

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

SOARING PAST DEATH

Morticia Knight

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

SOARING PAST DEATH

By Morticia Knight

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Black and white pic of a slightly built young man with his head bowed, on one knee, arms wrapped around his other knee. He's chained to the ceiling by a collar around his neck. In the foreground, there is the bottom half of a man facing him, holding a flogger.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

After years of doing this I never thought anything could surprise me, but I was wrong. Of all the trainees to be assigned, somehow Viper 44 was the last one I expected to see in the program.

Still so young, but then that's what the mission requires.

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I didn't want to box the story in too much that the author is tied down so I left the letter somewhat open. What I'm hoping for is a sci-fi/dystopia genre story with political machinations and emotional layering of the protagonists—the mentor and trainee. The degree of BDSM and what preferences are open to interpretation though I expect at least moderate pain play. Viper 44's mission is one many have failed before him; therefore is mentor's job is to do it well so he succeeds. Failure only has one outcome.

Whether or not sex is in interwoven in the training or separate is entirely up to you. Maybe this is all just advance interrogation techniques survival or is he being trained for a role he's to assume. Only limits I'm going to request: no scat or necrophilia. If used, I prefer torture that focuses on the mental repercussions more than the physical though I'm not particularly squeamish.

In the end, these characters have an existing relationship that gets dramatically altered at this moment in the picture.

BTW, the name Viper 44 is a placeholder and maybe used or discarded, author's choice.

Sincerely,

Vivian

Story Info

Genre: dystopian, science fiction

Tags: futuristic/post-apocalyptic, BDSM, military men, twink, spacemen/aliens, slave, reunion, age gap, dark

Content Warnings: torture, graphic violence

Word Count: 21,996

SOARING PAST DEATH

By Morticia Knight

Chapter One

“What the fuck is he doing here?”

The barely edible ration he'd just consumed for breakfast fought valiantly to make a reappearance. Turning to Raptor 10, Silverback 13 didn't miss the look of surprise that crossed the man's face despite his expert efforts to conceal it. They were all experts. Experts at detecting, interrogating, torturing and killing the enemy. Except for the one that mattered the most—the one they'd had no luck eliminating. The one they'd never even seen.

“I was certain they would have told you.”

13 grunted as anger, pain and frustration combined into one potentially explosive emotion. “Obviously, they didn't.”

He turned away from his friend. Friend? Maybe Raptor 10 should only be considered an acquaintance seeing as how nothing was the same anymore. Not since The Scourge had arrived on Earth and turned it into their own personal slave factory. Things like real friendships were too risky to keep.

Like love.

But he and 10 went back a long way, and if there was any human being left on the planet that he gave a fuck about, he was the one.

You're a lying sack of shit old man.

Reluctantly, he forced himself to face not only Raptor 10, but the boy who was now called Viper 44. 10 stood next to him, but 44 was on the other side of the two-way glass of the processing room in The Rebellion's primary underground station. Naked. Willing. Ready to fight. Ready to suffer for the cause. Waiting to meet the trainer who would either prepare him for the mission that would rescue Earth from the clutches of The Scourge, or who would send him to a gruesome death. Silverback 13 would be that trainer.

13 gazed at the small, beautiful form of the man whom he had once had as his sub. It was foolish to dwell on what might have been. They'd both known that their prospects as lovers and partners had been grim from the start. Life was struggle and loneliness. It was fear that ate away your sanity. Yet, death was to be avoided in case living became interesting again. So Silverback 13 had let 44 go to protect him. To save him from the program.

And here he is. After years of doing this I never thought anything could surprise me, but I was wrong. Of all the trainees to be assigned, somehow Viper 44 was the last one I expected to see in the program.

Still so young, but then that's what the mission requires.

He knew Cyrus would be angry, upset. Possibly refuse to train him.

Not Cyrus. Silverback 13.

But for a mission of such incredible magnitude, 13 was the only one that The Rebellion would trust with the training. And 13 would do anything that was required of him to aid The Rebellion.

At one time, Viper 44 had believed in love. Believed in 13's love—Cyrus's love. However, 13's unrelenting dedication to the cause had been the death blow to any hopes of lasting happiness together. 44 audibly snorted.

Happiness.

The word should have been banned from all Earth languages. Until recently, he had also believed that the word "love" should be on that same list. Regardless, none of his thoughts mattered. All that remained was for him to complete his training and face almost certain death.

There was little chance of success—none of The Rebellion plants had ever survived—but he wouldn't let that deter him. He had to at least try to be the one who made it, the one who would bring about the fall of The Scourge. His ex-Dom had tried to hide 44's special skills away from The Rebellion to prevent him from being recruited. What 13 didn't know was that he'd volunteered. 13 might not like that he was there, but the man also understood the basic facts. Viper 44 took pleasure in pain, and the Lord of The Scourge loved inflicting it. He'd soared higher than he'd ever believed possible under the skilled tutelage of 13. Now, that same instruction would aid in potentially saving 44's life. It no longer existed to save his soul.

The heavy iron door scraped noisily as it opened across the concrete floor. He kept his eyes cast downward as he sat on his heels, shoulders back, hands clasped behind his back in the program stance. The absurdity was that his cock was hardening at the thought of the former lover who had cast him aside entering the room. He wanted to be humiliated by his body's response, but it would serve him better if he wasn't. Maintaining an erection as much as possible would be part of what would be expected of him on his assignment.

44 had already practiced enduring the cold. He would be naked the entire time he was on the satellite ship where The Lord kept his lair. Ruling from Earth was a bad idea for The Scourge's insane leader—too many humans plotting on him. The male life-form was dumb, but not dumb enough for them to pick off that easily.

Of the almost non-existent intel they'd managed to obtain, one of the details uncovered was that the inside of the space station was frigid and without any type of carpeting or padding covering the metallic floors. 44 had also toughened up his knees before he'd arrived to be trained. Every possible scenario needed to be accounted for. As no pleasure slave had ever survived longer than a week with The Lord, much of what they knew was merely conjecture. Including what the evil fuck looked like.

"Viper 44, welcome to the program. I'm Silverback 13, your trainer."

Why is he acting like he doesn't even fucking know who I am?

"Yes, Sir."

Two can play at this goddamned game.

"Lord."

44's face drew into a scowl before he could stop himself. His head was yanked back by his hair so hard he lost his balance, throwing one hand down to keep from landing hard on his elbow.

"Any display of emotion in front of The Lord could result in your immediate termination. You stay still when I say so, you speak only when I ask something of you, and you never, *ever*, react to anything that happens to you."

13 had growled it right next to his ear, a small burst of spittle landing on the side of 44's neck.

"Is that clear, soldier?"

"Yes, Sir."

He'd kept his tone as even and flat as he could.

"I said, *Lord*."

That's when it changed. When he became truly afraid for the first time since he'd become determined to enter the program. 13's hand still clutched his hair, gripping him tightly, painfully. He wanted it, wanted *him*, and it could never be. Want spelled disaster—it was an emotion that crippled. Especially when they

were bound to a mission from which he would likely never return. Undoubtedly, 13 knew it too.

“Yes. Lord.”

13 pulled him up forcefully by his hair and dragged him to the other end of the room where the shackles and the majority of the other implements were located. The entire room was approximately a thousand square feet and as gray and sterile as the rest of the facility. The only objects of beauty were the bondage devices themselves. In addition to the shackles—there were the chains, the benches, the tables—everything outfitted with cuffs, collars and restraints. Every manner of apparatus that he and Cyrus... 13, had ever delighted in.

“Stand here. Don't move. Eyes down.”

He yelped as his cock was slapped harshly.

“Louder.”

Another blow landed on his tip, the sting building along with the hint of pleasure.

“Make sure I know you feel it. Give me your screams. If he doesn't believe you're in a lot of pain, he'll make sure that you are. He has to accept that you love it no matter how excruciating it is.” 13 barked it, his orders spat out fast, no hesitation.

The final strike was so hard, his toes curled and he grimaced before he could stop himself. This time 13 grabbed him by his throat.

“I've been in this room with you for less than ten minutes and you've already signed your death warrant twice.” His voice had come out like a snarl. “You're done.”

13 gave him a shove as he let go of his neck, and he fell to the ground, landing on his ass.

“*Bullshit.*”

His words hit their target and 13 whirled back around.

“Yeah? You know what's bullshit Viper 44?”

His face flushed and he appeared out of control as he rushed towards him. When 13 had been his Dom, he'd never lost control. Ever. Bent at the waist and stabbing a finger at him, any hint of control had evaporated.

“Bullshit is the other 43 Vipers who went before you and never came back. The ones who lived, breathed, and eventually *died* for the program. Older, more experienced subs who had embraced their submission for years, who began when they were younger than you, who weren't trying to prove something to an ex-lover.”

There was no thought when 44 sprang to his feet and slammed his body into 13. If he hadn't been so enraged, it would've been amusing. He wasn't more than a hundred and thirty pounds or taller than five foot six. 13 was well over six feet and usually about two hundred and twenty-five pounds when he was at his peak muscle mass. And there seemed to be plenty of mass when 44's head hit the solid wall of 13's mid-section.

“Fuck you, you arrogant prick! You know absolutely nothing about why I'm here.”

44 struggled against the tight hold 13 had on him. 13 grasped his upper arms, allowing him to flail and kick at him without even flinching. After a few minutes of struggling like a crazed wild animal, he stilled, panting, sweating.

“Are you quite finished?” It had come out akin to a growl.

“You don't know.” He refused to cry, but he would beg if he had to. “You have no idea why I'm in the program.”

He allowed his gaze to rise and meet 13's. To finally look into the gorgeous deep brown eyes that had always made him melt, had made him give every ounce of himself over to 13's control. If only he could again. 13 set him down and released his arms.

“Then enlighten me.”

Chapter Two

Reluctantly, 13 let go of 44 and frowned as the young man turned away, hugging himself. He wouldn't allow himself to think of 44's real name. It was essential he stick to the protocol of dehumanization. All recruits belonged to a class of rebel—Viper, Silverback or Raptor—depending on their strength level and skill set. Vipers were small, crafty and vicious when they stung. Silverbacks were sheer strength and 13 was their lead Dom. Raptors were rage personified, aided by a synthetic drug that could be triggered when needed. After that, they were assigned a number based on the chronological order they were inducted onto the team. It was a good practice. There were so few of the original fighters left that it helped to keep from thinking of the ones you sacrificed or fought alongside as individuals—people who had other people who cared about them.

Which was a part of why 13 was so puzzled by 44's inclusion into the program. It had been difficult to maintain his temper when he'd spotted him through the glass. When he'd seen the only man he'd ever loved, the only one for whom he'd be willing to die. The one who now seemed ready to forfeit everything to a cause he'd once ridiculed.

13 had given everything to the goddamned program, but he'd hidden 44 away so he could never be discovered. Beautiful young men who were drawn to pain were the perfect tools to get close enough to The Lord. Close enough to kill. In addition, 44 had spent months trying to convince 13 to leave The Rebellion, to run away with him. 44's position had always been that opposition to The Scourge was pointless and that they should seek their own happiness together.

“Well?”

He was tiring of the whole charade that centered on him training 44. There had been a sweet purity buried inside of 44 that only he had ever been able to reach. 13 not only didn't want to see that become sullied, but he was also sure 44's annihilation at the hands of The Lord would be much swifter than the other recruits before him because of it. He knew 44 well enough to know that he couldn't be readied for the mission in two weeks. It was preposterous. And 44 wasn't a number to him. 44 was a human being that he still loved more than his own life. Fucking hell, more than anyone else's life as well.

“I have to do this. The mission is all that matters to me.”

His words had barely been audible and 13 caught the crack of 44's voice at the second part of the statement.

"I can't imagine what universe you think we could ever be in where I would buy that pile of horse crap. You did nothing but denigrate the program when we were together."

Together. Fucking hurt to say that.

"You told me over and over that it was a mistake for me to be involved, that it wasn't worth it. And now it's all that matters to you?" He snorted. "Try again Buttercup."

44 flinched at what had been a very private endearment. The last thing 13 had ever allowed anyone to see in him was any hint of softness, anything that could ever be construed as tender. But 44 wasn't anyone.

"You don't understand."

13 threw his hands up in the air. "Obviously. Now cut the shit and spill it. You have two more minutes before I drag your sorry ass outta here and tell them you're untrainable."

"Then you'll be giving me an instant death sentence." 44 chuckled with no humor. "At least that one would be quick and painless."

13's breath caught.

The fuck?

"What are you babbling on about now?" His voice had lost a considerable amount of its edge.

44 gazed up at him, small wrinkles between his eyes as he pulled his brow together. "The new protocol? You know, the one where any Viper deemed unable or unwilling to complete their assignment would be dispatched immediately."

Ah, the language they chose. The Rebellion was always certain that every bit of verbiage they used was innocuous enough that it would dull the impact of its true meaning.

"Son of a fucking bitch."

He'd muttered it. In reality, he'd meant to keep the comment to himself, but his walls were slipping, eroding as each new bit of information unfurled. It had begun the moment he'd spied 44 behind the glass. Drawing in a deep breath, he

carefully constructed the wall again and prepared himself to do his job. The one that he was sure would result in his ex-lover's death anyway, but would at least offer the scantest possibility of hope.

"Then tell me why you're here." He released a heavy sigh. "Before we get started."

It had been a dick move on his part and he knew it. But the hurt that still lodged inside him from 13's rejection had risen sharply to the surface when 13 had entered the room. The Rebellion recruiter had informed him of the dispatch clause, idly mentioning that 44 would be the first Viper it would apply to—so 44 had been fairly certain 13 would be completely unaware of it. It had been tucked away in with his small arsenal of motivators intended to make his ex-lover train him properly for the mission—to not go easy on him.

The Rebellion had determined that the knowledge The Vipers possessed in regards to the operation to murder The Scourge's leader was too sensitive. If someone failed the training, they couldn't be left running around with that secret knowledge. It was also a great inspiration for a Viper to suck it up.

Suck it up, Buttercup.

That was what 13 had said the first time he'd ever used the bullwhip on him. 44 had laughed so hard that the session had become completely derailed, 13 eventually joining in on the hilarity. After that, he'd only used it affectionately—primarily when they'd made love.

He moaned at the pain slicing through him at the memory.

A good memory. A fucking beautiful memory.

"I found them."

There was no reason to lead up to it. To be coy. He knew 13 would know exactly what he meant.

Gazing over at 13, he noted the flat expression. God, he fucking knew the man so well. He knew exactly what 13 looked like when he masked himself against any genuine emotions.

"Where, how?"

"After you left me, I had nothing left. No one to live for."

He'd waited to say that to 13 for a year, but surprisingly, it didn't give him the satisfaction he'd always fantasized that it would.

“So I decided the only thing left for me to do was to hunt for them. Even though I saw the building my mom and sister had been holed up in torched into obliteration by The Scourge, I returned to Bear Valley and the Sierra Nevadas to search for them, search for someone who might’ve known of them.”

He paused, remembering the day that 13 had found him. The man who would become his Dom had rescued him after the battle which he’d assumed had claimed his family. He’d been hiding in a cave and had fought like one of the local bobcats when 13 had discovered him and held him tenderly, eventually calming him down. 44 had barely been eighteen years old, born after the initial takeover. Raised on fear and distrust, it had surprised him that 13 had not only been able to reach him, but to initiate him into a submissive state of being.

All of his anxiety and dread had been channeled into the glorious pain that 13 had inflicted on him. It had become his elixir against the abject terror that life had always held for him. He had taught 44 to trust for the first time, to let go of his worry. 13, and his unique brand of love, had become 44’s entire existence before 13 had abruptly torn it away from him after they’d only had a year together. Breaking the promise he’d made to always care for him.

“It took me over nine months of trekking through the wilderness to find them. I used the survival techniques you taught me as well as the focus I learned through our sessions.” He stared directly into 13’s eyes. “I never imagined I’d have a use again for anything that’d happened between us.” Shrugging he added, “I suppose there’s even more I can use now, given the current circumstances.”

“Don’t joke.” 13’s steely-edged tone had returned. “This is your fucking life we’re talking about.”

44 was amazed at how the calm trickled over him at first, then completely enveloped him.

“No. It’s not. It’s my mom and sister’s lives.”

Chapter Three

“We’re breaking for an hour. Be back here at nine, then we’re going to hit it hard.”

Without waiting for an answer, 13 marched out of the room. It was too much. Fuck The Rebellion for doing this. Even though he’d kept his relationship with 44 a hardcore secret, one never knew. Could he be completely certain that it hadn’t ever been compromised? There was no such thing as certainty in the new Earth world.

He’d left the iron door open, deciding he would worry about all the mind-fucky, head-spacey bullshit later. He would give himself an hour to wrap his brain around what 44 had just dumped on him, then he would come back and Dom him *raw*. But first, he needed to pay a little visit to Raptor 10 and find out whether the man was going to blow air up his skirt, or tell him something that at least resembled the truth in regards to the mission.

Rounding the corner of one of the long hallways in the catacombs of the underground station, he almost ran Raptor 10 over.

“Ah, funny I should meet you here, buddy.” He’d sneered out the last word.

“The training door is open, the sensors went off. Why aren’t you in there with 44?”

Well, fuck me sideways.

There was a glimmer of concern in 10’s eyes. The day continued to be ever surprising.

“We’re taking a break.”

10 grabbed his arm and valiantly attempted to pull him to one side where they were more concealed. Not wanting to be a complete asshole, he allowed himself to be guided.

“You can’t take a break. Commander 7 won’t allow it.” His voice had been barely above a whisper.

“Since when?”

“Since the mission went Omega.”

Holy motherfucking shit.

There was no point in retreating into panic mode—there had always been a strong likelihood that everything they had been working towards would reach a point of being so fucked that hard decisions would have to be made. It meant that 44 was their last chance. If he didn't succeed, then they would all go in, guns blazing, consequences be damned. They would probably all die, the remaining Earth survivors that weren't chosen for servitude incinerated, and The Scourge would make the planet of humans their sole domain.

“Anyone planning on telling me that?”

“It's a need to know.”

13 gritted his teeth. “Yeah? Well they need to know that after this is all over with, whatever happens to 44 is going to happen to them times ten.”

“Don't. For his sake, keep it together.”

Is that compassion in his voice?

If the day got any weirder, he would assume that someone had inserted a hallucifun chip in his neck. At the rate things were going, recreational drug use was beginning to gain some appeal.

“Fine.”

He knew he was practically snorting like a bull to keep his anger in check, but as always, anything that benefited 44 was his most important consideration.

“But 10? If there's anything left inside you that's from before, keep me in the loop?”

“Why do you think I came and got you?” There was a curl at the corner of his mouth trying to turn into a smile. “Now go back in there and get your boy ready.”

Can't shiver, can't move, can't breathe fast.

His foot itched. It was right below his ankle bone and he would happily give a blow job to the entire Rebellion if he could scratch it. But his first order from 13 had been to sit perfectly still, in position, for thirty minutes. There'd never been anyone other than 13. It hadn't even occurred to him prior to being with him that he was gay. He'd always assumed that the only lover he'd ever have would be the palm of his right hand.

The first night after he'd been rescued, 13 had snuck him into his private quarters before the refugees had been logged in. As the top trainer for all their

missions, regardless of type, 13 had his own mini-compound at the base of the Nevadas, near Mt. Whitney. It had been tucked away safely in a canyon surrounded by rocks and a cluster of thick evergreens.

According to 13, there was a road paralleling the range that had once been a main artery for people traveling up the state once called California. That was prior to the time when they'd all been forced underground, back when there were pockets of humans still trying to survive above ground. But on that day, he had been so completely terrified that he'd barely been coherent. Nonetheless, he'd still been able to see the hungry look in the eyes of some of the other soldiers. He'd clung to 13, somehow sensing he could be safe with him, not wanting anyone else near. The soldiers had assumed he'd been checked in and the refugee commander had no idea that 44 even existed.

That first night alone with 13 had been strangely comforting. He should have been petrified—the man was twice his size and looked as though he wouldn't know what a smile was if it skipped up to him and smacked him across the face. Instead, 44 had curled up on his lap and fallen asleep in the comfort of 13's arms. In less than a week—and after a few pointless attempts by 13 to discourage 44's affections—they had become lovers. 44 had simply known that 13 was safe, that he was home.

Don't let your mind drift, idiot.

The agony of his memories sliced through him, threatening to ruin his concentration. 13 was right about one thing. Even the tiniest slip up could spell immediate death.

In a firm and even tone, 13's voice interrupted his thoughts.

“On your feet, then over to the wooden cock and ball restraint.”

He rose gracefully, reminding himself that even though it was his ex-Dom training him, he wouldn't be treated in the same way as before. There would be no praise, no encouragement, no safeword. Only harsh, painful demands. He kept his stride measured, his posture perfect, his expression impassive. Pausing before the wood framed stand that resembled a centuries-old stock, it nonetheless held one important distinction. The only hole would be the one that would imprison his junk.

They'd actually used it a few times before, however that gave him no solace. Whatever enjoyment he'd experienced with any of the implements they'd played with would no longer matter. Anything The Lord used on him wouldn't be pleasurable—at least not for 44.

13 approached him, back in full Dom mode. He towered over him in nothing but a pair of worn, tight as fuck black leather pants. 13's bulky, solid muscles rippled as he sauntered over to 44, running both of his large hands over his shaved head, then shaking them out as if in preparation for what was about to occur. Any reaction from the surprise at finding 44 in the program was gone as if it had never existed.

Handling him roughly, 13 tugged his cock and balls and stuffed them in the u-shaped, metal lined indentation of the crossbeam that had already been adjusted to his height. Gritting his teeth at the sensation of the cold steel on his sensitive flesh, 44 worked to maintain a blank expression on his face.

Bringing the wooden arm down, 13 trapped his genitals. He proceeded to tighten the steel lining and 44 focused on his even breathing as the inner lining squeezed his dick and sac. His gaze was trained forward and it was a fight not to look down at what he was sure would be his purpling cockhead and swollen nuts. In the past when he'd played with 13 on the stock, their interaction had been much different. It wasn't merely that 13 was now pushing him harder. The connection wasn't the same and that hurt more than anything physical 13 could do to him. His ex-lover's harsh touch was done from a place of separateness.

Once 13 had seemingly bound 44's cock and balls to his satisfaction, he yanked first one, and then 44's other wrist up to shackle them wide and above his head, stretched to their limit. Then he kicked 44's legs apart, before restraining his ankles in the same manner. The pull on 44's genitals was more pronounced than ever once his limbs were imprisoned, and as each action was completed, 44 remained still and 13 remained silent.

There was barely a chance for him to register the quiet whoosh of the flogger before it angrily splayed across his back, the knotted ends stinging him in an arc across one shoulder blade and his upper arm.

He's using the one from before, the one I loved so much.

"Out loud."

"I was trying to—"

44 screamed. The second strike had been much more excruciating than anything he could ever recall them doing together. 13 had certainly never before hit him with full strength and without any build-up.

"No talking. You shut the fuck up at all times unless you're begging the Lord to punish you more or moaning about how much you love it."

The next blow was just as painful, landing on the top of his ass. About to practice his fake cry of ecstasy, he first bit his lower lip to assuage his response to the pain. 13 had apparently spotted it—the next hit was directly on his butt cheeks, the ends of the flogger nipping at the sensitive skin on the underside of his thighs.

“No hesitation. Commit to your love of the pain. Make him believe it, make *me* believe it.”

Another strike. He couldn't comprehend how each one seemed worse than the last.

“Yes, Lord, more please, I *beg* of you.”

Stupidly waiting for the words of praise, 44 had a momentary clutch in his heart when they didn't come. But why would they? It wasn't about the two of them reaching for sanctuary together, finding that balance with one another that would make their lives worth living. It was about staying alive long enough to kill a blight that threatened all that he held sacred.

The beating continued, 44 yelling in mock rapture. The rhythm intensified, the fiery pain traversing up and down the backside of his body. At his center was the hot, pulsing throb in his prick and sac—the pressure more intense than anything he'd ever known. He fell into it, fell into the dark arms of agony. Soon his cries morphed into something else, something genuine. A continuous wailing moan escaped his lips, the sounds hypnotic to his own ears.

Abruptly, the flogging ceased. Lost in a universe of his own making, it took him a moment to register that he hadn't looked for verbal approval from 13 that time. And that the awful beating he'd just endured hadn't been as unbearable as he'd thought.

It couldn't be that easy.

He was right.

The dildo that 13 shoved up his ass was at least lubed, but he hadn't had anyone inside him other than 13—ever—and that had been over a year prior. The shock of being filled to the max without any warning was half of what had freaked him out. 13 fucked him vigorously with the silicon toy, the burn even more severe than he could remember it being from when 13 had popped his cherry.

Once 44 got past the surprise of begin violated by the fake dick, he realized that it wasn't as large as it had seemed initially. His ex-lover was much more

endowed and 44 found himself becoming irritated with 13—concerned that the man might be behaving too hesitant with him. Regardless of it being his first day of training, they had very little time before 44 would be subjected to the abuse of The Lord. It was a good bet that their sadistic enemy was unacquainted with the concept of lubrication.

It was too pleasurable. The glorious stretch that he hadn't felt in so long, the pegging of his gland, the fullness—it was all there. There was a tingling in his spine, but it had nowhere to go. The pulse in his cock was so strong it gave the illusion that his swollen erection could explode. He couldn't move back to meet the object being rammed inside him, nor could he thrust forward. Yanking on his restraints, despite knowing he was tightly held all around, did nothing to alleviate his suffering. All he could do was take it.

He howled as 13 slapped his cock again and again while still fucking him hard with the dildo. His thighs shook with the strain of it all—sweat pouring down his neck and torso regardless of the temperature in the room. Soon tears joined the moisture leaking out of him. He ground his teeth together so hard, he actually feared he might crack them.

“Why aren't you begging for more, huh? You'd better fucking make sure I know you love it or I might eliminate you, get rid of you. Who needs a sex slave who's no fun? I'll just beat him until he's dead, maybe let all my minions fuck him to death...”

There had been a waver in 13's voice, then everything had simultaneously ceased. The images 13's words evoked were terrifying. Nauseating. They had to maintain the charade of what they were doing together by duplicating the surmised situations he might encounter with The Lord.

The next sensation was a spiked paddle on his already raw, tender ass. And so he begged.

Chapter Four

He was a disgusting human being. If he could even be considered a part of the human race any longer. 13 had beaten and tortured his ex-lover for almost two weeks. The only thing he hadn't done was have sex with him. Various dildos, plugs and vibrators of multiple shapes and sizes had, but 13 hadn't touched 44 in that way at all. Everything that had been done to him had been in the name of the program, all in the name of eliminating the enemy.

Who will undoubtedly eliminate him instead.

The guilt crushing him from the inside out at the knowledge that he had been capable of committing such horrific acts on 44 was something he doubted he would ever overcome. No amount of reassurances from Raptor 10 could break through to him. The urge to vomit rose up in his throat as it had so many times in the past several days. Every time he had sensed even the smallest twinge of need, desire—he had turned it around on both of them by amping up the cruelty. It was the only chance 44 had of survival, yet that had done nothing to assuage the cloak of self-loathing that currently enveloped him.

He was startled from his reverie by an insistent banging on the door to his compartment. Since he was the trainer of the supposed last hope for humanity, 13 had been afforded quarters almost as large as Commander 7's. As if that meant a good goddamned thing to him.

“What the fuck d'ya want?”

It wasn't as though he didn't put up with an assload of lame every day. The Commander's constant need to know what he was doing with his boy made him want to filet the shithead.

He's not your boy. Not anymore.

“Come on 13, it's me. Open up.”

Raptor 10.

“Just a minute.”

He pushed himself up from the luxury cot that—other than their leader—only the Vipers, Silverbacks and Raptors enjoyed.

One Viper anyway. All the rest are gone.

His stomach twisted like one of those old-fashioned washing machines he'd seen on the digi-com. There had been a channel that showed advertisements

from fifty years before, back when humanity cared about what brand of laundry appliance they purchased. Under their current circumstances, a big communal vat-like tub was the recipient of all their dirty garments. Once a week, one of the grunts was in charge of making sure the soldiers were all taken care of. That was the extent of The Rebellion's domesticity.

Even the food rations didn't require any special care. They ate what came in the packages and tossed the remains. Somewhere away from their hideout was a mysterious location that produced the bland packets of nutrition. When he and 44 had been in the Nevadas together, they'd caught and gathered their own food. They'd lived simply, but with full contentment in one another.

Fucking stomach.

Opening the door reluctantly, he prepared himself for what might be bad news. As it was, he was barely holding it together with the realization that 44 would be leaving to go on his mission in less than twelve hours. 10 pushed past him. 13 frowned.

"The fuck?"

"Close the door."

"When did you get so pushy?"

As 13 scowled at the man he'd finally determined was more of a friend than he'd ever realized, he noted his subtle hand signals. Technology had become more of a pain in the ass as the years had worn on. For every problem it had solved, it had created ten more. The ability to maintain any type of privacy had evaporated. That was until the attack by The Scourge had provided Earth with its one and only favor—the breakdown of society and the subsequent chaos that followed. Being able to sustain the level of policing that had occurred prior to the invasion had become a hit and miss affair. As a result, people had invented their own organic forms of communication when there was any doubt as to the security of a location. Raptor 10 was using sign language.

"We're safe in here. I took care of that problem a long time ago."

"Don't they keep trying to reinstall them?"

"No. The digi-com transmissions I send out from my quarters make them think I'm in here behaving myself." He raised one eyebrow at 10. "I even programmed some realistic sounds that a man alone in his room might make."

"I don't wanna know."

10 moved over to the plank wood bench that was the only seating in the ten by twelve quarters. He sat down, and 13 perched at the end of his cot, his hands clasped, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. Waiting. He knew 10 wasn't making a social call.

“Well?”

“Raptor 5 just came back from a siege on one of The Scourge's minion camps. He said that the whole thing had seemed too easy, which was why they were certain it was a trap. They all gave up without a fight, not one of 'em tried anything. For a species that has always been ruthless and without mercy, it made no sense.

“After a few days of everyone sort of sussing the other out, the leader of the minions asked to speak with 5.” 10 glanced around the room nervously, his knee beginning to bounce in agitation. “Are you sure...?”

“You doubt me?”

“No, but... fuck. Let's just say that if you're wrong, it's been nice knowin' ya, 'cause we'll both be dead in the next ten seconds.”

“Goddammit, out with it already.”

“Commander 7 and The Lord are working together.”

He sucked in a large breath. The room spun crazily around him and the sensation that he was about to face-plant onto the concrete floor was almost overwhelming.

“I. Am going to. Fucking. *Kill* him.”

Heat flushed through his body, rising to his face in such a strong wave, it was as though he were a human volcano. He trembled from the effort to keep from literally exploding his venom onto his friend.

“No. You can't.”

A sound more like an animal's growl than something a human would make gurgled out of 13's throat.

“We need him alive and unsuspecting. He thinks we're all on board with the whole pleasure slave mission to kill The Lord. And that we'll be happy to sacrifice our own lives when 44 fails. That's been the real plan all along.”

“But he could still—”

“Think man, can't you see it's a set-up? 7 has been buying time to get everything in place before he made his final move. The Lord needed him to

weaken our ranks, wear us down until we were desperate. Every Viper that was ever sent in was going on even more of a suicide mission than they ever realized. There was never an opportunity for them to get to The Lord, never weapons or weaknesses they could use that the fake intel had indicated they could.”

13's breathing increased in its intensity. Control had left the building and had been replaced by murderous rage. With words gritted through his teeth and in-between snorts, 13 attempted to remain calm long enough to get the rest of the information out of 10. Clenching and unclenching his fists, he took another deep breath.

“Go on, give me everything. Otherwise I'm going to go pay a little visit to the Commander right now and rip his balls off before I stuff them down his throat.”

“Deep breaths, chief. I'm supposed to be the rage monster.”

“Fuck that. Yours is enhanced, mine comes naturally whenever I think about innocent men dying over some fucktard's personal agenda. Now out with it.”

10 nodded, a look of understanding on his face. “While I'm telling you the rest, you need to bear in mind that there's a way for us to get the final result we intended in the first place, along with Commander 7's head. But if you go all berserker it'll ruin everything. It will also likely send 44 and his family to an immediate grave.”

13 scowled, an iciness surging into his veins to cool down the fire that was there. “What does 44's family have to do with anything?”

“7 recruited 44, using his family as an enticement—”

“How the hell did he even know about 44 or his family? That doesn't make any—”

“Let me finish, please? I'll give you every detail—I swear to all that is holy—but you need to hear it all first.” 10 sighed as if all of the breath had escaped from his body. “Okay?”

“Fine. Yeah, okay.”

Lowering his voice in an almost compassionate tone, 10 continued. “You and 44 weren't as stealth about your relationship as you'd thought. The Commander has resented you for a while. He sees how the others look up to

you, and he's always been threatened by it. Once he got in bed—so to speak—with The Lord, he searched tirelessly for any weakness that he could use against you. 44 is that one thing, the only human being that you would sacrifice everything for.”

His gut twisted into new and before untried knots.

I let him go for nothing, likely condemning him in the process.

“It was no accident that 44 found his family. Once 7 discovered you and 44 were no longer together, he contacted his cohorts who then located 44's mom and sister in one of the slave camps. The Commander had been following him the entire time he'd hunted for his people, so he approached 44 with the proposition of him being their last chance—the only one that could save his family. Save you.”

“Me?”

He'd never heard anything more ridiculous in his life. Not that he didn't need saving in his own bizarre way, but it was astonishing that 44 would give a shit about him after the way 13 had pushed him away.

I guess we've both been a little confused over the whole saving each other thing.

He grunted. “Shit.”

13 shook his head, dropping it into his palms, trying to unravel the complexities of what 10 was telling him. Trying to discern if he even believed a minuscule portion of it. He startled and straightened up when he felt 10's hand on his arm.

“Look man, I know this is all one big pile of puke, but I swear there're options. We can still win.”

“The first option I'm exercising is getting 44 and getting the fuck outta here.”

“Oh? Think he's leaving without mom and sis? Of course, even if he did, there's only the entire Rebellion to get past in this underground rat maze.” 10 mockingly slapped his forehead. “I'm sorry, I forgot to mention that mom and sis are already on The Lord's station where there will be a public torture and execution of the three of them while you're forced to watch. Of course, that's only after The Lord has had his kicks with your boy. If half of what we've heard is true, ugly doesn't even begin to cover what 44 will have to endure.

Don't you get it? This whole pleasure slave assassination horseshit has only ever been a game. A way for The Lord to get a little extra something out of the deal."

He really didn't want to retch in front of his friend, but the bile in the back of his throat had ideas of its own. One thing was for sure, it didn't sound like he had a lot of time to get 44 out of the whole mess. And he couldn't do it alone—he would need 10's help.

"And you're sure this minion, or whatever it is, isn't making crap up to keep himself alive? Or maybe he's been sent to plant distrust amongst us, get us to turn against each other. Not that I've ever needed much motivation in that regard when it comes to The Commander."

There had always been something off about the man, something smarmy. In truth, it wasn't much of a stretch to conclude that he might be consorting with the enemy.

Not much at all.

"He knew too much about The Rebellion, things only the highest in command would have known. 5 said it was terrifying when it became clear that it was all true."

"Holy shit." 13 had almost said it to himself. He looked up. "In that case, whadda we do?"

Chapter Five

Ten more hours. Ten more hours before I leave, before I never see Cyrus again, never see Mom or Rebecca again.

In his final hours left on Earth, he refused to think of Cyrus as a number. The program could take everything else away from him, but not that. It was dangerous to allow any softness in, but if he was going to die anyway, he needed to remember Cyrus the way he had been when they'd been together. Strict—but loving and protective. Every action obviously intended to put 44's needs first.

The ache in his chest far outweighed the other ones. Before it'd been healed with the restorative cream after his two weeks with Cyrus, his body had been plagued by endless bruises, pulled muscles, soreness and welts. Yet, none of that meant anything to him. It was all nothing more than the result of a training mission. It was his heart that was damaged.

He sat on the edge of his small cot in the six by eight cubicle that had comprised his home since he'd joined the program. Clutching at the thin blanket that was the only covering for the foldable bed, he pulled it to him. He wasn't cold. His nakedness was of no concern. But his need for a small measure of comfort in the final hours before he was sacrificed to an unknown hell gnawed at him. He wanted to hold someone in his arms. The blanket was all there was.

There was a shuffling outside his room and he tensed. No one was allowed to come near him, not even 13. From the moment he'd signed on, the only interaction with anyone that was approved was with his trainer, and even then, only in the training area. No one else was even permitted to speak to him.

Someone fiddled with the lock and 44 tucked his feet under himself, instinctively scooting back on his makeshift bed. The door opened slowly, the mystery visitor still hidden behind it. As soon as it had swung wide, 44 gasped. Not only was Cyrus there, but the one he remembered from before as being Cyrus's friend, Raptor 10.

Something's not right.

Cyrus held a finger to his mouth, his eyes boring into 44, a tiny glimmer that reminded him of their bond from before. 44 shuddered, the sense that there was a synchronistic reason for him joining the program assailing him all at

once. Both of the large men struggled to squeeze into the small space. 44 climbed off the cot, and all three of them pushed it up against the wall. Questioning them with a lift of his eyebrows, he waited for what he was sure would be distressing news.

Cyrus leaned into him, his ex-lover's hot breath tingling his skin, the brush of his lips next to his ear knee-weakening. For the past two weeks, 44 had been naked, bound, beat and fucked with various implements by Cyrus. But in that moment, nothing felt as raw or as intimate as the man's mouth so close to his face.

Cyrus's whisper was like a caress. "10 is sweeping the room. Hold on a moment longer."

Watching as 10 went through the motions of checking for listening devices, 44 attempted to remain still the way he'd been trained to do. Because his insides were jumping, somersaulting and cartwheeling all at once. He couldn't tell if that was a good thing or not.

10 nodded at them both. "We're clear."

Turning to Cyrus, he inhaled sharply because there was no attempt from his trainer to look away—he was purposely gazing into 44's eyes and what he saw in them had nothing to do with him being his trainer.

"I have something very important to tell you."

The look on 44's face was easy enough to interpret. He was in shock. Both he and 10 had toyed with the idea of playing the "need to know" game with 44, but neither of them wished to be a part of The Rebellion's methodology anymore. It was 44's life and he deserved to have a say in what went down. Especially since 44 would still be the pawn in their newly conceived plan to outwit both The Commander and The Lord.

13 could barely keep his expression neutral. The urge to gather 44 close and rock him in his arms was a palpable one. He loved him more than ever, needed him. But they would never stand a chance together until The Lord and any human traitors were taken out. Permanently.

At last 44 raised his head, looking at him with a questioning gaze.

"Has anyone ever tried the death capsules before?"

Those eyes. So fucking innocent.

“No. You would be the first.”

13 had already let 10 know that he would be the only one who would explain everything to 44—all that would be expected of him. It was only right.

“And if I don’t bite him hard enough on the first try, and the poison doesn’t get inside him, I’m worm food, right?”

13 tried not to cringe. “Correct.”

Unable to stop himself, he grabbed 44’s upper arms.

“But I know you can do this. You *have* to. The training we’ve done is more than sufficient for you to last long enough to get to him. I know he’ll have you bound and shackled most of the time, but strike the very second you get an opening, right when he’s distracted by tying or chaining you.”

44 dipped his chin in understanding. “And the minions will help you guys get to the station by taking you on their ships?”

Working extra hard to keep himself from stroking 44’s cheek with his thumb, he attempted to keep his tone as encouraging as possible.

“Yes. We’ll get there as soon as the capsules signal to us that the poison’s been deployed. It will be easy to take the rest of them out then.”

44 scrunched his eyebrows together. “But how can you be sure? How can you really know that the minions aren’t just faking you all out?”

The kid wasn’t an idiot. Never had been.

“We can never be sure of anything. But this is the surest we’ve ever been.”

Pressing his lips together, 44 seemed to have reached a conclusion.

“All right. Then fit the capsules on my teeth.”

Their good-byes, or lack thereof, had been excruciating. 44 had sensed that Cyrus had wanted to hold him as much as he’d wanted to be held. That there were words unspoken that might never be said. The distance between them had begun to evaporate from the moment his Dom had entered 44’s cubicle.

My Dom.

He didn’t give a fuck anymore about anything other than eliminating the vile creature known as The Lord so that he could go back to belonging to Cyrus once again. Because that was the reality. Even if Cyrus wasn’t interested in

keeping him anymore, he would never belong to anyone else. Cyrus would always be his Dom, his only love. Except this time, he would have the added joy of his mom and sister being in his life too.

The charade of being captured and taken to The Lord's ship had begun. They were on their way, traveling at a ridiculous speed to the lair in space. It was hard to keep all the details straight in his mind regarding everything. It was an undercover operation staged by The Rebellion that was actually a fake. Commander 7 still thought that Cyrus and 44 and everyone else believed the original assassination plan was underway. That 44 was going to attempt to murder The Lord using whatever methods he could since he would be nude and unable to conceal any weapons.

Except for the one Commander 7 and The Lord knew nothing of. The capsules. Once 7's nefarious scheme had been uncovered, 10 had rounded up the only soldiers he believed could be trusted to stage their own little coup. The most important person he'd recruited had been the scientist whom 10 had known since their childhood days. The scientist who'd invented the capsules and who'd never shared that knowledge with The Rebellion.

"Turns out he never cared much for authority. He's been saving this little device for the right moment."

44 reminded himself not to lick around his incisors where the capsules were fitted over his teeth. It wouldn't be good to call attention to his mouth considering the capsules were needle sharp to facilitate the breaking of skin. Also, he wouldn't be able to eat anything, or else he could pierce his own tongue which would kill him instantly. That meant that he would have to make his move quickly. Considering that any length of time spent with The Lord would undoubtedly be unbelievably agonizing, offing the Scourge leader as fast as possible was an excellent motivator.

The minions nearby kept eyeing him. He was fairly certain they weren't allowed to touch him as he would be The Lord's pleasure slave. It was difficult to work out in his mind whose side the four foot tall, lumpy dark blue creatures were supposed to be on. Since the Commander was actually double crossing The Rebellion, were these minions who were purported to be on The Rebellion's side, in reality still on The Scourge's side?

It gave him a headache. The only way to know anything for sure would be when The Scourge's incinerator rays and The Rebellion's boomer rifles battled it out. The looks and whispers amongst the minions had him on edge. The fear

that they'd all been found out already troubled him. The certainty that it would all be over soon one way or the other had never been more real to him than it was right then.

After being up all night plotting with Cyrus and 10, it had been easy to doze off during the trip. A sharp jostle of his shoulder startled him awake. His gut clenched at the realization that they were passing through an enormous hatch of The Lord's massive space station. If his circumstances hadn't been so dire, he might have been able to appreciate the beauty of the ship. It shone. There was nothing dark or foreboding about it, nothing tarnished or dingy. Bright, clean metal like a highly polished platinum comprised both the outside and the inside. The lines were soft and round—not the unforgiving hard edges that 44 had assumed it would have.

As the carrier he was on came to a complete stop, 44 shook uncontrollably. It was as if every muscle and nerve, every tendon and ligament was doing its own private dance inside his body. He was fucking terrified. One of the minions that had a grander outfit on grabbed him by the leash that dangled loosely at 44's side and yanked him forward. The chain was attached to a one inch thick metal collar that had been locked onto his neck as soon as he'd boarded the small ship.

The blue creatures were everywhere. Their funny little shuffling walk would have made him giggle under any other circumstance. *Any* other. He allowed himself to be jerked along by the alien grunt, considering it to all be a part of the act.

It's an act. That's all. I've been trained by the best, I can do this.

That's what Cyrus had said to him over and over, up until the very last moment when they'd held one another's gaze. Up until the door to the ship had closed.

"You can do this. There is more strength and power inside of you than any soldier I have ever known."

As he was led down the large expanse of the main section of the space station, he couldn't help but look around with fascination and curiosity. The way the various bubble-shaped adornments dotting the interior sparkled was very inviting. How could something so aesthetically pleasing be crafted by such a hateful species? Yet, he was certain there was more to everything than any of The Rebellion knew. If one large and powerful group of minions had already

reached out to humanity, then would it be that much of a stretch to believe that they were also being forced into servitude?

Once they arrived at the end of the open area, they took a turn down one of the many corridors, and something else came to his attention. There was an obvious difference in status between the smaller minions and the tall, pale, willowy beings that scowled and hissed at the various minions who 44 passed, along with the one who led him by the tether.

It seemed incomprehensible to 44 that the two very different species were related to one another in any way. Were the taller ones the true leaders? Which type would The Lord be? As far as 44 knew, the humans had only ever encountered the small blue beings. They had certainly been the ones who had raged the devastating war on Earth. His curiosity as to how Commander 7 had become involved in such an intrigue kept his mind occupied on something other than the nightmare that was almost upon him.

They rounded a corner and up ahead was what appeared to be a gold-lined hallway. It was smooth and gleaming the way that molten metal would appear. The compulsion to touch the walls to see if they were indeed liquid was powerful, but he didn't give in to it. The present was the perfect time to begin implementing his self-control. The start of his assignment was likely only seconds away.

As if in acknowledgement of his thoughts, the immense golden doors at the end of the hall swung open as if on their own.

Fuckohfuckohfuckohfuckohfuck.

He couldn't do it. How could he bite someone hard enough to pierce their skin? And this wasn't just someone. This was a fucking *alien*. An evil, sadistic, powerful, motherfucking-in-charge alien.

44 gasped, almost blinded by the magnificence of the stunning creature that appeared from across the room.

It can't be him.

The being approached 44, a light shining around the alien that seemed to radiate from within. It was luminescent. Gorgeous was too tame a word to describe him. 44 knew it was a him because the diaphanous robe he wore did nothing to conceal his enormous manhood.

Oh Jesus.

When they were within a few feet of one another, 44 was overwhelmed at the differences between them physically. He was at least two feet shorter than the being. The lithe form of the creature, complete with his long straight limbs was disconcerting. Even more so when 44 noted that his hands were similar to pincers, yet they didn't appear sharp. They were as soft and stark white as the rest of him. There was no sign of muscle or any other indicator of physical strength. His eyes were soft, large, sea blue and almond shaped—they radiated peace and beauty. The certainty that there had been some sort of awful misunderstanding nagged at him, threatening to derail his duty to the cause.

But then the thing spoke.

It was more cringe inducing than nails on a chalkboard. The croaking sounds that came out of the creature clawed at his nerves, almost making him visibly react before he could stop himself. But Cyrus's training kept him in check. He could feel his ex-lover's influence from afar. His touch.

“My slaaaave. Welcome.”

A snake. That's what it reminds me of.

“Lord.” He bowed his head slightly.

He didn't feel welcomed. Revolted was more accurate. The unholy noise that emanated from The Lord nullified any physical loveliness it possessed. 44 no longer thought of it as a “him”. Regardless of the enormous appendage that dangled between its spindly legs, 44 refused to assign it any gender, any regard.

It undulated around him, sniffing at him the way a dog would. One of the pincers thrust towards him and grasped at his skin, lightly pinching his arms, chest, neck, scraping down his back until they clutched his ass cheeks. The shudder was involuntary, rippling through him before he'd even had the chance to register the need to control it. The repercussions were swift.

He choked and struggled as he was dangled by his neck, held between what turned out to be very powerful claws. Soft claws, but the result was the same.

“Yooooou shall obey me in all ways or diiiiiie. My touches are your greatest wish. My punishments your greatest desiiiire.”

He nodded within the creature's grip, then was tossed to the ground where he landed hard, splayed out on his stomach.

I give myself one day. I've got to get to him today, otherwise, I won't fucking last through this creepy shit.

A loud command emanated from The Lord. It obviously wasn't directed at him as it was shouted out in another language. He was tugged to his feet, then lifted up by his arms by two similar tall creatures—their glow less radiant, their garments less shimmery. They held him that way between them, his feet not touching the ground, even when he pointed his toes.

Once they had reached a polished black door at the other end of the spacious room, they halted. Breathing in short gasps, 44 tried to focus on the mundane things around him, avoiding any thoughts that might lead to pondering what he might be about to endure. The door gleamed in a way that was reminiscent of an opaque stone, like obsidian. There could be anything on the other side of it, things that were beyond his imagining.

After the stone barrier slid into the golden wall, they all passed through. A soft glow of light illuminated them as they proceeded down a narrow hall as if a giant firefly were hovering nearby. Images and symbols that were reminiscent of hieroglyphics were briefly lit up, then cast in the shadows. One thing was for sure, he was being led somewhere far, far away from the landing area for the ships. Possibly so far away that no one who boarded the ship could ever find him.

Swallowing down the lump that had built up in his throat, he returned to more thoughts of his surroundings.

Before he had the chance to continue his assessment of the strange images that flashed by him, the beings abruptly stopped. The door, or panel, or whatever it was they stood before, gave the impression of being like water. A non-solid mass that rippled and reflected back the lights and images around it. His own likeness stared back at him. It was distorted, twisted. Ugly. But what stood behind him was much worse. Scourge. Pestilence. Decay. It radiated off of the thing, eradicating any physical beauty that it might possess.

“It is time little human. Time for us to plaaaaay.”

Chapter Six

In a purely humiliating move, 44 had fainted. When he'd again become conscious, he'd been distressed to discover that he was tied spread-eagled on his stomach, lying on top of a smooth glass-like surface. His wrists and ankles were restrained by some sort of wire. It dug into his delicate flesh, and it was easy to tell when he tested it that if he pulled too hard, it would slice him to his bone. He would have no choice but to stay still regardless of whatever punishment was inflicted upon him—unless he wanted to gravely injure himself.

As he became more and more aware of his body, he was alarmed to realize that something wasn't right with his genitals. They felt unnaturally heavy, and were most definitely not flush between his belly and the surface he was tied to.

That freak pulled my junk through an opening in this table.

Refusing to contemplate whether or not his cock and balls were being restrained with the same wire that his limbs were, he focused instead on his training. Stillness. Calm, steady breathing.

“My toy awaaaaakes.”

If it wasn't for the unearthly sounds the thing made, 44 would have been sure he could endure almost anything. But by being such a fucking coward and passing out, he'd already missed one potential opportunity to take out the revolting creature before he'd been restrained. And now he had no idea what was in store for his helpless body.

He bit the inside of his mouth to keep from reacting to the soft pincers poking and probing at him, bile rising in the back of his throat.

“Do you like my caresssssss? Are they pleaaaasing to you?”

“Yes, Lord. Touch me more, I beg of you.”

His tone had been flat, unconvincing to his own ears. His words sounding silly. The games, the scenarios he and Cyrus had acted out together would be next to useless in the face of the vile being that stood next to him. He was absolutely, royally, figuratively and literally fucked.

A strangled buzzing noise emanated from The Lord, and 44 wondered if it was its version of a laugh.

“Sssssuch a terrible liar. But ssssssooooo prettyyyyy. I will let you live. For nowwww.”

No time. There was no time to waste. The Lord could end him at any moment when the whim overtook it.

“Would you like to guessssss what I’ll do to you firsssst?”

Trick question. How the fuck do I respond?

“I only wish that you do to me what pleases you the most.”

There was an ear-piercing roar, along with a splintering sound from the other side of the room where some object had undoubtedly been smashed. More buzzing, crackling, unnerving howls spewed from The Lord as if every hornet’s nest that had ever existed had all been teased at once.

“This game, it boooooores me! Don’t you seeeee little human? There have been maaaany others before you. I knooooooow. I knooooooow that you think you have a chance to beat me. That you think your precioussssss Commander is on your siiiiiide. But he’s not! He’s on *my* siiiiiide. I will neverrrrrr untie you from where you are now, you will stay there until you diiiiiiie, until the flesh peels from your boooooones as a result of my loving touch.”

His insides liquefied. Things were not going how they were supposed to go, not at all. He hadn’t expected anything to go smooth. As a matter of fact, smooth had never even been a consideration. But to have it all be for nothing, for The Lord to not even play along the tiniest bit because it was bored with the whole charade? It was too cruel.

“I want to play myyyyyyy way now.”

The Lord bent down so that it was practically right next to 44’s face, right where he could inhale the creature’s cold fetid breath. It was so unnatural, all of it.

“And my wayyyyyy is to break soulsssss. Torture is an art, a great achievement among our kind. And I. I am, *The Looooord*. That is why you shall not diiiiiiie until you watch your mother and sister sufferrrrrrr.”

44 yanked on the restraints, the wire slicing his skin, the sharp sting awakening his nerves, the warmth of blood trickling along his arm. Using every miniscule molecule of focus he’d ever possessed, he stilled, forcing himself not to give in to the insanity fighting for dominance in his mind. There had to be a way to finish it. Had to.

“Yesssssss. Cry if you want, I shall lick your tears awayyyyyyy, taste your paaaaaaain.”

Fuck you, shitheap.

His balls were grabbed in a vice-like grip, the creature's pincers crushing them. He was no stranger to having his nuts abused. Cyrus had covered all aspects of potential physical torture during their training sessions. It had never occurred to 44 at the time just how kind Cyrus was being. After more twisting and pulling, he was let go, but his sac was being dragged down as if it would rip off.

Weights.

Then the whipping began. He hadn't the slightest clue what sort of implement was being used on him, but in reality, he didn't see what difference it made. The hot, searing pain was so unrelenting there wasn't the vaguest chance he could get into any kind of space in his mind that would allow 44 to maintain the control of the situation from within. The training had been a joke. It no longer mattered. Yet, what had always mattered still did. His love for Cyrus, for his family. He thought of Cyrus's words before he'd left on the ship.

“You can do this.”

Either The Lord had exhausted its energy or had become bored again—44 wasn't sure—but the filth had finally stopped beating the crap out of him. Unfortunately, the pain hadn't stopped. If someone were to tell him that his flesh was being consumed by flames, he wouldn't have found the information surprising at all.

Wonder what sort of aftercare I'll get?

He almost snorted out loud until he remembered that The Lord didn't seem to be a humorous kinda creature. Sweat poured from him, his shaggy hair drenched with it, trails of moisture pooling in his crack, trickling down his sides. As he'd suspected, there wouldn't be much in the way of respite from his captor.

“I bet your traaaaaainer didn't use thissssss on you. It's our own special deviiiiiiice. When your loverrrrrr learns of your death and the failurrrrrr of your mission, I will personally show him what's left of you before I gut him aliiiiiiive.”

Keep it together. There's a way. There has got to be a fucking way.

Something like an old-fashioned plasma ball hovered in his peripheral vision. As much as he didn't want to contemplate what the instrument might do to him, he couldn't help it. He couldn't even brace himself. Any tension or tightening in his body would cause the wire to cut into him more, juicing his agony levels. And he couldn't pass out again. He needed to remain as alert as possible in case some sort of random opportunity to off the sick fuck presented itself.

There was a bright flash and an almost immediate concentration of what felt like a thousand bee stings to the soles of his feet. He didn't scream. He screeched, he cried, he howled. He begged—but not for more the way Cyrus had trained him. He begged for The Lord to stop.

Unconsciousness drifted near him and he was tempted to lapse into it—anything to save him from what made him wish for death. Another flash and another area of his body was targeted. More excruciating hurt, agony, physical and mental despair. When the energy from the torture device hit his cock, he surrendered to oblivion.

“Wake up toyyyyyy.”

44's head was yanked up, his eyes crusty and swollen from his earlier sobbing. He wanted to kick his own ass for pussing out again by fainting. It was obvious that he wouldn't have the ability to survive much longer, and he had to at least attempt to use the capsules. He grimaced when the Lord's face was mere inches from his own, the creature seemingly inspecting him.

“I liiiiiike your mouth. You can't hiiiiide it from me by twisting it.”

The fuck?

“I'm going to taaaaake it now.”

Still holding 44's head up painfully by his hair with one claw, 44 watched in abject horror as The Lord shoved the sheer fabric of its robe aside, exposing its nauseating organ. When he and Cyrus had lived in the Nevadas, they'd kept a few horses to use for travel. Vehicles were too easily spotted, a signal that humans were nearby. One stallion in particular had been a real horny bastard. What dangled before him was a snow white version of that horse's dong. It was not okay.

All he could think of was that he'd rather die, be beaten alive, have anything happen other than taking that disgusting thing in his mouth. And wishing he

could think up a plan in the next split second that would allow him to use the capsules.

Oh shit.

He held his breath as the large head of the creature's cock was pushed forcefully against his lips.

Don't be eager. Don't let him suspect.

He struggled just enough so that he was sure The Lord wouldn't catch on. The stiff member bruising his mouth was a good indicator that the creature had given itself over to its own primal lust. Raptor 10's scientist friend had instructed 44 it was vital that he hit a vein. That didn't seem like it would be too much of a problem.

At last, 44 allowed the bulbous knob of The Lord to slip into his mouth. It was impossibly huge, the urge to gag overwhelming. But 44 was determined to take in as much as he could to be sure he hit home. Both of The Lord's pincers went to his hair, clutching at it as he moaned and stuffed his swollen prick further past 44's lips.

There was a split second of The Lord's muscles tensing then its shrill screams echoed throughout the chamber, seeming to multiply as if they were in a mountain canyon. Revulsion filled 44 as the cold blood from The Lord filled his mouth, oozing out the sides, but 44 clamped down harder, eliciting an enraged shriek from the dying leader.

There was a moment where 44 thought he might suffocate on the injured shaft that remained lodged between his lips. The sharp ends of the capsules held it in, but The Lord inadvertently saved 44 by tearing itself away from the source of its agony. As the creature writhed on the ground, fighting its own annihilation, 44 spat repeatedly, retching. He was desperate to clear his mouth of the foul residue of both The Lord's blood and any possible lingering poison. 10's buddy scientist had assured him that the poison needed to enter the bloodstream to be fatal, but that didn't mean that it might not make him sick. Especially as 44 was the one and only official test subject.

Gradually, the cries and shouts of The Lord became groans that turned into whimpers that ended in silence. From 44's vantage point, he couldn't see The Lord's face, only its lower legs and feet, twitching slightly. The rest of it was parallel to 44 except it was lying in the opposite direction. Although 44 was fairly certain he'd succeeded, he wanted to know for sure. Because he wasn't

feeling so good all of a sudden and thought he might be in for another surprise. That he might be dying after all. It would be good to know that he'd succeeded before death took him.

Chapter Seven

“You need to stay sharp 13. You’re not going to do your boy any favors by being so worn out you can’t function, can’t fight to your fullest.”

Glaring at 10, he nonetheless knew that his friend was right. Viper 44 had been gone for almost twelve hours and 13 was sick with the terror of what could be happening to him right that minute. Every moment since he’d watched the hatch close on the only man he would ever love. And here he was, useless, not there to protect or to keep him safe.

They were at the camp where Raptor 5’s team and the rogue minions waited for the word to attack. In addition to Silverback 13, Raptor 10, and his scientist buddy—there were about a dozen more soldiers who 10 said could be trusted, who had been just as suspicious of The Commander all along. The pretext for the large group had been that they were there to escort 44 safely to the rendezvous point, due to unusual minion sightings.

By now, Commander 7 knows better.

They were stuck in a very dangerous limbo. If they took off in the ships to be near The Lord’s lair when it was time to move in, they would be tracked by both The Scourge and The Rebellion. If they sat where they were for too long, The Rebellion would find them and the traitorous minions. Then they would have a fight on their hands, and not the one 13 looked forward to. The one that would save his boy and every other human.

“He did it! *Let’s go!*”

The scientist’s shout jarred him from his musings. Grabbing his boomer rifle that could pack the power of an old-fashioned RPG or the precision of a sniper rifle at close range—he practically leap frogged everyone else to get on to the lead ship. Everything seemed to move in double time, and right as they were launching, another shout rose up.

“Commander 7 is on our ass!”

Fuck. Don’t need this.

The hatches had barely locked shut when they blasted off, the egg shaped ships racing one another to stay ahead of The Commander and to reach The Lord’s lair in time to catch The Scourge unaware. However, if The Commander

already knew that they had betrayed The Rebellion, then he would've warned The Lord's space station. The element of surprise had likely been lost.

Even though he realized they still had at least an hour to reach the station The Lord used as his headquarters, 13 was tensed, ready to strike. Ready to end all the bullshit one way or another. Despite 44 being his only thought for the previous several hours, he banished him from his mind. If he didn't concentrate solely on eradicating the enemy, if he allowed himself any twinge of worry for the brave young man who'd risked and possibly already lost his life—then any sacrifice any of them made would have been for nothing.

He was knocked from his reverie by Raptor 10.

“Carter says that his readings indicate that the poison was administered.”

13 scowled, pursing his lips. He had been under the impression that once they'd received the signal from the capsules that they had been deployed, that it meant that the poison had hit its target, that The Lord was dead.

“I don't get it. Wasn't that what he'd meant when he said it had been deployed?”

10 shook his head. “No. It could have meant that the capsules had been discovered and destroyed, or that 44 had accidentally bit down too hard and broken them. Or that he'd tried to bite the target and the capsules were unable to pierce the skin—that they had simply broken against its shell and drained away.”

“Jesus. So what does he mean by the poison being administered?”

His friend appeared to be holding a smile at bay. “It means he's tracked the sensors that are embedded in the poison. They are inside the bloodstream of an alien life form. One that can no longer have the word 'life' attached to it any more. It looks like your boy succeeded.”

My boy. If he's still alive.

Thinking back on the first battle he'd ever had with The Scourge, 13 wondered if the course they had all followed could have been changed had they acted and reacted differently. If the minions that now stood beside them could have reached out then, would they have been able to end the conflict sooner? If his fellow human soldiers and leaders had taken a different course, would the suffering on both sides have been lessened?

Two of their ships had hung back, fighting with Commander 7's vessel, attempting to keep him from interfering with them boarding The Lord's space station. 13 pressed closer to the oval shaped window. It was only six inches across, just enough for him to view what lay immediately ahead of them. Two of the larger battle ships belonging to their compatriot minions flanked them on either side. 13 watched in fascination as the incinerator rays that had terrified humanity for the last twenty years were trained on The Lord's sanctuary.

Not anymore, you dead motherfucker.

Control was a strange thing. Whenever he'd worked with a submissive man, it had been one of his greatest assets. He stayed in control so that his sub had the freedom to soar. As he readied for the combat ahead—the one that would either save or destroy them all—his control prevented him from giving in to the horrors of battle. If he could find 44, and he was still alive, 13 would keep him. He wouldn't use any control when it came to his love for his boy.

A roar of excitement rose up between them all—humans and minions alike—when the hatch to the landing area was blown apart. They would be able to gain entry, but there would be no barrier between them and the openness of space. He turned to Raptor 10 to voice his worries, but his friend seemed to already be aware of his concerns.

"5 explained to me that once we're inside, the minions can reseal the outer shell. We can dock in the landing area and fan out from there."

"Do we have any word yet on the locations of their former minion allies?"

During the wait back on Earth, the second part of the attack plan had been worked out. They were relying heavily on the ability of their newfound partners to provide them with intel.

"They're tracking them. Fortunately, the landing area is completely clear now. Could mean a couple things. Either the fighters moved away to regroup, or the landing area is now unable to sustain any life."

13 groaned. "Perfect."

"Troops! We're less than sixty seconds from arrival, prepare your weapons and let's take this motherfucker!"

5's words had the desired effect of revving everyone up—shouts, grunts and fist pumps filled the ship as humans and minions alike readied to take out a shared enemy. 13 moved away from the window and pushed his away to the

front of the crowd gathering at the opening of the ship. No one bothered to remain buckled in for the landing. Despite all indicators pointing to their way being clear once they touched down, any deterrent to being able to move quickly was an epically bad idea. They could all be obliterated before they'd even moved out of their seats.

The landing was choppy, ungraceful. Their shared objective to overthrow The Scourge so clear that no one seemed to notice that both species held on to one another to keep from being thrown about the cabin. And then the ramp lowered. It was on.

Am I dead?

It was impossible to discern what was real. The pain was there. The sickness was evident. But it was all contained inside some fuzzy ball that seemed to be wrapped around his entire body like a cocoon. It would be good to be dead. Because he wasn't sure he could ever get over what he'd been through.

Cyrus was wrong. I don't have the strength he thought I did. I'm broken.

Hot tears forced their way past his eyelids and dribbled onto the glass table he was still imprisoned on. That was when he realized he was still alive. His agony at not ever seeing Cyrus again a tangible thing that rushed through his veins, mocking him, reminding him of what he'd sacrificed.

But he'll be safe, Mom and Rebecca will be safe.

When he'd volunteered for the program, he'd known that the likely outcome would be his excruciating death. He didn't have the right to feel sorry for himself. He'd embraced the original mission, then the subsequent one with a full understanding of the risks. However, that knowledge did nothing to eradicate his loss. His misery at dying alone without any of the people he cared about by his side still devastated him.

Drifting, he figured the time was near when his consciousness would cease permanently. With what little he had left of coherent thought, he tried to bring to mind various moments from a happier time. From the only genuine happiness he'd ever experienced in his short life—his time with Cyrus. Washing their clothes in a stream, then splashing one another like kids with the cool water. The first time Cyrus entered him, taking forever to prepare him so that it wouldn't hurt, then bringing him to an explosive orgasm. Cyrus's

powerful kisses that filled 44's heart with love. The first session with the flogger that had sent 44 to another place in his head, a place where no one could reach him. Where he was cloaked in comfort.

He held onto those memories so tightly that he was surprised at how real Cyrus's voice was, how close it was to him. It was amazing the way the mind could play tricks—he could even feel the heat of his ex-lover's breath against his skin, his masculine scent heightened by the strong smell of sweat.

Not ex-lover. It's my death and I choose to have him still be mine at the end.

“Logan, please, I'm here. Please wake up.”

That was when Logan knew he was hallucinating. He hadn't heard Cyrus use his real name since before he'd been let go by the man. A gentle hand wiped the hair that was caked on his forehead back from his face.

“Buttercup, I'm begging you, don't give up now. You're strong enough to hold on a little while longer. We're here to help you.”

A wall of pain filled his groin as his balls were released and the blood rushed back into them. He gasped, then groaned. Attempting to move, he hissed when the sting from the cuts in his wrists and ankles were awakened. Strong arms held him still.

“Don't move. You'll hurt yourself more.”

More voices. Movement. Soft kisses against his temple, across his forehead, along his cheek.

Don't be a dream.

He tried to open his eyes, but they were crusted shut. Attempting to speak, to find out if it was all real, the only sound that would come out of him was akin to a strangled croak. More voices surrounded him from all sides, but all he really cared about were the large hands that held him down gently, but firmly. Cyrus's hands.

“Well, Carter? Don't just stand there staring at him, do something!”

“Come on 13, he knows what he's doing. He has to scan him first, make sure The Lord didn't leave any parting gifts inside him that could transfer to the rest of us.”

There was some grumbling. “Fine, but I'm trusting you 10, I don't trust Carter. And don't fucking call me 13 anymore. I'm Cyrus, got it?”

10 chuckled. "Oh, we've got it, chief."

"Fuck you. I want my boy outta this pesthole."

I'm alive.

Chapter Eight

It had been a major cluster fuck once they'd stormed the ship, massive chaos as they'd aimed their weapons at their enemies. Their ability to discern the minions who were on their side from the ones that weren't had been next to impossible. But within minutes, it had all changed. As soon as it was clear to the minions on board the space station that their brothers were fighting alongside the humans, it became a brand new game altogether.

It turned out that The Scourge was really only made up of some creepy-ass white creatures that towered in size and in technological advances over the minions. Those who had been perceived as their enemies for so many years were just as enslaved and persecuted as the humans had been. Once they had banded together, it had been rather simple to tear it all down. The fact that the Commander's ship that included him and all his traitorous followers had been blown to bits had only added to the festivities.

No wonder The Lord and his weird buddies stayed up here and away from all the action down on Earth.

Once the enemies had been eliminated, Cyrus had endured a heart-stopping thirty minutes or so as he'd scoured the ship with the scientist Carter, and Raptor 5 and 10 searching for Logan. The unusual walls that sometimes resembled liquid gold and other times water, seemed to also block their scanning capabilities. The instrument that had been able to detect that the poison had been deployed hadn't been able to give the location of its whereabouts within the spacecraft.

When they'd at last entered the room that had contained the bloody, beaten form of his lover and the shriveled shell of The Lord, he'd almost collapsed to the floor in a combination of relief and dread. Relief that Logan had been found, and dread that they might've been too late.

Cradling Logan in his arms as they returned to Earth, Cyrus couldn't stop himself from gazing at him, marveling at how he'd survived in the face of such horror. How he'd succeeded. It meant nothing to him that the others eyed him curiously, no doubt wondering about his and the brave recruit's relationship.

Once Logan had been deemed clear of any contaminants, Carter had placed him under a medically-induced coma to allow his body the chance to heal and to save him from what would be days of intolerable pain. Then he'd wrapped

his body in one of the medi-blankets they always carried in the first aid kits for severely wounded soldiers. It was lined in a healing balm to soothe the flesh and once draped around the victim, would keep him at the ideal body temperature.

Cyrus bent down close to Logan's ear, whispering.

"I love you, sweet, sweet boy."

After kissing Logan's brow, he straightened up to see 10 openly staring at him.

"*What?*"

He hadn't been able to hide his irritation. However, he owed his friend a lot. Everything.

The corners of 10's mouth lifted slightly. "It's gonna be a different world now. Different again. There'll be a lot of birthing pains as people try to figure out who they can trust and whether or not they're really safe." He jerked his head towards the blue creatures on the other side of the cabin. "It won't be easy on them. They'll be viewed with fear and anger."

Cyrus scowled, nodding. All the prejudicial bullshit that had been so much better prior to The Scourge takeover would start anew, no doubt more insidious than ever.

"What are you gonna do?"

Raptor 10 shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe start with going back to my real name. Quit playing soldier."

Cyrus snorted. "As if you would know how to do that." He furrowed his brow. "You'll have to get the rage chip taken out."

Raptor 10—Denny—looked away. "Yeah, maybe. Not sure what I'll do, where I'll go."

There was too much melancholy in his friend's tone, especially after such an all-encompassing victory.

"Hey man, why don't you come with us?"

Denny turned to him, a confused expression on his face. "Us?"

"Yeah, Logan, me and his family. I'm taking them all back to the place in the Sierra's, back to where there's some peace."

“You think he wants that?”

Cyrus resisted the urge to snap at his friend. Or possibly do him bodily harm.

“We belong to each other, it’s that simple.”

“Awfully sure of yourself now aren’t you, chief?”

Just as he was about to yell something nasty and hurtful at his friend, he noted the wicked gleam in Denny’s eyes. He was messing with him.

He grunted. “Fuck you, Denny.”

His friend’s laughter was the first really happy sound he’d heard all day. With it came the sense that there was a genuine future for all of them. For all of humanity and maybe even for the minions. Someday soon, he would want to know the blue beings’ history and how they’d come to be enslaved by The Scourge, how they’d fallen victim to the evil that had almost destroyed mankind. Until then, he would oversee Logan’s healing and prepare the place where they would retreat to once he was better. Where they would live out their lives. Together.

The days had been a combination of weird sensations and disjointed moments. He couldn’t actually say he’d experienced much in the way of pain—likely because his caretakers had kept him suitably drugged all the time. What little he remembered revolved around attempts to get him to sit up, to eat, to take various medications. Salves were rubbed into his skin, his hair was washed, his body sponged down. Those were his most precious memories. Cyrus had done all of that. He only wished he could’ve been more aware when it had happened. So much of everything had been filtered as though it were through a dream.

But he’d been up and about for over a week, his strength gradually returning. When he’d finally become aware of his surroundings, he’d noted that he was in a much larger compartment than the one The Rebellion had kept him in when he’d been in the program. It was Denny who had informed him that it was Cyrus’s quarters. Which of course had led to his next question, where *was* Cyrus?

“He had to take care of something on the outside. He’ll be back in a few days or so.”

Logan hadn't known what to make of that statement. He vaguely remembered Cyrus whispering things to him when he'd still been under the influence of the meds. He couldn't bring to mind what the exact words had been, only that they had given him a sense of peace. But not knowing precisely what was going on and whether Cyrus planned on keeping him once he was better had begun to gnaw at him in the most frustrating of ways.

Which was why he'd decided that there was something he needed to take care of as well.

Right as he'd finished his morning stretches, there was a tapping at the door. Hopefully, it was Denny. Logan had enlisted the only person he felt comfortable with outside of Cyrus to help him with his scheme. Opening the door, Logan couldn't stop the big grin from spreading across his face as he saw what Denny held in his hands.

"I hope you know what you're doing, kid." Denny said it as he passed into the room.

"Thank you Raptor—Denny. I know what I'm doing."

He tried to keep the fluttering in his stomach at bay. There was no doubt in him that Denny knew much more about Cyrus's intentions than he was telling, so in some ways, Logan was launching himself into the unknown with his plan.

"How do you want me to do this?"

Logan couldn't stop the heat from traveling up his neck. He wasn't embarrassed about anything that he and Cyrus had ever done, but it had always been a private thing held sacred between the two of them. That is, until the program had wormed its way in and turned it into a job assignment. Which was why what he was having Denny help him with made him blush. It was back to being personal, something that would only be shared between them from that moment on.

After Denny helps me set everything up.

"Um, I think at the far end of the room. You're pretty sure the drill bit can break through the concrete?"

"Don't worry, kid. I got this."

Logan nodded. "And he'll be back when?"

Denny turned to him, an annoyed expression in his face.

“I told ya. I’m not exactly sure, so you’ll have to be prepared to be in this position for a while. I’m not a hundred percent sure that Cyrus won’t string me up when he finds out I helped you. Are you sure you’re strong enough after everything—”

“I’m fine. Jesus, I was in bed for almost two weeks and pumped full of every drug, vitamin and healing accelerator ever invented. I’ve been working out all week to get my strength back. The only thing that isn’t fine is being stuck in this fucking underground room by myself ever since I first woke up.”

He was still rather cranky that Cyrus hadn’t been there when he’d finally completely regained his senses. Denny had assured him that it was only because what Cyrus had needed to do was very important. Yet whatever was so crucial remained a mystery, as Denny had refused to give him any other details. At least he’d been able to take some meals and spend some time with his mom and sister, grateful that they’d come through everything relatively unscathed.

“Look, take pity on me. I don’t need that overgrown pile of muscles coming after my sorry ass because he thinks I manhandled you.”

Logan couldn’t help but snort out some laughter.

Denny frowned. “Yeah, it’s all so hilarious. Especially since he’d die to save you.”

The levity of the moment passed as they both fell into silence, the implications of Denny’s joking comment too real in light of what they’d all just barely lived through.

Denny cleared his throat. “Yeah, so let me get this hooked up real quick, then I’ll be ready for you.”

Pressing his lips together, Logan nodded and removed his clothes.

It was great to be able to travel in one of the solar vehicles since no one worried about air strikes any longer. There were still reports of resistance either from minions not trusting humans or vice-versa and some humans and minions didn’t know what else to do with themselves if they weren’t battling it out—it had become their entire reason for being. But in general, everyone had put up with enough fighting for so many years that they were genuinely over it. The joy of not having to hide in fear constantly and being able to have some semblance of a normal existence was more than enough to keep most people busy.

Which was what had occupied Cyrus's time for the entire week. It had hurt like hell to have to leave Logan before he'd fully awakened, but he'd wanted to be able to surprise him by taking him to their new home immediately. There'd been a combination of repairing what they'd left behind, and building a separate structure for Logan's mother and sister. Cyrus knew he'd need plenty of alone time with Logan.

He approached the cave opening that was no longer as concealed as it had once been—it was no longer necessary. Precautions were still taken and people weren't unnecessarily careless, but it nowhere near touched the anxiety levels prior to eradicating The Scourge. He went inside the darkened cavern, and punched in the security codes. Until everyone had dispersed to make their own way, the normal procedures would remain in place. It was uncertain when or where a new authority or government would take over, or what form it might take, but Cyrus was completely uninterested in being a part of that anymore. He wanted his boy, his boy's family and a quiet existence in the mountains.

His blood rushed through him, amping up his energy levels. It was excitement. Logan would be better, physically and mentally. There would no doubt be some psychological issues to overcome, but Cyrus would be there by Logan's side through everything. His only fear was that Logan would reject him, wouldn't want him anymore. It would kill him, but Cyrus was prepared to take Logan and his family to their sanctuary and live separate just to insure Logan's safety. He would do whatever was necessary to make it up to him after breaking his original promise to protect and care for him.

He spotted Denny coming towards him in the main passageway that led to Cyrus's quarters. He immediately noted the startled expression on his friend's face before he recovered his composure.

Cyrus narrowed his eyes. "What's up?"

There was a nervous chuckle right before Denny answered. "Nothing, chief, nothing at all. Just didn't think you'd be back so soon."

"Oh?"

What the fuck is going on?

Cyrus hadn't been one of the few survivors of the Rebellion's program because he was an idiot. He knew when things were off.

"Yeah, so, see ya later."

Cyrus grabbed Denny's arm in a punishing grip as he tried to pass by him in the hall.

"Ow, the fuck?"

"Is Logan all right?"

Denny sighed. "Yes. Logan is perfectly fine. Except for the part where he's wondering where the hell you disappeared off to."

"You didn't say anything did you?"

He still hadn't let go of Denny's arm and was aware that his tone had come across as somewhat menacing. Denny solved that by jerking his arm from Cyrus's grasp. Of course, he'd loosened his hold anyway.

"I said nothing. Now quit practicing your advanced asshole skills on me and go see him already."

Cyrus grunted. "Yeah, sorry. Thanks for watching over him while I was gone. I mean it."

Denny punched his shoulder.

"I could tell. I'll see ya later when you're less bitchy."

"Fuck you."

"Like I said..."

Cyrus watched as Denny took off down the hallway, waving behind him with one hand as he sauntered away.

It's time for me to see my boy.

That was going to be a part of his discussion with Logan as well. He wanted Logan with him and wanted to pick up where they'd left off. Cyrus would gladly accept all of the blame for leaving Logan to fend for himself. Even though he hadn't exactly tossed him into the wilds—making sure that he was with a safe group that was under protection—he'd still broken his promise to be his caretaker, lover and partner. His gut clenched at the memory of Logan's stricken face when Cyrus had told him he had to go. Cyrus would forever regret his decision from that day.

And there was the other thing. The horrific way he'd treated Logan during the program training. Oh sure, he'd told himself that it was necessary, couldn't be helped. Logan had even egged him on, said not to take it easy on him.

Denny and all of the others of The Rebellion had praised him for what a great job he'd done with Logan.

However, none of those facts changed the basic truth—he'd beaten, tortured and mind-fucked the most important person to him in the world. He wasn't sure if he could overcome that reality in his mind, but he refused to make it all about him. Logan had enough to deal with from the trauma he'd endured, and it was imperative that Cyrus remain focused on his boy. He would have to face his own internal shit by himself. And hope Logan didn't hate him for what he'd done.

Arriving at the door to his apartment, he tapped in the entrance code, then swung the heavy door open. He'd been about to say something but the air was stolen from his lungs. Logan was on his knees, naked, eyes cast down, hooked to the ceiling by a chain that was attached to a heavy leather collar buckled around his neck. Cyrus swallowed, trying to form an intelligible thought. His eyes tracked the length of chain that ran from the hook in the ceiling down to Logan's neck, then trailed off alongside him.

“Logan...”

“Sir. May I speak freely?”

It was jarring. Logan had slipped right back into their previous dynamic with one another.

“Yes. Please. Look at me when you speak.”

His tone hadn't taken on the edge it did when he was in Dom mode, primarily because he was still trying to wrap his brain around whatever was happening. Because the scene before him was nothing at all like what he'd expected when he returned. If anything, he'd been prepared for Logan's anger, his resistance to the idea of them ever being together again. His hurt. Logan's submission had been the last scenario he'd envisioned.

Logan slowly raised his head, locking his wide eyes on Cyrus, holding nothing back. He appeared so fragile, so delicate, yet Cyrus knew better than anyone how much strength Logan held within him. How much power. He watched as Logan swallowed, seemingly trying to work up his nerve.

“I belong to you, Sir. I'll never belong to anyone else, so if you won't keep me, then know that I'll always be alone.”

Shock overtook him at Logan's words. It was such an unexpected gift. Cyrus dropped to his knees, making Logan startle a bit.

“Of course I’ll keep you, there could never be anyone else. But only if you can forgive me for how I sent you away before.” Cyrus paused, his own nerves threatening to overpower him. “And for what I put you through for the program.”

Logan nodded, never breaking his gaze with Cyrus.

“That was when you were Silverback 13 and I was Viper 44. Those people don’t exist anymore. It’s only Cyrus and Logan now.”

A well of emotion swept through Cyrus, the impact of Logan’s words almost derailing his composure.

Logan continued. “And I forgave you a long time ago for the other stuff. After all that happened to me—the program, the training, the ship... I understand now that you were only trying to save me from all of that. Protect me. All I could see last year was how much I missed you, wanted you. Needed you.”

“Oh, Logan.”

Cyrus caressed Logan’s cheek even as the impulse to be tender with him made him uncomfortable.

“I needed you too. I still do.”

“Then help me soar.”

Cyrus’s breath hitched. He had actually considered the very real possibility that Logan would never ever again want to experience any kind of pain. Cyrus had been more than willing to forgo that part of their relationship if that was what his lover required.

“We don’t have to—”

“I do. It’s as much a part of us as anything else is. I *need* it. But only from you.”

“Yes. Only me. You’re mine.”

“I’m yours.”

Cyrus grabbed Logan’s throat, using his thumb to stroke the light scruff on Logan’s chin. Logan’s eyes rolled back and he closed the lids, melting into Cyrus’s commanding touch. Cyrus took Logan’s mouth in a bruising kiss. It was quick and rough, Cyrus holding Logan’s head still as he worked his lips over and over against Logan’s, his tongue jabbing inside him, tasting his sweet

essence for the first time in over a year. When Cyrus finally broke the kiss, they were both out of breath, their chests rising and falling almost in time with one another. Cyrus's cock twitched at the sight of Logan's swollen lips, still moist, so enticing.

Cyrus rose, anxious to begin. Because they were in the privacy of their quarters, Cyrus didn't have anything with him other than his own flogger, the one he'd made especially for Logan when they'd been together. It suddenly dawned on him why Denny had acted so strange earlier—Logan never could have put the chain in place on his own.

Not sure how I feel about that.

It was a tough call. He couldn't decide whether to be territorial or grateful. Probably both. He opened the top drawer of the small dresser that all the leading soldiers had been issued when they'd received their compartment assignments. He noted the bottle of lube and the dildo. He wouldn't need a fake dick for Logan anymore. The flogger next to the other items in the drawer had been a sentimental object that he'd kept from their old life. It had been almost too painful to use it during the program training sessions, but he hadn't been able to help himself. It had been his sneaky way of recapturing some of what they'd had. What he'd thought they'd never have again.

And now here he is.

He had to get back in control in order to be in the present for his boy. Snapping the flogger, he approached Logan, then stood before him with his feet shoulder width apart. Logan had one knee drawn up to his chest, his arms wrapped around it, his head lowered. Cyrus hesitated, unsure whether Logan was actually prepared to follow through with any pain play. It occurred to Cyrus that they hadn't mentioned one of the things that was essential in giving Logan the necessary control over their exchange.

“Do you remember your safeword?”

There was an audible sigh from Logan as he eased back into his kneeling position, his shoulders back, his gaze on the floor. It even appeared as though he were trying to conceal a smile.

“Yes, Sir. Poppies.”

Logan had explained to him soon after he'd been rescued by Cyrus that the bright orange flowers growing wild in the fields below the foothills during the spring had always been like a balm to his soul. An indicator that there was still beauty to be found in life, to not give up.

“Poppies.” Cyrus had said it barely above a whisper.

Strolling slowly over to Logan, he played the tendrils of the whip softly across Logan's skin, hypnotized by the way the dark suede strips contrasted with Logan's pale coloring, the way they fell along the curves of his shoulders as if they were attempting to embrace him. Then Cyrus traced them down Logan's back, his prick hardening as he noted the goose bumps rising on Logan's body, followed by a tiny shiver.

“So fucking beautiful.”

Resting his hand on the top of Logan's head, he allowed himself the luxury of petting him a few times before he clutched a fistful of his shaggy brown hair. He pulled his head back until Logan lifted his gaze to meet his.

“I want you to stand up, then turn around, feet spread wide, hands above your head and braced against the wall.”

“Yes, Sir.”

It was perfect. The dynamic was there, but not the same as it had been. After all they'd been through together it was deeper, more real. Cyrus ran his hand slowly down the length of Logan's back, grateful that the healing balms had all but erased the evidence of Logan's abuse from The Lord. His boy's skin was soft under Cyrus's calloused fingers, as alluring to Cyrus as was every other minute feature of the young man.

Once Logan was in place, Cyrus continued his sensuous exploration with the flogger. This time he was able to tease Logan's perfect little ass, tickle the backs of his thighs, taunt him between his legs. Logan's body language indicated he was relaxed, comfortable with Cyrus and the situation. His limbs weren't locked and his shoulders weren't bunched, he appeared accepting of everything that was happening to him. Cyrus was certain Logan was ready.

The first series of strikes were quick in succession, yet only moderately intense. He twirled his wrist as he whisked the tails of the whip from the top of Logan's back, down his torso, then back up again. On his third pass, he increased the power of his ministrations, coaxing a series of low moans out of Logan. After completing that grouping, he angled to one side in order to facilitate his next move, a series of hits aimed at Logan's tantalizing backside.

But it was Logan's straining erection leaking with arousal that captured Cyrus's attention. It filled him with lust, but also with relief. A strange combination that nonetheless allowed him to fully embrace their renewed

journey together. Swatting Logan continuously, he ramped up the intensity, careful to remain attuned to Logan's responses, even as his own stiff flesh pressed uncomfortably against the fabric of the tight pants he wore.

He watched in awe as Logan gave entirely of himself, readily accepting each series of lashes, lips parted in ecstasy. Cyrus paused once the redness in Logan's skin became more pronounced. His roughened hands skated over Logan's heated butt cheeks, the compulsion to prod the matching dimples at the small of Logan's back too tempting to resist. He allowed himself a smile, as he was positioned in a way that Logan couldn't see him.

Pressing his body lightly against Logan's frame he nuzzled his neck, inhaling him in, the tip of his tongue flicking out for a small taste. Then he spoke in a low voice next to Logan's ear.

"Once more, then I take your ass."

A tiny whimper escaped Logan's lips, his back arching. Teasing Cyrus. It was clear that Logan knew he had the upper hand. It would take a while for Cyrus to balance them out, but truthfully, he looked forward to the work that awaited them.

With a swish through the air his implement splayed across Logan's back, bringing forth a small cry. He increased the pace of his movements, his strikes. There was a specific sound, a certain moan Logan made that Cyrus recognized. It indicated to Cyrus that Logan had fallen into a submissive state of contentment. Logan had arrived at that place.

After tossing the flogger onto the bed, he grabbed Logan, enveloping himself around the much smaller man's body. Logan let out a gasp as Cyrus used his hands to explore him freely, tweaking his nipples, squeezing and kneading him everywhere. He encircled Logan's cock with his fist and his lover cried out.

"Not yet. You'll wait for me. Keep your hands on the wall and your face forward."

Grasping Logan's throat with his other hand, he maintained his grip on Logan's heated erection, controlling him that way as Logan writhed under his commanding touch. The ability to give Logan unending pleasure was the only thing Cyrus ever wanted to live for again.

Letting go, he slid down Logan's frame until he'd dropped to his knees. He bit the fleshy part of one butt cheek as he moved the cool chain to the front of

Logan. There was a gasp and Cyrus wasn't sure whether it was in response to the bite, the cold metal or both. He only knew that he was thrilled by Logan's every little response to what Cyrus did to him.

He clutched Logan's sweet bottom and spread him wide. Cyrus groaned at the sight of Logan's tiny pink hole, his balls tightening. His wish was that their first time back together could last for a long time, but his need spoke to him differently. Rubbing his nose on the inside of Logan's crease, he drew in his slightly musky scent. He kissed the puckered opening, sucking then licking, delighting in the soft noises Logan made as he wriggled against Cyrus's face. Stiffening the end of his tongue, he breached the tight ring of muscle and pushed his way in, fucking him that way until he was certain Logan wouldn't be able to hold back an orgasm.

He abruptly stopped, Logan letting out an agonized moan, gasping for breath.

“Sir, please, I need you inside me.”

“I need you too.”

He stood, then walked over to the drawer that held the lubricant. After popping open the cap, he allowed a liberal amount to dribble onto his palm. The idea of exploring Logan's ass with his mouth and fingers everyday held more appeal than anything else he could envision. In some ways, stroking Logan internally filled him with more desire than actually fucking him.

With his clean hand, Cyrus combed his fingers through Logan's hair as he nibbled at his ear lobe. Using the other, he searched between Logan's crack to find his entrance. He spread the moisture around Logan's wrinkled hole as he massaged the opening, aware of Logan's acquiescence to him. Licking his way down his lover's neck until he reached the crook of his shoulder, he popped one digit in to Logan's asshole, pushing up to his first knuckle. At the same time, he suckled the delicate skin in the dip of his clavicle, purposely making a mark there.

Cyrus stroked him with his index finger—sinking in deeper each time, searching for Logan's gland. As soon as he glanced over it, he pressed down, pegging him gently. Logan jerked, inhaling sharply. He dissolved into a desperate sounding moan, shoving himself onto Cyrus's digit that was impaled inside him, clenching his ass cheeks.

“That's it, take what you want. Are you ready for more?”

“Unh, please, Sir, please...”

Cyrus slipped his middle finger in next to the other and twisted them within Logan's greedy channel. Picking up the pace as he finger fucked his boy, his cock leaked, balls aching, the need to be inside Logan stronger than he'd ever thought possible. But he wanted to see Logan's face when they came.

After pulling out of Logan's passage, he reached for the buckle on the heavy leather collar, yanking at the thick strap to get it open. To get it off Logan's neck so that he could embrace him and take him to bed. As soon as Logan was freed, he gathered the small man into his arms and carried him over to the mattress. He shoved the flogger aside and lay him down. Cyrus tried to straighten in order to remove his clothes, but Logan held fast to him as if he were afraid to let him go, silent tears spilling onto his cheeks.

“Shh, don't cry.”

Cyrus swiped at the small drops of moisture on Logan's face.

“We're together now. Everything else is done. Viper 44 and Silverback 13 no longer exist, remember? It's only Logan and Cyrus.”

“Y-yes. Yes, Sir.”

Relaxing, Logan let his arms fall away from Cyrus, but he stared at him openly. Cyrus permitted it. It had never occurred to Cyrus to view what they did together as anything other than a magnificent sexual release. He'd always craved Logan physically more than anyone he'd ever been with in his almost forty years, but he no longer saw their fucking as a mere release. He saw it as making love.

Once he'd discarded his garments, he allowed himself a moment to enjoy Logan's nude form. Still too thin owing to his recent ordeal, he was nonetheless stunning. Long limbed, perfectly formed torso, with an innocent male beauty that imprinted itself on Cyrus's consciousness, demanded his reverence.

“Open yourself to me.”

Logan lifted his legs, then held them up by the backs of his knees. Without looking away, Cyrus reached for the bottle of lube once more. He squeezed some onto his hand and rubbed his shaft, slicking himself up thoroughly.

“Hold your sac up and out of the way.”

Logan did as he was told and Cyrus poured more of the cool liquid along Logan's crack. Logan jumped slightly as the moisture trickled down his crease, his asshole clenching and unclenching in response.

Fuck.

Cyrus lowered himself over Logan, using a hand to brace himself on one side of Logan's head and the other to grasp his own throbbing prick. He gazed down between them as he prodded his cockhead against Logan's twitching hole. Cyrus wanted in so bad, but he also didn't want to rush things. Even though they'd enjoyed hours of rough play and raw fucks when they'd been together before, he needed to try and physically express to Logan what he didn't have the ability to say out loud. That Logan was all that mattered to him, that he cherished him, that he would die without him.

Rubbing his swollen erection in the slickness between Logan's butt cheeks, he could tell that Logan was becoming impatient, anxious for their coupling. Cyrus paused at Logan's opening and pressed his dick against the resistant muscle of Logan's asshole. As he eased himself forward, Logan pushed out and Cyrus watched as the large knob of his cock was swallowed up. With a gasp, he threw his head back, the slick heat of Logan's channel tightly wrapped around his stiff flesh bordering on too much sensation.

Without a thought, he instinctively thrust balls deep, pulling out, then slamming in again. He dropped onto his elbows so he could capture Logan's lips with his own. Cyrus kissed Logan with all that he had, licking inside his mouth, suckling his tongue, scraping teeth along his chin, then latching onto his lips once more. At the same time, he buried himself deep inside Logan, each long stroke bringing them closer to what Cyrus had missed for so long.

Sweating and grunting, the speed of his rutting increased, his nuts smacking loudly against Logan. The tingling in his spine signaled his imminent release and he wanted Logan there with him. Placing the brunt of his weight on one elbow, he reached between them with his opposite hand, searching out Logan's rigid shaft, ready for them both to fly. He encircled it, and Logan mewled against his mouth, a pleading sort of a sound. Cyrus felt the first pulses in Logan's ass and knew the sticky heat would erupt from Logan at any moment.

He broke the kiss but stayed close. "Yes..."

Logan yelled as warmth gushed over Cyrus's hand, spurting between them. Even as Cyrus cried out in the throes of his own orgasm, he kept his eyes fixed on Logan. Watching every little expression cross Logan's face as he worked through his ecstasy, Cyrus was lost to his boy. Would never want anyone or anything else.

They stayed joined for as long as Cyrus could manage it, not moving, allowing their breathing to return to normal. Cyrus's cock softened and slipped from Logan's ass, a trail of semen leaking out as he repositioned himself at Logan's side. He couldn't stop staring at Logan's lovely face. Without breaking his gaze, he lifted the hand that Logan had come all over and licked it clean. Logan bit his bottom lip as he viewed Cyrus's actions, his eyes widening a bit. It had Cyrus's dick making a valiant attempt at coming back to life.

He bent down to leisurely kiss Logan's swollen lips, sweeping Logan's mouth over and over with his tongue, reluctant to ever stop. When he did, it was only for them to catch their breath.

Oh, yes. I want more.

He could see that his sweet lover was drifting off. It was okay, he could wait. They would have forever from then on. Sweeping Logan's tousled hair away from his face, he couldn't help but smile when Logan's eyelids fluttered open.

"Are you okay? I should rub you down with some healing balm."

"Mmmm, yes, Sir. Very okay. And I'm not that sore..." Logan yawned, then snapped his mouth shut as if he were embarrassed.

Cyrus chuckled. "Don't worry, get some sleep now. I want you again once you've rested *and* after I've rubbed you down. That clear?"

Logan nodded sleepily. He appeared ready to shut his eyes again, but they widened instead.

"Sir?"

"Hmm?"

"Where did you go this past week?" What looked like a flash of concern passed over Logan's face.

Cyrus caressed Logan's cheek.

"I had to take care of our home, it's been left untended for too long."

There was a catch in Logan's breathing. "You mean... Where we were, I mean, our place from before? The mountains?"

"Yes, and I started on a new structure where your mother and Rebecca can stay. Is that all right?"

Logan's bottom lip trembled, his words coming out wobbly. "Y-yes. More than all right." He scrunched his eyebrows together. "Really?"

Cyrus couldn't hold back a laugh. "Yes my precious boy, really."

He gathered Logan to him, hugging him tightly. When he released Logan from the embrace, he still kept one arm cradled around him. He saw that Logan was regarding him, something else obviously on his mind.

"Ask me anything you want Logan. This is the beginning of our new life together and I want you to share in every aspect of it."

"Okay. Will it be like it was before? Will you still be my Dom?"

"Is that what you want?"

"Yes. I want it for always."

"Then you have it. Always."

Logan threw his arms around Cyrus's neck and they held one another for a long while. Once they relaxed against the pillow, Logan went limp in his arms as sleep took him. Cyrus listened to Logan's even breathing for a long time before he drifted off to a place where there were large fields of bright orange poppies surrounded by snowcapped mountains. He was with Logan, and together, they soared.

The End

Author Bio

M/M Erotic Romance author Morticia Knight enjoys a good saucy tale—after all, who doesn't? Since she loves several genres, you may find your heroes in a contemporary, historical, paranormal or sci-fi setting. One of her passions is bringing people's fantasies to life on the page, because life is too short for even one boring moment. Her stories are volcanic in heat, deep in emotion, and sprinkled with doses of humor.

When not indulging in her obsession for books, she loves the outdoors, film and music. The Pacific Northwest is the ideal spot to enjoy both hiking and beachcombing. Once upon a time she was the singer in an indie rock band that toured the West Coast and charted on U.S. college radio. She now resides on the northern coast of Oregon, where the constant rain and fog remind her of visits to family in England and Scotland when she was a child.

She is currently working on the Gin & Jazz series about the glitz and glamour of 1920's Hollywood and additional installments of the Uniform Encounters series.

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