

The Boy Who Bakes

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The Boy Who Bakes

by [Evergreene](#)

Summary

In which Agron works at a bakery called The Ludus and Nasir has a crush on him.

Notes

This is my first attempt at writing a modern au for any fandom, so I really hope people like it!
Reviews are most welcome!

Chapter 1

'He bakes.'

'Mmm-hmm.'

'He *bakes*, Naevia.'

Naevia put down her phone with a sigh and looked at Nasir, who pushed the plate bearing the remnants of his half-eaten breakfast to the side of their small table and buried his head in his hands, his fingers tangling in the dark strands of hair fallen loose from his ponytail.

'Is that a bad thing?'

'Not exactly.'

Naevia shook her head and picked up her phone again. 'In other words, you're even more in love with him than you were already.'

'I'm not-'

'Nasir.'

The firmness in her voice defeated him and he dropped his head onto the rickety metal table, narrowly missing the edge of his plate as well as his barely-touched coffee. 'I have a problem,' he mumbled helplessly into the dimpled surface.

He felt Naevia's slim fingers wrap around his wrists, drawing his hands across the table until he looked up at her.

'Give it time,' she urged him. 'Things will work out the way they're supposed to.'

Nasir summoned a wry smile. 'Says the person who has already found her soul mate.'

Naevia looked at him strangely, an eyebrow quirked, but Nasir didn't see it, too busy shuffling his chair over a few inches until he had as good a view as possible out of the narrow window of *Domino's*, the coffee shop they had frequented for years. 'Shitty coffee and service without a smile' was how they had always described it to each other, but, set in their ways, they had never made a move to try somewhere else ... at least until *The Ludus* had opened up over the road.

Leaning forward in his seat, Nasir eyed brightly painted frontage of town's newest coffee shop warily. Since it had first opened just over a month ago, *The Ludus* had already attracted many of *Domino's* former customers and begun to do a roaring trade. Owned independently and therefore free of the chains of franchise, it was two-thirds bakery to one-third coffee house, and its relaxed feel, wide couches and multitude of coloured cushions had immediately gained it a wide following among locals. Its owner and manager – a man known only as Spartacus – was rumoured to pride himself on good coffee and a friendly atmosphere,

where a customer was just as welcome to sit and read a book from the stuffed bookshelves crammed end on end amongst the numerous couches as to place an order.

Naevia, as knowledgeable as ever, had told him the staff was made up of Spartacus' friends who had banded behind him when he had embarked on his dream of opening his own shop. The whole story was apparently written up behind what was becoming a town-famous cake counter on a big blackboard, decorated by swirls of coloured chalk that proudly proclaimed the day's specials - the result, explained the chalk, of the highly competitive staff trying to outdo each other in all manner of baked goods.

Of the two of them, Naevia was the only one who had stepped foot into *The Ludus*. She had been a convert from day one, her interest caught by the many trays of sourdough breads, fruit-laden pastries and sumptuous cakes that spilled temptingly from the many baskets in the shop window, and her loyalty won when she had fallen head over heels for Crixus, one of *The Ludus*' many staff. Crixus was broad-shouldered, determined and a dick to pretty much anyone who wasn't Naevia. He was also a key staff member of *The Ludus* and would swear to anyone who would listen that he had played as big a part in the bakery's success as Spartacus himself.

A tugging at Nasir's arm distracted him and he realised that Naevia had stowed her phone into her bag and was pulling at him.

'Come on,' she urged. 'It's time to go.'

'Why?' he said, grabbing his wallet automatically and dropping a few dollars onto the table before stowing it in his back pocket. 'Where are we going?'

'Anywhere but here. Come on.'

With a helpless shake of his head, Nasir pushed up and out of his chair and followed her out the heavily latticed door, which rattled shut behind them as they emerged onto the street. Naevia tugged again at his arm and Nasir followed her obediently, right up until he realised she was waving at someone on the other side of the street, who grinned in return and started towards them.

Recognising the newcomer, Nasir stalled mid-stride. 'Wait a minute-'

Naevia ignored him. 'You need to face your fears,' she said firmly.

He tried to wrench his arm free of her vice-like grip. 'Naevia, you don't-'

'Everything ok here?'

Nasir jerked his head up to see the guy he had been crushing on for the last two and a quarter months standing before them with a toothy grin on his face. He was holding a paper bag between his large, calloused hands, and was wearing a black t-shirt with the words *The Ludus* emblazoned on it in a bold block script.

Beside him, Naevia leaned forward with a kiss to the guy's cheek and a smooth 'Hey, Agron', just as she managed to deliver a sharp kick to Nasir's ankles. Nasir let out an involuntary hiss of pain which caused Agron to immediately start forward, his forehead crinkling in concern.

'You ok?' he said. Then, 'It's Nasir, right?'

Nasir nodded, his eyes watering furiously as he did his best to ignore the smell of freshly baked bread, spiced apples and aftershave that came from Agron. He wondered for a moment if was Agron's cologne or Agron himself, but suddenly realised that Agron was waiting for him to say something.

He cleared his throat. 'You bake good,' he forced out.

The concern on Agron's face lifted. His mouth quirked into a grin. 'Thanks.'

Nasir swallowed, feeling his Adam's apple bob up and down in his throat. 'Excuse me,' he said thickly. 'I have to go find a cliff to jump off.' Managing to pull himself together enough to dart Naevia a look promising revenge that she calmly ignored, he turned and walked away, hoping with everything he was that he could escape without falling flat on his face.

He had only gone a few steps when he heard his name being called.

'Shit,' he muttered, hastily running his hand through his hair. 'Shit, shit, shit.'

The next thing he knew, there was a large hand on his shoulder, dwarfing it. He turned and Agron was grinning down at him, all tanned skin and muscles against the bright summer sky. His hair was pushed back in sweaty spikes and a leather cord hung twined about his neck, half-hidden behind the black v-neck of his t-shirt.

Nasir took a deep breath. Calm. He was calm. He could do this. About to say something, *anything*, to break the silence between them, he was caught off guard when Agron pressed the paper bag he had been holding forward and into his hands.

'This is for you,' he said. 'In case it takes you a while to find a cliff or whatever and you get hungry.'

Nasir stared at him and Agron gave him a quick, shit-eating grin before turning to jog back towards *The Ludus*, giving Naevia a farewell wave on the way.

Nasir looked down at the parcel clutched in his hands. The brown paper bag crinkled against his fingers as he ran his fingers over it, smoothing over the white floury fingerprints left there by Agron. Carefully, he peeled back the edge of the bag to see the edge of a crusty brown loaf of still-warm bread.

A smile broke over his face and he turned to see Naevia approaching, slipping her phone back into her pocket.

She lifted her eyebrow at him and he grinned, fighting back the stupid smile that was trying to break over his face. 'He bakes,' he told her and ignored the roll of her eyes as she tucked her arm in his and led him away.

That night, Nasir dreamt of the hard, solid weight of another man's body pressed close against his own, pushing him back against a rough stone wall that ground against the bare skin of his back and calves.

The other man moved abruptly away and he found himself panting as he rested his palms against a warm chest that heaved in heavy gasps beneath his grip.

We must wait.

Time passes to slow.

We must be quick then.

A grin flashed, the other man surged forward and Nasir woke with a gasp, his cock half-hard and beads of sweat gleaming damp against his forehead, soaking the hair that was plastered close about his neck. He breathed in a huge gulp of air, the dream still dancing vividly in his mind. He could still feel the other man's stubble scratching against his cheek, the large hands tangled in his hair, the hard bite of metal and leather against his chest and he wanted to feel it all again.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, searching for sleep once more. The harder he tried, the more it eluded him, however, and, shoving aside the light sheet that covered him, he sat up and stared into the blackness of his room. It had seemed so real – the scent of sweat, the dimness of the torchlit corridor, the heat of the other man's body, the desire he had had felt for him, *from* him.

He shook his head. It was not like him to dream so vividly. His mind slowing, he lay back down and pulled the sheets about him, finally falling into sleep with the memory of green eyes gleaming at him through the darkness.

TBC

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

‘You did what?’

‘I gave him bread.’

‘You gave him bread,’ Duro repeated, a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Agron shrugged, doing his best to ignore the niggling feeling of doubt that had been burrowing into his gut ever since he had handed the loaf of bread to Nasir. ‘I had to do something.’

‘Yeah, but...bread? Why didn't you just pick him up and-’

‘Watch it, you fu-’

‘-hug him,’ Duro finished. He flashed a grin at Agron. ‘What did you think I was going to say?’

Giving his brother the finger, Agron leaned his head against the back of the sagging couch. ‘I think I scared him,’ he muttered moodily, staring up at the cracked ceiling of their apartment.

‘I told you to put a bag over your head.’

‘Maybe I’m too tall. He’s only little.’

Duro rolled his eyes. ‘Dude, you're always tall. He's always little. How is this different from any other time?’

‘Because I want him now!’ Agron snapped, slamming his fist onto the couch. Catching sight of the look on Duro's face, he swore. ‘Sorry. It's just been so fucking long ... ’

Clapping a hand onto his shoulder, Duro disappeared into the kitchen and came back carrying two beer. He passed one to Agron, who accepted it with a nod of thanks.

‘What's he like?’ Duro said, settling onto the couch beside him and throwing an arm over the back of it.

‘The same. Except for his hair.’

‘Short?’

Agron huffed a laugh. ‘Nasir? No. Ponytail.’

Duro whistled. ‘Cute.’

Jealousy flared up in Agron, loud and fierce. He sat up and glared at his brother. 'You even think of chasing after him and your face will find my fucking fist instead.'

Duro looked at him, eyebrows raised, then began to laugh. 'You've got it bad, bro. Everyone knows Nasir's yours.'

Agron subsided back onto the couch with a snort. 'Tell that to Castus.'

'Castus is a dick,' Duro said easily.

'Yeah.'

'Then again, so are you.' Duro frowned, forehead crinkling beneath his dreadlocks. 'You think Nasir has a type?'

'Shut up.'

Duro gave him a lazy grin and took a swig of his beer before stretching his legs out on the floor before the couch. 'So, what's the next move?'

Agron shrugged, stretching out his own legs to mirror his brother's. 'Help him remember, I guess.'

Duro nodded, fingers tapping a rhythm against the side of his beer can. 'What's the plan this time? You going to drag him to Italy and slay a couple of Romans? Or how about you start to carry a sword again?'

Agron gave him a dirty look. 'The sword thing only worked once, you asshole. And it was damn near more trouble than it was worth.'

'Hey, I bailed you out!'

'No, Nasir bailed me out.'

Duro lifted his shoulders in a shrug. 'He remembered you, didn't he?'

'Yeah, and I spent my first night with him in the gods know how long having my ear chewed off for trying the sword thing in the first place.'

Duro frowned. 'I never figured Nasir much for a biter.'

Agron scowled. 'You are not helping,' he pointed out sourly, taking a swig of his beer.

Duro shrugged innocently. 'Not trying to.' He grinned but, noticing the uncharacteristic slump to Agron's shoulders, gave him a shove. 'Hey, how about you try introducing him to the others?'

Agron kicked at the rug on the floor moodily. 'He already knows Naevia.'

'And?'

'Nothing. She texted me today to come meet them both– thought it might help if Nasir saw the two of us together.'

'Any luck?'

Agron shook his head. 'He's nervous around me, that's all. Almost fell flat on his face.'

'That's not like him.'

'That's what Naevia said when she came round to the bakery tonight.' Agron shook his head, his lip curling in disgust. 'It's never taken this long before.'

'What about last time?'

Agron stilled. 'Last time doesn't count.'

'You don't think it might have something to do with why it's taking so long now?'

'No.'

'But-'

'It doesn't, so stop asking.'

Knowing better than to press the subject, Duro rolled his eyes towards the ceiling. 'Fine.' He kept silent for a few minutes, then ventured 'How about Spartacus? It's worked before. Leader of the herd and all that?'

Agron chewed at his cheek, then nodded slowly. 'It's worth a try.'

'Damn right it is. The sooner you have Nasir back in your life, the sooner you'll stop being such a grumpy fucker.'

Glaring, Agron threw his empty beer can at him but Duro caught it just before it hit his forehead.

Agron eyed him, approval lighting his eyes. 'Nice.'

'Hey, it might have taken a few lifetimes, but pretty soon you'll have a gladiator on your hands.'

Agron directed a half-hearted kick at him. 'You're an idiot.'

'That's why you love me.'

This time, the beer can didn't miss.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone for reading! :)

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Again, thank you all for reading and I hope you enjoy!

'This is ridiculous,' Nasir grumbled. 'I should be at work.'

'It's nine o'clock at night, sweetie. Besides, you're too good to keep slaving away for that creep.'

'That creep is head of-'

'-of an empirical organisation that swallows up small businesses without a thought for the people who work there!'

'You worked there for years!'

'And the best thing I ever did was leave! Now stay here. I'm going to find Crixus.'

Nasir found himself pushed back onto one of *The Ludus*' low couches, which gave comfortably beneath his weight. Stubbornly, he started to get up again, only to be met with a pointed finger and Naevia's sternest glare.

Heaving a sigh, he subsided and watched as Naevia ducked behind the counter of *The Ludus* and disappeared through a swing door that was half-hidden in the corner of the shop. He gazed after her, in reality more bemused than annoyed. It was rare to see Naevia so comfortable about a place. Clearly, she felt at home here.

He looked around the room, taking in the shelves of dog-eared books, their covers worn at the edges from people devouring their contents, the low-hanging lamps that were suspended from the ceiling, the warm earthen-coloured rugs thrown casually over the many couches and tables. Apart from him and Naevia, the place was empty.

He still did not know how nor when Naevia had come to possess a key to the bakery. When she had said they were meeting Crixus after he finished work for the day, he had assumed she had meant *outside The Ludus*. Yet when he had arrived, she had given him a quick hug, then pulled a heavy metal key out of her bag and started fiddling with the lock on the door. Within seconds they were inside, with Nasir following Naevia uneasily as she had taken his black overcoat and slung it over a chair before urging him to take his tie off.

He had protested at that without really knowing why he was so reluctant, but she had remained indignant until he had loosened it at least. He spent so much time in his work

clothes, the tie usually felt as though it was part of him. Yet, ever since he had entered *The Ludus*, it had begun to feel tight and choking, as though he was overdressed for the place.

Tugging at it absentmindedly, he glanced up at a sound from behind the wooden counter, expecting to see Naevia returning with Crixus in tow. Instead, he found himself lurching to his feet as a man he had never seen before entered the room through the swing door. His arms were full of black t-shirts, each neatly folded one on top of another and bearing the logo of *The Ludus*.

The man paused, his eyebrows raising up towards his closely cropped hair as he took in the sight of Nasir standing uncomfortably in the middle of the bakery floor. In one swift, seeing glance, he seemed to take in every part of Nasir, from his work suit and half-loosened tie to the messy ponytail Nasir had done on the walk over, with which he now wished he had taken more care.

Realising that he was probably trespassing, Nasir hurriedly cleared his throat. 'Ah-' he started, wishing desperately that Naevia would reappear.

'You have come about the sign?'

Nasir stared at the man dumbly. His voice was deep and rich, well-cultured with an accent he could not place.

'Sign?'

Depositing his armful of t-shirts on the empty counter, the man gestured towards the far end of it. Switching his gaze, Nasir saw a piece of card propped up before a glass jar full of sugar cubes. The words 'HELP WANTED' were printed on the sign in big, black letters.

He looked back at the man, who was still gazing at him, his eyes calm and level.

'Ah ... I'm here with a friend ...'

A smile spread across the man's face. 'You are with Naevia.' It was not a question, but Nasir nodded, not knowing what else to do.

The man reached out a hand, offering his open palm for Nasir to shake. 'My name is-'

'Spartacus!'

Both Nasir and the man called Spartacus turned as Naevia's boyfriend, Crixus, pushed through the swing door behind the counter. He stopped when he saw Nasir and narrowed his eyes, so dark as to be like charcoal.

Nasir fought the instinct that was telling him to drop his gaze and forced himself to meet Crixus' stare. He had met the man before, shortly after he and Naevia had become first become a couple. He had never seen him out of Naevia's company, however, and was struck by how much harsher he seemed, all hard edges and brashness.

Spartacus, however, seemed unaffected by such things. 'Crixus?'

'Naevia is here.'

"Til morning then.'

Crixus nodded. He eyed Nasir again, inclined his head in a short nod, then disappeared, leaving Nasir and Spartacus alone once more.

Nasir eyed Spartacus warily. 'Where did he go? Where's Naevia?'

'They have left. Shall we?'

'Shall we what?'

'Bake.' Spartacus gestured towards the swing door. 'Come.'

Before he knew what was happening, Nasir found himself following Spartacus into the back of the shop, which, he discovered, was set up just like one vast farmhouse kitchen, packed to its bared rafters with sacks of flour, jars of dried fruits and a plethora of pots, pans and bowls. Crammed in a corner was a small section of office space, a desk strewn with paperwork, an old desktop computer that looked as though it had not seen the light of days for years and a swivel chair that was piled high with box files bursting at the seams with receipts.

Almost unwillingly, Nasir breathed in the delicious aroma that permeated the air. It smelt like Agron - freshly baked bread mixing with the heady scent of cooked fruits and the heavy, pungent smell of spices. Feeling almost light-headed, he forced himself fought to concentrate as Spartacus started to pull out large containers of flour, a sizeable chopping board and some glass jars of sweet fruits.

'We shall begin,' Spartacus said, and began giving instructions as Nasir watched him curiously from the corner of his eye. Spartacus had the strangest way of speaking he had ever heard. Despite it, or perhaps because of it, he found him to be strangely persuasive. Within a few minutes he found himself standing over a work surface with his shirt-sleeves rolled up and his arms covered in flour up to the elbows as he kneaded some dough for tomorrow's bagels, interspersing each new batch with cutting up dried fruit with a small knife, creating generous bites apparently destined for some new treat that Spartacus was planning.

It was not long before he built up a sweat and soon he began to wish he had taken off his tie when Naevia had suggested it. The tie was blue silk, the last gift he had received from his brother, and he did not want to ruin it with his floury hands. Doing his best to wipe his sweaty forehead on his shirt sleeve, Nasir was caught off guard at the sight of Spartacus standing next to him. Surprised, Nasir whirled, knife in hand, and almost ran Spartacus through, and would have done so if Spartacus had not grabbed the blade a bare moment before it plunged into his chest.

Horried, he began to stutter an apology, but to his surprise Spartacus laughed and brushed off his stumbling words, assuring him it was not the first time it had happened and probably would not be the last. The next thing Nasir knew, Spartacus had stepped forward and was gesturing to Nasir's tie.

'May I offer aid?' he asked. 'It looks a precious thing.'

Red-faced, Nasir nodded reluctantly and held himself still as Spartacus lifted the tie off over his neck. 'Gratitude,' he said, then stopped, wondering where the archaic-sounding word had come from.

Spartacus seemed to have noticed nothing however, merely handed him over an old, worn apron that Nasir slipped over his head and tied loosely at the waist. Then, together, they bent to their work, swiftly falling into an easy rhythm with each other before slipping into easy conversation.

'It's heavier than I imagined,' Nasir said, trying to pull his fingers away from the sticky dough he was kneading.

Spartacus smiled. 'It will lighten in time,' he said. The words sounded familiar, as though he had said them many times before.

'I'm no baker,' Nasir admitted. 'This is the first time I've done anything like this.'

'Skill will come with practice. And then we will find purpose to put you towards.'

Tempted to say that he had no intention of being 'put to' anything, Nasir was cut off by the sound of the shop door slamming. He looked up to the door that led to the shop front, hoping to see Naevia returning to rescue him, but instead he found himself face to face with Agron.

Nasir froze. This could not be worse. He had wanted to appear relaxed the next time he had seen Agron, casual but with an edge that Agron would remember, or preferably fall head over heels in love with. Instead, he stood in the middle of another person's kitchen in an oversize apron, his face flushed and hair mussed with effort, his tie missing, his hands smeared with half-chopped fruit, and with smudges of flour decorating him from head to foot.

Agron grinned at him and leant back against the wooden worktop that bordered the kitchen. 'Hey.'

'Hey,' Nasir managed. He tried to unobtrusively shake his hair out of his eyes and failed miserably, with the result that one errant strand decided to attach itself to his eyelashes. Deciding that ignoring it was the way to go, he tried a smile. 'I didn't know you would be here tonight.'

Instead of answering, Agron reached forwards and tugged the piece of hair out of his eyes, tucking it behind his ear.

Nasir swallowed.

'How'd he do?'

Confused, Nasir opened his mouth to ask what Agron was talking about, then realised that he was talking to Spartacus, who again had managed to appear silently in Nasir's line of sight without being noticed. This time, he was leaning next to Agron against the kitchen bench, holding Nasir's fruit knife in his hand. He was playing with it, twisting it between his fingers.

'He shows promise.'

Agron nodded, then turned to look at Nasir. 'Tell you what,' he said. 'How about you come in for a couple of hours every evening and learn how to do this properly. Spartacus will start you on half-wages and we can talk in a few weeks about you going full-time.'

'I have no choice in the matter?' Spartacus commented, raising an eyebrow.

Agron smirked. 'Not if I can help it.' He turned back to Nasir. 'So, what do you say? You in?'

Nasir stared at him, then at Spartacus. 'Are you mad?' he managed finally. 'You want me to start working here, just like that?'

Agron frowned. 'Well, yeah-'

Nasir shook his head. 'I have a job. A good job. I'm not going to throw it all away to come and work for someone else in some bakery.'

Agron was now starting to look impatient. 'Look, I know it may seem a little ...'

'Crazy?' Nasir offered incredulously.

'Quick,' Agron finished, his mouth narrowing into a thin line. 'But I'm serious.'

'So am I.' His fingers fumbling, Nasir started to tug off his apron, cursing as it got caught around his neck before finally managing to yank it off. Moving forwards, he handed it back to Spartacus then retreated. 'Thank you,' he said. 'I had a good time tonight. But this isn't for me.' He turned and walked away, moving almost blindly back through the swing door and into the main shop.

Just before he got to the door to the street, a large hand descended on his shoulder for the second time in two days. Knowing who he would find, he set his shoulders defiantly and turned around.

Agron's eyes had lost their spark of their first meeting. In the dimly lit shop, his face was hard. 'You would return to it then,' he said flatly. 'To your life? Ignore opportunity?'

Nasir snorted. 'Opportunity? Where? Unless it lurks hidden behind this madness?'

'You would see it had you any fucking sense!'

'Something known here only by its absence!'

Nasir realised they were standing toe to toe, their faces no more than two inches apart, so close he could have reached out and grasped the short hair at the back of Agron's head, pulling him forward into a fierce, angry kiss. For one brief moment, it almost seemed as though he could remember doing just that. But that was impossible.

He forced himself to concentrate on the here and now. 'I'm leaving,' he said and turned and strode away, out the door and down the street, away from the bakery and away from Agron.

Had he looked back, he would have seen Agron standing at the doorway of the bakery, framed in its light and raking a helpless hand through his hair as Spartacus clapped a gentle hand on his shoulder.

This time, the space was bigger, more a room than a corridor. Agron stood close by the window, his shoulders rigid with anger as wine from a broken pot dripped its way down the nearby wall.

The Cilician overstepped! Yet your response was-

Was as it fucking should be! Jupiter himself would find cause to tremble if he laid hand upon you.

He found himself huffing a laugh. *You would battle a god for me?*

I would slay all who laid attempt to wrest you from my arms.

He stepped closer, smelt the wine on Agron's breath, the heavy scent of his sweat, the sharp bite of the leather straps that adorned his chest. He looked up into Agron's eyes, taking enjoyment in the way that Agron drank in his gaze.

Strike Jupiter and the Cilician from mind. I would have them of no concern to the one that holds my heart.

Nasir jerked awake, breathing hard. For the second time in as many nights, his sheets were soaked with sweat. Cursing, he rolled out of bed and stumbled to the tiny bathroom at the back of his flat. There, he leant over the basin and turned the tap on full blast, before reaching up and scrubbing a hand over his face, which was just visible in the sliver of moonlight that entered the apartment through the open window set high in the wall.

A dream. That was all it had been. Nothing more.

The tap continued to run as he stared at himself in the mirror. He looked terrible, his eyes appearing huge and dark against pale skin. His lips were bitten red as well, and a strange light lingered in his eyes as the bathroom dimmed around him.

He saw himself reflected as in a pool of water, hair half-tied back by a leather thong as he bent down to scoop some clean water into his mouth, his whole body weary and aching from a day's hunt. Beside him, Agron knelt as well, running a damp hand through his hair before turning to Nasir, exchanging a word and a quick grin. Nasir smiled back, fascinated by this man who could switch from gladiator to boy so quickly, whose gentle kisses demanded nothing, who was stubborn and proud and did not know when to hold his tongue.

He thought he was coming to love this man.

He glanced back into the pool, then gasped a huge breath and recoiled, staggering back from the mirror until he hit the bathroom door. He stayed there, breathing hard, then slid down to sit on the cold blue tiles, which pressed coolly against his feet. Breathing shallowly, he

wrapped his arms around himself and curled his legs up beneath him. He did not move until dawn.

TBC

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay with this new chapter to anyone still reading! What with Christmas and my laptop deciding to send out sparks one day, I got a bit behind! I hope you enjoy it and thank you so much for reading. :)

'And you call me a fucking idiot,' Duro complained, slamming shut the pickup truck door and following after Agron as he strode towards the back door of *The Ludus*.

'Fuck off,' Agron muttered, pulling the key out of his pocket and jamming it into the door lock.

'What did you expect him to say?'

Agron cursed as the key refused to turn. 'I don't know,' he growled. Losing his temper, he slammed his fist against the door so hard that it shook in its frame and a few flakes of old paint detached themselves, floating slowly to the cracked pavement that was still damp from the previous night's rainfall.

Behind him, Duro snorted. 'Every fucking time,' he muttered.

Agron turned on him. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'I was talking about the door,' Duro retorted. 'Move.'

Unwillingly, Agron moved aside and let Duro take over. To his credit Duro did not say a word when he opened the door first try, just stood aside to allow Agron in before him.

Together, they edged their way across the shop's small storeroom, full of bags of flour stacked end on end, entered the main kitchen and finally pushed through the door to the main shop, where the last few members of the morning rush still lingered.

As one, they stopped. At the counter, dressed in a rumpled shirt and business suit, stood Nasir. He was just accepting a cup of coffee from Mira, who was chatting with him easily, though she paused as they entered, throwing them a quick glance before focusing again on Nasir.

Nasir had caught her glance and he twisted round, catching sight of them immediately. He looked suddenly uneasy and turned back to Mira, thanking her with a soft word before taking his coffee and heading for the exit.

Duro gave Agron a violent shove. 'Go on,' he hissed. 'Go talk to him.'

Agron took a deep breath and moved forwards, grateful for his longer stride that allowed him to intercept Nasir when he was still some feet from the door.

'Hey,' he said, then stopped, abruptly wishing he had had time to think about this. He cleared his throat. 'You came back.'

Nasir nodded. There were dark shadows under his eyes, Agron noticed, as though he had not slept well.

'Why?'

Nasir shrugged, his shoulders tense. 'I wanted a coffee.'

'And you came here?'

'I wanted a *good* coffee.'

Agron's lips quirked, but he sobered as Nasir spoke awkwardly.

'Look, if you don't want me coming here-'

'No!' he burst out. Nasir startled and Agron forced himself to calm. He took a deep breath. 'I mean, you're welcome here. Really.' He offered Nasir a smile and had to prevent himself from letting out a shout of victory as Nasir returned it, tentative but true.

Behind him, Duro gave a loud and pointed cough. Agron decided to seize the moment.

'Do you want something to go with that?'

Nasir hesitated. 'I really ought to-'

'I can bake it to go.'

Nasir's eyebrows rose, exactly as they had at him for lifetimes beyond count. 'Bake?'

Bracing himself, Agron reached out and took his hand, ignoring the wolf whistle that came from Duro's direction. 'Come on,' he said. 'I'm going to make you the best fucking cookie you've had in your life.'

Nasir laughed, an honest-to-god laugh with his eyes alight, and Agron had to stop himself from swinging him round in triumph. With difficulty, he fought back the grin threatening to take over his face and led the way behind the counter and through the swing door, leaving Duro and Mira standing together looking after them, Duro with a huge smirk on his face and Mira with a small, knowing smile.

Alone in the kitchen with Nasir, Agron busied himself in getting out the large jars of flour, sugar and baking powder that he needed. He ordered Nasir over to the large fridge in the

corner to retrieve some eggs and butter and in the meantime bent under the counter to pull out some oven trays and a large mixing bowl.

Nasir perched on a high kitchen stool to watch him and Agron had to bite his lip to keep from laughing as he saw the way Nasir's feet dangled just off the ground. *Little man*, he thought to himself with a grin as he went to work, combining the ingredients swiftly before binding them all together with the eggs.

He was just about to gather the dough together when he felt a gentle hand press against the hollow of his back. He turned to find Nasir standing by his side, his jacket off and his shirt sleeves rolled up to bare his forearms.

'Teach me,' Nasir ordered.

Agron swallowed. Carefully, he turned back to the counter, hugely aware of Nasir's slighter body beside his own, and gathered the dough between his hands before dividing it between Nasir and himself. With short motions, he showed Nasir how to roughly chop up some dark chocolate into rough chunks and knead it in to the mixture before tearing off slightly larger than bite-size pieces of the finished dough to place onto the prepared trays.

They were silent as they worked, and in spite of himself Agron found his eyes straying constantly in Nasir's direction, watching the way Nasir's hands worked the dough, gaining confidence with every turn and swiftly becoming quick and sure in their movements. Memories of those same hands grasping a sword tugged at him, awakening memories long pushed down, and they were soon joined by the thought of those same hands clasping his cheeks, rasping against day-old stubble as Nasir pulled him down to brush their foreheads together, seeking as well as offering affection and assurance.

Before he knew what he was doing, he had placed one of his hands over Nasir's own where it rested on the wooden bench top.

Nasir went still, then turned slowly so that he was looking up at him.

Hardly daring to breathe, Agron leant down, then pressed his lips against Nasir's, a gentle brush that brought back another, fiercer surge of memories - of bodies pressed against each other in the dark of a roughly-made tent, of muscles slick with sweat and oil, of schooling Nasir in the art of battle under a beating sun, of toiling for miles across a vast range of mountains that drove deep into the sky as they searched for a new home with their remaining people.

He heard a gasp and suddenly Nasir was pulling back, stumbling away. Agron forced himself not to follow and instead just watched as Nasir steadied himself against the kitchen counter for a long moment before swinging round to face him.

'I know you.'

Agron's breath caught in his throat at Nasir's words and he stepped forward. 'Nasir -'

Yet Nasir was backing away, one hand pressed strangely against the side of his chest as though it pained him. 'Who are you?' he demanded.

Agron decided to gamble it all. 'You know that already. *Think.*'

Nasir shook his head violently, fingers pressing into his chest just where, Agron realised, the Roman sword had pierced him so many centuries past. 'They are dreams. Nothing more.'

'You have dreamt of me? Of us?'

But Nasir twisted away and was gone, leaving Agron staring after him as the swing door swung slowly closed.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait, everyone! Hope you enjoy! :)

'I hate these early morning meetings,' Duro grumbled, dropping onto the couch next to Agron.

Agron picked stonily at a frayed thread on his jeans. 'Spartacus thinks they're good for morale.'

'My morale's back at home, asleep.' Duro let his head fall back against the cushions and closed his eyes. 'Wake me up when it's over.'

Agron did not reply, his mind fixed, as it had been for days, on the last time he had seen Nasir two days past. Unable to help himself, he raised his head and glanced up at the swing doors that led to the kitchen, half-hoping, despite himself, to see Nasir entering through them, his eyes alight as he gazed at Agron. Instead, he found himself caught off guard by the number of people packed into the front room of The Ludus.

The usual crowd were all there, including Crixus, Spartacus, Mira and Naevia, who were all stood near the front of the room in deep conversation. Donar was sprawled on a couch next to Saxa and Nemetes, and Lugo stood beside them, his arms folded across his chest and the keys to the bakery's delivery truck clutched between his thick fingers. Other familiar faces were there as well. Belesa stood arm in arm with Saxa, Laeta and Sibyl shared a couch, and even Varro and his tiny, dark-haired wife were present, standing close together with their small son sandwiched close between them, balanced securely on Varro's hip.

About to turn back to Duro, Agron stilled as his eyes fell on yet another familiar figure, though this one was far less welcome a sight.

Castus lounged the back wall of the shop, clad in loose jeans and a brightly-coloured top that showed off his toned torso to its best advantage.

Agron elbowed Duro angrily, making him jump. 'What's he doing here?'

Duro raised his head, but before he could say anything, Spartacus had stepped to the front of the room and was raising his hands for silence. Quickly, the low hum of conversation hushed and Spartacus looked around at them all.

'One of our own is absent,' he said finally, in a quiet voice that carried easily to the very back of the room. 'And has been for too long.'

Agron, who had been glaring at Castus, snapped to attention. 'What did he say?' he demanded of Duro, narrowing his eyes.

Mira, standing behind them, shushed them both, but it was too late. Spartacus had turned towards him, his face grave.

'Do not think, Agron,' he said, 'that you stand alone in feeling Nasir's absence.'

About to answer, Agron was interrupted as the front door clanged open and Gannicus strolled in, clad in jeans and a tanned leather jacket.

'Am I late? What'd I miss?'

Spartacus eyed him sternly. 'Be seated, Gannicus.'

With a roll of his eyes, Gannicus dropped onto the couch beside Agron. 'No sign of Nasir then?' he asked. 'Too bad.' He leaned around Agron to look at Duro. 'I'm betting your brother's a right shit without him, am I right?'

Near the front of the room, Crixus let out a bark of laughter, quickly muffled when Naevia dug her elbow into his ribs.

Spartacus cleared his throat. 'That is subject of discussion,' he said, giving Gannicus a look that made him subside back onto the couch with a grin. 'Tonight, we shall bring Nasir back to us.'

Agron finally found his voice. 'Come again?'

'We all miss Nasir,' said Naevia softly. 'We want him back here, where he belongs.'

'Yeah, and it can't hurt to give him a bit of a nudge-' Duro started, but he quickly sunk back into the couch as Agron glared at him before turning on Spartacus.

'This was your idea?'

Spartacus met his glare evenly. 'It was.'

Agron clenched his jaw. 'Nasir -'

'- controls his own destiny,' Spartacus finished. 'Yet it does not mean he should go absent help to remember his past.'

'And you were going to ask me when?'

'We don't need your fucking permission,' a new voice interrupted.

Agron spun round to face Castus, who had straightened up and was standing with his shoulders set aggressively. At once, Duro and Gannicus seized Agron by the arms, one on each side of him. Together, they began to pull him back but he shook them off, then turned back to Spartacus, his every muscle clenched.

'I'll have no part in this,' he growled. He gestured towards Castus with a jerk of his head. 'Not if that piece of shit has anything to do with it.' With that, he spun on his heel and strode out, slamming the door behind him.

Left behind, Duro heaved a sigh and let his head fall back onto the couch again as people began to disperse in twos and threes, muttering to each other as they went. 'That went well.'

'He's just worried for Nasir,' Mira said, coming to stand beside him. 'He always gets like this when he's so close to having him back. Especially if Castus is around.'

'He will return,' said Spartacus, joining them with Naevia and Crixus in tow. 'Nasir holds too great a pull on Agron for him to remain absent for long.'

'We're going ahead then?' Naevia asked.

Duro scrubbed his hand over his head edgily. 'So long as we make sure Castus doesn't get to Nasir first tonight. I'm not sure that 'bloodied Cilician' would be a good look for the menu.'

Spartacus nodded. 'Then it is settled,' he said. 'We make the call this night.'

'Nasir. Nasir!'

Nasir startled awake to see the office receptionist standing over him, a pile of filing in her arms and her brow creased in concern beneath the straggles of curly blonde hair that were doing their best to escape the carefully styled knot at the back of her head.

He sat up unsteadily, rubbing at his cheek where it had been plastered against the surface of his desk. He blinked away the sleep from his eyes, his mind fuzzy. 'Chadara? What are you ...?'

He cut off as Chadara leant forward and pressed her palm against his forehead. 'You feel fine,' she said critically, cocking her head at him like a curious bird. 'But you look like shit. No offence.'

'None taken,' Nasir murmured. His voice felt scratchy and dry as though he had been shouting for hours and there was a dull, lancing pain down one side of his chest. Surreptitiously, he pressed his fingers against it, trying in vain to remember what he was meant to be doing. All that came to mind, however, was the hour he had spent with Agron that morning, an hour that had woken more questions than it had answered.

Hastily, he shied away from the memory and instead tried to remember what he had done afterwards. He had made his way to work, he remembered that, and sat down at his desk, determined to bury himself in his work. Hours had passed and he had thought of nothing but what was in front of him, had not *allowed* himself to think of anything else. Then there had been the abrupt clang of swords in his ears, a harsh cry and then a sudden, vicious blaze of pain in his side that had sent him spiralling into blackness with invisible hands grasping at him from every side.

'Did you sleep at all last night?'

Chadara's voice jolted him back to the present. He lifted his shoulders in a shrug, then gasped as the movement sent a bolt of fire through his chest. The next moment, it had subsided into a painful ache.

Chadara immediately crouched down beside him, her hand on the arm of his desk chair and her usually bright blue gaze fraught with concern. 'Are you sure you're all right?'

He shoved his chair back and stood up, suddenly needing to escape. 'I'm fine,' he said, folding his arms across his chest protectively. 'Really. I just need to step out for a minute.'

Chadara frowned and pulled out her phone, glancing at it. 'It's almost nine o'clock, Nasir. Why don't just you head home for the day? It's just you and me that are left. Everyone else has gone home.'

Nasir cast a quick glance down at his paper-strewn desk. 'I can't,' he said regretfully. 'I've got to finish this. I'll just get some fresh air.'

'If you're sure,' Chadara said slowly. She eyed him curiously, then her face suddenly transformed into a smile. 'But when you get back, you're going to tell me all about Agron.'

Nasir gaped at her. 'Agron? Who said anything about Agr-'

Chadara reached out and picked a small blue paperclip off his cheek, her brightly painted nails grazing his skin as she grinned at him. 'Did no one ever tell you that you talk in your sleep?'

Feeling a flush creep up his cheeks, Nasir made a grab for his wallet and walked quickly towards the relative safety of the office lobby. Chadara followed him, moving with ease in her high heels that click-clacked across the polished wooden floor.

'From the sound of things, I envy you his attentions!' she called mischievously, waving at him merrily as he spun round to hush her, desperately glad that the rest of his colleagues had already left for home.

A short lift ride later, he stood on the street outside his office block, taking long breaths of the cool night air. The heat of the day had disappeared along with the sun and he suddenly felt almost chilled. Reaching up, he tugged his suit jacket closer about him, then rubbed at his eyes with the heel of his hand, creating black spots that danced across his vision.

When they faded, the city street had vanished and instead he was looking at a mountain ridge encased in ice and snow. A cruel wind ripped and tore at his hair and clothing and bit fiercely at the exposed skin on his face, chilling him to the very bone.

There was a break in the wind behind him and he turned to see Agron approaching from out of the storm, looking more bear than man, wrapped as he was in several furs. Without a word,

Agron moved in close behind him so that his height and bulk acted as a shield from the icy wind. Nasir pressed into him gratefully, trying to still the chattering of his teeth.

Never have I felt such cold.

Agron chuckled and wrapped a large arm about him, cloaking him in warmth as they walked together towards the tiny tent they had claimed as their own.

It stirs memories of my homeland.

Nasir looked up, curious. *Tell me.*

So Agron spoke of his home, of winters spent huddled round a fire with his parents and Duro, of playing in the snow, sliding on the ice, fishing in the frozen lakes, and Nasir listened, letting the rumble of Agron's voice drown out the howling of the wind and the ringing in his ears...

His legs almost went out from underneath him as he came back to himself, drawn by the insistent song of his cell phone as it vibrated furiously away in his pocket. Feeling as though his fingers were still half-numb with cold, he fumbled with it and finally managed to manoeuvre it up to his ear.

'Hello?'

'Nasir?'

Nasir pulled the phone away from his ear with a wince. 'Naevia?' he said uncertainly.

'Nasir, I need your help! I can't get home.'

Naevia's voice was urgent, ricocheting right through his aching head.

'Nasir, are you there?'

Nasir forced himself to take a deep breath. 'Yeah. Yeah, where are you?'

'Over in the next town. I was meeting a friend, but they had to leave and I can't find a taxi -'

'What about Crixus?'

'He can't drive.'

'Seriously?'

'He's not big on technology.'

'A car's not really-'

'Nasir!'

'Alright!' Nasir took a deep breath. 'Alright, I'm on my way. Just tell me where you are.'
Pulling a scrap of paper out of his pocket, he scribbled down the address. 'Ok, just wait there.'

'Can you pick up Crixus on your way?'

Nasir balked. Driving Crixus around was not exactly his idea of fun at any time, let alone late at night with his head about to split open. 'Crixus?' he repeated dubiously.

'He's waiting outside The Ludus for you. Please? He wants to make sure I make it back ok.'

The words slipped out before he could pull them back. 'What about Agron?'

On the other end of the phone, there was silence. 'He can't make it,' Naevia said finally.

I will not risk my life for this.

Nasir winced, rubbing his fingers across his temples. 'What did you say?' he said, confused.

'I said he can't make it.'

'I thought you said he wouldn't risk- ' Nasir cut himself off. He already suspected he was going crazy, he didn't want Naevia thinking it as well.

'...thought I said what?'

Nasir shook his head, dismissing his worries. 'Never mind. Just wait there. I'll be there soon.'

TBC

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