

Turning upside down

Von cayra

Written for wwmrsweaslydo in the smut_exchange challenge on Livejournal.

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The old clock rattles before the tiny hammer hits the brass bell mounted on top of its apparatus. In contrast, the chime rings out clear and sweet.

Eli runs his hand over the casing, fingertips tracing small dents and scratches before they come to rest on a small lever, press down. With another rattle, the chime is silenced, gears grinding to a stop again. He needs to hold it down for one full circuit of the smallest hand or else it will start up again.

Eli sits up, swinging his legs over the bed's edge. He cradles the clock in his hands.

The clock is a family heirloom, fully mechanical without a trace of magic in its design. Eli found it on a shelf, back when he was still bothering to explore. He has seen everything by now, though now and then, things keep popping up in the corners, while other useless trinkets get lost again.

The clock stays. Eli winds it up religiously, panicked himself into a frenzy the few times he forgot and the clock stopped. He can't be sure how much time was lost without him noticing. Three turns of the key, then he sets it back down on the side table.

Eli slips into his trousers and picks up his shirt, shrugs into it, buttons up. He doesn't bother with vest or tie anymore. There is nobody to call him on laziness or indecency. If anything, Fiddle is even worse.

Barefoot, he pads into the living room, blinks against the brightness. Most of the far wall and some of the ceiling is formed by one giant window that illuminates the clutter of books and bottles, scales and every possible kind of scientific apparatus throwing bizarre shadows into the rainbow colours swimming across the floor. The polished wood feels smooth under Eli's feet. He imagines the differently coloured patches feel different, the darker, muted shades somehow softer than the sharp brightness of primary colours.

Eli has to shield his eyes to look outside. Not that there is much to see, aside from

that never-ending glare of colours that goes into infinity. Today, a lot of purples and greens are massing, eclipsing swathes of yellow and orange in the distance. Eli still traces the shifting patterns with his eyes for a few minutes, searching for something more concrete and defined, something material.

Like the maintenance of his clock, this has become ritual. Eli does not expect to find anything, but he still keeps looking.

In the kitchen, the shadows are longer. The loaf of bread he cut up yesterday is back in the cupboard, still in its paper wrapper, so Eli starts a hunt for the bread knife. Since the incident with the scissors, most of the sharp tools in the house have come to love playing hide and seek. Eli suspects part of the reason is how strongly he wished for Fiddle to never go near any blade again. Somehow, what they want or say sometimes influences the little quirks of their home.

The jam is gone, but Eli finds a piece of butter on the counter, next to their plates. Humming quietly, he goes on to prepare breakfast, filling the teakettle and hoping it will boil.

A big stack of books has migrated onto the table again, Eli shifts them to a chair before the rising steam can dampen the paper. A fresh tin of tea is excavated from the mess.

The scent of tea prompts a sleepy grumble from the bedroom. A series of thumps follows, then Fiddle shuffles into the kitchen area. He rubs at the corner of one eye with his sleeve, then blearily surveys Eli's efforts. Without his glasses, he shouldn't be able to make out much, but the pale blue eyes still light up when Eli smiles at him.

"Good morning." Eli greets.

"Morning. Is it?" Fiddle asks.

Eli shrugs. "The clock says it is."

"Ah, yes, the clock." Fiddle considers the clock a sentimental toy, keeping track of time where no time exists. To Eli, it's a lifeline.

Eli pours tea and pushes the cup into Fiddle's hands. Fiddle looks at it blankly for a moment, then raises the cup to blow at the liquid. He ignores the plate Eli sets at his elbow.

"I dreamt of that fixed analysis array, the one we had at the academy," he tells Eli, "it was much bigger than the one we have here, more complex too. I was comparing essence samples with it, and this bit of black matter was mixed into one of them..."

"How would that even be possible?" Eli laughs.

"I don't know, but it gave me an idea of something to give a try. We still have some of those black crystals, right?" Setting his tea aside, Fiddle bounces up from his slouch, much more awake.

"Come on!" he prompts impatiently, obviously having discarded any lingering interest

in breakfast. When Eli just blinks at him, Fiddle pulls him up from the kitchen chair and proceeds to bodily drag him downstairs to their work room. Eli just barely manages to snatch up plate and cut. There is no way in hell he will join in Eli's scientific escapades on an empty stomach.

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Fiddle pulls a scrap of paper close, scribbling down notes with one hand while he flips pages with the other. "We've got the charged crystals to represent the light aspect already." Eli reminds him.

Fiddle nod absently, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose, then goes to rummage through the box in front of him on the table. He pulls out a small sachet filled with more crystals in various shapes, sizes and colours, spills the contents over the table surface. "Look how pretty they are!" he exclaims, picking up one of them to hold it in front of the lamp. "So many colours, producing different wavelengths of light, different magical signatures." He turns, beckons for Eli to join him.

With an exasperated shake of his head, Ei sets aside the book on temporal dynamics he had been leafing through and wanders over. Fiddle is lining up the crystals, sorting them by hue. He hands a small, pale green one to Eli. "Here, that one is you." he tells him.

"How so?" Eli takes the crystal, rolls it around in his palm with a doubtful expression, eyebrows crunching as he tries to decipher what Fiddle means. He can't see anything out of the ordinary in the bit of clear rock. Fiddle laughs. "It's the same colour as your eyes!" He snatches up the crystal again, rising to set it inside the magical array that covers half of the workroom's floor.

"It'll be your placeholder." Tracing the engraved circle forming the foundation of the complicated pattern, Fiddle crouches, picking up one of the many chalk sticks scattered around it, wiping out a rune and sketching a new one in its place. He sits back on his heels to look at his handiwork, then leans against Eli's legs as he steps up behind him.

"I still don't get why I couldn't simply do the spell backwards." Fiddle grumbles. "Finding the correct variables wouldn't have taken that long." He pouts up at Eli, then scrambles back to his feet. The chalk still in hand, he gesticulates widely. "I mean, we've perfected the spell to turn back time ages ago."

Eli shakes his head. "It's not like there is something to run backwards." He takes the chalk from Fiddle's hand, wipes away the wide streak of white he has smeared over his cheek. "You can't repair a chair you incinerated by doing the fire spell backwards. Why should it work with something infinitely more complex?" he asks.

Fiddle pulls his hand out of Eli's grasp. "Because it was done by magic in the first place? I managed to break time, so I'll be damned if I can't put it back together!" Pointing straight at him, he makes Eli stumble back a step. "You'll just wait and see. I'll

fix this and those complacent bastards at the academy will never cut our funding again!"

"They can't do that anyway." Eli tells him sadly, taking his hand again. "They're all gone, remember. Dead."

Fiddle subsides. "It's not like I hurt them." he grumbles. "They didn't feel a thing. They didn't even die, technically."

"Because they never even existed. Like we would have been unmade, if we hadn't been right at the center of it."

Eli looks like he is ready to cry, face all crumpling up, so Fiddle tries to distract him. "Yeah, I'm still not sure how we survived that. This bubble we're in, it must be made of pure energy, energy that was freed when time imploded." Pulling Eli over to the table, he flips open a folder and pulls out a sketch, its corners bent and fuzzy, the graphite lines smudged in places. "It's like the time bubble I made back then, the one the Professors were so excited about."

Eli nods. The award scroll still adorns one of the living room walls, amidst newspaper clippings. 'Enclosed time sphere created at the Selian Academy of Sciences. Doctoral candidate Aldebaran Hieronymus Fiddle receives the coveted Award for Scientific Wizardry.'

It had been Fiddle's great triumph; finally the dean had acknowledged their research. Before the award, they had been allowed to use the laboratories on sufferance alone, had been scrounging together what money they could for supplies. Afterwards, at least they did not have to fear getting kicked out of the academy anymore, the prestige that Fiddle's name suddenly brought coveted by the board of professors.

The small grant associated with the award had been almost instantly reinvested by Fiddle. Test tubes, raw ingredients and new lenses for the spectral catalyzer. It had been up to Eli to feed him that month after all.

Eli was used to this pattern, for Fiddle had not changed much since falling asleep on Eli's shoulder during the matriculation ceremony all those years ago.

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They don't pretend to have lunch, but Eli puts on another kettle of tea. They sit on the couch, curled up closely to keep from upsetting the fragile topography of books that climbs up from the floor and covers almost every surface.

"You're getting scruffy again." Eli remarks, running a finger over Fiddle's cheek. Fiddle laughs. "Funny how some things still happen. We don't get hungry or thirsty but hair still grows?" He reaches over to tug on Eli's ponytail. Eli bats his hand away. "You should shave."

Fiddle snorts. "With what razor?"

"Wait a moment." Eli says and gets off the couch, leaving Fiddle sitting there forlornly, hand still raised.

The cramped bathroom is as cluttered with books as the rest of the house. As Fiddle said, there is no razor in sight. "Oh come on." Exasperated, Eli digs through the cupboard over the metal sink. He excavates two rolls of slightly yellowed bandages, a brass cigar holder and a nearly empty bottle of rubbing alcohol - Eli suspects both the bandages and the alcohol would be needed if Fiddle had to shave himself, sets aside a jar of mysteriously green-tinted vaseline and takes the opportunity to throw a bundle of stained rags into the trash can. Finally, underneath a pile of washcloths, he finds the velvet case with his straight razor. He distinctly remembers leaving it on the sink yesterday.

A clean towel and the bar of shaving soap are found much more quickly; the leftover water in the kettle has cooled just enough not to scald him as he pours it into the wash basin, splashing himself a little. Eli mops at his damp sleeve with the towel.

With the towel over his arm and basin in hand, Eli returns. The straight razor he sets down on the coffee table, out of Fiddle's reach. He hands him the towel instead, stealing away his glasses. "Knowing you, the razor would rather combust than let you do the shaving." Eli dunks in the brush and starts a good lather.

Fiddle is ticklish, laughing as the brush runs over his jaw, leaving thick white foam in its wake. Eli dips it in the lather again, then covers the stubbly area thoroughly, tilting Fiddle's head to his convenience.

He sets the brush down and pulls Fiddle to lean back against him, his head on Eli's shoulder. Then he picks up the razor. "Hold still now." he warms quietly and Fiddle nods, resting a hand on Eli's knee, then tries to obey. It is hard on him, Eli knows. Fiddle is a creature of constant motion, always fidgeting, pacing, playing with some small gadget when he is thinking.

The first pass of the razor makes Fiddle hold his breath and his fingers clench on Eli's knee. Then he forces himself to relax as Eli scrapes the blade over his jaw, stretching the skin taut with his other hand. They have done this a hundred times before but Fiddle always tenses up at first. Eli lifts the razor and wipes it on the towel. Fiddle swallows.

Fiddle's hand is slowly closing on Eli's knee, then letting go again. It shifts its position a little, then grips again. Eli is sure that Fiddle doesn't even notice he is doing it, as his eyes follow the motions of the razor in Eli's hand. He sighs as Eli finishes with his cheek, then wipes the blade clean again.

"I don't know why you bother with the shaving anyway. Not like we have the opportunity to show off how well-groomed we are in polite company." he takes the opportunity to grumble.

"I like you better when you're shaved." Eli tells him. "It soothes my neatfreak urges." he jokes. Fiddle huffs, but obediently stills when Eli starts shaving again. His hand is clenching on Eli's thigh. He has a harder time holding still now, though. Eli has to be

careful not to nick him, as Fiddle keeps shifting, frowning.

Finally the last hairs are scraped off. "There, all done. Now was that so hard?" Eli asks, amused at the expression of blatant relief that Fiddle is sporting. He disposes of leftover foam with a quick wipe of the towel.

"Eminently." Fiddle assumes a tone of wounded dignity. "Admit it, you love to torture me."

"Torture? Of course not. Just because you find it a hardship to hold still for five minutes..."

Fiddle cuts him off by leaning over and kissing Eli, sliding into his lap. "Maybe I just don't like the thought of someone holding a blade to my throat." he says, drawing back only the barest of distances. "Even if it's you." He is halfway hard, rubbing against Eli's leg in little motions. "It's scary."

Eli raises a brow at him. Fiddle shrugs, then kisses him again. With a sigh Eli draws him closer, tilting his head so they can kiss properly. Fiddle makes a happy sound and dives into the kiss with sloppy enthusiasm, clutching at Eli's shoulders.

Eli's cheeks are stained red when they pull apart. Fiddle traces the stripe of colour with his fingers, then runs them down Eli's neck to slip them into the shirt collar. "Okay?" he asks, tugging at the topmost button.

"Fine." Eli concedes. Fiddle starts to work open his shirt gleefully. Every third button or so, he looks up at Eli with a goofy grin on his face. "We don't do this often enough. You need to relax more." he tells him, tugging the shirt out of Eli's pants and starting to pet at his abdomen, not unlike one would pet a dog, really. Eli huffs and starts to divest Fiddle of his clothes. An easy task, as half of Fiddle's buttons have never found the way into their corresponding holes this morning and the other half found the wrong ones. At least Fiddle has buttoned his pants today, though Eli isn't sure about his underwear. Oh well, the shirt comes off for now anyway. He can lecture his friend on that matter later. Fiddle probably will nod, but not listen at all. He did it before, after all.

With their shirts out of the way and in a crumpled heap on the floor, Fiddle does his best to scrawl into Eli's skin, rubbing himself against him and continuing to hump Eli's leg with renewed enthusiasm. Eli wraps his arms around him loosely, running his hands down Fiddle's back, kneading the muscles there. Fiddle always cramps up when he gets lost in his studies, hunched over books or beakers for hours. He is rewarded with a grateful moan as his fingers find a hard knot just beneath Fiddle's shoulder blade. Knuckling down on their respective sides of the spine, Eli's hands work Fiddle's back until he's resting against him pliantly, reduced to rocking against him lightly, mouthing along the side of Eli's neck.

"Good?" Fiddle hums drowsily, then shifts, making Eli groan. "Please don't fall asleep, now that you've worked me up." Now, that he is not solely concentrating on the massage anymore, Eli is painfully hard. Fiddle just snickers against his neck and sneaks a hand between them, flicking at the button of Eli's pants.

Eli slips both hands further, to the waistband of Fiddle's trousers and then underneath. For a moment, he just lets them rest there as Fiddle fumbles their flies open, then shoves the fabric down. He pulls Fiddle closer, adjusting their positions a little so that when Fiddle continues to rock and grind against his thigh, his own erection is getting some friction, too. Fiddle happily abuses the new possibilities.

They find a nice rhythm, Fiddle trailing open-mouthed, sloppy kisses over Eli's shoulder, Elli squeezing his behind, directing. They keep it up, mostly silent except for a few sighs and groans, until predictably Fiddle grows impatient. He pushes Eli back further, until the books that were digging into Eli's spine slip off the couch with a thud and he falls backward onto the cushions with a quiet 'oof'. Now fully on top, Fiddle shifts until he can reach between them again and takes both of their erections in hand.

Now fully on top, Fiddle shifts until he can reach between them again and takes both of their erections in hand. His loose grip makes them brush together with every movement, tearing a heartfelt groan from Eli as Fiddle braces himself on his other arm and begins thrusting down with vigor, rubbing them together along the full length of their bodies, occasionally squeezing down with the hand between them.

Eli is starting to feel lightheaded, glad he has to do little to reciprocate. He can just lie there and feel, as Fiddle is happy to do all the work for once. Their breathing grows ragged, words lost for the moment. Eli can feel Fiddle getting closer, as the movements of the body above is go more frantic, the hand around their erections squeezes down a little too hard.

With a bitten-off exclamation, Fiddle reaches his peak, slumping down as his arm gives out. Eli catches him before he can break his nose on Eli's collar bone. Fiddle murmurs thanks, shifting himself to a more comfortable position. "That was nice." he tells Eli drowsily. Resting his head on Eli's shoulder, he's sprawled more on his side now, with their legs still tangled.

Eli makes a pained sound as Fiddle's hip brushes against his still-hard cock. "Hmm?" Fiddle looks down, then gives him a sheepish grin before reaching down. "Sorry, didn't notice." He strokes Eli off with a firm grip, his hand sticky from his own release. It does not take long until Eli spasms, then becomes boneless, staining Fiddle's hand further.

"All better now." Fiddle announces happily. Eli grunts and hides his face in Fiddle's hair.

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Afterwards, they clean up separately, Fiddle using the soapy water from the basin and the towel still sitting on the table, Eli leaving for the bathroom.

Fiddle pulls his pants back on, then tidies up the couch a little, righting the stacks of books they pushed over, half-heartedly swiping at a fresh stain on the comforter. After a few minutes, it is as tidy as it will get. The razor is nowhere to be seen, so

Fiddle just bundles the rest of the shaving supplies into the damp towel and picks up the basin to dump the contents into the sink.

The splashing sounds from the bathroom have stopped, but Eli is not coming back out. With a frown, Fiddle goes in after him.

"Eli?"

Fiddle finds him sitting on the rim of the bathtub, head in his hands. Eli is shaking, so Fiddle kneels before him and draws him down into an embrace. Eli is stiff in the circle of his arms. Only slowly, he starts to relax, taking a deep breath. It comes back out as a sob. Eli shakes his head, then clings to Fiddle's shoulders as he begins to cry in earnest.

"Shhh." Fiddle keeps holding him, rocking lightly. "And to think we were doing so well today."

Eli shakes his head in denial. "It's not right." he chokes out. "W-we shouldn't be happy after what we d-did. We don't deserve it."

"You know that's not true." Fiddle tries to calm him down. "We don't!" Eli insists. "This is supposed to be our punishment."

Fiddle does not agree, but he also knows that Eli will not listen to him right now. So he just continues to hold Eli for long minutes, until the sobs become quieter, then trail off. Fishing around on the low counter with one hand, he produces an old, embroidered silk handkerchief and proceeds to mop away the flood of tears gently.

"Hey, I'm supposed to be the crazy one here." Eli manages a watery smile when Fiddle prods him to look up. "I'm not used to taking care of you."

"Mhmm. Sorry." Eli takes the kerchief from him and wipes his eyes himself. Then he drops his head back on Fiddle's shoulder, leaning into the embrace.

Fiddle is rubbing long soothing passes down Eli's back. "I still don't get why you blame yourself. I'm the one who set off the spell."

"I should have talked you out of it. I'm used to curbing your crazy escapades and knew there were failsafes missing. We didn't even have a containment circle." Eli says morosely.

"Yeah, because the stingy bastards didn't give us the materials for one." Fiddle points out, giving Eli a nudge. "You need to stop feeling so guilty. You'll just wait, we'll fix this and they'll even give us an award for it." he insists.

"Let's just go to bed, ok?" Eli asks, not lifting his head from Fiddle's shoulder. He doesn't sound convinced, just tired. They technically don't need to sleep, but it still feels good to let go for a while, let oblivion keep their troubles at bay. On the really bad days, Eli does not get up at all, preferring to let sleep take him out of his misery.

Slowly, they climb to their feet. Fiddle's calves have fallen asleep from kneeling on the

hard tiles; Eli is a little shaky still. They stumble into the bedroom and out of their remaining clothes, then fall down onto the mattress in an uncoordinated pile of limbs.

It takes them a little to sort themselves out, then they come to rest on their sides facing each other; their legs are still entangled but comfortably so. Fiddle snatches up the blanket and pulls it up over their heads, then snuggles close to Eli.

He buries his face in the crook of Eli's neck. "Maybe we'll find the key to fixing all of this tomorrow." he murmurs, muffling a yawn. Eli is running his fingers through his hair, petting absently as he tries to calm himself, too. "Yeah." Fiddle's breathing is evening out already. In the cozy hollow beneath the blanket, the sound is very soothing. Eli continues to pet. "Sleep well, love."

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The old clock rattles.