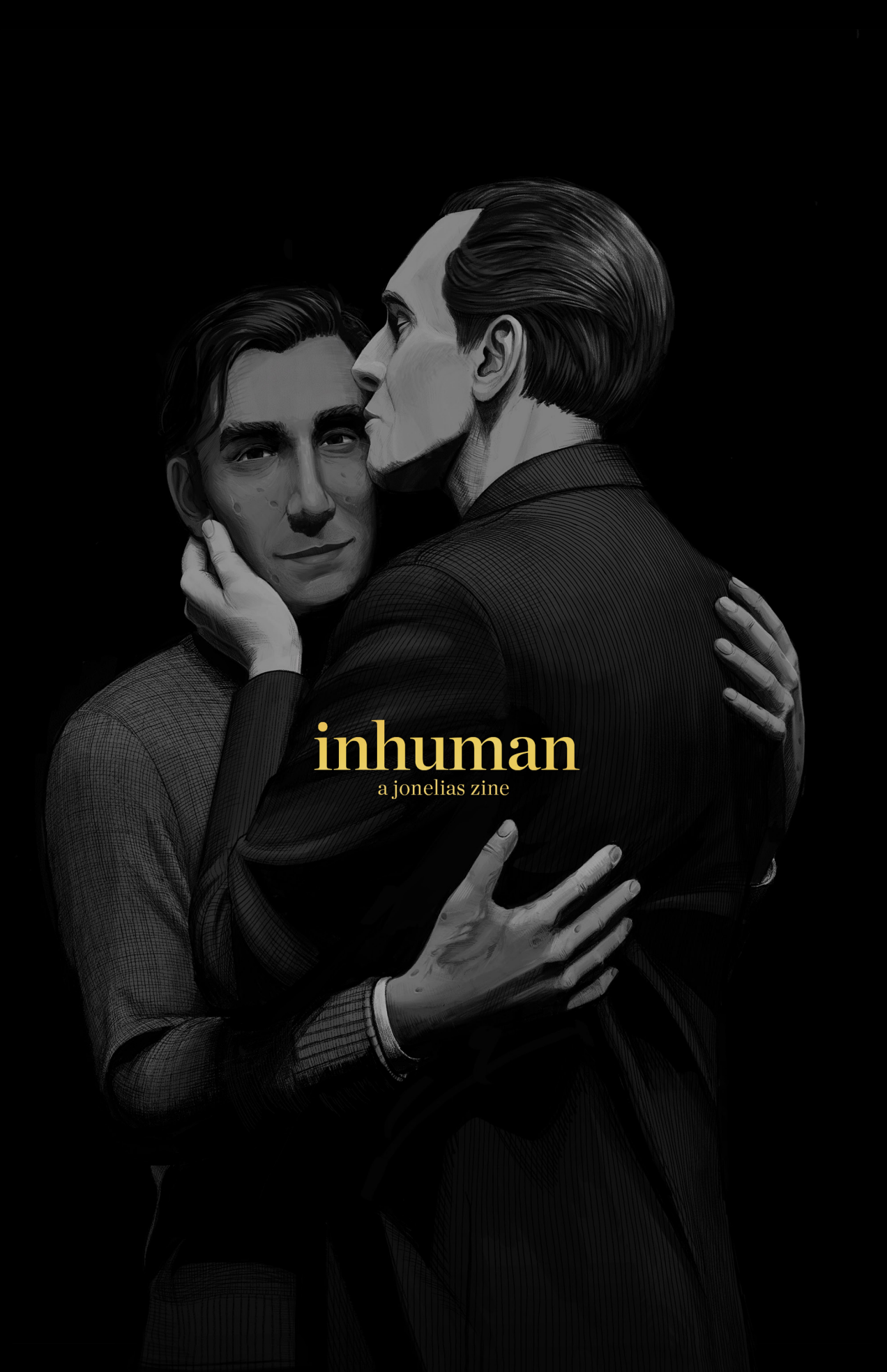




inhuman

a jonelias zine



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I believe it is time to go

RavenXavier



“YOU’RE EARLY,” ELIAS TOLD JON WHEN HE ENTERED THE BEDROOM.

Jon sat at the edge of the bed, still wearing the old coat Basira had bought him after he woke up and that was most definitely a size too large for him. He did not startle at Elias’s voice, nor did he move, and though Elias had known that Jon would be aware of him the minute he entered his orbit, it still sent a shiver of pleasure down his spine. He ought to be annoyed, truly, or even worried, but instead he felt light-headed with both quiet dread and hungry anticipation.

“You shouldn’t be here at all,” Jon pointed out with a snort.

“Well, this *is* my house,” Elias retorted, taking off his jacket to hang it by the door.

“Right.” Jon hummed, almost soft, and repeated, “Right” before asking: “Why am *I* here, Elias?”

“If I had to guess,” Elias said slowly, crossing the short distance between them. “I’d say you were called to the place you felt safest right now.”

Jon, at last, fully turned his face towards him. There was a gentle haze over his dark eyes, the sign of a man well-fed, and Elias let

himself be overly taken by the sight of it — he hadn't thought he'd be so pleased by Jon finally indulging, but oh, it was like staring in a mirror from centuries before. He brushed a careful hand over the bruise that was blooming over Jon's cheek — so pretty, and yet so unnecessary. Perhaps, if Jon hadn't laughed at the end of his meal...

Jon winced, surely following his train of thought, and Elias tutted.

"Hush," he told him, too fond. "You're here now. You'll learn soon enough how to avoid something like this happening again."

"It's the least I deserve for what I've done," Jon said, but it didn't quite hold the guilt it should. Not anymore. Or perhaps not yet. Hard to tell, with his Archivist, at times.

"If you want to be hit as penance, Jon, I'm sure we can find other, more pleasurable ways to do so."

Elias pressed very gently on the bruise and Jon shivered, leaning into the pain. Elias's mouth ran dry. He had genuinely not thought, before Jon, that there could be a perfect man in the world made for him, for his purpose — and yet there he was. In his house. In his bed. Under his thumb.

"Let me take care of you," he murmured, "You've had a long day."

Jon let out a short, breathless laugh. "I've had a long *year*. And you've been *nowhere*. Why now, Elias? Why should I let you, *now*?"

Elias didn't even try to fight the compulsion seizing him by the throat, relishing in the truth being pulled out of him:

"Because we both want to, of course." He let his fingers trail over the mess of Jon's hair, enjoying the way Jon's eyes fluttered in quiet pleasure, and tugged at it experimentally. Jon's mouth fell open, a deep sigh escaping him. "Come on. There'll be plenty of time to fight each other in the morning."

"...You don't have to make it sound like we should be looking forward to it," muttered Jon, but he let Elias pull him up, and didn't protest the hand on his lower back as Elias led them both to the en-suite bathroom.

He did hesitate once they'd crossed the threshold and Elias made

a move to take off the ugly coat, fingers hovering over the buttons of his shirt, and Elias smiled, deeply amused.

“Do you truly think this is the one boundary I haven’t crossed?” he asked.

The flush creeping up Jon’s neck was gorgeous. “Do you think it’s something to be bragging about, you prick?” he snapped.

“I know you’ve been aware of what I could do for more than a year, and you never once thought of taking precaution to avoid it,” Elias noted.

Jon opened his mouth — then closed it again as Elias decided to take the initiative to remove his shirt himself. He wavered on his feet, his eyes never once leaving Elias’s face, and his breath had picked up by the time Elias undid the buckle of his pants and they dropped around his ankles. There was a firm, stubborn expression on his face when he raised his own arms to take off his underwear, which made Elias roll his eyes, but he still took a step back, indulgent, and quickly removed his own clothes.

They stepped into the shower together and Elias got to work in silence. Perhaps he had been more tense than he’d previously thought, because he felt his shoulders relax at the same time as Jon’s did as he washed Jon’s body, first, and then took his time with his hair. Certainly he’d missed the luxury of a long, unrushed shower; and the pressure of the water here was just as he liked it best, contrary to the non-existent one of the prison’s. He dragged his fingers through Jon’s curls, slow and gentle, and Jon let his forehead fall against his clavicle.

“You hated it there, didn’t you?” he asked.

“I was barely *there* at all,” Elias answered. “A courtesy from our master that I appreciated quite a bit. But I supposed I missed a few things more than expected, yes.”

His hand ran down Jon’s naked spine and Jon shuddered against him.

“Like work?” he pressed on, sardonically.

Elias laughed. “Yes, like work,” he admitted, unashamed.

They stayed under the water for several minutes more afterwards, not even pretending they were not embracing, Jon's mouth half pressed against his skin, Elias's cock half hard against Jon's thigh. When Elias finally turned off the handle Jon made a small noise of discontent.

"Don't worry," Elias said. "We're not halfway done."

Drying each other was a quick affair, but Elias had not waited this long to miss any more steps. He made Jon sit in front of the mirror and took out the blow-dryer, intent on making him as beautiful as he knew he could be.

"...You like this," Jon remarked, watching him through the glass, obediently tilting his head to let Elias brush out his curls. His words were slower now, gentler. Elias was not the only one enjoying the moment.

"I truly do," Elias acknowledged. "I had high expectations for our reunion."

"You were never going to stay in prison, were you?"

"I'd never *intended* to be in prison at all."

"Most people don't," Jon snarked. "What are your plans, Elias? What do you *expect* of me?"

This time Elias swallowed the compulsion down, barely, licking the tingling sensation off his lips. Jon frowned but Elias merely shook his head, delighted.

"Were you hoping I would be distracted enough?"

"...I'll know, eventually," Jon said, with the stubborn confidence of a god in the making.

Elias was well-aware, of course. It was too late now to escape Jon's eyes and knowledge, which was exactly why he wanted this night to be *special*. He'd long made a vow to the Ceaseless Watcher, and to himself; but there stood someone that he'd watched so carefully grow into something even more beautiful, and, soon, even more *powerful*. His key to the throne, only one last scar away from opening the door to their eternity together.

Oh, Elias was so *hungry* for him.

Once they were back in the bedroom, he left Jon in the middle of the room for a moment to grab the nightgown from his wardrobe. Jon, predictably, scowled the moment he saw it.

“You can’t be serious,” he told him, aghast.

“Indulge me, would you?” Elias asked, caressing.

Jon glared, forgetting again that Elias knew him by heart; even if he hadn’t been mortally curious as to where this was all leading up to, even if the anticipation hadn’t been building up in his stomach ever since he’d let himself be disrobed, he would have liked the nightgown the moment it was between his fingers. It was old-fashioned and made of thick, soft cotton. It draped over Jon’s shoulders perfectly, falling down all the way to his ankles, and, without Elias having to say anything, Jon tugged on the ribbons sewn under the bust until the gown highlighted the gentle lines of his small chest.

He turned to Elias, a new flush on his face, and they stared at one another. For the first time in a very, very long time, Elias almost felt *young*. He walked to Jon faster than he’d wanted, grabbed his hips and squeezed a second before moving his hands up to cup Jon’s face once more.

“You’re too early,” he repeated in a raspy whisper.

“Am I ruining your plans?” Jon asked, his eyes darker and brighter than ever, utterly unavoidable.

“Yes,” Elias answered, honestly.

“Is this what that is, then?” Jon pushed, heart beating frantically against Elias’s chest. “A very dramatic, theatrical way of killing me?”

Elias huffed and, too impatient now, too giddy, decided to finally, finally press his mouth against Jon’s. Jon gasped, his fingers grasping at Elias’s back, his nails digging into Elias’s skin, but Elias merely deepened the kiss. He dragged his teeth over Jon’s lips, relentless, until Jon got on the same page and surrendered all at once, and started to reciprocate, just as hard, just as passionate, as if he could

find all of what Elias wasn't saying down his throat.

Only when the lack of oxygen truly started to hit him did Elias finally let him go, just long enough to say: "I am not afraid of adapting my plans, Jonathan." Jon stared at him, wide-eyed and dazed, and Elias had to kiss him again, softer. "Get on the bed," he ordered, tenderly. "I'll take you as any young bride should be: gently, for the first time, I promise."

"I— I don't— remember signing a marriage contract," Jon said, a beat too late, even though he obeyed.

"Don't you?" Elias challenged him and guided him to the middle of the bed, dark hair spread over Elias's pillows.

He showed it all to him, then — pushed through the welcoming windows of Jon's mind to have him live through all that Elias had lived — their first meeting, their first handshake, their first dinner, late at night in Elias's office, and then their first almost-kiss, and the hundreds that had come after that. He showed Jon his own terrified, gleeful expression the day he'd agreed to become Head Archivist of the Institute, his slow-build hunger for the stories and the horror, he showed him Prentiss and Michael and all the others and when they both felt the heady, powerful gaze of their patron over them, he bit into the fragile skin of Jon's neck, drawing blood and Jon, at last, at last, gasped:

"Jonah."

Jonah shuddered against him, hips stuttering, cock pulsing with desire, and he grinned down at Jon.

"Yes," he said, "Yes," and kissed Jon again, Jon's blood still on his lips.

Jon tried to ask questions — of course he did — but Jonah had given him enough words. Instead he let his hand wander first above then under the nightgown, swallowing Jon's every moan, every interrogation, every *how* and *why* until all that Jon could say and repeat was this: Jonah's name, like a prayer and a mystery, all at once.

Tomorrow, Jonah thought, he would tell Jon all of it; or, perhaps, before the night was over, Jon would know it all. Tomorrow, he would have to figure out how to get his Archivist his last mark, how

to convince him that there was no other path for them than the end of it all. But that was for tomorrow.

Tonight, after months and years of patient distance, Jonah intended to feast.



Kintsugi

Paptato



warnings: descriptions of medical horror and trauma, references to amputation, toxic caretaking, body horror, manipulative, obsessive and possessive behaviour, victim blaming, and gas-lighting

IT IS MIDDAY WHEN ELIAS MAKES THE TRIP UP TO SEE HIM. HE HAS made the same trip up these stairs many times over these last few months, but curiously, the novelty still has not worn off. Just a year prior, Elias would have found himself at the institute going through the minute routine of his spreadsheets, scheduling, and his plans of a grander nature. Jonathan would have, of course, been in the archives where he truly belongs and will eventually return to. Plotting against not only their God's enemies, but also endearingly and misguidedly- against Elias himself.

Elias cannot help but find humor in the irony that it is only now that Jon has learned his true purpose and succeeded in Elias's supposed defeat that he now finally ceases his attempts to defy Elias's well-laid path for both of them. Privately, Elias will admit to himself that it will be difficult to get them back on the route he has so carefully orchestrated. His Institute is still swarming with police who will be none too happy with Elias' escape from his lackingly

guarded jail cell. His Jonathan is, as anticipated, also in no state to return to work as he is now.

Yet, it will all be right in the end, Elias knows. He has recovered from bitter failure before, and he will inevitably do so again. For now, he dedicates himself to his craft. To his dedication to his Archivist that began as soon as The Spider guided him to Elias's doorstep all those years ago.

Elias props open the wooden door to the room he has Jon set temporarily into with one hand, guiding open the door with the other arm wrapped around a box of statements Elias had hand-picked out for him. The door, of course, is a formality, an illusion of privacy- they both know nothing between them is unseen by the other now.

The intimacy is both terrifying and serene. In all of his many years, Elias has never taken a bride, but he imagines that what he and his Archivist have now must reflect the qualities of a marriage.

The room Jon is situated in is illuminated and warmed by the sun that shines through the large windows that open to a view of London that could be enviable to anyone who didn't have Elias and Jon's specific set of capabilities.

The light cascading through the window casts Jon in an ethereal glow upon his hospital bed. His long, spidery hair falling down upon his shoulders, paired with his eyes glowing brighter than the sun as Jon works through a statement, paints him as divine as he has ever been. Still ever his Galatea, despite Jonathan's rejection of divinity from Elias's hands.

Elias cannot help but picture a world where, instead of being regulated to bed rest, his Jonathan would stand confident and proud by his side at the center of the world they had created- two gods amongst men in eternal horror and bliss. His heart pleasantly aches at the thought.

But that time has come and gone.

And despite it all, his Archivist still is beautiful and blessed as he has ever been.

Even with the absence of his legs.

Elias pulls out a chair to the side of Jon's bed and replaces the box of statements upon the table. Despite his current condition, Jon is still as faithful to his work as he always had been and doesn't even look up to greet Elias as he takes his place by his Archivist's side.

Naturally, Elias knows that Jon is unable to stop a statement once he's started it until he has completed feeding their God, but still, Elias is grateful that Jonathan has not gone on an inadvisable hunger strike- he wouldn't be able to recover otherwise.

At his side, Elias listens to the terror of another man's words leave the lips of his Archivist and notes without surprise that it is one that speaks of The Flesh. It does not surprise him, of course, because now, as with all statements the Archivist reads, Elias is the one who has bestowed it as an offering to him.

With mild interest, he notes that Jon's eyes are just so very slightly shaking, and Elias's heart is fond as he knows Jon is reliving something uniquely unpleasant.

He had paid an acquaintance aligned with The Flesh for the surgery. Surgery is perhaps the wrong word, as no self-respecting surgeon would ever amputate a leg without due medical cause or with such unadulterated cruelty. His acquaintance's lack of medical expertise had not mattered in the end. Her particular brand of violence had gotten the bloody work done well enough, and it gave Elias the unique opportunity to see something he had otherwise avoided.

Elias had never been physically present for the process of Jon's markings. He orchestrated each one with care and diligence, but he had consistently put a necessary distance between himself and the suffering he inflicted upon his Archivist.

Hurting Jon was never personal- it was always business. It was true then, and Elias supposes it is true now.

Still, witnessing his Archivist thrash and make futile and endlessly charming attempts to stifle his screams as flesh tore and bone broke far quicker than the Beholding's blessings could ever possibly heal, and as something of the Watcher's own was placed and merged with Jon's physical body in the absence of his own discarded *leg-*

It was an experience that bordered on religious ecstasy.

Jonathan's self-sacrificial nature always evoked the divine in him, but to witness it with his own eyes, with that last remaining part of Jonah within him, it echoed the first time the Beholding graced him with its true form in the Panopticon. His personal God made flesh.

Cut open for the Eucharist on his behest.

When the blood was cleared away and Jon finally stopped shaking, Elias took it upon himself to lead Jon through his healing process. He had always shepherded Jon through each step of his becoming, even when his Archivist could not see nor understand his guidance. However, he will admit that he had not expected to care for the man so personally and even within his own home, nonetheless! How Fanshawe would mock him now if the good doctor could see him. Only Jonathan Sims could turn him into a nurse. Indeed, Elias wonders how many versions of Jonah his Jonathan Sims will see during their time together.

How many more Jonathans that Jonah Magnus would sculpt into being.

As Jon is immersed within the statement and unlikely to rebuke Elias for his attention, Elias gently touches the place where Jon's skin melds into the porcelain of his legs with feather-light fingers. Jon's breath hitches as he continues to read, stumbling upon the words describing another man's arms being torn into shreds. With no small amount of fondness, Elias's finger nails trace one of Jon's scars he's received during his stay with The Stranger- an inaccurate and misplaced approximation of a Langer's Line. Elias knows now that this is one of the many places they were to cut him apart and skin him, to make him in their image.

Medical accuracy was never the Stranger's strong suit, nor was the ability to see beyond simple appearances of the flesh. As if his Archivist would ever be shaped into anything but The Beholding's designs.

Elias presses down on the tender skin with a little too much calculated pressure, and he can feel and hear his Archivist audibly shudder.

Elias relishes the noise.

Perhaps this pain, this particular suffering and cruelty that he has inflicted upon his Archivist with his knowing consent- perhaps this may be called personal.

For the ruining of his work, for the dashing away of his two centuries of hopes, for this, Elias can allow himself to acknowledge that his Jonathan looks exceptionally beautiful when he suffers at Elias's hand.

The borrowed terror in Jonathan's voice reaches a crescendo, and Elias removes the pressure from his leg and kisses the place on Jon's knee where gold melds into flesh in a silent apology and bestowal of admiration. Only Jon could make him so indulgent.

He recognises that he will need to remove Jon's knees soon. His Archivist's tibial nerve has already integrated well with the porcelain of his new legs- a development that Elias had honestly expected to take much longer than it had.

A ball joint will do quite nicely, gold perhaps to pair with the ornamentation that cracks through the porcelain and ceramic of Jon's lower legs. It will do well for Jon not to forget where he has come from. Elias has and will ensure that the scars he has carved into his Jonathan remain beautiful and golden for as long as he can tether his Archivist's lifespan to his own. Elias will not have his Archivist lose his mind to age as so many that had come before; this he decided- will be Jon's penance.

It is such a small sacrifice, truly, that the new physical form Elias has crafted for him can not hold his weight well. His Archivist does not need to run to perform his duties.

The porcelain where his shin once was is cold against Elias's lips, and Elias allows himself a private smile. His Archivist, his Archive, had run from his vocation, his throne at Elias's side, and now he will never run again.

The click of a tape recorder accompanies the trailing off of Jon's voice, and all at once Elias can feel that piercing gaze that had stared somewhere far beyond the page focus entirely back on him.

At his place at Jon's legs, pinned in place by his gaze, Elias has to restrain a shudder.

"I am glad to see that you are well," Elias greets him pleasantly, with the knowledge that the rasp in his throat is all too obvious.

Jon lets out a humorless laugh full of derision, and Elias delights in his prickliness that still inelegantly persists even after all Elias has put him through. He cannot help but suspect that he will never tire of it in all of the years to come.

His Archivist's eyes finally flutter, and all at once, the pressure from the heavy gaze of The Beholding made flesh dissipates. Elias lets out a breath he did not know he was holding and finds himself content.

The habitual silence that follows is not unwelcome- they have an eternity to talk after all. Elias is prepared to spend the next hour this way, he has always made a habit of studying Jon's charming intricacies without needing the spoken word after all.

And then, Jon surprises him, as his Archivist is so wont to do; "Has anything happened today that you'd like to disclose?"

Jon has no need to ask - he already knows.

Elias, in turn, has no need to answer, "Our Martin has come by again and demanded to see you," Elias's days of lying to Jon is over now as there is no purpose in the act, "I believe he is still under the impression that I have whisked you away and imprisoned you here."

His Archivist's assistant is honestly not too far off with that claim, but the consistent appearances by Martin have become a nuisance. He does not hate the man, far from it. Martin is a piece upon his chessboard that he had overlooked for far too long. Not just anyone could outplay both Peter Lukas and Elias, himself, at their own game. Elias would never admit it aloud, but he has, in truth, become more than rather fond of Martin Blackwood. As much as it pains him to, Elias accepts that old age has made him more than somewhat sentimental.

Perhaps that is why he had gone against his own better judgement and remained in his front seat to watch the reunion of his favourite pair of ill-fated lovers. He had always been fond of dramatic

theatre, and the prospect of being upon the stage as all of his plans had finally come to fruition had been too tempting to pass upon.

And of course, the oversight of having himself and his dear, foolish, and overly intuitive Archivist in The Beholding's most powerful temple had led to their current predicament today.

Despite it all, from this failure, Elias has been offered an opportunity. A wise man knows when it is fruitful to change course. Jonah Magnus has all the time in the world to determine a new way to stronghold both his throne and his immortality.

As beautiful as Jonathan Sims is-

Elias will not have himself die at his Archivist's knife.

For this, he supposes, he owes the two of them.

"Would you like to see him, Jon?"

Jon freezes.

Graciously, does not comment and devotedly watches as his Archivist unclenches his jaw and relaxes his shoulders with no small amount of effort. *Oh, poor dear Jonathan.*

It is an endeavour to restrain himself, but Elias will not let it be said that he is not a patient man.

"For all that I know that you think of me, I hope you will come to understand that I am not a cruel man when it is not a necessity." Elias begins to be met with a scoff from his Archivist, who immediately gestures down to where porcelain meets his skin in ugly, horrific, *beautiful* scars.

Jon may not understand now, but he will understand and take all that Elias has to give in time.

Unperturbed, Elias admits, "You have your reasons to doubt me, of course. Nevertheless, I want you to know that I will not deny you your connections that you have at the present," The sincerity that leaves his mouth surprises him, "They have their uses in the end and when you live as long as I have; you will learn that is best to savour them to their fullest before they-"

"No," Jon cuts him off sharply, "No- it's best that he stays away. Please, just continue to turn him away and let him go."

The tidal wave of pitiful, *pitiful*, longing that gushes from Jon in heavy currents would have made a delectable feast for The Forsaken. Elias's chest warms at the sight of Jon's mask of indifference fractures into rebroken pieces of lacquerware.

His poor, broken, and utterly perfect Idol. Still so completely willing to cut himself underneath Elias' knife. This is why Elias could never bear to discard him despite his failings. Were Jon not to have come to him with his proposal, Elias imagines that upon his Archivist's death, he would have collected and preserved his bones. Would have sewn his skin into that long since discarded notebook of Keay's- just to keep him, just to steal him close for no one's enjoyment but Elias's own.

"If that is what you wish," Elias says, satisfaction rolling through his veins, and because he has never been one to not indulge himself; "He has been acclimating rather well to the Lonely. While it pains me to let one of our own go, this may in fact be for the best. In time, your bond will fade. He will stop asking for you then-"

A chill works its way up Elias's spine. Those eyes, like a gaping and accusatory maw, are back on him again. What a marvelous creature Elias has made.

"We had agreed he would be kept safe." Jon actually *growls* at him. *Honestly*.

Unimpressed, Elias raises his brows, "Come now, Jon. You and I both know that your dear assistant has no one left to be kept safe *from*. Or was it not Peter Lukas's blood that I found soaking your clothes when you emerged from The Lonely?"

Jon averts his gaze and Elias simply can't have that, "He is becoming on his own just as you had," He takes Jon's hand then and sympathetically says, "I am all too aware that it must be difficult for you to accept it- but wouldn't it best that you respect his choices as you want him to respect your own? In time, he will come to be satisfied with his role- as you will yours."

"I never chose to become this!" Jon snaps and attempts to snatch his hand away from Elias' grip. He can't of course, for all of his fire- Jon is still weak in body, it will take him many more months of recovery before he can stand his own against Elias in terms of physical might, "If I had known all of this would have happened, I would have never-"

"Yet you are here regardless. You do us both a disservice to suggest you would have chosen any different otherwise." The guilt that flushes Jon's face almost makes up for the tired insult. Obliging, in reward, Elias tells him, "But, I will admit that I did help you along."

Elias speaks of nothing but the truth; after all, Jon is nearly all that he should be now. His new additions do nothing but accentuate what Elias had been sculpting him into being all of these years.

Jon would have been beautiful as his harbinger of their ruined world.

He is still beautiful now. Despite his initial intended use put on indefinite hold. Were Elias a less sensible man, he would have been enraged that all of his years of crafting Jonathan Sims into his masterpiece, his tool, his *messiah*, had gone to waste.

But instead, what Elias feels is pity. Jonathan could have truly been great, could have had power beyond any mortal imagination.

He is still powerful now, yes. The Ceaseless Watcher's blessings pour off him in waves that still somehow leave Elias breathless.

In barely repressed exquisite terror, Elias knows that even now, Jonathan could tear Elias apart until there is *nothing*. Until all that remains is Jonah, Jonah, *Jonah*-

And it is exhilarating. Because his Archivist does not. *Can not*.

Instead, Jonah, now Elias, holds Jonathan and all that he is capable of in his hands, only because he knows Jonathan Sims, self-sacrificial to a fault, wills it. Despite his purpose as Elias's sacrificial lamb, his reason for becoming scattered to the wind upon an unwanted divine revelation, he still bears the sins of the world upon his shoulders.

Still ever the lamb despite his fangs, he somehow found himself willingly bound to the devil that Elias is in a mistaken effort to spare

the world from Elias's cruelty. Poor man, poor creature. It would be remiss of Elias not to put him back together again.

"But you have chosen to agree to our arrangement," Elias challenges, just to watch Jon's hackles rise. "Whether you had wished for it or not, you are with me and will continue to be so."

The glare Jon levels at him is acidic: "I never have and will never *want* to be with you."

Elias adores him. He suspects he will never stop being fond of everything Jonathan Sims is and what Elias has shaped him into being—even when they both know that Jon is a terrible, *terrible* liar.

"Maybe so." Elias acquiesces with a smile, "But as you will come to learn, the eternity we have together is a very long time."

Elias stands from his place on the chair and moves to the head of the bed, where Jon glares at him impertinently. Elias places his other hand upon Jon's cheek and savors the flinch that accompanies the feeling of Jon's warm skin against his own.

With some manner of reluctance, Elias knows that he will eventually come to miss Jon's warmth when he touches him. That when the last shred of his humanity is replaced with porcelain and metal, that when even his thoughts may have to be digitized to prevent his Archivist's decay—that Elias will miss Jon's warmth and his softness hidden beneath all his barbs. It is inevitable, he supposes, and regardless, Elias and Jon had already made many sacrifices for progress. For their eternity.

This will be just one of the few.

They will both miss it regardless.

In an effort to savour the present, to bask in Jon's warmth while it is still here, Elias reverently strokes the skin beneath Jon's eyes. He relishes in the way that Jon has to restrain himself from leaning into his touch, "When you come to realize that the only one left alive who remembers your name and who you were is me, as you will be the only one to truly ever know myself. You will see then that there never was any other path for you."

Elias takes Jon's hand that remained clenched in his grip and brings Jon's knuckles to his lips. A gesture of fondness and respect that Elias, who was once Jonah, had not done for nearly two centuries, "In time, you will come to crave and desire my presence, as I do yours."

His Archivist gives him a rueful smile that is all sharp teeth and unsustainable hatred, "You're going to be waiting a long time then." He says.

Affection burns in Elias' chest and as he cradles Jon's hand against his cheek, which he knows he will eventually have to cut off, he thinks this must be what love feels like, "I can admit I can be a very impatient man," Elias confesses, "But for you, My Archivist, I can wait for an eternity."

Eventually, Elias will return to his plans to create the world in his image- when his Archivist is exhausted of fighting and when Elias can establish a feasible way to halt his undying world's slow march towards Terminus, he will place upon himself the Watcher's Crown once more. Only this time, his Archivist will be willingly and loyally at his side.

But for now, their slow descent into eternity awaits.

Their first year of many together ticks on into infinitum.



eyes without a face

Felix Strand



THE FOREST IS QUIET AT FIRST. THERE ARE NO ANIMALS SCAMPERING about on the forest floor, no birds chirping their tunes from the treetops. The weather itself is muted as the snow gently falls, collecting to form a blanket that covers every surface in stark, cold white. There is not a living soul to disturb the peace.

Until a man—no, no longer a man, but prey—stumbles through the snow, his chest heaving with each painful breath. His lungs sting from the cold, as it bites and numbs. He cannot slow down, not when he can hear the beast on his trail. He hears its powerful form bounding through the snow, trees splintering as it charges after its meal. The man lunges forward, trying to force his legs to pump faster, through the small gap in the trees in front of him.

He manages to squeeze through, just before the beast's claws can reach him. He continues forward, his loud breaths echoing in the space as he hears irritated growls from the beast behind him. His body is still tense, terrified that the monster will break through at any moment. He keeps going, step after step, until the beast's cries grow quiet. The forest is dark around the man now, the only light coming from the moon above, reflecting off the snow.

Here, he slows. His nose is numb, and his muscles ache from the physical exertion, his age a further hindrance. His vision is blurred at the edges as he tries to stay steady, to keep running. Alas, he has exhausted his muscles, and he falls to his knees, cushioned by the snow. He takes a few steady breaths, giving himself a moment of rest.

"I must admit, you made it quite far."

The prey looks up, startled. A man looks down at him. He is well dressed, each garment made with rich fabric, and a cloak reaching down to his shoes. Oddly enough, he stands on top of the snow, not sinking an inch. Below his right eye is a dark triangle that points towards his pupil.

"Get away from me, witch," the fallen man grumbles, palms pressing down to push himself up, but his hands only sink.

"Now, now, Jorgen, after all this time I thought we would be on a first-name basis." The cloaked figure responds, stepping closer to kneel in front of the man. "Don't you think you owe me that?"

The figure recoils as Jorgen spits at his shoes, snarling and wiping its shoe in the snow.

"I owe you *nothing*," Jorgen wheezes, arms trembling as he continues to try to push himself up. "You know I gave up my books, yet you hunt me down in my retirement. I'm an honest innkeeper, just trying to stay afloat. So why do you send that *thing* after me?"

There is the briefest relief as Jorgen feels himself elevate slightly, continuing to claw at the snow, trying to compact it enough that he has leverage. He cries out as the cloaked man brings his heel down onto Jorgen's fingers.

"He's been rather hungry as of late. I figured it would be best to tie up some loose ends. You're rather lucky I let you live *this* long," the man muses, bearing more of his weight down, feeling Jorgen's frail bones crack under the pressure.

"*Fuck you*, Bouchard," Jorgen hisses, trying to pull his hand back to no avail. He freezes as he hears a howl in the distance, the sound rumbling through the ground and through his chest. "E—Elias

please, I haven't done anything wrong to you. I don't—I don't even know where *any* of my books are anymore—I'm no *danger* to anyone Elias, please."

Elias hums, grey eyes looking over the pathetic man.

"Look at you Jurgen. You don't have much time left anyways. The best thing I can do for you, the highest honor I can give, is to let you be consumed by *him*." Elias gestures to the empty forest, where Jurgen can hear something quickly approaching. "You should be lucky; I don't allow him to feast upon just *anyone*."

Even in his fear, Jurgen curls his lip in disgust at the awe in Elias' voice towards the unseen creature.

"Y—You're vile. You're a second-rate sorcerer who has condemned his soul to damnation. If you think that *thing* will get you what you want, you're wrong. I've seen many men like you, Bouchard. You think you can gain power by having a '*pet*' do all the work for you? Let me tell you something," Jurgen grumbles. Elias raises an eyebrow, waiting for Jurgen to continue. "Oh no, if you want to know, you lean down here."

Elias rolls his eyes, but complies, leaning down and turning his head slightly, to hear the old man's last words. Jurgen coughs as he sits up just enough to whisper:

"One day, that beast will be starving. And it will look at you and see the *perfect* meal."

Jurgen starts a slow, deep laugh. It builds as Elias slowly faces forward, moving back onto his feet, standing tall. Jurgen laughs hysterically from the ground, eyes squeezed shut, frame shaking from the laughter and the cold.

Jurgen doesn't notice the massive hungry maw until it bears down on him. The beast's teeth clench down on Jurgen's frail body, snapping bone and carving through flesh. Blood sprays from the wounds, staining the snow red. Elias watches as his beast eagerly tears into its meal, coating its maw in viscera.

"Don't go spilling too much now. You need all you can get," Elias calls, wincing at the sheer amount of blood that hits the snow. It

was hard enough to find this meal—the village wasn't so lucky as to have anything else to spare.

Elias eyes the beast as its jaw easily pierces through the body, clawed hands reaching up to dig, muscles being pulled like taffy. Its tongue laps at the blood that drips, catching most of it before it drops down to the frozen ground. The only thing that hits the snow is pieces of tattered cloth. Better than before. It's a good indication that he's being properly trained.

The beast swallows Jurgen piece by piece, the matted flesh being unrecognizable. No one could possibly know that it was once a human being. Elias' gaze softens as the last bits of Jurgen disappear down the throat of the starving creature.

Elias raises a hand out, his palm upturned and open. While the beast licks its mouth, it slowly turns to face Elias, eyeing the extended offer. Its tail coils around Elias, surrounding the area, leaving no room for Elias to run. He doesn't look away from the beast, even as it grows closer, its breath tickling the palm of his hand.

"Hello, Jon," Elias says with affection dripping from his words.

A low rumble starts in Jon's throat, similar to purring. He gently presses his large snout against Elias' palm, all eyes flickering closed in bliss. Elias leans forward, closing his eyes as well as he rests his forehead against Jon's snout.

"You did *wonderfully*, dear. Absolutely *beautiful*," Elias whispers, his other hand reaching to card through the short feathers above Jon's mouth. He hears Jon whimper as an energy forms under his hands, crackling and snapping, grabbing at Jon's form and twisting it. The massive body begins to shrink, the tail shortening. The large beast with a thousand eyes slowly morphs into something else, something almost human.

Elias' hand runs through the grey feathers, watching as each one retreats under his fingers, receding into smooth skin. By the time he has reached Jon's cheek, the face of a man stares back. Jon looks tired, bags under his eyes, cheeks sunken slightly under the pressure of Elias' hand. But the satisfaction that reflects in his eyes brings a smile to Elias' face.

“How are you feeling?” Elias asks, his free hand petting Jon’s hair, which still is decorated with a few scattered feathers. “Full?”

Jon sighs, leaning into Elias’ hand.

“Enough to keep me going,” he admits. Elias’ expression tightens slightly at this.

“Do you feel as though you could eat another?” His eyes dart in the direction of the village. The people are most likely already on guard, but if it meant Jon could eat his fill...

Jon immediately brings both hands to clutch at Elias’ wrist.

“N—No, I’m fine, really,” Jon pleads, his tone rushed and a forced smile on his face. “I—I really couldn’t eat anything more.”

Elias narrows his eyes, sees how Jon swallows nervously, how he trembles under Elias’ gaze. Elias’ thumb swipes at the corner of Jon’s mouth, removing the bit of red mess from Jon’s meal. He then holds it to Jon’s lips, giving a slight nod to Jon. Jon obediently opens his mouth and allows Elias to drag his thumb across Jon’s tongue, a streak of red painting a pretty stripe.

“Quite a messy eater, aren’t you,” Elias hums affectionately. Jon makes a small noise of complaint, words silenced while Elias holds his tongue down. When Elias’ hand retreats, Jon’s mouth snaps shut as he swallows the small bit of blood.

“It isn’t as if my face were covered,” Jon starts, the tips of his ears growing pink in the cold. He opens his mouth to continue but then Elias coughs, although it almost sounded like a laugh. “What’s so funny?”

“It appears as though you haven’t looked down in a moment,” Elias says, his eyes traveling downwards, amused.

When Jon looks down at his exposed body, he understands why Elias found his comment so hilarious. Other than his face, the rest of him was practically bathed in viscera.

“Damn,” Jon sighs, already knowing that a bath was due. His body shivers, his hands reaching up to rub at his arms, only to cringe as he feels the sticky blood on his skin. His head snaps up as Elias

opens the clasp of his cloak. "Elias? What are you doing?"

"I can't have you freezing on me," Elias notes as he throws the cloak over Jon's frame, redoing the clasp in the front. "Besides, I would hate for anyone else to see you like this."

Jon's face flushes red at Elias' words, and he stammers a few times as he attempts a sentence.

"W—Well I wouldn't be naked in the snow if you had waited to transform me back, now, would I?" Jon complains as he pulls the cloak tighter over himself, feeling the cold seeping into his bones.

"Is it criminal that I wanted to see you?" Elias asks, pressing a gentle kiss to the side of Jon's face. "It's rather difficult to kiss a beast, no matter how much I wish it weren't so."

"Flattery won't get you anywhere," Jon scoffs, rubbing at his face as though it would lessen the blush that decorates his cheeks. At the very least, it assists with warming him up

"It got you to believe in me, didn't it?" Elias hums, rubbing at Jon's shoulder. Jon shivers under his hand, the few feathers remaining fluttered lightly. Elias lightly chuckles, "We should head home. There's a horse a little ways from here. I thought you might like something a little nostalgic."

Memories of horseback, feeling the hooves thunder underneath, crushing anything smaller. They flood Jon's mind, as though it was something he had lived through for years. It feels as though it is his own eyes he is seeing through.

"Y—Yes. Nostalgic..." Jon knows better than to correct Elias, than to say that it was the sorcerer's memories that he was reflecting, projecting.

"Come along then, I'd hate for our ride to freeze," Elias says with grace, but there is an undertone of ecstasy, of excitement. Jon can't help but smile in return, even though the cold stings his feet and the cloak does little for the rush of air as he runs.

It's moments like these that make it all seem worth it.

Jon shivers by the fire, pulling his blankets impossibly closer, burying his face in the wool. He hears the door slam shut, the sound of the outside air ceases for the most part. There is still the billowing of wind in the background, but the thick walls do their job of muffling well enough.

“There they go, all tucked away into the stable,” Elias sighs in relief, sitting back into a comfortable armchair by the fire. Jon leans back against Elias’ leg, and Elias reaches a hand down to run his fingers through Jon’s hair. Jon mumbles his appreciation, nuzzling his face against Elias’ trouser leg.

“I really shouldn’t let you do that before you’ve had a bath. You still have specks of filth on your body,” Elias remarks, thumb rubbing at a stubborn patch of dried blood on Jon’s shoulder. “Messy eater.”

Elias pinches at Jon’s cheek, smiling slightly at the annoyed scowl Jon gives, the red tint to his face.

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t call me that. It’s difficult enough to control myself as it is,” Jon complains. “What with how hungry you keep me...”

There is a heavy pause, and Jon’s eyes snap to the carpet, feeling that he has quickly overstepped the line of joking directly into disrespect. The hunger makes it far too easy. Elias’ hand no longer pets at his hair, instead opting to return to his side.

“I believe now would be the best time for that bath. Don’t you agree, Jon?”

Jon doesn’t bother to look up—he can feel Elias’ eyes glaring into him, gripping at his shoulders, pulling at his spine on a string, directing him with a tight leash. Jon’s legs shake as he stands, blankets falling to the ground. He waits for Elias to rise, to start walking to the bathroom before he starts following. He doesn’t have the right to stand beside Elias yet, and he knows this.

“Why do you think I neglect feeding you constantly, Jon?” Elias asks, opening the door and stepping to the side, allowing Jon to

enter the room further. Jon lingers next to the bathtub, staring at the number of soaps Elias has collected for him. It takes a lot to cover the stench of blood, even more so from magic-users. They can smell the power that their blood is steeped in, and they would massacre Jon if they knew how many he had killed over the years.

“What? Do you fear you’ll spoil me?” Jon asks, staring at Elias’ hands as he starts the flow of water.

“In a way, yes,” Elias admits, collecting a towel from a cabinet. Jon waits for a continuation, but receives none. His mouth opens to ask, but a sharp glance from Elias stops him. Not yet.

Elias turns his attention back to the tub and dips a hand into the water, the other adjusting the knobs until he is satisfied with the temperature. He gives Jon a small nod, and Jon steps over the edge. With just his foot dipping the shallow surface, the water turns a light pink.

Jon bites at his lip as he sits down in the tub, using the edges to lower himself. He so desperately wants to ask more, the questions just on the tip of his tongue.

Elias hums his approval of Jon’s patience, patting his hands dry on the towel before kneeling beside the tub. He rolls up his sleeves, exposing his forearms.

“I’ve noticed that after you feed, you seem so very *powerful*. Which is good, exactly how you should be,” Elias starts, leaning up to stop the water now that it has reached Jon’s abdomen. Jon lets out a sigh of relief, *finally* Elias is talking to him.

“But?” Jon asks, hearing the open end to the statement, watching as Elias reaches for a bottle of shampoo. Jon shifts forward to prepare himself to lean his head back.

“But I fear you becoming too strong too soon.”

“What do you mean by that?” Jon asks, leaning back just enough so Elias can start a lather. Elias gives a heavy sigh as he starts with the bottom of Jon’s hair.

“I worry about you tearing your body apart,” Elias admits. Jon

tilts his head in confusion at first, correcting it back when Elias tuts at him.

“Is that something I am capable of?” Jon asks, curious. Elias hums, suds dripping down onto Jon’s shoulders.

“Do forgive me for stating bluntly, but you weren’t in the greatest shape in the beginning of our—” Elias pauses, thumb rubbing at Jon’s cheek. “...*partnership*.”

Jon scoffs, ignoring the heat that flutters at his cheeks. “Surely I didn’t look *that* bad.” Elias chuckles lightly.

“Well, Jon, when I had found you, you were greatly neglected,” Elias starts. “I didn’t know *how* badly your body was damaged. If I pushed you too hard, forced your power into bloom, then your form wouldn’t be able to handle your strength. I needed you to grow into it. Does that make sense?”

Jon’s brow furrows in thought. He doesn’t remember his youth much. It had been suppressed so deep, flickering memories of a village that ignored him, watched as he nearly tore himself apart with every sudden transformation.

Now that Elias mentions it, he *does* remember feeling as though something inside of him was ripping, struggling to break free. His muscles would ache, his lungs burning, and there were many nights he would tear through the floorboards in pain. He would never hurt anyone in the village, of course, but as he grew, so did their worries. Even when he was practically a skeleton of a beast, they were scared.

Yet, he always felt better when they were scared.

His memories are scarce from that point on, running from the village, wandering the woods, being on the brink of death. He barely survived, until Elias found him.

‘Until Elias *saved* you’, a part of Jon reminds himself. Of course, how could he ever forget?

“...Yes.” Jon whispers, leaning his head back into Elias’ hands, water rushing in his ears.

Elias’ nails scrape at Jon’s scalp, like a blade gently dissecting his

head. It gives such a fluttery feeling, letting himself trust so entirely. He relaxes into Elias' hold, feeling Elias nudge stray flakes of blood into the water. Jon sighs at the feeling of Elias' hand slowly sliding down his neck, tracing a path down his torso. He feels Elias' thumb rub at a divot in his hip, slowly circling and pressing down.

"I do hope you know I do it because I care for you."

Elias' voice snaps him out of his haze, the water rippling with his sudden movement. Elias tsks, pulling away from Jon, stray soap and water dripping down his face.

"I—I'm sorry, I didn't—I don't know why—" Elias wipes at his face with a towel as Jon stammers.

"It's fine, Jon," Elias says, but Jon can see the downturn to his lips. Elias is displeased with him. Jon shakes as he faces forward, slowly leaning back into his previous position. Elias makes a small noise of approval, settling back behind Jon, rubbing the soap out of Jon's hair.

It is a while before either of them speak again, the only sound being the slosh of water and their breathing. Jon tries to fall back into that lovely floating feeling, where his mind is full of cotton and undeniable trust, where he doesn't have to think, just let Elias do whatever he wants. To his despair, it is unattainable.

"It's getting more difficult to control your magic, Jon," Elias admits, nails tracing patterns onto Jon's scalp. "With each meal you have, you grow stronger. Unfortunately, that beast inside you grows stronger as well."

His fingers trace lines down to Jon's chest, pointer circling where his heart beats strongest.

"It craves to eat the human part of you, to chew you up until there is nothing left."

Jon bites his tongue, keeping a comment about Elias' flair for the dramatics to himself. It most likely isn't false in the slightest; Elias wouldn't lie about something like that. Some part of him though wants to argue, and he desperately shoves that to the back of his mind. His hands twitch in the water, not knowing what to do with

himself as Elias leans forward to scrub at his collarbone.

Jon breathes slowly to calm himself as he watches the water turn pink with every brush of sponge. A few stray feathers float on the water's surface, each tinged red with blood. Jon mindlessly nudges a few as the room grows silent, the only sound being Elias' humming accompanied by his work.

"Elias... Should we be doing this?" Jon asks, staring at the blood caked under his nails.

Elias' hands still, soap and red-stained water dripping from his sponge. He slowly retreats from above Jon, settling behind him once more, a hand laid on Jon's shoulder. Jon waits for Elias to speak, to answer his question. A moment passes, and then another, before finally Jon looks up to Elias.

Elias' expression is calm, collected, to anyone who doesn't know him. To Jon, however, he can see the fury that boils behind his pupils. If Elias' eyes didn't betray his true emotions, then the crackling of magic under his fingertips did. Jon could feel it prickling at his toes, traveling through his veins upwards, an almost painful numbing sensation.

"Doing what exactly, Jon?" Elias challenges. Jon knows that Elias is aware of what he is talking about, knows that Elias wants him to say it out loud if he dares to. Once the words are spoken, Jon cannot take them back.

"We're... hurting people—" Jon starts, trying to choke back the bubbling fear in his throat when Elias stands. Jon doesn't dare move as Elias slowly moves to the far side of the tub, index finger resting on Jon's ankle. He tries to stifle his shaking as Elias' hand travels up Jon's leg.

"Think carefully about what you say," Elias warns, and the pain shoots through all the way to Jon's thigh, making him gasp out. The words quickly tumble out.

"We can't just hunt someone for no reason—I—I told you before I would only agree if it were criminals," Jon falters, his words quickening as Elias traces his ribs. Jon can feel them creak and bend

under Elias' hand, as though they wanted to change, to transform once again before the night was over.

"How do you know this one wasn't a criminal?" Elias asks, gently rubbing at Jon's collarbone. Jon jolts from the touch, feeling as though an electric current ran from where Elias' finger rested to the tips of his toes, the gentle touch feeling more like a knife.

"He—ugh—" Jon shakes from the effort to stay in the conversation, focusing on the water that still dripped off Elias' hand, watching the droplets that collected blood in their path down towards the tub. "He wasn't branded." He knows very well what that symbol looks like, as all his food up until now was decorated by it, right above their heart.

Elias' hand turns cruel as it reaches upwards, grasping Jon by the throat and bearing down. Jon chokes, hands frozen mid-air as though he would ever move to grab Elias. A few stray drops of water stain Elias' shirt red.

"Don't lie to me, Jon," Elias whispers. "Try again."

The longer Jon took to answer, the tighter Elias' hold would become. Jon can feel his lungs struggle to keep the smallest bit of air. The pain from his neck downwards is excruciating, and his body shakes, causing rippling in the water of the tub. Jon grits his teeth, not wanting to expose his secret, for Elias would tear into him for his actions.

"...I—I heard you," Jon gasps out. Elias' hand immediately loosens and Jon takes in deep breaths, gulping them down greedily.

"Heard me where?" Elias' hand remains on Jon's neck, threatening to repeat his action if Jon did not give the truth.

"In—" Jon hesitates, taking in another breath before continuing, "In the village. Near the cathedral."

A moment passes, and Jon worries that he still said the wrong thing. He waits for Elias to tighten his grip, to not let go until his vision fades.

"Oh, Jon," Elias' voice instead softens, the magic that bombarded

Jon's nerves fading, calming. Elias' hand rests on Jon's cheek, and Jon can feel something cool flood his veins instead. It eases the pain in his muscles, takes away the aches in his head. "You know you aren't supposed to follow me."

"I know," Jon whispers, his throat raspy. He is automatically leaning into Elias' hand, eyes fluttering shut. He ignores the part of him, far away, that screams to run from Elias. Even with the pain in his throat, he manages to ask, **"Why did we hunt him, Elias?"**

Elias stills, and Jon feels his body tense. Had he done something wrong again? Would Elias punish him again?

When his eyes open, Jon sees that although Elias' exterior still wears that calm expression, his eyes betray that he is elated. Elias gives a small chuckle, and his free hand cradles the other side of Jon's face.

"You needed to eat something that would help you grow," Elias admits. He smiles at Jon's perplexed expression. "That's all you need to know for now." He leans forward and presses a chaste kiss to Jon's lips, which quiet the questions that he so desperately wants to ask.

Elias stands, hand petting the top of Jon's head.

"Now, let's get you dressed."





Thirst

Ace phoebenavarro



warnings: vampires, blood drinking, etc., canon-typical eating disorder from jon

JONATHAN SIMS HAS BEEN A VAMPIRE FOR A FEW YEARS NOW. HE'S 40, though physically he stopped aging at 33. He met Elias Bouchard a few years before that, and after a whirlwind romance (or as fast as a romance with a vampire seems to go, as being functionally immortal seems to slow them down considerably), Jon has found himself in this situation. Immortal. Having to drink blood to survive. Married to his maker.

That last bit isn't so bad. In fact, it's quite good. He loves Elias, even though they frequently drive each other mad, and Elias is, quite frankly, obsessed with him. Hundreds of years as a vampire without a soulmate will do that to you, apparently.

Still, Jon is in a difficult position. He's been a vampire long enough that he is no longer a fledgling, but he's still young enough that he is basically still a toddler as far as other vampires are concerned. That is bad enough when Elias takes him to visit old friends, and they all treat him like a child, but truthfully, even beyond that, Jon is struggling to adjust to his situation. He expected it to be difficult, but he supposes he underestimated how hard it truly would be.

His pride will not allow him to admit it to Elias, but unfortunately, Elias picks up on it anyway. Hard not to when Jon has become so gaunt, with dark bruises under his eyes making him look not unlike a Victorian orphan. He feels Elias's worried eyes on him for months before Elias finally says something.

They are sitting together by the fire with their respective books when Elias looks over to Jon and speaks up. "Jon, you're wasting away. You need to feed."

"Funny, didn't you once say that a man's eating habits were his own business?" Jon says defensively. He's been preparing for this for a while. He refuses to look up from his book. "So butt out, Elias."

"It's quite different, because you are my mate, and you are starving yourself for no apparent reason."

Jon makes a face.

"I'm sorry," Elias continues, "I know you don't like being called my mate—"

Now Jon looks up, dropping his book in his lap. "Because it's not accurate! We're not animals. We're partners, or if you must call us something old-fashioned, companions."

Elias sighs. "I'm not letting you change the subject this time, Jonathan."

"Fine," Jon says tersely, crossing his arms. "For your information Elias, I have been feeding."

Elias huffs. "On what, anemic children?"

Jon gives him a withering stare. "On animals, mainly."

"Oh, well that would explain it."

"You told me I had to hunt for myself, so that's what I'm doing."

Elias scoffs. "You're being ridiculous. And stubborn. And contrarian!" Jon raises an eyebrow at him. "You know that isn't what I meant."

"I don't want to hurt people," Jon says, though there is much more to it than that.

Elias softens. "I understand that the adjustment is difficult. Not everyone takes to killing, and that is fine, because you don't have to do it. You know I like to avoid it myself for the complications it brings upon us. But any human blood is better than living off rats and pigeons. You're better at compelling people than any other vampire I've ever known, even at your young age. Are you worried you won't be able to stop yourself, is that what this is?"

"No."

"Then what is it, Jon?"

"I don't know," Jon lies. He doesn't want to talk about it with Elias. Elias respects him deeply, and Jon knows this, but Elias can be a deeply condescending prick sometimes. He doesn't even mean to be half the time, but he simply does not think about how much more time he has spent on this planet than Jon. If Jon is having a problem, it always seems to be a tossup whether Elias will be sympathetic and helpful or condescending and hurtful.

"Jon, please talk to me. I'm worried about you." Elias reaches over and takes his hand. Jon looks down, staring at his wedding ring.

"Alright," Jon says softly. He quickly locks eyes with Elias before looking off to the side. "I don't like it. I don't like hurting people."

Elias tuts. "No, I don't think that's it, though, is it?"

Jon grimaces. Elias always knows him so well. Too well. "Fine. I don't *want* to hurt people."

"Very few people ever want to hurt anyone. But Jon, I am sure you could find a willing donor, so to speak, and I think you know you could, too. You can tell me anything, Jon. I think we need to get to the bottom of this before we can move on."

God damn it. Elias can never leave well enough alone. He always has to know. Jon's patience snaps. He pulls his hand from Elias's grip.

"I like it too much! It makes me feel strong, for the first time— I feel powerful, and I *like* it. I like holding their lives in my hands. An-and what does that say about me? I like hurting people? How long until that turns into something worse? Until I'm—!" Jon looks down at

the ground before making eye contact with Elias. "Elias, I don't want to be a monster."

He hates being vulnerable like this. He feels tears welling up in his eyes. Fuck. He presses the heels of his palms against his eyes until he sees stars. A gentle hand lands on his shoulder, and he flinches. He knows it's Elias, and he tries to make himself relax. Elias wraps his arms around Jon, and Jon wants to push him away. He doesn't. He allows himself to be comforted and held, even though he doesn't want to accept it.

"Oh, darling." Elias rests his chin on Jon's shoulder. "Dear heart. Why didn't you come talk to me? It is my job to guide you through this, both as your partner and as your maker."

"I thought I could handle it myself." Jon quickly wipes tears from his eyes. "And I was managing, for a while."

"Animals will keep you alive, but they're not enough, Jon. I want you to do more than just survive. Forgive the cliché, but I want you to thrive."

Jon barks out a sharp, short laugh. "You're right, that is cliché."

"Jon, will you promise me that you'll do something about this? I can't bear to continue watching you waste away like this."

Jon extracts himself from Elias's arms. He loves Elias's affection, but when he is feeling this vulnerable, it makes him uncomfortable. He doesn't want to be perceived like this at all. Still, he forces himself to make eye contact with Elias as he says, "Yes, I promise."

"I will hold you to it, you know," Elias says, and there is a bit of humor in his voice, but Jon knows he's deadly serious. He doesn't want to think about what Elias will do if Jon doesn't follow up on his promise. "But, you don't have to do anything right this second."

"Right," Jon says quietly. He's a bit relieved, but it's also filling him with dread. Putting it off isn't going to make it any easier. Elias is right, Jon could probably find someone willing, but he just... He doesn't want to stop caring about people. He's seen it in Elias. He wonders how much he's just delaying the inevitable.

“Right,” Elias says, and he begins rolling up his sleeve. “I can practically hear you thinking.”

Jon can’t help but smirk. “You could literally hear me thinking if you hadn’t insisted on turning me.”

“I don’t regret it for a moment,” Elias says. Jon rolls his eyes a bit. He doesn’t think he’ll ever understand what made Elias choose him of all people, but he doesn’t regret it either, even with all this turmoil.

Elias holds his arm out to Jon, palm up. Jon stares at his hand, a bit confused.

“What are you doing?” Jon asks.

“Helping,” Elias says.

Then it clicks. Elias is offering his own blood for Jon to feed from. For a while after Jon was turned, this is how he fed. A newborn vampire is too dangerous to be allowed to feed on humans — unless of course you want them killing them. Neither Jon nor Elias wanted that, so this was the solution. It’s also meant to strengthen the bond between sire and fledgling, supposedly.

It’s not sustainable for the long term, though, which is why they stopped doing this years ago. Jon started feeding on humans, and it didn’t take too long for him to realize just how much he liked having power over people, which led to this current crisis.

“I really shouldn’t indulge you like this. It’s babying you,” Elias says, but he still slices his wrist open and offers it to Jon to drink.

Jon nearly flinches at the words. This was going pretty well, but there it is, condescending and hurtful, treating him like a child. He wants to refuse out of principle, but then the smell of Elias’s blood hits him, and the hunger he’s been suppressing rears its head. Any thoughts of refusing are gone.

In a flash, he pounces on Elias and sinks his fangs in, beginning to drink. It tastes better than he remembers. He can’t stop himself from moaning, and he isn’t even embarrassed about it. Elias chuckles and, with his free hand, laces his fingers into Jon’s hair. He scratches at Jon’s scalp, and Jon absolutely melts against him.

For the first time in... He can't remember how long, Jon feels completely relaxed. It's bliss. He completely loses track of time, just lost in it.

And then Elias is pulling him by the hair, pulling off and up. Jon whines and resists.

"You're going to drink me dry," Elias laughs. "Stop." He pulls Jon to him and presses their lips together. He licks his blood out of Jon's mouth, and Jon nips at his lips. It's filthy. They don't usually kiss like that because Jon usually doesn't like it, but right now he feels absolutely electric. They break away, and Elias rests his forehead against Jon's.

Jon laughs lightly. "Wow." He makes eye contact with Elias. "Hi."

"Hello," Elias chuckles. "Better?"

"Yes," Jon sighs. "Damn you." Elias grins.

"You love me."

"I do."

"We'll get through this together, Jon. We're partners. I'll always help you."

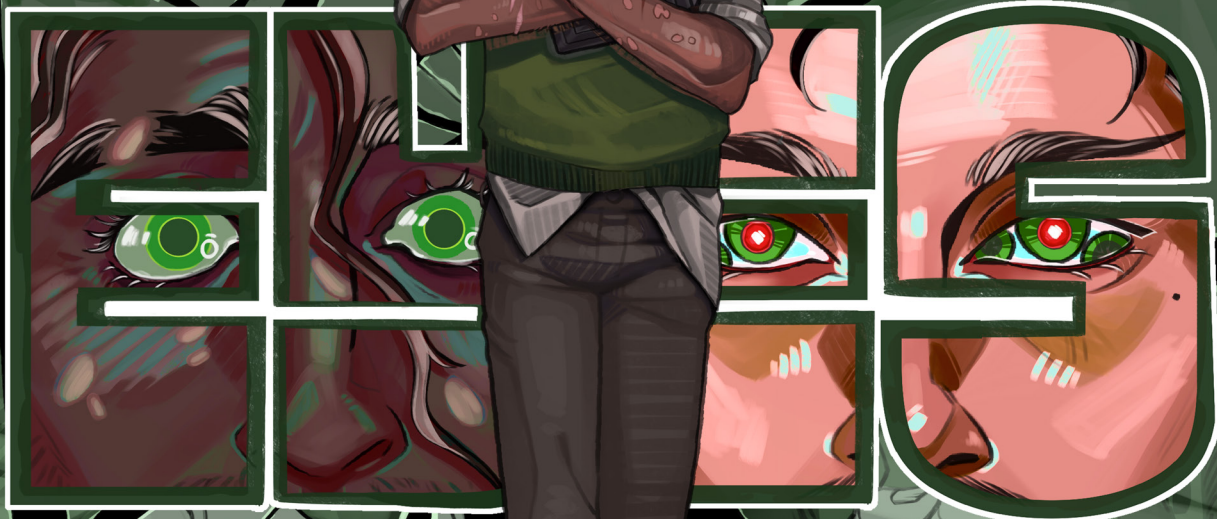
It's probably the endorphins, but Jon is feeling pretty good. The dread is gone. It will probably come back later, but for now, he isn't going to think about it.

"I know."

LOOK AT ME

LOOK ME

IN THE



FORGET

YOURSELF

SURRENDER YOUR MIND

Sway

Lua



warnings: some graphic imagery

A gentle push. A kind word and some advice. The desire to tell him not to stray from this path. Being earnest could truly go a long way.

A soft pull. A caring smile and an impossible task. The desire to break him to rebuild him perfect and new. Being a fake truly is the only way.

It's a strange dance between them.

A soft push and the sort of freedom that isn't all there. A gentle pull and an unrelenting grip. A request to stay. A command to go. At some point, "Follow my lead" has become "Move with me, Jon," and all is well. All is as it should be, and, as it is, Elias doesn't give Jon enough. Not yet. Not now.

A step away and the hand that pulls him back because it isn't the right time. Their song won't allow for that sort of break.

And so, Elias keeps Jon needy and eager for more. There is no doubt in Elias's mind that his Archivist will see this through. And so, Elias gives him crumbs of what Jon desperately wants to know.

Crumb after crumb after crumb: it's a trail leading him home.

If only Jon could see the path he is on, he would know that much. But he follows it blindly and it's a beautiful gesture. An unintentional show of trust. Misguided. Misplaced. Misused.

It's just foreplay.

An adjustment of hand position. Eyes that follow him everywhere and the knowledge that he still cares to be human. The desire to keep him safe. The desire to save himself. Being selfish is all that's left for Elias.

Elias who smiles and traces Jon's jawline. He watches him with honest and adoring eyes. It's a faithful sort of adoration: Elias will never leave him. It's a promise. It's a project. It's sheer cruelty: Jon can't ever leave him. A codependent affair. Forbidden love. As it is, Elias really wants what he cannot have. Doomed love.

By his own choice.

By his own hands.

It was doomed from the start, and he doesn't regret it. He doesn't regret it whenever Jon looks at him. He doesn't regret it because Jon looks at him. Because Jon watches him. Because Jon sees him. It's for the best not to regret it now. This far in, there is no way out anyway.

Elias will let go of everything for what he pretends to still be what he really wants. This far in, there is no other way anyway.

Elias traces under Jon's right eye. It's a barely-there touch, just the ghost of a love never allowed to fully be. A love rejected. A love dead long before it could be anything more than a promise. Dead because of Elias. Strangled by Elias's choices. Strangled by Elias's hands. His hands that slowly crushed that breath in its throat. His eyes that watched as life left its body. Not a crime of passion, but of self-defense.

Another lie.

"Tell me," Jon says, and it's not quite the command it can become.

A shiver. Pleasure and desire. An odd way of being wanted.

The full truth.

“I love you,” Elias confesses.

It’s a love that haunts him. Dead and still here. A love that screams bloody murder at Elias. A tether to his own humanity. A tether to Jon. A weakness. A ghost. A rotting body. There is no doubt in Elias’s mind that he will see this through.

It’s a full-blown addiction.

Elias leans in and kisses Jon’s neck, right under his ear. Jon closes his eyes and lets him. This much trust will only make the betrayal that much worse. Elias knows so. Jon could know it, too, if he looked at Elias. If he looked only at Elias. Elias would let him see it. Elias would stand there and let Jon look at every secret fear and untold desire. Elias would stand there, his naked soul laid in front of Jon like an offering.

If only he would look at Elias. But, as it is, Jon doesn’t look, and Elias offers nothing of significance. Adoring kisses. Loving touches. The sweetest lies. Elias reduced to a beggar. Nothing.

“Open your eyes, Jon,” Elias commands. “Don’t turn away.”

A step to the side. A pause. The music fully stops. A mistake. Such a dangerous dance is taking place between them. The music resumes, and they start again, with feeling. Lie after lie after lie and the only path left is to be swallowed whole by The Eye. A gentle push, a soft pull, and Elias’s broken heart. This is not a love that saves. Twirl. Follow the music and don’t fall for this villain.

A gentle pull and Jon shows Elias no restraint. He trusts and loves like there is something true to be found between them. And Elias wants it to be true.

A soft push and Elias shows Jon too much restraint. He hides and keeps the distance between them like Jon brought a knife to carve out his heart. And Jon never would.

But it’s Elias who caresses Jon’s face and touches Jon’s body and pulls Jon closer and wants more than this. Elias who wants meaning

and truth. Elias who dreams of him. At some point, “Move with me” stopped being enough, and Elias isn’t quite sure where to go from there. Eat me whole. Fear me. Make me fear you. He wants more than this gentle sway. He wants stormy waters. He wants to burn. He wants to feel. He wants to be consumed by this.

A bitter laugh.

A rotting corpse in the attic. A long dead love. A murder victim and a vengeful ghost that is sure to be the death of him. A vengeful ghost that will pull his heart from his chest and eat it bloody and raw.

Truth be told, it’s Elias who doesn’t see what’s right in front of him. It’s Elias who doesn’t look. It’s bad form. It’s a courtesy. It’s fear. It’s fear. It’s fear.

It’s denial.

Jon pets Elias’s hair, and Elias looks at him, searching his eyes for answers he will never ask out loud. Jon doesn’t look away. It’s bold. It’s too much. Elias turns his head, looks away and kisses Jon’s wrist. Jon watches him.

“What worries you so much?”

Elias smiles and doesn’t answer.

“Tell me,” his Archivist demands.

“You,” Elias answers, all restraint and no lies.

Jon searches his eyes. He waits for more. There isn’t more. Elias offers nothing but his heart. It doesn’t amount to much by now. An old thing tucked away. Dusty. Rotten. Forgotten. Elias smiles at him. He wants to be devoured by Jon.

“Breakfast?” he asks, all misdirection and fear.

Jon pauses, surprised by the sudden question. He can tell there is more than Elias’s words.

It’s obvious.

“Ah. Sure?” he answers, sounding mostly unsure.

Elias laughs and steals a kiss. Jon smiles at him. The ghost in Elias’s

heart screams bloody murder and scratches at the walls until its fingertips are bloody and raw.

“Join me,” Elias wants to ask Jon, like some sort of villain bound to be rejected.

Elias stands up. Jon takes his hand and brings it to his lips. A soft touch. A different song. A different pace. An invitation. The wrong one. All the things that could be and that were so openly offered in that kiss.

Soft lips. The offer to lead and that same old paralyzing fear. The inability to let go. Being so deeply scared that the way out must be forced through the walls of this prison.

The song offered doesn’t soothe him. The song offered isn’t enough. They must resume their usual tune, or else Elias may be tempted.

“Join me,” Elias will ask, he promises himself as he watches Jon.

One day.

When everything is said and done and lost. He will ask then, when the rejection is a promise and not a gamble.

Elias pulls his hand away and holds it to Jon. Another invitation. The fake one. Jon places his hand on Elias’s open palm without knowing how cowardly the offer truly is, and Elias pulls him up. A firm motion. A simple action. Too aggressive. Too needy. Out of pace.

Jon stumbles and falls against Elias’s chest. Elias laughs, still holding Jon’s hand, embarrassed to show his own greed. Jon laughs, too, a little embarrassed, believing himself at fault as well. They look at each other. There is a pause, but everything goes on as usual. A misstep and nothing more.

Elias smiles again, charming and playful.

“Shall we dance?”



The Garden of Earthly Delights

FreetobeProblematic



warnings: canon-typical violence and horror, surrealism

THE PILLOW WAS SOFT AGAINST HIS FACE. ELIAS SLOWLY BECAME aware of his body. How it was curled up underneath the blankets, how his hair was vaguely becoming a pest to his closed eyes, and that his arm was stretched out to encounter nothing next to him.

That last bit of information caused him to open his eyes. The sheets and blankets were rumpled next to him, and definitively empty.

Elias felt confusion trickle into his mind, before he heard the soft clamors of someone trying to be quiet while preparing a meal in the kitchen. A small smile pulled at his face as he rose out of bed. Thick grey slippers and a matching robe were donned against the slight chill of the house, and Elias went to go and watch his husband make breakfast in the uncharacteristically early hours.

Jon pattered softly about in the kitchen as he pulled down bowls and arranged plates. Bacon sizzled on the stove, and when Jon turned to attend to it, he startled slightly to see Elias standing in

the doorframe.

“Oh, sorry,” Jon said as he continued cooking, “I tried to be as quiet as I could.”

“Don’t worry, I think my waking was more to do with the realization that you weren’t in bed anymore,” Elias said, “Why did you have an urgency to cook breakfast so early?”

Jon’s smile turned shy, “I thought it would be a nice surprise, for today,” he trailed off meaningfully.

It took Elias a moment, a strange blank moment that seemed to stretch for ages, but then he felt his face grow soft with affection as he replied, “I have been under the presumption that if you’re going to celebrate an anniversary, it’s usually with both members of the couple involved.”

“What, you wouldn’t be involved by eating breakfast?” Jon teased. He began to fill the plates with a simple but hearty fare. Eggs, bacon, toast with butter and jam, and a little bowl of berries for them to share.

“I was supposed to serve it to you on a tray in bed,” Jon explained as he nodded over to their rarely used serving tray, complete with a singular red rose in a glass vase.

Elias had no choice but to lean over and kiss him. The rest of the day would be, to an unbiased observer, unremarkable. Jon had secured them tickets to the theater, but the show wouldn’t be until tomorrow. Which was to be preceded by a dinner at their favorite restaurant. But all of that was for the next day.

This day was about indulgence to the utmost degree. They watched trite television for the simple petty pleasure of making snide comments to make the other man laugh, they ordered their favorite takeout, read in the quiet stillness of each other’s company, and baked.

Which was an activity that Elias insisted on participating in, for while Jon was passable in the kitchen, he lacked any patience that the complexities of baking required.

As they began to get ready for bed, the intimacy they fell into was entirely unplanned. There was no cause for careful seduction. No coy remarks, or coquettish looks, or intricate lingerie. Elias merely looked across the bed at his husband, and felt warmth suffuse him from head to toe.

His husband, with his pockmarked light brown skin, endless dark brown eyes, and thick hair that was full of more steel grey strands than black these days. Other scars were on display on Jon's body, but Elias' mind easily skipped over them, preferring not to recollect their origin. They were simply a part of him.

Between one breath and the next, they were kissing and falling into each other. A tumble that was without pause but with no frenetic urgency. They were simply unable to stop touching each other. It was just as indulgent as the rest of the day, and similarly as satisfying.

When they were through, Elias was lying back on the bed, holding a fast asleep Jon in his arms. He could only see the small profile of Jon's nose and closed eyes. He felt his breath fan across his bare chest, tickling the hair and slightly sweaty skin. Elias' heart felt so full that it was on the verge of splitting apart.

"You look beautiful," Elias said with equal fondness and exasperation, "and we will be late for the dinner reservations that *you* so generously set if we dawdle any longer."

"Sorry, Elias, the day got away from me," Jon said with mild abashment. "But you don't think the earrings are a bit much?" He gestured to the studs, a pair of flawless emeralds set in gleaming silver.

"If anyone minds, they were simply cursed with poor taste," Elias reassured as he gently guided his husband out the door.

Dinner was excellent, as was to be expected. But Elias could not recall much of it, as he got embarrassingly distracted by Jon's wedding ring glinting from where it held his wine glass.

It was a simple but elegant design. A silver band with inlays of

hundreds of emerald chips that went around and around the ring in an almost hypnotic arrangement. It evoked the feeling of being swept away by an implacable ocean wave.

Elias was suddenly reminded of their beautiful wedding venue. The decorations had been in varying shades of cream, champagne, and ivory white, to provide a perfect backdrop against their bold suit colors.

It had taken a considerable effort on Elias' part to convince Jon that yes, red was a perfectly wonderful color to wear to a wedding, let alone his *own* wedding. Jon had decided on a more traditional monochrome suit with bold red accents, while Elias had gone for a deep emerald green and black ensemble.

They had, of course, looked amazing. And everything had been perfect. The food was delicious, the decorations tasteful, the music expertly done, and they had barely had any time to thank and greet guests while they'd danced the night away.

The guests that Elias now had a hard time picturing. Who had been in attendance? Jon was an orphan after all, and no extended family to speak of. And Elias' own social calendar was sparse at best. Had they had an intimate ceremony?

No, Elias could remember dozens of humanoid shapes, their outfits and words of congratulation were blurred into obscurity underneath the joy he'd felt that day. But their faces, were they also—

"Are you feeling alright, Elias?" Jon asked as he touched Elias' hand. "You suddenly seem distant."

Elias squeezed Jon's hand back, and interlaced their fingers so he could see their matching bands side by side. "Yes, apologies. I was lost down memory lane."

Jon smiled, guessing Elias' thoughts correctly, "We should revisit that bakery that made our wedding cake, I've never had another like it since."

Elias agreed, and mentally planned it as a delightful outing where they could also visit the antique bookstore next door. In the back of his mind, he couldn't quite recall the flavor of cake they'd decided on.

They took their seats up in the private box, their own little world of entertainment, looking down on all of the performers and fellow spectators. Elias wasn't sure where the sentiment came from, but it felt right, even natural, for the both of them to whisper about the goings on around them while the rest of the world was a distant concern at their feet.

The play was wonderfully performed. He could feel Jon being moved to tears next to him. Yet Elias was only growing increasingly distracted. Every time his eyes would glance down to the audience below, he was met with another upturned face staring directly back at him. The faces were impossible to distinguish in the darkness, but he knew with certainty that he was staring directly into new eyes every time he looked down.

Incrementally, he stopped being able to even look at the stage. He could only stare down, and understand that every person in the venue was staring up at him. There was no malice in the gazes, no sense of hatred, only a constant pervasive stare that crawled behind his own eyes and held his spine rigid. He also knew unquestioningly, though he couldn't turn his head to look, that the actors on the stage were also staring at him. Until he was meeting the gazes of hundreds of strangers, in an endless locked stare, and he felt absolutely nothing about it.

There was no dread, or fear, or even a small tickling of concern. It was only ever something that he was aware was happening. Perhaps it was tinged with a bit of disdain. Like being aware that there were neighbors arguing next door, and while being forced to listen to their heated words, the only consideration was if they would eventually shut up and let you get on with your day in peace.

In fact, Elias' most pressing worry became whether Jon was able to enjoy the show. That finally released the paralyzation of his neck, and he turned to see whether Jon was unduly affected. But Jon only looked at the play with a beatific expression, before some cue suddenly manifested, and Jon stood up to clap his approval.

The applause of the crowd was startling after such extended tense silence. Everyone in the audience faced the stage, with the appropriate amount of whistles and cheers while the actors came out for

their curtain call. Eventually, Elias joined with his own stilted clapping, though he didn't stand. He stared at Jon, who showed absolutely no sign of fear or anxiety about the strange spell that had just been broken.

Elias knew he should be relieved that Jon was spared from the strange occurrence. But he wasn't.

Instead, the look of happiness on his face felt...wrong. Not that it was forced, or unnatural.

It was only that Elias very much wanted Jon to *be* afraid. And he had no idea why.

"Jon...do you mind indulging a few questions? They may be a tad personal."

Jon turned to look at him, setting his finger inside of the book he was reading. It had been a few days after their anniversary, and they had been the usual blissful domesticity that Elias had never thought possible for himself. But little things had been nagging at the back of his mind that had never bothered him before.

Such as how no colleagues at his workplace, or any stranger on the transit, could ever meet Elias' eyes. And whenever Elias tried to recall what they looked like, the details slid away like rain on clean glass.

But that bothered him less than the realization that Elias didn't know something about his adored husband.

"Of course Elias, what is it?"

"How did you get your scars?"

Jon blinked at him a moment before he said with a wry smile, "What, you want a trip down memory lane?"

"If you'd be so kind. Just...indulge me?"

Jon then proceeded to tell him lies. Not that Jon knew that they were lies. But Elias knew. He couldn't pinpoint why. Just that every

small anecdote about an accident with hot wax, or chicken pox that had become infected, or being clumsy with a knife, all rang horribly wrong, wrong, *wrong*, in Elias' head.

One question began to simmer, and then churn, and then boil inside of Elias' chest. He needed to ask it. Was terrified to ask it. But it was because he wasn't sure what answer he truly wanted.

"Did I—have I ever—am I responsible for any of them?"

Jon blinked at him in confusion. Elias clarified, "Did I ever give you a scar?"

"What? No!" Jon said with surprise and upset, "Of course not! These were all accidents, or unfortunate matters of rotten luck. I know you would never hurt me."

Once more, it was a horrid truth that was filled with lies that Elias couldn't possibly want. Both intertwined with each other in an interlocking paradox that left Elias detached from anything certain.

Yes, he would never hurt Jon. But he *wanted* to.

The sadism was abhorrent to him. He is in love with Jon. He has only ever wanted to give him safety and comfort. A home where he could be loved without fear.

Yet he also wants Jon...more deeply than that. An obsessive and deep turmoil had been unearthed, and Elias could not name the source. He simply understood that he wants Jon to know, indisputably, that he is Elias'. That he owns him, but without a juvenile moniker like 'master'.

Elias owns Jon's soul. His body. It is his to mark, his to claim. Over and over again, with no regard to Jon's feelings on the matter. Jon's pleasure, his happiness, and his safety are all Elias' responsibility. But so is his fear, his pain, and his wretchedness.

The way he feels is not something puerile like 'master', but it does feel something closer to 'godlike'.

As the days bled together, from one precious moment of domestic bliss to the next, Elias' mental musings began to shift. While he treasured every moment with Jon, the soft and tender gazes of

understanding that only come with knowing someone utterly, he couldn't stop the escalating visions.

He saw Jon pull his sleeve down over one arm, the olive skin pock-marked with darker abrasions, and Elias could see, clear as day, the squirming white masses chewing to get inside, trying to burrow deeper under Jon's skin. To reach the very core of him, to gnaw their way to his heart and make a home of his hollowed out sternum.

While Elias knew that it should disgust him, horrify him, he also knew that he put those creatures there. He led them to the living feast of his husband, all so Elias could taste the purest essence of his first horror.

At another time, Jon was gazing contently at the stars from their back porch. His expression was one of tranquility. Elias went out there to encourage him to bed, but he basked in watching him for another few moments. Then Jon's expression turned from peace to enraptured awe.

It was an all consuming expression, a face that knew it was gazing upon something grander than itself, a force that by all rights should obliterate where they stand. But Jon was able to continue to stare upon it. To observe all of its tenebrous power, and to take it into himself. This thing that Elias could not see, Jon was able to withstand its grand impossibility and not break under the force of its existence.

Elias knew, but didn't understand, that it was because of him that Jon was able to witness this paradox. It was through his guidance, his teachings, his gentle pushes in the right direction, that made Jon stand successful in that moment.

It filled Elias with immense pride, to see Jon overcome something not meant for mortal eyes.

Even while horrified and exaltant tears of blood trailed down Jon's cheeks.

There are some visions that fill Elias with a baser pleasure than deep adoration and gratification. When he saw Jon wince in pain when the burn scar became tight across his palm, Elias could see

Jon's face twisted in a rictus of agony. He could hear Jon scream as his nerve endings seared together under his flesh, as the immense heat rippled the fat and boiled the blood.

When Jon was winded after their weekly exercise, he could see Jon's mouth open and close soundlessly. His eyes grew wide and darting, as he tried to find the air that refused to fill his chest. His fingers gripped desperately at the seat of a chair, as though if he slackened for even a moment he would be hurled off the edge of an abyss.

And Elias, inexplicably, craved these visions. He wanted to bask in them, to watch unendingly as Jon endured one pain, into another horror, into a terror that left him petrified and helpless. It was the most intoxicating thing that Elias had ever witnessed in his life.

The visions continued to bleed into his every day. With so much rapidity and tangibility that Elias began to have trouble distinguishing what was his present and what was this surreal horror that defied reality.

Where he would reverently watch as his beloved husband writhed, trapped underground, attempting to find some small clean pocket where he could breathe without wet muck flowing into his mouth and nostrils.

Perhaps the most horrifying ordeal of all of this, was that Elias was not sure which world he preferred to stay in.

To have Jon gaze upon him with love in his eyes, with no worry except what entertainment they'd wish to enjoy for the evening, was a joy Elias had never dared to believe possible for himself. It was a contentment he had thought beyond his holding, so he had never bothered to seek it out. Yet now it was offered to him freely, and from a person whose loyalty was as precious as any gem in the world.

And yet, in this other world, Elias was Jon's *only* concern. There is no outside world, no other distractions. Elias was free to take whatever he liked from Jon. His happiness, his pleasure, his wrath, and his dread. He could be Jon's comfort and also the source of his torment.

He trailed tender kisses across Jon's face while they lay together on the sofa. Jon giggled in pleased bursts, and in the next second Elias was licking the tears away as Jon felt his bones reshape into twisted configurations.

As he guided Jon to ecstasy and agony both, Elias began to form the epiphany that he may never need to choose. Why should he try to solve this twisting of his reality, when both of them were worlds he would happily live in? He could have Jon safe and loved in one world, while being tortured and captivated in another.

Perhaps some day he could tell each one about the other. To watch his domestic Jon scoff in absurd dismissal, that Elias would ever conceivably sink to such lows. While the other could struggle to contemplate the fresh horror of a version of himself that was blissful with his torturer.

The matter settled in Elias' mind like the final stone in an elaborate mosaic. He would have them both. He would be a doting husband and a sadistic jailer. He would be caring, and cruel, and loving, and bloody, until he would forget there ever was a distinction between the two halves of himself.

As the satisfaction suffused him, it was suddenly interrupted with a painful wrench. Elias felt himself spasm, as muscles that had been unused clenched into awareness. His mouth was dry, and his throat crackled from overuse. He knew he was not in his living room anymore, but he was not sure where he could be that had hard stone under his back and the overwhelming scent of dust and rusted metal.

His eyes cracked open, and he saw Jon standing above him. A far different one from either that he had come to know. Though he had the scars of both of them, this Jon had a sheared head, and eyes that contained neither love nor fear. Instead, they held a hard and intense gaze of iron determination that bored into Elias' soul.

A shiver of unease passed through him, but still Elias didn't remember yet, and in his confusion he said, "Jon? I—I was having the most wonderful dream..."

When the knife drove its way into his chest, it felt much the same way as when Jon would lay in deep peaceful slumber on top of him.



Burning Curiosity

Anysin



“HE’S WAITING FOR YOU,” ROSIE SAYS AS SHE STEPS OUT OF ELIAS’S office.

“Right.” Jon walks in, closing the door behind him as soon as he can. He is rather certain he knows what the meeting will be about, but he’s still a little nervous; he has been snooping into Elias’s past lately, and if Tim and Martin have taken notice of his actions, it’s very likely that Elias has noticed something too. He tries not to show anything as he approaches Elias’s desk, grabbing a chair.

“Yes, please, have a seat.”

Elias sounds and looks distracted, which is highly unusual for him; he’s not even facing Jon directly until Jon has sat down, and it takes him a while to set his hands on the desk and fold his fingers together, as if he needs to think about every action carefully. But Jon doesn’t say anything, placing his own hands over his knees, trying not to grip them.

“Has someone complained again?” Jon asks. Better to dive straight in.

“Well, yes, but this isn’t about that.” Elias sighs, lifting his gaze up from his hands. There is something almost sheepish about his

expression, which is so unlike him that Jon can't help but feel a little alarmed. "This is about personal matters."

Yes, Jon is definitely alarmed now. Elias doesn't do personal matters. Jon has known him for some years now, and only through his recent investigations has he gotten a glimpse of what Elias is like behind his surface, and those glimpses have only confused Jon more. It had felt like Elias was going to remain a mystery to him, and he's not sure how he feels about Elias letting him past his guard.

"What is it?" he asks, leaning forward. Elias looks away again, taking in a breath.

"My mother passed away recently," he says quietly. "The funeral is in three days. I would like it if you were to accompany me."

For a moment, all Jon can do is stare. Even during his investigation, he had uncovered nothing about Elias's family, nothing aside from the public information that the Bouchards are rich and influential in politics. For some reason, the fact that Elias has- *had* a living mother surprises him, but it shouldn't. As much of a distant figure as he is, Elias is still human.

He can't deny it stirs some nameless emotion within him, Elias allowing him to know this. But Jon hides it all as he says, "I'm sorry about your loss." He thinks for a moment about how to proceed, before deciding to be blunt: "But why me? Can't Rosie do it?" Rosie is Elias's assistant and she's respectable enough, so if Elias doesn't want to show up at the funeral all alone, she makes most sense as an option. But Elias shakes his head.

"Jon, my relationship with my family is very complex, to say the least. But as it's a vulnerable time, it wouldn't be wise of me to show up to the funeral with an unmarried woman." Elias utters a little laugh at the idea, but when he meets Jon's eyes again, he's serious. "And out of everyone I know, you're the one I trust the most."

Elias's words are as unexpected as the rest of this conversation. They are intensely flattering, which is why Jon tries to resist their effect; he needs to keep his head clear around Elias. He knows that the right thing to do now is to say no, and keep things as professional as possible between them.

But there is no keeping things professional anymore, is there? He has already investigated Elias behind his back, looking into his past to figure out if he played a role in Gertrude's death. This is an opportunity for Jon to find out more, more than what any papers he can find can tell him. It makes him feel a little like a scavenger, like a dirty creature, but he also has no idea when an opportunity like this will come again. He can't not take advantage.

"All right," he says, as coolly as he can. "I suppose I can be away from the Archives for one day."

Elias's shoulders fall slack, as if with relief.

"I can't thank you enough for doing this, Jon." He pauses, frowning a little. "Do you have a proper suit for a funeral? I can make arrangements if not."

"No need." It's been some years since the last funeral in Jon's own life, but the suit he had then should still be good. He will do this.

If Elias wants to crack the door open for him, he will go in.

Jon's own suit has become loose enough that he's practically swimming within it, but Elias's is just a tad tighter than his suits usually are. It's also different in style from his usual preferences, but he still looks collected as he and Jon climb up the steps of the church and go inside. They have barely entered when a tall man walks up to them, barely glancing at Jon before focusing on Elias.

"Elias," the man says, extending his hand. His voice and eyes are both cool. "I'm surprised to see you here this early. I half-expected you to sleep in."

"Tobias." Elias grasps the man's hand, his voice equally cold. "This is our mother's funeral. Of course I will put in an effort."

"That's not the brother I remember, but I'm glad if you are improving yourself." Tobias glances at Jon again, eyeing him from head to toe. To say his gaze is disdainful would be putting it lightly. "Who is this?"

Frowning, Jon opens his mouth, but Elias talks first.

"This is Jonathan Sims, a friend of mine." He gives Jon a smile, shrugging a little. "I'm sorry about the cold welcome, Jon. It's a complex relationship."

"Now, that's the Elias I know. Gossiping and speaking nonsense even at a funeral." Tobias sighs, but doesn't address Jon in any way, turning his attention back to Elias. "Despite everything, it's good that you came. Our mother deserves to have both of her children present when she takes her final leave."

"Truly," Elias says, in the driest possible tone. Tobias scoffs at him, but says nothing more, walking past him as he goes to greet other guests.

Elias grasps Jon by his shoulder, guiding him away from the doorway and Tobias. Jon lets himself be led, choosing not to comment on how tightly Elias holds onto him. He also chooses not to comment on Tobias, although the urge is there; the man is obviously highly unpleasant. But he wants to hear what Elias has to say first.

"Utterly loathsome," Elias mutters after a while, going with Jon's own thoughts. "I'm sorry you had to witness that, Jon. As I said, it's a complex relationship."

"I can tell," Jon says, which makes Elias snort.

The church isn't crowded - Jon wonders how public this affair is supposed to be - but there are other guests around, some of which are looking in Jon's and Elias's direction. Not all of them look hostile, but they don't appear to be friendly either. They probably feel the same as Tobias, wondering why a stranger has been brought among their midst.

Jon wonders the same.

He stops walking, forcing Elias to stop with him.

"Maybe it was a bad idea for me to come along," he says. "I don't want to cause extra tension."

"No, Jon." Elias glances at his own hand on Jon's shoulder before withdrawing it, taking it behind his back. "If anything, it would

be worse for me if you weren't here. But I understand if you don't want to stay."

Elias is looking downward, as if he's a bit ashamed. The sight makes Jon uneasy, so he says,

"That's not what I meant." Although it's not entirely true. Part of him *doesn't* want to stay, is suddenly worried about going too far with his investigation. But Jon smothers that part; too far or not, he must do this. Who knows when another similar opportunity will come by? If nothing else, the interaction between Elias and his brother gave him a glimpse of the family Elias hails from. He wants to find out more.

Jon's mouth feels tight, but he smiles. "I was just thinking about you, but if you want me here, I'll be glad to remain."

"Good." Elias pats Jon on the arm. "Prepare for a long day, then. We'll be here for a while."

It doesn't sound like a good time, but Jon nods. When Elias turns away from him, eyeing a group of people who have decided to approach them, Jon sees that the hand Elias is holding behind his back has curled into a fist.

They mingle with the other guests before everyone gathers into the chapel. Elias's other relatives are more polite than Tobias, but they aren't warm; only a few address Jon's presence in any way. Jon has a hard time biting his tongue, feeling defensive on Elias's behalf, but it's also very interesting. He wonders if this behavior is due to things Elias did in his youth, or if it's connected to him being the director of the Institute. He is sure that the Institute isn't impressive by Bouchard standards.

In any case, he tries not to feel too defensive for Elias's sake. Despite Elias referring to him as a friend, Jon is only an acquaintance at best, and he has no right to get emotional on Elias's behalf. Still, he cringes inside when Tobias approaches them again in the chapel.

"Your guest will have to sit in the back," Tobias says. "The front row is for family only."

Jon opens his mouth, before closing it on his own. He glances at Elias, whose face is as calm as it can be, but there is a quiet blaze in his grey eyes.

"I brought Jon here to support me," Elias says. "I would like to have him near. We have family friends on the second row."

"That's precisely it, Elias. We know those people, we don't know your guest." It doesn't escape Jon's attention that Tobias is very determined not to even name him, and certainly still refuses to look at him. It's very pointed and Jon wants to protest it, but he restrains himself. It's to his and Elias's advantage if Jon doesn't give any fuel to Tobias.

"I know him. Doesn't that matter?" Elias narrows his eyes at Tobias. "I know you and the rest of the family disapprove of all of my choices, but I am here, and me and my companion deserve the same respect as anyone else. I *will* demand it if it's not given."

Tobias's nostrils flare, his brows furrowing deep. Elias meets his gaze, his face absolutely neutral. Jon almost wants to smile at that, but he doesn't, staying silent as he glances between Elias and his brother.

"Fine, second row." Tobias sighs, giving Jon a dirty look before focusing on Elias again. "Come along, then. I'm sure your guest will be able to find a seat himself."

"He will." Elias glances over at Jon, smiling at him. "Catch me after it's all done. I won't be far."

"As you wish," Jon says, allowing Tobias and Elias to leave first before heading towards the second row himself.

There is space for him in the second row, but he tries to keep a distance from the rest of the people there. At this point it's clear nobody aside from Elias is interested in talking to him, making any kind of snooping impossible, but Jon could do without the aghast glares. He is curious about what these people think of him, who they think he is to Elias.

One thing is for sure: Elias brought him here to shake things up on purpose. Jon has some theories about why, but he can think about them later; now, he has a funeral to focus on.

As the funeral goes on, Jon can't help but compare it to the Lukas one that Naomi Herne told him about. The Bouchard family and their friends are cold towards Jon and Elias, but not at each other; he can see people leaning against each other, hands seeking other hands. Jon observes it all as well as he can, while also keeping an eye on Elias.

Elias seems to be neutral about it all, not participating in the hushed conversations within his family, and he lets Tobias make the speech about their mother. It's not until it's time to carry the coffin out of the church that Elias seems to react, but even then everything he seems to do is measured, controlled. His face shows no emotion when he takes his spot as a pallbearer, nor when he's carrying the coffin.

Jon aches to know what is going on in Elias's head.

He keeps his distance from Elias and his immediate family, and even as the funeral crowd leaves the church and follows the coffin into the graveyard, nobody tries to talk to Jon, although he can feel several curious eyes on him. Part of him wants to try to talk to the others, see if it's the matter of him taking the initiative, but he chooses to keep track of Elias instead. He will probably get more out of this day that way.

Elias remains emotionless as he helps lower the coffin into the ground. When it's his turn to toss earth upon the coffin, Elias turns to address the mourners, holding a handful of soil upon his palm:

"My mother was a glorious woman. May she have an interesting and fulfilling afterlife."

With that, Elias tosses the soil into the grave. Somewhere near Jon, someone makes the most intriguing comment: "At least he didn't cause a scene this time."

Jon bites his lip, itching to turn towards the voice to figure out who said that. But he restrains himself, waiting patiently until the funeral guests are withdrawing from the grave, and he can finally approach Elias.

“How are you holding up?” he asks.

“Pretty decently overall, I think. It both is and isn’t what I expected.” There is a slight strain in Elias’s voice when he speaks, but he still smiles at Jon. It’s a tired smile; the first time Elias lets some of his true state leak through. “The wake will be at the family home. I’m offering you a chance to back out at this point if you want to.”

Jon shrugs. “If you want me there, I will be there.”

Elias’s smile turns more natural at that.

“Good,” he says. “Let’s go to our car.”

Elias’s childhood home is an old, grand building away from the city. There is some charm about the house on the outside, but on the inside it’s bland and uninteresting. It doesn’t feel like a home, and Jon expects that Elias will wish to leave soon. Once the guests have settled in, Elias approaches Tobias on his own.

“I’ll be leaving before the evening is over,” he declares. “But I would like to go see my old room.”

“Hoping to find a lost joint?” Tobias snorts at his own comment, but he turns serious. “My wife and I have plans for this house, and we won’t be keeping your room as it is. Your belongings are in a box; you may take it with you when you leave.”

“Understood.” Elias gives Tobias a nod before turning towards Jon. “Come along, Jon.”

“No funny stuff though,” Tobias warns them as they start to leave. Elias ignores that, and while Jon is curious about what Tobias means, he knows it’s pointless to ask.

But from Elias, he might get some answers. So Jon follows him, eager for the two of them to be alone.

Once they have climbed up the stairs, Elias stops.

“I’m sure you’re wondering,” he says, “why I wanted you here.”

The second floor of the house is quiet, the lights dimmed down and every door closed, and it’s exactly how Jon wanted it; they are alone. It’s an exciting moment, but he also feels nervous- and so painfully curious.

“Yes.” He wants to lick his lips, but doesn’t, not wanting to give away his anticipation. “Why me? Why at all?”

Elias sighs, turning towards him.

“Life as a Bouchard is- demanding. I was not enough to meet those demands.” Elias states it like it’s a simple, undeniable fact, his face calm. “And they never let me forget it. I needed an ally to be even able to come here, and I couldn’t imagine anyone more fitting for the job than you.”

Jon came here to get insight to Elias; now it’s clear how much Elias values him, he feels ashamed of his intentions, almost to the point that he wants to confess. But even though Elias’s words align with everything Jon has witnessed during this funeral, it’s not the full story.

“That answers the second question,” he says. “How about the first?”

“Come with me.” Elias turns away from him and starts to walk towards the left wing.

The left wing of the house faces towards the forest surrounding the house. The room they enter has a balcony on it, but it’s otherwise unremarkable. Whatever signs there were of Elias having ever lived in this room have been scrubbed away- or more precisely, gathered into a box that stands in the corner of the room. Elias glances at the box, utterly indifferent, before turning back to Jon, taking his hand behind his back.

“There are only memories in this room for me,” he says. “It was assigned to me by my father, and as you will soon notice, it’s

nowhere near the rest of the family and their rooms. My father always thought that there was something deeply wrong with me, and he treated me accordingly.”

At that moment Jon notices that Elias’s other hand is in front of him, busily unbuttoning his vest. Once that is done, Elias tugs his shirt upward, until a sliver of stomach is visible.

“Elias,” Jon whispers. “What are you doing?”

“If you want to understand my relationship with my father,” Elias says, “take a look.”

The words make Jon’s blood run cold. Is Elias aware of his motives? He looks away first, hesitates, then looks forward again, squinting his eyes as he tries to see Elias’s bared skin better.

An old, round scar marks the spot on Elias’s stomach. Jon stares at it, his mind itching.

“He- stumped a cigarette on you?” he asks.

“When I was ten, yes.” Elias lets the shirt fall back down, although he doesn’t tuck it in. “To be fair to my father, physical discipline wasn’t his usual method. But when he did resort to that, he made sure it- left a mark.”

Elias smiles at his own words, although there is nothing funny about them. Jon rips his gaze up from Elias’s belly, feeling as his face heats up.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“It’s not your fault.” Elias reaches out, running his fingertips down the side of Jon’s arm. He brings them back up, grasping his shoulder. “There is one more thing I need to do. But we are heading to another room for that.”

“Which one?” Jon asks.

Elias meets his eyes, and Jon is almost shaken by the determination he sees in Elias’s gaze.

“The master bedroom,” he replies. “My father and mother’s room.”

The master bedroom has likewise been scrubbed clean of all signs of life. The bed is still there, larger than any bed Jon has ever seen, but it doesn't seem to be particularly old or otherwise worthy of note. Still, he doesn't comment when Elias approaches the bed.

"My parents weren't very romantic with each other," Elias says. "Their marriage was a good business arrangement that both appreciated, nothing more. Still, they shared the same bed for the rest of their lives."

Elias's vest is still open and his shirt is untucked, but despite these details, he looks composed- at first. It takes a moment for Jon to notice that Elias's hands have balled up into fists.

"Is everything okay?" he asks, taking a tentative step forward.

"No," Elias whispers. "I didn't think it would be this much. I-"

Elias turns around, sitting on the edge of the bed. He leans against his knees, hanging his head down, and Jon can't help himself: he approaches Elias, hesitating before putting his hands on his shoulders.

"It's tough to lose a guardian," he says, as diplomatically as he can. "They have an effect on us..,"

"Bad one in this case." Elias looks up, and his hand rises too, grasping Jon by his elbow. "Lie down with me."

"Excuse me?" The request is completely unexpected, and also a little grotesque given where they are. But even though Jon tries to pull away, Elias doesn't loosen his grip, and his eyes are intense as he stares up at Jon. Jon can't bear to face it, looking away.

"I will tell you everything you want to know about me."

Jon shudders. "I," he starts to say, only to end up yelping when Elias yanks him closer, until Jon collapses over him. Alarmed, Jon tries to get back on his feet, but Elias's hand finds its way to his waist, holding onto him as he pulls Jon all the way into his lap. "We can't," Jon manages to gasp. "The wake. They will hear."

“How interesting that your first reaction isn’t ‘no’.” Elias wraps his arm fully around Jon’s waist, releasing his elbow to bring his hand up to Jon’s head, running his palm over Jon’s hair. “I don’t want them to determine my actions, Jon. I want to be free of them.”

Elias buries his face into the crook of Jon’s neck, breathing harshly on the bare skin there. Jon sits there, feeling intensely awkward, face heating up when he feels Elias’s erection pressing up against him. Shivering, Jon tries to pull away, but Elias holds him close, fully embracing him now.

“Please,” Elias whispers.

Jon is tense, torn between fleeing from the room and demanding answers from Elias. He hesitates, his heart beating fast as Elias embraces him tightly.

“Fine,” he says. “But I want to know, why me?”

“I will tell you.” Elias pulls up from Jon’s neck; his eyes are damp. He cups the back of Jon’s head, holding onto him gently as he pulls Jon to him, their mouths sliding together.

Having Elias’s mouth against his own is a strange sensation. Neither of them tries to deepen the kiss for a while, just letting their mouths linger together, but it’s Jon who takes the next step, moving his mouth against Elias’s, wrapping his arms around Elias’s shoulders. They hang on the edge of the bed, wrapped around each other, before Elias starts to lie down on his back, pulling Jon with him.

Once they are fully on the bed, Jon sits up in Elias’s lap. He looks down at Elias, who is letting his emotions seep through now, his eyes wide, his breathing anxious. He seems so vulnerable that Jon almost can’t bear to look at him. Elias runs his hands down Jon’s sides, clutching his waist.

“Regardless of what happens,” he says, “I’m glad it was you.”

Shivering at the words, Jon leans down to kiss Elias.

He slides his hands into Elias’s hair, surprised by how soft it feels, while Elias pushes his tongue into his mouth, his hands wandering along Jon’s body. He pulls Jon’s suit jacket upward and tugs his

shirt free, cradling the small of Jon's back with his bare hand before sliding it underneath his trousers. Jon can feel it as Elias feels up the shape of his arse, stroking the back of his thigh, before twisting his fingers underneath Jon's boxer leg. He brushes his fingers over Jon's cunt, stroking the folds.

"Let me undress a bit," Jon whispers against Elias's lips. "It will be easier."

Elias nods, pulling his hand out. Together, they set out to unfasten Jon's belt, unbutton and unzip his trousers.

Jon rises up a little in order to let Elias pull his trousers and underwear down to his thighs, after which he sits in Elias's lap again. Elias is hard within his trousers, the bulge of his cock distinct against Jon's bare flesh, and Jon rubs down against it. He is surprised to realize that he has already grown a little wet, his flesh damp as it comes to contact with the smooth fabric of Elias's trousers; it will leave a patch. Flushing at the thought, Jon reaches down, shuffling slightly backward as he starts to unfasten Elias's trousers too.

"I know what you have been doing," Elias says.

Jon's cunt throbs at the words, and his hands turn a little shaky as he opens Elias's trousers, reaching inside to feel his cock.

"And what is that?" he asks.

"You have been - *ah* - spying on me." Elias's hands find him again, stroking over his hips and thighs, dipping underneath his shirt to caress his waist and lowest ribs. "You have been very clever, but I've kept my eyes open ever since Tim and Martin complained to me. We need to have a serious conversation about it later."

Elias's cock throbs warmly against Jon's hand through Elias's boxers, making Jon lick his lips. He grasps the waistband of Elias's boxers, pulling them down just enough that his cock can rise into sight, solid and erect.

"So why bring me here, knowing that?" Jon asks.

"Because I wanted you to know my origins." Elias's back arches against the bed when Jon grasps his cock, giving it a slow stroke. Jon

shuffles a little forward, until his own, stiff cock is in contact with Elias's; they throb and twitch against each other. Elias's hand slides up enough on Jon's body so he can pinch his nipple before dragging hand down again, letting it linger on Jon's heaving stomach.

"I want you to understand that I'm human," Elias says, the words coming out gasping as his cock jerks against Jon's cock and hand. "Is it working, Jon?"

Jon doesn't reply; instead, he moves his hips up and down, letting his cock drag along the surface of Elias's. The contact feels incredible, and for a moment Jon bends his head back, breathing in deeply as he and Elias throb together.

"You aren't telling me the full story," he breathes. "What are you keeping from me?"

Elias laughs at him, grasping him by the hips as they hike up. He holds Jon still, shuffling a bit beneath him until his cock is pressed against Jon's cunt, the head of it lined up with Jon's opening.

Together, they lower Jon on Elias's cock. Jon bites his lip as Elias slides inside, filling him up, forcing himself to go slow as he takes Elias all the way in, until he can feel Elias's balls underneath him, tight and warm. Elias exhales through his gritted teeth, moving one hand down to grasp an arse cheek, gripping onto it as he starts to rock his hips beneath Jon's.

"Kiss me," Elias commands.

"Tell me what you're hiding." But despite the question, Jon obeys, leaning over Elias again as he crushes their mouths together, moving his own hips along with Elias's. The bed creaks beneath them, the sound of it almost mournful.

They fall into silence as they fuck, Jon riding Elias's cock as hard as he dares, Elias clutching his hips, thrusting up into him. Jon rests his forehead against Elias's, panting as they rut together, feeling it as Elias pulses inside him.

"Tell me," he whispers.

"Make me talk." Elias pushes his hand into Jon's hair, grasping a

tight grip as he bends Jon's neck to the side, starting to nip at his throat. "What do you think I'm doing?"

Elias bites him, the sensation sharp. Jon knows that the bite will leave a mark, that everyone will see it when he and Elias finally come downstairs.

"I think," he starts to say, but Elias swallows his words into a kiss, gripping him by the arse now as he pounds up into Jon, his movements more erratic now, less in control.

Jon feels as Elias throbs hard and fast within him, as something warm and wet fills him up. Clamping around Elias's length, his own cock twitching in the air, Jon ruts back against Elias until he reaches his own climax, the tiniest possible moan slipping out of him. It echoes within their mouths, locked tight together.

Elias sighs, giving his lower lip a slight bite as he curls his fingers into Jon's flesh, lifting up by the hips. Jon feels semen dripping down from inside him, falling on top of Elias.

"I think this is a test," Jon says, finishing his earlier thought. "For what... I don't know." He closes his eyes, breathing in.

"It's all right." Elias rises, sitting up on the bed with Jon still in his arms. He kisses Jon on his forehead, stroking his cheek with the back of his hand. "Most of all, I came here to settle a score, and now I have. I'm very grateful for your presence."

It's an answer, and yet somehow it's nothing. Jon scowls, but he lets Elias kiss him again, lets himself be held.

The drive back home is silent. Although Elias said earlier that he will answer any questions Jon has about him, Jon has no questions; it's clear he's not going to get answers he really wants. He's not even sure what they even are in the end.

All Jon knows is that he has been left with a whole new hunger.

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We are preparing
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-Melanie King

Strange rambling

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JON, ELIAS FINDS HIMSELF THINKING, AS HE KEEPS AN EYE ON THE man he wants for his Archivist, for the linchpin of all he's dreamed of, is interesting. Well, no, that much ought to be obvious, for he'd never take a boring man for his own; *boring* is almost anathema to the Eye, after all. What he means is more along the lines that he is interesting in ways Elias hadn't anticipated; he reminds him of some of the people he'd found interesting, that Jonah Magnus had found to be interesting, back in his youth.

Of course, that is not to say Jon is the exact image of any of them, because *that* might imply that Elias had chosen him solely for that, or had let that influence his choice. Elias may be at times sentimental but he does not let that sentiment make him a fool, and it would be foolish to have picked Jon for anything other than the Web's blessing and the draw of the Watcher that he feels.

Nonetheless, he does, at times, permit himself to reflect on those similarities, when he finds himself to be feeling more Jonah Magnus than Elias Bouchard.

There's something that reminds him of Albrecht, Elias thinks at one point: the first distinct impression he's been given of a former

lover by his Archivist. Because poor Albrecht had had just a little of the Eye in him (hah), and there are those same impulses, that ouroboros of a calling—curiosity borne of a pull to the Beholding; a pull to the Beholding borne of curiosity.

Loathe as he has ever been to say that anything can be determined by one's birth—he thinks that some people *are* simply made for the Watcher's gifts, because how else can one explain that mutual creation, inquisitiveness and a calling both created by one another, save for it simply being Fate's intention? (But, of course, that is only potential, and potential must be honed before anything is made of it.)

There's a neat parallelism in it, too, because what those books had been... well, they'd been something of an Archive of their own, one craving an Archivist. His Archives (part of him, as all of the Institute is, but in the same breath more than merely *him*) take so well to Jon. He can feel it, the way that they're trying to set roots into the man, to keep him as their own forever. And if he'd been able to sense the books' feelings towards Albrecht... well, they had, in the end, claimed near every inch of the man from the inside out, and perhaps it had been vengeance for letting Jonah hurt the books, and perhaps it had been the only kind of love that the Powers know: complete and total possession.

(The comparison is even more fitting, too, because Elias is the one putting him further into the ever-tightening embrace of the Eye, further into this world of the supernatural than he'd ever been before, than a mere brush had brought him. Albrecht could not have simply lived in peace with his Archive, and Jon could not have stayed only as close as Mr. Spider had brought him, because Jonah, because Elias, *would not let him*.)

After Albrecht, it is Barnabas that he is reminded of.

Every time Jon asks for more security measures to be put in place against Prentiss, which Elias, for the most part, does not grant, it's almost... ah, it's funny how even a servant of the Beholding can struggle for words, despite the nigh-omnipotence his patron grants

him. It's certainly not nostalgic, because that suggests something other than the grief and guilt and aching numbness that had consumed a (relatively) young Jonah Magnus at how he'd willingly let Barnabas succumb to the Lonely, or the acceptance that he'd found in himself in years following.

No, it's not nostalgic. But it is... reminiscent of that letter that Barnabas had left him, another he cares for coming to harm through his own intentional inaction.

Jonah hadn't had the honour (and to watch the death of his oldest friend, someone who'd been utterly devoted to him beyond rationale, *would* have been an honour) of watching Barnabas fade away into the Lonely, though, whereas Elias *does* have the privilege of watching his Archivist become Marked by the Rot.

Yes, he thinks, it is an honour and a privilege to watch this, the worms burrowing into soft mortal flesh and trying to find a home in it, mindless and knowing only to seek a new host. To watch Jon's pain (beautiful, Elias thinks, beautiful is the way that his Becoming wounds his still fallible body) and to watch the things removed so brutally, that corkscrew causing more agony than the worms' entry had to begin with.

And somehow... somehow, Jon taking his statement, after (and the pull of words from his throat is not as strong yet as it will be, his Archivist not yet able to make him pliant and unresisting, but one day—) is eerily similar to gathering Barnabas's bones, cradling each one carefully in his arms and keeping it safe, removing them all from that which had killed his friend, those remains now his, forevermore.

Picking up the pieces. That's what he's doing now, offering Jon an abridged (and a little dishonest) version of events as the slightest nourishment that feeds his curiosity more than anything else, trying to entice him elsewhere just for the moment (for though his returned attachment to the Archives is encouraging, as is the fledgling obsession with his predecessor's death, he does wish that Jon would take a little time before pursuing either, lest he break). It's what he did then, though now it is in a much more literal sense; here, there are no bones to gather, only an Archivist to entice.

He finds, though, that he much prefers how much more involved he is in Jon's pain. Really, it's hardly a contest.

(Because Jonah hadn't known it to be an honour, to have another's pain shape him so, to mould and be moulded like that. But Elias does.)

Jon has never reminded him of Mordechai. He is callous, often, rude, but it's never the same. Jon does not believe himself above everyone he speaks to in that same, isolated, way. Elias finds that rudeness attractive, it's true, (because it's oh so endearing on Jon) but it's not in the same way that Jonah saw a man who disdained his company and decided he needed to work his way past his walls, see what that man was like at the core. (Much the same as he was on the outside, as it turns out.)

Still—if he was ever to say that Jon was like any of the Lukases, it would be, ironically, now. The very personal and social nature of his single-minded obsession is opposed to the Forsaken in some ways, yes, but it sets him apart from his co-workers in a counter-intuitively lonely manner. There's a disregard for what his coworkers want that's *almost* similar, *almost* nostalgic.

But the whole thing is, well... sweet of him, really. It's a word anathema to everything that Mordechai had ever been. Just as, save for a rudeness and a willingness to ignore boundaries both similar and dissimilar, Jon is too anathema to the man. (Though, seeing as Jonah was, Elias wonders if Jon would be begrudgingly fond of Mordechai.)

The betrayal that permeates Jon's being when he finally realises what (part of what, at least) Elias really is is so very sweet and so very bitter. There's at once the bone-deep, almost primal satisfaction that his Archivist feels at uncovering a truth so long hidden from him, but then the shock and the hurt and the grief of what that truth is, that someone he'd trusted had been lying claw through all of it, leaving every bit of that instinctual joy in shreds.

Of course, very little of this shows on Jon's face, surrounded by others as they are. Elias isn't even certain that Jon realises what he's been feeling—the emotion that lies upon the surface most easily is just a sort of fragile vulnerability entwined with sheer willpower, a sense of *prod me just right and I'll shatter*.

Elias just drinks it all in. There's a sort of desire to say that this beautiful state is unique of Jon, of his Archivist, but he knows that it isn't. Betrayal isn't a rare emotion, and even betrayal at his own lies isn't unique. There's a letter in the Archives, all disgust and grief, attesting to that.

Jon, though, is quite unable to cut off ties with Elias over this. Distantly, Jonah wishes the same had been true of his Jonathan, his oh-so-skilled doctor, who'd been all his until things became *too much*. He'd had an aching fondness for the man, though Elias's adoration for his creation may well outstrip it.

For a moment, he allows himself to reminisce.

About a doctor who had been remade to belong entirely to Jonah. He had been the only other man Jonah had known who'd been like him, the only other man he'd known to have to forge his own manhood, and for that he'd been moulded and changed at Jonah's hands until he resembled Jonah more than the Jonathan Fanshawe that he'd first been. Nudged, bit by bit, into the Powers' embrace, to feed Jonah's curiosity, his desire to see what would become of his doctor in the end.

He hadn't gotten to see what his creation had finally become, of course. Because Albrecht's fate was *too much* for Jonathan, enough for the creation to wish a swift death on his creator.

Will Jon be the same?

Despite all appearances, he Knows that this—that these deaths, these schemes—is not what Jon finds to be *too much*.

Elias wonders what *too much* will look like for his Archivist. He wonders if such a thing exists.

Jon does not beg Elias to stray from his nature, to let himself die in order to spare the world. There is no plea for him to avoid wearing the Watcher's Crown.

But that is not to say that Jon has no inkling of what is to come.

Because Elias simply cannot bring himself to believe that his Archivist does not know, not when those far more unintelligent had figured it out—those far less tied to the Eye had known plainly his goals, both this time and the first time.

If poor, hubristic Robert had been able to discern Jonah's purpose, his intent to wear the Watcher's Crown and remake the world in the image of his patron, with all the same evidence Jon has been given (rituals, the Panopticon, the way Jonah had won his immortality and lived forever)...

Well. Elias just finds it rather improbable that his Archivist does not, somewhere in the back of his mind, Know. Perhaps not on any conscious level. Perhaps this knowledge is something denied, something hidden and something ignored.

Perhaps Jon refuses to know this because he does not want to acknowledge how it makes him *feel*.

Because oh, when he holds in his hands the culmination of centuries of work, the words that will bring Elias's apocalypse, part of him Knows what it is. Knows that this is not some innocent statement, Knows that this is more.

Robert Smirke would've burned such a thing, begging Jonah to turn to the Lord Almighty.

Jonathan Sims, curious and always, *always* hungry to uncover such things, opens the letter, and begins to read.

(The look on his Archivist's face as Elias's compulsion snares him, coaxes and forces him to keep speaking... well, there's nothing to be said save for the fact that it is *beautiful*. Horrified and yet so, so, elated, though he little realises the latter.)

Somehow, Elias had forgotten that Jon is... just like Jonah.

Oh, he'd known that Jon was like him in so many ways, there was never any denying that. He'd both been like that from the very beginning and been moulded into Elias's shape, into his image, perfectly.

But Elias is not Jonah anymore, in most of the ways that count, and thus: it is easy to forget that Jon is like Jonah, as much as he is like the fully-realised being that is Elias.

Jon holds little of Jonah's ambition to power, that driving force that had propelled him through all his life, which is perhaps how Elias had managed to lose sight of that fact.

But there was more than that to Jonah Magnus, and there is more than that to Jon. Growing knowledge, a hunger to learn, to be seen as more than a foolish young man and to prove himself to his betters. A tendency to pragmatism when absolutely necessary.

And... as Jon holds the knife, there is one particular similarity that shines through.

Everyone who'd ever dared to love Jonah Magnus had been doomed, and to love Jon...

Well, Elias is doomed just the same.





Be Mine, and Everything Will Be Fine

Echo



*warnings: noncon/dubcon, explicit consent but under duress, jon/
elias/martin, cuckolding, public humiliation, choking, briefvomit,
voyeurism*

“THANK YOU ALL FOR COMING.” ELIAS SMILED, SURVEYING JON AND his assistants as they filed into the room. He seemed genuinely happy – excited, even – which was worrying to say the least. Martin closed the door behind the group of assistants.

“Jon? Would you like to give them the good news?” Elias motioned Jon to the front.

“Ah, yes!” Jon turned to face them. He looked... nervous. “Elias and I have come to... an agreement. To put it shortly, you all can quit. You are... released from your bonds to the Archive and to Him.” He nodded towards Elias.

Tim’s eyebrows raised. “What’s the catch?”

“There is no catch,” Jon stated solemnly. “I can promise that the repercussions of this will not fall on any of you. That is part of the

agreement. After this Elias will not meddle in your lives anymore.” A murmur of suspicion rippled through the group.

“What was the agreement?” Basira said, stepping forward.

“It- I think it would be best if that was kept between Elias and I.” Jon shuffled uncomfortably, not quite meeting anybody’s eyes. “But again, it will not affect you in any way. You all are free.”

“Fine then. I Quit.” A smile swept over Tim’s face. “I QUIT! You GODDAMN piece of SHIT!” He spat in Elias’ face.

“Don’t push your luck,” Elias smiled back.

One after another they were each able to quit: Tim, Melanie, Basira, Daisy, and finally Martin.

“Has that been proven to your satisfaction then, Jon?” Elias asked when they had finished.

“Yes.” Despite the excitement in the room, Jon still seemed... exceptionally solemn.

“Then kneel,” Elias commanded.

Jon paled. “Now?”

“They’re free. They can leave at any time. Kneel.”

Jon... got down on his knees. He looked small and out of place in his neat office clothes, kneeling before them on Elias’ carpet. The room shuffled uncomfortably, considering whether they should just leave.

“Here, your forms of resignation. Just a formality at this point. But it helps to have the paperwork. And it may help ease any... “hangovers” from being severed.” Elias took a small stack of papers off his desk. “Come Jon, take these and hand them out would you?” Jon started to get up but Elias stopped him, “No. On your hands and knees.”

Jon got on hands and knees, hesitated, then seemed to work up his courage. He began crawling across the floor towards where Elias stood stubbornly leant against his desk.

Elias bent down to hand Jon the papers, “You can hand them out – it’s your work that’s facilitated this, after all. I think it’s only fair.”

Jon slowly turned towards his assistants, not making eye contact with any of them. His face was hot and his hands shook around the papers. He made to move towards them, still crawling, but Martin rushed over to quickly take one from his hands.

“You really don’t have to do this!”

Jon just looked at Martin’s feet. The others quickly followed behind Martin, each taking their form. Tim ripped his in half. “I’m not signing another goddamn piece of paper from you,” he spat.

“That’s your prerogative, but I can’t promise there won’t be side effects from the severance.” Elias said, “Now, Jon. Come.”

Martin wrung his hands. “Jon don’t. You don’t have to–” He glanced towards Tim, begging him to back him up.

Tim turned away, “Look, Jon, I- I don’t forgive you but... Thank you for this.”

Jon nodded. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it again and turned away, back to Elias.

Elias broke the silence. “Well, if you’d all like to stay and watch the show...” He mused cheerfully, “I’ll wager Jon can’t undo my zipper with his teeth.” He grinned as everyone else’s expressions turned to disgust.

“Ok! We get the point,” Daisy growled. “He’s your little bitch to do whatever you like to now, you pompous freak. Can we leave?” If anyone noticed Jon flinch at her words, they were too stunned to say a thing.

“I’m leaving whether he says we can or not,” Tim announced, already turning for the door. Melanie shot Jon one last half-pitying half-disgusted look before she and Daisy followed quickly after him.

Basira hesitated at the door. “Jon. If you ever find some way to get out of this yourself... Well – you can call on me.”

“Wait! We can’t just leave him!” Martin cried, still wringing his hands.

Basira crossed her arms. “This was his decision Martin. Do you

honestly think he wants us to sit here watching Elias humiliate him? Take your freedom and go.”

“But—” Martin looked between Jon’s hunched form and the door. Basira shrugged in defeat and left.

“Come, Archivist. You know what to do.” Elias had Jon’s hair in one fist and was dragging him up to Elias’ crotch. Jon was shaking. “Tell you what, Martin. You want to watch? I’ll sweeten the pot. Stay, and I’ll let him speak to you after.”

“I-I- I do not want to watch!” Martin protested, “But – I don’t trust this. I’m not just going to leave him to you.”

Elias shrugged. “Well, enjoy, I suppose. There’s a guest chair in the corner if you’d like to pull it up.”

Jon was struggling to get Elias’ zipper between his teeth. Martin could see the shaking in his hands, obediently placed on Elias’ thighs. His fingers clutching at his trousers fabric. At a loss for what else to do, Martin pulled out the guest chair and sat.

Elias laughed, giddy almost. “Alright alright, you can use your hands, if your mouth is truly so useless.”

Jon cringed as if struck. Martin could hear now how hard he was breathing. Jon quickly undid Elias’ trousers with shaking fingers and then... stopped.

“Come now, you can do it,” Elias encouraged, “or do you need assistance pulling down a pair of trousers?”

Martin ground his teeth. “Y- you’re being needlessly cruel.”

“Yes, I am.” Elias smiled.

Jon moved in jerky, deliberate motions now. He pulled Elias’ trousers down as little as necessary, and reached inside to free his dick from his pants. Elias was hard and – despite this – seemed completely unashamed of his own nakedness.

“Suck,” Elias ordered.

Jon... stared at the cock in front of him, shivering. One hand twitched towards it then stopped. He tried taking a deep breath

but still he seemed frozen in place. His breathing was speeding up more now.

“Jooon~” Elias lilted.

Jon flinched. “S-sorry! Yes – sorry!” His voice was small, a whisper almost. One hand went to Elias’ dick, but still it seemed he couldn’t bring himself to put his mouth on it. “Sorry!”

“Do you need help?” Elias’ voice was so soft, it could almost have been mistaken for kind.

Jon’s breath hitched. He smushed his face into Elias’ crotch, nuzzling at him apologetically, but still – Martin could see now that he was crying.

“Give him a moment for God’s sake!” Martin burst out miserably. Jon flinched at his voice, like he’d forgotten for a moment that Martin was there.

“Hm, not happy with my technique? I suppose I could lend him to you if you wanted. Then you could treat him as softly as you like.”

“What!? N-no! You know what I mean!” But the thought wormed inside Martin’s head anyway. If Elias lent Jon to him... Well then at least he wouldn’t be with Elias, right? If Elias left them alone then he wouldn’t even have to fuck him, he could just... treat him softly. Like Elias said.

Jon nuzzled at Elias’ dick, stuck his tongue out and gave it a tentative lick. He made a little, unconscious expression at the taste.

“If you don’t obey, Jon, I can always go back on that bit about not meddling.”

Jon whined as if in pain, then opened his mouth. In one movement he shoved himself up Elias’ shaft as far as he could go. He sat like that for a moment, eyes glazed over. Elias breathed out slowly, then Jon tried to go deeper, immediately gagged, and pulled off in a coughing fit.

“Do you need me to guide you, Jon?” Elias asked again, and again his voice turned soft with it.

Jon spluttered and coughed and then– “Yes! Help me please! I-I’m sorry! I can’t - I don’t know why I can’t do it!” He was crying again, voice wrecked in a way Martin had never heard before – not even after he had been drilled full of worm holes.

“Good boy, Jon.” Elias took hold of Jon’s hair again. “Can you just open your mouth for me?”

Jon seemed to calm some, tears were still streaking down his face, but his breathing slowed. He opened his mouth. Martin dug his fingers into the arms of the chair.

“Good. Now stick your tongue out, so it covers your teeth... Good boy.” Jon took a shaky breath and blinked up at Elias. Elias let the head of his cock rest on Jon’s tongue. “There you are, keep breathing. Through your nose will work best... Good. Now, I’ll slide back until it hits the back of your throat, and then I’ll stop. Right where it starts to feel like you’ll gag.” Jon nodded and shut his eyes tight as Elias slid in. “There, that’s it! Not so bad, hm?”

Jon whined and Elias chuckled. Martin blushed and for the first time, looked away. He should be happy that Jon isn’t in so much distress now, that Elias isn’t being quite so awful to him. So why does Martin feel... absolutely furious.

Elias moved Jon up and down his cock, “there, just relax, try to keep your teeth out of the way, breathe in whenever I pull back... Good. Now, put up a hand to stroke what you can’t reach with your mouth. I’m not expecting you to deepthroat me.” He laughed, a little breathlessly. “Although that is a thought...”

Jon’s hand still trembled when he wrapped it around Elias’ shaft, and that shouldn’t have made Martin feel better. For a moment the room was silent except for the sounds of breathing and spit and sex.

Elias sighed, languidly moving Jon’s head at pace. “He really is beautiful like this, isn’t he, Martin?” He said conversationally. At the reminder Jon gasped, spluttering and pulling desperately against Elias’ hold. Elias tutted. “No. Stay Jon. Swallow, breathe, keep going.” Jon made an argumentative noise, but stopped fighting, breathing hard through his nose.

"You did that on purpose." Martin grumbles.

"Well, perhaps a bit, but answer me. He is lovely like this, is he not?"

"I mean- he- I'm not engaging with this. I'm just here to make sure- to talk after. I need to know what this deal was, whether he truly made it of his own choice... Whether we can actually trust you to keep your side of it."

"The Eye's not letting you go too easily then, is it?"

"This is not The Eye, this is me not trusting you farther than I could kick you."

"Whatever you say," Elias shrugged. He sighed pleurably and stroked Jon's hair, "Jon, I think you can move your head on your own now, yes?"

Jon made another sound in his throat, plaintive and embarrassed. But after a moment he started moving and Martin had to admit it was quite a sight, Jon suckling on a cock like it was his mission in life. His tears were mostly dry now, but his eyelashes were still stuck in clumps, and he kept making these little noises... Martin shook his head, disgusted with himself.

Elias was panting now, moaning on Jon's next pass. If Martin was honest with himself, there was also something about seeing Elias in such a vulnerable position.

Martin wondered if he had a knife or some similar preparations, would he be able to surprise Elias now – rush up and slit his throat.

Elias moaned, urging Jon to speed up with a slight roll of his hips. "Would you really?" He asked Martin, like he truly wanted to know – like the idea had surprised him.

"Don't read my mind!" Martin snapped, a growl entering his voice. "Or does that not 'count' as meddling?!"

"Ah!" Elias' grip on Jon's hair tightened as he pushed Jon down, taking his cock all the way. Jon jerked, clearly not expecting this, and made a horrible retching noise as he tried to pull off. Elias held him fast. "Fuck fuck fuck-" Elias breathed while Jon spasmed against him.

"L- let him go!" Martin stood, not sure if he should intervene.

Elias wrenched Jon off him, just long enough to get a gasp of air before he pushed him back down again. Jon cried out as he was pushed down, his body and throat spasming as he tried desperately to stop gagging. There were tears running down his cheeks again.

Martin took a few steps forward. "Elias-"

"He's fine," Elias panted. "You're fine, Jon. There." Finally he let Jon pull off. Jon gasped and then gagged again, spit and bile and cum hitting the carpet. Elias frowned, "Rosie will have to clean that."

"No!" Jon managed between coughs, "I'll clean it! Please!"

"That's enough Elias." Martin stepped closer, making an aborted gesture to touch Jon.

"What, raping him didn't cross the line but this does?"

Martin's blood ran actually cold with guilt. "I- It was the deal he made with you, I'm not going to- to undo all his work! But if you're going to choke him to death on your-" Martin stumbled over his words "-I'm not going to just watch that happen!"

"He didn't even pass out. Look, he's perfectly fine." Elias tugged Jon up by his hair, exposing his state to Martin's scrutiny. His hair was a mess, in his face and with various liquids dripped in it. Cum and spit coated his beard, tears streamed down his cheeks, his eyes were red and puffy. When he met Martin's eyes his expression shifted from terror to a sort of mortified horror. He tried to wipe at his mouth with one hand then... gave it up as a lost cause and cast his eyes down again.

Martin glared at Elias. "Are you done?"

Elias sighed, "I suppose you're wanting your promised time with him? Very well then." He tapped Jon with one foot to get his attention, "Jon? Go to Martin now and obey him until he leaves."

Martin stepped back, "I'm not going to fuck him."

"I know," Elias sighed, sounding almost disappointed. "I can't control you. You may do whatever you like with him during your time."

He just has to stay here when you leave.” Elias tucked himself back into his pants and stepped back behind his desk like nothing untoward had happened.

When Martin looked back, he saw that Jon had crawled to his side. Quickly, he knelt beside him. “Are you ok?” Jon just stared at the floor, eyes glazed over, “No, of course not, here-” he took Jon’s face in his hands, and used his sleeve to wipe the muck from his beard. Jon flinched at the touch, but then pushed back into it, eyes screwed shut tight.

In lack of anything better to clean with, Martin took off his sweater and wiped at Jon’s face till Jon took the garment into his own hands and stubbornly finished the job himself.

“There, there, you’re ok, you’ll be ok.” Martin murmured, “How do you feel? Are you hurt anywhere? Is- is your throat ok?”

Jon pressed his face into the clean side of the sweater and breathed in. “I’m sorry,” Jon croaked, his voice hoarse and strained. “You shouldn’t have felt like you had to see that. I-I’ll talk to Elias about- about what counts as ‘meddling’. I was just so surprised you even – I shouldn’t have let that happen-”

“Woah woah woah,” Martin stuttered, “it’s ok! This isn’t - Jon, this isn’t your fault.”

“I agree,” Elias said, startling them both. “It’s not your fault, and frankly I’m a little insulted by you taking credit.”

“Shut up, Elias!” Martin scowled. Elias shrugged and turned back to his work, although Martin still felt watched.

“I-” Jon frowned, “you’re not allowed to Watch him, Elias.”

The oppressive feeling lessened. Elias scoffed fondly, “He’s in the same room as me Jon, I can hardly be expected to erase him from my sight.”

“Watch him with your physical eyes then,” Jon grumbled.

“Very well,” Elias agreed, resting his head on one fist to stare unabashedly at them.

"I also think-" Jon broke off to cough for a moment "-I also think your treatment of Martin today counts as manipulation and therefore goes against our agreement." Jon straightened his clothes and gingerly climbed to his feet. When he was sure he could stand, he faced Elias.

"Oh? I didn't lie to him or trick him and he is free to leave whenever he wishes. Would you prefer I keep you all to myself? We could get a lovely cage for you..."

Jon not so surreptitiously glanced at Martin. "No-no... I just meant..." He took a deep breath, determined to see this through. "You could have let him see me without seeing... anything he didn't want to."

"So, am I to hand over any other possession of mine he asks for as well? You agreed you were mine to do what I like with. If Martin wants to make a deal with me that's his business, Jon."

Jon bared his teeth. "Any other... 'possession' of yours, fine, deal away. But you can't hold access to me over their heads."

"Hmm, alright then, let's say I did get a nice cage for you and kept you as a lovely decoration in my home. Obviously anyone who wanted to see you would have to come to my home to do so. Would that count as manipulation on my part? Forcing someone into my home in order to see you?" Elias stared at Jon while he attempted to stammer out a reply. "The truth is, you simply took for granted that anyone might still want to see you after this. Didn't you, Jon?"

"We agreed-" Jon's voice cracked, he started over, "We agreed, changes could be made for... an unprecedented event. You can do what you like with me, but using me as - as bait counts as both manipulation of former assistants and forcing me to harm others."

Elias thought for a moment, then sighed, "I'll allow that it could count as manipulation of former assistants. But with anyone else, well... don't sell yourself short, witnessing sexual acts would likely be what they were visiting for. I certainly don't think that counts as harming others."

Jon opened his mouth, then closed it again.

"Wait, sorry," Martin finally cut in, "can we go over what exactly all

this entails? Are you saying you could... lend him out to – to other people? Strangers or...?”

“That’s what I’m doing now, isn’t it?” Elias looked amused.

“That’s completely different!” Martin squawked, “I’m not going to hurt him or- and you’re right here! You wouldn’t want your- your ‘possessions’ getting- um- injured or-”

Elias waved his hand dismissively. “Oh, certainly not without supervision. I’d be there of course, making sure everything went smoothly...” He smirked at Martin’s discomfort. “Don’t worry, I won’t allow harm to come to him.”

“If this,” Martin waved a hand around the room, “doesn’t count as harm then forgive me if I’m hesitant to believe you.”

Jon had recovered enough to speak properly now.. “O-ok, but we agree you can’t use me as bait for deals with archival assistants. Yes?”

“Very well,” Elias agreed. “But I can still choose if and when they have access to you. And if they try to steal you from me, and you cooperate, then you will also have broken the agreement. Deal?”

“D-deal.”

“Good, we’ll add it to the document this evening, then.” Elias tapped something out on his computer.

Jon let out a breath, and slumped. He turned back towards Martin, “I-I’m fine Martin. Obviously it’s not an... ideal situation. But you’re free, you all are free and no one had to die! ... No one else,” He corrected, thinking of Sasha. “And in any case, I’m sure Elias will- will tire of me eventually. And he won’t kill me, it’s in the agreement actually. So, you really don’t have to worry.” He took a breath and finally looked Martin in the eye, “Go- go live your life Martin. Be free of this place.”

“Oh, fuck off, You self sacrificing asshole!” Martin paced in a circle. He felt that he was ricocheting wildly between rage and ice cold guilt with every heartbeat, “Can I at least see this agreement? See what it says? Like-” he lowered his voice “-if we try to kill Elias now would that have an effect on you still?”

Elias spoke, "I'm still connected to the rest of the institute, so unless you're fine with mass murder... And yes, Jon is still the Archivist. I'm not taking any unnecessary risks."

Martin huffed. "Fine, whatever then. But these are things we should know right? I'm sure Melanie is thinking the same thing, it would be in your best interest to share what exactly this deal is!"

"Personally, I agree." Elias said. "It was Jon's decision not to share the agreement."

"What?" Martin turned to Jon. "Why?"

Jon looked defensive. "Look, there are a lot of things... spelled out, ah, explicitly, in that document. I don't- I didn't- I suppose it's not much worse than what you've already seen, but the others wouldn't want- and I don't want-"

"Okok, don't hurt yourself." Martin tried not to feel irritated with Jon. His reasoning made sense, but did Jon truly think they would all just leave without looking into things further? Did he think Martin cared so little for him? "What if I read the document and then told the others an... abridged version." He suggested, "Would that be ok?"

Jon squirmed uncomfortably, "I- I suppose. For your own safety. Yes, you're right. I just-"

"I mean if you'd prefer you could just tell us the abridged version yourself, then no one would have to read it?" Martin suggested.

"No! No, that's fine I- It's good for a third party to know the full deal, and- and I'm sure the others wouldn't want to see me again anyway."

"Jon-"

"I would rather it was you, Martin." Jon interrupted.

"Ok. Alright." Martin looked expectantly at Elias, who he assumed held access to this document in whatever form it took.

Elias was still watching them. "Good. I'll print up a copy for you then?" Martin looked to Jon, who nodded. Elias started messing about with the printer.

Martin fidgeted. "So is it like a proper soul binding contract? Like being in the archives?"

"Oh! Um, sort of," Jon said. "It's- I can sort of... feel? If I'm getting close to breaking the agreement? But I could break it. But then, Elias could break his side of the bargain too."

"He could hire us again?" Martin frowned, the idea that all Jon's work could be undone in an instant made him see red.

Jon didn't seem to notice, "Well, if he could trick you into signing the paperwork again, I suppose. I'm more worried about him meddling in your lives or hurting you just to punish me?"

Elias took the papers off the printer. "Alright, here you go Martin." It was a substantial amount of paper, a small book's worth of A4 sheets. Martin took it. Elias clapped his hands. "Alright, I think that's your time up for today Martin. You can see him again tomorrow if you like. He'll be back in his office."

"Alright," Martin nodded, looking between Jon and Elias. Jon had shuffled back to Elias' side. He was looking at Martin with... concern, but also hope. Martin grit his teeth as he turned the doorknob and told himself he wouldn't be leaving him for long.

"See you tomorrow Jon." Martin gave a small awkward wave.

"S-see you." Jon replied.

Martin walked down to the Archives in a daze. The others had already collected their things and left – or in some cases abandoned their belongings at their workstations. Martin didn't bother with his own things. Instead, he sat down at his desk. He took out a notebook to take notes on, and then took a breath to brace himself with, and began flipping through the Agreement.



His body, in extension

hauntedteacups



IN SPITE OF EVERYTHING, ELIAS IS NOT A PARTICULARLY DEVOUT worshipper of Beholding. Of course he serves his god, feeds it, and relishes in doing so. That doesn't change the fact that he's never been a zealot – not in the way so many of his peers have been throughout the years. He could wax poetic about doubt and scepticism as facets of knowledge, but the reality comes down to simple pragmatism: it is in his best interests to feed the Eye, and therefore he does.

Perhaps that's why he's outlived so many of his counterparts.

If the Eye comprehends his selfish motivations, it is unbothered. There is no denying the power that thrums through the temple he's constructed. Even passersby feel observed by the security cameras along the iron fence and the tall windows that loom over the street. The building thrums with Beholding's power – his power.

In the simplest terms, Elias might call himself the heart of the institute. He is the central piece that keeps the whole mechanism working. That language might be too flowery, a sentimental poetry for the building he's all but lived in for so many lifetimes.

His own heart, after all, is far, far underground.

Jonathan Sims piques his interest before his interview even starts. As he is led down the corridor towards Elias' office with one clammy hand gripping his father's old leather briefcase, Jon runs the other along the wall. His knuckles bump over painted boards and plaster, just barely brushing against it. It's a subtle thing, a self-soothing gesture he doesn't even seem conscious of.

Elias is more than happy to be underestimated by his peers, but he guards his true vulnerabilities close to his chest. He is not, strictly speaking, the *heart* of the Institute, no. It would be more apt to liken the sprawling hallways, bookshelves and desks with pinprick bulbs overhead to a nervous system and him to its brain.

And so, as its metaphorical brain, he feels Jon's touch as if it were along his arm, faint and sticky like the gossamer of a Spider's web.

A dip inside Jon's mind shows anxiety, an old mark, and an undeniable appreciation for the Institute and all the promise and knowledge it represents. There's something about that appreciation that strikes Elias almost as much as the implication of the Mother of Puppets sending him. It's a warm, shy thing, almost a little embarrassed. For lack of a better word, Elias realises with a small smile, he would describe it best as a crush.

Well – he has never claimed to be immune to flattery.

With his next Archivist selected, it becomes harder than ever to ignore Gertrude's deliberate ineptitude.

He is always aware of the Archives, of course. How could he not be, when the weight of all that knowledge sits heavy in his gut and presses just behind his eyelids?

When Gertrude had been younger they were an organised, tightly run ship, but now he can feel the disorganised statements prickling at him, an irritant just behind his eyes that's impossible to scratch at.

Until recently, there had also been Gerard, but his presence and dress had made him a far more mundane annoyance. Beholding itself had seemed fond enough of him, despite his penchant for burning books outside of Elias' fire escape. Fortunately, that problem had resolved itself recently.

Gertrude, on the other hand, is more of a pity to get rid of. Elias has been alive far too long to be sentimental about failed Archivists, and she's been a thorn in his side in a far more literal sense than she's ever realised. That doesn't change the fact that she'd figured out what was causing the rituals to fail and survived admirably in spite of her many enemies. Her pragmatism might be even fiercer than his own. He respects her, even as he prepares to be rid of her.

Elsewhere in the building, Jon runs his fingers absently along the windowsill in the break room as he waits for Tim to finish making his afternoon coffee. He's contemplating the white pillars that frame the Institute's facade, and how much smarter they might look after a thorough clean. Tim glances over at him, and through his eyes Elias sees the pinched little smile on Jon's face.

Elias does not enjoy the weight of the gun in his hand. He does not want to know what she feels the moment the first bullet enters her body, though he's quite sure he could. Her sharp eyes glare at him even as they become lifeless; defiant until the end.

The ever present weight of the Archive in his stomach drops, becoming a wide yawning thing. It is so very hungry for a new Archivist.

He can taste the copper of blood splattered on the floor against his soft palate until the floors have been thoroughly cleaned and revarnished.

Pu Songling and the Usher Foundation send in their condolences and the CVs of eager candidates for Gertrude's replacement. He thanks them both but politely declines; he already knows exactly who he wants.

The real tests will come later, but for now, the mundane little rituals of paperwork and pay negotiations are enough to tether Jon to the Archive. He signs his name on the dotted line in all the right places, and when Elias offers his hands to shake, Jon takes it.

Elias makes sure to walk him down to the basement on his first day. He's always tried to keep his Archivists at a safe distance, but he allows himself to indulge on certain occasions.

Jon is nervous, but he covers it with arrogance and an eagerness

to please that Elias can't help but find charming. His fingers skitter down Elias' spine and the bannister on the steep staircase. An errant curl falls from where Jon had valiantly tried to slick it back that morning and falls prettily across his brow bone.

Elias chats at him as they go, feeding Jon little tidbits about how far back some of their statements are dated and his plans for replacing the sprinklers with carbon dioxide. Jon listens intently, although you wouldn't know it from looking at him. He isn't even trying to meet Elias' eyes. He's far too busy looking around the basement hungrily. Jon wants – has always wanted – to learn every nook and cranny of the building, inside and out.

Elias feels hot under his shirt collar. There's no way to tell Jon he wants that too.

All of Jon's meagre good manners quickly go out of the metaphorical window when he sees the state Gertrude left the place in.

Standing right beside him, Elias gets to watch with his own two eyes as Jon's expression morphs from shock to confusion to horror. He's frozen for a moment as he takes in Gertrude's carnage, and there's something a little vindicating about seeing the itch that crawls under Elias' skin reflected on someone else's face.

Jon brushes past Elias into the Archive proper. Elias leans against the doorframe and listens to him sputter his sharply worded complaints. It wouldn't take a mind reader to see how much he's straining to hold back an outraged *how could you let it get this bad?*

Elias himself is trying almost as hard to hold back his delight. Jon isn't even truly the Archivist yet, and already he's so defensive of the place, genuinely offended on its behalf. It's a relief – even more than Elias thought it would be – to have his Archives back in the care of someone who truly wishes to protect them. The sword of Damocles that was Gertrude Robinson is no more.

In spite of his efforts, a pleased smile worms its way across Elias' lips.

He can't resist following Jon inside, coming to stand close beside him. There are files on every single surface. Elias reaches up to give him a pat on the back which turns a firm squeeze on the shoulder.

Jon's blazer is worn thin and doesn't quite fit him right across the shoulders but the fabric is real wool to the touch.

Jon looks at Elias properly, actually meeting his eyes for once. They're wide and dark, etched with lines of grim determination.

Elias tells Jon, with an earnestness he didn't think he possessed anymore, that he thinks they'll accomplish great things together. He gets a withering look in return.

Jon stays late that first evening, sifting through decades of disorganised statements and getting them into stacks for later ease of organisation. Elias stares at a blank spot on his kitchen wall, eyes focused on Jon deep in the Archives. Knots in his muscles he's had long enough to stop noticing them are finally being released. A dip into Jon's mind reveals a warmth underneath his irritation. The archives are a state, but the vast majority of Institute staff haven't been down here – let alone guests. There's something in Jon that covets that secret – that the archives are now his to scour and sort.

In all honesty it's rather distracting, and Elias only just avoids completely burning his dinner.

Slowly, Elias adjusts to the presence of his new Archivist. The feeling of warm hands running up and down his arm as Jon traces along the shelves of the archives becomes almost comforting. Jon's fingertips drumming on the desk thrums in perfect time with Elias' pulse.

He's far from the only person down in the basement. His assistants are there, the odd researcher and a handful of particularly brave students on Wednesdays. They're all secondary to the Archivist, who Elias can't help but be the most aware of. Even unaware of their power, Jon treats the Archives with a level of reverent dedication that neither Gertrude or Angus before her had shown it, even more so than he already did to the rest of the Institute.

As pleased as he is and in spite of how important as Jon is, Elias does try to keep him at a reasonable distance. Too much dependence on Elias will dampen his growth, too little and he'll end up another liability. He comes up to Elias' office at least once a week to complain about Martin or Gertrude or not being able to access his office whilst the fire suppression system is updated. Sometimes

Elias is busy with other things, but often more than not he indulges Jon for at least a few minutes before shooing him out.

It's a matter of building trust. The fact that Jon's irritated enthusiasm is hard to resist is secondary.

The first night Jon sleeps in the Archives, Elias watches him through a small carving he'd notched into the cornice himself the week after disposing of Gertrude. He'd felt the carving tool like a cat scratch along the back of his neck, but she'd been thorough in removing most of his vantage points in the archives. He had no intention of letting his next Archivist run amok unsupervised.

From his bird's eye view he looks down on Jon, head resting on his arms on his desk. His glasses are still on his face, skewed somewhat. Elias can't help but feel an exasperated amusement discovering that Jon even frowns in his sleep. His hair is mussed from his usual slicked back imitation of Elias' own style. That rebellious stray curl Elias has grown fond of rests across his eyelid as it so often does.

Elias settles in his own far more comfortable bed on the other side of Chelsea. As he drifts in and out of sleep he's aware of Jon's body cocooned within the plasterboard walls and overflowing shelves of document storage. It reminds him, in his half awake mind, of a cat he'd owned a century ago – a wiry little mouser who liked to curl up on his rib cage at night.

He allows himself the indulgence of letting his breathing fall into sync with Jon's as he drifts back to sleep.

Time passes, and Jon settles into his role and his place within the Institute. The day he takes his first live statement is, in all other ways, a perfectly normal Tuesday.

Elias is thankfully alone in his office, so there are no distractions. Jon starts and stops with his questions in Rosie's office, and Elias' arms turn to gooseflesh. There is only a thin wall separating them, and he can feel Jon's breath on the back of his neck as he asks Ms Herne his questions.

Jon's laptop predictably glitches out and shuts itself down when Naomi starts to talk. Jon fusses with the machine for a while before

apologising and guiding the cold, lonely woman down into the depths of the building. Elias feels it like a shiver of cold down his spine – not unpleasant, but foreign. Certainly not Beholding.

Rosie is desperately relieved to escape back into her office alone, and Elias makes a note to drop in on her unannounced that afternoon. Her productivity is always at its best when she's afraid of him.

Jon's eyes are wide and dark as they fix on Naomi with interest and, yes, hunger. His lips part ever so slightly and Elias can just see the faintest sliver of his pink tongue. He is still so very human at this moment, but when Elias slips behind Naomi's eyes Elias can feel just how afraid she is of his lovely new Archivist.

There will be hell to pay if Nathaniel or his ilk get a hold of Jon before he's ready to face the Lonely head on. It's early days yet, so Elias will smooth things over with the Lukases if need be, but he'd really rather not need to.

The cultivation of an Archivist is a delicate process, after all.

As promising as Jon is – not to mention what seems to be an endorsement from the Web – Elias is cautiously optimistic. He knows better than to pin all of his hopes on Jon before he's seen any fieldwork, though. A promising Archivist can burn out fast, and there is still such a long road ahead of them.

What catches him off guard is how much he *wants* it to be Jon. There's something about him that's hard to look away from. Perhaps it's his reckless, enthusiastic need to know, so alike his own in a distant youth. Perhaps it is the way Jon stares back at the Institute, at Elias, with all the wonder of a newborn taking in a whole new world.

He truly hopes that he won't have to dispose of this one before he can figure it out.

The presence of the Corruption is faint, a nervous thing that skitters at the edge of Elias' peripheral vision where the tunnels scratch up against the Archives. In an effort to be safe, Jon has taken to leaving at a reasonable hour when he doesn't fall asleep at his desk. At night Elias is left alone with the itching in his skin, in the soles

of his feet, as the Hive pushes up through the floors. It is a minor annoyance for the most part – much like the man who led the Hive here in the first place.

Martin has been hoarding all the building's fire extinguishers and spends his nights sleeping restlessly in Jon's cot. He tosses and turns and Elias glowers at the dark ceiling of his bedroom when the foreign presence wakes him up for the third time in one night.

It is not ideal, but Elias will bear it whilst he serves his purpose. Knowing the turnover rate of archival assistants, it probably won't be long until he's gone, one way or another.

The Distortion too, makes its presence known in the twisting of the old paned windows of the building's upper levels and trailing after Sasha James in the walls. Michael, as it calls itself, is a petty irritant, even more so than Prentiss. If it were not likely to have its uses for his plans, Elias would have evicted it from his place of power some time ago.

At the very least it seems to be aware of this, and keeps its door far from his office, only appearing like a muscle spasm when and where he's most surprised to see it.

He dislikes having so many other forces at play in his Institute, but needs must.

His patience pays off when the Corruption finally attacks. He can even forgive a little bit of an intervention from the Web along the way.

The Crawling Rot is true to its name, a vile sensation that squirms up Elias' legs and back as it pours through the broken wall into the archive. Jane Prentiss, or what's left of her, sprays the hive onto statement after statement, destroying as much of the knowledge that did not save her as she can. It doesn't hurt Elias per se, but the sensation is... distractingly unpleasant as he tries to focus on his conversation with Sasha.

The same cannot be said of the worms that burrow into Jon's flesh. He cries out in pain, and it is exquisite.

Jon and Tim both make it, in part due to Elias and Sasha's intervention but largely due to Martin's corkscrew. It is a crude, blunt tool,

but Elias is genuinely impressed with his ingenuity.

In the end, the only casualty is Sasha. Considering the scale of the Rot's attack, it's really quite impressive that there was only one.

Elias winces sympathetically as she is unmade, the face that warps with terror now impossible to picture right, even for him. He may not have wanted her as an Archivist, but she was a competent worker and her replacement will have quite the workload to fill. That makes him smile – the thought of one of the Stranger's agents stuck serving its greatest rival. He wouldn't go as far to call it justice, but it's quite the poetic irony.

Elias makes a mental note to make a toast in her honour when he gets home that evening. It's not like anyone else will.

He'll have a long, hot shower first, he decides. The residue of the corruption in the building feels like a sheen of grime is coating his entire body. He knows the effect is psychological or spiritual depending on how he categorises his relationship to his Institute, that doesn't make it any more pleasant.

It makes Jon's commitment to taking everyone's statements whilst bleeding and bandaged all the more impressive. The invitation for Jon to come up to his office and take his statement there slips out naturally, easily. Jon's suffered plenty for one day, and frankly, Elias would rather not sit amongst the current mess of the archives. Jon refuses, of course, and instead insists he wants to keep watch of the archive, a hand resting protectively on his desk.

He already cares so much for their shared domain. There is no way Elias could deny him, so instead he sits and allows Jon to attempt to pry answers out of him.

He does not yet have the power to compel a human – let alone Elias himself. But, to Elias' delight, Jon tries. He doesn't know what he's doing, but he tries nonetheless. Knowledge is more important to him than his own body, or even the comfort of others.

Elias is rather proud of him.

Time passes, and the institute is thoroughly cleaned. It still takes about a week after the last painter leaves for Elias to feel settled

in his skin again, but soon the Institute is back up and running as before – with a few minor changes. The Not-Them taps away at the keyboard of Sasha's laptop in a futile attempt to coax the machine to work. Jon watches, peering through a slit in the blinds in his office, tape recorder in one hand.

Elias is not a particularly devout man, no. But watching his fledgling archivist rummage through his coworkers' drawers, marked thrice already and with agents of the Stranger and Spiral circling like vultures, he finds himself thinking back to Jon's first day in the archives. He'd been so instinctively protective of the place, and so eager to delve into all the secrets the contents contained.

Jon is running over the shelves with a dust cloth whilst he mutters to himself about Tim's suspicious behaviour. Elias breathes in, then out. It comes a little easier than before. Elias idly wonders if Jon will share this awareness of the Archives, the Institute, one day too.

The new Archivist is well suited to their god, yes, but beyond that, Elias simply quite likes him. He's abrasive, defensive and snarky, and Elias rather hopes he survives the trials to come. After many years of disappointments and discarded pawns, he's surprised to realise something: he rather likes the thought of getting to keep this one.

Perhaps Elias has some faith left in him after all.

With all my knowledge
and intrusion,



I can feed the caterpillar,

Whisper through
the chrysalis,





I could

never entirely

predict you.

But what hatches

follows its own

nature,

And is beyond me.

Feast Days

Statuscrows



HE AND TIM ARRIVE AT THE INSTITUTE AT THE SAME TIME THAT day—not because Tim has suddenly started showing up early, but because Jon’s phone died during the night and without his alarm his body decided it needed to sleep until noon. Even if he didn’t have an apocalypse to stop it would be irritating.

“Well hello,” says Elias as he walks in. Jon doesn’t bother acknowledging him as he tugs his scarf off. There are snowflakes melting on his glasses. “I was starting to wonder if you’d been kidnapped again. And a good afternoon to you too, Tim.”

He and Tim make similar displeased noises.

“What’s all that?” Tim asks. Jon finally looks up and finds that Elias and Rosie, who is also in the hallway, are wearing cone hats.

“Didn’t you guys get my email?” Rosie asks, brandishing a cupcake. “Today is Elias’s birthday.”

“Oh goodie,” says Jon, continuing to walk right past them.

“Do you want a—”

“Would I like to celebrate my boss’s birthday instead of figuring out how to avert the apocalypse? No, I would not actually, thank you Rosie. Have a great day.”

He hears Rosie make a confused sound as he walks off. "What was that?"

"You know Jon and his sense of humor," Elias says dismissively. There is no chance that she does. "Did you want a cupcake, Tim?"

Before the doors down to the Archive swing shut he hears Tim say, "...yeah, I'll take a morally dubious cupcake."

Jon reads through his statement during his lunch hour. It's a standard affair: a woman who finds that every food item she touches rots in her hands and no one seems to notice. It's disgusting and alarming in turn with no follow up whatsoever. He rubs at his eyes once he's done, blinking some of the strain from them.

He knows he's gotten stronger in the last few months but still the statements drain him. He drums his fingers along the surface of his desk and stares at the coffee he made himself earlier specifically for this purpose.

Elias will only give him one helpful statement a week and seems to believe that he can't handle any more. It's true enough that it takes time for him to feel fully like himself after a statement but surely that's not the deciding factor in whether or not he should keep working.

Letting his stubbornness lead, Jon reaches into one of the many, many piles of boxes in his office and withdraws half a dozen statements at random, uncaring of their content. He piles them into one large stack on his desk. And look at that: the tape recorder which he was certain he'd turned off a few minutes ago is up and running. How convenient. Jon swallows his lukewarm coffee in several bitter swallows and clears his throat.

Sometime later he's awoken by the pressure of warm fingers at his throat.

"No, he hasn't responded yet," Elias is saying from somewhere

nearby with a note of urgency in his voice. "I don't think he's dead if that's what you're asking. He's got a pulse. I think it's a bit fast—"

Jon lifts his head from the desk."105bpm."

Elias flinches and draws his fingers away in alarm. He's holding his phone in his other hand and leaning over Jon where he's been resting on his desk. A piece of paper from the last statement Jon read slides off his cheek to join the rest of the statement on the floor.

"Hold that thought, I think he's coming round. Jon?"

"Jonathan Sims, head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London," Jon says. He knows Elias is staring at him inquisitively but he can't seem to turn his head.

"Right...yes, thank you for your help. I won't be needing an ambulance after all. Sorry to waste your time." He pockets his phone. "Jon? Are you dying?"

"No." Jon attempts to sit upright in his chair. "It's severe fatigu—"

"...Jon?"

"Yes." Jon blinks several times. It seems he passed out mid-sentence and woke up again as his face smacked into the table. His mouth tastes vaguely of blood. "Sims. Magnus Institute, London."

"I remember that bit. You've done something very foolish, haven't you?"

"That is a subjective matter," Jon says into the wood grain of his desk.

Elias pushes him upright. Now that he's looking he can tell Elias is experiencing a genuine kernel of concern beneath his very obvious curiosity about what's happening to Jon. A layer of faked empathy, masking his curiosity, masking a deep more uncomfortable concern. How difficult it must be to live the way Elias does. "Have you fainted with your eyes open or are you just staring at me?"

"The latter."

"Can't fault you for that." Elias wipes at his bleeding nose with one of the tissues from his desk. Jon wobbles unsteadily at every touch to his face. "Forget it, come on. Let's get you up."

Jon's head still hurts badly, and not just from faceplanting into his desk. He allows Elias to drag him upright and manages to get his feet under him but little else. Elias puts his arm over his shoulder and begins to move the two of them towards the door.

"I can't imagine a hospital would do you much good," Elias is saying. "Best thing for it may be to let you sleep this off. Jon, if you're not going to walk I'll be forced to bridal carry you out of the Institute which I imagine will be very embarrassing for you once you're in your right mind."

He remains slumped against Elias's shoulder, face pressed against his throat. "You aren't physically strong enough to do that," he mumbles.

"Well I like to think I'd make a decent go at it."

The hallway, the upstairs and everything else in existence is far too bright for the headache he's sporting. Elias pats himself down.

"Left coat pocket."

"I beg your pardon?" Elias says, a touch incredulous. After another moment he leans Jon against the wall and pulls his keys from the correct pocket. "Oh. Alright. Good to know you can do that now."

In the car, while Jon is melting into the door and barely contained by his seatbelt, Elias explains that he'll be taking Jon home with him as he's concerned about his physical state. He also claims not to know Jon's address, which is a lie.

At a red light Elias stops to look over at him. His human eyes don't see much beyond Jon's hardly conscious, haggard state. Jon becomes briefly aware of Elias making an attempt to read his thoughts, which he's done many times before.

"Oh my *god*," Elias says, drawing back from Jon's mind and physically recoiling. He rubs his temples with a pained noise. "It's like someone's blasting white noise through your skull. How the hell are you coherent at all?"

Jon slides several inches down the cool glass of the window. "I am the Archivist." He points outside. "Green light."

Jon is unconscious again for the duration of the drive and wakes up briefly as Elias is helping him out of his car. He wakes up once more as he's being shoved into Elias's spare room and maneuvered towards the bed.

"I hate to ask," Elias starts—another lie, he loves to ask, "but are you going to be alright?"

"Yes."

"I meant are you going to be back to relative normal at some point instead of whatever this is?"

"Yes."

"That'll have to be good enough for me."

Elias dumps him down unceremoniously and then takes the time to remove Jon's shoes, coat and scarf. He lingers when he's done, staring at Jon's semi-conscious sprawl from his seat on the bed.

"You've certainly made a mess of yourself," he says, sounding fond. "Sleep well."

"Good night, Jonah," he mumbles.

Elias has some kind of response to that, something frightened and confused but the bed is very comfortable. Even with a hand shaking his shoulder he's already asleep.

Instead of waking up in his cluttered studio apartment with his ever growing floordrobe and his packed bookshelves, Jon wakes up in a tidy but completely unfamiliar bedroom that he has no memory of.

"What the hell," Jon says to the strange room, throwing an arm over his eyes. His head hurts, his throat is incredibly dry and his entire body is tingly with a soreness that reminds him uncomfortably of

his childhood growing pains. Having just woken up he is somehow still exhausted but he doesn't like the idea of falling asleep again in a strange location.

Has he been kidnapped again? God, that would be embarrassing. But at least the accommodations are nicer than his last ones.

Jon staggers his way over to the door, cursing under his breath.

"Ah," says Elias, "good evening, Jon. You look well."

Jon squints dry eyes at him. Elias is dressed down from his usual workwear, not by a significant degree but no coat or tie is more than Jon usually sees from him. His hair is a little less tidy too. More importantly he's sitting on the couch and sliding a bookmark into a book, because he's relaxing in his own home. Which Jon is currently in.

"Whatever this is," Jon says, gesturing at Elias, the room, and the situation in general, "I don't like it."

"I imagine not. But it was your own doing."

"No, the *statements* were my doing. This domestic scenario where I'm in your living room and you're wearing your slippers is your production. Wait, hold whatever snide, incendiary thing you're going to say for a moment. I just realized I really need to..."

"The bathroom is—"

Jon waves him off, heading to the second door on the right. "Yes, I know."

Jon has done his business, washed up, and is in the middle of poking at a bruise on his face that he only vaguely remembers getting when something very obvious occurs to him.

Elias has made coffee by the time Jon finishes up and he sets it down on the counter in front of him. Jon accepts it numbly.

"Why do I know where your bathroom is?" Jon asks, frowning.

Ever the paragon of helpfulness, Elias says, "I don't know, why *do* you know where my bathroom is?"

“Don’t know why I bothered asking that aloud. You took me here last night?”

“Actually I took you here Friday night. It’s currently Sunday afternoon.”

“Sunday after—you didn’t think it was concerning that I slipped into a coma?!”

Elias gives an admittedly sheepish shrug. “It was a very minor coma. And you seemed to think you’d be fine. From the look of things you are your lovely self again.”

“No thanks to—”

“Yes, no thanks to me. Would you like to talk about whatever you did to yourself or are you more in the mood to be accusatory? Also would you like breakfast or dinner? I can do either.”

“I...no. I’m not hungry.”

Elias raises his eyebrows at that but says nothing.

“I was...I was trying to read more than one statement in a single day. I assumed that if I read quickly I could get further before the fatigue caught up with me. I think it worked for the most part.”

“Interesting,” Elias says in a tone that makes the word sound like a severe understatement. “I’ve never seen an Archivist do that before.”

“I can see why. I feel like someone’s kicked a hole through my head.”

Elias smirks a little. “I can tell. Do you remember anything that happened after your little feast?”

“I don’t remember most of the statements, to be honest. I know I got through at least four. Might have passed out at the end of the last one. I have no idea how I got from my desk to here.” He can’t say for certain but he thinks Elias looks disappointed at that. “Why, did something happen?”

“We talked but no, nothing of note. What else do you know?”

“What do you mean?”

“On Friday you knew your heart rate off the top of your head. Today you apparently know where my bathroom is. What else do you know?”

Before he can explain that that’s an absurd question he finds himself saying, “your house was built in 1928. It was gifted to you in 1997.”

Jon blinks several times. “What?”

Elias hums. “Correct. Do you know anything else?”

Jon steadies himself with both hands on the island. “God, I—I don’t know. I think you need to change the light bulb in your closet?”

“Well, yes. What else?”

Jon doesn’t even need to think about it. It’s like there’s useless information lining up neatly in his mind just waiting to burst out of him. It’s eerie. “You’re out of milk apparently.”

Elias clears his throat in an obvious attempt to suppress his laughter. “Thank you, Jon. I’ll need to add that to my growing list of errands. Anything less mundane?”

“I don’t know!” Jon throws up his hands. “I apologize for not psychically divining anything of interest to you!”

“Only curious if your new found gift has given you knowledge that extends beyond me. Though I am extremely flattered to be on your mind.”

Jon is irritated to feel himself blush. “I wouldn’t take it as a compliment. I suspect it’s because you’re standing right in front of me.”

“Alright.” Elias is leaning on his elbows, smile indulgent. Everything is too languid, too intimate. Curse Elias for dragging them back to his house. “Tell me about myself.”

“God, okay.” Jon sits and holds the cup of coffee between his hands. His head still hurts but he can tell he’s different than he was before. Elias is staring with amusement and it should only irritate him but there’s something underneath it too, something softer that he suspects Elias doesn’t want to be showing at all.

Before he can analyze that, new information falls into the forefront

of his thoughts. “Yesterday—or rather Friday—it wasn’t really your birthday.”

Elias grins. “That depends on who you ask.”

“A clerical error?”

Elias’s brow furrows mockingly. “I don’t know, Jon. You tell me.”

“Great. Thanks.” Christ, that’s what he gets for imagining depth in Elias. He lets out a slow breath that does nothing for his level of annoyance. He considers compelling Elias just so he no longer feels as though he’s on the back foot. “You hate mornings but you still wake up at six every day.”

“The early mornings are a deeply ingrained habit from a different life. Doesn’t mean I have to enjoy it.”

“And what does that mean?” Before Elias can open his mouth Jon continues with, “oh shut up, I know. I have to figure it out myself. You have a...a scar on your right leg. An old faded one. You broke it falling out of a tree when you were nine.”

The smug delight goes stiff on Elias’s face for just a second before relaxing. “How very specific.”

“Was I wrong?”

“No, no, that’s correct.”

The insistence makes Jon all the more certain that he was wrong, but he can’t imagine why Elias wouldn’t just mock him or accuse him of throwing out a guess at random.

“This really isn’t necessary,” Jon says weakly, not convincing himself much less Elias. They’ve exhausted Jon’s attempts to pull order out of the thick miasma of information in his mind for now, and Jon is once again hearing the siren song of deep exhaustion.

“I don’t know that I believe you could make it home all on your own,” Elias says, leading him back towards the guest room. It’s only around ten which means Jon has barely been up for three hours,

which is alarming. He thinks uncharitably of a panda. “Even if you could, your current state is still concerning.”

Jon yawns. There’s probably a sensible response to that but it isn’t coming to mind. “Fine. But I’m leaving first thing tomorrow morning.”

“If you insist. Anything else you need in the meantime?”

“Would you consider raising the temperature above absolute zero?”

Elias smiles as he says, “I’m afraid my hospitality can only go so far.”

Elias gives him a small, mostly professional pat on the back which Jon is too exhausted to squirm away from like he usually might. It’s brief but the moment he feels Elias’s touch he remembers something, or Knows something, or maybe Elias remembers something. It seems impossible to tell which.

“Who’s that?” Jon asks.

Elias raises his eyebrows. “Who’s who?”

The thought, the *knowledge* is still clear and solid in his mind. Jon takes a step forward. “Five foot eight, brown hair, an inordinate amount of freckles. He hated the cold, terrible circulation or something like that. What’s his name? You were just thinking it.”

Panicked recognition flits across Elias’s face. “What?”

“No, don’t tell me, I’ll tell you.” Jon is too preoccupied with scouring his own mind for hints to take much satisfaction in Elias’s growing alarm. “Not a very common name. Something biblical.”

He has it in him to note passively that Elias seems to be having trouble breathing.

“Barnabas Bennett,” Jon says, “that’s who you were just thinking of.”

Elias says nothing but the faint tremble in his body speaks for itself.

“Right. Do you have extra blankets anywhere around here?”

Elias swallows. “Should be some in that closet,” he says faintly, gesturing.

“Thank you.” Jon grabs several because really it *is* freezing in Elias’s house. “Good night then, Elias.”

Elias mumbles something unintelligible in turn and Jon closes the door on him.

Jon lies in bed, mind awash with half-formed thoughts. There’s no added clarity in whatever he accidentally gleaned from Elias beyond the fact that he once knew a man named Barnabas and likely cared for him greatly. He thinks Elias had been very young at the time and he doesn’t know if Elias as he is now is capable of feeling what he’d felt in that faint memory.

He suspects—no, he *knows* Elias has an interest in him, the fact that Jon is currently on day three of an impromptu sleepover with Elias and wearing his spare clothes to his spare bed is proof of that much. But he isn’t sure that whatever is happening between them is a good thing.

He falls asleep muddling through his thoughts about Elias.

But he dreams of Jonah Magnus.

He has no reason to know that the person he’s seeing is Jonah Magnus, after all he’s never even read a description of him, but he knows who the man slumped against a desk in his office in Edinburgh is. He knows those grey eyes and the fall of his hair. It’s late at night and, perched on a stack of books that look precariously close to collapsing, is a human skull.

Jon watches him drunkenly stroke a finger along the bottom row of teeth.

“Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft”, Jonah whispers to himself, head pillowed in his arm. His voice is unfamiliar but something in the ironical tone is etched too deeply into Jon’s psyche to be mistaken. *“Or so I’d like to say.”*

The dream changes and it’s still Jonah but not how he was in 1825. It’s an imagining. Jonah is standing at the top of a prison tower, looking out on an endless row of cells. He’s walking along the

windows in a circle, skirting his fingers along the glass as he idly glances at the cells and the nightmares spilling from inside them, endlessly forever, nothing but this torment for every human on earth. Only he's exempt, only Jonah Magnus above it all.

Jon awakens in the dark knowing far more than he should.

He knocks briefly on Elias's door and lets himself in before he gets a response. It's probably around two in the morning but Elias sits up quickly, clearly having been unable to sleep.

Elias looks increasingly alarmed as Jon climbs into his bed and actually scoots back as Jon settles cross legged, facing him. Jon isn't nearly as exhausted now and does manage to find that funny.

"So. Why did you let him die?" Jon asks, straight to the point.

"Fucking hell." He watches Elias rub his tired eyes. "You're here to interrogate me in the middle of the night about *that*?"

"You're the one comparing me to your dead lover in your mind."

"I wasn't—god, it was a passing thought!" Watching Elias squirm is a new experience, one that he's eager to replicate ad nauseam. "And the two of us weren't even involved."

Jon blinks. "I'm sorry, you've kept his bones for nearly 200 years, and he didn't even love you back?"

Elias has his face buried in his hands. "That makes it sound pathetic."

They both sit in silence, Jon absorbing what Elias has admitted to now by not answering in the negative. Elias's hands slide from his face as the same realization comes over him.

"Huh," says Jon absently. "I was right about Friday not being your birthday. *You* were born on June the 11th, 1790. The Feast day of Saint Barnabas. I'm sure you got *something* out of that but I wouldn't dare guess."

Elias shrugs numbly.

"I didn't need the Beholding to get the date. I wrote your Wikipedia page."

"I suppose I'm charmed," Elias says with obvious trepidation. "I must say you're taking this well. You were more hostile when I asked you about the printer cartridges last week."

"Last week I didn't know who you were or what was going on. Obfuscation tends to leave me in a bad mood."

Elias is making a valiant attempt at not appearing to be afraid for his life. "Oops."

"Was it because he wasn't in love with you? Is that why you left Barnabas Bennett to die in the Lonely?"

"You'll understand, I think, why I don't want to answer a question like that."

"I do." Jon sits up on his knees and inches forward. Elias's face lights up as Jon slides into his lap, confused pleasure overtaking his fear. "Tell me anyway. I'm not going to compel you."

"I'd consider this—" Elias's hands go to his waist and when they encounter no resistance they slide under his shirt (or rather Elias's shirt), "—to be extremely compelling, but I take your meaning. I... it wasn't about being spurned. I'd never seen someone consumed by the Lonely. I weighed my...*infatuation*. Against my curiosity, and made a decision."

"Mm." Jon can feel the words filling in the tiny gaps in his knowledge. Its always been satisfying to know more than he should.

Elias is taking liberties with his distraction and teasing his way up Jon's body. Jon allows him to tug his shirt off and pull him closer with a hand on the back of his head. In his mind all Jon can see is Jonah Magnus, touching Barnabas Bennett's skull on a dark night. Mourning but regretting nothing.

"Is that how things are going to end with me?" he asks, devastatingly close to Elias's mouth.

Being crowded into the space above him Jon can't miss the flinch. Elias bites his tongue around a *no* caught in the sudden maelstrom

of his own feelings. His affection for Jon, buried beneath his selfish cruelty, buried now beneath the kinder mask of a lover. *No* is the answer he thinks would be best to give aloud since he's here in bed with Jon. *No* is also the answer he doesn't want to give because he fears it's the truth.

"If it'll save you some torment," Jon says quietly. "I know you can't end the world on your own."

"*Jon*," he says desperately, pulling Jon down into a kiss. His hands shake as they drag Jon in closer. Jon steadies himself with a hand on Elias's chest and feels a human heart drum against his palm.

"Jon," Elias says, just as hungry but far more breathless. "What don't you know at this point?"

"Regarding you? Your thoughts and feelings maybe. Very little else."

Elias smiles. "God, that's terrifying."

"Yes, well, I'm rapidly getting used to it." He allows Elias to free him from his sweatpants so he can stroke them both.

Under normal circumstances Jon thinks he would be overwhelmed by the intimacy of being in Elias's lap like that, staring into each other's eyes, Jon unblinking, but it seems almost inconsequential compared to everything else he knows about Elias. The cold, grey eyes staring up at him in wonder have a long sordid history, and Jon knows it all.

"Do you *like* knowing so much about me?" Elias asks, smirking. "Is it getting you off?"

"No," Jon says. A blatant lie. "Why, are you into it?"

Elias switches up his grip, focusing his attention entirely on Jon, which throws him off. "Obviously."

Jon kisses him this time, primarily to shut him up. He already knows everything Elias wants to say anyway.

Jon lies under the covers in Elias's bed, hogging most of them but

allowing Elias's hand in his hair as a consolation prize. They're facing each other, neither of them attempting sleep.

"I don't suppose you might tell me what you're thinking."

Jon is thinking about Elias Bouchard—the real one—cheerfully hobbling around with his crutches as a child, and Jonah Magnus, who never broke a bone in his life. He frowns. "You can't hear my thoughts anymore?"

"I can hear something in your thoughts, I just can't decipher any of it. It's all too loud. No need to look so smug."

"It's what you deserve for reading my mind for years without my knowing. It's less than you deserve, really."

Elias's hand slows in his hair before finally stopping. "Do you intend to get in my way?"

Instead of immediately saying no, Jon takes a page from Elias's book and attempts to coldly weigh his options. On one end of the scale sits everything he's ever known and loved along with the objective knowledge of what the right thing to do is. On the other end is the worst person he's ever met, and the eternal prison tower he's been dreaming of for nearly two centuries.

"Undecided," Jon says softly.

Elias bolts upright. Jon watches him purposefully dull his excitement. He goes back down to his elbow. "Would you join me, then?"

"Christ, Elias, I said I was *undecided*."

"Ordinarily a question like 'are you going to stop me from ending the world' warrants a firmer answer than 'IDK' so excuse me for being optimistic."

Jon rolls over onto his side, pointedly yanking the blankets along with him. Elias sounds unaffected as he slides in behind Jon and gets an arm around his waist.

"I think you're already decided."

Jon sighs. "Yes, I've decided to strangle you in your sleep. Close your eyes already so I can get started."

Though he can't see him he can tell Elias is grinning at the back of his head like a bastard. Jon pointedly shuts his own eyes though he's far from tired now. Elias doesn't need to consider that there's an option outside of Jon either helping him or impeding him. A path where Elias chooses Jon over the end of the world.

That can wait till morning.



Secrets

Jesse Mando



“YOU LOOK LOVELY AS ALWAYS, PET.” ELIAS’ HAND IS WARM ON HIS waist as he takes him in, and Jon feels his cheeks heat in delight at the praise. He’s still accustoming himself to the rules and fashion of Elias’ social circle, but his husband’s clear enjoyment of the process makes it all much easier. The corset vest is tight, like Elias’ hugs, and just as relaxing to be wrapped in. It’s a strangely contrasting feeling to the tailored pants that cling in ways that his husband appreciates, but *Jon* likes much less. It draws attention from others, and he’s never enjoyed that, in either the fae court *or* human social circles. It makes Elias happy though, showing off what he’s claimed, and Jon can never bring himself to tell him no when he gets like that.

Elias’ clear delight in showing him off makes these sorts of events more difficult. Jon has never enjoyed crowds, and he likes these evenings even less. They always remind him terribly that he’s not *like* these people, that he is, as always, an *outsider*. Their rules are as esoteric to him as the tomes Elias provides, written in languages he *knows* but doesn’t *understand*.

However, the fact that he loves secrets as much as Elias does makes up for it, somewhat. Secrets, after all, are the currency of the fae, and he craves them even more than most. These parties are always a glut of them, the things kept secret behind locked doors and

glad-handing, friendly smiles that hide a knife and backroom deals.

So, Jon sits in Elias' lap with a possessive hand on his waist and whispers secrets in his ear, and ignores the chatter around him, digging *deeper* to listen to what goes unsaid. It isn't like he's needed for conversation or to do anything other than be the pretty little thing on his paramour's arm—he's *expected* to be a thoughtless object, a decoration to show off Elias' prowess. They laugh over it in private, though there's always a voice at the back of his mind that perhaps Elias doesn't quite find it as much of a joke as he seems to.

"Miss Troy is the ... foreign lap into which Mrs. Yancy's husband is laying treasures," he murmurs, his fingers laced with Elias' as they sit together in the corner, "Not that you would know it by looking at them now." The two women giggle together. "Mr. Yancy is afraid that she knows, it's why he's barely left her side all night. He's afraid she'll take it as permission to find a lover of her own, but it would be much worse for her reputation than his if it gets out, so I don't know why he thinks she'll do such a thing."

Elias chuckles against him, and Jon hums as he watches the room. "Mr. Harris is preparing to undercut a merchant contract against Mr. Wood. He thinks Mr. Wood is unaware, but he will be very surprised when he finds his offices burgled."

It comes as naturally as breathing to pull the secrets from them, and Elias has a satisfied smile as he wraps his arms around him. "Thank you, Jon. Your talents are appreciated as always."

And in the end, that's what matters most, isn't it? That Elias appreciates him, and more than that, *loves* him? It tastes better than the sweetest honey and wine, and Jon drinks deeply from it, sighing happily.

Nothing matters any longer except Elias, and the sparkle of the golden band on his finger.



Hear.

See.

Speak.

Your Uncommon Dreams

cloverdose



THE HEAVY CRACK OF THUNDER RUMBLES THROUGHOUT THE COOL outside air. Jon lays in the same spot he's been in since the sky opened and he was warned not to go outside. He went out anyway of course, feeling the pull of The Watcher—and maybe even the pull of Jonah Magnus himself—to come see the ruin he's created. The image is breathtaking. There's not a sun anymore, just hues of dark purples and blacks and a large unblinking eye that follows your movements.

The world is beautiful.

Jon can't close his eyes. He feels euphoric as his body transforms in a way he never thought possible. He feels the eyes under his skin, all moving and withering, drawn to the beautiful horizon like a magnet.

And Jon finally—*finally* feels full.

Lovely, isn't it Jon?

The strange yet familiar voice fills his head. Elias. *Jonah*. He corrects. Elias Bouchard sounds wrong in his mind now. He can't help the corners of his mouth curl into a wide grin. He's still riding out whatever high this world is giving him.

Jon shivers and then with another loud crack of thunder sobers for

a moment. This isn't his ruined world. These feelings of devotion, happiness, pleasure, they don't all belong to him.

They belong to Jonah.

And you don't think I'd share this pleasure with you? When you've performed your role so exceptionally.

Jon suddenly feels trapped. The piercing eye's gaze no longer feels like sanctuary but scrutiny. He's being *watched*. His own feelings returning to the surface.

While reading Jonah's statement, something happened. Jon resisted to some capacity. He recalls feeling Jonah's—*presence*—in his own mind. Stronger than any bit of knowledge he's ever received. Jon ached to let him in his mind—like it was supposed to be there.

Do you miss that feeling, Jon?

Jon rolls to his side, as if he ever really could avert the gaze from the Watcher, but needs the sense of control. He doesn't need to answer Jonah because Jonah is still in his thoughts, sharing his pleasure in the world they created.

"Get out, Elias—" Jon says out loud. He still doesn't have the name on his tongue. *Jonah* felt off to say out loud. In his mind, in their shared wavelength connected by Beholding, all that exists is Jonah. Not Jon. Not Elias. But saying things out loud—Jon feels like himself a little more.

I'm part of you now, Jon. You feel that, don't you? Since you've read our plans.

Statement of Jonah Magnus. Jon doomed himself since he flipped that page. He knows now that there was a very small part of him that could've stopped before the page was turned. He knows that the instruction to keep reading wasn't just a command—but permission.

And you can't tell me you're not curious.

The words were true, Jonah knows Jon. He knew that once he created just an ounce of a mystery—Jon couldn't resist. He turned the page. He *was* curious.

And then Jon broke the world.

“Please get out,” Jon says again with a choked sob, neck turning back to the sky, the eye illuminated with lightning.

Not until you let yourself enjoy this.

Jonah’s words are back in his head, he feels the excitement again. Jon can sense Martin somewhere nearby and feels his worry. He can’t face him just yet.

He thinks of Elias’ words to him before stepping into the Lonely.

“Are you scared, Jon?”

Jon recalls Elias’ hands on his shoulder as he whispered the question into his ear. Jon had answered him truthfully—he was scared. He was scared enough that he almost didn’t follow Martin, he almost leant into the first human contact he’d felt in ages and let himself fall into Elias’ embrace. He could’ve just gone home and mourned losing Martin to the Lonely. Instead he did exactly what Elias knew he’d do—he followed after the other man because—well it was the right thing to do. Martin wasn’t really a part of this and Jon needed to save him.

And I needed you marked.

Then he thought of the other reason he so willingly let go of the warmth of Elias’ hands on his body—curiosity. A curiosity that led him to his current predicament—on the ground in some sort of blissful agonizing state under the gaze of the ruined world.

“Jon?” Martin’s voice snaps him out of the memory he’s fallen into. He sits up, looking at Martin standing above him. Jon realizes he isn’t sure how long he’s been sitting out there. While the passage of time isn’t nearly the same concept as it once was, he isn’t sure just how long Martin’s been waiting for him to return.

He’d told Jon after he was done reading Jonah’s statement not to go outside but Jon couldn’t help himself. He wasn’t fully Jon at that point, his mind still too linked with Jonah’s. And Jonah wanted to see the world through Jon’s eyes.

And then he lay there, feeling the fear of the entire world absorb

into his body. After a while, Jon wasn't sure how much of the enjoyment really was Jonah's influence. But he couldn't tell Martin that.

There's that enjoyment, Jon.

Jon clears his throat.

"Sorry," he finally says, putting a hand on his own knee to stand himself up. Martin extends his hand to offer help, but Jon doesn't take it. He doesn't deserve the support. He takes a deep breath, trying his best not to let out some sort of choked sob. He brushes off his pants and runs his fingers through his hair, trying to ignore the crawling sensation of the eyes moving underneath his skin.

"Jon—Jon are you alright?" Martin asks, his face shows concern but Jon detects, maybe even *knows* the slight ping of fear rippling through Martin's body. When Jon finished reading and went outside he wasn't exactly coherent. And while Martin begged him to come back inside the cabin, Jon just kept laughing before collapsing on the ground, and Martin let him be. Let Jon—and Jonah—be. At least for a while.

"I'm, uh—" Jon thinks about the question and feels an unusual sensation move through his body, starting in his head.

You want to tell him how good you feel, Jon?

Jon takes another deep breath, forcing the presence of Jonah out of his head with the exhale.

"I'm fine," Jon answers with a forced nod. Martin continues to look at him with the same concerned expression on his face.

"Do you—want to go back inside?" Martin's voice is timid, like he doesn't quite know who he's talking to. Jon wonders if he looks unrecognizable. But Jon feels more like himself than he has in a long time.

"I—yes," Jon nods, stepping forward to follow Martin back to Daisy's cabin.

They walk together in silence for a moment before Martin finally speaks, obviously uncomfortable with the quiet.

"It's terrifying," he says simply. He's talking about the world. "It's—it's bad." He repeats the words he told Jon when the world first changed. But Jon can't respond, he nods along, pretending to agree. He tries to ignore the tingle of Jonah's voice that's crept back into his mind.

It's alright to think that it's beautiful Jon.

Jon doesn't sleep, not in the same way as he did before the change. He lays down next to Martin, and they both pretend to rest until their body can't take the stagnation any more. Jon thinks that Martin might sleep little, but he's trying not to look into the other's mind. Jon lays down, facing away from Martin so his staring doesn't keep the other up, and uses his the power of Beholding to survey the world.

Our world.

He ignores the thought and continues searching. He sees everything of course, except for the panopticon. He feels the world in a way he couldn't even fathom before reading Jonah's statement. The more Jon thinks of the terror that the world has turned into, the more delight he feels thinking of the sounds of screams.

That scares Jon most of all.

In his state of possible unconsciousness, Jon sees Jonah Magnus. He knows that this is some sort of dream state because he can't actually see where Jonah is within the panopticon. Jon does know that Jonah currently is serving as the pupil of The Eye in this world, possibly acting as some sort of conduit for the fear.

But they both know that's Jon's rightful place.

This Jonah Magnus that Jon currently sees is still in the body of his former boss, his captor, his maker. He's still wearing the same smug grin Jon grew to detest but also miss the most when Elias was confined in prison.

"You never told me you thought of me so fondly while I was imprisoned," Jonah says, reading Jon's mind. They're standing in the

center of the panopticon, similar to how they stood before Jon rescued Martin from the Lonely.

“I—” Jon wants to protest, to lie and say he could never miss him. That he was grateful to wake up to Elias no longer around, that he was proud of Martin and Melanie’s pursuit of his arrest. These were of course half-truths. He was always—reluctant when it came to his feelings toward Elias. To Jonah. He knows why now. “I was alone.” Jon finally admits.

Jonah steps forward then, placing a gentle hand to Jon’s cheek.

“I needed you to be—so we could create our world. But I was always watching Jon. Your exceptional progression into a living Archive—”

“I’m not a *thing*, Elias,” Jon interrupts curtly, backing away from the man’s touch. He hated that most of all, that he was seen as a lynchpin, a tool, inhuman. Jon may not have been the best definition of human any more but he wasn’t—this. He couldn’t be.

But Jonah just looked at him in a way he couldn’t quite hate. Jonah shakes his head.

“Of course not, darling. You’re everything.”

Jon bolts awake in a cold sweat.

“These domains— they’re just getting worse,” Martin states as they make their way to their newest hellscape. Jon just hums a response that doesn’t satisfy the other man. “Jon?” Martin asks again, squeezing his hand.

“What? Oh—sorry,” Jon says, realizing he wasn’t quite paying attention. He feels the heat of the Desolation domain they’re walking towards creeping up and his entire body is buzzing, aching for another taste of fear.

He tries not to think of Jonah back at the panopticon, soaking it all in while his body is doomed to fizzle out.

The Eye wants you, Jon.

“Jon, are you *sure* that you’re okay?” Martin asks again. They’d been to at least four domains by now, Martin horrified at each one and Jon trying his best to subdue his own reactions to the thrill; the sensation of the eyes under his skin moving to navigate the source of the fear. Their hunger to drink more in.

“I’m just—I might need to, uh, make another statement again soon,” Jon finally says. Martin clicks his tongue in clear disapproval.

“Jon, I’m worried about you. I’m worried that you aren’t telling me everything,” Martin confesses. Jon chews his lip.

Will you tell him I’m with you, Jon? That I’m calling to you.

“It’s—Jonah,” Jon says, trying to shut up the voice in his head. Martin’s face scrunches in deep concern.

“What?”

“Jonah Magnus. Ever since I ah—god, ever since his statement I can, uh, well—*feel* him? Like he’s talking to me.”

“That’s not good Jon. *Why* haven’t you said something sooner?” Martin chastises, arms crossing in a defensive stance.

“Because you’re right,” Jon says with a dark laugh, unable to stop the feeling of Jonah creeping in his mind. “It’s not good. But Martin it feels—”

“What does it feel like, Jon?”

Will you tell him this feels right?

“He’s hard to shut out, I’m sorry—” Jon admits, rubbing his temples. He’s feeling too much—Martin’s worry, the call to make a statement about the fear domain they’re entering, and Jonah’s own thoughts are all flooding into his head.

“Well, try?” Martin suggests. “We can’t—Christ Jon, we can’t be walking around Hell with Jonah Magnus!”

Oh but you are.

“I need to make a statement,” Jon says, storming off into the wreckage.

“Will you be able to kill Elias—Jonah? When the time comes?” Martin asks after Jon’s already stated how uncomfortable he is with the idea of continuing to kill avatars. He sighs, knowing that the question was coming but still didn’t like having to process it.

“I won’t hesitate,” Jon says.

Confident of you, Jon.

Jon doesn’t want to admit to anyone, especially to himself, that he’s going to feel that pain.

The tunnels hurt. Jon’s connection to the Eye is severed and unlike Salesa’s Oasis—he *feels* the disconnect. He hates it, sleeping on the small cot close to Martin trying to hide his agony.

Jon properly dreams here though. He’s certain he’s sleeping with his eyes open, given Martin’s genuine unease when Jon wakes up. And more and more frequently, Jon dreams of Jonah Magnus. They’re standing in the same spot as all of his other dreams, where they last physically saw one another—the center of the panopticon. Jonah’s hands are on Jon’s arms, his grip is light and affectionate. He brings Jon’s hand to his lips and lightly kisses Jon’s skin. The eyes underneath squirm to see.

“You’re getting close, aren’t you, Jon?” Jon shakes his head.

“I-I don’t know,” he admits. He doesn’t know what he’s getting close to exactly, to answers, to killing Jonah or something more than all of that.

To where he belongs.

Even in his dream-like state, when things are supposed to feel duller, Jon’s struck with the aching pull to climb out of the tunnels and practically run to the panopticon. He feels the Eye calling to him and the nearly divine urge to see the world from his rightful place—the place currently occupied by the man standing before

him, with the same condescending, too-wide smile that Jon knew people found unnerving but brought him comfort.

“You did this, Jon. Do you know that?” Jonah Magnus asks, moving forward to take Jon’s hand in his. He allows it, the touch offering a small comfort—a reminder that The Eye is near him.

“I read *your* words,” Jon spat out, but didn’t retrieve his hand from Jonah’s grip.

“You read my statement, you felt my excitement, but *your* performance—my, my you were wonderful in your role,” Jonah’s thumb trails up and down the back of Jon’s hand and he wants to hate the feeling but he can’t. Jon knows what Jonah feels for him; Jon felt every ounce of it when he read the man’s statement.

Jon remembers the ache dissipating from his chest when he allowed himself to flip the page and to keep reading. When he let Jonah’s thoughts consume him as he read, the pleasure in feeling his guiding his plan to fruition. As Jon read about each mark on his body from Jonah’s words, he *felt* this man’s worship toward him. He felt Jonah’s reliance on Jon’s impulsivity, curiosity, and worst of all—his hope that he was doing something good.

And as Jon read from Jonah’s mind he felt The Eye changed as Jon pursued. The Eye didn’t think the same way as other powers, Jon knew that, but the Ceaseless Watcher was—*fond*—of its Archive. That fondness came from Jonah. Jon blinks.

“You—it doesn’t want you,” Jon says simply. Jon notices the subtle twitch in Jonah’s smile. That slight twinge encourages Jon to continue. “No, that’s why you’re able to get into my head i-into my *dreams*, Elias—” Jon scoffs, feeling the familiar pattern he always had with the other man as he came to these conclusions.

“Is that what you believe, Jon?” Jonah counters, hands moving to grip Jon’s wrist. The hold was delicate but firm, as Jonah always seemed to be.

“It’s what I *know*,” Jon retorts, finally backing away from the grip. He shakes his head. “The Eye wants me as its pupil,” Jon says in delighted horror. And then he feels that calm sense of

accomplishment, the same feeling from reading Jonah's words.

Jonah's smiling again, wide as ever—eyes unblinking. Jon feels that same radiating pleasure that he's been trying to suppress since he ruined the world, but with Jonah right there—Jon moves closer. The pull is the strongest he's felt it; starting in the pit of Jon's stomach and trying to move every part of Jon forward. He knows that if he gives in, allows the pull to take over—he'd feel good. And Jonah's moving closer too—and all Jon has to do is bridge the gap.

"Jon!" Jon's jolted awake by Martin's hand rubbing at his shoulder.

"I—eyes open again?" He asks, Martin nods, not looking Jon in the eye.

"Right, sorry."

Jon doesn't fall back asleep.

The sight of the panopticon sends Jon over the edge. For a moment, there's no one there but him and Jonah Magnus—who's standing in the spot that's been his from the beginning. Since Jon let himself open the door, with Jonah's feelings pulsing through his body allowing him to rip out the small stitches in Jon's mind that tried to shove away this darkness. And now he's there, right in front of it—he's fighting back tears.

Elias Bouchard's body doesn't really notice him. He continues to stand and chant and feel fears too great for him to comprehend. But Jonah knows that Jon's arrived and Jon feels his voice loud and clear into his head.

The Eye wants you, Jon. I want you.

"Jon?" He faintly hears Martin's voice. They have to go. But Jon can't. The feeling is overwhelming, it's a freedom Jon's never truly allowed himself to feel but it's here and it's strong and it's *begging*.

"Jon!" Martin cries again, finally Jon is able to blink and look at the man standing next to him. The willpower to turn away from something that's made just for him is painful.

“—” Jon can barely speak.

“It’s Elias, Jon! He’s in your head, he has to be!” Martin says through a desperate cry. Jon gives a slow nod.

“I think we should go,” Jon says in a whisper. He lets Martin drag him out of the panopticon, trying to ignore every aching part of his body begging him to turn around and go back.

I’ll be waiting, Jon.

Jon went early. He had to, he couldn’t do this in front of Martin. He couldn’t let Martin kill Jonah, not without at least saying his piece first. That’s how Jon justified it to himself at least.

When Jon releases Elias Bouchard’s body from The Eye, the first thing he can do is press his lips to Jonah’s. The kiss is deep and hungry and Jon’s feeling Jonah loudly in his head. He’s just as desperate as Jon, moreso probably, relishing in the human feeling of their lips moving together. Jon feels how much Jonah missed him, and he lets himself kiss back. He lets Jonah take over again, giving Jon the permission to kiss and pant, and press their bodies even closer together. When Jon does pull apart, Jonah presses their foreheads together and smiles, they’re both out of breath and staring into one another.

Those grey eyes bore into Jon every waking moment. They beckoned Jon to be where he now stands, to feel the waves of fear from the ruined world satiate him in a way he’s never been able to explain.

And with Jonah, he never needs to.

“Are you going to kill me, Jon?” Jonah asks, his voice is gentle—his throat hoarse from speaking nonstop for an indeterminate amount of time. He doesn’t sound as scared as Jon anticipated, how he imagined him begging for his life—the man’s two hundred year fear of death burned into him.

Jon doesn’t want to answer, he wants to put their lips together again and feel the warmth of The Eye—rewarding Jon for taking his rightful place in the ruined world. Eventually, Jon exhales, wrapping his

hand around Jonah's waist, knowing how much the man wants to continue the contact.

"I'm going to claim my place," Jon says. Jonah smiles and the rush of power takes over both of them. And Jon knows then that the delight, the praise, the true fullness isn't just from Jonah Magnus. Jon can't hide under that guise forever.

And Jon can't keep fighting this, not when he finally feels understood.



Gilded Teacups

Anonymous



“I TAKE IT YOU DON’T CARE FOR THE TEA.”

Jon does not care either way about the tea. It is sweeter than he was expecting, thick with a bit of cloying honey that still clings to his tongue from that first, too-long sip. It is expensive tea—loose-leaf from a tin with a name inscribed in gold and a Fortnum and Mason tag still wrapped carefully around the top clamping handle.

The tea is warm. And he is so cold.

“It’s fine.” Jon finally answers, the words scarcely more than a whisper. His voice is gone. Which makes so little sense it might be laughable if he weren’t entirely numb to it. The humor, the concern. Anything that wasn’t the bone-deep satisfaction set in the smile of the man across from him.

Elias’ face is clean.

Clean shaven where what had been a slight layer of stubble ghosting over the edge of his chin the last time Jon had seen him replaced with the smooth, sharp lines of his face.

Clean cut, the image of the late-in-life old money with close cropped hair and accents of gold even after he had changed clothes as Jon had sat still. In this chair, lined with paisley imprint of a flora and

fauna, sealed into the corners and cracks of the upholstery.

Clean of the soft, red flecks of blood that Jon had seen as Elias had opened the door.

“Apologies, Jon. I thought you took your tea sweet.”

Jon doesn’t answer, watching instead as Elias raised his own cup off the trimmed saucer and takes another sip. Jon watches the narrow line of his throat move as he swallows, his eyes fixed carefully on Jon. Not on Jon’s own, but on all of him, all at once. His still smoke-stained clothes, the constant tapping of his shoe against the hardwood, the rumpled lines of his clothes as he had run to the Tube station. No notion of where he was going, following a call that he knew now had come from some deep place in his chest.

Elias sets the cup and the saucer onto the table beside him—the first time Jon can feel the lightened weight of some stare slip back from him. For that moment, the heartbeat and breath that it is, it aches. A release of pressure that makes his body expand and fill space it ought not to. Strange, and unsettling until Elias looks back again, lips turned up in a smile that almost softens when he notices the tremble of Jon’s hands now wringing themselves together.

“There is no need to be nervous, Jon. I understand this is quite the change—”

“You killed Leitner,” Jon interrupts him, “I—why did you do that? He was answering my questions.”

“Precisely,” Elias agrees, tilting his head slightly to the side, “He was answering your questions, Jon. At a far more rapid pace than could be allowed.”

“So you ... You killed him? And left me to—”

“I understand your anger, Jon, and it’s perfectly reasonable given the situation.”

“Your plan was to ... frame me for this.”

“If that were the case, why would I have allowed you to see the truth, Jon?”

The shirt Elias wears now is purple. Two buttons open at the collar where Jon can see his skin is still damp from his shower if he looks closely enough at the soft, red flush of it.

When Jon had knocked on the door, his shirt had been white. Or at least, it had started that way. The mess of blood and brain matter that had been Jurgen Leitner strewn across his office had been painted with the same viscera across Elias' chest. Spatter and sordid colors; the smell of soot still stuck to Jon's mouth from the scraps of his suit jacket in the still lit fireplace.

"I don't understand how I ended up here."

"You came to me, Jon," Elias answers, as though it is the simplest thing in the world.

"I've never been here," Jon bit back, his jaw popping with the hard syllables, "I don't ... I don't know how I got there."

Elias says nothing. He sits back in his chair and now, rather than scouring all of Jon for some answer, locks his eyes on Jon's own. It's enough to make Jon's breath catch—the emotion that is behind the subtlest change in his expression. The same satisfaction, yes, but more now. There is hunger, twisted and tangled in some place that Jon is not certain he can reach. And, tied there with it, is a joy that is enough to set the world alight.

"How did I get here, Elias?"

"I don't know, Jon."

"Answer me," His voice wobbles, because the anger that is popping his jawbone now sits in some deeper place in his chest. It curls over his tongue, black and searching, and latches onto his tongue.

Elias blinks at the demand. A lapse of the pressure, a shiver running through his body that to Jon it seems is ... more visible. More present, every smooth line, soft wrinkle, gently sloping curve, and rigid angle present to Jon.

"I know you know something," He tells him, even as he watches the cage of Elias' ribs expand and contract with a long, slow breath, "Tell me what it is."

"I'm afraid that won't work quite yet, Jon."

Jon looks up, up into the eyes that are blown wide and dark as they stare back. Elias has not moved from his rigid position, but his body, with the more that Jon can now see is almost fluid. Pulsing as he moves the tiniest amount with each heavy breath.

"What won't work?"

"Compelling me to answer," Elias says so smoothly that for a moment Jon forgets that he does not know what that is. It sounds natural, it sounds like an achievement he ought to be working towards. "You aren't there quite yet."

"I'm not compelling you to do anything."

"Yes, as I said," Elias agrees, voice cut in that clip of a laugh that Jon knows well enough, "It will take time to grow your strength."

"My strength."

"Your power, if you prefer, Jon. Semantics are not precisely what I had in mind for this conversation."

"What did you have in mind?"

"You act as though I lured you here," Elias' eyebrows lift as he speaks, "I merely saw you coming, Jon."

"You saw me coming?"

"I know that you were told of our patron, Jon. I would assume you have considered at least some of the implications."

Has he? Had he thought of those things on the Tube ride over where the people had, in his jittering, smoke-stained mess, given him a wide berth between the open doors. Had he considered those things as he walked through this ludicrous neighborhood tucked into parts of Kensington he hadn't known existed? He had he thought of anything beyond the steps he had taken? The body in his office?

The collapse of his life which only now he realizes has been hanging from a single strand of thin, silver silk?

"You can read my mind then. You—you knew this would happen."

Elias dips his head to the side in exactly the same fashion as when he's answering a budget question without a clear answer at work. As if Jon is asking what line item to charge a travel expense and not making accusation that three months ago would have seemed not only implausible but impossible.

"I don't make it habit to read your mind, Jon. And I certainly can't see the future."

"But you did know. About Leitner."

"No," Elias says, just as evenly, just as slowly as he pauses to take a sip of his tea. Jon watched the curve of his lips then, turned dark and damp with the tea.

"Don't lie to me."

"If I had known about Leitner—" Elias cuts him off with words and a stare equally as sharp, "—do you quite think I would have reacted in this same fashion I did, Jon?"

Jon stares. Blinks and feels with each scrap of a moment he isn't watching a hunger that broils low and sharp in his gut. He can feel the reasoning, sensible and sure, on the edge of his tongue. On the tip of his fingers. He can almost touch it, almost taste it ...

The panic, still deep-seated, paints over it with a terrible brush.

"You ... you hadn't planned to kill him?"

"Until earlier today, I had no real knowledge of the whereabouts of Jurgen Leitner. Let alone that he was living under my Institute."

"You ... you didn't ..."

"If I had planned to kill him, Jon, I would hardly have employed that specific methodology."

"Trying, was it?"

"Messy," Elias corrects with a smile that feels nothing more than painted on. At least for a moment until Jon realizes that perhaps Elias is telling an actual joke.

For a reason he cannot ascertain, he huffs out a laugh.

"I suppose it was rather messy," Jon agrees, looking to the side of him. Anywhere but where he is staring. In any direction other than directly at Elias who seems as equally preoccupied with tea as the murder he has committed.

When Jon looks up again, he is still smiling.

"What would you do then?" Jon asks, knowing the answer. Knowing that the reasoning and the faint realizations that he would not allow himself are swimming slowly to the surface of his mind. Preparing to break water, held under by only the slightest tension, seconds from being split by the blade of a knife.

Elias smiles again, not bothering to hide his laugh. Jon hates it and Jon understands it at the same moment. It is funny. It is funny that they are sitting here in a flat he has never been too, having a conversation with a man he realizes that he has never actually known. That he still does not know, even the facade of him has been chipped away like flaking bits of marble into the image of a figure that is supposed to be a person.

"I would think—" Elias lets the word hang on his lips and Jon cannot keep himself from staring at them. The way they shape around words, around his laugh, around his teeth that seem too white after all the red, "—That a gun would be far more effective."

"Guns are hard to come by here," Jon counters immediately, "I-I looked when I got the axe. Even he didn't have them."

"Hard to come by these days, yes," Elias agrees, "But I will say that their usefulness is not undone by age. And there is hardly a weapon more ... effective on a personal level. Especially for targets more ... personal."

Jon does not know where the image comes from. The Eye, as Leitner said perhaps, or perhaps finally his exhausted brain has put together what he thinks he already knew.

Somewhere in this flat or in the plain, unaltered office at the front of the Institute there is a gun.

A gun that holds the same size and caliber of bullet that was buried in Gertrude Robinson's chest.

A gun that fit just as easily in the hands of the man across from him as the teacup settled there now. Gilded and perfect, scraping gently against the ceramic as he sets it down.

“Should I consider you settled then?” Elias asks, and when he looks up this time, at least Jon is ready. His breath catches, but for no reason other than one he does not know.

“Settled?”

“You are staying here?” Elias asks tilting his head towards the open part of his flat, “I think it is unwise for you to return to your own flat when wanted for murder, Jon.”

“A murder that you committed!”

“I’m not certain that excuse will buy you much time out of prison, Jon.”

“I could turn you in.”

“You could,” Elias agrees, nodding and lifting his hands in odd surrender. As though Jon has already called the police.

Just as quickly, his smile turns sharp again.

“But wouldn’t you like to know more, Jon?”

“More? What more is there to know?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know why? The real reason.”

“I don’t care.”

“Don’t you?”

Jon becomes, as he feels Elias’ breath on his cheek—mint toothpaste and Lady Grey tea—how close they are. Had he leaned in? Elias has not moved from his seat, from his tea cup.

He realizes in the same breath how true it all is.

“Of course I do.”

“Then stay,” Elias says simply, almost a whisper as his eyes track down. To Jon’s lips, to his tight swallow.

“Watch it unfold, Jon. It is, I think, within your nature.”

Elias’ lips are warm, Jon realizes. The same as his body beneath his purple shirt. The same as his flat, set to hold them both.

If it is a cage or a web, Jon cannot feel the bars or stretching sticky lines of it past the catch of Elias’ breath. The turn of his mouth. The gentle scratch of stubble that is invisible to the eye as it catches on Jon’s own.

He cannot see it. The thought alone is enough to keep him rooted in place.



The Night Gardener

Talking4TheIandonly



“No.”

“No.”

“No! No! **No!**”

He couldn't find it anywhere. Jon shuffled through his papers again, but his journal was missing. Most of his work was in that journal, and he was sure it was somewhere in his cabin, but despite his best attempts he couldn't find it!

Falling on the one part of his couch not covered in books, Jon glanced around the room one last time before giving up his search for the night. Every horizontal surface in sight was covered in at least three layers of reference books, papers, or equipment. The worst example of his desperate organization system was a stack he nicknamed 'the tower of terror'. The stack was constructed with a frankly scary amount of reference books and looked ready to collapse in a slight breeze. The vertical surfaces were not spared either. Out of desperation, Jon had started taping up his major notes, which covered the walls as high as his ladder could reach. Taking it all in, he finally had to admit it: the place was a mess.

Maybe he should have accepted Martin's offer to clean his cabin.

It's just the thought of letting someone else in his space, near his work, even to help ... it made him territorial in a way he hadn't anticipated.

While Jon was planning his next maneuver, a recorder on the coffee table clicked on.

"Need help, four eyes?"

Jon audibly sighed. "Took you long enough."

He turned to look at the calendar hung up on the wall. It had a cat hanging from a branch with the words 'hang in there!' The cat's eyes, which had been unfocused a minute before, were now staring straight at him.

"A wizard is never late. Nor is he early; he arrives precisely when he means to."

Jon snorted. "I should never have shown you Tolkien."

"*Well, it's a bit late for that.*" Jonah replied. The tape recorder next to Jon clicked off, and on his left, he heard another one click on.

Jonah summoning these was not helping with his clutter problem.

"Did you make progress with your scheme while I was gone?"

"I wouldn't call it a scheme. Besides, why were you gone for so long?" Jon had meant for the last part to come off as curt, but it more sounded wounded. He immediately cringed at the words.

"Worried over me? I must contact the news; Jonathan Sims has a soft side."

Jonah continued, and Jon quickly gave up on getting an honest answer from the being.

"You know, I could help you with finding the journal if you would—"

"No."

The recorder on his coffee table continued to roll despite Jonah falling silent. Jon stared at the machine, not bothering to look

for whatever painting or drawing Jonah was using to see him. He knew that Jon didn't want to share his body, and yet continued to insist that it would make everything easier! He presented it like Jon would just have to go to sleep, and while he was resting, Jonah would get some work done.

It sounded at first like an efficient and elegant solution, but it immediately set him on edge.

Jon had at first politely refused the offer, but the suggestion lingered in the back of his mind for days. He felt the pin pricks of unwelcome memories replaying on the edges of his consciousness. It was worse when he slept, and the scenes took center stage of his dreams. It had been years since the incident, but he was still haunted by images of his family walking forward towards the door.

He still remembered every word he screamed at his parents. He screamed everything and anything to make his mum look away from the book in her hands. He remembered how hoarse his voice had been from yelling, and how exhausted he was from crying.

After he ran out of options, Jon ran at his mom. If only he could snatch the book from her hands, they would stop acting weird.

Right?

Before Jon had a chance to even get close, his pa grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. Startled at the contact, Jon was easily pulled away by his dad who looked at him furiously.

"Jon, I hope you don't behave this way with Mr. Spider."

Jon had almost felt ashamed with the tone his dad had used, but he knew this was weird. He had never heard of Mr. Spider until his parents had grabbed that book from him. He didn't want to walk across town this late at night. He hadn't even had dinner before they were forced to go on this 'family outing.'

"I don't want to meet Mr. Spider!" Jon had yelled back, despite the pain it caused his throat. He jumped forward trying to slap the book out of his mum's hands, but she moved too quickly. It was weird, she didn't even look up from the pages while dodging him.

Eventually, they came to a dark alleyway on the edge of town. His parents finally stopped at this weird looking door. The whole place was creepy to Jon, but the door was especially strange because it looked drawn. Like an artist spray painted a cartoon door.

While Jon was puzzling out what exactly was off with the door, his mom knocked on the door twice.

“Knock, knock,” his mum said cheerfully.

His nerves were already on edge, but his heart leapt out of his chest when he heard a sound on the other side that almost sounded like, *“Who’s there?”*

He was proud of himself for not crying up to that point. He cried a lot and felt like a baby when he did, but when one tear started the rest followed. He started sobbing and pleading with his parents to go.

His parents stared at the door instead, watching as the

Thump

Thump

Thump

Grew closer.

Mr. Spider was huge, whatever it was. He could even see the door shake on its flimsy hinges as the steps came closer.

“Dad, please.” Jon looked up at his pa, who watched the door pleasantly.

Trembling from fear, an idea struck him. Jon bit him. He was released immediately and took the opportunity to run.

He ran so fast that his legs and lungs burned. He never did well in gym, but his coach would be proud if he saw the speed that Jon spirited away. He kept on running until his feet hurt and his legs wobbled with each step. Even then, he continued walking until he saw home.

He never saw his parents again, but knowing they were murdered

wasn't what kept him up at night. The guilt that was eating him from the inside came from the second he took to glance over. It was the last time he would ever see his parents, and his father's face was that of pure terror. His mouth was agape ready to scream, but he was pulled into the door before his throat could make a sound.

Jon had broken the spell, but he had done it too late.

He had seen what these creatures can do when they take control, and that was the only thing keeping him from giving into Jonah's suggestion. He held onto that memory and repeated it like a prayer; "you do not know these creatures." "You cannot trust them."

Jonah was different, and that scared Jon. The being that appeared in his dreams looked human and sounded human when he spoke over the tape recorders. Jonah claimed he was a human that had been trapped by one of these creatures.

Jon wanted to believe but couldn't shake his paranoid thoughts that Jonah was going to betray him, sacrifice him, and take his eyes. Maybe not that last one, but it was a worry he had.

He was also terrified because Jonah figured out his fear immediately.

That prick was too smart for his own good.

"*Jonathan*," Jonah had sighed.

"What." Jon snapped.

Jonah's voice softened and the tone made Jon's stomach flip with guilt. "I'm sorry about your parents. I am merely giving you a suggestion because I believe it would help you in the long run."

"Bugger off." Jon replied, with less venom behind it. He knew Jonah was only trying to help with his suggestion, but he wasn't going to give up the security of his body being his own.

Jon had a minute of contemplative silence before Jonah started speaking again. "*While I was gone. I found the next few objects you will need for your revenge.*"

Jon perked up and stared somehow more intently at the tape recorder. "What are they?"

"There is a flower deep in the forest that will do nicely. If we go now, you can have it before sundown."

Jon stood up to gather his supplies. "And the other objects?"

"One step at a time."

Jon bit back a comment about Jonah's dramatics being fit for a stage. He just wasn't up for banter at the moment.

Magnus Valley, Oregon was a unique place for many reasons.

For one, the people were all unique characters, to say kindly. He was aware these could be cultural differences, as Jon had spent most of his life in England. He knew that living in America would come with some changes—like he *really* didn't understand America's love of trucks. Why did Americans love their cars so much?

That aside, Magnus Valley had differences that went beyond cultural ones. The realtor in town had the uncanny ability to disappear anytime Jon wanted to speak to him. The man, Michael, would step into a yellow door, and then Jon would blink, and the door would be gone. Recently, his neighbor Jane Prentiss had gone missing, and no one in town seemed worried about that. Also, he was convinced that one of the town's officers was a werewolf. Daisy didn't work night shifts during the full moon, or the day after a full moon. She also only ate rare steak and had an incredible sense of hearing. Jon learned that last one after he got told off for 'stalking an officer of the law' when he had been standing well over 30 ft away!

Magnus Valley was also unique for the oddities in its forest. He was currently on a research grant, so, technically speaking he should be sending results regularly to his colleagues in Britain. Gathering data meant that he was frequently taking samples and notes on the animals and plants that lurked in the forest. Some of the plants were interesting and appeared to be perfectly safe. Other plants were worrying and made him hope that he was becoming paranoid while living alone in the woods. For example, there was this beautiful flower with amazing bioluminescence that faded to different

colors and glowed brightly like a fluorescent sign. The issue was that every time Jon returned to take more samples, whatever the plant had been growing on and the plant itself would disappear the next day. This was fine when it was fallen logs, but he once saw a patch growing on a neighbor's house.

He knocked on the door to find that the owner was... Martin. The man seemed surprised at Jon's visit. Jon gritted his teeth and decided despite his dislike for the man to invite Martin over for tea that evening. He managed to keep Martin the whole evening with little effort in large part because of Martin's uncanny ability to talk for hours on end without prompting.

Jon found his concern was warranted when the next morning Martin's home was gone.

Jon recounted some of his notable encounters, until his train of thought was interrupted by the sound of a recorder flipping on.

"What did you say about going incognito?" Jon whispered.

"Just wanted to offer some help, but if you aren't interested, I could just—"

"*What is it?*" Jon whispered, the irritation obvious in his voice.

"Well, since you asked so kindly, I wanted to let you know that the gardener cannot come too close to the tree."

"It's in the center of his garden. Why can't he tend to the main plant in his collection?"

"Hmmmmm, think of it the other way, why can't the servant go into the king's quarters?"

"Are you telling me the gardener serves the tree?"

"Serves it and feeds it."

That was a terrifying notion. "Lovely. Now, will you tell me what I'm actually here for?"

Jonah cleared his throat coughing as if he was actually speaking. It made Jon wonder if Jonah had a physical form that was talking through the recorders like speakers, but he doubted he would get

a straight answer if he asked Jonah himself. “*Yes, inside the garden is an Iris, you will need a couple for the ritual.*”

“For mine or yours?”

“Both.”

Jon let out a sigh but continued to trudge through the forest.

Jon knew a bit about the being of Magnus Valley with no thanks to Jonah. The being had given him brief pieces of information which piqued Jon’s interest but left him with more questions than answers. He knew there were beings beyond this world and the names of a couple of them, but major questions were still left unanswered. Why were these things in Magnus Valley specifically? Why did these beings choose specific people to feed on or to serve them? How do you protect yourself from them?

The gaps of information felt like when Jon lost teeth as a kid. There’s a gap that he’s keenly aware of and can’t help running his tongue over. In this case, he kept on running through the details in his mind as if that would bring a new revelation forward, or force Jonah to give him more answers. It was all so mind-boggling.

In this case, Jon knew that he was going to enter the garden of the flesh. The being that inhabited the garden was nicknamed ‘the gardener’ by Jonah and served a huge tree in the garden. He had to just go in and collect some flowers and then leave, easy enough.

Jon kept telling himself that, even as the landscape around him shifted. The tree’s bark looked ... softer and the pine needles beneath his feet had a different texture. Grabbing a fist full of pine needles from a nearby branch, Jon immediately dropped them as he felt the soft texture. The trees were covered in hair.

“Focus on the task, Jon,” he whispered to himself while hesitantly taking some samples. Maybe one day he would have the nerves to DNA test the hair.

The changes didn’t stop there, the pine cones glistened white and off yellow. The scales that broke off crunched beneath his feet, and Jon decided to ignore the sensation of walking on teeth.

He eventually came to a gate made surprisingly of regular looking wood. Not pushing his luck, Jon decided not to investigate the fence further. Gently pushing the gate open, Jon took care not to let it squeak as he went through. The other side resembled a serial killer's twisted idea of a garden. The rows of plants looked almost pretty from a distance, but up close, the illusion fell apart and the pieces of humans showed through. When a breeze came through, instead of wafting the smell of flowers, Jon caught the stench of blood. The scent was so strong that Jon nearly gagged.

He walked faster away from the roses after hearing a whimper.

His search for the flower garden took so long, the sun was setting by the time he spotted their corner of this appalling arboretum. Pulling out his headlamp for vision he started looking for his prize. He was struck by how many wonderful, lovely, and absolutely not horrifying flowers he witnessed as far as the eye could see.

After a while, it became clear he should have asked Jonah to describe them. His search for the Iris was taking most of the night. After midnight, he finally located a patch and ... he was not a fan of the way they all stared up at him, purple and blue eyes bloodshot.

Jon took out his clippers and carefully reached over the flowers. Thankfully he couldn't see any thorns on the stem but was fascinated by the nerve-like appearance of the stem. Carefully, he took a couple of the flowers until he heard a twig behind him snap.

Normally forests were full of sound. Especially at night when the bugs wouldn't stay quiet, and various nocturnal animals went about their business. Ever since he entered the garden though, it had been eerily quiet. The only noise was the muffled groan of something that was still being fed on by the plants.

That's to say, a branch snapping immediately caught his attention.

Looking up, Jon saw the source of the sound, and the source was staring back.

Standing there at a height that nearly reached the trees, the gardener was awake. It was dressed in a trench coat and a wide brim hat, which looked helpful if it was a sunny day and not the dead of

night. His hands were covered with gloves that were caked in layers of mud, and his boots were in a similar state. The entire being was covered in raggedy worn clothes with only hints of skin peeking out. The hints that Jon could catch sight of looked black and glistened in his light as if it was wet.

The being stood there unfurling itself, and Jon realized he had to move soon.

Shoving the flowers in the pocket of his jacket, Jon returned the stare that the gardener was giving him, before turning around and running as fast as his legs would carry him.

The moment their standoff ended, the chase was on. The gardener let out an inhuman howl before charging him. Jon didn't dare look back to see how fast it was moving, although he could guess from the steadily approaching sound of twigs snapping.

If he was a bit more athletic Jon would have commented on how poor a gardener the guy was for trampling his own plants. Alas, he was not athletic and was currently running for his life with the tree in the distance being his only hope.

He wasn't faster than the gardener by any means, but he had a decent head start and reached the tree before the gardener was able to catch up. That was when he noticed that the being wasn't stopping.

Jonah said he couldn't become close to the tree, but how close was too close?

Not risking it, Jon looked up at some of the branches and started scaling it. Thankfully, he was skilled enough with climbing to reach a higher branch before the being rammed into the tree. Jon grabbed the branch tighter as the gardener let out a screech that sounded like an injured animal.

Okay.

What the bloody hell.

"Jonah!" Jon yelled.

A tape recorder clicked on in his pocket. Jon spared the hand to pull the machine out and scream into it, **"What the fuck!"**

“Jon, it seems the gardener’s relationship with the garden has changed since I’ve last been here.”

Jon agreed, sarcasm clear in his tone, “seems that way.”

Beneath him, the gardener let out a howl again before ... grabbing a branch.

It was scaling the tree.

“Jonah, you have to do something.”

“There isn’t much I can do Jon; I don’t have a physical form after all.”

The tone was annoyingly calm for the situation. Jon couldn’t tell if it was from apathy, amusement, or trying to keep him calm? Either way, it was pissing him off more.

“Then tell me what I can do!”

Jon felt a gust of wind just under his leg. Looking down, the garden was just a few inches from grabbing him. With this closer view, Jon could make out many more details about the gardener. His skin looked damp, like a layer of topsoil covered its whole form.

His face in contrast to the rest of his form was entirely made of raw meat. It was composed of different colors, all sewn together like the pieces had come from different donors. The gardener smiled at him with a mouth that went a bit too far and showed him rows and rows of teeth.

“Let me take control. I can stop this now if you let me in.”

“No.”

The hand was reaching up again, the gardener was closer this time. He looked up, planning to continue climbing, but all the other branches were too far out of reach.

“Do you trust me?”

That wasn’t the real question. The real question was, did he want to die by the hands of the devil he knew or the devil he didn’t know.

He felt leather gloves on his leg. The skin underneath writhed like it was molding itself around him.

Jon screamed as he was pulled down from the branch.

The moment he hit the ground, Jon was surprised that his first thought wasn't 'I can't breathe, and I'm going to die.' It was, 'wow, the forest floor is very soft.'

Tilting his head, he was surprised to find he had landed on a patch of hair. That realization made his skin crawl, and the fight to catch his breath impossible.

He wasn't ready to die.

Without hesitation, the gardener plunged a hand into his torso. The sensation itched horribly and stung a lot but wasn't the excruciating pain that Jon had expected. Then it retracted its hand, and Jon spotted the prize it took. Gleaming white in his headlamp, Jon could make out what looked like his rib.

Then the gardener plunged his hand in again. So, he was an organ farm, this is how he was going to go, unless—

Jon looked helplessly at the recorder in his hand. He could hear the tape still running.

"I agree."

"Then it's a deal, Jonathan."

"—don't go into the woods at night, and that should be about it."

Jon hummed in acknowledgment.

The tour guide was a taller man with short cut blond and white hair. Despite the white hair, he looked like he could still be in uni. Jon assumed that it was cosmetic, and decided he didn't care to inquire further. He knew that the guide was kind to show him around the cabin, but Jon was struggling to bite back his snide remarks. The past few days of travel had been hard, and he was itching to have alone time.

"Well, that should be all."

Thank goodness, Jon was convinced his guide was the type to take

him on a tour of the woods to name every blade of grass. The only plus of the thoroughness was that he could now navigate his cabin with a blindfold on.

“Seems so. Well, this has been ... great, but I really should start unpacking—” Jon started to say while ushering the man off his front step.

“Wait, I have one last thing!”

Jon bit back a remark about this being the *third* one last thing. “What is it?”

“I run the diner just down the road, if you ever want to come by for a bite and coffee, or rather tea since you’re British? It’s on the house.”

“We’ll see.”

The man gave him a lopsided smile, which Jon caught a glimpse of before slamming the door shut.

After that, it was a whirlwind of discovering the mysteries of Magnus Valley. There were some obvious ones like those delivery men that kept on delivering coffins to this one house. It was strange because the guy didn’t run the funeral home, so why was he ordering them?

Or, who was ordering them for him?

Jon had tried to ask the two delivery men about their service, under the guise of wanting a package delivered. They seemed receptive to the idea of delivering a package ... until he started asking too many questions. They then made an offer to deliver a package to his house if he continued to bother them with questions. Which sounded innocuous enough, but their tone made it feel like a threat.

He didn’t know what to make of that threat but he wasn’t keen on finding out either.

Magnus Valley was full of strange people and occurrences, but what he was lacking was answers. No one who was friendly knew about the dangers or wanted to discuss them. Then there were the beings that seemed to have answers, who were too happy to “take care of the guy asking too many questions.” It all left him with more mysteries as the days passed, and no solutions.

As a result, the most helpful source of information was the Leitner library. The collection there was surprisingly large for a small town in the middle of nowhere, but the librarian said there was a rich donor that gave the town most of their books. Random fun fact, but Jon was happy to take advantage of the resources. The only problem with the library was their ever-growing bug infestation. It felt like every day Jon would spot worms or some other creature hiding amongst the books.

This was annoying but not unexpected for the library's age until one day it got worse. At the time, Jon had been several novels into investigating a new mystery. He realized half-way that this author had nothing new for him, so he went back to shelves.

The Leitner library seemed determined to resist the joys of a consistent system, instead giving into randomized madness decades ago. At least that's how Sasha explained Gertrude's method for organizing the books. She had finished her story by stating that it gave the library 'character,' which gave him a migraine.

Without a card system either, he was forced to randomly search the shelves until he found something promising, but high up.

Grabbing a ladder, Jon reached for the book but found himself slowly tipping over.

In less than a minute, three major things happened: One, he grabbed the shelf to steady himself. Two, this resulted in bringing the entire shelf down with him, and three, there was a large gaping hole in the wall.

Jon barely had time to process the third realization before a fourth one came crashing into him. On the other side of the hole was a huge infestation of maggots. One of the said maggots had found itself on his skin and was happily digging in as if his skin was merely dirt. He was horrified by the sight, but even more so when he saw the outline of a person. From the greenish tint to their skin and holes that marked their body, Jon assumed that it was something undead. The adrenaline kicked in immediately, and Jon found a sudden strength that he didn't know was in him. He ripped out the maggot and threw the shelf off himself. He sprinted away from the hole as several other maggots jumped after him.

Looking up, he saw Sasha run around the corner with a fire extinguisher in hand. Jon yelled that it was definitely not fire, but she told him to grab more as she pulled the pin and covered the writhing creatures in foam. He couldn't see the person anymore ... hopefully they retreated.

Jon wanted to follow her instructions, but he had no clue where the other fire extinguishers were. That's when he spotted another resident of the town, Tim. Tim apparently had already heard the commotion and practically threw an extinguisher at him. Jon fumbled the catch but managed not to drop the heavy container while Tim sprinted past him.

They covered almost every inch of the corner in foam, which thoroughly killed the infestation.

In the face of victory, Sasha and Tim were hooting and high fiving, while Jon took time to look mournfully at the books. It's a shame that so many of them were damaged.

Jon was shaken from his thoughts when a hand clasped his shoulder. He looked to see Tim was beaming at him. "I didn't know you had it in you."

"It's nothing ..." Jon mumbled, looking past Sasha and into what appeared to be a hole?

He swore he could make out a passage that went underground, so maybe that's where the creature went? Where did that tunnel go?

"Well, I think we should celebrate." Tim announced.

Sasha snickered. "You're always looking for a reason to celebrate."

"Sue me. We finally got the hermit out of his house, why not get to know him before he retreats for the next 30 years?"

Jon mumbled something about such seclusion being impractical as he would eventually need to buy groceries. He also expressed his irritation that he was not being asked if *he wanted* to join their celebration.

Despite his complaints, Jon found himself being dragged to the town's bar. The evening was fine, at least until Tim spun around in

his chair. Jon swore Tim had sixth sense because Martin was still in the doorway when Tim called out to him.

“Hey Martin! Over here!” Tim yelled, gaining the attention of several tables near them. Jon didn’t need to look over to feel the waves of embarrassment emanating from Martin. Looking over, his hunch was proved right by the beet red face that Martin was sporting. In addition, he was also hunched down as if trying to make himself smaller despite his large stature. After a moment of hesitation, he started walking towards them and Jon formulated how quickly he could escape this situation.

He considered just standing up and leaving, but Sasha had been rather helpful with his research. She seemed to have a knack for pointing him in the right direction, and she annoyingly had a soft spot for the local diner owner. Jon did the math quickly and decided he could finish his current pint in the next ten minutes, then he would have a plausible excuse to leave. When Martin joined them at the table, it became clear he was going to take the one empty seat next to Jon.

Jon gave him a nod before the man mumbled a thank you and took his place at the table. The conversation became much quieter with Martin there so Jon focused on finishing his pint.

The moment the drink was empty, he made a scene of checking his watch and commenting on the time. Everyone wished him a good night, although Martin’s sounded more like a squeak. Jon made no comment as he hurried out of the bar and to the destination that had been lingering on his mind.

He had a bit of knowledge about lock picking from his uni days. He and an ex-girlfriend would explore supposedly haunted houses together, but Jon was frustrated to find he was getting rusty.

Maybe I should buy some locks to practice with. Jon thought to himself after finally getting the door to push open.

He hurried inside and found the hole in the wall. Empty buildings at night could be eerie, which was why Jon had no trepidation about entering a mysterious hole alone.

Reaching into his bag, Jon pulled out a small flashlight and started approaching the wall. Beneath his feet the dead worms made a pop sound, and Jon resolutely decided not to look at them. On the other side, he saw a passageway with a staircase going down.

He hesitated. What if that creature he saw was still down there?

Maybe he should go home, or ...

Running to the library counter, Jon spotted a stockpile of fire extinguishers and grabbed one that still had a pin in it. "Watch out, mysterious passageway," Jon huffed, running back with the fire extinguisher in hand.

It was a balancing act to hold his flashlight and the canister, but Jon managed his way down the stairs. The top few steps were covered in dead maggots but as he went down, the bodies disappeared, and the steps changed too. The top steps appeared to be made of concrete, but the lower ones were carved into the stone. He pondered this until he came to a hallway. Unperturbed, Jon continued to wander the tunnels that seemed to have no end.

He continued to walk as the stone arched walls became packed dirt. He noticed after a while that it appeared he was in a cave. Maybe that was why the tunnels were going on forever.

"Maybe I should have gone home," Jon mumbled, until he spotted a ... doorway? It wasn't fancy, just a basic post and lintel design, but it was clearly man-made, so he risked looking inside. Poking his flashlight in, Jon was first caught off guard by how high the ceiling was.

The walls too were so far away that he couldn't see the other side of the cavern.

Jon's hands itched to record all of this immediately in his journal. It was beautiful.

Shining the light on the ground, Jon saw there was a slim bridge in front of him with no sides. He would bet that if he laid down, his feet would be dangling off the edge of the path. The drop off was steep and again went beyond what his flashlight could illuminate. He hesitated in the doorway for a moment before sighing to himself. "I've come this far."

The bridge was unique from the walls, it was made of cut stone, as if humans had constructed the bridge ... to what, exactly?

He continued to follow the bridge's path until he came to a large platform, which made him less nervous about tripping over the edge into a black abyss. He continued to look for his answer for why these people made the space, until Jon rapidly found his answer. He let out a surprised scream and nearly dropped his flashlight when he spotted the body. The only thing that kept him from sprinting away was that it was clearly a skeleton.

Jon approached the remains and looked for a sign of an altar or sacrificial artifacts. Instead, he found a scroll in the skeleton's hands. He was at first shocked by the paper not being dust if the body's decay was anything to go off of, but then was intrigued by what the person had been holding in their last moments.

Pulling it out of the clutched grip, Jon unrolled the scroll to find that it was still legible. "Statement of Jonah Magnus regarding the founding of Magnus Valley.

Statement given 1818—" Jon heard the sound of something clicking. He was tempted to look up and see what it was, but he couldn't look away from the scroll in his hands.

When Jon realized this, he immediately got flashbacks to strange alleyways and the empty look in his mother's eyes.

No.

NO.

The words of the statement kept on pouring out of his mouth as his hands shook. He couldn't even release the paper from his hands. More tapes were clicking on.

Was this how his parents felt? Were they mentally present the whole time, but found themselves prisoners in their own body?

A tear rolled down his face while he bit back a sob, but found the pitiful sound just mixed with his voice as he continued to read the statement out loud. Another tear came, then another and another until his vision was so blurry he couldn't make out the words of paper.

“Ceaseless watcher I call upon you to raise your loyal servant. I call upon you to mark this flesh and your own in exchange for his.”

Jon bit his tongue, but it was too late. The walls started to glow a deep green. It wasn't until then that Jon could really comprehend the scale of the room, and it was larger than he imagined.

It didn't matter anymore; he clearly was about to be killed by this watcher.

He closed his eyes and prepared for whatever horrifying end was going to take him ... when it all stopped.

Opening one eye hesitantly then another, he realized everything was silent. Even the walls' symbols, with the light which had been increasing in intensity, had suddenly stopped.

“Well, that was a pleasant walk down memory lane.”

Jon startled at the voice behind him so bad that he nearly stumbled off the bridge. The only reason he didn't tumble were two hands that reached out and grabbed him in time. They held him intently as Jon looked up to see ... Jonah.

Jonah stared at him with eyes that glowed brighter than his flashlight and a large, uncanny smile.

That with the vice grip on his arms would normally set him on edge, but seeing a familiar face was suppressing those worries.

“Why am I reliving my old memories?” Jon asked.

“You're asleep Jonathan, so your brain is taking inspiration from your real memories to fabricate this dream.”

Asleep.

He tried to recall the events leading up to falling unconscious. He was aware that he had been searching for something, but what it was was escaping him.

Jonah hummed as if he was reading Jon's mind, which since he was there ... that may be a real possibility.

At that thought Jonah's smile only increased, which felt like a

confirmation. Jon watched as Jonah's hands moved down his arms to lace their fingers together. The sensation felt comforting, and he felt too tired in the moment to deny himself the pleasure of leaning into the touch.

"Come along, we have a lot to discuss before you wake up." Jon nodded, and Jonah pulled him along, with their hands still entwined.

They left the room and instead of stepping into the cave, they entered a massive library. The bookshelves looked endless, and Jon found himself nervously eyeing the ladders that were attached to the bookshelves and looked equally endless. Far above them there were swirling clouds that formed a shape that reminded Jon of an eye.

"Here we are." Jonah said, ushering Jon into a plush seat.

Jon took the seat without a fight as Jonah assumed a spot across from him. In front of them was a checkered table with what appeared to be chess pieces already set up.

"Are you a fan of chess?" Jonah asked.

Jon nodded. He enjoyed the game but found it difficult to find an opponent that challenged him. It was boring to know the outcome of the game, and the kids at school seemed to agree because after a while he got socially exiled from the chess club.

Jonah grinned at him and moved the knight forward.

"Your turn, specs."

"You should stick with that one."

Jonah arched his eyebrow, seeming to silently ask for elaboration.

"I prefer that nickname over the others."

Jonah flashed him another toothy grin, "Noted."

It was odd seeing him in such a good mood. Jon wondered to himself what could have happened to cause it.

"What has you in such a good mood?" Jon asked, moving his rook across the board. He didn't expect an honest answer, but never hurts to ask.

“We’re on schedule, you’ll have your little revenge in no time.”

Jon frowned. He was enjoying the chess game, but the reminder of their work made playing games feel silly. He should be preparing the ritual, not relaxing.

“On that topic, I really should get back to work.”

Jonah huffed at that. “I love your dedication to your revenge, and your interest in the creatures of Magnus Valley.”

Jon tried to look unimpressed, but he could feel his face flushing at the compliments. Even worse, he was sure that Jonah could see it.

Jonah leaned forward, resting his arms on the table to reach for Jon’s hands. After placing a hand over Jon’s, he spoke again. “But I recommend you try a new approach.”

This immediately raised his defenses again, and despite the pleasant warmth in his hands, he pulled away like Jonah was made of fire. “New approach?”

“Delegation. You are doing the work of a research team on your own, and it’s truly unbelievable what you are doing. I truly could not have met a better man to break my curse, but you are doing it alone.”

Jon reached out to offer his hand again. It reminded Jon of when he used to feed feral cats. The slow approach and holding out your hand to give them the chance to interact first.

He considered it before. He really did want to take Jonah’s hand and agree to the deal, but he was still held back by fear. “Didn’t I already agree for you to take my body?”

Jonah hummed, “For that moment, yes, but for the long term we would have to make a separate deal.”

In a dream world, it’s impossible to tell the passage of time, but Jon could take a guess that he had been contemplating in silence for a while. At least, looking at Jonah’s strained smile, he could guess that it had been a bit of time.

“When I’m asleep, you can take my body to work on the ritual. You cannot harm anyone, including myself, and property. If you break

these rules, you will be pushed out of my body. Understand?”

“Perfectly.”

Jon nodded and took Jonah’s hand. As their hands clasped together, he felt a warmth of ... flames? The fire consumed their hands, but it didn’t burn his skin. Jon stared at it amazed.

Jon ventured to ask Jonah what was happening, “What is—”

Jon gasped for breath as his head rose from the pillow.

For a moment, panic swelled in his chest, and he noticed how soft the surface under him was, but he realized they were sheets and not grass-like hair from the garden. Jonah got him home safe somehow.

Letting out a sigh of relief, he noticed there was a book on his chest. Leaning forward, he was excited to see it was his journal!

Flicking on a side lamp, he immediately started writing about the night’s adventure. He was sure to fill a couple pages with details just from the garden.

He was thankful that Jonah had held up his end of the bargain and that gave Jon some hope that maybe he was honest about the other parts of his life. Jon wasn’t sure what being could trap Jonah in another plane of existence without a body, but if their partnership continued to work, he hoped they could find a solution that would free him.

For the next few days Jon would catch himself absentmindedly rubbing the part of his hand where Jonah’s held his. He hoped this ritual would work, not only for the sake of his parents’ memory, but for his new friend. Sometimes one can only hope.





A Final Farewell

greydecayed



warnings: gore, necrophilia, wound fucking

ELIAS LOOKS SO GODDAMN *SMUG*. HE'S HIS USUAL SELF-SATISFIED self, leering at Jon as he comes into view. Insultingly enough, he appears to be legitimately happy to see Jon. His gaze sweeps over Jon's face, those grey eyes glinting with an unhinged, manic glee, and his smile widens all the more like he actually missed him. How strange, to see that face once again, and to know for a fact it doesn't belong to Elias at all. The truth of who his boss truly was had always been located in those eyes.

He had chosen his stolen face well, and Jon had always disliked that he had always found him quite attractive. It feels like it's been forever since he last laid eyes on Elias, and he can't help but inspect him once more. One apocalypse later and he still looks just as good. An older man for sure, possibly in his 40s. He only has the faint beginnings of wrinkles showing on that handsome face, but they work well with his features and serve to grant him a certain depth, a maturity, though Jon knows now that the real Elias was in fact far older than a subtle implication of age could possibly convey. Usually his hair is impeccably combed, but now it's untamed and rather wild, enhancing the raw, nearly feral energy that he has taken on

now in the ashes of this ruined world. No doubt he has been exalting in his triumph. Despite his better judgement, Jon is drawn to him even now. Elias had always been good at reeling him in. He can't find it in himself to resist. Could he ever?

Even now, even when Jon knows the truth, that the man standing before him is Jonah Magnus, he still can't quite believe it. All Jon can see is Elias Bouchard, his boss, the head of the Magnus Institute. The man who ruined countless lives, who forced Jon into becoming something monstrous. Jon is furious, and he knows exactly how he's going to express his anger: with the eight inches of steel he has brought with him. He knows for a fact Elias would not expect this from him, and truth be told, he's unsure if he'll be able to do what he needs to do. But he makes eye contact at last, drawing his face away from that deadly smirk, lips pressed together in a knowing smile.

Those eyes. Within that facade of a face, they are truly his. They are rife with good humour, amusement, easily meeting Jon's own eyes. They give the impression that this whole situation, this manufactured apocalypse Jon had unintentionally heralded, is some kind of inside joke that the two of them are in on. Like they're co-conspirators, equals, *accomplices*, when that isn't true at all. Jon had been the unwitting victim the whole time, unknowingly wrapped around Elias' finger since the day that he had first stepped foot in the Magnus institute to interview for the job that would end up changing his life forever.

It's worth it, in the end, for as he stalks closer to Elias he delights in the shock in those cold grey eyes when he finally lunges forth and stabs the man. Jon does his best to channel everyone who had perished as he went about doing the grim business, but in the end, he realizes that, at its core, this is a selfish act of revenge. It's also easier than he thought it would be, but Jon tries not to think about that. He has enough force behind his initial strike that the knife slips into Elias' flesh effortlessly, and Jon savours the surprise written all over Elias' face. Finally, something he couldn't predict, he couldn't magically *know* due to deific power. Elias doesn't know what Jon is truly capable of anymore. This murder, as gruesome as it is, is a choice Jon had finally made for himself. He's done dancing

on Elias' strings, free at last from being a puppet to forces beyond his comprehension.

Yanking the knife out proves more difficult, but Jon has momentum now. Blood spurts from the gash left behind, and Elias is saying something, or maybe he's merely whimpering, and so Jon brings his arm down again, stabbing into his flesh violently. He realizes, belatedly, that he is enjoying this. He twists the knife where it lands before he withdraws it, delighting in the panicked, pained gasp he draws out from Elias. A delicate drool of crimson spews from the resulting gash, and as blood spills with each thrust, it feels so *good*. Is Jon truly lost, then? A monster? Is this what Elias felt, when he took matters into his own hands and beat Leitner to death with a metal pipe?

It's an act of pure rage. Jon vents all of his frustration as he brings the knife down, again and again and again. Elias is unraveling at last, undoubtedly dying, and a part of it feels wrong. After all, he had always been so capable, so larger than life, unflappable even when sentenced to prison. Of course, Jon can't go on forever, and the adrenaline rush is fading fast, diminishing along with his anger. Elias is bleeding out from countless wounds and he looks surprisingly sexy, drenched in scarlet more vibrant than Jon thought possible. It's really his colour, and more of it keeps coming, a steady saturation of red staining him thoroughly.

Elias' gaze is trained on him now, and they're so close together that it's no effort at all for Jon to bring himself forward further. Jon doesn't know what makes him decide to encroach on Elias' space, if only to be witness to the last words that Jonah Magnus will ever speak. Of course, he misjudged the look in Elias' eyes entirely. Jon's hand is still on the knife, and the knife is still inside Elias and Elias' bloody fingers flex weakly against his chin, drawing him in for a kiss. It's messy, bloody, and surprisingly intense. Their lips lock and Elias doesn't let him go. His world is a thing of flesh and blood, a wet tongue and hot blood rushing into his mouth as Elias kisses him hard. Everything is slick with Elias' blood as it's shared freely between the two of them, and to his horror Jon finds himself far too easily seduced.

There's so much blood, the harsh metallic scent of it filling his

nostrils and leaving room for little else. The taste of it is just as intense as the smell of it, Elias' blood lingering on his tongue, no doubt smeared messily all along his lips. Then, all at once, Elias has collapsed to the floor and Jon finds himself going along with him, straddling him, though he's unsure why he's bothering to do so, aside from old habits dying hard. A shock runs through him when he settles on his lap and realizes Elias is hard.

Elias withdraws his hand from where it had been pressed against the worst of his wounds, and Jon wonders what in the world could be worth Elias sacrificing some of his effort to hold his guts in. His question is swiftly answered as the bloodied palm comes into view, approaching his face. Elias' blood-soaked hand brushes against Jon's cheek, cradling him as gently as a lover and leaving a bloody handprint in its wake.

"What do you say?" Even his voice is fading as he teases Jon, his hand too weak to offer much more than an unsteady caress as the strength is sapped and it falls limply to his side. Jon swears he feels pressure from where he's straddling him, that perhaps Elias is attempting to grind into him even while he's dying.

"One last round?" Elias' voice is a soft, seductive purr, and Jon doesn't know why he's so eager for it, but it's not like he'll get another chance for this. Jon can't find it in him to resist. It had always been easier to go along with what Elias had wanted.

This is sick. It's disgusting. It's horrific and macabre and Jon finds he can't get enough. The monstrous parts of him are responding to it, the parts that delight in suffering, that want to make Elias hurt. He's desperate to settle the score, to inflict even more pain on him when he still has the chance. All is still, his ears burning with the pained groans Elias is making, the harsh, intermittent panting. It's too easy to find it erotic, and his mind starts to run wild. The knife is still buried inside of Elias, blood oozing rapidly now from multiple stab wounds. Jon fumbles around his blood-soaked torso, fingers fumbling as he finds the knife's handle and pulls it free.

This causes Elias to moan loud and long, delightful music to his ears, and Jon sees even more blood accumulating to spill freely from the fresh gash. Elias has never been more appealing than when he is

approaching death. Everything now is bathed in crimson, drenched in blood. It's difficult for Jon to undress, but all he needs to do is unbutton his pants. A few tugs on his cock and he's hard enough to insert it into one of the many lacerations. It's all too easy to slide his cock into one of the wounds, slick and slimy with blood as they are. There's no way Elias has the strength to do anything but lie back and watch, his breathy groans morphing into wet gargles as Jon agitates his wounds, shifting to sheath himself more thoroughly inside of him. The bloody current is flowing freely now, a messy torrent of frothy crimson.

What finally tips him over the edge is the belated realization that, during some part of this, Elias had indeed finally died and Jon didn't even register it. No gaze meets his as he stares into those dull grey eyes. Lifeless at last. The man who sought to escape death, dead by Jon's hand. The man who put him through hell, who made Jon into the horrendous monster he has become, finally meeting his end. Before something ridiculous like grief can begin to well up in him, he's already thrusting deep into Elias' guts as his orgasm overcomes him. It's overwhelming but so incredibly satisfying, the mixed emotions he has concerning his murder of his former boss obliterated entirely as he gives into the pleasure.

Jon isn't sure how long he stays there, fastened to the corpse as it grows cold and the wealth of blood spilled begins to dry. He gathers himself at last, and Jon sees that all that's left behind of Jonah Magnus is the bloody corpse of Elias Bouchard, butchered and violated. Jon feels like he always does after interacting with Elias: that something indelible has been taken from him to never return. Jon can't afford to be emotional after what he just did, but something strange overcomes him and he finds himself with his fingertips pressed to Elias' eyes. The tenderness he acts with surprises himself as he slides each eyelid shut. The mournfulness he feels is unexpected. He stands and rises, moving away from the cooling corpse, whispering the faintest of words.

"Maybe in another life."



ADMINS

LINN

proofreader, shipping

🦋 ppoka-p

EMPERIOCISM

organizer, artist

† emperiocism

🦋 emperiocism

DESMOND

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FELIX STRAND

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🔗 doorhusband

🦋 chaoticgremlinpriest

LOSTINBORDERLAND

artist

🔗 lostinborderland

TALKING4THE1ANDONLY

artist + writer

🔗 talking4the1

ACE PHOEBENAVARRO

writer

🦋 phoebenavarro

🦋 ace-isace

CULLENDRAWS

artist

🔗 cullendrawss

🦋 cullendraws

LUA

writer

🦋 lua

CAKE

artist

🔗 antlercakes

📷 antlercakes

FREETOBEPROBLEMATIC

writer

🦋 angelblack3

🦋 freetobedeaddove

CORNMAGNATE

artist

🔗 cornmagnate

ANYSIN

writer

🔗 anysin

🦋 anysin

CATBOYJONAH

artist

🔗 catboy-draws

📷 harimenui_forever

UNENDING-VIGIL

writer

🔗 unending-vigil

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RUNEFELLS

artist

🔗 runefells

HAUNTEDTEACUPS

writer

🔗 hauntedteacups

🦋 hauntedteacups

STATUSCROWS

writer

🔖 statuscrows

🔗 statuscrows

PORCHTART

artist

🔖 porchtart

✂ porchtart

JESSE MANDO

writer

n/a

JHADE

artist

🔖 irelise

CLOVERDOSE

writer

🔖 beheldandcompelled

🔗 cloverdose

SHAY

artist

🔖 mementoasts

🔗 mementoasts

ANONYMOUS

writer

n/a

TEEJCANDRAW

artist

🔗 teejcandraw

🔗 teejcandraw

TOBY

artist

🔖 inkcritters

CLOVER44

artist

🔖 clover-44-8

🔗 clover44

GREYDECAYED

writer

🔖 greydecayed

🔗 decayed

YAMSARTS

artist

🔖 yamwrites

🔗 yamswrites