

Crispin didn't move beneath the thin blankets that covered him.

Alexander laid over his chest. Cold, naked skin melded against Crispin's own like one flesh. His arm stretched over the expanse of exposed skin, the weight settled over Crispin's ribcage uncomfortably. Gentle huffs of air skirted across his sternum. There was no sleep. Only the need to be at ease from time to time.

Crispin stared at the canopy of their bed, eyes focused on the expanse of dark, thin velvet that hung from the four bannisters. Their room was cool, and dim. The afternoon sun faded behind the drapes of the long windows. Days drawled into nights, then weeks. Waiting seemed the needed thing, though Crispin felt the familiar irritation grow beneath the surface of his skin. There was nothing to do but wait. And wait. And stare until his eyes grew stale, and the constant hum that occupied his mind faded into nothing but the indifference of what he was before.

Life he knew before the end receded into shadow with every passing year. His mother, father, brother, sister – had there been any family? Surely, there must have been at some point. Perhaps even friends who cared. Now, the only memory that lingered sharp and bright in his mind was the final week.

He'd been on a trip with someone...an uncle he's able to recall now, to see out the family business on an important mercantile trip. They'd been bound for Punta Cana aboard a vessel carrying other business men, a wealth of cargo, and a crew to see the voyage through safe waters. The first night they'd set sail, the captain invited them all to his quarters, raised a glass and wished the business ventures good fortune and an assurance of comfortable travel. Before long, maps and pencil compasses were quickly swept away from the plotting table to make room for the men to sit and engage in cards. Herbal cigar smoke, the haze of cigarettes, countless refills of rich liquor into crystal tumblers and fresh sweat filled the closed room in near suffocation. Crispin tried to focus on the cards in his hand, the numbers and shapes swimming through his vision as the boat rocked and the gin slid hotly down to the bottom of his stomach. The men grew loud and laughed, slammed the table with a thunder of their bare palms at whether they lost or won. Coins flicked onto the wooden top, catching the sharp blink of candle light before they fell with a soft thud into a glimmering pile. Everything was too hot, too loud, cut into the sockets of his eyes. From across the table a group of men threw down their cards and yelled.

Startled, Crispin looked up.

On the other side lit by the sway of the candelabra above was a man he hadn't noticed before. No more older than his twenty-three. Long, hair smoothed over his shoulders, so blonde he mistook it for white, and skin of alabaster. He blinked, hard. The liquor had stupified his eyes along with his brain, he was certain.

A sly grin lifted the man's face as he left his full hand on the table, and drew the winnings towards the space where his thin elbow had been.

"Another round!" One of the men demanded.

"I'm afraid I'll clear you boys out," the man said. His voice velvet and sublime amidst the masculine rank. "Far be it from me to leave you all destitute before you've even reached your port."

"Forget the port," another slurred. He pointed a finger with a stab in the younger's direction. "You won't see another coin from my hand or by Christ above I'll have you."

The younger threw his head back and laughed, perfect white teeth exposed by pure amusement. "I don't think I'll be the one who's had." His eyes cut across the table and latched onto Crispin's. A private smile grew.

Crispin felt his skin grow hot, then frigid. Tried to tug at the collar of his shirt before everything turned to black.

He awoke the next morning in a room that was not his own, head tumbling over itself and the heat and chill in his skin fighting to escape every pore in his body. Beside him stood the ship's doctor, handkerchief pressed against his mouth and nose. An unknown sickness, he'd said, though Crispin must've imagined the worry in his tone. The only case. As such, full quarantine was determined until they reached their destination. No visitors. No leaving the cramped rectangle room.

Crispin clamped his eyes shut before the man had even finished speaking, his brain expanding and shrinking in quick, sharp pulses. The room spun him. Threatened to purge the contents of his stomach, what little there was to be had, out onto the cracked wood floor. He swooned. Felt his heart ready to collapse inside itself within his chest. With all his might, he tried to grasp the last thread that hung within his mind, fingers stretched out, touched the end, and fell back to the darkness.

A coolness laid upon his forehead, spread under his eyelids, the expanse of his face. With the effort he could afford, he eyes cracked open.

Sitting on the bed beside him was the man from the table. Despite the lack of light, he could see the whites of his eyes, the gleam of his teeth. They glowed through the shadow. His thumb was against Crispin's brow, moving in gentle strokes. The intimacy made Crispin's body tingle.

"Poor thing," the man's voice came through the dark, smooth like liquid. "All alone, and no one to see you." His thumb left, made Crispin shiver. Then came the tip of a cool finger to trail along the side of his cheek. "I can help you. Make you better." The finger took the curve of his chin, drew down the length of his throat in one slow motion and came upon the side of his neck. "I won't make you beg. But you do have to ask."

"P-please..."Crispin gasped over the rawness of his throat. Would've agreed to anything to make the pain stop, if only for a moment.

A gleam of pearl broke through the blur of his vision. "It'll only be a prick. Doctor's promise."

There was nothing. Then, a shock white heat sprang from his neck, ate over every surface of his body. The flames of hell itself consumed him alive from the inside out in one fell swoop and until...he ceased to exist. Never was in the first place. Never would be again.

Until the tin of amber met his tongue, coated his throat, and bled down to his heart.

He slid Alexander's arm off, and eased himself off the bed.

"Up so soon?"

Alexander propped himself onto an elbow, hair fallen into the creases of the silk pillow case. His pale chest emanated through the dimness. A figure that demanded attention, required adoration every waking moment. He reached out a slim hand, tips of his fingers grazing the cusp of Crispin's bare backside. "Don't

leave me yet.”

“It’s time to get ready.” Crispin replied, and left the room.

“Do you like it?”

Alexander stood before him, arms held out wide. A long coat, the shade of bruised cherry, hugged his body as he turned on his heel. “I thought it’d be fitting for tonight.”

“Another garment for your collection?”

“Certain occasions require certain statements to be made.” Alexander replied as inspected the pewter cufflinks. “I can’t go out looking like I fit in with the rest of the hoi polloi,” he threw a scrunched up nose in Crispin’s direction. “Which is more than I can say for you.”

Crispin looked down at his own outfit for the evening – a pair of simple brown pants, a matching tweed vest and cream button up shirt. “What’s wrong with being comfortable?”

“At the expense of looking like a proffer?” He eyed Crispin from head to toe. “*Criminal.*” He moved towards him, slipped his hands over Crispin’s shoulders. “I wish you’d let me buy your clothes. Let me dress you up, know what would look good with your complexion.”

“I never think about any of that.”

“Exactly. And that’s the problem.”

Crispin shrugged his tweed jacket on, trapping Alexander’s hands beneath it. He gave a playful click of his tongue before withdrawing his hands from their encasement. “You have such beautiful hair and eyes.” He reached over, spread his fingers through the neck length heavy, dark curls that framed Crispin’s face. With a stroke, he pushed a lock of hair away. “I want people to look at you. To look at what I’ve made.”

“It’s better that they don’t.”

“You’re such a puss.” Alexander replied with pursed lips. “But my puss, none the less.” He left Crispin and went to a pair of ornate armoires situated on the other side of their room. Rich mahogany wrought in fine detail, a purchase made once they’d moved to their new quarters six months ago. Alexander insisted upon the gaudy addition, had required it to match the bed, and nightstands as well. Old wealth facade succumbing to a modern ideal was his description of them to Crispin when the movers installed the pieces. A pair, side by side, indistinguishable save for the placement of the handles. Inside were small drawers and compartments that housed various items of wear. He tugged open a drawer, and pulled out a pair of slick, black leather gloves to go over his slim hands. “I think we’ll have an enjoyable evening, don’t you?”

Crispin picked the flyer from the nightstand. In red, bold letters across the top ran: *CIRCUS – TWO NIGHTS ONLY! FEATURING THE AMAZING PIETZI! PREPARE TO BE DAZZLED AND AMAZED BY MAGIC THAT DEFIES THE NATURAL LAWS OF OUR WORLD!*

The advert had been dropped onto Crispin’s lap the week before. He glanced up to find Alexander’s face looking down to his, an excited gleam in his eye.

He folded the flyer and tucked it into the inner breast pocket of his jacket as Alexander turned to him. Blonde hair slicked back into a velvet river, he adjusted the cufflinks on his sleeves before his eyes landed on Crispin. He bowed, lifted his head to reveal an arched brow. “Shall we?”