

Now

The first sight to fight its way through my swimming vision is a long, broad piece of polished wood running out from under my eyes to somewhere off in the distorted distance. Paint sealant coats the surface and catches dim lights above, refracting them into a wince inducing ballet that even the painkillers dulling the world about can't keep from pressing my eyes into a squint. They dance across its surface, a shimmering desert broken by translucent glasses shedding icy coats in the climate-controlled heat. All about them, plastic silos of golden liquid tower over pints and weep tears of condensation to pool around their collective bases. Someone's arm stretches out to lift one and pour its cargo into a nearby glass.

The pitcher is slammed back down after, sending reverberations throughout the smooth wood that throw the dancing lights to the ground and shake loose sleep from my ears. Noises begin to filter in through the post-nightmare confusion as consciousness fine tunes my cochlea. An identifiable cadence emerges from the cacophony of voices vying with loud southern rock over quiet, tinny speakers for center stage.

"Hey, friend. I'm not going to tell you again: you can't sleep here. Wake up."

My face peels away from the wooden pillow with difficulty, trailing a sticky residue of drool mixed with liquor and a little blood that my wrinkled sleeve wipes away.

"Yeah."

With my visual field righted, locating the commanding presence becomes much easier. It's a man of an age with myself wearing a "He Is Legend" t-shirt and some kind of name tag I don't bother reading. He's standing behind the wooden tableau that both separates us and lends support to his elbows as he leans forward. Tap handles and liquor bottles extend from either side of his back like unfurled wings; guess I've found my way into another bar. My eyes travel back to his face and catch concern with a bit of disgust lingering around the features, the sort of expression you'd see on someone looking at pictures of vagrants or drug addicts. If I look half as bad as my head feels, then I probably shouldn't take offense at the backhanded pity.

Something in the back of my mind whispers, a sibilant, hissing expulsion of anger and self-loathing that takes the greater part of my attention to muffle into silence. The bartender leans closer and raps an overlarge set of knuckles on the wood. The sound breaks my concentration and earns him a healthy dose of undivided attention garnished by a sprig of annoyance.

"I said are you all right, bud? You're not lookin' so hot."

"No worse than usual."

"In fact, you look like microwaved shit, man. Someone jump you?"

"No, just clumsy."

"Clumsy must be hitting harder than I remember if it's painting shiners like that nowadays. And that cut on your cheek is bleeding on my bar, put a bandaid on, man."

He proffers a bandage that I ignore in favor of looking for a glass, hopefully a full glass, close enough to be mine or plausibly mistaken for it. He reaches below the counter and pulls a bottle from underneath. That gets my attention.

"You want to tell me about it?"

I wait until he's finished pouring a miserly measure of whatever it is into an empty cup at my elbow before offering answer.

"No."

The tender laughs, a loud, rich sound that almost tops the thrumming flight of conversations and clinking glasses. In the background someone breaks a rack of billiard balls with a sharp crack that floats between us. He continues to gaze in my direction.

"I'm Chad."

"Mm."

I raise the glass and my eyebrows briefly in his direction and tilt it towards him before bringing the whisky, judging by its smell, to my lips and taking a not-so-carefully measured swallow. The entirety of its meager contents disappears down my throat in one smooth motion and burns all the way down to my stomach. I pull the cup from my face and frown at it; there's nothing quite so sad as an empty glass. I set it down carefully; close enough to maintain possession, far enough to suggest a refill without asking for one. I'm not even sure if I still have a wallet.

In the face of my utter disinterest to offer conversation he decides to prompt me again.

"How about yours?"

My index and middle finger scoot the empty glass closer to the bar's edge and Chad laughs again as he pours a little more into it. The music changes suddenly, scratchy southern guitars replaced with an array of screaming machines and heavy bass thumps. My tender sets his bottle on the wood in front of me and leans down to bring our eyes level.

"You look like you're having a bad fuckin' day, so happy holidays stranger. Just don't fall asleep on the bar again and get me in trouble, okay?"

I'm taken aback at the unexpected charity and give him a few nods. He smiles again, puts the bandage next to his gift, and slaps me on the shoulder before walking off. Nothing like a couple of free drinks to turn your crushing depression into, well, slightly less crushing depression. I take a moment to study my reflection in the bar mirror, the results not doing much to improve my mood.

I'd been lower than usual when I showed up for therapy earlier tonight, so it was no great surprise that I'd hung on for so long. Nothing like a little group chat to lift your spirits, I suppose. Only trouble is, I kept a pretty low ceiling over how high I'd let them rise. Call me Daedalus, because Icarus was sure as shit a misnomer.

I pick the bandage up and affix it to whoever's sorry-looking reflection is staring back at me, then rub a bar napkin in one of the drink rings nearby and use it to clean up the

last bits of dried blood still stuck to his face. One hand scoops whatever-his-name-was' gift up as the other occupies itself with our glass. I leave the stool I'd fallen asleep at and set my eyes on darker pastures, hopefully a corner booth, when a passing hand grabs hold of me by the still-damp chin. It caresses my cheek with delicate fingers ending in bright red nails before returning to the owner.

"Hey, sexy man, looks like you've had a rough night."

At least, that's what I think she said. It's hard to tell when every syllable is stretched to three times its traditional length. The girl speaking is dark eyed, darker haired and obviously drunk. Young too, judging by the soft, roundish facial features and utter ignorance to the exigent dangers of grabbing a stranger's face in a bar. Her speech is a bit slurred but it's the glassy gaze over a half smirk that gives away her lack of sober judgment. I'd place her intoxication somewhere between "dangerous" and "the fact she's standing is a scientific wonder".

Ah, the wisdom of youth. She's attractive in an innocent sort of way and maybe for this fact alone a greeting escapes my lips before running through the usual filters. That or my own blood alcohol and lingering narcotics are giving hers a run for its money.

"Lo."

Her breathing comes thick and heavy from behind a smile; it smells like cherries and ethanol.

"We just bought out the jukebox, you want to dance?"

Even under the best of circumstances, I'd rather not try to recall my lessons from etiquette school. It's not like they ever really took and I doubt ballroom steps and foxtrots are applicable in this setting anyway. Something about the way she carries herself, plus her obvious naivety, gives me further pause, too. Well, that and the pronounced slur somehow glaringly evident in her speech through the obnoxious music and bustling crowd. Better to take an unequivocal pass; I've no interest in utilizing anyone's intoxication against them.

"Oh no, I'm not much for the physical jerks."

The statement draws a quizzical look from my mildly determined pursuант; guess the education system is even more dismal than when I last ran its gauntlet. She cocks her head to the side a bit, though the slight stumble in her balance causes me to question whether this is from confusion or the need to right a sloshing equilibrium. Not really fair criticism, considering I likely resemble a besotted sailor trying to make use of his sea legs on steady ground.

“You’re kind of weird, aren’t you?”

Oh child, if only you knew the places I’ve been taken.

“More importantly, you’re kind of young. And drunk, while we’re making a list.”

That one strikes right through the comfortable courage alcohol has lent her. A momentary flicker of fear races through the girl, pausing just long enough to give her features a gentle kiss. She smothers it quickly and regards me with the sort of disgust one saves for a particularly repulsive insect. I’m just blowing this first impression thing out of the park tonight, apparently.

“What are you, like a cop or something?”

I manage a chuckle, probably even a smile before the hissing that accompanies so many of my thoughts shuts the pleasantries down.

“Not even in the slightest, but I’ve got the feeling that taking you up on that generous offer would find me making acquaintance with them. So, thank you, but I’ll be spending my night with,” I raise the arm with my bottle in it and squint at the label until it ripples into focus, “my new friend Cutty Sark here. Whoever he is. Or was. You enjoy yourself though.”

“No wonder someone kicked your ass, jerk.”

The girl flips her hair and turns about in an almost smooth motion, though it lasts a beat too long. The twirl leaves her facing me again with a decidedly confused expression tempered by determination. A slight, sharp-featured man catches hold of her elbow as she stumbles, guiding her into his arms with practiced ease. The smile on his face is too wide,

almost taut; as if stretched across a canvas meant to cover something less agreeable. He leans in close to whisper something, a thin and neatly trimmed goatee brushing at her earlobes. She giggles and rubs a hand at them before he guides their steps toward the dance floor. She shoots me a smug look of satisfaction and the finger as the stranger helps her walk off.

Well, alright then.

I turn back to the shadowy corner booth and settle myself in, the bottle of scotch sitting across from me like a cheap date. I admire at the smooth curves of its body; breathe deep the rich scent of its perfume. The comparison forces another chuckle, dragging it out by a rope around the neck like a bull in a Spanish arena. My hand scoops up the scotch none too gently and bring the bottle close to whisper sweet nothings.

"I want you inside me."

Another bitter laugh, just for the two of us.

I fucking hate myself.

Even more than I hate being forced into public, and that's saying something. I'm not usually one to do any social drinking, hell if liquor was sold out of vending machines I'd be the happiest suicide case alive. It's all the people; I'm no fan of crowds. But a quick check earlier this evening had shown my own cabinet to be woefully short and midnight was creeping up faster than I could run down the few blocks it'd take to hit a store. So here I am: surrounded by people and their constant need to make noise, listening to the trite drivel that passes for conversation in this world and wishing beyond hope that a liquor magnate would croak and leave me his private stock, plane, and an island.

I should just leave.

The thought takes root before I can weed it from my mind and suddenly the bar seems much smaller. Some clumsy simpleton drops a glass that gives a final, piercing shatter of a scream behind me; seconds later the obnoxiously shrill laughter of an exceedingly loud woman comes from the same direction with much the same effect. I move closer to the edge

of the booth, trying to avoid the wall as it scoots toward me like a determined date. Its rough, wooden surface takes another step closer and the chattering crowds of people grow larger; the air becomes oppressive and hot, drying my lungs and feeding the whispering voice in my head. I try to shut it out, quiet him before he fully wakes but the sensation of a slipping grasp assures me there isn't much time left. Downing what's left in my glass helps hold him at bay for a moment longer but, like an indifferent mother dropping a wet cloth on your fevered forehead, it's just not quite enough. I need to get out of here.

Fingers close around the bottle and push it into a large outer pocket on my coat. It's a decent one, too: a hooded p coat that does a good enough job of keeping the cold out and, now, the liquor accessible. Across the room, some other drunks break out into a shoving match by the pool tables, the usual accompanying clatter of wood on wood barks through the commotion as someone knocks a row of mounted pool sticks over. An overweight man jumps back to avoid it, accidentally bumping into another who is too busy with his hand between the legs of his date to care.

From across the room, the young woman gives me another one-fingered wave while she heads toward a back door emblazoned with a large red "Exit" in spray paint. The sharp-featured man from earlier is still at her side, his face tucked down in the raised collar of an expensive-looking long coat. Something about him has my attention, a vague sense of *je ne sais quoi*. His hand has her about the elbow, steadying her steps as she walks next to him, stopping occasionally to drunkenly grope at him. A gold chain about his neck catches the dim light of whatever bulbs in here haven't burnt out and glints faintly, the yellowed shine just bright enough to distract.

He casts eyes about the crowd, looking nervously at the people all around him while guiding her steps. The girl stumbles and he steadies her again, flashing a sickly smile that doesn't quite cover the greed in his eyes as they rove across her body. She notices my attention and waves to me again, yelling faint words across the bustling crowd.

"Bye, Mr. Not-Policeman!"

I shake my head, trying to remember what I was doing when the wall whispers in my ear and I realize it's pressed up against my back again.

Time to leave, then.

With the bottle in my pocket and the door in sight I head quickly over and pull it open against the winter winds outside.

The street is cold, poorly lit, and surprisingly devoid of pedestrians as I make my way through the newly re-frozen slush. One of the few working streetlights chokes on its waning bulb while I walk underneath, quickly sputtering out before I've left the illuminated cone. Cold hands pull my hood up against the wind and raise the liquor to its opening. My boots try to keep a good pace without sacrificing balance but it's hard to watch your step through the bottom of a bottle.

The burnt out bulb weighs heavily on the night around me. Blackness seeps in to claim the light's territory, a thumb and forefinger over the streetlamps wick that extinguishes my surroundings in the interval of seconds that it takes my eyes to adjust. My feet stop moving, better to pause and endure than walk blind in a crooked line, and I screw the lid back on the bottle before stowing it away again. The cold takes advantage of my motionless moment to send fingers up my pant legs and into my hood. The icy touch raises hair on end, sends out shockwaves of bumps that spread quickly down my arms and legs.

Cutis anserina

whispers a voice I had hoped to not hear. A dull ache accompanies the words and begins to spread throughout my mind.

From a grated stairwell to the left comes a dark hissing, like an agitated nest of snakes spitting dire threats at passersby. Serpents inspire no terror within me, but an electric shock of adrenaline dumps into my system nonetheless. This is something different, something old and all too familiar. The shadows condense as my feet start moving again. The pace is quicker than safety dictates, my vain attempt to flee the inevitable. The darkness laughs a viscous, black chuckle as the presence within them senses my intention. One boot's toe

catches a stone hidden by the snowfall, almost sending me to my knees and costing a crucial second. Not that it would've changed the outcome anyhow. He's already awake and on the move.

When my head rises, it becomes apparent just how futile my flight is. The road ahead is an obsidian wall of steeping shadows bleeding their darkness like a teabag filled with India ink. The floating tendrils draw in, a quick implosion that leaves a black hole tearing at the reality in front of me. Feral eyes open at its center, a leering grin of mismatched razors blooming beneath them to another bout of laughter. My hands raise up to ward it off, as if the gesture has ever stopped it before, and my back pedal turns into a stumble over the same rock that sends my world lurching and ends with an abrupt stop on the snow covered cement.