

to make a cradle of your palm

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to make a cradle of your palm

by [renquise](#)

Summary

Essek offers Caleb his spellbook, open to the page of a new spell.

As Caleb suspected, his adaptation of Essek's gravity spell was different in its conception, for all that the result was the same. The architecture of this similar spell speaks of a different thought process, a different set of basic assumptions. It is beautifully engineered, efficient in its use of components and energy: a simple spell requiring only a length of silk thread and yet capable of reaching over a great distance and causing great damage, if applied with intent to harm.

"If you would like, you can, ah. You may—" Essek gestures at his own throat, a quick, inelegant spread of fingers. "Test the application of pressure that the spell exerts."

It takes Caleb a moment to register what Essek is proposing. He is a delicate speaker, as always.

Notes

For a prompt for breathplay that draws on that "just breathe" moment. Takes place in an imaginary interval at the end of 131 after the conversation with Essek at the outpost before they go into Aeor. Mind the tags? I might be overstating things a bit, but I wanted to be sure that no one goes in blind!

I love how the wizards are finally having actual conversations about what is between them, and in response, I finish a wip where they utterly fail to have a conversation. Like, how wild that their relationship is evolving so quickly and dynamically that I need to pinpoint the exact moment between episodes where this story works with where they stand with each other, haha.

Edit 22-2-22: Oh my god. Please do your eyeballs a favour and look at [this gorgeous, gorgeous piece by saturdaysky](#) from this fic, because I absolutely lost my mind over it. The hands!! The HANDS.

The Nein step out of Essek's chamber to take a breath before diving below the surface, and Caleb stays.

The space is very bare. There are ledgers and a few books on a shelf, and the desk is neatly organized for writing and well-lit by a window, but beyond that—very little. The air is crisp and cold, with little of the ozone smell that always remains in spaces where magic is often cast, nor the tang of alchemical components. Caleb cannot tell if the space is empty or carefully blank, made to be unreadable. The door opens.

Essek is a long column in the doorway, silhouetted against the light reflecting off the ice. He drifts in. It takes him a moment to close the door when it is clear that Caleb is staying.

Caleb blinks his eyes, adjusting again to the semi-dark of the room, the details of Essek's face coming clear again. He is much the same as in Rosohna: the same high cheekbones and smooth brow. Deeper shadows beneath his clear eyes, perhaps. One of his hands emerges from his cloak, gently poised on the bag hanging at his hip.

"Caleb? Are the rest waiting?"

"The others are taking a rest before we leave."

"Ah. A good idea. There is a considerable walk ahead of us."

"I. Thank you for coming with us," Caleb says. He passes his hands over his face. "I apologize for—for the difficult position I put you in during that conversation. We have—there have been a lot of trials and complications, the past few days, as I said. It has made us desperate, I think."

He hates that it is this hedging language that comes to his tongue first. The urge to smooth ruffled feathers, if there are any, to make sure this alliance remains whole.

Essek shrugs, a brief shifting of the fur around his shoulders. His poise is crystalline and intact, as if he was not speaking in fervent whispers not an hour ago, as if he was not brought low by the mere idea that they might place some measure of trust in him. Difficult to read, Caleb thinks, and wants to laugh.

"I cannot blame you. It is a desperate situation," Essek says.

Caleb thought he had more to say. No. There is too much to say, and he does not know where to start.

Essek allows the silence to hang for longer than Caleb expects. His fingers trace over his bag. Caleb wonders if he is cataloguing his components with the same reflex as he.

"You mentioned briefly that a spell you used in your recent endeavour could be recognized as Dynasty magic. My curiosity would not forgive me if I did not ask what it was."

"Mm. The one with the—" Caleb holds out a hand and makes a fist of it, quick and vicious.

"I see." Essek blinks a few times. His lip catches on the point of his eyetooth. "You—ah, you reverse-engineered it? With some—noodling, I think you called it?"

Caleb shrugs. He remembers combing over the equations of the basic principles of dunamancy that Essek gifted him, trying to piece together what he saw in the dark of the dungeon, what it was in this magical framework that Essek had wielded so precisely, what a crushing force held in the palm of his hand might feel like. He knows now what Essek felt under his hand in that moment, the resistance and sickening yielding of a body.

"Yes. I'm not sure I achieved an exact reproduction. The details, I muddled through, I think."

Essek raises an eyebrow. "I wouldn't think so. You are not one to muddle details. It's—ah, it's impressive. Especially considering the context in which you encountered it."

Essek flicks his spellbook out of his wristpocket, the rift opening and closing in a blink. His fingers trace over the worked leather on the spine for a long moment before he flips it open.

"I have another spell for you, if you want it. A localized application of gravity. Similar to what you worked out, but more precise."

"I am always interested in what you have to offer. And I think we will need everything we can muster for what is to come." Caleb swallows. It is strange to find this familiar territory once again on uncertain terms. He is reminded of the way the snow changes the landscape here, dissimulating crevasses and solid ground alike. "I'm not sure I have anything to offer in return."

Essek ducks his head. "I think I mentioned before that I owe you all far more than I could ever repay. But I would be interested to see your notes for the other spell, later. I suspect you might have found a different approach with the same result."

Essek lays his spellbook open on the desk and steps away. "There is an inkwell in the first drawer. You are welcome to it."

Caleb draws his spellbook out of his holster and lays it on the desk. The drawer sticks when he tries to open it at first, but the ink that he finds inside it is shimmering and fine.

Essek stands a little distance away, his hands tucked under his cloak. His eyes flick to Caleb's work, but he makes no move to be any closer. He turns instead to an open ledger on the shelf that Caleb suspects is already meticulously balanced.

As he suspected, his adaptation of Essek's spell was different in its conception, for all that the result was the same. It is fascinating: the architecture of this similar spell speaks of a different thought process, a different set of basic assumptions. Essek's spell is beautifully engineered, efficient in its use of components and energy: a simple spell requiring only a length of silk thread and yet capable of reaching over a great distance and causing great damage if applied accurately, with intent to harm.

He thinks of Beauregard, held by the throat above the snow, her lifeblood spilling out of her, of what he would do to prevent that outcome again.

He finishes copying the spell. When he rolls the blotter on Essek's desk over the surface, the fine lines of the spell are carried onto it in reverse.

Essek folds down the roll of his bag. There are minute pouches sewn along the inside of it, each stamped with its component. His fingers unerringly find a bobbin of thread inside one of the pouches. Essek rolls it between his fingers, then steps closer to place it beside Caleb's spellbook.

Caleb stands and folds his spellbook away. He takes the bobbin. The thread is dove-grey and very fine.

"You do not need this?"

"No," Essek says. "I have another."

Before Caleb can file the bobbin away appropriately, Essek reaches out and taps a gloved finger on it.

"You should not go into Aeor with an untested tool."

Caleb shrugs. "There is so much that is unknown about what we are doing. This hardly makes the list, I think."

"Ah. Yes. But if you would like, you can, ah. You may—" Essek gestures at his own throat, a quick, inelegant spread of fingers. "Test the application of pressure that the spell exerts."

It takes him a moment to register what Essek is proposing. He is a delicate speaker, as always.

Caleb swallows. The air is very dry here. His fingers trace over the ink already dry on the page. Caleb would usually ask for a spell to be demonstrated on himself. That is the way he was taught. How better to know the effects of a spell on the body than to know it yourself. He should ask Essek to do so, and yet— he cannot bring himself to it, shies away from it.

Caleb finds his voice. "I do not know that it is a good idea."

Essek waves this aside. "I've seen you cast. Your precision is remarkable."

Caleb knows his magic, knows it intimately, like a lover, like a well-loved pet, like the weight of a weapon. He showed Essek this once: look, how I am able to finely control this extension of myself to delicately open a door to you.

He does not trust his hold on this spell. Not for this.

"Why would you trust me with this?"

As soon as it spills out of him, he knows it is too bare a question. Too desperate to his ears. Essek knows that Caleb would ask him to die willingly by working with Ikithon. Essek knows that glassy blood-red eyes sit in Caleb's skin, a mark of his own hubris and an unknown force in his skin. And yet, here he is still.

Despite everything, despite all his doubts, he wants Essek safe and well. It feels selfish.

Essek huffs out a breath. It hangs in the air as a brief cloud, the air around them cold, even in his chambers. The warming globe that Essek was carrying is extinguished, and its warmth fled quickly.

“You held my fate, my position, my life’s work in your hands and yet decided to let me go free. What is my breath, compared to that?”

By all appearances, Essek is contained, calm, and yet Caleb can feel the nervous energy sitting in his skin.

“That isn’t an answer,” Caleb says helplessly, frustration twisting in his chest. He wonders if Essek doesn’t know himself.

“Then: I would like to see how it handles with your touch.”

It still isn’t an answer. He has no idea why Essek would offer him this; not even a shadow of it like a shape moving below the water. Essek is entirely opaque to him, a still, icy lake that shows only his own reflection and betrays nothing of its depths.

"I would have to touch you. To ensure I notice the effect of the spell."

Essek’s eyes glance up to meet his, then dart away. “Of course.”

Essek undoes the ties to his mantle, takes off the outer layer of his cloak, and folds them onto his desk. He loosens the layers around his neck. The amulet hangs on his sternum, still inert, of no protection yet.

The edges of Essek’s thin undershirt are rumpled and displaced, hanging like moth wings around his throat. In this rustic setting, he seems almost unreal, all of him finely and delicately made. His shoulders draw up as a shiver passes through him.

Essek braces himself against the desk, his fingers curled around the edge. His feet are firmly on the floor.

Caleb wraps the silk thread around his palm in three loose loops, just as Essek’s notes specified. It feels almost weightless, delicate yet strong.

Caleb knows full well the altered state of mind that lack of air can incite. He wonders if Essek knows this. If he knows to what extent he is relying on Caleb to notice when it is too much. He must.

“Can you—can you counter this? Do you still have the ability to do so today?”

Essek blinks slowly at him. His gaze is steady. “Yes.”

“And you will, if necessary?”

“Mm. It will not come to that.”

It should be a warning. It isn't. Essek's voice is sure as snow, settling in layers and making the world still and muffled.

He has half a mind to ask Essek to demonstrate that he does have the magic pooled in his belly to keep himself safe. Like this, Caleb could stop any verbal components before they left Essek's mouth, arrest any shaping of magic through the vibrations of his voice. Essek has no components or focus at hand. For all his skill and knowledge and power, there is very little he could do to stop Caleb.

He wonders if Essek is deliberately making himself vulnerable. Caleb is no stranger to that move. But then: does it matter, when it is vulnerability all the same?

"Please," Essek says, tilting his chin up.

Caleb lifts his hand to Essek's throat, resting the fingers lightly on the side of his neck. He can feel the quick lift of Essek's chest when Essek inhales sharply and meets his gaze again. Essek guides Caleb's hand to lie just under his jaw. His pulse is quick.

Caleb twists the fingers of his left hand in the somatic gesture for the spell. He feels the spell take form immediately around Essek's neck, a slight pressure that increases when he slips his thumb under the silk thread to make it taut.

Essek's body jerks, his hands tightening around the edge of his desk and his foot sliding over the wooden boards. Caleb's hand rests lightly on his throat. Under his hand, the spell holds tight. The spell is finely tuned. He can control the pressure by the smallest of increments with the thread, shape it to press the sides of his neck and carefully cradle the trachea, to provide just enough pressure to limit his breath.

He can hear, feel Essek's speeding pulse as if it were his own, echoed in the spell, loud in his ears and heavy on his fingertips.

One moment, Essek's body is strung tight, and the next, his shoulders drop, his lips part. His gaze softens, a haziness layered over his sharp gaze. Caleb knows this feeling. The lack of air leads to panic, a reflex stronger than will to preserve the body, but then: a floating euphoria.

Essek's expression is so open. It shakes Caleb to see him so.

Essek is plainly terrified of retribution coming for him even in this far, icy place, his body strung tight with adrenaline every moment that they've been together, so brittle with fear and shame that Caleb fears that a touch will shatter him. And yet—Essek will let him do this. Will slacken against his touch as though it is a comfort.

Essek could crush him with a drop of blood and his outstretched hand. But here, now, Essek lies quiescent against his grasp, giving himself over to Caleb's hold. Caleb almost resents this vulnerability, wants Essek to be someone he cannot hurt.

Something falls away in Essek's eyes, his eyelids fluttering, and Caleb's stomach flips, and he banishes the spell from existence, his heart in his throat, silk falling in loose coils against his palm as he yanks his hand back from Essek's throat.

“Essek—”

He catches Essek under the elbow when he threatens to tip backwards. Essek sucks in a full breath, gasping, his chest heaving, a hand curled against his sternum. His wide eyes flicker up to Caleb.

His pupils are wide, black eating the clear violet of his irises, a hole in reality every bit as beautiful as the event horizon of his magic. The corners of his eyes shine with reflexive tears.

The room is very close and very silent, but for Essek’s breath.

Essek touches the back of Caleb's hand still hanging in the space between them, the loose loops of silk hanging from his palm. His hand is cool, even though his gloves. Caleb wonders if he is always so, or if Eisecross has chilled him.

“Again,” Essek says, his voice ragged, yet still gilded with the hauteur that makes Caleb want to both challenge him and please him.

Caleb cannot deny him.

He recasts the spell, presses his fingers into the column of Essek’s neck, and Essek shudders hard against his touch. The tremble of his skin echoes through his magic.

Essek’s hand drops to clasp Caleb’s forearm where it still cups his elbow, supporting his weight. The bones of their forearms press together, vein to vein.

This would be easier if he were lying down. But pressing Essek into the softness of a bed seems—too much in its wanting. Too much like something that would end with the two of them curled like parentheses around the scant space between them, space that could be filled with words.

He strokes the side of his thumb over Essek’s skin, his palm singing with the energy of the spell contained. Essek shudders hard and arches up against him, his mouth parted and soundless, the white points of his eyeteeth visible against the velvet darkness of his mouth. Caleb wants to see if his teeth will cut, to stop his breath with a more tender touch, to press his mouth to the fine line of Essek's throat and his thrumming pulse.

Without his cloak, his mantle, his layers of office, Essek is slight. He must feel the cold more than most. Caleb could easily sit Essek on his desk, part his legs around his waist, encourage him to grind slow and easy against him, let this warmth between them build and bloom. It is very cold here.

Caleb releases the hold of the spell, and Essek gasps, his eyes wide, his chest heaving. His fingers spasm against the edge of the desk, his knees loose under him. Caleb allows himself to touch the tender hollow beneath his jaw, to feel the living, breathing presence of his body.

“Are you—” He doesn’t know how to finish that sentence.

Caleb lets his hand rest on Essek’s chest, pressing small circles with the heel of his hand. He hopes it serves to ground him.

“Just breathe.”

Essek huffs out a ragged laugh. Another thing they have in common: a terrible sense of humour.

The tips of his fingers rest on Essek’s clavicle, the sweet jutting line of it inviting Caleb’s eye to the hollow of his throat. He wants to feel the places where Essek’s bones meet his skin, the places where flesh settles over them and softens their edges. Essek is too touchable in this moment with his layers laid aside, and it scares Caleb.

Caleb pulls Essek’s undershirt back into place, smoothing the wings of it with the flat of his shaking hand. He settles the overlayer back over it, and then finally draws together the edges of Essek’s high-collared robe. Caleb fumbles a few of the fine buttons when sliding them through their fastenings, but Essek is still, silent, letting him work. Even with this shield restored, it is too much to see Essek with his cloak and mantle still set aside, the tentative lines of his body bared.

It takes Essek a moment to find his voice.

"Ah. Well executed. I think you understand the principle of it," Essek says. His voice is raw, its silken edges singed, for all that Caleb was careful not to apply pressure to his trachea.

There are so many things he should say. “Thank you for this. I will try to use it well.”

Essek shrugs. He reaches for his folded cloak and drapes it around his shoulders. “I do not know if it will be useful where we are going. It does not have many uses beyond covert harm.”

"No," Caleb says. His vehemence surprises him. "That—no. That is a failure of the imagination. I can think of a dozen uses for it beyond this. This is not a tool made with a single purpose. Very few things are."

Essek's eyes are wide. He puts a hand to his own throat, resting on it lightly. Caleb wants to take his hand, to clasp it in his own. To take the potential to do harm to each other and thereby to themselves, and instead to make it something good, something they can offer each other.

"And this—I, I think it is not harm. If it is something you need. Something you want." He bites his lip. “I would also be interested to see how this spell handles in your hands.”

He can see the shiver that goes through Essek, the way his eyes darken again. It shakes him to realize that he would also give himself over to Essek’s hands, against all his instincts.

Essek takes his hand and picks up the loops of silk thread with the tips of his long fingers, then winds it back onto the bobbin, his gestures careful and precise. He hands it back to Caleb.

Caleb tucks it away beside the little cardboard boxes that hold his delicate cocoons. His fingers find the clasp of his spellbook beside it. The leather warms quickly to his touch, as

always.

He unsnaps the clasp and draws the book out. Holds it out to Essek with both hands. Keeps his hands steady. “If you would like to consult my notes on reconstructing the gravity spell, they are after the section on the tower.”

Essek’s gaze flicks to the spellbook, then up, briefly catching his eyes. The tips of his gloved fingers alight briefly on the cover, then pull away.

“I—thank you. I would very much like to read it, but I could easily lose myself in this for hours, and we have to move, no?” Essek looks wry. “A tower. I would like to see that too.”

It is unwise that Caleb wants to press his writing into his hands. It feels necessary.

“You will, I hope.” Caleb returns the spellbook to its holster.

Essek turns and opens the door to his chambers, squinting hard against the crisp light that pours into the close, dark space. They step out into the snow, the ice, the miles ahead of them to a city swallowed by the earth. Caleb touches Essek’s elbow as he passes through the doorway. Allows himself to hope.

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