

our second year at this

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by [jessalae](#)

Notes

Happy pine4pine, CypressSunn! I'm sorry to hear you've been having some health issues, and I hope these sweet dramatic boys pining hard for each other will help take your mind off things.

Content note for discussion/depiction of depression in Chapter 6.

Thank you to my lovely betas and cheerleaders R and H!

one year + one day

Eliot's voice echoes in his head all morning, over and over: *"Let's just. Save our overthinking for the puzzle, yeah?"*

He'd had a little smile when he said it, and his voice was soft and kind, not mocking. It's probably the nicest way Quentin's ever been rejected. Which. Doesn't say a lot of good things about his past partners, because this really sucks.

Quentin's working on collecting the green tiles into a pile so they can move on to their third pattern of the day. He lets himself glance over at Eliot, bent over at the other corner of the puzzle, gathering the pink tiles. His hair is a little more tousled than usual (from Quentin's fingers running through it) and his shirt is riding up to show a sliver of skin (that Quentin got to taste last night, finally, after months of thinking about it).

Quentin is acutely aware that he's been building this up in his head for far too long. He'd convinced himself, somehow, that if he just made the first move, he and Eliot would move beyond being good friends (best friends?) and into— something else. He thought something was there. Some potential. At the worst he'd thought it would just, take a while to settle in. Like of course they'd have a period of *It's Complicated*, probably, because things for Quentin are always *Complicated* no matter how desperately he'd like them to be simple, but he had hoped that eventually—

He focuses back on his green tiles, shuffles sideways to grab some more of them.

At the very least, forget anything about best friends or best something else or whatever, at the *very* least he'd hoped that Eliot would want to fuck him twice. Or more. Was it that bad? (*Of course it was*, whispers his self-loathing.) It's been a while since he was on the giving end of a blowjob, but supposedly he's pretty good at them, or he was. And he got it in as deep as he could, Eliot has to expect people not to be able to deepthroat the whole fucking thing. And Eliot *came*, definitely, he can't fake that. Quentin doesn't think he can fake that. Can he fake that? How would you even—

"I think we stay on the nature theme," Quentin says out loud, just so he doesn't have to keep listening to his own thoughts. "We've done sunsets, we've done forest stuff, maybe we go ocean next? Shells, starfish?"

"Yeah, maybe all those bougie moms with beach houses have been onto something this whole time," Eliot says wryly. "If that doesn't work we can try 'live, laugh, love' next."

Anger flashes hot across Quentin's skin. How can Eliot just— was turning Quentin down not enough cruelty for one day, now he has to be a fucking asshole when Quentin's trying to make totally normal suggestions about this stupid fucking bullshit quest—

He squashes the anger down. He can't actually be mad at Eliot, that's not fair. Eliot doesn't want last night to— be anything, and that's his *right*, Quentin would never want to coerce him, or. And this is just how they work, this is normal. One of them says something, the other

banters back. They go on with their day. They keep working through this stupid, endless, awful, torturous—

“So what’s your idea, then?” Quentin asks, finally, managing to sound just his normal level of snarky, not wounded.

“I was just giving you shit,” Eliot says, waving a hand casually. “Ocean’s a good call. Anemones, dolphins. Tropical islands.” He stands, stretches with his hands on his lower back, pushing his stomach forward. Quentin looks down at the tiles. “How about this, I’ll get the red tiles, then go make us some lunch. We can plan while we eat.”

Quentin nods, staring resolutely at the tile in his hand. “Yeah.”

“*Yeah*”—the same thing he’d said earlier. The thing he says to pretty much whatever Eliot asks him. The only thing he *could* have said, reasonably, right?

“Let’s just. Save our overthinking for the puzzle, yeah?”

“*Yeah.*”

Maybe someone else could have said, “Wait, what?” and gotten more of an explanation. Maybe someone else could have said, “Why?” or “But I want you, please” or even, fucking, “Okay, but I’d really like to still suck your dick every once in a while.” But that wasn’t an option for Quentin. Because it’s not just about the sex, for Quentin, although that was—*great*. It’s about more. It’s.

Hard to explain.

It’s Eliot’s voice saying, “Good morning, sleeping beauty,” when Quentin wakes up to him throwing their makeshift curtains open, already dressed, a fire blazing under the steaming tea kettle. It’s the thrill of bickering, picking stupid but hilarious fights to proverbially pull on Eliot’s pigtailed. It’s the seven loaves of bread Eliot baked, using up their entire precious sack of flour, when Quentin was coming out of his last bad depressive episode and finally wanted to eat again, but only carbs.

It’s not *that* hard to explain, actually. But the words for it are big, and get snagged on Quentin’s brain any time he tries to use them, even think them. So he’d just said “Yeah,” like he always does, and now here he is. Still Eliot’s good friend, and only that, nothing more.

When Eliot finishes with the red tiles, he heads past Quentin into the house, pausing to ruffle Quentin’s hair on his way in. Quentin reflexively smacks at his hand, and Eliot twirls out of the way, grins at Quentin as he dances backwards to go get lunch ready.

Quentin glares back at him. Eliot’s shirt is mostly unbuttoned in the late spring sun, so Quentin’s got a perfect view of the red bite marks on Eliot’s neck, his chest. Marks Quentin made last night, that he’d thought at the time he’d get to make again. That he almost wishes he hadn’t, now, because what if that’s the thing that Eliot didn’t like? It could’ve been that. But it could’ve been about a thousand other things, too, or a combination, or nothing. It could’ve been just Quentin himself, his whole general thing. Quentin is — a lot. This quest is

a lot. Being on this quest with Quentin, for a *year* so far and who knows how many more days beyond, is A Lot.

No matter how much Quentin stupidly built it up in his head, this outcome was always likely. Maybe all but guaranteed. He tried, he made the first move, Eliot doesn't want him. Quentin could have seen that coming. He *should* have.

"Let's just. Save our overthinking for the puzzle, yeah?"

To say that Quentin's not good at not overthinking is an understatement. But he said "Yeah," so. Here he goes.

one year + one week

Eliot's been someone's sexual experiment before, plenty of times. There was a while where he really enjoyed it, actually, getting someone into his bed who would have sworn up and down that they're not really like *that*, everyone gets curious, it's just this once. True, you did have a greater than normal chance of awkward first-time-with-another-man mishaps. Jagged edges on fingernails. Getting overly ambitious with their blowjobs and gagging on cock. Those risks were all vastly outweighed by the wonder on a guy's face when Eliot made him feel so, *so* fucking good, a wrecking ball through his previous concept of his own sexuality. Eliot's earned himself a few dozen toasters, all the work he's put in dicking down quote-unquote straight boys.

"Three reds," he says, peering down at Quentin's progress. "Then you're going to do four blues, one light blue, and four more blues. Then back to red."

"It doesn't *have* to be symmetrical," Quentin says.

"Q, of the two of us, which one has spent any amount of his life paying attention to aesthetics?" Eliot asks. "The human mind is naturally attracted to symmetry."

Eliot's always been fine with being someone's experiment when it was just for fun, just a way to pass the night. It's fine to be *that kind* of guy's experiment.

But it's been a week now, and Eliot has come to the inescapable conclusion that it's not fine, not even slightly fine, to be an experiment for someone who— well. Someone like Quentin.

Who he wakes up next to every morning, as soon as the sun is bright enough in the sky to come through the window and highlight his hair with gold. Who's quick-witted and funny and gives as good as he gets when Eliot teases him. Who's steadfast, caring, just a *good person* in a way that should really be kind of sickening but is absolutely endearing.

It's not anywhere remotely in the vicinity of fine to have that kind of one-off night with someone he'd really, really like to have every night.

Quentin puts the last blue tile down. "Who says human psychology has anything to do with this puzzle? Fillory doesn't exactly play by the normal rules." He stretches behind him for the stack of red tiles. Eliot can't help but notice how his shirt slides over his ribs, the stretch of it across his shoulders. "It's *the beauty of all life*, not *the thing Eliot thinks is most hot*."

"How sure are you about that? Maybe the gods anticipated my existence, and designed this pattern specifically to appeal to me. Two yellows then two whites, next." Eliot leans back in the tall chair, crosses his legs.

"And this is what appeals to you?" Quentin asks incredulously. "What even is it?"

"There's a bush my grandmother had growing by her front door," Eliot says. "I'm trying to approximate the flowers."

Quentin glances up at him. His face is open, curious. Eliot's heart aches. "What kind of bush?"

"A camellia, I think. I don't remember too much about it, she died when I was ten, and my parents sold her house. I'm having to get a little creative with the colors, but I'm hoping it'll be close enough," Eliot says. "Okay, from where you are, fill in with green to the edge."

Quentin goes to work, and Eliot watches silently, trying to convince himself that soon enough, once it's been more than just a few days since they had sex, he'll get over this. Everything will go back to normal. With time, all things fade, and soon it won't be a problem at all that Eliot now knows beyond the shadow of a doubt—

That Quentin's a surprisingly decent kisser, and he sucks cock like he was fucking made for it. That he has a gorgeous little body that fits so nicely into Eliot's arms. That he loves to have his hair pulled. That he makes *incredible* noises when he comes.

And that kissing him softly afterwards, holding him as they fell asleep, was somehow even better than all of the above combined.

Eliot had woken up that next morning knowing he was in deep trouble, and hadn't been able to face the conversation he knew was on the horizon. *It was fun, Eliot, but I'm not really—everyone gets curious, I'm not, um—*. So he'd cut it off before Quentin could even get close to saying it, wrapped their experiment up in a nice little bow, and that had been that.

"Were you close with her?" Quentin asks as he slots green tiles into place. "Before she died?"

"She was my summer childcare," Eliot says. His face scrunches into a strange half-smile, happy and sad at the same time. "She taught me to cook."

"Thank you, Eliot's grandma," Quentin says, and grins up at Eliot. "For making sure we don't have to survive on my cooking here."

It should have been that.

But he still has to wake up next to Quentin every morning, in the week since it happened. Watch him work all day long, his hands dusty with sand or chalk. See every expression that moves across his beautiful face: annoyance and laughter and frustration and the deepest, most terrifying sadness that Eliot isn't enough to prevent. Have conversations like this one where Quentin is sweet and adorable and always trying to get to *know* Eliot. Trying to get under Eliot's skin, like he doesn't live there already.

"If this one doesn't do it, what's the next thing on the list?" Quentin asks, starting work on the next row, filling in greens around the edges as he figures out the gist of the design Eliot is planning.

"Hm?" Eliot asks.

"What's the next possibility on the list of things-Eliot-thinks-are-the-most-beautiful? If we're gonna run with the theory that the gods meant this puzzle for you and only you."

“An excellent question,” Eliot drawls. “It’s got to be either the lights of Paris as seen from the top of the Eiffel Tower, or a bottle of 1996 Dom Perignon that’s just for me.”

“I’m not sure we can get that granular on the detail,” Quentin says, shooting him a look.

“Do a light green there. No, two light greens. Then six white. I’ll find a way,” Eliot says. “I’m full of possibilities.”

He’s glad that Quentin moves on to another subject, then, because if they kept going down the list of things Eliot finds shatteringly beautiful, it wouldn’t be long before they got to Quentin.

one year + two weeks

The little house they live in had really been more of a hut when they arrived, slightly dusty and full of spiders. Now, a year and a bit later, they have a whole pantry's worth of food, a kettle, a pot, a couple of reasonable knives, enough dishes that they don't absolutely have to wash them between breakfast and lunch (although they do anyway, to avoid an invasion from the family of talking squirrels that lives in a tree on the edge of their clearing). They have more blankets, a clothesline. Pillows. Garden plots with squash, beans, cabbage, something that's almost like broccoli but with a weird salty aftertaste. Enough to live fairly comfortably, or at least as comfortably as you can, in the middle of nowhere in a land with no electricity or running water.

There's definitely more upgrading to be done, though, Quentin thinks, looking around the house to avoid looking over at Eliot, who is gutting a fish for dinner. The bed, for starters.

Like, it's fine. It's much more comfortable now, with fresh straw and new ropes to hold up the mattress and a decent set of sheets, than it had been at first. But it occasionally wobbles alarmingly, it groans when Quentin sits down on it too hard, and most of all it's— not a large bed. It had clearly been built with the idea that if more than one person used it, they wouldn't mind getting cozy. Initially that hadn't seemed like a problem, other than Eliot's limbs are stupidly long and he tends to sprawl — but Quentin doesn't care if he ends up with Eliot's leg flung over his and Eliot's fingers brushing his cheek.

He hadn't, anyway, until he'd had Eliot's leg over his and Eliot's fingers on his cheek with *purpose*, just once, and now he can never have it again.

If this were modern times, the smart thing to do in this situation would be to run to a furniture store and get a bigger bed, or a second bed. That's not actually an option in Fillory, though, and even if there were somewhere to just buy furniture, there's not really enough room in the house for a second bed anyway.

And at this point it would make it really weird if Quentin brought up that he'd rather not share a bed anymore. It'd be making too big a deal out of what had happened. It's been two weeks, and Eliot's been acting the same as before they slept together. That's a huge relief, Quentin tries to tell himself. He didn't fuck everything up by coming on to Eliot. They tried it, Eliot's not interested in trying it again, but nothing changed between them. It could have been *so* much worse. Nothing changed.

He risks a glance over at Eliot, who has the fish roasting over the fire and has now moved on to eating all the raspberries Quentin picked in the woods this afternoon and had intended to save for dessert. Eliot notices his gaze, smiles at him sheepishly. He can never resist raspberries. His lips are red with juice. Quentin wants to taste them.

Nope. Nothing has changed.

Late spring is winding into summer, and the days are getting longer and longer, which gives Quentin the perfect excuse to stay out of the house as much as possible. Tonight after dinner

he goes walking in the woods, takes a book along and sits and reads on one of the big flat boulders along the bank of the river. It's not sticky enough for mosquitoes yet, so he can stay out as long as he can still see the words on the page. Maybe a little beyond that point. He's maybe giving himself some eyestrain, trying to just get one more chapter in before he has to go back and actually face— going to bed.

Eliot left one torch lit for him outside the front door, so Quentin doesn't trip over tiles on his way back. In the house, the torchlight comes in through the window and casts long, strange shadows across everything.

Eliot's sprawled across more than his fair share of the bed, eyes closed. He's under the blankets, kind of, but has mostly kicked them off by this point. Of course he sleeps in his underwear, because— of course.

Which also wasn't a problem initially. Quentin's an awkward mess but he's not *twelve*, he doesn't get all ooh-I-can-see-your-butt when someone just wants to sleep comfortably. He's not going to get flustered at the sight of Eliot's chest hair, the outline of his long legs under the sheets, torchlight across the pale skin of his shoulders—

He didn't *used* to get flustered.

Quentin strips out of his clothes, tosses them onto one of the benches by the table, rummages under his pillow until he finds his nightshirt. Sleeping in his underwear sounds really nice tonight, actually, it's warm in here, but. It wouldn't be a good idea to change things up at this point. Nothing has changed. Everything's the same as it was before.

Flustered is the wrong word anyway, he's not. Uncomfortable. He's the opposite, he's *too* comfortable and he wants to see Eliot like this so badly. Wants to touch, so badly. He knows he can be something more for Eliot, can make him feel good, he *knows* it. He'd do anything, he wants—

Eliot doesn't want him. Eliot doesn't want him. Just, fucking, he *has* to get over this.

Eliot stirs when Quentin slides into bed, making the rickety old frame groan. "Oh good," he says, sleep-heavy and still so fucking sarcastic. "You haven't been eaten by a bear."

"Not tonight," Quentin says. He aims a practiced tut out the window to put out the torch, then settles on his side, facing Eliot, because that's the side he prefers to sleep on and he's been sleeping like this for a year and it would be weird to change things now, Eliot might figure out he's— still thinking about it. Even though it's been two weeks, already, and Eliot's definitely stopped thinking about it by this point. Quentin sighs to himself and closes his eyes.

For a while before he falls asleep he just listens to the rush of Eliot's breathing. Tries not to wonder how close by his hands are. What if Quentin just like— readjusted, a tiny bit, could he maybe accidentally touch them? Would Eliot pull away if he did that? He shouldn't do that. He shouldn't, it's pathetic.

After a while of trying so hard to stay still that his legs are starting to twitch, Quentin lets himself open his eyes. Eliot's out cold, his eyelashes dark against his cheeks in the moonlight. Quentin lets himself look, at least. He used to look before, sometimes, when he couldn't sleep, and that was fine, right? So this can be fine. Nothing changed.

Eliot shifts in his sleep, rolls away from Quentin, pulling the blanket with him. The shadows in the house fall so nicely across the small of his back, that little curve where back transitions into ass and Quentin knows what it feels like to grab there, pull Eliot against him as they kiss deeply and Eliot tangles those long fingers into his hair—

Nothing changed, and everything changed. A little knowledge is a dangerous fucking thing.

And this bed is too fucking small.

one year + three weeks

Eliot promised himself long ago, when he was finally free of the hellscape of adolescence and had found a world and a persona to settle into, that he had spent enough time denying himself what he wanted, and he was never going to do that again. Hence the hedonism. And the first year here, it hadn't been *denying* himself, exactly, keeping his relationship with Quentin platonic. It had just been... what it was.

Obviously he'd wanted Quentin all through that first year of the quest. Hell, he'd wanted Quentin in varying degrees from the moment he saw Q's scrunched up, confused face as he stumbled across the lawn, the day of his entrance exam, when Eliot had considered him from a distance and thought, *I could eat this one up*. That wasn't the relationship that had developed between them, though, and that was fine. And when they arrived here in past-Fillory, they settled back into a relationship much like the one they'd had at school, and that was fine as well. It wasn't *denying himself what he wanted* to maintain the status quo.

Except then there was that one night, several weeks ago now, when the status quo had shifted out from under him, and now he *is* denying himself. Actively, at nearly every moment. Hundreds of thoughts he has to shoot down during the course of the day: no, Eliot, you can't kiss Quentin good morning. No, you can't wrap your arms around him from behind as he's standing at the wash basin cleaning up from breakfast. No, you can't grab his ass when he bends over a stack of tiles. You can point out the smudge of jam on his cheek after dinner, but no, you can't offer to lick it off. No, you can't just look your fill when he's taking a bath. No, you can't hope that this foot massage you offered him will turn into anything else. No, you can't kiss him goodnight.

It's maddening, the constant refrain of no, no, no. Don't. Don't want it, don't push it. It's maddening enough that Eliot actually volunteered to go out trading today, to try to barter with their terrible neighbors for fabric and soap and a shovel and the dozen other miscellaneous things they need and can't figure out how to make themselves. Anything to give his heart a moment's peace.

The bartering process is maddening in itself, unfortunately. "No, we don't have cheese," he tells the skeptical-looking farmer in front of him. She's got her hands on her hips, a scowl on her face. "We'll have more beans than we can eat, when harvest time comes. We could pledge you some of those?"

"I get my beans from Oswald," she says. "I've got no need of more. Only thing I'm missing is cheese, now that Pepper and her brood moved down south and took the goats with them."

"We're happy to trade labor as well, mundane or magical," Eliot says. "Do you have anything that needs mending? Or something that needs to be moved?"

"Not as of right now," she says stiffly. "We do fine for ourselves, around these parts. You fools at the mosaic, you come and you go and you ask for our charity because you're on a silly quest instead of working like decent folk. If you stay here a few more years, perhaps

you'll have something worth trading." She turns back to go inside her house, a clear dismissal.

Eliot stands outside the farmhouse for a long moment, hands in fists at his sides, breathing deeply. Everything here takes so much more effort, and so much more *time*. Shopping is a complicated series of if-then statements, the embodiment of "you have a goose, a wolf, and some lettuce and one boat..." And all the time and energy they spend on feeding and washing and sheltering themselves is time they're not spending putting tiles into the mosaic, which means they'll be here longer, which means more time figuring out how to feed and wash and shelter themselves.

Maybe their lovely neighbor knows better than they do. Maybe they're not going to last much longer. It seems unthinkable to give up on the quest, but— are they going to spend their whole lives here? Really? Is that a price they're willing to pay, to get magic back for everyone else?

Eliot's not sure. He hasn't been sure this entire time, and it's been even harder these last few weeks. He doesn't like denying himself what he wants, and what he wants is Quentin, and he can't have that. And there's nothing else, here, nobody else. Even if he did find a cute farm boy to fuck he'll still be with Quentin all day, every day, until — what? They solve this impossible puzzle? They die? Eliot loses his goddamn mind?

He makes himself visit a couple other neighbors, with more success, thankfully, and heads home as the sun is starting to dip back towards the horizon. He comes around the corner of their house (No, Eliot, you can't yell out "I return in triumph, my love") and sees Quentin crouched on a completed pattern (No, you can't go stand next to him and pet his hair and joke about how he's at the perfect height for his true calling of sucking dick), picking up one tile and swapping it with its neighbor, then swapping it again another few tiles down, working his way across the row in a weird crab-walk kind of fashion as he moves this one blue tile all over the place.

Yes, Eliot, you can tease him for that, that's innocent enough. "Did you forget how to stand up all the way? Are you broken?"

Quentin looks up at him, then stands all the way with a groan. "I might be," he says. "I had this thought — maybe I could do one pattern, and then just move a tile around to just, test out all the variants of that pattern without undoing the whole thing every time. Check a few more off the list."

"And this one's," Eliot says, cocking his head to the side, "a sailboat?"

"An eagle," Quentin says, irritated.

"It has a sail."

"A wing."

"And that's clearly water."

"Eagles fly over the ocean!"

"Do you think that strategy's worth trying for a while?" Eliot asks, to short-circuit their bickering. "Doing a pattern, moving one tile around?"

Quentin sighs, nudging a couple of tiles with his toe to push them into better alignment. "I doubt it," he says. "I mean, how likely is it that the beauty of all life is a polka-dot mushroom, but only if the blue dot is *here* and the green dot is *here*? If we could do it by magic, it'd be worth it, but. It was just another thing to try." He shrugs. "Then I didn't have to think too hard, or come up with anything actually creative. How'd you do with trading?"

"Not bad," Eliot says, going into the house to unload his haul. Quentin follows him. (No, you can't stop in the doorway and pull him in for a quick kiss.) "Soap, a promise of a hand-me-down shovel next time the peddler comes through and Magda can get a new one for herself, and Sirren, god among men, had some clothes his son outgrew that I think will fit you." He hands Quentin the bundle of clothing.

Quentin holds up one of the shirts against his chest, smiling. "This is great! I actually like this color."

"Quentin," Eliot says. "It's grey."

"I know," Quentin says. "I look good in grey."

No, Eliot, you can't tell him that he looks good in anything but even better in nothing at all. "I think you're more of an autumn than a winter, actually." It's the flimsiest possible excuse to look Quentin up and down, and Eliot takes it. "Maybe even a little bit towards the summer end of things."

"Whatever that means," Quentin says, rolling his eyes. "I'll be sure to tell my personal shopper that when it's time to pick next season's fashions."

"I *am* your personal shopper," Eliot says. "If I could keep you within a more suitable color palette, I would. But until we find our way out of the ass-end of nowhere somehow, I can't bring my full talents to bear."

Quentin shrugs. "I guess you'll have to put up with seeing me in grey, then," he says. "What are you making us for dinner?"

Quentin goes back out to work on one last pattern for the evening, leaving Eliot alone to cook. It's halfway a relief to not have to be constantly shooting down suggestions from his treacherous heart. Only halfway, though, since he'd been away from Quentin all day already, and he misses Quentin's easy smile, the chance to chat or tease. He listens to the soft clink of tiles outside, thinks about Quentin's sturdy hands pressing them into place.

You fools at the mosaic, their neighbor had said. She meant it like they were fools for thinking they could ever finish it, which is certainly true, but if only she knew how big a fool Eliot is in essentially every other way. He couldn't even pretend he hadn't known it was a bad

idea, letting the status quo shift like that. He'd just— ignored that it was, because Quentin had kissed him, and Eliot doesn't deny himself what he wants.

Even if getting what he wants once is going to make the rest of his life impossible.

one year + one month

Quentin and Eliot are— normal twenty-something guys, in some ways, anyway. They have needs. Like, every couple days or so, at least. And in anything resembling a normal living situation, they would take care of those needs in private, probably in the shower or maybe locked in the bathroom. Or like in college, memorize the other person's class schedule and find a time you can go for it when they won't be back for an hour.

(At least that's how Quentin would do it. He shouldn't make assumptions about what Eliot would do. Maybe Eliot had fucked his college roommate. Maybe he'd fucked him once and only once and then left him dreaming about it for the rest of forever. Maybe this was just Eliot's thing.)

But their house is *tiny*, and all one room. The bathroom is four walls and a wooden seat over a hole in the ground a few yards away from the house, they have a wooden bathtub instead of a shower. And just about everything they have to do, twenty-four seven, happens in this little clearing, within easy earshot of the house. So it's been— a weird unspoken negotiation, finding time to jerk off.

Quentin's pretty sure Eliot usually does it either in the mornings before Quentin wakes up, or the evenings if Quentin goes for a walk. Quentin, for his part, generally waits for Eliot to decide he should try and catch them some fish for dinner, or notice their stash of firewood is getting low and go chop some more, or casually announce that he's going to take a nap out in the chair in the sunshine. Something that'll keep him away for a reasonably long time.

The best opportunities are the rare days Eliot has an errand over at one of their neighbors' houses. The closest one is a half hour walk away, so that's at least an hour of private time, enough time for Quentin to really get into it. Come up with some nice fantasy to get himself going. Take all his clothes off. Be able to touch himself all over, if he wants, nice and slow, instead of having to go right for the main attraction. Be a little bit loud, if the moment calls for it.

Today Quentin knows Eliot plans to walk over to the mill an hour away to deliver some jam and bring back more flour, which— when he actually leaves, it'll be a very good thing, a nice long stretch of privacy. But currently it is very much not a good thing, because from the second, the *second* Quentin woke up this morning, he's been desperately trying to keep himself from fantasizing. And especially to keep himself from staring. It's the fucking worst — like, can his dick just, wait its turn? And not start getting hard every time Eliot bends over to move a tile? Or comes into the house freshly bathed with wet curls sticking to his forehead? Or smiles at Quentin, laughs at one of his jokes? Or just, like, exists somewhere in the vicinity of Quentin's gaze?

Eliot finally leaves around lunchtime, and Quentin forces himself to keep sorting tiles for about five minutes after he can no longer see Eliot, then walks into the house, shuts the door and the curtains. Gets out of his clothes — all the way out, fully naked. It's hot and sticky,

today, it's so much more comfortable to be out of scratchy linen and heavy wool. Settle down on the bed, taking up as much space as he wants. Close his eyes.

Getting hard is as easy as thinking about the way Eliot's hand wrapped around his walking stick as he set out. Long fingers, broad palm — Quentin knows what those hands feel like, cupping the back of his neck. Sliding down his sides, digging into his hips. Wrapping around his dick, big enough to almost cover the whole thing, squeeze and slide so nicely all up Quentin's length.

Quentin shudders and starts stroking himself, lazily, not going too fast yet.

He's got such vivid memories of that night. Vivid in a sensory way, not a perfect-detail way. He can't like, remember which blanket was on the bed. He can't remember if they left their cups outside or managed to bring them in, in their desperate flurry of kisses and undressing. But he can remember the heat of Eliot's mouth, the rasp of stubble against his cheek. The shadow of Eliot hovering over him on the bed. Eliot's chest hair soft beneath his fingers, the ridge of his jaw sharp where it pressed into Quentin's shoulder as Eliot kissed the side of his neck.

In the here-and-now, Quentin grabs at his own neck with his free hand, sliding his fingers over his skin.

The memories are great, but Quentin's brain (and dick) want to go beyond them, play out some other way it could have happened, some other thing they could have done. That's where most of Quentin's fantasies have been ending up for the past month. Because if Quentin had known at the time that he would only have that one night, he would have... slowed down, maybe? Tried out everything he wanted to try, not just the absolute bare minimum of kissing and handjobs and sucking Eliot's dick.

He only had the one night, in reality, but as he strokes himself, eyes closed, he can see it so clearly, how it could have gone instead:

If Eliot had slid backwards, sent those kisses all the way down over Quentin's chest and stomach and slid that hot mouth onto Quentin's dick. Looked up at him through those long lashes, *fuck*—

If Quentin hadn't gotten so lost in the stretch of Eliot's cock in his mouth, the tangle of his fingers through Quentin's hair, had stopped before Eliot came. Maybe had crawled up Eliot's body, settled in his lap, rubbed against him, both their dicks wet with spit—

If Quentin had maybe whispered to Eliot what he *really* wanted, clung to his neck and kissed him endlessly as Eliot slid his fingers inside him, getting him ready, then lining up and letting him sit back—

The hand that isn't stroking his cock is playing with his balls, and he lets it drift further back, thinking about it, pulling his knees up towards his chest. He doesn't have any lube or anything, so he's just going to tease, a bit, brush his fingertips over his asshole and imagine. Eliot's dick is— fucking big, probably not ideal when it's been a couple years since Quentin had anything decent sized inside him, but Quentin would make it work, somehow. Go as slow

as he had to. Use whatever they had lying around to ease it in, let it stretch him, Eliot's breathing rough and labored and his kisses sloppy—

The door scrapes against the dirt floor as it opens. Quentin's eyes fly open and he sits bolt upright, hands flying to cover himself.

"Oh, fuck—" Eliot says, turning his back hurriedly, shutting the door behind him. "Sorry, I'll be out of your hair in one second—"

"What the fuck, Eliot," Quentin says, hoping whatever expression is on his face right now, it doesn't scream 'I was just jerking off to the thought of riding your cock' like he's worried it might.

"I said I was sorry. I forgot the fucking jam I'm supposed to be bringing," Eliot says, still facing away. "I was ten minutes away already before I realized, but there's no point in me going all the way empty handed— here we go." He picks up the woven basket that Quentin hadn't even noticed was still sitting on the table. "You can go back to—" He clears his throat a little bit. "I'm gone, I'll be back at dinner. You have the place to yourself."

Quentin watches him walk briskly sideways towards the door, not looking back over his shoulder at all, slip through it and shut it firmly behind him.

Well. That was— a thing that happened. Quentin's flushed, not just because of the summer heat. And not just from embarrassment. He runs a shaking hand through his hair, bites down firmly on his tongue. He's still hard. And his first instinct, once he realized it was Eliot, had been to ask Eliot to wait, please, come here, don't you like what you see? This is for you. Can't you just let me—

Can't you just want me back?

He lies back down. That's a new fantasy to add to his library, anyway. Eliot walks in, sees Quentin. Doesn't turn his back. Doesn't hurry away. Prowls towards Quentin, a little smirk on his face, stretches out on the bed next to him, or between his legs — kisses the insides of Quentin's thighs, watches Quentin work himself. Maybe sucks Quentin down, at the last minute, lets him pulse into the heat of his mouth, against his tongue. Kisses Quentin right after so Quentin can taste it.

Quentin comes panting, clutching the sheets, his eyes squeezed shut and Eliot's name stuck in the back of his throat where it's been every time he's come for the last month. Stuck there like a secret. Because Eliot doesn't want him back, so that's where it has to stay.

one year + six weeks

For the third time since they arrived in Fillory, Q is lost in his own mind.

The first time, Eliot was terrified, but he'd muddled his way through it by trial and error. The second time, he'd had a better idea of what it was like in the awful depths of Quentin's brain, more guesses about what could help draw him out of it. It had been a worse episode, but they'd made it through.

This third time, he feels like he should be more confident, probably. He knows what works now, after all: narrow down the number of things that Quentin needs to worry about to the absolute bare minimum. Let him sleep in, but only to a certain point. Lay off the teasing, but continue to provide gentle humor. Coax him into eating at least twice a day, bathing at least every other day. And what really works, the best trick in Eliot's toolbox, is physical contact. He discovered during that second episode that if he just held Quentin, arms around him applying firm pressure, that seemed to draw Quentin back into the real world. Push away some of the darkness, at least for a while.

It had been entirely platonic. Eliot can provide physical comfort for a friend, even a friend he's attracted to, without it being sexual or romantic in the least. And it *worked*. Every time Eliot did it, it bought them a chunk of time where Quentin could take care of himself a little better, where he could find the energy to eat something or read or brush his hair, or where he could actually fall asleep without staring at the ceiling with silent tears running down his cheeks for hours first. It was by far the easiest and most effective tool Eliot had found.

Or it had been the easiest, initially. This time around it feels significantly more difficult. Because yes, Eliot can provide physical comfort for a friend, even a friend he's attracted to, without it being sexual or romantic — but he's not sure anymore that that holds true when the friend is Quentin.

Eliot wants so deeply to comfort him, hold him, but does he want it too much? How can he separate this wanting to hold Quentin from his everyday reality of wanting to hold Quentin? What if he gets turned on, with Quentin's weight resting against him, his body tucked so neatly into Eliot's larger frame — it hasn't happened yet, but what if? What if Quentin notices that he is? Or if Quentin doesn't notice, is that even worse, if Eliot just takes advantage of his depression to get his rocks off? How fucked up is that? He feels pulled in several different directions at once, paralyzed by fear.

But ultimately, he can't *not* do it, not when Quentin is listless and drawn like this. So when they finish dinner (or Eliot finishes dinner, at least, and Quentin finishes pushing food around his bowl and eating maybe two bites), Eliot sets their dishes aside carefully, and takes Quentin's hand, and leads him to the bed.

"You don't have to," Quentin says, when he realizes what's going on.

"I do," Eliot says. "And more importantly, I want to." He props himself up in a sitting position, tugs at Quentin's hands until Quentin clambers up onto the bed and sits cross-legged

between his knees with his back to Eliot. He holds himself a little forward, not quite leaning back into Eliot's embrace, and looks back over his shoulder.

"I mean it," he says. "I'll be fine. If you don't— want to."

Quentin's voice is flat, tired. Eliot's heart aches. He wraps his arms around Quentin's whole body, draws him gently back against his chest. "I just said I did want to," he says matter-of-factly. It's so tempting to murmur it, to breathe it against Quentin's ear. Kiss the side of his head. But that's not what Quentin needs from him.

"Fine," Quentin says, still flat. But as Eliot tightens the circle of his arms, squeezing steadily, Quentin's body relaxes. He leans back into Eliot, lets his head turn to the side, presses his face against the inside of Eliot's bicep. And he breathes, more deeply than Eliot's heard him breathe in days, slowly, calmly.

Eliot would really like to hold him even tighter, pour all of these inconvenient feelings into the hug. Eliot would really like to bury his face in Quentin's hair and tell him, against the back of his neck, exactly what all those inconvenient feelings are, and what they make Eliot want to do for him. (And *to* him, but that's a slightly separate conversation.)

Quentin doesn't want that, Eliot reminds himself. Quentin doesn't want any of this, he doesn't want to be trapped here, he doesn't want Eliot to be the person he's trapped here with. They are *friends*, and this is what friends do for each other. They learn each other's quirks, and they offer comfort and support when needed, and they don't ask for too much. They don't ask for more than the other person is willing to give, especially when the other person is in an impossible corner, stuck in a foreign time and place with no one else to turn to.

Quentin's hands have been down in his lap, and after a while he lifts one of them and holds on to one of Eliot's hands. His palm is a little sweaty. His thumb strokes gently across the back of Eliot's hand. Eliot, who is weak and extremely fucked up, lets himself close his eyes, recall the sweep of Quentin's thumb across his jaw as they kissed deeply.

"I don't get it," Quentin says at some point. "Why do you do this for me?" He sounds exhausted, and his voice is shaky.

"Why wouldn't I?" Eliot asks.

"I'm not that important," Quentin says. "This takes forever. You have other things you'd rather be doing. You have other things you *need* to do. A million reasons."

Eliot is silent for a long moment, trying to figure out how to phrase this in a way that reassures Quentin, his friend, and doesn't tip Eliot's hand about how he'd like Quentin to be his— more.

"I can't do this without you," he says finally. He hopes Quentin will think he means just the physical act of solving the mosaic, not the entirety of existing on this quest, in this life. "It's not like I have a packed social calendar, I'm not missing out on much. The garden will survive not being weeded for another day. Of course I'm going to— do this, when I know it can help."

“What if it didn’t help?” Quentin asks.

“There’s no point in dealing in hypotheticals like that,” Eliot says firmly. “If it stops making you feel better, I’ll stop doing it. Until then, this is where I want to be.”

If it didn’t help, if it stopped helping — that thought is terrifying, honestly. Not only because Eliot’s not sure he has anything else as effective up his sleeve, but because his soul is so hungry for this contact. If he had no excuse to touch Quentin like this, he truly doesn’t know what he would do. Lose his mind too, probably. That would be just lovely, if they were both catatonic. Although maybe he’d have an excuse, then, for this madness that keeps overtaking him, trying to convince him that he can have something he cannot, absolutely cannot have.

They stay there until there’s moonlight shining through the window and Quentin is dozing with his head against Eliot’s arm. Eliot’s legs have long since fallen asleep, but the numbness is fine. It’s only after he moves, when the pins and needles start, that he’ll regret it. So he stays still as long as he can, his heart beating slow and steady against Quentin’s back, trying to figure out how to drag himself out of where he’s lost in his own mind as well.

one year + two months

Quentin is soaked through and starting to get a blister on his heel by the time they finally, *finally* make it back to the house. He stalks across the mosaic silently, not looking back over his shoulder at Eliot, but he does push the door hard enough that it'll stay open long enough for Eliot to get inside as well.

Quentin goes straight for the chest of clothes, stripping out of his shirt. He can't even sit on the bed to take his shoes off yet, he'll get it all wet, and the straw will start smelling weird and they won't be able to get more for a month at least.

"Well, that could have gone better," Eliot says, over by the fireplace.

Quentin turns to look at him. "You fucking think so?"

"It could have gone worse, too," Eliot says. He pokes through their box of kindling, picks a couple of pieces, and starts arranging them on top of the banked coals from this morning.

"How?" Quentin asks incredulously.

Eliot has the gall to give him a look like, *duh, it's obvious*. "We could still be out in the storm."

"We wouldn't have been out in the storm at all if you'd just fucking stopped for two seconds and let me ask for directions before we left the barn-raising," Quentin mutters. He peels his pants down, the wet linen plastered to his skin, and bends himself in half to start working on his shoes.

"I knew the way back—"

"You clearly did not!"

"I *did*—we got here, didn't we?"

Quentin gets his shoes off, adds his pants to the sodden heap of his shirt on the chair near the fire. "After wandering in pointless circles for a fucking hour. Arris knows her way around, she could have told us the nearest bridge was to the north and we could have just gone straight there, if you'd just let me finish my fucking conversation before you dragged me away."

Eliot is staring intently into the fireplace as he does the spell to bring the coals back to life so the new kindling and logs he's stacked on top of them will catch. "Maybe if you'd bothered to ask for directions in the first hour of talking with her, instead of just flirting the entire time —"

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Quentin feels anger spark deep within his chest— not just annoyance at getting caught in the rain, like he's been feeling for the last hour of their walk,

but actual anger. "I wasn't *flirting*— and even if I had been that's none of your fucking business, anyway."

Eliot stands, undoing the ties on his shirt and peeling it off, shaking drops of water off of the tips of his fingers. "Come on, hang those over the fire," he says, nodding to Quentin's discarded clothes.

"You do it, it's your fault they're wet," Quentin says, petulant.

"God, what are you, a fucking child?" Eliot snaps. "You barely did any work at the barn-raising, you're throwing a fucking hissy fit about your clothes getting wet, now you're whining at me like this is the worst thing that's ever happened to you?"

"I didn't say this was the *worst* thing that's ever happened to me." Quentin grabs his pants off the floor and stalks over to the doorway so he can wring them out outside the house. "You do plenty of other worse shit to me every day."

"Like what?" Eliot asks, his voice rising. "Name one goddamn thing I *do to you*, Quentin Coldwater, other than feed you and keep you company and fucking take care of you like I'm your mother."

"You hog the covers," is the first thing that comes out of Quentin's mouth, and it's petty but so fucking true. He can build from here. Build to where, he's not exactly sure. "You keep making that squash stew even though you know I hate it—"

"Seriously, you're a *child*—"

"You *hum* when you have a song stuck in your head, and the only way I can get you to stop is to fucking *sing it with you*, and then you *make fun of me* for being off key," Quentin says, talking over him, keeping his eyes focused on his clothes as he hangs them over the rope strung above the fire. He can't spend too much time looking at Eliot right now, standing bare-chested with his pants clinging to his legs and his hair all wet down his face. "You claim you can't stand our neighbors and I should deal with them, but then when I actually get along well with one of them— I mean, talk about hissy fits, you fucking *dragged* me out of there—"

"We needed to go before the rain started—"

"We did not, Arris was this close to inviting us to just stay the night, then we could've stayed until the storm passed—"

"Well I'm sorry I fucking cockblocked you," Eliot spits, and Quentin looks up in shock at the venom in his voice. There are spots of color high in Eliot's cheeks. Is he actually— angry? Seriously? Like he has any fucking right—

"You know what, you should be," Quentin says. His clothes are hung up, he's standing in his wet underwear yelling at Eliot from maybe six feet away, their house is so small, and he can't — he can't keep from saying it. He's been trying to keep his disappointment in for a month and a half, he doesn't want to sit on it any longer. If he's going to be constantly on the edge of

having this fight, they might as well just go ahead and fucking have it. "Because you can't have it both ways, El."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"That just because you don't want to fuck me doesn't mean you're allowed to lose your shit when somebody else might," Quentin yells.

Eliot's mouth snaps shut, his jaw tight. "That is *not* what is happening here," he grits out.

"It absolutely is," Quentin says, and now that it's finally out there, in the air between them, after *weeks*, it's making him even angrier. "You tried me and decided you didn't want me, which, fine, whatever, but that means I'm not *yours*, Eliot, you don't get a say in who I fuck. We're 'not overthinking it,' remember?" He holds himself back from making actual air quotes, but just barely. "So stop fucking acting like we pledged our undying love and now I'm cheating on you every time I have a conversation with someone else. Let me fucking move on."

"I tried *you*?" Eliot asks. His voice is shaking, Quentin doesn't know why, but if he's going to fucking get all teary when he's the one who turned Quentin down this is just, the weirdest emotional manipulation Quentin's ever seen. "You kissed me first."

"Yeah, because I wanted to be with you. I knew what I was doing. And you knew what you were doing when you shut it the fuck down the next day. And that's fine, it's fine," Quentin says, starting to lose steam, his anger transmuting itself into pain because it's *not* fine but there's nothing to be done about that, he's tried getting over it and he just hasn't managed it yet.

Eliot's not saying anything, looking like Quentin just punched him in the stomach, so Quentin keeps going. "I just— I'm sorry, El, I'm just." He sits down on the bed with a huff. "I know this isn't normal circumstances, I know we're stuck with each other, but that doesn't mean you can just— the only people who would ever get that kind of say over what I do are people I'm involved with, and you didn't want that. I'm not gonna just up and give you veto power over my sex life because we have to live together until we finish this thing."

Eliot is silent. The only sounds are the rain thrumming on the roof, a slight sizzle as their wet clothes drip water onto the fire. Finally, Eliot says, so quietly Quentin can barely hear him, "That one night. Was that my only chance?"

"What?" Quentin asks.

"Was that my only chance?" Eliot repeats. "To be. Involved with you. Did I fuck up the only chance I'm going to get?"

Quentin frowns at him, thoroughly confused. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I have no idea what you're talking about either," Eliot says. "But I *think* you're saying you didn't— that that night wasn't just a one-off thing for you."

"Of course it wasn't," Quentin says, angry all over again. "What, you think I'd just— we *live* together, Eliot, we're here together for who knows how fucking long, you think I'm just gonna use you for a fucking fling?"

"Other people have," Eliot says. He takes a slow step towards Quentin. His eyes are huge, his shoulders tense. "Other— straight boys. There's this kind of, gay chicken, thing, I thought."

"God, how fucking heartless do you think I am?" Quentin asks. "Even if— like, I don't doubt some asshole's done that to you, but I'm not. That kind of guy."

"The kind who fucks his friends just for the hell of it?"

"Yeah, or the straight kind," Quentin says. "If that's what you think— you've clearly made some fucking wild assumptions about me, Eliot. Of the two of us, if one of us was going to— fuck their friends just for the hell of it, with nothing behind it, who is that more likely to be? Or, fuck 'likely to be', one of us has *done* that, and it wasn't me."

"Now you're making assumptions," Eliot says.

"Based on evidence!"

"You didn't answer my question." Eliot takes another step towards Quentin. "Was that my only chance? Or can I get—" he stops, breathes out shakily. "Can I get a do-over?"

Quentin stares at him. His heart is pounding in his ears, suddenly, he feels like his blood is racing through his body at top speed. "Do," he starts, his voice cracking. He swallows and tries again. "Do you want one?"

Eliot clenches his jaw so hard Quentin's worried he might break a tooth, he's staring at Quentin like he's never seen him before. "Yes," he says finally.

"Oh my god," Quentin breathes, then, "You had better not be fucking with me."

"You had better not be fucking with me either," Eliot says, and then he's striding forward and closing the distance between them and kissing Quentin, grabbing his face in both hands and pressing their mouths together so hard it almost hurts. Quentin is stunned, but not so stunned he can't grab Eliot's waist, try to push himself up to standing to get further into the kiss.

Eliot pulls back after a second, and Quentin makes a desperate noise and follows his mouth, up, up, why is this man so *tall* it should not take this much effort to fucking kiss him. *Kiss him*, like Quentin has been absolutely fucking dying to do for fucking *weeks*. He pushes forward, nearly knocks Eliot off-balance, and doesn't *care*, what the *fuck* have they been doing.

"What the fuck have we been doing," he gasps against Eliot's lips, because it's a good question, actually. "Why didn't we, what the fuck—"

"Not important right now," Eliot says hurriedly and grabs the back of Quentin's neck. The kiss this time is less rough but much deeper, Eliot's tongue hot in his mouth. He tastes like the

honey cake they had for dessert. Quentin leans his whole body against him, can't get enough contact after so many weeks of don't-touch don't-touch don't-touch.

They nearly fall over, still kissing, and Eliot laughs into the kiss and pivots them a little so they can fall sideways onto the bed, which creaks alarmingly. Quentin reaches up, combs his fingers through Eliot's wet hair, pushes on Eliot's shoulder until he's on his back and Quentin can fully climb on top of him. They're still hanging halfway off the bed—it's awkward, Quentin doesn't care, he curls himself up to keep from falling off the bed and kisses Eliot desperately.

"You really want this," he says in the split-second between one kiss and the next. "Like, really?"

"*You* really want this?" Eliot counters, and he grabs Quentin's ass with both hands and levers his hips up and rubs his dick against Quentin's thigh. Quentin moans and grinds down against Eliot's stomach. "Fuck, *Q*. Jesus."

"Does that answer your question?" Quentin says. Then he can't stand it anymore, he has to kiss Eliot deeper, shove his fucking tongue down Eliot's throat and maybe Quentin's overdoing it, maybe Eliot will regret this tomorrow, but Quentin can't *stop*. Eliot *wants him*. Their teeth clash, spit everywhere and Eliot's tongue all over Quentin's lips and their faces are both going to be raw from stubble burn. Eliot grabs Quentin's hair to turn his head so he can press open-mouthed kisses to his cheek, bite his neck, suck what will absolutely be a bright red hickey into Quentin's skin. Quentin moans again.

Everything turns into a desperate scramble, knees and elbows and Eliot's stupidly long legs flying until they're actually all the way on the bed and there are no wet clothes, nothing between them but superheated air and then nothing at all as Eliot grabs Quentin's ass again and pulls him down against him. Their dicks are trapped between their bodies, there's really too much friction for this to even be good except it *is*, somehow. Eliot gasps out a few words in Latin and does one tut with his hand by Quentin's hip and there's a flood of lube gushing out from between his fingers. Quentin rolls slightly sideways long enough for Eliot to smear it around, bites out a harsh noise when Eliot's slick fingers sweep over his erection.

Eliot wants him. *Eliot wants him*, and everything is different.

"We can do this again, right?" he asks, knowing he won't last long. Eliot's cock is sliding against his own, hard and hot as Eliot thrusts up against him frantically. "Tell me we can do this again."

"Fuck, of *course* we can do this again," Eliot says. He stops rolling his hips, cups Quentin's face, swipes his thumb across Quentin's kiss-tender lips. "I'm sorry, Q, I was so—I made the wrong assumption, I didn't—"

Quentin kisses him, mumbles into his mouth. "Not important right now, remember?" He hopes Eliot understands him. He's pretty sure Eliot will understand the way he slides against him, dragging their dicks against each other, and Eliot makes a deep noise, almost a growl, grabs Quentin's hips hard and encourages the motion. Quentin can't get enough of Eliot's skin under his fingers, he loves the way Eliot's thighs flex under Quentin as they move

together, finding a rhythm that's got Quentin even more breathless than he was before. Quentin was right, he's not going to last long. He's already moaning with every stroke, barely managing to press open-mouthed kisses to Eliot's face, his neck, anywhere he can reach, any way he can show Eliot how fucking badly he wants this with absolutely everything in him.

"Fuck," Eliot says, strangled, "Quentin—" and his fingers tighten on Quentin's hips as he loses his rhythm, fucks up against Quentin's stomach and comes, shaking. Quentin has just a moment to kiss Eliot's cheek, let him moan into Quentin's ear as he finishes. Then Eliot's pushing on Quentin's shoulders, getting his hand between their bodies and jerking Quentin off so *fucking* good and Quentin makes a noise he can't even describe as he follows Eliot over the edge.

"Fuck," Eliot breathes, as Quentin slumps over him, gasping for air. "God, Q. That was simultaneously the best sex and the worst sex I've had."

"What do you mean, worst?" Quentin asks, offended.

"I lasted roughly a minute," Eliot said. "I barely even touched you, I just fucking, came all over you."

Quentin laughs against his cheek, turns his head to kiss it. "I don't fucking care," he says, truthfully. "I don't, even if it's like this every fucking time it's worth it." He groans, manages to get his arms under him, and shoves himself up, rolling heavily off of Eliot and flopping down next to him.

With a sound like a gunshot, the bed collapses.

Quentin stays very still as dust settles around them. "Are you actually kidding me," he says.

Eliot snorts, then laughs, and doesn't stop laughing, and eventually Quentin joins him, burying his face in his hands and laughing until he's got tears on his cheeks and can barely breathe.

"I feel like we're supposed to take this as a bad omen," Eliot says, "But you know what, I refuse to. I simply will not. This is a good thing, and if the bed doesn't agree with me, it can fuck off."

"Agreed," Quentin says, and he gingerly sits up and leans over, hoping he won't get stabbed in the kidneys with a piece of shattered bedframe, and watches Eliot's eyes flutter shut happily as he leans down to kiss him.

one year, two months, and one day

Eliot wakes up, and it's another morning after. And just like the first time, when they were a year and a day into this, he knows he's in deep trouble.

This time he intends to see where that trouble can take him.

Next to him, Quentin makes a disgruntled noise in his sleep and turns his head away from the sunlight streaming through the window. Eliot smiles helplessly. He should let Quentin sleep in longer, probably, he's insufferable when he's cranky. But Eliot very much wants to hold him, whether or not that will wake him up, and Eliot is once again done denying himself what he wants.

He carefully loops an arm over Quentin's waist and pulls him closer. As expected, Quentin half-opens one eye and sits up a little as Eliot does it, and Eliot uses the opportunity to slide his other arm under Quentin's neck and draw him into a full hug.

"Good morning, sleeping beauty," he murmurs against Quentin's forehead.

Quentin hums, sounding sleepy but pleased. "G'morning."

"It really is," Eliot says, then winces. "Christ that was sappy. Who *am* I? Who have you turned me into, Coldwater?"

"Dunno," Quentin says. He arches his back, stretching his whole body, but makes no attempt to break out of Eliot's grip. "I hope it's someone who knows how to make us a new bed frame."

"We can put that to the test today," Eliot says. The pieces of their destroyed bed are piled in a corner, and maybe there's a spell that can put them back together. Or maybe Eliot's going to be teaching himself carpentry.

Quentin tilts his face up and Eliot kisses him slowly, taking his time, enjoying every scrape of stubble along his jaw, every soft millimeter of Quentin's lips. His tongue slips into Quentin's mouth, and Quentin makes a soft noise that Eliot can feel vibrate against his chest.

He pulls back for just a moment, grinning when Quentin leans in, trying to chase him. "Although if we gave up on having a bed frame and just kept the mattress on the floor, we'd be at no risk of fucking the new one to pieces as well."

Quentin smiles at him, then in a blink his face goes nervous and then determined, like he's made a decision. "Yeah," he says, "but we'd also have no headboard for me to hold onto while I ride your dick, so, is that really a tradeoff you want to make?"

Yes, Eliot, you can kiss him absolutely breathless for *saying that, holy fuck*. You can roll him over, pin him down and press your dick against his thigh to show him *exactly* how much you don't want to make that tradeoff. Quentin moans under him and presses up into Eliot's touch.

He's getting hard against Eliot's stomach, and he shivers deliciously when Eliot sneaks a hand between their bodies to stroke his hip, his inner thigh, everywhere except his dick.

"Is that what you want?" Eliot asks, when the last few blood cells not currently occupying his erection make their way around to his brain and he can speak again.

"God yes," Quentin groans. He gets one leg out from under Eliot, hooks it over Eliot's legs. The motion changes the angle, presses Quentin's cock up against Eliot.

"You're sure?" Eliot has to ask, just to check. He's never had a guy who was just experimenting want this before, but Quentin is— something else. Quentin is inexplicable.

Quentin kisses him hard, fucks into Eliot's mouth with his tongue, *fuck*. "Extremely fucking sure," he says.

And Eliot has decided he's not in the business of denying Quentin what he wants, either, so they rearrange, Quentin straddling Eliot's hips. Eliot drinks in the sight of him: serious case of bedhead, dark pink nipples and light scatter of chest hair and gorgeous hard cock, strong arms and sturdy hands. He's horribly torn between just keeping Quentin exactly where he is so he can truly look his fill, or pulling him down to kiss that beautiful, wet, panting mouth again.

Quentin makes the decision for him, planting his forearms on either side of Eliot's head, trapping him in for another deep kiss. Quentin's a *biter*, apparently, and Eliot moans when he catches Eliot's lower lip between his teeth, then sucks on it, soothing away the sting. And while he does it he rocks his hips, sliding his crack against Eliot's cock and Jesus *fuck* who is this man? Eliot should have trusted his very first impression, should have *known* that mouth and that ass could do incredible things.

"Have you done this before?" he asks when Quentin bends even further down to bite at Eliot's throat, leaving his mouth free.

"Um," Quentin says, and suddenly he's the man Eliot knows again, a little nervous at totally straightforward questions. "Yeah, but it's been a while. Like, a couple years maybe? So I'm, um. I'll probably need a bunch of prep. Fingers, or, uh, tongue, if you want, I like that too."

He's the man Eliot knows, stammering and uncertain, and also not at all the man Eliot knows, asking Eliot to rim him the fucking third time they're having sex, Jesus Christ. Eliot wants to do *everything* to him, and since Eliot wants it, he'll do it. But today Quentin is grinding back against Eliot's dick so fucking greedily, tonguing at Eliot's nipples, and— there will be time for *everything* later.

"I will absolutely do that another day," Eliot says, and Quentin lifts his head, looks confused. "But I am far too impatient right now. Sit back." Quentin follows instructions, and as Eliot moves his hands through a series of tuts he hasn't used in — well, certainly more than a year — his lovely face moves from confusion to understanding.

"Of course you know a fucking spell for this," he mutters. "I should have expected— *oh*," he breaks off, as Eliot finishes the spell. Eliot grins at him, knowing what he's feeling: open and

relaxed and slick. Eliot holds Quentin's hips, slides him backwards just a bit, and he does *slide*, the lube Eliot's just conjured inside him and over his entrance easing the way.

"All right?" Eliot asks.

Quentin slides his fingers into Eliot's hair, kisses him hard. "El, fuck, get inside me," he breathes into Eliot's mouth and Eliot makes a strangled noise.

"You said you wanted to ride me," he manages. "So this one's on you, cowboy."

He can feel Quentin's grimace against his lips. "Jesus. No nicknames." Quentin sits up, raises up on his knees, has to stretch a little higher to get Eliot's dick all the way under him and lined up.

"No nicknames at all?" Eliot asks, to keep himself from just coming immediately at the *sight* of this. "So I can't call you Q? *Oh* my god," he gasps, as Quentin begins an agonizingly slow descent. Prep spell be damned, he's *tight*, it's fucking intense.

"You can call me Q," Quentin says, unbelievably composed for someone who's lowering himself onto a fat dick. He *has* done this before.

"How about baby?" Eliot asks. Quentin is most of the way down now and starting to shift up and down a tiny bit as he goes, not just one smooth stroke but fucking his way onto Eliot's cock.

"Baby's fine."

"Darling?" Eliot asks, and grins as Quentin is momentarily speechless, settling all the way onto him, his mouth hanging open in a silent moan.

"Dramatic, but fine," Quentin says after a moment. Eliot can feel his thighs relaxing as he adjusts to the stretch of Eliot's cock inside him.

"Love?" Eliot asks, before he quite realizes what he's saying.

Quentin stares at him, and Eliot's terror at what just slipped out of his mouth falls away at the look in his eyes. Open, searching, curious. And whatever he's searching for, he finds it in Eliot's face, because he smiles a slow smile, cheeks dimpling, and bends himself in half so he can kiss Eliot without letting Eliot's dick slide out of him even an inch.

By the time Quentin pulls back a little, Eliot is panting, his fingers are tangled in Quentin's hair and his lips are tingling. Quentin smiles again, nuzzles Eliot's face so the tips of their noses bump together.

"Works for me," he says, "as long as I can call you that too."

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