



Quarts

BY
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Quartz

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What happens when childhood friends, Jet VanSickle and Apollo Clarke, meet for the first time in five years? Will feelings left unsaid spill forth in the spring thaw, or will the presence of the new season's warmth not be enough to make love bloom?

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The Ostara party was much too crowded for Jet's liking. The people at said event were rude, the selection of willing dance partners slim, and the constant correcting of their name and pronouns (but not of their newly acquired title of Lord VanSickle) had them in a slight dip of self-loathing; not quite a pit, but the start of a spiral most certainly.

It was supposed to be a happy event. Welcoming the spring and the return of warm weather. A night of dancing, drinking, and celebration. Nobody told them it was to be a type of spur of the moment debutante ball with the new, and eligible, Lord VanSickle at the middle of it.

The atmosphere inside the ballroom was stifling. The air was thick with tobacco, and the floor in some places was slippery from the spilled drinks and confetti being thrown from the upper balconies. Not to mention the glittering sycophants at every turn, thinking that if they somehow got into Jet's good graces that they would magically gain the status every one of them so desired. Yet, none of the various men and women were good enough actors to keep the thin veil of gentility completely covering the disdain that they still felt towards Jet and their transition.

Jet was used to the talk and gossip behind their back. The words whispered behind paper fans and tightly clutched gloves. The painted faces that talked about them with ruby-lipped sneers. The cloche style hats that were pulled down over eyes, and the balling of fists in fur-lined coats.

Finally, moving onto the moonlit veranda, away from the loud crowd, but still able to hear a faint string of music, Jet took a deep breath of sweet night air and looked out to the villa style gardens of the Cromwicke Estate. Dipping a gloveless finger in their practically untouched drink, they swirled it around the rim of the glass, making a mournful sound of discontent.

They stopped after their finger had grown dry, and instead scratched at their bearded cheek being careful to not smudge the dark lipstick. They were thinking maybe it was time to

have the auto pulled around, and to head home. They had people to meet with in the morning and didn't want to seem as exhausted as they felt.

They were lost deep in thought until a voice they thought long lost to the past spoke behind them.

"Jet? Is that you?" said a lovely, deep voice. Their skirts swished around their ankles as they spun to see a familiar face they thought they never would again.

"Apollo? Apollo Clarke? Is that really you? I thought you dead when you stopped returning my letters," They said, reaching out to the man as if in a dream.

"I am so sorry about the letters, I stopped receiving them when our encampment was moved. Not to mention the lack of supplies for 'non-essential' correspondences," He said embracing them. He had grown since their last meeting five years ago, and now Jet's temple rested against the shoulder their chin used to perch on.

So, he maybe hadn't gotten their last letter. Even if he had, he wouldn't have been able to reply...

Holding his hands in theirs, they stepped back to properly look at him. They could see that the military style his hair had been cropped into when he had boarded the train that fateful winter's day had grown out passed his ears since being discharged. The sweet baby blue eyes they had loved so much now held a sadness and fragility within their depths. Along with the height change, the ruddiness that had once made him look angelic as a choirboy had now settled, giving him an air of vitality and mirth to his otherwise somber features.

"I didn't even know you were back. There hadn't been a whisper of your return. When did you get in? Where are you staying?" Jet said. Their mind was a whirl of thoughts and questions.

"I arrived two days ago and I am staying with my Aunt and Uncle, the Locke's. I wanted to surprise my mother with my return also. I'm sorry I haven't contacted you yet. I've been busy recuperating from the journey and didn't want our first meeting in so long to be sub-par. You look lovely by the way. You seem to have taken to Dr. Swaim's treatments extraordinarily well. I believe you had just started when I left." At the compliment, Jet smoothed down the front of their black velvet dress, and fidgeted with the long string of pearls they wore.

"Yes, he is truly a revolutionary in his field. I haven't felt this right with myself in a long time. Who knew that a few simple injections of hormones over the years could help me so much?

"But enough about my life these past few years." Jet was quick to say. "I've been following the war closely since you joined. I heard about what's happened on the Eastern front. I can image you have some tales to tell, being that far away from home for so long."

Apollo looked at the ground with a soft, sad sort of smile, "Yes, I have many stories, more than I can tell in a single night. I also would assume that you would have a fascinating

collection of events and gossip I have missed while away.” He offered his arm to them, finally meeting their eyes fully. “Care to take a walk and trade tales?”

“I would love nothing more.” Jet said smiling. Taking his arm as Apollo started recounting the details of the three years since the letters stopped.

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The rays of midday light were streaming through the trees as Jet made their way along the dirt road. The scent of new spring was intoxicating, and the gentle motion of the thoroughbred under them was a welcome relief after their morning of placating stuffy men in an even stuffier room.

The night before had been lovely. A walk around the gardens, talking, laughing, getting to reacquaint themselves after so long spent apart. There was something so sweet in the air. Be it the newly bloomed orange blossoms and jasmine. Or the words Apollo used to describe some of the few lovely things he had seen while away. It all faded together into a memory that Jet would treasure.

As they neared the bend that would take them to the Locke’s home two greyhounds came bounding up to the road. Polly and Lolly were the Locke’s well-loved pets. For being such a skittish breed, the animals had no problems jumping around and dodging the horse’s hooves, thinking it a great game.

The Locke mansion was large and old, made with blocks of white, quartz laden granite mined from the northern part of the country. How it shimmered in the late afternoon sun. The style of the house, with it’s small windows, arches, and thick, climbing vines, made itself known to be almost four-hundred years old.

The dogs careened into the garden as Jet lead their horse to the stables. They loosened the girth straps and took out the bit, leaving Majesty with a bucket of water and a bushel of hay to keep the animal busy. Jet then made their way to the front door of the house. Stepping over Lolly and Polly, and the terror the dogs had inflicted on the front lawn.

They barely knocked twice when the door swung open to reveal Mr. Andrew Leitfoot; an older gentleman in his sixties, with a gentle face, watery, down-turned eyes, and a kind soul. He had been a fixture in the shire’s population since long before Jet was born. Originally coming to the village as a priest, he had soon, and accidentally, found the love of his life in one Peter Osborne, the local baker and painter. Andrew gave up the priesthood two years into his time in Mooreshire, but He still led the choir every Sunday.

“Jet, why it’s so good to see you darling. How has everything been? I haven’t seen you since the funeral. I hope you’re doing alright.” Mr. Leitfoot said.

Right, their Father’s funeral. The reason they were now Lord VanSickle; and everybody that had thought of them as something of an abomination previously, was now clamoring for their favor. That funeral.

“Yes, I’ve been busy trying to get affairs in order. Even on Mondays,” they noted with a tiny smile. Mr. Leitfoot let out a chuckle.

“Oh, that doesn’t matter. You are more goodhearted than half the ladies who zealously attend every service... mostly to just show off their best clothes.” Putting on a more sober expression though, he continued. “I do wish that you would maybe take the time to talk to someone though. I know you don’t have much in the way of family, but there are people here who do care for you.”

“I will be sure to do so if I feel the need.” They pursed their lips at the uncomfortable turn of the conversation, and instead asked, “do you know where I could find Mr. Clarke? We were intending to meet today you see...”

Mr. Leitfoot, getting the hint, pointed towards the stairs “He should still be up with Mr. Locke in his study. It’s up the stairs and two doors to the right until you come upon the set of pocket doors.”

“Thank you, Mr. Leitfoot,” Jet said starting up the stairs.

“And Jet?” Mr. Leitfoot called, his watery eyes holding a light like that of the pearly-gates, “Please don’t hesitate to talk to someone. We are not all the same as the status obsessed fools and tittering ninnies you have been having to deal with. Some of us do care. Don’t forget that.”

Jet felt like they were rooted to the spot under his steady gaze until suddenly, his face changed back to a more cheerful expression and waved them away.

They were so put off that when they made it to the top of the stairs, they almost walked past the doors to the study. Then, when they were about to knock, they heard voices from beyond the door.

“-I think it’s a lovely idea, but are you sure you want to do this so soon? You have only just gotten back.” That was Mr. Locke’s voice.

“The only thing that I believe kept me alive in the trenches so long, was the thought that I was going to get back to them someday. And the only way that I can assure that I won’t lose them again is by doing this.” Apollo said.

“But you are both so young. You haven’t even been in contact for at least three years. Are you sure you want to do this?” There was a heavy sigh and the sound of someone falling into a seat.

“I kept their last letter to me all these years.” Apollo said so quietly, Jet could barely hear him through the door. “I kept it in my breast pocket, over my heart. I promised myself that if I made it out alive, I would marry them. That nothing compared to the happiness I felt by just receiving letters from them.

“I wanted your advice on how to go about all this because you are like a Father to me. Especially since my own died when I was so young. I’m completely lost on how to do this, not to

mention if they say no. It's been three years since we have even spoken to each other. I would completely understand it if they have moved on, but I need to at least make my own feelings known, and try and make it so we're not kept from each other again."

His voice, and Jet's heart broke on the last word. How they had longed to hear that admission. To know that their feelings were returned, but not like this, not when he was this close to breaking, not in an eavesdropped confession.

They felt slightly sick to their stomach as they walked away from the door, numb. Everything from the last five years crashed down on them at once as they walked down the stairs; like a whirlpool dragging them down, deeper and deeper.

The boy they had loved was gone. He was replaced by a man who had seen the most wretched sins humanity could commit. Their mother had long since passed, and their father, their last bastion of protection, was gone. The last five years without a true friend had been nothing but a blur. Of going from meeting, to party, to service, to event. At every turn there were those looking at Jet as their meal ticket, like ravenous beasts, but still with that underlying disgust at who Jet was, and how they chose to present.

The fresh, outdoor air wouldn't fill their lungs. They didn't know when they had made it outside and didn't have the wherewithal to puzzle it out.

Finding a bench in the garden, they sat down. Resting their head in their hands, they took a deep, shuttering breath, and tried not to cry.

Everything crashed over them like a heavy wave. The loneliness, the isolation, the slow hollowing of their core being. Who were they anymore? When was the last time they felt well and truly alive? They had been so busy trying to survive, to just slug through the pain and anguish that they felt, that they had lost themselves.

As Jet regained their bearings, they saw Apollo jogging towards them from the house. At the sight of him, they took in their first deep breath of warm spring air. The first, it felt like, in five years.

The world, and garden, were brighter as they slowly walked towards Apollo. Picking up their pace, Jet was captivated by the reds and blues, the purples and yellows, all on a backdrop of new green. Picking up their emerald skirt, they burst into a full sprint. Feet pounding the ground with every step, and feeling truly alive with the burn in their lungs and the strain in their legs.

When within distance, Jet leapt into the arms of Apollo, fully trusting him to catch them.

"Jet? Are you alright?" Apollo said holding them. After looking at their face continued with a note of worry in his voice. "Have you been crying?"

"Yes?" They said, feeling the fresh tracks on their cheeks at the mention. "But that's not important. I- I overheard your conversation with Mr. Locke and I-,"

"Can we talk somewhere private? About... everything." He said putting them down and taking their hand to hold in his.

“Yes. Yes, I think that would be good idea.” They said, taking his hand as he led the way.

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Apollo led the two of them to an old conservatory on the Locke property. It was a structure covered in vines. The parts visible through the overgrowth though, were of a design popular about forty years ago. With it’s iron and glass construction, and it’s copper tipped peaks.

Apollo produced a key out of his pocket to unlock the door and hold it open for Jet. they stepped into the dilapidated, but cleared out room. The panes of glass not covered in foliage spread bright rainbow colors through the space, making the white flooring look like the way to The Summer Lands

While most of the room was cleared of furniture there was a wicker couch and two side tables against one of the walls. On one of these side tables was a gramophone.

“I didn’t get a chance to dance with you last night,” Apollo said walking towards the set up. “Might I remedy that now?”

A beam of pure white light hit his eyes, making them sparkle in the dimness. Jet felt their cheeks blush, and hoped their scruff helped cover it.

He offered his hand as the first few notes of Saeterjentens Sondag whispered through the air. The two waltzed around the room, every color awash over them, held tightly together, like even the smallest misstep would have the universe wrench them apart again. Every step treaded softly so as to not make them wake from this enchanting moment.

Apollo’s hand moving from Jet’s shoulder blade to the small of their back, to pull them closer yet still, and Jet’s hand moving from the outer edge of Apollo’s shoulder to instead grasp at the hair at the nape of his neck, pulling him towards them.

“I missed you, you know. Dearly.” They whispered but an inch away from his mouth, so soft as to not break the spell the lull in the music had created.

He closed the distance between them then. When the last few notes softly drifted between them and the empty space filled silence, but for the gentle rustle of trees against the glass panes, and the calls and twitters of early rising night birds.

“I know,” he said pulling away, but not going far. “I dearly missed you as well. I don’t intend on missing you again.”

“About the conversation I overheard? I really didn’t mean to, but I heard about the letter. Did you really keep it all this time? I thought you just hated me after my confession.”

“I could never hate you. I should have told you how I felt before I left, but I was scared of the rejection, and scared of where I was headed, and then you sent that letter and there wasn’t a way to send one back. To tell you I feel the same, and have for a long time.” He kissed them again then. Soft, chaste, and quick, before sinking onto a knee and pulling a small red velvet box out of his pocket. “I’m not saying we should marry immediately even if you do say yes, but after

so long of being away from you and missing you, I don't want to ever leave you like I did again. So, Jet Marie-Lloyd VanSickle, will you mar-."

"Yes!" Jet said, and then immediately flushed with embarrassment at the outburst. "Yes, I would love nothing more." They met Apollo's height, kneeling on the floor, as he slipped the ring onto their finger.

It was a loose fit, with room to grow. A ring made of silver that would eventually mold to the shape of their finger. Nothing fancy, no stones or engravings, but simply a promise to a future spent together.

The End

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