Summary

All Horatio wanted from his internship at the National Maritime Museum’s special collections was some time alone with the Nelson-era naval manuscripts. He didn’t expect to fall in love with one of the library patrons, an exuberant, confident actor about to make his film debut in a Napoleonic naval period piece.

All Archie wanted was to leave the nightmare of RADA and Simpson far behind, and to start preparing for the role that would change his life. The last thing he expected was to fall for an adorably gangly, socially awkward naval history nerd who worked the special collections desk.

But how do you navigate a new relationship when the past won’t stay in the past?

Notes

This work exists because of the support of a tremendous number of people: thanks to fionatlux for being the reason I wrote a Library AU, thanks to underhyll for reading early chapters, to girabbit for enthusiastically cheering me on, to tablelamp for her advice and for believing me the whole time, to idelthoughts for teaching me so much, for being the best
Horatio consultant anyone could ask for, and for the dedicated, careful beta work, and to sufficiently pornstar for listening to me talk about little else besides this novel for the last six months.

Note on the plot: This modern AU’s plot loosely incorporates and adapts elements from the first six movies, and Horatio's characterization combines elements from the books and the movies. The fic addresses recovering from the trauma of rape, but there will be no scenes of rape included in the story, and the rapes in question happen before the narrative begins. Do what you need to do feel safe while reading.

Trigger Warnings for this chapter:
Epileptic seizure

Final note on the fate of H&E: I am currently revising it for a GrubStreet workshop (filing the serial numbers off of it and making some structural changes) in the hopes of getting it published! Wish me luck!
“And when those patrons bring back their materials, make sure nothing’s damaged, mark the item as returned in the system, and give them back their ID. Have you got that?”

“Damage, mark, ID. Yes, sir, I think so,” Horatio replied, his head spinning from his morning of rapid-fire instructions. He had assumed the first day of his summer internship would have been more . . . well, quiet, really. He had imagined filling out paperwork, or maybe watching a video about proper protocol for handling some of the more delicate items in the archives. He hadn’t realized that, four hours into working at the National Maritime Museum’s Caird Library, he would have been shown how to create new Reader’s Tickets, how to check items out and in, how to search the archive, how to fill out his timecard, how to sign off for a lunch break, and what to do when the camera crashed, and he couldn’t for the life of him remember what Mr. Matthews had said about the swords. And it seemed he would be mostly helping library patrons instead of sharing his solitude with the archival materials. He wasn’t cut out for customer service. There were far too many people involved. To make matters worse, Mr. Matthews was still imparting wisdom to his inattentive trainee.

“–and the umbrellas. Sneaky little buggers, they are. Always check for ‘em, and make sure they’re in the cloakroom where they belong,” Mr. Matthews concluded.


“That’s the spirit, lad!” Mr. Matthews said. “You do all that, and you’ll be just fine. I’ll be back around 1500 hours; it’s usually near dead this time of day, so you shouldn’t have any interruptions. If anything does come up, mind, give me a ring. The number’s written down next to the phone.”

“Y. . . yes, sir. See you at 3 . . . I mean, 1500 hours, Mr. Matthews,” Horatio called out as his mentor hastily left the building. Horatio dropped onto the stool behind the desk and closed his eyes with a sigh as he relished the sudden silence after his frantic day. His temples throbbed, and he rubbed them to dull the pain. At least he would have an hour to himself to recover.

“Excuse me? Is this where I get a Reader’s Ticket?”

Horatio’s eyes shot open and he stumbled to his feet, toppling his stool over in the process with a resounding clang. “M . . . my apologies!” Horatio said as he bent over to right the stool. He was already mucking it all up, and this was only his first patron. “How can I help you?” he asked as he straightened up, smiled, and hoped that a professional demeanour could salvage this disaster.

Two extremely blue eyes in a very amused face put paid to that plan. “I called ahead about a Reader’s Ticket for the summer? My name’s Archie Kennedy.”

Horatio racked his brains: had Mr. Matthews said anything about expecting someone? It didn’t sound familiar, but, between his headache and current level of embarrassment, he couldn’t rule it out. He quickly glanced around at the surface of the information desk in front of him to see if a note in Matthews’ scrawl would helpfully provide him with the necessary details. Unfortunately, he had no such luck. He would have to improvise.

He looked back up at the young man in front of him--how were his eyes so blue?--before mentally
shaking himself and following the protocol Matthews had taught him earlier that day. “Welcome to the Caird Library, Mr. Kennedy. Do you have your two forms of identification?”

The young man looked particularly amused at the formality of the question. “Why, yes I do,” he replied with a barely suppressed smirk as he handed over his passport and bank statement with a flourish.

Horatio took the documents, willing his hands not to shake and reveal his nervousness. He opened up the passport and peered at the picture inside. He had always assumed that passport photos made everyone look as though they had been dead for years, but this man was remarkably photogenic. The light caught his reddish-blonde hair, producing a veritable halo around his face, and his smile was—well, the only possible word was radiant.

“Does everything meet with your approval?” The posh, slightly smug voice cut through Horatio’s stupor and spurred him into action.

“Er, yes, quite.” Horatio shook his head to clear it, switched over to the bank statement to type the address into their computer system, then handed the papers back. “Everything looks in order.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Archie said with a grin. “For a second there, I was worried you weren’t going to give them back. They’re the only identification I brought with me!”

Horatio cursed himself silently and wondered if it was possible to die of embarrassment. Sadly, he didn’t think he could escape that easily.

“Erm, it’s my first day here. I’m still . . . learning the ropes, as it were.”

Archie’s grin became tempered with sympathy. “And they’ve already left you at the desk to fend for yourself? Abandoned you to the whims of maniacal patrons?”

Horatio attempted a smile that had more in common with a grimace. “Something like that,” he admitted. “But they did instruct me on the protocol for creating patron accounts. The next step is for me to take your picture for the Reader’s Ticket. Unfortunately, this camera and I are not on the best of terms, so I’d appreciate it if you could hold off on any maniacal plans until after I’ve had a row with it.”

Archie stared unblinking at Horatio for a second, before bursting out laughing.

Horatio froze and wished the ground would swallow him. He hadn't meant to say that out loud. “Could you just pretend none of this ever happened? Or you could come in again and we’d go through it a second time without me mucking the whole thing up?”

“That would be a shame,” Archie said, still chuckling. “This conversation has been the highlight of my day! But I’m about to have lots of experience doing second and third takes of things, so I’m happy to get an early start. Shall I just exit stage left, and we’ll try again?” he said, pointing over his shoulder at the entrance.

Horatio looked quizzically at Archie, who shrugged. “I’m an actor,” he explained. “Or, about to be. My first professional gig starts filming in September: it’s a period piece, set during the Napoleonic war. I’m here researching—ship life, the British navy, those sorts of things—to get into character!”

That explained the passport photo. “Oh . . . erm, congratulations! You’ve come to the right place, then!” he said eventually, kicking himself again for his inability to converse like a normal person. “Do you know what materials you’d like to see first?”
Archie’s smile flickered, but returned to its normal wattage almost immediately as he retrieved a list from the back pocket of his jeans. Archie’s remarkably snug jeans. Horatio blinked and forced his eyes back to Archie --- Mr. Kennedy’s face as he tried to look the part of a morally-upstanding intern instead of the failure he was.

“Well, I thought I’d start with John Norrie’s *The Epitome of Practical Navigation,* ” Archie said, consulting his list, “but I’m open to suggestions. Any tips?”

*This, he could do.* “That would give you a fair amount of information about period-appropriate navigation techniques, but some people find it rather dry and heavy on maths. As for other reading materials, I suppose it depends on who your character is. We have diaries from ship surgeons and chaplains, some letters from the lower decks and people who were pressed into service, and some log books from midshipmen and lieutenants. We even have some letters from Nelson himself!”

Archie’s face lit up. “Brilliant! My character is a lieutenant, so I suppose I should start with relevant letters or log books from officers, and then move on from there.”

Horatio grinned. Maybe he wouldn’t disgrace the War Studies department after all. “Excellent! We’ll just finish your Reader’s Ticket, and then I’ll show you how to request materials. Let’s try that picture, then.”

Archie nodded. “Right! Where do you want me?”

Horatio’s brain ground to a screeching halt.

Archie raised an eyebrow. “For the picture?” he asked, the corners of his mouth rising with his inflection.

Horatio’s brain started up again with a lurch. *What the hell was wrong with him?* “Right! Of course! Erm, could you stand just there, please?” he asked, pointing to the tape line on the ground half a metre in front of the desk. It was already lined up with the camera to minimize error. All he had to do was click the mouse to take the picture. Surely it would go better than last time?

Archie nodded again and walked over to stand behind the line. “I’ll try to make it as painless as possible for you,” he said, his eyes dancing. And then, like a switch had been flipped, he grinned at the camera, his smile as wide as it had been in the passport photo. Horatio had to remind himself to breathe. “Like this?”

Horatio blinked, looked the at image the camera was sending to the computer screen, swallowed, and nodded. “Erm, yes. That . . . will do nicely.” He clicked the mouse.

Nothing happened.

Horatio stared at the computer as though he could force it into submission with the sheer power of his will.

Nothing happened.

“We seem to be . . . experiencing technical difficulties,” Horatio said through gritted teeth.

Archie looked like he wanted to laugh but was exercising restraint. “Well, you did promise me a row with the camera, so in a way, it’s all going to plan,” he said with a smile and a shrug. Then he walked up to the desk, resting his arms on it and peering over the top. “Have you tried turning it off and on again?” he asked with a grin and, inexplicably, an Irish accent.
Horatio raised an eyebrow at him.

“Oh, it’s from the *IT Crowd*. Great show! Good advice, too!”

That explanation hadn’t helped clarify matters at all.

After a moment, Archie’s face fell. “You aren’t having a very good day, are you? How can I help?”

Horatio raised an eyebrow. “Any chance you can perform exorcisms on electronics?”

Archie looked surprised for a moment, then chuckled. “I’m afraid not. I seem to have left my holy water in my other pair of trousers. Anything else you need?”

Horatio shook his head. “Just need your patience while I reboot this blasted thing.”

Archie nodded. “Of course! At least it’ll make your first day memorable?” he offered with an apologetic grin.

Horatio rolled his eyes. “I could do with fewer memories and more smooth sailing,” he said, checking the status of the camera. “Ah, good. It’s back. Shall we?” he asked, gesturing towards the tape line.

“We shall!” Archie said, dipping his head in mock-formal acknowledgement. He returned to the tape line. “Fire as you bear,” he called out, his grin back in full-force.

Horatio prayed with all his might to a God he didn’t really believe in that this damn camera would cooperate and put an end to his humiliating errors. He squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, and clicked the mouse.

A picture of Archie appeared on his screen that looked more suited to a magazine cover than to a library card. Horatio’s mouth was suddenly dry.

“It worked,” he managed.

To Horatio’s astonishment, Archie’s grin somehow became even brighter.

“The day is yours, sir!” Archie said, walking towards the desk.

Horatio found himself smiling along with him. “Yes, I’m sure they’ll add this tale of my exploits to the exhibit any day now.” He hit some buttons, and the card began to print. “While we wait for the Reader’s Ticket, I’ll go ahead and place a request for some of the letters and journals.” A sudden realization made him hesitate. “Oh . . . can you read 18th century handwriting?”

Archie’s eyes widened, and his tongue skated across the surface of his lower lip. “Is it really that different?”

“Well, the long ‘s’ can give people trouble. And spellings weren’t standardized. And the contracted words and abbreviations can take some time to get used to. But if you’re comfortable with modern cursive, you should more or less be able to mostly muddle through.”

Archie frowned. “And if I’m not?”

“Well, the modern monographs on the British navy won’t present a problem, but the journals, log books, and letters certainly would. I suppose . . . that is . . . if you wanted, I could . . . er . . . if you need help . . .” Horatio paused, shook his head, took a breath, clasped his hands behind his back, and tried again. “I’m writing a thesis on British naval strategy during the Napoleonic wars, so I’ve
spent a fair bit of time deciphering 18th century handwriting. If you want, I’d be happy to help you make sense of some of these texts . . . when I’m not needed elsewhere, that is.”

**What was he doing, making this offer to a stranger, who probably had better things to do with his time than spend it with a tall, gangly fool more at home with books than people?**

“No, I don’t want to interrupt your own research, or distract you, or get you into trouble with your new job, but, if that’s a genuine offer, then yes! Absolutely!”

Horatio felt weak-kneed with relief. “Yes! Yes, it’s a genuine offer. It would be my pleasure, in fact!”

Archie’s grin was now positively incandescent. “You’ve saved my summer . . .” Archie trailed off, his smile fading slightly. “Oh, you haven’t told me your name yet!”

This was Horatio’s least favorite part of meeting people. “Oh, Er, it’s Horatio. H . . Horatio Hornblower.”

Archie raised an eyebrow at him. “Really? Horatio, as in, Horatio Nelson?”

Horatio sighed. “Yes, really.”

Archie tipped his head to the side as he shrugged with a smile. “Then I suppose you chose an appropriate subject to be passionate about.”

Horatio blinked in surprise. “Er, quite. That’s . . . not the reaction I usually receive,” he admitted.

Archie laughed. “I can imagine. But, seeing as my first name is Archibald, I would be the worst of hypocrites if I said anything else. So, Horatio, wh--” He frowned suddenly as a loud buzzing filled the silence.

“Oh, shit! I thought I turned that thing off.” Archie dug his phone out of his back pocket with an apologetic smile. “Let me just--” Archie abruptly stopped talking as he stood transfixed by the message lighting up his phone’s screen. Horatio watched as the colour drained from Archie’s face, and his new friend became completely motionless. Then, his hands began to shake.

Horatio had never seen such a sudden change in someone before, and his limited experience with friends hadn’t prepared him for this. But he had to do something. “. . . Archie? . . . Archie? Are you alright?” he asked. His own fingers started to flex and fidget as he restrained himself from running to Archie’s side. Years of watching his father practice medicine had given him a mental checklist that he ran through automatically whenever he saw someone in distress, and it wasn’t in his nature to sit on the sidelines.

Archie jerked to awareness and glanced at Horatio, although, for some reason, he couldn’t maintain eye contact with him. “What? Oh . . . yes. Fi . . . fine. Um, I . . . I’ve got to make a call,” he stuttered. He glanced frantically around him like a cornered animal, spotted the exit, and walked quickly out of the room, his shoulders hunching in further towards his chest with every step.

Horatio started to follow him, but stopped on the other side of the desk. Archie obviously didn’t want to confide in him. He should honour his desire for privacy. But how should he act when Archie returned? Should he say something? Pretend nothing had happened? No one had covered *this* in his training this morning. He belatedly realized he had been pacing for the past minute as he turned this over in his mind. What would Archie think if he came in while Horatio was fretting like this? Horatio forced himself sit down and resorted to rapidly drumming his fingers on the table. He waited, glancing furtively to the clock on the wall every few seconds.
After five minutes and twenty-five seconds, Archie returned, looking a mess. His eyes were unfocused, his eyelids were fluttering, his hair was mussed, his breathing was unnervingly shallow, and he was almost vibrating with tension.

Horatio cleared his throat. “... Hello. Welcome back. Is ... is everything alright?”

Archie dragged his face up to look at Horatio, his glassy eyes going right through him. “Hmm? Oh. Yes. Fine.” Archie then cast a feeble smile in his direction before staring at the floor. It was not a convincing performance.

Horatio opened his mouth to call his bluff, and then paused. They had only just exchanged names! What right did he have to press for details? “Oh ... alright. Good! ... Good.” He cast about frantically for something to say. “Er, would you like me to put in a request for some of those journals or letters I’d mentioned earlier?”

Archie didn’t respond or even look in his direction.

“... Archie?”

Archie blinked slowly, shook his head sharply to clear it, then winced with his entire body. He staggered forward and caught himself on the desk, gripping it with both hands until his knuckles went white. He groaned and doubled over, pressing his forehead against his knuckles. He was becoming progressively more pale by the second and starting to tremble and sweat.

“... Archie? What’s wrong?”

“Pre ... ictal ... headache,” Archie gritted out. “Shit. Not now.”

“Pre-ictal ...” Horatio cast his memory back frantically to the summers spent in his father’s office. “That’s ... epilepsy? No, it’s alright, you don’t need to talk. Raise one finger if that’s correct.”

Archie lifted a shaking index finger without looking up.

“Right, good. Let’s see ...” Horatio took a deep breath and looked around the room. “There are pillows on the chair over by the window. I’m going to run and bring them here. I’ll be right back. 30 seconds.” He took off to the other side of the room, grabbed the four large pillows in his arms, and sprinted back. He dumped them unceremoniously on the floor and spread them out.

“Alright, Archie, the pillows are ready. Can you lie down?”

Archie tried to relinquish his hold on the desk, but clamped down on it again immediately with a shudder and a groan. He was shaking harder now. “Can’t ... move,” he whispered.

Damn it all to hell. “Let me help? That will hurt less than hitting the floor.”

Archie gave a slight nod.

Horatio stepped up behind Archie so they were almost touching and reached one arm around his waist. Archie clutched Horatio’s hand like a drowning man would a Kisby ring and collapsed into his arms with a pained whimper. Horatio gently lowered Archie onto the pillows, then knelt by his side to the right of the makeshift bed. Archie maintained his vice-like grip on Horatio.

“There. It’s alright. Can I get you anything else? Any meds you need to take?” Horatio hoped desperately that he was doing a good job of being soothing.
Archie’s face was screwed up tightly in pain, and tears were starting to leak out of the corners of his eyes. He shook his head slightly.

Horatio felt his own eyes start to water in response. “I’ll be right here,” he whispered, and ran his thumb gently over Archie’s with what he hoped was a comforting stroke.

Archie opened his eyes. They met Horatio’s, and conveyed all his pain, fear, and something softer that Horatio couldn’t quite decipher.

Then, with a scream, Archie began to convulse.

Chapter End Notes

Works Inspired by This Chapter:
The wonderful solitaryjo made this beautiful collage:
http://respectablespy.tumblr.com/post/155520988062/little-thing-inspired-by-the-first-chapter-of

Thank you so much!! I'm honored!
“Well, you did say to call if something came up . . . Yes. Yes, sir. No, it’s under control. He should be coming around soon.”

That voice. Where was it? Scratch that; where was he? The floor? No, this surface was soft. Pillows? Unusual. But better than concrete. Or cement.

“Thank you, sir. Trial by fire indeed.”


“The rest of the day? Are you sure?”

Why wasn’t he shivering? He was usually cold after seizures. Was this extra weight a blanket? No, this had sleeves. A coat? He hadn’t brought a coat. How . . . ?

“Right. Thank you, Mr. Matthews. See you soon.”

Oh. It must be Horatio’s. Nice fellow. Kind smile. Ridiculously attractive. And here he was, drooling and helpless on the floor of Horatio’s workplace! God, what must Horatio think of him?

“Archie? Can you hear me? How do you feel?”

“. . . Peachy.” It was a pity he couldn't roll his eyes in this state.


“Water?”

“Oh! Yes. Of course! Wait right here. . . Of course you’ll be right here. Just . . .” A frustrated sigh. “Right. I’ll be right back.” And then there was silence.

Well done, Archie, you’ve driven someone away in record time . At least he didn’t appear to have pissed himself this time. God, what did it say about his life that not pissing himself was cause for celebration?

No, better not to think about that now. He didn’t want to start feeling sorry for himself; then he’d start crying or thinking about the bastard who had turned his life into a living hell, and neither of those options were going to get him off the floor and out of Horatio’s hair. Lovely hair, though. Those curls were a work of art. Shame he’d never get to know how they felt. Not helpful!

Concentrate on the task at hand. When he gets back, you’re getting up.

Footsteps approached. A plastic cup was placed in his shaking hands. He tried to sit up, but a hand pressed gently against his chest, holding him still. A second came up to support his head, lifting it high enough that he could take a sip. “Drink. Slowly now.”

The cool water soothed his throat. Unfortunately, it did nothing for his headache. Or his embarrassment.
Horatio gently lowered him back to the pillows. “Better?”

Archie nodded, then lay silent for a few moments until some of the agony from that simple act had dimmed. “Seems I . . . outdid the camera . . . . in cocking up your day.”

Horatio stifled a giggle. Who knew that sound was even in his repertoire? “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but the camera won that competition. You weren’t here earlier this morning to see what it got up to. Pesky little blighter.”

It was sweet of Horatio to try to cheer him up.

“See? You’re smiling! Better already! Can I get you anything? Call someone to take you home?”

The rejection stung more than he’d anticipated. “No. I’ll . . . get a cab. Be on my way.” He struggled, sat partway up, and his head spun like a particularly enthusiastic top. The world tilted, and the pillows were coming closer.

He stopped falling. Why hadn’t he hit his head? He blinked and looked down. There were arms around his chest, holding him up. Horatio again. At least he wasn’t panicking at being grabbed unexpectedly. Or maybe his brains were still too scrambled from his fit for PTSD to kick in. That would be funny if it weren’t so pathetic.

“Archie, you can’t take a cab in this condition. My car is just outside; at least let me drive you home.”

Archie scoffed. “Don’t be absurd. It’s your first day. I’ll manage.”

“Mr. Matthews gave me the rest of the day off. It’s really no trouble at all.”

Archie opened his mouth to object—*I can fend for myself, thank you very much* should do it, or maybe *a bit early to come ‘round to my place* followed by a wink—but then a new slew of images raced through his mind. Navigating while alone, disoriented, and too weak to stand usually ended with him waking up on the pavement with strangers gawking at him. He shuddered.

“If you insist.”

“Let me just gather my things,” Horatio said with a pat on his shoulder. Then he froze and looked about him. “Er, I think you’ll fall over if I let go,” he said sheepishly.

Archie managed a wry smile. “Probably. Maybe you could prop me against that desk? Should be out of the way enough,” he said, stifling a yawn.

“Or you could lie back down while I get ready.”

Archie gave a slight nod, and Horatio slowly lowered him back to the pillows.

“I’ll be back soon. Rest now,” Horatio whispered.

The pillows felt blissful under Archie’s head, and the world started to slip away. He drifted off to the comforting sensation of hair being brushed from his forehead.

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A squeeze of his hand. A gentle pressure on his shoulder.

“Archie, time to go.”
The words bounced around in his head in search of something to latch on to. Reluctantly, he opened his eyes. They felt like sandpaper. The gritty kind. Horatio’s blurry face hovered over his. He smiled. Horatio was nice.

Horatio’s hand swam into view and stayed there. Archie stared at it. What was it for?

Archie heard a faint chuckle.

“Right. Up you get.”

Warm, safe arms enveloped him. His were draped around Horatio. They fit together perfectly. The world shifted, and the ground fell away. Horatio wouldn’t let him fall.

“Let’s get you home to sleep it off. No, not right now! Stay with me! Move your feet!”

What was that line? Ah, yes. “Are you askin’ me to dance?”

Horatio gaped like a fish.

“S’from Firefly. Great TV show. S’about ships. In space. In a Western.” Stringing those words together had been surprisingly difficult: they kept twirling just out of reach.

Horatio cleared his throat. “Er, yes. Ships. Good. Er, let’s focus on getting you home in one piece first.”

The world wobbled wildly: was he on land or sea? Everything was careening out of control. The familiar sirens of panic blared in the back of his mind. He shut his eyes and focused on Horatio, pressed close against his side. The sirens retreated into the distance.
Horatio had no idea how he managed to get Archie out the door, down the stairs to the entrance, out to the car park, and buckled into the car. Archie was surprisingly heavy for his height. How was that even possible? He must be deceptively muscular.

Horatio almost tripped over his own feet in shock. Where had that thought come from? He shook his head and tried to focus, then climbed into the driver’s seat as quietly as possible and risked a glance at Archie.

Archie's eyes were closed, his head resting against the seat back, and his breathing looked normal. He almost looked peaceful, apart from a slight furrow in his brow. Was that from pain? Anxiety? Nausea? Horatio sighed internally as he switched on the ignition. Staring at him this closely was completely inappropriate. He should deliver him home quickly and move on.

"Archie?" he asked quietly. "What’s your address?"

Archie responded without opening his eyes. "105 Hales Lane, apartment 4."

Horatio frowned. "Oh. You moved?"

Archie stilled, then cracked an eye open. "What?"

"The address on your bank statement. It's different."

Archie raised an eyebrow. "Quite a memory. Yes, it's different. Subletting closer to the Caird for the summer. Just moved in."

Horatio's forehead wrinkled in confusion. "But... it's not that much closer."

Archie shrugged slightly, closed his eyes again, and turned his face away. "Wanted a change."

Horatio frowned. He'd only been able to afford his own rather shabby sublet because of the internship's housing stipend. How could Archie just up and leave on a whim? It all seemed rather wasteful. Was there something objectionable about his previous flat?

But Archie stayed resolutely silent, arms crossed over his chest, and facing the window. Horatio tried to push it from his mind. After all, he didn't need to understand; he just needed to take Archie to his new flat safely.

Horatio shrugged and tapped the new address into his phone’s GPS. Only a ten-minute drive, and all on major roads. That minimised his chances of making some catastrophic mistake. Such as getting into an accident. Or getting lost. He swallowed.

"Right then. Off we go," he said, more to himself than to Archie, as he reversed out of his parking spot. Naturally, the car’s brakes chose that moment to squeal. Archie winced.

"Oh! Damn!" Horatio began. "The Indy’s brakes can be a little loud sometimes. I should take her to the garage for a tune-up."

Archie perked up slightly. "The Indy? Indiana Jones?"

"Hmmm? Oh, no. The Indefatigable! Captain Edward Pellew’s ship! Launched in 1784 as an Ardent-class 64-gun third-rate ship-of-the-line, converted to a 44-gun fifth-rate frigate and
commissioned in 1794, and broken up in 1816. Beautiful vessel. She took 27 prizes! I’ll have a whole chapter on her engagements in my thesis!”

Horatio started castigating himself immediately. Archie needed sleep, not naval trivia! What the hell was his--

“Captured many French prizes, has she? This car?” Archie asked, with a hint of a smile.

Horatio was startled into a laugh. “The name refers more to her spirit than to her success on the battlefield. She’s twelve years old: a bit temperamental, but reliable. She doesn't do the original Indy justice, but I still enjoy the little tribute.”

Archie murmured in agreement. “Ever sailed on a ship like that?”

Horatio turned red. “Er, once. For a module.”

After a pause, Archie cracked one eye open and tilted his head to look at Horatio. “And?”

Horatio sighed. “And I was seasick. Spent the entire voyage with my head over a bucket. I decided as soon as I was back onshore that I was better suited to studying tales of the high seas than living them.”

Archie shot him a sympathetic look, then closed his eyes again. “That’s a shame.”

Horatio shrugged. “In a way. But I’ve always loved naval history, so it all worked out for the best.”

“Have an interest in medicine, too?” Archie asked.

Horatio frowned. “What?”

“You knew about epilepsy. The recovery position.”

“Oh, that,” Horatio responded, ducking his head as best he could while driving. “My father’s a GP. I worked the desk at his practice for the last six summers. Painfully tedious. There was an educational poster on epilepsy and seizure first aid on the wall across from my desk for a few summers. I couldn’t help but memorise it. Anyone would have done the same.”

“Mmm. Of course. Perfectly natural.”

Horatio wasn’t quite sure how to read the expression on his face.

“Archie,” Horatio began before he could change his mind, “I noticed that you weren’t wearing any MedicAlert identification . . .”

“Didn’t bring it with me to the new flat,” Archie murmured.

“Archie! What were you---”

Archie winced.

Horatio forced himself to return to a more reasonable volume. “Sorry. I just meant -- isn't that -- can't you go back and get it?”

“Not necessary. It’s under control,” Archie said, turning his head to face away from Horatio.

“Right,” Horatio muttered to the road.
They drove for a minute in silence.

Archie sighed and rolled his head to point toward Horatio again. “S’all fairly new. Still getting used to it.”

Horatio frowned. What was it he’d read? “Adult onset is caused by . . . blunt force head trauma, isn’t it? What happened?”

Archie raised an eyebrow at Horatio. “Hit my head.”

_Damn it._ “Oh. Er. Right. Sorry.”

“So am I,” Archie muttered.

The Indy’s brakes squealed again as they stopped at a red light.

Horatio wished he could sink through the floorboards. How could he have asked a veritable stranger how he had developed a serious medical condition? He had to fix this.

“What prompted you—” Horatio started.

“How did you—” Archie said simultaneously.

There was a long pause. Horatio turned to look at Archie, who had opened his eyes again and was looking back at him.

“So, who talks first? You talk first? I talk first?” Archie asked. But his vowels and the pitch were off. _Was he slurring? Was his sudden American accent a sign of brain damage from the seizure? What should he do?_

Archie raised an eyebrow. “Star Wars: The Force Awakens?” he asked with his normal accent.

Horatio breathed a sigh of relief. “ Haven’t seen it.”

“We really must work on your pop culture references,” Archie said with a smile.

Horatio froze. Archie had said “we”? Archie still wished to spend time with him?

“. . . Horatio? The light’s green.”

“Hmmm? Oh! Right,” Horatio said with a start and started to drive again.

After a minute, Archie spoke up again. “You were saying?”

“Ah. Yes. What prompted you to become an actor?”

Archie waited so long to respond that Horatio took his eyes off the road to look at him. He was tilting his head in thought and had a distant look in his eyes. “Shakespeare and the theatre. Appreciation for the beauty and play of language in a good script.” Then, he frowned and stared at his hands. “The chance to be someone else,” he said more quietly. He shook his head and looked back at Horatio with another half smile. “What about you and ships?”

Horatio stopped trying to decode the flurry of emotions that had flitted across Archie’s face during that last speech and focused on the road again. “Oh. I’ve always been fascinated by the sea, ever since I read the Aubrey-Maturin series as a boy. Studied everything I could about it. After that, naval history was just . . . it was in my blood, I suppose.”
Archie nodded and closed his eyes. “What brought you to Greenwich?”

Horatio blushed. “Well, I’m here on an internship, as well as for my research. My advisor recommended it.” There was no need to mention that his advisor had selected him over fifty other students for the position, or that it was the most prestigious internship at King’s College. He hadn’t done anything to deserve it.

Much to his relief, the GPS indicated that he should turn right into the car park for the small cluster of white brick buildings. “We’re here,” he said, before Archie could ask him anything else. “Which one is it?”

“Second from the left, by the lamppost, second floor.”

Horatio pulled into the empty spot in front of the building and turned off the car.

Archie opened his eyes and took in the wooden exterior staircase that led to his door. He shuddered, then turned to Horatio with a shallow smile. “Right. Well, I better be off, then.” His fingers fumbled with his seatbelt for a good twenty seconds as he tried to free himself from it. “Fucking hell,” he muttered.

Horatio sprang into action. This was something he could do. “Here. Let me,” he said, and reached over to unbuckle Archie’s seatbelt.

Instead of being grateful or relieved, Archie looked away and covered his face with his right hand. He took a deep breath, then exhaled shakily.

Before Horatio had time to ask what was wrong, Archie cleared his throat, then scrubbed at his face. “Right. Take two. Goodbye, Horatio,” he said, and started to push open the door.

Horatio was out of the car and by the passenger’s side door in time to catch Archie as he stumbled before he realised he’d even unbuckled his seatbelt.

“Archie, stop. You’ll hurt yourself! At least let me at least help you inside?”

Archie muttered something inarticulate under his breath, then huffed in irritation and placed his arm around Horatio’s shoulders.

“Right.” Horatio stared in trepidation at the wooden journey that rose up before them. “One foot in front of the other.”

Together, they began their slow trek towards the orange-lit stairwell.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Nightmare of past rape attempt (to skip it, don’t read the section in italics from the section break through the word “NO!”)

Silly note: The Worthington Chronicles are fictional and only exist in my head (and in the world of this fic)! Sorry to disappoint!

By the time they finally entered the flat, both Horatio and Archie were out of breath, and Archie’s vision was starting to swim.

“Right. Archie, where to now?”

Archie pictured his comfortable bed. Then he pictured the distance between himself and the bedroom. His stomach churned. “Sofa. Living room. Through the kitchen, on the right.”

“Aye aye. Plotting a course for two points starboard.”

Archie glared at him. Horatio looked appropriately chastened.

Maybe that hadn’t been entirely fair. Horatio had just carried him up two flights of stairs. Being compared to a boat was a small price to pay.

“Mind the corner!” he yelped, as Horatio narrowly avoided catching his funny bone against the kitchen counter.

After two other close calls, they reached the living room. Horatio bent his knees and slid Archie down onto the sofa.

“Thank God for whoever invented the sofa,” Archie moaned, closing his eyes and relishing being horizontal again. “Probably the first Earl of Sofa, or some such nonsense.”

“The 4th Earl of Chesterfield for the most iconic design, actually.”

Archie opened his eyes and shot him an incredulous look, but his expression softened immediately. Judging by Horatio’s wide eyes and slightly parted lips, Horatio was equally surprised by that quip. Archie settled for an amused smirk. “Good to know.”

But Horatio continued to stand awkwardly in the living room, his hands clasped behind his back, looking as if he were awaiting orders. Archie decided to put him out of his misery. “You must be exhausted after dragging me all that way: take a seat.”

Horatio hesitated, then shook his head. “You need sleep.”

Archie opened his mouth to agree, but found he didn’t relish the thought of being alone. “It can wait,” he said instead. “Would you like some . . . I don’t know, tea or something? I probably have some in the kitchen.” He struggled to sit up.
Horatio lunged forward, put his hand on Archie’s shoulder, and gently urged him back down on the sofa. “Archie! Lie still! I can get it myself.”

Archie chuckled halfheartedly. “My mother would disown me if she ever found out that I was disgracing the Kennedy name like this. Very well. Kettle should be next to the toaster. Mugs are . . . bugger, where did I put them . . . third cabinet on the right? Tea’s in the canister . . . I think,” he called after Horatio’s retreating form.

Once the silence settled, the sheer absurdity of the situation crashed over Archie. Here he was totally helpless, and yet he’d invited a stranger into his flat for tea. Had his self-preservation instinct finally given up and died after the last two years of overtime? Self-preservation. Hilarious. As if anything had been preserved. What did he have left? Certainly not his pride or sanity. Or his body, so hopelessly broken that it had seizures in response to a phone call--

Archie cut himself off. He’d never stop if he started down that path, and then what sort of company would he be when Horatio returned? He listened to the clinking sounds coming from the kitchen and put his hand in his pocket. He clasped the familiar metal pocket charm tightly and ran his fingers over its surface. He focused on breathing and emptying his mind.

At the sound of footsteps, he pulled his hand out of his pocket and looked up. Horatio returned to the room, glanced around, then sat on the edge of the armchair, his fingers tapping repeatedly against Archie’s Shakespearean insults mug.

Was Horatio nervous? The knots in Archie’s stomach started to unclench at the sight.

The silence stretched on.

Archie took a deep breath and tried to suck up his pride. He knew what he had to say. He only hoped Horatio wouldn’t mind if he did it while staring at the arm of the sofa near his feet.

“Thanks. For staying with me, making sure I didn’t crack my skull open, drown in my own sick, or collapse on the streets of Greenwich like some tragic heroine from a Victorian novel. You didn’t have to do any of that, and I appreciate your going out of your way to make sure I survived intact.”

He swallowed, then forced his head back up to look at Horatio.

Horatio sat up straighter. “Of course I would help! What kind of monster would abandon someone in that condition?”

Archie’s mind threw up some vivid pictures.

Better to not disabuse Horatio of his belief in the inherent goodness of mankind.

“Anyway,” Archie said with a wry smile, “at least I made your day more memorable. You’re not likely to forget the mouthy fuckwit whose hand you had to hold while he drooled on the library’s floor.”

Horatio blinked. “I didn’t mind. But, Archie, you shouldn’t talk about yourself like that, it’s--”

Archie rolled his eyes. “I’m allowed to insult myself!”

Horatio gave him The Look of Earnestness. “Having epilepsy isn’t something to be ashamed of, Archie. It doesn’t make you--”

“For fuck’s sake, Horatio. I’ve heard it all before. Give it a rest,” Archie interrupted him, pinching the bridge of his nose.
“But--”


Horatio frowned. “Archie, I didn’t mean to--”

Archie waved his hand and cut him off again. “I know, I know.”

What the hell was he doing? He’d invited Horatio in to chat, not to grouch at him. Maybe he could still salvage this interaction, if not the friendship.

“Didn’t mean to take your head off,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “Seizures make me cranky sometimes. Let’s just talk about something else.”

Horatio opened his mouth to say something, then closed it and nodded. “Alright,” he said instead, “tell me about the film you’re going to appear in! Who’s your character? What’s the plot? Or is that top secret?”

Archie’s stomach plummeted. Ah yes, the production. That damn phone call had ruined everything. How could he possibly explain to the director why he wanted to quit? *Excuse me, but I’d rather not be on the set with my rapist. I’d prefer to avoid having a panic attack or a seizure on camera.* Keene was right: he’d be tainted. Acting was all he had. He’d rather die than let that Simpson take his career, too.

“Archie? Archie, are you alright?”

Archie blinked and looked up. Horatio was half out of his seat and looked ready to vault the coffee table to rush to his side. So much for convincing Horatio he was on the mend. Or good friend material.

“At ease, lieutenant. Just felt rather unwell there for a moment.” That should buy him at least a few moments to pull himself together.

Horatio was still frowning. “What can I do?”

Archie tried to smile. “Quite the man of action, aren’t you? Nothing, unfortunately. It’ll pass. Now, where were we? Ah, right. The movie.” He took a deep breath. “Well, I play Second Lieutenant James Griffiths, a--”

“You’re in the WORTHINGTON CHRONICLES!!??”

Archie winced at the volume. But at least distracting Horatio had proved easier than he’d anticipated. “Know them, do you?” He attempted his cocky grin.

Horatio was practically vibrating with excitement. “Archie, that’s wonderful! James Griffiths is a fascinating character! His courage, his humanity, his unwavering devotion to Algy! And Algernon Worthington is such an inspiring captain: so decisive and inventive! The way he puts out the fire in the hold? And then spins the ship around to fire on the Spanish fleet? Absolutely brilliant!”

Archie chuckled. “I’ll take your word for it. I’ve only read the script, not the books.”

Horatio hesitated, then began fidgeting with his hands. “I . . . erm, I have the first few volumes in my flat: would you like to borrow them? I could bring them to the library tomorrow.”

Archie nodded. “I’d like that,” he said with a smile.
Horatio’s grin came back full force, and Archie fought hard to keep from blushing. *For goodness sake, Archie. Pull yourself together. They’re books, not roses!*

Suddenly, Horatio snapped to attention. “Archie, what are you going to do about dinner?”

Archie shrugged. “Sleep until morning and get some breakfast then?”

Horatio frowned. “Don’t you need food for your seizure medication to work?”

Archie rolled his eyes. “Yes, because it’s working so beautifully now.”

Horatio’s frown deepened. Archie felt a sudden, surprising urge to make the frown disappear.


Horatio tapped his index finger against his lower lip as he pondered the question. “Japanese food?”

It didn’t sound absolutely revolting. “We could try?”

“Excellent!” Horatio said as he pulled out his phone and tapped at it. “Yama Momo is the closest option. I’ll go pick it up.” He paused. “Oh. The front door. Should I leave it unlocked?”

Archie reached into his back pocket for his keys. This day was becoming more and more surreal.

“Lock it behind you. Let yourself in. It’s the bronze-coloured key.” He dropped the entire keyring in Horatio’s hand. *Might as well go all in.*

Horatio stared at the keys in his palm as though they held the mysteries of the universe. “Right,” he said after a stunned pause. “Er, right! I’ll . . . be right back. With food. For us.” With that, he turned, almost tripped over the coffee table, and disappeared around the corner into the kitchen. The front door closed with a click, and Archie was alone again.

Archie stared at the spot where Horatio had been. Why was Horatio helping? Why did he care? Had he really just made a friend despite having a seizure? None of this made any sense. Maybe it would all be clearer after a nap? He closed his eyes and let himself drift off.

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The table edge bit into his back. His fingers scrabbled at its surface, grasping for anything he could use as a weapon. He glanced furtively around the small room. The door was too far away. He was trapped.

“Did you think you could get away that easily?” Simpson growled, his face so close to Archie’s that the stench of sour beer filled Archie’s nose and mouth until he could taste it. “Jack’s missed you, boy.” He grabbed Archie’s shoulders, fingernails stabbing through his shirt, and shoved him down. Archie’s knees hit the floor with a force that made white lights burst before his eyes. He bit his tongue to keep from crying out. He knew what that would cause. Archie closed his eyes. He didn’t need to see to know the next step of Jack’s game. “Come on, lad. Do what you’re best at.”

He heard the zipper and the rustle of fabric. Smelled the stench of his flesh. Felt the press of it against his lips. He couldn’t. Not this time. He clenched his mouth shut and turned his face.

“Open up, you little whore.” Long fingers wrapped around his throat and began to squeeze. The finger pads dug into his flesh. “I said, open up, boy!” Archie tried to yank the fingers away, to scratch them, anything to relieve his burning pressure building up in his lungs. The fingers wouldn’t move. Spots crowded his eyes. The edges of his vision went gray. He couldn’t think,
couldn’t run, couldn’t move, couldn’t see anything but the fury in Jack’s eyes.

“Trying to fight me, are you? I’ll show you who’s in charge, you little—”

“NO!” Archie screamed as he shot up to a sitting position, arms flailing. His hands flew up to his neck as he choked and coughed.

“Archie! What’s wrong?”

A warm arm wrapped around his back, its hand resting gently on his shoulder.

“Shhhhhh, Archie. It’s alright.”

The thumb started slowly stroking his shoulder as he gasped, savouring the blissful rush of air into his lungs.


Oh God .

The world blurred as his eyes filled with tears he couldn’t fight. Archie swallowed hard and hunched forward, his head buried in his hands, as he tried to control his breathing. Horatio leaned forward with him, his other hand resting lightly on Archie’s upper arm.

Archie closed his eyes and tried to focus on the warm support of Horatio’s arm, on the tender motion of his hands, on the sound of his voice, still murmuring reassurances. He let Horatio’s gift of compassion and comfort wash away the stains and stench of the nightmare.

“Would you like to talk?” Horatio whispered once Archie’s ragged gasps had quieted.

Archie shook his head.

“Alright.” Horatio continued to rub soothing circles into his shoulders.

Gradually, Archie stopped shaking. His breathing calmed. His heartbeat slowed. His terror leaked out of his body along with his pride. He was empty, save for bone-deep, soul-crushing exhaustion.

He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and started to lie back down, his face buried in the crook of his arm. Horatio let go of Archie and shifted to the floor to give him room.

“Did you want to go back to sleep?”

“God, no!” Archie groaned. “Not just yet.” He was in no rush to repeat that humiliating display. But he had to do something to distract himself, and soon. If only his brain would cooperate instead of spinning in endless circles like a hamster wheel. “Any other suggestions?”

Horatio pressed his lips together as he considered their options. “We could start on your education in the ways of the Royal Navy. I have a documentary on my laptop you might find interesting . . . or calming, at least.”

Archie turned his head and gave Horatio a wry smile. “Anchors away.” He hoped his words contained the thanks he wasn’t yet ready to voice.

Horatio nodded and squeezed Archie’s shoulder. “First, dinner. Back in a moment.”

Archie watched with a fond smile as Horatio strode purposefully off to the kitchen and began
clattering around in the cabinets. A man with a mission. How could anyone exude such seriousness and conviction in Truth and Right, even in the simple act of getting food ready? And he was still here: he hadn’t discharged his duty as a Good Samaritan and then exited, pursued by bear. Archie shook his head. He shouldn’t get his hopes up. Hope had landed him here, with one more fit and nightmare to add to the growing tally.

Archie looked up at the sound of hurried footsteps to see Horatio reappear carrying a tray, which he placed on the table in front of them. It held a plate of chicken teriyaki, a bowl of rice, and a bowl of miso soup. Archie's stomach lurched. “Horatio, this is . . . I can’t--”

Horatio shook his head. “When you’re ready. It’ll keep.”

Archie swallowed, then nodded.

Horatio looked around him, his head cocked, his hand cupped around his chin, as he tapped a finger against his lip. “Linen closet?”

Archie narrowed his eyes and tilted his to head to look at Horatio straight on. Horatio raised his eyebrows, impatiently waiting for the answer. Archie rolled his eyes and hoisted himself partly off the sofa to point down the hallway. “Across from the loo. What do you want it for?”

Horatio took off without answering. Apparently once Horatio had a mission in mind, the rest of the world ceased to exist. Archie shook his head and lay back to stare at the ceiling.

A fleece blanket was rudely thrust into his mise-en-scène. The words “I DON’T JUST ARRIVE, I MAKE AN ENTRANCE” stood out in white against its dark blue background.

Archie stared incredulously at Horatio, who was still holding the blanket out to him expectantly, before he doubled over, howling with laughter.

Minutes later, Archie calmed down enough to wipe the tears from his eyes and look up, to see Horatio standing over him, his forehead wrinkled in confusion. “It’s a blanket? In case you get cold,” he explained.

Which promptly set Archie off again.

“For God’s sake, Archie. Just . . . just take the blanket.”

And really, what was there to say to that?

Archie took it from Horatio’s outstretched hand, shoulders still shaking with laughter, and draped it over himself before lying back down.

Horatio folded himself into the armchair and pulled out his computer from the leather shoulder bag at his feet. He loaded the documentary with a few clicks and placed the laptop on the coffee table behind their food. Almost immediately, he began fidgeting, trying to turn the chair and position himself so he could see the screen without also having his gangly limbs block Archie’s view.

After half a minute of watching the show not on the screen, Archie sighed dramatically and sat up. “Alright, that’s it. Come on over.”

Horatio froze. “. . . what?”

“You heard,” Archie said, testing out his cheekiest grin. “There’s plenty of room. You can even have some of this blanket you’ve become so fond of.” He scooched over, then gestured at the space
Horatio looked at Archie, then the open spot on the sofa, and then Archie again, before smiling hesitantly. He rose and joined Archie to perch on the edge of his seat, fingers drumming on his knee. He looked more like he was awaiting a prison sentence than sitting beside someone he’d just cuddled for the better part of half an hour.

Archie rolled his eyes. “I’m not contagious, Horatio.”

“What?! Archie, that’s not . . . I mean . . . of course . . . Oh hell--” Horatio trailed off when he realised Archie was grinning.

“Horatio, it’s fine,” Archie said, bumping shoulders with him. “Now sit back, relax, and enjoy the show. And feel free to interrupt with navy trivia. I’m all ears.”

Still slightly pouting from being teased, Horatio hit the play button on the computer and leaned back, his plate of food in his lap. Horatio’s miffed expression fell away the instant the words “Life at Sea in the Age of Sail: The Napoleonic Wars” flashed onto the screen.

Ten minutes later, Archie was at his wit’s end. The reenactments and production values were cringe-worthy, and the presenter desperately needed a crash-course in acting: his delivery was almost as painfully over-dramatic as the script. After the announcer had asserted “No quarter is expected. None will be given” with the gravitas worthy of the “Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow” speech from the Scottish Play, Archie couldn’t hold it back anymore. He opened his mouth to Mystery Science Theatre the whole affair, and to hell with the consequences, when Horatio spoke.

“That’s a frigate! They could carry anywhere from 20-44 guns. Faster than a ship of the line, so they were essential in a fight. They often functioned as scouts or convoy escorts as well! Worthington and Griffith started out as midshipmen on a frigate!”

Archie grinned, his irritation suddenly forgotten. This was a new, excitable version of Horatio: his hands had been flying to illustrate his points almost as quickly as his mouth.

Watching him would be much more fun than the documentary.

“What’s that one?”

Horatio’s answering smile made Archie’s question worthwhile. “Oh! That’s a ship of the line! First rate, I should think! Largest and most destructive, but also the slowest and least responsive. Triple-decker, 100-120 guns, with a crew of over 800.”

Horatio continued supplementing the documentary by answering Archie’s questions and introducing his own commentary, including an animated rant about the presenter’s oversimplification of Pellew’s engagement with the Droits de l’Homme. It was the highlight of the experience, second only to watching Horatio splutter after Archie’s crack about putting Rear Admirals in charge of poop decks.

After detailing the nuances of the hierarchy in the navy, the documentary shifted to discussing life aboard ship.

“The lieutenants stand watch, apart from the First Lieutenant on a ship of the line, of course. Watches are in seven shifts: five four-hours shifts and two two-hour shifts,” Horatio explained.

He leaned over and passed Archie the bowl of soup and a spoon, then continued. “Those standing
watch are responsible for the ship and its crew during that time. First watch runs from 8pm until midnight, and so on.”

By the time Horatio had finished explaining the dog watches, Archie discovered he had drained his bowl. Horatio handed him the rice.

After a few bites, Archie’s eyes began to feel heavy as the strain of the day caught up with him. He set the bowl down on the tray, and leaned back, pulling the blanket up a bit further and letting himself become boneless under its weight. He couldn’t quite tell where he ended and the cushions began. The static that had crackled in the back of his mind began to fade. Something about “eight bells” emanated from the tinny speakers as his eyes drifted shut.
Chapter 5

Something was tickling his nose.

After a few blinks, Horatio cracked his bleary eyes open.

Hair. Blond. Attached to a head.

Archie’s head.

A nice, comfortable weight against his shoulder.

Horatio’s eyes drifted shut and he nestled back into the cushions with a smile.

The words “Archie’s head” floated through his mind.

Horatio’s eyes shot open, only to flinch as the sun streamed in through the blinds. He held his breath as he stared at Archie, still fast asleep and pressed against his side, Horatio’s right arm sandwiched between Archie and the back of the sofa.

Horatio’s mind jolted into consciousness and tried to outrace his suddenly hammering pulse. How had he let this happen? The last thing he remembered was sitting in anxious silence after the documentary had finished, wracked with indecision about whether he should stay until Archie woke up or try to slip out quietly. He had been partway through making the mental list of pros and cons, each item tied to its potential outcome, but everything after that was a blank. The sleep deprivation from his pre-internship nerves must have finally caught up with him, and at the worst possible time.

And how had they even gotten into this position? Hadn't Archie been slightly further away? Oh, damn, had his exhausted brain decided to cuddle Archie like his long-lost childhood blanket? Or had Archie just listed over to the nearest available pillow-like surface?

Well, regardless, he should try to leave immediately, before Archie could realize he’d stayed the night uninvited if he didn't wish to jeopardize this newfound friendship.

Horatio pressed his lips together tightly as he tried to free the arm that Archie had pinned against the sofa with his shoulder. It was no use; he was stuck.

Horatio sighed and glanced over at Archie again. Archie looked so peaceful in his sleep, his brow unfurrowed, his face nuzzled against Horatio’s shoulder, his little huffs of breath ruffling his fringe.

Horatio tore his eyes away immediately. Surely it was invasive and inappropriate to watch someone while they slept. So why did his eyes keep sliding back to Archie, despite the lecture he’d given himself last night? What the hell was wrong with him?

He shook his head and stared resolutely at the window. No more looking at Archie. But what should he do? Wake Archie up? No, after yesterday’s emergencies, Archie needed all the sleep he could get.

Horatio started drumming his available fingers on his knee as he tried to make sense of yesterday. What had set off the nightmare? That epilepsy poster hadn’t listed them as seizure side effects. He only hoped his attempt at comforting had helped somewhat. He’d never had to do anything like
that before: he’d never had enough friends to acquire such skills--apart from Will, of course, but Will probably had never needed to be comforted in his life. What must it be like, to be that steady?

He shook his head. He didn’t have time to get distracted thinking of his own inadequacies. All that mattered was that soon, Archie would wake up and be horrified at Horatio’s overstepping the bounds of friendship. What was the protocol for this sort of situation? He needed a plan!

Archie shifted slightly, and Horatio whipped his head back to look at him. Archie’s eyelids twitched, and he brought a hand up to rub at his closed eyes, before nuzzling deeper into Horatio’s embrace.

An instant later, Archie became impossibly still, then slowly tilted his head up, blinking repeatedly until his eyes found Horatio’s face, mere centimetres away.

Horatio’s frozen brain grasped desperately for some way to apologize.

“Oh! Hello!” Archie said with a sleepy grin that made Horatio’s breath catch in his throat. Archie’s eyes lingered on his before traveling down to his mouth. “Have you been awake long?”

“You -- No -- I, er, only just woke up! Archie, I am so sorry--”

Archie waved him off with a grin. “Horatio, don’t start. We both needed the sleep.” He paused, then smirked. “You especially, after the workout I gave you yesterday.”

Horatio felt his cheeks start to burn. He tried to come up with something to say, but his brain wouldn’t respond. Archie had fried his circuits. Full-scale system shutdown. He ducked his head and tried to focus. Why wasn’t this a disaster? And was Archie flirting with him? No, that would be absurd. Clearly, Archie was just referring to those stairs. And was still partly asleep. He had to steer the conversation toward safer waters before he made an even bigger fool of himself.

“How are you feeling?”

Archie grinned. “Better. Ready to give the archives another go.”

Horatio froze, his stomach lurching. “Archie, what time is it?”

Archie blinked, then slowly sat up and pulled his phone out of his pocket with a frown. “7:30. Why?”

Horatio sprang off the sofa and started pacing. “I have to be there for training at 8:00! Damn! Damn damn DAMN! I haven’t shaved, or showered, or changed! I can’t show up looking like this on my second day!”

Archie stood up and walked to Horatio. He captured his flailing hands and looked him in the eyes. “Horatio, it’s fine. Help yourself to my razor, shower, towel, toiletries, whatever you need. You’re welcome to anything in my closet as well, but I doubt I have anything in your size. If you’re quick, you can make it with time to spare!”

Horatio hesitated, torn between propriety and responsibility, before nodding and dashing off, closing the door to the loo behind him. He stripped as quickly as possible, hanging his trousers and shirt from the hook on the back of the door. He climbed into the shower and wrenched the faucet on. He focused on the water splashing his skin. On lathering the soap. On methodically and rapidly applying it and rising it off. On repeating the process with shampoo. On the disgrace he’d feel if he arrived late. On literally anything but the smell of Archie’s soap on his body. The minty scent of Archie’s shampoo in his hair. The memory of Archie’s body against his.
He shook himself and turned the cold water tap up. He shivered as the freezing droplets reached him, cutting through his mental haze. He had made it through 21 years of his life without being distracted by anyone like this. So what was different about Archie? He shouldn’t be able to think about anything while running this late.

Horatio turned off the water, his teeth chattering. He allowed himself only a moment to relish the warmth of Archie’s fluffy blue towel wrapped around his shoulders before he began vigorously rubbing the water droplets off his limbs.

He glanced around, and his eyes fell on an electric razor in dismay. He far preferred the precision a bladed razor provided, but there was nothing for it. With a sigh, he got to work.

At 7:45, Horatio sprinted out of the loo, fully clothed and shaved, to find Archie standing in the kitchen, staring impatiently at a coffee maker.

“The expression about watched pots applies equally to coffee makers, I’m afraid. I don’t suppose you could wait 5 more minutes?”

Horatio looked longingly at the coffee before shaking his head. Coffee was an acceptable loss. Mostly. “Thanks for the attempt.”

Archie’s face fell slightly, before he rallied with a small smile. “Of course.”

Horatio opened his mouth to take his leave, but realised he hadn’t the faintest idea what to say. “I had a lovely time”? Too insensitive. “See you at the library”? Too presumptuous. “Thanks for sleeping with me last night”? Impossible. He settled for nodding and took a step towards the door.

Archie stopped his progress with a gentle hand on his forearm. Horatio paused and turned, staring at the hand touching him before meeting the eyes earnestly awaiting his. Archie gave him a soft smile, then enveloped him in a tight hug. “Thanks,” he whispered into Horatio’s neck.

Horatio froze and his back stiffened, his arms fixed by his side. His mind was racing. Should he hug back? Where exactly should he put his arms? Once he returned the hug, how many seconds should he maintain it before it became inappropriate?

Suddenly, the warmth was gone. Archie had dropped his hands, stepped back, and was scratching the back of his neck while staring at the floor. “Right. Got it. Enjoy work.”

To his horror, Horatio realised he had entirely failed to do anything in response to the hug, apart from thinking himself into knots.

On impulse, Horatio threw himself forward and flung his arms around Archie—forcefully enough to wring a quiet “Ooof” out of him—and held him for three seconds precisely, before stepping back. “You’re welcome,” he said to the floor, before fleeing, flinging the door shut behind him.

********

Horatio sprinted down the steps without looking back and didn’t stop until he reached the Indy. He climbed into the driver’s seat and slammed the door, letting his head fall back and hit the seat. Every imbecile knew how to hug! And now Archie had seen exactly how incompetent he was at friendship after that embarrassing display!

His phone vibrated, bringing him back to the present. He dug his phone out of his pocket and glanced at the text messages. They were all from Will:
7:30pm:

How’s the Caird? Staying late?

11pm:

Beds are strictly better than desks for sleeping. Go to bed, Horatio.

7:46am:

Hope your first day went well. Call when you have the chance.

Horatio groaned. He had completely forgotten he’d promised to Skype with Will at 7 last night. And, of course, Will had taken it in stride, without a single complaint. Will was much too good to him. He sent off a quick text--“Sorry, didn’t make it home last night. I’ll call tonight”--pulled up directions on Google Maps, and drove off.

********

By 10am, Horatio’s stomach was growling and his caffeine-withdrawal headache was in full force. It didn’t help that Mr. Matthews had been telling all their colleagues about his bravery and level-headedness during yesterday’s emergency, so everyone was treating him like some sort of conquering hero. Mr. Matthews had personally witnessed his feeble attempt to carry Archie out of the library, so he of all people should know not to describe it in such a glamorous light. He hadn’t done anything momentous--anyone would have done the same, so he didn’t merit this attention. All he wanted was some food and, strangely, to see Archie. But instead, lunch was hours away. And as for the latter, there was no point in wishing for the impossible.

“Fancy meeting you here.”

Horatio’s head snapped up to see Archie, standing in front of the desk, a huge grin on his face.

“I thought you might want some breakfast,” Archie said, dangling a styrofoam coffee cup and small waxy plastic bag in front of Horatio.

Horatio smiled so hard his cheeks hurt. “Archie, this is . . . Thank you!” Then he glanced over his shoulder and saw Mr. Matthews and Mr. Styles watching them. He tried not to cringe, and adopted a more professional demeanor. “But, we’re not allowed to have food up here. It’s supposed to stay in the cloakroom on the Ground Floor. Didn’t Mr. Oldroyd tell you that? He should be at the Information Desk there.

Archie blinked, his smile faltering, and looked over his shoulder toward the stairs. “Oh. No, the desk was empty.”

Horatio frowned. “Oh.” He tried not to look too longingly at either the food or Archie. He was at work. That had to come first. “Er. Well, thank you for stopping by, but I’m on duty right now, so I
couldn’t possibly--”

Mr. Matthews cut him off. “Nonsense. You go have a quick bite with your mate. We’ll cover for you.”

Horatio tried not to look too relieved at this sudden breach of protocol as he stumbled through his thank yous.

“Shall we?” Archie asked, gesturing toward the stairs, his smile back in full force.

Horatio nodded, then followed Archie down the stairs.

As he rounded the corner, Horatio heard Mr. Styles exclaim “Wait, that’s HIM?” over Mr. Matthews’ abortive attempts to shush him.

He hurriedly followed Archie the rest of the way down the staircase.

*********

“Wasn’t sure how you took your coffee, so I left it black,” Archie said, holding out the coffee cup once they had left the building.

Horatio snatched it and took an eager sip. He closed his eyes, savored the rich taste and bitter burn, and swallowed.

When Horatio opened his eyes again, Archie was staring at his throat, his lips parted slightly. At Horatio’s questioning glance, Archie blinked, shook his head, and chuckled. “That answers one question,” he said. “I had brought some creamer and sugar, just in case, but it looks like you’re more than happy with it as is.”

“Er, yes. Never seen the point in adding all those extra flavors. Why order coffee and then disguise the taste? You?”

Archie removed his backpack and took a clear plastic lidded cup with some sort of iced light brown creamy liquid from out of the side pocket. “My poison of choice: the sweeter the better.”

Horatio made a face. “What has that poor coffee done to you to deserve such treatment?”

Archie laughed. “I could ask you the same thing about your mouth. Why torture your taste buds with coffee as bitter as Scrooge’s soul? Anyway,” he continued before Horatio could retaliate, “I hope you like croissants,” he said holding it out. “Unless,” he said with a smirk, pulling it back towards himself, “you had to swear off all French food when you began to study Her Majesty’s Navy?”

Horatio rolled his eyes as he snatched it from Archie. “No, Archie, I am still allowed to eat French pastries. And cheese, even.” He paused. “Not so sure about frog’s legs, though,” he said with a smile.

Archie chuckled. “No French restaurants. Got it. How do you feel about, say, Indian food? Food from former, brutally oppressed colonies should be just what the navy ordered.”

Horatio shrugged. “Never had it. I’m not particularly fond of spicy food, but I could be convinced.”

Archie nodded and shot Horatio a quick smile, before glancing down at his hands. “Horatio,” he
began, then stopped. His tongue flicked out to wet his lips, and his eyelids fluttered slightly.

Horatio’s heart started hammering. Was this about his horrible hug technique? Or was Archie going to lecture him on the utter impropriety of spending the night uninvited?

Archie cleared his throat, squared his shoulders, and met Horatio’s concerned gaze. “I’ve enjoyed our time together. Which is impressive, given that I’ve spent much of it in pain, screaming, unconscious, or all of the above. I’d like to get to know you better. Both of us fully conscious and emergency-free.” He licked his lip again, then tilted his head and met Horatio’s wide eyes with a smirk. “And, since we jumped straight to waking up next to each other, I thought we could go back to some of the parts we missed. So: would you be interested in having dinner with me? As a date?”

Horatio was vaguely aware that his mouth was hanging open. Was he even interested in people, let alone men? Was that why he kept finding himself thinking about Archie? What were dates like? Where would he go to research this? What if he was terrible at it?

Archie took a step back, his hand in his pocket, an oddly bright smile plastered on his face, and started speaking more quickly. “But obviously, friends are fine. Great, even. If you’re interested.”

Horatio’s heart started hammering as Archie backed away from him. He had to say something to convince him to stay. “No!-- I mean--yes! Yes, I would like to have dinner with you.”

Archie paused. “Are you sure? There’s no pressure.”

Horatio weighed his options quickly. He hardly had any experience with friends beyond Will, so that would already be challenge enough. The idea of dating should fill him with dread. And yet, it didn’t. Well, not more than most things. What would dating entail? He imagined having his arms around Archie again, of waking up next to him, of his lips-- his face started to heat up and he cut off that progression immediately, attempting to curtail the embarrassed smile that kept threatening to take over his face. He had his answer.

“I’m sure. A -- date, sounds, er, good.”

Archie raised an eyebrow. “I’m going to try to assume that hesitance isn’t personal.”

Horatio kicked himself. They hadn’t even gone on the date and he was already making a mess of it. “It’s not.”

Archie looked at his eyes intently for a moment, then nodded and took a step closer. “Alright, then,” he said with a smile that made his eyes sparkle. “When would you like to go on this date? 6pm tonight?”

Horatio smiled back instinctively. “That should work.” Then he remembered the text. “Oh. Damn. I promised I’d call Will tonight. Would 7pm work?”

“7 is fine.” Archie paused and frowned slightly. “Who’s Will?”

“Hmm? Oh, my roommate, at King’s College London!”

Archie nodded, then looked sheepish. “Ah, right. Catching him up on your first day of the internship? That should be interesting.”

Horatio imagined telling Will that he woke up with Archie in his arms and was now going on a date. Will had been after him to get out more for years. Apparently all it had taken was a trip to Greenwich. “Very,” he agreed with a smile.
Archie raised an eyebrow again, as if waiting for something, then shrugged. “So, reservation for 7? Mogul Restaurant alright?”

Horatio nodded. “And I could pick you up at 6:45 if you’d like.”

Archie grinned. “I’d be honoured to sail the streets of Greenwich in the Indy again with you at its helm.”

Horatio opened his mouth to respond, but closed it again when he realised he had no idea what to say.

Archie laughed and slung his arm over Horatio’s shoulders, bringing their heads close together. “It means yes, Horatio.”

Horatio stiffened, unaccustomed to the touch, then brought his arm up to Archie’s shoulder to mimic the gesture. “Alright,” he said, turning his head to look at Archie. He started to grin as he looked into Archie’s eyes and relaxed under the comfortable weight of Archie’s arms around him.

If the rest of dating was like this, he could certainly figure it out.

Archie’s eyes dropped to his lips. Horatio’s heart started thudding eagerly. That was new.

He blinked to try to focus. He was at work. One shouldn’t think about . . . that sort of thing at work. “Oh! Damn! What time is it?”

Archie instantly withdrew his arm and moved further away. Horatio forced himself to not pull him closer.

“Oh, of course. You’re on the clock. Although,” Archie began with a mischievous, but slightly hesitant grin, “I can’t say I’m sorry I distracted you.”

Horatio smiled back. “Neither can I.”

Archie’s grin returned full-force. “Shall we act like responsible adults?” he asked, gesturing towards the entrance. “I still need to pick up some light reading materials. I’ve heard from a reliable source that Norrie’s Navigation book is quite gripping.”

Horatio laughed as they walked toward to the door. “Only if you like trigonometry.”

“Oh, God, really?” Archie groaned, as he stopped and turned back to Horatio, blocking the entranceway. “Is there something else I could read? Literally ANYTHING else? A treatise on different types of knots, for instance?”

Horatio chuckled. “We’ll see what we can do. Come on, let’s go. I don’t actually have the catalogue memorised yet.”

He opened the door, and they walked inside.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: mild panic attack

Archie walked into the Reading Room and plopped the stack of books down with a thump on the nearest open desk space. At the sound, a balding man at the table in front of him turned around to send him an imperious glare. Archie responded with the most charming, innocent look in his repertoire, but the man shook his head in disgust, muttering something about “enthusiasts,” before turning back to his work.

Archie sat down with a sigh, the pile of books almost blocking his view of the entrance to the room. If Horatio were here, he could ask him questions, mock the bits that were sure to be painfully jingoistic, and maybe even get Horatio to giggle again. It was such a thrill to coax a laugh through the cracks in his new friend’s reserve. But Horatio would be at the desk for hours, and Archie needed to research, not spend all day daydreaming about his laugh. Or the bashful curve of his smile. Or those beautiful, full lips--

Why had Horatio hesitated, instead of going for the kiss? Were they moving too quickly, or was it because Horatio was at work?

Archie shook his head. He’d figure it out tonight. He couldn’t afford to get distracted now. He needed to get started on these materials.

He cracked open the book on the top of the pile and smiled. Horatio had been so enthusiastic about selecting books for him, alternating between vibrating with excitement and remembering that he was A Serious Professional At Work every time he glimpsed a colleague. Horatio had nothing to worry about: Mr. Matthews and Mr. Styles obviously respected him and looked out for him.

What was it about Horatio that brought that out in people? Archie sighed. His life was complicated enough as it was. He shouldn’t have any mental energy left over to worry about someone else’s well-being.

And yet, somewhere between Horatio’s sitting down in his armchair, nervously tapping on the mug, and Horatio’s hesitant relocation to the sofa, something had changed.

For fuck’s sake, he’d brought the man breakfast . . . and asked him out on a date, all after barely knowing him.

Not exactly rational.

Of course, Horatio’s actions over the last twenty hours might have had something to do with it. Why had he stayed? Did people that good actually exist?

Archie closed his eyes and indulged in the memory of Horatio’s arm around him, anchoring him after the nightmare. Horatio’s dark eyes gazing into his as his first sight this morning. Horatio’s lanky frame pressed up against his own. Horatio’s hands, stroking his shoulder. . .

Horatio had such expressive hands. And tonight, with any luck, they’d roam over his body as they
kissed, Horatio pressed against him, and he’d —

But what if he couldn’t?

What if he had a panic attack?

Archie shuddered as his eyes flew open, his heart racing. His other secrets had already been exposed and dragged out into the open. He wasn’t ready for Horatio to know that one.

He took a deep breath and shook his head. Here he was, getting distracted again. For fuck’s sake. He was not going to let Simpson ruin his date, his sex life, or his research. He needed to impress Horatio by memorizing information about the navy. And to prepare for this role, of course.

Archie rolled his shoulders, cracked his neck, and looked down at the page in front of him. The Articles of War stared back. Death and flogging for one and all. Because nothing improved morale and safety like living in fear of violence. Not that Lieutenant James Griffiths would object. He shook his head and tried to focus. It was like any other acting gig: he just had to get into the mindset of his character. He was a professional: he could turn off his knee-jerk reaction to abusive hierarchical systems for long enough to read this.

Article 1: All Commanders, Captains, and Officers, in or belonging to any of His Majesty’s Ships or Vessels of War, shall cause the public worship of Almighty God, according to the Liturgy of the Church of England established by Law, to be solemnly, orderly and reverently performed in their respective Ships.

Archie rolled his eyes. Absurd but unsurprising.

Article 2: All Flag Officers, and all Persons in or belonging to His Majesty's Ships or Vessels of War, being guilty of profane Oaths, Cursings, Execrations, Drunkenness, Uncleanness, or other scandalous Actions, in derogation of God's Honour, and Corruption of Good Manners, shall incur such Punishment as a Court Martial shall think fit to impose, and as the Nature and Degree of their Offence shall deserve.

Archie raised an eyebrow. No swearing? In the Navy? How did they enforce that one?

Article 3: If any Officer, Mariner, Soldier, or other Person of the Fleet, shall give, hold, or entertain Intelligence to or with any Enemy or Rebel, . . . every such Person so offending, and being thereof convicted by the Sentence of a Court Martial, shall be punished with Death.

Archie frowned, then tilted his head. Harsh, but wasn't that how spying and treason was always dealt with during wartime? Maybe the Articles weren’t as draconian as he’d been led to believe.

His eyes skimmed further down the page.

Article 29: If any Person in the Fleet shall commit the unnatural and detestable Sin of Buggery or Sodomy with Man or Beast, he shall be punished with Death by the Sentence of a Court Martial.

Archie slammed the book shut. Of course it was a capital punishment in England at the time, but for it to be considered an offense on par with treason? What the fuck was wrong this these people? How many people lost the love of their lives and had to mourn in private unless they wanted to be hanged from the yardarm? For fuck’s sake, England had wanted sailors so badly for this war that they pressed people into service! And yet, depending on where you stuck your genitals, your own side would kill you before the French had a chance to do the job.

Archie froze. If both parties involved were sentenced to death, what did that mean if someone--a
friendless midshipman or powder monkey—was targeted by a predator?

Was there no recourse if someone like Simpson—

Archie’s heart pounded as his breath started to hitch. His palms were sweating, his throat was tightening, the walls were—

He plunged a hand into his pocket and clasped the small metal pocket charm, his fingers shaking as he traced the familiar circuit over each raised compass point.

*North, East, South, West.*

*North.*

*East.*

*South.*

*West.*

He was in the Caird. Not RADA.

He was safe.

Archie swallowed, then took a slow, shaky breath. He braced himself, then looked around him. The library was fairly full, but no one was staring at him. Everyone was still lost in their books. His momentary lapse had somehow escaped unnoticed.

He exhaled slowly and sank back in his chair. That compass was the best two pounds he’d ever spent.

He closed his eyes and focused on breathing normally. He’d give himself two minutes to pull himself together, then try again.

When his heart stopped beating like a hummingbird fleeing a forest fire, Archie opened his eyes again. He took a deep breath, sat up straighter, and flipped open the book again, ignoring his still shaking hands.

He scanned the table of contents until his eyes fell on a section labeled “sailing a ship.”

That sounded safe enough.

***

Three hours later, he found himself walking out of the double wooden doors of the Reading Room toward the Library Reception Desk, book in hand. Horatio, thoroughly absorbed by a stack of yellowing letters in front of him, didn’t look up.

Archie set the book on the counter with an emphatic thud that made Horatio jump. “Horatio, this is impossible.”

“Archie, what are you talking about?”

“These aren’t even real words! A flying jibboom? Futtock shrouds? A spanker? Are you sure this
isn’t an elaborate practical joke on all landlubbers?”

Horatio rolled his eyes. “It’s really not that bad once you spend some time with it.”

“What, like Stockholm syndrome?”

“Very funny. Do you have particular terms or sentences you’d like me to explain?”

Archie opened the book to page 148 and pushed it to Horatio’s side of the desk. “The books keep using words without defining them. For instance, I now know that the futtock shrouds are attached to the top, which one reaches via the ratlines on the shrouds, and apparently the catharpins give freer sweep to the yards. Whatever the fuck that means.”

Horatio’s lips twitched. “It’s pronounced cat-harping. And the cat-harpings brace the shrouds toward the mast.”

“Oh, of course. That makes perfect sense now. The cat-hairpins brace the shrouds! And the gostak distims the doshes?”

“. . . What?”

“Naturally, the gostak distims the doshes,” Archie said with a smirk. “And of course, since doshes are galoons, we know that some galoons are distimmed by the gostak.”

Horatio tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. “Archie, are you feeling alright?”

“Fair point. I might still have some glossaries and annotated diagrams of ships if you’d like to borrow them. It’ll at least help you learn your jibboom from your taffrail.”

“Oh, yes, I wouldn’t want to mix those up,” Archie said with all the sarcasm he could muster.

Horatio snorted. “You really wouldn’t. But until then, why don’t you start with Nelson’s Navy, by Brian Lavery? I think it has a more generalist audience in mind.”

Archie nodded. “Lavery it is!” He paused. “Any lunch plans?”

Horatio frowned. “Staff meeting. Will you stay for the afternoon?”

Archie shook his head. “Got some errands to run.” It was past time to get his replacement MedicAlert identification. Maybe the bracelet rather than the dog tags, just to be safe. And this time, he wouldn’t throw them into the Thames in a juvenile fit of pique. “But we should exchange phone numbers. What’s yours?” he asked, getting out his mobile.

Suddenly, the entrance burst open and a vaguely familiar man with short blond hair strode in as though he owned the place. He marched over to Horatio, bypassing Archie as completely as if he didn’t exist, and stood in front of the desk. “I believe you have books for me. Lord Alexander Edrington.”

Archie cringed internally. Of course. Alexander was one of Alastair’s friends from Oxford. Maybe being ignored wasn’t such a bad thing. It was certainly better than having his new boyfriend find out about his family.

Horatio had been leaning forward to talk with Archie, but on Alexander’s appearance he
immediately leapt to attention. “Er, of course, sir! Just one moment.”

“It’s ‘My Lord,’ actually,” the disgruntled patron grumbled to himself.

Horatio shot an apologetic look at Archie and pushed his phone across the counter to him. “Go ahead and add it,” he said to Archie under his breath as he turned his back to check the shelves behind him for the correct books.

Archie glanced over at Alexander, to whom he clearly still didn’t exist, then picked up the phone and walked around the corner toward the loo so he couldn’t be seen from the desk. He tapped the “upload image” field for the new contact page and grinned. This would be fun.

He returned a minute later to see His Lordship entering the Reading Room.

“Where did you go?” Horatio asked with a frown.

“Just wanted to give that Edrington fellow a wide berth. He seemed far too pleased with himself. Here you go: name and number, as requested,” Archie said, handing the phone back. “Text me before tonight so I have your information as well?”

Horatio nodded and opened his mouth to say more, but then the door to the area marked “Staff Only” opened, and Mr. Matthews stuck his head out.

“Time for you to meet the rest of the crew, Horatio,” he called out, gesturing towards the door.

“Yes, sir! I’ll be right there.” He glanced at Archie, and Archie could see the cogs spinning in Horatio’s eyes as he tried to figure out what form of goodbye was appropriate before a first date and in front of a supervisor. Archie decided to make it easy for him.

“The books beckon, I must answer their call,” he said with a grin. “See you in a few hours!” He waved, then walked back to the Reading Room. Maybe the rest of the research would be less irritating with a new book to try and Horatio’s number on the horizon.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

It's time to meet Will!

Chapter Notes

I'm having a terrible day, so you're getting this chapter early (but please don't wish for me to have more terrible days so you can have more chapters early, because that would be sad.)

Also (and this is the main reason for releasing it early), this and the next chapter are short, so I feel ok about posting two in one week.

The Indy came to a squealing stop as Horatio parked in front of his flat. He rubbed his eyes and then stared blearily at the dashboard’s clock. 6:00pm. That damned staff meeting had been interminable, and the last several patrons he’d helped before closing hadn’t been much better. How was it physically possible for someone to merely close up and return their books so slowly?

He sighed and shook his head. He’d just have to hope that tomorrow would be better.

At least he still had 30 minutes before he’d have to leave to pick up Archie, which should give him plenty of time to call Will and get ready.

He froze, his hand on his seatbelt. Archie. He hadn’t texted him back yet to confirm their date! He’d been in perpetual motion--or meetings--since he’d said goodbye to him before lunch. What must Archie think? This was a terrible way to start their date!

His heart racing, Horatio pulled out his phone and scrolled through his contacts, then stared at his screen in surprise. True to his word, Archie had entered his name and phone number.

Archie had also added what must be a promotional headshot of himself with an exceptionally sunny grin as his contact photo.

Horatio blinked, then brought the phone closer to get a better look. How did anyone smile that widely? Didn’t it make his cheeks hurt? And how was it possible for someone’s eyes to sparkle like that? Surely it must be some sort of editing applied to the photograph. He zoomed in as much as his phone would allow, and stared at the image intently. Archie smiled back, as radiant as ever.

Horatio felt the corners of his own lips rise up in response. He blushed and pulled the phone back. This was absurd. It was only a picture. Surely he shouldn’t be wasting time, lost in thought, staring at a photograph, no matter how attractive the person was. Especially not when Archie was waiting to hear from him.

He shook his head to focus, tapped on Archie’s name, and prepared to send him a text. But what
should he say? He pressed his lips together tightly as he considered his options. “How was your afternoon”? “I’m looking forward to seeing you in 45 minutes”? No, none of those were right. Damn it.

Finally, he squared his shoulders, typed “It’s Horatio. See you soon. Thanks for the picture,” and hit send before he could waste any more time trying to figure out what to say as a first text to the person he was going to go on his first date with.

His phone vibrated.

He looked down eagerly, expecting to see a response from Archie, but instead, Will’s name appeared on the screen.

Will Bush, 6:05pm:

Everything alright over there?

Horatio rolled his eyes and shook his head, despite the faint smile ghosting over his lips. Apparently Will was still concerned from last semester. It wasn’t as though he had set out to spend the night in the library, asleep over his books, his phone muted by his side. How was he to know Will would stay up half the night searching the campus for him? And it was only the one... very well, those two times. But there was no need for concern now. Quite the opposite, in fact. Horatio smiled as he got out of the car. Will would be pleased to hear his news.

He grabbed his bag from the backseat, hit the call button, and waited.

“Horatio?” Will answered on the second ring.

“Will, hello! About last night--”

“It's no problem,” Will said immediately. “Good to hear from you! How’s the Caird? Are the manuscripts everything you'd hoped for?”

“I haven’t spent much time with them, actually. They’ve had me working at the desk, and yesterday was only a partial day,” Horatio said as he searched through his bag for wherever he’d shoved the keys to his flat. Why hadn’t he added them to his keyring?

“That’s rather cryptic, Horatio. Are you alright?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes, everything’s fine. Better than fine, actually. I’m about to head off to a date!”

There was a brief pause. Horatio was about to check to make sure he hadn’t dropped the call accidentally, when Will’s voice came through, sounding as steady as ever. “Sorry, dropped my phone. Congratulations, Horatio! Who’s the lucky person?”

“His name is Archie. Archie Kennedy.” Ah, so that’s where he’d put his keys. They jangled in Horatio’s hand as he walked towards his front door.

“Does he work at the Caird as well?”

“Oh, no. He was there to research. He’s an actor--about to play James Griffiths in a new Worthington Chronicles adaptation, of all things! Can you believe it? And quotes things: pop culture and the like. Oh, and he’s funny! I think you’d like him, Will.”

“That’s rather a lot of words for you, not on the navy. Turned your head, has he?”
“A bit,” Horatio said with a smile as he unlocked the door and entered his flat. “He’s--” Horatio trailed off as he entered the main room and stared in horror at the chaos in front of him.

“Horatio?”

“Damn. Damn DAMN.” He crossed from the living room area to the kitchen in five quick strides.

“What’s wrong?”

Horatio took a deep breath and focused on sounding calm and confident. Never mind that his mind was screaming in high alert. “It’s under control. Just a bit of a mess.”

“What sort of a mess?”

Horatio tried to find a way to describe the disaster in front of his pantry that wasn’t alarmist. “Well, it seems my pantry’s collapsed. Everything’s on the floor. And there’s water everywhere.” He glanced up. “Oh. There’s a hole in the ceiling. It must be coming through that.”

“Did the water knock food off the shelf?”

“Not exactly. Do you remember that 10kg bag of rice we bought?”

“Yes, I remember. You were worried it was unpatriotic to buy in bulk,” Will said dryly.

Horatio smiled as Will’s gentle teasing helped cut through some of the anxiety. “Well, there must have been a hole in the bag. And rice increases in size and in weight when wet. It seems as though 20kg of wet rice was too much for it. The shelf split in two and took most of the rest of the supplies with it. There’s rather a large pile of glass, wood, and spoiled food on the floor.”

Just then, a gurgle came from the hole in the ceiling, followed by a small deluge.

“And the ceiling is still spurting water.”

Will made a sympathetic noise. “Need a hand? It’s only a two hour train ride from Chichester. It’d be like last year’s clean-up after our weapons experiment.”

Horatio laughed. “Making a mini cannon out of a barbeque lighter wasn’t our best idea.” The memory of the two of them working side by side made everything seem slightly less impossible. It would be lovely to have Will there, but it was unfair to ask him to drop everything because of a minor inconvenience. “Thanks, but it should be fine. I just need to call the landlord.” Horatio groaned and scrubbed at his face with his hands. “Damn, I’m going to have to reschedule with Archie.”

“Good luck. And take a picture of the mess?”

“Alright. And I’ll send you a copy: you can forward it to your former captain, see if he can’t start weaponizing the full force of rice’s destructive power for future naval engagements.”

Will laughed. “Good idea.”

“Say hello to your sisters and mother from me.”

“I will. Bye, Horatio.”

Horatio hung up and texted a picture of the disaster to Will.
Then he took a deep breath and called Archie.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: short flashback of past rape (nothing described in detail; just skip over the italics to avoid it)

Also, Solitaryjo made this beautiful visual representation of the chapter:
http://respectablespy.tumblr.com/post/157120656702/another-harboured-and-
encompassed-thing-for
Thank you for this PERFECTION! <3

Archie turned from side to side in front of the full-length mirror hanging from his closet door. The fitted black denim was certainly the right look: Heather always said it made his arse the envy of his RADA class--and wasn’t that bitterly ironic, given what Simpson had put his arse through--but what about the shirt? Should he go with the blue? Or should he put on the green one again? The blue brought out his eyes, but the green gave his hair a nice reddish-gold glint.

His phone dinged, shattering his contemplation.

He grabbed it instantly, his new MedicAlert bracelet clanking against his cuff links, and sighed in relief at seeing Horatio’s name flash on his screen. He grinned as he read the message. So Horatio had liked the picture after all. He was wearing a blue shirt in that photo, so in that case, the blue shirt it was.

He texted back “Looking forward to it! ;)” and slid the phone back into his pocket. A little mild pre-date flirtation would prepare Horatio for the real thing. He wouldn’t want to short out that wonderful brain, no matter how charming Horatio looked when flustered.

Archie checked his pockets again--wallet, phone, keys, and a pill box with Xanax, just in case--and gave his reflection one last look. The trousers were tight, but not so tight that his full pockets made them look less flattering. He was ready.

Well, almost.

He hesitated, then walked over to the nightstand, pulled open the top drawer, and stared at the condoms inside. Why had he even bothered to bring them to Greenwich in the first place? He certainly hadn’t been looking for a relationship here, and, after the last year and a half, hooking up with a random stranger at a club sounded laughable.

But would it be different with Horatio? He sat down on the edge of his bed, closed his eyes, and tried to let his imagination run wild. How would it feel to wrap his arms around Horatio? Kiss him deeply until they were both panting for breath? Stroke every inch of his body and feel him writhe with passion? Grind fast and hard against him? Trail kisses along his jaw, his neck, his chest, his abdomen, his inner thigh, his--

Strong fingers gripped his hair and yanked, forcing him down. “Open wide, boy. This prick won’t suck itself.”
Archie’s eyes shot open and he griped the bed, heart hammering. He took several deep, gasping breaths, then dropped his head into his hands with a frustrated groan. This was ridiculous! If Horatio had wanted to hurt him like that, he’d have done it by now. He’d had ample opportunity after the seizure.

Horatio wasn’t Simpson. It would be just fine. He had nothing to fear.

But he’d had nothing to fear from Jeremy, either. That hadn’t kept his mind from replacing safe, eager hands with hated ones. He hadn’t entirely been lying to Jeremy when he fled, citing food poisoning: he had spent hours being violently ill after. It was just the hyperventilating and sudden flashbacks rather than the food truck burrito.

Archie rubbed his eyes, then glared at the nightstand again. The open drawer seemed to taunt him. He stood up abruptly, slammed the drawer shut, and stormed into the living room. He’d deal with it later, if at all. Horatio seemed to follow his lead when it came to physical contact anyway, so it could wait until he felt ready again.

If Horatio would still want him.

He checked his phone. 20 minutes until Horatio would arrive. He sighed, then flopped down on the sofa to wait.

He checked his email. He checked Tumblr.

15 minutes left.

He sighed and stared at the ceiling. Should he open up the script? Start memorizing lines? Fuck, had this been a terrible idea after all?

“Never hold back your step for a moment. Never doubt that your courage will grow--”

Archie sat bolt upright, fumbling his phone as his ringtone blasted from tinny speakers, his heart racing again. Fucking hell. He was much too jumpy already.

He shook his head, tried to regroup, then looked at the screen. Shit. Why was Horatio calling so early? Had he thought better of it after all? He took a deep breath, flopped back onto the sofa, and swiped to answer.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Archie? It’s Horatio. Er, about our date . . . ”

Archie’s heart sank. He blinked repeatedly as his eyes started to blur with tears. Of course it had been too good to be true.

It was alright. It would have to be.

Maybe they could still be friends?

He had to sound normal. He wouldn’t want Horatio to feel pressured into going.

He was an actor: he could pretend everything was fine.

It’d fooled almost everyone so far.

Archie swallowed, then managed a smile. “If you’ve changed your mind, I understand.” He
deserved an Oscar for keeping his voice from shaking.

“What? No! Not at all! It’s just . . . There’s a bit of an emergency here.”

In one frantic motion, Archie was off the sofa and running to the door, coat in hand. A series of scenarios, each more gruesome than the last raced through his head. “What’s wrong? Where are you? What do you need?”

“No, I’m fine, it’s not that kind of emergency, it’s just . . . Damn, I’m mucking this all up. Right.” He took a deep breath. “There’s a leak in my kitchen, rice absorbed the water and exploded all over my pantry, and it broke a shelf which brought the rest of the food crashing down. I have to stay here to wait for the landlord. I can text you a picture if you’d like documentary proof.”

Archie paused, his hand outstretched to the doorknob. “. . . You’re saying that wet rice destroyed your kitchen.”

Horatio sighed, and Archie could almost hear him pinching the bridge of his nose. “Yes. Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

Archie snorted, then turned and leaned against the door in relief, letting his head rest against the wood. “Well, I should have figured; nothing about us follows any logical plan known to mankind.”

Horatio let out a wet-sounding sigh. “I’m so sorry, Archie. Could we reschedule for later this week?”


“Yes. I want to get the worst of the mess picked up before the landlord and plumber arrive.”

Archie grinned. At last, something he could do. “Great. I can be there in 15 minutes; what's your address?”

“. . . What? Archie, are you out of your mind?”

“Very possibly, but I thought you could use the company.”

“But there’s food everywhere! It’s disgusting! And you could get hurt; I’ve cut myself once already!”

“Then I’ll bring gloves. Actually, give me 20 minutes; I need to change into rice-appropriate clothes.”

“Archie, what does that even mean? Do different grains require different outfits? Because I think some flour spilled, too, if that changes anything.”

Archie laughed, his smile reaching his eyes for the first time in hours. “Oh, in that case, I’ll wear the dark navy denim.” He paused. “But seriously, what’s your address?”

“76 Forest Road, Number 4. Are you sure this is a good idea? I’m having trouble of thinking of a worse idea for a date.”

Archie's brain helpfully played a PowerPoint of far worse ideas.

He covered it up with a laugh. “I don’t know, Horatio. It’s not so bad. We’ve already woken up together, and dealt with illness and nightmares, and now we’re wrestling with home repairs; we’re
just testing all aspects of this relationship from the get-go.” Oh. Relationship. Well done, Archie. That’s a reasonable speed to take things at. Next thing you’ll know, you’ll be imagining the proposal.

Horatio chuckled. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Good. I’ll be there in a jiffy. See you soon!”

“Er, right! See you soon!”

Archie hung up, then looked at his watch. 20 minutes. He could do that. He took a deep breath, then walked quickly back to the bedroom.

So much for this outfit.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The Expanding Rice Disaster continues, but this time, with 100% more singing and dancing.

The doorbell rang.

Horatio turned his head to look toward the sound, then wobbled precariously as he lost his balance on the top step of the ancient, rickety stepladder. He flung his arms out wide and bent his knees in a desperate attempt to keep from falling over, his heart stuttering frantically as the bucket dangled, forgotten, from his right hand.

The ceiling spurted again, soaking his outstretched arm.

He jerked his arm back to his side, glared at the offending ceiling, then sighed.

“Coming,” he called out.

Another minute without the bucket couldn’t substantially increase the property damage, surely. And now, he merely had to return to solid ground. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Why was going down ladders always worse than going up them?

He looped the bucket over his arm to keep his hands free and then began his painstaking descent. He ignored his legs’ treacherous insistence on shaking, and, step by step, reached the floor, taking care not to slip in the sludge and glass. He’d already cut himself once, and he had no desire to inflict further damage.

He placed the bucket next to the sink, dried his arm off with a paper towel from the roll on the counter, braced himself, and walked toward the entrance to his flat.

He hesitated, his hand in front of the doorknob. His studio flat was already cramped and uninviting, especially compared with Archie’s. The mess would make that ten times worse. And surely it was an imposition for Archie to come help. Should he have turned down the offer? Proven he could handle it on his own, without assistance of any sort?

He shook his head. It was already done. And at least it would be good to see Archie, regardless of the circumstances. Perhaps Archie would feel the same?

He took a deep breath, then opened the door to reveal Archie, wearing a smile, faded well-worn jeans, a little threadbare at the knee, and a cobalt blue T-shirt that brought out his eyes. And his arms. Good Lord, he was muscular. Horatio wrenched his eyes back to the T-shirt, and took in its slogan: in large, black letters, it proudly proclaimed “Singers duet better.”

“You sing, then?” Horatio blurted out.

Archie scrunched up his nose in confusion, then looked down at his shirt. His grin came back instantly. “It’s nice to see you, too. And yes, but these days, it’s mostly limited to the shower,” he said with a particularly mischievous grin.
Horatio turned bright red and cleared his throat. He forced his mind to abandon the images Archie’s comment had conjured up before he made the evening any more awkward. “Er, right. Come in,” he said, stepping to the side and gesturing into the hall.

Archie slipped past him and walked into the small mudroom. “So, where is this disaster of epic proportions?”

“In here,” Horatio said, beckoning Archie into the rest of the flat. He walked quickly past the sofa then the bed with Archie at his heels.

They stopped in front of the pantry cabinet and stared at the chaos on the floor.

The white, swollen grains of rice stuck out from the seeping reddish-brown sludge. Chunks of strawberries jutted out from under a heavy coating of pasta sauce. A sticky, beige-coloured paste cut through the middle of the muck, trailing from a torn, sodden bag of flour. A viscous dark brown goop dribbled into a thick, yellowish, glob which oozed from the shattered remnants of a Heinz salad cream bottle. A wet, hushed “plop” drew their eyes to the interior of the pantry itself. Honey, shards of broken glass, plaster, and splinters of wood coated the tins of baked beans and vegetables that lined the bottom shelf of the pantry, and everything was splattered with a sticky, sweet-smelling orange substance.

The ceiling let out another gush of water. The black rubber feet of the stepladder bore the brunt of the deluge.

“Well. That’s disgusting,” Archie said, wrinkling his nose.

Horatio nodded, then frowned. “You’re sure you don’t mind helping? It’s not too late to leave.”

Archie shook his head. “I’ve committed myself now.” His smile suddenly went a bit flat. “And I’ve seen worse.”

Another gurgling sound, then a splash met their ears. The sludge seeped closer.

Horatio scowled. Nothing for it but to go up again. He glowered at the ceiling one last time, then squared his shoulders and stepped onto the lowest rung of the stepstool.

The rest of the world narrowed to four small ledges as he slowly climbed up.

“Hand me that bucket?” Horatio asked when he reached the top. He hoped Archie wouldn’t notice the tension in his voice.

The plastic handle was pressed into his palm as soon as he reached the top, and Horatio closed his fingers around it, willing his hand not to shake. He swallowed, leaned to the side, balancing on one leg to maximize his reach, and stretched his arms up until the bucket bumped against the top of the pantry cabinet. He realigned it, then gave it a gentle shove. It slid directly under the hole, barely fitting underneath the ceiling.

He pulled back, resting both feet on the top step, and waited.

The water spurted again, splattering emphatically against the plastic bottom.

Horatio managed a faint smile. At least the mess would stop getting worse. He steeled himself again and began his descent from the ladder, one step at a time.

Once on solid ground again, Horatio became aware of Archie’s eyes burning a hole in his back.
Horatio forced himself not to wince and turned to face Archie, who was watching him with a raised eyebrow and a crooked smile.

“Not a fan of heights?”

Horatio scowled again. He should have done a better job of hiding it. It was only a stepladder, for Heaven’s sake. What must Archie think? This was an abysmal start to the evening.

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed about!” Archie said immediately. “I’m not too fond of needles, myself.”

Horatio blinked. Apparently Archie didn’t think less of him for his weakness, and had shared in kind. What was the appropriate response? “Oh . . . alright, then.”

Archie nodded, then grinned. “We should start cleaning this up. Mind if I open the windows? This particular combination of smells is a terrible air freshener.”

Horatio frowned. Had he acclimated to it already? He leaned forward to sniff the slimy mess, then pulled back quickly, as the sickening sweet and tangy stench wafted over to him. “Er, yes. Yes. Good idea.”

Archie walked across the flat to crack open the window by the sofa while Horatio hunted around in the closet for cleaning supplies. After a moment, he resurfaced, clutching a neon green swiffer mop, a dark green dustpan, and a roll of paper towels. “Let’s begin.”

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“Why do you even have so many cans of food?” Archie complained as he reached over the floor where Horatio was mopping to grab two more cans from the pantry, his bright yellow gloves keeping the glass shards at bay. “You’re not one of those doomsday preppers are you?”

Horatio paused, his mop hovering over the bucket of soapy water. “What?”

“You know, one of those people who think the end is nigh, and all that rot?” Archie asked as he rinsed off the second can. “Am I going to find a secret passageway to a bunker filled with guns and axes?” He placed the clean can on the other side of the sink.

Horatio snorted, and dunked the mop. “Of course not! Will and Anne just got a little carried away when they moved me in last week.”

Archie paused, his head still inside the pantry. “That was nice of them. Who’s Anne?”

“Oh! Will’s middle sister!” Horatio said, plunking the sopping mop on the ground. “Will’s back in Chichester for the summer, so they both came up from there to assist with the move. The preserves were from her.”

“Ah, so we have her to thank for the blobs of strawberry all over the floor,” Archie said, reappearing from the pantry armed with five more cans. “How long have you and Will roomed together?”

“Er, about two years, come January.” Horatio returned to pushing the mop back and forth across
the floor. “My roommate left King’s College after his first semester, and Will transferred in, so they put us together.”

Archie glanced over his shoulder at Horatio before plunging back into the pantry. “And you carried on as roommates? That’s rare.”

Horatio shrugged. “Well, it helps that we’re both in the same program. Spent lots of late nights studying.”

The sink stopped running, followed by a long pause, then the quiet clunk of a can being placed on the counter. “That must be handy. So, Will’s a devotee of the Age of Sail, too, then?”

Horatio nodded and returned the mop to the bucket. “It used to be more of a hobby for him than an academic pursuit, but yes, he enjoys it.”

Archie looked over his shoulder at Horatio. “Oh?”

Horatio shrugged again. “Well, he was in the navy for a time. Fought overseas until he was wounded in action and sent home. And now he studies battles instead of fighting in them. The techniques are different these days, obviously, but the practical experience is still an advantage. It colours his interpretive framework.”

“Hmm,” Archie said noncommittally, grabbing another sticky can. “And does he also run a canning factory on the side?”

Horatio smiled. “Because of all these?” He gestured to the filthy cans Archie had started lining up on the counter by the sink. “No. He just made it his mission, starting last semester, to make sure I had enough food.”

“Why? Is there a Guide to the Care and Feeding of an Horatio I should read?”

Horatio grimaced. “I . . . may have missed an odd meal here or there while revising for exams. Will . . . worries.”

Archie turned around to face Horatio again, a wry smile on his lips. “Well, we can’t have that. Clearly it falls to me to perform these duties while you’re here, as per the handbook. Have you eaten yet, or did you just rush into cleaning?”

Horatio ducked his head slightly. Damn it, how was he supposed to convince Archie he was a responsible adult if he couldn't remember the basic necessities? “Er, no. When our dinner plans fell through, I just . . . forgot.”

Archie shook his head, but the odd smile stayed on his lips. “In that case, it would be my privilege to supply food. That we can consume, rather than throw in a pile on the floor, if that’s alright with you.”

Horatio rolled his eyes, but smiled in spite of himself. “I suppose that’s a reasonable plan.”

Archie grinned. “Good!” He whipped off his gloves, rinsed and dried his hands, then pulled out his phone. “Indian still ok?”

Horatio nodded and stared at the bucket.

“Any requests?” Archie was looking at him expectantly, his fingers hovered over the keys.
Horatio’s pulse started to race. He’d never had Indian food before: his father didn’t like it, so they’d never ordered it, and he’d never sought it out on his own. And since everyone else had grown up with it, he’d never wanted to admit to his own inexperience and get ordering advice from others, so he had opted for not attending gatherings where it would be relevant. So here he was, almost 22, and yet probably the only British citizen unable to name a single item of Indian food. He couldn’t admit that to Archie, certainly not on their first . . . whatever this was. He mentally shook himself. “Er, what do they have?”

Archie frowned, looking at the menu on his phone. “Well, if you don’t want spicy, how about tandoori chicken?”

Horatio almost sighed in relief. Chicken sounded reasonable. “That’s fine.”

Archie hit some buttons, then straightened up with a smile. “Excellent. Our feast should arrive within the next thirty minutes. It’ll be almost like our original date plan.” He looked back at the cabinet. “But with more mysterious fluids.” He pocketed his phone again and gestured towards the cans to his right. “For instance, this orange substance coating everything? What do you think it is?”

Horatio frowned. “Haven’t a clue.” He propped the mop against the counter and walked to where Archie was standing. He leaned forward and cautiously sniffed the can. “Orange squash?”

Archie grinned. “Well, if you’re ever looking for an adhesive, I highly recommend it. It’s certainly sticky enough.”

Horatio smiled back. Archie raised an amused eyebrow. Then Horatio realised he was still leaning forward, almost at waist height, and that Archie was only mere centimetres away. He imagined he could feel the heat from Archie’s body next to his. He was overwhelmed with a desire to touch Archie-- to hold him, to kiss him, to . . . he hardly knew what.

Instead, he swallowed, wrenched his eyes away from where they had landed on Archie’s lips, and straightened up to a standing position. They were cleaning. It was hardly the appropriate time to engage in more physical pleasures.

He retreated to his mop and silence. The floor was essentially clean now, but at least it gave him something to do with his hands.

“Any objection to my putting on some music?” Archie asked eventually, breaking the quiet.

Horatio cringed inwardly. He’d never really seen the point of music: he’d been assured of its mathematical precision and had even given acoustical physics a try, but to no avail. Music still sounded painfully cacophonous and indistinguishable. But Archie had come all this way to help, so it was the least he could do.

“Er, no, not really. Go ahead.”

“Requests?”

Horatio shook his head. “Play whatever you’d like.”

Archie tilted his head to the right and stared into the distance with a mischievous smile, a look Horatio was beginning to recognise with anticipation and trepidation. “I know just the thing,” he said with a glint in his eyes.

Archie pulled off his gloves, took out his phone to tap on the screen, and then finally placed the phone on the counter. Noise with a relentless, thumping beat emanated from the phone’s tinny
speakers. Horatio was about to regret having agreed to this plan, and possibly having ears in
general. But then Archie began to move his shoulders back and forth slightly to the music while
bobbing his head: left, right, left, left. Right, left, right, right. How did he move like that? So
smoothly, so confidently, so gracefully? It was fascinating. Hypnotizing. Horatio realised with a
jolt that he’d stopped mopping and was just standing in the kitchen watching Archie move to the
music. His face burned with mortification and he tore his eyes away to redouble his cleaning
efforts.

He heard a new noise, one that sounded different from the others. What was it? He looked up to
see Archie humming, his eyes closed and slightly rocking his hips from side to side with the beat.
Suddenly the sounds didn’t seem quite so painful anymore. In fact, he didn’t want them to stop.

Horatio accidentally knocked the paper towels off the counter with the mop handle.

Archie glanced over his shoulder as he finished drying a can of asparagus, and met Horatio’s eyes
with a wink. Then he threw the towel over his shoulder, and turned to face Horatio, his right hand
still clutching the can. He brought it up to his lips like a large, cylindrical mic and began to sing
and dance along in earnest.

“But I don’t feel like dancin’
When the old Joanna plays”

Horatio watched, open mouthed, as Archie strutted a few steps toward him, swinging his hips from
side to side with each beat, until only a foot separated them, and placed his left hand on Horatio’s
shoulders. Horatio’s mouth went dry as the warmth from the touch seeped into his bones.

“My heart could take a chance
But my two feet can’t find a way”

The gentle touch was gone. Archie had released Horatio’s shoulder to take a step back and clasp
both hands over his heart in time with the words. But before Horatio could miss the contact, Archie
crossed his right ankle over his left and spun a tight, smooth 360 degrees. Horatio’s heart skittered
to a halt and his mind went utterly blank.

“You’d think that I could muster up
A little soft-shoe gentle sway.”

With an amused smirk, Archie pointed off into the sky at a diagonal with his right arm fully
extended—still holding the can—then crossed his arm over his body to point at the ground while
jutting out the opposing hip. Horatio felt vaguely like he was missing something, but as long as
Archie kept moving like that, he didn’t mind at all.

“But I don’t feel like dancin’
No sir, no dancin’ today.”

Archie locked eyes with Horatio, then put his arms out to his sides and gyrated his hips. Quickly.
Repeatedly. Horatio’s heart started beating like a jackhammer. An unfamiliar thrill raced through
him, and he lost the battle with a full-body flush.

Archie grinned, then stopped dancing and took a step closer, his hand outstretched and eyebrow
raised in invitation.

Horatio’s mind started racing: of course he wanted to touch Archie, to do whatever it took to keep
him smiling like that. But he was a hopeless dancer. On the rare occasions he had made an attempt, he always more resembled a malfunctioning robot or a fish flopping around helplessly on a dock than a sexy, coordinated, confident human. Wouldn’t that defeat the purpose?

Archie’s face started to fall.

Without consciously willing it, Horatio let go of the mop and put his hand in Archie’s.

The mop fell against the counter with a clatter. They ignored it.

Horatio took a step closer, his heart thudding wildly. Archie’s grin threatened to outshine the stars.

The doorbell rang.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Archie groaned, his head lolling back dramatically to glare at the ceiling.

Horatio swallowed as he tried to remember how to construct sentences. “That’ll be the food.”

“The food has terrible timing,” Archie grumbled.

Horatio’s mouth responded before his brain. “Well, you did sing that you didn’t feel like dancing.”

Archie blinked in surprise, then grinned. “Well played,” he said, giving Horatio’s hand a gentle squeeze.

The doorbell rang again.

They both glared in its direction.

“I’ll get it,” Horatio said. Reluctantly, he let go of Archie’s hand and walked toward the entrance.

He went through the exchanges with the delivery driver in a distracted haze, hardly aware of computing the tip, signing the receipt, and closing the door. What was happening? How could holding someone’s hand feel like that? Was this a date after all? Is that what holding hands and eating Indian food and almost dancing together and cleaning up kitchen disasters meant?

“All set?” Archie asked.

Horatio blinked. He was standing in front of the table with the brown paper bag full of food. “Hmm? Oh. Yes. Food’s here.”

“So I gather,” Archie said. “Glad we got our dinner together after all.” He hesitated, then slowly placed his hand on Horatio’s shoulder with a tentative smile.

Horatio felt his face heat up in response. “As am I.” He paused, considered his options, then brought his hand up to rest on top of Archie’s, intertwined their fingers, and squeezed Archie’s hand.

Archie beamed. It was the most breathtaking thing he’d ever seen.

Horatio grinned back. He had no idea what he was doing, but he wasn’t going to stop for all the world. “Let’s eat.”
Chapter 10

Archie felt like his heart was about to vibrate out of his chest. Horatio was grinning at him with such intensity that he felt a sudden, overwhelming rush of happiness that threatened to either knock him flat on his back or launch him into the stratosphere. This was working. They were working.

Horatio paused, then ran his thumb over Archie’s fingers with a hesitant, questioning smile. Archie grinned, nodded, and squeezed his fingers in response.

Horatio smiled harder.

Archie’s stomach growled audibly.

Fucking hell. Maybe he shouldn’t have skipped lunch again.

“Oh! Damn. I’m keeping us from dinner!” Horatio said, releasing Archie’s hand and placing the brown paper bag with their food on the table. He peered in, shuffled things around, then scowled. “It looks like they forgot utensils. I’ll go get some.” He took off, walking the few paces toward the kitchen section of the flat.

Archie sighed quietly, then unpacked the various takeout containers onto the table, his mind only half on the task. It was probably for the best that Horatio kept pulling away. What had happened to his resolution in the cab ride? He’d promised himself he’d slow down once their phone call had made it painfully obvious that he was already far too emotionally invested. But then Horatio had opened the door, and asked him about his shirt, and that resolution had evaporated. And then The Scissor Sisters had shredded what remained of his impulse control. He tried not to wince at the memory. He’d just wanted Horatio to smile at him like that again. To hold his hand again and not let go--

He shook his head. This was utterly absurd. They hardly knew each other. They hadn’t even gone on an official date yet. He needed to scale it back so he didn’t drive Horatio off.

Who was he kidding? Horatio would run for the hills just as soon as he realized that his new potential boyfriend was a pathetic, fucked-up, disaster of a --

“Archie? I should have asked earlier; what do you want to drink?”

Archie blinked and tried to bring his mind back to the present. He looked over at Horatio, who was standing in front of the open door of the fridge, staring into it with a frown of intense contemplation.

“I’m afraid I don’t have that much to offer,” Horatio continued immediately. “There ought to be some Ribena here, and I think Will left a stout or two . . . somewhere.” He bent over and started investigating behind various containers.

“Water’s fine,” Archie interrupted before Horatio unpacked the entire fridge. “Just in case my curry is particularly spicy,” he reassured him. And just in case the evening went to hell and he needed that Xanax after all. Not that Horatio needed to know.

Horatio hesitated, looked into the fridge one last time, then shrugged slightly and straightened up. “If you’re sure.” He closed the fridge, opened up a cabinet, then got down two glasses, which he filled with water from the sink. He scowled at the small mound of things he needed to bring from
the counter to the table.

“Short on hands? Mine are at your disposal,” Archie chipped in. Well, he’d gone a whole two sentences without flirting. That was progress, at least.

“Oh. Er, yes. Would you mind?”

“Not at all. Glad to be useful.”

Archie grabbed the waters from the counter, trying not to feel too relieved at having his drink under his command the whole time. Together, they finished setting up and sat down on either side of the dark brown kitchen table.

“How does it look?” Archie asked, as Horatio eyed his chicken warily.

“What? Oh. Fine. Er, can you pass the rice?”

“Of course. It’s not too traumatic after the pantry debacle, then?” Archie flashed a smile to cover up his internal wince as he handed Horatio the white take-out container. Trauma was the last thing he wanted them to talk about.

Horatio chuckled as he took the box. “I’ll live.”

Archie managed another grin. “That’s a relief. I’d rather not date a corpse.”

Horatio turned bright red and pressed his lips together as he fought back an embarrassed smile.

Archie felt his own lips rising into a genuine smile in response. How was it possible for Horatio to be so adorable? But he should pull back from flirting to put Horatio at his ease again. Age of Sail comments should do the trick. “You give better book recommendations than corpses would, for a start.”

Horatio sat up straighter and leaned forward, fork dangling, forgotten, in his hand. “Oh, good! The Lavery was helpful? How far did you read?”

“I jumped around a fair bit. Learned how to tell the port from the starboard, and started mastering the names of different sails and masts. And I now know how to fire a cannon, so clearly I’m ready to ship out to battle the frogs.”

Horatio grinned. “We’ll contact the admiralty immediately. I’m sure you’ll pass your lieutenant’s exam without a hitch.”

“Oh, they had exams, did they? I thought it was all based on who you knew, how much wealth your family had, and how little you questioned orders.” Archie starting kicking himself as soon as he’d opened his mouth. He’d meant to keep things lighthearted, not to venture into dangerous waters full of bloody icebergs.

“Well, wealth and influence helped, of course, but yes, they had oral exams. They covered matters of navigation, terminology, one’s ability to make snap decisions that would save the lives of everyone on board, those sorts of things. It was quite a rigorous process.”

“Glad to hear it.” Archie’s mind scrambled for something else neutral to say, but it only turned up criticisms of Horatio’s beloved navy. This was a terrible idea. He should reverse course and sail out of this conversation as quickly as possible. “Were there evaluations to determine whether the officers were as good in practice as they were in theory?”
Horatio tilted his head in thought. “Well, captains had to recommend lieutenants for them to move up the ranks. And a captain who lost his ship would be court-martialed, so those were checks on the system of a sort.”

“But what if a captain recklessly endangered his crew? Or abused his authority? Or, I don’t know, went senile? Would there have been any checks on his authority if he didn’t lose a ship?” Archie said, forcing his voice to remain steady.

Horatio squinted as he considered. “Well, I suppose the admiralty could revoke a captaincy. And actually, Admiral Hyde Parker himself was recalled after the Battle of Copenhagen, so it did happen on occasion. But luckily, there aren’t many reports of it. I doubt it came up much.”

What? Horatio couldn’t possibly be that naïve . . . could he? Did he honestly just blindly believe that people in power were always right? Did that mean Horatio would be just like Eccleston and not believe him about Simpson? Archie’s heart began to beat more quickly and his hands started to tremble. He put down his knife and fork and hid his hands in under the table so Horatio wouldn’t see. “Reports would require that people come forward. And be believed.”

Horatio frowned. “Surely they would have come forward.”

“Not if it was their word against the captain’s,” Archie shot back. “According to the Articles, even disagreeing with a superior officer could be a capital offense.”

“Well, I don’t like it either, but they had to enforce discipline somehow,” Horatio said.

Archie glared and leaned forward, his heart hammering. “Ah, yes. Discipline. A poor euphemism for a violent oppressive system. What if an officer was on the verge of making a horrible mistake? Better that hundreds should die than that one high-ranking man should have a bruised ego?”

“Archie, that hardly seems fair!”

“Tell that to the innocent people who suffered when power-hungry maniacs with cannons decided to have a pissing contest!” Archie spat out over the high-pitched buzzing in his ears.

“ . . . Archie?”

Archie blinked as he came back to himself. He was leaning forward, hands clenched into fists on either side of his plate.

Horatio was watching him, eyes wide.

What the hell was he doing? Fucking hell, he’d lost his shit at Horatio and ruined everything. Of course it was too much to hope for that he could have had one evening without that sadistic bastard haunting it some way or other. Well, that was that, then. Just a matter of minutes until Horatio would ever-so-politely kicked him to the curb.

Archie deflated and flopped against the back of the chair. He ran a hand through his hair and exhaled slowly. “Fuck. Sorry, Horatio. That was out of line.” He blinked repeatedly to clear his suddenly blurry vision and braced himself for the inevitable rejection as he stared at his dinner.

“No, no, I’m sorry,” Horatio said. “I was thinking about it from a military strategy standpoint. Of course, the system could have negative repercussions to those lower on the reporting structure.”
Archie blinked and looked up. Horatio was watching him, as earnest as ever, his forehead wrinkled with concern. That was it? No repercussions? No “what the hell is wrong with you?” Just an apology, an olive branch, and acceptance? What had he done to deserve this? He managed a wry half-smile. “Ironic that I’m playing James Griffiths, really. I’d make a god-awful naval officer. Probably be hanged as a mutineer.”

Horatio shot Archie a half-smile. “Let’s hope you’d have had a forgiving senior officer.”

Archie felt the corners of his mouth quirk up. “Or that he’d join me in the mutiny.”

Horatio’s brow furrowed. “Archie,” he chided. Then, he paused, tilted his head, and his expression softened into a fond smile. “Not everyone in the navy had such an authoritarian stance. For instance, Stephen Maturin would probably agree with you.”

“Who?”

“Stephen Maturin? The doctor in Patrick O’Brien’s Aubrey/Maturin novels?”

Archie shook his head.

“Surely you’ve seen Master and Commander?

Was this how Horatio felt with his never-ending allusions? “With Paul Bettany and Russell Crowe? No, not yet. Should I?”

“Well, it takes some liberties with Jack’s character, but, er, yes, I think so. It’s a favorite of mine, actually,” Horatio said hesitantly.

Archie managed a grin, eager to make up for earlier. “Then let’s watch it!”

“Tonight? Archie, it’s already after 9:00, we haven’t finished cleaning, and I have to be at work at 8:00 tomorrow.”

“It can’t be much more than 2 hours. What about taking my education in the ways of the navy seriously?” Archie said, hoping it came off as a joke rather than a desperate plea.

Horatio grinned. “Well, I suppose if we finish up here soon, we might be able to -- Oh!” He cut himself off. “Of course! One moment!” Horatio jumped up from the table and jogged the six paces to the bookcase by the TV. He grabbed five books from the middle shelf, and carried them back to the table, a spring in his step, and grinning the whole way. “Here you are. The first four Worthington books, and the first Aubrey/Maturin one as well, as promised.” He placed them on the table next to Archie. “I’d be happy to discuss them with you later once you’ve had a chance to start!”

Archie stared at the books. It really wasn’t over. Horatio had given him another chance, and he wouldn’t waste it. “Let the Age of Sail book club begin.” He looked up at Horatio with a smile. “So, which should I--”

A loud thump derailed his train of thought. He started and his heart began hammering as raised, heated voices carried over to them from upstairs. He put his hand in his pocket to clutch the compass. “Horatio? What's going on?”

Horatio frowned. “I think that’s my landlord. Perhaps he’s investigating the leak?” He made for the door, Archie following right behind him.
As the voices grew louder, Archie began to catch snatches of a thick Irish accent. “--in a timely fashion-- ankle-deep in-- more than an hour!?”

Horatio grimaced as he started up the stairs. “Oh no, not again.”

A slightly louder and considerably more Scottish voice retaliated, “Well I certainly wouldn’t have needed an entire hour to fix a simple plumbing clog!”

“Just what are you implying, sir?” demanded the first voice.

“I make no implications, sir, but others may read implications into a simple statement of fact!”

“How dare you!?”

As the shouting match continued, Archie reached the landing and got a look at the combatants. Two middle-aged men were standing nose-to-nose, red faced and gesturing wildly as they bellowed insults at each other. Behind them, a young man who couldn't be a day over 18 looked wet and miserable; his dark hair was plastered to his head and a very expensive and very soaked shirt stuck to him.

“--and I thought I could at least depend on a brother landlord! I’m beginning to think you don’t even want my help!”

“I congratulate you on your perspicacity, sir!”

At that moment, the young man saw them in the shadows and broke away from the group.

“Horatio! Is that you?”

The two men turned sharply towards the stairwell to see who had had the audacity to interrupt them.

Archie saw Horatio wince at being noticed, but he had on his polite public smile from the library by the time the young man reached them. “Hello, Jack. More problems with the sink?”

“Yes! It backed up. Water everywhere. How did you guess?”

“Because the water is going into my flat. Must be a leak in the pipes.”

At this, the two arguing men stormed into the stairwell, one stopping only a foot away from Horatio and managing to tower over him despite his shorter stature.

“Well, Mr. Hornblower? What’s this about a leak?”

“It’s in the kitchen, Mr. Foster. I caught much of it in a bucket, but not until after it destroyed the pantry. It’s still coming in.”

The taller man turned to Jack. “See there? This is why you should have stayed in The Calypso! Our rooms would never have problems like this!”

“That’s a bald-faced lie, Mr. Hammond! I’ve seen those embarrassments you call flats,” Horatio’s landlord yelled at the other man. Then he turned back to Horatio.

“And you expect me to believe that story, Mr. Hornblower?”

“You can come and see for yourself! I left you a voicemail about it two hours ago.”
The four of them followed Horatio down the stairs to the flat, pausing briefly for Mr. Foster to snipe yet again at his rival in the doorway.

“And what do you think you’re doing? I’ll not have a Hammond trespass in my properties! You’ll wait outside,” Mr. Foster snarled, before slamming the door in his rival’s spluttering face and marching into the kitchen after Horatio.

Archie followed, but hung back to hover by the dining room table, leaving the kitchen space to Horatio and Mr. Foster. He tried to ignore the muffled swearing coming from the hallway.

Mr. Foster looked at the hole in the ceiling, then at the splintered pantry shelf propped inside the still-orange interior.

“It’s nothing some superglue and some white paint can’t fix. Hardly worth troubling me over.”

“Sir, no amount of superglue would make this shelf structurally sound again. And there’s still the problem of the hole in the ceiling, not to mention the leak. That bucket proves the severity of the problem, if you’d like to take a look. I suggest we call a plumber and a carpenter.”

“You suggest, do you? Well, Mr. Hornblower, your suggestions are unnecessary. I’ll shut off the water to the flat tonight and give it a look myself tomorrow.”

“And you’ll replace the ceiling tiles above the pantry when the pipe’s been fixed, I trust?”

“Mr. Hornblower, you cannot demand a kitchen remodel at your whim.”

“With respect, sir, there’s a hole in my ceiling! And the surrounding tiles are soaking wet: if it goes untreated, it will start rotting and growing a bumper crop of mold. It has to be fixed!”

“As my tenant, you are in no position to give demands to me!”

“My father is a doctor, sir. I know what toxic mold can do to those who have to live with it. It can spread: it’s not only my health I’m concerned for, but for the health of everyone in this building.”

“How dare you imply that I’m endangering my tenants? I should evict you on the spot! You can forget about that repair work.”

“Then the responsibility for my health and the health of everyone in this building lies with you, sir.”

This had gone far enough.

“That and a lawsuit,” Archie interjected calmly.

Mr. Foster whipped around and stalked toward Archie, glowering.

“What did you say? And who the hell do you think you are?” he shouted in Archie’s face.

Archie attempted to adopt the casual boredom and condescension that came so naturally to his brother. “I’m Archie Kennedy, youngest son of the 10th Marquess of Ailsa, and Horatio here is my close personal friend. I have the number for the family’s lawyer in my phone, and she’d be more than happy to intercede. Let’s see, knowingly refusing to make repairs, ignoring suspected mold, implicitly threatening a tenant, retaliation for making complaints. . . I think we have quite a case here. Shall I give her a call?” He pulled out his phone and paused with his finger hovering over the call button.
Mr. Foster snorted derisively. “Of course you are. And I’m the Archbishop of Canterbury.”

“You don’t believe me? Very well.” Archie braced himself and hit the call button.

Mr. Foster crossed his arms and waited.

After three interminable rings, Tamsin picked up. “Archie? What’s wrong? Where are you? Are you alright?”

Archie grinned to keep from wincing and internally praised his past self for not turning on the speakerphone. “Hi Tamsin. Sorry it’s so late. I’m fine, but we’re having a bit of a situation here. I’m in Greenwich, and my mate here is having some trouble with his landlord, a Mr. Foster. Giant leak in the ceiling, water gushing everywhere, property damage, etc., and he’s refusing to bring someone in to do repair work. Threatened to evict my friend when he complained.”

Tamsin sighed in relief. “Oh thank God. So, you’d like some legal advice?”

“Precisely.”

“Well, this should be fairly straightforward. What Mr. Foster is suggesting is absolutely illegal. I can call the local council on behalf of your friend, make sure they take the complaint seriously, but there might be an easier way to deal with this. Is Mr. Foster there now?”

“Yes he is,” Archie said, narrowing his eyes at Mr. Foster.

“Put him on. Oh, and what’s your friend’s name?”

“Horatio Hornblower.”

“Horatio, eh? Alright, put Mr. Foster on the phone.”

“My pleasure, Tamsin. Here he is.” Archie held the phone out to Mr. Foster. “She wants to speak to you,” Archie said calmly.

“Does she, now?” Mr. Foster said, snatching the phone. “Got some friend from uni to play along, did you?” He held it to his ear and started speaking. “Now look here, you little--“

Mr. Foster trailed off as Tamsin presumably interrupted him. He turned purple with rage, then white. “Er, yes. Yes, ma’am, I understand. No, ma’am. Of course. Won’t happen again. Right away. Goodnight.” He handed the phone back to Archie, looking like he’d just been slapped in the face.

Archie held the phone up to his ear. “All set?”

“Should be. I reminded him of the penalties for instigating illegal evictions and violating tenancy agreements. He shouldn’t be troubling your friend anymore.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Tamsin.”

“My pleasure. So, when do we all get to meet Horatio?”

Archie did his best not to falter and break character. “What?”

Tamsin laughed. “Well, I figured that anyone you resorted to using family connections for must be special.”
Archie forced himself not to blush as he glanced at Horatio. “He is.”

“Don’t worry,” Tamsin said, “I’m not going to pry. It’s just good to hear you sounding happy. Your parents have been worried. We all were. Archie, you’ve hardly been in touch since being discharged from hospital.”

This was really not the time for this conversation. “Right. Well, thank you, Tamsin, for all your help.”

Archie could hear Tamsin’s sigh over the phone. “Any time, Archie. You know that.”

He hung up. Horatio and Mr. Foster were both staring at him open-mouthed.

“So, Mr. Foster, I believe we’ve reached an understanding. We can start with your shutting off the water tonight to stop this geyser.”

A loud scoff carried over from the hallway just outside the door. “If my tenants in the Calypso had these problems, I’d put them in a hotel overnight.”

Mr. Foster had deflated throughout the conversation, but at hearing his nemesis, he drew up to his full height in indignation. He turned on his heel and stormed off to confront Mr. Hammond. “I’m not surprised you have a policy for that, with the sort of construction you use,” he bellowed as he threw open the door and marched into the hallway.

Archie took advantage of the moment of privacy to drop the posh posturing. “Horatio, for once I don’t mean to be forward, but you might want to stay at my place for the night. I’m not sure I’d trust anywhere he’d put you up. Is that alright?”

Horatio had been staring at Archie with his mouth hanging open ever since Archie had intervened. After a few blinks, his brain visibly came back online. “Er, yours is fine.”

Archie had just enough time to nod and slip back into character before Mr. Foster barged back into the flat.

“That Irish buffoon, doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Right, where were we?” Mr. Foster growled.

“You’ll shut off the water tonight and call a plumber to fix the leak and a carpenter to fix the ceiling and the pantry,” Archie drawled. “Horatio will stay with me until the repairs are made. He has your contact information if we or my lawyer need anything else from you. Goodnight, Mr. Foster.” He gestured toward the door.

Mr. Foster looked from Archie to Horatio and back to Archie, before adopting a truly impressive scowl and storming out of the flat again, wrenching the door shut behind him. The sound of raised voices carried outside the flat and into the parking lot as the two rivals continued their feud.

The bang of the door roused Horatio from his stupor. He blinked, then opened and shut his mouth a few times. “Are you really . . . ?”

Well, that was anticlimactic. Archie sagged and leaned back against the wall.

“The son of a Marquess? Yes, much to the Kennedy family shame. And that was our family lawyer: none of that was made up.” He paused, then chuckled humorlessly to himself. “Never tried to pull rank before: I’ve always felt it all rather unethical. But I saw a way to help you, and I took it. And I don’t regret it for a moment.”
“Oh,” Horatio responded, sounding rather lost. “I see. Er, thank you?”

“Oh. And I hope you don’t mind that I said ‘close personal friend’ instead of boyfriend or date. Normally I’m all in favour of out and proud--much good it’s done my career--but I didn't think it would do us any favours in this instance. But, fair warning: Tamsin is my Mum’s best friend, so my family probably knows about us by now.”

Horatio nodded, his eyes still glassy. “Er, alright.”

Archie pushed off from the wall and walked over to stand in front of Horatio. “Horatio? Is this a problem?”

Horatio shook his head and met Archie’s eyes. “What? No! Sorry, I’m just wrapping my head around the fact that I’m dating a member of the nobility. Archie, my father’s a GP! I’m--” he paused, steeling himself for something he obviously thought of as embarrassing, “--I’m on scholarship!”

Oh. Was that all? Archie’s nerves faded, and he smiled as he draped an arm across Horatio’s shoulders. “No one’s asking you to call me ‘My Lord.’ And after all, I usually try to give that lifestyle a wide berth. It had its perks, of course, but I’ve mostly left that life far behind. “ ‘Pater, ’” he said, air quotes practically visible, “wanted me to choose between an allowance and attending RADA. Easiest choice of my life. I try to blend in--unless someone’s threatening my date, of course.”

Horatio nodded, then frowned again.

Archie rolled his eyes. “What now?”

“There must have been some other way I could have convinced him. His position was patently absurd! If I had just been able to appeal to his logic--”

Archie shook his head. “I’ve met men like that before. They just want to be the biggest person in the room, and they stomp on anyone who gets in their way. They only respond to wealth, fame, and power. We took the only path open to us. Now, stop kicking yourself and start packing.” He paused. “If you still want to stay at my place, that is.”

Horatio’s frown faded as he shook off his mental self-flagellation. “Of course! I’ll just be a moment,” he said.

Archie let go and Horatio walked to his closet to pack.

Archie looked about for something to do, then walked to the table to pack up the left-overs. “Mind if we bring Master and Commander as well? It would make a nice activity for tomorrow night--unless you have other plans?” he asked, suddenly nervous, as he stuck the food in the fridge.

Horatio resurfaced from the closet, clutching a navy blue button-down dress shirt in one hand and a green duffle bag in the other. “Go ahead. It’s on the bookcase; help yourself.”

Archie wandered over to the bookcase, grabbing the volumes Horatio had lent him on the way. He glanced at the shelves: all the books were carefully arranged by genre, then by author’s last name, but he didn't recognise any of the titles. They all appeared to be about the British navy’s history, or about the Napoleonic War. Did Horatio even have other interests? Or had he left all his leisure reading at home for the summer? He looked at the next shelf down, and discovered a small collection of books about Roman history, a Spanish dictionary, a French dictionary, and a copy of Don Quixote, clearly written in the original language. He raised his eyebrows and made a mental
note to get Horatio a copy of the *Temeraire* series at the earliest opportunity.

Archie glanced down at the DVDs that lined the bottom shelf of the bookcase: *Master and Commander* --which he plucked from the shelf and added to the bundle in his arms--the entire *Sharpe* series, something called *Sea Warriors: The Royal Navy in the Age of Sail*, and *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Black Sails*, both of which were still in shrink wrap. Archie shook his head, smiling to himself.

He glanced around the flat some more, the rustles and scrapes of Horatio’s hurried packing as the soundtrack, as he tried to figure out what was missing. Of course! There were no photographs or trinkets on any of the available surfaces. Archie frowned. Granted, he’d been short on friends himself these last two years--trying to avoid vindictive bastards and hiding injuries could play merry hell on one’s social life--but even so, he still had pictures scattered about the flat: him with the rest of the cast of *Pirates of Penzance* from Harrow, still wearing the Pirate King costume--those trousers did *not* breathe well--another of him, Heather, and Cleveland with Stephen Fry after his performance as Malvolio at the Apollo Theatre, and a third of the three of them with the great Kitty Cobham after her performance as Cleopatra at the Globe two years ago. But where were the glimpses into Horatio’s past?

He moved away from the bookcase and walked closer to the bedroom area of the studio. Maybe Horatio wanted to keep more personal items in one space? His nightstand was bare, apart from a reading lamp and the cord of a phone charger dangling over its base. Archie was about to give up and sit on the sofa to wait, when the glint of metal by the window caught his eye. He rounded the bed and stood by the low, wooden headboard which was pressed up against the windowsill. There, on the sill, were two pictures in well-polished, slim silver frames. One was of a smiling man and woman with their arms around each other, a small child with angular features and unruly hair sitting on the woman’s lap and looking seriously at the camera. Its slightly fuzzy quality dated it as from before the rise of digital cameras. The other must have been taken more recently: it was Horatio, clearly, but from a year or two ago--he hadn’t fully grown into his prominent facial features yet--and he was smiling at the camera, looking surprisingly at ease. His arm was around the shoulders of the person on his right, another man, very good-looking, maybe a few years older than Horatio, with striking slate-blue eyes that crinkled in the corner with his broad smile. His head was slightly angled toward Horatio’s, even though he was looking at the camera, and his hand rested affectionately on Horatio’s shoulder.

“That's Will,” Horatio said behind him.

Archie startled slightly and turned to face him with a guilty smile. “Oh, I didn't mean to snoop--I was just--”

Horatio smiled. “No harm done. But yes, that's Will. Taken a year or so ago at the Bush’s--er, his parents’--house one summer.”

Archie smiled wistfully. “You two look very happy together.”

Horatio’s forehead crinkled up. “Well, it was a good holiday. His whole family was there, so---Wait--you mean? Will and I? No, not at all! We’re just good friends!”

Archie raised his eyebrows. “Oh, I just thought--the way you speak about him--never mind.”

Horatio shook his head, still frowning and looking utterly befuddled. “Will’s a true friend and looks out for me--he knows what I need before I do, sometimes--but no, our coursework has always had our full attention. And I don’t think he’s particularly interested in matters of romance: he’s always seemed too . . . practical for that.”
Archie looked back at Will in the photo. The warmth in those eyes, the easy intimacy of the body language—it seemed to tell a story that Horatio didn't have the dictionary to translate. He glanced back at Horatio, whose confused, earnest eyes were still on him, before smiling. “Well, I’m glad you have such a good friend. I like him already.”

Horatio grinned back. “He’ll like you, too.”

Archie hoped Horatio was right about that.

Archie pointed to the other frame. “Is that you?”

Horatio nodded, and picked it up to hand to Archie, a strange look on his face. “Yes. Those are my parents. My mother died a month or so after this was taken. It’s the last picture I have of the three of us.”

Archie reached out and took Horatio’s hand, interweaving their fingers and giving it a supportive squeeze, his gut twisting with guilt. He hadn't meant to force Horatio’s confidence like this. “Oh. Horatio, I’m -- I’m so sorry.”

Horatio blinked rapidly several times, then swallowed and looked away. “It was a long time ago,” he said, but he squeezed Archie’s hand and lingered a moment before letting go.

Archie handed the photo back, and Horatio placed it carefully back on the sill.

“We should be off,” Horatio said, suddenly changing the tone and releasing Archie’s hand. Apparently that was the end of that conversation. “How did you get here, Archie? Cab?”

Archie nodded.

“In that case, I’ll drive. After you,” he said, gesturing to the front door.

Archie followed his directions, grabbing his coat from the wall hook in the mud room and draping it over his arm on the way, and waited outside as Horatio locked up. At some point, the shouting from outside had stopped, but he had been so intent on their conversation that he hadn’t noticed.

Horatio finished locking up and walked toward the blue Opel Astra. He unlocked it, and Archie yanked the door open.

“Hello again, Indy,” Archie said as he sat down, pulling the door shut and patting its armrest. “Now bring us that horizon,” he said to Horatio with his best Johnny Depp impression. Horatio stared blankly at him. “*Pirates of the Caribbean*? Oh, come on, Horatio! You even have that DVD on your bookcase!”

Horatio chuckled, then shrugged. “Victoria--Will’s oldest sister--gave it to me for my birthday last year. It’s part of her quest to expand my knowledge of pop culture.”

Archie laughed. “Yes, well, she’s clearly not been trying hard enough. We’ll add it to the list.”

Horatio raised his eyebrows as he backed up out of the parking spot. “There’s a list?”

Archie grinned. “There is now.”

Horatio dipped his head to concede the point. “My education is in your hands.”

Archie opened his mouth to make a crack about how he hoped other things would be in his hands, too, then thought better of it. “I’ll endeavour not to disappoint,” he said instead.
Horatio looked over at him and smiled, a look very similar to the one in the picture with Will. “You won’t.” He pulled out into the main road that led to Archie’s flat.

Archie’s heart responded with a complicated pirouette and backflip combination. He swallowed, suddenly warm, and smiled back.

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“You know, this is much easier when I'm not carrying you,” Horatio said as they reached the second floor landing.

Archie laughed and elbowed him. “I’m not that heavy,” he objected as he got out his keys.

“I’m not complaining,” Horatio reassured him. “It was just . . . unexpected.”

“Why, because I’m short?”

“Not short, just . . .”

“Yes?”

“Compact?”

“That means short.”

“Not exactly!”

“Oh, really? Then enlighten me, Professor Hornblower. What exactly are the differences?”

“Er, well, you see, compact, means . . . dense. Solid.”

Archie huffed indignantly. “If you’re trying to make it better, I have news for you: it’s not working.”

Horatio groaned. “Oh, bollocks. Fine. It means that what you lack in height, you make up for with . . . your, er, build. Because you’re rather, er, muscular,” he gritted out, looking more like he was slowly being tortured than giving a compliment.

Archie raised his eyebrows. “Oh, you’re trying to praise my physique?”

Horatio relaxed. “Yes!” he said with a relieved sigh.

“By calling me short.”

“What? No! I-- you--- but--damn it,” Horatio spluttered, utterly and adorably flustered.

Archie laughed and bumped shoulders with him. “It’s fine, Horatio. You’re quite attractive yourself,” he said with a cheeky grin, before unlocking the door and walking inside.

Horatio stood on the welcome mat, his eyes and mouth opened absurdly wide. He forced his mouth shut with an almost audible snap, dipped his head, tilted it to the side, pursed his lips, and looked at the ground. “Hardly,” he muttered, fighting against a slight, bashful smile.

Archie chuckled. “With cheekbones like that? It’s non-negotiable. But we’ll work up to
compliments. Exposure therapy of a sort. Come on, in you get.”

Horatio walked haltingly into the flat, and Archie closed the door behind him.

“The bedroom’s through there; make yourself at home. I’ll kip on the sofa,” Archie said.

Horatio straightened up, horrified. “Absolutely not! I’m not kicking you out of your own room!”

Archie rolled his eyes. “Horatio, just take the bed! You’ve had a hard day!”

Horatio shook his head. “As you may remember, I slept on that sofa last night. It’s perfectly comfortable.”

Archie froze, his mouth open to speak, as he remembered waking up pressed against Horatio’s side. His heart fluttered, then started beating more quickly. “Was that really only last night? My, we move fast,” he said, his voice a good fifth higher than usual. He swallowed. “Fine. If you insist on being a martyr, it’s all yours.”

Horatio grinned. “Glad we’re agreed.”

Archie’s heart continued racing, and his mouth went suddenly dry. What was happening? He needed to be out of the room as quickly as possible.

“I’m... um, going to go get ready for bed,” he said, gesturing toward the loo. “Go ahead and get settled. Back in a bit,” he called out as he walked away from Horatio.

Archie closed the door behind him, shut his eyes, and walked over to the sink. He stared at his reflection in the mirror and tried to calm the spikes of adrenaline that kept coursing through him. Panic was painfully familiar. But this? It was more like the rush during a standing ovation, and it was all in response to Horatio.

He shook his head. He couldn’t be falling for Horatio. Not after just barely 24 hours. Clearly Simpson had just broken him so badly that he no longer had a reasonable response to genuine compassion and friendship. He was just a pathetic weakling starved of human contact and affection, and that’s all there was to it.

He leaned over, closed his eyes, and splashed his face with water. Horatio’s smile floated through his mind. He dried his face with the blue towel that hung by the sink. He flushed at the memory of the gentle brush of Horatio’s face against his. He brushed his teeth, remembering the sensation of Horatio’s long, thin fingers intertwining with his own. He shook his head. They barely knew each other. Flirtation was one thing, but this was getting embarrassing.

He took a deep breath, rolled his shoulders, and opened the door.

Horatio was sitting, cross-legged, in the far corner of the sofa, hunched over a book he was resting in his lap, and quickly and repeatedly tapping a pencil’s eraser against his lips as he stared at a passage, lost in thought.

*My God he’s beautiful.*

The thought flitted, unbidden, through Archie’s mind as he watched the scene, and he froze in front of the sofa as all other thoughts clattered to the ground.

Horatio glanced up from the book and greeted Archie with a soft smile. He stuck the pencil in the book as a placeholder and put it to the side.
“All set?” Horatio asked.

Archie nodded, for once at a loss for words. Seeing Horatio there on the sofa, so comfortable and hard at work as though it were his own home, made him wish desperately that this could be more than a short-term solution. He didn’t want to walk down the hallway to his room, shut the door, and hide in his comparative solitude. He wanted to sit on the sofa, with Horatio’s arms warm and snug around him, his head on his shoulder, until he fell asleep, to wake and to have Horatio be the first thing he saw, to abandon words and to shove every contradictory emotion, everything he was and thought, at Horatio so Horatio could know him down to his bones, could understand his life, his desires, his past, and his conviction in the utter rightness of the two of them together.

Horatio tipped his head to the side and tilted it towards Archie as he watched him, waiting for him to say something.

Archie cleared his throat. “Y-- yes. It’s all yours,” he said, gesturing toward the loo. “All ready for bed here.” He swallowed. “Anything I can get you?” He forced himself not to wince at his clumsy attempts to string words together. Maybe Horatio wouldn’t notice.

Horatio shook his head. “I have everything I need, thanks.”

Archie managed a faint smile. “In that case, I’ll bid you goodnight.” He paused, and then his mouth continued running of its own volition. “And hopefully there won’t be any repeats of the whole ‘screaming and disturbing everyone’ nonsense from the other day.”

*What was he doing? That was far too painfully honest for a first quasi-date, Horatio would never want to be with someone who--*

“What should I do to help if there is?”

Archie blinked and looked up to see Horatio watching him, his forehead creased with a superhuman degree of earnest seriousness.

“Um. Well -- it’s -- you could--” The memory of Horatio’s arms around him, warm and safe, flashed through his mind. He shook his head and forced himself to smile. “Don’t worry about it. Like I said, not going to happen.”

“Oh. Alright.” Horatio frowned as his forehead furrowed more.

“But, um, you know. Thanks. For the offer, I mean. And for such a lovely day.”

“Of course!” Horatio looked at him with that honest, surprised smile, and Archie’s heart executed a few impressive Fouetté turns before melting in a puddle at Horatio’s feet.

Just as suddenly, Horatio’s face fell. “I’m only sorry I spoiled your plans for tonight with my kitchen disaster.”

Archie’s heart clenched with a need to bring Horatio’s smile back, and he took a step closer. “Nothing spoiled, I promise.” He paused. “Of course, we were going to drink champagne from a gilded gondola on the Thames, with fireworks at midnight while we kissed under the stars in the shadow of the Cutty Sark, but I should at least be able to get the deposit back on the orchestra I hired. I never did learn how they trained those monkeys to play violin.”

Horatio snorted, blushed, and smiled in quick succession. Then pressed his lips together and squared his shoulders, visibly gathering himself for something. Archie’s heart starting racing again. Had that been too much? Shit, what did Horatio--
“We could do the kiss if you’re still interested,” Horatio said in a rush as he turned impossibly red.

Archie grinned so widely his jaw started to hurt. “I could be persuaded,” he said, taking a step closer.

Horatio licked his lips as he stared at Archie’s mouth, then swallowed. His fingers flexed then curled again. Horatio leaned forward, and Archie’s eyes flickered shut expectantly.

Nothing happened.

Archie’s eyes fluttered open and fastened on Horatio’s perplexed face hovering a few inches away from his own. What was it now?

“Problem?” Archie asked, looking up at him, eyebrows raised, as he started to pull back.

Horatio pressed his lips together again. “It’s just that I don’t really -- that is, I’ve never -- er--.”


Horatio seemed to be stuck plotting the exact trajectory and coefficient of friction of Archie’s mouth judging by the intent stare he was giving Archie’s lips.

Archie rolled his eyes. “Just kiss me, damn it,” he said, laughing.

Horatio did.

All the breath left his lungs when Horatio’s slightly-chapped lips cautiously met his. The initial touch was so feather-light, so unbearably tender Archie thought he might lose his mind. Horatio was so earnest, determined, and driven, and yet so absurdly gentle, so exactly the opposite of everything he’d recently experienced.

“Alright?” Horatio asked when he pulled back for air, the breath from the question ghosting along Archie’s lips.

Archie nodded. “Full marks,” he breathed in response.

Horatio learned closer, mere centimetres separating their lips. “Would you care to provide any feedback?” he murmured.

In some distant corner of his mind, Archie rolled his eyes that Horatio’s perfectionist tendencies were so hardwired in he couldn’t turn them off even while being turned on. The rest of him had given up thinking entirely. “Hmmm,” he hummed as he lightly brushed Horatio’s lips, making him shiver. “Not sure. We’d better try again so I can take better notes.”

“Gladly,” Horatio whispered, and closed the gap between them in a less tentative kiss. Warm lips pressed against his again with an almost painful sweetness. Archie’s eyes began to prickle and he blinked a few times to push back the tears that threatened to ruin the moment.

Horatio pulled back once more, and Archie’s eyes fluttered open to find Horatio watching him with such a mixture of unguarded affection, amazement, and vulnerability that it almost took his breath away. Before he knew what he was doing, Archie reached out his hand, his fingers gently brushing against Horatio’s cheek. Horatio tilted his head into the touch, his eyes briefly closing, then echoed the gesture. His hand shook slightly as it hovered a centimeter or so away, then tentatively cradled Archie’s face, his thumb and index finger skimming against his cheekbone.
Archie’s eyes flickered shut as he relaxed into the touch. They’d hardly even kissed--he shouldn’t be this affected--and yet his breath was already slightly uneven. How could something so simple feel so intimate? He leaned forward, his heart in his throat, and lost himself in the steady press of Horatio’s lips.

Horatio caught Archie’s upper lip between his and gave it an experimental gentle suck. The sudden glide of smooth flesh against his, the unexpected, concentrated warmth—Archie whimpered into his mouth before he realised what he was doing. He froze. That was an embarrassingly melodramatic response. Horatio must--

Horatio’s breath caught, then sped up as he pressed their lips together more tightly. Archie grinned. How about that? Horatio liked it when he made noise. And if something as simple as gentle kissing got Horatio going, then he could make this very, VERY good for him. He sucked back on Horatio’s lip, letting it briefly drag against his teeth.

Horatio’s cut-off guttural moan coursed through Archie’s body, making every nerve spark. His heart started hammering, and he reached out involuntarily to grab Horatio’s arm--he needed to hold him more tightly, to anchor himself, to know this was real--and Horatio flung his arms around him. They clung to each other, the intensity of the moment deepening with the kiss, their hands trying to be everywhere simultaneously, running over every inch of back, of chest, of hair, caution and insecurity forgotten in a desperate attempt to commit the other’s body to their hands’ memory, as though, at any second, it would vanish forever.

Horatio’s lips parted slightly against his, and Archie’s tongue swept in. Horatio shivered and held Archie more closely. But it wasn’t enough. Archie kissed him more deeply, clutched him more tightly, anything to eliminate the molecules that separated them.

Horatio’s scrabbling fingers dipped towards his lower back, and Archie bucked into Horatio with enough force to send them tumbling them back onto the sofa with a yelp, Archie straddling Horatio, and each trying to hold the other steady. They pulled apart, panting, and stared at each other in dazed shock as they took in their new perspective, their kiss-swollen lips, and disheveled hair.

Archie cleared his throat and scratched the back of his neck. “Well. You’re a quick learner.”

Horatio grinned, his eyes still looking unfocused. “Better than violin-playing monkeys?”

Archie chuckled. “You know, I think so.” He paused, then continued with a smirk. “I like our fireworks more, too,” he said with a wink.

How did Horatio still have enough blood in his upper body to blush like that?

Archie shifted off of Horatio’s lap to sit next to him on the sofa. It was much easier to think without his pelvis hovering tantalizingly above Horatio’s. “What time is it?”

Horatio blinked a few times as the rest of his brain booted back up. “Er,” he said, shifting to pull his mobile phone out of his back pocket, “eleven thirty.”


Archie grinned, the elephant on his shoulders being temporarily relocated. “I was thinking of
calling it an early morning so I can go into work with you; alarm for 6:30 alright? I can shower first if you’d like.”

Horatio nodded again. “Alright.”

Archie smiled. “In that case, thanks for a wonderful evening. And, um, goodnight.” He leaned forward to give Horatio one last short, sweet kiss, before pushing himself up off the sofa and walking toward his bedroom door.

“Goodnight,” Horatio called after him.

He turned around in the threshold, waved, closed the door, and flopped on his bed, staring at the ceiling. He replayed the sparkle in Horatio’s eyes when he smiled, the tenderness of their first kiss. The desperation in Horatio’s hands as they ran up and down his back, holding him close. The absence of a panic attack. A slow smile spread over his face.

He was in love with Horatio. Everything else could wait until tomorrow.
Chapter 11

Horatio was startled awake from a strange dream about chimpanzees playing cellos by the insistent beeping of his alarm. He groped for the nightstand, eyes still shut, but his arm merely waved through empty air. He sat bolt upright, suddenly wide awake, mind racing with questions, before his eyes adjusted and he recognized his surroundings.

As he snatched up his mobile and silenced the alarm, the events of the previous day came flooding back to him. Especially those from right before bed. He flushed from head to toe at the memory of Archie, moaning into his mouth, grasping desperately at his hair to pull them more closely together. Archie straddling him and looking down with those piercingly blue eyes. And then, Archie practically running out of the room. Certainly Archie had seemed to enjoy it at the time, but what had he done wrong to force Archie to beat such a hasty retreat? He had stayed up half the night worrying that he had pushed Archie too far, that his kissing technique had been embarrassingly bad, that he’d imagined the whole thing, and a number of other more absurd explanations. He had thought about texting Will for advice, but he couldn’t bring himself to type the words: if it was his fault, wasn’t it better to minimise the number of people who knew? Telling more people, even his closest friend, about his failures would just compound his shame. He sighed and dropped his head into his hands. How had he mucked things up so badly?

The sound of running water cut into his thoughts, and he glanced over at the loo. The door was closed. Archie must be in there. Showering. He swallowed and tried not to think about Archie, standing naked in the stream from the nozzle, water droplets running down his back--

He shook his head and forced his mind onto a different track.

How should he act when he saw Archie? Should he apologise? If Archie still wanted them to be together, was a good morning kiss appropriate? Should it be a passionate kiss or a short peck? What if he had morning breath? Should he brush his teeth at the kitchen sink just in case? Or was that presumptuous?

By the time the running water stopped, Horatio had become so tightly wound and talked himself into such a state that he felt his insides had been tangled into a Gordian knot, and he wouldn't have objected to someone trying to slice their way through.

Unable to sit still any longer, he stood up and cracked his back, which twinged emphatically from a night spent scrunched on a sofa designed for someone several inches shorter than himself, and grabbed his toiletries and his clothes, which he had folded and placed on his duffle bag before bed. He walked a few steps toward the door of the loo, then hesitated. Where should he wait?

The door swung open suddenly. Archie stood in the doorway, his reddish-blond hair, darker now that it was wet, plastered to his face. Little droplets of water ran from the longer strands of hair at
the nape of his neck across his collarbone, and made trails down his chest.

His very naked chest.

Horatio blinked. Archie was standing a mere metre away from him wearing only a blue towel around his waist.

It matched his eyes.

Archie swallowed, turned faintly pink, and licked his lip. “Oh! So, you’re up--I mean, awake! Sleep well?”

Horatio made a noise that vaguely resembled the English language. He blinked and tried to force his mouth and brain to work properly. “Er, yes. You?”

Archie looked mildly amused. “Slept like the dead for a change.”

Horatio nodded, all of his attention focused on maintaining eye contact with Archie and not looking below the torso.

The corners of Archie’s lips twitched as he struggled to maintain his composure. “Not a morning person, then? No worries. Hang on,” he said, walking around Horatio to get to the linen closet behind him. He dug around in it for a few seconds, bending over slightly, and Horatio turned away to stare at Archie’s bedroom door to keep his eyes from wandering. He felt a gentle tap on his shoulder and turned back around. “Here you go; clean towels,” Archie said with a full-on grin, dumping them in his arms and letting his hand brush Horatio’s in the process. “Need anything else?”

The physical contact helped put some of his earlier concerns to rest. “No thanks,” he managed.

“Right! While you get cleaned up, I’ll get dressed and get the coffee started and see what food we have in the house.” He chuckled to himself. “I don't think my kitchen is as stocked as yours was before The Incident.”

That startled a laugh out of Horatio.

“Ah, good, he awakens!” Archie said with a grin and a nod. “Back in a bit,” he said, walked into the bedroom, and closed the door behind him.

Horatio stared at the spot that had previously contained Archie. He blinked and forced himself into action. He couldn't very well stand here all day. He walked into the loo and closed the door behind him. Perhaps conversing with Archie later would be easier when he was fully clothed.

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“Sorry again the breakfast options weren’t more scintillating,” Archie said as he followed Horatio out the front door of the flat and turned to lock it behind him.

“It’s not a problem,” Horatio insisted. “Muesli is perfectly fine.” He hesitated as he watched Archie finish locking the door. Flirting came so naturally to Archie, but perhaps he could try his hand at it, too. “It was just nice to spend more time with you.”

Archie turned back to face him with a raised eyebrow, an amused smile spreading over his face. “Oh, well in that case, are you still interested in watching Master and Commander tonight? We could grab dinner together beforehand. You can choose the restaurant this time, if you’d like.”
Horatio smiled back and managed not to sigh in relief. “Alright.”

Archie’s eyes twinkled, then he leaned forward, caught one of Horatio’s hands, and pulled him closer, tilting his head up and to the side, clearly preparing for some post-breakfast kissing. Horatio blushed and glanced around. Was this appropriate? He’d never participated in public displays of affection before. But the feel of Archie’s lips against his was too blissful to turn down. He leaned forward to meet them.

The sound of a door closing startled them, and they pulled apart, startled. Archie’s neighbor was preparing to leave the house.

“Oh! Um, good morning Hannah!” Archie said, turning faintly pink.

“‘Morning, Archie! You’re up early.”

“I’m heading in to work with Horatio. Oh, right! Horatio, this is my neighbor, Hannah Clayton. Hannah, this is Horatio, my--” he hesitated slightly, then glanced over at Horatio, and smiled. “--my boyfriend.”

Horatio’s heart skipped a beat as he heard those words uttered for the first time. Boyfriend. He had never been a boyfriend before. Or really considered being one. Or having one. And then Archie walked into the library and everything changed. What did boyfriends . . . do? And oh, God, he was “out” now, out of a closet he didn’t even know he had been in. How should he act? What should he say?

“Nice to meet you, Horatio!”

When in doubt, opt for courtesy. “And you,” he managed, shaking her hand.

“So, where do you work?” she asked, tilting her head to the side.

“At the Caird library. For a summer internship,” Horatio said, his heart still beating quickly.

“That’s how we met,” Archie jumped in, much to Horatio’s relief. “Two days ago, actually.”

Hannah’s eyebrows shot up. “Well, you don’t waste any time. Congratulations, then,” she said with a smile.

Her mobile beeped. She pulled it out of her jeans pocket with a frown, glanced at it, and shoved it back in. “I’m sorry, you two, but I’ve got to run--late to rehearsal--but you should come to our gig on Friday night! We can chat after, and you can tell me all about it. Drinks are my treat.”

Archie nodded. “We’ll try to make it. And you still haven’t told me how that date with Sarah went.”

“Oh, it was as horrid as we’d anticipated,” she said, shaking her head. “But yes, I’ll give you all the sordid details. And Horatio, nice to meet you,” she called out, waving, then hurried down the stairs to her car.

Horatio turned to Archie, eyebrows raised, and Archie shrugged in response. “She appointed herself my big sister when I moved in last week. Told her I already had one, but it didn’t make a difference,” he said grinning. “She enjoys looking out for people who live on this floor, showing us the ropes, more or less.”

“She seems friendly.”
Archie nodded. “She is. We had take-out together my first two nights here. Helped me settle in. I like her.”

They started walking down the stairs to the Indy, and they fell into silence as Horatio’s mind raced. Did Archie manage to charm absolutely everyone he came across? Would he expect Horatio to do that, too? Where would he even begin? And would everything always be such a whirlwind when Archie was involved?


“How do you do that?”

Archie narrowed his eyes. “... Do what?”

“Talk to people like that?”

Archie shrugged. “I like people. I like getting to know them: finding out how they think, how they work.”

Horatio suppressed a shudder. Voluntary socialization had never been something he enjoyed. People were so unpredictable. And then there were expectations to live up to. “I don’t even know my neighbors here, apart from Jack.”

Archie shrugged. “Well, we can fix that if you want. But, for what it’s worth, I don’t really have a choice.”

Horatio tilted his head. “What do you mean?”

Archie smiled crookedly. “I met Hannah because I knocked on her door right after moving in. Needed to warn her about my epilepsy so that if she heard loud thumps, screams, or the sound of things breaking, she knew to check on me and call the ambulance if I didn’t open the door. Ended up telling her where the spare key to the flat was hidden after a few days, just in case.”

“Oh.” Horatio didn’t know what else to say.

Archie nodded. “Yep,” he said, faintly popping the “p.” Then he shrugged again. “But, like I said, it helps that I like people.” He brightened up visibly as a new thought came to him. “Are you free on Friday?”

Horatio unlocked the Indy, and they both clambered inside.

“My schedule is open. What’s the event? And where?”

Archie grinned. “Hannah’s a fiddle player in a celtic rock band: Gin-Soaked Sot. Every Friday, they play at that pub right off of the main street. ‘Harbour’ something. She’s the evening manager. We should go!”

Music, loud noises, and people. Horatio tried not to grimace. There were few things that he disliked more. But, Archie wanted to go, so he should at least try. “Alright. If you’d like.”

Archie frowned. “Are you sure? I can make our excuses--”

Horatio shook his head resolutely. “It’s fine.”

***
Mr. Matthews and Mr. Styles raised their eyebrows at the two of them walking up the stairs together, but that was the extent of the commentary.

“Oh, damn!” Horatio said, stopping suddenly at the top of the stairs. “I completely forgot! We don’t open to the public until 10! Archie, I am so sorry!” How had he made such a miscalculation? What must his supervisors be thinking?

“Oh.” Archie’s smile faltered slightly. “That’s alright. I can go find a place to sit until then. Um, see you at 10, then?”

Horatio hesitated. Of course he didn’t want Archie to leave, but he didn’t want to display a flagrant disregard for the rules on his third day of work, either. Perhaps he could find a compromise? He glanced at his watch. “My shift doesn’t start for another ten minutes. I could walk you to the Costa Coffee down the street, if you’d like.”

Archie’s smile brightened. “Alright.”

Horatio grinned in relief. Situation salvaged. “I’ll just drop my things off at the desk and tell them I’ll be right back.” He patted Archie on the shoulder and jogged to the desk where his supervisors were waiting for him.

“You look chipper this morning,” Mr. Matthews noted.

Horatio blushed. “Er, yes. It’s a good day.”

“Your friend seems to like the library quite a bit,” Mr. Styles said, grinning.

“Ah, yes. I was just about to walk him to a coffee shop, since we don’t open to the public until 10.”

“Rather committed to his research, isn’t he?” Anything else Mr. Styles planned to say was cut off by Mr. Matthews elbowing him in the stomach.

“He is! You’ve read the Worthington Chronicles? Well, Archie’s going to play James Griffiths in the upcoming film adaptation! He’s at the Caird to learn about ship life to get into character.”

Mr. Matthews peered around Horatio to get another look at where Archie stood by the stairs, poking at his phone. “Is he now? Good on him!”

Mr. Styles was staring at Horatio in undisguised shock. “That’s Archie Kennedy?!” he whispered, excitement and disbelief warring in his tone.

Mr. Matthews turned to look at him with a faint frown that spoke volumes. “Now, how do you know his name?”

“How’dya think? I read the Worthington Chronicle forums! They just announced his name last week,” Mr. Styles shot back.

“There are forums?” Horatio asked, his forehead wrinkling. Did Archie know that?

Mr. Matthews raised a somewhat pitying eyebrow at him, but Mr. Styles completely ignored him.

“You’re shagging James Griffiths,” Mr. Styles continued, his eyes wide as he stared at Archie. Mr. Matthews glared at him and elbowed him again.
Horatio turned bright red and stared at the floor as he entirely failed to come up with a reasonable response.

“Matty, let’s give him a tour,” Mr. Styles begged. “Show him the vault! The other patrons won’t arrive for at least two hours!”

Mr. Matthews narrowed his eyes. “Excuse us for a moment, Horatio. We’ll be right back.” He took Mr. Styles by the arm and ushered him through the glass door labeled staff behind the desk.

Horatio heard the whispered words “I thought we’d agreed you wouldn’t call me Matty at work,” as the door closed behind them. He blinked in confusion, then walked back to where Archie waited. This wasn’t how he’d envisioned the morning going. He hadn’t imagined coming out to his colleagues yet, for a start.

Archie glanced up from his phone as Horatio jogged the ten paces over to him. “Ready?”

Horatio frowned. “I . . . think we’re supposed to wait.”

The smile fell off Archie’s face instantly. “Why? What’s wrong? Did I get you in trouble?”

“What? No, not at all. Er, it seems Mr. Styles had heard about your being cast in the Worthington Chronicles. You have a fan.”

Archie blinked and pulled his head back in surprise. Then he cocked his head and grinned. “Huh. That’s new!”

“Er, yes. Congratulations.”

Archie had a fan. Archie had a fan and the filming hadn’t even started yet. Horatio frowned as a dizzying cascade of images flooded his mind. Following Archie onto the red carpet for award shows and movie screenings. Making idle chatter at after parties. Photographers dogging them everywhere they went. Their faces appearing on celebrity gossip magazines, alongside articles dissecting their every day, from the food they ate to the clothes they wore to the places they travelled. He suppressed a shudder. He could barely manage conversations with ordinary people. Speaking with patrons at the library was difficult enough. And surely Archie would be embarrassed by his complete lack of conversational finesse. How was this going to work?

“Horatio? Problem?”

Damn. Had he always been this transparent? “What? Oh, nothing.”

Archie rolled his eyes. “I know that look. Your mind is going a mile a minute. So, what is it?”

Horatio hesitated. Will didn’t normally push like this. He merely provided essential, quiet support from the sidelines. It seemed Archie had a different philosophy. “Just thinking about the fame this role will bring you.”

Archie’s eyes widened, then he shook his head, an amused smile dancing across his face. “This isn’t exactly a large-scale Hollywood production, and most of the rest of the cast consists of newcomers like me. Assuming it does well, I imagine the occasional person may recognize me in the street, but I’m not about to become an international sensation.”

Horatio hesitated. “And the paparazzi?”

Archie squinted, then his eyes opened wide. “OH! Don’t worry, Horatio. We won’t have
photographers stalking our every move any time soon. Or ever, probably. And no one will be calling up asking for an interview exclusive with me, or you, either.”

Horatio nodded and tried not to let his relief show.

Archie took his hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “If it ever becomes an issue, which I doubt, I’d be right there to run interference, distract them, tell them to bugger off, whatever you want.” He paused, and his eyelids fluttered. “If you’re still alright with giving us a try, that is.”

Even entertaining the notion of not being with Archie made something deep inside Horatio’s chest ache. “Of course,” he blurted out, surprising himself with his conviction. How had he become so committed so quickly? And why wasn’t he more concerned about that?

“Well, that’s a relief,” Archie said. He grinned, and the ache in Horatio’s chest was replaced with a warmth that spread throughout his body.

“So, what else happened?” Archie asked, abruptly bringing Horatio back to the present.

“Oh,” Horatio managed. “Er, well, Mr. Matthews and Mr. Styles seem to have figured out that we’re . . . together,” he finished.

Archie narrowed his eyes, jutted out his jaw, and glared over Horatio’s shoulder at the desk. “And then they left? Are they giving you a hard time? Because I--”

“No! Not at all!” Horatio interrupted. “They didn’t have a problem with it, actually.”

“Oh,” Archie said, the anger extinguished as quickly as it had flared up. “Then what’s the problem?”

Horatio hesitated. “Are you alright with potential fans knowing? That you’re gay?”

An amused smile flickered across Archie’s face. “Horatio, I’m ‘about as subtle as a rhinoceros horn up the backside.’ It was never going to be a secret.”

“Archie!” Horatio said, as he blushed and glanced around in case one of his supervisors had returned unexpectedly. “I’m at work!”

Archie laughed. “Don’t blame me, blame Rowan Atkinson.”

Horatio frowned. What was he on about this time?

Archie raised his eyebrows. “The actor? From Blackadder?”

Horatio stared at him blankly.

Archie rolled his eyes. “We’ll add it to the list. They even have an entire series set during the Regency! The Duke of Wellington and the Scarlet Pimpernel are characters! It references The Battle of Waterloo!”

Oh dear. These shows never got the details right. But it would be fun to watch Archie enjoy them.

“Oh. Well, on the list it goes, then.”

Archie grinned. “Excellent. So, what’s the--”

The glass door opened, and Horatio’s supervisors entered. Mr. Styles led the way, looking more
than a little smug.

“Horatio,” he called out, “come over here and bring your mate!”

Archie’s smile waned as he glanced at Horatio, an eyebrow raised. A flicker of . . . something passed over his face, but it was gone in an instant, replaced with a shrug and a bright smile, and they crossed over to the desk together.

“I don’t believe we’ve officially met,” Mr. Matthews said when they arrived. “I’m Colin Matthews, and this is Michael Styles.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Archie. Archie Kennedy,” Archie said, as he shook their hands with a confidence Horatio could only dream of emulating. “I hope I’m not in the way. I was just about to leave until you opened officially.”

“You’re not in the way at all,” Mr. Matthews said with a smile.

“Would you like a tour? I could show you the vault,” Mr. Styles offered.

Archie’s eyes opened wide and he glanced at Horatio out of the corner of his eye. “What’s in the vault?”

“We have costumes, swords, navigation equipment, the whole works! You could hold them if you like; we’d just have to teach you the proper protocol,” Mr. Matthews explained.

Archie grinned. “In that case, I’d love the tour.”

Mr. Styles beamed almost as widely as Archie at that answer. “This way, then,” he said eagerly, and gestured to the glass door.

Archie glanced over at Horatio again. “See you later?”

“See you later,” Horatio answered, smiling. Archie grinned back, then followed Mr. Styles out of the room.

Mr. Matthews moved to pick up a book from the desk, then paused and looked at the door they had just passed through.

“I should go with ‘em. Make sure they don’t start havin’ sword fights through the corridors.”

Horatio nodded. “Probably wise.”

Mr. Matthews put the book back down and walked through the door, leaving Horatio alone with his thoughts.

Horatio frowned, trying to make sense of the past three days. A week ago, he wasn’t even sure he had a sexual orientation. Naval history has always been more interesting than in people. And apart from the curious, illogical warmth and tightness in his chest he sometimes felt when Will smiled at him, he had never felt anything remotely like this before. That one awkward kiss with Mariette at last year’s Christmas party hadn’t clarified matters at all. Thank goodness they had both decided to leave it at that. They were much better as friends . . . even if he did owe her an email.

And yet, here he was, dating Archie. Kissing Archie. And enjoying it. And now he was out to his colleagues, and no one had batted an eye. They seemed less phased by all this than he was. Of course, he wanted this to work, more than he could remember wanting something before.
An hour and a half later, Archie walked through the door. He was looking behind him and talking with Mr. Styles, entirely absorbed in the conversation. “And you made it yourself?”

“We got our friend, Jeremy Finch to help. He consults about costumes for period pieces sometimes--more often than not, they disregard his advice, of course. Matty and me sketched up the design, took it to him, and he fixed us up right proper,” Mr. Styles said as they both entered the lobby.

“Do you have a photo?” Archie asked.

“Course I do,” Mr. Styles said, pulling out his mobile. “It’s my Facebook banner image.” He handed it to Archie, who took it and stared at it intently, a slow smile spreading across his face.

“Well, if our costumes are half this impressive, I’ll be thrilled,” he said. He handed the phone back. “Horatio,” he called out. “Have you seen this? Mr. Matthews and Mr. Styles cosplayed as Worthington and Griffiths for a fancy dress party last year! It’s incredible!”

Horatio came over and Mr. Styles offered him the mobile. He peered at the image. “Is that a bullet hole?”

“It is! Made it myself!” Mr. Matthews said.

“Then these costumes must be from halfway through book 3, when James gets shot during the boarding of *L’Insaisissable*!” Horatio concluded with a nod as he looked up from the image.

Archie was staring at him open mouthed and his employers seemed to be smiling.

“Well, you certainly know your Worthington chronology,” Mr. Matthews said.

“I get shot?” Archie said.

“Eh. You recover,” Mr. Matthews said, waving his hand dismissively.

“But only after Algy helps you through the fever from the infection. He refuses to leave your side for weeks,” Mr. Styles added.

“Weeks? And did he get court-martialed for that particular act of dedication?” Archie asked with an eyebrow raised and a sardonic smirk.

“No, because they were in Gibraltar waiting for--” Mr. Styles began.

“Don’t summarise the entire story for him, Michael,” Mr. Matthews interrupted.

Archie looked at Horatio.

“It would rather spoil the ending,” Horatio agreed. Then he paused. “Wait, you didn’t research your character?”

Archie shrugged. “I wanted to read the books rather than look it up on Wikipedia. But, regardless, it sounds suitably dramatic. Let’s hope the first one is successful enough that they make a sequel or two so we get to it. And that my age of sail knowledge is ship-shape by the time filming starts.”
“We can help with that. What have you given him so far, Horatio?” Mr Matthews asked.

“Er, Lavery, and Nicholas Blake’s Illustrated Companion to get started on the terminology. I was going to give him Captain Redmond’s letters to his wife and Matthew Flinders’ Bellerophon notebook, assuming he can make sense of the handwriting.”

“That’s a fine plan,” Mr. Matthews said. “Michael, why don’t you grab the documents for Mr. Kennedy?” Mr. Matthews asked pointedly.

“Right you are, sir,” Mr. Styles said with a mock salute, and walked into the closed stacks. Mr. Matthews walked into the Reading Room, leaving them briefly alone.

“It was incredible, Horatio! Have you seen it?”

“Only a bit, on my first day. Mr. Matthews showed me how to make sense of the cataloguing for the swords and how to pick them up safely, but that was about it.”

“Maybe you can have them show you around some more. I got to hold Nelson’s own telescope! And a sextant from the HMS Victory! And they even let me put on a lieutenant’s coat.”

Horatio smiled as he watched Archie get increasingly excited about objects related to his own field of study.

“I’m sure I’ll get to see them soon,” he reassured him.

“And Colin and Michael are very friendly,” Archie said.

Horatio frowned. “You’re on a first-name basis already?”

Archie shrugged. “They insisted. It helps that I’m not working for them, so I don’t have protocols to observe.”

Horatio tried to focus on being excited for Archie and not jealous that Archie was quickly being more welcomed into the fold than he, despite his lack of knowledge.

“Ah, I see. Did the tour help you understand the time period more? Get into character?”

Archie grinned. “Absolutely! Even just holding the cutlasses and pistols helped me imagine what James would feel joining a boarding party. The heft of the compass and sextant in my hands helped me imagine him standing on the quarter desk, plotting out a course. And the clothes! The sturdiness and stiffness of the material, the many layers! I think I know how James walks and holds himself now.” Then he paused, his smile flickering, and he licked his lips. “Um, Horatio, I was wondering -- would you be interested in annotating the script with me, defining all the navy terms I still don’t know, that sort of thing? To help speed things along even more?”

Archie was going to give him a preview of the Worthington Chronicles script! Would it be a direct adaptation? Would it focus on the first book, or start in the middle, or combine elements of them all? What sort of naval terminology would it use? He should be able to define anything the script included; he had been studying the field long enough. He could finally give something back to Archie for all that Archie had given him, and—wait. Archie wanted to speed things along? Had he done something wrong?

Horatio frowned. “Are you in a hurry to get back?”

Archie scrunched up his nose in confusion. “What? No! Not at all! I just meant that the sooner I
understand the basics of the culture, I can move on to understanding the nuances of James’ character. I’ll be here the rest of the summer. You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

Horatio relaxed slightly. “Ah, good.”

Mr. Styles chose that moment to reappear with one fragile looking leather-bound volume, and two book boxes. “Here you are,” he said, placing them on the desk. “This has some lovely descriptions of wounds,” he said, pointing to the smaller book box. “And this one,” he said, pointing to the larger box, “goes into the gory details of battles. Oh, and I got you something extra,” he added, pointing to the leather-bound volume. “There’s a nice little story about a ship’s cat in this one.”

Archie looked at Horatio out of the corner of his eye. His lips twitched as he fought off a smirk. “Wounds, battles, and cats; everything I need.”

Horatio focused on scanning the barcode on the book boxes and checking out the leather bound volume to keep from laughing. When he was sure his voice and face were under control, he slid items across the desk. “You’re all set,” he said to Archie. “See you at lunch?”

Archie nodded. “See you then,” he responded, picking up the volumes. He smiled at Horatio, nodded at Mr. Styles, then walked into the Reading Room.

“Nice bloke you’ve found yourself,” Mr. Styles said when they were alone.

Horatio blushed. “Yes. Yes he is,” he said with a smile.

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“So, how were the descriptions of wounds?” Horatio asked Archie as they started eating their sandwiches at The Gate Clock pub three hours later.

“Graphic. Captain Redmond was injured during the Glorious First: shot in the side, then it got infected. He wrote all about it to his wife while he was recuperating. Wikipedia says he recovered, barely. God, what a horrible way to go.” Archie shuddered. “But not all the reading was that grim. For example, I learned about ‘the best cat in the world.’”

Horatio raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Archie nodded. “It seems that Matthew Flinder, the famous explorer, became very close with the ship’s cat, called Trim. He wrote a nine-page biographical sketch about him.”

Horatio frowned. “Nine pages? How could anyone write nine pages about a cat?”

Archie grinned. “Very easily, it seems.”

“Fair point,” Horatio said with a smile. Then he tilted his head to the side. “Will’s done some work on Flinder from his time on the Bellerophon. I wonder if he told Catherine about Trim.”

Archie raised an eyebrow. “Catherine?”

“Will’s youngest sister.”

“Ah. Fond of felines, is she?”

“That doesn't even begin to cover it. She came to stay with us in the dorm one weekend and discovered there was a feral cat prowling outside the window. It had caught a mouse and was parading around with it. Will and I had been debating famous naval commanders and their
strategies, and she decided to name it after one as tribute.”

“What did she name it?”

Horatio glared at the sandwich as though it had been responsible for the name. “Catpain Pellmew,” he said, each word delivered as though it were a form of torture.

Archie raised an eyebrow, then started laughing. “Please extend my heartfelt congratulations to Catherine on her naming abilities,” he said between chuckles.

“Of course you would like it,” Horatio said, suppressing a smile. Somehow ribbing about the age of sail seemed endearing when Archie was the one doing it. Just like everything else that Archie did. How was this possible?

“Yes, because I have excellent taste. Just like Matthew Flinder.”

“Oh very well. I’ll play along. What made Trim ‘the best cat in the world?’”

“Glad you asked, because I copied down a few choice excerpts to read to you.”

“Of course you did,” Horatio said, rolling his eyes and smiling.

“Let’s see,” Archie said, pulling out his notebook and flipping through several pages. “Ah, yes, here we are.” He began his reading, complete with hand gestures and a tone that was a cross between a Shakespearean actor and a BBC nature documentary announcer. “Indeed when it is known, that to the finest form ever beheld, he joined extraordinary personal and mental qualifications, the impossibility that the officers could be angry with him must be evident; and they were men of too much eloquent of mind to be jealous of him. I would not be an advocate in the cause of vanity; but if it is ever excusable, it was so in this case. How many men are there, who have no claim either from birth, fortune, or acquirements, personal or mental, whose vanity is not to be confined within such harmless bounds, as was that of Trim! And I will say for him, that he never spoke ill of or objected to the pretensions of others, which is more than can be said for very many bipeds.”

Horatio chuckled. “Alright, Archie, you’ve made your point. Trim was an excellent cat.”

“You have no idea. Oh, and he talks about science, too,” Archie added, the corners of his lips twitching rather oddly.

“Really?” Horatio asked, sitting up straighter.

“Oh yes! Here it is! ‘He was equally fond of making experiments upon projectile forces and the power of gravity: If a ball was thrown gently along the deck, he would pursue it and when the gravitating principle combined with the friction overcame the impelling power, he would give the ball a fresh impetus, but generally to turn its direction into an elliptic curve; at other times the form of the earth appeared to be the object of his experiments, and his ball was made to describe an oblate spheroid.’”

Horatio laughed and shook his head. “When you said you wanted to have a more in-depth understanding of the Age of Sail, I didn’t know this was what you had in mind.”

“Neither did I, but it’s remarkably entertaining.”

Horatio grinned back and took another bite of his sandwich. Was this what being a boyfriend entailed? Semi-flirtatious banter over meals? Gentle teasing about the other’s areas of interest? It
seemed manageable so far.

“The transcriptions are helping,” Archie said, changing the subject. “And Flinders’ handwriting is surprisingly legible. Will the others be that easy?”

“It depends,” Horatio explained. He put his sandwich back on the plate. “Some of the log books are almost indecipherable. I have some scans on my laptop that I’ve been transcribing that are rather difficult: we can see if you can read them tonight if you’d like the practice.”

“Alright,” Archie agreed with a smile. He paused, then licked his lips. “Speaking of tonight, where are we going for our first official dinner date?”

Horatio opened his mouth to defer to Archie, then paused as a brilliant idea struck him. “It’s a surprise,” he said, wrestling his smile back into submission.

Archie raised an eyebrow. “Oh really?”

Horatio nodded. Archie would love this.

Archie smiled. “Alright, then. What time should we have this surprise?”

“We could go straight from here once I close up at 5:30. Reservation for 5:45? Maybe 6 to be safe?”

Archie shrugged. “That sounds fine. I don’t need to change, then?”

Horatio shook his head. Archie’s black dress slacks and green button-down shirt looked splendid. “No, I shouldn’t think so.”

“Great! We have a date, then.”

Horatio grinned. This dinner should make up for the previous night’s disaster. He could prove, to himself as much as to Archie, that he could be a good romantic partner. Perhaps this would work.

After all, Archie had called him a quick learner.

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“Horatio, where are we going?” Archie asked for the fifth time in 15 minutes some five hours later. “Are you sure this restaurant actually exists?”

“Of course! We’re almost there!” Horatio said as he rounded a corner.

Archie rolled his eyes. “You said that five minutes ago.”

“And it’s still true,” Horatio said with a smile. “Just be patient a little longer.”

“Not one of my strongest suits,” Archie grumbled.

“Really? I’d never have guessed.”

Archie turned his head to glare at Horatio before facing front again. “Hilarious. Whereas you’re a paragon of patience.”
Horatio chuckled. “Of course.”

Archie rolled his eyes, but there was no actual irritation in it.

As they turned another corner, Horatio recognized the building in question from the website: elegant white brick with a black overhang. He pulled into the car park and parked right in front of the restaurant. “Here we are.”

Archie raised his eyebrows. He looked at the sign, then at Horatio, then at the sign again. Then he started laughing. “Le Rêve? A French restaurant? What would Nelson say?”

Horatio chuckled and shook his head. “Archie, this may come as a shock to you, but the Napoleonic War ended some time ago.”

“Ah, good to know. I’d heard rumors to that effect,” Archie said with a smile.

They got out of the car and walked toward the restaurant. Horatio gave his name to the woman at the front, who ushered them to a quiet, candlelight corner booth. “Enjoy your meal,” she said, and left them alone.

Archie glanced around him. “This all looks rather elegant.”

Horatio nodded. “It has good reviews.” He frowned. “I never asked if you like French food. Will you be able to find something here?”

Archie smiled. “Certainly! I’m not very picky.”

Horatio looked surprised. “But surely there must be some foods you don’t like.”

“How naturally. But it’s actually quite easy to avoid olives, especially in French restaurants, so I’m not concerned. You?”


“Of course you do,” Archie said with a grin. “Horatio Hornblower; model British citizen.”

Horatio frowned and stared at the gold embossed decoration on the cover of the menu as his nerves came back with a vengeance. Was Archie mocking him for being boring? Unsophisticated? Had he set their romantic evening on a bad track already?

Archie gently bopped Horatio’s foot with his own under the table to get his attention. “That’s not a bad thing,” he said with a soft smile.

Maybe not. Horatio risked a small smile and nudged Archie’s foot in response.

“And this is lovely,” Archie added. “Excellent surprise.”

Horatio grinned. “Glad to hear it.”

They both picked up their menus and looked over their options in silence for a few minutes, until Archie set down his menu and watched Horatio with a curious expression. What had he done wrong? Was he taking too long to decide what to order?

“Is everything alright?” he asked at last.

“We’ve spent the better part of 3 days together, but we still hardly know each other,” Archie
That was not what he had expected. Horatio frowned and set his menu back on the table. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” Archie began, “I know how you take your coffee, what’s on your bookshelf, and that your best friend’s name is Will, but I don’t know where you grew up, whether you have siblings, your dream job, favorite childhood toy, anything like that.”

“Oh.”

Of course, he wanted to know everything about Archie. But his experience hitherto with romance or even friendship was so minimal that he had no idea how to proceed. Archie’s comments would seem to suggest that one asks personal questions, and then shares in kind. How personal was too personal? What was considered appropriate? Well, he could start by answering the questions Archie had asked.

“Er, I’m from Kent and I’m an only child. You?”

Archie smiled. “I was born near Maybole in Ayrshire, Scotland.”

_Ah, so that’s where Ailsa was_. “But, you don’t have an accent,” Horatio said, frowning.


Horatio shook his head.

“Quaint little show about a man named Archie MacDonald who becomes a Scottish laird but wanted to have a normal life in London. Archie explains that he was sent to boarding school in England as a young boy to train the local accent out of him. It’s a common practice. I’m living proof.”

“Can you still do it? The accent, I mean?”

Archie exhaled slowly. “It’s been a while. Let’s see.” He squinted and stared up and to the left as he tried to remember something. “Got it!” he said at last, and, looking directly into Horatio’s eyes, began to recite:

“But there is ane, a secret ane,
Aboon them a’ I loe him better;
And I’ll be his, and he’ll be mine,
The bonie lad o’ Galla Water.”

Horatio’s heart started thudding wildly at Archie’s unexpected brogue. He swallowed and tried to school his expression into something more normal.

Apparently it didn’t work. Archie broke into a wide grin at his wide eyes and slightly parted lips. “A bit different, isn’t it?”

“Er -- yes,” Horatio said, his voice hoarser than he would have liked.

“That’s good ol’ Robbie Burns, Scotland’s national treasure. He was born in Alloway, only about 10km from my home. At this point, it’s easier to get the accent back if I quote one of his many poems we had crammed down our throat. Lovely stuff, though, so I can’t really complain.”
Horatio nodded. “What about your family?”

Archie shrugged. “Well, there’s my Mum and my father, and then two siblings: Alistair is the eldest, then Isabella—or, as she prefers, Izzy. I’m the youngest.”

“Are you close with them?”

Archie hesitated. “Izzy and I were close growing up: always up to some harebrained scheme. We’d try the patience of a saint.” He chuckled. “Actually, that describes my mother quite well. Ever since going off to Harrow, Izzy and I would have sibling weekend once a year. No friends, no distractions, just each other, games, movies, and lots of chatting. Haven’t done it since I went off to RADA. I suppose I’ve been too busy.” Archie broke eye contact. “I should call her,” he said, more to himself than to Horatio. Then he shook himself and was back to normal. “She’s been busy too, lately. Getting her PhD in Linguistics at Cambridge, and she’s been frantically revising for her exams for the last few months. These days, we stay in touch as best we can, see each other on holidays when I make it back, the occasional phone call, that sort of thing. As for Alistair, well, he and I have never been close: he always cared more for hunting, fishing, business, you know, traditional heir things, and he’s been . . . rather distracted over the last few years. How was being an only child?”

“Fine, I suppose,” Horatio said, still trying to process Archie’s suddenly different speaking patterns. “I spent a lot of time reading. It was quiet, with just the two of us rattling around in the house.”

“Do you get on with your father?”

“Er, yes. He’s busy, of course—his work occupies much of his attention—but we get along rather well. I look forward to introducing you to him,” Horatio said. Then his brain caught up with his mouth. Was that too soon? At what point in a relationship did one introduce one’s boyfriend to one’s parent? Was there a calculation for it? Will had already met his father, of course, but that was different. They were roommates. Would Archie even want to meet his father? He should tell his father he had a boyfriend. How would he respond? Would he be as welcoming to Archie as he’d been to Will when he’d mistakenly thought that they were together? It seemed likely. He was usually happy if Horatio was happy. And how could anyone not like Archie?

Archie’s eyes opened fractionally wider before a broad smile broke over his face. “And I look forward to meeting him! And you’ll enjoy meeting my Mum and Izzy, at least.”

Oh, good. It had been an acceptable thing to say. “I’d like that,” Horatio said with a smile.

The waitress arrived to bring them water and to take their orders before he had a chance to say anything more.

“So, you like research. Do you want to teach? Be a professor?” Archie asked when they were left alone again.

“I don’t think so. I enjoy the researching and writing well enough, but standing in front of a group of students every day, lecturing at them . . .” Horatio trailed off with a shudder.

“Which part of that sounds unpleasant? The people or the lecturing?”

Horatio frowned. Talking about his inadequacies wasn’t exactly something he went out of his way to do. “More the speaking at length in front of a room of people. I had to sit an oral exam once for a module in naval history up through the end of the Napoleonic War.” His pulse started to quicken
at the memory. “I -- er -- it was not my best showing. Could barely get through my name without stuttering. I hardly even remember what they asked. I scraped by with a pass.”

Archie smiled sympathetically. “Public speaking jitters?”

Horatio nodded. Everything jitters might be more apt, but it was a place to start. “Did you have to get used to it?”

Archie shrugged. “It’s never been much of a problem for me, to be honest. I get a bit nervous backstage, but as soon as I’m in the spotlight, I’m completely in the moment, entirely inhabiting the role. And of course, hearing the audience’s response always helps,” he said, picking up his water and taking a sip.

Horatio smiled wistfully. “Must be nice not to get anxious,” he muttered, looking down at the menu.

A sudden spluttering sound made him look up. Archie was turning red and coughing forcefully.

“Are you alright?” Horatio asked, pushing his chair back and prepared to run to Archie’s side.

Archie nodded, still coughing, and held up his index finger to ask for a moment. Horatio nodded and waited, fingers fidgeting restlessly under the table.

Once he finally stopped coughing, Archie took a sip of water, then set the glass back down, cleared his throat, and took a deep, slightly wheezy breath.

“Forgot water was supposed to be drunk, not inhaled,” he said, chuckling shakily.

“You’re sure you’re alright?” Horatio asked.


Horatio frowned. “What do you mean?”

Archie glanced around him, his eyelids fluttering. “Um, I -- Once -- I’ve -- There’s --.” He trailed off and scratched the back of his neck, staring at the table. He licked his lips again. He took a deep breath and held it. “Oh, fuck it,” he finally said. “I have panic attacks sometimes.” He looked up and met Horatio’s eyes defiantly, as though daring him to say something about it.

“Oh,” Horatio said. His brain whirred as it recalibrated. Is that what had happened with the text and the nightmare? But he was always so confident. How did this make any sense?

Then he realised he had utterly failed to say anything comforting or supportive. “Er, what should I do or not do when that happens?”

Archie blinked, then his shoulders gradually inched down from the spot halfway up his neck where they had risen. “Oh. Really?”

“Of course. I want to help.”

“Oh,” Archie said again, frowning. “Ok. Well . . . um . . . don’t tell me to calm down?”

“Alright,” Horatio said. “What else?”

Archie was still staring at him in what looked like disbelief. “Right. Well, sometimes I -- I
hyperventilate. So, I’d need help slowing my breathing.”

Horatio nodded. “Anything else?”

Archie’s lips quirked up into a crooked smile and he shook his head. “Don’t worry about it, Horatio. I appreciate the concern, but it shouldn’t be an issue. I have medication I can take if it’s an emergency, and I have other strategies to help keep it from getting to that point.”

“Oh. That’s good.”

They stared at each other for a moment.

“Such as?” Horatio asked.

Archie chuckled and rolled his eyes. “Look, are you sure you want to know? This is hardly romantic dinner conversation.”

Horatio frowned. “Of course I want to know. This is part of getting to know each other, isn’t it?”

Archie blinked again, then did a strange short of nod-shrug combination. “Fair point.” He dug into his pocket and pulled out a small metal disk, about 2.5cm in diameter. He looked at it, hesitated, then held it out to Horatio. Horatio held out his hand and Archie gently pressed it into his palm. It had an 8-point compass rose embossed on it.

“It’s a grounding object,” Archie said as Horatio turned it over in his hands. “Helps me snap myself out of it. I focus on the textures.”

Horatio ran his thumb across the raised surface, then along the smooth side. He looked up when he heard Archie’s soft, sharp inhale. Archie was watching him with a strange, unreadable expression on his face.

“Um. Yes. Like that,” Archie said, blushing slightly. He held out his hand and Horatio returned it. “Bought it when I got the Worthington Chronicles gig. Seemed appropriate at the time, if melodramatic: finding my truth North and all that. It’s nonsense, really. But it helps, so I figure, why knock it?”

“Good. And thanks, er, for showing me,” Horatio said quietly. He’d have to do some internet research later to supplement what Archie had already told him. It couldn’t hurt to be prepared.

Archie raised an eyebrow, then nodded. “And to you for listening.”

The waitress came back with their glasses of wine and food, then left again. Archie took a large sip. His hands were shaking slightly.

“So,” Archie began. “Now that we’ve covered my embarrassing issues--”

“--It’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” Horatio interrupted him.

Archie’s mouth was still open from the start of his sentence. He paused, staring at Horatio, then closed it, then opened it again. “Right. Ok. Glad to hear it,” he said. Then he shook his head, visibly refocusing. “Anyway, your turn. Tell me . . . Oh, I don’t know . . . Tell me about your first time meeting Will.”

Horatio blushed. “What makes you think there’s a story there?” he said, stalling.

“Well, it was just the first thing that sprang to mind, but now I’m curious,” Archie answered,
Horatio sighed. “Very well. It was move-in day for transfers at the beginning of the spring term. I was in front of the open door to our room about to close it to go run errands, when this man starts walking straight toward me. He puts out his hand and says ‘Will Bush, your new roommate.’ Then I see that the dorm’s rabble rousers, two very intoxicated seniors--Hobbes and Randall, I don’t remember their given names--are barreling down the hallway, full speed straight toward us. They were so intent on finishing their race they would have trampled him.”

“What did you do?”

Horatio ducked his head. “I yelled ‘look out!’ and then jump-tackled Will, throwing us both through the open door of our room, and landed on top of him. Hobbes and Randall raced right through where we had been.”

Archie laughed and shook his head. “How did he respond?”

“Well, I got up, introduced myself, offered him a hand, and helped him up. He just said ‘Interesting welcome ceremony you have here, Horatio.’”

“You attacked a vet within 30 seconds of meeting him. Lucky it didn't cause a flashback.”

Horatio nodded. “Will is fairly unflappable.”

Archie had a strange little smile that Horatio couldn’t remember seeing before. “Mmhmm. Sounds like it,” he said, nodding and his eyelids fluttered briefly. What did that mean? But before Horatio could figure out what to ask, Archie’s earlier expression had vanished with a smile and a laugh. “You do have a knack for meeting people in unusual ways, Horatio. Not that I’m complaining, of course: it’s served me rather well.”

“And me,” Horatio agreed. “How about you? Tell me about your friends.” It seemed a fair topic since Archie knew about his.

Archie shrugged. “Well, growing up, there were loads: I always had someone over. I used to be close with Tamsin’s son, Charlie. He’s my age, so we’d get into all sort of mischief. He was my first kiss, actually. But we’ve drifted out of touch recently. At Harrow, there was a core group of 7 of us; did everything together. Most of them have scattered all over the U.K., but some of them are still in London.” Archie paused and scratched the back of his head. “I haven’t seen them in awhile either. Just sort of dropped off the map. And at RADA, there’s Heather and Cleveland, my roommates. In my first semester there, we used to see shows together, run lines, karaoke, etc., but I, um, haven't had much time to spend with them lately. And you met Hannah this morning.”

Horatio waited, expecting the names to keep coming, but Archie had apparently finished. “Oh,” he said, entirely failing to come up with anything useful to say.

Archie shrugged again. “As I said, I’ve been busy. Rehearsals, auditions, revising: hardly leaves any time for socializing,” he said in an uncharacteristically glib fashion.

“Of course,” Horatio nodded. “No time for--.” He cut himself off. He couldn’t ask that! It was far too personal. “Right.”

Archie raised an eyebrow. “What?”

Horatio felt himself blush. “Have you -- were you -- that is -- did any of . . .?”
“Spit it out, Horatio,” Archie said with a smile.

Horatio glanced around, then swallowed. “What about . . . relationships? Previous . . . romantic engagements,” he managed.

Archie’s hand briefly paused in cutting his duck, before he carried on as though nothing had happened. “At RADA? Wasn’t really an option. Too busy and I had . . . other things on my mind.”

“Oh,” Horatio said again.

“You look confused,” Archie responded after a moment.

“I had just figured, from last night, that you’d--,” Horatio cut himself off, failing to find a way to express himself that didn’t sound ridiculously embarrassing or nosy. “It's nothing.”

“Ah,” Archie said slowly. He put his knife and fork down and picked up his glass of wine to take another long sip. He set the glass back down carefully. “Well, I dated a few people back at Harrow. Got a thorough education in kissing, among other things,” he said with a mischievous grin. “And my knowledge has been--” Archie hesitated as he frowned, then his lips twisted up into a strange, bitter half-smirk. “--expanded since coming to RADA.” He paused. “I suppose there was one person--Jeremy--I thought we might--” He trailed off, blinked repeatedly, shook his head, and smiled at Horatio again. “--Just had the one date. Didn’t work out. So, no. No relationships at RADA.” His strange smile lost some of its hardness as he met Horatio’s eyes again. “Alright,” he said, sounding chipper again. “Your turn. Any special someone in your history?”

Horatio shook his head slowly as he tried to make sense of Archie’s comments. “Er, no. Apart from one awkward drunken kiss.”

Archie smiled. “Well, I’m honoured you decided to give me a chance.”

“How did you know? That you were interested in men? From Charlie?” Horatio asked, the words tumbling out before he could stop them.

Archie shook his head. “No, I’ve known for as long as I can remember. But that’s when my family found out. I was 12.” He scowled. “Alastair had seen us kissing. Announced it to the family over dinner. That was an interesting meal.”

Twelve. Archie had nine to ten years of experience more than he did. It seemed he had a lot of catching up to do.

“What about you?” Archie asked, shattering his contemplation. “What's your coming out story?”

Horatio blushed. He’d known he couldn’t put this off forever. He could only hope that Archie wouldn’t be too disappointed. “Er. Well, yesterday, you asked me out, and I called Will to tell him I was going out on a date. Then, this morning, you introduced me to Hannah as your boyfriend.”

Archie’s eyes shot wide open. “Oh bugger! That’s why you were concerned this morning at the library, with Mr. Styles and Mr. Matthews. Shit, Horatio, I had no idea! I should have been giving you more time to get used to the idea. Is this going too quickly?”

Did he want them to slow down? What would that entail? Not staying at Archie’s house? Fewer meals together? Less kissing? Less banter and laughing? All those things were quickly becoming the highlight of his day. He had no idea how to do this, but he wanted to try. And as for being “out” and having others know? He thought of Hannah’s easy acceptance of him. Of Mr. Styles’ smiling and saying “Nice bloke you’ve found yourself.” He smiled as a sensation of warmth spread
through him.

Horatio shook his head. “No, not at all.”

“So, how long have you known? That you like men?”

Horatio swallowed, glanced at the clock on the wall, and did some quick mental math. “50 hours? Give or take a little?”

Archie huffed out a small chuckle and ran a hand through his hair. “Right. Well, how are you acclimating to this new knowledge? Seems like it might be a lot to take in. Anything you want to ask? Talk about?”

Was there? Did being Archie-sexual change anything, beyond the fact that he enjoyed kissing and being kissed by Archie and would like to continue finding out what else they both enjoyed? Not that he could think of. And he could always take Archie up on his offer later if he thought of a question. Or he could just Google it. That might be less embarrassing.

Horatio shook his head. “Not at the moment.”

Archie dipped his head in acknowledgement. “Alright. Well, if you ever want to talk about what it feels like to suddenly realise you’re not exclusively interested in women, I’m happy to listen. Heather is pan, so I’ve heard something of her struggles.”

Ah. Well, no need to correct his misunderstanding. Horatio nodded, doing his best to maintain a neutral expression.

“What?”

Oh. Apparently it didn't work.

“Nothing,” Horatio said, focusing on cutting his chicken.

Archie tilted his head to the side and stared at him thoughtfully. “There’s nothing wrong with being on the asexual spectrum, either,” he added.

Horatio blinked and set down his knife and fork. Apparently he had more internet research to do.

“I’ve . . . never really thought about it,” he said with a shrug. “There were always books to read, exams to prepare for, papers to write. Reading about the navy always seemed more interesting than thinking about sex or discussing which classmates or celebrities people fancied.”

Archie nodded. “That’s fair,” he said. “Plenty of people feel the same.” He paused, and his eyelids fluttered slightly. “Horatio,” he started, “last night, did I push you too far? Because we don’t have to--”

“No! No, it's fine,” Horatio interrupted. “I enjoyed it,” he said, feeling his face heat up.

Archie exhaled slowly and blinked repeatedly a few times. “Ok, good. Just . . . promise you’ll tell me if anything I do or say makes you uncomfortable?”

Horatio frowned. “Of course,” he said. Why wouldn't he?

“We don't have to do anything except hold hands if that’s what you want,” Archie continued, fixing him with an intent stare. Being with you is what matters to me: anything else is secondary.”
"I promise," Horatio said, still puzzled.  

Archie held his gaze for a few more moments, then nodded, exhaling quietly. “Good. Good,” he said, and picked up his silverware again. He looked a little pale.  

“Archie?”  

“Hmm?” Archie answered, looking up and sounding slightly distracted.  

“Are you alright?”  

Archie gave him a small, bitter smile. “Fine,” he answered. “Just angry at myself for not thinking of this earlier.”  

Horatio frowned. “Don’t be. You haven’t done anything I didn’t want you to do.”  

Archie raised a doubting eyebrow.  

“Remember, I was the one who suggested kissing last night,” Horatio said, blushing.  

“Yes. But I was the one who literally commanded you to kiss me,” Archie shot back.  

This was absurd. Why was Archie kicking himself when nothing had gone wrong?  

Horatio reached out and put his hand on Archie’s, stroking his thumb gently. “I will tell you if there’s a problem. But right now, there isn’t one. Alright?”  

Archie blinked repeatedly, staring at their hands, then nodded slowly. “Yes,” he said. Then he cleared his throat, shook his head, squeezed Horatio’s hand, and returned to something akin to his earlier, more chipper mood. “Of course. How’s your dinner?” he asked, pulling his hand away and returning to cutting up his dinner. “Mine’s delicious. Excellent restaurant choice.”  

“Er, glad to hear it,” Horatio responded, still reeling from the sudden changes of mood and tone.  

“Oh! I completely forgot,” Archie began. “Have you heard any news about your flat?”  

Horatio nodded. “Mr. Foster said a carpenter removed the soaked tiles and the old pantry and the plumber found the pinhole leak: it needs a new section of pipe, which should arrive tomorrow.”  

“What’s the timeline, then?”  

“They’ll replace the pipe tomorrow, but the carpenter wants to give everything another day to dry out before he puts in the new tile, just to be safe. It should be all set by Friday.”  

Archie blinked in surprise. “They’re moving quickly.”  

“You certainly seem to have lit a fire under them,” Horatio agreed. “I’ll be out of your hair soon.”  

Archie frowned. “Horatio, don’t be absurd! It’s not an imposition at all! I like having you around.”  

Horatio smiled. It was a relief that he hadn’t yet overstayed his welcome. The occasional back twinges from sleeping on the sofa were a small price to pay for spending additional time with Archie.  

Archie set down his knife and fork and gently pushed his plate away. “I don’t have room for another bite. You?”
Horatio shook his head. “I’m finished.”

Archie reached for his wallet, but Horatio interrupted. “My treat.”

Archie opened his mouth to disagree, but Horatio insisted. “You can pay next time, if you like.” He paused, then the words caught up with him. “Er, that is--”

Archie grinned and cut him off. “How does tomorrow sound?”

Horatio smiled. “Tomorrow it is.”

***

“The bird’s flightless?”

“Yes”

“It’s not going anywhere.”

“Did you see Jack’s smirk before he started strumming his violin? How many times has he ended arguments by starting a duet?” Archie asked, eyes shining as he turned to face Horatio on the sofa at his flat.

Horatio turned his head to watch Archie enjoy the ending of *Master and Commander*. His right arm was slightly numb from having it around Archie’s shoulders on the sofa, but it was entirely worthwhile.

“And now they’re switching who takes lead! Wait, you can STRUM A CELLO? Horatio, this is brilliant! It’s their entire relationship encapsulated with music!”

Horatio had no idea what Archie was on about, but he had more pressing concerns on his mind.

“Yes, their friendship is remarkable. But what did you think about the battles? The ship life?”

“Oh, yes, very helpful. And, -- wait. FRIENDSHIP? Really?”

“--Yes? They’re friends?”

“Horatio, I’m not sure we were watching the same movie.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You saw the bit where Jack said that all the mattered to him was capturing that ship?”

“Of course. Archie, I’ve seen this film many times.”

“And then he forgets about capturing the ship when Stephen is shot. Ergo, Stephen is more important to him than doing his duty.”

“Certainly, Stephen matters to him a great deal. But he couldn’t very well go into battle with a doctor gravely injured, Archie. Imagine the death toll. It was for the good of his ship and crew as well as for Stephen.”

Archie narrowed his eyes at Horatio, then grabbed the remote and pulled up the scene menu. “Watch Jack’s face during the self-surgery scene, and tell me that isn’t the face of someone
watching the man he loves in excruciating pain and danger.”

“He looks like he’s about to faint because such dramatic self-surgery isn’t something one sees everyday.”

Archie raised his eyebrows at Horatio incredulously. “He’s a captain, Horatio. He’s seen more blood and violence than you or I can imagine. And yet seeing Stephen like that almost undoes him. I’m telling you, Horatio, they’re more than friends.”

He hit play and they watched starting from the moment Stephen Maturin was shot. Archie narrated what he thought each minute flicker of emotion on their faces meant. This wasn’t exactly how he’d imagined their viewing going, but it had a different sort of charm. It felt . . . right, somehow.

“There! You see?” Archie crowed triumphantly. “What did I tell you? How can you argue with that?”

Horatio stared at the image on the screen. He wasn’t quite sure what he was supposed to be looking for.

Archie looked from him to the screen, then back to him again. “Jack can hardly hold eye contact with him because of how close he came to losing him. And right there, Stephen figures out that Jack loves him! And then Jack shows his affection by deflecting through making a joke, because Heaven forbid men show emotion in the Age of Toxic Masculinity.”

Horatio narrowed his eyes. “You got all that from body language? Are you sure you’re not just imagining it?”

Archie shrugged. “It’s what it would mean if I played it.”

Horatio stared at the screen again. The more he thought about it, the more it made some degree of sense. In fact, it reminded him of Will’s favorite theory about what would happen in book 5. “Perhaps that’s why some people think that Algy and James are in love in The Worthington Chronicles.”

The grin that answered that remark lit up Archie’s entire face. “They do, do they? Excellent. I’ll talk with André about it.”

“André?”

“My costar, André Côtard. We met for the screen test. We’ve only emailed once or twice, but, unless I’m very much mistaken, he’d be up for it.”

“They got an actual Frenchman to play the part? I was worried they were going to simplify his backstory and make him the uncomplicated British man of action.”

“I’d be much less interested in the film if they’d gone that route. No, it’s going to be a fairly faithful adaptation. And, if I get my way, with more gay,” Archie said with a grin. “Speaking of which,” he said, shifting position to facing Horatio and kneel on the sofa, “I’d very much like to kiss you again, unless you have any objections.”

Horatio’s heart started beating enthusiastically. “Er, no objections at all,” he said with a smile.

“Good,” Archie said. He tilted his head and leaned forward, his eyes flickering shut. Horatio echoed him instinctively. He shivered as their lips met.
It was strange that this felt so good. In fact, everything about this was strange. It was strange that Archie wanted to kiss him, that he wanted to kiss Archie, that the simple act of flesh touching flesh was enough to make him acutely aware of his suddenly too tight trousers and the throbbing therein. It made no sense that humans enjoyed interlocking the bits they used to eat with against each other. There was no reason it should provoke such a dramatic reaction. And yet, the slide of Archie’s lips against his made him forget how to breathe.

Archie’s tongue flicked briefly into his mouth and brushed along the inside of his lip. How could such a simple act make him tingle from head to toe? He copied the gesture and Archie instantly held him more tightly. Alright, good. He was doing this correctly. He opened his mouth more widely, and Archie’s tongue dove in again, but this time, Archie’s hands moved from his shoulders to cradle his face, sending sparks travelling down through his veins.

Hands. He had forgotten he had them. But where should he put them? He reached over and put a hand on either side of Archie’s hips. Archie moaned into his mouth and in an instant, Archie’s torso was pressed up against his, and warmth from the contact was spreading throughout his entire body. He experimentally pulled on Archie’s waist to try to bring them closer together, and ended up with a lap full of Archie. It wasn’t crushing or restricting at all: it felt perfectly comfortable. But last night, Archie had bolted soon after they had landed on the sofa, with a knee on either side of Horatio’s hips. What could he do to make sure Archie continued to enjoy it?

Apparently he had stopped moving as he pondered, because Archie pulled back and sat on his heels. “Alright, Horatio?” he asked, breathlessly. “We can stop if you’d like.”

“Better than alright,” Horatio managed.

“Let me know if that changes?”

“Of course. And let me know if you want to stop.”

Archie froze in surprise, his eyes going wide, then blinking rapidly, but not with the eyelid flutter that Horatio was learning meant that something was wrong. Archie briefly broke eye contact, staring at a spot on the arm of the sofa, before swallowing and meeting Horatio’s eyes again.

“I will,” Archie said, his voice shaking slightly. Was he still breathless from kissing?

Archie didn’t give him time to ponder it much longer, as he practically threw himself into Horatio’s arms, kissing him so passionately that it vaporised every thought in Horatio’s head. All plans to take detailed notes of the various noises Archie made in response to different amounts of pressure, different angles of lips and tongues vanished in a haze of pleasure, along with any sense of time. All that anchored him to this world was Archie’s lips against his, Archie’s tongue in his mouth, Archie’s hands in his hair, and Archie’s body pressed tight against his. But Archie was still too far away. He adjusted his hands’ placement on Archie’s waist to try to bring them more closely together, but instead of sliding across the smooth material of his dress shirt, it brushed against bare skin. Archie gasped and bucked into Horatio. Was this escalating too quickly? He started to remove his hand and Archie pulled back immediately.

“Don’t stop,” Archie gasped. “Unless you want to.”

That was an easy answer.

“In that case--” Horatio said, and slid his hand further up Archie’s shirt. Archie’s answering moan pulsed through Horatio’s entire body. Archie’s hands left Horatio’s hair and traveled down his back, pulling them even closer together. But there were too many clothes in the way: Archie’s shirt
was too form-fitting to give his hand much space, and his own was entirely tucked in. Would it be inappropriate to--

Suddenly, Archie pulled away and sat up. What had he done? Had he gone too far? How could he fix this?

“Fuck dress shirts and their fucking buttons,” Archie said breathlessly, reaching for his collar. “Mind if I take this off?”

Oh. OH.

“Off is good,” Horatio managed and started unbuttoning his own. **Off is GOOD? What the hell was his--**

Archie chuckled. “VERY good,” he said, getting the last of the buttons undone and tossing his shirt of the floor. Even in the mostly dark room, Horatio could see the outlines of an intimidating number of muscles: how did he manage to look both fit and slender? And what would Archie think of him? It’s not as though he was much to look at. He paused, one button left to undo.

“Horatio.” A hand on his shoulder.

Horatio looked up to find Archie’s eyes on him, his forehead wrinkled in concern.

“We can stop if you want. I can put my shirt back on. Whatever--”

“No!” Horatio blurted out.

Archie let go of his shoulder and sat back on his knees, giving him more space. “Alright. No to which part?”

Horatio blushed. “Er, no, you don’t need to put your shirt back on.”

Archie stared at him for a moment, then started laughing. “Alright,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “Shirt stays off.”

Horatio turned redder still.

“No need to be embarrassed. You just did wonders for my ego,” Archie grinned. “Now, where do you want to go from here?”

Horatio thought about it. He absolutely wanted to be as close to Archie as possible and with as few clothes between them as possible. And Archie was unlikely to judge him harshly for not looking like a film star. And after all, maybe tall and gangly was his type.

He unbuttoned the final button of his dress shirt and dropped it on the sofa next to him. Nothing some ironing wouldn’t fix. He glanced back up to see how Archie was responding.

Archie was watching him, his eyes wide, pupils dilated, and a soft smile playing on his lips.

“You’re beautiful, Horatio,” he whispered.

Horatio’s breath caught in his throat. Archie wasn’t acting. He genuinely -- how did -- but --?

Archie reached a slightly trembling hand toward him and paused with it hovering over his chest. He looked up into Horatio’s eyes. “May I?” he asked, his voice shaking slightly.
Horatio nodded, and his eyes fluttered shut when Archie laid his hand above his heart. His heart was pounding so hard it seemed vaguely astonishing it hadn’t just lept out of his chest.

“You can touch, too,” Horatio heard Archie say. “I’m not made of glass.”

Horatio wasn’t sure he was ready to see the sheer, unfiltered affection in Archie’s eyes. Knowing his luck, he would probably either start tearing up, or orgasm, or both. Instead, he put his hand on top of Archie’s, against his chest, and traced it back along Archie’s arm to his shoulders, across his collarbone, and down to his chest. He could feel Archie’s pulse jumping, feel the trembling of his breath. It helped to know that Archie was being similarly affected by something so deceptively simple.

He opened his eyes and met Archie’s, looking down on him, and looking abnormally shimmery. Archie blinked a few times, then leaned forward, head tilted, to kiss him again. With the new degree of proximity, things escalated more quickly. Before Horatio knew what was happening, they were both clutching each other, running their hands up and down exposed skin, gasping into each other’s mouths, and kissing as though their lives depended on it. Archie briefly relinquished his mouth, but before Horatio could start to miss it, Archie started kissing a trail down his neck. Horatio tipped his head back to grant Archie better access, which Archie acknowledged by gently nipping him an inch below his ear. The unexpected sensation made every nerve ending in Horatio’s body spark at once, and he tried to hold back a whimper.

“Ah,” Archie whispered. “Like that, do you?” He nipped it again, a little harder this time, and Horatio moaned, then bucked into Archie before he could think to hold himself back. The friction was almost unbearable, but he didn’t want it to stop.

He needed to make sure Archie felt this good. He sat up and leaned forward to get better access to Archie’s neck. He experimented with different spots and different pressures, and then he found a spot right behind Archie’s ear which made him writhe with pleasure. He gave it a cautious lick.

“Holy fuck,” Archie gasped, and ground down hard against Horatio with enough force to topple them over so they were lying on the sofa, Horatio with his back against the seat cushions, and Archie sprawled across him.

“Do you want me to move off of you?” Archie said, panting and holding himself taut, presumably so as not to put any pressure, physical or otherwise, on Horatio.

“Not unless you want to,” Horatio managed.

“Good,” Archie said, and applied himself to Horatio’s mouth with renewed vigor.

Horatio’s hips moved against Archie’s of their own accord, sending ripples of pleasure throughout his body. Archie made a noise--a sort of gasping, keening sound--which might be the most marvelous thing he had ever heard. He bucked his hips again, harder this time, and Archie positively moaned into his mouth.

Archie disconnected their lips long enough to whisper “do that much more and I won't last much longer,” into his ear, before giving it a gentle nip.

The noise Horatio made in answer was thoroughly undignified.

Archie chuckled breathily in response, and the sensations his breath on Horatio’s hot skin produced were electrifying. Horatio needed to hold on to something to anchor himself against the sensation. His hands grasped the nearest thing in reach and latched on.
“Oh God,” Archie moaned.

Horatio suddenly realised he had just placed his hands firmly on Archie’s bottom. Judging by Archie’s enthusiastic grinding against him, he didn't seem to mind.

Archie started to kiss a trail down his neck, but this time, he kept going further down. The sudden bursts of pressure and sensation from his lips, coupled with the maddening movement of his fingers across his chest were driving him to distraction. And oh God, he was going lower still! Archie had scooted down far enough that Horatio could hardly reach him any more. His fingers scrabbled for Archie’s shoulders in search of something to hold.

Archie pressed a slow, lingering kiss into his hip bone, right above his waistband. Horatio clung to him, panting hard, and bit his lip, trying to stay silent. But then Archie’s tongue flicked out to gently swipe along the sensitive skin just underneath.

“Archie!” he gasped. He bucked, helpless, and flailed, and his hands gripped Archie's hair as a lifeline.

Suddenly, everything stopped. Archie was unmoving and as locked and rigid as a board. Horatio pulled his hands away immediately. He must have yanked Archie’s hair.

“Sorry, Archie. Are you alright?”

No response.

“Archie?” Archie always talked. Always. What was happening? Why wasn’t he saying anything?

No response.

“Archie!” Oh God, was Archie angry at him? “Archie, I’m so sorry. What did I do?”

No response.

Oh God, was Archie about to have a seizure? How had he given Archie a seizure? No. No no no. This wasn’t happening. Oh God. How could he fix this? Light. He needed light.

Horatio sat bold upright, pulling his legs out from between Archie’s, and flicked on the floor lamp.

Archie was still sitting on his knees and was white as a sheet, his shoulders hunched and locked, his eyes wide open but unseeing, and staring right at Horatio with a look of abject terror.

This wasn’t a seizure. That was fear. Archie was afraid. Why was Archie afraid? Archie was afraid of him? Oh God, no. What had he done?

“Archie, talk to me!” Horatio said, reaching out his arm to touch him.

Archie frantically scrabbled away, pressing his back against the arm of the sofa. Horatio pulled back as though he had been burned.

Suddenly, Archie blinked and his eyes focused on Horatio. They widened suddenly, shock and surprise momentarily replacing terror, and for a horrifying moment, it looked like Archie had stopped breathing.

Then Archie took a loud, desperate, gulping breath and started gasping as though the air were being sucked out of the room, his eyes still wide with fear. His hands flew up and pressed on his chest, which was rising and falling much too quickly.
Oh God. Oh God, he’d given Archie a panic attack. How had this--no, no time. What had Archie told him?

“Archie, I’m so sorry. But you’re going to need to breathe, alright? It’s alright. We’ll do it together.”

Archie nodded. *Oh thank God. He was responsive again.*

*What if it doesn’t work? What if he faints?*

“Alright. Match my breathing. Inhale slowly for four counts, then exhale for 4 counts. Inhale 2, 3, 4.”

*Oh God, oh God, oh God, why wasn’t it working? When should it work? Was he doing it wrong? Was his presence making it worse? He never should have come, this was beyond a disaster.*

“Exhale 2, 3, 4.”

*It wasn’t working quickly enough. What else could he do? What else had Archie said? Of course! The compass! Why hadn’t he thought of it before? He just had to find it and bring it to him--oh. No, Archie kept it in his trousers’ pocket. Perhaps Archie should get it for himself.*

“Archie? Would the compass help?”

Archie looked up at him, his eyes still wide with panic, then stuck his hand into his pocket and pulled out the pocket compass charm, his hands trembling so forcefully he could hardly hold on. He ran his fingers over the points in clockwise order, round and round, round and round.

“You’re doing fine, Archie. Inhale, 2, 3, 4.”

*His breathing is slowing down. Oh thank God. He’s going to be alright.*

After what seemed an eternity, but was probably only ten minutes, Archie shifted position, facing forward on the sofa, and away from Horatio. He swallowed hard, then leaned forward and hid his head in his hands. He exhaled slowly and shakily.

*How could he even begin to apologise?*

“Archie,” Horatio started.

Archie lurched up from the sofa, ran to the loo, and slammed the door. A minute later, the sound of violent retching filled the flat.

*Horatio stood up and started to pace. What had happened? How had it all changed so quickly? Was it because he had accidentally thrust too hard? Or because he’d pulled his hair? But that didn’t make any sense. Had he violated some sort of cardinal rule of intimate relations? If only he’d had more experience, maybe he would have already known not to do whatever it was he had done, and Archie would still be fine. Instead, everything had spiralled out of control, and it was all his fault--*

The toilet flushed. Horatio froze and looked up.

Archie was coming back. He was running out of time. And he still didn’t know what he had done. Which meant he couldn’t fix it. But he had to fix it. But he couldn’t. What should he do? Should he go to him? Should he leave? Would Archie even want to see him again? And how could he face him if he didn’t know what he had done? What was the right thing to do?
He froze, paralyzed with indecision, and the door to the loo swung open to reveal a very shaken and trembling Archie. Archie shuffled over to the sofa, staring at the ground, unable to make eye contact with Horatio, and collapsed onto it, leaning his head in his hands again.

There was a long, painful silence.

“Well, that was mortifying,” Archie said eventually. He wiped a shaking hand over his face.

“Archie, I am so sorry,” Horatio managed.

Archie let out a shaky sigh. “Not your fault.”

“Of course it was,” Horatio said.


“Why are you saying that?” Horatio finally burst out. “I hurt you. You should be furious at me.”

Archie whipped his head up and turned on Horatio with a fire in his eyes. “You did not hurt me. Don’t think for a moment you did. This is my fault. I miscalculated. But that’s not on you.”

“That’s not possible,” Horatio said.

Archie closed his eyes and took a deep, shaky breath. “Can you just trust me on this?”

How could this be Archie’s fault? None of this made any sense. What was he missing? If only he understood people more, if only he had Archie’s social skills, maybe he would know. God, why wouldn’t Archie just tell him what he had done wrong so he could fix it?

“Archie, I don’t understand.”

Archie chuckled humorlessly. “No, of course you don’t. Look, I – it’s—I’m trying. I really am. I just -- the words -- I can’t --” He swallowed and dropped his head back into his hands. “I just can’t,” he said again.

Horatio tilted his head, his mind whirring now that it finally had something to go on. If Archie couldn’t find the words--and what on Earth could keep Archie from finding words?--maybe he could help. “You seemed fine until I grabbed your hair.”

Archie stilled. “Ah. Right. Observant.”

Horatio waited, but Archie didn’t add anything else. Why was this so difficult for him?

“Was that the problem?” he prompted.

Archie swallowed. “Do we have to do this now?” He sounded on the verge of tears and his shoulders had started shaking.

Oh no. He had made it worse. How had he made it worse? What was happening? None of this made any sense. What could he do? Was his presence hurting Archie? If so, there was only one thing he could do to make amends. “I’m sorry, Archie. I don’t mean to make it worse. I should go.”

“Oh.” Archie hunched in on himself and suddenly looked impossibly small. “Of course. Can’t say I blame you.” He turned his head so Horatio couldn’t see his face. Then he shook his head. “Wait, no, Horatio, that’s not fair to you. You don’t have a place to stay tonight. Where would you even go? You stay here. I’ll stick to my room, stay out of your way. Don’t worry, you won’t have to see
me,” he said, standing up. “You shouldn’t have to suffer because I’m a pathetic broken fuckup who--” Archie’s voice broke and he swallowed hard. “Right. You don’t need to watch me kick myself on top of everything else. I’ll get out of your hair--” Archie cringed and ran a hand over his face again. “Right. Poor choice of words. I’m going now. Bye, Horatio,” he said, and starting walking towards his room.

Somehow, seeing Archie like this was more terrifying than seeing him in the throes of a panic attack. Horatio was off the sofa before he realised what he was doing. “Archie, no, That’s not what I meant. I don’t want you to go: I thought you’d want me to go. Because I’m making you miserable and you’d be happier if I were elsewhere.”

Archie scrubbed a hand over his face. “You’re not making me miserable. Damn it, Horatio, this isn’t your fault.”

Horatio bit back on the urge to yell that it was in fact his fault and to tell Archie to stop being unreasonable in arguing anything else. That wouldn’t help anyone and it would just wind Archie up more. He took a deep breath and tried to calm down and approach this logically. “Would you like me to stay, then?”

Archie opened his mouth, then closed it.

Horatio waited.

“Not out of pity,” Archie finally said, so quietly Horatio almost missed it.

Horatio steeled himself. None of this was catering to his strengths, but he had to find a way to reassure Archie. And if that meant taking the first step, then that’s what he would have to do. “It wouldn’t be out of pity, Archie. Or obligation. I don’t understand what’s happening, and I don’t understand why you won’t tell me, but I want to help. Both as your friend, and your -- your boyfriend, if you still want me to be either. All I want is to make you happy. And I’m sorry I’m doing such a terrible job of it.” He took a deep breath and forced away the tears that threatened to spill.

Archie let out a humourless chuckle and sat back on the sofa. Horatio joined him. “You do make me happy, Horatio. Happier than I’ve been in a very long time. And of course I still want to be with you. But--”

Horatio’s heart stopped. “But?” he prompted. This was it. This was the moment Archie would break up with him. He braced himself. He wasn’t sure what heartbreak would feel like, but people survived it all the time. He would pull through. Eventually.

“But we’ve only known each other for three days and I’ve already had a seizure, a nightmare, and an incredibly embarrassing panic attack. And, as much as I would like to say it won’t happen again, I can’t promise you that. I’m more trouble than I’m worth, Horatio. You deserve someone better than this.” Archie swallowed and looked down at his hands.

How could Archie be saying this? And how on Earth was Horatio going to find the words to explain? “But . . . I want you .”

Archie looked up and met his gaze, eyes shining with tears he was trying to hold back. “Why?” he said at last, his voice shaking slightly.

Horatio took a deep breath as he tried to puzzle this out. How would Archie like to be comforted? With words and declarations, probably. He could feel the words he needed rattling around in his
brain, but when he tried to present them in an orderly, controlled fashion, they got tangled. How could he possibly explain what he felt? “Because -- because you make everything different and unexpected, and I should find that terrifying, but I don’t. Because you make me laugh at myself without feeling like a failure. Because you’re – because you’re -- you,” he concluded as he ran out of words. He tried not to fidget as he waited to gauge the effectiveness of his response.

Archie stared at him, his lips slightly parted, his face broadcasting too many simultaneous emotions for Horatio to identify. Archie blinked repeatedly to clear the tears that were trying to fall, then wiped them away when they fell despite his best efforts. He took a deep breath. “Well, that’s easily the nicest thing anyone’s ever said about me. So, um, thanks.”

Horatio tried not to visibly sigh with relief.

Archie licked his lips. “Look, I -- I know that . . . can’t have been easy for you. So, since you did that, I’ll try --.” He swallowed and ran a hand through his hair. “Ok, so, earlier? When I . . . um, panicked? That was because--.” His breathing became shallow and rapid and his eyelids fluttered. He shook his head, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes. After a moment, he licked his lips, then spoke again. “I don’t enjoy being pinned down. And it seemed like what you were going for,” he said all in a rush.

Horatio frowned. Why did Archie think that he--? OH! The hair. “Sorry, that wasn’t my intention. I just . . . wanted to touch you and I couldn’t reach anything else.”

Archie huffed out a breath. “I figured that out. Belatedly.”

Horatio’s mind raced over possibilities as he added up the information. “Cleithrophobia?”

Archie opened his eyes and looked at Horatio, eyebrows raised. “What’s that?”

“Fear of being trapped.”

Archie shuddered slightly, then caught himself and gave Horatio a sheepish expression. “Didn't know that had a name. Um, that is . . . certainly a contributing factor.”

“Allright. How can I help? And are some things more liable to set it off than others? You’ve seemed fine with my arms around you. Was that a problem?”

Archie gave Horatio a strange, amused look, then chuckled and shook his head. “No, hugs are fine. Kissing is fine. As is waking up in your arms. I’m still trying to figure out the full extent of the ‘fine’ and ‘not fine’ list. It’s . . . a comparatively recent issue. Still learning my limits.” He hesitated. “But it’s more of a problem the closer things get to sex, it seems,” as though each word were being dragged out of him.

Horatio hesitated. How had Archie phrased it at dinner? “Er, we don’t need to do anything more than hug, or, er, kiss, if that’s what you want.”

Archie shook his head with a crooked smile. “I don’t want to give up. Not yet. So, um, we can try to go more slowly, work up to things.”

Horatio nodded. “And I can avoid doing anything that seems like I’m trying to hold you down.”

Archie froze for an instant, then visibly forced himself to relax. “Good thinking. Oh, and, um,” he tried again, “I think hair, neck, and shoulders are probably the bits liable to produce a negative reaction. Just so you know.”
Horatio felt as though a huge weight had been taken off his shoulders. Finally, something he could work from. “Thank you for telling me.”

Archie nodded, suddenly blinking away tears again, but stayed silent.

“Is there anything else I can do to help?” Horatio asked. “Anything I can get you? Water? Oh, you’d mentioned medication over dinner? Would that be helpful?”

Archie shook his head. “Mixing Xanax and alcohol ends poorly. Just need to sit it out. The worst is over, anyway.” Then he frowned. “Well, barring potential nightmares.” He glared at the ground. “I doubt these walls are very soundproof. I don’t want to interrupt your sleep. Not on top of everything else. Hang on, I have an idea.” He moved to get up.

“What? Archie, where are you going?”

Archie paused, half off the sofa. “To get you some earplugs. They’re in the medicine cabinet.”

Horatio stared at him. He couldn’t be serious, could he?

Archie stared back impatiently. Oh God, he was.

“Archie, I’m not going to put in earplugs.”

“But I might wake you up.”

“Good. I’d rather be awake and help than be asleep and leave you to face it on your own.”

Archie frowned. “But--?”

“Unless, you don’t want me to help?”

“No, it’s not that, it’s ---”

“What?”

Archie shook his head. “Horatio, this is absurd. You’ve already shouldered far more than I have any right to expect. I can handle it on my own.”

“I’m sure you can. But you don’t have to. Your comfort is more important to me than sleep.”

Archie opened his mouth, then shut it again. “If you’re sure,” he said eventually.

Horatio nodded. “I am.” Perhaps Archie would believe it this time.

Archie shrugged. “On your head be it, then.” He paused. “Want to get ready for bed first?”

“Alright,” Horatio agreed and stood up. He winced as his back spasmed.

“What’s wrong? Did I hurt you?” Archie asked, sitting bolt upright.

“No, not at all. My back’s just a little sore.”

Archie frowned, then looked at the sofa, then back at Horatio. He winced in sympathy. “Ah. Sofa’s on the short side, isn’t it?”

“It’s fine. Nothing to worry about,” Horatio said. “Back in a moment.” He picked up his toiletries bag and his pyjamas and walked to the loo, shutting the door behind him.
Once inside, he walked over to the sink and started getting ready for bed. He tried to focus on washing his face, but he couldn’t concentrate. Flashbacks of the last thirty minutes kept playing in his mind. Archie, his eyes wide with terror. His hands shaking so forcefully he could barely move his fingers. His face twisted into a furious scowl as he hurled abuses at himself. His eyes full of tears as he wondered aloud why Horatio still wanted to be with him. How could Archie even ask that? Did he really have such a low opinion of himself?

Being a boyfriend was far more complicated than he had anticipated. It apparently involved discussing anxiety, providing reassurance and comfort, experiencing emotional and physical intimacy, and none of those catered to his strengths. But Archie was worth every second of it.

How could he convince Archie of that?

Well, for a start, he would be more cautious about where he put his hands.

Why hadn’t Archie mentioned his fear of being trapped before? They could have worked around it. They’d already discussed anxiety and panic attacks, so there had been a logical time to mention it. And why was it so hard for him to talk about? Archie had actually been at a loss for words. Was cleithrophobia often activated by sexual intimacy? What was he missing?

Horatio shook his head. Perhaps it would all make sense in the morning.

***

Ten minutes later, Horatio opened the door and went back to the living room to find Archie, looking more like his usual self, if a little pale and shaken, sitting on the sofa with a laptop.

Archie looked up, smiled, and closed the computer. “Just ordered you an air mattress. Should be here by tomorrow. Can’t have you throwing your back out while helping hapless patrons.”

“Oh. Er, thanks. But you didn’t have to--”

“I wanted to,” Archie interrupted. “It’s the least I can do. Anyway, it’s the sort of thing one should have around. Same plan for tomorrow, then? I’ll set my alarm for 6:30?”

Horatio nodded.

“Alright, then. I should copy your example,” Archie said, standing up and setting his computer on the coffee table. He paused, licked his lips, and met Horatio’s eyes.

“Thanks for a good evening,” he said. “Despite my horrible timing. Again.”

Horatio frowned. “Archie, you have nothing to apologize for. And you don’t need to thank me. I enjoy spending time with you.”

Archie blinked repeatedly, opened his mouth, closed it again, and nodded.

They stared at each other in awkward silence as Horatio tried to figure out the next steps. He desperately wanted to put his arms around Archie to comfort him again, but would Archie feel like that was trapping him? Better to wait for Archie to make the first move. He clasped his hands behind his back to make sure he didn’t accidentally make Archie feel pressured.

Archie raised an eyebrow at Horatio’s posture, then started laughing. “Alright, this is absurd. I’m still not made of glass. Come here?”
Horatio took a step forward, and Archie closed the distance, wrapping his arms around him. After a moment, Horatio copied the gesture, taking care to hold him loosely, just in case Archie was wrong about hugs being safe. Instead of flinching, Archie held Horatio more tightly. Some of his earlier concern started to trickle away at the sensation of Archie, warm and breathing, in his arms.

Archie tilted his head up to look at Horatio, then gave him a feather-light, gentle kiss on the lips. “Alright?”

“Alright,” Horatio agreed.

***

“NO!”

A thump.

Horatio sat up, suddenly wide awake, the events of the evening coming back to him in a rush. He turned on the floor lamp next to the sofa and listened. He heard a muffled curse, ragged breathing, and then a strange thwump noise, as though someone had just punched a pillow, coming from Archie’s room. Archie must have had a nightmare. Horatio stood up and started to walk to Archie’s room, then hesitated. What if Archie didn’t want him there? Should he wait until Archie came out to find him? What if he didn’t come out to find him?

Horatio paced back and forth in front of the sofa. After a few minutes, the light in Archie’s bedroom switched on, and Horatio was knocking on the door before he’d realised what he was doing. “Archie?” he called quietly.

Horatio heard a sniffle, the creaking of a bed, and then a shuffling noise and another curse. Finally, the door opened, giving him a view of a very messy room, and a bleary, red-eyed Archie, his hair sleep-mussed and sticking up in every direction, wearing a pair of blue boxers and pulling a grey t-shirt over his head, and still breathing a little too hard.

“I did warn you,” Archie said with a half shrug.

“I’m not here to complain,” Horatio answered. “Would you like some company?”

Archie started to shake his head, then paused. “Alright,” he said instead. “Come on in.”

Archie stepped aside and Horatio walked into the room. Archie shuffled back to the bed and hopped inside, pulling the covers up over his waist. Horatio stopped in the middle of the room and looked about. There weren’t any chairs for him to sit in.

Archie gave him a wry smile and pulled back the covers next to him, on the side closest to the door. “Plenty of room, should you care to join. No pressure, of course, but I promise I won’t make any attempts on your virtue.”

Horatio nodded and clambered into bed next to him. Now what?

Archie moved closer until they were side by side, touching from their shoulders to their ankles. Did physical contact help relax him, as long as he didn’t feel trapped? It had worked well after the first nightmare, so it was worth another attempt.

Horatio hesitated, then put an arm around him. Archie made a pleased little humming noise and sidled in closer, resting his head on Horatio’s shoulders.
Alright. Following the protocols from the first nightmare seemed to work well. He started gently rubbing circles into Archie’s shoulder with his thumb. After a few minutes, Archie’s muscles began to unclench and his breathing to regularise.

What kept plaguing Archie’s dreams? If only he knew, then he could customize his reassurances to the circumstances that haunted Archie. Perhaps it wouldn’t hurt to ask?

“Did you want to talk?” Horatio ventured.

Archie shook his head. “Not particularly. But could you?”

“Could I what?” Horatio asked, frowning.

“Talk to me. Tell me something Age of Sail-y.”

“Alright. But why?”

“It’ll distract me. And I like your voice,” Archie said with a yawn.

“Alright,” Horatio said again. But what should he talk about? Archie sounded exhausted. He needed sleep, which meant that Horatio should choose something with lots of things for him to list, and lots of details that would mean next to nothing to someone without extensive naval knowledge.

“Would you like to hear about the Battle of the Nile?” he offered finally.

Archie shrugged, and his eyes drifted shut.

“Right. Well, from August first through third, 1798, the British and French naval forces fought a dramatic battle off the Nile delta.”

“Fascinating,” Archie murmured.

“It was. The British navy had 15 vessels: the Goliath, the Zealous, the Orion, the Audacious, the Theseus, the Vanguard, the Minotaur, the Deference, the Bellerophon, the Majestic, the Leander, the Alexander—”

He paused, noticing that Archie’s breathing had stabilised. Had Archie fallen asleep so quickly?

“Alexander,” Archie prompted him, slurring sleepily.

Apparently not. “Yes, the Alexander, the Swiftsure, the Culloden, and the Mutine. It was a decisive victory for the British fleet: of the French’s 17 vessels, only two ships of the line and two frigates escaped.”

“Mmmmm,” Archie grunted.

“Indeed. The French fleet contained the Guerrier, the Conquérant, the Spartiate, the Aquilon, the Orient, the Justice—” Horatio trailed off as Archie’s head drooped forward, then jerked back up to his shoulder.

“Archie, why don’t you try lying down?” Horatio offered gently.

“’llright,” Archie agreed, and slithered down under the covers, his head resting on the pillow. Then he wrapped his arm around Horatio’s waist and nuzzled into his hipbone.

Horatio’s breath caught in his throat. This felt impossibly right, but wouldn’t Archie become more
upset when he woke up with a strange person in his bed? He tried to disentangle Archie’s fingers from his waist, but they were surprisingly difficult to pry loose. It didn’t help that he didn’t want to leave.

“Er, Archie?” When Archie didn’t respond, he tapped his arm repeatedly.

“Hmm?” Archie murmured sleepily.

“Do you want me to stay?” Horatio forced himself to ask.

Archie’s eyes fluttered open. He squinted, visibly trying to wake up for the conversation. “Would that be alright?”

Horatio’s heart thudded happily. Archie wanted him to help. Archie wanted him here. “Er, yes. Better than alright, actually,” Horatio said. The bright, sleepy, unguarded smile Archie gave him before his eyes closed again put to rest his lingering anxiety about the question. This way, he could help Archie have a good night’s sleep and be nearby in case anything went wrong. A seizure, for instance. Or another panic attack. He just had to hope that he didn’t do anything embarrassing, like kick Archie in his sleep. Or steal all the blankets. Or accidentally poke Archie with an erection in the middle of the night. Oh dear. Perhaps he hadn’t thought this through all the way.


Horatio chuckled. “Alright, Archie. No need to be impatient.” He slid under the covers, rotating so his back was facing Archie, and lay down next to him. Archie made a pleased noise and snuggled closer, his arm still around Horatio’s waist. “But you can change your mind about me staying at any time.”

Archie snorted. “—mad to kick you out of bed,” he muttered, mostly into Horatio’s shoulder. “This ok?”

Horatio nodded, then realised Archie probably had his eyes closed and wouldn’t see it. “Er, yes. Quite comfortable. Should I get the light?”

Archie nodded and made an incoherent grunt. Horatio reached over and turned off the lamp on the nightstand.

“Good night, Archie. Sweet dreams.”

He felt lips gently press against his shoulder. “G’night H’ratio,” Archie mumbled. Then, his breathing turned into the slow, measured huffs of someone fast asleep. Archie’s body was pressed up against his from head to toe, but it didn’t feel constraining at all. It felt right, somehow. He had begun to fear that he would spend the whole night anxiously thinking about every way this could go wrong, but with Archie doubling as a wrap-around electric blanket, his last few concerns slipped away and his eyes fell shut.

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An unfamiliar, high-pitched beeping noise filtered through the haze. Horatio felt a tug on his hand. He didn’t want to move. He was warm. It was nice.

He felt the faint rustle of breath on the back of his neck. “Morning, Horatio.”

Horatio blinked sleepily. “Mmmph,” he grunted, then burrowed more deeply into the pillow.
Horatio heard a faint chuckle. “I will need my arm back, though.”

Horatio forced a bleary eye open. He looked at his hand. It was holding another hand. Archie’s hand. They were nestled under his chin. He let go. The hand disappeared. The beeping stopped. Where had the hand gone? He turned his head in the direction the hand had gone.

“Hello,” Archie’s smile said.

“‘Lo,” Horatio responded. He wanted to stare into the blurry smile some more but his eyes kept closing.

“How about you go back to sleep, and I’ll wake you when it’s your turn to shower?” the lovely smile asked.

Horatio nodded and let his eyes close. The smile had a good idea. It was a very comfortable bed.

“Back soon,” Archie said, leaning over to kiss Horatio’s shoulder. Then the bed shifted. His side of the bed was suddenly too cold. He rolled over to where Archie had been and burrowed into the pillow. Ah, yes. Much better. This smelled like home, he thought, as sleep overtook him again.
Chapter 12

Archie slipped out from the bed and padded silently to the door. He looked back over his shoulder at Horatio, who had slid over to his side of the bed and nuzzled into the pillow with the most endearing noise he had ever heard from anyone. Then, his soft, quiet snoring started again. Archie resisted the urge to go back to bed and wrap his arms around Horatio, or to brush his curls away from his eyes. He forced himself to open the door and close it behind him, leaving Horatio on the other side. He couldn’t just stand here watching him sleep all morning.

He walked into the bathroom, shut the door, and grabbed his towel from the hook to bring it closer to the shower. As he walked by, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror and winced. His puffy eyelids were a dead giveaway. Maybe no one would notice? After all, he had plenty of experience giving people other things to focus on. Some well-timed quips should do the trick.

He stripped, left his clothes where they fell on the floor, stepped into the shower, and started the water. He cranked up the hot water tap, and as the droplets cascaded over him, he tried to imagine them burning away the humiliating memory of last night, leaving only the good parts of the evening. Or morning. Like waking up with his arms around Horatio.

He almost couldn’t find it within himself to be embarrassed about that. It had been ages since he’d slept so well . . . apart from when he’d woken up in Horatio’s arms on the sofa. And wasn’t that an interesting pattern? Twice now, nightmares had gone once Horatio was there. Even when asleep, his mind knew that he had nothing to fear from Horatio.

Not that his pathetic body had done something useful for a change, like remembered that when they were snogging on the sofa. No, far better that he have a humiliating panic attack and have to essentially give Horatio a how-to guide on shattering what remained of his sanity in a few short steps--

He slammed the lid shut on that memory and forced his mind onto better topics. Like Horatio’s hands running across his back, his lips pressing against his neck. And holy fuck, the things that man could do with his tongue. How did he know exactly what angle and pressure would have him writhing against him? Had Horatio created some sort of mental spreadsheet to track exactly what Archie liked or didn't like? Actually, this being Horatio, of course he had. And now it had “no hands on hair, neck, or shoulders during intimate moments.” Lovely.

No. Not thinking about that yet.

He shook his head to clear it. Where was he? Right. Horatio as a lover. He was cautious, generous, ridiculously observant, and a quick learner. If only he could get Horatio to feel how much it meant to him, to feel as treasured in return. He wanted to memorise every mole, every freckle on Horatio’s body with the dedication he would devote to a script, to caress every centimeter with so much affection that Horatio would know exactly how much he cared, to feel the friction of their naked bodies pressed together, and, yes, someday, if Horatio was interested, to blow Horatio so thoroughly that he would forget everything else.

And last night, when Horatio had gasped his name, for one split second, everything had been perfect.

For just one moment, he’d forgotten.

And then, of course, he’d ruined it.
Archie groaned and stopped fighting the memory. What was the point? Horatio had seen it all. There was no undoing it.

So: he had panicked. He had turned into a hyperventilating, shaking, puddle of a person, in front of the one man he had wanted to think well of him. That had been the worst-case scenario. The one that had ended everything with Jeremy before it began. And yet, Horatio was still here. Just like after the seizure. Just like after the first nightmare.

It didn’t make sense. Horatio hadn’t slammed the door in his face. Hadn’t called him a pathetic weakling, hadn’t kicked him out—well, it was his own flat, for fuck’s sake, Horatio couldn’t very well kick him out of his own flat—so, more accurately, Horatio hadn’t walked out, although it had been a very near thing—oh, fucking fantastic, now he was rambling.

Archie shook his head, took a deep breath, and tried again.

Horatio had seen him fall apart, had seen a glimpse of just how much of a fucking wreck of a person he was. And yet, Horatio had still climbed into bed with him. For all of Horatio’s idealizing of the unflappable, doesn’t-have-flashbacks-even-though-he’s-a-vet Will, Horatio didn’t seem to think less of him for it . . . yet.

Did Horatio know?

He must know. How could he not? It hadn’t been a particularly subtle reaction. Or was Horatio just blissfully ignorant about what reactions like that usually meant?

If Horatio didn’t know now, he would figure it out far too quickly after some Google searches. Would Horatio ask him about it? If he did, what would he even say?

Archie tried to imagine it. Tried to imagine sitting Horatio down—it’d have to be a weekend, because they’d need time to deal with the aftermath—and he’d give Horatio a mug of coffee, since he might need something comforting, and then he’d say—

Say what? How would he even begin? Where would he begin? A year and a half ago? Six months ago? The first time it happened? The last time? The hospital? The text?

What if Horatio decided it was too much for him to handle? Or that he was a coward and couldn’t stand to see him again? Or that he didn’t believe him? Then Horatio would be one more person who had walked away.

Could he survive that?

His breath started to catch as his chest tightened. The room started to spin and go black around the edges as though a dark chasm were about to swallow him. He shut his eyes tightly and took some slow, deep breaths as he pressed his forehead and hands against the cool tiles of the shower.

Right. Not the answer he’d hoped for.

Either way, though, he’d have to tell Horatio.

Horatio deserved to know.

So . . . he’d tell him. He would.

At some point.
Just . . . not today.

Today, he could continue to pretend that everything was fine, that he was normal, that none of . . . of that had ever happened. To pretend it was never going to happen again.

He shuddered.

He’d deal with it later. It was fine. No harm done. Probably. As long as he didn’t have any more panic attacks in front of Horatio. Horatio had been wonderful so far, but it was best not to push his luck.

His luck had never been very good anyway.

He took a deep breath, shut off the water, and reached for his towel.

First things first: shave, then wake up Horatio.

***

Archie opened the bedroom door quietly and snuck inside. Horatio was still fast asleep, and sprawled, face first, over Archie’s side of the bed like a possessive octopus, one arm draped over the edge to hug the mattress. Archie’s heart clenched painfully at the sight. The kindest, most generous, most absurdly attractive person he had ever met was gently snoring in his bed the morning after one of the worst panic attacks he’d had in weeks. How was Horatio still here?

And how would Horatio act once he woke up and found himself in a strange bed? He might be disorientated and anxious: he’d probably never done something like this before, apart from that first night on Archie’s sofa. Well, he could tread carefully and show Horatio the same compassion that Horatio had shown him last night.

He sat down on the available side of the bed. “Morning, Horatio,” he said gently.

Horatio’s eyes twitched and he burrowed further into his pillow.

Somehow, Horatio had just become more irresistibly adorable. Archie managed to tame the smirk that was threatening to take over his whole face and tried again.

“Come on, sleepyhead. Time to get up,” he said, a little louder this time.

Horatio mumbled something inarticulate. All Archie could catch was the word “azimuth.”

Archie’s heart turned to mush. “You really aren’t a morning person, are you?”

Horatio mumbled again in answer.

Archie chuckled and shook Horatio gently by the shoulder. “Come on, Horatio, you’ll be late for work if you don’t wake up soon.”

Horatio’s eyes shot open and he sat up so quickly Archie only narrowly avoided being smacked in the face by Horatio’s nose. His curls were the most beautifully disorganized mess Archie had ever seen. He looked around him, his eyes still unfocused.

“Archie?” Horatio asked, his voice still gravelly from sleep, “Wh-- What time is it?”
“It’s just past 7.”

Horatio blinked owlishly. “Oh. Alright.” He nodded, then stared at the bed. “I’m in your room,” he said, as though every syllable involved slogging through treacle.

Archie did his best not to laugh. Apparently Horatio’s brilliance had a cost: a prolonged loading period in the morning.

“True. Sleep well?”

“Er, yes,” Horatio answered, still trying and failing to get his bearings.

“Good. Glad to hear it.”

Horatio’s bleary-eyed expression began to fade as his brain came back online, but he skipped a smile and went straight to tightly pressed lips and a furrowed brow, which Archie had learned from yesterday was Horatio’s mind’s best impression of a hamster in a wheel entering a marathon.

Was Horatio worried he had overstayed his welcome? How could he set Horatio’s mind at ease about that?

“Thanks for keeping me company. You have a standing invitation to my bed any time you want it.”

Horatio blushed and ducked his head. Ah. Overshot the goal a little there. Moderation had never been his forte.

“Er, thanks,” Horatio said after a second. Then he paused and stared at Archie intently, scanning him for something, as his fingers, ever in motion, scrunched up the sheets. “How are you feeling?”

Oh. Of course Horatio had been concerned. Horatio had been forced to comfort him like a terrified child after his pathetic meltdown the other night.

“Much better. Slept well, once you came in.” And now Horatio will think he’s some sort of security blanket. Because that’s not embarrassing or codependent at all.

Horatio relaxed his death grip on the sheets and finally smiled. “Oh. Good!”

Archie blinked. Horatio didn't mind?

A faint beeping interrupted them from beyond the bedroom door.

Archie started and looked about him. What was that noise? It sounded like--

“Oh! Damn! That's my alarm! I must have left my phone by the sofa,” Horatio said as he threw off the covers.

Archie slid off the bed just in time for Horatio to dash to the living room without running him over. He passed out of sight. Soon after, the hurried footsteps stopped, as did the beeping.

A moment later, Horatio appeared at the threshold of the bedroom, clutching a spare set of clothes. “Er, Archie? Are you all done in there?” he asked, gesturing to the bathroom.

Archie nodded. “It's all yours.”

Horatio nodded, gave him a faint smile, then disappeared around the corner. The door to the bathroom clicked shut.
Archie sighed. Well, that could have gone better. Could have gone worse, too.

**

Twenty minutes later and armed with cereal, they sat down together at the table.

Archie was about to vibrate out of his skin. Horatio kept shooting him surreptitious looks whenever he thought Archie wasn’t watching: while he was pouring the coffee, getting bowls from the cabinet, pouring the cereal, getting the milk, etc. Was Horatio regretting last night? Was it pity? Did Horatio think he was so fragile after last night that he couldn’t handle dumping some manufactured grain products into bowls? Was it distrust? For fuck’s sake, what was going on?

“Archie? How are you feeling?”

Terrified that I’ve just ruined everything, thanks. How about yourself?

“I’m alright. Look, Horatio, about last night, I, uh, appreciate your staying with me.”

Horatio frowned slightly. “Of course I’d stay!”

Archie did his best not to roll his eyes at Horatio’s indignance. “Well, you hadn’t exactly signed on to be the receiving end of my best limpet impression last night, either. Hope you don’t mind spooning.”

Horatio blushed but kept eye contact. “Not at all.”

Archie tried not to sigh in relief. “You’re very forgiving, considering that I fell asleep during your explanation of the Battle of the Nile.”

“That’s why I chose it,” Horatio explained with a smile.

Archie raised an eyebrow.

“Well, that was adorable. And now, back to teasing before things get any more serious. “And you were right. So, why that battle? Why not the Battle of--” of course he’d now forgotten every other battle he’d read about, “--of Trafalgar?”

Horatio’s eyebrows made a break for his hairline. “The Battle of Trafalgar would never help someone fall asleep!”

Archie made a valiant attempt not to smirk. It didn’t work. “Is that a challenge? Surely the ships’ names aren’t that much more exciting.”

Horatio rolled his eyes, but a smile slipped through. “It’s not the ship’s names that are exciting, Archie, it’s the strategy! It’s a masterpiece!”

Archie grinned. This was much more fun than talking about last night. “Well, at the risk of proving you wrong and face-planting into my breakfast, fire away.”

Horatio gave Archie a look that was one part gently chiding, two parts amused in spite of himself. Second to Horatio’s full-fledged smile, this might be his new favorite expression. “Alright. Well, as you know, it was the most decisive naval battle of Napoleonic War. The most salient detail is that Nelson’s fleet was outnumbered: 27 ships of the line to 33. Instead of adopting the
conventional approach, in which ships lined up parallel to the enemy—that’s where the expression “ships of the line” came from—he divided his forces into two columns that approached the opposing ships perpendicularly, one toward the center of the line, one towards the far end. This broke the opposing formation into three groups.”

“Ah, so bucking the system saved the day. My favorite sort of story,” Archie said with a grin.

Horatio’s eyes widened. “Er, yes. Precisely,” he said. “This plan had the advantage of preventing the ships in the first group from being able to see the flagship’s signals and removing them from combat.”

“That is rather clever,” Archie agreed. Horatio should lecture about the navy more frequently. It was beautiful to watch the way his face lit up. Archie leaned forward, elbows on the table, and chin propped on his fist. “What were the other advantages of this new method?”

Horatio grinned. “He also knew the chances of a British success were increased in individual ship-to-ship combat, so breaking the line gave them an advantage there.”

Archie nodded. “Ok. What were the dangers of this strategy? Did approaching in columns like this -- fuck, I don’t know -- expose them to enemy fire more, or something like that? There had to be a reason this wasn’t a more common tactic.”

Horatio just stared at him, his mouth parted slightly, his eyes open wide.

“. . . what? What did I miss?” Archie asked, frowning. He had just tried to get into the spirit of the thing.

Horatio blinked and shook his head to clear it. “Er, no, no, you’re right. It put them at risk for raking broadside fire from the Franco-Spanish fleet.” He was still staring at Archie rather oddly, and he was speaking much less fluidly than usual when he talked about research.

“So why wasn’t it a catastrophe?” Archie prompted him. What did that expression mean?

“Er, well, Nelson had anticipated that.” Horatio paused to lick his lips. “And he, er --” he blinked again, “--that is, he had them make sail--” He trailed off, staring intently at Archie’s face.

Oh, no. Archie, what have you done this time? Gotten bits of Weetabix shoved up your nose or something equally embarrassing?

“How?”

Horatio pressed his lips together and frowned, his forehead wrinkling as he wrestled with himself. Finally, he swallowed, squared his shoulders, and met Archie’s eyes again. “Archie, er, would you mind if I kissed you again?”

Archie’s brain record-scratched to a stop, before starting up again, stuck on a loop of thank God thank God thank God. “Kiss me, Hardy,” he managed, despite his smirk.

Horatio hurtled out of his chair and closed the gap between them in two paces.

Maybe this wasn’t a disaster after all.

**
Four hours later, Archie took a bite of his sandwich from Costa Coffee as he sat down on a picnic bench overlooking the water. Not the most appetizing thing he’d ever eaten, but it would get the job done. Eating was so pointless without people to talk with. So repetitive.

He shook his head. This was absurd. Horatio just had a staff meeting. A mandatory staff meeting, which had already been on the calendar and had nothing at all to do with his panic attack from last night. He couldn’t expect them to eat every meal together. And in any event, he was a competent adult who could absolutely entertain himself over one meal. And no, of course he wasn’t missing his new boyfriend, because that would be utterly pathetic, because he’d seen him this morning, and most of the last four days, and they weren’t codependent. Not in the least.

He sighed and pulled out his phone. With nothing better to do, he might as well go back to reading the script. It should pass the hour. He took another bite of his sandwich.

Half an hour later, his phone buzzed, and the word “Mum” greeted him on the screen. His heart started racing. But he’d called her when he moved in a few days ago. Why was she calling so soon? Had Alastair had a relapse? Shit, how--

He shook his head and took a deep breath. It was fine. Tamsin must have called her about Horatio. No new emergencies. He almost laughed in relief.

Ignoring the butterflies still flitting around in his stomach, he swiped to answer.

“Hello, Mum.”

“Archie! It’s good to hear your voice. How’s Greenwich?”

“It’s fine. Good, actually. I’m making some progress in the archives. How’s Tamsin?” he asked, letting his smile seep into his voice.

She laughed. “She sends her love, as always.”

“So, how long did you wait between when she called you about the other night, and when you called me?”

She laughed again. “At least 40 hours.”

Archie shook his head, grinning. “Impressive restraint.”

“I thought so. Especially for something so momentous as you pulling rank for someone.” Archie could practically see her failed attempt to suppress a knowing smirk.

“Well, tell Tamsin that I’m glad my acting skills are still functional, and tell Father not to get too excited: it won’t happen again,” Archie said with a crooked smile, twisting around on the picnic bench to face the water, and propping his elbows on the table behind him.

“Archie, we’re just pleased you’ve found someone you like. Tamsin said his name was Horatio?”

Archie grinned. “Pumping me for information?”

“Only if you’d like to share it.”

Archie mock-sighed. “Well, if you insist.” He chuckled and rolled his eyes. “Yes, his name is Horatio. Horatio Hornblower. He’s my age, doing an internship at the Caird, and he’s adorably obsessed with all things associated with the British navy and the Napoleonic War. He’s gorgeous,
brilliant, serious, painfully shy, kind, generous, and an absurdly good person.”

“He sounds lovely.”

“He is. I like him. A lot.” Despite only having known him for under 100 hours.

“I can see why. Had you met him before you arrived in Greenwich?”

“No, just met for the first time at the library . . . four days ago.” He cringed. It sounded infinitely worse out loud.

“He certainly seems to have made a good impression, and you on him.”

Archie paused, then blinked in surprise. “That’s all?”

She laughed quietly. “Well, not quite. Are you happy when you’re with him? Does he treat you well?”

“--Yes.” Far better than I deserve.

“Then I’m happy for both of you.”

He scoffed. “Whatever happened to Archie, don’t be so impulsive! Think before you act!”

She sighed. “Archie, dear, that was ages ago. It’s just good to hear you sounding happier.”

The words “We’ve been worried about you” rang in the silence as loudly as if they’d been said. His stomach twisted with guilt. They had enough on their minds. The last thing he wanted was to make them more concerned.

Make it sound convincing. “I’m fine, Mum.”

A pause.

Fuck.

“Mum?”

“Archie, it’s alright if you’re not. You’ve had a difficult six months.”

Archie rolled his eyes and sighed. “Understatement of the century.”

She let out a humourless chuckle, then paused. “Is the medication helping?”

“Which one?”

“Either? Both?” she asked gently.

Archie groaned, then pressed the palm of his hands into his eyes to try to fight the tears that suddenly threatened to make an uninvited appearance. “Not really.”

She sighed, and he could practically see the compassionate look in her eyes that he knew so well.

“Archie, I’m so sorry.”

“Well, it’s not all bad,” Archie said instantly, plastering on a smile in a desperate attempt to cheer her up. “Remember how I said that Horatio was an absurdly good person? Well, I had a seizure in the library 45 minutes after meeting him.” He ignored her sudden gasp and plowed ahead to the
“He stayed with me, put me into recovery position, drove me to my flat, brought me dinner, and stayed and watched a documentary with me. We fell asleep on the sofa together. Asked him out the next day.”

“I’m glad he was there. He sounds wonderful,” she said quietly.

“He is.” And I love him.

“I know you said that Horatio is shy,” she began, “but if it wouldn’t make him uncomfortable, would you please tell him I said thank you for looking after you?”

“Muuuu,” Archie groaned. “I’ve got this under control. I’m not fragile or helpless, and I don’t need a protector, ok?”

“Archie, love, I didn’t mean to imply any of that. Of course you’re not helpless or fragile. You’re remarkably resilient, as always, and I know you can handle this on your own. But don’t you think it might be time to consult another specialist? The doctor had seemed confident that the seizures should have stopped with the new medication.”

Archie shuddered. “No. I’ve been poked and prodded enough to last a lifetime.”

“Then, we need to look for other solutions. You’d said the seizures are sometimes triggered when you’re reminded of—of that piece of excrement who pushed you. If you just tried meeting with a therapist or counselor—”

The world ground to a halt. “No.” Then eventually they’d find out, and they couldn’t know, not on top of everything else.

“Then do you need to leave RADA? Get away from the memories?”

“Oh, yes, Father would love that, wouldn’t he?”

“Archie. No he wouldn’t. He wants you to be happy.”

Archie snorted. “Just as long as I ‘act in a manner befitting this family.’”

She sighed. “He shouldn’t have said that, which is why he apologised the next day. Profusely. Through the shut door to your bedroom. And, as you may remember, you were the one who refused to accept the allowance once he’d changed his mind.” She paused. “You two and your Kennedy pride,” she said, her sad, amused headshake coming through as clearly as her words. “But he loves you, dear, and he wants you to be happy. And I don’t mean to make excuses for him, but it was a difficult time. For all of us. None of us had slept much that week, as you’ll recall.”

Archie winced. “Oh. I’d forgotten the timing. Um, how’s Alastair doing? Still alright?”

He could hear her smile across the phone. “Yes, Archie, he’s still fine. You know relapses are rare after transplants. He’ll be out of danger for a good long while.” She paused. “He really is safe, now,” she added gently.

Archie exhaled slowly. “Right. Right, of course, you’re right.”

“But, dear, regarding RADA, your father and I both want whatever’s best for you. And if you decide that means staying, we’ll support you. As we will if you decide to leave.”

“I’m not giving up,” Archie said immediately. Then Simpson would have won.
“It’s not giving up if you decide something else would be better.”

“But I love acting.” *It’s all I have*.  

“I know, dear. But . . . do you actually enjoy it at RADA? You haven’t sounded yourself since after your first term there. And that was even before Si-- even before the incident. Is . . . there something else that’s bothering you, love?”

This was a chance. A chance to explain what the hell had him dodging phone calls and jumping at random noises for the last year and a half. She might understand. She might believe him. And she would drop everything to be by his side, encourage him make a police report, release Tamsin on anyone who gave him a hard time, and not rest until the pile of shit was locked away for good. Which she had wanted to do back in hospital when all she had know was that a man named Simpson had “accidentally” bashed his head open. Would have done, too, if he hadn't begged them to drop it and agreed with Simpson’s story. God, he wanted to tell her. To be believed. To not have to constantly look over his shoulder. To be excited about the film again. To be safe.

But she would cry, silently and in private, of course, and secretly blame herself for not having magically found a way to prevent the year and a half of torture, and would tear herself up wondering why Archie hadn’t said anything, and his father would blame himself for the argument about RADA in the first place, and Alastair would feel guilty for nearly dying, and Izzy would -- well, Izzy would probably find a way to blame herself, too. The family was just starting to get back on its feet. He couldn’t be the one to knock it over. Not again. He just had to survive this a little longer, graduate, and hope to never run into the bastard again.

Archie ran a hand through his hair. “I’ve just been busy, that’s all.”

She sighed. Nothing got past her. This was why he didn’t call more. “Alright, Archie. But please, think about whether RADA is what’s best for you. I know you’re a talented actor, and we’re all proud of you about the Worthington Chronicles. Just take care, love. Nothing’s worth sacrificing yourself for.”

Archie managed a bitter smile. *Too late*. “I know, Mum. I’ll think about it. How are things at home?”

She paused, then decided to go with the obvious deflection. “It’s the usual summer chaos. Izzy brought some friends up for the week for a revising retreat and they’re leaving tomorrow. Your father and Alastair have a group coming up for some hunting next week, and Tamsin and Charlie are coming for the week next month.”

Archie smiled, remembering the mayhem that always accompanied the summer holidays. It had been a long time since he had brought his own troop of friends for a visit. Long time since he’d had a troop of friends. “Give my love to everyone?”

“Of course, dear.” She paused. “We were rather hoping you might come home for a visit this summer. We’d love to see you. All of us. You could bring Horatio. Everyone wants to meet him.”

Archie winced as he pictured the introductions. Izzy and Tamsin were both controlled cyclones of energy and enthusiasm: Horatio wouldn’t know what had hit him. At least Mum would know how to make Horatio feel at his ease, or at least, as close to ease as Horatio could get with strangers.

“Maybe we should work up to it. Start with a Skype chat.”

“Of course, dear. Whatever Horatio needs to feel comfortable. But he’ll always be welcome here
Archie’s chest ached at the idea of sharing all his favorite spots with Horatio. The little stream in the woods. The treehouse he and Izzy built, which his father and Alastair had promptly rebuilt before it could fall and take both of them with it. The “stage” his father had built for him in the playroom when he was a child. Maybe they could make it there before filming started, assuming Horatio was interested. He could work something out with Izzy in advance: set a limit on the number of questions she could ask in one sitting. But there were so many ways this could go wrong. He’d have to explain about the “accident,” for a start. But God, it would be lovely.

“No promises. But I’ll see what we can do.”

“Take your time. And . . . take care of yourself?”

“Yes, Mum. Talk soon.”

“Talk soon, dear.”

He hung up and stared out over the water. Should he ask Horatio? Certainly not yet; last night was still too fresh. Maybe in a few days, if Horatio still hadn’t changed his mind about them . . .

He took one last bite of his sandwich, then went inside, chucking the rest of it in the bin.

**

Six hours later, Archie rested his book in his lap and looked over at Horatio. Horatio had hardly said a word since Archie had handed him his computer with the script on it when they got back from dinner. He had just looked at the first line, his eyes wide with excitement, then asked with barely repressed glee if Archie minded if he started a Google Doc with detailed notes. Then he’d given Archie a quick kiss, and practically disappeared into the computer, his brow furrowed with concentration, the incessant clicking of the keys, the occasionally tapping of his finger against his lip as he stared into the distance, lost in thought, and the comforting repeated tapping of his foot against Archie’s thigh the only movements he made. It should have been boring. Instead, it was one of the most relaxing, peaceful sensations he could remember. Possibly even more so than reading at the lake at home. If only Horatio didn't have to leave tomorrow; his flat would be unbearably empty without him.

Archie glanced down at the book in his hand. He’d reached page 30 of the first book of the Worthington Chronicles. It wasn’t bad, certainly, although the puns were a bit much. Who had thought that For What It’s Worth was a good idea for a title? The tone in general hadn't been what he was expecting for an adventure on the high seas. At least the books avoided action hero archetypes as much as the film script. And James and Algy had just met, and after some initial misunderstandings, were in danger of being every bit as in love with each other as he had hoped. He and André were going to have fun with that. But for now, he needed a break.

He closed the book and placed it on the coffee table. Horatio blinked at the sound, then looked up from the computer for the first time in over an hour. Then he glanced over at the book on the coffee table and grinned.

“What do you think?” Horatio asked.

“I like it, I think,” Archie answered. “Still getting a feel for it.”
Horatio nodded. “Some people have complained that it starts rather slowly. The battles don’t begin until the end of the first novel.”

Archie smiled. Of course that would be Horatio’s objection. “Oh, I don’t mind that. I’m just surprised by how much of James’ perspective we’re getting, given that Algy is the main character.”

Horatio frowned. “How far are you?”

“James just yelled at the other midshipmen for snatching things from Algy’s sea chest and bullying him for being part French.”

Horatio’s eyes widened. “Ah! The beginning of their friendship.” Then he frowned. “And you put it down?”

Archie grinned. “Don’t worry, I’ll go back to it. Just stopped to think. I’m curious to see how someone so proud and aloof reacts to being helped like that.”

Horatio raised his eyebrows. “Aloof? But—oh, of course, you haven’t gotten there yet.”

Archie leaned forward. “Do tell,” he said with a smirk.

“Well, once the book shifts to give us Algy’s thoughts, we see that James doesn’t quite understand the complete picture, and Algy’s not aloof at all. He just tries to appear that way, because he thinks it’s the British Way.”

“And then James breaks down his barriers?”

Horatio nodded.

“Well, I’ll look forward to it. What do you think of the script?”

Horatio grinned. “It’s everything I had hoped! It seems to be a fairly faithful adaptation of book 2, with some extra scenes thrown in. Do you know who they consulted with on naval strategy? Whoever it was did an impressive job.”

Archie smiled. “No idea, but I’ll try to find out for you. How far did you get?”

“I’m about halfway through, I think. I . . . got a bit carried away explaining the significance of one of the set directions.”

Archie laughed. “How did you manage that?”

Horatio blushed, then pressed his lips together and ducked his head. “It briefly mentions a carefully preserved sketch sticking out of Algy’s sea chest. I think that’s a sketch of James that Algy made in book 1 when they were separated after being given their first commands and told to take their respective prizes back to England.”

Archie sat straight upright, a giant grin on his face. Algy was a romantic at heart? And was pining and drawing sketches? “This I have to see. Hang on,” he leaned over and grabbed the book from the table and thrust it into Horatio’s hands. “Can you find the passage?”

Horatio frowned. “But don’t you want to see how their relationship unfolds?”

“At some point. But I want to read this first. Right now, in fact.”
Horatio shrugged, then tilted the book to look at the top of the spine. He squinted at it slightly, then stuck a finger in between two pages at the top, righted the book, and glanced down at the page itself. “Here it is,” he said, and handed it back.

Archie glanced at the page, then back at Horatio, his eyebrows raised so high he could feel the muscles in his forehead start twitching. “You’ve cracked the spine from reading this passage so much? But, there aren’t battles in it. Where’s the naval strategy?”

Horatio blushed some more. “It’s a good scene,” he muttered, staring intently at the laptop’s keyboard.

Archie’s heart started tap dancing excitedly at this new and beautiful side to Horatio. He hadn’t thought it was possible to fall any harder for this brilliant, loving, ridiculous man, and yet his heart was so full that it was going to explode if he didn’t find some way to express it. He needed to touch Horatio immediately before he did something truly absurd, like tell him just how much he loved him. “Ok, you know what? I’ll read this later.” He tossed the book on the coffee table. “Because, I really, REALLY want to kiss you now. Any objections?”

Horatio’s eyes widened and he licked his lips. “None at all.” He quickly put Archie’s laptop on the coffee table and met Archie’s eyes eagerly.

As soon as his laptop had reached safety, Archie knelt on the sofa and leaned forward. Horatio sat up to meet him, his eyes burning into him with an intensity he had earlier only seen directed toward the script. Horatio’s hand shot out to pull Archie toward him, then stopped abruptly, hovering in the air between them. His eyes lost some of their fire.

Did Horatio not want him anymore?

Oh. Of course. Horatio didn’t want to do anything that seemed too controlling. He was holding himself back. Another gift of tenderness.

But, it also meant that Horatio wasn’t touching him right now, which was absolutely unacceptable.

Archie reached out, grabbed Horatio’s hands, and watched his eyes widen as he placed the hands firmly around his waist. He inched forward until he was straddling Horatio once again, and cradled Horatio’s face in his right hand, his thumb stroking his cheek.

“It’s alright, Horatio. You can touch me.”

Horatio started to pull him closer, then he paused and bit his lip. “Are you sure?”

Archie looked directly into Horatio’s eyes. “I am sure. I promise.” He poured every ounce of earnestness into his voice and eyes, hoping that if Horatio didn’t believe his words, at least he would believe his intensity.

Horatio searched his face intently for a moment, then nodded, and finally, finally pulled them together.

It didn’t matter that they had already kissed multiple times over the course of the day, or that Horatio tasted faintly of garlic from dinner. All that mattered was the gentle glide of Horatio’s lips against his own, Horatio’s long fingers wrapped around his wrist, firmly anchoring him to the present, and the marvelous warmth of their bodies pressed together. He let himself linger in the gentle haze of pleasure, no goal in mind, no particular plan for escalating their activities: just
unhurried, leisurely kissing. If he could focus on taking it slowly, on not pushing himself too far, then this could work without a repeat of last night’s disaster.

After several minutes had passed, Archie opened his mouth to let Horatio deepen the kiss. Horatio’s breath hitched, then sped up. He rose up to get a better angle, and his arms shifted to wrap around Archie as his tongue dove in and flicked along the inside of Archie's lower lip. The movement and intensity that came with it made his pulse race. This was real. Horatio wasn't repulsed or horrified by his behavior last night. Even though Horatio had stayed the night, had kissed him at breakfast, had laughed with him at dinner, had spent over an hour annotating his script on the sofa with their legs intertwined, he hadn’t fully been able to believe that the other shoe wouldn’t drop and stomp on him, like the foot in Monty Python. But here and now, encompassed by Horatio’s arms, it finally sank in. Horatio still wanted him. A mixture of affection, arousal, and relief rushed through him, so strong it was almost hard to breathe. How was it possible to love someone this much? And was it always so overpowering? So terrifying?

It was a physical ache, an inexorable pull towards Horatio so strong that his heart felt like it would only be content if it ripped itself out of his body to be next to him. There were too many boundaries between them--clothing, skin, cells, secrets--and he wanted to shatter them all, to throw himself at Horatio. Into Horatio. How could anything feel so perfect? So safe? It was so much more than simple physical comfort, so much more than mere pleasure in the friction of their bodies, the caress of Horatio’s hands along his sides, the desperate press of their lips. It was love. Protection. Home. Security more warm and enveloping than any blanket. Everything he had ever wanted, and everything he hadn’t known he wanted. A fierce wave of protectiveness washed over him.

Horatio needed to feel this, too. Needed to know, with every fiber of his being, that he was loved and safe, and treasured, and always would be. But words, in all their beauty, could never convey any of this, could never guarantee that Horatio would share this overwhelming sensation. And telepathy didn’t exist, and wishing wouldn’t help, and it was impossible and infuriating and unfair that he couldn’t just hit a button and have Horatio suddenly understand. He only had his body to communicate with. It wasn’t enough, it could never be enough--certainly not with the limitations he had to impose to avoid a repeat of last night--but it would have to do. He would put everything he was, everything he could be, into each kiss, each stroke, each thrust. And maybe Horatio would feel what he was trying to say.

He inched forward, pressing himself against Horatio from groin to lips, and wrapped his arms around him. Archie caressed a slow circle around Horatio’s tongue with his own. Horatio made that glorious cut-off whimper that went straight to his groin and held him more tightly. It was working. He ran his hand along Horatio’s back and Horatio’s breath sped up in answer. Another flick of his tongue. Horatio’s hand clutched at his side, then dipped inside his shirt and skated along his hip. Archie gasped as his entire body thrummed in response.

“Too much?” Horatio asked, pulling back.

“Absolutely not,” Archie panted, and untucked his shirt the rest of the way to give Horatio better access. They needed more contact, not less. “Don’t stop.”

“Gladly,” Horatio said, and dove back into the kiss. His hand ghosted up and down Archie’s sides with an almost teasing lightness.

Archie started to pull back from the kiss to remind Horatio that he wasn’t quite that fragile, when Horatio’s fingers flicked across his nipple, sending shockwaves through his body. “NNnggggg,” he moaned instead.

Horatio chuckled, then twisted his head to suck at the sensitive patch underneath Archie’s ear that
had him seeing spots the other night.

“Holy fuck,” Archie groaned, thrusting against Horatio as every nerve ending in his body throbbed. “Did you paint a bullseye on it?”

“Don’t need to. Have a good memory,” Horatio murmured into his neck between kisses.

“Never thought I’d have my own personal vampire,” Archie whispered with a grin, and snuck his hand further down Horatio’s back until it reached his waistband. Horatio’s hand twitched against his chest and then continued its maddening dance.

“Well, there’s an idea,” Horatio said.

“What’s an idea? What are you--OHMYGOD!” Horatio had discovered teeth. That was it, this was going to kill him. There was no surviving Horatio’s magnificent onslaught.

Horatio chuckled. The sensation of his warm breath against the damp patch on his neck sent shivers rippling through him.

This was glorious. It was fun, and sweet, and hot as hell, but Horatio needed to enjoy it, too. He darted his hand underneath Horatio’s shirt, eager to feel Horatio’s skin underneath his fingers again. Horatio paused, his hands hovering on Archie’s ribs, then let go. Did he not want to do that anymore? Was he afraid of a repeat of last night?

“Horatio?” Archie’s eyes flew open to try to read the situation.

Horatio was looking up at him, his hands on the buttons of his shirt, with a slightly sheepish expression. “I thought this might be more comfortable. Unless--?”

He wants me he wants me he wants me. “Uh, yes. Good. Excellent idea,” Archie croaked, and unbuttoned his own shirt and dropped it somewhere behind him. He could find it later.

Horatio was still tugging one arm free, and looked a little stuck. This was taking far too long. Archie reached out and helped pull it off, then tossed it over Horatio’s head behind the sofa. Horatio’s eyes opened impossibly wide.

“Oh, shit, did you want me to, um, fold it or something? Because I can if you--”

An incredibly eager mouth pressed against his answered that question more eloquently than any words could. Note to self: some day, do that to his trousers.

Horatio was clutching him to his chest, running his hands across every inch of skin he could reach, apart from his neck, shoulders, and scalp. Even while in the throes of passion, Horatio still respected his boundaries. And just like that, he somehow had fallen even more in love.

Archie pulled back slightly, enough to give him access to Horatio’s neck. Now, could he find Horatio’s spot as quickly as Horatio had found his? He kissed the joint where his jaws met. Sure enough, Horatio gasped and bucked hard into him. At least there was one advantage to that being where Horatio held much of his tension: the fireworks that would result when it finally released would rival Guy Fawkes Day in intensity. He gave it a gentle suck.

Horatio gasped, and writhed forcefully enough that he toppled over into his back on the sofa,
pulling Archie down on top of him. *Oh God, yes!* Horatio let go and froze immediately. *Why had he stopped?*

“Archie? Is this alright?”

What? Oh! Horatio was probably worried he had forced Archie down against his will. Nothing could be further from the truth.

“Entirely. Is this?” he asked, grinding once, hard, against Horatio, feeling the sparks of arousal course through him.

“Oh God,” Horatio moaned. “Yes.” His hands moved to hold Archie again, then hesitated, hovering a tantalizing inch away from him. This was no good. They should be touching as much as was humanly possible. He reached over, took Horatio’s hands, and pressed them firmly into his lower back, a solid, grounding presence.

Horatio’s eyes opened wide. “Archie, are you sure?”

Archie nodded. “Never been more sure in my life. Now, kiss me.”

Horatio did. Very enthusiastically.

It was perfect, it was blissful, it was -- fuck, it was magnificent to be pressed against Horatio like this. And holy shit, the sounds he could draw from Horatio were better than Sondheim. It was incredibly important that Horatio enjoy this as much as possible. What could make this even better, while still wearing some clothes?

He shifted so his knees were on either side of Horatio’s hips to get better leverage and thrust against him, kissing him so thoroughly that even someone who couldn't see the subtext of the Maturin-Aubrey relationship would understand just how much he cared.

“Oh God, Archie!” Horatio bucked back in earnest, and held him tightly, one hand sliding down and stopping just short of his arse to increase the pressure, and holy fuck, the friction was perfect. Nothing was better than the sensation of Horatio’s cock pressed against his despite the layers of fabric that separated them. And as much as he wanted to eliminate those barriers, now was not the time. Really, really, really not the time. Probably. *For fuck’s sake, Archie! Get through this without a panic attack first, and then you can revisit the question. You have time. You can be patient for once in your life.*

He could find plenty of other things to do to make Horatio blissfully happy.

He disengaged his hand from Horatio’s back and reached behind him, aiming for Horatio’s knee. Horatio gasped and arched his back, breathing heavily. Oh. Right. Horatio had long legs. That was his inner thigh. Well, that worked too. He trailed his fingers a little further up Horatio’s leg and Horatio stiffed.

*Shit.* “This ok?” Archie asked.

“Yes,” Horatio panted, then started to move again. His hand was sliding further down, it was--

“Holy fuck!” Horatio had grabbed his arse. His hand was actually cupping his arse and he was using it to press Archie further against him.

“--Is this?” Horatio asked with a smirk. Since when had he become so smug? And fucking hell, that was a good look on him.
“Yes.” Archie thrust against him again. “As if you couldn’t tell.” He followed it up with a kiss so Horatio would know he wasn’t irritated or mocking him.

“I had my suspicions. Wouldn’t want to presume,” Horatio murmured against his lips. Then Horatio kissed a trail up to the spot behind his ear again and gave it a slight nip, accompanied by an emphatic roll of his hips.

“H’ratio!” Archie moaned as sparks surged through him. *Oh God, he was actually going to come in his trousers.*

“DROOOOOOIIIIID” bellowed an electronic voice.

Archie fell off the sofa.

“What the fuck was that?” Archie yelled, flat on his back on the floor.

“Shit! Archie, are you alright?” Horatio’s face appeared over the edge of the sofa.

“Just got a few years scared off my life. Jesus buggering fuck, Horatio, what was that?” Archie rubbed his elbow from where he’d whacked it on the coffee table. Nothing like hitting one’s funnybone to kill an erection.

Horatio cringed then blushed. “Er, that’s my text noise.”

Archie raised an eyebrow. “And it’s the loudest and most obnoxious sound imaginable because . . . ?”

Horatio ducked his head. “Er, it was Will’s idea. I had a habit of forgetting to check my texts at inopportune times, so he changed the tone for me. It works well, unless I’ve forgotten to take it off vibrate. Which unfortunately, happens rather frequently.”

Archie rolled his shoulder and cracked his neck. “Well, you can tell Will that it successfully got your attention. Who’s the text from?”

Horatio frowned. “I’m not sure.” He scanned the room for his phone and snatched it up from the coffee table. Then he sat upright and stared at the screen.

Shit. Not good.

“Horatio? What’s wrong?” Archie scrabbled off the floor and sat on the sofa beside him, his mind racing.

“It’s Mr. Foster.” Horatio scowled at the phone. “He says the workmen finished early. My flat is ready.”

“Oh.” He should be happy for Horatio. *It would be selfish and inexcusable to want his flat to be damaged for longer just so they could spend more nights together.* “That’s good. Congrats.”

“Er, yes. Thanks.” Horatio stared at his phone another moment. “I suppose I should go back there tonight. You must be eager to have your flat back to yourself.”

Archie shook his head. “Not at all. It’s been a pleasure having you here. In fact, you could stay, if you like. I know the sofa isn’t comfortable and the air mattress isn’t here yet, but you could always share the bed with me again.” His pulse started to speed up. *Fuck. You’re going to spook him off if you move that quickly.*

Horatio looked up and met his eyes, his own wide and full of hope, before he visibly tried and
failed to tamp down on it. “Are you sure? I don’t want to overstay my welcome--”

Archie grinned, feeling giddy with relief at the eagerness Horatio had just shown. “No such thing. Stay as long as you like. I like having roommates. Saves on breakfast cereal. You can buy it in bulk.” He clamped his mouth shut before he could get even more carried away. Had he really just asked Horatio to move in with him? For fuck’s sake, what must Horatio think of him? He must be coming across as the most desperate, clingy, pathetic, useless excuse for a --

“So as not to place the utility bills burden on any one individual, perhaps a rotating schedule would work. Two or three days at each location should do the trick.”

Archie whipped his head up to see Horatio staring off into space, his head tipped to the side in intense contemplation. Archie suddenly had the strange sensation that he was a cartoon figure whose jaw had comically hit the floor and now needed scraping up. A very shirtless cartoon figure. He blinked as his mind tried to adjust to this new information. Horatio didn’t object to the idea of moving in with him, and had already starting thinking about the implementation. Was this actually happening? He shouldn’t want this so much. He should be terrified by the prospect. So why wasn’t he?

Horatio blinked and took in Archie’s shocked expression. “Ah. You didn’t mean that we should move in together. You meant that I should stay the night, didn’t you.” He stared at the ground and clenched his jaw so tightly that Archie was astounded he couldn’t hear his teeth cracking.

Archie scooted closer to Horatio on the sofa and put an arm around him. He knew the answer: now it was time to truly make the offer. He took a deep breath. “I meant, stay. For as long as you like. I want you here.”

Horatio slowly looked up and met Archie’s gaze, his eyes huge and full of hope. “Are you positive?”

Archie grinned. “Absolutely.” If he was out of his mind, then at least they were out of their minds together. “So,” he asked with a knowing smirk. “Stay?”

Horatio grinned back. “Alright.”

Archie beamed as his entire body thrummed back to life in response. “Excellent. We can figure out the details later. But first,” he said, leaning forward until his lips were mere centimeters away from Horatio’s, “where were we?”
“Ouch!”

The sound carried through the tiny flat into the kitchen. Horatio paused, then turned off the burner cooking the eggs. They were done, or at least, done enough. Archie liked them slightly runny anyway. “Archie?” he called out.

“Alright, that’s it,” came the response from the bathroom, “I’m buying a second electric razor to leave here. This thing is a masochism machine.”

Horatio rolled his eyes with a fond smile, set the spatula down on the spoon rest, and walked over to the open door to the bathroom. There stood Archie, still damp from his shower, wearing only his pyjama bottoms, and rinsing off shaving foam and tiny beads of blood caused by another shoddy shaving job.

“You cut yourself again? How do you keep doing that?” The words slipped out before he could stop them.

Archie turned to face him, eyebrow raised. “Of course you don’t have that problem. The razor probably took one look at your cheekbones and decided it had enough competition for sharpness.”

Horatio smiled and shook his head. “Archie, that doesn’t make any sense.”

“It’s before 10 on a Sunday,” Archie said with a shrug and a grin. “It’s still early. Don’t worry, my snark will be up to snuff once I’ve had some coffee.”

“Well, the coffee should be ready soon, so you’re in luck.”

“My snark and I thank you for your service to humanity. But, Horatio, are you sure this razor isn’t cursed?” Archie complained, pressing a tissue to the drop of blood on his cheek.

“Fairly sure. But you could just bring yours when you stay over.” Not that he minded Archie’s using his razor, but it did seem like a waste of money to get a spare.

Archie shook his head. “Already forgotten it twice this week and once last week. Not going to happen.” He nodded to the far side of the counter. “And my toothbrush will get lonely in that little corner by itself. I think it needs a friend.”

Horatio glanced over to where Archie had indicated. Archie’s spare toothbrush had a permanent home in his flat, along with his spare pyjamas, a change of clothes, and other miscellany. He had always thought that Will was the only person he would ever feel comfortable sharing a flat with, but now he couldn’t imagine a space without Archie. “Your shampoo and soap don’t count?” Horatio teased.

Archie smiled and shook his head. “They’re all the way over there in the shower. Much too far
away. And speaking of which,” he said, closing the few steps toward Horatio, “good morning.” He leaned forward, wrapped his arms around Horatio’s chest, and gave him a long, lingering kiss. Anything else Horatio had planned to say evaporated from his mind as he kissed back.

A high-pitched “ding” reverberated through the flat.

Horatio blinked and reluctantly pulled away from Archie’s lips. “Coffee’s ready,” he murmured.

“Mmmm,” Archie breathed, his lips hovering mere centimetres away. “The blackest of blends?”

“Naturally,” Horatio agreed, brushing lightly against Archie’s lips. “But I bought that raw cane sugar you wanted to make up for it.”

“Ah, good. My favorite,” Archie whispered between kisses.

Horatio smiled against Archie’s lips. “How does anyone have a favorite sugar?”

Archie pulled back slightly from the kiss to look up at Horatio. “Well, you’re mine,” he said, batting his eyelashes.

Somehow, in the last few weeks, Archie had realised that if he turned a compliment into a joke, Horatio would be more able to accept it. It meant that Horatio had been receiving a long list of the most excruciating chat-up lines in the history of man. And yet it was one of the most absurdly endearing things Horatio had ever seen. Horatio shook his head and started laughing. “That may be the worst one you’ve come up with yet.”

Archie grinned. “The day is still young. Give me time and I’m sure I can come up with something better.”

Horatio rolled his eyes with a fond smile. “Much as I’d enjoy continuing this all morning, your food will start getting cold.”

Archie’s face lit up. “You made breakfast?”

“Well, you made it last Sunday. I thought it might make a nice surprise.”

“It is.” Archie paused, then stared at Horatio’s chest with a mischievous smirk. “Do you always cook without a shirt on?”

“What?” Horatio looked down. Archie was right. He was wearing trousers, but didn’t have a stitch on his upper half. Oh dear. Apparently he hadn’t left that phase behind him. “Oh. Er, no?”


Horatio managed a sheepish smile. Somehow making mistakes in front of Archie didn’t make him want the ground to swallow him. “It wasn’t intentional, I assure you.”

“Then what happened?”

Horatio winced. Talking about it was still rather awkward, though. “I . . . was getting dressed, then decided to make you breakfast. It appears I forgot to finish.”

As per usual, instead of being horrified or patronizing about Horatio’s many mistakes, Archie just grinned. “Well, I appreciate your dedication to keeping me fed. And to giving me such a lovely view,” he added, pressing his lips to the little dip between Horatio’s neck and collarbone. Horatio’s
breath caught in his throat as his pulse sped up. Archie smiled against his skin, clearly pleased at the response, and his hand slid further down Horatio’s back. Horatio grinned as he shifted his position, ready to catch Archie’s mouth again. There was nothing for it but to fight fire with fire.

Several minutes later, Horatio pulled back from his ministrations on Archie’s neck to catch his breath. The time-sensitive nature of his culinary experiment slammed back into his mind. He hadn’t prepared the ham yet. He forced himself to disentangle from Archie’s embrace. “Food first,” he managed, his voice somewhat hoarse.

“Oh. Of course,” Archie said, unwrapping his legs from around Horatio’s waist and sliding off the sink counter. “I’ll be there as soon as I finish up here.”

Horatio gave his one last kiss before heading back to the bedroom section of his studio flat. Where had he put his shirt? He glanced around and saw a flash of green lying on the bed. Ah, of course. He’d placed it there, then remembered about socks, and then seen the frying pan sitting out on the range and forgotten all about clothes. At least he’d already put on his trousers. They hadn’t exactly reached that stage just yet . . .

He shook his head to refocus. He would burn the rest of breakfast if he let himself get distracted like that. He pulled the t-shirt on over his head--it was this one that Archie had said was so pleasantly soft, wasn’t it?--and walked back to the stove. How difficult could this be? He had done this one before, and he could do it again.

Probably.

**

“This is delicious, Horatio!” Archie said with a giant grin, then put another forkful in his mouth.

Horatio smiled back, relieved that he had mastered another essential relationship skill. “Glad you’re enjoying it.”

“So, what do you want to do today? Help me run lines again? Research? Figure out what to do to celebrate your birthday in three weeks? You still haven’t told me what you want, incidentally,” Archie said with a teasing smile. Archie had at least 10 distinct smiles--there were probably more, but those were he ones he had catalogued so far.

Horatio shook his head. “We don’t need to do anything special for it. It’s a day, just like any other.” And what do people normally do for birthdays with one’s partner? A romantic dinner? They did that anyway. Presents? He already had Archie. He didn’t need anything else.

“Well, it may not be an important day to you, but it’s incredibly important to me. On July 4th, 22 years ago, the world changed forever.”

Horatio frowned. Surely Archie was referring to something besides his birthday. Had one of Archie’s favorite films been released that day? “What happened?”

Archie chuckled and raised an eyebrow. “You were born, silly.” He paused. “Certainly changed my life for the better.”

Horatio blushed and looked down at his fork. Of course, Archie was being hyperbolic, but it was still sweet of him to say that.
“I did think of something we could do over a long weekend, though,” Archie started, interrupting the silence. “But there’s no pressure at all; you can tell me if you wouldn’t like it.”

Something in Archie’s tone caught his attention. Horatio glanced up. Was Archie nervous? Sure enough, there was the telltale tongue, and his eyelids were fluttering slightly. He gave Archie his undivided attention.

“What is it?”

“Well, the other week, my mum called. Wanted to check in; Tamsin had told her about us and she wanted to hear the details from the horse’s mouth, as it were. Told me that if we wanted to have a get-away at any time, we’d both be welcome there. Izzy and Alastair both brought some friends up earlier in the summer; it’s a bit of a tradition, or, well, used to be. It’s been awhile since I did. But, if you’d be interested, we could go. I could show you all my favorite spots. And, um, introduce you to my family.” He paused and licked his lips. “But, like I said, there’s no pressure. Just, something to think about.” Archie gave him a slightly shaky smile, then took a sip of his orange juice.

Horatio’s heart sped up. They had successfully reached the meeting-the-family stage of the relationship. This was an important milestone. Perhaps that was why Archie sounded so nervous.

“It sounds wonderful, Archie. I’d love to go with you.”

Archie gave him a gigantic grin, his earlier pinched expression forgotten. “Excellent! And I could show you the small stream! And the lake! Oh, and did I tell you about the treehouse? How do you feel about dogs? We have two, but we can make sure they give us a wide berth.”

Horatio smiled as Archie kept talking at a rapid pace, his overflowing enthusiasm filling him with warmth. He should start preparing immediately. Should he bring something? What should he wear? What would they talk about? He would be like a fish out of water as soon as they talked about anything other than ships. What if they didn’t approve? Why couldn’t he be as charming as Archie? Everything would be so much easier then.

A loud bosun’s whistle filled the room, shattering the mood. Archie glanced around, eyebrows raised. “Horatio? I’m assuming that’s you somehow?”

Horatio blinked, snapping out of his thoughts, and got up to look for his phone as it rang again. It was no wonder Archie had never heard it before, given how few calls he received. “Will set my ringtone to that. It’s the whistle the bosun makes when a captain’s come aboard.”

“Check the nightstand,” Archie called out behind him. “Also, who’s the captain in this scenario? The person calling, or you?”

“I don’t think it’s supposed to be a metaphor, Archie.” He wandered over to the nightstand and unplugged his phone as he glanced at the screen. “It’s Will!”

“Ah, good! I’ll do the dishes while you talk. Tell him I say hi. Until after, Captain Hornblower.” Archie turned and started picking up the dishes.

Horatio’s heart started hammering and he felt his face flush. What the hell was going on? He normally only had that reaction to Archie’s hands on him. It didn’t usually happen with his absurd flirtatious lines. He shook his head and refocused. He could think about it later. It had been far too long since he’d last talked with Will.

He swiped to answer the call.

“Hello, Will!”
“Horatio, hi! Am I interrupting?”

“No, not at all. Archie and I just finished breakfast. I cooked!”

“I’m impressed! What was on the menu?”

“Ham and eggs.”

“Good choice.”

“They turned out rather well, actually. Didn’t set off a single smoke detector.”

Will laughed. “Glad to hear it. Although I think the dorm staff have forgiven us for that one.”

Horatio chuckled. “I still maintain that something was wrong with the kitchen timer. Hard tack isn’t supposed to burn that quickly.”

A snort carried over from the sink. Horatio turned his head to find Archie grinning at him, a sudsy plate in his hand, the corners of his mouth twitching as he tried not to laugh out loud. Horatio rolled his eyes with a smile.

“Well, we’ll just have to try again some time,” Will responded.

“Alright.”

“How’s Archie?” Will asked.

“He’s fine. He says hello, by the way.” Horatio glanced over at Archie, who had looked up again at hearing himself referred to and was smiling at him.

“Tell him I want to meet him sometime!” Archie called out.

“Oh, and Archie told me to tell you that he wants to meet you sometime,” Horatio reported.

Horatio could hear Will’s smile over the phone. “Well, he’s in luck. I’m planning to visit Victoria in two weeks. I could come up a bit early, stay with you for a day before crashing at her flat. What do you think?”

“That should work! Let me check.” Horatio pulled the phone away from his ear. “Archie?”

“Hmmm?” Archie put the final dish in the dish drainer and looked up.

“We don’t have plans the weekend after next, do we? Will is thinking about visiting.”

Archie’s face flickered through a series of emotions that passed too quickly for Horatio to decode any of them, before landing on a smile that reached his eyes. “No plans at all. Tell him I’m looking forward to it.”

Horatio smiled as he thought about it. The three of them, sitting around, chatting, playing card games, visiting museums, laughing. It would be lovely to see Will again, to share his new life in Greenwich with him, and to introduce him to Archie. And of course, Will would understand immediately why they were moving so quickly. How could anyone not fall in love with Archie?

“We’re completely free! And of course you can stay with me. Hang on, let me get my computer.” He grabbed his laptop from the coffee table and plunked down with it on the sofa. “Alright. Were you thinking of coming on a Friday or Saturday?”
“Sunday, unfortunately. It’ll have to be a quick trip. I can leave Monday morning when you head off to work.”

“Then Sunday it is. I’ll see if I can come in an hour late on Monday so we can get a quick breakfast together. I’ll pull up the train schedule.”

The sofa shifted. He looked up to find Archie settling into the far end of the sofa, his back against its arm, his eyebrow raised in a question. Horatio nodded and Archie grinned, stretched out his legs, intertwining them with Horatio’s, and picked up *For What It’s Worth* from where he’d placed it on the coffee table last night. Any day now, he’d reach the drawing scene. Horatio smiled as he imagined how brightly Archie would grin, how excited his commentary would be--

“Horatio?”

He blinked and looked back at the computer screen. “Sorry, still here. Right. Train schedules. So, Chichester Rail Station to Greenwich Rail Station. If you left by 10am, you could get here by twelve thirty at the latest.”

“That works. I’ll buy the tickets.”

Horatio grinned. It was truly happening. Archie and Will would finally meet!

He should start drafting the itinerary.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

It's time to meet Will!

"DROOOOID," Horatio’s phone loudly announced.

Horatio sprang to his feet, his phone already in his hand. “Will says he just reached New Cross Station. Everything’s still on time.”

“Good! So, over half an hour left ‘till he arrives? What do you want to do?” Archie set book two of the Worthington Chronicles down on the coffee table. He’d barely had time to get nervous about meeting Will. Every moment since Friday afternoon had been spent either cleaning or trying to distract Horatio, who was inexplicably being devoured by anxiety about this visit while steadfastly pretending that everything was fine. He'd finally given up and sat down to read after the third time Horatio had done a full inspection of the flat and had testily refused any help. But it hadn’t done any good. If anything, Horatio looked even more on edge. Time to try distraction again. “I could put on that audiobook. Or I could read out loud to you from Worthy Cause. Oh, I still have For What it’s Worth here somewhere; should I read you the drawing scene again?”

Horatio hesitated, then shook his head. “I should inspect the flat. Make sure everything’s ready.”

Archie frowned. Even the drawing scene wouldn't work? What the hell was bothering him? “Horatio—”

“One last time,” Horatio insisted, then walked off to the far left-hand corner of the studio flat to start the circuit all over again.

Archie bit down on the urge to sigh as he watched Horatio walk off to torture himself some more. A muscle in Horatio’s jaw was starting to twitch and jump from clenching it, which meant that Archie had about five minutes before Horatio would be so tightly wound that he would end up with a splitting headache and grousing at everyone until the paracetamol kicked in. He had to try something else.

“Everything is ready, Horatio,” Archie called out as Horatio reached the kitchen. “As ready as it’s been the last three times you gave the flat a thorough inspection.”

“But I might have forgotten--”

“But you haven’t. Shall we review the checklist again?”

“I suppose,” Horatio said, walking over to stand behind the sofa. He pulled out his phone again and started reading off the list. “Pillows, sheet, blanket, your air mattress--you’re sure you don’t mind Will’s borrowing it?”

“Don’t mind at all! It’s not as though it was getting any use at my place,” Archie said with a grin.

That coaxed a smile out of Horatio, but it fell off his face almost immediately. “And . . . you’re really not too disappointed about our sleeping arrangements tonight?”
Archie shook his head. “Horatio, we’ve talked this to death already. It’s fine! It’s only for a night.”
A very long night that might bring the nightmares back, but just one night, nonetheless. “You and Will should have time to catch up in private. I’m not going to come between you.”

Horatio hesitated, frowning. “If you’re sure.”

“I am. So, what about the rest of the list?”

“Oh! Er, weekend itinerary, extra milk and Weetabix, replace the burned out bulb in the bathroom, and cleaning.”

“Alright. Let’s review: bedding’s over there,” Archie said, gesturing to the mound of carefully folded sheets, pillowcases, blankets, and the air mattress sitting on Horatio’s bed. “We went grocery shopping yesterday, replaced the bulb this morning, and spend all yesterday cleaning. The flat shines, Horatio. I can see my face on the oven door. You’ve finished, with time to spare. So what’s the problem?”

Horatio froze, his eyes widening as his back became impossibly more tense. “What? Nothing. Everything’s fine.”

Archie raised an eyebrow. “Horatio, if you clench your jaw any more tightly, you’ll shatter all your teeth. Come sit here for a minute, alright?” he said, gesturing to a space on the sofa next to him.

Horatio hesitated, pressed his lips together, glanced over his shoulder at the kitchen, then walked over to sit next to Archie.

Archie took Horatio’s right hand and began gently massaging his fingers. “Horatio, talk to me. Something’s bothering you. Is it about the visit?”

Horatio scowled but didn’t say anything.

“You’ve been looking forward to seeing Will all week. What’s changed?”

“Nothing’s changed. It’s just--” Horatio trailed off, then shook his head and stared at the ground.

Archie frowned as he tried to puzzle out the problem. “Are you . . . worried Will won’t approve of us?”

Horatio’s eyes shot up to meet Archie’s again. “What? No! Not at all! He’s happy for me, and I know he’ll like you.”

Archie squinted as he glanced around the room. What else could it be? “Then . . . is he particular about living situations? Everything needs to be spic and span? He didn’t strike me as a drill sergeant type--”

Horatio shook his head. “Not in the least.”

“But . . . what is it?”

Horatio scowled at his hands and picked at a stray thread sticking out of the sofa.

Archie wracked his brains to find a way to encourage Horatio to talk to him. What could he possibly say? He glanced over at Horatio again and his heart clenched at the struggle on his face. Archie’s mouth moved of its own accord. “Horatio, you’ve seen me seizing and panicking, and we’ve gotten through it. We can handle anything you could say.”
The words “hypocrite” and “take your own advice” floated loudly through his head. He slammed the door on them, refocused his attention, and gave Horatio’s fingers a supportive squeeze.

Horatio hesitated, then blinked repeatedly and swallowed. “It’s just that . . . Will is so . . . steady. Like a rock. He finishes everything on time and never pulls all-nighters unless he’s staying up with me, he remembers to eat and sleep, and he’s not afraid of anything. He’s so brave, Archie! He’s a true hero. He fought for our country. Lost a foot for it, even! And it doesn’t phase him in the slightest! And yet he thinks I’m special, somehow.”

Archie frowned. “But . . . you are.”

Horatio turned and glared at him. “No I’m not. I’m just a--.” He clamped his mouth shut.

“A brilliant, handsome scholar?” Archie ventured with a smile.

“A useless, gangly, skittish, neurotic failure who’s afraid of heights and gets motion sick,” Horatio burst out. He leaned forward, dropping his head in his hands and resting his elbows on his knees.

Archie felt a rush of fiery protectiveness sweep over him. He wanted to find whoever had hurt him and make them regret it. And to make sure no one ever hurt Horatio like that again.

“No. You’re not.” Archie said, leaning forward and putting an arm around Horatio to hold him tightly, his hand resting on Horatio’s shoulder. “Horatio, lo--”

He stopped himself before he could accidentally finish that term of endearment. If Horatio was this upset about someone thinking well of him, springing “love” on him might derail the conversation and send him further into a spiral of anxiety. And he should wait for a time when Horatio’s best friend wasn’t about to walk through the door.

“-Look,” he recovered. “Whoever told you that is wrong.”

“No one needed to tell me,” Horatio muttered.

That brought him up short. So, not the after-effects of bullying, then. He’d have to try a different tack. “Horatio, you are the least useless person I have ever met. You help people at work every day. You helped me, far and beyond the call of duty, as soon as we met. And look at how much you’ve taught me about the Napoleonic War. I bet you’ve helped Will, too.”

“Will doesn’t need help.”

Archie forced himself not to roll his eyes. “Everyone needs help at some point or other, Horatio. That’s what friends are for. Think about it. Name a time you helped Will.”

Horatio paused. “Well, I did help him prepare for the odd exam or two,” he offered eventually, turning to face Archie again.

Translated from Horatio-speak, that meant Horatio explained most of the concepts to Will, they went over flash cards and notes together, and took turns asking each other questions from the textbook and flashcards for hours before each exam.

“And I’m sure he was relieved he could count on you for that,” Archie said. “So, not useless.”

“But there’s so much more I should be doing,” Horatio insisted.

“How? There are only so many hours in the day. I’ve been by your side for most of them over the
last month. I promise you, you’re not slacking off.”

“But I can feel the seconds I waste tick by.”

“Define ‘waste.’ Do you mean when you’re taking a break? When we’re watching movies?”

Horatio lifted his head out of his hands to turn to look at Archie. “No! Of course not! Our time together is never a waste!” Then he looked at his hands, his earlier scowl returning. “I lose so much time to trivial things: wondering how a task is going to turn out, whether I’m doing it correctly, whether anyone else can tell that I’m worried about whether I’m doing it correctly. I can’t even prepare for his visit without mucking it up and needing you to coddle me.” Horatio stared at the carpet as though trying to set it on fire with pure self-loathing.

Archie hesitated. Horatio was trusting him more than ever before. He couldn’t afford to fuck this up. He gave Horatio’s shoulder a gentle squeeze and held him more tightly.

“Horatio, I don’t mind comforting you. If you’re upset, I want to help.” He paused. That was the easy part. “And of course it’s frustrating, to feel like you could do so much more if your brain would just cooperate. But that doesn’t make you a failure.”

Horatio rolled his eyes and stayed silent, but leaned slightly into Archie’s arms. Archie almost sighed in relief. Now, how to explain further without making things worse? “All those thoughts you just described, the things you say slow you down--you still get as much done as any two people I’ve ever met. If there’s some grand cosmic competition between you and the rest of the world, you’re already winning.”

Horatio managed a faint smile. Archie had never been so grateful for Horatio’s competitive streak.

“But even if you didn’t, you’d still deserve respect and friendship . . . and love.”

Horatio stilled then frowned slightly, his mind visibly whirring away. But what was he thinking?

Archie saw a path forward, then hesitated. What if it backfired? There was a reason he’d been resolutely not revisiting that early disaster. He licked his lips, his heart suddenly beating more quickly. Oh, what the hell. It was for Horatio. It was worth the risk.

“Remember what you told me about panic attacks? That they weren’t something to be ashamed of?” His insides squirmed. Yes, thank you, conscience. Message received, loud and clear.

Horatio whipped his head around to face Archie. “That’s different,” he said with a frown.

“How?”

“Because if I just tried harder, I could fix this,” Horatio blurted out.

Archie raised an eyebrow. “And some people would say the same about me,” he said quietly.

“But that’s ridiculous! It’s a fundamental misconception of the problem. You can’t just will away panic! It’s a legitimate condition with genetic, biological, chemical, and psychological components,” Horatio said, radiating righteous indignation and giving Archie his full attention.

Archie blinked. Apparently Horatio had been doing some research. He tried to shove that from his mind to process another time. This was about Horatio, not him. “Well, then. Anxiety’s the same. Or, so says all the research.”
Horatio’s face morphed into a vaguely squinting expression, as though Archie had just tried to insist that the French had won the Napoleonic War. “Anxiety?”

Archie narrowed his eyes. “Isn’t that what we were talking about?”

The furrow in Horatio’s forehead grew larger. “What? No, Archie, I don’t have anxiety. That’s completely different.”

A thousand different responses popped into Archie’s mind simultaneously. He chose the neutral option. “Ah. Well, good to know.”

Horatio rolled his eyes. “Archie, anxiety is a debilitating mental illness that keeps people from functioning on a day-to-day basis.”

Archie paused. “Well, it can be. But it doesn’t have to be that severe to count.”

Horatio opened his mouth, then pressed his lips together tightly and stared at his hands, his face scrunched up in a frown as he worried over the matter.

Archie licked his lips nervously and glanced at the door. Fucking fantastic. He’d made it worse, and Will would arrive any second, so they didn’t have time to talk about it more. How was he to know Horatio didn’t consider this to be anxiety? He’d basically just described the damn condition. Would Horatio want to talk about this again later, once Will had left? Would he research it on his own? What if Horatio interpreted his comments as an insult? Had he hurt Horatio’s feelings? Would Horatio ever trust him with something like this again?

Fuck, he was getting distracted. He had to fix this. He shook his head to refocus, then shifted closer so Horatio’s shoulder was pressed against his chest as he ran a comforting hand up and down his back. “But that’s not important right now. Point is, I like all of you, even the parts that you don’t. Wouldn’t change a thing.” He paused. “I also like your kindness, your compassion, your encyclopedic knowledge of all things British navy, and the truly amazing things you can do with your tongue—oh, good, that got a laugh out of him—’but I’ll sing their praises later. We have all the time in the world. I’m not going anywhere. I promise.”

Horatio blinked and turned his head to look at Archie as a small smile slowly wiped away the scowl. He placed his left hand on top of Archie’s where it rested on his right shoulder, and interwove their fingers, giving them a squeeze. “I’m not going anywhere either,” he said seriously as he held Archie’s gaze with such conviction that Archie’s breath caught in his throat.

Archie smiled back, feeling his own eyes start to get suspiciously moist. He reached a hand up to cup Horatio’s face as he leaned in, and his eyes fluttered shut as their lips met. Everything was alright. He hadn’t ruined anything. He hadn’t hurt Horatio. And, unless he was horribly misreading that look, that was . . . love. Everything that wasn’t them fell away as the universe narrowed to a point, a series of points—their lips where they met, their hands where they touched—

The doorbell rang.

Horatio pulled back and blinked slowly as the spell faded. Then he grinned, squeezed Archie’s hand, and sprang into action. “Coming!” he called out as he jogged to the door.

Archie took a deep, slow breath and tried to calm his suddenly pounding heart as he followed Horatio. It was time to befriend Will.

Horatio opened the door to reveal a man, approximately his own height, slender, and with ash brown, wavy hair that curled around his ears, a little longer now than it had been in Horatio’s
photo. His erect, military posture and black leather jacket seemed at odds with smile lines etched into the corners of his slate blue eyes, made more apparent by the broad grin that spread across his face when he saw Horatio.

“Horatio! It’s good to see you,” Will said, and stepped forward with his arms open wide.

“And you.” Horatio met him halfway and gave him a hug with no hesitation.

Several seconds later, Horatio released Will and took a step back, gesturing at Archie. “Will, I’d like you to meet Archie. Archie, this is Will.”

“Glad you could make the trip!” Archie said, shaking his hand. “Horatio talks about you a great deal; I’m thrilled to finally meet the man himself.”

Will smiled back. “Pleasure to meet the person who can turn Horatio’s head.”

Archie grinned. “I’ll endeavour to live up to your expectations.”

“You always exceed mine,” Horatio said, looking at Archie with a fond smile.

Will’s eyebrows jerked up before he resumed a more neutral expression.

“Oh!” Horatio said, suddenly remembering himself. “Er, Will, come on inside! How was the trip?” He stepped back to make room for Will to pass into the flat.

“No problems. Everything was on time and the walk from the bus station to here was straightforward enough,” he said, following Horatio inside to the main room with a slight limp. Will quickly glanced around. “The flat looks good, Horatio!” He pointed at the ceiling above the pantry. “That’s where the leak was? You can hardly tell.”

Horatio nodded. “The repair person Mr. Foster hired did a surprisingly good job.”

Will glanced at the ceiling again then turned to look at Horatio. “How did you convince the old bugger to hire professionals?”

Horatio beamed and looked over to Archie. “Archie convinced him.”

Oh dear. Sweet of Horatio to try to show him off, but an announcement of his family background was not how he wanted to start his friendship with Will.

“Oh?” Will looked at Archie, eyebrows raised.

“Some lawyers are family friends. I made a credible lawsuit threat. Crude, but effective,” Archie said with a shrug.

Will tipped his head in acknowledgement. “I’m surprised it worked. Well done,” he said, then walked over to get a closer look at the pantry.

Horatio cast Archie a questioning look, which Archie tried to answer with a small smile and shake of his head. He’d explain later. Horatio nodded and dropped the subject. Archie internally breathed a sigh of relief. And now, back to charming Will.

Will straightened up and nodded. “Good workmanship. Just don’t buy rice in bulk, and this cabinet should serve you well,” he said, a faint smile playing on his lips belying his otherwise serious expression.
Horatio smiled, but rolled his eyes. “I’ve learned my lesson. And it’s not nice to tease the host, Will. Unless, of course, you’d like to eat turnips for every meal.”

Will shook his head, and turned to face Archie, the corners of his mouth twitching as he fought against a smile. “I never touch the stuff.”

Archie grinned. Humor. He could do humor. And Will was bringing him in on the joke. That was a good sign. “Horatio, you can’t threaten friends with turnips. It’s just not right. Violates the friend code. Practically running under false colours.”

Will raised an eyebrow. “I see you’re mastering naval terminology.”

Archie opened his mouth to respond, but Horatio beat him to it.

“He is! The other day, he read several of Redmond’s letters without needing to look up any of the terms!”

Archie felt his face heat up unexpectedly. “Well, I have an excellent teacher.”

Will nodded, a faint smile appearing on his face. “That he is,” he said, turning to face Horatio.

Horatio rolled his eyes and tried to pretend he wasn’t beating back a grin.

“Has Horatio been showing you all of his documentaries?” Will asked Archie.

Archie and Horatio turned and looked at each other in unison. Horatio had a slightly mischievous smile. This could get interesting. How would Will feel about hearing of a well-meaning prank played on his beloved Horatio? Archie raised a questioning eyebrow, and Horatio nodded.

“Did you want the honours?” Archie asked.

Horatio shook his head and gestured at him to take the lead. “You’re the storyteller.”

Archie shrugged. Well, if Horatio thought playing the ham was the ticket to Will’s approval, then he could show off with the best of them. He turned to face Will with a grin. “Right then. Yes, Horatio has shown me quite a number of them. Including the jewel of his collection.”

Will looked at Horatio. “Did you make him watch Sailing with Nelson?” he said drily.

“Oh yes he did,” Archie said with a smirk.

“It does have an excellent description of how to shorten sail,” Horatio offered half-heartedly.

“So it does. For a five year old,” Will responded.

Horatio rolled his eyes, a begrudging smile on his lips. “Not this argument again.”

Will gave him a smile and a nonchalant shrug.

Archie grinned. So far, so good.

“So, after suffering through what I can now assume is a rite of passage, the other night I convinced Horatio that we should watch a classic work of cinematic perfection that faithfully documents the lives and actions of pirates during the Victorian age.”

Will raised an eyebrow.
“How was I to know that *Pirates of Penzance* was a musical?” Horatio said, shaking his head but smiling.

“It’s an operetta,” Archie corrected with a grin.

Horatio rolled his eyes. “That’s hardly the salient detail.”

“Well, regardless, the look on Horatio’s face when they started to sing was a masterpiece,” Archie said to Will, who was glancing back and forth between the two of them like a spectator at a ping-pong ball tournament.

“But the show makes no sense whatsoever. And the catlike tread song is ridiculous! They’re singing loudly about how quiet and stealthy they are,” Horatio insisted with a smile.

“It’s *supposed* to be silly, Horatio! It’s ironic. I’m surprised you weren’t more invested in the operetta, despite your feelings on music; after all, you have rather a lot in common with Frederick.”

“Archie, that’s absurd,” Horatio said laughing.

Archie grinned. “I’m not complaining. Wouldn’t change a thing. I like you exactly as you are—spectacular curls and overdeveloped sense of duty included.”

Horatio blushed, then rallied by raising an amused and disbelieving eyebrow his way. “And that would make you the Pirate King in this scenario?”

Archie gave him his best cocky grin. “Well, seeing as Mabel’s part is a bit high for me, I suppose I have no choice but to live my life on the high seas of Cornwall.” He suddenly remembered none of this would make any sense to Will. He tried to shake himself out of it and get back on track. This was about befriending Will, not flirting with Horatio. “I played the Pirate King in a school play a few years back: most fun I’ve had on stage.”

Will nodded, a faint crease in his forehead.

Horatio was still grinning at Archie. “Didn’t you say your Mum recorded that performance?”

Archie nodded. “She should still have the DVDs somewhere. Alongside our recording of *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, although I still maintain that there was no need for quite so much body glitter for my Puck costume. That stuff doesn’t come off.”

Horatio had turned a fascinating color of red and was trying to school his smirk into something more neutral. Archie smiled, his heart overflowing with how ridiculously adorable Horatio looked when he got like that. He made a mental note to add glitter to the shopping list.

He glanced over to Will, who was watching the proceedings, eyebrow raised in amusement. Will met his look with a twinkle in his eye. Apparently Will thought it was adorable, too. Archie grinned, relishing this new feeling of camaraderie, feeling like he could take off and soar into the stars if he took a running jump.

High on adrenaline and still beaming, he winked at Will, who responded with the same dry, tilted smile Archie was starting to recognise.

“Anyway,” Archie said, deciding to save Horatio from his flustered embarrassment, “Horatio’s been making a detailed itinerary for us.”

Will smiled. “I’d imagined that might be the case. What’s on the agenda?”
Horatio unconsciously adopted his captain’s pose. “Well, I bought us tickets to the 2pm entrance of the *Cutty Sark*, and the Maritime Museum is unveiling a new exhibit on the history of timekeeping through objects, so we should spend at least an hour there, and--”

Archie stopped listening, his mind rebelling at the idea of spending an entire hour in an exhibit on clocks. He glanced at Will to see if he thought this idea was as excessive as it seemed to him. Will was nodding attentively.

“--Then we have a dinner reservation for 6:30 at Mogul Restaurant,” Horatio continued.

Will raised an eyebrow again. “You eat Indian food now?”

Horatio smiled at Archie. “Archie convinced me. It turns out some of the dishes are plain enough.”

Will dipped his head in acknowledgement. “Glad you found something you like. Now we can finally go to that place ‘round the corner from our dorm.”

Horatio beamed.

Archie felt his face heat up. Horatio was trying to show Will how much he’d changed, how much Archie meant to him. And Will took it in stride and didn't seem threatened at all. He grinned as something deep inside him slotted into place. They could make this work.

“--And then we’ll finish by taking the Emirates Air Line at 9pm to get the best view of Greenwich,” Horatio concluded.

“Airline?” Will asked.

“It’s a sort of cable car that runs along the Thames and gives you a bird’s-eye view of the area. It reaches a height of 90 metres,” Horatio explained.

Will frowned.

This made no sense. Horatio was terrified of heights. Hell, he even hated stepladders. And spiral staircases. He would be absolutely miserable. Why was he planning on torturing himself? “90 metres? Are you sure about this, Horatio?” Archie asked.

“Of course I’m sure,” Horatio responded, his voice unusually harsh. “All the guidebooks say no trip is complete without it. Ergo, we should do it.”

Will frowned some more, shifted slightly, then shrugged. “Alright,” he agreed at last.

Archie frowned, then looked from Horatio to Will, then back to Horatio. Will had to know how much Horatio hated heights. So why was he going along with it? Well, if Will wouldn’t say something, then it was up to him to show Horatio he didn’t need to be someone else to have people care about him. “Just because it’s recommended doesn’t mean we have to do it, Horatio,” Archie responded gently.

Will raised an eyebrow.

Horatio paused. “But, Archie, don’t you want to see the view?” he asked, full of concern, the earlier tone gone as quickly as it had come.

“Not if you’re not going to enjoy it.”

Will’s eyebrow rose marginally higher.
Horatio bristled. “It has excellent reviews.”

Archie forced himself not to roll his eyes. Of course Horatio would assume that reviews from people who like heights should dictate their plans. “I’m sure it does. But, just because other people like it doesn’t mean you’re obligated to go or like it. And . . . Horatio, 90 metres—”

“It won’t be a problem,” Horatio snapped, cutting him off. “Unless either of you wish to skip it, we should go on the Air Line.”

Archie raised an eyebrow. Horatio never sounded like this. What the fuck was going on?

“I’m game,” Will said.

Archie stared at him incredulously. Why was Will encouraging Horatio to force himself into situations that would hurt him? Was Will the reason Horatio thought his fear of heights made him unworthy of love? Archie clenched his fists behind his back, suddenly furious.

“Excellent,” Horatio said. “In that case, let’s away.” He marched to the door, leaving Archie and Will behind him. Archie glared at Will, then turned and followed Horatio. Will followed him, a step behind. They left the flat, and Horatio pulled the door shut and reached into his pockets for his keys. His hands came up empty. He scowled at the door handle.

“I seem to have forgotten my keys. Give me just one moment and I’ll be ready to leave,” Horatio said, then walked back into the flat and closed the door behind him.

Archie waited until he heard Horatio’s footsteps leaving the mud room. “What was that about?” Archie whispered angrily to Will.

Will met his gaze impassively. “Horatio’s capable of making up his own mind,” he responded calmly.

Archie rolled his eyes. “Yes, but he’ll make up his mind to do whatever he thinks he’s supposed to want to do,” he shot back. “If we can help him stop torturing himself, then it’s our job to try.”

Will raised an eyebrow and gave a small dip of his head. “Let me know if you figure out how.”

Archie deflated as most of the fight drained out of him. No support from that quarter. He sighed quietly and they lapsed into awkward silence.

They heard more footsteps, and the door flew open. “Found them,” Horatio announced. He closed and locked the door, and they made their way to the Indy.

**

Archie scanned the Maritime Museum’s lobby after paying for his ticket. Where had Horatio gone? He found him at last over by the decorative plants, inspecting the map in the museum’s brochure and probably planning their route for the day, but that faint scowl was still there. He had tried to patch things up in the ride over—cracking jokes to cheer him up, telling Will flattering stories about Horatio’s skills as a teacher—and although Horatio had smiled and laughed, he still seemed slightly nettled. Archie sighed, then glanced around to the men’s room on the far side of the lobby. Will was still in there, so he had a bit of time to fix this.

Archie walked over to Horatio’s side. “Horatio?”

“Hmm?” Horatio responded, glancing up from the brochure.
Archie took a deep breath and braced himself. “I’m . . . sorry. About earlier. I was just trying to help.”

Horatio’s forehead wrinkled in confusion as the brochure fell forgotten at his side. “Archie, how was that trying to help?”

Archie blinked. It wasn’t obvious? “I was trying to say that you didn’t need to torture yourself by going on it just because you think you ought to enjoy it. None of us will think any less of you for choosing to give it a miss.”

Horatio rolled his eyes. “For heaven’s sake, Archie, I want to go on it.”


Horatio looked at him in disbelief, then shrugged. “For the same reason most people want to see things, I’d imagine,” he said at last. “It’s supposed to be spectacular, especially at sunset. And I’m curious what the fuss is about.” He paused and tilted his head. “Why did you think I didn’t want to see it?”

Archie frowned. “Horatio, you hate heights, and it’s very, very high. And your only justifications were that other people liked it. It sounded like you thought it was a matter of obligation. Of doing it because you thought it was your duty as a tourist, or Brit, or morally-upstanding citizen.”

“Oh,” Horatio said, his forehead wrinkling.

“And you’d spent the previous twenty minutes detailing why you thought you were a failure as a person for not liking heights, among other things, and then you immediately demanded to go on the highest object in a ten mile radius. What was I supposed to think?”

Horatio squinted at him. “So, you were trying to--”

“--to show you that you didn’t need to like heights to be worthy of friendship, yes.”

“Oh,” Horatio said again.

“Why? What did you think I was doing?” Archie asked, his heart starting to beat more quickly.

Horatio ducked his head and pressed his lips together. “I thought you were questioning my ability to lead things. Rubbing my nose in my failures,” he muttered.

Archie winced. “Oh, fuck, Horatio, that’s not what I meant.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Fucking hell, how had he fucked up so badly? Horatio deserved better than this. “I’m sorry. I just wanted to keep you from hurting yourself, and I hurt you instead.”

Horatio looked up instantly and met Archie’s eyes, a faint smile on his lips. “You didn’t hurt me,” he said as he reached out and took Archie’s hands. “It was just a misunderstanding. No harm done.”

Archie swallowed and looked at the ground, relishing the contact as he tried to get his pulse to return to a reasonable pace. “Ok. Glad to hear it.” It was fine. He hadn’t ruined anything.

“Archie?”

“Hmm?” Archie glanced up to find Horatio watching him, a faint frown on his face.

Horatio glanced briefly around them, then smiled slightly and leaned in for a kiss. Archie met his
lips instantly, the warmth spreading through him and melting the worst of the rising panic away.

After a moment, Horatio pulled back and smiled at Archie. “Alright?”

Archie nodded. “Alright.”

Horatio beamed. “Let’s go in, then.” he paused and looked around. “Wait, where’s Will?”

Archie frowned. Will. Will must have known Horatio would interpret his comment that way. That’s what the raised eyebrow meant. Shit. He turned around and saw him standing out of earshot over by the large map of the museum on the wall. “Over there.”

Horatio grinned. “In that case, let’s go in. The timepieces exhibit is closest.”

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Archie had already walked through the entire timepieces exhibit twice in the time it had taken Horatio to make it through the first two display cases. He had finally given up and sat down heavily with a sigh next to Will on one of the benches right outside the doors of the exhibit hall. Will looked over at him, nodded in greeting, and then went back to staring at the items on the wall. This was no good. He had to fix the earlier damage. How was he supposed to get to know Horatio’s best friend if he wouldn’t talk? And what else did Will know about Horatio that he didn’t?


Will blinked. “Stories?”

“You know, funny anecdotes, brilliant, madcap schemes, things he does that leave you wanting to tear your hair out. That sort of stuff.”

Will paused and squinted slightly. Was this his thinking face? Or his disapproving face?

“His terms papers are inspiring,” Will finally said.

Alright, this was progress. “I’m not surprised. He’s absolutely brilliant.”

Will gave him a small smile. “Yes, he is.” He turned slightly to face Archie more. “His papers always find something that all other naval historians have overlooked. The field benefits from his opinions.”

“Yep, sounds like our Horatio,” Archie said with a grin.

“And I’ve never seen anyone better at whist. Always five steps ahead of everyone else. Heaven help anyone on the opposing team.”

Oh no, not this.

“I can imagine. Strategy-heavy games like that seem to cater right to his strengths,” Archie said, managing to keep his feelings about the game entirely under wraps. “Do you play?”

Will nodded. “Horatio taught me. I’m not particularly good at it--it’s far too complicated--but I join in whenever our group needs a fourth person. Usually on Horatio’s team.”

Archie smiled. “I’m sure he’s glad to have you.”
“Do you play?”

 Damn. Will’s first question about him, and it had to be this.

 “Ah. Uh, no. No, not really my thing.”

 Will looked mildly surprised. “Why not?”

 “Partly the card counting aspect doesn’t appeal to me. Give me bluffing or trivia games any day. But mainly, my great uncle Cecil loves that game. He never shuts up about it. Once, he spent a full hour narrating every play in a game he’d won the night before in painful, excruciating detail. I thought it would never end. It rather turned me off of wanting to learn. But I’ll do it if Horatio asks.”

 Will was looking at him oddly.

 “What?” Was there a one-question best friend test that he had just failed?

 “Nothing,” Will said, and lapsed into silence again.

 This was getting ridiculous. He wracked his brains trying to think of another way in.

 “I’m trying to figure out what to do for Horatio’s birthday next week,” Archie tried again. “Of course he says he doesn’t want anything, but I’d like to do something nice for him anyway. I was thinking about a trip to Portsmouth: we could spend the day at the Historic Dockyard.”

 Will frowned slightly, but didn’t say anything.

 “Bad idea? Does he not like it there? I thought they had Nelson’s ship, the _HMS Victory_?”

 Will hesitated. “Has he told you about his last trip to Portsmouth?”

 Archie narrowed his eyes. “No. What happened?”

 “Our naval history class went to the Portsmouth Historic Dockyards for a private tour. Waited in line for our turn to go aboard the _HMS Warrior_--a steam-powered frigate from 1860 that’s docked there as part of the museum. Climbed up on the metal railing to get a better view of some intricacy of its design. Lost his balance and fell straight into the harbour. Had to throw him a lifebuoy to fish him out.”

 Archie started giggling, then covered his mouth with his hand to muffle the sound when one of the museum guards glared at him.

 “Poor Horatio,” Archie said, pulling himself together again. “He must have been miserable.”

 “He was. Scowled the rest of the day.” Will paused, and turned back to Archie with a faint twinkle in his eye. “Dampened his enthusiasm for the whole affair.”

 Archie blinked, then started giggling again. Will could make puns? Maybe they could make this work.

 Of course, Horatio chose that moment to join them. “What have I missed?” he asked eagerly.

 “Portsmouth,” Archie said with a smile, scooting over to make room for Horatio between them.

 Horatio turned red and frowned. “The wind must have picked up suddenly. I had balanced myself
on that railing perfectly."

And now Horatio would think they were laughing at him. How could he fix this? Archie reached out to take his hand, and Horatio joined them to sit on the bench between them. Archie put his arm around his shoulders. “I’m sure you did. You must admit, it’s a great story.”

Horatio shrugged. “I suppose. But it’s more difficult to enjoy historic ships when you’re cold and soaking wet.”

“Well, we’ll just have to go back some time and make sure you stay dry,” Archie said with a grin. “If you’d like, that is.”

Horatio looked up at him, eyes wide with surprise and hope. “Really?”

“Of course! How about next weekend, for your birthday!! That’s where the HMS Victory is, right? I’ll bring you to Victory for your birthday!!”

A slow grin spread across Horatio’s face. “That would be . . . Yes! Thank you, Archie!”

“My pleasure! We can book the tickets tomorrow.”

Horatio nodded, still grinning. Archie surreptitiously glanced at Will over Horatio’s shoulders. Will was watching them and smiling slightly. Did that mean he approved?

Horatio’s mobile beeped. He pulled it out and hit a button, and the beeping stopped. “Right. On to the next exhibit. To the Cutty Sark, gentlemen.”

Horatio had set an alarm for the museum? Of course Horatio did tourism as he did everything else: full-speed, head first, and planned to the second. And yet, Archie wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Lead on!” Archie said. “Just, not into the water. I didn’t bring towels,” he added with a smirk.

Will frowned slightly and turned his head to look at Horatio.

Horatio rolled his eyes, but kept smiling. “Shouldn’t be too hard. The Cutty Sark is on land.” He stood up, clearly ready to be on his way, and looked at the map of the museum.

Will looked back at Archie, his forehead slightly wrinkled. Was that distrust? Confusion? Surprise? Archie gave him a questioning look that Will didn’t answer. He sighed internally. Well, might as well get a move on.

Archie stood, then held out his hand to Will to help him up. Will stared at it, then met Archie’s eyes. Whatever he saw there must have convinced him of something, because he took Archie’s hand and rose to his feet. Side by side, they followed Horatio to the ship.

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“Oh, Horatio, the HMS Temeraire arrived the other night. We can try the Trafalgar campaign again once the term starts, if you’d like,” Will said as they walked off the Cutty Sark and back toward the museum shop.

“Campaign?” Archie asked.

Will’s eyes widened ever so slightly. “Horatio,” he said. “Did you not tell him about your little hobby?”

Horatio glared at Will.
Archie raised an eyebrow. “No he didn’t. Horatio? Care to explain?”

Horatio glared at Will again, then rolled his eyes. “Very well. I -- we -- collect Age of Sail miniatures. 1/1200 size. We paint and rig them ourselves. And we study military strategy by modeling battles from the Napoleonic Wars.”

“He means we play Age of Sail miniature wargames,” Will added.

“But it sounds unscholarly when you say it like that,” Horatio said, fixing Will with a glare again which Will met with an innocent expression. “We did the Battle of the Nile last year, and we thought the Battle of Trafalgar would be a good project to round out our time at KCL.”

“Of course,” Archie said, the corners of his lips twitching. “Perfectly logical. It all sounds very professional.”

“His strategy is very impressive,” Will volunteered.

“Thank you, Will,” Horatio said, nodding with satisfaction and shooting Will a smug look.

“I’m sure it is,” Archie agreed.

Horatio puffed out his chest slightly. God, this man was adorable.

“Do you wear miniature bicornes while you play?” Archie teased.

“Archie!” Horatio groaned with a grin.

“Don’t encourage him, Will. Otherwise the hats will show up in a box on Monday,” Horatio said, chuckling. “Archie, lots of people collect miniatures. It is a legitimate pursuit. And it’s serious.”

“So it appears,” Archie answered. “And I’m glad that you enjoy it. Everyone should have a hobby.”

Horatio nodded, momentarily appeased.

“I just also think that you’d be adorable wearing a tiny bicorne while executing famous naval maneuvers,” Archie said.

Horatio’s mouth fell open in shock. The corners of Will’s lips kept twitching.

“Now, where’s that cafe? I’m hungry,” Archie said, taking Horatio’s hand. “Come along, Captain Hornblower. Show us that navigational prowess.”

Horatio gaped at him a few seconds more, then blinked and shook his head. “Er, over there,” he said, pointing to his left.

“After you, then,” Archie said, and Horatio led the way.

**

“This is my treat,” Horatio insisted as the two of them got in line at the cafe.

Archie frowned. “Horatio, you already bought the tickets for the Cutty Sark. It’s my turn.”

Horatio shook his head. “I want to.” He glanced over his shoulder at the table Will had staked out
for them at the far end of the busy cafe, then looked back at Archie with a smile. “Did you want to sit? I could order for all of us.”

Archie chuckled and rolled his eyes. “Ok, Horatio, I’ll take the hint. It’ll be nice to get a chance to chat with him some more.”

Horatio grinned and intertwined their fingers. “I’m glad you two have finally met.”

Archie smiled back and squeezed his hand. “Me too.” He thought back over Will’s unreadable facial expressions and his long silences, and his heart started beating more quickly. He swallowed. “See you there, then,” he said, then let go and threaded his way through the crowd to the table.

Will was reading the museum brochure, but looked up as Archie pulled out the chair and sat down across the table from him.

“I’m glad you could come for a visit,” Archie started.

Will nodded and pocketed the brochure. “Wouldn’t miss it.” He stayed silent, but it felt more like a silence he was waiting for Archie to break than a silence he wanted preserved. Should he make idle chatter? Try to draw him out? Or should he just take the direct route and hope it didn’t backfire?

The silence stretched on. Oh fuck it. Direct route it was.

“Look,” Archie began. “I know I don’t seem like what you’d expect Horatio to go for. More teasing and spontaneously bursting into song, for a start. But I promise, I care about him. And I won’t be any sort of competition for you: I’m glad he has you by his side, and I won’t try to come in between that. What makes Horatio happy makes me happy.”

Will just stared at him with that unreadable expression.

“So, anyway, uh, good to finally meet you,” Archie concluded. Well, that went well, he thought bitterly.

Will cleared his throat and shifted his position. He frowned as though he was preparing for a speech himself.

“Thank you,” Will said finally.

“You’re welcome,” Archie said automatically. Then he paused. “Wait, for what?”

Will shrugged. “It’s good to see him happy,” he said with a small smile, looking over Archie’s shoulder towards the cashier’s line.

Archie grinned as his pulse started to return to normal. “Well, I try.” He thought back over all the times Horatio had talked about Will. “Sounds like we both do.”

Will dipped his head again, then looked slightly to the right of Archie as his smile brightened. Archie glanced over in time to see Horatio approach the table, tray in hand.

“What did I miss?” Horatio asked, sitting down at the empty seat between Will and Archie.

“Just getting to know each other,” Archie said. The giant smile that spread over Horatio’s face made him feel like he could fly. “Or, in the words of the immortal Humphrey Bogart, “I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

Horatio frowned. “Who?” he asked as he handed out scones: blackcurrant for Will and chocolate
chip for Archie.

The corner of Will’s lips quirked up. “The actor. It’s from *Casablanca*.”

“See? Will gets my allusions,” Archie teased, before taking a bite of his scone.

Will’s answering smile was the warmest he’d given all day, although still not quite as sunny as the one in Horatio’s photo. Horatio was positively beaming.

“So, what’s next on the itinerary?” Will asked, the remnants of the smile still ghosting on his lips.

“Well, it . . . took less time for us to finish the museum than I’d anticipated. Our dinner reservation isn’t until 6:30pm, so we have several hours free,” Horatio said with a frown. Only Horatio would be glum about having unexpected free time.

“We could always visit the Greenwich Market for some souvenir shopping. Or the Clocktower Market. They’re both nearby,” Archie volunteered.

“What do you think, Horatio?” Will asked.

Horatio shrugged. “I suppose. What are we looking for?”

Archie smiled. “Nothing in particular. That’s the beauty of it. Aimless wandering. Waiting for something to catch your fancy.”

Horatio raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“It’ll be fun. And if you get bored, we’ll point you toward a bookstore and you can wait for us there,” Archie said.

Horatio shrugged. “Alright. We can try it. Are we finished here?”

Archie shoved the last bite of scone into his mouth. “Mmhmm,” he mumbled while chewing.

“Lead the way,” Will added, stacking his plate on Horatio’s.

“Alright, then.” Horatio pulled up his mobile to check directions, stared at it intently for a moment. “Hmmm. My GPS is confused. Let’s see . . . which way is North from here?”

Will looked about him. “That way,” he said, pointing toward the water and Archie.

Horatio frowned and blushed slightly. Apparently he thought that was an obvious question and was now kicking himself. “Oh, right. Of course. In that case—” he scrolled around on the mobile’s map for a moment, “Ah, yes. Found it. Let’s be on our way.”

Horatio got up quickly, picked up their trays, and walked them over to the rubbish bins.

“You convinced him to go souvenir shopping. That’s new.” Will said, standing up and giving Archie a curious look. He gestured to Archie. “After you.”

“Let’s go exploring,” Archie said with a smile.

***

An hour later, they were still wandering through the Clocktower Market. Horatio and Will had spent 20 minutes comparing sextants and telescopes in a replica shop, and at least a good 30 minutes admiring an engraving of British and French fleets at the end of the Battle of Trafalgar and
trying to identify all the ships without the key. Archie had watched, amused, as they debated, but had gradually wandered away once he couldn’t follow the conversation and the entertainment factor of watching their enthusiasm had worn off.

He found himself in a stall that seemed to specialise in navigational jewelry and other small trinkets. Would Izzy want a necklace with a helm charm on it? Or earrings? No, probably not. Anchors and sails weren’t much better. He’d just have to keep looking.

Next up: a row of nautical-themed cufflinks. Not really his style.

He moved on to the next row. It was lined with baskets, each containing different small pocket charms: some anchors, some sails, some sea horses, some starfish, and some small pocket compass charms, much like his own, but shinier. He picked one up: it sat differently in his palm. Heavier, more substantial. There was something calming about its extra mass. He stroked its surface. Nice texture. He turned it over in his hands. Tempting. But no, his had served him well. No need for an upgrade. And he’d hardly needed his in the last week. And this one was probably too heavy to carry around in his pocket every day. He placed it back in the basket, feeling a slight twinge as he did so.

He started to turn to go back to the stall where he’d left Horatio when he saw something gleam out of the corner of his eye. He turned back. There, near the charms, was a slim, silver necklace chain, almost invisible except for where it shimmered when it caught the sunlight. He took a step closer. It held a small, silver pendant, about 2.5cm in diameter. He picked it up to get a better look. It was a compass. His thumb brushed the back of the compass and he started at the raised texture. Was that text? He flipped it over. The words “True North” were elegantly engraved on the back. He smiled as he ran his thumb over the words again, then turned the pendant compass side up. Could something so small actually work? He turned until the needle was facing the north arrow, and glanced up in the direction the compass indicated. There was Horatio, exactly where he’d left him a few booths away, hunched over another drawing, which he was examining intently with Will, both of them pointing at something as they talked. Archie grinned.

Horatio did have a birthday coming up.

**

Two minutes later, he returned to the shop where he’d left Horatio. Will had wandered over to the back of the store. Horatio walked up to him the second he rounded the corner.

“Where did you go?” Horatio asked. “I saw a print with a nice visual of the hierarchy of the navy and the uniforms that go with each position that I thought you might find informative.”

“I was just over there at that shop. Found something there, too.”

“Oh? Should we go see it?” Horatio turned to look over his shoulder, presumably to call Will over.

“No need. Actually, it’s for you. Here.” Archie held out the small navy blue gift box that held the pendant.

Horatio looked at Archie, his forehead wrinkled in confusion as he took the box. After several seconds, he dragged his eyes away from Archie’s to the box in his hands. He opened the lid and stared at the silver pendant inside.

“It’s a compass,” Archie said when Horatio stayed silent.

Horatio picked it up gently, the chain dangling down the back of his hand, the compass resting on
his index finger. He tilted it back and forth.

“It works,” Archie said out of desperation.

Horatio nodded. His finger brushed the back of the compass and he frowned slightly as he pondered the difference in texture from the engraved words. He flipped it over and read the text on the back.

“If you don’t like it, I can take it back,” Archie said finally, when Horatio hadn’t said anything or looked up. “I only thought that I have a compass, and now you can have one, too. And it's sleek and subtle so you can wear it under your clothes without anyone noticing. And it works, so it’s practical, like you, and you’ll always know where you are, no matter what happens with your GPS. And -- and you’re my true North,” he blurted out. *Oh fucking hell, that was the most hackneyed, cliched, sentimental claptrap you could have come up with! What the bloody hell is wrong with you?*

Horatio blinked repeatedly and then looked back up at Archie.

Archie’s heart was racing a mile a minute and his palms were starting to sweat.

“And if wearing it around your neck isn't manly enough for you, you could always carry it with you the way people sometimes wear pocket watches,” Archie said, aiming for a relaxed and joking tone. *This had seemed like such a good idea three minutes ago. Shit, this was a disaster.*

Horatio opened his mouth, then closed it again.

Oh God, he had totally fucked everything up. He had taken it too far. He had to fix this.

“Of course!”

“What do you mean, of course! You stared at it in silence for an eternity!”

“I’m sorry, it's just that no one had ever-- that is, I’ve never been given --” Horatio swallowed, then released Archie and took a step back. “Everyone apart from Will uses gifts to try to make me more appear more normal: a popular tv show or movie that they expect me to like because it has ships in it. You didn’t.” He swallowed again and blinked a few times, then gently pulled the chain until its clasp was visible. He brought it up to his face and stared at it. He poked at the lobster claw clasp with his index finger, then fumbled with its little lever. He frowned, perplexed.

“You push down just there, and then pull the chain off the loop when the gap opens up,” Archie volunteered, pointing as he described the process.

“Oh. Of course,” Horatio said. He followed Archie’s instructions and opened up the chain, then fiddled with the clasp a little more, smiling slightly as he figured out how all the bits fit together. He put the pendant around his neck, then slid his fingers along the chain until they reached the clasp. He tried to find the lever again, but his fingers couldn't hold it correctly when he couldn't see
it to operate it.

“Here, let me,” Archie said, and took a step forward.

Horatio turned immediately, presenting his back, neck, and the two halves of the chain to Archie without hesitation. The sudden, complete trust almost took Archie’s breath away. This position could put someone entirely at another’s mercy—as Simpson had demonstrated quite thoroughly with his MedicAlert dog tags—and Horatio’s implicit faith in him never stopped astonishing him. His hands trembled slightly as he reached for the two strands of the slender chain. It was a relief that Horatio couldn’t see them: in fact, Horatio would be entirely at a loss as to why this affected him so much. Must be nice. Archie flicked open the lever, interlocked the loop that completed the chain with the lobster clasp, and released the lever again. He gently let go, and the chain landed gracefully on the skin of Horatio’s neck and slithered under his shirt collar. Horatio shivered slightly.

“How does it feel?”

“Strange. But I’ll get used to it,” Horatio said as he turned around to face Archie again. He glanced down at his shirt, looking for the telltale bump of the compass pendant, but it looked normal. He lightly touched the fingers of his right hand to the pendant through the shirt. The compass lay right over Horatio’s heart, exactly as it should. Archie grinned.

“Thank you,” Horatio said again, putting more conviction into those words than most people have in their entire lives.

“You’re welcome,” Archie responded, his voice sounding somewhat hoarse.

They smiled at each other, and at that moment, the rest of the world ceased to exist. How had Archie not noticed those tiny flecks of dark green in Horatio’s eyes before?

A cough came from right beside them. Archie blinked, coming back to himself, and turned. Will was standing there, a faint smile on his face.

“Looks like they close up the markets at 5:30. Shall we walk back to the Indy, make our way over to the restaurant?”

Horatio’s eyes opened wide as he looked about him and took in the vendors closing up shop. “Oh. Er, good thinking, Will. Let’s head off.” He turned his head to look at Archie. “To the North,” he said with a grin as he took Archie’s hand.
“They’re actually going to film on a tall ship?” Will asked as they made their way from the car park to the Air Line terminal.

Archie nodded. “I think it was a requirement for the studio to get the film rights. The battle scenes will still use CGI, but we’ll be shooting on location for a fair bit of it. Should be fun.”

Will tilted his head in agreement. “Send us a postcard.”

Archie glanced at Horatio, then beamed. “Maybe I could do one better; I’ll look into whether we can show guests around the set . . . or ship. Horatio was already planning on coming for a visit, but you could come, too; make a vacation out of it.”

Horatio watched Will’s eyebrow jerk up in surprise and his step falter slightly. Will resumed his normal steady expression and pace instantly, but a glimmer of a smile still hovered on his lips. “Alright. Thanks.”

Horatio grinned. Everything was working exactly as he’d hoped. Archie and Will were getting along well--Will hardly ever talked this much to anyone else--and everything was on schedule. It was 8:45, and the sun was just beginning to drop. By the time they were seated in the cable car, the sunset would be as vibrant as the guidebooks had suggested.

Of course, that was assuming the dark clouds in the distance held off. He glanced over his shoulder to look at them again and frowned. The cable car would be shut down if there were a storm. That would ruin the entire evening.

He shook his head. The forecast had said the storm wouldn’t start until after 9:45; that was plenty of time for them to ride there and back. It would work. It had to.

Horatio turned to face forward again and took in the scene. Will had gone on ahead and was several meters away, investigating a model of a cable car through the window of the Emirates Air Line terminal. He glanced to his right. Archie was standing beside him, looking up. Horatio followed Archie’s gaze, up the sleek, white columns that littered the landscape to the cable cars that zipped along the wires. He focused on one cable car and watched its speedy ascent. The familiar dizziness rushed in as the world started to warp and turn inside out. He blinked and prayed it would go away. It didn’t. He scowled at the ground. He would just have to force his body into submission.

Fingers brushed gently against his. He looked up to find Archie watching him, his eyebrows raised with concern and a question he didn’t need to voice.

Horatio glanced back at the cable car, which was going higher still, then swallowed. His mind was screaming at him to walk away, but it did that with everything. It just screamed a little louder with heights. That shouldn’t dissuade him. What about the feeling of accomplishment that would come
from conquering his fear, from proving to himself that he could persevere, no matter the odds? From doing what everyone else could do.

The cable car reached its zenith. 90 meters in the air. Dangling on only a cable. His heart pounded.

What if he couldn’t do it?

He should insist that everything was entirely fine, shove his fear and anxiety down as hard as he could, imitate the stoicism he should readily exude. Voicing his terror to anyone would be a mortifying admission of failure. So why, after all these years, did withdrawing into the protection of his usual stubborn silence seem so unappealing? His hand drifted up to touch the compass pendant through his shirt.

“I still want to. I just . . . don’t know if I can,” he managed, the admission almost as hard as the height would be.

Archie’s eyes widened, then his expression shifted from concern to an oddly sad smile as he put his arm around Horatio. “I know that type of problem,” he began. “Intimately. How can I help?”

Horatio blinked. How could Archie do something to help, unless he had to power to magic away a fear of heights? He shrugged.

Archie squinted at him, then that slightly sad, crooked smile came back. “You know,” he began, “you can take my hand, put your arm around me, put my arm around you, whatever you need, if it would help. I won't mind; I always like touching you,” he added, the lopsided smile morphing into a full-fledged grin.

Horatio blushed and ducked his head, the flirtation momentarily disrupting his other thoughts.

“And if you want a distraction, I’m happy to yammer on about anything for the entire trip. Really. Whatever you need. You don’t have to do this alone.”

Horatio swallowed, then looked up at Archie and nodded. He could do this.

Archie gave him one last squeeze and an encouraging smile, then let go, his hand trailing along Horatio’s arm in the process.

Horatio’s pulse sped up the instant Archie let go. He took a slow, quiet breath. This was absurd. They weren’t even in the damn thing yet. And he’d already received enough coddling for the day. He shouldn’t need Archie’s arms to anchor him. He should do this without assistance.

He shook his head to focus, then glanced around and found the familiar leather jacket and hair on the move towards the ticket machine. “Let’s join Will,” he said, then set his jaw, squared his shoulders, and marched off, leaving Archie rushing to catch up.

Horatio nodded in acknowledgment to Will as the three of them met up.

“Ready for adventure, gentlemen?” Archie asked with a grin.

Will nodded, his lips twitching with amusement. Horatio felt himself smile despite the rising anxiety. Will enjoyed Archie’s mannerisms.

He started to enter the trip details into the ticket machine.

“Why don’t we do a one-way trip first? Make sure we like it before we pay for full experience,”
Archie suggested.

"Sounds reasonable," Will agreed immediately.

Horatio looked at them, both so eager, in their own ways, to make sure he didn’t overstep his
limits, then rolled his eyes. "If you insist," he said, and bought three one-way tickets, unclear if the
strange warmth spreading through him was embarrassment or pleasure in their concern.

They walked up to the gate, scanned their passes, and started a new queue for the next available
cable car. There was nothing to do but watch as each cable car rose higher and higher, wobbling
slightly in the increasing wind. Horatio swallowed nervously as his stomach started to object to the
plan he had implemented.

Horatio felt an elbow prod his side. He glanced over at Archie--of course it was Archie--who was
staring intently at a woman walking toward them carrying a crowd control barrier post.

"Excuse me," Archie called out to her, "what’s this about?"

"You three are lucky," the woman said. "This is the last cable car to leave for the night."

"Why?" Archie asked.

"We’re closing up early because of the storm," she explained. "It's just a safety precaution."

"Ah. Heights and lightning make for a bad combination?" Archie asked.

The woman nodded. "That, and the wind. The cars swing a bit. But not to worry, we’ll have you
back on solid ground before the rain starts. Our meteorologists monitor these sorts of things."

Horatio’s stomach clenched emphatically.

"Glad to hear it," Archie said, as charming as ever. He gave her a cheerful grin, then surreptitiously
 glanced over to check on Horatio, concern seeping out through his calm façade.

"Enjoy your Air Line experience," the woman said with a smile, then walked back where she had
come from.

"Horatio?" Archie whispered, turning to face him.

Horatio swallowed and kept looking forward. Heights were difficult enough: but wind and
potential lightning? His pulse started to race. But the woman had assured them that the trip would
be safe. It changed nothing. It would be a short, 10 minute ride, during which they could take
pictures and admire the view, and then take the tube back when the Air Line was shut down. They
were committed to it now.

He glanced over at Archie. The concern and affection in Archie’s eyes were almost enough to
break his resolution. But no. He could do this. He wouldn’t let physical weakness stand in his way.
He clenched his jaw more tightly and tried to ignore his pounding heart, his churning stomach, or
the vertigo that crashed over him every time he looked up at the cable cars. He tensed his
shoulders to keep himself from shuddering.

After what seemed both an eternity and a instant, the next cable car showed up. Horatio ignored
his suddenly shaking legs and walked in first, head held high. Archie and Will followed close
behind.
They sat down, and the welcome video began to play, requesting everyone to please stay seated, to admire the view, and to download the app for more detailed descriptions of all the landmarks they would see. After a loud, electronic “ping,” the doors closed and locked.

With a slight wobble, the cable car started to move.

Horatio kept his eyes on the screen and focused on breathing slowly and regularly. He ignored the pressure building in his skull as they rose higher and higher.

The car wobbled again.

Horatio’s breath hitched and his pulse sped up. God, what had he been thinking, this was a terrible idea, he couldn’t --

No. No, this was the right thing to do. Everyone else could handle this, so he could, too. It was only heights. Only 90 metres in the air. In a glass box. Dangling from a cord. He swallowed and tried to force himself to breathe normally.

“This is convenient,” Archie said, snapping him back to the present. “We have the car all to ourselves. Nice and cozy.”

Horatio blinked. What was wrong? Archie sounded tense. His heart sank. Of course. The car was small, and it had just locked, trapping them all inside. He’d completely forgot about Archie’s cleithrophobia. How had he been so thoughtless? He’d failed him utterly! He didn’t deserve the compass Archie had given him. He turned to face Archie immediately.

“Archie, I’m so sorry! I forgot!”

Archie turned his head to face him, his forehead wrinkled in confusion. “What?”

“I didn’t think! We’re in a small box. Archie, I’m sorry. I’ve been so selfish. I didn’t realise--”

Horatio cut himself off as Archie froze, his eyes widening, then darting to Will, before returning back to Horatio. Archie must not want Will to know. Damn it all to hell. Had he just made it worse?

Archie blinked repeatedly, then unfroze as he plastered on a brittle smile. “Ah. Um. No, I’m fine. Thanks, though.” He gave Horatio another ragged smile, then glanced out the window.

Will raised his eyebrows at Horatio as soon as Archie had turned his head. Horatio hesitated, then glanced at Archie, then back to Will. Archie didn’t want to talk about it, so he couldn’t betray his trust. He gave a small shake of his head. Will tipped his head in understanding, then looked out the opposite window as the silence spread.

Horatio frowned. Something didn’t make sense. By rights, Archie should be terrified. And yet, apart from his concern for Horatio, he hadn’t seemed particularly anxious before they got on the cable car. In fact, he had seemed more anxious about that conversation than he had about being locked in. Why?

The car wobbled again, derailing his train of thought.

Horatio swallowed hard, his stomach starting to feel decidedly queasy. He clenched his hands together in his lap and tried to ignore the dizziness that was starting to make its presence known. This was a terrible beginning, and he still hadn’t looked out the window yet.
“The lights are beautiful, Horatio,” Archie said after a moment. “And you were right, the sunset is spectacular. The sky and water look like they’re on fire. Want me to describe it to you?”

Horatio scowled. If Archie could do it, then so could he. He wrenched his eyes away from the screen and risked a glance outside. For one moment, everything looked vibrant and stunning. The white sails of small boats far below them glistened against the fiery backdrop. Then the familiar whooshing noise filled his ears and everything started to warp and spin. His stomach lurched as though he had missed the bottom rung of a ladder and was plummeting down. He gasped and sat ramrod straight, pressing his back against the cable car’s seat, his free hand clenched into a fist at his side.

“Horatio? Shit, I didn’t mean you should look.”

“I’m quite alright,” Horatio managed, staring at the screen again. The only thing more mortifying than his fear of heights was putting other people out by needing them to comfort him.

“I’m glad to hear it,” Archie said, but his tone made it clear he wasn’t fooled for a moment. “Anything we can do?”

Horatio scowled again. “Thank you for your concern, but it’s entirely unnecessary. I’m--” He trailed off as his last meal started to make a break for his mouth, and he was forced to swallow it with his words.

“It’s alright, Horatio. You don’t need to talk.” Archie’s voice was impossibly understanding and Horatio couldn’t decide if he would rather snap at Archie until he stopped, or curl up against him and hold on for dear life. Horatio glowered at the screen. There was no room for having a meltdown or a weak stomach in the evening’s plan. He just had to live with the consequences. He closed his eyes and tried to force his body into submission. But, of course, it didn’t work.

“Do you want quiet or do you want me to distract you?” Archie asked.

Horatio did his best to shrug. Nothing could take his mind off the fact that the world was spinning so quickly he might faint at any second, or make his stomach feel any less like they were on that hellish pirate ship ride he had been foolish enough to go on as a child. And this would probably end the same way: with him sobbing and vomiting publicly, and wishing he had never been born. He was already dangerously close to all three.

Fingers touched his. Archie had taken his hand, but with a loose enough grip that he could pull free if he wished. He should. He should shut everyone out and push all his fear, all his nausea, all his dizziness, as far down as he could and focus on suffering in silence. It was the responsible thing to do. He shouldn’t need support for something as simple as this!

The car wobbled and swayed.

He grabbed Archie’s hand tightly. Archie stroked his hand with his thumb in response.

“The wind’s picking up,” Will said quietly.

The storm was coming. It was going to be just like their module’s trip to Portsmouth, which he spent with his head dangled over the side of the ship or over a bucket. He couldn’t do this. He had been a fool to ever think he could. His pulse started to race and the world swam. The car wobbled again. A whimper broke free from his lips before he cut it off with a grimace. That pitiful display had been worse than motion sickness or heights ever could be.

“I know, love,” Archie whispered. “But we’re about to head down. We’ll be back on solid land.
soon. Just a little longer now.”

Archie had called him “love”? Oh, damn it all to hell, he had become so pathetic that Archie had to console him as he would a frightened child. He should try harder to be brave. Strong. Unless--what if Archie meant it? Did Archie really love him? Archie had given him the compass and called him his truth north. But geodetic north should be consistent. Dependable. Not motion sick or afraid of heights. But God, he wanted to hear those words again.

The car shook vigorously, then jerked to a sudden stop.

Horatio’s eyes flew open and every muscle in his body locked in terror. Archie and Will were both staring at each other, Will with a slight frown and Archie with his eyes wide in horror.

They both turned to look at him and tried to school their expressions into something vaguely comforting.

It didn’t work.

“I’m sure it will start moving again in a moment,” Will assured him after several seconds.

“Of course,” Archie responded, with a shaky smile. “Just a slight delay.”

Horatio steeled himself, then glanced out the window, ignoring Archie’s concerned and irritated “Horatio!” as he craned his neck. He fought down the wave of dizziness and nausea as he checked to see how far the shutdown extended. All the cars were motionless. He sank back into his seat, closed his eyes, and waited for the world to stay still.

“All the cars have stopped moving.”

“Yes, which we could have told you if you had asked,” Archie groused.

Just then, the narrated tour cut out and a new voice came across the speakers. “We seem to be experiencing technical difficulties. We apologise for the delay. Please stay in your seats as we sort out the problem. We hope to resolve the issue soon. Thank you for your patience.”

They had broken down. They were stuck. They were stuck 90m in the air and there was no way down. And the car was swaying harder now. And they were the highest up he’d been in his life. This couldn’t be happening. It must be a nightmare. He pinched himself to wake up, but nothing changed. His head was pounding, the world was spinning, he was starting to shake, and oh God, why wouldn’t his stomach stop roiling? He couldn’t do this. He was a failure, an embarrassment, a--

“Horatio? You’re hardly breathing. Here, can we try something? Can I put my arm around you while we wait? You can rest your head against my shoulder.”

God, yes, he wanted Archie’s arms around him, to comfort him, to anchor him against the whirling of his mind. But he couldn’t. It wasn’t right. He shook his head, and the world started to cartwheel. He pressed his lips tightly to keep them shut, desperately worried about what embarrassing words or fluids might come out if he opened them.

“All right. But the offer stands,” Archie said immediately. But his cheerfulness rang false; he sounded sad. Was Archie worried? Would it help him? Perhaps it wouldn’t be such a failing to take his offer if it would comfort Archie.

He opened his mouth to accept, then had to stop to swallow back bile. “Can’t,” he gritted out.
“Might be sick on your shirt.”

“My shirt can take it,” Archie said, and squeezed his hand.

“I brought sick bags,” Will volunteered.

“Will, you are a God among men. Hand it here?”

Horatio heard the rustle of paper.

“Alright, Horatio. I have the sick bag for whenever you may need it, and my shoulder is just a few inches to your right, if you want to tip over onto it.”

Horatio stopped fighting it. He was going to lose consciousness if he didn’t rest his head on something, and that would be the only way to make this hellish situation worse. He listed over to the side and felt Archie’s left arm wrap around his shoulder.

“Want Will to scoot closer? I’m sure he’d want in on the cuddle pile, too. I can’t have you all to myself. Will, get your arse over here.”

A moment later, a second, sturdy arm was resting on his shoulder.

“You’re doing well, Horatio,” Will rumbled quietly.

This was the worst experience of his life. He pressed his eyes tightly shut and tried to focus on the comforting sensation of the two people he loved most in the world supporting him. It helped slightly reduce the vertigo, but that just made his mind race faster. Why did this always happen to him? Was it too much to ask that just once, his ridiculously frail body wouldn’t let him down? Why did Archie and Will put up with him? The familiar prickling sensation started in his eyes. He pressed them more tightly shut to trap the tears before they could fall. He refused to humiliate himself more.

The gentle press of lips against the crown of his head. Archie. He tried to block out the rest of the world, apart from Archie’s fingers carding through his curls and Will’s firm hand on his shoulder.

“I don’t like the look of those clouds,” Will said after a moment, bringing Horatio’s mind back to the present.

“I know,” Archie muttered. “And this waiting is fucking absurd. Is that a two-way intercom? Can we reach them to ask what the bloody hell is taking them so long?”

Archie sighed. Will must have shaken his head.

“Bugger. Alright, Will, can you call the ticket counter? See if they can give us an estimate on when we’ll be getting out of here?”

“Of course.”

Will let go of his hand to poke at his phone.

“You’re doing well, Horatio,” Archie murmured, his hands still hypnotically carding through his hair. “Just a little longer now, love.”

Horatio swallowed. This wasn’t fair to Archie.

“You shouldn’t -- have -- to do this,” Horatio managed.
“It’s not a matter of obligation, Horatio. I want to help. And you’ve done the same for me and more besides,” Archie whispered.

“How are you so calm?”

Archie’s fingers paused briefly, then continued their gentle ministrations. “I don’t mind heights. And if I have to be trapped somewhere, at least it’s with you. And this isn’t exactly my trigger.”

Trigger? Horatio could hardly think beyond the whirling in his head and his stomach that had moved on to somersaults. “Don’t understand,” he whispered.

“I know.” Archie paused, then kissed the top of his head again. “I’ll explain soon.” He paused. “Next week. I promise. But don’t worry about it now. We’re going to get back safely.”

Horatio frowned. What was there to explain? If only the world would stop turning inside out, then perhaps he could--

“Ah, hello? My name is Will Bush, and I’m calling from one of the stuck cable cars? I was hoping you could give us an estimate on when we’ll start moving again.”

Horatio shuddered, then instantly regretted it.

“Right. Is there any way to speed that up?”

Oh God, they were going to be stuck here forever. They were never going to leave. He couldn’t do this.

“Breathe, Horatio. It’s alright,” Archie murmured, and started stroking his hand.

“Yes. And what are the chances of that happening, exactly?”

What? That was not good. That was very decidedly not good.

“Yes, I do actually understand how lightning works. What’s your suggestion?”

Oh. No, that was worse. They were going to be stranded up here and then get struck by lightning.

“And when would the helicopters arrive?”

Horatio’s breath caught in his throat as he imagined climbing onto the roof of the cable car and being raised up into a helicopter hovering above them. He imagined the view below and the oxygen disappeared from the room. Archie started rubbing his back.

“Fuck that. There has to be something else,” Archie whispered angrily to Will.

“That could be tricky,” Will said. “Anything else?”

After a pause, Will continued again. “Actually, I think that sounds worse.”

“What sounds worse, Will?” Horatio croaked and opened his eyes. “Whatever it is, I can handle it.” And what could possibly be worse?

Will shook his head. Why wouldn’t Will tell him? Horatio gave him the look--the one, beseeching expression that Will never said no to.

Will frowned, hesitated, then covered the phone’s microphone with one hand. “Lowering us by
rope into a boat waiting below,” he whispered.

Horatio’s heart stopped. Dangling from a rope 90m up? What if it broke? It would sway and take forever and he couldn't do it and oh God why was the world tilting?

“Thanks for that, Will. Horatio, love, lean forward for me and put your head between your knees. That's it. Just focus on breathing. Slowly, now. That’s right. You’ve got it.”

Eventually, the tilting stopped, leaving just the expected warping, distortion, dizziness, and ever increasing queasiness.

“What about that pylon?” Archie asked. “It looks like it has stairs in it.”

Horatio could practically hear Will’s stare of disapproval. “Our car is stopped just outside a sort of staircase built into a support pillar. Could we take that down?”

A long pause.

“Yes. Yes, of course, sir. Reckless and foolhardy. Right. I understand. We’ll wait. Thank you, sir.” He hung up.

“Well?” Archie asked, practically vibrating with barely restrained impatience.

“We’re to stay here until either they get the system running again or the rescue teams show up to help us into either a helicopter or a boat. Under no circumstances are we to take the staircase. But we may be here for awhile. We’re a low priority. The other cars are full of octogenarians from a nearby care home, and they need to get back on the ground before the strain gets to be too much for them.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake. How long until the storm hits?”

“10 minutes, give or take,” Will answered.

Horatio swallowed. He wasn't sure he could survive another 5 minutes. 10 might actually drive him mad. “Will the swinging intensify?”

Horatio opened his eyes in time to see Will frown. “Yes. Unfortunately.”

Horatio wanted to curl up in a ball and die so this would all be over, but that wasn't an option. He tried to push through his weak stomach and vertigo, and to come up with a brilliant plan to save the day, but his mind refused to cooperate. It was all he could do to avoid being sick all over his shoes.

“What about the stairs?” he gritted out.

“The stairs we were expressly forbidden from using?”

“No, the other ones,” Archie muttered.

Horatio could hear Will’s raised disapproving eyebrow. “The staircase is built into the pillar that holds up the cable. It’s designed for technicians to perform maintenance work on the cables. It’s not an emergency exit. And it doesn’t have harnesses or restraints. Nothing to stop us from tumbling to our deaths.”

“But there’s also no dangling over impossible drops,” Horatio said. He was starting to sweat. Damn it. He couldn’t hold it in much longer.
“No, just risking falling down them.”

“Alright,” Archie interrupted, “The way I see it, we can stay here for who knows how long and do a very good impression of a hammock in a hurricane and possibly catch fire and then be dangled to safety by experts, or we can try our hand at walking, which should involve less lightning and swaying, but more direct movement and potential death by falling. Neither of these are good options, but I’m leaning toward walking. At least we’d be doing something, Horatio?”

The wind chose that moment to pick up again, and the cable car wobbled more dramatically. Horatio’s stomach lurched, and he flailed for the bag. Archie placed it open in his hands and rubbed his back through the worst of the retching.

When he had finished, the bag disappeared. Archie must have closed it up and put it somewhere. He wiped his mouth.

“Walking. Anything but this,” Horatio managed. Even having to face the prospect of falling to his death was better than this infernal swaying. “How do we unlock the doors? Is there some sort of emergency override?”

Archie glanced over toward the entrance. “There’s a red lever that looks promising. Will? What do you think?”

“I think this is a terrible idea. But that looks like the right lever.”

_Oh thank God. At last, a way out._

“Then what are we waiting for?” Horatio pushed himself to a standing position, and Will and Archie rose with him, hovering on either side. The world swam, and they reached out to steady him, then draped his arms over their shoulders until they were acting as crutches.

“I don’t need help,” Horatio grumbled. “I can manage.”

In fact, his legs were shaking so hard, he might fall without their hands supporting him. But he had already relied on them more than enough.

“Humour me,” Archie said immediately. “Horatio, are you sure about this? Standing is a vital part of this plan.”

“I’m positive.” Otherwise, in another 5 minutes, he’d be in a fetal position on the floor. They had to leave, and immediately.

“Will? Are you coming?”

“Yes, of course.”

“But I thought you said it was a terrible idea.”

“It is. But I go where Horatio goes.”

Archie nodded. “Good man. Alright, everyone. One foot in front of the other. The door is the first goal.”

Each step made the car swing just a little more. Even four paces takes an eternity when the ground sways vigorously with each movement. Finally, they reached the red lever. Everyone looked at Horatio.
“All together?” Archie asked.

Horatio briefly moved his arm from around Will’s shoulders and put his hand next to Archie’s on the lever. He turned and looked at Will, who rolled his eyes slightly, then put a hand on the lever as well.


They pulled on the lever. A loud alarm followed by the rush of wind greeted their ears.

They stood frozen for a moment as the wind whipped by.

“Well, that’s dramatic,” Archie yelled to be heard over the roar of the wind.

“The shelter surrounding the staircase should cut the wind,” Will called out.

“Alright, then,” Archie shouted. “Perfectly safe. On the count of three?”

Will nodded. Horatio swallowed and tried to keep himself from looking down into the chasm between the car and the platform. The half a meter long chasm. Which was 90m deep. That they would have to jump over. Oh God. What had he been thinking?

“1, 2, 3, jump,” Archie called out. They moved as one and made it safely to the other side.

The wind was cold and biting and brutal up this high, without the walls of the cable car to protect them. But at least it was fresh air, and it wasn't shaking . . . much. Some of the nausea from the motion sickness started to fade. Now, if he could just overcome the vertigo, they might make it out of this alive.

They reached the top of the staircase. Horatio instinctively glanced at the next step, and saw the world below directly at his feet. The world went fuzzy. Hands suddenly gripped his sides, holding him in place.

“Horatio, I need you to not look down. We’ve got you, and we’re not going to let you fall. Right, Will?”

“Right.”

“So, let’s do this, one step at a time. Ready, Captain?”

Archie was only trying to cheer him up, and it was utterly absurd, but something about hearing himself called “Captain” cut through some of the panic. He nodded.

“All right, right foot first. Everyone ready? One foot in front of the other. Here we go! And step!”

The took the first step.

“Step!”

They moved on to the next.

“Step!”

“Good! We’ve got this! All together now! Step!”

After about 10 steps, they reached the first landing, but before they could celebrate, the wind
picked up. It whipped the brochure from the maritime museum out of Will’s pocket, and they all watched as it blew out of the stairwell and down to the ground below.

Horatio had been valiantly not looking down, but as the program fell, he couldn't stop himself from watching its rapid descent. It was going down, and down, and down, and oh God, his legs had turned to jelly, he was going to fall, he was going to take Will and Archie with him--

“Horatio. Tell me about the Battle of Trafalgar.” Archie’s voice sliced through his mental haze, and he looked up and tried to ground himself in Archie’s eyes.

“Now?” Archie had picked a hell of a time to become interested in naval strategies.

“Yep. Seems as good a time as any.”

“But I already told you about Trafalgar.”

“Tell me again. How many vessels were involved on each side?”

“Ships of the line? 27 for the British and 33 for the French.”

“Can you name them?”

“Why do you want to know their names?”

“I’m curious what absurd names each side comes up with. And I like any excuse to hear you say things in French.”

Horatio scowled. “Archie, you’re trying to distract me.”

“Well observed. Come on, Horatio. A ship for every step. It’ll help us pass the time away and it’ll teach me more about the age of sail.”

“And it’s good preparation for our campaign,” Will offered.

Well, if it would help them, too. . . . “Should I list them in order?”

“Good idea, Horatio,” Will said instantly. “Start with the British.”

“Very well. The British had the Africa, the Victory, the Temeraire, the Neptune, the Leviathan, the Conqueror, the Britannia, the Agamemnon, the Ajax--”

They stepped in time to his recitation. After the first ten or so, he hardly thought about the height, hypnotised by the regularity of the movement and of the familiar words which had been ingrained into his memory since he was eleven.

“And the Entreprenante, if we’re including cutters,” he concluded with a smile. Surely Archie was impressed with his ability to recite all those vessels while walking down a death trap. . . . Oh, God, he was walking down a staircase exposed to the elements, breeze whipping through his thin shirt, and nothing to stop his fall, and they hadn't even reached the halfway point, he wasn't going to make it, he--

“Impressive! What about the French ships?”

He turned his head to face Archie. Archie met his gaze steadily and with a smile, albeit one that seemed a little ragged around the edges. This couldn’t be easy for Archie either. And traditionally, Archie did find it soothing when he listed ships. And if Archie needed it, then of course he would
do it.

“Alright, Archie. The Franco-Spanish fleet included Neptuno, Scipion, Rayo, Formidable, Duguay Trouin--”

He fell into the comforting rhythm much more quickly this time around, as his body had already memoriised the motion and the sensation of three people moving as one.

“-- And Argus,” he finished after what seemed like no time at all. They all stopped moving to catch their breath.

“I love it when you speak French to me,” Archie said, trying for levity, but sounding a bit too tense and winded to reach the mark. “Which ones of them survived?”

“Franco-Spanish? Or British?”

“Both,” Will answered with a smile, “and differentiate between those that were captured and destroyed.” But his smile, too, looked pinched. It was more stairs than he usually preferred to climb. Perhaps his prosthesis was irritating him? Well, to help Archie and Will, he would gladly list ships until the day he died.

“Alright. Ready?”

At nods from the others, he began, and they started to move again. “First, French ships captured by the British: we have the Bucentaure, Algeciras, Swiftsure, Intrepide, Aigle, Berwick, Achille, Redoutable, and Fougueux. Next, Spanish fleet captured by the British: Santissima Trinidad, Santa Anna, Argonauta, Bahama, San Augustino, San Ildefonso, San Juan de Nepomuceno, and Monarca.”

“Oh, is that all?” Archie teased.

“Not quite. Ships destroyed: Achille exploded, Redoutable sank, San Augustino and Intrepide caught fire, the British scuttled Santissima Trinidad and Argonauta, and the Fougueux, Aigle, Monarca, and Berwick were destroyed by a storm after the battle.”

“What do you think, Will?” Archie said, breathily heavily as they rested briefly. “Full points?”

“I’d say so,” Will responded, shifting positions. “What about the Battle of the Nile?”

Horatio shook his head, resolutely not looking down. “Archie already heard that one.”

Will raised an eyebrow.

Archie chuckled. “I was asleep for most of it. Don’t mind a redo. Do you need to make it more of a challenge? Recite them in reverse alphabetical order?”

Horatio managed a smile. “I think merely listing them should be sufficient.”

“Then shall we?” Archie asked, nodding ahead, one arm still draped around Horatio’s back, and the other clutching the railing.

Will shifted and got into his earlier position. “We shall. Horatio?”

Horatio nodded, and they started moving again. “The Battle of the Nile: The British navy had 15 vessels: the Goliath, the Zealous--”
“--and Magicienne,” Horatio finished.

“And why should we care about the Battle of Grand Port?” Archie asked, panting for breath.

“Biggest defeat of the British navy in the Napoleonic War,” Will said.

Archie chuckled. “Probably best you saved it until the end.”

“Why?” Horatio asked, frowning.

“Because it might have seemed a bit ominous to recite ships involved in a horrible defeat as we’re trying to avoid defeat ourselves?” Archie responded with a grin. “Much wiser to save it for the last few steps.” He paused. “Assuming I haven’t jinxed it.”

Will shook his head with a faint smile. “Doesn’t work like that, Archie.”

“Of course it does. Play logic.”

Will chuckled quietly and dipped his head. “If you insist.”

“Your concession is noted,” Archie said, with a crooked smile. He released his hold on the railing to push his fringe out of his eyes, then grabbed on again. “Alright, let’s finish this. We’re almost there. Only about 17 steps left. Horatio, any last bits of ship trivia?”

Horatio opened his mouth to volunteer data about the Battle of Cape Ortegal, when he caught a glimpse of the base of the pillar. “There’s no land here.” They were on a tiny artificial island, just big enough for a dock and the base of the pylon.

“No. There’s not,” Will said drily.

“We may have to catch that small boat they had talked about after all. Will, do you want me to call the desk once we reach the bottom? It was my idea to disregard their advice and I don’t mind taking the heat for it.”

Will shook his head. “I went along with it, so I bear some of the blame as well.”

“Can we decide this at the bottom of the stairs?” Horatio asked. His legs were turning into rubber and weren’t going to support his own weight much longer.

“Of course. Here we go; once more unto the breach!”

They went slowly, step by step, until they finally reached solid ground again. Will patted him on the back with a nod and a smile, then walked a few steps away to make the phone call.

“You made it,” Archie said, turning to face him with a ragged smile. “How are you feeling?”

Horatio opened his mouth to respond, but naturally, his legs chose that moment to buckle. Archie helped guide him to a sitting position at the base of the stairs. Archie perched himself on the lowest step, right behind him, and leaned forward to wrap his arms around him tightly, occasionally rubbing his arms to try to keep him warm.

At some point, it had started pouring and they were quickly becoming drenched, but it hardly mattered. He was on solid ground once more, and they were safe. Certainly, a boat ride was between him and their destination, but even a small boat during a storm couldn’t be as unpleasant as a cable car during a storm. Could it?
A moment later, Will returned. “A boat should be passing by in 10 minutes or so. They’ll pick us up.”

Horatio nodded, then shivered. He looked down at his shirt, which was soaked through. Perhaps he should have brought an umbrella or a coat. A moment later, his shoulders and back were marginally warmer. He glanced over. Archie was draping his own jacket over his shoulders.

“Archie, don’t be r-r-idiculous. I’m q-quite alright.” Damn it, now his teeth were chattering.

Archie raised an eyebrow, an expression which was eerily echoed by Will. “Horatio? Take the damn coat. And Will? Plenty of room on the step. Come and join. We’ll need your body heat.”

Will did. With Will’s left leg pressed against Horatio’s right side, and Archie’s jacket, torso, and arms wrapped around the rest of him, he was warming up already.

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Almost there, almost there, almost there, don’t be sick, just hold on, three more minutes, then the boat will be docked, almost th--“Archie? What’s that?”

Archie squinted. “Looks like the employees have formed a welcoming party. Probably want to make sure we’re not going to sue.”

Oh no. An entire group of people, watching him getting off the boat. What if he tripped? What if he still looked as green as he felt? What if they wanted to talk? His stomach lurched again at the thought of all that attention. It was bad enough that there were three other passengers on the boat, but they all looked in such rough shape that they weren’t going to pay him any attention. But those people? Out expressly to see them? Oh God, he couldn’t do it. What if he was sick in front of everyone? Or had to make a dash for the loo? This was a disaster. He had to look like everything was fine. And as much as it felt like cutting off life support, that meant letting go of Archie and Will.

He removed his arm from around Archie’s shoulder, and Archie’s head whipped around to check on him immediately. He glanced between Horatio and the people waiting at the dock, frowning, then his eyes widened, and he glanced over at Will and nodded.

“Why don’t I go first? Then they can pepper me with questions and you two can go find somewhere to sit down out of sight until it’s all over.”

Horatio frowned. This had been his responsibility; he had encouraged them all to go so he should be the one to clean up the mess. It was the only way to fix this disaster. “Don't be ridiculous. I can handle it.”

Archie huffed exasperatedly. “Horatio, I know you can. That doesn't mean you have to. Let me do this for you.”

Horatio opened his mouth to disagree, then paused. Hadn't he said something remarkably similar to Archie after his panic attack? He wouldn't want to be a hypocrite, or have Archie think that he should feel obligated to handle everything on his own. And Archie liked people and was charming and could talk to the crowd without being in danger of making a fool of himself or being sick in front of them.

He took a deep breath. “Alright.”
Archie beamed, then gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder. As he moved, Horatio glanced over to see how Will was reacting. Will was smiling at Archie: grinning, in fact. Knowing that Will was happy made him feel marginally less guilty about accepting help.

Then the boat lurched again and he stopped thinking entirely.
“No, really, we don’t need vouchers for another ride,” Archie insisted for the fifth time. “Once was quite enough, and I speak for the entire group on that. And speaking of my group, I’m going to go rejoin them.”

He turned and walked away from the customer service representatives as quickly as possible in the direction he had seen Will lead Horatio—probably to the toilets, given how green Horatio had looked. That must have been, what, ten minutes ago? He started walking more quickly, his mind churning out a dizzying reel of worst-case scenarios.

He turned the corner and found Will sitting on a bench just outside the toilets, his forehead slightly wrinkled in what to most people would look like mild perturbation, but which for Will, judging from the last hour, was intense concern. At the sound of Archie’s footsteps, his head jerked up.

Archie glanced at the toilets and then back at Will. “How is he?”

Will shrugged, but the gesture conveyed helplessness rather than indifference. “Shaken. Sick. But I think the worst is over.”

Archie plopped on the bench next to Will. “Surely there can’t be much left in that lanky frame to vomit up.”

Will huffed out a laugh. “You’d be surprised.”

Ah. Speaking of which—“So. Sick bags?”

Will shrugged again. “Generally a good idea if Horatio and travel are involved.”

Archie nodded and made a mental note to buy some at the earliest possible opportunity. “So I see. What else should I have in a Horatio care kit?”

“I’ll send you the list,” Will said with a wry smile.

Archie managed a crooked grin. “I’ll give you my email. What’s top of the list?”

“Paracetamol, sick bags, snacks, and plasters.”

“Ah, alright. Got three of the four, then.” Not bad for only a month.

Will cracked a faint smile, then went back to staring at his hands.

Will actually looked a bit shaken. Had Will the unflappable actually been flapped? “Is it always this bad?”

Will sighed and shook his head. “No. No, this was new.”
Archie winced. Shit. He’d fucked something else up and hurt Horatio yet again. He took a deep breath and braced himself. “What should I have done differently?”

“What?”

He forced the words through his suddenly tight throat. “Did I make it worse?”

Will looked up at him, eyebrow quirked up slightly with surprise. “No. It was the combination of heights and motion sickness, I think. Not you at all.”

Archie exhaled slowly as all the adrenaline seeped out of him. “Oh. Good.”

Will frowned and turned to face him more directly. “You helped. He let you. That’s . . . unusual for him.” He frowned again and shook his head. “I’m glad you were here,” he said at last, turning to look straight ahead again.

That was strange. Will normally maintained eye contact. Maybe he just disliked discussing emotions. Or was still worried about Horatio.

Archie put a hand on Will’s shoulder. “I’m glad you were there, too. We make a good team.”

Will met his eyes again, his smile returning, and dipped his head in agreement.

They lapsed into silence as Archie’s mind replayed an endless loop of Horatio’s pained whimper. Horatio’s shaking hands. Horatio starting to faint when the brochure fell and coming heart-stoppingly close to toppling down the stairs. He shuddered forcefully enough that Will turned to look at him, eyebrows raised.

Archie shook his head. “Just thinking. What do we do now? Go home? Convince Horatio to take a nap? Watch the telly, play a game, read, give him a chance to recover?”

Will hesitated.

Oh no. “What?”

Will shrugged. “He may insist on not going home immediately.”

Archie rolled his eyes. “That's ridiculous. He’s just been through hell. He should give himself a break. What is it? Some sort of macho need to reassert control over the situation? Prove he’s not helpless?”

Will nodded.

Archie’s conscience gave him an emphatic kick in the gut. “Alright, fair point. How do you stop him from running himself into the ground?”

Will gave him a tilted smile. “He’ll stop if you need to stop.”

“But not before?”

Will shook his head.

Archie leaned back and let his head fall back against the wall with a faint thud. “Terrific. So, should we jointly suggest going back to his flat to change? Getting out of these wet clothes has to help everyone, right?”
“That sounds as good a plan as any.”

Archie winced slightly. “Better than my plan of walking down 90m worth of stairs?”

Will huffed out a quiet laugh and shook his head. “I see why you did it. It was daft and dangerous, but probably a wise move.” He paused. “Like most of Horatio’s plans,” he concluded with a wry smile.

Archie grinned. “I’d love to hear those stories sometime.”

Will nodded. “If you’ll fill me in on the last month. Seems I’ve missed a fair bit.” He paused, frowning slightly as he struggled to find the words. “I’m . . . glad you two have found each other. Horatio . . . cares for you, Archie. Rather a lot.” He turned his head to give him a heartfelt smile, then looked at his hands again.

“And I feel the same for him,” Archie responded instantly. He opened his mouth to wax rhapsodic about how much he cared for Horatio, how happy Horatio made him, how he would dedicate himself to making Horatio happy, but something in Will’s expression stopped him. Did Will not approve? No, that wasn’t it. Will had meant what he’d said. So why was he--?

Will’s smile from Horatio’s photo floated through his mind. Apparently he hadn’t misread it after all.

“And I’m glad you have each other, too,” Archie added.

Will raised his eyebrows and opened his mouth. He looked like he was about to say something, then closed his mouth again, then settled for looking vaguely uncomfortable and confused.

“It's obvious how much he cares for you,” Archie explained quietly. “And you for him.”

Will shifted awkwardly. “I’m not -- that is -- you don’t -- we’re-- he doesn’t--” Will glanced over at Archie, then sighed and shook his head. “He chose you,” he said simply, with a small shrug.

Archie’s conscience gave him another sharp kick. “Will, I--”

Will shook his head again with a slight smile. “It’s fine. He’s happy. That's what matters.”

Archie frowned. Shit. He hadn’t meant to force Will’s confidence or to rub his face in it; he’d just wanted Will to know how deeply Horatio cared for him, too. How could he fix this? “He chose both of us. Just manifests differently,” he blurted out. “And . . . well, honestly, the more people who love Horatio, the better. He deserves it.”

Will’s expression slowly changed into the fond, sunny smile from the photo. “He does. He really does.”

Archie smiled back, then belatedly realised his hand was still resting on Will’s shoulder. He gave Will’s shoulder a supportive squeeze and then put his hand back in his lap and interlaced his fingers. His hand felt slightly cold without the contact.

The sound of slightly unsteady footsteps echoed through the corridor. Will and Archie looked up in unison to see Horatio walking out of the toilets. He was still far too pale and tinged with green, but at least he was walking on his own and some of the fire was back in his eyes.

“Welcome back,” Archie said as he jumped off the bench and jogged over to Horatio’s side to give him a gentle hug. If he could just hold Horatio like this forever, he might be able to reassure
himself that Horatio was safe. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. Sorry to keep you waiting.” Horatio blushed slightly and ducked his head. Archie tried not to sigh in relief at seeing some colour in Horatio’s face again.

“It’s fine,” Archie reassured him. “Nothing else on the agenda. Shall we go home? Change out of our wet clothes? We’ve all had a long day.”

Horatio hesitated. “Of course, if that’s what you want.”

Archie raised an eyebrow. “What do you want?”

Horatio pressed his lips together. “It might be nice to walk about for a bit before we go back to the Indy,” he said, as though each word were pulled out of him.

Archie nodded. “Get some fresh air? Not being in a moving vehicle? We could do that. Will?”

“Alright,” Will answered immediately. “Where to?”

Horatio tilted his head as he contemplated their options. “How about Hannah’s bar?”

Archie stared at him in disbelief. “Horatio, it has lots of people, greasy food, and loud noises. And I think tonight is karaoke night.”

Horatio shrugged. “At least it’s solidly on the ground.”

“That is a point in its favour,” Archie agreed. “Will?”

“I’ll go wherever Horatio wants,” Will said.

Archie shrugged. “And I suppose I could do with a pint.”

Horatio looked at him intently, a faint frown spreading over his face. “Archie, are you sure having a pint is wise? It’s been a rather stressful day, and--”

Archie rolled his eyes. “It’s just a pint, Horatio. I’m hardly about to start seizing.”

Will raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, I have epilepsy,” Archie explained. “And I feel fine, Horatio. It’s not going to be a problem.”

Horatio opened his mouth to disagree, then glanced at Will and shrugged. “If that’s what you want.”

“It is. Alright, everyone! To Hannah’s bar.”

Horatio grinned for the first time in over an hour. Granted, it paled in comparison to his normal smiles, but that was to be expected.

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An hour later, Archie was nursing a pint and Will was on his second. Horatio had decided to stick to water. He had finally lost the greenish tinge and his smiles had been reaching his eyes for the last 45 minutes. Even Will was grinning.

Apart from having to subject his ears to some truly abysmal karaoke attempts, this was an excellent
way to round off the evening. Archie beamed, feeling the buzz from the pint mixed with the adrenaline from earlier thrum through his veins.

“Are you serious?” he asked, laughing. “Horatio, how on Earth did you manage that?”

“It’s not as though I did it on purpose,” Horatio said, smiling and rolling his eyes. “It just . . . happened.”

“That’s not possible,” Archie insisted. “I mean, everyone has at least one story of standing outside in only a towel, freezing their bollocks off during a fire drill. But four times in one term? Anyone would think you like running around starkers.”

Will snorted. “Once, he forgot his towel. It was snowing.”

Archie dissolved into giggles. “I’m dating a nudist.”

“WILL?!!” Horatio groaned.

“Just doin’ my part,” Will said with a faux-innocent expression.

“How did you forget your towel?” Archie gasped.

Horatio blushed. “I was outlining the paper I needed to write for Introduction to Military History in my head while I showered. When the alarm went off, I was so distracted, I just . . . charged out of the shower.”

Archie put his head down on the table, resting on his forearms, and howled with laughter, his shoulders shaking. When he lifted his head up again a minute later, tears were streaming down his face. “Horatio, you are a wonder. Never ever change,” he said, draping his arm over Horatio’s shoulder and pressing a kiss to his temple.

Horatio blushed and pressed his lips together, but a smile danced at the corner of his mouth. “I don’t see why you’re telling him embarrassing stories about me,” he said to Will. “Surely I’ve done something impressive over the last two years.”

The conversation from earlier that day crashed into Archie’s mind. Horatio thought he was an embarrassing, helpless failure. The cable car fiasco had probably made that even worse. What could he do to fix this? He racked his brains, then came up with the perfect solution.

He picked up his pint. He didn’t need his pride for the moment. Not if this could help Horatio.

“I have one. Will, have you heard the story of how we met?”

“Not really,” Will responded with a slight frown.

Archie glanced over at Horatio, who was suddenly staring down at his water and turning slightly pink. “Why, Horatio, were you protecting my honour?”

Will raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

Archie took a sip to fortify himself, then placed his pint back on the paper coaster. Here we go. “As I mentioned earlier, I have epilepsy. And I had the misfortune of having a seizure in the library within 45 minutes of making the acquaintance of a rather attractive library intern,” he said, giving Horatio’s shoulder a squeeze. “He proved himself quite the gentleman: knew exactly what to do. Stayed with me, insisted on driving me home, practically carried me--bridal style, I might add--up
two flights of stairs to my flat. Bought me dinner, too. It was all very romantic; apart from the fact
that I felt like shit and was unconscious for most of the time.”

“I’m impressed, Horatio,” Will said with a twinkle in his eye that belied his otherwise serious
expression. “That was an act of gallantry worthy of Algernon Worthington himself.”

Horatio blushed and ducked his head. “All right, all right. That’s enough,” he said while trying not
to smile. “Archie clearly embellished the story and made me sound far too heroic. I only did what
anyone else would have done.”

Archie laughed. “Don’t believe him, Will. Horatio, you were truly dashing; swept me off my feet
and everything!”

“Because you couldn’t walk!” Horatio said, gesturing towards Archie while getting increasingly
flustered.

Will smirked with one eyebrow raised.

“So you see, Will, it was destiny. I didn’t stand a chance after that meet-cute.” Archie looked over
at Horatio, grinned, then sighed dramatically and batted his eyes. “My hero,” he said, then mock-
swooned over into Horatio’s arms, narrowly avoiding knocking Horatio’s glass of water out of his
hand.

Will had propped his elbow on the table and was resting his head with his hand cupped over his
mouth to hide the fact he was laughing.

“Very well, you’ve made your point, Archie,” Horatio said with a smile as he gently guided Archie
back up into a sitting position, then draped an arm around him. Archie grinned so hard his jaw
started to ache.

“Last call for karaoke!” the announcer called out.

Archie paused as an entirely absurd idea came to him. He sat up straight and glanced at Horatio,
who looked at him quizzically. Then he looked at the stage right in front of them. He grinned.
Time to put on a show.

“One moment, gentlemen,” he said. He gave Horatio a quick peck on the lips, then bounded over
to the DJ.

It was the work of a moment to get everything ready. Before he had time to second-guess himself,
he was on stage, the microphone in his hands.

The familiar vamp of the opening started to play. Will must have recognized it, because his
shoulders started shaking with silent laughter immediately. Horatio looked from one to the other of
them, eyebrows raised.

“This song is for my special someone. He knows who he is,” Archie said into the mic with his best
announcer voice. He winked at Horatio, then started to sing:

Where have all the good men gone
And where are all the Gods?”

“Are you sure I can't buy you three another round?” Hannah asked.
“None for me, thanks. Already had one more than my usual limit,” Archie said as he stood up, wobbling slightly. The world wobbled with him.

Horatio rolled his eyes. “I should get them both home, I think,” he said as he wrapped an arm around Archie. Archie echoed the gesture, almost bopping Horatio in the face in the process.

Hannah laughed. “Probably wise. Alright, then, you three. Pleasure to meet you, Will! Horatio, see you soon. And you,” she said, pointing at Archie, “a free pint any time you want to sing. That, my friend, was astonishing.”

Archie beamed and did a low bow. Or tried to. Gravity had other plans. Horatio pulled him back upright.

“That's because he’s goin’ ta be a famous actor,” Will slurred as he staggered to his feet.

Archie grinned more broadly and slung his other arm around Will’s shoulders. “I aim to please,” he said.

Will grinned back, his sunny smile shining in full force.

Horatio looked from one to the other of them, then rolled his eyes as he fought a losing battle with a fond smile. “Alright, you two, let’s get you to bed.”

“An excellent idea, my love! Hannah, adieu! My friends, let us away! To the Indy,” Archie announced, pointing dramatically in the general direction of the entrance, and Horatio dragged them towards it.

“That was amazin’. Horatio, you should’ve seen the look on your face,” Will laughed as they left the bar and walked out into the night.

Horatio blushed and rolled his eyes but the grouchy effect was ruined by the smile. “But really, Archie. That song?”

Archie laughed. “Of course! And the Bonnie Tyler version, no less. Nothing but the best for my dashing captain.”

Horatio’s eyes widened dramatically and he turned beet red before he got himself under control and looked at the ground, pressing his lips together to push back the smile. Archie smirked. Horatio really did like that, did he? He’d just file that information away for later.

“How d’ya do the bit? When you spun, kicked your leg up, high as your head, then landed on the ground in a crouch? Can you do it again?” Will asked.

Archie laughed and shook his head. “I learned the hard way: never try that after more than one pint.”

Will nodded sagely. “Good thinking. Horatio, what was your favorite part?”

“The dancing in general was very impressive,” Horatio managed, still clearly trying to get his bearings.

“I thought you might like it,” Archie responded. He thought back to the look on Horatio’s face when he straddled the mic stand. ‘Like’ didn’t begin to cover it.

“How about the bit where Archie jumped up on the table and sang directly to you?”
Horatio tried to tame the embarrassed grin that kept dancing across his face. “Yes, that was good as well.”

Will nodded, grinning, then started humming his own, very out of tune rendition of “Holding Out for a Hero.”

Archie rested his head on Horatio’s shoulder. “Anything else you liked?” he asked, doing his best to bat his eyes.

Horatio blushed a particularly vibrant shade of red, glanced at Will, then turned his head so his lips were almost brushing up against Archie’s ear. “The . . . er . . . kiss was particularly nice, I thought,” he murmured.

“The audience liked it, too, if the cheers were anything to go by,” Will added. Horatio turned redder still, but the smile stayed on. Archie grinned.

They came to a stop in front of the Indy. Horatio looked at Archie and Will with amused and mostly feigned disapproval. “Can you two stand on your own long enough for me to unlock the car?”

Archie rolled his eyes. “I’m not that drunk,” he insisted, disentangling himself from Horatio. If he and Will held on to each other a little tighter afterwards, well, it was only because they were becoming good friends. Entirely unrelated to the fact that the floor wouldn't stay still. Or the fact that it felt surprisingly good to have his arm around Will.

Horatio raised an amused eyebrow, shook his head, and unlocked the Indy. “Alright, you two. In you get.”

They clambered in, Archie in the front by unspoken agreement, and Will in the back behind him, and Horatio started up the car.

“Archie, what other songs do you know?” Will slurred.

“Plenty! Singalong?”

“No! No singalongs!” Horatio insisted, laughing. “Driver’s prerogative to choose the music, and I choose no music.”

“What if it’s historical?”

“What?”

“If I can sing a song that relates to the Napoleonic Wars, can I get an exemption?”

Horatio rolled his eyes while smiling. “Yes, Archie, if you can come up with a song about 18th or 19th century military matters, you can sing it.”

Archie pumped his fist in the air. “Are you ready for a rousing chorus of that famous Swedish ballad about the might of the British army, lieutenant?” he asked, turning around and giving Will a wink.

“Absolutely!” Will responded, eyes shining.

“Wait. What are you two planning? You can’t actually mean-”

“On the count of 3,” Archie called out while flipping through his playlists. “1, 2--”
“You can't be serious-”

“3!”

Archie hit play, and the tinny speakers on his phone started blasting the opening guitar riff. Archie and Will chimed in: “Dum de dum dum de, Dum de dum dum de de.”

Horatio groaned.

“My my! At Waterloo, Napoleon did surrender!” they both belted.

***

“Archie, that doesn't count,” Horatio complained as he parked in front of Archie’s flat.

“Close enough,” Archie gasped out between fits of laughter.

“No it wasn't!”

“Waterloo: couldn't escape if I wanted to,” Archie sang in answer as he unbuckled his seatbelt.

“Archie!”

“Oh! Wait! Hang on!” Archie pulled out his phone and hit a few buttons. “All set. Horatio, call me!” He paused and giggled. “Call me maybe?” he said, before dissolving in another fit of laughter.

Will’s answering snort showed that at least someone appreciated his sense of humor.


“You’ll see. Just do it!”

Horatio rolled his eyes, but did it anyway. “There. Now, what's so--”

“--Waterloo: I was defeated, you won the war!” Archie’s cell phone sang, cutting him off.

“Archie, no!”

“Archie, yes!” Archie answered gleefully.

Horatio stared at him. “What?”

Will snorted again. “It's no good, Archie. Trust me. Your pop culture references are wasted on him.”

“Nonsense. Just the other day, I said ‘as you wish,’ and he grinned from ear to ear.”

Horatio paused in the act of opening the Indy’s door. “That was alluding to something?”

They heard another snort, then more laughter from the backseat.

Archie turned to face Horatio, horror and betrayal scrawled across his face as dramatically as if he were on a daytime soap. “I thought you knew! You looked so happy.”

“Because you agreed to listen to the audiobook of the new Nelson biography with me!” Horatio said, his face falling slightly.
“Well, it doesn't matter,” Archie added quickly. No point in being disappointed. “Tonight was perfect. Will,” he said, turning to face him, “it’s been lovely to finally meet you. Come visit again soon.”

“And you,” Will responded with a broad, warm grin. Then he frowned. “You aren’t joining us for breakfast tomorrow?”

Archie hesitated. “I . . . didn’t want to be in the way. Thought you’d want to spend some time catching up, just the two of you.”

“Nonsense,” Will answered. “We don’t mind, do we Horatio?”

Horatio was positively beaming. “Not at all. I can pick you up on our way to the tube station. We can grab something from that bakery you like.”

Archie’s heart thumped happily as he grinned back. “Sounds perfect.”

Horatio’s smile became impossibly brighter. It was the most precious, beautiful thing in existence. Even more so than his eyes. Or his hands. Or the noises he made when Archie pressed his lips to the spot under Horatio’s jaw--

Archie’s heart started beating more quickly as his felt his body suddenly thrum to life. His eyes dropped to Horatio’s lips. Horatio’s eyes widened fractionally, then darkened with intensity.

They should change venues immediately.

“I should--”

“I’ll walk you up,” Horatio interjected immediately and sprang out of the car.

Suddenly, standing up without wobbling didn’t seem so impossible. Archie was on his own two feet and closing the door by the time Horatio had made it to his side.

“Night!” Will called out as Archie shut the door.

“G’night!” Archie responded, his mind only half on his reply, as Horatio wrapped an arm around him and they walked toward the staircase.

“Are you sure this is alright? He won’t mind?” Archie asked quietly once they’d reached his floor. He pulled his keys out of his pocket and flipped through them until he found the right one.

“Will?” Horatio glanced back over his shoulder, a fond smile on his face. “He won’t mind at all.” He paused, then tilted his head to whisper in Archie’s ear. “And I told you he’d like you. He’s hardly ever that talkative around people who aren’t me.”

Archie shivered as Horatio’s breath ghosted along his neck. “Well, we do have something important in common,” he whispered back as he unlocked the door.

Horatio smiled and tilted his head. “Oh?”

Archie turned back to meet Horatio’s eyes. “You,” he said simply, hoping that one syllable could contain everything that was in his heart, because words never could.

Horatio’s pupils dilated and he swallowed hard.

Without looking away from Horatio’s piercing gaze, Archie pushed open the door. “Come inside?”
Horatio nodded wordlessly. He took Archie’s hand and followed him into the flat.

Archie pounced on Horatio as soon as he stepped through the threshold, the door slamming behind them as he pressed Horatio against it. He wrapped one arm around Horatio’s waist, tugging them close, and his other hand cupped the back of Horatio’s head and pulled it towards him, crushing their lips together. The warm sensation of Horatio’s mouth against his felt more like home than any flat ever could. Horatio moaned into his mouth, and the next instant, he was holding Archie against him, one hand clutching at his back, the other grasping his waist, his thumb stroking the skin above Archie’s belt.

Archie gasped, then deepened the kiss, savouring the slide of soft lips against his, the quick flick of Horatio’s tongue in his mouth, the gentle hitch of Horatio’s breath. It hardly seemed real. Horatio was here, holding him, kissing him, wanting him. Everything else seemed to fall away: all that mattered, hell, all that existed, was right here, with him, next to him, in his arms, and, for at least this moment, he was happy. Entirely, utterly happy. Complete, like a jigsaw puzzle after the missing piece had been found under a sofa cushion. Every cell, every fibre of his being was thrumming with energy. God, he felt so alive. He leaned forward more, pressing them harder against the door to his flat. Horatio gasped his name and shifted, thrusting his thigh between Archie’s legs. The friction sent sparks through him, and he was grinding against Horatio before he knew what he was doing. Horatio moaned quietly into Archie’s mouth, giving his lower lip a good tug, and held him more tightly. Archie’s pulse raced as he kissed back, dizzy from sensation, his cock throbbing. He was free, he was on fire, and he wanted Horatio so much he could hardly stand it. It was overwhelming, incandescent, almost too much for one person to feel, he was falling, had fallen, nothing was the same, and he didn’t care, because nothing had ever felt so right before, and dear God, he didn’t want it to stop.

And yes, they had to spend the night apart, but it would be fine because he was safe, and tomorrow night, Horatio would come back home, and maybe this was the new normal, the new forever, the happiness he had been dreaming of, holding on for, and--

Holy fuck, if Horatio did that with his tongue again, he would come right here and now.

He pulled back before the sensation could overpower him and started kissing a trail down Horatio’s neck, lingering on every spot that made Horatio writhe and gasp beneath him. It wasn’t enough. He needed Horatio to feel how much he loved him, how much Horatio had changed his life, made it seem something worth living again. His hands drifted lower--caressed Horatio’s cheek, slid down his neck and collarbone and chest, stroked along his ribs, and down his sides--before hovering above Horatio’s belt buckle. His breath caught in his throat and his hand shook slightly.

Horatio’s eyes shot open and met his. “Archie, are you sure?”

Archie swallowed as he looked at Horatio. Horatio was beautifully dishevelled: his lips were bright red and slightly puffy, his shirt was wrinkled and partially untucked, his curls were in a state of complete disarray, and he was watching him, affection and trust and concern shining through as clear as the night sky.

God, he wanted to. More than anything in the world. He was so fucking tired of waiting, of being afraid of having another humiliating panic attack. He wanted to touch, to taste, to finally, FINALLY pour all his love into one simple action--

But, after three drinks? When it would be hours before he could take a Xanax if everything went to hell? And when Horatio couldn’t stay to comfort him if that happened? Or rather, Horatio would try to stay, but then Horatio would have to explain to Will how Archie had ruined their visit--
He forced himself not to shudder. He could wait another day.

He dropped his hands to his sides and tipped forward with a sigh, pressing the top of his head against Horatio’s heart and the compass. “Should probably wait until I’m sober. And Will’s waiting for you. Didn’t mean to get your hopes up.”

Horatio wrapped his arms around him and rubbed his back gently. “Archie, it’s fine. I’ve told you before; I don’t mind. There’s no rush. I’m perfectly happy with -- with -- this. Us. Everything.”

Archie huffed out a laugh. “Right.”

Horatio sighed. “Archie, look at me?”

Archie blinked away the tears that suddenly threatened to fall and looked up to meet Horatio’s eyes.

“I promise. All I want is you. Alright?”

Horatio was looking at him with such sincerity and love that Archie’s heart felt like it would burst. It almost made him want to try again and to hell with the consequences.

But, no. It could wait. Just, not very long.

“Tomorrow,” Archie said, the word bursting out of him and filling him with hope and relief and joy all over again.

“What?”

“Tomorrow. I want to try tomorrow.”

“Archie, you don’t need to--”

“I know. I want to. If you do?”

“Of course I do, if you do.”

Archie felt a rush course through his veins as his good mood from earlier came back in full force. “Alright, then. Tomorrow it is.”

Horatio smiled, shaking his head. “Alright, Archie. But, there’s no obligation. I’m not going to hold you to it.”

Archie grinned. “But you will hold me, I hope,” he added with a wink.

Horatio laughed. “Archie, that was terrible.”

“You know you liked it,” Archie smirked.

Horatio laughed again and rolled his eyes. “Oh, fine. Yes I did. It’s you. Of course I liked it.”

“Well, that’s convenient. Because I like you rather a lot, too,” Archie said as he reached up and cupped Horatio’s face in his hand, his thumb tracing his cheekbones. “One kiss for the road?” he asked, hoping it came across as flirtatious rather than begging.

Horatio smiled back. “Always,” he whispered, before pressing their lips together again.
They forced themselves to keep this final kiss light, tender, and gentle. It was over in a moment.

“Time I was away,” Horatio said.

“Parting is such sweet sorrow that I shall say goodnight ‘til it be morrow,” Archie declaimed, complete with overdramatic gestures that would make a community theatre production proud. “Damn. I don’t have a balcony, but if I stand at the top of the stairs and look over the railing, and you go to the next landing down, we could give this scene some verisimilitude.” He was ridiculously proud of making it through that word after three pints.

Horatio started laughing.

“It’s from--”

“Romeo and Juliet,” Horatio said, smiling proudly.

Archie raised his eyebrows. “Ah, So you know pop culture from the 1600s. That’s where I’ve been going wrong.”

Horatio rolled his eyes. “Everyone knows that, Archie.”

“Oh, well, my mistake. I apologize for being insufficiently subtle. I’ll return to more obscure allusions tomorrow.”

Horatio chuckled. “I’m sure you will.”

“Oh, speaking of tomorrow, when will you pick me up? 7:30?”

Horatio raised his eyebrows. “Will you be ready to go that early? You did have three pints . . .”

Archie rolled his eyes. “I’ll manage. Nothing some paracetamol can’t fix. I’ll text at 6:50 to prove I’m conscious.”

Horatio frowned, then pulled out his phone and glanced at the time. “Damn! It’s after 12:30! Archie, I’m so sorry, I should let you get some sleep.”

Archie winced. “Will’s probably wondering what happened to you.” He paused, then huffed out a laugh. “Or not, actually.”

Horatio blushed. “Ah. Right. I should -- go.”

Archie nodded, reluctantly, then took a step back so Horatio could have enough space to pull open the door. “Sleep well. Sweet dreams.”

Horatio paused on the threshold, then turned around to meet Archie’s gaze. “You, too,” he said meaningfully.

They looked at each other, hesitating, neither wanting the other to go, and each wishing they hadn’t decided that three people in Horatio’s flat would be too crowded.

“See you in seven hours,” Archie said at last.

Horatio blinked, took a deep breath, and nodded. “See you then. Goodnight.” He leaned in for one last quick kiss--lips hardly brushing against Archie’s, then took a step back into the hallway and closed the door behind him.
Without Horatio by his side to distract him, the exhaustion from the day swept over him. As much as he wanted to just plop on the bed fully clothed and fall asleep, he should actually get properly ready for bed. Maybe drink his body weight in water to reduce the inevitable hangover. He filled a glass with water and chugged it as he walked toward the bathroom. The water felt absurdly refreshing. He glanced down at himself and wrinkled his nose. He was a sweaty, disgusting mess from all the dancing. It was astounding Horatio had felt in the mood to do anything at all with him looking like that. A quick shower would do the trick.

The warm water melted away the lingering stress from the day. By the time he had towelled off, pulled on his pyjamas, and reached for his electric toothbrush, he was yawning and struggling to keep his eyes open. He let his mind wander as he went through his evening routine.

Tomorrow. It would work. He could do it. Maybe if he took a Xanax first, just to be safe, it would be alright. And, even if it wasn’t, Horatio truly didn’t seem to mind their pace. He could take as long as he needed. He smiled. Was this what safety felt like? Maybe even going back to to RADA, to filming, would be survivable with this to look forward to.

He rinsed his mouth and padded over toward the bedroom. He saw the time on the cable box: 1am. He grinned. Horatio was probably still awake. He could text him to say a quick goodnight.

Where had he left his phone?

After a sleepy scan of the entire house, Archie remembered at last that it was still in the trousers, which he’d dumped unceremoniously on the bathroom floor. Shaking his head with a smile, he wandered back, picked up his clothes, phone and all, and carried them into the bedroom, before dropping the clothes on the floor by his bed. He grinned at the new message icon showing on his screen. Horatio must have texted to say goodnight while he was showering. A sense of warmth suffused him from head to toe, as though he’d been wrapped in a cocoon of blankets. He sighed happily as he flopped onto his back on the bed. He could get used to this.

He swiped to unlock the screen, then tapped on the icon to open the message. An unknown number. Not Horatio. He frowned. The letters were all blurry--he must be even more drunk than he’d realised. He shook his head and blinked repeatedly until the shapes turned into words.

12:45am: Unknown
   I’m disappointed we didn't catch up before you left. But Greenwich is lovely this time of year. See you soon.
   -S

Archie froze.

No.

No. This wasn’t happening.

He looked at the message again.

The words stared back. He blinked. He shook his head. He closed his eyes.

*Please, God, let this be a dream.*

He opened his eyes.

The words were still there.
His lungs started to lock up as his throat suddenly became painfully dry. Simpson had found him. There was nowhere to run. Was he already here? Was he outside? Was the door locked?

Archie staggered over toward the front door, running by the time he reached the living room. He slammed the bolt shut and locked the door handle for good measure. He wobbled back toward the bedroom and shut the door, locking it behind him. He made it most of the way to the bed before his legs started shaking too hard to support him any longer. He sank to the ground, his back against the side of the bed, and looked at the message again. As always, Simpson had stopped short of saying anything incriminating, but it was still ominous enough. He blocked the number, then dropped the mobile on the floor, his hands shaking.

How had Simpson found him? He hadn’t posted any pictures on Facebook; had hardly told anyone else where he was going. Keene? That bastard. Archie let his head tip back against the bed as he stared up at the ceiling and tried to organize his racing thoughts.

Meeting Horatio and Will tomorrow morning for breakfast was out of the question. He wouldn’t be able to keep himself from being a jumpy mess. What would Will think? What would Horatio think?

What if Simpson was at the tube stop?

Oh, fuck, what if Simpson saw him with Horatio? Would Horatio become a target? He couldn’t let that happen. If anything happened to Horatio--

His stomach lurched. He swallowed hard to keep his dinner where it belonged. His head swam. His pulse started to race, his palms were sweating, he couldn’t breath, he was going to shake out of his skin, he--

No. No, he could do this. He put a shaking hand into the pocket of his pyjamas. He just needed his--

His heart stopped as his fingers closed on nothing but lint.

He glanced around frantically, his mind going utterly blank.

*Think. THINK. Where could it be? Use your fucking brain, you pathetic little--*

Dark denim caught his eye on the floor behind him. He flailed for his trousers and stuck his trembling hand in his pocket, almost sobbing with relief when it grasped the familiar metal. He ran his fingers over its ridges and cardinal points. He closed his eyes and tried desperately to calm his breathing. This was always harder after a drink or two. But three? Fucking hell. He swallowed despite his rapidly tightening throat.

God, he missed Horatio. It wasn’t fair. Why tonight, when Horatio wasn’t here, couldn’t hold him, couldn’t--

He could tell Horatio. Horatio would come. He wouldn’t have to do this alone.

No. No. He couldn’t do that. Horatio didn’t know. And he couldn’t tell him. Not right now. Horatio had just had possibly the worst day of his life. And Will was there. Will couldn’t know. Not yet. And even if he did tell Horatio tonight, and Horatio insisted on coming over to stay with him, Will might end up resenting him for coming between the two of them.

But, God, he wanted Horatio by his side. He might even be able to sleep with Horatio’s arms around him.
If he told Horatio, would Horatio believe him?

If so, what would Horatio do? Call the police? Try to stand against Simpson?

*Horatio, jaw set, eyes narrowed, fists clenched, walking toward Simpson. Horatio, bleeding on the ground, Simpson standing over him, a smirk on his face as he looked up at Archie, unbuckling his trousers. “Too much of a coward to fight your own battles, aren’t you, you little--”*

Archie jerked back to reality, his heart hammering. He shook his head. No. No, that wouldn’t happen. It couldn’t.

No, the only thing he had to fear was that Horatio would decide Archie was more trouble than he was worth and would cut him out of his life.

The very thought felt like a shot to the gut, and Archie found himself hunching over, his arms wrapped protectively around himself.

No. No, Horatio wouldn’t leave. That man didn’t know how to cut and run even if it was in his best interests. Which this was. Horatio should leave. He shouldn’t be saddled with someone so pathetic that he--

No. He was getting distracted. There would be time for that later. He had to focus.

He owed Horatio the truth.

Just not tonight. Or tomorrow morning. Those were for Will and Horatio. He’d go to the Caird in the afternoon, distract himself with research, and try to tell Horatio that night. Or the day after. In any event, he could survive until the afternoon on his own.

He could.

Absolutely.

He’d just stay here, listen to music, and try to relax. He’d take a Xanax in a few hours and watch Netflix on his laptop until the afternoon.

He . . . probably wouldn't have a seizure.

And if he did, and no one was there?

Well, then Horatio wouldn't ever have to worry about Simpson.

He winced and shook his head. No. No, he was not going back to having thoughts like that.

He’d just have to . . . not have a seizure.

Somehow.

He swallowed and stared at his phone as it became blurry again. He sniffled and rubbed his eyes. Oh, great, now he was crying. Fuck everything. How had everything fallen apart so dramatically?

Maybe just texting Horatio wouldn’t hurt.

He picked up his phone again and tapped on Horatio’s name quickly, trying not to look at the other message. He stared at the blinking cursor. The text field was as blank as his mind.
Finally, he started to type. “Thanks for a great evening. :D” He hit “return.” His mobile made a quiet “woop” noise as the text sent.

The three little dots appeared as Horatio typed a response. He almost smiled. It was like Horatio was there with him.

His mobile dinged. He looked eagerly at the message:

1:01am: Captain Horatio Hornblower
Thanks for the same. :)

Horatio’s first emoji. Shame he couldn’t be more excited about it.

1:01am: Captain Horatio Hornblower
Sleep well. Wish I were there.

Archie smiled. It would be the work of a moment to ask him to come over.

He shook his head. This was ridiculous. He could tough it out. It would be fine. He sniffed again. “Me too. Sweet dreams. G’night,” he typed back.

His phone chimed again. He barely looked at the answering message. He reached up and pulled the blanket off of the bed. He tugged it around his shoulders. He’d get up in a moment. But there was no hurry. It’s not as though he had anywhere to be.

He’d cancel with Horatio and Will in the morning. Say that he was sick and needed to stay in bed. Wasn’t up to company. Might be contagious.

It wouldn't be far from the truth.

He tucked his knees up to his chest and rested his head on his knees. His eyes burned. He tried one last time to hold the tears back, but it was no use. He pulled the blanket more tightly around him as he began to sob.

Maybe it was for the best that Horatio wasn’t here to see him fall apart.

Chapter End Notes

Note: Remember when Archie said to his mom "I’ve got this under control. I’m not fragile or helpless, and I don’t need a protector, ok?” and gets really tetchy about it?

That is relevant to his thoughts on "Holding Out for a Hero" (a.k.a. in which Archie continues to have a deprecating/scathing sense of humor directed at himself).
Horatio stared at his phone again, his fingers tapping a rapid pattern against the case. 6:58am. Archie was late. What was taking him so long? Had his hangover been worse than he’d anticipated?

Or had he had a nightmare and was sleeping in? Horatio’s fingers rapped against the case more quickly. No. Surely Archie would have texted if that had happened. And, regardless, Archie hadn’t woken up with a shout, covered in sweat, in well over a week. Perhaps those days were all behind them.

Perhaps Archie was merely running late. Had he slept restlessly, too? Horatio had tossed and turned most of the night, the bed seeming to sway in the wind every time he closed his eyes. On several occasions, he had successfully drifted off, only to jerk awake almost immediately, wondering why Archie hadn’t come to bed yet.

The bed felt far too cold without Archie in his arms.

A quiet groan. Will must be waking up.

“Morning, Will. How are you feeling?”

“Remind me not to drink that much next time.” Will grimaced and sat up slowly. He rubbed a hand over his face, then took in Horatio’s posture, shoulders hunched over the phone. “How’s Archie?”

Horatio frowned. “He hasn’t texted yet.”

Will shrugged. “Maybe he’s just sleeping in. Lucky sod.”

“Maybe,” Horatio echoed, unconvinced.

“I should shower,” Will said with a yawn. He reached for his prosthesis and strapped it on. “I’m sure it’s fine, Horatio. But you can text him yourself if you’re concerned.”

Why hadn’t he thought of that? “Well, naturally. I was --- I was waiting for 7am.”

“Naturally,” Will echoed with a wry smile. A moment later, the door to the bathroom closed.

After three tries, the message was ready:

7:03am:
Good morning, Archie. How are you feeling? Did you sleep well? Are you still up for breakfast?

He hit send, placed his phone on the bed, and sat back to wait, fingers drumming against his knee as he stared at it unblinkingly.

What was taking so long? Surely Archie was--

“DROOOOOOID,” his phone loudly announced.

“Told you it’d work,” Will called out. The water in the shower started running.

Horatio rolled his eyes. Of course Will saw right through him. He snatched the phone and looked at the message.
7:03am: Archie Kennedy
Still hungover. Feeling poorly. Can’t make breakfast. Give my best to Will. Meet you at the Caird this afternoon?

Horatio hit the call button instantly.


Horatio frowned. Archie’s throat sounded . . . raw. Had Archie been sick from drinking? He hadn’t consumed nearly enough for that, had he? “I’m sorry you’re feeling so unwell. Can I bring you anything? Lucozade? I could swing by after dropping Will off at the station.”

Archie gave a small, wet-sounding chuckle. “No need. Just going to rest for another few hours and then drag my sorry arse out of bed.”

Horatio kicked himself for not having begged Archie to stay the night after all, lack of space be damned. Archie shouldn’t be alone when he felt this wretched. “I could come over anyway. Take care of you.” There was a long pause. A very, very long pause. “Archie? Archie, are you still there?”

Finally, Archie sniffled. “Probably a bad idea,” he said at last, his voice tight and strained.

Horatio narrowed his eyes. “Archie . . . are you sure you’re alright?”

Archie let out a long, shaky exhale. “Just feeling ill. Nothing to worry about.” His voice sounded off: congested and strangely . . . wobbly.

Horatio sat bolt upright. He knew that sound. Archie had been crying. “Archie, what’s wrong? Did you have a nightmare? Or -- oh, God, Archie, did you have a panic attack? A seizure? Are you alright? I’ll be right there.”

His heart in his throat, Horatio jumped off the bed and started hunting for his shoes.

“No! Horatio, fuck, no, I -- I didn’t have a seizure, it’s fine, it’s nothing, I’m alright, you don’t--I’m --fuck--” Archie cut himself off, his ragged breathing echoing over the phone.

Horatio ran back to the bed, shoes in hand, his heart racing. Something was horribly wrong. “It’s no trouble. I can be there in under half an hour.” He thrust a foot in a shoe and tied the laces frantically. “Will’s in the shower now, but I can drop him off early, he won’t mind. You need me. I can—”

“No. Don’t. Horatio, stop,” Archie rasped. “I’m just --fuck-- I can't do this. I feel like I’ve been hit by a bus, I can’t think straight, and I need to stop talking and lie down before I--” Archie swallowed back a sob.

Horatio froze, his remaining shoe dangling forgotten from his hand. Archie sounded seconds away from crumbling to pieces. Would being this upset trigger a seizure? Was it even safe for him to be alone like this? “Archie, whatever’s wrong, let me help. I can be there in an instant. Please.”

The long pause seemed to last a lifetime.

“I just need to rest,” Archie said at last, his voice breaking.

Horatio pressed his lips together and tried to force back the tears that had started prickling his eyes. Why didn’t Archie want him there? “Archie--”
“--I’ll see you this afternoon, ok?” Archie’s voice sounded reed-thin, but brooked no disagreement.

“Why won’t you tell me what’s bothering you? What did I do wrong?” The words burst out before Horatio could pull them back.

Archie’s shaky, sharp inhale nearly broke Horatio’s heart. “Oh, God, Horatio. Love, no, fuck, this isn’t about you. You haven’t done anything wrong. You’re the most perfect--” Archie swallowed back another sob as his pretence of not crying shattered as much as his voice. “I -- I just need a few hours.” Archie sniffled loudly, swallowed, and took a slow, shaking breath. “I’ll -- I’ll tell you tonight. Everything. I promise. Just . . . not right now.”

Horatio sat down heavily on the bed, his shoe falling out of his hand and landing with a clatter on the floor. It was almost a physical pain, to be kept from Archie’s side and in the dark, but the conversation was clearly tearing Archie apart. He had to back down. He swallowed and tried to pull himself together, for Archie’s sake. “Alright, Archie, if that’s what you need. But, please, do call or text if you need anything. Anything at all. I can be there in a matter of minutes.” He paused. “I’m worried about you.”

Horatio could practically see Archie running a hand over his face. “Shit. Horatio, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you worry. I’m fine, it’s--”

Horatio tried to cut off Archie’s tailspin before it could pick up speed. “Archie, you don’t need to apologize. Just . . . can you text me? Every now and then? So I know you haven’t had a seizure?”

Archie let out a wet, shaking exhale. “Ok. Right. Yes. Um, let’s say, every hour?”

Horatio sighed in relief as some of the terror started to drain away. “Thank you.”

“And I’ll be at the Caird by 1.”

Horatio hesitated. “Archie, is that wise? If you’re that unwell, shouldn’t you stay home? It--”

“No,” Archie nearly yelled, his breathing suddenly worrying fast. “No,” he continued more quietly, “I need to go in. Can’t just sit around all day feeling helpless, just waiting for--.” He swallowed. “--No, it’s fine. I need to do this.”


“Oh, fuck. Horatio, I need to go,” Archie interrupted, swallowing hard and almost panting into the phone. “See you in a few hours. Bye.”

“--Bye,” Horatio said, helplessly, as the line went dead.

The door to the bathroom opened. Horatio heard footsteps. The bed shifted under the weight of a second person.

“How’s Archie?” Will’s words floated into his ears, barely registering. A hand on his shoulder. “Horatio? What is it?”

Horatio stared at his phone, his mind racing and blank at the same time. “I don’t know.”

Will leaned in closer. “What’s wrong?”

Horatio took a deep breath and tried to organize his thoughts as he forced his eyes away from the phone to look at Will. “He texted to say he was feeling poorly and couldn’t come to breakfast, so I
called to see if he needed me to bring him anything. But, it’s more than a hangover. He was crying, Will -- he sounded at his wit’s end. Something’s wrong. Something’s horribly, horribly wrong.”

Will narrowed his eyes and tilted his head. “Did he say what was bothering him?”

“No, he wouldn’t tell me. What could be so awful that he couldn’t tell me?” Horatio ran his hand through his hair in frustration. “I should be there.”

Will leaned back slightly. “I can make my own way to the tube, let you get there more quickly.”

Horatio shook his head. “I offered. I practically begged. He didn’t want me there.” He forced himself not to cry.

“Maybe he prefers to be alone when he’s upset?”

“That doesn’t make sense. I’ve already helped him through nightmares and a panic attack. Why would this be any different?”

Will’s eyebrow jerked up before returning to its neutral position.

Horatio’s words came rushing back to him. He clapped a hand over his mouth, his eyes wide with horror. “Oh, damn. He wouldn’t have wanted me to say that. I violated his confidence!”

Will gave him a faint smile and leaned in to gently squeeze Horatio’s shoulder. “It’s alright, Horatio. I won’t tell him I know.”

Horatio managed a grateful, fleeting smile, before the situation crashed back over him. “But why won’t he tell me what’s wrong?” he asked again, his eyes filling with tears as he stared down at his hands.

Will squeezed his shoulder again. “He’ll tell you when he’s ready, Horatio.”

Horatio looked up and met Will’s eyes, taking comfort in his quiet, steady support. He took a deep breath. “He . . . did say he’d explain everything tonight.”

Will’s faint smile returned. “There you go, then. What else did he say?”

Horatio shrugged. “Just that he needed time but would be at the Caird at 1.”

Will frowned. “He’s . . . still coming in this afternoon?”

Horatio shrugged again. “That’s what he said. Will, what the hell am I supposed to do?”

Will raised an eyebrow. “What he asked. Give him time, then support him tonight.”

“I don’t know how to wait that long.” He couldn’t bring himself to be bothered by the fact that he had moved on to whining.

“You could text him mid-morning to say you’re thinking of him,” Will said with a faintly amused smile.

Horatio hesitated. “I . . . er . . . asked Archie to check in so I’d know he hadn’t had a seizure.”

Will raised an eyebrow again. “And he agreed?”

Horatio managed a pleased, apologetic half-smile and nodded. “He’s going to text every hour.”
Will paused, then shifted slightly. “He . . . really does . . . love you, Horatio,” he said after a moment.

“And I him,” Horatio said, breaking eye contact to look wistfully at his phone. If only Archie would call. Or give him something more to go on. Or something to do other than to sit and wait.

Will’s faint chuckle brought him back to the moment. “Alright. Let’s get you out of the flat. Where’s the best place to get a full English breakfast around here?”

Horatio glanced up, his eyes blazing. “How am I supposed to sit around eating beans and sausages at a time like this?”

Will gave him an amused, faint smile. “Archie will be alright. He wouldn’t want you to tear yourself up with worry. Now, let’s go get you some food. My treat. Think of it as an early birthday present.”

Horatio took one last look at his phone, then sighed and shifted to put it in his pocket. “Alright,” he agreed. He glanced down and took in the state of his feet. “Let me just put on my other shoe.”

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Horatio glanced at the clock on the wall, drumming his fingers repeatedly against the reference desk. 12:55pm. Five minutes until he’d see Archie again. The waiting was interminable. He should have just called in sick from work and driven over to see him.

He shook his head. No, Will was right. Archie had asked him for time, so that’s what he’d receive. Archie would confide in him when he was ready. There was no point in speculating. It certainly hadn’t done any good so far.

But still, what could it be? Family illness? It couldn’t be Alastair’s PKD; Archie would have said if it had come back. But it was genetic. Could someone else, Izzy perhaps--? No, Archie would have told him that, too. What could be so horrible that Archie wouldn’t want to discuss it? Oh, God, could Archie have received that diagnosis? What if his doctor had called to tell him--

Horatio shook his head and took a deep breath. This was ridiculous. Archie hadn’t had a doctor’s appointment recently and he wasn’t awaiting test results. And it wasn’t as though nightmares, panic attacks, and epilepsy were symptoms of kidney failure.

He glanced at the clock again. Still 12:55. He glowered. How was time moving so slowly? He had to do something to fill the minutes or he’d go mad.

He pulled out his phone and read the texts again.

8:00am: Archie Kennedy
Still alive.

8:01am: Archie Kennedy
Didn’t mean that to sound so ominous. Still rather out of it.

8:01am: Horatio Hornblower
How are you feeling? Any better?

9:00am: Archie Kennedy
Checking in as promised. How was breakfast?
Fine. Will sends his regards. I gave him your number so he could tell you himself.

Just got his text.

Pleased to hear it.

Archie?

Archie, you missed the check-in. Are you alright?

Archie, you’re worrying me. Say something. Please?

Archie, I’m going to call an ambulance if I don’t hear from you in the next minute.

Sorry, put down my phone for a bit. I’m still here.

Thank God. How are you feeling?

Ship-shape and seizure-free.

Archie . . .

I’m fine, Horatio. Be there soon.

Reporting for duty in 1 hour.

I could take an early lunch break; come get you so you don’t need to take a cab.

No need.

On my way.

Horatio looked up from his phone to glance at the clock again. 12:58. Damn it all to hell. He glanced around, desperate for something to distract him. Nothing caught his attention. He’d already pulled Archie’s books and placed them in a neat stack on the desk, so he wouldn’t have to leave Archie’s side once he arrived.

How would Archie look? Would he be pale and shaking? Tinged with green, his lips pinched, eyelids fluttering? Of course Archie was an actor—apparently an excellent one—but still, how could
anyone venture out while being as upset as Archie had sounded over the phone? Surely he must be feeling better, or he never would have left the house.

Horatio shook his head. He needed to focus. All that mattered was that Archie hadn’t had a seizure while alone in his flat, and was about to walk through the door. Archie would be counting on him for support. He could give him what he’d asked for: time and space.

He glanced at the clock again. 12:59pm.

Footsteps creaked on the stairway.

Horatio jumped up and whipped his head over to the staircase, his heart hammering.

Archie was walking up the stairs with the confidence and ease of their first meeting. He was wearing his favorite outfit--the blue button-down dress shirt with the black slacks--his hair was immaculate, and he looked ready for a photoshoot. He flashed Horatio a bright smile and waved as he walked toward him, head held high. But it all seemed . . . wrong, somehow: his eyes didn’t sparkle with the grin as they normally did. Instead, they quickly darted around the room, before landing on Horatio again. His hand surreptitiously slipped into his pocket, probably to grip the compass.

Somehow, tears might have been preferable to this charade.

“Hello, Horatio. How’s your morning been?” Archie flashed him another smile as he approached the desk.

Horatio rounded the desk in five paces and threw his arms around Archie, his carefully laid plans entirely forgotten. “I’m so glad to see you,” he murmured, running a hand up and down his back.

Archie instantly buried his face in Horatio’s shoulders and hugged him back tightly with a desperation that almost took Horatio’s breath away. “You, too,” he whispered.

A damp patch began to form on his collar as Archie’s breathing became unsteady and his shoulders started to shake. “Archie?”

At the sound of his name, Archie dropped his arms as though Horatio had burned him, took a step back, and pinched the bridge of his nose. He took a slow, shaking breath, then swallowed and blinked repeatedly. “Shit, I’d thought I was done with this for the moment. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.” He wiped his face with his hand.

Horatio frowned and reached out to place a hand on Archie’s shoulder. “Archie . . . are you sure you should be here? Let me take you home. There’s no need to torture yourself like this.”

Archie shook his head and scrubbed a hand over his face. “No, I’m here now. I’ve spent enough time alone in the flat.” He shuddered. “I just want to stay focused as best I can until you get off work.”

Horatio stroked his shoulder gently, hoping the touch would help soothe whatever ailed him. “We have time to talk if you want: my bosses won’t be by for awhile.”

Archie shuddered again. “Not here. Four and a bit more hours, then we’ll go home?”

Horatio frowned, then nodded. “Alright, Archie. If that’s what you need. Er, can I give you another hug? Or will that make it worse?”
Archie gave a wet chuckle. “Another hug sounds lovely.” He took a step closer. Horatio wrapped his arms around him and ran a hand slowly up and down his back to try to calm him. Archie was almost vibrating with tension.

“It’s alright. Whatever it is, it’ll be alright. I promise,” Horatio murmured into his ear.

Archie huffed out something between a laugh and a sob. “I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve you,” he whispered at last.

“What? Archie, I’m--”

Archie stiffened, then pulled back immediately. “Right, shit. Must go do my research. Are these my materials? See you in a few hours.” He grabbed his documents from the desk and fled into the Reading Room without making eye contact.

Horatio stared helplessly at the door as it shut behind him. 5:30 couldn’t come soon enough.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings: Stalking, panic attacks, vomiting, discussions of past rape, nightmare, suicidal ideation, epileptic seizure

Basically, this chapter is brutal. Do what you need to in order to feel safe while reading it.

“Thought you’d tell someone about our little secret, did you? I’ll teach you to--”

A loud bang reverberated around the room.

Archie jumped in his seat with a gasp, his pencil skittering out of his hand and onto the floor.

Simpson was here. Where could he hide? The toilets? The practice room? Had he--

He blinked repeatedly as the theatre faded before his eyes and books and empty tables began to take its place. He reached a shaking hand into his pocket to grasp the compass and ran his thumb over its raised surface. This wasn’t RADA. He was in Greenwich, in the Reading Room. The sound had been the door closing after a patron had left. He was safe, it was--

He wasn’t safe. Oh holy God, he wasn’t safe, Simpson knew he was in Greenwich, he could find him, he could--

Archie swallowed and clutched the compass more tightly. Simpson may have found out he was in Greenwich, but that didn’t mean he could find him. Simpson might not even be in Greenwich at all. It might just be a sick game, just another way of reminding him who was in charge.

Well, it had worked.

Simpson won--he always won--he’d taken everything at RADA and now he was here to take everything, too, and there was no escape and there was no way to hide it anymore, and now he had to tell Horatio, and what if Horatio decided to leave, or didn’t believe him, or--

The world started to spin and slip out of focus as his chest began to tighten.

Fuck, not again.

He shook his head to clear it and squeezed the compass more tightly. He swallowed and tried to take slow, deep breaths. Inhale for four counts, exhale for four counts. He was not going to fall apart in the fucking Caird. His seizure from a month ago had been humiliation enough for a lifetime. He refused to have a panic attack at Horatio’s workplace.

He reached a shaking hand into his back pocket to get another Xanax, then paused. How many had he taken already? Three? Four? He wasn’t supposed to take more than that in a day; not with the anticonvulsant. Fucking hell. He’d have to do it on his own, then.

He swallowed and tried to take another slow, deep breath. Then another. Then another. Eventually, the world became crisper. Edges became more clearly defined.
Disaster averted.

For the moment.

He scrubbed a shaking hand over his face, then looked about him. He was alone. Everyone else had left for the day. He frowned, then looked over at the clock on the wall. 5:20. He blinked and his heart started beating more quickly. How had it gotten so late? How had he missed so many hours? Had he done anything other than sit in this chair, staring off into space?

He glanced down at the notebook in front of him. A newly handwritten page lay before him. He frowned. He couldn’t remember reading anything, let alone writing. Oh, shit, had he just gone on autopilot and written “oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck” over and over? He flipped through the notebook, his heart in his throat, then slumped back in his chair in relief. No, those all seemed like reasonable things to write about officers’ uniforms.

At least he’d gotten something done. And he’d gotten off the bathroom floor, which should be victory enough for anyone.

Victory. Hilarious. As if victory here had ever been possible.

He sighed and tilted his head back to stare at the ceiling.

What the fuck was he going to do?

He’d promised Horatio he’d tell him tonight. So he had to.

But . . . how?

He’d tried rehearsing it most of the morning since the phone call. Tried to figure out how to turn the internal screaming and mental static that took over his mind into words, to figure out where to start, to write it out as a script that he could memorise, hell, to just make himself say the words out loud for the first time since . . . well, since that first time.

But it always ended the same way: hyperventilating, sobbing uncontrollably, curling up in fetal position on the floor, and being violently sick.

All in all, it made stringing words together surprisingly difficult.

The text from a second unknown number hadn’t helped. At least it’d been from Will in the end. He shuddered and clutched the compass more tightly.

He glanced at the clock again. 5:25. Shit. Five minutes until he had to meet Horatio, and he didn’t have a fucking clue how he was going to do this.

Maybe it would be easier in Horatio’s arms. God, it had felt so good to hold him. It made this whole disaster seem almost survivable.

And it had helped Horatio, too. Archie’s stomach clenched at the memory of Horatio’s miserable, pinched expression when he’d walked up the stairs. Not knowing was tearing Horatio apart. He had to find a way to tell the truth, if just to help Horatio.

But, what if Horatio didn’t understand? Or didn’t believe him?

Archie let out a bitter chuckle. Well, then nothing would matter much after that.

He blinked and shook his head. No. No, if Horatio didn’t believe him, he’d . . . he’d find a way to
carry on. Maybe. Possibly.

He slammed the door on that thought. First things first.

Step one: Pack up.
Step two: Walk to the door.
Step three: Open the door, give Horatio the books to return.
Step four: Go home with Horatio.
Step five: Tell him.

He shuddered, then took a deep breath, reached a hand out, and closed the book, then his notebook. He swallowed. Small victories.

He took another slow breath, braced himself, then stood up. The world stayed upright. He gathered up the books and notebook, squared his shoulders, and walked to the exit of the Reading Room.

He took one last, deep breath, then pushed the heavy wooden door open.

Horatio’s desk was empty.

That was odd. He’d expected Horatio to be standing there, vibrating with concern and watching the door like a hawk. Maybe he’d started closing up early so they could leave at 5:30 on the dot? Or maybe he was just crouched behind the desk picking something up?

Archie walked over to the desk and peered over it. Only empty floor greeted him. Where the hell was Horatio? Surely he wouldn’t have left without him--

“Hello, Archie.”

Archie froze, his mind going utterly blank at the chillingly smooth voice at his back.

“It’s been a long time.” Simpson’s breath tickled the nape of his neck.

Archie’s lungs stopped working as the world started to spin.

“Jack’s missed you, boy.” Simpson’s hand gripped his shoulder and wrenched him around.

*It’s over. It’s all over.*

“I have the information you asked for, Mr. Simps--” A pause. “Archie?”

Archie couldn’t move, couldn’t think, couldn’t do anything but feel his heart beat frantically against his ribs.

Simpson released his shoulder and stepped back. “Oh, you know each other? Archie and I are classmates at RADA. We were just catching up on old times.”

The world went gray as high-pitched screeching filled his ears.

“These are new times, Mr. Simpson.”

Archie blinked. Horatio. Horatio had walked around the desk to stand between him and Simpson. “We’re about to close up for the night. I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

Simpson chuckled and took a step closer to Horatio. “Why Archie, you didn't tell me you’d made a new friend.”
Archie swallowed hard to force the rising bile back down.

“The exit is there, sir. I recommend you find it yourself.”

“Not to worry, I’m leaving. I’ll see you two again soon.” Simpson turned and walked toward the stairs. “And Archie--”

Archie jerked his head up.

“--That’s a promise.”

The footsteps retreated down the staircase.

He found me. Oh God, he found me. No way out no way out no way out.

“--Archie? Can you hear me? Talk to me. What’s--”

Horatio’s lips were still moving, but he couldn’t hear the words, couldn’t think, couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe, why couldn’t he breathe, and oh God, the walls were closing in, and Simpson--

Horatio reached out his hand to touch him.

Archie flinched, then bolted to the toilets.

He slammed the door behind him and locked himself in the first stall. His back hit the stall door as his legs gave out from under him, and he slid down to the floor, gasping for breath. He tried to reach into his pockets to get his compass or his Xanax, but his hands were shaking too hard to obey him, and the crushing pressure in his chest was getting worse. Was this a heart attack? At least then Horatio would never know that Simpson--

With a lurch, he forced himself to his knees in just enough time to be sick into the toilet, sobbing between heaves. When the retching finally stopped, he flushed, then collapsed back against the door, still gasping for air. It was getting harder and harder to breathe as his throat tightened.

A repeated knocking on the stall door and a frantic voice gradually permeated the panicked fog of his mind.

“--Archie? Archie, let me in! You need to breathe!”

Oh Jesus buggering fuck. Horatio shouldn’t see him like this. That first time had been bad enough. He tried to call out “Go away,” but all that came out was a wheezing rasp that sounded more like a whimper. His throat was paralyzed. Oh God, this was it. He was going to drown in his own spit.

The scuff of shoes on the tile. Horatio’s voice. A sudden movement to his right. He looked down at the hand that appeared by his foot from under the stall door. Those beautiful, slender fingers, more familiar now than his own. He grabbed them immediately, intertwining their fingers. He was holding too tight, but he couldn’t make his fingers cooperate to loosen his grip. Oh, Christ, he was no better than--

Horatio squeezed his fingers back, then stroked gently along his thumb. Gradually, the unintelligible syllables took sonic shape.

“--can do this! Breathe with me. Inhale, 2--”

Archie tried to breathe in, but it turned to spluttering gasps and coughs.
“Exhale, 2, 3, 4--”

His lungs were burning, he was suffocating, he couldn't do this, he needed to breathe in, oh God, oh God--

“Inhale, 2, 3, 4--Good!”

Archie lost track of how many iterations they went through, but eventually, the crushing pressure in his chest began to lift. His frantic pulse started to slow. Gradually, he could make out the stall’s brown walls that surrounded him.

“--that’s right. You’re alright,” Horatio said, giving his fingers another comforting squeeze. Archie closed his eyes with relief and listened to the sound of his wheezing breaths filling the silence.

“Archie? Can I come in?”

Archie hesitated, then reached up and unlocked the stall door. He slid over until his back rested against the stall’s side wall and he was out of range of the door. He waited, his knees curled up to his chest and arms wrapped around his knees. He looked like shit, but what did it matter? It was all over now, anyway. Simpson had found him.

The door swung open to reveal Horatio, waiting for him with an unguarded mixture of fear, concern, relief, and tenderness. The compassion was overwhelming. Archie’s eyes started to burn, and he curled forward, bracing his head on his forearms, and gave in to the tears, trying desperately not to sob out loud, his shoulders shaking hard with the effort. Fucking hell this was mortifying.

He heard the rustle of fabric as Horatio slipped inside the stall and sat next to him, then reached an arm out towards him. Without conscious thought, Archie let himself tip forward into Horatio’s waiting embrace. Horatio wrapped himself around him and rubbed soothing circles into Archie’s shoulder and back.

“He’s gone. It’s alright,” Horatio murmured.

Archie snorted, head still buried in Horatio’s chest. “He knows where I am, now. He’ll find me.”

Horatio stilled for a moment before hugging Archie more tightly, burying his nose in his hair and pressing a gentle kiss to the top of his scalp. “What can I do?”

Archie blinked repeatedly and looked up at Horatio. “Take me home?” he whispered.

Horatio nodded. “Of course.” He paused. “Your flat?”

Archie shuddered and shook his head. Simpson might get his address through Keene, but he had no way of knowing Horatio’s. “Yours?”

Horatio nodded again. “Now? There’s no hurry; everyone else has left for the day. We can wait as long as you need.”

What choice did he have? He at least needed to go somewhere with enough space for him to lie down and flop about if this experience went the way of all others.

He stuck out his hand, and Horatio stood up, took it, and pulled him up to a standing position. He disregarded the whooshing sound and overwhelming dizziness that accompanied his change of perspective and hoped that his legs wouldn't follow through on their threat to buckle at any second.
He wobbled his way over to the sink to splash water on his face and rinse his mouth. He inspected himself in the mirror: wide, bloodshot, and red-rimmed eyes, red, irritated nose, the rest of his face pale as death but with a greenish tinge. He tried to flash a smile to see if that would help, and almost laughed at the pathetic result. Well, nothing for it: he just had to hope he wouldn’t run into anyone.

With Horatio by his side, Archie squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, then pushed open the door to the men’s room. He glanced around him: had Simpson truly left? Or was he just lying in wait? He shuddered and forced himself to take another step. Eventually, they reached the top of the stairs. Archie swallowed, glanced around himself one last time, then let Horatio guide him down the stairs and toward the exit.

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“--You sit on the sofa, and I’ll get you some tea,” Horatio said, walking to the kitchen.

Archie blinked, then sat on the sofa, staring at his hands. When had they gotten into the car? And when had this blanket been placed over his shoulders?

A warmth spread across his palms. His hands were curled around a mug. White with blue painted ships.

He looked up. Horatio’s brow was so furrowed with concern he must be giving himself a headache. “How are you feeling?”

Archie gave a wet-sounding chuckle, then a shrug. “Been better.”

Horatio frowned, then sat on the sofa next to Archie. He hesitated. “Archie, who--” he paused, pressed his lips together and stared at the ground, then tried again. “Archie, talk to me. Please tell me what’s going on?”

Archie tried to open his mouth to start somewhere, anywhere, but nothing happened. His mind and his words felt miles away.

“Archie, I . . . don’t know how to help unless you talk to me. Please. I care about you. And nothing you could tell me will change that.”

Archie snorted. “You say that now,” he muttered, staring into his mug of tea.

“And I’ll say it after. Archie, I’m . . . I’m not going to leave. I promise. Not unless you ask me to. So, please. Trust me?”

There was no point in hiding it anymore. It was impossible. And Horatio needed the truth. He could do this for him. Somehow.

He’d start at the beginning. Buy himself some time. Work up to it. Imagine he was narrating someone else’s story. Maybe it would free the words that were stoppered up inside him.

Archie’s eyes started to burn. He sniffled and pressed his eyes tightly shut. He was not going to cry anymore. He’d done enough of that already.

A hot splash on his thumb. He opened his eyes and looked down. His hands were shaking so forcefully he’d spilled a drop of tea on himself. Well, that was pathetic. He leaned forward, placed his mug on the table, and interlaced his fingers, clasping them so tightly that the knuckles turned white. He swallowed, nodded, and took a deep breath.
I first met Jack Simpson a year and a half ago at RADA. He’s a year ahead of me in the program. He can play villains convincingly as long as they’re like him, but that's about it. He’s an untalented hack who only got in because his father is a trustee and a donor. And unfortunately, he knows it. I was warned about him long before I’d met him. He made everyone's life a living hell--your typical bullying: menacing comments, gathering gossip on people, intimidation--and for one beautiful semester, I was spared all of that. We were in different productions, different classes, so I only heard rumors. But from the moment I walked into the module on Restoration drama, I felt his eyes on me, and I knew somehow, that he had singled me out. I don't know why. I keep wondering: was it something I’d said? Or done?” He paused and ran a hand through his hair.

“Well, whatever the reason, I felt his eyes on me everywhere I went and everything I did. He hadn't done anything wrong, exactly, but it just felt . . . invasive. Unsettling. There was nothing I could do: you can't get someone in trouble for looking at you. After a month or so of this, I was cast in our production of Henry IV, as Prince Hal. The role he wanted. And that everyone had known he wanted, because he had bragged about how it would be his. And of course, he couldn't have someone showing him up. They’d posted the results up on a board on the main office door. I was on my way out of the building, feeling on top of the world, when a hand grabbed my arm and yanked me into another room. It was pitch black. I couldn't see anything. Finally, I heard the click of a lighter, and Simpson’s face flickered into view right in front of me. He held the lighter right up in front of my face until I could feel the heat from it. I wish I could say that I smacked it out of his hands, yelled at him for threatening me, called out for help. But I didn’t. Coward that I am, I just . . . stood there, frozen. I couldn’t move. He said, ‘No. No, I shouldn't want to mar such a pretty face. I can think of much better uses to put it to.’ Then he forced me to my knees, held me down, and--”

Archie cut himself off, his breath catching. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. He couldn’t do this. He just couldn’t. It was a terrible idea, it was impossible, Horatio would never understand, he wouldn’t believe him, he wouldn’t want him, it would be--

The air next to him shifted, and he opened his eyes. Horatio’s hand was lying next to him, palm up, on the sofa. Archie looked up and met Horatio’s gaze. Horatio’s forehead was scrunched up with concern, but his eyes repeated the offer. Archie swallowed, forced his hands to separate, and grasped Horatio’s. Horatio gave it a gentle squeeze and an encouraging nod.

Archie swallowed, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. “He raped me,” he whispered at last, pushing the words past his throat.

“Archie.” Horatio’s voice shook.

Archie forced himself to open his eyes. In an instant, Horatio’s arms moved toward him. But then they stopped, hovering awkwardly half a foot away as Horatio pressed his lips together with indecision. Slowly, gently, and broadcasting each movement, Horatio reached over and placed a hesitant hand on Archie’s shoulder, eyebrow raised in a voiceless question. Archie nodded, sniffling, as Horatio’s arms wrapped tightly around him, and buried his face in Horatio’s shoulder, his eyes falling shut.

“Archie, I’m so sorry.”

The compassion cracked the barrier that had been restraining both words and tears. “The bastard put his goddamn prick in my mouth and forced me to suck him off,” he said, his voice breaking. “The entire time, he kept saying how much I wanted it, had been begging for it, had been watching him hoping he’d do this, as though he were doing me a favor. But I didn’t.” Archie lifted his head from Horatio’s shoulders, his heart racing, desperate to see his face, to make sure he understood.
“I know you didn’t,” Horatio said levelly.

Archie’s lungs tightened and his vision narrowed. Horatio didn’t mean it, he didn’t believe it, he was just saying it, why wouldn’t he understand? Archie clutched Horatio’s shirt and clung to it tightly enough to twist it in his fists. “I swear I didn’t, Horatio!”

“It’s alright. I believe you, Archie,” Horatio said more urgently, looking straight into his eyes and holding him more tightly.

The words shattered the glue that was holding him together and he started sobbing between harsh, gasping breaths, hyperventilating as his head fell forward onto Horatio’s shoulder again.

“Shhh, it’s alright,” Horatio whispered, running the palm of his hand slowly up and down Archie’s back. “I believe you. I believe you.” A few moments later, his voice sounded more worried. “Archie, you’re shaking. And you need to breathe. Would the compass help?”

The words gradually broke through into Archie’s mind. He forced his cramping fingers to release their hold on Horatio’s shirt and to fumble in his pocket for his compass. As he drew it out, his hand shook hard enough to send it tumbling onto the sofa and into Horatio’s lap.

“H -- Horatio, I d-- dropped it, I – I c -- can’t --- I can’t—”

“Shh, it’s alright, I’ve got it.”

The cool metal pressed into his palm, and warm hands cupped his, holding it steady. He rubbed his thumb across the ridges, reciting the cardinal points over and over again in his mind. Gradually, his breathing slowed, and Horatio wrapped his arm around Archie again, running a hand up and down his back.

“Archie,” Horatio murmured at last, “why did you think I wouldn’t believe you?”

Archie took a slow, shaking breath. “Eccleston didn’t,” he muttered.

“Who’s Eccleston?”

“The Dean of Students. I emailed him to report Simpson and asked the school to suspend him.”

Horatio nodded, the muscles in his jaw clenched tightly. “Good. The bastard deserved it.”

Archie’s eyes widened in surprise at hearing gentle Horatio so furious. The dissonance seemed suddenly hilarious. A high-pitched giggle burst loose before he managed to clamp down on it. He shook his head and tried to refocus. “Yes, well Simpson got there first. Insisted that I had gotten totally sloshed in celebration of my getting the lead and that I’d instigated the whole affair and was having cold feet now that I’d sobered up—Eccleston believed him. Summoned both of us to his office to lecture me on ‘keeping my impulses under control.’” He shuddered and gripped the compass more tightly, fighting against the flashbacks that tried to break through.

“--can’t go around blaming others for your own mistakes,” Simpson smirking, --

He shook his head and tried to imagine burying the images to force them out, but then the world shimmered and his mind started to float away. He glanced down at his hand holding the compass: it looked vaguely unfamiliar. Shit. Dissociation wasn’t any better. He took a deep shaking breath and pressed his thumb harder into the compass and started to count backward from 20 in his mind.

“What?” Horatio’s voice had lost the soft, controlled tones from earlier. Archie started, shaken out
of his counting, and glanced over to see Horatio frowning, his face scrunched up in confusion. “I
don’t understand. You mean they… They didn’t do anything to him?”

Archie took another shaky breath, and attempted to smile. He couldn’t even manage it for a second.
“Simpson’s word against mine. I had no evidence.”

“How could anyone believe him? He’s threatening, he’s dangerous, he…” Horatio huffed in
irritation and let go of one of Archie’s hands to gesture helplessly. “It doesn’t make sense.”

Archie clutched the compass so tightly his fingers hurt.

“I suppose keeping tuition money coming in was more important to Eccleston. Or maybe I didn’t
defend myself well enough. Didn’t say much once he started levelling accusations at me. I
couldn’t think past the sensation of Simpson shoving his prick down my throat.”

The color drained from Horatio’s face. For one brief moment, Archie felt a flare of satisfaction that
Horatio hadn’t been able to hide his shock. Sudden, overwhelming nausea wiped that away
instantly. How dare he feel anything but horror at Horatio’s unhappiness? Had Simpson’s cruelty
contaminated him, on top of everything else? He shuddered, gripped the compass more tightly, and
forced himself to listen to Horatio.

“--not right,” Horatio was saying, shaking his head. “It’s not fair.”

“Money makes the world go ’round,” Archie answered with a shrug. “I tried my agent, Keene, but
he was Simpson’s agent, too. Can’t have that kind of gossip associated with his people, he said.
Hard enough for him to get me the roles I wanted with my height and ‘sexual proclivities,’ and he
wouldn’t have me take another actor down with me.” Archie snorted. “Justinian Acting Agency:
ever was a company less aptly named.” He felt another bubble of hysterical laughter threatening
to burst to the surface. He swallowed hard and shook his head. If he gave in to that, he might
actually crack for good.

“This is unacceptable,” Horatio said abruptly. Archie flinched at the sharp tone. “How dare they?
Did you take it to the police?”

Archie pulled out of Horatio’s arms and fought to breathe as his lungs threatened to stop working
entirely. “No.”

“Surely the police could have—”

“I didn’t call them, alright? Maybe I should have, but I didn’t.” He swallowed hard and tried to stop
the dizziness that had started to narrow his vision.

“But—”

“But I didn’t!”

“Archie, I--”

“For fuck’s sake, Horatio. Not everyone can live up to your impossibly perfect standards.”

“No! Archie, that’s not—” Horatio cut himself off and shook his head, and his anger softened into
confusion. He reached for Archie’s hand again, but stopped himself. He looked as miserable as a
kicked puppy. “I’m not saying you should have done something different. I just don’t understand
why they didn’t help you. It’s not right, someone should have. I would never…”
“But that’s why you’re you, Horatio,” Archie said, the anger leaving as quickly as it had come. His thumb worried at the compass, tracing its edges around and around. “Hopelessly, impossibly noble. The rest of the world isn’t like that.”

Only silence met his declaration. Archie glanced over at Horatio to see how he was coping with this realignment of his worldview. Horatio’s jaw was tightly shut and he was breathing slowly and methodically through his nose, his nostrils flaring, as he tried to gather himself together. Of course this was hard on Horatio. He was so naive, so trusting. So innocent. And Archie has tarnished that by selfishly dragging Horatio into this mess.

Keene was right. He was tainted.

He looked down at his hands as the silence stretched on. The compass still lay in his palm, its metal suddenly seeming cold and alien.

“Thank you.” Horatio’s quiet words pulled him out of his thoughts.

He glanced up again, face scrunched up in confusion. Horatio was watching him, a crease in his forehead and his jaw jutting out in that serious and impossibly sincere way.

“What?”

“Thank you for trusting me.”

Archie blinked against the tears that had started to well up again, unable to do or say anything apart from pressing his lips together into a thin line to force back a sob and to give Horatio a shaky nod.

“What you need, whatever I can do… I’m here for you, Archie. I promise.” Horatio was staring into his eyes as though he could get Archie to believe it through sheer force of will.

Horatio turned into a watery blur as Archie interlaced their fingers. Horatio had done so much already--hell, he believed him and hadn’t slammed the door in his face--there wasn’t anything else he could do. But the offer was still appreciated. He managed another nod and, with effort, half a smile as thanks. Horatio hesitated, then scooted next to Archie and put his arm around him again, holding him tightly as silence fell again.

Archie’s mind had only dull static where words should be.

“Archie, is there anything I can get you? More tea? A blanket? Would you be more comfortable on the bed?”

Archie shrugged. It wasn’t as though the location made a difference. And physical comfort now wouldn’t change the fact that everything had irreparably fallen apart.

Horatio squinted in thought, then glanced around the room, his eyes finally landing on Archie’s tea. He leaned over and touched the mug with his free hand, then frowned. “Your tea has gotten cold. I’ll go reheat the water. Why don’t you take off your shoes, perhaps go sit on the bed and get under the covers? You’re still shivering.”

Archie looked down at his hands. They were still shaking, but so were his arms. And shoulders. He glanced down at his shoes. Taking them off seemed like too much effort, but at least it would be something to do. He wasn’t completely helpless yet. He sighed, dug deep inside to find the will to move, then pushed off his right shoe with his left foot.

Horatio’s relieved smile in response was utterly absurd, and yet somehow also adorable. Archie
rolled his eyes, and pried off the other one. His shoes were off. Clearly, his problems were at an end. Hallelujah.

But Horatio’s smile brightened, so at least it wasn’t a total waste.

“Do you want to relocate?” Horatio asked again.

Archie looked at the bed out of the corner of his eyes. It was a nice bed. Comfortable. And they’d just purchased those new sheets that were particularly soft. But if they moved over there, and he told the rest of the story to Horatio, he’d have to tell it on the bed. What if after that, he’d always associate the bed—with all its happy memories of the two of them—with the disclosure? With Simpson? He shuddered. Perhaps it would be better to stay here?

He frowned. Who was he fooling? Simpson had followed him here: he would follow him into his good memories, too. There was no getting away from him, even in his own mind. Might as well make Horatio happy.

He looked over at Horatio, who was watching him with a strange combination of confusion, worry, anticipation, and an implicit question. He sighed, nodded, slid the compass back in his pocket, and held out his hand for Horatio to take to help him up.

Horatio nodded and was off the sofa in an instant, taking his hand carefully and gently pulling him up to a standing position. Horatio held onto him, watching him with a pinched look, as they navigated their way slowly to the bed. He let go of Archie’s hand, pulled back the sheets so rapidly Archie nearly expected to them to rip, fluffed the pillows and propped them against the headboard so thoroughly and with such focus he might as well have been revising for an exam, then spun back around to take Archie’s hand, watching him intently as though he were worried that Archie might have vanished in a puff of smoke and misery while his back was turned.

A small part of Archie’s brain chuckled quietly to itself at the ridiculousness of the situation. The rest was watching the proceedings as though from the balcony seats of a theatre.

He forced his brain to find his legs again and dragged himself the final two steps into the bed. Slowly and ungracefully, he clambered in and pulled the sheets up over his waist.

“Better?” Horatio asked.

Archie shrugged. It wasn’t worse.

Horatio frowned. “Tea,” he decided, then walked over to start the kettle again.

Archie stared at the photo of Will and Horatio by the bed until Horatio returned, armed with a newly heated mug of tea, which he set on the nightstand, and a blanket.

“Let me know if it feels too confining,” Horatio offered as he wrapped it over Archie’s shoulders.

“S’fine,” Archie responded, leaning into Horatio’s touch, his stomach twisting slightly at the question. Horatio was trying to avoid setting off his triggers. That was better than the alternative. But he didn’t want Horatio to tiptoe around him as though he were a fragile china doll that might shatter in a strong wind, either. If Horatio idealised Will for his supposed lack of all weaknesses, and despised himself for his fear of heights and his motion sickness, then wasn’t it just a matter of time before Horatio lost all respect for him? Had it been a mistake to tell --

For fuck’s sake, Archie. It’s a blanket. Swallow your pride and let him show you he cares.
Horatio was frowning as he glanced around the room searching for something. His eyes kept sliding to the dining room chairs--

Archie rolled his eyes, scooted further to the right, and pulled back the covers in the newly available space. “Alright, in you get.”

Horatio startled and spun around to give Archie a searching look. “Alright,” he said at last, then kicked off his own shoes and slid under the sheets. Archie scooched closer until his side was pressed along Horatio’s, and Horatio hesitantly put an arm around him. Some of the mental static started to fade, and Archie rested his head on Horatio’s shoulder, his eyes falling shut.

Ten minutes later, Horatio inhaled as though he were about to say something, then . . . didn’t. The silence stretched.

A fond, sad smile formed on Archie’s face at Horatio’s attempts to figure out the rules. “You can ask.”

“What?” Horatio’s voice was a fascinating mix of surprise and slight irritation at having been so transparent.

“Whatever it is that you’re wondering. You can ask.”

Horatio hesitated, holding his breath slightly. “Are you sure?”

Archie nodded. “Tired of monologuing.”

Horatio’s amused exhale rushed across his scalp. “Alright. Er, was today the first time you’d seen him since . . . the incident?”

Archie huffed out a short, humorless laugh. “The incident. Appropriate. Nice and ominous. Um, no. Unfortunately. We still had modules together, the occasional play, etc. Couldn’t really avoid him . . . and he didn’t avoid me. The opposite, in fact.”

Horatio’s body went rigid. “Are you saying he did . . . that more than once?”

Archie winced. “More like every week for a year. More or less. Usually more. Only once a month or so for the past six months.”

"But . . . that’s . . . Archie, there are 52 weeks in a year."

Archie shrugged. “I stopped counting after the 10th time.”

Horatio’s arm tightened around him, and his other hand started rubbing slow circles into his shoulder with palpable tenderness. “Archie, I’m -- I’m so sorry.”

Archie swallowed, then nodded in acknowledgement, still keeping his eyes closed.

Horatio’s jaw clenched tightly enough that Archie felt the muscles shift against the top of his skull. “And no one tried to intervene? In all that time?”

Archie huffed out a breath and shook his head. “It’s not as though I was going around with a sign around my neck, saying ‘Simpson’s fucktoy. Send help.’ Most people probably had no idea. Just noticed that I was a little more quiet, a bit jumpy and pale, and losing weight. Well, apart from Heather. She tried.”

“She’s one of your roommates, isn’t she? You hardly ever mention them. What happened?”
“After about a month of this hell, she flagged me down before class. Asked if I was alright. She’d been a good friend to me earlier, so I decided to tell her after rehearsal that evening. Apparently Simpson heard us agreeing to meet. Whisked me off to a broom closet after class. Expressed his displeasure quite convincingly. Made sure I knew I’d brought it on myself. Didn’t know he had varying levels of brutal. That was the first time he--” Archie cut himself off, vividly remembering the searing pain that made sitting a challenge for days. He shuddered and swallowed hard. “Just... never underestimate the importance of lube.”

Horatio’s Adam’s apple jumped suddenly, brushing against Archie’s forehead, and he held Archie more tightly.

Archie swallowed again and tried to refocus. “Anyway, didn’t want to risk his wrath like that again so I tried to add some distance between us. Between all of my friends.” He paused. “Not that it did any good.”

Horatio hugged Archie again, then hesitated. “How did you--?”

Archie braced himself. “You can ask. How did I what?”

Horatio breathed in through his nose again, then exhaled slowly. “--survive it?” he finished, in almost a whisper.

Archie chuckled quietly at the absurdity of the question. “Which part? The rapes themselves, or the times in between? For the former, you get used to pain after a while. Just becomes a part of your life until you forget what that there was anything before it. And I learned to let my mind just... float. My body was there, doing things, having things done to it, but the rest of me was elsewhere: rehearsing my lines, remembering my favorite books, etc. It helped. Somewhat. The rest of the time... well--” *The hardest part was keeping myself from walking directly into oncoming traffic.* “--badly, it seems, since I landed us here. I’ll let you know,” he finished with a helpless shrug.

Horatio held him more tightly and started slowly rubbing his hand up and down his upper arm as though making sure Archie was still here. Archie opened his eyes and tilted his head to look at Horatio. Horatio was watching him, his eyes watery and full of compassionate affection, his lips trembling slightly as he tried not to cry. “Archie, I’m so sorry.”

Archie sniffled. “Me too,” he said with a wet, shaky exhale. Somehow, seeing Horatio’s response made it all seem more real. He snorted, shaking his head. “This fucking sucks, doesn’t it?” The words tumbled out of their own accord.

Horatio’s eyes grew wide in surprise at the absurdity of the statement, then he gave Archie a sad, amused smile. “Yes. Yes it does.”

A breathy, high-pitched giggle slipped past Archie’s lips before he cut it off. Horatio’s eyebrows made a break for his forehead. “It’s just so fucking unfair. I put in my time, I let him use my body, I got a fucking head injury for my troubles, and it’s still not enough. I’m still not free of him.”

Horatio frowned. “Why is that funny?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ve finally gone mad? It’s just all so fucking absurd.”

“You’re not going mad,” Horatio insisted as he held Archie more tightly. Horatio paused long enough that Archie could hear the gears turning in his mind. “Head injury?”

Archie winced. “Ah. Right.” He sighed. “Simpson’s the reason I have epilepsy. About six months ago, he tried to force me to suck him off again, and I just... couldn’t. Don’t know what was
different: maybe the fact that I’d been cast as a swashbuckling hero in a play and thought I could actually do something for a change. In any event, Simpson got angry, tried to teach me a lesson by throwing me against the wall, and got the angle wrong. My head got up close and personal with a particularly pointy table in that practice room. Had a stint in hospital for my troubles.”

Horatio’s hand instinctively moved toward Archie’s head, then paused.

Archie managed a wry smile. “It was here,” he said, parting his hair to point to the scar on his scalp that still smarted slightly in damp weather. “You can touch it if you want. It’s ok. . . Probably.”

“Probably?”

“We can try. If it’s a problem, I’ll tell you?”

Horatio nodded, then in a careful, fluid movement, leaned forward and gently pressed his lips to the spot Archie was referencing.

Archie’s heart started beating more quickly, but with something softer, warmer, and more bittersweet than panic. He swallowed and blinked repeatedly as his eyes teared up again.

“Archie, I’m sorry. Was that too much?” Horatio’s hands were on his shoulders.

Archie shook his head. “S’fine,” he whispered.

“But . . . you’re crying.”

Archie chuckled quietly and wiped his eyes. “They’re not bad tears.”

Horatio tilted his head as he watched Archie, squinting slightly as though he had just been told that the Battle of Waterloo had actually had a substantial naval component. “Alright. If you’re sure,” he said at last, and shifted to wrap an arm around Archie.

Archie listed to the side and rested his suddenly heavy head on Horatio’s shoulders. The warmth and safety of Horatio’s presence seeped into his bones and muscles, and his eyes fluttered shut as the silence wrapped around both of them.

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Horatio smiled and ducked his head. He was so adorable when he was flattered. How was anyone this –

Archie’s phone pinged. He frowned and pulled it out of his pocket.

Archie looked down at the screen:

“There’s no place you can go where I can’t find you. –S”

“Who is it, Archie?” Horatio’s disembodied voice floated over from the sofa.

“Shit!” Archie gasped, shooting straight up and darting frantic glances around the room. Where was it? He had to find it. Simpson was coming for him, he—

“Archie, shhh, it’s alright. He’s not here.”

“My phone! Where’s my phone?”
Horatio blinked in surprise. “In your pocket, I thought. Why?”

Archie shoved a hand in his pocket and pulled out his phone with shaking fingers. He flipped through his texts. Just the two from unknown numbers: Simpson and Will. Nothing new. He exhaled shakily, dropped the phone onto the bed, closed his eyes, and let his head fall back against the headboard.

“... Archie? What is it?”

Archie opened one eye to see Horatio watching him, forehead hopelessly wrinkled in confusion.

“Nothing important. Just a nightmare,” he responded instinctively.

Horatio frowned. “It’s important to me,” he ventured.

Archie took a deep breath. There was no need for secrecy. Not anymore. “Just... dreamed that he’d texted me again.”

There was a long pause.

“Again?”

“Oh.” Archie shuddered. “Simpson texted me early this morning, after we’d gotten back from Hannah’s.”

“... What did he say?”

Archie picked up the phone again, glanced down to make sure it was showing the right screen, and handed it wordlessly to Horatio.

Horatio’s eyes widened, then narrowed into furious slits. His knuckles went white as he gripped the device.

“I had hoped it was just his way of reminding me that he controlled me: that he wasn’t really stalking me, and that it was all limited to RADA.” Archie’s heart sped up. “I didn’t know he would show up at the library or that you might have a run in with him, I swear. I thought he was just after me.”

Horatio’s eyebrows shot up. “Archie, I’m not worried about me, I’m worried about you. There has to be something we can do,” he said, tapping his fingers on the side of the mobile as he thought.

Archie rolled his eyes. “There isn’t. There never is.”

“Of course there is. We just have to find it.” Horatio paused. “We could take this to the police,” he began again, brandishing the phone. “It’s evidence of stalking. As is his behaviour today.”

“No,” Archie insisted, trying to sound calmer than he felt while his heart started beating as though it planned on running out of his chest. “They wouldn’t see anything wrong with this message. It’s all in the context. And no one ever believes the context. Don’t you see, Horatio, there’s nothing we can do?”

Horatio set his jaw. “I refuse to accept that!”

Archie glared. “Try.”

Horatio blinked in surprise. “But... he should be in prison! Or at the very least, be under a
restraining order! What about Tamsin? She could--"

“No.”


“We’re not telling Tamsin.”

Silence stretched.

“You mean . . . you never told them. Any of them.”

“I’d hoped it was a one-time situation and if I could just power through and forget about it, I’d never need to. I could pretend it never happened. But then it happened again. And again. And . . . then I didn’t know how to tell them. What was I supposed to say? ‘Hi, Mum, listen, quick life update: I’m being raped every week by a sadistic bastard. How’s your month going?’”

Horatio’s frown deepened. “But, Archie, surely they’d rather know and take action than be part of the reason you stayed silent.”

Archie shrugged. “They had so much going on; Alastair’s transplant, Mum was recovering from being the donor. I couldn’t dump this on them, too. I couldn’t call Tamsin: she’d tell Mum.”

“They wouldn’t want you to be hurt while they stood ignorantly by.”

Archie chuckled humorlessly and shook his head. “You know, my Dad and I had had big a row about my decision to go to RADA. He threatened to cut off my allowance, told me that it would disgrace the family, that I needed to do something ‘befitting the family name,’ to stop acting like a child and acknowledge my responsibilities, etc. Took me completely by surprise. We’d had our disagreements earlier, of course--I’m hardly the golden child--but I’d always thought he’d at least been proud of my acting. But in any event, huge mess, lots of yelling, I told him exactly where he could stick the allowance, and he told me that if things got tough, I shouldn’t come running back to him about it. He apologised later that night, told me he was wrong, that of course I could have the allowance, etc. But it was never about the money.”

Horatio’s forehead was still scrunched up. “But, he took it back.”

“Doesn’t mean he didn’t mean it.”

Horatio’s wide eyes had rarely looked more lost. “But . . . you told me about the stage he built you in the playroom. The productions that you and Izzy and Charlie put on.”

Archie shrugged again. “Maybe he thought I’d grow out of it? Or that it fit his image as clan leader to play the role of supportive father? There are lots of reasons people do things, Horatio, and duty and keeping up appearances are usually prime motivators.”

Horatio held him more tightly. “Archie, I’m sure this isn’t what he meant when he told you not to ask for help. There must be some other explanation.”

Archie shrugged. “That’s what Mum thought. Said he was probably just handling his stress and grief poorly, since Alastair had taken a turn for the worst that week. I think he was panicking a bit about what the rest of the Kennedy clan would say in the event of the tragedy.” He stared at his hands. “Spare gay heirs aren’t exactly popular.” He sighed and rolled his eyes. “And I didn’t exactly handle it well, either. The point is, I couldn’t tell them then, don’t know how to tell them now. I’ll either hurt them, disappoint them, or, I don't know, maybe he’d say it serves me right for
going against his wishes and pursuing acting in the first place,” he said, his voice breaking.

Horatio wrapped his other arm around Archie and held him tightly. “No. You did not deserve this. No one could.”

Archie burrowed his face into Horatio’s shoulder. He hoped Horatio wouldn't mind that his shirt was gradually developing yet another damp patch. “Nice of you to say so,” he mumbled into the fabric.

“Archie, listen to me. You don’t deserve this.” He paused. “It’s not your fault,” he added quietly.

Archie sniffed and curled into Horatio a little more as Horatio held him more tightly. “It doesn’t matter now. It was all for nothing anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“Simpson’s been cast in the Worthington Chronicles. That’s what was in the text I got the day you and I met. A bit part, but still, we have to share scenes. But, given what I’ve learned from today’s adventure, I’ll probably get fired after having a very public breakdown instead and my career will be over.” He huffed out a sad sigh. “God, I’m such a coward.”

“Archie, no! You’re not a coward.” Horatio paused, then held him more tightly. “You’re the bravest man I know.”

The last shell of armour around Archie’s heart cracked open, and he burrowed his face further into Horatio’s shoulder to stifle the sobs that tried to break free as Horatio whispered soothing sounds and rubbed his back gently to comfort him.

When Archie’s tears had finally run dry, he pulled back to wiped his eyes with his hand. A tissue materialised in his hand. He looked over at Horatio, who had apparently grabbed the tissue box from the nightstand in the intervening second and was balancing it on his knees. “In case you want more,” he explained.

Archie chuckled wetly, then blew his nose. “Probably a good idea. That’s your favorite shirt. Shouldn’t get snot all over it.”

Horatio smiled. “I don’t mind. Not as long as it’s yours.”

Archie raised an eyebrow incredulously, then cupped a hand over his mouth as he dissolved into helpless high-pitched giggles. “Quite the romantic, you are,” he managed between fits of laughter. “Not a criticism, I promise,” he added, trying to sober up at seeing Horatio’s slightly pouty expression. “God, I’m such a fucking mess,” he groaned when he’d finally more or less pulled himself together.

Horatio shook his head and put his arm around Archie again. “I think you’re doing remarkably well under the circumstances,” he said in his impossibly sincere way.

Archie snorted.

“But you don’t have to suffer like this anymore.”

Archie raised an eyebrow and pulled away slightly. “Oh really?”

“I believe you, so you’re not alone anymore. We can make people listen.”
“Horatio, it doesn’t work like that.”

“But we have to try.”

“No, we don’t. I’ve tried before and got further away from safety each time.”

“I won’t let him hurt you.”

“Bollocks. You can’t control that any more than I can.”

“But you didn’t have me then. Now you do.”

“Horatio, stop. You don’t have that kind of power.” His hands were shaking, and it was getting progressively harder to breathe.

“But I can fix this.”

Archie wrenched himself out of Horatio’s arms, a high-pitched buzzing in his ears. “Fuck you.”

“What?”

“You can’t ‘fix’ this. There is no solution. It’s not like mending a fucking ceiling. You are not the authority on my life: you don’t have a fucking clue what it’s been like. How dare you suggest that I’m just not trying hard enough? I have tried, and I have suffered the consequences. And maybe giving up makes me a helpless, cowardly fuckwit, but I don’t need the great hero Horatio Hornblower to ride in on a fucking white stallion to rescue me, ok?”

Horatio looked like he’d been slapped. “Archie, I’m so sorry! I would never --” He paused, swallowed, and tried again. “Archie, that’s not what I meant at all.”

“Then what the fuck did you mean?”

“That I love you and want to help you if you’ll let me!”

Everything stopped.

Archie’s anger evaporated. He blinked. He opened and closed his mouth, but nothing came out.

Horatio’s face was scrunched up in misery as he stared at the ground. “I’m sorry. It just . . . slipped out.”

Seeing Horatio so upset made Archie’s brain blink back online. He took Horatio’s hand where it rested on the bed beside him and said the words he’d been carrying with him since the rice debacle. “I love you, too. Always will.”

Horatio’s eyes went wide as he stared at Archie in shock.

Archie raised an eyebrow. “. . . Horatio, love, what else did you think the compass necklace meant?”

Horatio’s eyes got impossibly wider, then suspiciously watery, and he stroked Archie’s hand in response.

For a moment, they just stared at each other, too many emotions between them to put into words.

Archie sniffled, then rolled his eyes at himself. “Films dictate that passionate kisses are supposed
to follow declarations like that, and instead, here we are, sitting on the bed, even, as somber as a funeral.”

Horatio shook his head and squeezed Archie’s hand a little more tightly. “We have time.”

That didn’t change the fact that this was painfully insufficient. But he was utterly out of words, holding hands wasn’t enough, and anything remotely sexual was out of the question. What else could he give Horatio?

“Archie? Can I . . . er, hold you again?” Horatio looked so hesitant and at sea, but also so incredibly eager to help. It made the decision easy.

Archie nodded, then scooted forward on the bed until he was in front of Horatio. Slowly, he slid backwards until he was sitting between Horatio’s ridiculously long legs, his spine nestled against Horatio’s torso and the back of his head resting on Horatio’s heart. He draped Horatio’s arms around him and closed his eyes, entirely enveloped by Horatio’s body. After a moment, Horatio rested his chin on the top of Archie’s head, his thumb stroking gentle, soothing circles into Archie’s shoulder as they sat in silence. Archie tried to let the hypnotic movement of Horatio’s hand dampen the static that still crackled loudly in his mind.

“Archie?” Horatio’s voice cut into his stupor several minutes later.

“Hmm?”

“We do need to talk about a plan. This isn’t tenable.”

Archie stilled. His head started to throb in earnest and he forced his suddenly too tight lungs to take in air. The familiar tremors started in his hands. Oh, fucking fantastic. He couldn’t even think about it without ramping his panic up to 11.

“Can it wait? Just a little?” He hated how reedy and pathetic that plea sounded, but he didn’t have the strength left to hide his desperation.

Horatio held him more tightly. “Yes. Of course. Whatever you need. Rest now.”

Archie exhaled shakily, his heart still racing as his headache worsened, and tried to count backwards in his head from 100.

“How are you feeling?” Horatio asked after several minutes.

His stomach churned, his eyes felt like they’d been boiled in acid, his head throbbed in a terrifyingly familiar way, and he felt like someone had gouged out his innards like a jack-o’-lantern.

Archie huffed out a quiet, exhausted chuckle. “Next question?”

“... That bad?”

Archie gave a brief nod and exhaled shakily. “You?”

“How am I doing?”

Archie tried to turn to face Horatio, then winced at the movement, which made his head feel like a metal spike had just been shoved through it. “I’m not the only one who’s had a rough day.” He tried to nestle more deeply into Horatio’s arms as he closed his eyes, desperately hoping to stave
off the inevitable.

“Mainly, I’m worried about you,” Horatio said quietly.

Archie snorted, his eyes still closed. “This? This is nothing. He hasn’t even laid hands on me yet.”

There was a sudden, deafening silence as Horatio went rigid. “And he’s not going to,” he said in a low, cold voice.

Archie rolled his eyes, then hissed in pain at the movement. “H’ratio, there’s nothing you can do. There’s still filming. And RADA in the Spring. I’ll do what I can to stay out of his sights, but that only goes so far. And really, he just has to wait until I have a seizure, and then--”

Horatio’s arms tightened around him. “Archie, no. You can get a restraining order! We’ll figure something out. Your career is NOT more important than your safety.”

A sudden stab of pain right behind his right eye. A familiar metallic taste in his mouth.

Archie grimaced and ran a hand over his face. “Now is not the time to discuss this.”

“But--”

“Horatio? Not the time. Pillows, blanket, open space of floor.”

Horatio froze, then sprang into action. He disentangled himself from Archie and slid off the bed as quickly as he could without jarring him. Archie whimpered at the sudden movement, then pressed his forehead on his knees to decrease the building pressure in his skull. He tried to focus on breathing regularly. It wouldn’t make a difference, but he could pretend it would buy Horatio a few more seconds to prepare.

“--ready now. Archie?”

He blinked. When had Horatio gotten back?

“--absence seizures. Damn. I’m going to carry you over to the floor by the sofa, alright? Thumbs up if you can hear me.”

The words made their way to his brain, and with difficulty, he was able to wiggle his thumb.

“Alright, Archie. Here we go.”

One arm slid under his bent knees. A second draped his own over bony shoulders, then came to rest on his back.

“I’ve got you. Just hold on one second more.”

He was moving. The jostling was almost unbearable: the spike went further into eye, and he clutched his lurching stomach with his other hand. He whimpered again as he came to a rest on the soft carpet, a pillow under his head.

Warm hands touched his forehead. He leaned into the contact.

“It’s alright, Archie. You’re safe. I’m right here. I won’t let anything happen to you. I promise.”

Horatio’s voice was shaking. Archie tried to open his eyes to see him, to reassure him, to comfort him, but then a sudden jolt of electricity shot through him from his feet up through his head. His
back stiffened and arched, he couldn’t make his lungs expand, and then everything went white.
Chapter 19

The jerking finally stopped. 3 and a half minutes. It had taken 3 and a half, excruciating, drawn-out minutes for Archie to stop jerking like a toy in the hands of a particularly vicious child. That had been twice as long as Archie’s seizure in the Caird. What did that mean? The cutoff was supposed to be five minutes. Five minutes, and you go to the ER. That’s what all the websites had said. Unless it happens again. If there’s a second seizure, you also go to the ER.

Horatio shook his head. This wasn’t helping. He had wasted precious seconds in panicking when he should be putting Archie in recovery position. Archie was counting on him.

He took a deep, shuddering breath, then picked up Archie’s left arm and placed his hand at a right angle to his head, palm pointing upwards. He lifted Archie’s right hand and placed it under his left cheek, then used it to support Archie’s head as he slowly and carefully turned it over until his hand was on the pillow, taking care not to jar his neck. He gently pulled up on Archie’s right leg until it was bent and his foot was on the floor. With shaking hands, he rolled Archie over onto his left side, facing him, and pulled his right leg forward so it was resting on the ground in front of his left. He tilted Archie’s chin up to make sure that Archie could breathe and wiped his mouth off with the corner of a towel he had brought over.

Then he sat back and waited.

He glanced at his mobile. A minute had passed. A full minute since the seizure had stopped. He looked back at Archie, running through the emergency list he’d committed to memory:
- Color: he was pale, but the terrifying bluish hue from the tonic stage had faded, so he was getting enough oxygen.
- Breathing: his sides were rising and falling slowly, so he was breathing normally. Airways must be clear.
- Injuries: he hadn't hit anything while convulsing and there was no blood from his mouth so he hadn't bitten his tongue.

Archie would be fine. It was a perfectly “ordinary” seizure.

So why couldn’t he believe it?

He took another slow, deep, shaky breath. He had to pull himself together. Any second now, Archie would come around. Archie would need him to be brave. But what the hell was he supposed to do? Archie planned to just--what--sit by and wait for the next time that sick bastard got him alone, and then pick up the pieces? He was going to just lead himself to slaughter because he thought no one would listen or because he thought it would hurt the people who could help? No. He refused to stand by the side and watch Archie be unravelled bit by bit. But what could he do? Report Simpson himself? But Archie had been so insistent that they couldn't involve the police. Even discussing it seemed to tear him apart. He couldn't-- shouldn't-- do it behind Archie’s back. But Archie’s safety was at stake. Damn it all to hell, what was he supposed to do?

He glanced at his watch. 3 minutes since the convulsions had stopped. He stared at Archie again. Why wouldn’t he wake up? He reached out to hold Archie’s hand, just like the first time in the library, then paused, his fingers hovering over Archie’s. Archie was unconscious: was it a betrayal to hold his hand without his consent? It wasn’t sexual. But where was the line? What were the rules? What could he do to make Archie feel safe?

Of course. The blanket. Where had it gone? He glanced frantically around the room, then saw it on
the floor where it had fallen when he’d picked Archie up. Damn it, why did it have to be so far away? He hesitated. What if Archie woke up while he was on the other side of the room? Would he think he’d been abandoned?

Horatio looked at Archie again, splayed out and helpless on the floor. His eyes started to prickle with tears. He blinked hard and swallowed. Keeping Archie warm was the least he could do. He’d just be quick and get back in time. He rose and hurried to the bed, only taking his eyes off of Archie to maneuver around the coffee table, which he’d shoved into the kitchen to clear a space on the floor. He scooped up the blanket, rushed back, and dropped to his knees by Archie’s side.

No change.

Horatio swallowed down the rising panic and focused on spreading the blanket over Archie. He smoothed out the last wrinkle in the fabric, then paused as a flicker of white caught his eye. Archie’s sock was sticking out from underneath the green fleece. Horatio frowned. He couldn't let Archie’s foot get cold. He carefully tucked it in, then sat back on his heels to wait.

He checked his mobile: 4 minutes since convulsions stopped.

Why wouldn't Archie wake up? Had something gone wrong? Had the seizure caused some sort of permanent damage?

What if Archie never woke up?

That was all it took. The tears he had been fighting back all day started to fall.

He swallowed hard and tried to get himself back under control. This was ridiculous. Archie would wake up. Of course he would. He was perfectly safe--

But Archie wasn't safe. He hadn't been for years. And he’d kept it hidden the entire time, assuming no one would raise a hand to help. Thinking he didn't deserve anyone’s assistance. That he deserved this abuse. Horatio’s tears fell faster as a hiccoughed sob burst forth despite his best efforts. He swallowed again tried to dry his eyes with his hand, but the tears kept coming.

He buried his head in his hands and stopped trying to hold them back.

When his silent sobbing had mostly run its course, he reached into his pocket, grabbed a tissue, and did the best he could to dry his eyes and nose. He sniffled, trying to put together the pieces of his armor again, and checked the time. 6 minutes.

He looked over at Archie. He must be getting close to waking up; his forehead was starting to scrunch up, presumably with pain. Horatio reached over and took Archie’s free hand in his. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered as he gently caressed the spot where his thumb met his wrist.

“Mrrph,” groaned Archie.

“Archie! You’re awake! Oh, thank God,” Horatio exclaimed.

“Oww,” Archie croaked.

Horatio winced. “Right. Sorry,” he whispered. “Would you like me to help move you to the bed?”

Archie cracked an eye open, then winced and groaned again, burying his face further into the pillow. “Nope,” he said, popping the “p” slightly. “Floor’s fine.”
Horatio nodded. “Of course. Take your time. We’ll move later.” He tucked the blanket around Archie’s shoulders where it had come loose slightly, and Archie nuzzled into his hand with a pleased grunt. Horatio let go of the blanket in favor of running his hands through Archie’s hair, and watched as the muscles that had started to tighten again with pain gradually relaxed.

“Er, Archie,” he began, uncertain how to phrase his suggestion.

“Hmm?”

“Would you - that is - I could - er -” he cleared his throat and tried again. “Would you like me to join you? On the floor? I could fit quite comfortably behind you.”

A slow smile spread across Archie’s face. “Spoon away,” he said quietly.

Horatio stood up, his legs tingling from having fallen asleep, and stepped over Archie. He pulled up the blanket, slipped underneath it, and slid right behind Archie, sharing his pillow and fitting perfectly against him. He hesitated, then put his left hand underneath his head and draped his right arm over Archie. Archie sluggishly interwove their fingers, and tucked their clasped hands under his chin, snuggling in tightly.


“Of course,” Horatio said, pressing a light kiss to the back of his head. “You need rest. Everything can wait until the morning. Sleep now. I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

There was no chance in hell he would fall asleep himself, but it was worth forcing himself to be still to provide Archie with some moments of comfort and safety.

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The bed was shaking. Horatio opened his eyes with a start. Archie was trembling in his arms and whimpering quietly. He started to toss his head back and forth on the pillow.

Damn it, not again.

“Archie?” Horatio whispered urgently. “It’s only a dream. You’re safe.”

Archie gripped the blanket more tightly. The whimpers gradually turned into words.

“No, don’t. Please, don’t!” Archie moaned as he started to thrash about.

Horatio grimaced. Archie would be in agony when he woke up after this much movement.

“Archie, it’s Horatio. Wake up. I’m here. You’re safe.” He tried stroking Archie’s arm gently, hoping that the tender touch would snap him out of the hell into which his mind had trapped him.

With a strangled gasp, Archie shot bolt upright, then clutched his head in his hands with a cut-off high-pitched whimper of pain.

“It’s alright, Archie. He’s not here.” Horatio held him tightly, stroking his shoulder and brushing the sweat-stuck fringe from his forehead with slightly shaking fingers. “I’ve got you. You’re safe now.”

After five minutes, Archie’s breathing had regularized, and Horatio helped him lie back down. Archie groaned and ran a hand over his face. “Fucking hell. How many times has it been? Five?”
Horatio hesitated. “Er, that was the sixth time, actually.”

Archie grimaced. “Fuck it. I give up. Sleep is not worth this. What time is it?”

Horatio checked his mobile. “4am.”

Archie frowned. “Long night.” He paused and licked his lip nervously. “Look, Horatio, you’ve hardly slept. No point in both of us being knackered. Why don’t I move to the sofa, give you the bed to yourself so you can get some rest? You have to get up for work in a few hours.”

Horatio’s hand stilled in Archie’s hair before he mastered himself again and continued. “I’m taking the day off.”

“But--”

“It’s fine, Archie. I emailed Mr. Matthews hours ago to say I’m taking a sick day. And you can’t think I would leave you on your own today. Not after everything.”

“I can’t hide out here forever.”

Horatio shook his head. “Let’s focus on one day at a time. For now, just try and rest. And I’m staying right here, in the bed with you. Er, unless you want me to move--”

Archie shook his head and leaned into Horatio’s hand. “Stay. Please?”

Horatio swallowed. He’d never heard Archie beg for anything--until that nightmare, and this simple request. Archie looked so impossibly small and miserable. And alone. And he wanted to destroy the person who had done this to Archie.

“Always,” Horatio murmured. He lay down on his back and cautiously stuck his arm into the space under Archie’s neck. Archie cracked an eye open, managed a small smile, and then slowly slid over, wincing slightly at the movement, until his head was resting on Horatio’s shoulder, Horatio’s left arm wrapped securely around him. “This alright?” Horatio asked.


Horatio pressed a kiss to his forehead and held him tightly, blinking tears away. “Love you, too,” he responded through his suddenly constricting throat.

Within a few moments, Archie’s breathing had deepened and the furrow in his brow had mostly smoothed away. Hopefully he would get at least another hour of sleep before the cycle began again.

Horatio ran his free hand over his face. He stared at a speck on the ceiling above his bed, his mind racing a mile a minute, circling around the only question that mattered.

What the hell was he going to do?
Chapter 20

Simpson was closing in. The footsteps thudded behind him, getting louder by the second. His lungs were burning and the stitch in his side was becoming unbearable, but he had to keep going. He couldn’t let Simpson catch him. Not again. He rounded the corner of the main corridor on the second floor of RADA Studios, barely noticing as his shoulder caught the wall, his mind racing with potential hiding spots. Maybe Simpson wouldn’t check the broom closet this time.

He skidded to a halt in front of a dead end. The broom closet was gone. A short hallway terminating with a door loomed before him where a long, multi-doored whitewashed corridor should be. He glanced behind him: any second now, it would be too late. There was no time to think. He took a deep breath, threw open the door, and raced through, slamming it behind him.

He squinted as sunlight glinted off the white brick building, temporarily blinding him. He shaded his eyes and looked behind him, but the door he had come through had vanished. Simpson would never find him here. He bent over to catch his breath, bracing his hands on his knees. He couldn’t just wait here forever: he needed to meet Horatio. He spun around, looking for the familiar unruly mop of brown curls. Where was he? Had he already left? Hadn’t they agreed to meet here, at his flat in Greenwich? He walked toward the front of his building and sighed in relief to see Horatio sitting on the bottom step, leaning forward to stare at the grass.

He plunked down next to him on the landing and draped an arm over Horatio’s shoulder. “Oh, good. You’re still here! What’re you doing outside, love? You have a key now, remember?”

Horatio lifted his head, his face still in profile as he stared straight in front of him and not at Archie. His shoulders were strangely hunched. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked, his voice uninflected and cold.

Archie whipped his head over to look at him, his eyebrows raised with concern. Horatio never sounded accusatory.

“Tell you what, love?” Archie reached down and took Horatio’s hand, then gasped and pulled away as his fingers touched something slick and warm. He stared down at his palm. It was covered in blood.

He cupped Horatio’s blood-soaked hand in both of his, his pulse hammering in his ears. “Horatio? What happened? Is that your blood?”

“Archie?” Horatio’s voice, suddenly reed thin, wavered slightly as he turned his head and faced him. Blood was running down the side of his face from a large gash in his temple. Archie’s heart stopped.

“Horatio?! Oh, fuck, no, not this. “Stay with me, love. You’ll be alright. I’m going to call the paramedics. They’ll be right here.” He reached to get his phone out of his pocket, but he didn’t
have pockets. He jumped up and spun in a circle, looking for his phone, his heartbeat positively frantic now. Fucking hell, where was it? It was his only way of getting help!

He ripped off his jacket and pressed it against the gash to try to stanch the bleeding, but it didn't do any good. He watched, helpless, as Horatio slowly dyed the fabric red.

He stroked Horatio's face as though it could remedy the fluttering eyes and stuttering pulse. “It's going to be alright. You have to be alright. Look at me, Horatio. Look at me. Don't close your eyes!”

Horatio slumped forward into his arms, his eyes drooping shut.

“How else did you think this was going to end?” Simpson said, stepping out of the shadows behind the trees, brandishing a blood-covered club. “You may as well have struck the blow yourself.”

“HORATIO!” Archie lurched upright, his eyes flying open and tears coursing down his face. Oh, God, he was dead. Horatio was dead, and it was all his fault, there was no point in--

“Archie, I’m here! It’s alright! Shhhhh. You’re safe now.” Warm arms wrapped around him and held him tightly.

Archie threw his arms around Horatio and sobbed into his shoulder, overcome with relief and grief that seemed more real than the warm body against his.

“You’re alive,” Archie choked out, running his hands over Horatio’s back. “Oh thank God, you’re alive.”

“Archie? What do you -- your nightmare was about me?”

Archie vaguely noted that Horatio sounded utterly flummoxed, but the rest of him was focused on more pressing matters, like touching every inch of him to make sure he was unharmed.

“Horatio, I’m so sorry. I am so incredibly sorry,” he gasped.

“What? Archie, you have nothing to apologise for! You haven’t done anything wrong.”

God, his voice was still the most perfect, beautiful music imaginable. Archie clutched him as tightly as he could. “I thought he’d killed you. I won’t let him hurt you, I promise. I’d rather die.”

Archie pulled back to touch Horatio’s forehead. He needed to feel it, to force his brain to stop superimposing gushing blood over firm, unbroken skin.

“No one’s hurt. I’m fine, I promise,” Horatio soothed. “Nothing missing: all present and correct.”

But for how long?

Archie’s hand fell to his side in horror, his heart still hammering. “You’re not safe as long as I’m around! He could find you. I can’t let that happen! Horatio, you have to leave. You shouldn’t be with me!”

Horatio froze. Then he narrowed his eyes and took Archie’s hand. “Is that really what you want?”

Archie flailed his free arm in frustration. “No! Of course not! Horatio, I love you. But I don't know how else to keep you safe.”

Horatio squeezed his hand. “And I love you. And I’m not going to abandon you to the whims of a sadistic monster. You’re not endangering me, and we will figure this out together. Alright?”
Archie swallowed and took a deep, shaking breath. “Alright.”

Horatio’s arms encompassed him again in an instant. Archie hesitated, then nestled further into their warmth. Horatio stroked gentle circles into his shoulder for several minutes until the room stopped spinning. His gut twisted with guilt. He should have pressed harder, begged Horatio to save himself. But he was too selfish and cowardly even to do that. He didn’t deserve any of this comfort or compassion.

“Archie? About yesterday,” Horatio began a few minutes later, his voice oddly sad and formal, “I . . . owe you an apology.”

Archie blinked in confusion then tilted his head to squint up at Horatio. “What on earth for?”

Horatio compressed his lips together, took a steadying breath, then looked down at the floor. “Last night, I . . . did some preliminary research. I wanted to know how to help and who we could turn to, so I looked at the websites for SurvivorsUK, and The Havens. And the NHS, and . . . some others--”

Archie froze as every muscle is his body clenched and his stomach lurched as though he’d missed a step of a staircase.

“--And they all said not to ask questions of survivors or to press them for details or on reporting plans, because it can come across as doubting them.” Horatio took a slow, shaky breath. “Archie, I am so sorry. You trusted me with something important and I mucked it up.”

Archie blinked. Then blinked again. He opened his mouth, closed it again, and frowned, his words having entirely evaporated. Eventually, his scrambled mind put together a proper sentence. “Horatio, what are you talking about?”

Horatio glanced back up and met his eyes, his face a picture of misery. “Last night. I pressed you too hard. You thought I was blaming you for . . . for what he did to you. Of course you lost your temper at me.”

Archie winced as his harsh words to Horatio came crashing back into his mind. Fucking hell, he’d hurt Horatio. What kind of monster did that to the man he loved? His stomach lurched again and he swallowed. “’S my fault, Horatio. I never should have lashed out at you like that.”

Horatio’s eyes went wide with surprise, and he held Archie more tightly. “What? No, Archie, you had every right to be angry, given what you thought I was saying. I deserved it! I’m just sorry I didn’t understand sooner, before I’d made it all worse.”

Archie raised an eyebrow. “Horatio, love, you held me. You believed me--” unlike everyone else, “--and you stayed. You didn’t make it worse.”

Horatio squinted at him. “--Archie, I pressed so hard about reporting him to the police that you had a seizure!”

Archie froze, the word “reporting” nearly short-circuiting his higher brain functions. He blinked, swallowed, and tried to focus on breathing normally. He shook his head. “That was Simpson’s fault. Usually have seizures after he--” he shuddered, then swallowed hard to fight back the rising nausea, “--touches me. Should have said. Don’t blame yourself. Not your fault.” He closed his eyes and focused on the soothing motion of Horatio’s hand gently stroking his shoulder. “And of course you want a plan,” he added quietly. “You’re you.”

Horatio’s arms wrapped around him more tightly, before he gently pressed a kiss into the top of
Archie’s scalp. “I do want a plan. Because I want you to be safe. And because no one should have to suffer as you have. And I’m worried about him hurting you again. But it’s not my decision to make.” He took a deep, slow breath. “So I will support you, whatever you decide to do.”

Archie squinted and tilted his head up to look at Horatio. “What?”

“I will be by your side, whether or not you make a report.”

Archie narrowed his eyes. “But . . . everything you said yesterday . . .”

Horatio set his jaw. “I still believe it. But it doesn’t matter what I think. This is your choice. If you decide to call or go to the station, I can go with you and support you however you need. If you decide you can’t, we’ll . . . come up with some sort of plan to keep him away from you. Somehow.” He swallowed, and a muscle in his jaw twitched. “I understand why this is . . . difficult, and you don’t have to decide either way right now. I just want you to know that I’m . . . here for you, Archie. Always. No matter what.”

Archie blinked again. He didn’t have to do it? He could keep on hiding, surviving, waiting it out, until--

An image of Horatio’s dead body floated through his mind. He shuddered.

No. Hiding wasn’t an option any more. He had to do it. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine walking into the police station.

“Thought you’d tell someone about our little secret, did you?” --fingers digging into the back of his neck, pressing his face against a table --trousers yanked down, the chilly air of the practice room hitting his arse as he squirmed to free himself, to run, to hide, to die, to feel anything but this--

Archie sat bolt upright, eyes flying open, as a high-pitched screech blared in his ears and the world started spinning.

“Archie? Archie, what is it?” Horatio’s hand started gently rubbing his shoulder, anchoring him to the present.

“I don’t know how to do this,” Archie gritted out, breathing heavily.

“Do what?”

“Report him.”

Horatio stilled for a moment, then squeezed his shoulder. “I know. And I understand. But you’re not alone. You have your family. And friends, including Will, now. And you’ll always have me. We can find a way, if you’re ready to try.”

Archie buried his head in his hands. It was so unfair. Hadn’t he suffered enough? The rape, the epilepsy, the PTSD, the family drama, the stalking, the film: he had served his time as the universe’s punching bag, so why was he expected to do still more? And why now, when merely breathing seemed like more trouble than it was worth? Why couldn’t he just give up, fade away, blip out of existence so he wouldn’t have to think about this ever again?

His gut twisted with guilt. No. No, he could never do that to his family, or to Horatio. What kind of a return for their love would that be? And it still wouldn’t keep Horatio safe. No, the only way to guarantee that was to make the report. And if it backfired as badly as he feared, then he and Horatio would pick up the pieces and figure it out together.
He closed his eyes, tried to gather himself together again, and took a deep, shaky inhale. “Ok.”

“. . . Ok?” Horatio’s voice wobbled.

Archie met his eyes and nodded. “Ok.”

Horatio’s eyes went wide with surprise and relief, and then started shining as his expression morphed into a watery smile. He nodded and took Archie’s hand. “What can I do to make this easier? Would you like tea? A blanket? Music? Do you want to make notes on what you’re going to say?”

Horatio had already lost some of that horrible pinched expression and was getting some colour back in his face, all because of the promise of a plan. Archie felt the corner of his lips on the right hand side of his face curl up slightly in response. Strange how little time it had taken for a smile to feel so alien. “Can you just . . . keep holding me for a bit first?” Somehow, asking for that didn’t feel particularly embarrassing just now.

Horatio nodded and held him more tightly. “Of course. Oh, do you have your compass? It might help to hold it when you make the call.”

Archie managed another small smile. “It’s in my pocket. But anyway, you’re better than a compass.”

Horatio gave him a shaky grin. “Fortunately, you can have both of us.”

Archie huffed out a laugh. “Luckiest man in Greenwich,” he said with a wry smile. Then he frowned. That had failed utterly. Better not try any more jokes for the time being.

Horatio’s smile faltered. “Let’s start by getting you some food. When was the last time you ate?”

Archie squinted as he tried to remember. “Sunday night? Mogul Restaurant?”

Horatio’s eyes opened wide with horror. “Archie, it’s TUESDAY!”

Archie’s face flushed and he broke eye contact to inspect the white bedspread. He’d gone back to that self-destructive habit, had he? “Oh, right. Well, I . . . um . . . had a slice of toast yesterday.” No need to mention that he’d only managed a bite. And it hadn’t stayed down for long.

A long pause.

Archie glanced up. Horatio was staring at the floor, his lips pressed tightly together as he fought back tears, the dark circles under his eyes testifying to the toll this whole disaster was taking on him.

_Congrats, Archie, you found the one way to make this worse._

“I could try some breakfast?” Archie volunteered. He probably couldn’t keep it down, but he had to try, if only to make Horatio look less miserable.

Horatio nodded so hard Archie worried his head would fall off. “Of course. I’ll be right back.” He was off the bed and searching through the pantry in a matter of seconds.

Archie braced himself for movement, then pushed himself off the bed and shuffled over to the sofa by the force of sheer will and by bracing himself against the chair and table as he passed. He flopped down, utterly drained by the exertion, leaning his head against the corner where the back
met the arm.

A moment later, a small bowl of Muesli appeared in his hands. He looked up and Horatio was watching him again, with that strange new combination of compassion and eagerness to act. And apparently, Horatio was going to keep watching him until he took a bite. He scooped up a spoonful, and forced himself to put it in his mouth. The effort seemed almost impossible, but he managed to chew and swallow it down. The smile on Horatio’s face was almost worth it.

He tried to make himself load up another spoonful, but failed utterly: the spoon seemed impossibly heavy and his stomach was cramping already. He sighed and placed the bowl on the end table. Defeated by breakfast. Wasn’t that a fitting symbol for his life. “I’ll finish it in a bit.”

Horatio’s smile flickered, but he nodded. “Of course.” He glanced around, then he sat bolt upright. “Thinking about the trauma triggers your seizures! You should wait to make the report until you’ve taken your seizure meds!”

Oh, caught on to that pattern, have you? Archie kicked himself immediately. Horatio was just trying to help. They were both out of their depth. “Don’t think the meds make a difference, actually. I keep having the seizures regardless.”

Horatio frowned. “Of course it helps. It’s probably the reason you haven’t had more of them. Stay right here; I’ll go get them.”

Horatio ran off to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. The metal cabinet clicked open. Archie waited for the rustle of pills in the container and the answering clack of the magnets catching as the door shut again. Nothing happened.

“Archie?” Horatio called out, hesitating slightly.

Archie sat up straighter, his pulse beating more quickly at Horatio’s tone.

“. . . Yes?”

“Do you have any of your pills left in the little box you carry with you?”

“No. Took the last one yesterday. Why?”

Archie turned his head in time to see Horatio stepping out of the bathroom, forehead wrinkled in thought. “You’re out.”

“Oh. Fuck. I was going to get another week’s worth to bring over when we stayed at mine tonight, wasn’t I?” Archie rubbed a hand over his face.

“So you still have some at your flat?”

Archie’s stomach dropped. “You’re not going to get them.”

Horatio frowned as he hovered by the arm of the sofa. “Why not?”

Archie glared at him, fists clenching. “What the fuck do you mean, ‘why not’? Do you want to make my nightmare a reality?”

Horatio drew his head back in surprise. “Archie, he’s not going to be there. We have no reason to believe he knows your address. And besides, he’s not likely to attack me.”

Archie’s vision started to narrow. “Oh, so, I’m just a magnet for rapists, then? Something about my
face just begs people to bend me over the nearest surface? Maybe I should just dye my hair brown and all my problems will be over!”

Horatio recoiled as though he’d been slapped. He closed the gap between them in a few strides and sat on the sofa beside Archie, taking his hand. “Oh, God, Archie, I’m so sorry, that’s not what I meant at all. You had just said that he was usually careful to avoid things that could be traced back to him. That suggests that he wouldn’t try anything in public. Archie, I promise, I would never think any of those things.”

Archie sank back against sofa, running a hand over his face as the anger and terror drained out of him. This was Horatio. He sighed. “Of course you wouldn’t.”

“All right,” Horatio said quietly, stroking his hand, “none of this is your fault. You need to believe me.”

Archie rolled his eyes and looked away.

Horatio hesitated, then leaned in closer. “Do you remember when you argued about the navy and the hierarchy with me over dinner that first night in my flat? You were defending the people who suffered from having no recourse and no voice. So, imagine someone else in your position. Would you tell them it was their fault?”

Archie turned back to face Horatio, glaring and ready to yell “of course not,” before biting it back at the last moment. Given Horatio’s near smile in response, his face had spoken just as loudly.

He scowled. It was different, somehow. It must be. But everything hurt too much at the moment to figure out how. “Alright, Horatio, give it a rest. I’ll . . . think about it. But --” he tried to wrench his brain back on track. They had been discussing Horatio’s safety. Nothing else mattered. “--You shouldn’t go. You don’t even have a contingency plan.”

“Of course I have one! I’ll . . . hide in the flat and call the police and they’ll arrest him for stalking,” Horatio finished, nodding to himself.

The world stopped. “We are not going to use you as bait.”

Horatio frowned. “That’s not the goal: just the back-up plan, and I’m not bait, because he’s not going to be there. But you need your medication and I can’t think of anything else. Can you?”

Archie focused on not hyperventilating. “My brain is screaming at me about the dangers of you leaving too loudly for me to think about anything else.”

Horatio’s forehead wrinkled with concern, then he shook his head and his resolve returned. “I have to do this, Archie. How else am I supposed to keep you safe?”

Archie sat up straight and glared at Horatio. “Fuck my safety, what about yours?”

Horatio rolled his eyes in frustration. “But that’s the whole problem; you don’t take yours seriously!”

“And you endangering yourself is not the solution!”

Archie’s continued glare had no effect. Horatio had set his jaw in that ridiculously stubborn semi-pout that meant that he had made up his mind and was going to implement his plan even if it involved dragging half the world with him. Archie’s stomach lurched. There was nothing he could say to change Horatio’s mind.
“Fine. But I’m coming with you.” Archie struggled to get off the sofa and tried to ignore the spinning sensation that threatened to knock him senseless on his back.

Horatio’s hands were on his shoulders in an instant, the gentle weight encouraging him back down. “Archie, you can hardly stand! You’re in no shape to travel!”

Archie shrugged off Horatio’s hand. “I can manage. There’s no way in hell I’m letting you out of my sight if he might be lurking nearby.”

Horatio frowned. “But if you think he’ll be there, shouldn’t you want to be as far away from him as possible?”

Archie threw his hands in the air as all the stress and frustration of the last hour exploded. “Of course I don’t want to be there! I’m fucking terrified. But I can survive what he does to me. I know how to live through it.” Even when I don’t want to. “But I don’t know how I’d live with myself if something happened to you.” He took a deep breath and sucked up his pride. “So please, Horatio, don’t go.”

Horatio took Archie’s hand and squeezed it. “I don’t want to leave either. But I don’t see another solution. And when I come back, you’ll call and he’ll never be able to hurt you again.” Horatio hesitated, then continued. “And your last seizure was longer than usual. I have far more reason to worry about your safety while I’m gone than you do to worry about mine. Archie, I need to do this.”

Archie scrubbed a hand over his face. Every cell in his body was screaming at him to hold onto Horatio and not let go. But he was acting like a child. A pathetic, clingy, hysterical weakling. Maybe Horatio was right.

He dropped his hand from his face and turned to meet Horatio’s eyes. He nodded with a shaky smile. “Just . . . be careful, alright? And run or hide if you see him.”

Horatio smiled back and gave his shoulder a tight squeeze. “Of course,” he said, shifting to get up. “Oh! And since you’re unmedicated, I can call Jack Hammond; have him stay with you, just in case.”

“No. Absolutely not,” Archie insisted. “I do not need a 24 hour babysitter.”

Horatio frowned. “But—”

Archie glared daggers at him. “No. I’m not going to have a stranger watch me try not to fall apart.”

Horatio opened his mouth, hesitated, then sighed, his forehead wrinkled with concern. “Fine, Archie, if you insist. But will you at least promise to text Jack if you start having warning signs?”

Archie rolled his eyes. “The Jack Hammond you described as sweet and more than a little incompetent?”

Horatio frowned, then his eyes widened and he took Archie’s hand again. “Archie, he’s trustworthy. You have nothing to fear from him.”

Archie huffed out an irritated breath and looked away, blinking yet more tears away, embarrassed at being so utterly transparent. It grated to be so helpless. All he wanted was for Horatio to stay by his side.

Horatio put a hand on his shoulder to draw him back. “Archie, please.”
Archie wavered, the desperate plea echoing in his ears. He swallowed and turned around to look at Horatio. His wide brown eyes were every bit as beseeching as his words. Archie sighed as the last wisp of his dignity floated out of reach, and rolled his eyes again. “Yes, fine. I’ll text the heroic Mr. Hammond if I’m in grave peril.”

Horatio breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

Archie glared at him and crossed his arms over his chest. “This whole plan is terrible.”

Horatio gave him a brief, sad smile. “But it’s the only one we have.” He leaned forward, broadcasting his movements as he did so, to give Archie a tight hug. “I’ll be back soon,” he whispered. Then he let go and stood up.

A sudden tightness gripped his chest as Horatio prepared to walk away from him. Without conscious thought, his hand shot out and grabbed Horatio’s forearm. “Horatio, wait!”

As Horatio turned to face him, Archie lunged towards him, throwing his arms around him and crushing their mouths together. It didn’t matter that moving hurt, that their lips met with too much momentum, that their noses banged together awkwardly, that this kiss utterly lacked any semblance of grace or elegance or seduction. It only mattered that Archie needed to press all his love and fears into Horatio’s lips, to smash through the barrier between their skin, to be closer to him than was physically possible. To kiss so hard that he would still feel the imprint of Horatio’s lips on his long after Horatio had shut the door.

Long after he was left alone.

Horatio’s initial surprise had briefly frozen him in place, and Archie only gave him only a moment to respond before pulling back. Horatio stared back at him, wide-eyed and more than a little dazed.

“I love you,” Archie said, trying to hide the shaking in his voice.

Horatio smiled fondly and took his hand. “And I you.”

One last, quick kiss, and Horatio was gone.
Horatio sat down in the Indy and turned on the ignition. His heart twinged as he looked back over his shoulder at the flat. Perhaps he should go back inside to make sure Archie was still alright--

He shook his head. He could be far more help to Archie with this short errand than he would be if he hovered over him, trying to gauge his breathing, his pupil size, his anxiety level--

Surely Archie must be going mad with his overprotective tendencies.

Horatio took a deep breath and started driving. He should grab some clothes and Archie’s Xanax as well, just to be safe. It wouldn’t add any time at all. The blue duffle bag was in Archie’s closet. The pills were in the medicine cabinet. The clothes were in the dresser opposite the bed. No need to bring spare pyjamas, toothbrush, or razor. It would only take a few minutes to run in, grab everything, and run out. He would be back home and by Archie’s side in under half an hour.

Horatio gripped the steering wheel a little more tightly. So much could happen in half an hour. What if Archie had another panic attack? Or a seizure? What if Archie wasn’t able to call Jack? Or didn’t try? Or if he did call, and Jack came, but was utterly useless? The coffee table was still out of the way in the kitchen, so there was a space for Archie to lie down on the floor, but what if Jack couldn’t cope with the recovery position? What if Archie stopped breathing?

Horatio drove a little faster. Archie needed the medication. It was the only way to keep him safe. If it was a race against the clock, then that's the way it had to be. And defeat was not an option.

A red light. Horatio glared at the offending traffic light and tapped his fingers impatiently on the steering wheel. This was fine. It was only a short delay. He’d get back before anything horrible could --

*Archie, backed up against the Caird’s desk, eyes wide with terror. Simpson, looming over him, gripping his shoulder, his face only a hair’s breadth away*--

Horatio flinched as the memory slammed into his mind and shook his head, trying to push it away. What would have happened if he hadn’t walked into the room and interrupted them?

No. He had come back in time then, and he would now, too.

The light changed, and he started driving again.

But Archie seemed more worried for Horatio than for himself. Did he really think that Simpson would have tracked down his address? That hardly seemed logical. The library was a much more likely spot for a confrontation.

And if he *did* run into Simpson, he’d run or hide. He had promised Archie. It’s not as though he would be much good at fighting: his fencing skills would be worthless here and he’d never tried to punch anyone before.
Archie’s face, frozen in terror, his eyes glassy and unseeing. Archie, curled in a ball on the floor of the men’s room, trying not to sob as though his heart were breaking. Archie, lips turning blue, his unconscious body arching off the floor as every muscle clenched.

Horatio narrowed his eyes and gripped the steering wheel more tightly. Suddenly, putting his fist through the bastard’s face didn’t seem so daunting.

Horatio pulled up in front of Archie’s building and parked the Indy. He looked at his mobile: 8:20. He needed to be back at the car by 8:30. He could do this.

He got out and started walking toward the staircase, his walk gradually turning into a run as he got closer. He got out his key, then paused in front of the door as a new plan came to him.

He put the key ring back in his pocket and knocked on the door to the left of Archie’s instead. After a few moments, Hannah opened it, looking bleary-eyed, her long blond hair pulled back in a messy low ponytail and wearing an oversized sleepshirt. She took one look at his face and was instantly alert.

“What’s wrong, Horatio?” She craned her head to look on either side of him. “Where’s Archie?”

“He’s at my flat. He--” Horatio paused and took a deep breath, fighting off his guilty conscience. “He has a stalker. His name is Jack Simpson. He followed Archie here from uni and showed up to terrorise him at the library yesterday.”

“Oh, God.”

Horatio nodded. “And he’s--” Horatio struggled to choose a word that wouldn’t completely betray Archie’s trust, “dangerous,” he finally decided.

Hannah’s eyes flashed, then narrowed. “Do you have a picture? I’d like to report him to the police if he shows his face.”

Horatio shook his head. “There wasn’t time. But if you see a tall, thin, unfamiliar man hanging about, call me, call the police, and call Archie, and tell him not to leave the flat.”

Hannah nodded. “Understood.”

“Thanks for your help.” Horatio nodded and turned to go.

“Wait!” Horatio stopped and turned around. “Does Archie know you’re telling me this?”

Horatio stilled, swallowed his guilt, then shook his head.

“Tell him. He needs to know that someone else has his back.” She paused, bit her lip, then continued. “I know a little something about problems like this. Tell him that if he wants to talk, if there’s anything I can do, he can always call or knock.”

Horatio nodded.

“And in future, if there’s another emergency, you can always give me a call, ask me to grab things for him. That way, you don’t have to leave him with someone else.”

Horatio’s stomach clenched with a guilty twist.

“Archie told me where the spare key is in case he had a seizure and the paramedics needed to get in; you knew that, right?”
Horatio cursed internally. How had he forgotten that?

Hannah sighed. “Archie’s alone in your flat, isn’t he?”

Horatio’s anguished expression was answer enough.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Go get what you need. Call me when you get back. Keep me updated.”

Horatio nodded and walked away, focusing on putting one foot in front of another. He had needless endangered Archie, and all because he couldn’t stand to sit by and do nothing. What if Archie had had another seizure and hadn’t gotten help? What if he was d--

No. He was not even going to entertain that possibility.

As he unlocked the door, his hand drifted to his phone. He could call Archie, just to double-check that he was safe. He shook his head and pulled his hand away again. It would only slow him down. He didn’t have the luxury of time.

He stormed through the kitchen and into the bathroom. He flung open the medicine cabinet and found the prescription bottles. He grabbed them from the shelf, closed the cabinet door, and hurried into the bedroom.

He opened up the closet door. Pure chaos greeted him. How did Archie find anything on here? He dug around in a pile of suitcases and bags for the blue duffle bag, before he found it at last, wedged in the back corner next to the laundry bag, and tossed it on the bed. He yanked open dresser drawers and grabbed the first shirts, shorts, and boxers he saw. There was no time to try to remember which combinations Archie frequently used.

Everything packed, he glanced once more around the room. What had had missed? His eyes fell on Archie’s phone charger, its cord draped over the nightstand and running alongside two items Horatio had never seen before: a Shakespearean teddy bear, complete with Renaissance garb, a quill pen in one hand and a bundle of plays in the other, sat placidly on the nightstand, its green velvet hat a little faded and worn, and a printed photo lay propped up in its lap. Horatio picked up the photo to get a closer look: it was of the two of them.

Horatio glared at the mound of monographs in front of him on the dining room table. It had been three hours and he still couldn’t find the one reference he needed to finish this footnote. His jaw hurt from clenching it so tightly, his temple throbbed, and he felt the overwhelming urge to throw his books across the room in frustration.

Archie’s quiet chuckle carried from the other end of the table. He glanced up to see Archie watching him with an amused smile on his face, leaning back in his chair, his book lying open and forgotten in front of him.

“What?” Horatio groused.

Archie stood up, shaking his head, the smile still playing on his lips, and walked to Horatio’s side, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Scoot your chair back?”

Horatio raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

Archie rolled his eyes. “Just do it, Horatio.”

Horatio sighed and pushed his chair back, wincing as the scratching noise it made on the tiles...
reverberated in his pounding skull. “There. Now, what was so--”

He cut himself off as Archie plopped down in his lap, draped his arms around him, and held him tightly, running his hand up and down his back.

After a minute, Horatio felt the muscles in his neck and shoulders start to unclench.

“There,” Archie murmured. “Much better.” He shifted and moved his hands up to Horatio’s temple and started gently massaging the tension away.

Horatio made a soft whimper of pleasure as the muscles around his eyes started to relax. He leaned into the contact, resting his head against Archie’s chest.

Archie chuckled quietly and shifted closer to improve the angle. “You shouldn’t work so hard, Horatio,” he murmured. “I think these muscle knots are trying to apply for permanent residency.”

Horatio rolled his eyes. “It’s fine, Archie, just a headache.”

Gentle lips pressed against his temple, before fingers took over again. “It’s not fine if it’s hurting you. And what’ll you do next semester, when I’m off at filming? Ask Will to take over this task?”

Horatio huffed out a laugh. “Hardly.”

“Oh, he’s not good at giving massages, is he?”

Horatio rolled his eyes again. “I wouldn’t know. He’s not exactly a . . . tactile person.”

Archie’s hands shifted to start massaging his neck and shoulders. “Well, his loss, then.”

They lapsed into silence as Archie worked away on a particularly stubborn knot. After a moment, Archie sighed. “I’m going to miss this,” he murmured.

Horatio pressed his lips together, and braced himself to ask the question he’d been putting off for over a week. “Will you be back to visit?”

Archie’s hands paused. “I’ll try. It depends on the filming schedule. But . . . you could always come visit me. I could see about getting you a behind-the-scenes pass, meet the rest of the cast. I know you don’t like flying, but, maybe with some Kwells, it might not be so bad. And . . . and I don’t much fancy the idea of going for three months without seeing you.” He chuckled quietly, then shifted to run his fingers through Horatio’s curls. “Even a day seems like far too long, actually.”

Horatio swallowed as he pulled back to look into Archie’s eyes. “Are you sure I wouldn’t . . . be in the way?”

Archie rolled his eyes. “Horatio, you could never be in the way. I want to spend time with you.” His amused expression softened into something so affectionate it made Horatio’s heart ache. “As much time as possible, in fact.”

Horatio started to smile as a sense of warmth suffused him from head to toe. It didn’t make any sense—Archie was charming and handsome and confident and was about to be famous—but somehow, Archie somehow wanted this—wished it—to continue past the summer as much as he did! He’d have plenty of time to worry about the logistics later. All that mattered for the moment was that Archie was in his arms, beaming at him like that. Anything in the future would be manageable with Archie by his side. “I’d like that.”
Archie grinned so widely the sun paled in comparison. “Then it’s settled. We’ll find a way.” He leaned in for a kiss, then paused and pulled back, a faint frown on his face.

“Hang on,” Archie said, fumbling in his pocket for his mobile. “I don’t have any pictures of us yet. Do you mind?”

Horatio hesitated. He hated having his picture taken and always tried avoiding looking at photographs of himself at all costs, but, strangely enough, right now, he didn’t seem to object. He smiled and shook his head. “Go ahead.”

Archie beamed again. “Alright then!” He leaned in, their cheeks touching as he held Horatio close, then stuck his mobile in front of them, slightly higher than eye level. “On the count of three! One . . . two . . . three!”

A click, followed by Archie’s bright smile as he looked at the result on his phone. “All set. And I think we’ve done enough work for one day. What do you say we take the evening off?”

Then, warm, loving lips met his once more.

Horatio blinked, coming out of the memory with a crash. Had that only been last week? It seemed almost impossible that they could have gone from carefree laughing and smiling, feeling optimistic about to future, to -- well, to this in so short a time. Would it ever be like that again?

Horatio cursed himself internally. He was losing valuable time reminiscing when Archie needed him. He could think about everything else later, when he was back at home. He grabbed the charger and shoved it in the duffle, hesitated for a moment, then stuck the bear and the photo in as well. Perhaps they would cheer Archie up.

He took one last hurried glance around, then zipped up the duffle, slung it over his shoulder, and walked out of the flat, closing the door behind him.

It was time to go home.

He put the key in the lock and turned it. Soon Archie would be safe in his arms again, and this nightmare would be over. If he broke the speed limit on the way home, he could shave a minute or two off his return trip, and be there in--

“Hello, snotty.”

*That voice.* Horatio whipped around, hoping against hope that he was wrong.

He wasn’t.

Slowly, deliberately, Jack Simpson stepped out of the shadows of the stairway and walked towards him. Simpson looked him up and down, narrowing his eyes as he took in the duffle bag and the key to Archie’s flat in his hand.

“Where is he?” Simpson asked, dripping with affected nonchalance.

“He’s not here,” Horatio managed through gritted teeth.

“So I see,” Simpson said, taking another step. “Hence the question. Don’t make me ask again.”

Horatio’s mind was racing a mile a minute. He didn’t have time to unlock the door, Simpson was blocking the stairwell so he couldn’t run to the car, and even if he did, he couldn’t go home without
leading him to Archie. There was nowhere to run.

“I’m not going to let you hurt him.”

Simpson shook his head. “You have something that belongs to me,” he said, advancing another step. “I want it back.”

Horatio’s attention, which had been split as he tried to come up with a plan, suddenly snapped together again in white hot anger.

“He does not belong to anyone. Now get off his property before I call the police.” He pulled his mobile out of his pocket for Simpson to see.

Simpson sighed. “Ah, snotty. So righteous. So idealistic. No wonder he likes you. But unfortunately—” he knocked the mobile out of Horatio’s hands—” you have no power here. Now,” he said, taking a final step towards Horatio, backing him up against the door, “tell me where that cowering whore is, or I’ll—”

Horatio’s fists had connected with Simpson’s nose before he realised what he was doing.

Simpson reeled back, clutching his face, his eyes wide with shock. Then surprise changed to fury, and his eyes narrowed to livid slits as he stormed towards Horatio. “You’ll regret that,” he yelled.

Horatio tried to make a break for the stairs, but Simpson grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him back against the door to Archie’s flat. “You’re not going anywhere,” he growled, as he pinned him down. “Time to teach you some manners.” He drew his arm back.

Horatio’s eyes closed involuntarily and he braced himself. Nothing could prepare him for the sickening crunch and jarring sensation that rattled his teeth and brain as Simpson’s fist collided with his nose. He spluttered as blood started to gush from his face and to trickle down his throat. His eyes were watering too much for him to see.

A second later, a fist slammed into his solar plexus, driving all the air from his lungs and forcing him to his knees. He tried to suck air in, to make his lungs inflate, but nothing happened.

Before he had time to panic, fingers clenched around his hair at the roots and pulled. He barely registered the pain before the carpeted stairwell was coming toward his face.

“He’s MINE, you bastard, MINE!” Simpson yelled.

Then the ground stopped moving, and the talons let go of his hair. Horatio almost sobbed with relief.

Then he screamed. Pain shot through his arm, the likes of which he had only experienced as a child after falling out of the tree in their front yard.

Simpson removed his booted foot.

“Last chance, snotty. Tell me where he—”

A metallic clang. A thump. Then silence.

“Horatio! Horatio, it's Hannah. Talk to me!”

Gentle fingers touched his wrist.
“Simpson?” he gritted out.

“Unconscious. Handy things, fire extinguishers. The police are on their way. Ambulance, too.”

Horatio grunted in acknowledgement. The world was spinning harder now, even with his eyes closed.

“Archie?” he groaned.

“I’ll call him. He can meet us at hospital.”

“Must --- take -- his medication,” Horatio managed. He couldn't tell the difference between ground and sky anymore.

A faint, wet sounding chuckle. “I’ll make sure of it. He’ll be fine, Horatio. So will you. Rest now, it’s--”

The ringing sound became louder, and everything went black.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Suicidal ideation, eating disorder, hospitals

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Archie glared at his spoon of progressively disintegrating Muesli, watching the milk run off either side, then drip back into the bowl. How had he gotten into a ten-minute long staring contest with his breakfast? He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, opened his mouth, and shoved it in. He chewed, trying to ignore the way the soggy mess turned into ash in his mouth, then swallowed, shuddering as it went down. His stomach lurched, but the food stayed put. He could do this. He could fucking well manage to feed himself. He had to.

He braced himself, then scooped up the next load, eyeing it warily. It was just food. All he had to do was to open up and shove something wet and slick into his mouth--

He shuddered and dropped the spoon into the bowl with a clatter, swallowing hard to keep down the rising nausea.

He thrust the bowl back onto the end table and sank back against the sofa arm with a sigh, his eyes drifting to the entrance of the mudroom.

He should have been the one to go to his flat. His cowardice was putting Horatio in danger--

No. Horatio was right: nothing was going to happen. Simpson didn't know where he lived. Everything would be fine. It was just a quick trip to his flat and back. He was getting carried away. Away.

What if Horatio had wanted to leave the house to get away from him? If he had just held himself together better at the library, then nothing would have changed: Horatio could have continued believing that he was a charming, sexy, funny, confident man who had the occasional nightmare and panic attack, not some worthless, spineless embarrassment who fell apart and flopped about on floors when things got difficult. He should have known it was just a matter of time before Horatio--

No.

No. Horatio loved him. Horatio had looked after him, had tried to help, from the moment they met. Horatio had never given him a reason to think he might cut and run. Horatio would come back. And he would be fine.

Absolutely, completely fine.

He glanced at his watch. It had only been 10 minutes. He could be patient for another 20.

Somehow.

Archie took a deep, slow breath and tried to empty his mind before it ripped itself to shreds. What was it their director at Harrow had always said before starting meditation? Imagine you’re on a
beach? The warm sand weighing you down, the--

“Jack’s missed you, boy”

Archie jerked up to a sitting position, his eyes flying open. He gripped the sofa cushions as hard as he could with one hand while he fumbled for his compass with the other, his breath coming in fast, strangled gasps. Fucking hell, couldn’t his brain just fucking stop already?

He held the cool metal, his fingers stroking along its raised surface, until he had fought down the panic enough to get his lungs to cooperate.

He wasn’t going to fall apart just because Horatio had left.

Horatio. Archie sighed as the dark, bruise-like circles under Horatio’s eyes flitted through his mind. He’d already destroyed Horatio’s belief in the fundamental goodness of people, endangered him by bringing a rapist into their lives, repaid his generosity by being a worthless, broken, fuckup of a boyfriend, and now he’d gotten Horatio dangerously sleep-deprived. Perfect.

And last night--

Archie swallowed and tried to blink back tears and the memory of Horatio, curled up with his arms around his knees, rocking back and forth in an attempt to stifle his sobs, while Archie lay on the floor after the seizure, desperate to reach out and comfort him, and too sick and exhausted to move.

It was his fault Horatio was miserable. He was ruining Horatio’s life. Horatio would be better off without him. His friends, too. He’d already stopped keeping in touch. They’d probably hardly notice. And he was already a disgrace to the Kennedy name anyway, so his family wouldn’t miss him all that much--

Archie groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. No. No, he’d promised himself long ago. He couldn’t do that to them. Any of them. Death was not an option.

Distraction, then. He could find something else to do until Horatio got back. Until . . . that stopped sounding like a viable escape plan.

His eyes darted around the room before falling on the wooden bookcase several feet away. He winced, then sighed. Nothing for it. With a deep breath, he braced himself and pushed himself to his feet. The world wobbled slightly and went a bit gray around the edges, but he stayed up. He managed a faint smile. Depressing as fuck that this was cause for celebration in his life right now, but he’d take what he could get.

Slowly, and through sheer force of will, he crossed over to the bookcase and stared at Horatio’s collection. Navy, navy, more navy, yet more navy. And Don Quixote. Archie shrugged. Nothing else to do. And he still had some rudimentary knowledge of Spanish rattling around in his brain. Along with all of Man of La Mancha.

Well, all of “Impossible Dream,” at least.

He pulled it off the shelf, tottered back to the sofa, and collapsed back on it to try to read the first page.

He reached the bottom, then realised he couldn’t remember a damn thing he’d read. He tried again, dragging his finger under each word to stay anchored to the text.

No use.
He scowled and dropped the book on the end table next to the bowl, regretting it instantly when it made a resounding thwack that reverberated through his entire skull.

How else could he distract himself? He rolled onto his side and pulled his mobile out of his pocket. He flipped idly through the games. Then the books on his Kindle app. It all seemed equally pointless.

He opened iTunes and skimmed through his playlists: “Audition,” “Confidence,” “Cleaning,” “Karaoke,” and “Horatio” glowed on the screen. He scowled again. No, he would rather not hear songs about all the happiness that would always elude his grasp.

Only one option remained, which he hadn’t allowed himself to listen to since hospital. It was helpfully labeled “Fuck it all.”

He hesitated, then jabbed his index finger against the play button.

Peter Gabriel’s cover of “Heroes” began to play.

He closed his eyes and let the familiar, high, dissonant, sustained notes of the strings wash over him. Let the vibrato of the strings pulse through his veins. Let Gabriel’s strained voice, a hair's breadth away from cracking, seep into his bones.

“Though nothing will keep us together--”

Archie swallowed through his suddenly tight throat as he curled into a ball, pressing his knees against his closed eyes.

“Ah we can be heroes, just for one day.”

Archie’s breath hitched, and he shook with the effort of holding back the tears that tried to break loose.

“And we kissed, as though nothing could fall.”

With a choked-off sob, Archie slid off the sofa onto his knees, his head resting on the floor, his arms crossed over his chest, his hands in fists against his shoulders. He lay there, crumpled and shaking, until the music died away, and his tears with it.

He mustered up the strength to hit pause before Johnny Cash’s “Hurt” could start to play, and slid off his knees and onto his arse. He let his head fall back against the sofa cushions and closed his eyes.

At least Horatio hadn’t been here to witness this.

He wiped his eyes with the side of his hand and sniffed. One more minute on the ground, and then he’d find a way to get up and to make himself semi-presentable before Horatio returned. He didn’t want Horatio to worry more than he already did.

His phone rang. He fumbled for it, too tired to even move his head to look for it, before his finger finally brushed against the plastic casing.

He picked it up and glanced at the screen. In big, crisp letters, it read “Hannah Clayton.”

His stomach dropped with a sickening lurch. He forced his shaking fingers to swipe to answer the call.
“Hannah?”

“Archie, how are you feeling?” Hannah’s voice sounded too deliberately calm.

Archie sat bolt upright, adrenaline coursing through his system. “What is it? Is Horatio alright?”

Hannah hesitated. “He’ll be fine. Archie, maybe you should sit--”

The oxygen vanished from the room. “What happened to Horatio?”

Hannah sighed, weariness and strain seeping through the sound. “There’s no good way to say this. Archie, Horatio was ambushed outside your flat. I knocked the bastard out, but not before he’d landed a number of hits. Horatio will be alright, but he’s in rough shape right now. He’s unconscious, and—” The sound of sirens blared over the phone line. “Oh, damn, I’ve got to go, the ambulance just arrived. Police, too. Can you meet us at the A&E? Probably Queen Elizabeth Hospital? I’ll text you to confirm as soon as they tell me. And don’t worry, I’ll be right with him the whole time. He’ll be alright, Archie, I promise.”

Archie was on his feet, disregarding the sudden vertigo that threatened to knock him down again, and stumbling toward the door before Hannah had finished speaking. He grabbed his shoes from the mudroom, ignoring the flare of pain in his shoulder as he bashed it on the doorframe, and locked the door behind him.

“I’m on my way.”

**********

Archie ran a hand through his hair, his foot vibrating against the floor of the cab. This wasn’t real. It was just a continuation of his nightmare. Any second now, he’d hear Horatio urgently calling his name, feel Horatio’s fingers gently stroking his shoulder, pulling him out of hell. This couldn’t happen. Not to Horatio.

But no hand touched his shoulder to bring him back to reality, and he’d already pinched himself hard enough to leave a mark on his wrist. His breath hitched and he shuddered.

He glanced at his phone. 9:01. Why weren’t they going any faster? He looked outside the cab’s windows to the gridlocked traffic that stretched as far as he could see. How had they only travelled a block in the last minute? At this rate, it would be another ten minutes before they reached the A&E Hannah had told him to go to. Was Horatio there already? Was Hannah still with him? Was he conscious? In agony? He must be terrified.

Archie eyed the door handle. Maybe if he tried running there--

Archie shook his head. Just walking to the curb to the call the cab had made his head spin and he’d all but collapsed into it when his legs gave out. He’d keel over after only a few meters if he tried to get there on his own two feet.

He dropped his head into his hands and groaned, then remembered where he was.

“You ok?” the taxi driver asked him, making eye contact in the rearview mirror.

Archie glanced up at him—the ID badge hanging from the window said his name was Amir Nazar—and ran a hand through his hair. “Not particularly. My boyfriend’s just had the shit beaten out of him.”
His pulse started fluttering. Saying it made it suddenly, terrifyingly real. The cab’s walls started to close in. He put a shaking hand in his pocket and clasped the compass in his fingers.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Amir gave him a sympathetic nod. “I’ll have you there as soon as I can.”

Archie managed a faint smile. “Thanks.”

He closed his eyes and tried to get his breathing under control, running his thumb over the compass again.

There must be something he could do to help while he was stuck here. What would Horatio need? What could possibly comfort him? He thought back to the cable car. Will. Steady, reliable Will. Horatio would want him there.

Archie unlocked his phone and scrolled through the contacts. He shook his head slightly to clear it. Horatio was counting on him. He couldn’t afford to fall apart now. He tapped on Will’s name immediately, drumming his fingers quickly on his knee as it rang. His throat started to tighten. What would he even say?

Will answered on the second ring.

“Hello? Archie?”

“Will! Oh, thank God.” The relief of hearing his voice made him tear up again.

“Are you alright?”

“Not really,” Archie said, trying to organise the screaming in his mind into coherent sentences. “It’s Horatio. He was attacked; beaten up badly. He's in an ambulance on his way to the A&E; Queen Elizabeth Hospital.”

“One moment.” The sounds through the phone became muffled: Will must have put a hand over the microphone. “Victoria? Horatio’s in hospital. Can you drive us there?” A moment later, the sound quality became clearer again. “We’ll be on our way in twenty minutes. Should be there in under an hour, depending on traffic.”

Archie almost sighed in relief. At least Horatio would have Will by his side soon. It would never make up for what he had done, but it was the only thing he had to offer.

“Is there anything we should bring? Anything either of you need?”

A time machine? A world where Simpson didn’t exist? He shook his head and tried to focus. What else would Horatio want? “H -- his father. But I --” He cleared his throat to try to cover up the hitch in his voice. “--I don't know how to reach him.” God, what kind of a pathetic boyfriend am I?

“I have his number. I’ll call on the way.”

Archie nodded. Will was dependable. Trustworthy. A part of Horatio’s family. Not a dangerous coward of a boyfriend who had landed Horatio in hospital. “Good. That’s good.” Archie swallowed hard.


Archie almost snorted with the ridiculousness of it all. Thinking of his well being was what had endangered Horatio.
“You too. Drive safe.” He hung up and dropped his head back in his hands. Should he call Hannah? No, Hannah would probably be keeping Horatio calm or talking to the hospital staff. She was helping. Unlike him.

This never should have happened. This wasn’t Horatio’s battle. Horatio had only been there because of him. He had endangered Horatio. He might as well have struck the blow himself. Would Horatio even want to see him? Horatio should hate him, he didn’t deserve Horatio, he wasn’t safe to be around--

Archie’s hand spasmed as his chest tightened, and the phone slipped to the floor with a quiet clatter. The police. If he’d only called the police before Horatio had left, if he’d only been less of a coward, he could have kept Horatio safe, could have saved him from the pain, the trauma, the--

Simpson throwing Horatio against the wall and pinning him, his forearm against his throat. Simpson wrenching him around, pressing his face against the wall as the sound of a zipper echoed as loudly as a gunshot--

Archie jerked as his mind slammed back into his body. The cab was taking on a grayish tinge, his chest was slowly being crushed, he couldn’t get enough air, he--

He closed his eyes and forced himself to take a deep, shuddering breath. He slowly bent over to pick up his phone, his hands almost shaking too hard for his fingers to work. He had to hold himself together. At least until he knew if Horatio was safe. Or would speak to him again.

The cab jerked to a stop. He whipped his head up and out the window. The A&E loomed before him. He grabbed his wallet from his back pocket and pulled out the only bill he had--a 20 pound note--for a 10 pound fare. “Keep the change.” He thrust it into Amir’s hands, opened the door, and hurried into the hospital.

He saw Hannah through the glass door immediately. She was sitting in the waiting room, leaning forward, elbows resting on thighs, staring at her clasped hands. She looked up when the door opened with a hiss, then jumped up and hurried to him to wrap him in a tight hug.

“How is he? Where is he? Can I see him?”

Hannah hesitated, then frowned. “I heard shouting, so I called the police. I crept outside, saw a man beating Horatio, snuck up behind him with a fire extinguisher, and knocked him in the head with it. He’s under arrest now.”
Archie swallowed and looked away. He couldn’t even bring himself to be relieved that Simpson would finally be behind bars. Not if this was the cost. He should have been the one to end it. Not Horatio. Not Hannah. Instead, he had risked everyone. “Thanks for stopping him. And for looking after Horatio.”

“I’m just glad I was there,” Hannah responded, her voice gentle. She hesitated. “Archie, Horatio told me that Simpson had been stalking you. I’m sorry you’ve had to deal with that. I . . . know a little of what that’s like, if you ever want to talk.”

Archie managed a faint nod before his mind filled with static. Horatio had told her without his permission. But it might have saved his life. But what if telling her had slowed Horatio down, which was why Simpson had intercepted him? Then it was doubly his fault, first for needing the meds, and again for slowing him down.

“And Archie?” She paused long enough that he looked up. “There’s one more thing.” She took a deep breath. “Because Simpson was unconscious, they needed to check him for a concussion, make sure there’s no permanent damage. He’s here, in a private room. They promised me he’d be far from Horatio and handcuffed to his bed. You won’t see him, and neither will Horatio, but I thought you should know.”

Archie’s chest became painfully tight as his mind started spinning. Simpson was here, he was where Horatio was, and what if he broke free and found him, or found Horatio, and--

The rustle of fabric sliding across the floor jolted him out of his thoughts. He blinked. His blue duffle bag was on the ground in front of him.

It had splatters of blood on it.

Horatio’s blood.

“--told Horatio I’d make sure you took your medication,” Hannah was explaining. “He said they’re in there.”

He stared at the bag. He didn’t want to take the fucking pills. They were the reason Horatio was in here.

Well, they were the catalyst. He was the reason.

“Archie?” He blinked again. Hannah was eyeing him intensely, her forehead wrinkled with concern. “I’ll be right back with some water. Why don’t you dig them out in the interim?”


A clear plastic cup appeared in his hands.

“Alright, then. Have a sip of water first. Would you like me to get the pills for you?”

Archie shrugged, unable to tear his eyes away from the evidence of what he had done.

A little orange prescription bottle floated in front of him.

“Is this the right one?”

He glanced at the label, then nodded and returned to staring at the bag.
The bag moved, and Hannah squatted down in front of him where the bag had been. He blinked and brought his eyes up to her face.

“Archie, I know this is a horrible situation, but skipping your medication isn’t going to help.”

Archie’s gaze drifted down to the floor.

“Archie, Horatio made me promise to get them to you. It was the last thing he said before he collapsed. Knowing him, it’ll be the first thing he asks about when he wakes up. Now, do you want to be the one to tell him that you didn’t take them?”

Archie swallowed. This was disgraceful. Horatio had risked his life to bring him these pills, and here he was, repaying that sacrifice by hurting Horatio still more. He had to take it.

He opened the bottle, dumped one into his hand, and glared at it. It seemed to glare back, as though daring him to go through with it. *It’s inanimate, you demented moron.* He closed his eyes, tossed it in his mouth, and chased it down with water.

He swallowed, then scowled. What the fuck was his problem, refusing to take his medicine like a petulant child? Hannah must be regretting ever having taken him under her wing in the first place.

“Archie? Look at me for a second?”

He blinked, then lifted his head. Why was it so heavy?

“Archie, this isn’t your fault.”

He stared at her, unblinkingly, before huffing out a humourless laugh and looking away. “Right.”

“Archie, I promise. None of this is your--”

“Guests of Horatio Hornblower?”

Archie bolted out of his seat towards the woman who had just spoken and who was standing in front of the door to the A&E, glancing around the waiting room expectantly.

“Yes. We’re here,” he said, as Hannah came up behind him. “How is he?”

“I’m Nurse Rashidi. I’ll be taking care of Horatio for today. We just finished the x-rays, and the open fracture in his forearm is the only break. It shouldn’t take too long to realign and anchor the bones. He should be ready to receive visitors in another few hours or so, so if you want to come back then--”

Archie’s heart stopped beating. “He needs surgery?” The room began to tilt. *He’ll never forgive me.*

“It’s alright, Archie. He’s not in any danger.” A gentle pressure on his shoulder anchored him again. He glanced up. Hannah was standing by his side.

“Oh, are you Archie?” Nurse Rashidi asked. “He’s been asking for you ever since he woke up.” She hesitated, glanced at her watch, then smiled. “Tell you what, why don’t you come with me? Say a quick hello before the operation starts?” She opened the door to the wards and gestured at him to come through.

Hannah smiled. “I’ll wait for you out here. Give him my regards.”
Archie nodded distractedly, steeled himself, straightened his shoulders, put his shaking hands in his pockets, and followed Nurse Rashidi through the door, down the corridor, and into the third ward on the right. It was wrong, it was utterly, horribly, nauseatingly wrong that Horatio would still want to see him. Horatio should be doing everything in his power to keep them apart. Was Horatio only asking for him because he wanted to break up? Archie’s stomach lurches. If Horatio had something to say to him, then he would hear it, even if it was goodbye.

Nurse Rashidi stopped in front of a bed mostly blocked off from view by the curtain that surrounded it.

“He’s in there,” Nurse Rashidi said quietly. “I’ll be back to check on him in a few minutes. Take your time.”

Archie braced himself, then gently pulled the curtain aside.

Horatio was lying on the raised cot, the pale periwinkle and white hospital gown heightening the deathly pallor of his skin. His face was mottled with bruises and cuts, from the newly dried blood crusting along the center of his lower lip, to the gash above his eyebrow, sewn shut with a few stitches, to his swollen nose and the discolorations on his cheek and forehead. His right arm was hooked up to an IV, and his left was carefully wrapped in a white splint. Horatio was staring in the direction of his feet with a deep frown and a glassy, vacant expression.

Archie blinked repeatedly as his eyes started to prickle with tears and his chest started to ache. It should have been him in pain and hooked up to those machines, not Horatio.

Horatio glanced up at the sound of the curtain and his expression went from surprise to shock to relief. “Oh thank God! Archie!” He struggled to sit up.

In an instant, Archie was at his side with a hand on his shoulder, gently pressing him back down. “Jesus fucking Christ, Horatio, don’t move! You’ll injure yourself more. It’s ok, it’s alright. I’m right here.” He took Horatio’s right hand and stroked it with his thumb, being careful not to jostle the IV.

“It’s not alright. I promised you I’d be right back and then I didn’t come back. I left you! You were right! It wasn’t safe and I didn’t listen, and I’m so sorry!”

What?

It must be the concussion. That was the only explanation. “Horatio, no, love, this isn’t your fault at all.” It’s mine. “Don’t torture yourself. I’m fine, I’m here, so you don’t need to worry. Just rest now.”

Horatio still looked like he was on the verge of tears. “You’re really alright?”

Well, I’m not dead. “I’m really alright. Don’t worry about me. Focus on you.”

Horatio was still frowning. “Did you take your medication? Hannah said she’d give it to you.”

Archie huffed out a laugh and blinked furiously to try to keep his eyes dry. He’d give Hannah a proper thanks after. “Yes, I took it.”

Horatio breathed a loud sigh of relief and sank back slightly onto the bed, his eyes closed. “Good,” he said. “That’s good.” He looked back up at Archie, suddenly smiling as though a great mystery had been uncovered. “You’re safe now.”
Archie’s smile wavered then crumbled completely. “But you’re not,” he managed. “That’s not any better. Horatio, I’m so sorry.” He swallowed and blinked harder. He couldn’t cry in front of Horatio. Horatio needed him to be strong. But the tears fell anyway. Of course even his eyes would let him down. They were a part of him, after all.

“Don’t be sorry! I’ll be fine.” Horatio let go of Archie’s hand and reached up to try to wipe Archie’s tears away. His hand drifted left by a few points and booped him on the nose instead. He stared at his thumb for a moment as though it had let him down unforgivably, then looked back at Archie, tilting his head and frowning. “I think my coordination may be off.”

Archie found himself smiling despite himself. “You have a concussion. And I think you’re on rather heavy duty pain meds.”

Horatio nodded slowly, apparently satisfied. “That would explain it.”

Archie wiped his tears away and tried to focus. What had helped him during his stint in hospital? He opened the door in his mind that he usually tried to keep shut, disregarding the way it made him feel as though he would shake out of his skin. He remembered Izzy holding his hand. Alastair reading to him. Tamsin and Charlie bringing him Shakespeare adaptations on DVD. “Oh, Horatio? Will is on his way. He wants to see you. Your Dad, too.”

Horatio frowned. “I don’t want to worry them. Tell them not to worry?”

*How am I supposed to do that? I’m fucking terrified.* He managed a smile and squeezed Horatio’s hand. “Ok. I promise I’ll tell them.”

Horatio nodded, temporarily satisfied. Then he perked up and glanced at Archie again, another large smile on his face. “Archie! You’ll get to meet my father!”

Archie’s heart skipped a beat. Could there be a worse way to meet the man you had once dreamed might be your in-law? *Hello, Sir, nice to meet you. I’m the reason your son is in the A&E. By the way, I have epilepsy, PTSD, and a panic disorder. Exactly what you’ve always wanted for your precious child.* “Um, yes. Yes I will. That’ll be . . . good.”

Horatio frowned. “Don’t be worried, Archie! He’ll love you!”

*No, Horatio, I can absolutely guarantee that he won’t.* “I hope so.”

The curtain rustled behind them and Archie did his best not to jump.

Nurse Rashidi walked in. “Just need to check his vitals,” she said with a smile.

Archie nodded. “Of course.” He turned back to Horatio. Horatio hadn’t said a single word about how he was doing; he was too focused on making sure Archie was alright. Archie’s stomach churned. He didn’t deserve this compassion. “H--how are you feeling?”

Horatio tilted his head. Archie could practically see the methodical inventory he was trying to conduct, the meds slowing his brain down to a quarter speed. “My arm feels odd. So does my face.” Then he frowned. “I’d probably get blood on you if I kissed you,” he announced very seriously.

Archie glanced up to see Nurse Rashidi trying valiantly not to laugh out loud. Horatio might be embarrassed about this little display later, but right now, he needed comfort and wasn’t afraid of receiving it. “Well, here,” he said, bending over to kiss Horatio’s forehead on a spot that looked uninjured. “And here,” he said, kissing the hand he was holding. “Until you’re up for something
Horatio’s grin came back immediately and he squeezed Archie’s hand faintly. He looked up to where Nurse Rashidi was poking at the equipment. “S’my boyfriend.”

Nurse Rashidi gave them an amused, knowing smirk. “So I gathered. And sorry, love birds, but I’m going to have to take him now. He’ll be back soon.”

Horatio looked up at her in alarm. “Isn’t Archie coming?”

Archie squeezed his hand again and Horatio looked back at him. “No, love, not right now. But I’ll see you soon. I promise.”

“You’ll be asleep the whole time,” Nurse Rashidi pitched in. “You won’t even notice he’s not there.”

Horatio frowned slightly. “Alright. I’ll see you soon?”

Archie’s eyes started burning, and he fought to hold the tears off for just a minute more. “See you soon, love.” He leaned over to kiss Horatio on the forehead one last time.

Nurse Rashidi turned a knob on the IV stand, and Horatio’s eyelids fluttered, then drifted shut. She glanced at the screen, then nodded, clearly pleased with whatever the little numbers meant. “If you’ll just return to the waiting room, we’ll tell you when he’s back. Should take a few hours. He’ll be right as rain soon.”

Archie nodded, and watched from the doorway as she wheeled Horatio down the hall, through a door, and out of sight.

He turned on his heels, walked through the corridor, out the door into the waiting room, past Hannah who stood up when she saw him, and straight into the toilets. He locked the door, collapsed on his arse on the floor with his back pressed against the tiled walls, and sobbed, covering his mouth with his hand so no one could hear.

Chapter End Notes

The songs mentioned in this chapter:
Peter Gabriel’s "Heroes": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsvuipGq2ns
Johnny Cash's "Hurt": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vt1Pwfnh5pc
"The Impossible Dream": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGzqbEeVWhs
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings: Eating disorders, hospitals, panic attack

North, East, South, West. North, East, South, West.

Archie ran his thumb across the compass in his pocket and tried to stop shaking. Horatio would be alright. He had to be. It had only been an hour since he’d gone into surgery. And these types of operations weren’t supposed to be dangerous. So the realignment would be a success, and then Horatio would wake up, and he’d be alright--

What if he didn’t wake up?

Archie fumbled the compass as his fingers started to shake harder. His chest began to tighten, there wasn’t enough air, he--

Fuck. Not again. He couldn’t disappear for another crying jag and panic attack in the toilets. Hannah was already starting to look suspicious. He couldn’t make her worry.

He didn’t deserve her concern.

He closed his eyes and tried to breathe slowly, in through his nose and out through his mouth. He could pretend everything was fine. He had to, for Horatio.

If only the room would stop spinning, he could--

“--Archie?” Hannah’s voice shattered his thoughts.

He jumped, his eyes flying open to assess the threat, then tried not to wince at Hannah’s concerned expression. So much for his acting skills. He blinked and tried to focus. Had she been saying something? “W-what?” Fucking hell, Archie, keep it together. Stop stuttering.

The furrow in Hannah’s brow grew deeper. “--I said, I was going to get something to eat from the cafeteria. Are you sure you don’t want anything? Some tea? A muffin?”

Archie shook his head as his stomach lurched. “Not hungry.”

Hannah frowned. “It’s really no trouble at all. And Archie, I really think you should try to--”

She stopped short, then glanced down at her pocket, which had started glowing and vibrating, and took out her phone. She frowned at the number, then hesitated. “I should take this,” she said apologetically, before swiping to answer. “Hello?” A pause. “Yes, speaking.” Another pause, then she glanced over at Archie. “Ah, yes. Thank you for calling. Tomorrow might work better for that, actually. We’ll be at hospital for awhile longer.”

Archie raised an eyebrow at her. Hannah hesitated, frowned, then mouthed the word “police” at him.
The oxygen disappeared from the room.

He closed his eyes and tried to force himself to breathe, pressing his thumb more forcefully against the raised compass points. What was he afraid of? Simpson couldn’t hurt him anymore. Not physically, at least. And it wasn’t just his word against Simpson; there was definitive evidence. Eyewitness accounts. It wouldn’t be like it had been with Eccleston or Keene.

A bitter little voice inside insisted it would be just like that.

He shook his head. He was being selfish. He couldn’t keep quiet any longer. Not when Horatio had paid the price--

Oh, God. Will. Will had been counting on him to look after Horatio. But he’d fucked that up, too, and hurt Horatio instead. Will would be furious at him. And rightly so.

“Right. Thank you, Officer Bowles. We’ll be in touch.” Hannah pocketed the phone. “Archie? What can I get you?”

The hiss of the automatic doors made him look up. Will was standing in the doorway, worry lines etched on his face, his shoulders in full military posture. He scanned the waiting room, then caught sight of Archie and walked straight towards him.

Archie stood up to meet him. The world went slightly black around the edges, but he managed not to sway as Will drew near.

“How is he?” Will asked. “Any news?”

Archie shook his head as everything came more or less back into focus. “Not since I texted you. He’s still in surgery.”

Will frowned. “Did they say how long the surgery would last?”

Archie shook his head again. “Just that we’d get to see him in a few hours.”

Will nodded, then paused and narrowed his eyes. “How are you?”


Will gave him a faint smile. “We came as soon as we could.”

We? Oh, of course. Will’s sister.

The glass doors opened again, and a woman rushed in, her expensive grey suit and impeccably manicured hands at odds with the neon green headband that held back her fringe. She must have been getting ready for work when Will had told her the news. And then she missed work to come straight here.

“Sorry for the delay; it took a minute to find a place to park. What’s the news? How’s Horatio?”

“No change,” Will said. “Still waiting. Victoria, this is Archie. Archie, this is my sister, Victoria.”

“Archie, it’s good to meet you,” she said with a sad smile as she stuck out her hand.

Archie tried to force his features to resemble a smile, although the required muscles didn’t appear to be working. “And you,” he managed as he shook her hand, forcing his fingers to stop trembling. “And Will, you remember Hannah? Victoria, this is Hannah Clayton, my neighbor.” He swallowed
down his pride. “She’s the one who saved Horatio,” he added as the two women shook hands.

Will nodded his appreciation. “The hero of the hour.”

Archie’s stomach lurched. A hero. Everything he’d never be. He plunged his hand back into his pocket and clutched the compass.

Hannah gave Will a sad, crooked smile, and shook her head. “Just glad I was there, really.” She gestured to her right. “Help yourself to a seat. We’ll have some time yet before they call us back.”

Will nodded, then sat on Archie’s right, with Victoria on his other side.

“So, what exactly happened? Was it a mugging gone wrong?” Victoria asked.

Archie swallowed as his throat suddenly became painfully tight and dry. He couldn’t tell them the truth; what would Will think? Or Victoria? He’d just met her, for fuck’s sake. And they were in public. But he had to say something, he was taking too long, oh, fucking hell, there was no way out of this, what could he do--

Will leaned forward. “Archie?” he asked quietly.

Archie rubbed a hand over his face, then took a deep shaky breath as his gaze dropped to the floor. Oh fucking hell. Fine. “Simpson’s been . . . stalking me at RADA, despite my attempts to report him. He showed up at the library yesterday, and today, he was lying in wait at my flat. Horatio was there getting my anticonvulsant meds--ironic, really, since Simpson gave me the head injury that caused epilepsy in the first place--” He shook his head. He needed to stop running at the mouth. None of that mattered. “Anyway, he beat the shit out of Horatio—” it should have been me, not him. “And here we all are.” And it’s all my fault.

He braced himself for the aftermath.

There was only silence.

Well, shit, this is it. It’s over. Horatio’s practically family to them, and I’ve hurt him. Will will hate me. Should hate me. Victoria, too. I’ve ruined everything.

Archie risked a glance up. Will’s jaw was set with a stony expression Archie couldn’t translate, Victoria’s hand was covering her mouth, and Hannah’s eyes were wet and shining.

“Oh, God,” Victoria said at last. “I’m so sorry.”

How could she be sorry for him? He had no right to her compassion. He wasn’t the victim here, he was the cause; this was all his fault, and it was wrong, it was an insult to Horatio, it was—

“—Archie?”

Archie started, his heart hammering and his head pounding as a crushing pressure built up in his chest.

“—Archie?” Will said again. Archie forced himself to turn and look at him. “I’m glad they caught the bastard. And Horatio’s going to be alright.”

No. Not Will, too.

His hands shook and his lungs tightened as the high-pitched screeching blared in his ears. He needed to get out.
Archie stood up so quickly his chair wobbled and the world briefly went black. “H--Hannah, you said you were hungry. I’ll go get us some snacks from the cafeteria.”

Hannah raised an eyebrow. “Archie, let me do it. You look like you’re about to keel over.”

He shook his head and tried to keep his breath from catching too noticeably. “Could do with some moving about. Back in a bit.” He picked a direction at random and started to walk out of the waiting room, forcing himself not to run.

“I’ll come, too. Help you carry things back.”

_Fucking hell. Will. Of course it was Will._

“Fine,” he managed, and made himself to wait for Will to catch up instead of disappearing to the nearest toilet to hide like the coward he was. He’d have to hold himself together a little longer. Had to keep Will from finding out. He stuck his hand in his pocket and ran his thumb over the compass again. He was alright. He was safe. Simpson wasn’t here. Except Simpson was, in this very hospital, and had almost killed Horatio, and it should have been him instead, why hadn’t it been him—

“Oh, Archie?” Will pointed up. Archie blinked and stared at the sign. The word “Cafeteria” swam into focus, with an arrow pointing in the opposite direction to the path of his retreat.

_Fuck._

“This way,” Will said, tilting his head to gesture in the right direction, and they began their trek.

They walked down a long white corridor dotted with closed wooden doors. What if Simpson was behind one of them?

His shoulders shook as the walls began to close in around him. He swallowed hard to force down the rising panic and tried to focus. One foot in front of the other. Step by step. Horatio was counting on him. Nothing else mattered.

“How are you feeling?”

Archie started, then had to blink for a few seconds until the world came back into focus. “W--what? Fine. I’m fine.”

Will raised an eyebrow.

Archie tried to flash him a smile. “Everything’s ship-shape.”

Will frowned. “Archie--”

_Goddamn it. You’re an actor. Hold it together. “I’m fine, ok?” Archie gritted out._

Will hesitated, shifted awkwardly, then shrugged. “Alright,” he said at last, and walked by Archie’s side in silence.


“--Archie? What would you like? Should we get some apples, do you think?”
Archie blinked. Shelves. A counter. They were in the cafeteria.

He nodded. “A—apples. Yes. Good.”

“Snack bars, too, perhaps? And some croissants? What about some water bottles?” Will added, as he picked up the items.

Archie blinked again as Will’s face started to blur. “Hmm? Oh. Fine.” He grabbed two water bottles from the shelf in front of them, then followed Will to the register. The cashier scanned their purchases in silence.

“That’ll be £20, please,” she said at last.

Archie reached for his wallet.

Will put out a hand to stop him. “My treat.”

Archie shook his head. He couldn’t let Will pay. Not on top of everything else. “S’on me,” he said, and shoved his card into the machine to pay for the whole lot.

Will grabbed both plastic bags from the counter while Archie was putting his credit card back in his wallet.

Archie raised an eyebrow.

Will shrugged. “You paid. It’s only fair.”

Archie sighed and rolled his eyes, then followed Will back toward the corridor. Each step felt like moving through treacle. Had his legs felt this heavy on the walk over?

Will glanced over his shoulder, frowned, then slowed down slightly. Archie gritted his teeth and tried to walk faster. If only the effort didn’t make the world swim quite so much.

“Anything you want to talk about?” Will said after a few minutes.

Archie glanced over, eyebrow raised. “Thought you didn’t do that.”

Will frowned. “Do what?”

Archie shrugged. “Talk.”

Will huffed out a quiet laugh. “I don’t, generally speaking. But I’m happy to listen.”

Archie shook his head. “Nothing to say.” Nothing you’d understand, at least.

Will dipped his head. “Alright.”

They lapsed into silence again.

Inhale for four steps, exhale for four steps. Inhale for--

A loud wooden bang echoed behind them.

Archie spun around and froze, eyes wide and heart racing.

“Just a door closing further down the corridor, I should think. Nothing related to us.”
Archie blinked. He was standing as rigid as a board, staring back down the empty corridor as though it were about to let loose an army of orcs and maybe a Balrog or three. He took a few deep breaths and the high-pitched buzzing in his ears began to fade. Will’s words finally sank in. He swallowed hard. “Y--yes, of course. Just a bit on edge.”

Will nodded. “Only natural, under the circumstances.”

More unwarranted compassion. Archie’s gut twisted.

Archie closed his eyes and tried to get his pulse to slow down. Simpson was still handcuffed to a hospital bed somewhere, not lying in wait behind every door. What the fuck was he doing, jumping at shadows in front of Will? Will, who didn’t have flashbacks, who didn’t have PTSD, despite losing a limb. Will must already think he was a coward. And he didn’t know the half of it.

He winced, then glanced over at Will, who was staring at the ground, his forehead creased in thought. Will shifted his weight, hesitated, frowned some more, then looked at Archie. “Archie, I--”

Fuck.

“--We ought to be getting back,” Archie interrupted.

Will hesitated then nodded. “Alright,” he said, his frown deepening.

They walked in silence again until they reached the waiting room.

Archie paused at the threshold to watch the scene before them. Victoria was now sitting next to Hannah instead of three seats away, and they’d turned their chairs to face each other. Hannah was sitting cross-legged, nodding and leaning forward to catch Victoria’s every word. Victoria was smiling, eyes shining as she related some anecdote, gesturing while holding the green headband in her hand.

Archie’s lips quirked up into a crooked faint smile. At least something good was coming out of this nightmare.

He glanced over at Will, who was watching them, too, an eyebrow raised and a hint of wry amusement flitting over his features. Will met his look, then nodded towards the others with a smile. “Shall we?”

Archie braced himself, nodded, and followed Will to where the rest of the group was waiting.

“What luck?” Hannah asked.

Archie nodded and faked a smile as he handed over his bag to Hannah. “A veritable feast . . . of fruit and snack bars. Help yourselves.” He pulled up a chair to her left.

Will handed Victoria his bag and then pulled out his chair, completing their small circle. “So, having a nice chat?” he asked Victoria, his voice disarmingly innocent.

Victoria raised an eyebrow as she turned to face him. “Yes, thanks, William.” She fixed Will with a Look that was similar to the glare Archie had given Izzy when she’d visited him at Harrow four years ago and had laughingly offered to tell his date, Sean, about his drunken antics at Hogmanay earlier that year.

Archie began to smile, the memory of happier times reducing the pressure in his chest.
“It seems we both have tickets to the Honeyblood concert in Victoria Park later this summer,” Hannah said with a smile as she pulled a pastry from the bag.

“You’re outvoted, Will.” Victoria grinned as she rummaged around in her bag. “Sorry, but it’s official. All-female indiepop-punk bands are actually good.”

Will shook his head in mock-disappointment. “And what prompted this revelation?” he asked as he unscrewed the lid of his water bottle.

Victoria glanced over at Hannah with a tilted smile. “How did we get to music?”

Hannah grinned back. “Via our jobs, I think. I mentioned “Gin-Soaked Sot” and the pub, which led to a discussion of Archie’s phenomenal karaoke routine--”

“--Which I’d heard about, because Will had described it to me in great detail,” Victoria finished, glancing over at Will with a positively gleeful glint in her eyes.

Will froze, the water bottle still against his lips, then swallowed, brought it away from his mouth, and carefully put the cap back on. He shifted in his seat. “It was a good performance,” he said with a faint smile.

“Yes it was,” Hannah replied. “I’ll keep hoping for an encore.”

“Let me know when it happens. I’ll put it in my calendar,” Victoria offered. “If your singing is half as impressive as Will’s suggested, I shouldn’t miss it.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence,” Archie said. Not that he’d get the chance once they’d learned the truth.

He swallowed and glanced over to the door to the wards as his pulse started to race again.

“He’ll be alright, Archie,” Hannah soothed. “He’ll be well looked after here.”

But he shouldn’t even be here. He’s only here because of me, because I endangered him, I hurt him, and--

A rustle of plastic. Archie blinked and looked around for the source of the sound. Will was holding the bag of food out to him. “You haven’t had any yet.”

“Ah, right. Good point.” Archie managed a smile as he took the bag, and tried not to hold it at arm’s length as though it were a grenade about to detonate.

He peered in the bag. The options stared back. His stomach lurched.

He glanced around. Everyone else had started eating. Any second now, someone would notice he wasn’t. And then he’d have to explain why he couldn’t, and then they’d know about Simpson, and they couldn’t know. Not right now.

So he had to do this.

His heart started to race. He braced himself, took a deep breath, and suppressed a shudder as he stuck his hand into the bag and closed his fingers around the first thing he touched. He pulled out a snack bar and put the plastic bag at his feet.

He glanced around again. No one was watching. He eyed the snack bar suspiciously. Maybe he could try just one bite. How hard could it--
“Open up, boy. This--”

Archie blinked, his stomach roiling as his hands started to shake, and he shoved the snack bar in his pocket. It crinkled loudly.

Will glanced over at his pocket, then at him, and raised an eyebrow.

Oh no. Oh, fuck, no, Will would make him--

His other pocket vibrated. He started, his heart hammering.

He pulled his phone out and read the name on the screen. It was Izzy.

Not Simpson.

Not a policeman.

Not an emergency.

But should he answer? They’d hardly spoken since he’d moved to Greenwich. . . mainly because he’d been ignoring her calls.

But what if she figured out something was wrong? What if she pressed for details? What if she learned the truth?

He couldn’t let that happen. No one else could know.

Archie glanced over at the group again.

Will was staring in mute disbelief at a snack bar Victoria had just placed in his hand, which the label proudly proclaimed to be a banana, chia seed & multi seed N’eat bar, 100% natural and wheat-free. He looked back at his sister, eyebrow raised, his dry, tilted smile taking on a fond note. “Really?”

Victoria grinned. “Just try it. At least it’s not turnip-flavored.”

Will rolled his eyes. “Might be an improvement.” He rolled his eyes and started to open the wrapper.

Archie looked back at the phone as waves of homesickness crashed over him, the screen blurring as his eyes prickled with tears. Hearing Iz’s voice right now was exactly what he needed.

“I should take this,” he said, brandishing his phone, then stood up and successfully walked outside despite his vision briefly clouding over.

“Hello,” he answered when he’d cleared the doors.

“You do still exist!” Izzy teased.

Archie winced. That hit a bit too close to home. “So it seems. How’s revising going?”

“Well, it’s coming along. By which I mean that it’s terrifying and stressful, but I’m keeping to my schedule.”

He managed a faint smile. No problems from that quarter, then. “That’s great, Iz,” he said, glancing back over his shoulder at the waiting room.
There was a pause. “Archie? You ok?”

“Hmm? Oh, just a bit distracted. So, what’s the occasion?”

Archie could hear her frown over the phone.

“Well, Mum told me that you and Horatio had decided to visit at the end of the summer so I wanted to see if I could crash the party, but never mind that now. What’s wrong?”

He winced internally. This was exactly why he’d stopped answering her calls. Maybe he could still deflect her suspicion? “What makes you think something’s wrong?” he asked half-heartedly.

Her raised eyebrow carried over the phone as clearly as in any video chat. “Apart from the fact that you only answer a question with a question when there is? Or that you only call me Iz if you’re very upset or very happy, and you’re clearly not the latter?”

Archie hesitated. He could keep avoiding her and this conversation.

But he didn’t want to.

It didn’t make sense. He should hang up before he let anything else slip. Should handle it all on his own.

He turned to look into the windows of the waiting room. Will pointed at the green headband which now lay in Victoria’s lap, eyebrow raised with wry amusement, probably teasing her about bringing it by accident. Victoria rolled her eyes, said something in response, then snatched up the headband and plopped it on Will’s head, before leaning back, arms across her chest, lips twitching as she admired her handiwork. Will glanced up at his hair, shrugged, and turned to say something to Hannah. Victoria took a picture of Will with the headband, her smile bright and wide.

“--Archie?” Izzy’s worried voice broke his resolve.

He took a deep breath, ran a hand over his face, then sighed. “Horatio’s in hospital. Some bastard attacked him, broke his arm. He’s in surgery right now. I’m here waiting to be allowed to see him.”

Izzy gasped. “Oh, God, Archie. That’s terrible! I’m so sorry. Are you alright? What can I do?”

“Nothing, thanks. It’s under control. Just a really crap day.”

“Of course. Let me know if you want me to call Tamsin to prosecute the shit who did this. Did they catch him? Who was he? What did he want?”

Archie’s heart stopped, the words hitting him like a fist. His legs turned to jelly and he half-stumbled his way to the bench by the overhang. He sat down heavily and leaned forward, bracing his forearms on his thighs, as he struggled to catch his breath.

“Irregular?” Izzy’s voice broke his resolve.

He took a deep breath, ran a hand over his face, then sighed. “Horatio’s in hospital. Some bastard attacked him, broke his arm. He’s in surgery right now. I’m here waiting to be allowed to see him.”

Izzy gasped. “Oh, God, Archie. That’s terrible! I’m so sorry. Are you alright? What can I do?”

“Nothing, thanks. It’s under control. Just a really crap day.”

“Of course. Let me know if you want me to call Tamsin to prosecute the shit who did this. Did they catch him? Who was he? What did he want?”

Archie’s heart stopped, the words hitting him like a fist. His legs turned to jelly and he half-stumbled his way to the bench by the overhang. He sat down heavily and leaned forward, bracing his forearms on his thighs, as he struggled to catch his breath.

“Irregular?”

He blinked repeatedly, his eyes stinging at the quiet compassion in her voice, then took out his compass and ran his fingers over the textured surface, his thumb lingering on the northern-most point. He took a deep, shaking breath, then swallowed. “Simpson,” he said at last.

“. . . What?”

“It was Simpson. He was lurking outside my flat, waiting for me. I wasn’t there, but Horatio was, and he--” he swallowed back the hitch in his voice, “--he beat the shit out of him, until Hannah
stopped him.” His heart started to race as his confession echoed in his ears.

“That fucking piece of -- wait, he showed up in Greenwich? Then that means . . . Oh, God, Archie, he’s been stalking you? Torturing you all this time?”

Archie swallowed as a lump formed in his throat, and he covered his face with his free hand. “Yes,” he whispered. *Here it comes.*

“Last November -- the injury -- he did that deliberately, didn’t he?”

A wet-sounding snuffle and a nod she couldn’t see was the only confirmation he could manage.

“Archie, why didn’t you tell us? There’s nothing we wouldn’t to do help!”

Archie shook his head. “I couldn’t, ok? It’s not -- I just -- I -- I . . . couldn’t. I’m sorry.” He swallowed back a sob and pressed his eyes tightly shut to hold back the tears.

“Oh, Archie, no, don’t apologize. I just . . . don’t understand. You always rebelled loudly against all injustice, from the tyranny of early bedtimes to bullies. What could be so horrible that you’d feel like you couldn’t tell u--”

Archie froze, every muscle clenching, as his mind started to race. *Don’t figure it out, don’t figure it out, don’t--*

“Oh.” The tiny word, more breath than sound, echoed in the silence.

Archie’s throat started to close up as his chest became impossibly tight. *Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck, she knew, she knew, he never should have answered, it was all over, why was she hesitating, she never hesitated, what was she thinking, was she angry, did she hate him, did she--*

“Archie, I love you. You know that, right? You will always be my baby brother, and there’s nothing you could tell me that will ever change that, ok? I promise.” Her voice was wobbling, but the fierce conviction in her words was unshakable.

Archie swallowed and nodded, wiping away the tears that had started to fall. “Ok,” he managed.

“What can I do? Do you want to talk?”

Archie shook his head and shuddered. He was much too exposed out in the open. “Later, maybe? When I’m back at the flat?”

Izzy exhaled slowly. “Take all the time you want. I’ll be here, whenever you need me.” She hesitated. “Archie, can I ask you two questions? I’ll understand if you don’t want to answer.”

Archie huffed out a wet half-chuckle. “You’re asking if you can ask me something? What have you done with my sister?”

Izzy snort. “I can restrain myself when the circumstances dictate. I don’t approach *everything* with the finesse of stampeding elephants.”

Archie managed a small smile through the tears. “News to me.”

Izzy laughed, but the effect was slightly marred by the sniffle at the end. “Fine, then. There’s a first time for everything. So?”

Archie hesitated, his breath coming more quickly. What did she want to know? Details? To grill
him about why he hadn’t told them or reported it? Why he’d lied about last November? But, if he
didn’t have to answer--

He took a deep breath. “Ok, ok. Ask your questions.”

Izzy sighed with relief. “Thank you. Alright, first: are you in imminent physical danger, or has
Simpson been arrested?”

Archie swallowed, the lump in his throat coming back full-force. “He’s under arrest.” *But he’s
here, somewhere, and he could be around any corner--*

“Thank God. Ok. Second question: are you eating?”

He winced. “Jesus, Iz.” She was never going to let him forget showing up for Christmas almost a
full stone lighter.

He could practically see her glaring daggers at him through the phone line. “That’s a no, then.
Archie--”

“For fuck’s sake. I have a snack bar in my pocket. Happy?”

She sighed. “Well, it’s not as good as in your stomach, but it’s a start. Can you try to have a bite
now? Or ask Horatio to make sure you’re not skipping meals?”

Archie groaned. “Iz, lay off. It’s fine, I’m fine, and I’m not going to ask him to do that. He’s
having a hard enough time as it is. Thanks to me, he’s unconscious and in surgery, and he’s just
been brutally attacked by my rapist, so--”

His mind went blank as he cut himself off, his chest tightening and his heart thudding frantically as
the high pitched screeching filled his ears again.

“Oh, Bean,” Izzy said, her voice wavering slightly. “I’m so sorry.”

And there it was. The silly nickname Izzy had used for him, ever since she’d found out she’d be a
big sister to the foetus inside of their Mum, which was the size of a kidney bean. The name she’d
used until he’d proudly announced, at age five, that he was far too old for it. The one she’d hardly
used since, except for when things were going especially to shit: after Alastair’s outing him at
dinner; when they’d gotten Alastair’s diagnosis; when he’d woken up in hospital; and last
Christmas . . . and now. The name that meant “I love you” and “I want to keep you safe” and “I’m
sorry you’re hurting.” It was comfort and compassion and unconditional love and a promise.

He exhaled shakily, his heartbeat starting to slow. “Thanks,” he mumbled.

“We all love you. And nothing will ever change that, ok?”

He sniffled. “Ok,” he whispered.

“What do you need? What can I do?”

“Don’t tell Mum?” Archie said immediately. He had no idea how he’d tell her--how he’d tell any
of them--but he had to be the one to do it.

“Of course. I promise,” she said gently.

He took another slow breath. “Thanks,” he mumbled again.
“Archie,” Izzy said after a moment, “I can be packed and there in a little over an hour. Do you want me to come?”

Archie shook his head. “Iz, I know how anxious you’ve been about your exams. I’m not going to-”

Izzy’s answering eye roll must have secret acoustic properties. “If you’re seriously suggesting that revising is more important than my little brother, I swear to God--”

Archie chuckled wetly. “Ok, ok. Point made. But I’m alright. I can manage. I’ll call if that changes.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Ok.” Izzy hesitated. “And can you text me later tonight? Let me know how you’re doing? Horatio, too?”

Archie rolled his eyes. “Yes, Mum,” he groaned.

Izzy laughed. “Ok, ok, standing down.”

“Look, Iz, I should go back in; see if Horatio’s out of surgery yet.”

“Oh, right. Of course. Give him my best, ok? And take care. Don’t work yourself to the bone trying to stay strong for him.”

Archie snorted. “Right. Talk soon, Iz.”

He hung up and stared in exhausted silence at the pillar supporting the overhang in front of him.

Izzy knew. She knew. So why hadn’t the world erupted, or the ground split to swallow him? Nothing had changed. She still treated him as she had before.

She still loved him.

He stared down at the compass in his hand and ran his index finger along the raised surface. He’d told someone in his family. Horatio would be so proud of him--

He should have done it sooner. Then Simpson might have been in prison and never would have been able to attack Horatio in the first place. His cowardice had almost gotten Horatio killed. He didn’t deserve Horatio. He didn’t deserve anything. He was a spineless, worthless, cowardly embarrassment of a--

The door behind him opened with a faint hiss. He turned to his right to see Will coming toward him. Archie tried to force his expression into something less panicked and hoped he didn’t have tears stains on his face. He nodded a greeting and tried to smile.

Will nodded back, then frowned slightly as he got closer and stood awkwardly by the side of the bench. “Alright?”


Will shook his head. “All quiet. I’m sure it won’t be much longer now.”
Archie nodded.

They lapsed into an awkward silence.

“Did you want to come back inside? You look cold,” Will said after a moment.

Archie glanced down and noticed that his hands were shaking as they held the compass. Fuck. Will had seen the compass. Fuck fuck fuck. He shoved his hands in his pockets as quickly as possible and tried not to wince as his pulse started racing. Will must be trying to help him save face. He shrugged as nonchalantly as he could. “Guess this shirt is thinner than I’d realised.” He stood up slowly enough to keep the world from turning upside-down. “Lead on.”

He nodded toward the entrance and followed Will through the glass doors.

***

Archie looked at his phone again. Three hours. How could setting an arm take three bloody hours? Had something gone wrong? An infection? Bad reaction to the anesthesia? A nicked artery?

His breath started to catch. He reached for the compass in his pocket again. He couldn’t afford another round of hysterical crying in the toilets.

And if he disappeared for that long again, Will might say whatever it was he held back with that pinched frown every time their eyes met. Archie shuddered. Which would be worse: undeserved compassion or judgment for selfishly falling apart when Horatio was in pain?

He sighed. Pity Simpson hadn’t thrown him a little harder against that table corner. Then Horatio would still be safe.

“Guests for Horatio Hornblower?”

Archie jumped as Nurse Rashidi’s voice rang out through the waiting room. “Yes, here.” Archie shot to his feet, then tried not to sway as his vision clouded over.

He blinked. He needed to be able to see to walk. They probably wouldn’t let him visit Horatio if he fell over. After a moment, the world resolved to a slightly blurry wobble. Good enough.

He walked towards Nurse Rashidi; Will, Hannah, and Victoria followed close behind. “The surgery was a success,” she explained. “No complications. He’s asleep right now, probably will be for another hour or so, but you’re welcome to stay with him. But we can only allow two visitors at a time.”


Hannah and Victoria glanced at him, then looked at each other and had what appeared to be some sort of telepathic chat involving raised eyebrows. He blinked again. Why couldn’t he focus?

“You two go,” Hannah said, gesturing at Will and Archie, “I have to make some phone calls, get someone to cover my shift tonight, that sort of thing.”

“We’ll go in a bit, when you’re done,” Victoria added.

Will glanced at Archie, then nodded. “After you.”

They followed Nurse Rashidi through the door.
“Are you alright?” Will whispered as they walked down the corridor.

“Never better,” Archie responded, blinking as the world swam before his eyes.

Will stopped in front of him and reached an arm out to touch his shoulder. “Archie--”

“Got to go see Horatio,” Archie said, his throat suddenly terrifyingly tight. He sidestepped Will’s arm, managing not to stumble, and plowed on ahead. He forced himself not to shudder and slipped his shaking hands back into his pockets. No one should touch him right now.

After a moment, Will was right back at his side. They entered the ward and walked over to the curtained bed in the far corner of the room.

“He’s right in there,” Nurse Rashidi said, pulling the curtains aside and gesturing them into the small enclosure. “I’ll be back to check on him in half an hour.”

Will pulled the curtains shut behind them.

Horatio was fast asleep, his mouth hanging open, and terrifyingly pale, almost translucent. Archie glanced over at Horatio’s right arm, which was encased in a bright white cast, with just his fingers sticking out from underneath the plaster. His chest tightened. Horatio’s hands were always fidgeting and in motion, never still. Was that why the room was starting to warp and spin?

Or was it because Horatio was only here because of him?

He shuddered, then turned to look at Will. Will was staring at Horatio, his eyes wide with horror, or as close to the expression as they probably got. Then, everything changed: his eyes narrowed, his jaw set, his fists clenched.

“Will?”

Will’s eyes hardened. “Just thinking about what I’d like to do to the fucking bastard that did this.”

Archie’s pulse started hammering as his lungs suddenly stopped working. Oh, dear God, it was all his fault, Will would hate him, Will would--

Will glanced at Archie, blinked, and the hard lines of his face softened. “Archie, you’re white as a sheet. You should sit down.” He gestured to an open chair near Horatio’s bed and took one nearby.

Archie blinked and ran his thumb over the compass in his pocket. This was absurd. Will was a friend. For now, at least. He nodded, sank down into the chair, and tried to breathe normally.

Will frowned, then looked at the plastic bag in his hand, and smiled slightly. He rummaged around in it and pulled out a snack bar. “Would you like one?”

Archie swallowed, his stomach clenching at the thought. He shook his head and managed what he hoped would pass for a polite smile.

Will’s smile fell slightly. “Are you sure? Horatio finds them helpful.”

Archie hesitated. It was an edible gesture of friendship. And he didn’t deserve it. But how could he turn it down?

If he did try to eat one, how would he explain away his inevitably getting sick in the nearest bin? Stomach bug? Might justify his repeated disappearances.
Will was still holding out the snack bar.

*Oh fucking hell. Here we go.*

Archie rolled his eyes, let go of the compass, and stuck out his hand. Will gave him a small relieved smile as he handed it over.

Archie peeled down the wrapper and opened his mouth to take a bite. His stomach curdled as the sickeningly sweet smell of the chocolate reached his nose. He hesitated, braced himself, then tried not to breathe as he shoved the end into his mouth and bit down. He tried to block out the taste and the texture. To just focus on the mechanical motion of moving his jaw up and down, up and down. He swallowed the mass down and felt his stomach revolt at the sudden invasion.

“Thanks,” he managed, and started to close up the wrapper.

Will’s face fell slightly. “Need anything else? Water?”

Archie shook his head, ignoring the increasing churning in his stomach. “Not really.”

Will nodded, then frowned, and stared at the ground. “Alright.”

Archie swallowed again and tried not to shiver at the clammy sweat that had started to form on the back of his neck. He closed his eyes and tried to pull himself together.

A quiet sigh made him open his eyes. Will was watching him, open concern on his normally closed face.

“Archie, are you sure you’re alright?”

Archie huffed out an amused snort. *Not in the least.* “Just a long day,” he murmured.

Will nodded, then shifted, and pressed his lips together. “Long few years, it sounds like,” he said deliberately. He let the silence linger, a blatant invitation, an opening to talk about Simpson.

But what could Archie possibly say, even if he wanted to? *Come to mention it, Simpson used me as his personal fucktoy for ages, but you wouldn't understand: you probably would have fought back. I have to make a police report and I think it may kill me, but maybe that’s alright because I’m not worth the space in the universe. I’ve disappointed or disgraced everyone who’s ever cared for me so you should probably just leave me alone and save yourself some time, and I’m the reason Horatio’s in here and you have every right to despise me for it.*

The quiet buzzing in his ears blared to life again. He was abusing Will’s trust. He shook his head again. “This is wrong.”

Will blinked, his forehead creasing in confusion. “What is?”

“This. You, comforting me,” Archie blurted out as his palms started to sweat.

Will frowned, leaning in slightly. “Archie, what are you talking about?”

“I don’t deserve it.” The room started to spin as the buzz became a screech.

“Archie,” Will reached a hand over to touch Archie’s arm.

Everything stopped.
Archie wrenched his arm away, bolted from the chair, and staggered out of the room. Where was the exit, he had to get out, had to get away--

“Archie?” Will’s voice followed close behind him.

“Leave me alone,” he gritted out as he stumbled to the nearest door and yanked it open, slamming it behind him. He lurched to the far side of the landing and rested his head against the cool wall, gasping for air and fumbling for his compass. He couldn’t breathe, oh fuck, he couldn’t breathe, his chest was being crushed, he was going to faint, and now Will had a glimpse of how pathetic and weak--

The sound of footsteps. Archie turned and froze as Will entered the stairway.

The door clicked shut behind them.

Archie’s lungs stopped working entirely.

Will squinted at Archie in confusion, then his eyes widened. He looked at the door behind him, stilled, then very slowly took two steps to the side so he was on the stairs going toward the floor below, leaving the path between Archie and the door open.


“Stop being nice to me,” Archie rasped, clutching the compass with all his might.

Will stayed motionless. “Why?”

“Because this is all my fault!!” Archie choked out, his breathing coming in quick gasps.

Will hesitated, then slowly lowered himself down until he was sitting on the step, putting his hands behind him. “Archie, breathe. No one will hurt you here. You’re safe.”

Archie shook his head. “Stop. I d --don’t deserve your help.” His lungs were burning and the world was turning gray.

“Yes, you do. But right now, you need to sit down before you fall down, rest your head on your knees, and try to match my breaths. Alright?”

Archie hesitated.

“I won’t come over there without permission,” Will said calmly.

Archie’s legs began to buckle, and he sank down until he was sitting on the stairs, his feet resting on the landing, his forehead pressed to his knees.

“Good. Now, breathe. Slowly. In and out. In and out. That’s right.” Will’s steady voice wafted over him and seeped into his bones.

Several agonizing minutes later, Archie’s breathing had regularized and the room had returned to normal levels of spinning.

“Well done,” Will murmured.

Archie rolled his eyes. “Hardly,” he muttered, his head still pressed against his legs.

Will sighed quietly.
The silence dragged on.

“Anything I can do to help?” Will asked after another minute.

Archie shook his head.

“Oh, all right,” Will responded.

Archie closed his eyes and waited for the sound of Will’s footsteps.

But nothing happened.

It didn’t make any sense. What was Will waiting for?

“You can go back to Horatio. No need to stay,” Archie mumbled.

“I’m fine right here, if that’s alright with you.”

Archie lifted his head from his knees to glare at Will. “He’s your best friend. You don’t have to stay with his broken fuckup of a boyfriend out of pity.”

Will raised an eyebrow. “I’m not staying out of pity. And you’re not broken.”

Archie choked out a laugh that had more in common with a sob. “Very funny.”

Will frowned. “You’re not.”

Archie sniffed and wiped his eyes. “You just saw me forget how basic involuntary human functions like breathing work. Spare me the pep talk.”

Will shook his head. “Not what I saw.”

“Oh? What did you see, then?”

Will paused. “Someone I care about having a hard time.”

Archie looked up. Will was watching him, his eyes full of concern and something far warmer than just compassion or pity.

“Oh,” Archie managed.

Will gave him a small nod and a faint, crooked smile.

“... That can’t be comfortable, sitting on that small step,” Archie said after a moment. “You can come closer, if you’d like.”

Will’s eyebrow jumped up for a moment before he resumed his neutral expression. “Alright,” he said, and slowly got to his feet and reached the landing, taking care to not block the door. “Where should I be?”

Archie hesitated, then scooted over towards the wall and tilted his head towards the space at his side. “Plenty of room over here.”

A flicker of surprise danced over Will’s face before he smiled slightly, nodded, then took the three paces necessary to reach the open spot. He sat down slowly, preserving inches of space between the two of them, and looked straight ahead of him.
Archie rolled his eyes, then slowly scooted closer until their shoulders touched. Will turned and looked at him, eyebrow raised. Archie managed a faint apologetic smile.

Will paused, tilted his head to the side in a sort of shrug, then shifted slightly closer until they were touching from hip to shoulder. Archie exhaled slowly and closed his eyes as the worst of the panic began to seep out of him.

“This isn’t your fault,” Will said at last.

Archie snorted.

“It isn’t. You weren’t the one who injured him,” Will said, his voice unexpectedly gentle.

Archie’s head shot up and he met Will’s calm gaze with a glare. “It’s not that simple.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it’s not,” Archie groaned. “I should have done things differently.”

“You did what you could with the information you had,” Will murmured. “That’s all anyone can do.”

“But I should have tried harder. Been braver.”

“ Seems like you did both.”

Archie shook his head. “You weren’t there.”

Will frowned. “Archie, I’ve seen what he’s capable of. You did well to survive.”

Archie rolled his eyes. “This is ridiculous. I’m not brave. You’re the one who’s fought in battles.”

Will shook his head. “Not all battles are between countries.”

“But I didn’t fight. I cowered. If I had just ignored Keene and Eccleston and reported him to the police for rape, then he wouldn’t have been able to hurt Horatio!”

The words bounced off the walls of the stairwell.

_Oh God. What have I done?_

Will’s mouth was moving but he couldn’t hear anything beyond the beating of his heart and the deafening silence in his ears.

He lurched to his feet, ready to run—to the toilets, into the ward, down the staircase, outside, anywhere—but a loud whooshing noise filled his ears and the world started to tilt.

The ground hurtled towards him as his eyes rolled shut.

Warm, steady hands broke his fall.
A strange beeping sound pulled Horatio out of a very bizarre dream about a cat that insisted on sailing the seven seas with him.

His nose itched. He tried to move his left arm to scratch it, but nothing happened. His arm felt absurdly heavy. He grunted in frustration and started to move his right arm instead.

“Horatio?”

Horatio frowned. Will? Why was Will here? He sounded worried.

He wrestled his eyes open, then blinked as his surroundings came into focus. A blue curtain. Not Will. He frowned, then slowly turned his head to the right. Will’s face swam into view.

“Will,” Horatio rasped, his throat distressingly scratchy.

Will smiled faintly, then reached out to pat Horatio on the shoulder. His hand lingered, a warm, comforting weight. “Good to have you back with us. How’re you feeling?”

Horatio blinked. His head felt like it’d been stuffed with cotton. It was remarkably difficult to think, let alone make words. “’M alright.” He paused, then looked down at his left arm, which had started to throb. It had a cast around it. He frowned. “My arm hurts.”

Will gave him a faint smile. “Understandable. Should be almost time for more pain meds. The nurse said the surgery went well. No complications. You should be back to rigging ships in no time.”

Horatio nodded distractedly. Something was missing. Something important.

“Hannah and Victoria are here, too. In the waiting room. Didn’t want to crowd you when you were just waking up.”

“Don’t . . . mean to be a burden,” Horatio muttered.

“It’s no trouble at all,” Will insisted. “And your father will be here in a few hours.”

Horatio met Will’s eyes again. “But--”

Will rolled his eyes. “He found someone to cover his patients for the next two days. You’re not inconveniencing him, either.”

Horatio frowned, his hand drifting up to touch the pendant around his neck.


Horatio glanced down at the compass between his fingers, then looked up, scanned the room, and
turned to Will, his eyes narrowed and his mind terrifyingly clear as worry burned away the mental fog. "Where’s Archie?"

Will stilled. "Archie’s fine," he said, his voice too deliberately calm.

Horatio glared at Will, his heart racing. "That’s not what I asked. What’s wrong? Why isn’t he here?"

Will shifted. "He’s . . . resting."

"Why? What happened? Did he have a seizure? Is he safe?"

The heart monitor started beeping urgently. Will frowned, glanced at the screen above Horatio’s head, then squeezed Horatio’s shoulder gently. "Archie’s safe, Horatio, and he didn’t have a seizure."

"Then why--"

Another gentle squeeze of his shoulder. "Because he . . . fainted not long ago. But he’ll be alright, Horatio, he--"

Horatio struggled to sit up. "Where is he? Take me to him. Now."

Will gently pressed him back against the bed. "You don’t need to go anywhere, Horatio. Lie still. He’s right here." He walked over to the blue curtain next to Horatio’s left side, and pulled it open.

Archie was lying in a hospital bed, his face unnervingly pale, almost ashen, and unnaturally still. Normally, even in sleep, his eyelids would twitch, or he’d smile, or frown, or nuzzle up against Horatio. But now, he looked like he belonged in Madame Tussauds. Or like he was--

Horatio blinked repeatedly as Archie turned into a watery blur.

Will’s hand squeezed his shoulder again. "He’ll be alright, Horatio. He just needs some rest."

Horatio swallowed and wiped his eyes with his good hand. "What happened?" he asked, unable to look away.

Will’s hand left his shoulder. "We’ll know more when all the blood tests come back. The doctor guessed that he hadn’t been eating enough. Or staying hydrated. Or sleeping. Stress response, most likely."

"But, I gave him breakfast," Horatio said, hardly caring that his voice shook.

"Did he eat it?"

Horatio grimaced. "Just a bite. I’d hoped he’d finish it while I was--" He trailed off, then turned to face Will, his heart in his throat. "Will, he said he hadn’t eaten since Sunday night!"

Will’s eyes opened fractionally wider, before he dipped his head. "That’d do it."

Horatio set his jaw and glared. "Didn’t anyone notice? You’re always making sure I eat. Why didn’t you give him food?"

Will raised an eyebrow. "I did. He didn’t eat it. Not really." He paused. "Not sure he could."

Horatio deflated, his anger and indignation rushing out with a shaky sigh. He turned and looked at
Archie again as an ache started in his chest that had nothing to do with Simpson’s fist. “But I don’t understand,” Horatio started, his voice sounding far too reedy and thin, “we’re in a hospital. If he felt too nauseous to eat, why didn’t he say something? Surely there must be medication someone could have given him—”

Will’s hand touched his shoulder again. “I think he had other things on his mind, Horatio.”

Horatio clenched his jaw. “Oh. You mean me.”

“Horatio.” Will narrowed his eyes. “This is not your fault.”

“Of course it is!” Horatio bit out as more tears started to fall. “If I hadn’t left him alone, if I’d listened to him, we’d both be safe at home, and I wouldn’t have a broken arm, and he wouldn’t have fainted, and--”

“Horatio. It is not your fault that you were attacked or that Archie collapsed.”

Horatio looked up, frowning at the unusually steely tone of Will’s voice. “But--”

“No,” Will insisted, his eyes blazing, his face as hard and cold as rock. “This is Simpson’s fault, and his fault alone. That fucking sadistic bastard--” He cut himself off, closed his eyes, and exhaled slowly through his nose. When he opened them again, the fire had been tamed. He cleared his throat. “It’s not your fault,” he murmured again, before glancing first at Horatio’s arm, then over at Archie, as a flicker of something soft and sad flitted across his face.

Horatio stared at Will, his eyes narrowed. Will never showed his emotions so openly. “Will? What’s--” He gasped as the explanation hit him. “--He told you?”

Will snapped his head over to meet Horatio’s eyes, then dipped his head in a quick nod, his gaze dropping to the ground.

Horatio managed a weak smile. “I’m glad he trusted you.”

Will huffed out a quiet laugh. “Not sure he meant to. Seemed to spill out.”

Horatio raised an eyebrow. “He could hardly make himself tell me, and we’d been together for about a month. He’d have to be at his wit’s end for that to come out involuntarily.”

Will hesitated. “He keeled over right after.”

Horatio swallowed, remembering Archie’s helpless sobs and uncontrollable shaking after telling him the truth. He squared his shoulders as best he could and took a deep, shaky breath. Pride be damned. Archie needed him. “What do I do? How can I help him?”

Will shifted his weight, then looked at the ground. “Ask him.”

Horatio bit his lip. “And if he won’t tell me?”


Horatio rolled his eyes.

Will’s expression became more serious again. “He’ll want to know it doesn’t change anything. That he still has you--” he paused again as his eyes drifted over to Archie,“--and me.”
Horatio nodded, his eyes following Will’s. They fell into silence as they watched Archie sleep, his chest rising and falling slowly. “At least he’s getting some rest,” Horatio said eventually, glancing up at Will. “He hardly slept last night. Nightmares every hour.” He paused. “How long has he been asleep?”

Will glanced at his watch. “About 45 minutes, I think.”

Horatio nodded. “He’ll probably be waking up soon, then.”

Will hesitated. “Possibly. They might have put something in his IV to help him sleep. It was rather chaotic. Didn’t get the whole list of ingredients.”

Horatio narrowed his eyes. “Will. Why was it chaotic?”

Will shifted uncomfortably. “He was . . . briefly unresponsive. But that passed quickly and then they started the IV.”

Horatio’s heart monitor started beeping again. “Unresponsive?? For how long?”

“It’s really not--”

“How LONG?”

Will hesitated, then sighed. “Five minutes.”

Horatio gaped at him as the world started crashing around him. “I almost lost him,” he whispered, his eyes filling with tears again.

Will’s hand was back on his shoulder in an instant. “But he’s alright, Horatio. He’s safe. So are you. The best thing you can do right now is to sleep. Both of you.”

Horatio frowned. “How am I supposed to sleep when he could wake up at any moment?” He paused. “Archie was unresponsive. Did someone call his family?”

Will nodded. “Nurse Rashidi said that his emergency contact had been notified and that she was on her way.”

Horatio frowned. “That’ll be Izzy, since she lives the closest. Cambridge is only an hour and a bit away.”

Will raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t that good?”

Horatio shook his head. “He hadn’t told his family about Simpson.”

Will nodded, then looked at the ground. “Right.”

Horatio swallowed as the image of the sudden influx of Archie’s family stormed through his mind. “Will, what are we going to do?”

Will squeezed his shoulder again. “The best we can. Just try and rest now. I’ll take care of everything.”

Horatio nodded, then shifted to get a better view of Archie, wincing slightly with the movement. He’d just keep watch until Archie woke up.

After a moment, Will sighed quietly. “You’ll jar your neck, twisting like that. Here, let me.” Will’s
warm hands reached out and adjusted his pillow, pulling it to the right to reduce the strain on Horatio’s neck, and brushing against a curl in the process.

The silence stretched, broken only by the occasional beep of the blood pressure cuff around Archie’s arm.

Archie was much too far away. Were the beds on wheels? Perhaps they could push the beds closer together. He stared longingly at Archie’s hand, then blinked repeatedly as his eyes started to prickle with tears again.

“He’ll be fine, Horatio,” Will murmured beside him as he scooted his chair closer to the bed. “The worst is over.”
Thanks, everyone, for your patience in waiting for this chapter! And happy birthday, Horatio!!

Trigger warnings: Hospitals, nightmare, panic

“You’re not going anywhere,” Simpson growled as hard, firm fingers wrapped around his arm and squeezed, the fingerpads digging into his flesh.

Archie squirmed, trying to break free from the vice-like grip. “Get away from me.”

A persistent beeping blared around him.

“One last chance. On your knees,” Simpson spat out as the pressure grew tighter and tighter.

“NO,” Archie yelled, jerking up to a sitting position and clawing desperately at his arm. He had to get him off, he--


Archie blinked and struggled to focus his eyes as the words echoed around in his mind. Why was his head so heavy?

“Just a blood pressure cuff, Archie. Rest, now,” Will murmured.

Archie slumped back against the bed as his head continued to spin. Why did his brain feel like mush? Had he been drugged?

A hand took his. He stared down at it. Those were Horatio’s fingers. He turned his head to follow a path from the hand, to the arms, to Horatio’s face, bruised and swollen, his forehead creased with worry.

The beeping stopped.

“H’ratio?” Archie managed, his voice surprisingly gravelly.

Horatio blinked repeatedly, his eyes filling with tears, then squeezed his hand. “I’m here,” he whispered. “Welcome back.” He brought Archie’s hand up to his face, wincing slightly with the movement, and pressed a feather-light kiss to the back of his hand.

Archie squinted. Welcome back? What did that mean? He shook his head to focus on the one thing that mattered. “How’re you? S’your arm ok?”


Archie blinked. “What?”

“Dehydration, low blood sugar, and sleep deprivation,” Will said calmly. “You’ve been out for
almost two hours.”

Archie’s eyes flew open wide and he glanced about him as his chest started to tighten. He was on his back in a hospital bed, and Horatio’s bed was pressed alongside his. Will sat in a chair at the foot of their makeshift double bed, and blue curtains had been pulled all around, separating them from the rest of the ward. He glanced to his right. An IV bag hung from a metal hook. He followed the tube with his eyes, down the metal stand, and down to the needle sticking out of the crook of his arm.

No. Oh fuck, no.

He’d ruined everything. He hadn’t tried hard enough, and he’d abandoned Horatio to wake up from surgery alone, and now he was forcing Horatio to comfort him, and he was hurting Izzy, and, oh, God, what if Izzy’d told their parents what Simpson had been doing, and – fuck, Will knew everything now, he must hate him for being a pathetic, pitiful weakling, and there was no excuse for any of this, he was a failure as boyfriend and friend and brother and a son, and a man, and why couldn’t he have just never woken up?

The curtain opened with a faint rustle of fabric.

“--Alright boys, I gave Hannah and Victoria the update, they’ll text me when the fam--” Izzy cut herself off, her eyes fixing on Archie instantly. “Thank God, you’re awake!”

Her hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail, her face was red and blotchy from crying, and she was wearing her comfort clothes: her Cambridge sweatpants and, from underneath a blue zip-up hoodie, the edges of the grey “I want to be a schwa; it’s never stressed” t-shirt he got her for Christmas five years ago peeked out.

His breath started to hitch as the world began to spin. “Fuck, Iz, I -- I’m s –so sorry, I didn’t--”

Izzy’s hands were on his shoulders in an instant. “No. Don’t you dare apologise. No feeling guilty, either.”

“Izzy’s right, Archie,” Horatio said, leaning forward to run a hand along his back with slow, gentle pressure. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“How can you say that?” Archie gasped out as his lungs started to tighten. “I hurt you, Horatio!”

Horatio frowned. “No, you didn’t. You never have and you never would.”

“Yes I did! I’m the reason your arm is broken!”

“I’m the reason your arm is broken!”

“Simpson did that. Not you,” Will said calmly.

“And he’s in prison now,” Izzy said, squeezing his shoulder. “Hannah saw them take him away in a police car. He can’t hurt either of you any more. It’s over. You’re safe now.”

“And it’s just a broken arm,” Horatio said. “It’ll mend.”

“But you could have died! And it’s my fault!”

Horatio frowned. “But I didn’t. And none of this was your fault, Archie.”

“Of course it is. He was only after you because of me. You should be furious!”

“I’m the only person I’m angry at is Simpson.” He scowled. “I just wish I’d punched him
harder.”

Archie sat bolt upright, pulling away from everyone, as the world swam. “You PUNCHED him??”

Horatio’s eyes went wide with horror. “Oh, God, Archie, I’m sorry, I know I’d promised I wouldn’t, but I forgot, and then I couldn’t get away, and—”

Archie’s pulse started racing. “I don’t believe this.”

“Archie, I am so sorry, I know I violated your trust, and I have no excuse, I just—”

Archie smacked his fist into the bed by his side. “You fought back. Of course you fought back. Fucking hell, Horatio, how can you stand to look at me?”

“Archie, no,” Izzy blurted out. “Don’t ever blame yourself for what he did to you!”

“Izzy’s right. And no one thinks any less of you,” Will said quietly.

“Archie,” Horatio said quietly, wrapping an arm around his shoulder again, “I love you. And all the Simpsons in the world couldn’t change that.”

Archie swallowed and looked away, blinking back tears. “But you shouldn’t.”

Horatio frowned. “Why not?”

Archie shook his head, the words stuck in his throat.

“Archie, what is it?” Horatio asked, his voice impossibly gentle.

“I’m – I’m not worth this, Horatio,” Archie managed, his voice cracking.

Horatio squeezed him tightly. “Yes, you are. You are worth it, and my arm, and any other price imaginable. What happened today changed nothing. I want to be with you, and I always will. I promise.”

Archie sniffed and blinked repeatedly to force back the tears that had started to form.

“Archie . . . please believe me?” Horatio asked, his voice barely audible.

Archie turned to look at him. His eyes were wide and suspiciously wet, but contained all the conviction of his words.

Archie swallowed as his pulse started to slow. He managed a short nod, not trusting himself to speak.

A glimmer of a smile flitted over Horatio’s lips and he squeezed Archie’s hand again. “Thank you.” He paused. “And whatever the future holds, we can figure it out, together.”

Archie froze, his heart suddenly racing again. “Oh, fuck, the police report.”

“It’ll keep,” Will said quietly. “For now, just focus on resting.” He paused. “That goes for you, too, Horatio.”

Horatio set his jaw. “I’m fine, Will.”

Will crossed his arms over his chest. “A deal’s a deal.”
Horatio scowled.

Archie narrowed his eyes. “Will?” he asked slowly.

Will looked pointedly at Horatio. “Nurse Rashidi agreed to bring your beds together if Horatio promised to rest.”

Horatio rolled his eyes. “I am resting.”

Will narrowed his eyes. “That’s not what she meant.”

Archie blinked. “You asked them to move our beds?”

Horatio ducked his head. “Er . . . well, I was on your right at first, and I couldn’t hold your hand while on that side, so I . . . er . . . asked her to swap our positions.”

Archie raised an eyebrow. “And is that why I’m in the surgical ward, too?”

Horatio shook his head. “That was Will. I was unconscious at the time.”

Will shrugged and stared at a spot near Archie’s feet as the tips of his ears went slightly pink. “Thought it’d be best not to separate you two. The ward’s fairly empty today, so Nurse Rashidi didn’t mind.”

Will had helped, despite the embarrassing display he’d witnessed? Despite what he knew about Simpson? Despite his own feelings for Horatio?

Archie felt a rush of warmth course through him. He shifted to tap his foot against Will’s hand, and Will glanced up.

Archie took a deep breath, his eyelids fluttering. “Thanks,” he murmured.

Will nodded, a short, jerking motion, and gave him a faint, tilted smile.

Archie felt himself smile back as some of the pressure in his chest began to lift.

Izzy looked from Archie, to Will, and back, then tilted her head, her eyes sparkling. Archie forced himself not to roll her eyes. She must have figured out Will’s feelings for Horatio. Time to distract her before she said something that would call attention to it.

“So, you three seem to have been already introduced. When did you get into town, Iz?” he asked.

Izzy raised an eyebrow, then shrugged. “About an hour ago, I think.”

Archie narrowed his eyes. “How did you get here that quickly?”

Izzy bit her lip. “I . . . er . . . had already packed a suitcase and was trying to decide if I should visit my friend Emily in London for the night, just in case you changed your mind, when the hospital called.”

Archie groaned. “Iz--”

Izzy rolled her eyes. “I wasn’t about to show up on your doorstep. I just figured I should be close by. You--” she hesitated, “--you sounded terrible. Of course I was worried. And, turns out, I was right to be. You were unresponsive for five whole minutes, Archie. Do you know how dangerous that is? We thought you were dying!”

Horatio blinked repeatedly. “You told me you were alright, Archie,” he whispered, his voice wobbling.

Archie swallowed and looked down at the thin sheet that covered him. “I didn’t want you to worry.”

Horatio held him more tightly. “Archie, you are allowed to worry me, even if I’m stressed or in pain. From what I’ve read, that’s how relationships work.”

Archie frowned. “But--”

Horatio shook his head. “If you’re sick, or scared, or not eating, or God forbid, in danger, I need you to tell me. I can’t help if I don’t know what’s wrong. And I--” he swallowed, “--I couldn’t bear to lose you.”

Archie tried to blink back tears of his own. “You’re not going to lose me. I’ll make sure of that. And I-- I’m sorry. About not telling you. I’m . . . a bit out of practice with that sort of thing. Got rather used to hiding it.” He shook his head to dispel the memories that threatened to crowd in. “But I promise to-- to try to tell you. I just might need some--” he swallowed and cleared his throat, “--some . . . help . . . with that.”


“But, um, speaking of talking to people--” Izzy began, “--there’s one more thing.”

Archie sat up straight, dislodging Horatio’s arm from around his shoulders. “What is it?”

Izzy scooted forward, took his hands, and gave them a gentle, supportive squeeze. “Archie? I’m so sorry, but the family’s coming.”

Archie stilled. “What?”

“I know. But you were unresponsive and in hospital. Of course they’re coming.”

Archie slumped back against his pillow. “Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. What did you tell them?”

“I said that Horatio’d broken his arm and you’d collapsed from dehydration, low blood sugar, and lack of sleep. I didn’t break my promise.”

Archie sighed. “But they have questions?”

Izzy nodded. “I told them they’d have to wait.”

Archie snorted. “I bet they loved that.”

Izzy chuckled quietly. “Not Dad’s favorite response, no.”

Archie rolled his eyes. “Or Alastair’s.” He groaned. “ Fucking hell, Iz, this is going to be a disaster.”

Izzy squeezed his hands. “No, it’s not. I’ve got this covered. I told them you’ve had a shock and they need to back off and wait for you to talk until you’re ready. If anyone tries to push you, I will give them hell. Will and Horatio will, too. This is about you and what you need. You get to dictate
He swallowed, then nodded. He couldn’t stomach another explanation today. Not after everything. But, if they could wait until tomorrow . . . “How much time do we have?”

She bit her lip again, then glanced at her watch. “Ten minutes, give or take. Their plane touched down forty-five minutes ago. I gave Hannah a description of them, and she’ll text when they arrive.”

He took a deep, shaky breath, then let go of Izzy’s hands and let his own fall on the bed beside him. “Right.”

Izzy frowned. “I can stall them--”

Archie huffed out a laugh. “--for all of thirty seconds before they push past you.”

Izzy shrugged. “I can still try.”

Archie shook his head. “Wouldn’t do any good. Might as well get it over with.” He scrubbed his hand over his face and tried to calm down. “Well,” he said, turning to Horatio, “looks like you’ll get to meet the rest of the family sooner than you’d thought.”

Horatio’s pale face took on a greenish tinge. “Oh. G-good.”

Archie took Horatio’s hand in both of his and gave it a gentle squeeze. “They’ll love you.”

Izzy nodded. “This one clearly does--” she said, reaching over to ruffle Archie’s hair. Archie rolled his eyes and batted her hand away half-heartedly, “--and as far as I’m concerned, you’re a member of the family already, so that’s two out of two so far. Fairly solid average, all things considered.”

“And if it’s any consolation,” Archie said, forcing himself to attempt a smile, for Horatio’s sake, “at least it’ll take the pressure off the visit to Scotland later this summer.” Assuming the family won’t disown me for being a disgraceful coward, who--

Izzy’s phone dinged. She pulled it out, then bit his lip. “Shit. It’s Hannah. They’re here. Um, I’ll go stall them as long as I can. I’ll . . . suggest lunch or something. And it’s going to be alright, Archie. You can do this. You’re stronger and braver than you think. And we’ve got your back. I’ll leave you in the capable hands of Will and your ridiculously cute boyfriend. Well done, by the way. See you in a bit.” And with that, she hopped off the bed and bolted out of the room, her footsteps echoing through the ward until the door closed behind her.

“So, that’s Izzy,” Archie said into the silence.

“So we gathered,” Will said, with a dry, tilted smile. “Bit of a family resemblance.”

Archie huffed out a laugh, then glanced toward the curtain. He had to distract himself from the fact that they’d all be stampeding into their small room in a matter of minutes, or he’d shake out of his skin. “Speaking of families, where’s Horatio’s father?” he asked as his throat tightened.

Will frowned. “He texted to say he got caught up with a work emergency. He should be here in a few hours.”

Archie nodded as the pressure in his chest started to build again. “That’s g-good.” He swallowed and tried to keep his hands from trembling. It didn’t work.
“Archie? Are you alright?” Horatio asked instantly.

“I’m fine,” Archie said automatically.

Horatio’s face fell. “Archie,” he sighed.

Oh. Right. He’d promised to try to be honest about his physical and mental state. Fuck.

He took a deep breath and braced himself. “Fine. I’m fucking terrified. And I don’t know what the hell I’m going to say. Better?”

“There’s nothing wrong being being scared,” Will said. He hesitated, then reached out and patted Archie’s shin.

“You’ll figure it out,” Horatio said quietly. “I know you can do this, Archie. And we’ll be right by your side the whole time.”

Archie nodded, closed his eyes, and focused on breathing, and on the warm, steady presence of Horatio and Will beside him.

“Where is he?” A loud voice boomed, echoing through the corridors. “Where’s my son?”

Archie’s breath began to hitch.

“If you’ll just follow me, sir,” Nurse Rashidi’s voice rang out. “He’s right over here, at the far end of the ward. But you can’t stay for long; he needs rest, not excitement, and we’re bending the rules enough as it is, letting all of you in here.”

“Nonsense. I don’t need permission to see my own son.”

“Reginald,” his mum’s voice sounded with a quiet warning note.

“Actually, in my ward, you do,” Nurse Rashidi responded. “It doesn’t matter who you are. If your presence is in any way going to adversely affect my patient’s health, it is my job to ask you to leave.”

“How dare--”

“Of course. Thank you, Nurse Rashidi. We understand and we wouldn’t want to do anything that would interfere with Archie’s recovery. Would we, Reginald?”

“No. Of course not, Fiona,” he grumbled.

Archie glanced over at Horatio, who had frozen in terror, his eyes wide and unblinking. He had just enough time to give Horatio’s hand a quick squeeze before Nurse Rashidi pulled back the curtain to reveal the whole crew: his father, in the lead, his eyes flashing with command and no small degree of concern, his mum, by his side, looking as outwardly poised as ever despite the red eyes and nose that showed how she’d spent most of the flight, Izzy, slipping in behind Nurse Rashidi to stand by Archie’s right, and Alastair, bringing up the rear, looking vaguely uncomfortable and irritable and doing a piss poor job of hiding both.

“Hello,” Archie said at last, forcing himself not to cringe with embarrassment at being the center of a production he didn’t want to star in.

“Archie, love. It’s good to see you,” his mum said, walking over to give him a gentle hug.
“Son,” his father intoned, approaching the bed to give him an awkward pat on the shoulder. “Glad to see you’re awake.”

“Hello, Dad.”

“Archie,” Alastair nodded in greeting.

“Alastair,” Archie responded, concluding the most uncomfortable family greeting he’d ever experienced.

“Good to see you awake, Archie. How are you feeling?” Nurse Rashidi asked, glancing at his vitals on the monitor.

“A bit better,” Archie said, desperately hoping the heart monitor didn’t give away just how scared he was.

“Good,” Nurse Rashidi said. “You should be able to go home in a few hours, once we’ve pumped some more Dextrose into you. Is there anything I can get you?”

Archie shook his head.

“Well, if you need anything, including some peace and quiet, just press this button and I’ll be right back. You too, Horatio.”

They both nodded.

“Right. I’ll leave you to it, then.” She gave them a quick smile and nod, then left, pulling the curtain shut behind her.

Archie glanced around. Izzy, his mum, and his father were on his right, and Alastair and Will were at the foot of the bed. He was surrounded. He swallowed as his throat went suddenly dry.

“You must be Horatio,” his mum started. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m sorry it’s not under better circumstances.”

“P—pleasure to meet you, too,” Horatio managed, his hand trembling slightly.

Archie gave it gentle squeeze.

His father glanced at their interlaced fingers and pointedly raised a eyebrow.

Archie cleared his throat, his eyelids fluttering. “Right. Introductions. So, this is my boyfriend, Horatio, and this is our friend, Will. Horatio, Will, this is my mum, my dad, and Alastair, and of course you’ve already met Izzy.”

Will dipped his head.

“Have they taken good enough care of you here, Archie?” his father asked. “We could have had you transferred to a private hospital, with a room of your own, instead of this ward.” Somehow, he’d managed to make the word “ward” sound like an insult.

Archie felt his muscles start to tense and tried to cover it with a smile. “It’s fine here, no complaints. Nurse Rashidi’s been wonderful. She let me stay in the surgical ward and she rearranged the beds so Horatio and I could be together. So, you see? Excellent care. Flexible and compassionate.”
His father nodded. “Good. I’d accept nothing less.”

Archie smiled through his clenching teeth. “And I thought there were only two visitors allowed in at a time.”

“I convinced them to bend the rules,” his father said.

“By pledging a sizable donation to the surgical ward,” Alistair explained, crossing his arms over his chest.

Archie’s pulse began to race as he turned to glare at his father. “You did what?”

“I’m sure the future patients of this ward will be grateful,” his mum added, giving Archie a look that begged him to stop before this could turn into a continuation of an age old argument. His father was already starting to bristle.

“I’m glad you were allowed in,” Archie said, swallowing his pride as best he could. “Didn’t mean to cause yet more trouble.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” his father insisted.

“Is there anything we can get you?” his mum asked. “Water? Something to eat, perhaps?”

Archie’s stomach lurched. He shook his head. “Maybe in a bit.”

Alastair rolled his eyes. “Of course not. Why actually fix the problem when you can be the center of attention instead?” he grumbled.

Archie’s heart started pounding.

Horatio went rigid against him, his jaw set and nostrils flaring. Will fixed Alastair with a particularly flinty stare.

“Alastair, that was uncalled for. You owe him an apology,” their mum said calmly.

“But eating’s not exactly difficult, and he has the funds to feed himself and a solid head on his shoulders. So what other explanation could there be? He couldn’t be bothered? Some sort of narcissistic acting thing?”

Archie swallowed as his lungs stopped working altogether.

“Alastair, what the fuck? Take that back now,” Izzy yelled.

“Narcissistic?!” Horatio snapped, clutching Archie’s hand with almost painful tightness.

Will stood up slowly and turned to face Alastair. “Archie, should we be letting you and Horatio get some sleep? We can all come back another time,” he said, his voice steelily and cold.

Archie’s heart monitor started to beep.

Alastair’s eyes widened as he glanced at the screen. He looked back at Archie and the color drained from his face. “Arch? What’s going on?”

“Archie?” Horatio’s arm wrapped around his shoulders and held him tightly. “Are you alright?”

Archie managed a nod, then closed his eyes and tried to make his lungs cooperate. He focused on
the steady, weight of Horatio’s arm, as grounding as any compass. On Will and Izzy closing ranks around him.

The heart monitor stopped beeping.

He swallowed, took a slow, shaking breath, then opened his eyes. “Last November. It wasn’t an accident. Simpson did it deliberately. He’d been stalking me and--” he took another deep breath “--and raping me since my second semester at RADA, despite my attempts to report him. And today, Simpson showed up at my flat, attacked Horatio, and broke his arm so badly that he needed emergency surgery. And now, Simpson’s in prison. So, it’s a tad more complicated than ‘couldn’t be bothered.’”

Horatio held him more tightly. Izzy put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. Will gave him a faint, tilted smile and a slow nod.

Alastair was staring at him, his eyes wide. “What? Arch, I . . . I didn’t know . . . I swear. Oh, God, I’m so sorry.” He glanced around the room, then turned to look at their father. “How could you not tell me?”

“We didn’t know either,” his father said quietly.

“What?” Alastair looked back at Archie, his forehead creased with confusion and concern. “Arch, why didn’t you say something? We have the resources to make people listen. You’ve been dealing with this since second semester? That’s, what, a year and a half? How could--”

He trailed off, his eyes widening, then sank down in the chair Will had vacated. “A year and a half,” he said quietly, staring at the ground. “Oh. Oh, God. Arch--” he swallowed, then looked up and met Archie’s eyes, his own starting to fill with tears, “—Arch, I am so sorry.”

Archie managed a nod, his throat too tight for words. So much for breaking it to them gently.

“Oh, Archie, dear,” his mum said, her voice shaking as much as it had the night she’d told him Alastair’s diagnosis, “it’s not your job to try to protect us. We could have handled both. You are just as important.”

Archie blinked repeatedly, trying to force his tears back, and she had him in her arms in seconds.

“I love you so much,” she whispered.

A shallow nod was all he could muster as he hugged back.

When she let go, and Izzy took her place. “I’m so proud of you,” she whispered, and ruffled his hair as she pulled away.

He swallowed, then wrenched his eyes up to meet his father’s. He looked ten years older and shattered, as though someone had turned his heart into a jigsaw puzzle and tried to put the pieces back together in the dark.

“I’m sorry,” Archie said, his voice breaking.

His father’s arms were around him in an instant. “Why? You have nothing to apologize for.”

“But I let you down. I wasn’t strong enough,” he whispered.

His father sighed and shook his head. “My darling, darling boy, there’s nothing you could do to
make me disappointed in you. You’ve always made me so very proud.”

Archie swallowed hard as he blinked back tears.

“I’ve only ever wanted you to be happy,” his father whispered, holding him tightly as though he were the last living thing in the universe. “And I’m more sorry than I can say that I made you think otherwise.”

Archie buried his face against his shoulder and curled into the hug as tears trickled down his cheek, creating a damp patch on his father’s shirt. He took a slow, shaky breath as the pressure in his chest began to lift.

After several moments, his father sniffed, gave Archie one last, tight hug, then straightened up, surreptitiously wiping his eyes. He cleared his throat. “With your permission, Archibald, I think we should contact Tamsin. Her legal expertise may be particularly beneficial.”

Horatio took Archie’s hand again and gave it a gentle squeeze.

Archie swallowed, took another deep breath, and nodded. “I can call her tomorrow morning, before I make my police statement.”

His father nodded. “Of course. Take whatever time you need.” He paused, then glanced over at Alastair, who still looked haunted and vaguely ill. He frowned, hesitated, then cleared his throat again. “Er, Isabelle had mentioned that there’s a sort of small cafeteria here. Alastair and I didn’t have a chance to eat before catching our flight. I think rectifying that is an excellent plan. Alastair?”

Alastair glanced up, blinked a few times, shook his head to focus, then nodded and stood, waiting in the gap in the curtain and staring down at the ground, his nose scrunched up the way it had as a child when he was trying not to cry.

His father patted Archie on the shoulder one more time, then took a step toward the entrance, before pausing and turning to face the bed. He cleared his throat. “And, er, Horatio?”

Horatio’s eyes went wide as he snapped his head up to attention. “Y-yes, my Lord?”

“Thank you for looking out for my son,” he said, before looking toward Alastair again. “We’ll be back shortly.” He walked to the entrance, put a hand on Alastair’s back, and gently guided him out of the enclosure.

After a moment, Will glanced back to the bed, pushed the chair a tad closer, and sat down again. He hesitated, leaned forward to give Archie’s leg a quick, supportive pat, then leaned back in his seat again.

The touch helped dampen the lingering static in Archie’s mind. He took a deep breath and let his eyes fall shut, relishing the silence and the extra space in the room. His head felt absurdly heavy.

“You alright?” Horatio whispered, accompanying the question with a squeeze of his hand.

Archie nodded. “Just going to close my eyes for a bit.”

“Good idea,” Horatio responded. There was a brief pause, then Horatio released his hand to push back a bit of fringe, letting his fingers linger on his forehead.

Archie made a quiet, pleased humming sound, and rolled onto his left side to press against
Horatio’s hand. Horatio’s fingers hesitated, then began gently carding his hair.

Archie managed a faint smile as a little of the tension of the last several years started to bleed out.

“So, Horatio,” Izzy began in a hushed voice, and Archie could hear the smile that danced underneath it, “Archie tells me you’re obsessed with naval history. What’s your favorite ship?”

Archie didn’t need to see to know that Horatio’s eyebrows jumped up, eyes going wide with surprise, before a hesitant but pleased smile took over his lips. “Well, the Indefatigable, or Indy, has always seemed particularly interesting to me. You see--”

Archie let the words fade into comforting noises. Horatio was in good hands with Izzy. He could rest for awhile.
“--And that's essentially the central premise of the final chapter of my thesis,” Horatio explained.

“Impressive!” Izzy said with a smile. “And now Archie knows all these intricacies of naval warfare, too?”

Horatio looked to his right. Archie was fast asleep, his nose pressed against Horatio’s side. He looked so peaceful, with his chest rising and falling slowly and evenly, his breath ghosting against Horatio’s hand, rib pain be damned. He contented himself with continuing to stroke Archie’s hair. “Most of them. Enough to be entirely prepared for his role.”

Izzy smiled again. “Well, clearly he has an excellent teacher.”

Horatio ducked his head and tried to stop the blush that threatened to make an appearance. He had trained himself to accept praise from Archie, and, occasionally, Will, but receiving it from anyone else always felt profoundly uncomfortable.

“I’m sure it helps that Archie’s always been a quick study,” Lady Kennedy said.

Izzy snorted. “The challenge was getting him to put his mind to it.”

Lady Kennedy smiled and shook her head. “He’d memorize an act of a play in a weekend, but heaven help anyone who insisted that he complete his maths assignments.”


Oh dear. More allusions to popular culture. Did all the Kennedys do that? Horatio frowned as he scanned his memory for something to associate with those titles.

“A Beautiful Mind’s one of Victoria’s favorite films,” Will said. “She’s always liked maths.” He paused. “And Paul Bettany,” he finished with a dry smile.

Izzy laughed. “Don’t we all?”

Horatio nearly sighed in relief as the conversation reached familiar waters. “He’s excellent in Master and Commander.”

Izzy nodded, a mischievous grin spreading over her face. “I’d guessed you’d be a fan. How do you think the Worthington Chronicles adaptation will compare?”

Horatio blinked. She’d given some thought to his film preferences? “Er, well, judging from the script, I think it’ll be at least as good. It seems fairly faithful to the spirit of the books.”

“Oh, you’ve seen the script, then?” Izzy asked.

Horatio nodded “But I’m not at liberty to say anything about the plot. Archie swore me to secrecy.”

“And he’s kept his promise,” Will said. “Can’t get him to say a thing about it.”
Izzy raised an eyebrow. “You’re a fan, too?”

Will nodded. “Ever since the first one was published. You?”

Izzy grinned. “Read them all once Archie told us he’d gotten this gig. I thought they were surprisingly fun.” She paused, then turned to look at Horatio again, a twinkle in her eye. “Especially the thinly-veiled love story between Algy and James.”

Will leaned back in his chair. “There, Horatio. Told you I wasn’t the only one.”

Horatio blushed, then ducked his head, unable to meet Will’s eyes, as the memory of those stories he’d glimpsed when he’d borrowed Will’s computer last term flashed through his mind. He set his jaw, then cleared his throat. “Er, well. Archie may have convinced me on the subject.”

“I’ll bet he did,” Izzy said, a laugh in her voice.

Will didn’t comment.

Horatio glanced up again. Will was staring down at his hands with a slight frown. What was bothering him? Surely Will should be happy that he’d finally conceded the point.

Will looked up, met Horatio’s eyes, then gave a small, crooked smile and a short, jerky nod. “Better late than never.” He paused, then glanced over at Archie. “Not surprised he saw it, too.”

Horatio smiled, his eyes slipping back to Archie. “He’s good at that sort of thing. We should watch *Master and Commander* together so you can hear his commentary on Aubrey and Maturin.”

Will chuckled faintly. “Maybe on my next visit.”

“You don’t live nearby, then?” Lady Kennedy asked.

Will shook his head. “Only during the school year. Horatio and I are roommates at KCL. I’m back in Chichester with my family for the summers.”

Lady Kennedy raised an eyebrow. “Chichester’s a bit of a trek from here, isn’t it? It’s good of you to come all this way.”

Will smiled and shook his head again. “I just stopped by this weekend on my way to visit my sister in London. We came straight here as soon as Archie called to tell us about the attack. It wasn’t a long trek at all.” He paused, then looked over at Horatio. “Though I’d be here even if it was,” he said quietly.

Horatio swallowed, his throat too full of emotions to make room for words. He managed a brief nod in thanks.

Will nodded back.

“How long have you two been friends?” Izzy asked.

“Going on two years,” Will said.

“And you and Archie?” Lady Kennedy asked Will.

Will glanced over at Horatio, then shrugged. “We met on Sunday,” he said with a faint, tilted smile.
Izzy and Lady Kennedy had matching expressions of surprise mixed with a hefty dose of incredulity.

Lady Kennedy recovered first. “Well, Archie did always make friends quickly,” she said with a smile.

Izzy tilted her head, then looked at Will with a mischievous grin. “And boyfriends, too.”

Will inexplicably turned slightly pink.

“How long did it take for you and Archie to get together?” she asked, turning to face Horatio.

Horatio swallowed. “Er . . . a little under twenty-four hours?”

Izzy’s grin became even broader. “That sounds like Archie. I never did hear any specifics, though. Just heard days later that Archie’d called up Tamsin, playing the ‘son of the marquess’ card like there was no tomorrow to help someone named Horatio out of a debacle with a collapsing flat and a crooked landlord.”

Will’s head jerked up, and looked from Archie, to Horatio, to Izzy and Lady Kennedy, his eyes getting slightly wider each time.

Horatio winced internally. Right. They’d neglected to mention the minor detail of Archie’s illustrious family background to Will.

Izzy tilted her head to the side. “So? How did you meet?”

Horatio swallowed. Neither his father nor Will ever asked personal questions like this. “Er, we met on my first day working at the library. He’d come in to get a Reader’s Pass. We were getting along splendidly, chatting, when he . . . er--” He paused. Should he mention the cause of the seizure? No, better stick to the version Archie had told to Will at Hannah’s bar. “--had a seizure. I followed the post-seizure protocol, escorted him home and . . . er--” we accidentally fell asleep on my sofa with my arms around him, “--stayed with him to make sure he was alright. He asked me on a date the next morning.”

Izzy frowned. “No, that can’t be right. The last specialist said they should’ve stopped with the new meds.”

Lady Kennedy hesitated, then shook her head. “Archie told me they hadn’t when we spoke last month.”

Izzy sat up straight and turned to look at Horatio. “How many has he had in the last month?” she demanded.

Horatio winced. “Er, that one . . . and, er, one last night.”

Izzy bit her lip and looked at her mother. “Should we consult another doctor?”

Lady Kennedy sighed. “I tried to convince him. He refused. Perhaps you’d have better luck.”

“Well, we have to do something,” Izzy insisted. “It’s not safe for him to have seizures at random. Is there something else wrong? More serious damage? Oh, God, Mum, what if that’s why he was unresponsive for so long?”

Horatio frowned. Izzy looked close to tears. Perhaps there was something he could do to put her
mind at rest on one score. He cleared his throat. “I... er... don’t think the seizures are entirely random.”

Everyone turned to look at him.

“What do you mean?” Izzy asked, narrowing her eyes.

Horatio swallowed and glanced down. “Both seizures have direct ties to Simpson. For example, the first was in response to a text his agent had sent, letting him know that Simpson had been cast in The Worthington Chronicles.”

Silence.

He looked up. Will’s hands were clenched into fists by his side, Lady Kennedy had a hand over her mouth and her eyes were welling up with tears, and Izzy was holding her mother’s free hand, her jaw jutting out in a gesture so familiar on Archie’s face that it made his chest ache.

After a moment, Lady Kennedy sighed and wiped her eyes. “That would explain why he’d stopped talking about the film--”

“--or answering our calls or emails yet again,” Izzy finished.

Horatio frowned. Surely it was an inauspicious start to meeting the family if he’d made one of them cry within an hour of meeting them. How could he make amends? He cleared his throat. “Er, I -- I apologize for bringing it up. I shouldn’t have mentioned it.”

Izzy shook her head. “Don’t be ridiculous. I asked. And--” She stillled, tilted her head, and narrowed her eyes as her expression turned dangerously stormy. “--Wait. Keene texted to warn him? Fuck! Keene KNEW! He fucking knew, and he did nothing! Who else knew? Who else did he tell? Who else abandoned him? Fucking let me at them, I’ll--”

Archie’s hand twitched.

Izzy clapped a hand over her mouth and everyone stilled, hardly daring to breathe.

After a moment, Archie made a quiet little hum, then inched closer, sliding further up Horatio’s side.

Thirty seconds later, Archie’s breathing had returned to the slow, regular rise and fall of someone entirely asleep.

Horatio glanced back over to the rest of the group. Izzy’s hand was still covering her mouth, and tears were running down her cheeks as her shoulders shook. Her mother had an arm around her and was holding her tightly. Will’s forehead was as creased as he’d ever seen it.

“I know, darling, I know,” Lady Kennedy soothed. “Shhhh, now. It’s alright. He’s safe now.”

“But he should have been safe then, and this never should have happened, and I should have been there! I should have followed up more, made sure he was alright, pressed harder when I knew he was hiding something, when he wasn’t eating last Christmas, when he looked so horribly unhappy that I was scared for him, but I didn’t, and he almost--” Her breath hitched and she buried her face in her mother’s shoulder.
Horatio looked from Izzy to Will in mute horror. What should he do? What could he say? How could he comfort her? He only knew how to comfort Archie, and even then, it hadn’t been enough to keep Archie from collapsing, and talking with women under the best of circumstances was always vaguely terrifying, and Archie loved Izzy and it was important to get this right, and--

“Izzy, darling,” Lady Kennedy said quietly, “let’s go get some air.”

Izzy sat up and nodded, wiping furiously at her eyes which were turned towards the ground, and hurried out through the gap in the curtain, her footsteps picking up speed the further she walked.

“Please excuse us,” Lady Kennedy said, her eyes darting after her daughter. “We’ll be back shortly. It’s lovely to meet you both.” She managed a quick, polite nod, then rushed out of the room.

Horatio stared after her and watched the curtain sway back and forth as his mind raced. How had that gone so poorly? He’d merely wished to set their mind at ease that Archie didn’t have additional brain damage, and he’d made them cry and beat a hasty retreat instead. Was there a set of rules for explaining the full extent of one’s boyfriend’s trauma to said boyfriend’s family that would have resulted in a better outcome? Surely, if Archie or Will had been in his position, they would have found a more successful strategy.

If only Archie were awake--

Horatio scowled. No, that was a horribly selfish thing to think. Archie needed rest. Speaking with his family while Archie slept was the least he could do.

But even that had been a disaster. Perhaps he truly was a failure as a supportive partner--

“Congratulations, Horatio.”

Horatio looked up to see Will smiling at him. He glared back. “On what?”

“You met the family. That’s quite the relationship milestone.”

Horatio rolled his eyes. “It was hardly a rousing success.”

Will raised an eyebrow. “It’s as good a meeting as was possible, given the circumstances. And you handled it well, as you always do.”

Horatio snorted.

Will frowned. “What?”

“That’s patently absurd. I haven't done anything well all day. If I had, I wouldn't have a broken arm and Archie wouldn't have almost died.” He sighed and shook his head. “I don't know what I’m doing, Will. I have no idea how to help.”

Will’s frown deepend. “But you're helping right now.”

“How?” Horatio scoffed. “By running my fingers through his hair?”

“Yes,” Will said simply.

Horatio rolled his eyes. “That's not nearly enough.”

Will sighed. “You’re by his side. Providing comfort. Safety. It's what he needs now, Horatio, more than big gestures or heroics.”
“How would you know?” Horatio snapped.

Will raised an eyebrow and sat back in his chair. “I have a bit of experience with being in hospital myself.”

The scowl fell off Horatio's face instantly. “Oh, damn, Will, of course you do. I’m . . . I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking--”

Will waved Horatio’s apology away with a shake of his head. “No harm done. Just . . . don’t underestimate how much you’re helping him. Or his family.”

Horatio sighed. “How do you do that?”

Will frowned. “Do what?”

“Stay . . . steady, like a rock, no matter what anyone says or does. You make it look so simple.” He sighed again, his eyes drifting to the foot of the bed. “I wish I were that unflappable . . . that unafraid of everything.”

Will huffed out a quiet chuckle and shook his head. “Everyone's afraid of something, Horatio.”

Horatio raised an eyebrow. “Even you?”

Will frowned. “Of course.”

Horatio rolled his eyes. “Well, I suppose if we’re being pedantic, most people are afraid of mortality.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Horatio glanced up. “Then what did you mean? What could you possibly be afraid of?”

Will stared down at his hands and shifted awkwardly. “Spiders,” he said at last.

Horatio rolled his eyes again. “That’s one thing, Will, it hardly--”

“Losing you,” Will said quietly.

Horatio blinked. He opened and closed his mouth. He frowned. Will was still staring down at his hands, his shoulders slightly hunched in.

“Will. I’m alright,” Horatio said quietly.

Will nodded, then swallowed, and continued to stare down at his hands.

Horatio’s heart clenched. He’d never seen Will look this upset before. The only thing that had come close was the two year anniversary of the day he’d lost his foot. Even steak and a good stout from his favorite pub had only gotten a hint of a smile out of him that day. But he couldn’t bring Will those things while in hospital. He cleared his throat. “Er, Will? What can I do?”

Will blinked and looked up. His eyes looked slightly damp. He sniffed slightly and shook his head. “I’m fine,” he said, his voice sounding slightly lower and more gravelly than usual.

Oh, damn it all to hell. Will was crying. Nothing made sense anymore.

How could he fix this?
He racked his brains. Will had put a hand on his knee and on Archie’s shin to comfort them. Perhaps he didn’t dislike physical contact in instances of extreme distress?

Horatio tried to move his arm to put a hand on Will’s shoulder, then hissed as red hot pain lanced through it. Oh. Of course. That was his left arm. The broken one.

Will was up and out of his seat in an instant. “Horatio? What do you need? A nurse?”

Horatio gritted his teeth and shook his head. “Nothing. It was just a miscalculation.”

Will raised an eyebrow.

Horatio rolled his eyes. “If you must know, I tried to move my arm.”

Will raised his eyebrow higher. “Why?”

Horatio sighed, rolled his eyes again, and tried not to blush. “Oh, very well. I thought it might help you if I . . . er . . . reached out to . . . er . . . comfort you . . . but . . . my left arm is closest . . . and . . . er . . . I forgot.”

Will stared at him unblinkingly for a moment, then the corner of his lips started twitching. A moment later, his shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter. “Horatio, you--” He shook his head, scratched the back of his neck, then sat down in his chair again, his smile fading. “I’m alright, Horatio. Don’t worry about me.” He leaned forward to pat Horatio’s knee one more time, but the smile didn’t return.

Horatio frowned. How did comforting come so easily to Archie? He braced himself, took a deep breath, then slowly moved his right hand from his side and placed it over Will’s hand on his knee.

Will glanced up, his eyebrow raised with surprise, then gave him a faint smile.

Horatio felt a curious warmth flow through him as he managed a small smile back.

Will’s phone dinged.

Will pulled his hand back instantly and shifted to get his phone out of his pocket. He stared at the message on the screen. “Oh. It’s Victoria. She and Hannah are wondering when they can come in and see you both.” The phone dinged again. He huffed out a laugh. “They want us to know that if you and Archie aren’t up for company, then they will require, in their words, ‘proof of life, in the form of a phone call, picture, or video.’” He shifted in his seat, then pressed his lips together. “They’ve been here for going on five hours. Horatio, would you mind--?”

Horatio sighed, then shook his head. “It’s alright, Will. Tell them they can come in.”

Will raised an eyebrow. “You’re sure?”

Horatio nodded. He had about two hours left in him before anything, even another surgery, would sound preferable to socializing with anyone apart from Archie or Will. He might as well make the best of it.

Will dipped his head. “I’ll tell them to come on through.” He tapped back his response, and the faint ‘whoosh’ noise signaled his success. “They’ll be pleased to see you. I think they’re both getting a bit worried.”

“It’ll be good to see them.” Horatio paused, then frowned. Victoria might find it upsetting to see
him in this state. What could he do to make this easier for her? Perhaps he should sit up more to look more alert? He braced himself for the discomfort that would come with moving, then tried to push himself up with his uninjured arm. He hissed in pain, then stilled as Archie’s nose twitched. He waited, holding his breath. After a moment, Archie frowned slightly, then wriggled up higher until his head was resting on Horatio’s chest. Horatio hesitated, then wrapped his right arm around Archie. Archie smiled faintly in his sleep.

Horatio’s heart clenched, and he ignored the slight protest his ribs made as he leaned forward to press a feather-light kiss to Archie’s forehead.

A short, amused huff reached his ears. He glanced to his left. Will was watching him, a faint, tilted smile on his lips.

Horatio raised an eyebrow.

Will smiled and shook his head. “You really are doing well, Horatio,” he murmured. “You’re taking good care of him.” He paused. “As he is of you.”

Horatio hesitated. Would Will have other suggestions of how to help Archie from his own time in hospital? Will never voluntarily spoke of it, or of the incident that had rendered the prosthetic necessary, but he’d already detoured from that course today to help them both. Perhaps he would do it again? He cleared his throat. “Er, Will . . . I was wondering--”

The curtains parted, and Victoria rushed in, followed closely by Hannah. They stopped short in the threshold, Victoria’s eyes going wide as she stared in shock at Horatio’s face, then arm. “Oh, God, Horatio,” she gasped, her hand coming up to cover her mouth, before hurrying over to Horatio’s side and reaching over to give him a gentle hug. “We’ve been so worried.”

Horatio tried to make eye contact with Will over Victoria’s head, his mind racing. What should he say? “Oh . . . er . . . hello, Victoria,” he said after a moment. “I’m . . . er . . . sorry for causing you distress. And for interrupting your time with Will.”

Victoria pulled back, her hands on her hips, and raised an eyebrow. “Horatio, you’re practically my brother. Of course I’d be here.”

Horatio blinked, his command of the English language vanishing in the face of such open affection.

Victoria rolled her eyes. “It’s not an inconvenience, if that’s what you’re worried about. I had plenty of sick and personal days saved up, and I’ve had a lovely time chatting with Hannah.” She glanced over at Hannah, who was still standing in the threshold, staring unblinkingly at Horatio and Archie.

Victoria frowned slightly. “Hannah?”

Hannah blinked, shook her head slightly, then walked a few paces closer. She swallowed, her eyes looking surprisingly wet. “Hello, Horatio. It’s good to see you awake and patched up. How’s the arm?”

Horatio floundered. What was the appropriate responses for situations like this? “Er, it’s--” “painful? Uncomfortable? Unnerving? “--better, thank you.”

Hannah smiled faintly and nodded, then looked over at Archie. The smile fell off her face instantly. “How is he?” she asked quietly.
Horatio held him more tightly. “He’s out of danger. Just sleeping now. The doctor thinks he should be waking up soon.”

Victoria pulled out a chair next to Will and sat down beside him. “What happened, Will?” she asked quietly. “Why did he collapse?”

“Dehydration and exhaustion, primarily,” Will answered.

“So Izzy said,” Hannah responded, her forehead still creased.

“If it’s something so simple, then why have I seen both Izzy and Alastair in tears?” Victoria pressed. She leaned forward and put her hand on Will’s shoulder. “Will, you can tell me. How bad is it?”

Will hesitated, then shook his head. “He’ll be alright, Vicky.”

Victoria watched him intently. “No terminal diseases or tumors?”

Will shook his head with a flicker of a smile. “No, nothing like that.”

She tilted her head. “So it’s something you can’t say without Archie’s permission?”

Will narrowed his eyes. “Victoria,” he said, a vague note of warning in his voice.

“What? I’m just concerned about him. It sounded serious.” She paused, frowned, then gasped. “Oh, God, did Simpson--?” She cut herself off and stared at Will, biting her lip.

Will hesitated, shifted in his seat, glanced at Archie, and winced slightly. “It’s really not our place to say.”

Victoria look over at Hannah, who was staring back at her with her mouth hanging open.

They turned in unison to look at Archie in shocked silence.

“Shit,” Victoria muttered after a moment.

Hannah nodded, her eyes welling up with tears.

“And Simpson was right here, in hospital, near him, for hours,” Victoria said, shuddering as she looked up at Hannah again. “God, can you imagine?”

Hannah swallowed. “That would explain a fair bit.”

Horatio’s pulse started to race. They’d figured it out? How? What should he do? Perhaps he should deny everything? “I’m not sure what you--”

Hannah raised an eyebrow.

Victoria rolled her eyes. “Horatio, I worked the crisis hotline in uni, remember? I know the stats. One in twenty women in their lifetime, around 72,000 men per year in the UK alone, according to conservative estimates? It’s not uncommon.”

“I wish it were,” Hannah murmured.

Victoria frowned, then looked up and took Hannah’s hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. Hannah blinked, glanced over, gave her a hesitant smile and nod, then looked back at Archie.
How had Hannah and Victoria intuited something that had seemed so unthinkable to him 24 hours ago? And what the hell should he do? Horatio turned to shoot a pleading glance at Will. Will met his eyes, frowned, shifted again, then shrugged helplessly.

Horatio pressed his lips together. Even Will was at a loss. He swallowed and held Archie more tightly, wishing desperately he knew what to do next.

Victoria looked back over to Horatio, then bit her lip again. “Um, look, Horatio, I know how you like research. I still have some links to articles and pamphlets you might find helpful, including some designed for friends and families of survivors. I can email them to you if you’d like.”

Will and Horatio looked at each other again, still entirely tongue-tied. How could they answer without confirming or denying anything?

Victoria smiled faintly. “Ah, of course. How about this: I’ll email them to you in the interests of spreading knowledge, and you can read them or not as the spirit moves you? And you can even share them with Archie if he finds himself interested?”

Will raised an eyebrow at Horatio. “Nothing wrong with a little knowledge,” he suggested quietly.

Horatio frowned. It did seem foolish to turn down additional information. And if it could help Archie . . .

He pressed his lips together, then nodded slowly. “I suppose it couldn’t hurt,” he said at last.

Victoria breathed a sigh of relief. “Ok. Good.”

They lapsed into an awkward silence.

After a minute, Victoria cleared her throat. “So, Horatio,” she began, a smile playing on her lips, “Will was telling me the other day about a new biography of Nelson coming out soon. What have you heard about it?”

Horatio blinked as he reeled from conversational whiplash. “Er, well, the initial reports suggest that--”

The curtain pulled open and Lord Kennedy strode into the room, with Alastair close behind.

Horatio swallowed, his heart racing at the prospect of having to face them without Archie’s assistance. How did one talk to a marquess and an earl, especially under such circumstances?

Lord Kennedy frowned and glanced about him. “Where are my wife and daughter?” he asked.

“Hannah Clayton, Archie’s neighbor here in Greenwich,” she said with a faint smile. “You must be Archie’s father. I met Izzy earlier in the waiting room.”

“Hannah saved the day by knocking Simpson out with a fire extinguisher to stop him attacking Horatio,” Victoria jumped in.

Lord Kennedy blinked, then looked to his left at where Victoria was sitting.
“Oh, and I’m Victoria. Will’s sister,” she added. “Pleased to meet you.”

Lord Kennedy nodded, looking somewhat at sea. “I see. It’s . . . good of you both to come. And, Ms. Clayton,” he cleared his throat, “thank you for your act of bravery. You’ve done us all a great service.”

Hannah’s gaze drifted towards the floor. “Just glad I was home,” she murmured.

Lord Kennedy nodded, looked about him, then cleared his throat. “And, er, this is my eldest, Alastair.”

Alastair stood up straighter upon hearing his name and uncrossed his arms from his chest. “Hello,” he said with a thin, unconvincing smile and a slightly stiff nod.

Hannah and Victoria nodded back.

Everyone lapsed into awkward silence.

Lord Kennedy hesitated, then cleared his throat. “Horatio . . . How’s your arm?”

Oh dear God, not this again. He swallowed. “F-fine, thank you, my Lord.”

Hannah and Victoria glanced at Horatio, then at Lord Kennedy, their eyes widening.

Lord Kennedy nodded. “Good. Good. Glad to hear it.” He paused. “We know some excellent doctors in London, and we’ve been more than pleased with the quality of their care. I could make the introduction, should you desire an expert opinion.”

Horatio blinked as Archie’s performance for Mr. Foster drifted through his mind. Archie had emulated his father perfectly, down to the hand gestures, inflection, and tone of command. “Er, t-thank you, my Lord. But my father’s a doctor, so I'm sure he’ll have recommendations of his own.”

“Ah! A doctor’s son,” Lord Kennedy said, nodding. “What’s his speciality?”

Horatio’s throat felt suddenly dry. “He’s a general practitioner.”


Horatio shook his head. “Kent.”

“Oh,” Alastair said, his forehead wrinkling.

Another silence fell.

“So, Horatio,” Lord Kennedy started again, “Isabelle tells me you're at King’s College London. I’m a Cambridge man myself, but I've heard it's an excellent institution. How do you find it?”

Horatio tried not to squirm under the interrogation. “I . . . er, enjoy it.”

Alastair nodded. “What are you studying?”

“War studies, specializing in naval history, as is Will.”

Alastair frowned slightly as he looked at both of them. “Huh. That’s a bit dry and esoteric, isn’t it?”
Horatio tried not to bristle. “On the contrary. All the modules I’ve taken on the subject have been both informative and engaging.”

“Ah. Right. Of course. And . . . er, how about the uni as a whole?” Alastair continued.

“It has good roommates,” Will added, nodding in Horatio’s direction.

“Ah, right, you’re roommates,” Alastair mused. “That takes me back. I had a single at uni, of course, so I haven't had to suffer through sharing a room since my Eton days.”

Horatio set his jaw. “Given my own experiences on the subject, I'd be loath to call it suffering.”

Alastair’s eyes opened wide and he cleared his throat. “Oh, naturally. Er, glad it worked out for you both.” He licked his lips, glanced at his father, then back at Horatio, then at Will. “So, Will. How about you? What prompted you to study old boats?”

Will raised an eyebrow again, then shrugged. “I like water, the Service, and ships. It seemed like a logical thing to study.”

Alastair blinked. “Oh, you served?”

Will nodded. “Three years.”

Alastair frowned. “Why did you stop?”

Horatio winced. Victoria glared daggers at Alastair.

Will raised an eyebrow, scanned Alastair's face for some sign that this was a joke, then pointedly looked down at his prosthesis, its black metal clearly visible from his shorts to the floor.

Alastair followed Will’s gaze, his eyes landing on Will’s prosthesis. “Oh,” he said with a slight frown. He tilted his head and took a closer look. His eyes flew open wide. “OH!” he said again, turning pale, then pink. “I didn’t mean to say . . . er, that is, I wasn’t . . . um . . . oh bugger.” He trailed off, sighed, then ran a hand through his hair. “Look, I know I’m bungling this all up. Not my best showing, and all that.” He took a deep breath. “Will, I apologize for my insensitivity. Thank you for your service to our country.”

Will nodded once. “No harm done.”

Alastair managed another faint smile. “And Horatio, I’m pleased you and Archie have . . . have found each other. Thank you for being there for him.” He sighed, and his eyes slipped back to his brother. “God knows he needed it,” he said quietly.

Horatio blinked in surprise, still smarting from his earlier remarks. But his thanks seemed genuine enough, and he was Archie’s brother, after all. He nodded. “There’s no place I’d rather be than by his side.”

Alastair looked up and met his eyes, his eyebrow raised slightly. After a moment, he nodded slowly. “So I see,” he said with a broader, slightly lopsided smile.

The curtain slid further open, and Izzy marched in again, her head held high, followed closely by her mother. “Oh, good. Getting to know our new friends, Alastair?” Izzy asked as they hovered by the entrance, her slight congestion the only evidence of how she’d spent the last thirty minutes.

Alastair gave a sheepish smile. “Trying to.” He looked at Horatio and Will with an apologetic
“Izzy and Archie are the ones with the flair for conversation, I’m afraid. Although Izzy tends to rely heavily on the interrogative. We used to call it the Izzy-inquisition.”

Izzy rolled her eyes. “Is this still about Jane? Alastair, I was 14.”

Alastair raised an eyebrow. “I’d be willing to bet good money on the fact that you interrogated Horatio just as thoroughly as you did her. It lasted, what, an hour and a half?”

Izzy rolled her eyes again. “I think I’ve matured at least a bit in the intervening decade. I know better than to go full throttle when getting to know my siblings’ significant others.”

Will shot Victoria a pointed look. Victoria blushed slightly. Horatio frowned. When had Will brought a date home? Had it been recently? Was it that woman Will had gone on a date with in his first term? Lydia, or Lilith, or something like that? Why hadn’t Will told him? Horatio shook his head. It didn’t matter.

And, in any event, after the interrogation Victoria had subjected him to when Will had introduced him to the family, he felt somewhat sorry for the poor woman Will must have brought home. Perhaps that’s why Will had never mentioned it.

“All right, you two, that’s enough,” Lady Kennedy said quietly.

Will’s phone dinged. He pulled his phone from out of his pocket, then smiled faintly. “Your father texted, Horatio. He’s just parking now.” He glanced up from the phone and met Horatio’s eyes, his stolid gaze a promise to prepare his father for the crowd and the circumstances that lay in wait. “I’ll go show him in.”

He stood up, and Izzy and Lady Kennedy stepped to the side to make room for him to pass. He nodded to Horatio with a brief smile, then walked out through the curtain.

Izzy and Lady Kennedy took up places next to Archie’s side of the bed.

“How is he, Horatio?” Lady Kennedy asked. “Any change?”

Horatio shook his head. “Still fast asleep.”

She frowned, then nodded. “He does tend to sleep for extended periods after a seizure.” She paused. “Just usually not this deeply.”

“He had another seizure?” Alastair asked, frowning. “But the new doctor assured us they’d stop.”

“Exactly what I said,” Izzy said, glaring at her mother.

Lady Kennedy’s eyelids fluttered briefly. “Yes, that’s what we’d been told. But apparently the specialist was wrong. And Archie refused to get a second opinion.”

Alastair’s eyes opened wide. “What? Why? How could he not take this more seriously? Doesn’t he know it’s not safe to gamble with his health?”

Lady Kennedy sighed. “He’s doing the best he can, love,” she said quietly. “It’s not always that easy.”

Alastair frowned. “So, it’s possible that his collapsing was entirely unrelated to forgetting to eat. Something else might be wrong, something the doctors haven’t found yet?”

Izzy put a hand on Alastair’s shoulder. “No. It’s not going to be like that, Alastair. There’s no
mystery illness, no hidden time bomb.”

“Then will someone tell me why my little brother almost died today? Because that’s the only explanation that makes any sense,” Alastair said, his voice nearly breaking.

Izzy squeezed Alastair’s shoulder, then glanced at Horatio. She bit her lip, hesitated, then raised an eyebrow.

Horatio’s heart surged to his throat. What could he say without violating Archie’s trust?

“If there’s anything you feel you could share,” Lady Kennedy began, “we’d greatly appreciate it.”

Lord Kennedy nodded, his shoulders slumping slightly. “Please, Horatio,” he said, his voice sounding almost hoarse. “How did this happen?”

Horatio swallowed, looked down at Archie, then nodded. He could only hope that Archie would approve of this decision. Surely he wouldn’t want his family to be tortured by uncertainty. “He... er... hadn’t really slept since Saturday night.”

Alastair’s eyes grew wide. “Why?”

Horatio pressed his lips together as his mind raced to put together an adequate explanation.

“Because Simpson had texted around 1 on Monday morning to threaten to ambush him in Greenwich.”

“Oh, God,” Alastair said as he turned pale.

Horatio nodded. “And Simpson did. He showed up at the Caird and... caught Archie while I was off closing up for the day. I arrived in time to keep Simpson from...” he swallowed as his stomach lurched at the memory, “from... doing anything, but his presence had caused harm enough. Archie spent the next twelve hours at my flat dealing with... after-effects of the encounter.”

“Which means?” Lord Kennedy prompted. Lady Kennedy took his hand.

“Er--” Horatio glanced down at Archie. Damn it, what was the right thing to do? “He was--” in a state of constant panic, with regular screaming nightmares, “--upset. He was having difficulty breathing, he had a seizure that lasted three and a half minutes, and was unable to eat or sleep. I believe that he’d been unable to keep food or drink down as well, although he didn’t say so explicitly.”

“Oh,” Alastair said quietly.

“We realized the next morning that he’d left his anticonvulsants at his flat, so I went back to get them. Simpson was there. We fought, he broke my arm, Hannah intervened, and I lost consciousness. When I awoke, Archie was there. He’d come, despite the post-seizure exhaustion, despite everything, to be--” his voice wobbled, “--with me.” He swallowed, then took a deep breath. “I don’t know how he made it here. When I left the flat, he could hardly stand on his own.”

“He took a cab,” Hannah said quietly.

Everyone turned to look at her.

“I called, and he left the instant I told him what had happened. He didn’t even hesitate. And then he stayed, even after knowing that Simpson was being held here for concussion treatment.” Hannah sighed. “I don’t know how he did that.” She blinked repeatedly, then shook her head. “But, in any
event, he was looking a bit the worse for wear. Glazed eyes, not noticing when people were talking to him, unsteady on his feet, and seeming more than a little disorientated. I thought it was panic, or maybe shock. I didn’t realize he was—"

Hannah trailed off, her eyes drifting to the bed. Victoria hesitated, then reached out and took her hand. Hannah glanced up and gave her a hint of a smile.

“Were you there when he collapsed?” Lady Kennedy asked Hannah.

Hannah shook her head.

“Will was,” Victoria said quietly. “He texted me, after Archie was out of danger. He said they’d been sitting down in the stairwell, talking, and Archie got up too quickly and keeled over.”

“He fell down the stairs?” Alastair said, his eyes wide with horror.

“No, Will caught him before he hit the ground and held him up until the gurney arrived,” Horatio said.

Everyone turned to look at him.

“Er . . . I asked the same question. That’s what Will told me,” he explained, trying not to flush under the sudden scrutiny.

“He neglected to mention that detail,” Victoria said quietly, as her eyes slid back to Archie.

Horatio frowned as he followed her gaze. Why wouldn’t Will mention it? Perhaps because Victoria didn’t ask? Because he was distracted?

He glanced up. Lord Kennedy was staring at Archie, blinking repeatedly, his lips pressed in a tight line, and his jaw jutting forward.

“I see,” Lord Kennedy said at last. He cleared his throat again, then swallowed. “I’m . . . grateful for the information. And for what you all did for Archibald. It seems he’s found some loyal friends.” He hesitated, then glanced over at Horatio. “And a worthy . . . er . . . partner.”

Horatio blinked in surprise. “Er . . . t-thank you, my Lord.”

Lord Kennedy gave him a faint smile. “Of course.”

“He’s this way,” Will’s quiet voice floated through the ward with two sets of footsteps.

Horatio swallowed and glanced towards the curtain’s opening. His father disliked socializing at least as much as he did, preferring individual interactions to groups, and there were so many people for him to meet. Including Archie. Horatio’s heart started beating more quickly. His father had sounded pleased when he’d mentioned his new relationship over email, and had of course expressed his wish to meet Archie, but he certainly couldn’t have envisioned it being in hospital, with his son beaten and Archie unconscious. And what had Will said to prepare him for the scene he’d find behind the curtain? Did his father now know why Archie was unconscious? As a doctor, he’d certainly never hold it against him, but even so, it was hardly the idyllic meeting he’d been planning.

The curtain pulled open, and his father walked into their enclosure, his eyes immediately going to the bed. He smiled, his eyes crinkling in the corners, then looking slightly damp.
“Horatio,” he said quietly, taking the few steps toward the bed and holding out his hand. Horatio managed to free his right hand from Archie’s hair long enough to take it. “It’s good to see you safe.” He patted Horatio’s hand with his other one before relinquishing it. “And this is Archie, then?” he asked, with a cautious smile, nodding at the man sleeping soundly in Horatio’s arms.

Horatio nodded as he grasped desperately for some way to convey how important this meeting was to him, the depth of his feelings for Archie, how much Archie had suffered, and how terrifyingly close he’d come to losing him. “He’s asleep,” he managed.

His father’s smile softened. “Best thing for him. We’ll meet when he’s rested.”

Horatio nodded gratefully. Will must have explained at least the outline of the situation.

His father turned to face the rest of the group. “And you must be Archie’s family,” he said, still keeping his voice down so as not to disrupt Archie.

Lady Kennedy stepped over to meet him and shook his hand. “Dr. Hornblower, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Archie’s mother, Fiona. This is my husband, Reginald, and these are our other children, Alastair and Izzy.”

Horatio’s father shook hands with each of them in turn. “Quentin, please.” He turned to the remaining people. “Victoria,” he said, clasping her hand, “it’s good to see you again.” He turned again. “And you must be Hannah. Thank you for saving Horatio’s life.”

Hannah shook his hand. “I’m just sorry I didn’t stop Simpson sooner.”

Horatio’s father shook his head, an understanding smile flitting across his features. “From what I’ve gathered, you did well to stop him at all.” He turned back to the bed. “Horatio, would you be willing to let me take a look at your chart? I’m sure the doctors and nurses have done a fine job, but I’d feel better for having seen the data for myself.”

Horatio nodded, and the room stayed silent as his father began to work. Horatio watched him, the faint frown as he studied the x-rays, borne of concentration rather than of concern, the slight squint as he glanced up at the monitor, the gentle tilt of his head as he ran over alternate potential treatments in his mind. For a moment, Horatio forgot that he was himself the patient, as the comfort of something so habitual washed over him.

“Everything seems in order,” his father said at last. “You’ve been well-looked after here. I couldn’t have done better myself.” He smiled faintly. “The break was comparatively smooth and should heal nicely, no damage to surrounding nerves or muscles, and the concussion and rib damage appear minor.” He paused, then frowned slightly. “But I noticed it’s been several hours since your last dose of pain medicine. I’d hazard a guess that this is at your request?”

Horatio winced, then glanced at Will, who was watching him, eyebrow pointedly raised, and his arms crossed over his chest. He swallowed. “Er . . . yes. They make it difficult to stay conscious. I’d . . . prefer not to sleep just yet.”

His father shook his head, a fond smile flickering over his face. “Very well. But we’ll revisit the question once Archie’s awake.”

Horatio’s eyebrow shot up. How had his father figured it out so quickly?

Horatio’s father’s lips twitched with some private amusement, and he turned around and faced the group again. “It seems I interrupted a conversation earlier. What were we discussing?”
Lord Kennedy had been watching him closely with a vaguely squinting expression, which was erased with a blink and a small shake of his head. “Er, we were thanking Horatio for everything he’s done for our son. You must be very proud.”

Horatio’s father nodded “I am,” he said quietly. He paused, then smiled. “And it seems Archie has made quite the impression on Horatio. I’ve rarely heard him happier.”

Horatio blushed. He hadn’t realized he’d been so effusive about Archie in his emails to his father.

“Archie as well,” Lady Kennedy jumped in. “We spoke a few days after they’d begun dating. I hadn’t heard him sound that alive in years.”

Horatio blushed further. Surely she was being hyperbolic.

Horatio’s father smiled again, then glanced over at Horatio. His smile slipped slightly. “Horatio,” he started, “Will tells me that you three had a lovely visit on Sunday. What all did you see?”

“Well,” he began, “Archie and Will hadn’t seen the rest of the National Maritime Museum, so of course we went there. And then we did some souvenir shopping at the Clock Tower Market--” his father raised an eyebrow, “--and then had Indian food--” his father raised his eyebrow still further, “--and then went on the Emirates Air Line’s cable car.”

Horatio’s father tilted his head, narrowed his eyes, then looked over at Will. “A cable car. Hmm. And how was that?”

Will shifted in his seat. “The view was lovely. But it had rather a lot of stairs.”

Horatio’s father’s eyebrow jumped up again.

Will shrugged. “It broke down while we were at the top. We had to climb the 90 metres down.”

Horatio glared at him. Will pretended not to notice.

He sighed, then looked up to find his father watching him, his forehead wrinkled with concern.

“That sounds . . . challenging,” his father said at last.

Horatio clenched his jaw. “It was perfectly fine. We all made it down intact.”

“Thanks to Archie,” Will said calmly. “He made sure we stayed in step, kept us from falling, and spoke to the customer service representatives once we reached the ground. We couldn’t have done it without him.”

Horatio scowled. Yes, his cable car idea had nearly ended in disaster, but there was no need for Will to go about parading his failing like that, and in front of his father and Archie’s family no less. What would they think of the fact that Archie had been forced to save the day, and--

Oh.

Will wasn’t insulting him. He was praising Archie. He was showing everyone Archie’s courage, his confidence and leadership under fire. His bravery.

Horatio swallowed down his pride, then nodded. “And Archie helped take my mind off my . . . . dislike of heights.”

Horatio’s father stared at him a moment, his head tilted and his forehead creased, before a small
smile wiped the prior expression away. “Well, it's especially fortunate he was there, then.”

“But . . . but that’s dangerous!” Alastair blurted out. “What if Archie’d had a seizure? You could have all been killed! We should call Tamsin, and at least register a complaint, or maybe inquire about a lawsuit--”

Horatio shook his head. “No, it’s alright. We’ll just . . . give it a wide berth in future.”

Alastair frowned. “But--”

The curtain pulled back again, this time, to reveal Nurse Rashidi. “Ah, I see the group has grown,” she said, glancing around the room with a faint frown. She eyes focused on the newest addition. “Are you Horatio’s father?”

“I am,” he said. “Dr. Quentin Hornblower. And I want to thank you for taking such good care of Horatio. I hope you don’t mind that I took a quick look at his chart. I imagined that would be quicker and less intrusive than flagging you down to ask questions while you were on your rounds.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Dr. Hornblower,” she said, shaking his hand. “I’m Nurse Rashidi. As you can see, everything went smoothly. We should be ready to discharge him soon.”

Horatio sat up slightly, ignoring the sudden, insistent throbbing of his arm. “What about Archie?”

Nurse Rashidi smiled as she checked Archie’s vitals. “He’s doing better. He should be able to leave when you do. Has he woken up recently?”

Horatio shook his head, trying not to grit his teeth against the pain.

“In that case, I’d recommend letting him sleep a little longer. He needs the rest, and we don’t have a shortage of beds at the moment. All going well, I’ll be back in forty five minutes or so to discharge you both.” She started walking towards the curtain, then paused and turned back to face him. “Any chance you’ve changed your mind about the pain meds?”

Horatio shook his head. The pain didn’t matter. He had to stay awake until Archie woke up. “I think I’ll wait awhile longer.”

She frowned again. “Are you sure? It’s important to stay ahead of pain. It’s much more effective to take painkillers on a regular schedule than to only use them when you’re in agony.”

Horatio nodded. “I’m sure,” he said as he tried to ignore the beads of sweat that had started forming on his forehead.

She sighed. “If you insist,” she said, before leaving their enclosure and drawing the curtain shut behind her.

Horatio’s father frowned, then turned to look at Horatio. “If you’re set against medication, will you at least consider closing your eyes for awhile? The body needs rest to recover, Horatio.”

Horatio swallowed and shook his head again, making sure to move slowly so as to reduce the fire raging in his arm. “I’m fine.”

Will frowned and took a step closer to the bed. “We can come back later, Horatio.”

Horatio glared at him.
Will narrowed his eyes. “Archie won’t be happy about this,” he said quietly.

Horatio bit back on the urge to snap back that Archie was asleep so it didn’t matter what he wanted. He opted for saying nothing. He resolutely met Will’s eyes instead.

After a moment, Will sighed and shook his head. “Have it your way,” he murmured.

Izzy frowned, squinted slightly, then suddenly turned her head to look at Will, a glimmer of a smile flitting over her face. “Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m in need of a stretch,” she said, standing up. “A brief walk outside seems like just the thing. Who’s with me? Will?”

Will turned to look at her, his eyebrow raised, then his eyes widened fractionally. He nodded as he stood up. “Good thinking.”

“How about me?” Victoria said as she and Hannah got up in unison.

Izzy smiled broadly. “Excellent. Alastair?”

Alastair frowned. “What?”

Izzy glared pointedly at Alastair for several seconds. “What? OH!” he said at last, his eyes widening. “A walk! Yes. I like walking.”

Izzy rolled her eyes.

Horatio glowered at them. Their tip-toeing around him like this was vaguely insulting. “I do in fact know what you’re doing,” he grumbled.

Izzy snorted. “Of course you do. We Kennedys are many things, Horatio. Subtle isn’t one of them.”

Victoria giggled. The corner of Will’s lips started twitching. Alastair looked vaguely affronted.

Izzy grinned, then turned to look at Horatio. “That reminds me, did Archie ever tell you how he convinced our father to sign him up for dance lessons?”

Horatio shook his head.

“Well, he’d just seen the musical *Billy Elliot*, about a boy from a coal mining town who wants to be a dancer—”

“Hold on,” Alastair interrupted, “are we not going on a walk now?”

Izzy rolled her eyes. “In a minute. This is a good story. So, anyway, we’d seen it together in the West End, and Archie became obsessed. He memorized all the songs, and gave the dance routines his best shot as well, much to our concern.” She chuckled and shook her head. “He kept crashing into walls because he didn’t know how to spot during his spins.”

“Oh, God, I remember that now,” Alastair groaned. “What was that song he and Charlie spent all summer singing and prancing about to?”

Izzy raised an eyebrow. “It was called ‘Expressing Yourself.’”

“That’s the one,” Alastair said with a sigh.

Lady Kennedy glanced down at Archie with a fond smile. “I still remember all the words, a decade
Izzy grinned. “It’d be hard to forget. But, back to the point, as you might imagine, every other sentence out of his mouth was about wanting to take dance lessons. He must have decided he’d been too subtle, because one evening, he said he had an announcement, and brought us all to his little stage.”

Lady Kennedy chuckled quietly, her eyes shining as she looked down at Archie. “He did a full rendition of the song ‘Electricity,’ including his own attempt at the dance routine.”

“Which he concluded by presenting Father with a petition, written in his best calligraphy, containing an itemized list of reasons he should be allowed to take dance lessons,” Izzy said with a grin.

Lady Kennedy smiled. “It’s still hanging in our bedroom.”

Lord Kennedy cleared his throat. “Well, he made a compelling case.”

Alastair’s expression softened, and he looked over at Archie with a faint, sad smile. “He always did know what he wanted.”

Horatio’s father raised an eyebrow. “How old was he?”

Lady Kennedy chuckled. “Eleven.”

An image of a small, earnest version of Archie, dancing and singing and making petitions, floated through Horatio’s mind. He huffed out a quiet laugh and held Archie more tightly, the vision an anodyne better than any drug.

Archie pressed his face further against Horatio’s chest with a soft, quiet grunt.

Horatio’s heart sped up.

Everyone snapped to attention. Izzy grabbed Alastair’s hand.

Archie’s eyelids twitched. After a brief struggle, he opened one eye, and then the other. He stared dazedly at Horatio’s hospital gown, blinked, then slowly tilted his head up to meet Horatio’s eyes, a sleepy, sunny smile lighting up his face.

“’Lo, love,” Archie mumbled, still more asleep than awake.

Horatio almost wept with joy.

It was going to be alright.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warnings: Hospital
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

I can't believe this is the end (until the sequel)!!!!!

Thanks to fionatlux for being the reason I wrote this; underhyll/gomicchi for being my beta for the earliest days; tablelamp for being my brainstorming buddy, early beta, and for teaching me to actually trust my instincts and have confidence in my own ideas rather than deferring to others; girabbit for reading some early versions of chapters, for the never-ending encouragement, and for being a huge part of the reason I didn't give up in a flail of self-doubt all those months ago (and for the MAGNIFICENT fanart which I still look at almost every day); respectablespy for the images and for being my consultant on all things British; sufficientlylargen for listening to me talk about little else than this novel for the last year and still loving me anyway; idelthoughts for being my beta for the previous incarnation of this story and for teaching me more about writing than I'd ever thought possible; and to kedge for being my tireless beta for the (30,000 word) rewrite and for reading draft after draft, no matter the hour, and for figuring out the exact things that were tripping me up. I'm so grateful to all of you, and this wouldn't exist without your help!

Thanks also to all of you for reading and commenting and giving kudos! I'd never written anything this big before (heck, it was only my 6th fic ever when I started), and I felt like such an imposter. I was terrified everyone was going to hate it (or ignore it), and I'm still in awe of the support and love this fandom has shown me and my quirky little AU. As cheesy as it may sound, your support helped me have the confidence necessary to make a career change and completely turn my life around, and I'll always be grateful to you all for that.

I love you all, and thank you for everything!

Chapter 27

Archie’s pillow vibrated.

That wasn’t right. Pillows shouldn’t vibrate.

He cracked an eye open.


What kind of pillow was this? He frowned, then wrestled his other eye open.

A hospital gown swam into focus.

Of course. His head was on Horatio’s chest. Must have shifted to snuggle while he slept.

He smiled groggily. Not a bad way to wake up.

Archie tilted his head up to see the face he loved more than any other in the world. “’Lo, love,” he
murmured, blinking blearily into Horatio’s warm, wide eyes.

A relieved, fond smile swept across Horatio’s face. “Hello, Archie,” he said quietly. “How are you feeling?”

“Sleepy,” he mumbled, stifling a yawn. “You? ’S your arm ok?”

Horatio’s long, slender fingers brushed gently against his hair. “It’s alright. In fact, Nurse Rashidi said we can leave in under an hour.”

Archie smiled and leaned into the touch. Home. Quiet. Snuggles. Far away from hospitals. “Yours ok?”

Horatio turned faintly pink, his eyes darting briefly to the left for a fraction of a second, before he shrugged slightly and gave him a warm, fond smile. “Of course.”

Archie squinted. What was Horatio embarrassed about?

“Of course you should stay together,” a low, unfamiliar voice murmured. “Best way to heal.”

Archie frowned. Why didn’t he recognize that voice?

He lifted his head from Horatio’s chest and blinked at the sea of people in front of him: Izzy and Alastair, holding hands; his dad with his arm around his mum; Hannah and Victoria, standing very close together; Will, the corner of his lips twitching; and . . . someone else.

The man was about Horatio’s height, even with his slightly stooped shoulders, and his dark brown hair, almost black, had the hint of a curl. His face was striking, his nose and cheekbones nearly as prominent as Horatio’s. His green eyes fell on Horatio’s hand as it gently stroked Archie’s hair, and crinkled with a smile.

Horatio cleared his throat. “Er, Archie? I’d like you to meet my father.”

Archie blinked. Horatio’s--

Oh, fuck, he’d just outed that they lived together to both of their families, and he hadn’t showered in days, and Horatio was being forced to coddle him right after surgery despite being exhausted, and, shit, what if someone had told Dr. Hornblower why he’d fallen apart? Jesus buggering fuck, what kind of a first impression--

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Archie,” Dr. Hornblower said quietly as he took a step forward and reached across Horatio to hold out his hand.

Archie managed a smile as he reached out to shake his hand, forcing his fingers not to tremble as his pulse began to race. “And you, Dr. Hornblower.”

Dr. Hornblower smiled back, a soft, understated expression that somehow still made his eyes shine. “Quentin, please. Horatio’s spoken of you a good deal. I hope you’ll come visit Kent with him before you leave for filming. You’d be most welcome.”

Archie blinked as his mind screeched to a halt. “Oh. Um. Thank you . . . Quentin. I’d like that,” he managed, his mouth working on autopilot. How did this quiet acceptance make any sense?

Horatio put his hand on Archie’s shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze, anchoring him to the moment as some of the tension started to drain away. Archie reached up and intertwined their
fingers, the best ‘thank you’ he could manage under the circumstances.

“Good to see you up, Archie,” Hannah said quietly. Her eyes looked slightly damp as she gave him a small half-smile.

Archie winced internally. Of course. She knew he’d collapsed. Yet more people he’d worried. “Oh. Um. Hello. Good to see you, too.” He paused as his brain scrabbled for things to say to change the tone of the conversation. “So . . . um . . . it seems I’ve missed quite the party while I was asleep.”

Izzy chuckled. “Oh, absolutely. Noise-makers, crackers, sing-alongs, embarrassing stories about you, the whole works.”

Archie huffed out a laugh. “Knowing you, I wouldn’t be surprised.”

Victoria grinned.

“You wound me, Archie. I’m gravely insulted,” Izzy said with a smile.

Archie rolled his eyes.

“Archie, dear, is there anything we can get you to make you more comfortable?” his mum asked.

“I’m sure we could get you some water,” Quentin added quietly.

Archie’s stomach twisted at the idea. Best not to risk it. “I’m fine as is. But . . . um . . . thanks all the same.”

Horatio’s arm tightened around his shoulder. “But . . . Archie, you’re dehydrated. You have to drink.”

Archie rolled his eyes. “I’m fine, Horatio. I’ve just been pumped full of fluids. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Horatio frowned. “Archie, that’s absurd!” He leaned forward and started to twist to face Archie. “You must—” he cut himself off, his mouth and eyes clamping tightly shut as he held his breath, then breathed slowly through his nose.

“Shit! Horatio, what’s wrong?” Archie asked, his hand instantly on Horatio’s uninjured shoulder.

“He’s overdue for his pain meds,” Will said calmly.

Archie rolled his eyes. “Of course you are,” he murmured. “Alright, love,” he said, rubbing Horatio’s shoulder, “let’s get you dosed up.”

Horatio shook his head and swallowed, gritting his teeth with pain. “I’m fine.”

“Horatio, love, you’re not fooling anyone. Just take the meds, let them work their magic. You might even get a short nap out of it.”

Horatio’s fingers twitched and gripped Archie’s shirt more tightly. “I’m alright. I don’t need to sleep.”

Archie paused, then narrowed his eyes. Why was Horatio so concerned about sleep all of a sudden? Oh. Of course. He’d collapsed the last time Horatio was asleep. Fuck. No wonder Horatio was jumpy. He stroked his thumb across Horatio’s shoulder, trying to put all his love and reassurance into the simple gesture. “I’m fine, love. I’m safe. It’s alright. You can rest now,” he murmured.
Horatio shook his head. “But--”

“What if Horatio agrees to take his pain meds if Archie has some water?” Will offered calmly.

Archie hesitated. Being sick in front of everyone would be the only way to make this situation worse. But, if he could keep it down, and if it could help Horatio --

He glanced up to see Horatio watching him intently. He sighed, then rolled his eyes. “Fine. I’ll agree if Horatio does.”

Horatio smiled faintly and squeezed his shoulder. “In that case, I agree as well.”

“Alright, then” Will said, leaning back in his chair.

“I’ll go find Nurse Rashidi,” Quentin said, and quietly left the room.

There was a long pause.

“Well done, Will,” Izzy said with a tense grin. “Ever considered a career in hostage negotiations? Perhaps ceasefire accords?”

Archie winced as the previous scene played back in his mind. What kind of psychotic fuckup needs to be bribed to take a sip of water?

Will shrugged. “I have four siblings.”

Izzy chuckled. “That would do it.”

Victoria rolled her eyes. “We were never that bad, Will.”

Will slowly raised an eyebrow. “Christmas, 2005.”

Victoria glared. “That wasn’t my fault.”

“Well, regardless,” Izzy interjected with a grin, “glad you convinced these two to give up their mutually-assured-self-destruction strategy. It seems overrated.”

Archie winced.

Horatio frowned at the foot of the bed.

“Well done, Will,” Izzy said with a tense grin. “Ever considered a career in hostage negotiations? Perhaps ceasefire accords?”

Archie nodded and hoped that words weren't strictly necessary.

“Good. Now, Horatio, take these--” she said as she dumped two small, white pills from one of the cups onto the palm of his hand, “--and this,” she said, handing him a small cup to drink from. He took a small sip and swallowed the pills. “You can take your next dose in 4 hours. That would be about--” she glanced at her watch, “--8pm. Any questions?”

Horatio shook his head.

“Alright. They should be bringing you some relief soon. I’ll be back to check on you boys in
another twenty minutes or so.” And with that, she left, pulling the curtain shut behind her.

“Your turn,” Horatio said, holding out what remained of his small cup of water.

“Ah. Right,” Archie managed through his suddenly tight throat.

“Archie?” Horatio’s voice was strained with worry. “What is it?”

Archie shook his head. “Nothing. A deal’s a deal.” He swallowed and took the cup, brushing his fingers against Horatio’s. He managed a faint smile, then raised the glass. “Cheers,” he said, then tossed the mouthful back.

The crisp water hit the roof of his mouth, then rolled over his tongue. He swallowed and his eyes drifted shut as the soothing, cool liquid slid down his scratchy throat. He waited for the sickening churning in his stomach. Only a cold sloshing sensation greeted him.

Archie opened his eyes to see Horatio watching him, his forehead wrinkled with concern. He rolled his eyes. “There. Mission accomplished.”

Horatio sighed in relief and took his free hand. “Thank you.” He paused. “You can start on the larger one now. We can get you another of comparable size in half an hour.”

Archie huffed out a laugh. “So, you’re my personal hydration coach now, are you?” he asked Horatio as he handed Quentin the paper cup and took the larger one.

Horatio grinned. “It certainly appears that way.”

Archie took a sip, then huffed out a laugh. “Hardly seems fair. What’s my task?”

“Making sure he keeps taking his pain meds,” Will said.

Archie turned to Horatio, eyebrow raised.

Horatio frowned, hesitated, then shrugged. “I suppose that’s only fair.” He paused, then smiled. “Have another sip.”

Archie snorted. “Aye aye, Captain Hornblower.” He took a longer sip to hide his smirk as Horatio struggled against a blush.

A faint buzzing filled the room. Archie’s mum frowned, then dug around in her purse, emerging with a phone. “Oh. It’s Tamsin. She’s been so worried about you. Do you mind if I--”

Archie shook his head. “Go right ahead.”

She smiled in thanks, then immediately swiped to answer. “Tami, he’s awake!” She paused, and her grin became brighter. “I know! We’re so relieved. Yes, we’re with him right now.” She nodded. “Let me just pass that on.” She pulled the phone away from her ear and looked at Archie. “She sends her love.” She hesitated. “Archie, are you up for saying a quick hello?”

Archie frowned. Maybe he could find a way to keep them from talking about anything too substantial . . . like what had landed him here in the first place, or the legal advice he’d need to get from her tomorrow?

Who was he kidding? This was Tamsin.

He’d just have to muddle through.
He managed a faint smile. “You’ll need to take my water, then, assuming Horatio allows that.”

Horatio huffed out a quiet laugh, and squeezed his hand tightly.

She took his water, then passed him the phone. He braced himself, then raised it to his ear. “Hello, Tamsin.”

She sighed in relief. “Archie, it’s so good to hear your voice! Charlie and I have been so worried. What happened?”

Archie winced. “You told Charlie?”

Horatio turned his head to look at him, his forehead wrinkled.

“Of course I told Charlie. You’d collapsed! He was looking into whether he could take time off work to come see you.”

Archie’s gut twisted with guilt. He hadn’t returned a single one of Charlie’s voicemails or texts in the last six months, and yet he was still there for him, as supportive as ever.

“I’m alright, Tamsin. Really.” He forced himself not to wince. His delivery sounded nearly as half-hearted as the sentiment itself.

The silence was deafening. “Archie, I’ve known you your entire life. You’re an exquisite actor, you really are, but right now, you’re not fooling anyone. Something’s been going on for awhile now, well before last November. We’ve been trying not to press, because you obviously didn’t feel you could talk about it, but, if you’re collapsing and being unresponsive in hospital, then maybe we’ve doing more harm than good. Archie, dear, what’s really happening?”

Archie sighed. That didn’t take long. “I was actually going to call you in the morning for some advice.”

A pause. “Legal advice?”

He winced. “Yes?”

She took a slow, deep inhale. “Right. Of course. Whatever you need.” She hesitated. “Does this mean you told your mum about whatever’s going on?”

Archie swallowed. “Yes. And, um—” he took a deep breath, “—you can ask her tonight if you want.”

Archie didn’t need to see her to know she was nodding, a sympathetic smile on her face. “One too many explanations to give in a day, or people in the room you’d rather keep in the dark?”

Archie glanced at Quentin “Both, actually,” he said, managing not to sound too sheepish.

“I see. And, how’s Horatio? I heard he has a broken arm?”

Archie nodded and glanced at Horatio, who was still watching him with a worried frown, but his eyes had started to look somewhat glassy. The meds must be kicking in. “He’s recovering. His surgery went well.”

“That’s a relief. What happened there, or is that also a story for another time?”

Archie hesitated, then sighed. Might as well. “Um... Simpson beat him up.”
A longer pause.

The pause stretched.

“Tamsin?” Archie said at last, too knackered to panic about the delay.

“Well. Fuck.”

Archie sighed. “That about covers it.”

She took a deep breath. “Right. Ok. At least two counts of GBH.” She paused. “And, reading between the lines, I can hazard a guess as to which other Parliamentary Acts I should review tonight.”

Archie rubbed a hand over his face. She was as quick as ever on the uptake. “And you’d probably be right.”

“Got it. Would you like me to research police reporting procedures? And to make a list of resources and reading materials you might find helpful?”

Archie found himself smiling slightly at Tamsin’s laser-like focus. Much easier to deal with than sympathy right now. “That would be ideal, actually.”

“Alright, then. I’ll do everything in my power to make every step of what’s ahead as clear and painless as possible. And Archie?” She hesitated. “I’m proud of you. Always will be. And so’s the rest of your family. You can do this.”

Archie swallowed. “Thanks.” He paused. “And, um, tell Charlie I say hello?”

Tamsin’s smile shone through her voice. “Of course. He’ll be pleased to hear that. Um . . . can I tell him what you told me?”

Archie hesitated.

“I won’t if you don’t want me to. But, for what it’s worth, he’ll understand. Anyone who’s worth anything at all will. We’re all on your side.”

Archie swallowed and blinked repeatedly as his eyes started to brim with tears. “You can tell him.”

“Thank you. I know it’ll mean a lot to him. He's been worried about you.”

Archie felt a faint pressure on his left hand. He glanced over to see Horatio, staring dazedly at their intertwined hands, his forehead dramatically wrinkled in confusion. He squeezed Horatio’s hand and watched as a slightly goofy smile spread over his face. Yep. Pain meds. Time to get off the phone.

“Tamsin, I really should head off now, but--”

“Oh, of course. And don’t worry, Archie. We’re going to get this piece of shit and he’ll be put where he can never hurt either of you again.”

He managed a faint smile. Maybe, just maybe, that would be possible. “Talk tomorrow morning?”

“Of course. Call anytime. I’ll be around. Oh, could you put your mum on, just for a sec?”

Archie nodded. “Sure. Here she is.” He passed her the phone, then turned to face Horatio, who had
started tracing each of Archie’s fingers with his thumb, from the spot where the bones joined the wrist, to the tips of his fingernails, in rapt, glassy-eyed concentration.

“How’re you feeling, love?” Archie whispered, tuning out his mum’s conversation.

Horatio slowly looked up, then grinned at Archie. “You’re back,” he slurred.

“I am indeed. Horatio, love, I have an idea. Why don’t you lie back and rest for a bit?”

Horatio shook his head. “S no need. ’M not tired.” His head listed to the side slightly, inching ever closer to Archie’s shoulder.

Archie wrestled back a grin. “Oh, ok. That’s good to know. But, love, I think you may be feeling the meds slightly, and--”

“’M ’ntirely un’ffected,” Horatio mumbled

Will snorted quietly in the background.

Archie swallowed down the giggle that kept trying to break free. “Yes, I can see that. But why don’t you just rest your head on my shoulder like this--” he slid his arm behind Horatio’s back and guided him closer. Horatio dropped his head onto Archie’s shoulder instantly, “--until they kick in?”

“’Lright,” he murmured as his eyes drifted shut. “’Rchie?”

“Yes, love?”

“I love you,” he murmured into Archie’s shoulder.

“I love you, too,” Archie whispered, his heart so full it might burst. He hardly cared that he could feel everyone’s eyes on them.

“’Nd your shoulder,” Horatio concluded.

Archie bit his lip to keep from laughing out loud. He only hoped his shoulders weren’t shaking hard enough to jar Horatio. “I love your shoulder, too.”

He glanced up. Quentin was watching with a fond smile, Will was pressing his lips together to fight off a smirk, Hannah and Izzy were grinning, as was his mum, who was putting her phone in her purse, and Victoria was covering her mouth with her hand to hide the fact that she was laughing. Even his dad and Alastair looked amused.

Horatio would probably die of embarrassment at having anyone else witness this. Archie hesitated, met Izzy’s eye, then pointedly glanced toward the gap in the curtain.

Izzy followed his gaze, then nodded immediately. “Mum, Dad, I think we should go get settled in our hotel. Archie looks sleepy.” She winked at him.

Archie rolled his eyes.

Their mum smiled. “Good idea, dear.” She turned to Archie. “Give us a call or text if you need anything at all. We’re only a few minutes’ drive away.”

Archie nodded as carefully as possible so as not to wake Horatio.
“Let’s go, Mum,” Izzy said, pulling open the curtain and starting to walk out of the room. “Archie needs his--” She cut herself off, then stood entirely still, blocking the gap in the curtain from view. “Oh. Hello. Can I help you, officer?”

Archie’s heart starting beating more quickly.

“Er, hello, I’m Detective Jones. I’m looking for Horatio Hornblower. I was told at the front he was here. Mind if I come in?”

Archie’s heart started hammering. Oh, fuck. No, no no, not now, anything but now, tomorrow, maybe, tomorrow would work, please, God, just walk away now, change your mind, remember you’ve left the kettle on, anything, just go the fuck away--

Izzy glanced over her shoulder. She paused, frowned, then turned back to face the detective. “Well, you're in the right place, but he just fell asleep. Can’t it wait until later? Tomorrow, perhaps?”

Detective Jones hesitated. “Today really would be preferable.”

Izzy crossed her arms over her chest. “And why is that?”

“The investigation is confidential, I’m afraid. Are you family? Or his girlfriend, perhaps?”

Izzy shook his head. “Neither, actually. He’s dating my brother.”

Detective Jones paused. “He’s . . . ? Oh! Oh, I see. Right.” He cleared his throat. “Well . . . er . . . good for them, I suppose. Is your brother here? I’d like to speak with him as well. It might give me a better picture of the situation.”

Archie closed his eyes and tried to focus on breathing and ignoring the sensation of seven pairs of eyes burning a hole into him.

“Um. Yes, but--”

“Oh, good! In that case--”

“He’s here as a patient, not a visitor.”

Archie swallowed, his throat suddenly dry.

“Oh. I see. Er, what happened?”

Izzy sighed. “Long story. Look, are you sure you can’t just come back later?”

“I wish I could. But we only have 24 hours to charge the man we’re holding before we have to release him, so we’re on the clock. Anything Horatio can tell us, or even your brother, if he knows any details, would be invaluable to the case.”

Archie’s eyes flew open as his chest started to tighten.

Izzy glanced over her shoulder again at Archie, her eyebrow raised in a hesitant question as she bit her lip.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck fuck, how the hell was he supposed to do this, and in front of Horatio’s father?

Archie swallowed. What choice did he have? It was the only way to make sure Simpson didn’t walk free and hurt Horatio again. He nodded.
Izzy gave him a sad, understanding smile, nodded, then turned back to the curtain. “Well, then you’d better come in.” She took a step back and beckoned for him to follow.

The curtains parted further with a quiet rustle, and he stepped through. He looked around, then blinked at the swarm of people. “Oh, hello. Quite the gathering you have here.” He turned, then looked towards the bed and made eye contact with Archie. “I’m Detective Jones,” he said, holding out his badge. “I was hoping I might ask Mr. Hornblower a few questions.”

Archie managed a faint smile and a nod. “Archie Kennedy. I’m not sure how much help Horatio could be right now. He just got a dose of painkillers for his arm; made him a tad woozy. Any chance you could come back later?”

Detective Jones shook his head. “Not without jeopardizing the case. It’ll just be some preliminary questions to start our investigation. He can come to the station tomorrow to make an official statement.”

Archie hesitated. “You’re sure it’s the only way?”

Detective Jones nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

Archie sighed, then gently squeezed Horatio’s uninjured shoulder. “Horatio, love,” he whispered in his ear, “could you open your eyes for a moment?”

Horatio’s eyelids twitched then fluttered twice before he pried an eye open. “‘Rchie? You alright?” he murmured.

Archie managed a faint smile. “I’m fine. A detective is here. He wants to ask you some questions about this morning. Do you feel up to it?”

Horatio blinked owlishly, then made a valiant attempt to sit up straight. “Oh. Detective. I’m sorry--was asleep-- ’M sure I can manage.” He blinked repeatedly, his eyes still hazy and unfocused, and swayed slightly as he tried to meet the detective’s eye.

Detective Jones smiled slightly, then shook his head. “It’s quite alright. Sorry to wake you. I’ll try to make it quick. Can you tell me what you were doing outside 105 Hales Lane, apartment 4?”

Horatio frowned, then nodded slowly. “‘S Archie’s flat,” he slurred. “Was getting his medicine. He’d run out.”

Detective Jones glanced up, his eyes opening a fraction wider. “And why was he worried about Simpson?”

Horatio frowned and swayed slightly. “He’d had a seizure. Needed rest.”

“Ah, I see,” Detective Jones said, nodding some more.

“Didn’t want me to go. Was worried Simpson might be there. Waiting,” Horatio said. He listed slightly to the side, frowned, then straightened again, wobbling slightly.

Detective Jones glanced up, his eyes opening a fraction wider. “And why was he worried about
that?”

Horatio paused, tilted his head, blinked, frowned, then turned his bleary eyes on Archie. “You didn’t tell him yet?”

Archie winced slightly and shook his head. “Didn’t have a chance.” And I don’t know how.

Detective Jones frowned and looked between the two of them. “Tell me what?”

Archie swallowed as the room started to close in. Telling family and friends were one thing, but this? He was a stranger. And it was official. There was no going back. Not really. Oh, fuck, how was he going to do this? His stomach started churning, this wasn’t possible, he couldn’t--

Horatio gently squeezed Archie’s hand.

“Detective Jones,” Hannah jumped in, “I’m Hannah Clayton, the one who called the paramedics and the police. I’d already arranged to give my statement to Office Bowles tomorrow, but I’m happy to give it now if it would help the case.”

Detective Jones frowned, then tilted his head. “I suppose it would be better than nothing, but--”

Hannah gave him a faint smile. “Well, there we go, then. These two should get some more rest after the day they’ve had.”

Detective Jones hesitated, narrowed his eyes, then shrugged. “Alright, Ms. Clayton. Will you tell us what you saw?”

No. Hannah had already been the one to strike Simpson down when it should have been him. He couldn’t let it happen again.

“He was stalking me,” Archie blurted out.

The room became deadly silent.

Detective Jones froze, then turned around to face him. “What?”

Archie’s eyelids fluttered as his heart tried to scamper out of his chest. “Simpson was stalking me. Had been for the last year and a half.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Threw me head-first into a table last November, which caused the seizures.”

Detective Jones frowned and flipped through his notebook. “But there was no prior history of violence in his records.”

Archie swallowed past the lump in his throat. “That’s because I . . . um . . .” he cleared his throat, “I said it was an accident. We settled out of court.”

He glanced over at his mum, who had pulled her phone out of her purse and had started typing rapidly.

Detective Jones started scribbling frantically in his notebook. “Why would you do that?”

Horatio ran his thumb over the back of his hand. Will shifted closer.

Archie closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He had to do this. For Horatio. He swallowed. “Because he’d been raping me and I didn’t want anyone to find out,” he said through his impossibly tight throat.
Horatio squeezed his hand and turned to meet his eyes with a watery half-smile. Will inched closer and gave him a short, supportive nod.

Detective Jones’ pen froze in mid-word. He blinked as he stared down at his page. “Oh,” he said at last. “Oh. Right. I--” he cleared his throat. “I see. Well . . . er . . . we have officers who are trained in handling . . . that--” Archie forced himself not to flinch. Horatio’s hand twitched, then gripped Archie’s more tightly, “--if you want to make an official statement.”

Archie swallowed and forced himself to hold his head high. He took a deep breath, licked his lips, and exhaled slowly. “I do. What’s the protocol for that?”

Detective Jones glanced at him, then the floor, then back at him. “Er, well, you go to the station. And, I -- you -- I suppose you ask to speak with one of the specialists--”

Will raised an eyebrow. “The training is optional, I take it.”

Detective Jones looked up, eyes wide, saw Will’s expression, then scratched the back of his neck. “Oh. Er . . . yes. It is.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Victoria sighed. “First, you ask to speak in a private room, and then you ask to meet with a Sexual Offence Liaison Officer to give your statement, although you may want to speak with an Independent Sexual Violence Advisor, or ISVA first to walk you through the process, you might try Survivors UK and the Havens, and--”

Archie’s eyes glazed over as the terms started flying.

“--and, um, actually, why don’t I email you and Horatio with some of this? It wouldn’t be a problem. I helped out loads of people of all genders and orientations at uni. And I formed a crisis hotline. I know the ropes.”

Loads of people. A crisis hotline. All genders. He mind swam as he tried to process the mixed emotions that swelled through him. “Ta,” he managed.

Victoria nodded and gave him a small, sad smile. “Of course.”

“Was there anything else you wanted to ask?” Izzy asked, turning to Detective Jones, her tone far more icy than it had been earlier.

“Oh, er, yes. Er, Mr. Hornblower, what happened with Mr. Simpson when you left Mr. Kennedy’s flat?”

Horatio blinked blurrily. “He tried to make me say where Archie was. Knocked the phone away when I tried t’call the police.”

Detective Jones nodded as he started writing again. “Ah, so, he hit you first?”

Horatio nodded.

“And did you hit back at any point?”

Horatio frowned, then nodded again. “Once. And then he did this,” he said, nodding towards his left arm as he swayed closer to Archie’s shoulder.

“And the concussion, broken nose, and bruised ribs,” Archie added pointedly as he shifted to put his arm around Horatio again. He guided Horatio’s head back to his shoulder. “Come on, love, rest
now. You’ve done enough.”

Horatio tried to shake his head but mainly succeeded in pressing his forehead against Archie’s shoulder. “Can’t let co-codamolol impede th’investigation. ’M alright.”

Archie huffed out an amused sigh and ran his hands through Horatio’s hair. “You can tell them tomorrow, love. Ok?”

Horatio sighed, then nodded as his eyes flickered shut. “Alright.”

Archie frowned. Horatio never gave in that quickly. He must feel beyond wretched.

“Actually,” Detective Jones interrupted, “I do have one more question. What happened after--”

“Pardon me,” Quentin interrupted, “I appreciate your commitment to your duty, but as you can see, they’re both rather tired. As a doctor myself, I have to recommend that you continue this later and let them rest now.”

The detective frowned. “I’m not sure that’s--”

“I’ve just consulted our family lawyer,” Archie's mum interrupted, “and she assures me that you now have more than enough to go on to keep that monster in a cell. You’ve done your duty, as have Horatio and Archie, who have both cooperated fully with your investigation. And, as the doctor has explained, that’s all you can safely ask today. Thank you for stopping by and for your commitment to the pursuit of justice. Have a good afternoon.” She smiled politely. It was the smile for showing the door to the stragglers leaving the yearly Kennedy clan gatherings at 3 am. The smile for demanding that Alastair’s doctors take his back pain seriously and give him an ultrasound. The smile that brooked no refusal.

Detective Jones froze, opened and closed his mouth, glanced around him, then scratched the back of his neck. “Ah. Yes. I probably should be getting back to the station. Er . . . here’s my card if you think of anything relevant before tomorrow, he said, handing it to Archie's mum, “and, er, have a good evening.” He smiled awkwardly, then hurried through the curtain. His footsteps echoed down the corridor.

Archie sighed in relief and slumped back slightly on his bed, his head throbbing. He closed his eyes and relished the brief moment of silence. Of course, he’d have to open his eyes in a minute, to face the scrutiny of everyone, but for now, in the darkness, he could pretend none of that had happened, nothing had changed, and he wouldn’t be facing a long, drawn-out, humiliating court proceeding that for all he knew could end up in the tabloids. He focused on breathing slowly, in through his nose, and out through his mouth, and felt some of the pressure that had been building up in his chest start to lessen.

“Archie, love, how are you feeling?” his mum asked quietly.

Archie huffed out a sigh. Not much point in lying after that. “Like I went a round or two with a lorry.”

“Perfectly understandable, under the circumstances. But you handled it well.” Quentin paused. “You should be proud of that.”

What?

He must have misheard. Archie turned his head to look at Horatio’s father. Quentin was watching them both with a faint smile, his eyes surprisingly warm and understanding, without even a
glimmer of disapproval or disgust.

“We’re certainly proud of him,” Archie’s mum said quietly.

Archie swallowed and looked at the foot of the bed as hundreds of conflicted emotions vied for supremacy.

Horatio’s eyelashes fluttered against Archie’s neck. Archie glanced down to see Horatio, struggling to keep his eyes open, looking up at him with a small, strained smile that radiated exhaustion as well as love and pride. Archie’s heart clenched with an overwhelming desire to hold Horatio as closely as the laws of physics would allow.

Archie’s father cleared his throat. “Are you sure you’d prefer to stay at Horatio’s flat, Archibald? We included a room for the two of you in our reservation, just in case.”

Horatio tensed in Archie’s arms.

Archie gently stroked Horatio’s shoulder with his thumb. “I’m sure. Think we both need a familiar space tonight.”

“Oh. Right. Of course. Er, how will you get there? We could have the car drop you off.”

“I can drive them,” Quentin said quietly.

“Is that on your way? Which hotel are you staying in?”

Quentin smiled slightly. “The air mattress at Horatio’s flat, in fact. It’s perfectly adequate.”

Archie’s father glanced at his mum, his eyebrow raised in a quick question. She nodded, then turned to Quentin with a smile. “Quentin, we’d be more than happy to have you join us. As you’ve heard, we already have an extra room, and we’d love the chance to get to know you a little better. It would be our treat, and the least we can do to thank you and Horatio.”

Quentin’s eyebrow shot up and he glanced over at Horatio, whose eyes were drooping shut again. “Thank you, but I’m afraid I have to refuse. I should stay with Archie and Horatio in case they need anything.”

“I could look after them,” Will said quietly.

Quentin frowned. “Will, that’s very kind of you, but you were visiting Victoria. I’d hate for you to cut your visit short.”

“I don’t mind.” Victoria said instantly. She glanced over at Hannah, eyebrow raised hesitantly. Hannah’s eyes widened, then she grinned and nodded. “I think I can find a way to spend the evening,” she added, a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

Will raised an eyebrow pointedly at her. Victoria blushed, but kept on smiling.

Archie grinned. Good to know someone would be having a pleasant night.

Quentin glanced over at Horatio. “What do you think, Horatio?”

“Hmm?” Horatio blinked repeatedly, then slowly looked up at his father. “Oh. You can go. We’ll be fine.”

Quentin hesitated.
Archie’s mum smiled. “Please, I insist. It’d be no trouble at all.”

Quentin glanced at Horatio one more time, then his frown cleared into a fond, amused smile. He looked back at Archie's mum and nodded. “If you're sure it's not an imposition.”

She grinned. “I’m sure. It would be a pleasure, in fact.”

“In that case, I accept,” Quentin said with a smile and a faint shrug. “But I should make sure the boys are settled at home first.”

“Of course,” Archie’s mum said with a smile. “We’ll have the car pick you up at 6.”

Quentin glanced at his watch, then nodded. “Alright.”


Archie frowned as he tried to remember the state of Horatio’s pantry or what foods would be easiest to eat one-handed. His head started to spin.

“I’ll text you a list once we get back to the flat,” Will said quietly.

“Then that’s sorted,” Izzy said with a grin. “We’ll get out of your way, let you rest up.”

“That is, unless you’d like us to stay until your discharge?” Archie’s mum asked.

Archie rolled his eyes. “I'm not so incapacitated that I need help understanding the doctor's orders.”

His mum sighed faintly and shook her head. “Alright, love. If that's what you want. Just . . . text us if you need anything at all. And it was good to meet all of you. Quentin, we’ll see you soon.”

Quentin dipped his head. “I’ll look forward to it.”

Archie’s mum smiled, then looked at her husband.

“I’ll call the car,” Archie’s father said. “And . . . er . . . you’ve done well today, son. We’re proud of you.”

Archie blinked as he fought back against unexpected tears. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d heard his father say those words.

“And, er, Horatio--” his father cleared his throat, then hesitated.

Horatio pried his eyes open and blinked blearily up at him. “Yes, m’lord?”

Archie’s father shook his head. “Call me Reginald. There’s no need to stand on ceremony. Not after everything you’ve done for my boy.” He hesitated, glanced over at Archie, then looked back at Horatio with a kinder, more open smile than Archie had seen since Alastair’s diagnosis. “Welcome to the family.”

Horatio’s mouth fell slightly open and he struggled to sit up. “T-thank you, m -- er, Reginald.”

Archie’s father nodded. “Of course.” He glanced at Archie again, then smiled.

Archie blinked. How was this the same person who had grounded him for a month for kissing Charlie? Granted, that had been a decade ago, but still, he’d resigned himself to a lifetime of
awkward pauses, mere nods of acknowledgement, and deliberate, performed politeness. Not . . . this.

“I think we should let them get some rest, Reggie,” Archie’s mum said quietly.

Archie’s father stood up straighter. “Of course. We’ll see you three boys in the morning. Izzy, Alastair, we’ll meet you in the waiting room.” He hesitated for a moment, then turned and walked out through the curtain, Archie’s mum by his side.

Izzy grinned. “We’ll get out of your way, too, let you rest up.” She walked over and gave Archie a tight hug. “Love you, little brother,” she whispered.

He smiled as he hugged back. “Love you, too.” He paused, then rolled his eyes. “And I’m not that little.”

Izzy ruffled his hair as she let go. “Whatever you say.”

Archie huffed out a laugh.

“Oh, and Horatio,” Izzy added. “I hope you enjoy being an honorary Kennedy, because you’re stuck with us now.”

Horatio blinked. “I -- you -- er --” He paused, then shook his head. “Er . . . thank you?”

“No teasing while you’re on pain meds. I can work with that,” Izzy said with a grin. “Alright, see you all soon. Archie, Horatio, enjoy your beauty sleep.” And with one last smile, she turned and left through the curtain.

Alastair started to follow her, then hesitated. “Er, Arch, I’m . . . um . . . sorry. About earlier. Just . . . take care of yourself, alright? You’re important. To all of us.”


Alastair licked his lips nervously. “And . . . er . . . look, let me know when you’re coming home for a visit, alright? I could take some time off. We could . . . catch up. Or, are there . . . I don’t know, musicals you like these days? You could always introduce me to one of them.”

Archie raised an eyebrow. “You hate theatre.”

Alastair shrugged. “Maybe I just didn’t give it a chance. What’s that one everyone’s talking about these days? Ham -- something or other?”

Archie’s eyebrow raised higher. “Hamilton?”

Alastair nodded, looking smug. “That’s the one.”

Archie tried not to laugh. “Alistair, it’s rap.”

The self-satisfaction drained from his face. “A . . . rap . . . musical. Right.” He shrugged, then smiled. “Well, er, might as well throw myself in the deep end. Only fair after all those polo matches I dragged you to.”

Archie blinked at him in disbelief.

“Well, I better be off. See you tomorrow, Arch. Oh, and--” Alastair cleared his throat and his eyelids fluttered slightly, “--you and Horatio are a good . . . couple. I’m glad you’re . . . together.”
He smiled—the thin-lipped nervous one—then turned on his heel and hurriedly left the room.

Archie stared after him.

Hannah and Victoria looked at each other, then nodded.

“We should be heading off soon, too, I’m afraid,” Victoria said.

Hannah nodded. “But if you need anything at all, or, Archie, if you need anything at all from your flat, just call, ok?”

Archie winced. Right. Hannah’d had access to a key the whole time. Well, shit. That was embarrassing.

Will nodded. “Thanks. Enjoy your evening.”

Victoria grinned. “Oh, we will. See you tomorrow. I’ll send you both that email. And sleep well, Horatio.”

Horatio blinked his eyes open and watched with a faint, confused frown as they walked through the gap in the curtain, with Victoria in the lead, her hand brushing against Hannah’s as they walked.

Will shook his head with a smile.

The curtain pulled open again. “Ah, peace and quiet at last, then?” Nurse Rashidi said with a smile. “Just in time for your discharge. Now, Archie, Horatio, who, if anyone, would you like to stay to hear your discharge instructions?”

Horatio glanced over at Will and his father, then paused, before looking back at Archie and frowning slightly.

“Archie, if you’d prefer me to leave the room for your portion, I understand,” Quentin said.

Archie hesitated. “If you wouldn’t mind?”

Quentin smiled and shook his head. “Not at all.”

“Same for me, I assume?” Will said quietly.

Horatio frowned some more.

“Um—” Archie thought back over the last several hours: Will’s catching him when he collapsed, making sure they stayed together while they were both unconscious, supporting him even after knowing the truth, standing up to Alastair. “—No, it’s alright. You can stay. If you want.”

Will’s eyebrow flicked up briefly. “Don’t mind at all.”

Horatio managed an unfocused smile and squeezed Archie’s hand.

“Alright, then,” Nurse Rashidi said, “Now that that’s out of the way, Horatio, let’s start with you. Your concussion was surprisingly mild, given the beating your head took. Expect some sluggishness, dizziness or balance problems, slight memory issues, headaches, or an increase in anxiety. You’ll need plenty of sleep, no heavy lifting or physical exertion of any kind—” she glanced over at Archie pointedly. Horatio frowned, blinked, then turned bright red as his eyes widened, “—and no working this week. Minimise computer and screen time, just to be safe. You’re on mandatory holiday.”
Horatio scowled. Archie winced. Horatio would be stir-crazy within a few hours of this.

“If anything gets worse, come straight back. You’ll need a follow-up appointment in a week to see how the recovery is coming.”

Horatio nodded as his jaw clenched tightly shut. Archie squeezed his hand and the muscles relaxed slightly.

“For your arm: the surgery went well, and the cast should come off in 6-8 weeks, after which you’ll need physical therapy. We’ll give you a prescription for some pain meds, but stop them as soon as you can while still getting sleep. Keep the cast dry, elevate and ice the arm for 30 minutes 4 to 5 times a day, and monitor it carefully.”

Horatio nodded again as his eyes glazed over more.

“I don’t expect you to remember all that, especially given your reaction to the meds, so it’s all written down for you here,” she said, waving some sheets of paper. “Who should I give this to?”

Will glanced around, then shrugged and stuck out his hand. “I’ll take it.”

Nurse Rashidi glanced at Horatio, who nodded, then handed them over. “Alright. Any questions? Concerns?”

Horatio shook his head slowly, frowning.

Archie hesitated, glanced at Horatio, then decided it was worth the risk. “Um, if it does cause an increase in anxiety, is there anything he can do for that? Or that we could do, for that matter?”

Horatio stiffened in Archie’s arms, then scowled. Quentin raised an eyebrow, then gave Archie a flicker of a smile and nod.

Nurse Rashidi looked at Horatio, tilted her head, and smiled slightly. “Ah. I’ll add a few pages to the printouts with some relaxation techniques, mindfulness exercises, etc. It might help to know that it should just be temporary, but if it becomes out of hand, we can always explore medication.”

Archie nodded. If Horatio was nettled at him for the next few hours, then that was a price he could pay. It was worth it to know how to help.

“Anything else?” Nurse Rashidi asked.

Everyone shook their heads.

“Alright, then. My number is on the bottom of the first sheet. Call if you think of anything later. Archie, your turn.”

Archie swallowed, his heart already beating more quickly.

Quentin stood up. “I’ll be in the waiting room. Will, text me if I’m needed.”

Will nodded, and Quentin left the room.

Will shifted closer to the bed and leaned forward.

“So,” she said, “I gathered from Horatio you’ve been having trouble keeping things down or getting yourself to eat, hence the dehydration and the low blood sugar. Has this happened before?”
Archie swallowed and tried to ignore the sensation of everyone’s eyes on him. “Once. A few months back.”

Nurse Rashidi nodded. “I see. And it sounds as though you’ve been under a good deal of strain lately, which can account for those problems. It’s actually quite common for eating, staying hydrated, and sleeping to become lost in the shuffle, or to become frustratingly difficult when dealing with traumatic situations, and it’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Archie’s dropped his gaze to the bed. Horatio squeezed his hand.

“But,” she continued, “as you might imagine, we need to come up with a workaround. If solid foods feel like too much right now, start simply: soups, rice, oatmeal, that sort of thing. Work up to it, eating a little at a time to give your stomach a chance to get used to having something in it again, and do not skip meals under any circumstances. Have Horatio and Will here remind you to eat if it helps. That’s a good short-term solution.”

Archie nodded. Of course it was humiliating to need to be reminded how to do basic human functions, like feeding himself, but if that’s what it would take, then he’d have to learn how to swallow the help along with the food.

Nurse Rashidi hesitated. “But, it’s not a long-term solution, especially since this has happened before. I recommend consulting with a mental health professional to help you find other strategies. Again, it’s nothing to be ashamed of, and it’s not a sign of weakness or failure. They’re just another resource to look after your health, the same as any specialist.”

Will looked down at the floor.

Archie swallowed. Oh, fuck, this was a disaster. Will, who had lost a fucking foot, who was always calm, who always had his shit together, had just heard someone say he was so broken that he needed help.

“I can give you a list of people I’d recommend, or you can research it yourself. Whatever you’d prefer.”

Archie swallowed. “I can research it on my own.” He tried not to wince at how thin his voice sounded.

Will glanced up, a faint frown on his face.

Nurse Rashidi shrugged. “It’s your call. Any questions? I know I’ve given you both plenty to process.”

They looked at each other, then shook their heads.

“In that case, Archie, let me just remove this IV.”

Archie looked at Horatio rather than at the IV bag, or the tube, or the needle under his skin that he’d been resolutely trying to pretend wasn’t there.

There was a brief sting as she removed the needle, and then --

“There you are. All set.”

He glanced over in time to see Nurse Rashidi wrap a purple bandage around his arm over where the IV site had been. Horatio was already sporting one in green.
“You’re both free to go,” she said with a faint smile. “Horatio, given your current coordination levels, I’d recommend getting a hand with changing out of your gown, and probably a wheelchair to escort you to the car.”

Horatio bristled. “Nonsense. I don’t need help,” he groused. He pulled himself out of Archie’s arms to sit up straight, then promptly listed back to his right. He glared at the foot of the bed, his jaw jutting out emphatically.

“It’s alright, love. I can do it,” Archie said quietly. He reached over to take Horatio’s hand.

Horatio turned his head to look at him. “No, you should be resting. I can manage.”

“It’s fine, Horatio, I--”

“But you said you were fine before, and --”

“Well, let's look at the facts,” Nurse Rashidi interjected. “Archie’s not dehydrated any longer, and his eyes look more focused. What do you think, Archie? Want to try standing first? See how steady you are on your feet?”

Archie almost sighed in relief at finally being able to do something. He slowly sat up and shifted so his legs were dangling over the side of the bed.

Will leaned forward, his forehead creased.

Archie braced himself, then gradually slid to his feet, still holding onto the bed. The room hardly wobbled at all. Vast improvement. He gave Horatio a quick nod and smile, and Horatio’s frown lessened.

Nurse Rashidi raised an eyebrow. “Any lightheadedness? Unsteadiness?”

Archie shook his head.

Her expression remained unchanged.

Archie sighed and took a quick inventory. “My legs feel a bit shaky, but they’ll hold. The room’s not spinning.”

She nodded slowly. “Alright, good. You can help him. But if anything changes, even for an instant, hit the call button and sit down. We don’t want you going down again, or taking him with you. Promise?”

Archie sighed again and forced himself not to roll his eyes. “Yes, alright, I promise.”

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Archie sighed again and forced himself not to roll his eyes. “Yes, alright, I promise.”

“Good. Now, take it easy, both of you. Make your friends and family follow your orders for the next few days. Best of luck with everything, and here’s to better days ahead.” She shook their hands, gave a quick, professional smile, and left, pulling the curtain shut behind her.

“Alright, then,” Archie said as soon as she had left. “Let’s get you dressed. Where are your clothes?”

Horatio frowned, his eyes still glassy. “Oh. Er... I think they had to cut them off.”


Will cleared his throat, then reached under Quentin’s chair and pulled out a white plastic bag.
“Horatio, your father brought some clothes for you to change into. He said they’re old, but they should still mostly fit.”

Horatio grimaced at the bag.

Archie held out his hand, and Will stood up to pass him the bag. “Thanks.”

Will nodded, then scratched the back of his neck. “Right. I’ll . . . just . . . wait out there. Give you both your privacy. Just . . . um, holler if you need anything.” He nodded in their general direction, not making eye contact, then walked out through the curtain, pulling it shut behind him.

Once Will’s footsteps had carried more or less out of earshot, Archie turned back to face Horatio. “Right, love. Let’s see what younger you used to wear.” He dumped the contents of the bag on the bed, exposing a soft, grey t-shirt that had an EKG tracing with a cartoon tall ship printed in the middle, some y-fronts, and a pair of faded and slightly threadbare jeans.

Horatio blushed. “I only wore the shirt around the house on weekends.”

Archie grinned. “It’s perfect.”

Horatio rolled his eyes, but didn’t manage to cloak the smile that danced at the edges of his lips.

“Alright. Lean forward for me, if you can, so I can untie this hospital gown?”

Horatio scowled, but obliged with a faint hiss of pain.

Archie winced. “Sorry, love. I’ll move quickly.” He knelt on the bed to get a better angle, then carefully undid the tie behind Horatio’s neck that held the gown up. It slid off his shoulders, exposing his upper half, and the silver chain that dangled around his neck.

“You’re still wearing it,” Archie whispered, barely more than a breath.

Horatio’s hand reached up to hold the compass pendant. He ran his thumb across the engraved text, then looked up to meet Archie’s eyes. “I haven’t taken it off since you gave it to me. It . . . helped.”

Archie reached out to tuck an errant curl behind Horatio’s ear. “I’m glad. That was the idea, after all. The texture’s nice, isn’t it.”

“But it’s more than that. It made you feel . . . closer . . . when you weren’t here yet.” He cut himself off and stared down at the bed with a faint scowl. “That must sound absurd.”

Archie smiled. “It’s not absurd at all. In fact, you can think of the compass as a promise. That no matter what happens, no matter where I go, or where you go, from hospitals to film sets, we’ll always find our way back to each other.”

Horatio frowned. “How do you do that?” he said at last.

Archie raised an eyebrow. “Do what?”

“This,” Horatio said, gesturing with his uninjured arm and swaying slightly. “Gifts. Words. People. Family. I -- I haven’t -- that is, I don’t know how—Damnit—”

Archie squeezed Horatio’s hand. “Horatio, you are a wonderful partner. And you don’t sell yourself short. Your declaration of love earlier was rather impressive. And my family adores you, as you may have noticed. You’re doing well.”
Horatio blushed, then visibly stomped down that reaction to look earnestly at Archie. “As are you.”

Archie froze, then shook his head as he sat back and sat on his feet with a snort. “Right.”

Horatio frowned. “What?”

Archie sighed. “Well, I didn’t collapse again. I suppose that’s something.”

Horatio narrowed his eyes. “But . . . yesterday you could hardly tell me what happened. Look at what you’ve accomplished.”

Archie shook his head. “Don’t be ridiculous. You’re the one who punched him.”

Horatio shook his head. “What you did today took far more bravery than that.”

Archie snorted. “Oh, yes, crying and fainting and vomiting copiously. Very brave. Let’s get Will back in here. I’m sure he’ll agree.”

Horatio rolled his eyes. “He does. But I meant starting the report--”

Archie blinked. Will thought he was brave? Why? When had they talked about that?

“--Telling people. And now he’s in prison, and he’ll stay there. You did it, Archie. It's over.”

Archie hesitated.

“What?”

Archie licked his lips nervously. “Well, it's not over. Not really. We still have the testimony, the trial, the chance he’ll get out on bail, or be found not guilty--”

“What? No one in their right mind could give that verdict.”

Archie huffed out a sad chuckle. “Then don’t research conviction rates if you want to keep your good opinion of humankind.”

Horatio frowned. “Oh.” He paused, clearly making a mental note to research that as soon as he could use screens again or could convince Will to Google it for him. “Well . . . you’ve . . . started the process, and we’ll figure it out. Together.”

Archie squeezed his hand. “Yes, we will.” He paused. “But, love, we should get some clothes on you before Will worries that I fainted on you and broke your other arm. Let’s try the shirt. I’ll start with the left arm. Tell me if I’m hurting you?” He pulled open the shirt’s arm hole as wide as it would go, then slowly slid it over the cast, taking care not to jostle the arm at all.

Horatio scowled at the bed. “This is ridiculous.”

“Well, it’s certainly a challenge, but you’ll get used to it.”

“But it’s so . . . embarrassing.”

Archie frowned as he worked the shirt up to Horatio’s shoulder. “It shouldn’t be. And you’d help me dress if our situations were reversed.”

Horatio rolled his eyes. “But they’re not,” he grumbled.
Archie paused, then grinned. “I’ve taken your shirt off plenty of times,” he whispered, “Just think of it as on rewind.”

Horatio gaped and flushed pink as he turned to stare at Archie.

“And --- there,” Archie said as he finished getting Horatio’s left arm through. “Should be smooth sailing from here. Right arm?”

Horatio rolled his eyes again, then stuck out his right arm. Archie threaded it through.

“Alright, love,” Archie said as he finished the procedure. “Just the head, now.”

Horatio frowned. “How do you know how to do this?”

Archie shrugged. “Spent over a week in hospital after the head injury being entirely helpless. Needed help dressing, bathing, you get the picture. It was as horrid as you might imagine. Not sure which was worse, actually--the frequent seizures or being entirely dependent on others.” He sighed, then shrugged again. “Anyway, I picked up some techniques.”

Horatio frowned. “Oh.” He went silent, his mind clearly whirring a mile a minute, as Archie pulled the shirt down over his chest. It was remarkably tight and on the short side, but at least it would get the job done.

“Alright,” Archie said, picking up the y-fronts. “Next up--”

“No,” Horatio said with a frown.

Archie froze, his hand still outstretched as his mind and heart raced. “Why not?”

Horatio frowned, then scowled at the bed, pressing his lips together.

Archie sank back down to sit on the bed and forced his hands not to shake. He had to be calm, for Horatio’s sake. He took a deep breath, placed the pants on the bed next to him, and took Horatio’s hand. “Horatio, love, is there . . . Is there something else wrong? Something you didn’t want to tell me. . . Or . . . Or Nurse Rashidi?”

Horatio looked up and met his eyes as his forehead creased. “What?”

Archie licked his lips. “Horatio, if he . . . If he raped you, too, we’ll get through it. I promise. You don’t need to--”

“Oh, God, Archie, no! I’m fine. That’s not what --” he shivered, then winced, and squeezed Archie’s hand tighter. “--He didn’t do anything like that, I promise.”

Archie scanned his face for any tell, any glimpse that he was lying to protect him. There wasn’t any. He was telling the truth.

He let out a shuddering exhale and pinched the bridge of his nose as his hands started to shake. He swallowed hard. Horatio was alright. He was fine. It was going to be ok.

“Oh, damn, Archie, I’m so sorry, of course you’d think--I promise, I’m alright, I’m alright, my love. What can I do?”

Archie closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and shook his head. “It’s fine. Just . . . I need a minute.”

“Of course.” Horatio paused, then tried to shift position, then hissed in pain. “Er, Archie, I . . . er,
can’t . . . hold you from here. Could you come a little closer?”

Archie huffed out a wet chuckle, then slid over to Horatio’s side.

Horatio put his right arm around him and slowly stroked his shoulder. “Are you alright?” he whispered.

Archie swallowed, then nodded. “Will be. Just gave me a bit of a scare there.” He cleared his throat. “Right. So, just a privacy thing, then?”

“In a way.” Horatio hesitated, then pressed his lips together.

“Lack of independence? Believe me, I remember. Recovering from a traumatic head injury isn’t exactly a picnic, you know.”

“Not exactly,” Horatio said with a frown.

“Then what?”

Horatio hesitated, then took a deep breath. “It's just . . . we’ve done everything out of order.”

Archie squinted. “Horatio, what are you talking about?”

Horatio frowned, then rolled his eyes and drooped his head, his chin nearing his chest. “We slept in each other’s arms and cleaned the kitchen before we started dating. We kissed before our first date. We moved in together after a few days. We met each other's parents after a month. We’re not following any of the rules or timelines I’ve seen on dating websites. I merely wanted the first time you saw me with . . . well, without . . . pants . . . to be . . . right. Special. Not . . . like this. Needing help to dress. Putting things on instead of -- of taking things off.”

Archie smiled and took his hand. “Horatio, love, real life doesn't follow a script. It doesn't follow rules. It just . . . happens. And usually makes as big a mess as possible. I don't need all the trappings of romance--mood lighting, music to snog to, fireworks over the Thames. That's what movies are for. I just need you. And if that means helping you dress when you’ve had the shit beaten out of you before I suck you off so hard you see stars--” Horatio turned bright red, “--then so be it.” Assuming I'm ever able to do that voluntarily again. “I just want to be with you. And I promise you that seeing you now, tackle out, as it were, will not in any way diminish whatever we decide to do later.”

Horatio blinked. He opened and closed his mouth. He swallowed and blinked repeatedly as his eyes started to look moist.

Archie smiled and reached his hand up to tuck an errant curl behind his ear, and gently trailed his fingers along Horatio's jaw. “Or, put another way, I love you.”

Horatio turned his head into Archie’s hand and brushed his lips against his palm. “And I love you,” he whispered.

Archie smiled. “Gently, Horatio. You’ll split that cut open.”

Horatio rolled his eyes. “No, I won't. Not if I’m careful.”

“Oh, and that's one of your foremost virtues, is it?”

Horatio snorted. “You’re one to talk.”
“Well, at least I'm trying. One of us should be.”

Horatio grinned. “Speaking of trying, I’d . . . er, like to kiss you now. If that's alright.”

Archie raised an eyebrow. “Now? Horatio, We’re in hospital, with Will down the hall, your father in the waiting room, and you’re still drugged. I really don't think now’s the--”

Horatio rolled his eyes. “I’m hardly suggesting--” he hesitated, glanced at the curtain, blushed, then swallowed, “--what you described a moment ago. I just want to . . . kiss you. I’ve--” he swallowed, and glanced down at the ground, “-- I’ve missed your lips,” he said quietly.

Archie grinned. “Alright. One kiss. But stop if it hurts.”

He leaned in and his eyes drifted shut as Horatio’s lips gently met his. He shivered as the faint raised line of a newly formed scab brushed against his lips. God, he’d come so close to losing this. Losing him. His heart clenched, and he forced himself not to clutch Horatio more tightly against his chest. He couldn't risk hurting Horatio’s ribs or arm.


Archie winced. “Shit. Sorry, Will. We’re fine. Five more minutes?”

“Of course. Take your time.” The footsteps walked away again.

“Alright. Let's get you ready to go.” Archie held up the y-fronts. “Your call. Joint venture, or do you still want to give it a go on your own?”

Horatio glanced at his left arm, frowned, then looked back at the y-fronts, calculating the exact logistics involved in dressing and undressing with one hand. His frown deepened, then he sighed, rolled his eyes, and glared at the bed. “Oh, very well. Yes, you can . . . help.”

Archie hesitated. “Um, in case it's part of the concern, I promise that I won't . . . touch anything. And I can avert my eyes if that would help. This is about your comfort, not sex.”

Horatio shook his head again with a sad smile. “Archie, it's alright. I trust you.” He sighed, cleared his throat, and nodded. “Alright. I’m ready.”

Archie nodded and got to work.

***

“And voilà. Your masterpiece of an outfit is complete,” Archie said, stepping back with a flourish. He tilted his head to get the full effect.

Horatio’s ship shirt hardly covered the waistband of his jeans, which looked like they would have perfectly fit someone at least five centimetres shorter.

Archie lost the struggle with his grin.

Horatio glanced down, then rolled his eyes. “It could be worse, I suppose,” he said with a faint smile. “At least the trousers didn’t rip.”

Archie snorted. “Nothing short of a miracle, actually. How old are these?”

“That would explain it. Can you actually move in them?”

Horatio hesitated, then kicked his legs out and back. “Well, nothing tore.”

Archie laughed. “That’s a relief. I’d hate for you to have to make an exit like Katharine Hepburn in *Bringing Up Baby*.”

Horatio raised an eyebrow.

Archie grinned and pulled out his phone. “Right. Adding it to the list.”

Horatio rolled his eyes. “Well, we’ll have plenty of time for you to update me on popular culture while I’m forbidden from working.”

“It’s from 1938, love. Not exactly contemporary popular culture. But, yes, point made. Once the screen ban is lifted, we can alternate audiobooks and films or episodes of things until you start climbing the walls, and then we’ll come up with a contingency plan. Maybe I’ll even agree to let you teach me whist.”

Horatio’s eyes lit up. “Will could help with that.”

“Oh, speaking of, shall we get him back in here?”

Horatio nodded.

“Right then. Will? We’re ready for you,” Archie called out.

Five seconds later, the curtain opened.

Will paused in the threshold, his head tilted to the side. “Nice shirt,” he said at last.

Horatio rolled his eyes. “I hardly think the person with HMS Bounty boxers has any right to judge. If they can even be called boxers. They shrink every time I see them.”

Archie snorted.

Will shrugged, a faint, amused smile flickering over his lips. “I like them.”

Archie swallowed back the giggles that threatened to break free. “Alright, love, let’s get you out of here. Do you feel up for walking, or should we get a wheelchair?”

Horatio turned his head to glare at him. “I can walk.”

Archie looked over at Will, who frowned, then shrugged.

Archie sighed. “Alright, have it your way. But you’re using me as crutch on your right side. Will, do you think you could get Horatio’s left without jostling his arm?”

Will raised an eyebrow. “Possibly, but I was going to get on your right.”

Archie frowned. “But I’m fine, Will. Horatio’s the one who needs—”

Will crossed his arms in front of his chest and set his jaw. “Archie, I watched you fall once today. I’d prefer not to do it again.” He stayed in front of the curtain, as inflexible as a slab of granite.

Archie glanced over at Horatio, who was beaming at Will. He rolled his eyes and wrapped his arm
around Horatio’s waist as Horatio put his arm over his shoulder. “Clearly I’m outvoted. Alright, let’s get this over with. Will? Get your callipygian arse over here.”

Will huffed out a laugh and crossed to Archie’s right. He put a hand against Archie’s side, his long warm fingers pressed firmly along his waist. Archie blinked as his skin seemed to tingle at the touch. He frowned. He must just be feeling a tad touch-starved now that the hypervigilance had worn off. He shook his head to focus.

“Alright, everyone. Let’s go to the car.”

**

“Just one more step, love,” Archie coaxed as Quentin unlocked the front door to Horatio’s flat and held it open for them.

Archie tightened his grip on Horatio’s waist. Horatio’s legs had started shaking when they were halfway to the car from hospital, and it had been getting steadily worse on the short walk from the car to the flat. If they didn’t move quickly, Horatio would be in a heap on the floor.

Horatio clenched his teeth, clutched Archie’s shoulder tightly, and squeezed his eyes shut as he stepped with them across the threshold.

“Alright, love, well done,” Archie said, hardly caring that he sounded winded. “Where to? Bed?”

Horatio shook his head. “Sofa,” he panted.

Archie frowned. “But wouldn’t you be more comfortable on--”

“--It’s closer,” Horatio gritted out.


Horatio rolled his eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous. I can manage,” he said, swaying slightly. “You’re exhausted, you shouldn’t--”

Will nodded at Archie. “Two-handed seat carry should do the trick. Do you know it?”

Archie grinned. “I do.”

They bent down, each keeping one hand against Horatio’s back and putting the other behind Horatio’s knees, then grasped each other’s wrists to make a seat.

“Alright, love. Sit back, and we’ll get you there in no time,” Archie urged, gently nudging the back of Horatio’s knee with his hand.

Horatio rolled his eyes, but sank down into their arms.

“Right. One, two, three, heave,” Will called out. They stood on “heave” and staggered slowly across the room, moving as one, until they reached the sofa. They gently placed him down, his back resting against the left arm of the sofa, and his legs spread across the seat cushions. He lay there, pale, panting, dripping with sweat, and with his eyes pressed firmly shut.

“Wheelchair next time, ok, love?” Archie gasped out as he leaned against the sofa to try to catch his breath.

Horatio nodded, the lack of protest telling them everything they needed to know about his current
“You should sit, too, Archie,” Will said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “You’re dead on your feet.”

Archie frowned and pushed himself up off of the arm of the sofa. “But--” The room wobbled slightly. He blinked and shook his head, and everything started to stabilize again.

“Archie,” Will said, his voice surprisingly gentle as he squeezed Archie’s shoulder. “Rest. Read. Sing, if you want. Anything, so long as it’s not standing up.”

Archie sighed. “Fine.” He shuffled over to the right side of the sofa, with Will following a step behind him, and sank onto it, his eyes shut, his back pressed into the corner, and his legs slotted in between Horatio’s, unable to stop the blissful groan that slipped out at being stationary again.

Will chuckled quietly and patted his shoulder. “Rest up. I’ll be in the kitchen helping Dr. Hornblower. If you either of you need anything, ask. Don’t try to get it yourself. Doctor’s orders, remember?”

Horatio huffed out a breath, his eyes still closed. “When did you start issuing commands?”

“Don’t worry. I won’t let it go to my head,” Will said, before walking off to talk with Quentin in the kitchen. Their quiet whispers faded into the background.

Archie opened his eyes and looked about him. Had it really only been twenty four hours ago that he’d sat right here and told Horatio everything? Or this morning that he’d sobbed on the floor, convinced he was never going to see Horatio again, that there was no point in anything anymore? How could things change so quickly?

Well, it’d only been a month ago that a gangly, socially awkward man with the most touchable mop of curls he’d ever seen looked into his eyes and changed his life forever. He should be used to it by now.

Footsteps approached. Archie glanced up over the back of the sofa to see Quentin walking over. “Are you boys hungry yet?” he asked.

Archie hesitated, then swallowed. At least his stomach wasn’t currently doing somersaults at the very thought. “Not particularly.”

Horatio opened his eyes and frowned at him. “You have to try anyway, Archie. What was on the recommended list of foods?”

Will walked over to look at the sheet he’d placed on the table. “Soup and rice, for a start. How about Japanese food? We could get your usual, Horatio. Just don’t put the leftovers in the pantry. You don’t want to ruin those new shelves.”

Horatio rolled his eyes and smiled back. “That only happens with uncooked rice, Will, and the leak’s been fixed.”

Archie grinned. So Will could tease Horatio into a better mood.

“Which restaurant?” Will asked. “Any preferences?”

Horatio looked over at Archie. “Yama Momo?” he asked with a smile.
Archie grinned back. “Sounds appropriate.”

“Yama Momo it is, then,” Will said as he pulled out his phone. “I’ll place the order. Archie? What would you like?”

Archie shrugged. “I’m fine with just miso soup and rice.”

Will frowned. “I’ll order an udon noodle soup, too, in case you get hungry later,” he said, and tapped on his screen.

Archie shifted to reach into his back pocket for his wallet, but Will shook his head. “You bought lunch. This is my treat.”

Archie shrugged. “I’m buying tomorrow, then.” He paused as his words caught up with him. “Oh . . . right, you’re probably going back to Victoria’s tomorrow. Well, your next visit, then—”

Will hesitated, then shifted. “Actually, I was thinking . . . I could stay a few days more. Help out a bit.”

Horatio looked up, his forehead creased. “Will, this is your vacation. What about Victoria? You should spend it with her, not cooped up here. We can manage.”

Will shook his head, a fond smile on his lips. “Cathy’s birthday is in a few weeks, so I’ll see her then. And I wouldn’t be ‘cooped up,’ Horatio. I’d visiting with you two. Unless I’d be in the way—?” He glanced over at Archie, and the smile faded into a question.

Archie hesitated. Will could help distract Horatio, take his mind off the pain and boredom. But then Will would witness the fallout from the police report tomorrow. The inevitable nightmares. The panic. That would be a mortifying disaster.

But Will had proven himself to be a good friend. And he’d already seen him at his worst, after only knowing him forty-eight hours or so. And he was still here.

Maybe it couldn’t hurt. They might even have fun.

Archie shook his head. “You wouldn’t be in the way.”

A slow, broad smile spread over Will’s face, and he turned to look at Horatio. “Horatio?”

Horatio beamed at them both. “Alright.”

“Good idea,” Quentin said. “Should I still stay the rest of the week?”


“Nothing’s wrong. It’s just . . . a tad hectic at the moment. Richard’s on vacation and Elle is still on maternity leave, so I’m doing double duty as it is to keep things running. But, if my presence would be helpful, then of course—”

“It’s alright, Father. We’ll be fine. But we can provide regular status reports if that would set your mind at rest.”

“It would, actually. Thank you.” He paused, then glanced at his watch. “And you’re sure you don’t mind my staying elsewhere tonight? I can always cancel and say I’m needed here.”

“Father, we’re sure,” Horatio said with a soft, fond smile. “You’ll enjoy it. When was the last time
you went out, and not to a work function?"

Quentin raised an eyebrow. “Says my son the hermit?”

The doorbell rang.

Quentin glanced toward the door, frowning slightly.

Horatio huffed out a quiet laugh. “We’ll see you in the morning.”

Quentin blinked, then looked back at his son, a hint of a smile ghosting over his lips. He chuckled to himself, then shook his head. “Right. I’ll be off. Goodnight, all. Call if I can help in any way.”

And with that, he opened the door, looked over his shoulder to smile faintly at them one last time, then closed the door quietly behind him.

Horatio waited until they heard muffled voices and a car door close outside, before he turned to Archie with a grin. “Archie, my father hasn’t gone to social gatherings since I was a child!! I think our parents are getting along!”

“I think so, too, love,” Archie said with a smile. He glanced over at Will, his eyes twinkling. “It’s a good day for friendships.”

Will dipped his head, his tilted smile taking on a slightly sly note.

Horatio nodded. “Hannah and Victoria in particular seem to have become fast friends. Although it seems a bit peculiar that Victoria opted to stay in Greenwich for the night instead of going back to her flat. It’s not all that far away. Perhaps she wanted to stay closer to you? Or--”

A high-pitched giggle burst from Archie’s lips before he could force it back. Will’s lips had started to twitch.

Horatio narrowed his eyes. “What’s so funny?”

Archie swallowed back the rest of the fit of laughter. “Horatio, love, think for a second about why else two people might spend the night together. And not for logistical reasons.”

Horatio scrunched up his face and tilted his head as the fingers of his right hand tapped rapidly against his knee. Then he froze. “OH!” he exclaimed, his eyes shooting open wide. He turned his head to look first at Archie, then at Will. “But . . . how did you both figure it out? Did one of them say something?”

Archie smiled and shook his head. “Not explicitly, no.”

Horatio frowned. “Then, how can you be sure?”

Archie shrugged. “There are signs, little cues, that can sometimes give away when someone’s interested in someone else. Body language, comments, that sort of thing,” he explained, his eyes drifting over to Will.

The tips of Will’s ears turned pink.

Horatio frowned. “Such as?”

Archie grinned and looked back at Horatio. “Well, for example, my blatant attempts to seduce you with my good looks and smile when we first met, and other entirely unsubtle comments that had a
sexual undertone?”

Horatio blinked, then his eyes widened again. “So, you were flirting with me?”

Will snorted. “Wise of you to choose the direct path, Archie.”

Archie’s smile flickered. Was Will thinking about how different things would have been for them if he’d taken that route himself? He winced slightly, and glanced at Horatio out of the corner of his eye. “Oh. It’s . . . um . . . a built-in feature, I’m afraid. I can’t really turn it off.”

Will nodded with a faint smile. “So I see.” He hesitated, shifted his weight, then looked down at the floor. “Archie, I--” He trailed off, and shifted his weight again.

Archie frowned. Was this about Will’s feelings for Horatio? “What?”

Will glanced up and met his eyes. He hesitated some more, shoved his hand into his back pocket, then emerged with a small, folded sheet of white paper. “Here,” he mumbled, thrusting it towards Archie.

Archie frowned and held out his hand. Will dropped it into his palm.

“What is it?” he asked as he unfolded it. The instructions from Horatio’s doctor? A blueprint and schematics for Horatio’s favorite tall ship?

Will cleared his throat. “It’s a list of specialists my counsellor recommended.”

Archie blinked as he stared down at the names and numbers in his hand, his mind utterly blank.

“I thought it might save you some time,” Will added.

Archie nodded distractedly, unable to tear his eyes from the paper.

Will cleared his throat. “And . . . talking with . . . someone . . . helps . . . I’ve found.”

Archie blinked repeatedly, trying to force back the tears that had started to blur the crisp, neat letters of Will’s handwriting. He swallowed hard as he tried to hold himself together.

“You have a counsellor?” Horatio blurted out.

A pause. “You may have noticed that I have one fewer foot than you. It takes some getting used to.”

Horatio spluttered. “But -- but -- why didn’t you tell me about this?”

A longer pause. “It’s on our shared Google calendar, Horatio. That doctor’s appointment I’ve gone to every week for the last year and a half?”

“Oh.” Horatio’s voice was suddenly very quiet.

Archie tore his eyes away from the paper and looked up. Will was watching him, his lips pressed together, his forehead creased, and his hands clasped behind his back.

Archie swallowed again and tried to remember how to make his throat work. “Thank you,” he said at last, his voice wobbly.

The crease in Will’s forehead faded away. The glimmer of a sad, understanding smile flitted over
his lips, and he gave Archie a short, jerky nod. He turned to walk to the armchair near the sofa, then paused, tilted his head, and pivoted back to face them. “So you both thought I’d carried on, business as usual, without blinking an eye?”

Archie winced. Horatio pressed his lips together, ducked his head, and dropped his eyes to the ground.

Will just rolled his eyes with a fond smile, shook his head slightly, then continued his walk to the armchair. He sank down into it with a tired sigh. “Right. So, Horatio, what’s the plan for tonight? An audiobook?”

Horatio blinked as Will’s question brought him back from where he’d gotten stuck inside his head. He tilted his head slightly, then looked up at Archie. A sudden grin spread over his face, and he turned to look at Will. “Let’s watch Master and Commander.”

Archie frowned. “Horatio, love, you’re supposed to limit screen time.”

Horatio rolled his eyes. “I have it memorized. I can look away if I need to.”

“Well,” Will said calmly, “if you have it memorized, then you can close your eyes and treat it like an audiobook.”

Archie raised an eyebrow. Will had handled that masterfully. “Sounds good to me. What do you think, Horatio?”

Horatio hesitated, then sighed and rolled his eyes. “Oh, very well.”

Archie grinned. “Right. Will, would you mind setting it up? I think the DVD is by the TV already.”

“I don’t mind at all,” Will said as he stood up.

Archie turned his head to face the TV. His neck cracked, loudly. He winced. Watching the movie in this position would give him a splitting headache in about twenty minutes. There had to be a better solution.

He sighed and started shifting to face the screen. Horatio looked up, instantly alert, his eyes open wide. “Archie?”

“Just changing position to face front, get a better view,” Archie explained. He paused. “You can stay as you are, if you want to lie back and put your feet in my lap, or you can face this way as well and rest your head on my shoulder while you close your eyes. What sounds best?”

Horatio tilted his head then smiled. “I’ll sit up,” he said as he started to shift position. He immediately hissed in pain.

“It’s alright, love. Let me help,” Archie said, springing from his seat to help.

It was a sign of how exhausted Horatio felt that he didn’t protest at all, beyond slightly rolling his eyes.

They resettled on the sofa, Horatio in Archie’s arms, and Archie began to run his fingers through Horatio’s curls. Horatio sighed happily as his eyes flickered shut.

“So, Will, are you an absolute-silence-during-movies sort?” Archie asked, as Will put the DVD in
Will turned and looked over his shoulder at them. “Not particularly.”

“Oh good. Then you may survive. I’ve been told I’m clinically incapable of keeping my mouth shut during films.”

“So I hear,” Will said glancing at Horatio.

Horatio smiled, his eyes still closed, and leaned into Archie’s touch.

Archie groaned. “Oh, God. Of course you told him. Which one did you describe? Pirates of the Caribbean?”

Horatio shook his head. “This one, actually,” he murmured.

“Ah, so you told him about my frame-by-frame analysis of the Aubrey/Maturin relationship?”

“That’s the one,” Will said with a short nod.

Archie chuckled. “Well, I can try to rein it in if it would really bother you. I wouldn’t want you to feel that I’m tarnishing the purity of these classic works of seafaring literature.”

Will cracked a smile and shook his head. “Not at all.”

Horatio tensed in his arms. Archie turned his head to ask what was wrong, then stopped short. Horatio was pressing his lips together tightly and blushing a rather impressive shade of pink. What on Earth was embarrassing about that statement? Archie shook his head. He’d ask Horatio tomorrow when Will was showering.

“Alright. All set,” Will said as he stood up, grabbed the remotes from the end table, and crossed back over to the armchair to sit down.

“Will? Plenty of room over here, if you want to join,” Archie offered, gesturing to the open space on his right.

Horatio frowned, then opened his eyes to look at Archie. “Oh, Will usually sits in his own chair when we watch things. He doesn’t really . . . touch people.”

Will glanced at Horatio, then at Archie. He hesitated.

Archie raised his eyebrows to repeat the offer.

Will met his eyes, paused, then shrugged. “It seems I do now.” He walked over and sat down on the sofa, scooting closer until his shoulder was touching Archie’s, then met their eyes with a smile.

Horatio’s mouth was hanging open as he looked back and forth between them. “But -- Will -- you - - I don’t -- when --” he spluttered.

Will’s smile flickered and he pulled back slightly. “I can go back--”

“--No, stay,” Horatio said instantly.

Will paused. “Alright,” he said. He hesitated slightly, then shrugged, and faced the screen again, his shoulders centimeters away from Archie. He glanced at the remote and hit the play button.
The film began.

Horatio immediately turned from staring at Will to gazing in rapt attention at the clips of ocean gracing the screen.

Archie rolled his eyes and started running his fingers through Horatio’s hair again. “Close your eyes, love,” he whispered.

Horatio huffed in mild irritation, then rested his head on Archie’s shoulder as he shut his eyes, a small scowl contorting his face.

Archie pressed a kiss to the top of his head.

Horatio’s scowl vanished, replaced by a soft smile, and he nestled further into Archie’s shoulder.

One problem solved. One left. He glanced over at Will, whose shoulders had become far too tight since Horatio’s comment. How could he fix this?

He hesitated, then shifted his position slightly, until Will’s shoulder was touching his again.

Will glanced over, smiled slightly, nodded, then looked back at the screen again.

Archie grinned. Much better.

***

“Shall we beat to quarters, sir?”

“See? That look on Jack’s face, that one right there. He’s choosing his dearest love over his duty, over the navy. Over England, for fuck’s sake. If that’s not love, I don’t know what is,” Archie said, gesturing with the arm around Horatio.

Horatio opened his eyes to look at him, a soft, tender smile on his lips.

Archie beamed, his heart fluttering with happiness as it overflowed into his words. “And look,” he said, gripping Will’s shoulder, “look at Stephen’s face when he says ‘tell me that wasn’t on my account.’ He knows exactly what the sacrifice meant. He knows what Jack’s saying. They don’t need to use the words ‘I love you.’ It’s said in their every look, every movement, every act. And everyone around them knows, because how could you not? Love like that shines through any façade you could ever put up, brighter than any star.”

Will turned from the screen to face him, his head tilted to the right, his eyes crinkling as his smile morphed from a faint, lopsided smirk to a fond grin.

“And then, oh, God, do you remember in the self-surgery scene, when Stephen is in agony, because he has a fucking piece of metal wedged in him to shift a rib out of the way, but despite that, he asks if Jack is alright. Can you believe it? Literal physical torture isn’t enough to get him to stop worrying about that man.”

Horatio frowned. “Archie, you’ve jumping ahead. That scene’s not for another few minutes.”

Will chuckled, shook his head, then reached behind Archie to pat Horatio on the uninjured shoulder. “Well, now we know what to look for.”
“See? Will understands my creative genius!” Archie teased, leaning back to rest his head on Will’s arm and bat his eyelashes.

Horatio huffed out a quiet laugh. “I’m not surprised. You both read The Worthington Chronicles as a love story.”

Archie turned his head to look at Will. “Really?” he asked with a grin.

Will turned faintly pink, then shrugged with his free arm. “It seems like the logical conclusion.”

Archie smirked. “Well, then, you’ll like our adaptation.”

Will blinked. “What?”

Archie nodded. “I talked with André, who plays Algy, and we talked with the director, who talked with the scriptwriter, and we agreed we’re going to play it as a love story as much as we can without giving the production company a homophobic meltdown. And the rumor in the studio is that the next book will actually have them get together, so with any luck, we’ll have additional support from the author herself.” He paused. “But . . . um . . . I’m not actually supposed to have told you any of that, so, just pretend you didn’t hear it. If it shows up on the Worthington Chronicle forums, I’ll know who to blame,” Archie finished with a wink.

The only word to describe Will’s answering smile was ‘giddy.’ Archie grinned. He hadn’t imagined Will’s lips could make that expression.

“Er . . . Archie?” Horatio asked.

Archie lifted his head to look at him. “Hmm?”

Horatio pressed his lips together, then sighed. “I can’t hear the dialogue. And we’re about to reach one of the best scenes.”

Will snorted, then covered it up with a cough.

“I thought you had it memorized?” Archie said, managing to keep his voice from shaking with barely suppressed laughter.

“I do. I just . . . want to hear that part. Particularly since I’m under strict order to watch with my ears alone.”

Archie smiled and rolled his eyes. “Alright, love. We’ll talk more about the adaptation after.”

He turned his head to face the screen, then realized his hand was still on Will’s shoulder. Funny how natural it felt.

Well, it’d been awhile since he had a good cuddle pile. Might as well.

Archie shifted to sit further back on the cushions-- he’d managed to slip forward during his explanation--and let his right arm slide around Will’s shoulder.

Will turned his head to look at Archie’s hand, then tilted his head, then looked forward, a faint smile playing on his lips. After a moment, Will shifted his left arm to rest on the back of the sofa, running from Archie’s back to Horatio’s right shoulder blade.

Archie smiled as the warmth from the touch spread along his back and some of the knots that had applied for permanent residency started to loosen. He turned and looked at Will, eyebrow raised.
Will met his eyes, then smiled, shrugged, and faced the screen again.

After a moment, Horatio blinked, then slowly craned his neck to look over his shoulder at Will’s hand. He blinked a few more times, then tilted his head to the side and looked to his right. “Will?” he asked quietly.

Will hesitated.

Archie forced himself not to roll his eyes. They’re just hugs, for fuck’s sake. They’re not exactly difficult. “Thought we could all do with some extra comfort after the day we’d had. And I rather like being in the middle of a cuddle pile. Is this alright?”

Horatio paused, squinted, then a slow smile spread over his face. “Yes,” he said. “This is . . . this is good.”

Archie nodded, then turned to look at Will. “Will?”

Will shrugged and smiled back. “No objections here.”

Horatio beamed.

“Alright, then,” Archie said with a grin. “Now, where were we?” He reached up and began running his fingers through Horatio’s curls again. Horatio’s eyes fluttered shut and he rested his head back on Archie’s shoulder with a smile.

Archie settled back into the sofa and Will’s arm with a quiet sigh, and watched as Stephen removed the bullet from his abdomen with the help of Jack, the surgeon’s mate, and the loblolly boy.

The next few months--maybe even years--were going to be hellish. There was still so much to do--the police report, finding a new agent, and the trial, if the case even went that far. And that wasn’t even taking into account the nightmares that would probably plague his sleep. And food. And as for sex -- well, better not to even think about that now.

But with his family, friends, Will, and Horatio by his side, surviving it finally seemed more than possible.

It wasn’t over. It wasn’t even close.

But it was a start.

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