

Chapter 5

A Request From An Old Friend

As Haemon was getting up to take his lunch, he was stopped short by a single rap at the door, and a familiar voice from the other side saying “knock-knock”.

“Come in,” he replied on instinct, kicking himself for it immediately. The door swung open and the interloper, Faustus Fitch, entered, carrying a coin-sized bag.

“It’s the headshrinker!” he cried jovially upon seeing Haemon half-up from his chair. “Caught you by surprise, did we?”

“You always do.” Haemon struggled for a moment before letting himself sit back down, defeated. “You know, I’m on my lunch break.”

“That’s perfect,” Faustus said. “We won’t be interrupted by a patient.” And he limped to the client chair and took a seat (the limp was nothing new to Haemon, but had grown more pronounced since they’d last met).

Haemon indicated the coin-sized bag. “Did they give you medicine?”

“They did.” Faustus passed it to Haemon as if for inspection. “Finally. Careful, it’s powder.”

Haemon gave the bag a cursory glance and handed it back. “Good news. Listen, I need to get to lunch—”

“That’s not what I came here about,” Faustus said quickly, and suddenly a change came over him that Haemon was very familiar with by now, an intensity of the eyes, a shifting forward in the seat. It was a matter of love. “It’s a matter of love,” said Faustus.

Haemon did not bother saying anything.

“Do you remember, Hae— well, you would remember, probably better than I, ha!— about five years ago we went to that tavern by the docks, the one on Lamplighter Street with the little sign out front. Marsh’s. Remember that place? Of course, don’t even answer that, of course you do. If you recall, we were served by the landlady’s daughter, Anya Marsh— I didn’t know her name at the time, but I came to know it later, we’ll get to that soon. She was only fifteen or so, and I remember thinking she was a rather

unfortunate-looking girl. I'm not sure what it was in particular that struck me so poorly, this was five years ago, but the point is that I didn't think about her again after that, and I never went to that tavern again either, since I don't pass down that road often. Did you ever go back there? No matter. About a month ago— two months ago or a month ago I was in the district and I decided to stop in for a drink, and I was served again by Anya Marsh, and this is how I came to know her name. And my God, Hae!" Faustus was talking with a sort of reverence now, his eyes wide. "You would not believe what's happened to this girl! In those five years she's gone and turned into an absolute deity, tall and full-figured and glowing. I didn't even recognize her until she mentioned she recognized me. Well, I could hardly speak. To think such a goddess would recognize me! You do remember this girl, don't you, and how unfortunate she was? Yes, you'd never believe it was her. God knows what they've been feeding her over there. And she recognized me, lowly me, after five years!"

"I remember her," said Haemon, who recalled her as a waifish and pale youth.

"Yes!" Faustus pointed at him with a burst of excitement, as though this were news. "You see, you remember her! And she's nothing like you remember, believe you me! Oh, Anya! I was hooked from that fateful meeting. This past month, or two months, I've made it a point to go to Marsh's, and to catch her eye and to make any sort of conversation with her. It's been hard lately, I walk there, you see, and the last few weeks I've been, you know." He smiled bitterly and shifted his legs. "So I've been deprived of her, and the effects have almost killed me. It's leagues worse than my condition. I can lie down and stop thinking about my condition, but I cannot stop thinking about Anya! She has afflicted me, Hae!" He was speaking quite fast now. "And every day I'm afraid that I'm too late in it all, that her sappy little peasant has already taken her away— there's this sappy little boy of a peasant who I've seen her with, it's very disgusting— and I haven't been able to check in on her at all, and so how do I know if she's even still there?"

Haemon had been listening with increasing distress. "You've never met with this girl outside of the tavern?"

Faustus waved a hand dismissively. "No. That's not my point. I'm not even close to my point, so please just listen. I know I've been calling this peasant boy 'sappy', but I do

worry about him, and why do I worry about him? Simply, his age. He's twenty or twenty-one, or maybe nineteen, it becomes hard to tell sometimes, but the point is that he can speak to Anya as a peer, he shares the careless *naïveté* that I somehow find compelling in her yet repulsive in him, and the fact of the matter is, Hae, that I'm nearly ten years her senior, and really past my prime in many ways."

Haemon frowned. If Faustus was past his prime, then it followed that he, the same age as Faustus, was also past his prime, and he resented the implication.

"I feel," Faustus continued, "that if you held me up to this peasant boy (his name is Bil, by the way— stupid name), if you held me up to him in comparison, any twenty-year-old girl with half a beating heart would gravitate towards the younger of us, would she not? Girls that age are about aesthetics, and I can't blame them, I was like that myself. And the problem with young men is that they're very impulsive, they propose marriage just like that, and my fear is that this Bil will get it into his head that he's going to propose to my Anya (yes, I'm calling her 'my' Anya, save your laughter), and that he's going to do it and that she, poor thing, is going to accept. And be condemned to a life of peasantry!" He fairly spat out the last word, surprising Haemon, who had been present on numerous occasions of him claiming that he loved the farming class. "Her hands would be ruined, Hae. I didn't even tell you about her hands. I'm afraid they'll be ruined soon already, from washing dishes and scrubbing floors. They're lovely, like lily-white gloves. The thought of her hands having to grip a hoe all day, or dig through the dirt, or reach into a sheep to birth a lamb— yes, I see you going pale, exactly. Exactly. That is exactly how I feel."

It was merely the image of lambing that had flipped Haemon's stomach over, but he didn't mention it.

"But to go back to aesthetics," Faustus continued. "There's no chance that I can win her over with mine, we're far beyond that point. I was thinking about this last night— I was up at three in the morning again, my whole leg was on fire, and I thought to myself, 'not only am I an old man, but a cripple...!' And I cried, I'm ashamed to admit. I can't even bear to look at my own foot anymore, I can't imagine any woman wanting to look at it."

A growing impatience and sense of vague offense (as well as midday hunger) was gnawing at Haemon, and he said rather meanly, “yes, I’m surprised you could even cram it into your shoe.”

Faustus picked up on the malice in his tone and immediately bristled, raising his voice all of a sudden. “What am I supposed to do? Buy a larger pair just for the one foot? Go around with one giant shoe, looking like a buffoon? Please!”

“What did you come here for?” Haemon said firmly, but Faustus had worked himself up and was not quite done.

“Why do they call it a rich man’s disease? How can they call it that, when I don’t have a token in my pocket? Answer me that, why do they call it that? How dare they call it that?”

“I don’t know.”

Faustus had not actually been looking for an answer anyways, and was now done. He let out a small sigh and fell quiet. He looked very tired.

“What did you want to see me for?” Haemon repeated.

“You’re a man of psychology,” Faustus said after a pause. “You understand how to make people do things or feel some way or another simply by talking to them, and massaging their brains in such a way that they feel as though they’ve come to their conclusions on their own, and not by your hand. It’s a very valuable skill. And I’ve come to you because I’m hoping to use this psychology on poor Anya to win her over to my side, to— to make her think that I’m— ah, to hell with it, to trick her! To trick her and fool her away from this peasant boy, to make her dispose of him and send him away so we never have to worry about him again. Is that cruel? I can tell from your face you think it’s cruel.” A desperate light had entered his eyes. “And maybe it is cruel, and may God punish me for it! But you don’t understand what I live through, the flames at night, the flames when I try to walk! You might say that even now I am being punished, that even now I am in Hell! Can you judge a man who is already in Hell, who has been driven mad by his suffering? If you could just lend me a book, so that I could learn—”

Haemon stood up abruptly. His hands were trembling. “Is that what you think of my profession?”

Faustus had clearly not been expecting this reproach, and fell silent at once, his lips frozen slightly parted.

“You think I’m in the business of *tricking* people? That I went to university for six years to *trick* people? Like a cheap stage show?” Haemon could feel blood rising to his cheeks. Faustus began to protest, but he ran him down. “And you think you can— *use* psychology to somehow ‘fool’ (in your words!) this girl, as if it’s *hypnotism* of some kind, as if it’s magic!” Haemon strode toward the door and opened it with a violent yank. He was gravely offended.

“I am on my lunch break,” he said severely, jerking his head at the open doorway. “If you’d be so kind.”

Faustus, mortified, scrambled to get out of his seat, stammering apologies, and accidentally dropped his little bag of medicine, which hit the ground in a tiny puff of powder and prompted even more ado, all while Haemon stood by the open door and waited for him with an icy glare. But then something happened that took them both quite by surprise: in his haste to get up and exit, Faustus stumbled and knocked his afflicted leg very hard against the side of Haemon’s desk, and the impact was such a painful shock that he yelped like a stricken dog and fell to the ground nearly face-first, his arms not coming up in time to catch him. There was a great thud of body on stone. Haemon immediately rushed to his friend’s side, horrified. No injury had been sustained (save for inevitable bruising), but the wind had been thoroughly knocked out of Faustus, and he reached out frantically and clung to Haemon’s waistcoat like a scared child, his eyes bulging and watery. Haemon let him cling, and in fact grabbed him and maneuvered him upright, aggrievedly chastising him the whole time and commanding him to breathe! Breathe in! Breathe in!

Eventually the shallow gasps slowed and Faustus was able to speak again, and Haemon walked him out of the room, still supporting him about the shoulders with a firm and worried grasp.

“Can I tell you something,” Faustus said softly, his voice sounding torn up somehow. “It was only in this last hour, right as I decided to pay you a visit, that I thought

up my little 'plan'. It was not a fully-formed thought. I do not think about your profession that way, Hae Glass."

"It's alright," Haemon said.

"I'd like to drink with you, sometime. It doesn't have to be at Marsh's. Come to my street sometime."

"You really shouldn't be drinking with your condition."

"*Fie!*" Faustus suddenly cried, and jerked himself away from Haemon's hands. "Fie on my condition! Next thing you'll be telling me I shouldn't eat meat, either, or beans or fish! No!" He began thrashing down the hallway at as fast a clip as he could go, fairly hopping on one foot, supporting himself against the wall. "No! You're going to come to my street, Hae, and we're going to get drunk, and that will be the end of it! Good-bye!" And he rounded the corner and left, his thumping strides fading away into nothing.

Haemon smiled a melancholy little smile, and checked his pocket watch. He had zero minutes of lunch break left.