Morgue Files

by rageprufrock

Summary

So occasionally I clean out my files and find bits and pieces that are completely entertaining on their own, but don't really belong anywhere, and are unlikely to be extended into full stories or finished. Henceforth, I am putting them here, as chaptered pieces.
Probabilistic Combinatorics (Iron Man)

It is sometimes said that probabilistic combinatorics uses the fact that whatever happens with probability greater than 0 must happen sometimes (Wikipedia)

The probabilistic method is a nonconstructive method, primarily used in combinatorics and pioneered by Paul Erdős, for proving the existence of a prescribed kind of mathematical object. It works by showing that if one randomly chooses objects from a specified class, the probability that the result is of the prescribed kind is more than zero. Although the proof uses probability, the final conclusion is determined for certain, without any possible error. (Wikipedia)

…right from the beginning, we — unlike other animals — have wanted to make things more complicated than they need to be.
Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, A History of the World in 100 Objects, Episode 2, "OLDUVAI STONE CHOPPING TOOL"

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Of all the departments at Stark Industries that wanted to murder Tony, probably weapons research and finance would get into a fistfight over which hated him more, and therefore who was more worthy of eating his still-pulsating heart. Tony was solely responsible for more stock volatility and 3 a.m. conference calls with their ratings agencies than U.S. government contracts, the decimation and revival of the commercial paper market, the presidential elections, and the death of his father combined. There was a reason that Stark's CFO and treasurer worked out of New York and Tony generally kept himself safely cloistered in California.

Except when Pepper kidnapped him out of his bed — still hungover — stuffed him pantsless onto his jet, and delivered him directly into a closed-door financing meeting on the 70th floor of the tower while he was still clutching, alternately, his head and the fly of his slacks, which he only barely got on.

"Tony," said Helen, his CFO's executive assistant. She was 46 years-old, had enough Restylane in her face to smooth a gravel driveway, and as far as Tony could tell, she'd never forgiven the karmic injustice of the universe for hiring her to work for Denis, who managed to marry being aggressively Russian with a level of emotional fragility that made Tony look almost stable in comparison.

He struggled with the button on his fly for another few seconds before he said, "Fuck it," zipped his pants shut, and said, "Hi, Helen. Is he waiting for me?"

A tremendous crash came from behind Denis's office door.

"Yes," Helen said.

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Denis had been one of the raft of new hires Tony had been forced to make immediately after Obadiah's small-aircraft fiasco over the South China Sea. The engineers that had been the worker bees of his betrayal had been — for the most part — alternately too valuable or too benignly harmless to discard, and it was hardly like Obadiah would have been having extensive conversations with the back office, HR, marketing, or communications about his evil plotting and
double-dealing or treason. But money trails needed laundering and auditors needed to be misled, and in between announcing he was Iron Man and getting a new asshole ripped into him by his independent directors, Tony spent a lot of time holed up with internal recruitment and external consultants restaffing the entire financing arm of Stark Industries with violent efficiency. Denis had been kidnapped like a gypsy bride from some No. 2 position at some company ("GE Capital, Tony," Pepper liked to remind him. "You stole him from GE Capital.") and installed in Stark Tower, anointed with Helen, and given the shattered FEMA zone that had been Stark's financial future, post weapons manufacturing.

The consultants and HR had winnowed the list down to ten good candidates, most with solid backgrounds in oh-Jesus-Christ-so-fucking-boring-cakes garbage that Stark needed. He and Pepper had ended up play rock-paper-scissors-lizard-Spock over their final choices for hire: Pepper gunning for a bombastic shouter with a devilish gray streak in his otherwise dark hair and a smile that made Tony wish he was a nubile young thing to be exploited, and Denis, who'd openly clutched at his inhaler during the final interviews.

"Potts, I can't believe you'd discriminate against that poor ethnically Russian man for a health reason," Tony had said. "He's like 14 different checkmarks on that bingo square HR gave me."

"Give me one compelling reason to hire that wheezing basketcase over Carlton," Pepper had retorted. "And HR better not have given you an actual bingo square."

"Oh my sweet mother Mary, his name is Carlton," Tony had marveled. "That's two. That's, 'his name is Carlton,' to go with 'you seem sexually interested in him,' as my two compelling reasons."

The argument had actually gone on, through two additional courses of dinner, before Pepper had said, "Jesus, fine, let's do this," and paper had disproved Spock twice in a row, leaving them at a dead tie, before Pepper had greedily played her Roddenberry hand again and allowed him to be poisoned by the lizard, foolish ginger.

"Hi, Denis," Tony said, first conquering the subject of the button fly of his pants and then settling himself into a leather wingback chair. He almost wished he could rescind the sign-off on Denis's corporate decorating expenses, because the seats were a fucking monstrosity, perfectly combining rococo pretension with being exquisitely uncomfortable, and Tony spent most of his time in them keeping his toes anchored to the carpets — imported probably with trafficked children in them or something from Astana, they'd certainly cost enough to include some illegal virgins — to keep from sliding out of them. "How are you today?"

Denis, clutching his head behind the satinwood behemoth of his desk, twitched violently.

"I am bleak, Tony," Denis told him, and slapped at his desk phone. "Helen, where the fuck is everyone else?"

"Being drag-asses, sir," she reported sweetly. "Do you want me to grind another Xanax into your vodka?"

Denis slapped at the phone again, all the lights going off dutifully. Tony can't actually help but be impressed that Cisco made phones that could stand constant abuse of this magnitude; Denis worked out sometimes with that guy who was Vladimir Putin's judo partner. "That woman has a throne in hell just waiting," he snarled.

"In theory, if you actually hated her, you could fire her," Tony suggested. He fired like, 40 people a week.
Denis looked genuinely horrified at the thought, and made some offended Cyrillic noises, which Tony figured translated into, *You spineless cretin, Helen, for all of her icy terribleness, is the singular point of joy in my otherwise crushingly unhappy existence.*

The desk intercom chimed. "The underwriters and Gareth are here," Helen said.

"Where the fuck were they before?" Denis demanded.

"Down on 60, in a conference room that our internal systems claim that you booked — "

Denis hung up on her. "Crazy woman. Crazy."

This was amazing. Tony had never been more grateful for HR and their literal, actual, printed-out bingo square. He was gearing up to ask, "So, seriously, that level of volatility — there had to be a fluid exchange involved. Did she master you? Whip you as you thanked her for punishing you?" when the door to Denis's office opened and shut without any proclamation, which could only mean that when Tony turned around, he was going to see a skinny white guy with a baby face and smudged glasses, a small mountain of files, and nothing but aggrieved, wet-eyed looks for Tony.

Tony waved at Gareth. "Hi, Gareth."

Gareth just stared back. The last time Tony had seen Gareth it was during an analyst call a fiscal half year after Tony had deep-sixed the weapons manufacturing business, and he'd looked like someone had murdered his children in front of him, shaky, with four emptied bottles of 5 Hour Energy discarded among his wrinkled nest of financial figures. To be completely honest, Tony wasn't actually sure what Gareth did, but it was boring and hard and involved long hours with Denis, so whatever Tony paid the guy, it probably wasn't enough.

"Leave him alone," Denis muttered, rifling around his drawers for something.

"What, come on," Tony protested, flashing Gareth his best smile. "People like me — Gareth likes me, right?"

Gareth clutched a binder against his chest like a shield. "Mr. Stark, in 2008, I had a brief psychotic episode where I drove my wife's Windstar over our son's toy car 46 times," Gareth said. "I only stopped because of a stress-induced pain that incapacitated my left side. I thought I was having a stroke."

Tony said, "Uh."

Denis came up with a pill bottle, orange and half-empty, saying, "See, I told you, leave it alone."

Tony wondered what it meant that most of his company's financing personnel were on the verge of committing mass suicide, or pooling their resources to pay off Rhodey and have Tony killed, but then $56,000 of menswear and £80 billion of douche tumbled inside Denis's office.

"Mr. Popov," Helen drawled from the doorway, "the gentlemen from Goldman Sachs are here."

"Denis, fucking jazzed about this, man, really fucking excited," said one of them with brown hair, unsettlingly white teeth, and a Tom Ford tie. He'd traveled directly across the office, seized Denis's hand, and had started wrenching it like there was oil if he just worked it hard enough. Denis endured it mostly by continuing to look miserable, and Tony started getting a sick feeling in his gut.

"Yes," Denis agreed. "Very excited." He looked over Tom Ford Tie's shoulder. "Is this the rest of your team?"
"Best and the brightest," the man agreed. "This is going to be the best fucking bond roadshow in history."

"Oh," Tony said, "fuck no."

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The combined effects of 58 tornadoes over the American midwest grounded both StarkJet 1, which Pepper had been trying to fly out to LA with, and StarkJet 2, which Tony had been prepared to chase her with, primarily to whine. She gives up hoping against hope after a while, and then Tony sits in the car with her and whines as they wind back through Manhattan toward the gleaming phallus of Stark Tower.
Mike Specter (Suits)

The first box of business cards had been a big deal. Mike had gone to the Muji in the bowels of the New York Times building and bought a sleekly unmarked case for them and stared at them on the subway home, too shaky to bike with all the fine embossing on his mind. He'd given one to the front desk at his Grandma's nursing home (in case of emergencies) (and also to see the nurses ooh and ahh that he's finally made something of himself), bought the most expensive frame at the Container Store for a single white rectangle and put it on his dresser, behind a rapidly accumulating pile of cufflinks, and he'd started entering every fucking yuppie drop-your-business-card-here-to-win-free-stuff contest in the city.

The second box is considerably less exciting. The third is pretty much an irritation since the mail room guy dumps it on top of a stack of briefs that Mike had carefully ordered in its disordered chaos, and the fourth is — at best — an afterthought.

So really, it's not his fault that he doesn't figure out there's been a terrible fucking mistake at the printer's until Jessica Pearson hauls him into the office.

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"I have to say I'm incredibly disappointed with you, Mike," Jessica says, which is up there with Donna before 6 a.m., Louis in flagrante delicto, and Harvey saying, "Don't worry about it," for striking fear into Mike's heart like a fucking poisoned spear.

"Um," Mike says intelligently.

Jessica just keeps frowning at him. "Setting aside all the dozens of workplace fraternization rules that had to have been broken for this, I'm even more disappointed neither of you had the courage to come clean to me — at least then we could have arranged for you to work with some other partner to make this less ethically questionable."

Mike stares.

"And let's not even broach the subject of the poor judgment that it requires to go ahead and have an official name change — to have new business cards made up without even letting us know about this change in your status," Jessica says, coming around to perch on the edge of her massive desk, folding her hands together in front of her lap, and her mouth is twitching like she wants to laugh.

Mike wishes he could laugh, too, the same way he always laughed at funerals and during dates that were crashing and burning, but he's pretty sure however much he's already fired, he's going to be extra super fired if he bursts out in nervous tittering.

"Well?" Jessica prompts, looking expectant. "Don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

Swallowing awkwardly, Mike says, "I don't…actually know — "

"What the hell, Jessica?" Harvey says, sticking his head into her office out of nowhere, looking so sleekly annoyed he almost makes annoyed look good. "Why is there a gay wedding cake on my desk?"

"Secret's out, Specter," Jessica says, officially grinning like a crazy person now. "Or should I say, Specters?"
Harvey, because Harvey automagically (like an asshole) assumes that everything strange or confusing or shitty that happens is Mike's fault, turns and frowns at Mike. "What did you do?"

"Dude, I didn't — !" Mike starts, feeling wronged! Because he still has no idea why he's in here with Jessica's scary ass shark smile or why Harvey has a gay wedding cake (what?) and no matter what Harvey says, Mike's done the math, and really only about 15 percent of the stuff that Harvey categorizes under "obnoxious bullshit" is Mike's direct fault, and —

And then Jessica cocks a brow and produces a business card out of nowhere.

"Don't tell me you really didn't notice this, Mike," Jessica interrupts.

"Oh," Mike says. "Shit."

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The gay wedding cake is actually a gay wedding cake.

It's an ugly cheap layer cake from Whole Foods that someone's stuck two grooms on top, their faces helpfully Krazy Glued together for that extra touch of tackiness.

"Wow," Mike says, while Harvey sits on the phone in his office yelling at the printer's because Donna had refused to do it on the grounds of their error being hilarious, and therefore laudable.

"How the fuck do you even get that wrong?" Harvey is yelling at someone in the background, shoulders tense and waving his arms. "It wasn't even a new card — it was a fucking reprint!"

Donna comes in with two forks. "Do you think it's chocolate?" she asks. She's got that crazy look in her eye from it being One Of Those Thursdays, so Mike says, "I hope it's chocolate," and takes one of the forks with a nod of thanks while Harvey keeps railing at someone's who's probably an intern.

"No I will not fucking hold!" Harvey snarls. "This is my associate! He's a reflection of me, and —"

There's a terrible, brief silence from Harvey before he says in a horrible voice:

"— a reflection of me not like that."

The cake turns out to be red velvet with cream cheese frosting, which Donna gives a thumbs up and Mike gives an orgasmic eye roll, so Mike and Harvey's gay wedding cake apparently falls somewhere between Magnolia Bakery's banana cream pudding and City Bakery's hot chocolate in the dessert sexual joy scale.

"What do I want you to do about — I want you to fucking fix it!" Harvey raves, turning on his heel just in time to see Mike and Donna with matching squirrel cheeks of cake and caught expressions. He puts a hand over the phone receiver. "Are you two actually fucking eating that cake?" Harvey demands.

"I promise I will wrap up a slice for your one-year anniversary," Donna says.

"It's free," Mike argues feebly.

Harvey points at Donna. "Don't make me tell Louis to set you up with his cousin," he threatens, and while Donna's making a series of horrified noises, Harvey transfers his finger to Mike and snaps, "And you — I haven't even started with you yet. How the fuck didn't you notice?"
"I was blind from the 700 page brief about plankton you were probably making me read," Mike protests. "The tears of blood made it difficult to see that they'd misprinted my last name."

"That's funny, Ross," Harvey bites out. "Keep working on that. You can launch your career in stand up right after I shitcan your ass."

Mike tries not to, but it's pretty reflexive at this point to pout when Harvey says shit like that, which is more effective as a rebuttal when Louis doesn't interrupt by pausing in the doorway of Harvey's office to say:

"Mazel tov, you crazy fuckers," and "Oh, is that red velvet?"

Harvey's glower gets exponentially angrier.

"Right, on that note," Mike says, and sidles out of Harvey's office, darting back for the relative safety of his cubicle, where at least he has taped up a mirror so he can see when Harvey's sneaking up on him and stand with his asshole to the wall.

He's still licking red velvet cake and icing off of his fingers when he starts digging under the mountains of paper on his desk. It takes a few long moments, but he comes up, eventually, with the box of business cards: heavy linen stock in snowy white, with a fine serif font spelling out: MIKE SPECTER, PEARSON HARDMAN.

"Well," Mike says, mostly to himself, "at least it doesn't say Mrs."

From down the hall, he hears Harvey yell, "I'm not getting divorced! We were never married! What the fuck is — put your manager on the phone!"

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By mid-afternoon there are no fewer than fourteen boxes of MIKE ROSS, PEARSON HARDMAN business cards stacked like douchey bricks around Mike's cubicle, spangled with Post-It notes saying things like, "NEVER ORDER FROM US AGAIN," and "DOUBLE CHECK SPELLING PLZ," and "WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOUR BOSS?"

"Overkill much?" Jessica asks, looking at Mike looking at the boxes.

Mike stares at her, baleful.

"I know," she says. "I promise I'll stop thinking this is funny sometime before I die."

"Thanks, really, thanks," Mike tells her, and Jessica waves over her shoulder as she wanders off, which gives Mike about 10 seconds of reprieve before Harvey is storming up the hallway, associates and paralegals and mail room boys scattering out of his path.

"Did you fix this?" Harvey asks, coming to an abrupt stop in front of Mike's cube.

Usually, Mike likes it in a perverse way when Harvey stops by. None of the other senior partners ever wander into this part of the offices except for Louis to parcel out his daily dose of bullying and asshattery, so Mike always engages in a little Fuck Yeah, I'm Mike Fucking Ross preening whenever Harvey drops by — which is perverse because whenever Harvey does do it it's because he wants to yell at Mike about something. Which makes today no different except this isn't Fond Yelling or Bemused Yelling or You Hilarious Failure Yelling, this is Irrational Sleep Deprived Nobody's Sucked My Harvard Law Degree Dick In Two Whole Days Yelling, which warrants Mike and Donna to send each other emails about what a raging shit Harvey can be.
Mike holds up one of the boxes of business cards. "This has been fixed 14 times over."

Harvey makes a sucked-lemon face. "Good," he says, and a beat later, "Finally," and another pause goes by before he adds, "So those fucking cards have been eradicated, right?"

"Absolutely," Mike says. "You'll never have to think about it again."

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Two weeks later, Gary Deckerman is in Harvey's office talking about something so intensely boring Mike's mostly preoccupied with not letting his brains dribble out of his ears when his presumed-true-at-the-time promise comes back and _fucks him in the ass._

"...So shared sports PTSD aside," Deckerman says, raising a glass to Harvey, who raises a glass back and shares a Rich Asshole (TM) laugh with the guy, "I admit that I was impressed by your company's out and out diversity. It's not something I knew Pearson Hardman for in the past, but my partner and I definitely appreciate it."

Mike's BlackBerry starts buzzing in his pocket, and since he's technically just standing sentry in the corner saying nothing and looking smart, he's allowed to pull it out and check it.

DONNA: OMG. MIKE.

Harvey, when Mike glances up to check whether or not he's already in trouble, is still smiling and bullshitting about how everybody underestimates how diverse Pearson Hardman is, and how he's grateful that Deckerman is at least intelligent enough to identify it.

The BlackBerry buzzes again.

DONNA: DID HE SAY PARTNER?

Deckerman's talking about workplace adversity now or something, which makes Harvey's face turn into a frozen rictus of polite disinterest, so Mike figures it's safe to reply.

DONNA: DID HE SAY PARTNER?
MIKE: ? yes? something about diversity?
DONNA: Michael Ross did you you give that man one of your cards

"Because there's a lot of polite rhetoric about acceptance and throwing open board room doors, but come on, Harvey, between you and I, we know it's a load of bullshit most of the time," Deckerman is saying. Harvey's understanding smile is getting more and more strained, but he says:

"Of course, but talk is cheap."

Deckerman takes another swig of brandy. _Exactly._

MIKE: no? harvey pulled this one.
DONNA: no, I mean is there a chance he got one of your OTHER business cards?
MIKE: wtf are you talking about?
In April, a fairy develops a crush on Dean.

She leaves him fairy bread (which Dean knows better than to eat) and flowers (which Sam turns out to be allergic to) and circlets for his hair.

"Not that I don't appreciate it," Dean tells the fairy. It's tiny and shimmery purple and pink, and nearly vibrates with thrill that Dean is speaking with her -- him? -- again. "I mean, nice thought. But it's nothing I really need."

The fairy looked thoughtful and then said, in a twinkle of laughter, "All right then, Hunter Dean Winchester -- I shall give you the greatest gift of all!"

* * *

Dean spent a month freaking out the fairy would give him wings or turn him into a unicorn or a mermaid or -- hell -- a fairy before he finally figured maybe the gift was like, kindness of heart or something else meaningless in quantifiable terms.

And then, half an hour after Dean disappeared into the back alley of a bar with a particularly skankalicious girl a month and a half post-fairy, he came tearing back into the bar -- horrified and gasping for air.

Sam considered who and how to kill whomever had put his brother in such a state, and then he said, "Who was it? Where are they?"

"Oh my God, tuck your dick back in -- I think that fairy made me a freaking virgin!"

* * *

"Well," Sam said several hours later, watching Dean breath into and out of a brown paper bag, "I just don't know how you can tell."

"I fucking checked my man-hymen," Dean shouted at him through the bag, looking furious. "I just know, you bucket of dicks!"

Sam bit his lip.

"Maybe you only feel like a virgin," he said soothingly.

Dean sets the bag down and stared at him, stricken.

"Dude," he said. "I couldn't find her *clit*."

"Okay," Sam said. "This is major."
Dean sulked for hours -- hours -- until Sam finally caved and reverted back to learned behaviors from when he was living with an actual woman.

He went out and bought Dean a bunch of chicken biscuits and a passle of seasoned fries and ran him a bath.

Dean punched him, but slunk into the bathroom, where there was a lot of splashing which Sam figured meant his brother was rediscovering himself all over again.

When he came out, an hour and many wrinkles later, Dean seemed less upset, shaken lose.

"You look better," Sam offers, handing Dean a biscuit.

"I feel better," Dean tells him, and smiles, sweet and shiny and -- Sam can't help but think with a hot flush -- all brand new.

* 

So Sam is apparently a much more gigantic pervert than he'd previously credited himself, because Dean, independent of his brand new virtue, is hot anyway -- all dark green eyes and lean lines, the smell of leather and gun oil. Forcefulness and flirting smiles.

Dean, untouched, is an astronomical degree of hot that would probably blot out all the rays of the sun. Everywhere they go, Sam feels like there's a sign on his brother: perfect, untouched, waiting for searching hands.

Sam already spends a lot of time punching out truckers who think Dean's a hooker -- apparently he's going to punch even more people who think Dean needs to be helped out of his hypothetical man-hymen.

He imagines a lot of grisley deaths for whomever Dean finally decides to take the (re)plunge with, and Sam knows his reaction to this cannot possibly be normal.

Only after days and days of tense fear, of worrying that Dean's going to slouch into some roadhouse some random woman with a great pair and no brains is going to get him -- nothing...happens.

Dean still flirts -- with everybody, in a maddeningly gender irregardless way that has Sam squirming in his seat. But he doesn't really touch anybody, not the way he used to, casual and proprietary and leering.

Mostly these days, it's just talk, a softer, smokier smile -- and if people lined up around the block for the old Dean Winchester treatment, it's like the brand new (hah, Sam thinks, bitter) one is drawing a classier, larger crowd that would line up around the town.

The four days they spend in San Francisco hunting a troll in a what appears to be a pansexual dance club are the worst days of Sam's entire life, and by the time he gets back to the motel in the evenings he's so stressed out from resisting the urge to kick people in the face or keeping obsessive tabs on his brother his head hurts from the effort.

They're in the Isle of Palms, off season, when Sam finally loses it standing on the back dock of The Wreck, watching Dean's silhouette against the pink-orange sunset.
"Would you just do it already?" he snarls. "Waiting for you to pop your cherry is making me completely fucking insane."

When Dean whirls around, hushing him loudly, there's a faint round of titters -- soft and amused but more importantly: interested.

"Dude, you dick!" Dean snaps. "Did I ever announce your virginity?"

"Yes," Sam says.

Dean scowls. "Well -- you were 18, it was unnatural."

"You're 28, this is better?" Sam demands.

Then Dean makes a face that can only be called a pout. Sam can't tell if it's his psychic powers or if the lust is just that strong, but he stumbles a bit, from the wave of it that hits the back of his head. He should have rearranged them, set Dean at a less attractive angle, he thinks frantically.

"Well -- I -- I didn't want to rush into anything," Dean finally admits, blushing, furiously shy.

Sam covers his face and is glad he pre-emptively tucked his dick under his belt, because he'd have to do it anyway now. "Oh," he moans, "God."

"You can just go fuck yourself!" Dean tells him, and stomps away.

*

And so Dean stays a virgin.

He stays a virgin in South Carolina, and he stays a virgin in Georgia and he stays a virgin in Louisiana, although -- and Sam nearly has a brain hemorrhage over this -- Dean does go on a date with a good ol' boy named Leslie, who delivers Dean to his motel door with his eyes filled with abjectly infatuated stars.

"I had a good time," Leslie says.

"Me, too," Dean tells him, smiling, and Sam can't tell exactly what kind of smile it is -- the angle at which he's got his face smashed up against the motel window isn't very illuminating.

"I," Leslie starts, and then stops, and then tries again, "Would it be all right? If I kissed you?"

Sam actually says, "Oh, for fuck's sake," out loud.

And then Dean says, "Yes, I think that'd be nice," and they do, but whatever happens after that Sam doesn't really remember because he's too busy having a rage blackout and banging against the glass of the motel window, shouting:

"Dean Winchester, you get your face away from that boy!"

Dean doesn't speak to him for a week after that, just plucks miserably at the shell bracelet Leslie the Cockhungry Whore Rat apparently gave him during their "date."

"I'm starting to feel really bad for Dad," Sam says out loud, to no one in particular.

*
The whole situation is very Electra, only it isn't because Dean isn't a girl and Sam isn't his father and their dad is dead. Also, Sam would like to fuck Dean himself, so really -- not like Electra at all only it's been four months now and Dean is still a virgin. It's starting to fuck with Sam's head.

"Aren't you always the one telling me to respect myself more?" Dean asks one day, sitting in a library fielding smiles from a professor with tweed patches on his elbows. Yeah, Sam bets that motherfucker would like to teach Dean something, and so he grits his teeth and puts a possessive hand on Dean's thigh -- branding him, owning him, as much as Sam's ever been allowed to, anyway.

"Yes, but I didn't mean be all evangelical about it," Sam tells him.

Dean frowns at him. "I'm not! I'm just realizing maybe there's something to this whole thing."

"What, being celibate?" Sam shoots back. He's supposed to be researching some sort of rabid, Southeast Asian demon with three faces. So far, he's glared down a dozen interested-looking undergrads and at least three of the reference librarians.

"Waiting for someone," Dean tells him, prim, and slaps Sam's hand away.

* 

The worst part is that Sam kind of knows what Dean's talking about. He can imagine now the sweet burn of anticipation, that dizzying sense of excitement. There's no baggage and no awkward, "So yeah, I have herpes" conversations in Dean's immediate future, just delight and discovery, of being with somebody he's old enough to know he should really enjoy -- not just be 14-enough to be grateful somebody will touch his cock. Sam would be jealous if he had time to be jealous of Dean in between being jealous over Dean.
The first midnight run for supplies made Kurogane feel stupid.

It was so late it was nearly early, and the screaming in the household had reached epic proportions —wailing and hiccupping sobs reverberating off of the walls and paper screens.

And Fai, who’d been up nearly 72 hours at that point, had given Kurogane a look that brooked no argument, and ordered him out of the house to the midwife’s, saying, “Fix this.”

The first three times, Kurogane had managed around it, making arguments that babies were loud, that babies screamed all the time, that it was normal and really, didn’t this seem more like the type of thing Fai should be responsible for?

But since spending a week sleeping in the male servant’s quarters after the third time, he’d wisely learned to keep his mouth shut on that last point.

So now, exhausted and slightly deranged, he was loping through the sprawling village toward the midwife’s cottage at the far outskirts near the stream—and when he reached it he didn’t hesitate to start banging on the door immediately, saying in his most feral of feral voices:

“It’s doing it again! It won’t shut up!”

And when the door finally did open, the shriveled old woman scowling at him, bedclothes in disarray, said, “Have you considered it might be because you keep calling him an ‘it’?”

“I’ll call it a he when it sleeps through the night,” Kurogane growled. “Isn’t there something you can do? An herb? An elixer? A stopper?”

Her mouth twitched and she pressed age-worn fingers to her lips for a long moment before she shook her head indulgently, beckoning Kurogane into her small, dark cottage, murmuring, “Honestly, how Fai-san puts up with you,” and searching about for a cloak, a clean robe.

“Nobody else could stand him,” Kurogane retorted, bouncing from one foot to the other, nervous and wary—at least 20 minutes had passed since he’d been exiled from his bed and he imagined he had less than 30 minutes more before it became a more permanent state of affairs.

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so certain of that,” the midwife said, a crooked smile stretching her mouth. “You know the men and women of Suwa find him quite charming.”

He couldn’t keep the jagged scowl off of his face. “Who?” he demanded.

The old midwife Kagome only shook her head at him, smiling as she drew shut the door of her cottage and stepped into the cool night air.

*
Summers in Suwa were thick with rain, rolling thunderstorms, and a lush greenness that permeated everything—flushed all things with life until they were bursting, trees and bushes drooping under the weight of their buds, exploding into flowers and the dizzy-sweet smell of honeysuckle, of cherry blossoms. Their first summer in Suwa, Fai spent almost every night in the garden, sitting on one of the ornamental rocks, scandalously underdressed with only a thin and richly embroidered kimono on—sliding down one pale shoulder. So naturally Kurogane had spent most of his nights in the garden, too, sucking kisses along the line of Fai’s neck, pressing him with rough hands into the soft green carpet of late summer grass. Kurogane thought it was probably a punishment from the gods for their lechery that brought them the child—abandoned at the doors to the house.

“We can hardly leave him to starve,” Fai had argued. “What would the villagers think?”

“What do you care what the villagers think?” Kurogane had snapped in reply. “They think you’re a woman.” Fai had ignored him in favor of pressing the baby close, of clucking softly like a song, rocking it back and forth, and Kurogane had tried again, saying, “We’re not keeping it.”

They kept it.

* 

Actually, the villagers thought Fai was a wife.

Kurogane never bothered to correct anyone when they asked after his new wife, it seemed more trouble than it was worth to explain. No one would believe him, anyway and Fai seemed disinclined to wear anything other than the beautiful kimono he found in the house, draping the cloth luxuriously over his shoulders, dipping low on his pale, smooth neck.

Kurogane never bothered to tell Fai, either, that they were once his mother’s.

It made sense, after all, that the new priest of Suwa would wear the old priestess’ robes, and Kurogane didn’t think his mother held it against him.
Gibbs lets himself go to the club once a month — just once a month. (Hey apparently I wrote NCIS d/S!)  

Gibbs lets himself go to the club once a month — just once a month.

He has drinks, smokes a cigarette, long, lingering, until the orange burn fringes the filter, and watches the room.

There's always somebody who wanders over, interested, and pleading, drops to their knees in front of him, head lowered in request. That's good enough just to fill up whatever holes that month's punched into him, but sometimes he wishes there was more, somebody he'd take home instead of into one of the back rooms.

He's classic, very old school. His interest in leather is more or less limited to his belt, folded over, and he doesn't need fancy fucking harnesses or metal rings — he wants somebody that bends for him, he wants somebody who lights up at his touch, and who's not going to be afraid when both of them start burning too hot.

"You look bored," someone whispers, close to his ear.

Gibbs glances, still save for his eyes, slanting. He sees a flash of hazel eyes, gleaming in the low light, a crooked smile. He stays quiet.

"It just seems like a waste," the man goes on, and Gibbs shifts his weight enough to see the rest of him — slate-colored shirt, black pants, expensive shoes. He's handsome, with fine features, long fingers around the base of a highball. "This place is too expensive to sit around alone."

Gibbs lets himself smile. "What about you?" he asks. "You too expensive?"

The man laughs. "Can't buy my love, mister," he says.

Gibbs pushes to his feet, his fingertips drawing across the man's wrist, where the bones are stark and close to his skin — just a taste, an invitation. "I'm a high roller," Gibbs lies.

"That so?" the man asks, smiling. "What kind of car do you drive?"


The man ducks his head, sweet, and Gibbs feels a pang at that. He changes his plan now, suddenly. He doesn't want this man in a back room, someone else might see the way the orange lamplight frosts the brown tips of his hair, limns his long, long eyelashes when he dips his neck, accepting.

"You're coming home with me," Gibbs tells him, lifts a hand to close it over the back of the man's neck, runs his thumb along the tendon along the side. "What's your name?"

The man looks up at him, hazel eyes dazzling, and Gibbs hears something shift — click — in his
chest. "Tony," the man murmurs, secret, and turning his cheek to kiss the inside of Gibbs' wrist, he says, "You can call me Tony."

**

Tony is sweet — sweet, uncertain.

It takes him a while, longer than usual, to let Gibbs take over, and Gibbs can't decide why he likes that, why Tony makes him want to laugh into his mouth when he pins the man to his front door, shoving his wrists up and holding them to the wood surface.

Maybe it's Tony's first time doing this; maybe someone floated the idea — a lover? Gibbs wonders, although it'll be an ex-lover, now — and Tony couldn't get it out of his head, asked a friend who asked another friend and found out about the club. It doesn't really matter, all Gibbs knows is he's glad he's here, holding Tony against a wall and kissing him, slow and consuming, biting at his mouth until Tony is one long, lean length of heat against him, melting.

By the time they make it to the bed, Gibbs feels like they're moving in molasses, too-sweet, now, but he can't get his hands off of Tony, take his mouth off of him — this isn't his usually modus operandi. He doesn't bother with his belt or to tie anybody to the bed, he just holds Tony down with a glance and his thighs, Tony flat and submitting splayed across the mattress. Gibbs takes anything he wants, takes everything he wants, and Tony just moans and gasps and says, "Yes, yes — anything."

***

Tony's downstairs investigating Gibbs' coffee maker when he wakes up at half past six the next morning, standing barefoot on the tile floor of the kitchen in his slacks and button down, the shadow of a bruise on his collarbone.

Gibbs looks until he gets his fill, hanging in the doorway, at the broadness of Tony's back, the lines of his legs, before he pads over, closes his hand over Tony's where's he's reaching for the coffee, murmurs, "Early riser?" in his ear.

"Not by nature," Tony says, grinning back, leaning into the half-moon of Gibbs' body. "But some of us work in Baltimore — got an hour's drive back."

Gibbs raises an eyebrow, studies the bruised red of Tony's mouth. "Not an hour's drive."

"Is if you don't drive like a maniac," Tony quips, and pulls away, sliding his hand out from underneath Gibbs' fingers and flicking the switch to brew. "What about you? You're up, too."

Tony's mouth's too much of a distraction for Gibbs to resist, so he leans in, kisses him wet and slow and lazy, first, before he mutters, "Once a marine, always a marine, Tony."

"Oh, illicit," Tony laughs, his voice a huff against Gibbs's chin. "I like."

"Is this a military kink I ought to know about, Tony?" Gibbs asks, but he's grinning into Tony's mouth. It's 6:40 in the morning on a Thursday, and Tony smells good, feels good in Gibbs's arms, in the gray light of Gibbs's kitchen.

"Depends on if you still have the dress uniform," Tony answers, deadpan. "Otherwise, don't tease me, Gibbs."

Gibbs thinks that between them, it's pretty obvious who's the tease, but he backburners the thought
when Tony darts in again, presses a kiss to the corner of his mouth, sucks a kiss into his bottom lip, when Tony sweeps his hand up the length of Gibbs's back and knots in the worn fabric of his t-shirt. Gibbs can't remember the last time he stood in his kitchen and necked like a teenager, and he can't remember why he hasn't, because he can hear the coffee maker babbling in the background, and taste the mint burn of toothpaste on Tony's tongue, and palm the angles of Tony's hips, and all in all, it's a fucking excellent way to start a Thursday.

Tony doesn't leave a number, just a sharp kiss — a scrape of teeth — before he climbs into his car and vanishes, and Gibbs, when he gets to work, mulls Tony's Maryland plates, debates checking the DMV records. His fingers itch.

It's pointless, Gibbs lectures himself, and mostly, he's managed to flush the memory of Tony out of his mind by the time McGee and Ziva stagger in, each looking so individually shitty he almost feels bad when they get the call about a dead petty officer.

***

Gibbs beats Ducky to Calvert Cliffs state park by almost twenty minutes, and by the time the coroner's van pulls up, McGee is almost a normal color again, photographing the cyanotic-blue fingers of PO1 Harold Garver.

"Talk to me, Ziva," he says, because Garver's face-up, cloudy eyes staring up at the blue sky, sprawled out across a beach, littered with driftwood, grainy sand smoothed out from the tide.

"It's a couple miles hike here from the gate," Ziva reports, tiptoeing around the body and pulling on gloves, her NCIS windbreaker whipping around her thin arms in the gust and her hat turned backward. "Most of these trails are for hikers only, no four-by-fours, but this is a hunting area — although it's off season. It's tough to see how someone would get a body down here at the bottom of the cliff."

Gibbs glances at the broken neck. "Probably threw him."

"Maybe better to say, how did they get the body into the park?" Ziva corrects.

"Could be a park ranger," McGee says, muffled by the camera, taking pictures of the petty officer's shoes now: untied. "Laces undone, Boss!"

"I see that," Gibbs says, mostly to himself, and anything else he wants to say gets cut off by Ducky and Jimmy's voices overlapping each other, the metal creak and protest of the gurney they're carrying in between each other. "You guys are late."

Palmer looks despairing. Ducky says, "Incorrect, Jethro: we merely adhered to the legal limits on vehicular speed."

"Honestly, everybody is so upclenched about that here," Ziva sighs, and McGee says, "Ziva, it's uptight," and Gibbs walks away, along the place where the Chesapeake Bay is licking at the shore. No footprints, although those could have been washed away by the tide, Gibbs thinks, and looks up the beach, to the distant smokestacks over a treeline.

"Time of death?" Gibbs calls, over his shoulder.

Ducky's got his meat thermometer out, frowning at it and doing math in his head. "I would estimate anywhere from 12 to 14 hours," he reports, nodding at Palmer. "I'll have more details once I get him home."
"Oh, also," Palmer says, helping Ducky with the body, "look for a bracelet."

"Bracelet?" McGee asks, peering out from behind the camera for a minute.

"What kind?" Ziva asks, already scanning the beach, the gray-blue pebbles, slick.

Palmer shrugs. "About half an inch wide? Something close to the skin. He's got a pale patch of skin," he says, huffs under the dead weight of the petty officer.

They look for hours, until the sun goes down, without any success, and the 10 o'clock news is wrapping up by the time Gibbs gets back to his boat. The basement smells like hot air from the steamer and clean, sweet wood from the lumber yard and the sour burn of bourbon. Gibbs wonders what Tony's doing tonight, or who, and he scrapes away at the spine of the boat until his fingers go numb and his eyes go blurry, and he lies underneath the wooden bones of the thing and falls asleep in the sawdust.

***

"Petty Officer First Class Harold Garver," McGee says, an unflattering headshot of Garver on the flat screen when Gibbs strides in the next morning double-fisting coffees and feeling ornery as hell. Friday hadn't started with lazy necking in the kitchen. "By all accounts a good but unremarkable marine, based with the Marine Corps Detachment at Aberdeen, where he had some friends but not a lot, and his CO remembers him as being a good kid but not much more than that."

"Overall," Ziva swoops in, taking up her spot shoulder-to-shoulder with McGee and blocking the screen as Gibbs takes to his creaking office chair, "nothing particularly special in his financials or his personal history. No criminal record, debt tied to a new car he bought, lots of online purchases."

She closes her folder and slants McGee a look.

"And?" Gibbs asks, because of course there's an and.

McGee swallows. "And then there's the matter of the bracelet."

Gibbs cocks a brow, takes a long drag off the coffee. "The one we didn't find."

"Right," McGee says delicately, and Gibbs starts counting backward from ten — his people have until about eight before he throws something. "Combined with some of his online shopping habits, we might have a theory."

"Meaning?" he prompts, when he gets to seven-and-a-half and all McGee does is look paler instead of spitting it out.

"To get that kind of tan line," Ziva interrupts, rolling her eyes at McGee, "the bracelet needed to be close to the skin and worn consistently, and the placement — "

" — on the left wrist," McGee cuts in, giving her a dirty look and handing Gibbs a printout of credit card charges, "may indicate his. Um."

Gibbs glances over the statement. "Right," he says.

"Right," McGee agrees.

"The last charge was at a club, Indigo, fourteen hours ago," Ziva continues. "Google tells me it
caters to very specific tastes."

Now it's Gibbs' turn to do some math in his head.

Fourteen hours before Garver, Gibbs was at the doorway of that club in Maryland, twenty minutes before he meets Tony, thirty before he's sliding his thumb along Tony's wrist. Somewhere in the two hours after that, Petty Officer Garver had been there, too, made it all the way out to the parking lot, probably, before he ended up at the bottom of a cliff.

Gibbs is too well-trained to think about all the different ways it could have gone down, how easily he could have gone home alone and gone to Calvert Cliffs the next morning and met Tony for the first time, dead and face-up on the beach, neck and body broken in five places. But still, he can't help but to console himself. Tony's young, and strong, had good muscle definition and calluses on his hands and would have fought if anything had happened, and anyway, it didn't.

Eleven hours ago, Gibbs was pressing Tony down in his bed, hungry, sliding his hands down his flank, gathering Tony up in his arms, safe and sound.
Their small establishment is a 45 minute walk outside of Lawrence during good weather, so of course Dean is forced to endure Charles's endless babbling the entire journey. The road is muddy from rain and the grass — what is left of it — looks defeated and stringy, and Dean cannot help but to curse the unrelenting downpour of a lingering Kansas winter, all the gleaming white of snow long-ago washed out of their fields and farms.

"I have heard that they are possessed of great fortunes," Charles confides, jogging to keep up with Dean's long strides. "Have you heard nothing yourself?"

Dean sighs. "I do not spend much time collecting gossip, Charles," he says, and Charles is, blessedly, and only momentarily, bullied into keeping the peace.

Up along the road, Dean can see the furthest stone wall, an outcropping of a much older structure inside which the Winchester house was built several generations ago and subsequently so heavily entailed and mortgaged it is everything he can manage to hold it together through will and work. It's a modest house with a wide porch in the back and pillars out front, incongruous as its tenants but well-loved, and although Dean is a confirmed black thumb, that is why he has a younger brother, and Sam has helped it flourish, for rosemary bushes to overflow their beds and roses to burst forth every spring and their apple trees to sag under rose-red fruit.

They are not wealthy, but Dean has never harbored much of a romantic soul, and he is happy with the small income they draw from the sharecropping their tiny acreage, with evenings spend arguing with his brother; if there is anything else he should want, he knows better than to want for it.

"I am sorry, Dean," Charles says finally, when they are already treading on the paving stones of the walk. "I always forget that — "

"It doesn't matter, Charles," Dean tells him, and overhead the thunder crashes, and he and Charles exchange a look before dashing the last distance to the house, the first downpour catching them in the last few yards — so that Sam is waiting for them with dry towels and a smug look when they shiver their way into the kitchen, seeking hot tea and dry clothes.

***

Throughout Lawrence, the Winchester boys are famous.

Their mother, Mary, bless her soul, passed when the younger boy was just an infant, and her husband, Mr. Winchester carried on as well as he could with two boys and very little spirit. Although most of Lawrence is too polite to note it, it is well known throughout the township that it is Dean, the older brother, who ran the house and kept the accounts and raised his sibling, who had grown tall and beautiful like a tree, and they'd run a bit wild without any real parental guidance. And goodness knows the well-meaning mothers and fathers in neighboring establishments tried,
but there is something to that Winchester smile, and when Dean laughs, it's hard to keep a severe
look.

They were never wealthy, but they are fine boys, and it's a terrible shame that is often whispered of
that they've had no prospects since the Great Tragedy. It is always a grievous thing to lose a parent
so young, much less both, of course, but so much the worse that Mister Winchester chose to
expedite the process through the judicious application of whiskey and a shotgun long after the best
hunting of the season had passed. No one ever mentions it of course, although there can be
expected to be the occasional and inelegant reference to the Great Tragedy, but it is well known,
and known so well it is a shadow cast over the remaining Winchesters — it is one thing to be
without a settlement for one's future and another entirely to be the subject of such scandal on top of
such a lack.

So Dean, because he has been pragmatic since he was just four, knows exactly the shape and size
of his future and does what he can to economize and keep profitable their small property. And
when their budget stretches enough, he can be found — very reliably — purchasing books for Sam,
who hoards them jealously and consumes them like a fire.

He tries not to think of the day that won't be enough to keep his brother happy any longer.

***

Charles manages to hold his tongue long enough for Sam to settle them by the kitchen fire with tea
and biscuits before he can contain himself no longer.

"Have you heard the news, Sam?" Charles bursts out. "Someone has taken Netherfield!"

Dean sighs and rolls his eyes in a manner Sam assures him is most unattractive.

"Netherfield?" Sam asks, looking surprised and setting down his teacup.

"Yes," Charles says, overjoyed to have found a compelled audience. "And I have heard that it is a
Miss Jessica Moore, and I have also heard she has an income of —"

"Charles!" Dean pleads.

"— Five thousand a year," Charles concludes, looking overly pleased with himself.

Sam's eyes round. "Five thousand?" he repeats in a hush. "That is something."

"And I have heard also that Mister Zachariah, who is the younger brother of a baronet, is to hold a
ball and has already invited her," Charles adds in a rush, and Dean stuffs a cake into his mouth
because it seems like a more profitable avenue than attempting to keep Charles from filling Sam's
head with nonsense from town.

"How diverting," Sam says, and his eyes are shining, of course, since their small estate and the
small town nearby it are never such, and Sam all but lives in adventure stories.

Charles and Sam spend some time engaged in a frivolous discussion about what might Miss Jessica
Moore be like, and who shall be her chaperone? And whether or not she will host a ball at
Netherfield. Mrs. Haverstock — Mister Zachariah's cook — once worked at that fine estate as a
girl and when it was last let and says the ballroom at Netherfield is exceedingly fine.

"A dance would be lovely, would it not?" Sam sighs, leaning back in his seat and curling his hands
around his teacup. Dean is torn between wanting to accuse Sam of acting like a girl before she's
out, dreaming of her Season, and regret that Sam won't have the opportunities he deserves — to
Travel, to study.

Dean likes to remind himself he is far too pragmatic for that sort of thing, so of course he has set aside his own fanciful thoughts, which are fine for daydreaming but useless when it comes to doing the monthly budget. There are always other concerns, beyond the things he might want: there are servants to be paid and food to put on the table, new clothes to be purchased, or when there is not enough money for that, old clothes to be darned, and the roof is ever-leaking.

"What are you thinking of?" Sam asks, later that night, when Dean is putting out the candles before bed. "When you look into the distance like that?"

Dean just makes himself smile at Sam, reassuring. "Nothing, Sammy, go to sleep," he says, and puts out the last candle, plunging the room into darkness.

***

Mister Zachariah does, indeed, host a dance to welcome Lawrence's latest residents, and it is a raucous, overwarm thing.

Sam spent the better part of the afternoon — with assistance from Becky — fluttering around the house pressing shirts and preparing clothes for the evening, and he soundly scolded Dean when he'd attempted to wear his second-best to the dance that night. He conscripted Becky and together they's press-ganged Dean into a fine white shirt, fawn colored breeches and a green frockcoat Sam claims suits the color of Dean's eyes. Then there is a minor skirmish regarding the tying of Dean's cravat that nearly ends in bloodshed, but Dean relents after a fair bit of shouting and allows Becky and Sam to do with his neckcloth what they will, complaining only every few moments it is ideal to allow the wearer to breathe in addition to looking fashionable.

There is an old and poorly-sprung carriage, and Dean's horses — among the finest in the county — but Mister Zachariah's home is but a two mile walk, and he and Sam — who is nearly quivering with excitement — had walked, enjoying the slight chill on the evening air, the way the sky fades from dark blue to pink at the horizon line.

People are fairly spilling out of the house when they arrive, all the windows light orange and glowing with candles, and music pours from the pianoforte in the drawing room. There is a dance already underway, matched sets twirling in mirror images across the dance floor, and girls in white muslin dash to and fro with glasses of lemonade, their laughter shrieking and high above the white noise of all of Lawrence's most prominent gossips. Sam and Dean pay their respects to Mister Zachariah and his wife, admire their latest grandchild and the fine carpets in the house. They take a turn about the dance floor and Sam vanishes to talk novels with one of the village girls.
Sam and Castiel have a running debate on whether or not it's technically accurate to call the current configuration of the world "post-apocalyptic." Cas argues that given the fact that the actual apocalypse was deep-sixed halfway through, it's an exaggeration of circumstances; Sam says that when the entire city of Detroit is destroyed by blight, it's time to fucking wake up and smell the sulfur.

The world after it nearly was ended and the world before are mostly the same: same people, same problems, same long ribbons of asphalt and bullshit reality TV. Mostly these days, Sam and Cas are in the clean-up business, tearing through the remaining demons that hadn't fled when Michael's searing grace had razed the horizon, coaxing ghosts out of old houses, tackling God damn trolls under actual fucking bridges. Spells in Enochian are orders of magnitude more powerful than Latin — that's another debate, about whether magic is watered-down by translation, by interpretation, by distance from its original tongue — and Cas's grace may have been ripped out of him, but all the words are still on his tongue.

They're sitting in a Waffle House off of 15-501, and Cas is methodically working through his hash browns, coffee, and cigarettes when Sam finally snaps:

" Seriously, smoking?"

"I'm exploring human vices," Cas answers, and takes another drag of coffee.

"Yeah, I got that between the drinking and the gambling last month," Sam tells him.

Cas is a dangerously good poker player and a fucking tragic drunk. Dragging him out of a bar and watched him throw up, gasping, "Dean, Dean," sucked, and it hurt, and Sam never wants to do it again but he will. Dean's summary possessions left on Earth are his car and his gun and his fallen angel, and Sam's not tossing any of those; he's holding on as tightly as he can.

"Why are you exploring human vices?" Sam asks.

Cas closes his eyes, rubs the heel of his hand into the ridge of his brow — and it's a move that's so effortlessly and unselfconsciously human it makes Sam's stomach clench — still holding the cigarette between two fingers.

"This is what being human is about, isn't it?" Cas says, after a long beat, the sound of cars hauling down the highway resonant through the scarred glass of the window.

There are a lot of things Sam can say to that: his knee-jerk response that being human isn't as trite as a collection of their most commonly shared sins; that smoking is terrible for Castiel's now-mortal lungs; that cigarettes are fucking disgusting. He could pull out his trump card, the one he hates using but will if he has to, that Dean hated smoking, the ugly taste of it on someone's mouth, that Dean wouldn't like it. Or Sam could really be a shit and say that putting him in a position of having to wean Cas off of nicotine eventually is not why Dean agreed to die for all of humanity, but none of these things make it past his lips, sealed away behind Sam's teeth, and he just drinks his coffee and watches the cars go by.

This is one of those moments, when the question burning under Sam's skin is so obvious he doesn't know how Cas doesn't see it — with or without his grace. Sam thinks people at the counter can see it, that people in Kentucky can see it, how much he wants to ask Cas what he lost, the day they
both lost Dean.

"Fucking — Jesus God damn Christ, you pussies," Gabriel says, suddenly in their booth, stealing Cas's coffee, and putting out his cigarette, "suck it up already."

***

It's been a year since Dean died, since Sam wended through the rubble and shit of Detroit after Michael had locked Lucifer back into his cages in hell, and found Cas curled over Dean's body in the gutted-out skeleton of an opera house. Sam doesn't really remember much of it, just climbing the stairs onto the stage and listening to the thunder and lighting outside, cracking, the great downpour of rain that would fall for a week, running off blood and sickness and healing up great rifts in the earth, mending the open scars across hills and valleys where demons had poured out among the population, where garrisons of angels had gathered in suicide rushes. He knows his shadow had fallen across Castiel's back, bent over Dean's body, that Sam had fallen to his knees and seen his brother's face — eyes closed, unlined with worry, unoccupied and abandoned — and listened to the ugly, wet noises Cas was making, hands fisted in Dean's jacket.

Sam hasn't grieved for Dean, not really. He doesn't know how to, after he'd lost his brother once and had him come back. It's been written into the interior of his heart, like a burn, a scar, the tissue knotted over and indelible now, and Sam doesn't know how to convince himself it's real this time, that Dean's not coming back, that there won't be another knock on the door. It's sick and fucked up but sometimes he wakes up in the middle of the night and wishes he could be consumed with grief the way Cas is, that it would eat him up like a cancer or twist like a knife to the gut, because then at least he wouldn't be waiting for it, that awful realization that has to come eventually, that this is not a question faith can answer.

***

Sam's knee-jerk reaction to seeing Gabriel still tilts closer toward "stab first, ask questions later," but he manages to dial it back long enough for Cas to steal back his coffee and snarl, "What do you want?"

"Bitchy," Gabriel sighs, vast in his disapproval, and he turns to Sam before adding, "It's been a year guys, even the Victorians would have you in half-mourning — "

Cas throws his steaming-hot coffee in Gabriel's face.

It's a neat flick of his wrist, before Sam can tell Gabriel to go fuck himself, and everything else in the Waffle House just stops. The short order cooks stop cooking — the range still steaming, hissing — and the cash register stops, all the previously rowdy patrons and cigarette waving, hungover college girls falling silent, conspicuously not looking.

Sam wants to feel mortified, to stand up and start apologizing, but Cas just says, voice acid and furious, "Leave."

Gabriel stares at him a long time before he wipes his face off — more or less — with a free hand, and finally the Waffle House bursts into life again, someone calls out an order, someone else breaks a mug, and Gabriel says, "I didn't know you felt so strongly about it, little brother."

Castiel just looks away, pointed, at the window once more, and Sam asks Gabriel, "Why are you here?"

Gabriel looks almost like he did back when Sam thought he was the Trickster, always on the verge of fucking someone unnecessarily, but his gaze catches the profile of Cas's face again and he soberes, the gleam in his eyes softening into something with more forgiving edges. Without looking
at Sam, he says, "I'm here to deliver a message."

Sam tenses. "What kind of message?" he asks, because he's never gotten a message from heaven that hasn't ended badly, and he's tired down to his bones, barely holding on.

"Untwist your panties, sweetheart," Gabriel counsels, smirking, and tugs something out of the inside of his battered jacket. "Here," he says, tapping Cas on the shoulder with the flat side of an envelope. "It's for you guys."

"We do not want a message," Cas says to the window, stubborn, and Sam wonders about the constantly changing, the way Castiel can speak for Sam now, too.

"Really?" Gabe asks, feigning shock. "Even if it's from Dean?"

"That's not funny," Sam warns. He can hear his voice shaking.

"Despite the source," Gabriel sighs, "this is not a trick — I'm here in my other capacity."

"I wasn't aware you had a job other than designated asshole," Sam says, but it comes out flat, and he can see across the table that Cas has closed his eyes, swallowing hard, and Sam thinks Dean would ache to see it.

Gabriel grins at him. "I know, it's hard to imagine that God would see fit to heap other responsibilities upon that grave duty, but in addition to keeping everybody on their toes, I am also Heaven's messenger," he says, easy, without any offense, and he sets the letter down on the dirty formica of their Waffle House table and adds, "Anyway — Dean stalked me across the gold-paved streets of heaven for a week until I relented and said I'd bring ya'll this note."

"How is — " is as far as Sam gets before he realizes he's talking to thin air, Gabriel here and gone in the blink of an eye, and then all that's left to do is to stare at the letter left on the table, amid syrup-sticky plates and ketchup smears and years of spilt coffee, with handwriting so familiar Sam feels something well up in his throat lettering out:

To Sam and Cas. Open me already, you douchebags.

***

They don't, because for all that they fight monsters, they're both cowards when it comes to Dean. The letter — wrinkled from Gabriel's pocket, the ink smudged on the front — sits in the glovebox of the Impala, and they don't talk about it for days and days.

They don't talk about it while they're taking out a werewolf thirty miles outside of Asheville; they don't talk about it when they burn out a nest of vampires in Georgia. They don't talk about it when they swing into Sioux Falls to irritate Bobby for a week; they definitely don't talk about it when they have individual and separate meltdowns after the Impala gets rear-ended by some douche nozzle in a Hummer and they go back to Sioux Falls and lets Bobby say, "Boys — you — God damn iijits," before showing them into the house.

Sam spends most of his time at Bobby's in the library, ordering and reordering Bobby's books, and when that's done, he goes on a honey-do jag, because Bobby's house is as old and creaky and cantankerous as he is. He oils hinges, fixes knobs and handles, takes his life into his own hands and fights an epic battle against the upstairs hallway wiring, and when he goes downstairs to look for alcohol — booze and electrical work being two great tastes that taste great together — he sees Bobby and Cas huddled around the Impala.
Michael, in addition to shuttering Lucifer back into hell, razing most of Detroit into the ground with the snap of his fingers, and killing Sam's brother, had taken two seconds out of the apocalypse to bring Bobby legs.

"I'd rather have Dean, you sumbitch," Bobby had gasped, because it was Michael, and it turns out when Cas had zapped them places and patched them up, he'd used a soft touch and not a hard sell, and Bobby had been sweating bullets, gritting his teeth in pain.

Michael had smirked, borrowed face mean, and he'd said, "Well, this is what you're getting instead," and left for Michigan.

So Bobby's mobile again, and leaning over the crunched-up back-end of the Impala, making clucking noises like a regretful aunt, pointing and pointing and talking to Cas. Sam can see that look on Castiel's face, part anger and part hurt, and Sam wonders what it's like to have spent the entire arc of time beyond caring only to find yourself fucked up over some twisted metal and steel. It's one of those petty human things Dean tried to explain to Cas, that Sam didn't think he'd ever need to know, that they were both exercised over nothing apparently, because it seems to be written into the flesh, burned into the body and bones.

"It looks beyond repair," Castiel says, sounding grave.
My "What if the djinn had gotten Sam?" story. This plays into my general belief that in addition to wanting to leave the family business, Sam was forced to bail on saving people, hunting things, because he wanted to append "fuck my brother" to that list of Winchester occupations.

After the djinn presses his calloused hand to Sam’s forehead things smear until it’s like looking at reality through Vaseline, and Sam opens and closes his mouth and tries to say something, anything, but all that comes out is the faint whistle of his breath until he’s sucked down, down down. And inside it—whatever it is—he dreams. He dreams—the way he dreams anything since he started getting the visions: in flashes and with physical jerks of pain or pleasure or fear—of the gold coast of California and the crash of waves, the stretch of American heartland spread at his feet like a patchwork of green and brown. He dreams about steam off of hot dog stands and the yellow and red and white umbrellas outside of Fenway Park and he thinks he sees Dean in the stands, on his feet and heckling, waving a beer. Sam dreams the flicker of sun burning on his skin, and in a split second he blinks and realizes that this isn’t a dream—this is memory, and he slips, and slides, and trips into black all over again.

* 

Sam wakes up fast, brain rolling over like the engine of the Impala, and it takes him a few shuddery moments before he pushes himself up onto his elbows—before he blinks the white glaze of sun out of his eyes and sees pale green walls. The djinn is gone and in its place there are overflowing bookshelves instead, monochrome photographs of classic cars on the walls, in stark black frames with gleaming glass. It’s quiet, and Sam lets himself breathe—once, twice, three times, come on Sammy, focus—before he looks round again.

It’s still there, all of it: books double and triple-stacked, with volumes layered on top of other books, piles on the floor next to mountains of The Economist and Harvard Law Review, the bed with the pale linens with a high thread count—the king-sized bed. Sam rolls off of the mattress and lands silently, onto a pale woven rug, one hand on the dark wood bedside table, fingers grazing the edge of a hardback book, the metal edge of a Tiffany lamp. He’s alone, and it takes some prowling around the room before he finds his cell phone.

It’s charging in a cradle on a dresser scattered with keys and change and ballpoint pens, and Sam tries not to think about that when he plucks it out, dials Dean’s number from physical memory and listens to the ring on the other end.

The phone goes six times before somebody picks up.

“What the fuck?” Dean says.

Sam nearly cries in relief, and he covers his face with a shaking hand when he laughs, when he
“Dean—oh my God, Dean. Thank God.”

“Sam?” Dean asks, and his voice has dropped half an octave, gone rough at the edges and hard, and Sam knows automatically and in his heart, against reason, that when Dean’s voice goes like that everything will be all right. “Sam, are you okay? What’s going on?”

“The djinn is what happened!” Sam hisses, keeping close to the walls. “I went to the warehouse and the djinn was there and he was definitely real, Dean—and then he put his hand on my face and I woke up in this room with like a thousand books I keep tripping over.”

There’s a long silence before Dean says, “A djinn, huh.”

“Yes!” Sam snaps, scowling into the deserted hallway—there more pictures of cars on the walls, black and white stills of carnival lights and cityscape. “Look, I’m going to try to figure out where I am—you need to come get me.”

Dean says, “Are you drunk?”

“What?” Sam squawks.

“Because it’s like 8 a.m. in the morning, Sammy,” Dean says, fond.

Outside the hall window, Sam can hear morning traffic, car horns. It’s a normal street outside, there’re sidewalks and trees and people walking around and talking on their cell phones, hefting laptop bags and briefcases. If this is hell or heaven or the ever after Sam can’t help but be unimpressed. “I’m not drunk!”

“Sure you aren’t,” Dean says, and hangs up.

Sam stares at his phone in horror, standing barefoot in pajama pants and a STANFORD t-shirt in the hallway until he hears somebody coming—but even before he can look around for a weapon his fingers go numb and nerveless—

“Dean,” Sam says, and it comes out hoarse, scrape out of his throat.

Because it is Dean standing in front of him, holding a chipped coffee mug and wearing a Red Sox t-shirt and sweat pants and glasses and holding a cell phone.

“What, did you think I was out jogging or some yuppie shit?” Dean asks, still grinning. He sets the phone and coffee aside. “Nightmare?”

Sam shakes his head because he doesn’t know what else to do. This is real. This must be real, and Sam tamps down the voice in his head that says the djinn must have found this—that he must have dug down deep somewhere and pulled this secret out of him, without words, because Sam’s never given it a voice, but it doesn’t matter, because here it all is and—

“No,” Sam manages. “Not a nightmare.”

It’s Dean smirking when he takes the last few steps to close the space between them, saying, “Man, Sammy, you are not a morning person,” before he puts a hand on the back of Sam’s neck and presses his mouth against Sam’s—soft, and Sam tastes coffee and belonging and love and home, and it doesn’t occur to him for a single minute to push Dean away.
Dean kisses Sam until Sam feels boneless and docile and agreeable, with Dean murmuring things into the skin at the corners of Sam’s mouth, his smile sun sweet and burning like citrus against Sam’s tongue. Sam feels like a cat, purring, and when Dean finally does pull away, it’s to say “You okay?” and “I’m here, babe,” and “Mornin’, sunshine.” And so Sam lets Dean lead him by the hand down the hallway, into a sun-drenched living room with still more books, let’s Dean sit him down at a blond wood kitchen table and give him coffee, to brush a fond hand over the crown of Sam’s head.

It feels like Sunday mornings: slow, sunken in honey.

“What’s going on, Sam?” Dean says, tugging out a carton of eggs and peering at Sam over the top of his glasses. “You’re acting weird.”

Everythings wrong, Sam thinks. “I’m not acting weird,” he says.

Dean gives him The Look. “You called me—from the bedroom.”

Sam squares his shoulders, leans back in the kitchen chair. There’re a row of cookbooks on a shelf over the sink, and a dying basil plant by the window; this looks like a room Sam always wanted to have, and maybe he can have it now.

“I didn’t know where you were,” Sam says, too carefully, because he could still be wrong.

“I was a whole 100 yards down the hall getting coffee,” Dean shoots back, frowning—he comes closer, poking Sam in the chest with the long end of a spatula. “You sure you’re not having nightmares again?” he asks.

“No,” Sam retorts, picking up his steaming mug and taking a sip. It’s terrible, and Sam thinks, only Dean could make coffee this bad. “And I’m not drunk either.”

“Yeah, drink your joe,” Dean says, and cracks eggs into a bowl, searches round for a fork. Sam has seen the line of Dean’s back almost every day of his entire life, and he knows—the way he knows the edges of his own body—how Dean’s shoulders look when he beats an egg, when he wakes up, when Dean looks away, out a window, as they’re cruising down a rural highway in the middle of nowhere. Sam knows Dean.

He takes another sip of coffee and watches Dean scramble eggs, watches Dean make toast and microwave bacon and casually flick on the TV, humming something by God damn Kansas under his breath as the morning news announcer chirps, “It’s another beautiful Saturday in Boston—and we can anticipate highs in the lower 50s today and plenty of sun.”

* 

Somewhere between eggs and bacon and coffee and lunch, Sam tells Dean that he dreamed he was being attacked by a djinn, which as stupid as it sounds is better than telling Dean he was attacked by a djinn.

“In no way do I want you to interpret this as me discouraging you from fawning over my stuff,” Dean says through a mouthful of toast, “but maybe you should quit reading my books right before bed.”

Sam forces himself to snap his jaw shut, so he doesn’t ask anything stupid like, “You write?” and “Books? You write books?” and thinks to himself, “Damn genies.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Sam finally manages, forcing down another mouthful of Dean’s coffee until the
taste hits him full in the face like a semi and he snaps the mug down and says, “Okay, Dean—you are never allowed to make coffee again.”

Scowling, Dean snaps, “There’s nothing wrong with my coffee.”

“People in prison get better coffee than this,” Sam argues. They do. He knows for a fact.

“People in prison also get ass-shanked in the shower,” Dean ripostes.

Sam looks at him for a long time, torn. “I don’t even know what that is,” he admits finally. “Is that a threat? I don’t even know what that was supposed to mean.”

Dean gulps down the rest of his mug, as if to prove some sort of point. Sam’s seen Dean eat sandwiches he’s found in motels and chicken cordon bleu from roadside diners, so it doesn’t prove anything other than the fact that Dean’s stomach acids should be studied by the CDC for possible medicinal properties.

“That means I’m going to be late for my meeting with my editor, and that you,” Dean says, pushing himself up from the table and leaning close—close enough to press an absent kiss to the corner of Sam’s mouth, and it makes Sam murmur a little, babble quietly in tongues to feel that: the chapped skin of Dean’s mouth with intent, “are a bitch.”

“Jerk,” Sam answers, reflexive, but even before horror can sink in, Dean’s wandering down the hall back to the bedroom—to their bedroom, calling over his shoulder:

“You love it. Don’t lie.”

Sam stares into his coffee cup, thumbs on the rims. “Yeah,” he admits. “I guess I do.”

*

Dean disappears from the apartment in a clatter of footsteps and yelling, “I’ll be back by seven at the latest, so I better see dinner on the table,” and when Sam yells back, knee-jerk, “Make yourself dinner, ass,” he says, horrified, “Oh my God, we’re married.” He waits just long enough to see Dean heading down the street from the living room window before he runs back into the bedroom—starts rifling around the desk, the dresser.

He needs details, explanations, he wants to know how any of this ever happened and why and why are they in Boston and since when does Dean write books. But instead of a wallet or a neatly-summarized list provided by his friendly neighborhood djinn, Sam finds a book on what he guesses is his side of the bed—opened and face-down on pages 57 and 58—by Dean Winchester titled Carnival.

He flips back to the beginning—before all the dog-eared pages and after the Library of Congress information—and creases down page one—realizes it was already folded before. When I read it the first time, Sam thinks crazily.

It starts:

It was six hundred degrees in the metal box of the Impala and the leather upholstery was starting to feel like sexual harassment. Even the wind blowing in the opened windows felt like a wall of steam, and outside on either side of the highway only half-abandoned farm shacks interrupted the land, cracked in heat. Jake ran one sweaty palm over his forehead, his upper lip, prickly from a day without shaving.
“It is too God damned hot,” he said, mostly to himself.

So of course Sam answered, “Which could be fixed if we got a new car.”

“We are not getting a new car,” Jake said. He glared across the front seat. “This car is a classic. She and I have an understanding.”

Sam made Jake’s least favorite Bitch Face (TM). “Do you,” she said. “Then could you be good enough to pass a message to her and tell her to make the fucking AC work?”

Jake stroked a hand over the steering wheel comfortably. “Don’t listen to her, baby,” he cooed. “She’s just jealous you got better curves than her.”

Sam turns the page with extreme prejudice. “Her,” he snarls. “I’ll kill him.”

* 

Jake Winston and Samantha Holloway are driving away from a harrowing experience with faith healers when they come across a haunted carnival, and Sam spends most of the first 40 pages of the book cussing and freaking out because Dean is writing their God damned lives. Their other lives—in glowing technicolor, with sexual tension so deliberate and obvious it sparks neon off of the pages.

It’s the kind of airport paperback Sam used to read in between state-mandated sets of textbooks, between schools, curled up in the backseat of the Impala when he and his dad weren’t speaking to one another. It’s fast and furiously-paced and Dean obviously thinks the car is nearly as sexy as Samantha Holloway, and Sam can’t help but feel a little irrationally wronged about that—but in the grand scheme of things it’s so low on his list of things to worry about it barely registers.

Sam’s still reading—Jake and Samantha are having a fight Sam knows he and Dean had in Iowa once and also that he sounded nowhere near as gay as Dean has portrayed him—when he feels somebody drop a hand to the back of his neck.

“I thought I told you to stop reading that,” Dean murmurs.

When Sam blinks he realizes it’s late, that shadows have cast over the pages of the book and he’s reading by the light of the street lamps outside, faint orange—that the noise of cars and people drifting through the cracked-open window has harshened, the way sound at night gets sharper around the edges, echoing and jagged in the dark.

“What time is it,” Sam asks. He puts down the book—opened now at page 94—rubs his eyes.

“It’s like, 6:30, babe,” Dean says, fond, and runs his fingers through Sam’s hair, reaches over to flick on a lamp with his free hand. “You been reading all afternoon?”

If this were home—if this were the other them, Dean would ruffle his hair: irritating, affectionate, too many sharing bathrooms and hand-me-downs on the hot, unforgiving highways. Sam closes his eyes hard against that thought, because it was impossible there, but not here—Sam can’t help but think there aren’t impossibilities here.

“I guess,” Sam admits, and leans into Dean’s touch—his fingers kneading the tense muscles in Sam’s shoulders. “I got sucked in.”

“It’s because I’m a genius,” Dean assures him, laughing, and steps away, touch gone but still close, and Sam finds himself following like he’s trapped in Dean’s gravitational field—like he’s always
been trapped in Dean’s orbit, helplessly drawn even when there was a continent between them.

“How was your meeting?” Sam asks, and he watches Dean make a grab for a cordless phone.

“It was good,” Dean says, glancing at Sam over his shoulder. “I’m ordering in—what are you in
the mood for?”

Sam shrugs, leans against a counter. “I’m fine with anything.”

Dean leans over to dial in a number from a magnet on the fridge—and then pulls the door open to
snatch a beer. He puts the phone between his shoulder and his ear and pops the top on a counter,
and Sam wants to scold him for that, but he doesn’t know if he does that here—if that’s a brother
thing or a whatever the hell this is thing, but Dean just gives Sam a preemptive don’t shit bricks
about it look Sam would know from any version of Dean.

“Yeah, hey, delivery please?” Dean says, and passes Sam his beer, digging around his pocket with
his free hand.

Sam takes the bottle in numb fingers, feels the slick glass against the pads of his fingers, and thinks
that Dean will keep his wallet in his back left pocket no matter where he goes, or who he is, or who
they are to one another. Sam used to steal Dean’s beers all the time, partly because dealing with his
brother long-term occasionally required alcohol abuse, but mostly because he could feel the
lingering warmth of Dean’s mouth that way.

Sam remembers feeling bad about it, guilty, like he was taking advantage—but Sam thinks that
back then, wherever he was, taking advantage was all he could ever take.

But that’s not true now, Sam thinks, and sets the bottle down, reaches over and threads his fingers
—they aren’t shaking, they’ve always known this geography—through the hair at the back of
Dean’s neck and draws him in. And Dean’s eyes are wide and amused but kisses Sam anyway, with
the tinny sound of the pizza guy in the background confirming their order and the metal frames of
his glasses cool on Sam’s cheek.

And Sam kisses—first—the corners of Dean’s mouth, and then the bow of his upper lip, scrapes
his teeth on the soft sweet flesh on the inside of Dean’s pout. He licks his way into Dean’s mouth,
sliding across teeth and tongue: Dean tastes like hops and Coke and still a little bit like the
toothpaste Sam found on the bathroom counter, he tastes exactly like Sam has always imagined.

And it’s that thought that triggers the rush of desperation, of want like a chemical burn under his
skin. Sam has been in a haze all this time, still dreaming, but the way Dean’s fingers are digging
bruises into his hip is real, and so is the slight chip in one of Dean’s molars—and Sam’s suddenly
knotting his fists in the fabric of Dean’s shirt, trying to climb inside.

“Oh, okay,” Dean says when he pushes away for air. “We’ve totally just scandalized Papa Johns.”

“Don’t care,” Sam tells him and leans over to bite at the line of Dean’s chin.

“But they give us pizza,” Dean protests, but Sam decides not to be annoyed because Dean’s sliding
his hands into the back pockets of Sam’s jeans. “It’s not like you can cook.”

Sam nips Dean harder for that. “I microwave.”

Dean hisses, and without a trace of irony in his tone, says, “God, you’re hot when you talk about
cooking.”
Sam never thought that if he got this he’d get laughter, too, and he’s still laughing when Dean knocks them over onto the sofa and insinuates a thigh between Sam’s knees, slides his hands up Sam’s sides and down again, fingers intoxicating and warm and rough-heavy through the t-shirt—close enough to burn. He feels like after 43 years in the desert, he’s just tripped headfirst into a river, and he doesn’t know what to feel first in the rush of water on his skin.

Dean reaches up, thumb and fingers on the rims of his glasses, pulls them off and sets them on an end table—and it’s so easy and ordinary Sam can’t help but blurt out, “I never thought I’d get this—you.”

Dean stares at him for a long moment, braced over Sam on his elbows, before he says, “What the hell are you talking about? I’m easy. You picked me up at Fenway. And I paid for that beer I was waving around when I met you—I got myself drunk so you could pick me up at Fenway.”

Sam can’t really do anything but stare up at Dean, astonished, because that’s so easy—that’s just plane tickets and being in Boston and forcing himself to watch the Red Sox play. All Sam’s abstract plans to get here before meant selling off parts of himself, trading in pieces he doesn’t think he can lose—but more importantly, trading in pieces of Dean.

He slides a hand round Dean’s side, rests a loose fist at the small of Dean’s back. It takes a while before Sam can swallow down the sob thats lodged in his chest, but he does it, and keeps it down long enough to say, “Still—lucky me.”

*

A day later, Sam spends half an hour digging around his—expensive leather—briefcase trying to figure out where he works while Dean sprawls out asleep, face down on his side of the bed. It’s hard to make himself to when he could just take his pants back off and crawl back under the covers, but when Sam actually picks up the phone to call in sick to wherever the hell he works, Dean—unmoving—mumbles into his pillow:

“If you do not get the fuck out of this house and let me get some God damn writing done, Sammy, I swear to God. I will kill you and find some other hot, young piece to keep as my sexual plaything.”


He’s already halfway down the hall by the time hears Dean thud out of the bed, shouting, “What? Where? Son of a bitch!”

It’s Monday and Sam steps out onto the steamy morning street feeling like he can do anything, like he can have anything—and when he heard the sash of the third floor window being thrown open and Dean shouting down at him, “You motherfucker!” Sam thinks, nevermind, nevermind, because he already has it, everything that matters.

*

It turns out Sam works at Ropes & Gray, which is only less terrifying than being told he’s about to go have coffee with Satan—and only because Sam’s not entirely convinced he doesn’t still owe the Prince of Darkness anything for the many and sundry things he did to Dean over the weekend.

And then, once he gets over his panic attack and goes through security, the guy at the metal detector only says, “Morning, Mr. Winchester,” and doesn’t tackle him and call him a fraud or anything. Sam knows that if anything’s screaming. “I JUST PASSED MY LSATS, THAT’S
“ALL!” at the top of its lungs, it’s not the revoltingly expensive Armani he found in his closet and put on this morning. (He spent part of this morning’s traffic snarl depressed he’s apparently kind of a stereotypical gay man.)

Sam gives himself a mental slap and says, “Morning—” he checks the guard’s nametag “—Curtis.”

Curtis cocks a brow at him and hands Sam back his security tag. “Still can’t remember my name,” he says disapprovingly. “Kids these days.”

Sam flushes. “I’m sorry—I’m just having one of those mornings.”

Curtis waves him through, rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah—for the last six years.”

Elevator’s not much better, there’re two women having whispered arguments into the bluetooth earpieces and at one point Sam’s seriously concerned that they’re arguing with each other from different ends of the elevator. Nobody says hello to him, but it’s still the sleepy part of the morning, when everyone’s letting the coffee seep in—but by the time he reaches his floor there’re women in businesslike heels and men with their sleeves rolled up saying, “Morning, Sam,” and “Hey, Sam, have a nice weekend?”

Sam doesn’t have a corner office, he finds, but he has a window and a potted plant, and a half dozen photographs of he and Dean on his desk—a coffee mug with highlighters in it. He closes the door and sits in his Herman Miller desk chair and stares out across the Boston skyline for a long, long time, soaking in it until ten past eight somebody knocks on his door and says, “Sam? Sam? Hey, we need to go over those S-8s Hellerman’s filing tomorrow.”

*

His harrowing first week at work ends up with one of the senior partners giving Sam fond, fatherly looks—precipitating in Sam’s assistant Hannah kicking him out of the office on Friday afternoon, barely three o’clock.

Dean’s in on it, too, and meets Sam out front, steers him into Sam’s silver Jetta and drives them out to a junkyard, which Sam immediately pronounces as the worst date ever. But then Dean drives them to the garage he rents nearby, and when he lifts up the door and Sam sees the Impala again, finally—half built, still a little bit in pieces, but all there, just waiting for Dean’s hands like Sam has always been waiting for Dean’s hands—he realizes he’s missed her like he’s missed Dean’s God damn bestsellers on the fiction list being truth. He ends up tackling Dean into the Impala’s backseat, grinding down on him heavy and hot and graceless, rubbing Dean off through his jeans and wrapping Dean’s long fingers—cool with rings—around his own dick and begging, “Yeah—please, please, you gotta, you’ve gotta,” until he comes with a gasp and Dean starts worrying about the upholstery.

They bicker about who’s the bigger pussy all the way back to the apartment and end up turning in early, creeping off to bed before midnight, listening to Boston outside their window. And the next morning when sunlight is draped over their covers, Sam wakes up to Dean singing, husky and sleep-hoarse in his ear, “Sweeeeeeet Car-ro-line oh oh oh—” and has to smother him with a pillow to make him stop.

This is happiness, Sam thinks, framing Dean’s face with his hands, this is what it tastes like on his tongue.

*
On Tuesday Dean gets packed off against his will and sent via an American Airlines flight to New York. “For ultimate fighting with my publishers,” Dean says. “To work out a few lingering contractual issues regarding the next three books in the Supernatural series,” Dean’s agent says, and Sam figures it’s sex-related bias, but he totally believes Dean more. The idea of Dean trapped in a mahogany conference room hammering out sums and figures and dates of release is enough to salve the indignity of being a girl in all of Dean’s books.

Work drags more than usual, knowing Dean will be gone when he gets home, and it’s half past 6 when he gets an email that says, “The Oak Room—8 p.m., under your name.”

Chapter End Notes

I just reread this entire story (because I had forgotten I wrote it) and got to the end and called myself a dick because I realized what that plot twist was and it was MEAN. Stop reading here if you don't want to be spoiled, but for the curious: if I’m remembering this correctly, this story has a flagrantly Regarding Henry bit to it where Sam realizes that he has the perfect happiness of fucking his not-a-brother-but-sort-of-a-brother in the djinn world but obviously is cheating on Dean with Ruby. Go team, Pru!
Unexpected (Merlin)

It wasn't that Lancelot was a particularly bad person, he just had a strong affinity for flight and self-discovery. Merlin looked at the note he'd left -- Have won the counsel and time of a cloistered sect of Buddhist monks in Hainan, China, am off to climb mountain and rediscover my center. Oo mi tuo fuo -- and reflected that, at least, his loud and angry shouting about Lancelot faffing off to God knows where without even leaving a note was beginning to sink in.

"Fucking perfect," Merlin told the note, and then the rest of his empty apartment, and then to the pregnancy test in his hand and its blinking digital plus sign. "Just fucking perfect."

***

Day 1

(At least I think it's day 1, I haven't been to see the doctor yet, and I'm daft enough that I probably missed all the early signs; oh God you're going to turn into one of those crack babies that comes out of the womb with preexisting addictions.)

Gwen -- my best friend, your de-facto aunt; I haven't any siblings -- tells me writing a journal to you may be therapeutic, although I suspect she might be doing it just to get me to stop calling her and shouting in her ear. So! Hello, embryo/fetus, my name is Merlin, your father; your other father is hopefully falling off of a mountain on the southernmost tip of China, where apparently there are no telephones but plenty of monks.

***

Having spent a small fortune on pregnancy tests and bankrupted himself of all optimism otherwise over the weekend, Merlin dragged into work frozen and fecund (oh God) on Monday fantasizing about throwing Lancelot off the side of a mountain himself. The thought of Lancelot's baffled, handsome face twisted in zenlike wondering as he fell to his violent, painful, and fully-aware death comforted him in the elevator, and all the way up to the 34th floor, where as soon as the metal jaws of the lift opened he was assaulted on all sides by junior editors.

"Judy Stimson is threatening to kill herself unless she gets the same marketing roll-out that Twilight got," Edgar said, audibly panicked.

Unwinding his scarf, Merlin snatched a packet of files away from Andrea, who scuttled off, BlackBerrying frantically and holding another sheaf of documents between her teeth as she teetered on death-defying heels.

"Tell Judy Stimson that she can go right ahead -- her marketing was decided in-contract about a half-decade of revision and re-revision ago," Merlin said, taking a deep gulp of air through his nose to fight the sudden upwelling of nausea. From the corner of his eye, he could see Lakshmi zooming toward him, holding a marked-up copy of The Children's Book From Hell. Preemptively, Merlin said, "No."

"I've toned it down quite a bit," Lakshmi pleaded, falling into step with Merlin as he wound through the corridors toward his office. "And honestly, you can't have every single book for young readers being about bloody rabbits and penguins."

"Nor can you market anything titled Beezelbeb's Babes," Merlin replied, tartly executing a courageous dash into his office and slamming the door shut and locked before anybody else could
dash in after him. Not that it prevented Lakshmi from yelling through it, "Fine! But you're abandoning the opportunity to be a groundbreaking children's editor!" or Edgar reminding him, "Meeting at 11, and Delphinia says Horace says Bronwen said his royal highness in a mood."

"Sod off, all of you!" Merlin replied, and collapsed behind his desk. The absolute last thing he needed was Arthur in a snit today, because Merlin could either be pregnant out of wedlock or deal with Arthur but he couldn't be pregnant out of wedlock and deal with Arthur's terrible mood.

There were a thousand emails awaiting his attention (all but three wallowing in his inbox were spangled with multiple exclamation points: URGENT URGENT URGENT) and the red light on his desk phone was blinking ominously. There was a pile of slush stacked by his chair and a half-dozen invitations for book launches and readings, themed parties for children's book series' about anthropomorphic objects and animals and a small mountain of trade paperback teen vampire romance novels awaiting his ritual burning.

"Right," Merlin said, resigned, and dived into it.

***

He was the last person in to the 11 a.m. meeting, having arrived at precisely 11:20 after being waylaid by no fewer than two interns, one hysterically-sobbing cover artist, two of their company lawyers and then being forced to take a long detour in order to vomit out three-quarters of all the food he had ever eaten.

"Nice of you to join us, Emrys," Arthur said from the head of the conference room table -- a feat for sure given that it was round specifically to foster an egalitarian attitude, an obvious relic of the old regime. "I hope our meeting isn't cutting into your valuable entanglement of personal business during work hours."

Merlin was frequently torn over whether Arthur Pendragon was more hateful for being devastatingly attractive or a bastard, and today he felt the latter fiercely, a sour burn in the back of his throat.

"Sorry, a little under the weather," he said, and slouched into the last remaining open seat -- the one immediately to Arthur's left. It spoke to Arthur's personality that despite his being golden-haired and blue-eyed and distractingly well-muscled, only the bravest, the sluttiest, or the least frequently trapped in close proximity ever volunteered to sit at his side, which usually left Merlin stuck with it. It wasn't that people didn't like Arthur -- that honor was held more or less exclusively by Merlin -- but he could be a bully and had a tongue nearly as sharp as his aim with binder clips, by which almost everybody above a certain management tier had been struck at least once or twice. Merlin once or twice daily.

Arthur gave him a brief, appraising look before turning back to the conference room at large.

"Returning to our earlier topic, Lakshmi, again and hopefully for the last time, no on the God damn Satan worship for minors book already."

Lakshmi turned a fascinating color red. "This is just like when you guys passed on Harry Potter!"

The meeting more or less deteriorated from that point, and Merlin zoned into and out of focus, hearing small snatches of conversation: the art-nonfiction editor making an impassioned plea about something that had to do with Danish rococo, someone from popular fiction asking about something about boys? Teenaged boys? Merlin kept drifting half to sleep and being seized by nauseating panic every time he remembered, oh God, he was pregnant! And Lancelot was
unreachable! And he was unlikely to fall off of a mountain and die, even! And that Merlin was fucked utterly fucked.

"Merlin," Arthur snapped suddenly. "What on Earth is -- will you stop hyperventilating?"

"What? No I'm not," Merlin lied, and only then realized he sounded extremely high-pitched and breathless for somebody not at all hyperventilating. "Okay, I might be. But just a little."

Arthur gave him a look that would have tanned leather while it was still technically affixed to a steer as a living organ.

"Right," Merlin said, getting out of his chair and hooking a thumb toward the hallway. "I'll just -- I'll just go sequester myself in my office so as not to spread my disease, right?" he offered, and fairly ran from the room.

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Lancelot, you fucking slapper! I have no idea where you are and neither does the British consulate in Beijing or in fucking Hong Kong. But look. Wherever you are -- please, please as soon as you get this message (dear God, tell me wherever the fuck you are has internet cafes) please, please call me post-haste because I could play coy with it or whatever, but sod that: I'm pregnant and I cannot bloody believe you've fucking abandoned me just after you've knocked me up.

Merlin.

***

He hid, for a while, in the men's room, staring at his reflection in the handicap stall sink mirror and feeling profound despair. But having not replenished his body's supply of things to throw up violently, Merlin was mostly trapped into a nauseated, indistinct sense of terribleness, and so eventually returned to his office to feel that way more privately.

The pile of slush and memos and trade paperbacks had somehow grown in his short absence, and nestled among them was a dark blue mug, a stark white ceramic chip on its handle, the peppermint tea inside steaming away inside. Merlin fell upon it.

"How do you even know that tea's all right to drink?" came Arthur's voice, and when Merlin looked up, the boy king was leaning against the doorway to Merlin's office, looking bemused.

"It would be fruitless to poison me -- everybody who might want to works for me," Merlin argued. "If I died, all this work would just be left to one of them."

Arthur smirked. "Maybe they wanted you out of the way. Get that promotion."

Merlin made a face. "Doubtful," he said, tone mild, and watched Arthur roll his eyes and walk away, striding purposefully down the corridor, expensive slacks molding around his gorgeous arse in painfully distracting ways.

His stomach made a strange, yearning flip, and Merlin glanced down at it, wondering if it was his digestive system or his brand new parasite.

"He'll only break your heart you know," he said to his embryo/fetus, just to be safe. "I know he's terribly attractive, but it's really, really not worth the years of therapy."

Edgar strolled in a bit later, divvying up a half of the slush pile, and Merlin smiled at him faintly
and said, "Thanks, by the way, for the tea," and Edgar only gave him a hassled look and darted away, leaving Merlin to his panic and fast-cooling tea and no answer from Lancelot, no matter how many times Merlin refreshed his email or how hard he stared at his phone.

It was Wednesday, which meant naturally that Gwen was waiting for him in his flat with Chinese takeaway and a tape of that week's Strictly Come Dancing when he got there at the end of the day. Only this time she was also wearing a solemn, worried look on her face that could only mean she wanted to have a meaningful, serious conversation of the sort Merlin avoided with every fiber of his being.

"Gwen, I don't want to talk about it," Merlin snapped at her, throwing down his shoulderbag of multicolored pens and a laptop and digital tape recorder and six manuscripts he didn't feel compelled to burn.

"Now that you've had some time to think over this calmly, it's probably time to make some decisions," she lectured.

Merlin made a straight line for the takeaway bags. She'd ordered ma po tofu and egg foo young and those horrid (delicious) fried fake scallops Merlin felt were probably laced with cocaine and Merlin felt a moment of deep, intense love for her. "Well, I've decided that I'm obviously going to be forced to kill Lancelot," Merlin said, conversational.

"Not a chance," Gwen replied. "I've said it once, I'll say it again: as soon as you're done with him, I'm next in line."

Merlin stared at her until she blushed, and it bloomed over her pale, golden-brown cheek.

"I mean -- like, when I say that, I mean that of course, if you were ever sick of him, as a joke, I might give him a go. Only I mean, not like, "give him a go" in the classic sense, rather than as a joke-y sort of interpretation, since naturally Lancelot is your boyfriend and I'd never -- "

Rolling his eyes, Merlin said, "Right. Look, Gwen, can't I just eat first?"

"Will you keep the baby?" Gwen asked, flat-out.

Merlin choked on a scallop, and after Gwen came over and whacked him on the back a few times to get it dislodged from his trachea, he managed to croak, "Gwen, I'm not sure abortion is an appropriate dinner topic."

"You shouldn't do anything drastic until you've gotten in touch with Lancelot," Gwen plowed onward. "As, obviously, it's his baby, too." She paused. "It is his baby, right?"

"No, it's Arthur's," Merlin said, and Gwen began choking on her tongue, so he shouted, "Of course it's bloody Lancelot's! Gwen!"

"I'm sorry!" she cried. "It's just -- you do have that crush on Arthur and -- "

Merlin stabbed at his lo mein viciously. "I do not have a crush on Arthur."

Ruffled and looking thoroughly annoyed, Gwen said, "Look, whatever. I think we should make you an appointment with an OB, get somebody to run a last round of tests, yeah? Make certain that everything's all right and maybe talk about some of your options."

"I thought I wasn't supposed to coat-hanger the fetus until I could confirm with Lancelot," Merlin told her through a mouthful of tofu and felt immediately terrible about it because obviously his
embryo hadn't ever done anything to deserve such ill will and tasteless jokes and even if he would be a terrible parent and shouldn't even be one, that was still a fairly shite thing to say. Also, Gwen was looking at him as if he'd just murdered a pair of the queen's corgies. "Er, sorry about that."

She gave him a suspicious look. "I'll write that off as hormones."

"That," Merlin told her, pointing, "that is going to become annoying very fast."

***

Merlin’s first day as an assistant editor at Albion Books he turned his ankle on a stack of slush, been an hour late for his appointment with HR, mispronounced the name of his direct supervisor and assumed that the admin—who of course controlled his access to office supplies, fax machines, printers and ruled his copying account—was a woman simply because his name was Leslie and he was very fey. Years later, Merlin was still convinced it was the worst first day of work possible, exacerbated by the fact that as he’d left the staff meeting, feeling helplessly exhausted already at just past noon, Arthur Pendragon himself had waylaid him in a hallway and said, “Well, you seem painfully dumb and underqualified for whatever position we’ve hired you—come with me.”

He’d spent the next eight hours making his way through Arthur’s cracked, deranged, incomprehensible filing system while Arthur sat on a phone and shouted at people in three languages, including appallingly accented Japanese.

Since, through a combination of accidental promotion and attrition, Merlin had moved from assistant editor to an associate editor to an editor and then senior editor. It was wasted effort and time on the part of HR and the printers to whom they sent away for business cards, because all of his official documents should have just written down his position as “Arthur Pendragon’s dogsbody.”

Arthur had a secretary of course. He had two. But it was Merlin who kept his schedule and who was obliged to join him for business lunches and travel alongside Arthur for particularly terrible business meetings and conferences at which Arthur invariably turned up in a terrible mood and required Merlin’s extensive coddling.

Worse even than that, instead of sympathizing with Merlin’s unendurable plight, almost everybody at Albion interpreted it as preferential treatment, and if it weren’t for the steady stream of gorgeous women and men that had decorated Arthur’s arm over the years, the gossip might have been even uglier.

Ah, Merlin thought with a rueful smile, and they were always gorgeous.

Over the years, there had been Sonia, with her ice-blonde hair and ice-blue eyes and pursed, narrow mouth as she’d surveyed the publishing office, dressed in a plunging black gown with diamonds dripping from her ears and down the white wings of her collarbones. Afterward, there was Gareth, who had a laugh even Merlin found charming, and dark, swallowing eyes and dark, curling hair. He had lasted almost two months before Arthur had appeared in a collage of society pictures in the Tatler with a redhead named Portia, who three weeks after that called Merlin a, quote, “bloody idiot!” when he had to interrupt she and Arthur as they were heading out to tell him one of their binders had gone into default and that Arthur was needed to sort it all out. Merlin never saw her again after that, but when he’d asked after her, mostly out of spite, a month later, Arthur had only said, “She’s not worth your consideration, Merlin,” and that had been the end of that.

Most recently, Arthur had been spotted at the opera and one of the more pretentious Gordon Ramsey kitchens with someone the two of the marketing girls had described as “stunningly
gorgeous” and “the stuff of visceral homoerotic sex dreams,” so Merlin assumed Arthur was well over that broken heart, too.

It was late, evening twinkling into the time of night when the sky was midnight blue fabric overhead, when stars would peer out if London weren’t so filled with light pollution. From Merlin’s opened office door and from peering between stacks of discarded — form letter rejection — and perhaps interesting — likely eventual emailed rejection — manuscripts, Merlin could see Arthur pace around the inside of his office as he held court via speakerphone. His tie was loose and his sleeves rolled up, his suit jacket discarded and the cuffs of his impeccably tailored pants dragging on the carpeted floors, shoes abandoned in favor of toeing the wool loops with gray-socked toes. If the workload went much longer, Merlin thought, finishing off the last of his email inbox and reaching for the light on his desk, Arthur might check up and down the deserted hallways before slipping on a pair of glasses, settling in behind his desk to burn the midnight oil, and Merlin might find him the next morning, asleep in a slump at his computer, long lashes a shadow across his cheek.

He was still pulling on his coat by the time he walked past the flung-open door of Arthur’s office, and he paused a moment, leaning against the frame as Arthur said, “Right, thanks then,” and disconnected the call. His eyes looked bloodshot when he looked back up and then startled.

“Merlin,” he said. “What’re you still doing here?”

“Preparing entries for the Nibbies and the Branford Boase,” Merlin told him, fussing with his coat, his scarf. “We’ve got a half-dozen children’s and young readers I think have a chance.”

Arthur actually smiled at that. “Might be the most of any of our imprints.”

“I am exceedingly good at my job,” Merlin bragged, because something in Arthur made him unable to resist, and also he was happy — it was a long day but a good one, and filing out forms and agonizing over which books to nominate took his mind away from things over which he had no control, away from Lancelot and away from unplanned pregnancies and what his mother would inevitably say about the entire business.

The smile on Arthur’s mouth turned challenging. “You keep talking yourself up I’m going to dispatch you to snatch us a Booker Prize.”

“I said I was exceedingly good,” Merlin scolded, “not a miracle worker.”

It wasn’t often Arthur grinned the way he did now, madly, and so Merlin forgave himself for flushing bright red and finding himself suddenly at a loss for words.

“Noted,” Arthur allowed, and glancing at his watch, said, “Well, it’s half-ten, I’m done for the night — interested in getting dinner?”


Arthur paused, halfway through shrugging on his coat, a dark, gray-wool duster lined with gray-blue silk that had felt like water against the pads of Merlin’s fingers, when he’d taken it from Arthur’s hands once. There was, for a moment, a flicker of darkness in Arthur’s eyes before he recovered and smirked, saying, “How silly. Of course — you’ll need to be running home to your knight in shining armor, after all. Forget I said — ”

“Lancelot’s not around,” Merlin blurted out and didn’t know why he’d done it.

Arthur stared at him. “Not around,” he repeated carefully.
Letting out a fluttery, too-nervous breath, Merlin laughed. “China. He’s — he’s fucked off to some island in China. I haven’t heard from him in a week.” Merlin felt his fingers go tight in his scarf, nails in the loops of yarn. “He’s meditating.”

“In that case,” Arthur told him, sweeping Merlin from the room with one hand on the small of Merlin’s back — the sort of touch that happened often enough it felt both easy and alarming — turning out the office lights, “then I see no reason I shouldn’t require you to entertain me during dinner.”

They ate at Awana on Sloane Avenue, and Merlin laughed until his sides hurt, listening to Arthur issue absolutely and unforgivably cruel character defamations of Albion Books’ finance department. He grew shy when Arthur asked him with genuine interest in the award submissions, made Merlin to promise to set aside a copy of each nomination for Arthur’s perusal. They talked about Lakshmi.

“I can’t believe you hired that woman,” Arthur complained, sending their server — a blonde nymphette who’d favored Merlin with a number of jealous looks throughout the night — for coffee and a desert menu. “She’s clearly mental.”

“I did no such thing,” Merlin complained. “She was here when I got here, working as an unpaid intern or some such thing, and I only —”

“Promoted her internally and gave her the agency to start pitching books about childhood Satanic worship,” Arthur interrupted, wry. “You’ve got to learn how to fire people, Merlin. Honestly.”

Scowling, Merlin said, “You know, sometimes I forget I hate you, and then.”

Arthur laughed, and took the menu when it arrived and ordered three different kinds of cake — over the top, as usual, and Merlin managed to stay angry an entire three extra minutes before they were brought two forks.

“Remember those books,” Arthur warned him, pulling up the curb in front of Merlin’s apartment block an hour later, and Merlin called out, “Thanks for the ride,” and “Of course, my lord,” over his shoulder as he forced himself out of the car and into the dark of the London street.

Gwen was wrong, Merlin knew, about his crush on Arthur. It’d gone beyond that ages ago, years ago.
I'm really sorry. This is based on an prompt from hypertwink that reads as follows: "The one where Tony is like The Little Mermaid but Steve ends up with another "iron man" Bucky."

It's crazy that the physical pain of dissolving away into the ocean is secondary to how much it had hurt to see Steve and Bucky smiling at one another, curled in close and crushingly happy -- no space in between them for Tony. And Tony's not good or sentimental enough, even, to hold close the memories of Steve from when he'd been walking around on fucking glass just to walk around near Steve and his sunshine-bright smiles. He resents it, he regrets it, he's not the kind of person who's unselfish and grateful enough to be happy for Steve to have Bucky, who can live with him and care about him and be good to him like a normal person -- not like Tony at all.

And Tony's fully prepared to go pissed, to vanish into whatever's after angry as hell that he'd bartered himself away so cheaply, but then Steve's tumbling over the dunes, panic in his blue eyes, skidding down the length of the beach to where the waves are dragging Tony away, piece by piece.

"Tony," Steve gasps, and he puts his huge hands -- gritty with sand -- on Tony's face, and presses their mouths together: fierce and bright, a sudden electrical pop of sensation. "Tony -- thank you, for everything."

"Oh," Tony says, "God damn it," and he can feel himself disappearing faster now, smiling crazily, something bubbling up like happiness in the spaces where he used to be, all the anger melting away.

"Goodbye," Steve tells him, wet-eyed and still perched close, watchful and intimate. "I'm so glad I knew you."

"I don't care that you're getting married, Rogers," Tony tells him, with his literal, last breaths. "You still owe me a date."

Steve laughing, crying, eyes wet and huge, saying, "Yes, of course, anytime," is Tony's last image, framed in the light of the sunset, and Tony is filled with a sudden surge of determined inevitability, because he's coming back, somehow the ocean is going to give him up again. There's no way he's not cashing this in eventually.
Based on a prompt by smokeyduck that reads as follows: "The one where Tony is researching how to be the best wife for Gibbs."

The first Thanksgiving is pretty disastrous, which is a surprise to nobody since Senior had been cooking dinner and by 10 p.m. every man in the house over 50 was drunk as hell, and Tony had ended up tucking them into bed together in a move motivated primarily by a combination of childish irritation and physical inability to move Senior to the guest room. Christmas is weird, since it'd had been less than a month later and by then Gibbs has kissed him, twice: once by the coffee stand to the general horror of everybody at the Navy Yard, and then once at the grocery store, saying, "Come home with me, give me a reason to get a Christmas tree," and what the hell does anybody say to that other than, "Okay," and "Let me grab some milk, first."

Tony's great at the first three months of a relationship. He's fun and sexually adventurous and all of his weirdness still comes off as charming. It's month four that usually fucks him over. He's pretty resigned to it, as a rule, but this is Gibbs, who Tony has wanted to marry since he still thought he was marrying a woman in Baltimore, so obviously it's going to take a lot more effort and also some research.

He cooks, he cleans. He surveys the happily married guys in the bullpen (there are four; there are about 75 divorced guys, not including multiple divorces). He freaks out, a lot, and lets Gibbs choose what TV they watch (Tony has never hated Hitler or the History Channel more in his entire fucking life). He tries to be entirely accommodating in bed -- which is how he ends up throwing out his back, and confessing like a common criminal under Gibbs's glare and the seducing influence of percocet 12 hours later.
The non-ninja Naruto schoolteacher AU. Because apparently that was a thing that happened once upon a time.

It would have been a flagrant lie to claim he’d never expected to get a call from the police about Naruto. Given the circumstances however, Kakashi felt justified in his surprise.

He had been losing a war of the wills to Pakkun when the phone had started ringing—five minutes later, Kakashi was out the door, tugging a coat over his sopping wet t-shirt and damp jeans, smelling like angry dog and shampoo and driving far too fast. The young officer on the phone had apologized for calling so late, but said that it was really very important Kakashi come as quickly as possible—Umino-san was already on his way to the hospital and there needed to be an adult to claim poor Uzumaki-san, audibly panicking in the background.

But rushing into the police station to see Naruto red-eyed and bruised, an officer trying to comfort him, was still like a punch in the gut.

“Uzumaki,” Kakashi said, rushing over.

Naruto stared, frozen for a moment before he leapt to his feet, grabbing Kakashi’s jacket and saying, “We’ve got to go to the hospital! Hatake-sensei, we’ve got to go to the hospital now.” He glanced over his shoulder at an officer and asked, “Can I leave yet? He’s here—you’ve taken my statement!”

Kakashi put a hand on Naruto’s shoulder, and couldn’t help but inspect his student, to take in the school blazer and loosened tie—the white shirt missing a few buttons now, the dried blood on his knee, down the shin of his khaki pants.

“I thought you said he wasn’t hurt,” Kakashi barked, glaring at the same officer suffering Naruto’s pleading look.

Looking sober, the young man shook his head. “He’s not—aside from a few bruises.” Wincing, he added, “That’s, ah, Umino-san’s.”

Kakashi’s mouth tightened. “We’ll leave right now,” he said to Naruto, looking down at his distraught expression. He turned back to the officer. “Is there anything I need to sign?”

*  

There had been rumors, of course, but Kakashi had dismissed them as exaggerated, ridiculous, that it was just everybody trying to scare the new guy. But then he’d found himself looking at an ocean of broken furniture at the end of his first day at Konoha.

“So,” he said cheerfully, crossing his arms over his chest and surveying the overturned desks and utter chaos in the room, “could either of you explain how you managed to destroy my classroom, again, in the—” he checked the wall clock “—five minutes I stepped out to make a phone call?”
The dark one made an aggressively disinterested noise, hands stuck into his pockets.

The blonde one paled, dark blue eyes rounding in absolute horror, “Ah, Hatake-sensei—you didn’t, did you?”

“Didn’t what?” Kakashi asked, raising his brows. “Call your guardians?”

“I’m dead,” the Uzumaki kid wailed, clutching at his hair, already sticking straight up at odd angles.

Uchiha, finally proving he was actually capable of speech, said, “Good.”

“WHAT DID YOU SAY?” Naruto shouted, balling up his fists and leaping to his feet, and Kakashi was reaching over to the chalkboard for an eraser to throw when the door to the classroom burst open and somebody shouted:

“NARUTO, I CANNOT BELIEVE YOU. IT’S YOUR FIRST DAY.”

That first time, Kakashi had been so busy being bowled over by the extreme loudness and fearfulness of the many and sundry threats being cast in Naruto’s general direction that he’d hardly had time to study the person shouting them. And then, in a whirl of suddenly-polite apologies, he’d been abandoned in his classroom, honor-bound to clean up after all. The second time, he’d been prepared, and the raving, furious man who’d stormed in turned out to be dark-haired and olive-skinned, dressed in a pair of jeans and a neat black sweater—and best of all, when he’d dragged Naruto and Sasuke out of the classroom, both of the punks had looked terrified for their lives.

The third time, Kakashi took some time out of the dressing-down the man was giving them to introduce himself.

“Hatake Kakashi,” he said, bowing slightly. “I’m the new teacher.”

Suddenly embarrassed, the other man had blushed, saying, “Oh! I’m Umino Iruka. I’m sorry for all of the trouble.”

“Oh, no,” Kakashi purred, looking at the delicate skin over Iruka’s halfway-exposed collarbone, “it’s no trouble at all.”

And while Naruto and Sasuke don’t get particularly better, they don’t get particularly worse, either. They learned to limit their standoffs and shouting matches to out-of-class time, which had both benefits and drawbacks. For one, Kakashi had many fewer parent-teacher conferences; on the other hand, Kakashi had many fewer parent-teacher conferences.

But it turned out Iruka was only three buildings away, in the elementary division of Konoha Academy, where he had a small herd of 6-year-olds constantly proposing marriage. Kakashi didn’t exactly blame them, since in the months and manufactured meetings afterward, he’d been tempted to do the same on more than one occasion.

*K*

Kakashi’s knuckles were white on the steering wheel, and at the first red light after leaving the police station, he glanced over to see Naruto rubbing a fist at his eyes, the other clutched tightly at his knee.

“What happened?” Kakashi asked. He had his suspicions—and they lay with the oil slick Naruto complained of nonstop during detentions, snarling about Mizuki this, Mizuki that, how Mizuki
wasn’t good enough, but Iruka-nii-san wouldn’t listen.

Naruto tried to draw his knees up on the seat—but he’d gone through a growth spurt and all his limbs were too long to fold up any longer, so he settled hanging his head.

“‘It’s my fault,’” he muttered.

Kakashi frowned. “Not what the police officers told me.”

Naruto looked up to stare out the windshield, eyes going glassy. “I started the fight,” he persisted, voice dull. “He pushed me first—but I pushed him back.”

Another traffic light, and Kakashi huffed in irritation, worry creeping underneath his skin like spiderwebbing vines, curling tight around his throat. “Why did he push you, then?”

“I saw Mizuki—” Naruto’s mouth turned downward in an angry frown, and he fisted his hands on his knees “—I saw him kissing someone else. On my way home from the arcade.”

Kakashi thought he should feel an explosion of rage or righteous fury, but mostly he felt unsurprised. Naruto was many things but he was above all loyal, and nobody ever managed to spend much time with the boy without hearing extensively about his Iruka-nii-san—about how Naruto would kill anybody who messed with him, or at least try very hard.

“Ah,” Kakashi said, turning into the hospital’s parking deck.

Naruto stared out the car windows, at the halogen glow of the hospital and the ambulances, high-pitched and red and blue and flashing on the street, the huddles of EMS workers and doctors on the emergency ramps. Swallowing hard, he said, “Anyway, Iruka-nii-san—he walked in on us while we were fighting and tried to break it up.”

Kakashi jackknifed into the nearest parking spot, hearing his tires protest with a shriek. “And that’s how he got shoved through the glass balcony door.”

“Yeah,” Naruto ground out, hoarse, “that’s how he got shoved through the door.”

The nurses were just as weak to Naruto’s tear-stained face as Kakashi felt, and they were ushered through the hallways at great speed and given a small mountain of forms before they finally located Iruka’s doctor.

“Ah, well,” the man said. He was white-haired and reliable looking, and Kakashi smelled only the faintest traces of cigarette smoke in the air around the man, his lab coat impeccable. “He was very lucky—it could have been much worse.”

Kakashi watched Naruto’s face grow even paler and wished they could move past the admonitions and warnings and straight to seeing Iruka—if only so Naruto would stop looking like he was about to start crying again.

“He’ll need to spend a week here, just for monitoring and to make sure there’re no infections—but then he can go home for the rest of recovery,” the doctor went on, and gave a mild, benevolent smile to Naruto, saying, “You’ll need to take good care of him, now.”

Naruto nodded so hard Kakashi feared his head would simply fly off from the effort.

The hospital room was dark and quiet, and Iruka was small on the hospital bed, his dark hair unbound and pushed to the side—bandages wrapped tightly across his back and side. He was
sleeping on his stomach, eyes closed and breathing heavily, hooked up to two different IVs—blissfully unaware of Naruto as he stood there, scrubbing angrily at his face and muttering, “Sorry—I’m sorry.”

*

It took nearly an hour of coaxing and the promise of ramen before Naruto could be persuaded to go, and Kakashi watched the boy eat despondently, stuffing noodles into his mouth mechanically and without any enjoyment.

“You know,” Kakashi said finally, “I’m sure Umino-sensei will tell you the same thing when he wakes up tomorrow—but it wasn’t your fault.”

Naruto froze mid-slurp and stared at his chopsticks for a long time before he said, “If it wasn’t for me, they wouldn’t be fighting anyway.”

There was probably a long story behind that, Kakashi thought. He could imagine Iruka, equally fierce in his fury and protectiveness, and how that might turn into long fights with somebody who didn’t love Naruto enough to see past the obvious personality disorders.

“That’s not any excuse for that guy to be cheating,” Kakashi said reasonably. “And he shouldn’t have pushed you—which I bet Umino-sensei will tell you, too, when he wakes up.”

Kakashi tried not to feel guilty about all the times he’d seriously considered flinging Naruto and Sasuke off of the school roof during detentions—the campus would be mostly deserted, and nobody would really blame him. But as elaborate and detailed as his plans might have become, he never would have actually carried it out—and he wasn’t even getting sex out of the deal.

Naruto just shoved his bowl away and put his head down on the counter silently.

Frowning, Kakashi said, “Hey! Snap out of it! Do you want your Iruka-nii-san to see you like this? You’ll probably just upset him more!”

Sniffling pitifully, Naruto picked up his head to give Kakashi a rheumy but irritated look.

“What do you know!” Naruto snapped, adding in a mutter, “Stupid teacher.”

Well, Kakashi told himself, cuffing Naruto upside the head, insubordinate and mouthy was better than wallowing in self-pity anyway.

*

Kakashi wasn’t particularly surprised Naruto wasn’t in class the next day, but by the time day three rolled around and Naruto still hadn’t put in an appearance, Kakashi figured he was probably honor bound to go do something about it.

Uchiha, who was reaching near-dangerous levels of emo that had driven away all but the most persistent of his fan club, was starting to look a little frayed around the edges, and Kakashi gave his theory of frustrated adolescent homosexual love yet another check mark as he headed out of the classroom and toward his car.

“By the way, Uchiha-kun,” he said, sugar-sweet, catching Sasuke’s attention as he stormed out of the school courtyard, “I’m going to visit Umino-sensei and Uzumaki-kun—if you wanted to tag along.”
Sasuke did something that looked suspiciously like blushing before he sniffed imperiously, smoothing his hair back and causing a group of first-years to swoon nearby. His moment of transparent longing over, Sasuke stalked toward the school gates, throwing over his shoulder a disgusted, “Please.”

Kakashi laughed all the way to the grocery store and then all the way to the book store—and managed to compose himself to a mild smirk by the time he reached the hospital: goody basket and stack of reading materials in hand.

He was at the nurse’s station, about to ask if Iruka was seeing any visitors when he heard Iruka’s voice boom out, “NARUTO I CANNOT BELIEVE YOU SKIPPED SCHOOL AGAIN!” and Naruto shout back, “OH COME ON. LIKE I CAN LEAVE YOU HERE BY YOURSELF!”

“Ah,” Kakashi laughed, seeing the long-suffering eye-roll of the on-call nurse, “I see he’s awake.”

The nurse gave him a pleading look.

Iruka’s hospital room was an ocean of flowers and fruit baskets and ugly, construction paper get well cards covered in awkward handwriting—signs of a well-loved teacher, for sure. And Naruto, perched on a plastic chair at Iruka’s bedside, was scowling as he argued, “I can go to school any day! You need me here!”

Iruka—looking much better if still flat on his stomach—put his face in a pillow before he glared back at his charge, snapping, “You should be going to school every day! They have nurses who take care of me! Nurses can’t do your homework.”

Unrepentant, Naruto crowed, “Hah! If I don’t go to get my homework, it’s not like it can come to me!”

Note to self, Kakashi thought, have Sasuke deliver Naruto’s homework from now on.

Clearing his throat, he said, “Sorry to interrupt.”

Naruto practically flung himself out of his seat, and catching himself just before he lost vertical integrity, Naruto said, round-eyed and gasping, “Hatake-sensei!”

“Yes,” Kakashi agreed, smiling, and turned to a fiercely-blushing Iruka. “Umino-sensei.”

“Hatake-sensei,” Iruka finally said, gathering his dignity—which Kakashi imagined was somewhat challenging when lying prostrate on your stomach. Glaring at Naruto, Iruka continued, “Sorry to force you to come all the way out here to bring Naruto his homework.”

Naruto winced.

“Oh, no, no trouble,” Kakashi laughed. “Besides, I’m planning to have Uchiha-kun deliver Naruto’s homework if he end up missing any more classes.” At Naruto’s gap-jawed, horrified expression, Kakashi smiled serenely. “It’s only fair—you are, after all, tending for Umino-san and your classmates should be sensitive to your needs.”

“I’LL GO TO CLASS,” Naruto declared, suddenly beet-red and huffing. “TOMORROW.”

Feigning surprise, Kakashi said, wide-eyed, “Are you sure? Of course, I understand—”

“IT’S FINE,” Naruto interrupted. “DON’T SEND SASUKE.”
From the corner of his eye, Kakashi saw Iruka burying his face in a pillow, shoulders shaking with laughter. It took some effort not to let his gaze trail down the opened back of the gown—to follow the line of Iruka’s spine, still covered with white gauze bandages, until the hospital sheets hid it all. Kakashi wondered what the small of Iruka’s back would taste like against his mouth, and if Iruka’s skin would be as sweet as his smiles, but shook himself out of it just in time to see Naruto’s eyes narrowing in rising suspicion.

Naruto reached over, tugging the covers up higher along Iruka’s back, and Kakashi allowed that perhaps Naruto wasn’t quite as oblivious as Kakashi had thought before.

“Well,” Kakashi said, holding up his shopping bags, “in any case: I brought gifts!”

Iruka flushed, red blooming out across his cheeks. “Ah, Hatake-sensei, there’s no need for—”

Shaking his head, Kakashi set his shopping bags down on a nearby table. “Now, now, Umino-sensei, this room is filled with flowers and cards and things—don’t tell me you’re only going to turn down my gifts.”

Iruka snapped his mouth shut.

Grinning, Kakashi unloaded green tea Pocky and cans of milk tea, rice crackers and candy, immediately passing a cup of ramen over to Naruto, who looked momentarily torn between staying to monitor Iruka’s chastity and ramen. “I’ll be RIGHT BACK,” he emphasized, glaring at Kakashi before bolting down the hall.

“Energetic, isn’t he,” Kakashi said, tone mild.

Iruka rolled his eyes. “That’s one way to put it, yes,” he answered, voice dry enough to catch forest fires. He nodded at the second bag. “Is that more ramen to soothe the beast?”

“Actually,” Kakashi said, setting the bag near Iruka’s reach, “it’s books, magazines, some manga—I figured you might be bored out of your mind laying here.”

Iruka stared at him, eyes wide, and stared long enough to make Kakashi look away, clearing his throat as he added, “I didn’t know what you liked, so I got a little of everything.”

There was a long pause before Iruka said, his voice soft, “Thank you, Hatake-sensei.”

“You can pay me back by breaking Uzumaki-kun’s legs,” Kakashi said.

“Don’t encourage me,” Iruka laughed, and pushed himself up onto his elbows, wincing a bit. “Actually, Hatake-sensei—I meant for everything: for getting Naruto from the police station—and for talking to him afterward.”

Iruka looked sincere and sincerely embarrassed and all kinds of sincerely grateful, and that was what killed Kakashi every time, defeated him at their every meeting.

“It’s fine,” Kakashi said at last, looking away. “I was glad to help.”

*  

Kakashi always subscribed to a theory of benign neglect insofar as his students went—it wasn’t that he was a bad teacher, or that they were particularly bad students, they just weren’t worth the trouble either way. Kakashi believed in free will. Those who would pass would pass and go on to take college entrance exams or enter into technical schools; those who didn’t wouldn’t. And those
who were prone to living in Shinjuku prostituting young boys would end up living in Shinjuku prostituting young boys—either way, beyond their grades in math, it really wasn’t any of his concern.

But it was difficult to ignore Naruto, who tried harder than almost anybody else in the class and still ranked mostly at the very bottom of their grade. He was also the biggest troublemaker Kakashi had ever had the misfortune to encounter, and Kakashi had come to realize over time that his coworkers’ sympathies for his plight were genuine, if unnecessary.

Naruto was interesting; not that many people were. Shortcomings aside, the boy was sunny and unhindered by worry, and most intriguingly, Naruto had the affections of one Umino Iruka, whose name inspired fond smiles from all and sundry and high-pitched shrieks of adulation from the kindergarten and pre-K sector.

Office gossip at the high school of Konoha Academy said that Umino Iruka had started off teaching in the middle school level, and been transferred around until a sudden opening in a kindergarten class had landed him there by surprise—even more surprising, he’d chosen to stay.

“Iruka-sensei?” Kurenai had said once, when Kakashi had asked. “The only thing he hates more than grading is seeing how much students are pressured in the system—it’s no surprise at all he stayed teaching at kindergarten!”

“I see,” Kakashi had said, and tried not to feel any reasonless jealousy, knowing that almost everybody else at Konoha called Iruka by his first name—it was pointless and foolish. What was Kakashi going to do, pick fights with school nurses and five-year-olds?

*  

Naruto condescended to attend school on the fourth day, but it was obvious he was there against his wishes and after having registered—probably very loudly—his protests with Iruka. He slouched in his seat and stabbed angrily at his notebooks. Sasuke, in his version of being overjoyed, divided his frowning between the classroom door and Naruto for the day. Kakashi made a note to acquire two copies of the filthiest, most degrading schoolboy yaoi available and distribute one to each of them—he’d gladly sacrifice the integrity of the classroom if they’d just get over themselves.

Math was the last section before lunch, and Kakashi was still gathering up the origami he’d been using to teach spatial relationships when he heard a thundering of footsteps in the hall.

And then the classroom was flooded with rugrats—two dozen of them, in the pale blue smocks of the Konoha lower school, dusty and smudged with finger paint, all clutching drawings.

“There!” one of them shouted, breaking the stunned silence of the classroom, and like a pack of wolves, all twenty-four of them descended on Naruto—whose eyes rounded into plates as soon as he noticed he was their target.

“Holy—hey, watch it!” Naruto shrieked, struggling for balance in a sea of pre-K enthusiasm. “Hey! Oh, geez! If I smush any of you Iruka-nii-san will kill me—gah!” he shouted, and thudded to the ground, the over-excited shrieks of a pack of six-year-olds drowning out his further protests, and everybody in the classroom watched the tableau in blank shock for a long, long moment of appreciation.
Little Town — Called Inception — on the Prairie (Inception)

Chapter Summary

Inception genderfuck Little House on the Prairie AU. DON'T JUDGE ME.

The schoolhouse Eames is helping to build is without an owner: gleaming blond planks of good, clean pine laying out the floor and well-chinked walls Eames split himself, a month ago when Matthew Framer and his brother, Worth, had tallied up the spoils of months of dime sociables and church roasts and fundraisers. Inception, when Eames had first arrived, had been just an awkward huddle of ugly buildings about a mile away from a gleaming, glassy lake, wild grapes and huckleberries banking in the water and razor-sharp weeds fringing the bank: a few homesteaders and a saloon, the ugly clapboard church Reverend Brooke had set up and abandoned when he'd gone back East. Now, the town stretches out in a half-moon shape around the lake, storefronts lining the clean, tamped-dirt streets; there are two saloons, dozens of schoolchildren, and now a school, too, with lavish wrought-iron desks bolted to the ground and a desk Eames had sanded down himself until it was smooth like silk. There are slates and a crate of readers and a fat, pot-bellied stove in the back near a rack of utilitarian hooks for cloaks and windows with actual glass — everything except a teacher.

"Well, that's soon mended," says Mrs. Cresswater, who is wrapping up a month's worth of salt pork and cornmeal and dried beans and things in neat, brown-paper packages for Eames at the counter of the general store. "You have heard, haven't you?"

Eames hears everything, but he likes to hear it from multiple sources, so he says, "No?"

She parcels out brown sacks of dark brown sugar, salt and coffee. "Well," she says, and her hands are flying, tying the packages tight with twine, "Mr. Cresswater's just been to the post office and heard we'll have a teacher by the end of the week."

"The end of the week?" Eames says, and loads the salt pork, the cornmeal, the flour and salt and sugar and coffee and things into his arms, Mrs. Cresswater stacking up bits and bobs over top, arranging it carefully. "That's soon."

"Not soon enough," Mrs. Cresswater says, because she has three boys under 10 who are universally loathed, but mostly by their own parents. "I'll be glad to have her — and a minister again, thank goodness."

Before Eames can even ask for it, Mrs. Cresswater spins around, her hoop skirts swinging busily, and turns back with a generous tin of tobacco, slipping it into the pocket of Eames's dark coat as she says, "And before you ask: yes, we're getting a minister. He's coming in on the train along with Miss Arthur."

***

By the next day, the gossip has gone from a low-level roar to relentless as the homesteaders are all dispatched by their wives to town to collect information, and Eames settles himself in at the post office to knit together all the pieces that seem reliable.
Their soon-to-be minister is a Reverend Cobb, who is coming westward from New York with the intention of saving souls, everyone says; with two children and no mention of a wife, Eames imagines more likely, Cobb is trying to save his own. Miss Arthur is only known as Miss Arthur at the moment, possesses a first grade certificate, and has taught at least two other schools. She is not merely sharing a train with Cobb, she was recommended by him, a family friend, Framer says, offhand, and Eames starts spinning out the possibilities in that.

"She rotating through the homesteaders?" Garson asks, and slides a look over to Eames. "Lucky you haven't got any brats of your own, then."

Eames, who has hardly been whoring at all since he fled England, rolls his eyes. "Like any spinster schoolmistress is going to catch my eye, Garson, when I haven't yet conquered the issues of your wife and daughters."

Garson sputters and everybody else roars. Eames is used to being the curiosity of Inception, with the easy polish of his accent and his disinterest in explanations. He's a mystery to the town and he prefers to keep it that way; besides, Americans are possibly even more Victorian about horse thieves than the English.

Framer, a man without a single humorous bone in his body, frowns and says, "As she'll be staying with Reverend Cobb, I highly doubt it." He favors Eames with a solemn look. "And I hope sincerely you will comport yourself appropriately, Eames."

"I always comport myself perfectly," Eames says, because Jesus Christ, a spinster schoolteacher staying with the town minister. He can't think of anybody less worthy of his interest.

***

Eames doesn't think he'll be interested, but that doesn't mean he's not curious, all the same, and he keeps an ear to the ground for further developments. The Reverend Cobb's star grows brighter and brighter, and the subject of Miss Arthur — and more importantly — how she knows the reverend, are a subject of constant debate. After two more days of this, it's fairly clear any legitimate information has long been abandoned in favor of wild speculation, of which Eames is a fan, but not when there's a real mystery at hand, and so he tells Framer he'd be free to drive with him to the station and fetch Inception's newest residents, the night before the train.

It's a clear, cold day, the last fingers of summer heat slipping off in the night's breeze into the dry gold coolness of fall. Eames has a garden full of overgrown cabbages and potatoes and pumpkins and beans to harvest, chores to do and repairs to make around the house and a few last things to sort out at the schoolhouse, but at 8 a.m. in the crisp, cold morning, he is at the train station instead, in his cleanest shirt and with his sharpest gaze.

Reverend Cobb, when he steps off the train, is immediately evident in the weight on his shoulders, his dark and practical clothes, the day's growth of beard and the tired look on his face. The porter follows, and trunks and bags and hatboxes are unloaded, and Eames watches Cobb's careful hands, how he inspects the luggage, how he speaks to the porter, and thinks Inception may have found themselves a good minister after all.

And then Cobb looks up, back into the doorway of the train, extending a hand to meet another — narrow fingers in a fawn-colored glove — that touches his wrist.

Eames sees the dress first, before anything else: pale gray poplin, a sweeping gown, lush heaps of fabric at the back of a narrow waist, dark gray bands of silk at the hem, the high neckline, the tight-fitting wrists. The bustle and the gathers of fabric, the spidery lace at the throat, a mother-of-pearl
pin, the gray silk ribbon and the neat straw bonnet, a lavish spray of ostrich feathers tucked into
the band.

Framer, to his left, clears his throat, shifts, looks nervous and hot in the cheeks, and Eames blinks
and sees everything else.

Miss Arthur — it must be her — is thin like a willow, with black hair pulled severely away from
her slender face, where she has a pair of wide, night-dark eyes that gleam like river stones. The
thick coils of her hair are nestled at the back of her neck, tucked underneath the hat brim, and
Eames stares at stares: at the pink, sweet shell of her ear, the soft line of her chin, her mouth, a pink
and curious bow. The suggestion of the white, white skin of her throat makes the inside of Eames's
mouth wet, makes him want to close the two meters between them.

"Reverend Cobb?" Framer asks, finally, breaking the silence, and when Cobb looks up at them,
Miss Arthur does, too, her fingers tightening where they rest on Cobb's arm.

Cobb narrows his eyes at them a moment, and Eames tries not to stare at the tips of Miss Arthur's
fingers as Cobb closes his own over them — protective.

"Yes?" Cobb asks, polite. Miss Arthur just levels them both a placid look, easy in Cobb's hold, and
Eames has to tamp down the way something in his gut twists at that.

Framer takes off his hat, bobbing a little as he says, "And I guess this is Miss Arthur."

She favors them both with a benign smile. "Pleased to meet you," she tells them, and where Eames
had imagined her voice might be as slight as she looks, it's clear and sweet and Eames wants to
know, immediately, what it sounds like when she laughs, what it might sound like if she's
whispering something secret to a lover.

"And you must be Matthew Framer," Cobb says, extending a hand to take Framer's in a solid
shake. When he turns to Eames, he says, "And you?"

Eames takes Cobb's hand, but he's still staring at Miss Arthur, who stares back, unashamed and
unafraid, and something shivers up his spine at that as he says, distracted, "Eames — just call me
Eames."
The AU where Sheppard and McKay are teachers at two Canadian boarding schools alike in dignity by divided by a freeway and Miss Scrimmage's shotgun.

On the way toward Macdonald Hall his final year of secondary school, carrying what felt like the contents of his entire house in the backseat of what was possibly the ugliest car below the treeline—Melvin O’Neal hit a dead moose.

It would be funny in six or so years (or probably immediately to Bruno, who had no soul), but between the Forestry Service’s solemn lectures, Mounties biting their lips to keep from laughing, and his mother’s deranged wailing, the very, very last thing he needed was to reach Macdonald Hall two days later, heavily dosed on Percocet for the enormous full-body bruise, only to find the entire school already in a very secret uproar.

“What the hell are you doing this time?” Boots hissed, stomping into room 206 to find Bruno writing in revolting, curlicue script all over an enormous pink heart, edged with lace.

Bruno looked up, all bright eyes and easy smile and waved, fingers dotted with glitter and flaking Elmer’s glue skin, worn into the grooves of his palms. “Glad you could make it, you slacker—we have an appointment with Mr. Fudge next week, by the way.”

Then, he turned back to the enormous paper heart, adding a flourish beneath the phrase “loins burning with desire.”

Boots rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “I—I just got here! How can we have an appointment with the guidance counselor already?” he demanded. “And what in God’s name are you making? On my bed! Is that glue?” he asked angrily, pointing at a gummy spot on the naked mattress.

“I dunno. I think Sydney thinks we’re in love,” Bruno said, shrugging, before his expression turned solemn and he said, “Oh—that’s right. You don’t know yet.” Bruno’s face became tortured. “Oh, Boots. You’ve come during terrible, terrible dark times.”

“You don’t say,” Boots said through gritted teeth, making a note to punch Sydney in the mouth—that stupid tattletale—right after he punched Bruno.

Nodding seriously, Bruno continued, “So Professor Frescette is taking some ‘personal time,’ which Mark Davis hears means he like, fell in love with naked winter kayaking or something and he divorced his wife to go rub up against glaciers—and the Hall replaced him with some total psychopath.” Bruno’s scowl deepened. “He gave me an F.”

Boots blinked. “It—it’s the second day of school.”

Bruno’s scowl turned positively toxic. “I know.”

“Oh,” Boots said. “Um. Maybe you can change it?”

“Oh maybe,” Bruno said, growing excited, “I hid in a bush underneath his window all night
yesterday and realized that he has the biggest, most pathetic crush on the new math teacher at Scrimmages ever and am going to preserve the sanctity of Macdonald Hall and save the Canadian education system by getting rid of Miserly McKay once and for all.”

Boots felt a migraine coming on. “His name is Miserly?” he asked, since there didn’t seem like there was much else he could do. Elmer, when Boots had seen him earlier, was sobbing brokenly into what looked like a scale replica of an EM field, letters floating among the charges saying “YOU ARE MAGNETIC.” And considering Elmer still technically had a get-out-of-Walton free card, the fact he was participating was the worst possible kind of sign. At least nobody was wearing ties.

“Rodney,” Bruno said, non-nonplussed. “Anyway—he’s a jerk and has a poisonous personality and will need absolutely all the help he can get.” Then, Bruno cackled.

Boots covered his face. “I really wanted to graduate from high school,” he whimpered. “I mean, I kind of figured it was unrealistic after I met you and we almost got expelled that first time, but you know—pipe dreams.”

“The best part of this plan is,” Bruno said, “that we already know it will work. I mean, if we could marry off Wizzle, McKay should be a dream: I hear he’s totally loaded.”

Boots wanted to cry, but didn’t, and it was very hard. “I’m going to go take a shower now.”

Bruno waved him off. “Don’t take too long—I’m cultivating aphrodisiac plants in there.”

*  

Dr. Rodney McKay, a quick Google search revealed, was a world-renowned physicist of uncommon caliber. He’d graduated with honors at the age of 16 from Northeastern and started collecting PhD’s and honors like they were going out of style, which he frequently assured the science press they never ever would. Lucky for Macdonald Hall, after a small if very violent “incident” at a conference where he’d pitched a fit, attempted to physically assault another physicist, and then collapsed with chest pains all in one hour, he’d been convinced to retire—however briefly—to his native land of Canada, where through machinations with dark lords, he’d acquired the temporary post as a science professor as a favor for an old friend.

“You have got to be exaggerating,” Boots muttered through his yawn.

Bruno glared. “I’m not, Boots. I’m not. You just don’t know yet.”

The night before had been one for the books: a festering combination of sexual tension and discomfort daisy-chained around the fact that two growing teenaged boys with rapidly-lengthening limbs and long arms should not be trapped in one twin-sized bed.

“Bruno, I seriously doubt he peddles his ass to the Prince of Lies,” Boots hissed, lowering his voice as two startlingly-young first years passed them in the hallway, looking lost and almost swallowed by the enormous, dark-wood halls of the school.

Rolling his eyes, Bruno said, “Whatever. You’re just grumpy because you didn’t sleep well—which was completely your own fault.”

Boots scowled. “Whatever.”

Boots, whose sheets had been lost in the car accident—stained hopelessly blue from the economy-sized bottle of laundry detergent that had upended all over it—and whose mattress was sticky to the
touch from head to toe, had punched his roommate in the shoulder and said: “Move over or I kill you.” Bruno, who was always disturbingly agreeable when half-asleep, had only murmured sleepily and shifted until he was pressed up against the wall, head off the mattress, and Boots had slid in under the light, summer sheet, exhausted.

It had been, in theory, a good idea—and then Boots had remembered he’d spent an embarrassingly large number of hours over the summer mooning over Bruno: Bruno’s messy hair, his wayward smile, his stupid ideas, and the way that he always gave Boots his ice cubes because he knew Boots liked his water very, very cold.

So for his own foolishness, he’d spent the night on the edge of wakefulness and sleep, terrified at the warring prospects of passing out and murmuring something incriminating during one of his vivid dreams or even worse, just rubbing the evidence of it against the small of Bruno’s back.

By the time the sun had started peering out over the mountain of dreary gray clouds, Boots was out of bed and into the shower, carefully ignoring some highly suspect plant life sitting on the counters and on the back of the toilet and too depressed to bother doing anything other than fistting his morning erection. My life is a freak show, he’d thought, and come on the shower tile.

“…And anyway, that’s why Sadie’s going to cotillion and how Dad got me drunk for Labor Day,” Bruno finished.

Boots blinked twice, categorized whatever Bruno had been saying under the heading of “Walton family freak stories” and said, “Your family’s so strange.”

Bruno shrugged, and sighing as they neared their English class, he said, “Can’t live with them, too much red clay in the yard to dig through and bury the bodies.” He grinned brightly and looped his arm around Boot’s shoulders in a friendly if thoroughly arousing way. “Anyway, I’m back now—and it’s going to be a great year.”

Mrs. MacKenzie’s English classes were somewhat notorious for their painful reading lists and by the time Bruno and Boots staggered out of their first section of the day, they already felt demoralized—school session nostalgia disappearing in a puff of classical literature and paperback copies of Madame Bovary.

For second period, Bruno headed off for a comparative political systems course and Boots wandered toward Canadian history, with Bruno saying as he went, “I’ll see you again in third—for physics—and then you’ll see!”

“Ridiculous,” Boots said to himself. “Totally ridiculous.”

“What’s even more ridiculous,” Dr. Rodney McKay said later, standing in front of the room, stiff-backed to the whiteboard, “is that I promised to take on this position under the impression I’d be teaching the very best of Canada’s future and they stuck me with classroom after classroom of subpar and—” he looked sharply at Elmer, who appeared to be on the verge of tears “—mediocre excuses for students.”

Boots stared, pencil still upright in weak fingers as Bruno hissed vile imprecations under his breath two seats over—loudly enough that Boots could hear them and probably loudly enough that Dr. McKay would hear them.

“Suffice it to say, I’m crushed by the weight of your inadequacy already,” Dr. McKay finished viciously before slapping the projector, an unbelievably complex physics equation suddenly shot up against the whiteboard, with whisper-traces of blue and red pen still stained into the surface.
“Now—you have five minutes: solve for theta.”

Despite Boots’ tendency to let Bruno walk all over him he loathed to admit Bruno was right, but as predicted, everybody crept out of the physics class stunned: like fish after dynamite.

*

That night, Bruno gave Boots the shakedown over the shenanigans with the moose—which Boots had conveniently neglected to mention. It would have warmed Boots’ heart to see Bruno so concerned if it weren’t for the fact that Bruno tended to be very physical in his inspections, hands warm and enormous—when had Bruno’s hands gotten so big? Boots thought morosely—on Boots’ shoulders, his sides, down his arms.

“I’m really fine,” Boots said, high-pitched, trying to catch Bruno’s eyes so his roommate wouldn’t do something like look down and see what else Boots was pitching.

Bruno snorted. “Please,” he scoffed. “I saw that pharmacy you unloaded into the bathroom and went and asked the Fish—I can’t believe you hit a moose and didn’t tell me about it.”

Boots scowled. “I was understandably distracted by the fact that you’d already gotten the entire school into an uproar,” he said sarcastically.

“It’s not an uproar, Boots,” Bruno said seriously, putting a hand on the back of Boots’ neck. “It’s a movement—a peace movement at that. Do you want the fragile social fabric of this school torn to pieces?”

Boots could feel a flush bloom out all over his skin: hot and wanting and awkward. The lizard-brain just above where Bruno was stroking a concerned thumb up the side of his neck murmured crazily: just do it, shove him against the wall, kiss that look off his face.

“Not even everybody’s in physics,” Boots managed to say sullenly. He knew that made about as much sense as his irrational crush on his sociopath of a roommate.

Bruno made a dismissive noise and pulled his palm away before turning round to rifle through a small stack of pages on his desk, saying, “Look—Macdonald Hall is a cohesive entity: when one of us suffers, we all suffer.”

“By which you mean you make us suffer,” Boots said, but didn’t mean it, and Bruno knew it, too, by the way he didn’t deign to give it a response, choosing instead to say, “Ah-hah!” and jerk a sheaf of papers out of the stack. “What’s that?” Boots asked.

“Research material,” Bruno said, triumphant, and held up a sheaf of grainy-gray pages, print-outs of…oh sweet Jesus.

“Oh, sweet Jesus!” Boots shrieked, hands flying up to cover his face as he yelled, “That’s gay porn! Why do you have print-outs of gay porn?”

“Breathe, Melvin,” Bruno said, rolling his eyes and turning the pages back to shuffle through them casually, with a speculative expression on his face. “The print quality on the inkjet in the newspaper office is terrible—I can barely see anything,” he sighed.

Boots heard a broken noise come out of his throat and kept his hands tight over his eyes, because if he didn’t he’d probably open his eyes again and stare at the blandly pixilated images of a dark haired man bending another one over the side of a desk. Their hips were sealed together, nearly seamless, pressed so tightly that Boots could feel his throat starting to close up: this was what he’d
spent his summer desperately trying to avoid looking up and now it was in his room—in Bruno’s hands.

“Bruno—Bruno,” he moaned, knowing just how pathetic he sounded, and peered out from between his fingers. “Why do you have printouts of gay porno?”

Glaring, Bruno demanded, “Have you been listening at all? McKay has the flaming hots for the new math teacher at Scrimmages—you’ve been in class with the guy, he needs all the help he can get.”

Boots took his hands off his face and blinked. “Scrimmage’s new math teacher’s a guy?”

Rolling his eyes, Bruno said, “To quote Cathy and Diane, he is so hot, their ‘underpants spontaneously caught on fire.’” He lifted the pages again and tugged out one depicting a frighteningly buff pair of identical twins making out. “What do you think? Stick this under his door? Think it’ll be inspirational enough?”

“Will you—!” Boots snapped, slapping the pages away. “Will you think about this seriously for a second? Just because McKay is gay doesn’t mean the other guy is!” he finished, trying to ignore the bubbling hysteria over the painful irony of it all.

Bruno looked thoughtful. “You know,” he said. “That’s a very good point”

*  

“No,” Cathy and Diane said together, scowling.  

Bruno and Boots exchanged a baffled look before turning back to the girls.  

“No?” Bruno asked, uncertain.  

“No,” Diane confirmed, raising her brows in challenge.  

“No,” Boots said, just to be sure.  

“No,” Cathy snapped. “Look, I don’t know where you got this harebrained scheme, but we’re not letting Mr. Sheppard become your sacrificial lamb here.”

Diane crossed her arms over her chest. “Also, don’t think we haven’t heard the horror stories about Miserly McKay over here, too—we’re not putting poor Mr. Sheppard go through that just so you guys can dump another crazy teacher.”

Bruno sputtered and made frustrated-looking faces.
Chapter Summary

The sex worker Merlin AU.

The flat isn't his, but he'd been couriered the key along with a note ("For our interviews.") and he'd smiled down at it, wondering. When he'd first reached the address — in a sleek, modern building with white-glove concierge service and no questions asked, a whisper-quiet elevator that took him to the 17th floor — he'd been forced to admit that cost was, apparently, not at all an issue.

He likes to keep it dark, carefully lit, without the abrasiveness of halogen lights, and so Merlin ignites the fireplace, turns on a few hall lights, wanders through the flat on bare feet, thoughtful, and inching things here and there out of the way until he's satisfied.

The plan for this week hadn't been a plan at all, just a package left at his post office box with a brief note in now-familiar copperplate writing: Make it convincing.

He'd take professional affront to it, except that it's Arthur and he's genetically predisposed to being a twat, so Merlin just does as he's told, spends all day running errands and subjecting himself to various trials and tribulations that come part and parcel with the job and dashes into the flat at half-nine to decant the wine, get ready.

The stockings are La Perla, black, with a seam down the back, with a wide band of satin along the tops, where they end mid-thigh, and he toes into a pair of severe, black stilettos. Standing in front of the white-sheeted bed, in front of the full-length mirror, Merlin admires the effect: the stark line down the back of his thigh, the curve of his knee, the lines of his calves. He slides on the black satin panties, purring at the way they glide over his legs, smooth, before they settle low on the flare of his hips, and Merlin reaches for the make-up bag, the lipstick.

He saves the corset for last.

Merlin likes the corset, probably more than he should, but it's an exquisite piece of work: black satin and a flat bust, severe, and Merlin laces it up, expert, and feels it squeezing the air out of him, closing in tight like a fist — like Arthur's fist — and loves the breathlessness of it.

He splays his hand, flat, across his belly and looks at himself in the mirror, the dark red moue of his mouth, the kohl around his eyes making them look smokey and blown, dark hair a mess.

Merlin barely has a minute to think, maybe a comb, before Arthur's hand covers his own, sliding over his belly, his mouth hot on the back of Merlin's neck, possessing, and when Merlin looks up in the mirror, Arthur's blue eyes are mostly black in the half-light.

"Convincing enough?" Merlin manages, husky, he hasn't spoken so long.

"Yes," Arthur murmurs, eyes sweeping shut, his other hand hot and and closing in a fist in Merlin's hair, drawing his neck back, so when he says, "Yes," again, it's into Merlin's mouth — one of those kisses that's all teeth and tongue and conquest, against which Merlin has no defenses.

***
Their first appointment had been in a private room at a members-only restaurant. The carpet had been lush and the walls had been dark panels of wood, and Arthur had been off-puttingly handsome and familiarly businesslike, appropriating the largest wingback chair in the suite and instructing Merlin on his knees in front of him. There'd been something about the way he'd said it, too — so offhand, disinterested — that had felt like a dare, and Merlin had taken it wholeheartedly. Everybody who says they love their job is, of course, talking bullshit, but Merlin loves sucking Arthur's cock, hands on Arthur's knees, the muscles taught underneath the bespoke trousers, his mouth wet and sloppy, tongue tracking the vein along the bottom of Arthur's dick and sucking Arthur's balls into his mouth and mouthing along the spot just beneath the head. Arthur had tapped him on the shoulder, polite, before he was about to come, and Merlin had let Arthur's cock slip out from between his lips, jerked him off the rest of the way.

Two days later, in his P.O. Box were the key, a tag with the address and Arthur's handwriting scratching out, Fridays, 10 p.m. Since, it's been as reliable as clockwork, the note, the package, the parcel on Thursday, and then Friday, half-nine, rushing to the flat. Sometimes, Arthur slams him into a wall, fucks him savage and reckless against it, holding Merlin rough against the wall, using him up; sometimes, Arthur likes it slow, maddening, laying Merlin out on the bed and taking him apart by inches. Sometimes, Arthur sends accessories. This Friday, at half-ten, Merlin is sobbing for breath, bracing himself against the wardrobe. In the mirror, the Merlin staring back at him is wet-mouthed from Arthur's kisses, ferociously expensive lipstick smeared, bruises on his neck still red and fading purple, Arthur's hands tight on his hips, his body rocking from where Arthur's fucking him from behind. He can barely breathe, the corset crushing down onto his ribs, and he can feel everything, all of it, heightened: the grainy smooth stretch of the stockings, the ache in his legs from the heels, the crushed satin where Arthur had just pushed the panties aside, eased his cock out of his trousers and fucked into him where Merlin was already wet and loose, ready for Arthur.

And behind him, Merlin can see Arthur staring at him in the mirror, the top button of Arthur's shirt undone and tie lose now, and Merlin gasps, "Please," so it overlaps with Arthur's, "Fuck, yes." And finally Arthur gives in, presses himself along Merlin's back, burying his face between Merlin's shoulderblades as he snaps his hips into Merlin's ass, vicious, relentless. Just when Merlin thinks the heat and sensation and need and lack of oxygen are going to make him pass out, Arthur reaches over and fists his cock, jerks it fast, once, twice, and Merlin comes, wailing, and Arthur does, too, fucking into him deeper, sending near-painful aftershocks though Merlin's body long after. Arthur doesn't bother to unhook the corset after that, either, just strips the panties off of Merlin — down the slick, sticky skin of his inner thighs, over his bony knees — lays him flat out on the bed and plows him into him again, not bothering to undress himself. All Merlin can do is clutch at Arthur's shoulders, wrinkle the fine poplin of his slate-gray suit jacket and gasp for air, all he can do is let Arthur hook his knees over Arthur's shoulders and give it up to Arthur, who takes and takes, greedy, needful.

***

Merlin has never spent any time under a street corner or suffered abuse under the hands of a client without being properly compensated for his efforts. He's not listed on any websites or in any phone books, and you could search all of London's remaining telephone booths without finding a card with his name and number on them. He takes clients case by case, by referral only, and he doesn't remember how exactly he came to be told of Arthur Pendragon's interests, only that shortly after, holding Arthur's business card — it's heavy, with a watermarked vellum finish — he'd walked past

***

The Friday after, all of London is held captive by abysmal weather. The snow is falling fast and thick and unrelenting, and Merlin cancels all of his weekend appointments, rings up Gaius to say he probably won't make it for their customary Sunday tea, and goes to hide in the flat with half the contents of the nearest Waitrose.

He's not expecting Arthur in this weather, and technically, Merlin knows better than to encroach upon space reserved for business transactions for personal use, but his own place feels terribly far away, and he doubts Arthur would mind, so he kicks off his shoes and curls up on the couch. The snow's a foot thick, the curry's in the oven, and Merlin's an hour into Torchwood when he hears Arthur say:

"My God, tell me you're not watching this rubbish."

When Merlin twists around on the sofa to stare at him, Arthur looks wretched: damp and frozen, his lips tinged blue, black cashmere coat dotted in snow and his trouser legs soaked mid-shin.

"Arthur," he says stupidly.

Arthur, equally dumb from the frigid wind, asks, "Do I smell curry?"

"Um, yes," Merlin says, finally, and then like someone's given him a shove, he gets climbs over the couch and starts tugging at Arthur's coat. "Oh my God, you're soaked."

Teeth chattering now, Arthur's shivering too hard now to give Merlin his customary dirty look, just manages around the shaking, "Yes — I — told Hathaway not — to risk it."

Merlin decides not to address the issue of Arthur deciding it was too dangerous to drive and then choosing to walk to the flat, dragging Arthur into the bedroom and peeling him out of his drenched clothing instead.

They eat the chicken tikka on the couch, and Merlin sacrifices most of the papadums to Arthur's voracious appetite, because it turns out that any time he doesn't have his mouth full, Arthur is busy making some sort of snotty comment about Children of the Earth. Merlin doesn't particularly care about the logical fallacy of walking into a room with a plastic containment chamber of evil alien, and he particularly doesn't care for Arthur destroying the romantic tragedy of Ianto Jones perishing in Jack's arms, so before Arthur can start ranting again, Merlin tears off a piece of his roti and jams it in Arthur's mouth.

"I'm just saying, Merlin, that given how dangerous the situation is and how supposedly competent Captain Jack is that — "


Arthur does, looking constipated.

"Has what you've seen of Torchwood, at any point, betrayed any indication that they're competent?" Merlin asks, and as Arthur ponders this, Merlin adds, "And anyway, if you don't want to watch this, you could just say so."

"I didn't say I didn't want to watch it," Arthur says.
"So this constant complaining," Merlin asks, "this is just how you engage with media."

Arthur looks mulish. "Yes."

"Right," Merlin says, turns off the television, and reaches a hand down Arthur's trousers, since at least when they're fucking, Arthur is cooperative.

***

The agency does a comprehensive background check on all of its clients, and so Merlin knows far, far more about Arthur William Henry Phillip Pendragon than the other way around.
Jack + John = BFF (Stargate Atlantis)

Chapter Summary

The one where Jack O'Neill and John Sheppard probably get along way, way too well.

On December 17th, Stargate Command got a surprise data transfer from Atlantis that, couched in strictly military terms, essentially said, "Oh my God! We found four ZPMs! It's the best ever! Come over and we'll make brownies!"

General Landry hemmed and hawed about efficient use of limited resources and Sam and Daniel launched an immediate campaign to go like, six minutes ago, babbling in as close to preschool whining as two well-educated doctorates could manage about the breathtaking opportunities and technology that awaited them on the other side of the puddle. General O'Neill expressed concerns that his desk had violent designs on his residual sanity and said the only way for the Air Force not to lose one of their finest was to allow him to supervise his team. Then, General Landry said, "Oh, for God's sake. Just get out of here."

Daniel and Sam and General O'Neill may have jumped around one of the more obscure labs holding hands and shrieking like thirteen-year-old girls, but nobody but Teal'c could prove it—and as usual, he wasn't talking.

* 

On December 20th, the original SG-1 steps through the puddle and Atlantis base was attempting to put its best face forward.

John was as close to military clean-cut as Rodney had ever seen him, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet; Elizabeth was wearing her Stargate uniform, freshly Atlantis laundry spinner-thing pressed, and wearing shiny new Athosian-crafted earrings which were probably not part of her BDUs. Rodney had considered wearing all of his diplomas but feared that carrying around four would really be excessive, so he'd settled for brushing his hair precisely and smiling his most jaunty and devastatingly attractive smile.

"Okay, remember," Rodney had said in the pre-SGC-arrival staff meeting, "we shouldn't rub their faces in it because that's not classy—but I think it'd be completely fair to point out how much prettier Atlantis is than Cheyenne Mountain."

"Rodney," Elizabeth had said, all reproach.

"But it is prettier," John had agreed, and Rodney swore the room brightened in as close an approximation as flickering lights could make to a blush.

"This is a purely factual statement," Rodney had argued. "They have a cold, emotionless cement bunker—" he'd motioned with one hand, and then motioned with the other, raising his voice as he spoke "—we have a glorious, sunlit paradise that floats on a perfect blue sea."

"I hardly think that bragging should be part of the tour," Elizabeth had said, mouth twitching.

John had actually pouted. "But it's Atlantis." He had actually stroked the conference table
soothingly. "She's been through so much. Shouldn't we get to show her off a bit?"

Then Elizabeth had done that thing where she cleared her throat and unofficially changed the subject, which was probably intended to be a dismissal of the issue but Rodney and John had always taken it as an official okay for whatever half-assed plan they had that week.

(Mostly, said half-assed plans didn't even blow up on them anymore—or at least happened in a far less statistically significant way so Rodney was considering that a major win, though not one he was going to advertise when Samantha Carter snapped out of her delusions and threw herself to her knees, begging to again be in Rodney's favor.)

Rodney glanced at John from the corners of his eyes, and said, "Remember to do the—"

"—thing with the place we found," John finished, grinning. "Got it."

"They're going to be so jealous," Rodney said gleefully.

Elizabeth sighed, deep and long-suffering.

When the event horizon had burst open, a wobbling, luminous blue, they all held their breaths as General O'Neill headed the group, crossing the threshold and saying, "Woah. Nice digs."

The first thing Samantha Carter did when she stepped through the gate was give Rodney a wary glance and say, "I'm engaged!"

Rodney scowled. "Oh, hey, very friendly!" he snapped.

Sheppard made a noise that was a cross between choking and hilarity and Elizabeth, giving both of them a reproachful glare, took a step forward to shake General O'Neill's hand, saying, "General. It's an honor to have you here."

And as the rest of SG-1 stepped one by one into the gateroom, their eyes rounded in astonished delight, with the same quiet awe that the Atlantis crew had found the city that first time, slumbering underwater.

"Oh, wow, this is just amazing," Daniel Jackson said, eyes huge, and wandered off immediately without any prelude or introduction. The team assigned to him, including two marines, an anthropologist, and a linguist, having been forewarned, rushed off after his meandering footsteps, and Rodney heard them say, "Wait, don't touch that!" almost immediately.

O'Neill, unfazed, just smiled, broad and excited and says, "Oh, not at all, Dr. Weir, this is the most fun I've had since they stuck me behind a desk."

"Truly, Dr. Weir," Teal'c said, his voice low and deep, rivaling Ronon's, "I have been looking forward to learning more of the cultures of the Pegasus galaxy, as well as of these Wraith."

"We're happy to have you," Elizabeth laughed. "This way, gentlemen, we'll get started on the grand tour right away."

Sheppard grinned at Rodney and Rodney grinned back, because had they got a grand tour planned. It hadn't started out as a game of one-upmanship, but Atlantis was cool and Rodney figured he owes himself a little pettiness—after all, the SGC sent him to Siberia. It was only fair they feel cowed and emasculated by the awesomeness that is Atlantis compared to their dour, miserable underground bunker.
But then O'Neill falls into step with Sheppard, cutting right between him and Rodney and said:

"I've been reading your reports, Colonel—" Rodney swore John stood up straighter than Rodney had thought his spine was physically capable of after all these years of cool slouching "—I've been impressed."

John fairly vibrated with pride. "Thank you, sir."

"Most of our success are because of me," Rodney said matter-of-factly.

"It's been a group effort," Elizabeth cut in to say, casting Rodney a dirty look.

"I have to say this is shaping up to be the best vacation I've taken in years," Sam said approvingly, grinning hugely. "This place is...even better than I'd imagined, McKay," she murmured, giving Rodney a rueful look that Rodney figured was just a precursor to her fatuous love-declaration.

"Oh, you're entirely too kind, Dr. Carter," Rodney said not at all modestly.

"Getting back to your mission reports, Sheppard—it's some of the least homicide-inducing material that crosses my desk," General O'Neill said to John, smirking. "Thanks for all the improbably hilarious crap."

"I do what I can, sir," John said sincerely and then cleared his throat nervously. "If you'd like, sir, my men and I are prepared to give you the Atlantis rundown—and then a more comprehensive presentation on the Wraith situation in the Pegasus galaxy."

Rodney wasn't sure but it seemed kind of like O'Neill's approval actually mattered to John, who was instantly allergic to almost all of his bosses, which was hilariously fitting, given their similarly, hilariously disastrous service jackets.

O'Neill laughed. "Sheppard—I think we have much bigger alien fish to fry."

"We do," John said uncertainly.

"Yes, and they're ziti shaped and fly—" O'Neill made a zooming noise "—real fast, according to your reports."

"Oh, oh," John said, and his smile could have powered the city for six weeks. "Jumper bay it is."

And then O'Neill smiled back and the combined force of their stupidly brilliant expressions could have kept most of the Pegasus galaxy running, and that was before O'Neill laughed at something John said as they were walking to the jumper bay and say approvingly, "Sheppard, you can be my co-pilot any day."

Rodney was nearly certain that was some kind of weird, Air Force come-on and was about to squawk angrily—not because he was jealous or anything but even if Sheppard was probably an intergalactic slut he was Atlantis' intergalactic slut and O'Neill had better leave well enough alone.

But then Rodney got all distracted and turned around when Zelenka all but shoved him out of the way and introduced himself to introduce himself to Samantha, and it turned out they both knew the same boring, feeble-minded guys in the same boring, feeble-minded fields and had even peer-reviewed the same papers before and they got along grandly—not even giving Rodney a chance to tell Sam that if she really really wanted, Rodney guessed they could make out before Zelenka had dragged her into the bowels of the city.
Not five minutes later, he was listening to her yelling "Holy Hannah!" with real conviction.

And then it was just Rodney and Elizabeth and Teal'c.

Elizabeth was all but giggling as she said, "I've always wanted an opportunity to speak with you about the Jaffa, Mister Teal'c, and you did say you were interested in Pegasus galaxy culture."

Teal'c bowed a little at the waist, saying, "This is true. Doctor Elizabeth Weir."

"I've arranged for Ronon and Teyla—two of our friends here—to help with the briefing," she said generously, and with a nod of her head, indicated Teal'c should follow. "If you'll come this way."

"Hey!" Rodney shouted after them. "What about me?"

Just then, he heard somebody yell, "Oh my God! Everybody! I think Atlantis just put on a laser light show for Colonel Sheppard and General O'Neill!"

* *

By dinnertime, Rodney felt furious and slighted, and not even the sight of Samantha Carter bouncing around the labs and control room yelling "Holy Hannah!" could drag him out of the depths of self-indulgent misery. Sheppard and O'Neill had disappeared somewhere around what the Atlantis crew refers to fondly as the Lido deck and reports of them wreaking delighted havoc on the city with their ATA genes had been reported everywhere, with indulgent smiles from scientists Rodney did not hate previously but now does.

Sheppard and General O'Neill, with the powers of their ATA genes combined, found an Ancient concert hall, some sort of hovercraft racetrack (which they'd found and then wrecked two hovercrafts before they'd told anybody else about it), initiated the Ancient light show, found the children's museum, a debilitatingly creepy aquarium filled with fossilized 10,000-year-old fish.

Then, they'd found the Ancient porno district and become the new heroes of Atlantis.

* *

"Zero gravity porn," John said over dinner, "is not as sexy as you'd think."

"Some people seem to like it," General O'Neill said innocently, looking around the sparsely populated mess.

He grinned at John. John grinned back. They shared a hetero-man-friends laugh.

Rodney hated them both so much he could barely see.

"I probably still need more flight hours on that puddlejumper, Sheppard," O'Neill said.

"Of course, sir," John said solemnly.

"For security reasons of course," O'Neill went on.

"I agree completely, sir," John said, and if he didn't stop sounding so shitfaced thrilled about calling General O'Neill sir Rodney was going to vomit in his face.

Jack put his hand on John's shoulder and said, "You're doing good, Sheppard."

John was so pleased he ducked his head, but Rodney figured if he let John Sheppard said, "Aw,
shucks, sir," he'd have to kill himself so he cleared his throat very loudly to break the moment and said, "So anyway."

O'Neill laughed, pulling his hand away to clasp them together and lean forward on the table, giving Rodney an interested smile as he said, "That's right, McKay—Sheppard here tells me he had to put you through PT." He cocked a brow at Sheppard. "How's he handling a gun, Colonel."

Rodney was feeling the beginnings of an aneurysm coming on, and as he rubbed at the space between his brows.

John said amiably, "Well, he remembers to reload now, so I guess we're making progress." He glanced at Rodney and then smiled at O'Neill, saying, "To be honest, McKay's shooting here's saved my ass before. I'm grateful for it."

Rodney barely had enough time to puff up in manly pride before O'Neill all but ruffled John's hair and said, "Thanks to your training, I bet."

John made a noise that was probably "daww," but Rodney refused to register it.

"I'm feeling suddenly nauseated," Rodney snapped, getting up from the table and scowling furiously at John, who only blinked guileless hazel eyes at him and said:

"Yeah? You should go see Carson. Me and the General here got this new gizmo in the infirmary—it should fix you right up."

Rodney made a noise that made John's eyes go flatteringly large with wariness.

"Huh. I always sensed there was a barely controlled streak of violence in you," O'Neill said.

* 

"Rodney? Where're John and General O'Neill?"

Rodney didn't bother to peel his face from the lab table.

"They're out drag-racing puddlejumpers," he muttered into the table.

There was a long pause. "Oh," Elizabeth said awkwardly. "Are you all right?"

Rodney wanted to yell, "No! No of course I am not all right! You invited General O'Neill and the rest of SG-1 here and Sam still doesn't want to have sex with me and Dr. Jackson keeps touching things and breaking them and General O'Neill stole Colonel Sheppard! And now they're drag-racing puddlejumpers and Sheppard didn't even invite me!" but he managed to keep it all inside and say, "No. I'm good," out loud instead.

Rodney hadn't seen Sheppard for more than ten minutes since dinner the night before.

"Are you sure, Rodney?" Elizabeth asked, and Rodney could hear the smile in her tone.

"No, really. I'm good," he said. "And I'm totally not at all bitter about the fact that he could have picked me to be his co-pilot but picked Sam because General O'Neill said it was only fair she get a spin and John has now lost the ability to make rational choices on his own since General O'Neill came into town and—"

Rodney probably would have gone on to whine about how John smelled bad and pulled his hair, too but the thud of footsteps clattering into the room interrupted him, and Rodney heard Sheppard
say:

"General O'Neill and me—"
Reliable Sources (Hikaru no Go)

Chapter Summary

Just because you're into Go doesn't mean you're not also into gossip.

It all started with Ashiwara's innocent observation that honestly, Shindou and Touya spent a completely ridiculous amount of time with one another, over the goban or not. Ogata, who had been lounging back in lushly upholstered, thoroughly decadent chair in the upscale lounge to which Ashiwara had followed him, had taken a drag off of his cigarette and looked considerate.

"They're self-proclaimed rivals," Ogata said thoughtfully.

Ashiwara smiled, oblivious to the crushing pretension in the room, and sipped his latte, which left an adorable foam mustache across his upper lip.

"I've never seen you take Kuwabara-sensei to lunch," Ashiwara said.

Ogata scowled. He debated briefly on whether or not he wanted the old bastard to die or lose, but concluded that while the latter would be better in theory, the former would be more satisfying in practice, but that neither was worth mentioning to Ashiwara, who either already knew or was waiting for Ogata to voice it so he could giggle.

"Maybe I should," Ogata muttered. "Psychological attack."

"I don't think Shindou is using ramen as a psychological attack."

Ogata had to admit that this was probably true, as Shindou's game was razor-edged, but fell away like rain on spring days, sudden and passing and inconstant. Shindou would no more use Kuwabara's brand of mental torment than Kuwabara would stop dropping totally inappropriate comments about Shindou and Akira's rivalry that totally went over both of their heads.

"Curious," Ogata said.

Ashiwara giggled.

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"Shindou-kun has a bruise," Kurata reported, hand paused over a piece of sushi.

Ogata, who had stopped eating about half an hour ago, was nursing his tea, because it was a far better option to hide in the break room and pick at food than go back into the youth invitational, where several terrifying swarms of sixteen year old girls had gathered en mass around Shindou Hikaru and proceeded to generate more sound than locusts descending on a field. Touya, from his seat halfway across the room from Shindou, had a respectable crowd of his own, though it was far more mixed in gender but no fewer in blushing patrons, which made some half-insane part of Ogata want to fall to the ground in laughter. At some point, he would have to pull young Touya aside and explain that certain presumptions were made about him, and that though getting a new haircut would probably be somewhat traumatic, it was ultimately in his best interests.
"I'm surprised a bruise is all he has," Ogata said, "with the way those girls were mauling him."

Kurata laughed, and shook his head. "No, no--it's on his forehead," he said, pressing his thumb to the apex between his brows. "Right here. I hear he got into another fight with Touya Akira."

"What does that have to do with the bruise?" Ogata asked, peeking through the doorway.

Kurata snorted in laughter. "I hear Touya-kun threw a go stone at him. Perfect aim."

Ogata cocked an eyebrow to protest that Touya Akira would never be caught doing such a perfectly childish thing, but he remembered that Touya was actually seventeen right before he said it. After all, Ogata reasoned, Touya seemed to find Shindou very trying, and Shindou was remarkably loud. That was all, he comforted himself, and nothing more.

It was at that time precisely he heard a thudding of footsteps and saw Shindou duck into the room, slamming the door behind him, leaning against it and gasping for breath. He had a hunted look on his face, like Go had suddenly become a contact sport.

"Are girls," he gasped, "always," he managed, "going to be," he wheezed, "like that?"

Kurata burst out laughing, banging the table. Ogata handed Shindou a beer.

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Though Shindou summarily pronounced beer to be the equivalent of horse piss, he kept drinking it, and as the flush of exertion faded off of his face, a charming blush of drunkenness replaced it, and Ogata made a note not to let the young pro have anymore until he went back on the floor, lest some poor girl become the object of Shindou's drunken affections.

"I have to say though," Shindou admitted, laughing, "I've got it better than Touya."

"How's that?" Kurata demanded, as he was taking a perverse amount of joy from the entire debacle.

Shindou laughed so hard he had to put his head down, and before he could look up and explain, the door to the break room burst open again, Touya Akira rushed inside, and slammed it behind him, looking markedly more terrified than Shindou had been.

"They--" Touya started, "Somebody--" he went on, and in a horrified yell, he said, "A sixteen year old boy just grabbed my--just grabbed me and called me pretty!"

Shindou fell off his seat, howling with laughter. Kurata put his head down, shoulder shaking.

Ogata handed Touya his cigarettes.

It was not the Go Institute's finest hour, with two of its rising stars for all intents and purposes hiding in the break room. One of them pronouncedly tipsy, the other trying his damnedest to resist the cigarettes Ogata had handed over. Though, Ogata thought reasonably, if the Go Institute wasn't going to protect its two rising stars from blatant sexual harassment, inappropriate touching, and all around abuse from its patrons, then Touya and Shindou had a right.
Fan Club (Hikaru no Go)

Chapter Summary

Hikaru and Akira pick up a fan club.

It starts with a photograph that gets printed in the arts and entertainment section of a major newspaper in Tokyo. It runs in full color, on the back page of the section, flanked on either side with fluff pieces about the latest debuts in pop music and a new anime. The headline reads, "ANNUAL YOUNG LIONS TOURNAMENT TELEVISED FOR THE FIRST TIME." The article is clearly written by somebody who has no idea what Go is, and would rather never know. They embellish wildly.

The photo is a candid of Touya Akira and Shindou Hikaru, leaning on opposite sides of a doorframe, smiling at one another in a lazy, familiar way that speaks of their long acquaintance. The way that their bodies stretch outward toward one another, tips of their shoes touching, creating right triangles against a backlit room filled with the hazy outlines of other people makes the lines of their faces like a Da Vinci painting, soft and foggy. It is apparent, however, that both Touya Akira and Shindou Hikaru are spectacular male specimens, examples of two ends of a surprisingly large spectrum when taking into consideration Touya's soft, charcoal-colored suit and Shindou's black t-shirt and jeans.

It takes twelve minutes for a fan club to be started.

*

The Institute is somewhat torn between total elation that a younger generation--girls, no less!--are suddenly ardent supporters of Japan's Go and a vague guilt over essentially prostituting its newest wave of players. The struggle is brief, bloody, and well-lit.

Shindou is neither amused nor emotionally prepared to be faced with the fact that seventeen year old girls find him attractive; privately, his mother spends two nights realizing sadly that her suspicions all these years about her son are probably founded. Being right does not comfort her. Touya is horrified, manages to turn six shades of red not otherwise found in nature, and duck his head in a way that would make the very girls who are his newest source of terror shriek with glee. Waya only grins hugely and winks, because he's always been the cute one, the rambunctious one, and the only one who ever bothered to go on a date. Isumi, who's been plagued by women since they realized if they appeared at a Go event they could converse or possibly even touch him, is neither surprised or happy about this turn of events.

When Shindou grudgingly appears at the photo shoot that the Go Institute arranges, he takes one look at the dark pants and lavender shirt Touya has been dressed in and says, "You look like a gigolo."

Touya lets Shindou know he can go straight to hell, and take his trendy jeans with him.

Every single copy of Weekly Go sells out that week. It is possibly the first time in history this has happened.
Touya is, unsurprisingly, horrified by this realization.

Shindou is, as usual, oblivious, and carries on dividing all his waking hours between Go, Shounen Jump, and ramen. He assumes cheerfully that with the photo shoot done and behind them, that he and Touya will once again concentrate on reaching the Hand of God and possibly lowering their voices when they fight in the Go salon.

Touya occasionally envies Shindou's ability to see only the sheerest suggestion of reality.

The girls in Touya's neighborhood are thrilled to have in their midst an idol. While none of them know anything about Go, they know that Touya Akira has beautiful, shiny hair which he pushes behind his ears when he is riffling through the mail and that when they ask about Shindou Hikaru, they receive icier than usual but still polite answers.

This is reason enough for Touya to be hounded day after day, and for love letters to be mixed in with the bills.

It's beginning to affect his Go, Touya realizes darkly, when later that week at the Go salon Shindou gives him a strange look over the board and asks, "Are you sick or something?"

The Go Institute requests--begs, really--Touya and Shindou to host a special Go Invitational, and it sells out in three days, with an attendance of just over two hundred. The tickets are apparently a hot item. Ochi, Waya, Isumi, Nase, and Yashirou are roped into helping as well. Ogata and Kuwabara are rumored to be making an appearance, though really, Touya suspects it's more out of sheer perverse curiosity than any desire to foster a youth interest in Go.

"This is all your fault," Shindou complains, lugging his overnight bag into the elevator at the hotel, wearing a pair of ridiculous orange sunglasses and a hat he swiped from Akari.

"I don't see how it's my fault," Touya says, tugging his baseball cap a little further down the front, jabbing the "close doors" button neurotically.

The hat and the hair tie that's keeping his pageboy in a demented ponytail is on loan from Akari as well, who met them at the station with disguises. "You two are such boys," she scolded. "You're about to get on a train, your faces have been everywhere. Here, wear these."

Later, Shindou said, "I think she just wanted to dress us up."

Actually, Touya thinks that she wanted the excuse to touch Hikaru, who is as grounded and real as the earth but just as beyond possession. It is a sensation he has an uncomfortable familiarity with, and he watches Hikaru's pretty friend sometimes and thinks that she should know better by now, should cut her losses before Hikaru's seemingly harmless strategy and misplaced hands result in careless capture. Hikaru does not mean to do the things that he does, Touya knows, thinking about the way that Akari's smooth fingers stroked too long over the soft, dark hair at the back of Shindou's head when she helped him with the hat at the station.

The doors snick shut and they both breathe a sigh of relief, slumping against the walls of the elevator as it moves silently to the thirty-sixth floor, where they are have rooms next door to one another.
It's been a terrible few weeks for them both; even Shindou's seemingly inexhaustible well of oblivious happiness has dried up. They have spent their meetings at the Go salon slumped over the board listlessly. Last week it took Touya fifteen minutes to realize that they were playing tic-tac-toe and not Go at all, and even then he didn't have the energy to be angry about it. Touya's mother, in a blatant act of betrayal and cruelty, seems to think all of this is very funny.

"You and your gigolo pants," Shindou muttered, but the doors to the elevator opened to their floor before Touya could bash him to death with his bags, and they dashed to their respective rooms.

"A game before dinner?" Shindou asked, struggling with the keycard.

Touya rolled his eyes, reached over, and opened Shindou's door, saying, "Fine. My room. I'll see you in twenty minutes."

Shindou jerked the keycard back and scowled, saying, "Fine. Idiot."

"Id--!" Touya started, but Shindou only whooped laughing and disappeared behind his rapidly shutting door.
Chapter Summary

I don't even fucking know. Apparently this is some Kyouya futurefic or something.

When Kyouya picks up the phone, Tamaki has already worked himself into a froth, shrieking and crying—his agony and tears audible.

“OH MOTHER,” Tamaki wails, as if the ten or so miles that separate he and Kyouya actually represent a four-hour time difference, as if wherever Tamaki lives, it’s not half past six in the morning. “OH MOTHER—WHAT WILL WE DO? HARUHI HAS FOUND A BOYFRIEND. WHAT IF HE’S CRUEL? WHAT WILL WE DO?”

Kyouya hangs up on him.

*

It’s late winter, when the fresh snap of cold is over and all that remains is a dour bitterness in the air, a pervasive sense of gray. Kyouya has—in theory—an office, but really it’s a sleek, edgeless room with large windows that look out onto the electrical orgy of Tokyo at night. It’s equipped with one glass-topped desk, one leather office chair, and a streamlined, gray guest sofa. There are no tables or plants. Kyouya doesn’t want his guests to feel welcomed—he wants them scared shitless.

No work is actually accomplished there, just face time. Kyouya functions best on the battered couch of Tamaki’s studio, his laptop power cord a tangle at his feet, Tamaki picking out Handel or Bach or Brahms on the piano keys, filling the air with something other than the smell of exhaust and winter.

It’s not an option today, Kyouya thinks with a sigh, not with Tamaki still crying and probably playing Night on Bald Mountain, composing elegiac pieces that would bring even Hani-sempai to tears. He’ll be lucky if Tamaki isn’t curled up in some corner, trying to induce a seizure.

So he sits in his office and works. It’s Thursday, and he has worlds to conquer.
I'll wait by your dresses for you (Star Trek)

Chapter Summary

Bones has said — over and over again — that Spock will be fine, caveat: eventually.

The recycled air of the sickbay triggers a series of sense memories like lacerations, and Jim winces as he dodges nurses and doctors and crewmembers. There's a knot of tension on the Enterprise, the worst of it clustered around the private chamber Bones had assigned for Spock, where everyone has taken to treading carefully. Spock's been too almost dead for visitors, but it hasn't stopped the entire bridge crew from walking past on tiptoe, from touching the tips of their fingers to the edge of the door, like a kiss once-removed, and Jim thinks that if Spock could see it he would let out one of those short, long-suffering sighs Jim pushes out of him, like Jim's the hands and Spock's the bellows and this — whatever this is in between them — is a fire gagging for air.

Outside the door Chapel and Bones are frowning at one another in one of those lingering moments of community sympathy Jim steers clear of if at all possible. It's terrible for everybody when Chapel and Bones argue — it's worse when they're on the same side.

"Nurse Chapel, Bones," he says, pulling to a stop.

Spock's door is closed tight, and the biometric monitor alongside it darkened. Jim has a captain's override for that sort of thing if he wants to be really invasive, but Spock always finds out about Jim's more heinous breeches of medical privacy and it usually isn't worth the snit his first officer would climb into and make cozy in.

"Captain," Chapel says, tense, the same time Bones hisses, "Ambassador Sarek is asking we release Spock into his custody."

"Obviously, that's not going to happen," Jim answers, reflexive, pitching his voice low even though he knows Spock's asleep behind a soundproofed door; he can understand Sarek wants his son close at hand, but Jim wants Spock where Jim can keep an eye on him, where he can call Bones at 2 am and demand a second opinion. "I'll deal with it."

Chapel stares at him, doleful. "I hope you can. He's in no condition for the travel required to reach New Vulcan."

"In the meantime," Jim says, changing the subject because he's lost the ability to be objective about New Vulcan, about Spock and the tiny handful of his people that remain, about the huge and deep dark measures of space that will grow between them soon enough, "Sulu reports to me we've settled into our moorings and we're going to be cleared for disembarkation in an hour — thoughts?"

"Yeah, that you morons should get shot less," Bones sighs.

"I'll take that under advisement and ask Commander Spock to make a note of it," Jim tells him, because there wasn't much else he could say.

Bones has said — over and over again — that Spock will be fine, caveat: eventually. The bones and organs and sinew underneath Spock's skin are terrifyingly delicate, and Jim had seen too much
of all of it as he'd wrapped pressure bandages around Spock's chest that day, trying to keep his
insides on the inside, green pouring out of Spock with every gasping thud of his heart, pouring over
Jim's fingers, numb and slick with Spock's blood. Jim's felt Spock's skin go from feverish against
his own to cool, felt his stomach sink and his eyes get wet and burn and heard himself gasping
horrible, desperate, embarrassing shit, rocked Spock back and forth and begged nobody and
everybody and it still comes to him sometimes in flashes during the Enterprise's artificial night. So
he walks by Spock's private room at night just like everybody else does and watches his crew touch
fingers to the door, affectionate, tender, and wishes it would be okay if he did the same thing, but
he thinks he'd be obvious about it, that Spock might feel whatever Jim's not thinking through the
metal and upholstery and cloth and the lightyears between them.

He clears his throat. "I'm having medical shuttle 2 prepped — if you get him ready to be moved
I'll fly him into SUMC myself."

Chapel actually smirks, and Bones sighs, "Oh, Jesus, that'll go well."

"It's my responsibility," Jim says, since he knows about how well that will go, too, and all the
inevitable diplomatic furor it will stir, but it's the sort of thing you do when you're captain — and
when you've held Spock in the searing hot desert of a mostly-deserted planet and watched him
bleeding to death under your hands.

***

Disembarkation always turns out to be an epic, irredeemable shitshow, and Jim has no idea why.
People always fucking get their mooring number wrong or their order of arrival incorrect and then
Sulu starts swearing at people in Japanese about having to back up a fucking spaceship the size of
a continent and Chekov makes that God damn face because he hates yelling.

Jim's ability to be a pain in the ass is instinctive, but he had to earn his masters degree in being
scary as fuck through a hands-on correspondence program with Spock — who has all of these
things going for his general ability to make people shit bricks.

Spock hates people who waste his time because Spock's time is important and nobody's ever
questioned that; Spock is always right because he is, and nobody will ever convince him that might
have something to do with his being ridiculously spoiled; Spock has plenty of respect for his elders
and his betters — but they have to earn it first, which is one of those things that makes Jim have to
bite back inappropriate laughter all the time.

Anyway, Jim makes it a point not to be a bully or a dick most of the time, but sometimes if being
captain means making a few ensigns at HQ cry, so be it, and he channels Spock.

"That's amazing," Bones says later, when they're on the medical transport pad along with Spock's
biobed and Spock, still asleep, at whom Jim is assiduously not looking. "I think I've actually seen
the green-blooded hobgoblin's version of that exact same tantrum before."

Jim winces. Green blood. "Shut up, Bones."

"It's like listening to the cover of a deeply annoying song," Bones continues, not shutting up.
Losing an arm had been pretty shitty, and the childhood of village-wide shunning hadn't been great, but finding out Hinata had left their baby with Kakashi is actually the worst thing that's ever happened to Naruto.

"Hinata," he says, clawing at his face.

Hinata, who's Hyuuga get and fucking cold when she wants to be, continues to calmly unpack their bag. Five minutes ago this onsen had been bliss. It was quiet. There was a futon, and someone else to cook, and no Boruto sobbing with lingering baby reflux that had Naruto sobbing with him because he was so tired and anytime Boruto was upset Naruto was upset. Now this room is a traitor's palace.

"You left our precious, perfect, amazing, pure — "

"You called him a little shit four times yesterday," she reminds him.

" — perfect pure baby with — with..." he trails off. He can't even finish the sentence.

"He's the Rokudaime. He's entrusted with the safety of the entire village — you helped put his face on Hokage Mountain," Hinata says relentless, and lays out a futon. It's like, 11 a.m., and Naruto is already so excited to see it he's almost distracted from his righteous horror.


Hinata pulls the covers up and crawls under them. She's still in her traveling clothes. "You trained with someone you called the Pervy Sage."

Naruto had learned many things from the Pervy Sage, none of which he feels are relevant at this juncture.

"I wasn't our baby," he says.

Hinata's entire answer is a soft snore.

Chapter End Notes

I say "Bad Grandpa," but actually, come on, wouldn't Kakashi be the GREATEST grandfather? Like nine dogs! Would spoil you rotten! Completely terrifyingly dangerous should enemy nin come after your dumb kid who your poor wife let you name BOLT. NO SPELLING IT BORUTO DOES NOT MAKE IT BETTER!! KISHIMOTO-SENSEI WHY.
Chapter Summary

So I found this in the back channels of my gmail account, where Past Pru apparently started writing a Regency era genderfuck Mycroft/Lestrade marriage of convenience spy romance. I -- what? I have nothing. For everyone who read Least of All Possible Mistakes and wished there was more Regency era marriage of convenience spy romance.

1800

The first time Mycroft met Georgiana, she was hauling his younger brother up the muddy street to the house in a prodigious downpour. He'd been hiding in the kitchen for the dual benefits of proximity to hot chocolate and protection from his sadistic fencing instructor when there'd been a great to do among the cooks. He'd gone over to the opened door — rain spattering inside and onto his carefully shined shoes — to see a furious and dripping-wet girl dragging Sherlock toward Epperley House by the ear, ignoring his shrieks of protest, loud enough to be heard over the summer storm.

"Oh, my," he said, when she'd stopped short on the stone step, the hem of her dress dark brown and streaked charcoal black from the London streets, one hand still clutching Sherlock's ear despite his clawing.

"Does this," she asked with barely banked fury, "belong to you?"

The head cook, long subject to Sherlock's cruel jibes, was speechless with delight at the state of him, so Mycroft swept in to say, "Regretfully — "

Sherlock squawked in fury.

" — he does. Dare I ask what he's done?" Mycroft asked.

She shook her hand clear of Sherlock, giving him an irritated shove into the kitchen, where he rubbed at his ear and dripped across the flagstones with equal ferocity, his expression mutinous.

"He ferreted himself away in the Bow Street Runners' office and interrupted several investigations, that's what he's done," she replied, cheeks pink with irritation, brown eyes gleaming, her fringe pasted to her pale brow. "And then he fled like a coward when caught and forced me to slog my way through London in a rainstorm to deliver him safely home."

"I didn't need an escort!" Sherlock shouted finally, too wronged to remain silent. "I would have been fine on my own!"

"Trust me, had I known what a trial you would be, I would have left you for the bodysnatchers and thieves," the girl assured him, and ripping off her drenched bonnet, she wrung it out pointedly before tugging it back over her coal-dark hair. She made a surprisingly elegant curtsy, given the circumstances. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I must go."

"And don't come back!" Sherlock hissed at her.
"If I catch you again I'll box your ears," she promised, barely staying long enough to make sure Sherlock look sufficiently horrified before she turned and dashed off into the storm once more.

By then, most of the downstairs house staff had gathered to wreath the kitchen door and stare at the the girl's retreating back with undisguised awe. Mycroft, who had made knowing exactly what to say nearly a science, felt his jaw gape open for an age before he grabbed blindly for the umbrella stand by the door, taking the first one at hand, and chased her out into the drenching rain.

She didn't hear him over the deluge when he asked her to wait, so he reached out — clothes sticking and shoes soaked through, hair plastered to his head — and seized her wrist before she vanished out the mouth of the alleyway.

Her eyes were huge when she whipped around on him, pink mouth an 'o' of surprise on her heart-shaped face, and he'd gone speechless all over again watching rain drip off of her dark, dark lashes, fumbling stupidly until he managed to open the umbrella over both their heads.

"I — thank you," she said, barely a whisper, really, but Mycroft heard it with utter clarity.

He wanted to introduce himself, to say "thank you" for retrieving his wayward brother, to manage something witty and erudite.

He said, "What's your name?"

"Georgiana," she said, and flushing, corrected herself. "Georgiana Lestrade."

"Miss Lestrade," he said, solemn, and he could feel himself smiling at her blush. "Thank you for returning my brother."

Cheeky, she said, "I'll thank you to spare me ever having to deal with him again, Mister — ?"

"Holmes," Mycroft said finally, horrified. "I beg your pardon, Miss Lestrade. It's Mycroft Holmes,"

Her smile — shy and sweet without a single pretension toward coyness — undid him, and five minutes later when he finally staggered back into the kitchen at Epperley House sans umbrella and dignity, he was shivering and confused.

Two days later, he was still shivering.

"I've read about this," Sherlock declared knowledgeably, sitting at the foot of Mycroft's bed and worsening his rain-induced illness by leagues. "Mummy has dozens of books on this sort of thing."

Mrs. Holmes, who had strong feelings on politics and maths and none whatsoever on medicine, had no such thing, Mycroft croaked at his brother.

"She does!" Sherlock protested, and produced a fistful of — oh for God's sake, Mycroft thought bleakly — penny dreadful romances and scattered them about Mycroft's prone form, buried away under a mountain of quilts and huddling in on itself for warmth. "I've consulted more than a dozen, and I am certain in my diagnosis. Mycroft: you have lovesickness."

"I've no such thing," Mycroft said through gritted teeth.

Eyes gleaming, Sherlock offered too innocently, "I can go back to the Runners? Find her for you?"

Mycroft resisted smothering himself with a pillow only because the estate would be doomed if left in Sherlock's care.
"Please, I beg you," he mumbled in between coughs, "just leave her alone."

***

Sherlock didn't. Not at all. Not for years.

1815

Mycroft had carefully placed and extremely well-trained operatives planted at embassies, ports, the French court, major importers, among the leading salons, and in the beds of very powerful men — and none whatsoever where he desperately needed one now. Who would have thought that after decades of mutual espionage using the well-traveled corridors of politics and the back doors into brothels, the French would be so crude as to resort to wives?

"There's Maria," Harry mused, settling into an armchair near the fire which burned continuously in the Diogenes Club's most concealed of concealed back rooms.

"Maria is an opera singer," Mycroft sighed, rubbing at the bridge of nose.

"Meaning she gets invited to soirees and dinners all the time," Harry protested.

Mycroft didn't bother to glare at him, slouching into the wingback chair and swirling the brandy in his tumbler as he said, "While that is true, Harry, I doubt Maria — despite her manifold skills — would be particularly welcomed among the ton's wives with opened arms considering her assignations with half their husbands."

Fondly, Harry said, "So spirited, that one."

Mycroft supposed that the War Office's tendency to recruit loners fueled by danger and unconcerned with fostering long-term relationships had more than a little to do with their current dilemma. Still, it was humbling to realize that of the thirty-odd employees within his direct report, none of the men were speaking with their wives and none of the women were highly placed enough in society for such an intrigue.

"We could work around it," Harry suggested, and Mycroft took a moment to spin out the possibilities of that.

There were household staffs of course, but that was a much broader base among which to win loyalty, or the possibility of dispatching Norah or Clarissa, who were both excellent governesses and well known for seducing society ladies. Of course, either of those possibilities would require more time than their intelligence implied they had at their disposal. The ton might be a tiny sliver of the teeming population of London, but it was a tiny sliver composed of a thousand possible traitors.

Taking a resigned sip of brandy, Mycroft said, "It'll take too long — their plant might already be passing along information."

It had been a trickle of rumors at first over the course of months that had turned into a veritable flood when news of Napoleon's escape from exile had reached London. Mycroft had spent the better part of a week systematically eviscerating their existing intelligence network searching for flaws, to determine how the man had managed to waltz out of Portoferraio with 600 men and make his way all the way into the royalist arms of Provence without interception.
Mycroft had only been halfway through that infuriating exercise when his best agent in Paris had managed to send a single message of warning that there was information coming from the ton's ballrooms and bedrooms that could only, realistically, be privy to a wife: plans for troop movements were a dime a dozen, but the petty details of finances and the tone of good society's parties and fundraisers in London were rarer and more worrying leaks. Mycroft could plant fifty plausible rumors about troop movements from the front in Brussels, but if someone was telling the French how much money was going where then it didn't matter how many people he had seeding the French semaphore lines with lies.

It also hadn't helped that Mycroft's request for a follow-up report had been from his operative's handler, passing along details and professional regret.

In reality, there was only one truly feasible route, and Mycroft had known that even before he'd engaged Harry in this particularly awful conversation.

"I suppose you might say that," Harry replied, because he'd known, too. Rising to his feet, he straightened his jacket and cuffs, asking, "Then may I ask which of our operatives I may be wishing congratulations upon shortly?"

For King and country, then, Mycroft thought, and said, "Me," before he tossed back the rest of his drink.

"I would think you'd want to select a duchess with...well, different considerations and qualities than those we would be seeking," Harry demurred.

"Marriage is transactional, Harry," Mycroft said. He was neck deep in self-pity, yes, but that still gave him plenty of room for lecturing. "I see no reason to romanticize it. A woman with the qualities of a professional spy may actually be the best fit for me."

Harry arched an eyebrow. "I assume you already have a woman in mind?"

"That discussion," Mycroft declared grimly, "is going to have to wait until I'm significantly drunker."

***

The Diogenes occupied a patch of Bloomsbury populated mostly by barristers and physicians, men who worked for their money, and although seeing Mycroft Holmes, the sixth Duke of Sussex strolling through the neighborhood was a curiosity, it was one that had happened with enough frequency that most of the longtime residents politely ignored him. He'd left Harry, his attendants, and his carriage at the club in favor of a walk and found himself — probably inevitably — standing on the front step of Sherlock's lodgings.

After being thrown out of both Eton and Harrow, Mycroft hadn't held out much hope for Sherlock's tenure at Cambridge, but someone must have shown him a corpse early on during his time there because he managed to complete his studies with relatively little damage. ('Relative' in this case meaning only one significant fire.) His return to London had been marked by a splashy disregard for the peerage, three fascinatingly awful interactions with debutantes, and the leasing of a set of offices and private chambers to set up a medical office. Mycroft assumed most of his patients were there out of perverse curiosity more than any hope Sherlock would be a helpful physician.

Or, he amended, observing the rather infamous widow powdering her bosom in the small sitting room off of Sherlock's offices, they came with intentions more perverse than curious.
"Your grace!" swooned Mrs. Norwood, the dowager Lady Darby, who managed to fan herself and adjust her gown lower down her impressive decolletage at the same time. Pity she couldn't be trusted with a shilling, much less the country's secrets; so much coordination and conniving — wasted.

Mycroft made a neat leg. "Lady Darby," he said benignly.

The fan fluttered, and yet another acre of her breasts appeared. Mycroft felt himself driven toward horrified respect.

"What brings you here this afternoon, your grace?" Mrs. Norwood asked, narrowing the space between herself and Mycroft in a series of swishy steps forward that sent Mycroft taking an equal, smooth number to the side, bringing him closer to the sitting room door and the possibility of escape.

"Same as you, I imagine," he said politely. "To see my brother."

"Could you not summon him?" she asked, commencing now with a frankly unattractive amount of eyelash-flitting.

Mycroft couldn't repress his smirk. "Lady Darby, you must not know my brother at all."

Before she could take offense and demand he satisfy her honor by marrying her, there was a great commotion in the hall, a door banging open and the sound of running, a child shrieking, and Sherlock's voice crying, "You're being completely irrational! My scientific methods are far less invasive than typically prescribed bleeding!" and a woman sighing, "Yes, thank you, Sherlock, I'm sure that'll make her more compliant."

Lady Darby fell into a stunned silence, her mouth half-open, and Mycroft took the opportunity to sigh, make his bow, and start toward the corridor, saying, "If you'll excuse me."

Well-trained, there was already a servant scurrying to usher Lady Darby away for another day as Mycroft ascended the stairs to the first floor, where the worst of the damage usually occurred. He could hear the vague sounds of protestations on the landing, but then the other woman's voice rang out from upstairs again, saying, "Oh for goodness sake — wait here. I'll be right back," and there was the tell-tale tap-tap-tapping of feet going down the back staircase.

The smoke billowing out of Sherlock's consultation room on the second floor was fairly standard, and so was Sherlock himself standing in the doorway outfitted in a white smock and tanner's gloves, some metal contraption looped around his neck, looking impatient and clutching a beaker of foul-looking liquid.

Looking marvelously uncooperative at the other end of the hall, back pressed against a glass-enclosed curio cabinet overflowing with taxidermied animals, was a little girl with a halo of dark curls, a scowl on her pink mouth, and her brown-eyes belligerent. Alarmingly, she was clutching a bone saw to her chest.

"Well done, Sherlock," Mycroft said mildly. "You've driven a four year-old to sharp objects. You must be very proud."

To his side, there was the clatter of a bone saw making abrupt acquaintance with the floor — Mycroft spared a minute to feel pity for Sherlock's landlord — and he took a knee just in time to catch an armful of now-smiling girl hurtling toward him, shrieking in delight. And because it was only his brother watching, Mycroft allowed himself a squeeze and to press a kiss into her silky hair.
— her skin was too warm, and Mycroft thought instantly, _fever, recent cold snap, three days bedrest_ — before rising to his feet and balancing her on one hip.

"Miss Phoebe Clarendon," he said, when she tipped her flushed face up to smile at him.

"Your grace," she answered, the words too solemn in her little girl's voice, even as she hooked her small hands round his neck with guileless affection.

Sherlock, never one to miss an opportunity, said, "Perfect: Mycroft, keep her immobile," and advanced all of two steps — Pheobe whining as he drew closer — before Mycroft stopped him with a glower. Scoffing, Sherlock said, "Honestly, Mycroft, you would think I was torturing her."

"You are torturing me," Phoebe retorted, because in addition to being a terribly pretty child, she had a charming streak of willfulness.

Sherlock narrowed his eyes at her. "I never should have encouraged you to speak. Or your mother to read to you."

Phoebe's response was to sniff and ignore him. (As it should be.) Mycroft's response was to ask her, "Where is your mother?"

"Acquiring a bribe," Georgiana called out, a thread of familiar laughter in her voice, emerging from the servant's staircase.

At thirteen, with night-dark hair and doe eyes, Georgiana had been a lovely girl, and Mycroft been arrested by the spark in her. At twenty-eight, the sweet curve of her face was thinner, haloed by black, loose curls drawn away from her cheeks, strands escaping from a mass of braids at the back of her head. Soot-colored lashes fringed copper-brown eyes, crinkled up in a smile, and Mycroft thought that admiring her now was to risk being engulfed by flames.

"Mrs. Clarendon," he said, when he caught his breath again.

She rolls her eyes, and without his polite detachment or any evident care for his societal standing, pulls her daughter out of Mycroft's arms — momentary brushes of warmth through the fabric of his jacket — as she says, "Mycroft, how many times have I told you? It's Georgiana."

"Mummy," Phoebe interjected, pressing her hands to Georgiana's cheeks and addressing her mother seriously. "Mr. Sherlock Holmes is trying to poison me."

Sherlock's outrage was automatic, as was Mycroft's smile. Georgiana, apparently immune to adorable children, schooled her face into one of firm command. "Doctor Sherlock Holmes most certainly is not," she said. "He's trying to give you medicine for your cold."

Mulish, Phoebe said, "I'm not ill."

Georgiana arched an eyebrow. "Odysseus would disagree."

Mycroft slanted a querying look to Sherlock, who explained, "She threw up on the dog."

Odysseus was an tiny cocker spaniel, the runt of a litter from Mycroft's most prized hunting dog. His gameskeeper had recommended drowning, but Mycroft had opted to put the little thing into his pocket instead and bring it to Phoebe — all of six months, then, who had all of Georgiana's effortless sweetness and a wide-open curiosity native only to children, before they learned that things were not all discovery and delight, that life could hurt them.
"But now all the sickness is on the outside so I'm fine," Phoebe insisted.

"My God woman, what have you been telling her that she would arrive at such an absurd conclusion?" Sherlock erupted, horror plain on his face.

"Ah, but the sickness is like a weed," Georgiana explained blithely, exercising a particular skill for ignoring Sherlock that was surely at the root of their years-long friendship. "It grows and grows in your belly, and if Doctor Sherlock doesn't kill the weed, you'll just feel poorly all over again."

Phoebe looked aghast. "It is poison," she said in a hush.

"For the weed," Georgiana laughed, "not for you, silly."

That declaration took a loop through Phoebe's head, circled twice, navigated her thoughtful frown, and when it reappeared as words, they sounded curious. "So I can't be poisoned?"

Sighing, Georgiana promised, "You can't be poisoned."

"I'm magic," Phoebe murmured, wariness transforming into awe.

"Exactly so," Mycroft cut in neatly, before Sherlock's tantrum could boil over and send them on yet another round of cajoling. Nodding at Georgiana, he asked, "And what's this about a bribe you mentioned?"

"Ah, yes, the bribe," Georgiana said with relish, bouncing Phoebe in her arms and smiling at her giggles. "The bribe is only for good girls who allow Doctor Holmes to administer treatment and take their medicine."

Behind the pair, Sherlock waved his flagon of evil-looking liquid impatiently. Phoebe spared him a glance before turning back to her mother, demanding, "Bribe first!"

Georgiana turned her brown eyes on Mycroft, like she was sharing a secret joke with him, which always had cataclysmic effects on his composure; one year, after a particularly devastating run-in on Bond Street, he'd gotten all turned around and managed to commission a miniature of her before he'd come out of his fugue state half a day later.

A smile twitching at the corners of Georgiana's mouth, she produced from one of her pockets a seemingly ordinary apple, except Phoebe's gasp of delight meant it was anything but.

"It's a flower," she murmured, closing her hands around it, and Mycroft leaned in a touch closer to see that it was.

In the skin of the rosy red fruit had been carved the white petals of a rose, furled tightly in the center and spreading more widely at the edges, as beautiful as anything one of Mycroft's terrifying cooks would produce for a formal dinner.

"Do we have a deal, Miss Clarendon?" Georgiana asked, pressing her forehead briefly to her daughter's.

Phoebe mulled it for another moment before she cradled her apple close to her chest and grimly turned to Sherlock, sticking out a tiny hand as she said, "I'll take the poison."

"God keep me from children," Sherlock muttered darkly under his breath, but passed Phoebe the beaker without any further commentary, watching her drink it in three quick gulps before making a high, keening noise and wriggling until Georgiana released her.
"Water, water, water," Phoebe chanted, and tore off down the servant's stairs still clutching the glass and her apple, Sherlock hot on her tail, crying, "Wait! Come back! I need to keep a record of your temperature you horrible little creature!"

Georgiana, with her signature bizarre fondness, sighed happily, "He's going to be a marvelously entertaining father."

"Bite your tongue," Mycroft replied, aghast. "You'd inflict him on children? And a woman?"

"People change," Georgiana said firmly, and smoothing her hands down the front of her dove gray dress, asked, "What brings you here today, Mycroft?"

His cane became suddenly fascinating: cherrywood with an elegant top in the shape of an elephant, a souvenir from one of his many excursions, a ruby the color of furious blood and facetted until it was gleaming pressed into the animal's forehead.

"Mycroft," she repeated, in the same tone of voice she used to send Phoebe off or corral Sherlock into behaving like a normal human being: patient, but to a point.

Anyone else, he'd fob off with a comment about the commonness of visiting one's sibling. But this was Georgiana, who — during their youth — used to send Mycroft helpful missives like, *Sherlock is at the prison interrogating a poisoner the Runners just sent down. You may want to intervene before he takes any more notes, and Your brother was just deposited in my father's office for harassing some gravediggers. He has a trowel. Where on Earth did he get a trowel? and most memorably, I have boxed Sherlock's ears and locked him in a cupboard since he came to ask if he could measure...well, bits of me, for an experiment. I recommend you send someone to fetch him before I have him murdered and sold for parts.*

Clearing his throat, Mycroft admitted, "I find myself in..."

Georgiana arched a dark brow. "I find myself speechless you're speechless," she says, and growing serious, asks, "Is it bad?"

Yes, Mycroft didn't say. "Vexing, really," he signed, knuckles going white on his cane. "Although upon reflection, it was pure foolishness to bring such a problem to Sherlock's doorstep."

"Is it one you could bring to mine, then?" Georgiana said.

Yes, Mycroft also didn't say, because to bring his problems to Georgiana was a luxury he couldn't afford to indulge. She'd always been beyond him, by arbitrary rules of social status and then marriage and now duty, and to linger too long in the illusion of shared intimacy would only make the inevitable break of reality worse. Instead, he smiled and shook his head, no. Georgiana looked like she'd like to argue the point further — there was a particular wrinkle between her brows that always telegraphed obstinacy — when Phoebe tore back up the servant's staircase, and her high, shrieking laugh filled up all the corners of the room.

After that, it was easy to fall into the proscribed rhythm of things. Sherlock offered tea served by his resentful housekeeper and Georgiana declined. Mycroft offered Georgiana and Phoebe the use of his carriage to take them back to their home just beyond the most fashionable border of Mayfair, and she declined in favor of a hackney cab. Both Holmes brothers saw her out. Sherlock sending a kitchen boy for the Diogenes club to call for Mycroft's horses, which left the pair of them standing on the step of Sherlock's house, where — inevitably — it began.

"You're pathetic," Sherlock said.
Mycroft sighed.

"It's been what, fifteen years now?" Sherlock went on.

"I should have drowned you as an infant," Mycroft told him.

Blithe, Sherlock went on. "First, you watch her with wretched desperation as she marries another man."

Mr. Thomas Clarendon had been the third son the Earl of Whitstable, and he'd fallen passionately in love with Georgiana one night when he'd seen her telling Sherlock off outside the gates of Vauxhall Gardens. (Yet another reason Mycroft loathed his brother.) Their courtship and subsequent marriage had been a terrible scandal one that was only softened when Mycroft had, in his first official act as the new Duke of Sussex, held a ball and invited Clarendon and his new wife, who'd come with shy warmth in her eyes and keen affection in her smile. It had been worth it, all of it, for the way she'd found him hiding on a balcony and pressed a grateful hand to his cheek as she'd said, "You're quite the kindest man I know, Mycroft Holmes."

"He was a good man," Mycroft muttered. He'd ascertained that, and had unsavory characters on standby to derail the romance had that not been the case, anyway.

"And now that she's a widow," Sherlock went on, long-suffering, "and a more-than-acceptable candidate to become your mistress — "

"Georgiana Lestrade," Mycroft intervened, firm, "is no man's mistress."

What a monstrous suggestion. Mistresses were to be kept cloistered away, into one of the carefully subdivided portions of a gentleman's life located somewhere in between the Houses of Parliament and his club, before supping with his wife and taking brandy his acquaintances. Mycroft couldn't imagine a universe wherein Georgiana could be so contained — that he would want to. Any further thoughts on the subject were always put aside with a disciplined hand and a firm recognition of the impossibility of such a thing.

"You're unbearable," Sherlock observed and tipped his chin toward the road, saying, "Your carriage is here — leave before you leave a reek of pathetic longing all over my lodgings."

For that, when Sherlock whirled round foppishly to take dramatically to a fainting couch or something, Mycroft casually tripped up him the steps.

***

Odd.

The word kept chasing itself around Georgiana's head, jostling along with the Hackney cab as Phoebe curled up — still a touch warm but improving — against Georgiana's chest. Outside, Bloomsbury was melting into Fitzrovia, the evening sky going pink at the edges and a chill spiderwebbing in the wind that made Georgiana feel quiet, thoughtful.

She couldn't shake the sense that Mycroft had been odd today, more so than his ordinary oddness. He'd been witty and alert as ever, but pensive somehow, and Georgiana couldn't imagine the state of things that could make Mycroft Holmes pensive — as if the world would dare to put a toe out of place with that threat hanging overs its head.

In all the years Georgiana had known Mycroft, he had only ever carried his responsibilities as the
eventual heir, and then the duke, and now his extremely obfuscated duties with the War Office with effortless grace. Only today he'd looked perturbed, uncertain, touched through with a very human look of indecision that appeared utterly foreign across his patrician features, in his lingering, gray-eyed looks.

It had made her feel a touch reckless, wish that she had the right to worry over him: press her hands to his cheeks and force his gaze to hers, to ask him what was wrong and know he'd tell her the truth.

But that, Georgiana reminded herself firmly, is ridiculous.

And fortunately, it was also the moment Phoebe woke up again, still a touch cross and whining from a week of being ill, and demanded Georgiana's attention.

The house windows were dark when the cab arrived, and Georgiana paid the driver with a free hand before gathering Phoebe to her chest and climbing up the steps.

It was cold inside, all the fireplaces on the ground floor ashen and the sitting rooms still and quiet. Georgiana bypassed the parlor and the drawing room for the staircase to the first floor, where she tucked Phoebe under a half-dozen quilts in her snug back bedroom before lighting a fire and sitting watchfully at the foot of the bed until Phoebe lapsed into deep, undisturbed sleep.

It was still early, really, just gone seven, and there was a tremendous amount left to do, so Georgiana got on with it.

She collected the washing from the line and folded it away, cleaned the dishes and dried them, and popped back upstairs to check on Phoebe — still deeply asleep — before wandering around the kitchen taken an inventory of their supplies. Always, in the back of Georgiana's mind, was the knowledge she could only sustain them so much longer with economizing and cunning.

The downstairs parlor maids had been the first of the staff Georgiana had let go, each with pay and a warm letter of reference. Then the footmen and the the butler, and there was no need to keep the groom if she wasn't going to keep the horses, so poor Derek had been let go as well. All in all, she'd gutted the servants quarters until there was only Susan, who came by twice a week to help with the washing. Florence, the housekeeper, had been to last to leave two months earlier, fretting every step of the way. She'd taken to visiting during her afternoons off from her new place of employment — probably just to ascertain the house was still standing and that Georgiana and Phoebe hadn't starved.

Thomas's parents had been initially incensed and eventually resigned about his marriage to Georgiana, with every misstep forgiven with the arrival of Phoebe, who'd been the great apple of her grandparents' eyes. But the Earl had passed when Phoebe was only six months old, and the countess a year after, taken by the same flu that had stolen Thomas away.

Thomas's older brother, the new Earl of Whitstable, had been neither understanding nor interested in listening to Georgiana's reasoning, and although he hadn't cut her off entirely, the tiny payments she received now were nothing to live on.

Georgiana hadn't grown up with governesses or etiquette lessons, but her nannies and mentors had been the once-great actresses and once-fine mistresses of high society that fallen low enough to drift into her father's purview. They hadn't taught her all the exactly correct forms of address, or how to host a flawless dinner party, but they'd drilled into her the certainty that a woman could rely on a man only so far. They'd told her time and again with the clarity of hindsight that there was no shame in leaning on a man, but that every woman must know how to stand on her own as well.
If it were only Georgiana, she would have laughed off everyone's concern. She'd grown up all too familiar with London's fingersmiths and crooks, kept close at her father's side and motherless as long as she remembered. She'd kept house from the age of six, and Georgiana knew how to wash clothes and iron and make do with the best of them — miles away from the hothouse flowers that they raised in Mayfair. She'd been happy before she'd become Mrs. Clarendon and thus the type of woman who had a grand kitchen and no idea what to do with it, and she would be without one as well. Georgiana had two hands and a mind of her own; she would be fine.

Except there was Phoebe to think of now, and her future, which Georgiana wanted desperately to be happy, to be prosperous, to be without the uncertainty and discomfort Georgiana had known. Georgiana wanted Phoebe to have every available opportunity, and knew with a grim kind of resignation the only way to provide them would be to remarry.

Tomorrow, I'll think about it tomorrow, Georgiana promised herself, snuffing out the candle and curling up in bed alongside her daughter.

***

Sleepless nights were impractical and pointless, which was why about three hours into one, Mycroft opted to get out of bed and stage himself in the study instead. There were always accounts that needed looking into and repairs to budget, planting calendars to adjust. And after the ten minutes all of that near-reflexive work occupied, there was nothing to do but sit at his desk and brood.

If he was going to be practical about it, the business of identifying a suitable partner for this intrigue didn't have to be difficult. His mother — carefully cloistered away in Somerset where she couldn't arrive at random to visit and despair over him every day — would all too happily produce a list of acceptable candidates, and Harry could certainly be trusted to whittle it down to women with the wherewithal to be trained for the task. Mycroft would select someone from the short list and proceedings could proceed; king and country would be safe.

Except whoever he married would be more than just a temporary tool for this operation, to be handsomely rewarded and set aside. She would be his duchess, which implied he'd have to continue living with her, long after this tiresome skirmish between the English and the French was finally concluded. It had the potential to be a nightmare, given that Mycroft's mother favored sensible women and Harry favored women who could appear sensible, which meant one who survived both of their selection processes would have to be a manipulator and actress of the first order.

That could be useful, interesting even, for Mycroft had always admired a worthy sparring partner, and women with sharp edges were interesting. Finding one with a mercenary streak might even mean she'd release him to his own pursuits after their work was done: her to her own interests and Mycroft to his.

But that was only the most transactional of definitions for marriage, and a template Mycroft was cross with, since it had forced him into this ludicrous position. If even one of his highly placed operatives was on friendly terms with his wife, this entire charade could have been neatly avoided. As it was, he was sitting at his desk at half-three in the morning eyeing his very fine port and stuck on the inescapable truth that whichever woman he married would also be the mother of his children.

And whenever Mycroft thought of children, mostly he thought of Phoebe, and how she looked in Georgiana's arms, in Georgiana's constant thrall. He didn't blame her, since Mycroft himself could hardly look at anything else when Phoebe's mother was in the room.
He and Sherlock had been raised with distant affection in the way of all their peers, through a series of nannies and tutors and then by way of letters after they’d been sent to school. Or, if you were Sherlock, sent to school and then sent home and then sent to another school and then sent home again where your mother and father awaited you at the estate to rain down a hellish fire of weeping and bellowing. More than the switch, Sherlock feared the carrying-on. Mycroft, having discovered the world was being run poorly at six and finally old enough to do something about it by sixteen, had no time for any such tantrums, and was thus left alone at university to cultivate his interests and begin accumulating owed favors.

In contrast, seeing Georgiana's manner of child rearing was a source of constant fascination. Phoebe was never far from her, forever being pulled in for a hug or a kiss, so Georgiana could card her fingers through Phoebe's dark hair or so Phoebe could run her tiny hands along her mother's face, eternally fascinated. So far as Mycroft could tell, Phoebe didn't have a nanny, and being sent away to the nursery, apart from her mother, was the worst sort of punishment, and not in the ordinary course of business at all.

"I know it seems strange," Georgiana had admitted one day in Sherlock's sitting room while Phoebe entertained herself with a doll in the corner, "But it's the way I was raised — at my father's knee — it's the way all of us were raised."

Mycroft had arched a brow at that. "Us?" he asked.

"Well, commoners, I suppose," Georgiana had replied, cheerful, rosy-cheeked in the late summer light, and Mycroft had remembered the particular patterning of whitework on the sleeves of her muslin gown because he was mindlessly greedy of her, to have any piece of her his own to keep. Over the years he'd accumulated volumes on her, kept it all close to his heart. She liked the citrus bite of lemon ice and was wholly unafraid of him, of Sherlock, despite the weight of their titles and Sherlock's particularly sharp words. Georgiana was fond of dogs and ambivalent toward cats. Georgiana was only a mediocre dancer, but had quite the most singularly beautiful smile Mycroft had ever seen. She'd learned how to pick locks and pockets during her extremely questionable childhood haunting the office of the Bow Street Runners, and had broken her collarbone as a child in a fall from a tree. She liked the pale pink color of blooming peonies and hated bracelets. She was the very nearest thing Mycroft had to a friend and Sherlock to a sister.

"You are nothing like a commoner," Mycroft had said, and barely managed to withhold, And it has nothing to do with your marrying Clarendon, either.

So what he needed, Mycroft concluded with deep irritation, was a woman who was clever, cunning, brave enough to take on such an assignment, and who he would care for and want to care for his children as well.

"In short," Mycroft said, bitter, into the watery flood of morning light in his study now, dawn creeping into the London sky, "I need to marry an exact copy of Georgiana Clarendon."

At his door, there was a scratching noise, followed by his butler peering inside and asking, grim and unamused, "Sir, will you be taking breakfast in your study, then?"

"Yes," Mycroft said, deciding in favor of fatalism and self-pity for today. "Yes, I will, and please bring it to me in the form of port and cake."

There was a long silence before Higgens sighed, aggrieved. "As you wish, sir."

"And Higgens?" Mycroft went on, with the steel-cored discipline that had kept him from
murdering his younger brother all these years. "Send for my mother."

The silence this time was even longer, but when Higgens said, "Yes, your grace," and "The port and cake will be with you very shortly," it was with immense pity.

***

In the morning, Phoebe was a vision of shining good health, and Georgiana rewarded her for it with a bevy of adoring kisses. Breakfast was porridge and planning, and by the time Phoebe was finished distributing her porridge over most of her dress, Georgiana was finished with all of her planning.

"Right then, my darling, come along," Georgiana declared to Phoebe, changed her into an unsoiled dress, and marched the pair of them over to Bloomsbury, where Sherlock answered the door in a state: hair awry in four directions, a streak of mud on his cheek, clutching a piece of some kind of root, and swaying on his feet.

"Oh," he said, "no."

"I am calling in my favors, Sherlock," Georgiana informed him, ushering Phoebe into the hall — where she promptly took off shrieking with joy for the kitchen garden — and maneuvered herself into the house, adding, "I require a husband."

Sherlock made a horrified sound. "I am not marrying you."

Rolling her eyes, Georgiana went immediately for the stack of cards and invitations overflowing the hall table, sorting out all the ones long overdue and ignored.

"And I would never want to marry you," Georgiana told him charitably, discarding a few notes inviting Sherlock to intimate dinners — why would anyone want Sherlock at an intimate dinner? — and country house parties — or a country house party? — in favor of the season's most well-attended events. "I just want to marry someone."

Sherlock's new sound of horror was only slightly less horrified. "Setting aside the issue of marriage being the summary surrender of personal liberty — if you are intent on it why are you here?"

"Because you are you going to acquire me an invitation for a ball where I will locate someone to be married to," Georgiana told him, and held up an invitation, asking, "Lord and Lady Rawlins' musical?"

"Only if you're attending for dramatics," Sherlock returned. "Lady Rawlins is exceptionally stupid but there's no way she's not going to realize the opera singer they've likely arranged for the guests' entertainment is for her husband's as well."

Georgiana was reluctantly impressed; she honestly hadn't thought Rawlins had it in him. Setting that invitation aside, she leafed past a half-dozen others — only about half of London society had been lured back to the city, but all of them were eager to be the opening salvo in the Season — before reaching one for a masquerade ball, which Sherlock categorically refused on the grounds of his dignity.

"It's clear you're going to press gang me into helping you no matter what, but I refuse to make a fool of myself unnecessarily," he told her, shaking his root and scrubbing uselessly at the mud on his face only to get it — for his sleeve was coated in the stuff — all over his hair.

"Yes, clearly it's me that's eroding your sense of respectability," Georgiana allowed, and frowned
as she asked, "So you don't want to be married?"

Flushing, Sherlock opened his mouth.

"To anybody," Georgiana clarified, lips twitching with laughter. "Not me."

"To anybody," Sherlock confirmed, impatient. "I see no profit in it."

"It's matrimony, Sherlock, not a business," she replied, keenly aware of the hypocrisy of such a statement. But then again, Sherlock had the dual benefits of his sex and his heritage and thus the luxury of marrying whomever he liked. "Then you don't mind? Being alone all the time?"

Sullen, Sherlock said, "I am never alone. You or my brother are forever underfoot, or endless streams of patients."

"I warned you about opening a practice," Georgiana said, because even now Sherlock seemed forever baffled that his opening a medical practice had actually drawn patients, when in reality he'd only intended to have a forum to show off his experiments.

"And anyway," he went on, ignoring her, "you're not married now, and you seem perfectly happy."

"It's different between women and men," she told him, distracted. Country house party, dinner, dinner, tea, salon, Georgiana found, before coming to a card with heavy stock and beautiful lettering. She held it up for Sherlock's inspection. "The Verkerks? A ball?"

Sherlock wrinkled his nose, but was otherwise silent, and Georgiana read that for the acquiescence it was.

"Splendid," Georgiana decided, noted the details of the event, and pressed the card into Sherlock's chest with a firm hand and an even firmer tone, saying, "This one, then, to start."

Sputtering, Sherlock said, "You're not even invited!"

"Sherlock, your brother is the Duke of Sussex, and until he has a son of his own, you are his heir," Georgiana reminded him, thoroughly without pity after a lifetime of fetching Sherlock out of brothels and barring him from haunting the prison and sneaking around graveyards long after hours. She would happily force him to perform a hundred favors for her without a single blemish on her conscience. "If you ask the Verkerks to add me to the guest list — they will."

Somewhere in between his 15th birthday and his 20th, Sherlock had gone from being guilelessly curious about all things to developing a peculiar and strange prudishness. Georgiana had a private theory involving Mycroft, Sherlock, a prostitute, and a financial transaction that rewarded aggressiveness, but she wasn't sure she wanted confirmation on what had surely been an unmitigated disaster.

Instead of well mannered cooperation, Sherlock asked, "How is it different? For women and men, not being married?"

"Men need wives to be happy," Georgiana said, with the confidence of past experience.

"And women don't need husbands for happiness?" Sherlock queried.

"I find husbands are most often the root cause of unhappiness in wives," Georgiana answered, smiling crookedly. "Being a widow is actually quite liberating."
"Surely Mycroft would have had Clarendon killed if he made you unhappy," Sherlock said, as if it were indisputable fact and not an exaggeration at all. "Do you not miss him?"

Georgiana considered. She did miss Thomas, ached for the daughter he would never see growing up and the friend she'd lost when he'd passed. She'd loved him the way you care for someone given into your care, someone who cared for you, but she'd never felt for him the way he'd burned for her: with a humbling tenderness, bewildering intensity. She'd married him because it had pleased her father so to see her well-settled, and because when she'd asked Mycroft if she ought to, he'd looked at her with wise, gray eyes and told her yes.

"Yes," she admitted. "But not the way you think."

She missed the certainty of her life with him, the way everything had been soft-edged and easy with Thomas. Georgiana hadn't stayed up long nights worrying herself sick over money, over Phoebe, over the vast and formless future that was coming for her, nipping at her heels. But she didn't miss the sense of nagging, frustrating obligation, the way she'd always carried her guilt like a lodestone for not loving him the way he deserved — the way he loved her.

Sherlock held up a quelling hand. "Stop," he instructed. "No more. I can tell you're about to embark on a discussion of emotions, which will likely be tiring."

She would be upset with him except she was used to him, and there was something comforting to know that Sherlock was uninterested — that their conversations would forever avoid the subjects Georgiana so desperately wanted to ignore.

And anyway, at that moment, Phoebe appeared in the hall, waving frantically for Georgiana's attention and crying, "Mummy, Mummy, Dr. Holmes has a snake!"

Georgiana's face must have betrayed her alarm, because Sherlock said:

"It's in a cage."

"It's sticking its tongue out at me!" Phoebe went on. "Can I take it out?"

"No," Sherlock and Georgiana yelled together, and started for the garden in tandem.

***

Eugenia Holmes roared into London like a late winter storm, bringing with her two carriages of luggage, two French lady's maids, a number of grooms and valets, and so much effusive, embarrassing joy that Mycroft managed only two minutes of rueful affection before settling immediately into regret.

"Don't make that face at me, Mycroft," she scolded brightly, as Mycroft's valet presented her with jacket after jacket and was summarily dismissed by a careless wave of Eugenia's hand. "You sent for me, after all, meaning no matter how much you sulk, you recognize the wisdom of my marital advice."

They were staged in the family drawing room on the second floor, in the orange light of late afternoon, the detritus of tea scattered across all the flat surfaces of the room, a flurry of discarded invitations blanketing the rug. The room was all rich royal blues and dark cherry woods, the walls lined with paintings of the ocean, with Turner's Fisherman at Sea roiling and green-glazed, the moon hanging a pendant in the sky, mounted over the fireplace, flames flickering golden on the frame.
"It's true, Mother," he allowed, clutching at brandy number three for the day, brandy number unknown since he'd sent for his mother four days previous. The study was the comforting reassurance of work, but the drawing room was — had been a haven. Mycroft didn't think he'd ever be able to retreat here again. "It is only my wisdom in sending for you at all that I question now."

Eugenia plucked up another cucumber sandwich and said to the valet, "For that, Harris, please go find a jacket in a color other than blue or black."

Fairly vibrating with excitement, Harris breathed, "Oh, I've dreamed of this day, my lady."

Setting his tumbler down with a warning click, Mycroft said, "Harris, if I arrive at the Verkerk's ball dressed as a common dandy, you will find yourself hoping to be in Sherlock's service."

Torn, Harris looked between Mycroft and Eugenia, until Eugenia mercifully said, "For goodness sake, Harris — just bring him a green jacket."

"Dark green," Mycroft added.

Harris did, but sullenly, favoring Mycroft with an endless number of baleful looks, as if he'd taken up employment with the Duke of Sussex for the sartorial opportunities and then been betrayed.

"Stop glowering at that poor boy and listen, Mycroft," his mother instructed, and went on, "Now, on the subject of the young lady."

Wincing, Mycroft asked, "Young?"

Mycroft's history of interactions with girls freshly out of the schoolroom mostly involved him being impatient and bored and their being terrified and near-mute for fear of insult, their mother's hovering nearby with stars of hope gleaming in their eyes. To say he wasn't impressed by one-dimensional charms of youth was putting it lightly.

"Young, dear," Eugenia insisted. "More years to produce an heir."

"Which, of course, is a key indicator of a good spy," Mycroft said sarcastically, and tried not to think about the bleak misery of finding a milksop miss in his bed and at his breakfast table every day for the rest of his life. Of endless conversations about weather and fashion and seeing Georgiana for tea in Sherlock's sitting room with the miles-long distance of propriety between them. And one day, she would marry again, and Mycroft knew the way he'd known the first time — cold and aching — that he would be happy for her, as much as he could.

Rapping his knuckles with a fan she'd produced from nowhere, his mother said, "I am trying to identify a girl worthy of being your duchess. You are the one looking for a spy."

It spoke volumes about his mother's character that her eldest son, the heir to the family lineage, had disclosed he was marrying to facilitate espionage, and her response had been to go into raptures and begin creating lists of the most fertile families in the ton. If Eugenia Philomena Holmes had her way, this whole ugly business with spying and the French would just be a minor distraction before Mycroft's future wife began producing grandchildren for her to spoil at a rate of seventeen a year.

"As we have discussed, Mother," Mycroft sighed, explaining again, "ideally, we are looking for someone who would succeed in both endeavors."

Eugenia made a noise wholly inappropriate for a dowager duchess. "Yes, while we're asking for miracles, let's also hope that the universe produces a woman for Sherlock this Season."
Mycroft choked on his tea.

Looking archly satisfied, Eugenia went on:

"Returning to the subject of your young lady — " she produced a piece of tattered letter paper, clearly well-consulted already " — I've compiled a list of this year's passable debutants and several acceptable widows. You'll only need to select from that."

It was with great wariness that Mycroft examined the list of twenty-odd names, each with "helpful" annotations alongside.

Miss Florence White was an accomplished violinist but unfortunate looking, Eugenia had observed, but probably still preferable to the unquestionably beautiful, but shockingly stupid Miss Julia Haversham, who had famously tipped over into a pond last Season with no discernible outside intervention. Mycroft sighed at the inclusion of Miss Theresa Verlander (whose father Mycroft had under near constant surveillance as a soft target for any French spy assets possessed of large breasts) and Miss Regina Rookwood, whose snobbery surpassed her breeding by several country miles.

Then Mycroft got to the widows.

"Mother," he hissed, scandalized.

She blinked at him angelically. "What, my darling?"

Mycroft held up the paper. "Mrs. Garrick is barely in half-mourning."

"Mr. Garrick was a dull brute and she's glad to be rid of him," Eugenia said with confidence. "I could tell by the way she was dabbing her eyes at the funeral."

Glowering, he said, "No."

"Fine, fine," his mother said, too easily, and asked, "What about Mrs. Charles then? Or Mary Power? She has the most lovely singing voice."

Mrs. Power had also once burst into tears because her florists sent her yellow roses instead of yellow-pink roses, and then taken to her fainting couch for an entire evening, according to a man in Mycroft's employ. A former infantryman who had earned a pronounced limp as a result of seeing to his own field dressing before charging into the heat of battle again, he'd begged without dignity to be released from the Powers' service within three months.

"I'm not certain that the particular stresses of being my wife or engaging in espionage would benefit from her particular delicacy," Mycroft said in a considerable exercise of his limited diplomacy in such matters.

"True, she's so fragile, the poor darling," Eugenia mused, and bringing her teacup — Russian porcelain, gilded, the saucer shaped like an opened peony bloom — to her mouth, she asked too innocently, "So? Who is it, then?"

Dear God, Mrs. Cresham was on the list, Mycroft realized with open horror, distracted as he asked, "Who what?"

"Who it you've already set your sights on," his mother repeated.

Gritting his teeth against the image of Mrs. Cresham's lazy eye, heavy breathing, and wandering
"It's very good your work at the War Office is behind the scenes, because you're a terrible liar," Eugenia said, setting her cup and saucer down with an elegant click against the rosewood and fussing with the blue silk drape of her gown over her knees. "Come now: I'm not so young anymore. Would you truly deny me the right to a daughter-in-law?"

Eugenia was still striking in her fifties, dark auburn hair laced through with silver now. But she held herself with the same grace that had carried her through her many duties, responsibilities, and private heartbreaks as the Duchess of Sussex, and that she'd tried to imbue in her sons. She seemed to Mycroft eternal the way the luminous portraits in the great hall were: ageless and forever poised to say something witty.

"I'm reasonably sure you'll outlive me," Mycroft teased.

"Which will be completely pointless if you refuse to provide me an heir to play with," his mother said firmly, and folding her hands in her lap. "You've never been a coy child —"

"Child," he muttered.

" — and I can only imagine what's caused you to turn so now," Eugenia continued. "You can either tell me now, or I can suss it out on my own."

Mycroft rolled his eyes and reached for his teacup.

"I see," his mother said, and then turned toward the door of the room, calling out gaily, "Harris! I've changed my mind — bring the powder blue jacket after all!"

***

Dororthea Verkerk's events were always lavish and always clever. Marriages and engagements were brokered and broken in the card rooms and on the balconies. Reliable as a clock, there was always a to-do in the orangerie: some years it was a duel, others it was a tryst — which often still led to a duel. No matter what the theme or who the guests, Dorothea's balls were never dull and so generously catered almost everybody was drunk long before dinner was served.

Which, Georgiana thought fuzzily, was a blessing, really.

The moment she'd arrived in the Verkerk's ballroom, the second and third sons of all the great families of the ton had swarmed her, rekindling acquaintances she'd barely cultivated before. They'd requested first and second dances and offered to fetch her lemonade and ratafia until her head had been hurting from the chorus of polished accents and she'd made her excuses for the lady's retiring room only to find the gossip and gabbing even more punishing there.

Georgiana blamed the Holmeses. Nothing was so fascinating as a woman with the friendship of two of the ton's most inscrutable men.

She knew she ought to be flattered, but after almost two years of being more or less absent from society, she felt alien in a way she hadn't since she was eighteen years old, crossing the threshold of Mycroft's house in London on Thomas's arm, trembling in a yellow silk dress.

She was too aware of everything: a lock of hair coming unpinned, the plunging neckline of her gown — a season out of fashion, at least — the too-delicate embroidered dancing slippers she was wearing, the deep flush she could feel spreading from her cheeks down the column of her throat, flaring across her collarbone.
And so she'd found herself here, hidden away near a towering ficus plant overwhelmed with bunting, standing shoulder to shoulder with Sherlock Holmes getting progressively drunker.

"They're still staring at you," Sherlock observed.

"Maybe they're staring at you," Georgiana muttered, clutching at her cup.

An invitation to a Verkerk ball could make or break a debutante's season, and a purposeful exclusion from the guest list could destroy a family's reputation, so it was always a crush, with people coming into town from as far as Yorkshire to make the Season's inaugural event. Naturally, Sherlock had been invited six years running and ignored it. He would have ignored it this year, too, except Dorothea had blackmailed Sherlock into attendance in exchange for extending an invitation to Georgiana. He'd complained loudly and pettily for hours.

Dorothea had selected a dutifully patriotic country idyll theme for her ball this year, with great boughs and masses of plantlife moved into the corners of the room and an artificial pond dotted with flowers and wreathed by greenery. The quartet of musicians were staged in an ivy-covered gazebo in a corner, and the long tables of food and drink were strewn with petals and fresh green leaves. Somewhere out there, Georgiana imagined a head gardener was in a state at the denuded dirt pile that used to be his life's work.

"Oh, surely there are some staring at me," Sherlock conceded, having matched her cup for cup of rum punch and possessed of zero ability to hold his drink, "but primarily they are staring at you — possibly because you arrived with me, but definitely, more than sixty percent of the people looking at us are looking at you, specifically."

Georgiana took away his punch. "You're not to have any more of this."

Except he was right, of course: they were staring.

She could just imagine the conversations. Mrs. Lydia Stockton bemoaning the state of Georgiana's hair, while the Honorable Miss Julianna Slater asking too-delicate questions about what might Georgiana be doing here again? After spending so long cloistered away in her house and mingling with commoners? And of course there was Lord Frederick Baker, whose considerable wealth seemed such poor compensation for his shockingly boorish manners, and who had spent the greater part of the evening leering at Georgiana from a distant corner. Glumly, Georgiana inspected her dance card, where he'd written his name in for the first dance of the evening and a subsequent waltz. Given the choice between taking Baker as a husband or letting her daughter grow up in splendid rural poverty, Georgiana was sorely tempted to begin searching for ivy-covered cottages.

"I thought you were doing this to find a new husband," Sherlock said, stealing a passing cup of punch from the hands of Lord Edward Spellman, who could be found prodigiously soused five minutes into any event, as he passed.

Georgiana stole the cup from Sherlock. "I am doing this to find a new husband."

"Explain how hiding in a corner with me is assisting in this endeavor," Sherlock asked reasonably, reaching for Lord Spellman's cup again as Georgiana held it away from him. A few yards a way, Lord Spellman was telling Dorothea Verkerk (loudly) about the great emotional conflagration of the musical at the Rawlins' home earlier that week, and how three pot plants, a music stand, and a crystal punchbowl had been casualties.

Spitefully, Georgiana sipped at Lord Edward's cup, at which point she realized he'd doctored it with his own private supply of what tasted like pirate's grog and promptly began gagging.
"Serves you right," Sherlock told her bloodlessly, and added, "Prepare yourself: another man approaches."

Georgiana was still red-faced as she looked up to see Clarence Tippery, the second son of the Viscount of Rotherhithe, on the approach. He was so beautiful young débutants were known for tripping over offending rocks and over other people and into the Serpentine when he was out and about on Rotten Row. Poor Miss Julia Havesham was still carrying the stigma from her accidental tumble. Beaming as he was now, Georgiana had to blink away the stars in her eyes as she looked into his: lapis lazuli colored and set in a handsome face with a strong chin and gorgeous smile.

"Mrs. Clarendon!" he declared, favoring her with an elegant leg, and said to Sherlock, "Mr. Holmes — good evening."

"Good evening, Mr. Tippery," Georgiana said, dipping into a curtsy as Sherlock said:

"Good eve — oh."

In front of them, Tippery froze. "What?" he demanded, instantly bringing his hands up to his left side.

Georgiana sighed. Tippery was also the stupidest man she'd ever met and the easiest target of Sherlock's more mean-spirited jokes.

"Mr. Tippery, my medical training compels me to ask: have you had any pain recently?" Sherlock asked earnestly. "In, say, your left side? Near your hip?"

Tippery's hands slid down a few inches until they were near his hip as he said, "Yes!"

"Ignore him, Mr. Tippery," Georgiana tried, because the last time she'd witnessed this sort of thing, it had concluded with Sherlock convincing Tippery the only way to cure himself of Leichersten — a German illness that rotted the left buttock, specifically — was to swim naked in the Thames during the coldest winter. "You know Mr. Holmes is infamous for his jokes."

Tippery gave her a deeply, crushingly condescending smile. "Oh, Mrs. Clarendon, I appreciate that, but Mr. Holmes is a man of great humor but he would never jest about a man's health, would he?"

Georgiana grit her teeth. "Mr. Tippery, truly — "

"There there, Mrs. Clarendon," Tippery said to her, fondly dismissive, and turned back to Sherlock, adding, "She's darling isn't she?"

Seeing red, Georgiana said to Sherlock, "Perhaps he's right, Mr. Holmes. What was it you were telling me about tunneling tapeworms earlier this evening?"

"They can attack at any time, drill holes into the bones," Sherlock said to Tippery seriously. "It usually starts in the joints, soft entry points — " Sherlock lowering his voice to a confidential whisper " — but they almost always move on to, well, areas not fit for discussion in the presence of a lady."

Tippery's face had gone from pale to a ghastly green. "A cure, Holmes! You must give me a cure — a tonic — some kind of treatment!"

Sherlock gave him a list. It involved the dung of a white dog and the red hair of a maid.
Chanting the list to himself, Tippery mumbled a panicked, "Excuse me — dung, white dog — I must take my leave — red hair, red hair," and steamed through the packed ballroom for an entryway, clutching his side the entire time.

They were silent a moment in the otherwise raucous noise of the ball before Sherlock said pointedly, "You're welcome."

Georgiana sighed and gave Sherlock the remainder of Lord Spellman's punch.

"Fine," she grumbled, "thank you."

***

There were many things Mycroft enjoyed, objectively, about the Verkerks.

Dorothea was a gracious hostess and witty drunk, complemented perfectly by her husband, Edward, who was dreadfully charming and wealthy enough that his ludicrous overspending was amusing instead of sad. Most importantly, when the Verkerk's threw a ball, absolutely everyone who was anyone in London poured into their massive home on Grosvenor Square, and it pleased the bureaucrat in Mycroft to see all the players so neatly organized on the chess board.

If his hosts were consummate patriots, then the spectrum grew muddier down from there, until it reached Clarissa Tippery, sister of the ton's handsomest and most useless member and a fairly useless asset for French intelligence for almost a half-decade now. No doubt her utility in that position would begin to strain if she managed to fall in love with someone English this Season, and anyway, Mycroft was actually terribly fond of her, and routinely made certain she had tiny tidbits to pass along to her handlers on the other side of the Channel, as Clarissa was a useful tool to have in play.

But somewhere, and far better disguised in the middle, among the swirling satins and silk dresses there was at least another agent — one far better placed and significantly more dangerous. Any day now Wellington would be rallying his forces to mount an assault from Brussels, and the more Mycroft could choke off of details on the English forces, the better the likelihood of a decisive victory. War was irritating, infuriatingly wasteful, and a distraction from more interesting, better avenues of inquiry.

"You look so intent that I presume there is no way you are looking at the young ladies at all," his mother sighed, arriving suddenly at his side in chocolate-colored silk and a cream wrap.

"Answering that question would only upset you mother," he told her graciously, and scanned the ballroom: Mrs. Power was, indeed, in attendance, and chaperoning Miss Haversham, it seemed. There was also Clarence Tippery, tearing toward the door with terrified purpose, which probably meant he'd imagined some exciting new affliction again. There was also —

"Oh!" Eugenia cried suddenly, sounding delighted.

"What," Mycroft said, feeling faint, "on Earth is Sherlock doing here?"

His mother clutched at his wrist, sounding positively girlish as she whispered, "And he's speaking with a woman."

And as Lord Spellman moved out of the way, Mycroft could see Sherlock was, and that she had beautifully sloping shoulders and soft arms, a dark pile of curls — a single peony tucked in among the strands, blooming snowy white at her nape.
It wasn't until Sherlock said something — eyes darting up into the crowd — and she turned to her side that Mycroft choked on his own air.

His mother sighed happily. "My, she's lovely isn't she, Mycroft?"

"Yes," he murmured, feeling his heart ache inside his chest, "she always has been."

Georgiana was pink with the heat of the room, her eyes inky dark in the low light, the orange glow of the candles ghosting over the wings of her collarbones, the long line of her neck, gilding her face. She was dressed in a sheer white gown with a plunging neckline and silver thread picking out a border of vines and flowers at the hem and neck and on the delicate puffs of her sleeves, a scarlet silk wrap draped at her elbows.

His mother leaned into his side, and too keen, asked, "Do you know her, then?"

Mycroft endured a flash of a horrifying future wherein his mother orchestrated a marriage between Sherlock and Georgiana, and having to see the pair of them bickering affectionately at Christmases and Easters and christenings and immediately said, "Yes, and immediately put out of mind of possibility of match there."

"Who is she then?" his mother asked, ignoring him. "I don't know that I've seen her in town before."

That was on purpose, of course.

In truth, Mycroft was an exceptionally gifted liar. Even Sherlock would agree. Except when it came to lying to his mother, and even now, the thought of introducing his mother to Georgiana and seeing the look of utter knowing on Eugenia's face — and the subsequent pity — would have been too much to bear. Steering his mother in the opposite direction or distracting her with whichever latest disaster Sherlock had orchestrated was the far, far easier path to take, and one Mycroft had selected for fifteen years.

His mother's hand on his wrist turned into nails digging into the skin as Georgiana laughed at something Sherlock said, looking terribly pleased with himself.

"Mycroft, you'll introduce me to her at once," she told him, the majestic patience in her voice at violent odds with the way her hand on his wrist had turned into her nails digging into his skin.

"Mother," he said, trying to pry her fingers off of him, "I'm bleeding."

"Is she married?" Eugenia asked callously, but at least she removed her hand.

"Widowed," Mycroft said, trying to rub inconspicuously at his arm. "But — "

She interrupted him with an arm looped through his own, and swatting him impatiently with her fan, said, "Hurry! Over there, immediately!"
Clearing out my Google docs. Apparently I once started writing a Ronon/Keller + McKay/Sheppard story before the show deep-sixed my hopes.

Four days after Rodney and Katie fail to set up a raincheck for lunch, he sees her having dinner with one of the biologists, smiling awkwardly and making one of her eyes twitch—which Rodney knows from personal experience is Katie's most carefully-guarded seductive technique. One attempt to throw it down with the biologist later, he lets himself into John's room and drinks Sheppard's stash of Sam Adams, wiping his nose on Sheppard's sheets and feeling sorry for himself and definitely not crying—partly because he's not as sorry as he should be, and his numbing inability to really give a damn is freaking him out. Also, it helps that he knows that John will forgive him, and sigh at him and help him out of his clothes and tuck him into bed. All of which John does when he finally shows up in his room at half past midnight, murmuring, "Geez--come on, Rodney."

"I thought she liked me," Rodney hears himself say, letting John push him down onto the mattress. John's bed is oddly comfortable for a nonprescription mattress, and the pillow smells like John: clean like soap and sunshine and a little bit like the sea. "I thought I liked her."

"You did," John promises, putting a hand on Rodney's forehead. "She did. Maybe it just wasn't meant to be."

Rodney closes his eyes. "I'm going to die alone."

"Doubtful," John answers, and Rodney can hear him shuffling around, untying his boots. "In this galaxy, it's likely I'll be there, too."

He's mostly asleep by the time John pushes him over a little on the mattress, telling him to make room, and the last thing Rodney remembers before he tips into a dream—about still oceans and the glimmer of fish beneath the water's surface—is the warmth of John's arm, curling over his chest.

* 

Rodney feels marginally better the next day, which lasts until Ronon shows up at breakfast looking shower-damp, and says, "I want to throw an Earth dance."

John's spoonful of granola stops halfway to his mouth and he sets it back down. "Okay," he says.

"For Keller," Ronon continues. He grins, and Rodney finally understands what the word 'wolfish' means. "She said she never got to go to any, when she was younger."

"I see," John says, and Rodney turns to gape at him, because, hello. There could not possibly be a worse idea in the world, on so many levels, and Rodney's about to say that when John adds, "Well, if you really want to throw an Earth dance, you'll need to do a little research."

Five minutes later, Ronon disappears on a scavenger hunt for Pretty in Pink, and Rodney points his fork at Sheppard as he says, "You are a terrible, horrible human being."
"I couldn't resist," John admits, and holds his serious expression for all of five seconds before he bursts out into his horrible, honking laugh. "Oh, man, he must really like her."

"Yeah," Rodney agrees, and tries not to feel bitter or anything. "He must."

*  

Rodney is perfectly capable of forming emotional attachments. He had loved his piano and his cat, still loves--despite himself, even!--Jeannie and to some extent Madison. He loves Ronon and Teyla and he loved Carson, fiercely, more fiercely than he'd known before Carson had died. He loves John. He loves Atlantis. Maybe that makes it worse--to know he's not fundamentally broken, it was just whatever he had with Katie.

"Feeling any better today?" John asks, sliding a cookie over to Rodney, his fingers light on the edge of a standard issue military paper napkin. Rodney has more love for one of John's stupid, sun-brown fingers than he has for Katie's entire life, he thinks miserably, and takes the cookie, eats it in two enormous bites, sighing heavily. "It's okay, buddy," John tells him, patting him on the shoulder.
"It's just that I don't want him to leave me," Eames babbles. "What if he gets bored with me, sexually? I've never done this before."

"Guys, or relationships?" Ariadne asks.

They're in the second level of a test run for a quick and dirty militarization job -- but Arthur is running the show, so of course their mark is already vicious as a pack of litigators and thus the reason why Eames was gunned down like a mob snitch and is now lying -- totally without dignity -- bleeding out in shock on the pavement next to Ariadne. She is, of course, staring down at him with the heartless disinterest of the type of girl who fell in love with guys working in record shops, and doesn't manage to muster up any of the high-pitched concern she'd shown when Arthur was hurt, that time Arthur got punched in the stomach, that dreadful occasion when the coffee shop had run out of soy milk and the black coffee had hurt Arthur's delicate lactose intolerant stomach.

"Relationships," Eames says through gritted teeth, and asks, "If it was Arthur was lying here, would you actually give a damn?"

"Arthur already likes you," she tells him patiently, ignoring his other question. "And I'm pretty sure you fuck full nasty, so don't worry."

"Yes, but what if he gets sick of me? What if he likes virgins? You're probably irresistible to him," Eames asks, so grateful he's starting to pass out from blood loss.

"I'm gay and also, I'm not a virgin," Ariadne retorts.

"Oh God," Eames moans, blessedly, finally dying out of this level, "he probably loves lesbians."

Apparently their mark -- Yamamoto Keiko, a Saito special request -- is sufficiently bloodthirsty to make even Arthur happy about a job well done, and by the time he and Keiko drift out of the dream Arthur is all smiles as he compliments her on the way her subconscious had ripped great chasms in the Earth and spilled lava like blood over green fields.
"So what's it like, working with the space cadet?"

Rodney froze, a hand stilling on the wall.

"Cam," Sheppard said, sounding annoyed, and Rodney swallowed a groan -- Mitchell, he thought, anybody but Mitchell.

"Come on, Shep, the guy is a legend," Mitchell continued, and Rodney heard a rustling a cloth, footsteps, and he peered around the corner in time to see Mitchell trap John against a wall, palm next to Sheppard's face, too close. And suddenly Rodney remembered that he wasn't the only one subject to rumors -- that even before John had knocked on the door to the basement office, Rodney had heard of him, in wry, crooked grins, with whispers.

"Hey, come on, John," Mitchell crooned, voice pitched soft and private, "you know I'd have you back in violent crimes in a heartbeat if I could swing it."

Sheppard got that look on his face -- like if Cam didn't get away from him he was about to punch somebody else in the face, and Rodney thought the last thing the FBI needed was to have Sheppard leading tours groups around the building, so he cleared his throat and stepped back into the room.

"Mitchell," he said, "when did you get assigned this case?"

Cam pushed himself away from the wall, unconcerned to be caught, and still languorous, untouchable -- still the bureau's golden boy. "Hey, Spacey -- it's been a while."

Rodney felt his mouth tighten, turn down at the corners, but before he could say anything, he felt John's hand on his elbow, catching his attention. "Hey, McKay," he said, glaring at Cam. "Mitchell was just leaving -- and I got something in the photos I think you should see."

"Oh, good to know," Rodney chirped, and pulled on a pair of gloves. "By the way, we've got a second crime scene in the janitor's closet."
It turns out the assistant did it, and when John goes to bring her in, she comes quietly, dressed too-lightly for the October cold in a rose-printed robe. Before she ever explains what their victim had been doing to her, before she pulls up the sleeves of her robe and shows John the fingerprints and bruises, John is already draping his trenchcoat over her shoulders, ushering her gently to the car. His hands are gentle with the cuffs, and he touches her head as he helps her into the backseat.

"You're such a soft touch, Sheppard," Rodney sighs later, after.

"Like I didn't see you getting her coffee from your stash earlier," John replies, flip, and shuts down his computer. "I'm heading out -- I'll see you tomorrow."

Rodney waits outside John's apartment for four hours that night, sitting in the dark listening to traffic and wind and distant voices, until he sees the light in John's bedroom window go on -- and then he finally drives away, back to work, sequestering himself until morning.

*

John came by his bureau posting honestly -- ex-Air Force to L.A. office to D.C. in five whirlwind years. He's a little disaffected and too shy, and Rodney thinks John was the kind of guy who was unremarkable until attractiveness hit him like a baseball bat in grad school -- but by then it was too late for Sheppard to be comfortable in that skin, so long overlooked. Rodney knows the rumors about why John got dispatched to the basement: sexual harassment magnet, people say, bureau retributory behavior for reporting -- people think John slept with witnesses, people of interest to cases, that he's kind of a loose cannon. Why else would he have broken ranks and burst into a warehouse as it was about to blow? Three agents died on his account -- by Rodney's account, in his own perusal of the files, those three agents would have died anyway, and the only crime Sheppard committed was reckless disregard for his own life. And it's selfish, but in the end, Rodney doesn't care why or who or how John came to knock on the door of his office in the basement, he's just glad John did, and that when he gets to work in the morning or sleeps in the office overnight, John is the first person he sees.

*

At Quantico, when Rodney was still hailed as a wunderkind and a headcase, he'd learned about resource distribution, about knowing how to make the tough calls. He knows the FBI doesn't negotiate with terrorists and won't negotiate for their own people in a hostage situation, and that sometimes interdepartmental cooperation is vital to the success of a mission, to keeping everybody safe.
But Rodney's fallen from grace a dozen times over at this point, and this is what he knows now: Rodney knows he'd make any number of stupid choices to talk to Jeannie again, to ask her how she is and what she is doing and if she's happy -- wherever she let the government take her. Rodney knows that he would never share John, even if John likes to pay lip service and pretend he doesn't mind walking back into the snake pit of the violent crimes unit, doesn't mind the way Mitchell touches him -- proprietary, invasive. Rodney doesn't care about rules or regs or what's best for the agency -- he'd barter away weapons of mass destruction and trade off civilians to keep Sheppard safe, to keep Sheppard, period.

So when Daniel Jackson -- dissociated psychopath, Rodney had told John, told him dozens of times and told him to ignore the raving and leave the guy to his institutionalized rotting -- had kidnapped him, shoved John into the trunk of a car, Rodney -- understandably -- goes a little crazy.

He doesn't come back from it for weeks, either, not after O'Neil tells him to calm the fuck down, not after Caldwell puts him on mandatory leave. Still, it doesn't really hit him that John is gone and that John's apartment is empty and that John could be hurt or dead or worse until after Teyla shows up at his apartment, weeping even though Rodney would have sworn Teyla was incapable of producing tears.

"Oh fuck," Rodney says, staring down at her. "Are you crying?"

She slaps the hell out of him and Rodney doesn't even try to pretend it's because he's too stunned by her hiccuping sobs to block the cheap shot.

"You son of a bitch," Teyla snarls at him, and shoves him, hard, as hard as she can, and Rodney stumbles back into his apartment. He knows it smells like liquor and desperation and like a frat house, abandoned, but he doesn't care: he has mustard and John's favorite deli turkey in the fridge and nobody to feed it to -- he lost John, and there's not much else he can bring himself to give a fuck about. "You <i>son of a bitch," she shouts, slapping her fists against his chest. "I hate you -- I fucking hate you."

"Okay, so, something we agree on," Rodney tells her, and that's when it kind of hits him -- awareness like a semi or a tsunami washing away the beach: John is alone, and Rodney is the only person who can find him.

* 

A week later, the trail that Zelenka and Lee and Parrish scent out goes dead in an abandoned train car -- and Rodney finds a row of abandoned specamin tubes in deep freeze: JWS.001.321,
JWS.001.322, JWS.001.336. He feels sick, he feels like crying, and he hides the sample containers with Zelenka, who just nods and puts them away -- doesn't say anything, not one comment, and doesn't meet Rodney's eyes. Rodney doesn't waste time wondering why anybody would take John -- it makes perfect sense that somebody else would want him, that there was something special to him all along. When he gets back to DC, he calls Teyla to say he's sorry, that he failed, and when she answers the phone, she says, "Rodney -- Rodney, he's back."

AND LATER, SGA X-FILES AU DOES MILAGRO:

Rodney lives in a nondescript apartment building in one of the in-between neighborhoods of Washington, and John knows the neighborhood well enough to know the best places to park and not the best places to eat. It's early spring, the light still thin and milky-yellow and the bite in the air is nearly sweet, John thinks, and ducks into the dusty brown hallway of 45 Hegal Place.

John's wearing jeans and a jacket but by the time his fingers trace over the button "4" in the elevator, leaves it faint orange, he's feeling more naked than anything else. There's a guy -- thin, weedy, dark hair and ironically unshaven -- staring unabashedly, his lips open and wet. It's a little galling, so far into the territory of rude John doesn't even have it in him to be flattered, and he rubs a hand over the back of his neck and tries not to look down at the floor.

*  

He'd been to the building before, in fits and spurts with uneven frequencies, and the Watcher had heard the man's voice before, in hallways, lingering in the doorway of the apartment next door. His name keeps getting lost in the space of the hallway, but the Watcher knows his green eyes, the moue of his mouth, the way he moves his hips as he walks, loose, and the long, delicious stretch of his back -- his spine a perfect mathematical shape beneath button-ups and t-shirts, the black sweater that hugs his arms. Since it's been unintentional, to call it a tease would be unfair -- but he's a startlingly beautiful man, and in absolute values, everything he does is a tease.

*  

Rodney comes to the door stuffing a waffle into his mouth, and waves John in, fingers tacky with syrup. He says something, which John doesn't deign to translate, and disappears into the kitchen again, where plates rattle and the sound of the fridge door opening and closing fill up the early-morning quiet.
"New neighbor?" John asks. "I met him in the elevator coming up."

"Yeah," Rodney answers, voice floating through the doorway. "He says he's a writer."

John can't help but smile at that. "Does he."

"Yes," Rodney says, disgusted, scrubbing at his mouth with a napkin when he reappears. He waves John to the couch, saying, "He said it wasn't anything I would know -- which obviously means he's a hack."

"Obviously," John allows, since disagreeing with Rodney on things that involve being nice to perfect strangers has always been somewhat quixotic. Rodney's still half-asleep, dressed in sweatpants and an MIT t-shirt, his hair sticking up every which way like a baby bird. He's flushed and endearing here, in the light of his living room, and John entertains the tenderness for a moment before the sharp edge of a sheaf of computer paper draws his eye again, stark white against the coffee table.

"Nothing new on the case?" he makes himself ask. Rodney's not interested in the things that John wants.

"New beyond my perfectly servicable theory?" Rodney is flipping through his notes again, his agitated handwriting crunched together on legal pad paper.

"Psychic surgery is not a servicable theory," John says, rote, and picks up the file again, pages through photographs.

They're up to six victims now, pairs between the ages of 19 and 26, all in secluded areas, none of them with a mark -- "At least beyond hickies," Rodney had muttered at the crime scenes -- and all of them covered in their own blood. Their hearts were missing, the MEs said, and when John sullenly took a second-pass at the cadavers, he'd agreed: no trauma, no tool marks, not a single knick on a bone -- just a void.
Chapter Summary

Apparently I once started writing a story where, as far as I can tell, Hobbits go into late summer heat, and also Bilbo is a lady. Yes, I'm aware that makes the title DISGUSTING. Yahtzee.

At some point, Balin is going to stop favoring Thorin with an indulgent smile every time Bilbo's requests for an escort home are denied.

The first months had felt almost as bleak as the journey and battle with Smaug and the five armies, in the fast-rushing winter and husk of Erebor, decaying from neglect and the worm's mistreatment. All the gold that had seemed so important he'd threatened to throw their burglar from the wall were cold comfort — literally — in the fearsome blizzards, and within weeks huge piles of gold coins had been melted down to make more practical things until wood and other materials could be easily had. The stupidity of a gold bed will never quite leave Thorin.

And he'd spent too long on it, healing slowly and waiting for his guts to finish knitting, resenting the smell of coal smoke on Bilbo's hair and clothes as she tended to him and the rest of their company, the dwarves that had made the journey from the Blue Mountains before the storms. She'd brought him news of Fili and Kili's progress, of the joy his dwarves seemed to be taking even in exhausting labor.

She'd never have left them, with the apologies between them still so tender and pink, like new skin. And besides, what would the mountain have done without one steady, female head to order all the male ones around? An accusing raven had alighted at the mountain just weeks after the retaking of Erebor with a note from Dis, saying she was choosing wisdom over her heart and staying in Ered Luin until spring, whereupon she would rally the population and arrive in full force with people and supplies.

But even when the snow had stopped, it was obvious Bilbo could not leave, since the dwarves that had come with Thorin on his mad quest knew next to nothing of farming. Erebor and Ered Luin relied on trade for their meals, and Bilbo had taken one look at the dwarves' plans for the planting season and made a noise of pure despair.

"How have you not starved?" she'd asked.
Dwalin, sullen, had argued, "We can hunt, lass."

"Oh, yes, on your giant rock face," Bilbo had retorted, with absolutely no respect for the dignity and magnificence of the Lonely Mountain. Had Thorin the ability to sit upright for longer than 15 minutes at a time, he would have shouted at her mightily. As it was, he groaned:

"Burglar, stop berating us and render aid."

And so she stayed then, through the slow drip-drip-drip of winter melting away into spring, till the mountain's rivers flowed merrily downhill, toward the long-neglected farm terraces that had once stocked the larders and kitchens of the royal house for marvelous feasts. The soil had rested all these hundreds of long years, fallow and still enjoying the irrigation systems from generations past, and Bilbo said that in spite of the holy mess of overgrowth and brambles, the earth was good — dark and abundant — and she sent Nori on a quest for seed cuttings and seedling and other plant-related things.

Dis arrived, eventually, with nearly 300 dwarves, rations and mead for many hundred more, and a bellyful of rage for Thorin.

Bilbo — who had sat through Oin stitching Thorin's stomach closed with ugly black thread, through the fevers and vomiting and had played nursemaid despite Thorin's pleas for her to leave him with some measure of dignity — had taken one look at the thunder of Dis's face, and excused herself to the garden.

Never let it be said that femaleness was sufficient guard against all the stupidity of the Durin line, because despite Dis's terrified love for him, it did not stop her from engaging Thorin in a bellowing match so violent he ended up popping two stitches.

In punishment, Oin had bade Dis to stay for the repair work and skimped on the whiskey for Thorin. All in all, a terrible day to welcome in the first green shoots of springtime, creeping up from the dark loam into Bilbo's overjoyed hands.

"There will be carrots and potatoes and turnips," she'd informed him, pleased with herself and flushed from sun. She'd conscripted three dozen dwarves to help with the planting, but was all too happy to spend all day out of doors, tending to green shoots and explaining why she was growing kale of all infernal things. "We'll have to trade for flour and sugar, and there'll be no fruit for ages, but between this and the dry goods your sister brought, your next winter should be a comfortable one."
She'd *seemed* happy enough, conspiring with Dis over female things ("Terrifying," Dwalin had reported, loyally bringing Thorin another flagon of mead and news on the refitting of the mines), hanging bows of sage and rosemary in his chambers, and weaving rush mats for the floors to guard against the cold of the stone.

So it was a hugely irritating surprise when summer began encroaching on the mountain, the heat swelling the rivers and pooling into quarry lakes heaving with half-naked dwarflings, that Bilbo began agitating to leave.

"Do you not want to sample the spoils of your toil?" Thorin had asked, leaning heavily upon a wooden staff, inlaid with mother of pearl and silver in the twisting, evil vines of Mirkwood. There was a coral dragon, curled in submission, where Thorin's hand gripped the thing, its eyes black onyx, forever crushed in his grip. It was Bifur's make, nowhere near as fine as some objects in the vaults — thankfully unmolested by the worm — but beyond price, a relic and a reminder of how he'd arrived here.

Bilbo had only flushed, nervous, and stammered, "I — I have things to tend to at Bag End, in Hobbiton, I'll have you know!" Recovering somewhat, she added, saucy and insubordinate as all members of his Company seemed intent to be forevermore: "And anyway, I have already seen a dwarf king recumbent upon a golden bed — what more could a simple Hobbit need to see?"

"Thorin would be unbearable without you," Dis had told her, the same time Thorin had said, "I'm having that blasted thing melted down tomorrow."

By pretending to have forgotten her requests and dispatching his sister-sons to make undignified, pleading demands of her, Thorin managed to delay Bilbo's requests another month, until the heat of summer felt imminent, the sky crisp blue overhead and clouds florid, with more dwarves arriving by the day to Erebor's gates.

By rights, Dis ought to have been the chatelaine of Erebor, and she did her duty to the mountain: helping manage the repairs and keeping a firm grip on domestic affairs. But it was Bilbo who had taken on the labor of feeding their residents, of spending hours with the Weavers Guild and the Tinkerers Guild and the Jewelers Guild, for while she knew little of dwarvish politics and royal protocol, she was a practical creature and knew everything there was to know about running a household — granted, a very large one — as every hobbitess is taught from a young age.

In June, when it is hot enough that Bilbo only dares walk barefoot inside the mountain, along cool stone and polished tile, she will have no more of Thorin's avoidance.
"Even with an escort and opened roads, even with the assistance of the eagles for part of the journey, it will take me nearly five weeks to reach The Shire," she scolds him, completely without regard for Thorin's kingly dignity.

Truthfully, since returning to the mountain, there's been no such thing as kingly dignity in his own chambers, a reality Thorin is well resigned to.

"Are you so desperate to leave us, then?" he asks, gruffer than he means to, and he can't look at her in the silence afterward, training his eyes to the mithril buckle he's been working on for days, since he'd found her wincing, applying an ointment to her toes.

Bilbo is soft as she replies, "I cannot stay forever, Thorin."

Ridiculous. As ridiculous as all the other protestations Thorin has ignored through the years: you cannot hope to keep your people together; you cannot possibly work for men; you cannot take back the Lonely Mountain. Thorin cannot bring back his brother or his father and he could not save his grandfather from gold madness, but he can lock away the Arkenstone and he can keep a bloody burglar.

"This is your home, now," he says. "You've more than earned a place here."

He hazards a look up this time, to see Bilbo's face rosy and shy, eyes bright with something he hasn't seen before. In the long months of their journey and her long months here, her short curls have grown out into luxurious waves, trailing burnished gold along the pink curve of her neck, down the line of her back, a tendril nestled between her breasts. Some wretched dwarf — Thorin assumes this is Kili's doing — has plaied a jadite bead into her hair, for purity, banked in by narrower beads of silver and lapis lazuli, the colors of the House of Durin. Thorin wonders if Bilbo knows at all that his fool nephews have her walking around tartered up as his intended; Thorin wonders why he noticed this days ago and has said nothing about it.

She bites the lush curve of her lower lip, and Thorin makes a note to forbid her from doing that in front of anyone else ever again.

"I — if I stay, there are...you'll need to take responsibility, Thorin," she says finally, choosing her words carefully, but she doesn't sound angry with him or resigned or even angry. She sounds hopeful. It's a delicate thing, blooming across her face like one of her blasted peonies: a fragile pink.
Thorin has long taken responsibility for his family and carries the weight of the mountain on his shoulders. He is strong and made to endure as all dwarves are, and he is not frightened of her, only frightened for her, for himself if she were to leave him. He can lead his men into battle and his people home, but he would not like to call any mountain such if she were not there, too. He knows these things, but does not know how to say them; his poetry and confessions are in his craft.

So he stops fretting over the minute imperfections, and lays the sandals in her lap instead: they're of the softest leader, fawn colored, straps festooned with a pattern of emeralds and quartz crystal, mithril buckles to press against the bone of her ankle, worked until the curves are perfect, and perfectly soft.

Her eyes grow round like the moon. "Thorin," she breathes out, shaking.

How she can be surprised by this, he has no idea. He's been sitting at her feet for an hour now — since she'd burst into his private quarters all ruffled complaints and settled in the armchair by his hearth as if she had a right to it — in his shirtsleeves, an array of jeweler's tools spread out around him. In the whole of the Lonely Mountain only Fili, Kili and Dis otherwise would be allowed this. To the other dwarves, he is King Under the Mountain. To Bilbo, he hopes he is only ever Thorin.

"Stay," he implores her, as much as he knows how to. "Forever, even."

She does that thing women do: she laughs — sparkling — and she cries a little, too, rubbing at her eyes at her narrow fingers. "You're so ridiculous — you don't even know what you're agreeing to."

"So you'll tell me," he says, and closes a rough hand around her naked ankle. "And I will agree to it, still."

Bilbo's eyes are shining, her face lovely and near enough to kiss, and Thorin feels the way he had the first time he saw the Arkenstone: wordless, enraptured.

And then Dwalin starts banging on his chamber door, shouting:

"Oy — Dain's here."
Dain's arrival is just the first indignity Thorin is forced to endure.

His presence heralds the beginning of the second phase of lengthy, long-planned trade talks, which have ever always been the only way to semaphore peace talks between dwarves and elves. There are two days of Thorin being forced to escort Dain hither and yon to make admiring noises about the mines — concealing the recently discovered veins of mithril and gold, naturally — before Thranduil and his phalanx of weed eaters arrives, and Thorin's mood during the endless hours of this evolves from "understandably cross" to "near catatonic with murderousness."

Somehow even worse than the unending talks with Thranduil about dividing responsibility for security and maintenance of watchtowers along shared borders and major trade routes is knowing that while Thorin is trapped with elves, Bilbo is playing hostess.

There is an animal part of Thorin that finds this pleasing, that she is taking ownership of this mountain — his mountain — their mountain in such a visible, meaningful way. She's already such a part of the fabric of the reclaimed Erebor, it is only fitting and right that she ought to be the one to play escort and guide to visiting dignitaries. Thorin hopes that with further appropriately gruff admissions of emotion and excessive application of emeralds, he'll be able to scam her into wearing a crown. Everything is as it should be.

Except.

Except for how even as a dwarfling Thorin was painfully aware that it was recognized among kingdoms that Dain was the handsome, gregarious one, and Thorin had perfected his off-putting scowl at the tender age of fifteen. He may be a king under a mountain once more — desiccated dragon shit aside — but Dain has his own mountain, and also persists on greeting Bilbo with a deep bow and a lavish kiss to her pink hand each morning when she collects him.

"Good morning, Mistress Baggins," Dain always says, while Kili makes a gagging noise behind him and Dori's mouth folds down like wrinkled shoe leather.

Bilbo, gifted at ignoring dwarves by now, always goes bright pink like her stupid beloved flowers, and giggles, "Your highness!"

Thorin's not so foolish that he'd doubt Bilbo's favor — even as she's blushing, she's wearing the
sandals he made for her, after all — but he spends a lot of time making what Fili calls "orc noises" in the moments following these encounters.

"Time was," Dwalin says nostalgically, "we cloistered our women."

"Time was dwarvish women rose up and carried out a coup against their misguided husbands and brothers, and painted scarlet a sacred cavern in the heart of Belegost with their greedy blood," Dis replies sweetly.

Dwalin turns an alarmed look at Thorin, as if Dis is his fault or something.

"I don't want her cloistered," Thorin growls, because it's utterly pointless to pretend they're not spending the minutes immediately after a tense series of negotiations with the elvish representatives gossiping like ninnies, "I want everyone else cloistered."

His sister pats his face affectionately. "And that is why I have not yet drawn up a rebellion and painted a sacred cave in Erebor with the greedy blood of husbands and brothers, dearest."

The expression on Dwalin's face is beyond description: a tortured mix of fear and arousal.

Perhaps the only reason Thorin doesn't goad his sister into starting a massacre, just so he can have an excuse to do some well-deserved beheading, is that each night, it is not a member of the kitchen staff that arrives with his evening meal, but Bilbo.

He'd tried explaining to her that despite rough living on their trek and in their past years, as more residents of Erebor return, among them will be the still-loyal household staff of the royal family. Fetching and carrying is beneath her, Thorin has said, and Bilbo had rolled her marvelous eyes at him as if the entire business of kingship was baffling and unnecessary, and launched into a long monologue on her day.

Bilbo is a better and more reliable gauge of the progress of Erebor's rebuilding than almost anybody else in the mountain. Balin may generate reports and have council with the returning guild masters, and Nori may dart among the fingersmiths, but it's Bilbo who goes to the small markets that have sprung up each day, gets drawn into the petty disagreements and small celebrations of Thorin's people.
There are reunited families to shed happy tears over, and the promise of a new baby to cuddle in a few months — "You'll need to find a midwife somewhere, Thorin," she lectures him, reaching for another piece of seed cake, "Oin is very good I'm sure but every woman wants at least one other female to be looking up her skirts during these things." — and problems with insufficient wells in one of the recently reopened districts, a wood fortification that's showing signs of rot.

"I'll send a crew of engineers to take a look tomorrow, first thing," Thorin decides, and snatches the last seed cake off the plate before Bilbo can grab it. Hobbits are generous with portions but vicious with desserts. He frowns, reflexive, and asks, "And Dain?"

Bilbo's smile is too soft and fond by half, as if she knows things about this question.

"Dain is as chatty as ever, and very curious about the fortification work being undertaken," she answers him, laughing. "I do genuinely believe he wants to help."

"It's delayed guilt," Thorin complains. "For refusing to help retake the mountain."

"Well Dain is apparently very afraid of dragons, so I'm not sure how helpful he would have been anyway," Bilbo teases, and reaches over to tug on one of Thorin's braids: he'd plaited it into his beard in wonder that morning, realizing he no longer needed to mourn the way he had, that he could allow it to grow out once more. "And you need to stop being such a bear around him."

Thorin collects her hand into his own, which is making this discussion about Dain marginally more bearable. "He smiles a great deal," he mutters. "Mostly at you."

"And I smile a great deal, mostly at you," Bilbo retorts, still laughing at him, but she condescends to lean in close enough so that their foreheads are pressed together and he can feel the soft warmth of her skin, the soft cornsilk of her curls. Much more shyly, she continues, "After all — you — you did promise to take responsibility for me this late summer."

"I intend to take responsibility for you for always," Thorin rumbles, reflexive, because he does. She's the most irritating creature alive; if he doesn't afflict himself with her, then surely some other fool dwarf with a greed for treasure will.

Bilbo sighs, and it's a sound of shy happiness. "Thank you."
And because it is as true today as it was 150 years ago that Dain is the handsome, gregarious one, Thorin says, "Stop smiling at Dain," in reply.

But it must be perfect for mad hobbits, anyway, because it makes Bilbo laugh and press adoring kisses to his cheeks, ghost one shy one over his mouth, and Thorin's trying to recall if his lessons in diplomacy had ever enlightened him on the habits of hobbits on the subject of premarital sex when Kili tumbles into his chambers — shouting nonsense with his tunic on fire.
Langya Mountain (Nirvana in Fire)

Langya Mountain was a single, rounded peak, and it floated in the Zhili Gulf, a frothy layer of clouds fringing its sloping sides. There was a thick forest that circled the mountain and its smaller hills, and it thinned to a rock beach and the scalloped shell of Ao, the tortoise, paddling smoothly through the Sea of Bo.

It was bitterly cold, still, the world just waking from the lassitude at the end of fifteen days of new year celebrations, but the boats would be arriving soon to the meeting place and there was a breath of impatient, happy anticipation in every blade of grass and each wave that broke on the patterned, ageless surface of Ao's shell.

Langya, old as the earth and formed from a piece of broken sky by Nuwa herself, was fortified by a massive wall: brick enclosing earthworks three feet thick. If some unsuspecting visitor who did not belong should come upon it, he could dig through the center of the earth and not find the bottom edge of it, nor could he ever climb over, the wall extending endlessly into the sky. The gate — for there was only one — was a massive thing of dark and brooding black, branded through with magic older than the world, inscribed by each of the guardian spirits that made Langya home. And carved into the stone pillars that flanked the doors were the eternally watchful gods of the gate: Chin Shu-pao with his sharp and ever-ready swords and Yuchi Gong with his spear, streamers billowing in the sea wind. They were splendid in their armor gleaming of dragon scales, and where Chin Shu-pao was fair, Yuchi Gong was dark, and they each kept lustrous dark beards that the littlest students weaved through with spring flowers.

Beyond them, over the wise and patient head of Ao, they could see the mortal world and all its troubles, their new and older students beginning to make their way toward the sea, where a fleet of narrow shanban boats would travel the waves like a school of fish. On Langya, the twin gods of the gates were busy lifting their spells — so that in the distance, on the shore, here and there fishermen and merchants at the port began to see the shape and size of an unfamiliar peak in the distance — and casting an enchantment on the floating lanterns that would guide the way, when evening chased away the sun.

Behind the gate they held, there was a great to-do, too.

Rolly polly lion cubs were inconsolable with longing for their school term playmates. The shizhi pairs were gathered in a sorrowful cluster by the massive drum house gate to the mountain, their embroidered balls clasped loosely between their massive paws, making whimpering noises that had the white tigers — so much more occupied with their dignity — snapping their jaws and retreating to their forests. But they, too, felt the same hum of impatience, and went about their forest pavilion and the mountain, for they were the king of all the animals, and must ascertain order and peace before their new arrivals. Further up the mountain, the phoenixes were descending from their palace in the clouds, lighting braziers and torches throughout Langya that would flicker and never
fail, laying a wake of blessings to mark this, the most auspicious of days. The dragon had uncoiled from its sleep at the peak of the mountain in its own celadon pavilion and summoned the sweet spring winds to feather away the dust of disuse from the study rooms and dormitories, until each chamber and hall was fragrant and clean.

The instructors, far less divine and more bound to earthly inconveniences, swore fluidly and pressed calligraphy blocks and heavy tomes on top of their papers and scrolls. There was no time to yell at the zodiac wheels of creatures who trampled through their classrooms to answer the white tiger's call, and Shen Zui — who taught numerology — blandly put out phoenix fires hither and thither while Cai Quan remained oblivious to the chaos, arguing with a sacred qiling about the nature of justice.

"You should let him burn," suggested Master Lin, who lived in a rambling pavilion of his own on the far side of the mountain, and was the master of all the students and friend to each of Langya's guardian spirits.


Master Lin waved a hand, cheerful. "Fine, fine," he allowed, and left the great hall for the apothecary, which shared a garden and courtyard with the kitchens.

There he found his son, Lin Chen, filthy and playing dogsbody to Madam Jing of the kitchens. Madam Jing had a calm and unrivaled beauty, a pervasive sense of unshakeable peace that made her frequently the singular oasis of calm on the entire mountain. More importantly, she was the divine creator and teacher of the science and magic of medicines, and Lin Chen had been in her thrall since his birth, helping her tend to the herb and vegetable patches and drinking up all of Madam Jing's wisdom. Today, he was engaged in a losing battle of wills with a knot of stinging nettles.

"Master Lin," said Madam Jing, gliding down from the lilyflower tree, a basket of blossoms in the crook of her arm. A pale jade comb in her hair was her only ornamentation, and she was so lovely to see Master Lin could not help but to sigh.

"How are the preparations?" he asked, watching Lin Chen get into a spat with a hatchling pig dragon, its turquoise snout trembling in irritation as Lin Chen wrested a turnip out of its jaws.

"Very well, the kitchens are in fine form, and the swallows have returned from the island laden down with tea," Madam Jing assured him, and wordless, tucked a lilyflower behind Master Lin's ear. "Go on — there is much to prepare, and I already have Lin Chen here to help me."
In the garden, Lin Chen continued to ‘help’ by now spitefully eating the turnip in front of the poor pig dragon, chewing savagely and with his mouth open while the little creature bayed in rage.

"He's young, still. They grow out of it," Madam Jing told Master Lin, with a note of very well-hidden pity. Master Lin still heard it.

"Your son is dutifully helping the dragons clean all of our wells," Master Lin said.

Madam Jing pressed three delicate fingertips to her mouth, concealing a smile.

"Manual labor can be very helpful when young people are in a mood," Madam Jing said, diplomatic, and Master Lin could hear the subtext there, too: there was only so long even a doting mother could endure pathetic adolescent pining.

"I trust General Lin's son will be on the first boat here," he laughed.

"And I trust Jingyan will be found sulking in the forest if he isn't," Madam Jing laughed.

Master Lin knew a great many things from a great many places and times, and he knew, too, that Madam Jing knew her son best. He bid her goodbye, rapped Lin Chen on the head with his folded fan and told his son to stop teasing the pig dragon.

"He may look small now, but he'll grow, and when he tries to eat you, I won't stop him," he scolded, and Lin Chen looked positively angelic in response.

"Fei Liu would never try to eat me, he's my precious younger brother," Lin Chen swore.

Fei Liu chose that moment to sink his small but exceedingly sharp teeth into Lin Chen's ankle, hard enough to draw blood, and then to tear off squealing laughter and puffs of delighted, smokey fire while Lin Chen collapsed into the turned-over garden earth screaming bloody murder.

"See," Master Lin said calmly.
"Oh, Lin Chen," Madam Jing sighed.

"Have Lin Shu avenge my death," Lin Chen wailed.

***

Lin Shu, unfortunately, was not available for vengeance.

He was still trapped in his family's mansion, enduring the comprehensive lecturing of his father, General Lin, and his mother, Princess Liyang. Surely there would be a royal missive from his uncle the emperor, soon, which a palace eunuch would read aloud and turn out also to be lectures. After having arrived home in semi-disgrace at the end of last term, his mother had probably prevailed upon his father, and now they were united in prevailing upon Lin Shu the weight and importance of his education. He was the young marshal of the Chiyan Army, after all, a proud and tremendous force 70,000 strong, the son of a grand princess, and the heir of a great general. It was fitting and right he was being educated in magic, to bring to bear those skills to their lineage. Could he not spend his time at school more productively? For example, learning magic.

Privately, Lin Shu felt he was learning magic. His marks were excellent, and besides, if he had not taken to heart any of Master Shen's lessons on numerology, many of his pranks would be significantly more difficult to execute. Out loud, Lin Shu knew better than to express this sentiment. Princes Liyang was holding her largest jade scepter, spelled for strength and virtue, and the ruyi-shaped bruise on his forehead from last week was still fading.

His only comfort was note he'd hidden away in his pocket, still lined with Jingyan's neat folds and brush strokes, that had flown from the island to Lin Shu's chambers and landed neatly on his nose, a message with all sorts of secrets and hopes, and brusque declarations that Jingyan missed him — a little. From Jingyan, it was practically weeping and rending of a hairshirt.

"It's no longer just our family name you're damaging by running wild," his mother went on, waving the ruyi threateningly. She specialized in musical spellwork, so her fearsomeness with doling out physical punishments was just inborn talent, Lin Shu thought glumly. "You know that this year Nihuang's little brother will be going to Langya Academy as well."

Muqing was hapless and very adorably stupid, so Lin Shu doubted he'd be any good for any good pranks anyway. He wisely did not express this opinion out loud.
"Nihuang's father already thinks you were raised by wild dogs," Princess Liyang complained. "Please serve as a good role model for Muqing at least."

"I will strive each day to serve as a virtuous and wise role model for Muqing," Lin Shu lied. Presumably, Jingyan would be available to serve as a good role model for Muqing, and he could just sponge off of the halo effect.

"Please just — don't bully him," General Lin said, because he knew his son.

"I would never," Lin Shu said with all apparent earnestness — but not enough to save him from the ruyi.

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For Muqing, whether Lin Shu would be wise or benevolent was, truthfully, the furthest thing from his mind.

Mu Mansion had been in uproar all day, with servants running thither and yon between his mother's fretful orders and his sister's shouting. There were carts ceaselessly arriving and departing, and their father tiresomely gruff with emotion at the prospect of both his children gone away for school. Muqing did not delude himself that their mother would miss them: she'd started packing their trunks two months earlier.

But all the rush and rabble of the day had faded now, and with one last, great volley of shouting, he and Nihuang and half the manor's worth of belongings had been packed into carts and palanquins and dispatched toward the sea.
Regency Batman (I mean. Batman)

Chapter Summary

From the brief fit where I started writing a Bruce/Dick regency AU.

Immediately after Bane threw him — with prejudice — Bruce found his primary response was not pain, but rather a calm sense of inevitability. Hadn't the stable master said the great black beast of the stallion would kill him? And, as a corollary benefit, if he died, it would spare him the indignity of traveling to London for the Season, whereupon he would be honor-bound to watch every young alpha buck in the ton buzz rapaciously around Dick, and then honor-bound to broker a marriage contract for the boy. It would not do to delay any longer.

Yes, all in all, death in the muddy field was far preferable.

It was at that juncture Miss Ivy, the mistress of Wayne Manor's gardens, came upon him, and — unfortunately — Bruce was rescued in short order.

Bruce vowed to savage all of her rose bushes while a pack of grooms came at him with a litter, and then to take to the hedgerows with sheers once Tim arrived, exercised and red-faced with barely contained tears. At some point, Alfred ignored his loud protests and doused him with laudanum, and a surgeon arrived to enact some manner of savagery upon his leg.

It was deep into the night, most of the servants and the doctor sent away, when the noise and confusion finally waned to just Tim, still sniffling, sitting at Bruce's bedside.

"Don't worry," Tim assured him earnestly. "I've sent for Dick."

Bruce gritted his teeth and stared at his ceiling. Truly, it would have been better to die under Bane's hooves.

***

In a thundering carriage, Dick stared moodily into the blur of the English countryside and curled his hands into fists, Tim's letter crumpling in his fingers.
It had been three years since that horrible morning after the night before, when he’d been informed by Alfred that a place had been found for him at Bludhaven Finishing Academy and that Dick would be dispatched within the week. His Grace had set off for London early that morning to tend to matters related to his various investments and his various estates, and sent his regrets that he would not be able to see Dick on his way.

It had been a mercy, in its own way, that Bruce had removed himself so ruthlessly, for Dick was aware he’d made the worst sort of fool of himself. With three years to reflect and repent, he’d dressed the old wound of that dreadful night, the desperation he’d felt at the prospect of leaving Bruce’s side, and the enormity of his longing — walled it all carefully away. He’d been a fool to hope, and Bruce had been as kind as he knew how to be by sending Dick away, Dick knew now. But at the time, his mouth still burning and bruised from his singular, desperate kiss, all Dick had known was the convulsive ache of his heart shattering to dust.

But he was three years older and many experiences wiser, now, and Dick had come to view the old scar of his love with a certain tenderness. Dick's love had been unwise, but it had been real, and so was his lingering hurt. If it was to be all he ever had of Bruce, then so be it.

Only then Tim's frantic litter had arrived by express the night before, and the house mother had come panicked to Dick's room in such a state Dick had felt his heart leap into his throat with fearfulness: was it Tim, hurt? or Alfred? Nothing could happen to Bruce — death and illness simply wouldn't dare.

Bane, however, was neither death nor illness, just a vile-tempered monster of a horse, and Tim had outlined a gruesome collection of injuries that had Dick sick with horror. His trunks had been packed within the hour, and the headmistress's carriage obtained, and Dick had been halfway back to Somerset before he realized what would await him there.

"Nevermind all that," Dick whispered to himself, squeezing his eyes closed against the memory of that night — the dark wood of the library, the orange of the fireplace, the way for a heartbeat, just one moment, Dick could nearly believe Bruce was kissing him back — and telling himself it was dead, and ought to stay buried.

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It was deep into the night by the time the carriage fetched up to the looming shadows of Wayne Manor, with its castle turrets and gothic arches, a hulking, muscular construction of dark gray stone and iron. It was built upon ruin after ruin, from before memory, and Jason had enjoyed terrifying the littlest children by telling them that the land upon which Wayne Manor was built had been
consecrated by the Druids, that beasts lived in the house's darker halls, and that Bruce was the master of them all. Predictably, Cassandra had been thrilled at this prospect, and set up a watch in the East Wing in hopes of capturing something gruesome and with many teeth; Tim had protested total lack of belief, and burst into Dick's room crying from nightmares for a solid week, bless him.

Bruce kept no kind of hours at all — country or otherwise — so while it was not unusual to see the lamps still burning, it was a thing of wonder to see the every window in the house fiery with light, a commotion afoot. And there on the front steps, impatiently dashing toward him as soon as Dick tumbled out of the carriage — half-witted from exhaustion and sore from the road — were Tim and Cassandra.

"Dick! Dick, you're finally here!" Tim shouted.

"Dick, it was disgusting," Cassandra reported, gleeful. "The duke's leg was in a revolting angle."

"His Grace said he didn't want any laudanum but then Alfred — "

"— Alfred was marvelous," Cassie declared. "He is very good at forcing drugs on people."

"Oh, goodness," Dick laughed, pressing earnest, lingering kisses to the crown of Cassandra's head and to Tim's sweet, pink cheeks, and giving them both a squeeze. "My goodness, it seems there's been quite a lot of excitement in my absence."

Cassandra made a noise of pure distilled disdain. She was sure to be a sensation after her debut. "Dick, do not fun me. This dreadful drafty manor and its dreadful drafty master have been dull as death without you!" she reproached him.

Tim, more quietly and more sweetly, only wrapped his small arms tightly about Dick's waist and mumbled, "We missed you — he was awful without you."

Dick felt his heart clench in his chest, and he ran a hand through Tim's wild, dark hair.

"Did he shout at you then, my darling?" Dick asked him quietly. "Shall I take revenge for you?"
Tim's answer was a crooked grin. Cassandra's was: "Oh, I already did it."

***

Dearest Jason:

Are you well? Please do not drink so much, as it makes your face swell very unattractively. And then Bruce whispers the foulest things of you resembling Prinny. It would be a disaster. The pretty boys and girls of the ton would never recover.

Anyhow, more importantly, we have a question of vital import: How do we arrange for someone to be ruined?

We do not mean for there to be any question of the ruining. We should like them to be thoroughly and spectacularly ruined, so that there may be no question of the ruination.

Also, please come home. Bruce's awful horse threw him and now Bruce is laid up in bed and Dick has been called home.

If all goes well (remember, ruining!!) there may be a wedding soon!

All our love,

Tim and Cassandra.
I think this is only currently posted scattershot on tumblr, which is an abomination. So here, have some Clint and his embarrassing crush on Coulson, if Coulson were a lady.

Contrary to popular legend at SHIELD, Phil Coulson had nothing to do with Clint's recruitment. Even 15 years ago, Clint was a snot-nosed so and so and Phil was already blandly, terrifyingly necessarily for operations and administrative errata at security levels beyond Clint's wildest imagining. When he'd been hauled into SHIELD headquarters as an L2 specialist, it had been by Carnaghan, who swore fluidly and profusely with probably the densest Boston accent Clint's ever heard. He'd been put through his training paces with Robinson and Soleymani, and Skolimowski and Maternofsky had been his most frequently two handlers on ops for the first three years of his SHIELD tenure. The day he'd been elevated to L3, Soleymani bought him a cupcake with a sparkler on top, kissed Clint on the cheek and said, "I'm really glad you didn't burn out and go dark side, buddy," and Clint had said, "Thanks, asshole," because all the rough edges hadn't finished coming off, yet.

The first time Clint saw Phil Coulson was in a makeshift mess tent that had been set up for a 300-person operation in a nowhere places in between several ramshackle Mexican villages. They were in abandoned territory, where the police and the feds had given up and the murder rate was so high it was pointless to keep track, and Clint had just come back from 14 hours parked in the blistering heat, drenched in sweat and woozy from dehydration and so generally fucking unhappy about everything he was ready to run away to the God damn circus some more. Again.

Except he'd stomped into the mess to get some water and stopped short at the way there was a woman in a nondescript gray suit sitting by herself in the middle of the lunch rush — everybody in the cafeteria giving her a three-table berth. She was eating the biggest plate of reconstituted mashed potatoes Clint had ever seen — just shoveling angry spoonfuls in her mouth — and crying, not making a sound. Her eyes were red and her cheeks were red and he kind of stood there in frozen awe, spellbound, watching her fucking murder this dish of potatoes over the four of 15 minutes, pause long enough to scrub the heels of her hands — blunt, short fingernails, no polish, a no-nonsense watch — over her cheeks, and then bus her tray without a word.

Everybody held their breath until she left, and once the the last clicks of her shoes melted away, some guy hissed, "Mother of Christ."

"Who the fuck was that?" Clint asked, to some passing, white-faced SHIELD guy, in BDUs wearing an ID code on his shoulder that indicated he was L5.

"That? Coulson, man," White-Faced SHIELD Guy says, and pulls off his cap, runs a hand over the back of his neck. "Fuck. I fuckin' hate it when she does that."

Later, when he's supposed to be maintaining radio silence, Clint asks, "But what does it mean?"

"Have you never heard the phrase 'eating your feelings' before, Barton?" Sitwell replies, because Sitwell is a solid bro like that.
Clint adjusts his scope 2 millimeters to the left. He's been watching their mark fuck an underaged prostitute for the last like 20 minutes, and Clint's almost as bored as the kid is. The SHIELD-issued scope is good enough that Clint can see the boy rolling his eyes as he mouths rapturous sex noises and the goon on top of him furiously jerks it.

"That was not eating feelings," Clint argues, because seriously their drug lord probably needs to see a doctor. He has testicles the size of a coconut, a rapidly purpling shrimp dick, and he's been promising to spatter jizz all over this kid's ass for a small eternity. "ODed on Cialis, you think?"

"Definitely ODed on Cialis," Sitwell agrees. "No, I mean, we lost five guys in a skirmish today. That's just Coulson's MO. She eats, she cries, she goes out and and shoots a bunch of people in the knees."

"Huh, no shit, sir," Clint says, meditative, and everybody on the op breaks radio silence together in relief when this asshole finally comes, a chorus of "fucking finally Jesus" ringing out across the radio. "Call it, Sitwell."

There's a click on the line, and a woman's voice carries across it:

"I'd wait until he rolls off of the bed mate at least, Barton."

Clint blinks. It's a new voice, but it goes on to add, "Sitwell, the compound is secured. Nigel will move on your call."

"Who the fuck is Nigel?" Clint blurts out.

"He's a very young looking specialist," the woman replies, apparently unflustered. "And Barton — aim for debilitating but nonfatal. Mr. Rodriguez and I have an appointment."

"Copy that," Clint says, reflexive, over top of Sitwell's, "Copied, Coulson." Clint manages to restrain himself until there's the tell-tale click of someone breaking off their line before he gasps, "That was her? The potato lady?"

"I will pay you $1 billion to call her that to her face," Sitwell informs him, and there's the sudden burst of static that comes from another radio held close by as he says, "Nigel — your efforts, as ever, are godlike heroism. We're ready to go once you're clear."

Through the scope, Clint watches the kid on the bad do some ripply stretch that's fucking criminal, and then say some stuff that gets their drug lord looking loopy and permissive, nodding his head and scratching of his hands through the mat of dark hair on his chest. Nimby, the kid rolls off of the bed, and if Clint wasn't such a fucking professional, he would have been tracking the kid — Nigel's ass as he swayed it toward the bathroom.

"Barton, stop staring you fucking pervert and take the shot," Sitwell tells him.

"You're the fucking worst, Sitwell," Clint tells him, and shoots Rodriguez twice neatly: once in his jerking hand and once in the left knee.

It's two weeks later, once they're all back stateside, that he hears, "Barton, right?" in the hallway outside of the sparring rooms.

When Clint looks up, it's to Coulson staring at him, waiting for an answer.

"Yes," he manages. "Yeah, that's me."
She smiles at him. Or at least Clint thinks it's a smile. The corners of her mouth move and it's not downward, anyway. She gives him a once-over with clinical detachment and makes eye contact again before saying, "Good job. On the Rodriguez gig."

"Thank you, sir," he says, before correcting himself. "Uh — ma'am. I guess."

"Sir's fine," she tells him, and what's when fucking Nigel comes out of the sparring room, glistening with a fine sheen of sweat in a soaked-through wife beater and fucking basketball shorts. Clint's seen the guy maybe five, six times around the office since the op and he can't fucking make eye contact with him.

"Theroux, with me," Coulson says, and Nigel jogs up to her all bashfully beaming, and the two of them saunter off down the hall.

It leaves Clint clutching at his chest and staring at the dishwater chignon of hair Coulson has at the nape of her neck and he thinks, oh, fuck, and realizes he is fucking crazy into that.

***

Getting Coulson's attention primarily involves getting onto her rotation. This is basically impossible because only half of her job involves field operations, and when she is playing handler, it's with the L7s and the most high risk intakes. The next time Clint works with Coulson in any capacity, it's because he and Maternofsky cross paths with Widow in Budapest, and any sighting of her is an immediate stand down and regroup with HQ. HQ sends Coulson.

"How'd she look?" Coulson asks, when she rocks up.

She's gotten a drop off via unmarked helicopter, wearing a white linen shirt tucked into loose taupe pants that cuff beautifully over a pair of glossy, pointed kitten heels. She's wearing no jewelry, her hair is loose, she has on eyeliner. It is the most devastating thing Clint has ever seen, so he doesn't blame himself for saying:

"Uh — murder-y?"

Coulson turns to Maternofsky instead, who is still staring at Clint with barely concealed disgust. "She looked tired, sir," he tells Coulson, who makes a considering noise.

She gives Clint the kill order, which he has every intention of following through on — he's seen Window's file — except he finds himself tangling with her in the rafters of an old warehouse just outside of the city limits, she doesn't look tired like Maternofsky said, she looks done. She looks ready to come inside, and Clint has a fleeting moment of familiarity that feels like a fucking gut punch.

Clint's primary coping method with occasionally having feelings is declaring them in flat statements, so he's not surprised that he tells Widow:

"I don't want to kill you. You should join us."

Or that she kicks him in the throat for saying it and gets away.

Clint's knocked back down to L1 after that and spends months serving penance in the form of milk runs. He gets his ass chewed out by no fewer than five senior agents, but he doesn't see Coulson at all. Sitwell, with his typical kid glove approach, explains that Coulson don't waste time getting furious with useless shitheads beneath her notice, so she'd delegated all the screaming to someone else and went off to Monaco. Clint thinks about the way she's probably getting all sunkissed and
freckly there and feels deeply, horribly punished for his sins.

"Monaco?" Clint croaks.

Sitwell smirks, all mean and all teeth. "Nigel texted to say she's wearing a skirt."

Clint's throat releases a creaking, croaking noise.

It's hard graft and an awful six months to get off the probationary list and be allowed on international gigs again, and as soon as he crosses U.S. borders, there she is again, the Widow, just hovering in the corners of the mission. She doesn't engage, and neither does Clint; he just reports her presence dutifully in Albania, in Pakistan, for the entirety of that two-month run in Afghanistan where they'd set up post too near a U.S. base and ended up with imbedded reporters wandering over to their side to ask questions.

"You realize the longer you stall out on telling me who you are, the more curious I get," she says to Clint. Lorna Shipman is 36 years-old, her hair gone frazzled and bleached from the sun, and while she is technically imbedded with the recon marines on the other side of camp, Clint thinks she must spend about half her life on the fringes of the SHIELD camp, bugging him.

He scowls at her. "You know I have a gun right?" he asks.

She peers over his shoulder. Hilariously, she's 5'1" on a tall day, so all she's seeing is shoulder and bicep. "There're a lot of women in there," Lorna plows on. "Are you guys an experimental convoy?"

Clint tries to imagine what would happen if someone told Hill or Soleymani their tits precluded them from front-line combat and has to choke back a laugh.

"Okay, sure, experimental convoy," he agrees.

Lorna looks unconvinced, narrow-eyed, and then her expression changes.

Over Clint's shoulder, Coulson says, "There's a reason we hire professionals for this sort of thing, Barton," and when he turns around to look at her, she smirks at him, jerks her chin toward the rendezvous tent and says, "Go — I'll be in in 5 minutes."

"Sir," he says, nodding, and Lorna does the appreciative whistle Clint can't do himself, saying, "That's a nice suit, Suit — what it is, Jil Sander?" as Clint beats feet.

He hears Coulson saying, "Yes. Resort collection, two years ago. The fabric breathes amazingly well," and "I'm going to need you to leave now, though."

As promised, 5 minutes later, Coulson's ducking into the tent, where Clint has been frozen in parade rest in a defensible corner trying not to stare at Fury's eye patch or melt under Maria Hill's poisonous gaze for the 4 minutes and 59 seconds previous.

"Barton, I hear you made a fucking friend," Fury spits out, the minute Coulson lets the tent flap close.

Reflexively, Clint says, "I don't have any friends, sir."

Hill sighs, and Coulson hides her mouth behind a manila folder.

"Then why is the fucking Black Widow following your pasty white ass across the globe," Fury goes
on, but it's pretty clear he doesn't really want an answer from Clint, so the obvious comment about doing a lot of kettlebell squats gets repressed in favor of continued respiration. No matter what Maternofsky says, Clint's not that stupid. Mostly.

"Our profilers suggest Barton's initial assessment may be correct," Coulson jumps in to say, handing Fury the folder and stopping holy shit like 2 feet away from Clint. That's 24 inches, plus or minus 2, and that means Clint's immediately compelled to stare stupidly at the pink flush over her cheekbones, the — be still his heart — bracelet that has appeared on her wrist. She's wearing a pale gray silk shirt with a keyhole opening that closes with a pearl button at the nape of her neck, and it's ruining his life.

"We think Widow's ready to come in," Hill explains, while Fury keeps scowling down at the folder.

"And she's ready to come in for this guy?" Fury asks, deeply unconvinced and glaring up at Clint even though Clint has literally done nothing but follow orders to a T for six straight months.

Coulson smiles, this time, Clint's definitely sure it's a smile. She says, "I don't know. Barton's not that bad."

"Thank you, sir," he says, and Coulson's eyes crinkle a little, like that little grin is making its way upward, but before it can turn into a full blown moment, Fury says:

"Fine. Fuck it. It's your call, Coulson."

Hill interrupts to say, "She's obviously batshit."

"Good," Coulson says, and motions at Clint to follow. "I like batshit."

***

Obviously, Coulson likes batshit because she is also batshit. Like calls to like.

She puts Clint to work on a fucking minefield of high-stress, crazy dangerous ops. She doesn't mention the Widow at all until Clint asks about it, two weeks later, at which point Coulson says, "She found you before, all those other times; I may as well get some mileage out of you until she decides to show up again." Clint makes a feeble noise of agreement and then goes to sit angrily in his perch for 12 hours, unmoving, ignoring the semi in his pants.

In his minimal off hours — read as: times he's not actively providing sniper back up on assorted missions — Coulson makes him sit in cafes and restaurants, wander around open air markets.

"Are you trying to get me killed, sir?" Clint asks. In retaliation, he's started to buy the ugliest souvenirs he can find and interofficing them to her in New York.

"Just making it easier in case Widow wants to make her approach," she says, unperturbed.

And absolutely everybody on Coulson's team is a dick. Just lousy with jerks. There's Sitwell and Heller and Lin and Kim and Smith 1 and Smith 2 and they're all straight up assholes. Coulson's comms are the loudest, most unrelenting stream of filth and one-upmanship Clint's ever heard until she cuts in with, "Guys," and then it all goes to pindrop silence, not even breathing on the line. If anybody seems stressed out about working with the legendary Philomena Coulson, nobody says anything about it, and Clint spends the first two months feeling like he's failing a test he's not sure he's taking.
After a while, Clint's hind brain crush on Coulson matures into a resigned irritation with his own reflexive desire to please Coulson. Eventually, he's even comfortable enough to start engaging in his normal behavior when this sort of situation comes up: act like a dick. He back talks. He shows up just a little late. His uniform's always kind of a mess. Either she doesn't care, doesn't notice, or operates with the knowledge that she'll always have the upper hand, that she can make Clint walk into walls and pop a teenaged boner with the way she turns the pages in a file, orchestrates ops. That she can make something inside his chest fill up, spill over, just by pressing a hand to Clint's shoulder and saying, "Good job, Barton."

Six months into his tenure with Coulson's traveling roadshow of insanity they get called into Budapest. Clint fucking hates Budapest.

Bar future experiences with Loki and the tesseract, it will be the worst mission of Clint's life. Smith 1 and 2 are killed within minutes of each other, and he and Heller end up hiding in the guts of the sewer for three days, nursing open wounds and anticipating gangrene and Coulson's inevitable, crushingly bland disapproval. The only reason Clint doesn't end up in the bodycount, too, is that Widow shows up, wild-eyed and sharp-edged. After all of it, after the literal dust settles and the last warehouse fire burns out in the cold winter rain, Widow surrenders herself into SHIELD custody — let's Sitwell usher her off into an unmarked white van, battered enough that nobody will look twice.

He'll get attacked by field medics wielding tetanus boosters and antibiotics as soon as they're back in safe territory, but Coulson — who has a broken wrist swollen to twice its normal thickness — gets hauled right past medical into a closed-door meeting with Fury. It lasts four hours, and not even the best of SHIELD's sound-killing technology dampens all of the screaming. It's unidirectional. So far as Clint can tell, Coulson never raises her voice. It's not her style. He can't imagine what he'd do if she yelled.

Clint will also have the fucking misfortune — three days later — of watching Coulson eat an entire tray of french fries while crying those same awful, silent tears; she'll be in black at the time, the funeral suit she wore to say, "I'm so sorry for your loss," to Smith 2's wife, to Smith 1's brother.

It takes months for Widow to become Natasha.

First there's the layers upon layers of vetting and evaluations miles and miles above Clint's paygrade, and even after she's released into the general population it's usually with a senior SHIELD handler fucking glued to her side. When Clint's around — when he's not out shooting additional drug lords in the testicles or whatever — he watches her carefully to see if she's about to bug out and kill everybody in the canteen. He'd probably let her get to Russell, but sometimes Coulson is in there; this deteriorates into thought experiments he shares with Sitwell during radio silence time.

"I'd sacrifice Hill, no questions," Clint says, about 20 minutes into a conversation about who they would throw at Natasha if she went batshit and started murdering people.

"Wise," Sitwell says meditatively. "On the one hand, she is probably one of the worst humans on the planet. On the other, she might actually survive a Black Widow attack."
"Coulson could survive Widow," Clint says, more out of loyalty than conviction.

"Barton, I want you to know that this fucking crush of yours is embarrassing, and I'm embarrassed for you, and to know you," Sitwell says, with his typical thoroughness.

The 45 page friendly fire report Clint has to write for shooting the coffee out of Sitwell's hand where he's sitting a million miles away from the action with a literal sack of cake donuts is completely, totally worth it.

Coulson, when Clint hands it in, asks, "Do I want to know?"

"I can say with perfect certainty you don't," Clint says.

"Fair enough," Coulson allows, and she pauses long enough to worry at her watch for a second, running a thumb along its face before asking, "What do you think of Romanoff?"

Clint sees Widow sometimes in the halls at SHIELD, but she's probably one of the most dangerous and high maintenance assets the organization's ever acquired, and Clint recently celebrated returning to L2 status by dint of not dying in Budapest. Soleymani refuses to get him another cupcake for quote, failing upwards, which Clint thinks is fair, if mean. Sitwell tells him Coulson made a ferocious bid to have Clint brought back to L3 based on his pivotal role in recruiting Widow, but Fury wasn't having any of it. Clint's neither surprised by Fury's assholeishness nor by the reflexive, humiliating lurch of something he gets at the thought of Coulson standing up for him.

Clint frowns. "You think she's a security liability?" he guesses.

Coulson smiles at him, worn and genuine and stunning. "Of course she's a liability, Barton — I meant more, do you think we'll be able to integrate her, one day?"

"I — wouldn't be the expert on that, sir," Clint says, evasive.

"I can think of no better expert," Coulson rejoins. "You were hostile, hurt, and more likely to burn the place down than toe the line when you joined SHIELD."

"I wasn't that bad," Clint mutters, lying.

"And now you're one of our most vital and effective assets," Coulson presses on, and that worn smile on her face has changed into something small and secret. It's a new expression, one Clint hasn't seen before, and he's greedy for it, commits it to memory. He wonders if this is the smile she has over fancy dinner dates with atmospheric lighting: pleased, provocative. "You have insight — more than most of us ever could — as to whether or not Romanoff could ever feel safe enough here to work for us."

Clint hesitates. He hates hesitating. But this isn't like pulling a trigger or taking a shot, and so he rocks back on his heels and asks, sounding shy and ten years younger, "Can I think about that and get back to you?"

"Of course," she tells him, tipping her head to the side. Coulson spreads her hand out across her desk, bracing. She says, "You know my door is always open to you."

He did not know that at all, previously, but he nods anyway, because there's nothing he can say to that. It's almost a week later — a week of watching Natasha carefully and caucusing with Sitwell, who's been handling her national security debriefings, and sitting for long hours in the canteen to pick up the ambient gossip — that he knows the unavoidable truth of the thing, the embarrassing reality of it.
"Hey," he says, sticking his head into Coulson's office one Tuesday afternoon and talking as quickly as possible. He's staring at her floor because he doesn't think he can look at Coulson's face, and he babbles at double speed, "I think Widow's going to be scared for a really long time, but people like us are used to it. But she's strong or she wouldn't have made it this far, and if you guys are careful — I think it could work."

His throat closes up for a long time. He doesn't say how shitty and tired and fucked up he'd been when SHIELD had come after him, three years into an illustriously bloody career as a merc. He doesn't say how he spent years waking up in a cold sweat in his SHIELD quarters ready to run, or that not every SHIELD agent had the soft but implacable touch of Coulson's inner circle. But he doesn't want Natasha to die, to immolate, and there're maybe a half dozen organizations in the world where someone with her background can land. Clint knows her entire life story in a SHIELD file but he knows fuck all about her — that doesn't change how much he hurts for her.

"That's heartening," Coulson tells him, patience threaded through her voice. "I'll take it under advisement as I'm compiling — "

"I think you should handle her training," he interrupts, sudden; his voice is shaking.

"Me," Coulson repeats, flatly.

Clint squeezes his eyes shut. "I think it would help," he mumbles. "You get people. You're good at this kind of thing."

When Coulson finally answers, it's so soft it's barely above a whisper. She says, "Thank you, Clint — I appreciate your input on this matter," and he more or less runs out the door, out of SHIELD, into the New York nightscape where the air has the bright sharpness of early winter and the traffic can drown out the panicked voice in his head yelling, you fucking idiot — you total fucking moron, now she knows, there's no way she doesn't know now.

***

SHIELD is weird, even for a shadowy pseudogovernmental organization, so the day that Coulson walks into the canteen and says to Clint, "Barton, with me," he doesn't even think twice about it. He punches Sitwell in the shoulder before he can say whatever he's going to say, ignores Natasha's all-too-knowing look, and trails after Coulson as she winds out of the bowels of the building, past the administrative offices and toward the lobby. Clint's abstractly been aware SHIELD had a lobby, but he's used it maybe once, maybe twice in the six years he's worked here.

"Where're we going, sir?" he asks, when they're already on the street and Coulson's hailing a cab.

She glances over her shoulder at him, wisps of her hair flying in the brisk February wind. "Intel gathering," she tells him, no-nonsense.

In the backseat of the cab, she tells the driver to head for the Met, and says, "Here," and sticks her purse in Clint's lap. She swaps out her flats for a pair of perilous nude pumps, and puts on a flat, cherry red lipstick. They're stuck in the endless traffic along Park when Coulson puts on earrings as she winds out of the bowels of the building, past the administrative offices and toward the lobby. Clint's abstractly been aware SHIELD had a lobby, but he's used it maybe once, maybe twice in the six years he's worked here.

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The driver, who is almost as bad a pervert as Clint, keeps looking in the rearview mirror despite Clint's continuous, unabated glower. He asks, "Midday date, huh?"
Clint almost swallows his tongue.

Coulson just smiles, the wide, sweet one that isn't her at all. "Don't tell my boss."

She tips him outrageously, and when then step out onto the sidewalk on Museum Mile, she loops her arm into Clint's, presses them close together, so she can rest her chin on his shoulder. Clint's wearing a beat up leather jacket over a ratty green henley, busted jeans and combat boots, and he knows exactly what they must look like together.

"I'm hurt, boss," Clint says, after he buys them egregiously overpriced entry tickets and laces their fingers together, leads her toward the Temple of Dendur. "Did you seriously just zero in on me in the mess as the most effective piece of rough trade?"

"No self-respecting cougar would prey on Sitwell," she says lightly, and dips her head in close. From a distance, it must look like she's telling him a secret, that beneath the veil of her hair she must be blushing, shy, flirtatious. Up close, Clint can feel the warmth of her skin and he can't fucking stop smelling her hair, not even as she says, "Just look besotted — I'll handle the rest."

So that's easy. Just, like the easiest ask Clint's ever gotten for SHIELD, and he steers Coulson around the museum and can't help but square his shoulders, touch her cheek sometimes, to get her attention. He leans into her too much, whispers into the crown of her hair too often, and from the looks they're getting, it's convincing. What's even better is the looks she's getting.

Clint knows Coulson is only kind of pretty; he can be objective about this so long as nobody else is saying this shit to his face. He's tangled with Natasha for years and Hill off and on, SHIELD assets as gorgeous as they're deadly. But when you stop and look at her, Coulson is striking, and when she smiles — even this fake smile she's been wearing all afternoon — makes Clint feel like he's underwater, like he's breathless.

They linger for what feels like a yawning eternity in European Sculpture and Decorative Art, in that room with the awful baroque chairs with the gilded flowers all over, that look impossible to sit on. Coulson's loosened up now, her shoulders losing the tension of her in medias op focus, and Clint suspects whatever intel she wanted has already been collected from the pair of sleekly suited businessmen that had been exchanging half-sentences in the medieval gallery, near the massive wall of the choir screen.

"That can't possibly be comfortable," he says, into her temple, because Clint's a good agent and would never break cover without permission from his handler.

Coulson huffs, her decorative laughter gone away now. When Phil Coulson talks, it's in short sentences and suppressed grins and the texture of her voice in Clint's ear has buoyed him through missions during monsoons, frigid endless nights, the gory flesh wound in his thigh, the arcing terror of a forest fire making the jump from the treeline to a house — one Clint had been perched on.

"Clothing of the period would have made it impossible to lean back, anyway," she answers him, but she doesn't slide their fingers apart. "Corsets, stays, that kind of thing."

Clint cocks an eyebrow at her. She has a swirl of hair, almost a cowlick, right at the top of her head, and he feels a degree of passion toward it he hadn't felt about the last three people he was fucking; this is so embarrassing.

"And how would you know that?" he asks, and barely swallows back the 'sir.'
She sneaks him one of those looks, from under the eyelashes. They must teach all girls how to do that in middle school. "I know my way around a corset."

Clint is aware the noise he makes is neither stealth nor ninja. "Sir," he pleads.

She doesn't say anything else, but she does buy him an overpriced coffee at the cafe near the sculpture hall, and Clint watches the late afternoon light thread through her hair and feels all of his old wounds ache.
"I have a theory," Rodney says.

"It is New Year's Eve. We are not dead. Wraith are not coming. I am ignoring you," Zelenka tells him charitably.

"My theory is this," Rodney continues. "John was a hooker."

"I hate when you speak," Zelenka says, agonized. "When you speak, my soul hurts."

Rodney tries to shape his horrified frustration and titillating arousal with his hands, and mostly it looks like he's mangling a ball of invisible lard. His face twists with worry. "There is evidence," he says. "There is a mountain of mounting evidence that he used to mount people for money."

Zelenka hums Auld Lang Sine under his breath and runs a comb through his hair, checking his reflection in the deep freezer in the lab, filled with highly experimental compounds and a couple of Ancient gadgets that had to be put down with freezing temperatures to keep them from setting themselves on fire and everybody's secret stash of vodka and popsicles.

"Number one," Rodney says, following Zelenka around the room as he shuts down the computers and cleans up the last workstations. "Number one is just the way he looks."

"I hate you," Zelenka says honestly, shutting down a fume hood. He doesn't want to know why that's in the physics lab.

"Number two is the fact that he's just too good in bed," Rodney babbles.

"My God," Zelenka says, horrified and looking for a heavy object.

Rodney's eyes are crazy. "Number three: he can put on a condom with his mou--"

Zelenka throws a book at him and runs away.
Belltown (X-Files)

Chapter Summary

Mulder and Scully take a case in Seattle. Seriously when the fuck did I write this.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They landed at SeaTac at 4:56 -- by 4:59, the mist that had fogged out the late-evening view of the Seattle skyline from their cheap seats just behind the left wing had morphed into a soaking downpour, rivers streaming down the edges of sidewalks.

From her vantage point under a too-narrow awning, Scully could see Mulder running through the Lariat parking lot holding a tattered copy of The Economist over his head as he dashed around looking for their car. She'd stopped feeling bad about letting him take one for the partnership when she realized he asked knee-jerk, automatic, perfunctory -- her answer didn't matter one way or the other. Maybe it was something about boys who grew up in Massachusetts; maybe it was Teena Mulder. Scully had gotten into fist-fights with her brothers over who had to be on the shitty side of the umbrella before.

Mulder pulled around with a red 2000 Ford Escort, a car whose dependability rivaled its supreme ugliness, and she dumped their bags in the back before climbing into the front passenger seat, rubbing water off of her cheek, her neck.

"You know, Mulder," she said, "we didn't have to take this case. We could have taken something else. Or vacation."

"What," he said, feigning shock. "And miss this beauty?"

The road out of the airport complex was marred with abandoned light rail construction -- cement pillars and crumbled asphalt framing the highway as cars crept away at an unsteady, jolting five miles an hour -- the red cast of tailights growing more intense as the sky darkened.

They played the "It's left, Mulder," versus "I think that exit was actually on the right side, Scully," game until they ended up asking for directions at a liquor store in a strip mall, and Scully barely resisted the urge not to veto Mulder's attempt to buy a handle of Jack on his company card.

They end up in a Holiday Inn, on the third floor in a discouraged-looking part of downtown Seattle, and she just had time to take off her heels and stare out at the Space Needle before Mulder knocked on her door.

"It's barely six," she said, cocking an eyebrow at him.

"I'm aging, Scully, I'm weak with hunger," he whined.

She toed on her shoes again, grabbed her coat. "If we end up in a Denny's, Mulder," she warned, "I swear, I will hurt you."
Mulder had once told her that the BSU had a whole series of really tasteless jokes about the rain and Seattle's reputation as an incubator for future serial killers, but then he'd refused to tell her what the jokes were. It was the kind of odd chivalry-not-chivalry that she found mostly worthy of eye-rolls, and sometimes charming. That time, she'd said that at Quantico there was a whole series of really tasteless jokes about pornstar triplets who'd been brought down to autopsy still attached.

"That sounds like an X-File, Scully," he'd said, serious.

"I shouldn't tell you, too raunchy for your delicate ears," she'd teased, and he'd smirked, abashed, at that -- admitted he was wrong. He still hadn't told her the jokes, but since she'd never gotten around to making up a corresponding backstory for her own, either, it'd worked out for the best.

Chapter End Notes

In this, the year of our Lord 2018, apparently I'm still mad that they spelled it Teena with two Es.
Student Teacher (Macdonald Hall, Twinkie Squad)

Chapter Summary

Honestly if anybody ever tells you that binge drinking in college isn't a big deal I want you to know that going through the archeology of my Google Docs folder is like a harrowing journey through a bunch of things that clearly some past version of me invested time in but that the present version of me so completely doesn't remember I have to assume it was all executed mid-blackout. Oy. Anyway. The Twinkies go to high school -- where one Melvin O'Neal is just starting his career as a student teacher.

"The class it just awesome," Commando said. "The materials -- he doesn't want to use the textbook! -- and his agenda -- Doug, we're going to have a summit -- and --"

"Have you inhaled?" Doug asked casually. "Just in the last five minutes or so you've been hyperventilating with love?"

Undeterred, Commando continued to babble happily, and Doug sighed, tuning him out to inspect with deep suspicion the steaming trays on the other side of the scarred sneezeguard. The hastily photocopied sign at the front of the line had said, "braised meat en shape with a flourish of blanched greens and freshly heated pain," which all sounded like garbled English for "inedible" to Doug. He tilted his head to the left, letting Commando's words filter back in:

" -- and he said that if the summit went well, there was the possibility of translating that into some sort of position paper that --"

Doug turned back to inspecting the plasticky pizza slices, the discouraged-looking salads, wilting from their proximity to the heat lamps. He'd been under the impression that leaving middle school would bring him back into the world of palatable lunches and well-stocked classrooms and now he saw that was wrong; if there was one thing he missed about the last snotty private school in a long string of them (from which he'd been kicked out), it was the creme brulee. He settled on pasta salad and four chocolate chip cookies, piled up a matching plate for Commando, and directed them both toward the nearest empty table.

Aaron Burr High School -- "Oh, you have got to be kidding me," Commando had said -- was packed to the gills, clustered in vicious cliques. Doug's homeroom had 31 students, each more bored and uncomfortable in their own skins than the one before. The ex-Twinkies had all chosen to come to the ill-fated school to provide a unified defense -- only to realize that they would be scattered to the four corners of Aaron Burr with cruel disregard for their social fortification plan. Doug shared homeroom with Yolanda and Geometry with Ric, and the only times during the day Doug and Commando saw one another was lunch and eighth-period English.

"I'm glad you're excited," Doug said, prim.

"Rmgn nhgh nh!" Commando answered, talking around two cookies.

Doug sighed.
"And now, boys and girls," Mrs. Feltzer creaked out, leaning heavily on the edge of her desk, "I'd like you all to welcome Mr. Melvin Boots."

"Er," the man said, flushing, "It's Mr. Melvin O'Neal, Mrs. Feltzer."

"Mr. Melvin O'Neal," Mrs. Fetzer parrotted, not missing a beat. "He'll be joining our class as your student teacher this year, and I want you all to be the perfect angels I know you are. Can we do that, boys and girls?"

The eighth-period honors English 9 class glared back at her, silent and still. The first week, Doug thought Mrs. Feltzer's undiagnosed senior-onset dementia was charming, in a distracted sort of way -- now, at week three, when she was still asking the class to wear nametag bedecked with unicorns and rainbows on the borders, it'd lost much of its charm.

"Um, hi," Mr. O'Neal jumped in, looking at the class as they looked at him. He was tall, and built like a swimmer, with wide shoulders and long arms, as he blond bangs, and while he looked young, Doug reflected, he didn't look quite young enough to be a student teacher.
Chapter Summary

Cadman figured out Rodney's secret during their little body-switching episode. Too bad it's a secret even from Rodney. (I ALSO have no memory of writing his God DAMN.)

Cadman's campaign of terror began the Tuesday after the Unfortunate Incident, as Rodney had started--and requiring all of his staff to, too--started calling it.

He got out of bed, banged around his room for a bit, and came in to work to find the following in his inbox:

To: Dr. McKay
From: Lt. Cadman
Subject: [none]

Rodney--I know. If you'd like this information to remain secret, please see me at lunch.

Sincerely, C.

PS, Also, I think it'd be a good idea if you started a workout routine. I could help you design one. There's just something not right about your heart rate.

Rodney's first thought was that he was going to set her room on fire because there were only so many indignities a man could suffer at the hands of another person before he was pressed to desperate measures.

And then he started to wonder what about it was she knew.
By eleven thirty he was a wreck, in a cold sweat, wondering what information she'd managed to
glean while he'd been asleep. Had she gone through his private belongings? Gotten out a hand
mirror to examine his birthmark? Had she measured things?

She was sitting by herself next to a large window, chewing her food thoughtfully when Rodney
stomped up to her and sat down heavily, clutching his eighth mug of coffee that day and feeling his
heart go at three four time.

"Well?" Rodney demanded.

Cadman smiled at him sweetly. "Hi, Rodney."

"Hi, yes, niceties," Rodney snapped, scowling. "I see you've resorted to preschool threats for my
attention, then--and if you haven't got anything important to tell me then this is just wasting my
time and I'm desperately needed back in the--"

"Did you know," she said, with exaggerated casualness, "that when somebody is around somebody
else they have a crush on, there is a physiological response?"

Rodney froze. "Um."

She blinked her eyes hugely at him. "You know, elevated heart rate, sweating, babbling like a
moron or reflexively insulting them like you're in the fourth grade and you're pulling on
somebody's pigtails?"

"I--she was my date! I'm allowed to like her!" Rodney said, high-pitched, trying to kill Cadman
with his mind.

She sighed at him. "You aren't really that oblivious, are you, Rodney?" Cadman started to collect
the remains of her lunch, and added, "Oh, by the way, she says she's still waiting for you to contact
her--but if you've got any balls at all, you'll just tell her the truth and say that there's somebody
else."

"There's somebody else?" Rodney squeaked.
Cadman grinned hugely. "Yeah, Rodney, there is. And, if you don't want me to tell, then you'll help me out this weekend."

Rodney stared at her. "I am not providing you with sexual favors!" he blurted out, making Ronon, the Colonel's latest large, muscular, poorly groomed stray, who was passing by the table pause, blink, and then continue blithely.

Cadman snorted. "No," she agreed, and winking, she added, "That's what Carson's for."

*

By the time Rodney had been able to exorcise the demon images of Carson engaged in carnal activities from his mind, it was nearly dinnertime and the labs were mostly deserted. The scientists had spent the last few days laying low, avoiding Rodney's admittedly jumpy temper in the fallout from the Unfortunate Incident.

(Zelenka, the squirrelly, Czech bastard, refused to cooperate, however, and continued to refer to the Unfortunate Incident as The Funniest Thing I Have Ever Seen In My Life And I Will Tell All Future Generations About It, You Cranky Rjzllkerks, or at least that's what it sounded like when Zelenka cursed in Czech.)

So he was muttering hatefully into the box of one machine or another when Sheppard hopped onto a lab table and said:

"So something weird happened today, Rodney."

"Go away," Rodney said darkly. He was tired. He was starting to get dizzy from the lack of sleep and caffeine intake. He was up to his tenth cup of coffee that day and his heart was just going bonkers from the stimulus.

"See, Lieutenant Cadman came up to me in one of the hallways today and asked me if I'd popped in to check on you today," Sheppard said. "Now why would she do that?"

"To make sure I hadn't given in and murdered my entire staff for incompetence?" Rodney muttered into the case. "Okay, Colonel, just…touch something on this horrible piece of crap. I give up trying to reason with it using physics."
Sheppard dropped a hand onto the unidentified machine and something in the circuitry flickered to life, simultaneously exciting and annoying Rodney, whose artificial ATA gene apparently hadn't been good enough for the damn thing. He kept poking and prodding.

"That was my first thought, too," Sheppard said earnestly. "But then she implied that you might miss me if I didn't."

"Perhaps she knew instinctively that Ancient technology was going to be a finicky bastard today--oh, wait, what an easy bet, since it always is," Rodney muttered under his breath, jabbing pointedly at a cluster of crystalline panels, touching along their edges and sides, watching his laptop monitors read electrical spikes, residual power, function, wavelength, and Rodney wondered what the hell this damn thing did.

"You're probably right," Sheppard finally said. He drummed his fingers on the machine. "Still need me?" He lifted his hand experimentally, the way he'd learned to do if he wanted to earn himself a way out, and the machine still buzzed under Rodney's probes--launched and running.

"Yeah, yeah yeah, get out," Rodney muttered.

He barely heard the lab door open and close behind him.

*

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