

## THE CAT'S LAMENT

Claude did not know exactly how old he was when he fell in love with her, as cats did not keep their age, and they most certainly did not count each second of their lives away in a long, monotonous crawl like humans did—

But he knew how old she was, which was sixteen years, seven months, fifteen days, eleven hours, 47 minutes, and 57 seconds old—no more, no less.

It was the moment that she first smiled at him, and danced with him on the lawn because his older brother was off being a prat, ignoring the fact that such a tall, awkward, gangly man should not have been awarded a beautiful woman such as...

“Manon,” Claude said for the hundredth time, tasting her name as he lounged back in his tree, wishing more than anything that he knew better and didn’t go around falling for things that were most certainly not his

—or humoring a world in which his beloved kingdom, the Kingdom of Spades, fell first to the King of Cards reign rather than the Kingdom of Clovers.

Of course, he'd never tell anyone of those dreams.

Just as he would never tell anyone of his feelings, because they were, quite frankly, an inconvenience.

"She's not yours," he reminded himself for the hundredth time as he looked out at the Clovers lawn, noting the way that she walked beside his brother and glanced at him with a heated gaze even then, despite the fact that William looked away. Manon was, for all intents and purposes, beautiful—breathtaking, life giving, astonishing, brilliant, so utterly clever that it made his heart ache—

And no one else could ever know that.

No one, that was, except for him—

"You know, some day he is going to find you spying on him, and he is going to put two and two together," Thomas noted from below Claude's tree, having previously been content shutting his mouth and pretending he didn't know that Claude was there, for the most part, until it was convenient for him to talk—i.e., until Claude's older brother undoubtedly gave Manon a hesitant kiss, pulling a grimace as he always did.

Claude let out a momentary sigh, but then just as easily moved to school his features of all emotion, knowing that there was a certain danger in it—

"You've never been able to hide your displeasure from me before," Thomas said, looking away from the

man with a grin and successfully convincing Claude to give up the ghost.

Claude immediately slumped into the tree trunk, rolling his eyes with a heavy sigh, his tail drooping over the side. "Why is it that I had to befriend you, of all people?" Claude asked, his voice taking on a jokingly bitter tone as he looked down at his friend, a grin that he could never hold in tugging on his mouth as he made eye contact with Thomas, knowing that he wouldn't have it any other way.

Ever since he met Thomas that fateful day in the stables years ago, when he had snuck into Fitz's home and began to purposefully misplace his brother's things to drive the man mad? Well, he knew he had a brother in arms, one that he could rely on after his little brother Kaeden turned out to be the straight-backed sort, rather than the mischievous little tike that Claude had been praying for.

It had been lonely before Thomas, but now?

"Father is having a meeting in Hearts," Claude provided, slipping from the high sitting branches of the tree to look his companion square in the eye. "One about the Jabberwock and other things he would rather you and I not know—" The corner of his mouth pulled wider and wider, his ears perking higher and his tail dancing in the air before him, "—would you like to attend?" He asked, only to receive a laugh and a hint of a crooked smile in return, the Joker proving to be far too good of a friend.



CLAUDE MADE A PERSONAL NOTE AS HE CREPT through the walls to thank his younger brother, though the boy was scarcely ten and likely hadn't realized what he'd done when he'd shown his brother, Claude, such things—the secret passageways of Hearts were such sacred things that not even his father knew of their existence, and they proved rather handy most of the time, as Claude made a habit of never truly minding his own business.

Why would he when everyone else's was always so much more interesting?

Like his father's business.

Or, more accurately, his father's business with one Reginald Grey.

Reginald was, by all accounts, one of the more interesting men Claude had met. Though Reginald did frustrate him with his frequent urging of Claude's father regarding the boy, saying that Claude was under stimulated and bored—therefore would cause trouble if the situation wasn't rectified. Claude wasn't a huge fan of that, but he was a huge fan of Reginald's little knick knacks from the other world, and his fond musings about Oxford as well as his two troublesome girls.

Claude had been hoping that day he would hear more stupid stories, the ones that didn't really matter, but that Reginald held so close to his chest—he didn't imagine that he would get to the end of the tunnel

outside of the Iron Room and hear an argument break out between Reginald and his father, nor that his father would furiously slam his teacup down on the table, shattering it into bits.

No, that most certainly was not what Claude wanted to see. Neither was the heavily interested face of Thomas beside him as he crowded towards the peephole by Claude while Claude decided that he would change his mind—Thomas's mind.

He was just unlucky in that regard, and while it might have been entertaining to leave Thomas in the wall, something about the discussion on the other side made the act feel almost...criminal in a way.

"Cornelius, I'm telling you this now," Reginald said as Claude skeptically glanced over at Thomas, the professor's voice heavy with exhaustion. "I can't keep doing this—"

"Because she told you you can't, or because you genuinely don't want to—" Claude's father pressed, his voice a harsh hiss that practically sliced through the air, making Claude wince. "—You and I are meant to be here together here; we're meant to rule this land—"

"—I don't want to rule any land—" Reginald argued, and the feeling like he was seeing something that he shouldn't sunk in further for Claude and was only reinforced by the crash that followed—one that hit the wall beside Claude.

"It's because of her, isn't it? Eleanor—"

"—Don't say her name— Not when you can't behave

properly concerning her—” Reginald’s voice practically shook with the wall beside Claude, and he realized then what an awful idea it had all been, that he had walked into something he shouldn’t have, and that it was making his stomach turn— “You’re mad because she didn’t love you—” Reginald spat, and Cornelius, of course, had to rebut—

A sharp yelp escaped Claude as a weight hit the wall beside him, causing the young man’s ears to fall and his curls to stand up on end, his eyes going wide. “Thomas—” He tried, finally giving in to a rare prickle of fear.

Despite that, Thomas’s eyes were narrowed all the same, the boy watching the scene with great interest. “Thomas!” Claude called again as on the other side of the wall Cornelius gave a great yell, and a full thump was heard, one of something heavy hitting the ground.

“Get up!” Claude’s father snapped, and Claude made a harsh choice as another sharp knock filled the passageway, the sound of something hard hitting the wall. “Get up and say it again!” The King of Cards howled as Claude gripped Thomas’s shoulder and yanked him away from the wall, knowing all too well what would happen if the two of them were caught; his father’s temper was hardly ever contained to one person. “You know that she always preferred me,” the King sneered as Thomas blinked at Claude, looking at the Cat with an almost dazed expression. “But be honest

with yourself, she was never smart enough for either of us—we've always out done her."

Claude could hear the blood and phlegm that gathered in Reginald's throat as the man regarded Claude's father, a wet cough escaping him. "We're going," Claude demanded of Thomas as Reginald replied...

"She's far brighter than you give her credit for," he said, and Claude knew what would come next. He knew how his father would furiously roar, and he knew the punches that would resonate against the walls, just as well as he knew the slight limp that Reginald would have when he exited the Iron Room. That is why Claude did not wait for Thomas to respond, that is why Thomas was not given an opportunity to wish otherwise...

Because yes, Claude did often mind business that was not his own, but he did not ever wish to sit around and watch conflict. He did not live for the splatters of blood that would cover the wall, nor for the harsh welling of bruises that bloomed under men's fists. Claude was a lover, not a fighter.

And Thomas? Well, Claude didn't care what Thomas was, just that he was his friend, and Claude would remain by him all the same.

Even if he looked at him with obvious frustration in his eyes when Claude pulled him out of the passageway and dragged him into the hallway, the other boy looking quite peeved as he pulled against Claude's hand and almost made to go back in the passageway. "You know,

we could have heard a lot more from them,” Thomas complained, which only caused Claude to furrow his brow at the boy, frowning.

“Sorry if I don’t have an interest in watching Reginald Grey get beaten to a pulp,” Claude spat, shaking his head at the boy as he spun away from him, his stomach churning at the mere thought.

There was a reason why his mother didn’t allow him to spend too much time with the King of Cards.

Just as there was a reason why he tried to encourage Kaeden to do the same; no one needed to end up idolizing the King.

Not like Fitz did... and not like it sometimes seemed Thomas did when he watched the King closely and barely blinked at his actions—a move that always concerned Claude.

Claude swallowed, doing his best to school his face of emotion and relax—he didn’t need to think about that. He didn’t need to worry about Thomas. After all, Thomas was a good friend to him, and that spoke for itself, didn’t it?

“Come on,” Claude said after a moment, painting the same smile that he always wore across his features—the one that hid behind when he was nervous or afraid. “I wonder what Kaeden’s doing,” he urged, his hand reaching out for Thomas’s once more and tugging, even though his friend resisted him.

After a minute, Thomas finally gave in, a heavy sigh escaping him as he trailed after the boy. “I heard the



Queen of Hearts got lost in her own maze the other day," Thomas said with a laugh, shaking his head at the thought of the older woman. "We should ask Kaeden about it," he pressed, and though Claude swore he heard something—just a hint of something, really—a bitterness in his tone, he gave in with a laugh.

"I bet that was quite the scene," Claude said, his grin stretching wider as his tail drooped down, and his ears went flat, his hand tightening ever so slightly around his friend's as he went to look for his brother.

