

Armor; best used: gathering dust

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/35282047) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/35282047>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence , Major Character Death
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	3rd Life SMP , Minecraft (Video Game)
Relationship:	Martyn Littlewood/Rendog , Jimmy Solidarity/Scott Smajor1995 Dangthatsalongname
Character:	Martyn Littlewood , Rendog (Video Blogging RPF) , Last Life SMP Ensemble
Additional Tags:	Canon Compliant , Slow Burn , Emotional Hurt/Comfort , Introspection , Banter , putting armor on your king in a completely platonic way , apple picking , Unresolved Tension , Play Fighting , Temporary Character Death , Panic Attacks , Crying , Explosions , Scars , Guilt , Literal Sleeping Together , Hurt/Comfort , Angst , Canon Beheading , Nightmares , Rejection , they all have trauma , Jealousy , tiny bit of found family , Apologies , Poison , flower husbands is background , Tragedy , Grief/Mourning , nonlinear storytelling , Betrayal , Bittersweet Ending , First Kiss , Last Kiss
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2021-11-23 Completed: 2022-01-25 Words: 27,830 Chapters: 10/10

Armor; best used: gathering dust

by [SpiralOfShame](#)

Summary

Tentatively, he spreads his fingers out until his whole palm is pressed against the armor. The magic makes it heavier to hold but comes with a certain kind of spark. Something hard to replicate. He wonders if it somehow feels warm when Ren wears it and feels silly when he finds himself hoping it does.

Something other than logic compels him to ask.

“Let me arm you, er, put your armor on you... my king.” He stammers through the proposition.

Martyn comes up with the idea of helping Ren with his armor. A story told in the yes' and the no's of getting close enough to kill but instead offering more protection.

Notes

I saw the "where is your rider?" animatic by genesis frog on youtube, played the song on repeat for what feels like a week straight, and wrote this. I also have a playlist called "Armor: Best used; gathering dust" by Brainslipperrylikedolphin on spotify if you'd like to hear the other songs I listened to while I wrote. I'm also on tumblr as mattress-ing if your a fan of shorter stuff and weird takes

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

Your heart is ticking like a clock

He's not sure why he suggests it in the first place. Even with the rise in tensions lately, they've both been on this side of fine. Bumps and bruises heal fast here, which feels more than ironic, but he needs to stop thinking about it like that.

As it is, by the time they return to Dogwarts, it's already too late to see if Ren is more hurt than he lets on.

Besides, he doesn't *have* to care if Ren is fine. It's just better tactically. The more allies he has, the safer he'll be. So he lets himself wonder about him.

The chestplate on the table is worn, but the iron still shines brightly beneath the scratches. It's cool where he dares to lay a finger on it. He shouldn't be touching it, not when it's the sole thing keeping his king alive, not when the word friends still feels like a stretch, but Ren has his back turned looking through their storage for something.

Tentatively, he spreads his fingers out until his whole palm is pressed against the armor. The magic makes it heavier to hold but comes with a certain kind of spark. Something hard to replicate. He wonders if it somehow feels warm when Ren wears it and feels silly when he finds himself hoping it does.

Something other than logic compels him to ask.

"Let me arm you, er, put your armor on you... my king." He stammers through the proposition.

In all truth and fairness, it would have been odd if Ren had accepted. Neither has a good reason to trust the other this far. Nothing beyond a lack of betrayal holds them together and even taking off this piece stretches their bond.

It felt like a test. The casualty with which he had placed it on the table in itself was an invitation, a question. What *will* he do if his king stands with his vulnerable back to him?

Ren turns to answer, and he freezes, caught with his hand still outstretched. The question swiftly answered.

The beating of his heart thunders in his ears. They both look at his hand, immobile on the armor. He can't read Ren's expression past curiosity and patience. He's waiting, calculating intent.

Stalemate looms.

His move. Slowly, he moves his hand, keeping it away from his sword or bow. Instead, he puts both his hands out, palm up. The gesture loosely passes as a shrug. Neither of them believes it.

Ren's approach is nothing short of cautious; he doesn't make a show of inspecting his armor. Still, Martyn notices his eyes pass over the place that had been touched a couple of times. Double checking that it hadn't been tampered with.

It's almost reassuring that he doesn't trust him yet. At least he knows Ren is going to be smart about an alliance.

"Why?" It's rhetorical, Ren's affixing the armor to his body as he speaks, but he still wants to answer.

He shrugs, trying to seem unattached to the idea, "I figure if my job is to protect you, why shouldn't I put your armor on as well? If you are to trust me on the battlefield," he cracks a nervous smile and motions towards their surroundings, the room doesn't really have one specific purpose; instead it's used for whatever they need it to be used for, "Why shouldn't you trust me in the kitchen?"

Checkmate. A quirked lip. Humor calls the game off.

The last strap is fastened without him, and Ren mimics his shrug back at him, "Your cooking is enough of a reason not to trust you in the kitchen."

It's not exactly the truth, and it changes the topic, but it's not the no he was expecting. *Curious.* He'll take it.

"Careful, my king. I believe I'm in charge of dinner tonight." he jokes, letting the mood settle from their standoff.

Ren rolls his eyes and makes a show of grabbing an apple on his way out.

"I can't reach."

He can reach.

"You can reach it, my king." Martyn deadpans. Right now, he's watching as his fearless leader swings his arm wildly behind him, reaching for a pauldron that has, in fact, fallen reasonably out of reach. He's not spinning in circles, not just yet, but he may as well be for how he parades around the room, knocking his shoulder on chests and furnaces trying to move the offending object into reach.

It takes incredible mental effort to ignore the imagery of a dog chasing its tail.

Tiny beams of light from the enchantments catch in Martyn's eyes as he watches Ren grit his teeth and try to use his shovel to reach behind him. Caught in the ridiculous charm of the moment, he smothers a laugh, poorly if Ren's expression is to go by.

"You find this funny." He accuses, stopping in his tracks to level Martyn with a glare that would be intimidating were he not having trouble hiding his own sheepish smile.

"A bit." He admits. Shuffling over, he grants him a reprieve, making sure he has the king's full attention when he undoes the clasp on the front of his shoulder and catches the pauldron when it falls off.

He can't stop the grin as he drops the offending item into his hands.

Ren's mouth is agape with indignity when he steps back; his hand comes up to touch the clasp as if just now realizing it's there, "You mean I could have done that all along?"

He shrugs, enjoying the way his face contorts, trying to find the right balance between upset and embarrassed. The faintest tinge of red spells a game won for Martyn. Serves him right for donning and doffing armor incorrectly.

"Martyn," Ren chides, still incredulous, "how many times have you seen me remove my armor? When were you planning on letting me know?"

This time he lets himself chuckle and be a little petty, "I was under the impression that you didn't need my help with your armor."

Ren huffs, and he steps towards the door, errands to run. The brief distraction was well worth the delay, but alliances wait. Important, life-saving alliances. Judging by their current kingdom of two and a few tentative friendships, they'll need all the alliances they can get.

Insult to injury is too tempting, "Besides, you would have figured it out... eventually."

An indignant "Martyn!" follows him as he journeys into the cold, grinning to himself.

Meet me in the woods tonight

Chapter Summary

After mining a bunch of gold; a trip picking apples is the perfect time to discuss strategy, ponder the necessity of armor, and shove the king into a tree. Great job Martyn! Folks, he's just really good at making alliances.

Chapter Notes

Shout out to my roommate, who has been hoping for a while to have something they say end up in one of my fics. The day finally has arrived.

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

There's always a burst of smugness that follows him out of a successful mining trip. However, instead of bursting into the room, he lets himself relax and, by the time he's reached the top of the stairs, he's quite at ease. In all honesty, it's... nice. Simple.

Ren looks peaceful. Sleeves rolled up past his forearms; he's hunkered down in front of the enchanting table with a stack of books by his side. He's murmuring to himself, *must be doing some enchanting, then*.

Holding his breath, he watches for a moment as Ren licks his thumb and turns a page.

It's not really a trustworthy thing to sneak around like this, but seeing someone alone and unguarded is almost a precious thing now. Walls are going up; quicker, and higher, and filled with lava. It's hard to find peaceful moments for himself, much less see someone else at ease.

Torchlight floods the room, golden and soft yet still dangerous in how the fire licks at the air around it. The lights seem to dance with the magic in Ren's grasp, pushing and pulling but endlessly bending to his careful hands.

They all know how to enchant, but the way Ren does it makes it seem genuinely magical. He's sitting comfortably but with a sort of commanding power like there is no option but to yield to his careful instruction.

Martyn knows it won't last forever. He steps into the room, noting that Ren casts him an analytical glance. He can almost hear the mental checklist. *Friend or foe? How armored are they? Nearest weapon?* Ren's eyes, after casting a quick glance at his chestplate; hung on the wall, return to the book in his hands.

Feeling like being a bit of a menace, he drops the gold he'd retrieved onto the table in front of Ren.

"We're going to need more apples," he informs him, trying not to gloat *too* much.

Noting the amount of metal in front of him, Ren grins back, closing the book he'd been working on

with a puff of purple dust. The magic slowly shimmers onto the binding until the whole thing is cast in a purple shimmer. "Well done, Martyn! I'm actually pretty wrapped up here; I can go grab them really quick."

"I'll join," *he really needs to get a breath of fresh air, plus the added bonus of potential team building is too important to pass up on.* He stows his pickaxe and grabs a shield, "I need to get aboveground for a bit."

There's no answer but Ren hums and motions for him to follow towards the door.

The part of him that thinks it would be funny to let him go as is loses to the knowledge that many deaths here will be accidental. He hopes it isn't naive to assume so.

"Forgetting something?" he strides across the room to Ren's chestplate and tosses it to him.

Catching it, Ren shrugs, "It's just picking apples; there really isn't a need for it. Unless you wanted to tell me something."

He levels him with an unimpressed look, "Just put the chestplate on."

Shrugging, Ren starts buckling it on. Martyn doesn't comment when he notices the way he attaches the pauldrons; he just winks when he looks over to find him watching. Raising one eyebrow, Ren raps the iron with his knuckles and heads out.

When the door opens the chill that rushes in cools the layer of sweat he had worked up while mining in a pleasant way, and he finds himself humming as they travel.

Fall is on its way out, leaving winter to rush in all over the place. They're lucky that apples grow year-round, but he still wishes the leaves would change color if only to have a bit of beauty around. They're at least owed that much.

The nearest forest is a bit of a walk from the castle, but he prefers wandering above ground to underground, so he ignores the burn in his legs. They get through a row of trees with little luck on apples before Ren brings it up again. Or rather, starts to take off his chestplate again.

"Do you have some death wish that I should have known about before allying with you?" Martyn looks between him and the chestplate incredulously.

Ren shakes his head and, leaving the armor on but unstrapped, he spreads his arms out wide, "There's not a mob in sight or range, and I've stayed off of everyone's bad books," he swings at another cluster of leaves. However, it seems to be more for dramatic effect than apple picking, "I don't need to wear it right this moment."

A skeleton avoids the sun by standing under a tree a couple dozen blocks away, but he decides not to point it out. Technically, Ren's right; the mob isn't in range, and he's got actual gripes here.

He focuses on the interesting part of his sentence, "You know not being someone's enemy doesn't mean you're their friend, right?"

"Enchanting for the cost of paper or leather?" Ren shoots back, "It hardly matters how they feel about me. They're going to be nice because I have something they want, and I've been nice to them with how I've been trading for it."

Oh, he's got some screw loose if he thinks that's what's happening here. Martyn shakes his head, "They're going to get used to taking advantage of that. And then, they're going to just take what

they want because they know you'll give it to them. You need to be a little more exclusive with it - make them *want* to be your ally."

"And then they'll just kill me to get it." he retorts, scuffing his boot in the dirt angrily.

Better now than later, weed out the liars and traitors, he keeps that thought to himself. "They're going to try and kill you eventually anyway and -are you serious right now?" He storms over to where Ren's pulling the chestplate over his head and shoves it back down, using the way he startles at the contact to start redoing the straps.

Recovering quickly, Ren bats his hands away, backing up to try and gain room, "Look, you can do whatever you want with your armor, but I'm fine with having mine off."

Using one hand to hold on to the side of Ren's chestplate and guide him, he follows the other, trying to redo the rest of it single-handedly, "You're my ally, Ren. If you're unarmored, I'm unarmored. If you lose lives, I lose lives."

"And if you lose my patience, you lose lives anyway," Ren shoves him. Not aggressively, not hard enough for it to be the start of a fight, but just enough for him to lose his grip momentarily. It's the closest to a real threat either of them has come so far, "What are you willing to bet on here?"

He's back before Ren can get out of range, reattaching himself to him as best as he can. Overworked muscles burn, but it just drives him forward.

Ren steps back again, accidentally pulling him along as well. Determined eyes meet indignant ones.

Unsure how to answer, Martyn just breathes out.

They both shift at the same time. The game starts.

Their feet move heartbeats apart. Stepping forward to push the other back. Gaining leverage to follow along. They don't punch. Instead, open hands slide across those of the other, firmly redirecting momentum.

It feels like a test, but he's not sure who's being tested here, and he doesn't know why Ren hasn't given up yet, *surely it doesn't matter this much to him*. Despite everything that marks it as potentially very dangerous, it's exhilarating. For now, he's willing to let the adrenaline take over, speeding up his steps.

Ren matches him, teeth showing through his lopsided smile. He's breathing hard, but so is Martyn, and it's just cold enough out that they can see miniature clouds of their breath as they search each other's faces for tells.

Ducking branches, they whirl through the trees. Turning, a ray of sunlight lands on Ren's face, illuminating his eyes with light for a brief moment before he squints and turns them around again. Sunbeams, golden, dazzling, and bright, pass over his own face, and he realizes that Ren had thought it a distraction technique.

He'll be writing that one down for later battles, real battles.

Hills become ways to interrupt footing enough to gain the upper hand. Their breath comes in crescendos as they maneuver faster and faster and faster still. Every step a scheme, they dance with each other, advancing and retreating in their own right.

There's a discernible glint in Ren's eyes like he's also enjoying this. Maybe it's good that he isn't angry or afraid of him right now, but he needs to be afraid of something, needs to be angry at *something*. If he approaches an actual fight with humor, he's going to get killed.

Calculating, he finds his answer.

"I'm willing," he tries to hook a foot behind his ankle and trip him. Ren sidesteps, "To bet on chasing you around in the woods," something moves in his peripheral. He moves them until his shield is between it and them, unwilling to look away, "because you think you're invincible."

He manages to bait Ren into trying to shove him again. Shifting his weight, he moves to overbalance him and pushes his hands out of the way with his shield-less arm.

"You," balancing precisely, he brings a knee up to Ren's thigh, using it to shove him backward with all his might. A surprised noise leaves his mouth as his back hits a tree and Martyn follows, swiftly pinning him in place as best as he can. Strong hands catch hold of his arms, and he's suddenly very aware that Ren's strong enough to just push him away.

An arrow embeds itself in his shield, effectively stilling both of them. Catching his breath, he finishes his sentence, "are not invincible."

He turns briefly to shoot the skeleton that had fired the arrow before returning to Ren's armor. Ren stands still, shocked, hands loosely holding the straps of Martyn's armor for balance. Uninhibited now, he finishes his work, "And if you die, it's likely I'll follow, and I'd like to live through all of this."

Giving the straps of the armor a final tug, he leans back to double-check his work, though he stays close in case the point hasn't gotten through yet. As fun as it had been, he's not looking to chase him around a forest again.

By the looks of it, Ren's still recovering, eyes wide and surprised, lips parted, breathing heavily from the exchange. His face is tinted pink from the wind chill that nips at their noses. He's shivering.

"And, armor is probably warmer too." He finishes, rubbing his hands up and down Ren's arms to try and warm him up.

"Okay." Ren blurts, moving away. He's wobbly when he steps away from the tree, and Martyn hopes he hasn't accidentally injured him, "I'll keep my armor on."

Noticing a change in the mood, he steps away and returns to apple hunting. *He must have overstepped, time to be cautious.*

Behind him, Ren slams his hand against the tree, Martyn's shoulders tense, "I'm not a fool. I know we need to be careful."

Casually, Martyn combs through another set of leaves, finding an apple and tugging it from the branch. He thinks about how he's started hiding things from Ren, just in case. "Right."

"I just thought -hoped, I guess -that we would have more time before things got *dangerous*, dangerous." He admits.

Armor doesn't feel inherently safe. Instead, it just serves as a reminder that no matter where he is, someone could turn red and attack him. Any time. Any place. It doesn't let him forget that it's a requirement, not a luxury. It's not very hard to imagine Ren thinking the same thing.

"Yeah." He mutters. "I get that."

Ren doesn't respond; he just returns to picking apples. Stolen glances reveal a different man than the one who had been enchanting earlier. A sort of sadness sits between his shoulder blades at the base of his neck.

"Look, nobody's red yet, but accidents happen here a lot." He can't believe he's even going to entertain the idea, much less be the one to bring it up, "Until someone turns red, do you want to have a code word that means like 'get ready' or something like that, if I see something and you don't or the other way around? Just for now."

"I'll just keep my armor on." He can't place the emotion behind the words when Ren grumbles at the tree he's shuffling through, something like appreciation mixed with defeat maybe, but it doesn't seem that soft, "A code word might be helpful, though."

He thinks for a moment, tries to bring a little humor back, "What about cocomelon?"

"That's two syllables longer than just saying lookout." Ren huffs, but he seems to be appeased for the moment.

Turning back to his own line of trees, he grins, "We'll workshop it."

Chapter End Notes

Folks, if you're ever wondering how much a comment does, I didn't have this chapter in the fic at all until I saw comments saying y'all liked the fact that they don't trust each other yet. (Also the concept of trust is genuinely an incredibly interesting concept to write so it's a win/win situation lol) Anywho, All you lovely people throwing words back at me, you're wonderful and the comments have been so fun to read and respond to!

Quick question; do y'all think Martyn is a reliable or an unreliable narrator? Personally I don't know because while he is honest to what he knows about the situation, he also doesn't know what is going on in others' minds beyond his best guess and may misinterpret. Feel free to lmk what you think about that. (or lmk what he may be noticing but not picking up on OWO)

But, as someone who's scared to comment on other people's fics, if you don't want to that is a-okay, I still love all your faces (curse Ren because now I say that irl FUCK)

Idle Hands and Absent Armor

Chapter Summary

Martyn gets an enchanting lesson, Ren gets an armor lesson, and, oh would you look at that? Ouch Scar! That must've hurt.

Chapter Notes

Ayyy a longer chapter. Also make sure you go back and check the tags as I update because currently they're chilling in a war and that shit is going to cause problems.

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

There's a very good reason for him to wait until Ren is away to start enchanting a second set of gear.

Actually, there are multiple good reasons. He doesn't have to tell Ren that he has it, which means a secret set of armor, plus there's space and quiet for him to focus.

He tests the armor, throwing his head back in exasperation as the metal warps; it's not supposed to do that.

Reason number three; he doesn't want Ren to know that he's not exactly the most *enchanting inclined* individual out there. The best-case scenario is that he's just teased about it. Worst case; death or betrayal of some kind probably. Help always has a cost here.

He cracks his knuckles. Sanding the purple bits of dust out with the grindstone, he sets the boots aside and brings the lapis back out. At this point, it's a waste of resources, but he needs these boots to be fully kitted out.

Resetting the setup only takes a few minutes. Grinding the lapis into powder, he thinks back, tries to pinpoint where he'd gone wrong.

He's almost too caught up in thinking to notice Ren returning from outside. The breeze from the door gives him away, and Martyn leans back, stretching his back and trying not to look mad at the enchanting table.

Ren doesn't say anything, presumably leaving him to work in peace. It's considerate, but he doesn't need consideration right now. He needs to know where he's gone wrong without asking. A little ridiculous but he's not feeling the most logically sound right now.

He spreads the lapis over the enchanting table, watching the heat from the obsidian warm it until purple shines through the blue and the whole thing starts to shine.

This time, he moves with intent as he brings the boots up to the table and covers them in the dust. A familiar pull in his stomach tells him the enchantment is almost complete, and he breathes out,

working to keep his mind focused on the results. *Protection three, feather fall, and unbreaking three, please.*

The armor hums low, sparks race across the iron, affixing the lapis into place until a pattern of purple emerges from the electricity.

Ren's still in the room, rustling around behind him. If he had to guess, he'd say he's still putting supplies away.

His particular mission today had been to speak with Scar and Grian. They're the most significant threat right now, with Scar teetering on a red life and Grian's words sounding less and less honest with a larger and larger smile.

Hopefully, it went well. The last thing they need is to be the first target for the first red, better keep themselves safe until the last possible moment.

The boots crumple again as he tests the enchantments, and he pinches the bridge of his nose in exasperation.

"Trouble with the table?" Ren asks.

"I swear I'm doing everything right," he turns the boots over in his hands, "I keep getting low enchants, and I couldn't tell you why. How'd things go with Scar and Grian?"

Coming over to stand beside him, Ren inspects the boots with him. He leans in over his shoulder and makes a low intrigued noise.

It makes Martyn nervous, showing off something he knows he's done wrong. His hands feel clammy, and he only gives Ren a few seconds to look at them before he puts the boots back into the experience grinder to reset the metal.

"Well, I've made it to the top of their kill list," Ren hums distractedly, his eyes still on the boots, "But they've stayed mildly harmless for the time being, so I'm not worried about anything past them spreading their opinions of me."

"Not about to join Dogwarts with you as king?" Martyn shakes his head, "Shame, I quite like it here."

"I still think it's funny that you managed to talk your way into a job as my salesman and then we just decided that we're a kingdom and I'm a king." Ren chuckles, "The Crastle people have a more castlely setup than us; why aren't they a kingdom?"

"Where's their enchanting table and fearless knight?" he shoots back, but in truth, it had been to intimidate. Fighting a group of people is a little scary. Fighting a *kingdom*? That will scare the protection two pants off anyone. At least; that's what he hopes.

Ren shakes his head but leaves the question be. "I don't think it's any part of the enchanting process that you've got wrong, my dude." he comments, "I think it's your mind. I had the same problem the first few times."

To get the correct enchantments with any consistency, the enchanter has to visualize the desired enchantments throughout the entire process. This can't be the problem because Martyn's been thinking about protection, feather fall, and unbreaking with such vigor that it's starting to give him a headache.

Having said that, Ren does seem to have the best accuracy with these things, so whatever will help. “I’ve been pretty focused, but I guess I can try and clear my mind a little more.” he offers.

“Do you think you’ll be the winner of the server?”

He almost drops the boots at the unexpected question, “Sorry?”

“Are you expecting to live through all this, or are you expecting to die?” Ren rephrases in an entirely unhelpful way, grabbing the lapis and crushing it onto the table for him. It leaves the palms of his hands a light shade of blue, and Martyn gets the urge to brush the dust off even as his own hands are stained the same color.

“I mean, I’ll be doing my very best to win if that’s what you’re asking.” He side-eyes Ren, waiting for his answer to cause rifts between them; they both know what one of them winning means, “There’s no one here not doing their best.”

The lapis turns purple, and he pauses, trying to clear his mind of everything but the enchantments by brushing the dust off of his hands and picking up the boots again.

“Right,” Ren snatches the boots out of his hands with one hand and pulls him to a stand with the other, “Can I try something that helped me?”

The topic of conversation gets him nervous about complying, “As long as it’s safe, go for it.”

“Close your eyes,” he instructs, setting the boots aside.

It’s times like these when Martyn really wishes he was better at conveying words with a look. Because the *do you think me an idiot?* that he tries to communicate by raising an eyebrow doesn’t seem to do the job.

“I know saying ‘trust me’ isn’t going to help my case,” Ren shrugs and steps back a hair, “But I promise I’ll double-cross you to your face later. With your eyes open.”

Surprisingly, it works to reassure him. There’s no lying about what they have to do. Just the knowledge of *not yet* settles his mind. He closes his eyes.

There’s the sound of Ren moving, but he doesn’t know where he goes until he speaks; he’s beside him now, “You know your armor has to protect you, but do you *want* protection? Do you think you deserve it?”

His first thought is how he’d been the one to lower Scar’s guard enough for him to not react in time to the creeper. Grian had just been pulling a prank, and he’d accidentally made it deadly.

“I feel like I got Scar killed, dude.” he admits, “I mean, I know it was an accident, but I can’t take it back.”

“So let him kill you, make it even.” It’s too casual.

He snaps his eyes open, moving away from Ren. Fear overrides his guilt, “I can’t.”

“Exactly,” Ren’s staring at him intently, something in his eyes begs to be understood, “No one here can take anything back without terrible cost. We can’t fix things when they go wrong. I hoard the enchanting table knowing it could keep someone from falling to their death. Grian steals trees to make everyone reliant on his supply. Cleo kidnaps llamas. None of us deserve to die for the things we do, and almost everyone will.”

Ren moves him back to the enchanting table, “Look, maybe it’s easier for me to imagine dying because I’m not the best fighter, but the threat means you need to take good things where you find them. Even if you don’t think you deserve it. And if that doesn’t work, do it for someone else.” His voice loses the serious tone, and he pushes him lightly, “Your armor is my armor and all that.”

He knows the last bit is a joke, meant to make him laugh and get out of his mind for a moment but somehow, it works the best. He’s going to need Ren alive as long as possible to protect him in battle.

“Okay.” He nods, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Then, get back to it. I’ve got extra lapis in the chests if you need a few more tries.” The door to the enchanting room swings shut behind Ren, and he breathes in, trying to find something concrete to focus on.

To be protected, he needs Ren alive, and Ren needs the same from him. A balance of give and take. He thinks about how their bodies moved in sync as they fought in the woods. It’s not hard to imagine fighting side by side with him.

Calming his breath, he refocuses on the image of them protecting each other.

When his stomach pulls, it feels more like butterflies, and before he opens his eyes, he knows that the enchantment worked.

GoodTimesWithScar fell from a high place.

He’s close enough to Ren to see it sink in that the first red name on the server has only *just* finished threatening his life.

“Alright, show me.”

Ren in his room isn’t as uncommon as one would expect. At least, not anymore. As the hand of the king, his council is often sought. All hours of the day and, judging by the oceanic darkness outside, all hours of the night as well.

What gives him pause is the armor he holds in his hands, which he’s not wearing. *Not this again.*

Questions can wait until after the door is firmly shut. He tries not to look like he’s rushing as he rushes to the door and ushers the king in. After peeking his head out of the door, he closes and locks it.

“The armor? Now?” His hands flutter nervously between Ren and the aforementioned armor. He scans him, no protruding arrows or bloody wounds to tend to. It’s silly, he knows; if there had been a fight on the way over, he would have already been told. Still, he breathes easier knowing the king is alright, if only physically.

Martyn knows he’s strong; under all his bark, there’s more than a bit of bite, but without his armor, he knows strength can’t account for everything. Not here. Never here. Not with Scar on red and looking to kill.

“The whole server is stressed out at night because of the phantoms; no one will attack.” When he

doesn't calm, Ren continues, "and if you teach me quickly, we'll have the advantage of speed if they do."

"You," he shakes his head, "You need better timing for these things." He takes the armor from Ren's hands and lays it out on his bed in order of necessity. The enchantments hum under his hands. Like greeting a friend, he hopes. Though lately, he's found himself looking for sentiment where there is none.

"You're worried." Ren sounds touched by the thought.

Even so, the words bite like an accusation. Some secret he's never supposed to share and, with the way this world works, it may be true. If Ren decides to betray him, it'll hurt far more than any useful alliance should.

"One of us should be." He shoots back, moving all the armor to make it easier to reach, and trying not to get angry at Ren's flippant words, "And you're out here, parading around armorless like you want to be assassinated."

A rough hand on his stops him from fiddling with the armor. The urge to flip his hand and hold the other rises in his chest. *Confusing*. He narrows his eyes, trying to remember when that had started.

He doesn't have gloves on.

The observation is true, although Martyn doesn't know why it has only just now sunk in. He writes it off as a sleep-deprived mind, though he makes a note to get more sleep. No use going into battle tired if he's this unobservant.

"I'm okay, Martyn." Ren murmurs from somewhere over his shoulder, "I just took it off outside the door. I thought it would be silly to have you take my armor off just to put it back on."

Well, now he feels silly anyway, "Ah," best to just move along. He grabs the leggings off the bed, "First is the leggings, then. The enchantments make them a little different to wear, but I learned a trick with them..."

Ren, as he learns, is an attentive pupil. There's hardly a second when his eyes leave him, and he only has to demonstrate once how to wear them for him to pick it up. It's... oddly intense to be watched like that. The feeling isn't too far off from being hunted, but the lack of aggressive intent just leaves him feeling winded. Confusion returns, though that likely has more to say about him than the situation, so he doesn't ask for clarification.

"...and a bonus enchanting effect is that they're not too bad to sleep in." He steps back to give him a once over and make sure he's done it right. Unsurprisingly he's succeeded in getting everything where it needs to go, "There you go, got it first try."

"You're quite good at teaching, Martyn." Ren praises, reaching for the chestplate.

Smacking his hand away from it, he tsks, "Boots next, if you're going to be dressing yourself properly." He picks up a boot and drops a knee to the ground. "I've seen you almost tip over far too many times without realizing it's your chestplate in the way."

"I knew," Ren grumbles, "I just didn't think it was that much of a problem."

"Not a problem?" Martyn scoffs, grabs his foot by the ankle, and props it up on his knee so he can get better access to the boot straps while he works, "I'd tell you how many times I've seen you almost fall onto something sharp, but I honestly lost count after it hit double digits."

Ren, who had almost been overbalanced due to the sudden and abrupt shift in where his foot was, plants his hands on Martyn's shoulders and huffs, "I had it under control."

Martyn has his own chestplate off, having quite reasonably expected to be sleeping, so the warmth from his hands seeps into his shoulders. The temperature change sends shivers up and down his spine as his body tries to adjust, still a little sleepy and confused. Ren's fingers press in gently.

"*I had it under control*", he says." Martyn shakes his head, trying to focus on the task at hand, and puts the boot and shin guard on, "You know, I'm starting to think you'd fall apart without me."

There's no response past a hum of what sounds like agreement, but he doesn't want to think about that right now. Not when he has to come and go so frequently.

Not when he could come back to an empty castle. The thought has started to hurt.

Finishing the straps, he slaps the boot, and Ren switches his feet to start copying what he's done. He ignores the way his shoulders protest being left to the chill of the air.

This time he needs to guide him a little more, tapping his hands away from where they aren't supposed to be and murmuring, "Not yet, remember?"

The awkward moments of quiet are entirely his fault; the thought of not having this, the alliance, and budding friendship rings in his mind. Too loud for words to drown out.

He shakes his head, unsure of what to do with his hands, and hums, "You would be alright without me."

Ren shrugs, the motion moving his whole body, "I'd be a king without a kingdom to fight for. And what kind of king is that?"

The question begs answering. Martyn lets himself ponder for a moment, loathing the way his heart grows warm at the implication that *he* is the kingdom instead of the castle of Dogwarts.

His answer isn't kind. *How many times did Ren call for a retreat just to go back and take one more arrow because he'd been too slow to follow? What number of supplies have been spent on failed traps or plots of his own doing? Does he not spend sleepless nights questioning if betraying his greatest ally is a profitable strategic move?*

Guilt squashes the warmth of the moment in an instant.

"Free." The answer comes out a whisper wishing to be unheard, the honesty burning through his lungs. He can't lie, not anymore. Not when it could save his life. "Freer than this."

A discontented growl sounds from above him, and he looks up to see a look of burning anger cross the king's face. He doesn't have time to wonder why it doesn't terrify him. Despite the anger shown, the hands that cup his face are gentle as they bring him from his knees until he's standing again.

They don't speak. Not immediately. Instead, Ren furrows his eyebrows and stares at him, searching in some way. Getting the feeling that he's thinking, he waits, letting Ren look at him. He tries not to shrink under his gaze.

And in turn, he looks back.

Ren's forehead is more creased than usual, pinched in a way that implies a thought trying to escape

or an idea that requires sleepless nights. Many sleepless nights if the sunkenness of his eyes are anything to go by. Unbidden, the desire to tell Ren to sleep more rises and is squashed in his chest.

Slowly but surely, the anger on his face passes, leaving something that looks too much like pain.

“Then let me never taste freedom again.” Ren murmurs, the words stopping his heart in its tracks, “let me spend my days happily in a cage,” he takes his hands in his own, moving slowly, “*this* cage.”

Martyn wants to speak, to tell him he’s a fool to trust him even that far, to say to him that against everything, he wants nothing more than to spend the rest of their bloody lives together. His traitorous mouth stays shut, and he tries desperately not to shake.

When Ren continues, it sounds like a plea, “Let me vow to you now that wherever your journeys take you, your king will always protect you. Whether it be by reputation or by a blade. Let me be your shield.”

He waits for Ren to ask the same of him. It never happens. *He’s just giving.*

For a moment, the context with which their lives are already set vanishes, and he believes. For one cruel minute, he lets himself be blinded by hope, foolish hope that whispers softly, ‘maybe it doesn’t all have to end in bloodshed. Maybe there’s a time after all the hate, all the war. After the battles are over, peace and love can settle in. Surely there is no battlefield too betrayed for loyalty to return, no back so stabbed that the wounds can’t scar over.’

He’s a fool, but for the moment, he’s a dreamer, and then it’s his turn to take his king’s face in his hands. He tries to smooth the bags under his eyes with his thumbs, wanting it to be enough to fix the way he would have betrayed him not five minutes ago, “Then shield me, my king. And I’ll know wherever I go that I am safe.”

“I will,” Ren promises, “I know there’s no way to prove it, and maybe it’s impossible here. But it’s you and I until the bitter end.”

It comes as an idea, the last two standing, steadfast to each other, throwing down their swords and leaving the whole thing behind them. He imagines spring. It leaves as a chilling promise, *there will only be one winner.*

Horror builds as he realizes there is no painless way out now, and maybe it’s been that way for a while.

He tries and likely fails, to keep his hands from shaking as he steps back, tries to look like he isn’t mildly ill at the notion of killing his friend, the notion of the bitter end, “Well, if we both want to make it that far, you’ll need this.” he grabs the chestplate and holds it out for Ren.

When he looks back, he sees the tail end of confusion leave his face, and a mask slips back into place, one he hadn’t been aware of in the beginning. “Of course,” Ren clears his throat and takes the chestplate from him. Martyn tries to ignore how purposefully he doesn’t touch his hands, “though this one I think I’m pretty good at if I do say so myself.”

This time he’s the one watching as Ren keeps a running trail of thoughts on how he puts the chestplate on and that sometimes it’s too loose but not by enough to notice, and he can’t reach the next hole without pinching his fingers anyway, so it’s probably not even worth mentioning. Martyn’s moving before he’s done, curious as to if it would be any help at all.

“Like I said,” Ren starts speaking quicker as he approaches. *Odd.* “it’s not even that big of a

problem. I just notice it sometimes, and,” Martyn reaches out and pulls the strap tighter where he can’t reach and buckles it in, “Oh.” He circles his shoulder, testing it out, “Oh, that’s actually a lot better.”

He shrugs, though that warm feeling is back, “I’m here to help, you know.”

The faintest hint of pink is all he catches as Ren ducks his head, “Sorry. I wasn’t expecting…” he trails off. When he speaks again, his voice is solemn, “This place, it doesn’t feel like the type of place that will just let someone ask for help, much less get what they need when they ask.”

“I know what you mean.” He sighs, looks at his hand, still resting on the chestplate. He wants to offer, but even now, it would feel empty. Ren’s right; there is no way to prove loyalty here. Here words are nothing, and actions are everything.

Ren makes a gesture like he’s pinching his eyes. Martyn grants him the mercy of pretending not to see, retracting his hand to brush invisible dust off of his bed, “Well, thanks for the armor lesson, Hand of the King.”

It’s a goodnight as well as an emotional retreat, so he murmurs back, “Sleep well, my king.”

They’ve somehow passed all necessity for pretense. When Ren leaves, he does so quietly, not doing either of them the disservice of pretending he’s alright. In turn, Martyn doesn’t do him the disservice of asking if he can help. He stands still as he leaves, letting him grieve the tragedy of their lives in the only way the world allows; alone.

At that moment, the single strongest beat of his heart was anger. They stole, betrayed, and killed, and for what? To satisfy some hellish world in its search for *entertainment*? A world where the smallest act of kindness is foolishness, where every piece of peace seems so out of place that it feels right when it’s burned, where sleepless nights are spent hoping enemies kill friends because the greater hurt is doing it yourself. And the doing will be done in the end.

He’s never hated destiny more.

And maybe it’s then that he decides. If love itself is an act of defiance to the ugly hatred of the world, then loving is what he’ll be. He’s a fool, naive, and by all realms of his power, if he must die in this world, he will do so knowing he found peace inside a war. Honesty despite bitter lies.

He will not be what’s been set out for him. That night, mind still trying to catch up to what it all means, heart pounding in his ears, he pledges himself the most rebellious type of man; a loyal one.

Chapter End Notes

"but they just practically just got married, how is this a slow burn?" :D :D :D

Two steps forward one step back. And by one step back I mean give me a second, I'm going to cause problems.

Also, y'all in the comments are absolutely stunning. I'll drop one of my favorite things so far and get the funniest and/or most beautiful comments on earth holy biscuits. (I also read all your comments to my roommate and mother so y'all are famous around here lol)

Side note to everyone worried that they're interpreting the fic wrong: You're very much not wrong do not worry. There are some things I purposefully don't fully explain (or have Martyn explain) because I trust y'all to pick up on them and the comments so far have more than proved that you will. <3

Again, comments are wonderful, kudos are beautiful and keyboard smashes are interpreted as praise so really just get all in there lol.

It's not Agoraphobia, it's just a lack of air supply

Chapter Summary

Martyn spirals into the mines and into his own mind. Skizz stops by to dig a hole. And Ren realizes he's made a loyal friend. Also there are phantoms, the unspoken stars of the show.

Chapter Notes

Wanted to stay on my “only drop the fic at 12 noon est every Tuesday arc. But my brain thinks that the sooner I post this chapter the sooner I can post the next one and that’s the one I’m the most excited for. Time does not work how my brain thinks it does lol.

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

They’ve been chumming it up with Etho and Skizz lately. The need for alliances hangs above their heads like a dull guillotine, certain to injure before it kills.

Etho doesn’t seem half bad, more used to being on his own than most, but Martyn almost doesn’t see that as a downside. And if he sticks to his own in a corner, it’s just another corner to watch carefully. That’s fine; they can handle it.

Besides, Martyn thinks about how he’d spent the first five minutes in their base opening every chest within reach, his woolen castle is far too flammable for him to be picking and choosing his allies.

Skizz is energetic, his movement meaning Martyn’s looking all over the place to try and settle the part of him waiting for betrayal. But his energy means he’ll be tough to beat in a battle. Good to have him on their side.

Impulse has also come and gone with promises of ‘looking into an alliance.’

It’s strange. A certain level of distrust is required in all of them, but the goal is to build trust. Every word feels like two steps backward and three steps forward and then flip it and do it all over again until somehow he’s losing ground, and he doesn’t even know how he had ground to lose in the first place.

Even Ren, after all their talking, all of their tests, and all the times they both considered twice before putting their blades away or taking their armor off. Even he makes Martyn jump with terror when his voice sounds unexpectedly, or his shadow crosses the corners of his eyes.

The only difference is that the second he notices it’s Ren, his heart stops racing, settling down ever so slightly.

It’s confusing, but if there’s any time to be thinking confusing thoughts, it’s now, as he swings

away at the rock in front of him with his pickaxe.

He's been spending more time in the mines lately, not entirely sure why. The place stresses him out. Few mobs are trying to kill him. Any lava problems can be solved with a bucket of water. He knows how to prepare for almost any situation. It's dangerous. It takes his guard down.

For now, true quiet fills the mines, nature quiet. Water runs over stones in the distance, a little song trying to soothe him to sleep. When they stumble across him, Bugs simply dig back into the earth and continue along their ways with better things to think about than the quarrels of humans. The furnace he's set up heats the place, a welcome change from the increasing cold of the outdoors, with pops of embers soft enough that they don't startle him. Even the stones are kind when they break, but that may be more a stretch of his imagination than any reality of the world.

Leaning against a wall to catch his breath, he drifts into calm within his mind. Half the time, he doesn't notice the fear settling into his bones; only quiet moments like this show the staggering difference between normalcy and calm.

The first ingot hits the bottom of the furnace with a loud clank, and he hurries to bring it out, startled by the loud noise. Only then do his eyes open.

He hasn't been paying enough attention. *Water, the sound of enemies cushioning their falls. Any second now, they'll close in on him. Bugs, scouts surely, somehow, on their way to let some unforeseen eyes know that he's defenseless where he stands.* The furnace burns. *Everything burns eventually. And stones can be hiding any number of enemies, any number of friends.*

His heart races. In the mines, he's defenseless to an ambush.

He needs to get back to safety; even now, he's been gone too long. Anything could have happened. He'll have no one to protect him if he loses Dogwarts.

The furnace bellows behind him as he drops everything and runs. Long etched into his mind, the path passes stone by stone as he begs not to be too late.

There! The stairs, and he's sprinting as fast as he can, and *it's not going to be quick enough, he can hear them screaming for him, why is he too late? Always too late.*

He bursts into the castle, startling Ren and Skizz, who both draw their swords and approach where he stops at the top of the stairs. His chest heaves as he tries to speak, looking frantically around for the fight. *He heard a fight.*

Ren reaches him first and pulls him into the room fully, spinning him, so he's between him and the mine, fixing his eyes on the entrance as he demands, "My hand, what happened? Are you alright?"

Skizz cautiously approaches and peers down into the entrance to the mine for a good minute before sheathing his sword, "Whatever it was is gone; you're okay, Martyn."

"No-" He's still gasping as Ren turns to him, hands poking and prodding around his armor, searching for a reason for distress, "You -thought you were-"

"Hold on," Two fingers find his pulse, and he's urged to a chair, "Sit down, catch your breath. You scared the daylights out of me, dude."

"-under attack." He heaves, his hand is clutched in Ren's, and he's not quite sure when that happened, but he's not about to let go. With the way Ren moves so he can still stand within reach, neither is he.

And it's in the movement that he notices, his chestplate is one hole too loose.

His frantic mind latches onto it, a goal to focus for, and he holds his breath, trying to stop it from shaking audibly. Drowning out their voices as they pry for answers, he plans, slowly exhales. Skizz is still an uncertain ally, not yet allowed to be let in on the weaknesses of their king. Skizz needs to leave.

And for that, a clean lie. Not too perfect, but believable.

He cleans up his breathing, forces his mind into focus, lets them imagine they're comforting him. It still takes him a long while before he's ready to speak, "Sorry, a spider poisoned me, and I thought another was after me. I didn't think; I just ran."

It's only then that everyone relaxes. Ren and Skizz take a second, make some jokes that he forces a laugh at before getting back to plans that he doesn't hear over the ringing in his ears. His hand remains clutched tightly in Ren's.

He tries not to stare too hard at the strap on Ren's armor. Eventually, Skizz says his goodbyes and takes off into the night to the tune of, "I'll start digging tomorrow, so if you hear someone in the mines, it's me. Oh, phantoms, this isn't going to be good."

When it's just the two of them, he relaxes fully, chiding himself for doing so when there's still someone here, but when Ren turns and grins at him, he only half-heartedly listens to his own scolding.

"I think Skizz is going to be a good ally to have here, Martyn. He's got a plan for a tunnel between our bases. It should be helpful if we're ever attacked and need to run." Ren sits across from him at their table -more of a war desk than anything. He hums noncommittally.

Ren raises an eyebrow in question at the non-answer, and in truth, it was only a matter of time before he said something, may as well be now, "Your armor is too loose."

"Oh," He shrugs, "Yeah, it turns out I really just can't reach that one. It's not too bad, honestly. I've got the rest of my armor all squared away and ready for war." His voice softens, "Want to talk about what happened down there?"

It's true; the rest of his armor is finally done up properly. But it still prickles at his hands until they move. He gestures towards the chestplate, trying not to think about how Ren saw right through his ruse, "Want it fixed?"

Ren cocks his head with a pinched smile that says he'd assumed the answer would be no, "Sure, I just don't want to get too used to having it like this." He laughs, the kind of laugh that happens when someone's about to tell a joke they know is more sad than funny but still needs saying because holding it alone hurts more. "Chances are I'll be the one putting my armor on when I head out to die for the last time."

The only feeling worse than hearing him say it out loud is knowing he's likely right.

"No." He objects as he starts on the straps, just a few of them, so it's easy to fix even with his clumsy fingers. "You said 'you and I until the bitter end,' and I'd like to think if it was the bitter end, you'd trust me enough to know I'd take you out with honor on the battlefield and not in our home. So," He tugs to check it's secure, "I'll still be doing your armor then."

It's only after he speaks that he's granted hindsight, funny how that works, and he realizes that it's far too many cards at once. He stands back, tries to cover up what he's just by pretending it's a

normal thing to say.

Ren, on the other hand, stands with his mouth agape. A sort of pain has taken up residence in his eyes recently. It's the kind Martyn sees all the time on the server and in the shine of iron armor, pain for friendships that can never end in anything but grief.

He hasn't seen it bring tears before now. They well in troubled eyes, and he watches as Ren ignores them, seemingly frozen.

His heart pulls, confused. Out of all the emotions he'd been prepared to feel in this bloodthirsty server, this wasn't one of them. Hate, oh he'd been ready for hate, prepared to let it in and encourage it to destroy everything he's ever built. Grief had been a given; friends, allies, enemies even -in the times he finds his humanity. Guilt, of course. But it's already here. It eats him alive every night and snacks on the leftovers of his conscience during the day. He's been pushing through the guilt every day for the sake of surviving.

But this? No, this one's going to hurt.

This feeling draws Ren into his arms and holds him as tightly as he can. It pushes matching tears out of his own eyes. It makes him so small, throws them both to the floor, and suddenly he's not sure who's holding who anymore.

They won't both make it out of here alive. But how on earth is he supposed to grieve a man that's right in front of him?

Chapter End Notes

Gosh, what could possibly cause a rift between the two of them in a way that would make this a slower burn? I'm convinced nothing short of like, I don't know, death would do tha- *the sniper outside my window takes the shot*

Also I can't figure out how to make the notes from the first chapter leave so they're going to take this journey with all of us lol

Y'all know I love your kudos and comments so gosh darn much, forehead kisses for the lot of you

Also also Martyn, you fool, let Ren comfort you, he likes your face! Smh can't have shit in a SpiralOfShame fic

Just a pinch of salt in the wound, you'll be fine

Chapter Summary

We take a dip into on screen cannon just long enough to get our collective feelings hurt <3 Impulse has a disagreement with Martyn, Solidarity sets off TNT, and sometimes all you can do is sleep it off and know that tomorrow will happen.

Chapter Notes

Also WARNING just in case you missed the updated tags, this chapter will be fairly violent and is what's kicking our rating up to mature and our warning up to GDOV. This is the highest the rating is going to go but please make sure to heed your limits <3

Anywho, Social anxiety's been kicking my ass this week but to everyone that left a comment on the last chapter, I loved them so much, I swear y'all put crack in them. I'll literally just pull up y'all's comments at dinner if I ever get bored (The consensus is that you are all brilliant and hilarious btw)

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

Recon with Impulse, Etho, and Skizz is the safest option. Not a sane soul on the server would mess with five people at once, not unless they've brought an army of their own. And right now, no army is as strong as theirs.

So, it's silly when he notices that Ren's still doing his armor up too loosely. It had been the first thing he'd looked at when, in his oversight of everyone, his eyes had landed on Ren. Something he has a brief moral quandary about.

There is no threat. Even grieving their building should be fine with the ender chest hidden elsewhere and everyone on trap alert.

An elbow gets him in the side, and he turns to see Impulse looking between him and Ren with a raised eyebrow. "Should I ask?"

So he's been staring too long, then. He shrugs, "Nah, just doing my job, you know?"

Impulse's face twitches as they both look at Ren, "You know, I'm still trying to figure out what you get out of this deal you've got with him."

It's not really something he had felt the need to consider, "What do you mean?"

"You watch him like a hawk; everyone sees it. People are like *legitimately* scared to attack him because they know you'll run up with your bow. And, yeah, he owns the enchanter and founded the place, but none of that requires your level of..." he waves his hand at the way Martyn's brought his own to the pommel of his sword, making sure he knows he's noticed it, "Protection. And from our side?" He shakes his head like he's telling a child that too much candy will make

them sick, “I mean, you actually look scared every time he’s in trouble.”

He wishes he had an answer that felt real. ‘*I trust him*’ feels more than a little dangerous, both to think and feel, “I don’t have an answer for you.”

But he should, shouldn’t he?

Trying again, he clears his throat, “I guess I figure that actions are the only way to prove loyalty, and I don’t want there to be any doubt about me when I eventually do die. And, I mean, if I had someone I knew was loyal,” Even suggesting Ren would do it feels wrong, “They would be the last person I’d kill.”

Impulse shifts, starting to look uncomfortable, “You sound like you’re not even going to try to win. Giving up already?”

Shaking his head, he sighs, “Do you think there *is* a winner here? Whoever it is will have just killed an enemy at best and a friend at worst. And then that’s it. They’re alone.” He feels sick again, hates that he keeps stumbling across the image of killing his king, his friend, hates that it’s that or watching Ren kill him, “None of that feels like winning to me.”

“Yeah, well,” Impulse shoulders his shield and shrugs, moving away and towards Skizz and Etho, standing at the top of the entrance, ready to leave, “Dying doesn’t feel like winning to me.”

Across the room, Ren clears his throat. He looks over to see him tap his shoulder once, twice.

It’s both a question and an invitation.

Motioning for the rest to get started without them, he approaches Ren, waiting until the door shuts before he starts tightening the chestplate, “I don’t trust Impulse.”

Ren hums, “No one here trusts anyone.”

It’s mostly true. “But more than the rest. He doesn’t have the same views on loyalty as the rest of them.”

There’s a calculating silence, and then Ren sighs, “I’d be a fool not to take your word, but I trust him. At least for now. He’s a good ally to have; with his resources, we can win this.”

Somehow he knows he’s not talking about Dogwarts. He’s talking about the two of them. Martyn wants to ask what winning means to him, but he knows there is only one answer. One he’s not ready to hear yet.

“Just be careful, Ren.” He murmurs, ducking his head as if he could hide from the gravity of hoping Ren makes it out alive.

“I will,” Ren turns his head to catch his eyes, his own honest and true. It registers how close they are and how it could mean something entirely different to be here in another life. Ren smiles, warm and fond, and then there’s a hand on the side of his face, and his heart is so utterly torn. “After all, I have you protecting me, and you make it look easy.”

And later, it’s a lie. It’s such a lie because he says, “Don’t touch it.” When he backs away, he pushes Ren back, pausing to tell Jimmy to stay out of there. They all see the danger.

He finds the TNT. It should be fine because he *finds* the TNT and tells them all to stay away, give him time, let him make it safe again. His job is protection, and he’s not about to fail here.

Dogwarts is surrounded by chaos. Grian and Scar are in and out of the base, and then everyone else is there, and Etho is being sneaky, and there's nothing but fear driving his focus because *why are they all here? Why now? And why is no one answering his questions?*

His heart pounds in his throat as he runs around, trying to keep his head on straight, knowing lives depend on it. There are dozens of distractions, but he tries to focus everything because *what's the real motive and what's a red herring, and how would he even know?*

He gives chase when they leave, ready to get some answers. The TNT can wait, but they may never get a straight answer if they get away now. None of it makes any sense, and he's confused again, but this time it's worse. This time it's deadly.

Later, he'll hear how Jimmy falls at the worst moment, but for now, all he sees when he looks over from the hill is the explosion; red and yellow and deadly. Horror chokes his lungs before he can scream, mouth frozen in a silent shout as Ren's already limp body slams into the walls of Dogwarts and falls to the ground.

Even from here, he knows he's not going to be getting up.

A second explosion goes off.

In all his preparation, he never thought to prepare to lose him.

He can't hear the sound he makes as he hits the ground. Already moving, running towards him, he wishes for the impossible; *get up. Please get up.*

He's running, *too late, always too late*, and the body despawns before he can reach it, Ren returning to meet him in the crater. Now he's armorless, dazed, and standing with the largest gathering of heavily armed people Martyn's ever seen. There's no time to think.

He can't feel his hands; it must be the cold.

Skizz comes back shocked as well. Red now. He's red now, and he's right next to Ren. He tries to stand between them, trying to evaluate just how low they are on Skizz's kill list. It was pretty low, he's sure.

He wants to blame Etho just because he doesn't know where he'd been in all the chaos. The urge to torch something in retaliation is strong, and, in fairness, his house is the easiest to torch. But they all know it's Grian and Scar, standing on the hill and just watching. Still watching.

Ren's an idiot, running up to them, but he's just died, so maybe they'll stop attacking for a moment to just give answers.

The hill is too tall, but that's a good thing. By the time they reach the top, all his adrenaline has been burnt out on the hike up. The fear torched away into acceptance. No time to grieve here. That can come later when they're finally alone again.

"I lost everything in the second explosion." Ren is explaining when he arrives.

Some stupid attached part of him wants to pipe up, 'I lost everything in the first.' But it's not true. He looks at Ren, still alive. Their alliance; still alive. It's not really true, so he keeps quiet, searches their faces for lies.

He doesn't notice the flash in Scar's eyes, hardly notes that Ren's standing a little too close to the cliff's edge.

He thought they would give them time before attacking again. His fault. Again.

Ren's startled eyes turn to him as he falls. He watches the confusion morph to fear in the split second when they lock eyes and wishes he had the time to say something, anything to make his death hurt less this time. The first words that come to mind terrify him.

"It was Scar." Someone says, answering a question he'd asked on instinct.

He's hitting him before he even remembers he has a sword, relishing the moment after his fist connects when Scar looks afraid. But it's not enough, and he draws his blade, knowing the enchantment would burn him as badly as the fear has his own heart. He sends him over the same cliff he'd sent Ren down.

It's poetic for a moment, chasing him down, ready to end him once and for all.

And then he sees Ren out of the corner of his eyes. Safe, albeit incredibly injured, and his feet freeze in their chase. Ren's still okay. Revenge can wait.

He's not sure who he's mad at when he ushers Ren inside. Or maybe he's not sure who he isn't mad at. Etho, for confusing him, innocent as he may be. Grian and Scar for attacking the king, *his* king. Jimmy for getting him killed in the first place. Scott for not leaving when he had asked.

Himself.

Oh. *That hurts.*

"Ow! Martyn!" Ren barks and rips his arm from his grip. Too late, he can see the indents of his fingers through the dirt and leaves still hanging off him from cushioning his fall.

Ren's limping when he backs away, looking if not afraid then very wary.

"Sorry," He mimics the movement away despite his every urge to stay close; he curls his arms around his torso, *he's going to fall apart*, "I didn't mean to."

"It's fine; I'm fine." Ren brushes the dirt off and paces the room.

Even with his anger reading plainly in the way his jaw is clenched and his steps are solid, the king looks deceptively fragile without his armor on. Martyn can see where he's not healing. Bruises quickly raise along his arms where he must have fallen sideways, and he burns up inside. He could have lost him to red today.

"My liege, please eat," He instructs, tossing an apple over to him, *damage control, fix what you can*, "You are far too hurt for me to feel comfortable here."

Ren shakes his head, but he's biting into the apple, so it must be about something else, something that has him staring into the distance seething, "The test will have to wait then." There's an edge to it that he's sure wasn't there before.

Martyn tries not to feel slighted, tries not to wonder if Ren blames him, "Have I not just proved my loyalty tonight, my king?"

"You have," he agrees, "But I have yet to prove my loyalty to you." He watches as he inspects his hands, knowing that they're both looking for any differences that come with being a yellow life. "That may have to wait, though."

The urge to tell him it's not necessary doesn't make it all the way out of his mouth. Impulse's words ring in his ears. *I'm still trying to figure out what you get out of this deal you've got with him.*

A moment of weakness. He doubts him. Every touch, every gift, quiet words spoken close. They hadn't known each other for long when they'd been pulled into an alliance. He knows it's the fear talking. It's hard to ignore when every other emotion seems to be unable to disagree.

A moment of strength, he gives him the benefit of the doubt, finds a new set of armor, and approaches with confidence. "Take your time, my king."

He runs his hands along the edges of the armor as he puts it on, and Ren lets him without question or complaint. They both know it's not necessary for anything more than Martyn's own mind. *Solid body, flesh, and bone, warm skin. Too warm? He wants to be able to tell, wants to have a solid grasp on how warm Ren's skin usually is.*

He's got the leggings and boots on when, in his gentle searching, he brushes the collar of his shirt open.

The air catches in his lungs and his hands freeze, "Did you see this?" he whispers, pulling the collar back more.

Interrupting his chest hair are dozens of pink scars, each about the size of a spider eye. Even though they look healed, he avoids touching them, curling his hands into fists instead. It's accidental when he ends up with a handful of Ren's shirt, but he can't seem to make his hands let go.

Ren looks down, "Oh." He doesn't seem all that confused; raising his arms and turning his forearms over to, to Martyn's rising concern, reveal more of the same. "I guess I managed to get my hands up in time after all."

Martyn wants to remind him that he still died, but he can't bring himself to say it. It's too soon, or maybe too late. Whatever time it is, it's not the right one. Instead, he asks, "Do they hurt?"

Maybe his mouth moves without asking his brain because right now, his brain *does not want to know the answer to that question.*

Shrugging, Ren pokes at a spot on his torso covered by his shirt, "No. I didn't even know they were there."

There are more, Martyn can't breathe, reaches out like he's going to touch, "Can I..." guilt takes over, and he trails off. *He could have prevented this; he doesn't deserve to feel bad.*

Even unsaid, the rest of the question sits in the air.

"Sure, I want to see how many there are, actually." Ren fumbles with the buttons on his shirt, and Martyn, at a nod of approval, helps him undo them.

As more skin is revealed, so are more scars. The largest being half the size of Martyn's hand. Tenderly he brushes it with his pointer and middle fingers.

Ren hisses at the contact, and he pulls his hand away, stumbling back like he's encountered a creeper, "I'm sorry! I -I thought it wouldn't hurt!"

He's caught, Ren's hand shooting out to stop him before he can back up further, "No, it's okay."

Ren shakes his head, pulling him back in gently, "It didn't hurt. Your hands are just cold."

"Oh." He breathes a sigh of relief, but his head still spins, "Sorry about that."

Ren gives his hand another light pull before letting go, letting him choose whether or not to touch, "It's okay," He repeats, "You can touch now."

He rubs his hands together, letting the friction warm them up. This time he breathes slowly, focusing on touching as gently as possible. "You're sure they don't hurt?"

When Ren nods and doesn't shy away from his touch, he presses slightly firmer. The skin is raised somewhat, with large clumps of hair missing entirely. It causes his torso to look patchy and uneven. Out of the corner of his eyes, he watches for any grimaces or hesitation, and, finding none, he moves from one scar to another. *He has to touch all of them.* Atonement, in some way.

Swallowing a lump of bitter emotion, he chokes out, "I'm sorry."

He's glad that Ren doesn't deny that it's at least partly his fault, doesn't say it's okay or that it was an accident. Instead, he just takes his free hand and squeezes it tightly.

A reminder. He's still here. He's not leaving just yet.

They both cry though neither acknowledges the other's tears past a soft thumb across the cheek when there have been too many too fast for too long. To do much more is to think too hard.

That night, when he turns up in Ren's room, the other doesn't say anything at all. He doesn't do much of anything either. Face blank of emotion, he sits completely still on his bed. It doesn't look like he's going to be sleeping, not with how he's still fully armored, staring at his bed like he's not sure what it is.

Martyn's scared to talk.

Biting his lip, he skips asking if he's alright, "Ren?"

There's barely any acknowledgment of his presence. Ren turns towards him, but his eyes are so blank he could be staring right through him.

He thinks back to what Ren had said before, living, not just surviving. Thinks that if he can't heal this wound a little, he might crumble to bits. "Can I sleep here tonight?" he asks, voice trailing off for fear of a no.

The nod he receives could be for anything. Ren's still not looking anywhere but through him.

Approaching slowly, he takes one of Ren's hands in his. After a moment, he gets the slightest response, a pained sigh. Ren leans until his forehead rests on Martyn's shoulder.

He doesn't think he wants to talk.

Gently, minding wounds that he knows don't hurt, Martyn helps him out of his new armor. Quietly, painfully, they lie down, and he wraps his arms around Ren, hoping the touch is grounding. He wants Ren to say something, make a joke, cry, scream, anything but this, this *nothing*.

Ren doesn't speak or acknowledge his touch past a light hand on his where it lies over his heart.

Neither of them sleep well that night.

There's nothing to say about it. No dialogue that will make it hurt more or less. It just is.

Chapter End Notes

Please rate your pain on a scale of one to ten so I can be sure to make it worse- better. Definitely better.

Also, on a scale of "it's really annoying/misleading" to "it's so irrelevant in my life I hadn't noticed it until you said something" what do you think of the tags getting updated before the next chapter drops?

The urge to ask specific questions vs. the way I've been loving what you've all been writing [fight!]

I've been really excited to post this chapter! Lmk what you think <3

But haven't you heard? Hearts turn to dirt, along with the rest of your body, it's all claimed by the earth

Chapter Summary

The canonical beheading scene that every slow burn needs :D

Chapter Notes

The *canon compliant beheading scene* is a multistage aerobic capacity *beheading scene* that progressively gets more difficult as it continues.

Again, a reminder to check in with yourself in regards to your limits <3

Enjoy <3

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

He wakes to Ren leaving the room. That's alright, it didn't have to be forever. Even if his body still sleepily yearns for him to return and cuddle more. But he's carrying his armor instead of wearing it, and even half-asleep, Martyn's not going to let him go anywhere unarmored.

Even if it almost doesn't matter. His tired mind kindly lets the thought slip away before he's standing.

Yawning, he doesn't manage to open his eyes all the way, so he misses how Ren freezes, brushes it off. Nothing like that really matters to a tired mind early in the morning.

Neither of them has the acting chops to pretend to be surprised when they easily fall into their places. Martyn slips his boots on and then starts on his chest plate, and maybe he's too tired. Maybe he's not sure if it's physical or emotional exhaustion.

"Do you think the killing will ever stop? Even some sort of stupid hope?" He murmurs, too sleepy still to notice that he's practically speaking into Ren's ear, one of his hands balancing them both where it lies still on his arm.

"Martyn..." His voice screams pity in its softness, despair in the way he flinches backward ever so slightly.

He doesn't know what to do about the despair, but he doesn't want pity. Not now. He wants Ren to keep telling him everything will be alright. Mornings are for idiots hoping for a better end than the one they're destined for, "Maybe there's a limit to the number of people that have to die."

They both know deep down that he's grasping at straws, looking for a way for them both to survive it all. The world marches on towards a cruel end for the two that make it that far.

He thinks of the other protectors, hurting alongside him, guarding their friends and loved ones as

much as they can without daring to ask the fatal question.

Ren's breath is quiet and calming, letting him think, and he can't escape the question any longer.
What am I willing to do for you to live?

The answer is quiet. Damning.

Anything.

"Maybe," His eyes blur with sleep, he hopes it's sleep, he hopes when he's asleep, "Maybe it doesn't have to all be hate. Maybe there's room for..." Even tired, he can feel when Ren pulls away, firmly this time. It hurts when he's too fatigued to figure out why. Part of him wants to say it anyway, but the truth is he's been a coward this whole time, "Peace."

"My hand..." Ren tries to catch his eyes, clearly trying to be gentle. He knows what's coming next, tries to turn away from it. He still somehow doesn't expect Ren to actually say it. "There's no room for peace here; there never was; we just wanted there to be."

The way he says it makes Martyn wonder what dying had been like if there was something about it that just, *removes*. It feels unfair to ask after last night, especially when he's talking again. He doesn't know what else to say.

"I'm sorry." It would have been easier if Ren had been unsure. But the way he speaks gives answers to questions left unasked. A sort of dread for the future, what Ren had spoken about before they'd parted for the first time last night, with the intent to each sleep alone. "If anyone..." He pauses, seems to reconsider before continuing, "If anyone here deserves it -peace -it would be you, Martyn."

It feels like an apology when Ren takes his hand and squeezes it once. It feels like fire when he leaves.

He wakes up again hours later, almost writing it off as a dream, but Ren doesn't meet his eyes when he greets him.

The day is spent circling each other, each unwilling to overstep but unable to take anything back. He distracts himself with busywork, finally getting two enchanted sets of diamond armor. Martyn wants to believe that whatever crazy idea Ren has planned, he isn't about to go through with it. But when he steps forward to switch out his armor, Ren waves him away.

"I've got it."

It shouldn't scare him this much to be kept at a physical distance. He wants to ask if there's a betrayal in order. If he should be preparing for a knife in the back.

The courage to speak never comes. Dread builds.

Soft orange paints the sky at sunset when they find themselves outside, and still, Ren doesn't let him take his armor off. Instead, he stands in the center of Dogwarts' newest addition: Black Heart Altar, and fumbles with the straps until every piece is on the ground in front of him.

Then, he asks the question. He calls it a casual test of loyalty, calls it a terrible thing, hands Martyn the Red Winter axe, and he hates the way it makes sense, if only logically. The only way to prove that you'd die for a friend here is to do it.

His heart beats in his throat. He knows he'll be back in a flash. Knows he'll still technically be

okay. "I don't know if I can do it, my lord."

"Sometimes in life, we've got to do things that hurt." Ren's voice is tender, even if his gaze is stone.

He watches as the king kneels on the ground in front of him, and he wishes he could see his face, knowing it will just make it hurt more.

Something in him cracks, and 'how could you ask me to do this?' dies on his tongue.

"I'll try to make it as painless as I can." He promises as he heaves the axe over his head. It's cold, and the axe feels colder in his hands, heavier too though it must just be his mind.

He hesitates a second too long. A second for the reality to sink in for the both of them.

"Get it done with!" Ren exclaims, curling his hands into fists where they press into the stone beneath him. He wishes he couldn't hear the fear and hesitation in his voice.

One swing. *Maybe he can do it in one.* Wistful thinking, but that's all that's left of his mind now.

Ren falls forward. *He's not dead.* Martyn feels sick, his hands shaking as he raises the axe again, trying to hit the same bloody spot as before, trying to ignore how deep the wound is.

Two should do it. The axe arcs through the air.

He was supposed to protect him. The two of them to the bitter end.

He flinches, wanting to draw the axe back. The momentum changes but doesn't stop, *he can't stop it.*

After the crack of contact, the body doesn't disappear. His own wants to react, to apologize and fail the whole test, to pick up the broken pieces of his king and cradle him in his arms.

It's still not too late to fail the test.

Maybe he's the one being cleaved from himself. His throat splits to match Ren's, cries of anguish ripping free from his vocal cords.

There is no going back even if he heals him now. No taking back what he had been ready to do. What he still is ready to do, he lies.

A gurgle of pain comes from the ground, and he refuses to look down. A failure. *He can't fail Ren. Never again.*

Tears run down his face, but he ignores them, doesn't have time to wipe them away; he needs to aim. There's so much blood. There's too much blood.

"My lord!" He cries, an apology wrapped in a scream for help, even now wanting Ren to fix it all, make it hurt less. Eyes closed, he buries the axe where the first hit had been.

The body despawns immediately. Little mercies. Little cruelties, nothing to hold, no time for grief.

What have you done? Falling to his knees, he shakes; he's sure he's falling apart, curling his hands into the bloody stones as if there's still a body to cradle. He tells himself it's just until Ren gets back.

He had been innocent before. Painful coughs break their way out of his chest as he struggles to breathe, unable to be quiet, unwilling to grieve alone.

A hand lands, cold but reassuring, on his face, and he lets Ren tilt his chin up. It doesn't feel like naivety to expect kindness from him now, so when he looks up, he doesn't wipe the tears from his face, ready for comforting touch to make it all better.

He feels stripped to the bone like he's the one who's just been slaughtered on the altar, but he still looks at Ren without hiding. Letting him see every emotion, every painful breath. He turns his face into the hand holding it and kisses his palm. He doesn't know what else to do.

Ren doesn't look the same as before. Somehow after the axe, something else returned. They are not gentle eyes that greet him, "You thought that was your test, did you hand?"

Shock dries his eyes, adrenaline restarts his heart. "Yes! I just beheaded you!" He snaps. Surely it's a cruel joke; surely they've settled all the scores that need settling between them and more that didn't.

"The test begins now." Ren steps back, taking his hand away. His face feels frostbitten in the absence of touch. Martyn watches him breathe. He has nothing to fear now, yet, his inhale shakes.

Why is he afraid?

"If I attack you right now," He booms, "You can take me out of the game for good!"

Their eyes meet, surprise and composure size each other up. Ren, who's been putting on quite a show so far, breaks first, murmuring, "Are you with the Red King to the end? Or do you take Dogwarts for yourself?"

He opens his mouth to respond. The fix here is easy; he can just say he doesn't need to be asked this question; he's already made up his mind, the bitter end. But before he can, Ren slaps him square across the face.

Quickly, he learns. When a red life causes pain, it's like a fog lifts, and waiting anger sets in.

He's unarmed. His first thought, as his king turns away.

Ren doesn't shield himself with his hands, doesn't cower. Brave to the end, he stands, the only tell being how his head ducks. Instinct; the terrifying urge to live.

Innocence had been such a silly game to play. *He's a killer now.* Martyn looks at the axe, still dripping with Ren's blood.

Under his unsure eyes, a drop of blood traces the axe, falling like hail to the ground. His stomach churns at the things he's capable of doing. No matter what, he'll die a killer. *What's a little more blood?*

He shakes his head, "No!"

The sound makes Ren flinch, and he runs up to him, places down the closest thing to a white flag that he has, a spiderweb. "I won't do it!" His heart hammers in his chest as he waits, hoping Ren will turn and look at him.

"I won't do it." He murmurs, softer now.

Ren doesn't move from his spot. Maybe he still awaits a betrayal.

"You took me in when I was a lowly traveler," He remembers being scared, being alone. He remembers having nothing. "Going across the lands, searching the four corners of this world," And it's the world's fault, isn't it? Driving them all together just to try and split them apart. Well, not here. Not today. "I learned there was nothing in this world for me. Nothing but walls, corners, edges, and you know what? You showed me life." He approaches when Ren still doesn't move, lays a hand on his shoulder, "As much as I've taken it from you, you've given it back to me in bucketfuls." Ren's hand meets his, holds onto it like he's never been so sure of anything in his life. "I'm with you. This is us."

Ren turns, a flash of red, and then he's throwing himself into Martyn's open arms, squeezing him tightly like he's the one that almost died.

The axe clatters to the ground.

Wrapping one arm around the back of his shoulders, he uses the other to cradle the back of his skull, firmly pressing Ren's chin into his shoulder. He doesn't know how many times he apologizes as they stand there together, doesn't know if even one falls from his lips.

Their shaking breaths and bodies speak for them with the way that the hug hurts, all painful elbows, too-tight hands, moments where he can't breathe properly, fingers freezing in the chill of the air. Eyes open, they clutch each other, willingly suffering the pain of being close.

It's just going to be painful to be close.

Freezing water drips down both of their faces, but neither are crying. Instead, snowflakes fall around them, thick and fluffy and thawing on their feverish bodies, melting in the pool of blood on the ground, still warm.

Ren burns in his arms.

"Can you-" He shakes his head. Knowing it's going to hurt, he pulls away, doesn't have it in him to care for anything right now, "I think I need a moment alone... for a bit."

"Of course." Ren goes to reach out but seems to think better of it, curls his fingers in the air for a moment before dropping his hand down to his side. He opens his mouth again but doesn't say anything more, just closes it, nods, and makes his way indoors.

He lasts until the door shuts.

Then, grief, still churning through him like a rotten meal, collapses his knees until he's face down on the stone. He's not sure how long he sits like that, shivering from the cold.

The stones smell like blood.

And he's the one that put it there.

Pulling his bandana from his hair, he dips it in the nearest puddle and scrubs at the stones. It only smudges the blood, but that somehow feels like progress, so he dips it again, scrubs again.

Tears finally fall, the saltwater dripping from his nose and chin, helping him wash the blood away drop by drop.

His hair falls into his eyes as he moves from stone to stone, carefully cleaning them as best as he

can. Blood soaks into his bandana, turning it brown, then redder and redder as the moon lights his work.

Hands crack from the water and the cold. Knuckles split. He pushes his hair out of the way so he can see, leaving behind a smudge of what he hopes is his own blood but probably isn't.

If Ren's first death was salt in a wound, this is sand. Painful and impossible to ignore. Threatening the necessity of more pain before it's all over.

There's blood in the grass as well. He kicks at it until the grass is all uprooted from brute force, but the blood is gone.

The stones still smell like metal when he lies down to catch his breath. It's stopped snowing, leaving nothing on the ground to ever suggest it had been in the first place.

He looks around, trying to convince himself for a moment that nothing has happened. There was no test. Ren's inside on his yellow life, probably enchanting.

The rigging for his disbelief snaps and plummets as the spider web catches his eyes. Untouched. Reaching for it, he notices how his hands are caked in blood and dirt. One last time he washes them in a puddle before picking up the spiderweb, twisting it over and over until it's a thread of string in his hand.

Ren's asleep when he finally turns in, but a potion of healing turned into a thicker kind of gel sits by the door. It stings for a moment when he rubs it into his hands as the magic works, repairing the frostbite and splits.

He curls up next to Ren on the bed, careful not to disturb. Tucking his hands in between them, he drifts off, wishing he could ask to be held.

In the morning, he sews the string into a banner. Blood red cascades down until it's interrupted by a shock of white. A promise, if one ever could stick. No more will they even think of hurting each other. Never again.

It's going to be a keepsake until Ren sees him working and comes back with bundles of wool.

They curl into each other, tucking their bodies, so close Martyn's not sure where he stops, and Ren begins. That's how they spend the rest of their waking hours that day, making banner after banner for the Red Kingdom. Martyn tries not to shake too much when he finds tears collecting on the fabrics. Ren murmurs pacifying little words with a needle and thread held in his teeth.

He finds his bandana, washed and finally clean again, in a chest.

Nothing heals.

It's hard to come back from the beheading.

Sleep is easier now. Though rarely refreshing, it's at least an escape of sorts. They've taken to sharing a bed. Enemies close and friends even closer, and at this point, he doesn't care what Ren thinks of him. Nothing matters as long as they're still lying next to each other when they wake up. His dreams -nightmares really -are never clear, just fear and hurt, but he never knows why. Leaving no one to blame but himself when he wakes up. The only fear and hurt he knows he'd dream about was his own fault.

But it's Ren's fault too.

He's not sure if Ren dreams anymore. As it is, he barely moves when he's asleep. Breath so soft sometimes Martyn will scoot closer just to feel it on his face.

He's got trophy scars, despite Martyn wishing he didn't. Deep shades of red and blue cover the back of his neck, coming to two jagged points about halfway to the front.

Gradients of redder bits leading to the points on either side of his neck show the third strike, the one that killed him. The lines are clean, and it would look intimidating if he hadn't been the one to put it there.

The first strike is the largest and darkest, almost blue under the moonlight. It alone is half of the scar, leading into the scar from the third strike. Theoretically, because all he can do is think about it now, it had been left longer to bruise before Ren had died.

The scarring from the second strike is the hardest to look at. Where the first and last are decently in line with each other, the second scar strays inches away from the others when it finally ends. The edges are rigid, and at a few points, other smaller scars branch out from where the force caused the skin to rip. It's raised higher than the other two, muscles around it warping to fit.

It should have been the one to kill him. Quicker and kinder to do it in two. Instead, it stands as a painful reminder when Ren turns away.

He doesn't like to look at the scars when they're this close. Doesn't like to look at Ren anymore, either. But, after everything, it feels more damning to look away.

When he'd respawned, he'd come back grey, colorless. At first, Martyn had hoped that would be the only change, but recently the bags under his eyes have started to look bruised, his skin getting tighter over his face. Under torchlight, Martyn can see red veins running under his skin, compares them to his own blue ones, and fears the chill of his touch even as he brings him closer to try and heat him up. When he loses the animation of being awake, he looks sickly.

He looks dead.

Nights like these make him want to wake the other up. Over and over, what stops him is the simple fact that he has nothing to say. Nothing to ask or confess. Nothing to offer as an apology. Not anymore.

So he just lies there.

It's quiet.

Healing is a long way off. But in the hours of night, when he slips his hand into Ren's and waits for him to wake up, he stops pretending that Ren is the one shaking with fear. When there's nothing to do but watch how the scars move as he breathes, his heart ever so painfully starts to scab over.

Skizz doesn't really ever seem to get over it. Not entirely, at least.

Not that he can blame him when he's not over it either.

They circle Ren with the same intent, trying to protect him from the other in a made-up worst-case

scenario.

If Ren notices, he doesn't let on, letting them eye each other.

Etho understands. He understands all of it. Martyn is never really sure why.

Once, in the middle of the night when Ren had been looking particularly dead, Martyn had bundled himself into his wool castle, and they'd spent the rest of the night talking. Until Martyn didn't have any tears left and the sun rose on the horizon.

He doesn't really remember much from it, only the realization on the way home that Etho could have easily killed him.

Ren's pacing in the storage room when he gets back. And when they walk in, he jumps, clears his throat, and brushes invisible dust off his armor.

Martyn doesn't miss how he sticks to his side for the rest of the day. Knows better but still, questions why later that night.

"I was scared that after all that, you'd just left." The expression on Ren's face gives away that he wouldn't have blamed him.

He imagines waking up and not seeing Ren.

He doesn't leave without telling him for a long while after that.

Impulse doesn't say anything about it past a murmured, "I didn't think you had it in you." when they're standing out of earshot of the others.

And yeah, he didn't think he had it in him either.

Chapter End Notes

I'll be honest I don't even know what to say here. It feels like every chapter from here on out is my new favorite chapter to read and write and edit and just...

holds you all gently you're very wonderful for coming along this ride of sadness and tragedy with me

(okay but purely to boost my own ego, what line made you the saddest, angriest, happiest, etcetera? I want to know what makes people feel. The bribe is forehead kisses /p)

All That I Have To Lose, And All I've Lost In The Fight To Protect It

Chapter Summary

The knights of Dogwarts take a stroll around the kingdom laying waste to their enemies. A close encounter with a sand castle. Renewed vows. A canary call. A bitter drink.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is decently violent so here's another tag warning <3

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

It's all a game.

He can't stop thinking about it.

Others are lying and setting traps to spill blood for fun. He had tried to avoid it and had been handed the blade anyway.

Scar should have died on that mountain. But not even that would clear his conscience enough for what he had done to hurt less.

When they next meet, he tries not to seek out a fight, even with death creeping into his mind through the cracks. Still, he's happy to fly arrows at him when he pushes too far, gets too close to hurting Ren. He lets himself lie that he'll never let anyone hurt him again. Tries to pretend he's not guiltily hoping it happens.

He wants Ren's pain to stop being his fault.

The banner Scar picks up, and waves around is different from the rest. The first made, meticulously crafted, not even letting Ren peek. He'd kept it when they gave banners out across their allies, when people started to choose sides, curled his hand around it when Jimmy threw a different banner into a fire, standing in front of Scott with his eyes narrowed and jaw clenched.

He had pretended not to see the way Scott had brushed against him when he pulled him back, chiding him.

The soft stroke of a thumb across knuckles. Neither looks surprised when it happens as if gentle touch is a given with them. There's no hiding when Jimmy turns back to Scott, apology and affection looking so natural that for a moment, he forgets the game entirely.

Something he knows well and refuses to name boils inside him when Ren's hand pulling him to their next destination is rough against his skin.

Forcibly ignoring it, he focuses on the banner. He doesn't know when it had been lost.

It had been a present, kind of, more so he'd shoved it onto a shield and thrust it into Ren's arms. He's not sure if Ren's noticed the tiny stitches of cobweb yet, not sure how he even would with how they're pinned between the cloth and the front of the wooden shield.

He had tried to be honest with it. Kept the bitterness away from the words. If it's all that's left of him, he wants Ren to keep it. *My greatest ally. My weakest part.*

Maybe he should have lied.

As much as he'd like a day of downtime, too many plots are thickening far too quickly.

Etho falls. They respond as fast as they can.

Gathering their forces, while reassuring, makes his hands twitch toward his shield. Their alliances are half-finished, but their weapons are fully forged. Everyone around him is dangerous in their own right; his only comfort is that they'll be dangerous to his enemies before they're dangerous to him.

Etho speaks of arrows that cleave through bone and still go all the way through.

Impulse throws down black-tipped arrows and a bow built to kill in two shots. Martyn hopes he takes mercy on him when they eventually have to fight.

Every enemy they meet, Martyn can almost see something murderous rippling in response under Skizz's skin; it calls for blood, and something in him agrees. They need to fight; someone needs to die. The world exhales aggression with them, but every inhale feels like a reluctant gift.

Joel picks his side, sends an arrow into Martyn's side. Fine. That's just fine; they didn't need him.

They stand off outside his house, bows drawn, civility hanging on by a thread. He has no leverage here. The burnt wall becomes a problem. His lack of information becomes a bigger problem.

When it becomes clear that there's no reason to stay and fight for Joel's house, they run to Monopoly Mountain.

On the way, he double-checks his allies. He waits for betrayals, prays they don't happen. Not yet. He's not ready yet.

He steadies himself to kill again. The language of blood is hard to forget.

It feels safer to be on the offense. Steal before they're stolen from. Lives, alliances, and -he starts opening chests in Grian and Scar's base -items whenever possible.

There isn't much left in the house. It takes him too long to realize why.

He sees the TNT half a second after someone ignites it.

His heart crawls into his throat, and he runs, knowing he doesn't have time to make it back outside. For all his talk and hopes that if he is to go, then it's quick, he doesn't want to die.

Time slows down, and he holds his shield up. A piece of shrapnel hits his cheek.

And somehow. That's it.

He makes it out with barely a scratch to his name.

The explosion changes the group's mood, and they race home; they've pushed too far, overextended themselves. They forgot that even armies can fall.

It's too much. They weren't made to fight like this, to fear like this. They're only human.

Martyn almost misses the way everyone flanks him as they run. When he realizes he almost trips and falls as surprise restarts his nervous system.

Ren and Etho stick close by, each taking a side; Ren to the right, Etho to the left. They're hypervigilant, looking around trees and checking the terrain. Skizz darts back and forth out front, calling out the route, casting glances back at him. Bigb runs tighter circles, putting them all in his sight and range of protection, diamond sword gleaming in the light. Impulse follows behind, keeping an eye on the group, bow drawn.

They're protecting him. He runs faster, unable to keep the wild grin off of his face. This whole time, he'd been unwilling to let his guard down around the people he knew he would kill for. He'd forgotten that the street could go both ways. Doubt, fear, everything else, is shoved out of his mind, and he *chooses* trust. *These are his knights, and they have his back.*

The elation doesn't last long. When they arrive, intruders are already in the castle, laying waste to their resources.

His heart beats in tune with the rest of them. Whether or not it's their permanent place of residence, this is their home. Their exhales all sing the same tune; *this calls for blood.*

They bow them off the wall, but it isn't enough. Boiling anger drives them onward. Too long have they let people come and go and take without giving and betray them like they're nothing.

They run Scott down, watching as he takes arrow after arrow, stumbling but never falling, firing back whenever he has cover, drawing fire away from the others. There isn't a second where Martyn doubts what he's fighting for.

They could kill Jimmy. Shivers run up his spine, and he knows he's right. *Scott's the better fighter of the two, but a broken spirit does as much damage as a blade if it's done right.*

He fires, aiming directly for Jimmy. Scott takes the arrow, throwing an arm out in front of his husband just in time for it to hit him instead. Jimmy grabs his armor and pulls him to cover behind a tree, Scott still firing as he's led backward through the trees, not double-checking for a second if he is being misled.

A creeper explodes behind him and Ren, on the mend from a couple of well-aimed arrows, gives him a once over, pulling an arrow out of his side, "Martyn, you okay?"

He nods, lets the ridiculously fast healing do its work on his ribs before turning to trail after Scott again. Burning arrows stick in the ground, and he grins, "Follow the trail of fire."

Bigb and Ren throw him arrows when he runs out, the both of them laying a steady hand on his shoulder as they pass them over. Blips of safety inside a raging battle.

He leads when the enemies run from Skizz Point. Drawing his bow back time and time again, letting the way his fingertips burn focus him away from the way his body takes arrow after arrow of return fire.

Jimmy's words ring in his ears, the way he leaned in, bared his teeth, and growled, "I'm coming back for you."

He's stepped way too far out of line to stay alive now. He jumps from the tree he's perched in, starts to give chase.

Ren grabs his wrist, yanking him to a stop, "We've won this battle today."

It takes a moment for the urge to chase Jimmy to wane. When his head finally clears, he looks up at Ren to see narrowed eyes and a tilted head. The message is clear, *this isn't a suggestion; it's an order to stand down.*

He drops his bow, letting his muscles relax.

Winning a battle feels good. Winning with no lives lost is starting to feel bad. The stronger they all get, the harder it will be to win.

His battle plans start to feel sadistic. Options he wouldn't have even considered weeks ago start to look enticing. He wants his enemies to die alone, *afraid.*

Ren is still calling it a victory when they get home. Even so, he seems more careful around Martyn, pacing around as he recounts the explosion from earlier.

The night feels welcome after the chaos and fear of the day. This time it's Ren who reaches out awkwardly for the straps holding his armor in place. He doesn't have to speak for his yes to be known, just catches his gaze and gives him a curt nod.

It feels strange to be on this side of the armoring process, but Ren doesn't seem to find it odd, so he doesn't mention it.

His hands are warm against his skin, making it hard to stand still. Something about the contact makes him feel fluttery and nervous even as it grounds his mind, distracting him from the violence. It's not like he's in denial about *why* he likes it when Ren touches him.

He's just a little confused. Ren had been clear about where he stood. Even if the question hadn't been actually spoken, it had been answered. No room for love. Never was any. Not that kind, at least.

Ren still touches him like he's precious.

"I'm glad you made it out of there." Ren's sneaking glances at his face as his hands undo his chestplate.

The shrapnel. He halfheartedly scratches the dried blood on his cheek, and it flakes off; he can't feel any wound underneath.

"I was alright," He motions towards his shield on the table. Looking at it now, he can see rips in the fabric and larger pieces of shrapnel embedded in the wood underneath, "My shield got the worst of it."

Ren exhales loudly and kneels down, grabbing one of his boots and propping it on his knee.

He knows they're equals in this; the royalty thing is more for the rest of the Red Army. But something feels wrong about having the other at his feet.

"I can get that, my king." He goes to pull his foot away, but Ren catches his ankle, holds him there. It's not aggressive or angry, just firm.

He shakes his head and goes back to undoing his boot, huffing under his breath, “This isn’t for you, my hand.”

Oh. It shouldn’t be as surprising as it is.

“You’re worried about me.” He doesn’t mean to sound dumbfounded; he doesn’t mean to feel it.

Ren shrugs like it’s obvious, swapping the boot he’s working on. He points at himself and then Martyn, “King. Kingdom.”

“You’ve got more kingdom than just me, Ren.” He reminds him.

The other shrugs again. Martyn watches his gaze sweep across his body, knowing that he’s looking for any injuries. “That’s true.” It straightens his posture, sets his face with a look of pride, “Did you see their faces when we handed out banners?”

He had been a little preoccupied looking at their weapons, “I’ll be honest, I was more looking at how badly they can beat me in a fight.”

“I saw it in their eyes, every last one of them.” Ren smiles fondly, “They’ve got something to fight for, something to fall back on. I know you saw the way they rallied to you after you were hurt.”

He had.

“That’s Dogwarts.” It swells in his own lungs then, the promise of protection, the people he fights for, “That’s the kingdom we fight for.”

The way Ren looks at him makes his heart beat rapidly, “I love them,” he hums, honesty marking every word, “I fight for you.”

Martyn laughs at the clarification. It’s that or ask why he keeps bringing his hopes out. No matter how far Martyn has them tucked away, he finds them, snatches them out of the small, scared place he’d put them, and makes him put them back. Ripped into the tiniest shreds he can make them go.

“Don’t let them hear that,” He jokes, instead of telling him he’d die for him if he asked, “They might reconsider.”

It must have been the wrong thing to say because Ren’s head ducks, sending confusion whipping through his mind once more. Martyn catches a glimpse of the scars across his neck. Flinching, he tries to continue nonchalance when he doesn’t feel any. He wants to know why Ren keeps acting like he’s in love with him when he’s said the very opposite, very clearly. He wants to know if it will ever stop hurting to see the scars.

He’s so close to ruining their alliance, just for a moment of truth. “You’re a confusing man, my king.”

Letting his boot fall, Ren stands, and Martyn can see a quip coming from a mile away, but they both notice the way his eyes linger on the scars.

The mirth leaves Ren’s eyes, and he brings a hand up to rub at them. There’s peace in the way he doesn’t flinch at the touch, just rubs at the scar-like he’s forgotten it’s there, “I’m sorry I had to ask you to do that.”

“No.” Martyn shakes his head, his voice suddenly hoarse. He hates that he has to disagree now of all times, but Ren is wrong. Pain pushes his voice out, “You didn’t have to.”

“No. I didn’t.” He admits, “I’m sorry I asked you to do it anyway.”

Martyn can’t forgive him, not yet, not when guilt is the only thing he tastes anymore, “Why did you test me like that? I have blood on my hands like everyone on this server, but it’s a friend’s. My only experience spilling blood is of the person I’m most loyal to.”

Guilt crosses his face, “I needed to prove myself to you. I need to be able to protect you, and that means I need to start fights we can win.”

“But you still didn’t trust me. Even after I killed you at your own command.” He accuses, reminds him of the other half of that test.

Ren drops to his knees, expression solemn, “and I must apologize to you,” he takes Martyn’s hands in his own and holds them close to his face as he bows his head to him, “I’m sorry. I have said - promised on our banner -that I would never doubt you. I promise that it was only in that moment, on the altar, that I faltered. Only in the moment after I struck you did I ever doubt your loyalty.”

Martyn laughs, both at the absurdity of Ren humbling himself before him and the idea that he would have betrayed him that night. That he even could.

“You laugh,” Ren continues, “but even with the betrayal I would have felt, I still cannot find it in me to fault you if you made that decision. The kingdom, the throne, it would have all been yours.”

Shaking his head, he goes to pull away, and Ren flinches, only slightly. He hums, removes one of his hands from Ren’s to pet his hair gently, “My king, you have made your hand known. Even now, you seek reassurance. Even now, you doubt.”

The other man kisses his hand, lips burning Martyn’s heart even from their distance. He shakes his head, “Then I must apologize again. You need not answer. On my red life, I will never doubt you again, even should it cost me the world.” He knows it’s not a lie.

Kneeling, he joins the other on the ground. He presses a palm to his cheek, holding his hand fiercely in the other. This is something he knows how to fix.

“I don’t want the throne, nor do I crave the power of leading a kingdom. My loyalty doesn’t lie with you. Not as a king.” Panicked eyes meet his, but he meets them with a gentle stroke of his thumb across his cheekbone, “I have loyalty to *you*, Ren. Were you nothing, I’d be your friend.” It doesn’t hurt as much as he thought it would to repeat it. Again he offers love, in any way Ren wants, they’re in too far for lies now, too much has passed for pretense to be helpful, “All I am and for all time is yours if you can promise the same.”

Ren nods, and then there’s a hand on the back of his neck, and their foreheads are pressed together, “Then let us celebrate. For in my moment of doubt, you are clarity. In my moment of weakness, you are every grain of strength I need. And in your life, I will forever be the shield at your side. Mark these words, you will not be laid to rest while I have air in my lungs and blood in my veins.”

They breathe, letting their vows set in. The world quirks an intrigued eye at them, two loyal men in a world meant for betrayal. Aren’t they curious?

The tension stretches, thinner and thinner until there are only two options, only two ways to proceed. Martyn speaks, picking the duller pain, “So is it if you lose both that I die, or is it one or the other?”

Ren laughs, collects himself as well, “If all goes well, we shall never have to know.”

Etho kills Scott, and the desert explodes.

They all push when Grian runs away, sure it's a retreat, until the sand turns into shrapnel, flying into the sky just off to the right of him.

He sees Skizz get sent into the air, holding his shield and squeezing his eyes shut to keep the sand out.

When he lands, Martyn rushes over, quickly shouting, "It's me!" Before licking his thumbs and passing them over his still-closed eyelids to remove the sand.

They don't have time for more than that; he rounds on Grian. It feels strange to release a fish in the desert, but he knows what pufferfish can do, throws it at the other man, and watches its spines dig into his skin before he screams and pushes it away. The motion leaves both of them bloodied in the process, spines ripping from the pufferfish and poking into his enemy.

Sickly green spreads out under Grian's skin as he runs away, getting himself caught in his own trap.

Something about a bow feels impersonal. The arrow could really go anywhere, moved by the wind or an accidental breath. He feels apathetic as his fingers twitch the string out of his grip, releasing the arrow. Aimed straight through Grian's skull.

Skizz, eyes clear and gaze true, stands next to him as they lay siege to the foolish house built to protect the red names. It doesn't occur to him to care about their desperate attempts to keep the people they love safe.

Jimmy's body is pinned to the floor for almost a full minute by the arrows that Skizz fires, one after the other. He's waiting; whatever bit of him is left.

"Just despawn." Skizz sounds like he's pleading as he continues to fire arrows into the body, the first *really gone*. Maybe Jimmy listens.

Arrows clatter to the floor.

He picks up Skizz's bow when it falls, places it back in his hands. They have time for words. He has none to offer, just a hand on his back and the bow in his hands, and somehow it's enough.

There's time to wonder how Skizz makes it through the day.

It's his own fault, really. Scar, who escaped, far too many times escaped, still has the banner, waving it around like it's insignificant. He knows not to be headstrong, but it's insulting to see the physical representation of their loyalty waved around like it's funny. Like Ren didn't die for it. Like he didn't kill for it.

So, he pushes too far. Goes alone. He Fires arrow after arrow because he can fight now. Scar's hit him.

Grian, ever at Scar's side, lingers, slows him down. Martyn remembers well what it felt like to kill him, craves it again. Death he doesn't have to feel guilty for. Scott taunts, ducks, and weaves around him.

When he catches up to Scar, he breathes, trying to fill his lungs, wondering when he'd stopped taking full breaths. Something in his mind screams the unfairness of it all. They're all just doing their best to survive. This wouldn't be a temporary death. Killing Scar means never seeing him again, ripping Grian from his friend.

Scott's hands aren't unshaking when they draw his bow anymore. Skizz had hidden his sniffing by following the group at a distance, almost far enough to hide his small sounds.

He doesn't want to die with that much blood on his hands.

The little bit of humanity left in him pauses. His hesitation gives them time to regroup instead of giving them a friend to mourn.

They throw the banner down, and for a moment, he's almost sure they can all make it out of there alive. He's in and out almost fast enough.

Someone throws poison, and he still has the good sense in him to run before the effects take hold, hearing Scott behind him shouting for his allies' help.

He doesn't know if Grian and Scar think killing him is worth letting Scott die, and he sure as hell doesn't stick around to get the answer to that question.

The night closes in. Quick bursts of fog steam in the air as he runs, panting, pleading to make it home.

He trips, hits the ground like a brick. Adrenaline doesn't let him feel it.

His eyes start to burn from the poison, skin aflame and hands shaking. He wishes for snow, something to dilute the caustic liquid in his eyes. He's left unanswered.

A shadow moves, and fear saves him. He only barely has his shield up in time to throw off a spider, scrambling back to his feet before it can jump again.

As he runs, he retches out bile that burns on its way up and tastes like gunpowder in his mouth. His tears feel like acid, but he can't close his eyes to try and assuage the pain. There's no time to stop and try to breathe right, so he hacks and coughs, fights to keep breathing, sprints with empty lungs. His body runs on pain.

Poison eats away at his skin, the scent of burning flesh making him gag. He keeps running. The only other option is to die.

The lights are disorientating now, blurry burning eyes unsure if they're painful or welcoming. He's turned around; in the blurry light, he sees what he's sure is the hill to Dogwarts and runs towards it. He can't feel his legs, the burning of the abused muscles becoming nothing more than a blip in his mind.

A sound behind him, his shield again.

The *thunk* of an arrow burying itself into his shield.

He can't see what shot it, hopes it isn't Grian or Scar. He doesn't have time to call for help, doesn't have anyone but foes nearby.

Hearing water rush, he turns; he's sure Dogwarts had a river nearby if he could just get to the right side of the shore. *Maybe the water can stop the poison.*

He can't see anything but light or the absence of it, throwing his hands out in front of him, hoping to dodge trees before he runs directly into them.

The pain from the poison ebbs for a moment, and he doesn't know if it's because it has run its course or if his body is shutting down even as he forces it to keep moving. He's not sure if he's in charge of his body anymore. It runs without command, keeps him ducking away from anything that looks like movement, anything that makes sound.

A golden apple touches his lips; the enchantment feels familiar and safe. He bites into it, trying to gather enough saliva to chew it. He tries to choke it down.

An arrow sprouts from his throat.

Chapter End Notes

Kindly and respectfully puts the watcher lore to the side, it's good and wonderful lore but I don't think I know enough about it to feel like I'd do it justice to write it into my fic. (and I like doing the things I write about justice in whatever sense that is)

To everyone that gave me direct quotes in the comments: are you thinking spring wedding or summery? I can do other seasons as well.

To all the people in the comments regardless: mwah, there are your forehead kisses, I'm wildly in love with you <3<3<3<3 (/p)

We're underground, fighting for our lives, arm in arm with a fire in our eyes

Chapter Summary

A brief interlude in a space between, followed by fighting again. The knights of Dogwarts do their best to protect each other, leaving little room for Ren and Martyn to acknowledge anything between the two of them. Skizz thinks a little too hard about the things he's done. The author sets up the first line for the next chapter.

Chapter Notes

Believe it or not this is going to be the chilliest chapter we ever get again. yay!

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

He floats in darkness with his eyes wide open, looking for anything. He's pretty sure there's supposed to be a light somewhere. Unless that's supposed to happen later.

Nothing happens for a long time. Minutes, or maybe years, pass with nothing. No sound, no light, no gravity. No time.

As time passes, he grows worried; he knows he's not supposed to be *dead* dead. He wonders if this is what Ren experienced when he had killed him. It's lonely.

Closing his eyes just to see if there's any difference in light when he does, he takes a deep breath, ready to shout into the void for anything to remember him, to move him somewhere else.

Ask.

His lungs empty in a pitiful squeak. He's not sure if he's making things up amidst the silence or if he actually hears a voice; gravely and apathetic and everywhere.

He waits, but it doesn't sound again. Nothing but endless darkness meets his senses.

Whatever, no one's here to call him crazy if he is making it up.

"Does it have to end with all but one dead?" he calls, unsure if he's afraid or angry. Maybe there's a reason, something that would make killing easier. Something to make dying easier.

A deep rumbling sounds. There's no point of origin and no point of end, but it rattles through him anyway, turning his stomach inside out with its reverberation.

Yes. The answer rumbles, cold and apathetic in the stillness of the nothingness.

He waits for an explanation or an emotion. No further noise comes.

Like a cord cut, he falls. From nothingness into nothingness.

He doesn't like waking up armorless. Likes it even less when he wakes up to find the castle rigged with explosives. No doubt a trap set by Monopoly Mountain.

By the time he returns to the place where he'd died, Scott and Grian have already scooped up most of his things, and he can faintly hear them threatening the castle. His heart beating rapidly reminds him that he's wildly unarmored and unprepared to encounter either of them right now.

He ducks under the water, forced to run. *At least he let people get their stuff back when they're shot in the neck in the woods.*

Etho's is the closest safe house, so he runs there, scrapes together a set of armor with nervous hands, reminding himself to let everyone else know about the trap he'd woken up to.

It's unnerving to be alone now. Safety in numbers had felt like a suggestion before but, he rubs his throat and holds up a piece of iron to check his reflection. It's a requirement now.

His neck has a scar, as he'd expected, a circle of pink skin and likely one to match it on the back, but his face throws him off.

Tear tracks are burnt into his face. It's hard to see, the skin is only slightly tinted paler, but when he runs his hand over his face, he can feel a groove, starting under his eyes and ending just below his jaw, where the tears had collected.

The poison. Crying it out of his eyes, spitting it from his mouth.

It's not painful when he touches it.

He drops his hand, continues on. He's not sure what to feel about his new scars. It's easier to ignore for now.

Etho gets to him first, an accidental teleport at exactly the right time, and brings a hand up to the side of his face to steady his frantic looking around. "You okay?" He asks.

He almost flinches at the touch but reminds himself that out of anyone, Etho is the one to understand. He'd understood before, even before they both had been scarred.

"I lost my stuff." He admits, grateful that he has some level of protection now. Etho always seems to have keen eyes looking out for them all.

The look he gets is sympathetic, "They probably burned it, but let's see what we can get back."

When he sees Ren again, he watches him narrow his eyes at his iron armor like it had personally affronted him.

He wants to tell him he's alright, but his dream sits in the front of his mind. It would be a lie if he said it now. Instead, he lets the other look all he likes, knowing that even if the armor is trash, he's put it on correctly.

Ren inhales sharply when he sees his new scars. Calloused hands trace the exit wound, and light touches land under his eyes. Still, the touch is firm and unafraid.

"I should have been there, Martyn." Ren is solemn, forehead creased with guilt.

He's starting to think that everyone spends too much time feeling guilty, "It was bound to happen

eventually.”

They don't get time for a sappy moment, not that Martyn wants one. Etho, staring into the horizon, suddenly shouts, “My castle's on fire!”

They split up, Impulse citing that he doesn't want Martyn going red trying to diffuse the trap laid for them all.

Later, he'll wonder if he should have stayed and died with Impulse when Scott, Scar and Grian catch them unaware. But that's for later.

Now is fear. Enemies drop from the ceiling, and he doesn't think, just runs, blocking the path behind him, trapping them all down there. Trapping Impulse in an outmatched fight.

It's his fault when he dies.

Bdubs and Cleo catch them on the way over to protect Impulse from Scott, Scar, and Grian. And maybe it's then that it sinks in. There's no redo's here. Everyone's picked a side, and most of them are enemies.

Cleo is hard to read, her civility is curt, and her smile is wicked. The last Martyn remembers she had been Ren's ally.

Somehow, he's forgotten that Cleo's red now. He doesn't expect anything violent, even when she approaches Ren with her sword drawn. She raises it, and still, he's a fool. So is Ren.

He watches it sink into the back of his shoulder; a smatter of blood crisscrosses the scars he himself had put there. The rules of interaction, his compassion for the red names, everything flies out the window.

No one touches Ren.

Skizz flanks him, and together they chase her down, taking her out of the game. He watches Skizz clench his jaw, and Martyn wants to tell him there's no room for remorse. He wants to admit that he thinks his died days ago. Shriveled up after he'd started screaming at it to shut up, stop repeating things he can't hear.

He doesn't want to know when he'd started thinking like that.

After a long moment of staring into space, Skizz turns back to him. Something in his eyes is unsettlingly at peace, “I forgive you, by the way.”

“For what?” It's not that he thinks himself innocent. Rather he's wondering for which act is he forgiven.

“What you did to Ren.” Skizz seems focused, jaw set, “I just wanted you to know. I think I get it now.”

“I'm not sure I deserve your forgiveness,” He contends, “But thanks. It means a lot -knowing you don't resent me for it.”

Skizz laughs, “I did for a while, probably longer than necessary. I guess I forgot this is a war.”

Silence falls after the word. War.

“I wish Ren had asked me to do it,” Skizz admits. “I know why he didn't but, I was already red.”

“You don’t,” Martyn curls his hands, letting the pressure and expenditure of energy calm him, “I can’t see anything but red when I close my eyes. You don’t want that.”

At a tilt of Skizz’s head, they both look at where Cleo had fallen. Her body is gone, with all of her stuff strewn across the water.

“And save you the headache?” Skizz’s smile doesn’t quite make it past a corner of his mouth, “I was already seeing red. That’s what it does to you. You’re still innocent in my books. Ren-” He sighs, “Ren did what he had to do to protect the kingdom, and I respect him for it. But you?”

Martyn quirks his head.

“I just don’t want you to have to be a killer.” Skizz doesn’t quite manage to hide the way he glances at his hands as if looking for blood.

“I’m glad we have you on our side,” Martyn takes his hand, holding it firmly, blood and all, “You’ve protected us more than we give you credit for. But we’re in this with you. If you ever want to talk -if we get the time, I’m here.”

Skizz chuckles, squeezing his hand back, “I’ll take you up on that later. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to stop trying to protect you all.”

They let Bdubs run, if only because he’s not the one starting fights. Losing an uphill battle doesn’t seem like a good idea to any of them, so they fall back to Dogwarts to lick their wounds and meet back up with Impulse.

Martyn tries to take a second amid the chaos to apologize for leaving him there, “I had nothing to fight with.”

Impulse doesn’t say anything, just gives him a tense smile, looking carefully around at everyone.

Cleo’s armor has better enchants than his, so he strips out of his own, *she’s not going to need it anymore*. He’s got the boots on when Ren takes the chestplate from him.

It should be incredibly telling that he had expected it to happen. What he’s not expecting is for those two straps to still be done up too loosely again. He tskts and pulls Ren into reach to fix them for him.

Ren doesn’t seem to expect to be moved. Inhaling sharply, he catches himself on Martyn’s arms, and for a second, they’re nose to nose. Martyn swears he sees his thoughts mirrored.

Recovering quickly, Ren gets back to putting his chestplate on, and Martyn starts on the straps.

“Really, you get attacked, and your armor isn’t even in place?” He shakes his head, but they both know he’s not upset, just happy he’s still alive; they’ve lost too much today already, taken too much, “Some king you are.”

“Your king,” Ren murmurs, head moving forward as he follows the straps on Martyn’s armor over his shoulder, straightening them out.

His scruff brushes Martyn’s jaw, and he tries not to react to how it, coupled with how he speaks, low and sure, sends electricity coursing through him. Ren smells like gunpowder and blood. The adrenaline remaining from the chase courses through him one last time, and he squeezes his eyes shut, heart pounding.

Ren needs to stop doing this to him.

“My king,” He repeats anyway, reaching up and holding him close with a hand to the nape of his neck, unaware of the way his fingertips press into the second scar, “My Ren.”

Ren stills, and his breath stutters where it lands on Martyn’s ear, “Martyn, I-”

“I’m going in.” Skizz gives them only a moment’s warning before he leaves the castle walls, wiping his blade on the grass as he goes. The way he swings the sword in a wide arc towards the Crastle has Martyn sure he’s thirsty to use it.

Martyn should have asked how he reconciles the killing he’s done with how eager he is to do it again. *Maybe he doesn’t.*

“I love you guys, and I hate them.” Determination settles in Skizz’s steady words, “Everyone ready?”

He’ll never be ready now. Not when he’s almost certain as to what Ren was thinking. Not when he was thinking the same thing.

Skizz is sprinting towards the Crastle now, not checking for his allies' backup. With all the intensity in his stride Martyn’s sure he could take down all their enemies by himself.

He pulls away, “Yeah, let's go.”

The five of them head out into battle.

Chapter End Notes

As we get nearer to the end, I'm feeling myself literally pulling back from posting chapters because It's ending. I really loved working on this fic and sharing it with y'all and I'm very much not ready for it all to be over. Always going to hold a place in my heart though.

It feels like every time I got to post a chapter I really want to post the next one immediately. This literally cannot work since half that shit it not edited in the foggiest. smh.

Anyone want to guess what I have set up for next chapter? (He says as if y'all haven't *seen* third life /lh)

Y'all know what I like, (it you. you all are what i like :D) but here's me again pretty please asking for comments because you all literally have no idea how excited I am when I get them. have a lovely and wonderful Tuesday y'all <3

Here are forehead kisses, just because y'all deserve them: mwah <3

This kind of love never lasts, if it does; it will kill you

Chapter Summary

Buckle up. We've got a jumble of emotions as they return to Dogwarts, we've got Scott -oop nevermind, we've got hugs, interesting thoughts on what love is, hands and the status of whether or not they can be loved, we've got the blatant plagiarism of songs and the author is not sorry, Ren finally does something, not what you're hoping but definitely something necessary, the author almost called someone an angle of death don't worry about it, the server is a little glitchy but at least we have Ren and Martyn still and nothing at all will change about that... We also finally get nonlinear storytelling because the author is addicted.

Chapter Notes

The words I said to my mom about the last chapter: "I don't think I traumatized my readers as much as I could." /j

Also, shoutout to me, who finally threw some nonlinear storytelling in because I simply love that shit.

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

Three of them return to Dogwarts at the end of the day.

Ren and Etho are almost perfect opposites. Ren storms around the room, slamming chests open; he's got an arrow -likely one of Impulse's -stuck between the plates of his armor. Etho mutters softly to himself a string of threats in Impulse's general direction; it seems like it's equal parts genuine hurt and caution.

Martyn's still grieving Skizz.

The image of him grinning and punching him in the shoulder before running into the Crastle closes his throat as he tries to speak. They hadn't even tried to help him. Called back by the knowledge that no enemy comes out of that castle alive.

They had all known that no one comes out of that castle alive.

A bookshelf crashes to the ground, and Ren stands over it, looking utterly pissed that more damage hadn't been done. He's standing still, every muscle tense like it wants to jump out of his body and wreak some havoc of its own.

Etho tips over another one, albeit more cautiously. His movements are calculated, giving Ren space, watching him carefully. When he moves, his body remains carefully turned so he can see both Martyn and Ren simultaneously. His hand lingers at his shield.

After a moment, Martyn walks over to Ren and places a hand on his shoulder. He gives him a squeeze before turning to the nearest bookshelf and tossing it onto the pile that they had made.

That night it's the three of them that huddle together in a pile of wool. Dead men lying there in silence. Martyn tries not to wonder aloud how much time he has left with them.

"So, what are you going to do if you win?" he asks.

Nestled in between the two of them, he has the benefit of being able to feel the both of them freeze up.

He can't stand the feeling that they're all grieving alone right next to each other, "Come on, we're all going to war -likely tomorrow, let's be honest -so what are you going to do if and when you win?"

Etho indulges him first, "Move somewhere cold." he laughs humorlessly.

"Tear down Dogwarts." Ren chimes in, surprising him. "It's not what I wanted it to be."

Still, Martyn smiles, imagines Etho waking up to a chill in the morning instead of fire on the horizon. He thinks of the hill Dogwarts had been built on. Maybe it grows tulips in the spring.

"I think I'll move far away, see if I can get past the border." He muses. It's just a little too quiet, and he waits to be called out on foolishly, hoping to get past the border.

No one speaks for long lonely minutes.

Etho raps his knuckles on each of their chests in turn, "Well then, let the best man win."

They could kill each other in their sleep, but just being close to someone is worth not wearing their armor.

Somehow, likely due to BigB returning from the mines for the battles to come, they don't get attacked immediately the next day.

They take refuge with him, glad to have the friendly arms of an ally. Safety in numbers returns, and they venture out together to hopefully gain an advantage in weapons for the coming battles.

It doesn't last as long as any of them would hope. When they get back to Dogwarts, they split up, only for them to find each other again, trying to evade their enemies.

He grabs Ren and runs, trying so hard to stay together that they separate from the others.

Outnumbered, they fight wherever they can, take hits and arrows for each other, the accidental wound from each other. They try not to blame each other. It catches up to them eventually.

They take a stand in the desert.

Martyn sees it in Scott's eyes as he dies. Beneath the pain and fear, there's a sort of relief. He tries to imagine how he would feel if Ren had died when Jimmy did. How willing he would be to kill anyone for revenge.

He remembers the emptiness from when he'd died and tries not to mourn for Scott. Wherever he is, it's unlikely that he's with his husband.

He tries to be gentle when they torch his armor and supplies. Under a birch tree, they slowly dump all his stuff into the fire. He murmurs a goodbye under his breath as the last of the ashes floats

away.

Ren's anger doesn't hide his grief. He puts two flowers down in front of the burn hole, and Martyn knows he's thinking a similar thing. Guilt paints his face as he stares at the makeshift grave of the man he's killed.

Martyn knows guilt hurts more when it's deserved.

He doesn't know if it's the desperation of war or the promise of protection that causes Ren to turn to him, "Hold me." He pleads, voice strained and eyes red.

Ren's asking for help. Martyn realizes.

And so he does; he wraps his arms around him and lets him sob into his chest.

"They made me a monster," he snuffles and tucks his head in further, shaking like being held is the only thing keeping him together right now, "I'm a killer. I wasn't supposed to be this."

They're all monsters now. Denying it is a lie.

Instead, he pets his hair and holds him as tight as he can. They grieve together. Lives lost, in both the living and the dead. The people they could have been if peace had ever been allowed.

He wonders if they would have even been friends if the war hadn't pushed them together. Embers from the birch tree catching fire pop, and he squeezes his eyes shut in an attempt to stop the tears. In a heartbeat, he would choose a life where they never met, as long as they both got to live it.

An explosion sounds from behind him, and he pulls away managing to choke out, "Eyes."

There's a moment, before he turns towards the battle, a split second where he's violently aware that this could be the last time he ever sees Ren. Frantically, he scans his face, tries to commit it to memory.

If things had gone differently, if love had been an option instead of a cruelty, he would have kissed him then and there. But they've fallen too far to open that door now. Instead, he catches his eyes and takes his hand for what he hopes isn't the last time. He squeezes it, trying to convey feelings even he doesn't fully understand.

Ren squeezes back, heartbreak playing plainly behind his eyes.

Their tears don't dry as they run. Instead, blurred gazes make the stars look like firelight in the sky, lighting the path to Skizz's house.

It feels right to take a stand there, guarded by him even now.

Ren manages to poison Impulse, and when Martyn had first died, he'd been sure he wouldn't wish the feeling of drowning from his own tears on even his worst enemy. Lucky for him, Impulse isn't his worst enemy, just his worst friend.

He watches Impulse back away, trying to cover himself, and presses in, lets him finally get the short end of the stick.

The problem is; sometimes, the short end of the stick is the sharper end, and by the time he realizes he's going to lose this fight if he doesn't retreat, it's too late.

He's too slow to dodge the arrow Impulse sends his way, just quick enough to see it streaking

towards him.

The darkness returns. As does the voice.

Ask.

“Why?” he screams into the void.

There is no answer.

He barely has time to notice that Ren is barreling down a hill towards him, shouting, “hand of the king, you’re alive!” before they slam into each other and subsequently the dirt in what can loosely and violently be called a hug.

Not bothering to ask how he got out of there alive, he returns the hug, just glad that he’s done it.

They lie there together, and amongst the dirt and grass, they hold each other, both surprised that they were lucky enough to find the other before their enemies did. Both hoping their luck never runs out.

Martyn doesn’t know what he says when he starts talking, he doesn’t know what either of them is saying. Threats, confessions, promises, hasty goodbyes, and pleas to stay safe all blur together in the way they run hands over the other’s armor, checking that they’re still safe.

The two straps are done up correctly. Intrigued, he gives them a light tug, “Thought you couldn’t get these ones by yourself?”

Ren shakes his head, “I had to get back to you in one piece.” He butts him with his head affectionately, “It was well worth the pinched fingers.”

And it’s something small. But it’s something beautiful, and Martyn can’t escape the giddy laugh that ripples through him as he tries to pull Ren ever closer.

Thumbs rub the dirt from faces, not that the dirt has ever mattered but just to touch each other, to protect each other. Calloused and cracked hands hold hands; unloveable but so entirely loved that Martyn doesn’t know if it’s despite all they’ve done or because of it.

Foolishly he tries to believe that if they die today, this will be enough. One imperfect moment in the sun, in a field, in his arms. It has to be enough.

They make their way to Etho’s castle.

“Are you up for one last fight?” Ren asks what they’re all thinking, are they ready for The Last Battle?

They’re all ready for it all to be over; one way or another, it ends soon. It would be reassuring if it wasn’t so terrifying.

He takes a breath, the final test of loyalty; to stay and fight together. Doubts die, and he’s left with nothing but resolve. He plants a hand on Ren’s shoulder, and they both look out at Dogwarts. They’re ready to go home.

“Get me a shield, and I will go to the ends of the earth with you.” He promises.

BigB and Etho draw their swords and join them. A traveler and a bookseller, so utterly broken by each other, go into battle together one last time, surrounded by friends.

The chaos doesn't quell the pain when Etho falls to Impulse. His death could have been heroic, a blaze of glory. Instead, he dies running, trying to heal. All Martyn hears is a quiet, “I'm in bad shape.” And he's gone.

Nothing changes when sees red, watches fear set into Impulse's eyes as he and Ren close in, strike after strike landing. For all the pain he'd given them by his betrayal, they return it tenfold in the way they cover each other and trade blows.

“Traitor!” Martyn swings, watches flames consume him, and knows he's dead. He shouts it, putting his mind at peace, knowing that it will be the last thing he hears for a while.

He wishes it had been Impulse's last life.

Tango falls in a similar fashion, but there isn't a second to recover before Grian and Scar fall from the sky to continue the battle. Two angels of death.

Trading blows with Bdubs, he tries to stay alive long enough to help Ren. He can't see him, but the clang of blades nearby tells him that against all odds, he's still alive.

Bdubs runs, and he's about to give chase when the sounds of swords stop. He whirls around, please, not like this, not when he's this far away.

Scar stands over Ren's body, still there, waiting for him. He's holding on. One arrow sticks straight up out of his chest.

Bloody and beaten and entirely uncaring about both things, he charges Scar, positioning the sun behind him. He knows it's not likely he makes it out of Dogwarts alive. Fine. He's taking Scar down; he's avenging his king.

After all the times he'd spared him, he swings, the blade catching Scar across the chest. Every time he'd allowed him to retreat, he raises his shield to block an arrow to the head, every time he'd talked his way into another day of life.

He raises his sword.

Scar raises his bow quicker.

Something glitches, he's dead, but he feels a few seconds of movement left. The world unsure of what to do with him.

As he falls, he reaches out to Ren's body, needing to touch him one last time.

He's gone against the rules time and time again with this alliance, with his allegiance. He tries to plead with the world, the voice in the darkness, Scar, anyone. Please, if this is all they get, let him have something.

Scar startles by his movement, and he's pushed back.

His hand lands an inch from Ren's.

—

Sometimes, Ren thinks, Martyn breathes for the both of them.

Sure his loyal hand was a bit jumpy, a bit wary of everyone and everything. But in a battle, he could always look over and see him.

Martyn would forever be unwavering in his presence nearby, breath strong and calm as he takes aim at their foes. They're both killers, after all that's happened, but it suits Martyn more. He's a master of the ability to focus his gaze and guard his heart until he's got what needs doing done.

His hand shakes when he strikes him. Body quivering as he turns his back on his ally. The only person he's ever been sure about. He doubts. Fears. He wishes he had the strength to look him in the eyes one last time.

The courage escapes him. He'll die as he lived, a coward who talked too much talk.

"I won't do it."

The anguish in Martyn's voice matches the betrayal he was oh so unprepared to feel. He's frozen in place, unable to turn and look at him.

It's not a hug, but two sets of grief colliding. One for an impossible task completed and a worse one refused. One for the knowledge that they would return here if they come out of this alive, and he would be forced to kill his greatest love.

There is no question when they embrace. Strong arms wrap around all that matters. Arms that have never before felt so weak.

Ren knows he's shaking. He's only mildly comforted with the knowledge that Martyn is shaking too.

When they eventually need to pull themselves together, It's Martyn that leads the charge back into life. His breath slows, steadies, from a rapid broken thing into a calming presence. His inhales are slow and purposeful.

Ren tries not to jump when a hand cradles the back of his skull, still on edge from what he's just done. What they've both just agreed to. Not a word more is spoken on the matter. Martyn just holds him and breathes.

And somehow. Somewhere in all of it, he finds Ren, lost and scared and as alone as he'll ever be, and he brings him back. Out of fear. Out of doubt.

His breathing.

He's breathing.

The last thoughts he lets himself have are about Martyn. How maybe Ren did protect him in the end. Even if he dies, his friend will live on.

He's still breathing.

This time Martyn knows to expect the darkness.

He waits for the voice, but it never comes.

Instead, a pinprick of light shines somewhere between miles away and right next to him. He's about to start walking towards it when it starts to grow, and grow, until it burns his eyes to look at it.

He doesn't look away, isn't sure if he can even if he wanted to; he just lets it wash him with light until he has to close his eyes, and even then, it burns in the back of his eyes.

It's too much. He squeezes his eyes shut, but the light still gets brighter.

"Martyn?"

Chapter End Notes

"Matt, when are you going to fix this though?"

Okay, don't worry, we're headed good places.

One chapter left to go! Okay, the sheer terror is leaving and the excitement is back. Lmk what your favorite unresolved bit from the story is, lmk what your favorite call back is, lmk if you'd want me to do the same to -I mean *for* Flower Husbands.

On a realer note, this has been a lot of ups and downs for me. Writing and reading has for the longest time been how I connect to the world. Having said that, it feels like a confession of being different in whatever way that presents itself. I find that most of my writing is a criticism of fanfiction that I read (stuff from ages ago before I really understood how to filter properly L to me) and that, since there is a lot that I would do differently I tend to take it as *I'm* the one in the wrong (when really there isn't a right or wrong in fanfiction, just different stuff for different tastes). So it's definitely scary to put it out and give the opportunity for rejection (even online) and it's been so wonderful to be met with not only acceptance, but with y'all's support and care and genuinely beautiful analyses. Some of you have said that I've made it easier to comment on fics but Y'all, you've made it easier to *write* them.

See you in the next chapter and thank you so much for being here for the last nine <3

Heaven can wait, it's true, I still need you

Chapter Summary

They talk in the in-between life. It looks a lot like home and yet, it looks a lot different from home. What will they say when they don't need to lie or hide or hurt anymore? And are they too broken to fix?

Chapter Notes

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

He opens his eyes at the sound of a familiar voice, blinking the light spots out.

He's standing back in Dogwarts -or something similar enough to Dogwarts that he recognizes it as such. Different walls greet him, wooden now, but the roof is the same. The air feels calmer as if the world itself knows that, one way or the other, it's all finally over.

He shuts his eyes again at the thought, unable to stop a few tears of relief from slipping from his eyes. Taking a moment just to breathe, he focuses on inhaling and exhaling, letting some of the anger and fear float away on his breath.

When he opens his eyes again, he gives the room a good look wondering why this of all things has been changed. Wanting to understand.

Instead of armor and weapons, he can see books lining the walls. He's not sure how but he knows that these books are only available here. The shelves reach the ceiling with one or two ladders in place to reach the higher of the shelves.

The room is bathed in golden hour light, soft and gentle. It's warm too, and the heat has him confused for a second. A glance out the open door gives away that it's far past spring and moving swiftly into summer. Tulips dot the hills outside.

He's not sure why he had assumed there would be no sense of smell after he died, but he's pleasantly surprised when the scent of old books and something sugary greets his nose. The wooden walls give the faint scent of living things as if the trees that replaced the stone did so happily.

Drawing his hand along the spines of the books, he forgets for a moment why he opened his eyes in the first place.

Each book is hand-bound, clearly a collection, someone's life's work. Some are enchanted, the magic familiarly humming under his hands. The rest are old books, incredible journeys, discussions of love, poems. Dust doesn't dare land on these books; it knows the careful hands that will come along and sweep it away if it does.

He pulls one off the shelf, a newer one, the book's binding fading from the brown of a bow into the deep black of damage arrows. Flipping through, he skims the words.

It's a tale of a liar, a backstabber, a man afraid. Flipping towards the end, a passage catches his eye, speaking of a bookseller and his lover.

“The depths of their affection shone plainly. I loved my kingdom, I did, but they would die for it. I knew then that if the three of us made it to the end, it would be them against me. So I will not ask their forgiveness if I win; I will ask their pity.”

No.

He closes the book, shoving it back onto the shelf and picking up the one next to it with shaking hands. This one is the bright red of the red names, the ombre that drifts downward, getting lighter and lighter until it looks like it's emitting a faint light that mimics the light he'd seen just moments ago. He flips through right to the end.

“I don't think we'll have forever here, but not even the stars spend forever in the sky.”

He flips a few pages back, throat closing with emotion. *Surely it's not them.*

“I can see him now, approaching over the hill. I think he'll like what I've done with the place. I'm not much of a builder, but I tried to learn; I've got time now to learn, for Scott.”

The book almost falls out of his hands.

It's barely a shelf, but the books nearby are bound in a way that makes each clear what story they tell. Greens and golds sit next to blues and purples, each given the same amount of care, each built to last.

There's still so much he doesn't understand, but some things click, some missing pieces of him gently settle into the cracks. They're here with him.

“Beautiful.” He murmurs. He never thought Dogwarts would be beautiful.

“I wish it could have been like this when we were alive.”

He's turning in an instant at the sound of Ren's voice. *If there's any way he's been this lucky...*

A table sits in the middle of the room with two glasses on it, full of a shimmering liquid that looks like molten gold. Somehow he knows that when the glass is empty, he moves on to wherever is after this in-between place.

Across the table sits Ren, armorless and looking at him like he'll never get enough of the sight.

“My king.” He breathes, throwing every ounce of love he can into the words.

“My...” Ren smiles fondly, tilts his head, and starts the sentence over -or maybe he's not starting the sentence over, “Martyn.”

And they have time, they finally have *time*, so Martyn slowly crosses the room towards him. He takes in every detail as Ren, still with a look of disbelief, stands to meet him.

He's more relaxed than Martyn's ever seen him, eyes trusting and affectionate where they still haven't looked away. His smile is open and honest as he lets him approach, unafraid. Ren's scars are still there, a pattern describing his life, and he reaches out to touch them, maybe finally get closure in a place where Ren doesn't have to guess if he's telling the truth.

They don't touch. Instead, his hand phases through to nothingness.

He sighs, too tired to feel upset right now, and takes a seat in one of the chairs.

“Oh,” Ren murmurs, sitting back down as well, “I should have known there would be a catch to seeing you again.”

“There’s always something, isn’t there?” There had always been something. A deadly game, too much hurt, not enough time.

“I’m sorry.” He looks up to see Ren shaking his head and looking down at where he has the glass clutched tightly in his hands, “I tried, you know? This is always what I wanted Renchanting to be. Somewhere safe.”

Taking a sip of the mead, warm and pleasant, he contemplates. All the time in the world. All the time, to be honest, to be angry, to be so utterly human that they end up hating each other. He wants to kiss him everywhere and hates that they can’t touch even now.

“I forgot you’d named it that in the beginning.” He hums, trying to keep his mind focused, “Don’t be a dog, be a god. Feeling particularly godlike?”

Ren laughs, “I’m feeling like a bit of a fool for trying to take on Scar alone.”

“I didn’t know this was what you imagined.” Martyn changes the subject, nothing they can do about that now, “I had assumed you wanted something that looked a little more like a shop.”

“For the enchanting books, yeah.” Ren looks around the room, and Martyn notices the way his face seems gentler than it had been when they were alive like it’s only now that he’s relaxing, “The rest I don’t think I would have parted with.”

“I... didn’t know you liked books that much.” He’s not sure why it sounds like an apology when it comes out, “I had assumed you were just playing the game.”

“It’s alright,” Ren answered his unsaid fears, “We didn’t have the time to talk about stuff like that.”

“I know.” He shakes his head, wishing he could take Ren’s hand, just once more, “I wish we had won, we... gosh we were *so close*, weren’t we?” Ren goes quiet, and he amends, “I mean, we would have had to fight each other, but I’d rather die at your hand than Scar’s, as morbid as it is.” His voice trails off all on its own, “And we could have waited, for a bit. Talked about things like that... before...”

He’s sure they would have talked beforehand. He knows he would have bared his soul; confessed until the words stopped feeling real. Somehow they would have been able to fight. But not before they really *knew* each other.

“You wouldn’t have died.” And he sounds so sure, too sure. He doesn’t make eye contact when Martyn looks up.

“Well,” he lets his voice get angry, “What on earth do you mean by that?”

They both know what he means.

That’s when Ren looks up, guilt and anguish written in the lines of his face, “You cared for me that whole time. You did everything I needed and then everything I asked, even when I asked you to betray me. You offered...” he trails off, grimaces, and Martyn knows what he’s thinking as if he’s the one thinking it himself. “And I denied. I tried to make it easier to betray you in the end; I promise I tried. Even then...” he shrugs, as if he’s not talking about throwing the last fight, “I don’t think I could have done it.”

He kicks his chair under the table, happy that he can at least unbalance him if he can't hold him close, "You would have left me with that?" he accuses, "Killing you?"

It's pettiness that brings the glass to his lips, and he chugs the drink, wanting desperately to leave before new wounds open inside him. It goes down like smooth glass, hot as fire. One would be wrong to think the afterlife is the one place free of pain.

Reaching out, Ren tries to catch his hand in his own. It lands on the table instead.

"Don't do that, Martyn." He urges, "Don't make our last moments together angry ones."

Despite the hurt, he's right. The glass hits the table, half empty. They both sit back in their chairs.

They're back at stalemate.

"Did you love me?" Martyn asks, still angry. Hurt sits under the anger, quiet and afraid, fingers clutching the glass ready to drink again, "And not like a friend or a kingdom," he spits the word out, "Did you love me like I loved you?"

"Will you believe me if I answer honestly?" Ren shoots back, "Or have I lost your trust that quickly?"

His heart pulls. Funny, he wasn't sure it could do that here. "I don't know if it matters anymore. We're already dead."

"It matters," The sincerity with which Ren speaks draws his eyes up. Ren's fiddling with his own glass, but he doesn't look unsure, just anxious, "I swear it matters."

"If we could do it all over-"

He's not even through the question when Ren speaks, gaze soft but voice fierce, "I would have kissed you, that day in the forest. Picking apples." He chuckles, but he doesn't seem to find it funny, "I would have held you when you ran from the mines. I wouldn't have asked you-" He looks like he wants to leave the sentence there, but he pushes on. "I wouldn't have *ever* asked you to kill me. I would have told you that everything you felt, I felt too." He trails off, looks away, "And we would have died because of it."

"Well," Martyn informs him, "We died anyway, didn't we?"

"I-" Ren swallows, "I thought I would hurt less than this."

There's no way to tell if it would have hurt less. They've got nothing to compare it to.

They sit quietly together.

"I'm still glad I get to see you." Ren offers an olive branch quietly.

He sighs, "Me too."

His eyes catch on their glasses, somehow both too full and too empty at the same time.

"You know eventually we have to leave, right?" He murmurs, wanting it to be too quiet to hear.

"Not until we're both ready." It seems strange that Ren's saying it as he takes a sip, but he lets it slide. There's still a lot left in his glass for now.

“I don’t think I’m ever going to be ready.” He admits. There’s still too much that he needs to say, and not a word of it comes to mind.

“Then we’ll stay here.” Ren gives him a small smile, “But eventually we do go.”

Martyn tilts his head, confused.

“I read the beginning of a couple of books while I was waiting. I don’t know how, but I knew you were on your way.” He takes a deep breath, “There’s more of the same after this.”

“No,” Martyn whispers.

“I didn’t get to look far before the books disappeared,” Ren amends, “I don’t think I’m supposed to know what happens. Just that it does.”

“Can’t believe you got to look at all, honestly.” He’s not sure why he doesn’t feel angry at the knowledge. Maybe defeat. But not anger. “I’m going to miss you.” He whispers, “But if what comes after this is more of the same, I hope I never see you. In fact, I think I’ll make my own army. And then,” He’s spiraling into fantasy now, but he needs it so badly that he doesn’t stop, “Then, I’ll do what Impulse did, and I’ll just betray them all.”

Ren laughs in a way that says he doesn’t quite believe him, “Solid plan. I hope the next time we meet in battle, you betray me of your own accord.”

“I will,” he grins through the way the idea brings water welling up behind his eyes, “I’ll make it hurt too.”

“I think I’ll take everyone down by myself.” Ren hums, “No alliances, no friends, no one to betray at the end.”

This time it’s Martyn who laughs. The two of them liars until -even after -the end. “Nah, you couldn’t; you’re as loyal as I am.”

“I couldn’t,” Ren sheepishly admits, “But it would be so much *easier* if I could.”

“Wouldn’t be worth it, though.” He challenges, “Knowing you did it all for nothing.” He means to stop there, but his mouth opens of its own accord, “I wish I could kiss you, or just *touch* you, just once more, even if it’s the last time we ever touch. We-” His voice cracks, “We never did get anything gentle.”

Something pulls when he says it in a way that makes his stomach lurch. Ren must feel it too, with the way he keels over and grabs his hand to steady himself. It feels like an earthquake that resonates just within his body, turning his vision white and shaking his bones in ways no bone is supposed to shake.

When the feeling passes, the drinks are gone. Ren’s hand is warm in his own. One exit replaced by another. They both stand, shocked.

Blinking, unsure if it’s real, he brings a shaking hand up. He’s afraid at the end of it all that Ren isn’t real, that it’s all been a cruel lie.

He means to touch his face, but something else in him is ready for healing. The scars from the axe are still raised and angry looking, but the skin there is still just skin when he touches it. He laughs quietly, wondering why his mind had ever told him differently. Slowly he steps closer, taking his face in both of his hands and taking a second to just hold him.

Ren takes longer to recover, mouth agape for a few seconds before returning the gesture, tracing the poison scars under his eyes with his thumbs.

“Hi.” He breathes, relishing the way he feels under his hands.

“I love you.” Ren responds like he’s been holding it back long enough that the chains keeping it in rusted and snapped, “I-” His voice breaks, “I’m so *sorry*.”

Maybe there’s something about the way that the fighting’s finally all over. The things they did, still painful, move away from where they’ve been collapsing his lungs for far too long.

He takes a breath in, then a second to make sure he’s sure, “I forgive you.”

Laughter, bright and dazzling, leaves Ren’s lips, and it’s a second before his own joins in. It takes reaching the afterlife but finally, he can feel all the cracked bits of him filled with gold. Maybe it was something in the drink. He brushes his thumbs across Ren’s skin, not sure he’ll ever get enough of touching him.

“Thank you.” Ren breathes.

They both go still, letting peace wash over them. It feels fitting that they’re in Dogwarts. Finally, it’s a place for healing instead of hurt.

“Impulse thought-” He laughs, unsure as to why he finds it funny but sure that it is, “That we wouldn’t hurt each other in the end. It’s why he left.”

Ren chuckles, “Etho thought a similar thing.”

That’s news to Martyn, “Was he planning a betrayal?”

Shaking his head, Ren gives him a conspiring look, “No, he was sure he could beat the both of us in a battle.”

Martyn laughs, “You know, good for him.”

This time, it’s laughter that draws them into each other’s arms, bright and beautiful and healing in ways Martyn was almost sure didn’t exist.

“Ready to go?” Ren asks eventually, pulling back to look at him. His thumb traces Martyn’s bottom lip, and he shivers at the touch, still undone even now.

This time he almost means it when he says, “I don’t think I ever will be.” Not now. Not when he’s finally able to touch him like he wants. Slow and gentle, treating him like he’s precious.

“Me neither.” Ren lies, but they’re already close enough that he can feel his breath on his lips and now there’s really no going back.

Their lips brush softly at first. Ren makes a little hum noise, and Martyn mimics it against his lips. *He smells like apples and honey*, he thinks fondly, wonders if he’ll ever know if he tastes like them too.

Ren tilts his head a little with his hands, and he thinks he gets a hint of honey, but he’s really not sure, so he tries to pull him closer in response. It’s dizzying, being this close to him, finally kissing him. It feels like floating in nothingness and everything all at once.

He knows they’re supposed to only get the one kiss, but he’s ignored the rules before.

When they pull back, there's just enough time to smile and steal one more peck under the petulant eyes of the universe before the light swells again.

Chapter End Notes

I was going to end on a slightly less sweet and slightly more bitter note but then I looked at all the trauma I put them through and went, yeah they're legally owed nice things at this point.

anyway
drops this
screams
runs

Send me an ask on tumblr (mattress-ing) if you want in depth answers/explanations/etc for literally anything about this fic or others.

Thank you all very much for the continued support and very kind words in the comments, I love you all <3 <3

End Notes

Good times for all. Leave a kudos and/or a comment if you liked it. There's nothing quite like the sweet sweet dopamine hit from having someone from the internet validate my writing. Feel free to also leave theories if you're feeling particularly writey at the moment I'd love to hear what y'all think is going to happen next. (I'm a big fan of tone indicators but they're not a requirement)

Anyway have a lovely day <3

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!