

Jordan Miller

### The Artist and the Muse

Séverin Courtois was a strange artist. Not for his subject matter, as he was but one human portrait artist in a plentiful sea. Not for his chosen medium, the tried and true oil paints. Not even for his technique, which many often compared to that of classical art, reminiscent of the Renaissance greats. On all other accounts, Séverin Courtois was just another painter, and everything he did stuck to the books, the roots of the artform. Where his oddities lied was, in fact, with his models. Or rather, his *sole* model. For the last three years of his artistic career, Séverin had made only one man the subject of his works: Micah Belcher, his beloved muse.

It wasn't like Séverin hadn't struck fame prior to his unconventional partnership with Micah, though. His work had been propelled into international relevance just seven years ago, all thanks to the wonders of social media and a viral set of self-portraits. The works themselves weren't anything out of the ordinary, but the internet was captivated by their painstaking

attention to detail. Every pore, every fine hair, even the ridges of the fingernails—not a single microscopic feature was forgotten, earning the artist a great deal of awe and admiration. Even after the social buzz wore off, he had garnered himself a considerable audience in the artistic world. In fact, Micah himself was such a follower, and he had practically *worshiped* the artist's body of work since that first moment of Séverin's online virality. Which is why, when Séverin first offered him the infamous position of his full-time model, Micah wholeheartedly thought he was joking.

The two met in a rather unassuming location, but in such a dramatic way that anyone who witnessed the event would find it hard to forget. Micah had been tragically down on his luck that month. He was freshly out of college, riddled with a disgusting and frankly unethical amount of student debt that put him far behind on rent payments. To nobody's surprise, his degree in Art History had yet to land him a single job thus far. Not even his “prestigious” alma mater, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, could make up for his lack of experience, it seemed. His card declining at the nearby coffee shop had nearly been his breaking point if not for the kind stranger behind him, who overheard his predicament and offered to pay for him. When Micah turned around to profusely thank his benefactor, he nearly keeled over from shock when the man shouted, "*Mon dieu!* You are exactly what I've been searching for!" When the shop fell silent, he cleared his throat in slight embarrassment at his outburst before offering a brief apology. Then immediately, he directed his focus back to a stunned Micah.

"Please, allow me just a few moments of your time," he pleaded, a French accent thickly coating his perfect English. "You will not regret it." Micah agreed with a nod, still recovering from the shock. The man might have been a little strange, but he was still generous enough to buy his order. It was the least he could do to show his gratitude.

He was also ridiculously handsome and *ridiculously* Micah's type in men, but that was certainly not a factor. Not at all.

When they sat down and the man introduced himself as *the* Séverin Courtois, it took everything in Micah not to spit out the coffee he was just gifted. He found himself fighting back the same urge just moments later at the salary Séverin agreed to pay him for his newfound modeling career, as well as his offer to clear any and all of his existing debt. In minutes, Micah had gone from idolizing the man to *working* for him.

But, what truly shocked him wasn't the artist's financial generosity, or the surreal fact that he was sitting and talking with the most talented portrait artist he had ever seen in modern times. No, it was how this man, despite all his artistic expertise, social status, even his reportedly notorious ego, had practically *begged* Micah to accept his offer. As if the flat-broke college graduate was in any position to refuse. He could hardly believe the famous artist he knew was the same person that sat in front of him, praising his "unmatched beauty" and promising to move to the States permanently, all for a man he just met. One who, most would certainly agree, was far from the type of person to fit the bill of a prestigious painter's VIP model. Even as he agreed to the proposal that sounded far too good to be true, one question rang clear in his mind above the cacophony of emotions racing through his head.

*Why him?*

Why him, when Séverin's fame and talent could bring him anyone he wanted? Why would someone so renowned dare to restrict his body of work, to hinder his growth for someone so *average*?

It had taken an astonishing three years for him to finally get his answer.

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The prospect of working with Séverin Courtois in any capacity was a dream come true for Micah. In many ways, the real thing truly did measure up to his lofty expectations—getting to observe the artist's process up close, seeing his workspace, and all the other intricacies that only someone with Micah's level of both knowledge and obsession could appreciate. However, in plenty of other ways, his new career was not quite what he'd hoped at first.

For starters, Séverin was *difficult* to work with.

It seemed the rumors of his infamous ego were founded in truth. A man with Séverin's level of talent certainly warranted a great deal of confidence in his work, but nevertheless, there was still a fine distinction between confidence and conceitedness. A distinction that Séverin was more than willing to cross. Not to mention his old-fashioned ways that didn't stop at his painting methods—just his earnest use of the word "muse" in the 21st century was a hell of an adjustment for Micah. Bluntly put, Séverin Courtois' personality was an impeccable blend of insufferable traits. At least, in regards to his art career. Although he was still haughty and outdated outside of the studio, it was toned down enough that Micah could easily accept it as Séverin's personal charm and quirkiness. The artist certainly spared no expense in lavishing compliments and affection onto Micah, either, which at times could more than make up for his prickly attitude.

That was another thing: the studio. Seeing Séverin's workspace was still fascinating, but the novelty quickly wore off when it was the only scenery Micah had to stare at for posing sessions. From a professional standpoint, the place was admittedly impressive, with its massive square footage and well-stocked storage areas filled with high-grade supplies. He even had an entire costume rack, an array of props, and plenty of tarps with any background one could

imagine. The two never had to leave the studio, and that was precisely the problem. Aside from unsold original paintings and a sparse collection of canvas prints adorning the walls, the studio was painfully vacant and dull. With plain white walls and gray tile flooring, the sheer amount of unused space, and the pitifully limited decor, long sessions were nearly unbearable in the beginning. However, after Séverin had reprimanded the model one too many times for his complete inability to sit still, he folded ever so slightly and purchased a wireless speaker for Micah to listen to music. His choice of music, no less, although Micah's love for rock and metal wasn't received well by the artist at first. It did little for the eerily empty atmosphere of the studio, but Micah was rarely chastised for restlessness again.

Despite the difficulties, though, the two had gradually learned how to work with and around each other over the past three years. It wasn't a perfect arrangement by any means, but it was, for the most part, a harmonious one. Micah had learned the ins and outs of Séverin's quirks, both the peculiar and the endearing, and Séverin had made his best effort at softening his words and accommodating Micah's needs. The model even began to get accustomed to Séverin's high praise, and the gradual yet visible changes it had on his self-esteem. Even outside of work, they had almost seamlessly integrated each other into their daily lives, save for actually living together. There was only one major work-related element they had left to tackle—Séverin's latest gallery showing at The Renaissance Society, *the* gallery in Chicago for international artists.

Surprisingly, the infamous model himself had yet to attend one of Séverin's art shows, and the artist thankfully never pressured him to. The atmosphere of social gatherings never suited him—he was plenty content to admire Séverin's works through the comfort of little to no company. This time, however, he *wanted* to make the effort and take part in this particular showing, and not just because he was every work's sole model. The selected portraits were

special this time, following a highly personal theme of Micah's suggestion. A theme that fit perfectly with Séverin's signature hyperrealism. Created over the course of the past year and a half, they acted as a physical and artistic representation of Micah's changes through hormone therapy, his first and only step into medical transitioning so far.

Séverin had been fully willing to pay for each and every procedure Micah could ever want when he initially explained his identity and transition progression, but the younger man shot him down immediately. The guilt of allowing Séverin to so generously provide for him was already overpowering enough, and Micah's pride drew its limits at expensive surgeries and drugs. That was the case, until his dysphoria eventually triumphed over his dignity. Séverin was just gracious and supportive as he'd always been, even ecstatic that Micah had finally accepted his offer. He was even more elated when Micah sheepishly suggested the very idea the gallery was based upon, his own feeble attempt at repaying the older man's unwavering generosity. Now, at the culmination of over a year's worth of hard work and hormonal changes, both Micah and Séverin were ready to show the world. Not just this side of Micah, which had been kept relatively covert until now, but the true closeness of their friendship and partnership.

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Micah wasn't ready. He felt fucking stupid for thinking he was.

On a financial and publicity standpoint, the show was a resounding success. But Micah couldn't shake the whispers, the rumors, the bold-faced criticism that filled the gallery that day. It's not like he wasn't aware of the commentary surrounding Séverin's artistic decisions, especially in regards to Micah himself. The public confusion buzzing around Séverin's

dedication to him as a model was hard to ignore at first. Some praised the painter for choosing a subject that "embraced the little flaws that make us human" in their words. That read more as a backhanded compliment from hell, so Micah was reluctant to accept it as positive. Others labeled Séverin's works as stale, tired, and repetitive, all valid points in the mind of a consumer. The worst of them called his existence in the paintings propaganda, that Séverin must have been poisoned with radical ideologies to even consider a trans man attractive. But, for the past three years, Micah had been able to brush these comments off, to even avoid them almost entirely.

Not anymore.

The show had initially started off a lot tamer, the only real offense being the near *constant* grilling on the pair's relationship status. Séverin's adoration of Micah was no secret, so naturally it became easy to suspect that the two shared a deeper connection—a romantic one. A somewhat controversial one at that, attributed to their "scandalous" twelve-year age gap. Micah was well aware that his petty crush and hopeless admiration had shifted into feelings of genuine love by this point, which didn't help his case one bit. At one point, the questions got so frequent that Micah was fully red-faced before he could even touch the champagne at the refreshment table. Each time, though, Séverin would simply deflect with his signature grace and skill, protectively pulling Micah just a little closer to his side with every comment. All of this silly speculation was expected. All of this was something the model could handle. But of course, it didn't stop there.

The comments about his looks were the worst.

Séverin's paintings of Micah always turned out beautifully, and for their entire collaboration the model had never been prouder of them. He genuinely felt *attractive* when looking at them, something that rarely happened otherwise. But, here at this show, the crowd had something no others did: Micah's in-person presence. A live reference, *the* reference that had

captured the eye and sole dedication of their renowned artist. As it turns out, the real deal didn't live up to the visage of his painted legacy. When Séverin officially began his introductory explanation on their series, all eyes zeroed in on the model instead. Micah felt sick as whispers filled the room.

*That's him? Really?*

*He's so... boring compared to those portraits.*

*At least the paintings are still beautiful as ever. He's got some serious talent.*

*Honestly, I don't see it. Courtois really makes some strange decisions.*

There were others that lauded his looks regardless, but the damage was done. Micah could physically *feel* the progress his self-image had made crumbling, slipping through his fingers like sand. The room began to blur as his throat tightened and stomach churned. Séverin had finished his speech on the paintings at some point, yet the model didn't hear a single word of it. His head was spinning, every overheard comment and snide remark replaying all at once. His face burned with shame. He thought he had gotten over this, so why was it happening *now* of all times? He needed to get a fucking grip, needed to calm down, calm down, *calm down*—

Séverin, observant as always, noticed his silent struggle, if him stopping his conversation with an attendee and ushering Micah into a secluded corner was anything to go off of. The model first felt hands on his shoulders before Séverin bent down, completely filling his field of vision.

"Something is troubling you, *mon cher*," the artist said, his sharp features knitted together in worry. "I can feel it. Talk to me, please."

"I—" Micah stammered, wincing at how his voice rasped out. "I'm sorry, I really do want to be here, it's just— People have been saying things... about me, and I thought I was past this, but I'm really not. I—" He cut himself off, fearful that if he kept speaking, he'd start crying. As if



this entire display wasn't mortifying enough. Séverin shushed him quietly, running a soothing hand through Micah's thin brown locks. "I was afraid something like this might happen. Shall I call a ride for you to return home? We can talk about this later." Micah could only nod, hiding his face in his hands to obscure his teary eyes and quivering lips. He chose to ignore the ensuing cacophony of noise that erupted from the room as he left, for his own wellbeing. Only after he had safely returned home and shut the door did the tears finally fall.

As Micah laid in his bed that night, staring holes into his ceiling, the events of the evening haunted him. All his old doubts had successfully been resurfaced, unearthed from the flimsy layer of recovery he had painstakingly built up. His physical insecurities hadn't truly dissipated yet, but he had been doing *so* much better at not dwelling on them. Not picking himself apart painstakingly in the mirror, not obsessively taking photos from every unseen side and back angle just to be devastated because *that's* how he looked like to everyone else. The unconditional acceptance Séverin gave Micah had blinded him, the art studio acting as their echo chamber of positivity. He was so immersed in their relationship, in this project, in the euphoria of his own transition that he failed to consider public opinion would not be so understanding. And now, his feelings of inferiority had reared their ugly head once again, and he was right back where he started. It was unfairly cruel, how even the sliver of self-confidence Micah allowed himself had been too much to ask for.

The unspoken question of *why him* was no longer a fleeting, personal uncertainty. It was clear now that Micah hadn't been the only person to ask it, to wonder the true, complete reason behind Séverin Courtois' unorthodox decision. And he couldn't be content without an answer any longer.

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For the longest time, the idea of bringing up such concerns to the artist wasn't even a potential course of action in his mind. He had quickly learned that one thing Séverin did not take kindly to was questions of any kind that even *slightly* put his authority as an artist under scrutiny. However, Séverin wasn't just an employer or friend to him. He was Micah's *savior*. The man who had deeply entwined his presence in nearly all facets of the model's life. And Micah wouldn't dare do anything to jeopardize the relationship they had, or whatever it could be. On the other hand, this latest incident had been eating him *alive*. He was certain that asking just this one question was worth the risk.

It was a few days after the gallery showing, and Micah was modeling for Séverin's latest piece. The mood in the room was serene as soft rock music echoed throughout the spacious studio. Sunlight streamed in from the windows, stretching across the tile flooring and illuminating the room. In the relaxed atmosphere of the pair's daily routine, Micah felt a familiar sense of calm wash over him. Perhaps that's where he found the courage to finally speak up.

"Séverin," he said quietly, voice slightly rasping from underuse. "Can we take a break and talk?"

The artist's head popped out over the top of the easel he was sitting at. "About what, exactly?" His tone was even and measured, but a raise of his eyebrows told Micah he already knew the answer to his question.

"It's, um... about what happened at the show." As he spoke, the artist was already standing up and walking towards where Micah sat, removing the barrier of the canvas and easel to properly face the younger man. He nodded, a silent encouragement for Micah to continue.

Micah swallowed, suddenly nervous. "Well, it's just— What people were saying that night, I've been thinking about it ever since. It made me realize that... I don't think I've ever really understood why you picked *me* to be your only model? A-And it's not just me, you should've heard how many people were just as confused as I am. About how boring I look in comparison to your *beautiful* paintings of me, how strange your 'choices' are..." Micah sighed, a shuddering breath escaping his lips. "I guess what I'm saying is— I'm worried they might be right." The room was completely quiet for a solid minute until suddenly, an offended scoff from the older man ripped through the deadly silence.

"Micah, my darling muse," Séverin started in response. "How could you say such things about yourself?" When Micah opened his mouth to clarify, Séverin cut him off. "Those critics may know how to use obscure vocabulary and run their mouths, but they will *never* have the artistic vision I was blessed with. I'd even argue your question is an insult to my intelligence and capability. Do you see me as someone who would make such mistakes?"

"No! Absolutely not!" Micah sputtered. "I just—"

"Just what? I personally selected you and your unique qualities the moment I laid eyes on you. You are the pinnacle of beauty in my mind, and my creations only deserve the finest of models. I paint you exclusively because nobody else is worthy to be my muse. Do you understand?"

"...Not quite. I'm sorry."

"Hm. Not good enough. Come with me."

Micah felt a hand clamp down on his shoulder. Before he got the chance to react to the sudden touch, he was already being guided over to one of several full length mirrors in the studio. This mirror in particular happened to be framed by quite a few of Micah's painted

portraits, positioned neatly on the surrounding wall space. Their painstakingly refined beauty seemed to taunt the model as he observed his reflection, so drab and dull in comparison. It was almost like the figure in the paintings was an ethereal, idealized version of the face that stared back at him in the mirror, like an angelic being wearing his body as a skinsuit.

"Now, I want you to humor me for just a moment," the artist said, leaning over Micah's shoulder. The close proximity made Micah feel lightheaded. "What details of your appearance do your eyes first wander to when looking at yourself like this?" Studying his features in this manner wasn't a foreign concept to Micah, but it was always performed in a self-scrutinizing, hypercritical way. He was unsure if it was even *possible* for him to step back from that mindset, much less on such short notice. After several moments of uncomfortable observation, Micah spoke up in a small, uncertain voice.

"I guess... my nose shape? It's what most people tend to notice about my face, anyway." That was putting it lightly. The hook of his nose bridge had been the subject of criticism and taunting, both from others and self-inflicted, for as long as Micah could remember. He despised it more than anything.

"Ah, yes, your wonderful nose," Séverin replied. "That has always been my favorite part of your face to sculpt in the underpainting."

*...What? Really?*

"Well don't look too surprised, my dear. Why else do you think I favor painting your side profile the most? The slope of your bridge is just exquisite." Looking up from his own gaze, he was startled once again by Séverin's genuine look of disbelief at Micah's reaction. Was he truly being serious?

"I- um..."

"Let's put that aside for now. This is already proving to be quite informative. Tell me what else you recognize, *mon chéri*."

"My eyes, they're asymmetrical," Micah blurted out before he realized what he was saying. Suddenly, everything began flooding out, all his lingering thoughts and shameful features coming out in one big rush. "My smile's all crooked, I've never had the motivation to get it fixed. My hips are *way* too feminine, I can't stop thinking about how they still make me look like a girl." He wasn't sure at what point his voice began to crack and waver with the threat of tears, but he was too far gone by this point to care. "My shoulders are too bony, my hair is just flat and boring, I bite my fingernails so *those* are too stubby, my-"

"Micah."

At the sound of the artist's voice, he immediately stopped. "Y-Yes?"

"*Breathe*. And be quiet. I refuse to let someone insult *my* model in such a manner any longer, even if that someone is yourself." Micah flinched at the underlying anger present in his tone, any attempt to soften his words now fully abandoned.

"I'm confused. Are you mad that I'm... self-conscious? That I don't like how I look?"

"I said, *be quiet*," Séverin hissed, his hand clenching Micah's shoulder tightly. "Yes, that is precisely why I am upset with you. To demean your physical appearance is to do the same to my expert understanding of human aesthetics. My very *core* as an artist. I fail to see why I must continue to repeat this."

"But I don't see what you see," Micah said pitifully, his voice breaking. Fuck. He hated losing composure in front of anyone, much less Séverin. "I can't. I've tried to for so long. But I just can't." He sniffed, wet and pathetic, vehemently fighting back the urge to cry. "Your paintings are always so gorgeous, but I'm... just not. I'm not some 'pinnacle of beauty'. I'm not

even the standard. I know it. *Everyone* knows it. I don't understand. Why... Why do you insist on painting me as more attractive than I am? Why—"

"That's quite enough."

Micah felt like all the air had been knocked out of his lungs. Séverin sounded *furios*.

The model had never been spoken to with such venom by him. "W-What?"

"You think I would dare *lie* with my paintings? Am I to believe that you are suggesting that I have compromised my abilities to replicate flawless likeness just to spare your feelings? To impress others? That I *personally* selected you as my sole model just to turn around and dedicate my image to inauthentic works?"

Micah couldn't bring himself to look at the other man's face. Séverin's voice alone was dripping with offense. Dread flooded Micah's senses, overpowering everything else.

"I- well... I didn't mean to insult you." Micah's voice was weak, timid, barely audible. "I'm so sorry. There is no excuse."

Séverin sighed, a defeated sound. His hand, which had begun to clench the divot of Micah's shoulder in his tirade, released its grip. Instead, Micah was spun around and swept into a brief hug. "No, *mon amour*, I apologize. I do despise raising my voice with you," the man lamented before pulling away to look Micah in the eye. "I'm just failing to understand... Why must you continue to doubt my integrity?"

Micah felt suffocated by the jumbled mix of emotions racing through his head. Séverin had contradicted himself and switched moods so many times in just this one interaction that he wasn't sure how to respond. A part of him wanted to finally break, to sob and scream in Séverin's arms as he begged his savior for mercy and forgiveness. Another, quieter part wanted to rip the artist's hands away from him, to spit out that he *didn't understand, how could he possibly, he'd*

*never know what it's like to be this way.* The smallest yet loudest of them all craved to just retract everything, return to the false comfort of ignorance, and never bring this issue up again.

He did none of that. He simply elected to stand perfectly still, staring at the other man's forehead to avoid meeting his eyes.

"I'm sorry." It was all he could say. He felt like a fucking broken record.

Séverin's expression flashed with something indecipherable before he let out a heavy sigh. "The only flaw I will admit to you having is how easily you allow the opinions of the uneducated to cloud your perception. You at least understand my capabilities as an artist, yes? The unerring resemblance to life I always strive to achieve?"

"Of course!" Micah was quick to stammer out an answer. "There's no one I respect more than you. Your raw talent is truly like no other."

Séverin smiled down at him. "Excellent. Then, continue to extend the same courtesy to my many, many works with you as my subject. No buts," he interjected when Micah opened his mouth to protest. "Perhaps, my darling, you view my paintings of you as attractive because you're able to see yourself how I see you."

Oh.

*Oh.*

"I... never really thought of it that way."

The artist clicked his tongue in disapproval before moving to tuck a strand of hair behind Micah's ear, causing his heart to stutter. "Honestly, Micah. Must I spell everything out for you?" Micah's face flushed with embarrassment, his cheeks a burning red against Séverin's palm. The flutter in his chest amplified to a resounding thudding, his entire body thrumming with the force

of his heartbeat. Micah didn't want to get his hopes up, but it was also hard to believe Séverin didn't understand the implications of his actions. Fuck, this was *dangerous*.

"My dear muse, I say this with nothing but absolute sincerity," Séverin continued, his thumb absently stroking Micah's cheekbone as he spoke. "In my eyes, you truly are the picture of human beauty, the *only* man worthy to be the face of my creations. How else am I to achieve the pinnacle of fine artistry and aesthetics, if not through the infinite potential of your likeness?"

Every nerve in Micah's body was on *fire*.

He couldn't even muster an argument, an apology, or a compliment of his own. All he could do was stare at the man before him, Séverin's poetic words of praise rooting him in place. An empty silence loomed over the art studio, its spacious walls only able to echo the loud, unsteady pulse of Micah's heart. Séverin's hand still hadn't left his face. He wasn't sure if he wanted it to, ever.

The older man cleared his throat, breaking through the quiet tension. "So, if you're *still* wondering why I chose you..." He trailed off, a nervous hitch of breath following his words. The usual hint of melodrama that coated his tone was completely gone. Séverin's brow furrowed in contemplation, an uncertain look in his eyes. A new wave of anxiety shot through Micah's body at the uncharacteristic behavior. The Séverin he knew *never* got nervous, and certainly never doubted himself.

Suddenly, the artist's face drew closer, Micah only given time to blink before a chaste kiss was pressed to his forehead. As soon as it happened, it was over, but Micah still felt the searing impression of the artist's lips against his skin. As if in a daze, he reached up to touch the spot, almost in disbelief. Sure, Séverin had always had an affinity for being affectionate, even excessively handsy, and it wasn't like Micah hadn't been kissed on the cheeks in a traditional



French greeting countless times. This time, though, it felt... different. The atmosphere felt charged with unspoken tension, with feelings that Micah hadn't prepared to fully confront yet.

"Because, Micah," Séverin said, breaking the spell of silence. "I don't want anyone but you. That should be reason enough, should it not?"

Micah couldn't fucking *breathe*. The gravity of Séverin's words, the entire situation, it was all too much. It was everything he could have dreamed to hear, but that didn't make it any less overwhelming. Any less *suffocating*. Everything suddenly became overpowering, unbearable—the hand on his face felt like a vice grip, keeping him trapped under Séverin's observant gaze. His heartbeat rushed loudly in his ears, *too loud*. His clothes didn't feel right against his skin. His binder constricted his chest where his heart hammered violently. His stomach churned with unease. The kiss still burned on his forehead like a brand.

Micah ripped away from Séverin, his chest heaving as he tried and failed to rein in his panicked breathing. He felt like a trapped, wild animal, the art studio like his cage. Not even giving Séverin a moment to register what was happening, he began grabbing the few belongings he brought in a frenzy.

"I-I'm sorry," he stuttered. "I... I have to go."

He looked up just enough to see Séverin gawking at him, visibly in shock. "Micah, what—"

"I'm sorry."

"Did I say something wrong, *mon chéri*? I apologize, I didn't mean—"

"No! No, you're fine, everything's fine."

"Then, what? What's the matter? Talk to me!" Séverin was getting desperate now, moving from where he was frozen in place to chase after the model.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry— It's too much, I'm sorry," Micah choked out. "I- You- I can't. I don't know. I just can't. Not right now." He was properly crying now, tears cool against the raging heat of his face.

"Wh- I don't understand. Did I misread the signs? Did I—"

"No! Please, I can't fucking *think*, I need to go—" Micah's shouts sounded more like sobs, echoing tauntingly throughout the room. Before Séverin could manage to catch up, Micah was already out the door, racing towards his car. Thank God he drove himself today.

"Micah, please!" Séverin had never sounded so distressed. It was almost unnatural, how uncharacteristically *normal* he sounded—like he wasn't the confident, borderline untouchable deity Micah saw him as. "Please, don't go! We can talk about this!" He kept talking, pleading in the doorway, but his voice was muffled by Micah's car door as it closed. Then, it was drowned out entirely as the engine rumbled to life, his futile protests hanging empty in the air. Micah didn't dare spare another glance at Séverin before he drove off. He wasn't sure whether or not there would be hurt painted across the other man's face, or if he had already accepted defeat. He had no desire to find out.

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It had been three days since their conversation in the studio. Séverin had been texting and calling Micah almost nonstop from the moment he left. His notifications were flooded with frantic apologies, desperate questions, and many attempts for permission to see him, to "make it right". The only reprieve he got was when the artist eventually went to bed for the night, and he certainly wasn't known for his healthy sleeping patterns. Regular communication was normal

between the pair, and Micah was no stranger to Séverin's endearing habit of daily "good morning" and "good night" messages. Texts at every hour of the day, however, were another beast entirely.

It's not like Micah was particularly keen on giving his beloved artist the cold shoulder. He had unfairly left Séverin mid-conversation because of his own panic and confusion, and he realized that from the moment he drove off. In fact, it had taken everything in him these past days not to cave, to message back or pick up a call, to just race over to the studio and into his arms. The crushing guilt he felt as he replayed Séverin's distraught pleas was almost too suffocating to bear. However, he had a fair bit of self-reflection to do before he could confront the other man.

For starters, Micah was insane to think that his crushing attraction to Séverin wouldn't come back to bite him in the ass. In his defense, however, he never wanted to even *address* it in the first place. He had been content to squash those feelings down, to let them naturally fade on their own time as most of his prior infatuations did. But then a month turned into two, then six, then a year, until three years passed without a single chance of his love waning. At some point, Micah had resolved to just live with his affections for the artist, because no way in *hell* he was going to confess and risk losing *everything*. He was more than content with the relationship they already had, and he certainly wasn't prepared for it to evolve past the platonic level. So, of course Séverin's undeniable romantic confession sent Micah into a panic, and he did what he did best when confronted with extreme emotions: he ran away. Just like the gallery show, and just like he'd been running from his own stupid romantic feelings for years.

Séverin was cutthroat. He wasn't afraid to give his honest opinion, mainly because he was always convinced it was objectively correct. He was haughty and harsh with his words, even

insensitive at times. But, he was also a man with the most intense dedication and passion for his craft that Micah had ever seen. That's what drew him to the artist's works in the first place, long before the two had their fateful meeting—that passion was evident in the careful, masterful refinement of his technique, visible in every brushstroke. He was naturally generous, borderline philanthropic with his wealth. He was intentionally observant of Micah's likes and dislikes, his hobbies, his favorite foods, even his triggers and the methods of comfort he was most receptive to. Micah had never met someone who treated him with such precise and attentive care, even beyond their relationship as artist and model.

He really did love him. And, if their last conversation was any basis, Séverin unequivocally loved him back.

God fucking damnit.

Micah's hands trembled with nerves, the ambient sounds of his bedroom slowly becoming drowned out by the rush of his heartbeat in his ears. With a shaky sigh, Micah picked up his phone, opening his texts and sending out a message before he could back out:

*I'm ready to talk now. About us.*

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Within 20 minutes, Séverin was already bursting through the door. Micah startled at the sound from where he was standing in wait nearby. The artist never knocked, not since Micah gave him a key to his place, but that didn't make each visit of his any less surprising.

"Micah!" Séverin gasped out. "I came as soon as I saw your text." To put it simply, he looked like a *mess*, at least by Séverin's personal standards. He stood in the doorway in nothing

but pajamas and sandals, despite it already being midday. His dark hair, always styled to perfection, was mussed and unwashed, and his usually clean-shaven face was adorned with stubble. He had a wild, desperate look in his eyes, confirming just how little he slept the past three days. Micah felt a familiar pit of guilt forming in his stomach at the sight of him. A quiet "hello" was all he could manage, all the words he wanted to say drying up on his tongue. They stared at each other in the doorway for a moment, neither knowing how to begin.

"I—" They both started to speak simultaneously before immediately cutting off.

"You can go first," Micah said timidly after a brief silence. Séverin looked at him quizzically, as if to say "Are you sure?", to which Micah nodded in response.

"My d- Micah, I am truly sorry for how I behaved the other day."

"...What?"

Séverin shot him another questioning look. Micah clapped his hands over his mouth, humiliated. He didn't mean to say that out loud.

"Wh- I-" the artist stuttered in incredulous disbelief. "What do you mean, 'what'? I've obviously upset you, and I'm apologizing for it."

"Sorry, it's just— Why are *you* apologizing?" Micah stammered out, uncovering his face. "I was the one who left you for no good reason and with no explanation at all. I'm the one who gave you nothing but radio silence these past few days. If anyone's apologizing, it should be me."

Séverin pinched his brows together with a sigh. "Well, yes, but I was the one who... who made unsolicited advances without considering whether you would reciprocate positively or not. You weren't ready for that, and I selfishly pushed further regardless. I pushed you too far. I was careless. I'm... truly sorry."

"That's not true!"

Séverin raised his head to look Micah in the eye. "I beg your pardon?"

Micah flushed under his gaze, but pressed on. "That's not true. You didn't push me too far, I just— I got overwhelmed, and I reacted badly. Nobody's ever said anything like that to me before. I guess... I just didn't know how to handle it. I panicked. It's not your fault."

"But it is!" Séverin cried out, voice breaking. He was still standing far apart from Micah, like he was *afraid* to touch him for once. Like Micah would run away again if he did. "I— I felt as if I was losing you in that moment. Like I was losing a part of me." Séverin was crying now. And he *never* cried. Not once in the three years they had known each other had Micah *ever* seen him in such a state. Without thinking, Micah rushed forward to wrap the other man in a hug, burrowing his face in the crook of Séverin's shoulder to hide his own tears.

"You could never lose me, Séverin."

The artist froze in place at first, but quickly reciprocated the embrace. His hold was gentle, achingly tender, like Micah would shatter if he clutched on too tightly. Micah breathed in deeply, the faint smell of turpentine lingering in his nose as he fully relaxed in Séverin's arms. Here, in his hallway, being held close by the man he cared for more than anyone, was the most at peace Micah felt in a long, long time. Perhaps that's why he chose this moment to lean up, whispering in Séverin's ear:

"I think I figured out what you were trying to say the other day. And... I love you, too. I have for a while. I'm sorry it took so long for me to tell you."

Séverin pulled back just enough to look him in the eye, face adorned with the same incredulous excitement as when they first met. "You really mean that, *mon cher*?" He breathed, his voice wavering. Micah just nodded, his mouth stretching into a smile of his own. Just like the other day, Séverin's hand reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind Micah's ear before cradling

his cheek, his thumb brushing against the drying streaks of tears that still remained. He leaned closer, their noses just centimeters apart.

"Then... may I?"

"Please," Micah whispered, barely audible.

The kiss that was then pressed to his lips wasn't perfect. It was clumsy, their noses accidentally pressing into each other before they laughed and adjusted. It was awkward, with Séverin craning his neck down uncomfortably and Micah standing on the tips of his toes to accommodate their height difference. It was tentative, still unsure, then more confident, longer, more passionate. It was strange, uncharted territory, a new experience. It was everything Micah could have ever wanted.

Séverin Courtois was a strange artist. And Micah Belcher was never happier to be his beloved muse.