**Gentlemanly Pursuits**

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**Gentlemanly Pursuits**

by PresquePommes

**Summary**

Nobody calls you by your first name.

At the office, you go by Mister Egbert or just Egbert alone, but only to the few coworkers you consider close enough to allow the privilege.

At home, your son just calls you Dad.

To others still, you’re pipefan413.

You prefer it, honestly.

**Notes**

So here we are, folks. My second major work. The product of writing in the looming shadow of Joker Over Knave.

It’s going to contain a lot of food metaphors and there isn’t a damn thing you can do about it.

Rated Explicit because knowing me it'll escalate, just like everything else I do.
Nobody calls you by your first name.

At the office, you go by Mister Egbert or just Egbert alone, but only to the few coworkers you consider close enough to allow the privilege.

At home, your son just calls you Dad.

To others still, you’re pipefan413.

You prefer it, honestly.

You lead a neat existence. A pressed and starched existence, sometimes as distant as office work, other times as intimate as baking.

You keep your world carefully filed and separated in visually-coded mental organizers- harlequin for home, monochrome for the office- and you like it that way.

You’ve grown accustomed to John’s distaste for your baking. It saddens you, a little, but you understand.

His suspicious nature hasn’t lessened with age, unfortunately. He’s stopped drawing on the walls, now, a strapping lad of nineteen, but he still eyes the friendly red spoon of Crocker Corp. with a cold stare when he doesn’t think you’re looking.

You sigh when you catch him doing it, a gesture more for the benefit of his expectations than one born of any real feeling. By now, you’ve long been resigned to supposing that it could always be worse.

He’s grown up quite handsomely. You can’t say you condone his frequently sloppy manner of attiring himself, and heaven knows it only matches the breezy mess of licorice black curls that you gave up on taming so many years ago all too well, but you recognize the importance of being supportive, of allowing him to find his own way, even if you have your doubts about the practicality of its apparent direction.

You suppose he inherited his interest in misusing perfectly good meringue from his grandmother, but you have not yet succeeded in convincing him that shaving cream is a more desirable, if less amusing, alternative.

When you hear the thunder of John’s footsteps running down the stairs, followed closely by the equally resounding- though somewhat less endearing and, perhaps, less welcome- rap of leather-braced knuckles on your front door, just in time for the slap of one bare foot hitting the hardwood of the living room floor, you have only one shamefully uncharitable thought:

You still dislike that Strider fellow.

You dislike his impudently upturned collar.

You dislike his tastelessly ludicrous eyewear.
You dislike his garishly emblazoned belt buckle and the worn leather of his shoes and his sun-bleached baseball cap and the cuts and bruises you always see peeking out from under his ward’s sleeves and neckline.

You dislike the man you know is standing on your doorstep, and you suspect that he not only knows, but revels in it.

There have been times when you have suspected that he takes a special sort of interest in discomfiting you.

In your worst moments, you suspect the long stares and loitering smirks that linger with him in your doorway of containing meaning beyond just the inspiration of discomfort.

 Needless to say, despite your disgruntlement in so obviously catering to his whims, he does, in fact, discomfit you, and so you take your time in washing the flour and cocoa from your arms before rolling down your sleeves.

The low murmur of another voice in the living room, deeper in pitch than John’s boyish chatter but higher than the carrying rumble of the object of your disdain, inspires in you a thrill of chastened self-reproach. You don’t dislike the younger Strider brother. You welcome Dave’s visits.

You enjoy Dave’s visits to your home far more than John’s visits to the Strider household.

When John returns from such a visit, he does so stinking of appallingly poor nutrition, old sweat, and cheap cologne, and the profanity begins to eke out between his words in the days that follow.

He catches himself, of course, like the good son he is, but you still register the errant shhs and fuhs, regardless.

When Dave visits, he calms his more explicit language within a day, two on rare occasion-occasion you strongly suspect has to do with the level of stress he keeps tucked behind those ever-present sunglasses- but he never seems to manage the feat of keeping his elbows off of the table during dinner, and proves resistant to your gentle suggestions that he abandon his aviators even momentarily for the sake of practicality.

You’ve accepted it, begrudgingly. You find it difficult to begrudge that shiny crop of buttermilk blond; always succumb to exasperated affection for the boy behind that errant spackling of brown sugar freckles.

You’ve seen his eyes just once, the chance product of meeting in a hallway too awash with predawn greys for him to see through tinted lenses as he made his stumbled way to the lavatory, and in that instant of sleepy hesitation he met your gaze before he passed you.

They were maraschino red, with the kind of liquid clarity of colour that overpowered even the shifting monochrome of the half-gloom, and for the world you can’t imagine why he’d hide them.

But inescapably, while Dave is many things, he is not your son, and you are not entitled to question his decisions.

To you, Dave is a sweet boy, for all the failings of his upbringing that you might find yourself inclined to see, and you admire the resilience of his sweetness and can only hope his life improves. But privately you fret, because you suspect that such a thing could be affected if only he would accept the importance of being properly attired.

He’s a good-looking boy, you think. A tailored suit and a good face alone can do even the poorest
man wonders.

There’s a hissed reminder in the familiar breathless *whumph* of a large duffel bag being tossed carelessly across a hardwood floor, and you abandon both your apron and your hopeless speculations with it.

==>

Good lord, you dislike this man immensely.

He’s learned, at least, not to come into your house with his filthy, disgracefully unkempt shoes, but he seems to have taken this as an invitation to simply throw things inside rather than come in at all, and the manner in which he does so suggests very little interest in ensuring that his sibling or your son can intercept them before they damage your collection of mirthful figurines.

He pauses when he sees you, and the combination of your passage through the saloon-style doors that separate the kitchen from the living room and the shattered gleam of his atrocious belt buckle only reinforces your sense of antagonism; not only has he intruded upon the aesthetic sensibilities of your home, but infused the very atmosphere with a crude Southern flavour unfit for a tasteful gentleman.

You watch him raise a hand to the brim of his hat and tip it to you, and the languid crookedness of his smile assures you that he knows how absurd an action it is.

You do not return the gesture, but you deign to tip your own head in fractional acknowledgement because you are a person of practiced manners, even to those who mock them.

When he slips back from the doorway, you can only feel relieved, even pleased, perhaps, because the void his imposing frame leaves behind isn’t empty at all.

In it is a young man who seems to grow another measured hand’s width with every passing year, a fast-leavening creature of honeyed brightness invariably arrayed in an incongruous combination of old t-shirt, faded sneakers, and worn-out jeans.

Except that this time, this year, your keen eye catches a tellingly straight and even flat-felled seam amidst the rich black of new denim, and despite the distraction of John’s excitement and the weight of another overstuffed drawstring bag in each hand, Dave straightens from his customary slouch when he greets you.

And for a moment, you can almost see a gentleman.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Dad does some baking.

Chapter Notes

My hand slipped and my Dad characterization just took on a life of its own.

A very, very repressed life.

You find yourself continually marvelling at the subtle, almost elegant changes the younger of the two Strider brothers has undergone.

You notice, off-hand, the thinning of his cheeks when the light strikes him from an unfamiliar angle and reveals a flat plane between cheekbone and chin where once you saw a gently curving softness.

You note the tell-tale shimmer of coarsened hair, too short and too fair to be seen by any light less unforgiving than the kind that comes through your kitchen windows in the late afternoon.

You remember the slouch he’s always carried himself with, and warm a little at the obvious care he takes to remind himself to stand correctly when he begins to slide back into the arms of the old, unconscious temptress of long habit.

You see long fingers with short, finely kept nails, clean sneakers with the shoelaces tied and tucked behind their tongues, and a pair of jeans with a waistline that might sit too low on his hips for your discerning eye, but neither gaps nor sags despite the lack of a belt.

You see the markings of an eye for detail with your own, and though they are not, perhaps, the details you would linger on, you see the care he’s taken with them, nonetheless.

You’re not sure if it’s a blessing or a torment, because in those details you still perceive the mocking flash of another pair of sunglasses yet, and know too well that they would never brook the direction you would coax the wearer of those details in.

You would see those thin, angular shoulders in angora, even silk, because you are by the day more certain that you could persuade them to carry the weight of that fabric and those meticulous seams without complaint.

You would, but you won’t, because you would not risk the incursion of a less reasonable man’s wrath upon the angles of a face that already bears the thickened bridge of a nose that’s been broken at least once.

And so you resign to yourself to the compromise of appreciating these things that you see for what they are, rather than what they could be.
Speaking truthfully, they are perfectly appreciable without your interference.

You’re aware that in catching on those flickers of potential in his mannerisms and carriage, you’ve formed an unfortunate bias. You’ve begun to expect of him what you have given up on expecting from John.

You’re being terribly unfair to Dave, and you know it.

He is not your son.

You are unable to impose yourself upon him, and perhaps that’s for the best.

Despite your best efforts, your resignation has begun to flavour your baking.

By the moment, you find yourself straying ever further from the meticulously arranged sequence of familiar boxes that fill your cupboards, each too sweet and uncomplicated to satisfy the unnameable itch you feel, even in combination.

You feel like a faithless adulterer, the whiskey brown streaks of molasses staining your apron always lingering at the edge of your vision like a bruised smear of lipstick peeking from the inside of a philanderer’s rumpled collar. You watch each cake in succession grow richer and darker in the suffocating heat of the oven and taste the bittersweet pungency of cocoa building in the humid air like sharp juniper and sweet vermouth on the smoky breath of a temptress.

Your frustrations fill the kitchen with a chokingly aromatic haze, and in it, you find Dave.

There in an instant in which you feel almost capable of appreciating the irony of that.

That instant disappears into the next, swallowed by the silence of his hesitation, and you invite him to help you if he feels the inclination because you’re a fool too quick to rely on manners before sense.

He tells you that your son is currently preoccupied by a very engaging telephone call and you tell him that he needs no excuse to visit you, that you always welcome the company, because these are the things that proper conduct obliges you to say.

The issue you face is not that he isn’t welcome. There is nothing at all the matter with Dave.

It is that his quiet inflection—more reserved for your ears than the rambling murmurs you’ve so often heard through thin walls and closed doors—breathes out from between lips pursed with concentration. It is that you can see his pale, furrowing brows disappear behind a frame of wire and glass. It is that you feel the intensity of his focus, read it in the lines of his posture, but you yourself are unable to access what it is that he’s seeing.

He is no longer only chest-high to you, and having those blackened lenses at eye level makes you feel as though he has you at something of a disadvantage.

He is studying you as intently as you have studied him, and you fear, irrationally, that the irregularity of your behaviour has betrayed your frustration and guilt.

No.

No, if you are being honest— which perhaps you should be, if only to yourself— you fear you have
betrayed your fixation.

Even unspoken, the word is sour on your tongue.

You are a neat, self-contained sort of gentleman, efficient and reliable.

A fixation is, by definition, a messy, unpalatable thing.

You dislike even the suggestion of the word, but it is still infinitely preferable to the supplied alternative.

The alternative is unthinkable, more so for the leering countenance of its provider.

You will not allow your gentlemanly interests, however intense, to be defined by someone who shows no indication of ever having shared them. Certainly not by a scoundrel who would suggest that your appreciation of a brown Harris Tweed jacket or merino wool pant in charcoal grey extends beyond the simply fanatical to something obscene— even now, you find yourself putting the suggestion far more delicately than he had.

You’re not certain you could reproduce the kind of filth you tolerated from him, and that itself should be proof enough of the error in his defamations.

And yet you’re trapped by them, because if you saw fit to act upon your motivations, it is he whose watchful eye would see impurity in the tailored marks you left behind.

And the careful focus of the subject your mind would feign to tailor inspires you to wonder if he believes you as depraved as his brother claims you to be, but even as he assists you, as you request and receive one more ingredient with one more composed smile and word of thanks, you see nothing but the faintest distortion of your own face in the steam-clouded mirrors of his eyes.

It rankles you, not because you feel exposed to him, but because it occurs to you to fear that you have been painted as a deviant in the mind of one you would be a mentor to.

You really, really dislike that man.

=>

You greet the advent of the work week with more than usual enthusiasm.

This is because you are a hard-working citizen and a dedicated father who takes pride in contributing to the gains made by a highly productive day.

This is not because your earlier affability has dramatically increased the amount of time the younger Strider sibling spends in your presence.

That is, of course, not something a polite gentleman like you could ever take issue with.

Especially not if, for whatever inscrutable reason, the circumstances demanded that this youth inquire after the hypothetical specifics of procuring and maintaining a well-fitting arrangement of formalwear.

You are highly knowledgeable about such things, after all.

There is no part of you that has ever wondered if Dave is actively attempting to torment you.

Such a thing would hardly be a torment to a tasteful gentleman who takes a certain amount of pride
in his appearance.

Such a thought has no reason to have ever occurred to you.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Dave's bony and mumbles too much.

Chapter Notes

Sorry it took me so long to write this! I'm still struggling with the differences between this and Joker Over Knave- this is a lot less stream-of-consciousness and a lot more controlled, which makes it infinitely less effortless for obvious reasons.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The office is stifling.

It’s not too warm- no, not precisely.

It’s just utterly still.

There’s no movement- it is too early in the year for air conditioning, yet too late for central heating- and so the air just hangs, lukewarm and faintly humid, heavy and close against the exposed skin above your shirt collar.

It’s an imperturbable calm that seems to dampen and swallow the familiar rustlings of paper, softens the rhythmic clicking of typing fingers into an almost inaudible tapping from all sides and no direction.

Logically, you’re aware that beyond the flimsy walls of your cubicle, there sit a number of gentlemen and ladies you’ve known for many years.

You’re aware that not too far behind your open back, there is another, turned away to face yet another keyboard besides yet another neat pile of forms to be processed and sorted. You’re aware that if you looked over your shoulder, you would see them, and be reassured of their existence.

But you do not.

You do not because it is nonsensical for a grown man to feel alone on a floor of over a hundred other people, and therefore, that is not something that you feel.

You do not because there would be no excuse for you to miss the scalding breath of your oven when you know perfectly well that you’ll be home to feel it in scant hours, and therefore, that is not something that you feel.

You do not because you are proud to contribute to the motion of this seamless machine you have fitted yourself into, proud to be a well-oiled cog in an engine of perpetual progress, and if you were not, that would imply that you must then harbour some reluctance lingering in the face of your domestic bliss.
And that, of course, is not something you could feel.

Whenever he bends to retrieve something from a low cupboard or drawer, you can see the faint ridging of his spine through his shirt, and even, on occasion, the smooth inner edge of a shoulder blade.

You know he’s a strong lad, and you’ve seen for yourself how well-matched his appetite is to your tendency to overproduce anything you cook, but you’re still inclined to think he’s rather too thin.

Perhaps it’s just that you are accustomed to John, who’s always carried a healthy softness around the middle.

Or perhaps it’s merely that you work within a cohort of persons defined by heavily layered attire.

Whatever the reason, the sight of Dave’s bones gently protruding through his clothing fills you with an irrationally frantic sense of having witnessed some unconscious impropriety.

You’re thoroughly unaccustomed to seeing fabric dip into the breathless hollows above someone’s clavicles when they hand you a whisk, so when such a thing occurs, you can’t help but feel almost as though he’s slightly naked.

You recognize that such a thought is both unkind and utterly ludicrous, but the fact remains that you have made a habit of politely averting your eyes.

And the fact remains that for all your attempts at subtlety, he’s noticed. What precisely he’s gleaned from that, you’re unsure of, but you’ve noted an increasingly marked tendency to reinsert himself into your line of sight when you do. You’re not sure what to make of it. You suppose he wants your attention. Despite his adult appearance, he may still just be a child after all.

You find that thought inexplicably comforting.

Your decision to opt out of attending the Tuesday after-work luncheon is not due to any perceived distance between your coworkers and yourself.

You are simply a man of careful habit.

Besides, you have a son waiting at home.

And a guest.

Dave’s inquiries seem to be sporadic, and somewhat varied in their levels of sincerity.

The first time he asked you about acquiring a suit, it was even more a mumble than you were accustomed to hearing from him, and he was fidgeting as if nervous.

The second time, it was an off-hand tumble of words filtered through the tines of his dinner fork, and he met your studied dissertation with complete inattention, opting instead to drop an ice cube down the back of John’s shirt in a moment of distraction.

This is the third time, and despite his appearance of rapt attention, you’ve grown wearily
suspicious that his interest is too shallow to sustain the leavening of your well-intentioned efforts.

In any case, you conclude that it’s probably for the best if you divert this inadvisable interaction before it once again fails to occur. You are not, of course, frustrated with him. You have no cause to be. You are, perhaps, reasonably exasperated.

“Is my son neglecting you again, Dave?”

No matter how many times you address him, the way you say his name always comes out sounding a little clipped.

You want to call him David. It’s not even precisely a matter of suitability. The manner of your speech just seems to demand a second syllable from his name. It took him a number of years to successfully impose upon you that the name on his birth certificate is only four letters long, and contains only one syllable. It took him almost as many to recognize that you’ve developed an unfortunate tendency to forget that on the mercifully rare occasions that you find yourself seriously displeased with him.

You can see one pale eyebrow rising above the metal frame of his sunglasses, and the corner of his mouth starting to pull incredulously outwards. You hope this isn’t going to be one of those occasions.

All he says is, “It’s Tuesday, Mister E.”

Years of coercion, and you are still as far from convincing him to call you Dad as you are from convincing him to remove his shades whilst indoors.

You’re aware that it’s Tuesday. You look at him expectantly, and watch that pulling corner of his lips part to reveal one half of a dentistry-perfect canine, a third of a pair of glossy white premolars. They make you think of a teenager’s orthodontic bands. They were always the wrong red; maroon rather than maraschino.

“John has piano classes on Tuesday, Mister E.”

Oh.

You feel a little foolish, and more than little guilty for forgetting.

Thankfully, the experience of a much younger man has left you well-provided for, and you reveal nothing of the sort.

You opt to frown. “I am aware. I had merely assumed that John would choose not to attend while you are his guest in our home.”

You watch his expression do something inscrutable and a little alarming at “his guest” and cannot help but feel that he’s taken your words as some sort of rejection.

His posture sags almost imperceptibly for a moment, almost like that of a child resisting the urge to draw in on himself protectively, and indeed, you believe you may be correct, despite his smooth composure.

When he says, “I totally get that but neither John or I knows how long I’m gonna stay up here so it’d be kind of stupid instead of polite if he did that,” all you hear is one continuous exhalation of breath before an uncertain pause, and in it, the saccharine flavour of childlike nervousness.

“Maybe.”
You believe you understand the source of his hesitation now.

“Dave, you are welcome in my home for as long as you feel comfortable.” Even as you say it, you’re unsure why you’re saying my rather than our, but you continue speaking, regardless. “There is no limit to your time here that is not set wholly by your own inclinations.”

You know you’ve caught him off-guard; he actually smiles for a moment in his confusion, revealing a little crack in his façade that’s as sweet and crooked as the first clumsy cut into the soft flesh of an angel food cake. You haven’t seen him do it since he was seventeen. It’s no less an arresting sight now than it was then- more arresting, perhaps, for the absent dental braces.

His mumble drops to incomprehensibility. He’s gone a touch pink around the ears.

He wants something from you.

You study him carefully.

“May I ask what occasioned your interest in acquiring a suit, Dave?”

It takes you a moment to extract the meaning from his, ah, somewhat inarticulate response.

You weren’t aware that the screenwriting and film programs at the University of Washington held enough prestige to draw potential students all the way from Texas.

You’re also not certain what that has to do with acquiring a suit.

You may, however, finally comprehend why Dave’s been so nervous about outstaying his welcome.

You’re not quite sure how to feel about this.

Chapter End Notes

I legitimately know nothing about the University of Washington aside from its general vicinity to Maple Valley. Forgive me.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Dave reveals his life plan. John gets a job opportunity. Dad doesn't approve.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the brutal delay on this chapter, guys.

John won’t be back from lessons for another half hour yet. You take your time asking Dave questions.

He’s fidgeting with the zipper of his hoodie. He’s given in, tucked his chin to his chest a little in a pretense of looking down at it. He’s nervous, and you can certainly sympathize, but you want to better understand his motivations.

As pleased as you are at the thought of not having to send him home to the dubious machinations of his sibling, you don’t want to keep him here against his better interests. It would not do to discover that something as important as his choice in post-secondary education was influenced by John’s occasionally quite coercive inclinations.

Dave tells you that he wants to make movies. You believe him. In fact, you can all too easily see those slim fingers directing and gesticulating content in such a context; more curious still, you can think of no place where those ever-present sunglasses would be more readily accepted as an iconic mark of Dave Strider than they already may well be.

Dave won’t tell you why he chose the University of Washington. He admits to you that it isn’t, perhaps, the best school he could have attended, but assures you that it “has its own charm.” He says this with a raised eyebrow and a wry twist to his mouth that tells you his words are meant to be pointed, but you’re not sure where he means to be pointing them. You make a mental note to inquire after John’s involvement in the matter.

Dave tells you that he wants to make a good impression.

Dave tells you that he thinks it’s important to be “as well dressed as your content is ridiculous” and while you really have no idea what that is supposed to mean, you assure him that you’ll assist his efforts to achieve the correct level of contrast between the aesthetics of his future work and that of his wardrobe.

Judging by the depth of interest he’s showing in being very nicely attired- “Unfortunately, tailcoats have long been out of vogue, Dave, and carry with them a certain aspect of outlandishness as a result; I would recommend a well-tailored blazer made from high-quality materials for best effect, instead. You may find it more prudent to counterbalance a large measure of absurdity with an equal and opposite measure of subtlety and taste”- you must assume his proposed material is very silly, indeed.
John was already aware of Dave’s predicament, and proudly reveals to you that it was his suggestion that Dave take up residence in your home.

Sadly, you find yourself surprised by neither his clumsy scheme nor the pride he seems to take in having kept it from you.

Your son developed an unfortunate tendency to excuse his own tactlessness and rude behaviour with boasts of masterful pranksterism many long years ago. In the end, it was your own ironclad sense of propriety that was made to bend in the face of your affections. You are very ill-equipped to deny John anything, even undeserved approval.

This may be why you can barely muster irritation at the shameful way he’s berating your- his? You suppose so- guest for loosing the prank from its secretive oven before it had a chance to rise, let alone go whatever shade of appealing golden-brown your son considers quality comedy. If his teasing is to be believed, the original plan was to maintain Dave’s guest status indefinitely, or at least until you caught wise to their ploy.

You know your son better than that. John would have loosed the secret himself, eventually; a prank undiscovered is no prank at all. You’re embarrassingly willing to believe that he’s more irritated that Dave stole his spotlight, and in a moment of what you can only assume was guilt, at that.

You hardly know what to say to his antics anymore. You just listen.

“Seriously, Dave, you’re so lame! We’re talking ultimate uncool, dude, you suck!” Your son is stomping his feet. He’s huffing. He’s rolling his eyes.

Despite the show, he’s not really angry. From what little you can glean from Dave’s carefully kept expression, you think he likely knows that, as well.

“Yeah well maybe if you were the one who had to worry about the chance you might get your ass kicked to the curb you’d feel differently bro, my ass and the curb have been divorced for years and sorry but I just don’t feel like now is a good time to revisit our estranged relationship, the curb and I are moving on with our respective lives and we don’t need that kind of setback, you know,” and you find yourself turning towards the oven to hide an irrepressible smile, because while Dave visits you somewhat regularly and John is around as frequently as can reasonably be expected of a nearly-adult son, it’s so rare that you witness the two of them together.

And yet here they are, in your kitchen.

“Oh, come on, like Dad would kick you out. You are such a loser, god.”

He’s right, of course.

It would take some truly extreme circumstances for you to even consider leaving your young guest helpless and alone in a strange city. You’d like to believe you’re not even capable of it.

“Forgive me if I seem unreasonable to you dude but moving into somebody’s house without telling them seems hella rude to me and my bro would kick my shit if I pulled what you tried to pull and this is kind of my whole future dangling on the line here so I think I maybe need to reel this fish in to port before it flops off the hook and disappears forever because you’re the one who’s gonna have to deal with me talking about it for the rest of our lives so I don’t think I’m gonna apologize for playing this one on the safe side, sorry,” you’re not certain when he stops to take breath, but he must, because his sentences never seem to end.
Perhaps it’s just your perception of him.

Whenever he speaks to you, he’s typically fairly succinct. You only hear this kind of breathy endlessness when he’s nervous or excited.

But when speaks to John, he always starts as though he’s picking up where he left off and stops as though he’s just pausing for thought.

To your ears, everything he says is part of one infinitely long run-on sentence.

It’s improper, and it should bother you.

It does not.

You find that somewhat curious.

==> You discover that the very engaging telephone calls that John has been receiving as of late are not, as you had thought, the work of some mysterious suitor he had been furtively entertaining.

They still emerge as the telltale marks of a passionate courtship, but the wooing being done just under your admittedly rather generously proportioned nose is not one of a romantic nature.

John has been speaking to a very particular variety of business owner: those in possession of a space in which aspiring and professional entertainers alike ply their trades to a discerning audience of potential admirers.

You knew that John had made a habit of frequenting amateur nights at a few local venues, quietly disappearing for a certain number of hours on certain weeknights, sometimes coming home unusually late in the evening on weekends, but you’d thought- or perhaps hoped- that these humble expeditions would satisfy him.

If you are being honest with yourself, you had hoped that the rigours of the entertainment industry, which seemed to your keen eye even more unforgiving than you knew them to be when you were a young man, would dissuade your oft-fickle and inconstant son of his dangerously grand illusions.

It is not that you do not have faith in his abilities. Quite the opposite, in fact.

It is that you are far too aware of the very particular brand of cruelty a discerning audience can heap upon the shoes of those it has raised upon its shoulders. It is that you are far too familiar with the ease with which a discerning audience can substitute the kind word and the tapping clatter of applause for the snide remark and the jeering echo of mocking laughter.

It is that you know far too intimately that a person alone will rarely overstep the boundaries of common politeness to his neighbour, but a people gathered around a distant idol will show little compunction when trading the rose in the right hand for the tomato in the left, and both will hit the stage with equal fervency.

It is because your son is the last patch of vibrancy in your small grey universe, and you have already given much to ensure that it does not bleed the colour from him as it did from you.

You, only child of a woman left orphaned and brotherless by a sequence of ever more tantalizing mysteries, the estranged heiress to an iconic American business. You, a boy left fatherless at ten by a war that no one seems to have won, the last vestige of sanity standing between your mother and a
bleak landscape of prying eyes.

You, who knew the meaning and the purpose of discretion before you’d mastered the letters with which to spell the word.

You watched your mother grey in more than hair.

It was only when you had the money to finally give back to her what she had so long provided you, when you guided her tottering steps from the car and directed her failing sight to a sold sign in an otherwise empty glass storefront, that you remembered your mother had eyes the colour of a robin’s egg.

In that moment, you saw colour in her for the first time since you were a boy, and she seemed to you to return almost to the dark-haired and smooth-cheeked woman of your distant memory.

If you ever had colour, you lost it long before you ever rediscovered colour in her, and in her pale but vibrant blue you found vicarious contentment.

And then she was gone, in one instant a familiar silhouette on a ladder, slightly obscured by the glare of mid-afternoon sun on smooth glass, in the next, nothing but ash, returned to grey in but a moment.

Amidst that grey, you found an abandoned scarf, a rather hefty unabridged joke book, and a fragile flash of cobalt blue. You adopted all three without hesitation.

You nursed that blue from fragile infancy to boisterous adulthood, and you did so carefully eluding the attentive eye of your late mother’s discerning audience, reawakened once again by the peculiar circumstances of her passing; the loss of the last person to bear the Crocker name did not remain unnoticed, nor did you, a Crocker in blood, if not in name.

In another life, you may have considered it. You are well-accustomed to such attention, after all.

You understand perfectly the importance of an iconic figure, of an industry having a familiar and well-loved face. You understand perfectly the attachment of the American public to the idea of the all-American family-owned business, perfectly comprehend the appeal of the progression of smiling faces adorning labels and attending functions generation after generation, each one set side-by-side in the front lobby of the company’s main office like a hallway filled with family portraits.

You understand perfectly why your cupboards will never be empty of product, even if you do not fill them.

Even after all these years, they haven’t given up on you yet.

But this is not another life. You treasure your son’s sheltered vibrancy too greatly to be tempted from the shadows of relative anonymity.

When the day comes- if the day comes- that they finally accept that, you assume it will be the first Wednesday in nearly two decades marked by a missing box.

A much younger man than you imagined that on that day, the arrival of the morning post would break dawn on a world in which he could retrieve that morning’s newspaper from the front step without fear of a single watchful eye.

A much younger man than you shaved diligently and ironed fastidiously and smiled pleasantly and
waited patiently for a day that never came, and he grew into a much older man who isn’t certain that he’d know what to do if that day came after all.

A much younger man than you started to lose hope somewhere along the way, and in his darkest, most indecorous moments, his wished the world would end and leave nothing behind but him and his son and, perhaps, a woman with a little girl about his son’s age, whose long-forgotten scarf still smelled faintly of juniper and rose.

It was never within imagination that his carefully tended world would begin to fold and wrinkle around its bright epicenter.

But it has.

You suppose you should have considered this possibility. John’s interest in public performance is not new, and should he gather the scattered attention of the public, your little family will come under the spotlight once again.

Uncharitably, you never considered the possibility of his success.

And now he has been successful.

When he tells you that he’s going to New York for a week in the hopes of securing the interest of an influential franchise owner, you smile because you’re expected to, but you do not wish him luck.

He tells you that he’s leaving in a week, and you pass that week in silence because as a good father you are expected to support him, and because you know that nothing you could say would dissuade him from going.

Some part of you is not numb enough to forgo noticing the peculiar interest with which your guest observes you when he is party to you humouring John’s professions of excitement, and the morning of John’s flight arrives with a strange addendum.

It had been your intention to remain in the car until your son’s airplane disappeared from sight entirely.

You smiled as you explained this to Dave as the tedious whim of a foolish old man, asked him to humour you, and offered him a rather compelling amount of allowance to entertain himself in the general vicinity of the airport while you stared bleakly into an ever-emptier sky and contemplated how the vibrancy in your life had never seemed so perilous or so distant before.

You did not expect him to stay with you.

You did not expect him to stay, but no matter how sweet your coercion, he would not go.

And so you sit in silence beside a boy who is not your son, your suit baking you in the heat of the afternoon, and watch a fleck of white disappear into a cloudless backdrop of uniform blue.

When you look at him, he’s already looking back at you.

Even sheltered by the car as he is, the bridge of his nose and the narrow crescents of cheek visible below his sunglasses have begun to redden ominously. He doesn’t bother straightening up from his slouch for you. You can see that his shirt is sticking to his back. He’s been sweating.

You stare at him for far longer than is appropriate. You don’t know what to say.
He asks you if you’re hungry.

You are.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Breakfast and a tiff.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is unusually long, and this story gets weirder every goddamn time I write it.

I don't even know what's happening anymore, it's just doing its own fuckin' thing now.

A part of you may never cease to find Dave’s inability to take your generosity for granted somewhat frustrating, because it does nothing but heighten your awareness that he is not your son.

Exasperatingly, another part of you is endlessly pleased by his conscientious nature, particularly the seemingly unconscious good sense and social grace born from it. You’ve grown unused to being thanked for small gestures. In some ways, Dave has remarkably sophisticated social etiquette.

His table etiquette leaves something to be desired, however.

John never mastered table manners, but his conduct was never truly unacceptable, and always in accordance with the rest of his half-cultured behaviour. He was, and is, constant in that, at least.

Dave is reserved with you, careful with his words, and either almost unsettlingly attentive or exceptionally good at giving the impression that he is, and the aura of youthful maturity that this lends him is so bafflingly at odds with the clumsy way he palms his fork and saws haphazardly through his meal with the point of his knife that you find it almost surreal.

There is something strangely hilarious about such a solemn-looking young man leaning so intently across the table towards you with a muted lipstick-smudge of ketchup at the edge of his thinly pressed lips.

You’re unsure whether to attempt polite correction or succumb to an oddly pervasive feeling of fondness.

Your eggs and toast are delicious but decidedly unhelpful, and they afford you no answers.

Needless to say, you partake of a very conflicted breakfast.

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Dave’s company is a surprisingly effective balm to the raw heaviness of your mood. You don’t believe he knows it, and you’re all the fonder of him for that.
You can tell he’s relieved to be home by the quick eagerness of his movements, and quite frankly, you don’t blame him for it; the two of you arrived at the airport before the sun had broken more than the edge of the woolly grey pre-dawn sky, and that same sun is now starting to drift into the early west.

It has been a very long day, and you are, unexpectedly, very glad he was there to weather it with you.

You are very glad he is here with you while your son is not, placing his shoes in their proper space beside the door but leaving their laces in a trailing mess across the wood, standing straight with his shoulders squared but still shuffling when he walks, footsteps silent except for the dragging whispers caused by his seeming inability to properly lift his heels.

The idea of coming home to an empty house is a disquieting one.

You do not find it difficult to imagine opening your front door to a close stagnancy subtly marked by distinctive mustiness, to a dark spot of mold already beginning to grow on your cake-and-sugar life. Left alone for the first time, you can too easily picture yourself nurturing that mottled toxic blackness, cracking green-tinged eggs into a bowl of unspoiled sugar and watching it turn as damp and grey as the rest of your colourless existence, the beginnings of a sick batch of royal icing with which to sculpt a precise and rigid complement to the inartistic patchwork of fungus that has grown on you in the shade of your loneliness.

Instead of this, instead of being welcomed home by an empty room that would be consumed by utter stillness were it not for the ever-lengthening shadows of the afternoon, you are looking in at a warm patch of sunlight that has made itself your guest.

A languidly stretching sunbeam wearing sunglasses of its own. You think he’d appreciate the irony, if the sentiment wasn’t so strange.

Though you have been alone before, surviving for weeks on the few rushed and distracted telephone calls of a child that always makes idle promises and rarely keeps them, the yawning emptiness of your home today has filled itself with a week of sleepless worries that your son that will return only to leave you again, that you have raised a child who will promise to visit often but only brighten your doorstep at Christmas, a child who will only call you when he is in need, and never when you are.

The faintest thought of being left so utterly abandoned carries with it the siren song of a bottle of fifteen year old scotch that you have never touched before seven in the evening, and never until after dinner, but the heaviness of that despairing call is allayed by wonder at the pale scotch-and-water blond of your company, twenty years old and in every way as layered with complexity as the firewater whiskey you would use to dull your pain.

In the right light, you can see that the gold of his hair is shot through with faded copper red, and you marvel at it, for it seems to you that his natural vibrancy, though understated, is also unparalleled.

He holds a curious power of transfixion to which you cannot quite affix a name.

After all, blue and grey are all you have ever known.

You are so accustomed to John disappearing into his bedroom until you call him down for dinner
that you unconsciously expect the same of Dave, and his continuing company comes as a mostly pleasant surprise.

For the sake of clarity, you assure him that he is not obliged to linger under your watchful eye like an errant child requiring constant supervision, but he merely looks up from his cellphone and shrugs.

He tells you that there is nothing he would be doing on his own that he cannot also do in your presence, and you very nearly remind him that he is only just out of his teenage years before catching yourself with a thrill of horror at the way in which that statement could be misinterpreted, and a moment after, a deeper sense of shame at the realization that you’re not precisely sure how else it could be interpreted at all, or even how you really meant it.

You think perhaps the combination of your long pause and lingering stare serves to communicate to him the same degenerate thought you were endeavoured to conceal, because even the first rosy flush of Dave’s mild sunburn never reached such a height of colour, not did it extend quite so far down his cheeks.

It is an exceedingly awkward silence that Dave breaks to tell you, in an embarrassed rush of words, that he doesn’t like to be unaware of his housemates’ movements.

He fills the broken silence with a tale you’d find outrageous coming from the mouth of any other, a tale of scattered notes and trapdoor ambushes and an opponent so quick as to be more a blurred afterimage of a man than a man of flesh and bone. He tells you about a ventriloquist’s dummy so masterfully handled as to seem capable of autonomous action, sometimes a friend, sometimes a foe, but always the bright-eyed marker of a guardian who was always watching but rarely present.

He tells you something about the other puppets. It is something that you were not previously aware of.

You don’t think he means to. After all, he never has before.

It’s a slip of the tongue, nothing but a few words spent on the momentary expression of a long-established and still-enduring vexation, but you still hear it, nonetheless.

And like your improprietous thought, just minutes old, the phrase “bro’s weird sex puppets” has very few interpretations, none of which serve to lighten or cool your growing alarm and fast-darkening mood, not when you recall the many occasions on which you sent your son to dwell among them, not when you recall so many stories of impassably scattered floors, stories of inescapable cascades of brightly-coloured felt falling from overstuffed cupboards and overhead cabinets, and most particularly not when you a recall a very old story of a friend in Texas with an independently wealthy custodian.

A business-owner. A toy-maker, even, of all things.

You suppose it was your own failure to inquire after precisely what kind of toys this gentleman produced, and to what discerning audience he sold them, that allowed you to remain so long ignorant, but for the sweetness of a younger boy than the one that sits before you, it was never a question that had occurred to you to ask.

As incongruous a profession as toy-making had seemed to the ostensible toy-maker of your acquaintance, you had assumed that it was simply another of the elder Mister Strider’s many idiosyncrasies.
However, with the addition of this tiny detail, of this one last jigsaw piece, the two halves of a puzzle you have long been riddling over have finally intersected and joined, and they form a truly horrifying whole.

You don’t have the chance to say anything before Dave is speaking again, nor do think you would have to for him to understand the depths of your displeasure.

He tells you that it is- as all things seem to be in his household, from broken noses to barren cupboards- “ironic.”

Even as he says it, he doesn’t look like he really believes it. His glasses may hide his eyes, but the hesitation of his words betrays his doubts, and that even he who grew up amidst it finds cause to doubt it somehow worsens everything for you.

He tells you that it “isn’t that big of a deal,” that “bro never did anything messed up” while he and John were present, and you tell him, very calmly and politely, that one does not have to be engaging in indecent acts to make obvious the purpose of a lewd magazine.

Judging by his expression, you believe he knows that just as well as you do.

And judging by the convulsive tightening of his mouth at your words, you begin to suspect that lewd magazines themselves were not absent from his apartment’s apparently somewhat eclectic décor.

He tells you that you would have called Child Protective Services.

You tell him that he is absolutely correct.

You explain to him, very patiently, that “without another, less deviant context against which to compare one’s own, the most reprehensible of behaviours may be made to seem normal to an impressionable child,” and through the suffocating haze of your tightly-controlled anger, you watch something curious occur.

You watch a very real storm begin to brew on the sinking brows of one from whom you have never heard a complaint born of anything greater than petty aggravation.

When you go to speak again, he interrupts you.

“I had to teach John how to put on a condom.”

He’s very quiet, but you stall completely, suddenly at a loss for words.

He watches you silently for a moment, lips pressed together so tightly as to have almost disappeared.

“Do you have any idea how fucked up that is?” You don’t even have time to remind him to mind his language before he’s standing, suddenly much closer to you than before. “Shut up. No seriously, shut the fuck up for a second.”

You just stare at him, startled into compliance.

“I had to teach my best friend how the fuck condoms work. See, that’s normally a thing your dad or your bro or like, your weird older druggie classmate who’s been held back a couple years is supposed to teach you, but you didn’t do that and John didn’t go to school, John was home-schooled, so he didn’t even have the weird chill druggie dude option, nobody fucking taught him
this shit.”

Even through his sunglasses, you can feel the heat of his glare. The colour has risen in his cheeks again, but this time, it’s not from embarrassment.

“In case you didn’t fuckin’ know this, bro, Houston is two hours ahead of Seattle on account o’ time zone shit, and when I was seventeen, my best bro called me in the middle of the fucking night asking me how to put a condom because he was about to lose his v-card—” you’re so flustered that you don’t even bother trying to disguise your considerable confusion “—his virginity, dude. When we were seventeen, John called me at like one in the goddamn morning asking me how to properly roll a rubber down his dong over the phone like some sort of weirdly helpful midnight sex line operator, and I did it knowing he was fumbling with his boner the entire goddamn time—”

You can feel the heat rising in your own face. “John had no cause to be engaging in such activities at such an age, there should have been no need—” Dave interrupts your growing lecture with a rather cruel laugh.

“People have sex,” he snaps, enunciating every syllable with a jab of his finger in your direction, “it’s a thing people do, they have sex, everybody has fucking sex, that’s how most of us got here in the first place, it’s a normal goddamn thing, so don’t you fucking tell me that my bro didn’t know what he was doing or was irresponsible and messed me up or some other fuckin’ thing when I had to teach what he taught me to your son because you fucking didn’t!”

You are having rather severe misgivings about the fact that Dave is now approximately equal in height to you, because this tirade may have proved remarkably less formidable coming from someone not at your eye level, someone who could not, therefore, stand with his face much too close to yours and his left index finger pressed hard into your chest.

You understand what he is doing perfectly well. Should you betray your discomfort by stepping back, you will have lost ground to him, and he will only continue to press you further until you have no choice but to submit to his unexpectedly fiery temper.

However, should you stand your ground, you will have no choice but to endure his proximity, and in his closeness he has left you with nowhere to look but at him, nothing to hear but his words, and nothing to feel but the heat of his breath on your face.

And you cannot push him back. He is very young, and despite his current attitude, he is still your guest.

So you stand your ground and memorize every inevitable scratch that mars the smoky glass of his aviators, study the faintly visible lines of his eyes behind them, and say nothing.

He seems to find this particularly displeasing.

“Ask me who had to answer John’s questions about why he was popping random boners when he was twelve,” he whispers to you, sounding for all the world like he knows every dirty little secret you never knew you had. “Ask me who John called the first time he had a wet dream.”

There’s an arresting intimacy to the way he speaks that will not brook your inattention, and you think again about that strangely coercive power he wields, and consider that perhaps it is not as unconscious as you had originally thought.
You watch the corners of his mouth pull down in a frown, and understand that he thinks that you are not listening.

You watch him tilt back his head to slide his sunglasses up into his hair, and for only the second time in more than half a decade, you see what he keeps behind them.

They are all at once exactly as you remember them and entirely different, because their unearthly pigmentation and seemingly endless liquid depth has not changed, but the face that holds them is no longer the face of a child, and it is certainly not the face of someone who has been taken by surprise.

It is not the face of an adult, but it is also not the face of a mere adolescent. It is a jaw set by stubbornness and a pair of tightly closed lips and a proud nose with its nostrils flared indignantly and a pair of pale eyebrows furrowed over an unwavering gaze, defined more by determination than anger, and just the same maraschino red that you recall so vividly.

It is a face filled with impossible vibrancy.

And in that moment the most irrational piece of your mind finds the word for which you had been searching:

*Witchlight.*

While every sensible part of you understands that you are looking at a young man as fraught with mortal worries as any other, a young man whose preternaturally bright eyes do not adequately disguise the ghostly waver of anxiety behind them, there is still something almost occult about him.

From his long fingers to the bones that shape the fall of his clothes with their gentle protrusions, from his murmuring speech to the strands of rose gold in his hair to his carefully-hidden eyes, there is something intrinsically mesmeric about his person, and it conflicts with the inexperience of the youth dwelling within, who has not yet truly learned the power he holds.

There is something very dangerous about Dave Strider, and you have more than enough experience with shutting out the whispering allure of very poor ideas to be both wholly unwilling to find out what and completely capable of not examining why you don’t want to know.

You break eye contact and slightly incline your head amicably towards him. “It appears we have discovered a difference of opinions in which we are both totally unwilling to compromise,” you state decisively.

He blinks, stepping away in visible confusion, and he is suddenly just Dave once more, the boy who confuses a Windsor and Manhattan tie knot.

You look back, allowing yourself a self-indulgent moment of amusement before crushing that, too, into the unexamined abyss of things you do not and will not think about, for too much freedom with one will invite the others to come crawling up over the edges towards it, like ants, and then you shall never be rid of them.

You smile at him.

“What would you like for dinner?”

With his glasses still perched atop his head, you are afforded a rare vision that you do not think he intended you to see.
Dave looks intensely unnerved by your response.

You do him the courtesy of turning away and busying yourself with preparations until he recalls his transgression, and in the moment of silence between the rumble of an opening drawer and the clatter of selecting silverware, you hear him mutter “that was some weird ass stepford shit right there.”

You find his sentiment interesting rather than offensive.

It would be appear that, in John’s absence, you have turned out to be a very unnatural household, indeed.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Dad thinks.

Chapter Notes

A short update less than twenty-four hours after I last updated, because I'm completely insane.

Dave is treading lightly around you. While you do understand why, understanding does not make it any less lamentable.

He is being careful in a way that he clearly did not feel was necessary before.

Before, he watched his language, just like any good boy should, and you forgave him his momentary slips, because their coarseness was never equal to the care he took.

Before, he watched his words, careful of your sensibilities, eager to please, unwilling to offend.

Now, he is being careful, but it is a very peculiar kind of careful.

He is treading lightly around you.

Before, he had made great effort to follow the waltzing steps of propriety that you dance, and though it seemed that he was always looking down at your feet for direction, you did not begrudge the few times you found him treading on your toes, because he danced carefully, and with a clumsy kind of untrained grace that told you that he might one day learn to be a greater dancer than even you.

But he had never treaded lightly, for those still learning the steps never do.

You had been mistaken. Foolishly, you had assumed that his sinuous grace was a marker of looseness waiting to be tailored into something sleeker, something that would lie snug to the lines of his obvious potential. He had seemed to you to wear an ill-fitted suit of mannerisms.

But you see now that the fluidity of his movements does not denote a lack of training. He is not a youth without direction, and the cloth he wears is not uncut.

It was simply tailored by a very different kind of training than that which you would have imposed upon him.

Dave does not tread like a dancer.

Dave treads like a fencer.
He walks with a swordsman’s grace, and struggles with a dancer’s step because he has been trained to keep strong stances, lest his opponent knock him down. He speaks politely, behaves honourably, but does not engage in the diplomatic exchange of expected niceties, for he is trained in the way of those for whom a question is a question, and never a politeness.

His is a sort of medieval civility, and he is ferociously loyal to his king and crown, though his kingdom has been built on the mockery of sense, and financed by the romancing of depravity.

So yes, you understand why he’s abandoned the starched collar of clumsy emulation for a knightly crest he wears with much greater comfort.

You have uttered words of treason against his liege, and you have refused to rescind them.

You found him packing this morning, and you understand that, as well.

After all, this is not his kingdom. In his eyes, this must be, invariably, your kingdom.

And in it, you are king.

So it is no great surprise that he would feel himself unwelcome, particularly not when he has so little access to the meanings behind your mannerisms. He would not know if he was unwelcome, because you would never tell him such a thing.

It was only with great effort that you dissuaded him of the worrisome notion that he is.

You are not a hard man. You are a gentleman, not a tyrant.

If your home is your castle, then he is a guest of its prince, regardless of whether or not the prince himself is present.

And you do not dislike him. Your difference of opinion has not changed your opinion of him. He is, in age and physiology, an adult, and he is allowed to disagree with you.

You would not have him abandon his pursuits for nothing but a petty disagreement, and you would not surrender him to the dangers of poverty, poor grades, and potential degeneracy that beckon young men left unsupervised in strange cities.

He agreed to stay, though not without obvious reservations, and in the hours following you have come to realize that he believes that you to have given ground to him. He has begun to tread lightly around you because you have answered his rebellion by making him secure, and in doing so you have given him no cause to continue abiding by the steps of your waltz.

He believes he holds some small measure of sway over you because you would still have him stay.

But his is not a mind that sees a multiplicity of meanings.

He believes that you would have him stay, but the reality is simply that you would not let him go.

Should he leave, you will have lost little, but he will have lost much.

And so without the furious heat and uncertainty of a recent dispute, he will not find cause to leave. He would have left, but you did not let him, and now he will not, for the benefit of staying is simply far too great.

Dave is one for whom wars are waged entirely with iron.
You are one for whom wars are waged solely to provide distraction for those who require it.

You see, Dave is not your son, and so any effort you might have made to shape him into the gentleman you can see lurking even now just behind that fencer’s mask of black glass and deadpan solemnity had always been dissuaded by the inevitable encroachment of a red-circled date on which you had to send him home.

But a calendar without such a date is a curious thing. Indefinite is a curious word, and this, a rather curious occasion.

You do not have to send him home. For the time being, for the few years to come should all go well, he is a stranger to the kingdom to which he has sworn allegiance. A stranger too to its keeper, perhaps. You cannot imagine that his brother is an individual by whom calls and visits are encouraged, let alone prized. You suppose you will know soon enough.

Dave is a guest in your home for an indefinite period of time.

And if a man’s home is his castle, well, you daresay he’s miscalculated rather grievously.

He is your guest.

This is your home.

In it, you are king.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

In case you forgot, Dave's a gross college-age kid.

Chapter Notes

Standard length, just a single scene. Maybe a little boring? Bear with me, haha.

You’re having a significant amount of difficulty coping with Dave’s responses to things he may have deemed inappropriate in a less contentious scenario.

That is not an appropriate amount of clothing.

You down the last of your scotch rather decisively.

Your little debacle with him this morning meant that you were forced to be embarrassingly late arriving to work. Though you have never once been late in the two decades you’ve found employment there, and though your coworkers were infinitely gracious about your tardiness, you chose to stay late to satisfy your own sense of obligation.

When you finally arrived home, you immediately secured your place in the kitchen.

After all, all men must eat, and you are somewhat disinclined to allow the one dwelling in your home free reign of your comestibles and cooking appliances, not when you consider what the dubious circumstances of his upbringing might mean about the state of his kitchen at home. In fact, you believe you once heard mentions of small flash explosives left cooling in the ice maker, accessible via the dispensary in the refrigerator door for no doubt ironic purposes.

No, you do not believe you’ll allow Dave to engage in any sort of culinary experimentation in the near future.

And so it was not until you had the preparations of your evening meal well underway that you ventured out into the rest of the house with the intention of depositing your vocational artifacts in their proper places, as you normally would have done before embarking upon a food-related endeavor.

It was there that you discovered that Dave had spent some not insignificant measure of time engaged in battle with the workings of your laundry machines, apparently to little success.

Like most youths, this was a necessity he did not address until he was left with nothing but a single pair of threadbare pyjama bottoms. You very seriously considered asking him how many of his shirts he was forced to, ah, recycle the use of before they became too unpleasant to endure, but decided against it in the interests of preserving your mental health.

Unlike most youths, he greeted your gentle suggestion that he borrow something from John’s
wardrobe in the meantime with an indifferent shrug, and sat down to eat his dinner at the table with you still bare-chested and tugging absent-mindedly at a worn elastic waistband that always seems to find itself creeping down a thin but ever-widening trail of reddish-blond hair.

You say nothing because, inescapably, you doubt your own unspoken protestations.

The voice of your self-doubt is muted but uncomfortably intimate, almost as though it is speaking into the exposed skin just above your collar and just behind your ear, just where the fine hairs at the nape of your neck have begun to shiver away from their roots, and it whispers unkindly that this should not pique your irritation.

If John had done the same, you would have sighed over his carelessness, adjusted the temperature to one more suitable for a half-clad youth, and thought no more on it.

You dissect your potatoes methodically and rationalize that it is precisely because you’re accustomed to this behaviour from John, and not from Dave, that you find it troubling.

Your self-doubt murmurs back that you should expect the same or worse from Dave, because he is the product of a household in which you can too easily imagine haphazard laundry days spent barefoot and bare-chested.

You reluctantly allow that, eying your empty tumbler indecisively. It is possible that Dave does not consider it an act of defiance, at all. It may simply be that he has never remained long enough in your presence to manifest this specific objectionable behaviour. You may be judging him with a harsher eye than is strictly necessary.

Your suppositions are not always dependable. After all, you did not believe yourself a man drawn to the succour of liquor except in the most extreme of circumstances, and yet, when Dave took his plate from your hand, you found that hand creeping irresistibly towards the bottle at the back of the cabinet beside your oven.

Your self-doubt suggests, somewhat coyly, that your difference in perspective lies in the fact that Dave is not your son.

Sensing that a catastrophic error is about to occur, the higher-functioning portions of your brain shut off in self-defence.

You have made an excellent meal, as per usual. The plating of the food is comfortingly standard, and pleasing to behold. You suspect you may have produced an overabundance of greens, however, upsetting the ideal vegetable-to-protein ratio in your distraction.

You make a note to be careful not to engender such inharmonious blunders in the future.

Preoccupied by the close consideration and routine consumption of your meal, it takes you a moment to register the slim fingers lifting your glass from the table.

You look at their owner inquisitively.

“Dude, did you want another?”

You continue to look at him, not quite comprehending what he’s asking you. This is your home. It is your responsibility to provide for him, not the reverse.

He’s starting to look a little bemused. “I’m done eating so I’m gonna put my dishes in the sink and maybe crack into this frosted beauty here if that’s okay which I’m kind of assuming that it is
‘cause I know John never ate your cakes but you made them anyway so unless you, like, hoard them or something then it’s probably okay right, but anyway I have to get up and go over there to do that anyhow, so, uh, were you wanting another?"

You blink, absorbing that tumbling torrent of words before rising from your seat.

“You are absolutely welcome to partake of anything I have baked, Dave, but there’s no need for you to trouble yourself about it, and it most certainly isn’t necessary for you to take me into consideration, though I appreciate your thoughtfulness,” you smile, taking your glass from his hand, “What would you like?”

Something creeps into his expression, furrowing tiny lines in the smooth space between his eyebrows. You identify it as unease.

“No, it’s like… I’m basically living here now you can’t really keep doing everything for me forever, I’m gonna feel like I’m freeloading, which I guess I kind of am actually, but I don’t know, I’m not really cool with that, that’s not really okay with me,” he mumbles, and yes, you can hear his discomfort filling the disappearing spaces between his words.

You chuckle a little. “I apologize if I’ve made you uncomfortable, but I’m afraid I am unaccustomed to allowing guests to inconvenience themselves.”

He fidgets. You wait patiently.

He mutters “I dunno if I really count as a guest at this point” and you ask him what he considers himself, then, and despite your best efforts it’s a statement laced with the frustrations of a dozen years unsuccessfully spent trying to adopt him into your family, if only in spirit instead of name.

His mouth starts to pull at the corner like he very much wants to say something- something rude, you suspect- but he appears to think better of it and just asks you, “Actually could I maybe try some of that?”

It takes you a moment to realize he’s not referring to any particular pastry.

You stare at him disapprovingly. “You’re twenty, David.”

He tucks his hands into his pockets, and for a second, you think you see a little smile. “I’ve had beers and sh-stuff before at home it’s no big,” he rambles, and he must see that you’re unconvinced because there’s only a beat between that and, “but all my bro drinks is Natty Lite and it’s hella nasty, and he, like, puts ketchup and mayonnaise on pancakes, so I’m just curious what people who actually have taste drink, you know?”

You raise an eyebrow at him, decidedly unimpressed. While you can appreciate the appeal to your sophisticated instincts, you’re not nearly enough of a fool to misunderstand what he’s attempting, and you believe he knows that just as well as you do.

He’s testing his boundaries.

You choose your words judiciously. “Whatever the case may have been whilst you were living with your brother, I’m afraid it isn’t so here. When you turn twenty-one, and are thus of age in the eyes of the law, you may have a drink with me.”

You think that’s more than fair.

He doesn’t look too upset.
In fact, he just treats you to a surprisingly wicked little smile and rolls his shoulders up in a shrug. “I tried.”

He starts to turn away before you can ask him what he’d like for dessert. You frown, a bit puzzled, and ask him if he’d still like anything.

He pauses, tilting his face towards you rather than actually turning back, and tugs at the rippled elastic waistband of his pyjamas again. “Naw, I’m not really hungry, but thanks, Mister E.”

You look after him as he leaves, perplexed.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

There is a process to suiting up.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, guys. Been a bit of a shitshow on my end, but things are evening out again. I hope you enjoy the new chapter!

Also, special thanks to tumblr user mimemasks for helping me with various Washington factoids and appeasing my strangely obsessive need to ensure that all the details of a single sentence are supportable and accurate!

Something peculiar has occurred at your place of employment.

While your office, like any other, has no shortage of dawdlers, chief among them those who believe the workplace exists to help fulfill their daily quota of purposeless mingling, you had always been exempt from the attentions of these people in the past.

For reasons unclear to you- though you suspect they are reasons related to your uncharacteristic tardiness yesterday- that has changed.

You are having difficulty maintaining your usual level of productivity as a result. It’s beginning to aggravate you.

However, it would be imprudent to demand outright that your workmate leave you be.

And he is somewhat resistant to your subtleties.

You can only remember speaking to Arthur Woodgrave twice in all your time working on the same floor. The first was when he first joined the company; he was, and still is, precisely the sort of fellow who feels that it is necessary to inconvenience every other person in his work group in the name of a lengthy introductory greeting. You don’t believe he achieved anything of measurable significance within his first two weeks of employment.

The second was shortly thereafter, when he felt it was necessary to organize an exciting affair on behalf of his new coworkers to celebrate the unusually high percentage turn the company had achieved that quarter- a percentage turn he had absolutely no hand in achieving.

You did not attend.

This is the third time, and you are persuaded that your original worries of having offended him were unfounded.

Instead, you believe he simply ceased to recall your presence in the face of more interested parties.
This suits you fine.

It would suit you better if it had continued to be the case.

“Egbert, me and some of the boys are going down to Gator’s after work to grab a couple beers and scope out the new management before the Mariners start their season. You in?”

You are not “in.”

You would also appreciate it if he would stop leaning on your cubicle wall.

He treats you to a smile that’s all teeth and no sincerity.

“Ah, come on, you haven’t come out with us since… Tacoma?”

You remind him that since you’ve never “come out” with them, you did not join them in Tacoma, nor do you wish to hear the details of what transpired there.

He has a large, fleshy face, and it looms over your cubicle wall like a pallid, heavy-cheeked moon. You watch the lines at the corners of his eyes deepen.

“You sure? I could’ve sworn you were there with us in Tacoma. Maybe it was one of our nights out at Stimpy’s, then?”

It was not. Regardless, you cannot attend tonight, as you have a son to attend to.

The lie slips out too easily. You often forget that John’s gone, yourself.

Woodgrave leans more of his weight on the arm rest on top of your cubicle wall and gives you a sly look. You don’t like it.

“Your boy’s almost twenty now, isn’t he?” He doesn’t wait for the answer. “You know, you’ve got people talking lately,” he tells you conspiratorially.

You sigh through your nose. People always talk. People other than you, at least. Prudently, you keep that thought to yourself and hope in silence that someone more entertaining will pass by and distract his imperturbable gaze.

“They say you’re looking like you’ve got a girl, lately,” he says, “or a boy,” he amends, and despite yourself, you look up at him, startled and a little scandalized.

He chuckles and stands up straight. You hear his spine pop as he stretches.

“You don’t think he does.

You really don’t think he does.

==>

Dave has taken it upon himself to be a nuisance of the highest degree.

Upon your arrival home, he is quick to remind you that you still need to instruct him in the “art of swank business wear,” as he so eloquently puts it.
Ordinarily, you’d find it somewhat endearing.

But you have had a very trying day, and you are very tired. Woodgrave’s nonchalant shamelessness dealt quite a blow to your composure.

After all, there are some things one simply does not speak about to his workmates, or even to those he calls his friends.

Or to anyone.

As a result, you are feeling rather strained, and this must be why the prospect of doing Dave’s measurements fills you with a vague sense of dread.

Of course.

You’re still faintly annoyed by his resistance to your suggestion that he entrust himself to the care of a practiced tailor.

You are an accomplished wearer of suits, and are, of course, quite experienced with the process of measuring for one, but you do not make them.

He explained himself with claims of reluctance, and while you can certainly understand his discomfort at the thought of allowing a stranger to touch him, the particular way in which he refused was more like a challenge, and less like the words of a shy boy of barely twenty.

You’re not sure what he’s challenging you to do, or not do, for that matter, and your interest in finding out is so negligible as to be nonexistent.

The challenge is there, regardless.

And, dare you say it, a word you have always tried to avoid using has found itself rising to the inside of your lips, unspoken but incontestable.

You hate it to say, because you do carry a certain fondness for the boy, but Dave is, speaking frankly, a brat.

You think he might be trying to make you angry.

You also think he might want you to investigate the motivations behind that particular inclination of his.

You refuse.

If he cannot find it in him to tell you himself, then you simply will not know.

And you prefer it that way.

==>  

You can feel him watching you behind those sunglasses.

It may be the particular cock of his head, or the pointedly impassive set of his face, but you know, nonetheless.

You are measuring his sleeve length diligently- only after assuring him that he did not, in fact, have to remove his clothing for this experience- God save you, if your sweet mother in heaven could see
such indecency-

Well, she’d probably have laughed.

Your mother was always a sight too soft on others, perhaps because they were always so hard on her.

But still, the slyness of his suggestion burns at your ears, themselves hot and raw from a day of mortification.

The arm you are measuring begins to sag.

“Please be still, David,” you snap, and then wince at your own tone.

Your patience is suffering at the hands of your irritation. You’re being unfair to him.

He seems unworried, mercifully, and rights his arm with a long-suffering sigh.

You think *brat* and chastise yourself for it. It’s such a short, clipped word that you can’t seem to stop it from leaking out from behind your careful wall of appropriate conduct, easing its way in through gaps in the caulking like condensation on a rainy day.

You step away to jot down the number and he lets his arm fall with a grunt of relief, but doesn’t complain.

You feel guilty again.

You make your way behind him and he tenses uncomfortably. “I’m going to measure your shoulders now,” you assure him briskly, and some of the tension eases, but he’s still stiff.

For the best, perhaps. At least he’s standing up straight.

You measure them and hum thoughtfully. Narrower than you would have guessed.

He looks a little relieved to have you back in front of him, if somewhat uncertain when you loop your measuring tape around his throat. His skin is very warm. There are freckles peering out at you from the shaded hollow between his collarbones, you note dispassionately. Endearing, but a sign of sun damage, nevertheless. You’ll have to invest in some sunblock.

His throat ripples under the measuring tape as he swallows, and you tell him that it’s for his collar. He nods almost imperceptibly, but there’s a flush to his cheeks that you find bemusing.

You can’t read the meaning of his expression when you take the tape away.

He is rather narrow-chested, and slim through the waist, but not small. A very neat, linear figure, too frequently obscured by the sloppiness of his regular dress. You think it better suited to him than the alternative; you couldn’t picture Dave with the brawny triangularity of his elder brother, nor would you like to.

You kneel to measure his inseam and he looses a truly alarming sound of protest.

When you look up, his face is suffused with blood.

You ask him if he’s quite alright.

He looks utterly bewildered for reasons you can’t begin to guess.
“I’m going to measure the inseam of your pant,” you tell him, and he nods, albeit a little hesitantly.

You feel the tension spike in his posture as you tuck the edge of the measuring tape up against the groin of his pants, and suppress a sigh of your own.

Honestly, children and their baseless worries. It’s not as though he has a woman’s hand in such close proximity to his genitals.

You jot down the last of his measurements with an insuppressibly triumphant flourish, glad to be done with it.

He is looking exactly everywhere but at you, and still remarkably red.

You do sigh.

You also inform him that the experience could have been much less painstaking and uncomfortable if he had taken your advice and gone to your tailor, and he responds with a quick “uhn,” which you suppose is meant to indicate agreement.

You tell him that he will have to think about available options, and that while you personally recommend custom suiting, that may not be a viable option for someone subsisting on a student’s allowance, even if he does not have to pay for lodging, and he retorts with just an “nngye,” which is frankly something of a mystery to you.

When you ask him if he’d like to go wash up before dinner, he’s gone before the sentence has finished tumbling from your lips.

You frown a little.

You did think you had asked him to respect a speed limit within the range of visible motion whilst in your home.

You find that “flash-stepping” of his very disconcerting.

And without even a thank you.

Brat.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Dad keeps things appropriate. Dave does not.

Chapter Notes

I'm both very sorry and not sorry at all.

He’s quiet throughout dinner, which is unusual.

You’re accustomed to having to provide him with at least two gentle reminders not to speak with his mouth full, but tonight, he requires none.

You find yourself a touch concerned, as absurd as being concerned about good table conduct may be.

Even as you take his plate from in front of him- clear of all but a thin residue of gravy and a few slivers of fat that had edged his cut of the beef, you’re pleased to note- he is looking down at his lap, eyebrows furrowed and fingers twisting restlessly at the hem of his shirt.

Needless to say, his question is unexpected.

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

You pause, blinking. “I beg your pardon?”

He repeats himself in a voice much quieter and more self-conscious than before.

You chuckle despite yourself as you deposit his dishes into the sink with the rest. “Dave, I think I may be an older man than you assume me to be. Besides, if there was such a person to come calling on me, I must say, I believe you would have noticed by now.” You hear an unexpected bit of wryness creeping out with your words. After some deliberation, you decide that it’s nothing to be concerned about. You’re feeling rather comfortable.

He scrunches his nose at you incredulously and you raise an eyebrow in answer, packing the chamber of your pipe with a pinch of fresh tobacco. A good smoke always seems to fill the time a dish should spend soaking quite adequately.

“You’re not that old.” Dave makes a rude noise with his mouth to finalize his words, but they still sound like a question.

You are, in fact, that old.

He’s neither quick nor composed enough to conceal his momentary gawping. You chuckle again, a touch muffled by the stem of the pipe clenched between your teeth, and resume patting your
pockets for your apparently elusive matches.

You must have left them on your nightstand with your spare wallet instead of captchalogueing them appropriately. No matter.

It catches you by surprise when Dave rises to a squat from his chair to fish a slim silver lighter from his own pocket. Rather than offer it, however, he shuffles towards you and clumsily tips flame to the carefully packed surface of your tobacco. You tilt your head obligingly and politely refrain from mentioning that you keep an extra book of matches over the stove for occasions such as these. He is only trying to be a gentleman, after all.

And you must certainly be the last soul on Earth who could take issue with that.

Still, you do eye him rather disapprovingly for having it at all. You have seen no reason for him to own such a thing, and you don’t think you are being too unkind in believing that he is not the sort of youth who carries a non-disposable lighter for the express purpose of obliging forgetful old men.

He catches your look and returns it to you in full. “So I maybe smoke a couple cigarettes sometimes, don’t be a hypocrite, dude.” The silence lingers between you. He makes no move to sit down again. “And you’re not that old, just older than I expected, I guess I thought you were like forty-five-ish or something, I dunno.”

You take a moment to savour the aromatic burn of the smoke trickling through your sinuses. “I could say that you are far too young a man to knowingly be doing damage to your body, Dave, and that I was helplessly ignorant in my youth and am now both far too accustomed to be capable of stopping and far too old for it to matter if I could, but I suppose I will restrain myself,” you allow, smiling despite your words.

You spent so many of your years in a world that saw a man’s enjoyment of fine tobacco leaf as something refined and glamorous, after all. To a younger you, smoking was always painted in dark and vivid colours as something well-suited to a sophisticated gentleman’s pursuit of leisure, and such an image is not so easily covered over with the watered white of modern science.

Like acrylic over oil, the whitewashing always peels and flakes away, too thin a medium to adhere to the smoked and lacquered history that precedes it.

You watch Dave retrieve a cigarette from the same pocket as he did the lighter, and observe his furtive motions with some amusement. He still expects you to object.

You do not.

You can tell a child in the most scolding of tones that a fresh pan of brownies is not to be touched, that it will burn him just the same as the oven it was drawn from, but if you leave that pan newly cut and wafting a hot perfume of cocoa and vanilla from its opened flesh, if you turn away from it and him for only a moment, you will still turn back to the wail of a child who has burned himself.

All the warning in the world cannot allay some temptations, and so you cannot in good conscience blame him for succumbing to them.

Despite his best efforts to the contrary, a younger man than you could still be seduced by the allure of those temptations he had been warned against, and you suspect he did so once too often for the man he became to pass judgement against those who now do the same.

A chest filled with lingering smoke was, perhaps, the only temptation he could claim he fell victim
to in ignorance.

And so it is the only temptation in which you claim innocence.

The others you simply don’t claim at all.

The silence is amicable, but in your comfort, you are curious, and in your curiosity, you break it.

You wonder why he asked you what he did.

It takes him a moment to recall what you’re referring to. When he does, he shrugs. You think it’s supposed to look indifferent. Instead, it looks uncomfortable.

“I was just kind of curious I guess, I mean you don’t really talk about yourself much and John never mentioned anything so I just sorta wondered if you did or even if you’ve ever had one actually but no offense I’m just kinda thinking aloud and it’s totally cool if you don’t want to talk about it, it’s not really any of my business,” he trails off before adding another mumbled, “no offense or anything, sorry.”

He gestures while he talks, and you watch the red eye of his cigarette weave from its perch between the first two fingers of his left hand, mindful of the possibility of falling ash. You may have to invest in an ashtray.

You smile privately as you tell him that yes, of course you’ve had your sweethearts, though none recently, and not for some time. In the past, you were a bolder man, much less free in your behaviour than others, but still just a man, nevertheless, and one given to romantic notions, at that.

You have all of his attention.

He doesn’t have to say it for you to know that it’s true. Even through the smoke of his cigarette and sunglasses and the haze of your tobacco, you can see the intensity of his focus, almost childlike, his cigarette growing cold and hanging loose between lips unconsciously parted by captivation.

A part of you acknowledges that it is an odd reversal of the order you’ve grown accustomed to. The rest of you refuses to acknowledge even the thought.

The eye of his cigarette has gone grey, and it shivers in ominous promise.

A simple cup will have to do, you suppose. You really will have to invest in an ashtray.

He looks surprised when you tap the ash from his cigarette without taking it from him, but draws obligingly nonetheless when you reignite its tip. The smoke tumbles from lungs in an emphatic burst.

“No seriously I want stories,” he demands breathlessly, barely pausing to cough, “you can’t just say that and then go all quiet, that’s just cruel, come on, don’t be a tease.”

Even when held against the wheeziness of his voice, against the voice of a boy too intrigued to catch his breath before speaking, his last word still comes out strangely husky by comparison, and it seem to hang in the air, buoyed up by an intermingling of smoke.

Something in your brain tries to catch on that groaning cadence. You put it to bed for misbehaving.

Something else tries to catch on the flash of self-consciousness that ripples across Dave’s face in the moments following, and you quash it with equal purpose.
“I doubt my exploits are nearly as exciting as whatever you’re anticipating.” You do not doubt this. In fact, you would be very unhappy to discover that his opinion of you equalled the sometimes tumultuous reality of your past. “I’m afraid being a man of romantic inclinations sounds considerably more, ah, romantic than it is in reality,” you laugh, succumbing to a dry slip of irony to bridge his apparent misunderstanding to your ostensible reality.

You feel that there are things that he simply does not need to know.

When you tell him about your childhood sweetheart, you do not mention that her feelings for you were never truly reciprocated.

When you tell him about your courtship of a college schoolmate, some sweet thing in pin-curls and pearls and an array of sensible frocks, you do not mention your ill-advised dalliance with a much less sweet thing in high boots and a skirt short enough to push up or pull down at a moment’s notice, nor the unfortunate way in which both relationships ended.

When you tell him that you once played suitor to a circus acrobat, you do not mention her sister, and you certainly do not mention the mortifying circumstances that eventually led to the imposition of a legal restraint against you by the entirety of the troupe.

You were relieved, but not particularly surprised that the incident never made the papers.

You don’t believe your mother’s company has ever aspired to have a figure of infamy as its smiling face, and they hadn’t, and haven’t, given up on you yet.

It would probably be wise to check the status of that restraining order, just on principle alone.

It would not do to find yourself in a circumstance where you would be forced to explain the reasons behind an injunction of such notable duration.

At the moment, however, you say little and remember much, and Dave seems satisfied with that.

This suits you fine.

==>

Sometimes the night seems much shorter than you recall it being when you were young.

And sometimes, it seems much longer.

Tonight, the night is much too long.

Typically speaking, the number of your age arrives with many companions, an unsavoury collection of hangers-on accrued over the years, most of whom you, personally, have been fortunate enough to avoid the acquaintance of.

Your eyesight is still impeccable. Despite so many years of clenching a pipe between them, your teeth survive you admirably, and despite just as many years of smoking that pipe, only the skin around your eyes and the creases bracketing your mouth betray you.

And despite your many years spent idling behind a desk, you are still strong. Stronger, perhaps, than many men half your age or less. Your mother was quick to tell a younger man than you that this was a family trait, and more than proud to do so. You can’t say that you disagree.

She aged under the hand of stress and grew bent and small in the face of heartbreak, but even in her
last days, there was a vibrancy of life in her bright eyes that seemed inextinguishable.

An old and quiet part of you believes that nothing else but precisely what transpired could have doused her.

The long-forgotten child in you still believes your mother had the capacity to be eternal, just as every child does.

But she was not, and you are not.

Though you are free of so many of the burdens of your age, you are not free of all of them.

There are days you cannot sleep enough, and there are nights you cannot sleep at all.

Sometimes you wake at the slightest stirrings, and then you cannot sleep for worrying, because the whispers of brooding unease are loudest in the silence of the darkest hours of the night.

You go through the same motions as everyone who suffers what you suffer.

You rise from your bed, blinking away the shadows.

You pull on your dressing gown, and tie it against the after-midnight chill.

You pick up the glass from your nightstand, walk to the bathroom with careful, quiet, practiced steps, and draw yourself a glass of water, knowing full well that it will only raise you from your bed again two hours hence.

And you begin to walk back, retracing your steps for no other purpose than the satisfaction of completing a routine.

You go to pass the guest bedroom.

You fail to pass the guest bedroom.

Your step catches on a muffled sound of discomfort, and you pause to listen.

A frown pulls at your lips.

You’re not certain what the problem is, only that there seems to be one. You’re not sure if you should intervene.

You don’t know if it would be wiser to knock, consequently respecting your guest’s privacy, or to open the door to check up on him without incurring the risk of waking him from what could be a mere nightmare.

Though you are inclined to think he’s awake. There’s a touch of light filtering out from under the door. It’s too little to be a lamp.

A cellphone, perhaps? Or a portable computer. You think it’s more likely the latter.

You consider that perhaps he’s homesick. For all your disdain towards his home and guardian, they are still, of course, his home and guardian. It isn’t implausible. You know all too well how such things can strike in the dark.

But the question remains whether or not you should interfere, and how.
You hesitate, and he groans again.

There’s something very troubling about it, and it nags at you. It’s a low sound, not so unlike a sob, but followed by an almost pained gasping, and desperately muffled, like he’s trying not to be heard. You reach for the doorknob, concerned but undecided.

Your fingers close around cool metal at almost the same moment as your ears ring with a combination of sounds that even you could not choose to mistake.

The friction of skin on skin, a sound both too wet and too rhythmic to be simple restless shifting. The vibration of a voice trickling up the back of the throat, up into the sinuses to resonate before eking out the nose and through the lips, clenched hard against a sound as involuntary as sobbing, but wholly different.

You know you should remove yourself from the vicinity as fast as is possible for the sake of basic common decency, but you are paralyzed, hand fastened to the doorknob as if by the convulsive power of an electric shock.

Against your bidding, your brain methodically translates your presumptions into their more accurate counterparts—groaning into moaning, gasping into panting—and you feel a scarlet heat of mortification pushing forward from behind your eyes.

And yet you cannot move.

It is as though every part of your brain but that which listens has shut off defensively, leaving you the defenseless audience to a symphony of sensations that you were never meant to hear.

A symphony fast approaching its crescendo.

An uptempo rhythm accompanied by an increasingly desperate hitching of breath in the chest, that telltale mark of growing pressure.

The muted eighth- and quarter-note staccato of pleasure escaping between hitching breaths.

The low climbing note that signals the beginning of the end, shaking its way up the spine under those feverishly clenching abdominal muscles, rising in intensity until it reaches the mouth and tumbles loose in a parallel movement with its partner, the symphony finally hitting its harmonic peak.

The long exhale as the conductor surrenders mastery of his ensemble.

Silence.

You abscond as fast as is physically possible without causing some sort of noticeable disruption.

Your empty mind rings with residual sound like an echo chamber, too uncluttered to dilute or soften the feedback loop created by that last clandestine note.

You do something shameful, and dream strange dreams.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Shit goes down.
Sort of.

Chapter Notes

And now we're into double-digits, wow.

Morning breaks with light drizzle of rain and a frantic need to avoid all interaction.

Dave is lounging on the sofa with the television on, still half-dressed and half-asleep.

You dodge his notice with the graceless expertise of irrational discomposure.

Woodgrave winks knowingly at you when you enter the office, and you hate him with a murderous passion that you thought yourself incapable of.

The rhythm of work is tremendously soothing.

You turn your brain off and fulfil your expected duties with flawless precision and everything is alright.

Until noon.

You’re accustomed to taking your lunch at your desk, and you do so as methodically as you’ve done everything else today.

But lunch is a social hour, and you have acquired a friend.

He’s not your friend.

He is most certainly not your friend.

You know he’s there without looking. You make a point of not looking.

“Something’s got you twisted, Egbert, we can all see it,” he remarks, apparently wholly undisturbed by your coldness.

You make a point of not responding.

“Or maybe it’s someone, huh, old boy?”

You hate his laugh.
You hate his laugh so intensely that you inadvertently puncture a hole in the plastic covering your dish with the tips of your fingers and shove them into your food.

“Come on now, spill the beans, Egbert, who is he?”

You slam your lunch down with more force than you’d intended and turn to look at him.

He’s grinning with only half of his mouth and leaning on his arms and for an instant, all you can see is a superimposed image of ridiculous sunglasses and a near-identical leer over his face and you hate him, you don’t just dislike him, you loathe him.

“I don’t like you, Woodgrave.”

He lurches backwards, visibly startled, and you’re being very rude but you don’t care.

“We are not friends,” you tell him quietly. “We have spoken three times in twice as many years, and I have not enjoyed any of the conversations I have been forced to have with you.”

He looks dumbfounded. Somehow, that only makes you angrier.

“You seem to believe that you are a master of deduction who has pieced together the specifics of a private life you have imagined for me and brazenly assume to be true,” you seethe. “If what I do or do not do outside of this building was the business of you or your lewd imagination, I would see fit to inform you of it. As it is not, I have to ask you to refrain from speculating.”

The office is silent.

You’re painfully aware that everyone is listening to you.

Woodgrave is just staring uselessly. Your jaw pops.

You hadn’t realized you were grinding your teeth. They ache as you carefully unclench them.

You take a deep breath.

“Lunch break is almost over,” you tell him, careful of your phrasing. “I would like to finish eating mine.”

He goes, mercifully, but he takes your anger with him and leaves a gaping hole of anxiety in his wake.

Mister Gan Suttikul, who works back-to-back with you, in a manner of speaking, is looking at you with some concern.

You take another deep breath and treat him to a terse nod.

He returns it and turns away respectfully.

You’re grateful.

=>>

You are significantly calmer when you arrive home after work.

You no longer feel like you are teetering on the brink of something terrible.
You take a deep breath and linger a moment longer in your car.

The front door is still locked when you try it.

Dave is still lounging on the couch.

You suspect he hasn’t moved.

He turns a smile on you when you come in, just a little thing, closed-mouth and crooked, but his first words are still “Whoa shit, are you okay, you look all bent out of shape about something.”

You do not feel guilty.

You look at him disapprovingly. “Language, David.”

There is nothing to feel guilty about.

He laughs and apologizes lazily as he sits up, arching his back and rolling his shoulders in a stretch.

You do not feel guilty, therefore it is impossible that he detects your guilt, because you do not have any.

He’s still not dressed.

You may need to speak to him about that.

But not now.

At this particular moment, you need to put your things in your bedroom and get started on dinner.

And perhaps do a little baking.

You find it therapeutic, and you are feeling rather in need of some therapy.

The sight of your bed does not flood you with a wave of anxiety, because it has nothing to do with why you are currently feeling anxious.

You’re simply having problems at work. It’s been a stressful week.

Nonetheless, you do not linger.

After all, the kitchen is always more soothing by comparison.

Dave left his temporary ashtray on the windowsill, and that unadorned little cup with its thin layer of mottled cigarette ash and single crushed filter at the bottom has grown pungent. You’ll have to speak to him about that, too, you suppose.

Or introduce him to superior tobacco.

You push the thought out of your mind. It is one thing to be unhypocritical, another entirely to encourage a damaging behaviour.

You let your eyes rest on it a moment longer before emptying it, scrutinizing the patterns in the pale flakes and dark powder at the bottom- and that garish bit of scorched orange- like a man trying to read his own fortune in the sodden remnants of tea leaves.
Appropriate that it would be the dry ashes of tobacco leaves, for you.

You tap the thought from your head with the ash from the cup, and you wash it immediately. It would not do to have the smell permeate the ceramic. You make a note to buy that much-contemplated ashtray as soon as possible.

==>

You are very careful not to unbalance the respective portions of your evening meal, and take great pleasure in the exactness of your results.

Dave is finally dressed when he comes to dinner. You take a certain amount of pleasure in that, as well, albeit one you leave much less closely examined.

You discuss a convenient time to seek out affordable retailers from which he might acquire a suit, and debate the various advantages and disadvantages of his going to your tailor versus a less costly and no doubt inferior alternative.

You find yourself offering to ensure that he has at least one high-quality set, just as a matter of principle. Much to your surprise, he accepts, if only with the stipulation that he will eventually reimburse you in full.

You appreciate his thoughtfulness, but you’re not tremendously worried about such a thing. After all, despite your keen interest, it is not often that you have the opportunity to attire anyone but yourself.

The only person you feel could owe you anything, in fact, would be his elder brother, for instilling in you a strange sense of shame about what should be, and is, nothing more than the wholly innocuous hobby of an older gentleman with some small amount of leisure time available to him.

The assistance you have provided the younger Strider could never be motivated by even a modicum of spite against the elder, however.

That would be most untoward of you, and indicate a very ungentlemanly flaw of character.

So it is, of course, impossible.

==>

You were correct. Baking is, as always, very therapeutic.

But tonight, it is also very lonely.

You grew too quickly accustomed to having Dave’s company, you’re ashamed to realize. You find yourself glancing behind you expectantly, despite knowing perfectly well that he is not there.

Baking is very therapeutic, but it is therapeutic because it is so habitual to you as to be effortless, and requires no thought.

You are too alone with yourself.

It feels strange to seek him out, rather than the opposite. You have also become too accustomed to being approached.

You are hesitating for reasons that have nothing to do with the unfortunate happenings of the night.
You are simply worried about being a nuisance. You should have expected that he would eventually tire of your constant company, and you should respect his desire for privacy. He’s a young man, after all, and though you have not been one for a very long time, you still retain that same strong desire for privacy.

For different reasons, perhaps, but the sentiment remains comparable. You do not think about these reasons, nor their recent demonstration.

That would be unseemly of you.

You hesitate because you are conscientious of his feelings and do not wish to impose upon him.

And for the second time in as many days, you hear something through his door.

Your immediate instinct is to abscond. Your second is to reconsider, because this is clearly a very different circumstance.

He’s speaking to someone. You assume he’s using his cellular telephone.

You hesitate again. While infinitely less improprietous than the unfortunate alternative, listening in to someone’s conversation is nonetheless quite rude.

His voice is muffled by the door, but you can still tell he sounds upset.

“No way, no fucking way, just call him and tell him yourself, I’m not your goddamn receptionist, he’s your father John, your dad-”

Your heart almost stops.

Any thought of flight you may have had flees without you. You creep closer to the door, simultaneously ashamed of your childishness and desperately, mindlessly worried.

“No, dude, hang on a second he’s right here just wait, are you even there still- John? John?”

When he pulls his phone from his ear to look at it, you examine it with some small feeling of marvel. They’re always getting smaller and smaller, these gadgets. You remember the days when a portable telephone was likely to be the heaviest thing in your briefcase.

He looks at you. You watch his mouth tighten. You’ve inadvertently put him in an unfortunate situation. You are proving an absolute villain today. You really should apologize.
“John’s not coming home yet,” he tells you, and you know that, you did hear and register the implication of his words, but you nod and *hmm* regardless for the sake of courtesy.

“I guess he’s had some luck, I don’t know, he didn’t really say,” and you murmur *ah I see* and linger blankly in his doorway.

You watch his feet weave across the floor towards you. Not unlike a drunk, but more like a toddler. Uncertain. Like he’s being pulled in multiple directions. The familiarity of the movement is both nostalgic and painful.

“Sorry your son is such a dick,” he mutters and you frown both at him for saying it and yourself for having nothing to say in response. “He really does love the hell out of you but I don’t know, he’s… he’s John. He’s kind of super thoughtless all the fu- all the time and I’m sorry if I was swearing I got kinda frustrated.”

You almost laugh at his nervous rambling, but it comes out through your nose like a sigh.

You should go back to baking and leave him alone. He must believe you to be acting very oddly. With good reason. You are, of course, acting very oddly. You don’t know what’s wrong with you.

There’s a brewing pit of guilt in your stomach and you don’t know why.

You feel his hands on your face before you really register how near he’s come, but you’re too numb to startle properly. Your hand twitches and your shoulder jumps. The rest of you shifts sluggishly in acknowledgement.

His forehead is very warm, and a tad sweaty, but the gesture is incredibly intimate and strangely comforting, nonetheless. His hands are cool against your cheeks.

You can feel the edge of his sunglasses leaning up against your brow. They’re warmer than you’d have expected.

The length of the moment stretches into a question mark.

You’re not entirely sure what’s happening.

You pat Dave on the shoulder comfortingly, for the simple lack of a better gesture to communicate your admittedly mixed feelings about this increasingly confusing embrace.

The pit of guilt in your stomach has grown even more toxic in the silence.

Dave swallows.

His forehead pulls away from yours. The air feels very cool in its absence.

His nose brushes yours for a moment. You can feel his breath on your lips. You recognize, distantly, that he’s hesitating. You don’t know what about. You register that you probably don’t want to know what about at about the same time he mumbles “*sorry*” again and rolls back on his heels with a sigh, dropping his hands from your face to shove them- rather forcefully, you notice- into his pockets.

You’re very confused.

“Are you alright?” You find yourself asking. Your brain feels as sluggish as the rest of you.
He shows you a brief, pained smile and a raised thumb, and you think he looks somewhat like someone who’s just stubbed his toe but does not want to complain. You puzzle over those tightly-knit brows for a moment before turning away.

The guilt begins to creep up your spine, undeniable and relentless.

You’d forgotten.

Twenty years of counting each and every day that John remained out of your sight, and you’d forgotten that he was due back soon.

His week in New York was almost up, and you made no plans for his return, devoted almost no time to the consideration of his absence.

You have no idea how to feel about anything.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Pesterlogs.

Fucking.

Pesterlogs.

You aren’t certain what in particular has changed in your life, but you feel as though some unspoken tension has broken, and the days have begun to pass remarkably quickly and amicably.

Perhaps it’s that the social element of your workplace has reverted back to keeping a respectful distance from you, has resumed allowing you to work in peace.

Perhaps it’s that the electric atmosphere in your home has softened perceptibly, that your houseguest seems to have begun another clumsy attempt at stepping in time to the movements of your dance.

Regardless of the reason, as the days turn to weeks, John makes no mention of coming home, and you begin to worry about Dave.

Ever since your embarrassing little malfunction in front of him, he’s been acting strangely.

Originally, you’d thought it a product of vicarious shame. After all, you must have been a painful thing to behold. You imagine you looked rather lost, and that is an expression suited for the faces of children, not grown men.

But the passing days have not lessened the odd tightness of his movements. He’s grown sullen, and any attempt you make to cheer him seems only to worsen his mood. He fluctuates unpredictably in his behaviour, sometimes seeming as though he wants nothing at all to do with you, at other times dogging your steps like a slim shadow.

There are moments when you think he is about to reach to you for comfort, a few chance instances in which he looks at you with an expression of conflict you could not begin to understand, but these always end in quiet displays of intense frustration, with or without your intervention.

You do worry about him, but abstain from interfering, cautioned by the touch of your own conflicted feelings. You’re unsure what, precisely, an attempt to help him would entail.

You do not know how to ask, and a wiser part of you tells you that you do not actually want to know, despite your good intentions.

A wiser part of you sees the enticing glimmer of a dark road and quite sensibly recommends that you do not set your foot near it, let alone on it or down it. You respect that. It is always healthier to take the better-lit path.

But you still worry. You’re very fond of Dave, despite the fact that he seems to be even more viciously opposed to being treated like a son by you than he is to being treated like a guest.
You just don’t know what he wants from you.

Dave’s continuing quest for respectable attire has progressed most excellently, if in jumps and starts.

In those stretches of time where he seems either unable or unwilling to extricate himself from your immediate vicinity, you have not only secured a small number of very suitable items, but have definitively decided upon- and subsequently contacted- your tailor to assist in making adjustments to the new pieces in Dave’s growing wardrobe.

Like all but the luckiest of men, Dave is, as you had expected, not average enough in proportion to fit neatly into that limited range of sizes available to even the savviest of consumers. You suppose it is a blessing that you are not, either, or he may have been without your guidance in that regard.

In its entirety, the jaunt has been something of a process.

You’re both glad and somewhat disheartened to realize that it is nearing completion.

After all, there is very little more decisively final than the act of retrieving from your tailor what should be- hopefully, if all went well- the finished products of your combined labours. All that remains is to ensure that each part of the jigsaw ensemble fits as it should, and forms at least one seamless whole.

And to correct his frankly atrocious tying technique. His Windsor knots are always crooked, without exception. There is a very definite difference between kinds of knots, but every attempt you have made to educate him on the matter has been met with a rather suspicious degree of distraction.

You do not want to know where his mind wanders to when it is left unguided by a firm hand.

He really is like a child.

You feel the inside of your mouth saying brat and stifle it judiciously.

Really, he’s more like a cat, you suppose. A child is trying, but relatively consistent.

Dave, when he wants your attention, brooks no inattention. He interferes with your usual routines. Several dinners have been rendered lopsided under his supervision, and at least one cake has burned.

Now, as you help him into his new attire, he holds his arms out at his sides, childlike, and you sigh through your nose and button his shirt for him obligingly.

Your tailor’s workmanship has turned out to be, as it usually is and as you’d hoped, quite adequate. With every fastened button, you can better see the thoughts that went into the subtle adjustments made to this particular piece. It is a very good cut for him. Much better than his regular t-shirts: flimsy, mass-produced, and always made too wide through the body or too narrow in the shoulders. He has a good figure, well-matched to the fineness of his facial features, and the manner of his usual dress simply does not do him justice.

He’s watching you do up his buttons with a small frown.
You’d like a moment to admire the fruit of your labours, but you can almost feel the tidal surge of his incoming moodiness in his agitated fidgeting. You pray he refrains until you’re done here.

He does not.

He still looks very respectable in his suit, you must admit.

When he next ventures into your kitchen voluntarily, you are surprised not by his presence, but by the fact that he’s neither avoiding you nor getting in your way.

He’s simply sitting at the table, leaning on his elbows. He looks very casual.

It’s most peculiar.

You suspect he wants something from you.

You pause, measuring cup still in one cocoa-dusted hand and milk carton in the other, to look over your shoulder at him inquisitively.

His lips tighten almost imperceptibly, and it seems to you that his near-flawless aura of nonchalance, smooth and opaque as blackstrap molasses, has taken on a sudden bitter tang. Some remnant of the harvest, perhaps. A crop of grass missed during separation, threshed and refined with the rest without his knowledge. He’s nervous.

Most peculiar, given his recent behaviour. A part of you recognizes that it is not outside of reason that this could herald a much-needed return to some form of normality. You have been concerned for him, after all.

You oblige him. “Did you need something, Dave?”

He fidgets. You find it nostalgic. You wait.

“Could I maybe go out tonight if it’s not a problem I get that you’ve got your own sh- stuff going on and all and yeah. Uh.”

Very nervous, apparently. It takes you a moment to process that.

Ah, and it’s Friday. You’d forgotten. Of course.

“Are you asking to be driven somewhere?” you inquire calmly, setting down the milk on the counter. You remind yourself that you mustn’t forget to put it away. It has never been a problem in the past, but it wouldn’t do to have it become one today.

He is, in fact, asking to be driven somewhere, but is afraid of imposing himself upon you.

From his somewhat garbled and frequently meandering mumbles, you glean that although he does not start attending classes until the fall semester, he has made a point of becoming involved with the student society associated with his program via the internet, and that some of the people in question are gathering in celebration of the end of the winter semester.

Ah, yes. You suppose it’s almost April. You wonder if John will come home in time for his birthday.

“Of course, Dave. That isn’t a problem at all. When are you expected?” You’re somewhat relieved
that he’s taken measures against isolation. Belonging to an academic organization can greatly improve a young man’s scholastic experience in general. You’re pleased by his prudence.

He still looks a trifle undecided. “It was never my intention to keep you confined here, with only me for company,” you tease gently. He rewards you with a little laugh, but continues to fidget.

You wait for him to collect his thoughts.

It would appear that he’s uncertain when, precisely, the event is expected to conclude. It is an evening affair, after all, and one proposed and attended by students. You were once a student yourself, and though you were not one who made a habit of keeping excessively late hours, you knew many who did. You understand.

Your routine as he has seen it is, of course, one in which the day typically ends much earlier than a celebratory gathering of youths could be expected to, and you understand that this is why he harbours such a concern over potentially disturbing you. You find that both endearing and a little amusing.

You make him an offer of compromise, and one you think quite generous: unless he should call you beforehand, you will come to collect him at midnight.

He agrees, though only with a rather wry-sounding reference.

You raise an eyebrow at him in amusement.

You would think him a somewhat too self-sufficient Cinderella, personally.

=>>

The house is very quiet in the later hours of the evening.

You live in a quiet neighbourhood, but even the quietest of suburban neighbourhoods is too compact and uncluttered by greenery to dampen the carrying sounds of a spring afternoon. Always present is the low roar of a car engine starting, the metallic rumble of a garage door opening, the high piping voice of a child, and the lower, more resonant tenor of an adult. Always present is the traffic of a distant highway, despite the lengths to which the city has gone to ensure the contrary. Always present is at least one bird, or one barking dog.

There is an ambiance to a suburban neighbourhood, but until you have sat up past the last child’s bedtime and heard the distant slam of a car door closing by the hand of the last overtime worker to arrive home for the weekend, you do not realize it.

It is Friday, but you live in a quiet neighbourhood, and past the stroke of eleven, it proves itself a silent neighbourhood.

You find yourself checking your palmtop computer more frequently than you’re accustomed to doing, but your ongoing presence as pipefan413 appears to be greatly appreciated by your peers, two of whom have suffered cataclysmic wardrobe failures and are in dire need of guidance. You have been neglecting them, of late. You may have to remedy that.

You have almost seen officeurchin1280’s pant leg catastrophe through to its bittersweet resolution when a strange notification pops up at the bottom of your screen.

It takes you a moment of confused fumbling to remember that, some years ago, John had taken the liberty of installing a strange application on your phone. You had thought you’d removed it.
TG: yo
TG: uh so
TG: i kind of made you an account
TG: and i didnt know what to name it
TG: so the name is sort of dumb and obvious
TG: sorry i guess
TG: kind of rude of me
TG: but i hope you dont mind too much

You’re struggling. You’re not sure how this program works.

TG: its just that i thought maybe it might be loud here
TG: and i was totally right
TG: like infinitely right
TG: righter than the direction
TG: so right there isnt even a left turn left to turn down anymore
TG: wait
TG: nevermind just ignore that
TG: that was dumb
TG: are you even there

You think you’ve got it now.

TG: oh man maybe you dont carry your pda on you
TG: and i was supposed to call the house phone or something
TG: that would make sense actually
TG: im not sure why i didnt think of that
TG: and now when you finally check it this bs is what youre going to find
TG: waiting for you like a kid abandoned at the park
TG: except less tragic and more dumb
TG: theres just going to be this endless awful novel
TG: and im probably going to be there when you find it
TG: which is gonna be super embarrassing
TG: damn it
TG: i wonder if i can delete it before you get a chance to read it
TG: probably not

ME: EXCUSE MY TARDINESS. I AM NOT FAMILIAR WITH THIS APPLICATION.
TG: whoa all caps
TG: i was not expecting that
TG: like
TG: at all
TG: you seem like more like
TG: i dunno
TG: like youd type like rose i guess
TG: dude how much are you even typing
TG: are you writing me a novel too
TG: are we starting a book club
TG: can i be oprah
TG: you can be ellen
TG: wait no
TG: if youre ellen i want to be portia
TG: i think id make a pretty good portia
ME: DID YOU HAVE A QUESTION, DAVE?
TG: oh my god it cant have taken you that long to type that
TG: nobody types that slow
TG: nobody

You don’t believe yourself to be a particularly unskilled typist. You do a considerable amount of it for work, after all.

TG: thats like
TG: a new record of slow
TG: super ultra mega slow
TG: so slow it sounds like the title of a japanese game show

Dave is just very fast. You assume it’s a generational difference. He is very young, and grew up with this sort of thing, after all.

TG: dude come on
TG: wait i didnt offend you or anything did i
TG: i didnt mean it like that
TG: its just kind of amazing
TG: im used to john
TG: and john is pretty slow tbh
TG: but not like this
TG: but anyway i guess you asked me a question
TG: wow i should probably answer that
TG: give me a second
TG: i gotta scroll up

You would comment that this wouldn’t have been an issue if he didn’t feel the need to type so much, but you are certain your words would be lost in the very sea of text they were referring to.

You like to think he’d appreciate the irony of that.

ME: DO YOU WANT ME TO COME AND GET YOU?
TG: yeah so i kind of wanted to ask if it was cool to come home now
TG: oh
TG: man you actually beat me to the punch
TG: that is some tortoise and the hare shit right there
TG: damn
TG: im proud of you
TG: wow that was a weird thing to say
TG: just wow dave
TG: but yeah i think i want to ollie out of here
TG: cinderella my ass on out of this joint
TG: getting macked on a little too hard by these sophomores
TG: when thats not really why i came here
ME: PLEASE MIND YOUR LANGUAGE.
TG: i mean im flattered but
TG: what
TG: oh
TG: sorry
TG: ive been
TG: i wasnt thinking
TG: my bad
TG: fghtj
TG: jkkllkmk
TG: goddamn it
TG: theyre trying to take my phone
TG: i think theyre jealous
TG: see this is what i mean
TG: i mean i cant blame them but damn
ME: I WILL BE THERE SHORTLY.
TG: ok
TG: my hero
TG: i can already taste freedom
TG: it tastes like cake and liberty
TG: oh man im eating all of the cake when i get home
TG: you dont even know
TG: i dont even care that its probably gonna be past midnight
TG: i am gonna sleep in that cake
TG: make myself a bed of pastry and lie in it
TG: lay my head upon a sweet ass pillow of icing and never get up
ME: PLEASE REFRAIN. YOU WILL MAKE A MESS.
TG: sorry
TG: youre getting faster though
TG: nice

Though it is against your nature to leave a message unanswered, you tuck the device in your pocket decisively.

You don’t believe you would succeed in retrieving him before dawn if you waited for him to disengage from conversation, frankly.

At least he seems as though he’s in a good mood.

==> You have very little difficulty locating the house in front of which you’d originally dropped him off.

It is, as he’d mentioned, most incredibly loud. You’re inclined to suppose that it is only the combination of student-occupied housing and general weekend excitement that has prevented the police from being called.

He isn’t waiting for you outside, which is to be expected. It’s drizzling, and only a few dedicated smokers are lingering on the porch, each of them pressed as far back against the wall as possible in an attempt to stay dry under the meagre coverage afforded by the overhang of the roof. You watch a young woman cup a hand over the end of her cigarette, struggling valiantly with a lighter that sparks, but never burns.

Neither of the two young men accompanying her has moved to assist her. You feel a small frown tugging at the corners of your lips.

You linger in your car a moment longer, indecisive. For once, the screen of your palmtop computer is empty of notifications. Dave has not answered you. That’s just as well, you suppose.
You light the young lady’s cigarette for her before you go in. She looks surprised, but murmurs a shy word of thanks nonetheless.

It is even louder inside.

If he intends to make a habit of attending functions such as these, you believe Dave will require a hearing aid before you do.

Mercifully, it is less crowded than you had feared. Aside from a narrowly avoided collision with one very excited young person, you are unimpeded.

You are being looked at rather strangely by those lingering in and near the foyer, though. You’re not surprised. While you may be many things, you are certainly not part of the target demographic that this party was intended for.

At least one person is courteous enough to try to engage you in conversation despite the noise level, and you politely- though with great effort and much repetition- inform her that you’re looking for a young man with blonde hair, unsure if she’ll know him by name.

She yells something several times before you recognize it as “are you here for Dave?” and nod in affirmation. She raises a finger and then disappears into the next room.

The noise- which you recognize as music only now- abruptly diminishes, much to your relief.

She returns, only to immediately pass by you. “This way,” she calls, gesturing for you to follow before peering into yet another room nearer to the rear of the house.

You’re a touch bemused. It hadn’t really been your intention to become an attendee. You follow, nevertheless.

Despite your suspicions, Dave was surprisingly faithful in his account of the general conduct of his peers. One of these young ladies seems to have succeeded in requisitioning his phone.

Another is squatting over him where he’s sitting cross-legged on the floor, and she seems to be doing her very best to fashion some sort of braid in his hair.

You find yourself suddenly struck by how many more young ladies than young men you’ve seen thus far. You have your suspicions about that, as well.

Regardless of their veracity, Dave doesn’t seem to have done too well by himself, if his defeated slouch and listless expression is anything to go by. You look for the girl who guided you here to thank her, but she’s already disappeared, lost into the cacophonous ether of the event once again. You wonder if she’s the host.

“Yo Jenny can I have my phone back I’m sort of waiting for someone,” you hear, and chortle internally. A fellow jostles you with a mumbled “excuse me” on his way out of the room, and you realize that it may be unwise of you to linger in the doorway.

“Maybe when you finally get my name right, Strider,” the girl- who is apparently not a Jennifer- teases, waving the offending object above her head, and you suppress a little smile as you pluck it carefully from between her fingers. You choose to ignore her unflattering squawk of surprise in favour of a kinder first impression.

Dave sighs gustily, throwing the back of his hand over his eyes like a swooning maid. “Oh my god finally, I thought you’d left me to the wolves, they were gonna eat me for sure, I was terrified,
there would’ve been nothing but bones, bro-”

You chuckle despite yourself, but only until he staggers to his feet to take his phone from you.

You’d thought, perhaps, that his sluggishness was due to fatigue, but now that he’s near, you can smell the pungency of tequila on his breath.

He is clearly not too inebriated to perceive your look of disapproval, because the next words out of his mouth are “Janice spilled on me,” to which the girl who is named Janice- not Jennifer- howls a very damning protestation to the contrary.

He looks about ready to strife her, but she plants a quick, wet-looking kiss on his cheek before absconding past you into the hallway.

Dave flinches at your stern expression.

==>  

“I didn’t-”

It’s fine.

“It’s not-”

It’s fine.

“Are you-”

It’s fine.

It is a very quiet drive home.

==>  

You’re not angry.

You’re just… disappointed.

You have made it clear that you do not encourage such behaviours in minors, most particularly not those who are due to enter into the demanding world of post-secondary education in the near future. You hope this is not something he makes a habit of.

He mumbles “no.”

You look at him appraisingly.

He’s slumped down in his chair, hips almost aligned the front edge of the seat and head lolling back in indifference.

He’s not listening. You frown. He should drink some more water.

He does, if only to appease you.

You sit down across from him with a tumbler of you own- you believe you’ll need something to calm you down after all this excitement- and a sigh.

“Did you have fun?”
He lifts his head, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “What?” You just look at him. “Are you… done being mad at me?”

You stifle a sigh. “It seems as though you’ve made some new friends, Dave,” you encourage gently, and he tilts his head at you.

“I don’t know if I’d say friends.”

Well, you would. He seemed quite close with the young Miss Janice, for all his many objections. You’re not so old as to have forgotten that not all courtship is conducted with flowers and sweet words, after all.

And frankly, you can’t really imagine that he’d be the sort to give a girl flowers. It hardly seems, well, ironic enough.

He makes a face at you. “No, man, I mean, I guess she’s cool and all but no, it’s not like that.”

Well, if he’s absolutely sure. You suppose she just seemed a charming girl.

You hide a smile in your glass as he begins to redden.

“Ugh no, it’s really not like that, god,” he blusters, and you have to bite down a laugh at the surge of colour in his face. “Man, if you think she’s so ‘charming’, why don’t you date her?”

You raise an eyebrow at him, relishing the warm creep of whiskey through your stomach.

“I think you’ll find me much too old to be an object of interest to pretty young things in their twenties, Dave,” you tell him drily.

The colour of scotch has always interested you. It has a look to it that seems almost as though it should belong to something of a syrupy thickness, but to taste, it is hot and thin, and leaves only a lingering sweetness in its afterburn.

Dave is unusually quiet.

When you look at him, he’s just staring at you, eyebrows flattened into a line above his sunglasses.

“Is something the matter?”

The look he is giving you is so patently unimpressed that you begin to feel as though you’ve done something wrong.

You watch his mouth work furiously in silence.

“So that it’s, right,” he mutters incredulously, “that’s what it is, you’re like- most people are like the ‘you can bring a horse to water but you can’t make it drink’ sort of deal but you’re just like ‘what water’ and then walk across that lake like you’re jesus, suspended by the magical power of denial because the water doesn’t exist if you don’t want it to, that’s your deal, isn’t it?”

You have no idea what he’s talking about.

His lip curls in visible frustration. “No, okay, it’s like, I thought this was just you being polite because you didn’t want to hurt my feelings or something even though sometimes there’s pretty obviously some shit going on under that hat sometimes that kind of says otherwise and it’s confusing as hell but I thought I had it figured out, I guess, and now I’m pretty sure I really didn’t, I think you do this thing where you just don’t see what you don’t want to see.”
You are genuinely very perplexed, and somewhat concerned. He seems very agitated. Maybe he should rest.

He just stares at you.

“Oh my god, it’s like you have an off-switch for comprehension. Like, I’m almost kind of impressed but that’s also really annoying, I’m not gonna lie.”

You frown.

“It’s somewhat unreasonable to expect that I would understand something I don’t believe you’ve discussed with me, David,” you chide.

Immediately after saying it, you’re beset by the feeling that this was a very unwise thing to say.

If you were to judge by his expression, it very well may have been. He looks quite displeased with you, perhaps even to the point of antagonism. You do hope that’s not the case.

You’re quite fond of Dave.

When he rises from his chair, you try to avoid tensing up- you don’t want to provoke him.

You’re about to speak when he interrupts you.

He doesn’t interrupt you with his words, however.

He interrupts you with his knee, sinking it down to rest in the space between your thighs, without provocation or warning.

You are, understandably, a little startled.

He interrupts you again by placing first one hand on your shoulder, and then the other on your face.

You get approximately as far as “What are you-?” before he’s kissing you.

And he is kissing you.

Even your capacity for wilful ignorance lacks the speed and finesse to outrun and explain away the suppositions that this sort of behaviour must suggest.

He is kissing you with all the reckless fervency of frustration, hands fisted into the collar of your shirt, but he is kissing you, nonetheless.

He is kissing you, and it is warm and wet and faintly sweet with orange juice and bitingly bitter with tequila. He is kissing you, and it is both a belligerent challenge and a desperate coaxing.

He is kissing you, and you have no idea what to do.

In your panic, you are simultaneously thinking about too much altogether and nothing at all.

There are insectile thoughts creeping out from under the wallpaper faster than you can quash them.

When his lips pull away from yours, you feel, rather than hear, him say, “Don’t misunderstand me,” and you are slightly terrified to realize that you don’t.
To say that you are at a loss would indicate a degree of composure you simply do not possess at the moment.

You think, perhaps, that he’s had too much to drink, and cling to that thought.

He growls in aggravation when you suggest this to be true, but his leg removes itself from between yours. You are somehow both incredibly relieved and strangely conflicted.

The substitution of it for the weight of him in your lap was unexpected, however, and for a moment you fear your heart may have given out from the shock.

You don’t know what to do with your hands. You barely register that you have them except to hold them up in a stance of confused surrender.

He looks at you and sighs heavily.

“You’re flipping your shit,” he tells you, “stop flipping your shit.”

You are not flipping anything, this is just very-

“No, seriously dude, you’re flipping shit like only an Egbert can, I can see where John got it from, jesus.”

You’re disturbed by the insinuation of that.


And you’re John’s father.

“I mean bro figuratively, stop flipping the fuck out and making weird comments and talk this out with me, jesus christ.”

You might feel better equipped to do that if he didn’t have his thighs wrapped around your waist.

“If I get up, you’re going to abscond the fuck out of here and then pretend nothing happened for the rest of forever but also probably not let me leave and we are just going to be the awkward moment, it’s gonna be us, we’re gonna be the dictionary definition of a whole new word dedicated to what happens when someone unsuccessfully macks on their best friend’s dad, man.”

You’re strangely divided between comfort at the thought that he’s just sitting on you to keep you in place and a peculiar feeling of resentment.

He hooks a finger behind the knot of your tie, and you feel your face going hot in mortification.

“Don’t get me wrong, daddio, I’m not being altruistic,” he laughs.

You feel the fingers of his other hand tracing your jaw.

“Hey, look at me. Come on, man, you’re weirding me out.”

You look at him and immediately regret it.

You’re close enough that you can see his eyes through his glasses—just faintly, but enough to match them to the expression on the rest of his face. Your mouth feels very dry. You taste something burnt.
Distantly, you’re aware that it’s likely a mixture of whiskey afterburn and the smoke that seems to linger in your sinuses from years of indulgence, but you still have the strange feeling that you’re having a stroke.

You almost hope that you’re having a stroke.

You’ve lost control of your life.

He kisses you again, and you should stop him, but it’s slower, sweeter, this time, and you don’t. His hands travel down and over your shoulders, around to the back of your neck, where one of his thumbs is tracing a shivering line down the nape of your neck, and you have absolutely lost control of your life.

He makes a vaguely uncomfortable noise in his throat and you swallow in apprehension.

“Okay, so—” his voice sounds thick in a way you find strangely maddening “—I, uh, I just kind of need a yes or no answer for this because normally I’d just assume that is was a no sort of thing because if it’s not a yes then it’s a no and all that jazz and I’mma respect that because I don’t want to be a dick and I feel like my bro is going to come crawling out of the oven like the girl from The Ring and beat my stupid ass if I don’t because he came out of my ceiling once when this guy was being pushy with me which is mad fucked up for all kinds of reasons and the guy shit the bed, like actually shit the bed and I needed a new mattress but I’m getting off-track and what I’m saying is that it seems like you’ve kind of been doing a really extreme version of that thing John does when he doesn’t want to admit that he wants something, so—”

He takes a deep, whooping breath. His fingers are working at the back of your collar. It’s incredibly distracting.

One of his legs is bouncing nervously. It’s even more distracting.

“So I feel like this is maybe like that except that he shit talks stuff to make it seem like he doesn’t want it and you just don’t talk about it at all which is smarter but not really helpful in clarifying things for me, and I want to be able to say ‘no pressure bro it’s cool’ but I’m not going to lie, I’m really sort of hoping you’ll say yes, I mean obviously I want you to say yes but I’ll totally respect it if you say no I just need you to say something so I can go hide in my room until I graduate and everything can be totally cool, okay?”

You’re having some difficulty processing this. You don’t feel capable of speech yet.

He shifts uncomfortably and mutters, “yeah okay I’m just gonna go,” and you grab his waist in a fit of panic and say something very stupid.

“I don’t know what you’re asking me,” he repeats slowly.

You’re mortified.

Dave makes a strangled sound of rage.

“Just say yes, you asshole, holy shit, you can say no later if you change your mind.”

You say yes. He kisses you.

You kiss him back and run your fingers through his hair and revel in the sound he makes in the back of his throat when you slide your hand under his shirt and wonder what happened to your
sense of decency.

You were supposed to be a gentleman.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Shit goes down. Nobody could ever have possibly predicted this. How unexpected.

There is an awkward process to beginning a strange little affair that you’d almost forgotten.

It isn’t at all like it’s portrayed in the movies, wherein the couple, having succumbed to desire for one another after enduring so much prerequisite tension, transitions fluidly from its point of origin—that is to say, an elevator, a rainy street, or even a kitchen chair— to its endpoint—a bedroom, typically—by means of artistic scene change.

This is real life, and those steps must be walked, those stairs climbed. Left with only the options provided by reality, you discover that you do still remember the breathless interims of your youth.

You only recall a dozen or so furtive dashes, some of them down hallways in search of a door to slip behind, some of them through crowds in search of relative seclusion, but each and every one was filled as thoroughly as it could be with sneaking kisses and lingering touches, if only to stave off the apprehension and doubt brought on by prolonged silence and lack of contact.

It’s been so long that you don’t know if you still remember how to keep the tension from breaking. Alone, you’re not sure if you can ward off the multitude of guilty shadows that the warmth of a welcome body repels, so you put it off, hoping that it won’t happen, hoping that it will.

He kisses like someone who learned how to kiss by watching movies, appropriately enough. You suppose that perhaps he did, and that if the rest of his generation did as well, he can’t truly be blamed for not knowing any better.

You fit your palm to the back of his neck and take charge almost without thinking.

He struggles to adjust, reluctant at first to relinquish the wet and fervent heat of a dance he knows to the slower and more rhythmic tempo of one he does not, and you consider that you may be too accustomed to giving silent instruction, and to expecting to be obliged by those you strive to teach.

But, as you know so well, he’s a smart boy. Gradually, he falls into your rhythm, matches your proverbial step, imitates and emulates in tandem with you, and you feel his body melt against yours in a motion that you recognize as being more of an attempt to become a part of one seamless whole than it is a gesture of simple intimacy.

You feel your breath drawing short in your chest at the sensation. It is, for a total lack of better words by which to describe it, something you could only call akin to a slow, agonizing burn, and in you, the intensity of its heat inspires a smoky haze of thoughtless appetite to curl upwards from the fibres of a purposefully dampened and long-neglected wick.

This is not the place for this.

When you pull away from him, he tries to follow after you, voicing a small sound of complaint before sitting back compliantly.
He’s rather disheveled. You’ve made something of a mess of him. Judging by his look, he’s made a mess of you, as well.

You take a moment to collect your thoughts while he fidgets with the buttons on your shirt, fingers working nimbly down your chest. You’re about to speak when he slides a slim hand along your bare chest, and you realize precisely what he was doing.

“David,” you warn, and he bites his lip mischievously. “This is not the place for this.”

Given voice, the words sound different. The tone you use for your own admonishment is different than the one you use for him.

He gives you a rather coy look. “Are you inviting me upstairs, Mister Egbert?” he teases, and his joking imitation of a playful coquette is so impeccably apt that you surprise yourself by laughing.

Grinning, he leans back into you, fingers playing under the open lapels of your shirt, and tries to coax you back into a kiss.

You nearly relent. He’s very persuasive.

But when he rolls his hips down against you, you grab him tighter than you’d intended to.

This is not the place for this.

“Nobody’s watching,” he murmurs.

He can’t know that.

He makes a dismissive sound with his mouth- not unlike someone passing wind, you note disapprovingly- and locks his legs around your waist. “If I get off you now, you’re probably gonna start freaking out.”

He’s likely right.

“I know.” He kisses you again.

You’re a strong man. You have always been a strong man. You have been father, mother, and schoolmaster, all at once. You have been a landscaper, redecorator, and handyman. You have carried many things in your lifetime, and many more in just the past twenty years.

Years of singlehandedly rearing a child and running a household has made you tougher than most in many ways.

You’re typically careful to restrain yourself. In a refined gentleman such as you, a brute display raises many unkind and unwelcome questions.

But you suppose there are moments in which an exception must be made.

You struggle to get your feet under you, but it’s not him; your knees are very stiff. You suppose you are getting old, after all.

He weighs surprisingly little. Not nearly as much as a refrigerator. Certainly not as much as a safe.

He’s nearly as tall as you now, but compared to the burdens you’re accustomed to carrying, he feels birdlike and delicate.
His squawk of surprise at being lifted is particularly appropriate.

“Holy shit-” he should really try to mind his language “-that’s, this is, goddamn.”

You adjust him carefully, fitting him higher on your waist for better stability as he clings to your neck, wide-eyed.

You’re both amused and concerned. “Are you alright, Dave?”

He’s quiet, at first, and does nothing but chew his lip. You wait patiently, shifting as the feeling comes back into your legs. They ache.

“I’m not going to lie to you, dude,” he mumbles distractedly, “this is sort of hot. Like really hot. Like ‘throw me around let’s do the wheelbarrow and then the flying circus’ hot, just whoa.”

You raise an eyebrow at him, puzzled by his terminology. Typically, you can follow the meaning behind his strange and rambling speech relatively well, but in this instance, you’re not certain what wheelbarrows or circuses- flying or otherwise- have to do with anything.

He flushes and clamps his mouth shut.

“You know, just ignore me. It’s no big.”

You oblige him.

After all, he’s made no move to loose himself from your grasp, and you will have to traverse those stairs at some point.

It seems to you that his wandering hands all but promise that the climb will be treacherous.

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He drops his legs from around your waist and braces his feet and elbows against the doorframe when you try to bring him into his room.

His expression speaks volumes, and the first line of the first volume is apparently “Oh hell no, I know what’re you’re trying to do here, no way.”

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He drops his legs from around your waist and braces his feet and elbows against the doorframe when you try to bring him into his room.

His expression speaks volumes, and the first line of the first volume is apparently “Oh hell no, I know what’re you’re trying to do here, no way.”

You bite back a choice word and feign polite confusion.

He quirks a pale eyebrow at you. “I’m on to you, dude, don’t even try this with me,” he accuses, “I’m sleeping with you tonight, fucking fight me.”

You consider his problematic choice of words and sigh heavily.

This is a very poor idea. He’s been drinking.

He smiles crookedly and drapes his arms around your neck. “I’ve had worse ideas sober.”

As a responsible adult, you are morally obliged to be stern with him in this respect, even if you have failed to be before.

He makes another rude noise and shoots you an odd, sly sort of look. “I didn’t say we were gonna do anything. I just said I wanted to sleep with you. Maybe I meant totally platonic- okay maybe just mostly platonic, let’s be real I’m probably going to feel you up a bit- mancuddles and then the sweet embrace of slumber brought on by male bondage. What did you think I meant?”
You think he means bonding.

He furrows an eyebrow. “Huh?”

Bonding. You think he means *male bonding*.

“Wait, what did I say?”

Something Sigmund Freud would have found very interesting, no doubt.

And something you believe betrays his somewhat less than platonic intentions.

He ducks under your arm before you can catch him and continue in your attempt to coerce him into his room.

He’s too fast. It’s mildly infuriating, as well as unnerving.

He slips his arms around you from behind, resting his chin on your shoulder.

You can’t see his cheeky smile, but you know it’s there, nonetheless.

*Brat.*

He laughs.

Oh.

You hadn’t intended to say that aloud.

The wet kiss he plants on the back of your neck surprises you. You suppose it’s been a very long time since someone behaved so affectionately towards you.

A part of you would like to believe that this is why you’re having difficulty resisting. To a starving man, the richest foods must seem all the richer.

He starts to walk backwards, pulling gently, and you hum a little sound of disapproval.

You can almost *hear* him grin. You couldn’t explain why, or how, but you know exactly what expression he’s making, and it is a very impudent one.

His arms are gone from around you. You berate yourself for missing their warmth and cast around for him. He can’t have gone far.

He hasn’t gone far.

He’s leaning against your door, grinning at you impertinently. You cross your arms.

If he wants to sleep there, fine. You suppose you’ll take the couch.

His smile drops in a whine. “Oh, *come on.* I’m just going to crawl in after you once you go to sleep anyway, you pretty much can’t stop me so it’s probably better if you go for the more comfortable and spacious option anyway or else I’m gonna be all up in your business,” he insists.

You raise an eyebrow.

You believe he’s already very thoroughly *“all up in your business.”*
He splutters with laughter. “Just come to bed, dude, please, I’ll behave,” he starts and then looks thoughtful in a way you’re not sure you like. “If you do, I mean.”

His sly smile tells you that he knows precisely how tenuous the chances of that are. You are already doing a very poor job at behaving.

But you relent, nonetheless, sighing, and he whoops triumphantly as you open the door.

He should really keep his voice down. You remind him.

He looks at you strangely. “There’s nobody else home.”

Oh. You suppose not.

He laughs and starts pulling off his shirt.

You turn away respectfully.

He laughs again, somewhat incredulously.

“Dude. Dude, really?”

His fingers snake around your waist again. He begins to pull your shirt from your pants.

You thought he was going to behave.

“I am behaving, I’m being so good, you don’t even know. You’re just not sleeping in full clothes, no way.”

He reaches for your belt buckle and you grab his hand.

You are an adult, not a child.

You are perfectly capable of changing yourself.

In the bathroom. You think you’ll do so in the bathroom.

Your ears burn with his laughter for the entirety of your short trip down the hall.

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When you get back, he’s left the door ajar, but the main light is off.

His face is painted half in orange, from the ambiance of the streetlight filtering through the window, and half in blue, from the luminous glow of what you assume is his phone.

He’s lying on his back.

“You’ll ruin your eyes,” you tell him automatically, and he grins lazily at you.

“Tuck me in at night and maybe I won’t go blind before I’m thirty.”

His retorts are getting bolder and more nonsensical. You think he’s falling asleep. You hope he’s falling asleep.

You also hope he isn’t, but you’re not particularly willing to embrace that.
You linger in the doorway uncertainly.

He looks at you. His eyes are very red, even in the odd lighting. He’s not wearing his glasses.

Of course he’s not wearing his glasses, he’s in bed.

Why on Earth would he be wearing his glasses in bed?

He sighs. “Dude, stop flipping shit and get in here. You can flip shit in the morning.”

You oblige him, but not before reprimanding his fast-degenerating language.

He replies with an inattentive “uh-huh” and turns towards you.

Even in the gloom, they’re red. Redder than cherries. Red like something painted. As red as you remember. An impossible shade, rendered only improbable by the reality of the slim figure creeping a hand across the bed towards you. A figure you have held, and touched, and felt the heat of.

You think witchlight again, vaguely, and pull him towards you without thinking anything else.

He makes a pleased sound into your mouth, arms looping eagerly around your neck. His legs entangle themselves with yours.

Even through your pyjamas, you can feel that they’re bare.

You make an undignified sound of surprise and look down without meaning to.

Underwear.

Loose underwear, you realize, and lose yourself in a wave of relief.

The strain he is putting on your heart is making you feel more your age than any visit to a physician wearing only one white glove ever has.

You keep that thought to yourself, suppressing a grimace, but the doubt it incurs persists.

You’re not entirely certain how he expects this to work. In your admittedly limited and entirely clinical experience, the necessary action that must be taken by two persons of a, shall you say, more masculine persuasion who seek to couple- of which you have only heard whispers, being, of course, too adamantly incurious to seek out such a thing yourself- is not a particularly enjoyable one.

And you already carry the heavy burden of having cause for personal reluctance, even without taking the mechanics of the act into consideration.

Dave’s hand cups your cheek. It’s very warm. “You’re thinking too much, it’s time to stop thinking.”

You’re having difficulty obliging him. He laughs and pulls the blanket up, childishly, over both of your heads.

It helps, somehow. Even though the room is dark, the kiss you share in the total blackness under the bedclothes feels more private.
More safe.

When his hands wander along your shoulders and down your chest, you don’t stop him.

When you let your hand explore the slight curve of his side, thumb hitting the hard ridge of a slightly protruding hipbone, he gasps, loosing a tiny puff of air into your lungs, and squirms.

You smile against his mouth and he says “no” very adamantly against yours.

He’s quite ticklish.

Intensely so.

He deals you a healthy wallop in his thrashing. You stop and sit up, blinking back the spots swimming in your vision. He’s got a good arm on him.

He looks like he can’t decide whether to be very angry or very contrite.

Instead, he just says “don’t tickle me that’s not cool please don’t tickle me,” and you hold up your hands, palms open towards him, in surrender.

He’s still squirming indecisively.

After some consideration, you can tell he thinks he’s made an error. He’s afraid you’re angry with him.

You lean down to kiss him reassuringly.

You’re not certain why you don’t think he’ll pull you down on top of him. He does.

You think you like him on his back like this, under you, but you’re avoiding thinking too deeply about it.

You bury your face in his throat when he runs his hands down your back.

There are questions you should probably be asking right now. You don’t want to.

He pulls you tighter to him, nails scraping lightly along the curve of your spine, and you swallow convulsively.

You can feel his erection pressing against your hip.

In a moment of extreme surreality, you realize that it doesn’t bother you.

You’d never dwelled on it. The concept was too alien, too far outside of your idea of normal to be allowed. You suppose you had always assumed that it would seem wrong to you because of that.

But it doesn’t.

It makes you want to touch him, and the intensity of the impulse makes you nervous.

There are questions you should probably be asking right now.

Questions about where he intends to go with this, and to what end. Questions about tomorrow.

You don’t want to make his time here uncomfortable for him due to one ill-conceived night of stupidity.
One mildly inebriated night of stupidity.

You feel very ashamed of yourself.

When you start to pull away, he makes a breathless sound of complaint and grabs for you.

You think he asks you where you’re going, but however gamely he is fighting his fatigue, you can tell he’s very tired. He’s frequently difficult to understand, but like this, he is almost incomprehensible.

You lie down beside him and think very seriously about what you’re about to do.

This proves too stressful, so you resolve to think about it in the morning instead, which you’ll undoubtedly be doing anyway.

He moans and leans his forehead against your shoulder when you run your hand over the front of his underwear questioningly.

You suppose it’s obvious that you’re not sure what to do, or what’s acceptable, because he presses his hand over yours and rocks against your palm lazily.

He mumbles something into your chest. You have no idea what he said.

You do, however, know that your wrist is turned at a strange angle and becoming quite sore, and that as someone who shares a similar configuration of genitalia, you wouldn’t find this stimulation particularly satisfying.

You try very hard not to think about what you’re doing, and who you’re doing it with. Without the warmth of his mouth against yours, the room seems very quiet and empty. Irrationally, you feel like everyone knows what you’re doing.

Paradoxically, the noises he makes help.

Perhaps it’s because they give you something to listen to, to fixate on.

Or perhaps it’s because you know that you are eliciting them, these muffled gasps and throaty groans, this panting, orchestral accompaniment to the way his fingernails are starting to dig into your shoulder unconsciously, to the way he’s moving with your hand.

He’s still mumbling. You still have no idea what he’s saying.

You catch a couple of swear words and then feel his hand slipping under your pyjamas. You grab his wrist. He groans, but not pleasurably.

He says something. You tell him to speak up.

He does, and you catch “wanna touch you.” You take a deep breath.

“Tomorrow,” you tell him firmly, and then wonder why. You spoke before you had a chance to think about what you were saying. He seems to accept it anyway, though somewhat reluctantly.

It doesn’t take him long to finish. You suppose that’s a benefit of youth.

He’s asleep by the time you’ve cleaned yourself up.

You suppose that’s also a benefit of youth.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary


Your bed is very warm when you wake up.

A part of you is reluctant. You sense, distantly, that there is some reason you’re unwilling to be awake.

But you must get up or you’ll be late.

A whispering voice insists that you do not. There’s some reason you don’t want to be awake. Not yet.

But one of the slim fragments of morning light that trickles into your bedroom over the rooftop of the house backing yours is already burning at the edge of one of your eyelids like a reminder. You really must get up. You don’t like to rush.

You open your eyes to another peripheral glimmer of gold and look down.

A supple head of hair, shot through with copper.

He has his cheek pressed against your chest, an arm thrown over you, and a leg tangled between yours.

Ah. Yes.

It’s no wonder you’re so warm.

You attempt to extricate yourself from his grasp, but he just clings to you more tightly and grumbles in his sleep.

You take a moment to look at him. You count the freckles on his shoulders and resist the urge to run a hand through his hair. You indulge yourself by carefully pushing it out of his face.

He murmurs. His eyelids flutter and then crush shut against the meagre light of the morning.

“Dave,” you coax softly. “I have to get up.”

He doesn’t seem to agree.

“I have to go to work, Dave.”

He opens one bright eye- all the brighter for being bloodshot, you note with amusement- and then the other. He has rheum crusted into the corner of one eye. What was it your mother called it? *Sleep*, you believe, and the term always confused you. You resist the urge to clear it away.

Dave raises his head. He looks unamused. You think he may be slightly hungover.
A crueler part of you thinks he deserves it.

You feel his ribs expand against yours as he takes a deep breath. “It’s Saturday,” he tells you flatly, dropping his cheek back down to your chest with an impact that reverberates in your lungs. “I’m not leaving this bed before noon, and neither are you.”

Oh.

Oh, you see.

Alright.

You run your hand through his hair and try not to think too much. It’s very soft, and it tangles easily. You’re careful not to snag your fingers. You don’t want to disturb him.

He murmurs with pleasure and then sighs heavily.

“You’re not gonna go back to sleep, are you?”

Likely not.

You’re not accustomed to sleeping in.

He groans.

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You know he’s joined you in the kitchen when you hear the distinctive sound of his bare heels dragging lightly against the linoleum, a breathy whisper at the end of the ellipsis that is every noiseless step, but you opt for polite silence. It isn’t a long time you’re forced to wait before his arms are winding around your middle and his chin is coming to rest on your shoulder.

You know he thinks highly of his ability to move undetected. You see no point in ruining that for him.

A man less attuned to his presence likely would not have noticed him, anyway.

Moreover, you’re glad for the warmth and solidity of his chest against your back. Left to your own devices, the faint humming of the lights and the papery rustle of your clothing folding and sliding against itself sounded too much like the buzzing and skittering of insectile thoughts creeping up behind your open back.

Loosed from captivity as they were by your indiscretions last night, they are much more insistent. They can no longer be folded behind the walls of your mind and papered over with a more pleasing shade. Their emergence was catalytic, each dragging the other out behind it as if bound together by surface tension like so many drops of water, and it is all you can do not to drown in the crawling sensation of obtrusive thoughts with only the task at hand to buoy you.

You can feel them creeping across your scalp, looking for a hole by which to enter and infest.

His proximity is a paradoxical comfort. The tentative kiss he plants in the narrow space of open skin behind your ear is soothing calamine to the itch he himself fostered. *Hair of the dog*, your mother would say.

“Pancakes, hell yes,” he murmurs, reaching stealthily towards the batter bowl, and you smack his hand lightly.
There are raw eggs in that, and you’re half-done already. He can wait until it’s all cooked. He’s not going to die in the meantime.

He mumbles something discontented into your shoulder and squeezes you. You bite back a smile. He’s impeding your movement rather grievously, but you can’t find it in you to complain.

“Do we have bacon?”

It’s a shy question, spoken too quietly and too quickly for the nonchalance he’s affecting. He doesn’t like to ask for things. You find it endearing.

You debate whether or not to indulge the little proclivity for mischief you have, but decide better of it.

There’s bacon cooking in a pan in the oven. You’ve already turned it. It seemed more pragmatic to do it all at once, knowing his appetite. Besides, you didn’t want the grease spattering all over your stovetop. It can be troublesome to clean.

He moans in a way that sounds more than a little inappropriate and squeezes you even more tightly. “Oh fuck yes—” you appreciate his enthusiasm, but you don’t think he’s even trying to watch his language anymore “—you’re the best, oh my god, I love you.”

Your intestines coil tightly in your abdomen, a sudden weight pushing up against your diaphragm, robbing you of air. You tell yourself it’s the formidable pressure that he’s applying to your midsection.

Such easy words, these days.

Easy, meaningless words.

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He’s eating quickly.

He has a good appetite.

You look at the unfinished crescent of pancake on your plate and set down your fork with a sigh.

Dave tenses. You suppose he’s as unwilling to have this conversation as you are.

Nevertheless.

“Dave,” you start, and he sets his elbows on the table, hunching over his plate and chewing in long, bovine movements while he cuts another bite. You dimly recognize the logic. If his mouth is full, he can’t be expected to speak. Ironic, considering that it is a politeness he does not make a habit of observing.

You sigh again. As you suspected, this is going to be difficult. “Dave, I believe we need to speak about…” You pick your words carefully. “The events of last night.”

He groans through his food and swallows it all in a lump. Judging by his pained expression, it did not go down smoothly. “Can I finish eating first?”

You study him carefully. “Are you going to construct another reason to delay this conversation if I allow you to?”
He looks down at his plate as though it has wronged him. “Maybe. Probably.”

You’d suspected as much.

Despite your words, the silence stretches out between you, thick with reluctance. He breaks it before you do.

“It doesn’t really have to be a big deal, you know. I’m an adult and you’re an adult and it doesn’t really have to be a big thing,” he mumbles, pushing a piece of bacon through the accumulation of syrup and butter that has pooled at the edge of his plate.

You remind him that he’s only five months older than your son.

He shrugs. “At least I’m older.”

You give him a stern look. He crosses his arms and leans back in his chair, unapologetic by all appearances.

You remind him that he is also your son’s best friend.

He does look slightly guilty at that. “Yeah. I mean, if John hooked up with my bro or something I’d be super weirded-out but okay with it, but I don’t exactly come from the most normal of backgrounds and a bro isn’t really a parent even if he raised you, I guess.” He chews the inside of his cheek contemplatively. You fight back a paranoid tingle of murderous instinct at the faintest suggestion of his brother laying hands on your son. “But this isn’t really about John, dude, it’s not like I’m asking you to marry me or ask for his blessing or anything, if it comes to that I’ll handle it. This is kind of about you, I guess.”

“I…” You swallow down the metallic edge of panic and consider what you’re about to say with a fair amount of shame. “I hope you won’t think too badly of me if I ask that you don’t mention this to John.”

His head snaps up in shock. “What? No, no, dude, no, I don’t mean I’m gonna tell him, can you even imagine, oh my god,” he babbles, “how would you even have that conversation, like, ‘yo John so I might have gotten a little drunk and come on to your dad and we maybe fooled around a little bit really hope that’s cool bro,’ seriously, no way would that fly-”

You chuckle into your fist, more relieved by his vehemence than you’d like to admit.

Silence falls between you again, broken only by the scraping of him pushing things around on his plate with his fork.

“It doesn’t have to be a big deal,” he insists again, quietly.

You can’t help but feel that it does. He was barely out of childhood when you first met him. You feel as though this calls into question the trust you were given to be a good, responsible guardian to him for so many years, if only in brief and temporary snatches.

He laughs. It’s a strangely bitter sound.

“You think you’re breaking my trust, dude? Come on.” He looks genuinely unhappy without any pretense of composure. You suppose it’s understandable, but you still find it concerning. “I came into your house and messed everything up for you, that’s not exactly your fault, you were just trying to be nice to me and all fatherly and shit and I had to turn that weird on you. I mean, I kinda jumped you and even though I was trying to not be a dick about it I was still kind of pushy with
you, and, like... I don't even know your first name, man.”

He shoves his glasses up and runs a hand over his face. “I don’t even know your name, I mean, I
 don’t think John even knows your name, but he’s your kid so that’s okay even if it is kind of weird,
 but I was always like ‘what am I gonna do’ because I sure as hell wasn’t going to call you dad
 ‘cause that’s just fucked up, so it was this thing I had to get creative with and it was just sort of
 funny I guess, some dumbass teenager calling his best friend’s hot dad stupid pet names, you can
 laugh about that, sure, but now I’ve actually kind of messed around with you and I have no idea
 what your name is and that’s actually sad as hell, like if I was some chick coming back from some
dude’s house and my friends were like ‘yo Davina who was he what’s he like what’s his name’ and
I was like ‘I don’t actually know his name oops teehee’ they’d be like dude you’re a whore, get
thee hence to a nunnery, wow, just wow.”

You blink, speechless for a moment.

Nobody calls you by your given name. No one has for some years now.

“James.”

He looks almost as startled as you feel. You hadn’t really meant to say it, you suppose. You just
did.

You fish your wallet from your pocket and hand it to him. He takes it from you gingerly,
marvelling at it like it’s about to explode in his face or disintegrate through his fingers like sand.
“My name is James.”

“James,” he parrots distantly, rolling it out of the side of his mouth like it sounds strange on his
tongue. “Huh.”

You watch his eyebrows furrow as he pulls your cards out one by one. He mutters something.

You didn’t catch it.

“They’re all different,” he repeats. “This one says James R. Egbert, this one says James D. Egbert,
this one says James Egbert, no R. or D. or anything, and this one just says D. Egbert.” He looks at
you, confused.

You almost laugh.

You’d forgotten. It’s been a very long time since you’ve had to have a card reissued or replaced.
It’s a rare occasion indeed that requires you to provide identification. You’ve hardly looked at most
of them in years. Some may even be expired or defunct.

“My middle name is Richard,” you tell him, smiling despite yourself. “It was my grandfather’s
name. Colonel Richard Sassacre. My father’s name was James, as well, so, to avoid confusion, I
was called by my middle name for many years, even after my father’s death.”

He screws up his mouth in confusion. “But then why is it a-”

His face does something remarkable. You narrow your eyes as he ducks his head, sheltering his
face behind his forearm.

You raise an eyebrow. “Are you being immature, David?”

He bursts into a fit of snickering. You cross your arms disapprovingly.
He laughs for far longer than you feel is appropriate.

“Are you quite done?”

You watch as he attempts to school his expression and fails. “No-” the word comes out cracked and sounding mildly hysterical “-your friends and family called you Dick I am never going to be done oh my god I can’t handle this, Dick Egbert, man about town I can’t do this oh my god.”

You’re not impressed.

When he catches your expression, he tries valiantly to quench his merriment, you must admit. Valiantly, but unsuccessfully. You can see it pulling at the corner of his mouth, at his eyebrows. He looks like forcing himself to behave is causing him physical pain.

You drum your fingers on your bicep impatiently.

To his credit, he does look a little sorry.

Not very, though.

He opens his mouth to say something and you interrupt him. “I would much prefer it if you called me James,” you interpose coldly.

He strangles a snort through his nose and buries his face in the crook of his arm. He’s shaking.

Your irritation is starting to give way to reluctant amusement. His face is turning purple. He’s wheezing rather alarmingly. You hope he’s not having some sort of attack.

“It’s not actually that funny,” you point out. Your words come out drier than you meant them to.

He peers at you from the table, finally reduced to nothing but the exhausted sighing of someone who has laughed entirely too much. His sunglasses are mashed strangely against his face. It can’t be comfortable. You can see a wet sheen on his cheeks. You don’t feel any sympathy for him.

“I know,” he admits, “I was just really nervous or something, I guess, I wasn’t trying to be mean, I think I was a little hysterical or somethi-”

He hiccups mid-word and slaps his hand over his mouth. He hiccups again.

And again.

He begins to look very distressed.

You laugh at him.

It’s not your finest hour.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

This chapter is explicit.

It’s surreal.

The experience of… existing in this particular way, you suppose.

Of casually participating in something you know to be imprudent and of highly questionable integrity.

You look at him and think, very distantly, that this young man has known your son for half of his short life.

You have rented movies for this young man and your son. You have driven this young man and your son to and from the airport, to and from the theatre, to and from a collection of strip malls and video game stores. You have watched this young man and your son grow up, and you have discreetly given them space to grow, as any sensible old man should.

You had always assumed that your grey presence would be crowded out by the natural advancement of youth, you suppose. When Dave rejoined your household once again, you had assumed that as he and John grew and flourished in adulthood, the space they took up would come to fill all emptiness, leaving you pressed into your small corner- a homemaker’s cubicle, and rightly so- confined to the role of an observer, and you were content with that.

When John left, he opened a void where you had never thought there would be one.

And so there was only Dave. Clumsy, graceful Dave. Rude, well-mannered Dave.

He was different, strange, but you sought to fashion in his presence a balm to soothe your grey soul, nonetheless. It was unkind of you. Unkind to Dave. Unkind to John. You cannot contain the uncontainable in hopes of replacing the irreplaceable. Foolishness. Unkind foolishness.

But you had assumed that he would crowd out both the void and you, because such is the way of youth, and he is more vibrant still than most. You had accepted your fate as a part of the furniture. A future in which you were part encyclopedia, part phonebook- part car key, perhaps- offering guidance and direction and mobility when convenient, tucked into a drawer and forgotten when not. You had sought to shape him, to carve out your corner and more- he is not your son, after all- but not to restrain him.

In the ways that mattered, what you had expected was no different than what you had always assumed would happen. It was, instead, just a simple act of substitution.

And it had seemed natural that it would happen with John. You are not your mother, and your son is not you. It is not your way to be doted on, and it is not his way to dote.

But Dave was not John. Is not.
Incandescently bright, dangerously beautiful Dave, who does not know enough to recognize his own potential, thank god.

And now it seems to you that he wants to consume you. Or be consumed by you. Both, maybe, or neither. You honestly don’t know.

Regardless, such a renegotiation of your relationship seems as though it should be a thing of considerable gravity.

But the way in which he behaves, ambushing you with cheeky kisses, snatching your hat away in flirtatious bids for your attention, easing himself into your lap at odd moments as though such a thing should simply be expected- these are the thoughtless acts of an infatuated youth who thinks nothing of the troubles you brood on.

He says he doesn’t care about your age.

Frankly, you believe him.

It hasn’t been so long that you’ve forgotten the blinding power of a young man’s hormonal cocktail of lust and affection, particularly one coloured by the titillations of secrecy.

It also hasn’t been so long that you’ve forgotten how fast such intoxications fade, leaving, like their alcoholic counterparts, a headache that seems to consist invariably of one part sheepishness, two parts shame.

You don’t want to be the liquor he sips upon today and regrets tomorrow.

You don’t want to be the last loose sock in the bottom of the laundry hamper, unwashed but partnerless. You don’t want to be the pan left too long in the oven, encrusted so deeply that no amount of soap and relentless scrubbing could ever hope to cleanse it. You don’t want to be these things to Dave, because you see in him a person who, despite the smell, will not discard the sock for the superstitious conviction that only then will the other appear, someone who remains determined that the browning of the sink water means that the ruined pan can be saved if it is only given enough time and attention.

You see in Dave a person who hoards the offal of his emotions alongside the best cuts of them, and you suspect that should the good meat of his mind be thrown into the shade of that heap of wasteful thoughts, it would putrefy in its shadow, leaving him soured.

Not grey, like you, but green and brown with putrefaction. You fear he would lose that maraschino red to his own poor judgement.

He says he doesn’t care about your age, but you remember swearing in the fullness of youthful certainty that you would never regret things that you did, inevitably, learn to regret.

You are not like Dave. You are a neat, simple man, and you discard what you cannot use and will never need. You have survived by smoking away any promise of spoilage you could not simply avoid. Your soul has become bloodless and grey, and your flesh likely tastes more of tobacco than meat these days, but you are preserved. You are made sterile.

And you are torn, because while you are a neat man, and even if you know enough to see the dark promise of catastrophe on some distant horizon, you are still not immune to temptation. A storm seen such a long way off may yet clear before it reaches you, after all.

And if the devil offered you water in an endless desert, you would drink it. You would settle first
on some agreed-upon and non-renegotiable course of reimbursement by which to extricate yourself from untoward obligations in the future, but you would drink.

You would drink because even if the storm is distant, you are a careful man, and while you could simply remove yourself from the plains of temptation and risk nothing, you are not always a good man.

As much as it pains you to admit it, while you are a man who is not easily tempted, you are a man who can be tempted, and given temptations sweet enough, would still risk the thunder just as long as he is guaranteed an umbrella for the rain.

You are not a saint.

You have been alone for a very long time, and you are not unaffected by Dave’s nearly palpable desire for you.

A trifle puzzled by it, perhaps, but affected, nonetheless.

He is very thoroughly averse to being dissuaded, and you are very reluctant to dissuade him.

And so your life has become very surreal, because you find yourself walking calmly on the other side of a line of appropriateness that you have always strived to remain faithful to, and yet you are doing nothing to cross it once again.

You had meant to make a gentleman of him, and yet it seems he’s unmaking a gentleman of you.

Your name is Mister James Richard Egbert, and for the first time in your very long life, you don’t think you care.

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When you determine that you must continue to make an effort to behave, it strikes just how ironic that determination is.

You are not behaving, and yet you are determined to behave within the context of your misbehaviour.

You’d almost like to tell him that, but you’re not certain your appreciation of irony runs parallel to his. You’re not certain what he considers irony to be at all, quite frankly.

The Strider household’s definition of what is and is not ironic is something of an enigmatic beast all of its own.

And so you appreciate it quietly, and appreciate him in a way you’re sure he can understand.

He’s gotten quite bold with you.

It’s been, as you have reflected, a very surreal day. A strange breakfast. A nervous lunch.

An unfinished dinner. That should bother you more than it does.

But you understand why, and you suppose that serves to dampen your irritation.

Or perhaps it’s just him who serves to dampen your irritation. He’s very good at it. Irritatingly good at it, you think, and wince internally.
A Strider is a seven-letter word that appears to come packaged part-and-parcel with a five-letter word that works its way as insidiously into one’s mind as the Strider does into one’s-

You are behaving, within your particular context of misbehaviour. It’s harder than you thought.

And your difficulty re-establishing some line of appropriateness by which to measure your conduct has fast relieved him of his shyness and anxiety.

After breakfast, he stood too near you, followed behind you so closely that he was nearly stepping on your heels, but his nonchalance was coloured by renewed shyness.

By lunch, he was flirting again, sneaking you kisses between bites and climbing into your lap when your plate lay empty, emboldened but still unsure.

You did not discourage him. Now it is dinner, and he did not even wait for you to finish eating before he coaxed you out of your chair, fingers hooked behind the knot of your tie- he laughed at you this morning for wearing one, and you politely refrained from inquiring just how many thin cotton shirts with record symbols on them he owned- and now your plate is growing cold.

It is, perhaps, the only thing in the kitchen growing cold.

He has his lower back settled against the counter, his hands fisted in your collar, and his spine arched in such a way that has him doubled almost backwards onto the countertop. You can’t imagine it’s comfortable, but he seems undisturbed, if the fervency of his kisses is any measure of such a thing.

When you feel the pulse of his abdominal muscles tightening against your own, you suspect, and when his thighs press into your sides, you know.

The tension eases out of him as his shoulders meet the laminate, and you pull back from the kiss to send him a stern look. “David.”

“What?” You can tell that he’s trying to sound teasing, but the word just comes out sounding breathless.

You look at him disapprovingly. “We’re in front of a window.”

He grins at you and tightens his legs around your waist.

You hoist him off of the counter with a grunt and he complains that nobody’s looking. He doesn’t release his grip. You're left carrying him again. You suspect he has an unspoken fondness for it.

You tell him that he can’t be certain of that, and that you are entirely too old and boring to be making a mess of your counters.

His smile is filthy in ways that you couldn’t hope to describe. “What, are you planning on making a mess of me?”

You quirk an eyebrow at him. He bites his lip.

You’re trying to behave, you really are.

You’re simply not sure what behaving is in this context.

And he’s certainly not helping you determine it.
He seems to be in a nigh-perpetual state of attempting to disrobe you.

You’re a methodical soul, even under pressure. In the interests of doing something right the first time, you like to do it slowly, carefully. You like to pause and periodically reflect back on your progress, just to be certain you haven’t erred.

You are pure stock of that particular brand of people who stare long at a piece of fine artwork before reading the title. You are he who steps back to appraise a canvas once more with this new frame of reference in mind, a man who abides by the weight of a few words by which to see a few paint strokes.

Dave is not.

Dave is someone who comes to see a single painting and does not linger in the hallways that precede it unless something particularly interesting catches his eye along the way.

Dave is also one of those curious individuals who runs and leaps across a chasm before considering that there are the makings of a bridge nearby. His mode of action is his first thought, and his first thought is not always the best course of action.

Dave is, in a word, impatient.

He’s also very fast.

It seems that every time you succeed in coercing his fingers away from the closures of your shirt, you find that he's undone your belt and the button on your pants, and when you pry his eager hands away from that rather sensitive area, he’s loosened the buttons on your cuffs.

And he can undo them faster than you could hope to do them up again. He is making progress on your dishevelment that you cannot combat with stubbornness alone.

But he is reckless and sees only one avenue, and therefore expects only one avenue of recourse from you. You can feel the overconfidence in the smile that plays across his lips, even as they’re pressed against your own.

You call him a brat again, a measured little breath coiling over your tongue onto his, and his fidgeting slows for just a moment as he laughs into your mouth.

You take this opportunity to remove them from the equation altogether.

After all, he may be much faster than you, but you are quite a bit stronger than him.

You feel the pulse in his wrists quicken under your palms as you press him back against the bed. You look down at him for the second time in as many hours and wonder, fleetingly, if this is a position he actively attempts to engage you in.

You tell him to slow down.

He makes a rude noise out of the corner of his mouth and pulls, hard, against your grip.

You sigh as his smug look fades into one of vague frustration.

“Please don’t hurt yourself trying to do the impossible,” you advise him patiently.
He looks confused.

You cock an eyebrow in amusement.

You’re heavier than him.

He doesn’t see why that matters. He’s fought heavier opponents than you.

You raise the other eyebrow, quashing an ache of hot distraction in your lower midsection that only seems to grow worse as his helpless petulance deepens. You don’t really want to think about the worrying implications of that at the moment. “I had assumed you would be better acquainted with the physics of grappling, all things considered.”

He doesn’t know what you mean.

You explain to him that in the situations such as these, the heavier opponent utilizes his weight to pin the lighter opponent, and expends far less energy keeping him restrained than he who resists expends attempting to free himself.

“You’ll tire yourself out if you keep this up,” you inform him, nodding your head conclusively.

He lies still and just looks up at you through one half-lidded eye, head turned slightly away. “Sounds an awful lot like you think you’ve won, but I don’t do surrendering so good, you know?”

The force of his sudden resurgence of resistance catches you off-guard, and he manages to lift his forearms, heavy as they are with the weight of you, about an inch or so above the bedspread before crashing back down in defeat. You’re pleasantly surprised by his strength. Judging by his panting, however, he’s succeeded in fulfilling your prediction that he would only tire himself out with the effort.

You plant a light kiss on the sliver of collarbone visible under the twisted neck of his shirt. He whines in protest.

You can’t help but laugh, unkind as it is. You press a kiss to his lips, and he responds eagerly, straining up after you when you pull away.

You linger a moment, looking at him. Taking in the paint strokes, as it were.

The paint strokes respond by lifting one of their thighs and rubbing it provocatively against your groin.

You grimace at him. “There’s no need to be so rushed, Dave.” You risk running a thumb down the inside of his left wrist. He doesn’t pull away. A good sign, you think. “Unless you haven’t told me something, you don’t have anywhere to be tonight, and yet you’re acting like you’re afraid you’ll be late to the dentist if you don’t hurry things along.” He laughs. Better still. “You need to slow down, Dave.”

He wrinkles his nose and looks away. “I’m not so good at slow.”

You contemplate the freckles on that nose affectionately and kiss it, too. “I’ve noticed.”

He sighs discontentedly. “Sorry.”

You chuckle and press your mouth to his neck, acutely aware of the inconvenience of not having the use of your hands but unwilling to trust Dave’s lamentably poor self-control just yet. You
suppose you could find some other way to restrain him, should the need arise.

You murmur something to that effect in his ear, mostly in jest.

He exhales shakily under you. You feel his stifled moan vibrating where it catches in his throat.

He pushes up against your palms again, but without any real strength. “You’re killing me here, come on, you can’t just say shit like that.”

He thrashes weakly against you, for all appearances a little enraged by your bemusement.

You look at him. His face is growing quite red, and quite quickly, at that.

He chews the inside of his cheek and stares somewhere above your shoulder. “Some people are into that okay you can’t just be throwing around statements like that it’s rude I’m just trying to impart a bedroom etiquette lesson here I mean I don’t really mean anything by it,” he rambles.

You can feel the heat radiating from his skin when you kiss away his mumbling. He tucks his chin into his chest defensively. You rub soothing circles against his wrists.

You’re… not certain how to phrase this.

“Are you,” you start carefully, “expressing an interest in being restrained?”

He doesn’t need to answer. You’re not so unwashed in the waters of debauchery as to not understand the meaning of that particular look of mixed hope and self-consciousness.

Some other time, perhaps.

That would be a strange foot indeed to start an already strange affair off on, you must say.

Some other time.

He nods distractedly and murmurs something nonsensical at you, working his wrists free of your hold surreptitiously. You hum warningly, testing your teeth against the shell of his ear on impulse.

There’s no mistaking the shiver that runs through him at that, and no subduing the trembling groan he releases when you begin work your way up the curve of his ear investigatively.

He pressed his leg against your groin again, and you shift away once more. His next attempt is more impatient. You’re a mite concerned that his growing fervency will end badly for you, given your position and his target, so you push his knee carefully outwards with your own, settling yourself between his thighs.

He responds by immediately wrapping them around your waist and pulling you insistently down towards him. You’re not sure why you didn’t anticipate that. You resist.

He starts to squirm again and you sigh in exasperation.

His eyes are burning, and when you catch his gaze, they threaten you with a thousand kinds of hellfire, from the glowing coals of desperate, lustful need to the smoking wick of feeble rage. “Don’t tease me,” he begs, and the throaty huskiness of his tone lights a flame of its own in you, “don’t fucking tease me, not when I can’t do anything about it, I’m gonna die and then I’m gonna kill you, don’t tease me like this.”

You swallow down several uncharacteristically wanton responses to that and ask him what exactly
he’d have you do, then.

“Let me blow you.”

For a split second, you are about to inform him that his proposal has nothing to do with what he’d have you do and that he failed to answer the question, and then you actually realize what he said.

The heat of shock surges in your face. “I beg your pardon?”

He bites his lip. You register, very distantly, that he looks quite pleased by your reaction, if his look of self-satisfaction is anything to go by. “I want to suck your cock,” he repeats, enunciating every single-syllable word as though he is talking to a child.

It is the clearest you have ever heard him speak, and the least comprehensible sentence he has ever spoken to you. Your brain stutters like a poorly wound clock.

You try to say something and just make a very strange noise.

He’s grinning now and the very small part of you that’s still making sense resents him for it.

“You gonna get off me or do you plan on riding my face?” he asks you, and the crudeness of his wording is enough to snap you out of your shock.

“David,” you scold, scandalized.

He laughs outright, arching up against you as best he can. “You haven’t said you don’t want me to.”

You don’t not want him to.

That is, you aren’t not-

It’s been a long time since grammar school, and you’re not sure you remember how these sorts of sentences are supposed to work.

You only realize that he’s slipped his hands loose when he runs his hands over your shoulders. You flex your hands against the bedspread, bizarrely startled by their sudden emptiness.

“Roll over,” he coaxes, pressing a palm against your chest and pushing lightly.

You do, albeit a little numbly. He snickers at you. You suppose you must look a trifle flummoxed.

“Lie down,” he guides, pushing you back. He settles himself between your calves, resting on his knees. Your hands twitch at your sides, unsure of what to do.

It’s been a very long time, and he is not particularly similar to any of the small variety of lovers you once entertained.

He finishes his earlier quest of unbuttoning your shirt and parts it almost reverently, smoothing his hands up your stomach to rest on your chest. “Relax.”

He works his way down with kisses, lingering below your collar and at your navel, deft fingers exploring the subtle crevices of your body. You remember this, and you find that comforting.

You suppose you had the strange fear that he would simply dive into the act like he does all others. You wonder if it’s strange of you to feel as though you need the preparation provided by this small,
apparently universal ritual.

You stop wondering much of anything when his lips tickle the skin below your beltline with light kisses. His fingers start working at your pants, edging them down.

He pulls and looks at you impatiently and you raise your hips for his convenience, feeling simultaneously very young for the act and very old for the ache it incurs.

He pulls down your underwear with them, which both surprises you and doesn’t surprise you in the slightest.

The sudden air is cold. His hand is very warm.

He mumbles something appreciative and squeezes and you take in a sharp breath. He chuckles a little. “Fuck, man, you have a really nice dick.”

You neither know nor care to know what qualifies you for such a compliment, only that he is doing something that feels very good and that you are having a great deal of difficulty maintaining your composure.

A swath of wetness.

You swallow convulsively.

You feel his breath on you when he speaks. “Hey, look at me.”

You do.

It’s a terrible mistake.

He’s looking back at you when his mouth slides over the head over your penis, and it’s nearly fatal. His eyes transfix yours even as you feel the pressure of his tongue closing the path between the rest of you and a place of tight, hot suction.

You groan low in your throat, closing your eyes, and he squeezes you again. The warmth of his hand all but disappears, but he doesn’t move.

You look down again despite yourself.

Only his index finger and his thumb, squeezing periodically, teasingly, at the base. You can feel your abdominal muscles twitching with the urge to move, but the sight sends barely restrained spasms into your thighs and glutes, as well.

For a moment you’re afraid you’ve jerked up involuntarily, and then you realize that no, he’s moving down.

And down.

You clench your jaw in shock as you feel yourself meet and pass the resistance at the back of his throat.

His look is less smouldering, now, strained under eyebrows knit with concentration, but his eyes are still locked on you. You run a hand through his hair, either for encouragement or to reassure him that you haven’t died from the shock or perhaps to assure yourself that you’re not hallucinating particularly vividly, and he closes his eyes and hums.
Your fingers tighten sharply in his hair and you snatch your hand back, strangling a moan that seems to reverberate all the way from his vocal chords to your mouth.

He pulls your hand back to his hair and holds it there, lips moving slowly up your erection, and you pull encouragingly before stopping yourself. He hums again. He really shouldn’t do that.

The pop of his mouth coming free is one of the most profane sounds you have ever heard. It’s appropriate. The smile he gives you- head tilted back, hair still tangled in your fist- is absolutely unholy.

“You don’t have to let go,” he pants. His voice is hoarse with exertion. Knowing why makes the sound of it almost as unholy as the mouth it trickles from.

When his lips slide over you again, you don’t let go.

You’re trying to be good.

You’re trying to be gentle.

You guide. You don’t direct. You don’t force.

But when the suction of his mouth pulls you just so or his tongue flicks and catches against this or that ridge of nerves just so, it becomes very hard to be gentle.

And when you push a little and he moans as his nose bumps against your pubic bone, it becomes very hard to be gentle.

When you have your hand fisted in his hair- and so tightly, it must hurt, you hope you aren’t hurting him, you don’t want to hurt him- and you’re sliding his mouth along yourself in sharp strokes, when he’s moaning between the short gasps of air he’s sucking through his nose, it’s hard to remember why you were trying to be gentle, though you’re sure you had- have- a very good reason.

One of his hands splays against your hip to steady him. You don’t know where his other hand is.

You can see his elbow moving rhythmically. You realize that he’s touching himself. You feel yourself groan, but your ears are hearing the sounds of a place very far away from here.

You push a little too hard. He chokes.

You pull, a little panicked, pull him all the way off and up because you’re frantic with the need for stimulation but you don’t want to hurt him, so you kiss away his mewls of complaint and smooth down his hair and he bites your lip rather viciously.

It hurts quite a bit. You think you might be bleeding.

“Fuck,” he swears, and even if you weren’t too muddled to chastise him, there’s little you can do but hiss with surprise as he scrapes his fingernails down your chest and rocks desperately against your leg. “Fuck I was so close fuck shit it hurts oh god please,” he babbles and you murmur apologies helplessly and reach for him, but he slaps your hand away before fisting his own in your open collar.

“Fuck me,” he begs, but he keeps speaking before you’ve even had a chance to process that request, “please please please you can’t fucking do this to me please I’m not at all above begging right now I will put on a crown and a fucking tutu and call you daddy if you fucking want me to I just need
this so fucking bad I feel like I’m gonna die just fuck me, please god fuck me-”

When your brain catches up with what you’re hearing, you yelp with alarm and he kisses you desperately, erection grinding against your thigh with stuttering thrusts. “Please,” he moans against your lips, “fuck me until I can’t fucking walk I don’t give a shit just fuck me, please, rail me-”

In your flustered and foggy-minded state, all you can manage is a baffled-sounding, “But I don’t know how,” and he wheezes breathlessly with laughter.

“I got this,” he assures you, “I got this, just let me do my thing okay-can we do that tell me we can, oh shit- will you let me ride you, fuck, please let me ride you-”

You fumble your agreement into his mouth and he moans pornographically, looking around frantically and then swearing. “Lube?” he demands and then “don’t laugh okay it’s a stupid hash map fetch modus sometimes I have to get creative-”

You discover that Dave stores anal lubricant in his sylladex under the title sphincter slicker and do not succeed in not laughing at him for it, if only out of surprise when he nearly ejects it across the room.

Belatedly, you remind him about condoms, and he mumbles something entirely too long to be a two-syllable word, sending the box careening towards the headboard and back into your waiting hand.

He kicks off his pants and shirt so quickly that it’s almost as though he willed them away.

You take a moment to remove yours- and your now very wrinkled shirt, as well- but before you can reconsider what you’re about to do, he takes your hand and closes it around not one erection, but two.

You’re utterly baffled until his slides against yours. You warm to the sensation rather quickly.

At first, he’s kissing you, balancing with one hand against your chest, the other stretched behind him, and then he’s panting into your shoulder as you tug and stroke the both of you clumsily.

When his head drops, you can see his hand, and almost his fingers, where they disappear into him. Where you’re going to disappear into him.

Your breath hitches in your chest. A pulse of interest against your palm. You’re not even sure if it was you or him.

He murmurs “you wanna fuck me?” in your ear and you do, you really, truly do. You have to force him to pause so you can roll down the condom properly. He’s very eager.

His fingers slide out more easily than you slide in, but he still lets out a shuddering moan of pleasure as he stretches around you.

And he does stretch.

As he slides further and further down you in halting spurts, you pant through your nose, and when his bottom comes to rest flush against your skin, you bite out a pained curse.

He’s almost too tight.

He laughs breathlessly and rolls his pelvis in a way that’s gloriously excruciating. “So you do
know bad words.”

When he starts to move in earnest, you understand his phrasing.

You also understand that there is absolutely nothing more frustrating that being unable to control the pace of his riding. He’s rushing. Always rushing.

You told him you’d let him “do his thing.”

You should. He has, presumably, more experience with this particular brand of fornication than you do.

But he’s always in such a goddamn hurry.

It doesn’t take much to shift him in such a way that means you can get your knees under you- they might be a little sore tomorrow, though- and if he seems startled by the sudden change in position, it’s not enough to stop him from wrapping his legs around you eagerly.

You expect him to cling to you, but he unwinds in a slow arc towards the bed, and you run a hand up his taut stomach wonderingly as he does so.

When his shoulders settle and he finds purchase, however, he starts to ride again, winding and unwinding in fast rolling motions, and you grab his hips tightly, pushing down his frantic bucking with your own, more temperate rhythm.

You push one of his thighs backwards experimentally, and he babbles something breathless and incomprehensible and pulls them both back until they’re almost touching his shoulders.

It’s a very good view, and judging by his expression, an equally good sensation.

You find your pace quickening despite your best intentions.

The sharp impact of your hips against his glutes is stimulating in a way that’s hard to resist, and his increasingly vocal response to your ministrations is dangerously tempting.

Gentle, you remind yourself desperately, aching.

When you take his erection in your hand, he releases his legs with a hissing moan and scrabbles weakly at you. “Not yet,” he babbles incoherently, “I don’t want to blow yet it’s so fucking good feels so fucking good keep fucking me don’t stop yet no not yet please please please-”

He orgasms like a man under a defibrillator, arching hard with a loud and wordless moan, and you feel him spasm around you and you feel your fingers digging too tightly into his skin- and you must be hurting him- and you pull out with a gasp, stroking yourself to completion in the shock of cold air.

When the fog of orgasm clears, you’re grateful for the condom.

He blinks at you lazily as you collapse beside him with a grunt. “Could’a blown in me, y’know,” he mumbles, “that’s allowed, that’s what the condom was for that would’ve been pretty okay, I mean, just so you know.”

You want to tell him that’s not the point, but you’re old, and you’re very tired.

You fall asleep on top of your comforter naked and unkempt, and you fall asleep knowing that you were right.
He’s made a mess of you.

You don’t care.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Dave's not a morning person. In the Egbert household, all important talks happen at the dinner table.

You were right.
Your knees are giving you trouble.
Sleeping on top of the covers instead of under them proved to be inadvisable.
And you forgot to remove your socks.
You sit up with a grunt, blinking against a blue gloom and wondering if it’s very early or simply raining.
You check.
Both. It would be both. You sigh and look behind you.
He really is beautiful.
Even with his knees bent to his chest and a white streak of dried saliva at the corner of his mouth, he’s beautiful.
He’s also shivering. You sigh again.
He’s not an especially heavy sleeper, so when you gather him into your arms, he stirs with a groan and a mumble. You catch the word “time” and draw your own conclusions.
“Early,” you tell him gently. “Go back to sleep.”
He clings to you as you nudge the covers aside and attempt to slip him under them, staring at you with half-focused eyes. “C’mere.”
You smile, smoothing his hair out of his face. “Go back to sleep, Dave. I’m just going to put something on and fetch a glass of water. I’ll be back in a moment.”
He frowns groggily at you. “Why d’you gotta get dressed for that?” He yawns. The sight of a thin metal band installed behind the front teeth of his lower jaw inspires mixed feelings in you. You weren’t aware that he had a permanent retainer. “Only me here, and I seen you more than just naked.”
It’s a little too early for the smirk he’s attempting, and it manifests more as a silly grin. It’s a tad infectious. You force down one of your own. “Your grammar is atrocious this morning.”
He laughs, wrapping his arms around your waist. “Ya done fucked it straight outta me, y’hear,” he drawls.
You raise an eyebrow at his heavily affected Southern twang.

Now he’s just being absurd.

He chuckles into your thigh, grip loosening as his runs his fingers teasingly down your hips and buttocks. “Come back to bed and I’ll see if I can remember how to speak proper.”

You cross your arms, unimpressed. He grins cheekily up at you.

You’re not sure why he’s so adamant on you returning to bed. You’re not going to be able to get back to sleep. You’ll just keep him awake.

His eyes narrow mischievously. “That’s sorta the idea,” he comments drily. “It’s Sunday. Weekend’s almost over. Gotta make good use of our time, you feel me?”

You do not “feel” him. You don’t even understand him.

He responds by feeling you and you suppose that’s a clear enough demonstration to facilitate understanding in you.

Unfortunately, you’re not as young as he is, to say the least.

He looks up at you uncomprehendingly. “And that matters why?”

He may find that you’re old in ways that certainly do matter to someone looking to be sexually intimate with you more than once in an eight hour period, you’re afraid. A man’s sexual refractory period tends to increase in duration as he ages, after all, and you’ve certainly had some time to age.

His eyebrows furrow stubbornly. “You know that for sure?”

You suppose you don’t.

He grins wickedly at you. “Wanna find out?”

=>

You discover that you’re not quite as old as you feel.

For his persistence, Dave gets his wish, if somewhat belatedly.

You are not out of bed before noon.

You cannot bring yourself to feel this gross disruption of your usual routine as deeply as you should.

=>

He reasons with you that showering together is more economical, but you’re almost certain that your foolishness in choosing to believe him has driven up your water bill immensely.

You’ve never taken such a long shower in your life.

You can’t see the bathroom for the steam.

He’s not even slightly sorry.

=>
Your dinner portions are especially generous today, considering that lunch turned out to be a late and hasty affair, but you still have to force him to sit down and finish clearing his plate.

He’s terribly distractible. It seems that you cannot smile or speak or even straighten your tie without distracting him.

No wonder he’s so thin, you muse disapprovingly. You daresay he’d rather starve than sacrifice a single moment he feels could be better spent fondling you.

He chuckles at that and, in response to your stern look, bolts down the rest of his meal rather *too* quickly.

“You’re going to make yourself ill,” you chastise.

He makes a smart remark about being nursed back to health and inches towards you with an impertinent smirk.

You press your lips together in a tight line and push him away with the tip of your finger. “Please take a moment to digest, Dave.” He protests. “Even if *you* don’t need a reprieve, I’m afraid that I do. Or is it your intention to exhaust me so thoroughly that I expire in my sleep?” you ask him wryly.

He groans and collapses back into his seat. “No, yes, but no, it’s like- sorry, you’re kinda super fucking hot and it’s hard not to mack on you when I know that I can totally mack on you without getting into shit for it, so I get a little excited or something I guess,” he mutters, grimacing. “See, I mean you’re *hot*, there’s no denying that or anything, you’re mad hot, but then you get all rough and shit sometimes and that’s like fucking *surface of the sun* hot, and holy shit this really isn’t dinner table talk is it-”

You massage the bridge of your nose in exasperation. “It certainly is *not*.” You see his grin out of the corner of your eye and sigh at it. He isn’t taking this seriously. “It…” You sigh again. You are beyond getting too old for this. You’re already much too old for this. “I feel it may also be pertinent to discuss your, *ah*, rather problematic attitude towards certain aspects of my… physical capabilities,” you voice, viciously aware of how delicately you’re waltzing around the issue at hand.

You prefer not to speak about it unless absolutely necessary. You prefer not to *think* about it unless absolutely necessary.

Of course, such things as a man holds closest to his heart are, of course, always the subjects of keenest interest to others. It is human to seek the hidden meanings between a man’s words, and only the fullness of experience can make wise the prying mind.

There is an art to ignorance.

Dave is a bright, inquisitive boy. He will likely never learn it.

You have his full attention.

You run the tips of your thumb and forefinger outwards across your brow.

You are much, much too old for this.

“While I can appreciate the adventurous spirit with which you approach your youthful experimentations-” he looses an unattractive squawk of laughter at that “-it is my concern that you
endanger yourself unduly in doing so.” You look at him, tracing an eye across the bend of a furrowed eyebrow that wavers uncertainly with an expression of wary amusement. Even with those sunglasses firmly in place, you have seen enough of him to recognize that he’s laid a firm grip to the handle of his receptiveness, and is ready to shut you out, should the need arise. “As you’ve likely noticed, I possess a level of physical strength that, in a man of my age particularly, is considered most abnormal.”

The last consonant of the word clicks out from between your tongue tip and palate with a sour taste. You press on, sensibly ignoring the way in which his cautious look gives way to renewed curiosity.

“I am very strong, Dave,” you tell him frankly. “There are not words within my vocabulary to express how gross of an understatement that truly is, but to say anything else would sound like grand hyperbole, or worse, consummate fabrication.”

He’s silent. Focused.

You almost wish he had laughed at you, as you had feared he might.

“I wish I could provide you some frame of reference by which to understand my unease, but…” You swallow down raw anxiety. “I, myself, do not have one. I cannot assure you that this is simply another instalment in a long history of managing some especially peculiar idiosyncrasy, because while I have always been a strong man, the extent to which my strength has increased in the last twenty years defies logical explanation.”

He’s leaning forward, this lamentably captive audience of yours. You resist the urge to tell him to remove his elbows from the table. “Since you got John,” he murmurs.

There’s a tone of strange excitement to his voice that catches your attention more than his words.

He looks a little discomfited by your stare.

“I dunno I just mean it’s been twenty years or so, so it seems like that’s kind of related-”

Got. He said that you got John. Like an acquisition, not a birth. What an unnatural choice of words.

“-oh man did I say that well you know me shit just comes out of my mouth sometimes, just this fountain of shit comin’ on out of me like I’m some sort of fuckin’ masterpiece carved from pure bathroom marble, one hundred percent recycled from the toilets of dead old people like a good suburban yuppy and carved by some Greek dude in a toga but he’s probably dead too I should put on a toga and pose maybe they’d put me in the scat section of the Louvre-”

He’s getting anxious.

How suspicious.

“I mean they’ve got those places they put meteorites so they’ve gotta have a place for my weird poo-slingin’ ass just on principle let’s be real not that I’m saying anything about meteors that has nothing to do with babies or poo unless it’s like alien poo that got freeze-dried by space like space food then all the scientists’d be flippin’ shit but there was no meteor, the meteor was a lie-”

What meteor.

“-exactly, that’s what I’m saying, what meteor, there’s no meteor, meteors got nothing to do with it so what meteor right… so wha… uh… um… what…” You watch his throat bob as he swallows.
You’re not sure when you stood up. “…Meteor?”

The word comes out sounding a little squeaky.

You take a deep breath, and then another, for good measure. You feel very warm. The room suddenly feels very small, somehow. Small and close and much too warm. “Indeed, what meteor, David?”

He tries very hard to laugh, but sounds a little hysterical for the effort. You can see his pulse fluttering frantically in his throat.

He swallows again.

“You mean, um, John’s meteor?” he mumbles.

My, my, what a nervous smile. Is that your fault?

“Oh, uh, my… meteor?”

He flinches with the visible realization that he just said something inadvisable. You must be making a truly terrible face.

You can’t bring yourself to stop.

“You meteor?”

You only realize that you’re leaning in when he starts to sink down in his chair.

He takes in a deep, whooping breath.

“It wasn’t me I didn’t do the thing also John knows but it wasn’t me it was totally Rose, Rose found some newspaper clippings and shit that her mom had or something and told us I didn’t know except Bro’s been giving me shit for fucking up his favourite record shop with my and I quote flaming fucking meteoric baby ass since forever so I guess I did know sort of oh god don’t look at me like that seriously it’s giving me the weirdest boner and you probably hate me right now but I can’t help it-”

You continue looking at him that way.

“So what you are telling me,” you interrupt, “is that not only did you fail to inform me that you have long been aware of the unusual circumstances under which I became a father even upon the instigation of an intimate relationship with me, but that you yourself also came into your brother’s care under similar circumstances and are aware of yet another individual who shares these unique origins, am I correct? Rose, was it?”

You’ve heard the name before.

“And Jade,” he supplies helpfully. “Jade too.”

You look at him and sit back down, pinching the bridge of your nose between your fingers.

He laughs awkwardly. “You okay, dude?”

You need a drink.

“That’s not really what I was-”
You need a drink.

You hear rather than see him rise and start rummaging through your cupboards.

A pause.

“Uh, is it okay if I pour this ‘cause last time you got all weird on me and while I think you’re kind of hot when you’re mad I’m a little afraid you get the kind of mad that looks sexy but means I’m gonna be high and dry until you stop being mad and I get the feeling I’m already kind of in deep shit so-”

*For the love of god, you need a goddamn drink.*

He mumbles “*shit don’t bite my head off here goes nothing*” and sets a glass in front of you.

It’s empty so quickly you question that it was ever full.

He looks nervous. “Am I in the doghouse? I’m in the doghouse, aren’t I, shit I just got into this and I’m already in the doghouse I fucked up *hard*, please don’t make me sleep in the garage I’ll sleep on the couch if you want some space-”

“There’s still a guest room,” you mutter, barely even processing his words.

He deflates. “Aw shit, I really am in the doghouse.”

You’re distantly puzzled and a little annoyed.

You don’t have a doghouse. You don’t even have a dog.

He laughs and then groans. “I really hope that was just you being dumb and literal and not you disowning me or whatever the word is when you stop acknowledging that somebody exists because the dog is me, I’m the dog and I guess I took a metaphorical dump on the new carpeting or something but I’m sorry, I’m really fucking sorry please don’t hate me-”

You don’t hate him. You’re terribly confused by the accusation.

You’re just in a bit of shock at the moment.

First after the destruction of your local Crocker facility, and even more so after your mother’s death, you spent many years closely attuned to any mention of meteoric activity, but to no avail.

You had finally ruled it a mystery and a miracle.

And yet, here you are, reviewing so many old unanswered questions with still a thousand more to puzzle over.

Dave smiles awkwardly.

“I just meant that maybe you got strong because you got John I mean my bro is crazy fast and Rose’s mom is apparently super smart even though she’s drunk all the time and I guess Jade’s dog is just weird and scary and immortal but we don’t even know what the deal with that is anymore so that’s all I was trying to say I wasn’t trying to start shit.”

You frown. While that certainly clarifies your situation a little, it hardly invalidates the concerns you’ve expressed. Baffling circumstances aside, you don’t want to hurt him.
He looks intensely relieved by the change of subject.

“Dude, you’re not going to hurt me,” he insists. “Bro beat the shit out of me on pretty much a daily basis for like, my entire life, I think I can take it.” He cuts off your weary protestation with a firm wave. “No seriously, I don’t really get the slow and gentle thing anyhow, I think my nerve endings are damaged from all the strifing because I can barely feel it and I get bored and I guess I just get weird, too, maybe because I’m not used to touchy-feely crap? Makes me nervous ‘cause I feel like somebody’s gonna do something shitty if I relax so I guess I’m actually more relaxed when shit gets rough,” he rambles, “that and I’m kind of into that anyway so really, don’t worry about it, if my ass gets bruised up all that means is I’m going to pop a boner whenever I sit down and be even more all up in your business because of it.”

You stare at him, startled out of your haze.

He shrugs.

You struggle for words.

“Did you just imply that you find pain sexually arousing?” you ask incredulously.

He shrugs again, but his cheeks have gone a touch pink. “Not like any pain, just like… sexy pain,” he tells you, full of affected nonchalance until he makes a distasteful face. “Oh god I’m going to have to explain this too, aren’t I? You know what, hell no, I’m just going to get you a reference book or something, this shit is embarrassing.” He cuts you off again. “What I’m saying is you’re not really a ‘slap a bitch around to establish dominance’ kind of guy so I’m not really worried about that and unless you hurt me like hospital bad, I’m probably going to like it anyway so it’s sort of a nonissue. I mean, I guess that’s why you got all weird about it, pulling me off your dick and pulling out to blow and shit? ‘Cause I gagged a bit and I guess you were like ‘oh shit I killed Dave’ and then you were really fucking railing me for a while there and that was fucking great- no seriously, that was awesome let’s do that again like, soon- but I’ve got a couple bruises on my thighs and I probably sounded like hell so you were probably like ‘oh shit Dave is dying I’m killing him dead’ am I right?”

Your face is quite warm.

What an absolutely mortifying line of conversation.

Dave grins and you admire the brilliance of his orthodontically perfect teeth through the fog of your embarrassment.

He leans in a little too close- you can smell him, even after years of smoking, you can smell that sharp heady mixture of laundry detergent and soap and warm skin- and plucks your glass from your fingers. You’d completely forgotten you had it.

He places his hand on your thigh and whispers something obscene to you.

You’re certain you’ve gone absolutely scarlet.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

This is mostly just porn.

Chapter Notes

I'm so, so sorry for how long this took.

You’re dozing before your eyes are closed completely.

You really are quite tired. Despite how little you’ve actually done and how late you rose from your bed, it feels as though it has been a very long day.

Dave does not appreciate this, if his hopeful caresses are any indication.

You feel him sigh and hear him mutter, and then you are asleep.

==> You’re gone before he wakes.

While it goes against your admittedly romantic instincts to leave without giving him so much as a kiss, you have shrewd instincts, and they inform you quite adamantly that he will do his utmost to make you late.

You still sneak him a light kiss, just as a matter of principle, but ensure that you’re already slipping out the front door by the time he’s truly stirring.

An acceptable compromise, you think.

==> Woodgrave eyes you curiously at lunch and shoots you a knowing smile when you stare back pointedly.

He does not approach you, however.

You are intensely grateful for this.

==> Dave’s slim fingers are pulling your neatly tucked shirt out of your pants before you have the door locked behind you.

You can feel the heat of his chest pressing against your back.
“Hey,” he murmurs, resting a heavy chin on your shoulder.

You swat a wandering hand away from your fly. “Are you having a good day, Dave?”

He hums lightly, leaning his cheek against your neck. “You didn’t say bye. Not that I care, you know, it’s just kinda rude.”

You chuckle despite yourself. “I do believe you’re sulking,” you comment wryly, struggling to turn around in his clinging embrace.

Oh.

You look at him disapprovingly.

He looks back at you unrepentantly.

“Did you even get dressed this morning?” you chide.

He shrugs. “Didn’t go anywhere.”

You eye his brightly-coloured underwear with amusement. “That’s not really the point of clothing, Dave.”

He disagrees.

You raise your eyebrows at that. “Have you even showered?”

He grins a little for you and hooks his fingers in your pockets. “I was sort of hoping we could do that together.”

You are afraid not.

You have learned your lesson about showering with Dave.

He wrinkles his nose at your vehemence. “Oh, come on, now who’s in a rush, don’t be a hypocrite.”

You cross your arms. “I am in a rush to keep my bills reasonable,” you retort, “you are in a rush to despoil every surface in this household as fast as is possible.”

He opens his mouth and then closes it, tilting his head with a look of serious consideration.

“Yeah, fair enough.” You don’t like the look of his grin. “Wanna get started?”

You roll your eyes skyward and wonder, for the thousandth time, what exactly you’ve done to your life.

==> 

You bake.

You feel as though it has been a very long time since you last baked, despite knowing otherwise.

The routine is comforting, as is Dave’s clumsy assistance.

You do wish he wouldn’t do such childish things as holding your whisk away and hiding your ingredients until you consent to give him a kiss, however.
It forces you to make a conscious effort not to find such obtrusive behaviour endearing.

You’re afraid you already let him get away with far too much.

You’ve come to assume that the manner in which Dave collapses into bed indicates whether he is feeling amorous or not- on his back when he wants your attention, on his chest when he’s feeling tired or avoidant or simply petulant- but he proves you wrong.

You look disapprovingly down at him as he grins over his shoulder at you.

“What are you doing?” you ask him warningly.

His expression is positively devilish as he presses his bottom back into your groin, balanced solidly on his elbows and knees. “Thought we could maybe try something.” His grin slips for a moment. “By which I mean we should do doggy-style, if you didn’t get the implication or something, sometimes I think things are obvious but then you’re you, so…”

You wait, unsure whether or not he’s done speaking before you realize that the incompleteness of his sentence was intentional. He’s looking at you expectantly.

You lay your hands on his hips hesitantly, frowning a little.

Dave sighs gustily and rolls over. You don’t think he’s very impressed with you.

“What’s the don’t?” he asks you brusquely, and for a disconcerting moment between hearing and understanding him, you’re absolutely certain it’s a phrase of nonsensical inquisition he learned from his brother. The thought triggers an odd sensation in the pit of your stomach.

You choose your words carefully. He’ll probably laugh at you.

“It seems very impersonal,” you try, and he makes a rude noise with his mouth and asks you to explain how sexual intercourse “isn’t the most personal you can get with somebody”.

You opt for honesty.

“I like to look at you,” you admit. It comes out more hesitantly than you’d hoped. No man of your age should ever sound so abashed, and yet here you are.

You’re right.

He laughs.

It’s not an unkind laugh. In fact, his bright eyes soften for a moment before he composes his face back into its former expression of focused mischief.

“You can still look at me,” he assures you. Something in his tone excites a certain wariness in you. “Just a different angle, is all, no big, no big.”

You frown at him, unimpressed. “That’s not what I meant, Dave.”

He smiles up at you lazily. “That don’t sound like a no to me,” he drawls.

You sigh at his poor grammar. “Don’t,” you correct sternly, despite knowing full well that he already knows better. You suspect he does it on purpose. It’s a fairly recent habit, after all. “And…”
well, no, I suppose it isn’t one.” You reach out and run a thumb over his cheek. He leans in your palm, all young heat and hooded maraschino eyes. “I suppose we can. That is, if you would like to,” you allow reluctantly.

He smiles beatifically at you. You’re painfully aware of how firm his hold over you has become, particularly when he guides your thumb to his parted lips and sets it gently between his teeth, bright eyes still fixed on you under those pale lashes.

He lets you kiss him first, chest-to-chest, as you prefer it, and you’re not sure whether to appreciate his thoughtfulness or resent his mischief.

When he pulls back ever so slightly- lips parted from yours but still breathing your air, still soft and immediate- and ghosts his hands over your shoulders, it certainly feels like mischief.

A part of you wonders if his sudden patience isn’t a compromise, as you had thought, but simply a new tactic by which he means to terrorize you. It’s a touch too teasing to be honest foreplay. You suspect he seeks to tease you as he sees you as teasing him.

The thought brings a little smile to your mouth, and he must feel it, for he murmurs inquisitively against you.

You answer him not with words, but by slipping a hand under the small of his back to pull him perfectly flush against you, and he responds in kind with a soft sound of approval, wrapping his arms around your neck eagerly.

You smile again, but this time the mischief is yours.

As unbecomingly egoistic as your satisfaction may well be, the knowledge that you can crumble his resolve so simply is gratifying.

And truly, his ability to become almost liquid against you will never cease to amaze you. His slenderness and the lithe density of his musculature should mean that he’s only dubiously pliant in your arms, should mean that the experience of holding him is much different than that of holding a woman.

It is, in a way, and it isn’t.

Despite the ridging of his bones and the tautness of his flesh, he defies reason and becomes a singular molten heat in your embrace, pouring himself into every grey crack of you as though he’s held together by nothing more than a skin of delicate surface tension.

It’s as though he’s about to drown you in himself at any given moment.

As though he wants to.

Or, perhaps, as though you want him to.

Despite the growing intensity of your caresses and the breathlessness of his soft groans, he suddenly scrapes his fingernails lightly along your spine, biting your lip in gentle warning. You pull away compliantly.

He’s looking at you with a familiar, knowing little smile. “You’re not going to distract me, dude, so if you don’t want to, just say so, it’s cool.”

You sigh.
It’s not that you don’t want to.

He’s looking at you questioningly.

You suppose it’s simply that it seems like such a forced switch, and you are accustomed to enjoying a natural progression of sexual intimacy into copulation, rather than a planned one.

Simply put, it’s just that it all seems rather brusque in your eyes.

He laughs sharply and sits up to kiss you again. You can feel him smiling. “Trust me,” he whispers warmly.

You do, and you find yourself with your forefinger and thumb wrapped around the underside of his knee, pushing it back as he slides his fingers into a place you would have thought highly unfit for such an action not so long ago.

It’s both hard to watch him and hard not to.

You weren’t able to properly see him, ahem, preparing himself the first time you had intercourse, so this frank demonstration of it is somewhat shocking.

It’s possible it wouldn’t seem so brazen to you had you grown up in an age where women were bolder and you more accustomed to allowing them to pleasure themselves, rather than relying on your assistance, but the result is still the same.

This is very new to you.

That is to say, it is not necessarily a terrible experience, simply a new one.

On the contrary, your primary worry is just how red your face seems to be getting.

Judging by his snickering, quite red indeed.

When he removes his fingers from inside himself and guides your own to the space they’ve just vacated, you look at him in slightly frantic worry. He laughs again.

He groans when you oblige him, eyebrows knitting together in a way not unlike an expression of pain.

It takes a great deal of trust for you to overpower your immediate impulse to stop.

As if your unorthodox penetration of his body has allowed your thoughts to enter his mind, he cups his hand over yours and holds it there as you adjust.

You feel, rather than hear, yourself make a small sound of surprise.

He smiles lazily, briefly squeezing your hand. “S’up, man?”

“I can feel your heartbeat,” you tell him, a little too taken with the novelty of the thing to avoid sounding infantile.

He laughs, and you can feel that, too, an echo of muscular contraction around your fingers, and you curl them almost reflexively in answer, pushing back against that ripple of tightness inside him.

His breath hitches and you watch him carefully, feeling a peculiar nostalgic nervousness that you had almost forgotten.
You think he’d laugh quite outrageously at you if you told him he’s inspiring a fit of virginal anxiety in you, so you tell him nothing of the sort.

You simply oblige him as he begins to guide your hand between his legs, torn between concentrating on pleasing him and becoming childishly fascinated by just how different touching him feels when compared to what you’re accustomed to.

He murmurs instruction to you and you admire his boldness even as it flusters you.

You become shamefully aware that the breathless, stuttering cadence of his words is bringing a flush of heat to more than just your face, and judging by the way he begins to trail the fingers of his free hand up and down what he can reach of the inside of your thigh, he’s aware of it.

He asks you a question.

You produce some semblance of a response by pressing your burning cheek against the bend of his raised knee, but it’s nothing more than a desperate bid to be seen as someone suffering something more closely resembling impassioned wordlessness and less obviously the victim of a mixture of bizarre arousal and mortification, and he knows that just as well as you do, if not better.

He has the decency not to laugh at you.

“Do you want to fuck me?” he repeats, carefully enunciating each single syllable word.

You’re positively tongue-tied.

He’s very cruel.

“I’m gonna need an answer, dude,” he teases, gently pulling your fingers almost free of him before pushing them back in with a soft groan.

You try for composure and are left with a strangled tone of pleading exasperation. “Dave-“

He squeezes tightly around your fingers and you swallow. “That’s not an answer,” he coaxes.

A hostile bubble of frustration rolls up the back of your painfully dry throat. You cling to the meagre dignity it offers you.

“You are an absolute brat, David Strider,” you tell him defensively, and he snickers at you.

“You are,” he goads knowingly, “avoiding the question, Mister Egbert.”

You don’t miss the absence of your first name, his pointed emphasis, nor the look of mischief with which he imitates you.

You lean in, pulling your fingers from between his thighs. “Roll over.”

A strange look pulls his eyebrows together. “Shit, remind me to be a piece of shit when I’m in bed with you, goddamn that’s hot, I mean really, fuck-”

You grind out a “David” and nearly shock yourself out of your irritation with how much it sounds like a growl.

Whether fortunately or unfortunately for you, your utterance is too closely followed by a fast and shallow “yessir” that affects you almost as deeply as his speed and compliance in assuming the desired position, much to your suppressed but still very real mortification.
You think you may have to seriously re-evaluate whatever estimations you had made about the typicality of your sexual preferences and interests.

Not at this moment, however.

At this moment, you are quite content with expressing those preferences and interests without giving thought to their normality.

You run your hands along his hips appreciatively and he rolls them back against you.

“One moment,” you caution. You’re not so distracted as to overlook the importance of proper protection.

He complains and you resist the urge to do something terribly unkind.

He points out that you’re resisting the urge *rather mockingly* - “oh man that’s quite the face you’re making dude should I be scared, are you gonna send me to bed without any cake tonight, daddio”- and, in an uncommon moment of self-indulgence and poor temper, you slap him quite resoundingly on the buttocks with very little regards to the consequences.

You manage to feel panic and remorse for less than a second before he bites off his teasing words and your regrets with a surprisingly loud moan and a muffled string of desperate curses. “Hurry up, jesus-”

You do.

It takes a little fumbling to get your erection properly aligned with its intended destination- his overeager fidgeting is *not* helping- but when you do, he pushes back on you with all of the forcefulness and determination you anticipated and have no intention of obliging.

You obliged him already in his desire to do this a certain way.

You think it’s only fair that he damn well oblige you doing this at your own pace.

He groans in protest as you grab his hips and still them, and you cut off the bubbling stream of his complaints a little more briskly than you had intended to.

“Be patient.”

He informs you in muttering and half-incoherent words that he’s not very good at that.

You know.

Oh, you certainly know.

He pants shallowly as you slowly push into him, mumbling vaguely worded moans into your pillow and a hard-won sound of satisfaction when you finally bring your hips flush to his buttocks.

You hate to admit it, but he was right.

The sight of him kneeling and groaning in front of you is an embarrassingly good kind of different, and the way he arches his spine as you run a hand down his back inspires in you some fairly dangerous urges.

You come to some vague conclusion about your own primal urges before he sends you a sneaky look over his shoulder and the muscles of his backside ripple tightly around your erection. You dig
your fingers into his waist with a grunt, simultaneously amused by his cunning and frustrated by his apparent resolve to hurry you.

You make a point of moving slowly despite the ache it awakens in your hips, and he rewards you with a truly pitiful sound of need.

You kiss the groove of his spine affectionately and whisper “patience” into it.

He tells you to do something very rude and improbable.

You tell him “I believe I’m rather preoccupied with you at the moment” and he gawps at you.

“Did you just sass me? You just sassed me!” he exclaims incredulously, and you can’t help but laugh.

You kiss him again, between the shoulder blades, as you increase the tempo of your movements, guiding his hips against your own rather than holding them still, and he reaches a hand back, sliding his fingers between his buttocks.

You straighten, curious, and slow as you watch his fingertips slide over the exposed skin of your erection. “What are you doing?”

He laughs a little sheepishly, but doesn’t stop. “I, uh, like to feel it,” he mumbles, “you know, ‘cause I can’t really see anything like this, so I guess I like to feel your cock fucking me instead,” he pauses before adding, “it’s kind of really hot, sorry,” though he doesn’t sound sorry at all.

You’re fine with that.

You’re not particularly bothered by the action.

You are, however, slightly piqued by the inadvertent reminder that he’s had other sexual partners, as utterly irrational and unfair as being resentful for something you are equally guilty of is.

You suppose you’re still capable of that old gut-rot burn of jealousy, after all. The discovery is surprising.

You are, of course, a mature adult, so you deal him a very mature and gentlemanly slap to the bottom for his completely accidental affront to you.

He really doesn’t seem to mind.

In fact, the way he shudders and fists his hand into the pillowcase seems to indicate the opposite.

You have a sudden suspicion, and in the spirit of experimental science, you bring your hips forward against his bottom in a sharp, hard movement to test it.

His very vocal reaction confirms your suspicions and assuages your- of course purely scientific-curiosity.

You suppose he did tell you that he has an unusual preference for roughness.

You let yourself be rough with him.

He presses a palm against the headboard for support, slim neck exposed as he buries his moans in your bed, and you grip a narrow shoulder with one hand and a bony hip with the other, trusting him to tell you if something goes wrong, gauging if something is wrong by his reactions, letting
yourself be certain that nothing is.

He arches and he pants and he scrambles against the headboard for better purchase as you edge his knees forward another tiny increment with every thrust and you take almost as much pleasure in how absolutely undone he is as you do in the act itself, because you are a shamefully prideful man, and you will not be outdone.

You’re also an older man, unfortunately, and your hips and knees begin to ache before your desire to unravel him runs its course.

You’re also a very stubborn man, push come to shove, and you remedy this by shifting one aching leg into an odd crouch, setting your foot flat on the bed beside him.

This change in position, however judiciously made, doesn’t come without consequences.

For a moment, you’re terrified you’ve injured him, but your stuttering pace and hesitation earns you a truly frantic-sounding protest.

He’s shaking and swearing and his fingernails are dragging helplessly down the wood of the headboard with an aimless desperation that speaks to the darkest part of your carefully manicured soul. You can feel the tension winding in his muscles with every thrust.

You bend, overcome with the desire to be closer, to have more of him to touch, and press your mouth to the back of his neck possessively.

You discover that you have the capacity to be a very poor gentleman, indeed.

“What are you- no no no don’t please god let me blow, please-”

A very distant and slightly out-of-touch part of you thinks that he’s awfully inconsistent, always changing his mind on this front, and you maintain your measured grip around the base of his penis despite his complaints.

You say something. You’re not sure what. You think may have said something rude and embarrassing and then you realize the phrase lingering on your lips is “What do you say when you want something, David?”

“Please,” he begs, and you are absolutely beyond not finding it diabolically erotic, “Please, James, please-”

Your name on his lips is incredibly sweet.

He orgasms with a scream that should probably concern you on account of your neighbours, but all it does is quicken your pace even further.

He’s still shaking when you feel that familiar pull of tightness in your abdomen, and you’re not being gentle at all and that’s fine, for what may be the first time in your life, that’s fine, and he has both of his forearms braced against the headboard for purchase by the time you start to lose yourself.

You come down from your haze still settled inside of him, leaning your forehead heavily against his spine, and it is with great effort- and a slightly concerning hiss on his part; you fear you may have overdone it- that you pull yourself free.

He rolls onto his back with a long groan, and it’s all you can do not to collapse on your side and
simply fall unconscious like you did the first time.

He has quickly reddening marks on his left shoulder and peeking over the crest of his right hip.

You frown regretfully, ghosting your fingers along them.

He looks at you strangely when you murmur an apology. “Don’t be sorry, dude.”

Light peeks out from under him as he arches his back with a grunt.

“Shit, never be sorry.”

The smile he shoots in your direction cures all ills.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Dad has a son. That never stopped being a thing.

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the length of this chapter- it's shorter than is typical.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He wakes up spackled with an appalling array of light bruises and you wake up apologizing profusely.

He says he doesn’t mind it, but then, he doesn’t seem to mind you fretting over him, either.

He still tries to make you late for work.

He very nearly succeeds.

==> 

You and Dave settle into a routine of kept secrets and stolen kisses, and for a time, you risk forgetting that he doesn’t belong to you.

The immediacy of his murmuring lips and smiling eyes makes it all too easy to believe that he was made to fit against you as a woman does, made not just to linger in your arms and in your bed, but for something lighter, sweeter, and altogether more tempting.

With every passing day, with every shared dinner, every petty disagreement, and every animated conversation, you feel yourself toeing closer to a line of affection that cannot, and should not, be crossed.

But it is much easier to let yourself be swept along on the frothy crest that boils atop the tide of his emotions than to struggle in vain against the rocks you know it will break against.

And with the sky painting your sea foam throne in sunrise reds and sunset purples, you know that you and he are bracketed on all sides by breakwaters and the promise of bad weather.

But he makes it too easy to want to believe that he’s yours, or could be, and you are far too old to redesign the romantic aesthetic of your soul.

You almost forget.

And then, one day in April, without telephone call or courtesy, your son comes home.

==>
John is the mirror against which you measure the world, for he is, of course, the centre of yours.

A man without a mirror allows himself to grow unkempt. You are no different.

The sight of his broad smile and mischievously glittering eyes in your doorway awakens in you a great many things.

A multitude of misplaced or nearly forgotten ingredients.

Many of these go into the makings of a tight embrace which browns and leavens nostalgically as he protests perfunctorily against it—*Daaad, let me put my bags down first, jeez*—before wrapping his arms around you in return, murmuring the same “I’m sorry I didn’t call, I forgot” into your shoulder that he always does, followed by your assuring him that you’re simply glad he’s home, just like you always do.

But there’s a bittersweet icing waiting to grace this cake of yours, and you bury your nose in his hair as if it can be avoided, as if you could lose the guilt of what you’ve already done in those blackstrap curls if you only hold your son long enough.

With him here, close enough for you to see the minute dilation of his pupils darken the striated blue of his irises when he hears the shuffle of Dave’s socks at the top of the stairs, the fact that Dave is John’s best and oldest friend, and you, John’s father, is no longer a distant or academic thought.

You’ve done something terrible, and when Dave looks over John’s shoulder at you, red sleeves wrapped around a blue back, you don’t see your own guilt reflecting back at you in that mirrored black glass.

You see him see you hesitating, and you see him unashamed.

Even now, he feels the assurance of someone who thinks he’s done nothing wrong, and his confidence frightens you.

So you decide not to see.

Dave is not your son, nor is he your spouse. He may not even be your lover, for you hesitate to call what you do with him *making love*.

He’s a guest in your home.

He does not belong to you.

You would do well to remember that.

You would do better to be a better gentleman, if not a better father.

==>

You make an excellent dinner and betray your own principles in a fit of helpless indulgence, allowing the boys a finger of scotch each in celebration of John’s success.

At that, the younger Strider brother looks at you with a cocked eyebrow, and the pointedness of his subtle amusement confirms for you that he has not yet realized the gravity of your unease.

Distantly, you’re glad, and then you roll the wallpaper back up over that knowledge and you are nothing.
John regales you both with tales of his grand adventure in New York, a narrative cultured and cooked in the pride he takes in having watched the end date of his invitation extended further and further back into the future with every evening show, each more successful than the last.

You’re proud of him more for his diligence and the joy he takes in his work than his sudden and unexpected success. You’re relieved that he did not encounter overwhelming difficulties, and eternally grateful that he’s come home to you just the same as he left.

He’s a wonderful son, and the very least you can do is be a loving and supportive father.

“And I got interviewed, like, by a real reporter and everything,” he rambles excitedly, and you smile at his animation. “But it was just for a newspaper and not for a magazine or a show or anything which is kind of lame, I guess.”

Dave mumbles, “I’m pretty sure that’s a journalist, dude, I think reporters report real news, not like, goofy up-and-coming stand-up comedians” and John squawks indignantly.

You suppress a smile. “Being interviewed by a newspaper is very good exposure, John,” you correct gently, “While only some people may read a certain magazine or watch a certain television show, many people will read newspapers for a variety of reasons. More people are likely to read about you this way.”

He grumbles about the perceived “coolness” factor of newspapers versus entertainment magazines and Dave asks him if the article has been published yet.

John’s soft face brightens immediately. “Duh, the interview was a whole week ago, don’t be a dumbass- oops, sorry Dad- just gimme a sec, I have a copy in my suitcase,” he babbles over his shoulder as he dashes towards the stairs.

For the first time since John arrived home, you are alone with Dave.

He shoots you a wry little smile and says ”Well, this is, uh, kinda weird,” but they’re the words of someone who shares a private joke with his companion.

You say nothing, and you do not notice when his smile starts to falter in realization as John comes thundering back down the stairs.

John thrusts a thick roll of paper into your hands before snatching it back and pulling the sections apart. One falls on the floor. He makes no move to pick it up. You sigh through your nose and force yourself not to reach for it. The word sports is burned into the corner of your eye.

He pushes a much thinner square of pages towards you. You take it. It’s the entertainment section of what you recognize to be a fairly successful and widely distributed paper, though you suspect it may not be a terribly reputable one.

The smile on your face is not a composed one, but genuine, because his face graces the first of the four highlights that begin the front page. You flip obediently to the indicated page.

Your eyes have only just dropped below the headline before your smile stiffens arthritically. You go through the motions of reading it and offering to Dave. You beam at John and tell him you’re going to frame it in the office. He feigns embarrassment, but you know that he’s pleased and excited. He’s just being contrary, as per usual.
Both of your voices come from a very distant place.

_Fletcher Marsden._

Your face is a hot plastic mask on your skull.

_Fletcher Marsden._

Despite your best efforts and generous experience in acting unaffected, Dave has noticed your sudden stiffness. You pay him no mind.

_Fletcher Marsden._

The name leaves a sour, bilious taste in your mouth.

Oh, you remember Mister Marsden.

You excuse yourself graciously on the pretense of finding a frame—“One invariably ends up collecting a number of frames without ever using or discarding them, I’m afraid, it seems to be a universal constant of getting old”—and retreat into your study to think.

Your smiling face peels off like poorly-made parchment paper, leaving you as hot and raw as if you’d peeled away a layer of skin.


You say a very nasty word.

Chapter End Notes

The newspaper name in this is apparently one that existed at one point and later ceased publication, but consider them unrelated— I just didn't want to reference any existing newspapers.
You leave the newspaper in your study and your mind there with it.  
You go through the motions of indulging John’s love of movies and hushing Dave’s dry commentary regardless of your own feelings on the matter. 
You do not notice Dave’s meaningful looks in your direction. 
You are civil without being either cold or warm. 
When you tuck John into bed that night, you tell him that you’re proud of him. 
It is as though he never left. 
Dave is lingering uncertainly in front of your bedroom door. 
You slip discreetly downstairs instead. 
=> 
When you turn away from your collection of frames—admittedly less abundant than you’d thought—Dave Strider is standing quietly in the doorway of your study. 
You aren’t terribly surprised. 
He’s looking at you with the almost bored expression of someone who, to be perfectly colloquial, ‘isn’t having any of it,’ whatever it may pertain to. 
“You gonna tell me what the hell that was all about,” he asks, but it isn’t really a question. 
You eye him silently and he sighs. 
“Look, dude,” he starts, and you frown a little at his condescending tone, “if John was a little less wrapped up in himself or maybe a little more observant, he could’ve taken that shit the wrong fucking way- hell, I’m not so sure I haven’t, so I’m thinking you should start talking.”
You cross your arms and stare at the wall beside his head. “I don’t believe I know what you’re referring to.”
He sighs even more emphatically. “Man, come on. Something’s up, and I actually looked up this crappy-ass rag online and read the goddamn thing *twice* trying to figure out what and I haven’t found jack shit, so either you tell me what’s going down or I’ll… I dunno, start prank calling your work and being a bigger piece of shit than usual, I guess.”

You can hear the exasperation in his voice. Your jaw pops. You hadn’t even realized that you were clenching your teeth.

You take a deep breath. “Dave,” you say patiently, “if you see the man who wrote this article, do not speak to him. If he approaches you, say as little as possible.” He looks wary and skeptical. You cannot, honestly, blame him for that. “This is not a person you want involved in your affairs,” you insist.

He turns his face slightly to the side in an oddly familiar posture of nervous confusion. “Uh, isn’t he in New York or something? I don’t think that’s really a possibility-”

“It is,” you interrupt, and rather rudely, at that. You choose your next words carefully. “Fletcher Marsden and I were acquainted in the past. I suppose you could say that we’re not friendly.”

He’s unconvinced.

You stare silently back at him, praying he’ll relent.

“You’re going to have to give me more than that,” he tells you, and you close your eyes in frustration.

This is a very long story, and it is one you are not particularly fond of telling.

“Marsden was involved in the media coverage of my mother’s death,” you state succinctly.

His expression tells you all you need to know.

“You are aware of the identity of John’s grandmother, Dave?”

You’re asking for the sake of courtesy. He does not.

He wrinkles his nose unevenly, visibly confused. “Her name was, uh… Nanna? Nanna Egbert? Or was that just a grandma thing I don’t know, but I guess she died just before John was, uh, ‘born’ or something and I don’t get it man what does this have to do with Fletching Marsbar or whoever-”

“My mother’s maiden name is Jane Crocker,” you inform him, and he cuts off sharply.

His eyebrow furrows. “Wait, like Betty Crocker’s kid?”

You confirm his suspicions.

You can vaguely see his eyes go wide behind his sunglasses. “But John hates Betty Crocker, I don’t get it, shouldn’t he be like inheriting that shit or something then, and wait doesn’t that mean Colonel Sassy Acres is your grandpa or something what wait a second I think you mentioned that before-”

You sigh heavily. “Yes, Colonel Sassacre is my maternal grandfather- Colonel Richard Sassacre, from whom my middle name was taken. I think you may have been too preoccupied with laughing at me to have understood my meaning, David.” To his credit, he only barely snickers at the reminder. “And no, John is not the heir to his great-grandmother’s legacy.”
You don’t like the way he’s looking at you.

“My mother was estranged from her family. She married a soldier and took his name. I’m not certain if you’re aware of this, David, but my grandfather died while my mother and uncle were still infants.”

He’s listening intently, lips slightly parted. In other circumstances, you might find it amusing.

“My uncle disappeared when he was a young teenager, followed many years later by my grandmother, who vanished similarly. To my knowledge, neither was ever found.”

“So it was just your mom left, then,” he breathes, and you watch the realization dawn on his face.

“Yes,” you say again. “We lost my father to the war when I was quite young. As completely absurd and irrational as linking his death to the conspiracy theories surrounding the disappearance of my mother’s family may sound, it nonetheless only added to the speculation that surrounded her,” you swallow down dryness, “and therefore also surrounded me, if only by extension.”

His lips part further. You wonder if you should tell him that it’s impolite to gape.

“Yes,” you say again. “We lost my father to the war when I was quite young. As completely absurd and irrational as linking his death to the conspiracy theories surrounding the disappearance of my mother’s family may sound, it nonetheless only added to the speculation that surrounded her,” you swallow down dryness, “and therefore also surrounded me, if only by extension.”

His lips part further. You wonder if you should tell him that it’s impolite to gape.

“And then she died too,” he mutters, “and it was just you-”

You watch realization flood his face for a second time, but this iteration looks a trifle nauseous.

“It was you and John,” he mumbles disbelievingly. “Your mom dies in this crazy coincidence and suddenly you have a baby you can’t explain on top of all this other shit that you can’t explain.”

You tilt your head forward in confirmation.

“Fletcher Marsden wrote a very, ah… sensational article on the Crocker family disappearances, my mother’s involvement in that—” you molar are gritting together again. You unclench them carefully—“and what he supposes to be my involvement in my mother’s passing. And I quote,” you say rather bitterly, “Just as the female spider eats her mate, she is in turn eaten by her young. The late Mrs. Egbert née Crocker would have done well to remember this.”

Dave is making a truly awful face.

“What, he thinks you can summon meteors?” he asks you incredulously, and he looks so disgusted with the utter absurdity of the thing that you let out a bark of laughter without meaning to. He starts to grin. “I mean, that’s a pretty rad superpower bro, don’t get me wrong, does this mean I get to make jokes about you calling me down from the heavens, aw shit—”

You trail off into companionable laughter. His smile starts to slip again, and you eye him warily.

“Not meaning to be disrespectful or call into question your sanity or anything, but,” he starts, “couldn’t the whole interviewing John thing just be kind of a coincidence? I mean, you’re not the only Egberts around and I’m just sayin’ that assuming he’s out to get you after like twenty years or something sounds a little paranoid, y’know?”

You do know.

You also know that you’re not being paranoid.

You smooth John’s article out on the desk. “Researching your subject even perfunctorily is standard procedure, I’m afraid. Reputable or not, it wouldn’t do for a journalist to find himself
having written a glowing review of someone with an unsavoury history. It would reflect badly upon him. I guarantee you, Marsden knows that John is my son.” You run your fingers along the title line absentmindedly. “Knowing this, and knowing how familiar Fletcher Marsden is with my family and myself, tell me, Dave: what is missing from this interview?”

He furrows his eyebrows at you before turning to look at the article. “I don’t know, I’ve read it twice alre-” he stops, and you watch him realize for the third time. “He didn’t ask about it. When somebody who’s just getting famous is related to somebody else famous, they always point that shit out and ask awkward questions about family connections and nepotism and shit. He didn’t even bring it up.”

He looks at you questioningly and you smile tightly back at him. “These things have more impact if you present them in a context where they are more than just interesting trivia.”

You sag into your desk chair rather heavily, feeling suddenly very tired.

“Marsden’s article about my mother’s death is still the most widely-read and remembered thing he has ever written. If Marsden were to write another, presumably to bring to light new information after twenty years or simply to reiterate those same conclusions with John and I in mind, it’s very possible he could secure his legacy on judiciously phrased slander alone.”

Dave looks a touch sick. “That’s fucking terrible.”

You smile wryly at him.

“It’s nothing personal,” you say, just so, as the same words were said to you.

“It’s just business.”

==>
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

The mightiest tiff of all.

John turns twenty with all the fanfare characteristic of someone accustomed to being the centre of attention.

You shower him with affection. You are patently overindulgent. You bend compliantly to his whims and encourage Dave to do the same.

You drive both boys to a movie theatre at what you would consider far too late an hour on any other Wednesday evening. You yourself sit at home, content to wait complacently for your son to call you.

As you wait, you do not think about the way Dave has not been furrowing his pale eyebrows over his sunglasses at you for the past week, and you don’t think about the great lengths which you have not, of course, taken to avoid being left alone with him.

If you have neglected your baking, it is not because you are avoiding you son’s best friend. That would be both unmannerly and uncalled for.

You’ve simply realized how much you missed your son, and you think perhaps you would not find yourself enslaved to your oven and miss a moment better spent spoiling him.

You do not think about Tuesdays, when you do not lock yourself in your study, nor do you think about the way Dave does not sit with his back against the door, waiting for you to come out until John comes strolling back into the house after his lessons, sheet music and soft drink in hand.

You are not avoiding him.

You are not guarded with him.

You are his best friend’s father, and he is your son’s best friend.

Your relationship is, and always has been, perfectly normal.

Two months pass this way.

You have reason to suspect Dave is upset with you.

You can’t begin to imagine why.

When John tells you that he’s leaving again, you have no cause to be apprehensive.

He’s proven himself quite competent and remarkably shrewd when left to his own devices. You’re
truly proud to have such a wonderful son.

You have no complaints about being left alone with your son’s best friend once more, even if he
does seem to have a complaint waiting somewhat impatiently for you.

==>

The second time you see him off is a repeat of the first, and Dave will not budge from your side.

He’s waiting for you in the car when you finish watching John’s airplane disappear into a
panoramic expanse of wet steel and drizzling pewter.

He’s looking at you as you close the door, and his face begins to threaten thunder as you draw your
seatbelt across yourself.

“Yeah,” he comments. “So.”

You turn the key in the ignition and see him cross his arms across his chest from the corner of your
eye.

“Yep, that’s pretty much what I figured,” he continues, voice rising slightly to be heard over the
murmur of the engine. “Uh-huh.”

You debate the wisdom of speaking versus enduring him in silence.

You can feel the weight of his stare.

“This is gonna be real fuckin’ interesting, y’know,” he starts, and you swallow and shift the car
into reverse. “I mean, on a purely goddamn clinical and almost not completely pissed off level I’m
really looking forward to seeing how this shit is going to go down now that you don’t have John to
hide behind, that is actually the biggest question science has ever fucking posed and I think I might
be gunning for a Nobel prize here-”

You endure his venom until your house comes into view.

“-I dunno, man, I think the scientific community could really do with some input from its favourite
suburban family man, do you want to provide a comment for the public and the press or are you
going to pull this shit until I have to lay your ass to rest, shit, I’m almost getting lyrical from the
stress-”

“You seem upset,” you interrupt, turning into the driveway.

The engine gutters and stills. He’s completely silent.

You know precisely what expression he’s making even without looking at him.

“I ‘seem upset’,” he repeats.

You anticipated this. By no means does that mean you’re prepared for it.

You very reluctantly turn to meet his burning stare.

He’s visibly shaking.

“Would you look at that. It speaks. Fuckin’ miraculous. It speaks and it says I seem,” he drags out,
“upset. And how do you fuckin’ figure?” he asks you mockingly. “I don’t know what gave you that
idea, bro, you want to take a shot, would you like to solve this fucking puzzle now or do you wanna buy a vowel first?"

You unbuckle your seatbelt and slip out of the car before he can move to intercept you. You’ve barely fished the house key from between the others before he’s dogging your steps to the front door. “Here, I’m feeling generous so I’ll give you one for free: $U$, as in fuck you, and fuck this bullshit you’ve been pulling since John got home, fuck whatever bullshit logic you thought justified acting like the world’s worst whatever the fuck I’m supposed to call you, and fuck you for ignoring me.”

He snatches at the key when you try to slide it in the lock and you look at him. “You’re making a scene.”

He’s pulled his lips back over his teeth in a snarl. He’s so close you can smell him, a little sharper and muskier than you remember. He probably needs to do a load of laundry. You don’t find that surprising, all things considered.

“And why exactly shouldn’t I?” he challenges.

You say nothing.

“You know, I thought I had the twitchy thing you had going on figured when you shared the details on captain douchenozzle newspaper reporter extraordinaire with me, but no, naw, I don’t think I need to get into how much naw happened after that,” he growls. “It’s one thing to be kept on the down-low, that I can deal with, but let me tell you, it’s kind of another thing fucking entirely to be put out in the cold like that, so yeah, yeah, I might be a little upset, as hard as you might find that to believe, Dick.”

You eye his flushed face and take a deep breath. “I’d prefer it if we had this conversation inside,” you tell him quietly.

He twists his lip at you. “Are you going to fuck off and avoid me again?”

“No.” He looks unconvinced. You sigh. “You have my word.”

Walking into your empty home feels every bit as oppressive and dire as you had expected it to the last time you let John leave you behind.

Where once you beheld a languid sunbeam, now you find yourself at the mercy of an unforgiving sun.

The instant the door is closed behind you, he backs you into it, cornering you between the hard edges of a sunken doorframe, a lithe silhouette separating you from your living room. He doesn’t even let you take off your shoes.

“Talk,” he snarls, jabbing a finger into your chest. “Or I swear to god I will make you fucking miserable until you do.”

You tuck your keys and your hands into your pockets and rememorize the scratches on his sunglasses. One is new. He’s got a scrape on his cheek. You suspect he and John were roughhousing.

“I’m not certain what you want me to say, Dave.”

He leans in close, so close you have to set your back against the door to stop his nose from
brushing yours. “Yes you do,” he accuses. “You know perfectly goddamn well what I want to hear from you, don’t you.”

It isn’t a question. It never is. You resign yourself.

“You’re my son’s best friend,” you point out, already aware of what his response will inevitably be.

“Yeah, I kinda noticed, we’ve been over this.”

“Yes, we have,” you retort sharply. “And the issues remain the same, regardless of how insignificant they might seem to you. You’re much younger than me. You’re barely older than my son. My son would be hurt immensely were he to know what has already transpired, and if it were to continue, the risk of him discovering exactly that would only increase over time.” You grit your teeth. “In addition, the very same would put at risk my reputation as a respectable citizen of this community. You might think that what I do with you behind closed doors is our business alone, but should it become public knowledge, the manner in which I am viewed and treated by the people who surround me could be changed irrevocably, and only for the worse. Dave, you may think you’re an adult, but you are still a child in the ways that truly matter.”

He’s gone scarlet to the tips of his ears. “A child?” He sounds choked, both with anger and with shock. “Says something about your taste, doesn’t it?”

You move to pass him and he whips his arm out in front of you. “You want to stop, fine, but don’t hide behind bullshit excuses you know don’t really matter,” he yells. “And don’t treat me like I can’t make my own goddamn decisions- I’ve been choosing who I do and don’t want to fuck for a hell of a lot longer than I’ve been fucking you-”

“Only because your brother is an idle and irresponsible guardian-” you interrupt.

“I’m my own fucking person, he’s got nothing to do with this! He’s got nothing to do with what I know I want-” he retorts and you feel the next words leave your mouth before you can consider their wisdom.

“You’re not old enough to know what you want.”

Had he been just a fraction of a second faster, or you even an instant slower to react, the blow would have connected.

You feel the rush of air strike your cheek as his fist flies past your face, just a hairsbreadth from your skin.

You grab him before he can swing again, too aware that you cannot match his speed and will not be graced with the same luck a second time. He thrashes in your grip, turning his wrists against your fingers and pulling against them with his full, if mercifully insubstantial, weight.

“Let me go,” he grits.

“You’ll hit me,” you point out calmly.

He barks humourlessly. “You’re fucking right I’ll hit you!”

You tell him that’s hardly incentive to let him go and he aims a clumsy kick at your shins. You tighten your hands around his wrists to a point that makes him gasp and sag, lessening the tension of his insistent pull. You almost succeed at not feeling absolutely terrible about it.
“You need to calm down,” you tell him, and he pushes with his shoulders, trying to shove your hands back, towards you. His short fingernails come dangerously close to your face.

You jerk them upwards, pulling him closer and his arms above his head. He leans against you, pushing as best he can. You brace your feet and set your jaw. “Calm down, David.”

When he lifts his head, he’s only slightly below eye level, disadvantaged by his flat sneakers to your thick-soled dress shoes.

You half expect him to attempt to headbutt you.

He does not.

You’re not sure what inspires him to mash his mouth against your own, but it’s not what you were expecting, and the combination of clashing teeth and the sudden bite he delivers to your lower lip are hardly the hallmarks of anything you’d see fit to call a kiss.

You’re not sure who is madder: him for initiating the thing, or you for reciprocating it.

Nevertheless, when you find yourself with his legs around your waist and his back pressed against the door, find yourself with your belt around your ankles and his pants discarded on the floor, you know without a doubt that you’re both thoroughly insane.

It’s simply a matter of perspective who is worse and who is better, if the concepts even still apply to wretches such as you.

You may be acting the piss-poor gentleman, but he was never one at all, no matter what you may have thought you saw.

==> The bruises on his wrists are more black than purple. Five and five, a matching set.

You don’t know whether to continue being angry with him or to surrender and become contrite.

He tested your resolve and found it wanting.

For that, you punished him with a purposeful and ferocious brutality that you had forgotten you possessed and have never known another to willingly endure, let alone be unhinged enough to enjoy.

He did appear to enjoy it, though.

You’re torn in your feelings about that, as well.

You are not without some share of karmic retribution, however. Your back is very stiff this morning, and a little sore.

It may not be a fair share, but it is a share, nonetheless.

Dave is still sleeping when you leave. You don’t disturb him.

==> Woodgrave approaches you at lunch. Your irritation triples.
You attempt to ignore him, but he will not be ignored.

He leans over you conspiratorially, placing a meaty hand on your shoulder. You look at it disdainfully. “Hey, Egbert, have you been looking into taking out a loan?”

You have not, and you don’t appreciate his asking.

He chuckles despite your tone. “I just thought you should know somebody was calling about you-wanted to confirm you still worked here. Something about a credit check, you know the kind. I thought it stank, so I stopped by to give you a heads up.”

You pause, all too aware of what he’s suggesting and conflicted about how properly react in his presence.

He solves your dilemma himself, patting you one final time before leaning down and whispering, “Oh, and you should probably pull up your collar. Just a tip.”

You’re not certain what he means.

=>

You refrain from checking the status of your collar and its apparently insufficient height for approximately an hour before relenting and slipping away to the men’s washroom to investigate.

When you do, the problem is immediately apparent.

You suddenly understand the peculiar tenderness your back has been experiencing throughout the day- a higher and sharper pain than that characteristic of simple muscular overexertion.

Your little debacle yesterday has left you with long, angry-looking red welts peeking out from under your clothes, at least one of which looks to be scabbed over, leaving you darkly suspicious of what lays beneath and below the abused nape of your neck.

Your own resilience somewhat surprises yourself.

Nonetheless, it is purely physical. That is a kind of pain you can and do endure.

When Woodgrave catches your eye and grins knowingly at you as you exit the washroom, you pull your collar up hurriedly once more and curse the flames of mortification that must be colouring your face.

You suppose you’ve paid your karmic dues, after all.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Aftercare and badly timed visits.

Chapter Notes

Not a lot happens in this chapter. My bad.

“Oops.”

Dave looks unrepentant.

You haven’t even mentioned the source of your complaint yet.

And here you had hoped it had been unintentional.

He laughs at you from the couch. “Hey, it wasn’t on purpose, don’t give me that look.” His grin is infectious. Thank goodness for your strong immune system. “I just kind of figured you wouldn’t be too pleased with me, judging by the amount of shit I found under my fingernails this morning. Doesn’t take a genius to put that brownish-red puzzle piece in its scratched-all-to-shit place, dude.”

You’re still not very impressed with him. “I’m decidedly apprehensive about what I’m going to find under my shirt, David.”

He smirks. “Hey, I’ll patch you up if you help me up. Deal?”

He’s a tad sheepish under his nonchalant facade. You raise your eyebrows inquisitively. He begins to turn a touch pink around the ears.

“Look, you kind of put me through the meat grinder yesterday, okay, it took me like an hour to get a shirt on and come downstairs and I might be in a whole world of hurt right now.”

He grunts and wobbles as you hoist him to his feet, and your annoyance with him is lampooned by sudden guilt. You can tell he’s doing his best to remain nonchalantly upright, but the insistent pull of some hidden pain is bending his knees and stooping his posture in a way wholly different than habitual slouching. You steady him regretfully.

He flinches even as he attempts to reassure you. “Hey, don’t look at me like that, I’ve been through worse, it doesn’t even hurt too bad I’ve just sort of got jelly legs right now, I’m just stumbling around like baby Bambi who got into the woodland liquor cabinet ‘cause my deer mom is dead and my stag dad abandoned me and I have no real deer parental guidance so I’m just getting throwed with Snow White and the seven-eleven dwarves and some rabbits and shit, aw yeah, we’re getting our interspecies bond on-”

You help him up the stairs as he talks, noting the missed beat of every breathless pause and the
dissonance of every sharp hiss amidst the climbing tempo of his speech.

You’ve long suspected that the way he talks is rooted in a desire to present a certain image of impassivity- a somewhat ironic method in and of itself, perhaps only more ironic for his apparent inability to understand how fast and nonsensical speech would itself fail to make one appear aloof and unattached- and it seems to you that you were correct, for every twitch and gasp is followed by an onslaught of words.

He attempts to fill the questionable gaps in conversation with endless prattle, painting over his windows just as you paper over your walls.

It’s a strange house you build between the two of you. A trifle eclectic, busy but spare, with fine furnishings done all in washed barnwood grey and aged silver over red carpets.

No.

Actually, no, that’s not right at all.

The house you build together is floored with shoe-scuffed red and white tiles like the ones you remember seeing in diners, places where your back stuck to the red naugahyde of the booths in summer, places with silver tables and silver trays and roller-skating carhops carrying burgers and wearing tight shirts with nametags that sat high on their left breasts, girls with pin-curled hair who called each other things like Betty and Patty and Ruth.

Places you went with your mother, girls you wouldn’t have the courage to smile at until their white roller skates and pleated skirts had already gone out of vogue.

You’ve driven past what’s left of them, these places you went as a boy, and the ones that haven’t crumbled under the weight of new shopping malls and developing condominiums are places where teenaged part-timers and full-time old men still make milkshakes for those curious what the world was like before the sun bleached the plastic and the paint started to peel.

Places where the past humours the present and pretends it doesn’t know that it’s over, pretends that it’s significant or charming enough to put off indefinitely the day when its double doors close behind its very last unsatisfied customer, and it does this for the present, for the multitude of people who can’t remember how brightly those freshly waxed floors used to shine.

And yours is a place with glass doors and a neon sign that never worked, too far off the beaten path to draw attention to itself, and you both too paranoid and too private to advertise it.

The house you build together is a house that you had already built to hide the sterile room you house yourself in, and like Dave’s many words fail to hide his fevered nature, the faded glory of your storefront façade only served to incite his interest in you.

You decorated the place with a lot of silver and a little blue, but he was the one lit those smooth glass tubes for the first time, and you never would have guessed that they would be red.

He keeps pushing closer to the counter, flirting and fighting and begging to be shown around the kitchen, matching his false disinterest to your distant veneer, playing his strange music and painting everything red and attracting an undue amount of attention from you to yourself.

It occurs to you that this will probably end with one of you cracking the other, peeling off the paint or paper to reveal the ugliness beneath, and even if the one who did the cracking isn’t repulsed by what he finds, the one who was cracked will be, and he will be resentful.
But he digs, so you dig in return. Even as he feels for the edge of the wallpaper, you peer between the black lines of his sentences, hoping for a glimpse inside of him, because his interest in you frightens you, because you don’t know why he is.

Each pained gasp he tries to smother is a glimpse in at a boy who feels pain but only complains when it benefits him and only talks about the hurt when he thinks you’ll find it funny.

He always complained when John’s pranks went awry and left him with the slightest bit of broken skin or the smallest robin’s egg bruise, but he’s not complaining now because he knows you’ll draw away from him in shame.

The fact that he knows is a both a comfort and a cause for concern, because you are very afraid of not knowing when you’re hurting him.

Or, you suppose, you’re afraid he doesn’t truly know the limits of what he can stand, and will not tell you until you’ve pushed him over that perilous line.

He’s still talking when you guide him into the bathroom, and when he says something that has the cadence of a question, you look at him inquisitively.

He raises his eyebrows, slouching on the edge of the bathtub with his elbows on his knees in what seems to be some poor attempt at a relaxed and unaffected pose.

“Do you want me to take a look at your back or not?” he asks you again, and you began to remove your shirt obediently. “Sit down on the toilet, man,” he instructs, “back facing the tub- it’ll be easier to see the damage that way.”

You oblige him, unbuttoning your shirt, and he pulls it from your shoulders for you.

You feel the fabric catch and pull at your skin at points, and your suspicions are all but confirmed by the concerned hiss Dave sucks in through his teeth.

“Shit, man,” he mumbles, tracing his fingertips in gentle downward strokes along your wounds, “I’m so fucking sorry. Jesus.”

You turn to look over your shoulder and he pushes your face forward with a strained sounding laugh. “Uh, it’s not pretty back here, ‘specially up top, I maybe wouldn’t recommend that.” You stare out the window, looking but not seeing, more focused on the movements of his hands. “They should’ve closed already, but it looks like some of them opened up when you showered or something. You’re, uh- I hope you weren’t too attached to this shirt.”

You chuckle a bit at that. “This isn’t very encouraging, Dave. Will I live?” you ask him drily.

He rewards you with a laugh of his own. “I dunno man, I’ll do my best to clean and cover up these bad boys but I think your chances are pretty slim, you should probably get your will in order, I promise I’ll make sure John doesn’t flake out on your funeral-”

You frown a little at that and despite being unable to see your face, he goes quiet, hands stilling on your shoulders. “Sorry, man. That was… kind of tasteless.”

You reach a hand up and squeeze his fingers reassuringly instead of speaking. He’s right. It was tasteless, especially given the circumstances. But it was said, and he’s apologized. He didn’t say it intending to injure you, even if he has.

You continue to stare out the window, distantly noting the colour of your neighbour’s curtains as
he rises with a groan and begins to rummage through the medicine cabinet above the sink, remarking to yourself about the faded paint on the fence that separates your houses as he open a bottle and fills the room with the pungency of hydrogen peroxide.

You force down a flinch as he begins to apply it, murmuring apologies all the while and stopping occasionally to caress your arms and those other unmarked places before his eyes.

He surprises you out of your oddly melancholic reverie by pressing a kiss to your throat, and you turn again.

He’s leaning on the towel rack. You gently request that he refrain from doing so. He snorts and kisses you before sitting back down.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbles again, almost inaudibly, and then clears his throat rather affectedly. “So, uh, you should maybe just leave these uncovered for now, since we’re at home and all,” he starts, and you fight a wry little smile at his transparency. “It’ll heal faster if you just hang out shirtless or something, and if you’re not comfortable with that I can join you, nothing wrong with a couple of bros hanging out without shirts on—”

He misses a beat. You twist to look at him, ignoring the twinges of pain the movement incites. He’s fidgeting.

“—but on the other hand it’d be kind of nice to be the one with clothes on for once, nice little reversal there I guess—”

You treat him to a rather stern look, turning around completely. “David, we should probably see about those bruises of yours.”

The fervency of his protests reignites your worries. “David.”

It is with great reluctance that he disrobes, and if it is not wholly the product of the tenderness of moving, you can certainly understand why.

Your expression elicits a frantic response in him. “Yo, don’t get freaked out, I bruise pretty easy this isn’t as bad as it looks, I’ll be okay in a couple days and I don’t got anywhere to be anyway it’s cool—”

You outline the dark marks on his hips and thighs regretfully, and turn over his wrists in your hands, ashamed of the clear correspondence between each line and each finger.

He interrupts your apology with another kiss, soft and lingering despite the strain his half-crouched pose is putting on his abused legs. He tilts forward precariously, and for a moment, you’re sure he’s about to fall, but he just slips onto his knees on the floor with a soft grunt and leans his forehead against your collarbone.

“We’re okay,” he mumbles, sliding his palms along your thighs. “No more saying sorry, okay? It’s starting to sound like a weird word because it’s getting used too much.” You suppress a chuckle, but he feels it, and you feel him smile against your chest.

He looks at you.

“Saw,” he over-enunciates with an exaggerated grimace, “Ree.”

You can’t help but laugh.
In the days that follow, nothing seems to come of your strange caller and his questions about your employment, and for the most part, Woodgrave leaves you be.

Your indiscreet display is not mentioned again.

You are immensely grateful.

Your back heals much faster than Dave’s bruises, much to Dave’s irritation.

You fend off his hopeful fondling for what feels like, and may very well be, the thousandth time.

“But I’m horny,” he whines, leaning over the back of your desk chair.

You’re beginning to miss the hindrance to his mobility.

“But you’re injured,” you retort, pushing his questing hands away from your shirt buttons, “and I have work to do.”

The groan he releases is positively theatrical. “In all the months I’ve been here, you’ve barely come into this room at all, but now that I’m a little roughed up and want some sexual healing you’ve suddenly got paperwork?” he needles. “Come on.”

He’s right. You don’t really have anything urgent that requires your attention. You specifically requested extra work precisely because you need a distraction from, to put it frankly, your main distraction.

He ghosts his lips over the shell of your ear before catching it between his teeth playfully. “I’m not going to leave you alone, dude,” he coaxes quietly, “you’re not going to get any work done until I get some play, because I’m pretty sure we both know you don’t actually want me to leave you alone and I’m not about to just because you think it’s responsible to pretend you do.”

You stare blankly at the report you’re meant to be reading.

He’s wrong.

You think you’ve successfully understood the title. Progress has been made.

He slips his hands down your chest. You don’t bother to stop him again. He smiles as he palms you through your slacks.

You shut your eyes tightly and take a deep breath.

“You,” you mutter, “are an absolute menace.”

He laughs. “Yessir.” His mouth is hot against your throat. “What’re you going to do about it?”

Nothing, apparently. He’s much too endearing. It’s dangerous.

You grumble half-heartedly as he turns your chair to face him and he grins, six of his orthodontically straightened white teeth on full display. “Hey there.”

It’s a silly, flirtatious little greeting, and you’re entirely too busy resenting yourself for giving in to
him to humour it.

He’s not discouraged.

He puts a knee on the armrest and leans in to kiss you, lips coercive and languid against your own, and you relent.

A teasing pressure returns to your fly, and then he starts pulling at your belt. You groan. “Dave,” you chide, “you’re in no state to be putting your body through strenuous, ah, activities.”

He slides his hand into your open fly and squeezes you mischievously. You bite down a soft curse. “So let me suck your cock, then,” he murmurs into your mouth, sucking lightly on your lower lip. “That’s not going to hurt anybody.”

Even as used to his often lewd speech as you’ve become, you still feel the blood rising in your face at the suggestion. “I hardly see how that would alleviate your condition,” you grouse. He laughs.

“I like it,” he tells you, and your cheeks are almost certainly scarlet, “knowing you’re watching me blow you, having my hair pulled when you use it like a handle so you can fuck my mouth—” his words tumble out from between his lips and into yours like secrets—“knowing I can make you come unglued like that, that it feels good enough to make you get rough with me, that’s hot, fuck—” You barely register when he brings your hand to the front of his jeans until your palm finds the raised shape of his erection, canted slightly left and very firm.

“I’m already hard just from talking about it,” he whispers breathlessly. “Trust me, getting my mouth on your junk will ‘help alleviate my condition,’ have no fuckin’ fear, there’s pretty much no way I’m not going to be jerking it when you have your dick down my throat, I fucking love getting you all twisted like that, it makes me wish I could blow you and ride you at the same time, you have no idea—”

You’re absolutely mortified by the way he’s talking. “If only to stop your indecent mouth, good lord,” you tell him, and as rude a thing as it was to say, he chuckles and drops down in front of you. You seriously consider pulling your hat down to hide your flaming face from his gaze. What a devilishly cheeky grin.

You’d been wrong, in thinking that he would hold to the precepts you were accustomed to, because he wastes no time before burying his mouth and nose against the front of your underwear. You suck in a sharp breath. His bright eyes narrow impishly as he begins to mouth your erection through the thin fabric that covers it, sucking lightly at the shaft and leaving small patches of wetness in his wake.

You smooth your hand through his hair in an attempt to relieve some of the restless pressure his ministrations are producing. “David,” you groan, pointlessly stern and increasingly frustrated, and he responds by smirking and sucking lightly at the head of your penis, the sensation of a sliding tongue hinted at but interrupted by the maddening barrier of cotton between it and you.

You’ve just begun to twist your fingers in his hair when the doorbell rings.

“Leave it,” he tells you immediately, “they can come back later, we’re busy.”

The doorbell rings a second time. You’re unaccustomed to leaving attended doors and ringing phones unanswered.
You look from Dave to the direction of the front door again.

He redoubles his teasing suction, forcing a soft gasp from you. You watch him rub a hand over the protrusion in his jeans, stroking and squeezing himself through the denim that covers it. You swallow, conflicted.

There’s someone waiting at the front door.

It’s probably unimportant. Dave will hound you if you interrupt him to humour a Tupperware salesman.

All the same, you’re keeping someone waiting.

He’s noticed your anxiety.

He rocks back on his heels with a strangled noise of anger, both hands pressed against his groin. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

You tuck your lamentably insistent erection under your belt, followed into the hall by a long and frustrated groan.

You take a second to compose yourself and pray both that your caller is still waiting and that they are not.

She is.

Dave’s onetime companion smiles at you.

“Hey, I don’t know if you remember me, I’m-”

“Janice,” you supply, pleasantly surprised despite yourself. “It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

She looks positively tickled that you’ve remembered her name. “You too, Mister E,” she giggles before asking, “Is Dave around?”

You consider the wisest answer. You don’t think he’ll be especially pleased to see her, all things considered, but you don’t want to turn her away. You settle on “He is,” with an addendum of “but he may be indisposed to receive visitors at the moment.”

She scoffs at your light discouragement, brushing a strand of dark hair out of her eyes. “Dave hasn’t come to any of our events since the first one, and now he’s not even answering my texts—unless he’s dead, he’s not indisposed enough to hide from me after I came all the way out here,” she complains, and then lapses into uncertain fidgeting. “…As long as that’s alright with you, I mean. It’s your house.”

You invite her in with a smile and a small feeling of trepidation. A very unamused looking Dave peers out into the living room at you.

She spots him almost immediately. “Indisposed, my ass, you look fine.”

He squawks indignantly. “Hey, it’s not my fault you have shit timing, man, I was busy.”

“Have you been busy since May? What’ve you been doing, jerking off twenty-four seven?”

You cough uncomfortably and Janice colours and apologizes because “oh shit, sorry, you probably don’t want to think about your kid’s best friend spanking the monkey, oops, sorry.”
Dave snorts.

You watch her harangue him for a moment before slipping into the kitchen. You’re still rather excited. You need to calm yourself.

You’re pulling the flour from the cupboard when you hear a feminine voice say “I don’t care—more importantly, your friend’s dad is smoking hot, can I just say that?” followed by a hissed “He can probably hear you, shut up, dude,” and a bright laugh.

“No, but seriously, I thought I had some hardcore beer goggles on at that party, but that guy looks every bit as fine sober as I remember him looking drunk, you lucky son of a bitch—”

You’re torn between secondhand embarrassment and amusement. Dave is fumbling his responses quite badly, no doubt perfectly aware that you can hear them both.

“—you have to bring him to the orientation party so he won’t think we’re a bunch of drunk assholes with cameras and scripts—”

Dave says something along the lines of “but that’s exactly what you are” and you have to stifle a laugh of your own.

It’s murmurs and minutes before Janice strolls in to your kitchen, and there isn’t a doubt in your mind that she intends to ask you precisely that.

Dave spots the mixing bowl in your hands and makes a disbelieving face. “You’re baking?” he asks you incredulously. “Now?”

“It would certainly appear so,” you tell him wryly, and he grimaces and surreptitiously adjusts himself.

Janice is all bright eyes and warm dark skin as she looks up at you. “I don’t know if Dave mentioned this to you—he probably didn’t—” she snipes over her shoulder at him—“but the film studies students hold an event at the beginning of each school year to welcome new students,” her pause is pregnant and cinematic, which you find amusingly appropriate, “and their parents and guardians. If you’re interested, we’d love it if you could come. You could keep Dave out of trouble,” she adds slyly, and the Dave in question protests futilely.

You smile at her. “I’d be delighted to. I trust Dave has the details?”

She confirms that to be the case, and Dave complains that she’s too overbearing.

You entertain her company for another hour, but she cannot be convinced to stay for dinner, citing religious restrictions on her diet. You drop the subject respectfully.

When she leaves, she murmurs something to Dave that you don’t hear, and then looks at you speculatively.

Dave goes quite spectacularly red, but will not enlighten you as to why.

==> He fails to entangle you in another round of debauchery.

You have work in the morning, and it would look unseemly for you to request extra duties and then fail to fulfil them.
When you’re finished, it’s much too late for such things.

He throws himself onto the bed with an exasperated groan.

“Okay, but I’ve gotta jerk off or I’m not going to be able to sleep and that means you’re not going to get to sleep either,” he gripes.

You don’t see why he has to do it in your bed.

He pauses, half divested of his clothes. “Because it smells like you and I want you?” He sighs. “Are you really going to kick me out for wanting to get off beside you?”

You don’t appreciate his ham-fisted attempt to make you feel guilty, honestly. He looks appropriately chastised when you say so.

But no, you’re not ejecting him from your room. You just think it’s rather odd to want to masturbate with someone else watching you.

It always struck you as a rather solitary activity, personally.

He’s already begun to fondle himself into erectness by the time you’ve finished expressing your thoughts, lip caught between his teeth. “It’s not,” he pants distantly, “I mean, it doesn’t have to be- sorry, I got impatient- but you still wouldn’t be off the mark if you said I was hoping maybe you’d get a little hard from watching or, uh, ah, maybe decide you want to join in but you don’t- you don’t have to-”

His speech starts meander distractedly as he strokes his erection, choking off familiar sounds as he twists his palm at the end of each movement, his other hand cupping and gently squeezing his testicles.

You remember the last time you heard him do this, and swallow against dryness, sliding into bed beside him.

“H- uh, hey,” he mumbles, and you give into a strange impulse and press your lips to his throat, burying your fingers in his hair.

He moans. “Yeah, that’s okay, that’s definitely okay, you can definitely do that,” he rambles breathlessly before mumbling “It’d be pretty cool if you maybe got some teeth in on that too, no pressure though-”

“What?” you ask, startled, and he groans.

“I like a little teeth in on my manhandling and I’m definitely manhandling right now, do I have to spell it out for you, sometimes people maybe like a little biting but it’s cool if you don’t want to, that’s just what’s up-”

Despite your bemusement, you graze your teeth against the raised and fluttering line of his pulse obligingly and he starts panting in earnest and rolls his face away, exposing more of his throat to you. “Oh fuck, yeah, yeah, that’s pretty much what I was getting at.”

You set the skin below his ear between your teeth experimentally and his helpful rambling slips abruptly into babbling incoherence. “Jesus fuck mary and joseph fucking god help me oh shit oh shi- shit, harder, don’t go easy on me-”

You dig your teeth in sharply and aside from a liberal sprinkling of curse words, his comment on it
is entirely unintelligible.

He moans your name as he orgasms, and belatedly, you regret not being more involved in bringing it about.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Dad really dislikes that man.

Today, waking is a slow and languid experience.

You’re only half-conscious. Later, you’ll speculate that it may have been the result of having your usual sleep schedule disrupted. Without intervention, you do tend to awaken at a very particular hour in the morning.

But now, you’re rising from the womblike embrace of a pleasant dream that dissolves ever-further into an impressionistic canvas of colourful insinuations and distant sounds.

Your mind is heavy with your waking, and for a moment, a handful of still-sleeping synapses in your brain are convinced that you can feel a very particular shade of purple, and that its reddish undertones impart a certain warmth to it by which one can differentiate it, even without seeing, from the sensations associated with other shades.

Vaguely, beyond your dozing wonder at this revelation, you’re concerned that you’ll stain your fingers with the purple feeling should you attempt to touch it where it is touching you, and you experience an instant of absurd relief and mild puzzlement in which your discover that your purple is not a wet colour, but rather, a very soft and remarkably fibrous shade of red-saturated heat.

In the same infinitesimal fraction of a second, you realize both that your confusion stems from the wetness of the purple feeling where it touches you and that your mind has embarked on a truly bizarre flight of partial lucidity.

Even before they adjust to the grey light of early morning, your eyes find red, not purple, and a sleepily mumbling part of you contentedly declares that perfectly in accordance with your theory before blinking into consciousness.

“Dave?”

Your voice comes out sounding wet and thick, and when you swallow, you pull against an accumulation of unpleasant stickiness.

You feel the wind of his breath as he laughs, and it seems to your groggy mind to be a thousand miles from your own.

“G’morning,” he murmurs, and turns his mouth against you.

You’re not prepared for the sensation of his tongue sliding lightly against the skin of your erection, nor the heat of his mouth, though you recognize that your confused mind was already trying to make sense of precisely these things just moments ago.

You mutter something half-inquisitive, half-accusatory, and his tongue draws agonizing circles on you before pausing.
You can still feel his lips as he speaks, removed just enough to allow it. “Sorry,” he murmurs, and you really don’t think he sounds terribly sorry at all, “I woke up and you had some pretty spectacular wood and it was calling to me,” you suck in a sharp breath between your teeth as he traps you between his lips and his hand, “not my fault you have such a suckable dick, dude, you should probably be the one apologizing, I mean damn-”

You’re fairly certain his logic is fundamentally flawed in some way, but the wet suction of his mouth is disrupting your attempts to deduce just how rather badly.

You tighten your hand in his hair with a defeated groan, and he hums teasingly.

“I have to go to work,” you scold him, but the words sound husky and, if you’re being perfectly honest, embarrassingly pleading, rather than stern, as you had intended.

His mouth pulls up, tongue catching against the ridge of nerves just under the head of your penis before his lips leave your skin with an unholy pop, and he smiles lazily at you, naked, half-kneeling between your legs, a hand playing absentmindedly between his own. “Not for another hour, you don’t,” he retorts, and you suppress a groan at the sight of him twisting his palm over the tip of his erection.

He’s staring at you, eyes gone darker and yet more liquid under heavy eyelids. “You gonna tell me to stop anyway?”

“No,” you admit, and those eyes are smiling playfully even as his mouth descends on you.

You guide him with one hand and smooth the hair back from his face with the other, watching him and cursing yourself for it.

It’s nearly painful how obviously arousing he finds it, and the low moans he releases when you pull or push him a little too roughly- the tip of his nose pressing hard against your public bone before you drag him up again- are positively diabolical.

He makes it very hard to want to be gentle with him, let alone gentlemanly, particularly when he begins to moan almost incessantly, elbow working in furious circles at his side.

You’re fast losing the words to describe the sensation of rolling your hips up against his mouth, of his hair twined in your fingers as you push them down against his skull, and, most especially, of the coiling tightness that is building in your pelvis.

“Dave-” you grunt warningly, and try, clinging as you tend to do to some incredibly alien-seeming sense of courtesy, to pull him off of you, but his hand suddenly presses on top of your own, pushing insistently downwards, and you stop resisting.

When the fog of orgasm fades enough to allow it, you’re very distantly shocked at yourself for ejaculating in his mouth.

You clumsily cast around for something for him to discreetly spit into.

“Dude, what’re you even doing?”

For one merciful heartbeat, you’re about to answer.

The next, your face is suffusing quite rapidly with blood.

“David, that is absolutely foul,” you admonish, scandalized.
He just laughs dreamily, still idly stroking the last traces of ejaculate from his softening erection. He’s made a mess of himself. You eye a glistening trail as it makes its languid way down his hip and the growing smattering of small dark spots on your sheets with a mixture of amusement and disgruntlement.

“Shit, I think I could learn to wake up early after all,” he mumbles, and you sigh.

You suppose there are worse things.

You’re a little reluctant when he tries to kiss you, however.

He kisses you anyway.

Several coworkers politely inquire as to whether or not you’ve gotten a new haircut or, perhaps, have been getting more sun than is usual as of late.

When faced with your confusion, the universal consensus seems to be that you look, to put it plainly, younger and more relaxed than you typically do.

You are flustered enough by their comments without Woodgrave’s wink and knowing grin.

You do not appreciate his obliging silence about the matter as much as you probably should.

When you arrive home, Dave is, remarkably, fully dressed.

He is, however, asleep on the couch.

You suppose one out of two isn’t too bad, all things considered.

You slip past him, deciding he’s better left undisturbed.

After much preparation, you’ve just slid a cake into the oven when you feel his arms slip around your waist.

He nestles his face into the back of your neck. He’s leaning on you. It’s somewhat obstructive.

“Dave, I have to stand up to close the oven door,” you reproach him gently, and he complains about your indifferent attitude, but relents.

When you straighten and turn to face him, he’s wearing both a familiar expression and a familiar button-down. You hadn’t noticed before. He’d been sleeping on his stomach.

You raise an eyebrow disapprovingly. “Is that my shirt, David?”

He smiles flirtatiously at you, hands tucked in his pockets. “Maybe, maybe not. Maybe it’s just laundry day.”

You laugh lightly through your nose, patting the flour on your hands onto your apron. “That would still imply that you are wearing my shirt, Dave,” you point out dryly, and he draws closer to you, mouth posed like it’s on the verge of an onslaught of mischievous words.
They never come, however.

He freezes for a quarter of an instant, eyes suddenly wide and staring behind his sunglasses. You haven’t even composed a concerned thought, let alone a query, by the time he’s retrieved his sword from his strife deck and is turning away from you.

Your confusion ends with the sound of steel hitting steel.

As does your patience.

In the briefest of moments between this parry and the next, you thrust a weapon of your own into the fray.

Two swords of differing makes screech against the seasoned cast iron of your baking sheet, and there is a pause.

You grit your teeth against sudden irritation. “There will be,” you enunciate carefully, “no strifing in my kitchen.”

Dave’s elder brother snorts and curls his lip at you. You continue to stare pointedly at him.

Only after you hear the distinctive click of Dave sheathing his weapon does his sibling do the same.

The sight of his face evokes a multitude of emotions in you.

Good lord, you loathe this man.

“Mister Strider,” you smile tightly. “I don’t believe you knocked. In fact, I do recall locking the front door, so I must inquire as to how you entered my house uninvited.”

He clicks his tongue against his teeth and you wonder, absurdly, irrationally, if he has somehow discovered and decided to actively utilize in your presence every unconscious habit that has ever aggravated you.

“Don’t happen to lock your windows,” he mumbles, and you release a strained sound of acknowledgement.

“I see,” you confirm politely, “However, in the future, I must ask you to, please, use the door. It is there for precisely that purpose.”

You very nearly add “though I fear you have not been educated in such niceties;” but catch yourself.

His look informs you that he likely heard your words, unspoken though they were. “Keep it in mind. Just gotta keep the little man on his toes, though,” he tells you, and then turns to the ‘little man’ in question. “Gettin’ rusty, bro. Old man’s makin’ you soft.”

When you turn your gaze on the elder Strider’s heretofore unexamined younger brother, you discover something very concerning.

Dave Strider is the variety of person who can lie, and perhaps does, both casually and well to all acquaintances and most friends, but is utterly unable to form fabrications in the presence of a select few individuals.

One of whom, unfortunately, is his brother.
The very moment that his brother utters that—doubtless *intentional*—insinuative phrase, the entirety of Dave’s guilt and apprehension spills forth across his features like so much water, held until now by such a delicate surface tension that the abrasiveness of the other could not help but rupture it.

Dave’s eyes flicker to you for long enough to make apparent the source of his sinful feelings.

You recognize that his sibling will have recognized this.

In almost that very same instant, you recognize that there is only one way to contain the damage that Dave has already done.

In the periphery of your vision, you see his older brother’s eyebrows shoot up, and rather than hear it, you feel it in your pulsing temples when he looks first to you and then back to Dave and says “Oh. Well. That’s interesting.”

You recede back into your carefully papered room within and smile absently at him. “I’m sorry?”

You have never seen his eyes, but you can still feel them searching you in the pause before his response. “Nothin’. Just commenting on my bro’s taste,” he nods, and then turns away again. “No, seriously, we need to talk about standards, man.”

You quash the feeling of hostile offense that his words incite, weaving a careful tapestry of obliviousness to hide behind.

Dave is your son’s best friend.

You have a perfectly normal platonic relationship.

His sometimes questionable behaviours towards you escape your notice absolutely, aside from the odd and quite rare moment of disgraceful uncertainty.

You put all of these things behind the wallpaper.

“I can see I’m not part of this conversation,” you interrupt gently, wholly unaware of the irony of such a statement, as you should be, “may I, perhaps, suggest that you move your discussion into the living room, if only for some privacy? I’m afraid I’m quite occupied with the kitchen at the moment.”

Dave’s brother’s look of contempt does not escape you, however resilient your defenses. “Naw, we *really* need to talk about your standards, little dude. This white-picket-fence bake-sale-running creampuff is straighter than a bucket full of rulers and half as self-aware.”

Dave is reddening rapidly.

You unclench your jaw and take a deep breath. “I’m afraid I must insist, Mister Strider.”

He treats you to a long, unforgiving stare. You return it pleasantly, periodically reminding yourself that no good will come from grinding your teeth.

“You gonna strife me out, then?” he asks you rudely, and your careful wallpapering proves too dry, and cracks.

“You’ll make a mess,” you murmur almost involuntarily.

There is a drumbeat of absolute abhorrence beating in your temples. You breathe deeply to calm yourself.
You clicks his tongue against his teeth again and sneers and you bite hard against the desire to strike him. “Usually do. Not my fault you don’t have anywhere good to throw down.”

You simply do not care anymore.

You just despise this person too much.

Good, almighty and apparently unmerciful lord, you do not care about anything except stopping the mouth of this uncultured and boorish individual.

“You’ll be cleaning up,” you tell him pleasantly, and he’s not unintelligent, you must give him credit for that, because the understanding is as instantaneous in his expression as the reprehensible look of vague excitement at the promise of violence, and he’s redrawn his weapon in record time.

You’re very calm.

When he winds up his strike, you’re very calm.

He hesitates for but a shallow breath when he sees that you have not yet drawn your weapon, and in that breathless half-second, you slam a cherry cheese pie against his face with utterly uninhibited and maliciously delighted force, driving him back into the linoleum floor with a hearty and incredibly satisfying thump.

He knocks the pie plate away with a choked cough, and you ignore Dave’s “holy shit, jesus fuck, holy shit” in favour of continuing to stare to at him as he clumsily wipes cream cheese off of his glasses.

You hold out a cloth obligingly.

He reaches for it.

You drop it on his chest before he can take it from you.

“You’ll be cleaning up,” you repeat pleasantly, and then turn to check on your cake.

You could’ve sworn it had been longer. You suppose you still have time to wait.

Behind you, you hear a low, muttered “Okay, that was maybe a little hot,” and a strangled “bro, don’t you fucking dare-”

You take a deep breath and close your eyes.

You will survive this.

He, however, may not.

==>

It would be just your luck that the day Dave’s dear brother would decide to visit would be a Friday.

You are simply so fortunate.

His motivation for coming, declared in such stirring words as “You didn’t get kicked out yet so I figured you’d want the rest of your stuff,” is surprising to you. You honestly hadn’t thought he paid that much attention.
You were, apparently, wrong.

This does not lessen your antagonistic view of him.

While Dave is not particularly pleased to be shuttled back into the guest room after such a brief reprieve from his last exile, you do take a particularly profound glee in apologetically informing his brother that he will simply have to take the couch.

That is, until he shrugs and informs you that he normally takes the couch.

You resent him most grievously for spoiling your fun.

==> 

On Saturday, you wake up to the sound of arguing.

You realize that you had been clenching your fists in your sleep. However short your fingernails may be, there are still red marks on your palms.

It is with fast-mounting irritation that you tie your dressing gown and descend the stairs to investigate.

It is, of course, exactly as you expected.

The elder Strider’s fingers are twitching with intent. You feel your jaw begin to ache preemptively.

“Good morning,” you greet, smiling.

They pause.

Dave’s brother meets your pleasant gaze.

“I’m afraid,” you murmur apologetically, “that I also failed to specify that I do not allow strifing in any other rooms of my household, nor do I allow it on my property in my general. I fear I may have given the wrong impression, in my telling you to cease such activities in my kitchen. I’m terribly sorry.”

Strider’s fingers relax, albeit a trifle arthritically. You smile at him.

He looks very slightly uneasy.

You’re glad.

==> 

Breakfast is tense.

You pointedly allow Dave to eat as much as he would like, all the while questioning his brother’s equally voracious appetite.

Unfortunately, he is highly resistant to your subterfuge.

You are still left without leftovers.

==>
Late into Saturday evening, he calls Dave something very rude.

Joke or not, your gentlemanly instincts cannot abide by it.

You can already feel an inappropriately hateful expression clouding your face when you begin to speak.

You don’t need to look at him to be perfectly aware of how receptive he is to the nuances of other’s speech, and, consequently, that he will inevitably recognize the meaning underlying yours.

He looks at you contemplatively.

“You know,” he starts, “people don’t usually get so worked up over kids that aren’t theirs.”

You pull your face into some facsimile of a smile. “I don’t suppose they do.”

You watch the realization blossom across his face like a sick flower and fail to care quite spectacularly.

“This is my house, Mister Strider,” you tell him pleasantly.

You don’t say “In it, I am king.”

But he hears you, nonetheless.

Oh, yes.

He hears you.
His reaction isn’t quite what you expected.

He stops.

He points at you.

He turns to Dave and makes a sound not unlike gas escaping from a balloon.

Dave just raises his shoulders helplessly. “I, uh, thought we were keeping this shit under wraps, like a full mile under wraps, so far under wraps that this shit was practically mummified but okay, yeah, I guess this is a thing that is not under wraps anymore, the cat is out of the bag except instead of a cat it’s the nasty ass shambling zombie of a long-dead pharaoh streaking through this conversation like some ancient freshman just getting away from home for the first time and wow this is a mad shitty way to describe my, uh, our, uh-” Dave’s hands are making senseless gestures “-our thing? I don’t even know what to call it, we don’t really talk about that on account of the very recent wrappage thing that this thing was under so, uh-”

Strider silences him rather rudely and then studies you for a moment, eyes flickering over to Dave. “Seriously?” Despite being unable to see his eyes, you can still feel them sweeping down you in a way that you find deeply discomfiting. You’re used to him rolling back on his heels, languid and disinterested, before disappearing back into his vehicle. You’re not familiar with the particularly attentive way he’s holding his head, nor the manner in which he’s taken to leaning slightly towards you.

You suspect he’d never really bothered to look at you properly before. You would have preferred that not change.

“So you’re fucking your best bro’s dad,” he states flatly, and you close your eyes and grit your teeth against irritation gone sour with regret. You don’t know what you were thinking, outing yourself.

You think perhaps you weren’t thinking at all.

You can almost hear Dave’s mortification. It’s simply that palpable.

When you open your eyes, his brother is still looking at you, but he has his face turned slightly away. “Seriously,” he marvels. “Little man, I don’t know if I should beat the shit out of you or give you a high five.” He clicks his tongue against the back of his teeth. You flinch convulsively despite yourself. “On one hand, you’re fucking your best bro’s dad, and that is some seriously fucked up shit. On the other,” he muses, rolling his shoulder back with a barely audible pop, “if you’d asked me, I would’ve sworn six ways to Sunday this buttoned-up asshole wasn’t interested in slipping into anything that didn’t come with a ‘dry clean only’ tag on it.” You press your lips together tightly, studying the glossy, rimless black sunglasses that he hides behind. You think you
can see the curve of an eyelid behind the side that isn’t aglow with reflected light. “Huh.”

You consider what you say next very carefully. “I would prefer that you refrain from speculating about my personal habits,” you tell him evenly.

“Bet you would,” he murmurs, stepping towards you. His posture suggests that he’s testing you. You don’t move. “You’re a hell of a liar, you know that? Goddamn.”

You raise an eyebrow. “I hope you don’t mean to try to flatter me, Strider.” He laughs. It’s a short, breathless sound. You are reminded, disconcertingly, of Dave.

“Naw, but seriously, I’ve got an eye for people,” he confides, low and uncomfortably intimate, beginning to pace around you in a tight circle. You understand, abruptly, why Dave was so agitated when you measured his shoulders. The proximity of his brother behind you ties knots of tension in your back.

“People are simple. They either say what they want outright or they do a little song and dance to convince you they don’t want what they want. Sometimes it’s the other way around, sometimes it’s whether or not they fucked up, but it all comes down to pretty much the exact same thing.” You watch him saunter lazily back around to the other side of you out of the corner of your eye. You don’t turn. “Dave here, he eithers sings like a motherfucking canary or shuts up altogether whenever he’s fucked up. He can’t lie worth shit. And you know,” he comments, standing much too close to you, “I thought you were the same way. Just a bundle of fancy fuckin’ suits and a pot o’ shoeshine and a couple of those weird quirks that you either find endearing or annoying depending on your personal taste.” He leans in. His breath smells faintly of processed meat and ketchup. You register, with dim surprise, that he does not smoke. “See, I came into this white picket palace of yours and took one look at those crap figurines and smelled the air and I thought, yeah, these are the little things that separate people who got something to hide from people who are just boring, plain and simple.”

You return his conspiratorial smirk with a blank stare.

He’s unperturbed. “And it turns out you’re not really boring, are you? Just a hell of a lot better at pretending to be than most.”

You sigh through your nose. “I suppose that’s a matter of opinion. I happen to quite like baking.”

Strider laughs again, and you turn your eyes to Dave, who seems to be making an attempt to sneak away discreetly. “Dave, where are you going?”

His brother answers for him. It’s very irritating.

“He’s just pussying off to his room, let him go.”

“You if you were intending to have a conversation about the questionable nature of our relationship, I would prefer that he stay,” you respond, before adding casually, and not at all with an unseemly thrill of spite, “And all things considered, that is a somewhat ambiguous destination.”

The elder Strider looses a satisfyingly startled sound of realization. “Shit, man, I’m pretty sure you’re not as big a vacant lot as you come across- you trying to pick a fight with me?”

Of course not. You’re hardly the type.

He snorts at that, and then his expression turns morbidly thoughtful. “Man, what would the room of a guy like you even look like?”
“I would prefer it if you refrained from-”

He cuts you off with an absent wave. “Yeah, yeah, heard you the first time, still doesn’t mean I’m gonna.” He’s silent for a few blessed seconds. “Bet you have a tie rack. You totally have a tie rack, don’t you?”

You do not respond to his question.

Dave is still lingering uncertainly by the stairs. Strider looks over his shoulder at him.

“What’s it like boning a dude who keeps a tie rack in his room?”

You would very much like to hit him.

Dave just responds with an “Uhhh?” and an “I don’t really wanna talk about that with you, bro, no offense or anything that’s just, uh, kind of horribly awkward and weird.”

“I knew he had a fucking tie rack,” Strider comments smugly before asking him, in a sterner voice than you’d thought him capable of, “You been using condoms?”

Dave lets out a strangled scream of horror at the question. “Bro-”

You should have expected this. In a way, you did.

“Get out of my house,” you tell him calmly, and he turns his face back towards you sharply.

“You can’t kick me out,” he smirks. You find his confidence annoying.

You’d like to know why, precisely, he thinks you cannot remove him from your own home.

His smirk is diabolical. “You’re bagging my little bro,” he points out, swinging an arm around your shoulders companionably, “we’re practically family.”

You are not inclined to agree, and you tell him so.

You would also prefer it if he made an effort to never touch you again.

You also tell him this.

He responds by smiling devilishly and plucking your hat off of your head and setting it, absurdly, on top of his own before tipping it at you.

It is only with great effort that you refrain from punching him in the face.

You are amazed by your own restraint.

=>

You think you would have preferred a more hostile reaction.

Strider’s odd chumminess, for lack of a better word, seems to be both sincere and insincere simultaneously. It’s highly disconcerting, and you’re uncomfortable with the direction his attempts at conversation with you inevitably seem to take.

When Monday morning comes, you’re incredibly grateful to be gainfully employed.

You’re almost glad to see Arthur Woodgrave smiling knowingly at you over the wall of his cubicle
at lunch.

At least the moments in which you are forced to endure his unpleasant company are typically sporadic, brief, and occasionally avoidable.

==>

It’s Wednesday.

He persists.

You linger on your own doorstep and watch the street, enjoying the residual warmth of the late afternoon sun and breathing still, damp air through a pinch of fire and fresh tobacco.

You’d rather not expose the poor man to the lunatic that has invaded your household, to be perfectly frank.

Unfortunately, it would appear that you don’t have a say in the matter.

For all the carefulness its craftsman once took to fit it to its frame, and for all the meticulous care you’ve since taken to maintain its hinges, latch, and lock, it is the wood of the front door that swells infinitesimally when it rains, and it sticks against its jambs, producing a distinctive sound when it is opened- an auditory fingerprint of resistance giving way to force.

You’ve thought idly about having it altered or replaced for years, but it’s never inconvenienced you enough to outweigh your reluctance to revise any part of the house your mother left you.

Now, that telling grind and burst serves just as well as a knocker or doorbell.

Dave’s lived with you for long enough to know the trick to your home’s handful of troublesome idiosyncrasies. The hand that shoves the door open behind you with more force than necessary is not his.

You breathe out smoke and watch it curl in the wet three o’clock air.

You hear the door close much more quietly than it opened.

He learns quickly. You don’t particularly like it.

He’s already too good at moving silently, and to know if he’s near, you’re forced to rely on your intuition more than you would like. You refuse to be reduced to watchful paranoia. You are a man who maintains his dignity in the company of all but a very few persons.

Your son, your doctor, and Dave, to be precise, and your doctor is made an exception by necessity alone.

Strider is most certainly not.

“Did you need something?” you ask him crisply. You don’t turn, despite the tension that creeps up your spine at having him behind you.

There’s a pause before he answers.

If not for the door, you might not have known he was there at all.

“Naw. Just trying to get a handle on you.”
You sigh. Smoke trickles through your sinuses and out of your nose. “I’m not entirely certain I like the sound of that, Mister Strider.”

He snorts breathily and you are once again reminded of how intensely you dislike the symmetry of mannerisms that exists between him and his brother.

“How long you planning on screwing my bro?”

You carefully unclench your jaw, inspecting the dying embers in your pipe before placing it between your teeth once again. “I don’t believe it’s any of your business,” you murmur, tearing a match from its book and striking it, “but I know you won’t be satisfied with that as an answer, and so: I did not plan anything that may or may not be occurring between Dave and myself at the moment, and I have no plans in regards to if or how they may or may not continue to occur in the future. Take from that what you will.” The relief of having a freshly lit pipe and a lung full of smoke is substantial.

When he speaks again, he sounds closer. You suspect he may have been leaning against the door. It seems appropriate, given his personality.

“What I take from that is that you’re plannin’ on doing this until he gets bored of you, and I don’t think I’m wrong,” he tells you from somewhere behind your left shoulder. “And given that I’ve known my bro a bit longer than you, though maybe not so biblically-” you close your eyes against sudden irritation- “I’m gonna say it’s likely we’re going to be each other’s problems for a while, so you can drop the ‘mister’ bull and call me Bro.”

“You’re not my brother,” you inform him decisively. He snorts again.

“In a manner of speaking-”

You look over your shoulder at him, thoroughly unimpressed. He grins, suddenly and crookedly, and you glimpse white but imperfect teeth. A small and only hesitantly sane part of your mind distantly theorizes that he may have insured that Dave had access to orthodontics because he himself didn’t, and wonders at that strange symmetry, for you never forced them on John because you didn’t want him to feel that he required correction as you had.

After all, when John was just a boy, he had no audience, and you did your best not to foster in him the dishonesty that had prepared you for a spotlight you spent a lifetime avoiding.

As suddenly as they were revealed, those crooked premolars are gone from your sight, and his face is a flat expanse of smooth black glass and skin just beginning to tell its age in the wrinkles between frequently furrowed brows.

“Everybody calls me Bro,” he clarifies, and you risk being slightly appeased by his unexpected prudence.

“I am not everybody, Mister Strider,” you tell him patiently, “there may be much ruder things that I could call you than your family name, but that does not mean I will call you by some absurd moniker.”

His lips part to reply, but he pauses, turning his head ever so slightly, and you look forward, preparing your smile.

You’re a touch surprised.

The punctual young man who wears the familiar blue shirt and carries a large brown box in his
“Mister-” he glances down and you have just enough time to flinch internally before he says it-
“James Crocker?”

“Egbert,” you correct politely, smiling at him as you sign for the package. “I don’t believe we’ve met. I was expecting Mister Corvale, I’m afraid.”

He smiles back at you somewhat hesitantly. “He’s on leave. For, uh, a while. I’m Stephen Douet.”

His words come out sounding like a question. You suppress amusement. “I suppose Mister Corvale’s wife has had her little girl, then,” you remark amiably, and the unfamiliar postman relaxes visibly. “He had said she was due soon. Please congratulate him for me if you see him.”

The young man nods obligingly before turning away. “Will do, Mister Crocker. Have a good day, okay?”

You let the correction die on your lips. He’ll learn, with time.

You can nearly feel Strider’s stare on the box in your arms. You don’t bother to conceal the washed-out shape of what is clearly meant to be a red spoon marking four of its six cardboard sides.

“Crocker, huh?” he comments, sounding for all the world as if he is only discussing some particularly mundane weather. “So I guess you’re that Egbert, then.”

You watch the young Mister Douet climb into his vehicle and remind yourself not to grind your teeth. “That depends entirely on which Egbert you are referring to.”

“You mom’s Crocker and Sassacre’s kid, yeah?”

“Ah,” you respond, “yes, then I’m afraid I am that Egbert. I wasn’t aware you took an interest in old scandals.”

You see him shrug a shoulder out of the corner of your eye. “Probably older than you think I am.”

He pauses. “Guess that makes two of us, actually.”

In your periphery, he makes an odd expression. You smile around your pipe.

“I told your brother as much, but he didn’t seem to find it discouraging.” Your words come out sounding a touch more wry than you had intended.

Strider just laughs. “You could be from Mars and that kid wouldn’t have a problem with it if he wanted you bad enough,” he snickers. “Trust me, I saw some of the crap he used to drag home with him when he thought I wasn’t around. Got weird fuckin’ taste. And, I mean, that coming from me…” He says this in a confidential tone, as though you’re supposed to understand something implicitly. You do not. “Never anything real memorable, but always easy on the eyes if you took a second to look, and always with that bad air people who turn out crazy give off. Made me wonder if he was trying to get boned or get the shit beaten out of him. Was just, fuck, if you’re into that, cool, but don’t go looking for folk who really want to hurt you, that shit gets messed up fast.”

In a moment of strange clarity, you’re sure you heard him say “I would know,” and the realization that he did not inspires a deeply discomfiting instant of imperturbable intimacy between you.

The instant ends when you realize the implications of what he said beforehand.
You turn slowly and stare at him, unsure whether or not you should take offense, and if so, precisely how offended you should be.

He looks back at you. “Don’t get excited, you’re just weird because you’re too fucking normal, mostly. Makes me suspicious what you get up to when you get down.”

You take a deep breath. All troublesome vestiges of some imagined mutual understanding have vanished.

“I have a package to bring inside,” you tell him pleasantly.

He does not offer to open the door for you, despite your awkward load.

You did not expect that he would.

==>

Despite his earlier insistence on partaking of his dinner in places that were not the dinner table- something you found to be both an aggravation and something of a relief- he is suddenly a fixture at yours.

You know why.

As you are as beholden to the rules of your house as any other, you are unable to escape his endless list of intrusive personal questions and comments when you sit down for dinner.

You’re slightly surprised that he didn’t realize this earlier.

He has either the decency or the damnable canniness to refrain until you’ve had a stiff drink, but the moment the glass bottom of your empty tumbler touches the wood of the table, he starts, and his tone is as casual and unaffected as if this was a scene he had rehearsed a thousand times prior.

“I’m assuming John doesn’t know,” he begins. Beside you, Dave inhales a half-chewed bite of roast beef, dissolving into strained coughing. You pour him a glass of water and ensure that he’s not in any danger before deigning to respond.

“You would be correct in that assumption,” you reply. Your tone sounds mild and distant to your own ears. The amount of meat on your guests’ plates is dwindling. You stand to further carve the roast that sits in the space separating Dave’s brother and yourself.

Even in out-of-focus realm of your peripheral vision, you can tell his expression is contemptuous. “Real nice.” The silence is pregnant, but you prefer it, nonetheless. You’d rather the unspoken remain unspoken. “When you planning on letting your kid know you’re nailing his best friend?”

You pause in the midst of paring another slice from the roast, the grips of your carving knife and carving fork still clenched in each of your hands. “I hadn’t.” His lip curls derisively. “If you have a complaint about my relationship to your younger brother, I ask you to voice it plainly. What I do or do not tell my son is my business, and what should happen if he were to discover something I had not intended for him to know is mine alone to worry about.” You fix the space between his eyes with an absent stare. “Do not insert yourself into my affairs in an attempt to validate your personal objections.” You begin to move your arm again, focusing dimly on the resistance of the meat against the serration of your blade.

“Don’t get me wrong: you give me the creeps something fuckin’ fierce, but I don’t have a problem with you and Dave,” he says. His frank tone suggests that he’s being honest. You slow your
movements, aloof but begrudingly attentive. “It’s become pretty clear to me that he started it, and that despite your obnoxious-ass holier-than-thou attitude about the whole goddamn thing, you didn’t mind so much. He’s an adult,” he says, nodding to the person in question, who happens to be staring at his plate quite intently. You serve him another cut of beef to give him something less taxing to focus on. He shoots you a grateful glance. “He can make his own decisions, and even I don’t necessarily like what those are, I’m inclined to respect them on account of him not being a kid anymore.” Strider reaches for another cut of his own. “If our positions were reversed and it was your kid pulling the ‘but daddy I love him’ act, I’m sure you’d hold off murdering me, however much you wanted to.”

Your knife screams against the white ceramic of your serving dish. You lift it from the plate, noting the bulging tension of your knuckles around its handle with some detachment.

You seem to have lost your usually impeccable sense of gentle moderation in the white noise that followed a suggestion you’re unwilling to believe was presented as a possibility, even in the realm of the theoretical. Its surreal presence lingers in the fluorescent hum of your empty mind like the smell of burnt hair.

“I’m sorry,” you apologize softly, “I believe I must have misheard you.”

He withdraws his hand from the edge of the dish very slowly. “Okay, or not,” he mumbles, and then raises his open palms in front of him defensively. “I wasn’t sayin’ nothing.”

“I daresay you weren’t,” you murmur, and smile pleasantly. “Another slice?”

“Uh, sure.” The elder Strider’s head tilts slightly to the side. You see Dave shrug as you place a slice of beef on his brother’s plate.

“Don’t look at me, dude, he’s only done this to me once and I’m pretty sure we were talking about you at the time, I think he really fucking hates you-”

“Hate is a very strong word, David,” you interrupt, returning to your chair. “Rather, I strongly dislike your brother’s ethos of educational violence, his lax treatment of the sanctity of childhood, his loose sense of decorum in both word and action, and his general appearance.”

Dave furrows his eyebrows. “No matter how you look at it, that’s pretty much just a politer way of saying you hate him-”

“Which reminds me,” you continue sharply, “I believe you and I are long overdue for a discussion of what is and is not appropriate material to expose a child to, Mister Strider.” You smile without any pretense of warmth. “Most particularly one that is not your own.”

He still has his palms raised in front of him.

“Huh?”

His obvious confusion is infuriating.

Dave’s first attempt to interject is entirely unintelligible to you, but Strider’s head whips sharply in his direction. “You told him what?”

You turn your gaze on Dave as well. He groans and slides down in his seat. Words begin to tumble from his mouth so quickly you’d swear they fill his lungs instead of air.

“I didn’t tell him anything, I didn’t lie or nothing it was John, he said you were a toy-maker and it
wasn’t like it was it was really a lie so I didn’t say anything about it so that’s on John not me don’t look at me like that I was thirteen and I wanted to see my best bro and I thought his dad would flip his fucking shit if I told him and I was totally fucking right because we were arguing about you and I sorta let it slip- what do you mean how do just let something like that slip, I just let it slip, bro, it just sorta slipped out, sometimes I slip and fall down the endless stairs of the ‘oh fuck I’m so dead’ temple in slipped-and-fucked-myself-over-shire, Saskatchewan, Alaska- and anyway I was totally right ‘cause I swear to god I saw my life flashing in front of my eyes, I thought he was gonna kill me.”

One glance at the elder Strider informs you that the fury you once saw storming on Dave’s lowering brow is a weak solution of his brother’s fury, and another in Dave’s direction confirms it.

Dave is growing increasingly frantic.

“-what was I supposed to do, tell him my bro made sex toys for a living? I-”

“Yes,” Strider growls, and you blink, too startled by his intensity to produce any of your own.

“Yeah, Dave, that is what you were supposed to do. The fuck did you think was going to happen? You don’t lie to people like that and then expect everything to be okay, bro.” Dave’s protests are drowning in his rising voice. “So maybe he wouldn’t have let John come down, but are you really telling me you’re living in the house of someone you trust enough to fuck you but don’t think would’ve still let you come up to visit back then if he’d known? Yeah, somebody’s at fault for this, but I’ll give you a goddamn hint: It’s not him, and it’s not me. It was your responsibility to make sure he knew what was up when you found out he didn’t, bro, and you kept lying about it for, what, five years? No wonder he’s pissed, jesus christ. How the hell do you expect this guy to trust you about anything?”

Dave is stiff and silent in his chair.

Strider sits back in his, lip curled in disgust. He jerks his chin sharply towards you. “Take fucking note- this shit that’s screwing you two up? Fuckin’ nothing compared to what’s going to go down if your kid finds out the hard way you’ve been hiding what you’re doing from him.” You can feel his eyes studying you. “Or what, were you just planning on dropping him cold and denying everything if that happened?”

Dave twitches in surprise.

Strider notices and sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers.

“Christ, you gotta be kidding me.”

He looks over his glasses at you. He has eyes the colour of orange marmalade.

His eyelashes are nearly as white as his eyebrows.

You find this fascinating.

“You’ve got problems. And I’m only going to tell you this once, but if it’s me saying you’ve got problems, then trust me, you’ve got some serious fucking problems to sort out, bro.”

He rises from his chair with his plate in one hand and rests the other on Dave’s head, coaxing a squawk of protest from him. “Good luck with your knight complex, kid.”

As he’s walking past you into the living room, you hear him mutter “there is some weird ass Stepford shit going on here.”
This time, you’re less amused by the sentiment.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Dad actually does have friends.

Chapter Notes

Excuse me as I casually update again.

When your superior calls you into her office, you’re certain something has gone terribly awry.

You consider the possibilities.

None of the likelier ones are pleasant.

And yet, when she sits you down across from her, folding her hands on her desk and looking at you with serious eyes, her first words are:

“Richard, you’ve been with this company for a long time, and I don’t think I’ve ever asked you if you feel you’re being treated well here.”

You blink.

You weren’t even aware she knew your first name.

Well, the name you were still in the habit of using when you joined the company, rather.

All you can manage in response is a simple “I beg your pardon?”

Her serious expression falters a little, and you suddenly realize that she, like you, has started going grey. There are washed streaks of yellowed-white in her sandy blonde hair.

You really have been here a long time.

“I’ll be frank with you, Dick,” she tells you, and there’s a warmth in her voice that surprises you. You’ve rarely spoken to each other. “We don’t want to lose you. If there’s anything we can do to change your mind, please let me know.”

You are so terribly confused.

The lines around her eyes have grown deeper with age, but they serve as a sort of punctuation to her expression of sincerity.

You are so terribly, terribly confused.

“I’m very sorry, but I’m not entirely certain where I’m meant to be going.” you state, baffled.
She just looks at you, and then a small look of amusement starts to creep around the corners of her eyes and mouth. “You weren’t aware that I received a phone call asking for confirmation of your employment here? A reference, Dick.”

You furrow your eyebrows in confusion. “I’m not looking for another job, nor have I applied for any.”

She starts laughing quietly into her fist. She seems to be relieved. You’re glad, if still completely perplexed.

“Well, you should thank your prankster,” she smiles, “you’ve already been approved for a pay raise. One that is, in my opinion, long overdue,” she tells you confidentially. “I’m glad you’re staying on with us, Dick.”

You just stare at her, mystified.

“Oh. Thank you.”

When you leave her office, you have no idea how to feel.

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Mister Gan Suttikul, who works back-to-back with you, extends you an unexpected invitation to join him for a drink after work.

You accept for a number of reasons, as uncharacteristic of you as it is to do so.

The truth is that you’re quite fond of Suttikul. He’s a hard worker, a quiet and efficient man with a sophisticated sense of social decorum, and the ability to be courteous without being cold in a crowded environment is one you prize highly.

The other truth is that you’re dreading what awaits you at home. You’re still rather perturbed by the events of last evening, and you’re unwilling to repeat them just yet.

So instead, you sit with Suttikul at a small table in a small but nicely furnished bar and talk quietly about inoffensive subjects.

He tells you that one of his nieces from Pattaya is visiting and that his wife wants her to stay, and you know without him telling you that he suspects it’s because they only have boys in the house. You laugh quietly together about it.

You tell him that your son is in New York working as a comedian, and despite your smile, he recognizes your apprehension. He pours you another drink. You appreciate his sympathy.

He tells you that he’s accumulated enough leave to take a vacation and you congratulate him. He says he’s considering visiting his wife’s family. His slightly pained expression informs you that this may be a matter of obligation rather than preference.

You tell him about the strange events of the morning and he laughs softly and congratulates you, expressing much the same sentiments as your superior had. He tells you that a stranger has done you a favour and you agree, despite your unease.

The conversation moves on without interruption.

You’re glad.
You're a very silly person, on occasion.

You failed spectacularly to realize that Suttikul is the variety of person who refills a man’s glass whenever he pours himself another, regardless of whether or not it is empty. If you had been paying closer attention, you would have realized precisely how much you were drinking.

You’ll have to pick up your car in the morning, before work.

You tip the taxi driver generously and stare at your house with a vague feeling of reluctance.

It nags at you that something is missing. You assume it’s your car. Its absence from the driveway must be bothering you. It feels strange to walk through the empty space where it should be.

You nearly drop your keys when the door opens before you’ve had a chance to unlock it.

You can see yourself reflected in the scratched lenses of his aviators.

Dave does not look especially impressed.

“And where the fuck have you been?”

Very distantly, you find the fact that it’s him saying it, and that he’s saying it to you, quite funny, but you’re unable to grasp precisely why. You fail to suppress a small smile.

“I was with a co-worker,” you answer. “Are you going to let me come in?”

There’s a long moment of silence before he answers. You raise an eyebrow, slightly amused by his mounting look of incredulity. He also looks strangely flushed.

“…Are you drunk?”

You consider your response.

“It is possible that I have been drinking,” you allow evasively.

His eyebrows go completely flat over his sunglasses. “Man, are you ever John’s dad,” he mutters, opening the door and waving you inside. “Know better than to lie when you’re busted but still won’t admit it, just in case.”

You don’t particularly appreciate his tone, but you’re a little preoccupied with the suddenly complex task of removing your shoes, so you sit down on the stairs and allow him his grousing.

He sighs. You look up at him.

His arms are crossed over his chest, but he doesn’t look upset.

“You know,” he muses, “if you’d asked me earlier what kind of shit I thought I’d find myself dealing with, this would’ve been pretty low on the list.” He squats in front of you, pushing his glasses up into his hair. “You’re seriously drunk. You. Daddy Egbert, Mister E, the man who never forgets to shave and barely says a bad word even when he’s balls deep in freaky twink ass.” He’s squinting at you as though he can’t believe what he’s seeing. “Huh.”
You pause in your endeavors to fix him with a flat look. “I never said that I was intoxicated, David.”

He snorts. “You look fine and sound fine, sure, but you’re moving like somebody’s put you in slow-mo. I mean, jesus, you’re taking off your shoes is like somebody who’s gotta disarm a bomb but isn’t sure which wire to cut,” he laughs, knocking your fingers away from your laces and setting about them himself. “Man, what would you even do if my bro was still here?”

You suddenly remember why you were so reluctant to come home.

He must feel the sudden tension in you, because he places a hand on your knee and squeezes reassuringly. “He left noon-ish, guess he got his digs in enough last night- lift your foot, I can’t do everything for you- so you don’t have to worry about that. You didn’t notice his car’s gone from the driveway?”

Ah.

Ah, yes.

That was it.

You feel very silly indeed.

He’s laughing at you. The freckles smattering the bridge of his nose seem denser and darker than you remember them being. He’s been getting a little sun, you suppose.

You kiss him impulsively. There’s a confused moment where it’s all teeth because he’s still laughing at you, and then he drops onto one knee and slides his arms around your neck. “Oh, okay,” he murmurs teasingly, “so you’re that kind of drunk, okay.”

You’re not sure what he means.

He smiles against your lips. You pull him closer, sliding a thumb down the faint ridging of his spine.

He seems less thin than when he first came to you, as well. You’re pleased.

He pulls away, tucking his chin closer to his chest, and leans his forehead against yours. “This is really hot and all, but I guess I have to be the responsible one here and say the stairs are maybe not the greatest place in the house to make out, right?”

You suppose so. You’re quite enjoying kissing him. You run your other hand up the back of his neck. He shivers.

“You, don’t tempt me,” he complains, and you laugh. “I’d love to get down and dirty right here, inevitable backaches and sore knees notwithstanding, but you’re just going to get mad at me in the morning if we do, so…”

“So…” you echo encouragingly, not entirely comprehending the content of the conversation. He has freckles on his lips. They’re very inviting.

He looks at you like he’s considering harming you instead of kissing you. “Seriously, don’t tempt me.”

He sighs and shifts to slide an arm around your waist and you bat him away, a little offended. “I
can stand perfectly well on my own, thank you.”

He snickers. “Maybe I just wanted to touch you, what then?”

“You were touching me just a moment ago, and you’re the one who insisted we stop,” you point out, feeling rather pleased with yourself. Even somewhat inebriated, you’re hardly a fool.

He rolls his eyes.

You pick up your things and make your way around the couch towards the hall. It’s dark.

Suddenly, it isn’t. You squint against the sudden brightness. “Light switches are still a thing,” he comments. “Where the hell are you even going?”

You have to put your briefcase away. You lift it meaningfully at him before entering your office.

He follows you. Even as you’re setting it on the desk, he doesn’t look like he quite understands.

“I prefer to have my things where they belong,” you inform him patiently. He just shakes his head and surreptitiously pulls at the front of his jeans.

You open your briefcase and look inside speculatively. You feel as though you’re forgetting to do something.

Dave eases himself between you and your belongings with a “Whoa, hey, you’re not doing homework when you can’t keep up with a simple conversation, come on-”

He’s warm and pliant against you, so you settle for kissing him again instead. He groans before lifting himself up into a sitting position on the edge of your desk. You hum approvingly, leaning in.

“Okay,” he interrupts, hands settling firmly on your shoulders, “look, we- I would really, really love to let this go where I think it’s going, because the way you’re looking at me right now is starting to give me a brutal chubby and I’m not gonna lie to you, I think I’d really like to see what kind of damage you could do to my ass when you’re sauced up and I might not get the chance to again, but we should probably do that thing people do where they talk about shit instead of avoiding it forever, ’cause even though I’d never admit it to him and he was being a huge sack of shit about it, you and I both know my bro hit on a few things back there that could really use some talking about and stop doing that it’s really fucking distracting and it’s making me hard and that’s distracting too-”

You stroke your thumb up and down the seam between his thighs again, smiling a little at his inarticulate frustration.

He grimaces at you. ‘I’m trying to be all mature and shit here, I thought you were supposed to encourage that in my tender young mind or something, fuck.”

You pause to consider it. “It’s not particularly convenient to me at the moment,” you admit.

He gawks at you and then starts laughing helplessly.

“I seriously think that might be the most normal thing I’ve ever heard you say- I was starting to think you never did selfish shit that didn’t have something to do with being a gentleman or a good dad or whatever.”

“If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have let you into my bed in the first place,” you murmur distractedly,
pressing your mouth into his throat. He stops laughing, and you feel the vibration of his groan through your lips and teeth. “I’m not so kind that I could be led astray by your desires without having any of my own.” You slide a hand under his shirt contemplatively. “What I do to you is very selfish, I’m afraid.” He’s an intoxicating haze of warmth, and you think you’d like to bury yourself in him.

He shivers, curling his fingers into your shoulders. “Yeah, and it’s not like I don’t fucking beg you to do it to me,” he retorts breathlessly. “Fuck, I was trying to say some shit but you know how bad I want you and I can’t deal with this, it’s not fucking fair-”

“I could say much the same,” you respond, setting your teeth against his pulse experimentally and pulling his hips flush to yours.

He moans something that sounds like “you are so full of shit” but suffers for his breathlessness and lax enunciation.

You can feel his erection through both your slacks and his jeans, and you roll your own against it, stifling your groan with his skin.

His fingernails scrape lightly up your spine. “You’re gonna fucking kill me with this,” he gasps. “I don’t even know what I was saying before, is this what I’m like when you’re trying to get shit done, jesus fuck, I’m so sorry-”

You laugh, gently grazing your lips against his ear. “No.” He lets out a shuddering breath. “I don’t talk so much.”

You cut off his protests with a kiss, coaxing him into compliance, and he dissolves into mumbling discontent, resting his head against your shoulder.

“I don’t talk that much.”

He’s sulking.

You smile and bury your nose in his hair affectionately. “You really do. I don’t mind.”

He wraps his arms around your waist and holds you tightly. You run your fingers through his hair, careful to avoid dislodging his sunglasses. “I pretty much like you a lot more than I probably should, you know,” he whispers into your shoulder. You can barely hear him. If you were sober, you’d probably wonder if you were even meant to. “Like a scary, stupid amount, even when you’re being crazy. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with you, man.”

You feel your mouth forming words, but you’ve sobered enough to know better than to say them. The words “I could say much the same” still linger on your tongue when you kiss him again, and they flavour your kisses with a vague sense of manic and possessive urgency.

He’s suddenly much too far away from you, tucked back on the desk as he is, and you fumble for your chair before dropping into it and pulling him into your lap. He nearly kneels on your groin. He does not, and consequently, you fail to care that he may have.

“Dave,” you murmur, running your thumb over his lips. He mumbles something inquisitive behind it, so you slip it between his teeth to hush him. “God, just look at you.”

He looks a little taken aback. You feel the shadow of a smile creeping across your lips. “You really have no idea, do you? Just look at you.”
Even while you’re speaking, you’re dimly aware that you’re treading a very dangerous road. You can hear the siren song of inestimable perils waiting for you, see it in the depths of those witchlight eyes, and you are helpless to ignore it.

You are afraid to give a name to how madly you want to keep him for yourself despite the many reasons that becomes a poorer and poorer idea by the day.

There is something very raw and disconcerting about that nameless feeling of possessive wanting. You simply can’t seem to reason with it.

“Just look at you,” you sigh, a little frustrated with yourself.

You pull your thumb from between his teeth and he melts against you as if you’d unstoppered him, suddenly hot and languid in your arms. You revel in the heat of his mouth, swallowing his moans as you coax his pants down to his knees and palm him through his underwear.

His hips have begun to twitch forward to meet your caresses. He’s started to whimper a little for you. You recognize the desperate tension in his shaking thighs.

You’d be lying if you said you didn’t want this.

You’d be lying most disgracefully.

When you slip your fingers between the curves of his buttocks, you’re surprised to encounter a slight wetness.

You pull back to look at him.

He’s gone quite red.

“I, uh,” he mumbles, “might’ve been fingering myself a little, um, just before you got home, by which I mean I kind of just hauled up my pants when I heard somebody shuffling around in front of the door-”

You raise an eyebrow. His ears have started to go a touch pink.

“-don’t look at me like that, you were super late getting back and bro took forever to fucking leave and we couldn’t do anything while he was here and I just kept thinking about how bad I wanted you to rail me but you were taking forever to get home and we were supposed to talk about making this whole thing not weird and fucked up and I needed something in my ass ’cause I thought maybe if I got off I’d be more focused but then you got home right when I was starting to get into it and you were fucking drunk and I was like how the fuck are we going to have this conversation now and you started getting all sexy with me and I’ve been like half-hard at best this entire time, you don’t even know-”

You raise your other eyebrow. “David, were you masturbating on my couch?”

He’s gone positively scarlet.

You chuckle, pressing the tip of your index finger into him. He shivers. “I believe I asked you a question,” you murmur.

“Um… I might’ve been?”

He looks incredibly embarrassed and a little unsure. “Yes or no, David,” you press, pushing your
finger in further.

He licks his lips uncertainly. “Yes?”

“Yes, what?” you scold teasingly.

He looks at you with a slightly pained expression. “Yes, James? Yes, Mister Egbert? Yes, I fingerfucked my asshole on your chesterfield? I’m not really sure what you want me to say,” he pants. “Yes sir?”

You hum approvingly and he groans.

“Because that doesn’t make me want you to bend me over a table, no, not at all,” he complains, “and if you fuck me down here then you’re probably going to pass out after you blow, and I don’t know if I can carry you upstairs.”

“I’ll be fine,” you assure him softly, pushing a second finger in beside the first. You watch his eyebrows knit a little with exertion as he struggles to continue half-kneeling astride your lap. “It’s not a table, but I think we have something in here that should do,” you entice.

He looks at you with heavy eyes.

“Remember: you’re the one who suggested it,” he breathes, “don’t get pissed at me tomorrow if we make a mess.”

He’s out of your lap and kicking off his pants before you’re able to rise, and you eye him appreciatively as he lingers indecisively by your desk.

“You’re not going to get whiskey dick, are you?” he asks suspiciously. “Because I don’t know if I could handle that right now.”

You laugh through your nose and push him against the desk. It’s a little high- when he bends over it for you, he’s straining to keep his feet on the floor rather than putting his full weight on the wood. As you slide your fingers into him again, his thighs are shaking with the effort.

He’s panting outright, one hand above his head, the other between his legs. You have a slightly wicked thought.

You pull your hand free, place it against the small of his back, and push him flat to the surface of the desk. He grunts with surprise.

You slide into him more easily than you thought you would.

He’s looking over his shoulder at you. “Oh fuck, oh fuck, are you-” His fingers reach behind him, tracing the girth of your erection where it presses into him. He moans rather pornographically. “I don’t know if you know this, but you’re totally going bareback right now and even if I think that’s hot as hell, I don’t think you’re going to agree with me-”

You’re barely paying attention to what he’s saying when you begin to thrust, holding him in place with one hand, the other idly caressing a hip, a side, a buttock. His thighs press into the edge of the desk with every movement. He’s pressing his erection into his belly with a hand, straining to keep his hips angled away from the table as you drive him into it insistently, relishing the sensation of having him braced against something.

He’s moaning when you slide your arm around his waist, and you relish it, but you need him
closer, because he’s somehow much too far away. You need all of him.

When you pull him from the desk, taking him back into the chair with you again, he leans back into you, rolling his hips up and down on your erection in a way that’s gloriously excruciating.

You idly slide the fingers of your clean hand over his lips and he bites them gently before he starts to suck on them.

It’s provocative. It’s an electric echo of what he’s doing to you elsewhere. You’re beset by a growing and irrational need to have him in every way at once, and in your frustration, you sink your teeth into the nape of his neck and thrust up into him as though you can make it so through force alone.

You drive into him mercilessly as he orgasms, barely hearing his strangled moans, instead feeling his body shaking in your grasp as he does.

When you orgasm, it feels strangely unrestrained, as though you were brazenly emptying yourself into him, and there’s a vague and perplexing sense of triumph that comes with the sensation.

He pats your hand listlessly and you startle, already half-dozing. “We can’t sleep here.”

You have no idea how you get upstairs, only that you somehow do manage to find your own pillow, and that the last thing you hear before you fall asleep is an exhausted but affectionate-sounding “what the fuck am I even supposed to do with you?”
Chapter Summary

Dad has a rough morning. Dave reveals that if something that must be cooked cannot be cooked in a frying pan, it was not meant to be eaten.

In those first few years of his independence, there are a certain number of inadvisable things that a socially-inclined young man with some small amount of leisure time at his disposal is likely to do, and after each, he inevitably finds himself having awoken the next morning with no recollection of what he may or may not have done.

You too were young once, and so you know all too well that the narrative of youth must occasionally be written with the aid of last evening’s evidence and tomorrow’s extrapolations.

You would, of course, hesitate to call yourself a young man now.

You are old, and you do not forget things so easily these days.

When you wake, your alarm is not yet chirping its oft-unneeded reminder.

When you wake, the sun has not yet risen at all.

Except for the meagre orange ambiance of a streetlamp, the room is dark, and the street outside is silent. The only sound competing with your frantically climbing heartbeat is the soft and even breathing of the boy who sleeps behind you.

What wakes you is not remembering, but rather, never having forgotten.

Without the alertness of his waking mind to sharpen its childish curves into familiar angles, his face is still soft with youth. He looks distressingly young when he sleeps.

He’s drooling on his pillow. You resist the urge to shift his cheek away from that growing patch of dampness, reluctant to wake him.

You’ve been an absolute cad.

You’ve used Dave quite terribly.

A less sophisticated part of you wakes to lazily insist that while it’s certainly true that your actions would have been truly appalling had they been made towards a woman, Dave is, like you, a man, and is therefore subject to different standards of delicacy and care.

You promptly come to the conclusion that you’d rather not acknowledge the existence of this part of your mind, nor what it insinuates about your capacity for reprehensible callousness. Dave deserves better.

You’ve done something foul, and his apparent enjoyment of it does not change the fact that you neither warned him of what you were about to do nor asked him if you could at all.
Your state of mind at the time does not excuse your behaviour. You may not have intended to disregard him in the particular way that you did, but you have known yourself for long enough to recognize that even had you realized your lapse at the time, you likely still would have excused your actions with your urges and the near-certainty that he would oblige them, regardless of whether or not you did him the courtesy of asking first.

Had he been a woman, you could have found yourself made a father twice, and with a daunting amount of explaining to do.

You are fortunate that he is not, but his being a man does not mean you’ve done him any less of a disservice.

You try to tell yourself it’s only this and last night’s liquor that have left your tongue thick and your mouth dry, but you’ve already dulled the edge of your self-denial against the tough skin of someone who deserves far more than you have ever given him, and you leave yourself feeling unconvinced.

You’d like to say that it is infinitely easier for you to accept the pretense of his being an inconstant youth than it is to even begin to fathom the impossibility that his affections may exceed your own, but his head was much heavier on your shoulder than it is on his pillow, and you can still feel the shape of his mumbled words in the weight of your guilt.

He deserves not only more than you have given him, but more than you can give him, more than you could ever hope to give him. The meagre decades you have left to live are not nearly enough time to give him all that he deserves.

You may feign to believe that it’s you who does him the kindness of humouring his misplaced attentions and strange desires, but you know perfectly well that it’s his own time he’s wasting, not yours.

You know that when he finally grasps the staggering immensity of his own allure and endless potential, he will realize this as you have, and he will resent you for allowing him to believe otherwise for as long as you have.

For as long as you will.

You are almost selfish enough to hope that you’ll have met some convenient end before he discovers the unseemly truth that is how you’ve come to covet his continuing attention.

Just the ephemeral promise of seeing those maraschino eyes turn distrustful sours your breath with the pungency of dread.

It is one thing to fight. From the art of debate to the science of swordplay, a fight is a test of oneself and one’s opponent, and to have fought is to have strengthened one’s understanding of both the self and the other, to have disciplined either the body or the mind.

Fighting is a gentleman’s pursuit. It is one thing to fight, in any iteration.

It is another entirely to be ousted as a villain, and when you look at his sleeping face, you suddenly feel as though you may have robbed the young and waking world of something precious, suddenly wonder if you haven’t made your whitewashed suburban home into an ivory tower.

If it ever really was anything but an ivory tower.

In that moment, your mind turns against you, and you find yourself weighing the good intentions
that drove you to keep John so completely hidden from prying eyes against Dave’s hissed accusations of having sequestered him away from precious experiences, of having robbed him of so many of those things that teach a boy to stand on his own when he becomes a man.

In the burnt gloom of the early morning, you map the lines of a young man’s sleeping face with your eyes and begin to wonder.

You wonder, somehow, if you’ve spent all these years mistaking yourself for someone else. You wonder if you have never been the king ruling in his castle or the gentleman smoking in his favourite chair, but the tyrant who bars the doors of his fortress not only against invaders, but those who would escape.

You count Dave’s eyelashes as you distantly consider the question of whether or not you would have done anything differently if John had been a girl, and then you pause, half-focused on a stray dark hair nestled in that fine brindle of faded ginger and buttermilk gold.

You stare, feeling strange.

“You never would have made it through my door,” you murmur to Dave, barely breathing, inaudible even to yourself. “God, never.”

For just one nauseous moment of indisputable clarity, you saw him through the eyes of the father you would’ve made if, instead of a little boy, you’d been given a little girl, a lovely little dark-haired girl with bright blue eyes and a Bugs Bunny smile, and despite your fond memories and warm feelings, despite the desire you feel even now to pull him to you and lose your dark thoughts in holding him as he stirs awake, you hated Dave more fervently than you have ever hated his brother.

In that moment, you hated him, madly and bitterly, for the very same reasons you want to keep him for yourself.

You hated him because he is entirely too easy to want, to grow attached to, and to eventually fall in love with, and were you another child’s father, all you would have seen in the mirrored lenses of those sunglasses was the potential to make a little girl cry.

You would never have let him through your front door, and if you had found him lingering halfway through your daughter’s bedroom window in just the same way that you once crept in and out of the second-floor bedroom of another man’s daughter, you may have murdered him just for knowing what it meant that he was there at all.

You lean forward to rest your forehead on your knees with a soft groan.

If John ever has children of his own, you think you’ll tell him that good parenting is a practice in well-meant hypocrisy.

Dave mutters and shifts beside you, mouth tightening and eyebrows furrowing as though your brief but intense hostility was potent enough to infiltrate and ruin his good dreams.

You murmur an apology and refrain from smoothing his hair back from his forehead.

One of your knees buckles as you slip out of bed and attempt to stand, and you’re forced to sit down again. You pause to will away sudden dizziness.

You’re of the opinion that you’re entirely too old to be drinking away what little good judgement you seem to have retained, and your body seems to agree. You breathe deeply, eyes closed and
head lowered, before you try to stand again.

It is, you would say, a conditional success. You make it halfway down the hall before the weakness and disorientation that betray your dehydration force you to sit down again.

You’re very glad Dave’s asleep.

This is quite embarrassing.

Another attempt sees you to the bathroom, and it is somewhat less mortifying to sit with your head in your hands on the toilet than it is on the floor, so you don’t hesitate to linger there significantly longer than you necessarily need to.

It would be prudent to have a glass of water, but the sink is out of arm’s reach and consequently feels as far from you as the bathroom had from the bedroom.

Even as you recognize your own foolishness, you quietly despair over the inevitability that is having to walk the three paces that will bring you to it, after which you face the prospect of remaining vertical for long enough to draw water.

Something cool bumps your hand.

You peer through your fingers blearily.

You see blue glass held between long fingers with short, even nails. You take it from him gratefully.

“You need to puke?” Dave asks you softly, and if you felt less terrible you think you’d laugh at how poorly his gentle tone matches his frank words.

You try to shake your head, but the room moves more quickly around you than it rightfully should, so you stop. “No,” you respond. “I don’t feel ill.” You don’t quite manage the “Thank you for asking,” because your voice is a hoarse growl in your throat, and the water helps, but doesn’t completely ease the pain of speaking.

He’s squatting directly in front of you, but you can barely make out his expression in the gloom. Your uncertainty resurfaces under the gauzy film that overtook your thoughts when you first tried to stand.

“You can-” you try, and then swallow down dull pain with a wince. “Turn on the light,” you indicate with a weak gesture.

You hear him laugh. “I thought I was supposed to be the one who was into getting my hurt on,” he jokes, “the last thing you need is for me to turn on the light, you just chill out and drink your water, dude.” You feel one of his hands rest lightly on your thigh. “Hey, you’re not- man, don’t get mad at me for this.”

You squint at him, feeling dimly apprehensive.

His fingers begin to fidget nervously over your skin, and you’re uncertain whether you find it pleasantly distracting or vaguely irritating.

“You’re, uh, not going to work tomorrow- or today, whatever the hell you want to call it- I’m gonna make that crystal clear right fucking now.”
You attempt some sort of coherent protest, but all that escapes your mouth is a hoarse and disgruntled “No, Dave-”

He hushes you, sliding his palms up and down your legs soothingly.

“Look, you’re a wreck, and that wheezy shit you got going on means you probably had some kind of bug that blew up while the booze was putting your immune system all out of whack- I’ve seen pretty much this exact mess before, and it’s not going to end pretty if you don’t drink some water, eat some soda crackers or whatever, and lie the fuck down and get some sleep.” You don’t agree, but he doesn’t seem inclined to give you a choice in the matter. “I will call your work my goddamn self if I have to, and if that happens then you can have fun explaining why you couldn’t call in yourself to the suit brigade when you haul your sorry ass in the day after, you got that?”

You reluctantly concede, and he sneaks you a kiss you weren’t expecting.

You can feel the smile on his lips in the brief moment that they’re pressed against yours.

“I’m won’t lie to you, dude, you’re pretty fucking cute when you’re too messed up to argue with me,” he teases, and when you try to voice your displeasure, he just laughs and kisses you again. “Big Daddy E down for the count, never thought I’d see the day. You want some Tylenol or something? Coffee? MacDonald’s fries? Two raw eggs and a shot of vodka?”

You have difficulty communicating your bewilderment at that last option, but later, you’ll decide that it may have been good that you weren’t able to. You settle on a croak of “What time is it?” instead.

He tells you that it’s three in the morning. You grimace.

The knowledge that you most likely deserve this is not especially comforting.

His warm caresses are, however, despite your suspicions about the mischievous smile he seems to be wearing.

You are thoroughly unaccustomed to being doted on, and your self-sufficient nature, in combination with your unfortunate state, has brought out a facet of Dave’s personality that you can’t remember ever making the acquaintance of.

His insistence that you sit and stay while he rummages through your dresser drawers, your medicine cabinet, and finally, your kitchen cupboards leaves your fingers twitching impatiently on the table and muscles jumping in your leg, despite how listless you still feel.

Your mind has recovered enough to be deeply irritated at your body’s refusal to catch up with it, and so you find it casting around for things to distract it from its restlessness- and, of course, the most accessible of these is Dave.

You’re conflicted in your feelings about his clear enjoyment of the reversal of your roles. His normal routine, a half-baked false bravado made flavourful by bursts of tentative affection and hopeful groping, has given way completely, leaving you the victim of his apparent determination to talk over your protests until you surrender to his ministrations, which he goes about with what seems to be genuine delight generously seasoned with mischievous glee.

It can be quite difficult to irrationally resent him when he kisses you, softly and sweetly and without any pretense or justification.
It can be quite easy to irrationally resent him when he pulls back to grin at you, cheekily, in a way that tells you without any shadow of doubt that he’s enjoying the irritation you feel at being declared unable to do anything about your self-inflicted helplessness.

Nevertheless, you have sentenced yourself to liberal helpings of both, and he proves himself a charitable soul.

You frown at him as he rifles through your crisper drawers.

“David, do you even have any idea how to cook?”

Your voice is still rough and unfamiliar to your own ears. The soreness in your throat, thankfully, has subsided to a level that could perhaps be defined best as absentminded twinging, but only during certain words, or if you speak too extensively.

He leans out from behind the refrigerator door to quirk an eyebrow at you. “No matter what I say to that, you’re going to take it as a no, and then you’re going to try and do it yourself, so the answer is sit the hell down and drink your tea, I got this.”

You twitch uncomfortably at the sound of something being dropped. “Please don’t make a mess of my kitchen,” you warn. “You’re making me rather concerned, Dave.”

You hear a rude noise from somewhere around the cheese. “What I’m making you is food, bro, it might not be up to your standards but it’ll probably be edible and you’re going to eat it anyway, so chill the fuck out for a bit, alright?”

You feel your lips thinning in apprehension. “Probably? I beg your pardon?”

He shuts the door to the refrigerator with a cringe-worthy slam, and shrugs at you. “Yeah, probably. Eight out of ten chance. Most of what I’m used to eating comes out of cans or rings the doorbell, so cooking isn’t a thing I’ve done a lot of.” He grins at you reassuringly. You are not reassured. “I mean, I’m always worried that whatever I’ve got brewing is going to burn and half the time it kind of looks like it’s about to climb out of the pan and start its own religion, but it usually tastes pretty okay, all things considered.”

“All things considered,” you echo weakly. He laughs at your expression.

“Have a little faith, dude, you’re killing me here.”

You’re trying.

He is making it hard not to dread whatever monstrosity he’s going to fish out of that frying pan and feed to you.

But god, you’re trying.

==> 

Dave’s cooking turns out to be edible, if a little too salty and rather peculiar-tasting.

You refrain from asking him what it was supposed to be not because you think he missed his mark, but because you’re not convinced he knows either.

You think it might have involved fish.

You’d have to see what he’s taken from your freezer to know with any certainty.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Dad is a fixed point in space and adulthood is a masterful illusion.

Chapter Notes

Things are going to happen soon, I swear to god.

For now, have these two idiots.

You called in sick to work yesterday.

You’re so apprehensive about what you may find yourself facing today that you actually feel slightly ill.

When you left your house this morning, you stood in your driveway, fumbling with your cellular telephone and cursing yourself under your breath for neglecting to pick up your car yesterday. You were very relieved indeed to discover that it was still where you had left it.

One of the small mercies afforded those who could not find room to spare in a customer parking lot, you suppose.

Your anxiety ensures that you’re the very first person to arrive on your floor, but anticipation and uncertainty leave you utterly unable to focus, and the more the words on your computer screen seem to swim in and out of focus, the more anxious you feel yourself getting. Every distant click of a door seems an impending lecture, every tapping footstep and approaching elevator a disapproving glance in the making, and you, a tightly wound spring, ears ever more sensitive to the damning ticks and clatters of what once was just white noise.

When the doors to the elevator really do slide open on your level, it seems positively deafening, and you have to fight not to turn around and betray your guilty conscience.

Your muscles spasm with shock when a hand falls on your shoulder companionably.

For an instant, you’re convinced it belongs to Woodgrave, and you’re briefly consumed by a lethal cocktail of alarm and anger and shame, but the face that’s smiling at you from over your right shoulder is not his.

You’ve never spoken to this gentleman before, but you know his face. You wrack your memory. He joined the company three years ago, in December, if you are remembering correctly, and proved himself to be social, but not obtrusive. You’re sure you know his name.

“What can I do for you, Mister Hallowell?” You try carefully, and his face lights up, creasing around the eyes with pleasure.
“Didn’t mean to startle you, Mister Egbert, sorry about that. Just wanted to check in on you- I don’t think I’ve ever come in and not seen you here,” he laughs, “we were all thrown for a bit of a loop yesterday.”

It’s not an unkind laugh. He has a broad, honest face, and you realize with some astonishment that he’s being completely genuine.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you miss a day of work,” he comments before you have a chance to respond. You search the expressive lines of his dark face with a mixture of confusion and pleasant surprise.

“I suppose I’ve never had occasion to,” you admit, and he squeezes your shoulder lightly.

“Well, we all need a day off once in a while, and nobody deserves one more than you, what with your perfect record and all. I’m just glad you’re well- you’ve been here so long, yesterday it felt like this whole place might fall apart without you,” he jokes. “See, my cubicle’s right by the elevators, so I’m always the one they ask, and half the time I’m telling someone from downstairs who to ask about this or that problem with their work or helping some poor ess-oh-bee from tech services find who they’re looking for, I find myself going ‘oh, you’re looking for Kathy, she’s two cubicles down from Egbert- on the left’ or ‘Freeman’s opposite Egbert on the wall side, about four cubicles forward’, and I know I’m not the only one- yesterday, Coupland came in- he’s been talking the stairs, lately, says his wife has been getting on him about his weight- and when he saw me, he went ‘Oh, thank god, for a second there I wasn’t sure this was my floor!’- just because your desk was empty when he was walking past, and he doesn’t know everybody yet.”

He talks and laughs wheezily and you’re baffled.

This is baffling.

You don’t think you quite understand.

Your mind fixates on “perfect record” instead, as that is easier to comprehend. “I have been late before,” you insist vacantly.

He smile becomes a touch puzzled. “Were you? Oh, just the once, I think, and it was something like fifteen or twenty minutes or so, maybe thirty at most, if I recall- and didn’t you stay late that day? My little girl’s got club activities after school is out, so I usually stay until I’ve got to go get her, and I seem to remember that you were still here when I left, that day. There are folk that don’t even get here until half-past the rest of us, I wouldn’t sweat it.”

You find yourself absentmindedly marveling over the curious vitality captured behind his bright smiles, how it seems to defy the weight of his aging cheeks and heavy eyelids, and realize that you’ve been staring. You’re embarrassed, but the fact of the matter is that you’d always thought he was younger. He carries himself like a much younger man than you.

You murmur an apology, citing residual fatigue as the reason for your distractibility, but he doesn’t seem to be terribly perturbed by your scrutiny.

Rather, he simply smiles again- you’re not actually certain he ever stopped smiling, to be perfectly honest, as he is a man with a face that seems to smile even when it isn’t- and tells you not to work too hard.

“Don’t go making yourself sick all over again, you hear?” he shoots over his shoulder, face composed in what you think is supposed to be a mock-stern expression but faltered for how little it
suits him.

You raise your hand to your hat in bemused acknowledgement and consider, perhaps, that you should have been less staunch about refusing to meet with coworkers after office hours.

He seems like a nice fellow.

Sometimes you forget that many of the ladies and gentlemen who work with you are fathers and mothers as well, parents like yourself, and finding commonality with them seems like a forced and unnatural endeavor without that in mind.

As you watch him saunter towards his desk with leisurely steps, you suddenly feel rather ridiculous for worrying.

Despite your meticulously high standards for yourself, you’ve never harshly judged a coworker for being ill, though you may sometimes suspect that a Monday ailment may have resulted from imprudent behaviour, and think privately that such things are better left to college students and layabouts.

You suppose you’ve no right to criticize, these days.

The thought is both humbling and peculiarly liberating.

==> Your day only grows more bemusing as the hours lengthen.

By lunch, you feel as though half the floor has inquired after your health, and all but two have done so with a tone of genuine concern and a pleasant word of reassurance regarding your immaculate record of punctuality.

The first of these two exceptions is, with good reason, Mister Gan Suttikul, who merely smiles wanly at you in apology. You respond with a firmly dismissive shake of the head. Anything you may have suffered was a result of your own indiscretions, after all.

The second of these exceptions is, of course, Arthur Woodgrave. You find this incredibly surprising, to be terrifically insincere in the worst of all possible ways.

At no point did you expect Arthur Woodgrave to grin knowingly and wink at you from over the wall of an adjacent cubicle.

That would imply that he is a routinely boorish and indelicate individual whose habitual attempts to aggravate you have caused you to find the sight of his face unwelcome.

Such a thing is unthinkable.

Nonetheless, you breathe a sigh of relief when he passes your desk without endeavouring to address you.

This is because you’re busy making up lost time, and are therefore most certainly too busy to speak to the likes of him.

==> When you arrive home after work, you feel quite at ease.
Dave, on the other hand, appears to be quite put out by the resolve with which you insist on reclaiming control over your own care, and during dinner, he lapses into a period of petulant sulking, leaning on fist and pushing broccoli off of the edge of his plate with his fork.

You retrieve yet another piece from the table and steadfastly refuse to find his poor behaviour bizarrely charming.

“You’re twenty years old, David,” you chide mildly, exasperated.

He mouths your words back at you childishly. “Sure, I know that, bro,” he snipes, “do you? Naw, didn’t think so.” He starts to push another broccoli out of his dish, but stops when you give him a stern look.

You’re really not sure what he’s on about, but whatever his issue is, it’s making a mess of his placemat.

On Saturday morning, he suddenly announces that he’s going to be attending another event hosted by his peers. When you ask him where he’ll need to be driven, he waves you off, saying that Janice’s roommate is going to pick him up.

When you ask him when he’ll need to be picked up, he just looks at you moodily, phone in hand and face impassive.

“I’m probably just going to crash there and hitch a ride back tomorrow, if that’s cool. That’s cool, right?”

You suppose that’s alright.

He is a legal adult, after all, though you’re admittedly somewhat suspicious of his airy declaration that there shouldn’t be any alcohol at this event, and that he’ll prudently abstain if it turns out that there is.

Still, he is an adult, and he is entitled to make his own decisions.

He’s not your son. He’s not even your significant other, nor is he anything else to you that would allow you control over his actions outside of those that concern you.

Sourceless vexation sets your stomach roiling with uncertainty when a young lady in a green sedan pulls into your driveway. She doesn’t bother to leave the car, instead parking to sit hunched over the steering wheel with what looks to be a cellphone in her hand. Dave trots down the stairs and brushes past you with only an absentminded goodbye before he joins her. They pull away. You don’t know her name.

That bothers you quite a bit.

You’re rather ashamed of yourself.

A less lamentable part of you feels as though it will probably do him some good to get away from the house.

Away from you.

You tell yourself that you’re going to catch up on your recently oft-neglected baking, but you spend
the majority of the evening worrying over whether or not it would be overbearing to ask him how
he’s enjoying himself.

Eventually, the smiling yellow face beside his peculiar username turns grey, and you put down
your palmtop computer fretfully.

The house is very large and very empty.

It takes you a long time to fall asleep, and when you do, you dream about strange things that you
cannot remember in the morning, but still find you overwrought and irritable, nevertheless.

It’s almost evening by the time he returns on Sunday.

You would very much like to scold him.

You say nothing.

==> By Wednesday, you’ve recognized the pattern of his behaviour.

You know these spurts of resentful sullenness, and the periods of vague frustration and
overwhelming neediness that follow them.

At dinner, you put down your fork with a sigh.

He tenses expectantly. Even with his sunglasses on and his face turned down towards his plate,
you know he’s looking at you from the corner of his eye.

“Do you have something you’d like to say to me, Dave?” you inquire.

His mouth flattens into a line, and for a moment, you’re not sure if he’s going to respond.

“Look,” he starts, “the problem here is that I feel like you’re treating me like a kid who can’t take
of himself or anybody else, and that bugs the shit out of me, but I kind of get the vibe that if I say
so you’re just going to think I’m being ungrateful or childish or some other shit that’s completely
not at all the fucking point, and if that’s the case, then no, I don’t have anything I’d like to say to
you, because that’s bullshit.”

You blink, taken aback. “I’m sorry you feel that way,” you tell him. “But I will admit that I’m not
quite certain why you feel that way. I have never intended to treat you like a child, and
consequently, while I’d like to remedy my error, I’m at a loss as to how I would do so.”

He looks at you, eyebrows flat above the metal frame of his glasses.

“And see, that’s the problem right there. You’re doing it right fucking now, pulling this ‘calm and
reasonable daddy trying to figure out why his snot-nosed kid is crying’ thing, and I get that you’re
trying to smooth out the wrinkles here so we can go back to screwing and smoking and all the other
shit that’s just sort of become normal between us, but you know what?” You do not know what.

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“It’s kind of pissing me off that I’ve been living here for almost half a year- probably gonna be
here for like four more, too, come the fuck on- and you’re still treating me like a goddamn
houseguest, getting all twisted when I don’t want to be waited on hand and foot, acting like I’m
being cute when I want to do something for you-” He pauses, hands raised in an gesture of futile
exasperation, and you hesitate, unsure whether or not you should interrupt. “Dude, we’ve been
fucking like the nastiest couple of teenaged losers this side of my old high school and you won’t
even loosen up and argue about politics or religion or whatever the fuck else with me, we’re always having this polite goddamn conversations where you just sort of give me this shitheaded little ‘oh David, you’ll understand when you’re older’ smirk—” You do not sound like that—“like I’m not allowed to have an opinion, but you won’t even say anything and it drives me fucking nuts!”

You open your mouth.

You close your mouth.

“I’m really not sure what to say,” you confess. You look down at your plate contemplatively. “That’s quite a complaint.” You sit back in your chair. “While I understand your frustration, please understand that I’m not intentionally singling you out, and I don’t believe I’m treating you especially differently than anyone else, Dave. If anything, I am, perhaps, more lax in my behaviour towards you than I am to others.”

His eyebrows furrow, but he remains silent. You sigh, resigned to the remains of your dinner going cold on your plate.

“I prefer not to invite confrontation,” you explain carefully, “and I have never allowed anyone to do anything for me in my own home, regardless of my feelings towards them.”

He makes a rude noise. “What, you never made John set the table?”

You look at him.

His mouth pulls at the corner, all white teeth and incredulity. “You spoiled the shit out of him, you know that? Man, when I was a kid, my bro made me drag the garbage down sixteen flights of stairs to the dumpster because it wasn’t cool to bring that shit in the elevator, and he didn’t tell me there was a goddamn garbage chute down the hall until I was fucking twelve,” he complains. “And you know why? Because he figured it was my own damn fault that I didn’t go looking for the damn thing. I had to keep food in my closet if I didn’t want to dodge a bunch of shitty knockoff ninja swords and shurikens and shit just to get a snack.” He snorts with disgust. “And what, John spent his tender years loafing around in his room until dinner? Christ, I bet you did his fucking laundry, too.”

You cross your arms across your chest, unimpressed. “If you were hoping to discuss your complaints with me like an adult, I would recommend you behave like one.”

He bristles, lips pulling back from his teeth before settling back into a stubborn line.

“Yeah? How do you mean, should I maybe ignore you for a month and pretend everything’s okay and lock myself in my room every night so you can’t talk to me, that sounds good?” You flinch at his accusatory tone. “Don’t tell me to act like an adult when you can’t even decide what the fuck that means, dude, you just pull that card because it makes it easier for you to shut me up when you think I’m being difficult—”

That’s not what you meant at all.

“I’m being as adult as I can fucking manage right now, fucking look at me, I’m talking about my problems instead of throwing a goddamn tantrum or pretending they don’t exist, please excuse me for actually giving a shit about communication—”

You didn’t mean to start an argument.
“-and you know what, you asked, you invited this confrontation, so here’s some goddamn communication for you: I’m not so good at getting spoiled, I don’t like feeling like I owe people shit, and when you do all this shit for me, I feel like I owe you, and it makes me hella uncomfortable, it makes me feel like I don’t belong here, and when you pull that pointless small talk shit on top of that, it makes me feel like you’re only *screwing me* out of a sense of obligation-”

You turn to face him with a start of shock, opening your mouth to protest. Instead, you stare.

The colour has risen in his face, and he has his shoulders hunched defensively around his ears. He’s nervous.

“-and look, I get that that’s not the way it is, okay, but I spend all day loafing around this place and it’s not really that I want or need to get out more or anything because I like it here and I like you and I’m a lame sack of shit who’d rather mack on you than go out half the time but I feel like I don’t have a stake here which sucks because I’d, uh- I, um,” he falters, flushing brilliantly.

You raise an eyebrow.

“I like it here or something, I guess,” he finishes lamely, and then admits, “I just still sort of feel like I just moved in, I mean, I keep taking shit out of my suitcases and then putting it back in again because it feels weird to get totally unpacked, like that’d be presumptuous or something or I’m in a hotel, I dunno, man.”

He’s devolved into mumbling, and you study his face with a strange mixture of emotions.

You discover that it’s very difficult to voice what you want to say, and that as much as his vulnerability compels you to say it, you find the prospect of doing so terrifying.

You chew over the words in your mouth, battling a frustrating amount of anxious tension.

“I… would prefer it if you felt at home here,” you voice awkwardly. “As indifferent as you seem to find me, I am quite- ah, quite fond of you.”

He’s staring at you. You feel heat rising in your own cheeks.

“I’m not terribly good at expressing,” you gesture vaguely, looking down at your plate, “these sorts of things in words. I don’t usually talk quite so much about-”

You’re still gesturing vaguely.

He’s still staring at you.

You’re mortified.

He throws his hands up in surrender.

“Holy shit. Holy fucking shit. I’m having flashbacks to like grade two because of what just came out of your mouth- you were the kid in elementary school who gave the girl he liked a frog at recess and then didn’t understand why she got mad, weren’t you, you totally fucking were, and you know what, you still are, you just sort of do things and then expect people to take them the right way and when they don’t you get all confused and irritated and then you just keep *doing them* instead of talking to anybody about it because you think people are just supposed to get it automatically for some reason like it’s common sense to anybody but you, you’re totally that fucking kid, you accuse me of being childish and you are literally fucking *five*, holy shit, I give up.
I give up!” he proclaims, letting his head loll over the back of his chair. “I’m almost twenty-one and I’m still trying to reason with that one super fucking serious kid in my third grade gym class who insisted that dodgeball was dangerous and could result in severe injury and that it was irresponsible of our teacher to make participation in such an activity mandatory, this is what my life has come to, you’re right, I am also fucking five, I’m five years old and I still have a crush on that stupid fucking kid in my third grade gym class, I give up.”

He lifts his head to look at you again, and then looks up at the ceiling.

“Oh my god,” he mutters, “holy shit, Bro was right. I have terrible fucking taste.”

You mean to say something intelligent. You really do.

What leaves your mouth is a baffled-sounding, “You had a childhood infatuation with a boy in your physical education program?” and then a definite “Third graders are eight or nine years old, not five.”

He barks with mirth, and then proceeds to laugh helplessly at you.

You find it somewhat irksome, but the more you attempt to defend yourself, the harder he laughs, until he’s pushed his hands under his sunglasses and there’s wetness glistening on his cheeks.

After many chastening minutes, he subsides into heavy sighing, and you frown at him.

“I don’t think this is very funny, David,” you scold.

He takes one look at you and then dissolves back into laughter.

“Oh my god, somebody help me, I can’t fucking deal with you-”

You really don’t see what he finds so funny.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Dad discovers different forms of domesticity, and entertains unexpected visitors.

Chapter Notes

Yep. Here's that curveball.

You would say that nothing has changed between you despite your peculiar argument, but by July, he’s finally succeeded in his attempts to secure for himself the responsibility of a household chore, and you’re forced to concede the point in that regard.

You’ve never seen someone so pleased to be washing dishes. You don’t imagine it will last long, but for now it is, admittedly, rather childishly endearing.

But if you’re being honest, you’ve long since begun to feel nervous.

The origins of your growing unease lie almost entirely in the irrefutable fact that your circumstances are starting to feel disconcertingly regular- even, you hesitate to say, properly domestic.

In the third week of June, you woke up to the daunting realization that Dave had been living with you for almost six months, and the day that marked his having spent less than half of that time in an appropriately platonic relationship with you was creeping ever closer.

Now, as July stretches out languidly before and behind you, it has been that six months. Without taking John’s visit taken into account, Dave’s time in your bed has eclipsed his time in his own. You have spent a not insignificant portion of this year with Dave and without John.

You have spent more of this year as a lover than a father, and for you, that is unprecedented.

You have always been something of a romantic, yes, but you lack the experience of one who has had the time to pursue romance as he pleases.

Unlike the fireworks and fanfare that inevitably accompany a clock striking out the first hour of the first day of the first month of a new year- another year- the taut shadow of a young man in your doorway was the only oddity cast by the grey sky of an otherwise unremarkable January afternoon.

You were not warned.

And now, because you have puzzled over more in this molting season than you have ever had occasion to do in all decades that preceded it, you find yourself marvelling that it has only been six months.

In one breath, you could swear that he had only walked through your front door a week ago, that
just yesterday you had watched John’s airplane disappear into the sky for both the first and second time.

In the next, you would declare it impossible for so much to have changed in so short a time as half a year.

His presence in your life seems simultaneously recent and enduring, and this frightens you, because you are not nearly enough of a fool to mistake the meaning of your feeling that way.

When you were young, you entered into each new dalliance with a romantic heart that saw no end to it, and you left all of them somehow no wiser for what you rightfully should have learned—the arc of your last relationship perfectly mirrored your first.

And then you became a father, and ceased altogether to fail to learn what you already should have already learned long before.

It was age that lent you wisdom, a lifetime of caution in place of meaningful experience, and when you first took Dave into your arms, you did so with the ultimate expectation that he would one day become restless, that you would wake some not-so-distant morning to find that he had already slipped through your fingers.

It was a singularly unromantic beginning.

But the longer his warmth lingers, the more difficult it proves for you to remain convinced that you have grown out of the worst of your romantic inclinations.

You’ve lost sight of the end. You can no longer see the storm that brews on the horizon. You are dangerously close to succumbing to the treacherous promise of false stability and imagined permanence that is romance between a man your age and a boy barely in college.

You know that it is foolishness on your part to feel as though Dave knows this and encourages it in you, but nonetheless, you find yourself casting his character in the unfavourable light of your baseless and paranoid suspicions.

You know perfectly well that you’re simply doing it to slow your seemingly inescapable descent into inestimable stupidity.

You’re too old for this.

You would say that he’s going to be the death of you, but age has made you wise where experience did not.

You are going to be the death of you, and you are doing Dave a great unkindness in making him your weapon.

After all, a gun is not at fault for the actions of a man who turns it on himself.

==>

He smells like detergent and is much too pleased with himself for a twenty-year-old man who just now grasped how to use a perfectly normal washing machine.

“It’s got way too many dials, dude,” he complains, sneaking an arm between you and your palmtop computer. You lean towards the arm of the couch and try to tap out an apologetic goodbye. It seems that the urgent matter of grayslacks66’s waistcoat dilemma will simply have to wait. “Most
washers have got at least a line that says, I dunno, turn here to wash normal people clothes and shit or something like that, how am I supposed to know how hot and how fast and how long I want my laundry to spin?”

You suppose it says something about your relationship that you immediately know what he’s about to say next.

Even if you didn’t, his wicked smile betrays him. “I mean, I’ve already got that down for the part where I make the dirty laundry, what more do you even want from me,” he teases, and you treat him to an unimpressed look.

Before you can stop him, he’s snatched your PDA away from you, and is eying it doubtfully. “Serious Business? Are you actually serious, holy shit, this is such an old dude app, it’s fucking ancient-”

You look at him.

He pauses. “Oh, right.” You reach to take it back from him, but he whips it out of sight, kneeling beside you with both hands behind his back. You’re tempted to tell him to get his feet off the couch. “Pick a hand.”

You raise an eyebrow at him. “David-”

“Or, you know, you could not pick a hand,” he interrupts, reappearing your device from behind him and holding it aloft as he scrutinizes the contents of its screen, “maybe just help me make a disaster of my clothes over here since it looks like that’s what you’re into-”

You actually flinch a little at that, and he looks chastened.

“Yeah, okay, that was pretty fucking terrible, anyway just put down your phone for a bit, it’s hard to make out with you when you’re talking about-” he glances up at it again “-uh, heather grey coats? It’s the middle of summer, I don’t-”

“Waistcoats,” you correct patiently. “A waistcoat is a vest, Dave. We were talking about fabric textures, specifically about whether or not a heathered wool vest constitutes enough of a textural element in an outfit to clash with a tie of a different, and visually distinct, texture.”

He stares blankly at you and then drops your palmtop computer on the couch behind him. “Yeah, okay, I’m pretty sure we can figure that out on our own,” he muses, crawling haphazardly over your knees.

He straddles you, and he’s warm and solid and thoroughly distracting. You do have to admit that his lips are making a good case for giving into his demands.

“I’ll give you a hint,” he murmurs into your mouth, “nobody gives a shit if your tie and vest match, you look better naked anyway and shit man, that’s fucking saying something-”

You forgo informing him that it wasn’t you who needed assistance. The way he’s rolling his hips against yours makes you suspect he doesn’t particularly care.

You smooth your hands down his sides and he shivers. You smile, resisting temptation. He bites your lip lightly in warning.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” he growls, “if you try to tickle me again, I will lay you out, I swear to god-”
You don’t.

You do, however, work up a considerable level of frustration in him. He’s too easily excited, and you, entirely too unwilling to commit acts of depravity in your living room.

He’s got his hands fisted tightly in your shirt collar when you hear a faint buzzing. You kiss him lightly and begin to coax him off your lap.

“Your laundry needs to be switched over,” you inform him pleasantly. He groans in complaint against your shoulder.

“It can wait-”

“Dave,” you insist, and he groans again, louder, before scrambling off of you.

“Stay there,” he orders.

You don’t.


You can hear him grumbling discontentedly downstairs, and it makes you smile for reasons that aren’t especially gentlemanly.

There’s something about seeing him desperate that brings out the absolute worst in you. After some serious introspection, you’ve come to accept the fact that there’s something about his impatient and abrupt personality that makes it exceptionally satisfying to make him wait. He asks, but he rarely asks politely or properly, and he too often expects to be obliged immediately.

In a peculiar sort of way, you suppose you still have an inclination to train him, even if you’ve given up all hope of making a gentleman of the inveterately rude Dave Strider.

You just hadn’t realized that you would enjoy doing it quite so much.

And you’re not entirely certain you actually want him to conform to your standards of politeness.

To be perfectly honest, you’re actually just avoiding overthinking the strange enjoyment it brings you to make him wait.

You hear him coming up the stairs with his laundry when someone knocks at the front door.

For a moment, you’re not certain it is a knock- the sound is light but firm, and oddly discreet, as though the person knocking does not wish to rudely interrupt.

By the time you’ve reached your doorway, his basket of laundry is abandoned in the hall and his feet are tapping rapidly back down the stairs.

You hear him open the door with a peculiar squawk of surprise, and you slowly make your way towards the landing, curious.

The young lady Dave has not yet had the politeness to allow in is a vision of loveliness, and the soft laughter that trickles out from behind her palm is pleasant, almost musical.

You observe the short sweep of her vanilla blonde hair just above her eyes and just below her jaw and think, with a feeling of marvel, that if you did not know that Dave and his brother were the only members of their family, you would swear this girl was his sister.
There’s something about the set of their mouths that’s similar, you think, though it may be the shape of her eyebrows, or the line of her nose. You can’t quite place it.

The pretty thing in your doorway looks up at you, and you smile down at her warmly. A small smile curves the corners of her lips.

There really is something about her that reminds you of Dave. It’s very odd.

“Mister Egbert, I presume?” she inquires. Her voice is soft but carrying, and her words so clearly enunciated that, instead of the similarities you’d been dwelling on, you immediately begin to delineate the differences between her speech and Dave’s. So subtly similar in looks, but so clearly different in tone and diction.

You confirm her presumption as you descend the stairs, puzzled but not unwelcoming.

If it is not the similarities between her and Dave that are nagging at you, then you must know this girl. You’re sure you’ve seen her before.

Your mind catches on a remembered glimpse of a computer screen.

“Miss Rose Lalonde?” You venture.

She dimples. It’s charming.

You notice, with no small thrill of wonder, that her eyes are most unusually coloured.

While most of your mind is puzzling over the curious number of John’s friends and acquaintances that seem to be in possession of such strange features, another part of you finds it distantly pleasing and appropriate that hers are more subdued, more subtle, than Dave’s. You’ve only just met her, but it seems fitting, somehow.

She looks past you, to Dave, and then back up to you. She quirks a slim eyebrow, lips pinching together in a way that seems both telling and secretive.

“I don’t see John. I had assumed he’d also be here to greet us.” It sounds like a question, but you think you hear a note of mixed amusement and suspicion underlying its rising musicality.

In your peripheral vision, you see Dave raise a hand to his face. Rose’s eyes flicker over to him once more, dimmer through a fall of dark eyelashes.

“I see,” she muses, before you can respond. “He had told me that our Mister Strider—” wry and rolling, but said with a hint of a smile “—would be here, but I think I might be right in supposing that John didn’t tell you about the invitation he had extended me?” A beat, or a breath. You’re not certain. “In December?”

He certainly did not, and you’re quite embarrassed by it.

She raises her eyes skyward and sighs through her nose in what you could only hope to call an expression of pure and long-suffering exasperation. It flickers under the weight of what looks like impatience. It’s a peculiarly ugly look to see on so pretty a face.

Her voice is somewhat less carrying as she turns away from you.

“Have you fallen, Mother? I’m beside myself with worry.”

You don’t hear her mother’s reply, nor do you manage any lasting surprise over Rose’s dismissive
attitude towards her or, indeed, the discovery that Rose did not come alone.

The woman who appears in the doorway is older, but no less beautiful, than you remember her being, and you know now whose familiar features you were reading in Rose’s face.

Rose’s mother moves in elegantly overstated motions, but her hesitation when she sees you is unaffected.

An hour passes in an instant before you find your words.

“I believe I have something of yours,” you tell her, and her dark lips grow round with surprise.

Beside you, Dave stiffens, and in front of you, Rose’s eyes dart to him with a sharpness of interest that is difficult to miss, but you do not notice either of these things, because you know the face of the woman in the doorway.

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