

## A Roman in Britain

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# A Roman in Britain

by [Kadma32](#)

## Summary

Marcus is a first year university student from Rome trying to settle in his new life in the UK. The task is already challenging as it is, but it is soon made even more complicated by the arrival of his new, attractive and strangely grumpy neighbour in the student halls.

As time passes and they get to know each other better, Marcus starts to realise that they are much more similar than he first thought.

## Notes

Please note English is not my first language and this work is unbetaed.

This work will borrow a lot from my own experience as a Roman student in Britain.

I have set myself this work as a challenge to build my skills in creating slow burn romance, so do let me know if you have any feedback :)

Please enjoy!

## First impressions

When Marcus woke up, his eyes were heavy and he was certain an elephant was sitting on his forehead. It had to be, that could be the only logical explanation for that horrible, pounding feeling every time he opened his eyes. His mouth was horribly parched and everything in him screamed “coffee”. But he couldn’t move. For a moment, he crushed up on himself, making a burrito of himself in his big, fluffy duvet.

‘Oh, that must be how a hangover feels like’ he thought, as he passed both hands on his face, hoping to wake himself up a little but with no avail.

He had always thought that reports of horrible hangovers felt were massively exaggerated in the movies, why would people do this to themselves otherwise? It had to be fun, right? And yet, there he was, struggling to lift himself up as his brain told him to just keep on lying down till this was all over while his stomach was protesting, shouting that he wanted some of that cold pizza that he had left in the fridge.

Cold pizza? Wait, he didn’t have any memory of any cold pizza...

Wait, no, he did have some memories. They were all a bit fuzzy, but he was pretty sure that the night before, when he came back to the students halls with the boys, they had made a massive order to pizza from the local Dominoes and spent two hours laughing their heart out at how strange this “AngloSaxon” “pizza” was (we will not mention the whole pineapple on pizza debacle. Marcus was pretty sure he had actually tried a piece of it the night before but he was never going to admit it again in the light of a sobered up day. And he hoped nobody was going to remember that, otherwise goodbye to the pride of being a decent Italian).

But that was what you got when you hung out with lots of other Italian students, right?

Well, before you say “you shouldn’t socialise just with students from your own country” and bla bla bla, hold your horses, as Marcus’ current, “Italy centric” social circus wasn’t really his fault, the “Home” students weren’t on site yet, so far it was only foreign students involved with the International Students Welcome Programme, which was meant to be a great introduction to the British way of life.

Oh, and it had been a great introduction to one of the most British things Marcus could think of: the drinking. Not that Marcus had been tea total before, he had had his fair share of the so-called “shottini”, a series of alcoholic shots under the shade of Giordano Bruno’s statue in the middle of Campo de Fiori in Rome.

But Italians don’t need to be drunk out of the heads to get loose and have fun, right?

Well, he did, but that was another point.

The loud sound of things, heavy things, being moved around brought him back to reality.

What day was it? Saturday, 28th September. Shit.

The Home students were moving in on that day!

His phone buzzed. Damn, even the sound of the vibration on his bedside table made his head pound.

It was a message from Lutorius.

‘My roommate has moved in! And I already want to strangle him’ cue a long string of angry looking emojis, which was weird because Lutorius wasn’t the kind of guy to add those to a message.

‘Why is that?’ Marcus typed, before managing to seat himself up.

‘He has the most obnoxious laugh’

‘Could it be that you are just too drunk and the sound is making your head pound?’ he said, smiling to himself. He was quite glad that his uncle had spent a little more money and had managed to secure for him a single room.

Although there was the problem of the room right in front of his. So far, during that week of peace and quiet, he had enjoyed having his rather secluded room, close to the kitchen (which was going to be a problem if they intended to have a lot of parties) but also close to a bathroom which he could basically use for himself. If the room right in front were to stay empty, that was.

Gods, please let it stay empty. He liked his peace and quiet.

‘No. It’s obnoxious. I hate him. Weren’t British people meant to be quiet? They hardly open their mouths as it is’

Marcus smiled at the memory prompted by that sentence. He could easily picture himself, Lutorius and the rest of the gang gathering for lunch after the first days of lectures and laughing their heart out when each of them reported how strange it was that British people didn’t really open their mouths much, compared to Italians, with their big, wide vowels.

‘Maybe you got the only loud one’

‘He also has a strange name. What kind of name is Cradock anyway? What happened to John, Tom or Luke?’

‘I think you are far too stressed. Come here, I am about to make a bucket load of coffee’

‘Lavazza Rossa?’

‘Of course, what do you take me for?’

‘I will be right there. Give me ten minutes’

Which was actually going to be ten minutes, as Lutorius was the only Roman he had ever met who was always on time. Well, except for Marcus himself, as he hated arriving late for

anything and thought it was his duty to keep to his part of any arrangements. Did you make a date with a friend/crush? You arrive early. Do you have to catch a plane? He was known to have arrived about six hours in advance for his flight to Bristol.

He managed to stand up and, braving the thumping in his head, threw a tshirt on, hoping that nobody would be too scandalised if he went to the kitchen with that and his dark blue pajama bottoms.

He stepped out of the room and wished he had never done that. All around him, from the kitchen, a few steps away from his room, to the landing and the corridor leading to the other rooms, there were people moving things around, talking to each other about how their little darlings needed this or that. There was also a couple of men sweating like angry warthogs as they dragged a heavy looking sofa up the stairs, encouraged by a young looking lady with flaming hair.

Avoid talking to people, his mind said. He was in no state to make any cogent conversation.

Marcus managed to slip through the crowds unnoticed. Well, unnoticed, he did feel the eyes of a few young ladies and gentlemen on him, but, as everybody was far too busy with their own bits and bobs, nobody bothered him as he grabbed his moca, the Italian style coffee machine and filled it up with both coffee and water. He had brought two from home, one which was meant to do only two espresso cups, and another that was meant to do six. He went for the six, making sure to put more water than coffee. It was going to be a little closer to an Americano than he liked, but he did need to balance out the need for a bucket load of coffee with the need to prevent his heart, and Lutorius', from exploding.

He grabbed the cups (they were tacky souvenirs from the Colosseum, but, deep down, he loved them and he was sure Lutorius was going to have a laugh at them) and made it for his room.

When he stopped on his tracks. To his horror, the door of the room in front of his was open. Well, more like ajar, but it was the same thing, right? Someone was moving into the room!

Now, what are you going to do, clever clogs? He told himself. He had read in a few articles about British freshers that it is the done thing to leave the door of their rooms slightly open to encourage others to come in for a chat. He could knock and introduce himself, right?

And yet, that very moment, he could also just head for his room. A bit like a Schrodinger's cat situation, right in that moment his new neighbour could be at the same time the nicest person and the nastiest.

Come on Marcus, he told himself.

You are not a coward, go and introduce yourself.

So he charged forward and knocked on the door.

'Hello?'

‘Hello?’

It was a guy’s voice. Thank goodness. He didn’t have a problem with sharing a bathroom with a woman, no issue with that, but it was just going to be easier with a guy.

‘Can I come in?’ he asked.

‘Yes’ the other replied. Marcus opened the door, even though he was sure he had heard the noise of the other guy rolling his eyes.

The room was similar to Marcus’, very spacious, to the point that Marcus was sure they used to be double rooms, before the University had opened the newer, fancier accommodation halls. The furniture was quite anonymous, just a bed, a wide desk and a wardrobe.

His neighbour was standing near the bed, taking clothes out of a rather worn looking suitcase.

There were no parents or older adults there with him.

Not that Marcus cared. His attention was caught by the young man. He was shorter than him, but clearly well built under the jumper and jeans. He had a mop of unruly hair and sharp facial traits, and his eyes were just...

‘What are you staring at?’ the voice of the young man brought him back to reality.

Marcus felt his cheeks warm up.

Quick, quick, think of something to change the topic.

‘I am your neighbour by the way. Marcus’ he said, extending a hand, even though it was still holding the cup of coffee.

Idiot.

The young man’s face crisped up in a very amused smile.

I see, you are the sarcastic, cheeky type, right?

‘Esca’ the guy replied

‘Esca?’ Marcus said, frowning, finding himself in a situation just like Lutorius.

‘Where are you from?’ Esca replied, cocking his head to the side.

‘Italy, Rome’ how did that have to do with the conversation they were having?

‘That explains’

‘What does?’

‘Your reaction. I know that Esca in Italian means fishbait, right?’ he replied, with a smug look on his face.

‘Well, yes, I guess’ Marcus replied.

May-day. He clearly should have gone back to his room.

‘It’s a Celtic name. My parents liked it’ he went back to take his clothes out of the suitcase with a sour expression.

‘Your parents’ Marcus started to say, not even sure where he was going to go with that, but Esca whipped his head up again.

‘Anyway, can I do anything else for you? Your coffee is getting cold by the way’ he said, quickly changing the topic.

Marcus, like the drunk idiot he was, looked down at the cups, which were still steaming, but the phone he had chucked in the pocket of his trousers was vibrating like nothing else. Lutorius was probably waiting downstairs.

He was about to say something else to Esca when he realised that the “Your coffee is getting cold” was a subtle invite to move out of his way. Gods, it was going to take a long time to get used to the British subtleties.

‘I will see you around then’

‘Yes, see you around’

Oh well, great first impression, right?

# When in the Silent Zone...

## Chapter Summary

Marcus navigates his first few days of lectures.

## Chapter Notes

Please note my Liathan is quite a bit OOC, but it serves my goals XD

The day after, Marcus got on the bus towards uni in the most complete silence. It was a little odd, in all honesty, but nonetheless he took out the yearly bus pass (which had cost him something ridiculous, like three hundred pounds or something) and showed it to the driver. He then found a place near a window and soon, all the other seats were taken, with quite a few students having to stand.

But they were all in complete silence.

Marcus was sure that he had never, ever, ever seen a bus in Rome so quiet, especially not one full of young adults starting out.

He managed somehow to suppress a delighted grin. How many of those students were about to face their first day of university with the strongest hangover of their lives? Marcus looked around himself. Well, judging by the amount of people with big, dark glasses and huge travel mugs full of coffee, probably a lot. Well, served them right, the welcome party for the Home Students had lasted much longer than planned and many students had lingered around the gardens between a student residence and the other talking in very loud voices till very late. In comparison, the foreign students like Marcus had behaved like little angels during the International Students Welcome Programme, or at least they had not left the incredible quantity of paper cups around the park.

Well, at least they were biodegradable.



Still, the silence was so strange.

Have I made a mistake in coming to study here? He thought. It didn't make much sense after all to go and study classical archaeology in Britain, especially if you are a born and bred Roman...

He clenched his fists. No, it had been the best idea he had ever had. He only needed to keep smiling through the pain. It was going to get better, right?

It was then that he noticed the guy a little further ahead. He was clutching the handrail with one hand and was quickly writing something on his phone.

Marcus would have recognised him everywhere. It was Esca, his neighbour.

Marcus turned his head around, hoping that Esca had not seen him since no, he had no intention of talking to him. The guy had made it clear that he wanted to be left alone, and Marcus was going to pretend the same.

Finally, the bus arrived at the bus stop and a steady stream of students started to slowly get off.

And each and every one of them thanked the bus driver, who might have grunted something at the first couple, but had since then lost all interest.

Marcus followed suit, saying thanks to the bus driver, because, even though he really wanted to try to say "cheers boss", like he had heard the natives say, it somehow still felt a little stupid on his tongue, while "thank you" was something he had practice since age three, when his mother was still there to teach him the importance of foreign languages.

Marcus shook his head. It was very stupid to think back about a lifetime and a half ago right when he was about to start another.

And yet he hoped, deep down as he wrapped himself against the already chilly air, that both her and his father were proud of the choices he was taking.

He passed near the cemetery (who the hell had the great idea to have a graveyard right next to the university? His Roman sensibilities had shivered the first time he had seen that, as he was absolutely convinced that cemeteries had to be outside the main town) and then turned left, straight up to campus. He looked at his watch. Was there time for another coffee? The answer was technically yes, but coffee on campus cost an arm and a leg and he had already plans to go and meet with Lutorius and the others after the lessons at the Loaded Dog, where they were told drinks were half price that day for freshers.

Could he really spend all that money? No, not really. His uncle was understanding and supportive, but he was quite money savvy and he would have asked for an explanation if Marcus would have needed extra cash.

He couldn't let his caffeine addiction have the better of him.

So, duty bound to enrich his mind with culture, he made his way to the department of Ancient History and Archaeology, on the left side from the road coming up from the bus stop that seemed to cut the campus almost in half. Compared to the rest of the building, like the department Genetics, Geology and English-Lit, it was quite a small building, a very self-contained one floor construction. But that was for the best, right? If the year group was on the smaller side, there was more chance to make a lasting impression.

He entered the building and found himself in a wide lobby. The walls were all covered by big message boards with pictures of the different professors, readers and teaching assistants, plus of some well deserving students who got prizes and publications. Thankfully, it was quiet, with only a young man in jeans and hoodie sitting on the two little couches left there in the waiting area.

Quietly, Marcus took a seat.

‘Excuse me, are you here for the archaeology lesson too?’ he finally asked.

For a moment, the young man looked at Marcus with an expression of profound surprise, almost as if Marcus was wearing a pair of underwear on his head, but then he seemed to get over the shock of human conversation and said:

‘Aye’

And then he said something else. Marcus was sure the guy had said something, after all he had seen his lips moving, but Marcus had not recognised any word.

Was he speaking English or some kind of foreign language?

‘What?’ he said, immediately feeling bad because he had recently figured out that it was rude to just say “What?”, you were meant to say “Pardon me?”.

Anyway, Marcus was now staring at the guy’s lips. Not that he knew how to lip read, but maybe it could help a little.

The guy repeated the sentence exactly as before, but this time Marcus was almost sure to have understood the word “lecturer” and “waiting”.

‘Thanks’ Marcus replied.

Ok, fair enough, let’s wait. Could he use that time to make acquaintances if not friendship with this guy? He looked at him from the corner of his eye. He looked so nervous that Marcus wouldn’t have been surprised to see him collapsing on the floor anyway minute now.

How was it possible that British guys needed to have tons of alcohol in their veins to have the guts to make conversation? Ok, maybe he could move to talk to someone else, as more and more students were coming into the building. He had never really had any difficulties

conversing with people, he was after all most beloved by all the old ladies in his part of Rome, who always seemed to like having a chat with him as they waited for the bus together.

But somehow it seemed extra hard with British people. They seemed to either be drunk, and thus incredibly sweet and touchy feelings (or angry and ready to punch you in the face, depending how it had got to them), or distant but polite, like they said. Polite, well, at least until they noticed his foreign accent, then they just stared at his lips with a frown on their foreheads while they tried to understand a single sound. Ok, right, he had just done that with the tall guy on the couch, but it pissed him off when it happened to him, ok? After years and years of studying the language, it was a little annoying that he was still at that level.

He looked around himself. Did he need to do the same thing as when he was in high school? Did he need to find the right circles?

Marcus immediately stopped his search around the place when he noticed Esca, chatting quite freely with a young man and an older woman.

Marcus shook his head when a surge of anger washed over his chest.

It was stupid, incredibly stupid.

And yet, he was angry. How was it that he was all “no, I can’t possibly talk to you” with Marcus the day before, but now he seemed all nice and relaxed with those people.

And why was even that angry?

Well, rejection stings, ok?

In that very moment, the door of the lecture theatre opened but itself.

‘Uuuuuh, spooky’ Marcus said, automatically, as if Lutorius was next to him and not the spooked Briton. But, to his surprise, the guy chuckled. Maybe there was a small chance for a

decent acquaintance.

'I am Marcus by the way' Marcus said, stretching his hand. Make it or break it, right?

But, luckily, the guy did take his hand and shook it.

'Liathan' he said as they moved to follow the other students

‘Originally from Inverness, but my parents moved early on to Liverpool. You?’

'Rome’

‘Wow’ Liathan replied. He was surely about to add something when the laughs of the other students distracted them.

The lecturer was already in the theatre.

And he was dressed like a Roman legionary.

Wow, Marcus thought. No Italian university professor would have dared so much.

Maybe, after all, this was going to be fun.

Lectures continued till 2pm. Marcus was surprised by how few contact hours they had. Ok that there was the assumption that students were going to spend a lot of time in the library studying their sorrows away but considering all the money he was paying in tuition fees, they could give a little more. But hey, whatever.

Now Marcus had a choice to make: he could either go back home, have a shower, maybe even a nap after all that excitement, and then get ready later to go and meet up with Lutorius and the others, or he could go to the library to study.

And, for as much as the idea of a nap was appealing, duty called once again. After all, it was going to be quite relaxing as he knew that most freshers, strong of the knowledge that the first year didn't count for the final mark, would probably not be spending much time in the library till exam time. Ah, the thought of staying in the library all by himself, surrounded by history books, was exactly like his personal heaven was going to be like.

He went through the turnstiles and started to go up the stairs to the third floor, where most of the humanities books were gathered.

Once he got there, he concentrated on searching for the books on the list the dressed-up professor had given everybody. So, his first essay was going to be on the problems that historians might face when using ancient, primary sources. Perfect, time to take up "A True Story" by Lucian, which at least was funny. Trying to make as little noise as possible, he entered the Silent Zone, a separate part from the rest of the third floor where anyone wishing to study had to stay in silence.

Well, silence. Marcus wasn't entirely sure you could define that as silence, especially if you considered that most of the students working on their laptops were pressing on their keyboards so hard that they were making a racket. It was a miracle the keyboards were not smoking hot already.

One of those crazy students was one Marcus was starting to think was stalking him.

It was Esca.

And, just because life was always very happy to make fun of him, the only available place to sit was right in front of his neighbour.

Well, whatever. Marcus took the books he needed from the shelves and took his seat, after noticing that, right next to Esca's computer, there was a huge Latin to English dictionary,

which shouldn't have come as a surprise. During the lesson, the lecturer had asked all freshers to lift their hands if they had five or more years of experience with ancient languages. Only Marcus and Esca had lifted their hands.

'Wow, for real?' Liathan had asked him, with a mixture of admiration and envy. Marcus smiled at him but had not added anything while he wondered how was it that Esca had so much experience with Latin and Greek. Marcus had gone to the classical studies high school in Rome, where you are taught ancient languages from when you are fourteen and most people have already a smattering of knowledge prior to that. But Esca? If he had understood it right, classical languages were mostly the thing you did if you were some push, upper class kid, and Esca didn't look like a daddy's boy.

Damn curiosity.

Esca hadn't even lifted his eyes from the screen (or maybe he had, in that very English way to look at someone without being seen, because meeting someone's eyes is very dangerous, it could turn you into stone, don't you know?)

But Marcus was not British, and with the excuse that he was a bloody foreigner, he did get another good look at his neighbour. He had seen them right, those amazing, bright eyes.

What he hadn't seen before was the blue tattoo picking out of his dark t-shirt, as he had shed his jacket, considering how hot it was in that room. He couldn't see the design, just a few lines poking out.

Marcus felt his cheeks warm up at the thought that he would have been just so curious to see what those lines were doing on Esca's arm. And chest. Did he have any other tattoos?

'Are you done staring? I mean, I know I am good looking but still' a very irritate whisper brought him back to reality.

Esca was glaring at him from behind the laptop screen. Marcus had never really, fully understood what an icy stare was. How could a stare be icy? But suddenly it was very clear as a cold shiver rushed from his nape all the way down his spine.

‘Sorry’ Marcus replied, lowering his gaze. He opened the book and tried to pay attention.

And before you say anything, he really did try. He looked at the first page, then at the second. He only read half of the third and by that point he realised that he was only letting his eyes run through the pages without really reading.

Shit.

Ok, think. Ok that one didn’t have to necessarily become friends with one’s neighbour, but it would be nice to reach a more decent relation, just so that if Marcus needed a bit of sugar for his coffee, he could ask him. Come on, think. Esca didn’t seem the kind of person prone to panic attacks like Liathan had seem, maybe he could talk to him without risking a rush to the A&E?

‘Look, me and a few friends are going to the Loaded Dog later after the lessons. You can come to if you like’ he said, trying to whisper in the quietest way possible. But he still got tutted by the girl sitting next to him.

Esca bent his head to the side. For a moment he looked at Marcus very carefully.

Was he pondering about the invite?

Damn you Esca, and damn your eyes, he thought, as he tried to look at everything else but his neighbour.

Please say you will come.

‘I am sorry, I am busy this afternoon’

‘With the Latin dictionary?’ Marcus replied, before he could get a grip on that sudden sense of rejection, he had felt grip him.



Gods, stop being such an idiot. What is happening to you?

‘It could be’ the other replied. Esca brought his eyes back to the keyboard, but Marcus didn’t miss the little curve of a smile on Esca’s lips.

‘Did you study Latin at school?’ Marcus asked, trying to keep an eye on the girl next to him. How long was it going to take for her to send an anonymous message to the security guards, those people tasked with going around the library to tell people to shut up, because even the librarians could be bothered anymore.

‘No’ Esca replied.

That cheeky smile was still there.

Was he being mocked?

And why wasn’t he minding this as much as he should?

‘But you lifted your hand earlier’

‘Yes, but the answer to your question is no’ Esca lifted his eyes to meet Marcus’ gaze.

That little curve on his lips was now a full-blown defiant smile.

Beautiful, was the first think Marcus thought, right before someone entered in the Silent Zone to shout:

‘Silence please’

The two of them immediately lowered their heads, as if they had just received a reprimand from an evil teacher, then they looked at each other with amusement in their eyes.

‘For what it’s worth, I really can’t this evening. Thank you though’

Then, after a moment of uncertainty, Esca added:

‘It will be for next time’.

Marcus answered him with a little nod. Maybe it was better that way, after the first day of lesson, a quiet evening with just friends and a few drinks would be good, just what he needed.

Right?

Esca went away first. He would have left without saying bye if Marcus hadn’t lifted his eyes at the right time. Esca made a little nod, half a smile and vanished.

Marcus managed to finish the chapter he was reading and left too.

Ok, it was too early. He was sure that Lutorius didn’t finish his classes till five. Could he go and have a little bit of very early dinner? Maybe a snack? No, he had a lot of food back home and money doesn’t go on trees, right? If he was meant to waste money, he could just waste it later at the pub. So then, what could he do to kill time?

Bloody Esca, he had really affected his concentration. If he could have just not had him right in front of his desk, he could have found his inner peace to hit the ground running with his

studies.

Well, what was done was done. It was his fault really, he should have behaved like a proper first year student, going home and having a nap. Instead, he went down to the ground floor where, right at the entrance of the library, there was a coffee shop, with cute little sofas and decent muffins on sale. He bought a hot chocolate (because, even though it seemed socially acceptable in England to have a latte in the late afternoon, he was still an Italian after all).

Then he took a seat at a little table near the big windows opening on one of the main courtyards in between the uni buildings and, after detangling his headphones, called his uncle back in Rome.

They hadn't chatted in a bit. To be fair, they normally didn't chat much, so Marcus shouldn't have been surprised if the distance between them had increased as the geographical distance had increased. But still, considering that he was paying for his education, he really should be gracious enough to call sometimes.

Bloody duties and expectations.

It took a while (Uncle Aquila was not the best with modern technology, and that was an euphemism) but finally he picked up.

He just got a few pixels of his uncle's face, and the video feed got interrupted.

'Hello? Can you hear me?'

'Yes, I can still hear you uncle'

'Can you hear me?'

Marcus didn't reply, suspecting that there was a little delay in the connection.

'Ah, Marcus, how are you? Everything alright?'

'Yes, yes' and he told him about the lecturer dressed up as a Roman (making his uncle roar with laughter, as he had always found those very British behaviours extremely interesting and funny in equal measures) and of Liathan, with whom, he hoped to have a proper conversation sooner or later, especially considering that now they were in the same Greek and Latin seminar.

'Good luck' his uncle said.

'What do you mean?'

'As far as I know, British students don't study grammar, not even for their language, let alone for dead languages'

'Oh my god, are we going to start from the first declension?'

'Well, yes, probably, but that will make it easy for you, no?'

Well, hopefully, he answered, and he had the final confirmation the day after when he arrived at the seminar with a ferocious headache, after having clearly drunk too many cocktails at the Loaded dog the night before (but how was it his fault if everything was half price for freshers? And how was it his fault if every half an hour his friends were going around the table with new rounds of drinks? Not to mention that shots go down like water, when you get pressed by Lutorius to teach his roommate Cradoc and a new, Japanese student the rudest gestures that the glorious people of modern-day Rome had come up with? Ok that 45% of the Italian language goes through gestures, but still, modern day Romans had a lot of rather promiscuous gestures...)

'So, let's see, Marcus, right?' the seminar tutor said, with a strident voice.

‘What do personal pronouns have to be so funny?’ she asked, having clearly noticed Marcus’ goofy smile at the memory of the night before. She must have been some doctorate level researcher because she was too young to already be a lecturer, surely.

‘Nothing, I am sorry’

‘You are the one with the five-year long experience in Latin, right?’ she asked, frowning.

Marcus nodded.

‘Ok, please stay a moment longer after the lesson’ she said, before turning back to the blackboard that was clearly too big for the miniscule room where they had their seminar.

Marcus exchanged a terrified look with Liathan, who seemed even more scared than him.

At the end of the lesson, the other students, six in total, left, while Liathan said that he would wait outside for him.

‘So’ the teacher said, with a certain gusto. She must have been one of those teachers that enjoyed making their students shiver in fear.

‘I am sorry, this course is probably going to be too easy for you. I was thinking that, if you want, I can give you some extra homework, some more interesting translations perhaps. It could be fun’

Was she trying to convince him or herself?

‘I know that the other boy with experience is with Sergio, and he has already agreed to give him extra translations’

‘Do you know what texts he has given Esca?’ Marcus asked. His interest was suddenly reanimated.

‘No, but I can ask. We could organise it so that you have the same texts. Are you friends?’

‘No, not really, but he is my neighbour’

‘Ok, so, if you can get the text from him for next week, we can use that. In the meantime, I will have a chat with Sergio, and we will agree on a schedule’

‘Perfect’ Marcus said, before smiling, saying goodbye and rushing outside.

‘What did she tell you?’ Liathan asked, when they were far away enough from the room.

‘That she will give me and Esca extra homework’

‘Who is Esca?’ Liathan asked.

For a moment, Marcus found himself thinking that it was unbelievable that Liathan had not noticed Esca yet.

Somehow, Marcus seemed to always be aware of Esca every time they were having lessons together.

‘The other idiot who has confessed to know a bit of Latin’ Marcus replied, already imagining Lutorius’ laughter when he would tell him that he had voluntarily agreed to have extra homework.

Liathan said something incomprehensible.

‘What? No, wait, Pardon?’ Marcus replied, suddenly a little irritated. Why did he always have to ask Liathan to repeat things? If people expected people like Marcus to have a good level of spoken English with a clear accent, the same thing should be expected of the Britons, right? Damn double standards.

Liathan rolled his eyes. Marcus was about to reply when he thought he understood:

‘Well, at least you can make some money out of that. I am sure lots of people might like to have tuitions’

How he had managed to say all those words in that strange blur was still a mystery to Marcus.

Marcus crushed his nails in the palms of his own hands to try and calm him down. What was the point in getting so irritated with a guy who, deep down, was kind of nice? But what could he do, his irritation was growing in his chest since the tutor had mentioned Esca.

And all because, the night before, as he came back half drunk, Marcus had gone near his neighbour’s door, not even sure of what he was going to say if Esca had opened the door. But he had stopped right before knocking, when the noises inside had one clear meaning. No, Esca was not going to come to open the door. Marcus had grinned angrily to himself when he heard the slightly louder moan of a woman.

But the night before it had been a man.

Bisexual, right? he had thought as he went to his room and slammed the door, throwing himself on the bed and falling asleep immediately.

‘Marcus, are you still there?’ Liathan’s voice brought him back to reality.

‘Yes, yes, I’m sorry. What did you say?’

‘That I think I have seen Esca at the first Game Society night. Do you want to join too?’

‘Game Society?’

‘Yes, I subscribed during Freshers week’ Liathan replied, biting his lower lip.

‘It’s a group of students that meet up to play boardgames’

‘Like Scrabble?’

Liathan laughed.

‘Tomorrow there is a pub crawl, do you want to come?’

‘But don’t you have to be a member to join the events’

‘Yes, but I am sure you can become a member there and then, I don’t think it’s such a formal thing.

‘What’s a pub crawl?’

Daniel looked at him as if he was saying some kind of blasphemy.

‘We all go as a group from one pub to the next, drinking and joking’



‘And becoming drunker and drunker’

‘And becoming drunker and drunker’ Liathan replied, who seemed to be so happy just at the idea.

‘Come on, you need to come. It will be your British culture baptism of fire’

‘Oh well, if you put it like that’ Marcus replied, but smiled.

It sounded incredibly scary and weird, but he was going to give it a go.

# The wager Part 1

## Chapter Summary

Marcus wakes up to find a drunk Esca sleeping in the common room.

## Chapter Notes

We delve a little deeper into Marcus' past, with some hits at Esca's.

And things are starting to warm up a little.

Marcus woke up suddenly. He found himself staring at the ceiling, with his heartbeat racing to new levels against his ribcage. He passed the back of his right hand on his forehead, finding it sweaty even though the temperature outside was edging towards three or four degrees Celsius. Feeling restless, he sat up and crumpled the duvet against his chest, trying to hide his face.

Damn.

Damn nightmare. When were they ever going to leave him alone?

He just wanted a bit of peace and quiet, that had been the whole point of leaving Rome behind, right?

And yet, it seemed that his problems were just chasing him, like a pack of angry wolves from the underworld.

You need to talk to someone, he thought to himself. His rational part that was always trying to find a solution for everything. But he didn't want to talk to anybody. Who on earth was going to be bothered to listen to him? When he had moved to live with his uncle after... well, he would have hoped that his uncle would have said something. Anything. But not a word had ever been said between the two of them about what had happened. And he had never mastered the courage to ask him to pay for therapy. Because that is not what manly men do, right? Therapy is for crazy people, and his uncle was one that believed the old ways were better.

Marcus hugged himself a little tighter as he listened to Lutorius snoring away loudly on the air mattress next to his bed.

Thank goodness he was still asleep.

Thank goodness Marcus hadn't screamt at night. It had only happened one night, to be fair, on the first anniversary of his father's passing but he had screamt so loudly in his nightmares that Stephanos, his uncle's live-in carer, had rushed to Marcus' room to check that everything was ok.

Marcus felt himself blush at the memory of the old man trying to comfort him and failing miserably.

That hole in his heart could never be fixed.

He idly wondered if Esca would have come to help him if he had heard him shouting out loud like that.

For as lovely as the thought was in his sleep deprived mind, he shook his head.

It's not going to happen.

Kissing goodbye to all possibilities of going back to sleep (which was a real bugger considering that he didn't have lectures or seminars at all till the afternoon), he quietly stood up and tiptoed out of the room in search of coffee and something to snack on before having a proper breakfast with Lutorius. He entered the blissfully quiet common area and, before slipping through to the kitchenette, he had a quick look in the living room, hoping that his assumption that the place was quiet was indeed right.

He stopped on his feet as he saw that there was someone laying face down on the little, stuffed chairs around the living room table.

It took him less than a second to recognise Esca.

The first thing Marcus thought was that the idiot had drunk himself into oblivion and, once home, he had thrown himself on the chairs.

The second thing Marcus thought was if it was only his impression, or Esca's body wasn't moving like someone in a deep sleep should be? In fact, was his body moving at all? Marcus got closer. He should check he was ok, right?

Move, idiot, he thought as panic started to rush through his veins.

He shook Esca's shoulder as gently as he could.

When Esca's body moved, Marcus sighed loudly.

He was still alive.

Thank fucking Jupiter. Or Mithras. Or whatever.

Esca turned around and opened his eyes immediately, with a murderous, bloodshot shade in them.

‘Good morning’ Marcus said, with half a smile, feeling like he was staring at a very, very angry wolf.

Damn you and your incredibly expressive eyes.

Ok, he had been an idiot to worry like that, but he was glad to see that Esca was still alive.

‘What do you want?’ Esca asked, bringing an arm to cover his eyes as he still lied on the chairs. The clothes he was wearing from the night before were rumpled and his jumper was up enough on his stomach for Marcus to have a peak at Esca abdomen.

What have I done to you, Mithras, for you to punish me so? Marcus thought, trying to shake his thoughts from Esca’s skin.

And yet, the skin of his own hands was burning.

When was the last time he had touched anybody?

‘Nothing’ Marcus replied, crossing his arms to his chest.

‘I was just checking if you were still alive’ he added, finally bringing his gaze back up to Esca’s eyes.

‘What do you care? You are not my mother’ Esca replied with a glare as he, slowly, sat up.

Marcus frowned. The guy certainly had a way to push you with your back against the wall when he wanted to.

‘No, that would be a tad difficult I suppose’ Marcus replied, keen to change the topic from anything even remotely close to family relations.

‘But it would be very inconvenient if you were dead and rotting in our common room. Not to mention a gross waste of a nice body’ he said, before really thinking twice of what he was saying.

As he saw Esca bending his head to the side to study him, he cursed all the gods in the heavens. When would he learn for once that he shouldn’t be allowed to speak before having his morning coffee?

‘A nice body, eh?’ Esca said in a low voice, a cheeky smile appearing on his face.

‘Also, don’t you have lessons today? Seminars?’ Marcus added, changing the subject.

Act natural, don't tease the beast further.

Why was he always such a pathetic idiot in front of Esca?

Not that he had checked when the other language seminar groups were taking place. Esca must have thought the same, because that pleased little smile was starting to turn into a full-blown grin.

'Do you want me to make you some coffee?' Marcus asked, finally changing the subject after noticing the bags under Esca's eyes.

Who have you spent the night with?

'No, thank you' the other, who still wasn't giving any sign of wanting to move any time soon, replied.

'Are you sure? It is not a problem' Marcus said.

'No, thank you' Esca replied, shaking his head and still looking at him like "I might bite you".

'Let's do it like this. I was going to make some for me and my friend anyway. You can, if you want, take some. Sounds like a plan?'

Esca watched him for a moment, uncertain. Then, without saying a word, he nodded.

Marcus smiled, satisfied with himself and his strategy as he retreated in the kitchen.

The Brits would have really preferred the worst tortures than accepting anything perceived as pity charity.

And he had the strong impression that Esca was particularly bad at that.

Why was that?

What was in his past that made him so?

Did he have the same gruesome past as him?

Get a grip, Aquila. Not everybody has a shitty past like yours and nobody wants to hear about your past trauma and fears. Nobody. All people want is to laugh at you. Little weird you.

Lutorius appeared in the kitchen, still in his pyjamas but he had put on his big university hoodie, covering half of his face with the wide hood.

'Why are you awake already? We are freshers, we are supposed to stay asleep till like, ten at least' he asked him, yawning as he watched Marcus putting the coffee machine on the hob.

'Let's just say I am cursed' Marcus replied. He liked Lutorius, he really did. But he didn't trust him enough to tell him about his past.

He didn't trust anybody

'Ah' Lutorius replied, not having registered much of what Marcus had told him but his hands seemed to be much more awake than his body, as he started to fill up the three bowls Marcus had put out with the Cheerios. He didn't even ask why there were three bowls instead of just two.

'Bring the milk' he told him, as he moved to the living room.

'Ah, I am sorry, I didn't want to disturb' Marcus heard him saying to Esca, who presumably answered something at such a low volume that he couldn't hear him.

He didn't hear any of them say anything else to each other as Marcus waited for the pot to boil. But it wasn't a big surprise. For as chatty as Lutorius was, he didn't chat much that early in the morning with people he didn't know. And he could only imagine that it was the same for Esca.

Esca.

He was stupidly glad that he hadn't changed his mind and left.

Finally the pot boiled and Marcus filled the cups and placed them on a tray he had had to disinfect all over because the last person to use it had left it covered in some kind of sticky substance he didn't want to know the origin of. He had also thrown in three, slightly stale croissants. Why? Don't really ask, Marcus wasn't entirely sure himself.

Ah, he was sure alright. If it had been only Lutorius and himself, he would have kept to just milk and cereals.

But Esca looked hungry.

Was he eating alright?

As he put the tray in the table, he left the cup and the croissant on the tray. If Esca needed anything else, he just needed to say.

'So, what kind of hours do you have today?' he asked Lutorius, and the two started to chat between themselves, as Marcus kept studying Esca from the corner of his eye.

Lutorius understood the situation pretty quickly, because, as he chatted about how they would have needed to come up with some drinking game based on the second movie of the Lord of the Rings for him to even consider the idea of watching the second movie, his lips had curved in a mischievous smile.

During their chats, without saying a word, Esca had got up from his corner and had moved to sit next to Marcus. Before stretching his arms to take what was offered, Esca murmured a quiet “thank you”, in such a barely audible voice that for a moment Marcus thought he had imagined it.

Marcus was about to reply when he realised that, maybe, the best way to say “you are welcome” to Esca was to not say anything at all.

Slowly, as they finished breakfast, Esca seemed to relax a little and joined in the movie related conversation, showing off some strong opinions of his own.

If anybody had asked him later to repeat anything about those opinions, Marcus would not have been able to recall anything.

His mind had gone blank, his brain replaced by complete, static noise as he just listened to the sound of Esca’s voice.

He got back to himself when Lutorius kicked him in the shin. Marcus looked at his friend only to see him bending his head to the side, towards Esca, with a Cheshire cat’s grin on his face.

Finally getting back to his senses, Marcus took that chance to ask him about the translation, because he really didn’t want to have to face that gorgon of a teacher without having done the homework he had agreed to do.

‘What extra translations has your tutor assigned you?’

‘How do you know about my extra translations?’ Esca replied, frowning. His shoulders hunched a little forward.

Marcus didn’t know what to say for a moment. How was it that whatever he said to Esca he seemed to jump like a hurt, angry animal?

Lutorius came to his rescue, by bursting out in his famous, wall vibrating laugh.

‘You are certainly the suspicious guy, aren’t you?’ Lutorius said, before taking one, huge sip of coffee. He brought the cup down, wiped his face with the back of his right hand and added:

‘He is just another nerd, addicted to ancient stuff like you. His tutor was just lazier than yours and is piggybacking off your assignment’

Marcus wouldn’t have been able to express it in a better way.

‘Would it be alright if I make a copy of it? We could work at it together if you want’ he said.

Why was he not meeting Esca’s eyes?

‘I don’t work well in groups’ Esca replied, straight to the point.

Oh, well. Great.

Marcus was about to ask him if he could at least make a copy of the homework when he saw Esca bite his lower lip, blushing ever so slightly.

‘But we could sit together again in the Silent Zone and work there. I can make a copy for you’

Some demon must have taken possession of Marcus body and soul, because then he heard himself saying:

‘Sounds fair. That way you can ask me for help if you get stuck’

Esca’s eyes widened in surprise, before letting space for the cockiest grin Marcus had ever seen in his life.

‘Ah, confident, aren’t you?’

‘Well, my...my native language is a direct descent of Latin. I got an advantage’ he mumbled, repeating in his mind the first and second noun declension on loop as he tried to stump out one very clear thought that appeared in his brain.

I want to see you smile again like that.

‘Yes, but you need to write the translation in English for your tutor, and English is my language’

‘Are you putting my English language skills in doubt?’ Marcus replied, crossing his arms to his chest.

‘No, I wouldn’t dare, Roman’ Esca said, stressing the word Roman like it was some insult.

But the cocky smile was there again.

Gods.

‘But I wage that you will be the one asking me for help before the end of the day’ Esca added.

‘Wager accepted’

‘Wait, what are you wagering?’ Lutorius asked, his elbows on the table and all his fingertips touching each other. He only needed to say “Excellent”.

Damn you Lutorius, I thought you were my friend!

‘Are you going to the pub crawl tonight?’ Marcus asked without a second thought.

‘What, the Game Society pub crawl?’ Esca asked, frowning.



‘Yes’ Marcus said, trying to pull off the strongest poker face he could.

‘Didn’t imagine you liked games’

‘There are many things you don’t know about me’ he said, before taking the longest sip of coffee he could without burning his tongue. He had meant to say just yes, and that maybe his knowledge of ancient roman military would come in handy for some of those board games.

He hadn’t meant for it to sound sexy. At all.

But Esca’s cheeky grip was back.

‘Well then. If you ask me for help, you will buy me a drink during the crawl’

‘And if it is you?’

‘Well’

Marcus was not expecting Esca to pause.

Marcus was definitely not expecting Esca’s gaze to stop for just a moment too long on Marcus’s lips.

Esca opened his mouth for a moment. Marcus watched him take a breath before collecting himself quickly and say:

‘I will buy you one’

One. Two. Three drinks. I hope you will spend the night drinking with me.

‘Deal’ Marcus said, stretching his hand out.

Esca grabbed it and shook it.

Marcus felt Esca’s hand shake just like his.

They stared at each other a moment too long

Rosa, rosae, rosae, rosam, rosa, rosa.

Esca shook his head first.

‘I need to go and get ready. I will see you later’

Marcus and Lutorius stayed in silence for a moment.

‘You like him’ Lutorius finally said.

‘What?’

‘That guy. Esca’ Lutorius said, with a quick movement of his head.

‘No, no, absolutely not’ Marcus replied.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

# The wager Part 2

## Chapter Summary

Marcus and Esca meet again in the library.

A very important book is borrowed.

## Chapter Notes

I should have the pub crawl chapter (when things will spicy up a little XD) up on Sunday.

Esca didn't appear for their lecture.

Fine, ok, after all the lecturer for that specific module was a guy with the most soporific voice, so maybe Esca had thought, if he was going to fall asleep anyway, he might as well stay home. Marcus couldn't fully blame him.

But he wasn't anywhere to be seen around lunch time either.

Not that you could ever be sure of something like that in the students union, considering the sheer amount of students sitting everywhere, even on the floor when there was not enough space to sit down and the weather outside was too rubbish to even consider sitting under a tree.

'Oh, you miss him already?' Lutorius said, starting to munch on his very overpriced panini as they sat down in a booth in the students' union.

Marcus looked at anything but his friend, knowing, even without seeing it, that he had his stupid, Cheshire cat smile on, probably growing bigger and bigger by the second, as Marcus felt his cheeks warming up.

Why was it that Marcus could not hide any emotion away? He sincerely hated that about himself, how everything he thought appeared on his face. It made playing poker extremely difficult.

'Shut up' Marcus replied, immediately on the defensive.

He really, really didn't want to talk about it. He felt stupid enough by himself, he didn't need Lutorius to "mettere il dito nella piaga", stick his finger in the wound, like they used to say

back home.

It was stupid anyway to even think about it.

Esca had made it abundantly clear that he didn't want to be friends with him, that he wanted to keep to himself and not get involved with his neighbour.

And yet, after that morning, after the whole breakfast sharing and that little, whispered thank you, Marcus hoped that things maybe could change.

Stop hoping. Hope is for fools, isn't it? he thought, already feeling his body tensing.

'You know that there is nothing wrong with this, right? It's kind of cute'

At that point Marcus did lift his gaze to meet Lutorius and shot him the coldest glare he could manage.

Lutorius' face relaxed a little in an expression of pity Marcus could really do without.

'Seriously, he probably just went back to sleep or something. He seemed pretty out of it this morning'

Marcus just nodded. Yes, that was the most likely scenario.

And yet it stank.

He was about to say with the most petulant tone he could master that the two of them had a wager to settle when Lutorius asked:

'What do you like in him anyway? He seems so...well, angry'

'I don't know' Marcus replied, hiding his face behind a huge mug of coffee, feeling suddenly a little shy. He never liked talking about his feelings with other people, and he suspected that, no matter what he was going to say to Lutorius, his friend was just going to ascribe his attraction for Esca to his fit body.

How would he explain to Lutorius that he thought Esca, amongst everybody, could perhaps understand the void in his chest?

Rationally he wasn't sure, of course he wasn't. He knew virtually next to nothing about his neighbour, besides that he had a Celtic name and that he really, really didn't like mornings.

But there was something in Esca's eyes, something that had resonated with him ever since he had barged into the young man's room.

He had the strong suspicion that a dark, gaping void was hurting right in the middle of Esca's chest, mirroring his own.

Esca was angry, just like Marcus was, deep down, terrified.

Pain calls on pain, right?

He said goodbye to Lutorius, who had a few more classes that afternoon, and, resignedly, he walked up to the third floor of the library, sneaking into the Silent Zone, which seemed quieter than normal, which was fair enough, who was going to the library on Friday evening?

As he was about to go in search of a few more books he had selected from the reading list, the skin on his neck started to prickle.

Someone was staring at him.

Esca was there, sitting in the same place where he had seen him before, his laptop still in front of him and a big, heavy duty pair of Bluetooth headphones on his head.

But this time he was staring at him. Waiting. His face, all angles and steel, didn't show any emotions. Was he happy to see him? Was he annoyed?

Marcus watched him take his headphones off.

Esca's eyes were still on him.

Marcus felt himself blush.

Stop looking at me like that, he thought, feeling completely out of place.

But he forced himself to move. This time there was a seat free right next to Esca, which Marcus didn't know if it was better or immensely worse.

'I didn't see you in lecture' he said, as he kept his focus on his rucksack, taking out his notepad and the textbook he was still finishing, a Mary Beard special. Gods, he loved that woman.

Esca didn't answer immediately.

'Yes, sorry'

For a moment he went silent again. Then, as if he decided that Marcus deserved an extra bit of explanation, he added:

'I fell back to sleep and arrived on campus a bit late. Didn't want to disturb you know who'

Marcus smiled. Yes, the sleep inducing lecturer would only speak up when a student would arrive late and he was known for asking you very strange questions in Latin, which most students wouldn't be able to answer anyway, making for a very uncomfortable and humiliating scene.

But, surely, of all people, Esca could have been able to stand up to the challenge.

'I'm surprised you of all people are scared of Mr Sanders' Marcus replied, looking at Esca from the corner of his eyes, curious to see if he could get another glimpse of Esca's competitive grin.

'I am not scared of him' Esca replied immediately, with a determinate tone in his voice.

And there it was. Without even realising it, Marcus smiled too.

'I just don't want to look like a massive snob in front of the others. Most people are already struggling with Latin and Greek as it'

'I didn't imagine you would be one to worry about what others think of you' Marcus said, feeling quite impressed at what Esca had said. Why would he care about people they even barely talked to?

'There are many things you don't know about me' Esca replied.

'Anyway. This is the text. Aeneid' Esca finally said something.

'Classic' Marcus said, trying to catch his breath as he took the photocopied page.

And a classic it was. Esca's tutor had selected a passage of the epic poem about Nisus and Euryalus, two friends on the side of the Trojan hero Aeneas who ended up dying tragically fighting side by side.

He scanned the page for a moment, before turning back to Esca, catching him still staring at him.

Stop looking at me.

Esca then frowned, mumbled something about starting to work and put his headphones back on.

Marcus relaxed a little and put himself to work as well.

From time to time, he looked at Esca from the corner of his eyes.

And, from time to time, he caught Esca do the same.

For a moment, he was totally and completely happy.

And then, right when his fogged-up mind had finally concocted a clever enough comment on the linguistic choices by Vergil and how well they conveyed the feelings of pain, Esca's phone, that had been abandoned near the laptop, vibrated. Esca grabbed it incredibly quickly, but Marcus had had enough time to read the name "Cottia" on it.

Who was Cottia?

Clearly someone important thought, judging by how red in the face Esca had turned as he scrolled through what looked like a very long message. Marcus tried to pretend that he was not fussed, that it was none of his business after all, because really it wasn't, for as much as he would have wanted to ask who this person was.

Esca then started to put his things away.

'I am very sorry, I need to go now'

'Oh, ok' Marcus replied.

Was this Cottia one of the people he had heard in Esca's room?

Gods, Esca looked even more mortified than he himself did.

'Are you still going tonight?' he asked, breathless, as if he had just finished running a marathon.

Where are you going? What is going on?

Marcus nodded.

'Ok then, let's say that I forfeit the challenge and you win. A drink for you tonight is on me'

'Oh, well' he was about to say that it wasn't necessary, that they could just postpone the wager and then go for a drink another time, but then Esca said:

'Ah, I almost forgot'

And he took out of his bag a book, a paperback novel by the look of it. He passed it to Marcus with a look that, for a moment, took Marcus' breath completely away: Esca was

blushing furiously, the red clashing even more dramatically with his pale skin, and he seemed to be taking deep breaths.

But his eyes were stern, glacial almost. As they looked at Marcus, they seemed to openly challenge him and say, “if you say anything, I will fight you’.

Marcus couldn’t take that look anymore and lowered his own eyes to the book. The title, in big, golden letters was “The Eagle of the Ninth”.

‘What...’

‘To say thank you for this morning, I want to lend you this. Just read it. Then we can talk about it another time’

And just like that he was gone, rushing out of the Silent Zone, leaving Marcus with the two tragic lovers and a frigging passive periphrastic he had no idea how to translate decently.

Damn grammar.

Before going back to the text, Marcus had a closer look at the novel, as he had never heard about it. The volume looked quite old, the pages were more yellow than white and there was a stain here and there.

He smiled when he saw the names of the main characters. Esca and Marcus. Ah, what a crazy coincidence.

Then, almost accidentally, his eyes fell on the first page, where someone, with a nice, curvy penmanship had written:

‘We will meet again beyond the sunset. Always.

Dad’

Marcus closed the novel immediately, feeling his heart pound in his chest. He felt, maybe wrongly, that he had stumbled on something incredibly private.

And, for a moment, Marcus felt immensely honoured that Esca had lent him that book.



# The Pub Crawl

## Chapter Summary

One night. Two boys. A lot of alcohol.

## Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay.

Enjoy!

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

After finishing the translation, Marcus went back home to get ready for the evening. He took a shower, a long hot shower, trying to wash away everything that was running around in his mind.

So many thoughts. So many flashes of Esca staring at him. Of Esca looking at him when he thought he wasn't looking.

Those eyes. What were those eyes hiding?

Marcus felt a shiver rush through his body. A pleased little smile appeared on his face.

Whatever they were hiding, they were looking at him.

It felt new. And exciting like nothing else he had experienced before.

He had never felt like this before, not even when the first signs of puberty were starting to kick in, because, compared with his classmates that were not talking about anything else than girls, he had never had time for such frivolities.

There was only a sense of duty that crashed everything else out of his mind.

There was his need to get himself sorted as soon as possible because, without any parents and with an old, ailing uncle, there is not much one can do but focus and be the best you can get.

Be ready for when the next tragedy will fall on you.

But now it was different, right? This first year of university was a new lease on life.

Now he had the time.

Now Esca's eyes felt like freedom.

But, as soon as he felt the excitement grow stronger again inside of him, his darkest fears rushed back.

Stop fantasising. The more you dream, the harder you will fall, he told himself.

You will never be worth anybody's time, he thought, the distant echo of those voices that were persecuting him behind his back.

The son of a fraud. The son of a failure.

You will never amount to anything in life anyway, no matter what you try to do.

Marcus lifted his face to the strong jet of water.

He was better left alone in the darkness.

After the shower, he put on a pair of jeans and the best shirt he could find, and off he went.

Only to come back in, grab his warmest coat and his lovely red scarf.

He had agreed with Liathan to meet at the bus stop near campus before walking together back to the students' union, where they were going to meet the rest of these people from the Game Society to then finally fit the bars.

And there Liathan was, wearing just the official t-shirt of the event and a pair of jeans. Even though his hands were quite red, he didn't seem too bothered by the cold. When he spotted Marcus crossing the road, he waved and rushed towards him.

'Come on, we are late' he said

'Well, hi to you too' Marcus replied. He was actually ten minutes early, Marcus never arrived late.

'Hi, hi' the other replied, buzzing away with energy.

'Are you alright?'

'Yes, yes, I just want to introduce you to people before we are off. Let's go.'

He wasn't kidding. When they joined with the rest of the group, an incredible series of introductions started, to the point that Marcus asked himself why was Liathan even taking all that care, considering that Marcus was never, ever going to remember all those names.

And then everything, suddenly, made sense when Liathan introduced him, aka Samantha, a beautiful girl who was fully aware of her grace. She was wearing the same t-shirt that Liathan

had put on, but one could tell that, under the shirt, there was a very short dress. Marcus suspected that the t-shirt wasn't going to stay put for long. To be fair to the girl, she was gracious enough to shake his hand and told him he was more than welcome to join their society. She was about to go back to her group when Liathan stopped her and tried to restart the conversation, his eyes shining as if he was looking at the most incredible treasure. She smiled back and answered appropriately, but her stiffened up shoulders were hint enough that she was a little uncomfortable. Was Marcus supposed to save her and bring his friend back to reality, because he clearly didn't have a chance with her?

Well, yes, he was supposed to.

Did he do it?

For once in his life, Marcus decided not to do the honourable thing and let the lady fight for herself. To be fair, she looked strong enough to deal with a nerd like Liathan while he looked around trying to spot Esca.

He wasn't there. He kept on looking and looking, after all there were some many faces all around him.

Idiot. If Esca was there you would recognise him immediately.

Marcus smiled sourly to himself. It was starting to feel like he was dealing with an elusive, wild cat.

Anyway, whatever, he could still have fun with these nerds, no? He followed the gang to the Loaded Dog, with its low lights and cosy atmosphere, which felt nice, it was his home turf after all, after all the evenings spent there with Lutorius and the others.

And, just like all those evenings, the volume grew louder and louder. And the amount of colourful shots grew and grew.

Everybody was getting louder, even Liathan, who normally spoke so quietly was laughing aloud to the stupidest jokes Marcus had ever heard, even though Marcus himself was laughing his head off too.

And that was only the first pub.

After about forty minutes, Sam, freed from the stupid pub crawl t-shirt and with a megaphone she had gotten the gods only knew were, shouted:

'Gamers!'

Raucous laughter.

'Finish your drinks that we leave in ten minutes'

'Well, down it fresher' Liathan said, pointing at the pint right in front of Marcus.

It was still completely full, Marcus had literally just got it from the counter.

And, somehow, this didn't scare him like it would normally do.

'Challenge accepted' he said, lifting his glass, pretending to make a toast before starting to drink as fast as he could, not caring much about the little rivulet running down his chin.

For Mithra's sake, how much beer was still there? he thought, as he kept his eyes on Liathan and the other guys that had stopped to look at the foreign fresher making a spectacle of himself.

What would your uncle going to think?

He was about to give up when he finally finished the pint. He then slammed the glass on the table and roared like a lion among the cheers of the others.

'Very impressive for a foreigner'

'Well done' some of them said.

For some reason that his sober self wouldn't have been able to explain, Marcus felt incredibly proud for those comments and for the pat on the shoulder someone gave him.

'Let's go, it's time'

'Yes, off to the WalkAbout'

'WalkAbout?' Marcus asked, who had been sure that, by then, he knew all the pubs, bars and clubs in town.

'Yes, the one on London Road. Or Granby Street. Can't remember' someone said, before bursting out laughing.

In all of that, where was Liathan?

'Anyway, you down it well, for a foreigner'

'Where did you say you are from?'

'Italy' he replied, knowing that, on a few occasions, when he had said Rome, he had seen quite a few blank stares.

'Ah, is it true that you eat pizza the whole time?'

'No, no, it's pasta they eat'

'Wait, how did you say it.... wait...ah! Ciao Bella!'

The three guys kept on laughing at a ridiculously loud tone.

Marcus tried to smile at laughs.

It was funny after all, right?

No, not really.

Tried to keep the memory of other laughs locked back in his mind.

They had been funny too, right?

Even less so, he thought, as he clenched his fists, planting his nails in his palm to try and ground himself.

What do you want to say to people like this, anyway?

Was he ever going to not be a national stereotype for people the moment he would say where he was from?

‘Cut it out idiots’ said a voice that Marcus was getting to know too well. Esca had appeared out of nowhere. Under the streetlights, Marcus noticed Esca’s blushing cheeks. It was cold that night.

‘Shut up Esca’ one of the guys said, changing the subject already as they walked down the road with the rest of the group.

Esca though didn’t move. He didn’t join the others.

Marcus didn’t follow them either. Feeling his guts making somersaults in his stomach, he took a step closer to Esca.

Esca, who, as Marcus approached, was keeping his gaze to Marcus’ lips.

‘Thank you for the rescue’ he managed to say.

The others by now had moved forward a lot and soon they would have to run to catch up with them.

But Marcus had no intention of joining them if there were any other options on the table.

‘No problem’ Esca replied, taking one step forward, entering arrogantly in Marcus’ personal space.

Marcus stayed perfectly still, his muscles completely paralysed.

Fear? Maybe. Self-doubts and insecurities? Of course.

Excitement?

Through the roof.

‘You came’ Marcus heard himself say.

‘Yes’ Esca said, his voice barely audible above the traffic around them.

Silence. Esca took a deep breath before adding:

‘I am sorry I am late’

‘No worries’ Marcus replied immediately.

‘Look’ Esca said, taking one more step.

He slipped his frozen hands in Marcus’ ones, making him shiver, but Marcus didn’t bat an eyelid.

He was too scared that if he even closed his eyes for a moment, Esca would disappear.

‘Would you like to’

‘Yes’ Marcus replied, breathlessly.

He had not even allowed Esca to finish the sentence. He didn’t care.

He watched Esca lower his eyes, smile in that barely-there manner he had when he was embarrassed only to raise his eyes again, looking straight at him before say:

‘Come’

They didn’t say a word to each other on the journey back to the student halls. Not that Marcus would have been able to hear, let alone understand, a word, considering the static noise in his mind.

They didn’t look at each other.

Esca sat near the window, his face completely turned to look outside, while Marcus tried to keep busy with his phone, going from one window to the next without really reading anything, but he needed to keep his hands busy, hoping that his heart would stop threatening to jump out of his chest.

You don’t deserve happiness, he thought.

Shut up.

Once they were finally back in front of their rooms, Esca surprised him by saying:

‘Are you still sure?’

Esca, that same Esca with the grumpy morning face and the cheeky, confident grin when it came to his language skills, was standing there, right in front of their rooms, trembling. Marcus smiled. Somehow, seeing Esca so anxious made him relax.

‘I am’ he said, taking Esca’s hand and squeezing it.

Esca avoided his eyes as he nodded and opened the door, letting Marcus in.

## Chapter End Notes

Please note that next chapter will be explicit, but you will be able to skip it, you just need to know that things will get spicy but not necessarily romantic.

# Esca's Room

## Chapter Summary

The boys share the night after the pub crawl in Esca's room.

And some revelations are made without words.

## Chapter Notes

Please note that this chapter can mostly be skipped if you are uncomfortable with the erotic component in it.

There is only one tiny aspect that might be necessary to know future chapters- please see end notes.

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

What the hell was he doing? Esca thought, as he slowly closed the door behind him. The cold metal of the door handle was almost painful against his feverish skin. He didn't turn immediately to face the enemy, as his breathing was feeling too laboured to risk it.

This situation was trouble. Serious, serious trouble.

Before leaving for his first year at university, he had made a promise to himself that he was not, under any circumstances, going to create bonds of any sort with people. Because people leave. People die, go away or simply disappear. And they leave you to mop up after them and with a bleeding heart to top it all.

Esca didn't need people.

For all he cared, they could all go and fuck off the face of the planet. He could fend for himself.

He definitely didn't need the fleeting friendship of some first-year students.

He had Cottia's friendship already, and that was already scary enough for how deep it went.

But now he had Marcus standing in his bedroom, only a few steps away from him in his own, carefully empty space. He could feel his eyes on the skin on his neck, heating it up while the rest of his body was shivering in cold fear.



While his hands were itching to touch that warm body in the room.

That warm body with a kind soul in it.

‘Esca, are you’

Don’t ask me questions, he thought and, before Marcus could say anything, before Esca could either talk himself out of this or try to convince himself that this was, after all, just a one night stand to satisfy an itch that had not let him sleep properly for a week, he covered the distance between the two of them, cupping Marcus’ face with both his hands and kissing him with a searing, violent kiss.

Marcus’ body went completely still for a moment as Esca pressed his lips against his.

Please, please, please, do something, Esca thought, as his hands moved down Marcus’ face to his neck and powerful, broad shoulders.

And, right as Esca was pushing his lips once more against the Roman’s, Marcus finally, finally moved, passing his arms around Esca’s waist.

A simple gesture, and yet Esca found himself moaning, as he rubbed himself against the other.

Gods, he was already so hard, like some kind of schoolboy that could hardly keep it in his pants.

It was all the stupid Roman. Esca had the strange feeling that this whole mess in his head had started right on that first day, when he had entered in the room with the coffee mugs and a stupid, sleepy smile on his face.

Only to become even worse, when he had shown him the simple kindness of shared food and drinks.

Stupid, stupid Roman.

And stupid Esca too. He should not have brought Marcus into his orbit. He didn’t deserve the pain it would bring him.

Was it ok to be selfish for once in his life, if the price was to hurt someone else? No, it wasn’t.

And yet he couldn’t stop.

Not when Marcus, with slow, but certain gestures, was touching his face, neck and back and, finally, lifted his jumper just enough to place one of his broad, warm hands on the skin of his back, dragging him so impossibly close to his body.

Esca was sure he was going to self-combust soon. His body arched against Marcus', rubbing his erection against the Roman's.

Who was excited as much as he was.

'Do you want me to stop?' Marcus asked, his voice low and hoarse as he seemed to try to keep himself rational, even though he, automatically and probably unconsciously, had started to rub himself against Esca's erection, causing sparks of pleasure to fly around in Esca's body.

'Don't you dare' Esca replied, as he copied Marcus' gestures and slipped his shirt out of his trousers.

But he couldn't limit himself to just the simple touch of his hand on the other's skin.

He was not a patient man.

So, effortlessly, without Marcus putting up any sort of fight, he took off the Roman jumper and shirt, leaving him bare from the waist up.

Gods, he knew he was attractive, he had suspected it since that very first moment, but right there and then, broad shoulders and muscular chest, it was a completely different story. Esca looked and looked, enjoying the look of his darker skin, of his nipples crinkling up in the cold room. Esca bit down his lower lip as he felt his member straining even more in his trousers.

'Dare you to touch' Marcus said.

Esca looked up at the other's face, and his heart, for a moment, was on the brink of giving up all hopes to keep his body going.

Marcus was trying to smile that smug grin he had seen on him in the morning, when it was all a competition on who had the best grasp on a stupid, dead language and all. But his eyes weren't smiling with him.

He seemed unsure. His shoulders curving inwards under Esca's gaze.

Did he not know how handsome he was?

Without a word, Esca, fighting to slow his own body down, placed his right hand, palm open, on Marcus' chest, right above his heart.

Marcus sighed loudly as he arched under Esca's touch, hoping for more.

His breathing faltering, Esca lifted his eyes to Marcus.

They were both shaking.

Gently, Esca passed his other hand around the side of Marcus' neck and, gently, kissed him again, taking his time to feel Marcus' reaction. To enjoy the sounds of his quiet moans. He opened up his mouth and was delighted when Marcus opened his and gave him access.

Then Marcus tugged at Esca's jumper.

'Want to see you' he said, his voice shaking and his accent thickening.

You don't, he wanted to reply. You shouldn't see this, his fears shouted in Esca's head.

But his body acted on autopilot and, without a second thought, he stripped himself of his jumper.

The jumper he had always kept on with other partners.

He was not a patient man. No. But he was brave and angry, so he didn't take long to finally face Marcus. Face the worry expression he was definitely going to see.

But Marcus' face was not worried. It was not grossed out. He was just looking, taking in all of Esca's body.

All the scars peppering his chest that had always prevented him from enjoying the summer properly.

All the tattoos on his shoulder.

Esca was shaking, but didn't lower his gaze, challenging Marcus to act.

And the Roman, true to what he had shown of himself till then, took action, covering the distance between them and showing the bravery and kindness Esca was starting to associate

with him.

Marcus didn't ask anything as he gently stroke his tattoos, following the designs and the letters with his fingertips.

Esca watched him as the skin under Marcus' hands was left burning. Aching to be touched again.

Marcus didn't ask any questions as he knelt in front of Esca and proceeded to kiss the largest scar.

Esca should have told him to stop, but his voice was long gone.

Marcus didn't leave Esca's eyes as he, slowly, unfastened Esca's belt and took it off.

Marcus placed a kiss on Esca's erected member right before lowering his trousers and underwear, leaving him completely naked and exposed, with a leaking cock and shaking legs.

When Marcus' warm, broad hand finally wrapped around his member, Esca's voice came back with a rush.

'Fuck' he said, as his back arched and the lower part of his body started to move automatically, trying to match Marcus' slow but relentless rhythm causing waves of pleasure to wash over him.

'Yes' he heard Marcus' voice only distantly through the static noise in his mind.

Marcus soon seemed to figure out that Esca enjoyed it most when he touched him from right underneath the head, upwards.

But he couldn't expect Esca to be able to stand on his own legs as he continued on that terrifying, magnificent torture.

'Wait' Esca managed to say.

'Sorry, did I do something wrong?' Marcus replied, immediately stopping his ministrations and creating distance between them far too wide for Esca's desires.

Esca wanted to kiss him again and to shout at him for being such an idiot.

'No, of course not. But I do have a perfectly functioning bed. It would be great to use it if you don't want me collapsing on you'

Marcus smiled, true and bright and fearless this time as he pushed Esca on the bed.

'I took my top off earlier. It's only fair you take your trousers off too now' he said, trying his best to sound cheeky and only sounding needy.

Marcus hesitated for a moment, but then, without a word, complied, finally releasing his thick, straining member.

Esca licked his lips as an extremely pleasant thought entered his mind.

And then he saw it, the long, angry scar on Marcus' leg.

What happened to you?

For the first time in forever, Esca saw in Marcus' eyes the same insecurities he knew shone in his eyes too.

But, at least for that night, he knew what to do.

Esca lifted himself from the bed and, just like Marcus had done a few moments before, knelt in front of him and, gently, touched that angry line and kissed it.

'Esca' he heard Marcus moaning loudly.

Neither of them could take that gentle dance anymore.

Esca lifted himself up again and, taking charge, he was the one now to push Marcus on the bed, the top part of his heavy body on the mattress while his legs were outside.

Esca opened them wide before kneeling between them.

'Esca, you don't have to'

'I want to' he said, before planting a kiss on the tip of Marcus' member.

Slowly, he took it all in, all the way to the root, his nose hitting Marcus' dark curls down there.

It was hot, heavy and hard.

It stretched Esca's mouth.

It tasted like salt.

Esca loved it.

As an even louder moan from Marcus vibrated to Esca's very core, he took himself in hand and started to stroke himself at the same rhythm he was applying to Marcus.

Slow and relentless, like Marcus had started on him only a few moments prior.

At least, till Marcus tangled his hand in Esca's hair as he tried to impose a quicker rhythm with his thighs.

'Esca' Marcus moaned again as he arched his back.

Gods. This man was going to be the death of him.

‘I am close’ Marcus said.

So what? Esca would have said if not otherwise engaged.

He was going to taste it, no matter what Marcus was going to think of it.

‘Esca’

Marcus came first, spurting inside his mouth.

And Esca drank it, as he listened to Marcus’ rugged breath.

Esca came only a few moments later, his body collapsing under the weight of his orgasm.

## Chapter End Notes

In this chapter, Marcus and Esca see each other naked and learn of each other's scars.

# Cottia

## Chapter Summary

After their night together, things don't go exactly as Marcus expected.

And, one quiet evening, he receives an unexpected visit.

## Chapter Notes

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

Marcus started to stir gently out of sleep when an impudent ray of sunshine filtering through the not properly closed blackout curtains hit his eyelids.

But he didn't open his eyes immediately, enjoying for a moment longer the warm, soft feeling of the duvet.

And of the naked body lying next to him.

Suddenly, flashes of the night before flooded his mind.

Esca. Esca had come to find him.

Esca had taken care of him in the most unbelievable ways.

Marcus smiled as he felt a blush burning his cheeks.

There was a lot of unsaid stuff between them. And yet he was happy. Happy physically, because he hadn't been with someone in such a long time. Happy emotionally, because it was clear to him that his impression of Esca as someone that could understand him to a deeper level than others was confirmed.

He felt like a complete, cheesy idiot when the strong desire to wake Esca up and have a chat and maybe a repeat of the breakfast from the day before washed over him.

Was Esca awake already? He wasn't entirely sure. Esca was with his back at him, his breathing was still quite slow, as if he was asleep.

And yet, now that he was paying a little bit more attention to it, Esca's body, so close to him, felt tense.

Oh, he was definitely awake.

Without thinking, Marcus bent his head a little to plant a kiss on Esca's back.

But that sweet gesture, that in Marcus' head would have been the start of a nice, gentle make out session, had the completely opposite effect.

Esca's shoulders stiffened up further.

Esca had been tensed, but for all the wrong reasons.

'Get out'

'What?' Marcus asked. Had he heard that half whisper, right? His mind was still a blur from the lack of coffee and the overabundance of alcohol from the night before, so he wouldn't have been surprised if his mind had played a trick on him.

'Get out' Esca repeated, this time his voice was loud and clear. He was still giving his back to Marcus, his body shaking ever so slightly.

'Esca' Marcus said, immediately then feeling ashamed of the pitiful tone in his voice. And yet this sudden change in Esca's attitude towards him made him dizzy.

What had he done wrong?

You haven't done anything wrong.

You are wrong.

Still under the duvet, Marcus felt intensely cold even under the cover.

'Are you deaf or something? Out'

It's an order, soldier, Marcus thought.

He slipped out of the bed, feeling vulnerable in the cold room as he scrambled to get his clothes together.

Once he was presentable again, he left the room.

For a moment, he stayed there, standing in the corridor like an idiot. It must have already been past ten o'clock as there was nobody around, thank goodness.

He closed his fists, trying to contain the anger that he was feeling towards Esca, but also towards himself.

You are being unreasonable, he told himself, trying to calm down once more. It was perfectly possible that Esca only had in mind to have a one-night stand with him. They were not in a relationship and nobody had forced Marcus to accept. They were both young and had all the justifications in the world to have a bit of fun, right?



Right. Except that Marcus didn't usually have just casual fun.

He took the key to his room out of the pocket of his trousers. As quickly as possible he grabbed a towel and rushed to have a shower.

Maybe the hot water was going to calm him down and wash away the night before.

Fuck you Esca. Fuck you.

After one, long shower, with the temperature one degree lower than boiling, Marcus left the shower, praying to all the most powerful gods that Esca would not decide to leave his room right that second.

He got ready to go out even though he only had a seminar that afternoon. Thank goodness not the Latin one.

Speaking of the Latin seminar, would it look too strange if he was going to ask his tutor now to actually, pretty, pretty please, give him different texts than the once Esca was given? He was more than willing to just get the Aeneid and start translating from the beginning, that would be enough as a distraction, right?

As he waited for the next bus to campus (because of course he had missed one by just one second, seeing it pass past him before he could reach the bus stop), he checked on his phone, immediately discarding Liathan message about meeting up so that he could teach him the basics of Dungeons and Dragons.

He had no intentions of joining them for their meet up next week. Maybe the week after. Maybe. It would all depend on how things developed.

What things? He thought immediately.

There is no thing with Esca. You had heard him having fun with a profusion of other people before, what did you expect?

Why were you looking for what you need when he clearly can't be the one to save you from your doom?

The second message was from Lutorius.

'How did the night go? Did you have fun?' followed by a few winking emojis.

Lutorius did use far too many emojis for his taste.

'It was a riot' Marcus replied quickly, before finally getting on the bus and angrily showing his bloody bus pass to the driver, who didn't even flinch.

‘Any deets?’

‘You are curiouser than a monkey, you know that?’

‘It’s just that I care about you, want to see you smile more’

‘How can you even care about me? We met like a month ago’

He pressed send and regretted it a moment later. Lutorius didn’t deserve to be at the other end of his anger.

‘Well, We Romans need to protect each other in this desolate land, no?’

That made Marcus smile.

Maybe he could just pass over this whole Esca debacle and just go back to study and have fun with friends.

He didn’t need anything else.

‘Romans...you are a Samnite at best’ he texted.

‘And you are originally from Etruria if we really want to split hairs. But we all became citizens of Rome after a while, no? You are the historian, you should tell me’

‘Too early for historical talks’

‘Ah, see, you have had a long night’

‘Fuck off Lutorius’

‘Fancy a coffee? I am on campus already’

‘I should be there in twenty minutes’

Lutorius didn’t push him to talk about what happened, as they sat down inside the library cafe’ and lounged for a bit, enjoying a hot drink and a muffin each. Instead, he prompted him with talks about what was the first thing he was going to do once back home for the winter break, after going on and on about having to meet all the members of his huge family, various batty aunts and a couple of cousins that would always fault how successful they were.

‘So, all fun and games’ Marcus had commented.

‘You bet’.

Marcus didn’t have much to share regarding family. Christmas was usually a quiet affair for him, with him and his uncle having a nice meal while watching a war movie and that was about it.

So, instead, he mentioned how he was eager to go around some of the exhibitions in the city and try the new suppli’ place that had opened near his uncle’s house.

‘We live in the sticks, really, so it’s kind of a big deal when stuff opens’

‘Yep, absolutely riveting’ Lutorius replied, looking amused.

‘Anyway. I have been thinking. As we are here, we should really have some trips around the place, explore this chilly, yet beautiful country. Fancy a trip to dear old Aqua Sulis?’

‘As in Bath?’

‘Yes. The international students’ society is planning one in two weeks’ time. Fancy joining? It’s a weekend long, so I am assuming we will be staying in some kind of hostel.... don’t mind bed bugs, do you?’

Right there and then, that sounded ideal.

‘Where do I sign up?’

He didn’t see Esca at all for the rest of the day. He didn’t appear on campus, in the lecture theatre or in the library.

Better that way.

Marcus didn’t see him the day after either. Which was good, he was still feeling a little sore at having been chucked out of the room without much of a n explanation. He could have at least bothered to make up some excuse, right?

Marcus refused to worry when it got to a week since the last time, he had seen Esca around the place.

Well, just like he was planning a trip, maybe Esca had scampered out of town for a bit. Maybe he had even left the course. It had happened before, he had seen some first years that had found it too difficult or stressful to be away from home and had thrown in the towel.

Esca could have done the same.  
And he had no reason to tell Marcus.

It was then, right when Marcus was settling in his room after receiving a pizza delivery, that a loud knock on the door rattled his peace and quiet.

Who the hell was it?

For a moment, he thought of not opening the door. Not that they ever had visits from door to door sellers or people trying to convert you, access was limited to students and their guests, but still.

Another knock.

‘I know you are in there. I just saw you with the Dominos guy’.

A young woman's voice.

And it was not one of the girls living in the same building.  
Trouble.

Big, big trouble.

Finally, he took all his courage and went to open the door.

In front of him there was a young woman with flaming, wild curls framing her beautiful face. She was dressed in a black, ruffled dress, with black boots and black nail polish to complete the look.

Not that Marcus had much time to assess that, as her piercing green eyes were staring into him with such intensity that he was surprised she hadn't bore a hole in his head.

'Can I help you?' he managed to say, still keeping his hand on the door.

'You are Marcus, right?' she said, frowning a little.

'Yes' he said, after deliberating that there was no easy way to get out of this.

'We need to talk' she said, pushing him out of the way and entering his room.

'Wait, what? Who are you even?' Marcus replied, as she took a seat on his desk chair.

'My name is Cottia' she replied, crossing her long legs.

He remembered that name. It had flashed on Esca's mobile.

She seemed to smile a little as she probably detected the glimpse of understanding in Marcus' eyes.

'We need to talk about Esca'

'Why?'

'Because he is spiralling out of control'

## Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the cliffhanger. I always wanted to attempt one XD

If you are curious, suppli are the Roman version of the more famous Sicilian arancini.  
[https://www.eataly.com/us\\_en/magazine/eataly-recipes/suppli-al-telefono/](https://www.eataly.com/us_en/magazine/eataly-recipes/suppli-al-telefono/)

# Cottia's tale

## Chapter Summary

Cottia opens up about Esca'spast.

And about why they urgently need to find him.

## Chapter Notes

Apologies for the rushed chapter, but I was using the boys as a little procrastination from work :)

Still, I hope you enjoy this little chapter :)

Marcus, for a moment, stood completely still in his own room.

His mind had short-circuited and had gone completely blank at the young woman's words.

Spiralling. What did that even mean?

His rational part of him was shouting to send her away. Esca didn't want to have much more to do with him, so he needed to keep his distance.

In that moment though rationality had thrown itself out of the window, leaving him unable to process what she had been saying.

But he really needed to do something, as Cottia was clearly expecting a reaction. A word. Or anything really. Her eyes were not missing any of his moments, any of the minimal changes of expression on his face.

Marcus felt himself blush a little under that scrutiny, so uncommon with most British people when they didn't know you.

Silently, he moved towards his bed and let himself sink on the soft mattress.

At that, Cottia seemed to relax a little against the back of the chair and started to fidget a little with a loose strand of her mane of ginger curls.

'He hasn't told you anything about himself, has he?' She said.

Marcus just nodded.

Although she wasn't looking at him directly, he still had the distinct feeling that she was keeping an eye on him.

'He hasn't mentioned me either, has he?' she added, suddenly leaving her hair to focus on Marcus once more.

Marcus shook his head.

Cottia sighed loudly, before moving herself forward again, her elbows on her knees as she planted her pretty face in between her hands.

Marcus wasn't entirely sure he could stand her gaze much longer.

It reminded him so much of Esca's.

'Esca and I grew up together. In foster care'

She paused, letting what she said sink in the air between them.

Marcus crossed his arms to his chest.

'He was a little older than me, I think around twelve, when his parents died in a car accident. He was lucky to survive'

He knew full well the pain of that loss.

Marcus took a deep breath as he thought that maybe those scars, he had seen on Esca's body were the constant reminders of that event.

Just like his own scar.

A constant reminder of one's past.

Cottia's voice brought him back to the present, saving him from the echoes of his own past.

'We bonded immediately, even though he was even more prickly than he is now back then. I got a sort of older brother and he got a cheeky younger sister' she said, a little smile appearing on her face and what presumably had been a fond memory.

'Anyway, I could hardly remember my birth parents, which was a blessing in disguise really, it made me able to move forward faster. It wasn't so easy for him. He would talk about them very rarely, but I could see the pain in his eyes at night especially'

Yes, the nights were always the worse, Marcus thought, a shiver running through him at the memory.

Cottia then took a deep breath as she lowered her eyes.

'All that pain has changed him in more ways than one. He has developed a people phobia'

‘A people phobia?’ Marcus frowned.

‘Well, I don’t know the official name’ she replied, rolling her eyes.

‘I call it that. He refuses to create meaningful relations with people. Friendship, Romance. Anything really. He has this idea that there is no actual point. People are going to leave anyway, one way or another, so why bother? Which, in turn, only makes him lonelier and more scarred’

‘It’s just a copying mechanism’ Marcus murmured, more to himself than to the young woman, but she heard him anyway, rewarding him with a “really?” look.

‘Why are you telling me all of this?’ Marcus then asked.

Cottia dropped all the act of being amused or outraged by Marcus’ responses and, suddenly very serious, he said:

‘Because you are the first person he has ever told me about’

‘What?’ Marcus frowning.

But he had understood her perfectly.

Idiot, he told himself as he felt his heart, till then frozen by the memories of his past reanimated by Cottia’s tale of Esca’s past, started to beat much faster.

Cottia stood up and started to pace right in front of him.

‘You might not understand it, but this is huge. Huge for Esca. He never, ever tells me about anybody he meets, anybody he talks to. Nobody. Because he refuses to even consider them. Then you come along’

‘What has he told you?’ Marcus whispered.

Cottia stopped in her pacing and looked straight at him again.

Marcus just knew that, one day, those eyes were going to set fire to his very soul.

‘He said he met someone that challenges him. That was all’

Ok, that was a little.... well, little, for what had been flaunted as a main revelation.

‘It’s not much’

Cottia shook her head.

‘You don’t understand. For him it was huge. And I was there. I’ she smiled a little.

‘I saw him blushing. Ever so slightly, because he is not the type with his emotions all over his face. But he was blushing as he said that, before adding that you were a “stubbornly kind student from Rome”

This time it was Marcus' turn to smile.

'You see, we are developing this sort of Ancient Rome based banter and'

'I don't care' she cut him off, suddenly very serious again.

'What I care about is that, from that positive change I saw a little while ago, he is now miles back the other way. He is not answering my calls and he is not coming to the shelter'

'What shelter?'

'We volunteer with charities helping young kids needing fostering and stuff. Anyway, that's not important. He has not come for a week. Then today he sends me this message' she said, taking her phone from her pocket and shoving it in his face.

'I need a bit of time. Will be in touch'

Marcus lifted his eyes to say that perhaps he just needed a little time, but Cottia preceded him:

'Before you say anything stupid like "he needs more time", just know that last time he did this, I found him half drunk on the side of a very dodgy road. And I have no intention of seeing him do through that again. So, are you with me?'

Marcus stood up.

You have a mission soldier, his father's voice said in his head.

'What do you want me to do?'



# Instinct

## Chapter Summary

Marcus and Cottia head off to town in search of Esca.

## Chapter Notes

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

Marcus grabbed his coat and followed Cottia out of the building and back onto the road. The strong wind blasting away that late evening slapped him in the face, but the cold air helped him concentrate.

There was a man in need of help.

A man he wanted to know more about.

A man he was starting to care for far too deeply.

And any minute, any second, counted.

He pushed forward, bumping against a few groups of fellow students heading towards the bus stop to head into town.

What were all these idiots doing? Go home people and make way, he wanted to shout.

‘Where are you going?’ Cottia called, standing a few steps behind him.

‘To the bus stop?’ he said, frowning as he pointed with his head to the queue of people already waiting to head to the local clubs. Wasn’t it obvious? How did she suggest going into town?

‘Nah, car’ she replied, pointing instead to the little, red Ford Fiesta parked not far from them.

Oh, fair enough.

‘And before you say anything, I saved up a hell of a lot before managing to buy my baby. She was my ticket to independence’ she added, as they sat down and Cottia turned on the engine.

‘It didn’t really pass my mind to ask’ he said, clicking his safety belt. In truth, he had wandered as cars could cost a pretty penny and from her tale it sounded like her life, and that of Esca, had been quite an uphill battle.

She had struggled through, conquered her past and worked hard for a goal. He could get behind that behaviour.

But he didn't think she was the kind of girl that needed lots of compliments or to be mollycoddled all the time.

She was a burning fire.

'Sorry to say but we have more pressing matters' he said then.

'Good, I like your attitude' she smiled, as she drove much closer to the speed limit that Marcus would have liked but she seemed perfectly in control of her baby.

It was then that he noticed the little statuette abandoned on the side.

He recognised it immediately: it was a little reproduction of the statue of Boudicca near the Houses of Parliament in London.

'Boudicca? Really?'

'Why not? Strong, female lead. Got to love her. Besides, Esca did say that you have a colosseum mug that not even the most desperate tourist would buy'

'Oh, did he?'

Marcus didn't tell her about the sudden feeling of warmth blooming in his chest.

Esca, where the hell are you?

After a few shouts against some idiots that, according to Cottia, were taking far too long to cross the road, they arrived in town.

And, just like Marcus had suspected, they were going around and around in circles trying to find a parking space, losing all the advantage they had gained by taking the car.

'What are all these people doing? One would think it's a Saturday night or something' Cottia mumbled, as she turned the same corner yet again.

'There should be the shopping centre parking lot'

'They lock up after a while, and I don't want to risk being stuck'

Fair point. Ok that the parking lot would not be locked up till after midnight, but they had no idea where Esca was.

He might not even be in the city.

This was going to take some time.

And, even if they found him, even if HE found him, what was he going to tell him?

‘Ok, so, listen up, I am going to find a parking spot, you get out and head to the Liquid and Envy, see if you can spot him there’

‘What makes you think he might be there?’ Marcus replied, already feeling his blood curdling. He had been there a couple of times, it was a club not too far from the main train station. It was ok, just a massive, sticky dance floor with a decent bar where you needed to shout your lungs out to be heard by the bar people. So, a normal place, but people seemed to love it mainly for their DJs.

A normal place full of people shaking about in the dark.

If Esca was inside there, he was never going to find him.

‘I have no idea, but we need to start from somewhere, and I know that of all clubs and stuff, this would be his favourite. Or, at least, his least not favourite if you know what I mean. Probably a good place to distract himself’

‘True...’ he said, picturing quite well the image of Esca losing himself in the thumping noise of the loud, club music.

Wild, was what he thought right there and then.

And then he had an idea.

‘Wait, he could have gone to the library’

‘And risking meeting you there, I don’t think so’ Cottia said, starting to slow down so that Marcus could get out in a side street not far from the station.

‘But he could have gone to the library when most students are having fun. You know him more than I do, but he is quite observant, he probably knows that I wouldn’t have gone to the library at this hour’

Cottia smacked her lips together, thinking over what he said. Marcus felt a little bit proud of having come up with a clever point.

Then someone honked right behind them and Cottia almost jumped out of her skin.

‘Ok, fine, if we don’t find him in town, we will go back to uni. But as we are already here, we might as well have a look. Go’ She said, and Marcus didn’t insist, getting out before she could roar against him some more.

Standing back in the cold, Marcus looked around himself. There were a lot of people around the entrance of the club, waiting to get in. By the looks of it, it was the usual mob of girls in skimpy dresses (he had no idea how they managed against the cold, he would have thought they were all going to suffer from hypothermia at that point) and guys dressed in variation of the same motif of jeans and shirt/jumper/whatever was left that didn’t stink.

He started scouting their faces, hoping not to be noticed by any irritable person that might jump at his through for whatever reason.

He really, really didn't want to go inside that place, his head was thumping, his stomach was empty, and he was certain they might have a better chance elsewhere....

His heart skipped a beat when he spotted Esca, talking to another guy as they waited to be let in.

Another guy.

A tall, muscular guy whose shirt was clearly a little too tight for his stature and his hair was far too coated in gel.

But still, he was there with Esca, and Esca was laughing at his jokes.

Go back, he told himself. He is there with someone else, trying to have a good time. This is none of your business.

But Cottia was trusting him.

Cottia was worried about Esca and Esca's behaviour.

And Marcus really didn't like the face of that guy.

He crossed the road in quick strides, suddenly much surer of himself than how he had felt the whole evening through. He was going to speak with Esca. He was going to get some answers.

Esca was going to tell him why he had chucked him out of the room after their night together.

As he got closer, he noticed Esca's body stiffening up.

He knew that Esca had noticed him moving towards him.

And he knew that he was now purposefully avoiding his gaze.

Well, can't avoid me much longer, he thought.

'Esca' he called when he was a couple of steps away from the couple.

Esca didn't even flinch, as he kept on talking to the other young man.

'Esca' he called again, closing his fists in the pockets of his coat.

If you want to be stubborn, I can play this game all night, he thought.

‘Esca’

‘I think that guy is calling you’ the young man said, not turning to face Marcus, but moving his head to indicate his presence.

‘Don’t worry’ Esca replied, not even paying much attention.

‘Esca’ Marcus called again, smiling when he saw Esca roll his eyes.

‘I will be right back’ Esca said to the young man, before stepping away to face Marcus and dragging him a little further away.

Was it a good sign that he wanted to keep their conversation to themselves?

‘What?’ Esca said, crossing his arms to his chest.

‘What are you doing?’ Marcus replied. Now that he had to talk, now that he had his chance and Esca was listening, all the words seemed to have disappeared from his mind.

‘What does it look like I am doing? I am trying to have a good time. You should try some time, it’s fun’ he replied, his cheeky grin on his face.

He was challenging him, Marcus thought. He could tell that Esca wanted to see how far he could push him.

Well, he had one nuclear weapon still to use.

‘Cottia was worried’ he said, swallowing down the annoyed remark he was that close to make about the guy Esca was with.

At that point, Esca’s eyes widened.

‘Cottia?’ he said, his voice suddenly not as confident as it had been. His cheeky grin had left space to a very serious, thunderous expression on his angular face.

‘Yes, she came to see me and asked for my help locating you. She was worried sick. She still is’

‘Where is she? She shouldn’t have come to call you. You, of all people’ he replied, looking around himself.

‘Esca, she was just worried’

‘She had no right to come looking for you. She should mind her own business’ he said, pointing his finger in accusation right against Marcus’ chest, pressing to the point it hurt.

Had he already been drinking?

‘You have no right to barge in my life like this. Bugger off Marcus, back where you belong. Back to your room or back to Rome. I don’t care’ he said, storming away. Away from the club.

Away from him.

‘Esca’ Marcus called, and he heard the young man calling him too, confusion in his voice.

But Marcus didn’t have the time to turn around and tell him that he could forget Esca for that evening.

Marcus barely had the time to think at all.

A car was coming quickly, swirling dangerously.

It was luck that it didn’t crush on the crowd of bystanders.

But it was heading right to Esca.

Marcus’ body reacted instinctively, moving forward. His legs, for once, pushed him in the right direction.

He rushed to Esca and pushed him out of the way just in time.

White hot pain flared all around his body.

Everything went dark.

## Chapter End Notes

Apologies for another cliffhanger XD

I promise there will be some comfort in the next chapters :)

# The Hospital

## Chapter Notes

Please note that this chapter is divided in two parts, the first from Esca's point of view, the second from Marcus'.

Enjoy :)

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

Shouting. Lots and lots of shouting.

And running. People running everywhere.

Blood everywhere he could see.

Marcus' body limp on the ground.

The sounds of the ambulance approaching, quickly called by one of the club's bouncers.

A pair of strong arms forcing him up even though his body was refusing to move.

All those images were twirling and twirling around again in Esca's mind as he slumped there, in an anonymous chair in the anonymous looking local hospital.

He was vaguely aware of Cottia's attempts to talk to him, as his mind was stubbornly refusing to connect back to the world around him.

Because the world, right that very moment, didn't make any sense.

Not when the impact of the car with Marcus' body had been so strong.

Esca bent his body forward, taking his head in his hands.

The noise of the impact had been so strong. Th crash and the crunch were on loop in his head

'Esca' Cottia said.

'Why did you have to call him?' he managed to whisper, getting scared at how hoarse his voice came out.

'Because I needed help to find you. And I know you don't really listen to me when you are feeling like that' she said, taking a sip of the dark, disgusting coffee she had purchased from the little vending machine the next ward over.

‘And now look at the result’ he mumbled, keeping his gaze resolutely away from Cottia.

God. It was all his fault.

‘It was an accident, Esca’

Yes, ok, an accident.

But if it hadn’t been for Esca’s behaviour, or for Cottia’s stupid help call, Marcus at that point would have been safe and sound in the halls of residence. Esca knew that he never really went out on a Thursday, when he was much more likely to meet up with his friend Lutorius, or whatever his name was.

‘You like him, don’t you?’ Cottia asked.

Annoying, stubborn Cottia. Stop asking me questions.

Esca didn’t answer, keeping his gaze resolutely in front of him, staring at the grey pavement ahead.

Yes. Of course I like him. The stupid buffoon with his cringey souvenir mugs and the kindness to offer breakfast to a mess like me.

But he didn’t say that to Cottia. He didn’t even really admit that to himself.

Although, deep down, he knew it to be true.

He kept silent, but Cottia continued on like a bulldozer.

‘What happened, Esca? If you like him, why running away? I met the guy, ok that it was in strange circumstances, but he seems nice enough and’

‘Because I can’t take it, ok?’ he burst out, quickly moving so that he could stare at Cottia in the face.

If she wanted the truth, if she wanted a confrontation, she could have it.

But she was going to have it all.

‘Because we spent a night together. And it was perfect. I had never felt more at ease in my life. He looked at my scars, the accident’s ones and myself self-harm ones and did not budge, he didn’t look disgusted or anything. And then the morning after came and I realised that I didn’t want to be there the moment he would see the mess I am, I didn’t want to be there for when he is going to leave. Because for as much as he might think he likes me, he will leave. And now it’s even more certain, considering that because of me he is fighting for his life’

‘Esca...’ she said, extending her hand towards his shoulder.

But Esca recoiled before she could touch him.



Instinctively, he stood up and walked away.

He wasn't a coward. He always faced life's challenges head on.

But this time it was too much.

The first time he woke up, he barely registered anything. Everything sounded distant, muffled. Everything looked much whiter.

But it looked peaceful, in a way.

It was easy to abandon himself back to oblivion.

The second time it was easier. And, slowly, he managed to zoom in the two people sitting next to his bed: Lutorius and his uncle.

His uncle?

He tried to sit up from his bed, but he felt he couldn't. There were tubes coming out of his body and Lutorius himself had quickly moved to put a hand on his arm. The pressure had been barely there and yet Marcus had felt it so much.

'Easy there, big boy' Lutorius said as he tried to smile. But he didn't look so happy. More than anything, he looked a little tired. Since when did he have bags under his eyes?

'Devi riposare, ragazzo' you have to rest, son, his uncle said.

'What happened? Where....' Marcus managed to say, although he felt a little too tired to continue his questioning. Since when was talking making his throat so sore?

'You were involved in a car accident just outside the Liquid and Envy' Lutorius said, his face going extremely serious.

'You have been here for a couple of weeks. There were fears you were not going to make it'

'I kept on telling your friend here that you are made of strong stuff. Marcus Aquila won't be broken down so easily' his uncle said, trying to keep things like.

But even with his fogged-up mind Marcus could tell that even his uncle had had a few bad nights.

'I am glad to see you awake though son', he added, with a gentle caress on his leg.

Marcus smiled a little.

He didn't say it, but he hoped they both knew he was glad they were there. Waking up again in that white room all alone would have been horrible.

All alone.

Wait.

What happened to Esca?

‘Esca?’ Marcus managed to ask.

The two men looked at each other for a moment, hesitancy written all over Lutorius' face as he bit his lips.

‘Everything ok?’ Marcus asked, as he felt his heartbeat rising.

‘Yes. Yes, he is ok, as far as I know. That girl, Cottia, said he seems ok, he wasn’t injured or anything, thanks to you’

Marcus took a deep breath.

Esca was fine.

Esca wasn’t injured.

His sacrifice had been worth something.

‘We have never seen this boy here during visiting hours’ his uncle added, shaking his head.

‘But a nurse said that sometimes, during her night shift, a young man comes in asking to see you. She has sent him away most of the time, but every now and again she takes pity on him and lets him. Apparently, he never gets close, only comes in, looks at you and, without a word, leaves’ Lutorius explained, raising his shoulders.

‘Did he have a tattoo on his arm?’ he asked, forcing himself to talk.

‘She didn’t say. All she said was that the guy was handsome, incredibly persistent, and clearly troubled by you being in hospital’

Marcus tried to relax against the bed as a little smile appeared on his face.

It was Esca.

## Chapter End Notes

I promise these two idiots will chat properly at some point :)

# The plan

## Chapter Summary

Esca goes, once again, to visit Marcus in hospital.

## Chapter Notes

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

The nurse, Daisy, Daisy May, or something like that, was clearly in a good mood that evening, because it didn't take Esca the usual amount of time to convince her to lead him to Marcus' room. She took the hot cup of tea he had brought her (which he never forgot, once he discovered that her gears were a lot easier to oil if she had a nice cup of tea in front of her), drank a long sip without scolding herself and led the way.

'Any news?' he said, as he followed her through the corridors. They all looked the same, really, but after so many evenings following Daisy, he felt he could almost walk the distance with his eyes closed.

'Not really. All the same. But I guess no news is good news, am I right?' She said, turning around just enough to wink at him.

Uhm. Wink. Daisy was on the flirty side of the spectrum, much flirtier than Cottia would ever be, but he couldn't remember her ever winking before.

Anyway, don't overthink it, Esca told himself. Maybe she had just a particularly good day.

'Yes, I guess' he replied.

Because he thought that, after all it was true. It could have been a lot worse. He could have arrived only to find Lutorius and Marcus' uncle in the waiting area crying their hearts out, ready to pounce on him to scratch his eyes out.

Not that he would have blamed them.

'Here we are' she said, chirpy as usual, before knocking on the door, in the off chance that Marcus was up and about, something that Esca had always found quite sweet, even in the depths of his sadness.

She gave him a pat on the shoulder as she left him.

'You know the way back'

He just nodded and entered.

The sight was, by then far too familiar: Marcus lying in his bed. Esca closed his eyes, took a deep breath to calm himself down. To erase the memories of that night that, immediately, had flooded through his mind.

God, that noise, that horrible crash was haunting his dreams since that night.

Focus on the moment, he told himself, so he reopened his eyes to focus on Marcus. He looked smaller in that bed. His skin turned paler than usual and there were still tubes sticking out of him.

And it was all his fault.

Stop it, he thought. The nurse was right, no news is good news, so sooner or later Marcus will wake up and you will be able to apologise to him.

To talk to him like a normal human being.

Could he do that? He wasn't entirely sure, his legs felt wobbly just thinking about it, but he was going to give it a shot, because it was the least he could do for Marcus.

Stupid, stupid heroic Marcus.

Esca should be the one in that damn bed, not Marcus.

Esca took a step forward. He had never done that before, he had always just stood there, in deferential silence, but that evening he wanted, he needed, a proof that Marcus was fine, that he was going to open his eyes.

He wanted to feel the warm of his skin like the night they spent together.

With his heart in his throat, Esca took another step forward.

And another.

Till he was close to Marcus' side. His arms were lying above the cover, relaxed in their sleep.

Stop, he told himself.

But he couldn't.

He stretched his arm and, gently, with just the very tip of his index finger, struck the back of Marcus' hand.

It was warm, somehow so warm even in that cold room.

Esca felt incredibly silly but couldn't help the smile that appeared on his lips.

He smiled till he felt the familiar tingle of someone looking at him, making his body immediately go on high alert.

And that someone was Marcus, who burst out laughing the moment their eyes met.

Esca should have felt mortified. He hated being caught in moments of weakness. He had shouted more than once at Cottia for much less.

But, somehow, for whatever reason, hearing Marcus' laugh cancelled everything else out.

He is awake. He is alive and awake. He is alive and awake, he thought.

And fuck, I think I'm in love with him.

'I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh. But your face was priceless' Marcus said, bending his head a little towards Esca but didn't do any other movements.

'She knew, didn't she?' Esca said, feeling his cheeks turning incandescent under the weight of Marcus' gaze.

'Of course. We have been brainstorming ideas on what to do next time you came for a visit. And I must say the girl has a lot of inventive way to mentally torture people'

'Not exactly something you want to hear about a nurse' Esca replied, keeping his eyes down, fixed on Marcus' hand.

He was burning to touch it again.

He was alive, he was awake, Esca could see that.

And at the same time, it almost felt like a dream. Maybe he was asleep in his bed, under Cottia's supervision (as she had got herself an air mattress and was now camping in his room to keep an eye on him), and he would just wake up and see that nothing had actually changed.

That Marcus was still unconscious in his bed.

'No, I guess no'

He should have thought something was up when Daisy May had winked at him.

'But she is a good nurse. I will miss her' Marcus replied, with a sigh.

And then silence fell on them.

Silence fell on Esca, as he felt Marcus' eyes still on him.

Be brave, Esca thought. This is not what your father would have expected of you.

But, as usual, words were not exactly Esca's forte.

He just needed to say "thank you" or "I am so sorry, please forgive me", and instead all he managed to say was:

'Why did you do it?'

'What?' he heard Marcus say, as he resolutely kept his eyes away from him.

Was he really going to make him spell it out? The skin of his face was turning so hot in his shame and desperation that he wouldn't have been surprised if it was about to melt clean off.

'Why did you push me away from the car?'

Marcus didn't reply for a long time.

The silence stretched around them like a soap bubble ready to burst.

And then, finally (finally!) Marcus had mercy on him and said:

'Because you are like me'

'What?' Esca asked, lifting his eyes to Marcus again at that answer that surprised him a little.

Something knotted tightly inside his chest as he saw Marcus smiling.

'We are alike. I know that both of us have known pain. And darkness. Life has not been kind to me, and, from what I hear, it has not been too kind to you either' Marcus said, turning more serious.

'Cottia' Esca said, nodding slightly.

'Yes. But she hasn't told me all of it. And I am really curious to know your secrets'

'They are not pretty' Esca replied crossing his arms.

God, this man was turning out to be the only person on the face of the planet that could make him feel so fucking exposed even when he wasn't naked.

And he loved and hated that feeling in equal measure.

Marcus smiled softly again.

'No. And neither are mine. But I hope you might be as interested in hearing mine as I am yours'

'Are you asking me out?' Esca said.

Alarm bells were ringing in his mind.

No, no, relationship is bad. You will only get your heart broken.

He will leave.

No, he thought.

He won't leave.

Or, at least, for once, I won't.

'Maybe. Just a dinner, nothing more. If you want, you can even come to the welcome back party I believe Lutorius and my uncle are planning for when I am finally able to leave this place. I think they were trying to keep it a secret, but they are not the best at subtleties' he said, with another sigh.

Maybe I should let him rest, Esca thought. And yet, he just couldn't go yet.

'Uhm, I am better to stay clear of them' he replied, fidgeting a little with his hands.

He had bumped into Lutorius as Esca was running away from Cottia, and his accusations had been strong enough that the nurses and receptionists around them had been very close to call the security guards on them.

Luckily, Marcus didn't ask. Was Esca's embarrassment that evident?

'Ok, then maybe dinner once my uncle has gone back to Rome, what would you say?'

Esca wanted to laugh, cry, scream and praise the Sun all at the same time. But all he could do was to take his courage again, lift his eyes ones more and nod as the warm feeling in his chest made him smile.

'Sound like a plan then' Marcus said before yawning.

'I should let you rest' Esca said.

'Ok, but don't disappear again' Marcus said, shuffling a little on the mattress.

Esca nodded and, slowly, turned around to the door.

Right when he was about to put his hand on the door handle, his heart told him that there was just one thing he really should do before going.

Quickly, he turned around once more and rushed to Marcus's bed.

Before Marcus could say a word, Esca planted a kiss on top of his head and murmured:

'Thank you for saving me'

And, before Marcus could say anything, he rushed out.

His heart that night felt a little less heavy.

Let the fluff begin! I am not making any promises, but there might be an actual date on the horizon :)



# Good night

## Chapter Summary

Marcus finally leaves the hospital.

## Chapter Notes

Forgive me, this is a very self indulgent chapter where I aimed at describing a little more the relationship between Marcus, his uncle and Lutorius.

Next chapter we shall have the date I promised :)

Marcus was discharged from the hospital about a week later, with a full list of medicines to keep taking and the names of a few good physiotherapists that would accept patients on the NHS, the national health system.

‘Marcus, you know that I am more than happy to pay for you to see a private doctor, don’t you?’ his uncle said, as Lutorius kept walking super close, far too close to Marcus really, as they made their way to the elevator to go down to the parking lot.

‘Yes uncle, I know’ Marcus replied, trying not to laugh at Lutorius immediate panic as he took a little break from wobbling around with his crutches. He was allowed to walk like that for short distances, but even that seemed far too much, if the level of sweat on his brow was anything to go by.

‘Are you sure? You don’t need to be all strong about this’ his uncle continued.

‘Every now and again you can let me pamper you a little’

‘Listen to your uncle, you silly idiot’ Lutorius said, crossing his arms under his armpits, almost trying that way to stop himself from taking Marcus on a piggyback ride (no idea how that was going to work, considering that Marcus was taller and broader than him, but hey).

‘You are already throwing me a party, that is pampering enough, trust me’ Marcus replied, as he took a deep breath and started to wobble a little further.

‘Stubborn as always, aren’t you?’ his uncle said. He didn’t need to look at him to tell that his usual, sardonic grin was painted all over his face.

‘Yes’, Marcus said, smiling through the discomfort.

‘Plus, the NHS doctors have been fantastic, why would I need to go and see a private one if someone can do it for free’

‘Suit yourself. Regardless of where you will be going, Lutorius has promised to always come with you’

‘Man, you know that I don’t need a bodyguard, right?’ Marcus replied, sending a sidelong glance to Lutorius.

He could tell his friend was that close to making a military salute to his uncle. Tell Lutorius one thing, like that his uncle had been in the army, and that was the result.

‘Considering the speed at which you are going I really think you could do with one’ Lutorius then said.

Marcus rolled his eyes as they stopped again, waiting for the elevator.

‘Anyway, I hope you haven’t spent too much for this party’

‘Oh, don’t worry, you will see’.

The party was only in the evening, so for the time being, they just drove him back to the student halls in the car that Marcus’ uncle had rented.

There was just one problem.

The stairs.

To get back to his room, there was a full ramp of stairs. And no elevator.

Thank you, stupid old building, he thought, as the three of them stopped, trying to ponder for a moment what to do.

‘Come on, the only way is up, right?’ Lutorius said.

‘Not funny’ Marcus replied, as he held onto the railing, trying to put all his weight on his stronger leg while lifting the other and having one of the crutches on the side closer to his left leg.

It was hard work, but they did it.

Even though it was to go for a party, he wasn’t sure he relished the idea of doing that all again.

As he was deposited on his bed with his legs distended, he thought that Esca wasn’t there.

But he wasn’t too surprised, he had said that he didn’t want to meet his uncle or Lutorius again.

Fair enough. And yet he would have liked to see him.

They hadn't really disclosed the location of the party, so it turned out to be a rather big surprise when Lutorius parked the car right in front of Casa Romana, their favourite restaurant in town. It was such a good little gem, that it didn't even do much publicity for itself.

Everybody in town seemed to know about the little, unassuming green door without even a sign with the name of top.

And everybody knew that behind that door there was the best Italian food for miles.

It was tiny really. The ground floor was nothing more than a glorified corridor with little, chequered table-clothed tables either side right after a counter where you could order some booze and pay your bill if you were too much in a hurry to wait for the waiters to bring it to you. Near the entrance there were a couple of couches where people waiting to be given a seat could nibble on olives and other little starters while reading the special of the day.

But the best part was upstairs. The second floor was much wider, with a lot more tables and even a big, wide terrace where you could enjoy your meal out in the summer. And his uncle had booked the whole floor for them. As they went slowly up the stairs, Marcus found himself immersed in a sea of smiley faces telling him "welcome back" as they enjoyed the live music provided by three musicians in the corner.

He didn't know half (let's face it, probably more) of the faces dancing around him as he was propped up on a chair, but hey. He was quite happy to see Liathan though, who spent a good half hour telling him about how upset he was when he got to know about the accident, that Sam had officially friend zoned him, and that he was looking forward to Marcus coming back to their Latin seminar, because clearly their lecturer was massively fed up with how incompetent at languages they were and they urgently needed Marcus to come back to stave off her dissatisfaction with her work.

As a vast number of starters started to appear in a seemingly endless parade of trays and dishes, his uncle finally sat down next to him.

'You know you didn't need to do this' he whispered to his uncle.

'I know, I know, you have never been one for much pleasure in life' his uncle said, rolling his eyes.

'But let me do this, please?' he said.

Marcus smiled.

They never really had the most open of relationships. There had been many times when, during his teenage years, his uncle had tried to get to him in his ways, but never made it

through.

Because Marcus had never allowed him to make it through.

But maybe, that evening, he could do it.

It was as they tucked in that Marcus spotted, sat in the corner of a distant table from where he sat, Cottia's bright, fiery curls.

When their eyes met, he smiled and signed to her to come closer.

She looked around herself and shook her head.

But lifted her phone.

A few moments later, his phone vibrated in his pocket with a new message from an unknown number.

'I just wanted to say I am deeply sorry for what happened the other night and I am so glad to see you are better.

And thank you, for having brought a smile back on Esca's face'

He smiled before typing:

'It would be nice to say this stuff in person'

'I can't. It's already a miracle Lutorius had let me through the doors. He hates Esca the most, but I don't think he is a big fan of me either'

'It will get better'

'I hope so' she wrote, with a smile face.

'Anyway, the food is lovely' she added.

'The food of my people. Enjoy' he replied, with a little smile face too.

Gods. There was a room full of people around him, and yet, there was only one that, right in the very moment, he would have wanted to see.

At the end of the dinner, Lutorius drove Marcus' uncle back to his hotel room and then they were off to their student halls.

Ok, maybe this was the time to speak up.

'Thank you Lutorius, for your help today'

'My pleasure, you idiot. I would do it again, but please don't just in front of cars again' he said.

'Thank you also for letting Cottia in the restaurant'

He noticed immediately how Lutorius' body tensed up. His grip increased on the wheel and his shoulders stiffened.

'I have had a few too many drinks I think to resist her batting her eyelashes at me. I wouldn't have let her in otherwise' he said, between gritted teeth.

'Still thank you'

'Are you sure you even want to hang out with these people?' he said, as they finally arrived at their destination.

'Yes', Marcus replied.

'And you could too if you wanted' he continued.

'Too soon man, too soon' he said, as he turned off the engine.

'You don't know what it was like that night' he said with a sigh, without giving any indications he wanted to move out of the car.

'It was lucky that we have been texting a lot lately, so that Cottia thought I was a close friend, otherwise they wouldn't have even called me. And then I got there, and I waited, and waited with her, and we had no idea what was going to happen. It was very scary'

'I am sorry'

'Just, don't do it again' Lutorius said, turning to Marcus with a face like thunder.

Marcus nodded.

'I won't'

'Promise?'

'I can't promise that, you know that I am a bit too pig-headed for this kind of stuff. But I certainly will try my best to avoid any more life-threatening experiences for a while'

'Ok, it will do for now' Lutorius said, shaking his head but there was a little smile on his face.

They got out of the car and slowly, very slowly, made it to the halls of residence. Lutorius helped him open the door.

It was then that they found Esca, sitting right on the first step of the ramp of stairs. When Esca looked up from his phone, his face lit up for a moment. Only to grow immediately serious, and perhaps even a little scared, when he saw that Marcus was not alone.

But, after a moment of uncertainty, Marcus watched him stand up, his face as expressionless as stone, before he bowed his head a little while he said:

'Lutorius, Marcus'

‘What are you doing here?’ Lutorius all but hissed his sentence.

‘Maybe I help Marcus back to his room?’ Esca said, his eyes still completely focused on Lutorius.

‘How dare’

‘It’s fine Lutorius’ Marcus intervened, smiling as gently as he could when his friend turned around with the most outraged expression on his face.

He watched his friend opening his mouth to protest and then closing it again.

‘Are you sure about this?’

‘Yes. I will see you tomorrow, we got to drive my uncle back to the airport’ Marcus added.

Lutorius nodded. He shot the most glacial glance Marcus had ever seen towards Esca and, without a word, left.

Leaving them alone.

Finally, Esca’s eyes were on him for a moment. One, fleeting moment, before he lowered them to his crutches.

His ears were starting to turn bright red again.

The most adorable thing he had ever seen.

‘It’s good to see you’ Marcus managed to say.

Esca smiled, even though Marcus didn’t miss the note of bitterness in it.

Then Esca lifted his eyes once again and said:

‘It’s good to see you’

As they approached the ramp of stairs, Marcus tried to remember what to do. The movements were not exactly the most normal things to remember, especially after having spent a lifetime going up the stairs one specific way.

But, as he held of to the railing, Esca took his crutches and put the to the side of the stairs.

‘Wait’

‘I will come to get them as soon as you are sat comfortably’ Esca replied, in a matter-of-fact tone, before blushing a little and say:

‘You can hold on to me now’.

Marcus felt himself blush a little too, as he passed his arm around Esca’s shoulder, feeling his solid, strong body right next to his.

One step at a time.

One other.

And, before he could even fully realise it, they were up the stairs and into his room.

As promised, Esca rushed out again to grab his crutches and put them right near his bed.

Like the night they med in the hospital, Esca gave him a kiss on the top of his head and whispered:

‘I will be next door. Good night Marcus’

And he rushed out.

# Date night

## Chapter Summary

Marcus and Esca finally go out for their date night.

## Chapter Notes

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

Marcus waited.

And waited some more.

He waited for his uncle to go back to Rome, with the strong recommendation to stay out of trouble because he wasn't sure he could take another phone call in the middle of the night like that.

He waited for Lutorius to progressively relax and stop going around like a crazy mother hen looking after her broken chick.

And he waited for Esca to bring up their plan to have dinner together.

He could have asked himself. God, he really wanted to. He had been close to doing so a handful of times, now that, every time he arrived in the kitchen to make himself some coffee, he would find his colosseum's mug already filled up with hot coffee just the way he liked it, next to Esca's mug, with his choice of tea.

And Esca himself sat at the table, welcoming him with a little, crooked smile. No words necessary.

The wait was driving him nuts, to the point that, at night, in the quietness of his lonely room, he would imagine all sorts of scenarios, from a nice romantic dinner in his favourite Italian restaurant, to just ordering some take out, wait till the food arrived only to leave it to the side as they shed their clothes, much more interested in satiating their lust than their stomachs.

But he didn't dare.

He wasn't sure how much of a flight risk Esca was. And, for as much as the longing to touch Esca's skin in a more intimate way than just the contact they shared when he helped him up and down the stairs was driving him nuts, he waited.

Hoping that Esca realised that he hadn't forgotten about the plan they made in Marcus' hospital room.



Don't worry, Esca hasn't forgotten, he kept on telling himself.

After all, why would he bother with all the little gestures of kindness he was silently doing for him? From the coffee in the morning, to replenishing his food cupboard, even to the exact type of pasta he liked best (well, among the much smaller selection one could find in England).

Marcus had concluded that Esca didn't talk much.

But he observed everything.

It was just that, in that situation, he really needed Esca to talk and take him out of his misery.

Esca did it in a message, right after Marcus had finally been all cleared and didn't need to use the crutches anymore.

'If you are in town, and you don't have any plans this evening, would you like to have dinner together? I hear that Casa Romana is good. Say seven o'clock?'

Marcus smiled.

'Good news?' Liathan asked, but Marcus was far too distracted to even pay attention.

'I thought you would never ask' he typed back.

He watched the three dots moving around on his WhatsApp.

They were moving and moving, but no word came.

What was Esca writing? Was he writing and deleting or something?

'Thank you for your patience' finally appeared on the screen.

'Always' Marcus wrote back instinctively, without giving his mind time to think about it and stopping himself from sounding like the cheesy, lovesick man than he was turning into.

'If you want, I will book us a table. I sort of know the owner'

'How do you know them?'

'Well, all Italians abroad know each other' he typed back, with a smile face to make it clear that he was joking.

'Ok. I will see you at seven'

His heart started beating so fast that he couldn't really focus for the rest of the lessons.

But then again, third declension nouns are not exactly the most riveting of subjects, not when his mind was just full of Esca.

For the whole afternoon, time seemed to pass incredibly slowly.

And then, suddenly, it was seven o'clock.

As he approached the restaurant a few minutes before seven, fully expecting Esca not to be there yet.

Instead, he was there, standing in front of the green door, breathing on his hands to keep himself warm that cold, wintery night. His pale skin was reddening a little around his cheeks in the cold air.

But he was there, standing tall and proud. Like he always did.

'Hi' Marcus said.

'Oh, hi' Esca said, for a moment looking almost shocked.

Marcus smiled. Perhaps he had been so lost in his own thoughts that he hadn't actually seen him coming.

'I'm sorry, have you been waiting long?' Marcus asked, standing a little further away from Esca.

Even though he would have wanted to step forward.

That distance was annoying.

'Oh no, no, just arrived' Esca replied.

Somehow though, Marcus didn't believe him.

Have you been distracted the whole day like me? Have you arrived here too early because you were too fidgety? He thought but didn't ask.

'Come on, let's go in'.

The restaurant welcomed them with the usual warm atmosphere. That night there was no live music, but perhaps it was better like that.

Marcus wouldn't have wanted to miss one of Esca's words.

‘Hi, have you booked?’ a rotund man asked them, welcoming them with a broad smile. The smile of a man happy with his lot in life.

‘Yes, under Marcus Smith’ Marcus replied, feeling, for once, like someone full of self-confidence.

‘Perfect. We are a little behind today, but your table should be ready in about fifteen minutes. Can I bring you something to eat or drink while you wait? On the house’

‘It’s ok for now’ Marcus replied.

He wasn’t one of those people thinking that snacks could “break” your appetite, like his uncle used to say. But, that evening, he was already not that hungry and he didn’t want to risk not eating anything else.

‘Marcus Smith?’ Esca asked, arching an eyebrow in amused confusion.

‘I wasn’t entirely sure I was going to speak with an Italian speaker and I didn’t want to make their life even more complicated with my whole name’ he explained, feeling perhaps a little stupid, but he had seen that strategy online, favoured by other immigrants in the UK. Some even liked to use the names of VIP, like George Clooney or whatever, but Marcus had opted for a simpler strategy, being sure as hell that he would have ended up far too embarrassed to use a name like that.

‘Marcus Flavius Aquila. It’s not so difficult’ Esca said, pronouncing his full name perfectly, without the slightest hint of an accent and with smug pride all across his face.

It almost looked like he was taking pleasure in pronouncing it so perfectly, letting the letters roll down his tongue as if he was been a native speaker.

‘I hate you’ Marcus said, laughing.

‘Wait, what? Did I say it wrong?’ Esca replied.

And that mask of pride slipped down immediately.

‘No, no. It’s just that you don’t have the slightest hint of an accent. While I have been studying English forever and I still sound like an idiot’

He was not surprised to see pride shine back on Esca’s face.

‘Well, I have a natural talent, what can I say?’

The arrogant bastard.

And yet, Marcus laughed.

‘Speaking of languages, how have you become so good at them? You said you didn’t study ancient languages at school’

Esca's face became a lot more serious all at once.

Don't prod further, Marcus told himself, you want to give him time.

But he wanted to know more.

He was burning to know Esca's secrets.

But the owner of the restaurant came to call them, leading them to a table originally for four, but they had it all for themselves.

Marcus noticed the wink from the restaurant owner. And he smiled back, embarrassed.

Was it that obvious they were on a date?

Marcus found that he didn't care.

Let the whole world know, for all he cared.

They then both took the leather-bound menu and started to have a look.

But if Esca was hoping to keep his secrets for himself, he was wrong.

'Is that ok with you if we go directly to the first course?' Esca asked.

Marcus nodded. For as much as he liked that place, they were still students without an income.

They then ordered a carbonara and cannelloni with spinach and cheese.

'Vegetarian?' Marcus asked, when the waiter went away.

'I tried to be. For health and for the climate' Esca replied. Judging by the sparkle in Esca's eyes as he talked, he had the strong impression he was about to tell him everything he had always wanted to hear about the faults of intensive farming, but he didn't.

'Sooner or later I will have to try that too. But the majority of the recipes I know include meat'

'Mummy's recipes?' Esca asked, with an amused grin on his face.

'Stereotypes, aren't they?' Marcus replied, hoping to make the other feel uncomfortable.

And, as predicted, he saw Esca blush a little, a delicious pink shade on his cheekbones.

‘Don’t worry, don’t worry, I am not offended. My mother didn’t know how to cook, if I remember well, she could boil an egg and some pasta and that was it. Everything I know how to do I learnt it last summer before coming here’

‘Your mother?’ Esca asked.

He had picked up on the past tense immediately.

There we go, he thought.

Perhaps, if he told Esca his secret first, he would then volunteer more of his.

‘She died, not long after my father’

Esca’s eyes widened, but for all the rest his face was completely expression less.

Yes, I am an orphan too.

Perhaps the goddess Fortuna has, for once, dealt us a good hand, letting us meet.

‘She wasted away after my father’s death. She couldn’t cope with the pressure of the scandal that was surrounding us after his passing’

He hadn’t told a single soul any of this in such a long time.

Esca kept silent.

But his eyes were fixed on Marcus.

‘It was never really cleared how my father died. He was in the army, quite high up the chain of command. And, under his command, some military secrets were sold to foreign powers. The investigation that followed concluded that he had committed suicide out of shame. But it was never really conclusive. There were far too many variables that they didn’t consider’

But that hadn’t stopped people from making up their minds, because, after all, if the accusations were in the papers, they must be true.

The whispers.

The backstabbing.

And the pain of being isolated from the rest of the kids his age, because nobody wanted to play with the son of a traitor.

And, later, nobody wanted to be even close to the son of a traitor and one who botched his own suicide, the scars of which were still on his body.

The scars that Esca hadn't been scared of.

Marcus hadn't even noticed how his mind had travelled so far away from their present situation. Back in the past.

He hadn't even noticed how tightly he was holding the glass in his hand.

But he noticed the warmth of Esca's hand when he wrapped it around his.

They looked at each other for a moment.

Esca nodded ever so slightly.

He understood. Marcus was certain that Esca, of all people in the big, bad world, understood the cold in his chest every time he thought about his past.

And Marcus felt less alone.

'I learnt Latin and Greek in my spare time. They'

Marcus watched Esca hesitate, for a moment. He watched him take a deep breath before finally adding:

'Became a constant, while I navigated the foster care system. They gave me an escape route to another world. Another time'

Something tugged at Marcus' heart at the note of sadness in Esca's voice.

But he was also happy. Esca had finally volunteered a secret of his life, something Cottia hadn't already told him.

And, just like Esca had done, Marcus wanted to cheer him up.

'Oh, Ancient Greek too, I see'

'I am a well-read Barbarian, what can I say' Esca replied, with a cheeky smile as he took a sip of his wine.

Yes, he was well read.

And so many other things.

'Achilles or Odysseus?' Esca then asked.

'What do you mean?'

'Which hero do you prefer?'

'I wish I could say Odysseus' Marcus said, moving his glass left and right, letting his drink slush here and there.

'Why?'

'Because he is cool and cunning. But I am definitely more like Achilles, stubborn till the end'

'Yes, I can see that. Pigheadedly stubborn' Esca said.

Marcus' brain short-circuited when he saw Esca lick his lips.

'What about you?' he managed to ask.

'Patroclus, for sure'

'The armour-bearer? But he was not an option'

'No, true. But he is the most honourable and reasonable of all the Greeks. He changed the course of the war for love of his people and of his companion. Is there anything more honourable than that?' Esca replied, his eyes heavy on Marcus' face.

'No, I guess there isn't' Marcus replied, feeling himself blush.

Time flew past, laughing in the face of Marcus' prayers for it to stop, to give him a little bit more time to enjoy Esca's company away from everything.

Past, present and future.

For a brief moment, they had been suspended in space, in a little bubble of their own.

But time didn't listen, and before Marcus knew it, it was time to pay their bill and go.

As they slowly walked to the bus stop, they didn't say a word to each other, but the silence wasn't oppressive.

He almost jumped out of his skin when Esca's frozen hand closed tightly around his own.

Marcus turned his head to him, but Esca was looking away.

Give him time, he thought.

But even that simple, little touch let warm bloom in Marcus' chest.

They were still hand in hand as they reached their residence.

And Esca's hand slipped again into his own the moment they managed to reach the top of the stairs.

But now, surely, it was time to say goodbye.

Any moment now, Esca would kiss the top of his head and rush back to his room.

But Esca didn't do any of these.

'Well' Marcus said, lowering his hand to their still joined hands and then back up to Esca's eyes.

He was about to say good night, but the fire he saw burning in Esca's eyes stopped him from uttering a single sound.

'Marcus' Esca said.

Still hand in hand, Esca stepped closer into Marcus' space.

Even the sound of his voice was intoxicating.

'Yes?'

'Marcus' he said once more.

Marcus could now feel Esca's warm breath on his face.

Esca's eyes were fixed on his lips.

'Would you.... are you...?'

'You don't have to ask' Marcus replied.

It took all his energy to stay still, as Esca's hand finally let go of his hand, just so that he could move it together with its twin to cup Marcus' neck and lowering Marcus' head gently a little further down, so that their foreheads were now touching.

And, in the span of one more deep breath, Esca finally kissed him on the lips once more.

Gently. A soft kiss at first.

One more, for good measure.

Marcus, responding in kind to anything Esca was willing to give him, remained mostly still, slowly passing his arms around his waist.



But the fire was burning under his skin.

His desire was stirring, and so was Esca's.

'Esca...' he managed to say, surprising himself to still have enough breath in him, considering how everything, from his chest to his toes seemed to be on fire.

'Yes?' Esca asked back, his face still so close to Marcus.

His hands still on his neck, branding him.

'We should....' Marcus indicated in the direction of their rooms.

'We don't have to though. We can...'

'Open the door Marcus' Esca said, his voice so steadfast that sent a shiver of pleasure down his spine.

He fumbled for a moment with the keys.

But the door finally opened.

## Chapter End Notes

Pardon the cliffhanger, I promise that next chapter will be NSFW xD In all honesty, the NSFW part should have been in this chapter too, but I have not been sleeping very well and I want to make it justice instead of writing something silly.

I am curious, do people generally prefer top Marcus or top Esca? Just curious XD

# Tha Gaol Agam Ort

## Chapter Summary

After a lovely dinner, the boys share the night in Marcus' room.

## Chapter Notes

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

Marcus let Esca into his room before turning around to close the door.

He took a deep breath, his hands shaking so much on the door handle that for a moment he was worried he was going to drop the keys.

Esca was in his room.

In his space.

He trusted him enough to follow him.

And Marcus knew now that Esca wanted him as much as he still wanted Esca.

That knowledge was just too much.

As he finally gathered the courage to turn back, he saw Esca standing in the room, looking around himself, surely filing back in his clever mind all the details and pieces of information about Marcus he could gather, from the bed left unmade to the prints on the walls purchased at several different Comicon to even the light projector on his bedside table he sometimes used to make the nights less dark.

Somehow thought, that night, he knew he was not going to needed.

The only light he was going to need now was that in Esca's eyes.

'Esca' Marcus heard himself say in a breathless voice.

He needed to see his face.

Esca finally turned back to him.

Right there and then, Marcus' breath died in his chest at the open, vulnerable look in Esca's eyes.

They looked open and watery as Esca smiled at him for a brief moment, his lips quivering a little.

Marcus didn't have the courage to move a muscle as he watched Esca's eyes take all of him in one, long look.

Esca then opened his lips, only to close them again, suddenly uncertain.

Tell me, please tell me what you are thinking.

I am here.

I will follow you everywhere.

But then, he opened them again only to whisper:

'Tha Gaol Agam Ort'

Marcus wasn't fully certain, but those words sounded like some form of Gaelic all harsh sounds. And yet, said in such breathless voice full of emotions, they were the sweetest sound Marcus was ever going to hear in any language.

'I don't know what that means' he said, trying not to let the storm in his heart show too much.

He didn't know the words.

And yet, deep down, he suspected he knew what they meant.

Esca lifted his eyes back up to Marcus' and, smiling brightly this time, he said once again:

'Tha Gaol Agam Ort'

Over and over again, Esca repeated those words.

Repeating it as if it was a mantra.

Repeating it as if the enchantment was freeing him of a heavy weight on his chest.

And his smile was widening on his face.

Marcus couldn't stand there any longer.

He rushed to him, closed the distance between their bodies and, after gently cupping Esca's face with his hands, he finally, finally kissed him with all the hunger he felt for Esca.

He was overjoyed when he felt Esca surge against him, meeting his hunger with the same lust. The same desire, pressing urgently against Marcus.

Marcus was amazed by his complete inability to stop.

He wanted more, so much more, but even just that, just that urgent, violent kissing in the middle of his room felt like sex.

He couldn't stop, not even for a second.

He was burning. His mind, his heart, his soul.

Was that how love felt like?

He moaned loudly when Esca's cold hands touched the fevered skin of his back.

'May I?' he asked, his forehead against Marcus'.

'Yes' he murmured back.

It was almost painful to separate himself from Esca, even for just that brief moment to allow him to take Marcus' jumper off and discard it to the floor.

He blushed as he saw Esca look at him and lick his lips instinctively.

In the blink of an eye, Esca took his own jumper off and, as he closed once more the distance between them, the drag of fevered skin against fevered skin made them both groan in pleasure.

Marcus' body arched as hot shivers went down his spine as Esca nuzzled at his neck while his right hand took Marcus' perked up nipple and rolled it between his thumb and index finger.

'Sensitive, aren't we?' Esca whispered, probably meaning it to sound cheeky, but Marcus could only hear the need in his voice.

'Yes' Marcus replied, laughing, as pleasure, love and happiness rushed over him.

He had come to Britain to leave his pain behind.

He had never dared to hope he could find love.

'God Esca' he moaned, as Esca lowered his head down enough to take his other nipple in between his lips, grazing it very lightly with his teeth

'Tell me what you want' Esca murmured against his skin

'Everything you want' Marcus said, hiding his hands in Esca's hair.

He knew that he would have said yes to anything. Everything. As long as it was with Esca.

'I asked you first' he heard Esca chuckled.

Then Esca lifted his eyes to meet Marcus.  
That smile Marcus saw before was still there.

'Do you trust me?' Esca said.

'Yes'

'Lead me to your bed then' Esca said, his voice so hoarse and full of emotions that Marcus wasn't certain he could hold on much longer.

They both stripped themselves of their remaining clothes and then Marcus, his heart thumping a mad rhythm against his ribs, took Esca's hand, leading him through the few steps to reach the bed.

They laid down, facing each other and, slowly, enjoying the pleasure of each simple movements, they got together, languidly kissing each other. Languidly letting each other's hands studying the maps of their bodies, separate and as one.

Esca moaned against Marcus' lips when Marcus hand caress his straining member.

Marcus arched as Esca tugged lightly as his erection.

But, soon, the hunger and the lust surged once more and Esca, as nimble as ever, pushed Marcus down on the bed, climbing on top of him, his legs on either side of his body. Marcus knew that, if he could exist in one place, in one time, for the rest of eternity, he knew that he would pick that place, lying on an unmade bed under Esca's naked body.

'Yes' Marcus murmured without even thinking, as Esca pinned his arms down above his head.

'I have imagined this so many times. You have no idea' Esca said, lowering his head to kiss Marcus' lips, his cheeks, his forehead.

Yes, yes, I have an idea because it's exactly what happened to me, he wanted to say. He wanted Esca to know the full extent of his desire. The force of his lust.

But he couldn't, not when all his strength was required to keep himself from coming like a damn youth at his first experience and Esca kissed him once more.

'Do you trust me?' Esca asked again.

'Yes'

'Do you have any...'

'In the drawer' Marcus muttered before his breath got caught one more.

Esca smiled before getting off him and off the bed.

Marcus admired the strength of his body, the firmness of him, as he rummaged in the first drawer of his chest of drawers to find a bottle of lube and a box of condoms.

'How is your leg?' Esca asked then, standing there, naked, coating his fingers.

'Fine, fine' Marcus replied.

His leg was the last thing on his mind as Esca joined him back on the bed, lying with his chest to Marcus' back.

'Breath in, Marce' Esca whispered, starting to nuzzle his neck once more.

Marcus smiled at hearing his name in the vocative case in Latin.

Leave it to Esca to show off his Latin knowledge even in a situation like that.

He did as instructed, breathing in deeply.

The whole room smelled of them coming together.

The whole room smelled of sex.

As he breathed out, Marcus felt Esca's finger breached him.

'Esca' Marcus cried out.

'Tha Gaol Agam Ort' Esca said, nibbling at his lobe.

'Tha Gaol Agam Ort, Marce'

Esca's finger was soon joined by another.

In and out. In and out. Esca moved them wisely, dragging so much pleasure out of Marcus' body as he scissored them inside of him.

Marcus cried out once more when Esca hit that spot, that little, sweet, sweet spot that made everything explode behind Marcus' eyes.

With the limited range of movements left at Marcus' disposal, he moved his head enough so that Esca could kiss him deeply.

'More' Marcus moaned.

'Please, Esca'

'Yes' Esca said.

Marcus shouted his name once more as Esca finally entered him.

Esca took it gently, taking his sweet time penetrating him slowly, savouring every little inch of Marcus he could get.

Marcus' eyes burnt at the feeling of finally, finally being so close to Esca.

Finally knowing, that with all their hurt, with all their past, Esca loved him.

'More' he could only manage to say. He brought his hand around, hoping to touch Esca's hip and encourage him to go faster.

He needed to feel all of Esca's passion.

'Yes' Esca replied.

Esca gripped Marcus' arm, leading it back to Marcus' chest, closing their hands fisted together about Marcus' heart.

'You feel what you do to me?' he asked, sure that Esca could feel his made heartbeat.

'Yes' Esca breathed out, as his thrusts became quicker. Deeper. Faster.

'Can you feel mine?' Esca said. His chest so close Marcus' back.

For a moment, Marcus couldn't be sure where his heartbeat fished and where Esca's started.

'Come for me, Marce' Esca whispered, biting lightly on top of Marcus' ear, as he abandoned Marcus' hand on his chest to let his own hand travel down to Marcus' member.

When Esca's hand wrapped around his member, trusting up and down especially right underneath the head, Marcus' world exploded in a million colours.

He came, spilling all over Esca's hand and on the sheet.

'Marcus' Esca cried out once more, curling himself against Marcus' body.

One last thrust, and Esca came too, deep down inside Marcus.

Sated, pleased and full of emotions too strong for Marcus to even fully comprehend, they cleaned themselves and cuddled up together under the duvet.

‘You will still be here when I wake up tomorrow?’ Marcus murmured, as he could feel sleep starting to make his eyes heavy.

‘Yes. I will be right here’ Esca replied.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this! Do let me know if you have any feedback.

Tha Gaol Agam Ort, as far as google translate tells me, means I love you in Scottish Gaelic.

There will be a proper love confession in the next couple of chapters :)



# Gentle mornings

## Chapter Summary

The boys wake up after their night together.

## Chapter Notes

Apologies for the short chapter, but this was really just meant to be a cute, fluffy excuse to have some post-sex cuddles :)

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

Esca woke up early, as usual. His stubborn body, and even more stubborn mind, had decided a long time ago that he was doomed never to sleep in. He was always active, ready for action, because, if you are ready for them, troubles or dangers won't surprise you and it will hurt less. Normally, he would toss his duvet away, quickly scrub his face and body before making his way to university.

But that early morning, with the first rays of sunshine filtering through the curtains, something was different.

That morning, Marcus was asleep in his bed. He was still there, lying next to him.

That thought made him smile.

Marcus had turned around in the night, so he was now facing Esca. He had one arm under the pillow and the other tossed around Esca's waist.

It was a warm gesture.

It was a possessive.

Almost as if, after a night when he had relinquished all control to Esca, in his sleep he had found back the strength to make his claim on Esca.

It should have freaked him out.

The constant voice of doom in Esca's head should have been screaming loudly in his mind, telling him to run, because this was getting more serious.

More dangerous.

It should have made his legs weak and his heart cold with fear.

But, that morning, everything was quiet.

Peaceful.

Everything was soft.

The only things in Esca's head was the regular rhythm of Marcus' breathing and the memories of the night before.

Marcus' heat.

Marcus' voice.

Marcus's naked body against his.

Esca had to bite his lower lip to stop himself from sighing.

He brought his attention back to the moment.  
And to the young man sleeping in front of him.

Esca decided that, perhaps, his constant early wakeups were not actually so bad, as, that morning, they allowed him to take his time to study Marcus' face, without being caught by his ever watching, ever attentive, green eyes.

Sleep was kind to Marcus, it made him look younger, taking away some of the worry lines, that, for as much as he tried to hide them, were always there.

Now he knew why. Now Esca knew that Marcus was haunted by his past as much as he was.

He smiled. He shouldn't have been happy at that thought, nobody should wish something like what had happened to Marcus on his worst enemy.

But the facts were in the past, what had happened happened, and now they were both just dealing with the aftermaths.

So yes, Esca was happy. Maybe he was not alone anymore. He had always had Cottia, but she had moved forward already, ghosts didn't haunt her present or her future.

They had haunted Esca's for a long time but, maybe, in the dim like of dawn, they were finally receding.

Esca continued his examination, slowly passing his eyes over his cheeks, his nose. And on his lips.

His nice, soft lips.

Slowly, trying not to wake Marcus, Esca lifted his hand.

He wanted to touch.

‘You never sleep much, do you?’ Marcus’ voice started him.

Esca lowered his hand immediately, blushing furiously, even though Marcus was still keeping his eyes closed.

But a little cheeky smile was appearing on his face.

‘No, I guess not’ Esca mumbled, wishing to cover his face with the nearest pillow, but managed to fight the urge.

Right there and then, Marcus opened his eyes.

And there was a fear in them.

Cute, Esca thought. Too early and not much coffee in his system, and there was Marcus, completely naked, vulnerable and with his defences down.

‘Are you ok?’

Esca then lifted his hand one more and placed two fingers over Marcus’ lips.

‘You always worry too much about others, don’t you?’ he said, trying to replicate the same amused voice Marcus had used.

But it was not the right moment to be amused.

‘Esca’ Marcus whispered, frowning a little.

He still wanted, and deserved, an answer.

‘I am ok’ Esca said, in a whisper, which seemed to help Marcus, who relaxed back on the pillow.

But there was more he deserved to hear.

The night before, he had told Marcus he loved him.

But he had done so in a language he knew Marcus wouldn’t understand.

It had been the language his father had insisted on him learning, even though he barely used it, because he had said that it was the language of their ancestors, the language that connected them with who they were.

And thus, when it mattered most, he had to use it.

It was truer. More direct. For him.

But not for Marcus.

‘Marcus, I’ he started, looking down at Marcus’ neck and, even lower, at his chest. Everywhere to try to avoid his eyes.

‘Are you staying?’ Marcus said, his voice a little shaken.

‘Of course’

That was not even a question anymore. He knew he would stay at Marcus' side for as long as he would let him.

And it was terrifying, it was making his head spin and his breath itch in his chest.

But he wanted to try it.

‘Then that it’s all that matters’ Marcus then said, passing his arm back around Esca’s waist and pulling him close.

Marcus was all around him now.

His heat. His breath. Even his heartbeat.

It was intoxicating.

‘Rest now. I will make us breakfast in a bit’  
Esca smiled against Marcus’ skin and closed his eyes.

Perhaps, Esca could sleep a little longer after all.

## Chapter End Notes

I promise that a proper love confession is coming :)

# The words

## Chapter Summary

The end of term is coming.

And Esca still needs to tell Marcus three important words.

## Chapter Notes

This is pure fluff :)

Enjoy :)

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

The end of term was coming, Esca thought, one evening as he and Marcus made their way home from the library, having spent a fair chunk of the night with other, tired looking students, pouring their heart and souls in their last essays before the Holidays. They also had their extra task, having been given a particularly obscure oration by Cicero, just because their sadists of language seminar tutors were probably taking all their pleasures on them and leaving the other, less language adroit students in peace.

But yes, the end of term was coming, which meant that they were going to have to separate for a while. They hadn't talked much about their plans, but Esca imagined that Marcus was probably going back to Rome for the almost three weeks of break they were going to have. For the past few days, he had been going on and on about all the new food establishments he was planning on checking out with Lutorius, about this Pandoro cake, or whatever it was called, that he wanted to stuff his face with, and how beautiful the city was in the winter.

And he was at it again.

'It doesn't snow, not really, but, if you are lucky, in December you get these lovely days of pure blue skies and sunshine. It still cold as hell, but you can go around town and enjoy the lights on the ruins and' everybody seems happy'

'Are you sure you are not just seeing your memories through rose tinted glass? I am sure people in December are probably going around stressed out of their eyeballs to finish up their Christmas presents' Esca replied, as they stepped on the bus home.

Marcus laughed.

For all the gods in the sky, there was no sound Esca enjoyed more.

‘You know’ Marcus continued, as they sat side by side in the quiet bus (except for the two drunk guys coming back from downtown, who were singing “I am walking on sunshine” completely offkey)

‘You could check it yourself if my memories are distorted or not’

‘What are you on about?’ Esca asked him, frowning, as a very pleased -with-himself-smile appeared on Marcus’ face.

‘You could come to Rome with me. I know the flights around Christmas are super expensive, but I have been saving up lately, I can help you cover the expense’

Esca lowered his eyes from Marcus’ excited gaze.

Hearing his, what, partner? boyfriend....well, his Roman, so excited about sharing his past, his memories with him in the city where he grew up warmed his heart.

But there was one little problem.

‘It’s a very nice idea but’

‘So, it’s settled. We can’

‘But’ Esca said, grabbing Marcus' gloved up hand and giving it a squeeze.

‘I don’t know if I am ready to see your uncle again. And I really think he is not that ready to see me again that soon anyway’

‘Ah, don’t worry about my uncle. He will be happy to have a little bit more company in the house, he always says how it’s pleasant to have young people around’ Marcus replied, lifting his shoulders.

‘Trust me, not mine’ Esca replied.

‘Well, I will be happy to have your company around Christmas’ Marcus said, his face, half covered by his red scarf, going suddenly more serious. He had stressed the word I as much as humanly possible.

Gods, why was he making it much harder than it already was? He would have loved to spend the holidays with Marcus, and in a place like Rome, where they could have gone around, nerding out in the museums, in front of the monuments that, for now, he had only visited through Google Street View and the likes.

He could picture it.

If he could have gone back in time to tell his younger self that things do get better, he would have described exactly that picture to the young man in the depths of depression.

But he didn't want to risk it by rushing it. Marcus' uncle was the only family he had left, and he had made it very clear that, well, to put it with a typically British understatement, he didn't like Esca very much.

Esca took a deep breath.

Hopefully, there were going to be other Christmases that they could be spending together.

'Maybe next time Marcus' he said, hoping that Marcus would understand that he was not refusing him.

He was just trying to be extra careful about him.

For them.

Damn. There was a them.

And he wasn't scared.

Fortuna, the goddess of good fortune hadn't always been the most generous with Esca, and, as she had already smiled at him giving him Marcus when he least expected it, he wasn't too keen on pushing her further.

'What are you going to do then?' Marcus asked.

Yes, what was he going to do?

He could go and visit his previous foster carers, but he didn't like the sound of that much.

'I am probably going to stay in the halls. Cottia and I are planning to get a lot of take out on Christmas Day and have a party'

Marcus didn't comment, but Esca could see that he was not best pleased at the sound of that.

Well, Esca and Cottia had spent a lot of festivities like that before. It was nothing new, and, for as sad as it could sound to others, he always found much comfort in it.

Marcus exhaled loudly before saying, with a defeated tone:

'Promise me that we will video call every now and again though'

Esca smiled.

'Promise' he said.

'And promise me that you and Cottia will come with me, Lutorius, Liathan and his girlfriend to Bath next week'

'Wait, what?' he said.

'I thought it was cancelled'

‘Well, we missed the trip with the International Student Society, but we are organising it ourselves. Lutorius is renting a minivan or something and Liathan said that he has found a nice hostel’

‘Are you sure we can trust Liathan? His head seems to be up in the clouds most of the time’ Esca replied, frowning, already foreseeing disasters.

He had been in his fair share of horrible accommodation, so, if possible, he would rather avoid being bitten by bedbugs.

‘I am sure. Come on, it will be fun’ Marcus said, giving him a little, light punch on the thigh.

To which Esca responded with two light punches on Marcus’ good leg.

And Marcus did the same.

Till they both chuckled like schoolboys.

‘Are you sure Lutorius is ok with me and Cottia coming along?’

‘Yes, I have talked to him multiple times. He is as cool as a cucumber, is that how you say it?’

‘Are you sure, sure?’

‘Come on Esca’

‘Ok, ok, I promise’ he said.

It could be his chance to build up a bridge with the two boys that, perhaps, could turn into friends.

But, more importantly, it could be his chance to tell Marcus how he felt.

This time, in a clear language he could understand.

The day of the trip, a cold but luckily just overcast Saturday mid-December.

‘Wake up’ Marcus said, softly, kissing the tip of his ear.

‘How are you awake already?’ Esca said, trying to make himself smaller against Marcus’ chest and wrapping the duvet closer around him.

‘I know right, this usually never happens. But we got to go, come on’ Marcus said, grabbing the duvet before throwing it away.



If Esca hadn't wanted to stay in bed a little longer, he would have found all that excitement quite endearing.

'You know, you are an evil, evil man when you want to' he said, as he finally stood up to get ready while Marcus, just in his underwear, quickly shuffled to his room to get some clothes.

Cottia arrived a little later, bringing croissants.

'The best in town' she said, putting them on the table as Marcus sorted out coffee and tea.

Esca had known ever since opening the door of their residence to get that she was quite nervous too.

Without saying a word, he squeezed her shoulder a little.

It was going to be ok.

Lutorius arrived around 8 in the morning with an old but rather sturdy looking car that could seat up to eight people.

Liathan and his girlfriend were already sat in the car and, instead of getting out, he just opened the window and said out loud:

'Morning!'

Lutorius, who, instead, had gotten out of the car, rolled his eyes and whispered:

'He is insufferably happy at the moment'

Then he looked seriously at both Esca and Cottia.

Ok, Marcus had said that he had spoken with him, that he had "forgiven" Esca for all the trouble caused.

It was the moment of truth.

He saw his shoulders slump a little as he stretched his hand to Cottia and said:

'May I help you with your bag miss?'

Esca stopped himself from smiling at the surprised expression on his friend's face.

But Cottia soon seemed to relax too and, passing him her rather heavy bag, she said:

'Thank you'

'I also hear that you are a good driver. I might need someone like you to help me navigating as I panic a little at big roundabouts. Driving on your side is so hard'

'Well, not really'

'Yes, it is, I automatically go for the gear stick on the other side and'

Esca disconnected his mind from their conversation about cars, as he had never cared much for them, but he was glad to see that the two of them seemed to be hitting it off ok enough in that strange social experiment that Marcus seemed to have engineered to have everybody happy by the end of term.

'So, do we have an itinerary?' he asked Marcus as they moved into the car.

'Oh yes, we are going to hit the museums and the Roman ruins. I don't think I have ever seen any actual curse tablets before and then I have the names of a couple of great cafes that shouldn't steal all our money...according to TripAdvisor anyway' Marcus said, enthusiasm dripping out of him.

Esca relaxed against the car seat.

He couldn't be glad for what had happened, for the pain that Marcus had been put through and all.

But, right there and then, in that car with a bunch of people he was starting to feel closer and closer too, he thought that, perhaps, sometimes nice things can bloom from tragedies. Yes, he was going to do it. That day was the day he finally would tell Marcus how he felt.

But the words didn't come.

Not that Esca hadn't had the time, space, or romantic moments.

During their visit, there was a moment when he and Marcus had stayed behind. He could have said it then.

But Marcus had seemed to be engrossed in the history, the archaeology, even the ancient religiosity of the place, that Esca decided not to distract him from something he was clearly enjoying a lot.

There had been a moment when, Liathan and his girlfriend and Cottia and Lutorius were chatting away between themselves while they waited for a table in one of the cafés Marcus had found, that he could have very well whispered something to him.

But, every single time, his heart would start pounding in his chest and his palms would start to sweat. Not to mention the cold shivers down his spine.

He even had a moment when he told himself to screw it, Marcus could be the one to say it first, after all, he technically had already said it.

But he knew Marcus was not going to say it first. After all that had happened, Esca knew the Roman well enough, and, if he was right, he was giving Esca time and space. He was grateful for that consideration of his feelings.

And yet, paradoxically, that same consideration was weighting on his chest, as he tried to fall asleep curled up against Marcus' body in his tiny hostel bed, in which Esca had sneaked in once he knew that the other people in the room were asleep.

So, he let his chance slip by.

And the end of term, ultimately, came.

And with that, the time to say goodbye, even though those blasted words were still stuck in his throat.

'You know, you don't have to do this' Marcus told him, as they stood, side by side, waiting for the bus to take Marcus to Heathrow airport. It was early in the morning, far too early really, considering that the only things open where the chip shop further down, the one that was always open at any time of the night, and the only people around were sleepy looking construction workers and other poor travellers like them.

'I am not doing this for you' Esca replied, deflecting.

Right, exactly what you need to do, stupid Esca, he thought.

'I want to go and have breakfast at one of those airport cafes'

'What, the ones that charge you an arm and a leg for a ham and cheese croissant?'

'Exactly. A little extra for the experience of being surrounded by stressed out boomers trying to make their way to Malaga or somewhere warm' he replied.

Marcus didn't say anything at that stupid sentence.

But Esca blushed when he saw, reflected in those big, green eyes, the same love he was feeling.

Those three weeks were going to be so long. But he knew he had taken the right decision.

The journey was long, a good two hours plus.

He felt himself grow a little drowsier.

But, when Marcus' sleepy head lolled onto his shoulder, all the feeling of sleepiness were suddenly gone.

Esca lowered his head on top of Marcus' as he looked outside.

And a little smile crept up on his face.

He must have fallen asleep too, as he was suddenly awakened by the rough voice of the driver shouting:

'Heathrow Airport Terminal 5. Everybody off'

Marcus was still sound asleep.

'Marcus, wake up' he said, kissing the top of the Roman's head.

'Five more minutes' he mumbled.

'If I could give you five more minutes I would, but the driver looks about to skin us if we don't get a move on' he whispered, keeping an eye out on the sour face of the man.

'Oh, we are here' Marcus said, finally opening his sleepy eyes.

'Come, time for another coffee, my treat'

They made their way in the terminal and, as Marcus went to check in his luggage, Esca ordered them a couple of lattes to go.

'Thank you' Marcus said, as he passed him the drink.

They spent a little time wandering around a little, looking at the windows of the shops around them.

But then, before Esca could fully, their time was up. Marcus needed to go through the security checks now if he wanted to arrive to his flight in good time.

'So, this is it' Esca said, stopping near enough to see that there was not the most enormous queue for security yet.

'Yes, I guess it is' Marcus said.

Then, gently, Marcus took his hand and said:

'Esca, I'

'I love you'

For a moment, Esca was more surprised than Marcus himself, who was looking at him with blown wide eyes.

The words, just like that, had come out of him naturally, without the need to push himself hard, without the need to worry so much.

A huge weight light from his chest, as Esca smiled to Marcus and to himself.

He loved Marcus. He loved that stupid, far too kind and selfless Roman.

And he was proud of it.

Life, perhaps, could be much simpler than he thought.

The surprise in Marcus' eyes left space to a sweet, gentle smile as he hugged him tight.

‘I love you too’

## Chapter End Notes

There might be at some point a little one shot about Esca going to Rome with Marcus.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!