

# In fear of being a tributary

## 1

The candelabras shone on the glossy metal of their cups as they toasted, having shared their goodbyes and well-wishes for Laurel. The cups descended to their lips. That was, in fact, the first time Laurel tasted wine. He savored that first sip and it brought the excitement of the trip he'd take the next morning.

"You'll remember all we talked about when you're up north, won't you, boy?" his uncle asked, patting his back with more force than he should. "All of it. I value your guidance," Laurel answered and they shared a knowing glance.

"And I'll miss you so! Write me something too when you write your uncle, will you?" Aunt Clara chimed in, shining him one of her kind smiles. "Oh, it's heartbreaking to see you grow up..." Laurel held her hand gently as his uncle chastised her for her sentimentality.

"It will be a good opportunity though, being tutored by Wyvern... Especially for an aspiring young mage such as our prince" The court's resident mage seemed to feel welcome enough to share his insight. Indeed, their castle folk were all quite close. Laurel would miss that feeling. "It's nothing less than we should be offered. As long as you steer clear of all that black magic nonsense. Those Umbral Star scholars have far too much freedom to mess with things they shouldn't. And you'll be close to some prominent ones," his uncle added, looking at him sternly.

Of course, they'd had that talk in depth multiple times. Their country's relationship with their northern neighbors was hanging by a thread and the fact their prize academy flaunted black magic without a care wasn't quite helpful. "Wyvern herself doesn't dabble in that stuff, though, does she?" As soon as Laurel made his question, their resident specialist

piped up. “No. Wyvern would be the crown jewel of any country. She’s one of the last honest great mages out there.” Most of the others at the table chuckled softly. “Ever the Wyvern enthusiast, you,” Aunt Clara smiled. “You almost sound treasonous at times, Everett.”

As the banter progressed, the intoxication brought about by the wine started lulling Laurel to sleep. The feeling was peaceful enough. Despite the fact he knew he wasn’t going abroad just to study and maintain cordiality, he felt quite taken care of and certain of the future.

With assurance that the trinity of regents would take good care of the Ashen Valleys in his absence, Laurel had a tranquil, albeit long, trip north. When he finally arrived at Lunar Bay's capital, Estella, all the excitement he'd stashed away in his chest bubbled up. They'd done their best to arrive in time for the Winter Solstice celebrations, which he'd known would be grand, but hadn't quite imagined the actual scale of. Children and adults helped each other hang lanterns along the clean streets; star-like decorations were strewn about, glittery and shimmery; food stalls marked the road to the castle, which became increasingly steep. It seemed like they'd been going up for a while. In any case, the Lunar Bay was famous for its enormous, continuous crescent-shaped terrain and Estella's castle sat right at the top, ever vigilant. It seemed like the castle doors were wide open that day; the plaza was bustling with life. Still, Laurel and his entourage were taken all the way to the hall, immediately swarmed by staff. They showered him with warm welcomes and compliments.

"I am utterly sorry that the Royal family could not come to your reception themselves, your Highness," a young woman said, instructing others to pick up his baggage. "They are unfortunately busy with-"

"The Solstice event, I'm aware. Don't worry yourself, it's cool," Laurel interrupted, which seemed to leave her dumbfounded. "May I guide you to your quarters then, Prince?"

After a nod, she proceeded, walking through cold, spacious hallways. Laurel and the other servants followed, their steps muffled by lavish rugs. Chandeliers more exquisite than the ones from his home dangled from the ceiling. "I must inform you that Archmage Wyvern requested that you be positioned close to the Umbral Star scholars. She said that, considering your Highness' purpose, being close to the Academy headquarters and the Umbral Library would be fitting..." the woman shook her head, but kept her voice soft. "Still, we can arrange accommodations more fit for a prince in an instant." Even though his uncle would have claimed Laurel was being insulted, he found himself smiling. "No, that's perfect. I've heard about Estella's library. All good."

The room he was led into was at the very end of a corridor; the window faced an enormous rectangular building positioned in the middle of a plaza and a dozen other windows such as his were turned to it in a circle. Must be the library. Laurel instructed them to drop his baggage by his bed and, as he stretched all the road-sore out, the woman who'd been guiding him spoke up: "Your Highness must be exhausted from the long trip, so please feel free to relax. If anything is needed, one of us will certainly be found down the hall. We extend cordial invitations to the celebrations at twilight..." He raised a hand and tried to put some kindness in his smile. "I'll definitely be there. Wouldn't miss it." She started telling him where he'd be able to find his own entourage, but it was easy enough to dismiss everyone with a wink.

Being alone so suddenly was odd in the best way. Not once had he thought he'd be pushed to the far ends of some student dorm, but he was pleased. Should probably thank Wyvern for that once they met. All was good, except for the fact that the bed was much harder than what he was used to.

Before realizing, Laurel had drifted off to sleep. The nap was deeper and longer than it should have been, though, because when he woke up he was sweaty and it was already dusk outside the arched window. *Great*. No time to change clothes. He slipped his travel cloak back on and sprinted out of the room. Well, it wasn't quite a sprint; that would be rude. As he made a break for the front garden, a servant in as much a hurry as he was caught up with him. "Your Highness?! No one showed up to escort y-" Laurel reassured him that it was cool and, as soon as he merged with the rest of the huge crowd at the front plaza, he realized he'd missed most of the Queen's speech... Not that he minded oh-so-terribly. Actually, he minded even less when Wyvern walked to the center of the raised stage; that was the main event, wasn't it?

Of course, he'd never met her before, but her legendary status made her easily recognizable. As she walked up front, her dress' feathery, dragon-like tail trailed behind her, offering a somewhat bridal imagery. She spread her arms and the whole plaza was enveloped in a warm glow; colorful fairy lights shimmered into existence, obfuscating the many lanterns that hung from the trees and making the Umbral Star insignia on her belt shine. People started taking their coats off, so Laurel followed suit, amazed to find that the temperature was pleasant. The spell's effects weren't only visual, then.

"Let's enjoy one last warm evening, shall we?" she beamed, making the audience vibrate as well. "Is that good?" Since everyone seemed to say yes, she kept going: "Good! We have some things to get out of the way before tea time... Our homegrown percussion band, The Quads, would like to put their show on and then yours truly..." she paused to splay her hand on her chest with a smile, "...is reading a poem by Siren." She scanned the crowd for a moment, spinning her index finger and furrowing her brow. Her wrist was constrained by a splint. "Not to put him in a tight spot, but today we also commemorate the arrival of the Ashen Prince... Laurel Greyland? Mind a show of hands?"

Though he wasn't quite presentable, he shot his hand up, complying excitedly. A light beam seemed to descend from heaven to light him up and make his sorry state obvious to everyone. "Good! You're, of course, welcome to the stage if you'd like. Or maybe you'd prefer to have a song from The Quads dedicated to you?" A tad ashamed, he cupped his mouth and screamed back: "Oh, I'm good!" With a flick of her finger, Wyvern extinguished the beam, relinquishing Laurel to anonymity again. "Then, without further ado... The Quads!"

The Archmage took a few steps back and dimmed the lights that shone upon her, redirecting all the attention to the musicians who dragged their instruments frontstage. For some reason, The Quads were, in fact, five. Their performance was horrifying, a true cacophony of sound, but the audience still seemed to vibe with it. People threw their arms up, swaying side to side in sync. Laurel gave in to the peer pressure and mimicked them. After it was done, Wyvern walked back up and cleared her throat. "As promised... 'Obscure Northern Star', a sonnet by my little Siren." That made Laurel's eyebrows raise. Did Wyvern have a kid?

What followed was, as the title itself announced, an obscure piece of literature that the prince mostly tuned out. All he made out were bits about orbiting and the void or whatever. Fortunately, as soon as the entertainment was out of the way, everyone was guided further into the garden and sat at a huge picnic area. The warm glow followed them, keeping the surroundings pleasant. Before Laurel could fully enjoy the abundance of food, a hand brushed his shoulder lightly. "The volcanic valleys' crown prince himself," Wyvern's sharp voice greeted him; when he turned to meet her eyes, she had a smile as cheerful as the one she'd displayed on stage. Though his heart faltered, he kept his face cool. "I trust you've been given a warm welcome?"

“Yeah, the servants were very nice to me,” Laurel answered, perhaps with a bit of snark. “Heard. Sorry, it’s sort of an atypical day,” she made a wide gesture with the hand that wasn’t in a splint, “May I sit with you?” Having been granted permission, she sat on the spread towel, carefully folding her huge dress. “So you’re my exchange student, huh?” She made conversation while casually reaching for a cup of tea. “Though I haven’t really been informed of what it is you wish to study.”

“Magic,” Laurel answered matter-of-factly, earning a chuckle from the Archmage. “Yes, but what field?” He pondered the question. “Not sure. Haven’t found my, uh, calling.” Wyvern averted her eyes for a moment, taking a sip of her red tea. “You’ve been described as an aspiring mage. Nothing specific you’ve shown an interest in?”

“People tend to, how should I say... embellish my skills,” Laurel grinned. “Ah. To be young and in the spotlight,” she said, seeming a bit embarrassed. “In any case, you’re obviously welcome among our scholars for as long as you’d like. I’ll always find the time to assist you, but I’m assigning one of the councilor to you.” That was somewhat disappointing, because, well, Wyvern had been a celebrity for a long time. Everything started to seem like false advertising. Still, she seemed oblivious to his dampened mood: “Would you like to start tomorrow?”

“Oh. Of course,” he answered, picking up a biscuit. “We can meet in the library at eight, then. Sound good?” It did.

Once the next morning rolled around, Laurel had had enough time to regain his composure despite the festivities. He got out of the dorms on the dot, excited to get started. Walking into the hexagonal plaza, he lost his breath; the library was much bigger than anticipated, obfuscating the sun that shone over the adjacent buildings. Beautiful stained glass art occupied its every window. The entryway was as shocking as everything else — double

doors as tall as the first floor itself. They were wide open, allowing him passage. The interior was much grander than he'd pictured a library could be. Thinking about it, the first floor alone probably held more books than the one he knew back home.

Among the reading spaces, there was a reception desk aligned with the door. A girl wearing the Umbral Star cloak sat behind it and another woman leaned over to talk to her; her silver-rimmed glasses slid slowly down the crooked bridge of her nose as she spoke softly, pointing at the columns of different tomes. The younger one nodded, watching intently. Uninterested in their conversation, Laurel walked up and waited for a chance to interrupt. He didn't have to wait long, because the one in glasses glared at him and asked after sighing: "Are you Laurel Greyland?" Unaffected by her stare, he smiled. "Yes. I was gonna ask if Wyvern's been through here?"

"Not yet," she said, turning her back to him and going back to whatever she was doing before. He picked one of the comfier chairs around to plop down on and wait. After a short while, Wyvern crossed the entrance, as extravagantly dressed as the day before. As she went past Laurel, she smiled: "Good morning, your Highness". He greeted her as well, but she didn't stop; instead, she walked over to the desk and affectionately pushed that other woman's glasses back up her nose. "Hey, Siren dearest," she beamed, effectively cutting their conversation, "You find any books on what I asked you about?" Oh. So the grumpy librarian was Siren. "Yeah. I set them aside on the bottom left drawer," Siren tapped the desk she was leaning against lightly. "Just don't take too long to get around to them." Wyvern chuckled before asking: "Well, are you busy?" Leaning towards the younger, quiet girl again, Siren furrowed her brows. "Is everything clear?" Once the girl had nodded affirmatively, Siren exhaled sharply. "I have a moment."

"Good. So, as we've talked about, Laurel Greyland, crown prince of the Ashen Valleys," Wyvern gestured towards him as she spoke. "And this is Siren, our head librarian

and curator. She also has a chair in the Umbral Star council," then, addressing Laurel, Wyvern added: "You'll be in good hands." Siren was either squinting at him or that was her usual face. "Pleased to meet you," she said. "Likewise. So you're the one who wrote that poem from yesterday, huh," Laurel tried to make conversation. Unfortunately, that seemed like the wrong thing to say, because Siren's brows furrowed again as she turned to Wyvern. When it seemed like she was about to yell, she crossed her arms instead and spoke in a low tone: "You read my poem on stage." It was phrased like a question, but said in a quite monotonic manner. "Well, dearie, at least a part of you had to be there," Wyvern answered, unremorseful. Siren's eyes shot down to her own boots and her cheeks seemed to go a little red. "Which one." Still smiley, Wyvern answered the question, meeting silence from Siren. After a while, she said: "Well, I have a meeting now, so I trust Siren to take care of your Highness and help in figuring out where to go from here."

Just like that, the Archmage was gone. And, despite what she'd said, Siren didn't seem ecstatic to have him either. "Follow me," she ordered, sighing again. Then, she crossed the huge hall in the direction of the stone stairs. They started ascending, the noise produced by their heels contrasting with the library's silence. The second floor would be much like the first if a huge, somewhat circular room didn't sit in the middle of it, heavily tinted stained glass windows lining it where possible. Siren headed straight there, pushing the double doors open; she held them for a moment to allow Laurel passage and then shut them again. As he walked in, he looked around; the main difference from the other rooms was that the shelves had doors and locks and, instead of places to read and simple tables, there was a huge workstation and a handful of smaller ones. The only comfy place to sit down with a book was a soft-looking couch covered by varied pillows and a blanket. He spun around on his feet, watching the fairy lights; they were present in the other rooms as well, but they were more noticeable in there, since there was less natural light.



"What's this room for?" Laurel asked. "It's my office," Siren answered, sitting down at the big desk. "These bookshelves are locked, but you can bring books from the other rooms here if you'd like." Without hesitation, Laurel sat on the couch, glad to find out it was as comfortable as it looked. He heard Siren sift through paper. "So... What are we doing?" She didn't look at him as she answered: "You tell me. You need to figure out what you want to focus on." Laurel hugged a pillow to his chest. "I'm not sure where to start, though." That made her raise her eyebrows. "Why do you want to learn magic? Do you have any aspirations?" That caught him off guard. "Does it matter?" When she looked up, she didn't seem amused. "Yeah. As far as my experience goes, intent plays a lot into it. You don't need a livelihood. You don't need to defend yourself. So. Why?" she tilted her head as she probed him for an answer, the silver stars that dangled from her glasses' string swaying.

Laurel took a deep breath. "It's never a waste to learn something," he answered at last. Her eyes seemed to widen, intensifying the bags under them. "Knowledge for the sake of knowledge. I suppose that ought to do," she said, her tone dropping. Another sigh. "Still, you have to figure out an objective. Read up on whatever seems interesting," she went back to the books in front of her; "I'll be here if you need even more food for thought." That was so hands-off of her. Despite the sudden silence, Laurel didn't budge from the couch. "You're a councilor, so you're an Umbral Star graduate, right?," he asked, not quite into the idea of spending hours reading. She grumbled what must have been an affirmation. "Then, what do you use magic for? Since you mentioned intent and whatever," his persistence seemed to frustrate her, considering her frown. "My specialty is curse inflicting," she answered in spite of the apparent annoyance. "Like... 'Your teeth shall fall off' or something?," he asked, eliciting a smile from her — even if it wasn't a happy one. "Yeah, something."

He shifted. Was it normal for someone to admit to doing black magic so nonchalantly? He'd thought his uncle had been exaggerating. "So... Black magic?" By that point, she'd

gotten pen and ink out and seemed to be transcribing something from one tome to another. "Ooh, *black magic*," was all she said, which kinda made Laurel feel like he was being mocked. He was seldom mocked. Silence settled in and, as time marched on and Siren's pen nib scratched paper, he started feeling rather small. Eventually, he gave in and wandered away from the office and among the other bookshelves. Even though there were a few scholars around, all sporting their navy blue cloaks, the library remained quiet. The prince struggled to find something relevant and beginner level, but it was mathematically impossible not to, being in the biggest library in the region and all. As soon as he did, he proudly took his findings back to the office, closing the heavy doors and encountering the heavenly couch again.

Time to get to it. When he opened the first book, though, he was greeted by sigils and a long list of warnings. They dictated rules of use of the library's books and detailed the consequences of their infringement. Laurel couldn't quite believe it wasn't a prank or rather, a bluff. "Is this serious?," he asked, showing Siren the page. She raised her eyes and squinted for a moment. "Dead serious. I suggest you pay that some mind and don't inconvenience me," she said, immediately going back to her work. Damn. So, Laurel read the warnings. They told him not to damage the books in any way, shape or form — including folding corners of the pages — or, under any circumstances, take them out of the library's perimeter. The consequences were, of course, curses. Why wouldn't they be? Something about developing delusions of seeing dots of color and licking them off the floor until your tongue couldn't physically manage it anymore. "Umm... Who writes these? Are they like, in the curse handbook or something?" Upon his new question, Siren seemed a bit amused. "Me. And I prefer original curses." Laurel stared back at the page for a bit. "No offense, but how sick does your mind have to be to think this stuff up?," though it sounded like an offense, he laughed lightly and smiled. Of course, he wasn't quite convinced that the stuff written there

was for real. That remark made Siren sigh again. "Stop procrastinating," she said. Yeah, she did see right through him. Better get started.

Hours crawled by as Laurel tried to make sense of what he was reading. His thorough education didn't delve into that territory, but at least he had reading comprehension to make up for it. Eventually, he got fed up of studying something he hardly had the basis for. "Is it lunch time yet?," he asked, glancing up. "Probably," Siren replied, still writing, "Go ahead. I'll be here." Laurel hesitated, book still open in his lap. The sudden silence made Siren unglue her eyes from her work. "You can tell me what the issue actually is," she said, her voice calmer than usual. Laurel breathed in deep. "It's just... I don't think I'm getting this. Maybe I could use your input," he said, trying to smile at her even knowing it would probably have no effect. His mouth was agape once she actually got up and walked over. He forced it closed as she sat by his side, keeping a world of distance between them. Siren extended her hand, motioning for Laurel to give her the book; he did. She merely glanced at the cover before going "Ah, this one. Telekinesis..." She craned her neck as she looked at him, continuing: "Where did you get lost?" Taken aback by her sudden helpfulness, he took a moment to formulate a phrase. "At the start, I guess. The book acts like at the beginning of a spell, you can just... feel it in your body. I don't feel that." Siren averted her eyes and they got lost on the book's cover. "I'd say this book won't be of great use to you right now. You can't convert your mana into physical force if you haven't yet figured out how to harness it," she said, laying the book down on the couch and looking at the others he'd selected. She clicked her tongue, nodding a bit. "Honestly, maybe none of these. We have to address this notion first..." Before she could conclude the thought, though, there was a knock at the door. That scholar from the front desk walked in, nodding respectfully as she walked directly to the closest fairy light. Raising her hands, the student refueled it; its cold glow grew stronger.

Siren's eyes stalked her as she did the same to every other light and, as she took off, Siren thanked her.

Suddenly, her head made a sharp turn to Laurel. "I've got it. Fairy lights are an expression of energy. Someone who can harness their mana properly can easily progress to that stage," she mused, her face lit by the purple-ish gleam. "You could read into them once you grasp that initial hurdle," she got up, grabbing the pile of books, "We can leave these for later." She headed for the door, making Laurel leap off the couch to follow her. "What about that part? Harnessing? How do I learn that?" Siren started organizing the books in their respective shelves, which she seemed to find with ease. "Any mage would be able to teach you that," she said. He bit his lip and then attempted the pleading smile again; it had worked before, after all. "So... Could you help?" Siren blanked for a moment, but ultimately turned to look at him. "I suppose so. But I am, in fact, busy right now," she said. "Oh! That's okay. Totally. Maybe... later?," he still smiled, joining his hands together. Maybe it was his imagination, but her cheeks seemed kind of red. "Later."

So he took his lunch break, making small talk with anyone who sat beside him. Warm food was a blessing in that chilly weather; no one else seemed bothered by it, but he wasn't used to lower temperatures. In the afternoon, he got fished out of the hallways to finally be officially welcomed by the royal family. The formality of diplomacy sucked whatever fun Laurel was having out of his body, though he knew keeping the appearances was one of the reasons he was there. They made promises of setting up a dinner party, which meant more networking; at least there'd be wine. When he'd finally gotten through the ordeal, it was already evening. Stepping out to the frosty breeze made him shudder and envelop himself in his dark red cloak, which made him easily recognizable, House Greyland colors and all. Actually, that was probably the only thing that made him recognizable. He made it to the library as fast as he could, slowing down once he'd crossed the entrance to be silent. There

were a pair of scholars slouched on a nearby table, eyes glued to books — better not disturb them. The student at the front desk wasn't the same one as before; they must be interns taking shifts. Having gotten to the top of the stairs, he noticed Siren's office doors were a tad open.

Approaching with light steps, Laurel pushed them a little further to scan the room. Though it didn't seem that late, Siren was laying on the couch with a blanket, eyes closed and glasses hanging by their chord; it might be better to return the following morning. When he stepped back, though, her voice rose: "I'm awake." One of her eyes opened halfway. "Oh," he mumbled, entering the office and closing the doors behind him, "I can come back tomorrow." Siren sat up, casting the blanket aside and putting her glasses on. "No, it's fine. I was just taking a break." Laurel's eyebrows rose and he let curiosity win: "So you're not done for the day?" She got off the couch and stretched her arms. "My work hours aren't set," she said, looking around for a moment before seemingly remembering what they were supposed to do. Before that though, she rekindled one of the fairy lights that were giving out with a sigh, its glow bathing her skin. "I thought the interns did that," Laurel commented. "Students in general tend to do it for me as a favor," she answered as she organized her desk with nimble hands, "I won't ask them to. I'm perfectly able to do it myself, but I'd rather save the mana." He smiled, immediately getting the sentiment, "Well, if I learn it, I can do it for you as long as I am here." That made her hands pause for a second and a hint of a smile passed through her face. "That would be helpful. I guess it's in my best interest to assist you, then," she replied.

"Why fairy lights anyway?," he asked, a hand on his waist. "Fire is expressly prohibited in here," she said, done with the organizing, "And I'd rather the books stay away from sunlight... hence all the stained glass." Laurel looked around, newfound appreciation for the magical lanterns, "Well, it looks good." Siren sighed and crossed her arms. "I feel like you're procrastinating once again. Come on," she said, setting her eyes on his like daggers, "Do you

actually know the basic principles behind mana?" He shifted in place, crossing his arms as well. "Um, it's a being's life energy," he muttered. She clicked her tongue and lost her gaze somewhere. "Mana and vitality are not the same, though exhausting all of a being's mana can suck its vitality through compensation," she started, focusing on him again, "Think of it as something more spiritual, or even related to will... Which is one of the reasons I told you intent is important." Since Laurel's face was blank, she kept talking: "I can rephrase that if you'd like."

He tried to take on a more serious posture. "No, I think I got it," he said. "And if you concentrate, can you feel your own mana?" Considering her question, Laurel made an attempt, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. He wasn't quite sure. "Well, what do you feel when you do it?," he asked, opening his eyes again to look at her. Siren's face turned pensive and she took her hand to her chin. "Like a second layer of me inside of me, ready to act. The denser it is, the more I can do at the moment," she said after a while, ending the sentence with a sigh. "I'm sorry, it's difficult to put into words. But you should also be able to feel another being's mana, which might be easier than what we just tried if your natural reserves are too low or you've never been in touch with mana at all..." her voice trailed off as her eyes drilled into the distance again. Then, she lifted her hand to him. "Here, take my hand," she said, raising her tone again with a serious look. Of course, he obeyed, holding it as if he was going to shake it. "Like this?," he asked. She exhaled; "Might be easier with both." Again he obeyed, encasing her hand between both of his. Her fingers were long and quite bone-y, not to mention the sheer quantity of calluses. Still, having something warm to hold was nice. "Now?," he asked. "Now I'll focus some in my hand. That might make it easier for you to detect it," she said, soon adding nonchalantly: "Done. Try it."

Yet again, he closed his eyes. Before a new attempt, he thought of all she'd said; her words had been different from prior explanations he'd heard. If intent really had such a big

part in it, then she should be channeling a motive as well. Opening himself to outside influence, maybe... Laurel took that moment and, instead of trying with all his might, just let go; almost as if he sat by the river and just heard the stream. Sure enough, he felt the crackling of condensed energy in front of him. "I did it!," he shouted, which made Siren take a step back and let out a surprised chuckle; "I'm glad for you, but-" she touched her index finger to her lips, shushing him silently, "-we're in a library." He covered his mouth in reflex. Her smile faded and she asked: "So, how did you do it?" Laurel felt his head tilt to the side as he found the words. "Um, I thought of what you said about will and figured that you must have really focused intent at that moment, so... if I opened myself to you or rather, your influence, I might feel it," he strung the thoughts together, a little disturbed by how much Siren's eyes widened as he spoke. She seemed stunned for a moment, but ultimately let out another chuckle and turned to her desk. "You should be more attuned to your own will than mine, you know... So I'm sure you'll figure it out."

"Oh," he tried to sneak a look at what she was doing with her back to him, "are you going back to work?" She didn't turn to face him as she answered affirmatively. "Well... You helped a lot. Kind of changed my perspective," he said wholeheartedly; "Maybe you should get into teaching or something." Though he'd thought such a compliment might make her happy, she shrugged. "I read a lot," she said, revealing nothing in her tone. Laurel wished he could see what kind of face she'd made. Still, all he could do was bid her good night and walk away.

Walking into the dining hall for breakfast the next morning, Laurel was a bit taken aback by the sight of the tail of Wyvern's gown as she sat on one of the benches, back turned to him. Still, he recovered from the light shock and served himself, making a point to walk by her table as he searched for one; though she was excitedly talking to someone beside her, she

paused to greet him. “Hey, your Highness,” she exclaimed, scooting to the side to free a spot and patting the bench, “I was actually itching to ask you something.” He acquiesced, sitting with them and many others. “How come you’re eating in the student dorms’ hall?,” he asked. Wyvern adjusted her posture to let the man she’d been talking to into his line of sight; by the insignia and colors of his cloth armor, he was a guard. “‘Cause this is where Des eats,” she said, then introducing them plainly: “Desmond, Laurel Greyland, vice versa.”

After they exchanged pleasantries, she immediately kept going: “Nevermind that! I wanted to ask you if you’re getting along with my little Siren so far.” Eh. He ignored her pleading gaze by taking a sip of hot milk with honey. “Well, to be honest... She doesn’t seem into chatting. Unless I ask her for help. Then, she talks a lot,” he said. “Oh? So you did ask her for help?” Wasn’t that the point? “Yeah. I managed to be able to sense her mana and stuff,” he kept drinking his milk, somewhat uncomfortable.

“What? She let you use her as an example?” By that point, Wyvern seemed deeply invested. “Eh, I think she regretted it anyway. She seemed peeved after she asked me what made it click,” he snuck a glance at Wyvern, terrified to find her wide eyes hovering over him. “Why? What did you reply? Come on. No suspense.” Laurel shifted, focusing on the table. “Well... I said that once I opened myself to any intent from her, it was easy.” Wyvern’s sudden laughter made him shudder; she contained herself as soon as Desmond touched her shoulder. “You must have freaked her out,” she said, still smiling as she rubbed her eye.

“Why?! That sounds perfectly normal,” he said, but still felt oddly defensive. “No, no. It’s because of the nature of her work,” said Wyvern and, noticing he was looking at her quizzically, explained: “You shouldn’t be casually making yourself vulnerable to a curse inflicter. Especially not her... Her brand of cursing relies much more on her own will than most curses you’ll encounter.” He thought it over for a second before admitting: “I haven’t encountered many curses.” Wyvern snapped her fingers as if that gesture would make him



understand. Or maybe she just liked doing that. “If you did, most of them would be something to the effect of cursing you to go bald. That’s because that sort of curse relies on the properties of spell ingredients. Siren’s... not quite. Hers are, I’d say...” Wyvern paused, looking around as if pondering how much she should say, “... a battle of wills. Ultimately, hers ends up overpowering yours and she’ll lead you to relentlessly harm yourself.”

“Seriously, Wyves, you should stop butting into the girl’s social life,” Desmond interrupted, stealing a pancake off her plate. “But she’s like the little sister I’ve never had!” He rolled his eyes upon hearing that. “She hardly speaks to anyone as is,” he said, “I’m sure she doesn’t need a big sister as overbearing as you.” With a flick of Wyvern’s finger, the napkin Desmond had been cleaning his lips with made its way into his mouth, effectively choking him. “I’m *not* overbearing!” Wyvern hissed.

From the lack of concern of everyone around them, their banter should be a regular occurrence. Laurel silently withdrew from the conversation, finishing his breakfast and trying not to miss the food he’d be eating back home.

As soon as he was done, he took the path to the library again. Maybe it was best to explore the castle grounds or even venture out into town, but he wanted to experience that faint taste of progress again... in magic and maybe also in conversation. He was glad to see that the building looked busy that morning. Studying along those scholars made him feel like a student too; perhaps that was silly. Once he got to the privacy of Siren's office, he found her sitting at her desk, writing something. Somehow, she'd gotten her coat's sleeves off. Her exposed arms had weird symbols drawn all over them; some seemed tattooed and others seemed like dry, or even fresh, ink. Taking a few steps ahead, he saw that whatever she was drawing was much alike the symbols on her skin.

"Good morning," he said, staring unapologetically, "What are you doing?" She tapped the pile of books beside the one she was currently drawing on and said, "Cursing this batch."

He bent over slightly to get a better look, "How does it work?" Siren sighed. "Focus on the basics for now," she said. As expected, it seemed like personal questions wouldn't fly. Laurel let himself fall on the couch, willing to attempt some more small talk. "It's a bit disorienting how big or, um... grandiose everything is around here," he said, looking around, "I mean, just your office is gigantic." That seemed engaging enough for Siren. "I suppose the Ashen people don't have a flair for ostentation," she paused and then smirked, "though the royal family must have access to a lot of frivolities the common folk do not." Her voice had a bit of a bite to it, but Laurel shrugged it off. "I didn't mean to imply otherwise," he replied. She stopped writing altogether and tilted her head to the side, smiling tightly. "As a prince, do you really deserve to wear the boar and wheat grains you have embroidered on your cloak?," she asked, resting her head on her hand, "That symbol belongs to your people."

Despite all the soft pillows Laurel was on top of, his body felt tense. He opened his mouth to answer, but the words didn't come out. Whatever he said would have sounded pathetic, wouldn't it? So he shrunk in place while Siren went back to work as if nothing had been said. As he watched her smile melt away, he noticed that there was a smudge of ink where her hand had touched her cheek. Though maybe then too much time had passed to reply, he still did: "Isn't your life very cushy too?" She chuckled, pen gliding away at the paper, "Since my Umbral Star graduation, yes." As her eyes narrowed, she continued: "Though I may have been detached from existence for a while..."

Siren's amusement, even if it came at Laurel's expense, made him relax a little. "How so?," he asked. "Isn't it time you started studying?," she said. Right. He thought it over. "I don't really know where to go from here." That gave Siren some pause. "Let's try the opposite of what we did yesterday," she said, focused on her books, "I'm busy though, so just touch my arm and we'll both try to keep tabs on your mana flow." Laurel got up and circled her desk, "Shouldn't I be able to feel my own mana?" Siren refilled her pen nib, a dull look in her eyes.

"Optimally, yes. I just want to discard a hypothesis," she said, letting out a frustrated sigh as she attacked a smudge with her blotter.

Choosing obedience, Laurel grabbed her bare arm, trying not to touch any fresh ink. "What now?" Uneasy, he looked down at her, but she didn't look up. "Try to do the same thing I did yesterday. No rush," she answered. So he did. Multiple times. Nothing seemed to change or flow or whatever within him. Under his grip, he felt Siren's arm tense up as she worked, unbothered. "I think I'm doing it wrong," he said. "As I said," her head seemed to go further down, "you should be more attuned to your own will. If you want to direct it somewhere, you need intent." He could try that again. Having someone to hold for reassurance was a confidence boost, actually. Keeping her advice in mind, he clarified his intentions to himself and tried to redirect that energy towards the hand that touched Siren.

A while later, a tingling sensation along with that focused layer that she'd described made him smile wide; he almost yelled in celebration, but remembered the library thing. "Did I do it?," he half-whispered, trying to contain his excitement. He was pretty sure of it, but the way Siren looked at her own hand with her brow furrowed made him doubt himself. "Yes, but you transferred it to me," she said. His eyes widened, "Is that bad?" She shook her head and sighed. "No, it just dispersed," she continued, "Maybe your intentions weren't focused enough." Laurel scratched his nape, looking away for a moment as he said, "Well... I was thinking of showing you... The way you showed me."

He snuck a glance at her face right before she looked off to the side. "Ah," she said, "That felt... clean." For some reason, the interaction felt awkward, though Laurel thought it shouldn't. After a while, Siren smiled a little and said, "Since you've skipped from harnessing to transferring, you could try refueling a fairy light for me." That made his excitement come back.

Faster than he thought it would, a large chunk of days flew by as he hung out in Siren's office. He was so out of sync with time that he hardly noticed he should have already written home; it only caught up with him once that dinner party rolled around. So he dressed up — even though, no matter how dressed up he got, he wouldn't look comparable to his hosts — and showed up, which was a big part of the job. There was a larger quantity of people than expected, which meant more small talk than he was prepared for. Of course, small talk came easy to him, so he drifted along in smiles and cordial laughter.

As the night progressed, he had the sneaking suspicion that he was being buttered up for something. And, over dinner, it was confirmed. It all started when the younger princess, who seemed to be about Siren's age, exclaimed: "Oh, Laurel, I have a cousin your age..." The girl proceeded to shower said cousin in compliments, describing her appearance with seeming precision. From her wide gestures, she seemed drunk; the queen's concern with the impropriety of her behavior seemed to confirm that.

Regardless, Laurel managed to slither out of that situation. When he was spat back to the hallways in the early hours of the morning, he wobbled and shivered all the way to his room, getting lost a few times in his dizziness. Meanwhile, his thoughts spun. He was in no rush for marriage, though he was soon to be crowned. As long as his relatives weren't in a rush, neither was he. Still, the more time that passed, the more he got roped into unpleasant conversations. Though he was thankful for managing to slide under the covers at last, they were too thin to keep him warm enough.

Morning came with the news that even drinking socially was still too much for him to handle. Even though his head was throbbing, he managed — or at least tried — to straighten himself out before going about his day. Once he got to Siren's office, the nausea had subsided

a little. Still, she smirked at him. "Mm, hungover?," she asked. "How'd you know?" The question made her chuckle, "You look like crap." The novelty of the phrase stunned Laurel, as silly as it was. He stood in place, looking at her like a frightened animal; that only made her smirk grow. "Has no one ever told you that, princeling?," she teased. "Actually, no," he said, laughing a bit too before sitting down.

"I imagine you had fun mingling with your fellow elites," she mused, taking her eyes off him as usual. "Oh, yeah. I love when people try to marry me off." The gossip seemed to entertain her, which made Laurel's chest heat up. "Mm, let me guess. They used their second daughter's apparent naivety and excitement as an excuse for ignoring formality in order to present Duchess Cordelia as a marriage candidate to you," she said, speaking fast as if to keep him from growing tired. He wouldn't have. Actually, his mouth was agape. "What, how'd you know?! Is there a spying spell or something?"

Siren lifted her head to raise her eyebrows at him in mockery. "Perhaps you should brush up on your geopolitics, princeling," she said, "That was, by far, the most predictable plot they could have engineered for that dinner party." Laurel felt his cheeks warm up and threw himself back on the couch. "No way. That was really out of left field. And random. A Duchess from some corner of the Lunar Bay?" Somehow, he couldn't seem to wipe the smirk off Siren's face, but at least he had her undivided attention in moments like these. "Isn't that the point? You get no substantial advantages but a faint tie to our country. And, you know... Every noble here is crazy for Ashen wine. We don't grow coffee either," Siren shrugged, "A bad deal for a crown prince, but a great one for them."

"You talk as if I should have predicted that," he said, averting his eyes. "You should have. For someone who, if I recall my dates well, will be king in a year, you're surprisingly uninformed," Siren replied, still looking triumphant. When it seemed like her words were about to make him feel insufficient, he saw a crack within them. "I think your worldview is

warped," he said, walking over to her desk to rest his hands on it as he bent over in her direction; "It feels like you have sat here reading everything there is to read for so long that you don't know what's common knowledge anymore and what isn't." She staggered, forcing her back against her chair as if repulsed by his proximity. "It's not about me. It's about the fact that you have had all the free time and resources to study..." she started, but he cut her off: "No. Well, yeah. True. But you're minimizing yourself. You know more than you think you do."

Again, she took a while to answer: "Even then, there's much more information available to me than most people will ever dream of having." He smiled, happy to see her cowering like that. "But you interpret it. And you're able to put it into words that even some princeling like me can understand," he paused, staring right into her eyes; her pupils were quite contracted. "So... don't," he said. When all was said and done, they were gazing at each other with full attention, closer than usual. Though he'd been brave enough to back Siren up into a corner like that moments earlier, Laurel then felt his throat tighten, rendering him a bit out of breath. The room itself felt off. They didn't move for a while; Siren seemed as stunned as he'd been before. Finally, she cracked the ice: "Shut up. Flattery will get you nowhere." Just like that, she was back to work. That should be his cue as well.

In the past handful of days, he'd gotten his harnessing and transferring stable enough to make Siren proud. Though it tired him out pretty easily, he'd realized the small gesture of making and fueling fairy lights for her made him happy; he'd look at her gingerly and notice she was smiling in thanks. That was enough to motivate him to keep reading and learn something new. So, after he'd recovered from their tense conversation, he spoke up again: "Well... I could use a book recommendation from you at this point, I think." It was easy to get her attention with such a request; "Sure. What were you thinking of?" Fortunately, he'd

thought about it further. “I was thinking that that thing Wyvern did to keep us warm during the Solstice celebration was pretty cool,” he said.

Siren got up, knocking on her desk with her knuckles for a bit. “That stems from basic thermodynamics... Which would be the principle of many other more advanced spells,” she talked as she walked out, Laurel in tow. “So it would, in fact, be useful. As for Wyves... She does that every year. It’s easy, except for the scale of the area she maintains.” She scanned the bookshelves, pacing slowly with her index finger tapping her chin. “Of course, the heat is transferred from elsewhere. So, an area that big... you were inside it, but if you’d been immediately outside, you’d have noticed how cold it was.” She handed him two books and, considering that she was seemingly done with talking, he felt free to speak: “Isn’t that a little inconsiderate of her then?” Siren dismissed the concern with a wave of her hand as she headed back to the office. “Mm, I’m pretty sure she forces the heat against its natural flow, transferring it down from above. When I said you’d have felt it if you were in that area, I meant hypothetically.”

Office doors securely shut, they both sat back down and got to it. During Laurel's reading session, someone knocked at the door. It was a person in white-ish attire motioning for Siren to come with. It was a bit of a regular occurrence and he’d come to expect it; still, being alone in the office during those moments felt weirdly depressing. She'd never taken too long to come back though, stretching her arms and hands out before going back to work.

The days kept piling up, organizing a neat new set of daily motions for Laurel. For instance, every morning at breakfast he could see Wyvern and Desmond chatting; they seemed so happy and it irked him. He thought there was no reason, but it finally hit him that it was resentment. Resentment that they had what he didn't; that Siren would only talk to him when it came to studying and would never leave her office. Once that truth came to him,

Laurel was set on changing it. She was the only person around him, after all; why not be friends?

As they went through the day as usual in Siren's office, he waited until it seemed natural enough to close the book he was reading and act bored. "Hey, Siren..." he said, waiting for her to look up, "You know, I have barely seen anything but the office since I got here. I thought I should go sightseeing and stuff." She furrowed her brow and went back to writing, "Then go, you don't owe me satisfaction. Weren't we past that point?" It seemed like outright rejection, which made his cheeks warm up; then he remembered she was a bit slow with that stuff, so he admitted: "Um, that was an invitation... A guide might be helpful." He was pretty sure she rolled her eyes. "Then get someone else, princeling."

His chest tightened as he searched for something to add — preferably of the kind that wouldn't make him sound pathetic. "But I like spending time with you and... I thought we might have fun," he said at last, actually making her freeze for a moment. Laurel felt silly as his heart pounded in wait for an answer. He could see Siren's face soften before she turned it away. "I doubt the 'fun' part, but I guess I could go with you to the plazas and gardens." He smiled, but she didn't meet his eyes. "That's good enough," he conceded. Thus, she straightened her coat out and they ventured outside the office together for the first time.

They took the outdoor routes, walking side by side. Laurel could see the top of Siren's head, her hair haphazardly parted; she seemed out of her habitat, hands in pockets and as stiff as a bug. The air was somewhat chilly and gray as the clouds obscured the sun, which seemed to be standard in the Lunar Bay. "There's a nice spot in that plaza by the hill side," she said, pointing with her chin. Once they got there, he felt inclined to agree. The stone tiles were slowly being overtaken by moss, slippery under their feet; a half-wall lined the edge of the plaza in a wide semi-circle. Coming closer to it, Laurel noticed there was a long drop down.



“I feel ‘hill side’ is kind of an euphemism,” he said. Siren shrugged, “It’s par for the course here.”

As she sat atop the wall, he mimicked her motions. The way the wind made his long hair sway was a little nauseating once he remembered the height they were at. “Why did you say you’d only come to the gardens and stuff?” Siren sighed and her shoulders went slightly upwards. “The halls are too... populated,” she answered. “So you mostly dodge people, huh...” he said, appreciating the scenery. “I’m quite busy,” she said, still looking away. Laurel took a deep breath and made a point in staring at her. “Then I’m glad you came along,” he softened his voice, “I like... your presence.”

Her head dropped as she seemed to stare at the tip of her boots. After a long deep breath, her voice came out: “Is this your sick idea of a prank?” The force of the question was enough to make him waver. “*What?*” She finally turned her face to him, focusing her gaze. “I mean what I say. Is this some ploy to waste my time?,” her voice lowered an octave, “Or you heard something from Wyvern that made you think I’m some pitiful being?” Her eyes dwelled on his as if she wanted to pluck them out.

Laurel scoffed. He couldn’t help it. As his chest tightened, he wondered if it was because he felt offended for being doubted. No, that wasn’t really it. In any case... “Are you really so insecure that you can’t fathom someone genuinely being interested in talking to you?” Her lips noticeably quivered and she gripped the wall. “I’m not insecure. It’s the opposite. I know the value of my time all too well,” she said, averting her gaze again, “And how can you be interested in talking to me if you don’t even know what that’s like?” Kind of unaware of himself, he bent a bit towards her. “So you admit you avoid talking to me outside of work?,” he asked, to which she just shrugged.

“That’s exactly the point, though. I *want* to know,” he tried not to sound as desperate as the tug in his chest made him feel, “I want you to talk more.” Not letting him see her face,

she got back on her feet and turned towards the ledge, resting her elbows on the wall. “I don’t know how to make casual conversation,” she said, speaking so low he could hardly hear it. “It can be as shallow or as deep as you want. I’m just... interested,” he said and, after a second thought, added: “Genuinely.” She exhaled slowly and knocked on the stone a few times. “... Sure. Okay. To the basics, then,” she said, staring at the city that unfolded beneath them, “I know House Greyland tends to train their youth in a few hobbies. So I wager you’re good at fencing and horseback riding.” Tentatively, she looked up at him before asking, “But is there something you actually enjoy doing?”

Laurel chuckled, sliding a little closer. “You make a shallow question sound like an interrogation,” and, after rethinking it: “... In a positive way. Well, I do enjoy music. I’ve been trying to compose my own songs lately, but they still feel off.” She seemed perfectly attentive, eyes glued to his. “What do you play?” The tension in his chest had dissolved by then. “Guitar, mostly... And you’re a poet.” Siren shifted. “Wouldn’t call myself that, but sure,” she said. He hesitated. “If you’d be up for that... I’d love to hear some of it. Or read,” he said at last. Her mouth hung open for a moment and she inhaled sharply. “Ha. That’s...” she cut herself short, shaking her head, “You’d find me pretentious.”

After staring at her for a while, he smiled. “I like pretentious,” he replied. Now she was the one who scoffed. “Don’t play me. No one does,” she said. “I’m not playing. I like *your* brand of pretentiousness,” he said, “I like how you’re eager to recommend books and can compile a reading list off the top of your head. I... Not just because it’s useful. Because... Sorry.” His turn to exhale. She waited, biting her lip slightly. “I like hearing what you have to say,” he finished his thought. Seeing the reddish tint on her cheeks made his warm up as well. There was an awkward pause and he scanned her face for any trace of offense.

“Let’s make it equal, then. I’ll read you some if you play me one of your songs,” she said, adjusting her glasses with a shaky hand. Relief washed over Laurel. “Sounds good, but I

didn't bring my guitar," he said. "I'm sure you could borrow one from the auditorium," she stared at the floor again, "We've got a surplus of instruments." He extended his hand to her; "In that case, deal." Siren accepted the handshake faster than he'd expected.

The rest of the walk had Laurel feeling that tinge of awkward excitement and, judging by Siren's slight smile, she felt the same. Once they were back at the office, focusing on reading was a bit hard for him. "So... I told you we might have fun," he said. After a pause, he clarified: "If you did, of course." She didn't look up. "I did," she replied.

He flew through the next morning, the bubbling excitement within him silencing Wyvern and Des' banter during breakfast. Wyvern did try to include him in it at some point, asking a vague question: "In that case, what do you think would happen, since you're our resident Ashen Valleys representative?" Unwilling to ask what she was talking about, Laurel decided to take the easy route and bust out his small talk expertise. "Regardless of the process, everything should turn out fine," he smiled softly, earning himself a grin from Wyvern. "I like your spirit," she said. Crisis averted, he shoved the conversation to the deep ends of his mind, favoring thoughts of which song he could play for Siren.

As promised, he did find an unclaimed guitar in the auditorium, which he hauled back to his room even though the resident musicians seemed quite receptive. The ensuing practice would be too personal to broadcast. Plus, it would be for Siren's eyes only. Though he could hardly wait to be ready to see her, he took his sweet time tuning the guitar before exercising his memory in search of his old songs. The moon was already up when he judged himself sufficiently de-rusted. There was a spring to his step as he made his way to Siren's office, finding her at her usual spot.

"Ah, I see you're not the forgetful type," she said, nodding towards the guitar. Despite the crescent purples under her eyes, she smiled at him and his lips quivered in return. "Quite the opposite," he said, sitting down eagerly, "The only thing on my mind has been making you read me those poems." She furrowed her brow. "Ever unoccupied and neglectful. Truly a diplomat." Instead of rolling his eyes, he shrugged. "I'll have you know that making strides in our friendship is actually a diplomatic ordeal," he said. Siren set her pen aside and slowly walked over to the couch, hips swaying lazily. She sat by his side, keeping some distance. "I'm indeed hard to please. So go on, play me a tune and make it good," she played along, her smile spreading.

By that point he'd set the guitar on his lap. He strummed along hesitantly, making sure it was still tuned. His smile faltered. "Well, to be honest, if you're that demanding I'm not sure I'm up to speed," he said. Her eyes widened and one of her ink stained hands shot up. "Oh, no, I'm mostly joking. I'm sure you'll be satisfying," she said as if to smooth it over. Laurel raised his eyebrows, still doubtful. "Yeah? What type of music do you like?" he asked. Siren averted her eyes and joined her hands, heating them up between her thighs. "Umm, Quads-adjacent bands." The raised eyebrows turned into a frown, "Then I guess I'm really not up to par." Siren grabbed a pillow and sighed, rolling her eyes. "From your expression, I gather you didn't like my answer," she said, "You should really get into the Estella indie scene." He jokingly scoffed. "Is it all Quads-adjacent?" She smiled. "Mostly. I could write you an essay on it, but... play your song. Please."

So he did, so tense he could feel his heartbeat on the tips of his fingers as the strings dug into his skin. It was a bit of an upbeat tune with rapid progressions, but it mellowed out a lot in the middle and final bits. As she watched intently, he found himself making silly mistakes he hadn't made during practice. When he finished and had the guts to look up, he found that her sharp face had really softened. "That was sweetly melancholic," she teased. "Hope it was enjoyable enough for a local band connoisseur," he said. "It was. Very. I'm refreshed," she got up and stretched, "Guess it's my time to hold up the other end of the bargain, huh." Laurel forgot to hold back his excitement, folding himself over the guitar to grin at her. "It is!"

Siren seemed a bit taken aback, but quickly recomposed herself and walked over to her desk. She opened a drawer and he could hear the rustling of paper. "I didn't quite peg you for a poetry guy," she said, trying too hard to sound nonchalant. "I'm not." She squinted at a piece of paper. "Then you really have nothing to be excited about," she replied. "Well... I'm excited to listen to *you*," he let out, feeling warmth in his cheeks as the implications hit him. Siren

froze for a moment in that way she often seemed to. "That's silly," she said at last, sitting by his side again. There was silence for a while; then, Laurel gave her an encouraging nod and she cleared her throat.

"infiltrate the nest  
the perfect mannerisms  
of a fellow ant  
will turn the rest.

our pleasant memories  
sullied by inflicted pain.  
her crafted facade  
distorts my brain.

a touch can stain my outer shell  
i regain my notions  
as it pierces me.

even after my escape  
my daily motions remain a mimicry,  
outsourced. the learned and unlearned."

Though literature had never been much to his taste, Laurel paid close attention to each verse. Once she was done, he figured making a question would show her he'd actually listened — and maybe shoo her obvious nervousness away. "Is it about a parasite?" She nodded, "Yeah, zombie ants." Nice to hear, but he'd actually mostly thought it through. "Sounds like a metaphor for abuse," he said. Siren shifted and reordered her papers, looking

down. "It's just... Well, it's not a metaphor," she mumbled, getting up to return her poems to the drawer. Laurel laughed lightly. "Come on, don't insult my intelligence," he said, "If it's personal that's all you gotta say and I won't poke at it." She paused, looking at him like a distrustful stray cat would. "Mm, just like that?" He smiled. "Yeah," he said, "I want your trust."

They both staggered. Even though he was determined to be as blunt as possible so he'd make his every intention clear to her, sometimes talking like that was still embarrassing. He sought out something that could kill the silence. "So... Since you like writing poems, I take it you read a lot of them?" Peace restored, Siren sat down with him again and said yes. "Then who's your favorite poet?" Upon hearing the question, her cheeks rose along with her smile. She started answering, but then paused with her mouth in an "O". Her hands gestured excitedly. "Actually, it's a poet from the Ashen Valleys," she said, "And, coincidentally, your mother is the one who gifted us a copy of her work in a gift basket... I transcribed it and locked that one away, of course..." Imagining that made Laurel's chest warm up and his smile spread. "Which poet is it?" he asked, kind of regretting not having talked to his mom about her literary tastes. "Alina Trenchwalker," she said, "Her work made me actually enjoy writing."

Laurel inched closer, trying to make out the look on her face. "You didn't enjoy it before?" She shrugged and averted her eyes. "I'd busy myself with form too much. I'd get frustrated counting syllables and starting over," she said, lowering her voice, "But if Alina can freeform everything and still make worthwhile art, then... there's surely no cause for concern." He stashed his guitar away and tried to ignore the fact he could hear his own heart pounding away. "I have no clue what you're on about," he said, "But I liked listening to it and I liked your poem. It had good flow to it, I think." He got up and paused; "Maybe... we should keep this bargain up." Siren readjusted her glasses. "I did have fun," she replied, an

impish grin growing along her lips before she added: "Guess a princeling would have as much free time as he'd like to hone his guitar skills and entertain me." They couldn't help but smile at each other.

Even after they settled down and got back to their routine, Laurel couldn't shake the seedling of an idea. So he fed it. In turn, the study session wasn't very productive, since he was too preoccupied with other thoughts. In the next few days, he put his plan in motion secretly, jotting down ideas and playing them out on the guitar. He tried to write down as many verses of Siren's poem as he could remember; it was essential for the song to come along, after all. And it wasn't really coming along. He'd hit a bit of a slump on progressions and chords he could try to get that... angst-y vibe. Perhaps not angst-y, really, but definitely far from what he'd usually go for. And just infiltrating practice sessions in the auditorium to listen to other musicians turned out to not be enough; yet another source of inspiration was needed.

Thus, he devised his own cover mission to the library. Well, not that it was elaborate; it mostly consisted of bothering an intern instead of Siren. As expected, there was one at the reception. "Would you kindly point me towards the foreign poetry section?" he asked, keeping his voice low. The student's answer made him shudder, because it was on the same floor as Siren's office. He walked up the stairs the same way as he'd sneak in the hallways at night during childhood, peeking around the corners once he got to the second floor to make sure Siren wasn't lurking about or whatever it was librarians did when they weren't at their desks.

As he walked among the shelves, his eyes were locked to the numbers carved on each one so he'd find what he was looking for. His heart was frantically trying to keep up with the realization that Siren could actually be anywhere within that maze of books. If she was, his mission would be over, so he made his step lighter. Fortunately, he got to the desired section



without encountering her; he sighed noisier than he should have. Now all he had to do was grab the book and find a place to read... then, of course, pray that Siren wouldn't see him. Feasible. Laurel scanned the authors in search of Alina Trenchwalker, dismayed to realize that it might take a while considering that there was only one copy.

A somewhat raspy voice sent his mind into a frenzy. "Hey there," it said, coming from behind him. He turned to find Siren's smug face. Hearing her say that was worse than getting caught in the kitchen at three in the morning. "Oh, hello, Siren," he mustered up a smile. Unimpressed by his attempt at sounding chill, she crossed her arms and took long, slow steps to stand beside him. "What are you doing here?" he asked, feeling stupid as soon as the words left his mouth. Her scoff made him think she thought the same. "I live here, you know," she said. "What, you *live* here?" That brought wrinkles to her forehead. "... Yeah, I had the basement turned into a bedroom," she said, her shoulders pointing up, "It was too humid for storage anyways."

She looked down and tapped the floor with the heel of her boot for a while. Eventually, she recovered and grinned at him. "I see you're perusing the poetry section without me," she said, taking another step towards him, "That feels like betrayal, you know." In turn, he took a step back. "I thought you said I don't owe you any satisfaction," he attempted to deflect, but it felt off. Judging by her expression, it felt off for her too. "Eh, and I thought we were past that," she said, her eyes shooting straight at his in that uncomfortable way she seemed to enjoy pinning him down in, "You agonizingly tried getting in my good graces, sang me praises, begged for book recs... and then, nothing." With each word, she inched closer, making him back away. Soon enough, his back touched a shelf and it felt like they were breathing the same stale air, but she looked triumphant. "You leave me alone for days and don't even need me to hand you books anymore. Is stringing me along your definition of fun? Would be fitting," she smiled, though it was somewhat bitter.

For a while, he felt trapped between her and the books, not to mention the way his chest constrained his lungs. The cold that came with being accused ran through his veins. However, his shocked face soon gave way to a smile and he felt himself take a deep breath. The thought had struck him. "So you've missed me," he said, taking a step towards her instead of running away. She uncrossed her arms, hands dropping. "Don't be full of yourself," she said, "but I suppose so. Be more responsible or something." When he bent a bit to match their heights, he noticed her eyes widen. "How can I make you happy, then?" he asked, the words clinging to his tongue. It was Siren's turn to put some distance between them; she averted her eyes. "If you're gonna swing by the library, at least be a mindful enough friend to say hi," she answered. "Is that really all?" he said. He'd admit that he was teasing her and that it was quite vindictive. Unexpectedly, her eyes shot back up. "No," she said, "Need me. Ask for me. Ask me things." Siren got closer and they locked gazes; Laurel almost regretted having bent down as he felt the tickle of her breath on his face. "Let me show off," she finished, any hint of a smile gone.

Hesitant to breathe that close to her, he started running low on air. As he searched for an answer, realizing that his lips were parted plagued his mind. All he could manage was, at last, "Yeah?" She moved, finally giving him room to breathe. "Yeah," she replied, breaking off the eye contact. They stood there for a moment, Siren shifting awkwardly; then, out of nowhere, she walked off like the conversation hadn't happened. "I'll see you in my office," she said, not looking back.

Once she was out of sight and his head had finally stopped racing, Laurel found himself in a dilemma. On one hand, he really felt like obeying her and heading to the office; on the other, wasn't that the perfect moment to get what he'd come looking for? Weighing his options, though it pained him a little, getting the book and following through with it seemed like it would have the biggest pay-off. Maybe he could do both things if he was fast enough;

then, Siren wouldn't be disappointed. So he powered through the seemingly endless bookshelf until Alina Trenchwalker's name graced his eyes at last. He grabbed the book and looked over his shoulder to make sure Siren wouldn't materialize herself behind him.

The original plan had been finding a seat on the ground floor and reading it there, but obviously that wasn't safe enough if he wanted to keep it a secret. Great. He stashed it under his cloak after a second of consideration. Even if the whole curse business wasn't merely a word of warning, he figured he'd be fine. His bedroom was as close as possible to the library, after all. Besides, imagining spots of color on the wall or whatever didn't seem like too bad of a trade-off if it even came down to that. All too aware of the book's weight, he walked out of the library, conscious of each step taken.

Getting outside and realizing he wasn't licking the floor on all fours and stuff was enough of a relief that he sighed heavily. His conscience lightened up a bit as he walked to his room; however, as he took his key out, a sudden bout of heat in his mouth made him stagger. He fumbled with the lock until he was safely inside and ran his tongue over the burning spot. It was his gums. The texture was... off. Oh, come on. Please make it unrelated. Laurel rushed over to his bed and sat down, opening the book to the usual warning section which he'd come to ignore recently. There it was: the first symptom, bubbling gums. No time to process that, because time was essential then. Instead of reading the rest of the warnings, he decided to just read as many poems as he could before it got any worse; then, he could drop the book off at the library and it would all go away. At least he thought it worked that way. Of course, Laurel did realize it was wiser to do that right at the moment, but he hadn't gone to that length for nothing.

Turns out ignoring the pain in favor of reading was hard. Still, he powered through, focusing on the verses and trying to form critical thoughts on the content and the form — or lack thereof. Ingraining as much as he could on his mind for later would make it worth it. He

could withstand the symptoms until a certain compulsion hit him full force. His hands seemed itchy and his muscles tensed up; though he wanted to stay put, the stone floor suddenly seemed inviting. There was a terrible sensation underneath his nails and he just had to scratch it out. He set the book aside and dropped to his knees against his will, muscles locking without a command. Before he knew it, he was scratching the rough stone with full force, some nails immediately chipping away. His body wouldn't obey him and the terrible wave that overcame him wasn't just pain.

It was impossible to know how long he'd been scratching away for. Couldn't be long, because the symptoms hadn't progressed any further. Still, fatigue hit him and the stone drew blood; his fingertips left behind trails of it. He'd thought the burning in his mouth was bad before getting to that. Should have gone back to the library when he could still move. Then, when he thought he couldn't take it anymore, there was a soft knock at the door. The chills of pain coalesced with chills of relief until he realized he couldn't speak and the door was fucking locked. The horror increased once the person spoke up and he realized who it was.

"Laurel," Siren's voice called him, serious, "Are you in there?" If only he could answer. Instead, the silence dragged on and she sighed. For some reason, thinking that she might walk away made the pain dig deeper. "If you are, I'm going to talk even if you don't feel like seeing me. I guess this sounds insecure or obsessed, whatever. I'm not. You're always earnest, so... I had an errand to run and I wanted to... clarify." He could hear her rest her head against the wooden door. "At least I thought you were earnest, because you came on really strongly at first. But now I feel like you've been avoiding me somewhat. And I guess I made myself clear enough earlier today, but I was serious. I want to keep seeing you and talking to you. So... If you're in there and I just humiliated myself to your attentive ears, come see me if you're still... genuinely interested." She paused for an agonizing moment. "If you're not, I guess I got it out. And... I'd see your face in Umbra's. For now."

Oh. Don't let her walk away. There was so much he could say in return, reassure her that his avoidance hadn't been intentional and, in fact, he'd been busy thinking of ways to show her he cared. He wanted to ask what the remark about Umbra meant. And, of course, he also wanted her to make it stop. He'd been scratching for so long that the skin had really worn down and each motion was insufferable. He tried with all his might to answer and euphoria hit him once he felt a sound form in the back of his throat. But instead of the words he'd meant to say, he... barked. Loudly. More than once.

Immediately, the doorknob turned. Hard. When it seemed like Siren had realized it was locked, Laurel could hear what sounded like a slap on the wood. "*Laurel*," she raised her voice, "Are you barking because you're a freak or because it was *you*?" Instead of answering, he kept barking. "I should have known," she said, "I'll be back." He could hear her heels hit the very stone that tortured him as she walked away. Rather, it sounded like she was running. Soon footsteps echoed through the hall again and he heard a crashing sound at the door; after it repeated for a bit, he could see the blade of an axe poke through the splintered wood. The whole process felt too long while he was forced to watch his fingertips go raw, exposed flesh rubbing against stone. Once the hole was big enough, he could see, through the corners of his eyes, an arm pass through it and fumble with the key that was thankfully still in the lock. Soon, the door opened.

Someone in guard colors rushed to his side, pulling his hands away from the ground forcefully; Laurel still clawed at the air, reluctantly barking as he was tied up. The characteristic sound of Siren's boots as she paced behind him was enough to induce a chill in his spine. "You should apologize for wasting Des' time as soon as you can speak," she said softly. He could feel the disappointment emanating off her in waves when he heard her pick the book up — or maybe it was his imagination. Barking non-stop only made the experience more humiliating. Aside from that, the overwhelming silence as Desmond carried him to

Siren's office felt as bad as his injuries. The worst was that Des was inadvertently holding him in a way that kept Siren in his direct line of sight. She had her arms tightly crossed as she walked in front of them.

Once they got to her office, Desmond promptly tied him up to a chair besides Siren's desk, going so far as to tying his legs to the chair's. "You know, this is looking pretty bad," he said, standing somewhere behind Laurel, "You better hope he doesn't make a complaint against you." Siren didn't seem to care enough to look at Des as she answered: "Yeah, he'd be arrogant enough to do that." She unlocked one of her drawers and used both hands to pull out a huge, dark leather tome. She laid both books down side by side and, after taking a look at the one Laurel had swept away, started mincing some herbs. He desperately wanted to apologize and eventually thought he'd gathered enough will to say something, because he could feel himself start saying something; instead, what came out was "I'm Siren's good little puppy!" To his utter horror, Siren and Des looked at each other and the guard laughed. "I like some humiliation," she muttered, mixing whatever she'd done with black ink.

She loaded her pen and started drawing symbols on the dark tome; once she was done, she moved on to a paintbrush and dragged her chair over to Laurel's. With one hand, she cupped his face and pulled it towards herself. "Fuck, I wish you'd shut up," she said. It seemed like she wanted to sound angry, but all he found in her eyes was a hint of sadness. Then, she jammed her fingers along his mandible to try to stop him from moving too much when he barked. The wet paint was cold as she drew the brush along his cheeks. Relief washed over him as soon as he realized he'd stopped moving unwillingly. "Siren, I..." he started, despite her forceful fingers. "Thanks, Des," she interrupted, "You can untie him and go now." Des obeyed and Siren turned away, cleaning her materials as if Laurel wasn't there anymore.

Laurel regretted rubbing his at last free wrists when his blood stained his shirt and he felt the fabric on the exposed flesh of his fingertips. Despite the mind numbing pain, he wanted to say something. Anything. There had to be something that could settle the score. "Siren, I'm sorry. Really. I inconvenienced you." She sat a paperweight atop the tome's wet pages and ran her fingers along Alina's book, still not looking at him. "You really did," she said, "But what bothered me was that it was you." He got up, his knees weak from kneeling for so long. Still, he stood close to her, his disfigured hands hanging by his sides. "How so?" he asked. "Sometimes you're quite true to the nickname 'princeling', you know. There was ample warning of what would happen if you broke the rules," she finally turned to him, a stoic look on her face. "That's not... I just... Didn't want you to see me reading it. I wasn't thinking straight," he said, the desperate tone in his voice paining him. She looked at the book and smiled slightly, "Trenchwalker, huh. Why not?" In his yearning for approval, his hands shot up and grabbed hers, dirtying them with blood; it felt warm and damp and shot pain up his arms. Siren's pupils widened. "You said you were afraid of sounding obsessed," he said, "I don't think you do... But I thought you might think that of me. I... want to understand everything you tell me." Of course, he wouldn't tell her that he'd also been planning something.

She bit her lower lip and looked at their entwined hands. It was a bloody mess, but she didn't pull away. "Honestly, that really messes with me. Deeply," she said, pausing to exhale slowly, "Which is why I couldn't believe that you'd do this and prove that you don't take my work seriously." He gripped her hands tighter and pulled them closer to himself. "No! Siren... I do. I just... Thought it would take longer to take effect. I don't know." She squeezed his hands too. "That's not even the point. Do you just think you're exempt from rules?" He sighed. "No. I fucked up. And I won't do it again." After a while, she looked up to meet his eyes. "I know."

"I'll make it up to you," he said. "I just need time. It's fine," she replied, "And you should go to the healers." Noticing his puzzled look, she explained: "You know, the ones in white attire that come by sometimes. You'll find them in the main greenhouse." She let go of his hands, but he didn't let go of hers. Not yet, even though the touch burned so bad. "What did you mean when you mentioned Umbra's face?" he asked at last. Her cheeks visibly reddened. "You should forget that." He shook his head. "No, I want to know," he said. She chuckled, "I only said it because I know Umbra is not in the Ashen people's imaginarium." Laurel pulled her closer once again. Her eyes widened even more. "I care about every word that leaves your mouth," he whispered, raising a tainted hand to carefully adjust her crooked glasses. Her lips were parted and he could feel her choppy breathing against his hand as he paused. "Doesn't matter. I'm still hurt, you know," she pulled away and turned her back to him. "Yeah, I know," he said, keeping a soft tone, "I'll come back some other time."

He eventually found his way to the main greenhouse and, as soon as he was in there, whoever noticed his sorry state pointed him in the right direction. After a walk through the garden that would otherwise have been leisurely, he encountered some of the people clad in white. Though they seemed busy tending to the area, his arrival brought them to a stop. An older woman approached him and, after looking at his painted cheeks, said: "Siren?" Laurel nodded, a bit taken aback by her disgusted expression. She sat him down on a bench surrounded by tall plants; butterflies fluttered about without a care. After motioning for her colleagues to fetch something, she sat in a low chair in front of him.

"I take it it's not the first time this happens?" he asked, trying to sound sympathetic. Seemed like he was inconveniencing lots of people that day. "No, that girl's responsible for a good chunk of our work load," she said, grabbing his wrists to take a look at his injuries. "So lots of people get cursed?" he asked. "No." Before Laurel could ask her to clarify, another



healer came by holding a cage. It was filled with rats. The woman tending to him gladly took it and set it by her side. "Um... What's that for?" he asked, a bad feeling overcoming him as he exchanged glances with the rats. All he received from the healer was a stern look. Then, she took his hand with one of hers and shoved the other inside the cage, touching whichever rat first came in contact with it.

Immediately, Laurel felt pin pricks all over his hand. It made him want to pull away. Still, he stayed put and, soon enough, his injuries started closing up — or rather, completely healing up, skin regenerating itself. Mesmerized by the process, it took him a while to realize that, under the healer's other hand, the rats died one by one. Of course. Nothing was free. There was a reason they didn't have that method in the Ashen Valleys, after all. Though he felt a bout of nausea, he knew he should have seen that coming. He held himself there, looking only at his hands until the healer was done. She sighed, locking the cage up. Examining his hands, Laurel noticed something. "My fingernails..." he muttered. Indeed, all the fingernails that had been chipped or ripped away still looked the same, his flesh exposed. "It will only heal what your own body has the capacity to heal. Fingernails are dead tissue. You'll just have to wait," she said, getting up, "We can bandage your fingers up." So she did, sending him on his way afterwards.

Once he got to his room and locked his door — considering the hole in it, privacy was an illusion — he realized someone must have scrubbed his blood out of the floor. Yeah, definitely inconvenienced a lot of people. The guitar was still where he'd left it, waiting for him to finish composing what he'd started. But... no fingernails. So it had all been for nothing. Before he started sulking in bed, he realized he could just find a fucking pick. Okay, everything was back on track. Even if it still hurt a little, he'd go through with it. He hadn't done all that and disappointed Siren in vain. In fact, he'd managed to read some of the poems in Alina's book before completely losing it. That would surely inspire him... after a long nap.

As promised, he let days go by and gave Siren space. It was easy when he could busy himself by finishing the song, though even with a pick his fingers ached. During that period, nothing of note happened aside from the weird tension during breakfast after the curse incident; Wyvern had quizzed him on whether or not he planned on lodging a complaint. That hadn't even crossed his mind. He didn't even intend on mentioning it in his letters home, considering the freakout it would cause.

By the time he'd mostly finished the song, a good chunk of days had gone by, though his fingers were still bandaged. He dressed up properly to meet Siren, hoping her thoughts had rearranged in his favor. His fingertips complained as he tied his hair up, but he pushed on and was soon out the now fixed door with the guitar on his back. Laurel made his way to the library, too conscious of himself when the intern at the reception eyed him down. They definitely knew what he'd done days prior. He pushed the office doors open to find Siren on the couch, boots off and arms hugging fluffy covers. She grumbled and he closed the doors silently. "Oh, sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to wake you." After finding her glasses where they hung by their chord, she sat up, clearing some space on the couch. "I wasn't asleep," she said, looking up and smiling, "Do you plan on serenading me for forgiveness?"

He took the guitar off his back and sat with her on the couch, smiling back timidly. "If you asked me to," he replied, pausing for a deep breath, "But no. I've been writing something... for you. Inspired by your poem. And what I could read of Alina's." Laurel hesitated, unsure of what the look on Siren's eyes meant. "And now I realize maybe I should have asked you if that was okay. Well... It was meant to be a surprise, so..." She slid closer to him, not smiling anymore. That made the task a little more daunting. "Stop talking. Play it." He inhaled sharply and acquiesced, refusing to look at her as he played. The pressure was already too big without having to guess what was going on behind her face.

The progression was more intense than what he was used to playing and the idea of messing up instigated a cold sweat. He'd written it keeping the way her poem had felt in mind; that was where the intensity came from. It was more of a translation job, really, and it made him insecure. But glad. After the last note, he could faintly hear his own frantic heartbeat. He dared look up to her, finding her mouth agape and eyes wide. The silence was crushing. He mustered up the courage to speak up, but then her shock broke into a smile and she said: "That's the most attention anyone has ever paid me." Her voice was low and soft and it made him want to come closer. He set the guitar aside, not taking his eyes off her. "And... you like it?" he asked. "I love it. Be more sure of yourself," she smiled widely, "It... made me really happy."

"I'm never sure of myself when it comes to you," he said, lowering his voice. She seemed surprised for a second, but it soon gave way to a grin. "I suppose that's good," she said, sliding closer, "I do enjoy the tension." Time slid by as they stared at each other, both at a loss for words. Too aware of their proximity, Laurel cleared his throat and found the will to break it off. "So, it's your turn," he said. That seemed to confuse her for a moment, as if she'd been too caught up to process the words. "Right, though I don't know if anything I show you will be enough to balance that out," she said, getting up. She paused. "I'm serious. I liked it a lot," she muttered as she went through her drawers again. When he heard that, Laurel's chest felt too small for his heart. She returned with a piece of paper and, after a second of hesitation, started reading for him:

"a dweller of the river Beltpass  
seeker of greater depths  
beside decomposing fellows  
leaving behind all things shallow.

together we dive  
and share no words  
separated by states of life  
and the plagued mold.

no longer an individual  
our bodies, the body of water  
our personalities, residual.

though for now i am a living creature  
the overwhelming pressure  
distorts any human feature."

As always, he let it sink in, focusing on her every word. After it seemed like she'd had a moment to breathe, he said: "It sounds to me like you feel pretty lonely." That gave her pause; her eyes widened and she turned her face away. Still, he could see that she furrowed her brow. "Not all poets write from experience, you know," she said, sighing, "That's quite the ignorant take." He chuckled. Whenever she wanted to deflect, it seemed like she resorted to insulting his intelligence. "But I think you do," he replied. There was no answer and she didn't look at him.

Laurel shifted, feeling some words lodge themselves in his throat. He'd been watching her for long enough to form coherent thoughts and he wished things could be different. "To be honest, I know you don't want to feel like that... Better yet, you don't want to need social interaction," he said, finding the guts to get it out. Though she didn't look at him, he continued: "So you repress it... But all the time you spend agonizing on it means you already feel like that." Gingerly, he touched her hand, glad that she didn't shy away. At last, she

scoffed, "Fuck, have you been psychoevaluating me?" Laurel smiled, "I've already told you I hang onto your every word." Siren sighed and he thought her hand shivered a little. "Well... Any friends?" he asked. "I talk to you. Sometimes Wyves," she said.

In anticipation of what he'd ask next, Laurel's heartrate picked up. "Um... Any exes?" Siren laughed bitterly. "As if anyone would want anything to do with someone as unavailable as me," she said. He could feel his heartbeat on his fingertips as he held her hand. Hoping his hand wasn't sweaty, he took a deep breath before risking it: "Then... Maybe you should try someone as unavailable as you." She finally met his gaze, lips slightly parted; her hand twitched a bit in his grasp. "Like?" she asked, almost whispering. "Like..." he inched closer and took a deep breath, "The crown prince of another country." His breath escaped him as he waited for her reaction; for a while, she just stared at him, mouth agape. Then, her shock became a grin, her cheeks stained light red. "Oh? There are only a handful of those, you know..." she said, grabbing his hand and coming closer; "Where do you suggest I find one?"

That close to her, breathing became hard again; he felt lightheaded, unsure whether to stare at her eyes or mouth. "I happen to know one..." he said, hearing his own blood rush by his ears, "Laurel Greyland?" Though her hand was shaky, she raised it and tucked a loose strand of Laurel's long hair behind his ear. Her smile was just as shaky. "Yeah, I know him. He's quite... pretty," she said, her voice so soft he wanted to inch even closer to listen better. The compliment made his cheeks warm up, a pleasant tingling in his body. "Yeah?" he asked. No one had ever called him pretty. "Yeah," she said, "But would he be interested?" He bent towards her, their noses nearly touching, and chuckled slightly, "All he seems to talk about these days is you." The silence felt too heavy, like boulders on their backs pushing them closer to each other. Instead of giving in, Siren squeezed his hand and said: "I want you to call me by my name... Olga." He squeezed her hand in return, touching his forehead to hers

cautiously. "Olga," he repeated, obeying immediately, "That really fits you. It's nice." She laughed and the sound was relieving.

Despite the pressure between them, all they did was stare at each other for an agonizing moment, hands entwined. So close. But still, they didn't get any closer. After what felt like the whole afternoon, Siren cleared her throat and pulled away. "You haven't studied at all these past weeks," she said, "Should probably catch up." Of course, he obeyed. He was more than glad to just sit close to her and read quietly. However, after that, he couldn't help but chastise himself for not being even more direct. He tried to focus on reading something he barely remembered from weeks prior, but his mind kept going back to things he could say to Siren instead.

Fortunately, it seemed like she had the same problem, because she was the one to interrupt his frail concentration: "You know, for someone from the Ashen Valleys, you took the curse and the healers quite well." He put the book he was reading down and chuckled. "Ah, yeah," he said, "Well, I mostly brought that upon myself. Also... I've always been more on the curious side when it comes to that stuff." She laid her chin on her hand, elbow firmly resting on her desk. Her pen's ink slowly dried away. "Mm. So you're not scared?" she asked. "I am. Now more than ever. But... It's the same as fire. Interesting, I mean," he said. She smiled. "Though I wager you won't be writing home about it," she said, twisting her pen, "Since you're too desperate to be in my good graces."

"I won't," he said, turning to her completely, "About that, I thought you'd... take longer to come around." Siren shrugged. "Maybe I'm also desperate. Although a major part of it is that I was sort of glad to see you suffer the consequences of your actions," she said, touching the top of her pen to her chin. Then, she gave him a twisted smile. "I want you to take me seriously. And now you know." Her grin shot a warm wave through his body and he couldn't help but return it. "You did say you enjoy humiliation," he said, his tone graver, "Did you

enjoy watching me suffer, then?" She closed her eyes for an instant, as if she had to ponder the answer. "It was somewhat sweet," she said, "But I was surprised to see how much it hurt me seeing the pain on your face." He took a deep breath, "You have no reason to feel bad. I did that to myself." She seemed content enough; he could see her bare feet swaying under her desk. "I like your attitude," she said.

The next few days included awkward, albeit friendly, conversations and study sessions during which Laurel couldn't find a comfortable position on the couch. Even after all they'd said and seemed to have agreed on, time went on as normal, though with that added layer of insecurity. That is, until a day when Siren seemed more stressed out than normal. He'd noticed it as soon as he entered the office, but it became clear once she stamped something out with her blotter with too much force and muttered a raspy "fuck" under her breath. She balled her hand into a fist and took it to her forehead, resting her head against it and taking a deep breath.

Laurel put whatever he was reading aside and got up, cautiously walking to her side and touching her shoulder. "Olga... Is something bothering you?" he asked, lowering his voice as if beckoning a secret. "I don't know, it's just... Fuck. Whatever," she said, adjusting her posture and evaluating the blot she'd tried to clean up moments before. "It's obviously not fuck-whatever." She rolled her eyes. "Yeah. Okay. You were right. I feel alone," she said, as if it was some sort of new revelation. He caressed her shoulder slightly, waiting for her to keep going. She sighed. "It's... And I don't know why it bothers me so..." she pressed her eyes closed for a moment, "Wyves and Des are going out."

Laurel paused, looking at her with a blank face. Honestly, he was a bit dumbfounded. "*What?*" she said, mistaking his confusion for judgement. "Um, is that like, a new thing? Because I always got that vibe from them," he said, gesturing loosely. Siren groaned, "That's

worse, because I thought she was my only friend but I was the last one to know!" Laurel cleared some space on her desk to sit on, which seemed to piss her off even more, but she let it slide. From his new viewpoint, he took in the sights of her scared face and a deep breath, "Keep going." She obliged, "It's... I don't know. I've thought on it. Maybe it's because she's spared me so little time in the last few years. She has other people and I... don't," she scratched herself and hid her eyes from Laurel's. "You'll be gone soon enough. Aside from that... Maybe part of me hoped she'd look my way instead. But I... don't really feel like that anymore." She was gripping her arm, eyes focused on the papers she'd been working on.

"Damn. You're such an overthinker," Laurel said, "Seems like you've sorted it out, mostly." He couldn't really see a way to contribute. Instead, he reached his hand out to her, palm upwards. His fingertips had closed up nicely in the past week. Gingerly, she took his hand, unsure. "Yet I still feel pathetic," she said. "Look, you don't have to judge yourself for having normal human emotions," he took his free hand to her chin, lightly motivating her to look at him, "You want the people you care about to show they care about you, too. Isn't that normal?" At last, Siren didn't look away, focusing on his face. The bags under her eyes seemed more intense than usual. "I don't like it," she said simply. He smiled and, though faintly, she did too.

"Her sister's in town," Siren started after a moment, "And they're throwing a dinner party. I was... wondering if you'd be my plus one." With a sudden fierceness, she grabbed his hand, the one that had been caressing her chin, and pressed it to her warm cheek. Her eyes dug straight into his. "Obviously, you're theoretically coming as my friend. But you know that's not the only thing I mean by the invitation." She smiled and he felt her facial muscles shift under his palm. He realized he was bending closer to her, but had no clue when he'd done it. "Sure. I'm formally trained in mingling," he said, trying to sound cool. "I mostly want



someone to talk to while I'm there," she bit her lower lip and her smile grew, "But... we don't have to stay there all night, you know."

After his heart had settled down a little, Laurel jumped down. He kept that one hand on her cheek and put the other on the back of her chair, effectively trapping her between him and her seat. "Olga... You're sounding really bold," he whispered. "I thought being direct was best," she said, stammering a bit. "It's big talk when we haven't even kissed yet," he said, pushing her glasses up a little bit. A strand of his own hair fell on her face and it was enough of an annoyance to bring him back to earth and embarrass him so. Still, she seemed unbothered, tucking it away immediately; she hardly shifted her eyes from his. "Do you want to?" she asked, tilting her head closer ever so slightly. Feeling a sudden wave of cold on his hand, he pulled her in further, but still didn't go through with it. "I do," he said. Laurel could hear her breathing perfectly; staring at her parted lips made him dizzy.

Then, Siren kicked the floor, sliding herself and her chair away from him. He stumbled forwards from the shock of it. "Cool," she said, crossing her arms and smiling cordially, "Come by again near closing time." Initially, Laurel opened his mouth to provoke her for sounding scared, but then realized he was also scared. Maybe he could have gone ahead with it in that moment; not anymore, though, because he suddenly felt completely exposed. "Sure. When's the party?" he asked. "Tomorrow." He raised his eyebrows. "Seriously? Was inviting me an afterthought?" Siren laughed, seemingly less tense. "It's not like you have anything better to do," she said, "You've been completely abandoned by your hosts, after all. You're all mine to look after." She looked up for a moment and murmured something. "Though I suppose that oughta change if war does break out," she said, pensive.

"*What?*" Laurel threw his weight on the desk, feeling his blood pressure drop somewhat. She shrugged. "Yeah, if it does, they might bring you under their wing. Though they don't exactly need your allegiance, passage through Ashen territory would be quite

beneficial." As she stretched and twisted her arms, he took a deep breath. "No, back up," he asked, "I didn't hear any war talk." She scoffed and grinned at him, smug as always. "You definitely did. Must have tuned it out, as is your privilege to do so," she said, "But I'm sure you can imagine what it is." Yeah, it hit him. "Oh, seriously? Is the Lunar Bay finally planning on invading the western coastal line?" he asked, kind of exhausted just thinking about it. "I wouldn't know. But that's the talk. Judging by Wyvern's cryptic lines these days, I'd say it makes sense," she said, not looking too grim. "She's in the army?" Siren dragged her chair back to the desk, dodging Laurel. "Advisor," she replied.

"Well, if it comes down to pressuring the Ashen Valleys for allegiance, I might be stuck here for a while," he sighed. "It should. But would being stuck here be so bad?" The question sounded a bit like a trap. "Not the point. It would get pretty fucked." She got back to her papers, reloading her pen. "I'm sure it will. But, you know, I technically shouldn't be swaying your opinion. It seems to me like the officials and royals here view you as an easily influenced young prince," she smirked as if that was somehow funny, "I wouldn't want to get myself involved in that perception." He sighed, still resting against her desk, "They're kinda right. I'm a few months away from being crowned and I obviously have no idea what I'm doing." That made her laugh a little. "Obviously. Becomes even worse when you realize the Ashen Valleys have the highest crowning age requirements," she said.

Laurel rubbed his eyes, already tired. "You've read everything on my family, haven't you?" he asked. She nodded, "A considerable amount." He hadn't. "Was I already born when the last biography was written?" She stopped trying to work, giving him her undivided attention. "You were a child," she said. He smiled faintly, a flash from his childhood going through his mind. "Then you can probably imagine I grew up quite sheltered... Even for a crown prince," he said. "Mm," she mumbled, pondering it for a while, "I thought that might be the case after your parents' history. Plus, any records from your childhood are haphazard at

best." He chuckled, shoving his hands in his pockets. "So you see. You were right. I *am* behind on my geopolitics. On everything, really. I was primarily raised to be alive," he said, looking at her more affectionately than he should before reaching out to fix her glasses yet again. "I'll see you tonight, Olga. If you still want to... you know." He smiled. Going down that topic of conversation had tired him out more than he'd expected. "You too. For now, I still do," she said. As a goodbye, he rekindled some fairy lights for her before taking off.

During the hours before sunset, Laurel paced about castle grounds. Even though he'd already had a bath that day, he cleaned himself up again, his mind running out of things to do. Once night had already fallen and the library's closing time drew near, he hurried over, his heart fluttering so much he thought it had come loose. "We're almost closing," said the intern at the reception. "I just have to talk to Siren and I'll be out," he said, which seemed enough to convince them. Or maybe they didn't care. Pushing the office's doors open and being immediately greeted by Siren's smile was enough to make his own falter. He carefully closed the doors again and walked over, perhaps a bit rigid; she got up to meet him.

"So you came," she said in her usual way of teasing. "I wouldn't miss it," he said, taking a shy step forward to touch her hand softly. She returned it, her fingertips almost tickling his skin. "So... What now?" he asked. "We wait for closing time," she said, squeezing his hand before letting it go. "And then?" She returned to her desk and looked up to grin at him, "We go down to my room." The sudden silence was as loud as a slap. Siren must have noticed the redness in Laurel's cheeks, because she added: "... For privacy. Considering your status and all." She ran her eyes through his clothes. "Of course, it would have been helpful if you didn't come in House Greyland colors, always announcing your presence and such," she said. He looked down as if shocked by his own cloak. "Fuck, I didn't even realize. Sorry," he said. "You should worry about your own reputation," she laughed, "I don't have one to uphold."

After taking in his puzzled look, she sighed and said: "You really don't know anything about me, while I've read your family's biography. Makes me sound obsessed." He took a seat on the couch, realizing they might be there a while. "It doesn't. It just so happens you transcribe lots of books," he said, "Though I'd say going around at night kissing people before marriage would hurt anyone's reputation." She laughed again, though it sounded somewhat snarky. "Your optics are so screwed, princeling," she said, "You can only imagine social

norms and interactions among nobles and royals." Laurel raised his eyebrows and, after a moment of silence, Siren's smile widened. "You mistook me for a noble," she accused. "So?! That made the most sense!" Laurel exclaimed, suddenly wanting to prove his optics *weren't* screwed.

To his surprise, Siren's face softened and she touched her back to her chair, relaxing somewhat. "I suppose it does. For you especially. I don't recall any scholarship programs such as Umbral Star's in the Ashen Valleys," she shook her head, "But no, I'm a farmer's daughter." She paused and then bit her lip, but it wasn't out of anxiety; no, it was done provocatively. "Does that turn you off?" she asked. He shifted, too aware of the space he took up. "Honestly, Olga, I don't think there's much that could turn me off right now," he said in a lower tone, immediately regretting it and looking away so as not to see her reaction. To make it worse, she didn't answer verbally. So, they just sat there in the awkward silence until someone knocked on the door. They didn't come in, just screamed from outside: "Siren, I'm heading out!"

That made them face each other again. They both looked breathless, as if the intrusion had been a surprise, even though it was what they'd been waiting for. Slowly, Siren got up and walked over to Laurel, reaching her hand out to him. He took it and got up as well. Wordlessly, she guided him down to the basement. Looking down at the back of her neck made him more nervous. Honestly, he kind of wanted to restyle her badly done hair. She always had bed hair. It made him want to sit her down before him and brush it carefully so it would look nicer. But their relationship didn't go to that extent and he really shouldn't want it to.

At last, they got to the final step and Siren fished her keys out of her pocket; she unlocked the heavy door and pushed it open to wide darkness. "Mind lighting it up for us?" she asked, "I'm spent." He didn't mind. Soon the room was lit, revealing a space he bet Siren

didn't spend much time in. Still, he looked around. By the bed, there was a bookshelf as short as a nightstand, but wide enough to be functional. Close to a wall, there was a desk much less grand than the one at her office. In any case, the star of the room definitely was the bed. Even to Laurel's standards, it was lavish: huge and adorned by fluffy covers and an unholy number of pillows. He suddenly realized where the pillows on the couch came from.

Siren's touch on his arm brought him back to reality. She guided him to the bed and sat him down cautiously, as if setting a scene up. Her movements were faulty. There was a split second of consideration where she looked at the space beside him, but ultimately decided to sit on his lap, knees going past his waist. Laurel wasn't sure if it was her sudden weight that rendered him breathless or her proximity. Hesitant, he wrapped his arms around her; she felt warm and... solid. Maybe that was an odd way to think of it, but he wanted to squeeze her against him. Her hands were firmly on his shoulders. "This might be too forward," she muttered, "But you did say there was little that could turn you off." He could hardly focus enough on what she was saying to reply. Because of their position, her neck was almost touching his lips; he could smell her perfectly with each breath he took. Yeah, having her on top of him might prove to not be that comfortable.

Then, she looked down, bringing her face closer to his. Her breath was warm against his cheeks and he was sure she felt the same. Each second stuck like that was agonizing. "What now?" he asked. As if that was possible, she came even closer. Great. "You kiss me," she said. Feeling a little childish, Laurel demanded: "Why me?" Siren squeezed her eyes shut for a moment and hissed. "Because I don't know how to," she said, as if admitting it pained her. "Well, I don't, either," Laurel said. Her eyes were a bit wide when she opened them to investigate his. "Fuck," she mumbled. She took a deep breath and, having successfully convinced herself, grabbed him by the nape and brought his mouth to hers. That was enough to do him in; all he could really do was hope she didn't mind. He rested his hands on her hips,

trying not to grip too hard once he'd felt their shape. The kiss was sloppy and all over the place; it seemed like they were never in agreement of its direction, but he'd be tortured if it stopped.

Then, the inevitable happened. Her teeth caught on his, or maybe the opposite. Still, when she pulled back to cover her mouth, he just gripped her hips tightly and pulled her closer, barely aware of his actions. It had felt oddly cold when she took her body off his. "Can we try again?" he asked. She uncovered her mouth and smiled. Actually, it was that impish grin. "I can feel it, you know," she said. It didn't take him long to understand. "Olga, I'm sorry," he said, feeling his cheeks warm up. Her grin grew and her voice dropped even lower, "You've been grinding me against it." He immediately lifted his hands from her hips, letting them go. "Fuck, I'm so..." She interrupted him by grabbing his hands and putting them back where they were, still smiling. "Yeah, we can try again," she answered at last.

What was supposed to be a mere kiss turned into a full-blown make out session. Before Laurel knew it, Siren had pushed him down on the bed and pinned him against it with her weight; he had his hands on her waist, fighting against the urge to run them all over her. At some point, just kissing her wasn't enough anymore. He wrapped his arms around her and forced her down against his chest so they could both catch a breath; she dug her fingers into his shoulders. "Maybe we're going too fast," he said. "Do you want to stop?" she asked. He gripped her a little tighter, the implication that their bodies might be separated making his heart race. "No... That's not the issue," he said. She nudged him to keep talking. "It's because you're making me feel like... doing more." Siren staggered. "Ah," she murmured. After a while, she started laughing and sat up. "Then I guess we'd better stop, huh," she said, smiling down at him. He'd never seen her smile so tenderly. Her face looked softer than ever when she said, "Do you want to hang out?" He sat up as well, feeling his blood rush when their

faces got that close again. Before they stopped completely, he gave her a quick last kiss.

"Yeah," he said.

She got off his lap, making him feel quite exposed, and started rearranging the pillows. Finally, she sat against the headboard and motioned for him to come close. He obeyed, soon finding himself right beside her; they took their shoes off and Siren covered their legs with a fluffy duvet. "Do you want me to end up falling asleep here?" he asked. "It'd be fine, I wake up earlier than most," she said. "And your bed is so good..." he said, closing his eyes. They just chilled out for a while, which was great, because Laurel really needed to recollect himself. "Did you... have fun?" he asked after a bit. "I did. Actually, we should do that again," she said and, when he looked at her, she had a smile on her face.

"I've been having a great time with you," he took her hand gently, playing with her fingers, "I hope you know that." That seemed to embarrass her somewhat. "I thought I'd despise your very presence, so I'm pleasantly surprised," she said, turning her palm up so he could keep outlining her calluses. "All I had to do was suck up to you," he laughed a bit. "My ego is *not* that big." He smiled as well. "Well, but you wanted someone to take notice," he said, lowering his voice, "You told me to need you and ask you things... Speaking of which, what did you mean when you mentioned Umbra's face?" She hissed under her breath again; "You're not letting that go, are you?" As he shook his head, she sighed, "Look that up yourself and spare me."

At that point, he grabbed both her hands and brought them closer to his chest, making her eyes widen as usual. "But, Olga," he tried to find her weakness, "I need you. I love when you explain things to me. You're the strict teacher I always dreamed of having." She squeezed his hands and took a deep breath. "You're weird," she said, "And a liar." Still, she exhaled slowly and acquiesced: "You know, the Umbral Star Academy is named after Umbra, the deity. It's a remnant of what the universe was before planets and stars were invented.



Essentially a collection of cosmic dust. It's seen and assimilated everything." She paused, looking at nowhere specifically, like she was thinking. "But it's said that it can take on a humanoid form before us, though it doesn't have a face. So it wears a heavy veil, because the dust that comprises it stores secrets to... well, everything, really." Siren glanced at their hands and then looked away. "Even if one were to lift its veil, there's a failsafe, you see. As a last resort, Umbra mirrors your matter instead of revealing its."

She stopped again, taking a good look at Laurel's blank face; he hadn't quite processed it yet. Her hands were trembling a little in his grasp, so he smoothed them over with his thumbs. "We like to tell kids and hopeful people that you'll see something true about yourself if you stare at Umbra's face," and, before he could react, her face turned stern: "That is why I shouldn't have said it. You'll only misinterpret me." She might be right. The conclusion had kinda messed with him. "If you tell me what you meant, I can't misinterpret you," he said, trying to help her amend it. Siren inhaled sharply. "I meant that you were right. I am lonely. And I do want you to be my friend, as pathetic as that may be," she said.

He was ready to just accept that and move on, but he sort of wanted to give her hell for the times she'd teased him. "Ah, because that made it sound like you... liked me," he said. Immediately, her cheeks reddened and she hid her face on his shoulder. "I don't. Don't be an ass," she mumbled. "That'd be okay. I do have a minor crush on you. It's okay to feel these things," he paused, feeling his heart sink a little, "It doesn't mean we'll do anything about it." She still hid her face in his cloak, gripping it tightly. "I don't have time for that," she muttered. "And I *can't*," he said, holding her closer in a hug, "But I'm not going to pretend I don't have feelings for you. I do. And you can choose what to do with them." She looked up and bit her lip. "I want to do more things to you," she said, "And I want you to pay attention to me and praise me even more." He slid a hand up to play with her hair, enjoying the feeling

of intimacy he'd never gotten before. "I love how vocal you are," he said, "I can certainly do all that."

She inched closer and kissed him slowly; the desperation from earlier seemed gone. It was soft and warm and feeling the tip of her tongue made him shudder. "Then we're good," she said afterwards, "Still on for the party tomorrow?" He nodded. "Yeah. Can't miss the opportunity to see you out of your usual clothes," he said. "Don't make me self conscious," she grumbled, "Though I am curious to see if you'll do makeup." He raised an eyebrow, unsure what to make of the question. "Of course," he said and, after rethinking it: "Is that an Ashen Valleys thing?" She smiled. "Yeah," then, she took her lips to his ear: "We can hang out here afterwards." It sent chills down his neck.

Next day rolled around and, though he was bubbling at the thought of seeing Siren, he avoided her. Under the light of day, it would be weird to look her in the eyes after the way he'd touched her — that, and admitting he had a crush on her. When it came time to get ready for the party, he had to take a breather as he did his eyeliner. Her comment about wanting to see what he'd look like had gotten him a little self conscious, even if readying himself was usually second nature. He put on a corset and ditched the usual travel cloak in favor of a better looking one.

He'd agreed on meeting Siren in front of the library after sundown and, sure enough, there she was. The first thing he noticed was that she looked shorter; her daily boots had taller heels than the shoes she was wearing. Over a long dress, she wore a dark green cloak with the Umbral Star insignia. Surprisingly enough, her hair was loose and most of her fringe had been brushed back and contained by a silver tiara. "You clean up well," Laurel said as a greeting, "Your hair looks so good like that." He tried to hold back the adoring look that wanted to show itself on his face. She stared at him for a while, mouth agape; then, she

scoffed and held her arm out. He accepted it and they started walking. "I'm not boosting your ego," she said, "You already know you're pretty."

"Do I?" he asked, somewhat amused. "Don't tease. You're so pretty it disgusts me on principle," she rolled her eyes. "On a more positive note, *your* beauty doesn't disgust me," he said softly. She went quiet for a while, but he could feel her tense up beside him. "By the way, I thought Umbral Star cloaks were meant to be navy blue," he said. "That's for alumni," she replied. "And green is?" She fiddled with the silver star. "For councilors," she said. He thought it over. "Is this some sort of formal function? Am I, like, underdressed?" he asked, widening his eyes at her. "Uh, no. It's just a small party." Laurel smiled a little, digging his thumb into her hand. "So you just want to show off? How pretentious," he said. "Shut up," she exclaimed, whisper-shouting, "You said you liked my pretentiousness." He bent down a bit, whispering back close to her ear: "I love it."

She elbowed him away, putting some distance between them. "We're almost there," she said, looking at him somewhat apologetically. Indeed, they soon got "there", which seemed to be a courtyard similar to the lookout him and Siren had chatted at a few weeks prior. There were tables, chairs and fairy lights scattered about — and, of course, people. Not many. Immediately, Wyvern came running over to them, arms wide open. "Siren dearest!" she beamed, her voice dropping a little when she added: "Oh, you brought the Ashen Prince. How delightful." Though her words were positive, Laurel found himself guessing. "He's been working hard," said Siren, "Thought he deserved a night out." That was a blatant lie. He'd barely worked the past few days. "Nevermind that," Wyvern declared, picking Siren up by the armpits and lifting her above her head as if she weighed nothing, "You look just like a doll!"

Laurel nearly stumbled on himself with concern; "Wyvern, your wrist-" he started, cutting himself short once Wyvern let Siren go and she remained on the air, her expression like that of a kid on timeout. "Levitation. Effortless!" Wyvern exclaimed, smiling. "But look

at her hair. Looks just like her student years," she sighed, rotating Siren as if she was meat on a stick without even moving a finger. "Let me down," she groaned, crossing her arms.

"Sorry," Wyves said, obeying, "I'm just so proud. I have to show you off to people." Desmond appeared, bringing in tow the last guest, a woman Laurel didn't know. "Let the girl be," Des said, placing his hands on Wyvern's shoulders.

"Siren," said the stranger in a rough voice. "Fabiana," Siren returned the greeting, narrowing her eyes. "Oh!" Wyvern beamed again, gesturing to the woman while looking at Laurel, "This is my older sister, Fabiana. And this is Laurel Greyland." Considering the reason behind the party, he should have guessed that was her sister, but they didn't look much alike. Fabiana was slightly taller and, well, bigger. More muscular. Somewhat scarred. "As in the Ashen Valleys' Greylands?" she asked, her face twitching slightly. After Wyvern confirmed it, Fabiana made a face at Siren, who didn't flinch despite being obviously smaller. And weaker. "Out of all people, *you* are hanging out with royals now?" she asked. Siren shrugged. "He's somewhat insufferable, but I've adopted him as a pet. Plus, he's no rat."

They walked to a table and found seats. "How do you know he's not?" Fabiana asked as they did so. Des snickered and Siren tried to look mad at him, but ended up laughing too. "Let's say he took it like a good boy when I cursed him a while back," she said, glancing at Laurel with a crooked smile for a split second. That seemed enough to convince Fabiana. "Can't say I don't like your style," she said. "Yes, like that," Wyvern cheered, "You should all be friends." Des sighed, "I don't think you're being helpful." The table fell silent while drinks and appetizers were served. "Come on, Bibi. You know I only came for business," said Fabiana, immediately pouring herself some wine, "Yet you always throw a stupid party or whatever."

"Bibi?" Laurel asked, surprised to notice that it was the first time he spoke. Wyvern seemed a little embarrassed; "Bibiana. My superiors thought that wasn't a very menacing

name, though." He smiled, "But why would you have to sound menacing?" Fabiana looked over to Siren. "Is he always this dense?" she asked. "Yeah. It's like having a dog." The older woman looked at Laurel for what seemed like too long. "Do you have an inferiority complex?" she asked. "Well, somewhat," he admitted, pouring himself wine as well, "This amuses me though." He was pleased to notice it was Ashen wine, though the taste made him kind of homesick. Not that he was hating his stay at Estella. "He has this 'good royal' act," Siren said, making air quotations, "So I'm pushing his boundaries to see how long he can keep it up."

"Seems like you want to end up back near the Beltpass," said Fabiana, a sudden seriousness in her eyes. Siren averted her eyes, shoving a piece of bread in her mouth with zero class. "Not happening," she mumbled, grimly. "Yeah, even if Siren dearest insulted a random prince right to his face, I'd be in her corner," Wyvern proclaimed, patting Siren on the head. Well, as far as things were concerned, Laurel *was* a random prince. He had to find a way to make the conversation stop reverting to Siren, but it seemed like there was some weird tension between her and the sisters. "I really hadn't noticed you guys were sisters," he said, smiling cordially, "You hardly look alike."

"We get that a lot, actually," Wyvern smiled, "Fabiana being so strong and all." Her sister sighed. "Our father and I think she's a bastard," she said, "Not that he minds. There's also her health issue, which I think is the reason she looks so... frail." Wyves chuckled, "Wouldn't call it a health *issue*, but okay." Laurel raised an eyebrow, "Health issue?" Siren nearly choked on her bread, punching herself on the chest and coughing. "You seriously don't know?" she asked, brow furrowed. Laurel shook his head. "You're sheltered alright, no kidding," she said, "But you must have heard it. Most powerful mage in the world, freak of nature, vitality always completely leeched, endless supply of mana, etcetera. It's what makes kids talk about Wyvern." That brought up a smidge of acknowledgement in Laurel's mind.

"Ah, I knew she had some special circumstances, but wasn't sure what," he said. They held still while the main dishes were served.

"Anyway, what are you here for this time, Fabiana?" Siren asked, drinking a clear glass of water. She had a grin plastered on her face, as if talking to her was provocative in itself. "Just some border shit," she replied. "Oh, we have mercenaries on the border? Must really be going down," Siren smiled wider. Des, who had seemed content just talking to Wyvern up until then, spoke up: "Can you guys really be saying this in front of him?" Of course, he pointed at Laurel. Fabiana chuckled, "It's already happening anyways. Plus, he's gonna be stuck here soon enough... And I imagine you have people monitoring his letters." Wyvern scoffed and giggled, "What? Totes not!" Siren shot him a meaningful glance.

"Hey, Siren dearie, I've been hiding something that's totally going to cheer you up," Wyvern deflected. "I'm not down," Siren paused, her loaded fork near her mouth. "Sure," said Wyves, "Well, I got The Quads to come play after our meal." Fabiana audibly groaned, but Siren nearly punched the table. "No way, how?" she asked. "They just wanted food. It was quite whatever," Wyvern smiled, her cheeks going so high they hid her eyes a bit, "Anything for my prized pupil." Though at least someone was happy, the interaction Laurel had witnessed prior to that didn't go well with the wine. He couldn't really concentrate on what was being said the rest of the night. Plus, The Quads sucked.

He waited for the night to end just so he could take Siren up on her offer of sleeping on her bed. Not to even do anything, really. Maybe just cuddle. He was too buzzed to process everything; she could help him think in the morning. She was good at helping him. When it finally did, she pulled him by the arm, using some excuse like heading the same way and helping the drunken prince get to the dorms. They walked back wordlessly, Siren humming some tunes that were definitely horrendous Quads songs. They were halfway there when someone beckoned them from behind a building. "You two," it was Fabiana, casually resting

against a wall. She motioned for them to come closer. Reluctantly, Siren obliged, dragging Laurel along to the shade.

"What the fuck are you doing, Olga?" Fabiana demanded, immediately making Siren recoil. "The usual," she replied. "No," she pointed at the spot where their bodies touched with her chin, "You're fucking around with some royal kid." Siren rolled her eyes, "Not." Fabiana's face remained stern. "Anyone on that dinner table could get that just from hearing you talk, you dumbfuck," she said, "A seasonal fling with some peasant girl is hardly a stain on a young prince's reputation. Anyone would say he was just messing around." At that point, she unleashed a harsh look on Laurel, whose brain was already fried enough; then, she turned back to Siren. "But *you* should know better. You act like you have this huge safety net that doesn't exist. So high and mighty. Something like this comes up, you're unemployed and back home. That simple."

Siren made that weird hissing sound again, separating herself from Laurel to take a step forward and push her chest out. A laughable effort. "Such a small thing would hardly dent my position," she said, "My superiors wouldn't bat an eye. My work matters more than that." Fabiana crossed her arms. "By superiors, you mean Bibi?" she asked, lowering her voice. "Don't start," Siren equalled her tone. "You already know. Bibi is not in your corner. She never was. Not in anyone's, really. Don't count on her." Siren's face nearly distorted itself. "Yeah, just casually forget all the times she helped me," she said. Fabiana put her hands on Siren's shoulders, letting all their weight fall on them. Siren seemed to get smaller. "Olga... Siren. She didn't. You got that scholarship on your own," Fabiana said, a melancholic note in her voice, "You worked really hard, kid. It's always been just you. Don't count on Bibi."

"I don't know why you even care to visit anymore," Siren said, forcefully tearing herself away. The effort made her pant. "You obviously don't value your sister at all." She reached out to Laurel, grabbing his hand. "Come on, I'll take you to your room," she softened

her voice for him. Before she left the shade, she looked back at Fabiana and it seemed like she'd say something, but didn't. Laurel was dragged behind her towards the library, where Siren stopped and produced a bunch of keys from her pocket. The light was faint and he could see how thin her mouth looked. Then, she exhaled heavily. "You must think I'm pathetic," she said, resting one hand on her hip and looking down at their feet. "I'm not the kind of person who can judge that," he said, unsure of where the conversation was headed. His thoughts were mostly just buzzing along.

"That's good," she paused, jiggling her keys, "Do you want me to take you to your room?" He stuttered, trying to find delicate words; ultimately, he gave up on that effort. "Do you wanna cuddle?" he asked instead. Without verbal reply, she guided him down to her room again, helping him take his boots off so he could lie down. "Fuck, that's humiliating," he said. "You've yet to get to my level of humiliation," she said, lying down beside him and covering them with a soft blanket. "How so?" Laurel shifted to look directly at her, though the pillow beckoned him to sleep. "I was completely debased in front of you," she muttered, averting her eyes. "Oh. No. That's not what I gathered," he mumbled, his words a bit jumbled. "Then what was?" she asked, seemingly impatient.

"It felt like Wyvern's sister cares about you," he said, seeing her face contort; "Even if she was wrong. I don't know." Siren's brow was furrowed and the space between her eyebrows was totally wrinkled. Still, he didn't feel like retracting his statement. "You wouldn't," she said, sighing and relaxing a bit after a while, "You've only been here a couple months." Making his intents clear so she took the initiative, he hugged her, holding her against his chest. She felt warm and it soothed his spinning mind a little. "Well then, let's think about it. Starting with that scholarship business," he whispered close to her ear and closed his eyes.



“Fuck that,” she mumbled and, though she tried to sound annoyed, it seemed like she was just as tired as him; “Fuck the scholarship thing. I’m an adult now. I don’t have to think about my teenage years anymore.” He chuckled, finding her hand and holding it tenderly. “I don’t think that’s how it works,” he said, “I want to know if Fabiana was right. Would you tell me about the scholarship thing?” There was a pause as Siren frowned and snuggled up to him. “You’re annoying... and yet I like it,” she said. She took a deep breath. “I obviously didn’t have money for tuition anywhere. I always wanted to study, but it felt delusional, so mostly I just wanted to... get away,” she said, pausing and pursing her lips for a moment; “I pulled a stupid teenager move and ran away from home. Shit happened. Eventually I got singled out and picked up by the Archmage. That’s Wyvern. So, yeah. That’s the scholarship thing.”

Laurel felt his tongue catch on his teeth. That story sucked. He blinked with force, trying to shove the teenage angst away. It had hurt to hear as well. “Fuck, and you say that so casually as well,” he said, hugging her tighter, “So your family’s crap?” She shrugged lightly, her face lightening up. “Ah, yeah. Dad’s cool. Mother’s a bitch though. We’re cool these days,” she said, “It was an absurd stunt. Worked though. In any case, as you can see, Fabiana was wrong. Wyvern meant something.” Laurel sighed. “And you always say *my* optics are fucked,” he whispered, “Come on, Olga. You’re brilliant. You got a scholarship for a reason.” She laughed a bit. “Oh, I know I’m brilliant. But I wouldn’t have had a chance. I didn’t just get a scholarship,” she shook her head and swallowed hard, “With a wave of Wyves’ hand, my meals were all paid off, my housing costs were annihilated, my class materials were accounted for. Everything. I lived within castle walls for free. A regular scholarship doesn’t cover that.”

Of course she’d hold on to that dearly. “That should be a normal thing,” he said, pressing a kiss to her hair, “It’s unfair that you wouldn’t get a chance normally.” That made

her laugh a bit. It sounded bitter. “Funnily enough, you’re one of the few people who have power over that somewhere... Soon. And you won’t do anything,” she said. Siren flicked her wrist and all the fairy lights in the room gave out, immersing them in darkness. “Go to sleep, princeling. You reek of alcohol.”

He woke up the next day to a faint headache and Olga's silhouette in a soft light. She took her hand to his forehead, caressing his bangs away. "Hey, Laurel," she said. "Hey," he said back, "What time is it?" He was still groggy — the pillows and covers felt like a hug and Olga's hand made him want to drag her back to bed. "Probably close to six," she sat by him, "You can sleep in and go upstairs when the library's more lively. No one will notice you came from my room." Her hand on his hair was soft and sweet, which seemed unusual. "Where are you going?" he asked. She laughed a bit, "I have to get ready."

Laurel took a good look at her. It seemed like they'd slept in party clothes. Her simple dress clung to her figure and he thought it was a shame she'd thrown a cloak over it the night before; after the thought, he was immediately ashamed. "It's early," he said, reaching his hands out to her, "Come back to bed. Just a bit longer..." She kept caressing him, unmoved by his pleading. "I'm not messing with my routine to cuddle with you," she said, getting up, "I'm changing now. If that bothers you, turn away." The residual warmth of her hand on his head faded bit by bit. He gripped the covers. "What if it doesn't bother me?" he risked the question. She was rummaging around her wardrobe, but paused upon hearing it to look over her shoulder. Her wide smile sent chills to his stomach. "It doesn't bother me either," she said simply.

Olga set some clean clothes aside and closed the wardrobe. Then, she locked eyes with Laurel and bent down slightly, bringing her hands to the rim of her dress. She took it off with such ease that it was as if Laurel's presence didn't make a difference. His heart throbbed like the gesture was a jolt of electricity and he gripped the blanket tighter. She was suddenly naked before him, aside from one flimsy piece of underwear; his cheeks heated up as he stared, feeling guilty despite her explicit permission. When his eyes somehow wandered back to her face, he realized she still smiled, though it didn't seem provocative anymore, just...

happy. And embarrassed. "You look so soft," he said, extending his arms out again, "Are you... sure you don't wanna cuddle some more?" She chuckled. "I can get closer if you want," her voice lowered, "But I'm not getting back to bed."

He nodded and let his arms drop. She took cautious steps forward to the edge of the bed, now closer to his face. It was enough to make him think his body wouldn't take it; his veins had to rupture or something. Olga sat beside him and he noticed her cheeks were also tinted. "No touching," she whispered, not that he'd have the guts to. She took a hand to his face and softly rubbed his cheek with her thumb. It was an innocent gesture, but it made him shudder. "It's too early for you to be doing this to me," he whispered as well, completely aware of how adoring the look on his face was. She laughed. "You kinda asked for it." They both smiled.

Though all he wanted to do was hug her and pull her back to bed, he took a deep breath and paused. "Is it really okay for us to be like this?" he asked, afraid of the expression she'd make. He was right to be. "You took what she said to heart?" she said, not caressing him anymore; her hand stopped where it was. "I just... feel like it was true. This might be inconsequential for me, but you..." he said, letting the thought trail off. She scoffed, but then seemed to find it funny. "Don't you think we're old enough to each make our own choices?" she asked, smiling in that bitter way she had. He raised his hand to touch hers and rub his cheek against it; the fact she'd stopped had left him somewhat touch starved. "Honestly, I don't feel mature enough at all," he joked. "In any case, you should trust me to make my own," she said, getting up.

She got back to dressing and he remained in bed, alone. Lying down had never felt so lonely. He'd looked at her so much that he'd burned her image in his mind, being able to conjure up the very smoothness of her bare skin. It was torturing him a bit — probably would for a while. "I hope you know you're stunning," he said, feeling as if he hadn't praised her

enough, "Well, you stunned me." Olga looked back at him and smiled. She was dressed in her usual manner, the ugly coat with the Umbral Star insignia and all. "Aren't you a charmer," she grinned. "I'm serious," he said. "You just want to get me to go back to sleep with you," she crossed her arms. "Yeah, I do. But you're still beautiful," he said. After a while of staring at her face while it seemed like she was trying to find another quip, he added: "It's okay if you don't know how to react."

Olga blanked out for a moment and then sighed, seemingly content. "Give me your keys," she said, "I'll get you some clean clothes now that everyone in the dorms is still asleep." Ah. She was right. He hadn't thought of that at all. He acquiesced. "I trust you with my life," he said. She grinned again and threw him her own bedroom key; "And you have felt firsthand what happens if you mess with my shit." He caught it and it felt heavier than it should. "I prefer to hear your secrets come out of your own mouth," he said, drawing the sentence out. "Speaking of which, you owe me," she said, "We only spoke about me yesterday. I'm not up to speed on your family gossip." He laughed and closed his eyes, "Because the biographies aren't either." After she confirmed, he added: "Well, I'd say you only gave me a brief summary." She audibly sighed. "I'm fine with that. Swing by my office, pay your dues, bare your soul and then we can actually make progress with your studies for once." After that, she ruffled his hair and took off, letting him fall back to sleep. It was easy; her room was quiet, comfy and smelled just like her.

When he woke up again, his only company was a dim, lone fairy light. He refueled it and noticed that Olga really had left clothes for him. They were neatly folded and stacked; his keys were on top. He changed, cleaned up some and sneaked upstairs — after locking her bedroom, of course. She'd been right. No one paid him any mind. He headed straight for her office, her face lighting up immediately once she saw him. Still, she kept writing. "Did you

already have breakfast?" she asked. "No," he admitted. She frowned, "Then go. You drank last night."

He pulled up a chair to sit next to her desk, peering at what she was working on. Seemed like it was just transcription work. "I'm here to pay my dues," he said, resting his elbows on the sturdy desk, "Ask away." She smiled and her teeth dug into her lower lip. "So you're just offering yourself up, huh?" she said. He nodded and mm-ed. "I thought you'd have been with someone before me," she said softly, not taking her eyes off her writing. "I told you I grew up really sheltered," he lowered his voice too, taking advantage of her distraction to blatantly stare at her. "Yeah. And it made sense, with your parents and whatnot..." she mused, tapping her pen to her chin a bit, "But records get scarce after you were born."

"Ah. Well. Again, this feels like an interrogation," he said, keeping a positive tone, "Then you know about the years of miscarriages and all. You can imagine how I was treated." She chuckled, "Rainbow baby with a pretty face? Yeah, I can picture it. Go on." He crossed his arms atop the desk and dropped his head on them. Could take another nap. "I didn't think of it in these terms before I met you, but looking back on it, I was a pretty lonely kid," he said, pausing to try to look at her eyes under her glasses, "About the dating thing... Your view of how royal kids act is, um, very Lunar Bay-esque." Olga scoffed, side-eyeing him. "Oh, come on. Are you gonna say Ashen royals are saints now?" she asked. He laughed a bit. "No. We just don't fuck around with that. You only do those things when you intend on marriage."

She paused, lifting her eyes to him. Her pen dripped a little as her gaze dug into his and she lifted her eyebrows. "Then what are you doing with me?" she said. He averted his eyes and felt his nose go a tad cold. "I did also tell you I was raised to be happy. I'm not fit for a king," he said, taking a deep breath before adding: "Or maybe my crush on you is not just minor." She pressed the blotter to the page and pursed her lips. "Now you're really fucking

with me," she muttered. He lifted his head. "I'm not. Look, Olga..." he staggered, short of breath for no reason; "If we're really risking so much, can't we get the most out of this while I'm here? So what if I *am* head over heels for you? I'm going away in the end anyways." He reached his hand out to her, hopeful. "Unless that makes you uncomfortable. But I don't regret saying it," he added.

Laurel heard her inhale sharply and subconsciously mimicked it. Her lips were slightly parted and she finally smiled, making his heart beat much more calmly. "Sometimes I wonder if you're just a huge flirt," she said, dropping the pen to take his hand, "Then I realize that'd be an insecure thing to think." He smiled back and squeezed her hand, "It would." Her skin was soft under his touch and he couldn't help but recall the image of her body and picture how tender it must be elsewhere. "I didn't mean that we should be in a rush," he said, "I just... Wanted you to know. And trust you to make your own decisions." She glanced at her work and then back at him. Maybe she also measured her time. "I know. On that note, understand that this is... hard for me," she said, focusing on him again, "But I've enjoyed spending time with you."

After exchanging glances with her for a while, his chest felt full enough. He sighed and let go of her hand. "Then am I invited to your bedroom again today?" he asked, adjusting his posture and smiling. "Only if you actually study for once," she said, suddenly raising her hand with her palm up, "And give me back my key." He fished it out of his pocket and deposited it in her hand. "Ah, sorry." Olga stashed it away, dried her pen and stood up. She motioned for him to follow her out the door. "Come on, we're circling back to those books you wanted to read on your first week here," she said. Not surprised that she still recalled what they were, he beamed with pride. "You think I'm ready?" he asked in an excited whisper, following her across the library. She made beelines for each book, finding them in that maze with ease. "Quite honestly, I don't think your natural mana deposits are big enough

for much. But maybe it's a matter of stabilizing your manifestation of will," she said, lowering her voice as well, "You have little practice after all."

That wasn't the answer he'd asked for. "Here you go," she dropped the small pile of books in his arms and started heading back. Laurel followed, glued to her like a lapdog would be. However, something made her stop before the door. One of the white clad healers was standing beside it. "Siren," he called, "Ready for your appointment?" She distanced herself from Laurel. "Yeah," she said, looking over her shoulder, "Focus while I'm gone." They walked off and he was left alone with the books, so it was not like he had much of an option.

He did his best, but would definitely ask for her guidance when she got back. Not just because he liked hearing her speak, of course. When she did finally get back, she didn't say a word before sitting back down. "Hey," said Laurel, "What's up with these constant visits anyways?" She shrugged, "Nothing much." He closed the book he was reading on his thumb to mark the page. Telekinesis could wait a bit. "They did say you're responsible for most of their workload," he pressed further. That actually made her chuckle and grin. "They did, huh? Of course," she said, "They complain whenever they actually get work to do. Because, *oh*, black magic just takes *such* a toll!" She flicked her pen on a dirty rag as she ranted, getting rid of the excess ink. Not a very gentle gesture. "They don't even tap into their own vitals. Black magic is easy when you have a whole garden of living beings to kill," she furrowed her brow.

Laurel touched his back to the couch, as if trying to get away from her outburst. He managed to smile thinly, "I gather you don't get along." She scoffed, pausing to rub her wrinkled forehead before touching pen to paper. "Doesn't matter," she muttered. Something that she'd said was bothering him, though. "Do *you* tap into your vitals?" he asked. "Whatever your opinion is, spare me," she replied, "I don't discuss work matters." He sunk into the couch, his cheeks burning as if she'd chastised him. Wasn't it natural for him to be concerned?



Still... "Then what do you have 'appointments' for?" She shifted and exhaled slowly. "Just your regular occupational pain. From writing so much, you know," she said. He mumbled something in comprehension and decided to go back to reading.

Aside from lunch break, Laurel worked diligently, though the conversation had left a sour taste in his mouth. There was also the matter of what he'd write in the next letter home. As far as things looked, it was definitely best to start packing. Definitely. In any case, he preferred focusing on his studies than dwelling on it. At some point during the afternoon, Olga gave him one of her spare blotters to practice on. No luck. He set it aside and sighed. "Olga..." She raised her head, but something about the way he said it made her get up and walk over. "Yeah?" He got up as well, scratching his nape and looking away for a moment. "I feel like you completely brushed me off earlier," he said, focusing his eyes on her, "It's not like I'm gonna reprehend you or something. As I said, I do have feelings for you. So I guess I do get concerned when you say things that sound self-destructive."

She bit her lower lip and held her eyes closed for a while. Then, she took a deep breath and returned his gaze. "Sorry. I did get defensive," she said, "I just don't like it when it seems like people doubt my skills and measurements. And it was you, who must be a prude when it comes to black magic." He chuckled. "I'm not that prudish. You've said it yourself," he took her hand and traced it with his fingers again, "And I don't doubt your judgement. I'm just... overly protective of you right now." She outright laughed in his face, but grabbed both his hands and played along. "Oh yeah? What are you gonna protect me from?" she asked, forcing him to take a step back. She looked quite smug. "I guess that was cheesy, huh?" he said. She nodded and, after glancing off to the side, pressed a quick kiss to his lips. It was really just a touch, but it made Laurel wish he could get more.

"Did you make any progress in your studies?" she asked. He let their hands drop and swayed them side to side, taking peeks at the door and windows all the while. "I was actually

gonna ask for your help," he said, "But I'm quite tired. Maybe I can just... come back later." She grinned. "Sounds to me like you're not that tired, then," she teased. Olga tiptoed to bring her lips to his ear: "It's not fair that I was the only one undressed, you know." Feeling her breath that close to his skin sent a shiver across all of it. She backed off, smiling awkwardly. "If you'd be fine with it, I mean," she amended. "Don't tease me so much when I'm about to leave," he said, his face heating up. "What's the difference?" she chuckled. Laurel squeezed her hands. "I can't leave if..." he cut himself short and sighed, deciding on just kissing her goodbye to leave the matter behind.

Things seemed generally normal the rest of the day. There was no weird chatter in the halls and the overall atmosphere contrasted the dinner party he'd attended. He took the time to sit down and properly write another letter to his uncle, promising to return home soon. Well, it's not like staying would really inconvenience him personally that much. At most a delayed coronation, but likely not even that. Not that he was excited for that anyway. Should send the people who'd come with him back though. There was no realistic reason to stay; none that he could explain to his family, at least. Laurel was acutely aware that dating a peasant he had no intentions of marrying — who also happened to be a black magic practitioner — wouldn't fly at all.

Still, at night he found his way back to Olga, who soon took him to her room once again. After she closed the door and they were securely alone, he noticed how exhausted the look on her face was. She smiled faintly anyway. "You talked about enjoying our time together," she said, "How much longer do you wager we have?" He pushed her glasses up the crooked bridge of her nose and sighed. "I think I'm staying regardless," he admitted. "That's such a shit political move," a corner of her mouth raised, "If their crown prince stays here, the Ashen Valleys' regents will be nothing short of obligated to side with us." He smiled. It was

easier to smile when he didn't really know whether it would happen. "Or they stay neutral and we wait it out, which is most likely," he said, taking a step closer, "Staying here wouldn't be so bad anyways."

She grabbed him by the arms and touched her chest to him, frowning. "This really better not be because you're desperate for affection or something," she said. "Well... As you were saying?" he asked, shrugging lightly. Her hands ran up to his shoulders. "Enjoying our time," she recalled, pulling him down towards her, "I think your decision is fucked, but I'm not gonna stand here and chastise you when you could be kissing me instead." Their noses touched and he found himself wrapping his arms around her. "Ah," he whispered, "So you were gonna use time as an excuse to jump me." Olga grinned, "Don't make me sound that shallow." Still, she didn't deny it.

She kissed him viciously, barely giving him time to breathe. In any case, it only took him a moment to adjust to her intensity. Before he knew it, she'd made him step back all the way to the bed and pushed him down. She straddled him and then straightened her spine out, looking down on him while she caught her breath. It was like she didn't know where to go from there. "Is this too much?" she muttered. He took a deep breath and, after a lot of consideration, put his hands on her thighs. "Why are you wearing a skirt?" he asked, gripping her a little. She smirked, suddenly aware. "I often do." His hands were somewhat numb; perhaps his heart rate had really picked up.

"It's not too much," he said at last, "Well, it is. But I'm fine with more." Her hands found his and dragged them a little bit upwards. His fingers suddenly dug into tender flesh. "Then you can touch me more," she whispered close to his face before reaching in to kiss him again. The blood in his body felt like it was being reheated again and again, waves of warmth dispersing throughout all of him. In comparison, the cold touch of her fingers sliding under his shirt felt like frostbite. "Olga..." he said, gripping her tightly to get her to remain still for

a while; when his thumbs dug in, he realized they were dangerously high up her thighs. He felt lightheaded. "Now you're torturing me," he completed.

"Are you afraid of getting too close to that line?" she asked, her voice surprisingly calm. "To be honest, it feels like we've been kinda threading along it," he replied, too conscious of every slight movement of her hips. "We will only go as far as you and I both want to," she whispered, laughing as if it was obvious. "I know," he said, raising his arms to hug her, "It's just... I can hear my heartbeat." Laurel pressed her down and immediately regretted it. "It feels like you might kill me," he whispered.

Olga pulled back a little to smile at him. "You also make me feel like that," she said. Her lips quivered and her breath caught. Then, her smile got a bit crooked. "Maybe we can do something to stabilize you," she said, her hair tickling his forehead when she inched closer, "Can I touch you a lot?" That stunned him for a moment, mouth agape. "You..." he started, biting the rest of it down. "If I can also touch you a lot," he said instead.

A kiss to the forehead and soft hands woke him up in the morning. He opened his eyes to find Olga's smile; her naked body was still under his arms and their legs, entwined. "Hey, Laurel," she whispered, "I have to get up. Same as yesterday, okay?" His own bare skin felt terribly cold when she pulled away, so he pulled her back, her skin sticking to his. She laughed. "You feel so good," he said, "Don't go." Still, she put a hand on his chest and pushed him away so she could sit up. "Don't worry," she said, lowering her voice to a whisper to add: "You can finger fuck me every night as long as you're here." His cheeks heated up and he pulled the blankets up, feeling too exposed under her overly analytical eyes. "So you... liked it?" he asked. "Yeah," she was embarrassed, as if she hadn't said something much more scandalous right before. "But I had no idea what I was doing to you either," she said.

"Stop making me think about yesterday," he said, turning away. It took a while, but soon she dug her elbows into his waist to look down on him with a grin. He could feel her chest despite the covers and it only made matters worse. "Why? Are you horny again?" she teased. He closed his eyes so he wouldn't have to look at her smug face anymore. "I'm going back to sleep," he said. She gave his hair light pats and he felt her weight fade away. "Sleep well."

Laurel had hugged a pillow and fallen asleep pretending it was still Olga in his arms. Thus, he had some pleasant dream he couldn't remember after waking up to a flash of light and her serious voice. "You should get up," she said, shining intense fairy lights directly at him. Before he could get the question out, she explained: "The Lunar Bay is formally declaring war on the entire west coastline." She threw a clean set of clothes at him and he sat up to catch them. "All three countries?" he stuttered. She remained unfazed. "Yeah. It would be the same, anyways. We'd antagonize the Jagged Rock and the other two would immediately follow suit," she said, shrugging, "We'd have to cut through their territory."

He got up and dressed as fast as he could, letting out a sigh of frustration. "As soon as the news hits them, they'll go asking our regents for allegiance," he said. As he tightened his belt, he caught Olga glancing at him and biting her lip. Laurel preferred not to comment on it; instead, he walked up to her and squeezed her hand. "Thanks for waking me up. I'm sure I have some shit to sort out," he said. "Yeah," she agreed, but he didn't see her expression as he walked out.

As Laurel rushed through the halls of the students' dorms, Des stopped him. He'd been standing by in his uniform, which was what his job mostly consisted of. "Say, prince..." he started, looking somewhat concerned, "Some people from your entourage were tearing the place apart looking for you. But you weren't in your room and I didn't see you at breakfast, so..." Laurel could see the subtlety behind his raised eyebrows, but didn't care enough to justify himself. "Thanks for telling me," was all he replied, continuing on his journey.

As soon as he found one of the servants who had come with him, he laid the course of action down. Laurel promised he'd arrange everything for everyone to go home as soon as possible and left them with the letter he hadn't sent yet. When he was asked about himself, he just nodded along and said: "I'm going back on my own." Though he trusted them to organize

themselves, he relayed the message to which one he saw and, without fault, was asked why he wouldn't come with. Sending servants and a handful of nobles back was easy; sending himself would be an insufferable fuss... Not that that was the only reason. Well, it would be if he was reputable.

He spent a good chunk of the day running about, sorting everything out. There was a pull in his heart as he made travel plans. It was day one; there was still enough time to change his mind and go with. Surely enough time to go through formalities and all the motions of royalty he only ever smiled through. Thinking about going home and hugging his uncle and aunt made the pull harder. Everyone was waiting for him. Back home, the air was easier to breathe and he never felt cold. The rain and clouds were quite predictable. In contrast, the Lunar Bay was gloomy and humid.

When he got home, he'd laze about in the sun, listen to music and drink warm coffee; he'd confide in his aunt about falling in love for the first time. Though aunt Clara was nice about that stuff, he still wouldn't be able to talk about Olga in specific to her — or anyone, for that matter. But he had the feeling he'd never see Olga again if he went; if he ever did, it wouldn't be for a long time. Thus he shoved the thoughts to the back of his mind and finished all he had to. No Lunar Bay royals came by to pester him as he'd thought they would, so he gave in to the pressure in his own head and walked to the library.

Olga gave him immediate attention when he entered the office. She had them both sit on the couch and held his hand. It seemed like hers was a bit shaky. "I suppose you're not in the mood to study," she said. "Sorry, no," he replied, resting his head on her shoulder, "Turns out I did have some shit to sort out." She gave his hand a light squeeze. "And have you made a decision for yourself?" she asked, speaking softly. "I'm staying." He could hear her exhale sharply. "I should have taken that time to chastise you yesterday," she said. "I know it's selfish," he admitted, "But I felt like this is the only time I'll ever get to be with you." She

scoffed and frowned at him. "Now I feel like I'm dragging you down and ruining your future or something."

"It's a delayed coronation at most. One I hardly want, anyways," he said, bringing her hand to his lap. "So what do you want? To just do whatever you want with your privilege and never take responsibility for it?" she said, her voice becoming more stern. He looked up to find that she was staring at him, her eyes drilling holes into his. Well, it was not like that criticism wasn't something he had thought of on his own before. "I've given up on deciding on what I want to do," he said with a faint smile, "I do not have a penchant for politics and yet I am not naïve or arrogant enough to claim I wish I wasn't born a royal."

"So you'll just float about life in your bubble?" she asked, though her face had softened somewhat. "I don't know. I've only ever had to think about it after my parents died," he smiled, "I guess they enabled me too much." Olga shifted by his side, squeezing his hand so hard it hurt a bit. "If you're staying after all, Laurel, I won't pretend that I'm not glad to be with you for longer," she said, turning her face away, "Because I'm afraid it will feel like it was a fever dream once you go away." He was stunned for a moment, mostly shocked because that resonated a lot with what he'd been thinking earlier. "Ah," he said, shutting his eyes for a bit, "I feel the same, though I wouldn't have put it in such a poetic way." She smiled at him. "Because once I go back home there won't be anyone that met you," he complemented, "And I won't be able to tell anyone about you." That made her laugh, but he was sure it was out of melancholy. "On the contrary, everyone around me knows you. Which I imagine will also feel isolating," she said, peering at the tinted windows before touching her lips to his cheek. It was long and sweet.

"Are you still coming to my room tonight?" she asked, pulling back, "Despite everything?" Laurel got up, reluctantly letting her hand go. "I don't see how I could sleep without you now," he chuckled, "But I'm bringing a change of clothes myself this time."



After a second thought, he ran his hand along his face and added: "And a razor." Her mouth contorted into that impish grin of hers. "So you're basically moving in?" she asked. He bent towards her, his hair getting in the way as inconveniently as always. "Well, you did say I could finger fuck you *every* night," he said, returning her crooked smile. By her stunned look, it seemed like he'd managed to beat her at her game. Satisfied, he straightened his clothes out and walked away.

Just like that, days flew by again as they fell into a routine. By day, they'd do the same as always and, at night, they'd fall asleep in each other's arms. However, it didn't feel completely comfortable, considering the fact Laurel expected someone to show up and ask him to do his job at any point. He wasn't quite sure what, but... something. Of course, it seemed like Olga was observant enough of his mood to catch that. "You've been antsy lately," she said, "During the day, at least." She was sitting by her desk, feet propped up on a nearby chair; she had stacks of paper on her lap and it seemed like she was binding them together.

"I mean, yeah," he said, closing the book he was mostly pretending to read, "I just figured the Lunar Bay royals would have whisked me away for some meeting by now." She snickered. "Why would they? They know your thoughts have no weight in current affairs," she said, "Your only use is months from now." Yeah, like marriage to some random countess. He'd consider marrying a peasant before marrying someone he didn't know for hardly any gain. "It feels like nothing is happening," he groaned. "We are not going to feel the effects of the war here in Estella," she said nonchalantly, "Most people this far in the Lunar Bay won't feel it. It's going to be mostly a border affair."

"How can you be so sure?" he asked, focused on her even though she kept her eyes on her binding. "Oh, you know. I'm sure you aren't that behind on your geopolitics. They lost this war the moment they didn't bend over backwards for us," she laughed a little, "It's just a

matter of time now. Until they're completely demoralized, that is." Laurel frowned. "Why are you acting like that's funny?" he asked. She glanced at him and her smile got crooked. "It's not. If you haven't noticed, I'm a bit on the bitter side," she sighed and added: "I wouldn't say this near anyone but you, but I'm not that patriotic. I don't condone our imperialistic tendencies."

That opened a bit of space to breathe in his chest. After a weird pause, Olga raised her voice again: "Got any letters from home lately?" He took a deep breath. "Yeah, one from my uncle a few days ago," he said. "And do you have any clue what your regents are up to?" she asked. "Like I said, I think we're staying neutral. Not just because I'm here. Any position would be to our detriment." That didn't seem to surprise her. "I thought so. Your historical friendship with the Jagged Rock means allying with the Lunar Bay would fuck your trading in the long run. And, of course, positioning yourself against us would be..." She paused, looking for the right word. Laurel offered up: "Ill-advised." She nodded. "Though I feel like neutrality hurts us anyway," he muttered.

Olga carefully set her project aside and stood up. "Maybe you should focus on studying," she smiled, "Not that I know what you'll be using magic for in the future." Laurel smiled and tried to look more alive. Then, she picked up something from her desk and, before he could process it, threw it up; with a flick of her fingers, it was flung across the room at full force in his direction. Telekinesis. What a show off. "Catch," she said in that split second. Well, he did, which made her frown. "Why do I always forget you're actually used to swordplay or whatever?" she complained, walking up to him, "You were supposed to take that hit to the face." With the object in his hand, he could actually take a look at it; "A rubber ball?" She took it from him and made it bounce off the ground for a bit, all smiles. "Ah, you see," she said, "I'm not obsessed. I just think a lot about you and I thought this might be useful."

With another flick of her fingers, it shot up and bounced off the ceiling. Having failed to collect it with her hands, she forced it to a floating stop and made a face. "It's great practice, see? Very light." Instead of being awed by the simple magic, Laurel got up and encased her hands in his; her index fingers and thumbs were bandaged because of the needlework. "Aw, you spent your salary on me? That's so sweet," he lowered his voice, "You're so in love with me." Olga let the ball drop and laughed awkwardly. "I don't have a salary, stupid," her face distorted in a nervous smile, "It was taxpayer money. Besides, it's my ball. Mine. I'm just letting you borrow it."

Laurel furrowed his brow and threw the banter aside: "You don't have a salary?" She shrugged. "It's whatever. I just ask for whatever I need when I need it and it's supplied to me. Like, you know, this rubber ball. All my living expenses are taken care of. I can just... work." She was still smiling, seemingly unbothered. He put his hands in her shoulders and peered into her eyes, trying to relay his concerns through a mere look. "Olga. What about your financial independence?" he made his tone graver. She raised her eyebrows. "I have everything I could want," she said. "If you don't have savings, you'll always be tethered to this place," he slowed down as he talked, highlighting every syllable as if that would help get the argument through her head. "You say that like I care. I'm not tethered," she said, brushing his hands off to hold him by his wrists, "I'd always choose to do this until I die."

The force of the sudden realization made him take a step back and put an unstable smile in his face. "You were alone before we met because you don't care to have anyone in your life... or try not to," he said. "This is my life's work. I thought you'd understand that. It's fine that it isolates me," she paused, averting her eyes, "You... read that last poem." He hadn't thought of it like that. After glancing at the windows, he raised his hands to cup her cheeks, which made her eyes widen. "Olga, that's *fine*. This can be the most important thing in the world to you," under his hands, her face wrinkled and he was afraid that she'd deflect the

conversation; still, he pushed on, "And I think it's meaningful and amazing. But *you* matter too." She pulled back, not having to fight much; Laurel let her go as soon as he'd realized that's what she intended on doing. Olga opened her arms wide and smiled bitterly. "And I'm fine! Look at me!", she exclaimed, lowering her voice to add: "And you've seen all of me, so you know I'm okay. So. Drop it."

"I'm dropping it," he said, softening his voice and posture, "And I'll give you space." That seemed enough to make her soften too. "I'll see you later?" he asked, "Then we can talk only as much as you want to." He'd lost his disposition to study. Thankfully, she agreed.

At the end of the day, he was back in her room. The dim lighting and the basement's smell had become comforting. They sat and took their shoes off together. "About earlier today," started Laurel. Olga gave him a warning glance, but he kept going: "I worry and care. But I'm aware that your decisions are yours to make, even if I hope you change your mind. That's... all I meant to say." She smiled and took her coat off, throwing it at a chair. There was a long silence, but Laurel didn't break it because it seemed like she was winding up to say something. "You keep repeating that and it strikes me," she started at last, "Because I haven't been completely honest. And I guess that interferes with your autonomy."

His extremities went cold. Her room suddenly felt much colder and humid than it really was. Still, he just nodded along. "You asked me about the toll of black magic and I did totally brush you off," she said, "Because I felt like that wasn't your business." Olga wasn't looking at him. "And now I guess I was... hesitant because of your family history," she said, looking down, "I do use my own vitality. And it doesn't bother me, but I didn't tell you because I thought you'd be concerned." Yeah, considering the way she was skirting the topic, he was concerned. "Look, I'm quite positive that I'm infertile. I haven't had a period ever since I was a student."

The odd pause made him reach out and grab her hand. She was right. It had made him worry. The magic she did was completely unknown to him and the fact it could kill a living thing just for fuel was incomprehensible. "Hey. Look, Olga..." he took a deep breath, "You shouldn't feel pressured to tell me that. You're right. It's not my business. But I *do* worry about your health." Though he wanted her to meet his eyes so he could give her a comforting look, she still looked away. "Ah. Your, um... Right to decision making enters in the part where..." she paused and exhaled slowly, "You were obviously scared of an illegitimate child. I'm just, you know, keeping you fully informed."

The cogs in his brain took way longer to turn than they should have; ultimately, they did, and it made his whole body heat up. "Are you telling me about a chronic health issue and assuring me we can have sex in the same beat?" he exclaimed, mouth agape. She tapped her feet on the floor, still avoiding his gaze. "It's *my* chronic health issue, so it's not insensitive for me to say it. And I've mostly come to terms with it," she said, "I never wanted kids. I've just told you I want to work until I die. It's... fine." She stopped her tapping and lifted her face, side-eyeing Laurel. "Fuck, I know, this does sound weird. But I thought you should know." She took another deep breath and finally turned to him, gripping the mattress under them tightly. "And I'm letting you know it would be fine if we... And I want to." Olga bit her bottom lip and hesitantly reached out to touch his hand. "I want you to fuck me," she whispered.

He held her hand and slid closer to touch their shoulders, which was enough to make her smile. "You're right. It's your body," he said, "And yeah, I'm scared." Her pupils were scarily wide, as if she wanted to peer into his thoughts. Knowing what she wanted him to reply to, he raised his other hand to caress her cheek. It was warm. "I feel fucked up for thinking this right now, but hearing something like that, I must admit I want to fuck you, too." There was a pause; he could feel her slowly gravitate towards him.

"But it's still scary," he said, one hand pressing her waist, "Not just for me, but you too. I don't want what happened to my mom to happen to you." She didn't seem dissuaded at all, a melting smile on her face as she touched her nose to his. "That won't happen," she whispered. "You can't know that," he replied. "That's where you trust me to make my own decisions, remember? And you can make yours." His heart skipped. "Are you just that horny?" he asked. She pulled him down and kissed him, making him immediately taste her tongue. Combining that with the imagery of the possibilities she'd conjured up was really doing numbers on his mind. She broke away only long enough to whisper: "Yes. I want to ride you so, so hard."

She climbed on his lap and ran her hands under his shirt; he'd grown accustomed to the feeling of her fingertips on his back, but would still never grow sick of it. He pulled her in, making her hips fit perfectly with his. "If you say that, it's hard to keep my judgement," he muttered, losing his breath while kissing her neck. "Then don't," she said, grabbing him by the hair and forcing him against her neck even harder. It seemed like she'd untied his hair at some point. After a while, he pulled back and inhaled deeply. "Are you sure?" he asked, a hand on her chest to push and pin her to the bed so she'd answer instead of kissing him more. "I feel like getting the most out of you," she said, playing with his bangs. "You don't know how much I want to please you right now," he whispered, getting closer to her ear. She trembled under his hands. "Is that all you want?" she asked. Laurel touched his chest to hers, wishing their skin was bare. "No."

After they'd washed up and gotten back in bed comfortably, Laurel wondered: "How are you gonna get that dirty rag washed?" Olga snuggled up to him, her head and hand resting on his chest; one of her legs was atop his and he could feel that it was shaky. "Eh, whatever," she said. "Did you...? For a first time, at least," he asked, a bit awkward. Her fingers dug on

his ribs. "Yeah. I want to do it again," she said, her chest rubbing against him. "Now?" he asked; she confirmed it. "I can't," he laughed. Despite making a sad sound, she settled down and went back to relaxing against him.

"I was wondering," he started, "I mean, I do care. You were just... clouding my judgement before." She snickered, "Go on." He hugged her closer. "How come black magic has made you infertile?" he asked after mulling it over for a bit. Olga laughed softly. "That's not it. You see, some of these tattoos are curses I've tied directly to my bloodstream," she lifted one of her heavily tattooed arms to showcase it, "Think of them as parasites, if you will. I feed them before I feed my own body." Hesitant, Laurel caressed her side, keeping her close to him. Of course, what she'd said had been alarming, but she'd lash out if he didn't measure his response. At least that was the impression he had. "Why would you do that willingly?" he asked, lowering his voice. She still seemed content enough. "Most curse inflictors don't. Cursing is classified as black magic solely because of the effects on the recipient. Wrongly classified," she shrugged, "But this is nice for augmentation. And for someone like me, passive feeding is better than active feeding."

He touched his chin to the top of her head. Whenever she said something so personal so casually, he'd think her worldview really was warped. "Do you... need that? For the library. Isn't just regular cursing enough?" he asked. She went silent for a moment. Then, she took a choppy breath. "You'll think I'm vain. It would be enough," she said, her grip on him almost hurting, "I completely changed the plans of operation when I took over. Now the building itself and everything in it is tied to me." Her voice became a whisper. "I devised a whole new system. I'm not just a councilor. I'm a resident specialist," she said, "They need me."

"That's not vain," said Laurel, "Though that makes me even more worried about your relationship with your job. It's like it consumes your life." She shifted, her nose touching his neck as she hid her face. "It *is* my life," she said. He put some distance between them to look

her in the eyes; she definitely looked like an animal that had been pulled out of its burrow.

"That doesn't reassure me in the slightest," he said. She frowned. "I already said you shouldn't worry about me," she groaned. "I care about you. There should be more to your life than work," he begged, cupping her face, "And I'm hopelessly in love with you." She laughed a bit and it looked and sounded bitter; "Soon you'll be gone and I'll never hear from you again. You won't be able to care."

He hugged her tighter and let her hide her face again. "I know," he whispered, "And I'm sorry. Though I know you'd only have eyes for your job even if I stayed." She chuckled again. "Ah, that's true. But it was the whole premise of our relationship," she paused, kissing his neck tenderly, "I still love the time we get together."



It was easy to lose track of days in the haze of a new relationship. Soon winter was over and spring was upon them; it was still a bit on the colder side for Laurel, but seemed warm enough for residents like Olga. She had mostly been wearing shirts with no sleeves. He felt too juvenile when admitting to himself that that was enough to turn him on. Maybe he'd had her on his mind too much.

In any case, there was a spin in his new routine when Wyvern tried to chitchat with him during breakfast. "Have you decided who your babysitter is gonna be while little Siren's away on vacation?" That made him stagger far too much; he forced himself to look alive again. "Siren's going on vacation?" he asked, chuckling nervously, "I can't picture that." Wyvern seemed to agree on the humor of it. "She goes every spring. The healers had to badger their superiors so she'd be forced to go," she said. "Because she never gives them a break?" he asked, wondering if there was still any color left on his face. "I see you've heard the complaints," Wyves said, "I'm sure Des would be fine with you hanging out with the guards from time to time." Beside her, Des smiled at him. "Yeah, we'd love an excuse to punch a royal," he said, "I'm joking... Of course."

As soon as he was done with breakfast, Laurel headed straight for Olga's office. Though he wanted to burst in, he respected the library's silence. So he got in as cautiously as ever. "Hi, Laurel," Olga greeted, predictably busy. He touched his back to the door and looked at the ceiling, measuring his words. "Oh," she mumbled. "Yeah," he said, walking over. He crossed his arms and tried to smoothen his features. "Why didn't you tell me you'd go on vacation?" he asked. She gave him a tired smile. "Because you'd want to come with," she said. "I would," he agreed, "Can't I?"

She got up and knocked on her desk for a bit, her eyes wandering about. "People already think you're stuck to me, so that wouldn't be so weird," she admitted, "The thing is... I'm going home." She rested against the desk, crossing her arms as well. "To my parents, that is," she said. Laurel suddenly understood. Not that he knew details. "Oh. Is that really fine?" he asked. She laughed, "I go every spring and I've survived so far." He stepped closer to hold her hand. "Can I go?" he asked again. She still seemed to find it funny. "I don't see why you'd want that," she said. "I want to go through every bit of your life," he replied, mimicking her usual crooked smiles.

"I'm so glad to be your new obsession," she said, "You know, I leave in three days. If you can get clearance until then, you can tag along." She smiled back at him, "Good luck." As his eyes widened in shock, her smile only grew. She pulled back and went through her desk, fishing for something. "You know I've been doing some bookbinding," she said. She lifted a book up to him. "It's a blank tome. My idea was..." She paused and took a deep breath, looking away. "We could leave messages for each other here. And I'd... curse it to make sure it's for our eyes and hands only." The fact she couldn't look at him made it so much sweeter. "I was going to suggest this to you before I went away, since I know you'll be thinking of me so much," she said, grinning.

"I love that idea. It's great, Olga," he said softly. Still, she sighed. "There's a catch," she admitted, "To do this, you'd need one of these." She pointed at one of her tattoos. "It's not like some of mine. The ones I described as parasites, I mean. It's just..." she paused, tapping the book's cover, "A signal for the curse to exempt you. Okay, it's more complex than that, but you get the idea." His fingers felt somewhat cold and her words tickled his mind. Again, he felt juvenile for even considering that. "So we'd get matching tattoos?" he asked, eyes wide, "Knowing we are only going to last a few months longer?" She stifled a laugh. "Yeah, it's completely nonsensical," she said, setting the book aside and coming closer to Laurel. She

firmed her hands in his waist and pulled him a step closer, making him feel his own blood rush. "Doing stupid, irrational things to you and with you makes me happy," she said, "I know we'll break up, Laurel. But I'll look back on our time fondly."

"I think that's the closest to a confession I ever got from you," Laurel smiled. "I guess so," she chuckled, "Look, only do this if you're confident about it." He paused, looking at her smile and perpetually tired eyes. Something about it pulled on his heartstrings. He grabbed her shoulders and brought her closer, peering into her eyes. "You know what? Fuck that. Let's do it. It's not like anyone back home would associate a tattoo like that to you," he exclaimed, "I want to keep good memories of my first love." She beamed, shuddering under his hands with excitement, "Yes, fuck it. I'm gonna prep." He kissed her, gently pushing her chin down with his thumb to make way for his tongue. Her whimper made him stop and look at the windows. She gasped for air. "I'll sort out the travel stuff," he said, "Where are we going?" Olga smiled. "Where the Beltpass splits into one of its smaller tributaries. Not that you'd know."

Though nobody seemed to understand why he'd want to venture to a town barely anyone knew of the existence of, he was allowed to go. It seemed like they were fine with letting him run where he pleased and trusted Olga to actually be his babysitter. Having figured that out, he returned to the office that night to find Olga standing beside many supplies neatly organized. "So? You sort it out?" she asked. He got closer, hesitating a bit upon seeing a huge needle on the desk. "Yeah. I'm coming with," he said.

She fished for a notebook and showed a bookmarked page to him; it was a sigil much like the ones she'd usually draw on other books. "So, where do you want this thing to go?" she asked, smiling. He unbuttoned the cuff of his shirt and rolled the sleeve up, offering her the outside of his arm. "Solid," she said. "How'd you come up with the design?" he asked,

sitting atop her desk. That seemed to tick her off, but she didn't chastise him. Instead, she started shaving and cleaning the area he'd chosen. "I let my intent guide me. That makes it easier to imbue them later," she said, focused on loading the needle with ink. "So, what was your intent?" he asked, waiting for her cheeks to redden. "Something that's only ours," she said, her smile turning melancholic.

When the needle got close to him, he flinched. Olga must have felt it, because she paused and raised her eyebrows. "Are you scared?" she asked. "Well, no. I'm sure the cursing thing was much more painful," he said. "Oh, yeah. This will be fine. I'll just stab you a few dozen times," she grinned, "And I have a feeling you'd like that, anyways." Laurel tried to make sense of it, but all she did was smile. "What's that supposed to mean?" he asked. "Nothing. May I?" After getting the greenlight, she pierced his skin. Over and over. "You do realize we're done if anyone here sees this," she said a while in, "Because this is really extra of us." He averted his eyes, sick of looking while she poked his skin. "I'll be careful. I care about your livelihood."

Something had been in Laurel's thoughts. "What are you gonna introduce me to your parents as?" he asked. She immediately frowned. "Good question. An exchange student. My intern. Something like that," she said. "Not your boyfriend?" he asked, feeling his hope crumble a little, "It's not like they'd tell anyone... Or know who I am." That made her pause for a bit, but she kept going. Seemed almost done. "My boyfriend, traveling to meet my parents," she mused, "Isn't that too official for our scope?" Her light smile made something flutter within his chest. "I thought we'd get the most out of each other as long as it lasted," he said. "Yeah. Okay," she chuckled, cleaning his arm up, "Though you might regret that once my mother gets her claws on you."

She grabbed him by his wrist and showed him the fresh tattoo, explaining how to care for it. "When are you doing yours?" he asked. "Tomorrow," she said, putting her things away,

"Since I thought we'd go down to my room now." He didn't need to hear it twice to get off her desk.

Meeting before the sunrise in travel cloaks to go somewhere distant was exciting, even if Laurel preferred to be asleep. Olga's bed hair was worse than usual and she hadn't even arranged it in pigtails. After they'd loaded their bags and gotten in the coach, Laurel commented: "I thought they'd send a guard with me for sure." She chuckled. "You do realize you're always in the pocket of a high ranking mage? It's not a joke when we say I'm babysitting you," she said, "Though I'll definitely be taken to trial if something happens to you on this trip. So, you know..." He nodded, closing the curtains. It was still too early. "I'll be good," he said. That seemed to put her in high spirits. "Boy, you're gonna hate this," she laughed again, "But I must say I'm a bit excited to see if you'll let my mother skin you alive or if you'll fight back." He scoffed. "You don't even know that," he said, "She might like me. I'm a likeable guy."

A few days later they got to a town in the middle of nowhere. Olga had been right; he had no idea where they were. The rural expanses made him feel more at home though. The coach dropped them off in front of a small wooden house with a few adjacent buildings scattered about. After getting their bags, they were left alone with an old lady who'd just gotten out the front door. "Hello, mother," said Olga, smiling. Yeah, they did look just alike, considering the broad shoulders and prominent cheekbones. "Hey, kids! It's that time of the year your sister remembers she has a family!" the old woman turned back to yell at the house.

Olga merely chuckled. "Yeah. Did you tell them to stay in their rooms?" she grinned. "No. They just heard you pull up and hid," her mom shrugged. Then, she turned her angry gaze on Laurel. "Did you bring one of those bratty rich kids from your school along?" she

asked, "How many mouths do you expect me to feed?" Olga squinted. "As always, you'll be accordingly compensated for our stay," she said, keeping her tone calm. "Does that mean money?" her mom asked, her frown softening. "Yeah. And aside from being a rich kid, he's also my boyfriend," said Olga, pushing Laurel a step forward, "Laurel, say hi to your mother-in-law."

Laurel reached his hand out. After making a face at him, Olga's mom accepted the handshake; like her daughter's, her hands were callused, though in different spots. "I'm Laurel. How can I call you, ma'am?" he asked, putting his trademark cordial smile on. She raised her eyebrows a little bit. "That's Mrs. Riverfork for you," she said, frowning again, "How come it's 'boyfriend' and not 'fianceé'?" Olga laughed and crossed her arms, answering before Laurel could. "You know, mother, back in Estella, marriage is *so* outdated. It's really a failed institution," she said, the impish grin making a comeback, "We believe in enjoying our youth. For instance, making out behind buildings..."

Her mom's cheeks reddened and she turned their back on them, re-tying her apron. They could hear her scoffing. "All those words to say you couldn't bag such a handsome guy," she said, "Only some old man will pick you up." Olga laughed out loud as they were led inside, carrying their bags. "Where's dad?" she asked. "He had to trade something with the neighbors," her mom stopped, pointing at the bare wooden floor. "The snobby kid can sleep here. You can go sleep with the twins." Olga laughed again and threw her bags on the floor. "Or we can both sleep here," she said, "I'm on vacation, not baby-sitting duty. *Not* watching the girls." Her mother crossed her arms as well and suddenly they were both in face-off mode. Laurel felt so left out. "The last thing I need is you whoring yourself out in the living room!" the older woman said, to which Olga quickly replied: "I'd fuck outside before doing it in this house, so we're good."

She suddenly clapped, smiling as if they were having a pleasant chat. "Oh!" she exclaimed, opening one of her bags, "I had some clothes made for all of you guys." She immediately pulled out some pieces of winter clothing, going over them with her mom while Laurel merely watched. It seemed like putting on that act amused her or something. He couldn't really get it. Actually, it was quite sickening. After they were done, Mrs. Riverfork got up and told them she had work to do. "And you make yourselves useful," she said, "You aren't guests. Right, Olga?" Olga nodded and hummed some tune while her mom walked off. Then, she started rummaging through a wardrobe. "By the way, her name's Matilda," she said, "Don't fall for the Mrs. Riverfork thing. No one treats her with any decorum whatsoever." Laurel shifted, watching as Olga laid a thin mattress on the floor and got some blankets. "I don't mind," he said.

Smiling at her work, Olga pointed at the makeshift bed. "Nap time?" she asked. "Weren't we... supposed to be useful?" he shifted yet again. "What?" she furrowed her brow, "That trip was shit. I'm laying down and not getting up until dad comes home." She sat down and pulled up another bag to look around in. Then, she gave Laurel an annoyed look. "What are you standing around for?" she asked. "Well... She might get mad," he said. Olga scoffed and patted the space beside her. "You're *my* lapdog," she said, her eyes pinning his, "Don't go being that submissive to anyone else." That shut him up nicely, not to mention the warm wave that overcame his body. He sat with her as she fished a jar and bandages out of the bag. She rubbed some kind of ointment from the jar along her hands and wrists. "What's that for?" he asked. "There are no healers on vacation," she muttered. When she was done, she bandaged it carefully. The fabric looked quite humid. "Okay," she said, "Nap."

To his despair, nap she did. She was out in a matter of minutes, leaving him alone in that foreign place. After a creeping feeling, he noticed a pair of kids peeking at him from around a corner from time to time. His unease grew, but eventually the two girls walked up.

Their hair was much the same burnt brown mess as Olga's. "Who are you?" one of them asked. "Laurel," he said, trying to sound polite though his soul was leaving his body, "Your sister's boyfriend." The other kid blinked, "So you're a client?" Laurel stammered. "Client?" he asked. "Mom says Olga can move to the city because she gets lots of male clients," the kid said, innocently. Laurel laughed nervously. "Ah," he said, "No. I'm more like... Someone she could marry." That seemed like exciting gossip, but their mom peeked from the kitchen and made an ugly frown at them; that must be genetic. They turned tail to their rooms. The frown was also turned to Laurel, but he stayed put.

As she'd promised, Olga woke up to the noise of someone arriving outside. She got up in a rush; he couldn't help but notice her expression of pain when she put her weight on her wrist. He followed her out of the house, finding an old man with the same eyebags she had under his eyes. With him was a young boy. Together, they unloaded a wagon. "Olggie!" the old man beamed, opening his arms. With surprising obedience, Olga accepted the hug. The boy hung beside them awkwardly, as if waiting for his turn. It came, but it was in the form of a fist bump instead of a hug. "Elton, you're prohibited from growing any taller," she said, flicking her brother on the forehead.

"Who's the man with you?" her father asked, eyeing Laurel apprehensively. That gave him a weird feeling. No one ever regarded him as *man*; at most, *boy*. "This is Laurel, my boyfriend," she said, pulling him closer to her. "Pleased to meet you," said Laurel, going through another handshake. The old man's mouth really dropped when he heard those words, aside from the fact his eyes widened. "Laurel...?" he asked. "Greyson," Olga lied with ease. Laurel's stomach churned when her dad smiled at him. It did suddenly feel like he was playing her family. "You can call me Sal," her dad said to him, "I'm happy you came see us." He started carrying some bags to what should be a barn. Elton stayed behind, still unloading his share. He looked at Laurel with caution. "Are you a mage like Olga?" he asked, pausing



in his tracks to wait for the answer. "Not much of a mage and nothing like your sister," said Laurel. Seemingly satisfied, the teen walked away as well.

They had an alone moment. Olga chuckled. "I did say I didn't know why you'd want to come," she said, "Aside from mother's antics, my dad is gonna be absolutely thorn apart at you. And so is my brother." Laurel started to somewhat see her point.

"This is good," Olga said as they dined, all squeezed up around a dinner table. "I doubt it's as good as your castle food or whatever it is," her mom replied. Olga just smiled. "So, Laurel, what are you doing with my daughter?" Matilda started again. He was thankfully great at dodging. "You see, Mrs. Riverfork, your daughter is a wonderful woman..." he attempted, immediately being interrupted. "Cut the crap," she said, "She has no charms and no family name. She's only easy for one thing. And you're a boyfriend." The twin girls stared at their plates in silence, while Olga and Elton looked on as if a soap opera unfolded; their dad seemed horrified.

"Is boyfriend such a bad word?" asked Laurel after regaining his composure. "Means you have no intentions of marrying Olga," she said, unleashing a killer stare that was much better executed by Olga. "Now, now," Sal interfered, holding his hands up and smiling weakly, "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. It's just the first night. Why else would he come all the way to see us if not to ask for Olga's hand in marriage?" Though the old man obviously had good intentions, Laurel's heart wanted to carve a hideout in his own chest upon hearing those words. Before he could smooth things over, Olga spoke on his behalf. "Stop smothering Laurel. He's just tagging along with me because he's irrevocably in love and can't tear himself from my shadow," she said, drinking a generous spoon of soup, "You know I have no intentions of ever getting married." She kept spilling the soup, her hands shaking more than normal. They'd been like that the past few days.

Her mom gave her a chastising look. "You can't just let some guy play with you," she said. Olga grinned, her teeth pressing down on the spoon a bit. "Maybe *I'm* playing with him," she said, side eyeing Laurel. Matilda's face turned red. "In front of the kids!" she exclaimed. Olga shrugged. "Elton's not a kid," she said as Elton snickered, "And the other two are already alienated to anything I say." She pointed at the unresponsive twins with her shaky spoon, "See? Unfazed." They kept fighting and, the more they talked, the more Laurel felt out of place.

When dinner was finished, Matilda looked at Olga and said: "You clean the kitchen." She raised her bandaged hands and said: "Can't." Her mother scoffed, "You already pulled that last year. Better get to working." Olga rolled her eyes and, after everyone else had left the kitchen, started piling their plates together. Her shaky hands made them knock on each other. "Are you okay?" asked Laurel, getting up to gingerly touch her waist. "Yeah. I told you it's just... induced by repetitive motion," she said. "It's obviously not just tendinitis," he said. "Never said it was," she replied, reaching for a cup. When she had it, her grasp faltered and it slid from her hand; before it could shatter, she brought it to a halt with telekinesis. They exhaled together and Laurel took the cup. "Come on. You know you can just tell me things," he pleaded. "Eh," she shrugged, crossing her arms, "Without daily sessions, my hands are pretty useless these days. I just worked my joints to the bone is all."

Laurel sighed. Did she ever hear herself speak? How could he convince her that she was a workaholic? After all, she acted like *that* was normal. "I'll do the cleaning," he said. She stifled some laughter. "Have you ever done that? Have you cleaned something a mere day in your life?" she asked. "No, and I have no clue about any of it," he admitted. She got closer and touched the tip of her nose to his cheek; her breath tickled him a little. "So you need me to instruct you?" she asked. He nodded and received a kiss on the cheek. Laurel's

cleaning skills were abysmal and they did slow progress, but eventually managed to go to sleep.

Similarly, he helped the family prepare breakfast the next day. Matilda didn't seem impressed. "Olga, make yourself useful," she said, "Living with those rich brats spoiled you." Olga was standing against the wall, arms crossed; she watched over Laurel to make sure he didn't injure himself. "Laurel is helping in my stead," she said. As predicted, her mom made a face. "That's why you're unmarriageable." As they ate somewhat stale bread, Olga smiled at Elton. "I got the clearance from dad. We still heading to town?" she asked, a knowing glint in her eyes. He nodded enthusiastically. Laurel's lips parted, but, before he could speak, Olga added: "Sorry, Laurel. It's a sibling thing. You can hang out with my dad or something." Again, Laurel's soul left his body. Sal gave him a small smile in encouragement.

While Olga and Elton organized themselves outside, he approached them. "Yes, Laurel?" she asked, looking over her shoulder as she heard his footsteps. The sun was hardly out yet. "Can I really not come along?" he sighed. "Betts wouldn't be happy," she said, pointing at the horse, "And we really do have matters to sort out privately." Olga brushed his hair out of his face with her trembling fingers. "You'll be fine," said Elton, "Even mom had a good impression of you." Laurel's shoulders tensed. "Did she?" he asked. The siblings snickered as if it was a private joke. "Sorry, Laurel," Olga said. While using one hand to push her brother's face away, she pulled Laurel to her by his collar and kissed him tenderly. After she left Elton's face alone, he seemed quite disgusted with them. "You did say you're quite likeable," Olga chuckled.

Back at the doorstep, Sal was putting his work boots on. "Hey, Mr. Riverfork," called Laurel in a soft tone, "May I... accompany you for the day?" That made the old man smile. "Sure," he said, eyeing Laurel down, "But maybe you should get into some cheaper clothes first." Laurel looked down on himself and bit his tongue so as not to say he considered those

his cheap clothes. "Ah, I didn't really bring anything more... work-suited than this," he tried to smooth it over. Not that they hadn't already noticed how rich he was. Sal averted his eyes. "You can wear my spares if you want," he said, "But you might need a belt. And the pants might be too short..." Laurel smiled, "If you're comfortable with that, I'm sure I'll make do."

Olga's dad waited patiently as he changed. Then, they ventured outside and the chilly wind made Laurel shudder. He watched intently over Sal's shoulders as the old man checked and cleaned his tools. "Could I help you in some way?" he asked. "I'll ask you if I need it," he said. Yeah, they'd all realized he wouldn't be helpful in many ways. Laurel followed the old man around as he fixed a broken piece of fence and tended to the livestock, listening to his pieces of farming advice. Though he'd never have use for it, Laurel made sure to show he was paying attention.

Still, there was something he actually wanted to discuss. "You know, Olga said I'd tear your heart apart because of the informal nature of our relationship," he started softly. He kept his eyes fixed on Sal, hoping to measure his response. "She said that?" he only had a second of surprise; "She's been dramatic since she was a kid." Laurel smiled, "She thinks you care." Sal rubbed his hands. "Of course I do," he said, "You're... the first person she ever brought home. I thought it meant something." That was an odd choice of words. "It means something to me," said Laurel. "But you're not staying with her," he sighed, "Look, I understand that being twenty now is not the same as it was before. You kids live longer. You want to... enjoy being young."

It seemed like he hadn't said all he wanted to say, so Laurel waited. "I just don't know you," said Sal, "I don't know what you'd do if, for example... Olga got pregnant." Of course, he'd thought of that, even if she'd assured him he didn't have to. Thus, he had a ready answer. "I'd drop everything to support Olga in any way she saw fit," he said, "Physically, emotionally and financially." Though the answer seemed to please the old man, he still

narrowed his eyes. "Aren't you some kind of noble?" he asked. "Of course, neither of us wants that. We've been together for very little, anyways..." Laurel took a deep breath, "But I'd see it as a happy accident. I just hope it wouldn't make her unhappy."

He held his forearm, suddenly too conscious of their matching tattoos. There was heat in his face and his chest compressed with guilt from having seriously considered all those scenarios. Olga wouldn't like any of them. Maybe it wasn't intentional. Maybe it was just the intoxication of being in love. "I, uh... Respect that," Sal said after clearing his throat, "Wanna help me slaughter a chicken? The kids will come home hungry." Ecstatic to finally be included in an activity, Laurel beamed; "Sure!"

To Laurel's dismay, the siblings only returned for dinner. The look on Olga's face was more annoyed than usual; so, he managed to pull her aside to ask about it. "Is everything okay?" he whispered. She pinched her forehead. "To put it simply, Elton had asked me for a favor. I pulled some strings to get him into Umbral Star, but now he wants to stay here," she stared off to the hallway, "Says he's more mature now or something." Laurel offered her a sympathetic sigh. "That frustrates you?" he asked. She mulled it over for a bit and then shook her head. "I made bread with your mom," he said, "She said I have very delicate hands." Olga smiled, "With a frown and disapproving tone?" Laurel nodded, "Ah, yeah." She looked around before tiptoeing to take her lips to Laurel's ear and whisper: "They're the perfect shape to fuck me." Then, she smiled and walked away nonchalantly, as if she wasn't responsible for the effects the phrase had had on him.

Once again, Laurel and Matilda cleaned the kitchen; Olga stayed close to him, arms crossed. She'd applied the ointment a few more times that day. Her mother's face had been looking as bitter as always; however, at that point she glanced at Laurel and sighed. "You

should just ask him to marry you, Olga," she said, "This is a one in a million thing. Some beautiful guy who's also rich and interested enough to meet your parents? Not happening again." Olga scoffed, "I have options. My future doesn't depend on marrying, you know."

Matilda furrowed her brow. "If it depends on your work, your time is running out. When you come here, you can't even hold a fork right with those hands," she said. Olga took a step forward, balling up her fists. Her forehead was wrinkled. "That is not in detriment to my work or skill," she lowered her voice. "I'm just saying maybe that's not right for you. It's not normal for a young woman to get joint issues," her mom shrugged. Olga side-eyed Laurel, pupils contracted. He could feel her anger, but wasn't sure how to interfere. "Even if Olga can't write anymore, she's a specialist in her field," he pushed his voice in softly, "Besides, her work will outlast many of us. Her life's taken care of." Though Matilda just scoffed and repeated *field* in an annoyed voice, Olga blinked at him.

Hugging comfortably on the mattress, Laurel couldn't shake the feeling of Olga's body under her clothes. She felt warm and one of his arms was right under her chest. In turn, he was short of breath. "You smell nice," he commented. She chuckled softly. "You're just horny," she said. "I just said you smell nice," he protested, gripping her tighter. To prove her point, she rubbed against him. "Yeah, and you just think that because you're horny." They kept quiet for a moment. "Are you?" he whispered next to her ear.

She turned towards him; the movement was near torture and so was her hand on his waist. The grin on her face sent chills down his spine. "I actually don't know how I'm gonna endure this trip," she said, pulling him in for a kiss, "I need you." He closed his eyes shut and took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. "I didn't know I could feel like this," he said. Seeing her lips so close to his face made him give in to another kiss. They rolled about,

missing the mattress and hitting the living room floor at some point. Cold stings spreaded across his body, either from euphoria or the paranoia of getting caught.

At some point, Olga grabbed him by the neck and pushed him away. Her touch nearly melted him down. Still, her words made him focus on her wide eyes. "We can't fuck in the living room," she said. That sounded completely rational, but he still screamed internally. Then, she added: "But I'm sure the barn is unlocked." As they sneaked away and giggled through the night, he wondered if it was a stupid thing.

Even if staying at Olga's parents wasn't very comforting, they found a vacation pace and got into it with ease. Whenever Matilda wanted Olga to do something, Laurel took it off her hands. He had no prior cleaning experience, but hearing his girlfriend praise him for getting such basic things done made his heart swell. On a particular pleasant afternoon, they sat on a fallen tree together. Having grown tired of examining and categorizing fungi on the bark, Olga looked up at Laurel. "I wish you'd play me a song," she said. He chuckled. "No guitar." She smiled, slumping forwards. "Are you any good at percussion?" she asked. "Not particularly, no," he replied and, after another look at her: "Anything for you, though."

He started knocking away on the wood and she hummed along, horribly out of beat. It was messing up his pace a little, but she didn't seem to mind. Not like she'd notice. Suddenly, her father walked by on his way somewhere, carrying some tool Laurel actually had no idea the name of. He stopped tapping. "Hey, kids," said Sal, stopping across from them. "Hey," Olga smiled. Her dad scratched his scalp and averted his eyes. "I, um... Wanted to ask you kids something," he said. "Yeah?" she asked. "When you, uh, get out of the house at night, can you... be quieter?" he asked. Olga choked on her own spit, but Laurel recovered gracefully, despite the red cheeks. "Sorry, Mr. Riverfork," he said, "We'll be quieter." Olga gave him the death stare and then looked back at her father. "We'll stop! We'll totally stop!"

she exclaimed. Sal just shook his head and walked away. For a while, she just stared at the grass, stunned. Then, Laurel started laughing and she just went along.

After a couple more days of passive aggressive jabs between Olga and her mom, their vacation was over. As they were boarding the coach, Sal and Elton watched on; the others had long since gone inside. "Hey, Olggie," said Sal, calling to her after they'd all already said goodbye, "Bring Laurel again, will you?" She smiled and Laurel saw a reflection of his own sadness. "I'd like that," she said. Safely inside and a few minutes away, Olga smiled at him. "You really are quite likeable. Even my mother was nice to you," she said. Really? "It was good. Being somewhere we don't have to hide that we're a couple, that is," Laurel said. He reached his hand out to her and she gladly took it, making a pained expression. "I expect a lot of isolation out of our experience," she lowered her voice.



Exhaustion only hit him after they'd gotten to Estella. He laid down and let it wash over him, falling asleep in dirty travel clothes. Seeing Wyvern again during breakfast the next day was odd; he hadn't thought of her at all during the time he'd been gone. Still, he sat with them as usual. "So, enjoy your trip with Sirenne? Though I'm sure it wasn't as fun as you envisioned it," she said. "Actually, I did have fun," he said, somewhat unaccustomed to the food again, "Olga's family relations were unexpected." Wyvern paused and turned her eyes on him. It took a moment for his mistake to sink in. "Olga?" she asked, "I did have my suspicions." Wyvern smiled and it made him shiver. Beside her, Des snickered.

Laurel opened his mouth to debate it, but ultimately gave up on it. The bad feeling settled on the depths of his stomach and he looked at the table. "Don't worry, I'm not giving you a sermon," she looked at him meaningfully. He let his breath go. "Thank you," he said, "I wouldn't want this to be a problem for her." Wyvern laughed. "That's nothing. Meanwhile, the healers are already complaining about her again," she added. He felt more at ease. "I'd believe it," he softened his voice, "She could hardly close her hand away from them." Wyves went quiet for a while. "She works a lot," she said at last, "I'm glad you're distracting her from the library somewhat."

When he got to the office, it seemed like everything was back to normal. Olga was back to her usual clothing, writing away with seeming ease. She seemed to be working on a blank tome; she cautiously held a page above the wet ink as Laurel approached. "I can't look at it?" he asked. "No," she smiled, "It's our journal. I'm... trying to write something for you." She set it aside and got up, joining their hands. "That also really counts as an admission of love," he said, lifting their hands to kiss her fingers. "Don't make it harder for me to write," she said, her voice faltering. "Are you scared to admit you're also in love with me?" he laughed softly,

feeling a smile form on his face. She smiled as well, but it was melancholic. "I'm scared to give you love when I know you'll be gone soon," she nearly whispered. "You give me love all the time," he said, holding her hands to his chest, "Even if you don't say it out loud."

She got on her toes and brought her lips closer to his, pausing to look at the windows. That gave him pause as well. "I must tell you that something happened," he pulled away slightly, "I kind of called you by your name in front of Wyvern." Olga stopped tiptoeing, eyes wide. "Did she pick up on it?" Laurel raised his eyebrows. "She said that she already suspected we're together but needed confirmation," he said. "Ah. Yeah, that checks out," she mumbled, averting her eyes. "Are you... mad at me? For messing up," he asked, caressing her hands. "No. We were bound to slip up at some point," she shook her head, "I accounted for this in my decision. I... think this is fine." He kissed her forehead. "You know her better than I do," he said, "She also said she was glad you're doing something besides working." Olga smiled and messed with his hair, her hands now much stabler. "Sounds fine. I want to listen to some music tonight," she said, "So play."

Before they could fall back to their comfortable routine of sleeping in Olga's room and spending the day at her office, it was disrupted. He realized it one day that he got there and met Wyvern by Olga's side. As soon as she saw him, Wyves joined her hands and turned a pleading look to Olga. "Look, you're a valuable member of the Academy and an employee. Your health is of great importance," she lowered her voice, "Just go through this process. You'll be fine, dearie." She smiled at Olga and, after glancing at Laurel with odd caution, walked away.

"What was that all about?" he asked his girlfriend, leaning against her desk. She groaned and pinched her forehead. "Out of nowhere, they're cutting me off the healers," she said. Narrowing her eyes, she stared at her hands. "What? Why?" the sudden jolt seemed to

make his ribs stab his lungs; he knew how much writing meant to her. "To ascertain my actual condition... Or something like that," she sighed. Then, she got up. "My range of motion will decrease again," she pointed out, "Until they reinstate my privileges, that is. So I'll recruit some students to do my transcription work." Bitterly, she chuckled. "They're always famished for internships, anyway."

Laurel tried not to look concerned. "What will you do?" he asked. She frowned. "You know, I have a lot of work to do regardless of writing. I have a ton of job titles," she said, "What I wonder is what *you* will do while my office is filled with interns." Her eyebrows were raised. "My life here doesn't revolve around you, alright?" he said, scoffing. Of course, that was a lie.

Over the course of the next few days, she looked filled with hate whenever he tried to check on her. Her features did get smoother when she noticed him, though. Now that she couldn't just write away all day, she was working on her feet much more; he'd have to meander the library to find her. Sometimes she'd be reordering an entire shelf, but it seemed like she was much more keen on helping students. Laurel felt a sting of jealousy after realizing he wasn't the only one she'd explain things to in minutia. He caught her as she walked away from a table filled with scholars, their navy blue cloaks taking over the scene; Olga herself wore one of her councilor cloaks, as if to identify her better.

"They look desperate," he pointed out, whispering. "They always are," she replied, pulling him to a more secluded area of the library. She sighed heavily. "And you don't look so good, either," he said. Her eyebags had never been quite so purple-ish. "It's just about my work situation. I'll sort it out," she said, "I have another meeting tonight." Then, she lowered her voice as much as possible: "I might be late tonight. Wait for me in my office. I'll make sure the interns clear out by then." He wanted to touch her and offer some kind of

reassurance, but couldn't. "You can talk to me," he whispered. "I know. Tonight," she said, "But I mostly want you to hug and praise me." He smiled. "I'll do that whenever you want."

That night, he waited as she'd told him to. Cold waves ascended from his feet with a sense of dread that somehow things weren't the same. That was confirmed by the look on Olga's face when she shuffled into the office. After closing the door and peering at the windows, she tore the silver Umbral Star insignia from her chest and chucked it at the couch. It fell close to Laurel, cushioned by one of the many pillows. Her face was dead serious, but she was frantically shaking. She also threw a key at Laurel after messing with it to free it from a bunch of others. "Lock the office doors," she said, pulling her desk's drawers with unnecessary force.

"Slow down," said Laurel, getting up to put a hand on her shoulder, "What's going on?" She fished out a knife and some herb jars. "Take this at face value," she said, "Don't shake my focus." Then, she opened her desk's main drawer, the big one directly below the workspace. "My bitch mother was right. After everything I did, I..." she took a deep breath and started carving on the bottom of the drawer, "It seems I'm now too useless for manual labor and a specialist curse inflicter is more coveted as a battle tactician." She held the knife with both hands; the force applied distorted her face with pain. "And what did you say?" asked Laurel, thinking of too many questions. "I said yes," she bit her lip so aggressively he thought it'd bleed, "Because it wasn't a question. It was a draft."

His lungs sank in his chest. "You're joining the Lunar Bay army?" he asked. She frowned and lowered her voice, "I'm dodging. I already told you I don't stand for that. They said I could serve this war and gracefully retire or whatever. Fuck that." Olga stopped carving and lifted the knife to examine the marked wood. Sigils. "So I guess this is the last time we see each other," she said, not looking at him. He could see her face drop, though. "Where are

you running to?" he asked, touching her arm to ground her. He wasn't sure, but thought he'd seen tears form in her eyes. "I don't know," she said, "Home. I don't know." He gripped her arm. "You know you can't," he replied. She nodded and took a deep breath.

"Don't freak out," she said, "I need this for this curse. It's standard procedure for me." She paused and looked him in the eyes. "It's fine," she reinforced. He nodded and she took the knife to her arm, cutting it open as casually as slicing bread. She angled her arm above the sigils she'd carved out and waited for the blood to start welling up. "What the fuck are you doing?" asked Laurel, holding himself back so he wouldn't raise his voice or shake her. She'd asked him to be mindful of her focus, after all. Still, he wanted to grab her and bandage that cut up. Olga looked unfazed. "Some heavy duty black magic," she whispered. Letting the knife go, she dipped her fingertips in the blood and started running them along the sigils, eyes so fixed they could pin someone to a wall. "What's that curse for?" he said, hesitant. It seemed wrong to just let her do that. "My farewell. Whenever anyone besides me comes in touch with this desk, they'll start beating their heads against it. Relentlessly," she said it without missing a beat. Was that what she was losing time for? "What's the point?" asked Laurel.

She looked up, face still completely focused and serious. Her pupils were contracted. "It's my desk," she said, adding a bite to the sound of each syllable, "*My* fucking desk." He swallowed hard and touched her arm, pressing down on the open wound in hopes of diminishing the blood flow. "If you have nowhere to go, take refuge in the Ashen Valleys," he whispered, his voice too mellow, "I'll drop everything and go with you. Right now. Every formality." She touched her forehead to his chest and her breathing seemed labored. "That would be a heavy blunt to your country. Politically," she whispered. "Trust me to figure it out," he said, "If you want to come, I'll make it happen." Her grasp on his clothes was too faint. "You can't be selfish enough to risk that for me," she replied. "Trust me to make that

decision. I can think of something," he said, "It's not just that I couldn't withstand thinking that I didn't help you. I really care. I don't know how to word it." She was quiet for too long before exhaling loudly and replying: "Okay. Let's go." He cupped her face and pulled it up to stare at her and make sure. "Yeah?" he asked. "Yeah."

"We'll grab your things," he said, "There's nothing important in my room." She nodded and reached for a book in a drawer. It was their journal. "You didn't have the time to read what I wrote," she murmured. "I will. I swear," he whispered back, grabbing her hand. They descended to her room, crossing the empty library in a panic that was only theirs. "I need to say something," he said. "Say it while I pack this bag," she replied, things falling out of shelves and wardrobes and landing on the bed haphazardly through telekinesis. "I want you to know that I know this isn't what we planned," he said, orderly piling up the stuff she'd pulled out, "I don't want you to feel trapped with me because of this. Even if you don't want to be together, I'll find you a place to stay back in the Valleys." She gave one of the bags for Laurel to carry. "Laurel," she took a moment to pin his eyes to hers, "I wouldn't expect any less of you. And I'm not thinking far ahead. We'll just... Stay together while it works."

"Right," he said, a nagging feeling eating at the back of his throat. "Are you sure you can get us out of here just like that?" she asked, narrowing her eyes. "Yeah. Though you should put your cloak in a bag," he said, taking his own off, "And put this one on." He wrapped her in it, pulling the hood up and adjusting the gold pin. She looked smaller than she really was and it made him smile. "The border shouldn't be a problem. Not the southern border," she said, bothering to lock her room for some reason. Her hands shook as she jammed the key in the hole; she frowned. "I wish you could meet my parents," he said, lowering his voice. It was just a passing thought. "Mom would have liked you. In the same way one finds a cornered spider amusing, but she would have." Olga chuckled in a tone as

low as his, sticking close to him as they walked. "I'm in love with you, too," she said. It was the softest voice she'd ever used and his face heated up immediately.

Despite the tension regarding evading at the border or not, the trip went well. Too slow, but well. Still, their speed was an issue, which was why Laurel left Olga in an inn near the capital before going on on his own to find out whether or not anyone from the Lunar Bay had gotten there before them. He discovered that they had already come and gone, sent back over the border by the trio of regents.

Thus, they waltzed into the Ashen Castle unbothered, Laurel's recognizable face granting them immediate passage despite the oddness of the situation. There was hardly any time to lay the bags down before being ambushed by his family. The bedroom door swung open without any ceremony. "Laurel Greyland," his uncle called out in a deep voice, "What do you think you're doing?" He carefully took the cloak off Olga. She seemed comfortable enough in a sleeveless shirt. However, his uncle reacted like the sight of her bare arms was scandalous. Laurel had totally forgotten they were covered in tattoos.

"You completely ignored the one thing I told you not to do!" he exclaimed, pointing at Olga's blank face, "And brought some criminal Umbral Star mage home. A famously dangerous one at that." Laurel raised his eyebrows at Olga. "Are you famous?" He didn't recall hearing about her before visiting Estella. She shrugged. "Probably now that I've committed treason, yes." Laurel took a deep breath. "Look, she's a refugee. She dodged a draft," he said, "She'll be charged for treason if she goes back." He looked straight in his aunt's eyes, knowing she'd be more sympathetic with the story.

"Look, boy, that's all fine and good," his uncle said, sighing, "You know I'd commend anyone who dodges a Lunar draft. But we can't afford to take any more heat from them." Laurel took a deep breath. "That's why I'm holding myself accountable," he said, meaning it completely, "I'm giving up my position in the succession line. In fact, I'm retracting myself from House Greyland. I'm the offender. That should smooth things over." He took a glance at



Olga, thinking she'd look proud of him, but she looked stunned. Her mouth was agape. In fact, everyone's was.

"Why would you go that length for this woman?" his uncle pointed at Olga, nearly shouting. He seemed to bite his tongue back. Though his tone made Laurel wary, he kept the usual cordial smile. "All we ask for is a place to stay," he added. "We?" his aunt's eyes were big and humid. Laurel took Olga's hands carefully and turned his attention to her. Her expression still hadn't recovered. "If you're okay with staying with me, that is," he whispered. She smiled a little. "We'll figure it out," she whispered back. "I would go that length because I'm asking her to marry me," he announced, focusing his gaze on her eyes, "And give me her last name."

As his uncle and aunt despaired, shouting at him and demanding more context, he tuned them out and cupped her face. She raised her shaky hands and touched his gently, her pupils wide as she focused on him. "Olga," he said, "Will you marry me? You can regret it and change your mind at any time." He smiled. "Yes, though I never thought I'd say this," she smiled as well, albeit it was a sad one, "What I want the most is somewhere we can lie down and cuddle." Laurel kissed her forehead and rubbed their noses together a little bit. "I know. I'll make the dust settle and then we can nap on my bed," he whispered. She nodded.

When he turned back to his family, they had already given up on losing their minds. His uncle had his head on his hands and his aunt merely watched, mouth hung open and eyes wide. "Why didn't you tell us?" she demanded suddenly, marching over and gripping him by the cheekbones. "I'm sorry!" he begged, trying to step away from the pinch, "But no one would approve of Olga, so I didn't say anything." She let him go and seemed to examine his face. "Are you really in love?" she asked. "Irrevocably so," he replied, glancing at Olga. It seemed like she didn't know what to do with herself. His aunt surprised him with a hug. "My

baby's all grown up," she said. "Isn't twenty too late to have your rebellious teen phase?" his uncle asked, still close to the door. Laurel chuckled.

As soon as he could, Laurel took the time to cuddle with Olga in bed as she'd asked. For a long while he just hugged her as she rested with her head on his chest. "How are you feeling?" he asked at last. "My whole life has been clawed away from underneath me," she said in a rough tone, "I haven't even begun to process it." He kissed the top of her head. "I feel safe when we cuddle," she added. His heart was a bit too happy to hear that. "I didn't think you'd say that," he said. "It's like being stashed away in a different pocket of the universe," Olga said, rubbing her cheek on his chest. "So you *do* have a flair for the dramatic," Laurel chuckled.

"I have a lot to iron out," he said, caressing her hair, "But there's somewhere I can take you that might be entertaining while I do that." He could feel her face shift as she smiled. "A library?" she asked. "Better yet," he said, "Our Archmage's office, where his private collection is. I'm sure he'll let you browse." She found a space between his neck and shoulder to hide her face away comfortably. "I accept that proposal," she said, "But I'll nap first."

Once she was rested and willing enough, Laurel took her to Everett's office. She'd cleaned up and was wearing some of his clothes, which was again enough to render him breathless. As they walked the halls, she looked around. "I get why you thought Estella's castle was too grand," she said, "I like this place. It's... rustic." He smiled. "Yeah. All the internal buildings are wooden. They're quite old." He knocked on the door and got a ready answer.

They walked in. It was a small area and the shelves and the desk made it feel even smaller. The wood walls had lots of what Laurel would consider art, even if that included

encased dead insects. He thought Olga's eyes would be lit, but she had a frown. Laurel followed her eyes to discover why; she stared at the open curtains. Sunlight streamed in freely. "That's egregious," she said. Everett had been sitting behind his desk, looking bored. When she spoke up, though, he got up. "That's Siren, right?" he asked, eyes wide. "I think I'm dropping that title," she said. "Has everyone heard of you but me?" asked Laurel. "Oh, no, I'm just... a major Wyvern enthusiast," replied Everett, "And Siren was her prized pupil." Olga crossed her arms and looked at the ceiling for a moment. "I also devised my own revolutionary cursing system," she said, "But okay. Sure."

"I have no basis on which to judge black magic," said Everett, "But it's great to hear you're a Lunar Bay defector." She wandered about, browsing the titles on the bookshelves with her eyes. "I hadn't gotten the feeling the Ashen people held animosity towards us," she mumbled, focused. "I'm sure most people do. War by itself is one thing, but their methods are despicable," said the other mage. That made her stop and straighten her posture to look at him. "I've curated a library for years," she said, "And I've always had the feeling some of what gets to me is sanitized." She paused. "Or was. In the sense of..." she sighed, "What do you have on reports of Lunar Bay attacks?"

The question seemed to excite him. He walked over to her and started searching the shelves. "A lot, actually!" he said. Laurel felt as though he was watching beetles scuttle about in their natural habitat. "I'll let you guys, like... do your thing while I officialize some stuff," he said. Olga looked back at him with a tiny tired smile. "I'll be here," she said.

As promised, he came back to get her later. It seemed like she and Everett had been chatting before he got there. "You could stay here and take on students," the mage said eagerly, "Put your skills to use and ignore your black magic roots." Again, the pressure on Laurel's ribcage was too much, though he wished she'd stay where she preferred. "My

presence in the capital would further strain the Ashen Valleys' relationship with my country," she said without missing a beat. "That's a shame," replied Everett.

She grabbed Laurel's arm and took a deep breath. "Let's go," she mumbled. When they were out in the hallways, he asked: "Learn anything new?" She gripped his arm tighter. "Our records don't show the aftermath of most of the attacks in recent years," she said, "The damage is consistent with intense offensive magic. At that scale, it either means a big number of highly trained mages, which take years to train..." At that point, she paused and furrowed her brow. "Or a freak of nature who is basically long range artillery." He didn't say anything. Her notion of her own life had really been trashed. "She was there in that meeting, you know," Olga said, "And she tried to convince me that serving would be a good idea. Told me to think of my retirement. Train someone." Laurel took a good look at her face, finding anger instead of sadness.

During the night, they slept in each other's arms. They were pleasantly woken by the sun and soon received breakfast in bed, which stunned Olga. She eyed the trays and then looked up at Laurel, frowning. "Are you serious?" she asked. "Sorry?" he said, chuckling nervously, "Still, now that you're here, you can actually drink coffee." He offered her some and she raised her palm. "I don't drink coffee," she said. "Really? I thought you'd be quite into it." She shook her head. "I avoid it because of its addictive nature, considering it's an imported good in the Lunar Bay and not always available," she said. Laurel smiled reluctantly. "I don't know how to say this, but... you're not there anymore," he softened his voice. "I'll have some coffee," she acquiesced, averting her eyes.

After they were done and about to get ready to tackle on the rest of the formalities, Laurel started going through his closet. "I know this is going really fast... in relation to the pace of our relationship," he started, "So tell me if this makes you uncomfortable. Please." He

grabbed a small wooden box and turned to her, exhaling slowly. Her face seemed hesitant as well, as if they were both suspended in that moment. "My parents were buried with their wedding bands, but I've been keeping my mom's engagement ring," he said, feeling his cheeks heat up, "Even though I didn't think I'd fall in love."

The pressure in his chest waned when she smiled, even if her face seemed quite frozen and she stammered when she answered: "That's... I never thought so, either. So I don't know how to react." She was still sitting on the bed, so he knelt before her. "You don't have to go through with this," he clarified again, "I don't want you to wake up in bed with me and realize you resent me." Olga bit her bottom lip. "I'd tell you. Right now, I fear that *you* will resent me," she said. He shook his head. "What would I resent you for?" he asked, laughing. "You just dropped your whole life for me overnight," she said. "It's your turn to trust me to make my own choices," he replied. Her face subtly softened.

Laurel opened the box, presenting her the ring. "Will you be my wife?" he asked, his voice sounding too loud for his own ears. It felt like their first kiss all over again. Suddenly, she entwined her fingers in his hair and smiled. "Only if you'll be mine," she said, her smile turning to a grin. He slid the ring onto the ring finger of the hand that wasn't in his hair; even if it turned out not to be the correct hand for an engagement ring, he didn't want her to stop caressing him. "I love you," he whispered, kissing her hand. It was the first time he actually said it that way, wasn't it? The words echoed in his mind and he felt as though his consciousness might just blow itself away. "I love you too," she said, looking like she'd said the most embarrassing thing in the world.

## Epilogue

Laurel walked into the bedroom to find Olga doing her usual stretches. By the way she moved her hands, it was obvious that she'd woken up with terribly rigid wrists. She always did. "That smells amazing," she said, her smile distorted by the pain. He set the breakfast tray on the nightstand and sat by her side on the bed. "A freshly baked bun for my bun," Laurel answered before reaching his hands out and touching his fingertips to hers, "Want a boost?"

After a nod of her head, he joined their hands and pushed hers in different directions; he did it slowly, helping her get a bigger range in her motions. "Hurts so good," Olga muttered, sighing as soon as it was over. As thanks, she kissed his cheek. Laurel reached over to the tray and grabbed a warm bun, shoving it in her mouth before she could defend herself. Chewing a mouthful, she protested, though it wasn't very intelligible: "You should have woken me up earlier!"

He ate as well, relishing in the good old taste of new bread. "But you're so sweet when you sleep." Olga grabbed the mug of hot tea and took a long sip, staring harshly at her husband over the rim. "Am I not sweet while awake?," she asked. "Oh, love. Your mistrust hurts me so. I'd never say that," he smiled. That seemed to tide her over.

Satisfied with breakfast, they got out of their pajamas and into comfy, worn clothes. Once Laurel was done with his hair, he let Olga have the hairbrush. Though he could see the pain in her features as she brushed, he said nothing. "I wonder if I should cut it short again," she said, eyes fixed on the mirror. "If you feel like it," he approached her, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I feel like it's inconvenient. You end up doing a lot of the upkeep for me," she averted her eyes when she noticed his gaze in the mirror. "You act like that inconveniences me. The only good reason to get a haircut is because you'd like to, love." So, Laurel cupped her face gently and tilted it to the side, as if to help her get a good look. "Well?"

With a light chuckle, she leaned into his hand and pretended to ponder. "Hmm, a tough one. Tiebreaker: Do I look nice like this?" He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "Spectacular, though that's always been my opinion. Also, we kinda match." That made her smile. "Yeah?" He took the brush from her hand after a light tap to ask for permission. "Yeah. Mind modeling for a cool hairstyle? By which I mean regular plaits." She didn't mind, though a hint of sadness in her smile let him know that she still felt like an inconvenience.

Unable to reassure her further, Laurel immersed his fingers in her hair and started a low plait. As he intersected the three sections of hair, his mind drifted off. When he'd said he didn't mind doing these things, he hadn't been lying; looking after Olga always felt peaceful. Plus, sparing her from straining her hands more than necessary made him glad. Once he was done, their eyes met in the mirror. "Do you like it?" There was no answer to his question, however, because Olga pulled him down for a kiss. At first it seemed like it would be a quick thank you, but they ended up back in bed; the comfort of it all made Laurel think he wouldn't mind melting away right then.

When she pulled back to breathe, he snuck in the question: "Don't you have anything to do today?" That prompted another chuckle from her. "The wonders of unemployment... Which you have always been familiar with," she said, immediately chastised by tickles to the neck. "Actually, I'm heading out and reading to the kids. Haven't shown them that storybook your uncle sent us yet," she shifted in their embrace while talking, lodging her chin on his shoulder, "Are there any errands I can run while I'm out?" Even if there weren't any, he always made sure to make some up when she asked.

While she was out, Laurel took his time cleaning the kitchen. The counters were a mess of sprinkled flour due to his early morning venture. Though he knew that Olga also felt immense guilt when she came home to a squeaky clean environment, he still did it. There wasn't much he could do in order to convince her that he enjoyed such a mundane activity.

He'd learned cleaning from her that one spring, being taught with patience and gentle motions, whereas she'd learned it from the monster she called mother. Of course she'd see it as a major burden.

Once he was done, there was a song he wanted to try to finish composing. Before that, though, he wanted to write something sweet while his wife was still on his mind. The cursed journal she'd made for them a few years ago lay on the coffee table; there were some blank pages left to go. Back then, he'd thought she was entertaining delusions of a serious relationship when she'd bound a huge tome for them to write messages to each other. Not that it bothered him. Now, though, the day that it was completely filled drew near and that left a bittersweet taste in Laurel's tongue. In any case, he'd continue leaving messages in it, even if Olga rarely did; her wrists didn't tolerate such precise motion anymore. Well, she did doodle some wide hearts and cats around his writing sometimes. Having set up pen and ink, he wrote:

"This is a reminder that I love you and I don't see you the way you see yourself. I sometimes wonder if I should reassure you or not; I'm afraid that saying it out loud would serve as validation that I think these things... to you, of course. Not me. I don't think these things. Sorry, you've always been more of a wordsmith than me. I hope breakfast was good today. And every other day. Well... Bye. Please keep this on your mind. I chose this and I'd do it again. Love you lots. I'd fold the tip of this page so you can come back to it, but I'm not sure if that would trigger a curse... It definitely would back in the day.

P.S.: I'm working on that song right now — and I still want you to think up some lyrics."

Hopefully that was an okay message for the day. For good measure, he added a smiley face at the end. He really hoped she'd contribute the lyrics. Olga still did that sort of stuff, of course; sometimes she'd muse out loud and Laurel would jot her thoughts down; he'd had to



write lovey-dovey messages to himself a few times, even. Their home was decorated with paintings she enjoyed making with her fingertips. She'd told him it didn't hurt because it used the whole arm, not just the joints she'd wrecked. The colorful canvases always made him think of her.