The Caretaker
TW AGAIN!!! GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF BURN INJURIES

5 minutes. That was how long this ‘grooming’ session was supposed to take.

Instead, Bartholomew’s hind legs were already cramping from sitting in the same position for too long, and the mouse that had declared himself a ‘totally *legit* cat caretaker’ (source: trust me bro!) —— and had shown him his equally *‘legit’* cardboard license card to back it up —— was currently fighting for his life, trying to untangle a makeshift brush from Bartholomew’s tail fur.

Which Bartholomew had told him — *explicitly* —not to touch. What a stellar way to start the morning.

“What in the tarnation are you trying to do?” Bartholomew turned to see the mouse, striking a pose that could make even a music box ballerina jealous. Maza was quite literally head over heels, hind legs gripping the comb from where it was embedded at the very tip of Bartholomew’s tail, trying to pull the brush out using his own body weight, which — *obviously* —wasn’t working. The sight of it was amusing. So much so that Bartholomew could excuse the fact that he was missing a brush sized patch of fur.

After watching Maza struggle for a few more minutes, the novelty of a mouse accidentally performing an acrobatics show wore off, and he got *very* tired of the constant pulling sensation on his tail.

“Paws OFF!!!” Bartholomew yowled, barely giving Maza any time to react, before vigorously swaying his tail. The comb was flung off to a mysterious corner of the room, and unfortunately — and quite annoyingly — the troublesome rat was too. Bartholomew knew that it was *slightly* unreasonable to expect Maza to react in a split second, but… Come on, the foolish mouse could at least have had the decency to land close by! At least, anywhere closer than the fireplace, from which Bartholomew was hearing a few alarmed squeaks.

Wait a minute.

The *FIREPLACE*.

(The rat probably didn’t have the decency to turn fireproof when he decided to make a beeline for the flames.)

Bartholomew would never in his 9 neverending lives admit that he cared for the Minikin in the mansion. They were invasive vermin that were only useful when they were servicing him. He merely tolerated them. If ‘acceptance’ was a stretch, ‘care’ was a marathon. He didn’t care for them, their lowly, mousey lives, or whether their tails got burned off. At least, that had been what he told himself since time immemorial.

But something in Maza’s terrified squeaks incited his dormant protective instincts that he wasn’t even aware existed. Perhaps it was the tone of his scared voice, or the absence of the pattering of paws that would signal that he escaped with a tuft of singed fur or two.

Yet, even as he prowled closer to the fireplace, he couldn’t even make out that familiar, mousey, silhouette, which — needless to say — was rather concerning for a mouse as eager as Maza.

Just as Bartholomew was about to move closer, he stubbed his paw on something.

Something red and key shaped. Bartholomew’s blood ran cold.

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It was Maza’s key.

The rat he had carelessly flung across the room was currently stuck in a fire, immobile, and helplessly fearing for his life.

Against all his better instincts, Bartholomew dove into the fire.

The fire seemed to burn brighter, almost mockingly. It licked at his fur, hot and ferocious, and he felt like — in that moment — that he could taste the flames, charring his skin, boiling the saliva on his tongue. The smell of his skin was akin to the smell of roasted *‘pork’*, something that Mabel had loved before timelessness.
Bartholomew would never be able to smell it again without remembering this feeling.

As Bartholomew sought for the familiar sight of white fur, or even a glimpse of the red dead-fish eyes he so hated, he felt as if he was staring into the light of a thousand candle flames. As if he were looking at the core of the sun, as if the rays were reaching into his very eyes, piercing straight through his head.

He remembers Prudence telling him that his eyes could not feel the difference between hot or cold. She had said something about ‘nerves’ and whatnot, but she also had never dived headfirst into a fire. Bartholomew felt the heat inside his eye sockets, spreading like a black mold plague. His head felt like a lump of heavy gel, like his brain was a melting, sloshing, jellylike mass.
Though his brain must have been turned into a slug long ago, considering he was currently in an abnormal situation he would’ve never been in if he were in his right mind — getting burnt half to death for a minikin.

The pressure from inside his skull was immense. The slosh that his brain was turned into pressed up against the confines of his cranium, drowning out all noise as if he were underwater. The irony was laughable, and Bartholomew had never wanted to feel the ice cold grip of water more than in this fiery moment.

And even though he was blinded and half deaf, the hot coals felt numbing and excruciatingly hot to his paw pads, he fervently felt around for Maza’s keyless body.

He didn’t remember when he had found Maza, or how he had even found the foolish minikin out alive. All he remembered was that he grabbed the scruff of the rat by his mouth and left alive.
He remembered that Maza’s fur had tasted of soot. Which decidedly, did not taste very good at all.

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When he came to a few seconds later, he was lying beside the fireplace. He had felt more pain than his immortal body had ever needed to feel, and the after effects were still making themselves known.

Every breath was strenuous, the smoke in his mouth burned his throat with each inhale, and he was practically wheezing. His skin felt numb and lifeless, as if he were just a skeleton in a foreign flesh body. As if every single nerve ending in his body was surgically removed and replaced with lead wire. The missing fur on his tail was several orders of magnitude less than the mortal pain he was in. Most of his fur was singed badly, causing large patches of his fur to be a sooty black colour. He had felt so, so helpless and so, so alone in those moments.

He didn’t want to move at all. His limbs must have liquefied in the fire, as they felt wobbly and impossible to walk on. Nevertheless, he dragged his half dead body across the carpeted floor, grabbing the key and winding up the mouse. Bartholomew wanted to curse Maza for the rest of his immortal life, to the hell Bartholomew had just crawled out of and

back, to damn that rat to an eternity of suffering for making him go though so much trouble to save his worthless mousey life.

But Bartholomew couldn't bring himself to do it. The stupid rat had made him go soft. He was at least sure of that; but he couldn't understand why.

Why, after coexisting with these pathetic mortal vermin for time immemorial, did he suddenly become so self sacrificed for a species he historically hated? When did his cold, dead heart begin to go soft, for Minikin, no less? He was upset at Maza now, but the source of anger had changed; It was not because of the immeasurable pain he'd been put through. That could be forgotten with time, and eventually even the deepest of gashes would scar over and heal.

What he could not let fester was that this rat had made him question the values he had held close to his heart since timelessness. It made him feel like a foreign soul in his own body, and he didn't like that one bit.

But for now, as he stared at the limp soot covered paws of the minikin he was winding up, his traitorous heart began to beat for the first time since timelessness.

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And when that Minikin woke up again, his fur was no longer pure white, his paws having been stained with soot permanently. A sick, constant reminder of the horror of nearly being burned alive. His eyes were bloodshot from the smoke, and he didn't know if he would ever be the same mouse again.