

“WHERE are you going?” says Sejanus, as his father’s car pulls up.

It takes Coriolanus a moment to hear him. “Hm?” he says.

“Where are you going now?” Sejanus repeats. “Back to the Academy?”

Coriolanus looks at him; it’s too dark to make out his expression, even with the extra illumination from the car’s headlights. Or maybe, given the angle, it hinders more than helps.

“Suppose so,” he says.

“You want to come back with us instead?” says Sejanus. “Just for a bit? You ... you got kinda beat up in there.”

Beat up physically, or beat up on the inside after what he did to that tribute – Sejanus doesn’t specify, but Coriolanus thinks he has an idea.

“Your parents won’t mind?” he says.

“Think they’ll wanna thank you after what you did,” Sejanus points out.

Coriolanus barely has time to nod before the car door swings open and a woman who must be Sejanus’ mother steps hastily out; he averts his eyes to permit them their long embrace.

“Come on,” says Sejanus, suddenly at his shoulder again. “I explained. She’s *delighted*.”

His hesitation must be obvious, because Sejanus follows up with a short bark of laughter and adds, “Don’t worry. I told her you were tired – she knows not to give you the third degree.”

They climb into the car, Sejanus bounding forward like a valet to open the door and gesturing for Coriolanus to go first. He has an infuriating grin on his face as he does so. Coriolanus is preoccupied enough to avoid scowling at him – a good thing too, as he feels Mrs Plinth’s eyes on him as soon as he takes his seat.

“Thank you very much, ma’am,” he says.

“You’re very welcome,” she replies. It seems briefly as if she’ll say more, but Sejanus has slid into his own seat by this point, and they exchange a look before she turns to face front. It seems Sejanus told the truth: whatever he said to his mother has convinced her not to interrogate Coriolanus, and Coriolanus supposes he should be grateful for that at least.

“All right?” Sejanus murmurs, when they’ve been on the road for a few minutes.

Coriolanus looks at him. He’s smiling, wanting to please and be pleased like a puppy. Coriolanus can’t believe he’s smiling.

“Fine,” he says, turning away again.

They say nothing more until they get to the house. It’s a large one, in a nice area on the edge of the city – of course. Inside, the furniture is expensive and tasteless – of course.

“Well, boys,” says Mrs Plinth, clasping her hands together such that she almost appears to be wringing them. Indoors, the lighting accentuates her wrinkles. “Can I get you anything,” she says, “or –”

“We’re fine, Ma,” says Sejanus.

*Ma.* Coriolanus feels his lip curl. Their classmates were right. He wonders how deep one must be in Sejanus’ confidence to hear him speak so unguardedly.

“Come on,” Sejanus adds, and Coriolanus follows him through the spacious hallway and up the sweeping staircase.

“Why are you smiling?” he asks at last.

Sejanus shrugs.

“Have you forgotten what you just did?” Coriolanus presses him. “You went in there wanting to say something to everyone, to make a difference, and now you’re just grinning like it was all some joke?”

“I guess it gave me a sense of perspective,” says Sejanus. “Lots to think about, is all.”

Coriolanus shakes his head in disbelief.

“Anyway,” Sejanus adds, “I’m not the one who killed a guy in there.”

He opens his mouth and lets the words come out. “A tribute. He’d have died in a few hours anyway, most likely.”

“Yeah,” says Sejanus. “I guess.”

They say nothing for a moment.

“You hurt?” Sejanus asks at last.

Coriolanus shrugs. He feels bruised and sore in several places; most are probably his injuries from the bombing, exacerbated by the strain of tonight’s activity. “I’m OK,” he says.

“You got a cut on your face,” Sejanus says smugly.

Coriolanus raises a hand to where Sejanus is looking; his fingers come away with a sheen of ochre blood. He scowls. “Right.” It can’t be bad – he hadn’t noticed.

“That one there’s mine,” says Sejanus, gesturing towards one of the doors that lead off the hallway. “I’ll go get the first aid stuff. Wait a sec.”

Coriolanus walks stiffly into the room Sejanus has indicated; he finds it decorated just as gaudily as the rest of the house. Now that he’s alone, the thoughts of what he has done come closer to the surface. He concentrates on his injuries instead. Sejanus was right: he did take a beating in the arena, and he was hardly in the best state to begin with.

He sits on the bed, then lies down.

Sejanus is in moments later, holding a little tin of medicinal supplies. Coriolanus forces himself to sit up – it takes effort. “Sorry,” he mumbles.

“No, no, it’s fine,” says Sejanus. “You OK? You good?”

“Just,” says Coriolanus, “uh, a little beat up, like you said.”

“I bet,” says Sejanus. “Here.” He sees to the graze on Coriolanus’ face first, dabbing at it with cotton wool soaked in something that makes it sting, but Coriolanus succeeds in not flinching away.

“Where else?” he asks.

Coriolanus gestures vaguely over his upper body. “It’s probably nothing,” he says.

“You want to take your shirt off?” Sejanus suggests.

Coriolanus removes his jacket and shirt, feeling Sejanus' eyes on the bandages that cover his chest. His right elbow twinges as he does so – he winces and clutches it gingerly.

“Let me see?” says Sejanus.

He shows him. “I don't think there's any blood. Must have pulled a muscle or something.”

“I'll bandage it, anyway,” says Sejanus. “For support. It'll help.”

Coriolanus watches as his friend carefully winds the bandage over his arm. “You're good at this,” he remarks.

Sejanus shrugs. “It's useful. Wanted to learn something practical – not like the stuff we do at school.” He tucks the end of the bandage in snugly. “Anything else?”

“Nothing new,” says Coriolanus.

With a little hum of understanding, Sejanus withdraws his hands from Coriolanus' arm, and then reaches for his chest instead, tracing over the bandages that are already there.

Their eyes meet. “Sorry,” says Sejanus, and he takes his hand away. Then he adds, “Thanks for coming to get me.”

“It wasn't my choice,” Coriolanus admits.

Sejanus nods. “Yeah. I'm ... glad you did, though. I don't know why I did it. Don't know what I was thinking.”

“You wanted to make a difference,” Coriolanus reminds him.

“Yeah,” says Sejanus again. Then he adds, “I'm sorry. I didn't think they'd send you after me. I wouldn't have done it

if I'd thought they'd put you in danger. You're my only friend at the Academy, Coryo – you're the only one who's nice to me ...”

“Stop it,” says Coriolanus.

“But it's true,” says Sejanus.

Coriolanus shakes his head. “I'm not nice to anyone.”

“You're nice to your tribute.”

“Well,” says Coriolanus, “you know why that is.”

“I'm not sure,” says Sejanus. “I thought I knew, but ... at the zoo ... and the arena, the way you guys stuck together ... none of the rest of us did that.”

“I'm playing the game, Sejanus,” says Coriolanus. “I want that damn prize.”

Sejanus chuckles ruefully. “That damn prize. Got a lot to answer for, huh.”

“Hm.”

“So ...” says Sejanus. “It's not true, then? What they're saying about you and your tribute?”

Coriolanus levels his most unimpressed gaze at him. “What are they saying about me and my tribute?”

Sejanus looks unfazed. “That you *like* her.”

“Really.”

“I guess it's just rumours.”

“I guess it is.”

“That's good,” says Sejanus.

“Good?” Coriolanus echoes.

“Well,” says Sejanus, “wouldn’t want you getting mixed up with the wrong sort.”

“There’s a certain irony in your being the one to say that,” says Coriolanus.

Sejanus grins. “I *know*,” he says enthusiastically. “In my own house, what’s more.”

“You know what they say about you, don’t you?”

“Of course. It’s hardly easy to avoid. But I know you’re looking out for me, Coryo.”

“I told you,” says Coriolanus. “I only went in there because they made me.”

“You risked your life, just for the Plinth prize?” Sejanus asks him. “You’d really rather be dead than not get that money? Don’t tell me you don’t have a backup plan. That doesn’t sound like you.”

“I have a backup plan,” Coriolanus says, because it’s what Sejanus expects to hear.

“Right,” says Sejanus. “So why’d you come for me?”

“I –” says Coriolanus; and then he stops. Why indeed? Does he care for Sejanus that much? It’s something he’s never considered before. The realisation takes him by surprise.

Sejanus reaches out and takes hold of Coriolanus’ arm, just under the fresh bandage. The touch is strangely gentle.

“I don’t want you to kill yourself trying to win this prize,” says Sejanus.

Coriolanus laughs. It sounds false. It is.

“What,” he says, “you care? About me?”

“About as much as you care about me, I’ll wager,” says Sejanus.

And then, before Coriolanus knows it, Sejanus has leant in, lips against his own. If he had ever imagined something like this happening, he would have pictured himself moving away. Reaching to move Sejanus’ arms away from himself, politely enquiring as to whether Sejanus had lost control of his senses. And yet – he does nothing but relax into it. He relishes the sensation. Sejanus’ hands are both in his hair now, in his curls, already messed from the arena. The heavy fabric of his shirt is brushing against Coriolanus’ shoulders, refreshingly soft and cool. And his own hands, the greatest traitors of all, are at Sejanus’ waist, gripping that same shirt and feeling through it the warmth of his flesh.

They break apart.

“Fuck,” says Coriolanus.

There’s a silence.

At last, Sejanus speaks. He’s still wide-eyed, almost immobile. “I was going to call you a cab,” he says. “You probably want to get back to the Games. To the – the screening, I mean.”

“It’s nighttime,” says Coriolanus. “She’s probably not doing anything. Just, you know, sleeping, and ...” He trails off. It may be the least eloquent he has ever been in his life.

“So,” says Sejanus, “you want to stay?”



Coriolanus nods. His mouth is dry. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah, if it's OK –"

"It's OK!" Sejanus replies, too quickly. "I'll – I'll just go tell Ma."

He's out like a shot; Coriolanus can hear him bounding down the stairs two at a time. As the sound fades, he manoeuvres himself up and limps into the hallway to listen.

"Of course," Mrs Plinth is saying, as if this is something that required her permission. "Are you sure you don't need anything? You both looked a little shaken – no wonder –"

There's an indistinct reply, and Coriolanus realises Sejanus is about to make his way back upstairs. He hurries back into the bedroom and sinks onto the bed.

"So what now?" says Sejanus when he comes back in.

Coriolanus turns reluctantly to face him. "What do you mean?"

"You want to talk?" says Sejanus. "Tell me you want to talk."

"I don't," says Coriolanus. "I want to sleep."

"In my bed?" says Sejanus.

"Looks like it."

Sejanus pauses, and then says, "With me?"

Coriolanus shrugs. He turns away. The next thing he knows, Sejanus is pressed against him, a soft warmth against his side. "Move over," he says. "Give me some room."

He does so.

Moments later, Sejanus has raised a hand to his hair, tracing idly through the curls. His head is close too. Coriolanus can feel his breath against his face, quick and moist. Soon, it's the feeling of his lips instead, making their way daintily across Coriolanus' cheek.

"Don't you have some fancy pyjamas to put on?" Coriolanus mumbles.

Sejanus hums in what he can only assume is agreement, because he gets up after that and embarks on removing his clothes without an ounce of discretion. Soon, he stands there stark naked; he turns to face Coriolanus and stands still, as if inviting Coriolanus to appraise him.

Coriolanus says nothing.

Sejanus turns away, at last, and retrieves his pyjamas. The fabric is as ludicrously rich as Coriolanus imagined. Just like Sejanus himself, he thinks for a moment.

Sejanus gets back into bed beside him.

"We'll talk in the morning," says Coriolanus.

"Yeah?" says Sejanus.

"Yeah."

Sejanus takes his hand this time and strokes it, his short thumb drawing circles over Coriolanus' palm. "I'm sorry," he murmurs.

"Tomorrow," said Coriolanus.

"Yeah," Sejanus replies. "Tomorrow."