

promise a future I can come back to

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by [Riv_Styx](#)

Summary

"Do you know what it is?"

That's when Jed feels it – the pull. He knows that feeling well. It's the desire to go out into the world and sate the curiosity that's burning a cigarette hole in his stomach. It's the duty to come back and tell people what he's seen.

Also, if he listens over the sounds of the people in the town, he can hear muffled voices from beyond the cliffs. This new world might not be one he's ever seen before, but he's still an explorer.

"No, I don't," he says. "But I think I'm gonna go find out."

A story about two men, second chances, and destiny - or, a mostly-pre-canon soulmate AU, featuring matching scars and a healthy dose of gay pining.

Notes

Title from Find Me by Aviators.

It's been a while since I did the longfic thing, so my hope is that y'all will forgive me for any hiccups in the process <3

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

Chapter 1: Life in the Dreamhouse

When Jedediah had fallen asleep for the last time, alone in a canvas tent in a Rocky Mountain blizzard, he had assumed it would be the last time he would ever see the wild land he'd grown to love. Now, as he looks out at the lifeless rocks around him, he's realizing that he was right. But it's a little late for celebrating; this landscape is nothing like the mountainous forests he's used to. This is the deadest desert he's ever seen.

It's not entirely lifeless, though. Sheer rock cliffs rise sky-high on all sides. In the dip in the center, there's a town that Jed feels like he should recognize, but he doesn't.

Noises behind him catch his attention and he turns around, but the sight that meets him there is enough to knock him flat.

There's no other wall to this canyon. There's nothing there at all.

His mind races with possible explanations, but he discards each one as soon as it occurs to him. He turns his back on the missing half of the world and starts walking. Is this a dream? He doesn't feel like he's dreaming. He needs information, that's what he needs. That's what he's always done when he's in an unfamiliar situation and he ain't about to throw away a perfectly good process just because one tiny little thing is wrong.

(It is not tiny. It's half the fucking world.)

"Excuse me, I don't believe we've met," a young woman says, stepping in front of him and knocking him out of the loop in his own head. She sticks her hand out – pale skin, no scars. When he looks at her face, he notes the red braid on her right shoulder and the marksman's rifle resting against her left.

He shakes her hand and doesn't comment on anything. He may not be some high-class gentleman, but he's not a barbarian, either. "No, miss, I don't think we have," he says instead. "My name's Jedediah."

"I'm Annie," she says, "Annie Ogden, and it's a pleasure to meet you, Jedediah. Now, I apologize for skippin' over all the pleasantries, but do you know what on Earth is going on?"

So it's not just him. Thank God.

"No, Miss Ogden, I don't have a clue. Last thing I knew, I was in the Rockies."

She hums, planting her free hand on her hips. The rifle sways worryingly as she moves. "The Rockies! Ain't that interesting. I was in South Dakota."

He looks out at the dry rock surrounding them. "South Dakota," he repeats. "Now, I've never been there, but I don't think it looks much like this."

She shakes her head. “No, sir, it doesn’t. Home’s as flat as the eye can see. I ain’t never seen cliffs like this.”

“Neither have I,” he says distantly. A sudden thought strikes him. “Is this Indian country?”

“I don’t think so,” the young lady says. “Well, maybe it used to be, but it sure ain’t anymore. So far, I’ve talked to eight different people, and every one of them has been speakin’ English.”

Jed’s line of sight falls across a group of men in Chinese clothes and he raises an eyebrow.

“I know,” she says, lifting a hand, “but it’s true. I’m telling you, somethin’ fishy is going on here.”

“I believe you, miss.” He turns halfway toward the open hole at the side of the world and pauses. “When you were talkin’ to people, did anybody mention... that?”

She glances over his shoulder and grimaces. “I think most of ‘em are trying to ignore it. Why? Do you know what it is?”

That’s when Jed feels it – the pull. He knows that feeling well. It’s the desire to go out into the world and sate the curiosity that’s burning a cigarette hole in his stomach. It’s the duty to come back and tell people what he’s seen.

Also, if he listens over the sounds of the people in the town, he can hear muffled voices from beyond the cliffs. This new world might not be one he’s ever seen before, but he’s still an explorer.

“No, I don’t,” he says. “But I think I’m gonna go find out.”

When Octavius opens his eyes for the first time in two millennia, he knows immediately that something is wrong. Whatever this place is, it is not Rome. He knows the area surrounding the Colosseum. These streets are not the streets he remembers. The square is too open – where are all the people? – and on second inspection, the Colosseum isn’t even there. What he had originally assumed to be a building is nothing but a flat painting. It may be the largest painting he’s ever seen, but it still isn’t real.

He turns slowly on his heels, taking in every detail of the imitation world surrounding him. Every new sight unsettles him further.

Something dark catches the corner of his eye. When he turns to look at it directly, his mind goes blank.

The world is missing.

No, he realizes after a moment, it’s not. Of course it’s not. That would be ridiculous. But he can’t deny the evidence his own eyes are showing him, and there is definitely a very large hole where the other half of the city should be.

He takes one careful step closer to the border, then another. He doesn't trust the ground under his feet. None of this is real. He's sure of it. Every possible piece of evidence is building up in his mind to the same conclusion.

The edge of the world approaches much more quickly than he was expecting. But this, too, doesn't surprise him, because it's not real. Why should anything make sense? The only thing that makes sense is that nothing makes sense, and he can't even think about the logical errors in that sentence because his mind is too busy fighting off the urge to scream.

The world does not end at the edge of Rome. Below him – far below, perhaps a hundred feet or more – is a tile floor. When he looks out, he sees a bench and a barrel that look like they're sized for giants.

He looks to his right, where clear daylight falls through another window, and there, standing on another wooden ledge, is a man.

He's too far away for any real detail to be visible, but it's clear when he sees Octavius, because he jumps and nearly stumbles off the ledge. Then he raises one arm and points right at Octavius.

He looks down at himself self-consciously and freezes.

He's *blank*. The familiar lines that used to slash across his forearms are gone, leaving him with skin as unblemished as a newborn. This, more than any of the previous sights, sets him on edge. He, too, staggers back, and now that he's really looking, all the old scars are missing from his legs, too. There isn't so much as a scratch on him.

Where *is* he?

Jed stumbles back from the edge and lets his arm fall to his side. "Oh my God," he says shakily. His mind can't formulate a more cohesive thought.

"What?" She grabs him by the shoulder, steadying him. "What did you see?"

Her stare is intense. He can only meet her eyes for a moment before he looks back out into the giant-sized world.

"There's others," he manages. "It's not just us. There's more of 'em out there."

She lets him go and leans back. "Oh my God."

"And there's a bench," he adds. "Huge. It's got to be two hundred feet tall. Like it was built for giants."

"Well, I knew that."

That catches him off guard. "What?"

“It was the first thing I noticed when I woke up today. It's right there. Didn't you see it?” She looks at him like he's an idiot.

“No, I – I didn't really look.”

“Well,” she huffs. “I'm sorry you missed that, cause I thought you already knew about it. I'd'a said something if I realized. But you do know what this means, right?”

“No,” he says.

She grabs him by the gloved hand and yanks him along. “We oughta tell the others about it.” She twists halfway around and winks at him. “I love a good mystery, you know. This'd be fun if I had any clue what was happening.”

Jed follows. *Others?*

They stride into the center of town. Well, Annie strides. Jed still feels like he's walking on the wrong feet. The hair on the back of his neck hasn't laid back down yet. He can't shake the feeling that something is deeply wrong.

The center of town, for what it's worth, is more like a dirt patch in the middle of a loose ring of buildings. It seems that while Jed was hiking out to hell and back, every person in the valley collected here.

Annie steps up onto the porch of the nearest building – SALOON, it says in big, comical letters across the front – and clears her throat. She stands with her head held high and her gun steady on her shoulder. If Jed was fool enough to make a guess at her age, he'd be surprised that such a young lady was so self-possessed. Then again, he's never been that good with ladies. He might have thought she was twenty at first, but she could be anything from fifteen to fifty and he wouldn't know the difference.

“Excuse me!” she shouts.

One or two heads turn, but it's nowhere near the consideration she's clearly hoping for.

“Can I have your attention!”

Nothing continues to happen.

She crosses her arms and looks at Jed. “I need a better idea. This ain't working.”

“S'cuse me,” says a mild voice.

Jed looks over. The voice belongs to a Chinese woman in a fancy dress, leaning against the outside wall of the saloon.

“Did you need something?” she asks, gaze flicking between Jed and Annie.

Jed has never done well with meeting new people, but Annie clearly has no such issues. “Yes, and it’s important!” she says immediately. “I’m trying to get these people to listen, but nobody will even look at me. I can’t get their attention.”

“Well, you got mine.” The woman sizes her up and Annie blushes.

Jed looks away. Even he can tell when he’s intruding on something.

“It’s just – we’re trying to figure out where we are,” she says. “Look, I’ve been talkin’ to a few people and I met this nice boy along the way. Well, he went out to the edge of that big ol’ hole in the wall, and do you know what he saw?”

The lady leans forward. “He really went out there?”

“Not all the way. Just to the edge of the wood part.”

“Well, you’d have to be insane to go further out than that.”

“I am *right here*,” he mutters.

The women ignore him. Well, it’s good to know some things never change.

“Of course, there’s that big old bench that looks like it’s a hundred feet tall,” Annie says.

“Hard to miss that one,” the lady agrees.

“Ain’t it? More important, though, is the other people out there. There was a man, our size, standing out on a ledge just like the one we’ve got, but about two hundred yards to the left side. He must have seen us, 'cause he turned and left pretty quick.” She straightens up.

“That’s what he saw. Ain’t that right, Jedediah?”

“You can just call me Jed,” he says. “And yeah, that’s it. I didn’t think it was that interesting, to be honest.”

“No, it’s very interesting. And you, you wanted to talk to the townsfolk about it?” she asks, looking at Annie.

Annie nods.

“I can get that for you,” the lady says, and she straightens up. “HEY!” she barks.

Every mouth in the square closes. All eyes fall on her. Even though Jed is standing right next to her, no one is paying him any mind. Faintly, through the haze of existential confusion that stubbornly refuses to lift, he’s impressed.

She gestures to Annie. “This nice lady would like to talk to you.”

To her credit, Annie doesn’t miss a beat. “Good morning, neighbors! My name is Annie. I know we’re all very confused right now, and that’s why I am trying to figure it out. Can anyone raise their hand if they know what’s happening?”

No one moves.

“That’s what I thought,” she mutters. “Alright. And does anyone know where we are?”

“I do,” says one of the Chinese rail men. “I don’t know this exact place, but I remember this desert. They used to call it the Mojave.”

“So we have a location,” she says. “This is good! Well, it’s a start. Listen, I and my friend here have been out scoutin’ a little bit and we have some information that I think you all ought to know.” She nudges him with her shoulder. “Tell ‘em.”

"What?"

"Just do it."

Ugh, he hates getting put on the spot. He takes a steadying breath and looks out at the crowd. “I went out to the edge. Wherever this is – whoever we are,” he says, “we’re not the only ones.”

The crowd erupts with shouts loud enough to make his ears hurt.

“Quiet!” the lady yells again, but this time, not even her voice is enough to hush the crowd.

“That went well,” Jed mutters, more to himself than anybody else.

“Shh,” Annie says. Then she turns to the lady and smiles. “I’m sorry, I’d thank you properly, but I don’t think we got acquainted yet. What’s your name?”

The woman looks surprised at the question. “Jane,” she says after a moment.

“Jane,” Annie repeats cheerfully. “A nice name for a very nice girl. Well, Jane, thank you very much for your assistance.” She half-turns to leave, but Jane catches her first.

“Hey. Do you and your friend want to come in? You can sit down for a minute.”

Jed’s not sure what he expected from the inside of the saloon, but he sighs in unashamed relief when he sees plain whitewashed walls and rickety furniture. There’s no way he could take any more surprises today.

Then the Chinese woman - Jane - slips behind the bar and uncaps a bottle faster than he can blink.

“Shouldn’t you ask the bartender about that?” he says uncertainly.

She looks him dead in the eye as she takes a swig. “That’d be me,” she says, wiping beer foam from her mouth with the back of her hand. “I was out on the porch when I first woke up and nobody else has been in here yet. And you wanna tell me,” she says, holding out the

bottle, “that you wouldn’t want a drink, after the day we’ve had? Hell, I already broke a bottle and sliced myself open on the glass.” She glances down at her hand.

“Aw,” Annie says. “Do you think it’ll show up on someone else? I’d try to guess, but all of my scars are gone, so I don’t know if that even happens here.”

Jed *really* doesn’t want to have the soulmates conversation right now, so instead he looks over at Annie and asks, “So what do you think we should do next?”

“Oh, I couldn’t say,” she demurs.

Jane leans on the bar and sets the bottle down with an audible clack. “Well, I don’t know about you, but I wanna know who our neighbors are.”

“Oh! We could go find out,” Annie says, brightening. She’s almost vibrating with excitement next to him at the prospect. “I saw a whole bunch of climbin’ equipment in the railroaders’ stuff. I bet we could get up and down with those!”

“Whoever they are, they might know more about this place than we do,” Jane adds.

Jed realizes that they’re both looking at him. “What? I ain’t got any ideas. I assumed I was getting dragged along with you no matter what you decide.”

“Sure, but we can’t go alone,” Annie says. She nods in the direction of the crowd gathered outside. “And you’ll have an easier time convincin’ the men out there than I will.”

Jane nods along with her. “Come on, Jedediah. Let the smart lady do the planning. All you have to do is be the spokesman.”

Now, he’s made a lot of dumb decisions in his life, but even he knows better than to keep betting on a losing hand. “Alright,” he says. “What’s the plan?”

Jed regrets every single decision that led him here. He regrets living, he regrets dying, and he especially regrets talking to that crazy lady and letting her talk him and those two other suckers into this. The Chinese lady, on the other hand, seems real happy to be here, so he doesn’t feel bad about bringing her along.

He stares up at the edge and lets the rope fall slack in his hand.

“Annie,” he says, “are you sure about this?”

“Positive!”

His doubt must show on his face, because Jane scoffs at him from behind the two other men they dragged along.

“Come on, man. You’re actin’ like a coward. What’s the worst they can do?”

“We don’t know a thing about these people,” he shoots back. “What if they’re crazy, huh?”

“They can’t be crazier’n us!” Annie chirps.

Before he can say another word, she’s swinging the hook in tight circles and flinging it high into the air. It bites into the wooden ledge and she grins at him as she pulls the rope taut.

Well, too late to go back now, Jed thinks, and throws his own rope.

Chapter 2: A Match Made In Hell

“General?”

Octavius looks around for the general in question. Surely the speaker can't be referring to *him*? He's been retired for years.

A young soldier runs past him at full speed. He skids to a stop and backtracks, coming to a wobbly pause in front of Octavius, then mutters something that Octavius doesn't catch. Knowing soldiers like he does, though, the odds are good that it was some form of curse.

“Can I help you?” he asks.

The boy snaps himself to attention – unnecessary, he thinks, but the general in him appreciates the diligence. The touch of routine is refreshing, compared to the craziness that's defined this morning so far.

“Yes, sir!” the boy says. “I was sent to find the general.”

He has to cut in before he can continue. “I'm sorry, but I don't think I'm the one you're looking for. I'm retired.”

The soldier glances between his face and the top of his head. His expression is one of barely-contained skepticism.

Octavius suspects he, too, is looking at the red plume that's bouncing in the very edges of his own periphery. *Wonderful*, he thinks. *It's barely ten minutes into the day and I've already lost control of this situation.*

“Did you need something?” he says aloud.

“Leadership,” the young man says blankly. “The legion is in chaos. We – none of us know where we are, or who anyone else is, and none of us have any scars, and—”

Octavius puts his hand out, quieting the boy. “I see. Where are they now?”

“Scattered. A few of us tried to stay in formations, but it, uh, didn't take.”

“Hm.” He looks around. “All right. You should go find as many of them as you can. In the meantime, I shall do my best to gather the civilian population, and we will all meet in the center of the city.”

“Yes, sir.” The boy nods and darts away without hesitation.

Octavius lets his own posture slump as soon as he's out of sight. This is going to be a long day.

As he stands at the edge of the square, the sheer scale of the chaos becomes clear. Everywhere he turns, there's a clump of people looking scared or another person darting around in panic.

How many of us are there? he wonders briefly. There's no time to stand around and think, though – he did promise that young soldier he would try to calm the populace, so that is what he shall do.

“Excuse me!” he starts, but the crowd here is noisy enough that no one pays him any mind. Instead, the waves of people shift, buffeting him toward the front of the group.

As he approaches the edge of the world, the buzz of general chatter shifts into a higher register. His shoulders rise instinctively at the sound.

He turns just in time to see metal hooks sailing through the air. They fall with terrifying speed, biting into the ground wherever they land. He should move, to try to do something about this bizarre new development, but he finds that he can't. One man can only take so many strange happenings in a day and this is well beyond his limit.

In the distance, he sees a head pop up over the ledge for less than a second.

The crowd of Romans falls silent. He was not the only one that saw it.

He steps forward and leans closer to the edge. He hears a faint “Oh my God”, then a “what?”, and four more heads appear. Arms and torsos follow as they climb into Rome. When the ropes finally fall slack on their hooks, five people stand at the edge of the world, looking at the gathered Romans. He thinks one of them says “holy shit”, but he can't be sure.

There are five of them. Two are women who couldn't be more different from each other – one has simple clothing and a reddish braid, but the other has a curtain of dark hair and a dress covered in lustrous designs. The other three are men: one skinny and pale, with a freckled face; one with brown skin and a death glare fixed on the legion; and one in the center of the group, who has long, fair hair, a neglected beard, and the bluest eyes Octavius has ever seen.

He shouldn't stare, but he can't stop himself. What he should do is say something poignant, at this momentous first contact with these strange foreigners, but nothing will come to mind. All he can manage is a weak “Who are you?”

The man meets his eyes and doesn't seem to care that he's being stared at. “We're from next door,” he says, almost-but-not-quite smiling.

The blonde woman snorts and the dark-haired one elbows him in the side. So they all know each other. Fascinating.

“Where—” he begins, but a whistle in the air cuts him short. His mind registers the sound a half-second later as that of an arrow zipping through the air.

The dark-haired woman takes two staggering steps forward, then she collapses.

Fuck, he thinks eloquently. *That was our chance for friendly relations with these people.*

“Who was that?” he demands, whirling on his heels.

The crowd behind him parts. Some distant part of him notes, *oh, good, I still have it.*

Far in the back, one skinny archer has been abandoned by the other members of the legion. He stands there, bow in shaking hand, standing alone against the full force of Octavius’s anger.

As he approaches the boy, he almost feels bad for the lashing he’s about to dole out.

Almost.

Of all the things Jed had been expecting in this other world, ‘Jane getting immediately shot’ was pretty damn low on the list.

Annie is the first to react, dropping to the ground and grabbing her by the shoulder. “Oh my God! Are you alright?”

“They fucking shot me!” she hisses through her teeth. One hand is wrapped around the shaft of the arrow sticking out of her chest. The pretty yellow embroidery on the front of her dress grows redder by the second. The arrow’s feathers bob up and down with each ragged breath she takes.

Jed stands there, feeling completely useless. He knows the basics of first aid, of course, but this is way beyond anything he’s ever had to deal with. Where he comes from, if you get shot in the chest, you just die.

Annie sees him standing there and waves him away. “Go! I’ll take care of it. You... I don’t know, go find that trigger-happy bastard and ask him what the hell his problem is.”

He’s only too happy to oblige. He turns away, blinking away the image of the arrow sticking out of the woman, and stalks off. The movement gets a little of the buzzing in his limbs to dissipate. His fingers tap an instinctive rhythm on the handles of his guns.

“Hey!” he snaps at the nearest men. They don’t look like any army he’s ever seen, but he still knows a soldier when he sees one. “What the hell is wrong with you? Is this how you treat everybody you meet?”

“I don’t know!” one of them says, throwing his hands up. “I – I’m not an archer! You want him, or the general! Not us.”

Well, at least this one is helpful. Jed turns, gun halfway out of its holster, and snaps, “Who’s your damn general?”

A man with a funny-looking hat turns around. “That would be me,” he says. He looks pretty unconcerned about the pistol barrel that Jed is tapping against the metal chestplate he wears,

but his shoulders raise ever-so-slightly, almost like he wants to lift his hands in surrender.

Jed hopes he does. He'll treasure the sight. "And who are you supposed to be?" he asks, holding the gun steady.

The man grabs the barrel and pushes it aside. When the words come out, they are measured and level, with only a slight undercurrent of frustration. "I am the general of Rome, it would seem. My name is Octavius."

"*Octavius*," he repeats. What a dumb name. "Well, Mr. President, do you want to explain what the hell your man was thinking?"

To Jed's surprise, the general's face twists darkly as he looks over at that archer. "I was asking him the same thing," he mutters. "Believe me when I say that it was not done with my approval."

"I fuckin' hope not! Some first impression you made."

"Yes, I do regret that." His dark eyes flick away from Jed's face, over to where Annie and the other two men are clustered around Jane's fallen form. "I would have preferred to establish relations more diplomatically than this."

"You don't say."

The ghost of a scowl starts to appear on Octavius's strong features. He looks at Jed like he's an idiot. "Yes," he says, and Jed can practically hear his teeth grinding. "For instance, I would have preferred to introduce ourselves before resorting to violence."

Okay, he thinks, I see. I'll play along. He makes a split-second decision and holsters his gun. "Name's Jedediah," he says, and puts his hand out for Octavius to shake.

He says nothing; he just looks between Jedediah's proffered hand and his face for a few painful seconds.

Jed has to fight down the urge to smirk at this asshole. He wants to keep trying to rile him up - it'd be pretty satisfying after all this - but he won't. Really, this guy ought to count himself lucky. Jed is going easy on him. "I mean," he adds after a moment, "you don't need to be some kind of military genius just to keep a handle on your own damn soldiers."

"Yes, I know," he snaps, letting go of the pretense that he's trying to hide his irritation. "Are you done? I've apologized. I have other important business to deal with tonight, you know."

Jed wants to keep pushing his buttons - something about him makes Jed want to keep talking to him - but then he feels eyes on him, and he remembers the hundreds of soldiers that have gathered to surround them both. "Alright," he says, "I'll leave. You know where to find me." He turns and stalks off without another word, putting an extra bit of stomp in each step just to make a point.

Self-important bastard. Who does he think he is, anyway?

Well, it doesn't matter. He's got more pressing issues right now than worrying about some random Roman guy who he'll probably never even see again.

When Octavius is done impressing upon the young archer that you cannot just shoot people, he finds his way to an empty room. The silence is a balm after the morning's events. He sits, luxuriates in the quiet, and lets his mind wander.

He thinks about the disastrous conversation with the barbarian visitor. That meeting could not have been worse if he'd tried.

The simulated sunlight still glows in the corner of his eye. He can't actually see it from here, of course, but he imagines that it's reflecting off the rocks there. He'd only caught a glimpse of that alien landscape, but that much was enough to discourage him from wanting something so ludicrous as to *visit*. He could never be comfortable in a place so lifeless.

However, the man - Jedediah - is something else. Though their introduction had been brief and unfortunate, something about him has already managed to fascinate Octavius. He is captivating, in the same way that you can't look away from an injury or stop picking at a scab.

He wonders if the woman will recover.

He wonders if their actions will be forgiven.

He wonders, distantly, if her wound will scar.

Once Jane has been dragged back home, Jedediah collapses, exhausted, into a chair in the saloon. The other two men – whose names he's learned are Luke and Micah – join him. Jane, who's not very happy but not actively dying, is safely upstairs with Annie, who's kicked them all out while she patches up the arrow wound.

The men sit in silence for a while and ruminate.

“Well,” Micah says eventually. “That was something, wasn't it?”

“Definitely something to write home about,” Luke agrees.

Something metal clatters against the tabletop. Jed looks up just in time to see a red bottle cap, all sharp angles and rust-colored paint, stop spinning and come to a rest. Micah puts his knife away and takes a long drink from the open bottle in his hand. "Kinda fucked up," he says.

Jed's known him for less than a day, but he likes him already. He seems to be a man of few words, but what he does say is spoken with a light Mexican accent and the wisdom that can only come from a hell of a lot of life experience. He wonders if Micah's ever had to deal with something as strange as this.

“They could’ve killed her,” he says. His own voice sounds hollow in his ears.

Luke nods. “I was trying not to think about that.”

“She could’ve died,” he says with more force. “Any of us could have, just ‘cause one guy had an itchy trigger finger. Does that worry anybody else?”

“I don’t think bows have triggers,” Luke points out.

Micah ignores him. “That general is pretty lucky I didn’t shoot him. He woulda deserved it, after that stunt.”

“I hear that,” Jed says, planting his palms on top of the table to stop himself from fidgeting with his guns. He can feel the nervous energy running through him. It feels like a bent sapling, and all he can do is hope that it doesn’t spring loose before he can figure out how to contain it.

Micah stands. “I’m goin’ out for a smoke,” he mutters. Jed notes the tremor in his voice and knows that he’s feeling it, too.

“I’ll join ya,” Luke says, and then the barroom is empty.

Jed lifts his hands to take off his hat. Being alone right now feels... weird. The vagueness frustrates him, but he can't find another word to describe it. He's too up in his own head to think straight. His mind can't hold on to coherent thoughts – it's just fast-moving images that flicker by like a reel of film getting cranked too fast.

Cresting the ridge to see a crowd of people straight out of a history book.

Meeting the general.

Jane taking two uneasy steps.

The familiar-but-foreign weight of the gun in his hand that isn't really his.

Blood soaking through embroidery.

The general's dark eyes.

Standing there with hundreds of eyes on him.

Pushing through the legions of soldiers.

Jane falling.

Octavius staring.

His forehead hits the rough wood of the table with a hollow thump.

Ugh.

He needs a drink.

Chapter 3: Oh No He's Hot

After the first disastrous meeting, Octavius knows the road to peace is going to be long.

After the second, he wonders if they'll ever be able to overcome their differences.

At the fifth, he has to admit that this fighting is almost fun. If nothing else, it's an interesting way to pass the time.

He can't remember if today is an attack or defend kind of day, so he settles for shouting, "Forward!"

His men respond in kind, cheering and raising their weapons, and the archers light their flaming arrows with aplomb. Far in the back of the formation, the bowl of a catapult is just visible above the heads of the army.

He smiles. It is a beautiful feat of modern engineering. The Americans won't know what hit them.

He moves through the throngs of men – no, not men, just people. As they learned on day two, the women of the West are not the type to stay home. The memory makes him grateful that their guns don't work.

He can't remember what event or even which side triggered this one, but it's not important. Frankly, it's a relief. The army gets an itch under their collective skins when it's been too long since their last battle, so this outlet is good for them.

As general, he wouldn't usually be so personally involved in these things, but he has always been a hands-on kind of leader. His destination is the opposite side of the room, where he'll be better able to see the catapult in action. He dodges and weaves between the sparring pairs that dot the floor. Though he has to keep an eye out for flying objects – the guns may not work, but they're very effective blunt weapons – he nearly makes it to the other wall unscathed.

Nearly.

A body appears in his peripheral vision, but he doesn't have time to react before the person collides with him. He scrambles back to his feet and comes face-to-face with the cowboy, Jedediah.

"Hello," he breathes. It comes out more like a pant - he's not as young as he used to be.

"Oh, shut up."

Octavius dodges leftward a half-second before Jedediah's fist would've connected with his jaw and steps back to give him a bit of room to stumble. He aims a kick of his own, but

doesn't bother putting much effort into it, because Jedediah moves to avoid it without even trying.

They've done this dance before.

"Enjoying yourself?" he asks, drawing his sword.

"Only with you, sweetheart." He grins with what can only be a mocking expression and cocks his head toward the catapult. "New toy?"

"Oh, yes. It should be ready any moment now."

Jedediah smiles at him, guns in hand. "Won't that be a treat."

He returns the smile – it's only polite – then lunges forward.

He dodges the graceless stab and openly laughs at him. "You're gettin' rusty!"

"No, I'm going easy on you," he lies through his teeth. He raises the sword and swings it downward, hoping to knock the guns from his hands. He's not going to give another cowboy the chance to beat him with one of those.

Jedediah counters it easily, lifting his arms and crossing the gun barrels. The blade catches in the V where they meet. His arms shake almost imperceptibly as he resists him. His bright eyes are barely visible under the brim of his hat. "One of these days, I'll get me one of those," he pants. "Then we'll see who's boss, huh?"

Octavius swallows and doesn't lighten his touch, though the sword is slipping through his hands. "Never."

"Bastard," Jedediah says, and that's when his hold breaks.

The blade rings as it slips free from the barrels. It slides, skating lines into the leather of his gloves, and bounces off his hip as Octavius finally loses the last bit of grip on the hilt.

It clatters against the floor. For a moment, there is silence between them; all he can hear is the sound of battle around him and his own heavy breathing. He feels like he ought to say something.

Shouts make them both jump. The voices are familiar; it's the catapult squadron, readying their assault. He turns away, and when he glances back, Jedediah is already gone.

He sits alone in his rooms the next day, where he can't stop himself from looking at the brand-new silver scar that has joined the ranks decorating his skin. He traces the razor-thin line across his hip and wonders, *who are you?* If he had a coin for every time a new scar appeared the day after a major fight with one of the other civilizations, he would have... well, two coins. It isn't a lot, but it's certainly strange that it's happened twice.

It feels like a puzzle, taunting him every time he catches sight of his own bare skin. Silver scars are nothing new to him, of course, but seeing it on himself is still foreign. In his previous life, he had nothing but his own hard-earned battle scars. His wife, being a respectable Roman woman, had never done anything that could have permanently marked herself. Not even Octavius's scars made an appearance on her perfectly smooth skin. She had been bare. But that, too, was to be expected – she had been a Vestal before she married him. Her purity was absolute.

But Octavius is allowing himself to wander. The facts, as he understands them, are these: someone else's scars are on his body, they have only appeared after the Roman army has battled the Americans, and no Roman would be so foolish as to hide the marks that the gods have given him.

(He's not stupid enough to assume that his match is a woman. Fifteen years of marriage taught him enough that he's not going to lie to himself about that any longer.)

So he's reasonably sure it's not a Roman. And if there are only three civilizations in this hall, and the odds of it being a Mayan are slim...

He groans aloud. What does it all mean? Is it meant to be some kind of divine test?

He stands and readjusts his clothing. This self-pity is not going to achieve anything.

"I think I'll go for a walk," he says to himself. Then he cringes.

I must get out of that habit. This talking to myself is only going to come back to bite me someday.

The thing that Jed hates the most about Octavius is the fact that he doesn't hate him. Oh, he should – there's plenty of things he shouldn't find endearing about that pretentious bastard – but he's just not that bad, honestly speaking. Fighting him is satisfying, sure, but Jed knows as well as anybody else that that's just what men do. It's not like he's emotionally attached or anything. If it wasn't the Romans, it'd be the Mayans from across the way. It's just something to do.

Their fights are also the only times he sees Octavius, but that's irrelevant. The fact that his chest lightens and his heart starts beating faster whenever he sees him is irrelevant. He's just a good fighter, that's all. It makes life interesting.

He startles at the sound of approaching footsteps. Luke and Micah round the corner of the barn he's sitting against and wave when they notice him.

"Hey, Jed," Luke says. "You look awful lost in thought."

"That's a bad sign if I've ever seen one." Micah laughs.

"Ain't you funny," he grumbles, but there's no heat to it. They're good men, both of them, even if they are a little weird. "It's nothing. I'm just gettin' antsy for no reason. You know

how it is.”

Luke and Micah look at each other and nod in perfect sync.

Maybe they're more than a little weird.

“Yeah, Janey was just tellin’ us about how much she hates being cooped up.”

“She really does! I tell ya, I’ve never seen a woman happier than when Annie told her she was allowed to move barrels again.”

“Nah, I think she just likes showin’ off to all the pretty girls she gets in the bar.”

“Lucas!” He elbows him. “That’s not nice. She wouldn’t do that to Annie. I think she’d rather give up drinking, and you know how much she likes drinking.”

Jed nods idly. He wants to be involved in the conversation, he really does, but his mind is too busy being somewhere else. It takes him a second to catch up.

“Annie?” he asks. “Did they get together?”

Luke snorts. “Jesus Christ, where have you been?”

“I’ve been busy!” he says defensively. “I had other things to think about than gettin’ into other people’s business.”

“News to me,” Micah says. “But yes, they’re together. Soulmates and everything.”

Thankfully, Luke comes to his rescue before he can embarrass himself any more. “Hey, Jed. I’ve been thinkin’ about fightin’ the Romans some more,” he says.

He sits up. “You are?”

“Why, what’d they do this time?” Micah asks.

Luke grins conspiratorially. “Nothin’. I just know he wants to go ogle their soldiers some more.”

So much for that.

“Smartasses,” he says over the sound of their laughter. “To hell with you both. I’m going for a walk, alright? Don’t start any wars while I’m gone.”

Jed mutters to himself the whole time he climbs down the rope to the floor. It’s not that he doesn’t like his neighbors. Of course he likes them. They’re perfectly respectable people. He just gets fed up with them sometimes, as proven by the strings of half-coherent curses that pass his lips as he descends the rope.

Oh, he probably looks insane doing that. It's not likely that anybody's going to see him, but he shuts up anyway – the last thing he needs is somebody watching him talk to himself and spreading rumors that he's crazy.

When there are six feet left to go, he lets go of the rope. He lands on his toes like a cat and can't resist cracking a grin. This funny little existence of theirs has its downsides, but there are a few benefits; for one, he seems to be much more durable than he used to be. The daredevil side of him isn't about to complain. The little rush he gets every time is more than worth it.

Of course, he's not indestructible. None of them are – poor miss Jane can attest to that. In fact, it seems that the only real threats are the other people their size.

(He refuses to call himself a miniature. As far as he's concerned, he's normal and everybody else is weird.)

He sets off at a leisurely pace across the tile and wanders for a little bit until he reaches the bench in the middle of the room. There's a nice little inset around the bottom that's just the right height for him to sit down and tuck himself up against the wall, so he does. When he takes off his hat and leans back, it's pretty cozy.

In fact, it's so nice and quiet that he could almost doze off and take a nap. Now, *that* would be nice. His eyes threaten to drift closed as he thinks about it, but no. He can't. That would just be begging for somebody to come along and fuck with him, and he ain't that stupid. You aren't gonna find him losing control of a situation like that. No, thank you, he'll leave it to somebody else to be that careless; somebody more optimistic and naïve, somebody with much worse judgment. Like that damn Roman, who's still acting friendly with Jed even though his soldiers have managed to piss off just about everybody else in the West. It's almost cute, in a sad kind of way.

Footsteps approach and he looks up – right into the eyes of said damn Roman.

“Oh, it's you,” he says, and to his displeasure, he sounds downright cheerful.

“Am I interrupting something?” Octavius asks.

“Obviously,” Jed says, gesturing to the emptiness around him. “I'm doin' real important work here. Can't you see? I'm swamped.”

Octavius smiles at him. “Yes, of course. Let me guess. Plotting your next doomed invasion?”

Jed has to fight back a smile of his own. God, what's wrong with him? He looks around and sighs softly. “Not really. I just needed a break.”

“I understand that.” Octavius sits down. He's barely an arm's length away.

“You got overbearing neighbors too?”

“Yes,” he says lightly. “They can be quite rowdy. Undisciplined, you might say, and they have no sense of propriety.” He grins. “And then there's my soldiers, of course.”

Jed has to lean forward to properly swat him on the arm. “Bastard,” he says fondly. “My guys are practically my family, you know. I’m the only one allowed to complain about ‘em.”

“Practically family?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“*Only* family?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Is there no one you’re especially close with?”

He finally lets himself laugh softly. “Subtlety ain’t your strong suit, is it?”

“So I’ve been told.” Octavius smiles. “But it usually works for me.”

“It does,” Jed says, glancing at his truly ridiculous getup.

I mean, really. What kind of man wears a skirt that short?

It strikes Jed then that Octavius’s legs are bare. No, not like *that* – the metal pieces remain firmly attached, unfortunately – but his skin is unmarked. There’s not a scar, natural or otherwise, to be seen. He wonders, for one wild moment, whether he has a silvery scrape to match the one on the inside of Jed’s ankle, but he discards the thought almost as soon as it occurs to him. He’s not gonna entertain that right now.

“No scars?” he hears himself say.

Dammit.

Octavius looks thoughtful before he answers. “A handful, here and there. What about you?”

“Just a few. I used to have more, before,” he half-laughs. When Octavius gives him a questioning look, he adds, “I did! I was just covered in ‘em. For a while, I wondered what the hell kind of person somebody would have to be to get that many scars, but then I grew up and I gave as good as I got. Yeah, I got into all kinds of scrapes. Half of those were my own damn fault, though.”

Octavius sits up. “You didn’t—”

“No, no,” he says, waving him off. “I know what you’re thinking, and it ain’t that. And I wasn’t that I was clumsy, either. But you try guttin’ a squirrel with a dull pocketknife and see if you don’t stick your finger once or twice.”

“Really,” he says skeptically.

“Hey, that’s my story and I’m stickin’ to it.” He relaxes. “Alright. Your turn.”

He sees him swallow. “If you insist,” he says, fidgeting with the clasps on his cuffs.

Well, ain't this interesting, Jed thinks. Where'd all that confidence go, toga boy?

Then the cuff separates into two parts, falling off Octavius's arm, and Jed forgets to breathe. Because there, inscribed on his inner wrist in lustrous silver, is the same scar Jed has been hiding under his gloves for a month. He doesn't even remember how he got it; all he knows is that it was already healed over by the time he noticed it.

"Fuck," he whispers.

"What?"

Octavius is looking at him with an expression he doesn't bother to unravel, because he's too busy scrabbling at his glove to think about anything else. The laugh that escapes him is high-pitched and embarrassing, but he moves on. The more he thinks about it, the more sense it's all making. Of course there's a reason they're always drawn to each other. Of *course*.

The leather of his glove is worn too smooth to get a decent grip, so he gives up and tugs at one fingertip with his teeth until it slides off.

His hands are shaking. Why is he shaking? This is a *good* thing. This is—

They stare at the pink mark on his skin.

"Oh," Octavius breathes.

Jed doesn't reply. He doesn't know what to say. There's a funny sort of feeling building up in his chest. His blood has started fizzing like a shaken beer. He can't quite seem to catch his breath.

It might be the worst possible moment for this, but nevertheless, a memory strikes him — washing clothes with his mother, sleeves rolled up, silver lines shining bright under the soapy water. His mother chiding him for the state of his jeans.

You need to pay better attention to your surroundings, Jedediah.

Sure, Ma, you know I'm great at that. Why do you think I've never noticed when a new scar shows up?

You know, honey, I think that's different. I don't think you've ever had a new one show up.

Really?

Mm-hmm. As far as I can tell, Jedediah, you've had the same lines on your skin since the day you was born.

How do you know?

Oh, mothers just know these things. You'll understand when you're older.

He got older, and he did understand eventually, but he never did find someone else who had those same marks. Here, though, in this weird little existence they've carved out, it's not something he needs to worry about anymore. And if he had to share scars with anyone here, he's glad it's Octavius. It certainly explains a thing or two. In fact, he feels vindicated. He knew there was a reason they always ended up nose-to-nose during those big battles.

When he shakes himself free from the memory, Octavius is looking at him with an inscrutable expression. Jed follows his gaze down and realizes just what he's staring at. His first instinct is to be embarrassed, but he brushes it off without shame. After all, this is *Octavius*. It's not like he's going to hurt him.

"Lookin' for something?" he asks after a moment.

Octavius starts, his eyes flicking back up to meet Jed's face. "Sorry," he starts to apologize, but Jed doesn't let him.

"No, it's alright," he says. He tugs at the kerchief around his neck, but the knot stays stubbornly tied.

A hand appears in his periphery. He looks up at Octavius, who yanks his hand back as though he's been burned. He opens his mouth to apologize, but Jed silences him with a wave.

"S'alright," he says quietly. "I don't mind. I trust you."

"You really shouldn't."

"Why?" he asks, lifting his chin. "What are you planning to do to me?"

He freezes for a long moment. "You're bold, aren't you?" he mutters. "You ought to warn me before you say things like that."

Jed grins. "Aw, darlin'," he croons, dragging out the vowels in the word. "You're too much fun to rile up." He makes quick work of the buttons on the shirt. It slips down his shoulders, leaving nothing but his ratty undershirt on his chest and his kerchief around his neck. Sitting like this, he feels almost nude.

Note to self: I should probably do laundry tomorrow, if I live to see it.

There's an awful lot of skin on display, but he finds that he doesn't mind so much. He points, in turn, to silver lines on each collarbone, then raises an eyebrow. "What are these?"

"Pressure marks," he says. "There should be a matching set on the back. I had to add new pads inside the shoulder pieces so they wouldn't cut into my skin."

He twists. Huh. Sure enough, it's there, glinting with silvery light on the back side of his shoulders. "Well, I'll be damned."

When he turns back around, Octavius is tapping an unfamiliar rhythm on his own hip with a curious look on his face. "You have - here, on your hip," he says. "Was that one of mine?"

"It's yours now," he says, grinning. "But if you're asking if that one was your fault, then yeah, I think it was. But if you're asking 'cause you want to see it, you're gonna have to work a little harder than that."

He pauses. "Is that a challenge?"

Their eyes meet. "If you want it to be."

Octavius nearly knocks him to the floor in his haste.

Chapter 4: A Torrid Affair

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Octavius lets out a long breath as he climbs down the rope ladder to the floor outside. It's always refreshing to get out of Rome for a little while; managing the army is one thing, but dealing with the Senate is entirely another. When they call him in for meetings, the ego in the room is so large that it seems to crush the air out of his chest, making him dizzy with the effort of balancing it all.

Octavius is a military man, not a politician. His job is giving orders. Nothing less, nothing more.

The Senate is what drives him toward the simple canvas tent where his lover resides. As he ascends the Western rope, he thinks that in a way, he envies Jedediah. The political makeup of the West is much simpler than the complex government of Rome. Of course, as a settlement of less than two hundred people, they don't need the same strict order that Rome does. It's for the best; such rigidity would likely not go over very well with the rest of the townspeople, if Jedediah is any indication.

He swipes a folded blanket from the pile of equipment near the railroad and wraps it around himself. With his helmet and cuirass gone - tucked away safely at home - and the blanket draped around his shoulders, he looks like just another American wandering around the empty desert. He knows the land well enough by now that it's easy to slip between the buildings and make his way to Jedediah unnoticed.

He pauses at the edge of the square, where a handful of people are milling around. Should he cut through? No, he decides. It would be pointlessly risky. He ducks around the church building instead to avoid the possibility. There's only one American whose attention he *wants* to attract. The others all want him dead.

When he arrives at the tent, it's empty. Thankfully, when he looks around, it's easy to spot the familiar dark hat against the white wood of the church's rear wall.

Jedediah perks up as soon as he approaches. "Well, hello, darlin'," he says, smiling brightly. He sets down the items in his hands - a chunk of wood and a knife - and turns toward him. "What are you doing here?"

"Avoiding my responsibilities," he says, settling to the ground next to him.

"Aw, and here I thought you just missed me."

Octavius smiles. "Always."

"So what sort of responsibilities are you avoiding?" He removes his hat.

"The Senate."

"Ugh," he agrees with a nod. "Politicians, huh?"

"Exactly! It's like dealing with a room full of children every time they want to have a meeting."

Jedediah falls into his armored shoulder with a soft thump. "I reckon the kids would do it better."

Octavius has to laugh at the mental image of a group of children in senator's clothes. "It would certainly be more exciting. Imagine the debates!"

He snorts. "Hey, don't underestimate a bunch of kids. Those little bastards can be real creative when they want to."

"At this point, I would happily take the children, if it meant I didn't have to sit through one more session of the same five points being made again and again. If the men would allow me to do my job and give my own orders, it would be so much smoother, but all they ever want to do is argue pointlessly."

"Well, I don't know about that," Jed says. "A good argument can be fun, if you have the right partner. And besides," he continues quickly, "if everybody around here did what I suggested every time, I think about half of us'd be dead by now. The fightin' is for our own good." He shifts, letting his head slide down into Octavius's lap. He smiles up at him.

His hair falls against the side of Octavius's hand. He takes the strands absentmindedly and rolls them between his fingers as he thinks. "I suppose... though that sort of thing may work for you, there are just too many of us. There are over a thousand citizens in Rome. I can't imagine what it would be like if every one of them had a say in the way it runs."

Jed snickers.

"What?"

"Nothing," he says. "Nothing. It's just that America runs a little different."

"Yes?"

"Yeah. We kinda fought a whole war about it."

"Americans." He laughs. "Quite a war-happy people, aren't you?"

"Oh, sure," he says. "That's awful bold comin' from you, *General* Octavius."

He rolls his eyes. "Please. I'm the only thing stopping the Senate from ordering a full-scale invasion."

"Another one, you mean?"

"The first one doesn't count and you know it!"

"Yeah, yeah, if you say so." He pauses. "But imagine if it did happen. Who do you think would win?"

"Well, us, of course," he says easily. "The numbers favor us. We would simply overwhelm any forces you could gather, not to mention the catapults."

"Oh, it's catapults, plural, now, is it? Ain't that good to know."

"Forget I said anything."

"Sure, sure. Anyway, you might have numbers on your side, but you're forgettin' one important thing we have that you don't."

"And that is?"

Jed smiles. "Dynamite."

"Well, whatever that is, I'm certain we could overcome it," he declares, over the sound of Jedediah's quiet laughter.

"Oh, please try. I'd love to see it."

"You are a menace," he says, laughing too, despite himself. "You think you're so clever, don't you? Really, my love, it's not your best feature."

"Yeah, I know. I got plenty more to offer." He grins up at him and Octavius has to look away. "You know, the neighbors seem to think I'm getting lured off by some evil seductress every other night, but I take offense to that."

"Do you?"

"Yeah. I'm plenty pretty enough to do it myself."

He laughs, though he can hear the undercurrent of concern in his own voice. "Do they know that it's me you're meeting with?"

"Nah. I ain't told anybody and I don't plan to."

"Why?"

"Maybe I wanna keep you all to myself."

"*Jedediah.*"

He smiles. "Oh, don't worry about it, alright? They're just... aw, I don't know. I guess all the months of fightin' each other made 'em not like you very much."

Octavius's hand pauses where it still sits in his hair.

Unfortunately, Jedediah notices. "Somethin' wrong?"

He has to consider his words carefully. "Many of us in Rome think the same way."

"Do you now?" he says, softer now than before.

"There's – it's a sense of superiority, you could say. Rome feels..." He has to search for the right phrase. "The general mood is as though we are more civilized than your group of outlaws."

Jed stills. "You don't think that."

"Of course I don't. I would never."

"I know."

"I think very highly of you."

"I know, darlin'. I just wish our guys would be a little more polite to each other, you know? It'd make my life a hell of a lot simpler."

"I'm working on it," he says softly. He scratches his scalp absentmindedly. "I'll take care of it. I promise."

Jedediah's eyes fall closed. "That's nice of ya. Always takin' care of stuff." He blinks, looking back up at Octavius with a mischievous grin. "Take real good care of me, too."

Octavius pushes his hand away from where it's started creeping up his leg. "Please, don't distract me. I should be on my way soon and..." He has to force himself to focus before he can finish the sentence. "...you make it very hard to leave when I need to."

"Aw." He pouts. "Fine, I'll let ya go. I wouldn't want you getting in trouble back home or nothin'."

Jedediah sits up, and Octavius rises, brushing off the dust from his legs.

"Wait!"

He smiles. Of course, Jedediah practically won't let him leave without a kiss.

Fifteen minutes later, Jed sits back down. Alright, so maybe he let himself get just a *little* carried away.

A good while after Octavius leaves, he's still smiling to himself as he whittles. The project isn't anything fancy - it's a half-formed figure that barely resembles the wolf it's meant to be - but it doesn't matter. Really, it's just something to do to look busy on the off chance someone walks through, but hardly anyone ever does.

Then Annie rounds the corner and calls out. "Jed!"

"Jesus!" He drops his knife. It lands, quivering, in the dirt where his leg had been just a second before. He closes it with a snap and stuffs the damn thing safely back into his pocket. "Hi, Annie. I didn't see you there."

"No kidding," she says. Annie plops onto the ground next to him, where Octavius had just been sitting.

He wonders in a wild moment if she can feel that the dirt is still body-warm.

Her rifle, thankfully, is not on her shoulder today, so she must be in a good mood. It's not like she can shoot anybody, of course, but Jed still doesn't want to be within swinging distance. He's seen what she can do with that thing.

Man, he thinks, I need less violent friends.

"Boy, your head's in the clouds today, huh?" she chirps, derailing his train of thought.

"No," he says, unconvincing to even his own ears. "I'm just thinkin'."

"Well, ain't that a dangerous occupation. What's got your mind?"

"Personal business," he says shortly, remembering the warmth of Octavius's jaw under his lips.

"Aw. Trouble in paradise, sugar?"

"No, no. Look, I'm doin' just fine. How are you and Jane?"

"Oh, I'm alright. Janey's mighty fine now that she's learned how to fight the Romans." She holds her arm out for Jed to see the shiny mark across her forearm. "Only took a couple tries!"

"Yeah, she's a tough one," he says absently, hacking off another corner of wood. It starts to look even less like a wolf.

She laughs. "Oh, she is. Stubborn, too, but I like a lady like that. And Janey's stubborn as they come. You know, once she gets started on something, she'll just go all night if I let her."

He shaves a corner into something that is probably not going to look like an ear while the sentence percolates. Then he realizes he ought to be scandalized. "*Annie!*"

She doesn't even have the decency to blush. "Lord, you really are oblivious, aren't you?"

"I am not."

"Calm down! I'm just teasin'. Besides," she says, "From what I hear, you can't say jack shit to me. If the gossip's true, you've got a little paramour of your own, hm?"

He feels himself flush. “And what if I do?”

“Come on, everybody’s talkin’ about it. We all wanna know where you’re sneakin’ off to every night.” She winks at him. “Don’t take it personal, but Janey and I have got pretty good money on it.”

Oh, God.

“What the hell are you betting on?” he asks. He’s not sure he wants to know the answer.

“Well, *I* think you’ve got a girlfriend hiding somewhere around here. But Janey says you’re runnin’ off to Rome to carry on with one of their soldiers.” She giggles. “If she’s right, then I gotta say, you’ve got interesting taste, Jedediah Smith.”

He can feel his cheeks heating. “I reckon it’s none of your business either way.”

“Of course it ain’t!” She laughs, then rubs at the spot on her chest where he knows there must be a silver scar. “But you know that’s the way it is around here. Me and Janey got our fair share of it, so I’m just sharin’ the love. It’ll pass eventually. You just gotta let it happen.”

“Well, God forbid I wanna have some privacy,” he mumbles, attacking the other side of the wood. He curses at the knife as it catches on a knot and slips.

She pats his knee like the mother hen she is. “Privacy don’t exist here. The best you can ask for is a few minutes alone with your honey.”

She gets up to leave and brushes the dust from her skirt.

“A few minutes,” he mutters.

I’ll take what I can get.

Annie pushes the bedroom door open. “Janey!”

She’s greeted with nothing but silence, but she can clearly see the lump in the bed.

“Jane,” she hisses. “Wake up. I got something important.”

“I’m sleepin’.”

“Jane, 我的爱人, light of my life, I swear to God.”

“Fine! Jesus, I’m listening.” She sits up, hair sticking up every which way, and scowls. “What’s so urgent it can’t wait?”

Annie looks away, back towards the door. “I owe you a dollar.”

“...huh?”

“The bet, remember? You said Jed was sneakin' off with a Roman or something like that, and I called you crazy? Well, you win. I was walkin' past the church and who did I see but Jed and his little ol' boyfriend outside, practically desecratin' the grounds. Boy, Pastor Morgan'd have a heart attack if he knew what they were doin'.”

“You saw – oh, shit. Who was he with?”

“I'll tell you,” she says, “but you ain't gonna like it.”

“Lemme hear it.”

She tells her.

She doesn't like it.

Chapter End Notes

annie and jane say butchfemme rights

我的爱人 - my sweetheart

sorry for the delay on this chapter! I had 2.8k written and hated most of it, so I ended up spending more than a few days rewriting it from scratch. thankfully, i'm much happier with this chapter, and I hope you are too! let me know what you think :D

Chapter 5: The Talk of the Town

If Jedediah had been smart enough to have any shame at all, he might have seen this one coming. As it is, though, he doesn't even remember to button up his shirt all the way before he ducks into the saloon. His head's still in the alleyway back in Rome.

It's mostly empty inside, with just two men playing cards in the corner and Annie and Jane flirting at each other over the bartop.

"Howdy," he says to the ladies. They ignore him, but he's used to that by now. It doesn't stop him from talking to himself. "How come we always end up hanging out here?" he wonders aloud.

"I'm the only one in this little group that has a real building," Jane says dryly, plunking a bottle into his hand. "I ain't hanging out in your damn tent. God only knows what you've been doin' in there."

He doesn't really want to get drunk – this night is one he wants to remember – but it's something to do. So he takes his knife from his pocket, cracks the top of the bottle, and takes a swig. Then he grimaces. This is the stuff that's closer to water than beer, so clearly he's pissed somebody off.

Well, I dunno what happened, but I'd rather find out sooner than later, he thinks, so he raises the bottle in the bar's general direction and calls, "Hey, Janey. What'd I do?"

Annie turns around and he sees the dopey smile melt off her face in real time.

Uh-oh.

"The question's more like who'd you do," Jane says, staring him down.

"Where've you been, Jed?" Annie says, honey-sweet.

The pit drops out of the bottom of his stomach. "That's none of your damn business."

"I'm sorry, but I think it is." Annie glances over at Jane. "And I think we should talk."

He takes an instinctive step back. They follow him.

Jane says, "Jedediah, do you realize who exactly you're bringin' into town every night?" and Annie says "I've got some concerns, sugar," and Jed finds himself dropping into a chair as they bear down on him.

Shit. This is gonna blow up if he can't find some way to defuse the situation.

"What do you want? What's – where's this all comin' from?"

"Jedediah, do you think I'm stupid?"

“No! Of course not.”

“Then what do you think?”

He racks his brain, trying to think of something that could have precipitated this, but only one memory comes to mind. “Oh, fuck.”

“There it is,” Jane mutters. “Now he gets it.”

“Did you really think you could sneak in your little boyfriend without anyone noticing? Without *me* noticing?”

“It ain’t never been a problem before!”

The sudden silence crashes down around his ears. Even the guys in the corner have set down their cards.

He tenses. That was probably not the smartest thing to say.

“Before,” Jane repeats.

“Jedediah.” Annie glares at him. Her eyes are such a pale green that it kind of creeps him out, especially when she doesn’t even blink. “How many times have you brought *him* in here?”

“Not that many.”

“*Jedediah.*”

“A couple! I don’t know. It’s not like I’ve been keepin’ count.”

That’s a lie, but they don’t need to know that. He certainly doesn’t need to make it worse.

Jane shrugs. “Alright, sure. Whatever. Even if I believed you, it wouldn’t change my opinion.”

“Okay,” he mutters. “Why should I care about what you two think of my datin’ life?”

Annie shakes her head. “Because we ain’t the only ones. People talk around here, Jedediah, you know that.”

He does. There’s nothing to do in this town except drink and gossip. They need something to keep themselves occupied – it’s one of the reasons they keep going out to fight the Romans.

“Annie, if you’re trying to make me worry about my reputation, that dog ain’t gonna hunt. You know I don’t care about that kind of thing.”

“No, it’s not that.” She pauses, turning her head like she’s listening for something.

Jed hears it too – footsteps coming down the stairs. He turns just in time to see shadows appear in the doorway. A voice says “oh, damn”, then Luke and Micah sidle into the room. “Are we yellin’ at Jed already?” Luke says.

“Come on in,” Jane says brightly.

Realization dawns on him like a bucket of water over his head. “You planned this,” he accuses.

“Guilty.” She grins like the bastard she is.

Jed’s never hated her more. “So. If the gang’s all here, why don’t you lay it all out for me? What’s the point of this?”

Annie folds her hands behind her back and he can just see her itching for the weight of her rifle. “We’re askin’ you to reconsider your little entanglement,” she says plainly. “You have no idea what that man is planning.”

He doesn’t like the way she says *that man*. “You don’t know him,” he says. “I do, and I like him. I trust him.”

“Jed,” she says. “I might already know the answer to this, but are you insane?”

“You watch who you’re talkin’ to,” he snaps. He can already feel himself wearing thin.

Jane chimes in. “There’s a whole army batterin’ down our door every night, just dying to get in here, so what do you do? You bring in the biggest cheese of the bunch, under everybody’s noses, and let him poke around in all the soft spots he can find.”

“It ain’t like that! You don’t get it.”

“No,” Luke says, surprising him. “She’s right. I want to be happy for you, bossman, but are you forgettin’ what we’ve been doing to each other?”

Annie pulls her sleeve back, exposing the silver line that darts across her forearm. “I haven’t,” she says simply. She looks at Jane with an expression he can’t place.

How dare you, he thinks. *You don’t have the right to play that damn card*. But he can’t say anything – nobody but Octavius knows, and it’s not his secret to reveal, not anymore. So he’s got to take a different tack.

He takes his hat off, sets it on the table, and looks each of them in the eye in turn to get his message across. “I can’t believe y’all would do this. I’m—” He searches for the right words. What he settles on almost surprises him more than it does the people listening to him. “I’m happy,” he says finally. “Ain’t I allowed to have that?”

Annie at least has the decency to look ashamed. “I’m sorry, Jed, but it’s for the best. We just don’t know what could happen.”

“That’s right, you don’t! It might turn out alright, so why do I gotta give up a good thing? I ain’t a delicate little flower or nothing, you know. I’d know if I was getting taken advantage of.”

“No one’s saying that, Jed,” Jane says. She looks almost bored. He could hit her, but he won’t; not ‘cause she’s a lady, but ‘cause he knows she could throw him through this table without breaking a sweat.

Shit, but maybe she’s got a point. He’s never known Jane to back an idea she didn’t fully agree with, and she’s usually right. Her judgment tends to go against whatever’s getting planned, but they’ve also had a lot of ideas that were just flat terrible in hindsight. Like that time somebody wanted to string a clothesline between the cliffs and go sliding across, but when they tried it, all they had to show for it was a snapped line and some nasty rope burn on their palms... yeah, Jane is a smart lady. He trusts her instincts – maybe more than he trusts his own.

“Janey,” Luke whispers. “You broke him.”

Jed blinks as it all comes crashing together in his mind. “My God,” he mutters. “What do I do if it’s true?”

Annie smiles softly at him. “For what it’s worth, sugar, I’m sorry about this. I wouldn’t have brought it up if I didn’t think it was important.”

“Let me talk to him,” he says distractedly. “I’ll... I don’t know. Fuck.”

Because they have a pretty good point; he doesn’t actually know that Octavius isn’t planning something. As much as he wants to, he just can’t say for sure. After all, Octavius must have seen almost all of the West by now, whereas Jed’s only been into Rome once or twice. And sure, Octavius is a big ol’ softie when he’s around him, but he’s also supposed to be a master tactician, isn’t he? What if he’s just lying to him to get more information? Jed could be leading every person in the town straight into a death trap and he wouldn’t even know it.

And sure, what they’ve got is good – it’s the best thing that’s ever happened to him, to be honest – but now that he’s letting himself think about it, it’s not exactly perfect. No relationship is – his parents were proof enough of that – but Jed’s not exactly an expert. How would he know what’s fixable and what ain’t? And what if he really is being lied to?

Oh, God, he’s being paranoid. He should just ask.

But does he really think he’d get a straight answer?

A hand comes to rest on his shoulder and he looks up. The others have all disappeared, including the card-playing decoys in the corner, and now it’s just Micah left at the table with him. He’s looking at him with a kind sort of pity in his face.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “If it helps, Luke feels like shit about this.”

“Thanks,” he mutters, though it really doesn’t help. Luke’s too damn nice. When he feels bad, everybody does. The kid is like a kicked puppy.

Goddammit. Why did they have to come and raise all their concerns with him? Now they’ve got him second-guessing every little interaction he’s ever had with Octavius. They’re

soulmates, for love's sake. It's all supposed to turn out fine.

A terrible thought worms its way into his mind.

The system – whatever magic bullshit makes the connections – isn't perfect. Rare as they are, mistakes do happen. Luke and Micah are walking proof of that.

“Hey,” he says quietly.

Micah looks up.

He has to pause to find the right words before he can ask his question. “You and Luke,” he starts. “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“I just – how do y'all make it work? Doesn't your match have somethin' to say about it?”

“As far as we know, I don't have one.”

“And Luke?”

“He does. She's real nice.” He smiles. “But her husband doesn't like him very much.”

“Well. I can't imagine why.”

“Oh, it's alright. He means well.” Micah leans forward over the table. “Look, I know what you want to ask.”

“You do?”

“Everyone does. Once word got out that me and him are spiting God, or whatever the pastor called it, people always want to ask. Don't worry.” He smiles. “I'm used to it.”

He has to close his eyes and shake his head at that. “*Spiting God* – man. That ain't right. Y'all make it work, and I respect that.” He cracks one eye. “So how do you make it work?”

“Ah, there it is,” Micah laughs. Then he quickly sobers. “I'll tell you what I tell everyone; I share everything with him and I trust him with more than my life. But do you know what I don't tell everyone?”

“What's that?”

“Even if the circumstances were different, I would still choose him. I don't care what fate says. Sometimes, fate is wrong.” He looks him in the eye. “You should remember that, Jed. And know that I'm sorry.”

“Thanks,” he says hollowly.

After a moment, the legs of Micah's chair scrape against the floor as he stands. “I'm going out for a smoke,” he tells him. “Do you want one?”

Jed shakes his head. He's got enough to chew on as it is.

Octavius's helmet is barely holding on to his head by the time Jedediah leaves. After he watches him disappear over the ledge, he has to duck behind the nearest building to adjust it. The cursed thing is always slipping down over his eyes at inopportune moments. He flushes, remembering earlier, when it had fallen and nearly hit Jedediah in the head while they were... indisposed. The strings come untied easily; it's a nice change from two days ago, when he had been so distracted that he was unable to find the damn things and Jedediah had offered to cut the knot apart. The ties slip through his fingers with no snags, the helmet slides off, and he freezes.

There are figures in front of him.

He has to blink, allowing his vision to readjust to the light, before he recognizes the pair of them as two of the more war-hungry senators.

His stomach drops. This is not going to end well.

"Can I help you?" he asks.

"Yes, Imperator," one of them says.

He frowns. Now, that is a title he is not worthy of claiming. He's accepted his role as general here, in this false Rome, but he is no *Caesar*.

The other one steps forward. "We bring you a concern. Will you hear it?"

He has to fight to keep his face neutral. This one, Cassius, is his least favorite kind of politician, slimy and self-serving. He knows a different Rome, and he's been fighting Octavius to get theirs closer to the war-hungry state that he apparently remembers. "Yes," he says after a second.

Where is this going?

"Our concern, General, pertains to your location on certain evenings."

"It has been noted that you disappear, sometimes as often as every two days."

Would it kill you to speak like a normal person? he thinks uncharitably. But instead of voicing that thought, he says, "What I do in my own time is my own business." He pauses. "Unless you think I am neglecting my duties, I see no reason to be concerned."

"No, no! There's no need for that."

Cassius smiles insincerely. Frankly, it's insulting. "We are merely concerned about those who think themselves worthy of your time."

Oh. Oh, no.

“I will spend my time however I want, especially when I am doing my best to avert an all-out war. Do you have a problem with that?”

The shorter one blurts, “What’s wrong with war?”

“Tiberias!” Cassius snaps, glaring at his companion. “My apologies, my liege. I believe what my friend was trying to say is that of course war should always be avoided. But, unfortunate as it would surely be, Rome is perfectly capable of fighting when necessary.”

Oh, so that’s where he wants to go.

“Mind your words carefully, Senator. Rome has nearly achieved peace. Diplomacy is our guide. Attempting to interfere with such workings could easily be construed as treason.

“No need to be so formal, my liege.”

To borrow a saying from the Westerners, are you fucking kidding me?

He’s sure his irritation is beginning to show on his face, but there’s nothing to be done about it now. “Thank you for the conversation, gentlemen, but I’m afraid I have other things to do tonight. Being so concerned about the value of my time, I’m sure you understand.” His paludamentum swishes behind him as he turns and walks away.

“But, General—”

“Good day!” he calls.

Thankfully, no one is around to see him scowl. *Ugh.* And he had been having such a nice day before he had to interact with them.

Unfortunately, as much as it pains him to admit it, they may have a point. He has been spending a disproportionate amount of time with Jedediah. If the circumstances were different, it would be fine, but as it is... his first duty is to Rome.

Of course, there is the matter of his bond with Jedediah, which complicates things slightly. If he was just anyone, it would be easy to break it off and rededicate himself to leading his people, but Jedediah is not just anyone. For better or for worse, he is important to Octavius. He’s taught him to enjoy his time in the West, to be more comfortable with their interesting ways, and – most importantly - to pick his battles.

A memory drifts, unbidden, to the front of his mind – Jedediah, relaxed, confident, and reassuring:

Don’t worry, darlin’. It’ll be alright. Most of the stuff people worry about never happens.

It’s true, of course; there’s no way they’ll actually go to war. It would take an unusually concentrated effort for the Senate to go behind his back. It will all be fine.

Whenever Jed needs a break, or some time to think by himself, he doesn't go to his tent. Instead, he goes out into the big room, where no one can just poke their heads in on his business. It's been a couple days since Annie and Jane dragged him into that come-to-Jesus meeting, but he hasn't been able to get it out of his head.

He tucks himself up into the tiny space at the bottom of the bench, unfolds his pocketknife, and sighs. Because of *course*, the instant he gets himself settled, there's a person approaching him. Really, he should have known. It's only fitting that here, tonight, is where he sees Octavius again.

"Hey," he says, the *darlin'* implied but unsaid. "Funny seeing you here."

"Sorry, am I interrupting something?"

He smiles halfheartedly and gestures with the half-whittled wolf. "Nah. I've got all the time in the world."

"I see. What brings you out here tonight?"

"Oh, just needed some room to think. I... got a lot on my mind."

"As do I."

"Oh? What's going on?"

"The political tides are turning once again. I can only hope it will pass without causing too much damage."

He digs the tip of the knife into the wolf's eye, carving out its pupil. "You've been talking to the senate lately, huh?"

"What?"

"You sound so *formal*. You oughta relax a little." He pauses. "You can tell me anything, you know."

"I know." He smiles. It doesn't reach his eyes. "But I don't want to burden you with it. I know you hate our politics."

"It's nothing personal," he says. "I hate all politics. I spent fifteen years in the wilderness to get away from politics."

"And yet the people in your town look up to you."

He scoffs. "Hardly. I just get dragged into everything. If I had it my way, nobody would ever give me responsibilities."

His blade catches on a knot in the wood and the conversation dips into a lull.

Ten full seconds pass while he cringes to himself. If he lets his random thoughts keep falling out of his mouth, this is going to get weird, so he changes the subject with all the subtlety of a brick through a window. "So, political tides, huh? That sounds exciting."

"It really isn't," he tells him. "I'm spending all my time trying to convince the Senate not to launch a full-scale invasion. I can't remember the last time they were so... bloodthirsty."

"Lovely," he mutters, attacking the knot.

"Don't worry. I'm doing everything I can to avoid it." His face softens. "I promise."

"I appreciate that. In the meantime, I guess I'll see what I can do at home. I don't wanna fuel the rumor mill any more than I already have, but there's no use pretendin' like I don't know what's coming." He pauses, thinking. "Maybe I'll give Annie and Jane a heads-up. I don't know."

"Whatever you think is best. I'm going to have to have some very delicate conversations, myself..." He stares at a point somewhere over Jed's shoulder and sighs.

"Well, whatever you do, I hope it works. I'm getting sick of these little skirmishes every week."

"You and I both. If I could just talk the senators out of the patrols, perhaps we would have an easier time. But that isn't going to happen while your friends are still wandering the floor out here. If there's any possible way for intruders to come into Rome, they want it guarded."

"Yeah," he says distantly. Curls of shaved wood drop to the floor under him. "Why don't you just put the rope up when you don't need it?"

"That won't work. Don't you remember how we met?"

"How could I forget?"

"It wouldn't be the first thing," he mutters, but he keeps talking before Jed can ask what the hell that's supposed to mean. "No, until we find a way to hook-proof the wood there, it's still a weak point. Our engineers are good, but we have limited supplies."

"Yeah." He stuffs the whittling kit back into his pocket. and gets up. "Hey, I hate to cut our visit short, but I should really get going. Gotta make sure the boys haven't gotten themselves killed yet."

Octavius smiles. "Ah, youth. I should do the same. We have similar problems with some of the younger soldiers."

"Yeah," he repeats. He raises a hand in farewell. "I'll see ya later?"

He nods. "Until we meet again."

Chapter 6: Dirty Laundry

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's a normal day when it all goes to hell in a handbasket. Jed's back in the bar again, idly listening to the chatter around him, tapping his nails on the still-full bottle in front of him, when the doors fly open and Luke and Micah stumble inside.

They collapse into the chairs closest to the door. Both of them look like hell – there's blood stained bright red on Luke's pale face, but Jed can't tell what's coming from the nosebleed and what's from the fat lip. Micah doesn't look much better, clutching the side of his ribs and listing dangerously to one side like he is.

“Oh, shit,” he hisses. He jumps out of his chair to help, but so do most of the patrons in the bar. He has to shoulder his way through the crowd, jostling this way and that, and by the time he makes it to the table, Annie's already slipped in after them and taken command.

“Janey!” she yells over the noise. “I need help!”

“What can I do?” he asks.

She barely spares him a glance. “You can get outta the way. Janey! You got a rag?”

An idea strikes - he unties his kerchief and holds it out. “How's this?”

“It'll do.” She takes it and turns away from him without another word.

He has to lean to one side so he can see over her shoulder. “Micah, Luke, where've you been? What the hell happened?”

Annie twists away from Luke's face just long enough to snap, “your *fucking* boyfriend,” and it's so unlike her that Jed has to take a step back. The hair on the back of his neck stands up. Something ain't right here.

“We got caught,” Micah rasps. “Not even doing anything. We were just out for a walk and they got us.”

Oh.

Oh.

“They didn't,” he says quietly. “Tell me he – no. Tell me they didn't.”

Luke waves Annie away and holds the handkerchief to his own nose. “They said we were trespassing,” he says slowly, like he can't believe his own memory. “We were on their claim, or so's they called it. Told us if we didn't leave, there'd be consequences.”

Annie takes the dirty kerchief and passes a fresh one from Jane's hand into his. "What'd you do then?"

"Well, I told 'em that as far as I knew, they didn't have claim on jack shit outside Rome, and that we'd go wherever we please. That's when they jumped us."

"It wasn't a fair fight," Micah cuts in. "Not even close. There was four of them and only two of us. We weren't even doing anything," he says. His frustration bleeds into every word.

"That bastard," Jed mutters through his teeth.

"What was that?"

"They're not – he promised." He stands, shoulders drawn and hands balled up into fists. "We were supposed to have a goddamn truce. Oh, I should have known."

"Jed," Jane says, but he ignores her. His emotions are roiling like quicksilver in his gut, slipping and sliding every time he tries to catch hold of one of them to identify it. It's hard to concentrate on anything but the white-hot anger lighting him up from the inside out.

"I'll be back," he says shortly. "Don't follow me."

The doors swing shut behind him.

"So," Luke says through the handkerchief in his nose, "what's the odds on him comin' back alive?"

Janey gestures with the bottle in her hand. "I give it two bucks on us havin' to pick up his corpse tomorrow night."

Micah blinks. "Not it."

When Jed stomps into Rome, Octavius is about as happy to see him as he is to see Octavius.

"I'm sorry, but can you come back later?" he says. "This is not a good time."

"I don't wanna hear it!" Jed snaps. The anger has been simmering under his skin the whole time he was making his way over here, and it's more than ready to jump out. "What the hell did you do?"

"I could ask you the same thing! Do you have a good explanation for why my soldiers came back from a routine patrol looking like they had just escaped the Battle of Thermopylae?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe 'cause they jumped two of my guys for no reason!"

"Yes," he says derisively. "I'm certain two of your men were able to overpower four trained Roman centurions."

Jed stops short. "Are you callin' them liars? Are you callin' *me* a liar?"

"Maybe," he says, shoulders rising. "Who am I supposed to believe here?"

"Me! That's the whole point!"

"My liege—"

Octavius silences the soldier with a wave of his hand. He doesn't even look at the kid.

"Jedediah," he says quietly, holding his gaze. "I'm not going to ask you again."

"Oh, you—" He clenches his fists. "I knew I shouldn't have trusted you! That's all people like you ever do, lie and cheat to get what you want. You probably think all of this is funny, huh?"

"I had nothing to do with this!" he erupts. "It was not even on my orders—"

"And I'm saying it don't matter, 'cause you try tellin' that to the guys who come home lookin' like they came from a warzone—"

"—as I said, that is not my fault—"

"—they get beat to hell every week, and what am I supposed to do, just let it happen?"

"—I can't control every single thing—"

"Well, you sure goddamn act like it—"

"—you have no idea what it's like—"

"—'cause you're always telling me what I can and can't do—"

"—well, aren't you being bold? I've seen your decision-making—"

"—well, I don't fucking care anymore!" Jed's chest is heaving. He and Octavius are nose-to-nose, and the closeness is so familiar that it pisses him off even more. "I don't care," he repeats. "You've been so worried about yourself and your damn politics that you don't even think about what I have to deal with."

"So what if I have other priorities? Is that such a crime? There are a thousand Roman citizens that look to me for leadership. I simply do not have the time to control your people, too! Perhaps if *you* would step up—"

"Don't you dare finish that sentence, toga boy," he snarls.

"Don't worry, I won't. You won't let me." Octavius steps back. "You think you're so much smarter than everyone else."

"I do not—"

"I'm not *fucking* finished," he hisses.

Jed shuts up.

“You are always doing this! You think you’re so clever, don’t you? When you think you’re right, you cannot even consider the idea that another person might know more than you do. It’s like you have never had to cooperate with someone in your life. You are so difficult, Jedediah,” he spits, “and I do not need the stress of managing your temper on top of the nation I am running. I’m not going to do it anymore.” He jabs him in the chest with one outstretched finger. “Now I’m finished.”

God, he hates getting caught on the back foot; he never knows how to react.

“Fine.” He swallows around the angry lump in his throat. “Then I’m going home.”

He turns on his heel and pushes Roman soldiers out of his way. Octavius’s voice echoes after him as he storms out.

“*Good!*”

Jedediah sits at the edge of the world, staring morosely out into the hall, and stew. There are so many emotions swirling in his chest that it would take months to unpick all of them.

For one, there’s anger. He can’t remember how many times he’s talked to Octavius about keeping a handle on their own men. If it all happened like Luke and Micah said, there was just no reason for them to get their asses beat. And they would have avoided the fight if they could have - they’re both smart men. They wouldn’t have thrown themselves into something that stupid, especially not if it was two against four.

So, yes, he’s mad. After that, it gets harder to puzzle out which feeling is what. For instance, he knows he’s not happy about the way Octavius was talking to him earlier, but that’s also mixed in with the shame of having said what he did. There’s sadness, and frustration, and the creeping dread that Octavius – or worse, Jed himself – has fucked up bad.

(Part of him suspects they’re both in the wrong, and somebody smarter than him would be able to sort it all out, but the much bigger part of him is too busy nursing his bruised ego to care.)

“Why,” he grumbles to no one. “Why?”

He leans away from the edge until his back hits the gravel. It crunches with footsteps as someone approaches.

“Hey, Jed,” says Annie’s mild voice. She leans over him, carrying something small that he can’t identify. “This yours?”

He reaches out, up toward the roof. When he takes it, the object is rough and warm from Annie’s body heat.

Oh. It's the little half-carved wolf. His fingers close around it, holding it tight enough that his knuckles go white and his hand shakes.

The temptation to throw it off the ledge is strong, and he knows the impulse is petty and vicious and stupid, but he gives in anyway. The wolf disappears into the air, blending in with the walls of the room outside, and he's standing up and turned away before it hits the floor.

"Well, I guess I shouldn't have worried about it," Annie says.

"It's fine. I appreciate it. That's where it belongs."

She walks doggedly alongside him, keeping perfect pace with his long strides. "What do you want to do about the boys?"

"We got 'em taken care of, don't we? They'll be alright."

"What about the Romans?"

He pauses, slowing, but he doesn't look back. "I'll be patient. We'll get 'em back for it soon enough."

"If you say so." She glances out past the edge of the world. "You know, the smart ones in town are worried about us getting invaded again."

"You can tell them it's gonna be just fine. Hell, I'll do it myself."

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Annie pinch the bridge of her nose. "Sure, Jed. And what exactly makes you say that? I don't think our neighbors are feelin' very friendly towards us right about now."

"Oh, they'll all stay away if he knows what's good for him. He knows what he did."

"You men and your drama," he hears her mutter. "Lord help us all."

Chapter End Notes

and thus concludes act one! i've fucked up my schedule a little bit, so just know that it might take longer than usual to get the next chapter out

Chapter 7: Love Don't Live Here Anymore

Jedediah isn't sleeping so well these days.

He doesn't need much – whatever mystery force knocks them all out every night seems to do a decent job of rejuvenating them – but it's still nice to get a little real shut-eye. But, for whatever reason, it's been a lot harder to find in the last weeks. When he lays down to get some rest, it doesn't matter how tired he is; his mind just won't stop wandering.

Where it wanders could be part of the reason for that, but that's neither here nor there. The point is, he appreciates every bit of rest he can get, even if it hits him while he's sitting at the card table on a rare night of quiet.

The nap is nice, but waking up to his friends talking about him is less so.

“He really don't get enough rest, huh?”

At least they have the decency to do it quietly.

“Nope. Between that and *you-know-what*, he's just so grumpy all the time now. I know he was crazy before, but shit! I didn't know what we had till we lost it. Makes me wish I hadn't said anything. Your deal, Janey.”

The cards make a satisfying noise as Jane shuffles them. “Yeah, Lord knows I'm never listenin' to your ideas ever again,” she says.

“Ugh, you shouldn't,” Annie complains over the *thwip* of cards being dealt. “I need to learn to shut my stupid mouth. And would you look at that? Another crap hand.”

From the sound of shifting fabric, Luke must've reached across to pat her on the shoulder. “Hey, it's okay. Don't beat yourself up over it! It's not like you knew what was gonna happen. Gimme another one, Janey.”

“I should've, though.” Glass clinks against wood. “I mean, now I just feel bad, you know?”

“Yeah. Micah does, too.”

“I don't! I'm having the time of my life.”

“I'm not,” Luke says dejectedly. “I bust.”

“Honey, you just like beating people up,” Annie says.

“Yeah, I like beating *Romans* up. They're shitheads! They deserve it. Annie, you taking another one?”

“You're a damn menace.” The smile in her voice is audible. “No, I'll stand. What do you got?”

Jane flips another card. “Ha!”

They groan.

“That’s another win for me, I believe. Thank you, lady and gentleman.”

Luke brushes the edge of Jed’s sleeve as he slides his chips across the table. “Once again, Miss Jane, I am counting myself lucky that I ain’t on your bad side.”

She snorts. “Don’t call me *Miss* nothing. There’s nothin’ ladylike about me. And anyway, you’re too nice to get on anybody’s bad side.”

Jed’s finally awake enough to process the conversation, so he mutters into his arm, “Whose bad side?”

“Oh, shit.”

“Hey, sugar! Welcome back to the land of the living.”

He unsticks his face from the leather of his gloves and blinks in the low light. “Did I miss my turn?”

Luke laughs. “I guess you could say that! You’ve been asleep for comin’ up on an hour.”

“Passed right out on the table,” Jane says, handing the deck of cards to Luke. “You didn’t even move. I thought you were dead for a while.”

“I feel like I was.” He grimaces. “Anybody got some water? I feel like I’ve been drinkin’ sand.”

Annie hands over her canteen. “I’ve got some. We were thinkin’ you might want it if you ever managed to wake up.”

Jane snorts. “Yeah, your exact words were ‘he snores like a fuckin’ freight train’, weren’t they?”

“Anyway,” she says, ignoring her, “we just finished this round. You want us to deal you in?”

“No, I’m alright. Y’all have fun. I think I might go back to my tent and see if I can get some real sleep.”

Jed spends a lot of time in his tent these days.

They’re still at war with the Romans – whatever flimsy veneer of peace they might’ve had is long gone – but Jed doesn’t put himself on the front lines anymore. He stays put in town, protecting the older folks and the folks that don’t want to fight.

All the better to avoid that lying bastard.

That's not to say he never gets involved, though. When he sees the shadows moving at the edge of the world, he ties his hair back, wraps his kerchief over his face, and goes to beat the tar out of some Roman soldiers. He doesn't want to say fighting the Romans is calming, because that's the kind of thing a man only says when he has serious problems in the head, but it does quiet his mind in a way that not much else does.

Of course, not every night can be a good battle. The deadest nights are always the worst; when the supplies are running low, the gossip's exhausted, and even the face cards are starting to look tired, there's nothing left to do but think.

And Jed hates thinking.

Sometimes, on those unavoidably quiet nights, he stares at the single lantern hanging from the top of his tent and wonders if maybe he's being too harsh. If maybe there's some way to fix this thing between them.

If maybe they could have a chance to try again.

After all, they're supposed to be destined for each other, or whatever sappy bullshit they're calling it these days. Whether he likes it or not, his life's intertwined with that son-of-a-bitch, and there's no untangling that string of fate.

But the fact of the matter is, Octavius hasn't cracked yet and he sure as shit isn't gonna be the one to break first.

He turns over. Sleep would be real nice right now.

"Again!" he shouts.

Octavius's men dutifully return to their positions, wooden training swords in hand. This legion is spending the day running the usual drills – half the legion armed, half unarmed, sparring in the usual scattered formation that the Westerners seem to prefer over the more civilized blocks. Jedediah had once told him that they don't form anything at all, that they just do whatever seems right to the individual, but he doesn't believe it. If that were true, Rome would have claimed a decisive victory long ago. But he shouldn't be surprised; Jedediah had told him a lot of things.

The key word there, of course, is *had*. He hasn't had a single interaction with the man since that last explosive fight. The months have passed largely uneventfully; the drills and skirmishes and full-blown fights all blend together into one long string of existence in his mind. Progress on the catapults is going well, but that's not his domain.

No, his rightful place is here: watching the legion move around itself, envisioning all the ways that Jedediah's men might try to counter their motions, and devising a plan for every single one of them.

At least the army expects less out of him than Jedediah did. All they want is a leader confident enough in his own calls that he'll join them in the fray, and that he can deliver. The days of uncertainty over his position are gone. Now, he is sure-footed in a way that he never was before.

These days, his role is the only thing he's sure of.

The sword-bearing half of the legion forms a loose circle around the unarmed half, and the last empty-handed man falls to his knees in surrender to his comrades.

"Better," he says. "Again!"

One of these days, Jane will learn that when Jed is complaining, it's better not to ask him why, but it's far too late for that now.

"I don't miss him. That ain't it. I just... shit, I don't know," he says, half-slumped over the counter. He lifts the bottle he's been nursing for the last forty-five minutes. "God, I can't fuckin' think tonight. What's in this again?"

She sighs. "Hon, that's root beer. You're just exhausted."

"...yeah. No, but listen—"

Oh, for fuck's sake.

"I just don't know what's worse. The fightin' sucked, sure, but would it have been better to wait for it to bite me in the ass? At least then I wouldn't have known it was coming."

She's had enough of this. "You want the honest answer?"

He nods.

"I don't know what the right thing would have been. I went along with everybody else 'cause Annie thought it was a good idea. 'Cause I'm not the planning person, you know? I'm just the one dumb enough to love her."

"You're really happy together, huh?"

"Yeah." She looks away. "I dunno what I did to deserve her. She's better than anything I ever thought I'd get."

"That's real nice. I'm happy for ya." He shakes his head and lets it hit the table with a solid *thunk*. When he speaks, his voice echoes strangely off the wood. "Janey, do you think I fucked up?"

"Oh, honey, you don't want me to answer that."

"Gee, thanks," he mutters.

“Really, though? I don’t know. I can’t tell you what’s right and what’s wrong. I’m not the moral police or the pastor or whatever. I’m the fuckin’ drink girl.”

He turns so his cheek squishes against the countertop. “No, I know. But I don’t know who else I’d ask! The way I was brought up, you just don’t talk about situations like this. Not in polite company, anyway. What I wouldn’t give to just forget the whole thing ever happened.” He slumps upward in his seat, chin resting in one hand. “What do people do in China when they don’t get along with their partner?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t know.”

“What?”

“I’m *half* Chinese, dumbass. You think I came from Xinning with this accent?”

“I don’t know! I never put that much thought into it.” He’s starting to look real sad again. “I guess I don’t put much thought into anything, huh?”

She smiles. There’s an idea brewing. “You know what? I’ll tell you the whole life story. Everybody always asks anyway.”

He looks up, curious.

“My dad landed in San Francisco in 1862, met Mama, and then I was born in February ’64. I made it, Mama didn’t. You know how it goes. So I got her name. Dad didn’t have much other choice, so he took me out working whenever he could find an odd job.” She smiles. “It was just us, you know? I spent a lot of time in little towns like this one when I was a kid. Every day, I wake up and I feel like I’ve gone back in time.”

She takes a drink.

“The railroad workers loved havin’ a kid around. And I loved bein’ there! At the end of the workday, when they all came in to camp for the night, it was like having fifty brothers and a hundred uncles. They taught me how to do a lot of odd little jobs, so that’s how I learned to fix everything I know how to. Gave myself quite a few scars doin’ that, thought I never did find out who else I was givin’ em to. Dad always hoped it was a rich white man who could pay for everything I needed. ‘Course, he wasn’t happy when I started lookin’ at girls.”

“Yeah? What’d he do?”

“Oh, he couldn’t do anything about it! I was grown up by then. I went back to California, worked whatever jobs I could find. I cooked, I cleaned, I washed clothes. In the evenings, I learned how to dress like a man so I had an excuse to dance with the ladies in the bars. Dad died somewhere in there. So did I. The last thing I remember is hacking up a lung in a sick house in Sacramento, and then I was here. And there.” She grins. “You haven’t thought about your boyfriend for two whole minutes.”

He smiles, but he doesn’t look much happier.

She shakes her head. “God, you are a mess. I can’t believe I’m friends with you.”

“Aw, come on. What would you do without me?”

“Jed, if I’d never met you, I wouldn’t have gotten shot in the tit.”

“Hey, you can’t hold that against me! Octavius apologized for that one already.” He sighs. “I think I need to talk to him. I ought to apologize for actin’ like an idiot. I’ve been an ass.”

I shouldn’t have said anything, Jed thinks, because whatever cruel master governs this world drops an opportunity into his lap not more than a week after he says it. For once, he’s not at home – he’s been dragged along on a mission to lay claim to the bench when the Romans take issue with them and charge.

He has to weave and dodge left and right just to make a little headway through the brawl. The tile is packed with people – Westerners and Romans battling it out like feral animals – and there, in the center of it all, is Octavius.

Thank God, I don’t think he saw me yet, Jed thinks.

Then his head turns and their eyes meet. It’s almost like he was looking for him.

Shit.

His jaw tenses, but he stays put. Sure, there might have been a time or two that he thought about telling him he’s sorry, but now that he’s seeing his face again, he can’t do it. He’s not a liar.

There’s no one he wants to see less than Octavius right now, so he turns on his heel. But that’s about as far as he gets. The gaps he was passing through before are long gone now, and the crowd moves in every direction, opening and closing new routes faster than he can track.

The line advances toward his position. He has to take one, two steps back, then a third, just to avoid getting hit.

“Hey!” he says, but no one hears him through the ruckus. He retreats out of the way of a Roman soldier and backs into something unexpectedly solid.

Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me.

“Well, imagine seeing you here,” he says, side-eyeing Octavius.

“Yes, I could say the same. Come back to apologize, have you?”

“Are you crazy?” The fight rages around them, filling the air with shouts and cries of pain and the harsh slap of skin against leather. “I don’t forgive you!” He has to put every ounce of air in his lungs into the words to be heard over the din.

Octavius looks at him with unbridled disgust written on his fine features. “Good,” he snaps. “Even if you did, I wouldn’t want it! Do you have any idea what you—”

“Oh, those are some bold fucking words from you, toga boy.” Jed's running on spite now, fueled by the anger that's finally boiling over in his chest. And his mama might have taught him never to lay hands on his partner, but he and Octavius haven't been that way for a long time now. He lunges forward.

Chapter 8: Gone Home

Chapter Notes

check the end notes for spoilery warnings!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

There's something different in the air.

It's not the soap or the oil that he and Luke are using to clean their tack. It ain't the sound of Micah darning his socks next to them. It could be the Romans, he supposes, but it doesn't seem likely. They've been pretty quiet since the last time Jed saw them - Octavius must still be down from Jed kicking his ass into next week.

But something is definitely different. It's been bugging him all night.

“Do y'all hear that?”

Luke puts down his rag. “Hear what?”

Micah perks up. “I hear it too. It sounds like...”

“Footsteps?”

“Yeah, footsteps,” Luke echoes. “Not from here, though, I don't think. From beyond.”

Jed shakes his head. “Oh, don't say it like that. You make it sound like somethin' weird is gonna happen.”

A giant turns the corner and stampedes through the room, chased by a monkey the size of a house.

Luke looks at him. “You really ought to—”

“No, I know.”

They stare at the opening where the man and monkey had disappeared.

“What the hell was that?” Micah mutters.

“Guess he had somewhere to be. Listen, don't you hear that? There's a commotion somewhere.”

Jed listens. It's faint, but there does seem to be a scuffle somewhere above their heads – then again, in this weird world, most everything is above their heads.

“I wish there was some way for us to find out,” Luke mutters.

Jed pauses. There’s an idea here. “I know what we ought to do if he comes back.”

“What?”

He grins. “I don’t suppose either of you are familiar with bronc bustin’?”

When the man runs back through, Jed, Luke, and Micah are prepared: they’re at the very top of the rock cliffs, at the perfect height to jump at him.

“Get him, boys!” Jed hollers as they sail through the air. He lands with a thump on the man’s arm, where there’s a patch with a nice, thick edge for him to grab. He digs his fingers in as the man swings around, and through some miracle of miracles, he stays attached.

Whoever this man is, he ain’t happy. “What the – oh, my God!”

Jed has to dodge his swipe to keep hold of his sleeve. “Get on, hoss!” he cries.

The man freezes for just a second, then shouts “No!” at something Jed can’t see. “Don’t you dare – Dexter!” And then he’s off, sprinting out of the hall and into the lobby.

For a brief couple of seconds, he’s riding the daredevil rush. His fingers dig deep into the edge of the patch, but he can’t get a foothold with the smooth soles of his boots. His whole body bounces as the man runs.

Excitement freezes into dread as Jed regrets every decision he’s ever made while he clings to the man’s sleeve. He can’t see much from his vantage point, so it’s a surprise to him when they go through a set of spinning doors and out into the cool night air.

The man skids to a stop and points an accusatory finger. “Give those back!”

He must be yelling at the monkey, because Jed hears a weird chirping, chattering noise before they dash back into the museum.

The giant’s head twists and looks down at Jed, nearly going cross-eyed to focus on him, and he glares before he swipes. “Get off me!”

This time, Jed’s fingers are tired, and he can’t hold on. He hits the ground hard, tumbling like dice in a cup until he smacks into the wall and comes to a snake-eyed stop. All he can do is stare at the ceiling and pant through the dizziness until it passes.

“Luke,” he wheezes. “Micah. Y’all okay?”

A beat of silence.

“You there? Did ya die or something?”

“I’m not dead.” Micah’s voice sounds thin and high from somewhere to his left... or right... or left. The room is still spinning too hard for him to tell.

“Oh, good.”

“I wish I was, though.”

He sits up. “That’s alright. It’ll pass. I can work with that.” He looks around. “Where’s Luke?”

“I lost him,” he gasps. “He was right next to me until we went outside.”

Jedediah’s blood runs cold.

Micah finally throws himself upright. “The door. Jed, please.”

Jed runs without a second thought. The heels of his boots click against the floor, echoing off the walls in the empty lobby. He can barely draw enough breath to shout. “Luke!”

He catches a glimpse of red hair through the glass of the spinning doors. They can make it.

The giant’s foot crashes down in front of them both. “That’s it!” he huffs. “I’ve had it with you crazy toys.”

Jed doesn’t even take offense at being called a toy. There’ll be time to be mad about it later. “Please,” he shouts up at the man. “Let him in!”

“Who?”

“Him!” he says, gesturing out the door. “Luke. Please, he’s our friend. We gotta get him inside.”

“Why?”

“We can’t be out past sunrise,” Micah says. “Bad things happen.”

“Oh, of course they do. Like what, exactly?”

So many goddamn questions! They don’t have time for this. “I – I don’t know,” he has to say. “It’s just a feelin’. I can’t explain it.”

“Please,” Micah says. His voice cracks.

The man looks away, over to where the woolly mammoths have started to stampede, and he curses. His footsteps rattle their bones as he stomps away.

“No!” Micah yells, but it’s too late. He’s gone.

Jed looks back toward the door, where Luke is standing with his palms pressed flat against the glass. He looks wide-eyed at the two of them and mouths something, but whatever he says is unintelligible from where they’re standing.

He tugs on Micah's sleeve. "Come on!"

They run, full tilt, at the door. Jed skids to a stop just short of it, but Micah doesn't. His whole body slams into the frame.

Jed's arms shake with the effort of pushing the door open, and Micah throws himself into it, crashing his shoulder into the metal over and over again, but it doesn't budge.

"Come on," Jed mutters. No one can hear him. He shoves again, but the door is too heavy. He raises his voice. "It ain't gonna open!"

"It will!" Micah hits it again. "It has to."

Jed drops his hands. There's nothing else he can do. He shakes his head silently at Luke. "I'm sorry," he mouths.

Luke must be thinking the same thing. He smiles silently at them through the layers of glass. He takes two steps back.

"No," Micah says, quiet as always. "No, no, no." He breaks into a string of Spanish.

Jed doesn't know the words, but he understands him just fine; they're too late. Jed can feel it stiffening his limbs and dulling his mind. This is it.

Luke raises a hand toward the rising sun.

He waves.

Jed gets half a glimpse of his friend dissolving into golden dust. Then there's nothing.

There's nothing more disorienting than waking up in a completely different place from where you thought you'd be. Jedediah blinks at the sudden change. He's back in the West, standing five feet to the left of his usual spot, with Annie so close that their shoulders bump together. The opening to the rest of the world is glassed over.

"Oh, Jed!" Annie says. She takes a step back – he's immediately grateful for the space. "Thank God you're home. We were concerned about you. Are you all right? Where's the other boys, are they okay?"

Jane slots into the place by Annie's side and clasps her hand. "I saw Micah down by the railroad stuff. Jed, you seen Luke?"

He presses his lips together. How is he supposed to answer for this one? How can he ever explain himself?

"Jed, sugar, you alright?"

He opens his mouth, but all that escapes him is a shuddering breath. He shakes his head again.

Annie's brow begins to furrow. Jane's eyes go wide.

"I'm sorry," he forces out. "I'm so sorry. It was all my fault."

"Jed..."

The dam's broken now. "Annie, he's gone. He's gone and it's all my fault. I fucked up. I—" He chokes on the words. "I should've done better. Oh, God."

Jane's hand comes to rest lightly on his forearm. "It's all right."

"No, it ain't. He's dead." His throat threatens to close in on itself as he speaks. He can barely get the air in. "He's dead, alright? I tried, I swear. I didn't – I wouldn't have just left him."

"But you said it was your fault?" Annie looks confused.

"It was. It was my idea to – oh, God, I shouldn't have said anything. I should've known better. I should've—"

Jane lets go of his arm and glances over the top of his head. "Annie, darlin', would you go and get Micah from the rails? I think we all ought to sit down."

Jane must have worked some kind of bartender magic, because the place is deserted when they get in there. It's just the four of them, their usual group, sitting around the usual table, and it makes Jed want to vomit a little bit.

"Okay," Jane says softly. It's the voice she might use to calm a spooked horse or a crying child. "Tell us what happened, alright? From the start."

He can't take his eyes off the empty chair. It doesn't match the rest of the set. They'd had to push the other four to one side of the round table and squash all their knees together just to fit the five of them at the one table. Luke had laughed and said he'd take it; he didn't mind having a special chair.

Annie's voice is sharper. "Jedediah."

He blinks. "Where do I start?"

"The last we saw, y'all were hangin' on to that giant's jacket. Where'd you go after that?"

"The lobby," he begins. The lump in his throat threatens to cut off his air the whole time he tells the story. He doesn't know how he gets through the whole thing, but he does. By the time he's done, Jane has gone stock-still and Annie – Annie is furious.

“You have got to be fucking with me,” she declares. “A monkey? *Really?* I think I would have noticed somethin' as crazy as that.”

“I believe it,” she mutters.

“Come on, Janey, really? How can we be sure he’s not - you know, imagining things?”

That smarts. “I’m right here!”

“I was there,” Micah says in a low voice. It’s the first time he’s spoken all night.

“We know,” Annie says, but he keeps talking.

“He must have fallen out of the giant’s pocket. We were too late. We couldn’t open the door. We watched the sun rise together.” He raises his head with unfocused eyes. “He likes sunrises. It’s the thing he misses most about being here all the time. He used to get up early just to watch the sky change color.”

Well, rip his heart out with a rusty fucking spoon. What kind of jackass is he, to not even think about what Micah must be feeling right now?

“Micah, fuck, I’m sorry. I tried, you know I did.”

“I do,” he says simply. “I know. We both did. I think I bruised something on the door trying to get it to open.”

“That, I can deal with,” Annie mutters, getting out of her chair. “Show me, sugar, and I’ll see what I can do.”

Jed squints at Micah as he silently unbuttons his shirt. Something’s not right about the way his arm is moving.

The shirt slips off, exposing a black-and-blue mess of a shoulder.

“Jesus,” Jane hisses. “What the hell happened?”

“I told you, we were trying to open the door!”

Annie’s anger is gone, replaced with unbridled horror at the sight of him. She prods the bone gently. “This... don’t this hurt?”

Micah doesn’t respond.

Jane cranes her neck to get a closer look. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s dislocated. Popped out of socket. Micah, sugar, you should be hollerin’ as soon as I touch it. I... shit. This needs to get put back in place.”

Micah nods. “Okay.”

“It’s gonna hurt.”

He nods. “Okay.”

She exchanges a worried glance with Jane before taking hold of his arm and slowly turning it.

Jed’s stomach turns at the sight of the bone moving under the skin. He shuts his eyes.

It’s unnaturally quiet as Annie works, with nothing but the soft sounds of fabric on skin and the four (*not enough should be five one is gone*) people breathing. There’s an unpleasant pop as it shifts back into place, and it’s horrifying, but not the worst thing he’s experienced in the last twenty-four hours. He figures it’s safe enough to look now.

Annie unties her neckerchief and starts to wrap his arm with it. “You should keep it slinged up for a while. A week at least, if not longer. You won’t have much use of that hand till it’s healed up.”

“It’s fine,” he tells her, and he really sounds like he means it. “Luke will take care of me. He always does.”

The pastor’s voice drones too loudly in this little church graveyard. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...”

He’s heard this scripture so many times that it practically tunes itself out.

It’s not like any funeral Jed has ever seen, and he’s seen more than enough in his time. For one, there’s no body. In the two days since Jed came back and Luke didn’t, somebody’s scratched LUCAS MAITLAND into the wooden face of a cross in the church graveyard, and it’s in front of this that the pastor stands as he delivers the eulogy. Frankly, Jed’s not sure how Pastor Morgan even got involved – Luke never was very religious, as far as he knew, and Micah’s a lapsed Catholic. He doubts *this* would have been his choice.

Secondly, there’s no chairs. He’s well aware that it’s not on the same level as not having a body to bury, but it sure doesn’t help the atmosphere. It feels more like a knockoff Sunday social than a funeral. Though, Jed has to admit, he hasn’t attended a great many social events in graveyards.

I could do better than this, he thinks. *He deserves better than a shitty funeral. It’d be the least I could do.*

At least there’s a decent crowd. The only thing worse than an impersonal funeral is an impersonal, poorly-attended one. But there’s Jane and Annie, leaning on each other near the front of the church, and poor Micah standing alone in front of the grave marker with his arm wrapped up next to his body. Jed turns, slowly enough as to not attract attention, and spots Maggie and her husband a little ways back. Her skin must have already gone blank by now. He wonders how long it’ll take them to get used to it.

Boy, everybody's here. There's even a couple people Jed doesn't recognize. One of them catches his gaze as he turns – their eyes are bright under the shade of the hat, but there's a bandana over the rest of their face and a pick in their hand, which means they could be just about anybody. He nods politely at them and twists back toward the pastor.

“...though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil...”

The words feel like a kick in the teeth. *Why the hell is that the standard line they use at funerals?* It ain't right. They should be thinkin' about what they're missing, not what some stodgy old pastor has to say about a kid he never even liked that much. Jed could do a better speech and he wouldn't even have to prepare.

Luke Maitland, he thinks, the nicest kid I ever met. He was good, and kind, and that might not sound like much, but it's rare enough to find a man who's either. Luke was both, even when I didn't deserve it.

I wish I'd done him better.

He starts paying attention just as the pastor is finishing his shitty eulogy.

“...will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.”

“Amen,” the crowd choruses.

“Amen.” Jed turns away, toward the glass that hasn't gone away since he came back. He can't be here any longer.

Chapter End Notes

warnings: character death - luke gets stuck outside and dies with the sunrise, then the rest of the chapter is focused on the effects of his death and his funeral

okay so this chapter was up for a good few hours before I realized I forgot to add the above warning and I'm so sorry for that!! totally my bad - great reminder that i should double check everything before i post it :grimace: again, my deepest apologies for that!!

Chapter 9: Time Goes On

~~Thursday, July 9, 1871~~

Thursday, July 9

I got ran out of the bar for the night – Jane handed me a stack of paper and told me to go talk at someone else for a while. I can't really blame her. She and Annie were playing cards while I was thinking out loud, and I guess Annie's started to pick up on Micah's little tricks. She's not very happy, but I guess I wouldn't be either. Then again, I know better than to bet against him when we play.

I'm worried about him. There's not much to do in our little town as it is, but I think he's having a real hard time adjusting to being alone. But I guess I can't say much, can I? ~~I miss~~

I asked him how he's holding up. It was a few days ago, but I'm still thinking about what he said – let's see if I can remember it right. I asked him if it was hard, doing what he's doing, and this was what he told me: "Of course it is. I keep trying to lean on a shoulder that isn't there. I reach for a hand that isn't going to reach back. But what other choice do I have?"

Then he said something about how it's a good thing he can't leave, cause if he had the chance he'd go join him in a heartbeat. That's when I started to worry.

There's not much I can do about it. I hope he's alright. ~~I can't~~ I don't want to lose anybody else.

It's been a month and we're still locked in. We're running out of stuff to do to pass the time. At least we had Rome before, but without that outlet – I don't know. I don't really know how to describe it. I guess I almost miss them. Not that bastard – if I never see him again, it'll be too soon – but I kinda miss the fighting. At least it was something new.

Good news, though! Turns out our supplies don't ever run out. Stuff breaks and gets dirty and all that, but consumables are just fine. So the bar is still pretty well stocked (though none of it is top shelf. I ain't forgetting that anytime soon.)

I still don't quite understand what it is that keeps us here. Or that put us here in the first place. If I had to guess, it's the same mystical shit as the scars, but I wouldn't put money on it. If we manage to get out soon, it'd be real nice to try and figure it out.

Wednesday, May 23

I can't remember the date off the top of my head. Doesn't that just tell me all I need to know? It's too damn hard to keep track of the days. But if you don't get too picky about the specifics, we're coming up on a year since we got locked up. I can't believe it. It's like the time has flown by, but every day is a drag. How does that work? I don't know. It's just the way it is.

I've had to accept that a lot of stuff is just the way it is. It's

I don't know where I was going with that. I got pulled away halfway through the sentence and lost the thought. Some timing it was – I hardly ever get needed these days. We're pretty self-sustaining. There's not too much infighting anymore, and I thank God for that every day. I don't know what we'd do if we went to war with ourselves.

We started working on the railroad a little while ago. I don't know why. Whatever makes our supplies last forever also seems to get rid of any progress we make on it. I heard about a story like that one time, where the guy pushes a rock up a hill and it keeps rolling down. He does this same impossible task over and over and over again, just for the rock to roll back down every time. I feel like that's us sometimes. I think the guy died at the end, though, so we're doing better than he was. ~~For now, anyway.~~

The general consensus is that we gotta get out soon, and I have to say I agree. I don't know how much longer we can do this.

Sunday

Well, I forgot about these! You find all sorts of things when you clean, I guess. Reading through these old entries has been fun. I forget just how much time has passed. It's been – well, a long time. We stopped counting months forever ago. Without seasons, there's not much point in keeping track of what time of year it is. But I can say for sure that it's Sunday – the pastor about caught fire when somebody tried to suggest that Sunday might as well have been another day for all the difference it makes. Boy, I've never seen him that mad.

But I sort of get what he means. Time passes weird these days, and Sunday church is about the only thing keeping some of us going. I don't bother to attend, cause Lord knows I've heard it all before, but there's plenty of others that like it. I ain't about to tell them what they can and can't do.

Speaking of the church, I walked by the other day and noticed Luke's grave was in pretty sorry condition. The wood's all falling apart and you can hardly read his name on it anymore. ~~Has it really been that long?~~

Micah still goes and sits by it, bless his soul, so I mentioned it to Jane and she fixed it up with some scrap. I think Annie's gonna repaint it later so you can read it better. It's about the least we can do, as far as I'm concerned.

I forget how nice it is to update these entries. It really helps to jog my memory. I really ought to do it more often.

I had to dig these out again so I could write down what the hell we just saw. I don't know what day it is. I'll have to ask somebody once I'm done. But the important thing is, we saw the Romans today. I don't know what they did to get out, and I'll probably never find out, but they were out there on the floor of the big room. I forgot just how many people they have. Rome must get real crowded.

Annie was the first one to point it out, and soon enough we all had our faces pressed against the glass. Those Romans swarmed that bench like a pack of hungry ants. It was one hell of a sight. If I'm being honest, it was nice to see them, just to know that they're still out there. We hear them every now and again, making some kind of racket against the east wall, but God only knows what they're doing. But that ain't important. Tonight, they were free for the first time in – hell, I don't know. I don't keep a calendar anymore.

It didn't last long, though. That old guard came in and he was hopping mad when he saw them all out on the floor like that. He scooped up those soldiers like jacks and chucked them back into Rome. I sure wouldn't want to be in their place. That must've hurt like hell.

Even from all the way back here, Octavius was pretty easy for me to pick out in the crowd. He made a hell of an easy target for that giant. He was throwing him around so bad that I swear I could feel it a couple hundred yards away. I'm not sure how I feel about that yet. I guess I'll wait and see if anything shows up on me. That damn connection still comes in handy, I guess.

I want to hate him still. But – shit. You get years and years of hindsight and you realize it was all so stupid. Petty garbage. I don't even remember why I was so mad anymore! There was Jane that first time, but she was just fine. There was a couple of arguments, but nothing I never heard before. If I knew then what I know now, I would never have let it happen. I should've

Micah and Luke picked that fight on purpose, I found out a while back. Back in the day, I would've been pissed to hear that. But it's been a long time, and Micah was real sorry about it when he told me, and I just can't be mad at a dead man.

There was one other thing I meant to write down about the Romans and the guard today. It's real hard to hear through the glass, but I swear this is what it was. I couldn't hear what Octavius was saying, so I don't know what was so funny, but the giant laughed and told him to "be grateful they're replacing us". I don't know what that means, and God, do I wish I did. Is he getting replaced?

Are we?

I don't know. I probably never will. All I can do is write it down.

Chapter 10: Something New

Jane puts her hands in her back pockets and huffs. “That’s it. Where the hell is my pocketknife?”

“I don’t have it,” Jed says reflexively.

Annie kisses her on the cheek. “Calm down, Janey, I know exactly where it is.”

“Oh, good, ‘cause it’s got my only bottle opener. Where is it?”

“Last I saw it, Micah had it.”

“Oh.” She sighs.

“I can go get him,” Jed volunteers, already half out of his seat. “Anybody know where he went?”

Jane sighs. “Where do you think? He’s in the same place he always is.”

He finds him in the graveyard.

Micah sighs audibly as he approaches and doesn’t even turn to look. “Annie, if you’re here to remind me, you don’t need to. I *know* he’s not here, alright? It’s just a good place to think.”

“Uh,” Jedediah says.

“Oh. It’s just you. Hey, Jed.”

“Hi,” he says, glancing back despite himself. “Did you... think I was Annie?”

He nods. “Yeah, sorry. You sound like her when you walk.”

“What? What’s that supposed to – no, never mind. Hey, Janey wanted me to come find you. She said you’d be here. What have you been up to?” he asks.

“Thinking about my failures. My mistakes. The gap in my life. The freedom I used to have. How much it sucks being locked up, and how much more bearable it would be if he was here to brighten it.” He turns to Jed. “The usual. What did Jane want?”

He blinks. It takes him a second to put his train of thought back on its tracks. “Her pocketknife,” he says uncertainly. “Annie said you had it?”

“Oh, right.” He rummages around in his pocket and produces the knife. “Here it is. Did she need anything else?”

“No, that was it. You, uh, have a good night, Micah.”

He nods, turning back toward the grave. “You too, Jed.”

“I’m worried about him,” he says, dropping the knife into Jane’s hand.

Annie sighs. “Tell me about it. He’s my friend, you know? I want him to be happy again. Time goes on, but he just doesn’t seem to get any better.”

“Oh, I know. You don’t need to tell me twice.” He accepts the freshly cracked bottle Jane hands him and takes a drink. “I just don’t know what to do for him. It feels like nothing has changed since Luke died, you know?”

Jane shakes her head and takes a swig from her own bottle. “Yeah. Something’s gotta change soon.”

The glass is gone.

The glass is *gone*.

The sight of it doesn’t quite process in Jed’s mind, still half-dazed from sleep. It’s open. They could leave.

The idea fills him with a sort of manic energy and makes his scarred fingertips itch with the possibilities. But then he remembers what happened to Rome – it ain’t worth it. The guard will be back soon enough to lock them up, and there’s no point in trying to get out before then.

The railroad guys are still happily working the railroad, so Jed lets them be, but he can’t join them. The uneasy shiftiness lingers under his skin, and the hair on the back of his neck stands up. His horse must feel it, too, though he’s doing his best to sit quietly on her back. She’s not used to this – he doesn’t spend enough time with her these days.

“It’s okay,” he murmurs, patting the back of her broad head. “Somethin’ interesting is comin’ our way.”

He doesn’t know how long he sits there, waiting for the guard to come. Time still doesn’t pass the way it used to for him. He just sits on his horse and stares, listening to the workers and the railroad sing, willing something new to happen.

The guard doesn’t come. The old guy, that is – instead, there’s a new guy that shows, and he makes quite an impression when he does, falling ass-first into the desert. It’s a miracle he doesn’t break anything or kill anybody. Finally, a new story to tell around the campfire.

I knew it, he thinks, smuggier than he ought to be. *Finally*.

The railroad workers don't even panic – they throw their lines over him and pin the giant to the dusty ground with a beautiful efficiency. Jed couldn't be prouder.

The train gambit doesn't quite work out the way he's hoping, but that's fine. They don't know enough about the giants yet to have a good plan for fighting 'em, so the only thing they can do is keep trying new things till something sticks. One of these days, they'll figure it out.

Then *he* shows up.

How the hell did he get the whole army in formation that quick? Jed wonders. The bastards must have been practicing while they were all locked up. And of course their commander just as obnoxious as Jed remembers him being. He can't believe it. The first conversation they've had in God-knows-how long and it's just to yell at each other again? Ugh. This was why they avoided each other for so long.

Then before he knows it, he's screaming bullshit after the guard and his horse-riding rescuer as they ride away.

The room falls silent as the hoofbeats fade.

“So,” Micah says quietly from where he's appeared at Jed's shoulder. “What do we do now?”

Jed shrugs.

Annie slides up next to them both and grins in that way of hers that makes stupid men soft and smart men terrified. “If'n you'll excuse the interruption, gentlemen, I have me an idea.”

It's a good idea. But as it happens, they only need to use half of it – the first half of the plan, 'go rustle up some Romans', becomes moot when a certain pompous idiot delivers himself right into their hands with only a handful of soldiers to cover him.

He really should have known better.

“Come on!” Jed shouts, squaring his shoulders. “I dare you.”

To his credit, the soldier in front of him manages to look like he knows what he's doing, and the first swing of his sword is a pretty good one. But they're in Jedediah's territory here. He's spent uncountable years learning every single detail of this place. For instance, there's a rock that lives about two inches from where the soldier is about to step, so Jed kicks it with the tip of one toe. The soldier's foot lands on the rock and skids across the sand, sending him flat into the ground, tin can and all. He gasps for air.

Jed turns. He'll be fine. Probably. “Anybody else wanna try me?” he challenges.

Nobody takes it – his friends and neighbors are already putting up one hell of a fight on their own. They don't even need his help to beat back their invaders.

He grins. “Octavius, you son of a bitch,” he says to himself as he looks out over the brawl. “This is the best gift you could have ever given me.”

Even better, it seems the high-and-mighty general's gotten complacent in their time apart. He gloats about it as they clap him into the stocks. "Well, wouldn't you look at this! Finally come back to say hello after all these years, huh, Octavius?"

"I am going to kill you *so hard*," he seethes.

Jed laughs over the strings of Latin he's spitting. "Cuss me out all you want, darlin', you know it don't work on me. It never has," he says, leaning closer, "and it never will."

Octavius's head turns, and for a moment Jed's not sure if he's gonna kiss him or spit in his face. He doesn't do either; he just turns and glowers at the empty wall across the room.

Jedediah leans back on his heels and crosses his arms. "Oh, I did miss you."

The glass is gone again the next night. Now, he doesn't waste any time not believing it; the whole town is suffused with a bubbly energy that can't be ignored.

Jed stands at the edge of the world, glorying in the feeling of moving air on his face, when Micah dashes up to him and nearly topples off the edge in his excitement. "Jed!" he says, and he's smiling so brightly that Jed almost doesn't recognize him for a second.

"Careful there!" Jed says, catching him by the wrist. "Everything alright?"

"The railroad guys wanna start on the tunnel into the mountain!"

"Alright." He pauses. "So what do they want me for?"

He grins. "They wanna dynamite it."

Now that – that he wants to see.

"But I'd hurry if I were you! They don't wanna wait for long."

Jed smiles. "Let's go."

Jedediah only has time for one thought – *these damn giants ruin everything* – when he's plucked unceremoniously from the West and set on top of the bench. And oh, *great*, look who else is here. He crosses his arms and does his best to ignore Octavius while Gigantor talks at them. So he wants to know why they can't just get along, does he? Well, Jed's not about to spill all his business to some stranger, so he rolls his eyes and says, "Look, we're men. We fight, okay? That's what we do."

Octavius shrugs next to him. "It's kind of how we pass the time."

Jed blinks. *Oh, so now we're on the same page?* His annoyance might show through a little too much when he calls the big guy a freak again, but neither Octavius nor this stranger seem

to notice.

But then—

Then—

“You’re gonna let us *out*?” he clarifies. “What, and just – just roam free?”

“Yeah,” the guy says. “Yeah, I might,” and he keeps talking, setting conditions, but Jed doesn’t hear any of it because this is their freedom they’re talking about and he was starting to think they’d never get to have it ever again. He doesn’t care what it takes if it means he can go for a fucking walk.

The giant – okay, *Larry*, whatever – gets pissy about Jed nicknaming him, and threatens them with the glass again, but Jed hardly even pays attention to what he’s agreeing to. Sounds like all he has to do is avoid the Romans, and shit, he’s been pretty good at doing that for years! That ain’t gonna be a problem.

And more importantly – they’re *free*.

He climbs the rope with a speed he hasn’t felt in years. “They’re letting us out!” he cries, flying over the edge and back into the West.

Heads in every direction turn to face him. “What?”

“They’re letting us out,” he repeats, laughing. “All we gotta do is stay away from the Romans and we’re free as a bird, baby!”

The rest of the night flashes by in bursts of excitement. Peace lasts about two hours, then he finds himself playing King of the Hill for the top of the bench with none other than Octavius. It’s just like old times. But that, too, passes faster than he thinks it will. Then it’s later, and it kills him to admit it, but Gigantor is right. They really aren’t that different. Jed looks at him sideways, and meets his eyes, and all the happy memories float back to the front of his mind like it was yesterday.

They find themselves heading outside for the first time since they woke up here. There’s snow on the ground, which is strange enough, but stranger still is the fact that he and Octavius are actually working as a team. His forearm is pressed against Octavius’s shoulder as they bear down on the air pipe with the spear. It’s a ridiculous situation, even for them, but the daredevil in Jed is still enjoying it. Then the guys that came outside with them are blown away and it suddenly gets a lot more serious.

Jed digs his heels into the snow and puts every ounce of strength into the spear. He can’t fail now.

Octavius’s chest heaves. “Save yourself!” he calls.

NO.

It's an immediate, violent instinct – he's not leaving him behind. The words fall right out of his mouth. "I ain't quitting you!"

Oh, shit, where did that come from? He wasn't expecting to say that, but there's no time to tease out that problem. They've got to get back inside first, and he suspects it'll take several days to pick apart whatever the hell just happened.

Then again, maybe he shouldn't assume he'll live that long.

The car is a spur-of-the-moment, seat-of-the-pants idea. Octavius climbs into the passenger side and Jed takes the driver's seat without a word between them. He wraps his fingers around the steering wheel and finds the pedals with the tips of his boots.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Octavius asks.

Jed looks him in the eye. He can't resist showing off a little bit. "Yes," he says, and floors it.

By the time Jed gets back to the West, there's barely ten minutes left before sunrise will hit. The edge of the world looms high above him. He stares at the rope with doubt forming sharp crystals in his gut.

"Jed!" Annie looks down over the edge. "Holy shit!"

Jane's head appears next to hers. "Oh my God, he lived."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

Annie laughs. "Please! We had complete and total faith in you. Now get your sorry ass up here before it's too late."

He looks at the rope. "I don't think I'm gonna make it, y'all. I'm just gonna live down here forever."

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

Between Annie and Jane's combined strength, they manage to haul him up and over the ledge. He sprawls out on the dirt like a ragdoll.

"Welcome back, partner." Jane nods at him. "Sounds like you had a fun night, huh?"

He shakes his head, smiling despite himself. "You have no idea."

Every night that Jedediah wakes up a free man, he's filled with a new gratitude. They really didn't know what they had till they lost it.

The same sentiment goes for the car – though after driving the little blue sports car, he doesn't really miss the big yellow behemoth from that first night. He'd been more than happy to walk away from that crash with nothing left behind but a couple new scars, both natural and otherwise. The blue car is even zippier than the last one, and *much* fancier – he's pretty sure the interior is real leather. It's quite the change.

There's one other big change, of course, and that's his passenger. Octavius doesn't ride along with him all the time, but he's there more nights than not.

The strangest thing might be the talking. It's both familiar and utterly new, these conversations they have. Everything and nothing is different. He tells him about the West, Jane and Annie and Micah and Luke, and in return he gets stories of the ridiculous shenanigans that the Romans got up to while they were gone. Octavius tells him that Rome counted forty years of captivity and Jed almost throws him out of the car, but not in a mean kind of way.

They don't talk about the new scars that mark both their skins. They talk, but they don't say a thing. But it's fine. Jed figures they never will, not while this arrangement is working out for them. It would take something real big to throw off their routine.

Chapter 11: Clarity

As far as Jedediah is concerned, the less said about the Smithsonian trip, the better.

Unfortunately for him, nobody else seems to agree. As soon as the bar is unpacked from the crates, the townsfolk pack it right back up again. The atmosphere inside can only be described as jubilant. Liquor flows like water as they take a collective sigh of relief.

Personally, he'd be having a lot more fun if he couldn't hear half the damn town talking about him and Octavius. All he catches is snippets of conversation as he works his way through the crowd, but it's plenty enough to put a damper on his mood.

"Did you see—"

"—yes, what a story! You know, I didn't think—"

"—so chivalrous, honestly, like it was right out of a storybook—"

"—*my* husband was never that brave, is all I'm saying—"

"—do you know if he's still, you know, single? Because I sure would—"

He finally approaches the five-chaired table in the back corner and sits down with a groan.

"Rough night, sugar?" Annie pushes a pile of poker chips at him.

He looks flatly at her. "Do you have any idea how much sand I poured out of my clothes this morning?"

"Broken glass, too, I'd imagine," Jane says. She slides her chips into the pot and takes a couple of his. "Come on, Jed, ante up."

Micah deals the cards. "It would seem you and the general are the talk of the town once again, amigo. Not that they ever really stopped."

Jedediah picks up his hand and sighs. "They can't all be gossiping about me. Can they?"

"I don't know, you only dramatically escaped death thanks to a heroic last-second rescue by a literal knight in shining armor," Annie points out. "Yeah, I can't imagine why they'd wanna talk about that."

"It wasn't that big of a deal! I was fine!"

"Right, you were so fine that you were about to give him an entire speech's worth of last words."

"How do you know about that," he despairs. It's not really a question.

Micah snorts. “Oh, you are not quiet.”

He... can't argue with that one. “Okay,” he says, switching gears. “Fine. So what if I wanted to tell him I'd miss him if I was dead? He's my friend! I'd say the same to any of you.”

Jane flicks through her cards. “You're in love with him, you know,” she says bluntly.

Well, that was unwarranted. “I am not!” he protests.

“Uh-huh. And that's why you're always goin' on drives with him, is it?”

“I like havin' him around!”

“Do you now?”

“Yeah. He's funny, okay? And he has good ideas. And if he doesn't, he's always ready to go along with whatever stupid shit I think up. And God only knows why, but he forgave me for everything I did to him. I mean, even if you ignore the last couple days, he's still saved my life more'n a few times.” He puts down his hand. “I'd be crazy not to want him in my passenger seat.”

Then he realizes what he's said.

“Wait.”

Jane smiles. “Oh, honey, subtlety really ain't your strong suit.” She looks at his cards. “And neither is diamonds. That's the worst hand of the round.”

“Oh,” he says, thunking his forehead against the tabletop. “Fuck. What do I do?”

“It's okay, sugar,” Annie says, patting him on the shoulder. “These chips ain't worth real money.”

“Not that. I just – oh, my God. I think I might still be in love with him.”

Somewhere to his right, Micah snorts.

Jane levels a look at him. “What, and you're surprised?”

He sits up.

“You don't need to be mean, Janey,” Annie says, swatting her on the arm.

“No, I'm actually not trying to be rude, for once! But actually, you're *surprised?*” She lays her cards down and shakes her head. “Ever since you first met him, there's been something there. Even I could see it then, and I had an arrow sticking out of my tit. But it still hasn't changed! Anybody with eyes can see it. My mother can see it, for fuck's sake, and she's been dead for a hundred and fifty years.” She leans across the table and pokes him in the chest. “Honey, you don't know how to exist without being in his orbit. It'd be kind of pathetic if you weren't so damn sweet on him. There's just no point denying it anymore.”

Micah nods. “You have a chance. Don’t waste it.”

A heavy sigh escapes his lips. “Yeah. Y’all are right.”

“Always are,” Annie says, smiling.

Jane collects the cards and puts them back in a neat pile. “So what are you gonna do about it?”

“I don’t know.” He leans back in his chair. “God, why can’t this fate thing be easy? I thought that was supposed to be the whole point of the soulmate thing, ‘cause you’re made for each other. That’s what Ma always said.” He blinks. “Then again, Ma was one hell of an idealist. God knows we’ve seen enough weirdness that I should have known it wasn’t gonna be that easy with him.”

The room is still filled with the noise of the crowd, but the other three people at the table have gone dead silent.

“What?” he says, feeling self-conscious.

Annie drops her cards and her voice. “You and Octavius?” she whispers.

“Yeah?”

“You two are – oh, my God.” Jane exchanges a look with Annie. “Are they really? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t know!” she hisses. “Do you think I would have tried to break them up if I did? I mean, I might be a bitch, but I’m not a monster!” She runs her hands down her braid. “Oh, fuck me. Why didn’t you say something before, Jed?”

“Well, I thought you knew!”

Jane shakes her head. “No, man, you never said anything!”

“Didn’t I?” He fiddles with the edge of his glove as he thinks, where the silver scar marks the skin underneath. “I swear I have. I... oh, shit. Maybe not.”

Annie has her head in her hands. “I can’t believe it. I can’t *believe* it!”

“It’s alright, darlin’, it’s not your fault.” She pats her on the back and stares at Jed. “We didn’t know.”

“Fine, fine, I get it! I should’ve told you. Well, now you know, so.” He clears his throat. “Are y’all done interrogating me?”

“No, ‘cause now I want my question answered even more. Okay, so he’s your literal perfect match and you’re in love with him. What the hell are you gonna do about it?”

“I don’t know. What am I supposed to do?”

“You could talk to him! God, Jed, I thought you’d gotten better at this whole emotions thing.”

“I have! Or I thought I did.” He sighs. “I guess when it comes to him, I just can’t think straight.”

“You don’t say,” Jane mutters.

Annie elbows her in the ribs.

“Look,” she continues, unfazed, “I don’t know what else to tell you. I hate to say it, but you need to man up.”

“She’s right,” Micah says.

Annie nods. “Come on, Jed, you can do it. You see him often enough, so just talk to him! God knows enough of our problems would’ve been solved if we’d all been better at talkin’ to one another.”

All three of them are looking at him hopefully. He hates to crush their spirits, but... “I can’t.”

“Why the hell not?” Jane groans.

He shakes his head. “I... there’s a lot of history between us, y’all know that. There’s a lot of old wrongs that I just don’t think I can right. It don’t matter if I want to kiss him or not, because it ain’t gonna be the same either way. For all I know, he never actually forgave me, and he’s just waitin’ for a chance to bust my head on the hood of the car.”

“If that’s what you think, then I can’t help you.” Jane gets up and glances between Annie and Micah. “I’ll be right back. I don’t know about you two, but I need more liquor to deal with this.”

Annie stage-whispers at Micah. “Did you say anything about kissing? Cause I wasn’t saying anything about kissing.”

Jed glares at her. “I’d like to play some cards now, if you two are done bullyin’ me.”

They both smile at him, and he gets the distinct sense that he’s being made fun of.

As he waits on the floor outside Rome for the third time this week, the conversation still weighs heavy on his mind. Tonight isn’t a night-hours kind of night, so they’ve got free roam of the museum.

“Where to?” he asks, leaning against the hood of the car as Octavius approaches.

Octavius carries himself ramrod straight and doesn’t meet his eyes. The tension in his shoulders must be visible from a mile away.

“Oct?” he says softly. “Are you alright?”

He takes a shaky breath. “I’m sorry,” he says, and the words almost seem like they fall out against his will. “I can’t keep doing this. I just can’t do it any longer.”

Well.

Jed’s not going to act like that doesn’t sting. Sure, they have history, but he’d hoped they could work past that. God knows they can never go back to the way they used to be, no matter what Jed feels about it, but there’s no law that says they can’t be friends. He might not be able to kiss him, but he still wants him in the passenger seat while he drives. But he also can’t say he’s surprised. Octavius is more than entitled to tell him to go to hell, after everything they’ve done to each other.

“Okay,” he says after a minute. “Do you... I can leave, if that’s what you want. You can go on home.”

“What I want?” he says. He glances toward Jed, but he still won’t meet his eyes. “What I *want* is – no. It’s not important.”

“You can tell me. I won’t get mad. I know I ain’t the best at emotions and stuff, but I get it.”

“You do?”

He rubs the back of his neck. “Yeah. I ain’t the easiest person to get along with, I know. And whether I like it or not, we’ve got history.” He sighs. “It’s alright. I’ve been an asshole to you enough that I shouldn’t have thought you’d actually forgive me for it.”

“...what?”

“I mean – aw, hell. I don’t know. How many times have I tried to bust your head? How many scars have I given you?” He turns away so Octavius is just in the edges of his vision. He doesn’t want to look him in the eye right now. “It’s alright. I guess I don’t know what I was thinking.”

He sees him move and hears him breathe, “Jedediah, you idiot,” then Octavius is kissing him.

Instinct and old habits push his hands up – his fingers wrap around his jaw with ease, and the old familiarity of the feeling almost manages to quiet the alarm bells ringing in his head. There’s a hand fisted in the front of his shirt and another one tugging at the hair at the back of his neck, and Octavius is kissing him. His skin is smooth under Jed’s calloused fingertips, his lips are rougher than he remembers but he still tastes the same, and Octavius is kissing him.

His lips go cold. He realizes with a start that Octavius has pulled away.

It’s like he’s crashed the car again. This – he doesn’t know what to do with this. He’d been expecting him to break it off entirely, to tell him he never wanted to see him again, and he’d prepared for that. He’d had a Plan A, and B, and C, but whatever’s happening now is something like Plan Z. The air might have filled his chest again, but his mind still feels like it’s stuffed with cotton. “What was that?”

Octavius closes his eyes and sighs. “A poor decision. I apologize. We may never speak of it again.”

His hair is still mussed up and his lips are very pink. It takes Jedediah a second to get his thoughts orderly enough to speak. “No, I – I think we should.” He puts a hand on his bare forearm, right over the pink scar that sits on the skin.

Octavius looks pained. “Do we have to?”

“I think we do. Look, I’m trying to be better than I used to be.” In a stroke of bravery, he slides his hand down his arm and slips their fingers together. “I’m sick of not tellin’ people things. All it does is screw me over. I already tried keeping secrets about you once, and it ruined everything, so I’m not gonna let that happen again. I know better now, alright? I won’t lose you, not if there’s something I can do about it.”

Octavius blinks at him. “Really?”

“Yes! I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it. Hell, do you know how much I’ve been thinking about it since the whole Smithsonian thing? I mean, if it wasn’t for my friends, I probably wouldn’t have figured out I was in love with you for another couple years or something stupid like that, but this is what I got to work with right now. I don’t know what else to tell you, darlin’.” He claps a hand over his mouth. “Jesus, I don’t know where all that came from. I’m gonna shut up now before I embarrass both of us.”

Octavius reaches up and pulls his hand away. He smiles softly. “I don’t mind.”

“You sure?”

“Jedediah,” he tells him, “you may talk all the time, but do you have any idea how long I’ve been waiting for you to *say* something?”

“Octavius?”

“Yes?”

“Shut me up already.”

He does.

Chapter 12: Second Chances

It's not perfect.

It never will be - Jedediah knows it won't - but it's good enough. He's a little better at talking than he used to be, and Octavius is a little more direct. They're working on it.

"I should like to meet these friends you keep referring to," Octavius tells him one night.

"You have! A couple times."

"That doesn't count," he says, flushing slightly. "You told me the stockade wouldn't count."

He laughs. "No, I was thinking about the times you were tryin' to invade. Trust me, darlin', they know who you are."

"But *I* don't know *them*. They are your friends! At the very least, I should make an attempt to be cordial."

Jed shrugs. "I don't know any of yours."

Octavius doesn't respond.

"What?"

"I... don't have any. Certainly not in the same way that you do."

"Really? What'd you do when we were all locked in?"

"Mostly? Argued with the Senate." He shrugs. "I ran drills with the army if the Senate didn't need me. If the army didn't need me, then there was really nothing to do, so I would sit in my rooms and make an attempt to sleep. Then at least I would have some dreams to try to interpret. It was better than doing nothing."

That's—

That is—

"Fuck," Jed mutters. "I'm sorry I asked. Boy, you sure know how to make a guy feel two inches tall."

Octavius snickers.

"Oh, hush, it's just a turn of phrase. *Anyway*. I think Annie would adopt you on the spot if she heard you say that."

"Why?"

“She loves takin’ care of people. It shows kind of funny sometimes, but she really does.” He stands. “You’re right, darlin’. Come on, let’s go see if we can’t find ‘em.”

To no one’s surprise, they’re hanging out in the saloon when they walk in.

“Jed!” Annie cries, actually clapping her hands in glee. “So we finally get to meet the boyfriend, huh?”

Jane grins. “Well, well. Look who’s come to grace my humble establishment with his mighty presence.”

“I hate you both so much,” Jedediah groans. “Y’all, this is Octavius. Octavius, this is the gang. That’s Annie and Micah at the bar, and Jane’s the one behind it. She owns this place. The rest of us only got tents, so we pretty much live here when we ain’t doing anything else. That’s the reason hardly anybody else comes in here,” he adds in a whisper. “Janey scares ‘em all off.”

Annie reaches out to shake his hand. “It’s sure nice to finally meet you, sugar.”

Micah greets him next. “Yeah, I always prefer to meet people when no one’s teeth are getting knocked out.”

“Uh,” Octavius says, lamely returning the handshake.

Jed shakes his head. “That was one time! God, you people have long memories.” He drags Octavius to the usual table and sits down. “Come on, I thought y’all were trying to be nice to me, seeing as you were half the reason I even have to reintroduce everybody in the first place.”

“Don’t blame us for your fuckups, honey,” Jane says. “It’s like my experiments. Hey, toga boy, you want to try something new?”

Jed ignores the nickname and prays Octavius does too. “Trust me, you should say no. It’ll burn your insides out and she won’t even feel bad. Honestly, it’s a waste of liquor.”

She points an accusing finger at him from behind the bar. “I can hear you, you know. And I got two words, Jedediah: infinite fucking booze!”

“That’s three, you lush. You can’t even count! What am I gonna do with you?” Annie says, laughing.

Octavius blinks politely. “Jedediah, your friends are very colorful.”

“You’re goddamn right we are!”

Micah joins them at the table with his drink in one hand and a deck of cards in the other. “Ignore her. Has Jed taught you to play poker yet?”

“I haven’t,” Jed cuts in, “but you don’t get that privilege either, you cheating son of a bitch. If I had any cash, I wouldn’t put a cent of it on a game with you.”

He grins. “Good. You shouldn’t.”

“What are we playing?” Jane calls.

“Texas hold’em,” Micah says.

“Oh, I want in. Come on, Annie, let’s play.”

They settle themselves around the table, bumping elbows as they move, and a thought worms its way unbidden into Jedediah’s mind; this is the first time in a depressingly long time that there hasn’t been an empty chair at the table. But he’s not going to say anything. Micah looks happy as he shuffles the deck, probably coming up with new and creative ways to cheat, so he’s not going to mention it to him. Not yet, anyway.

Jane looks at Octavius with a surprisingly genuine smile. “Really, though, can I get you anything? We’ve got...” She glances back at the bar. “Well, we’ve got beer and bottom-shelf whiskey. I got rotgut, too – I think it was originally supposed to be gin, but that shit will burn your eyebrows off if you ain’t careful. A lime would make it a hell of a lot more drinkable if I had one, but I guess the diorama people didn’t see fit to give us anything good. God, but I miss food,” she mutters.

Micah looks at his cards and sighs. “I would die for an orange.”

“Peaches,” Jed says reverently. “Warm from the sun and so ripe you can peel ‘em with your fingers.”

“Fresh vegetables. With oil and vinegar,” Octavius adds.

“To hell with vegetables. You know what I miss? Sumbitch stew.” Annie leans back in her chair. “All the best parts of the cow, right there! You know, that’s what I wanted for my last meal, but they wouldn’t give it to me.”

Octavius looks up. “Your last meal?”

“Yeah, the thing they feed ya before they kill ya.”

“Yes, I’m familiar with the concept,” he says.

“Annie,” Micah says slowly. “What happened?”

She sips her drink. “Public execution.”

“What?!”

“Oh, yeah. They hanged me right in the middle of town. The folks in the town put up a whole commotion about it, but the sheriff and his gang won out in the end. Though I’m still here and those bastards are long gone, so who’s the real winner here?”

“What...” Jane looks baffled. “Annie, what the hell did you do?”

“Oh, I shot that Dixon bastard!” She laughs. “Boy, that whole family was a real piece of work, but he was the most rotten one of the bunch. His poor wife kept comin’ to me with all kinds of scrapes and bruises and shit. She came over one time with her arm bent in three places, and you know me – that was just the last straw. So I reset the bone for her, went over to their house, and killed him a little later that night.”

Octavius shoots Jed a helpless sort of look.

“Of course, the sheriff wasn’t happy about that,” she continues, unbothered. “I tried to tell him that I’d only given him what he deserved, but he wouldn’t hear none of it. You know, I sat in jail for a month before they finally hung me. At sunrise, of course, to try and head off any accusations of impropriety. But there was still quite the audience!” She laughs again. “Dangers of livin’ in a cattle town, you know. Everybody’s awake before dawn. And you know everybody wants to go, just to say they saw a woman get hanged.”

For a long second, nothing but silence hangs in the air.

“So who’s bettin’ first?” Annie chirps.

Jane shakes her head fondly and slides a handful of chips into the center of the table. “You know, darlin’, some of us just died of smallpox like a normal person.”

Octavius lays a hand on Jed’s thigh and leans closer. “Are they always like this?” he whispers.

“Pretty much. You get used to it.”

“I’m not concerned,” Octavius says. “After all, how long have I known *you*?”

Jane fake-gags at them. “God, can you two go back to bein’ at each other’s throats? I liked it better that way.”

“Oh, we sure can,” Jed says, grinning. “But I don’t think you’d like that much better.”

“You are the worst, sugar. Come on, ante up, ya lovebirds.” Annie shakes her head.

Their hands rest on Jed’s thigh, fingers intertwined. He smiles. He’s with his friends, and with Octavius, and nobody’s trying to kill each other. It’s good. It’s right.

It’s what he’s been waiting for.

Chapter 13: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I got an idea,” Jed says one quiet night. “I think we should take a page out of Micah's book and tell fate to go to hell.”

Octavius groans into his shoulder. “Oh, no, and I was almost asleep. At least let me get my helmet first.”

“No, no, it ain't that bad. I was just thinking about the new caveman, remember him?”

“Unfortunately, yes. What about him?”

“Well, he had to have come from somewhere. And so did we, and that got me thinking. What's stopping us from getting on the computer?”

Octavius blinks sleepily at him. “I trust you, my love, but I'm not sure I follow.”

“It'll make sense once I explain. I just think I might be able to make up for one more thing that happened a long time ago.”

From: collections@amnh.org

Subject: Replacement “Lucas” figurines for Old West diorama?

To: customer.service@historyminis.net

Good morning! During a recent audit of our exhibits, we discovered that our Old West diorama is missing a cowboy. After cross-checking with the original order forms, it seems that the missing man is a “Lucas” mold from the 1956-1962 set...

Rebecca sits at the front desk and ignores the notifications on her phone while she waits for closing time. *Two minutes, Mom, she thinks. Give me two minutes and I will call you back. Stop panicking. I'm not dead.*

A woman steps through the front door and looks around.

“Hi, I’m sorry,” Rebecca says, raising her voice a little. “But we’re actually just about to close.”

“Sorry!” the woman says. She holds out a small brown package. “It’s okay, I’m not here to visit – I’m here way more often than I should be, anyway. No, I just saw the FedEx guy drop this on the front stairs. And it’s addressed to the collections department? It seemed like something that should probably, uh, not get left on the front step.”

“Oh, thank you! Yes, that keeps happening, I don’t know what’s wrong with the delivery people lately...” She takes it and reads the label, ignoring the phone buzzing angrily in her pocket. “Oh, it’s from the diorama vendor. I’m so sorry, but if you know the building already, could you go and leave it in the Hall of Miniatures? I really need to get going soon, and the night guard should find it just fine. And if he doesn’t, then the collections team will find it when they come in tomorrow morning. Either way, someone will take care of it.”

When the sun sets, the first thing Jed notices is the cardboard box sitting on the bench seat. He squints at it; sure, it’s pretty far away, but he could swear it wiggles a little as he watches.

“Weird,” he mutters.

Then he remembers last week’s project.

“Oh, *shit*.” He starts heading down the sloped paths. “Hey, Annie?”

She meets his eyes from twenty yards away and nods. “I see it! Come on, Janey, it’s time.”

“What?” It takes Jane a second to react; she must still be a little bit asleep. “Where are we – oh, fuck me, I got it. I’m on my way.”

He stops at the edge and pokes his head out past the wall. “Octavius! We’re gonna need to borrow some of your guys again!”

His voice wafts out from Rome. “Is it here?”

“Yep! And we ain’t got time to waste, so come on. It’s been long enough already.”

Getting up on the bench is a lot easier than it used to be, now that he’s not being shot at. Octavius is right on his heels as they scale the left-side rope. The two Roman soldiers are making quick progress up the right-hand one – Jed tries to remember their names as he climbs, but he can’t keep a hold on both his memory and the rope at the same time. But it doesn’t really matter; there’s more important things to worry about right now.

The box is a lot bigger up close. The sides have got to be ten feet tall, towering above their heads like it is. Jedediah narrows his eyes at the cardboard. It’s almost like it’s taunting him – the thought doesn’t make any sense, but his mind is too occupied with planning to do language properly. “Octavius,” he says, “can you get up there?”

He looks between him and the top of the box, considering. “I can if you give me a boost. On your shoulders, I think, like—”

“—when we climbed those stairs?” he finishes.

Octavius nods. “Exactly.”

Jed kneels without another word. They have this down to a science, this whole “working as a team” thing, and it’s easy to help him up to the top of the box. “Slice open that tape now, would you, darlin’?” he calls, once he’s safely there.

As Octavius unsheathes his sword and turns around, Jedediah suddenly finds his mouth dry and his stomach unsettled. *What if it doesn’t work?* There’s a lot that could have gone wrong already, and even more in the steps of the plan that are yet to come, all of which he’s been doing his best to ignore until right this moment.

“Come on,” he mutters.

The sword cuts through the tape with ease. Octavius gets the far side taken care of in a snap and moves on to the near side, dragging the tip of the sword behind him as he goes. It glides effortlessly through the strip of tape that runs down the center of the box. He kneels at the edge and gets to work on this side, but then Jedediah sees what’s about to happen a fraction of a second before it does.

“Wait!” he calls, watching Octavius’s foot slip on the glossy tape, but it’s too late for him to recover.

He falls, taking the sword with him, and it bites a jagged line into the cardboard. The sword slows his fall just enough that Jed manages to catch him – if breaking his fall with his body counts as catching, anyway.

Jedediah doesn’t bother apologizing right now. There’ll be time to kiss it better later. When they get back up, it’s plain to see that the flaps have opened a bit, but it’s not very far at all. Jed can still see thin sections of tape straining at the corners.

“Damn,” Octavius mutters. “I missed a spot.”

He glares at the box. They’re so close. There must be an easy way that he’s just not seeing.

“Wait!” one of the Roman soldiers says. “I have an idea.” He kneels by the hook end of the climbing rope and pops it out of the upholstery, coiling the rope as he pulls it up. He swings the hook in expert circles, preparing to throw it.

“Where’d he learn to do that?” Jed mutters, worried for a different reason now.

Octavius leans over. “I think he’s been spending time with the cowboys.”

“Oh, God.”

The hook sails over the top of the box and lands perfectly in the space under the flap on the opposite side.

“Well, I’ll be damned.”

“Brace the other side!” the soldier calls to his friend. He tugs on the rope.

Once again, Jed can see what’s about to happen. “Wait—”

The flaps pop open and the box tips over, sending a cascade of shredded paper pouring out.

Goddammit, he thinks.

Then something stirs inside the pile of shreds and Jedediah has to remind himself to breathe. *This is it. This is why we’re here.*

When he pops up, Luke’s ginger hair is a stark contrast against the dull browns of the packing. He spits a fleck of paper out of his mouth and grins. “Hey, Jed!”

Holy shit, it worked.

“Boy, am I glad to see you,” he continues. “How’s it going?”

He grabs his arm and helps him upright. “Hey, Luke. You alright?”

“Peachy. It’s been a weird couple weeks, let me tell you, but now it seems I’m fit as can be.” He side-eyes Octavius. “Y’all sure work fast. Made up already, huh?”

“Oh, you have no idea.”

Luke bends down and roots around in the paper for his hat. “Now, that sounds like a story I’ve got to hear.”

“You will,” Octavius promises. “In due time. I believe there are a few things you ought to do first.”

Jedediah extends a hand to him. “Come on home, Luke. There’s a few people who are gonna be real happy to see you.”

Luke looks around the West as they walk. “It looks different around here,” he comments. “Did we replace the light? The rocks get a new paint job or something?”

“It’s probably dust,” Jed admits. “It’s been a while since anybody deep-cleaned around here.”

“Really, y’all have been slacking off? Come on, it ain’t been that long.”

Octavius looks at him, wide-eyed.

Jed shrugs helplessly. “What do you want me to do?” he whispers.

“What’d ya say?”

“I said we’re here,” he lies to Luke. “Ignore the new half of the porch - that’s a story for later.”

The doors swing open noiselessly, opening up into the cozily-lit bar.

“When did Janey find time to redecorate?” Luke wonders.

“She didn’t. I did,” Annie says, smiling at him. “Nice to see you, sugar.”

“You too, Miss Ogden.”

She gets out of her seat. “Oh, it’ll be Mrs. Ogden soon enough,” she says offhandedly, then calls up the stairs. “Hey, Jane, sweetheart?”

Luke turns to Jed. “Are they getting married? Oh, my God! When’s that happening?”

Jane thunders down the stairs and takes the corner at a ridiculous speed. “Not soon enough!” she cries, then grabs his arm and actually kisses him on the cheek. “Welcome home, Luke.”

“Well, y’all are awful friendly today!” He laughs. “Nice to feel loved, I suppose. Hey, speaking of – where’s Micah?”

“He’s on his way. MICAH!” Jane hollers. “Get your sorry ass down here!”

Micah’s footsteps break up his words as he comes down. “Janey, I’ve already told you, I—”

He freezes at the bottom of the stairs.

The pause is so thick with unspoken emotion that you could slice it, fry it, and eat it on a sandwich.

Jedediah knows they should clear out, to give them a little privacy, but he can’t stop himself from staying here to see their reunion. Octavius’s fingers tighten around his.

When Micah finally speaks, his voice is the softest Jed has ever heard it.

“Luke?”

“Hey, partner.” He smiles, bright as the sun. “I missed you.”

Chapter End Notes

micah, much later: I guess I can stop going and talking to your gravestone, huh?

luke:

luke: my WHAT

End Notes

and that concludes *promise a future I can come back to!* it's been a wonderful journey doing this little project. my eternal thanks go to hom for being my sounding board, CarissimeScribbit and PunsAndMusicals for leaving me the sweetest comments i could ever ask for, the good people of the eata discord server for putting up with my brainrot, and of course you, the reader, for sticking through to the end with me! i really cannot thank you all enough.

you can find me at [rivstyx](#) on tumblr! my ask box is always open <3

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