sniffling*

Alia: you're my inspirations in life, thank you, thank you, thank you.

Me: thank you so much.

(we had one more big group hug, and ROGER IS SO TALL. i am not exaggerating. almost a foot taller than thom, so about six foot three or so. and he was wearing a really nice cologne.)

Thom: okay, well, enjoy the rest of your night! thank you, you're really lovely.

Roger: yes, enjoy. thank you for coming over. have a really wonderful night.

(so they wait for a minute and we go and sit down, and roger puts his scarf around thom's neck and they hold hands, and roger waves and they leave. and alia and i just sort of stare at each other and finish our wine in one pretty massive gulp)
so it's one a.m. and we're about to go to bed, but here are the pictures. look at thom's RING in the third one, it's so beautiful.

and best til last: here's the ones we took of them. look how adorable they are.

so yeah we'll post more tomorrow, but basically, roger was so, so sweet (alia didn't get to give him back his handkerchief) and warm, and thom was really gracious and so lives up to his videos.

ps. i'm just putting it out there that roger is the hottest man on earth. but like. i think he knows it.

***

**CON T É'S CHOICE**

Roger Conté, in the middle of a love triangle between TV star Delia Eldorne and transsexual musician Thom Trebond

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**WHO'S REALLY IN THE CLOSET AND WHAT'S REALLY DOWNSTAIRS?**

Recently bisexual Roger Conté’s relationship with female-to-male Thom Trebond goes public

***

**SCOLDED WOMAN OR SCOLDED MAN?**

Who came first in Roger Conté’s life, Delia Eldorne, or Thom Trebond?

***

**BREAKING DOWN WALLS! THE FIRST A-LISTER TRANSGENDER ROMANCE EVER?**
Transgender man Thom Trebond goes public in romance with musician Roger Conté

(Roger and Thom are having penetrative vaginal sex for the first time. Funnily enough, this was always going to be just dialogue.)

“Are you okay?”

“Mhm.”

***

"Is this okay?"

"You're okay, Thom. You're good."

***

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

***

"I'm-- shit, don't laugh at me!"

***


***

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, stop asking."

***

"Fucking-- ouch!"

***

"Kiss me."

"Always."

***

(It was a good experience. They slept for a little while but Thom has gotten up to go to the
bathroom, feeling something is wrong. He is bleeding, and very very dysphoric and confused.)

"Thom?"

"Just give me a second." "I'm bleeding."

"That's normal." "Come back to bed."

"Give me a sec."

Thom didn't want to cry, but he did anyway.

Roger press a sleepy kiss to the top of his spine, enveloping him in warmth. "Sleep." Thom just hummed.

26th February

"Roger is about to get on a plane to Virginia--"

"Where there are still tickets available for one of my three shows, I might note."

"Yes, go buy tickets. But he's about to get on a plane and we thought of a song that we have a burning need to cover, and while we can record another version later we wanted to do it now. So it's very rough, but we hope you like it."

"This is 'Throw Your Arms Around Me', by Hunters and Collectors."

"One, two, one, two, three, four."

"You will make me call your name, and I will shout it to the blue summer sky."

"And we may never meet again, so shed your skin, and let's get started."

"And you will throw your arms around me."

"Cool."

"Cool." "Ha, um, thank you for watching. As said, Roger will be in Virginia over the next couple of days and there are still tickets available for Thursday night, so... get to it."
"Thank you for watching!"

#rogerconte #thomtrebond has there ever been a couple more in love? No? No.

#throwyourarmsaroundme #rhom #thonte #trente #conbond (they need better names) omg the amount of gay in this is too much for my queer soul

#rogerconte looking at #thomtrebond like he's an angel is my aesthetic

Did anyone notice Thom's shy little sideways look at the very end of the video? And Roger laughing at him? Oh my god. #thomtrebond #rogerconte

"People will talk, Roger, the hour is almost inappropriate."

"And we wouldn't want that."

"But of course. "Do you want me to tour with you? Is that what you wanted to ask? Your break is four months long, right? Late March through to July. That's more than enough to slot me in."

"I... yes, that's precisely it."

"You sound upset, are you okay?"

"I'm really tired. I don't know what's wrong, I'm just... distressed."

"Nothing's happened?"

"I have a headache. It's not even that severe, I just..."

"You've been touring for a very long time, Roger, and even the time spent with me is insubstantial as a break compared to two years."

"I know that."

"Don't get snappy, I'm trying to be nice. It doesn't come naturally."

"Yes it does. Anyway, touring... I don't know. This is my pre and mid-album tour. My contract states a preference for another October release, so I suppose that going back on tour in late June makes sense, but--"

"October? Are you going to have an album ready in time for that?"

"Of course I will. But how are we going to fit you in? This album will be a solo album, even if I fit you in as a guest."

"I'll... I don't really want to be a back-up vocalist."

"I know. Well, guest artist... and I can do concerts with you outside of my tour."
"I know it should be low on the list of priorities but I really... want to be with you."

"No, it's... I feel the same."

"Is that's what's upsetting you? Feeling attached?"

"I don't know, Thom, I'm not good with attachment. I'm attached to Jon, Roald, Lianne... Alex, and you. That's about it."

"Do you want me to not be with you on this tour? Because that's okay, too, if you need to... work through that in yourself."

"You're a really good boyfriend, Thom."

"I don't want to fuck this up with you by rushing it."

"I do want you on tour with me, but it may not be practical. And you're mid-degree."

"I can get this degree in my sleep, Roger, that's not an issue. I can defer if necessary."

"How about you guest-perform through the States, as an opening act and some stuff with me, and then... when I go overseas we'll see, past then."

"I don't want to leave Alanna for that long. But..."

"We'll work it out. Keep a contract loose."

"If... I can cowrite some songs, if you would like."

"I would, actually, I almost forgot."

"And we've got the EP."

"Yeah, we do. I need to sleep, okay?"

"Of course. Sleep well."

"Sleep well, Thom."

***

**Remedy – Adele cover - Thom Trebond**

March 26 by HesitantGinger

*When the world seems so cruel*
*and your heart makes you feel like a fool*
*I promise you will see that I will be your remedy*
Ophelia - Conté - The Lumineers cover
March 27 by ContéOfficial

Heaven help the fool who falls in love.

aliatrebond tweeted: 'your heart makes you feel like a fool' 'heaven help the fool who falls in love' rip me.

ameliaconte tweeted: @HesitantGinger what's it like having a perfect boyfriend?

HesitantGinger tweeted: @ameliaconte Pretty great to be honest.

RogerConte tweeted: @HesitantGinger <3

HRHDeliaEldorne tweeted: Joining the party... send my love to your new lover, treat HER better [link]
@HRHDeliaEldorne ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

HesitantGinger tweeted: Think of me in the depths of your despair, making a home down there, as mine sure won't be shared. <3
@HesitantGinger THEY WERE ROOMMATES IN HIGH SCHOOL
    REALLY?
    YES LOOK [link] [link]
    and oh my god they were ROOMMATES

memeception. 10/10

savage, Thom, SAVAGE.

@HesitantGinger u ain't hesitant no more, my boy.
@HesitantGinger oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
Jonathan Conte tweeted: if it's going to be a meme i'm totes on the scene. bless your soul, you got your head in the clouds.
[link]

@JonathanConte oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

@JonathanConte how does it feel to have slept with ur cousin's lover?
their family and the whole like conte-trebond-eldorne scene is a mess tbh.

KnighlyGinger tweeted: Look, I just really like this lyric: all the games you'd play you'd always win, but I set fire to the fucking rain.
@KnighlyGinger oooooooooooooooooooooooooohhhhhhh

HesitantGinger tweeted: @KnighlyGinger Alanna, dear, I don't think that's the lyric.
@HesitantGinger ooooh

KnighlyGinger tweeted: @HesitantGinger Fuck off, Thom dear, the lyric is implied.
@KnighlyGinger ooooooh

Roger Conte tweeted: Bringing this around full circle, rumour has it he's the one I'm leaving you for. [video]
@RogerConte oh my fucking God

@RogerConte OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO000000000000000000000000000000OHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH
@RogerConte are hand-clapping games becoming your sign of changes in life? Throw Your Arms and now this?

@ FUCKING EVERYONE are we ignoring 'Turning Tables' playing in the background of Thayet's snapchat? Is this her contribution?
If Jon and Thayet break up love is officially dead.

do thom and roger not make up for it?

No. Absolutely not.
**KnightlyGinger tweeted:** Look my boyfriend doesn't have twitter, so here's my chance to be soppy without his knowledge. [link]

***

**Jonathan Conte tweeted:** i sent 'one and only' to Alanna's boyfriend and he thought it was just me confessing my love. mad respect.


(on the way to raoul and gary's wedding)

**Jonathan Conté posted:**

being in a car with these three is like being in a car with Adele, Lady Gaga, and Beyonce, all the while not being a singer.

[video]

With: **Alanna Trebond, Thom Trebond, Roger Conté**

**Thom Trebond:** But who is who in this mix?

**Jonathan Conté:** you’re gaga (most like Bowie). rog is Queen Bey because he thinks he’s royalty. alanna is Adele because she can’t stop swearing and has an understated grace.

**Alanna Trebond:** Fuck off, Jonathan.

**Jonathan Conté:** case in point!!!!!

**Roger Conté:** I AM royalty. [image] I would have a crown, otherwise.

**Jonathan Conté:** @Thom this was why you shouldn’t’ve given him a crown.

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(Thom and Jon)

Jon: "When I said 'you can bring a date' I didn't actually mean my cousin."

"Everything I do I do to upset you, Jonathan." "I didn't make out with him in the pews, at least."

"You're still causing scandal."

"I cause scandal whatever I do." "People are making racist comments about Thayet. Raoul is black, I don't understand."

"Politics, my friend. Talk shit until you get hit."
Raoul looked back from Gary and Roger to Thom. He glanced at Thom's hand, examined the ring. Thom, in turn, looked at Raoul's. It was broad gold, with words inscribed around its band. “You know that he cheated on you. Don't you?” Raoul's eyes were soft on him, gave away nothing of what he was thinking.

“Yeah. I know.” Thom looked over to Roger, who caught his gaze and smiled.

“When did you find out?” Raoul asked. He looked so confused that Thom thought that maybe his reaction was more abnormal than he had thought. It had hurt. It hurt a little, then. But Roger was consistent in his affections from that point on. Their relationship had moved on, it had only been new.

He realised, however, it still stung. He breathed in and tried to keep smiling. “Oh, in early January. Having gotten together in August, I think he cheated on me four times.”

“I'm rather sure it was only twice,” Raoul said. “Does he know that you know?”

Thom nodded. “Yeah, he knows. I made it quite clear... that it couldn't continue.” He felt pitifully weak; it wouldn't have been so painful if Raoul didn't actually seem to care. The softness is what made it hard.

“And you trust him?”

“Is this a therapy session or the 'most important day of your life’?” Thom retorted. Raoul just chuckled and loosened his tie.

“Gary's entertaining himself, and I'm not deluding myself into thinking that any day can be without multiple facets. This is your facet of my day.”

“You're drunk.”

“You're still hurt.”

Thom went to stand up, but decided against it. He crossed his arms over his chest with his legs parted. He knew he probably looked like a sulking child. “Well, he's been... good. He hasn't cheated since.” Raoul elbowed him until he let his own arms go and handed him a glass of champagne.

“Why didn't you dump him?” Thom drained the glass. “Do you know?” Thom reached out for another glass, and Raoul slapped his hand. “Answer me.”

“He's... special. We fit.” Raoul sighed and let him take another glass. He drank slowly, felt the bubbles on his tongue. He didn't particularly want to look at Raoul, so he looked at his hands instead. The callouses on his fingertips looked more prominent through the distortion of both liquid and glass, and the ring cast light over their surroundings.

“You're special. There are a thousand guys much kinder than Roger, with less of a manipulative streak.” Roger and Gary seemed to be trying to waltz, but Gary was a little too tipsy and Roger was a little too sober. Raoul didn't seem to notice them, though. “You never thought he could cheat, did you?”

“Fuck, Raoul. I thought he could. I didn't think he would. I, like the rest of the world, overlooked
all of the manipulative and cruel traits that he hides from almost everyone as to maintain a dynamic which I was happy with - in which he maintained fidelity, and was doting on me, and me alone."
Thom stood up, the alcohol rushing through him and leaving him light-headed and unbalanced.
"He's a multi-faceted man, I well knew he has a history of sexual promiscuity and fucking his way to the top. I thought that his care for me would put a stop to that, and I was naive. I also understand why he did it. I care about him despite his disrespect for others' feelings. And that's because he's chosen me. He's putting the work in now, there's no point in throwing our dynamic away for the past."

Raoul looked up at him with a soft, sympathetic look. Thom groaned and tried to walk away, but found himself incapable of making a solid step forwards. Alcohol did not suit him well. “Gary and Jon always know. He thinks they don't, but they do. When he's lying, or cheating. They still think he's pretty much perfect, but they know. Jon was angry at him.”

“"As was I.”

“"Just be kind to yourself, okay, Thom? You deserve far more than 'special', if that's the only explanation you can provide.” Gary came up to them, and put his hand out for Raoul with the type of love-struck expression that Thom hoped he would never take on. That was vulnerability. “Now, if you'll excuse me, I believe my husband would like my attention.” Raoul stood and slapped between his shoulders with that soft grin of his. “He doesn't own you, Thom. Even with that ring of yours,” he said, as an afterthought.

"That's a lovely ring," Roald said. Thom refrained from rolling his eyes - he was sick of comments on the thing. Then he remembered-- "Was it my father's?"

"Yes, Sir. Roger gave it to me. I hope that's okay by you."

"Of course. Father left it to Jason, my brother - Roger's father - and when he died it came to Roger. It suits you very well." "I didn't realise that you and Roger were so invested in one another."

"It's all quite new. I think we... we are very fond of each other. He's a very good man."

"I'm glad you see that in him." "Well, I'm happy for both of you."

"Uncle!"

"Roger, come here, boy." "It's been too long. How are you?"

"I'm well. How are you?"

"Very well. I was just talking to Thom about your grandfather's ring."

Roger's arm settled around Thom's waist, and he pressed his lips to Thom's cheek. Thom bit back a smile and rested his hand on Roger's hip. "I'm sorry I didn't ask you before--"

"The two of you are like parrots. It's fine, Roger, it suits him well." "I'm happy for you."
"Thank you. "Gary and Raoul are love-struck, it's quite endearing."

"It is, very much so. Gareth is... still discontent."

"I think Gary has gotten past the point of caring."

"Gareth isn't 'homophobic', I think it's too harsh a term, but he doesn't want his son to be presenting outside of 'the norm'." "He's behaved well, though, I think he likes Raoul."

"He does, I'm sure of it. Gary and Raoul have been friends since childhood. It's not the dynamic he wants, I think, that's all."

"'Nimbyism' is an interesting phenomenon."

"'Nimbyism'?"

"It's a term in sociology to refer to an individual or community not being opposed to change or the diversifying of their community, in and of itself, but 'not in my backyard'."

"Hm. Gareth just worries that it will negatively affect Gary's career."

"It can't. Gary is a superb speaker, he's maintained good face through adolescence and adulthood... almost the entire political family is here."

"I agree with Thom. There will be difficult moments but Gary is well-respected in his own right. He will overcome what he needs to. Raoul is hardly bad for his image. Polite, respectful, highly motivated, working in social services." Pause. "Upper middle class, and on the rise." "You're a worrier, uncle."

"Yes. Yes, I am." "They're a good couple. All will be well."

"And you will be president."

"Don't jinx it now, Roger."

"You know it's true."

"I hope it's true." "I really must go, I have a four a.m. flight. You've booked all of your flights for--"

"Yes, uncle."

"I love you, Roger. You make me very proud."

"I love you, too, Roald." "Thank you."

"Thom. Thom, I'm sorry for... my behaviour in the past."

"It's okay, Sir. Understood."

"Make sure Roger eats, if you can."
"Will do."

"Well, best wishes to both of you."

"Make sure Roger eats'."

"He's a mother hen."

"Do you want to get out of here?"

"Hm." Thom took the required step back to stand on the stairs, and pushed Roger's fringe back from his forehead. "Yeah, okay." "I love your eyes." "You're one of a kind."

"One of two, let's be fair."

"How many cliches do you think we can fill in one night?"

"A few."

"You're so beautiful. I feel out of place next to you." "Not... unworthy, don't misread that. Just... you've got the pure type of charisma mixed with perfect looks that equates to 'can't take my eyes off of you'."

Roger chuckled. "I'm lucky. My nose is too large, though."

"Too large. I'd argue a great many points there, but here: we are socialised to believe that large noses are unattractive due to deep-seated anti-Semitism and racism. You can't say that ever again or you're being problematic."

"Caught me there." "I'm so glad I met you." "You can't use political correctness against me all the time."

"Watch me."

***

rogerconte posted to instagram

[image]
We realised we've missed out on some key cliches.  
(with: thomtrebond)

***

thomtrebond posted to instagram

[image]
He fell asleep. Loser.  
(with: rogerconte)
(wow these boys make a lot of music in a short span of time - here's some social media about their music:)

the 3 a.m. sessions ep

Roger Conté and Thom Trebond

1. Prosper
2. Ulna
3. Autumn (Vivaldi sample)
4. Winter (Opia) (Vivaldi sample)
5. Practice of Bloody Hands
6. There is Time
7. Take Me to Church (Hozier cover)

***

aliatrebond tweeted: Did they just Beyonce this shit?

***

ameliaconte tweeted: they just beyonced this whole fucking world.

ameliaconte tweeted: also how the fuck do you sample Antonio Vivaldi?

***

aliatrebond.tumblr.com

March 13

Reacting to 'the 3 a.m. sessions ep'

I get notifications when Roger or Thom tweet, post on facebook, upload anything to YouTube, or upload anything to iTunes, so basically my phone exploded at exactly 3a.m. (they Did Not plan this well or kindly) and I screamed so loudly that my sister came into my room then proceeded to scream with me as I downloaded the album and called Amelia. So I thought I should embarrass myself (not really, I'm justified) for your entertainment!

As it's downloading: JESUS FUCKING CHRIST iTunes HURRY UP.

Prosper: (intro) Thom sound so pretty with Roger my god, how do they make phonetics so pretty?
(first verse) Aww it sounds like a love confession. (chorus) Jesus Christ I hope you fucking prosper so that we can listen to you two sing together forever I hope that your love prospers too, babies. (second verse) omg this sounds like wedding vows, boys you are too YOUNG AND BEAUTIFUL but please get married. what the fuck was that chord? (chorus) ((in tears)) I hope that you prosper perhaps it's selfish but i hope that we can prosper too there is quiet in you and there is gold in my veins and i hope you prospeeeeeer i hope to thrive and i hope you prospeeeeeer (bridge) ((mindless sobbing)) (chorus) emotionally wrecked forever. i can't get more emotional than this, surely.

Ulna: (opening notes) huh what a funny name better google that shit (verse) cello. bass guitar. pretty intense. i am emotionally invested what the fucK THIS IS SAD AND I'M ONLY FIFTEEN SECONDS IN. roger where are you? babe? oh this is a solo-- (chorus) oh roger hi my heart is bleeding oh my small queer babies please let me protect you i'm so sorry babies (verse) jesus christ the ulna is the bone that broke when thom was attacked i can't deal with this shit roger please protect him (chorus) that belt was unforgivable thom trebond what the-- jesus christ i'm most of a man when i'm covered in blood, so i hope that you break me, i was told i was made to be broken' i have never been in so much pain (outro) 'and if you tell me i'm a broken man i promise i promise i promise i--' what the fuck you can't end it there what???????????? this is. worse than Prosper.

Autumn: what the fuck is it with you boys and violins? (verse) what is this about? are you high? you sound so happy. are you actually singing about pretty leaves? (chorus) are you just violins and vocals? nerds. they can't be singing about how pretty leaves are. oh fuck it. it's pretty. not sad. i can cope. (verse) this is definitely about how pretty fall is. aw babies. (chorus) these two are actual rays of sunshine and positivity in the world this will inspire me for the rest of my days. (bridge) fucking harmonising with fucking violins. this is so calming i don't think i can deal. (outro) i stg no-one is joking when they say thom has saved their life. or roger, jesus fucking christ. i didn't know you could find perfect peace in this world. leaves are so fucking pretty.

Winter (Opia): tears of beauty. opia means fucking eye contact. just the whole way through. how did they turn vocals in total unison without any instruments imitating a violin break my heart? magic? evil? who fucking knows. fucking soulmates. i can not deal with their soppy shit. (at this point roger's handkerchief has come out of its box and is being used a hell of a lot)

Practice of Bloody Hands: (verse) roger you are a sinner. what are you even singing about? oh my god is this a self harm song? is this a media song? who fucking knows roger conte is breaking my heart. (chorus) baby are you anorexic? other baby are you bulimic? what the fuck are you purging? where is the blood coming from? sweet children (verse) thom please hug roger for me but also please step back he sounds angry (bridge) okay, scales, pretty-- boys are you splitting vocally? okay, in opposite directions. fine. one and a half octaves. two. two and a half what the fuck. thom your falsetto is beautiful roger your voice is like porn. is that a three octave split? what the fuck. what the fuck. what the fuck.

There is Time: this is the most sarcastically peppy song in the world. 'don't tell me there is time when you're holding the clocks, voice drops, does your heart know to race any more?' TRANS HAMILTON AMIRITE? this is going to be in my head for the rest of my life and i don't even care.

Take Me to Church: these two. are a lot.
Pillow Talk About the End of the World - Thom Trebond

1. (Sonnets from the Portuguese, Elizabeth Barrett Browning)
2. Before Dawn
3. Keychain
4. Olives and Lemon Juice
5. Atlas

Before we begin please note that there are two hidden tracks, both featuring vocals by Conté. After Olives and Lemon Juice is Pillow Talk, and after Atlas is Aspirin.

Best lyric:

1. I (Sonnets from the Portuguese, Elizabeth Barrett Browning): 'Death, I said, but there the silver answer rang, 'not death, but love'. It wasn't written by him, but that's one poignant line.

2. Before Dawn: 'And I've never spent a sunrise here that wasn't spent alone.'

3. Keychain: 'She learned to paint her lips with blood / tell me, did they teach that young? God knows who's in power here / and all she's got is a keychain for a loaded gun.'

4. Olives and Lemon Juice: 'Her hands smell like olives and lemon juice / and time isn't real / break my heart, time again / but she's the one who taught me how to feel'

4.1 Pillow Talk: 'I'm happy to learn about the end of the world from you / if you let me tell you about the start.'

5. Atlas: 'I don't mind my bruised skin / if it means that I've carried you'

They're cheesy as heck, a little repetitive, but clever and sweet and heartbreaking, and having the object of his affections as a guest artist is almost too much for me.

So, for those of you who don't know it was actually Thom who wrote 'On Me'. Legend has it he threw the sheet music at Roger in the middle of a meal with his sister, her partner, Jonathan (Roger's cousin) and his partner, and Roger was so disoriented that he poured wine over it. (edit: sadly, this was found to be not true. Thom gave it to Roger and told him 'you're singing this, my vocals aren't contemporary enough', and when Roger tried to buy the rights to the song Thom left the room for a quarter of an hour and returned with a make-shift contract giving the performance and recording rights to Roger, wrapped up with a bow on it, and apparently very grumpy.)

Anyway, back to the key narrative. Thom wrote the song for Roger's voice, based on something Roger said, so Roger recorded it and it was released as the second single from 'Orange', and three days later the world was blessed by the music video... in which Thom is playing Roger, who is playing music video!Roger's lover...
I'm not sure if it's super romantic or just a long, slow cycle of narcissism. Let's try mapping it out like this:

**Roger:** says something  
**Thom:** writes a song about the something  
**Roger:** sings the song  
**Thom:** produces the song  
**Roger:** gets a music video set up  
**Thom:** stars in the video, lip-syncing to Roger's vocals  
**Roger:** plays Thom's lover in the video in which Thom is basically him.

The music video was pretty gorgeous, and follows Thom, who looks pale and unwell, walking through various streets and landscapes, seeing bright sparks of colour on different people’s chests, getting closer to them, only to see the colour fade, and that they don’t have faces - and because of the low saturation, they’re grey. It’s all very retro-chic. Each of them grip onto his forearm, then spin out, almost like a dance. As the song builds there are more and more flashes of colour, but he pushes all of them away. The streets and the sea and the mountains all fade into grey, alongside each other, and the people are milling around with their sparks of colour, then we see Thom's chest spark with purple (like his fucking eyes), despite having been without colour before. He chases after one of the people who is on the other side of the road who is sparking orange, and when orange person grabs his arm like the rest, orange guy's face fades onto his very grey skin and oh hey, Roger, what a surprise to see you here, and we get a close up on their fingers locking together. The colour palette remains the same, the people do not regain their faces, but their spark stays until their faces only glow with their colour. Roger and Thom are rotating around each other, with their hands together, and their sparks of light grow down their arms until the purple and orange meet and become red. Close up on their faces, almost kissing. Cock-block.
"Can I ask about you pre-t?"

"Well. It depends on why."

"I want to know more about your history."

"So do you want to know my history, or more about me when I was pre-t?"

"A bit of both."

"I don't ever want you to think of me as a girl."

"Never."

"And I don't want you to look for photos of me pre-t. If you haven't already."

"Of course. I mean, I saw the photos in yearbooks. But you were there."

"Okay. What do you want to know?"

"Come here, babe."

"Why am I being hugged?"

"Because you don't need to tell me anything if it makes you uncomfortable. You're my boyfriend. I just want to know you more, your history more. Because you make me happy."

Thom hid his face in Roger's shoulder, content lying on top of him for the time being. "You make me happy, too." "I came out to Alanna when I was ten, but she... outed me to myself earlier than that. When we were four she apparently introduced me to our classmates as her brother. With my old name, and my hair, and... appearance in general, it raised some questions. People decided she didn't understand. But she was right. "I hit puberty harder than her, I was the more effeminate, curvy one, so I was binding at thirteen with the good old fashioned ace bandages and sports bras. I bruised several ribs before I found Doctor Rosethorn, when I was fifteen, and she told me about binders. I couldn't wear one all the time, because of sport and because of singing. Alanna and I cut our hair at the same time so that there wouldn't be too many questions, and we could still pretend to be each other in class if necessary." "She never thought anything of it. I was quiet, so she stuck up for me, educated her friend group if they questioned it. I didn't have friends." "I started T pretty
much as soon as I turned sixteen. Doctor Rosethorn was in Idaho, so I was travelling a lot back and forth with paperwork. I forged my father's handwriting, and she lied for me." "I got top surgery when I was nineteen, and due to long term binding my breasts hadn't grown much, so the surgery was far simpler than it could have been if they were larger. The scars are... unfortunate. I rushed finding a surgeon, and the one I picked was hygienic, but not very competent. They're better than they were before."

"That wasn't what I asked."

"I know. I wanted to tell you anyway." "Ask away."

“There’s a quote - ’History forgot about us, and the Bible didn’t mention us’ that I feel summarises so much of the pain that comes with being LGBT+. History has a tradition of ripping LGBT+ narratives from its timeline. Love stories and people, gone. Love letters burned, people burned, art destroyed or shoved to rot in basements. We will never be forgotten again.” “Please welcome my pianist, and my boyfriend, Thom Trebond.”

“My beautiful boyfriend, everyone.” Thom bowed again, shy for the first time in a long time, and in true classical fashion indicated Roger, who too took another bow. They put their arms around each other coming offstage.

“You felt something.” Thom said. Roger was putting effort into control of his face, his emotions. He raised an eyebrow.

“I do that sometimes,” he said, bemused smile.

Thom looked up at Roger, taking his hand. “You felt something about me,” he said. Roger ran his thumb over the length of Thom’s cheekbone. He loomed over Thom when he was sitting.

“I do that sometimes,” he repeated. He tugged his hand from Thom’s and went to get changed. Thom wasn’t sure whether he should be worried. Roger had looked so vulnerable to him, hand outstretched, standing still. He was so in love with the man he couldn’t understand it. Roger had looked so deeply sad, so different from his performative sadness. He was ready for the next number, and so looked through Twitter and Tumblr under Roger’s tag. Others had noticed a change. It wasn’t really the best method of assessing his boyfriend’s well being, but the videos, blurry as they were, showed something different. A hot flash of fear shot through him. Had Roger cheated? Was he leaving him? He quashed the thoughts promptly. He wouldn’t present that for his fans to see.

Roger came back to him slowly, exchanging quiet words and laughter with the other performers. He didn’t seem subdued or anything of the sort until he perched himself half-on, half-off Thom’s lap, as the chair would allow. Thom kissed him, careful not to smudge his lipstick. Roger smiled and kissed his forehead. “All good?” Thom asked, words muffled in Roger’s shoulder.
“Yeah. All good.”

One of the other performers, an up and coming something or other, asked if he could post a photograph of the two of them online, and for the first time since he’d met him, Thom saw Roger hesitate before saying ‘yes’. They were trending within half an hour, even before ‘Take Me to Church’. The original video played behind them. It was an odd juxtaposition, the horror story on the screen and the vital couple on the stage. It was well received, though, even more so as Roger leaned down to kiss him, however chastely.

(raoul, gary, joh, alanna, thom and roger are arguing about pop culture)

"Political controversy in fashion is ridiculous. New styles, fashion, bringing society into fashion, fine, but the fact is that bringing BDSM into the haute couture scene is not an act performed for the love of fashion, but for underhanded tricks of controversy. It's Alexander McQueen against Lady Gaga."

"You started dating me for controversy. Is that an underhanded trick?"

"It was far more complex than that. I wouldn't have gotten involved if I didn't care for you and didn't believe that we would work well together."

"You came out in the name of controversy, as far as I can tell, Roger, you can't look at fashion with a double standard. Your image is part of your career."

"As the only person here who has ever modelled or been involved in the fashion scene I think I'm slightly more of an authority on this. Politics plays into fashion, not vice versa."

"Kiss, exchange 'I love you's and make up, boys. Come on." Roger looked at Thom very carefully, and kissed the corner of his mouth. "And..?" Thom played with his serviette until it was little more than environmental waste, Roger's hand too hot on the small of his back. "Don't you... say that to each other?"

Roger and Thom turned to each other in a close unison, and examined each other critically. Roger looked more open than Thom could have expected, and he himself felt more terrified than he should have. He felt like he was being dissected. "Well. Do you love me?" Thom asked.

"Do you love me?" Roger retorted, entirely ignoring the others. Thom watched his eyes, but felt too vulnerable to make a judgement.

"What's your definition? Is it a noun or an adjective or an add-on to every other emotion--"

"It's a verb. It's only love if it's a verb and an emotion. It's an active process."

"Oh shit," Alanna said, and buried her face in her hands. Jon and George went to pat her back at the same time. Raoul and both looked inquisitive, but as Thom and Roger started firing off fancy words at each other, they understood. No-one tried to interrupt, in fact splitting off into their own conversations, as Thom and Roger fumbled around for paper and pens, googling quotes.
Jon very seriously considered bashing their heads together after fifteen minutes, but Thayet told him it was far too entertaining to interrupt.

"Love is an abstract concept."

"Romantic love is a Victorian concept used to oppress women and enhance capitalism, historically."

"Love is an inherent emotion."

"But what does it do?"

"Love is a concept in the music industry, and if we're going by our music we've been in love since August 2015."

"But what is the intersection between romance and friendship and sex?"

After forty-five minutes and no less than five full pages of writing, Roger nearly yelled, "I stand by my point, 'love' is an active process and choice, into an ongoing positive relationship based around incomparable affection and care, and deep commitment to the maintenance of the relationship!"

"Then I love you. Of course I love you." Thom didn't have time to regret saying it, as Roger automatically said,

"And I love you." Roger looked more confused than Thom had ever seen him, and he took Roger's hand up and kissed his knuckles. "I love you," Roger repeated. Thom leaned against him and settled his head in the crook of Roger's neck and shoulder. Roger's arm felt warm and familiar around his waist, their breathing felt natural slotted in along-side each other. Roger yawned and Thom fell in closer against him, rested his hand just under Roger's shirt on his hip to rub gentle circles into his skin.

Jon ruined the moment entirely by breaking the group into a vigorous round of applause.

(while performing a duet, a hate group starts chanting homophobic rubbish. they're promptly removed, but everyone else is pretty shaken.)

"Do we need to call this off?" Roger whispered on Thom's ear. He shook his head into Roger’s neck, hot with fear and cold sweat.

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes." Thom took his hand away from the microphone. Butterflies erupted in his stomach. He looked out to the audience, with Roger so close they could share body heat. They were both too hot, Roger's heart raced under his hand. He hadn't realised how scared he was. The audience were almost entirely silent.
He wrapped Roger's tie around his hand, pulled him close, and whispered into the microphone, "The world is changed because you are made of ivory and gold." They were barely touching.

"The curves of your lips rewrite history," Roger murmured back, and they kissed, full and passionate and only just maintaining the grace of a staged kiss. Thom kept his hand tangled in the red tie, and Roger's hands spread from his hair to the base of his spine.

He felt the rush of power, of knowledge, that they could rewrite history. He could rewrite history, and make history, but the fervid passion he felt with Roger buried all of that. He let go slowly, pushed their foreheads together.

The silence was contrasted with the shrieks and yells of delight, thousands of phones flashing. He had drowned them out, for a second. There were police and guards at every entrance, they weren't even trying to hide themselves.

"Nothing makes one so vain as being told one is a sinner," he told them. "This is a song called 'Ivory', and I wrote it for you."

"Are you planning anything new with Thom Trebond?"

"Oh yes! Quite soon we plan to take over the world."

RogerConte tweeted: To respond to the question 'Why and when did the references to 'Velvet Goldmine' start?: (1/4)

RogerConte tweeted: Somewhere between the music, glitter, Oscar Wilde, and needing something beautiful in the world is why it started. (2/4)

RogerConte tweeted: 'Velvet Goldmine' is an anthem, a homage to glam rock, to sexual liberation, to liberation of sexuality and gender (3/4)

RogerConte tweeted: to all things beautiful, and in a twisted way, to love. Perhaps that sounds melodramatic, but it's the truth. (4/4)

RogerConte tweeted: And to carry through with Ewan McGregor: 'The greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love, and be loved in return'.

(Alanna is formally quitting music and youtube, taking down all of her solo work)

"So hi, I'm Alanna Trebond."

"And I'm Thom Trebond."
"And that was our mashup of 'You and Your Hand', by Pink, and 'For Your Entertainment', by Adam Lambert. This mash-up is the last video ever to be posted on the LIONS page. Our band is officially dissolved." "Thom will be continuing with his channel, and I've relocated over to the Not an Object and Kalasin and Anne page for self defence and feminism work."

"Alanna and I have split into different pathways in life, and that's-- well, it's absolutely fine. I will always be a musician, and that is my career and life, but it's not Alanna's."

"I'll be working on various NGOs internationally in promotion of women's welfare, and while Buriram and Keladry have taken control of Not an Object, I'm still a co-chair."

"And she'll keep singing, and singing with me, I won't allow her to stop, but it just won't be for public consumption. We're both musicians, but she's chosen where she wants to go in her life, and I support her fully in that."

"And hey, you can all know that at least we dissolved our 'band' on a great pun."

"What?"

"You're literally here for their entertainment, and I'm not here for their entertainment."

"Shut the fuck up, Alanna." "Oh my god. Anyway, that brings us around to the first point. Alanna arranged this number, hence why I didn't quite realise the dissonance in entertainment, and she bullied my boyfriend's band into playing it, and booked the venue, so basically she's gone out with a bang."

"And as said, I'm going to be doing music in my own home and when I'm with Thom, but I can't give myself to it. So thank all of you lovely viewers for your support over the past five years, but this is Alanna the musician signing off."
Chapter 24

Chapter by dunedinparsley

Chapter Summary

an optional chapter - this was in a divergent narrative in which roger becomes more actively violent/akin to his canon counterpart. it didn't work, so isn't really part of the H:V canon, but i thought i should post it anyway
. the remainder of this fic will be posted tomorrow. :) 

content warning: spousal violence (verbal and physical)

(Roger has signed up to act in a music video which fetishises trans women. thom has just found out about it.)

"You're queer, Roger! Queerer than I am, a queer poster child, you are queer, please tell me you are not backing out on that!"

"I'm not backing out on it. I'm still fucking you, aren't I? I'm still 'a queer poster child', aren't I? I'm merely not giving in to bisexual erasure."

"That's bullshit. You narcissistic prick, there are a thousand projects for you. And this? This fetishises trans people so severely I want to vomit."

"Representation, baby."

"Don't feed me that crap, you don't care about trans representation."

"Sure I do."

"You actively don't care. You don't give a shit that I'm trans, that anyone's trans, you would be entirely indifferent if it weren't marketable. If you want to stop being spoken about like you're an object, then damn well start acting like you're not one."

Roger grabbed Thom by the top of his neck, thumb on his jaw. "You don't know what you're talking about." He pulled him closer, height difference very apparent as he towered over Thom. It was painful, his neck held that way. "Everything is an asset, Thom. Even you. Some assets are more valuable than others--" He squeezed Thom's wrist with his other hand, made him gasp, "--but I take the assets I see, and I don't care about the consequence." He shoved Thom to the side, knocking their shins together so that he fell against the wall. There was resign in his face, the anger gone.

Thom leaned against the wall, his heart making his head hurt with its pounding. His neck hurt his heart hurt his head hurt his wrist hurt his boyfriend just assaulted him Jesus fucking shit--

Roger's tie made an impressive snap as he pulled it up. The wine red fabric looked hazy, wool - or
was it silk? - looked like it was moving. "Get dressed, Thom, we need to go."

"I'm not going."

"Thom--"

"I said I'm not going, so leave." "Leave, Roger!" "Don't worry, I won't say anything and I'll cover your arse. Just leave."

He felt like he went for hours without breathing.

***

Thom Trebond - Official posted
I'm sorry to all in attendance and those who were looking forward to my being there, but I won't be attending the Gala this evening. I'm sick and a bit disgusting; I think I've got whatever Conté had last week. I know it'll be a wonderful night! Everyone behave.

***

Confirm transfer of

500,000 USD to RAINN (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network)
from your primary account TREBOND, THOM?

CONFIRM

This transfer will be approved by your assigned proxy, TREBOND, ALANNA.

***

11.16
From: ICE2 Alanna
RAINN?

11.17
From: ICE2 Alanna
What happened?

11.17
From: ICE2 Alanna
Did he hit you?

Incoming call: ICE2 Alanna
Incoming call: ICE2 Alanna
Voicemail from: ICE2 Alanna
"If you don't pick up I'm calling the police."

Incoming call: ICE2 Alanna
Incoming call: ICE2 Alanna
Incoming call: ICE2 Alanna
Incoming call: ICE2 Alanna
Incoming call: ICE2 Alanna
Incoming call: ICE2 Alanna
Incoming call: ICE2 Alanna
Incoming call: ICE2 Alanna
Voicemail from: ICE2 Alanna
“Where the fuck are you, Thom? Please, just-- please, Thom, pick up the phone.”

Incoming call: Jonathan Conté

Voicemail from: Jonathan Conté
“Hey, Thom. Alanna’s freaking out, are you okay? Whatever’s happened please just call her back, or call me, or someone. We’ll do whatever needs to be done, just call one of us.”

Incoming call: Maude Tanner

“Maude!”

“Hi, sweetheart.”

“Happy birthday. Did you get my flowers?”

“Yes, they’re beautiful. Thank you. Alanna’s worried about you, are you okay?”

“Yes. Yes, I’m fine. Is that why you called?”

“Well, I needed to thank you, but yes.”

“Oh.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’ve just got a cold. Hence, why I wasn’t picking up for Alanna.” Maude very obviously doubted this, but they chatted for a while anyway. Thom was pleased to hear from her. He wasn’t sure if he cared about her as much as Alanna did, but to be fair, if Alanna cared about something it was automatically, on a scale of one to ten, at least an eight. He knew that Maude probably wouldn’t have called if not to tell Alanna that he was okay.

He curled up on his side, and counted down from a thousand.

***

Roger smelled like whiskey and perfume when he crawled into bed, still fully dressed. Thom didn't want to open his eyes, but Roger kissed the back of his neck and placed a hand on his waist. He usually slept without a shirt on, but he didn't want Roger's hands on his skin. The clock on the bedside told him it was three, in blaring red.

"I'm so sorry." Roger's obnoxious oxfords scratched on the wood at the base of the bed. He stayed still as Roger stroked circles into his side, kept his forehead at the nape of his neck. "I'm so, so sorry, Thom."

"I'm not an asset. And I'm not a mannequin to be tossed around and shoved into the cupboard then dragged out again when you need me."
"I know."

"Let me sleep, Roger." "And shower. You stink." Thom didn't want to contemplate whether that much perfume could be transferred via honorary hugs or by the type of fucking that came from rage.

"I'm so, so sorry. I'm so sorry, sweetheart." He didn't want to contemplate that he wanted to stay with a man who he truly believed could cheat on him, who hit him.

Thom was wrong - he had bruised, just a little under his jaw, right next to his ear. It ached. Talking hurt. He found out through the back of a spoon and the whispered 'hello' over breakfast. Roger had made pancakes and coffee.

Thom ignored Alanna's calls, though he stared blankly at the screen of his phone. He chewed on a strawberry that Roger had fed him on an unnecessarily miniature fork. "You assaulted me." Saying it out loud felt wrong, foreign. It was like learning to roll his 'r's all over again. "There's cheating on me, and then there's..." He proffered his jaw to Roger, showed him the bruising. He didn't flinch, nor wince. He stared at the shadows of Thom's skin.

"Are you going to call the police? Tell someone?"

"I donated to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network last night. Anything over three thousand dollars Alanna has to clear. She guessed, but she won't do anything." "I won't, either. But if there's a next time I will. Is that clear? I will call the police and I will publicly shame you, I don't give a shit about your familial trauma or your self-entitlement, I will shame you and have you penalised and I will leave you. Did you cheat on me last night?"

"No."

"You stunk of perfume."

"Side effect of galas, pretending to give a shit about people."

"I note that whenever it seems you're attracted to someone outside of me it's someone with a cu--" Thom slapped himself internally, and pinched his thigh until the skin broke. "--vagina. You've told me to back off on the PDA. And you've signed on for this fucking music video, and this is all adding up to someone who isn't particularly trans friendly. I'm not your damned girlfriend, Roger. My vagina isn't my defining factor but if the only reason you're fucking me is because of it--"

"I've fucked more people in my life than you've hugged, I'd wager. There's a decent split of penises to vaginas in there, and if you honestly think that I wouldn't be fucking you if you had a cock you're kidding yourself. I care enough about you that if we didn't get together I wouldn't have minded 'just being friends'. I don't do friends."

"You do assets."

"And you're the best asset I've got, baby."
"Don't call me that when we're fighting."

"God, what do you want me to say?"

"You once said to me that apologies only matter superficially, or that the apology comes from a place of remorse - not just for the action, but for why it happened. I don't know if that was your version of moral wooing, but... god, Roger! Roger, you're my lover. You're my best friend. And I want... I want you to be an ally to the trans community, a real one. I want you to swear on something you actually give a shit about that you didn't cheat on me again. I want you to swear on yourself that you will never lay a hand on me again, because the only people who've hit me in this world are dead, my father, in prison, the men who assaulted me in Washington, and Alanna, in training so that precisely what you did to me would never happen, and I can't handle you being added to the list. I will not stand by and allow you to be a philandering, abusive, alcoholic partner. I want your word, right now, and always, or I am walking out the door and I am not coming back. I love you too much just to give up on this, on us. But I respect myself more than I respect our relationship."

Roger stood up, and paced for a good minute. Thom watched him, heart racing. Roger came to stand next to Thom's chair, and got down on his knees, placed his hands on Thom's thighs. "I want control in everything I do. I want proof that I am the exception, the best, I have the most capacity, I can do more than anyone has ever done. I generally don't care enough about anyone to think of them as more than a marionette. I think of you as a person, because you are one, and because I love you more than I ever thought I could love anyone. However, when I am frustrated, or feel I am not progressing, or I am out of control, I... do anything I need to take control. Our PDA has always toed the line of good publicity and a repellent, and I need to appeal to everyone, I need all the teenage girls in the world to imagine me sweeping them off their feet, and the boys. Stevie says I'm losing traction with female audiences, and that's the primary constituent of the pop industry. Sure, some people fetishise you and I, drool over us holding hands, but most don't. It just makes me seem unreachable. That video was a glorious uprising from an otherwise plateauing period. I can't plateau, I'm not ready. I'm on edge. You challenging its morality made me question how it would effect my publicity, and I freaked the fuck out."

"Your improvidence astounds me."

"You challenging my request... I was angry, things weren't going my way. I don't know if I can apologise for being ambitious. But I am so, so sorry for ever treating you as less than autonomous, thinking of you as such. I'm sorry I hurt you, for being so. It was wrong. I know it. I swear on myself that I will never, ever hit you again. I promise. I promise, sweetheart. And I... fuck, I don't know, I swear on Jon that I didn't cheat on you. I swear on the Gliga Vasile, I swear on you, Thom. You're the best asset, and the best friend, and the best partner I will ever have."

"The music video?"

"I've signed contracts, I can't break it." "I can demand a change in cast, though? Get a trans woman put in, have the lingerie scene taken out."

Thom didn't know what to do. So he offered his hand. At Roger's perturbed look he said, "Traditionally, you shake it."

"Let's move in together."
"Okay." "Roger, I don't know what you want me to say. I can't sing, my neck hurts and I've talked too much. I'm hurt. I'm still angry at you. I need to just... I don't know. Regroup? Give me a bit, okay? Just... give me a bit."

Pop musician Thom Trebond named ambassador of RAINN
so according to my notes this is all still 2017-2018, but realistically it's more like 2020-2022, if not later.

content warnings: sexual references, implied spousal violence

Trending: Thom Trebond
Thom Trebond releases first studio album 'Auburn'.

thomtrebond tweeted: Hi, yes, this is my new twitter.
thomtrebond tweeted: Thank you all for the positive responses to 'Auburn'.
thomtrebond tweeted: My 'thank you' list for the album can be found on my website. <3

alannatrebond tweeted: He changed first so I don’t have to feel guilty about it. Hey everyone.
thomtrebond tweeted: love u
    alannatrebond tweeted: love u too, loser.

(Roger and Thom are living together in LA)

Thom: "You remember Ozorne Tasikhe?"
Roger: "We sold Dorian Gray to him, yeah?"

"He's directing a production of 'Bare'! It's off-Broadway, but it's fully funded and they've already got Alexandra as choreographer, and they're not doing the fucking musical, they're doing the pop opera, and--"

"Slow down." Roger looked exhausted, but his smile was bright and warm. "You're never this excited, come on, continue."
"He's asked me to audition for Peter. No, he hasn't 'asked me to audition', he's said 'if you want this part it's yours, with no questions asked'. He's asked you to audition for Jason though. He's emailed you and Stevie."

"Oh."

"I mean-- 'Bare' is my thing, not yours."

"I love 'Bare', you know that. But... has he given a time?"

Thom perched on Roger's knee to show him the email. "I wouldn't want to go past the thirteenth."

"Hm. I'll think on it." "Are... are you going to think on it? Or are you taking it?"

"Well, I was thinking of extending the tour, but... I don't know. I've always wanted to play Peter. Thinking on it. But I'll have to tell him soon, he won't put out a call for Peter."

"Okay."

(Several days pass and it's clear Roger isn't pursuing the same goals in life as Thom is - they're having general spousal discord about where their relationship is going. Thom chooses to go to New York and perform in Bare, which necessitates six months apart. Costarring with Numair, rehearsals are going well, but Thom is incredibly isolated - he has no contact with Roger, and Alanna is entirely detached from him. He is finding the level of celebrity he has unmanageable in terms of professional development and being able to live a semi-isolated life, where he can live independently, make choices for himself etc..

Alanna is very scattered and trying to achieve a thousand things at once, and while she's doing relatively well, it's unclear as to what she's actually doing with her life. She and George are in a good place, but not living together.

Thom spends Christmas alone, but calls Jon on Boxing Day - they talk progressively more over time, developing a strong friendship entirely separate from Alanna and Roger. The ongoing theme of magic in canon being music here is made more salient because a lot of what they talk about together is about power - how social power is an entirely different thing than it was five hundred years ago, and how Jon chooses to pursue politics because he believes he has a civic duty that he is capable of performing well, not out of a want for power, and how Roger, on the other hand, chose to pursue music rather than the family standard of politics not just because he loves it, but because he viewed it as a far higher point of social influence and social capital. Thom realises he has no interest in power or social capital, and decides to withdraw from the public eye once the show is over to pursue the academic side of music again, and focus on composition rather than performance. He is having quite severe anxiety, and panic attacks.

In this upcoming scene, Thom had gone to visit Roger in LA for his birthday weekend. It was a tense period of time. Roger made a proposal of marriage, which Thom rejected, because it was clear that Roger was proposing for publicity not out of love.
Thom has just fucked up in a rehearsal and gone outside, trying not to cry. Numair has followed him.)


Thom: "Long weekend." "I went to see Roger in L.A, and travel is bad enough, but he... he was just looking to pick a fight. He said I was kissing him differently and it just... escalated."

"Thom... I know it's none of my business, but as I understand it Roger's never been quite fair to you with the whole 'possessive' thing. Nor in general."

"He just wanted to pick a fight. He's angry that I turned down his proposal, he misses me, he's stressed."

"Whoa, you turned down a proposal? A marriage one?"

"Yes. His sales dropped drastically and he proposed the next day."

"Ouch."

"Yeah, I told him he was a selfish prick and that marriage means more to some of us than a publicity stunt."

"And you didn't dump him."

"I love him. He loves me. We've both put too much work into this relationship to let it go based on... something that was justified, in theory."

"It's not justified at all." "Did he hurt you?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake." "No, Numair, he didn't. I would have called the police. Actually, I would have punched him in the face, and then called the police. He's just being a brat. We bickered and we fucked and neither of us got emotional clarity so we both got more angry."

"You have bruises on your wrists."

"I would have stopped him if I needed to." "I'm sorry, I'm just... tired. I don't mean to be irritable."

"We all have off-days." "You're going to be the best Peter to ever grace the stage." "Hey, god, that wasn't meant to be a tear jerker." "I accuse your boyfriend of being abusive and it's the compliment that makes you cry." "Thom, you've got to stop letting him get under your skin like this. I know you love him but if he leaves you this on edge, in this much pain, with such self-doubt he's not worth it. He's not worth this show, either." "I'm not saying 'dump him', not just like that. But something needs to change." "Okay, we've got three minutes. Go wash your face. If you suck on a wet towel the lump in your throat will go away."

"Nice trick."

"I was a very angsty adolescent."

"You're a very angsty adult."
"It's true."

(The cast have gone for drinks after a rehearsal. Thom is drunk for the first time in several years, and highly emotional. Numair is looking after him after vomiting in the bathroom.)

“Numair.”

“Yes, Thom.”

“Your voice is my sexuality.”

“Thank you.”

“I cried during ‘Cross’ today, it was so embarrassing. Maria mocked me.”

“Do you feel like a sinner?”

“I don’t think sin exists.”

“You went to church as a child and went to a religious school, didn’t you?”

“I cared more about the organ than about God.”

“Why do you love Bare so much?”

“Because I don’t know where I’d be without it. The music’s just the start. It’s racist and it stereotypes and it can be graceless but every character is grace. No-one is a villain. Matt and Ivy are just as sympathetic as Jason and Peter, moreso sometimes. They’re human.” “And even when they’re fighting Jason and Peter fight for each other. It’s external force, not their love that’s corrupt.” “I think I need to break up with Roger.”

“Yeah. Me too.” “You’re a nice drunk.”

“I can’t get drunk much or else I’ll hurt my liver. I sort of want to cry.”

“That’s alright. I’ll join in if it helps. I’ll even start, if that’ll set you off.”

"You're such a mess."

"You've got puke on your shirt, so I think I get the higher ground here."

***

ARE 'BARE' COSTARS NUMAIR SALMALIN AND THOM TREBOND HAVING AN AFFAIR?

thomtrebond retweeted this: No.
(Roger is gross and passive aggressive about the rumours of Thom and Numair having an affair.

It is opening night. The show went very well. Roger is there with several security guards, and has greeted Thom as the cast come out into the theatre. Thom is visibly upset and trying to engage with other people before addressing Roger - Numair is being protective.)

Numair: "Give him a second. He's not okay, Roger."

Roger: "What happened?"

Numair: "You happened. Look, mate, you can pull that face on me but Thom's struggling and he needs more support than you're giving him. Actually, eighty percent of the support he needs is about you."

(Thom enters the conversation with forced cheer.): "Hey, babe. Thank you for coming."

Roger: "I wouldn't miss your opening night. You were perfect."

Numair: "I know it's a hard concept for you to grasp, Roger, but appearances aren't everything."

Thom: "Numair, drop it. I can deal. Daine's over there." (Numair leaves, albeit hesitantly.) "There, the magic word." "I didn't know you were coming."

"I wouldn't miss it." "Come here." "What's happened, Thom?"

"It's been a really, really long few months."

"I've booked a hotel room. Do you want to--?"

"No. I mean... can we go back to mine?"

(The car trip back is tense, Thom not speaking or engaging at all. They get back to Thom's hotel room.)

Roger: "What the hell is going on?"

"You tell me." "I mean it, you tell me. I'm sick of putting the work in and you just-- taking that for granted because you're the hot one. The older one. The better of us." "I'm going to shower."

"What do you want me to say?" "I'm sorry for proposing with ill intentions? I'm sorry that you get called my girlfriend, despite being male? I'm sorry I'm not as unrealistically communicative as you want me to be?"

"Hey, Thom, how was your week? I thought of you, just once. I haven't cheated on you. I know you didn't cheat on me. Do you want to hear about this stupid thing that happened today? I do love you, even when I'm not in front of a camera. No, you're not my sob story publicity stunt."
"You know all of that."

"Say it anyway!"

"I haven't cheated on you since 2016. I do love you, particularly when we're not in front of a camera, because we are so much more than an image! No, you're not my sob story publicity stunt. And even if it started like that it most certainly isn't now. You're my partner, if not my fiance, I love you, I want to be with you."

"Then put some fucking effort into being with me! And not just when there's a photo opportunity, not just when you need a shag, not just when you imply that I'm cheating on you because I have a career that doesn't entail being your puppy dog!"

"My career has always been my priority!"

"My career is my priority, too, it doesn't mean I ignore you for the better part of four months!"

"Your time isn't as pressured as mine."

"Fine, maybe that's true, but don't treat me circumstantially, or as a buzz-word in interviews, just dump me and date your career exclusively."

"I spend my days in meetings, you spend your days playing piano and snogging Numair."

"That is bullshit, Roger, and you know it! Numair is married! And straight! And my costar, in a job, which takes a hell of a lot of work and control, which I am being paid substantially for - in a romantic musical, which I asked that you audition for and you very clearly refused! Playing Peter in 'bare' has been my dream since I was eleven years old, I have an amazing costar, and acting inherently implies not real. If I am kissing differently it's probably because I've kissed three people in my life, one who I don't know the name of, you, who I've only seen for forty-eight hours in four months, and Numair, who yes, I have been kissing intermittently for the past four months under direction, with dozens of people watching, for a fucking stage show."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, you should be."

"How was your day?"

"Terrifying. I spent an hour with the make-up team to cover up my scars and that was two hours before call. Numair had a date with Daine, so I called Alanna who is in the process of getting her gun licence, and so was at a shooting range and couldn't talk. I also spoke to Jonathan, who says you haven't spoken to him since last year, and that he loves you. I didn't know if you were coming, so I text you as a last ditch resort, considering you never respond, and it turns out you got a new phone while you were away."

"The old one broke. I didn't think to..."

"Tell me. Yeah. I figured. "How was your day?"

"It was... okay. I got yelled at by a Katy Perry fan this morning."
"Baby, is she not a firework?"

"Nope. Alex got the girl away, but it was rather unpleasant a wake-up call. I don't know how she found me. Oh, but I've finished working with the team of lawyers, so most of the contracts are done. We've got a building in L.A." "Give me your phone." Thom did as told, and Roger looped an arm around his waist, pulled him down. He was sprawled, half over Roger, half on the couch, and rested his head on his shoulder. "I was so proud of you tonight, baby." "You were perfect." "Why was Numair so angry?"

"After that weekend I... had a bad day. Started crying. He saw the bruises on my wrists, and I had said that you accused me of cheating on you, and he assumed that you were abusive." Roger tugged him closer, so their limbs were tangled and they were face to face. Thom tried his best to read Roger, the tiny lines at the corners of his eyes and his wrinkled brow, but kept speaking. "I promptly informed him otherwise, but I can't say that you're not an arse a lot of the time."

"The bruises..?"

"You held my wrists above my head and wouldn't let me move. You were rougher than usual."

"I--"

"Didn't you realise?" "I would have told you to stop, if I thought you hadn't."

"I didn't realise." Roger kissed the inside of each of his wrists, and rested his head in the crook of his shoulder. Thom slipped his hands up under the back of Roger's shirt for the warmth, the knowledge he was there and real.

"I've missed you so much." He looked out the window, penthouse glass walls overlooking the city lights. It was so excessive, he knew it. He did not need the space he had, the money he was spending on it was outrageous, but he loved the city. There had been fireworks on New Years, and he sat as close to the glass as he could, wrapped in blankets, and watched from start to finish.

"I've missed you, too." Roger tilted his head to glance out the windows. The view was extraordinary, even for New York. Thom had picked well. "I love you," he repeated, whispered soft against his ear. Thom smiled, and kissed him. The way their limbs and hands and clothes tangled was so familiar, and he realised in a rush how fiercely he had missed it.

"Are you staying?" he asked, barely parted from Roger's lips.

"Two weeks. Then I have to work on the album, but I'll be here. I could stay with you, if you want."

"An album? The last in the contract?"

"Yeah. It's about half way done." "Sorry."

"Which songs are you using?"

"Only three that we've worked on together, out of fifteen."

"Which ones?"
"'Wilde', 'A Little Unconscious', and a rework on the chorus of 'Crown'."

"Are the others all new?"

"No. I've reworked some of my very, very old stuff. There are... seven that are entirely new."

"Can I hear them?"

"Tomorrow?"

"Okay."

"Do you want to go to bed?"

"No."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"Definitely not."

"Do you--?"

"Just stay here. Okay?"

"Okay." "You dyed your hair."

"It washes out after a couple of days. The director thought that my hair made me stand out too much."

"It's your voice that makes you stand out."

Thom laughed despite the tears. "Tell me more about how great I am."

"I cried in 'Role of a Lifetime'. Apart from Matt Doyle, recorded, no-one has held that power in the high notes. You just... blew me away. All of your songs were... beautiful. 'One', despite not featuring you heavily, was... perfect. You captured everything. Your acting was... well, it surprised me. I didn't know you could act like that. I was so, so proud of you. You are the best Peter I've ever seen or heard. And that comes from both my biased and unbiased judgement." "I won't deny I was jealous of Numair, but it was entirely worth it." "I've missed you so much." "How have your headaches been?"

"Nasty. So nasty." (Thom starts sobbing.) "I missed you, Roger. I thought-- maybe you'd-- and you kept not responding-- and I rejected you and while-- I don't want us to-- and I didn't know-- I thought you'd decided-- I didn't want--"

"Sh... sh..." "I'm so sorry. I... I take you for granted. I never think to... respond to you because I view you as constant. You're not a question in my life, Thom. You never were, even when I was angry."

(The next morning)
Thom: "You don't have any engagements?"

Roger: "None. Just you." "Oh, and I have a ticket for tonight, too."

"Thank you." "Can you kiss me?"

"Always, babe." "I don't want to keep apologising."

"You don't have to." "I was right to turn down your proposal. You know that, right?"

"In a way. We have agreed on publicity stunts before."

"Not ones that entail a legally binding contract of commitment, that the LGBTQ community has fought for the right to take for generations. We've staged dates, kisses, matching mismatched socks. Not... this."

"That's illogical."

"I know. But I feel it, in a way I can't fight." "If you had said 'I want to get married, as a publicity stunt', it would have been... better. Not staging a sincere proposal."

"It may not be legal, but I am committed to you, entirely, Thom. You are... my life partner, as I can foresee."

"Would getting married change that?"

"It would make it legal. Have... sentimental value. Exchange some more rings. Have some pretty photos. Time in the press."

"So let's wait until my hair is red and you're not underweight, and when both of us are on the verge of trending all the time, and we're in the right space for the sentimentality and pomp. And organisation."

"Okay." "So--"

"I want to marry you, Roger. So much. I can not imagine being in a relationship with anyone else. I'm in this for the long run, but considering we both feel that, a wedding won't change much about us. Only the external." "I love you, Roger, but it hurt like all fuck. You could have talked to me."

"Okay. I misjudged you."

"Let's get breakfast. And you can show me the work on the album."

thomtrebond posted to instagram

[image]
And so I wait for you like a lonely house
*Til you will see me again, live in me
‘Til then, my windows ache

With: rogerconte

rogerconte posted to instagram

[Image]
As you were fire from within
The moon lives in the lining of your skin

With: thomtrebond
    thomtrebond: gay

(a few months pass. Thom has withdrawn almost entirely from the public eye, and is having a much better time. They are living together full time but aren’t both around much, which suits them both fine.

Jon’s work as a diplomat becomes full-fledged, and Alanna slowly settles into the idea of doing diplomacy and politics. George and Myles are like, running a spy organisation?? My notes here make legitimately no sense, but that’s what I can gather. Keladry has graduated high school and started studying law.

Roger and Thom get engaged, quietly and privately, with the caveat that they will have a very large, very publicised wedding. Thom is composing for film scores and other artists, but is slowly putting together a new album of his own.

Thom and Alanna are quite detached from one another.)
(These upcoming scenes all take place in the days leading up to Thom and Roger's wedding.

Jon and Thayet got married about a year ago.

Alanna and Thom haven't seen each other in over a year, but Alanna is acting as best woman. Thom's bachelor party involves karaoke - he seems to be panicking about this. He is two weeks late for his testosterone injection, which always makes him miserable.)

"She's better than me, Roger."

"I-- she's-- what?"

"I'm only the successful one because I care about it more. And I'm male. And I'm about to be married to you. "Have you heard her sing in the shower?"

"I've heard her in live concert, and recorded, and on our couch, she's not better than you. She's also out of practice."

"She's naturally better than me."

"And you fight for it, work for it, she doesn't."

"She's going to outsing me, at my own bachelor party."

"She is not."

"Do you know how competitive she is?"

"Yes."

"She's going to beat me, and I'm a singer, and it's my bachelor party."

"You sang with her for years."

"Yes, and I'm even more scared of her voice now, because she'll probably out-belt me, or go on a run-- I can't do runs like her!"

"How long has it been since you've seen her?"
"A year. And a half."

"And you love her."

"Yes."

"And you admire her." (Roger sits Thom down and hands him a cup of coffee.) "Well, I can't say that I agree with your sentiments, but you're just having an excess of feelings, not being a whiny brat." "Her hair is longer. She's dyed it, as she said she would so she won't take attention away from you, but it's still red - just a bit darker. She's got freckles. She looks more muscular, but she's dressed like she's always dressed."

(Thom stops panicking. Roger checks his phone.)

Thom: "I love you. Thank you so much for this, Roger. For... for all of this." "For asking Jon for my number."

"Don't get too emotional." "Baby?"

"Hm?"

"Thank you for texting back."

(nice pre-marital emotions)

"Roger?" "Can you do my injection? Please? I know you don't like it, but I'm two weeks late. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't making me cry about the three feelings I've ever had in my life."

"A whole three? Wow. "Yes, fine, I'll do it." (Roger goes to wash his hands and put gloves on; Thom gets out the injection attaches the needle etc.. Roger enters, looking displeased.) "I don't mind doing it, I'm just bad at it."

"You've only done it three times, of course you're bad at it."

"Funnily enough, bruising your arse isn't my idea of a fun learning experience."

"Wow, so romantic." (Thom leans over a desk and pulls his trousers and underpants down. Roger injects him - not particularly well, but fine. He's struggling to get his grip right to pull the needle out. They both laugh about it.

Alanna enters, at an unfortunate moment considering Thom's pants are still down and Roger is wearing plastic gloves with both hands on Thom's arse. She's perfectly aware of what's going on, but full of snark, says:)

Alanna: "Break it up, lover boys, or the marriage bed won't satisfy."

Thom: "Alanna!" (He turns to see her just as Roger pulls the needle out.) "Ouch!"

Roger: "Sorry."

Alanna: "Hey, Thom." "First time I see you in two years and your pants are down and there's blood
on your arse. Typical."

(She is very amused. Roger is trying to put a bandaid on Thom while simultaneously wiping up the blood already there.)

Alanna @ Roger: "You're horrible at that."

Roger: "He knows this, and asked me to anyway."

Alanna: "Conceding to being bad at something? Wow, you've changed."

Roger, full of sarcasm: "What can I say? I take your criticism to heart."

Thom: “You take hers to heart and not mine? Ouch.” (He’s managed to get himself adequately dressed.)

Roger: “Give me three more days of freedom.”

Alanna: “Your perspective on marriage is heartwarming.”

Thom: “How’s George?”

Alanna: “He’s downstairs getting our keys. I asked which room you were in. If you’d waited a hot second I’d’ve even done your injection for you.”

Thom: “It’s good to see you.”

(They hug. It’s a significant moment.)

Roger: “I’m gonna go see Jon.”

(Thom and Roger kiss.)
"I love you," they said in unison.

Alanna: "Oh my god, you two are vulgar."

(All the same, she and Roger manage to shake hands in a cordial enough way.

She and Thom sit on the bed. It’s genuinely awkward. Unlike in canon, a mix of having actually grown up into adulthood together means they haven’t quite managed the on/off switch that their parting ways in canon initially allowed (then Thom went around leeching people’s Gifts, raising the dead etc.), at least on Thom’s part, in terms of ease of interaction.)

"Oh my god, your hair,” he said eventually, reaching out to touch it. She smacked him away.

"Have you gotten shorter?” she retorted, only to ruffle his hair.

"Fuck off."

"Charming as ever. Oh my god, Thom. You're getting married."

"I know."
"To Roger."

"Well yes, I’d hope so."

"He’s never going to talk like that to anyone else, I hope you know. You two are disgusting."

"We are, aren’t we?"

"Oh my god. Disgusting. Come on, let's go sing karaoke."

"Alanna."

"What’s wrong?" "Don’t cry." “Or, cry if you have to.”

"I won’t. “Can we just sit here for a bit? Um. Just, catch me up on… stuff.”

“What’s the elephant in this room?”

“One and a half years of dead skin cells, I guess.”

“I’m sorry it’s been so long.”

“No, it’s fine.”

“No, it’s not.” “We used to cry at each other all the time.”

“Yeah, well. Dead skin cells and all.”

“What, with your millionaire skin regime? I don’t think so.”

“Oh, fuck off, Saint Laurent.”

“I loved ‘Carbonel’. I watched the awards ceremony while I was in Beijing with Jon, live. It was like, two in the morning and we had a meeting with a governor the next morning and we were both cheering like it was a football match until four a.m..”

“I never knew you had such strong feelings about animated cats.” “Oh, actually, Carbonel looks exactly like Faithful. I get it now.”

“Faithful died.”

“What?”

“He died last year.”

“I’m so sorry. How did he die?”

“Just age. He fell asleep and didn’t wake up. Which is good. I was always scared I’d get us into trouble someday and he’d get shot or something.”

“He was… fourteen?”

“Yeah, or fifteen.” “I’m pregnant.”
“What?”

“I’m pregnant.” (She’s clearly terrified, but incredibly happy.) “I haven’t told George yet. But I’m pregnant.”

“And you’re getting on my arse for getting married? Jesus Christ, Alanna.” “That’s… is that good?”

“Yeah, I think so. Not awesome timing, but I… we… want kids. We were planning it. Just didn’t think it through really well.”

“I… how far along are you?”

“Only a couple of weeks, a month, maybe. I just… suspected. Did a test yesterday night.” “You’re the first person to know, so you can’t be mad at me for not saying ‘happy birthday’.”

“No, you’re going to name it ‘Thom’. That’s the only thing that’ll get you out of this one.”

“Oh yeah, they’ll love that. Not an easy name to live up to, you know. Or down to, for that matter.”

“So, it’s due in June.”

“June.”

“When are you telling George?”

“I don’t know how to tell George.”

“He’s going to be a great dad.” “And you’ll be an amazing mum.”

“I’m going to be a mediocre mum at best, you know that.”

“No. You’ll be a stubborn arse and infuriate the kid, but once little Thom is all grown up, they’ll be very grateful for every time you made them pull their act together.”

“I don’t know how to be a mum.”

“You’ll be good.” “Oh, I’m gonna spoil the crap out of this kid.”

“See, you get it easy! The ‘uncle’ position features birthdays, Christmases, and as much money as you can blow, the ‘mother’ features vomit, and teen angst, and--” “I really want to be a good mum.”

“There are lessons, you know.”

“And I’ll get along there so well. ‘Hi, I’m Alanna. I never had parents, I’m scared of intimacy, I don’t like nonsense, and I’m a part-time diplomat, part-time personal security guard, and I met the kid’s father when he tried to pickpocket me and I sprained his fingers.’”

(laughing) “I’d forgotten about that.”

“Thayet’s pregnant, too, you know.”

“What?”

“Yeah, two and a half months. They’re saving the announcement until she’s past the first trimester.”
Jon nearly broke my door down in tears when she first told him, he was so happy.”

“I love that disaster of a man.”

“How times have changed.” “Don’t tell anyone.” (Thom is clearly hurt by the assertion that he might.) “Sorry, I just-- I’m scared.”

“Isn’t that a good sign?”

“Yeah, probably.” “And I assume you and Roger haven’t started planning any kids?”

“Oh god no, can you imagine? It’d die of fright if nothing else. I’d die of fright.”

“The perfect celebrity child. You know, they can genetically engineer kids now. I say give some poor surrogate the ‘purple eyes’ gene and make the world wonder if you’ve actually developed magic.”

“Or just grown a dick capable of impregnating someone.”

“That’d be a type of magic.”

“What if your kids have purple eyes?”

“Kids’? We’re just talking one right now, thank you very much.” “Do you feel like I’ve stolen your thunder?”

“A little bit.”

(Clearly mocking.) “Aw. You’re such a big baby.”

“And you’re having a big baby! Whole new human! Whole new soul in the world! That’s a much bigger deal than a wedding!”

“I mean, yeah. But this is big, too.” “Did you ever think you were going to get married?”

“Never.” “You?”

“Oh yeah, absolutely. I just don’t care, now. I’m sick of smiling already, can you imagine if I had a wedding of my own?” “Are you happy?”

“Very.”

“Is this what you want?”

“Absolutely.”

“You know he’s not the only person who could fit with you.”

“You sure about that?”

“Numair.” “No, I mean it! If he wasn’t married to Daine, you’d be perfect.”

“He would want too much of me. That’s the problem with normal people. They want to take a part of their partner away to keep for themselves. I want to keep myself. I want him to keep himself – I don’t want a part of him as mine.”

“He feels like you belong to him.”
“Only in the way that, y’know, ‘keep your friends close, but your enemies closer’. That’s not because we’re lovers, it’s because we’re competitors. It’s because we both have talent most people could never dream of.”

“And he keeps yours under wraps.”

“Alanna, I’m worth more than him.”

“What?”

“We were working out bank accounts when we moved in together, but going over them before the wedding. I own more money than he owns.” “I never wanted to be a pop star. That’s just a part of what ended up happening. I would have been… just as happy if the popular music side of my life were… concert cello.” “That’s not the same for him.” “I am a well-rounded person. I love what I do more than I love him, and he knows that.” “And he brings out the best in me.”

“Every time we’ve talked about him you’ve been crying.” (The conversation tone changes. It’s serious, now, not banter.)

“When did we last talk about him, Alanna?” “Seriously? When we were 22? 23?” “You are never going to like him. But I need you to trust me when I say that quite aside from the fact that I have written the best music of my life with him, he makes me…” Thom looked at the ceiling, but closed his eyes all the same. “He makes me feel like I am not alone. Not ‘in this world’, not because you or Jon or anyone else aren’t enough, but because he makes the music make sense. Because he… has the same ambition, and passion, and commitment that I do. We’re very different people, but the levels on which we are intrinsically the same? That’s profound, Alanna. That’s…” “Alanna, I grew up thinking I would never love anyone except for you. You know how unhealthy and damaging to both of us that was. I love other people, too. But I shouldn’t talk about how profound anything is without saying that I love him. He makes me happy. I love that I’m going to be in the spotlight and wear nice things and people will be talking about this wedding for decades. But that strength of feeling? That’s eclipsed, by the fact that I’m marrying him.” “And I know you don’t need to get married to love someone, to be monogamous, whatever! But I do.”

Alanna cleared her throat. Her eyes were shiny. He touched the side of her cheek, and dragged his thumb under her eye. A tear fell, only from the touch. “Please don’t cry,” he said. “I want you to be happy for me. Please just pretend. Pretend, Alanna, I don’t care, just please don’t--”

“I am happy for you,” she choked out. “That’s why I’m crying.” She covered his hand with hers. “I don’t care about him. I don’t care if we never talk about him again. As long as you keep that feeling.” Her hands were rough with new callouses. Not from strings or piano, not the fingertips. The pads of her palm, thick with use. From holding a gun, he realised. She was aging differently than him. There were wrinkles setting into the corners of her eyes already, her skin was different colours in patches, her freckles were haphazard, and her neck, of all things, somehow seemed like that of an adult – a real grown-up. But his veins all protruded so much more than hers, his skin looked somehow tighter. His knuckles all protruded so much more. “But if you ever,” she was saying, “stop feeling that way…” She swallowed against the lump in her throat. “And you feel alone, never think that that means there is any less love for you in the world.” “And you have no idea how hard it is to say that-- no, you don’t!” She predicted his interruption before he made it. “Because I feel alone in entirely different ways. And these past few years… without you around… I remember what it was like when we were kids. And how… we had no choices in our lives.” “But there is so much choice. And it is so scary. And saying rubbish like that is the hardest choice I can make. Because I want every choice I make to be a good one. And it’s really fucking hard to figure out what ‘good’ is, Thom.” “If life were… more black and white, and there were good guys and
bad guys, that would be so much better. And I think I’d be a much better person. But… telling you
I love you will never achieve anything tangible. But I, me, just me, I need you to know that.” “And
we’re never going to be close like we were again. And that’s probably a good thing. And talking
about this is making me so uncomfortable I want to claw my own skin off, you were always better
with feelings than me! But how much I love you will never change.” “And once I thought that love
was not a choice, that I loved you because that is how the world worked. But it’s a choice that I
will make always. No matter what.”

Thom wasn’t quite sure why he wasn’t crying. The tears did not well, though the lump in his throat
hurt so badly he wished he could cough it up. “I’ll choose you, too,” he whispered. “No matter
what.”

“God, we’re so late for your bachelor party.” She tried to laugh, and wiped her eyes with her
sleeve. “Fuck. Is it too early to blame this on the pregnancy hormones?”

“Yeah.” He handed her a tissue. “But I won’t tell.”

“What are you blaming it on then?”

“Oh, the injection,” he said immediately. “My arse is fucking aching, and not in a remotely nice
way. Do you think I can get him to take lessons in not treating a needle like a damned dagger?”

“Say it’s a wedding present.” “I brought Mum and Dad’s wedding rings. Like you asked.”

He shook his head slowly. “No. No, I don’t…” “Get George to melt them down, ‘Lanna. Make
something for—” He poked her stomach. “—baby Thom.” She scowled and tossed both ring boxes at
him.

“I’ll name the baby ‘Thom’ only if you die, and as it stands, I think I’m the only person who’s
planning on killing you any time soon.”

He laughed, tossed his head back and felt the lump in his throat vanish. “He’ll live on in my name.
Literally.”

“Oh, go get dressed and brush your damn hair. Or is this how cool kids wear it nowadays?”

“Are you implying I’m a cool kid?”

“I’ll deny it if you tell anyone.” “We’re not kids any more, are we?”

“No. I guess not.”

(a bit of banter later:)

Alanna: "Are you seriously going to take espresso shots?"

Thom: "I can't drink alcohol and I've been awake for three days, fight me, Alanna."

Alanna: "I swear to god I'll outbelt you."

Thom: "You're out of practice."
Alanna: "I'll beat you if it's the last thing I do." "Numair, you're the only other professional musician, you're incredibly biased, you've had Thom's tongue in your mouth, but you're also one of my closest friends, so Daine, keep him honest."

Gary: "She has a way with words, doesn't she?"

Raoul: "What kind of kisser is Thom? I'm writing him a sonnet."

Numair: "Well, he was in character, but... good. Good technique. Gentle, but with the capacity to make things change tone quickly. He uses his hands well, to anchor everything. He did this thing that I think would be better for someone with straight hair, say, his fiance, where he'd move his hand up from the middle of my neck up through my hair, then he'd keep his hand still, pulling on my hair just enough to keep me in place. It's nice."

Thom (joking): "I'm uncomfortable with this on at so many levels I can not quantify them."

Alanna: "I was recommending he marry you earlier today."

Numair: “Hell yeah, baby, shotgun wedding. We can bond on the trip to Vegas.”

Thom: “Good to know I’ve got a back-up plan if he gets cold feet.”

Raoul: “He won’t.”

Thom: “Oh of course not, and miss the photo opportunities? The fame? We’re already trending. People are speculating as to what I’m going to wear, let alone him. He’s got a whole team to dress him. He’s got his beard to ‘just the right length’. It’s exactly the same as it’s been for five years, I swear to god."

Raoul: “Aw, you already sound sick of him. That’s beautiful.”

Gary: “I’ve been sick of you since we were ten, what does that say?”

Raoul: “Getting married only made the bitterness stronger.”

Thom: “That’s inspiring.”
Gary: “This is the marital bliss you’re about to embark on.”

(at the end of the night – the nerves have hit Thom quite abruptly:)

Raoul: "What are you doing tomorrow?"

Thom: "Staying out of the hotel, because Lianne says that if I come near Roger she'll never forgive me, and I can not stand to see that woman cry. I was thinking of finding a bookshop."

Numair: "I think we should have a picnic, and find a bookshop."

Thom: "Well... organise it amongst yourselves, I'm about to fall over."

Alanna: "I'll walk you up to your room, make sure you don't break a bone just before your wedding."
Gary: "You're not getting cold feet, are you?"

Thom: "I am more nervous for this than I have been for… any major performances."

Gary: "You'll be fine. Our wedding was far more formal than yours, we lived."

Alanna: "But you two have been married since birth, you don't count."

Daine: "Ours was in front of a crowd of six hundred people we didn't know, simply because I'm trans." "I mean, Numair did sort of choreograph it that way."

Numair: "I abstain from comment." "You'll be fine."

Alanna: "Okay, he's actually about to faint, let's go."

(the wedding's fine, very extravagant. Alanna gives a really nice speech as best woman that ends:)

"They argued for an hour about what 'love' is before admitting that they love each other for the first time, and if that isn't a sign of a perfect couple, then I don't know what is."

(then Roger gives a very witty and well-composed speech, and then Thom says this:)

"While Roger so concisely states that love is a verb, I will say that 'harmonising', too, is a verb. Not, necessarily, because we are both musicians. There are two relevant definitions: 'to make consistent or compatible', and 'to add notes to a melody to create a harmony'. And while both are true, I would argue that harmonies are never so clearly about compatibility. A harmony implies so much more than a pretty set of notes layered upon each other. Dissonance and discourse, perfects and goodness. Marriage is a statement that you believe in the best case scenario, yes, but more than that, it is a statement that you will fight for it. We will fight for consistency, for compatibility, for the perfects and unisons, but 'harmonising' is a verb. And so, my vow tonight is that I will always fight. I will always take the action of love, of harmonising not harmony, because a noun is fixed. A noun can not summarise what you mean to me."
Roger: "Thom." "Thom."

"Just a second!"

"Thom!"

Roger never yelled like that. "What's happened?" Roger was sheet-white, his hands shaking. Blue eyes over-bright. “Baby?” "What's happened, baby?"

Roger handed him the phone, mute.

09.40

From: Jonathan Conté

mum's dead. she died an hour ago. something with her lungs. don't call dad has only just gotten to sleep. please come roger i need you.

"Oh god, baby." "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." "I'm so sorry."

Roger's phone started buzzing, Jon's name flushing on the screen. "Can you... book a plane ticket?" he whispered, voice raw. Thom nodded. He got his laptop quickly, and settled himself at Roger's side. Roger's body was stiff as a rod, he wasn't moving at all. It wasn't Jon's voice on the phone, but Gary's.

"Jon is with his father. Roald... isn't..."

Roger: "Yeah."

"Can you come?"

"I've booked plane tickets," Thom interjected. "We'll be in DC first thing in the morning."

"Okay. I'll... see you at the house. Don't... don't be seen. There's... the family PR manager is trying
Roger: "I'm sorry." "Can you... leave me alone for a bit, please?"

Thom: "Yeah. I'll... I'll sleep. The plane-- it's open on the computer. I'll pack for us if--"

"I'll do it myself."

"Okay. I'm so sorry."

(As per canon, soon after Lianne's death, Roald killed himself. Thayet is trying to hold everything together, and has roughly pulled Thom into the house.)

Thayet: "Get inside, quickly, there are press everywhere." "Thom, Roald is dead."

"I--"

"He killed himself. He's made it look like an accident, but there was a copy of his will, and he's dead, and--"

"Slow down. You need to breathe." "Thayet, you're about to fall over. Breathe."

"Jon and Roger are... through there. They... oh my god, those poor boys."

"I..."

"You have no idea what to do, do you?"

"No."

"Neither do I."

"Maybe we should just..."

"No, we're... we're their partners. We have to... oh my god."

"Roger was already an orphan." "Is Alanna here?"

"She's on her way. Jon needs her."

"Gareth has put guards around the entire building, no-one is allowed in, or out."

(some time in silence)

Thom: "Jon loves his parents more than anything."

"My Mum killed herself in protest of my father's abuse, and it was like hell. This is... a hundred..."
"times worse."

"I'm so sorry."

"What did you do when your dad died?"

"Nothing. Because nothing changed." "It hurt, a little, but I just kept going. My Mum died giving birth to me."

"It's Orphan's Christmas, huh?"

(Thom goes to be with Roger.)

"Thom." "Don't... don't pity me right now."

"Okay." Thom kissed him very gently. "Can I help?"

"Just... come sit with Jon, he can't be alone."

"Where's the body?"

"On the way to the morgue, don't worry."

Thom embraced Jon on the couch, tangled them together. He had nothing to say. Jon sobbed against his throat. Roger was holding Jon's other hand, and his calloused fingertips and painted nails looked rough against the stark, smooth white of Jon's. Thayet dropped to her knees at Jon's feet, rested her forehead on his knees.

They only moved when Alanna arrived. Jon's sobbing had subdued, but doubled as soon as Alanna gathered him into her arms.

Roger reached for a bottle of vodka in the kitchen, as Jon cried viciously, and Thom slapped his hand. "Not now, Roger."

"What do I do?" he asked. His voice cracked. "What am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know." "I don't know, Roger." They ended up in front of the television, not paying any attention, but Thom played with Roger's hands. "Do you want me to paint your nails again?"

He laughed and sobbed, but he nodded. So they painted each others' nails, while waiting for a report from the Garys and Raoul. Jon asked if he could have rainbow nails, 'but without orange or that stupid fake purple', so Alanna and Thayet each took a hand, while Roger finished Thom's and Thom started Alanna's. They compared techniques and tried to find glitter somewhere in the house, and it ended up being Thom's travel bag that presented them with any - he had forgotten to take out the body glitter from one of his last shows. Roger's nails were a dark red, Thom's metallic gold, Alanna's silver, Thayet's deep purple, and Jon's rainbow, with a different type of glitter on each colour.

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Alanna and George have announced that they're expecting a child. They all spend Christmas together.

"Orphan's Christmas," Thayet whispered. They held up their glasses, clinked them.

(Alanna and George have announced that they're expecting a child. They all spend Christmas together.)

(Thom has just found a fertility test on their kitchen table. He's incredibly upset.)

"What's this, Roger?"

"It's a fertility test."

"Are we having a child? Are you having a child? Who's carrying it?"

"God, Thom, pause for a second, let me explain."

"We both said we didn't want children, I am carrying no child, and I doubt you are."

"I'm infertile, Thom! So it doesn't matter anyway. I'm one hundred percent infertile, so you'll be happy!"

(Thom diffuses slightly.) "Oh."

"Yeah." "I didn't want a kid, anyway. Just... after Roald died... fuck. I don't want a child. It was a spur of the moment thing, I don't want a kid, I was just curious."

"I'm sorry."

"I just wanted to... know."

Thom sat at Roger's side and pulled him into his lap. "We can adopt a whole school of fish, if you'd like. Get one of those... depth perception fish tanks that can be filled with glittery castles."

"Not even a puppy? God, Thom, you're failing as a husband."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. "But let's be quite honest, we would forget to feed the fish."

"But now that you've said it I would do it out of spite."

"Do you want to get some fish?"

"Yeah." Roger hid his face in Thom's shoulder for a little while. Then, they went out and bought a fish tank as tall as Thom and just as wide, which wouldn't be filled with fish for several months. Out of spite, however, Roger fed the fish methodically and competently, and Thom made jokes about fertility.

Roger Conté gives first interview since death of adoptive father, former president Roald Conté, with husband Thom Trebond
(It's February. Jon is just getting back into the swing of political work - he and Alanna are in a meeting.)

Alanna felt a sharp jab of pain in her stomach, that left before she could trace it, but she felt nausea swell in her again. She kept her face blank, and flushed a deep red as she realised that there was liquid trickling down her thighs. Incontinence is part of pregnancy, she told herself.

She leaned down to whisper in Jon's ear, with a hand on his shoulder. "Jon, I need to use the loo - I'll be right back." He took her hand and squeezed very gently.

"Of course."

She left as calmly as she could, with her legs clenched together, but as soon as the door swung shut behind her, she ran through corridor after corridor, barely breathing, until she locked the bathroom door and shoved her pants down to her knees. Her underpants, light blue, were covered in dark clumps of blood, shrouded by crimson liquid. She sank down onto the floor, staring in between her knees at what was surely too much blood to be just spotting.

Hot tears ran down her cheeks, but she didn't notice them until they landed on her bloody thighs. A miscarriage, at twenty-eight. She tried to rationalise it. Maybe it wasn't a miscarriage. Even if it was, there was a one in ten chance of miscarriage in any pregnancy, higher, supposedly, in a first pregnancy. Even if she didn't overwork herself, didn't drink too much coffee, did sleep properly, it was a one in ten chance. Still, she sobbed until her chest ached.

***

10.02
To: George Cooper (ICE 1)
i lost the baby

10.02
To: George Cooper (ICE 1)
i'm so sorry

***

Alanna sat there for God-knows how long, with her face hot and wet against the ceramic of the wall. She had vicious cramps that she didn't bother try locking away. She had wiped most of the blood away, stared at it in the toilet and couldn't quite bring herself to flush it. Her attempt at cleaning her thighs left her cold, and toilet paper only worked so well when it came to moisture absorption.

She thought about George, asleep at home, planning on being a father in six months time. She thought about Thayet, two months off being a mother, and Jon, who would be such a perfect parent she would fight for his time off when he became president, because of course he will be, she told herself, and she decided that mattered far more than one particular set of cells who may have been a child someday, but--

There were four loud bangs on the door, and she yelled with the shock of it. "Alanna? It's Jon, are you in there?"

She stumbled getting to her feet, dizzy, and she grabbed onto the edge of the cubicle to hold herself
up. "Yes. Just a second. I'm so sorry." Alanna was horrified at how hoarse - how *wrecked* - she sounded. "I'll be right there."

"The meeting's over, don't be silly. What's wrong? Can I come in?"

"Yeah."

She pushed open the cubicle door, fumbling to do up the zip of her trousers and the bottom of her shirt. Jon's tie was loose on his neck, the same colour as his eyes, and those lovely eyes were framed by grey semi-circles. She tried for a smile, which only led to more tears. "How did the meeting go?" she asked as her throat seized with sobs. She held onto the door of the cubicle with all her might.

"Alanna, what happened?" Jon scanned the length of her body, and she could just *see* the confusion in him grow.

"I lost the baby. I had a-- I had a miscarriage." She looked down at her bloody hands and tried to force down her tears. "I lost the baby."

Jon embraced her, circled her body entirely as if to keep some invisible villain away. She collapsed against him, sobbing like she didn't quite know she could. "I'm so sorry." Jon carded his fingers through her hair then rubbed her back then held entirely still, just letting her shake.

"Jonathan!" Gary called from the hallway. "Where are you, Jon?"

"Are you ready for me to let go yet?" Jon whispered into Alanna's hair. She shook her head.

"Jonathan, why are you--?" Alanna couldn't see him, but she had seen the light shift as he filled up the doorway.

Jon turned his head, and spoke very softly, but with the type of power he usually reserved for public emergencies. "Gary, I need you to call a doctor - a competent one. A woman, if possible. And wake up Thayet. Tell them both to come to my suite." Alanna didn't bother protesting, just breathed as deeply as she could. "Alanna's... lost the baby."

"Oh my god. Alanna..."

"Does George know?" Jon asked. She lifted her head a little. Jon had been crying, and she hadn't known.

"I texted him."

"Do you want to go to him? Or should we get him here?"

"No, no, don't wake him, don't wake him--!"

Gary placed a hand on the top of her head. "George needs to know, Lioness. He'd want to be with you."

"We'll get him on the first flight out."

"And Thom!"
Alanna disentangled herself from Jon, shaking her head. "You're making a big deal of this, I don't-- don't call Thom. Just... just George." She wiped her eyes, and (careful not to look in the mirror), began splashing her face with water, washing her hands. She didn't look back at her friends, either, though she knew they were staring.

"Gary, just... the doctor, Thayet, and George." Gary left without a word. "What do you need right now?"

"A hot chocolate," she whispered. He let out a bark of a laugh. She looked into the mirror, and cringed. Her skin was drawn, eyes puffy and red. Her hair was greasy. "And... Jon, I can't-- I can't flush the toilet. I... I can't." The movement of her mouth was confronting, all of her muscles looked out of place.

"The--? Oh."

"I'm sorry, I'm being a wuss."

"No, you're not. No, don't... don't think that. Do you want me to do it?" Jonathan looked just as tired as she did, but his eyes weren't lined with red like hers. They analysed each other through the mirror, and Jon nodded, answering himself. "Okay."

Alanna clamped her eyes shut, and a sense of cold washed through her from head to toe. Jon's breath was heavy, but still he glanced back over his shoulder, closed the lid, and flushed the toilet for her.

Thayet spoke to George quickly and quietly at the door. "The doctor left a little while ago, but she confirmed the miscarriage. Alanna's going to be fine. She'll have cramps, at most for three more days, but her blood is fine, and her cervix and womb are normal - healthy." Alanna was cradled against Jon's chest on his bed. They were both fast asleep, her with still-wet hair and dressed in clothes obviously not her own.

"Then why did she..?"

"The doctor thinks it was stress. Alanna... hadn't eaten in a couple of days, hadn't been sleeping well. She's given her some pain-killers and sleep pills." Thayet kept her hands on George's wrists. "Please don't blame Jon."

"I'm not blaming anyone, Thayet."

"Are you... okay?"

"I'm sad. Plain and simple, there's no use fightin' that. But I love Alanna more than anything, and if she's okay.... We can try again, if she wants to." He kept her gaze for a moment. He chuckled all the same. "Do you think that bed's big enough for two more?" His eyes sparked with mischief, and the same sparked in hers. The bed was excessively huge, and Alanna and Jon only took up so much space when they were compressed together.

"Oh, I'm sure we can work something out." She took off her shoes and took out some of Jon's sleep clothes, holding them up against George and giggling at the size discrepancy. It was so early in the
morning they were dizzy with it, with the grief, with climbing into bed with their lovers just to prove that they could. Thayet tucked herself in under Jon's arm, so neat at his side that he didn't wake. Her engorged stomach made the blankets move, creating a tent-like structure between her and Alanna's side, Jon in the middle with a billowing white sheet above him. George tucked an arm in above Alanna, Jon, and Thayet, his front to Alanna's side, other arm slung over her and Jon.

Still asleep, Alanna mumbled and turned closer to George. He almost wanted to cry, just to get it out of his system. This incredible, strong woman had shadows like paint under her eyes and skin still marred with tear tracks. Pain. He had no place to feel the pain he did - cells, genetics. Yes. That may be all a foetus is but he was enraptured day after day after day after moment after millisecond on the idea of a child, his, his and Alanna's, Alanna's. A family, full and full of love. He wanted to-- no, needed to protect Alanna. I'm so sorry' had said her text. She had no right to guilt.

Alanna had the sense that she wasn't in her own bed. She was in a haze, half awake but still weighed down from sobbing and drugs. She was with her George, though, but she was also with Jon, and maybe she was actually seventeen years old, ridiculously high, the past eleven years a hallucination, and they'd just had a threesome and she hadn't just had a miscarriage.

Her uterus ached. It was like period pains on the highest switch, constantly. She felt it before she could feel her arm - numb, trapped under George.

The slithers of light from between the blinds showed maybe seven in the morning. She was sure she had things to do today, but she didn't know what, and she didn't think she cared. She was vaguely curious about having both Jon and George with her. George would have arrived three or four hours ago, but trying to visualise Jon's bed-- and oh god, what about Thayet? Thayet was pregnant, still pregnant, she needed to stay healthy and pregnant and well-rested in her own bed--

"Alanna?" Jon's chest rumbled as he spoke. "You awake?"

"Yeah."

"George," Jon said, "George, wake up."

"No don't wake him--"

"I'm awake."

"You didn't have to wake me," and that was Thayet, from Jon's other side.

"How many people are in this bed?" Alanna asked. She didn't want to disentangle herself yet. She was warm. She felt protected, and the panic regarding independence hadn't quite sunk in past her sore eyes.

George didn't seem to want to move either, but he shifted, just a little, so he could see her. "Just four," he said. George hadn't cried. She'd learned over the years to know George's face when he'd been crying. He was guarded, in the sense that he meant to guard her. "How are you?"

Alanna: "Well, I'm still not quite sure if this is just a teen fantasy gone awry while intoxicated, but... I'm fine." "I'm not fine. But I will be fine."
Thayet: "What do you need?"

Alanna: "I feel like we're all going to have rather severe cramps when we stand up, we should... we should get started on that."

"I sort of want to backtrack to the teen fantasy gone awry," said Jon. Everyone else in the bed groaned, and at least three feet kicked him.

Alanna: "You'll always be my number one trash boy, Jon."

George: "What about me?"

Alanna: "You're not a trash boy."

Jon: "Ouch." "Do you want me to get your pain killers before you get up?"

George: "And don't say you don't need them, because we know you do, no matter how stubborn you are."

"Is this what polyamory is like? Because I feel just as stressed as I do supported. Whose idea was it to share the bed?"

"Mine," said George.

Alanna: "You're a wicked man." "How are you, Thayet?"

Thayet: "I'm good. And the baby is good, too, I promise. They're kicking furiously, which I take with love and only a little bitterness." With a bit of shuffling Alanna was moved next to Thayet, and put her head on her stomach. George and Jon, like curious children, were touching each others' arms, as if to embrace. "Do my bodily fluids sound good, Alanna?" Thayet asked teasingly, stroking her hair.

Alanna: "Oh, absolutely." "Am I... what are we doing today, Jon?"

Jon: "We're taking the day off. We're having hot chocolate and cereal for breakfast, you'll see the doctor at ten, and Thayet had a room set up for you and George."

Alanna: "Okay."

Alanna fell asleep on Thayet's stomach. Her hands were tangled in Alanna's hair.

(A month later. Roger doesn't know about the miscarriage, and was in a discussion with Thayet and Jon about their emergency plans if anything were to go wrong in her labour. He and Alanna get into an argument about the worth of an adult vs. a child.)

Roger: "It would have been better for me to die than my mother, and it would have been far, far better if you had died than yours."

Alanna: "You condescending prick, you have no concept of others beliefs or values. You're not the final fucking authority, Roger. You don't get to make choices for anyone, and I'm damned glad of it." "And just so you know, it would have been Thom that died, not me. But that doesn't change
your answer, does it? You've never given a shit about him unless it reflects positively on you."

Roger: "How dare you? You talk about me acting like a final authority--"  

George: "You stay the hell away from her. Or I'll kill you."

(Roger is iced out by Thayet and Jon for a while, even after the baby is born (healthy and happy). Thom isn't quite sure how to handle the situation. Roger leaves abruptly in April, to the other side of the world, for 'professional development', with an unclear deadline as to when he'll return. Thom is doing fine, but it's Christmas again, and is feeling the hurt of the past six months. They're on the phone - it's midnight where Roger is, but it's still evening for Thom.)

Thom: "What are the fireworks like?"

Roger: "They're okay. The theme is waterfalls, the current ones are gold and blue. Just a moment, I'll show you." (He sends photographs to Thom.)

"Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, babe. I'm sorry I left like I did."

"It's okay."

"You're angry at me."

"Yeah, but it's still okay."

"I've contemplated what Alanna said."

"You don't have to--"

"I would choose you. It's bias, circumstantial, but I would choose you. And I won't tell her this of course, but maybe... maybe she has a point. In some circumstances."

"Someone call the police, there's an impostor in my husband's body! He just admitted my sister might be right about something."

"Yeah, yeah, shut up."

"Come home soon. Please."

"I promised to fight for you, Thom. I know what you think of me and my concepts of commitment and faith. And you're justified. As is Alanna. But I'm going to fight for you, Thom. That was my vow. "I'll come home soon."

"I need to go, Roger. I'm tired."

"Thom--"
"I'm tired, Roger."

"Okay. Merry Christmas, sweetheart."

Thom hung up and cried; sobbed viciously for exactly one minute and thirty-seven seconds. He stared at the clock as if it would make it easier. With shaking hands and hastily-wiped eyes, he picked his phone back up and called again. "Do you need to sleep?"

"No."

"Can you tell me about... everything?"

"Yes. Yes, of course."

---

(Roger comes back in early January and all is well. Alanna had fallen pregnant again in December, and successfully carries the child to term. They call it 'Coram'.

Thom is picking up a gift Roger bought for the child from his office, and is having a great deal of fun pretending he doesn't know who Roger is to the security guard.)

"He doesn't just have 'a foot in'. People would move into the same room, even if they hate each other, if they think it would please Roger - and everyone wants to please Roger. But if you mess with him, if you offend him, hurt him, you're not fucking with one man, you're fucking with the entirety of the American music industry. If you try to fuck him over he'll fuck you over two-fold."

"How do you not know this?"

"Sheltered, I suppose."

"And who are you?"

"Thom Conté. I'm Roger's husband." While they hadn't changed their names, it still felt nice, occasionally, to use Conté.

"Shit." "I didn't realise-- I-- I'm so sorry-- I--"

"Calm down. Let me in, I need something from his desk." "Oh, for heaven's sake. There's a photo of our wedding day on the wall, and you can watch, make sure I don't slip poison into his water bottle."
Chapter 28

Chapter by dunedinparsley

Chapter Summary

the last chapter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 15

3 a.m. Essays About the End of the World
Roger Conté and Thom Trebond
A collection of forty essays

Roger Conté and Thom Trebond married on the 20th of October, after six years together, so it's appropriate that they're releasing this intimate collection on their ten year wedding anniversary.

'A lot of this anthology was written or drafted well before the past two years, but that which was complete needed revision, and there were links missing. Most of our work, I am very happy to say, has been completed while lying in bed with no time pressure - a rare privilege, in the past, which I don't think we have had in over ten years,' said Trebond in an interview last week.

Now, onto the 'book review' aspect of this article. There is nothing that isn't touched on in this anthology. I have my qualms with it, but it can't be denied that it is courageous and well composed, both beautifully written and confronting.

The title itself is a testimony to their history: The 3 a.m. Sessions EP was their first music release together, and 'Pillow Talk About the End of the World' was an EP Thom (subtly) devoted to Roger.

Each essay averages at about 5000 words; it is a massive text, but even in proof copy is beautifully presented and bound, without being too cramped. The beginning five essays are all Thom's, the middle ten cowritten to some extent, and the last five Roger's. Each of their individually written essays parallel each other - either they rebut each other or take on a related topic.

The most heart wrenching essays are Thom's third and Roger's second, which are linked by the fourth joined essay. The fourth is interspersed with scanned copies of the notes that they took during a forty-five minute argument over what it meant to be in love - which finished with their very first 'I love you' - and further explores their discussion on what it means to love someone.

Roger's fifth is about vulnerability and trust, and while quite plain in theory, and dependent on pre-existing works by philosophers, anthropologists, and linguists, third person, and yet - a prerequisite, I suppose - it is fiercely vulnerable. In part, yes, it is about Trebond, but he talks about social media, standing on a stage or in a recording studio, as a confident person - who feels something. For someone renowned for the emotion in his voice he implies an incomparable terror about the strength of his emotional experience.
Thom’s fifth explores mortality and survivor guilt (which is linked to Roger’s fourth, about survivor guilt and the worth of life - more, however, on how society views death and its inevitability), and touches on the deaths of his mother and father. While detached and a perfect example of critical analysis the brief moments of first person show a novelist, not an academic.

A power-couple that seems built to last; I'm excited for the rest of the world to read this book.

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Trending: Jonathan Conté
Jonathan Conté elected Democratic president of the United States of America

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Trending: Gareth Goldenlake-Naxen
Democratic candidate takes place as vice president to cousin Jonathan Conté, in long-term plan for the two men to share power

***

Trending: Roger Conté
Musician Roger Conté releases 10th studio album

***

Trending: Elizabeth Goldenlake-Naxen
Child of politicians Gareth and Raoul Goldenlake-Naxen born to surrogate mother

***

Trending: Thom Trebond
Musician and academic Thom Trebond awarded honorary degree for excellency in contribution to music

***

Trending: Thayet Conté
Wife of former President Jonathan Conté elected as Democratic President of the United States of America, eight years after her husband’s last

***

Trending: Alanna Trebond
Alanna Trebond, right-hand to Jonathan Conté family and founder of the ‘STRENGTH’ organisation awarded honorary medal of achievement for work against domestic violence and violence against women

***

Trending: Trebond Twins
Alanna and Thom Trebond post video thirty years after last video, thanking those who supported their musical careers and announcing scholarship program at the Corus Academy for Excellence
***

Trending: Corus Academy
Trebon Scholarship established, accepting thirty new students of low financial means and/or a history of domestic violence with musical skill to the high school each year

***

Trending: Thom Trebond
Musician and activist Thom Trebond has died of liver cancer, age 73

Chapter End Notes

whoa I sure have a lot of feelings right now!! It's 1:30 in the morning, I am nineteen years old, and I've been writing this in some capacity or another since I was fourteen!! whoa lots of feelings. (The amount of work it took to get my drafts to an even slightly readable state is embarrassing though, I'll be honest.)

Thank you so, so much to everyone who has read this far - or any of it. It means the absolute world to me. As said, I'm open to any questions you may have on plot in between scenes, more details, whatever you'd like to ask I'll respond to as soon as I can.

Honestly, a thousand and one thank yous to everyone who has read, kudosed, commented on this fic - I hope we haven't disappointed anyone too badly. I'm still very much writing for Tortall, so I hope to engage with the rest of the fandom again soon!! We are far too small a fandom and if the self-serving content fitting my exact wants isn't there, then I'm darned well going to write it myself.

(p.s. Basil's the best)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!