

where the dead man called out (for his love to flee)

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Characters:	Larrikin , Anton Shudder , Ghastly Bespoke , Erskine Ravel , Saracen Rue , Dexter Vex , Hopeless (Skulduggery Pleasant)
Additional Tags:	During the War , late-night conversations , First Kiss , technically , Handholding , (Platonically) - Freeform , (and romantically) , LGBTQ Character of Color , almost none of the dead men are white , except skulduggery , bc he's bones (lmao) , Tragic Backstories™ , the gist is horrible , but larrikin is nice , after the war , Developing Relationship , actually , my kink is consent and actual communication , if you couldn't tell , the handholding got a lot more romantic folks , Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , y'all can guess what that is , Larrikin Lives AU , Alternate Universe - Everyone Lives/Nobody Dies , Well not everyone , just the important people , you come into my house , And You Try To Tell Me , That Larrikin Is Not Both The Founder (wait nah that's Saracen) , And President Of The Anton Shudder Protection Squad™ , Friends to Lovers
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by [ObsessedWithFandom](#)

Summary

“Stay,” said Shudder, words not quite a command but not quite a plea either. His voice was rough around the edges, as though he’d screamed it away. “Talk to me.”

Usually so quick to do so, now at the request Larrikin’s mind drew strangely blank. “About what?” he barely managed to get out through numb lips.

“About anything. Tell me about how you found out you had magic.”

Finally Larrikin found his voice again, and he gave a short laugh. It came out harsher than he meant it to. “It isn’t a terribly interesting story, if that’s what you want.”

“I don’t care,” said Shudder. He sat so still that Larrikin would’ve mistaken him for stone -- never mind that Shudder wasn’t an Elemental -- if it wasn’t for the faint twitching of fingers at his pulse, or silken hair, fluttering around an impassive face. “Tell it to me anyway.”

Notes

the title comes from the hanging tree in hunger games, which has like nothing to do with this fic but i heard the words "dead man" and was like (° 5 °)

Chapter Notes

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

Larrikin came awake to the rustle of wind against canvas, Ghastly's loud snores, Hopeless' indelicate snuffles, and the crackle of a fire. For a moment he stared at the stars he could just barely see out of the badly-woven tent, then rolled into Dexter with an irritated grunt. Tomorrow they would be marching again, and it was better to do on a good night's sleep.

Dexter was silent and warm against him, but still Larrikin couldn't close his eyes. It was too dark to be anywhere close to dawn, but the light from the fire, bleeding into the rip of the tent and over Hopeless' twitching body, created a good enough impression. Larrikin poked at Dexter in the hope that he would wake up and share Larrikin's misery, but his friend remained stubbornly still.

He gave it a few more minutes, just to be sure, but the light shone through his eyelids and he found them inevitably opening up again. With an irritated gruff, he finally stood up, stepped carefully over Hopeless' dark form, and exited the tent.

There was already someone at the fire. Larrikin hesitated, half-in and half-out of the tent. They'd agreed, the previous night, that the area was deserted enough that they didn't need to keep watch. Besides, they could go faster when they were all well-rested.

Yet there Shudder sat, muscles tense and spine rigid.

Larrikin felt unsure whether to approach him or not. Shudder had been tense from the start, barely even approaching Rue -- who was supposedly his friend -- and shying away from anyone who tried to get closer. What with the rumour of his power, there weren't many who tried. Still, slowly but surely he had relaxed into the Dead Men, sitting around the fire at night with half-lidded eyes and something Larrikin would've called a smile on anyone else perched on his mouth. For him to be this tense...

In the end he gave a mental shrug, sat down to Shudder's left, and said, "Hey, Shuds. What's up?"

Shudder's hair was a dark curtain that hid his face. He didn't speak.

Oh, who was Larrikin fooling? Even now that most of the Dead Men tentatively considered him a friend, Shudder still retired early at night, still preferred to tend his own wounds even though Ghastly was better at stitching and Hopeless at ointments, still didn't really talk to anyone except Rue.

He'd most likely wanted to take this moment alone while the others were sleeping, and here Larrikin was intruding on his solitude. Larrikin frowned to himself. He was a very extroverted person himself, but could usually read people better to know what they would prefer. With Shudder, he drew a complete blank.

Without a word, Larrikin stood up, intending to return to the tent for a night of restless rolling around until either Dexter woke up, or Hopeless grumbled at him to go to sleep. Hopeless was usually a polite enough chap, but when you came between him and sleep, you were playing with fire.

He didn't even make it a step from the fire when it happened.

On the whole, Anton Shudder was a very private man. Despite the Dead Men washing and dressing together more than once, Larrikin had never seen him fully unclothed (and oh, he'd tried). He was also quite particular about touching, which was something they'd learnt when some sorcerer back at the Sanctuary had tried to give Shudder a celebratory pat on the back and almost lost his arm. After that, Shudder had made a point of informing the Dead Men that he was not to be touched under any circumstances, unless it was an emergency -- though as long as Rue made his intentions clear, he seemed to fare well enough. Larrikin wasn't nearly as close to Shudder as Rue was, so a strict no-touching rule was always in place.

So Larrikin could be excused for nearly jumping out of his skin when a surprisingly cool hand fastened around his wrist.

He followed it with his eyes to the elbow, then shoulder, then chin; flitted to burning eyes and then jumped quickly away to the edge of a sharp cheekbone.

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Eventually, Larrikin allowed himself to be pulled down to sit on the ground. Shudder was a quiet presence next to him, waiting patiently for him to find his voice.

And find it, Larrikin did. He quickly got into the story, gesticulating with one hand -- the other still caught fast by Shudder -- but making sure not to raise his voice too much. He didn’t want to know what the others would think if they witnessed this strange arrangement.

It was a short story, and not very exciting, as he’d told Shudder. He’d been born into a poor family and had to steal to survive. He’d gotten cocky, snatched a fat money-purse in plain sight, and had paid for it with three of the Watch chasing him through the streets. It hadn’t been much -- just a little push of air that tripped the lead Watchman -- but it had given him the chance to escape into a side-alley.

The wind had been quiet and the street deserted that day, so Larrikin had guessed that it might have been him that did it. He'd tried it again, with mixed results, but over a time it had started to creep back in. Nothing was as powerful as that first incident, but it gave him hope and he practised until the magic actually became useful, so that he could use it to shift attention from him while he pickpocketed and ran.

He'd discovered the fire nearly a year later, and then only by chance. He had thought the magic was limited to air, so it was a shock when he snapped his fingers excitedly one day and produced a spark that slowly grew into a little flame as he panicked. After that, he found himself a teacher.

Shudder seemed pleased with the story, short as it was, posture already relaxing. Yet as soon as Larrikin finished talking, he prompted him to continue with another question.

Who was in his family? There was Larrikin's ma and pa and his three older sisters, too plain to get a good dowry but nice and unremarkable, which had made them perfect for pickpocketing. It was hardly a fair comparison, though, because while his sisters had all inherited their father's pale skin, their mother's blood flowed true through Larrikin's veins, and he was noticed in a crowd, what with his auburn curls and dusky brown skin and overabundance of freckles.

Why had he joined the Sanctuary's army? His teacher had told him that he would age slower because of his magic, but he hadn't believed her until they buried his ma and his eldest sister -- wrinkles deepening around her eyes -- remarked on how unchanged he looked. He couldn't bear staying to see his remaining family age and die, and joined the Sanctuary because that was where his teacher said she'd go. He hadn't found her, but he became a low-tier soldier until he joined the Dead Men.

Why had he joined the Dead Men? Shudder knew that one, but Larrikin told it anyway. Ravel had been out of commission, the Dead Men were a number down, and they were doing poorly for it. There were plenty of volunteers when Meritorious called for them, but not even a month's taste of a Dead Man's life had been enough to send them packing. Larrikin had been used to living hard all his life and had been comfortable with combat from his time as cannon fodder, so he didn't approach the position with the same illusions of grandeur as his predecessors. He got used to it, even been startled to miss it when Ravel reclaimed his spot. And now, with Pleasant vanished to who-knows-where, he was back.

And always, always it came back to: *What's your happiest memory? Tell me a happy story. What do you want to do when the war is over?*

Alright, Larrikin thought to himself. Shudder clearly wanted something happy to hold onto, even if it wasn't his own. That was easy enough to do.

So he talked.

By the time Larrikin's voice finally gave out, the fire was burning low. He stood up to fetch another log, adding it to the fire and creating a spark in his hand to make sure it burned. Next to him, Shudder had settled onto the ground. The flames glinted against his dark eyes.

Larrikin opened his mouth to speak, but only a faint wheeze came out. He cleared his throat, tried again, and managed to say, "What was that?" He'd never heard his own voice sound so hoarse.

Shudder didn't meet his eyes. For a moment, Larrikin wasn't certain he would answer, but then he said, "Sometimes... sometimes after I've used the Gist too many times, I can't control it as well. It's as if too much use weakens the tether. I don't trust myself to sleep then, in case it comes out and I can't control it. It -- helps, to think about something positive. Anger, and panic, and fear... It only makes the Gist stronger, makes it easier for it to break free, to control me rather than be controlled by me."

Oh. It wasn't as if the Gist was the best deal in the first place, with allies eager to see Shudder during a fight but terrified of him after, but if control was also an issue...

"That's why you wanted my stories," Larrikin stated. He didn't pretend that his voice was only quiet because of their sleeping comrades. "Even if they weren't that exciting."

"They were happy, which was enough. I don't have enough happy memories to be able to control the Gist."

It was said with a brutal kind of honesty, the sort that made it difficult to think of a response. Somehow, Larrikin thought, *I'm sorry* didn't quite cut it.

For a few moments it was silent, and Larrikin stared up instead of into Shudder's eyes. The sky was still dark, but the steady lightening to the east told him it wouldn't be for long. He dreaded the coming sunrise. The others would sleep in, but Dexter and Ravel always rose with the sun, and for some reason, Larrikin didn't want to share this conversation with them.

"You remind me of one of the children," Shudder said.

Larrikin's throat clicked when he swallowed. "You have children?" he asked, foolishly.

It was worth it, though, for the surprised laugh Shudder gave. Larrikin had never heard him laugh before. It sounded sharp-edged, as harsh as Larrikin's earlier one. He wondered if it always sounded like that. If you didn't know better, you might mistake it for a scream.

Larrikin wasn't entirely sure he did know better.

"I suppose I did," said Shudder. His laugh had faded, but there was still something in his voice that spoke of amusement. "I was the oldest of the children in the orphanage where I grew up. I raised the younger ones."

Larrikin hadn't known Shudder was an orphan. He wondered where the ones before Shudder had gone, if they had died or simply left. He wondered who had raised Shudder. Still, all that stumbled out of his mouth was, "I thought you didn't like children."

Shudder didn't laugh again, but his lips quirked briefly into something like a smile. "I don't like *people*. The children at the orphanage were mine. I was the closest thing to a parent they had."

Again, the blunt honesty. Larrikin thought he wouldn't be able to bear it, to be that truthful.

"Who do I remind you of, then?"

Dark eyes caught on his face. Larrikin didn't dare meet them.

"There was a child at the orphanage. He was an older child than most when he came to us, but remembered nothing of his previous life, not even his name. He would've been the same as the rest of us, orphans for as long as we could remember, except that he remembered being happy."

There was only the crackle of the fire in front of them. Even the wind had quieted, as though afraid her sigh would stop Shudder's story.

"Happiness was a powerful thing in that place, but dangerous. Quang was always smiling, always trying to cheer the others up. I managed to get him to stop being so obvious before the caretakers beat it out of him, but he still went out of his way to do it."

It was a surprisingly wistful smile that crossed Shudder's face after he said it. Larrikin had never seen anything like it on him before.

"I think it must've inspired the rest of us, this one bright flame in a place of darkness, because we all took extra work on to make enough money to buy him a treat, and waited for a day when the caretakers were less watchful than usual, and we gave it to him. I don't remember everything, but I think he started crying."

"It was nice of your caretakers to take an off-day on his birthday," Larrikin remarked, half-teasing but more than a bit curious.

Shudder snorted, and he stared, despite himself.

“Hardly. Most of us were brought there when we started showing signs of magic. For many, that was when we were just babes, and the caretakers didn’t bother to record our names, much less our dates of birth. We made up names for each other until we created our own, and then we made up a birthday for Quang. After that, he started using it as his birth date.”

Larrikin tapped at his knees, strangely sad. He wondered what it was like, to not know the exact moment you had lived a year longer than before.

“So, what did they call you?”

“What?”

“You said you made up names for each other until you chose your own. What was yours? I’m assuming you didn’t decide on Anton Shudder when you were still a toddler.”

Shudder didn’t smile, but he tilted his head back with a little huff that might’ve been a laugh. Shadows played strangely over the hollows of his cheekbones, the dip of his throat, the bruised skin beneath his closed eyes. Larrikin quickly tore his gaze away, before he did something stupid like touch him.

“An,” he finally said, eyes still closed. “Linh was raised by her big sister before she came to the orphanage, and her sister’s name was An. Since I took care of her at the orphanage, I got the name.” He opened his eyes and looked closely at Larrikin, as though he thought he might laugh at him. “It’s where Anton came from.”

Larrikin had a hard time concealing his smile, but he was afraid Shudder might think he was laughing after all.

“You said I remind you of Quang,” he said, when his patience finally wore off.

“I did.”

“So, what, I remind you of him because I’m happy?” Larrikin asked, again struggling against a smile. He wished Quang could be here to see it, to know that his legacy lived on.

“No,” replied Shudder, and before he could feel offended, went on. “He was always trying to cheer up the others, making sure the caretakers didn’t hurt them or that the orphanage didn’t suffocate them. Even me, the one who raised him, nearly old enough to be one of the caretakers myself. But sometimes, when the younger ones weren’t looking, he seemed... sad. You look like that too, at times.”

Larrikin’s breath caught in his throat. He wanted to smirk and prove Shudder false, to show he’d never been sad a day in his life, but this pre-dawn confession was no place for falsities.

He was surprised Shudder had noticed at all, with how quickly he would paste a smile on his face when he felt it coming on. Yet it seemed Shudder was more observant than he’d first thought.

Shudder was right, was the thing. Larrikin was a sorcerer in a mortal world, a fighter in a war he didn’t want. He knew grief like an old friend, sometimes had to turn away from the Dead Men to let the smile drop. He’d never known someone had been watching.

So instead, Larrikin said, “I am sad at times, I suppose.” And then, desperate to steer the conversation away from his confession, “What happened to them? Quang and Linh, I mean. And the other children.”

The wind didn’t hesitate to fill that pause, and Larrikin was half-afraid she would blow Shudder’s quiet words away before they reached his ears. He pushed the air so that the wind didn’t blow directly at them, straining to hear Shudder’s voice.

“They burned,” said Shudder, finally. Quietly. If Larrikin hadn’t pushed the wind away, he wouldn’t have heard at all. “The orphanage was well-known because so many of the children had magic, and the caretakers were meant to teach us. I think the Sanctuary wanted us to fight for them when we grew up. Only, Mevolent’s underlings got there first. They burnt it to the ground, made sure none of the children made it out.”

“And you?”

“Bão had started showing magic the previous day. I worked longer on the day to make extra money so that we could celebrate. I came back there later than usual, only to find a smoking wreck. Witch-burnings weren’t uncommon those days, so I thought it was that, only for one of Mevolent’s men to come at me with a knife.” Shudder smiled thinly. “That was the day I manifested the Gist.”

Larrikin tried to imagine a younger Shudder, screaming and crying next to the ruin of the only home he’d ever known, as his own demons fought off a man intent on killing him. It was an illuminating picture.

“You know what the funny thing is?” Shudder asked, voice flat and matter-of-fact. He didn’t wait for an answer. “I never wanted to fight against Mevolent. Of course, some of the older ones did, but they were few and far in between. If things had stayed the same, I think most of us wouldn’t even have left the orphanage.”

“But you had to avenge the children,” Larrikin realized. It seemed a lonely reason to fight, but was any reason really better?

Shudder let his silence speak for him. After a moment the strange quiet passed, and he inhaled deeply before sitting up. “Thank you for sharing your stories with me,” he said, strangely formal.

Larrikin grinned, noticing with no small amount of surprise that it was genuine. “Thank you for telling me about your past.”

A nod, almost as if to himself. Then, before Larrikin could blink, Shudder leaned over and pressed a kiss to his cheek. His lips were whisper-soft.

Larrikin watched, frozen, as Shudder loped to the tent that he shared with Rue and Ravel. As soon as the tent-flap closed behind him, Larrikin raised a disbelieving hand to his cheek. It

was still faintly warm, cooling quickly in the light breeze.

He wondered, suddenly, if there were villages around where he could purchase something sweet. He wondered whether he should get a candle or not. He wondered what would be a good day to give it to Shudder.

Most of all, he wondered at how quickly and completely he'd gotten himself into this mess.

Chapter End Notes

An comes from 安, meaning “safe, secure” in Sino-Vietnamese.

Quang comes from 光, meaning “bright, clear” in Sino-Vietnamese.

Bảo comes from 寶, meaning “protection, security” in Sino-Vietnamese.

Linh comes from 靈, meaning “spirit, soul” in Sino-Vietnamese.

All names and meanings are taken from Behind the Name, [here](#).

Anton is Vietnamese in this fic. He grew up in an orphanage in Vietnam, and after it burned down, he travelled all over the world, sabotaging Mevolent, until he eventually made his way to Ireland. There he met Saracen and started working for the Sanctuary in Dublin. He and Saracen partnered for most missions, and later they joined the Dead Men together.

He created Anton from An (安 -- “safe, secure”) and Tuân (遵 -- “obey, follow, honour”), which was Anglicized to Anton in Ireland.

Chapter Notes

there's [art](#)!!

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

The halls of the Midnight Hotel were deserted, Larrikin's footsteps the only sound as he walked through them. Any other day, he would've been thankful for the change. Today, however, he just wanted to find Anton, and irritable door-slamming wasn't helping him any.

After the twenty-third door closed after a guest who did not, in fact, know where the director of the hotel had gone off to and very rudely informed him of this fact, Larrikin finally threw his hands up and went straight to the twenty-fifth room.

It was the only room besides the twenty-fourth that was always unavailable, though for a much less dangerous reason. (According to some, at least. According the others, the inhabitant of the twenty-fifth room was equally as dangerous, if not more so, than the twenty-fourth room's.)

It was tucked away in a corner, right next to the room that housed the Remnants, but not nearly as luxurious or even as large as any of the other rooms. Larrikin knew from previous visits that only a small bed, a slightly larger desk, and an ancient-looking chair filled it. Attached to the wall were thick chains that were flecked with what Larrikin had hoped, but doubted, was rust and not blood.

His knock yielded no sounds of protest, so he guessed that it was safe enough to enter. The entire room was dark, with the curtains drawn and the fire burned out, and for a moment Larrikin stood in doorway, blinking away dark spots and forcing down a bright flare of panic. He needn't have worried; the chains rested limply and empty on the floor and as soon as his eyes adjusted, he could see that the bed was occupied.

Anton hadn't responded to the knock or the light that filtered in, but Larrikin still kept his movements cautious as he went first to the fireplace and then to kneel next to the bed.

“Hey,” Larrikin said, pitching his voice so that it was just audible over the sudden crackle of the fire as it started to burn again. He’d learned to be careful on bad days, where even a too-sudden laugh could have Anton whirling around, wide-eyed and ready to attack.

When Anton didn’t reply, Larrikin lifted himself up with a soft grunt of effort to sit next to him. Black lines spread over the pillow like half-finished artwork, and ever so gently, he carded his fingers through them. Anton was still particular about touching and being touched, but his hair had always been the exception. Now, as it had every time before, his body twitched when Larrikin brushed through it.

Just when he’d given up on an answer, starting to relax and consider lying down and falling asleep next to his friend -- it wouldn’t be the first time he’d done it -- Anton sat up. “Hello.”

Exhaustion was clearly in every line on his forehead, the bruised purple under his eyes, how his body relaxed of itself despite the tension in his face. Clearly an appointment with his bed had been a long time waiting, but Larrikin couldn’t find it in himself to feel sorry when Anton obviously hadn’t been able to fall asleep.

“Are you alright? The guests missed you today.” Larrikin had only arrived at the Hotel an hour ago himself, but the mutterings had reached even him where he was seated at the front desk. He’d been awaiting an appearance himself so that he could rent a room and maybe -- just maybe, mind you -- spend some time with an old friend.

“I’m fine.” He shifted so that the shadows obscured his face -- nothing as blatant as turning his face away, but still hiding it -- and it might even have worked, except Larrikin’s eyes had always been good, and the relit fire brightened even the shadows considerably. The soft downturn of his mouth was a clear contradiction to his words. “I’ll apologize to them tomorrow.”

A century ago, before he’d learnt Anton’s quirks, Larrikin might’ve argued, pointed out how obviously untrue that was. Not even a few decades before that, he wouldn’t even have picked up on the lie.

Now, Larrikin said, “Alright,” and went back to playing with Anton’s hair. He’d done it before, during the war -- they all had, since Anton enjoyed it most and had the longest hair among them -- but back then it had been almost permanently caked with blood, grime, or both. These days Anton washed his hair regularly and had no reason to cut it, so that it was softer and lengthy enough to reach mid-back, and it felt like heaven to run your hand through.

Larrikin wasn’t the only one who thought so. Whenever they got together for one of their Dead Men reunions, one of them would inevitably end up with Anton’s head on their shoulder, despite him being taller, and their fingers in his hair. Ghastly liked to twist it up in the latest fashionable hairstyles, while Saracen tried to make it as messy as possible. Skulduggery always complained about how the strands got stuck in his finger bones, but never really stopped touching Anton’s hair. Both Dexter and Erskine just absentmindedly ran their hands through it while their attention was elsewhere.

More often than not, it was Larrikin who ended up sitting next to Anton. He always pretended not to know why, and then pretended not to notice to amused side-eyes the other Dead Men shot him. Sometimes, when he was feeling nostalgic -- and that had been strange, finding it harder rather than easier to conceal his melancholy after Anton picked up on it -- he would braid it, like he used to braid his sisters’ hair, so long ago.

If they’d both been mortals, if Anton had lived in the same town as him (a stupid thought; Vietnam was nowhere close to Ireland, and Anton was much older. Even if he’d been born in Ireland, a mortal Anton would’ve died before Larrikin was even born), Larrikin might’ve gone walking with him, might’ve twisted braids into his hair that meant something else.

Larrikin guiltily ripped his thoughts away from the direction they’d been going in, disguising the twitch his hand gave as a light tug on Anton’s hair. “Did something happen today?” It was a plausible enough. He’d seen Anton before when the Hotel showed up unexpectedly at a former battle site. And it must’ve been today, because one of the few talkative guests, while ignorant of where Anton actually was, had known that he had been amiable enough yesterday. A haunted Anton was many things, but amiable wasn’t one of them.

“The Midnight Hotel’s previous location was in Vietnam,” Anton said, voice quietly wrecked. Larrikin frowned at the confession, slowing his hand until it was just cradling Anton’s head. While he doubted Anton was lying, the Hotel had been in business already for almost a century and moved location twice a day, which meant it must have visited Vietnam at least once before. And while Anton didn’t exactly have good memories of his country of birth, a mere second (or third) visit should not have left Anton as shaken as he still was, half a day later. Which meant...

“The town?” Larrikin asked, a sick feeling at the bottom of his stomach. “The town where you grew up? Is that where the Hotel showed up?”

“Yes,” Anton replied, and his smile was grotesque. Like a dying animal’s. “It’s a city now, actually. They’re calling it Lạng Sơn. I went to the place where the orphanage was.” The smile dropped, and Larrikin was horrified to find himself missing it. Anton with that smile was dying. Anton without it was already dead. “It’s a graveyard now.”

Larrikin sucked in a deep breath, closing his eyes and then his free hand around Anton’s tightly. When he could breathe around the knot in his throat, he opened his eyes to see Anton staring at him. Belatedly, he realized that their hands were still joined together.

“Sorry,” he said guiltily. “I know you don’t --”

“It’s fine,” Anton interrupted, hand steady under his and eyes never wavering from his face.

“Are you?”

This time, Anton actually seemed to think about it. “No,” he replied finally. “No, I’m not. I don’t think I’ll ever be. I don’t think any of us will ever be.”

“Yes, well. I don’t think any of us has memories that compare to yours.”

Anton frowned. “Of course you do. You of all people --”

“By the Faceless Ones, Anton, I probably have the best childhood out of us all! What’s going hungry a few times compared to seeing your whole life destroyed before you even reach eighteen?”

“Trauma isn’t something that should be dismissed just because it’s -- lesser than someone else’s!”

“I agree,” Larrikin said, struggling to keep his voice from matching Anton’s intensity. “I’m just saying that you shouldn’t dismiss your own trauma, especially not today. You’re allowed to be upset. It’s hard to see the world move on without you, to realize that no one will ever know that your loved ones even existed.” As soon as the words were out, he regretted them. Not for Anton -- Anton would understand, might feel better for hearing it, or so he hoped -- but for Larrikin himself. It had been too truthful, too applicable to Larrikin’s own life, and that honesty went against all of his instincts.

For a moment, he thought Anton might let it go, which showed that while he might know Anton’s quirks, and it would take a few more centuries to discover all of him. “Did you ever look for your sisters?”

“Sure,” Larrikin replied readily. “I asked around, but the people had never even heard our family name. I thought I would visit the graveyard, see their graves maybe. Turned out there was a new one, and the old one didn’t survive.”

“*Larrikin*,” Anton said, and now it was his hand that went to Larrikin’s hair. Larrikin had never been as partial to it as Anton was, but he still shivered when warm fingers curled around his nape.

“It’s not so bad. It was a long time ago. Right after the war ended. Remember when I told you that after the war ended, I would eat anything in sight and then sleep for a week?”

Anton smiled. “Yes?”

Larrikin wondered if his memory of that night was as crystal-clear Larrikin’s own. Sometimes, he dreamt of warm lips pressed to his cheek.

Clearing his throat and fighting down a blush, he continued, “Well, I did do that. But first I went looking for my family.”

The fingers that had been teasing at Larrikin's hair paused. "Why didn't you tell me that when I asked?" He hid it well, but there was still a hint of hurt in Anton's tone. The next moment his eyes widened, then lowered in shame. "Forgive me, I forgot we didn't know each other as well then. You had no obligation to tell me, just as you have none now."

"It's fine, really. It was just that I got the feeling that you wanted happy stories, and wanting to find your dead family wasn't exactly part of that."

"You were right. Thank you for taking it into consideration." Anton's words were an eerie parallel to his last ones that night -- or rather, early morning --except this time he didn't kiss Larrikin's cheek. Larrikin would've denied that he was disappointed, but he didn't tend to make a habit of lying to himself.

Casting desperately around for a change of topic, Larrikin's eyes landed on the chains. This close, he could see that while several of the stains were definitely blood, at least as many were just rust. And none of the bloodstains looked particularly new. "How long has it been since you've used them last?" he asked, nodding at them.

Anton followed his gaze. "A while. It's -- easier now. I don't use the Gist as much as I did during the war, so it's easier to control it, and the Hotel is usually peaceful enough that it can't escape without a struggle."

Larrikin hummed agreeably, but made no reply. While he agreed that the Midnight Hotel's tranquillity went a long way to keep the Gist under control, he sometimes thought it might be too peaceful for Anton. Anton had never enjoyed fighting with the Gist, but he was good with his fists and better yet with Daisy. And beneath it all, he was an adventurer at heart. In a better world, in a fairer world, he might've gone traipsing through countries as he wished, instead of being forced from location to location every twelve hours, looking after guests instead of himself. If Anton had let him, Larrikin would've liked to come with.

There was something else off about what Anton had said, though. Something -- "*Usually* peaceful enough. Today wasn't, though, was it? Did the Gist give you a hard time?"

Anton gave him a careful look, and said, "Yes. Well, earlier, at least. Your company helped."

He didn't say it with anything other than his usual truthfulness, but Larrikin couldn't quite contain the warmth nestled in his ribs, nor the smile that spread across his face. It was small, and more honest than his usual grins, but somehow Larrikin couldn't find it in himself to suppress it.

"Thank you for letting me help you," he said, and without really thinking about it, moved the hand in Anton's hair to cradle his face instead. Anton glanced down towards it before staring back at him, and Larrikin's breath caught in his throat at the sight of Anton's eyes. They were no longer cautious, but as bright and blazing as the stars used to be back in the day, before pollution had painted the night sky orange.

Now might be his turn to steal a kiss, Larrikin thought, and leaned in. If anything went wrong, he could pass it off as gratitude, as Anton had surely meant it that night.

Anton didn't seem to object, though. He held perfectly still as Larrikin drew nearer, until at the very last moment he tilted his face so that Larrikin's mouth met his instead of his cheek.

There was a moment where he was simply surprised that it wasn't Anton's cheek he was kissing, and then the shock of realizing *Anton Shudder* was kissing him, and then panic as he tried to figure out how to respond. After that, he was quite sick of his whirling mind, so he just closed his eyes and kissed back.

It was everything Larrikin would ever deny thinking about. It was Anton's lips -- much warmer than they'd been the night he'd kissed Larrikin's cheek -- moving against his, and Anton's hands on his waist, and the squirming of his stomach that was much more awful than the quaint little expression 'butterflies' made it sound, and the breathy sound Anton made as Larrikin accidentally tugged at his hair that he hadn't even realized he'd wrapped around his hand --

With a start, Larrikin wrenched himself away, breathing heavily and trying to ignore his pounding heart. He wasn't the only one. Anton's lips were parted around his quick inhales -- and Larrikin tried not to look at them, he really did, but he of all people knew when a battle was a losing one -- and his hair was as disordered as whenever Saracen played with it. When his eyes opened after a long second, Larrikin could only bear his gaze for a moment before looking away.

Anton's hands were still on his waist, still keeping him there, and as soon as he noticed, he started to draw them away. "You kissed me," Larrikin blurted, and the hands froze.

"You kissed me first," Anton replied, careful again.

"Yes, but I didn't --" He shouldn't have done it in the first place. If Anton had kissed him on the mouth, but just because -- if Larrikin held onto that hope, but it was just -- "It wasn't because of Vietnam, was it?" he asked, suddenly desperate. "Or -- or -- my family?"

The possibility of it being either of the two made him feel sick to his stomach. At least if seeing the graveyard in Lạng Sơn was the reason, he would know he had helped Anton somehow. But if Anton had only been trying to make him feel better out of some sort of misplaced pity, Larrikin really would be sick.

"No," Anton said, thoughtfully. Honestly. "I kissed you because I wanted to kiss you. Maybe Vietnam reminded me of how fleeting these things are, and how quickly those you care about can disappear, which in turn encouraged me to act, but that is all it has to do with this."

Despite himself, the words caused a tidal wave of warmth to spread throughout Larrikin's body, including, he had a feeling, his entire face. Still, just to make absolutely certain everything was cleared up, he asked, "And this isn't just you seeking company because you're emotionally vulnerable?" A horrible thought occurred to him. "Is this me taking advantage of you, kissing you when you're emotionally vulnerable?"

Anton seemed to consider himself, and then said, "A no to both. I don't think I'm emotionally vulnerable anymore."

Larrikin couldn't quite tell whether he felt light-headed because of the relief that swept through him, or because of their gazes meeting and locking. "Well, that's alright then," he replied faintly, and kissed Anton again.

It was, in his opinion, far more enjoyable than the first one, especially because he was actually participating instead of freaking out. It took Anton a bit longer to get with the program, but his eventual response was enthusiastic that Larrikin didn't mind. When they drew apart once more, they were both out of breath and Anton had an elegant flush high on his cheeks. Larrikin might've been more self-satisfied at seeing it if he wasn't certain he was an unappealing shade of red.

"I'd like to keep kissing you," he admitted, all in a rush. "Today and tomorrow and the rest of our lives, preferably. But you're definitely a little emotionally vulnerable at the moment, so I won't go any further than kissing."

Anton smiled at him, and it was far wider and with more feeling than any of the ones he'd ever seen. Before seeing that smile, Larrikin had thought the idea of your heart stopping at the sight of something beautiful was terribly cliché. Now, he thought he might understand.

"I'm afraid I have no complaints about that arrangement. Though that you would think I'd... go any further before even a first date is terribly insulting, Larrikin."

Larrikin pulled him in for another kiss, but started laughing loudly in the middle of it so that they were forced to break apart. Anton didn't move far, kept his forehead pressed against Larrikin's as Larrikin silently gasped.

"So a date is definitely in the books, then?" he asked when he finally got his laughter under control. The lovesick smile was a bit harder to wipe, and Larrikin didn't even try as he swept gentle thumbs over cheekbones and lips and jaw, mapping the face he'd been thinking about for so long. "Because I could totally go for that. It's getting late, though, so maybe I should go fetch us both a meal, and then maybe you can organize me a room?"

"You can stay here if you want." Anton seemed to have difficulty tearing his eyes from Larrikin's mouth, which wasn't distracting at all, oh no. It was only when he finally managed to meet Larrikin's eyes that the words registered, and Larrikin stared cautiously back at him. "Just sleeping. We've slept in the same bed before, and we've already established that we won't go further."

"Well, don't know about you, but I'm not opposed to a bit of kissing --"

“Sleep,” Anton commanded, holding a pillow aloft threateningly. “We’ll talk more in the morning.” He hesitated for a mere second, and then brushed a soft kiss on Larrikin’s cheek.

Larrikin wondered if it was possible for one’s heart to overflow with love. He wasn’t opposed to testing it. Still, that was concerns for tomorrow, so he settled down, tugged Anton’s arm over him, and fell asleep to the sound of the fire crackling, the wind outside the window, and Anton’s breathing.

Chapter End Notes

period-typical homophobia?? idk her

also, feel free to ignore this, but in my mind i totally cast willy cartier as younger!anton. just look at [this](#)!! hot damn.

also also, look at [his mother](#). if i hadn’t already established anton as an orphan in this fic, i might be tempted to add her in. like damn, i am Very Bi™!!

(for those who don’t remember or haven’t read it, daisy is anton’s gun, as found in *armageddon out of here*. it’s a pretty good book, and there’s anton and larrikin in it!! they’re even in the same place at the same time!! be still my shipper heart, etc etc)

and now that i’ve updated chapter 1, i’d like to include how i imagine larrikin. [this](#) (w/ darker skin tho) and [this](#) (w/ red hair tho) is kind of what i want to convey. but again, feel totally free to ignore, your imagination is your property, blah blah, it’s purely my own thoughts. (ok but [this](#) is totally baby!larrikin, sorry, no arguments).

thanks for reading!

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