This Is Mr. Pitch

by standalone

Summary

For everyone who's wished Baz were an English teacher, here's a stateside high-school AU.

The Watford School of Magicks doesn't exist, but this year, there's a new hire in the Watford High English department.

Notes

This was about 50,000 words long at the point that Carry On came out, so while it's fundamentally rooted in a pre-Carry On Snowverse, there are plenty of elements from that book as well.

Innumerable thanks to friend, beta, and instigator Snowflake8.

See the end of the work for more notes.
This is Baz's eighth year as a teacher, and therefore, the first year he's eligible for the Teacher of the Year competition. This is the year Baz will win.

He's already received every New or Rising Teacher award out there; he gets poaching offers every week, from Watford Prep, from River High across town, from fancy boarding schools, and schools with colonial pedigrees, and curriculum manufacturers, and policy groups. They all offer the same things: better compensation, more recognition, lighter hours. And Baz dismisses them all out of hand.

After all, he is a Pitch. If he wants money, fame, and indolence, all he has to do is whistle. Still, he welcomes the acknowledgment of his dedication. It's not unheard-of for a Pitch to eschew the moneyed professions—his mother was in education too, wasn't she, and who's received more accolades than she?—but no Pitch gets by without celebration.

* * *

He doesn't teach in spite of the long hours and bureaucratic drudgery; he teaches because he knows that when the brilliant shy away from the onerous realities of teaching, the students, who still need teachers regardless of the mind-numbing torture of staff meetings, are left to suffer in the hands of the mediocre pedants and fools who think the bullshit is reasonable.

Unfortunately, Watford High has plenty of the latter, too.

As a Pitch, you learn the art of the mask early and refine it by the decade. This skill has served Baz throughout his life, but never more than in faculty meetings like this one, one hundred sweaty and distracted teachers, all itching to be in their classrooms wiring computers and wiping desks in preparation for the first class of the year, but instead, by Principal Magee's decree, crammed into the school's black box theater for a three-hour discussion of policies that will never change.

Baz has a mask for this. He sits comfortably erect, shoulders back and loose under the short-sleeved linen shirt that is the most relaxed garment he'll wear to this campus this year, and that he's only wearing today because of the stifling heat and the HVAC system's notorious back-to-school failure rate. His neck emerges, long, curving, especially stark in its darkness, from the unbuttoned collar of the light shirt; he holds his head at a small slant, eyebrows signaling a mild curiosity and below the long sharp slice of the nose, his lips curved into the smallest hint of a smile—just enough to offset the constant pinched disdain that is his face in its native state (“a face like a pickaxe,” his little sister Ari described it once).

Today's agenda is long and moronic, obviously neither proofread nor vetted, but hastily devised by the mysteriously-but-not-unexpectedly absent Principal Magee and foisted onto the vice-principals who are now scrambling to interpret it on the fly.

Since Baz appears vaguely intrigued but certainly not eager, this mask keeps the riffraff at bay. He ought to know the effect. He's practiced it enough.

* *

Rangy and lean, a stark study in black and brown, Baz is under no illusions about the effect his appearance has on other people.

Granted, he didn't look himself up on that horrible harassment website last year, but then, neither did his rigid principles interject to stop his unflappable little sister Ari from reading his whole page to him.
when she did. It was predictably sordid.

“Their views on your ability to take it long and deep were remarkably detailed,” she commented after.

“Posturing,” Baz had grunted.

“Several also made choice remarks about the sharp ferocity of your teeth. Think they suspect something?”

“Impossible,” Baz said, but the thought struck a cold dagger of fear inside him. The only people who knew about his vampirism were his family and the Countess Oriana Vidalicia, the woman who had taught everyone in his family about how to control their magic, and who, when the time had come, had taught Baz everything he knew about being a vampire. She’d offered to teach him much more, any time he was ready, but Baz had been vehement: All he wanted to know about being a vampire was how to disguise it.

The Condesa is gone now, on a vacation of uncertain duration to no one knows where. When she kissed him goodbye at their last meeting—for tea, always tea at the Cortez family's shop downtown, where clouds of magic floated like steam over the espresso machine—she smelled like violets and honey, her skin soft and wrinkled against his own, and it was hard to believe that she, too, felt the persistent call of the pulsing bodies that surrounded her, and that she knew first-hand what it was to yield to the desires he fought against: the urge to draw sustenance from someone else's veins.

Baz had insisted that he would never want that, but on the rare occasions when he goes more than four or five days without fresh blood—from cows, pigs, goats, never humans—he starts to smell it bubbling under his students' skin and the fangs threaten, so embarrassingly, to descend. So he keeps a strict regimen, one quart twice a week, and the teeth stay under his control.

* 

An hour into the meeting, they've plodded through the items “Front Desk and Pool Safety” and “Testing Policy Oversights,” and as usual, the lack of clarity in agenda and absence of discussion protocol means that each item has been a carnival-sideshow free-for-all of overheated teachers dredging up memories of past frustrations that may be peripherally related to these agenda items, if they have any idea what they mean, and screaming across the room at anyone who is still conscious.

In his head, Baz is tallying use of the phrases “To be fair…” (7) and “I just have to say…” (12).

In his heart, the bits of Baz not yet hardened to the omnipresence of idiocy scream and rend their tender trappings.

In his shirt, Baz is perspiring a not-insignificant amount, and is grateful for his day's sartorial choices.

By fiat, the vice-principal team chooses to skip agenda item three, “All Teachers Well Understand KNX-20 Requirements,” overruling several separate factions who insist that they know exactly what Magee intended, that this has to do with a very important health exam / sporting regulation / internship and that discussion is imperative—and moves on to item four, beguiling in its simplicity: “Dress Code.”

Baz, who is the kind of person who reads an agenda all the way through at the start of a meeting, steps up the intensity of the mask to cover an overwhelming urge to shake his head in disgust. Dress Code makes the agenda every year, and every person present whose brain hasn't blown from the heat knows exactly how this whole charade will play out: Ms. Chilblains will make a comment about girls
these days and their sexy little half-shirts, and Coach Mac will demand to know exactly how difficult it really is for boys to pick their pants up, no one wants to see your damn drawers, son, and then Mr. Tejo will lambaste the collective faculty for their casual sexism and racism, which is the cue for the usual melee to begin. Eventually, Magee, who has been absent for two and a half hours now, will materialize in the back of the room, harrumph, and point to the clock, and they'll all move on to the next agenda item with nothing resolved and everyone simmering.

But today, before Ms. Chilblains has even risen to speak, a different voice rings out.

“Excuse me.” A few rows away, there's a small huddle of people Baz has never seen, who must be this year's new hires. One of these is talking. He's casual almost to the point of disrespectful—faded down vest, losing its puff, hanging loose over a too-tight heathered t-shirt of the kind that probably makes some irritatingly pithy cultural reference. The man shoves a tangle of golden-brown hair out of his eyes and grins, a grin that he must know people find disarming, but that Baz, who doesn't exactly pride himself on first impressions, but is a fairly goddamn decent judge of character, finds more appropriate to a high-school movie heartthrob than a goddamn professional educator, even if he is going to teach Protest Art or Jazz Band or some other preposterous elective. Did Magee hire you in front of the 7-Eleven ten minutes ago? Baz wonders from behind a deceptively blank gaze. Where'd you ditch the skateboard, bro? Baz knows this type too well, and he is sick of it. He wishes he could evict the know-it-all dabblers who swoop in to lecture everyone about equity and ideals for a year or two, jam “Teacher” on their resumes, and scoot off for more lucrative pastures after the school's invested its scant resources into their professional development.

Every damn year. New teachers, same game.

Baz feels the blank mask crumbling into scorn.

“Sorry,” this one says. “I know I'm new here, but I'm looking at this list and I'm pretty sure no student in the last thirty years has followed these rules to the letter.” He hoists the paper high with two hands like he's a yeoman with a royal decree, hammering it up. Baz is losing the fight against his face. He's going to cut someone with this sneer. “Hell, probably no teacher has. Like, seriously, knee-length skirts? No hats? No tattoos? It doesn't even say visible, just straight-up 'no tattoos.'” He grins delightedly at the absurdity, the staff laughing along at this scrubbed-and-tousled instigator. “So, you know, I can't imagine anyone actually enforces this code. Couldn't we, like, cut this,” he flaps the densely-printed orange sheet of paper, “down to a few rules we're actually willing to get behind?”

It's the know-it-all smirk of the guy everyone's been waiting for.

“ ‘We,’” Baz thinks, particularly venomous in the face of the faculty's apparent concordance. You prating bastard. One day in, and you've got all the answers. There's no “we” here.

The discussion segues to teacher attire; the best of the vice principals, Ms. Deschamps, exhorts everyone to put their best foot forward for Day 1. Smugly, Baz imagines the new asshole hipster crammed awkwardly into some facsimile of a suit.

Then Magee takes the floor, and for a moment, Baz's mask falls away entirely when the principal reminds them about the increasing threat of vampires.

“Vigilance is key,” Magee says, rolling each word over the tongue like a salty delight. “The Watford city council has declared a state of alert. They can incapacitate you in seconds. Carry protection. Be alert. I've ordered my VPs to issue stakes in all the emergency kits this year. Tell your students: Stake first, ask questions later.”
“That seems like a dangerous precedent!” Ms. Martinez yells.

Magee’s voice grows brackish with self-satisfaction. “Has no one told you, Ms. Martinez, that it’s better to be safe than sorry?”

Magee is the worst.

* 

They break for a hurried lunch, meant to be an hour of collegial bonding, but actually spent surveying and attempting to rectify the horrors summer school has visited upon their precious classrooms.

Baz shoulders open his jammed door into the distraught clutter of half his neighbors’ personal effects, including Tejo’s mangy reading couch, Alizarin’s potted plants—and how those things are still alive after two months of suffocation in this sealed room, he has no idea—three ancient overhead projectors, several gallons of darkroom chemicals, and boxes upon boxes of plastic swords, spangled capes, crowns, silk roses, and other acting props. Because he has learned a lot about collegiality over the last seven years, he doesn’t fling everything into the hall, but redistributes it to his colleagues’ rooms, wishing, as ever, that he lacked the ethical compunctions to refrain from using magic at his place of business. Cleaning would go much more quickly.

Still, there’s something satisfying in seeing the jumble turn to order under his hands, and it turns out Baz’s missing collection of Isabel Allende resurfaced under Mr. Tejo’s desk, so at least Baz gets something for his pains.

After lunch, they regroup for meetings by discipline.

“And first order of business is new hires,” says Ms. Bunce, having called together the English Department’s meeting. “For those who haven’t yet had the pleasure, I’d like to introduce our single new addition: taking the position of Mr. Benedict, who retired in June, we are fortunate to have snagged Simon Snow.” She gestures toward Baz, who is momentarily confused until he realizes that there’s someone sitting behind him.

He turns to see, and crap. It’s the guy with the hair, the smug one from the morning’s all-hands meeting. The guy—Mr. Snow—is beaming like he comes from some culture where hiding your teeth is a mark of grave disrespect, and Baz does his best to stifle another sneer.

Ms. Bunce continues. “Mr. Snow joins us as a first-year teacher from ACT, and”—and here she glowers meaningfully at several of the teachers in the front row, Baz included—“I hope that you, as professionals, will be able to set aside your preconceived notions about the ACT program to recognize Mr. Snow on his own considerable merits.”

(Though everyone’s intimately familiar with the Auxiliary Corps of Teachers, the program—a governmental attempt to attack the education crisis with battalions of underprepared and overconfident 22-year-olds—is commonly ridiculed as Anyone Can Teach, usually followed by “literally, anyone.”)

She offers Snow a minute to introduce himself. He springs to his feet and takes the front of the room as easily as he’d stepped into the dress-code discussion that morning.

“Hey guys!” That grin again; it’s like those blinding electronic billboards, the ones that drivers sue over after they rear-end 18-wheelers because they lack the optical self-control to drag their eyes from the enormous flashing ads for tires or strip clubs or gargantuan, melting slices of pizza. “So, like Ms.
Bunce said, I'm Simon. I've been working in non-profits for most of my life, and I'm really excited to be trying my hand at teaching.” 

Trying your hand, Baz repeats in his head, like it's a goddamned game and not these kids' lives. He is getting a good sense of this Snow—good enough to know that he'll probably be gone the second his two years are up (if not before; it's not as though that signed “commitment”'s worth the paper it's printed on) to law school or med school or international wandering or whatever else is fashionable with the ACTers this season, and that Baz just needs to steer clear in the meantime so he doesn't feel too tempted to punch him in the face. Snow is apparently done talking, judging from the others' polite applause, and as he retakes his seat, Ms. Bunce notes that he'll take Benedict's old courseload and classroom.

Baz kicks himself for not having already put this together; that's directly upstairs from him.

“Let's all take a moment to introduce ourselves so that Mr. Snow can start to place names with faces,” Bunce continues, and she leads off: “As you know, Simon, I'm Penelope Bunce. I teach junior and senior English and am Department Chair.”

They go around, with Simon Snow shining that overlarge smile upon each of them. When it's Baz's turn, Baz has to swivel in his seat to face Snow, which puts him awkwardly close for a group introduction. On impulse, he sticks out a hand. “Basil Pitch.” Apparently delighted, Snow shakes hands with a smaller, more real-feeling smile than Baz has seen from him yet. Up close, the boyishly freckled skin's seen some life. He's older than the usual ACTers—probably not all that much younger than Baz and Powell and Bunce, who for most of the school year make up the mode in the Watford English age spread. Snow’s hand is warm, the grip strong but not crushing. “Senior English and adviser to the literary journal. I'll be your downstairs neighbor, it seems.”

Snow has let go now, and the smile spreads back to its pornographic full spread of teeth. “Sorry to hear it,” he says. “I've been told I stomp.”

James bloody Joyce. Baz is not going to dignify this with a response. He gives a tight chuckle—and if that chuckle sounds completely sarcastic and passive-aggressive, Baz has nothing to say about that—and turns back to the front.

After introductions, Ms. Bunce says, “Second on the agenda is that I need to step down as our rep to the Faculty Senate. So we need to nominate a new one.”

“Ohhh, but you're so goooooood at it!” says Ms. Martinez, the mock-whining at odds with her badass exterior, but she's just saying what everyone knows is true. “The rest of us suck at being organized.”

“Speak for yourself,” Ms. Rios grins, glancing up from where she's sketching something in her notebook.

“Sorry, Melba,” Ms. Martinez apologizes, too sincere. “Can I nominate you, then?” Several others echo her—yes! do it!

“Oh god, no,” Ms. Rios protests, raising her hands. “You don't want this— she gestures to herself, aware of her general disheveled aspect, the indeterminate number of markers and pens and pencils jammed into her hair, a shirt that may well be inside-out “—in charge of departmental decisions. I'm wearing my son's shoes today.” She waggles a foot, clearly in a sneaker too large and too young for her. “Management is not my strong suit.”

There's general laughter, and Lucinda Powell returns them to the topic at hand. “Can you explain what's involved?”

“Of course,” Ms. Bunce grins at Ms. Powell, pulling up the school calendar on her projected screen
so they can all see the various school-leadership meetings and how they feed into one another. “It's a
year-long commitment—one voted rep from each department. You go to the meetings, you report out
to us. There's no compensation,” she says, dropping a significant look at Ms. Sullivan, who raises a
perfect eyebrow but doesn't look up from the puzzle game on her phone, “but it's a great way to get
involved with the workings of the school. I've really enjoyed being our rep for the past four years,
but on top of all the other committees I'm on, this year Magee's asked me to lead the Piloting
Instructional Growth team, so I literally can't continue with Faculty Senate.”

Finally lifting her eyes from her phone when presented with the opportunity to question someone
else's dedication, Sullivan drawls “Can't or won't?,” because Sullivan is just shitty by any measure
that you can't capture with a camera.

At this, Baz lets the mask drop. He snaps back, “Who do you think she is, Hermione Granger?
You're looking at the same damn schedule as the rest of us”—he gestures toward the projector
screen, realizes actually Sullivan's already looking at her phone again, and then just plows on
through—“Unless Ms. Bunce is possessed of a Time-Turner, there is, as she said, literally no way
she can continue on Faculty Senate.”

Bunce is magical of course, but no one else in the English department knows that, and come on—
time manipulation's beyond the reach of any magic they've ever learned.

Ms. Sullivan shrugs a shapely shoulder. She is stunning as always today, in a vintage Chanel-style
peach skirt suit with a plunging-front blouse that Baz is simultaneously ashamed to find himself
criticizing—because he is a goddamned feminist, and why shouldn't women wear what feels right to
them without fearing the censorious male gaze?—and utterly appalled by, because undergarments are
so named for a reason. “I nominate you then, Pitch,” she says.

Baz really should have expected this. Sullivan is nothing if not vindictive, and this would be the
perfect payback. However, he is a top-notch teacher of Honors Senior English, and he is not about to
put his students' educations at risk by frittering away time on some asinine committee.

“I second,” smiles Powell warmly, and Baz realizes she thinks his silence means he wants this.

“Other nominations?” asks Bunce, and shit, it's already a foregone conclusion, he can hear it in the
rise of her voice, she thinks he's stepping up to this plate and he is most certainly not here to play
ball.

“No,” Baz blurts out. “I don't accept the nomination. I— Thank you, Ms. Sullivan and Ms. Powell,
you honor me, but I cannot.”

Ms. Bunce looks crestfallen, like she’s been counting on him, and maybe she has. There are bonds
here. In addition to their intellectual compatibility, Bunce is one of the few other magical teachers at
Watford High, and of those, only she and Baz are black. It doesn't matter that she didn’t grow up in
Watford, nor that she didn’t attend Countess Vidalia’s Charm School; they are rare people, and it’s
only right that they watch out for each other. “Mr. Pitch, are you sure?”

He is sure, but is not going to discuss this further. He won’t leave her in the lurch, though. He looks
desperately at Ms. Alizarin, who favors him with a tiny nod. She'll do it.

“I'd like to nominate Ms. Alizarin instead. She's only been at Watford High for a few years, but she's
been in the profession for—what? Fifteen years?” She nods, smiling gently. “She'll represent us with
the dedication our department deserves.”

“I second!” Ms. Powell offers again.
“Do you accept this nomination, Nadwa?” asks Ms. Bunce, who, as always, is a quick study. Ms. Alizarin nods demurely. “Are there any other nominations?”

Hearing none, they hold a vote—14 in favor, none abstaining—and Baz is pleased to suspect that, except in the case of Michelle Sullivan, the votes indicate actual regard for Nadwa, whom he really does respect as a teacher and colleague, and who he knows has felt like an outsider since she arrived at the school.

Out of nowhere, a hand claps hard on his shoulder. “Way to dodge that bullet, bro,” Snow says.

Baz despises him. He makes an internal bet; odds seem strong that a man who calls his colleague “bro” is also a man who will teach in track pants.

Ms. Bunce must see the look on his face. “Mr. Pitch!” She calls him over at the end of the meeting, “Would you mind showing Mr. Snow the sign-in sheets and teacher mail-room?” Under her breath, she adds, “We need this guy. Just try to be vaguely pleasant, okay?”

*

Baz has always felt a little wary around Watford High School’s front office—there's something about the air there that feels like it's watching him, appraising, judging. If he allowed himself to voice such thoughts, he would call it inauspicious.

Today, the office gleams after the summer cleaning, its veneer countertops clear and dustless. Baz points out where the timesheets hang on the wall, pulls his down, signs in and out for today, and hands the pen and clipboard to Snow.

Snow flips the page to find his own name.

Baz isn't trying to spy, but he's a fast reader, and despite his general scorn for Mr. Snow, he can't overlook this name. “Your middle name's Olivier? Like Laurence?”

“I wish.”

Baz leans forward and squints. The official timesheet definitely says Snow, Simon Olivier.

“It's just Oliver. The school district got it wrong.”

“Could've been worse,” Baz sympathizes, and he is not at all sure why he's still talking, but maybe it's decency; he did initiate this conversation. And there's this smell, he realizes, so close to Simon Snow: a familiar smell, something bright and ancient, and he needs to stay close if he's going to track through his memory. He lets his mouth keep moving. “My first three years, they had me listed as Tyrannosaur.”

“Sounds pretty badass.” Snow is flipping back to the previous page, where Baz is listed. “But actually,” he says, finding it and pointing, as if Baz might not be aware of which of the many printed strings of characters is meant to mean him, “your name's pretty badass anyway.”

“It's a family name,” Baz shrugs, discreetly inhaling and cataloging the sharp corners of this smell. “I'm actually the third. If I ever have a son, that kid is cursed.”

“Why just a son?”

“How terrible a person do you think I am?”
Maybe it's just that he's looking at Simon Oliver Snow through Laurence Olivier-tinted glasses at the moment, or that he's finally placed that smell to a morning in the country 25 years before, when he had fled the half-built insult of his father's new house and into the woods, to watch the rising sun warm a stand of towering pines... but the answering smile has shifted, at least for this moment, from smug to rakish.

* * *

Shaking his students' hands at the door on the first day, Baz is grudgingly pleased to see that, at the top of the staircase, Mr. Snow has the decorum to wear a suit.

The disdain sweeps back at full blast, though, when he gets closer.

Maybe it's a hipster backlash, Baz speculates. Surely someone with Simon Snow's faux-slouchy street style understands that a fitted shirt would be infinitely more polished than this blocky department-store number he's got on, so maybe this is a move toward the opposite extreme, sort of a Zoot Suit mentality—narrow's been in long enough, let's make a statement with Shapeless Drab.

The suit trousers hang in tragic puckers from where he's cinched them tight at the waist. The jacket makes him look like a child trying on his father's clothes.

It's almost better when he removes the jacket, except that the shirt below is every bit as ill-fitting as the suit itself. It billows starchily from his shoulders to the waist of his pants.

Still, at least he's wearing a shirt and tie today. At least there are no ironic messages. (He hopes; he scrutinized the tie for a minute before deciding it really is just some abstract print, not a message. It's blue on darker blue. The colors are actually very tasteful, and he must realize that they turn his eyes into gemstones. That part is not terrible.)

The hair, though, is a disaster.

* *

On Day 2, the jacket's gone, and there's a boxier shirt—if such a thing is even imaginable—and a broad, goofy-looking tie in stripes of purple and green. It's an abomination, Baz thinks.

Also, Snow definitely stomps. His whole class stomps. All day long, Baz's light fixtures tremble.

* *

On Day 3, the jeans come out. Before long, it's clear they're here to stay, usually paired with a t-shirt and faded hoodie.

Baz believes that fashion is arbitrary but not meaningless; as such, he teaches in a business suit four days each week, since in our world, a business suit is one way for a man to show that he's serious. His suits fit like sheathes. As fashions have slimmed and straightened, the family's tailor has grudgingly but skilfully bent to Baz's stepmother's will; thus, with a bit of magical touch-up for spots and stains, Baz has maintained an icy grasp on “Best-Dressed Teacher” for the last eight yearbooks.

On “Casual Fridays,” which a horrifying number of Watford teachers interpret to mean cargo shorts, flimsy dresses, or—most horrifying of all—sports jerseys, Baz has reluctantly conceded to dressing down by swapping out his trousers for slim-fitting jeans. The shirt and tie are not open for negotiation. His students need to know that he is a person deserving of respect. He dresses accordingly.
The following week, on College Pride Day, Simon Snow wears a football jersey from his school—a state college of minimal repute (except as regards the great equalizing lure of its infamous debauchery, which snags jocks and drunks from every social stratum)—with gaudy logos on the front. On the back, Baz is surprised at how unsurprised he is to see, in block letters across Mr. Snow’s broad shoulders, SNOW, above an enormous number 61.

Baz assumes the worst.

Of course Mr. Snow was a football player: yet another worshiper at that church of misplaced patriotism, macho blood-lust, and debilitating head-injuries. Just what you'd assume, and here he's trying to lure in our school's youth, who are too young and foolish to understand that their chances of a career in sports are worth about five cents and a broken pencil.

Honestly, he could have just worn a college t-shirt, right? That's what most teachers do. In this case, Baz finds a t-shirt vaguely acceptable.

Baz is wearing a button-down, because this is his way, with a small insignia on the breast, a tie in his school's colors, and a school-crest tie clip.

He tries not to shake his head while continuing on to his own classroom.

There is a waffle on the stairs. Not a tidy, square little dry toaster waffle of the variety that the school calls “a complete breakfast,” but a full-on, plate-sized golden, round waffle. It looks sticky. And it's just sitting there in the middle of the grey staircase, lonely as a cloud.

Baz scowls and steps over it. In the process, he notes that his shoes are miserably scuffed.

Behind him, he hears a student ask Snow something about the jersey, and next thing he knows, there's a mock-football game on in the upstairs hallway, with Mr. Snow hollering plays and a herd of students pounding the floor.
September

At the next English-department meeting, Mr. Snow poses a question during Open Forum.

“Maybe it's too late now that our students already kind of know us, but can I ask what you all do to stop them digging into your backstory?”

“Like, if the Internet knows your secrets?” Ms. Powell inquires.

“That's right.” He shrugs. “Nothing too wild, but I was arrested at a Fuck the Police rally six years back. There are public records.”

Tejo leans in, curiosity dripping like motor oil. “What'd they get you for?”

“Disorderly. Just a fine and time served.”

Tejo clucks his tongue, dry and disappointed. “Trust me, man, you got nothing to worry about.” He kicks back. “If you'd seen the things teachers here do…”

There was the math department test-fixing scandal six years ago; the semester Mr. Ogbu taught P. E. with a flask in his back pocket; Tejo himself getting locked up three times in as many weeks during Occupy; not to mention Ms. Ellis, the last principal, who got caught out in an affair with the new Bio teacher.

“It's not like Watford High's a stranger to drama,” says Ms. Martinez to a chorus of agreement.

“Thank god that horror-show of a website went down,” Ms. Rios says, shaking her twice-bespectacled head primly. “Now, that's a weight off all of us.”

Mr. Gordon says, “It really shouldn't have been 'on us' at all. I found that whole situation deeply disturbing.” He's clearing his throat to say more, but Ms. Fetherhew's leaned over to stage-whisper the whole sordid situation to Snow, the only person here who didn't have to live with that infamy.

“There was this gross website where kids could basically write pornography about how they wanted to fuck their teachers…”

A clear voice emerges over the rabble. “Strategies, folks?” asks Ms. Bunce, and this is one of the many reasons she is so good at her job. She condones just enough bullshitting that people get to pretend they're having a fun chat, but she always knows just when to cut to the chase. “For Simon's question. How do you address the issue of 'privacy in the Internet age' in your classes?”

Powell's first, of course, bright and sure. “I just flat-out say on Day 1, 'Look, I'm gonna assume you've all Googled me, or are going to now that I've said that. You find anything you want to ask about, you know where to find me after school.’ She pauses, and her sunny demeanor turns sleety. You can imagine a student cowering. “But don't you dare bring up my personal history when I'm teaching.”

“Thanks, Lucinda,” says Bunce with a quick smile—perhaps her first of the meeting. “Anyone else?”

There's a pause as people formulate responses; then, abhorrently, Ms. Sullivan surfaces from the depths of her phone chat just long enough to smirk, “I'm sure Mr. Pitch has some insights on this topic.”
You meaningless waste of air, Baz fumes, but he can comport himself. Especially after the last staff meeting, when he was rude to the new hire and left Bunce in the lurch looking for a new department rep, he is trying to play his part for the English team.

“I do about the same as Powell,” he shrugs, attempting a certain deference. However, because he is Baz, he cannot quite leave it at that; he feels compelled to add, “although I could perhaps do without the use of 'Google' as a verb.”

Powell lifts a shapely brow in cool acknowledgment that Baz is still a dick.

“Oh, come on,” Martinez says, rolling her eyes. “How many freaking times, Pitch, are we going to have this same damn fight about the mutability of the English language—“

Ms. Bunce steps back in before anyone gets too heated about neologistic verbification. “Thanks, Basil.” The tone is conclusive: we are moving on. “Simon, when it comes down to it, the Internet's just messy. Most of us have stuff we'd rather our students didn't see, but we don't always have the control. What's important is that the students see how we, as rational adults who share this modern world with them, handle that situation.” She goes on, efficiently, obligatorily patient, but Baz’s mind is drifting. He knows exactly why Sullivan called him out, exactly how she hoped to goad him, exactly what page she wanted everyone to flip open in the lurid scrapbooks of their minds:

*That damn picture.* He'd been at a wedding, what, five years ago now, with Dev, and looking back, that definitely must have been the absolute helicopter-fly-by, flags-waving pinnacle of their relationship, because Baz hadn't at all minded when they pulled up for air minutes into a serious make-out bout under a fruit tree at the edge of the reception grounds to find that a photographer had caught the whole thing. In fact, Baz had minded so little that he had in fact spelled his own name—for reasons that he will never understand, his own full name—for the photographer, who, it turned out, worked for a national newspaper (and what they were doing here was the kind of mystery that could only be answered by the sheer force of interestingness of the newlyweds, whom fame and publicity trailed like stray dogs they'd tossed scraps to once). So it was available forever in internet record: *Groomsmen Tyrannus Basilton Pitch III and Dev Zhou share a romantic moment after the ceremony.* In the picture, his hand cradles the side of Dev’s head and they're centimeters apart, about to kiss. It turned out that the photographer had captured the next several minutes too—and remembering the insistent thrum of Dev's tongue, Baz can well imagine why they didn't notice all those shutter-clicks—and later sent Baz proofs as “a little gift,” she wrote on the note, probably thinking Baz would relish them, since she'd have had no reason to suspect that the poisoned barbs were already sinking deep into the flesh of the relationship, which would succumb entirely within weeks.

Every now and then Baz sees the picture online. Someone sends him a link (“Did you know?!?”), or it shows up in a search for those interesting friends, or it pops back up in the social media feeds… well, he just can't escape it. And it's a good photo, almost iconic; tightly cropped, a few out-of-focus blooms at fore, the dark colors of their suiting a stark contrast to the blossoming trees behind. Dev looks ruinously lush; you can't tear your eyes away from those turned-out lips.

And of course, this is the photo the students always find the first day he takes them to the computer lab, when surreptitiously researching the teacher is infinitely preferable to starting the actual assignment. So, of course, it's common classroom knowledge basically within minutes that he's gay, and he doesn't say anything about it—because first and foremost, he's not ashamed, but also because he knows exactly what excruciating questions he'd get if he told them he was actually bisexual.

“Gay” is fine. Although considering how things have devolved with him and Agatha—and devolved perhaps implies a sounder basis than this relationship ever deserved—maybe soon “sexless” will be
more accurate.

When some rich boor asked about his sexual orientation at one of their parents' parties recently, Baz, too many drinks under, looked him in the eye and drawled, ‘I'm not gay or straight. I'm just a lover of humanity, friend.’

“No, you're really not,” Ari had said, dragging him away.

*

The others have moved on to other topics, but Baz spends the rest of the meeting in stony self-control; at adjournment, he takes his briefcase of essays and bids no one farewell.

* * *

“I hope you thank the gods you're a man,” Ms. Bunce says, apropos of nothing that Baz can discern. He pauses, third week's quiz masters in hand, and looks over, perturbed.

Ms. Bunce is on her knees ripping through the innards of the best of the school's three copy machines, which is clearly busted again. Her experience with the jams is obvious; she's rolled up her sleeves to the elbow so that the sooty ink that streaks her arms won't mar her work-clothes, which, Baz observes, are quite nice—a dove-grey blouse tucked into a sea-blue wool skirt. It fits close—not in a way that says Check me out! or I still buy clothes in my high-school size but that instead indicates something like, I understand and am comfortable with the fact that I have an actual body.

“Uh,” he says. “Sorry? Do you want help?” She looks up at him acidly, like she would like to dissolve him along with the whole situation. “What?” Baz is a little defensive. He is very confused by Bunce's comment. “Do you?”

“No,” she says bitterly, rolling her eyes. “I do not want help clearing the copier. I will subjugate this machine to my will.”

“Then why … Are you angry at me about something?”

She huffs out a breath, straining deep into the machine. There's a tearing sound as papers shear loose from the combs and barrels; they emerge crumpled and inky in her stained hands, but the machine's display continues to blink angrily.

“I'm mad because you can get away with it.”

“What? What am I getting away with?” Noticing the time, he sets his papers into the scanner tray of another copier and punches the numbers for 150 copies.

“With being a cold, aloof, cerebral asshole who wants to lock himself into his intellectual cocoon of a classroom and ignore that US high schools are social environments in which people are forced to coexist.”

Whoa. Despite having an arm all the way into the machine now, like an agricultural vet examining a pregnant cow, Penelope's looking right at him. Behind her pointy glasses, her eyes are ferociously bright, defying him to contradict her.

Instead, he smiles cheekily. Ms. Bunce has never been a person to shy away from controversy; she can deal with some snark. “Is that a problem?” She sighs in irritable response. “I hardly imagine you've forgotten that my students …”
She cuts him off: “… consistently earn the highest scores in the district, disaggregated for mitigating factors, of course. No, I haven't forgotten, Pitch. You're great at what you do. And the fact is,” and now she's poking her face timidly into the hot metal guts of the copier, her voice muffling, “I don’t have a problem with how you teach. But I couldn't get away with it.”

In the eight years he's worked with Penelope Bunce, he's never heard her sound so resigned. “Do you …” He pauses. “Are you saying you want to teach more like me?”

“No,” she snaps, affronted, then reconsiders. “Not really. I like how I teach, and I am damn good at it. But do I wish I could slam the door sometimes and just do what's right for me and my students and tell the rest of the world to fuck off?” She shoves her way out of the copy machine, triumphant, clutching the accordioned remains of yet another ink-dredged sheet of paper. “I absolutely wish that.” She seems to sense the question that's coming. “And I can't, Basil. You know that. You know what happens to women who don't play the game.”

* * *

On the third Wednesday of the school year, Baz stops by the artisanal butcher on his way home. He does this twice a week; they're the closest place that'll sell him fresh blood, which they package in the same kind of squat plastic tubs that you get take-out curry in, that always become disconcertingly soft from the warmth of their contents, “for his dog.”

The dog is real, named Eustace. The first few times he bought blood from the butcher, he brought Eustace along, since seeing Eustace answers basically any question anyone might have about what kind of beast enjoys drinking fresh blood. Eustace is huge—his head comes well past Baz's waist, and Baz is 6' 3”—with a glossy, menacing coat and a penchant for sloshing his glistening tongue across his teeth like he's got bits of pedestrian stuck in them.

In fact, Baz has no idea why Eustace doesn't eat people and destroy furniture, because he certainly could, but he is the mildest-tempered beast and seems satisfied to just stroll to the dog park and engage in a little growl give-and-take, diving after various flying objects with the assorted beagles and terriers. Ari found baby Eustace in a dumpster the summer before her last year at Spelman and prevailed upon Baz to keep him just till she had a place of her own. Six years later, no one disputes that Eustace and Baz belong together.

Baz loves his dog.

He doesn't often think of it in those terms, because at first, Eustace was more of a practical benefit; there are only so many times you can buy blood before a butcher starts to wonder how much blood-sausage you really need, so Baz had to circulate through all the meat-shops in town. But a dog like Eustace … the butchers see his murderous face out the window and basically fling the pints of blood across the counter, no questions, just glad he's not gnawing their fingers from the knuckles. Parents shield their children with their own bodies when Baz walks Eustace past.

(Seriously, he is the sweetest dog. Right now, he's probably looking out the window and panting with excitement waiting for Baz to get home. The dog-walker takes him out each morning, but still, it's like he lives for that wriggling fling-and-cuddle when Baz opens the door.)

Today, Ralph, at the butcher-shop counter, looks relieved to see Baz enter on his own. “Same old?”

“Yes please,” Baz says, failing to keep the chill out of his tone. He would prefer a polite distance, or barring that, the pretense that he doesn't always buy blood. “And some chicken.”

Ralph measures out Baz's order. “You got plans for this?” he asks, conversationally, handing the
packages over the counter, and Baz freezes for a hideous moment before he notices that Ralph’s indicating the paper-wrapped bundle of chicken.

“Yes,” Baz says, tersely. “I do.”

The bells on the door jingle as he elbows his way out.

A voice calls, “Hey, Pitch!,” and Baz offers a nod, not effusive but cordial, to Mr. Huynh, who has already almost zipped past him on his afternoon run, tiny fluttering shorts and a very snug, shiny-looking athletic shirt showcasing his sleek distance-runner's musculature. His training runs tend to coincide with Baz's walks home, and Baz hasn't missed the way Huynh's eyes rake over him. Being ogled is certainly not an uncommon experience for Baz, but in this particular case, he is perhaps a little secretly flattered to receive attention from a person of such renown. World Cultures teacher Declan Huynh's running is the subject of Watford High lore—he's placed top-100 in the Boston, New York, and LA marathons the last three years straight.

Watching Huynh's long legs spring mechanically away, Baz can't help but feel a pang of jealousy at the contrast of their post-work activities: the one teacher refining the glorious machine of his body, the other lugging a sloshy sack of dead-animal juices to fuel his own disgusting, needy corpus.

On the walk home, though, he's able to chuckle a little, realizing that while the blood, bought “for his dog,” is for him alone, Eustace will probably enjoy a sizable share of the chicken that's meant to be for human consumption, because Baz is less stern about table scraps than he ought to be.

* * *

The tension that's been sizzling between Demarius Gentry and Lionel Lim-Santos finally ignites in a brawl during Period 3; Baz has just pulled the boys apart—and checked himself, as usual, just be strong enough that no one gets concussed —when a bee flies in the open window and stings Jennifer Reyes, who swells up faster than Baz had thought humanly possible and he physically hefts her and sprints upstairs and down the hall to the nurse's office where thank every god it happens to be one of the two days each week the nurse is actually in, and the epinephrine does what it's supposed to and he's able to leave a snotty and gasping Jennifer in the nurse's capable hands; but then the rest of Period 4 is shot to hell; and then the air conditioning starts shooting out hot air and by 2 p.m., it's 88 degrees in the room, no one remembers anything about subject-verb agreement, and someone is going to get stabbed.

This, of course, is why Simon Snow chooses to jog downstairs for a visit after school.

It's not uncommon; Snow stops in every few days in a bewildering show of what Baz assumes must be some sort of professional scrutiny. He tends to fling himself through the door, blink at the agenda for a moment, stumble through a few basic attempts at a civil greeting, and retreat, probably to record his every observation of Baz's antiquated pedagogy.

Baz doesn't even bother to greet him anymore. It's obviously too much of a struggle for Snow to even look him in the face; he gets all blustery and loses the thread of whatever tripe he's babbling, and it takes longer to get rid of him.

Today, though, Baz is not feeling courteous. He has stripped off his jacket and loosened his tie, but the gushing heat still galls him. He's just going to write tomorrow's agenda on the board, he thinks, and finish the day's work at home.

When Snow pops in, looking unaccountably cool and collected, Baz has had enough.
“Congratulations,” he sneers in Snow's direction. “You find me at my worst.”

“What?” Snow asks, eyebrows furrowed, then seems to register the heat. “Holy cow, it's hot as fuck in here, Pitch. You like it like this? Don't the students—“

“Object?” He hears the blade in his own voice, but Snow either doesn't notice or doesn't care.

“Right? I mean, it is hot. I mean, you've probably noticed students can't focus when—”

“Good day, Mr. Snow.”

“What?” Snow grins, like it's a joke. “I was going to say, it was amazing what you did today, that girl—“

“Leave my classroom, Mr. Snow.”

“Just, like, wow man, you must have, like, super-strength to—”

“Leave my room.”

Snow's eyes, bright and vacant, harden when they meet Baz's stony gaze.


*

Baz shoves everything into his bag at once—this is highly unlike him, but today is an uncommon day—and storms out of the building.

Once he gets to the front of the school, his anger has given way to despond. He's a bloodsucker and a leech and on top of that, he's a goddamn classroom teacher trying to make change in an inherently broken system. Nothing ever really gets better.

Mr. Huynh, bent L-shaped in a stretch against the fence, notices Baz trudge through the school gate. “Hey, Pitch!” he calls. “You good?”

Baz nods; he is not about to talk to Huynh, or anyone. “Fine, thanks.”

Baz keeps going, but a few minutes later, as he's approaching Vendette's House of Meats, he hears pounding footfalls closing in behind and spins a little too aggressively, caught off-guard, before he realizes it's just Huynh again.

“Hey,” Baz says, trying for nonchalance and hoping Huynh's too pumped on adrenaline to have seen the quick flare of Baz's nostrils, the curl of his lips.

Steady on one foot as he stretches the other leg, Huynh studies him warily.

“Sorry,” Baz says. “You took me by surprise. We okay?”

Huynh's still just looking at him, eyes raking his face. Baz runs his tongue surreptitiously over his teeth to check that they're presentable, then gives his grandest, falsest grin. In most people, it would be a polite smile; on him, it's essentially a leer.

“Yeah,” Huynh says lightly—too lightly. “No worries. Sorry to startle you.”

“Um, yeah.” They're right in front of the butcher's shop, but suddenly Baz feels like he shouldn't go
in, not until Mr. Huynh's gone. “Do you always run down Main?”

“Lately,” says Huynh, giving away nothing.

“Well, I've got to get to the … florist,” he says, seizing upon the first non-flesh store in sight. “See you around?”

* * *

Baz has one guilty pleasure. (The blood doesn't count: it's pretty much the opposite of a pleasure, and moreover, why in blazes should he feel guilty about his own survival?)

Baz's guilty pleasure is driving.

Since he lives close enough to walk to work regardless of meteorological inclemency, his students tend to assume he doesn't drive. This is far from the truth. In fact, Baz's walking time is often dedicated to daydreams about driving, about the feel of the rubbery gear-shift in his hand, the churn of the transmission under his feet's command.

He feels guilt about driving because a) other than the occasional visit to his family, he has almost no need to drive, and b) his car is desperately inefficient. A modern car would burn a tiny fraction of the gas his car consumes, if any, and consume less oil, and emit fewer pollutants, but Baz will never relinquish his car.

It's older than he is by a fair margin—a 1974 Triumph Spitfire, black and chrome, but mostly black. He is too tall for it—his head brushes the canvas when he has the top up—but it is his car, he knows its instincts and hesitations, its capacity, the limits he can push and the limits that cause its guts to grind and sputter.

Nothing feels as good as folding himself into that seat (welded in place farther back than the slides used to allow), clicking the ignition to life, and roaring away into a warm night, wind rushing over and the stars climbing into the car with him, taking time away.

* * *

The first Ethics Commission meeting of this year takes place on the second Friday in September.

Baz sees the texts when he checks his phone at lunch. They're both from Elspeth Canus, whom he's known since they were kids; her little sis Felicia and Ari moved to London together and still talk to each other literally every day. Elspeth teaches freshman algebra and sophomore geometry—a double burden of bottom-of-the-barrel classes, since all the high-skills kids have already taken algebra in eighth grade.

First text, sent to all her WHS contacts: Spread the word: EC today, 4p on, usual location.

Second text, just to Baz: Holy fucking mackerel, if everyone's had the week I have, the Arms is gonna need more beer. Be there, Pitch. Need you.

The Ethics Commission meets once or twice a month, usually, depending on how organized Elspeth's feeling, since she's the one who sends the texts.

It's because of Elspeth that Baz has always gone. Penelope Bunce notwithstanding, Baz hasn’t tended to have much to say to his colleagues, nor they to him, but Elspeth always wants him there anyway, and so he goes. It’s been good for him, he admits. Because of Elspeth, he has had to figure out a way to belong.
Watford High's Ethics Commission meetings take place in a bar—usually The Watford Arms, which is a scuzzy old faux-English pub from the fifties with clunky wooden furniture and not enough windows but a passable patio and enough range on tap to satisfy even Mr. Tejo, who, damn his populist ideals, is passionate to the point of abrasiveness when it comes to questions of beer selection.

Also, Ethics Commission meetings have never, in Baz's eight years as a member, discussed ethics.

* 

Elspeth really does look miserable. It's hard to tell at first—she is a born master of redirection—but her brows don't usually knot like that, and in any other mood she'd have been first in line when Ms. Martinez threw down that arm-wrestling challenge. There are eight dollars on the table now, with Mr. Tejo and Ms. Bunce locked in a spirited grip that wavers back and forth for a solid minute.

“You're breaking, Alan,” says Bunce through gritted teeth. “Like a pencil. You're gonna crack, any second now …”

If Tejo's trying to laugh, he's failing in epic proportion; his slid-back lips grimace at Bunce. “Oh, I'm real scared, Penelope. Just look at me quaking.”

Except he kind of is quaking, because Bunce is strong as rocks, so the taunt, too, falls short. Everyone's sweaty, even out here on the patio, but Bunce and Tejo's faces are streaming with it.

Bunce is just starting to jockey anew for the upper hand when Coach Mac lumbers in at full bore, bearing three beers and a grip of hot dogs, in his rush to bestow his refereeing expertise upon this match, and inadvertently overturns one of his beers all over the competitors. As the actual ref, Ms. Martinez calls a time-out and everyone takes a minute to dry off and reset.

“You okay?” Baz asks Elspeth quietly while the others swab off the table.

She nods, but she's clearly not.

“You're clearly not.”

She nods again. “Shit, freshman are hard.”

“You say that every year.”

“Every fall I think I've got a better handle, you know? And then they're still the same human cannonballs ricocheting off my walls while I try to lob knowledge at them, and it just sucks.”

“It's still September,” he reminds her, hopeful.

“Yeah,” she accedes, still gloomy. “I know it won't be this shitty all year, but Archimedes' asshole, these kids … One of them set another kid's backpack on fire today. While the kid was wearing it. While I was reviewing basic fractions. Who gives a shit about when to multiply the numerator when you could be watching imminent human immolation?”

Ninth grade. Baz doesn't know how anyone does it. By the time the kids get to him in twelfth, they're almost real people.

“The worst part is it wasn't even out of anger. It was a joke. This kid thought he'd just punk his friend by lighting his ass on fire.” Elspeth sounds burnt herself, her voice sooty and tired, as if she's miles away from the raucous laughter of their colleagues, who suddenly explode in hoots and whistles as Bunce slams Tejo's knuckles to the table.
Mr. Snow is there, he notices, drinking boilermakers with Fetherhew and Huynh in a ridiculously complicated way that's probably some absurd ACT ritual. Their eyes catch for an uncomfortable moment before Snow's flick back to the arm-wrestling.

“I'm sorry,” Baz says, yanking his gaze back to Elspeth. “I wish I could do something.” He really does. He hates to see teachers—especially the ones he likes—succumb to the endless uphill that is this job. He would really love to believe anyone ever makes it to the top.

“Charm me,” she says, taking him by surprise.

He scrutinizes her. Is this a joke? She certainly looks serious, dog-tired and downcast.

“What, here?”

“Yeah, just a little one. Just to take the edge off till I get home.” She casts a glance at the scrum of arm-wrestlers and cheering fans and very illegal waving of dollar bets that's sucked in half the bar at this point. “Come on.” She reaches into his coat to tug the pen from his inner lapel pocket and press it into his hand. “No one will notice.”

This makes Baz feel a little uneasy, but it's far from the biggest breach of Magic Code he'll have committed (his father was right, Dev had been a terrible influence), and Elspeth just looks so dejected.

He closes his eyes for a moment to find the totem in his mind, then murmurs, “Happy as a clam.”

The warmth pools like melted wax around the pen that he clutches and seeps into his fingertips. Reaching for his glass, he lets his fingers graze the back of Elspeth's hand. Like a spent wave sucked back to sea, the heat recedes from him as the spell permeates Elspeth's skin and brings her back, if not to joy, then at least to a temperate pleasure.

Her forehead smooths; her dark eyes open wide and moist with gratitude. “Thanks, Pitch,” she says, nudging him with her shoulder. “I needed that.”

They stay for several more rounds of drinks. Surprising no one, gentle giant Niall Cragshore wins the arm-wrestling, which ends up netting a purse of $28, and reinvests his winnings in another round of pitchers for the table even though he and Georgie Gwinn have to dart off moments later to pick up their kid. Surprising all who notice—which may just be Baz, who is taking it easy, relatively speaking—Lucinda Powell and Penelope Bunce appear to be sitting closer than is strictly necessary and partaking from both the same glass and the same joint.

Baz sees a cheerier Elspeth into a cab and is, again, glad that he lives within staggering distance of the Watford Arms.

* * *

There are a few things you can do if the copy machine jams midway through your job. You can push up your sleeves and pull a Bunce clearing that shit; you can pretend to be a technological moron and, in helpless tones, report it to the office manager; or you can slink away and hope the machine unjams itself and that no one ever pins it on you. This last, by far the most popular option, cements in Baz's mind the understanding that nothing about being a teacher means you're inherently a good (or even decent) person.

September's a good time of year to foil everyone else's copy plans. The copy room's down to one working machine today; when Baz walks in, there's an impatient crowd of teachers hovering in wait as Ms. Gwinn's worksheets chug out of the chute.
Snow’s one of them, Baz notes. In shapeless jeans and the flat down vest, he seems to be slumping over his copy masters. His posture’s an exaggerated version of everyone else’s obvious gloom—it says, *It's September and in the face of real adversity, I am as waves on the sand.*

Without thinking it over too much, Baz approaches.

His thoughts aren't particularly charitable—more along the lines of, *You thought this was gonna be a picnic, champ?* But even through his bitterness, he can't miss the way Snow’s bedraggled despondence drags at his own deeper feelings. Something in him wants to blaze in and elbow Snow into the swaying fiberboard shelves, knock some sense into him—*idiot, of course it's hard and terrible, that why only the worst and best people do it*—and knock the sorrow away with anger. Snow’s a fool; there’s plenty of evidence for that. But sometimes, it hurts to see even a fool brought low, especially when the cause has downed people of far sturdier stock.

Baz isn't a clapper-of-backs, but neither is he entirely averse to offering the reassurance of school-appropriate physical contact. He has shaken this man’s hand once before; he can spare the generosity it takes to do so once again. We were all new to this once.

“Snow,” he says, offering his open palm.

The expression of surprised gratitude as Snow seizes his hand is so pathetic that Baz already regrets it, but you don't take back a handshake. (Even if it’s less of a shake than a clutch, like a drowning man might clutch at the floating debris that could be his salvation.) “Hey! Mr. Pitch! Fuck man, this week…” His voice trails off.

Baz considers saying that it gets better, but he prefers to avoid lies. “If nothing else,” he says, Snow’s rough grip not relinquishing his own, “persevere.”

“It gets better!” chips in Fetherhew from behind them, from the sagacious depths of her second year. “It really really does!”

* * *

The next Wednesday is yet another bone-fraying day, snarled in such a frazzle of meetings and directives and standards-based assessments that nothing wants to emerge whole.

Baz is glad of his work, he really is, but every now and then, especially when he's spent hours wrestling for the kids' attention while chucking syntax and rhetoric and structure at their brains, he thinks with envy of the Condesa dropping a gentle “*Listen, my children,*” or “*Your attention please,*” and bangs his head on the metaphorical desk, wishing he could smooth his job over with just the littlest smidge of magic.

He can't, though, obviously. It's one thing to charm a magical friend in the bar, and a very very different one to spell gandries—and not any old gandries, but *gandry minors*. They'd have to throw the entire tome of Magic Code at him. He might even be *Clean-Slate* d—he's never known anyone who was, but it's the ever-present threat that's lurked in all the magical children's minds since Charm School. This is why you behave. This is why you keep your magic under wraps. Even at our lowest, we all have too much to lose.

He wrenches open the jingling door of the butcher's with far too much force. *Wrong*, he thinks viciously to himself. *Pretend you're capable of being pleasant.* But the closest approximation he can manage is *sad sack*, which at least has the benefit of being the truth.

Ralph, arranging lamb chops under the glass, wipes his hands clean. “Same old?”
“Sure,” Baz says drearily, resigned. This is his life—he is the guy who buys blood twice a week, there's no use in dodging it. “And a half a chicken for me, cut up, please.”

Ralph wraps and weighs the purchases, which Baz settles into a canvas sack. “Any suggestions for the chicken?” Baz asks as he pays.

“What do you usually do with it?” Ralph inquires, looking guardedly pleased at Baz's foray into conversation, his thick fingers poking at the cash register buttons.

“Bake it—some rosemary, some lemon. It's good, but …”

“But you want something different.” He looks close at Baz's face for a minute. “Tell you what I do, when I want something like home, I roll the chicken in some corn flakes, bake it—you don't need much more than that—a little pepper, salt. My mom used to do it that way. The cereal gets all crispy with the grease …” His eyes roll up in his head as if there just aren't words.

“You've sold me,” Baz smiles, but it is an effort to get any expression at all out of this depleted body. It's all he can do to accept the bag calmly and walk at a reasonable pace for the last blocks home.

As soon as he's inside his apartment, though, Baz lets his bookbag slam to the ground. Eustace whines, excited to see him, but the scent of Baz's parcels tells him he'll need to wait for his owner's attention. Baz is a man intent.

Bee-lining to the kitchen, Baz thumbs open the tight lid of the first pint of blood and, tilting his head back, gulps it down.

The warm blood floods his system immediately. It's like he's just removed the dark glasses through which he's been watching the world all day: the color has returned, bright and hyperreal, like drugs, like Oz, and he wishes he could drink in the green-glass tiles and turquoise countertops in the same way he's about to drink this second viscous tub of mud-red blood.

He's halfway through it when—and wouldn't you know she'd choose this godforsaken, miserable day to fly home for one of her irregular but frequent visits to her company’s Watford offices—Ari strolls into the kitchen. “Chug! Chug! Chug!”

He breaks off and shoots her a glare, the to-go container momentarily forgotten in his broad hand. He has a solid glare; he's willing to admit that he's cultivated it in the mirror, that he knows it makes his students' insides curdle. In the past, when he's turned it on his sister, she has been known to call him “severe as fuck,” and a “scary-ass motherfucker.”

He notices just in time the contents sloshing over the edge, and spells Control-Z. The dangling bulb of blood slips back upward into the pint tub.

Ari wrinkles her nose at him and quips, “Got blood?” He stares blankly, he's sure, the burst of energy from the disgusting sustenance feeling so good after the past day's emptiness that he is unprepared to comprehend anything less than literal. Ari gets it. In the tone of a person spelling things out for an idiot, she clarifies, “The effect would be more awe-inducing without the bloody mustache.”

She offers a tea-towel, but Baz turns his back on her to finish off the container. He does need to chug it—not just because his body's aching for it, but because it's really pretty gross. Being a vampire hasn't made him enjoy the taste or texture or peculiar chemical tang of raw blood; it's only made him need it. God damn it; Ari, of all people, should get that this is no laughing matter.
He slams the empty tub on the counter, wiping his mouth with the back of one hand, and feels a soft touch on his shoulder.

“Sorry, B,” she says, and she sounds like it, because she is his sister and they love each other. She's probably seen the poems he's left open for himself around the apartment today—poems for a monster: Erdrich's “Windigo” and Crane's “Behold, the grave of a wicked man.” “I know it sucks.”

He makes them the butcher's cereal-covered chicken for dinner; they eat it with fresh bread and salad, and Ari looks up after the third bite and says, “I think I'm going to cry, this is so good.”

Ari's in town for several days this time. She sets up dinner with Agatha one night—the first time he's seen Agatha in more than a week.

“Seriously, Basil,” she says when Agatha texts to confirm, “‘Don't tell me you're going to waste my time acting horrified that I know you and Agatha are just glorified fuck-buddies.”

Baz, swallowing to buy himself a second, wants to say, “I don't see anyone doing any glorifying,” but this would steer right into his sister's net, so he glowers instead.

Baz is touchy, because he knows that eventually, Ari's going to succeed in her efforts to force him to admit that he and Agatha are not really together—not anymore, not if they ever even really were, which, let's be honest, a more enthusiastic pair would have established months ago, so that's a pretty decent indication—which means that Ari's going to start trying to make Baz date her friends again, which has never ever worked out well.

But meanwhile, they go to dinner and it is lovely; Agatha has a million questions about his work and she never makes him feel saintly or stupid for having chosen a career that pays less annually than he could make in a single paycheck at Pitch Co. She legitimately admires his life choices, and he returns the feeling. She's vice president in charge of philanthropic operations for Wellbelove Zhou, and despite her being daughter to one founder and niece to the other, no one would ever dare to suspect that she earned the role for any reason but her own staggering capability.

Honestly, he thinks, watching her refined hands tear off another scrap of injera, it would be a lie to say that he doesn't feel an attraction to her. How could he not? She is so inhumanly, luminously beautiful, and his whole chest flutters in the presence of her intelligence—but it's her confidence that's most compelling. Agatha is the kind of person around whom conversations, and people, and transactions, naturally orbit, just as a star holds easy dominion over its planets.

He loves her. But he doesn't want her. Not in enough ways. He just wants to know that she's around, that she thinks well of him, that she'll always believe he's making the right decisions. (And maybe sometimes to fuck, because come on, their bodies, together, are a goddamned work of kinetic art.) He'll have to talk to her about this; Ari will make him anyway, so it's going to finally happen.

It turns out that watching Baz and Agatha trade lingering sips from a glass of honey wine is just more than Ari can handle.

“Gods,” she storms, interrupting Baz midway through an overview of his upcoming Tempest and colonial lit unit, “you guys need to figure this out.” She pulls out her phone. “I'm going to go call Felicia and talk about some dunces you definitely don't know who are living in utter fucking denial.”

They don't talk about it right away. At first, there's some awkward paddling around the issue, both
laughing about Ari's discomfort, Agatha lamenting that she's never had a sibling to give her the kind of shit Ari deals Baz. But eventually they're both staring at the picked-over remnants of soft-cooked lamb and yellow pigeon peas and injera, puffy with grease and sauces, on the silver serving platter, and the mood has turned serious. Baz fumbles with his napkin, uncharacteristically ill at ease in his body.

“I'm sorry,” he says, stiffly. “I'd rather not hash this out, because it feels like an ending, and I don't want us to end.”

“You are wonderful, Basil,” Agatha smiles, but it's a drawn, quiet smile without her usual fire. Clearly, she's way more ready for this conversation than he is. “And I care about you a great deal, and of course I enjoy physical and emotional intimacy with you,” and maybe she's smirking a little here, because for every coin Baz has in his piggy-bank of times and ways people have wanted him, Agatha has ten, “and yet, we both know we can't be enough for each other. And that,” she says, reaching across the table to cover his hand in hers, and her liquid gaze black and tender upon him, “is okay. We're adults, Basil. We can handle this.”

It's a rare moment of softness; accustomed to being the slightest person in the room, Agatha tends to compensate with imperious self-righteousness, which tends to be highly effective because she is generally right and she's so damn beautiful (and no, that's not fair, but such is this world, and when will we finally stop feigning shock that the beautiful get more than their due?). He loves her this way, and he knows that this inconstant love is a muddled stew of knee-jerk lust and intellectual admiration and finely-crafted blue-blood friendship, and he believes her when she says that they will work their way through.

“May I kiss you now?” she asks.

Ari returns to find Agatha more or less in Baz's lap, their mouths and tongues entirely occupied in sucking and teasing and tugging at each other.

“I'm glad you had that talk,” she says, dry as cracking pavement. “Seems like you really cleared some things up.”

*

But things are clearer, now. Agatha and Baz fuck a few more times, here and there, without any declarations or expectations—Baz goes out on Agatha's arm for a charity soiree, which they follow with a rapid divesting of tuxedo and gown; there's one late-night text several weeks later; maybe they leave a dinner together in kind of a hurry one time, who knows?—and they keep talking, and they are adults about this and no one cries.
“Let's get to brass tacks,” says Ms. Cheng-Jimenez during October's first English department meeting. “I'm talking Halloween: Are we doing literary costumes again?”

“Um, yes,” says Ms. Martinez. “It's tradition?”

“Dibs on Juliet,” Ms. Sullivan mutters into her tablet, because of course.

A tight circle of desks clamps them too close together in the middle of the room, and Baz, who has little to add to this procrastinators’ convention, almost wishes that he, like Snow, was for gods know what reason leaning cockily against the frame of the open door. (Actually, although it's true that one side does lean heavily against the steel frame, leaning is not the right word, since his arms press lazily into the top corners so that his body slices the spots of dark hallway behind him into sharp angles. The overall impression is one of easy ownership and formidable size. Let none say that Snow is incapable of taking up serious space.)

Packed around Baz, everyone else is gibbering about their plans

“I want to be Holden Caulfield!” says Ms. Fetherhew. “Anyone have a hunter's hat I can borrow?”

“Who wants to do 1984 with me?” asks Rios. “Or maybe Fences? I could do Rose if I could get a Troy.” She casts an eye at Alan Tejo, who could probably fit the bill as a washed-up baseball star.

“Sorry, I'm thinking Meursault,” says Tejo.

“That's terrible!” objects Ms. Martinez. “I mean, racist?”

Tejo says, “Yeah, I noticed. That's kind of why I teach it?”

“Hey,” Snow breaks in, interrupting his doorway poses with the air of a person inspired, “Anyone want to team up as George and Lenny?” He scans the room expectantly, then lets his eyes flick to Baz. “From Of Mice and Men?”

Thanks a lot for that clarification, Snow, Baz snarks to himself. Because obviously no one would get that obscure reference, except maybe a freaking room full of English teachers.

Lenny happens to be Mr. Cragshore's bread and butter; it's been his go-to costume as long as Baz has been teaching. He's already a gentle brute. All he needs is some tattered workman's garb and a fake rabbit and the costume's complete. Baz waits for him to say so, but Martinez does it for him. “That's Cragshore's bag,” she says. “You'd have to be his George.” She looks skeptical; even though Snow's a good several inches shorter than Cragshore, there's no way he's a good fit for small, scheming George.

After rubbing his jaw for a second, Cragshore says, “Actually, this year, I was thinking about Gregor Samsa.” By way of explanation, he adds, “We've been doing a lot of papier-mâché in our house lately.”

“Mr. Pitch?” Snow asks, smiling his new-people grin, as if he's forgotten he and Baz haven't spoken in weeks.

“I think not,” says Baz, haughtily appalled that anyone has left off on Halloween preparations till now, a week before the holiday, and who figured out his costume a month ago specifically to avoid
the last-minute beseeching to be Oedipus! Or be Okonkwo! Or be Dracula, please Pitch, won’t you? It would be so perfect for your personality! which is more fuel for the goddamned pyre, he thinks, with vampire-spotting and vampire-self-defense classes popping up right and left and vampire-hunting vigilantes not far behind. “I don’t teach the book, and we are essentially the same size.”

“Height, sure,” Snow says, and why won’t he let this go? “But I’ve probably got fifty pounds on you. If you just sort of crouched down…”

“No, thank you,” Baz says with finality, in a tone meant to remind Snow of their unpromising history. Snow shuts down, lips drawing together in a pouty scowl, and Bunce, who seems to be seriously considering Powell’s entreaties that she dress as Janey from Their Eyes Were Watching God, calls the meeting back to order.

Snow, irrepressible, bounds to the front when Bunce asks him to update them on his progress with the dress code.

Baz's first instinct is to wonder whether the question is a snarky reflection on Snow's wardrobe—today, he's in that crunchy down vest and an intentionally-distressed skater-tee. He is in dire need of a haircut.

“It's going great!” Snow glows. “I got a little committee of freshman teachers to help me work up a staff survey to start us off. Julia, do you have them?”

Ms. Martinez flaps a thick sheaf of papers. “While we've got you all here,” she says, “dig out a pen. We want to know what you think constitutes reasonable schoolwear. Be honest. No names.”

In the comments section, Baz writes “Uniforms,” and makes a few tolerable sketches that approximate his own high-school wardrobe. Throat-to-ankle coverage, neckties early and often. Catching a glimpse of a thick bicep that protrudes from Snow's shirt, Baz nods to himself in sharp confirmation: casual clothing distracts everyone from the important work of learning.

* * *

Begging off early from a worknight gala as Agatha's charming companion, Baz drives a few stops too far on the freeway, not on purpose, but not exactly by accident either. It's a temperate night. The open engine rumbles through his chest. It feels like power and like comfort.

He'll take city streets back, he thinks, through the seedier part of town. Pitch Co. owns some apartment blocks out here; he sees them looming in the distance, and wonders idly how many Watford teachers live there. The ACTers, in particular, tend to live out this way, where rents are cheap and life gritty enough to turn the two-year commitment into a real adventure in poverty tourism.

It's late, but the streets are far from empty. Through little windows in their chain-link security fences, shops offer greasy tortas, pupusas, bánh mi—anything filling and savory and cheap. Baz rolls down his windows; either way, he's a poverty tourist himself, but at least this way's more immersive, the smells of grilled meat and cigarettes and hot sewer grates funneling through his open windows. Pretty young people in tiny clothing lean against the exhaust-stained corners of buildings, bored, one or two to an intersection, inclining their heads slightly as headlights sweep over them with each car's approach.

This, Baz recalls too late, is why I don’t come here anymore. When the kids are underage, sometimes he can still get them help, but once they’ve reached majority, all his intervention will do is get them arrested, which just means bail and more debt to their shitbag pimps. Today, he tries not to
look. Eyes on the road, red light, green light. Just another mile till the roads will narrow and the sidewalks widen, till the grimy convenience stores give way to glass-fronted bars and restaurants that spill romantic light and fashionable music into the streets. But he's not there yet, and he brakes gently at a red.

Two boys cross, sinuous and loud, casting heavy eyes at the waiting cars in invitation.

One, tall and thin, is blessedly unfamiliar, but the other—Baz sees the firecracker gestures and needs no more sign to recognize Calvin, a student he taught just last year. From the low, low sling of his jeans, and the artful way he's hiked his white T up on the right to reveal a stretch of smooth brown skin and a bony hip descending into snug boxers, it's obvious that this is his work now.

The boys are nearly across the street when, without meaning to, Baz sticks his head out the window and hollers, “Hey!”

Both boys turn, expectant and surprised, faces already composed in sultry pouts.

“Hey, Calvin!” he says, and Calvin snaps to saucy attention, kisses his friend on the cheek, and shimmies over to Baz's car.

“Order quick, light's changing,” he says casually, leaning against the windowframe, and then does a double-take: “Holy shit, Mr. Pitch?”

“Get in,” Baz says, angrier than he wants to be and keeping his voice low and hard. “Get in the car, Calvin.”

He drives them away in silence—Calvin keeps trying to talk, but Baz holds up a hand, abruptly enough that Calvin shuts it.

Once they're miles off, Baz pulls into a parking spot near a hopping club—populated, well-lit—and shuts off the engine.

“So,” Calvin asks brightly, sliding his body toward the stick-shift. “What do you want—“

Baz raises the hand again, this time a physical boundary. “We're going to talk.”

“Oh, shit,” Calvin's face falls, not like he's hurt but like he's bored to death and back. “Like, about how I'm degrading myself because I'm a prostitute?”

“Uh, yeah,” Baz says, because his intentions should be obvious. “Is this what you want?”

Calvin shrugs. “Close enough. I get money and drugs, and you should see some of the guys I get to fuck…”

Baz cuts him off. “Do you think you wouldn't be able to get these things another way?”

“Maybe? But this is what I'm doing, and I'm kind of locked in. Things don't just change, Mr. Pitch.”

“Locked in?” Baz homes in on these words. “Is it because you owe someone something? If you're stuck…”

“I'm not stuck,” Calvin sneers, but it doesn't convince Baz. “I'm here. It's just …” He sighs theatrically at Baz's obtuseness. “It's who I am now, Mr. Pitch.”

Baz is pulping the steering wheel in his hands so they'll stay away from Calvin, so he won't give in to the temptation to slap him across the face and yell You are a child, you have a whole life to be
Calvin misreads Baz's tensing jaw, the way Baz's fingers grapple with the soft leather of the steering wheel. “Remember that website last year?” he asks. “The one where you could say what teachers you wanted to bang?”

Baz nods a curt yes. That hideous debacle. Of course he remembers.

“Well, I feel like I should say, one of the things about you was from me. The one about being belted to your desk while you fuck my mouth? Super demeaning, right?” Baz remembers that fantasy distinctly, read aloud in Ari's voice, and his utter horror that anyone could even imagine him capable of taking sexual license with a minor at all, let alone in his place of business. He jerks his head in a tiny nod. “I felt like you should know I wrote that.”

“Thanks,” Baz grunts, grudgingly grateful for this surreal apology.

“I just need to say…”

“It's okay,” Baz says, ready to not be talking about sex in any capacity with this young man. “You don't need to say any more. We can't always apologize for our pasts.”

“No,” Calvin says, leaning in again, broad lips soft and pouted. “I wasn't going to apologize. I wanted to say,” he dusts a soft hand across Baz's cheek, “the offer still stands. No charge.”

Dismayed and repulsed, Baz smacks the steering wheel so hard that the horn sounds even though he hasn't pressed it. Down the block, heads turn their way. Thank Merlin, Calvin backs off.

Still, Baz is fiery with embarrassment at this conversation, and the misunderstanding, and his stupid, blaring loss of control. Very stiff and proud, Baz asks, “Where can I leave you?”

“Wait!” Calvin exclaims, grabbing Baz's right hand off the wheel and pulling it to his lap, so quick that Baz doesn't pull it away in time to avoid feeling the hard cock below those ridiculous jeans.

“You're taking this wrong! Teachers need to fuck too. Let off some steam! You wouldn't be the first. I'm offering a service you could really use, Mr. Pitch. Really, it would be my pleasure. No one would ever have to …”

“Get out,” Baz says, furious, but he knows it's not at the boy but at the situation, so he fumbles for the emergency hundred he stashes in the center console. “Take tonight off, get something to eat.” He growls his last words. “Take care of yourself, Calvin.”

* * *

Knowledge takes its time to settle in. It pearls in droplets on the surface where everyone can see it, like it's yours already, but it's time that will permeate the skin—which seize up in violent bumps and ridges, contortions that prostrate the self before this unfamiliar new, to try to figure out if it belongs.

(All this to say, Baz knows people want to bone him. He knows it well, and everyone knows he knows it because how could he not? He wears his poise like a woolen raincoat, beaded with onlookers’ base desires. But you can know a thing without really knowing it; some things never quite soak through.)

* * *

Baz is writing Friday's agenda on the board when he senses an uneasy presence in his doorway. He looks over and this shouldn't be a surprise—he is, after all, wearing a tricorne and breeches and
scores of tiny men that dangle on strings from his chest—but he realizes he is deeply unprepared for the reality of Halloween.

Loitering in the doorway, Mr. Snow looks particularly raffish in an enormous pair of overalls over a too-small buttondown with a frayed collar. His forearms jut out awkwardly from the ragged, grime-streaked cuffs, exposed wristbones somehow looking almost lewd in their nakedness.

This should not be cute, but Baz is forced to admit (silently, to the part of himself that just likes to give himself shit for having the nerve to even exist) that it makes him want to smile, especially when Mr. Snow tugs off his own dented, shapeless hat and the hair springs wild in clumps and curls.

He looks like a desperately awkward hick gone courting, and somehow, something about this jerk yanking off a hat at his threshold tickles at the edges of Baz's heart. This is perseverance. People don't persevere for him; they give the fuck up and move on.

“Lennie happened,” Baz observes, just this side of snide.

“Yeah.”

“You get a George?”

“I talked Powell into it. You gotta see her. Her costume's perfect.”

Baz isn't sure if this is a dig. “Yours could be worse,” he offers.

“Thanks!” Snow beams, taking this as an invitation to grip the top of Baz's door like a monkey mountain climber in a too-tight suit. “I still have to figure out some mice.”

“Talk to Ahmed,” Baz says, because he cannot resist helping out a little with a costume, and he’s definitely seen some plush animals overlooking their living brethren in Mr. Ahmed’s specimen cages.

“Awesome, bro! Will do!”

There is a stretchy sort of pause where it feels like Baz ought to say something, but this is his goddamn classroom, and why is Snow back in it? And talking to him like a goddamned surfer?

He is probably glowering a little, because when Snow finally breaks the silence, his tone’s a little trepidatious. “Lucinda said you'd probably have a sewing kit.”

“I do,” Baz says, making no effort to move. One of the ways that teaching has ruined him for casual conversation is that he has lost all patience with people asking for things without actually asking.

Eventually, Snow seems to get this. “Uh, can I borrow it? I just realized when I tried to sit down on the train that there's nothing holding the fly on this thing shut. I don't want to get canned for indecent exposure.”

Baz chuckles inwardly at the image, which isn't so far off from some of his worries about his own costume, since it showcases a lot more of the legs and groin than he'd ever reveal on not-Halloween. Keeping his face impassive, though, he just says, “Sure.”

Rummaging around, he finds the kit and offers Snow the privacy of his storage closet for repairs. “You better be good with a needle—we've got eight minutes.”

Snow laughs, disappearing into the closet, and in a voice that's clearly meant to sound amusingly seductive says, “I'll get it in and out in no time at all.” The door closes.
Baz is smiling, which perplexes him. It's not a large smile, but that was a terrible joke, and if it was indeed meant as the innuendo it sounded like, then it's definitely not appropriate to the workplace.

Faintly, over the jingle of the overalls' metal buckles falling to the floor, Baz hears, “Sorry, worst back-door brag of all time.” A minute later, “Fucking needle, just hold the fuck still, why don't you? Thread, this is your goddamn job, go in the hole. … Shit, did I mention I don't know how to sew?” Followed immediately by, “Oh crap, sorry about all the swearing, do you have students in there now?” Then there’s just a lot of muttering.

Baz’s Period 1 class tends to be extremely punctual since they all come straight down from school breakfast, so he's got about three minutes before the students should show up. He cannot start class with a half-naked man raving from the closet, so he locks the classroom door and knocks on the closet.

“Snow, time's almost up. I'm coming in.” He pauses—that's too pushy. “Okay?”

“Sure, please. I mean, if you want to see me in my underwear cursing at a tiny piece of uncooperative metal, it will be my…”

Baz pushes into the little closet. The scene is as described, although Snow failed to mention the heavily muscled thighs, straining with the effort of this ridiculous squatting position Snow's contorted himself into because he was apparently too lazy to actually take the garment all the way off before sewing it. His pale legs shine under a confusion of soft-looking golden-brown hairs, the same color as that disheveled hayride that is the top of his head right now.

“Fuck!” Snow yells as he pulls the needle clear off the end of the thread.

“Just give it to me,” Baz groans, taking a knee, and because they're now down to about two minutes, he definitely does not allow any of his precious attention to dwell on observing that the bottom two buttons on Snow's shirt are broken so the shirt splits open to reveal some kind of fancy organic-cotton underwear that bands possessively over his firm upper thighs, nor that it would be goddamned obscene if he didn't fix this fly because said underwear are red and obviously bulging; moreover, he certainly doesn't allow himself to get close enough to smell the grassy, rich smell of Snow’s body, nor to follow that scent trail to its possible origins of bodies sliding across each other, pulling sweat and sharp pheromones to the surface—good gods, Snow looks freshly-showered, how can you have just showered and still smell like that, like an invitation from the boudoir?; instead, he gets his head in the game, whip-stitches that shit together, and has Snow ready to go back upstairs before the warning bell.

Out of the storage closet again, Snow pauses for a second at the classroom door.

“Thanks,” he says, raking a self-conscious hand through his unruly locks, and Baz wants to say no, stop that, it’s better how it is—which may not be exactly the objective truth of the matter, but it’s the relative truth—and dang, relative truth, this is novel.

Instead, Baz looks away, returning the sewing kit to his desk drawer. “You're welcome.”

“Thanks. Again, I guess. And, uh, I don't think I said: You're a great Gulliver.”

The bell rings, and Snow is already flying upstairs when Baz's students start to shuffle in.

*

Later that day, Baz is giving an exam, but there's pandemonium upstairs, even worse than usual, and that's saying a lot. If he weren't downstairs from the whole thing, Baz might suspect that this degree
of shrieking and apparent hurling of desks had to be the result of major flooding or avalanche.

When one high-pitched set of screams just keeps going, siren-like, Baz beelines to the phone, asks Ms. Alizarin in to proctor his students for a moment, and sprints up the stairs. He could have just asked Alizarin to investigate the disturbance, he realizes, but honestly, he is curious.

Pushing open the door to Room 224, Baz stumbles into a room in panic. Beglittered, horned, and sequined students crouch atop every desk in wary piles of cheap costuming cloth. They hoot and shriek at something Baz can't see, something that's happening on the floor, and that is obviously the source of a lot of the banging and screeching of desk feet against the linoleum.

No one notices Baz. He strides closer, wondering what in hell is happening down there, and then he sees: It's Mr. Snow, crawling thunderously on one hand and his knees.

Poking out from the splayed knuckles of Snow's other hand, which is lifted protectively above his head, at least two mice sniff the air inquisitively.

“Oh my god,” Baz says. He cannot believe this. “You got live mice?”

“Well, yeah,” Snow scoffs, craning his head around but still thrusting an arm around in the shadows deep under the corner desk. “Have you read the book?”

Like any doubt about his knowledge, this question sets Baz's teeth on edge—seriously, have I read Of Mice and Men? Do you want to see my goddamned MASTER'S THESIS? —but Baz isn't about to dignify this asshole's elitist bullshit with a response. He just repeats, “Live mice?”

“You think I should've killed them first?” One of the mice in Snow's left hand squeaks.

Tell me you didn't train the fuckers, Baz thinks, but he says, rather stiffly, “My students are taking a test.”

“On Halloween?” Snow laughs, jabbing his right hand toward the mouse that's cowering against the back wall. This time, he makes contact and catches it deftly. “Who gives a test on Halloween?” Baz has a lot he'd like to say to that, like, Teachers who don't make excuses, or Teachers who expect their students to be capable of thought every day, or, Technically, Halloween is tomorrow, bruh, but maybe for the first time Mr. Snow seems to notice the deafening hubbub of the rest of the classroom.

“Oh, crap,” Snow says, and he actually sits up and turns his body toward the angry teacher who's towering over him. “Is this loud?”

“Yes.” Baz is ready to get back to his students. “It's loud. Too loud. It's unprofessionally loud, I would even say.”

“Sorry, man,” says Snow, and he looks it. His hat has fallen off again, and his hair mirrors the lifted eyebrows, creating an all-around impression of shock at his own misbehavior. Asshole though he may be, with his fists full of mice and those blue-sky eyes wide, Snow's entire demeanor seems to plead for love. It takes some work for Baz to maintain his cross-armed, scowling rigidity, but he must —the freshmen watching will be his someday. Snow's shoulders fall. “Call it bad judgment. Won't happen again.”

Mollified, Baz reaches to offer Snow a hand up. It's almost worth it for the way Snow's eyes brighten. Unfortunately, in accepting the offer, Snow uncurls his hand, forgetting its rodent cargo. The terror-ridden little mouse hits the floor, flips once, and flees across the room to the nearest ventilation grate. Snow lunges after it but gets tangled in Baz's Lilliputians, who pop like ripe grapes from the ends of their strings and clatter onto the floor.
Meanwhile, the mouse is well gone. Baz is still trying to register what's happened.

“Oh crap,” Snow says, and the students explode in peals of laughter. “Where does that vent go?”

Baz grits his teeth and walks away, leaving Snow to pick his own sorry ass off the floor.

*

Later in the period, a student in a cow suit delivers a handful of the little people Baz abandoned upstairs in 224. Baz cannot even manage a thank-you, because there is a goddamned mouse scuttling around in his ceiling tiles and he has already had to postpone this test till Monday.

*

“That’s unsafe as fuck, man.” Snow's voice is less brassy and cocksure than usual, but still irritatingly confident. “What're you even doing?”

Head and shoulders committed to the tight, dusty space between the acoustic paneling and the support beams for the second floor, directly above, all Baz can see is his own rage, which has the concentrated heat and brightness of a lesser sun.

“What in the name of Keats do you think I'm doing up here? There is a goddamned mouse in my ceiling, and this is a matter of life or death for some of my students, so I am going to do whatever the hell it takes to catch this scratchy bastard and bring it, and all responsible for it, to justice, even if I break my goddamned legs in the process.”

Baz is aware that he doesn't sound like a real prince of a man right about now, but it's hot and his eyes are adjusting and now he can see that rodent scurrying around on the panels in a far corner and he's damned if he's going to let anything distract him from his anger. Snow can just get the hell out as far as he's concerned, and leave him to deal with this mess from atop this rickety stack of desk, chair, and textbooks. (It really is a risky approach, and he is kind of wishing he'd locked the door so he didn't have to deal with anyone beholding his tense, stockinged legs when he can't glare back at them. He must look ridiculous.)

“Can you see it?” Snow asks.

“Yeah,” Baz grunts, against his will. He doesn't want to talk with this jerk.

“Where is it?”

Baz lowers an arm below the panels and points. “That corner.”

“Keep an eye on it,” Snow says. “I'll trap it.”

A sudden cloud of dust sets Baz coughing miserably and clinging to the flimsy bars that support the ceiling since he can feel his rickety structure wobbling underfoot.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” he gulps when he's expelled the dust from his lungs, but now he can see: Snow is rapidly popping the ceiling panels loose, discharging another puff of old dust with each, till there's only one panel left in that corner, home to a very scared and skittish little white mouse. Stacking a chair on the nearest desk, Snow catches the mouse gently and holds it tight.

Hopping back down, he turns on Baz.

“Did you call your class 'a matter of life or death'?” he smirks. “We're talking about Honors English,
right, bro? Or do you secretly teach classes in armed combat?"

Baz sneers. “Do I need to spell it all out for you?”

Snow has the gall to look intrigued. “Go for it.”

Baz finds this nonchalance infuriating. As he settles the last panel lightly back onto its metal frame, Baz jumps heavily down to the floor. “All right,” he begins, crossing his arms over his chest and speaking with an exaggerated slowness that would make Ari smack him if she were here to witness him being such an asshole. “Just imagine, if you can, bro, that maybe some of our students don't have, like, money? Or connections? Or marketable skills? And further, imagine that they live in some 'underserved community'”—and yes, he immediately feels a little shitty about the air-quotes—“where such people end up selling drugs or sex, or stealing from people, or joining the goddamned armed services, all of which, you can probably agree, carry at least some modicum of risk.” Snow is grinning at his sarcastic tone, which just makes him madder. “But now, imagine some of them make it through 13 years of school and find themselves in an Honors class for the first time ever and it's … well, it's a test. Can I be something more than everyone else thinks? And I do my goddamned utmost to get them past that test, but sometimes they fail anyway, and then it's almost worse than if they'd never tried, because they never want to trust their brains again.”

Snow scrutinizes his face for a moment, then bursts out laughing, his eyes crinkling closed. He grabs Baz by the shoulder, which is so sudden and unlikely that Baz doesn't shrug him off. “Wait!” he says, like he's just figured something out. “Bro. You think you know me.” Baz looks back at him, steely-eyed. “You think I'm a white ACTer so I've got to be, what, rich and clueless? An outsider? A humanitarian on a mission to fix this city from on high, slumming a little for the sweet satisfaction of 'giving back' to a world that gives me everything.” He must see the bitter confirmation he seeks in Baz's eyes, because he backs away, and Baz is surprised at how cold those spots on his shoulder feel, free again from the temporary heat of Snow's fingers. Snow has gone particularly pale—so pale that a pair of apricot-toned moles Baz has never noticed stand out below the three more prominent ones that line Snow’s right cheekbone.

“Look,” Snow spits out, “you got me all wrong, bro. I'm sorry about the mouse thing, but if it's the make-or-break of these kids' lives, then so is literally every other moment since they were born. Bet the kids in school called you Richie Pitch, huh? You don’t even wanna know what they called me. You and me, we’re not from the same world. You have no fucking idea what these kids go through.” If we’re not from their world, Baz sneers to himself, then who in the name of Horace Mann are you to lecture me? “You don't know shit about what's going to get them ahead. You're not their fucking savior. Get over yourself, Pitch.”

He takes his mouse and leaves.
November

It’s not enough that he’s from here; it’s not enough that he’s black; the Pitch name is a marble pedestal that lifts you, like it or not, above the hoi-polloi.

Ms. Martinez used to give him veiled shit for it all the time; it's hard to hide your connections when half the town lives in PitchCo properties. She, like many—maybe most, at first—took his professional remove for snobbishness. In time, though, his long hours, the uncondescending earnestness of his work, and his stiff but diligent commitment to becoming part of the social fabric of Watford High's faculty, won her over. (Now when she gives him shit, it’s usually with the knowing exasperation of almost-friends.)

He hates that it took Simon Snow, someone who's even more of an outsider at the school than he is, to call him out. Maybe, Baz reasons, it's because Snow's new; surely, in Baz's first years he burned with an equally anti-establishment fervor. Surely back then, he, like Snow, saw a greater contrast between the wealth of the private schools he'd attended and the sheer crumbling need of Watford High—surely back then, if pressed, he would have called teaching his vocation. Is it so surprising, then, that Snow sees Baz as an invading crusader impelled by the force of his own consuming fire? Is it so surprising that their scorn should be mutual?

Snow said, “You got me all wrong.” This is obviously untrue—there is no doubting Snow’s brashness or his irreverence—but Baz is willing to concede that, beyond these indubitable realities, he may have assumed more than was seemly. He recalls with a subtle shame the way Snow has seemed to lurk around every corner the last few months. He recalls Bunce forcing him to be decent to Snow early on, and innumerable moments when he’s looked up at staff meetings to find Snow’s questioning gaze on him.

It always felt like an affront. But maybe it wasn’t. Maybe Snow was just looking for inspiration.

In which case, clearly Baz has let him down.

But to the hells with that, Baz decides. Baz doesn’t lead anyone. Watford High is a storm-tossed vessel in jagged shoals, but he’s never tried to take the helm. He's just here to plug as many leaks as he can. Snow's right (and Aleister Crowley, how?) that every moment's a matter of life and death for some of their students. Honors English feels like clambering out of the hold, above-decks, but the waves up here are ferocious, and the plummet overboard into sharky water is the work of an instant.

He's just trying to keep everyone on the ship.

* * *

“Hey Pitch, you heading to the meeting?”

Baz looks up from his after-school paperwork in muted surprise. Mr. Snow is dangling from his doorway like he's been there for days, which he most certainly has not; they haven't spoken since Halloween.

“Mr. Snow.” The potted plants by his window suddenly appear to be in dire need of watering. Baz turns away from his visitor to remedy the situation. It's a pointed enough gesture that even thickheaded Snow should get the message.

“Wait!” Snow swings loose from the doorframe and thumps heavily into the room. “Hey. I was kind of an asshole.”
What do you say to this? Correct? Agreed? "Kind of"?

Baz scrutinizes Snow. He looks fairly earnest, if a little lunkish and sweaty. He's in track pants. At work. Mentally, Baz tallies a point in the Baz column.

Snow, taking the critique all wrong, beams and plucks at his Watford High Athletics shirt. “Filling in for track coach till Huynh gets back from New York. Sweet gig, huh?” He sighs in mock dejection at Baz's lack of enthusiasm. “Seriously, bro, NBD, right? We cool?”

Mostly to avoid the imminent fist-bump, Baz shuffles the papers on his desk into a stack. “Sure,” he says. “We’d better get going.”

He feels Snow’s eyes on him the whole way to the all-staff meeting in the theater. There's an expectation hovering in the air between them. Baz has a decent suspicion he's supposed to make some kind of half-assed apology of his own, but Baz Pitch does not apologize for the person he has to be.

* 

Martinez and Snow have requested time in the first part of the meeting.

They project the findings from their dress-code survey. Martinez, looking particularly tough today in black shirt, black pants, and studded leather belt, is having a hard time keeping her voice neutral while she discusses the data. “When we looked through the surveys, we found some biases that the staff should be aware of. For example, we had photos of a black girl and an Asian girl in almost identical outfits, same body type, but we were almost two times as likely to mark the black girl 'inappropriate.' Same for students who appear male versus students who appear female; apparently we get all antsy when we see a boy in short shorts.”

“Obviously that's pretty messed-up,” Snow says. When no voluminous outpouring of outrage ensues, he adds, “Right?” People mutter their assent. “Right. So we asked Ms. Yoo in the art department to work up an anti-sexist, anti-racist alternative dress code, and she put this together.” He changes the slide and gives everyone a moment to check it out.

It's pretty brilliant, really—a cartoonish figure outlined in grey, with heavy stripes shading all the portions of the body deemed inappropriate for display at school. A few neatly-lettered word bubbles provide clarifications, and that's it. No need to sully anyone's minds with the depressing terminology of midriffs and cleavage. Baz is impressed.

Snow is obviously equal parts proud and anxious; his eyes slide from the projector screen to the crowd, as if seeking someone’s response. Baz is surprised that he expects that someone to be him. Snow tends to challenge him in their English-department meetings, and after the mouse fiasco, he's sure Snow is eager to gloat about being seen doing something right.

Snow's face rumples a little, like he's not sure what to expect from Baz. What he gets is a nod—coolly approving, a nod Baz learned from his father, one that simultaneously makes a person feel that they've been touched by greatness and that they'll never be good enough for more. This is good, Baz thinks, but a) what hubris, neophyte, in the mouldering institution of Watford High, change occurs in geological time, and b) it's not like I'm trying to be your friend.

The assembled teachers give a little cricket-chorus of appreciative finger-snaps; then there’s questions and answers, and everyone's looking pretty enthusiastic about the whole thing when Magee, arriving customarily late to the meeting, harrumphs, says, “Well, if you really want, you can work up a formal proposal and run it by the Faculty Senate and the PTA and, uh, the Board of Supervisors, and then if
they all approve it, you can bring it back to the faculty at large for a vote.” Martinez looks pissed; Snow, whose face was glowing with sycophantic readiness for the principal’s high-heaped praises, appears bewildered. “And if they approve it, then it'll go to your union for ratification. You ask me, seems like a lot of energy for such a little change, but who am I to stand in the way of ‘progress’?” The air-quotes lose a great deal of their impact due to Magee’s losing hold of a large clipboard during the process and spilling notes and crossword puzzles all over the stage.

“Thank you, teachers, for your work,” Magee says dismissively as a Snow who is clearly never too dejected for showy chivalry hands over a clumsy stack of the collected papers. “If you have nothing more to say, I’m sure we have important business ahead in the agenda.”

Baz allows himself a secret smile of the purest schadenfreude at the way Snow’s shoulders slump when he retakes his seat. That's right, Mr. Snow, he thinks, This system ruins fledgling heroes like you. It'll shroud your ideals in burlap and chuck them down the well.

A moment later, though, he catches Snow glaring up at him. Maybe the smile turned out less secret than intended.

* * *

“Hey, Pitch!” Baz has grudgingly reconciled himself to the frequency with which he encounters Mr. Huynh on his training runs; in fact, he almost looks forward to the understated camaraderie. He pauses to greet the runner, but the greeting dies on his lips. Jogging in place beside him, now, are two men: Declan Huynh and a remarkably disgusted-looking Simon Snow.

He's the one who ought to look disgusted, Baz reflects, unable to even walk home in peace without the conversational assaults of sweaty colleagues in fluttery little shorts and vests.

Who the hell runs in a vest? Mr. Snow, obviously. Between its flapping, unsnapped panels, a mint-green t-shirt's soaked with sweat (and no wonder; who the hell runs in a vest?). It's hard to tell what the shirt says; Baz can just make out what looks like the words “hen one” in showy copperplate.

Baz recovers his manners. “Huynh,” he says evenly, offering a nod. “Snow. I did not take you for a runner, Mr. Snow.”

“I'm pretty shitty,” Snow says haughtily, but the effect, already ruined by the words themselves, is doubly ruined by this ridiculous exercise thing he's doing where he kicks his knees up toward his chin like a drum major.

“Not true,” Huynh defends, jogging in place while polishing the fogged lenses of his trendy black-framed glasses.

“If you're keeping up with Mr. Huynh, you can't be that bad,” Baz concurs. He really really hates small talk.

“Only cause he's recovering.”

They are literally twelve steps from the butcher's shop. Is it so goddamn much to ask that this conversation end so he can get his steaming vat of blood and go home? “Have you been ill?” Baz hears himself as Huynh solicitously.

Snow guffaws. “You seriously can't have missed the New York marathon news.” Baz must look blank, because he goes on. “Like how Declan, like, came in eighth?”

“In my division,” Huynh hems.
Now that Snow mentions it, Baz is pretty sure he saw some mention of it on the daily bulletin, but Snow's incredulity is a little bit delicious.

“Congratulations, Mr. Huynh,” Baz says.

“Seriously, it's all anyone's been talking about for like a week. How did you miss this?” Snow sounds incensed.

“Thanks,” Huynh says to Baz, studying him intently as he continues to bounce in place. It's disconcerting. “It's my first run post-race, so we're taking it easy.”

“Easy being seven-minute miles,” Snow grouses. Sweat continues to bubble to the surfaces of his face and stream down into his hair and shirt. _That vest must be pretty humid_ , Baz thinks, smirking.

“Next time, we'll do six-thirty,” Huynh says.

“Next time, I'm breaking my leg first,” Snow retorts.

“Stop whining,” says Huynh.

“Yeah, yeah, all right, I'll thank you when I'm outrunning the vampires.”

Baz really needs to practice not flinching when people say that word—especially if the attacks keep mounting. It's on all the newsstands this week.

Huynh's eyes behind his sparkling lenses are looking at Baz a little too sharply. Baz realizes that his lips are still parted in surprise. It's a look that tends to draw stares. He snaps his mouth shut quickly when Huynh slaps Snow on the ass. Whoa. Baz is not an organized-sports person, so he's always a little perturbed by the ways men get to touch each other if they're engaged in the same arbitrary physical pursuits. He fears that he may look too interested; he averts his gaze. “Hasta, Pitch. Let's put down some miles, Simon.”

“Later.” Snow jerks his head toward Baz in a dismissive half-nod and follows, leaving a cloud of sweat that stains the area where he stood.

* *

When they approach again, when Baz’s tote bag strains under the dual weights of blood and sausages—and it _can't_ be just neurosis; Huynh's route intersects with Baz's own walk home with a frequency that must be intentional—Snow has the vest wadded into a fluffy lump in one hand. The perspiration has turned his shirt dark everywhere except the white letters across the chest, which, seen in full, spell the unlikely message “Whence Boners.”

Baz is appalled.

The two tall men wait for the crosswalk at the far end of the block, but even from here, Baz can see the way the floppy hair—properly brown when wet—gleams in the fading light, and can almost smell the crush of wrung-out pheromones that's oozing through Snow's clothes to drench the air around him.

Baz would really rather avoid a second running-in. He detours into one of the alleyways that tidily dissect his neighborhood and, once home, gulps dutifully at his blood and sits down to a dutiful night of lesson-planning.

* * *
Mia Montero is having sex with her boyfriend.

Baz really doesn't want to know this, but he brought it on himself.

Mia isn't his very strongest student, but she's a glowing beam of pure intelligence, and in the not-insignificant subset of his students who fled Central American violence in their early teens, surviving train roofs and starvation and bad adults and ICE internment all for the flickery dream of a better future, she's a tidy head above the rest. When she missed the last two days of class with no explanation, Baz called home. The aunt, or whatever she is, told him Mia would be back today, and she is, and Baz slipped a note onto her desk: *Please meet me after school.*

Now Mia's telling him about her sister, who gave everything to get Mia here—who, Mia now realizes, accepted hunger and injury and sexual abuse and lots more as the costs of getting Mia here safe—but who only toughed out a year in US schools before getting pregnant and dropping out to work full-time. And now Mia and Jose are having sex, and Mia knows where this road can lead—she spent the last week in labyrinths of fear that she was already stepping too closely in her sister's footsteps—and she doesn't want to go down it, doesn't want to disappoint her sister by not rising above, but also feels conflicted because if there's one thing her splintered family's done for her, it's establishing that no good girl has sex before marriage, and that if she does, she needs to be ready to accept her punishment, which is, of course, children. Which is a gift, how would you not want children.

Understandably, presenting this convoluted case that others have constructed against her, Mia's face is twisted—but she has been forged in a goddamned crucible and, Baz knows (and is eternally grateful to know) she will not cry.

“I just don't know what I'm doing, Mr. Pitch.” It's candid and defensive and angry all at once, and why shouldn't it be? Who's supposed to tell this kid—this kid who has a literal *barbed-wire* scar scoring her right cheek—what to do?

Certainly not Baz Pitch.

At the same time, here he seems to be once again the only person around with the sense to see the world as it is, the dispassion to tell the truth, and the ruthless dedication to justice to see it through.

“Look, Mia,” he sighs, from the cramped student desk where he's sitting to talk with her, because he would never stay behind his foreboding teacher desk when students Get Real. That would be cold, unkind. He may not be the opposite of those things, but he is definitely several ticks further up the spectrum. “What do you want?”

She glares a little. “You’ve *read* all the applications.”

Baz can wait her out. His classroom clock ticks so loud that even humans can hear every tiny progression of the hand. It never takes long.

A solid minute later, she continues, grudgingly. “I want to go to college. I want to be someone who has power, who can really help people.”

“What happens if you get pregnant?”

She shrugs. “Have the kid, my aunt'll let us stay with her if I start making money.”

Baz is stone. He can wait as long as this takes.

“Which meeeans,” she rolls her eyes, “working, which means I don't have as much time for school,
and that means maybe I just work at the drugstore till I'm old and all my dreams are dead. Is that what you want me to say, Mr. Pitch?"

He chuckles quietly, but is suddenly furious, because it was just last weekend that he stopped at the gas station and saw Hui Tran at the counter, wearing a little blue logo visor and a fake smile—until she saw it was him, and then it was a nervous, pitiful smile, a smile that begged for understanding even though it didn't understand itself. How could she not have gone to college? How was she not ascending to the upper rungs of academia by now? It had been his first year—Baz should be able to forgive himself for not having known more, then, about how to force a wedge under the iron door between his students and ongoing education, but he can't. He really can't. He lives with it, with the knowledge that we cannot permit the perfect to be the enemy of the good, but it is no consolation, not when he sees scribbling genius Hui with no pen, even, trapped hopeless between the cigarette packs and give-a-penny tray.

“Do you want to get pregnant?”

This answer is quick. “No. Not now. Why would you even think—”

“When students tell me they don't want to get pregnant,” Baz interrupts her, and this is always a sensitive conversation and he needs to steer it away from being about her, make it general, because sex advice is really not his job—in fact, it is actually Not His Job, to a legally-punishable extent, “I say, 'You have two choices: Don't have sex; or, if you're going to have sex, use protection.'”

“But that's a sin,” Mia objects.

Baz can wait all day.

Realizing this, Mia continues in a tone that suggests that Baz is a heathen and an idiot. “It's a sin to have sex without … to have sex if you don't want to make babies.”

“Do you want to make babies?” his voice is gentle; they're retreading ground they've already crossed.

“No.”

“Okay, then.” He drops the hammer: “Like I said, you have two choices.”

She is frowning at her hands, one middle finger scraping viciously at the cuticle of the other, because this is a crappy discussion for her, too. Baz feels a stab of pity for anyone who has to come to their cranky English teacher for sex advice.

“Have you ever gone to the after-school clinic?”

She shakes her head a little. She sees where this is going.

“I'll walk you over.”

They run into Snow on the way, and the man cannot read a social cue for beans; totally oblivious to Mia's obvious agitation and to every impression Baz has given him ever, he elbows Baz in the ribs and inquires stagily, “You gonna make it to the Ethics Commission tonight, man?”

Baz edges away and hisses through curled lips, “I'm rather busy now, Mr. Snow.”

“Sorr-ry!” Snow exclaims, fingers spread wide in open-handed victimhood, also with far more drama than this conversation requires. “Just trying to be friendly, bro.”
Glancing at Mia, who's several steps ahead of them and fortunately doesn't seem to give a shit about teacher nonsense, Baz whispers, “Mr. Snow, this is Not the Time.”

“Got it,” Snow mutters, and thank the gods, leaves.

The nurse welcomes Mia, as Baz knew she would, and Baz shakes Mia's hand as he extricates himself from the situation. The nurse will set her up with birth control if she wants it, and she'll be in class again next week, and as far as Baz can marshal other people's lives, this kid is going to be okay.

* * *

When Baz finally arrives at the Ethics Commission meeting, the loudest voice in the group definitely belongs to Snow, who is a couple beers deep at one end of the table, in heated debate with Martinez about something that sounds like sports.

The dark night is cold enough to hurt, but since the inside of the sweaty bar is jammed to the doorways, the Watford High crew make do with a couple of failing torch heaters and plenty of practical down jackets—they are teachers, after all—on the back patio.

Baz clunks down a pitcher and a stack of glasses at the end farthest from Snow, to general approbation and greetings. “Warm-up?” he inquires, topping off a hodgepodge of offered glasses, many of which obviously contain lagers, stouts, and pilsners in colors that range from honey to molasses, and no one objecting at the addition of the local amber ale he's pouring. It's the start of Thanksgiving Break and now that they're here, the air smells like salty meat and sauerkraut, the beer is icy cold, and there are no students in sight.

When Baz sits, a half-dozen teachers raise their glasses, Ms. Bunce claps him on the shoulder, and for the next hour, all that anyone's thinking about is building up a good head of giddiness for the five long days to come.

Elspeth slides in next to Baz, slapping her phone down on the the table. He pours her a pint.

“Jesus, my dad,” she says, downing half the beer in thanks.

“How is the Witch King?”

She laughs. Elspeth's dad chosen profession makes him a controversial figure in their parents' circles; as the only real psychic in a massive field of charlatans, he draws, some of their magical peers argue, a dangerous amount of attention to the existence of magic. He upholds that with his splashy cloak of subterfuge and a heavy counterbalance of false predictions, no one's the wiser.

“He's good. He's been on some purging kick—'Cluttered home, cluttered mind,' he says—and he says he's getting rid of all our stuff if we don't take it back. Which is fine for me, I already got all my stuff, but …”

“… but Felicia's in London,” Baz finishes.

“Yeah. That was her, asking if I could just hold it all for her till she gets back.”

“When will that be?”

“I don't know. Never?”

“You should make her come home with Ari sometime. I see her more now than when she was in coll —” Baz’s commentary seizes up when Powell leans directly across him to interject a heated
comment into some conversation he didn't hear. She jeers at Snow, “What are you, some kind of expert on what black people do on Thanksgiving?”

“Nah,” Snow says, rather humbly, around a swig of beer. “But my best mom was black.”

Powell nods as though satisfied by this response. Baz assumes it's an in-joke; he certainly doesn't get it. He helps Powell more or less right herself.

Standing to leave, Mr. Cragshore shakes Mr. Snow's hand. “Sorry we won't be around, bud, or I'd invite you to our Thanksgiving. We'll get you for dinner again soon—Milo's been asking when you're coming back.”

Mr. Snow says something back, beaming a melty version of that giant smile, and Cragshore shakes hands with the rest and departs. Most of the crew are leaving now, to sedate nights in or bumping nightclubs—the youngest of the Commission, Ms. Fetherhew, having strategically imbibed caffeinated mixed drinks instead of beer—and when Elspeth heads out, they're down to five: Baz, Mr. Snow, Mr. Huynh, Ms. Martinez, and Ms. Powell.

Snow’s end of the table is empty save for the army of drained glasses, and despite Snow’s lack of taste or humor, Baz feels a small tug of empathy. Clearly Snow doesn't have Thanksgiving plans—maybe it costs too much to fly back home on his slummy teaching salary, or maybe he's feuding with his uptight parents, or maybe he just couldn't pass up the chance to see one of those vulgar bands play in the city this weekend—and, well, regardless of its colonial origins and the unshakable nature of family drama, Thanksgiving is Baz's favorite holiday. No matter why, and no matter who you are, spending it alone is just sad.

Baz downs the dregs of his beer and slides down the long bench till he's opposite Mr. Snow.

“Hey,” he launches in, voice feeling crunchy and stilted, not certain what he's going to say till the words come out. “Uh, I heard Mr. Cragshore. If you're looking for something to do this Thanksgiving, around here, I wanted to say, well, anyone's always welcome at my parents' house.”

Snow leans forward, head lolling into his own hand, and, marginally winning the struggle to align both of eyes in the same direction at once, swivels them toward Baz.

“You said what?”

“I said, uh, come have Thanksgiving with my family.” Snow's jaw is working in a way that looks somehow judgmental, and Baz feels compelled, as a Pitch, to sell the offer. “They're good people.”

Elspeth, bless her, leans in to help. “They really are! I've known them forever. It's not like they bite.” Baz cringes. Not that Elspeth would know, but Word Choices.

Rubbing his eye like he's not sure why there's an eye there, Snow contemplates him with the other. Baz tries his best to look earnest, as though this is the legitimate and well-intentioned ask he means it to be, but he knows his face is probably screaming the opposite. Baz's face doesn't do gentle. It does defiant. It does commanding. It does throw-down.

It is not selling this invitation at all.

“Fuck you, bro,” Snow slurs, and Baz feels suddenly, inexplicably cold. “What the fuck makes you think I'm so desperate? When I need your fucking pity, I'll come begging. You thought you'd get me on my knees?” Baz shakes his head, about to protest, but Mr. Snow's head has already dropped down into his hands. Snow slumps lower, and slumps lower—is this some kind of defiant rejection? Baz wonders or is he just blitzed?, because it is seriously an odd reaction—and then somehow Snow
overbalances and his whole body slips sideways off the bench. Without thinking it through in any way, Baz finds himself grabbing Snow firmly, just above the elbow, in time to arrest his fall before he strikes the cold concrete.

Mr. Snow is more solidly built than Baz suspected; his weight threatens to pull both men to the ground, but come on, Baz is stronger than any full man alive. He could probably catch a cow in one hand if he needed to. This is easier. He drags an unsteady Snow back to standing.

Snow takes the whole thing the wrong way.

Tilting his bleary head back, he squints at Baz, his voice suddenly ice. “Get your hand off of me.”

“I just …” Baz is behaving honorably.

“Get your fucking hand off of me,” Snow growls, but Baz can feel that if he lets go, Snow will lose his balance and go down like a bag of rocks, and also Snow’s sweatered arm is shockingly warm and muscular, and honestly, he can't quite bring himself to relinquish his hold.

The shove catches him unawares and sends him reeling back, hard, into the outer wall of the bar. In the jagged moment of impact, red flooding his vision, Baz wants to strike back. Even before he's staggered back to his feet, he feels his hands knuckling into fists, his lips curling back, his fangs erupting… Borges! He clamps his mouth shut hard, ducks his head. His own blood curls into his mouth from where his fangs have razored the insides of his lips, but he cannot acknowledge this. That he is apparently now engaged in some kind of a fight, in public, with his colleagues watching, is horrific enough already without him turning it into some grotesque vampire coming-out ceremony.

This sudden turn to violence seems to have caught the rest of the group as off-guard as Baz. Looking perplexed but not unprepared, Ms. Powell has rocketed between them, her slender body a wall.

Several feet away, Snow clearly knocked himself down with the effort of repelling Baz, and now he's scrambling unsteadily back upright.

Baz cranes his head around Ms. Powell, who maintains her space. Hormonal ninth-graders have taught her more than a few things about how to prevent punch-ups. Sucking down the blood in his mouth, he mutters through barely-opened lips, “What the hell, Snow?”

Snow's answer is garbled and defiant. “I said to fucking stop touching me.”

“You were about to fall on your ass.”

“You say.”

“You want me to let you fall next time?”

“You better want it, cause I swear, you touch me again, bro …” and behind the not-inconsiderable obstacle that is mild-mannered freshman English instructor Lucinda Powell, Mr. Snow seems to be teetering forward with menace in his eyes.

Powell has obviously put in plenty of time at the centerline of a fistfight; without touching either of her colleagues, she keeps them both a stony distance from each other.

“Look guys,” she says from between them, her voice the thin golden thread of reason that you strain to pick up when drama catches you at the wrong moment, “I'm not trying to get in the middle of this, but it sounds pretty dumb.”
Baz is indignant. “It is dumb.” Who shoves? Honestly, they're not kids. Why's Snow so bent out of shape about a little touch on the arm?

Then it dawns on him, perhaps more slowly than it should (because of the beers but also because Baz lives in a major US city in the 21st century and tends to associate with progressive and decent human beings who don't give a shit about his sexual orientation). “Wait,” he says, and he glares at Ms. Powell till she leans aside just enough that Baz can make eye contact with Mr. Snow. “Are you scared to have me touch you because you think I'm gay?”

He knows already that he's hit the nail on the head. It's obvious from the disgust that seizes Snow's features at the word gay. What stagnant, incarnadine backwater is this bigot even from?

Snow emits an angry laugh. “That's right. You got me. You've got me on every count. I'm a, what?”—he counts on clumsy fingers—“an opportunist, a cultural voyeur, a snob, a shitty teacher, and now … now I guess a homophobe too.” He looks from his splayed fingers to Baz. “High-five, bro.” He reaches past Ms. Powell, who seems a little unsure about what exactly her role is here (and Baz really feels for her, with the tiny part of him that's not indignant and volatile, because it's really not her godforsaken job to have to separate grown asshole adults), as if to give Baz five, but instead jabs the hand into Baz's chest—in the exact same spot, even, which is surprisingly tender from that first shove—and Baz's instincts kick in to grab Snow's wrist so he can't do it again, but Baz twists it down and back much further than is really entirely necessary, far enough that he can feel the joints strain and yield like when you're working loose a chicken leg. He doesn't know if it's better or worse that he relents only because of sheer gut-churning self-disgust.

Letting go, though, is a mistake; as soon as Snow recovers his injured hand, he's punching Baz in the face with the other, and yelling words—sound garbled, but intention clear—that convey that Baz is such a bourgeois douche shitbag that he is constitutionally incapable of understanding that Snow doesn't need fucking anything or anyone. The punches are hard and fast, like Snow knows enough about boxing that even his inebriated body can recall some basics, and fuck if Baz doesn't deal a swift elbow to Snow's eye before he knows what he's even doing.

Rage freezes him then. He is not going to cause more injuries, and gods damn Simon Snow for having pushed him this far. (That's right, Ari jeers in his head, the other guy made you punch him.) His nose is swelling already; he can feel the blood gushing through it, and his eyes' neighborly blur and fury. Everyone's eyes are upon them: where do they go from here?

This just got far more real than anyone could have anticipated for a Tuesday night beer.

Fortunately, compared to Mr. Snow, Baz is basically sober and drowning in regret, so he's able to back away. Mr. Huynh is helping him now, too, tight-lipped and assessing Baz with a calculating eye at the same time as he takes control of Snow's wrists.

Baz looks desperately up at Ms. Powell. “I think I need to get out of here.”

“Yeah you do,” she says. “Go. We've got this.”

Ms. Martinez and Ms. Powell step forward while Baz extricates himself, grabbing a stack of paper napkins for his bleeding nose, and bolts out the door.

* 

Baz is both relieved and irritated to find Ari lounging on his couch when he gets home; he wasn't
expecting her till next day, and was looking forward to an ice-pack and a beer and maybe indulging in some Vietnamese delivery and a good wallow. But he can do all that with her, too; he'll just have to take more shit for it.

“I don't know what the fuck just happened,” he says through the pulp of his swollen nose; she looks up from her laptop, her unflappable demeanor rippling with question-marks, because this is unusual talk from her brother.

Before she makes him say anything, though, she orders him to sit down and gets the ice and beer and calls in the food, and while she snaps his nose back into alignment he watches the ink in her forearm glow with analgesic magic, and Baz feels gratitude prickling deep in his esophagus because sometimes you just want someone to take care of you.

“Is he crazy?” she demands a little later. They're eating bánh xèo straight from the delivery boxes and he's just about finished telling the story—at least as much of it as he understands. “I mean, is he actually insane? Because these don't seem like the actions of a sane person, no matter how drunk he was.”

Baz thinks it over. “I don't think he's crazy. Or notably racist,” he adds, anticipating her next question. “But homophobic? Maybe that’s its own brand of insanity.”

“Maybe.” Ari's not convinced. She's pulled up Simon Snow’s limited social-network presence, and he definitely Declines to State his sexual orientation. “If you hate the gays,” she says, “you’re not going to dick around, you're going to declare your straight ass off-limits. I just don’t see it. He's too progressive for that shit anyway—have you seen the places he's worked?” She pries open a little tub of chili sauce and dumps it into her noodles. “Heeeey!”

“What?” Baz looks up suspiciously. He has never cared for that tone.

“I've got it.” She lowers her head intently, keeping her dark eyes on him. She is well aware of the smoldering intensity of her gaze when she does this; on most people, it's very effective, but Baz is not most people, he's her brother, and he suspects a joke at his expense.

“What?” he asks, rolling his eyes.

“It's so obvious, B! He has a cruuuuush on you.” She is singing it, in the way that makes him want to throttle her. Instead, he throws a couch-cushion. He is not at all prepared for her to deflect it straight back at him; it hits him smack in the damaged nose, and when new pain bursts through his battered, ice-numbed face, he can't not yell.

“FUCK!”

He hates Mr. Snow so much more than he ever thought possible.

* * *

The next morning, Baz's eyes won't open.

Well, that's not totally true. They won't open all the way. The top lids seem to be working fine, but the bottom ones are so puffy that they impede half his vision. He has to lean forward a little to see himself clearly in the mirror.

He looks like shit. It's Wednesday morning, Thanksgiving's tomorrow, and even with healing charms, there's no way his parents won't notice that he's been punched in the goddamned face. It’s hard to slip much past the shrewd gaze of a family as magical as the Pitches.
He goes back to his room and punches the pillows a few times, experimentally, imagining Mr. Snow. He shouldn’t be surprised the man had so much fight in him; it was exactly the kind of compact, blunt power you’d expect of a goddamned football enthusiast who’s always dangling his bulging arm muscles in your face.

**Bam.** The pillow is pathetically flat in its surrender. He grabs a few more.

Those arms. Glamour muscles, people call them. He probably targets them at the gym, to hide that he’s gone slack everywhere else.

Except Baz has seen Snow running. Damn it, he’s seen more than that. He’s seen his legs—his bare, bent, tensed legs—from mere feet away. That guy’s nowhere close to going to seed.

The punching feels oddly satisfying. Arachne keeps telling him he should try out boxing, that it would be a societally-acceptable way to get that stick out of his ass, and he thinks maybe she’s right. Kneeling on his bed, he dumps another volley of slugs into the pillows—straight-on, right hook, a back-handed slap for good measure—and then remembers that Ari's in the guest room and she might hear him and think this is some weird sex thing, and then realizes to his extreme discomfiture that he is good and hard, so maybe it actually **is**.

Gross.

*Simon Olivier goddamned Snow. What the hell is his problem?*

* From: Principal Magee
  To: Tyrannosaur B. Pitch, Simon Olivier Snow
  Date: Thu, Nov 26, 2015 at 6:04 AM
  Subject: Must discuss

Events have come to my attn. My office Mon at 7.

* Penelope Bunce: *How’s Thanksgiving?*
  Basil Pitch: *Fine. My family send their love.*
  Penelope Bunce: *Thanks! Back at them from CA where we just set new record for # of Bunces in room at once. (28) Six pies*
  Bunce is the only one of Baz’s contacts he can trust to eschew emoticons. It’s a blessed relief.
  Penelope Bunce: *Hey, I heard about Tuesday. You okay?*
  Basil Pitch: *Yes, bruised but fine.*
  Penelope Bunce: *Good. Guess holidays are rough for Snow*
Basil Pitch: *Every day is rough with him.*

Penelope Bunce: *But hols must be esp lonely*

Basil Pitch: *Because he's the angry drunk in the corner who yells at everyone's kids?*

Penelope Bunce: *Are you some kind of monster?*

Basil Pitch: *I am confused.*

Penelope Bunce: *He has no family? Obvs*

Basil Pitch: *Wait, what?*

Penelope Bunce: *You know he was a foster child*

Basil Pitch: *Why would I know this?*

Penelope Bunce: *Everyone knows.*

Baz's students tell him a terminal period changes the tone of a text message. He doesn't recall exactly how, but he doesn't think it's good.

Basil Pitch: *I didn't.*

Penelope Bunce: *Well, you do now.*

* 

“No one leaves until you've talked this out,” says Principal Magee, lounging in the only comfortable chair in the room.

“Look,” Baz says, gritting his teeth, because he feels the familiar, uncomfortable weight of the air of the front office hanging heavy around his throat; because he is going to get this part over immediately; because he needs to be forthcoming about this one thing before Snow starts with the punching again. He can see the chip on Snow's shoulder. Actually, it's not a chip; it's a goddamned log. He tries to see himself through Snow's eyes: Snow's a foster kid, and Baz, with his refined language and pressed suit, is a Pitch. Words break barriers if you pick them right. “Look,” Baz repeats. “I've been kind of an asshole.”

Magee looks up sharply and mutters *Language,* but Baz is busier noticing that his admission didn't actually cost him much.

He continues, quick before he turns back: “I made some assumptions that were probably really wrong, and I can see why you might feel like I've been needling you and mocking, and why what I said in the bar wouldn't have sat well.”

“Cool, bro,” Snow says, cutting in with shocking ease, hair disheveled and eyes twinkling. Baz could swear they were never bluer than now, set against the fading purple-grey ring of a black eye. His shoulders are unslumped. It's like a weight's fallen away. “I shouldn't punch people,” he adds with merry contrition. “That was fucked up.”

“Language!” Magee snaps, glaring.

Mr. Snow ignores it, standing to cross the room to Baz. “We cool, bud?”
Conflicting emotions fight inside Baz: his increasing revulsion for Snow's endearments vie with a not-entirely-honorable wish to take that knobbed, muscly hand in his own; his legitimate desire to get along (what in hell is this? get along? if Ari could read his mind right now, she would ream him) with Snow wrestles with a perverse desire to call Magee's bluff, to drag this conflict out past first bell and to leave Magee feeling even a little bit of the worthless that Magee actually is.

But Baz is a gentleman, and he takes a hand when it's extended.

“Yes,” he says, rising to meet Snow in a firm shake. Snow's hand this time is rough and strong; he presses hard but not hard enough to hurt—even if Baz were the kind of person who you could hurt with a mere squeeze. “We're cool.”

Magee, too stupid to question anything beneficial, claps tersely inches from their faces. “Glad we worked through this, gentlemen. Now, time and teaching wait on no man. Get moving.”

Walking at Baz's side down the long central hallway, Snow murmurs conspiratorially, “Magee is kind of terrible, right?”

Baz groans in assent. No one agrees with him about Magee; most people are oblivious or uninterested or just don't see it; even Bunce had such a shitty principal her first two years here that Magee seems normal and effective in comparison. “The worst,” he agrees.
Early December

Chapter Notes

Note the chapter title! December got huge, so you get half this week, half next.

At the first faculty meeting in December, Magee announces apropos of nothing that all teachers must observe another teacher in their department before the end of the week. “Your department chairs have your assignments,” the principal says dismissively before shuffling out of the meeting and leaving the beleaguered department heads to field the questions.

“Don't stress,” Bunce says to her cranky English crew, anticipating a furor. “Yes, it's a typical last-minute ask, but anything that gets us into each other's classrooms is good by me.”

Of the gathered teachers, only Sullivan appears unmoved (probably because she’s busy envisioning all the ways she would murder Baz if she cared enough to bother, starting with jamming that flashy new cell-phone down his throat).

“It's costing us our prep periods,” complains Mr. Potts.

“Every goddamn time,” growls Powell. “The district tells Magee some deadline in August and we hear about it three days before it's due.”

“It's because they don't respect us,” Tejo pontificates, fire in his eyes. “We need to fight back, show them we won't take this lying down.”

“Alan,” Bunce says, patting him on the shoulder, as one might a restless dog, “all they're asking us to do is spend half an hour in someone else's classroom, and they'll even give you a sub if you don't want to lose your prep. Bring your grading if you need to.”

She distributes a pre-labeled observation form to each of her grumbling teachers.

Baz is assigned to observe Snow. Of course, he thinks, but after their oddly unifying meeting with Magee the other day, he's actually okay with it.

Baz arranges his observation for last period the next day. Mr. Snow sits in on one of his classes that morning. It’s a lecture on cultural approaches to satire, and Snow appears to be transfixed by the way Baz interweaves lecture with paired discussions. They'll debrief both observations after school.

That afternoon, Baz hands off his Honors students, who are reading Allende, to a sub, and climbs the stairs to Snow’s classroom.

When Baz slinks into the room and claims a vacant chair in the back corner, Mr. Snow seems to be transitioning from teacher-focused to student-group work.

He cajoles, “I think we can all agree that Romeo's a jerk, right?”

The students oppose him, vociferously. In a tangled roar, they holler about true love and bad luck,
but one girl slams a hand on her desk and yells, “Damn straight, he's a jerk. Boy went to that party for another girl; Juliet shoulda been like, 'Boy, bye.'”

At the front of the room, Mr. Snow laughs and calls for order. And calls. And calls.

When he finally gets some semblance of attention, he says, “All right, guys, you see where I'm going here, don't you? I want you to get into your groups”—Order of operations! Baz cringes; student desks are already shrieking and skidding across the linoleum—”not yet! Wait! Just a minute!”—they keep dragging the desks, which means that Snow is more or less yelling at them—”and one of tomorrow's debate resolutions is going to be Juliet shoulda been like, 'Boy, bye.'”

“For real?” asks the girl who said it, her surprise a bright spot in the madness.

“Something like that,” Mr. Snow shrugs at her, then bellows, “So, now, get in your groups and plan arguments for both sides. What's the aff? What's the neg?”

Baz has to admit that, despite the apparent chaos and the unquestionably high decibel level, the students do what they're told. They jab fingers in their tattered school copies of the play, identifying lines to copy into their debate organizers. The animated conversation seems mostly on point. Baz is impressed.

Mr. Snow swaggers around the clumped desks, redirecting here, praising there, and the fifteen minutes of group-work rocket past.

Snow stands up front again, by the board, and calls for attention. It's not happening. He tries again, louder; still the hubbub continues. He tries one of those clapping routines, and the students clap along agreeably but no one actually quiets down.

Baz is curious to see how Snow will handle this. Thus far, the class has been remarkably productive. The little half-looks Snow has tossed his way have had a flicker of defensive pride, like, See, I can teach too. But when he catches Snow's eye now, lifting a brow in quiet question, Snow looks deeply flustered.

To spare him the scrutiny, Baz pretends to make a note on his observation sheet.

Then he looks back up to the front of the room. Snow is doing something strange. He's raising his hands as if to call for order, but the fingers are bent oddly. One wrist crooks back and swivels as Mr. Snow opens his mouth to speak again, and then, suddenly—at the same moment as it is just beginning to dawn on a horrified Baz that it almost looks as though Snow's trying to cast a spell—he says, voice thick as molten rock, “Listen up, guys,” the noise quells like a candle being snuffed, and every student's attentive eyes are locked to Mr. Snow.

Ishiguro's ironies. It's magic.

Whatever happens in the remaining ten minutes of the lesson, Baz doesn't know. He sits in rigid fury, shredding the corners of his observation document and waiting, waiting, waiting.

* 

As soon as the last student's shuffled out, Baz slams the unslammable classroom door. Mr. Snow jumps at the bang. Baz whirls on him. “What the fuck was that?”

“A ninth-grade English class?” Snow says, brashly feigning ignorance like a guy accustomed to confronting danger with insolence. “A lively and intellectual discussion about the power of semantics?”
Baz is livid, crushing the air around Snow with the force of his anger. “Don't toy with me, Snow. I saw you. You just used magic on your freshman English class!”

Snow blanches. Like, the pink in his skin disappears, dry-erased. He stares at Baz with blank eyes. “You saw? You know? How…?”

“Because it's magic,” Baz blurts out, too annoyed to mince words. “Because magical people know magic when they see it.”

It strains the limits of belief to see how big Snow's eyes have grown.

“You…” he breathes, and Baz has no idea what to make of that stare. “You can see it? Can you do…?”

“Obviously not at my place of business, but yes.”

“But you really mean you can do what I just did?”

“Why is this a surprise to you?” Baz is unimaginably furious, for the second time in the last month, angrier than he ever is about anything. How is Simon Snow so good at making him mad? “How can you not comprehend that I might be capable of the same things you can obviously do? Do you really think I'm that incompetent?”

“No!” Snow squawks, clearly straining for full sentences. “I just… I always thought it was… just me.”

Just him. The nerve.

The horror.

Just him.

It's like watching a night darken in negative, like the minutes after you’ve turned off the lights and dimmer stars poke through the deepening celestial blackness. Like this, as the color leaches from Simon’s dumbstruck face, constellations of pale freckles and moles resolve around the few darker ones you always see on his cheekbone and forehead. His throat flushes minutely in time with the muddled cannonfire of his pulse. (Yes, Baz hears heartbeats. He tries not to—it's invasive and annoying and constant—but sometimes he can't help it.)

Simon looks helpless and afraid and very, very young.

Zora Neale, what has Baz Pitch ever done in his life to deserve this? How is it possible that Simon Snow—the only person Baz has ever heard of living for any time, let alone thirty years, without anyone seeing his klutzy magic for what it is—has washed up on Baz’s metaphorical doorstep? And why in all hells is Baz the right man to initiate him?

“It's not just you,” Baz sighs. “There are a lot of us. All the Pitches, for example—obviously, it's usually a family thing.” Snow is staring as if worms are writhing from Baz's orifices. Baz is sorely tempted to conjure just such an illusion, just to see if he can actually get Snow's eyes to pop loose from their sockets, but again, they are still at work, and there are limits. “Listen,” he relents, “What are you doing now? Actually, forget it. Whatever it is, it'll wait. Pack up. We're going to my place.”

With schoolyard chatter fading behind them, Mr. Snow scuffs a toe and says, with the creaking
weight of important words that are rarely spoken, “I don't know if you heard, but I don't know my parents. I grew up in foster care. No one gives me things, Pitch. Everything I am, I fought for.”

He has heard, of course, from Ms. Bunce, but still the frank, angry admission punches Baz in the heart. And it explains why a magical Simon Snow never got Charm School, his weird DIY spell, his defensiveness, maybe his readiness to fight—so many things. Baz glances over at Snow, who is bulldogging his way through the chilly evening, chest straining against the strap of the bursting bookbag. From any distance, you’d still think the world would give this cocky white boy everything he wanted.

A few curls escape the bedraggled knit sports-team beanie he'd tugged on artlessly when they stepped out of the school doorway. Puffs of air hover in front of his face, and in this wintry weather, pink-nosed Simon Snow looks like a goddamn furnace, powered by his own self-will.

Baz is not too proud to recognize the ache inside him as respect. He might quibble if you pushed for admiration, but respect feels fair.

*

Once they're in the little elevator of his building, Baz can't hold the question any longer: “You never knew anyone who could? What'd you think? You were some kind of god?”

Snow laughs half-heartedly, staring at the ground. “Doesn't everyone think that about themselves?”

Baz would contradict him if this weren't absolutely true. He's taken human development classes; life is just the crushing process of slowly discovering how remarkably little actually centers around you.

Baz pauses outside the door of his apartment. “I have to warn you. There's a dog.”

Simon grins. “Cool.”

“He can be kind of scary.”

“Gotcha.”

Snow keeps grinning, so Baz opens the door, and Eustace bounds out—part Doberman, part German Shepherd, part huge, a black-and-brown blur of flesh-ripping tooth and slavering jowl—and springs past Baz toward his guest. Baz turns to grab at the collar, but Snow has already taken a knee and is clearly handling himself fine, patting Eustace's head and flanks while a frenzied Eustace covers his face in drool.

“Well,” Baz says, taken aback by Simon's warm reception of his terrifying pet, “This dog is Eustace.”

Snow laughs, rubbing the silky fur behind Eustace's ears. “The dog is useless?”

Baz looks sharply at him, on the verge of correcting him since he's not sure if Mr. Snow's making a reference—the right reference—or actually misheard, but Snow rolls his eyes. “Yes, it turns out I can read.”

After a compulsory nuzzle with Baz, Eustace accompanies Snow into the main room of the apartment and plops suggestively onto the hardwood beside the big armchair. Simon takes the hint and the chair, his enormous bookbag thudding to the ground near him, and folds his arms behind his head as if to ask Now what?
Now that they're safely inside, Baz pulls the pen from his shirt-pocket and starts doing little showoffy bits of magic just because he can. With a gesture from him, books sail back to the handsome teak shelves that line the back wall; with another, the cushions on the low couches plump themselves; with a third, the linen drapes swish open and the sparkling dust motes swirl in a series of loops and squiggles before settling tidily into the wastebasket by the desk.

Snow's eyes are going to freeze like that, and Baz will feel a little divine recompense for the months of endless thumping that still sends sporadic dust-showers down from his classroom ceiling.

A glass of cold water lowers itself neatly into Mr. Snow's hand and he automatically says, “Thanks,” then does a full-on double-take and Baz snickers.

Snow glares at him. “You get that this is all new for me, right?”

Baz bites off the laugh. Seeing the morose huddle of Snow's shoulders, the way he's clutching the glass like it might fly away again at any minute, he feels like kind of a jerk.

“Sorry,” he says, putting the pen back. He means it. “I know it's new for you, but I keep forgetting. Every magical person I've ever met has grown up in the World of Mages. Most magical kids come from magical families, and we all went to weekend Charm School together, so the community was always there, like it or not.”

Now Snow's the one laughing. “Charm School?” He cricks a little finger out and takes an exaggeratedly polite sip from the faceted drinking-glass in his hand.

“Well,” Baz huffs, “they couldn't very well call it Magic Lessons. Because, and this is the point at hand, one of the very first things they teach you is that it's a secret. Magic used to mean something much bigger, back in the days of dragons and sorcerers, but even with careful breeding, it diluted over the millennia. If we're found out, our magic won't be enough to save us from being poked and prodded and tested and examined like lab rats. That's why there has to be a line. For most people, it's anything public. Work is almost always outside of the bounds.”

“But what if it helps?”

“Like the crowd-control you were using today?”

“They listen so much better.”

Baz is trying very hard to remember that Mr. Snow is new to this, but come on, he thinks, you're a public-school teacher, learn to control your goddamn students. “Even if it helps,” he says fiercely, glaring daggers at this ignorant, rakishly unkempt man who's curled up in his best chair talking risks that could ruin the magical world he knows. “We don't always see eye to eye on what makes a situation a matter of life and death, but this really is. Magical people are targets. For good reason,” he admits. “Not all of us are scrupulous with our magic. A lot of us have used it to gain money and power, and if that got out—well, people would be calling for our heads.”

“Like with the vampire bounties?” Snow asks.

“Bounties?” Baz inquires, trying very hard not to sound like there are alarm bells ringing in his brain.

“There's billboards everywhere. Obviously you would know.”

Baz gives him a sharp look. He will not ask “Why would I?” because the answer is too obvious.

“What?” Snow gives a defensive shrug. “Don't tell me 'magical people' are the crazies who don't
believe in vampires.”

“Of course we believe in them,” Baz allows with relief. Snow doesn't know. “It's not like they're pixies, or numpties.”

“So you know about the bounties, then.”

“Yes,” he yields, “I've heard.” He thinks it over. “You're right; it's not so different. Ordinary people are scared of magic, and what people are scared of, people want to conquer and destroy. Vampires are fickle. Once a town becomes sufficiently inhospitable, they move on. We all know about Stockholm. Kill a few leaders, and the rest of the vampires high-tail it for redder pastures. They're opportunists. But vampires don't have lineage and friends and bonds. Vampires don't have community, not like we do. If our magic comes under attack—if they ever get one of us—everything crumbles.” He is pacing a little, which would be embarrassing, except that he is a teacher and he knows that sometimes his pacing really drives a point home, especially when he suddenly seizes up, very close to someone, and drops the hammer. “We can't draw attention. Each of us knows too much.”

“I don't.”

Baz pulls the pen out again and flicks it at Snow's tasteless wool beanie, which flies neatly across the room to the hatrack by the door. “You do now.”

Hatless before him, Snow looks surprisingly bare. He nods, very small and serious. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay, I won't do magic at school. I mean, if I can help it.” He hesitates, glancing up at Baz from under his shaggy bangs. “I don't always know when it's going to happen.”

Something in Baz shifts at this—the plainness of Snow's mop-headed confession, the confusion in his voice. It's because he can understand temptation—he can definitely understand doing what you're not supposed to—but he has no idea what it's like to live life not even knowing the rules.

“What do you know?” he asks. “Are there things you can do reliably?”

“Um, a few? I can show you if… can you hit me?” Baz must look confused, because Snow mimes winding up and smacking someone. “You've done it before, bro.”

After another sidelong look, Baz raises his hand and brings it down hard. It's human hard—it'll sting, but nothing will break. Except instead of smacking the canvas of Snow's jacket, his hand clangs into something metallic and cold and invisible just short of it.

“Yow!” He flaps his hand in shock and surprise. “A shield?”

“That's one of the things. There's not a lot, but that one came in handy.”

Baz is confused. He definitely got Snow at least once in the face in that brawl last month.

Snow seems to see this, because he says, “I sort of lost the instinct for it when I figured out punching. I like a fair fight.”

And now, damn it, Baz feels a tiny sliver of remorse for his superhuman reflexes, because even under the influence, Baz is not a fair opponent.
“What else?” His hand still aches, but Baz can feel his eyes narrowing with curiosity about this strange, uncouth magician.

Snow produces a little light between his cupped hands. It's real but wan in the bright living room, and he is suitably impressed when Baz unballs his own bruised fist to form a tulip-shaped drop of flame so brilliant that when he blows it out, the afternoon loses a little of its luster.

Snow warms the room and cools it and drags items toward him in stuttering jerks that make Eustace growl from the mat by the door, hackles raised.

Baz nods. Snow's obviously got real magic, at least as much as most of the magical people he grew up with, but he doesn't know how to channel it. It sparkles diffusely all over the room.

“There's one more thing,” Snow says, but he doesn't need to—the second Baz looks him in the face, it's unavoidable. Snow's face hasn't changed, but it's so beautiful, too beautiful, a splendid, sensuous, sleepy compilation of perfect curves and angles, every bit drawing him in, and suddenly more than anything, Baz wants, he wants so much to—

“Enough is enough!” Baz orders desperately, tearing his gaze away. “Now! I'm going to teach you, Snow.”

When he dares meet Snow's eye again, the charm is gone, replaced by Snow's usual smirk. The charm is gone, Baz has to remind himself, because having once seen Snow in such a light, it's impossible to unsee.

“You're gonna teach me?” Baz growls. “You're too strong not to know how to control yourself.”

* *

Hours later, Baz and Snow are both exhausted. Baz has run him through a crash course of highlights from the first few years' worth of Charm School—everything from sleight of hand and silent incantation to simple levitation and transportation. Sprawled back on the mid-century armchair by the window, Mr. Snow looks almost asleep but is wiggling his upturned fingers so that several dice, confiscated from students earlier in the day, dance languidly in the air above. It's like he can't look away.

“Hey, Snow,” Baz says, interrupting his focus because his stomach is gnawing and he is starting to smell the rich, warm blood that courses through his guest's veins. “You want something to eat?”

The dice tumble down onto the chair and floor.

“Sure?” he says, surprised out of his reverie, and scrambles to pick them up.

Baz fusses around in the kitchen for a few minutes; he has some leftover lentil salad and a bunch of greens from the farmer's market, and there are a few steaks he picked up from the artisanal butcher with his last order of blood. Eustace snaps up the scraps as Baz trims the steaks so they'll fit in his skillet, which is bubbling with hot butter.

He brings the plates back out to the main room. He finds the dining arrangement in his apartment a little precious—there's a high bistro table and stools that feel like the place is staged to sell to some hip young twenty-somethings—but not so pretentious that he'd risk offending his doting stepmother by changing it. He sets out table settings and glasses and, on impulse, a bottle of wine because this steak is going to taste eight times better with a Cabernet Franc.
“Food's up,” he announces, and then realizes that Mr. Snow is fast asleep, feet rucked up awkwardly on the ottoman and knees flopping like the pages of a dropped book.

Baz debates his options. He could let Snow sleep, but that would be weird. They are only just barely getting along, and it's distinctly unlikely that Snow relishes the possibility of waking up hours from now, drooly and disoriented, in Baz's home. He'd probably accuse me of drugging him, Baz thinks, rolling his eyes. So he goes over.

“Snow!” he says, a few safe feet away. “Snow, food's up!”

Nothing. Mr. Snow's breathing remains even and calm, lashes long and golden in the lamplight.

Baz leans in closer, tries again. Finally, as lightly as he can, he taps Snow on the shoulder. “Snow!”

And goddamn, that's more than done it; Snow's hand shoots up at this and grabs Baz's wrist hard and sudden. Oh gods, Baz thinks, don't make me fight you again. But he doesn't—he just gropes his way down past Baz's frozen wrist-bones to the hand, and holds on like he's falling off a cliff and it's Baz's job to drag him back to safety. And wait, is Snow dreaming? He tenses, arching his body, and suddenly yanks so hard on Baz's arm that Baz is thrown off-balance and has to catch himself on the chair's arm so that he's definitely up in Snow's space now.

“Snow!” Baz tries again, a little too harshly, because really, dinner is going to be delicious and it's getting cold. “You're dreaming. Wake up.”

Snow does, at once, eyes brilliant blue and refocusing instantly, seeming to take in all in a second Baz's closeness and their clutched hands—his pulse drumming through his fingers, aromatic and loud—and the smell of butter and seared beef. Snow's stomach rumbles audibly.

“Sorry,” he says, letting go his grip of Baz's hand, but asking no more questions than he answers. “I guess I fell asleep.”

“Dinner's up,” Baz repeats, because it is a thing to say. At Snow's request, he points him to the bathroom so he can wash up before they sit to eat.

It's only after they've scarfed the first halves of their meal that Baz remembers the wine. “I was so hungry I forgot. Will you have a glass, Mr. Snow?”

Snow laughs, nudging his glass forward. “Sure,” he says. “Thanks. But, listen bro, I think maybe you shouldn't call me 'Mr. Snow.' I mean, I'm at your house having dinner, and I've basically spilled my life's biggest secret to you—and maybe it's not such a big deal for you, because apparently, like, everyone you know is magic, but you're actually the only magical person I've ever met, so for me, this is kind of a Thing—so could you maybe call me 'Simon'?”

Baz concentrates on pouring. Sure, he could do that, he guesses, twisting the bottle as he finishes a pour, catching drips before they form. He resists the urge to mouth the name, Simon, to feel it on his tongue before he says it.

“Why not?” he asks, as casually as he can, handing back the glass. “Cheers, Simon.” He makes it through; if it comes out a little clipped and over-precise, no one calls him on it.

“Cheers!” Snow says enthusiastically, tapping his glass to Baz's. “Uh. Is it cool if I call you something besides Pitch? I think you introduced yourself as Basil, but I remember your real name's, like, Ty… Tyro…”

“Tyrannus,” Baz supplies, taking a baleful gulp of wine.
“But I asked Lucinda, and she said no one calls you anything except ‘Mr. Pitch.’”

*He asked Powell about me?* Baz thinks, and needs to take another drink to mask whatever expression that thought's brought on. He supposes they *did* engage in fisticuffs once, so maybe there's some kind of chivalry here; know your enemy as yourself.

“So…” Snow asks.

“Oh,” Baz snaps back to attention. “Either's fine. Whatever. Most people call me Pitch. I'm used to it.”

“But what do *you* call you? You *must* have one name you use when you think about yourself?”

This question takes Baz aback. He feels oddly shy about answering, like he's been asked to recite his poems or be filmed brushing his fangs. It's an intrusion into a space no one else gets to go.

He could just shut the door—he could say *Basil*, or even *Pitch*. He could say any variant of *Tyrannus*. He could even trot out the old family nickname, *Trip*. But what comes out is an admission: “I call myself Baz.”

The grin this elicits from Snow—bright and small, not the enormous fake smile he bestows on the world at large—is worth all the naked embarrassment Baz is feeling. He shovels in another bite of salad and forces himself to chew slowly; his cheek twitches; his skin is too hot; he can hear the chomping in his ears.

“Dude, you have all the best names.” Snow is still grinning, and that sparkle in his eyes is dangerously close to magic. “Is it cool if I call you Baz?”

“Sure,” Baz says, trying not to strangle in the tangle of excitement and discomfort that he feels at hearing Simon call him by his name.

*

Well, Baz thinks alone later, preparing for bed, that was 100% surprising, and one hundred times better than he had anticipated. Simon Snow had been… well, unsure, eager, polite, *humble*. Almost shy, even; once the defensiveness and self-pity fell away, he'd looked like a child seeing his first star-shower, open-mouthed in abject astonishment that the universe was so much larger than he'd ever known.

All of it had been unexpected. The dinner chit-chat had definitely verged on banter, and may even have toed the line of friendly flirtation. The delighted recognition when Simon read the poem propped open on the shelf—“*He Lit a Fire with Icicles*,” set out by Agatha, probably, who gave him the bookstands years ago when she first acknowledged his habit of leaving passages open as notes to himself—and clearly saw humor in the likeness. Friends. In what world does that make sense?

He even liked Eustace, Baz realizes with a start. No one likes Eustace at first. Brave people, and dog people, approach with a sort of stalwart obligation (and maybe a treat): this is *How You Greet a Dog*. But not with affection. Baz readily acknowledges that this is smart. Eustace is the kind of dog you expect to see dragging a bloody carcass down the ravaged streets of some post-apocalyptic blockbuster, the unquestioned leader of an indomitable clique of mutts who do not give a fuck, dogs the wasted humans avoid even though there's good meat on those bones because the risk of getting close to such a dog always outweighs the rewards.

Simon Snow had kept no distance. He had basically flung himself at Eustace.
Baz has to admit that this may indicate a mental disorder. Eustace is terrifying. Eustace's happy face, especially, when he smiles with all the clean pointy teeth at once, is the face people see in the seconds before they wake up screaming and clawing at the sheets.

Simon likes his dog. (And of course Eustace likes him back; that's a given. Eustace likes everyone. If you were hitting him with a stick, Eustace would still like you. He might rip the stick from your hands and shred it in his fangs, but when he was done, he'd lick you till your face hurt. But maybe Eustace especially likes Simon? This is hard to say.)

Dev never got along with Eustace. He approached the dog with the same bluster and bravado he brought to every endeavor in the boardroom and the ball courts, and would offer two firm pats on the head before walking away, having once again exerted his dominion over the beasts of the land.

Baz doesn't like to think about Dev when he goes to bed, because then he falls asleep angry, but sometimes there's no way around it. They've been apart longer than they were together, and still Baz's life is tied up in those memories.

Even this room, Dev leaning in a pretense of casual irritation—irritation as a mask for the actual deep, festering resentment—against that narrow, inlaid dresser that had been his own space when he was at Baz's, where Baz now stores his rather alarmingly-large collection of sensible sweaters.

“Don't you ever worry?”

“About what? Money?” Baz had thrown his flannel-shirted arms wide, disdainfully indicating his fashionable apartment, the custom art on the walls, the tailored suit hanging on the closet door, his monogrammed goddamned pillowcases (a gift, of course, from his stepmother). “Have you forgotten that I'm a Pitch?”

Dev muttered something, and turned away.

“What?”

“Nothing. Let it go, Basil.”

But Baz was sitting bolt upright in bed in his pajamas at two a.m. fighting, and he was damned if he was going to let anything go right now.

“What did you say, Dev?” he demanded again, horrified at the ice in his own voice.

Apparently it meant something to Dev, too, because he turned back and the calm was gone, he was hissing now: “You really want to hear it, Basil? It's nothing you don't know, if you'd admit it to yourself. I said, you're a Pitch in name only.”

It stung. It really did, more than Baz liked to admit, because it was true: he was different from the rest of the family. He didn't acquire, he didn't invest, he didn't wield power. So he made a joke of it. He sighed resignedly, “I guess you were bound to peek under the wolf suit eventually.”

Dev looked at him with repulsion, as if Baz had turned into some kind of talking lizard, and did not laugh—and looking back, Baz realizes now, this was the reason they should have broken up, the reason Baz should have dumped him, because for all the things Dev could see about Baz, he never understood that Baz was funny, would have called him “quirky,” if pressed, or “unorthodox,” but never ever “funny,” and Baz cannot believe he spent multiple years of his life fucking someone who never got that about him—and below the perfectly-coiffed hair, his eyes were black glass.

“I'm a fucking Zhou,” Dev said. “You're never going to be what I need.”
Gods, Dev was such a tool. But tool or no, there's no way Baz would have survived the break-up without Eustace.

Now, Simon Snow gone and the sounds of sparse late-night traffic in the streets below, Baz whistles once, softly, just to hear Eustace grumble quietly in response from his own little bed in the corner, where—apart from his eternal vigilance—he is fast asleep.

* * *

Just like that, Simon Snow becomes part of his life. It's really that easy—Baz sees him do one awkward little spell and suddenly they're spending a few evenings a week together. Baz teaches magic and cooks and tries to rein in the unsolicited advice about teaching; Simon soaks everything in and learns where Baz keeps the clean napkins.

Snow stops in his classroom most days during lunch. Sometimes it's just for a moment, but it's a welcome moment—a break in the flood of students who want things from him. Sometimes he brings (shockingly delicious) apples, which he lobbs over when he thinks Baz isn't paying attention. (Baz tries very hard not to suspect that Simon’s testing his reflexes.) Baz is snarky and removed, because that's who he is at school, but Simon doesn't seem to mind; if anything, it makes him more eager for Baz's attention.

Today, Simon’s asking for teaching advice. He passes an assignment sheet across Baz's desk. It's a creative extension task: Design a motto for your R&J character and write a defense of that motto.

He's listed a few examples. On reading the second, Baz feels his lip curl.

Simon sees. “You got a problem with YOLO?”

“I'm sure YOLO can live without my approval,” says Baz, handing the paper carefully back.

“It's had a good run,” Simon agrees with a laugh. “How’d it get under your skin?”

“You mean in addition to its omnipresent meaninglessness? Its use as a malleable justification for any shortsighted life decision? Its self-centered, contemporary-focused implication that the idea of living for the moment is somehow a modern construction?”

Simon nods, grinning.

Baz is on a roll. “In addition to that, it sounds dumb. And,” and he really doesn't mean to go here, but somehow, here he is, “it's just factually incorrect.”

Oh shit.

Simon's nod freezes. He gives Baz an appraising look.

“Don't tell me you believe in reincarnation. I'm not that gullible.”

“Yes, you are,” Baz says, because come the hell on, this man lived for 31 years thinking he was the single human vessel for all magic, “but no, I’m not sure if I believe in reincarnation. At least not how you're thinking of it.”

Percy Bysshe, he thinks, observing himself with a sort of detached curiosity, as if he's peeking down from the ceiling at a man who looks a great deal like him making a truly sketchy decision. The man, oblivious to the chattering students strewn throughout the room, appears riveted to his clunky wooden desk, as though a force within him has grown so heavy that it forces him to immobility. He
swallows, attempts to reunify himself, and steels himself to say it: *Death can mean many things.*

“Oh,” Simon says, looking around as if he just figured something out. “I get it, bro. You're going to say there is no *once*, that time is relative, that a lifetime is a million million onces strung together and packed into each other, and that we live every one of them separately. That our cells die and regenerate constantly. That the YOLO ethos fails to recognize that our lives are, like, *always new.*” He beams expectantly at Baz.

Simon's smile is broad and hopeful, and Baz is really sad that he's about to destroy it with the miserable fact of his parasitism, but Baz is a man of honor, and that honor, suddenly, seems a weight too great to bear in secrecy. “That's not quite what I was going...” Baz begins, a little too much acid in his voice because oh shit, is this happening? Is he really going to do this? to tell Simon who he *is* —

But Simon cuts him off curtly.

“Right, Mr. Pitch, I'm sure you would've been more eloquent.” The smile's gone, replaced by a thin, hard line. “Listen, I have to go make my copies.”

*

Simon blows off that day's magic lessons, and at Ethics Commission on Friday, he sits far from Baz. After they've each finished a drink—just enough to curb animosity, not enough to make them rash—Baz goes to the bathroom, then slides into a new spot between Simon and Declan Huynh.

“Look,” he says quietly. “I wasn't trying to be rude. The other day, you know, in my room.”

“What?” Simon demands, much louder. “When you shat all over my pop-culture analysis?”

Huynh stirs with apparent interest, so Baz leans in closer to Simon, because this is really just between them. “Um, yeah. I didn't mean... Look. There's stuff you don't know about me.” This sounds stupid; he knows it sounds stupid, but it's the best he can do. “I can't say more than that, but just believe me, I didn't mean to knock you *at all*.”

“Yeah?” Simon sounds unconvinced.

“Yeah. Really.” Simon's face is squinched up into a tiny and belligerent star. “I don't think you're dumb, if that's what you think.”

Through the creases of his folded face, Simon looks dubious.

“I don't waste my time,” Baz insists, sneering because sometimes a sneer's the most authentic way to transmit feeling. “What, you think I'm tutoring you out of *pity*?”

Simon nods. Apparently his opinion of Baz is low enough that only the scorn gets through. Obviously Baz is too much of an asshole to actually care about someone. “Right.“ His face reshapes itself. He pours himself another beer. “Cool, bro. Want one?” Baz is learning: When Simon moves on, he moves on.

Baz pushes his glass forward and Simon fills it, brusque and competent, not too much foam. It feels like an acceptance. Mercenary Baz gets past Simon's defenses.

So noted.

Huynh's holding his glass out, too, and Baz really hopes that he didn't overhear much of that. This
part, though, Huynh can hear; in fact, for general beef-dismantling purposes, he should:

“Hey, if you think you can restrain yourself from the amateur pugilism this time, I'd like to invite you
to come to Christmas at my parents’ house.”

“What makes you think he's available?” laughs Ms. Fetherhew from Simon's far side, slinging an
arm warmly around Simon's shoulder, and Baz is suddenly horrified to realize that he hasn't ever
talked to Simon about his other friends or, possibly, even lovers. He knows Simon hangs out in
Fetherhew's room at lunch some days, and looking at them now, Fetherhew draped against him, they
seem like an obvious fit. She's a little young, sure, but bubbly and pretty and just the kind of woman
Baz would guess Simon would date—if he were to guess at all.

Simon laughs too, knocking his head lightly against Fetherhew's, in a way that suggests some
history.

“I don't have plans,” he says, his voice oddly formal. “I would love to come to your family’s
Christmas.”

“Good,” says Baz, and they clink pints on it. “No presents.”

“Are they all as fancy as you?”

Baz eyeballs him, recalling from this morning that somewhere below the warm layers, Simon's once
again wearing that appalling sports jersey, and who cares if the red wool sports beanie he's wearing
keeps his head warm? It's hideous. “Bring a suit.”

* * *

“Declan's curious about you,” Simon says at their last lesson before Winter Break. They've started
working on healing spells, and Baz's forearms are a mess of slashes and half-healed welts.

“What do you mean?” Baz grunts, rolling his sleeve higher so that he can flay a thick flap of skin
from his bicep with a steak knife.

“He thinks you're hiding something.”

“Well, yeah,” Baz says, trying to hide his fear by indicating the obvious—the room sparkling with
magic, the blood flowing from his arm to stain the white washcloth he's holding just below. “He's got
my number. I'm goddamned magical.”

“Sure,” Simon says, contemplating this. “But there's more than that, isn't there? You told me there
were things I couldn't know about you.”

“Yes,” Baz snaps, a little irritated and more nervous. “There are. Meanwhile, are you going to fix me
before or after I bleed to death?”

“Sorry, I got you.” Simon steps close. “Together again,” he says, calling the magic into his hands
and then lightly pressing them against the wounds, pushing the detached skin back where it belongs
and holding it there till the edges begin to knit back together. Simon's challenge is focus—the power
of the spell comes to him more easily (Baz now has to admit) than to any other magician Baz has
ever seen, but it spurs out wildly, spattering across the room. In this case, it's rather nice—Baz feels
healed everywhere, not just where Simon's touching him, like soft cotton’s binding snug around the
organs that clank and rattle in his chest—but a magician's real power comes with concentrated
direction of magical force.
They've talked about instruments; Baz has shown him how his own magic condenses when he touches the pen he always carries with him. Sometimes he even points it, like a wand. It jumped into Baz's hand when he was 11, and he just knew.

Simon said no object's ever spoken to him that way.

"Have you ever really wanted anything," Baz asked then, "for reasons you just couldn't understand?" Ari, instrument-less till 18, had woken up one day with the mad eyes of a person possessed and had dragged Baz along with her to the tattoo salon, where she coerced him to get matching pieces on their forearms—a stylized combination of knot and flame. His healed into a fine and elegant secret; hers healed into the gleaming gold locus of her magic.

"Baz," Simon said with exasperation, "that's the fucking story of my life."

"Better," Baz says now, with Simon's incandescent fingers kneading the flesh of his bicep, and trying not to groan at the burn of bonding skin. He doesn't know if it's just that it's been a while, but he could swear this spell never worked so fast or with such searing heat. "You're getting it. That's pretty much all you need for most surface cuts. Next time, we'll work on deep-tissue repair."

"I feel bad that you keep hurting yourself so I can learn. I can cut myself next time."

"No!" Baz says, too ferociously, because Simon is still touching him and through his fingertips, he feels the pulsing blood that keeps Simon alive. "You can't. It… You need to be in full control of your senses. While you're learning, at least. It's harder to cast spells if you're in pain."

"Hmm." Simon seems to assent. He pulls his fingers away to examine the repair, which has already sealed itself. Baz has explained that it'll be a few days till the scarring disappears; there are other spells to hasten this, but Baz wears long sleeves almost every day, and he doesn't mind bearing the marks for a little while.

Simon takes their glasses to the kitchen, Baz assumes to get them some more water. Having lost a fair amount of blood in today's lessons, he's grateful that Simon's thinking about his hydration.

A minute later, though, a smell comes coiling from the kitchen, minerals and resin and pine-sap, and Baz's fangs emerge in a thud of his heart. *Fuck.* Simon, whose blood even through a protective barrier of skin smells better than anyone he knows, couldn't let it go. He's cut himself to test.

"You all right in there?" Baz calls, trying to keep the shake out of his voice.

"Fine," Simon calls back, and it's hard for Baz to tell if it's Simon's voice or his own hearing that's strained. He sits down hard on the couch, focuses on buttoning his cuffs again, and wills his own thudding blood to slow.

He's almost managed to coax the fangs back into the gumline when Simon calls again, this time definitely a little frantic, and yes, it's not Baz's imagination—the smell of blood is stronger now, filling the apartment. "Baz, can you come here for a minute? Please?"

Torn between responsibility and terror for what he might do, Baz rises, slowly, from the couch, and moves in measured steps toward the kitchen.

The sight is no better than he feared—Simon's cut himself too deeply, and despite the superficial
healing spell he’s used, the blood’s burbling out of his forearm like hot fruit juice bursts from a pie crust, uncontainable.

“You hit a vein,” Baz says through barely-parted lips, shuddering. Baz is going to need to get under the skin to stitch the vein closed. “That won’t work. Cut it again.”

“I…” Simon holds out the paring knife he's used and his arm. He's too pale, his blood puddling on the floor. “Can't. Please.”

Baz likes to think he would have taken the knife even without the magic to prod him. Gritting his teeth, he grabs Simon's arm by one hand. This wasn't Simon's first attempt; there are a few fresh little scars, tidily healed, beside the gushing mess of the third. “Fuck you,” he grunts. “Just this goddamned once, you couldn't listen?” He slices the wound open.

His heart feels weak, and his legs. Simon's leaning swoonily against the fridge, and Baz pulls him to the ground, never mind that the blood on the floor will soak into Simon's jeans, so that Baz can take a knee to steady himself.

“Sorry,” he says to Simon, not because he actually is but because Simon has to be kindly disposed toward him for this spell to work. “Forget I said that.”

“Just fix me, Baz,” Simon begs, and the hope in his tiny voice makes Baz weaker still.

“I will,” he promises, tossing the knife away and grabbing for his pen, he wraps both hands around it and Simon's forearm. “Look at me.” Simon's blue eyes, hazed with pain, find Baz. Baz's brain is clanging and chiming. Simon's blood streaming across his hands, he can barely think, he's using half his brain just to fight back the fangs. But he needs to think. He lets his mind zero in on the spell and just hopes Simon's too far gone to notice his teeth.

“*If you pardon* ,” Baz whispers, the words quavering between them, “*we will mend* .”

He feels the magic sizzle and spit, raucous as forest fire, through his hands in every place where they touch Simon.

When it's hot enough, singeing his nerves, he carefully plunges a thumb into the deep gore of the wound. Simon hisses with the pain and, thank the gods, passes out. He doesn't have to feel the rest of it—Baz rejoining the severed vein and tendons, healing the muscle tissue, and finally sealing the skin back over it all. Baz kneels tall and straight for the procedure, keeping his keen nose as far as possible from the unspeakable quantities of Simon's blood. He can only imagine how he looks, his teeth sprung long and tongue poking disobediently out between them, tasting the traces of Simon that float through the air.

The second he's done, he pushes away and almost runs out of the kitchen. A few spells wash the blood away—off the floor and knife and from Baz's hands and pen and Simon's arm—and another gets Simon into fresh clothes and onto the living room couch, his bloodied outfit knotted inside three layers of plastic bags.

* 

It was a lot of blood (*A LOT OF BLOOD*, enough to lacquer the insides of Baz’s desperate brain red, even after he’s thawed and surreptitiously downed two of the pints from his freezer), but honestly, probably no more than people donate at the blood bank.

Still, even though Simon’s more or less back to his usual swagger again after a hearty dinner and a lot
of water, Baz insists on driving him home. Despite the blood-memory that still clings like perfume all over Simon’s boisterously unquelled body, Baz has to act normal. He must. They can still be normal together.

“I live way out on the crappy side of town,” Simon protests.

“I like driving,” Baz says offhand, “And this way I'll know where you live when I pick you up next week.”

“Pretty sure you'd know it anyway, landlord,” Simon winks. William Butler Yeats. How have they not talked about this. Baz ardently hopes it's not one of the more questionable Pitch holdings, but on that side of the city, it's anyone's bet.

Simon's eyes on seeing the Triumph are a thing of wonder.

“You gotta take me out with the top down sometime.”

“Sure,” Baz agrees, perhaps too readily, the familiar thunder rumbling through them as he lets off the clutch and lets fuel surge into the thumping guts of his machine. Cutting through the everpresent scent of Simon, the car smells like itself—the reliable, strong smells of clean oil and old leather. “But listen, Simon, if we're going to keep being…”

“Friends?” Simon asks, and the word is a small sun.

“Right. You can't take chances like that.”

Simon shrugs, as if to dispute the assertion of risk. “You were there.”

With fangs out and vision clotted. Simon’s trust dissects him. “I'm not always going to be strong enough.”

Simon looks doubtful about this, but he gives his word.
So, it is not impossible that in October, midway through my first read of *Carry On*, I flung down the book in horror to send my beta a breathless email titled "Christmas with the Pitches?!?" that began "Noooooooooooooooooo."

Even less impossible is that said beta, who had already finished *Carry On*, and who had, in September, read an early draft of this chapter, texted back immediate and unequivocal reassurance that the two Christmases (while both Christmas 2015!) were sufficiently different to coexist as canon and fic. I breathed again; life continued; *Carry On* was, as we all know, great.

Lessons of this story: a) if you're going to write fic of unpublished works, you've got to figure the writer might beat you where you want to go, and b) my beta is the best.

Baz expected that Simon would still be asleep, or at best, maybe mid-shower, but no, when he pulls up in front of the cheap but well-maintained Forest Apartments (A PitchCo Building), Simon's out front with an overstuffed gym bag slung across his shoulder and a half-eaten russet apple in hand.

Up close, he's bleary-eyed, but grins when Baz steps out of the car to unlatch the tricky little trunk and squeeze Simon's bag inside.

“How’s the arm?” Baz demands once their hands are free.

“Cool?” Simon shoves his sleeve up to show a forearm ridged with narrow scars, one longer and darker than the others. Without thinking, Baz runs a finger over it.

Simon shivers and pulls his arm away.

“Sorry, it’s cold,” he says hastily, tugging his sleeve back down, and Baz castigates himself for his thoughtlessness. So Mr. Snow’s not a homophobe; that still doesn’t mean he wants Baz’s grabby hands all over him.

Fortunately, Simon doesn’t seem too troubled. Eustace hops lightly out of the car when Simon gets in, then flops contentedly across him like the world's heaviest lap-robe. Simon scratches and coddles him the whole way; it's the best ride of Eustace's life.

* Simon laughs richly as they pull through the broad front gates into the private drive. “And you thought *I* was slumming?” They are descending the hill into the family’s land. Simon goggles at the sights around him—sights that Baz has to look at fresh in light of Simon's wonderment.

It's true, he supposes, that few houses have their own topiary gardens.

Simon shakes his head. “Are those trees cut to look like trees?” he asks, but it's obviously a rhetorical question. Near the entry to the estate, Delphinia's had the gardeners carve a whole little village from the boxwoods—neat, angular homes, a church, a clocktower, and throughout, conical
trees, all like enormous green versions of what you'd find in a nice Scandinavian child's wooden playset. By the time it had sprouted into being, Baz was already getting too old to play there, but he remembers his sister and brother playing hide-and-seek and pretending to trick-or-treat at the little hedge houses.

They roll on down the hilly drive. Tastefully understated white lights line the low, spare architecture of the groundskeeper's cottage. Eb waves from inside her window, where she appears to be stringing novelty chili-pepper bulbs around a tree that will almost certainly not meet with Delphinia's aesthetic approval.

It's a warm enough winter that the fountain's still gushing merrily in the middle of the parking circle where the drive meets the family home.

“Holy fuck,” Simon says.

What? Baz wonders, and follows Simon's line of sight. Oh right. The family home is, of course, more rightly the family mansion: a multi-leveled marvel of local wood and stone and so much glass, all assembled with such exquisite delicacy that the tiers that jut out at odd angles from the main floor appear almost to float.

Baz's dad had commissioned the home as a gift for Baz's mom, but the concrete of the foundation was still curing when the vampires turned Baz and took his mom from them forever. It wasn't until many years later, when Tyro had remarried and Ari had just been born, that Delphinia was able to convince him to dig out the shelved blueprints. From there, with incredible speed and startlingly few modifications, considering that persnickety Delphinia had become the de facto project lead, the Pitch House soared into being.

His parents have kept the house in town—why not, really?—but since Ollie finished high school three years ago, this country estate has become their real home.

The heavy front door glides open—it would have slammed, were it capable of slamming—and a bulky blur of a man hurtles down the stairs toward them. Baz extricates himself from the car just as his brother flings arms around him.

“Ollie,” he says, with the fond disbelief he reserves for his youngest sibling. Ollie hefts him bodily from the ground in the enormous hug.

“Hey there, my brother!” Ollie exclaims, spinning. “Oh man, am I glad to see you!”

“I just saw you at Thanksgiving,” Baz points out, rapping a gentle fist on the soft twists of his brother's hair. “Will you please set me down?”

Ollie obliges, thumping Baz's feet back to the gravel. “Thanksgiving barely counts, man, you were so moody the whole… Hey!” he interrupts himself, because of course Simon chose this moment to snap out of his Welcome-to-Oz fugue and clamber out of his seat. Eustace is chasing birds around the corner of the house, and Simon's grinning at Baz and Ollie across the little car's canvas roof.

“You were moody?” he asks, mischief flitting under his words. “You? That hardly sounds like the Mr. Pitch we all know back at Watford High.”

“Someone had punched me in the face two days prior;” Baz says, suddenly snippy because this feels an awful lot like he's about to get ganged up on, even though there's no way his brother and Simon could have planned an attack. “I was understandably not operating at top cheer.”

Ollie looks back and forth between them, at Baz's glower and Simon's smirk. “Dude, was that you?”
he asks, incredulous. “It was, like, the first fight of my bro's life.”

Baz sees no reason to correct this. He would like to correct the look of delight on Ollie's face, but this burgeoning camaraderie is obviously beyond his power. Ollie's already bounding around the car to thrwack Simon on the back in jockish introduction. When he insists on carrying Simon's bag to his room, and when, on hefting said bag, he almost drops it from his pure joy at observing the faded college football logo emblazoned across it, Baz acknowledges to himself that he is fairly well fucked. It's in the stars.

“What'd you play?” Ollie's demanding as he holds the front door open, with that aggressively earnest enthusiasm that’s like chum in sports-infested waters.

“QB, mostly,” Simon says, shrugging a little like it's not a big deal, but the fact that even Baz knows quarterbacks exist seems like a strong indication that it's going to mean something to Ollie.

“No way, man.” Ollie is wide-eyed with reverence. “My mom never let me play, but man, bro! Want to throw a ball around later?”

“Sure,” Simon says, following Ollie up the south staircase. “What did you play instead?”

“Basketball.” Baz can hear the eye-roll. “But now I'm on the lacrosse team.”

“Shiiiit,” Simon says, drawing the word out in appreciation. “Fuck throwing a football, bro, you got some sticks?”

Half a floor behind them, Baz pauses to reflect on what the sweet Dickinson he's gotten himself into. Ari had better have his back when she gets here.

* 

They've set Simon up on the same floor as Baz. All the bedrooms on this level, like most of the personal spaces in the house, feature dark wooden walls on three sides with full glass on the last. When they first set foot in the newly-constructed mansion, back when Baz was still in elementary school and the surrounding second-growth forest was young, he had chosen his room because when you looked out the windows on this floor, you could see forever—endless tree-tops, squares of farmland, distant electrical towers. The world felt infinite, and he felt so powerful, watching it all from his huge window like a control deck.

Twenty years later, all you see is trees. When it's dim and grey out, as it is today, and the soft yellow ceiling lights warm the room, your own reflection hovers in the glass.

In the next room over, Simon's thrilled. Since their doors are still open, he can hear him exulting to Ollie, who is loving showing off.

“Fuck man, this window.”

“Pretty great, right? And you can always drop the blinds if you want, there's a switch right there, but you really don't need to unless you feel like it. No one's gonna see you. Shit, you could stand here naked, no one would know.”

Shit, Baz thinks. You could. He certainly has on many an occasion. He and Dev even fucked against his window a few times, which was just incredible, like falling and falling and falling, everything green and triumphant.

But something about the idea of Simon Snow standing naked in his family home is just catching up
to him, and it sits ill in his mind. Baz feels a little unclean. He steps into the en-suite bathroom, admiring Delphinia's latest towel acquisitions, to splash the road from his face before they all go down to greet his parents.

* 

“Basil!” Delphinia swoops on him the second he descends the staircase. For a moment, he's encased in her cashmere amplitudes before she pulls away to meet his guest. As usual, her hair is very short—still coal-black; Baz suspects some cosmetic charms, since his dad's most of the way grey by now—the soft curves of her cheek and neck highlighting the glinting golden shards of the dangling earrings that she always wears. “And you must be Simon,” she says to Simon, leaning to press his hand in hers. “Welcome, darling. I'm Delphinia—please, call me Delphinia—and if you need anything at all while you're here… well, you'll probably just tell Basil. But I'll be around too.”

Simon thanks Delphinia for having him and is starting to praise the house, but Delphinia flutters a hand—she's heard it all before, and from people with the kind of credentials that render a mere English teacher's praise entirely meaningless. “Darling. I just hope you'll enjoy yourself here. Talking of which, Tyro's on a call, but lunch is waiting, and we're going to eat.”

Baz is glad that she's ordered something simple and hearty. The Christmas Eve dinner tends to be extravagant, so this soup-and-salad lunch is a gentler entree into the Pitch household. (Of course, it's crab bisque and wild chicories, but still.)

Once they've sat down and Delphinia's said her words, everyone tucks in enthusiastically. Baz feels a sudden twinge of guilt for not having thought to inquire whether Simon wanted to stop for a pastry or something before they left town this morning.

“Ari's flight should be landing about now,” he comments to his brother.

“Shit,” Ollie says, slapping the table. “I forgot to say, Ari's not coming.”

“What?” Baz sets his fork down too loudly. Sure he sees Ari a lot, but he'd been expecting her here.

Delphinia shakes her head sympathetically. “London's snowed in,” she says. “No flights for a few days, they think.”

“She said they're going to Easton's mom's or something,” Ollie adds.

“Easton?” asks Delphinia.

“Her guy, right?”


Delphinia claps a hand to her own head in mock anguish. “Don't let your father hear us,” she hisses to Ollie and Baz. “You just know what he's going to say.”

“Names are power,” Tyro Pitch's sons both quote; Ollie's tone is flippant, but Baz feels slightly chastised, because the words are true, in magic and in everything else, and maybe they are being jerks. She's their sister, and he loves her, and it seems like she's pretty into the guy.

Simon asks, “Have they been together long?”
“Like, a year?” Ollie guesses.

“Maybe once you meet him, it'll be easier—”

“Oh, we've met him,” Delphinia assures. “Two weeks we spent in Normandy last summer with them. A lovely boy.”

Baz sees the dubious look Simon's getting. “Don't judge us,” he says in a cold parody of defensiveness, chuckling inwardly even as he says it. “He has a weird name.”

“Now I'm judging you even more, bro,” says Simon, and Baz is surprised at the thrill of vicarious satisfaction he gets a second later when Ollie punches Simon in the arm before passing him the bread.

Simon is still recovering from that—Ollie packs a solid wallop—when he startles to see Tyro Pitch looming over him.

“Greetings,” Tyro says briskly, not seeming to notice the awkwardness of the angle at which Simon, apparently struggling to recover his composure at the appearance of the man Agatha secretly refers to as “The Ghost of Basil Future,” is contorting himself in order to shake his hand.

“Dad,” Baz says, “This is Simon Snow. Simon—”

“Mr. Pitch!” Simon exclaims with a deference Baz has not yet seen.

“'Mr. Pitch’ is my son,” his father deadpans. “Tyro. Glad to have you.”

He claps Baz on the shoulder. “Son.”

Baz nods up at his dad, but he's distracted. There are about two people in the world who realize that Baz's father uses a different tone when he's in the presence of non-magical people. Baz is one of them.

His father’s not using that tone now.

He made Simon in less time than it took Baz to get annoyed back in August by that first grin.

“Dad.”

That's about as effusive as Baz and his father ever get. Tyro Pitch is not unkind, but he is a hard man. He's also a surprisingly gracious host.

“Wine? I had Eb chill a white Bordeaux.”

* 

After lunch, Ollie drags Simon out to the lawn for some of the aforementioned lacrosse stick-work and pigskin-tossing. Baz deflects the jocular invitations in lieu of flinging himself across his favorite of the couches in the upstairs lounge. There, he reads a bit and stares idly out the window at the men on the lawn.

Every so often, Eustace dashes out of the trees in one of his madcap circuits between gardens and woods that seem to occupy the better part of his visits to the Pitch house. Simon whistles when he sees Eustace, who surprises Baz by slowing down long enough to indulge Simon in a few scratches behind the ears before he's off again.
Simon straightens up and grips the football. He shouts something; Ollie fakes right and runs hard left across the lawn.

Ollie in motion is not unlike a galloping zebra. Thick and taut, he barely ripples as the thuds of footfall vibrate through his bones. Both of Baz's parents were tall and narrow, and so is Baz. Ollie and Ari, though, while still of decent height, have more of their mother's fullness to round it out.

Ollie's build's actually kind of similar to Simon's, Baz can't help noticing as his brother charges away in anticipation of Simon's throw. Both are broad through the shoulder, solid with muscle over a thick core of good human flesh.

*God damn it*, even in his head, he sounds like a vampire.

But, he reminds himself, at least he's comparing them for a philanthropic reason.

*Before dinner, he stops by Ollie's room on the second floor to ask a favor.*

A little later, laden down, he knocks on the smooth wood of Simon's door.

"Come in!" Simon calls, so Baz does.

He's not sure what he was expecting, but he wasn't expecting this much tidiness. The bed is still made, of course—they only got here this morning—but the laid-out clothing is a surprise. He recognizes the suit that Simon wore on the first day of school and on Back-to-School night. Beside it, there's a boxy, pressed white shirt and that broad, purple-and-green striped tie that would look at home on the embarrassingly cheery septuagenarian clerk at his local bank.

Baz cringes to recall that he once sneered at Simon's sartorial choices. How could he have thought their dowdiness was intentional instead of the result of poverty, frugality, and the lack of decent guidance? Why did he assume so little?

"Simon?" he calls tentatively.

"Sorry, just shaving," Simon calls from the bathroom, where steam is curling out of the part-open door. "Be right out."

Baz deposits his armload on the bed next to Simon's suit and takes a seat in the wing-chair by the window. The view is the same as from his own window, of course, but the angle's just different enough to be novel; he hasn't noticed that bird's nest before, in the upper reaches of the pine, nor that you can still see a hint of the distant countryside above the stand of birches. From the next room over, the tree-tops are too high.

It's starting to rain, quiet and grey, and he feels cozy and at home watching from the comfort of this soft chair and warm house. He's not much of a napper, but his eyes want to droop shut. His brain encourages it. *Just give in*, it says, *take a load off. Simon will wake you up.*

This shakes him back to full consciousness—he was trying not to think about Simon in the bathroom. It's odd enough that they're staying in the same house at all, let alone that Simon's doing something so private as shaving—which he clearly enjoys enough to take his time about it; Baz can just imagine the way Simon angles his jaw to pull the razor along each long, sloping plane of his jaw—just one sturdy wall away from Baz. Weren't they punching each other less than a month ago?

Baz has to admit that he's glad Simon feels safer around him now, but that doesn't mean this isn't a
“Sorry,” Simon says again, stepping out from the bathroom in a sweet-smelling cloud of steam. “Didn't mean to keep you.”

“You don't need to…” Baz begins, then cuts off, because of course, how did he not piece this together beforehand—Simon has just taken a shower, before shaving, and he is naked save for one of Delphinia's thick, cream-colored towels that wraps snugly around him from hips to knees.

Every part of his brain that ought to be committing the scene to memory chooses this moment to start flashing rude error messages.

Baz is suddenly acutely aware that Simon knows him to be a gay man. Even though they're getting along so much better, there's a history of distrust here. He doesn't want to give the wrong impression, doesn't want Simon to think he's noticing that drops of water still cling to the ox-like sweep of his freckled shoulders, nor that they're freckled in the first place, and definitely not that the sight of Simon's nude torso is actually leading him to think exactly the kind of thoughts Simon's probably always feared from him.

Crap. How has he not noticed until now that Simon Snow is unreasonably attractive? Despite the red CAUTION scrims that filter his vision, this is still obvious.

It's also obvious that this encounter is not going to end well if he doesn't tear his eyes away soon.

He knows this is really Simon's problem, not his—it's the 21st century! learn to deal with the fact that men are going to find you attractive sometimes—but Simon's his guest. It's Baz's job to make him comfortable.

“…don't need to apologize,” Baz finishes clumsily. “You're on vacation. No hurries, no worries.”

God damn. Words. Choose better words. He tries to look away. “I just came because, I brought some clothes. You don't need to wear them, obviously you have your own, but I thought, you're about Ollie's size, some of these might fit…” His voice trails off unceremoniously.

“Better than my old Salvation Army suit, you mean?” Simon asks.

“Yeah,” Baz says; he appreciates the frankness, and can still dig up a little resolve. At least he's not going to pussyfoot around the issue: Simon's suit looks stupid on him no matter what, and now that he knows what Simon's got to work with… well, god damn. It's a disgrace to hide this body under all that shapeless fabric. He gazes at the window again. He can still see Simon's glimmering reflection against the trees, but at least he doesn't have to make eye contact.

Simon waits for a moment, like maybe he's weighing Baz's words and intent for insults, and finding none, finally says, “Thanks.”

“My pleasure,” Baz says, mentally scrawls WORD CHOICE! in all caps in the margin, and flees to dress himself.

* *

A little later, Simon's knocking at his bedroom door. As Baz had hoped he would, Simon has opted for Ollie's navy blue trousers, into which he's tucked a close-fitting grey-blue shirt. Dressed like this, he is not bulky; he is linear and firm. He looks powerful. Baz has to step away from the door to keep from being sucked in by the force of Simon's transfigured presence.

But Simon, as if unaware of the change, just thrusts out a forearm like a clothes-rack, grimacing at
the three neckties that hang from it. “I can't decide,” he says. “What do you think?”

“A tie is an expression of the self, Mr. Snow,” Baz says superciliously, because he's pretty sure if he's smug enough, he'll make Simon laugh, which will maybe make it easier to stop eyeballing his physique. “Which one is you?”

In his offerings, Baz included an assortment of neckwear from Ollie and himself, and he approves of all three of Simon's selections. He looks forward to seeing which Simon likes best.

Without invitation, Simon strolls further into Baz's room to contemplate himself in the wood-framed mirror. He holds each tie up in turn—a maroon check, jewel-toned paisley, and a burnt-yellow brocade.

“This one,” he says definitively, raising the last. “It's cheerful. It feels Christmasy, but, like, tastefully Christmasy.”

No wonder Delphinia likes him. Baz has his slate necktie in a tall, cylindrical Van Wijk knot—his one showy concession to his stepmother, who will certainly rag him for keeping to a typical white shirt and steel-grey suit on this day of celebration.

“Whoa,” Simon says, noticing Baz's tie. “Show me how to do that.”

Baz shakes his head. “It's not right for that tie.” Plus, they can't match. That would suggest intimacies that might lead people to unwelcome conclusions. “Go for a Half-Windsor.”

Simon tugs the tie into position around his raised collar. “Is that, like, the normal way?”

It's not—at least, not Simon's normal. Baz tries to talk him through it, but that's a miserable failure that, after several tries, ends with a slightly worse-for-wear tie knotted too tight and too low, narrow end hanging to Simon's pockets.

“Can you just…?” Simon gesticulates helplessly at the dangling slash of silk, and Baz can't say no. He carefully unties Simon's knot, smoothing the tie between his fingers, and remembers why he bought this tie—one of the few he's ever actually purchased for himself. It was in a fit of blithe spontaneity at the height of his relationship with Dev, when he happened to rest his hand near it in a suit shop and was struck by the epiphany that sunny tones look beautiful against his skin. It's the tie he's wearing in that picture, he remembers. The groomsmen wore a carefully-coordinated rainbow of ties. Dev's, tacked through with his signet tie-tack, was a slubbed sea-glass green.

He hasn't worn the tie since. The color really is a little bold for his taste.

“Hey, bro, that's not what you told me to do,” Simon accuses as Baz's long fingers wrap and tuck the fabric around itself.

“No,” Baz agrees, squinting at Simon's chest to suppress his ongoing scorn at the bro. He is a host. Simon is his brotherless guest. He inhales till the untended sparks of magnanimity within him glow. “I changed my mind. A Pratt's going to look better on you.” He snugs up the material so that the knot lies flat above Simon's clavicle, then folds the collar back down, shaping it lightly with his fingertips. He used to do this for Dev, too—he's always been dexterous.

Through his fingers on the soft cotton shirt, he can feel the blood pulse in Simon's chest.

“It looks good,” Simon says, giving Baz an appraising look that Baz can't fully interpret. Baz looks back. It doesn't seem negative, at least.
Simon's a little shorter than Baz, but not by much. After the awkwardness in Simon's room a little earlier, it's surprising how easy it is to stand this close to him, to help him dress, to rest his hand on... *Mother of the Gods*, he's left his hand on Simon's shoulder. No wonder Simon's scrutinizing him. He's probably trying to figure out whether etiquette permits you to knee your host in the groin when he gets fresh with you. *Fuck.*

Baz snatches his hand back.

“Guests are about to get here,” he blurs, because it's better not to even acknowledge what just happened there. He just needs to keep his goddamn hands to himself so that Simon can relax around him again. “Let's grab our jackets and head down?”

*

Christmas Eve dinner in the Pitch house is always a lengthy affair. This year's clocks in at about four hours, if you don't count the two hours of hors d'oeuvres and chitchat as the guests arrive. (If you do, well, you can handle the math.)

Baz warned Simon about this on the drive up—all Pitches and personal guests are expected to help entertain a few dozen rich and fancy neighbors and friends before dinner is served.

First, though, they must pass muster with the hosts.

As anticipated, Delphinia clucks at Baz's dull apparel. “Well, at least you'll be ready if we need to bury anyone.” She chuck's Simon on the chin. “Very dapper, dear.”

Ollie comes down in blue, too, brighter than Simon's, with a silver necktie just this side of gaudy.

Tyro, of course, wears black. He always wears black. It enhances one's sense that he is a formidable human being, which he really is. A casual observer might think he's waiting in resigned horror at the necessity of mingling with the arriving guests, but Baz knows better. His father says little, but takes in everything. He loves to be surrounded.

Simon makes surprisingly pleasant small-talk, Baz notes with some pleasure. It is definitely not his strong suit, so he tends to roam the room with a few bottles in hand—never mind that there's a real bartender and a flock of caterers, playing the impromptu bartender offers Baz an escape from meaningless conversations.

Simon, though, seems content to lean against the fireplace with a flute of “champagne”—*Cava*, Baz corrects him on one refill, *Sekt* on another, each time earning an impressively unimpressed eye-roll—and exchange polite chit-chat with any and every leering society stalwart in his vicinity.

As Baz tops off the Possibelfs' glasses, he overhears his stepmother introducing Simon to their ancient neighbor Aurelia Flores.

“This is Simon Snow,” she says, resting a proprietary, gold-gleaming hand on Simon's blue-suited shoulder. “Simon is Basil's friend.”

Oh, gods in the skies, Delphinia. The implication—which, really, *what*?—is clear as day. Fortunately, Simon seems blissfully oblivious; he shakes Aurelia's dainty hand and gives her that ridiculous new-people smile. Baz used to hate that smile, but it's not so bad, really. Aurelia devours it. Her keen eyes sweep from Simon across the room to Baz, who tries to look objectively uninterested for the remainder of whatever mundane conversation they're having, but it's tricky with Aurelia making pointed eye contact at her friends and gesturing, in a garish charade of subtlety, between Simon and Baz.
As soon as Aurelia steps away, though, Baz swoops in for damage control. If he's next to Simon, he can manage the introductions from here on out.

“My colleague,” he says a great many times to anyone who happens by, leaning shoulder-to-shoulder beside Simon against the mantel and refilling their glasses from the blanc de noirs bottle that dangles from his grip. “My colleague, Simon Snow.”

He doesn't want anyone getting the wrong impression.

*D*

Dinner is magnificent and exhausting.

Baz is seated between Simon and Ollie, but as Ollie is in charge of taking the guests' kids out for air whenever the atmosphere gets too yelly, he's mostly next to Simon.

They can't talk about magic here—several of the guests are non-magical—so they talk about food and manners and the house's history and his mom, and then they're talking so seriously about parents—missing, dead, influential in their absence—that they completely fail to observe the lighting of the brandied Christmas pudding.

Baz startles away from the sudden boozy fireball in the center of the table. It's bright and hot and close; he can almost feel the flames lick at skin. Simon catches the back of his chair before he can tip.

“You okay, man?” he asks, letting his arm fall reassuringly around Baz's shoulders for a moment. It's warm and solidly heavy.

“Fine,” Baz says shortly, shrugging Simon off as the flames die back, but he's not, not really. He's a Pitch, so of course he’s fine with fire when it’s under his control. Fiery surprises, though, are the worst surprises. Fire makes him want to bury his head in the safe oblivion of someone's lap—preferably someone suited in brick and asbestos. He wouldn't actually mind Simon's arm back, if that wouldn't be so entirely awkward, if Simon's eyes on him weren't so bright; it was real and protective, almost like being held.

Ollie and the children return a few minutes into dessert, lured back by the promise of sweets and hot drinks. They're sodden and disheveled from a gift hunt followed by hide-and-seek in the rain-soaked topiary garden, and the parents all give Ollie the side-eye, but honestly, who in hell brings kids to a four-hour dinner? A few grass-stains and sneezes are a small price to pay for a little grown-up time.

* Few guests linger for more than one glass of port. It's late, and the rain is thrumming hard against the windows, reminding them that it's high time they were cuddled up in their own homes.

Ollie drags Simon off somewhere—probably for a rainy swim, if Baz knows his brother when he's had a few drinks, but the billiard-room's a close second bet.

Finally, Delphinia escorts the last guests to the door, and the only people left in the sitting-room are Baz and his father.

“Brandy?” Tyro offers, tipping the bottle in his direction. “Californian, in the style of Cognac.” Baz wishes that Simon were hearing this, because then maybe he'd get that Baz comes by the specificity honestly—it's not just pretentiousness.

Baz accepts a sizable pour in a glass that fits in his palm like a transparent globe, and he and his
father relax in the dark-green wing chairs for a few minutes before Delphinia flutters back in.

“Basil!” she coos, pouring herself a narrow drink of port at the sideboard, “he is just darling. Cute and funny?” She raises an eyebrow in a lazy imitation of her reserved husband. “I can see why you like him so much.”

He nods. It is so pleasant here in his family's house, the safely-contained fire warming him outside, the drink heating him up within. His father, startlingly forthcoming, nods back at Baz as if in understanding. Delphinia beams.

That's when the message sinks in, again. Wait. Like him so much?

“He's a colleague.” He shakes his head emphatically. “That's it. We don't even get along half the time.”

Delphinia raises the brow again and taps the wall with a mauve fingernail, murmuring “Show and tell.” An image bursts bright and lurid across the surface—Simon leaning close to ask Baz a question at dinner, his arm wrapped protectively around Baz's shoulders.

“Seriously?” Baz asks, sneering coolly at the image, but he knows that, in their own disparate ways, his parents are always serious.

“Dev was a long time ago,” Delphinia says.

“Dev?” He is confused.

“You need to move on, Basil.” She taps the wall again, and in the remembered image, Baz shifts almost angrily, almost like someone's forcing him to do it, till Simon gets the hint and pulls his arm away.

The picture hovers like a firework before sliding apart in bits of light that vanish into the carpet.

“It's not about Dev,” he says curtly. He has zero interest in explaining the harsh realities of human sexuality to his parents. He can just imagine it: Look, straightish-liberal parents, this may come as a shock, but even in my sexually- liberated generation, not everyone's got it in them to be into you, even if you really wish they did.

Oh.

Oh.

Paschal Beverly Randolph. He doesn’t just like ogling Simon. He wants him.

Baz is grateful for the enormous glass bulb in his hand; watching the amber brandy swirl in idle arcs inside, he takes a long moment to school his face back into impassivity. He's sure he's not fooling his dad, but maybe Delphinia will buy it.

“Have you seen the way he looks at you, Basil?” she's imploring. She strikes another image into the wall—bright-eyed Simon gazing in playful ridicule at a stern-lined Basil. Baz recognizes the scene from lunch today. Simon's about to get punched in the arm, Baz recalls, but in this moment, he has no idea it's coming; he's only looking at Baz. Despite the stoniness of Baz's countenance, Simon knows it's all a joke. He knows they're both laughing together, even if only one of them's showing it.

No one knows that. Or, barring the Condesa and his stepmom, no one who's not his blood.
Simon's definitely not his blood. But he is magical. That's something, isn't it?

Maybe it explains Delphinia's question, too. “Of course he admires me,” he says bluntly, flicking a sloppy hand toward the wall to erase the disquieting image there. “My students always do.”

“You just said you're his colleague.”

“That too. But I mean to say, you're right,” he relents, ready to drop the hammer; “I guess we are more than that since... since I started teaching him magic.”

As he expects, Delphinia's taken aback. Her eyes go wide. “Is he?” she exclaims. “Why didn't you say?”

Why didn't he? Maybe he wanted to see if everyone would be as oblivious as he'd been. “Dad knew right away,” he confesses. “Right?”

His father lifts his chin a few millimeters in typically unostentatious assent.

“But not Ollie or you... or me,” Baz continues. “It took me months, and even then, I only figured it out because he misjudged me and used magic in front of me.”

Delphinia considers this, bouncing her fingernails on the back of an armchair in quick contemplation. Simon's stock is obviously only going up. “It can be harder to see magic in someone who's been raised differently in it,” she muses. “He didn't go to the Countess, of course. Did he learn from Murali?”

Baz shakes his head.

“Foy? Karstjen? Nakamura?” She rattles a dozen other teachers before Baz lifts a hand to stop her. “All right, then, Difficult, where did he go to Charm School?”

“He didn't.” Baz gloats a little.

“Private tutorial, then.”

“No.”

Sharply, like she suspects he's pulling her leg, she asks, “Then how did he—“

“He didn't. Not at all.” She looks appalled.

It really is shocking.

He wonders, anew, how any magical parent could abandon a child to an unknowing world. He knows his parents set charms over him at birth so his godparents could locate him should any harm befall them. All the magical families do so. Simon's parents couldn't have been ignorant of this need. “I'm teaching him now,” he says again.

She nods, still with him, but in a different, more knowing way that he doesn't think he cares for. “Of course you are, Basil. It's just like you. He's lucky to have you. But don't you think we ought to call up Ollie's old tutor? You're trying to cover 30 years of missing lessons—it's work for a professional.”

“Delphinia,” Baz says, rising to his feet in what's become a matter of course in his conversations with his stepmother, in which he is frequently annoyed, but never angry, “once again, I am a professional. A professional instructor, as a matter of fact. Not Charm School, but I, of all people, know better than most how to coax out the underused genius that has stagnated within a person for decades. If I
require assistance in teaching Simon, I will not hesitate to request your services. But I doubt either of us will need the help.

“He’s a fast learner. You should see his *Together again*.”

* * *

Unfortunately, Delphinia takes Baz’s flippant remark to heart.

“Come help me carry a few things?” she asks Simon the next morning. The others are already settling around the table for the family’s Christmas brunch.

When they come back several minutes later, Simon, who bears a silver platter of glistening cinnamon rolls, is shockingly pale. His freckles stand out bright against his skin.

Behind him, Delphinia slinks in, beaming from behind an enormous bowl of scrambled eggs.

“Coffee?” Baz offers as Simon slumps into his seat.

“Yes please,” Simon says, nudging his cup over distractedly. “Black.”

Baz fills both their cups—his own smoothly intermingling with a hearty splash of cream—but Simon doesn’t touch his.

Tentative, he taps Simon's wrist. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah!” Simon startles. “Fine.” But his eyes are still looking elsewhere…. Baz follows the gaze, and now he sees: Delphinia's forearm, mostly hidden by the jangling bracelets, is marred by one thick, fresh scar. A scar as from a knife, very recently healed. He recognizes the type; he's seen enough on his own arms in the last few weeks.

“Delphinia,” he says, surging to his feet, because he may not teach mathematics, but he can certainly solve an equation, “I am appalled.”

“Then, I'm surprised,” she crows, reaching luxuriantly for a roll. “You've known me for twenty years, Basil. You can't taunt me with Simon's skill and not expect a test.”

Simon's look of trapped panic blurs; Baz imagines that a little of Simon's discomfort has fluttered over, like a troublesome pigeon, to land on him instead. Delphinia is definitely misrepresenting that conversation, isn't she? When he said that to her, about Simon and the healing spell, that wasn’t a taunt. He wasn't holding Simon up as some case in point of his pedagogic brilliance. And he didn't really mean that Simon was so prodigiously skilled that it was worth slicing yourself open to see him work. He just wanted her to know that Simon can hold his own.

“Basil was right,” Delphinia smirks, ignoring her flustered stepson. Like the lurid society ghouls who make up the bulk of her social circle, she winks showily at Simon down the table. “You are a quick learner.”

“Aristotle ,” Simon exclaims, the set-up finally dawning on his fogged-over brain. “Are you…? You mean…? You cut yourself on purpose? That’s why you wouldn't let me get Baz to help? What if I hadn't been able to…”

In response, Delphinia looks calmly down to survey the shining tines of her breakfast-fork. She lifts it, turns it to catch the meager morning light, then, with the swiftness that so often characterizes a Delphinia Pitch decision—the swiftness that leads fools to conclude that she acts on pure instinct, not
that her cogitation comes in nanosecond bursts of total neural engagement—jams the fork a full inch into her bicep.

Simon makes a dreadful noise that is probably a swallowed scream. His fingertips clamp hard on the thick lip of the table.

*What on earth was Baz thinking, bringing him here?*

Delphinia wrinkles her nose as she retracts the metal from her flesh. Blood boils instantly to the surface.

Almost as quickly, wincing sympathetically in Baz's direction—that *smell*; in blood relatives it's not so alluring, but in anyone else...—with a little concentration but no words, no wands—she smooths her fingers across the line of tiny wounds, and they're gone. Vanished entirely.

“Sorry, Basil,” she says. *Rainer Maria. She's going to give it all away.*

“No!” he explodes, cutting her off before she can say anything more to out him as the bloodthirsty weakling he is. “Don't! It's... it's... What the hells, Delphinia? It's Simon who deserves an apology.”

“You underestimate him,” she says, then extends her arm down the table toward Simon in an unstated confederacy. “I was never in danger, darling.”

Ollie, who's more or less ignored the whole thing, too busy wrapping himself around a sizable number of cinnamon rolls, looks up long enough to mumble to a shell-shocked Simon, in unnecessary and full-mouthed explanation, “Mom's really good.”

“Really *magical,*” Delphinia corrects modestly. “It's just genes, sweets.”

“Genes, and training, and practice,” amends Tyro, spreading jam on toast. “You are both talented and accomplished.”

Baz can't even with this, so he thumps back down into his chair. What alternative is there? Storm off to his room like a child and let the others speculate about his appetites in his absence? Obviously that won't do. As a younger man, he'd have castigated them for their callousness; he'd have sprung to the defense of his guest. But, Delphinia has a point: Simon's not helpless, and honestly, this visit has overall gone about a thousand times better than he would have predicted, and you can't change your family, so sometimes the best you can do is hope your friends can deal with them as they are. It seems like Simon Snow knows how to deal.

Anyway, Baz's coffee's cooling, and everything smells entrancing.

Simon gradually lets go of the tabletop and assesses the apparently unperturbed air of the room—Baz resignedly sipping his coffee and Ollie cramming in food and Delphinia grinding a delicate sprinkling of pepper over her plate. His color's returning, Baz notices, starting in fiery blotches in his cheeks. Finally he shakes his head, less outraged than wondering. “You Pitches are crazy.”

“Noatall,” rebuts Tyro, who can always spare a word for the honor of the family, lowering an egg-laden fork back to his plate. “The skill is useful, but the real test is application in distress. It seems evident that you put forth a serviceable performance.”

He lifts the fork again, in a sort of eggy salutation, then sticks the bite in his mouth.

“Compliment,” Baz whispers.
“Thanks?” says Simon, lifting a drippy, fragrant cinnamon roll in dubious return. The white icing clings to the square knuckle of his thumb.

*

This year, like every year, Baz gives everyone books. It's a family joke that he, as the poor relation, isn't allowed to spend real money on gifts; but it's also true that he is an excellent judge of people's readerly interests.

Delphinia looks skeptical about the two he's chosen for her this year—both nonfiction accounts of a subterranean archaeological expedition—but that's only because she's still coming to terms with the real passion of her love for the juncture of academics and adventure.

For his dad, there's a wry, observational first novel by a minor magician. It had Baz in relative hysterics when he first read it. He can just see Tyro relaxing, ramrod-straight in his wing chair, eyelid twitching in delight at every barbed description.

Ollie gets a couple of light sci-fi reads and one book about brain science, because believe it or not, Ollie's really into neurons. No one doubts he'll be in med school this time next year.

And for Ari, represented in absentia by a heap of lonely, glittering gifts under the tree, there's an enormous sequel to her favorite novel—a sequel that he knows she's been looking forward to since she read the first a decade ago. It's distinctly possible that she preordered one for herself before it came out, just in time for Christmas—but it's highly unlikely that the author hand-lettered an original acrostic stanza spelling ARACHNE inside the front cover of any copy but this one.

Baz doesn't like to exploit the family connections, but when it comes to getting his sister a really good present, he'll do whatever it takes.

Ollie's apparently decided to celebrate his first over-21 Christmas by buying everyone booze. There are a few distilleries near his school; all his gold-papered gifts turn out to be sparkling-clear bottles of fruit brandies, their watercolored labels so luscious you want to suck the dripping fruit right out of the creamy paper.

Baz casts a deploring glare at the gift Delphinia hands him. It's rude, sure, but the gift has to be a joke: a loud, bulky Fair Isle sweater-vest in a dozen shades of green and gold. The only reason he would wear this sweater—and hasn't she mocked him enough for the size of his sweater collection?—would be if he were planning a long roll down a grassy hill and didn't want the marks to show.

“Delphinia,” he begins hesitantly, unsure how to play this.

She cuts him off with a small spell that whisks the sweater out of its box and tosses it lightly across the gleaming black back of Eustace, who's snoozing by the fire. A few cleverly-concealed straps wrap fuzzily around to hold the dog's new sweater in place.

“The look on your face!” she chortles, flapping her hands in mock terror. “As if I'd ever dare buy you something that anyone might actually notice. Ferocious though that dog may appear, Basil, he's not meant for rough weather. I thought, if you won't get him something cozy, I will.”

“Nothing gold can stay,” Tyro adds. Face stretched especially long and narrow in his amusement, Baz's father rises to pluck several small, thick envelopes from the tree and hands them to the three other men.

In Baz's is a handwritten note promising a new suit from the family tailor. The tight, thin penmanship is Tyro's, although there's a loopy postscript from Delphinia as well: “A bit of color this time???”
“I've barred Antoine from dressing you in black or grey this year,” Delphinia adds, aloud. “What about a nice green, darling?”

“I'd look like a leprechaun,” Baz scowls.

“A very tall, very dark leprechaun,” his father notes, weighing the possibility as if he rather enjoys it. “Perhaps a subdued russet?”

Baz rolls his eyes. “Says the man in black.”

“Your father's a lost cause, Basil,” Delphinia coos, planting a kiss on the fine black merino that drapes her spouse's shoulder. “But you—you still have time.”

“Wait,” Simon breaks in now. He is gazing at the contents of his own envelope. “Am I… You mean…?”

Delphinia laughs gaily. “A man like you should wear good suits,” she says. “You were a vision in Ollie's yesterday.”

Ollie says, from deep inside his book, “Thanks a lot, Mom. You never say that to me.”

“You're welcome, sweets,” she says blithely, misunderstanding on purpose. “In fact, Simon, you really ought to go to the shop along with Ollie, while he's still in town. It seems as though your tastes, at least, converge.”

Simon's face is doing something weird. It's like a wrestling-match between the enormous smile and the scream you'd let out if someone knifed you in the toe. The smile wins, but just barely.

“Thank you,” he says, studying the crisp little card once again. “It's very… very generous of you.”

“I hope we'll see you wear it many times,” Tyro offers. It's a kind sentiment, but seems to strike Simon badly, since the scream-face seems to be fighting its way back up off the mat.

Randall Zwinge, does Simon think they're trying to set him up with Baz? Is he trying to figure out how to get the hell away? In his circles, this is a not-unprecedented sort of gift, but in the non-magical, non-estate-having world, Baz realizes, a custom suit worth several months’ salary may come off as a bit much from a person you only just met a day earlier.

“Um,” Simon says awkwardly, shifting from foot to foot, “I brought you guys some things too, but they're all kind of little.”

“Thank god,” Delphinia chuckles, breaking Simon's nervousness. “We're running out of room.”

Baz hadn't noticed, but Simon's presents have been under the tree the whole time.

For Delphinia, there's a small framed painting of a girl's face, in close-up, looking out of a bus window. It's painted in a stark palette of greens and greys, and has an arresting, demanding beauty. “I worked at the Foster Center for a decade, so I know you donate,” Simon says, slipping into what must be his fundraising-event voice, “and, thanks, that's awesome. This is by a kid—well, she just aged out, but a kid named Brianna. I've known her since she was nine. She's a great kid. She was selling some of her stuff at the craft fair this year, and I thought you'd like to know she's actually going to the Art Institute now because of the Foster Center's college-counseling program. I had her sign it to you.”

Delphinia flips the painting over, reads the inscription, and has to bite her tongue for a moment to
keep from letting out any unflatteringly real overflow of emotion. Baz knows the signs. Squealing, which will ensue soon enough, is one thing; the display of actual raw, unprocessed feeling, though, isn't for company.

Tyro's gift from Simon is so little that it's actually hanging from the tree like an ornament. Tyro lifts the lid of the tiny hinged candy tin and withdraws a small slip of paper. He squints at it, then looks sharply up at Simon. “Vance's Vermilion?” he says doubtfully. “They went extinct when I was a boy.”

“I know a guy,” Simon shrugs. “He says they go a little leggy, but they bear like wildfire. Lemme know if they don't work out.”

Baz's father is staring hard into the little box. He pinches up a few infinitesimal seeds, almost invisible, then brushes them carefully back into the container and, only once the lid's firmly back in place, shakes Simon's hand with more enthusiasm than Baz has perhaps ever seen his father exhibit.

“My mother's tomatoes,” Tyro says quietly. “I hardly know how to thank you enough.” Simon looks vaguely strangled with pride and discomfort.

“Sure thing,” he says.

“Hey!” Ollie exclaims, the awkwardness finally great enough to tear his eyes from the neuroscience book. “I forgot about Eustace's present. It's in the yard!”

“Funny,” a grateful Simon chuckles, tossing a furtive little package to Ollie on their way out, “that's where you're getting yours, too.”

Coffee mugs in hand, the three men watch from the front steps as Eustace revels in a muddy, thumpy morning of digging up buried bones.

* * *

In the afternoon, the three swim together—naked, because it's Christmas and the sky is so low and grey that it's almost like twilight all day, and no one will see or care—their splashes cascading through the steaming water. The sky reopens while they're in there, so there's water on all sides: walls of it coming down, a floor of water into which they're sunk, a ceiling of clouds so near they could touch it. It's drillingly cold.

Baz does a few quick laps when the chill starts to set too deep. His brother and Simon—both soft-eyed from one of the joints Simon gave to Ollie—are grappling with each other in what appears to be a death-match version of water polo, played without a ball and with few holds barred; their arms span each other's shoulders, waists; at one point, Simon upends Ollie, heaves him up above the waterline into the icy torrent of rain, and then flings him back in with a tremendous splash.

Baz sees it all.

How could he not? Weed doesn't work on him. He sees the stark outline of Simon's pink hand on his brother's dark, wet skin; the glee in Simon's eyes below the curtain of sodden bangs; the muscles of those arms, the chest— the thighs.

He sees it all. He cannot get closer.

Instead, he hops out of the pool into the rain. He stands there, cold enough to shiver, if he were the kind of person who shivers, till he can feel each individual drop strike his skin. The rain runs down the long muscles of his back, over his buttocks, down the thighs and calves. His toes curl away from
the cold, over the tiled edge. They assess their grip. Baz takes in the distances, the drop, the rain. And he springs.

Flipping in the air takes practice and grace and a willingness to fail. Baz doesn't always think of these as his strong suits. When he's doing it, though, tucked into himself, turning, turning, once, then twice, everything suspended as he whirls around nothing, then peels out to slice the water open with his outstretched arms—when he's in it, he believes.

Relishing the warm caress of the water over his frigid body, he swims underwater to the other end. As he surfaces, he hears a hoot.

“Holy shit, bro!” Simon hollers at him. His voice is garbled by the din of falling water. “I had no fucking idea.”

* *

“You ever think about coaching football?” Ollie inquires when they're toweling off after in the spa. It sounds like the continuation of an earlier conversation that Baz must have missed.

“Nah, dude,” Simon says, chucking his towel into the wicker basket by the door. “Not my thing.”

“Seems like you'd like it, Snow,” Baz says. He pulls a dry robe from the shelf and hands it over, careful to keep his eyes averted from Simon's majestically comfortable, bros-in-the-locker-room nudity. “All those jocks hanging on your every word.”

“Fuck that,” Simon says, grabbing the robe almost angrily and lashing it tight around himself. “Sorry.” He thumps down heavily on the very edge of a graciously-curving spa chair; it teeters and threatens to dump him off, but doesn't. “But you don't know. Fuck, man. Football coaches. Think they're your dad. I speak from experience when I tell you that no fucking parents is better than a football coach. Fuck that shit.”

And, in small, layered bursts, it comes out: Simon only played because it was the only way he could afford college; he hated almost everything about it—hated the yelling coaches and their bigoted vitriol; hated the clash of enormous body to enormous body; hated the knowledge that his burly squadron of linemen were taking the full-body hits to protect him; and worst, hated seeing those men pounded into the ground, helmets rebounding too sharply off the hard turf, in the seconds before the defense smashed him, too, and in that powerless moment, flying through the air, the gut-wrenching blame that snaked through him, his mental voice echoing the coach's: anger that those fucking faggots hadn't done their goddamn job.

The only part Snow enjoyed was the adrenaline.

“Damn it,” he finally mutters, “I don't want anyone on the line for me but me.”

Baz feels like a class-A asshole.

* * *

Ollie goes out after dinner; one of his high-school friends lives nearby, and they're probably going to get wasted, so he says some goodbyes before he leaves since he'll probably stay the night and return after Simon and Baz have gone.

He demands Simon's number: “For once, Baz brings home someone cool?” Baz winces for a whole slew of reasons. “You'd goddamn better come back, dude.”
“Ollie!” his mother admonishes, but the glint in her eye shows total approbation.

After Ollie takes off, having made plans to see Simon later this week for that suit-fitting and maybe some kind of companionable physical exertion, the others share digestifs with Baz's parents, who are glad of the chance to finally grill Simon on his non-magical upbringing and his magical coming of age. Baz is surprised to see how the conversation opens up even his father, who recounts a few anecdotes from his own rascally Charm School days.

Eventually, though, Delphinia tugs at Tyro's sleeve and bids the younger men good night. “You boys want to take a bottle upstairs?”

In the upstairs lounge—which still gets called the Kids' Lounge pretty often—Simon flops lengthily across the couch that Baz loves best.

Baz could maybe fit at the end, but it's too close for comfort; instead, he settles for one of the sleek white pod chairs. They are supportive and soft and he really does wish he could melt into them, but these chairs always make him feel a little ungainly and gawky. He is a hard person to cuddle.

He could take the other couch, he supposes, but it's weird and backless and exposed, almost like a psychiatrist's chair. Even if he's a very awkward chicken inside it, right now he's grateful for the protection of the chair's sides curving up around him like a shell.

They've both had quite a lot of pear brandy already tonight; nestled carefully into the egg-chair, Baz holds his glass like a tinier egg in the cup of his hand, but sips it rarely.

From the couch, Simon is talking. Baz lets his head fall back against the cushioned back of the chair and his eyes close.

Simon's voice is confessional, forthright; it's the same as when he was talking about football earlier, but with less anger. And the subject turns out to be the same.

Baz is surprised to find that he doesn't mind hearing about football right now. Not at all, in fact. Oddly, it thrills him a little—the way Simon's speaking, it feels like he's trying to disclose something essential. Baz wraps an arm around his ungainly knees and tries to snuggle deeper into the oval of cushions.

“… tell you when it happened,” Simon is saying. “Right before my last game—well, last regular-season game; we had a shot at playoffs—Coach was giving us another piece-of-shit racist, homophobic diatribe, and I just snapped, and I jumped up in the middle of the locker room where I was supposed to be keeping a knee like any dumb jock in the movies, and all the other heads swivel to me, and I'm like, ‘Excuse me, Coach, but before you say anything else about the gay-ass homos who deserve a beating, I want you to know that I'm a gay-ass homo, so if someone needs to beat me, let's get it over with, 'cause I have a fucking football game to play.’”

“Fuck.” Baz doesn't say fuck that often, but this situation seems to call for it. He feels his lip curling at just the thought of that fetid, hateful locker room; to actually be there, for years, because you had to... and then, finally, after seasons of abuse, to fight back? He can readily admit he wouldn't have stuck it out long enough to have the chance.

“Yeah.” Simon winces, as if remembering a particularly dreadful part. “You know how people like to write about a 'ringing silence’?”

“So, what happened?”

“Fucking nothing, bro. It was like I'd streaked through Mass or something, like no one wanted to
admit they'd even *witnessed* someone desecrate such a holy moment. And Coach played me because I was the best shot we had, and it was his last chance to work that scholarship out of my hide.

“I played hard. I always play hard, even for assholes, because it's, you know, *not just me* on the field, but we lost. 17 – 14. When I went back to the locker room, my duffel was packed and waiting for me on the bench, which seemed clear enough, so I left my gear on the rack and got the hell out, sweaty and gross and still wearing my fucking jersey.” There's a smirk in his voice. “You know that jersey.”

Baz doesn't want to recall all the shitty things he's thought about that Snow jersey. *A corrupter of youth,* his brain supplies unforgivingly. *A glorification of mindless violence.*

He was so wrong.

“But—well.” He opens his eyes; he feels a little dizzy. That whole coach interaction is scrambling his mind. “You earned the ultimate slow-clap.”

Simon's shaking his head. No. “Nah. A couple guys texted later. But it's cool. I knew what would happen if I declared myself gay in front of a team that still prays at the half and hits the strip clubs after every win.”

“But why?” Baz is perplexed.

Simon shrugs, like it's obvious. “I was tired of all the shit.”

“Don't mistake me—I fully understand your revulsion, and admire your stand. But why lie?”

“Lie?” Simon is apparently confused.

“Why not just call your coach an idiot?”

When Simon really doesn't get a thing, his eyebrows scrunch down and his nose and mouth scrunch up so that he turns into sort of a facial asterisk. He does this now. Baz is getting more and more confused.

“'Declaring yourself gay.'” Baz tries, again, from the depths of the world's most disconcertingly comfortable chair, to clarify: “Allies help too. There's no need to pretend you're someone you—“

“Oh, whoa, bud.” Simon interrupts, holding out a hand, and literally saying *whoa* like a person says *whoa* to a rearing horse when saddling up outside the saloon in an old Western. “Whoa there, Mr. Pitch.” He looks befuddled—like the picture that should be next to the dictionary definition of *befuddled,* in fact, wide-eyed, brows knotted. “I'm starting to think you maybe don't know that I *am* gay.”

Above his bent knees, Baz's face is iron, hard and unmoving, because he doesn't know what joke Simon's working on here, but he definitely does not like it.

“Like, 100% gay,” Simon continues from the couch, throwing up a hand dismissively and looking a little annoyed at Baz's lack of response. “All-the-way gay. Gay is the only orientation I've had, like, sexually. Like, I don't know how to say this more directly: I am a homosexual man.”

Simon flashes a quick gesture, both palms offered up, like a petulant magician who's just rushed through the reveal of a trick and is ready to escape the dim-witted audience, as if to demand *What? You expected more?*
Baz can assemble some sort of reaction, he thinks. This is what people do. This is what he does, every goddamned day, when his students drop bombs all over his carefully-ordered universe—he cobbles together tidy responses that make them feel heard and appreciated and as if they have bestowed their trust upon a worthy soul. He can do this.

But... His mind objects in a strobe of stereotypes: Football! The terrible clothes! The constant goddamned dudes and bros. Carys Fetherhew’s pretty arms around Simon’s neck. Either Simon’s lying or this is one hell of a disguise.

No, he corrects himself. Not disguise. He remembers Simon’s shield spell; remembers, with a small pang, that the only siblings Simon’s ever had were probably people out to get him in his foster homes. It’s camouflage.

How can Baz, of all people, fault him for this?

With great, great effort, he looks into Simon’s eyes, which continue to be brighter than seems practical or safe, and Baz nods.

After a beat, Simon nods back. And Baz nods in acknowledgment of that nod, and then they’re both alternating nods, and at the same moment, both of them realize that they’re engaged in an endless birds-that-drink game—nod, nod, nod, nod—and they both crack into uneasy laughter.

Baz tries not to think too hard about why this is so uncomfortable and funny and gut-churning, but he knows: they are not just Simon and Baz alone in a room anymore; they’re two very attractive and mutually cognizant men who like men, alone in a room, and this doesn’t sound like the start of any joke Baz has heard.

Baz shakes his head a little to shake out some new area of focus, something he can sneer at that’s not himself. He lands on Simon’s atrocious coach. “Did you say ‘gay-ass homo’?—isn’t that kind of redundant?”

Simon’s whole face lifts in disbelief. “What? You thought I was taking artistic license? That is some word-for-word imbecile coach shit is what that is.” He raises his little glass of pear brandy, and, like a toast, says, “Fuck a hater.” He throws it back, and Baz does the same.

They burn through a few more glasses in quick succession; every time they try to talk, their eyes end up too much on one another, and liquor is the only diversion close enough to hand.

Simon is more or less horizontal on the couch, but even so, he’s clearly on the verge of drunken collapse. With great effort, Baz helps Simon stagger to his feet and out into the hall.

“I wanna go swimming again,” Simon whines, tugging at Baz’s shirt, “Let’s just go splash a little, you’ll see, it’s so great. We can just float and look at the stars, bro, there’s like a million stars here, did you know?”

“I know,” Baz says. He keeps his voice admirably crisp, but some warmth creeps through, too. Simon’s literally starry-eyed, gazing up where water pounds the glass ceiling of the walkway. “But it's raining.”

“So what?” Simon demands, stars forgotten in an instant in the chance to get a little indignant. “Just gonna get wet anyway.”

“You'd drown,” Baz says, shouldering Simon through his bedroom doorway.

Simon is heavy and strong and smells like distilled pears and pine forests. Holding his listing mass is
not an easy task. Baz gratefully relinquishes him with a gentle push into the soft embrace of the down comforter.

He could leave, he thinks. Simon will wake up in a few hours more sober and take off his shoes and trousers and everything will be fine.

But some part of Baz is horrified. You cannot go to sleep in shoes and trousers, no matter how drunk you are. Not on Baz's watch.

“I'm going to take your clothes off, Simon,” he warns. Simon appears to be passed out, but when Baz gingerly plucks at the buckle of his belt, Simon lets out a dreadful groan that triggers some kind of spasming in Baz's soul. “There you go,” Simon grunts. “That's right.”

The clothes—of course, because that's what you get when you undress your drunken colleagues, Baz; Anansi's got his eye on you—are far too snug to tug off easily. Baz has to wriggle the pants down off Simon's thighs, which gleam in the yellow light of the bedside lamp.

The jacket's easier, except that at one point, Simon just about traps him with a giant sideways flop when one of the arms is twisted in its sleeve. Finally, though, he steps away from the bed, having stripped the man in it to a white undershirt, red underpants, and a fantastical terrain of golden limbs.

“Well,” he says, trying to drag himself out before he stares any longer, “that's it.” He tugs the comforter out from under Simon's stubborn drunk body and tucks it around him. “May you sleep well.”

Reaching to switch off the bedside light, he suddenly feels Simon's hand clamp his arm. He stops cold.

“Wait,” Simon orders, voice suddenly far too clear—dangerously clear—and Baz feels a wild compulsion surge through him. “Kiss me.”

Oh fuck, he thinks. This compulsion is more than just Baz's brain supplying its own unhelpful desires: it's magic. Simon doesn't mean to (Does he? He wouldn't.) but he's poking at the gears of Baz's mind.

Like always with his magic, Simon's plunged in head-deep, he has so little control—Simon's using drunk mindbender magic, and using it on Baz without Baz's permission.

This is very bad. Any second-year Charm School kid knows that. Simon should be ashamed of himself.

Or wait. Baz is Simon's Charm School. If Simon hasn't learned Magical Ethics yet, we all know whose damn fault that is. If anyone should be ashamed, it's not the unschooled pupil; it's the inadequate instructor.

So, even though Baz could easily resist this sloppy spell, he doesn't. Not entirely.

Simon's forehead is just sitting there, he thinks, right below him, and, like everything about Simon, it's smooth and square and rugged-looking.

“Kiss me,” Simon says again, sounding mildly hurt and betrayed that it hasn't happened already.

Simon knows he can pull people in. But has he done this before? Does he have any idea?

It's like serpents uncoiling in Baz's chest, urging his limbs forward—you want this, you want this,
“You have to. You tucked me in.”

Baz can't contradict that. It's complicated and wrong, but it's also so easy: Simon, at core, is beautiful and somehow soft inside the hard body on the soft bed in the angular house—it all just fits.

At the fickle mercy of Simon Snow's mind-control snakes, Baz recalls that he is also quite drunk.

He remembers this with his lips on Simon's skin.

It's so warm. He can't feel the pulse through the forehead, but Simon's thumb and fingers still grip his wrist. The blood inside Simon's body is surging. The smell is overwhelming—the steam from a pine forest after rain.

Simon shudders. “Not there, asshole,” he says when Baz pulls away. His eyes are pressed closed, lashes almost invisible. “Kiss me real.”

There is no way in all the hells that that's a good idea. He can't. He won't.

The snakes churn inside him. You want this.

“Sleep well,” Baz repeats, gives the duvet a mechanical pat, and flees the room before shit gets any weirder.

* *

Showering alone before bed, he jerks it, hard and fast, thinking unapologetically about the guy passed out in the next room. Simon's magic slid away from Baz as soon as he shut the door, but the hard-on remained unabated.

He is grateful that drunk-magic ethics can't possibly extend to the question of how one maintains slipperiness under a torrent of hot water. As if anyone even cares what he does behind the closed door of his bathroom.

It has been a long time since he had to brace himself against the tiles to bear up under the onslaught of images that come when he does.

The onslaught is rarely so onslaughtty. It's a fucking deluge—Simon's shiny teeth, the bristly line of Simon's jaw, Simon bright against the grey as he hurled Ollie across the pool, Simon's legs, his legs, his legs flopped out wide and warm on the white bed, oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck…

This is not usual, Baz thinks. The frenzy ebbs, like a wave, but it's nowhere near gone—just in temporary retreat. This is not the way Baz knows attraction to work.

He dries himself roughly. The thick new towels chide his yielding skin. How could he? he demands of himself as he fumbles for his toothbrush. What on earth possessed him?

Also, although he is of course still fully capable of the basic dignities of dental hygiene and appropriate sleep-wear, Baz is drunk. Let's not forget that.

Definitively-speaking, nothing that happened tonight means anything.

* * *

When she's hugging Baz goodbye next to his car the next morning, Delphinia seizes the opportunity
to whisper up to him, “You know he's crazy about you, right?”

In response, Baz looses a considerable number of throat-clearing coughs just inches from her ear.

“Delphinia…” he says waringly.

“It's lovely to see you so happy, darling,” she says louder, warm and loving even as she twists the knife; this statement is clearly intended for general consumption.

She turns to a hazy-edged Simon while Baz presses the steel of his father's long, thin hand.

“I can't thank you enough for your hospitality,” Simon says, his words the soul of graciousness, but their delivery stilted, as though it pains him to speak at all.

“Simon,” Delphinia says in a voice tinged with motherly rebuke, enfolding the poor hungover man in the soft prison of her embrace, “It was nothing. You must come see us again soon.”

* 

Simon sleeps most of the drive back, bent awkwardly against the cold glass of the far window. Every now and then, his hand moves to stroke the thick shag of Eustace's fur. Baz focuses on the road, his windshield wipers flipping away the rain that pummels the little car, and tries not to pay too much attention to the way Simon's breathy snores intermingle with Eustace's whiffling sighs.

They're approaching the city limits when Simon startles abruptly awake. He jolts upright, gasping. Remembering that first time Simon fell asleep in his house, in the chair in the living room, and the terror in his first waking breaths, Baz reaches to reassure him with a hand on the rigid plank of Simon's left shoulder. He holds fast. “You're all right,” he says, eyes still on the glassy tray of water that is the freeway before him. “I've got you.”

It's not what he means to say; it's too intimate, too personal. It's the way you comfort a lover who bolts up from a nightmare, not the way you check on a colleague. But all the same, strangely, it's not uncomfortable. Holding Simon up with one hand while he drives with the other, Baz feels oddly strong, oddly normal. Simon's right hand, which has been grabbing futilely at the air, settles back into Eustace's coat, and Eustace issues a low, familiar growl that means that despite all appearances, all is well.

Under Baz's hand, Simon's shoulder shifts up, down, up again, like he's cautiously reanimating. When he looks pointedly down at his shoulder, though, Baz snaps the hand away.

“No, hey,” Simon starts, and cuts off. “I don't mind. I mean, I'm not gonna, like, get the wrong idea, bro.”

Baz looks over for just long enough that it's not a dart of the eyes, but has to return them to the road. He is an attentive driver, these are rainy conditions, and their off-ramp's coming up.

“No. Look, man, I'm sorry about, well, if that was weird? Last night?”

Decelerating as he exits the freeway, Baz puts in the clutch and shifts down to first. The clunk of the old gearbox is never anything but satisfying. Coming to a stop, he looks evenly at Simon for a moment.

“Was it weird?” he inquires. He doesn't love this tone he's using, but at least it's calm and controlled. Calm and controlled is usually Baz's wheelhouse; right now, though, it's taking the kind of effort
that's at least worthy of honorable mention, if not award.

“Honestly, I don't totally know. I mean, I know you're gay, bro—”

“Bisexual, actually,” Baz interrupts stonily. It's surprising that he says it; why? But also it feels good to get the truth out now and again.

“—okay,” Simon says, scratching a hand into his hair, which is a tangled, tawny mess. “I didn't know that, but anyway, what I'm trying to say is, it doesn't matter, I shouldn't have…”

“Do you know what you actually did?” Baz asks, and if his voice was controlled earlier, now it's practically robotic. “Do you have any idea of the boundaries you crossed?” He needs a little remove here, because yes, it's his fault; he should have taught Simon better; but also, what the hell, Simon, you have to know you can't use mind-control without the subject's consent. Come on, isn't that how I figured you out in the first place?

“Yeah, I get it,” he says, and he sounds dejected enough that Baz believes him. “You're right. It was stupid. Sometimes I'm kind of out of control when I drink.”

Something in Simon is so good at provoking Baz to severity. It's like he's begging to be chastised.

“Control,” Baz hisses, again not sure quite why he's talking, “isn't a gated pleasure-garden. Control needs walls you'll break your fingers failing to climb. It's not an excuse, 'I was out of control.' Get better control.”

Simon's fists clench into Eustace's fur—Baz doesn't see it, but he senses Eustace tightening in alert readiness at Simon's touch. Simon stares out the window at the faded monotony of the neighborhood they're driving through.

“Sorry,” he mutters finally, when they're just a block from his home. “Really. I didn't mean to… I'm sorry.”

The emptiness in Simon's tone guts him. Baz isn't sure what he wanted to get out of the conversation, but it wasn't this. He thought Simon might snap back; he definitely didn't expect Simon to sound defeated.

Maybe he was too harsh. He suddenly recalls the spare cartons of blood in his freezer in a wave of desperate delirium; it's been several days. No wonder he's not being his best self right now.

Yet here he is lecturing Simon about self-control.

He finds a spot a few doors past Simon's apartment building. Switching off the chugging engine, he climbs out to extract Simon's duffel from the trunk. Simon's petting Eustace one last time.

“Thanks for coming,” Baz says, handing Simon the bag.

“Thank you,” Simon says, and if he sounded stilted saying goodbye to Baz's family, this right now is positively wooden. “You have been very generous.” He slings the bag over his shoulder and turns to go.

Hells.


Turning back, Simon finds Baz's hand waiting. He takes it, and something extraordinary happens;
his hard-set, blank face brightens and opens till it's the one sunny thing in this dull grey morning. Simon gives a good solid handshake, too, as ever, fingers strong as living wood.

“Really,” Baz says, because he wants Simon to know he means it, and because as long as they're talking, maybe Baz can pretend it's normal for a handshake to last this long. “I'm glad you came.” The lips bend up, almost to a smile. “My family loved you.” At this, surprisingly, the almost-smile falls away. Simon nods curtly.

Maybe Simon just knows families always love him. Or maybe he didn't like them?

Baz dismisses that possibility out of hand. Simon's a terrible pretender. He liked the Pitches just fine. He was so good with them, too. Astonishingly good.

“But I thought I said no gifts.”

Simon's hand tightens. Simon hasn't learned that Baz is uncrushable; he must not intend for his grip to feel so good. “I'm not a fucking charity case,” Simon growls. “You never show up empty-handed.”

“I didn't—” Baz feels like an idiot. He hadn't been thinking about money at all—but of course, he ought to have. How acutely has Simon been feeling his family's riches these last few days? “I meant—they're impossible to buy for. How'd you know?”

Simon shrugs, and the pressure relents, and there's that twinkling brightness again, the flicker in the too-wide eyes that says Simon Snow is about to fuck with you. His enunciation is a precise and pointed jab: “I Googled 'em.”

Baz feels his own face stretching in mirth.

“Look, Baz,” Simon says, letting go of his hand in an icy rush of air on the parted palms, “Look, I just want to say again, I fucked up. I'm really sorry about last night.”

Baz tries to dismiss this.

“No,” he says, “it's my fault. I should have been clearer about the rules.”

“It's just, I'm glad we're bros, you know? You've done so much. I'm just, like, really grateful. I shouldn't have got stupid.”

We all get stupid, Baz thinks, because honestly, Simon Snow made a few bad magical-ethics decisions, but Simon's not the one giving his legs strict orders to step away before his stupid body gets stupider in the presence of this disheveled hair and broad-browed face and finishes what the two of them, temporarily relieved of their senses, started last night.

“Do you want another lesson before school's back?” Baz offers from the safe distance he's dug out between them. “Thursday night?”

“Thursday's that thing with Ollie,” Simon says. “I think after the suits, we're gonna get sweaty and go drink beers and yell at a TV somewhere.” He pauses, then politely adds, “You want in?”

Baz, shockingly, kind of does, but he says no. He likes the idea of Ollie and Simon broing down some more. He'd be in the way. They plan for next week instead, and Simon jogs inside.

First thing Baz does when he's home is order another copy of *The Magicians' Code*. Even if he does select the high-end gilded hardback edition, it's not a gift. It's a necessity.
January

The vampire gossip flames hotter and brighter than a month or two back; there’ve been attacks throughout the city, including on the Christmas party at the clubhouse of the Watford Warriors motorcycling organization (which attack technically took place on Boxing Day, when all celebrants were, a witness reported, “keisters-up, sleeping it off,” rendering themselves essentially a box of liquored bonbons for the visiting horde of vampires).

The patio at the Watford Arms is partially roofed with what looks like a terribly unsafe temporary barrier against the weather, particularly considering the heat-lamps that blaze over the frigid tables. Tipsy though he may be, Baz keeps a wary eye on the flickering torches; he's ready to spearhead an evacuation at the first errant spark.

At the next table down, Rios is gossiping about the bikers. From what Baz can overhear, she swears she saw a whole pack of them roaring down 8th Ave a couple nights ago, just like always, but the skulls on their vests all have fangs now.

Directly across from Baz, drunk Snow apparently also overhears, because he leans way too close and asks, hot and rough in Baz's ear: “I've been wondering—your folks. Did they ever mind? About you being…?” Simon trails off significantly.

Thank Thackeray the chipped old table's a solid block of wood for Baz to grip in his horror.

Simon knows. And if he knows, he must have known for a while—ever since Baz's fangs shot out toward Simon's stupid sweet-smelling puddling blood way back before Winter Break. At least he hasn't burned me, Baz reflects in an angry storm of agitation. At least he's too stupid to be scared. But seriously, how is now the time to ask?

“Of course they goddamned minded, Snow,” he snaps, his mind flailing to hold the thread of whatever Rios is saying about her Warrior brother-in-law and his dragons.

“Dragons?” Ms. Sullivan inquires with cool disbelief.

“They're just little,” Rios insists, “but I saw them with my own eyes.”

“But don’t they breathe...” Vivienne Cheng-Jimenez asks, sliding in beside Rios and effectively blocking the conversation from sight.

“Fire?” Clearly, this is vindication of Rios’s own puzzlement. Baz, too, has always been perplexed by the folkloric connection between vampires and the pet most likely to kill them. “Right?”

“You cool, bro?” Simon’s solicitous fist in his shoulder jounces Baz back to awareness.

A bump, not a stake. That’s a good sign, right? Maybe they can talk about this. Maybe they have to. He forces himself to turn back toward Simon. Keep it normal, he thinks, mindful of the animated crowd around them. Our low-level sniping goes unnoticed. Another fight won’t. “I can't imagine how much my dad put into trying to 'cure' me before he finally admitted it was impossible.”

Simon winces sympathetically. “At least he admitted it,” he says. “Bunch of my foster friends got kicked out by dick parents who were convinced it was some kind of perverted choice.”

“Choice?” Baz is befuddled. “It's an abomination against the natural order, Snow. Now, of all times, it seems particularly apparent that it threatens to destroy human society as we know it. Who in hell
would choose…”

Snow’s face stops him cold. It takes him a moment, in which he mentally reviews, sorts, and annotates the last several minutes’ conversations, before it clicks.

Oh.

Right.

Damn it all.

Disappearance would be useful right now. So would Control-Z, but unfortunately it doesn't work for conversation. Simon's not talking about vampirism. Baz gets it now, but just late enough that if he by some stroke of luck hasn't managed to give himself away—and the cool assessment in Simon’s eyes hints at some kind of connection happening inside that mind—at least he's made himself sound like a self-loathing asshole.

For once, Simon is the one to lift an eyebrow. “I would, for one. Dudes are hot.” It almost looks like he's eyeballing Baz from across the dark table, but he glances away quickly. His hair is a thrashy disaster. “And come on, bro”—he looks straight into Baz—“if anyone here is choosing to fuck guys, it's obviously you.”

In the dim light of the pathetic heat lamps, Simon's eyes are the blue-black of a new tattoo. Baz feels, looking into them, the sudden and appalling desire to rally the gang for an excursion to the neighborhood tattoo parlor. They'd be game, he knows; after Winter Break, teachers feed on unity and purpose, because it's a long hard slog ahead—how better to show it than with shared ink? The Watford High crest? Or the school's mascot, the roc volant? (But of course not the cartoony bastardization thereof at which Baz shudders every time he's forced to look upon the school's stationery or team jerseys; obviously Ms. Rios or Ms. Yoo could sketch up something majestic they'll all be proud to wear upon their persons forever…)

What in hell is he thinking?

Baz is not a person who rallies troops. Baz is a person who only even joins in for beers after a seemingly display of reluctance.

And he is definitely not the kind of person who instigates group tattooing sessions.

Baz has one tattoo. Ari led that charge, then they both went along a few years later when Ollie insisted on one to match when he turned 18. The needle was mesmerizing; Baz remembers the pinpricks of darker pigment sinking below the brown of his skin, the tiny beads of purple-stained blood that formed on the surface...

This is a terrible idea.

Shaking his head a little, he realizes with no small embarrassment that he's been thinking through all this nonsense while buried in the inky blue of Simon's gaze. It does explain the muddled thought process, at least. Simon's leaning into the table still; through it, Baz can feel the solid percussive thump of Simon's heart.

If the opportunity ever arose, Baz realizes like a clash of cymbals interrupting his reverie, horrified that this is where his thoughts have wandered, he would definitely choose to fuck Snow senseless. No question.

Simon looks like he's waiting for an answer to something. Baz nods, murmurs, “Mm-hmm,” in
“Totally, bro. Like, everyone’s on board with the vampires, but then you talk dragons and suddenly they think you’re on some orcs-and-goblins fantasy shit. Like, where’s the fucking line?”

Baz blinks. He thought they’d moved past vampires. “Pixies?” he hazards. “Gnomes?”


Baz looks sharply at him for a moment. There’s no hint that this is anything but a drunk dreamer’s drunken dream.

“None,” he says. “I’ll get you a gnome.”

Alcohol obviously affects Baz, but less than it affects full humans, and he downs it easily; he’s trained his face to give so little away. Snow, on the other hand, grimaces after the first few shots, then literally hisses as he slams down the third empty glass. The sound itself is intoxicating; Baz can’t not swipe the last two shots from the far end of the table and relish the way Simon’s unsteady hand butts against his as he claims one for his own.

“Fuck, man,” Simon slurs, noticing as if for the first time the lurid little glass in his hand. “C’n I crash at your place?”

Not trusting himself to words, Baz lifts his glass and looks past it into Simon’s face. The things Simon’s gulp and hiss do to him, how they tap his nerves like tuning-forks, are things Baz must never admit.

They are so incredibly drunk that Baz isn’t even sure till Monday, when the jokes are swirling through the teachers’ room, how they got home. It turns out Huynh and Martinez walked them back to Baz’s, and Georgie Gwinn has a very cute photo of Simon and Baz following those two out of the bar; the drunk men are listing hard to opposite sides and apparently only kept upright by the counter-pull on their linked elbows.

Baz has always hated being teased. This, though—him and Simon Snow as the objects of a shared joke—this borders on charming.

* * *

Simon stays over after the next Ethics Commission meeting, too, since even without the raving oblivion of shots, he tends to put away too many beers to trust himself to find the right two trains and then navigate the five dimly-lit blocks to his crappy apartment. This time, like the last, he crashes on Baz’s couch and lets himself out early on Saturday morning.

Meanwhile, Simon’s making lightning-quick progress in their once- or twice-weekly magic lessons. He’s already working through the stuff that Baz didn’t learn till high school—veils, glamours, illusions, jinxes.

When they first started to cover targeted spells, Baz had to rein in all his own magic in order to be an effective test subject; otherwise, he would instinctively wrestle all incoming spells into submission at
the tentative tickle of someone else's magic against him.

It's with real reluctance that Baz admits to himself, while Simon's testing the strength of his *Butterfingers* jinx one snowy afternoon, that he's no longer having to squash his own magic at all. The floor is littered with pens and pillows and books that have slid headlong out of Baz's compromised grasp, and honestly, at this point, he is really trying to hold on.

“Break?” Simon asks.

“Sure.” Baz heads to the bathroom, where he is chagrined to find his hands ridiculously clumsy at unbuttoning and unzipping and generally doing their job. Feeling like he's wearing a goalkeeper's gloves, Baz finally fumbles his pants back on, thank the gods—*what if I'd had to ask Simon to unspell me so I could? Or if I'd had to ask him to…*—no, this is where this train of thought comes shrieking into station. He remembers only too well how weird it got last time he and Simon interacted around zippers.

Back in the living room, Simon offers Baz a tall glass of water. It's sweet, Baz thinks—even as he inwardly retches at thinking the word—that Simon thinks of him. He looks, in this moment, holding out the glass, devoted and grateful. His eyes shine.

Baz isn't actually that thirsty, but he takes the glass. It's a half-second later—too late, after it's slid smoothly into a plummet, the long straight facets of the glass giving him no grip—that he recalls that he's still under the *Butterfingers* spell.

The glass fragments rocket in all directions from their point of impact on the wood floor.

“Oh shit,” Simon exclaims, horrified. He's not looking at the glass on the floor, but at Baz's useless hands that dangle hard as turtles at his sides. “Fuck. I totally forgot, bro—I guess I thought it would wear off or something. How do I undo it?”

“You know how,” Baz reminds him, trying hard not to snap, because it is really impressive that this jinx has stuck around as long as it has, and on a person as magical as him, no less.

“Right, yeah,” Simon says, discarding the spell with a gesture that's suspiciously similar to the way Baz's students ball up rejected essay drafts and shoot them at the recycling bin on the far side of the room. “What about the glass? Can I, like, *Together-again* it?”

“A spell name isn't a verb. Unless it's a verb.”

Simon rolls his eyes mightily; diction aside, the question stands.

“No,” Baz answers, and yes, it comes out a little snappish after all. “Together again only works for healing biological organisms.” He yawns; it's kind of late, and there will be essays to grade, and he needs to clean this up. He's annoyed at himself; had he remembered a split second earlier, before the glass hit the ground, he could have just cast a quick Control-Z. It's such an easy spell—just two fingers.

“Really?” Simon asks. “Cause it feels like it could… I just…” His brain is clearly grinding away at this idea. “Yeah,” he says with certainty. “It will.” His face furrows and tightens the way it does when he's casting a spell, and when he speaks, his eyes flicker closed. He says, very soft, “Together again.”

The bits of glass—shards, splinters, a ribbon of powdery crumbs—rouse themselves from the floor. In sleek, translucent streaks, they shoot back to the middle of the room, dodging Baz's legs and the
furniture, and smooth as water, slide into a prickly, opaque structure. Edges melt together; obtuse corners begin to take shape. Then the liquid form resolidifies and, delicate and whole, it's just a glass again.

Baz is dumbfounded. That is not how this spell works.

He realizes he's spoken out loud when Simon answers with an embarrassed and defiant shrug.

“I don't know, bro, I just felt like it would.”

“How?” Baz asks, incredulous. This man, inventing magic.

“Just, you know, the way a spell feels inside of you, like… maybe like something you'd cook with, like an herb or something, and when you taste it on its own, it's not like you need a recipe to tell you this is gonna be good with eggs or whatever.” He throws up his hands, clearly exasperated at the inability of words to convey something he's always felt. “You just know.”

Baz isn't sure what to say. Just know? What has he ever just known? Magic has always been delineated for him; the intuition, when it's there, is layered under a surface of definite rules. If Simon's magic is a dense, mystical forest of primal energies, Baz's magic is a prim topiary garden. For a brief moment, the jealousy is so thick that Baz cannot speak.

Simon is watching him warily. “What, don't tell me it's another ethics thing. Like come on, man, people are one thing, but who gives a fuck what I do with a glass?”

“I do,” Baz says finally, and realizes immediately from the way Simon's face is twisting up that it's the wrong thing to say. “No, wait. Listen. I don't mean it's wrong—only that you continue to astound me.”

Simon, who had looked about ready to fling his own glass of water in Baz's face, freezes. His eyes are brilliant and unsure. It's hard to look at them.

“Show me how,” Baz says. The suspicious look lingers, and Baz hates this. He's handed back enough failed essays to recognize the devastation his criticism can cause, but this isn't criticism. How is it that Simon can't see how insanely capable he is? He catches Simon's sharp gaze, seeks out the pure core of power inside. “Please.”

At that, Simon relents. He smiles. His fingers loosen, and he lets his own glass crash to the floor.

* * *

A few nights later, at Ethics Committee, Baz is at the far end of the table making polite noises about some pictures of Cragshore's kid when he overhears Simon jabbering to Bunce about something that sounds suspiciously like magic spell. “Excuse me,” Baz says hastily, handing Niall back his phone.

“The robot costume is excellent,” he adds, because it's clear the kid made it himself, and it's very robbity.

He plunks down next to Bunce, since there are a lot of people down here and Ms. Fetherhew's already crammed in on the far side of Snow. He can't risk a scene. Instead he raises his glass to the folks at this end and leans in to listen.

“Little fucker, twenty minutes late to my third period every day, never can pin him down on a story.”

“Wait, you said Darion?” Huynh inquires beerily from across the table.
“Right,” Snow confirms, bright-eyed under his red beanie. “Little shitbag. Darion Mazlitt-Bell.”

Mazlitt-Bell, Baz chides himself, not magic spell. Isn't he supposed to have super-hearing? “About six two, slippery as an eel, looks exactly like the kind of piece-of-shit bad boy you'd have been in love with in high school.”

“Well, this is revelatory.” Huynh cocks an eyebrow so high it arches above the black frames of his glasses.

“I mean. You know what I mean. Know him?”

“Yeah, pretty sure he's the guy who flirts with my student aide in period three. I have to chase him out literally every day.”

“Case solved!” Fetherhew cheers, raising a glass and snuggling in closer around Simon.

“Awesome!” Simon says, beaming across the table at Huynh. “Case solved.”

“One more win for everyone's favorite detectives, the crack team of Huynh and Snow,” Fetherhew says, making an imaginary tally in the air.

No matter how gay Simon thinks he is, Baz doesn't like the way Fetherhew's basically poured across Simon's shoulders; even less does he care for the goofy smiles he and Huynh are tossing back and forth as they brainstorm ways to get this student to his fucking class on time. Every now and then Huynh's eyes flick to Baz—because I'm a rival? Baz hopes, but at the same time, if he's a rival, he's losing. He's not the one making Simon laugh with some pithy burn on the freshman work ethic. He seethes quietly to the bottom of his beer.

“He's not bad, is he?” Bunce asks in his ear. Baz startles. He hadn't meant to be so obvious. “I know you had reservations, but I think he's working out splendidly.”

“You mean Snow?” Baz says, acutely aware of the obviousness of the answer.

“I didn't say this, Basil, but I had you in mind when I chose him. There were a few other options, kids right out of college, but Simon? Well, he's unseasoned and brash as all fuck, but he has a kind of experience that just sort of bleeds out his eyes, you know what I mean? I thought, Before the year's up, Basil Pitch is going to look at this frat-boy with respect.”

“Huh,” Baz says with as much distance as he can muster.

Bunce could kill with that eye-roll. “Okay, maybe we're not there yet. But he's not bad?”

“Sure,” Baz agrees.

Beside him, Bunce rises. “Ride home, Lucinda?” she asks.

“You're not driving?” Baz demands.

“No,” she winks, tapping him with her ring. “We'll Get home safe.” It's a useful spell.

Powell stands, a little teetery, and clutches at Bunce's arm as she downs her glass. She nudges the remainder of a pitcher toward Baz's end of the table.

“Kill this?”

“I'd better get going too,” Baz says apologetically, because he is not about to stay here for another beer's worth of Huynh's bright brown eyes flicking too alertly between him and Simon.
“Cool, we're going?” Simon asks, uninvited but welcome (so welcome), and stands with surprising alacrity. And steadiness. “You got something to drink at your place?”

*

Baz is thinking about offering the guest bed this time, but he's not sure; through drunken precedence, they've established a few tenuous limits between them over the last few weeks, and that might be weird.

They're on the couch at the moment, facing each other from opposite ends and drinking bourbon in sturdy little glasses. It's too late and Baz has had too much whiskey to remember how long they've been here, or how full it was when it began, but when he goes to pour another round, he sees the bottle's approaching its limit. So are they.

Lifting his glass toward Baz, light glinting in his eyes, Simon says, “Your turn.”

“Mm. Given the choice…” Baz begins, trying to think of an area they haven't already covered. “Given the choice, would you occupy a world without liquor, or a world without poetry?”

Simon cocks his head appreciatively at the question, then tosses back a swig.

“You're going to hate me for this.”

Baz furrows his brow into some expression he hopes looks brooding and serious. “Try me.”

“I keep the booze.”

“Why would I hate you for it? I'm the one who posed the question.”

“Because you're a goddamned English teacher.” Simon's voice is jocular and raw.

“You are too.”

“Yeah, but you think I'm a fraud. I know it. You think I'm some shitbag who'd deprive the world of poetry just to feed his own petty addiction.”

“Oh,” Baz says, taking this in. “My god. Is it…” How has he not noticed this? “Do you have … a drinking problem?”

Simon laughs. “Well, it's not good for me.” Through hazy, half-shuttered eyes, he watches Baz process it. “'swhy I only drink socially. But it's your turn, bro. Given the choice … would you give up sex or give up magic?”

Baz says “Sex” immediately. It's not even a topic of internal debate. Gods, life would be so much easier, wouldn't it? This, his ready brain supplies, this thing you're doing right this second, sharing furniture with Simon Snow—this would be much easier.

Simon clucks at the choice, but doesn't say anything, and they rattle through a few more.

*Hell or high water?

Simon takes water, for which Baz is profoundly grateful.

*My classroom or yours?

Baz would never leave his classroom.
“Even with the noisy upstairs neighbor?”

Even with.

_But chips for lunch or no lunch at all?_  
Simon chooses hot chips; Baz is appalled.

_Past life: goblin or gnome?_  

“I should think that’s rather obvious,” Baz sneers, eyes goblinishly hooded.

“Nah,” Simon shakes his head, rejecting the statement. “You may be a Pitch, but you’re not out for power. Or money. Your _intentions_ are what fucking matter, man. And your intentions are—”

Baz is not about to have this conversation. “Goblin,” he insists.

_Apples or candy?_

Simon says apples, but is visibly conflicted, and isn't Baz able to think of any questions that aren't about food, and is there maybe something to eat in this house?

Recognizing the worth of these questions, Baz sends Simon to investigate the kitchen; he returns with the better part of a pint of vaguely-crystalline mint chip, a couple of spoons, and another question: _James Baldwin_ or _Frank O’Hara?_

Baz is really truly stumped.

“Wait,” he asks after a long slow bite of ice cream, like this will help things: “As literary genius or as sex partner?”

It turns out that the answer is irrelevant to his being able to make a decision, and he ultimately has to flip a coin, which disgusts Simon, who insists on getting to ask again.

_Animal blood or human blood?_

Baz freezes.

As if oblivious to Baz’s immobile silence, Simon nudges him roughly with his socked toe. “I mean, if no one got hurt, if all it came down to was what _you_ liked best.” He speaks so casually, as if this is just an everyday acknowledgment of who they both know Baz is, like someone might ask Ollie to choose between that wolf team and that team with the birds, and not a revelation Baz has never entrusted to anyone who doesn't share his last name.

Baz's stare feels opaque as mud. His brain churns in loop after loop:

_Goddamn it, he knows. He knows. He knows._

_But, _Baz intercedes in his own thought processes, _you thought Simon knew before. You were wrong._

_No, Simon really knows this time!_  

_You misread him once, _he protests half-heartedly; _you could be misreading again._

_The human blood question lacked ambiguity, Baz._
This last, he cannot gainsay.

Simon hasn’t yet looked away from Baz’s flat-locked face. Instead, he wrests back the tub of ice cream. Even if it wasn’t meant to be a telling gesture, even if Simon really does just want to lever up a precariously enormous slab of chocolate-cluttered mint ice cream, this answers the question Baz doesn't dare ask.

_Samuel Clemens. The freezer._ How many times has Ari told him he's going to scare off dates with the six or eight garnet-dark pints he keeps in reserve on the lowest shelf of the freezer? He has always pointed out that in their three years together, Dev never noticed; she has always pointed out in rebuttal that Dev is a shitbag, at which point this conversation always screeches to a fiery halt.

Agatha's never noticed either, because she's over pretty rarely, and until recently, when she _was_, it was always with intentions more provocative than a dig through the freezer.

If Simon didn't know already (and, Baz is not too proud to admit to himself, that’s an unlikely _if_), he definitely knows now.

There are one million lies Baz could tell right now, and he knows he won't tell any of them. He won't lie because he's an honest person, sure, whatever that means, but more because Simon is looking at him like this isn't insane, like it's a very reasonable topic of discussion among friendly colleagues—if that is indeed what they are—and because a lurking, hand-wringing, beastly part of himself really wishes it _were_. So he tells the truth.

“I don't like… I don't think I _like_ any of it. But,” the dogged truth claws its way out, “I know what I _want_. Blood from livestock is …” How to explain, that it's like fetid pond water when you're thirsty, that it fills the need but not the want? “It’s … not satisfying.” The answer isn't satisfying either, but it will have to do. “I can only imagine that human blood is different. The smell when someone's cut themself, it has the same all-consuming hold on my brain that the smell of baking cookies used to when I was little. But I haven't …” Staring at his clenched hands, he cuts himself off. Even this moment, through its smooth, perfect skin, he can smell the wild rush of Simon’s blood.

“You know,” he says, resigned.

“Bro,” Simon says, voice thick, “I've _known_.”

There's no more Baz wants to say on this front.

Instead, he dares, now, to glance at Simon's face. What he sees unsettles him: There’s no terror, of course, and though it's there, there's less smug vindication than he feared, and much more of something that looks edgily close to sympathy. There's something else, too—something smoky and heavy and blinding in Simon's gaze, something from which Baz needs to tear his eyes away.

He throws back the last of the whiskey in his glass. “It's my turn,” he says firmly, dispelling all the new questions bubbling up in his chest. He's already thought of a few that will put Simon on the spot. He chooses this one because it will be terrible: “Given the choice, would you live the life you're living or the life you always thought you wanted?”

He knows this is hard and personal and intrusive. He knows enough, now, about Simon's childhood to know Simon's earned his defenses. It's a fucked-up question.

“That's a fucked-up question,” Simon says, and Baz nods in agreement. “I mean, it's extra fucked-up to ask it to someone like _me_.” Baz nods again, and Simon _flinches_. His face—those cocky, wide-swept eyebrows buckling in, the mouth set and small. “You sure you don't want to take it back?”
Simon is curling in on himself somehow; he's not moving, but Baz can see the shell curving around him.

“No,” Baz says, very low. “I want an answer.”

Simon is basically a roly-poly ball on the end of the couch, and apparently this quiet, withdrawn Simon has a direct link to Baz's spleen, or pancreas, or some other arcane particular of his anatomy, because a place he's definitely never been aware of before right now is knotting into lumps. “I want out,” Simon says, and Baz isn't sure if that's meant to be an answer.

“Out of this life?”

“Out of the question, asshole. You didn't answer.” The fight rises in Simon's voice for a moment. “Give me that quarter back.”

Baz hadn't realized he was still holding Simon's coin from when it did the dirty work of choosing Baldwin for him. “When you answer the question,” he says and he must be pretty drunk because his fingertips rise, smoothly and seductively, to drop the quarter into the pocket of his own narrow-striped button-down shirt. The implications are unmistakably physical, Baz knows, and if he was sober, he'd definitely have the self-awareness to stammer out an embarrassed escape route.

He is not sober, though, not at all, and he's apparently trying to seduce Simon into answering a question that crosses all kinds of lines that no one's been brave enough to write down.

Simon is lured to snide laughter, which was Baz's goal, so point Baz. “Like I couldn't rip that away from you if I wanted.”

Baz raises his right eyebrow. He won't confirm the number of hours he's spent comparing and contrasting the effects of his two brows, but he definitely knows that the right one's best at telegraphing disbelief.

Simon sits all the way up now; the eyebrow has done its work. “Come on bro, remember when I laid you on your ass in the bar?”

Baz rolls his eyes. “Sucker-punch, doesn't count.”

“Then all right. I'll fight you for it.”

“For what?” Baz is kind of foggy about everything except the idea of fighting, which is a shining beacon of excitement (even if it's blinking bad idea, bad idea) in his confusion. “What are we fighting for?”

“If I beat you, I get a new question.”

“And when I beat you?” Baz exhales. “Because you cannot be stupid enough to think I won't.”

“Then I answer.” Simon says, then, like an idiot, clarifies: “If.”

“Okay.” Baz says, but he is very unclear on the situation. What kind of fight are they having? Why exactly are they going to fight? Maybe they worked this out and he forgot? Even after all these boozy nights with Simon, he is still not accustomed to quite so much to drink.

He tenses up when Simon stands to shrug out of his hoodie, readying himself for an attack, but Simon doesn't approach. Instead, he walks to the table at the far end of the room and leans heavily against it. Positioning his elbow on the wooden surface, he waggles his fingers in the air—a clear
invitation.

You fool, Baz thinks in vicious glee, cuffing his right sleeve to the elbow. You have no idea.

Simon is, it's true, much much stronger and more coordinated than Baz would have given him credit for. From the second they wrap their hands around each other, fingers re-lifting to find purchase, snuggling up their grip, it's evident that this will require actual effort. Under his fingers, Simon's hand is callused and hard, almost trembling with readiness.

“Ready?” Baz asks.

“Don't forget the other,” says Simon, nodding down at the table, and shit, Baz is pretty sure this isn’t what you’re actually supposed to do. Doesn’t your other arm just lie on the table?

“I can’t imagine that’s regulation protocol,” Baz objects.

If it is, how is it possible that anyone arm-wrestles in public? This has the intimacy of a wedding-night; below the battles of their minds and wrestling arms, they're really just supposed to hold hands, as though it's not impossible to be all these parts at once? It's like taking a pleasure sail underneath a land-to-sea firefight. How?

“Chicken?” Simon demands, and Baz finds a way.

He settles his left hand like it's nothing into the gentle cup of Simon's left hand on the tabletop. They hold each other as lightly there as they crush each other above. Baz tries not to notice how many of Simon’s hands he’s holding right now—nor how much of him rests in Simon’s grasp.

“All right?” Simon asks. Baz nods. “Go.”

Baz lets the fight take longer than it needs to; Simon is working hard for it, veins and sweat standing out from his skin, his jaw working, and his eyes, flame-blue, never leaving Baz's. He is startlingly strong, and a few times, Baz allows him to think he's got Baz on the run, their clutched arms tipping just past the mid-point, Simon's bicep lurid below the sleeve of his faded red t-shirt. And then, in his distraction, he's at 45 degrees and he almost is letting Simon win, and that is not okay.

Taking a deep breath to corral himself, Baz allows himself just enough strength to power slowly back up to vertical, and then, incrementally, forces Simon's arm down—tick, tick, tick, and with each tick, Simon groans like he's being punched, punched and fucked, like both at once—till the hard knuckles rap against the table and Baz has won.

They let go, and Simon rubs his arm. “Damn.” He shakes his head. “You wiry motherfucker. Fuck, I'm not supposed … I don't say motherfucker anymore. Except when I'm drunk, I guess.”

His expression is dazed and bright and searching as he reaches to shake with Baz. “You got me, bro.”

Baz shakes solemnly. “You put up a good fight.”

“Don't you condescend to me, motherfucker.” There's a grin now.

“All right,” Baz agrees. “Now pay up.” He reminds him of the terms: “The life you're living, or the life you used to dream about. Choose.”

Simon groans for real now, and lets his head fall forward onto the high table. “I thought I'd win.”
“How could you think that when you know…?” Baz begins, then can't remember exactly how much he's admitted about himself—can he say vampire yet? And while we're talking diction, “yet” implies some future here, Baz… — and lets the thought die. “Don't try to get out of this, Snow.”

“I'm not,” he mumbles into the wood, but then his head just stays there, waiting for Baz-has-no-idea-what. Finally, he grunts, “Just help me, okay?”

Baz is perplexed. “What, you want me to help you answer a question about yourself?” Oh. “Oh. Like, you want a truth spell or something?”

“Yeah,” Simon says to the table. His ears, poking out of his shaggy hair, are very red.

“That crosses my ethical lines, I'm sorry to say.”

“Goddamn magic,” Simon mutters, thumping his head against the table. “What's the fucking use, even.”

Baz feels bad. “I won't force you tell the truth, but,” he offers, “I can give you this.” Pen tucked between his fingers, Baz draws his hands together like they're a box and its lid, whispers, “Know thyself,” and when he folds them back open, they're heaped with blue-grey mist. “Do you want it?”

Simon peeks up, and his eyes widen at the sight of the insubstantial magic that rests in Baz's broad hands, which are dark and solid as hardwood. He whispers. “What is it?”

“It's called Know thyself. A kind of courage. It helps to bridge the chasms we dig between body and brain, between ideal and real. So, do you want it?”

Simon doesn't hesitate. “Yeah.” He sits up taller. “Does it hurt?”

Baz isn't sure whether pain might actually be a selling-point for this lunatic, but he doesn't answer, just blows gently to stir the shimmering wisps in his hands—and Simon is very interested by this if the way he's leaning in is any indication; he's practically climbing across the table—then wraps his palms around Simon's and holds tight. He can feel this magic leaving him and sliding into Simon's arms, and knows it's coiling through his veins toward his heart and lungs and brain.

Simon gasps, eyes huge, whole body quivering as it absorbs the spell.

“Does it hurt?” Baz chuckles.

“No, asshole, you know it fucking doesn't. It's amazing. I just about … Well…” he looks down, as if suddenly shy, and pulls his hands back from Baz's. “Does it always feel this good?”

“Sure, it can feel good,” Baz agrees, not exactly sure why Simon's hotfooting his way back to the couch. “You ready to answer?”

“I choose this life,” Simon says decisively, flinging himself down on the cushions. “I choose to be a parentless child raised by a broad cross-section of America's Least Wanted, with the occasional decent human being thrown in just in order to make all the rest of them more atrocious by contrast. I choose a childhood without love because I've already done a fucking lot with this life, and I am proud of what I've done with the person I had to be, and I am hopeful about the life ahead of me, and goddamn you, Pitch, fuck you for asking the question because I don't ever want to stop feeling bad for myself.” Despite the salt in the words, Simon is laughing, pink with bashful pride. His eyes shine.

“Like admitting it changes anything,” Baz sneers, but he's pretty sure Simon will know it's a friendly sneer.
“It's already changing me,” Simon says, and the look in his bright eyes looks a lot like hope.

“I am what time, circumstance, history have made of me,” Baz begins dreamily, pulling the quote from his classroom wall to his brain. “Certainly. But I am, also, much more than that.”

Simon surprises him by finishing: “So are we all.”

Baz raises an eyebrow—the left one, the one that's surprise or disdain, depending how high and how arched he wants to go. This one's surprise. “So are we all,” he repeats. “So you've always been. You're not going to fight with Jimmy Baldwin about it, are you?”

Simon laughs. “I guess not. I mean, now you're lovers.”

“You better not. He may look little, but that fellow’s scrappy as hell.” Simon laughs again, and Baz adds what may be only the second or third mark in the mental tally of times in his life he's made a joke about James Baldwin to an appreciative audience. “Anyway, it's your turn.”

“Okay.” Simon doesn't think long. Looking up from his hands to where Baz still leans against the wall at the end of the couch, he asks, in a quiet voice, “Given the choice, would you fuck me?”

Haruki Murakami. Baz's shoulder slips and he leans harder, trying to keep from falling, keep it cool. “Or?”

“Or what?”

“Or what's the other choice? 'Fuck me or eat a live frog'? 'Fuck me or amputate your cock with a table saw'?” Did he really just say cock to Simon Snow? Part of his brain is pretty sure that's highly inappropriate, maybe even harassment. But wait, Simon started this, right? He keeps going. “'Fuck me or pledge the bro-iest frat in the midwest and lead every one of their fucking racist, sexist chants for the next year'?” He is getting silly, trying to keep this shit light, because holy fuck, is Simon really asking him to have sex?

Simon Snow, who is reclining against the tasteful grey and maroon pillows of his tasteful and impersonable couch, who is a little sweaty and whose shirt is no question too thin and too snug and too clingy for an adult professional to have worn to work in a place where hormonal adolescents are supposed to learn things (things not related to the question, Can the human form maintain the rippling musculature of a college athlete at least into the early thirties?, which answer is herein readily apparent). Simon, who is now talking, saying, “No other choice.” Holy mother of the gods. “I mean,” he clarifies, “if it was a choice between 'fuck me' and 'don't fuck me.'”

The words crackle like ice in the heat of Baz's belly. It's not that he doesn't want to hear them, but they are hard and real and he can feel the pool of what-ifs coagulating around them.

“…So, given the choice…” Simon repeats.

“Wait,” Baz interrupts, scrambling for clarity. “Are you giving me the choice?”

“Sure.” Simon's heavy-lidded eyes haven't left his.

Baz puffs out a frustrated breath, because obviously Simon knows that he can feel his every move even from where he's still leaning uncertainly, not sure whether to rejoin Simon on the couch. “Couldn't you have made it a little harder?”

“You won't be asking that for long.” Simon grins, and Baz can feel his skin heat with embarrassment at how easily he walked into that one, and also because Simon is really right on the money here.
Then Simon's on his feet, upon him, a hand somehow gripping his grey necktie and pulling him close by it, and the disconcerting pressure around Baz's neck kind of makes him want to break Simon in two but is also basically turning Baz's stomach into an echo chamber of excitement. Simon keeps pulling till Baz's forehead is against his own; and so close, close enough to feel Simon's liquor-rough breaths course across his own lips, Baz literally gulps.

“I want to make one thing clear,” Simon slurs. “I will take whatever you are prepared to give, and I will fucking like the shit out of it.”

_Baldwin and Brooks_, Simon is throwing him onto the couch and kneeling astride his legs, and low enough that _holy fuck_, his cock, which is now painfully hard in his pants, feels the pressure of Simon's clothed groin descending onto it, and Baz closes his eyes to try to gain some perspective, but all he finds behind his closed eyelids is a dizzying swirl of galaxies in purples and greens that remind him—how does he keep forgetting this; this is clearly not a normal state of affairs; he should make a note to keep more cognizant and reflective about how he presents himself to the world—that they are both fucking _lit_.

“Fuck.” Baz says with real feeling, opening his eyes, which is not helping because they are inches from the dark-blue depths of Simon's own, and there are not words to convey what an enormous disappointment it is to him to have to say this: “Fuck. I can't do this to you.”

“Do what?” Simon asks, undeterred, running a clumsy hand down Baz's arm, which burns in every spot Simon's touched.

“I mean I can't fuck you now. It's not fair to you.”

“I _want_ to,” Simon says.

“I want to too,” Baz protests, and it is fucking difficult to protest into the hot smoke-and-caramel taste of Simon's so-close breath, but he is a person of honor, so protest he must. “I do, but I can't fuck someone who's drunk.”

Simon fights for it, tie coiling around his hand as he pulls closer, the other hand stinging paths across Baz's chest, extracting the coin from Baz's pocket and not pocketing it himself—although there’s a moment’s fumbling where Simon’s knees grip tight at Baz’s sides where it seems like he’s going for his pants pocket before he thinks better and tucks the quarter behind Baz's belt, and it is all so good and _so not okay_. Some tiny and rational corner of Baz's brain reminds him that he could just move away, but that feels like a bridge too far, because then they wouldn't be touching each other anymore, even though that's exactly what Baz is telling Simon they shouldn't do, and his thoughts are all a muddle of _sex_ and _sex!_ and _no_ and _really, sex!_ and _but Simon!_ and, obnoxiously insistent, _not now_. Eventually, Baz is more or less yelling, and he's not sure at whom, “God damn you, Simon, just listen to me. I take it back. I _don't want to fuck you._”

It's a lie, but maybe it's the only way he can live with himself.

Simon drops the end of the now-bedraggled tie and sits back on his heels, sulking. His pants bulge at the crotch—too much like that half-dressed moment in the classroom closet back at Halloween, the red underwear Baz can't scrub off the backs of his eyelids, and Simon wasn’t even _hard_ that time—and Baz can't help shuddering. What has he done? What kind of idiot actually _says no_?

Fortunately, Simon is not too distraught to notice where Baz's gaze has landed, nor his inability to look away. Simon leans back in.

“Oh, fine.” Simon says into his ear, and his voice is crazy and desperate and throaty and _fuck_, Baz
is fucking hard as nails. “What if…,” he pauses, and every part of Baz is saying yes, say yes, let this proposal be even vaguely reasonable and you can nod till your neck snaps. “What if I don't touch you, and you don't touch me. But we just, like, watch each other. Because I tell you what, Tyrannosaur, I need to fucking come.”

Baz can’t find a single reason to object to this proposal, which is a good thing because his hands have already signed for the yes message and are reaching to free the aching length behind his zipper.

Simon’s eyes go wide, as if he wasn't expecting this to be such an easy sell, but he unbucks his own belt and sits back, still straddling Baz's upper legs, sprung-open trousers and underwear jammed awkwardly down in front for—gods in the fucking skies—exposure, and begins to stroke himself.

His vision a whirling maze, Baz still gets close way faster than he would have thought possible. In front of him, above him, Simon is already there, his whole face gasping with the effort of holding back, and Baz realizes that Simon's been talking throughout the whole thing—nothing particularly coherent, just a lot of profanity, a few gulped observations about Baz's thick, straining cock, a few more lewd observations when he catches Baz's eyes on the rapid pumping of his slick hand—when he suddenly falls silent for a moment. Baz looks back up.

He doesn't understand the tense look in Simon's face—a look like frustration, like hurt, almost like anger. Through his panting, Simon whines. “Fucking talk, Baz. Say something.”

“On what topic?” Baz almost says, but that doesn't seem entirely appropriate—too conversational for this level of intimacy—so he looks for context clues, which help him sort things out pretty quickly.

The clues: Simon is gasping like a drowning man sucks in water hoping it's air; his face is a mottled red (and how is mottled red ever a sexy look?, but on Simon Snow, it's a goddamned mating display); his eyes are brilliant and pained and pleading; and through it all his fist is pumping, jerking himself so hard that Baz feels the reverberations through Simon's ass on his legs, realizes his hand's following almost the same pattern.

Baz recognizes the look now. It's not entirely unlike the quick, challenging glances Simon throws him while Simon's speaking in staff meetings—sometimes it seems like he's daring Baz to contradict him, others like he's begging for praise, but most often that he needs a second, a co-signer, a corroborator and he's defying Baz not to back him up. He needs Baz's assurance that he wants the right things.

Sex talk is not Baz's strongest suit, but there is no question that he wants to see Simon come, and maybe this is what it will take. Still, the words feel stilted and thick, burring in his throat so that they come out scratched and rough. “You want to come, isn't that right, Mr. Snow? You want to come all over yourself.” He quickly reevaluates. “All over me. And you're going to do it, and oh, when you do—“ Simon is thrusting against his own hand, lost to everything except Baz's eyes, Baz's heavy, measured words, “—you're going to come—" and here it is, Simon's head rearing back from the impending orgasm, fist a pumping blur “—So.” He pauses, and so does Simon, eyes on him, trusting and desperate and wanting. “Goddamn.” Simon shudders, hand working one slow slow, breathless pull from base to tip. “Hard.” And a trembling Simon's unloading all over the untucked front tails of Baz's striped button-down, which would normally disgust Baz no end, but again, this is indisputably not normal and anyway, Baz invited it, and anyway anyway, even as a fusillade of tremors wreak havoc on his upturned face, Simon's eyes haven't left his, which is really fucking hot and Baz is seconds from losing it himself.

Still shaking, Simon shifts forward as if to kiss him. Baz's mouth opens a little, ready, surprised, eager, but when Simon's close enough, he hovers—just waits, millimeters from Baz's gasping mouth, so that Baz can feel the air seethe between them, ricocheting back and forth with their breath. This is
going to do it, Baz thinks, just being this close, it's going to push me over and maybe Simon can read this in Baz's face, because he chooses this exact moment to stick out just the small, pink tip of his tongue and touch it, liquid, cool, to Baz's parted lips.

The restraint of the gesture hits Baz's brain with an intense and focused heat that redirects immediately to his balls, which are sure enough tightening and radiating a tension that trembles through every inch of him for a few long and blissful seconds, and then the gates slide open, they release, and he’s miles-deep in Simon’s eyes when a hot stream jets up to further deface his poor shirt.

There must be more than this that happens, he's sure it happens, but whatever it is that happens, it's gone in seconds; however Simon lifts off his lap and Baz extricates himself from his besmirched shirt, however they separate from one another, whether either or both of them spend hours hurling in the bathroom—all of that is lost to history, at least as far as Baz is concerned.

*

Baz doesn't even remember stumbling into his bed, although he must have, because that's where he wakes up the next morning with the blinds still open and his head a tumbler full of jagged stones.

He seems to be sleeping in his underwear and undershirt. It takes a little while to remember why. His journal's cast open across the pillow beside him; was he writing? Why would he be drunk and writing? Oh. Except the one thing that always makes him write.

He rolls over, tangled in blankets and sheets, and the pants and button-down strewn across the floor trigger memory, which springs up eager and afraid.

Simon Snow. His eyes on Baz's, angry, begging, and then Oh gods. Is he still here?

He is not.

A muddle-headed Baz is ashamed to admit, even to himself, that he examines the filthy evidence of his tie and shirt as proof that anything even happened. The evidence admits little room for dispute. Then he crumples back into his bed to wait for the floor to stop bucking underfoot.

***

Baz likes to think of himself as a person who confronts a situation head-on. A voice in his brain says that he's already missed the chance to do that with Simon; he let the whole weekend slip by without texting or emailing or calling to follow up on Friday night, perhaps afraid to cut short the blissful reliving of that night's hazy ecstasies. But that same voice seems willing to accept his counterargument that head-on means in person, so as soon as he's prepared his room Monday morning, he climbs the stairs to 224.

Simon is staring at a giant sticker chart (classic ACT strategy, measure young adults' intellectual growth in smiley faces and kittens), apparently intending to compare it to the list in his hand but obviously lost in some kind of reverie. He's the only one in here. Baz enters nervously, which means his face is the unnatural placid of a frozen wave.

“Mr. Snow.” He means the address to be tender—a joke and not, because the pretense of professionalism is essential if he and Simon are going to be the kind of colleagues who bring one another sexual joy.

Simon shakes himself as from a reverie, only slowly taking Baz’s extended hand. “Baz.”
“I wanted to talk, before school starts.”

Simon stares at him, openmouthed, his lower lip jutting forward. After a long moment of this, he seems to realize his hand’s still in Baz’s. He jerks it away and grunts, “So, talk.”

“Um.” This isn’t the conversation Baz expected. *Yiyun Li,* he should’ve just said *Simon.* “Is there a problem?”

“Yeah, there’s a fucking problem.”

Baz remembers how much they drank that night, how discombobulated he was the next day. He hesitates. “Do you remember Friday night?”

“Do I remember? I’m the one who dragged your sorry passed-out ass to bed. Yeah, I remember.” Simon’s bitterness is deep and harsh.

Baz shakes his head. “I was unpardonably drunk.”

“Unpardonably.’ Fuck you, so was I.”

*What?*

“No, I mean—I don’t mean it as an excuse. I should have stopped us.”

Simon glowers. “I didn’t want to stop.”

Baz didn’t realize what that lump was in his throat till now, when it suddenly fizzes off into his bloodstream. *Thank sweet elocution, Simon didn’t want to stop.*

“Listen,” Baz says, daring to scootch closer. “I’m not sure what you’re afraid of. I’m not a person who tells tales, if that’s what’s worrying you.”

Simon rounds on him. “I don’t give a shit what other people think about me.”

“Then, Simon, I just don’t know what the problem is.”

“You put a spell on me.”

Baz halts. It’s an accusation.

Lots of that night is pretty blurry in his recollection, but if there’s one thing Tyro Pitch, Jr., taught his first-born son, it's that you do nothing without consent. When he's triple-checked the memory to make sure, he says, “You said yes.”

Simon looks truly defeated. “Yes to *courage,* not to … what happened next.” You half-expect him to start sobbing and ripping out his hair.

Baz's stomach sinks. A new lump's forming in his windpipe, twice as large as the old one, and four times as knuckly.

“You know you initiated it, right?”

“Right … under the influence of whatever you *did* to me.”

“What I did?” Baz's words could slice stone. “All that spell does is make you trust yourself. It forces you to pay attention to what you *actually* want, instead of what you think you're supposed to want or
think or feel. Obviously, what you wanted is…” Baz stops short of saying … to have sex with me, you really did, that was no magic but your own wishes. But he definitely thinks it.

The warning bell rings.

“What I wanted?” Simon challenges, eyes fiery in the ruin of his sleepless face.

“What you wanted…” Baz fumbles, “… it ... well, you said it.” You wanted me. You wanted to have sex with me.

“Listen, Pitch, whatever I said, it was only true in that specific and very fucked up moment. I’m not trying to be your fuckbuddy, bro.”

Baz steps instinctively back, and looks away to make sure no one else is hearing this. He tries to reconcile this. You wanted to have sex with me.

Once.

You wanted to have sex with me once.

Once upon a time, we were drunk, and you wanted it, and you don’t anymore. You’ve had enough.

“Right,” Baz chokes out numbly even as the first student totters sleepily in. Fuckbuddy. Ari used the same term for him and Agatha. It was bad enough then, but at least it was sort of true. To diminish his friendship with Simon to that vulgar epithet is entirely repellent.

On this, at least, they are agreed: He’s not trying to be Simon’s fuckbuddy either.

“Then, we’re on the same page,” Baz says stiffly, quashing the instinct to exit with a cold bow. “I’m so glad we cleared this up.”

He is glad of an escape. He scurries down to his room, where his students are already filling the tidy rows of desks. If he is particularly acerbic and polemical in today’s lessons, well, there’s a reason his classes are always over capacity. Mr. Pitch has a reputation for professorial stringency; the students clamor for it. There’s nothing soft or coddling in Pitch’s class. It’s where kids come to get beaten into shape. His classroom brims over with Watford's most driven.
February

Simon dodges Baz for the next few weeks; it's a ridiculously busy time of course, January and February always are. Even Baz is almost overwhelmed by the workload; he has to remind himself to rein it in to a humanly fast stride and plans three steps ahead so that while he's entering attendance he's planning his copy requests and while he's dropping off copy requests, he's mentally outlining tomorrow's lecture on Toulmin argumentation or synthesis or literary theory.

Ari drops in for a long weekend laden with Christmas gifts, but after multiple hours of attempting conversation with a brother who keeps breaking away to jot down common fallacies of argumentation, she thrusts a beautiful little package at him, boutique-wrapped in brocade paper and gilt ribbons, says, “It's a decent razor for once. Shave more,” commandeers his car, and heads off without him to their parents' house, leaving Baz to shake his head over his students' logical leaps in solitary despair.

It's while running off a stack of essay prompts in the copy room and mentally composing a unit around the rhetoric of privilege that Baz suddenly finds himself in the same room with Simon for the first time in weeks, and alone with him for the first time since their confrontation in Simon's classroom. (If he's honest, Baz has been avoiding Simon at least a little—it crushes him to remember the way his excitement shriveled in the face of Simon's disappointment. It reminds him of the humiliating earnestness of his smitten students in the flush of a first crush: painfully, embarrassingly ardent and eager.)

When he hears the copy-room door slam behind him, he tilts his head in recognition of whoever's entering the room; it's all the greeting his colleagues expect from him. They usually try to chat him up anyway, as though the only thing locking Mr. Pitch's lips is the lack of a scintillating discussion starter in re: someone else's classroom management issues (Try magic, he now thinks, bitterly) or teacher's union pedantry (No, I will not keep an hourly record of my unpaid work, because if anything, it will just depress us all) or Magee's latest shittiness (The worst, he will chime in, but silently).

He doesn't need new friends. He has Elspeth and Agatha and sort of Bunce, and that's already more friendships than a person like him can adequately maintain.

Anyway, he tried. He tried, and look where the hell that got him.

But today there's no reply, just a few heavy steps and he looks, and sure enough, it's Simon, now poking angrily at the buttons on the ancient grey copy machine in the corner.

Simon looks terrible. Baz can't avoid thinking with shame of the first time he saw Simon here, way back in September. He'd thought Simon was a posh know-it-all and a dunce. Had he had the power to do such a thing, he would have terminated Snow's employment that instant and sent him packing back to Snow Mansion to lounge around in ill-fitting thrift shop clothes and feel sorry for himself while his parents bought him a new electric car or something to sanctimoniously cheer him up.

Shit. Baz hears himself thinking this, and it finally hits. Everything I hated about Snow, it wasn't Snow at all. It was me. I tried to make him into all the things I never wanted to be.

Snow's back is a barricade. He is not acknowledging Baz at all, but Baz is getting pretty good at reading this guy's posture. He's angry, yes, but the anger is a hard shell around something else—something he's not letting Baz see, maybe something he's not letting himself see—and Baz feels a hot tightening of sympathy in his chest.
He’d like to pat Snow on the shoulder, but as he’d rather not get punched in the face, he keeps his hands and thoughts to himself.

The vacant whirr of Snow’s machine tells Baz it’s going to jam half-way through the next copy order. On his way out the door, bearing his own stack of fresh copies, Baz says, “It’s not going to work. I’m done. Use mine.”

* * *

“Hey, can I talk to you about something that is very definitely not about work?”

Ms. Bunce sizes him up. “Of course you can. I have a few minutes till my next meeting. Do you want me to close the door?”

“Actually, I’d rather take it off campus.”

“Then you're buying me a drink. Six-thirty at the Arms?”

*

One of the more delightful interior features of the Watford Arms is the hole in the wall that connects it to the shitty hot-dog place next door. It’s an actual hole in the wall, about 18” in diameter and dangerously jagged at the edges. There are many stories. Most hinge on a bar fight, although a few years back Ari convinced some drunk guy who was hitting on her that it was from Hurricane Katrina—never mind that this town’s never seen a hurricane, nor that the only damage is to an interior wall.

More likely is the most mundane explanation: that some ravenous former patron, who happened to be in possession of a sledgehammer and mediocre aim, couldn't be bothered to walk the thirty seconds it would take to exit the Arms and enter the Doggery through more conventional means, and took matters immediately in hand.

It's not a conveniently-located hole; it punctures the wall a few feet above one of the booths on the bar's long wall, and since there's never enough seating at the Arms, someone's invariably sitting there and gets stuck as the middleman in dozens of hot-meat-for-money transactions, because seriously, now that there's a perfectly good hole in the wall why would anyone walk that thirty long seconds next door?

Baz arrives a few minutes early and snags two stools at the end of the bar. Claiming one with his bookbag, he hears Penelope's voice above the gabble of the after-work crowd. She's half-standing on the bench of the booth with the hole, leaning hard toward the wall, one hand pressed against it for stability. Below her bent torso, a couple appears to be making out. “No sauerkraut!” Penny's yelling into the Doggery. “I'm watching you, Vincent! I remember last time.” There's a pretense of menace in her straining voice. “Say hi to your sister for me! Tell her to stop by …” she pauses to tuck down her skirt, which seems to have gotten caught up in the lovers' groping below her. “Tell her to come say hi at her Spring Break!” She accepts two flimsy paper trays from the hand that reaches up on the other side, then deftly maneuvers down from the bench, no thanks to the booth's other occupants, one of whom appears to mount the other as soon as she frees up the space, much to the dismay of the next would-be hotdog patrons.

“I got you a dog,” Bunce says, settling in next to Baz at the bar.

Baz wrinkles his nose in a show of distaste, but honestly? Hot dogs are delicious. Especially the cheap ones, especially with cheaper beer to wash them down.

Baz has already ordered the house special for both of them—a shot of well whiskey and a pint of
whatever beer's overstocked. He knows how Penelope Bunce rolls.

“So,” she says, after they've downed and chased the shots, setting down her half-empty pint glass. “You wanted to talk?”

“Mm,” he mumbles in assent. He swipes at the mustard he can feel dripping onto his chin. “Yeah. That.”

“It's not about school?” Bunce prompts.

“No, it's …” This is suddenly seeming like an ill-advised idea.

She lowers her voice, bringing her head closer to his. “Is it about magic?”

“Sort of? Yes. Yes, it's about magic, and also about …” God damn it, he should be able to say this; he is 32 years old, he should be able to say the word. “It's just … sort of …” He almost gets it out, then takes an awkward sip from his glass, a paltry diversion.

“Snakes alive, Pitch.” Bunce ducks her head to the bar to look him in the eye. “Are you trying to talk to me about sex?”

Frederick Douglass. “Um. Yes?”

The ensuing laughter is prolonged and immersive; Ms. Bunce pounds a hand on the scarred counter while regaining her composure. “Sorry. I just never thought I'd see the day.” She takes another swig of beer. “Hit me.”

Baz has been battling it out in his mind. This whole discussion is already deeply embarrassing, and given the choice, he's not sure if he'd rather continue it or stick his naked junk through the window to the Doggery. Given the choice. Crap. That phrase still makes something spurt and roil inside of him. It makes up his mind for him: He wants answers.

He takes a deep breath. “Have you ever used magic on a … on a sexual partner?” He is so nervous. His mouth is full of anthrax dust.

“Sure,” Bunce says readily. Too readily. Baz hasn't thought through how much he's ready to hear about Bunce's sex life—she's his colleague and sort of his friend—but no matter, here they are. “Wait. How is this even a question? Don't tell me you and Dev never …”

“We did.” He and Dev had used a lot of magic, come to think of it—animation of inanimate objects, intensity amplification, reciprocal sensation, this great thing Dev could do with invisible bonds and a little levitation …

Bunce smirks at whatever look's on his face. “So what are you asking, exactly?”

“I guess I want to know whether anyone's ever gotten upset about it.”

“Mr. Pitch!” She looks at him sharply. “You haven't been taking advantage of anyone?”

He tries not to be insulted—it's a fair question—and fails. “Of course I haven't!”

“Then what's the problem?”

The phrasing comes in clunky bursts. “There's … this guy.” He almost says, you don't know him—like he's in middle school, like she'd buy it even if they were. “He's. I …” How to say it? “I want something. With him. And I asked, explicitly, I asked if he wanted a Know thyself, and he said yes.”
Bunce appears rapt, her chin resting on her left hand, elbow propped on the bar between them. She doesn't give him shit for the stammered confession, which is one more reason Bunce is the person for this job. “Did he understand what that entails? It can surprise you to see so much of yourself at once, especially if you don't have magic yourself.”

“No, he has magic.” He pauses, and hisses under his breath. “Wait, have you used magic on gandries?”

“Don't look so astonished. I get consent every time, for the spells and for the Never mind. Lucinda can't get enough.” She flushes a little at that, perhaps having divulged too much.

“You and Powell are dating?” Baz surmises, glad to divert attention for a moment.

“No, definitely not,” Ms. Bunce laughs. “We just make out when we're drunk; it's not going anywhere. Come on, we work together.”

“So do Cragshore and Gwinn,” he points out.

“Yeah, but they're a special case,” she says, a little ironically but with warmth. “Sometimes it's just written in the stars. And they're so tranquil in it—gods,” she muses aloud, “do they even touch each other, or is jacking into the same wifi all the intimacy they need?”

“Love moderately,” Baz intones. “Long love doth so. Too swift arrives as tardy as—”

“Spare me. If I never have to watch freshmen stumble through that drivel again, it'll be too soon.”

“You don't even teach freshmen.”

“The sacrifices I make as department chair.”

They complain about work for a while before Penelope returns to the topic. “So, you got consent, but then he hated it.”

“No, I don't think he hated it.” He can't say if it's pride or honesty that compels him to finish: “At all.”

“But under the spell, he did things he might not have done?” Bunce guesses, because either she is really good or Baz is really obvious, or maybe both. “And now he feels used? Guilty? Naked?”

The first two options have presented themselves to Baz already, but the last stops him short. “What do you mean, naked?”

“I mean when you're busy knowing thyself, you might end up letting someone else know more about you than you intended.” She looks at him knowingly. “Especially if you've just downed a pitcher or three at Ethics Comm.”

He swears under his breath. At least he didn't embarrass himself with some transparent attempt at deception. “God damn your perspicacity, Bunce.”

“What, you thought I wouldn't know? Come on, Pitch, Lu put money on it the night of the punch-up. And then you guys left together for, what? five meetings straight?”

Baz raises a hand to shield his eyes; for him, this is the equivalent of burying his head in his hands and whimpering. Bunce seems to get it, because she reaches over to tentatively pat his shoulder.

“And now you just glower and pretend to ignore each other in staff meetings?” Her hand settles
solidly between his shoulder blades. There’s sympathy in the touch. “I’m not judging, Pitch. He's cute, and, for what it's worth, smart, too.”

*Cute?* The vividness of Baz’s mental image is startling—in his mind, Simon appears with the striking outlines of an Deco-era advertisement for manly soap or manly trousers or manly radios—what he might call (if he allowed himself to spout such inanities) *ruggedly handsome*. Definitely not cute.

“And Basil, he’s *magical*?” She looks meaningfully at him for a moment in a way that he finds a little disturbing. “Who knew? Well, I guess you did. I won’t lie: Simon’s struggling right now, and I’m questioning whether he’s actually cut out for a life of teaching, but he's got some good ideas.”

“So,” he finds himself saying, “do you mean I should keep trying?”

“Yes,” she sighs, as if this is starkly obvious. “He stuck it out for Christmas with the Pitches, didn't he?”

“How did you—?”

“Lucinda told me. And then I asked him about it. I’m his new-teacher coach,” she explains matter-of-factly, as if aware that this might seem an unprofessional conversation for her to have had with Simon. “I’m supposed to inquire about my mentees’ emotional well-being.” She is actually patting his hand now. “And he is not *being* well. Not that I’m an expert on affairs of the heart, but that man adores you, Pitch, he really really does, even if he's too blockheaded to see it.”

Nodding, Baz shrugs off her hand. He needs to process this. Bunce, of course, understands and settles back to kill off her beer. Baz waves the bartender down for another round. “Thank you, Ms. Bunce. I don't know how long it's been since we talked like this.”

“A year or so?” she wonders aloud. “Before I switched rooms with Tejo, I think. I've been so busy with all this administrative bullshit.” She pauses, clinks new glasses with Baz. “I've missed you too.”

They spend a companionable few minutes just drinking and making derogatory comments about whatever sporting assholes are careening into each other on the screens above the bar. When it cuts to commercial, Bunce is still gazing vacantly up at the TV, and Baz feels a pang of remorse. As is his wont, he's failed to be a good friend.

“Hey, Bunce,” he says, “is the reason you and Powell aren't serious that you're too busy?”

At first he thinks she hasn't heard, but after a moment, she shakes her head. The tidy rust-brown braids stay where they're pinned.

“No. It's that damn cat of hers. It's going to flay me one of these days.” She looks at him balefully, measuring the moment, the depth of their history, and decides to spill. “Okay, I'll admit it: I wouldn't say no to more, but she has, and I don't need it.” She gives a little nod, as if to solidify something in her mind. “Casual isn't perfect, but it's pretty good. We're adults, Pitch. We can handle this.”

Something jostles loose in Baz’s mind. He’s heard these words before.

Beside him, Bunce taps her hand idly on the side of her almost-empty pint. The bartender, swamped with a bunch of cocktail orders, has been blind to their nodding; Baz has almost forgotten there are easy workarounds. The band of Bunce’s purple ring tings against the glass—once, twice, three times. “*Fill 'er up,*” she whispers. On the third set of clinks, a narrow stream of beer snakes loose from the unmanned tap and ribbons above the surface of the bar and into her glass. “Another?” she asks him. For the first time in possibly ever, Baz looks at Penelope Bunce with something besides admiration. It's still admiration, sure, but it's admiration muddled with sympathy. Penelope's alone, and she
doesn't want to be, and that is a goddamned shame.

Before he's quite sure what he's asking, before he could even start to articulate what he's going to do, Baz is starting in on a fix. His brain is steps ahead; he scrambles to keep up.

“Do you have plans next Friday, Bunce? Can I invite you to dinner?”

She laughs, surprised and teasing. “Is this a date, Pitch?”

“Bunce.” He uses his most self-deprecating voice, which, he is has been told, still sounds like he's awarding himself a merit badge. “I have already burdened you with the sordid details of my love life. I would hardly impose upon you further by subjecting you to date me.”

She says she'll be there.

* * *

Agatha is the last to arrive. Baz has already sweet-talked (okay, bribed) the host into a quiet, tucked-away table in one of the window alcoves, and is perusing the wine list with Ms. Bunce when he feels Agatha's hand on his shoulder. Despite her obvious confusion, she is too polite to inquire why the table is set for only two when clearly he invited her and clearly he's already seated there with someone else.

Baz rises and holds his chair for Agatha, nothing if not a gentleman, and she sits with breathtaking elegance. She and Bunce look at one another, then too-swiftly away, back up to the safety of their mutual friend's familiar face.

“This is a set-up,” he announces to the two befuddled women. “Sorry. You're both great and also both preposterously busy, so it was the only way I could think of to get you together. So, Agatha, this is Penelope Bunce. Penelope, this is Agatha Wellbelove.” Bunce's eyes flare in recognition of the famous name; she's probably placed the face, too—with its fresh intelligence and bold-lined, gleaming eyes—as the one at the center of every front-page feature story on WZ Philanthropic. “You are going to like each other,” Baz continues, “professionally and personally. Here.” He drops a stack of hand-written question cards onto the white tablecloth between them. “Some things to talk about, as if you'll need help. I'm leaving now. Dinner's on me, by the way, so don't try to leave. Get good wine. You are both very worthy of the best the house can offer.” He wants to kiss their hands, or cheeks—they're both watching him intently, as if postponing the look they'll have to share any moment, the measured mutual assessments—but settles for clapping both women on the shoulders. “I'm leaving you alone now,” he announces, and does.

* * *

At 12:34, he gets the first text.

“Basil, I have conf call to Abuja at 6a but who could sleep after that? Thanks a lot.” A minute later, a follow-up: “(Really. Thanks a lot.)”

A few minutes after that, there's one from Bunce, too:

“Would kill you Pitch, but find self unwilling to do even peripheral harm to darling Ag.”

“Ag?!?” he writes back, grinning.

And Penelope Bunce texts him back a smiley face.
“When I checked my mirror, it scolded me,” Agatha says a few days later, when they're finally together again to debrief. Her legs are in his lap on the sofa, and she's idly dangling a glass of wine from the gracefully-articulated fingers of her shapely left hand.

“Really.” This gives Baz a second's pause. Agatha's mirror watches out for her at all costs. It's the vicious watchdog Eustace will never be, except without teeth.

“Really. It said, *Coward, put me down and confront the inferno.*”

“*Inferno?**

“I thought I might explode, looking at her.” She covers her mouth with the other hand for a moment, thinking, yes, but also maybe remembering the pressure of a mouth there where her hand now presses. “I don't know how to explain it. It's like being sucked into a tornado, except the tornado is clever and benevolent and—and, Basil!—did you know, breasts are alluring?*

“I've heard,” he says, sucking in a smile and trying not to sound lewd while discussing breasts with a woman who has, in encounters not so long past, and on this very couch, taunted him with the clever, slim-fingered manipulation of her own delicate nipples.

“Well, they *are,*” she says, defensive and sheepish and smug, and loses herself again in a miasma of Bunceful memory. After a minute, she finds the self-possession to demand of him, “How did you know?”

“Know?” he inquires, with knowing blankness.

“Know.” She scowls a little. “I've never thought about myself as bisexual, even.”

“I wasn't thinking about your sexuality at all,” he says. It's the truth. “It's not as though my aim was to set you up with a *woman.* If anything, I was thinking about what you need, about what kind of person could be enough for you—and what you need, as far as I can tell, is basically totalitarian rule of a multi-million-dollar charitable organization, which, *check,* and also, the brilliant and insightful force of nature that is Penelope Bunce.”

The name stirs her. He sees it: the way the beauty of inflections sits with the beauty of innuendoes; the way a name claims tangible space in the room; the way it shimmers and hums, and the way that Agatha, hearing it, isn't quite alone with him any more.

“You are too much, Basil,” she grins, and he feels a certain pride in knowing that he has, this time, done very right.

* * *

Except for in English department meeting, at which Snow sits several desks directly behind Baz so that Baz doesn't see him, only senses his vibrating agitation, Baz doesn't see Snow again for some time. The workload that seemed preposterous at the start of the month now borders on intentional torture. What with Graduation Readiness advisories and scholarship recommendation letters and textbook review panels and district compliance visits, and with last-minute subbing for sick colleagues—whose valiant human immunities tend to succumb right around now—eating up his precious minutes of prep time, Baz isn't getting home till hours after dinner most nights anyway. He stows frozen meals in the staff kitchen, but never remembers to eat them, and by the time he arrives home he's so ravenous that he'll tear into the cold, raw meat in his fridge as a first course while everything else cooks.
Most people would find this lonely and horrible. Habit fills in for happiness. It's not awful, though, just monotonous. His world is grey right now, the nights and days flattening into one another without extreme. His sophomoric self-satisfaction wanes in the harsher light of each new responsibility.

Bunce wants to nominate him for district Teacher of the Year, but the mere thought of writing the dozens of vainglorious essays the application requires repels him. Another year, he says. In a year, perhaps he’ll be ready to boast again.

The saving grace is his students, who occasionally still manage to surprise and impress him.

Mia Montero misses a week of class. She returns with a new resolve in her eyes and writes a comparative analysis of Baldwin and Coates so good that Baz plans to use it as an exemplar for the rest of his career. She offers no explanation of her absence; Baz asks no questions.

One night in late February, he's trudging back from a Curricular Integration meeting that he really had no call to go to in the first place, except that if he hadn't gone, Bunce would have had to, and Agatha had begged. So they're off to a long weekend of steam and snow at the Wellbeloves' mountain retreat while Baz slogs through the muck of his half-frozen city streets and thinks about small comforts—the extra pint of blood he bought yesterday and the bottle of red waiting on the countertop to wash it down.

He's pausing to read the handbill tacked up outside one of the crappier music establishments on the street—a show featuring Whence Boners, which seems to establish, to Baz's horror, that the phrase is not just a terrible Simon Snow shirt decision (he shudders to recall quite how self-referential that sweaty shirt became in its insolent insistence on clinging to Simon's broad pectoral muscles), but also some real people's terrible band-name decision—when a shiver of a sound assails him and he freezes.

It's his awful old student Calvin, and he's in the alley behind the club, and someone is about to hurt him.

God damn it.

Darting a resigned glance around, Baz ducks dutifully into the alley.

It's long and narrow, barely wider than a corridor—there's a row of trash bins for the businesses on either side, then it slopes sharply upward and becomes concrete stairs that lead through to the other side of block. Halfway up the stairs, there's a landing lit by a motion-detector spot on the side of the club. Even from the mouth of the alley, it's easy enough to make out Calvin up there with someone else. Calvin's got his hand down the other guy's pants, and if it weren't for the infinitesimal tremors in Calvin's voice, Baz would really believe he was into it.

"Oh fuck," Calvin breathes, like raw nerves frying on the fire; "fuck, you're so fucking big, I can't fucking wait to have you in me." He unfastens the other man's belt in a scream of steel. "Lemme get you ready."

He drops to his knees, apparently taking the man into his mouth, and the man leans back into the shadowed part of the wall beyond the club door to let Calvin suck him.

Baz is troubled. Calvin's obviously terrified—Baz can smell the rank terror from here—but he also
seems not displeased by the act of fellating this man; moreover, he seems quite good at it. The braggadocio's fallen away, and Calvin is just a sex-mad 18-year-old going to town on a fat cock. The man's hands creep up from Calvin's shoulders to his neck, and suddenly, he's yanking Calvin back. "Not yet," he says, and the cold command in his voice is a jagged shard in Baz's stomach. "You feel me, you slow down."

Calvin squeals out some sort of assent that's more animal than human, and returns to it with hands clenched around his neck. The man's breathing remains measured; it grows deeper, but no faster, despite Calvin's rocketing heartrate—the man must be choking him, Baz thinks distantly, and wonders at what point he is supposed to step in, and what on earth to do when he does.

When the man wrenches Calvin away for a second time, lifting him bodily by the throat and flinging him forward onto the stairs that lead up and away to the next street, some things click.

Baz is already sliding forward along the dark wall.

He knows precious few people strong enough to lift a grown person with one hand. In fact, when it comes down to it, he knows exactly one: himself.

The man is behind Calvin now, thrusting into him so hard that Baz is afraid that Calvin, who's bracing his arms against the concrete steps in front of him (and who, honestly, has much more dire things to worry about right now, but maybe this is why Baz needs to worry on Calvin's behalf), will bust a tooth.

Baz slinks closer. He's to the base of the stairs now—close enough to hear Calvin's teeth gritting anxiously against each other with each jolt; and to hear the strange popping noise as the man flicks a finger painfully hard, over and over, like a phlebotomist flicks a promising vein, against the side of Calvin's neck, bending harder across him; and to hear—if that's even true, if it's even a thing you hear and not an ancient feeling in your vibrating vampirical core—the snick of the man's teeth emerging as he opens a gaping, fanged mouth inches from Calvin's throat.

Baz has no idea how he got there. All he knows is that before the man's teeth make contact with poor quaking Calvin, Baz's arm is between them, shoving them apart.

A fang rips into the sleeve of his jacket.

The man seems to think he'll take Baz down with a bite; it's not until Baz has slammed him into the brick wall that he seems to reevaluate and gauge exactly what he's up against. He looks at Baz as appraisingly as you can look at someone whose forearm's pinning your semi-dressed monster corpus by the throat to the wall of a seedy club.

"One of us," he says with satisfaction.

Baz says nothing, just presses tighter.

"You want the honors?" the man offers, gesturing to Calvin, who hasn't even run away, just balled himself up on the far side of the landing as if curvature is armor.

"Were you going to turn him?" Baz asks. His voice is ground rocks.

"Come on," the man—the vampire—leers. "Little prick like him? Good for exactly two things."

"Fuck you," Baz says to the vampire. He drops him.

The vampire lands roughly but springs back to his feet. Baz gets his first real look at the guy. He's as
tall as Baz, at least, maybe taller, with a gleaming head of hair and brutally perfect features. Calvin probably couldn't believe his luck at first, Baz thinks. He glances back, just to make sure Calvin's still there—he is—and in that half-second, the vampire's grabbed for Baz's waist and grappled him into some kind of immobilizing hold.

“I'll drain you both,” the vampire says. His breath is sterile. As his teeth approach Baz's throat, he smells like absolutely nothing. “You first.”

And Baz realizes he has not considered, up to now, how he will die. Nothing and no one is forever, but still, he just hasn't thought it through. He figured the classic vampire ways were likely—fire, beheading, stakes... but to die by vampire—to die by vampire again, because obviously he's not exactly alive now, is he?—and alone, his last hideous seconds spent in the cruelly full-circle company of one of his greatest professional failures and dragged into unlife by a demon of his own kind—is an indignity he refuses to suffer.

Shoving his free hand under the flap of his satchel, he digs out a brand-new pencil. It's not a stake—it's not even sharpened—but it'll do.

It has to do.

The teeth are scraping his neck. He's suddenly aware that his own have emerged, hard and sharp as arrows, ready, eager. His nose twitches; he never knew till now that he could want to consume a vampire, but there, underneath the nothingness that clings all over this machine-solid beast, there's a dim murmur of settling blood.

**Blood again.** Even in the deadly clutches of the vampire, he thinks about blood.

Repulsion fills him like a jet's roar.

**Now,** Baz thinks.

He lets the fury carry him through. With enough rage propelling it, the pencil sinks deep. Blood jets out in torrid spurts that Baz can't avoid; in seconds, he's streaming with the stuff.

Hands shaking, he lowers the monstrous, hissing mass to the ground.

On the far side of what is, almost instantly, a corpse, Calvin peeks up at him from under his arms. “Holy shit,” he whimpers. “Holy fucking shitballs fuck, you fucking killed him, fuck, I almost fucking died holy fuck I thought I knew, he didn't smell right, but I thought maybe the drugs—you know, so much of it's just stories, but, is that thing a vampire for real?” Baz offers the poor boy a hand up. “Oh fuck Mr. Pitch, you're a fucking vampire too, fuck, don't fucking kill me, please please please just let me—"

**Oh.**

Baz is about to run after him to convince him everything's okay when he realizes that he's basically bathed in blood and has a madman's eyes and, of course, his fangs must be showing, and running Calvin down is going to be deeply counterproductive.

“Calvin,” he says instead. His voice is adamantine. He cannot bring himself to consider ethics right now. He has just killed, and he abhors violence. “Damn you, Calvin, **Hold your horses.**”

After that first spell, the rest are easier—a few healing spells, a **Don't worry, be happy,** and finally the Never mind that Baz casts in the split-second after he wrenches open the stage door and thrusts a
disoriented but grinning Calvin into the wings of the theater. He won't remember any of this, Baz reminds himself. For good and for bad, it will be, for this deeply irritating and distressing young man, as though nothing's changed.

Calvin, damn him, shows how totally he's forgotten by turning back to blow Baz a pout-lipped, wide-eyed kiss.

In that moment before Baz is able to slam the door shut again on this latest indecency, one of the band-members goggles out at him. Of course he does; Baz looks like he just stepped out of a slaughterhouse.

Someone will be coming to investigate soon. Opening his hand to produce a tiny flame, Baz ignites the hem of the vampire's coat.

He's at the top of the staircase by the time the first long tongue of fire licks at the dead vampire's flesh. In one searing burst, it's over.

*

He continues down the sidewalk, alone with himself. Behind exhausted eyes, where he might have expected he'd see Calvin recoiling in terror or the pornographic jut of the vampire's teeth toward his throat, instead he sees hands. Students' hands. They're raised—the pathetic few hands, like overlooked, unharvested stalks of grain, that rise above his listless classes when he asks who among them read for pleasure. He tends to lecture, then, incandescent with fury and passion—the kind of lecture that was once Pitch at his purest, the kind that makes students fear and love him—but all these years in, though the words and delivery remain the same, the underlying feelings have gone cold.

Every year, the same war, the same 150 individual theaters of action, but also the growing knowledge that even in the battles he wins, the fighting never really stops. So he gets an 18-year-old to read a few good books, and maybe even like it. That doesn't guarantee that the kid's going to ever read again. It doesn't close an 18-year literacy gap. It barely draws the sides closer together—maybe just enough that the kid can see across to realize the gaping width of the chasm. It doesn't mean the kid's even learned anything, not really.

It doesn't mean the kid's not going to be vampire fodder a year or a decade and a sleazy road away. The only reason Baz snatched a goddamned life from the jaws of death tonight—a life barely cognizant of him as anything more than a teacher he'd like to fuck—is that his own brutal biology impelled him to the kill.

Fuck.

He can't hide it anymore. He can't pretend to himself anymore that he's just a little stronger and faster than everyone else. He felt the iron grip of the vampire. That's how he touches people.

A cuddly couple prance down the street toward him, hand in gloved hand. Not that it matters—it's dark out—but Baz adjusts his scarf so that its thick folds hide the lower half of his fanged face.

How do vampires ever live with themselves?

How do teachers?

*

When he gets home, Simon Snow is shifting around awkwardly on his doorstep in a puffy jacket and that stupid red beanie.
Of goddamned course.

“Baz,” Simon says, squaring his shoulders when he sees Baz shuffle up. “I need to talk to you.”

“I cannot,” Baz says, because god damn it, he just can't. He is disgusting and depraved; he is made to kill; his kind should be destroyed.

“I get it if you're mad, but you at least have to—“

“No.”

“No, listen, bro,” Simon says, and his voice is not whiny but is a little desperate in a way that makes Baz deeply uncomfortable. “I just want…”

“No.” If Baz blows up and bites Simon right now, that's more or less his own damn fault. *Charm School Day 1: Do not provoke a fucking vampire.* “Well,” he concedes, because even in tatters, he is truthful to every fault, “actually, yes, but I'm too ruined to make anything a spell right now, Snow. All I want is to get into my building. Deny me entry at your cost.”

“I said no, Snow,” Baz snaps, stepping into the welcoming light of the front entry. Simon literally jumps away.

Oh right, Baz recalls wearily. He's covered in gore. How appropriate. “Pay it no mind,” Baz says, trying to step past him to the front door, but Simon blocks his way.

“Right, like I'm going to just forget—wait. Is that a spell?”

“No.” But then he follows Baz into the foyer of The Uptown (A PitchCo Building). Baz whirls and snarls, “Take a goddamned hint, Snow. I am angry and exhausted and scary.” He refrains, somehow, from adding that it's been almost a month since they even talked, outside of growling at each other in meetings. “You shouldn't be around me.”

“Chill, bro,” says Simon, pointing his empty palms at Baz like you do when you're trying to talk down a crazy person. “How about I just take Eustace for a walk. Cool?”

By the time Simon and Eustace get back, Baz has downed a carton of blood, incinerated his clothes, showered while swigging what remained of that bottle of wine, and changed into a loose sweater and sleep pants. His fangs have retracted; he doesn't give a shit if Simon knows he's a vampire, he's still not seeing the fangs. It's just embarrassing.

Simon taps on the front door.

“You look nice,” Simon says, taking a knee to fiddle with the clip on Eustace's leash. “Sorry I got you at a bad time earlier. Want to talk about it?” The twist of his mouth indicates that this last is a joke.

Baz glowers anyway. “No.”

“Cause it looked bad.”
“No.”

“Really bad.”

“No.”


“It wasn't.” Baz says curtly, because maybe it wasn't. Was it? It can't really be murder if we're already dead. “I just got caught up in someone else's business.”

“A bloody business.”

After a moment's pause in which he weighs the likelihood that Simon is making an intentional literary reference, and in which he recalls Simon's affronted glare when so questioned in the past, Baz says, “I heard the owl scream,” and he really doesn't mean to sink with such leaden drama onto the couch as he says it, “and the crickets cry.”

Simon, who has been messing with Eustace's collar this whole time, finally figures out the release. He beams. It takes Baz a moment to figure out that it's not about the leash, but because he knows Baz second-guessed him and caught himself.

“You didn't come here to walk my dog,” Baz accuses as Eustace romps off toward the water dish.

“Right,” says Simon, rising contritely to stomp mud all over the entry mat. “I came here to get yelled at.”

“Much as I’d love to dress you down,” Baz begins, “I find myself rather depleted of vehemence.” (He is seriously so tired that the dreadful word choice only now catches up with him. His arms, holding him upright, feel wobbly, and his useless heart.)

“Yeah, no, that’s fine. You look worked. Lie down, huh?” Simon gestures to the couch, where the pillows fluff up at his bidding and make way for Baz to stretch out. “Just make that face.”

“Face?” Baz asks, collapsing ungracefully into the cushions.

“The one like you hate me.”

Baz’s eyebrows lift. He takes some umbrage at this; he does not hate.

“Right,” Simon says wryly. “That one.” He grips the back of his neck with his hand. Like this, he’s all muscles and angles. “Man, can you...? Just ... don’t fall asleep yet. Okay?”

Baz’s brain and voice and ears are tired. His soul hurts. He wants desperately to escape into sleep, but Simon is back, and talking to him, and he needs to stay awake for this. He says yes.

Simon paces a little and works at his neck.

Maybe he likes that, Baz reflects woozily, on the brink of sleep. This will not do. “I can’t wait all day, Simon,” he says. “Use your words.”

Simon takes a deep breath, as if to steel himself, and launches in.

“Penny says I’m a piece of shit.”

“I doubt it,” Baz mutters, because she wouldn’t.
“Okay, fine, she actually said ‘foolish,’ but the tone of voice said ‘piece of shit.’ I ... it’s been a hard
time for me, Baz. I thought I could do more, you know? I thought ... all these kids...” He trails off. “I
thought I had so much shit figured out. It’s why I decided I should teach, because I thought I could
do more here than in the Foster Center, because those kids don’t get what they need in school and I
thought if they just had better teachers...” He shakes his head and paces harder. Eustace whines in
annoyance at Simon’s heavy footfalls. Baz pats the couch till Eustace hops up to cuddle by his feet.
He wants contact right now.

Simon’s oblivious, caught in his own mind, face tortured by the search for tortured words. Finally, he
finds some.

“It’s fucking hard, bro.” Baz had no idea that word could cause forgotten notes to ring melodious
inside him. “You know. And you saw what I did, and you ... it’s like you ripped the covers off the
world and everything I always thought was the sky was just some planetarium ceiling and now
everything is stars. You saw right through me.

“You saw right through me, and you kept seeing into me, and it’s great. It was great. You’re fucking
awesome, man. And then I ... you know ... I took it too far. I always take it too far. It’s like, my
whole thing. When something’s making me feel weird, I take it to an extreme, I do too much, and
then I just have no option but to walk away.”

He looks wretched.

“Except walking away feels terrible. It always feels like the stupidest fucking thing. I pretend it’s not
my fault, that it’s on everyone else, but that’s bullshit. None of this is on you, Baz. You have done
directly right by me at every fucking step.”

Baz would dispute this last except that his brain, finally allowing itself to focus on something other
than murdering and blood, is willing itself to shut down before Simon stops talking. Let him fall
asleep with Simon’s voice plucking at the harpstrings in his chest.

“I fucked up so bad. I want us to be friends. I wanted it right away, but I didn’t ... I didn’t think I
deserved another shot. I didn’t think you deserved the fucking-with. But then Penny said I was being
shitty, and, you know, I trust her.

“So, like, if it’s not too much to ask, do you think we could maybe, like, start lessons again?”

Through the wondrous blue haze of dreams, Baz is pretty sure he manages to say yeah before he
conks out.

He wakes up very early with a blanket draped over him and Eustace nesting in the space behind his
knees like a (very hot and clawsy) 90-pound finch.
Baz is startled to realize how glad he is to have Simon coming back for lessons. He's learned enough about Simon to know that he'll eat anything, but especially fruit; he arranges tangerines or little apples in a bowl on the coffee table before lessons now, and revels in the unthinking ease with which Simon helps himself.

Over dinner after their third lesson on healing—which Simon suggested they hold on Friday since there's no Ethics Commission meeting this week, and which (being a Friday that they've planned to spend together, so that Baz even shopped in advance rather than just cobbled together a meal from what's in the fridge) feels uncomfortably formal compared to their usual weeknight drop-ins—Baz observes, “I haven't seen you running with Huynh the last few weeks.”

“Nah, he's training for LA. He says he's tapering, whatever that means, but no way I'd keep up.”

“You two are pretty close.”

“I guess. You know he was an ACTer too, right, like five years ago? There's kind of a network for us. And we live together. Well, not together, he's next door, but you know.” Simon hacks off and devours a thick slice of roasted squash. “This is really good, by the way. How do you know how to cook?”

Baz doesn't really want to get into his childhood pickiness, nor his initial hatred for his father's replacement wife, nor that he gradually and resentfully learned to first tolerate, then admire, then even—so slowly, over a million chirpy remarks that chipped away at the face of his granite silence—love her as a result of the hour she required him to spend at her side in the kitchen every evening, excepting Charm-school days, for the entirety of his youth. That was also where he found some modicum of control—especially once he was in high-school and the vampirical ache was manifesting itself in blood-spattered nightmares that haunted even his waking hours.

Delphinia had been the one to find him with the first squirrel he'd caught in their woods, its throat slit, as he attempted to drain it tidily into a glass in the kitchen sink, as if it were a sun-warmed lemon and not a tiny life he had stalked and taken. He'd thought no one else was home. When he heard her, he whirled, squeezing too hard, and a thin spray of blood struck the curtains and windowsill. For a long moment, Delphinia had just looked at him. She hadn't moved toward him or away, just stood there in the bright kitchen and watched him with something that certainly wasn't pity or revulsion or fear; if he had to describe it, Baz would have had to call it affectionate resignation—the way a mom looks in a tv ad when her spoiled asshole kid is writing on the walls or flooding the bathroom. It pulled him apart inside. When Delphinia finally spoke, it was so dryly and so casually that Baz hadn't been sure whether to laugh or to sob in her arms. Flicking a dismissive hand toward the windows, she muttered, “Out, damned spot.”

His own mother had been sharp and incisive; it was from Delphinia that he learned to be funny, too.

Anyway, Baz doesn't particularly care to go into how he learned to cook. Delphinia has been calling a lot lately, and every call is so heavy with insinuations of blossoming romance that Baz can't maintain a pleasant tone for more than a few minutes. He loves Delphinia, but she can be a bit much. At least she also gushes over the archaeology books he gave her.
He shrugs at Simon. “You just pick it up. You know how to cook, right?”

“Right, but ‘cause if I was useful I didn’t get shipped to new homes so often. That was the hope, at least. Your family has its own cook.”

“They do now. Now that we’ve all moved out. They wanted us to grow up normal.”

Simon snorts. “That’s what you call it.” He takes a hearty gulp of beer and watches Baz watch it go down. “You know you guys are anomalous as fuck.”

Of course Baz knows this. One could hardly live a lifetime as the scion of the Pitch family without a certain excruciating awareness of the rarity of black families in their social stratum. “Magic,” he shrugs. He suspects there’s some unsavory history there, if you cared to prod, but honestly, probably no more than in any other rich family. How often is fortune just fortune?

“Magical families,” Simon concurs, shaking his head. The last word hangs.

Baz cannot for the life of him explain how a snorting, beer-swilling Simon Snow became so wonderful to him, but there it is. “Simon,” he says. He would like, in this moment, to be brave. “We should talk about something.”

Simon's still holding the glass. When, after a very long, contemplative pause, he sets it on the table, his face has grown more serious. “Declan thinks you’re a bad idea.”

Baz must look blank.

“Declan Huynh,” Simon says, instantly impatient, as if that’s the part that’s confusing and not the whole goddamned premise that he and Declan Huynh have been talking about him and Simon. “We were just talking about him?”

Baz nods, and (inside, of course) grins to himself. He is, obviously, at least somewhat tickled by the thought of being Simon Snow's Bad Idea. And also, he has seen Huynh with sufficient regularity of late for him to hazard a guess as to Huynh's low opinion of the matter. “Do you suspect he might be jealous?”

“Declan?” Simon is so incredulous that he actually puts down his fork. “Nah, that guy's great. We hang out all the time; there's no way he thinks I'm going to drop him just 'cause I'm friends with … Wait.” He is scrutinizing Baz's face like it's hieroglyphs. “You mean, like, romantically?” Baz stifles an eye-roll. He's trying very hard to be nice, but Simon makes it difficult. Instead, he nods. Simon laughs. “Hell no. Dec's straight as a rail.”

“You have evidence of this?” Baz has seen how Huynh's eyes can't stay away.

“Well, I mean, he seems open-minded, like I wouldn't be shocked if he got up on some bros back at college parties 'cause it seemed like the cool thing to do, but I'd say the live-in girlfriend is a good clue.”

“Really?”

“They bang a lot—the PitchCo tenements specialize in thin walls. What's so hard to believe here?”

Baz knows this is going to end in him getting ridiculed, but he can take it. “He's always looked at me strangely; I catch him glancing over from across the room, or see him in unlikely places when I'm out and about.” Simon air-quotes out and about back, just to mock him. “I assumed he was interested.”
“Oh!” Realization dawns golden and riotous on Simon’s broad face. “You didn’t think he was jealous because he was into me—you thought he was jealous of me for being around you. You arrogant asshole!” But he's smiling, smug.

“In fairness to myself,” Baz says, “when people look at me oddly, they usually do want… well, want me.”

Simon shakes his head. “Noted. You are very hot and very aware of it. Now, I'm here. You wanted to talk? And I'm assuming not about Declan Huynh.”

Baz leans back in his chair to steady himself. “Right.” He grimaces, rethinking, and reaches to freshen the Hitachino in their glasses. This will not be easy. “I don't talk about this, but … you know what I am.”

Simon nods, eyeing him carefully.

Is that confession enough? No, he decides.

“You need to hear. I'm a vampire.” Has he never said those words aloud before? They sound unused, like clean new steel knives unwrapped from decades of storage. “I don't... I've never bitten anyone. I wouldn't.”

Still not enough.

“But I killed a man.”

Simon, beautiful idiot, leans in. This is not a reasonable reaction. “Yeah?”

“A vampire. He attacked one of my old students. You saw me that night.”

Closer still. “Oh shit. The night I waited in the snow for you. You were all bloody.”

“Yes.”

“But you didn't bite him?”

“I did not.” He would rather not describe the impact of the pencil, the way the cloth and flesh yielded to admit his blunt stab, the horrible scentlessness of the vampire's blood.

“Was the kid okay?”

“He is now. I committed several breaches of magical code that night.”

Both men drink.

“For obvious reasons,” Baz says, “I do not discuss this.”

“Unobvious reasons too, huh?” Simon speculates.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you don't let much slip, Baz. You keep shit to yourself. If I hadn't fucked up showing off that day you were in my room, I'd know this much about you.” Simon's fingers pinch a tiny space of air.

“But you showed off.”
“I did,” Simon agrees cheerfully. “So I know, like, this much.” He spreads the fingers a little wider, like he's holding a thin book by its spine.

Baz surveys the hand, which holds its shape even as Simon pours out the last of the tall bottle. “You're not frightened.”

“Bro.” Simon's direct eyes below half-lowered eyelids signal affectionate disdain. “You ought to be. Predators failed to entirely kill me, and in so doing, turned me into one of their own.”

“Bro, you are underestimating the shit out of how much I know you. Wait” Simon suddenly seems to recall that his fingers are still frozen in contradictory measurement of this exact concept. He adjusts. “Let's say it's this much.” You can see how a football would fit comfortably in those spread fingers. He ticks each finger up as he starts to enumerate: “You have a great dog. You cook. A fucking ton of vegetables for a vampire, by the way. You talk shit about motivational quotes, but leave poem-books open all over your house. Your students fucking revere you. I guess I would've known that anyway, but I wouldn't like it, because you're an asshole know-it-all who doesn't deserve their love.”

He must see Baz's eyes on his hands.

“But that's just what you tell yourself—that you're an unfeeling asshole. Baz.” His fingers drop open, his hand falls to the table, palm up. “I tried to talk myself into believing it, too, but I know it's not true.”

Baz can't look away. It's not quite close enough to him to be an invitation, not quite far enough not to be.

Feeling shaky, Baz reaches. He doesn't put his hand on Simon's, or in it, but on the table just beside, so the thin gap between them trembles with self-awareness.

“So why did you run away?”

Simon's laugh, a little too hard, startles them both. “I'll just fucking say it. You want me, and I want you, and that scared the shit out of me.”

If Baz had less control of his magic, he would suspect that the air between them was actually vibrating. Actually, this is Simon. It probably is.

“You said you're not scared.”

“I was.” Simon glances from his empty glass to their two adjacent hands, and spells Get over here. A six-pack of weissbier lurches clumsily from the kitchen to the table, lids of two bottles flipping away as the pack lands. He holds one to Baz.

“After that night, I wanted you so bad. I would've done, fuck, anything to get to have you, Baz, in whatever way I could. I didn't mean to make it so obvious, but then I was drunk, and there was the magic, and I just couldn't—” Shaking his head curtly, he pauses to pound half a beer. “I've always been the strong one, you know? I'm fucking six-foot-something and bench 350 pounds.” (This doesn't seem like the right moment to mention that Baz himself has, on various occasions, hefted a range of mid-sized cars.) “I solve my own fucking problems, I don't need anyone.”

And in one night, Baz thinks, I made you psychoanalyze yourself, physically overpowered you, and used formal magic—which, for all your untutored air-distorting genius, is one area I know a hundred times better than you—to mess with your brain. “No wonder you were angry,” he says.
“You're so strong, Baz,” Simon says, and the look in his eyes is want filtered through fear.

“I am. But does my strength diminish yours?”

“It's just—I don't want you to fucking pity me. I don't want to think you're holding back all the time to stroke my delicate fucking ego.”

In answer, Baz lifts a butter knife from the table. His silverware is thick and heavy, the kind of stuff that gets passed down for generations. As Simon watches, with his index and ring fingers spread on top and the middle finger lifting from below, he folds the knife handily in two and drops it with a clank on the tabletop.

Simon is cautious in picking up the bent knife. He clamps a hand around each end and pulls. The veins stand out in his neck before the knife slowly begins, just a little bit, to give.


“Diego motherfucking Maradona. Do you ever think about just… just saying fuck it all and going to —” Simon stops when Baz, who has rocketed from his seat, pins his gesticulating arms to his sides.

“Don't move when you say that.”

“Say what?” Simon's triceps tense under Baz's grip.

“Fuck it all.”

“What the fuck? Now that's a spell, too?”

“Obviously.”

“What's it do?”

“Disaster.”

“What kind of disaster?”

“You never really know.”

“Really?” Simon looks far too happy about this prospect. It's possible that Baz's grip tightens. “Okay, okay,” he says, in a tone of mild panic under the steel clamps of Baz's hands, “I'm not gonna use it. I swear. We're cool, bruh. Lemme go.”

Baz would really rather not, but he is definitely working on listening to whatever Simon says about his personal space. He lets go. Fortunately, Simon doesn't move so much as twitch backward in his tall chair, so Baz doesn't move away either. He just stands there, too close.

“You were saying.”

Simon's a little pink in the cheeks. “I was?”

“Before you almost destroyed us and I incapacitated you.”

“Incapacitated, my ass.” Maybe this is how they'll play it. “But I was saying, don't you wish you could go hide out in a cottage in the woods at your folks' place and say—“ he folds his hands with pointedly demure restraint “—'Fuck it all,' and eat whatever the fuck weird shit you like and fight bears and uproot trees?”
“That doesn't sound normal.”

“You're not a normal person, Baz.” He touches Baz's arm when he says this—it's the first time Simon's touched him in months.

“It sounds lonely. I like people.”

“Sure about that, bro?”

“I really am.” He pauses. “Not all of them. But I have friends. I like Bunce. I like you.”

Simon's hand is still on his arm.

“Not, I hope,” he says, and his voice is very low, like he's daring himself to speak at all, “in the same way.”

Baz raises an eyebrow.

“If I did?”

“Shit, man, I don't know.” He pulls back, that perturbed squint in his face. “I mean, I'm pretty sure we've talked about my predilections.” He looks a little wretched. “Shit. Do you?”

Baz lets him suffer for just another moment's magnificent confusion before he gives in.

“I don't. Not at all. As it happens, I want a great many things with you, Simon Snow, that I have rarely, if ever, wanted with anyone.”

Baz must mean it. Has he ever admitted half so much before? Simon juts out his lower lip, apparently impressed at Baz's forthrightness. “Trying to scare me off, Pitch?”

Baz looks at him incredulously. “No.” He is going to give Simon some goddamned truth. If it scares him off… well, if the pattern holds, he probably won't stay away long. And if he does, at least Baz has been honest.

“Good,” says Simon, clicking his teeth a little—a nervous sound. “Look, Baz, I want… I want you to know… I need to say, I don't like you for your money.”

The idea has literally never occurred to Baz.

“The idea,” Baz says, “has literally never occurred to me.”

Simon rolls his eyes. “Of course not, asshole. Who wouldn't swoon for your sparkling personality?”

“I'm not talking about me,” Baz says. “I mean to say, I would never suspect such base motivations in you.”

“Even after I saw your goddamned family estate, bro? Anyone would want in on that.”

“Do you?”

“Do I?”

“Do you want in?”

“On the Pitch estate?” Simon’s so close, and looking right at him. “Fuck yeah.” He laughs, probably
at the velvety avarice in his own voice. “I'll take the sparkling personality too, though.” It sounds serious. It feels real. For once, Simon's lips aren't clamped into a hard line, his jaw doesn't jut in defiant angularity. “I don't care that you're rich, and I don't care that you're a vampire, and I don't care that you're taller than me and look better in a suit. I don't even care that you're a stuck-up asshole. I want you in all the ways, Baz.”

Richard Potter's magic brush.

But.

“Why are we always drunk?” Baz demands.

“We're not always,” Simon protests.

“Always when we're alone together and shit's getting real, we're always drunk.”

“Can you magic it away?” Simon swooshes his hands around a little, as if to demonstrate to Baz how magic works.

“No, I cannot 'magic away' drunkenness.”

“I could probably—“

“And I forbid you to try. You'll melt our ears or something.”

“F*ck you, I'm the best student you ever had.” Simon grins. “Except students aren't supposed to want to fuck you.” Gods alive.

“You're not unique in that,” Baz mutters, and Simon laughs tears into his eyes mocking Baz for his egotism. “Really,” Baz says, as close as he gets to plaintive. “I wish it were otherwise.”

“But point, you want to fuck me, I want to fuck you, so why the f*ck not?”

“Because—just as we were two minutes ago—we are drunk, Simon, and we have established that we sometimes act, when under the influence of alcohol, as we might not in—”

“Oh, hey!” Snapping his fingers, Simon digs into his jeans pockets, coming up with some crumpled dollars, a nickel, a bunch of loose almonds with skins rubbing off, and a sheet of standard college-rule binder paper, folded in quarters, which he holds out like it's a treasure map. “Almost forgot. This whole stupid drunk thing, I totally anticipated it, bro.”

“Unlikely.”

“Two steps ahead. Read it, you'll see.”

The paper turns out to be a note in Simon's startlingly upright hand. It reads thus:

*I'll only be brave enough to give this to you when I'm drunk, but a drunkard's words don't count for much. I am sober as Hell, and hell, Baz, I could try some fancy “ferocity of my feelings” bullshit, but the fact is, I just really fucking want you. All the time. (As this note, which I am writing across from you in the most dispiritingly undrunk of staff meetings while you and Sullivan trade some serious statue-face, will attest.) Do you know? You probably think I'm grading—yep, that look you just gave me was pure spite, you definitely think I'm ignoring our fearless Ms. Bunce in favor of reading papers, but I promise you I'm really not, if it weren't for Penny I'd still be licking my wounds in my grim cave, not one unimpeachably persuasive letter away from touching you everywhere—you can't
know I'm writing to you and thinking about you naked (which, btw, is an astounding sight). Can you?

If I didn't get so blushy and flustered, I'd be the one staring you down right now. I really would. How much do I have to provoke you to get you to grab me?

Dude. When you touch me it feels like all the bad things are burning away.

Let me in your bed, Baz. I'll make you glad you did.

Baz's whole head swims with the cramped little words. He can barely take them in in order, but he knows enough to fold the paper again in careful fourths, smoothing it flat, and rising, to tuck it into one of the crannies of his desk. The distance is good for him. It gives him a moment to realign himself after the heady disorientation of that letter.

“You can stay.” He catches the brusque edge of his voice in the air and tries again. “Please stay. But still no sex.”

Simon rolls his head in abject disgust at Baz's compunctions. As if yielding enormous concessions, he asks, “Then can we just make out drunk?”

Baz can think of no objection.

Simon is warm and clumsy and huge under his hands, like a football field crammed inside a soft cotton shirt. He holds Baz with a trepidation tempered by the dual, thumping hammers of cockiness and lust.

This close, Pablo Neruda, Simon's eyes are millions of blue threads interwoven into a tentative snare. His breath still smells like the clementines he ate hours ago; Baz remembers the soft pockmarked peel unfurling from Simon's fingers as he stripped it cleanly away.

Baz doesn't wait. He pulls Simon hard against him by the long, broad muscles of his back, and tries his goddamned best to scare him off.

*

Simon drags him to his bed pretty soon. He's so eager for Baz that he's just about collapsing, except it's not really collapsing if you're clinging like a rock-climber to the super-strong man whose tongue cannot seem to navigate the way back out of your mouth.

They grapple and tumble atop the bedspread in a mess of hands and hair and gaping buttons and the whispery taunt of the off-limits until, after some indeterminate span of bliss, Simon says, “Hey Baz?”

“What?” Baz asks from around the enticing curvature of Simon's thick left ear.

“Should fuck.”

Baz tries to sit up. This is difficult—not because Simon is spread above him, broad hands barring the sides of Baz's ribcage, and not even because, through several combined layers of clothing, Simon's groin and his have established an unmistakably shared vision of what's to come. In fact, it's only difficult to sit up because god damn it he's still drunk and the spinning in his head is a much-needed reminder that even if he's through some miracle in his bed with Simon Snow—and how is this even possible? Baz is literally pulling the coarse thatch of Simon's hair and he's gulping about it and whimpering fractured pleas for more; how is this the so-called life that Baz Pitch is now so-called living?—he doesn't get to claim every bit of him right this minute.
Simon seems to sense Baz's inner struggle, because he leaves off Baz's jaw to find his mouth again; one of his hands slips along the ribs to the waist, then breaches the band of Baz's trousers.

“It's fine,” Simon murmurs placatingly into his mouth. “We've talked it to death and back, bro, let's just fucking do it, it's not like we'll regret it.”

Baz is not too drunk for astonished disdain. Taking Simon's bare upper arms in hand like a weightlifter with dumbbells, he presses Simon to a full arm's-length above him so that he can dodge, for a moment, the intoxicating lull of Simon's muddled lips. “Do you even listen to yourself?”

It's not an easy victory, but the drunkenness is, in some regard, on Baz's side, and Simon's lust eventually loses the war with his clingy sleepiness. Baz drifts off then, in his bed with Simon, tangled and half-dressed, after Simon's dwindling series of thrusts and increasingly-sloppy kisses eventually fades into the soft breath of sleep.

*

Baz wakes up with his arms around Simon Snow, his hard cock against Snow's back, and a dreadful suspicion that—if his dreams were any indication—he's been grinding up on him for some time.

Simon rolls over in his arms. He is disheveled and reeks of last night’s whiskey and the grin on his smug, toothy mouth does not seem to indicate anything other than total satisfaction with his current state.

Baz just stares at him. This is what Keats meant, he thinks—irrationally, because of course it's not—about wild surmise. This is everything and anything.

Simon stares back. When he finally speaks, the words float like swaths of sunrise.

“*You're gonna fuck me today, Baz.*”

Baz tries not to react, but the overhanging words shake him till he shivers. “Do you have any idea …”

Simon mistakes him. “I think I have some,” he murmurs, shifting closer for a kiss.

“No,” Baz growls, quaking with the effort of restraint, “Do you seriously not know you just commanded me to fuck you?”

“Oh fuck.” Simon pulls back, looking truly horrified. “Oh fuck, no. I don't think I do this shit usually. Baz, seriously, I really don't. I think it's just … I just really really want you, you know. I guess I'm like, missing a valve; I mean—oh. Fuck.”

He must sense how hard Baz is pushing against the compulsion that Simon has issued; if Baz thought he was hard before, now he's aching iron, his whole body tensed to the point that things inside him might actually start to snap from the terrible work of not giving in.

“Fuck,” Simon says again, clouding over. “I mean, fuck, shit, sorry … *Backsies. What you do with your body is your business, Baz.*”

“Thank you,” Baz says sardonically, “for granting me sovereignty over my own person.” But it worked; his body is his again, and the self-control, combined with a renewed astonishment at the raw magical ability of Simon Snow—*how the hell does he imbue unique speech with magic?*—and, of course, all those other things about Simon Snow that are wrapped up with him in their boozy nest of sheets, brings him to say, “But yes. Let's.”
The look on Simon's distraught face beggars description.

It doesn't last long, though, because in essentially no time, he is flinging back the sheets and unbuckling Baz's belt. Baz cannot believe that he fell asleep in pants and a belt, but the internal head-shaking stills the moment Simon finds Baz's hard cock.

“I …” His mouth, for once not grinning but just open a little. “I … I just …” The lips, soft and curled, glide in a minuscule tour of the head, a tease that Baz feels like lightning in his nerves. Simon lifts his mouth from Baz's cock, looks up at him for a moment. His eyes are blue flares. “Baz,” he says, like it's reckless, and flings himself around Baz's length.

Baz is very sensitive, and Simon is very, very good at this. Baz could probably narrate every trace of Simon's clever tongue, every perfectly-timed suck and twist, every moment he thinks he must be harming Simon's throat and Simon just grunts and takes him deeper, but there's no way he'd be able to explain its combined effect. His mind sails over vast expanses—granite and shale, majestic and lonely and so beautiful that his gasps might sound almost like sobs.

He is actually a little relieved when Simon creeps back up his body before Baz is done—even if Simon's hand has taken the place of his mouth—and whispers in Baz's ear, “How do you want it?”

Baz has to close his eyes; this is too much and too good. He can't look at Simon at the same time.

“Any way, Simon. What you said: All the ways. You decide.”

“No, really,” Simon insists. “Like, at least, what?—you like top, right?”

“I do, but I do both. I enjoy both.”

Simon's hand twists tightly on an upstroke. “Bro, you do not get to fucking say 'enjoy' while I'm pumping your cock, okay?”

“Okay,” Baz concedes, thinking Bro, you do not get to call me ‘bro’ while you're... but Simon's know-it-all face is just begging to be punched, and somehow that thought—bloody, punched-up Simon leering through the bruises—means he suddenly needs to concentrate hard on control. “I like both ways. There are obviously a lot of politics involved, and—” Simon lets go. Baz's forlorn dick thrusts hopefully upward into nothing.

“Fucking politics? How is this even a point of discussion? I mean, what the fuck. It's fucking. Without all the politics in the way, Baz, it's a simple question: What do you like best?”

Lifting himself up on an elbow in a vain attempt to get some kind of handle on the situation—and trying not to let on that after one night with Simon, not touching him feels like dangling ropeless from a precipice—Baz admits that, well, yes, if he really must choose, he prefers being on top.

“Although again,” he adds, “I'm very happy to …”

“We get it,” Simon snaps, “you're very open-minded. Now lie the fuck down so I can stick it in you.”

And Baz does, confused but ready for whatever, and Simon says, “You're not even going to ask?”

“Should I?”

“You really fucking should,” he says, his hand sliding electric between Baz's thighs. “Respect yourself, bro; I asked you what you wanted, and I'm doing the exact opposite.”
Baz quirs an eyebrow. “I imagine you have a reason.”

“You imagine,” Simon imitates. Simon's fingers become light—so light he can barely even feel them till one whispers against Baz's balls and oh god, he needs that again but so much firmer please, just let him feel that again and again, sparking down his legs to the soles of his feet, and Baz whines and yes, a large part of it is the agony of incomplete pleasure, but also it's that Simon actually gives a shit about Baz's dignity. Honestly, now? Here? When Simon's literally got him in the palm of his hand, when he must know he's got total control, this is when he demands that Baz respect himself?

That's what rips Baz apart. That's why when he finally manages to say, “WHY?” it comes out so much louder and fussier than he'd meant.

Simon chuckles, but thank Dickens, the laugh unstops his hands and he's everywhere between Baz's legs, firm and sure. “It's always awkward the first time. So you're gonna wait to fuck me until we've fucked enough to know each other's bodies. Your first time in me is going to be fucking perfect.”

Baz is whining harder now, because Simon's sturdy fingers are sliding wetly into him, and honestly, he really truly meant it about being sexually flexible, he has zero objection to taking it up the ass, and this pressure is incredible.

“You mad, bro?” Simon whispers, and gods of our fathers, this is the world's worst sex talk, Baz would sneer so incredulously that he'd strain his nose except that all his features seem to be marionettes under the direct control of Simon's spreading fingers. Jesus fuck.

“I…” Baz pants. “I knew you had a reason.”

It's not till Simon—appropriately sheathed and lubricated—pushes slowly into him, that Baz feels for the first time that Simon is trembling. In fact, he's biting his lip and trembling, looking Baz full in the eyes as he enters him, and Baz sees how hard Simon's holding back for him.

“I'm ready,” he says.

“It's not that,” Simon grunts, sweat standing amid the curls that cling to his temples. “Fuck, Baz, I just, I just want you so …” Intermixed with the hot, wild smells of his body, there's a rougher, wilder smell, one that pierces the air and Baz's thoughts and makes him feel Simon's want like a thorn of pleasure in his own viscera.

“Control yourself,” Baz grunts back, because magical Wanting Simon is a loose cannon and right now, for once, Baz really is just trying to get fucked.

Simon does.

He seems to, at least. As he rocks into Baz with increasing depth and urgency, the scent subsides; his hands are everywhere, scratching and caressing in response to Baz's own.

He is as ready as Baz was—more so, even—and it can't have been long yet when Simon's breathing shreds apart and if he was beautiful above Baz before, now he's a vision, glowing bronze and golden against the matte morning white of the ceiling.

His fingers, longer and stronger than Baz would have guessed, grip into the tight hollows of the muscles that stand out in Baz's upper arms, and when they squeeze so that Simon's thumb presses in almost to the bone, Baz lifts one of his own arms into an L so the forearm elevates Simon's enormous chest, takes himself in hand with the other, and growls.

At the noise, Simon can't hold back any longer.
He comes spectacularly, face anguished like he's being torn limb from limb and just shouting, “Oh, fuck, bro, fuck, Baz, fuck!” and it's no time before Baz is there, too, but Simon is just starting to grow limp and Baz comes clenched hard around Simon's softening dick and is whining a little as he comes because he wants to feel more of Simon everywhere, but Simon has already pulled out a little so that he can hold the condom in place.

Still, he's in enough that Baz can feel him, soft though he is, and punish that dick for coming too soon by riding out another wave of spasms tight around it.

Sprawled enormous across his bed after, Baz is a little sad, but mostly not, because he's just come around Simon Snow and everything is amazing, even if Simon has departed the bed to clean up.

He's back before Baz can thoroughly relive it all for even the first of the dozens of times he plans to do so before he lets Simon's face ease out of his mind.

Simon assumes he's welcome back in bed. If Baz hadn't spent a life holding his cards close to his chest, it would be hard not to beam at this. Throwing the clumped covers aside, Simon thuds back down. Baz has a very nice mattress. Making it thud requires bulk and effort.

“Important question,” Baz begins, once Simon's stretched beside him again. Simon looks away from the teasing voice, his shoulders going stiff, and Baz's fingers itch to feel those long muscles again, to see the relief, and disbelief, on Simon's face when he levered his fingertips into the hard knots of Simon's neck.

“I'm always really sensitive,” Simon says belligerently, “the first few times …”

Baz laughs, and then tries to unlaugh, which is of course impossible, and instead rolls his eyes, flopping a long arm into the pillows so the hand drapes against Simon's forehead. “I have no concerns on that front,” Baz says dryly, his deep voice surprisingly composed. “Question, though: Now that we've been intimate with one another, will you please stop calling me 'bro’?”

Instantly haughty again, Simon rotates his head into Baz's hand. “You couldn't get enough a minute ago, bro.”

Baz lowers his hand casually to Simon's neck, pretends to clench it around the taut cords of muscle, pretends not to notice the involuntary, resonant grunt this pulls from Simon's throat.

With surprising alacrity, perhaps to cover for that sound, Simon agrees. “Okay! Fine. No more bros.”

They shake on it, looking in each other's eyes, into sex-blind eyes still readjusting from the celestial spheres, and Baz says, “All right, I've done what I came here to do.”

He hops abruptly out of bed as if to leave, but as it's obviously his own bed, the joke fails. Simon laughs anyway and draws him back down.

“Kiss me, br—“ Baz glares in warning. “Baz!” Simon squeals, as Baz flings himself across Simon's body. “Baz!” He's not squealing anymore. “Kiss me!”

* 

They stay in bed for quite some time.

Eventually, with Simon's hands idly massaging Baz's pecs, forearms—and Baz's hands lower down, working over the tight muscles of Simon's lower back and glutes—Simon asks, “Did I mention you're going to fuck me today?”
“I thought you wanted to wait …”

“I till we’ve fucked a bunch?”

Baz nods, otherwise inert from pleasure.

“Yeah, I’m standing by that.” And oh shit, does this mean Simon’s not leaving? That he thinks they’re going to spend the entire day in bed? Because this idea holds deep and immediate appeal. Simon’s swagger breaks for a moment: “I mean, you don’t have, like, things to do, do you?”

But it’s Saturday, and Baz does have things to do.

When Simon heads to the shower, Baz steals a few moments to write in his journal because of the sex, good god.

“What's next?” Simon asks, bursting wet-haired and tousled from the bathroom.

“Errands,” Baz offers as humorlessly as he can manage. Take it or leave it.

“No fucking way, man,” Simon says, and a little fizz of disappointment settles in Baz’s throat until Simon chucks the towel at him and says, “Not without breakfast.”

*

Despite its proximity to his apartment, Lola’s Cafe has never warranted a second look from Baz. It’s the kind of too-popular brunch spot that’s always obscured from view by gaggles of coffee-sipping twenty-somethings in tight jeans and plaid waiting for their chance to buy, Baz assumes, overpriced frittatas and benedicts and beignets.

Simon shrugs ahead through the crowd, leaving Baz on the outskirts of the sneaker-clad crush, then reappears moments later with two mugs of excellent coffee (Baz’s with plenty of milk). “About an hour,” he chirps, as if this is a normal amount of time to wait for eggs.

The sun lifts high in a brilliantly blue sky—the day’s warm enough already that Snow’s unzipped his hoodie, and the light catches in the messy waves of his hair as they lean together like unhurried assholes against the brick wall of the restaurant and don’t quite touch but don’t quite need to.

Time shifts in cross-sections: Simon’s name; a clattering door; a tiny corner table half hidden under condiments; the glorious abandon with which Simon throws himself at the blackberry jam; the hearty way Baz attacks his omelet and potatoes; Simon’s hand on the bill.

At the library, while Baz returns a small stack of books, Simon mentions that he hasn’t signed up for a card here yet, and proceeds to do so.

At the florist, Simon can’t stop ogling the larkspur. “Of course you like them,” Baz teases, buying a thick bunch in shades from cloud to sky to indigo. “You know, their other name's delphinium.” Simon has the good manners to blush. He knows moms love him.

Walking out with an armload of blooms, Simon almost trips over a small flock of dogs, whose leashes, it turns out, all lead back to Elspeth Canus.

“Mr. Snow!” she exclaims in delight, and would, no doubt, be doubly delighted to see Baz on his heels but that Baz, too clever for accidental run-ins, makes an about-face to take a brief but keen interest in the miniature succulents. When Simon’s finally had his fill of being sniffed and pawed and licked by the disparate horde of beasts, and when Elspeth whistles to call them along on their way,
Baz thanks the florist (again) and edges warily out to join Simon.

Simon winks. He hasn’t given them away.

And good Gulliver, that wink.

At the door to the butcher, Baz hesitates. He needs his blood, but Simon doesn't need to see this.

“Come on, dude,” Simon says, pushing through the door so that the bell jingles and Ralph looks up from the newspaper with welcome in his eye. “He'll have the usual,” Simon says. “And what's good for dinner?”

At home, in his kitchen, Baz debates whether Simon's sufficiently busy mangling that bouquet that he won't notice if Baz takes a few quick swigs from the pint container in his hand.

He is not in luck.

As Baz pries the lid surreptitiously loose, Simon tosses the scissors and hacked-up stems aside on the kitchen counter and leans in to watch.

Baz stops.

“Don't mind me,” Simon leers.

No one watches this. “Perhaps you should step out.”

“Hey man,” Simon says plaintively. “You can lemme see. It's not like I don't know, you know?” His face has grown startlingly serious; there's a hunger there, under the smooth pink skin, a need Baz doesn't tend to associate with him.

“It's vile,” Baz says. It's not for you.

“I don't care.”

Simon steps closer—close enough to peel the lid off the container, close enough to watch the insubordinate fangs slip free of their housing, close enough to watch the life surge through Baz's ashen cheeks as the gulped sustenance (gods, he is so weak) courses through the lonely pathways in his flesh.

“Fuck,” Simon breathes. “Fuck, Baz, you should see your face...” and inexplicably, he falls to his knees on the hard tiles of the kitchen floor. “Fuck,” he scrabbles at the buckle of Baz's leather belt. “Who else, Baz? Who else gets to see?”

No one, Baz thinks, but it's hard to speak because he's too consumed with consuming the blood of dead animals while his mutinous cock springs free of his trousers and toward the open-mouthed, wide-eyed, impassioned face of Simon Snow, who apparently thinks this whole goddamn thing is sexy. This will not do. Blood is disgusting and Baz is 100% uninterested in forging any mental bridges between it and sex.

“Out,” he orders. It's possible that the hardness of his cock to some degree lessens the hardness of the command, but Simon reluctantly obeys.

* 

Baz does submit to a mind-clearing bj immediately after he's done.
“You gonna leave me hanging?” Simon inquires impishly from the living-room floor where he’s still kneeling; Baz is clinging to one of Simon's shoulders, the thin t-shirt bunchy under his grip, and leaning back, the two of them a balanced sculpture: *Vampire, Spent*.

When he collapses on the couch, Baz is not too done to pull Simon back on top of him.

It's their second full-on fuck.

The third comes after dinner; Baz is fixing drinks at the kitchen counter when Simon, who is ostensibly making hot fudge sauce on the stove out of common household ingredients, suddenly is no longer cooking at all but pressed against Baz's back, a hand sliding down the front of his close-fitting weekend jeans, and the drinks and sauce can wait—this one's going to need a bed.

Around 11:30 or so, they are still there—maybe *still* isn't quite the right word, since Simon's retrieved their drinks, the ice mostly melted, as well as huge gloppy bowls of ice cream under steaming fudge sauce, which are certainly not something that's ever been allowed in this bed before—companionably bumping shins under the covers and watching with scientific curiosity what happens when Simon, who is a little fizzy with happy magic, blathers miscellanea without checking himself.

“Whatever” makes for a dazzlingly disdainful array of whirligigs, “Sweet!” an ebullient soda-bubble giddiness in the air; “See if I care” is a spectacular mess.

Baz fishes for his pen in the pocket of his cast-off shirt. “As you were,” he orders, and the spilled bowls right themselves and reclaim their diaspora of chocolate and melted cream.

“Did Delphinia show you this?” he asks. He can't do it with a whisper and a tap of a finger like his stepmom can, but a quick zig of the pen and the words “Show and tell” conjure an image in the air just before where they sit propped up by the pillows (too many damn pillows, he would usually argue, but not right now) and clarify it into a moment, pearly-grey and fluid, that they both remember.

Simon sputters, “Oh, shit,” and then they just watch as he, in Baz's memory, wrestles naked with Ollie in the Pitches' pool, huddles into himself after in the spa, lies helplessly beautiful and needy and demanding in the drunken aftermath of that day, ordering Baz to kiss him, bro, for real.

“Oh shit,” Simon says again, and Baz can't tell whether he's ashamed or excited or impressed, but deciding it's a little bit of all of the above, he chooses this moment to point something out.

“You said I'm going to *fuck you* today, right?”

Simon cannot deny it.

“We've got about ten minutes left.”

“Fucking clock dictatorship,” Simon mutters.

“We can count it as twenty-four hours from when you—“

“Nah, what are we waiting for? I've been ready.”

Baz throws him a quizzical glance; he certainly hopes Simon hasn't been otherwise involved while eating dessert in his bed.

“There's this other thing I can do,” Simon shrugs. “It's pretty cool.”
Bowls and undeniably sticky sheets flung aside, Baz lets Simon yank him across the bed.

“You ready for this?” Under him, Simon’s grinning and firm and broad and angling his body upward, shifting till Baz feels the wet welcome heat of Simon on his cock.

(It is truly a blessing how quickly magic gets you into a condom.)

“I am,” Baz says, and into that open eager face, he’s unsure whether to smile or sneer. He settles for a look he hopes is smoldering—set-jawed and stern, lips twitching open as if in vague amazement.

There’s something mischievous and bright in Simon’s face that makes Baz’s heart feel tight. “You thought I was good on top?” Simon asks smugly. “You have no fucking idea what you’re in for, dude. I will give you everything.”

Seconds later, Simon’s preposterously strong arms have dragged him in—in, all the way in—and any control Baz had over his face is gone.

Baz doesn’t tend to say much during sex. Why would he? It's all so inane—blustered swearing and bitten-off praise and lewd observations that would shame to see the light of day. He doesn't say much now. Neither does he need to; it's all in his face. His every small nerve tingles under not just his linkage to Simon, but his closeness, at so many memories of Simon distant and then all the ways they’ve been together in this day, at the knowledge that this one day will be one of so many days.

There’s no narrative, just what feels like an eternity on the mouth of an abyss, teetering together in thrusting ecstasy and something that's not totally unlike terror at their nearness to the edge. He can’t tell if they're supposed to keep each other up or plummet in; all he knows is whatever happens, they do it together.

At the end, Simon, is arching below him, muscles rigid under Baz's hands, and it's like he's straining to say something, but for one of the only times ever, words seem to be eluding him.

Baz's chest is full to aching with the exertion of holding back, holding on in the face of the exquisite torture that is Simon Snow’s face contorted with sex—and has he really only seen this a handful of times? it's already as familiar as a mirror, and as unexpected; could he ever tire of it?—and he asks, rough as hell, “What can I do for you?” because this is everything. Baz might start to actually cry if they fuck much longer, it is so good. It's so good it's edging into fantasy, and that is not okay: this has to be the realest thing he's ever done.

In fact, he might cry anyway.

It's not impossible, he realizes, eyes ransacking Simon's face for a response, that they're both crying a little bit right now. This is novel.

Simon's grunting and his jaw is working as if it's trying to shape words but only finding emptiness, and Baz tries again. “What do you want?” he rasps. “Is there something I can do for you?”

Head curving back and sideways, Simon chokes out, “I … I …” and seems ready to shake his head in frustration except that he can’t because every one of Baz’s slow thrusts in and out of him undulates through Simon like a wave. Baz feels a little pity; he thinks, I know exactly how you feel, but then realizes he doesn’t; he's never felt it as much as Simon's feeling right now, never when it was someone else in him—but he does know the strength of Simon's feelings because it's exactly what he's feeling too, right this moment.

“Or,” Baz hazards, scrambling for the go-ahead, “do you just want me to fuck you?”
This seems to be the right thing to say, because when he hears it, Simon lets out a sound that's almost a howl. He throws his head back in obvious relief, blocky jaw jutting up from the thick, straining neck, and moans, “Yes. Yes, please, Baz, fuck me, fuck me, yes.”

And Baz fucks him so hard—so hard that he'd be afraid if Simon was a smaller man, or less strong himself, or if he weren't moaning throughout, “Yes, yes, like that, yes.”

One of Simon's hands kneads into the hard flesh of Baz's ass with every movement—the dull fingernails provide a prickling resistance each time Baz pulls away; his eyes flicker bluely open and closed, like he can't quite look at Baz but can't stop wanting to either; his other hand seems to be on his own cock now.

He's trembling again.

“Baz. I can't not … I want you to know …” Thin lines of sweat stream over the planes of his chest, and Baz recognizes the needle-sharp smell—lavender and mustard-seed and pine sap—of the magic Simon can't hold back. “Fuck it,” he says, and Baz is learning to see the way Simon's jaw muscles clamp when he speaks with magic. “Feel this.”

In radioactive fusillades of feeling, Baz does.

He and Dev used to do something like this, he reflects in the milliseconds before he realizes that, compared to the mighty forests of feeling they once shared, this is an entire goddamned sunlit continental landmass. He feels his thrusts doubled, in him and in Simon; he feels the familiar strain of Simon's hand except on Simon's cock, coaxing it back from the edge, and he feels Simon's absolute unfettered eclipsing joy—a swelling in his heart and limbs and throat, a giving-up, and taking-in.

It's a kind of joy, Baz is pretty sure, that you can only feel if you've spent enough time being gnawed by the specter of eternal emptiness. Baz knows. He knows the hopelessness, and he knows the glory. He knows Simon and Simon knows him.

The moment Simon starts to let go, everything else disappears for Baz. It's like he's in a tunnel, an echo chamber, a tomb—a tomb? some part of his brain chastises, that is just weird, Baz; but who cares if it's weird, he's weird—a tingling, half-human mass of explosive sensation, apart from everyone and everything else, just him and his body (thank every holy thing for this body, this body that who knew could feel so much? this ridiculous chunk of meat and bone that is him) and, of course, the riotous, stunning, and unfathomably real man unfolding below him.

If forced to diagram his ensuing ejaculation, Baz would have to insist that it originated in every part of him, fingertips, toes, the soft backs of the knees, his tongue pressed against his yearning canine teeth (which are somehow still behaving, and he suddenly isn't sure he actually wants them to because he wants to be whole in this moment, but that smarter part of him says too much, and the tongue and the teeth rein each other in), and that while the DNA may be stymied by the condom, all the rest of it—the energy, the life force, the sense of deep and permanent meaning in this world—transfer directly into the roaring torrent of Simon Snow.

It’s incredible and terrifying—a power beyond his control.

Simon's feelings are pulling away from him, now, but he knows Simon feels this.

He sees it when Simon watches him come, in the open horror of an ecstasy too great to believe, the face you imagine of a saint being burned, of anguish and welcome and infinite wonder.

They hold there for a long moment before Baz's overheated mind has cooled enough for him to pull
carefully out, clean up cursorily, and tumble back across the bed, letting his loose arm pin Simon's chest. Simon doesn't say anything for quite some time; he lies still, wide eyes fixed on the ceiling.

Baz is finally thinking of checking in, maybe with Are you okay?—too casual but also the right words, because he knows that was too intense, that he went too far, Simon had to offload some feelings just to get through, and here Simon's not saying anything still—and Baz opens his mouth to speak right as Simon rolls his head on the pillow so they're face to face.

“Fuck, Baz,” he says, and yes, fuck, his face, he really has been crying, oh shit, what has Baz done to him? and can he ever regain that trust? and even if he can, will Baz wither to soot if he never comes like that again? “Fuck,” Simon repeats, shaking his head. “I want to always do that.”

What does Baz care if his own laugh comes out more like a strangled sob?

“You liked me on top?” Baz asks cautiously, because this sounds promising, but he doesn't want to make any assumptions.

Simon's still shaking his head. “I have never had sex like that in my life, Baz. I don't want to fuck you any other way. I don't want to ever be doing anything else.”

Baz drags himself across the sheets to Simon's lips. He looks for a moment, very close, at this man who wants so much of who he is. You need to be careful, his mental voice tells him in a tender frenzy of responsibility, This is precious. Simon's eyes are piercing and bright, his upturned nose insistent against Baz's cheek. Protect him.

Simon's tongue darts out, like that day months ago, and tags a delicate point at the center of Baz's closed lips, but this time, Baz pounces. Once they start to kiss, he forgets caution.

* * *

Well, he doesn't entirely forget. There is no biting. Not from Baz, at least.

But Simon sees every part of him, the physical parts and the metaphysical and metaphorical and dreamy parts—as best Baz can tell—and despite Baz's really admirable efforts, the only things he writes down this weekend are a few snatched moments squirreled away in his journal; his students will definitely not be getting their graded essays back on Monday.

* * *

On Monday, Magee calls an emergency staff meeting during lunch, which is technically a contract violation, but see if Magee gives a hoot about contract violations (except when they're someone else's). Striding in from a hard-faced lecture to a twelfth-grade plagiarist, Baz arrives right when Magee's getting started and settles himself in the second row of seats. Simon, whom he hasn't seen yet today, is several rows back with his freshman English corps.

“You've all heard the threats,” Magee begins.

“What threats?” yells Fetherhew, because she is foolhardy and young and also probably planning to quit after she finishes this second year of ACT.

Magee's eyes narrow. “The vampire threats.” This is clearly supposed to sound ominous, but in Magee's blustery voice, it comes off as laughable. “I assume you all watch the news.” (Seriously? Baz thinks. We are goddamn teachers, Magee, maybe assume we read. Magee's life becomes, tragically, more vivid in Baz's mind: a too-big TV crammed with blown-out talking heads on royal blue, the never-ending monotony of “This just in!”) “So you've heard the Watford vampires are on
the prowl." Baz rethinks his criticism; clearly every cliched speck of Magee's paltry vampire education comes from sensationalist infotainment programs. With admirable restraint, Baz resists the urge to glance at Simon, who is almost certainly smirking at him. “They hate us and they want our blood. They’re in packs now. They’re not converting people anymore; they're killing them.”

Baz is both relieved and perturbed to note that no one seems particularly shocked by Magee's revelations. Obviously, he'd rather not see anti-vampire hysteria at his place of business, but it seems remiss to gloss over what has been a marked uptick in attacks lately.

Baz remembers, too clearly, how helpless Calvin had looked in the vampire's grasp.

“Well,” Magee goes on, harrumphing, after a dramatic pause in which there are exactly zero gasps, “I called this meeting because I was attacked this weekend. By a whole herd of vampires. Obviously, I wasn't bitten, but only because I was prepared”—Magee triumphantly displays a little silver anti-vampire multitool of the sort they sell in airline-shopping catalogs, likely containing garlic spray and holy water and engraved with the cross and the evil eye. Behind the implacable mask he wears in staff meetings, Baz sprains his eyes rolling them, because sure, he's not a very good vampire, but as far as he can tell, that shit is worthless and the only reason Magee didn't get eaten is that Magee is AB and ain't nobody want AB. (He's read a little about this in vampire forums in the past, wondering why some people smell more delicious. It's body chemistry, yes, but now that he knows what to look for, Baz can recognize blood type by scent, too. Simon, obviously some sort of type O, always smells exquisite.) “I scared them off, but they're coming back, they said. They're coming to Watford High. And they told me they have someone on the inside.”

*What does that even mean?* Baz wonders, but Magee continues.

“There's a vampire here,” Magee says, rubber-eyed stare pinging around the room. “Here.” Another, more dramatic, pause. "At Watford High. Among us.”

From a few rows back, Ms. Fetherhew snickers. It's the stifled, squelchy sound of a laugh someone's totally failed to suppress, and for perhaps the first time, Baz is truly grateful for the existence of Carys Fetherhew. Nervous little chuckles answer from around the room.

“I, for one, do not understand what could possibly be funny about this.” Magee looks ready to stomp a foot. “The school is at risk. The students are at risk. *We* are at risk. That's why, effective immediately, we are going to Code Orange.”

“We don't have fascist terror codes!” Tejo yells from the back of the room.

“We do now, Mr. Tejo.” Magee hastily unfurls a sign that's been rolled up on the floor; it immediately curls back up. “Code Orange. No extracurriculars, no sports, no dances, not until further notice.”

“But what about prom?” Elspeth calls out.

“What about prom, Magee?” parrots Fetherhew. “What about *prom*?” Any gratitude Baz felt for Fetherhew vanishes when she catches sight of him craning round toward her—actually toward Simon, who happens to be raking fingers through his hair in a particularly distracting way—and careens the spotlight over to him. “Mr. Pitch has been dressing for it all week! Don't break his heart!”

Baz has no problem being the center of attention, but he's accustomed to setting the terms. His colleagues are all laughing—not at him, he knows, but at Magee and the situation, and, he can only hope, in appreciation of the line of his slim black suit, which today happens to top an uncharacteristically flashy shirt in a blue that borders on turquoise—and he isn't sure how to play it.
As has so often happened in reverse, Baz now finds himself glancing surreptitiously at Simon in hope of guidance.

Simon's face is a smirky beacon in a storm. He shrugs a little—did he really wear that hoodie to work today? Has he seriously no sense of the dignity of his role?—and mouths something. *Fuck it.* And he winks, which is a bold move in this packed room, but everyone's eyes are on Baz, not him, so no one else gets to see the way his whole face stretches to force that odd little wink through.

So Baz rises to his feet, fastening the button on his jacket and straightening the knot in his tie. The chuckles turn to whistles and catcalls. A particularly wolfish whistle from Mr. Ahmed earns a little provocative nod in that direction, which spurs more nonsense. *Harassment,* his brain supplies, but in this case, it feels more like an inside joke. “Prom, then?” he inquires mildly, open hand a mocking emissary extended toward Magee. (Baz has never actually asked a person to prom. For all the pomp of his social circle, he has never cared for the formal milestones of high school. At least it's better than graduation.)

“Vampire!” Magee snaps through the madding crowd, and Baz is so startled that his teeth almost prove the point. “I have no idea how I can make this more clear. There is a *vampire* in our *school* and it's going to get us all.”

Mr. Huynh's gaze, from Baz to Simon and back again, is sharp enough to sever ropes.

“Sit down, Mr. Pitch,” Magee orders, and Baz just about collapses from relief. Behind him, Fetherhew whines in exaggerated disappointment. “Ms. Fetherhew, we are not holding a Prom of Death. Not until we have found our vampire and brought it to justice. Understood?”

Fetherhew's eyes sparkle. “So, let me get this straight: Once we get the vampire, we get to hold a Prom of Death?”

Magee's face is shifting from its usual expression of arrogant anger to borderline apoplexy. “Need I remind you—”

Bunce has been waiting politely, but she breaks in now, loudly cutting off Magee's burgeoning rant. “Question: We haven't added any staff since October. If there is indeed a vampire in our ranks, why do you think they'd just now be getting around to attacking people?”

“Do you expect me to have insight into the vampire psyche, Ms. Bunce? Feel free to psychoanalyze the vampires' motivations on your own time, but for now, allow us to return to the vital work of securing our illustrious school against the vampire hordes.”

Bunce clearly knows there's nothing more she can say. She crosses her arms resignedly across her chest; beside her, Ms. Sullivan's on her phone, probably playing one of those idiotic gem games, and for once Baz actually envies her ability to not give a shit.

*  

“Mr. Pitch!” a voice calls behind him right at the moment he's finally pushing open the goddamn theater doors to escape this charade of a vampire-hunt. Feet pad hurriedly toward him.

If he could pretend not to have heard, he would, but Baz is a shoddy pretender. He turns slowly. If this is an accusation, or an insinuation, or even just another *Blade* joke, so help him, he may just commit his largest-ever breach of magical code and fling a few invisible fireballs at the smoke detectors so he can make a break for it under the sprinklers. The prospect of wet Magee like a drowned mouse, at least, is rather sweet. “Yes?” he inquires coldly, and finds himself inches from the
flushed face of Simon Snow.

Oh.

It is a good thing that Baz has such a talent for masks.

“You… You look like you're going,” Simon says, gesturing toward Baz's bags. “But, sorry, but can we talk for a minute? About that peer-revision strategy you used the other day?”

Baz is temporarily confused by Simon's awkwardness, and then realizes it's a performance for the gaggle of colleagues who surge around them out of the theater, who believe them to be on (at best) shaky standing. Simon's a credible actor, Baz acknowledges with an internal nod. He, on the other hand, is not, and attempts to imagine how he'd react were his viscera not coiling boa-tight in anticipation at the thought of time alone with Simon.

He sighs, just a little. “Five minutes,” he says, aiming for the put-upon attitude between standoffish and professionally tolerant.

“Awesome!” Simon beams, too big, almost fake—will onlookers see it as menace?—and just about drags him down the long halls to his classroom.

There's no way he's staying this close to Simon once they get into the classroom. For one thing, it's their workplace. Moreover, it's certain that at least one or two colleagues will walk past, and likely sneak a peek through the narrow windows to the hallway that flank each classroom door. Third (and perhaps this should be first, Baz considers, as rationality seems a safeish haven in this moment), his every inch itches to be touching Simon's stubbly jaw, unzipping that decrepit hoodie, manhandling the man inside, and this is definitely not appropriate.

Baz leans against a student desk and folds his arms across his chest: a shield. Ideally, prying eyes will note the barred posture, the bookbags still hanging heavy from his shoulder, the dismissive tilt of his head, and assume that Mr. Pitch and Mr. Snow are still at loggerheads.

“Well, Mr. Snow?” Baz asks Simon, who has locked the classroom door and is now perched on his own teacher's desk. The words are abrupt, but he trusts Simon to hear the warmth in his tone.

“I just realized, in the meeting, I had to ask you something.”

Baz waits. Simon twitches a little, his face contorting in ways that Ms. Powell, who is glancing in with unchecked curiosity, will probably read as anger. Baz attempts to wave her off.

“It's like, well, if I was, like, at a bar, say, and some hot guy was macking on me,” (Baz does not attempt to hide his revulsion at this turn of phrase), “and I, like, went out back with him, if you know what I mean…”

Baz rolls his eyes. Through the hallway window, Powell flashes him a questioning thumbs-up. He waves her off again, but his attention is divided. Vivid images of Simon and other men—burly, athletic men with recruitment-poster muscles and intentionally ill-fitting jeans—assail his mind. Simon with his hand down another man's pants. The man's beery mouth on Simon's lips. On his cock. Simon in ecstasy, choking out another man's name.

A small muscle in his cheek tightens.

“Like, dude, I guess what I'm asking is, would you be cool with that?”

Baz is so far from cool with this. He is a Pitch, and if he were to actually see any of the dozens of
horrific scenes he just imagined, with his storm-scud Pitch eyes, fire would literally be shooting from his palms.

As it is, he feels like he's spontaneously combusting from within.

So this is how they end.

At least it will be over quick.

At least he hasn't told anyone.

At least this weekend was... everything it was. He can live on that for a while.

At least Simon didn't hit him with this months down the road. Or years.

*Months or years would have been a lot, though.*

"Baz?" Simon asks insistently, and it's a poker at his throat.

Pushing himself upright, Baz looks Simon level in his deceitful face, that face that let Baz believe, even if it was just for a few days, that he could actually be exactly what someone else wanted, and answers. "No."

He already has his bags. He turns toward the door—Powell's apparently gone now, *thank Austen*, but a small congregation of freshman math teachers have coincidentally chosen to pause their walk-and-talk directly outside Simon's room, and these all quickly avert their eyes when they see Baz striding toward the door. They can probably tell he's about to fling it open. They won't know, though, that the door's slam against the wall comes not from disdain but heartbreak. How has he been so ignorant? How has he allowed himself to think that he and Simon were...

"Good." Simon's voice is almost a roar. The doorknob gleams just beyond Baz's reach. He doesn't take it. Outside, the math teachers are frantically pretending to talk about some paper one of them's holding. "Cause I was thinking, in the meeting, when Ahmed kept whistling at you and you, like, tightened your tie at him, I thought I might puke. Not like I was grossed out, but like, like how sometimes everything's just so wrong that your body tries to reject every part of itself it can. I'm not..." he pauses and grabs a handful of his hair. It looks like a storm hit a wheatfield. "I'm not trying to assert any kind of rights over what you do, man, I get that it's too early for that, but—"

Baz notes with some astonishment that he has not collapsed in relief. He attributes it to his superior sense of balance. Vampires rarely stumble.

"As you have pointed out before, Mr. Snow," Baz says, "time is relative. You have no right over me, but you always have the right to state your own wishes."

Simon's harrowed hair gets another vigorous tug. When he talks, it's in a rush. "Fuck. Baz. I just want... just, like, as long as we're doing this, I don't want you with anyone else."

"Nor I you," Baz says, trying not to let any of the elation bubble out below his stoic mask where the snoops in the hall might see. Simon is less successful. Stumbling toward Baz, he looks like he's swallowing rainbows. "Then, may we consider this matter settled?"

His extended hand, too, is deceptively still and cold. Simon's, when they shake, radiates heat. Intentionally or not, Simon's pulling him in. Baz steps back resolutely.

"Will I see you tonight?" he asks.
“Tonight?” Simon asks, momentarily befuddled, then, “Fuck, yes! Yes. When?”

“After dinner, if you don't mind. I'm afraid I have work to complete, and I doubt I'll accomplish much in your presence.”

“Damn straight,” Simon grins.

On his way out the door, Baz is struck by sudden inspiration. Turning back, he catches Simon's eye, straightens his tie, and gives one curt, upward nod.

It's well worth it. Simon looks like he's been smacked across the face with a flatfish.

* * *

“Who was your last?” Simon asks a few nights later, his fingers playing silent, sleepy music on Baz's collarbone.

“Last?” Baz murmurs.

“Last fuck? Or I don't know, kiss? Whatever.”

“Isn't this risky territory?”

“It used to be,” Simon says, kissing below the hard terminating curve of Baz's jaw.

Baz grins. *Time is relative. Uncertain Monday was another era.* That was back before Simon was his. “My friend Agatha, actually. You'll meet her one of these days. She's dating Bunce now, if you can believe it, which is perfect. Agatha's one of those rare humans who make you feel the race isn't doomed.”

“Wait,” interjects Simon. “You don't mean Agatha Wellbelove?”

“You know her?” asks a surprised Baz.

“Oh, no, no. I was just at this charity thing for my old work back in, what, December maybe? And she gave a speech, and it did make me kind of weirdly hopeful about, you know, the fact that there's a future.”

“That's Agatha.”

“Wow, fuck. I was scared to even talk to her. She is fucking smart as shit, like so smart you don't even care that she's hot, and, like, wow—you were actually, like, with her?”

Baz contemplates how much to tell, and is glad that, as always in his interactions with Simon, frankness seems best. “We grew up together. We'd both had bad breakups, and some friends set us up. We tried, but even though it was very good, we weren't quite right. We each wanted more.”

Simon, unsurprisingly uninterested in the relationship postmortem, cuts to the chase: “Are you telling me Agatha Wellbelove has fucked you in this very bed?”

“I was not telling you anything of the kind,” Baz says sniffily, but he can't keep the front for long. “Although your supposition is not beyond the limits of possibility.”

Baz swallows down a mocking retort and instead lets himself wallow for a moment in the contrast between how he felt six months ago, entwined in Agatha's slender limbs, and now, crowded to the edge of his own bed by the sprawling bulk of Simon Snow. He'd felt so aimless, like a traveler walking a straight road with no turnoffs, on track only because that track was all there was. Being with Simon feels like veering off the road, parachuting into a canyon, and hacking a path through the rattlesnake-infested scrub. It's a series of risky decisions, and making them makes him feel like he could do anything.

“It's funny,” Simon muses beside him. “A guy I hooked up with last fall actually works at the same place as Agatha—what's it called? Wellbelove something.”

“Zhou,” Baz says reluctantly. In addition to the two he’s fucked in this very bed, he knows a lot of people who work at Wellbelove Zhou, and he really doesn't want to imagine any of them touching Simon—or imagine they're who Simon's been choosing to touch. Used to choose.

“That's right. He was kind of a smug asshole, but—“

“You thought he was a smug asshole?” There goes the brow.

“Well yeah, he was all over me all night, you know, one of those fundraisers, with this know-it-all you want me face, but once he got me alone, come on, he was really fucking hot, so I did.”

“Did…?”

“Wanted it.”

“A little shallow,” Baz hazards.

“Fuck you, like your entire opinion of me didn't change the first time you saw me naked.” It wasn't that, Baz thinks, but does not say. (It was the suit.) “But yeah, so, we got it on in some fancy hallway but I didn't go home with him. He was a little short for me, and kind of a dick.”

Baz is caught between a vague internal quibble that he should perhaps be disappointed by Simon’s continuing shallowness and exultation that the shallowness is, here, entirely on his (very tall) side.

“Fucking society asshole,” Simon says, “kept splashing his name around. I was actually going to go home with the guy, but when he handed over his valet ticket he made some dick comment to the valet about how ’we Zhous prize exceptional service,’ and I was like, fuck this, I'm not trying to crawl in anyone's pocket, later bro. But he was throwing a lot of money at the Foster Center, so I didn't say that, I pretended my mom was sick.”

“That's bad luck,” Baz says distantly, because 89% of his brain is circling sharklike around the unlikely core of this story, which, unless he is really missing the mark, is that Simon has made out with Dev Zhou. With his Dev. All the descriptors match: smug, smallish, ostentatious with his family name, and blisteringly hot.

Simon and Dev kissed—and sure, it was before he and Simon kissed, but still. Simon and Dev? Baz can't reconcile it. These worlds do not belong together.

“Not for me,” Simon says. “I mean, I'm pretty sure she's not getting deader.”

He didn't say kissed, though, did he? Whatever he said, it wasn't kissed, and it wasn't fucked, and if Baz really wants to know he can just ask, but Crowley's crumpets, this answer is not one he wants. Too bad you can't cast Never mind on yourself. Maybe someday he can ask Simon to wipe this memory away for him.
“So the society jerk was your last?” It's an attempt to change topic, but Baz immediately hates himself a lot for asking this, because Simon is already laughing.

“Nah, what am I, a monk? There were definitely a few other guys in winter, and like, sorry, but I fucked this one dude a bunch the last couple months because I was kind of fucked up about you.”

Baz feels the Monday tension assault him again. There is no used to after all. It's all now. Is he supposed to feel glad that Simon was so troubled by his feelings for Baz that he had to have a lot of sex with someone else?

“Did you call him bro?” Baz asks through clenched teeth, because clearly he is trying to annihilate himself.

“Yeah,” Simon grunts. He rolls over to kiss Baz, and the whole consequential substance of him leans into Baz's side. “But my heart wasn't in it.”

Chapter End Notes

For those keeping track, this chapter's where the story timeline and our own cross over. The bulk of this chapter takes place last weekend, particularly 3/18 and 3/19. For you late-night readers, the final scene is Thursday, 3/24! (Tonight! Right this very minute!)
Surprising all comers, the perennially mediocre English Department team comes mere points from winning the Spring Staff Basketball Challenge (this year, held at the downtown Y in circumvention of Magee's stupid no-extracurricular rule). Mr. Snow and Ms. Martinez are formidable partners; Baz and Mr. Tejo and Ms. Bunce are basically there to fill out the roster. Still, there is a lot of running and sweating for all involved.

The fans, of whom there are a considerable number, including a quite enthusiastic Agatha and the entire Watford High English department—even Sullivan, who is a porcelain portrait of contempt—favor Snow. On the court, Simon is in complete control. He hollers instructions, shoots three-pointers, sees your player breaking from thirty feet off, and high-fives at the slightest provocation.

His fatal mistake is assigning Baz, who refuses to exceed normal human speed, to guard Declan Huyhn, who's just back to full capacity after a sub-2:20 finish in LA, in the finals. With a capable defender, they might have actually won. As it is, Baz makes a few plausibly impressive blocks and limits the Social Studies Department to a slim victory. This is mostly for Simon's benefit, because only a cad could miss how fired-up Simon is about this, and also, Simon's wearing flimsy basketball garb that turns him into some kind of sports-page hero, which has really not ever been Baz's thing, but it is now.

They are both impatient with the post-game beers, when they're all wrapped up again against the chilly evening, legs knocking secretly under the table at the Arms, and the second they get back to Baz's place, they crowd together into the welcome steam of the shower.

Baz clutches Simon against him and feels the warmth return to his skin while he lets his lips tease at Simon's sturdy shoulders and chest.

"Fuck, I want you." Simon says to Baz, whose tongue is flicking over the tight, tiny bump of his nipple.

"Yes," Baz agrees, moving lower down Simon's torso.

"Not in the shower."

"Really?" Baz asks from the general vicinity of Simon's hard cock. "Isn't this the stuff of locker-room fantasies?"

Simon's eyebrows shoot up, but since his head's tilted back into the spray, his eyes stay squinched closed. "Maybe yours. Mine were more on the lines of, like, 'I admit I'm gay and they still let me back in the locker room.'"

Baz's chest contracts. Oh, Simon. He is not allowed to feel sorry for him, though; Simon has made that much clear.

Simon seems to sense Baz’s distress in the sudden pause of attentions to his midsection. His hard hands grip at Baz’s shoulders. “But, I mean, that’s not a treasured memory. I’m willing to entertain the possibility of better fantasies.”

Baz rights himself again, the better to murmur into Simon's ear, “Then I readily admit that I relish the thought of having you in a public shower. Impracticable, but alluring.”

“You know, at some point, we're gonna have to tell people.”
This (of course) wasn't at all what Baz meant, but it's true. “Yes.”

“Not yet, though, okay?”

“Fine.” He trusts Simon to know that it's a warm fine.

Simon wraps hot, wet arms around Baz, who is enjoying the way Simon shudders every time Baz's fingertips glance against his cock. “Let's get out of here.”

“We could stay in,” Baz says. “It's not a public shower, but it's a close second.”

Simon looks skeptically around the tiled shower stall. “Man, shower sex always seems like a good idea until you're doing it, but all that water—it gets real draggy.”

“Bro,” Baz says, because if Simon is going to persist in being so obtuse, he totally deserves it. “Magic.”

Recognition on Simon's face is like sun on water, splintering off at jagged and brilliant angles. “Right,” he says.

Baz could spell them himself, but he won't; he waits, hands idly admiring the body below them. Simon can probably just will it, he's so damn good. Baz loves seeing the way magic steams out of Simon.

“Ready?” Simon asks. Baz hadn't even realized that Simon already made it happen; the water's not bouncing off their skin anymore, but a millimeter above, as though they're packed in ultrafine bubble wrap; Baz feels the heat of the water, but not its impact or wetness.

“When you are,” Baz says, and Simon kisses him till he can't doubt Simon's readiness. Simon reluctantly drags his mouth from Baz to pivot away and slump grandly, human art in sprawl against the mosaic of the shower wall.

Baz caresses Simon’s broad, strong back, flanks, lower, teasing Simon a little bit with a few long fingers—fingers that just happened to become slick and wet the second they approached Simon's ass.

The magic on this guy. The steamy air pulses with it. Simon says it's stronger when he's around Baz, but maybe Baz just helps him channel it. It's like all Simon has to do is think a thing, and it happens. Baz always feels vaguely guilty for suggesting sex magic; using power like Simon’s to lube your hole is roughly equivalent to dispatching Air Force One to pick up takeout.

Still, this is just an observation. Baz—sinking upward into the sweet warmth of Simon's body—isn't complaining.

He dots kisses into the wet tangle of Simon's hair, onto the ear and the cheekbone, the back of his neck, sliding slowly at first as Simon takes him in, then harder and faster and, as Simon begs for it, harder and faster still.

They end in shouts, Simon pressed against the wall so hard he'll have marks from the tiles' edges, his head turned sideways so the water would be hitting him right in the face if it was hitting him, but it's not, and it's incredible to see the droplets bounce away from the invisible space in front of Simon's stubbornly brave, wide-open eye and streak away. Simon braces himself against the wall with one bent arm; the other flings itself backward to grab blindly for Baz's haunches and pull him closer while he thrusts them both through to gloriously cacophonous roars of completion.

(Baz, who almost always magically muffles sex noise, feels vaguely bad for the neighbors.
Fortunately, the walls of this PitchCo building are well insulated.)

After Simon's towed off, he saunters naked out of the bathroom to find something to wear. He'll probably dig through Baz's drawers for pajamas, Baz knows, and the idea pleases him no end. Simon Snow is brash as fuck. Everyone knows it; now Baz loves it.

Inspecting his face in the mirror, he decides he's due for a shave, which he has been enjoying much more since Ari gave him that black-man's shaving kit, but this reminds him of the hard smoothness of Simon's shoulder against his rough cheek a minute ago, the way Simon clamors to be overpowered, the way he loves…

From the living room, there's a weird thump, like a body hitting the floor, and then a shout: “BAZ!”

Simon's voice is panicked and muffled.

“What?” Baz's head is still fluffy and languid, so it takes a moment for Simon's tone to register.

“There's a woman in your apartment!”

Oh shit.

“Ari!” Baz yells, scrambling to dry himself. “Get out of here!”

He yanks on his pajama pants, strides into the living room just enough to see the whole scene with his own eyes—Simon, naked, flung flat in ridiculous cover behind the sofa, Ari by the door leaning expectantly on the handle of her narrow suitcase—and says to her, “Get out!”

Her face stretches oddly, and he feels a terrible pang around his heart. He is an abysmal brother. Hasn't he told her she's always welcome, that it's no trouble, that she doesn't need to plan ahead or call or even knock? And here she takes him at his word, like she always does and like he always wants her to, and it’s been months since he’s seen her, and he's being such an asshole.

He steps toward her, more calmly now. He glances from the ridiculous, muscular, unhideable mass of Simon to his refined, flight-weary sister, and he realizes the time to go public has arrived. He wants to make amends. Gods, don't let her cry.

He puts a hand on her shoulder. “Arachne Pitch,” he begins this time, contrite and controlled. “You are my sister and I love you…” and that's when he realizes she's not about to cry, she is barely holding back laughter, which suddenly explodes from her like when the pilot finally sparks and the invisible puddles of gas around a stubborn burner burst into an enormous fireball. She is shortling, cackling, guffawing. There are tears now, and she is beating a helpless hand against Baz's shoulder, leaning into him, and Baz just cannot for the life of him handle his sister's mirth right now. He takes a deep breath, squares her up by the shoulders, and finishes. “But you need to leave.”

She looks him in the eyes, as if daring herself to take him seriously, and manages to squeak out the word, “Forever?” before collapsing into giggles again.

“No,” Baz says, struggling for dignity. “Of course not. But, can you give us twenty minutes?”

“Sure,” she says, nodding with the same carefully-schooled show of seriousness you might offer a child who won't let you in his fort till he banishes the dragons. “I'll make it an even thirty.” She leaves her luggage but grabs her purse on the way out the door.

*
By the time she returns, they've pulled themselves and the apartment together. Simon offers to leave, but Baz forbids it.

“You are not leaving me alone to explain to my sister about the naked man.” Actually, he thinks, that would probably be much easier than whatever showdown's about to ensue, but Simon and Ari need to meet each other eventually. She'll get over not being told quicker if she gets to see them together.

But, together? No one sees them together. Together, thus far, is for them alone.

Baz hurries out of the humid bathroom, where he's been flinging towels back onto their bars, when Ari taps ostentatiously on the door. “May I enter?” she calls.

Simon opens it. “Hi,” he says, offering a hand. “I'm Simon.”

“Oh, I know you,” smirks Ari. “I've seen pictures.”

"Arachne Maralaine Pitch," Baz growls in warning from behind Simon.

“Sorry,” she says, feigning embarrassment. “I should have realized that might make it sound like Basil's jumping the gun showing you off, since you guys have probably only been sleeping with each other for, what?” she looks appraisingly between them, then back to Simon, “a month? But it wasn't like that at all. It was way back in fall when we were cyberstalking you to find out if you were a homophobe. Which,” she says, patting Simon on the shoulder (probably to ascertain to exactly what degree that flimsy t-shirt's playing down the deltoids, and obviously arriving at the appropriately impressive conclusion), “I'm guessing not?”

If Baz had hair, he'd be tearing it out.

But Simon just laughs and steps out of Ari's way. “Get you something to drink?”

Ari's dark eyes flash with glee at Simon playing host to her here in Baz's apartment, her stateside home.

“Red, thanks,” she says, dropping into the armchair, beside which Eustace is already lying in wait for a good head-scratching. “Crowley, I'm knackered.”

Once they're all comfortably set up with a glass of wine, Baz claims one end of the couch. He wonders, a little nervously, whether Simon will sit with him—is he ready for anyone else to see them touch each other? if no one sees, maybe nothing ever has to change—but Simon neatly dodges the issue by sprawling on the floor.

Ari's pulled down the Audre Lorde book from the mantel, which, Baz realizes with a wince, he last left propped open to “Coal,” and is rereading the poem smirkily while she sips her wine.

Scratching Eustace's back and making easy conversation, Simon's wearing one of Baz's looser pairs of pajama pants, cuffed once to keep from dragging. Flopped on the carpet like that, he looks like part of the room.

“Um.” Baz says in a lull. “How's Egon?”

She laughs. “Isn't that one of the dead kids from Game of Thrones? Eoin is grand.” There's a long pause. “I could start writing his name phonetically if that helps.”

“How hard is it to remember Owen?” Simon inquires, and Ari spells it for him and he cackles.
“Speaking of whom, I’d better ring him and then get to bed.” She rises unevenly from the chair, the jet-lag charms obviously losing the battle with her exhaustion. “If I have a bed to get to, that is. I assume you won’t be using the guest room, Simon.”

* 

“Hey, I was wondering,” Simon says at breakfast the next morning, with an angle in his smile that makes Baz's hackles rise, “just how long were you here last night before I came out?”

Ari, bundled in drapey charcoal handknits, takes a slow sip of her tea. “Long enough to know I’d better stick around.”

You monster, Baz thinks. He's in the habit of casting secrecy spells when he has sex, even when there's no one likely to hear, because he is a private sort of person. The only reason he didn't yesterday, was, well, the fact of Simon's magic coursing loose around them in the shower. He hadn't wanted to interfere. Let down my guard one damn time.

He wants to squirm.

“Cool,” Simon grins. “Baz was teaching me some new shit about magic.”

“You don't say.” Her voice is neutral, but below the surface, she's bubbling over with mocking laughter. Baz knows it. He's really hoping Simon does too.

“Overcoming my prejudices. A real inspiration, this guy. He's really helping me to loosen up, you know, to accept all kinds of new things. Like, I'll take whatever he—“

Baz elbows him hard in the ribs. “Take this,” he growls, handing over a plate of toast.

“Only if there's jam.”

Simon definitely knows by now: there's always jam.

* 

“Are you going to be here again tonight?”

“I don't know,” he says, tossing a questioning look at Baz. “Should I be?”

Rather stiffly, Baz says, “Of course, you're always welcome…”

“Sorry, Simon,” Ari cuts in. “I appear to have a chilling effect on Basil's affection. Do you realize you haven't even touched each other in my line of sight?”

Baz wants nothing more, right now, than to drag Simon into the safety of his arms and glower over him at Ari, whose skill at mockery really ought to have plateaued by this point but instead seems to grow more incisive by the year. If he does, though, she'll mock him as a pushover, or a sore loser. She'll still control the narrative. Baz shoves his hands in his pockets.

But Simon sees this, and shouldn't Baz have known he'd know this conversation for exactly what it is?

“We haven't?” Simon asks, sounding so incredulous that Baz almost buys it. “Well, fuck.” And he grabs Baz so suddenly, and with such force, that Baz lets Simon manhandle him even though Simon's wearing that terrible old red wool beanie and even though his sister's just a few feet away. Baz barely has time to register the thud in his stomach before Simon's kissing him, tonguing Baz's
lips apart and licking hotly into his mouth.

Baz doesn't think of sex as dirty, because it's not—sometimes it feels like the most satisfyingly wholesome thing he does—but this kiss is straight-up filthy. Moreover, it is of not inconsiderable durance. By the time Baz recovers the presence of mind to pull back a little, Simon's short of breath and has the glint in his eyes that usually means they're about to fuck.

*Not now, though, Baz counsels himself hurriedly, a little alarmed.*

“Is that what you meant?” Simon asks, a touch of concern gilding the preposterous innocence of the question. If Simon thinks a little up-close smooching is enough to throw his sister's composure, he has a lot to learn about Pitches. But still. That kiss saved him some teasing, at least, and honestly, when it comes down to it, this thing with Simon might be worth all the teasing the Pitch family can pile on.

Baz takes Simon's hand and eyeballs his sister. “Well?”

“That was it,” Ari says around a sparkling smile. “That was it exactly.”

* * *

“You didn't have to tell her about how we have sex,” Baz complains the night Ari’s gone back to London.

“Like, you mean, the thing about how you stick it to me?”

“Correct.”

“Well, you do. And it's really fucking hot. Plus, I figured she'd like to know.”

Ari's everpresent curiosity is obvious, but Baz is horrified to think that Simon's okay with it. “Why?”

“Cause she thinks people take advantage of you.”

Despite their provocative merits, Baz will not permit Simon’s insights to deter him. “Yet how is this alleviated by your regaling her with mental images of us copulating?”

“You're on top,” he says, like it's obvious. “It's power.”

Simon. “You realize you're just perpetuating despicable phallocentric stereotypes.”

“Sure.”

“And you realize that I'm no more in control of us than you are.”

“Fuck, really?” He mulls this for a bit. “Let's get our fucking shit straight, then, Baz. Point, though: I thought Ari might like the whole situation better if she knows my ass lives to serve your fat cock.”

“That phrasing is reprehensible.”

“You're reprehensible. Now come on, Baz, gimme some D. My ass has been at your beck and call all damned day.”

Baz has a powerful urge to tent his fingers like a movie villain. “You are trying the limits of my tolerance, Snow.”
“Fuck, that teacher voice gets me hot, Baz. If I try you farther, will you tie me to something?”

Baz hisses. “To what do you wish to be tied?”

“Do you think I fucking care?”

Baz is already unfastening his necktie. When he lashes Simon's wrists to the cold steel heating register in the floor near the front door, and sees Simon, eyes so wide they'd swallow him whole, seeing him see him in the full-length mirror there, and the gasp that Simon still makes every time the fangs erupt, he definitely wonders why this has not occurred to him before.

_Because it feels like crossing a line_, he thinks, watching and feeling from both sides as he slides into an emotionally and physically open Simon Snow. Without meaning to, he has a broad hand around the base of Simon's neck, but only now notes that Simon is straining against the bonds that hold him to the grate. “Is this okay?” Baz asks, but he doesn't need to. Simon blasts him with a wave of sensation, and Baz feels it all: the hunger, the fullness, the omnipresent need for more, the prickles of fear and the shuddering joy of giving in.

“Fuck you, Baz,” Simon groans, arching his neck into the spread of Baz's hard fingers, “you fucking know.”

* * *

“Hey,” Simon says some nights later, running a finger along the topographical lines of Baz's cheek and nose, “since you won’t let me call you ’bro’ anymore, how about ’bae’?”

Baz knows more than enough to know to say, “Absolutely not. You may call me Baz.”

“But it could be our special thing...” Simon wheedles.

“Simon, I may not have made it clear. No one else in the world calls me Baz. Only you.”

“Really?” Simon’s fingers pause in their traversal of Baz’s smooth jawbone. Baz loves moments like this, when Simon’s unguarded smile is exactly as enthusiastic as his hard-pumping heart.

Baz just lies there and lets Simon absorb this for what is, for Simon, a remarkably long time to stay still. When he finally moves again, it’s to kiss Baz, full and deep and slow, on the lips.

He lifts back up. “I just mean,” he says, his voice low with teasing, “it’d be a fucking great contrast to call you some cute shit when you look, well, you know, _like that_. You know,” he adds, “have you ever thought how you kind of look like ...”

Baz groans. He knows what's coming.

“Why the groan?” Simon asks. He must sense Baz's shift in posture—the mix of pride and defensive embarrassment—because he says, “Oh, right. I'll bet people always tell you you look like, mm, _Tyson Beckford_. Or maybe _Tyrese_?”

Baz rolls his eyes in confirmation.

“Why the groan?” Simon asks. He must sense Baz's shift in posture—the mix of pride and defensive embarrassment—because he says, “Oh, right. I'll bet people always tell you you look like, mm, _Tyson Beckford_. Or maybe _Tyrese_?”

Baz groans. He knows what's coming.

“They're idiots. Those guys are such bros.”

“You always used to call _me_ a bro,” Baz points out, “which means they must be super-bros. Bros squared.”

“No, I didn't call you a bro. I called you _bro_. A mark of familiarity, a way to be friendly. Like, we
know each other as well as brothers. But you're not *a* bro."

Baz quirks an eyebrow, but lets this stand.

"Then what were you **going** to say? Tell me, Simon Snow, which black entertainer *do* I most resemble?" There's no heat in his voice; he is actually curious, and waits demurely.

"You don't have an entertainer's face. You look like the lovechild of maybe, Lance Reddick? and ... well, he's not black, but like, **structurally**, Adrien Brody," Simon begins, and Baz is not able to hold off on laughing loudly in his face. "No, listen, you're like two impossibly thin and severe men had a baby," he pauses, "but that baby was also half-witch. Like, okay, like, Lance Reddick and Adrien Brody's nose had a three-way with a broomstick. Okay?"

Baz is laughing so hard that he's crying, but he nods. A tear slides back from the corner of his eye and rolls down his cheek to the pillow.

*

Baz is pretty sure he knows these guys, but the next day, he looks them up anyway, just in case. He is inordinately pleased with the results.

***

46 essays deep, Baz thoroughly regrets having limited his students to two possible *Hamlet* prompts this year, because he has reached the point where he despises both. Still, they are essays and he is a teacher, and these long late hours of unpaid labor are the backbone of his teaching, so, sighing at his unread queue, he opens another three essays in new tabs, pastes a blank rubric into each, pours yet another tall glass of wine to maintain the razor’s-edge balance of drunkenness and logic required for this slog, and starts reading.

He's a few formulaic paragraphs into Destiny Hurst's defense of reason in a world gone mad when *thank the gods*, the buzzer rings.

"It's me," Simon says into the intercom. "Can I come up?"

"Yes, of course," Baz says, trying and entirely failing to pretend he isn’t thrilled.

"If I come up, I'm staying," Simon warns.

"Then come up."

Baz isn't expecting Simon to stagger into his apartment, wearing soccer shorts and jersey below several layers of mud and gore, flinging a duffel bag to the mud-mat in the entryway. His astonishment must show, because Simon says, sheepishly, "Got a little banged up." He kicks off his ridiculous soccer sandals and hobbles further into the room, the intoxicating tang of his injuries a potent cloud preceding him, to ask a paralyzed Baz, "No kiss?"

"What can I get you?" Baz demands, keeping a safe distance. "Ice? Bandages? Can I wash you up?"

"No, I'm fine," Simon says. "I'll take a shower in a few, if that's cool. First, though, can I just collapse? For a minute?"

Baz unfurls a blanket hastily over the couch, less from his own compunctions than because he knows Simon will feel horribly guilty if he bleeds on Baz's furniture.
“You must know that this is… not easy for me,” Baz says, excessively formal because he's basically sitting on his hands to keep them off Simon's blood-stained soccer gear. “I don't want to make you move, but could I, maybe, help you out of those clothes?”

Simon laughs, eyes half-closed from his repose among the soft couch cushions. “If me being naked makes things easier for you, go right ahead.”

Simon must know that Baz's teeth are twitching as he tugs off Simon's grime-caked shin guards and socks. Clumps of dried mud and grass litter the blanket and floor, but all Baz can see are the crusts of blood from a long, angry sliding wound on Simon's left knee and thigh. When he comes to the rest of the clothes, he quickly realizes that there's little point in exercising caution on the garments' behalf—the shorts are tattered and the jersey has several obvious, bloodsoaked tears. It'll be gentler for Simon if he just rips these clothes to pieces, so he does, revealing so much more blood that Baz gags with desire and fumbles backward from the room.

He returns with a bowl of water, some washcloths, and a medical kit, and Simon is lying there in underpants and blood with his eyes closed, grimacing a little but also somehow smiling.

“Gonna fix me, Baz?”

“I…” Baz cannot look away from the luscious carnage of Simon’s body. He is just sober enough to know he’s too drunk to trust his limits. Definitely too drunk to try to fix anything with magic. “I’ve been drinking. Maybe you can…” He cuts off, because Simon can’t.

Simon says what they both know: “I’m shit at healing myself.” It’s true. Simon’s bright, omnipresent magic, so effective on others—he once fused Baz back together, layer by layer, from the femur to the surface, and the whole time the sensations of pain were secondary to the tingling thrill of Simon’s magic coursing through his whole system—has never succeeded in more than a superficial skin bond on Simon’s own body. It’s like watching magnetic fields crash into each other—his magic cannot enter back in on itself. It skitters, volatile, directionless, over his own skin.

“We need to find your instrument,” Baz says. It’s not the first time. And it’s not like there’s anything they can really do to hasten the process.

“Agreed,” Simon yawns, looking half-asleep as he stretches an arm up to pillow his head and winces in the process. At the movement, a wound below his ribs gapes open, streaming new red blood. “But you’re gonna fix me first, right?”

“Can you buy me an hour?”

Simon smiles lazily and hooks a thumb into the waistband of his underwear. “We could kill some time.”

This is both the best and the most terrifying invitation Baz has ever received. He cannot. No; he doesn’t know if he can, so he must not.

“Please,” Baz says, setting the supplies down on the coffee table and backing away, “I’ll help if you need it, but can you please just wash yourself off?”

Simon’s eyes pop open at Baz’s pleading tone.

“What's wrong, Baz?” he asks, and then sees Baz clinging to himself in the doorway to the kitchen, eyes bright and teeth unfettered—yes, Baz knows how he looks in these moments; he's basically a vampire pin-up model, he fucking gets it—and inhales sharply. “Oh.” Deeper. “Oh, Baz. You want me, don't you?” He's rumbling now, so low, smirky and seductive, because Simon loves to feel
wanted. But he shouldn't want it this way.

“It's not you,” Baz groans, gripping the doorframe to keep from throwing himself onto Simon's gory chest. “It's just your blood.”

“Do you want it more than other people's?” Simon asks. “Because it's mine, because you like me?”

“I don't know.” Baz says curtly. He cannot say yes, because he doesn't want Simon getting fucked-up ideas about his blood-lust being in any way romantic, but then, he can't say no, either, because that would be a flat-out lie.

Unfortunately, bringing up ‘chemistry’ will not sound sufficiently clinical.

“Okay,” Simon says in what is obviously a display of some real willpower. “Come back in a few minutes?”

When he comes back, the water and cloths are stained pink and Simon, still washed in pale red, has a few bulky bandages plastered to his chest and legs. Once Baz has drained and rinsed the bowl, the air begins to clear a little and he begins to smell, again, the surface-smells that are Simon to him—the warm, bright, treesy scent of Simon who is alive and almost naked and beckoning Baz atop him on the couch.

In the ensuing sex, Baz is gentle to the point that Simon's clawing hands seem ready to split his back open. “I'm injured, not fucking weak,” Simon yells in frustration, and Baz thinks it's not your weakness that worries me, but lets him have it.

Simon wrestles him back with each thrust, of course. Wounds reopen.

As his pulse stills after, Simon sees that Baz, taut arms elevating him as far as he can get from the man below him, can't pull his eyes from the peeling bandage on his rib cage. It's one of the big ones, as big as a sandwich, taped at all sides and patchy with red through the waterproof top layer.

There's blood under there—Baz licks his teeth.

Watching and still clenched so tight around him, Simon hisses. “Fuck, Baz, if I hadn't just come all the fuck over us…” (which is really unhygienic considering that, on closer inspection, several of the bandages are now spattered in Simon's semen). If not tangible, his desire is at least impossible to miss.

Anyway, it's enough to get Baz to shove away, shuddering and shaky from the satisfaction he always gets fucking Simon plus that come-hither blood, like a clandestine third lover whispering in his ear, pulsing through the wounded skin the whole damn time.

He stands. “If you're staying, which you really should…”

“I really fucking should,” Simon concurs, bleeding.

“… you are taking a shower. I'll hold you up, if that's what it takes, but I can't sleep in the same house with you smelling like this.”

* 

“I like you like this, Baz,” Simon says from the shower.

Baz is brushing his teeth and glares at himself in the mirror. He always pops his fangs out to brush
them, but they're out without his say-so right now, and he's so annoyed by it. “I really don't,” he says, and Simon says no more. The water shunts noisily off the shower walls and the room fills with the honey-and-lemon smell of Baz's soap.

When Simon throws the glass door open, he is goddamned beautiful. A golden god, strong and solid body dripping water and accented with the sharp, vicious marks of his injuries.

Baz looks at him steadily, willing his eyes not to drift.

“You didn't get hurt playing soccer.” It's not a question. He's not about to give Simon the chance to lie to him.

“Towel?” Simon asks. Rivulets stream from his chest down his sides, over the hips, course down the soft, curling hairs of his thighs and calves. Without looking away, Baz pulls a clean towel from the rack behind him and tosses it over.

“So how did it happen?”

Simon busies himself with drying off. He dries himself briskly, the thick towel turning the skin pink.

Baz can wait. Simon dries his face, his hair, which stands up thatchy and ridiculous in the towel's wake, his toes.

Blood is starting to seep, again, from the deeper wounds on his ribs. Now that he can see the wounds clearly and now that his body has fully processed most of the wine he was drinking while he graded, Baz is ready to cast some mending spells. “Okay?” he asks, holding the magic hot in his hands, and Simon, apparently oblivious to his blood soaking into the towel where he's been dragging it across his cuts, winces assent. “Brace yourself,” he says, and Simon leans back, elbows on the shower wall. He doesn't look happy about it, but neither does he look scared; there's a certain gleam, isn't there?, whenever he takes magic from Baz.

Simon groans through clenched teeth as Baz starts the wounds healing. It's not all pain.

Simon's only just regained his breath when Baz asks again. “Who hurt you, Simon?”

“Look, Baz, let's save it for the morning.”

Simon eyes flash a miserable icy blue as he strains to tug on one of Baz's sleep shirts without damaging his healing tissues. Baz almost yields to the entreaty. Almost.

Instead, he asks again, with rare vehemence: “Who the fuck hurt you?”

Simon sort of sags down. “Get me a drink?”

Tucked up in Baz's bed, wrapped in his pajamas and several layers of down quilts, and with a small whiskey clutched in his hands, Simon tells the story.

“I was walking back from pick-up soccer with Declan and we were talking about some cross-curricular planning about systemic oppression and Raisin in the Sun, and we were going to go get a beer but when we walked past school, Dec like, froze like a hunting dog and was like, 'I gotta go back in, it's the vampire.'

“And I was obviously like, 'What, bruh?' and he was like, 'The vampire, it's here, I have to get it.'”

Everything inside Baz cracks like fractured ice.
“And I was like, 'Nah, man, first off, I'm pretty sure you're wrong,' because like, I knew you were home, 'and also, if there is a vampire here, why the fuck is that your job?' And Baz, he like, literally took me by the shoulders and looked at me real serious, like this,” and Simon's look is so serious and troubled that Baz ignores the trickle of whiskey that splashes onto his shoulder from where Simon's awkwardly clutching too much in one hand, “and he said, 'I made a promise.'

“He's a fucking vampire hunter, Baz. I swear I had no fucking idea till now—no fucking idea. And he was right. The front door was propped open, and he led me down the halls toward our area, and we were just climbing the stairs between our rooms when we got ambushed. There were three of them, all teeth and claws all over us, plus someone else at the top of the stairs who didn't touch us.

“I just started punching, but Dec staked the first fucker right off the bat and threw him down the stairs. He'd given me a knife, but I hadn't really thought about it till I had one of them—a woman, I think—by the hair and I was just thinking about not letting her teeth get me, but that meant she had an arm free and was slashing me up pretty bad with a little knife of her own, and Declan yelled,” Simon chokes a little on this, “'Cut her head off.'”

He pauses to kick back the rest of the whiskey.

“Did you?”

“No. I knocked her unconscious so she'd stop knifing me, and Dec threw his second guy down the stairs and then he pulled out—I am not fucking kidding—a goddamn hatchet and told me to hold her up and close my eyes, and he fucking chopped it off. Three strokes.

“We burned them out on the terrace.”

“You said there was someone else.”

“Yeah, at first, up at the top of the stairs, like, next to my room.”

“What did the person look like?”

“Fuck if I know. I was pretty busy not being bitten. By the time I could check, whoever it was was gone. Declan said not to go looking. But Baz. Baz.” He grabs at Baz's bicep. “I didn't want to kill them. I mean, I guess I wanted to fight them. I didn't want them to kill me. But, Baz, I didn't want them to die.”

Without meaning to, Baz has locked down. His arms wrap his folded knees, making himself as compact as possible. Simon could have been killed tonight—killed by vampires—and someone should comfort him and hold him and reassure him that he did what he had to, that the true horror of monsters is that they make us do monstrous things, but that someone should definitely not be a person who gets hard when he sees Simon bleed.

“Baz,” Simon says again, insistently, “I didn't want to. After, I just kept thinking about you.”

“That's fair,” Baz hears himself say, distant and cold. “I, too, would risk death to taste your blood.”

“You fucking know that’s not why. I meant I wanted you, Baz. They're dead, and they should be, and you're alive, and you're mine and I wanted you.”

“'Alive,'” Baz says, “is a questionable word choice. I am certainly sufficiently not-dead to be able to drool over your open wounds.” His voice is a jagged wire. “No wonder you came to me.”

“Fuck you,” Simon says. “This isn't a-fucking-bout you. None of us choose what's sexy to us. So,
you're a vampire, and you feel guilty about it, and, like, ashamed?"

Baz hisses his assent.

“But guilt and shame are for things we think are our faults. What part of being a vampire is your fault?”

Baz shakes his head, unwilling to let Simon talk reason to him.

Simon's hand is on his face, rough, turning it. “No part is, Baz, no fucking part, because it's not your fucking fault and in fact, the only parts of being a vampire you're responsible for are the parts where you save people.”

Baz sits and sits and wills this to sink in.

“You've lost a lot of blood,” Baz mutters after a long time.

“Yeah, sorry about the towels. I'll wash 'em tomorrow. Cold. Blood'll come right out.”

This sounds unrealistically simple, and anyway, magic exists, but Baz just says okay and lets Simon drag him down so they're lying together under the warm covers.

His brain is puzzling it all out, though. Simon trusts him. He knows this. But still, it's one thing to know and another to believe. “You came here.”

“Yeah.” Simon's breath is sweet and hot against his cheek.

“You wanted me to know.” You knew I would help you. You knew I’d figure out how to control myself.

“No—Declan had to, like, file some kind of secret official report, and I just needed to get the fuck out of the street before anyone recognized me.”

“Lots of bars and subway stations open.”

“Um, I was dripping blood?”

“So you went to a vampire.” You knew your blood would get me turned-on and crazy with lust and hunger and you came here anyway. You wanted to see me like this.

“Are you fishing for me to say I wanted to fuck you? Because congratulations, that was one of the reasons I wound up at your door, Baz. One of several reasons.” He rolls over so that his head rests atop Baz.

“What are the others?”

“Like I said, I had to get away, and I wasn't about to hop the train covered in blood. But also, like, I'm pretty sure you're my boyfriend or something, so coming to you in my time of need seemed like a very normal choice.”

Baz winces at the word. “Boyfriend?”

“Or something.”

He groans. Simon's hair is still wet—a clammy weight on his chest. “All the somethings are worse.”
“Yeah, I don't know what to tell you, dude. Like, we could be, fucking, _Magicians who fuck? Colleagues with benefits?_ But honestly, I think we're boyfriends.”

“Agreed,” Baz agrees. “Let's never speak of it again.”

*

Spreading butter on toast the next morning, though, Baz realizes something: “I ought to tell the family.”

“Tell them what?” Last night's scars have already crusted into clean scabs that stripe Simon's freckled chest. Why is Simon drinking coffee with no shirt on? “Like, that we're fucking?”

“Or something,” Baz says.

“I mean, I guess you can if you feel like getting mushy about it, but they definitely know.”

Baz shakes his head dismissively. “Ari and I have an understanding.” She wouldn't have ratted them out.

“Sure,” Simon agrees, “but I'm guessing Ollie's an information free-for-all.”

“Which is why I haven't—”

Baz cuts off because Simon has stretched to fill the kitchen doorway, coffee mug in one hand and the other pushing up on the lintel as if it would collapse without the support of his ridiculously shapely pillar of a body. His eyes catch Baz’s with hypnotic precision over the rim of his mug as he takes a hot swig, and when he lowers the mug loosely back toward his hip, Baz doesn't at all care for the giddy flicker around the edge of his lips.

“Simon,” he accuses. “When did you tell him?”

“I don't know,” Simon shrugs, bonelessly nonchalant. “Like, a week ago? When he called to plan with you about Ari's birthday, but you were out with Eustace? It was after Ari had walked in on us, so I was like, _This is a funny story you're gonna want to hear,_’ but then was like,” (he knocks a fist against his head) “oh right, you're going to wonder why I'm naked in the story, so like, for context, you have to know your bro and I are fucking,” you know?”

One well-buttered piece of toast has turned to a tight glutinous lump in Baz's clenched fist. He takes a deep breath so his voice will stay level. “You told Ollie.”

“Yeah.” That shrug again, like nothing touches him. That skin, marked with rust-colored slashes that emphatically prove otherwise. There's no way around it: Ollie's obviously told their parents already.

_So it goes_, Baz thinks.

Honestly, Simon's probably spared him the initial squealing ecstasies of his stepmother's self-satisfied delight. Why should he care?

“Why don't you have a shirt on?”

“You like what you see?” Simon does a sort of shimmy in the doorway, and all right, all right, Baz _does_ like it, but they have to leave for work in a minute.

“Put a shirt on, Mr. Snow.”
“Someone tore mine off me,” Simon says plaintively, slumping seductively against the doorframe.

“Then take one of mine.”

The glimmering expanse of teeth in the responding grin indicates that perhaps Simon's a little too pleased by Baz's suggestion.

A few minutes later, when Simon returns, Baz sees why. Stretched snug across Simon's broad chest is the same turquoise shirt everyone ribbed Baz for in that faculty meeting a few weeks back. It's one the tailor threw in as a gift—hence the unusual color—and Simon has definitely never owned a shirt with such status. In fact, prior to his Christmas suit from the Pitches, Simon has probably never owned a shirt that would even be allowed as a guest at the turquoise shirt's country club.

Gods alive, how does it fit Simon so well? Their builds are so different—Baz tall and lean, Simon a stalwart buoy of muscle—but perhaps Baz's height is misleading, because this shirt hugs the bulk of Simon's shoulders and pecs as though it were cut to his measurements. The button placket lies perfectly flat.

There’s no mistaking the message it signals.

“Ah,” Baz says around a fresh mouthful of toast and jam. He swallows roughly. “So we're doing this.”

“Help me out?” asks Simon, holding out a slender strip of black silk.

The half-Windsor anchors a forbidding slash of black to that too-blue field. The overall effect is devastating. It looks like Baz's world about to detonate.

*

Baz figures they couldn’t have made it more obvious if they’d strode through the cafeteria holding hands, so he’s shocked that no students say anything. When he checks his work email at lunch, though, he's got this from Simon:

*Lucinda figured it out before class even started, so the jig's up. Carys, Niall, Declan, buncha others all stopped by to talk shit.*

Wanna make out in the stairwell? LMK

Baz, horrified, types back, *I use this address for professional correspondence, Mr. Snow.*

The second he hits Send, though, he registers his tone, and, for the first time in his life, uses the Undo Send feature in his email. He doesn't change what he's written, but he does append, *Are you available to meet tonight at 7? Dinner will be provided.*

He's not shocked when he looks up, chuckling, from sending the email to see Bunce leaning like a ship's figurehead over his desk.

“Thought I'd see if it went both ways,” she says. “Where's the band t-shirt, Basil?”

He glowers up at her from under heavy brows. They both know it means nothing. “The day you find me in one of his ragged shirts,” he begins, but she jumps in before he gets much farther.

“Will be the day you finally figure out you're in love.”

*Many tasteful people maintain reasonable attire despite their lovers' corrupting influence.*
“Those people aren't in love with the fashion disaster that is Simon Snow.”

He shushes her with a wild roll of his eyes. There are students in the room. Sure, they’re yelling at each other about anime, but still. Let’s defer, as long as possible, the revelation that Mr. Pitch and Mr. Snow are shacking up.

She laughs. “Oh, Basil. They are so far ahead of you. There's already a side-by-side Who Wore it Best? on the Class of ’19 Facebook page with three pages of comments.”

“How—?” He is mystified. Obviously someone noticed and took a photo of Simon this morning, but, “How do they have a picture of me in it?”

“They probably got it from Watford Style.”

His blank look tells enough. She shoves him aside, types in a URL, and sure enough, how did he not know this?, there’s a Tumblr page dedicated to the fashion choices of Watford students and the unsuspecting fools who teach them. About halfway down the first page, there's a photo of him in the charcoal tweed suit he wore yesterday. She clicks the tag (not his name but his room number—very clever) and dozens of photos of himself fill the screen. He scrolls through dumbfounded—it's every outfit he's worn this month, he's sure, and while the photos are all sneaky candids, they are good, with attractive lighting and angles and composition, and he is already boggling at the photographer's dedication before he even reaches the bottom of the page and sees that this is only page 1 of 26 of his personal photo gallery. Amid a sea of tags such as #gay???, #HAWT, and #suit party, roughly half of his photos seem to include the hashtag #vampire style.

_Sweet Merlin._

“It's been going for years,” she says. “I can't believe you didn't know.”

“Invasion of privacy,” he says, at a loss for complete sentences.

“How else would they decide Best-Dressed Teacher?” she asks wryly. “They take it very seriously.”

This is a lot to take in. Still, Baz is capable of cutting to the meat of a conversation; he understands Bunce's point. “It's public knowledge,” he says.

“You're public knowledge,” she confirms. “Let me know if you want to talk it over at the Arms sometime.” She pats him on the shoulder. “I'd better go get ready for class. But Pitch? Good job.”

* * *

Before long, there are giggles on the wind and crude messages in the bathroom graffiti, whistles when they're seen together and pointed questions when they're not; Mr. Huynh's around every corner, and even though Baz knows now that it's not jealousy over his new relationship status, he tries to pretend to himself it is, because the reality—that Huynh's pegged him for the vampire he is—is infinitely worse.

Simon starts to cook the dinners sometimes—hearty basics based around pasta and sausage and cheese—and marvels aloud at how much better all his cooking tastes when he cooks in Baz’s kitchen, with Baz's specialty-store ingredients.

“I think I should tell Huynh the truth,” Baz says over one of these dinners.

“Hmm?” Simon asks around an enormous bite of salad.
“I should just tell him I'm a vampire so he'll lay off the spy act.”

“Fuck.” Simon's face has seriously blanched. “He'll fucking kill you, Baz.”

“I wouldn't let him, Simon. I'm capable of explaining myself.”

“Listen, Baz, here's what would happen: You'd be like, 'Hey, Huynh, I'm a vampire,' and while you're trying to figure out the exact right words to say the next part, you'd be like, whoa, how long has that stake been in my heart, and exactly how fucking dead am I right now? Because he's a goddamned genius at vampire-killing, Baz. There's like a vampire mafia, and they've been jumping him for a while.

“He was already goddamned suspicious of you, and then they ambushed us by your classroom. And, you know, the rumors don't help. The only reason he hasn't come for you is professional courtesy. And maybe personal courtesy now,” Simon adds, mulling over the extent to which Huynh's behavior may hinge on his friendship with Simon. “Fuck.”

There have always been rumors about Baz—particularly vampire rumors and gay rumors, and now that the gay appears to the myopic world to be established fact, and with vampires at the epicenter of public discourse, the vampire rumors have surged to the forefront. The students all know about Magee's edicts; today's Watford Style portrait (apparently snapped right when Ms. Sullivan, in vintage black lace, waylaid him with complaints outside his least-favored place in the school, the front office, before first period, as evidenced by the way the supercilious tilt of his head curves into the long, impatient lines of his white-shirted arms, his body especially narrow in an amber sweater-vest and slim navy trousers) includes the tags #vampire style, #bite me, and #for real, bite me.

“Then what course of action do you advise?” Baz's voice is cold. There are attacks in the news every day. People are dying and disappearing, and he feigns distance. He is sick of all the idiotic pretenses.

“Just stay out of his way, Baz,” Simon says, and Baz is ready to snap back at him, but Simon finishes, “I really fucking don't want you to die.”

Simon makes Baz eat seconds of lasagna and is uncharacteristically respectful about not hanging over Baz's shoulder making lewd jokes while Baz drinks his two pints of blood in the kitchen after dinner. He even leaves the room. When Baz finds him after, in the living room, Simon's planning lessons and leafing through Baz's best dictionary—a compact OED Dev gave him when they first started dating.

“Nice dictionary,” Simon says, squinting through the magnifying glass at the tiny type.

“It was a gift.”

“I saw.” The words are loaded. Baz knows there's an inscription in the front of the first volume: For Basil, who likes words. Dev Zhou, 2007. Simon looks up at him; it's half a challenge—will Baz call him on it, finally, on the fact that Simon got with Dev?—and half an invitation. Baz chooses to take him up on the latter. Sliding off his shoes, he stretches out on the couch so there's no room in Simon’s lap for anything but his head. Simon sets the book aside, bends over, and starts in on kissing him.

* 

Much later that night, in bed, he decides the time is right for the request he's been waiting to ask. Simon's wrapped across him, and his breathing hasn't quite steadied into sleep yet.

“I want you to expunge a memory for me.”
“What for?” Baz’s t-shirt muffles Simon’s drowsy voice.

“You and Dev.”

“What?”

“You made out with Dev.”

“Who’s that?” Simon mumbles.

“Dev Zhou. At a hotel, you said. In a hallway?”

“Ohhh.” Baz hears the slow, semi-conscious smile in Simon's breath. “So fucking hot, Baz, you want me to show you what we did?” His hand tickles across the front of Baz's shirt, heading down.

“No!” Baz grabs him by the wrist. “No, I do not want to compare notes about how we’ve pleased the same man.”

“Oh, shit,” Simon says, pulling back so his head's on a pillow of its own. “Right.” He suddenly sounds much more alert. “I mean, I admit I put it together. I recognized his name when he introduced himself, and I remembered that picture of you guys from online. And he was fucking hot, sorry, but that wasn’t why I wanted his prick in my mouth.” *Octavia Estelle Butler*, there’s no way Baz is allowing Simon to allow him to remember this conversation. “While I was blowing him, I just kept thinking, *Baz has sucked this exact cock*. It was kind of intimate, you know?”


“Fuck you. I mean, it was like, like I was being intimate with you. Like this cock was the messenger through space and time that connected my lips with yours.”

“That is truly appalling.”

“I thought it was all I was going to get, Baz. I didn't know I'd be able—” He shifts toward Baz. “—to put my lips on you whenever I wanted—” He does. “—or to touch you—” His fingers wiggle into the top of Baz's sleep-pants. “—Or to show up wounded at your door and watch you fight to control yourself around my blood—”

“I always fight to control myself around you,” Baz says. “My wants are destructive.”

“But anyway,” says Simon, unwilling to indulge his wallowing, “that's why. Sorry. I know it's shitty. I guess I can *Never mind* you if you really want. But I thought you'd like to know the whole story.”

“Which is…?”

“Oh, we made out a bunch and I gave him a hell of a bj, and he was like, 'You are leaving with me,' and I was like, 'Okay,' but then he was an asshole so I didn't.”

“Did he get to…?” Baz smooths a hand along Simon's bare torso. He is only asking, he tells himself, because he can make Simon erase these answers, too, if they're too terrible.

“Nah,” Simon says. “Asshole. He was happy to let me do the work.” His tongue on Baz’s earlobe brings Baz’s prick to sudden, quivering attention. Simon murmurs, very close and quiet, “Not that it was work, exactly.”

“He is beautiful when he comes,” Baz muses as Simon gains full access. Oddly, with Simon’s kisses
on his throat and his hand jerking Baz’s cock, sure and sweet, the thought of Dev coming down Simons throat is no longer entirely too repulsive to be borne. “But not…”

“Not like you,” Simon says at the same time as he does.

* * *

April ends with a long weekend for Ari’s birthday at the Pitch house. Baz is damned if he cares what Magee thinks about him and Simon requesting personal leave on the same Friday. It’s the first time he’s brought Simon back to the house since Christmas. It will be the first time the family sees him and Simon together. Thank all the gods Tyro and Delphinia won’t be back till dinnertime so the kids can all settle in a little before their folks get home.

Ari, serving afternoon tea in the many-windowed breakfast room, pours her own strong and milky and a little sweet. “A thing I picked up from the Brits. I quite like it, really.”

“I quite like it!” Simon parrots in a toff accent. “Another thing you picked up in Merry Old England?”

The others stare at him blankly. “Ah,” Baz realizes after a moment. “Simon, when will you comprehend that our speech patterns are not affectations?”

Ollie tromples into the room at that moment. “Nah,” he laughs, sloshing a couple heaping spoons of sugar into the steaming cup that’s waiting at his place, “the real question is, when will you figure out the whole damn thing’s an affectation?”

Baz raises an eyebrow and his teacup. “The whole damn thing?”

“The money, the house, the fancy cars and lessons and social gatherings and all that shit. Shit!” His too-vigorous stirring slops scalding tea onto his hand. “Chill out,” he says, gesturing with his other hand, the one with the cord bracelet that is his instrument.

“Watch it, Ollie,” his sister warns, waggling a teaspoon at him. “We can still disown you.”

He scoffs.

“Wouldn’t be the first time. Remember Mordelia?”

“Who?”

“Exactly.” Arachne’s eyebrows arch rivals cathedral domes. It’s a classic sort of Ari joke, so dryly convincing that a fragment of Baz’s mind actually fleetingly racks his memory for missing siblings. “Don’t fuck with the Pitch way.”

Turning his back on the other Pitches, Ollie says, “Hey Sim, don’t let the snobs get you down.”

“No worries, man,” Simon grins at him, executing a fist-bump that turns into a back-slapping hug. “You know last time Ari was here we played Scrabble, and these guys fought for twenty minutes about whether British spellings were acceptable?”

“To be fair,” Ari sneers, “twenty minutes is far less than the duration of Basil’s average turn.”

Simon and Ollie both sneer at their heads.

“In what world is any part of that fair?” Simon demands plaintively. Under the table, his leg’s cementing itself to Baz’s.
“Finding the right word takes time,” Baz insists. He passes Ari the scones that he and Simon picked up at the bakery before leaving the city this morning. Ari and Ollie both roll their eyes.

“She’s not some sappy metaphor, B,” says Ollie. “Look, is there anything you want to tell me?”

“Didn’t you say you already …?” Baz asks Simon, but Ollie thumps a heavy hand on the table.

“Maybe I want my brother to be the guy who tells me he’s back in the game, bro.”

Baz runs an incredulous hand over the curve of his skull. “It's not a game, I wasn't out, and I'm not in. Simon and I are … well … we've …”

Ollie grins delightedly. “Sucker! You bought it! I don't fucking care whether you tell me. Simon, welcome to the family, man.”

Simon cackles back, knocking Ollie's shoulder. “It's not like we're getting married.”

“Or apparently even boyfriends, if you're waiting for this asshole to grow the balls to say anything about it.”

Having taken Baz’s hand on the tabletop, between the fine china settings and the little platters of fruit and tea sandwiches and sweets, Simon says, “It's cool. We disclosed all the assholery up front. I think we both know what we're in for.” His ankle kinks around Baz’s and Baz’s whole leg turns to silent flame. If they can make it through tea and dinner, they are going to fuck in every corner of his childhood bedroom (and maybe the woods and gardens too). “Is there any jam for these scones?”
May

His classroom phone rings one evening in early May as he's about to leave school; he’s got to hurry in order to stop by the butcher's before they close.

“This is Mr. Pitch.”

“Hey, it's me,” Simon says. “I have to bail on tonight.”

“You don't have to say 'it's me,' you know; I will certainly figure it out.”

“Fine.” Baz expected an affectionate fuck you; someone else must be in the room. “I have to do something with Declan. I won't be over till late, okay?”

“All right.”

“Sorry.”

“It's fine,” Baz says, even though his thoughts are oddly unsettled, sloshing turbulent in his brain.

“Cool, thanks. Later?”

It's only after Simon hangs up that Baz registers the tension in Simon's voice.

* 

Instead of eating dinner, he takes Eustace for an hours-long romp in the dog park. Now that they're back, Baz has just plunked a serving of dog food into Eustace's bowl and is pouring himself a drink to help allay his concerns about exactly what Declan and Simon are up to when the phone rings.

He texted Simon from the dog park an hour earlier, just to check if everything was okay. Simon wrote back immediately: Fine. It was not reassuring.

When the phone rings from the other room, where he dropped it on the entry table, he lunges after it. His cell display announces the call as Watford High.

“Hello?” Baz answers.

All he hears is yelling. But “yelling” isn't the right term. It's the sound of a fight, of screeching furniture and frantic invectives, the heavy thud of bruising flesh, the strangled screams. At first he doesn't recognize the voices. Then, after a moment, there's a roar like a dam's burst, a smattering of horrific shrieks, and the roaring resolves into a far-away voice, and it's Simon's voice, and it's bellowing, “Fuck you and the monster you rode in on!”

A different voice, nearer the phone, female and cool, sneers, “That was a dragon, Mr. Snow.”

Simon: “Fuck you, I know what a fucking dragon is. You saw it too? Wait, why are you even here…”

The voice says, “Watch out behind you, Mr. Snow.”

“Holy fucking fuckgods,” Simon bellows. “There's fucking more of them?”

“Care to tell Mr. Pitch what's coming toward us?”
“What— Wait— Fuck, no, you said ‘backup.’ You fucking called him? Baz, don't, it's a fucking set-up, just stay the fuck away.” His voice changes; Baz hears the bravado he associates with jock-Simon, bro-Simon: “Fuck you!” He sounds like he's hollering at someone or something distant. “You too. I have a fistful of stakes and I know exactly how the fuck to …”

Then he grunts, sudden and horrible, like one might grunt at the unexpected impact of a cement mixer, and the call cuts off.

*  

When Baz walks like a normal person, his commute to school takes about ten minutes. At full who-gives-a-fuck-what-people-think speed, he's there in just under two.

The school's dark and apparently vacant; the front doors are locked tight and the only sound's the rustle of the leaves in the two massive old sycamores that flank the entrance. Baz doesn't even bother checking the side entrances. Simon was attacked near their classrooms before, and he'd bet good money they're there again.

Sprinting to the rear courtyard, Baz nearly trips over a shapeless heap in the dark before him. Coming to a halt, he realizes with dread that it's a body. A body, male, muscular, hair a moonlit tangle. Anxious, he hefts it by the corner of its suitcoat, and—thank fucking Faulkner—a rictus of sharp vampire teeth leers at him from a dead and unfamiliar face.

A little farther on there's another, and another, each staked through and left in an ignominious lump on the brick terrace. They smell like stale fear and clotted blood. The fourth lies in a fragrant pool (which actually smells borderline delicious, which Baz had no idea vampires could) beside the doorway into the school.

A puff of fire erupts at the end of the courtyard. Baz jumps back, shielding his face and drawing his pen from his pocket, readying for battle, before he sees in the fire’s light the face of a deeply unhappy-looking dragon chained to the bike racks.

The dragon rolls its yellow eyes appraisingly at Baz.

Can it sense that he’s a vampire?

Would that make it more or less likely to burn him to the ground?

Baz doesn’t have time for this.

“Let freedom ring,” he yells, pointing his pen, and the chains around the beast’s neck disintegrate. It wriggles its shoulders as if to test its liberty, then unfurls enormous wings—wings that would easily fill his classroom—and wheels on Baz.

Baz wills himself not to flee. He’s almost inside, but when you’re as flammable as Baz is, almost away from the dragon is only almost good enough. He wills himself to look steadily back. He wills himself not to yell.

The dragon breathes height into itself, then lurches forward, awkward on its legs, until its head is nearly touching Baz’s own. The lizardy face wrinkles. Then—Baz would swear this under oath, under magical oath, even—it gives a cursory little nod, spreads its wings, and, in wingbeats that churn the air, takes to the skies. It doesn’t look back.

Baz cannot take the time to laugh till he cries from relief. The moment the huge black shape lifts into the blacker night, he’s turned back to the building.
There are lights on inside here—in his room and in the other classrooms on the lower hall—and without thinking it through any further, Baz shoulders his way through the door.

“It's another one!” a woman's voice shrieks from the top of the stairs, and Baz immediately flings himself to the side. He presses himself against his own classroom door, scanning the area for people and finding only corpses strewn in the stairwell and corridor. He’s just tugging the pen from his pocket when the door jolts open from within and faster than he can take in what's happening, someone cuffs his wrists and he’s thrown unceremoniously face-first to the ground.

Feet clop down the stairs toward him, and meanwhile whoever cuffed him is dragging him further into his room. Something hard jabs against his clothed back.

He puts two and two together right about now, right as his frightened fangs erupt. That warning wasn’t for him, it was about him. “I'm not going to hurt you!” he exclaims in self-defense. “I'm here to help.”

“Nice try, Dracula,” says the woman's voice, parsimonious and superior; and so close now, he can't help but match it with the voice on the phone. He knows exactly whose it is.

“Sullivan?” he asks, incredulous. He strains his neck backward to look up.

“Pitch.” Waves of revulsion shimmer off her perfect body. She is definitely wearing four-inch heels for her part in this vampire bust, and seems to be keeping just enough distance that if this stake—which Baz is only just now registering must be the thing poking uncomfortably down into the back of his blazer, between the ribs—penetrates, the spatter won't damage her swag. “Really. Put the fangs away. You're in mixed company.”

Baz hisses. It's not the smart move, but sometimes there's only so much you can take.

A hand jams his head into the floor, and the point of the stake digs closer to the skin.

“Hey, Pitch,” Declan Huynh says miserably above him. “I really don't want to do this, but, I mean, look at you.”

Sullivan's pretty shoes amble around behind Baz; then, her surprisingly strong hands grip his shoulders and yank him to a seated position at the front of the room. A hood—Simon's beanie? he registers with surprise—obscures his eyes, and now the unforgiving point’s pressing against him in front, just over the heart. He draws his posture straight, cautious of quick movement so as to not startle Huynh into impaling him.

“Where's Snow?” Baz asks roughly.

“Just taking care of something down the hall,” Sullivan says. “I'm sure he'll be along any moment. He wouldn't want to miss this.” Her voice, when she talks about Simon, drops to slow-pouring syrup. Baz wants to throttle her.

“Don't you think we should just get it over?” Huynh demands. He smells like sweat and terror-fueled rage. He is strong and ready and fearsome, but it doesn’t take vampire senses to tell that he hates this. Killing vampires may be his obligation, but it's no vocation. He insists, “It's like you said, he followed them in. He's the last one. Let's end it before Simon has to—”

“No,” she whispers, vehement. “He needs to see.”

The footsteps pound like a herd of athletes taking the field; Simon's coming. Baz almost doesn't care that Simon's going to see him like this, trussed up and vulnerable at the business end of a sharp stick
(and how is it possible that Simon hasn't yet made any vulgar jokes about Baz's weakness for hard wood?); he's just glad that, at least, he won't be alone when he goes.

The point punctures his sweater-vest at exactly the spot where it should bump into the pen—his pen—in the pocket of his Oxford. Except his pen’s not there. He’d just been grabbing for it, over there by the door, when they got him. Claude fucking McKay. He’ll die without his magic. Baz breathes deeply. It's not strictly necessary, but he needs the calm.

Simon’s cry when he bursts into the room is the anguished relief of a man who expected a funeral and instead arrived at the execution. His sneakers squeal on the linoleum as he slows his approach. He is panting and desperate and his words, when they come, are the kind of careful you use when you're trapped with a rabid dog.


“Can't,” Declan says quietly. His voice sounds so barren that, had Baz even a few inches’ more distance from the situation, he’d mourn Declan’s joyless lot.

“You're wrong about him. He wouldn't—”

“Look at him, Simon.”

The hood covers him to the nose, but he can still smell the hand that approaches his face, sharp and sweet as apples and pine, so that Simon can stroke his cheek. His thumb coasts gently over the exposed tip of one of Baz's unhideable fangs. “I'm not saying he's not a vampire, Declan. I'm saying he's not a killer. He's never even bit anyone.”

The words are sinking in, Baz thinks. Simon's squeezing his arm on one side, and it seems as though the pressure of Huynh's stick in his ribs is lessening. Maybe Simon can convince him. Maybe this is not the day he'll die.

Sullivan breaks the growing calm like a toaster dropped in a bathtub: “Then who's been letting the vampire mafia into Watford, Snow?”

Oh right. She’s here.

The warm hand vanishes from Baz's face. Simon's jumped to his feet, and is apparently striding away from him.

“I still haven't heard an answer, Sullivan.” Simon says flatly.

“Haven't you?” Her voice is sugared and unnerving, enticing as absinthe.

Baz can't see, but he can hear in the tone that Simon's staving off an advance. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Helping,” she trills. “I had something Mr. Huynh needed.”

“What's that?”

“Intuitive discernment regarding vampire thought processes.” She sniffs proudly, hungrily. “Knowledge of their plans, desires, weaknesses.”

“She’s the one who told me they’d be here today,” Declan verifies. “She’s the one who told me about you.”
“I did!” Her voice glitters. She sounds very close to Simon now. “Mr. Snow, does it trouble you to know that you've been fornicating with a vampire?”

“Fuck you,” he says. “It fucking troubles me that you're goddamned groping me ten feet from where my boyfriend's about to get a stake in the heart.”

Oh shit. Clearly, Baz has allowed himself to be distracted. He wills his mind to refocus. He hears Huynh's breathing. It's very very close, gathering strength. Huynh must be leaning over him, ready to stab the fatal spear home.

*Use your magic,* Baz wills Simon silently. *Make the wood vanish, or the people freeze. Carry us away. You're strong enough. You're strong enough to save me.* But there’s no trace of Simon’s magic in the air. All he smells is the spiky, metal-and-rock smell of anger. Simon’s magic smells like new life. This room smells like the end.

“Stake him whenever,” Sullivan says, offhand, to Declan. Then, to Simon, almost a whisper, “You people disgust me.”

Simon snaps back, “What, gay people?”

“No,” Sullivan retorts, and there's a tiny, unmistakable *snick* that strikes into Baz with far greater immediacy and terror than any old scrap of wood could possibly do. It's the sound of fangs emerging. “Not gay people. *People.*”

Then, everything happens very fast. Some parts Baz doesn’t put together until later, when the hood’s gone and he can see again. Other parts, he doesn’t need to see, including this first: Simon flings himself away from Sullivan and back toward Baz, knocking a shouting Declan Huynh down in the bargain. Declan, loopy on adrenaline, the shock of Sullivan’s vampirism, and the insult of Simon's assault upon his person, stakes Simon in the shoulder for his pains. Simon—who does like to mention that he wrestled in high school—flips Declan hard and pins him with his one good arm and both legs while Simon’s left arm runs with blood from where a literal wooden stake sticks clear through.

Meanwhile, out of Huynh's reach, Baz has already channeled every ounce of his superhuman strength, ripped through the handcuffs, torn away the hat that blocks his vision, taken in the scene, and grabbed for Sullivan.

Sullivan is faster than he expects, and stronger—*oh, right, she's a vampire, Baz*—and she squirms from his grip. Faster than Baz was prepared to consider, she's ripped Simon off of a possibly-unconscious Declan's back and is pressed against the wall with Simon a human shield between herself and the others. Before her pearlescent, sharp-fanged pallor, Simon, who is losing blood rapidly from the puncture wound in his shoulder, looks like the absolute picture of health.

Sullivan sniffs at the blood that's soaking through Simon's shirt.

“Never, Pitch?” she taunts. “Your boy smells like a Transylvanian boudoir, and you expect me to believe you kept your teeth to yourself?” She nuzzles the side of the sharp wooden spear where it exits the meat of Simon's shoulder. He groans. Baz can smell the fresh spurt of blood. “You must, at least, have tasted him.”

Baz is glaring, furious, fists clenched and body coiled, trying not to move until he can gauge his opening. Sullivan literally has the man he loves by the throat, the slim, powerful, manicured fingers of her left hand jutting up into the underside of his jaw, holding him aloft and powerless. He can't risk this. Sullivan's shapely tongue emerges from between her fangs—it's a move befitting kitschy
vampire porn, the soft perfect pink against the shining white hardness of the teeth—and dips into the bloody space behind Simon's shoulder. Simon grunts.

“Oh,” she moans theatrically. “Oh, it's good, Mr. Pitch. I'm so sorry you'll never get to know how good he could have been for you, if you'd used him right. But you know what? I'll make you a confession.” She giggles coquettishly, her lips bright with Simon's blood. “Human blood has never been my aim. You, see, Mr. Pitch, I'm not here for Snow. I'm here for you.”

Baz’s abhorrence can’t disguise his astonishment. Sullivan wants him?

“I've always been here for you,” she whispers like a fawning heroine. When she smiles, her eyes are like flame. “The vampire community thrives on gossip, Pitch, and there's always been plenty about you. *Turned as a child*, they said, *at his dying mother's side*. It's all very romantic. But we waited and waited, and you never came to us.”

“I didn’t realize there was a bloodsuckers’ social code,” Baz begins, fighting for vocal control. Her right hand, which emerges from the space between Simon’s good arm and his side, lifts an admonishing finger. She licks a long swath of bloody space up Simon’s shoulder and onto his throat, leaving a faintly red trail behind on the cleaner skin there. Simon droops against the clamp of her hand. Sullivan hesitates with her mouth breathstoppingly close to his neck.

“Mm,” she says, as if recalling her train of thought. “So, when you didn’t seek out your own, there were two possibilities: First, that the rumors were false, you were never bitten. Or second, that you’re a vampire who denies his true nature. You know what we call those?” She takes another lingering lick along Simon’s wound while she waits for an answer. Her tense, anxious audience provide none. “Threats.”

“Why?” Baz demands. “I have steered clear of vampires in every possible way. How am I a threat?”

Sulllivan’s laugh is beginning to jingle his composure apart at the seams. “Come now, Mr. Pitch. You’re the only kind who can harm us. Who else would? *People*? No offense to your incapacitated friend Mr. Huynh, but you must know his kind are pretty much only good for killing the newly-turned.

“I came to Watford three years ago to find you.”

When this is all over, Baz thinks, if he survives, he will forever repent that Sullivan’s presence at Watford was his doing. This, among so many regrets, is the one that will keep him up at nights.

“I’d thought I’d get it over with right away, but then I met you, and I wasn’t quite certain. I like certainty, Mr. Pitch, and you made a very passable human. So I waited and waited for the moment when I could know, with a complete absence of doubt, that you, heir to the Pitch empire and dapper asshole extraordinaire, were the vampire I’ve always suspected you to be.

“Now I know. And high time, too; Watford's getting a little hot for my taste, and they've killed all my bait. I'm ready to move on.

“So, Mr. Pitch, this is it.”

Still held aloft, Simon groans. Baz’s face must crumple.

“But,” she pauses to take his measure with her gaze, “I’ll allow you an indulgence before I kill you—because I am going to kill you here, today: come here. Taste your boyfriend one time before you die. Then—I give you my word on this—I’ll drain you and let him go. You die, he lives.”
Through the contortions of pain, Simon's eyes are flashing. *No*, they glare, hard as lakes; his face has lost its color too, now. *No no no no no.*

But Baz doesn't have to ask himself any questions. He doesn't have time—the fangs are at Simon's throat, that pretty pink tongue licking at the salty, freckled skin.

“Deal,” Baz says. He's walking forward slowly, building an illusion of absolute control. “Anything you want. He lives?”

“You die,” she repeats, murmuring into Simon's skin. Her lips form a tiny kiss there. “He lives.”

Baz meets Simon's eyes. The pressure of Sullivan's hand on his throat makes it a struggle to breathe, but he's trying to communicate something. His eyes dip down to the left once, back up, then down again. The stake. Poor Simon. He must be in agony. If only Baz could heal him now—if only Baz could think of anything but the lustrous richness of Simon's spilling blood and the imminence of his own death. He lowers his head to the wound. It's not the worst offer he can imagine. In some ways, isn't it everything he wants? At least he'll die with Simon's taste in his mouth. At least this second death won't be so different from his first—just teeth, not fire, not a sharpened …

*Oh.*

His face is pressed to the sodden cloth of Simon's shirt, his hand raised to cradle Simon's shoulder, as if that might in any way lessen the intense pain of being goddamn skewered, and suddenly he understands what Simon meant with his eyes just now.

Stake. Vampire.

The stake stabs out from the back of Simon's shoulder, making him basically a human version of a board with a rusty nail protruding dangerous from one end. He's up too high, but with a little adjustment, he could be right in line with her heart.

“Duck!” Baz hisses, slamming his body upward into Simon to loose him from Sullivan's grip. Simon drops down, but Sullivan, sensing treachery, bares her teeth to bite. Baz has so little time. In one motion, he's shoved one hand into the Scylla of Sullivan's teeth and, ignoring as best he can the raking pain of the vampire tearing into his skin, he's jammed the other hand against the butt end of the stake beside his face. He watches it sink deeper into Simon, who is gasping with pain, and its point enter the splinterly ribcage of former English teacher Michelle Sullivan.

Except she's not former anything yet. She is biting and wild, thrashing behind Simon, and whose fucking idea was it to nail the two of them together? They tumble to the ground.

Simon's gushing blood now, collapsed on top of her and bound to her by the terrible stake through his flesh and hers, fresh runnels bubbling anew at every jolt. There's no way to remove him without making it worse, but Baz can't even think about that now—all he can do is make sure the only person she bites is him, that he hold those deadly fangs away from everyone else she might be able to hurt.

She's lapping at his hand, suckling it, even as his right hand comes to crush her head immobile against the floor, as though she thinks his blood might replace what must now be pouring out of her.

Baz smells it. He smells the fetid horror of her insides, her blood the fermented juices of a neglected corpse, mingling with Simon's good clean living blood in the pool below them. He smells the familiar hollow, mineral scent of his own blood too, and feels Sullivan's little tongue probing his dorsal metacarpal veins for more. Why isn't she dead?
“You missed,” Huynh’s shaky voice says from behind him, as if in answer. “It's not her heart. I have more stakes—if we could just get Simon out of the way, we could—“

“Don't move him,” Baz growls. Simon is bleeding too much. He needs a doctor, or, better, a magician. If Huynh pulls him off the stake now, he could die.

They can't wriggle him aside to stab her. A hatchet might work, but Sullivan's still too strong; Simon's too close.

“I think …” Huynh hesitates. “I think you need to … you know …”

“Basil!” a person hollers from the doorway, and Baz doesn't need to look up to know it's Bunce. How long she's been there, and why, and with whom, he cannot say. “Just bite her.”

She's right, he thinks. Bunce doesn't traffic in speculations or imperfections. This is the obvious solution, and no compunctious visitings of revulsion ought to intrude on his rapid disposal of this menace so that he can get to the much more important business of saving Simon's life.

His fangs are still out, lured on by the crimson lake that's growing below and around them. He can do this. It's his nature. He leans in, cold and clinical, and, as if he's trained for this, opens his jaws.

For a moment, the faint flutter of Simon's breaths is all anyone can hear. Sullivan's hair is silky in his grip; a few strands have sprung loose from her head, but she seems unaware of anything but the apparent bliss of Baz in her mouth. He can feel that she's torn the back of his hand into a throbbing pulp. It hurts a lot, but he can survive it. Maybe he doesn't have to kill her after all.

Then Sullivan's eyes pop back open, her teeth sink in deeper, and as he winces in pain, Bunce yells, “Bite her, idiot!”

He recoils; why the fuck hasn't he done it already?

Perhaps he imagines it, but it feels as though the fangs judder loose in their sockets as he sinks toward her. Sullivan smells dreadful to him, like rotten flowers; meanwhile, all around him, the sweet spicy smell of Simon's blood weaves invitations in the air. It's like trying to eat week-old slops in the presence of a fresh-cooked feast. He opens wider to bite and gags on the smell. He gags, but it doesn't matter—he can't stop. He needs to do this. His teeth sink through the skin like a fork through a sponge cake's sheath of rolled marzipan.

The taste is horrific. He is a little relieved even as he regrets that, even in this last interaction, he will get no satisfaction from his dealings with Sullivan. She strains against him, but Simon's weighing her down and she's weakened from the stake.

Her blood is inhuman, slippery and hard as liquid mercury. He feels it roll in thick streams down his esophagus and sit heavy in his stomach. He drinks, and hates it, and drinks, and hates it, and drinks again.

There is so much blood. By the time Sullivan finally twitches into sullen emptiness on the floor, Baz
feels like he's consumed oceans of icy hatred. It's awful. He'd excuse himself to hurl, but he can't leave.

They have to take care of Simon. Simon, who somewhere in the marathon bloodletting session lost consciousness, who is now flopped heavy across the dead body of Watford High's worst vampire, looking for all the world like a second corpse.

Thank the gods for Bunce. She's already issuing instructions, so that Huynh steadies the stake from below while Baz lifts Simon off, and the second the body's clear, Bunce's fingers are inside the gaping wound, cauterizing and cleansing and healing from within, and Agatha—wait, Agatha?—oh hell, Agatha's here too, to steer Huynh away from the mess once his part's done, and to whisper *Sweet dreams* in his ear, guiding him gently to sleep behind Baz's desk.

“Fucking god-damn piece-of-shit motherfucking shiiiiiiiiirit,” Simon sputters back to consciousness in the middle of the floor, and Baz's heart collapses like a ball that's been kicked with a steel-toed boot. “Holy mother-fuck, Penny,” Simon roars, but it's already a more controlled roar, a yell that suggests he's regaining some sense of the decorum appropriate to an exchange with the person who's saving one's life. “It doesn't hurt so much when Baz does it.”

*Baz. He still calls me Baz. Like I'm not a bloodsucking villain.*

“What happens in your bedroom is your own business,” Bunce mutters abstractedly, sealing the last layers of skin.

*Maybe he didn't see.*

Simon gasps, then puffs out a hard breath of air. “Thanks, *sestra*. You got my text?”

“I did.”

*Maybe he doesn't know.*

*Maybe he should.*

Baz backs away from the blood—not because it tempts him, because he feels literally full as a tick and as disgusting, but because it reminds him. He edges into the corner where he squats listless against the wall, letting his long hands dangle over his knees as he watches the scene like someone dispassionate, like a surveyor taking measurements.

“And you brought a posse,” Simon’s saying.

“Just Ag. Elspeth's in England. But I think we tripped a security alarm. There are lights flashing in the halls. I don't know how all the dead vampires out there didn't trigger it earlier.”

*All the dead—*

Why is he still here?

Why the fuck are any of them still here?

But especially, especially what the fuck is Baz still doing in this room, with these people, all of whom now have unquestionable proof that he’s a vampire, yet haven’t destroyed him?

“Dec’s done this before.”

“You don’t mean it,” Agatha exclaims in what Baz knows to be not horror but concern.
“Maybe not just like this,” Simon concedes. “But vampires have been hitting Watford for a couple years now, sounds like. Dude held the fucking line.”

“Why him, though?” Agatha asks.

“Got me. It’s like he just, like, can’t not.”

From across the room, the healthier rise and fall of Simon’s red-stained chest is a small glory. He can just watch this. He can watch from the periphery, which is where he belongs, after all—on the half-lit edges of their pulsing, burbling sphere of living.

“How do you mean, ‘can’t not’?“ Bunce asks. She sounds deeply interested.

“It’s like he’s compelled. You know? And kind of a responsibility, I guess, cause he always just knows when they’re around. And he’s really fucking good at killing them.”

“A compulsion,” Bunce says significantly, looking over Simon at Agatha. “Combined with hyperawareness.”

Agatha nods as if in understanding, and smiles.

Baz is glad for that smile. It’s a speck of hope; the others will be okay. Meanwhile, the leaden weight of Sullivan’s blood drags at his innards. Every part of him wants to twitch and bolt and recoil. He can control this, though. He can control himself.

He stays very still.

“Hey, uh, guys, can someone check on Baz?” Simon asks.

There’s a strange, silvery flame of sound filling the air around him. It takes Baz a moment to realize that it’s his own moaning.

Agatha, who has been checking Simon’s pupils, looks with a flush of embarrassed consternation at Baz, who is still squatting immobile against the wall.

“Basil!” she cries, because for a moment there, tending Simon, she must have forgotten him. Simon should have let them forget. “Basil! Are you all right?”

“I’m a vampire,” he says dully, eyes still monitoring Simon’s respiration.

“That’s a relief,” she says, “because otherwise the whole thing where you just drank that woman’s blood would be pretty disturbing.”

“I never said.”

“For obvious reasons.” She kicks a fallen wooden stake; it glides across the polished linoleum all the way to Sullivan’s leg.

“But you and I—”

“Were lovers, yes, but not in love. You owed me nothing but decency.”

“I could have hurt you.”
Her laugh is light and chiming. “Just try to convince me I was ever in danger with you, Basil. Even once.” She shakes her head. “Anyway, how many people can say they’ve slept with a vampire?”

Baz must blanch at this, because she laughs again and squints at him in a show of disappointment. “Of course I wouldn’t tell. Darling, do stop the worrying and wallowing.”

He takes her offered hand up, mostly because denying Agatha anything is more trouble than it’s worth, and allows her to tug him across the room to the others.

Simon’s glaring at him, which is a confusing but acceptable reaction to the situation. “You need help.”

“Yes,” Baz agrees, downcast.

“No, you fucker, you’re like, spouting blood. Penny, I still kind of hurt everywhere. Do you think you can fix him?”

Simon actually looks worried that she might not. Clearly he has not fully processed the magnitude of the repairs Penny’s just made to him.

“God, Basil,” Bunce says, turning her attention to his left hand, which is seriously demolished. “What the fuck were you thinking. I thought I was going to have to get one of those hashtag shirts that says ‘I need feminism because my vampire friend’s misguided chivalry killed him.”’

“That’s a terrible slogan,” Simon reflects, chuckling with uneven relief—was he really so worried about a hand? At the same time, he throws Baz a look like a wink—he is so bad at winking—that says he definitely knows that Baz’s reluctance to bite Sullivan had much less to do with gender politics than it did with species identity.

It’s also (god damn it, bloody Simon) distressingly sexy.

**Simon doesn’t care.**

**Simon’s an idiot.**

**But he’s my idiot.**

**And it’s not that he doesn’t care. It’s that he trusts me.**

“When Simon does this, it doesn’t hurt as much,” Baz says.

“Oh, fuck off,” Bunce says, but there’s a laugh stifled in there. “I don’t have time to dilly-dally. We’ve got blood to scrub.”

*  

Baz drags corpses outside and—having found his pen in a bloody puddle—ignites them, flash after flash vanishing the vampires from earthly physicality, while Simon, propped up in Baz’s teacher’s chair with a bottle of water, helps Ag and Bunce clean the classroom.

When Baz returns to find the two women wide-eyed in admiration, he recalls suddenly that this is the first time either of them has enjoyed the privilege of watching Simon’s extraordinary magic in action.
Simon's gritting his teeth with pain, but he's also clearly relishing the adulation. Every magician knows *Clean as a whistle*, but Simon's literally *whistling*—a cheery marching tune, no less—to peel the coagulating blood from the floor and desks.

He breaks off when he sees Baz. “You said she could kill you,” he accuses. “That was stupid.”

“Yes,” Baz agrees, nodding seriously while striking an insouciant Simon-style pose in the doorway, and as he knew they would, all conscious people in the room can't help but laugh.

* Of course, it's just minutes later, right when things are starting to look halfway okay, that Magee chooses to stumble in, wild-eyed and brandishing a fire extinguisher like it's a club.

“I saw the security footage,” the principal shouts in damning greeting. “I saw.”

“Good,” Agatha says. She's heard about Magee. “Then you understand that Mr. Pitch and his colleagues have saved your school from——”

“He's a menace,” Magee screams. “He drinks blood! He sets people on fire with his bare hands! Stand back!” Magee raises the extinguisher, although no one really knows whether the intent is to throw it or to use it as a bludgeoning device.

Baz extends his hands, palm out. He wishes he were not quite so thoroughly soaked in various people's (and monsters') blood.

“Believe me,” he says, “there is no one who hates what happened here tonight half as much as do I.”

Magee lets out an inhuman yell and springs forward, the extinguisher raised, but then, suddenly, as if by magic, the extinguisher hovers free, sails across the room, and crashes dully into the trash can. *Thanks, Simon,* Baz thinks.

Magee, landing painfully, shrinks like a frightened crab. “Don't kill me, Pitch! Please, no!” The principal is cowering, scrambling backward in a mess of sweaty polyester suiting.

“I don't kill people,” Baz says, and doesn't add, *but if I did, you'd be first to know.* He advances till he's face-to-face with Magee, who's hit the wall and therefore run out of escape routes.

“Just calm down,” Bunce says from behind him.

“Right,” Baz says. “Really, stay calm. Everything is going to be okay.”

Magee stares into Baz's face, voice wavering with the thrill of the question: “Am I in your thrall?”


But Simon's beside him, clutching his arm for support, and Simon repeats. “*No.*” The magic isn't directed at Baz, but he feels it anyway; Simon's in that radiant state where every word shimmers with it. “*You're in mine.*”

Simon's eyes are locked on the pathetic heap that is Magee. “*Let it go, Magee.*”

Baz feels Simon's intentions take effect: the forgetting, the un-hating, the unspooling of memory and power, ages of self-satisfied idiocy and bombast. It’s grimly beautiful to watch the past erase itself from a person’s mind. It’s perhaps the closest he’ll ever come to watching a *Clean-Slating*—he
This isn’t that. Simon, though, is ready to go as far as he can. When he’s expunged all the magic and most of the vampires, and when he starts to erase the memories that claim the principalship, that claim Watford High at all, Baz steps in.

His hand takes Simon's shoulder. “Enough,” he says.

“Enough?” Simon snarls. He’s enmeshed in the magic, still tugging Magee’s feeble soul apart.

“Yes,” says Baz, as firmly as he can, using the spell the right way: “That’s enough. Let it go.”

When Simon reluctantly pulls back, fierce and angry still at Magee's attempt on Baz's person, Magee sparkles with the compelling wrath of Simon's magic.

“Thanks,” Bunce says. She knows Baz’s intervention was at least in part for her. They don’t need to oust the principal. Magee is no good, but who in hell is Baz to question Bunce when she says there have been worse?

“May I do the honors?” Agatha asks. This, too, needs to be erased, and neither Baz nor Simon is eager to step back into Magee's mind. Agatha's Never mind is so gentle that Magee collapses into it like a bed.

“You're gonna have to do Huynh, too,” Simon says with apologetic defiance, as if expecting her to object. “I can't tell you how many ways I swore to him Baz isn’t a vampire. If he wakes up remembering this, it's gonna be hell on our friendship.”

Agatha runs a hand across Huynh's forehead. “He's fine,” she says.

“He doesn't want to remember,” Bunce adds. “He's not suited for killing.”

“He tried to keep me away tonight,” Simon says. “But I thought I could help him.” He looks up at Baz. “And you. I knew he was getting ready for a hunt. I thought maybe for you. I didn’t know it was Sullivan putting him up to it.” His hand brushes the hair from Huynh’s forehead. “It all fucking sucks.”

Agatha studies the two for a moment, then reaches into her handbag for her little mirror. Angling the mirror so that she can see Huynh reflected in it, she purses her lips and clucks. “You called it, Penny. It’s a spell. Poor guy.” To her mirror, she whispers, “Undo this hurt.”

Agatha's mirror-magic is bronze-colored and knobbly, like an army of mechanical crickets; it snaps its way out of the mirror and into Huynh, vanishing into his skin. Huynh's limp face twitches at the intrusions.

Far down the hall, in Ms. Sullivan's classroom, a small time-bomb explodes, destroying a locked cabinet of illicit artifacts. The paper ones burn hot; flames lick up the wall. Soon, the whole classroom is alight and the fire devours its way out into the long hallway.

There's no sound as self-satisfied as that of fire snickering across vast, flammable expanses. “There's a fire,” Baz says. He can’t quite hide the terror in his voice.

“I got it,” Simon yells, staggering away. “Watch Dec for me.”

Baz is definitely watching. Anything to avoid imagining the inferno down the hall. Anyway, it wouldn’t be easy to tear his eyes away from the convulsions those burrowing magical extractors
spark in Huynh's face. Imagine relinquishing everything you hate about yourself to these tiny machines, how easy it would be to let it all go. When they reappear, glossy like they're dripping engine grease, they scuttle swiftly back into the glass of the mirror.

“It's gone now,” Agatha says after surveying her mirror carefully. “Not the ability—he might need that again, gods forbid. But all the horrible parts are gone.”

_Jhumpa Lahiri._ Gone. Just like that.

“What kind of dastardly mage would force someone into service?” Bunce demands. Even though she’s the one who figured it out in the first place, her shock is real.

Agatha takes her hand. “Magicians are people, darling, and too many people do awful things.” She pulls her girlfriend closer and wraps arms around her till the shaking stills. “I doubt we’ll learn who cursed Mr. Huynh to a life of vampire-killing. But at least we know that it’s over.”

If Baz hadn't been watching Agatha's surefire magic since they first sat down in the Condesa's parlor decades before, he wouldn't believe it. But Huynh's pulse beats tranquilly below his skin, which has lost its pallor and instead looks the normal unhealthy hue of anyone unlucky enough to be lying under these 1950s-era fluorescents. Imagine if you could lose the pain.

Agatha clicks the mirror shut with satisfaction. It's like a hypnotist's snap, returning Baz and Bunce to awareness.

“Great snakes!” Bunce says. “Does Simon know how to put out fires?”

Baz would rather not admit that, for all Baz has taught him, the brunt of Simon's magic is basically just force of will. Baz didn’t even ask himself the question. “I don't doubt he'll figure something out.”

As if on cue, they hear a faint cry of “Chill out!”

It's a spell for healing common burns. “That's not going to do it,” Agatha says, releasing Bunce and grabbing Baz by the elbow as if to steer themselves toward Simon for backup. They're not even to the hallway before the blast of cold hits them. It's like when you open the door in a snowstorm and the chill is so immediate and wall-like that your indoor comfort immediately seems an unthinkable fiction. “Basil?” she asks, face pale and lips chattering, “Penny? What was that?”

The cold dissipates in seconds, leaving Agatha's skin underlain with rose.

“Simon figured something out,” Baz says smugly.

* * *

When no one remembers what you've done, no one applauds you. Neither does your life need to change all that much. As Baz sees it, all of this is good.

Bunce managed to erase all the security footage, and Agatha, who is the kind of excellent judge of character who can instantly peg a person’s stereotypes about vampires, planted some dried roses, a taxidermied raven, and a bunch of gothic vampire texts in the charred remains of Sullivan's classroom. While the police and fire marshals aren't convinced, Magee (whose entire memory of this vampire situation is sketchy at best) sees this as more than sufficient evidence that the Watford vampire, Michelle Sullivan, self-destructed in a fiery blaze. As Sullivan doesn't show up to contradict this view of things, and as Magee—like the city of Watford at large—apparently ceases to receive unwelcome visits from Sullivan's vampire henchpersons, this is ample reason to resume school as usual.
Prom's back on.

It's too late to rent someplace fancy, though, so it's in the gym, and catered by a restaurant that offers chili by the five-gallon bucket. Fetherhew's the adviser to the students' social committee; therefore, Baz is unsurprised when he arrives to find the place decked out in black crepe-paper streamers, thumping mood lights, and an elaborately-painted cardboard archway that reads Prom of Death. Magee, whom someone has unfortunately permitted to visit the DJ table, announces each couple as they push through the red satin curtains and into the low-budget vampire-nightclub of the Watford High gym. “Penelope Ann Bunce and guest Agatha Well Bay Loave,” Magee intones with nasal pomposity. “Tyrannosaur B. Pitch and Simon Olivier Snow!”

Simon’s name comes out like a taunt. Apparently, Magee’s sole souvenir of the night of the vampires is a general and deeply unattractive distaste for Mr. Snow—one that Simon, unfortunately, does little to allay. (“No one attacks you without getting on my shit list,” Simon explained when Baz asked if he could maybe stop goading Magee so much. “You attacked me,” Baz pointed out. Simon nodded: “Case in point.”)

They've taken the early shift, which happens to end at precisely the moment Magee decides to start shoving chaperones onto the dance-floor to put a stop to “all this touching!”

Baz drags Simon—who may have had a few drinks with dinner beforehand, and who’s trying and failing to convince a freshly-arrived Huynh and his very real girlfriend to get up in some '90s-style freaking with him—and the others out before Magee can embroil them. This is not their fight.

It's a satisfactory prom night. They all go back to his place to get hammered, then Ag and Bunce take the guest room, and in the morning, everyone feels a little shitty till they've stumbled down the block to wrap themselves around a mountain of eggs at Lola's.

* * *

Simon is a fool. He bounds down the stairs after school, and, like the breathtaking dilettante of a fool he is, leans against the doorframe in his too-fitted, too-faded (entirely inappropriate for a high-school teacher because the whole ensemble screams “Fuck Me: I'm Fuckable”) band t-shirt and jeans, grinning.

His body glows with health and vigor. It’s hard to believe that only weeks ago he lay on this very floor in a garish pool of his own juices, death fluttering like moths in the air around them. He is beautiful and bright-eyed and clearly begging for attention.

“Yes?” Baz asks, right eyebrow arched.

“I forgot about graduation!” Simon exclaims.

Baz is busy with actual work, entering student writing scores into the online gradebook while mentally composing tomorrow's lesson on quotation analysis. He tries not to roll his eyes.

“You're four weeks too early. Try forgetting it in June.”

Simon squawks like a goddamned cockatiel, delighted. “I forgot it happens! Because my whole life is freshmen! And they really really don't care about graduating.”

“Yes, Mr. Snow, I can confirm that graduation happens.”

Simon just shakes his head at Baz's dry response; he will not be deterred.
This man. Baz would joyously retire his own hood and robes in an instant if graduation-support wasn't a stipulation of every teacher's contract. "It's required," he says. "You have no choice." And Simon just beams wider and basically skips across the floor to where Baz is still clutching thick stacks of stapled binder paper, but doesn't totally remember what he intended to do with it, because despite the wide-open classroom door, Simon is inches from kissing him, sweet-apple breath drawing him closer.

"What jobs do we get to do?" Simon asks, very close, and the poor doofus doesn't realize that this is exactly the wrong question if he has any hope of kissing Baz again in the next ten minutes, because Baz has some strong thoughts on graduation.

Baz straightens away from Simon. "Basically," he begins, setting down the sheaf of papers, "it boils down to, 'think of every possible way the kids could fuck this triumphant day up for themselves, and then prevent them from doing it.' There are four teachers whose job—their whole job—is to deter students from falling off the stage—off the stage, four teachers there to stop them, as if there's even any reason students should be near the front of the stage, except for the goddamn sheep instinct that strikes as soon as they're herded, by another pack of teachers, to the backstage before they get their diplomas, and then they're pushed one by one out out in the lights and they panic. They just want to get back to all the other people, to their flock, like all those gowns in the front of the audience are a homing beacon and the second they've got that paper, they're booking it straight for the crowd. And meanwhile, a bunch of the other kids definitely have balloons and beach toys that they're blowing up under someone's robes, and as for what I'll be doing, I'll be heading up the crew that's flying around like rabid bats catching these beach balls and shredding them with my hands of fury because this is graduation, and someone's trying to get a picture of her kid shaking hands with Magee—who is the worst at graduation, by the way, never even remembers which hand to use for what—and I want to let this one parent get a goddamned photo without an airborne blow-up doll in it since the kid's about three seconds from toppling right off the …"

"Baz." Simon's laughing, brushing a rough kiss over a stubbly bit of Baz's cheek. "Enough!" he whispers. "I'm trying to kiss you."

"Making a pretty sorry show of it," Baz observes, because he can be flexible and save this rant for another day. He has a whole month of ranting ahead, so he permits himself to let the point of graduation's shittiness drop for now to pull Simon closer and murmur seductively against Simon's lips, "Wait till you see me in my robes, Mr. Snow. They're so long, and so severe. And so floppy. You're going to lose it when you see how good I drape."

He pushes in for more, his lips opening Simon's, but Simon is laughing harder now, right into his mouth, and saying something unintelligible, but that sounds like, "Ah luffa too mush to kissou."

Failing to find satisfaction kissing these contorted lips, Baz pulls back to puzzle over what Simon just said. Wait. This doesn't seem right, but in case it is, he has to ask:

"I don't think … well, I have to ask: Did you say you love me too much to kiss me?"

Simon laughs even harder, maniacally, beside himself. Ridiculous as a mechanical monkey, he guffaws and cackles and pounds the desk, and this isn't really making Baz feel excellent. In fact, Baz may look a little hurt at Simon's mirth.

Simon seems to notice that Baz is closing up again, because he suddenly makes a bid for composure. Clapping a sturdy hand on Baz's shoulder, he takes a few deep breaths to steady his voice, then says, "I said I'm laughing too much."
Baz is shocked to realize that he isn't relieved. In fact, after a moment's self-examination, he finds that he's closer to disappointed. Maybe even dejected.

This cannot be, but it is: He wants Simon to love him, damn the costs.

(And yes, he's aware of those costs; yes, his mind says Simon Snow is an emotional minefield, is cataloging a whole mental library of hour-long rebuilding-fund-solicitation slideshows full of the mangled devastation that this way lies; but every single other part of him is ready to risk detonation.)

Simon smiles impishly, and the laugh is still there caught in his eyebrows and the corners of his mouth. Baz hopes he hasn't given himself away; he wonders how much of his own hand he's revealed through the stern mask that is his face—and then, of course, realizes that this situation is funny, he should be laughing but he's very much not, and that may be the biggest tell of all.

And, watching him, Simon says, “But … um …”

“Um.” Baz repeats it intentionally—a challenge. And when Simon doesn't respond, he says it again, a slow moment later: “Um?”

Simon's eyes are so serious under that sparkle of laughter, and maybe a little wounded by Baz's teasing.

“Um, yeah,” he says resolutely, “Fuck you, Baz: I fucking love you.” He looks shrewdly at Baz, who is aware that his face is no longer holding its cards close. More likely, his face has flung its cards across the table and is crowing their names like a drunken gambler. “But not too much to kiss you, asshole.”

No faith comes without cost, Baz thinks. No one believes without dying.

It's happened: Simon is a fool, and Baz loves him.

*  

“If you had told me eight years ago that I'd be lecturing Basil Pitch about workplace decorum,” Bunce begins, then shakes her head. Scrap that. “If you had told me eight months ago, I would've bet you naming rights to my firstborn that you were wrong. What the hells have you done to him, Simon?”
“I still don't fucking buy it,” Martinez roars down the long table. “So there's a fucking fire and she disappears. That doesn't prove shit.”

“Magee keeps talking about that creepy bird they all found in her room,” points out a glassy-eyed Fetherhew.

“Weird goth shit. Doesn't take a vampire, I mean, I fucking hated working next to her, but I feel like we owe it to her to at absolute minimum baseline look for her instead of just saying, She was a vampire, so good riddance.”

“Nah,” Powell breaks in, “didn't you see the security footage?”

“There wasn't any. It got wiped, right?”

Fetherhew breaks in: “Oh, shit, do vampires not show up on video?”

Powell guffaws. “Carys, you gotta stop with the vampire romances.” She pulls out her phone. “The school video got wiped. Not the motorcycle club, though. Back in January, remember? The bar across the street had a camera.” She passes the phone down to Martinez and Fetherhew. “The police were sitting on it. Just dropped today. Take a look and tell me this isn’t proof.”

The dubious squinch of Martinez's eyes as she thumbs through the first of the photos on Powell's phone gives way to wide-eyed amazement. “No fucking way.”

Baz knows what she's seeing. Bunce showed him and Simon while they walked here. In the released video stills, a slender woman in a smart teal coat leads an ominous-looking handful of people into the biker clubhouse. Then, in a zoomed-in, grainy view through the window, we see an attack. Upright in a sea of slumping drunkards, the woman in the coat bites the tattooed throat of a brawny man whose pixelated expression reveals only surprise. Finally, quite clear, the vampires emerge. At their head, again, the woman in the teal coat casts a sidelong look across the street, directly into the camera. It's unmistakably Sullivan.

“Doesn't prove she's dead,” Powell says, “but if she is, I'm not crying any tears for her.”

“Four years,” Martinez says heavily. “Four fucking years I worked next to a fucking vampire.” The word is a lead weight. Baz feels it drag him down.

“And lived to tell the tale,” Bunce breaks in easily, topping off Martinez's glass. “Cheers to you.”

“To all of us!” Coach Mac corrects, slapping his leg. “We dodged a real bullet there, guys.”

Elspeth agrees. “To all of us.” The amber drinks slosh heartily as glasses clank together overhead.

“Seriously,” Elspeth marvels quietly to Baz and Simon a moment later, when Martinez seems a little less stressed out by the whole thing, “a vampire at Watford High? I admit I found Magee's warnings paranoid, but—oh my god, do you realize this means Magee was right for once?”

“For real,” Fetherhew laughs. “And, I mean, for all the little shit Magee gets wrong, at least the one
right thing was like a really important thing, like a life-or-death thing. Wait.” She heeds her own instruction, freezing in uneasy thought. “How the fuck are we not dead? How's Pitch not dead?” She whirls, accusatory and loosely-balanced, toward Baz.

“Why him?” Elspeth asks from in between, eyebrows bunching.

“The way those guys snarked at each other?” Fetherhew shrugs. “Figured it was hate. Or maybe—“ She leans onto Elspeth a little to address Baz. “Sorry, but, maybe that you were closet fuck-buds?” Reaching a little clumsily, she pats Simon's hand, which is curled into Baz's on top of the table. “Guess not. But, like, not so far off. Still, did you have any idea what kind of enemy you were making with all the assholery, Pitch?”

None, Baz thinks.

“Oh god,” Elspeth shudders in suppressed horror. “If you'd been bitten, Basil. That was how your mom—I don't know how you can be so calm! If I were you, I'd be buried in my pillows screaming.”

People are looking.

“Your mom?” Powell asks. “What happened with—“

“She died fighting vampires. I don't know how you're so cool, Basil, when all this time we've been working with one of the exact same kinds of slimy, bloodsucking parasites that killed your mom.”

“I...” Baz realizes with hideous discomfort that he is expected to say something. “It pains me terribly to think of my mother's death.” Simon squeezes his fingers harder. “However, I hardly think this grounds for revoking basic tolerance of my colleagues.”

“Tolerance?” Powell spits out. People are listening. “We're not talking religious differences here, Pitch. They're fucking succubi. They're not humans anymore. They don't feel things like we do. They don't control themselves. They just take and they take.”

Declan Huynh, it is a relief to see, ambles away from the table in the middle of the conversation to play 2x4 Jenga with Mr. Tejo. If he notices the topic, it makes no mark.

“I remember her,” Elspeth is saying to him quietly. “I know we were little, but of course I remember. We all do. She was so smart and so powerful, and they just ripped her away. Mindlessly. Like she was nothing.” She sounds teary. “I'm sorry. Why am I saying this to you? You were there.”

“I was there,” Baz repeats. He has nothing to add. Everything Elspeth’s saying is accurate.

“Those vampires are no joke,” Cragshore adds, having apparently missed the bulk of the conversation. “Only good vampire's a staked vampire.”

“It's really the humane thing to do, if you think about it,” muses Elspeth gloomily. “Like shooting a rabid dog. All the light's already gone.”

Baz concentrates on breathing—it makes him look human and normal, and the steady current of air through his internal tubing helps calm him.

“We just have to stay ready,” says Cragshore.

“Alert, yeah,” Fetherhew agrees.

“Vigilant!” Powell yells, collapsing into giggles at Magee's much-parodied word choice. The Ethics
Commission at large joins in. Simon's fingers tighten further around Baz's. Baz won't look him in the eye. “No wind, no rain, nor winter's cold... keep those stakes ready!” Tighter, angry magic simmering just below the skin, the singed smell of faulty wiring. No looks necessary; Simon's about to blow.

“They're gone!” Simon bursts, slamming his other fist on the table. “No attacks since the night Sullivan—since the night we think Sullivan burned. Can we just drop it for a few goddamn minutes?”

The silence is immediate and obtrusive. Everyone tries and fails to suppress their gawping. They know by now that Snow's an orphan, an ACTer, and highly volatile. They've pissed him off. Maybe some of them feel a little bad, too. If they're reading this right—in the way least likely to get Baz destroyed—they probably figure Simon's trying to protect Baz from a bunch of drunken buffoonery about the creatures that killed his mother.

“Hey, man,” Cragshore ventures. “Not trying to bum anyone out.”

“I just...It's just been a fucking lot of weird shit, you know?” Simon grunts. Cragshore's a good guy. Simon likes him. “Can we just not talk about murder for a little bit?”

Elspeth, who looks like guilt has devoured her innards, is gnawing on her cheek.

“What about students we'd like to murder?” Baz inquires in a stilted attempt to reintroduce some humor.

“Like who?” Elspeth asks, and Baz is so taken aback by her guileless gratitude, so unlike the trademark trickery of her charlatan Witch King of a father, that he lets drop the grammar pedantry.

“What say we commence with a certain senior reputed to have been discovered in the bathroom dealing dime bags and the answer key to Ms. Canus's algebra exams.”

“How the fuck that kid got the key to the copy room...” Elspeth storms, and the swiftness with which her contrition converts to wrath sets the crowd roaring again.

* 

It's a fine evening. Simon runs across the street for takeout barbecue, which comes in a thick, folded paper bag that he wedges under one arm for their walk back. He takes off half a step ahead, which isn't like him. Lately, he's been insisting on holding hands when they walk. Baz minds this far less than he lets on.

Tonight’s distance is unsettling. Simon's hands are jammed in his pockets. The cornbread’s probably getting crushed.

“Thank you,” Baz says to Simon's shoulder after a block or so. He is not famed for his graciousness or appreciation, but this comes out all right. He trusts Simon to know he means for the watching-out earlier, not the ribs and slaw (although that fragrant bag is awfully enticing).

“It wasn't for you,” Simon mutters. “I don't want to think about someone staking you.”

What do you say to that? Simon trudges on, fiery in his defensive isolation, a silly sack of meat under his arm and dejection in the hunch of his broad shoulders.

“Simon.” Baz's voice is commanding. Simon pauses, turns. There is something remarkable in seeing a body you know from every trembling, naked angle, fully clothed in the warm evening gold of a
streetlight. The sharp shadows break him, for a moment, into incongruous polygons of color and
dark. He is someone else—a stranger. Then he shifts, and everything is right. Baz is holding out a
hand to him and saying what he’s said too many times to track these last few weeks. “I love you.”

“You fucking better,” Simon says. He takes the hand.

* * *

To Baz’s great surprise and delight, Mia Montero is awarded the title of Senior Speaker of Note, a
position assigned to a senior whose great accomplishments don’t necessarily show up in a report
card. It’s usually the one speech you’re actually glad to hear at graduation. (To no one’s surprise, his
student Roland Jackson will speak as valedictorian, and good thing, too; he’s been drafting his
pompous oration for two years now.) Midway through listening to the latest iteration of her speech
after school one balmy afternoon, Baz notices Simon slip into the doorway. Mia doesn’t see, too
fixed on the hesitant words on the crumpled sheet in her hands, so she startles at the burst of applause
when she finishes.

It is not Baz’s custom to applaud a speech he’s been asked to critique.

“That was flippin’ rad!” Simon says, launching himself into the room. “Man, I’m gonna cry.”

Mia smiles uneasily; she doesn’t know Simon.

“Mr. Snow,” Baz explains. “This is Mia. And yes, Mia, I agree that this is far more compelling than
the earlier drafts. The tunnel metaphor may drag on a bit, and the light-and-dark contrast is certainly
far from original, but—”

“It’s not just light and dark, though!” Simon cuts in. “It’s about being trapped, and possibilities, and
there’s that whole thing about, like, ‘I used to think the light was freedom,’ and the starry night, and it
totally subverts expectations. I think it’s great.”

Mia’s smile is bigger now.

Baz shakes his head a little, but he mostly agrees.

“You’d do well to listen to Mr. Snow,” he says. “It's a fine speech, Mia. Will your sister be at the
ceremony?”

He promises to meet them on the terraces afterward. He will shake hands and smile for photos, and
the pride in his eyes will be real.

After Mia leaves, Simon says, “Hey man, so I know you’re busy, but it’s been hard to get five
minutes with you at school lately. I need to settle a score.”

“Which?” Baz inquires.

“Christmas.”

This doesn’t make sense.

“The presents?” Simon goes on. “I didn't get you anything, you got me that magic book—”

“That wasn't a present.”

“Fuck you, that was the first present you ever gave me; you wrote our names in it; it was a goddamn
present.”
“As you like it. Should I take this to mean, then, that by 'settling the score,' you mean to say that you have a gift for me?”

“Yep.” The look in Simon's eye makes Baz a little uncomfortable.

“Is it sexual? Because if it's sexual, this is hardly...”

“No, it's better.”

Baz raises an eyebrow disbelievingly.

“Better for you, at least.” His voice falters a little. “I think.”

He leads Baz out of the room, upstairs, down the long broad corridors toward the main office. It's late enough that the lights in the office are out, and the hall's mostly empty.

“It's in the office?” Baz asks. He has never liked the office. Usually he can't get even this close without feeling rotten. It's like guilt and judgment and accusation ooze from the walls.

“Come here,” Simon says. He sees Baz holding back.

Baz is in the habit of bracing himself mentally before he steps into the office. He tends to rush in, grab his mail, sign his timesheet, say a civil word to the office manager, and flee. He tries not to let himself feel anything. It's awful. It's awful and painful and the memories are too terrible. He knows enough to know what he's trying to hide from himself. With deep reluctance, he takes a few steps closer.

“I did some research, Baz,” Simon says with a quiet of which Baz would have suspected him incapable. “You never told me this is where it happened.”

“She worked for the district Board of Ed.” Baz has never told this to anyone. “She had an evening meeting here, and she'd picked me up from childcare and brought me along—I was the sort of well-behaved child who would sit quietly and draw while the grown-ups talked—but we were just walking up to the office when they attacked us.

“They got me first, and maybe they would have been content to take just me. They weren't leaders or masterminds, just a couple hungry vampires on the roam, and they'd just drained the principal—they can't have wanted much more. But one of them was just starting to bite me when my mom cursed them and they leaped at her instead. I don't remember this part that well—there was a pile, them on her, and she was fighting back till suddenly there was blood, like they’d bit her, and in that instant she gave up; her arm shot out, clutching her wand, and she yelled—she yelled, “I hold with those who favor fire,” and the flames engulfed them all.”

“You were—”

“I was far enough away.”

“No, I mean, you were, what, five?”

“Four.”

The mirrored pain in Simon's eyes is unbearable. Baz looks away.

“Why are we here?”
“Let go, Baz. I know you lock yourself up when you're near here. I can feel it. And I could feel the way the place gets to you. But I think it's changing.” This is not at all what Baz expected. “Let down the guard for a second.”

It's not easy. It's like trying to relax in the seconds before the doctor injects you. He is tense and anxious—more anxious than he would have guessed he would be, perhaps because now that he knows Simon can feel it too, he has proof that his mother's eternal judgment is not a figment of his imagination. It's real, and it's here, in the walls and the beams and the air of this, the place she died.

Simon's hand, reliable as oak, welcomes his.

Then, he lets go. He lets himself listen and feel. The air whips motionlessly, silently around him, whispering wordless sentiments that he can't make out. They bombard him, brusque and sleek and unending, thought after thought, vague ideas of betrayal and disgrace and shame, and though it’s not pleasant, this is more or less what he expected. He can tolerate it.

He lets go a little more. The invisible messages gain more substance. As they slip past, they leave soft impressions on his skin. But they’re kinder now. They don't hurt. In fact, they feel …. He looks wide-eyed at Simon.

“It’s starting to feel good now, yeah?”

It is. They do. He lets the phantom winds buffet him. They feel warm and clumsily approving.

“Like a, what, like, an affirmation, right?”

The distasteful term jolts Baz back into himself. “You can't know that.”

“Sorry, I'm not you, but, like, I can feel it too. I think she’s proud of you, Baz.”

“She died so she wouldn't be …” Recalling the moment his mother stopped fighting and chose death, he’s almost yelling. He hushes himself. Even in this near-deserted hallway, someone might hear. “She killed herself so she wouldn't end up like me.”

“And you took a job here.”

“I did.” Baz is not sure where Simon's going with this.

“You took a job here, where she'd watch you and judge you, because even when our parents hate us, we want them. But she doesn't hate you.”

“She scorches me. I'm a weakling. I've stayed for my selfish pleasure, attempting to mitigate the abomination of my soiled genetics with the work that she regarded most highly. It's not enough. I'll never be brave enough to be what she was.”

“And thank all your fucking gods for that, asshole.” Simon is now perhaps a little louder than is appropriate, considering their circumstances. “You're a fucking hero, Baz, and everyone who knows enough about you knows it, except you. You'll never be good enough for your own standards, Baz, but let me say this: On your worst days, you're still a fucking cauldron of gold pieces better than a shitheel like me.”

Baz's reluctance to listen to Simon's obviously biased drivel takes backseat to indignation: “You're not—“

“Here's your present, Baz.”
Simon drags Baz to a knee beside one of the wooden beams that supports the door to the office. It's old, dark wood, knotted and scarred and shinier in patches where it's had graffiti rubbed off over the years. He presses Baz's hand to a long, seam-like scar near the base of the wood, and Baz suddenly knows: This wood is walnut. Like his mother’s wand.

“When she cast that spell, Baz, her wand protected itself,” Simon says, but he doesn't need to.

Her wand didn’t burn. Through his palm, through the inches of heavy sister-wood in which it burrowed for refuge almost 30 years ago, the wand's bright, insistent warmth is connecting with Baz, and Simon, damn him, Simon knew: it's affirmation.

“I thought you’d like to know,” Simon breaks in many long moments later. “Maybe, like, stick up a plaque or something.”

“No,” Baz says, or at least thinks he says—his mind is otherwise consumed—”This is quite enough.”

* * *

Baz would far rather read poetry than write it. His critical ear and eye for meter and rhyme don’t seem keen to guide the earnest ventures of his clumsy hand. He tries blank verse, sonnets, acrostics, even free verse—which comes out the worst of all of them, too free, too little rule to hold those obstreperous words in line—and every draft’s a failure that he scorns to look upon again.

He’s already ransacked every poetry book he owns. Nothing’s quite right.

Finally, he turns in key-tapping irritation to his laptop. Someone must have written something that will do the job.

This is how Ari finds him, hours later, still glaring at his computer, afloat in a sea of flopped-open books that carpet half the living room.

“Shit, B, this looks ominous as hell. Are you a conspiracy theorist now? Am I going to find my bedroom wallpapered in thumbtacks and madman’s decoupage?”

Baz uncurls himself from his hunch. “Obviously, I am trying to locate a poem.”

“Then you’ll be grateful to hear that I have located approximately four hundred such in my immediate line of sight.”

“A particular poem.”

“Ah.” She nods, eyes crinkling. Lifting the poem book nearest at hand, she reads, “‘Lay open now to only me that white body, and I will, as the awkward butterfly, land quietly upon you.’” She fans herself lightly with the thin volume. “Particular, you said? As in, for someone particular?”

Her finger taps at her lip. Tap. Tap. Tap. Then, horrified:

“Tyrannus Basilton. Don’t tell me you’re proposing.”

Her posture suggests that this would be a scandal of considerably greater magnitude than his recent forays into vampire-slaying and memory erasure.

Honestly, Baz’s opinion of the situation is not so far from his sister’s. “Crowley, what would even lead you to suspect—?”

“Only that you’ve clearly forgotten about dinner in your mad quest to find the perfect poem to pledge
“the everlasting troth of your love.”

Crap. He did forget dinner.

“When are they arriving?” he asks.

Ari checks her forearm. “Literally any minute now. I’m assuming you’ve prepared nothing.”

“Correct.” With a despairing look around, he brandishes his pen at the detritus of his failure. The books sail to their shelves, the laptop to its corner of the desk, and the room’s almost to rights again. “Perhaps you can make yourself useful with some drinks while I get to it?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We’ll take them out.”

Seconds later, Simon blows through the door, holding it wide for a cheery Bunce, Agatha beaming on her arm, all three fresh from what must have been an inspiring meeting to rough out plans for a formal partnership between the Foster Center and Watford High.

“Turn it around!” Ari orders before they’ve all even made it in. “We’re going to L’Arc en Ciel. Rumor holds that’s become rather a significant locale for the two of you?” She heralds Agatha and Bunce back down the hall toward the elevator, but doesn’t miss the way Simon drags Baz in for a kiss before he runs back to rejoin the meeting debrief.

Walking down the sidewalk behind the prattling trio, Ari nudges her brother. “Just ask him.”

It takes Baz, who may have neglected his usual vigilant attention to personal rigidity while watching Simon stroll before him, a moment to recall what this means. “I will not,” he blinks.

“Oh fine. But you guys. I mean, it seems—” She hesitates, and when she speaks again, her voice sounds a little strange. “It seems really good, B.”

“It is,” Baz says seriously. “He’s become my port in the storm.” Who knew he was capable of saying such a thing straight-faced, let alone meaning it?

“Then say that.”

* * *

The phone rings. Simon grabs it with half a hand, says a hurried, “Snow here.” He listens for a second. “Sure, Penny, come on over.”

Simon’s changing the wall displays, again, because apparently one of the three things ACT teaches you before they saddle you with 150 disadvantaged students’ educational needs is the absolute necessity of frequently-updated sticker-charts, even in this, the last instructional week of the school year. Baz lounges in Simon’s teacher’s chair, rereading *The Importance of Being Earnest* and making occasional snide remarks about chart alignment.

“Maybe you could get your face out of your Whitman or whatever and gimme a goddamn hand,” Simon mutters in mock irritation. “Goddamn English majors.”

“It’s Wilde,” Baz says, displaying the cover for a moment. “But I suppose you made it clear from the beginning that literature isn’t your greatest passion.”

“What? Oh.” Simon colors a little, remembering that night of questions, way back in January. “What did you ask me? Booze or books?”
“Something along those lines, yes.”

“Simon!,” says Bunce, putting her head in the door. “Oh, and hello, Pitch. I'm sorry, but I was hoping to speak to Mr. Snow alone for a moment.”

Baz rises to leave, but Simon stops him with a touch and says, “I don't mind if he's here. Unless it's, like, a warning about how he's plotting to kill me, in which case…”

Ms. Bunce chuckles politely, but her face is tight. “No.” She closes the door behind her and takes a seat in one of Simon's student desks. “I'm afraid I have bad news, though.” Penelope Bunce is not the sort of person to prolong a distasteful reveal. “Principal Magee has decided not to re-elect you for next year.” She looks down at the scratched, graffiti-ridden surface of the desk. “I'm really sorry, Simon. I was hoping we'd get to keep you.”

Baz doesn't remember reaching out, but his arm's around Simon's shoulders, a defensive stance—protecting what is his. “How do we fight this?” he demands.

Ms. Bunce scowls. “I suppose we can appeal to the school board, but while it's obvious to me that there's some personal bias from Magee, it's true that our projected enrollment is down, plus Simon doesn't have tenure, and on top of that, he's an ACTer.”

“So's Fetherhew.”

“Yeah, but Carys was planning to leave after this year anyway to be a lawyer or astronaut or whatever. There's not going to be a ton of sympathy.”

“It's fine,” Simon breaks in, shrugging out from under Baz's hand, which may be clenching uncomfortably tight around his shoulder. “It's really fine. Fuck 'em. It's not like there aren't a dozen other high schools in the district. Or fuck, what am I even teaching English for? It's like you said, the books or booze. I don't love it enough. I'm not here for the words; I just want the kids to, like, turn out better than me.

“I'm the guy who takes booze over books every time. I'm the guy who's always gonna need a goddamn escape.”

“Simon,” Baz protests.

“Just give me some space, okay?” Simon stops on his way out the door. “Thanks, Penny.”

* 

They don't talk about it the next few days or nights; Simon acts like everything's normal, and so Baz tries to do the same. Things are fine, but also less. They're friendly and jocose, but there's a barrier to seriousness. Any time Baz tries to bring up anything of importance, Simon deflects the conversation. Since his deflection techniques are primarily cheap insults and cheaper advances, Baz tends to drop the subject pretty quickly.

Baz does find and leave open the Rita Dove poem that keeps running through his head, and he's pretty sure Simon sees it because he makes a snide remark over dinner about “being responsible for the lives we change.”

Despite the tone, it's obvious that Simon's read and reread the poem. He knows this about Simon—Simon loves poetry. He devours books. He glories in the crude grace of language.

“Pretend all you like,” Baz tells him, “but I know you appreciate beauty.”
“Narcissistic much?” Simon snipes, eyeballing him, but Baz will not be deterred.

“The world tried to beat it out of you,” Baz continues. His voice is low and very very serious. He knows that Simon will not like this. “They tried to beat out the gay, but you were too strong. They tried to beat out the compassion, but again, you resisted. They showed you ugliness and oppression and presented loss of self as the only viable salvation. And you hid yourself for … for so long, you hid yourself, Simon. You hid yourself from everyone else, and maybe you learned to hide so well that you hid from yourself, too. Remember when …” he touches the end of his finger to the back of Simon’s hand, lets him feel the memory of the Know thyself spell he cast on Simon all those months ago.

Simon, who has been leaning in, almost as if hypnotized by the rivery depths of Baz’s voice, flushes and sits back hastily, petulant arms taking refuge in their own closeting embrace.

“If letting go is saying no,” Baz says, quoting Baldwin at him because he knows about Simon and Baldwin; he knows, “then what is holding on saying?”

Simon stares at him for a long long minute, and in that stare, there’s everything he loves and aches for—a steely cage of hurt and defiance and tight-lipped resolve and, just below it all, vast joyous meadows of want and sunshine.

“You are so much to me, Simon,” Baz says. “I’ve been searching for the right words, but no one seems to say exactly what I mean. I’m afraid this means I must resort to an overused analogy, because trite though it may be, it’s the truth. I find refuge with you.” I feel safe. I feel protected. I feel loved. “You’re my port in a storm.”

Simon’s eyes flare and darken, and whether it’s with gratitude or terror or resentment for the limitless strength he will never not believe Baz controls, Baz cannot say. Baz will press no further. Even now, Simon’s barriers are his own. If they fall, it will be on Simon’s say-so.

Simon finally breaks off the stare, and the conversation. “Fuck your words. I’m having a drink.”

“Get me one?” Baz asks in the lightest tone he can manage, flicking his pen to clear the laden table.

After this, there are carefully-clinking brandy glasses, and the thawing companionability of side-by-side grading of the final stacks of homework, and when they tumble into bed far too late for sex, they have sex anyway, warm and slow in the lazy late-spring night air.

Then, he really should go to bed, but it has escaped no one that Baz can rarely sleep after sex until he’s written in his journal. Tossing under the light sheets, Simon mocks him:

“Dear Diary, Simon Oliver Snow just gave me the beej of the millennium…”

Baz doesn’t glance up.

“In my journal, you’re Simon Olivier.”

After a quizzical second, Simon starts to laugh—the real, open laughter even Baz too rarely hears from him—and he keeps laughing as he ventures to caress the long furrow of Baz’s spine, arched by Baz’s writing-in-bed posture. Pull me closer, Baz thinks, and keeps writing.

*

Simon is a fine teacher. It may not be his calling, but his students have learned from him and will miss him. Baz hears Simon’s students’ tearful goodbyes at the top of the stairs while he dismisses his
own students with a resolute final handshake.

Some of them will do great things. He will be proud—not of, but for them. Others will do terrible or sad or meaningless things, and he will try not to take those failures too hard.

Simon spends a few nights at his own place. This, too, Baz tries not to take too hard. Sometimes you need room when you're forging bonds.

Sometimes, you need room to reassess.

*

“I used to think the light meant freedom,” Mia says. Her hands still grip the rails of the podium to hide their trembling, but her voice has grown steady and strong. “I thought if I got somewhere bright enough, I would see who I was really supposed to be. I thought everything would just make sense. But it wasn’t in the light where I found myself. It was the dark.

“There was one night Mr. Pitch—that’s my English teacher—” She is interrupted by whistles and applause from the hundreds of students below her. Baz, who is certain his name didn’t appear in the earlier draft of the speech, ceases disabling confiscated inflatables to nod in muted recognition. “Yeah.” She smiles. “So, Mr. Pitch made us read this letter about exploring space. I don’t want to explore space. But I stuck my head out the window to look at the sky—it was the middle of the night, there was no moon, just some stars. It wasn’t even the stars I noticed, though. It was the dark.

“It was space. There’s so much of it. So much more than I can imagine. And I stood there looking out at it and thinking, I’m so tiny. We’re all so tiny. All of us. And space is so huge that it has to mean something.

“Maybe it means my life is meaningless.

“Or maybe it means that this one tiny life—this one chance to exist in this enormous universe—is the greatest gift any person could ask for.”

In black robes at one side of the stage, Simon is waiting for the moment when he’ll be needed to offer an arm as graduates in teetery heels descend the carpeted stairs. Simon, who will not be here next year, but upon whom we shall rely today. Reliable, strong, stubborn Simon, who right now is turned in unfeigned rapture toward Mia.

“A lot of things changed for me this year. I made some big choices about my future and closed some doors to my past. Sometimes people say I am growing up too quickly. It’s true that I am growing up. But when they say too quickly, it makes me want to ask, Compared to what?

“I am starting to think that we are all in the dark, all the time. And the darkness? The darkness that I have been running from? Sometimes the darkness is the freedom. It’s everything we don’t know. We trip over things in the dark, and we make stupid decisions and we get hurt. Sometimes we break our bones. Sometimes we drop things,” she pauses to draw a breath, and Baz hears the rough breathing of those around him, contemplating what this girl has lost, what we each lose, “and never ever find them again.

“But in the dark—also, in the dark, everything is possible. Because when we can’t see, that’s when we can dream. In the dark, we saw the dreams that brought us here. In the dark, I see myself being someone I could never imagine in the crushing reality of day.”

Beside the stage, Simon is gripping his hands tightly behind his back. Baz knows him well enough, now, to recognize a desperate bid for self-control when he sees it.
The crushing realities. A proud orphan. A prickly vampire.

What I could have never imagined, Baz thinks. Us.

“I’d like to say something to all the adults who are here. Thank you for being here. Thank you for supporting us. We admire you, and we are grateful to you. I want to say that first, because what I’m going to say next might sound rude. Adults, you don’t have to admit it, but I’m starting to think most of you are in the dark, too. I think you’re scared because no one really knows where we’re going.”

Baz hasn’t heard this part. It definitely wasn’t in the earlier draft. Mia, he demands internally. Have we made it so obvious?

Simon’s face is hard with emotion.

“But I think that kind of fear is good. I think that’s what keeps us dreaming and hoping and planning. I think that’s the kind of adult I want to be.

“No matter what happens in the light of day, at night, in the dark, I want to always believe that I can be anything. That I can have anything.

“More than anything, I want to believe I can find a way to be happy.”

She looks out at the audience then, long and slow and serious, and you cannot doubt. This kid is going to be okay. Then, she smiles.

“Thank you.”

In the tumult of Mia’s ovation, nary a beach ball flies. From the front of the theater, Simon, stalwart in his robes, catches Baz’s eye for a fraction of a second. It’s not long, but it’s enough.

* 

That evening, Baz comes into his classroom for one last check before summer vacation begins. It already smells dusty and disused, the smells of jostling bodies fading and the scraped-up floors awaiting their annual fresh coat of wax. Baz has already boxed all the valuables—all right, all the books, that’s seriously the only valuable in this room—and locked them in the storage closet.

He wipes the dry-erase boards clean, then secures the pens and erasers in a drawer. Magee says summer school will only use the upstairs classrooms this year, but Magee says that every year.

All that’s left are his plants—a few brimming pots of succulents that grace the room’s windowsill from August to June—and his own heavily-annotated copies of the books he teaches.

He left them all on the desk yesterday so he wouldn’t forget.

Having satisfied himself as to the room’s readiness to survive the next few months without him, he opens his shoulder-bag to go pack away the books. That’s when he notices it.

Between the stacked volumes and the terra-cotta pots, there’s a note waiting on his desk:

It's a small piece of paper, folded once so that it makes a little white tent over the tidy wooden surface. Before he even gets close enough to read the words, he feels the residual magic that courses through it—the tingling warmth of a Know thyself so strong that, even yards away, Baz's own wants rocket through him, caressing and needling every bit of his vampire's body, reminding himself exactly how much and how little he knows of the person he is. He feels weak before it. It's an odd sensation for Baz; he rarely feels weak before anything, but he knows—better than he's ever known any of his own desires—exactly what he wants this note to say. Where Simon's concerned, he wants
everything. If it's anything less, he'll be devastated.

Closer, he can see Simon's handwriting. On the front of the folded rectangle of a card is this quotation, which of course Simon must know he knows by heart, and when he reads it, Baz feels his chest unlock:

_To / you I offer my hull and the tattered cordage / of my will._

Inside, there are just a few short lines:

_I lied, Baz._

_I keep the words._

Chapter End Notes

(Despite the notes that follow, which may suggest otherwise, there is actually now a Chapter 13 too.)

_*_*

This wraps up the school year at Watford High, but it's not the end of the Teachers universe. There will be more—although _where_, _when_, and _how much_ I cannot say—so if you want to stick with these folks, please do subscribe to the Teachers AU series for updates. (You can also just subscribe to me if you don't mind some misc other smut thrown in.)

It has been such a pleasure writing this story, and also a big undertaking, and god damn it, I am going to say some thanks. Thanks to Rainbow Rowell, of course, for her magnificent stories. Thanks also to the fic writers whose original characters or characterizations I borrowed. (Ari! Ollie! Carys!) Thank you to everyone who's stuck it out with the reading, and double thanks for you marvelous commenters (and especially C for the emailed insights). Finally of all, there's no way I would have written this without you, Snowflake8. So many thanks.
Epilogue With Fucking

Ms. Bunce was right; Simon was never really cut out to teach for the long-term. This becomes clear to Baz just a few days into Simon's half-hearted job hunt, at which point Baz texts Agatha. *Keep an ear out for jobs for SOS?*

In no time, Simon's interviewing for a mentoring position with an outdoor-ed organization that receives a heavy share of its endowment from the Wellbelove Zhou philanthropies. Agatha insists, though, that while her money and connections get him the interview, he gets himself the job. In fact, they offer him a position better than he interviews for, where he'll split his time between organizational leadership in the Watford office and hands-on work with underserved teenagers.

He leads three different treks that first summer—Rockies, Sierras, and Everglades—and *comes back* from each pungent, lean, burnt, and beaming.

While he's gone, Baz starts sleeping in a couple of Simon's old t-shirts that have been kicking around his place. They're very soft, and they have a pleasantly faint smell like grass and woodsmoke. He refuses to relinquish them when Simon comes home.

* * *

The next year, Baz volunteers himself for English Department chair since Bunce has accepted an Assistant Principal position. He runs unopposed, but appreciates the unanimous vote nonetheless.

In spring, he wins Teacher of the Year, and doesn't give a fuck. Having ascertained that the people who reviewed his shitloads of paperwork are assessing his merit in all the wrong ways, Baz has little respect for the ensuing accolades. Besides, Simon moved in with him a month earlier, and he's too busy living a buoyantly disjointed life to care about some plaque and eighteen column-inches in the city paper. (Okay, there’s more attention than this, but all the interviewers, indifferent to pedagogy, seem more curious about his interracial same-sex relationship, and Baz is really not eager to blab his home life to the press. Delphinia diligently clips every article and has it mounted; they’ll hang on the wall of the Kids' Lounge for the rest of Baz's life.)

Reluctant to distract himself further from his work in the classroom, Baz declines to complete the twenty-page application required for advancement to the state competition. Upon noting the blank form still sitting on the entry table the day before it’s due for mailing, Simon takes matters upon himself. Next to Prompt 1, *What does dedication mean to you?*, Simon scrawls, “Not wasting my time on this bullshit.”

Baz is pretty sure Simon actually sends it, too. They do not hear back.

Still, for the rest of the year, and far too many after, Simon insists on introducing Baz as, “My boyfriend, the best goddamned teacher in Watford.”

* * *

The following summer, immediately after graduation and still a few weeks before Simon will start leading summer treks again, he asks Baz if he can take him backpacking for a week. Leaving Eustace and the apartment to Ollie’s care, the two go to the Sierra Nevada mountains—a flight and a drive, but worth it because Simon wants them to go there so bad. Of the trips he led last year, he says this was the one that humbled him before his makers, so there they must go.

On the afternoon of the third day, they find themselves in a mountain valley all their own, cut off by
granite cliffs from all humanity except the occasional plane that stripes the too-close sky. Simon, red-cheeked, marveling once again at Baz's cool composure after ten miles of steep terrain, chucks his pack and clothes in the dirt and flings himself through the glittering surface of their private lake. He hoots and bellows at the cold. “Get in here, asshole,” he yells, but Baz is already arcing through the air to join him.

They romp till Simon's teeth are chattering and his lips are going blue. It's like he's so happy splashing that he doesn't even notice, Baz thinks, and casts Warm hands, warm on his own hands so that he has to touch Simon everywhere. Soon the heat is pouring off of both of them, gentle steam rising from the water's surface, and once Baz feels confident that Simon is, for the moment at least, safe from hypothermia, he sinks below.

It is not so often that Baz takes Simon into his mouth, and Baz isn't sure why, because the way Simon writhes below him is exquisite. Now, underwater, listening to the warped reverberations of Simon's moans—and imagining Simon's head above the surface thrown back in gorgeously helpless agony, water running from his hair down into the lake—Baz teases and cajoles and sucks hard till the water's thrashing around him and Simon's shouting expostulations and gripping at the back of Baz's close-cropped head as Baz sucks down his come.

“Me, now,” Simon says when he's caught his breath. “Fuck me underwater.”

Baz objects. Unlike him, Simon is limited by the frequency with which his body requires fresh air.

“Bro.” Simon shakes his head and drags Baz in for a kiss. They kiss and kiss and kiss, Simon's tongue deep inside of Baz, and when he pulls away, there's an odd shimmer to the air around him, which seems to stretch and wobble like an enormous soap-bubble in a breeze. “Come and fucking get me.”

He dives away from Baz, who takes a good few seconds to realize what's going on, by which point, Simon's already skimming over the stones at the lake's barren floor, deep below the few lazy fish that drift in the warmer water above.

Baz catches up with Simon deeper still, trapping him from behind against a submerged boulder the size of a small house and fucking him in the stark silence of this dim underwater world. Simon braces himself against the slippery side of the rock as Baz enters him—his slickness, though it really shouldn't be at this point, still startling. At first, Baz keeps a hand on Simon's throat to make sure he's breathing all right; after a minute, though, it becomes clear that although Simon's breathing fine in the bubble of air around his head, the presence of Baz's hand is actually making those breaths lip-curlingly shaky, so Baz clutches harder and wrenches Simon free of the rock. They're fucking in open water now, bobbing erratically, all directions up at once and with the repeated, insistent union of their bodies, and Simon's gulping throat in Baz's broad grasp the only constants.

It's like they're mer-people in a cold and unrelenting kingdom of extremes. Below, variegated greys and greens of barren stone; above, a sky bluer than imagination—a ferociously determined, wild, unyoked blue offset by only the wavering image of a single high stand of snow-crusted peaks, the probable recent source of this very water. Baz knows this blue, even as he mouths at the familiar scattering of moles at the back of Simon's neck. He doesn't need to see them to know: it's the same blue as Simon's eyes.

If Baz isn't upside down when he comes, it certainly feels that way.

*  

After, Simon stretches out on a rock to dry and falls asleep there. When he wakes up, hours later, it's
to find Baz heating water on the tiny campstove—unnecessary, but charming, and after all, Simon did want to show him the gandry nuts and bolts of his job—and whittling a thin stick of manzanita that he snapped from a shrub by the lake.

“Bored?” Simon asks. Baz's insides warm at the edge of wariness in his voice. He wants Baz to love what he loves.

“Not at all,” Baz says. “Quite the contrary. I'm making something.”

“What is it?”

Baz raises a finger, just a touch imperious. Simon loves him imperious. “Patience.”

The little kettle boils. Simon fixes them tea and digs out some chocolate and a box of scones from the bottom of their bear canister, prattling away about how he should always bring a superhuman along on camping trips, because when weight's no object, you get scones instead of dry crackers and actual fucking camp chairs—not that he's dissing rocks, but, well, you know.

“Here,” Baz says, finishing his handiwork, and in return for the tea holding out the product of his efforts. “It's for you.”

“Congratulations,” Simon says wryly, picking it up. “You turned a stick into a stick.”

But he must know it's more than just a stick. It's smooth and rounded, slender, swirled in faint shades of red-brown. It's just a fraction longer than the spread span of Baz's hand.

“I don't actually know if it will work,” Baz cautions.

“What?”

“You've never been able to focus your magic,” Baz says, “and I keep saying…”

“I need an instrument.” Simon's eyes widen. He gets it. “Is this really a magic wand?”

“I've been looking,” Baz says. “Nothing felt right until now. I came out of the water and I saw you next to this thorny bush, and the air between you was scintillating.”

Simon has forgotten his tea now; he's staring at the stick in his hands like it's cut from gems, not common wood. “I don't know what to do,” he says.

“Just try it,” Baz suggests. He points to a half-submerged log floating a ways down the shore. “Lift that up?”

Simon points the wand, blushing a little. “I bet I look like a real asshole right now.”

“No one here but us,” says Baz, who actually thinks Simon looks kind of more like a dashing movie wizard, even in this shredded old sleeveless t-shirt, long underwear, and unlaced boots, but is unwilling still to boost Simon's confidence more than is essential. (There's a line, he feels sure, between support and fawning, even if it grows wavier by the day.)

“Up, up, and away!” Simon says, and for all the trepidation he may feel at testing out Baz's experiment, the man casts spells like he was born to it. (And yes, obviously he was born to it, the whole whence of the entrance into this world notwithstanding.) He used to bark them like the quarterback directing his linemen, but his voice has deepened and calmed. It comes from his center, now, not his larynx. You can see the power gather and course through him—the way he always
seems to glow with the energy of a spell, but remarkably, now, there’s no seem about it: Baz sees it surge up from his core and out the extended arm, then slice two-dimensional from the tip of the wand out through the air toward the log. It’s a narrow filament of energy, invisible but realer than the tangible world behind it. When it hits its target, the stodgy log almost sizzles in its alacrity to shoot toward the atmosphere.

It hovers aloft. Suspended a small skyscraper’s distance above the lake, it twists gently at the end of Simon’s sustained spell like a kite on a long string in a steady breeze.

Simon’s guffaw of astonishment is truly a beautiful thing. “Baz!” he hollers, and Baz, who is seriously right behind him, rests a cautionary hand on Simon’s shoulder. Regardless of his intentions, the results of Simon’s any-words magic can be difficult to predict.

Indeed, momentarily bereft of Simon’s attentions, the log’s already plummeting back downward. It’s half a second from striking down beside an exposed boulder that bumps up through the water to make a tiny island when Simon catches it with a small flick of the wand.

“Nice try,” he says to the log, which halts and floats in embarrassed immobility just feet above the water. He squinches his face together for a moment in tortured thought. “Fuck it, Baz, this shit’s going to my head. I can’t remember all the fancy words.”

“I’m sure you’ll persevere.” What else do you say, honestly? Simon learns and adapts so fast; he’s not even watching the log, and it’s just hanging there in stasis, awaiting his whim while Simon arches back to kiss Baz full on the lips, long and slow. Baz will never cease to shiver at the touch of Simon in the humming throes of his magic. It courses through them both like an electrical current at absolute value.

Simon smiles and turns away.

“Okay, log,” he says, leveling the wand. “You’re getting smoked like I’m a Pitch.” Simon’s shoulder lifts against Baz’s hand as he takes a breath. It’s breathtaking. “Burn.”

The fire doesn’t erupt at once. The sodden wood hesitates for a moment, emitting hopeful hiccups of smoke. A tiny creeping flame licks across a projecting bit of bark, then vanishes.

Simon’s jaw tightens. When he speaks again, it’s harder. Imperious Simon is pure stone and steel. “I said, Burn.”

In spectacular abandon, it does.

The tension drops from Simon’s frame, leaving him in the slack looseness of awe. Before them, a fire roars, reflected in the perfect stillness of the high lake.

Baz has rarely wanted Simon quite so desperately.

(All right, that is patently untrue. But he does very ardently wish in this moment that Simon were less dressed and more thoroughly and immediately folded around him.)

Unfortunately, Simon is not done.

He lifts the wand toward the lake in still suspense, like a conductor’s silent pause, wand aloft, in the moment before the first measure. Then, with a grandiose flourish, he gestures and whispers, “Everywhere,” and the waters come alive.
At first enormous gobbets of water rocket into the air like bucketsful tossed aloft, then plunge downward to splash back into the lake. They’re swiftly followed by smaller quantities that snake through the air and plummet home; soon, the space above the lake is laced with a filigree of slender dribs and streams that catch the golden light of sunset like blown glass, but that are constantly moving, threading their way through one another—molecular art in motion, all surrounding the log that still burns bright.

It is not unfortunate. Baz takes it back. “I take everything back,” Baz murmurs. He doesn’t really know what he means, not exactly. Maybe Simon’s too caught up to hear.

New jets arc over the flames and don’t fall back down, transforming instead at their flame-boiled zenith to steam that rises in little puffs. Then more, faster and furioser till the fire’s sputtering, almost doused, and the log teeters on nothing and rolls into the water with a truly satisfying hiss.

Simon flicks his wand once then, hard, and the water drops in a million tiny splishes that reintegrate at once into the lake’s surface. He eyeballs the wand in his hand with fascinated suspicion, rather like Macbeth eyeballs the dagger of his mind.

“Fucking hell, Baz,” he says in hushed astonishment. “You know what this fucking means, don’t you?”

“What’s that?” Baz asks, raising an eyebrow that Simon can’t see, since he’s still pressed against Simon’s back.

“You’ve made me stronger than you.”

Baz shrugs. He could certainly banter about it, but there’s no point dancing around the truth: “You’ve always been more magical than I am, Simon.”

Simon whirls on him then as though this is some kind of joke. He jabs viciously with the wand. “Fuck off.”

Although this wand-pointing seems distinctly risky, Baz shrugs again, just to goad him. “Isn’t it time we progressed beyond self-deception?” he says. “Your magic is, to my experience, unique. Perhaps it’s the lack of Charm School that permitted yours to grow unchecked to wild excesses; perhaps it’s just you. Regardless, Simon,” he pleads dryly, enjoying the contrast of the tone and the words, “at minimum, please accept at least that you are a truly unusual mage.”

“Oh, I accept the shit out of that.”

Baz wasn’t expecting this response. “Oh?” This eyebrow, he quirks for Simon’s benefit.

It’s Simon’s turn to shrug. “I don’t know any other mages who get to fuck you.”

Baz refrains from pointing out that the only other mages Simon really knows are Penelope and Agatha, and that one of them has fucked him, actually, quite a few times and in quite a few seriously challenging positions.

“I am offering this wand to you,” he says, undeterred, “since it’s something you deserved and something within my power to provide. It’s why I taught you spells in the first place. But your magic’s not about me. You are exceptional, Simon. In that regard, I have nothing else to give.”

Baz will not be the ruler by which Snow takes his own measure.

*
After dinner, as the sky starts to streak with color, Simon rummages around in the bear canister and produces a flask of whiskey.

“Hey Baz, do me a solid and get some snow?” he asks, rather too casually.

Baz, who has been leaning back in the kind of arms-behind-his-head reverie he associates with people who are very definitely not him, just points, a little incredulously, at the white upper reaches of their neighboring cliffs. He can’t possibly mean that.

“Come on, it’s just a couple miles,” Simon wheedles. “It’ll take you like two minutes.”

“Simon, exploiting one’s vampire lover is a gandry’s game.”

“So?”

“You don’t need me.” He nods toward Simon’s new wand, which is sticking out of the important-things pocket at the top of Simon’s pack, which Baz happens to know also contains $100, a crumbling copy of Saroyan’s *The Human Comedy*, and a note Baz snuck in the year before, before Simon’s first trip, now read many times over and carefully refolded and returned for safe-keeping.

Simon’s eyes brighten. “You really think it can...?” He hefts the wand again and rolls it in his hands, appraising. “Worth a try.” He points it at the nearest of the peaks. *Get over here!* he bellows.

The first incoming hunk of snow wallops him in the face and knocks him flat. *Holy shit!* he exclaims, and Baz wrests the wand away because Simon’s disoriented and talking magic, and more snow’s rushing their way. This snow, though, is better behaved and alights neatly atop a clean stretch of granite. Sputtering, Simon knocks the snow from his face and hair.

“Whiskey?” he asks, licking a bit of ice from the corner of his mouth. “On the slush?”

Together, they drink and watch the sky go periwinkle, then plum, then eggplant. Simon keeps twisting the stick in his hands. “I fucking knew I was magical,” he says in wonder, “but I never really felt it. Not like this. It feels like I’m in control.” He hesitates. “Which, like, irony: it’s kind of scary. I feel like I’m one of you.”

“You are one of us, Simon. You’ve always been.”

“No, like, real magic. Like, charm-school style magic. I feel like I could be, like, a Pitch, you know?”

It’s the second time today Simon’s said this. Baz would be a fool to let pass this opportunity for a nerve-wracking conversation. "Do you want to be a Pitch, Simon?"

"Fuck yeah, all the time. You guys have, like, that high-end aristocrat magic. You’ve got fire magic in your blood. That shit is awesome."

Baz’s blood is more complicated than this, but this is not the time.

"I didn’t intend the question hypothetically."

"Well I mean, how the fuck else—oh—" Simon’s arms bar his chest, as if he’s actually indignant. “What the fuck, Baz. Is this a proposal?”

*Merlin and Morgana.*
He prevaricates. He didn’t quite mean it like that, but, well, he’s been thinking a lot about time. About lots of time. "As I say, I didn’t intend the question to be hypothetical, but neither did I intend it to have any immediate effect. But, Simon," (have a little nerve, Baz) “could you imagine, some day —"

“Every day.” He cuts Baz off, rolling his head sideways so they can look slantwise at one another. Inside of Baz, everything lurches. Simon grins like a person who’s met love from both sides. “I imagine that shit every day, Baz.” His wand is pointing upward, so must be responsible for the sudden fireworks that shower down upon them from the darkening sky. The sparks vanish in tiny, heatless bursts of light as they strike the earth. “There’s no way it’s not happening. You’re gonna marry me so hard.”

“Were you planning to inform me?” Baz wraps his fingers around Simon’s wand-hand, caressing the rectangular solidity of the index finger and thinking, vaguely, wordlessly, newly, Mine.

“You figured it out.”

*

Baz does just a little spellwork—an invisible net to keep the mosquitoes at bay—and they fuck under clear dark skies on a granite slab bigger than magic, that slopes precariously down into the icy mountain lakes that line the valley below. The moon won’t rise for hours, so the stars are brighter and closer than Baz has ever seen. But Baz isn’t looking at the stars. He’s looking down at Simon, at the tousled, scratched, unkempt, joyous mess of him.

The air smells like pines and dirt and cooling underbrush, and Simon—so much Simon, the sweet rough smell of his lakewashed hair and skin, smells that are just him.

Baz fills anew with a sort of distant self-pride at the noises that churn loose from Simon with every movement of their interconnected bodies.

Baz’s body, his abominable vampire body that should not have survived, makes Simon Snow feel better than any other thing on this earth ever has. And Baz knows this. Even if he hadn’t felt it himself, even if sex-addled Simon wasn’t always thrusting him into the mad bliss of telepathic fucking, Baz would know. He has ears, after all, and filters have never been Simon’s strong suit.

“Fuck, your fucking hands, Baz, fuck me. Fuck, give me your hand, I need you in me.”

“I’m quite certain I’ve been,” Baz pulls back, hesitates just long enough to watch the absence register, the first flickerings of frustration in Simon’s bright eyes, then rams forward, “in you,” he retreats again, “for some time now.”

“Fuck my mouth with your thumb, shitbag, you fucking know what I,” and then the words give way to thick, surprised yelps of pleasure as Baz feels Simon’s lips close around the knuckle and Simon’s tongue traces the whorls of Baz’s skin. It’s devastatingly good.

Baz tries to pull his hand away. He’s closer than he meant to be yet. Simon’s not there; he wants them to come together, but there’s no way that’s happening if he can’t get his hand away from Simon’s clever mouth, since Baz’s balls tighten a little more with each flick of the tongue.

Simon grabs him by the wrist, so that when he opens his mouth to speak, Baz can’t easily pull the hand away. “You got this, bae.”

Before Baz has time to properly glower, Simon’s already going at his thumb again, and Baz cannot think about anything but the sunset-radiant flashes of sensation that threaten to overcome him.
“Hold on,” Simon mumbles around him, the vise of his hand on Baz’s bicep a familiar counterpoint to the slide and slap of flesh on flesh, the inner and outer joinings of their bodies. He sucks at the tip of Baz’s thumb a little more, teases it, then, watching Baz’s eyes, at the very moment Baz plunges back into the depths of Simon’s ass, bites hard.

Baz’s teeth spring free. Yanking his hand free, he arches up and back, establishing a little safe space as he does when Simon provokes the fangs; it’s only prudent to keep the overexcited recent arrivals clear for a moment till they’ve settled in.

“This what you wanted?” Baz grunts. The way Simon’s looking at him—at first, it unsettled Baz, like Simon was some vampire-chaser who just loved him for the goth romance of the thing, but now he knows better. It’s how Simon always looks at him. He’s just more aware of it now, with the fangs out (and everything else, too). It’s only when he feels completely naked that he can fathom the endless depths of Simon’s admiration and love.

“Fuck yes,” Simon grins through the contortions Baz’s barely-restrained cock, on the brink of climax, has wrought in his face. His powerful arm drags Baz down toward him. He trusts the teeth. He always does. Baz clutches Simon by the sturdy handholds of his muscled arm and neck. The neck. His hand behind Simon’s neck, curling to cradle it like the precious gift it is. He lets his fingers tighten just enough to feel the blood—that beautiful blood he’ll never taste—stammer below the surface.

Miles from human life, in a spare, hard world of spiky trees and snowmelt, the two men hold onto each other and, for one long second, together, they hold on.

Then, breathless, they move, slow at first, then faster. The bedroll below them bunches and slips. They don’t care. Above Baz’s straining back, a black sky curves with the perfect certainty of calculus.

“Yes,” they whisper, and declare, and scream. “Yes.”

The sky and mountains take every sound for their own.

Without looking away, Simon stretches an arm to grope for the wand Baz made him, and suddenly, through Simon’s eyes, Baz sees infinity.

End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

If you are interested in occasional Teachers AU musings, I made myself a tumblr page. Stop on by.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!