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LOVE'S LANDSCAPES  
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 3

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance Anthology*

## Volume 3

### Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate 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 these anthologies are 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.

Over 210 stories were submitted and have now been published as a seventeen volume set with five additional bonus volumes, titled *Love's Landscapes*; this edition is Volume 3.

### Words of Caution

These stories may contain sexually explicit content and are **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.

### Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating over 210 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in e-print involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Over the course of seven months, nearly forty members chipped in to help at various times; the *M/M Romance Group* would like to extend a special thanks to the volunteers of the event team for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm.

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## Ebook Layout and Navigation

This ebook can be navigated through the Table of Contents which lists the authors, their story title and its overall genre or theme. Any time you see the words [\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#), you can click on the link and be transported back to the TOC.

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view these photos, 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.

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These stories are works of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# THE BLOOD LEGION: ORACLE

By Ashlyn Daube

## Photo Description

A blond swordsman in a red cloak holds a young man with reddish-brown hair and shackles around his body, arms and legs, close to him. He holds a sword in front of them protectively, while the chains start to break with the color of blood.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*In my younger days, I was a rogue. I stole things for money, or simply for thrills, and I was very good at what I did. Throughout the underground I became legendary. But as the years wore on, the luster wore off, and I found myself at an impasse. My life felt empty. So I embarked on a career change, learning all I could about the ways of a warrior. Now my skill with a blade is nearly equal to my skills as a thief; I work for whoever hires me, returning objects to their rightful owners and battling whatever human or creatures stand in my way.*

*This job is different. A rescue mission. Simple, or so I think. When I meet the man whose clan wishes for his safe return, I find many surprises... The magical prowess he has. His claim that his clan has dark plans for him. The fact that our destinies are intertwined more deeply than I ever expected...*

Sincerely,

Julia

## Story Info

**Genre:** fantasy, young adult

**Tags:** magic users, adventure, mythical creatures, oracle, sweet/no sex, reformed thief

**Word Count:** 39,749

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*Acknowledgements*

Much thanks to Julia for her prompt that inspired the creation of this story. And to Jessa, Finn, and Barb for their feedback and editing prowess that shaped this story to its final version.

# **THE BLOOD LEGION: ORACLE**

**By Ashlyn Daube**



## Chapter One

### *The Thief*

Filina Sommerset liked to say that she had seen everything. She was one hundred and four years old, after all. Mother of nine children, grandmother of twenty one, great-grandmother of thirteen, and great-great-grandmother of one, she had outlived seven of her children and three of her grandchildren. Seen storms that seemed to desire the destruction of the world, floods that turned her village upside down, and fires that burned so bright, night turned into day. She had seen the best and worst of people, the birth of her children, and the death of her children.

Yes, Filina liked to tell people she had seen everything, yet she had never seen a man wrapped in a black-hooded cloak climb through her third story window before. Her room wasn't just on the third floor; it crested a steep hill with a two hundred foot drop down a ravine. No one would be crazy enough to break into her house. Perhaps the legendary thief Leire would dare—his reputation was such that many in Lenen called him *The Shadow*. But why would he? Filina had nothing of value. No gold. No jewels. She had shared every treasure she ever received with her children. She kept only trinkets and memories.

The invader silently moved one leg inside her bedroom, slowly pulling himself up. Impressive, but no matter how extraordinary the feat was, she wasn't going to allow a thief to just waltz his way into her home without her permission.

She reached for the double crossbow next to her bed. It had been bought by her youngest great-grandson, Niel, who, at fourteen, thought his great-grand-nana needed some extra protection. He'd been right.

A candle flared, shrinking the darkness in the room.

"Stop right there!" Filina ordered, holding the crossbow steady, hand on the trigger.

The thief faltered, his leg twisting oddly. He missed a step and almost tripped. Not very thief-like. "Bloodless!" he cursed, putting his hands up in defeat. Smart lad, you didn't mess with an old lady and her crossbow.

"Why are you here, boy?"

“I’m not a boy. I’m a man. I just turned twenty-one.” Filina raised her brow and her crossbow trying to see the face under the hood. “I will turn twenty-one in two months,” the thief corrected.

“I am one hundred and four years old. You are merely a child.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Why are you here? I sense you are not some random thief. Random thieves don’t risk their lives. You are here for something, and you will come back to get it when I am not here. What is it?”

The thief moved slowly, the hood of his cloak hiding his face as he glanced past the window he came in, possibly measuring if a jump out was survivable. It wasn’t. Filina wasn’t going to accept anything other than the truth. The question was, was the man willing to give it to her or die with the secret?

“A paper,” he admitted. Guess he wanted to live.

“My will.” Filina smiled. It wasn’t the first time someone wanted to get their hands on it. No matter how much she shared with them, some of them would never be satisfied. “Which one of my children asked you to steal it?”

“Niel.”

“Niel?” Filina’s confidence almost vanished, and she lowered her crossbow. The thief rushed toward the door, but stopped when she raised the crossbow once more. “What reason did he give you that would compel you to steal from me?”

“He said he was your caretaker. That your mind had gone and you refused to give your will to anyone. That you rewrote it stating that you wanted everything you owned destroyed after your death. He asked me to retrieve it so he could fix it and keep it in a safe place.”

“Rubbish! My mind is fine.”

“Your hands, too.”

Filina didn’t find that the least bit amusing and fired one of the arrows from the crossbow. The thief hit the floor faster than a rubi bird diving for prey. “That was a warning. I have done many things during my life, and I hope murder will not become one of them.”

“I see an arrow, I duck.” The thief held very still. He was apparently no fool, and he knew she had an extra arrow on the bow at the ready.

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“Hush! Get up.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The thief slowly stood, taking care to keep his face hidden.

“How much did Niel pay you?”

“One hundred rio.” He pulled a small pouch from his cloak and offered it up. “This is half of the payment. I don’t want it anymore. This was a mistake.”

Filina considered taking the money, but she had a better idea. “I didn’t know thieves were such cheap labor. Keep the money. I’ll pay you one thousand rio if you work for me.”

The thief held the little pouch in front of Filina for another minute, maybe hoping she’d take it. She didn’t, and he put it back in the inside pocket of his cloak. “What is it that you want retrieved, Mrs. Sommerset?”

“My grandson, of course. And I want your name.”

The thief tugged down the hood of his cloak. He was clearly younger than he had stated. Wind-snarled fair hair tumbled over his shoulders, and several strands had snagged in the clasp of his cloak. Others had stuck to his forehead from the sweat. He’d be a handsome lad if not for the pieces of straw in his hair and the dirt on his face. His skin was tanned from the sun, but it wasn’t marked with the lines of age an older man would have. He blinked slowly, his eyes a gray so vivid they spoke of the troubling things he’d seen, things that shouldn’t be seen by children’s eyes.

“You’re not twenty, are you?”

The boy shook his head. “Seventeen.”

“Your name?”

“Rem Lumes.”

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## Chapter Two

### *A Child's Honor*

Rem sat in the middle of Filina's living room cradling a cold cup of milk. Certainly not the way he thought this job would end.

The old lady scared him. No way was she that old! Her long peppered hair was tied in a ponytail, and really old people didn't have any hair. Sure, she had wrinkles and her step hobbled a tad, but her violet eyes never reflected any uncertainty, and her hands didn't shake once as she kept that crossbow aimed at his chest. When she shot the arrow at him he thought that was it, that he was going to feel it piercing his chest, but the arrow flew far above his head and sliced into the wall. Rem guessed Mrs. Sommerset didn't mean to kill him, but why take the chance?

The march downstairs had been quiet. Rem had tried once to hasten his steps—no way the old lady could keep up with him—but Filina saw through him immediately, and poked his back with the tip of the arrow as a warning. There was no way he was getting out of this job, was he?

Once on the main floor, she made Rem go to her kitchen and pick up the milk jug next to the hearth, as well as a jar of honey and two crystal cups. Rem wanted to bolt through the door, but he had accepted her odd job offer and was honor bound to complete it no matter how much he wanted to leave. What in Jove's name had he been thinking when he accepted a lousy hundred rio for this job?

The little crystal cup looked as if it would shatter if Rem just put the slightest pressure on it. Filina took a sip from her cup. "Too cold." She hovered her hand above it until steam rose from the cup.

Rem's eyes widened. "You're Legion!"

"Ha!" Filina snorted, doing the same with Rem's cup. "I haven't been involved in Legion business for decades, but yes, the power runs in my family. I can do silly things like this, but nothing big. I can't set houses on fire, or people for that matter."

A shiver crawled up Rem's back. "The candle..."

"You didn't notice?" Rem shook his head and sipped the warm honey-flavored milk. He despised the Legion and anyone involved with it. Most

Legion members thought they were better than normal people just because they had a little magic. Rem had yet to meet any Legion members who could really do anything other than parlor tricks, but he'd heard the stories of those so powerful that they could kill men by simply looking at them. For a second, Rem thought about asking Filina if any of those stories were true, but decided he'd rather not know. People in the Legion were all just a bunch of braggarts, anyway.

"There's a guest bedroom down the hall to the right. You can spend the night."

Rem spit some of the milk back in the cup. "Is that alright?" he asked.

"I'm not so mean-spirited to kick out a homeless child in the middle of the night. Especially not after hiring you."

"I'm not—" Rem was about to say he wasn't homeless, but that wasn't true. Last night he'd slept in a barn next to a horse and in the morning, washed himself on the banks of the Simas River. He had to admit there was no fooling the old lady. He'd considered using the fifty rio down payment to get a room at an inn, but he was glad he hadn't. He felt utterly humiliated that he'd been tricked into being a simple thief. His job required sneaking around and taking things without permission, but at least they were things that needed to be returned to their rightful owners. Or so he'd thought. A sickly feeling gnawed deep in the pit of his stomach. How many other people had tricked him into stealing? How many times had he been naïve enough to believe them? "I'll leave at dawn. I'll bring back Niel."

Filina put her cup down next to the honey jar. "Do you know where to go?" she asked.

Rem remembered a small home. Shaking Niel's hand. It gave him a headache. "Yeah, I can handle it." He had to. Rem had made the mistake; he owed her, and had accepted the job when he'd put the coin pouch back in his pocket. He was homeless, a child as far as Mrs. Sommerset was concerned, and alone in the world, but if there was one thing he had, it was his word.

The importance of keeping one's word had been one of the things he'd learned from his parents. They were little more than blurry images fading from his memory now—a woman squeezing him tight while she ran, a man behind her protecting them. Their voices had become echoes, ghosts he barely remembered. Sometimes, Rem wondered what thing his parents had run away from, and why, after going through all the trouble, they had abandoned him.

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Vague memories, scattered images, the creepy sensation of webs and dead leaves brushing his bare skin as his mother hid him inside the hollow of an old tree. She'd kissed his forehead and held his hand while she told him to be quiet. His father promising they would be right back. Rem remained inside the tree for days, cold and hungry. Alone and afraid, he cried for his mother and father, but they never came back for him.

To keep your word. To tell your child you would be back when you had no intention to.

Rem had learned to live with that. It was one of the reasons he had decided to start his new life without that taint. To be someone who left goodness behind in the world, not something bad. To start living honorably because he knew how it felt when someone gave you their word and you waited and waited for them to keep it, before slowly realizing they lied to you, and that everything you thought was true in the world, was actually false.

It took him almost his entire life to realize this, but he was here now, and he was not going back.

Mrs. Sommerset remained quiet. Perhaps she was already regretting asking a child to work for her? "There is food in the kitchen. Help yourself to anything you need." She went up the stairs, leaving Rem alone with a slow burning candle.

This would be the perfect time to run away. The front door tempted Rem as he stood. There would be little consequence to leaving, except his broken honor. Rem put everything back in the kitchen. No one would ever say he was a bad house guest. He'd take this job. He'd decided for his honor's sake, but most of all, he desperately wanted the thousand rio. With coin in his pocket, he wouldn't have to sleep in barns anymore. Maybe he could even settle down somewhere.

A simple bed next to the window and a scuffed wardrobe completed the small guest room. It had been a long time since he'd slept on a real mattress. Rem removed his cloak first, and threw it on the right side of the bed. His belt and sheath were next. He'd hidden the fact he'd been armed, but his sword never left his side. His boots and leather top were last off, leaving him in only his plain white shirt and his trousers, which were passably clean and comfortable. The only bad thing was that, unfortunately, they tended to smell. Rem sniffed the inside of his shirt. It didn't smell, but could use a rinse in the river next time he washed. He could deal with a little odor for a few more days until he found Niel and brought him to face his great-grandmother.

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He really had no idea how he was going to convince Niel to come back with him. He'd just have to figure it out as he went.

Rem fell on the bed, his eyelids feeling suddenly heavy. Today had been a strange day. Everything sped by in a big blur. Walking here, passing random strangers, climbing the wall of the house, almost getting skewered by an arrow. Rem wanted a clear picture of the many little events that had happened, but the pillow was soft, and as soon as he closed his eyes, sleep claimed him.

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## Chapter Three

### *Leila*

Niel's village, Vesca, was only half a day's walk from Mrs. Sommerset's house. The fact he'd traveled the path the day before made the trek seem shorter.

While walking past empty fields and small patches of forests, Rem thought of ways to convince Niel to return to Mrs. Sommerset's house. Whichever idea he came up with, meant he'd have to confess that he did not have Filina's will, as his contract with Niel stipulated. He couldn't lie and say he'd lost it. Maybe just telling the truth would work best? He could tell Niel the will was still in Filina's possession. He only had to think of reasons for why he was unable to obtain it and why Niel needed to go back with him.

At the edge of the woods, Rem skidded down a steep incline and only managed to save himself from landing in a spiky thorn bush by grabbing the root of a large oak. As he straightened his clothes, he noticed a small collection of chimneys in the distance. Smoke rose from a couple of them, probably midday meals being prepared in the little wood and brick houses. The familiar smells brought Rem back to a time when he was younger and peeking through windows, hoping someone would take pity on him and give him some food. Rem's stomach complained about being empty; he made a mental note to grab something to eat.

Vesca was a small village wedged between a forest, two farming fields and the Simas River. The village shops surrounded the simple fountain at the center, with residences extending to the village's edge.

Niel's home wasn't far from the fountain, six houses away if he recalled correctly. The exposed-beam, two-story house blended perfectly well with the rest of the town's dark lumber structures. It was clear all the houses had been built in the same period of time. Rem knocked on the door three times, right under the fancy *L* carved into the wood. The story he'd chosen was now clear in his mind.

The door opened slowly, and a small freckled face framed by dark blond curls peeked through the gap. "Can I help you?" she asked, lisping through a missing front tooth.



Rem didn't remember seeing the girl before. "I'm here to see Niel Sommerset."

"Uncle Niel left for a Legion meeting. I dunno when he'll be back."

*Not the Legion again.* Rem frowned. "Do you think he'll be back by nightfall?"

The girl shook her head. "Last time Uncle Niel went to a meeting, he was gone for two weeks."

Two weeks! Rem couldn't wait that long. Mrs. Sommerset had only left him with the fifty rio Niel had given him, promising to pay the full one thousand once Niel had been delivered and that wasn't even close to being enough for his basic needs. He could barely afford food with what he had.

"Do you know where the meeting is?" Rem asked. The girl stood there silently for a moment and then started closing the door. "Wait." Rem slid off his cloak, flipped it over, and pulled the hood over his head, hiding himself in a sea of red. "Niel was supposed to take me," he lied.

The girl's mouth formed a small "O" shape and she no longer seemed quite so hesitant. "Nevenen," she said, then closed the door in his face.

"Bloodless!" Rem swore under his breath. A pair of elderly women passing by looked at him with contempt, but he ignored them and kept on walking, flipping his cloak back to black before reaching the edge of town. As far as distances went, Nevenen was the closest, most accessible village to Vesca. Most of the food farmed in Vesca was exported to Nevenen. Carts and caravans rode up and down the road between the two villages day and night—it was a short, one hour trip. Unlike Vesca, Nevenen was a large village that hundreds of people called home. A place he would typically avoid.

Rem snuck a ride inside a shinberry cart. He was tired of walking, and a free ride was a free ride as long as the driver didn't notice him. Rem also didn't say no to easily accessible food. Shinberries were too sweet for his tastes, but his hungry stomach didn't care.

Finding Niel or wherever the Legion meeting was taking place wouldn't be easy, but he knew someone in Nevenen who might be able to help. Someone Rem hadn't spoken with in almost a year. Someone he'd rather not see. But that person had the information he needed regarding Niel's whereabouts.

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Rem left seven rio on the edge of the cart as payment for the shinberries he'd eaten, and made his way into Nevenen. Crowds of people were walking about now that it was so late in the day. They were heading home. Buying meals from street vendors, Rem blended in easily. The village's center also had a fountain, but much larger than the one in Vesca. A few children sat on the edge soaking their feet. Some were even brave enough to stand in the low water and splash around. An old man tossed a coin in while he walked past, causing the children to all scramble for it, splashing a young woman busy pasting wanted posters for the thief, Leire, around the base of the fountain.

The Rubi's Nest was the largest tavern in Nevenen, and aptly named after the large population of rubis in the area, the little red birds that were famous for dive bombing into the Simas, as well as anyone unlucky enough to walk into their territory. Pubs weren't usually very welcoming to people Rem's age. The owners preferred to reserve their limited space for regulars or men with plenty of rio to waste. But with the sun still out, the place was half-empty, and no one spared Rem a second look.

A dark-haired girl with striking, sun-warmed skin tended the pub. The platinum strands caught in a ribbon running from her forehead to the ends revealed her inhuman heritage—the thin fae blood that ran in her veins. Rem hesitated. She looked exactly the same as the last time he'd seen her. Strong, motivated, dazzling.

Rem leaned against the far end of the counter, distancing himself from the rest of the patrons. He waited until the girl turned and noticed him.

Rem waved. "Hello, Leila."

Her eyes shot up, met his, and she dropped the mug from her hands as she ran to him. She leapt over the counter and threw her arms around him.

"Rem!" She held him tightly, like she was afraid he'd disappear if she let go. Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to vanish for months without saying a word. "You—how could you leave like that? What have you been doing? How—" The words tumbled out one over the other. Her eyes filled with relief. "I missed you," she said, and hugged him again. Rem immediately regretted coming here. He wasn't ready to see her yet. He wasn't over their last meeting. Not completely.

She was shorter than him now. Had he really grown so much in just a few months, or had she always been shorter?

She certainly hadn't been when they first met. Rem had been so young when his parents abandoned him in the tree hollow, it was pure luck he survived at all. Found by a hunter—or so he'd been told by the orphanage priestesses—he'd spent the next four years in an orphan house, where every day was a battle for the limited supply of food the priestesses gave. The older children always got first dibs. Some shared their portion with the younger children, but most just kept it for themselves. After his best friend, Ziemī, died when they were six, Rem decided to run away from the house, thinking he would fare better in the streets.

He'd been wrong.

After less than a month, Rem had been on the verge of death, starving and hurt. He'd often wished to simply fall asleep and never wake so he wouldn't be hungry anymore. His hands had been bruised and covered in scars from scrambling for meals. He'd seen three other kids his age, die. Others disappeared. No one cared about them. No one cared about *him*—no one except Leila.

She'd been a wise, old, eight when she found him. She'd grown up in the streets and was strong and resilient, yet she was barely able to keep herself alive. She'd been scrounging for food when she found him lying in a puddle of mud, bruised from a fight, and suffering from three days without eating. It would have been so easy for her to walk away and let him die, but unlike so many others would have, she didn't. She grabbed his hand and took him to the place she called home. Rem sometimes wondered, *why him*. Why not someone else? He wasn't the only street kid dying to live.

They survived together. They learned how to get food. There were many ways—begging, working, thievery—to name a few. The latter proved the most productive. One of them would create a distraction while the other stole. Thievery became their lives, their way to survive. They got so good at it, people whispered their name in the shadows. The older they got, the less food they stole. Replaced by things they could sell for coins.

Leila stepped back and tried to clean his face with her sleeve. “You never cared about dirt.”

Rem squirmed away. “I'm fine.”

“You weren't the last time I saw you. Are you still having the nightmares?” Leila asked.

Rem blinked, as a memory he'd tried to forget resurfaced. He saw a man, a blade, blood. "Sometimes."

Leila grabbed his hand. Her touch was something he'd missed. They'd been inseparable until the day he tried to kiss her. She'd stopped him before he could and said the words that changed everything he believed in. "*You're my brother, Rem. I could never love you like that.*"

It was still too painful to think of that day. Rem had decided he couldn't be around Leila anymore if she didn't share his feelings, so he'd left without saying a word. That had been ten months ago. He thought he'd be over the sting of rejection by now, but the wound still felt tender.

"I need information." Rem pulled his hand away from Leila's grasp, kept his voice just above a whisper.

"Information? Rem... are you in trouble? I thought we were going to stop."

"We have. I mean, I have. I'm finding my own way, doing honest work. I'm looking for a man named Niel Sommerset. He's part of the Nevenen Legion clan. I heard they're meeting somewhere around here."

"You shouldn't get involved with the Legion."

"I'm not getting involved with them. I just need to know where this guy is. Please, Sis."

Rem surprised even himself. It was easier to say the word than he had imagined.

Leila smiled for a second, then turned serious. "If I tell you where they are, you have to promise not to disturb them. The Legion is not to be messed with. The stories I've heard from the Nevenen clan are not kind. A man missing three fingers was here just last week, and he was telling everybody the Nevenen clan had done that to him."

"I'm not an idiot."

Leila's eyes narrowed and that little furrow formed between her brow warning him he better do as she said, or she would pull his ear until he promised, but they were no longer children. At some point she had to let him make his own choices, good or bad. Leila sighed. "Try next to the river, near the abandoned barracks."

## Chapter Four

### *The Legion*

Rem thanked Leila and ran off in the direction of the river without looking back. The Simas River meandered for miles throughout the entire country of Lenen, and was legendary for its grandeur and occasional ferocity. It was an unpredictable body of water, as calm as a foggy morning one moment, or furious as a battleground the next. Many people became prey to her current each year, but the Simas gave life more than she stole it, there was no way Lenen would survive without her.

Rem kept to the river bank as he raced toward the barracks. Thank Jove, he didn't have to cross the temperamental Simas. Only a couple of hours of daylight remained. Rem slowed his pace as he got closer to the tree line, just past the brush. It was the perfect place to hide. But the barracks were just ahead, so he had to be cautious. From his hiding spot, Rem heard the men and women of the Nevenen Legion clan chanting.

The flash of red caught his attention. Not many of them, just nine. All had their hoods over their heads, hiding their faces. This was how they identified themselves from people that weren't Legion, from people who didn't have magic running through their veins. Ordinary people like him.

Rem frowned as he crouched down in the brush. He checked that the ties of his cloak were well knotted. He didn't want to risk Legion members seeing the red lining under the black. He hated resorting to that trick, pretending to be Legion—to scare people or hoax them into giving him information. Rem sometimes wondered if using it made him a hypocrite. To dislike the Legion so strongly while at the same time using their very recognizable color to his advantage.

As one, the clan raised their hands in front of them. Each member held a small blade, and with it, they each cut a single line across one of their palms. Rem cringed. Like he needed to be even more creeped out by the Legion's weird rituals. Seeing them like this, hiding, secretive, believing themselves better than anyone else... Rem didn't care if sometimes wearing their red made him a hypocrite.

The Legion members created a circle while continuing their chant. Blood flowed freely from their open wounds as they put their blades away. One of the

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group, a man with broad shoulders, stepped toward the middle. His bushy, white beard escaped the concealing hood, but not much else was visible. By the time he reached the center of the circle, the rest of the group hushed, and waited for him to speak.

“We have an intruder,” the man announced. Startled, Rem dropped to the ground, and pressed his entire body into the dirt. Maybe it wasn’t him the leader spoke of. Leaves rustled behind him and heavy footsteps followed. It was him.

Rem didn’t try to run. That would likely get him killed. And if he pulled out his sword, that would just start a fight and get him killed even faster. No choice. He didn’t fight when the dark-haired Legion guard grabbed his arm and hauled him toward the center of the circle where the white-bearded man waited. Rem didn’t say a word, either. Surrounded by men and women in red cloaks, he was severely outnumbered.

“Do you know what happens to those who spy on the Legion?” the old man asked as he pulled his hood back. His beard wasn’t completely white like Rem had thought, but peppered like Filina’s hair. Charcoal gray eyes watched Rem intently—unusual—Legion members generally had vivid eyes of unique colors—gray was common, the same color Rem had. Rem felt the scrutiny of those eyes. “Do you?”

Yes, Rem did. Punishments, shunning, stories mothers told their children to keep them safe in their beds. He’d heard once of a boy who accidentally stumbled upon a meeting, and a week later, they found him floating facedown in Simas. “I’m not spying. I’m looking for someone in your group. He hired me to do a job.”

“Who?”

Rem looked around the hooded figures. He couldn’t really see their faces. “Niel Sommerset.”

The old man’s brows rose. “Step forward, Niel.” One of the hooded figures slowly made his way to them and pulled down his hood. Striking violet eyes glared furiously at Rem through a mop of short, ash-brown hair that covered his ears. The purple stood out against his pale, olive skin, marred only by a narrow white scar above his left eye.

“I don’t know this kid,” Niel lied. Rem wasn’t particularly surprised.

“Yet he knows your name.” The old man didn’t seem angry. Slightly amused perhaps. He kept his eyes fixed on Niel. Did he know Niel was lying, like Rem did?

“He hired me to steal from his great-grandmother,” Rem wasn’t above throwing the blame on Niel. He wasn’t the one lying.

The white-bearded man turned his eyes on Rem. “Child, what is your name?”

Rem hated that word. *Child*. He stopped being a child the day his parents abandoned him. Few people could call him a child, just Leila, old ladies with crossbows, and obvious Legion leaders. Rem didn’t want this man’s attention on him; he’d much rather be invisible. He gave the man his name.

“To which clan were you born?”

Rem cringed just thinking about being a child of the Legion. “I’m not Legion. I don’t have any magic.”

The bearded man’s eyes furrowed. “My name is Abraham Thorns. I lead this Legion clan.” The way Abraham stared at him, Rem thought perhaps he should have recognized that name, but he couldn’t remember any story where he’d heard it.

“Nice to meet you,” Rem didn’t know what else to say. This play of meeting, greeting, and talking was a farce. Soon this old man and his clan would reveal their true faces.

“What did Niel ask you to steal?” Abraham asked.

“His great-grandmother’s will.” Once he got started, the entire story spilled out easily, from what he did for a living, to Niel approaching him at the market where he’d been trying to haggle the price down on a pair of napples. How Niel invited him to his home for dinner, telling him the sob story of his crazy nana. And finally offering the hundred rio to retrieve the will.

“You must be pretty gullible to believe a story like that, Rem.” Abraham didn’t hide his smirk, and Rem felt the shame of being the fool, followed by anger and disappointment because it was true. He had fallen for it. He had been gullible enough to believe Niel’s story. Rem always thought he was a good judge of character, that he knew when someone was hiding their true nature. He’d seen it enough from living on the streets. Learned it the hard way from the corner men who dressed like counts and barons and convinced young girls or

boys to go with them. Rem had almost been one of them until Leila found him and kicked the man between the legs.

Once he grew older and knew the cruelty of the world, it was him doing the deceiving, him setting up acts. Him jumping and rolling through dirt until his skin was broken, allowing Leila to slap him until his eyes were red and his cheeks swollen, so when he knocked on a door and begged for food, they wouldn't say no. Distracting vendors, pretending he wanted to purchase a trinket while Leila put things in her satchel. Is this what his victims had felt when they'd realized they'd been deceived?

"Unless..." The amusement on Abraham's eyes vanished, and he extended his hand toward Rem's head. Niel's eyes widened, and his teeth pressed against his lip.

It took every inch of Rem's self-restraint to stay still as Abraham touched his forehead with the tip of his fingers. Rem felt the tinge of sorcery there, like a virus invading his consciousness, and his skin crawled from the sensation.

Abraham snapped his hand away, and his eyes were no longer amicable. "There's a spell in the boy's mind. You have broken faith, Niel."

Rem shook away the feeling of power inside his head. A spell in his mind?

The Legion guard that had dragged Rem from the bushes grabbed the back of Niel's neck and shoved him closer to Abraham.

"Lorez, please. No need to be so rough. Niel has been one of us for a few years. He knows the rules and what happens when you break them." Abraham's words were kind, but the tone was harsh.

Rem thought back to yesterday. It was still all so blurry. He couldn't grasp onto anything that happened between meeting Niel in the market, and finding himself inside Filina's home. Everything was hazy, a mess of disjointed moments inside his head—pieces of memories—Niel touching his hand, walking through an empty field, seeing Filina's big house in the distance, staring down at the ravine from the second floor. Nothing clicked until Filina spoke like a snap of fingers, her voice drawing him back from a trance. The only clear thing was standing in Filina's bedroom, needing to steal her will, and being scared of being shot with a crossbow.

Niel stared ahead, like he didn't care what was happening, like he wasn't even there. Anger pulsed in Rem's veins, hot and searing. How dare Niel use him like a puppet! How dare he take Rem's life like it meant nothing. Rem



dashed forward with his hand a tight fist, and landed a savage punch to the sorcerer's face.

Niel's head snapped back, his feet tumbled, and he fell butt first to the ground. Blood poured out of his nose, and his eyes flashed with anger toward Rem. Rem stood ready for Niel to fight back, but Niel saw something behind Rem, and his ire disappeared in a blink. The fight was over without even beginning. Niel wiped away the blood trickling from his nose with the hem of his cloak, and he calmly got back on his feet, a thin smile on his lips.

Lorez suddenly grabbed Rem's arms and held them behind him in a tight grip. Abraham approached and grabbed the hem of Rem's dark cloak. Rem's breath caught. The hood of his cloak had fallen back when he'd punched Niel. Abraham turned over the hem to reveal the red.

"You pretend to be one of us," Abraham's voice rattled. There was such anger there.

*I'm dead. They will kill me for this.* Niel stepped next to Rem.

"I have never seen such offense to this clan. Both of you," Abraham snapped.

Rem looked around in panic, his breath choked in his throat. He didn't want this to be the last thing he experienced, to die surrounded by figures in red. He should have never accepted Filina's demand. No amount of money was worth his life. Lorez's large hands squeezed his upper arms, and thinking quickly, he threw his head back and slammed the back of his skull into Lorez's forehead, forcing the man to release him. No hesitating this time. Rem went for his sword.

"Put that away, child! Unless you wish to die." Abraham's eyes fumed with rage.

"I think you've already decided that's what you're going to do to me, so I'd rather not." Rem raised his sword. "I've seen what you do to people who offend you." This was going downhill fast. Rem looked around. The six remaining Legion members in the group were closing in. At least two were powerful sorcerers. Abraham of course, and Niel with his sly mind tricks. Odds were high some of the other members were just as powerful, or close enough to be a problem. Did Rem trust his swordsmanship enough to try and escape?

Abraham signaled his clan to a halt. He seemed conflicted. "What about repaying your transgression with a job?" His voice calmed. "Everything will be forgiven. You won't have to fear the end of your life from us."

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Rem kept his sword pointed at the elder. "What kind of job?"

"Find something that has been lost and return it to us."

Return something? Rem had a feeling that anything lost or stolen from the Legion would come with endless complications, but what choice did he have? He had to accept the fact he wasn't getting out of here alive unless Abraham allowed it. "If I get this thing back for you? You'll forget I was here? You'll forgive what I wear?"

"Yes." Abraham took a step back. "Merina. Senum," he called.

Two cloaked figures separated from the group and lowered their hoods. They were an odd looking pair. The man's dark brown hair was cut short to the point his ears stuck out. Exhaustion tugged at his green eyes, upstaged by the dark, jagged scar on his chin. The woman seemed small and fragile next to him, younger than him with locks darker than the night. She had been beautiful once, but the bags under her blue eyes had stolen her youth. "Senum and Merina Borges," Abraham introduced the couple. "Their boy, Luca, has run away. His power disorients him, makes him confused. He's wandered away before, but we've always managed to find him. This time he's run far up north, outside our territory. It is difficult for us to go retrieve him without breaking norms with the clans of that area. Luca's Inception ceremony is in four days. That day he will finally become part of this clan, and his blood and his power will become part of us. After that, he will no longer be lost."

Senum put an arm over his wife's shoulders. Merina pulled a small broken rag doll from her cloak and squeezed it. "Please bring our Luca back," Merina begged. Tears trickled from her eyes. This mother wanted her child back. Unlike his own mother, who had left him inside the hollow of a tree and walked away.

"I'll bring him back," Rem decided, lowering his sword. "What does he look like? Where can I find him?"

"Niel will tell you." Abraham grabbed Rem's wrist at the same time he grabbed Niel's. "Bring back Luca, Niel," he ordered, his tone carrying a clear warning. "You have four days." Niel tried to pull his arm back. Abraham's eyes turned dark, and he began chanting.

If Rem could have described what happened next, he would have said an unknown force pulled him off the ground and threw him fifty feet into the air. Abraham's sorcery—his power—was more frightening than Rem ever imagined.

Rem collapsed to the ground, his heart beating madly, his head throbbing. The world spun around him and the taste of blood and dirt mingled on his tongue.

“Bloodless!” Niel swore next to him. He picked himself off the ground and dusted off his cloak. “That spineless bastard!”

“What happened?” Rem asked. He was still trying to figure out what Abraham had done to them.

“He transported us.” Niel was looking around, touching his cloak, searching for something. “And he took my coin pouch.” The statement was followed by another set of obscene sentiments.

“We’re not in Lenen anymore?” Rem hated the idea of not being in Lenen. Lenen was dangerous enough as it was. But being stuck in one of its neighbor countries would be far worse.

“We’re still in Lenen. Up north. Abraham’s power is not that great, but we’re now a few days travel from the barracks where the ceremony will take place. We have to make sure Luca doesn’t miss that ceremony.”

“Not that great? That old man just threw us miles away from where we were just seconds ago! That is—” Rem couldn’t finish the thought out loud. *Terrifying*. So terrifying he didn’t want to think about it. If Niel thought this type of power wasn’t great, Rem didn’t want to find out what *great* was then. Ever.

Niel removed his red Legion cloak, made it into a giant ball, and tossed it in the bushes. He wore a plain outfit underneath, just dark brown trousers with a dark brown vest over a white shirt. A foldable dagger dangled from his belt. Rem took note of that little blade. It was good to know Niel was armed. “Why are you even here?” Rem pulled his hood back over his head. “You’re the last person I want to talk to right now, after what you did to me.”

Niel made a face. “Because it’s such a joy for me to escort two brats back to Nevenen.” He stomped away a few steps, then turned to look back over his shoulder. “This is my punishment for using my power on you.”

Rem felt like punching Niel again, but he restrained himself. “After I return the boy, I’m taking you back to your great-grandmother.”

For a moment, Niel’s expression turned serious. Maybe he regretted what he had done to his great-grandmother after all, and wasn’t a heartless prick like Rem thought. Niel rolled his eyes. “Absolutely not. Nana Filina will kill me for what I did.”

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Rem happily imagined hitting Niel on the head and dragging him to Filina's doorstep. He almost said something about making sure Filina would have her day with Niel, but he decided to save it for another time. If what Niel said was true, he was obligated to not only help locate Luca, but bring him back to the Legion for their ceremony in the barracks. The barracks was only half a day's walk from Filina's house. He'd figure something out by then, and complete this awful job and collect his damned one thousand rio.

"There's a town up ahead." Rem pointed past a line of trees to a group of houses where smoke rose from a chimney or two. "We can make it before evening."

"Piri. I've been here once before. It's not a nice town if you're Legion. Luca must be there." Niel tussled his own hair. No one would guess he was Legion without his cloak.

"How do you know?"

"Abraham's power is pretty accurate. That, or he already knew where Luca was."

Rem made sure his sword was safely in its sheath. "If that's the case, then why did he send us to get him instead of doing it himself?"

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## Chapter Five

### *Luca*

“He’s here,” Niel said, as he walked out of the tiny village inn to meet back up with Rem. Niel dusted his sleeve.

Piri was a cesspool. Discarded trash littered every other alley. The market was closed, and the houses were in shambles or abandoned. Their fountain sat broken and empty, just like the people in this town.

“Why didn’t you go get him?” Rem hadn’t ditched his cloak like Niel had. Unlike the mind sorcerer, he could hide the red.

“Because I’m from the clan Luca is running away from?” Niel replied sarcastically. He walked around to the side of the building and pointed at the light coming from the second floor. “There.”

“What are you pointing at?”

“Climb up to Luca’s window and get him.”

“No! I already had my window climbing exercise for the week. Your great-grandmother’s window access is dangerous—did you know that?”

“Of course I do. Pretty sure I placed the impulse inside your mind to climb to that specific window.”

Rem impulsively threw another punch at Niel. Niel blocked it and returned one of his own, hitting Rem in the nose, and sending him to the ground. “That’s for earlier! I only pretended to let it slide because Abraham was there and because you were pretty screwed on your own with that half-red cloak. Don’t forget, you’re just a kid. I’m an adult.”

“I’m not a kid!” Rem stood, but kept his distance from Niel. His nose wasn’t bleeding, but it hurt. The urge to retaliate was strong, he wanted to hit the egocentric sorcerer badly and erase the smug look on his face. Rem felt emotion after emotion pile up about this deceiving Legion man, and on top of the list was hostility. Manipulating people, trying to steal from his great-grandmother, Niel was a horrible person.

Rem kept the thoughts to himself. It wasn’t worth getting in a fight with Niel, even if he knew he could easily beat the trickster in a fair duel. “I’m seventeen. You can’t possibly be that much older than me.”

Niel looked down his nose at Rem. "I'm twenty-one. I'm an adult. And in this little rescue mission, I'm the boss. Now climb to the window and convince Luca to come with us."

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Luca sat on the edge of a bed in the smallest room of the inn. The bed creaked when he moved, one of the doors of the wardrobe was broken, and dust covered the small chest by the foot of the bed. The little details kept bothering him, because he didn't remember them, but it didn't matter. This was where he was supposed to be.

Remier was almost here.

Luca had the dream to come here three days ago. He'd dreamt of walking for those three days, crossing the river, getting a room at this very inn, and sitting on this bed. He glanced at the window.

Remier—the boy with the blond hair. The boy he'd dreamt about.

Luca remembered his mother's words before he left, when she thought she was going to see him the next day. *You are so important to the Legion, Luca. Without you, we are lost...*

More than once he had heard her say those words, and they always sounded like a lie. It was the same with his father, except Senum didn't have as much to say. It was possible Luca may never see them again, yet even so, he felt little regret about lying to them—or leaving them. They would never understand, but he had to be here.

Today.

Now.

Voices carried from outside his opened window. Hushed, then loud, *louder*, a scuffle. That, he didn't remember from his dream. Scraping sounds on the wall followed the voices, closer and closer. A hand appeared on the windowsill, then another, blond hair covering a face hidden under a dark cloak. Suddenly, the blond boy pushed himself up over the windowsill, saw him, then his leg got stuck on the edge, and he crashed face first onto the floor.

Luca laughed joyfully. "Remier."

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"Bloodless!" Rem swore, stubbing his toe on a chair as he stood quickly. That had been his worst window entrance ever. He hadn't expected to find

someone there just waiting for him. He had expected... he wasn't sure what he had expected. A little kid that played with rag dolls? When he looked up and saw Luca his brain stopped, and his coordination along with it.

Rem slowly pulled down the hood of his cloak. The way Abraham and his parents had talked about him, Rem imagined a kid a few years younger than him, nothing more than a stupid little boy that had run away. But that was not the person standing in front of Rem. No.

Foremost, Luca was not a child. He was a teenager about the same age as himself. Rem had to tilt his head down slightly to meet Luca's eyes. Haunting eyes as blue as the Simas River—a sign of the Legion blood in his veins—surrounded by silky-looking, tousled brown hair. Rem had the urge to run his fingers through it, but shook his head and the nonsensical thoughts away.

Luca tiptoed back and forth like he wanted to close the gap between them, and it took a lot of self-restraint not to do so. "Who told you my name?" Rem looked around the room, half expecting to find other Legion members hiding under the bed or in the wardrobe. The room was empty except for Luca.

There was a sense of awe in Luca's eyes, awe mixed with joy, and he just stared and stared like he knew Rem. *Weird*. "Remier. Hello."

Luca knew his real name. How? Rem was certain that they'd never met before. He definitely would have remembered those eyes. Dread slithered up Rem's spine. The only way Luca would know his name was if someone told him, if someone set this up. "Are you in on this, too?" Rem demanded. The smile on Luca's lips vanished. "I said, are you in on this?" Rem asked again, hovering over Luca, using his height to his advantage. Luca finally looked away, his face going from happy to doubt to downright sad. The awe was gone.

Rem recalled what Abraham had said about Luca—that his power disoriented him, that his power left him confused. Maybe Luca thought he was someone else? Maybe Luca didn't even remember how he got here.

Luca bit his lower lip and took slow, even breaths. His hands closed into tight fists. His eyes shimmered as he stared at the floor. Rem felt like apologizing. "I didn't mean to yell at you." He opened the wardrobe just in case there really was someone hiding there. "Look—your parents, and Abraham, asked me to take you back home. Do you even remember running away from home?"

Luca shook his head and stopped biting his lip. "I didn't run away. I just left and didn't tell anyone." Luca played with the hem of his shirt. "Don't you feel anything when you see me?"

What the heck was he talking about? Maybe Luca really wasn't right in the head, as Abraham had implied. Why hadn't he asked Niel more about Luca before climbing the side of a building like a good dog without questioning him more?

"Why would I feel anything?" Rem said and glanced outside, noticing the sun low in the sky. He was wasting time, so he stepped forward, and reached for Luca. He was going to take this odd, blood-sorcerer back to his clan, no matter what. He'd pay his debt of life to the Legion, return Niel to Filina, and be done with the whole mess. Clearly, Luca just wanted to rile him up. Blood sorcerers, especially Legion members, were people who should never be trusted. Like Niel, who used it to manipulate, like Abraham who abused his power. Rem loathed them all. He wondered what Luca could do, what his power was.

"Don't touch me!" Luca yelled, stepping back. He looked frightened. Truly and honestly frightened.

"Look, your clan told me to take you back. They want you back, and I want my freedom from them."

"No!"

Rem closed in. His fingers brushed the silk of Luca's shirt. Luca's entire body stiffened, and he pulled back as if struck. His mouth opened wide and a soft choke escaped it, spasming once, as if he forgot how to breathe. Luca closed his eyes then reopened them slowly. The blue was gone, replaced by a gray fog. Rem shuddered at the sight. This was not the same person.

Luca took a sharp breath, his voice barely a whisper, thick and ominous. "If you touch me, you cannot go back. You will fall in love with me, and we are going to suffer."

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## Chapter Six

### *Luca's Words*

"I said something weird, didn't I?" Luca covered his mouth. His eyes were a clear blue again, the fog in them gone.

Rem hesitated, but only for a moment. "Quite." That had been a premonition, or as close to one as he had ever seen. Rem didn't really believe in the predictions of fortune tellers. He'd met a few, but they had all been shamblers with little or no talent. The only one he'd met that he thought could be real had been a sixty-year-old woman in the village of Beru—near the desert—that told him he would take a life before his seventeenth birthday. She'd been right.

But this Legion runaway—Rem wasn't sure what to think. His common sense told him it was smoke and mirrors, a carefully developed plan to scare him, but his gut hesitated.

If Luca's words were true—If Rem closed the space between them and touched Luca—it would be him choosing the fate of Luca's prediction. That he would fall for him.

Rem shook his head and snapped away the nonsense. He didn't believe in premonitions. He didn't believe in fate. Life was an accident. His own life was an accident—when he met Leila, when he ate moldy bread when there was nothing else, when he drove a sword into a man's heart—none of those things could have been his fate.

Fate was a lie.

Rem closed the gap left between him and Luca and grabbed his arm. His thumb rubbed the soft skin over Luca's wrist. One second. Two. Three. Testing Luca's words. "I've touched you, and I'm not in love with you. And to make it clear, you're not really my type. You're too short. I like darker hair. You're eyes... well, maybe I like your eyes. They're beautiful." Rem felt Luca's pulse under his thumb speed up. "Not that it matters, because I would never be interested in someone from the Legion. The only reason I'm here is because I've been threatened. I don't even know how old you are."

Luca stared at Rem's fingers wrapped around his wrist, and placed his free hand over them. "Sixteen," Luca's voice was just above a whisper. "Everything

I've seen—all this time it's just been me, just me. The moments with you... why did I ever believe it would be any other way?"

*Strange. Strange.* Luca was very *strange*. "You've seen me?" Luca's fingers felt warm against his skin. It had been a while since he'd felt the touch of another person. That touch reminded him of how long he had been drifting from place to place. How much he wanted to stop.

"I've seen you," Luca's words were soft.

Rem was getting tired of Luca speaking in riddles; it was impossible for Luca to have seen him before tonight, but he could tell that Luca believed what he said. "I'm not the same person you saw," Rem said coldly.

The words were a taunt, a test to see how Luca would respond. Surely he would laugh them off or dismiss them. Luca raised his head; there were tears in the corners of his eyes. "No. You're not. Now let me go."

Rem let go. "Look, Luca—"

"No. You're right. I don't know you. I've never met you. It's true that I saw you in a vision, but that's not the same as meeting you in person. You don't say the same words. Or do the same things." Luca opened the chest by the bed and pulled out a long red Legion cloak.

Rem crossed his arms. "Sorry to disappoint."

Luca turned away. "It's fine. I don't care anymore. Just take me back to my parents. My clan. I don't even know what I came here for."

"It's a long journey. A few days."

"I know. I walked all of it." Luca looked dejected. He threw the cloak on and tied the knot slowly, avoiding Rem's eyes. His body suddenly spasmed again, and like before, his breath caught. His voice came out in a raspy whisper, "There will be three incidents to end this journey. If you miss them all, your objective to take me back to my clan will be achieved."

"Luca?"

Luca blinked, then took a deep breath, wiped his eyes, and headed for the door. "Take me back, Remier. I want to go back."

Rem opened the door. "Then let's go." Luca walked ahead, the red of his cloak hiding everything except his head. The red flowed behind him like a waterfall as he rushed down the stairs. Before Luca stepped out into the foyer

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of the inn, Rem grabbed his arm and pulled him back into the dark of the stairs. "Are you sure you want to wear your Legion cloak? Isn't Piri famous for being anti-Legion?"

Luca pulled the cloak tighter around him. "It's fine. It's who I am. Who I'll always be until I die."

Rem let a soft curse escape his lips. If his job was to take Luca safely back to his parents, then the least he could do was get on friendly terms with him. Maybe he should have just pretended to believe what Luca had said, no matter how ridiculous it sounded. Falling in love? He'd thought he'd been in love with Leila, but she only thought of him as a brother. So love wasn't something he wanted to think about right now. Maybe when he was older and wiser, with his past long behind him, and his feelings for Leila completely resolved. Maybe he'd meet a nice girl, or boy, someone uncomplicated. Where they could either make babies or adopt them. Not someone from the Legion. Not Luca. Luca seemed too fragile. Rem had always imagined sharing his life with someone more like himself, someone who could stand on their own two feet, someone like Leila.

Rem sighed. He didn't want to think about Leila right now. She wasn't here. They weren't a team anymore, and wouldn't be again. He was alone now, and this was where life had led him.

The few people at the inn turned their heads as Luca went by, but no one said anything. Luca opened the door and walked outside. He stood out with his red cloak, and every passerby slowed down to stare at him. Some downright stopped and pointed. Luca pulled the cloak over his head. "Which way, Remier?"

"Call me Rem."

"Which way, Rem?"

Rem pointed toward the town center where Niel was supposed to be waiting, and Luca headed that way. Rem walked beside him for the short walk to the broken fountain.

"When you said there would be three incidents to end this journey, what did you mean? I always keep my word, and I promise to take you back safely."

Luca glanced at Rem. "Sometimes I can't control the things I say." As Luca and Rem walked by, a group of young men whispered to each other. "There are many things that could prevent you taking me back to my clan," Luca sounded distant.

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“Like what?”

Luca opened his mouth to answer, but a shout interrupted him.

“Legion scum!”

Luca cringed, but didn't turn around. He hid further under his cloak. Rem did turn around. The shout had come from one of the men they had just passed.

Three men stood just a few feet away, two with dark hair, and one blond. The blond gripped a small blade between his fingers, and he was the only one armed. Rem stood in front of Luca, feeling his sheath at his side. These men were no match for him. He pretended to hesitate and when the blond was five steps away, Rem dashed forward, kicking the blond in the gut, knocking the wind out of him. It gave Rem enough time to disarm him and land a blow in the middle of his head. The tallest of the dark-haired men grabbed Rem by the shoulders and pushed him down to the ground as he threw punches against Rem's back, while his friend moved toward Luca. Rem tried to push the heavy man off of him, twisting his body around and delivering a punch right between the man's eyes, knocking him out. Luca made a sound. Rem turned as the third man picked up a large rock and threw it, hitting Luca in the face. Luca didn't fall, didn't run, he barely flinched. The man grabbed a second, bigger rock.

Rem sprinted, his hand closing over the hilt of his sword. “Drop it!” Rem warned, as he pressed the tip of the blade against the man's back.

“It's three against two—” the man glanced behind him and noticed his two friends were unconscious on the dirt.

“You really don't want to hurt someone under my protection—” Rem pressed the point of his sword harder until a drop of blood formed—“again.”

The man hesitated, then dropped the rock and ran, leaving his friends behind.

Rem pulled Luca away from the scene before anyone else showed up. He needed to get Luca out of this town and to some place of relative safety. Maybe the forest near where he and Niel had been transported would work, but Rem had one thing to do before leaving the village. He hauled Luca between two decrepit houses, hiding them from the view of strangers. “I told you to take that cloak off!” Angry, he tugged at the knots of the cloak around Luca's throat.

“No!” Luca pulled away. “I'm Legion! I have to wear this.”

“No, you don't.” Rem reached for the knots again. His breath caught when he saw the blood under the hood. “You're bleeding!”

Luca tried wiping the blood away, but smeared it across his cheek and eye instead, making it look worse. "I am not a child! I can make my own decisions. Aren't you always saying that?"

Rem did always say that. He hated when someone started acting stupid or changed the way they treated him once they realized his age. Yet here he was, treating Luca like he was a little kid.

Rem sighed. Luca was just as stubborn as he was then. He couldn't force him to take off the red cloak, but at least he could make it useful. Rem made a little ball of cloth with the hood of Luca's cloak and gently wiped the blood away from his face. The culprit was just a cut under his eye that was bleeding profusely, but it wasn't that bad. "You said there would be incidents that would prevent me from taking you back. Was this one of them?"

"No," Luca said, flinching when Rem touched his cut. "That was just people with hate in their hearts." The blood was almost gone. Luca leaned against the piece of cloth Rem held. "Can you do something for me? I promise to never ask again."

"What?"

Luca stared down. "Can you hold me? Just once. I need—"

Rem didn't wait for Luca to finish. He pulled him close, one hand around his back, the other on the back of his neck. It was an easy request. If this was all it took to make a fresh start with the weird Legion boy, so be it. Hugs were easy. They were simple and didn't mean anything. Luca reached up and held on to the back of Rem's shoulders. His body shook with each breath. Rem tried to say something, but nothing came out.

When was the last time he'd held someone like this? The day he left Leila's side—the day after he'd taken a life—the day he'd promised to become the opposite of what he had grown up to be. To atone for a childhood of crimes—even if it was to survive—thievery was something that no longer gave meaning to his life. The act of taking a life... Rem wanted to help people. He wanted to atone for the life he'd taken. Using the tricks he'd learned as a thief, he'd thought he could help others get back what was taken from them, but every item he returned somehow made him feel emptier. How could things replace a life?

Luca squeezed him tighter, and Rem realized that, here in his arms, was a person. A life. This was his chance. He had to get Luca back to his home no

matter what. This was the way he would atone for his crime. Rem took a deep breath, his fingers grazing over Luca's brown locks, and reminded himself hugs meant nothing.

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Luca fell into the temporary safety of Rem's arms and cursed his power. How many times had he seen this? How many times had he fantasized about this? Believed it to be more than what it really was. He wanted to cry, to break down right here, right now. It didn't matter if Rem saw or not; he needed to let go of every dream or hope he'd ever had—let it flow away like the blood that had flowed down his face.

Rem's heart thumped against his ear, and Luca couldn't hold it in anymore. The tears fell unwillingly from his eyes, as he mourned what he had believed was his future, his truth. He'd been so naïve.

Rem suddenly pushed him away. Putting his hands on Luca's shoulders and putting that space between them. This was reality, Luca reminded himself. This was what was real. Not him in Rem's arms. He had to stop crying.

Rem knelt like a knight before his king. Luca had never seen such a thing before. "I'll protect you," Rem said, and grabbed Luca's right hand with both of his, squeezing tight. "Luca, I've known you for less than one hour, and I've already broken a promise to you. I promised I would take you back safely, and you already got hurt." Rem stood and gently touched the skin next to Luca's cut. "So I will make that promise again. I'll protect you, Luca. I promise I won't let anyone hurt you. I promise I'll take you back to your parents."

Luca stared. Happiness prickled all over his entire being. He leaned against Rem's touch and the happiness turned to heartache. Rem had no idea. Luca made his own promise, if only to himself. That this would be the only time he would allow Rem to hold him—to touch him. He promised to let go of his dreams. And most important, he promised himself that Rem would never find out how he felt.

"Three chances that won't happen," Luca echoed the premonition.

Rem touched the sword against his hip, a quick reflex. "What could possibly stop me?"

"My death," Luca said as a matter of fact. "Or yours."

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## Chapter Seven

### *Nightfall*

They found Niel leaning on a tattered fence just past the village entrance. Luca's eyes lowered in a glare when he saw him.

"So nice to see you, Luca," Niel said mockingly, and made to pat Luca's head.

Luca moved back. "Don't touch me! You don't need to mess with my head to convince me to go back. I'm doing it of my own free will."

"Are you now?" Niel stared at his fingers. "How about a slight suggestion?"

"Don't touch me!" Luca snapped. Niel stretched his hand toward Luca again.

Rem stepped forward. He'd promised to protect Luca from anyone who tried to hurt him, and that included Niel. "He said, don't touch him."

Niel snorted and withdrew his hand. "Touchy." Rem glared. Niel rolled his eyes. "What? Did he tell you I would try to kill you or something? Just because he can see the future, doesn't mean he can't lie."

"He didn't say anything. I just don't want you touching him." Rem wrapped a hand around Luca's wrist and started hauling him toward the woods.

"Where are you going?" Niel yelled. "I made arrangements to stay at a barn. Free of charge."

"To Veles," Rem answered and continued forward, tugging Luca along.

"Are you mad! That's almost a three hour walk. The sun will set in one—one and a half at most. We should stay here."

Rem didn't bother to turn around. "It's too dangerous."

Niel ran and tried blocking Rem and Luca's path. "Dangerous? What about werewolves, vampires, or the fae? Isn't it more dangerous to be eaten by one of them?"

Luca's fingers brushed against Rem's. Rem glanced down for a moment then looked back at Niel. "Werewolves are banished to Zemera Island, vampires are extinct, and the fae don't eat people. The only danger here is humans. Can't you see what happened to Luca's face?"

Niel opened his mouth, but quickly closed it. "It's still safer than going into the woods."

Luca pulled on Rem's hand, and tilted his head to look at Niel. "If we stay in that barn, someone will burn it down."

Niel bit his lip, and Rem spared him one last glance before moving forward with Luca. If they hurried, they could make it to Veles shortly after nightfall.

Niel followed behind, muttering under his breath.

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Rem adjusted his cloak tighter around his neck. The sun was almost down, and the chill of the night had started seeping into their skin. Luca also hugged his red cloak. Niel had to manage with rubbing his hands over his arms. They made for a strange group. Two cloaked figures, one in black, one in red, and one obviously wishing he had a cloak.

Rem matched Luca's pace. The young blood sorcerer hadn't spoken a single word since they'd left Piri, but he frequently turned to stare at Rem. At least five times, Rem had turned his head to catch Luca pretending he hadn't been staring. If this continued, it was going to be a tedious trip. "Why don't you tell me about yourself?" Rem said, breaking the silence.

Luca glanced toward Rem. "What's there to know?"

"Why you ran away from your clan would be a good start. Tell me why I'm here."

Luca pursed his lips. "Would you laugh if I said its fate?"

"Yes," Rem scoffed. "You made the choice to travel to Piri. I made the choice to talk to Niel in the market, even if he did use his power on me. I talked to him. I went to his home. The only reason we're here together is because we are victims of coincidence. You chose yours. I stumbled more into mine."

"Did you?" Luca looked back at Niel.

Niel, who had remained quiet until now, looked irritated to be pointed a finger at. "Why are you looking at me? I wasn't the one who left."

"You chose Rem, didn't you? You wanted someone to steal for you, and out of all the people in the market, you chose Rem. Why him?"

Niel threw his hands in the air. "I don't know! I'd never seen him before, so if he got hurt, or caught, I wouldn't have to worry about it." Rem's fingers



lingered over the hilt of his sword. Niel stopped. "Listen—I know what I did to you was pretty awful. Did I care about your life when I messed with your head? I did not. Was I aware that you could have died climbing to my grandmother's window? I did!" he yelled in frustration and yanked at his hair furiously. "But I need that will! I need to show Nana that she can't just disown me. Doesn't she know how much I love her? Why? Why did she stop loving me just because I joined the Legion? Didn't she think that would hurt me?" Niel dropped to the ground; he kicked some dirt with his foot, held his forehead with both hands. "You two should keep going. I need some time to think. I'll catch up with you in Veles."

"No." Rem's voice was firm. "We're not separating. We already knew you were a selfish asshole, but we are not the ones who need to listen to your half-assed confession. It's Filina who needs to hear that."

Niel looked up at Rem and Luca, took a deep breath, and seemed to realize that among the three of them, he was the only one acting like a child. He slowly stood, and Rem wondered if Niel's pride had survived his outburst. Niel looked at Luca. "What about you, Luca? Why did you leave your home? You're an Inception child. You have everything. Everyone worships you."

Luca shifted uncomfortably. Rem remembered Abraham talking about a ceremony with the same name. "What is the Inception?"

Niel started walking forward again. Rem and Luca followed. They'd wasted enough time chatting. "Inception is the name given to powerful blood sorcerers," Niel began. "They're children usually born to Legion parents. They display their powers at an early age. People like Abraham. They are revered, honored, and everyone loves them," Niel spat the last words. "They don't have to suffer to join the clan."

"It can't be all that great if Luca decided to leave," Rem said.

Luca looked a little pale. "I didn't leave. I just—I saw myself here, so I came here."

"That isn't a premonition." Rem kicked a pebble out of his way as they reached a clearing. "You could have just stayed put. You could have ignored what you saw." *Or claimed you saw.* "Then we wouldn't be here. And I—"

Luca froze, held his head between his hands. "They're coming for me."

Startled, Niel strode to his side. "Who?" he asked. "Lorez? Abraham?"

Luca pointed ahead. He was eerily calm. "No. They're not from our clan."

Rem saw them now. Five red-cloaked figures illuminated in the glow of the falling sun. Their hoods were down—three men and two women.

“This is the first incident,” Luca warned. His hand pawed at Rem’s cloak. “They want me dead.”

Rem’s sword rasped against metal as he withdrew it from the sheath. Seizing Luca’s arm, he dragged him beside him. “Don’t leave my side!”

“I think I can bespell one or two of them,” Niel said, and snapped his fingers once. He almost seemed giddy, as if looking forward to a fight.

“Who are you? What do you want?” Rem yelled across the clearing. He pointed his blade at the strangers, wanting them to see he was armed.

“We’re members of the Piri clan. We want the oracle of the Nevenen clan!” One of the two women spoke. She was standing fourth in line. To her left, a young man with dark hair put his hands together and started chanting. The space between his hands started sparking, and as his words rushed faster, the sparks grew stronger. “—lur!” he yelled, and a large bolt of light zapped directly in their path.

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“Move!” Niel yelled and jumped aside. Rem jerked Luca the opposite way as the bolt struck between them. Three of the Piri Legion rushed them. The man who’d hurled the lightning bolt at them lay on the ground, unconscious. The woman who’d spoken earlier knelt at his side.

Reaching up, Luca touched his head as headaches struck him. Visions invaded his mind, and for a few seconds, Luca couldn’t tell what was real, and what was a vision. Rem pushed forward, intercepting two men who were trying to reach Luca. The first wasn’t even a challenge—one elbow to the side of the man’s head was enough to take him out. Across the clearing, Niel was trying to put his hand over the other woman’s head, but she kept dodging him and trying to stab Niel with a dagger.

Luca found himself apart from the melee, a spectator. Niel managed to snap two fingers against the woman’s forehead; her eyes rolled back, and she slumped to the ground. Niel laughed; he was having fun, then turned his attention to the kneeling woman.

Two swords clanged and Luca turned toward the noise. The second man Rem was fighting was big, too big to be simply human. Some type of fae must be in his blood, ogre blood.

The ogre-man swung his sword fast. Rem dodged the swipe aimed at his head, rolled, stood, then curved his sword against the man's back, slicing skin. It was only a superficial wound, but the ogre-man screamed like he'd been cut down. Rem did not hide his glee.

Another vision pounced on Luca. In it, he saw the ogre-man putting his sword on the ground. Saw Rem walk away. Then the ogre-man pulled a knife hidden inside his cloak and plunged it into Rem's back.

Luca blinked as the vision faded and the now became real; he saw Rem cut the ogre-man's leg just above the knee. "Any deeper and it will leave a mark," Rem gloated.

"You brat! You—"

Rem laughed, angering the ogre-man even more. His anger made him brazen and his attacks both hasty and reckless. His mistakes made it easier for Rem to dodge the attacks and retaliate with his own.

The sword fight only lasted seconds, but it felt much longer. The ogre-man's frustration with being unable to cut Rem was palpable. Luca noticed Rem only had a shallow cut on his shoulder, while the ogre-man suffered open wounds all over his body. Blood trickled down his face as he muttered under his breath and let go of his sword. Showing his intent to surrender, he kicked it from his reach.

"Wise choice," Rem said, and sheathed his sword. Niel was standing in front of the girl and the unconscious lightning man. They didn't seem to be a threat anymore.

Rem turned his back to the ogre-man, his eyes searching for Luca.

Luca's breath caught; in the distance he heard the call of rubi; it was so quiet now that the fight was over. If a stranger came upon them they would never know people had just been trying to kill each other. Rem's smile widened when their eyes met, and Luca saw the moment his vision started becoming reality, saw the ogre-man reach for something inside his cloak. Luca ran. "Rem!"

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As Luca ran toward him, a strange sense of joy came over Rem. He'd managed to keep Luca safe like he'd promised. "Rem!" Luca screamed again, but there was nothing joyful in Luca's face. Why would Luca be scared now? Behind him, someone's steps crunched on the loose dirt. Luca suddenly threw

himself between the noise and Rem's unprotected back, and shoved him to the side. Rem tumbled a few steps forward and heard a yelp—a very soft sound—like when a small creature gets trapped by a predator, and it screams one last time.

The ogre-man had Luca in his massive hands like a little rag doll. His large fingers wrapped around the dagger he'd plunged into Luca's shoulder, far too close to his neck.

A red haze clouded Rem's vision; his fingers tightened around the handle of his sword, pointing the tip toward the ogre-man's head as he ran. Fast—incredibly fast—Rem's body moved in one fluid motion. For that moment he wasn't Rem Lumes, teenage wanderer, homeless orphan, retriever. He was the shadow he and Leila created, the whisper in the dark. He was the boy who'd driven a blade into a man's heart. And he was about to do it again.

How dare this brute hurt what was his to protect?

The ogre-man focused his entire attention on Luca as a thin smile formed on his lips. Rem dashed and drove his sword forward. As if he sensed Rem's fury, the ogre-man dropped Luca and raised his arm so he could block Rem's attack. Rem's blade met thick leather, barely stopping Rem from driving the sword into his chest. Rem twisted, and something moved inside him, something so fluid it didn't feel human. He kept the pressure on the handle on his sword, making sure the ogre-man continued to block him while he pulled a smaller blade from the other side of his belt and drove it deep into the ogre-man's shoulder.

There was screaming. And blood. The ogre-man stumbled back allowing Rem to stand over Luca, both blades ready.

*I dare you to touch him again!*

A swift-moving shadow appeared behind the ogre-man, jumped up and clamped its entire hand around the oversized head. The ogre-man's eyes rolled back, and he went down. Niel loomed over his unconscious form.

"Luca!" Rem kneeled on the dirt next to Luca's writhing form. "Don't move."

"There's a knife in my neck," Luca gasped.

"It's not in your neck." Rem held a hand to Luca's chest, keeping him still. What now? They still had an hour's walk before they reached Veles. And Piri—the town these people came from—would likely be glad to see Luca die.

“Niel. Help.” Rem’s voice shook. He hated breaking his promises. He hated seeing Luca breathing shallowly with an unnatural piece of metal protruding from his body.

Niel swore under his breath. He lurked next to Rem and Luca, unsure of what to do. “I’m not a healer. I can only close small wounds.”

Luca twisted to glance at the two remaining Piri Legion members—the lightning man and the woman by his side. The man was still unconscious; the woman had his head on her lap. “She’s a healer,” Luca whispered. Rem wasted no time rushing to the pair, his sword out.

“I told your friend I wouldn’t attack!” the girl yelled, holding her partner. She loved him, Rem realized, loved him enough to not abandon him. “I didn’t want to be a part of this. I just didn’t want Pine to go alone.”

“Can you heal my friend?” Rem didn’t want to point his sword at the defenseless pair, but he needed a quick answer.

The girl started at the tip of Rem’s sword, at the blood on the blade. She nodded.

“Then do it.”

After setting Pine’s head on the ground, she made her way to Luca’s side. She kneeled next to him and examined Luca’s wound. Rem didn’t like the furrows that appeared on her face.

“I need someone to pull the dagger out,” she said.

Rem reached for it. If someone had to take that little dagger out, it had to be him. He knew blades like the back of his hand. He’d seen the damage they did. He didn’t trust anyone else to do this. He didn’t trust the woman either, but he had no choice in the matter. She was the only one who could save Luca. But if she didn’t...

Rem felt something he hadn’t felt in a long time as he imagined himself kneeling there with a bloody dagger in his hand while the girl did nothing but watch Luca die. A distorted irrational feeling of anger awoke deep inside him, making him say words he would otherwise never utter. “If you let him die, I will kill the man you clearly love, and I will make you watch.”

Her face twisted in silent horror and fear, and even Rem was horrified at the words that had come out of his mouth. But he wasn’t taking them back. Luca had to live.

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The girl rubbed her hands together and took three long breaths. “I have a small knife in my belt. I need to take it out to cut a line on my palm.”

“Why?”

“It will increase my power. This is a bad wound. I want to make sure I do a quick job.”

Niel stepped in. “She’s telling the truth. Our power does increase when we spill blood. That’s why some people call us blood sorcerers.”

Rem nodded, and the girl pulled a little knife from inside her cloak, cutting twin, single lines inside both her palms.

Rem carefully clasped the handle of the dagger protruding from Luca and held his breath. Luca’s eyes silently pleaded with him, like he wanted to say something, but couldn’t. “Ready?” The woman nodded. Rem pulled the dagger out quickly and there was so much blood. Luca gasped, his eyes going dark immediately. He started muttering, his body jerking up, so Rem held him down while the girl covered the wound with her hands. She chanted quickly, her hands emitting a strange glimmer.

The blood stopped. Luca calmed. His eyes closed.

“The wound is sealed.” She slowly moved her hands away from Luca’s wound and delicately wiped the blood away, as if afraid the wound would reopen.

Rem hesitantly touched the spot where the wound used to be—solid flesh.

The girl was hugging herself, like she was afraid to move. “Can you leave now? Please let us be.”

Rem watched as Luca breathed in and out. Niel touched Rem’s shoulder. “They will wake up in less than an hour. We better hurry.”

Rem picked up Luca, his body light in his arms. Rem had the urge to clean the blood from Luca’s neck, but it would have to wait.

The girl stared at him as he walked past, her eyes wide, her body shaking with fear.

*Yes, Rem thought. Tell everyone what you saw. Tell everyone what happens when you hurt someone I’ve sworn to protect.*

He hoped she told everyone. He hoped she told the entire world.

## Chapter Eight

### *Sweet and Sour*

Luca slept like the dead. More than once Rem worried that the girl had not healed Luca properly, that the shock had been too much, but Niel reassured him Luca was fine.

They reached Veles hours before the sun rose. At the first inn they came to, the manager refused to give them a room, but one tap of Niel's fingers against his forehead was enough to make him change his mind.

The room had two beds, a wardrobe, a chest, and even its own water closet.

"Is this the best room in the inn?" Rem asked as he put Luca down on the bed closest to the window.

"What else would I get?" Niel kicked his boots off and used the plumbing pipe to splash some water on his face. "Get some sleep. We start early again tomorrow. Luca should be up by then."

Sleep. Rem couldn't even remember the last time he'd actually slept. So much had happened since then. Just this morning, he'd woken up in Filina's house and eaten the meal she had left for him in the kitchen. He'd been to Vesca, Nevenen, Piri, and now Veles, all in one day. He'd seen Leila after almost a year, infiltrated a Legion meeting, and gotten caught. He'd feared for his life. He'd met Luca. Exhaustion didn't even come close to describing how Rem felt. His brain was heavy, his thoughts too many to count. Fatigue weighed on his bones.

Rem tossed most of his clothes on top of the chest, keeping just the plain shirt and trousers on. Niel was already asleep and snoring, sprawled on the bed closest to the door like a large feline. Luca took so little space on his bed, Rem was sure Luca wouldn't mind if they shared it.

Rem gently removed Luca's boots and his cloak. His shirt was ruined from the blood, but Rem still removed it carefully, soaked it in water, and left it to dry on the windowsill.

He hadn't shared a bed with anyone since leaving Leila. It was how they had helped each other to keep warm from the cold, snuggling together like poggypuppies. Rem felt a shiver from the breeze outside and pulled the thin sheet over himself and Luca. Luca shivered, his brow furrowed, and his eyes opened.

He looked around, seemingly confused. Rem waited for him to ask for an explanation, but he didn't.

"I'm cold, Remier," he said.

Maybe it was the impulse of memory. Maybe Rem was just as cold as Luca was, and body warmth made the best blanket. Either way, his body seemed to move automatically, curling a hand around Luca's back and pulling him close until Luca was in the nook of his arms. Luca looked up, his eyes studying Rem's face, then he closed them and went back to sleep.

How odd was this? Just hours before, Luca had asked Rem to hold him for no real reason. Luca said it would be the only time, yet here he was again in Rem's arms. Could it be? Could he really fall in love like Luca had said? Rem thought he knew love with Leila. It was the desire to be with someone, to think about them at odd moments, to laugh at the same things together. He and Luca had nothing to laugh about. Handing over the boy to his parents would be a weight lifted off his shoulders. This wasn't love. This was—what was this anyway?

"Remier," Luca murmured, his eyes were still closed. He was only dreaming.

Things had gotten far more complicated than Rem had ever wanted. Or intended.

Or perhaps it was simpler than that. Perhaps Rem just missed the warmth as well.

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Luca's feet were freezing. He moved them tentatively, searching for a blanket, but there was nothing. Something warm lay against his side though, something warm and heavy that made him forget all about his cold feet. Luca slowly opened his eyes, his brain still fuzzy from sleep. Rem, sleeping next to him, holding him.

Luca had dreamed about this. It was one of his favorites. Rem usually slept deeply like this—quiet, heavy, one arm hooked over Luca's body. Other times he snored lightly and hogged the covers. Sometimes Rem didn't sleep. Sometimes he kissed Luca.

Luca wondered what would happen if—in this version of his dreams—he kissed Rem instead.



The gap between them was small, just a few inches. So Luca leaned in and just did it. Rem's lips were warm and soft, and Luca couldn't remember any other dream where they'd felt like this.

Rem moved away, and his gray eyes slowly opened.

A loud snore caught Luca's attention. Niel. Niel was sleeping in the bed next to them. Wait. Niel had never been in one of his dreams before.

"What are you doing, Luca?"

Realization hit, and Luca scrambled out of bed, tangled his feet in the bed sheet, and tripped into the space between the two beds, landing on his rear. *THUD.*

"Ow, ow, ow," Luca muttered, rubbing his sore behind.

Ruffling noises came from Niel's side. He mumbled, "Can you stop with the noise? I'd like at least one more hour of sleep."

Luca stopped fidgeting and untangled himself from the bed sheet, hoping that Rem had dismissed everything as some strange dream and gone back to sleep. Luca looked up to find Rem's head hovering over the edge of the bed. "Were you just kissing me?"

Luca wanted to throw the bed sheet over his head and hide. He heard Rem settling in the bed. "I'll forget it happened, if it makes you feel better," he mumbled, his voice husky from sleep.

Luca slowly sat up and peeked over the edge of the bed. Rem was lying back with his eyes closed. Luca silently tossed the thin bed sheet over Rem and then hurried to the water closet, closing the door behind him.

The mirror on the wall was a small dingy thing. Luca shook his head at his reflection. By Jove, he looked horrible, and where was his shirt? Someone had tried to wipe most of the blood away from his dirty face, but there were still red specks on his cheek and throat. Luca splashed water on his face, washing thoroughly until the specks were gone. He stared at the angry pink line on his collarbone. It was like seeing a ghost come to life. He'd dreamed of having this scar, but he'd never known how he was going to get it.

He didn't remember much after the ogre-man stabbed him, but he remembered Rem. He'd looked so incredible, fighting like magic flowed in his veins, fighting because of him. It didn't help Luca's resolve to try and let go of his feelings for the blond boy. Feelings he'd built up from dreams that, so far,

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weren't entirely accurate. A good portion of them had already happened—Rem climbing through the window, Rem cleaning blood from his cheek, Rem holding him. Luca wondered how many more visions would become reality, and how many would remain dreams forever.

Luca quietly stepped out of the water closet, careful not to wake Rem or Niel. He spotted his shirt draped on the windowsill and put it on. It was stained with dried blood, but he had nothing else to wear.

“We should get you a new one.”

Luca looked up. Rem was still lying in bed, but his eyes were open, and he was staring at Luca. Niel, oblivious, continued snoring.

“It's fine,” Luca said, his fingers scratching away bits of dried blood. Rem stood up and started to get dressed.

“I have some money. Let's go before Niel wakes up.”

They left their cloaks with Niel and found a clothes shop in the market. Veles wasn't a large village, and this early in the morning not many people were out and about, but there were enough to make Luca feel self-conscious and a little embarrassed about the state of his bloody shirt. He took one look at the assortment of shirts and quickly picked up a plain white one to replace his ruined one.

“Thank you,” Luca tossed the dirty shirt in the wastebasket, and followed Rem as he browsed through the market. Rem stopped at a fruit cart where a man was selling napples for half a rio. Rem took two and tossed one to Luca. “I don't like napples,” Luca admitted as he sniffed the sour fruit.

Rem hesitated. “They're cheap...”

Luca flushed with embarrassment. How could he complain about a gift of food when there wasn't a single rio in his pockets? He'd spent it all on his trip to Piri. Luca pulled at his new white shirt. “This cost twenty-five rio,” he said.

Rem was halfway done with his napple. “So?”

“We could have gotten something less expensive. This shirt is worth at least two meals. Why didn't you say something?”

Rem shrugged. “Because it's the one you wanted. Because it was my fault your old shirt was covered in blood. Once again, I failed to protect you. I have done nothing but break my promises to you.”

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“I chose to protect *you*. Didn’t you notice? It was my own decision that got me hurt. You shouldn’t have spent so much money.” Luca took a bite of the sour napple and forced it down, his face twisting the entire time.

Rem laughed, then took the napple from Luca’s hands, biting it and eating it effortlessly. “What do you like then?” he asked, pulling a full rio from his money pouch. Luca almost told Rem to put the coin back, but instead, he took a look at the assorted fruits and pointed to the batch of natberries.

Rem purchased the large, purple berry and gave it to Luca as they started making their way back to the inn through the quiet streets. Rem continued eating the napple Luca had bitten. “You like sweet. I like sour. Yet another fact that reassures me I’m not falling in love with you.”

Luca was halfway through chewing his natberry, the sweet taste he enjoyed vanishing. He tried hiding the hurt those words brought, but Rem noticed.

Rem bit his lower lip, a quick quirk. “Are you hoping that really happens?”

Luca held back the impulse to say the answer he wanted. He stared at the fruit Rem had bought him, touched the shirt Rem had bought him, little memories of dreams that had come to pass. Maybe he should throw caution to the wind and just tell Rem how he really felt? “I—” he started to say, then stopped. A piercing and familiar headache struck him. His sight grew foggy, darkness covered it. He gasped. “The thief Leire will come for me.”

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## Chapter Nine

### *The Oracle*

Luca looked behind him, like he'd seen a ghost. He squeezed the natberry in his hand until juice flowed out. "Leire is coming for me?"

Rem frowned. He opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. "You shouldn't be scared of that, Luca."

"How can you say that? Haven't you heard the rumors? The stories? Haven't you seen the dozens of wanted posters?"

"Nobody has seen or heard from Leire in months. He's probably dead."

"Then why would I say that he'll come for me?"

Rem shrugged. "I don't know. Haven't you ever said something that doesn't turn out like you said it?"

Luca stopped to think. "Sometimes. But there's always some truth to it. Especially the premonitions I can't control." Luca fidgeted while his eyes stared off toward empty air and his body shook. "Why would he come for me? I don't remember ever seeing something like that. Why wouldn't I have seen it before?"

Rem put a hand on his shoulder when Luca's shaking worsened. "Nothing is going to happen to you, Luca," he said.

Luca brushed him off. "How do you know?"

Rem seemed annoyed. He rolled his eyes. "Because I'm going to protect you, even from a famous thief. I will protect you. Trust me."

Fear and anger tugged at Luca's heart when he heard Rem dismissing his words. Rem still didn't believe what he could do. He still didn't believe the things Luca saw.

Out of all the horrifying things he'd seen, Luca tried to remember the last time he'd been so frightened by a vision. The more visions he had, the more he became numb to them—and there were plenty of horrifying things he'd seen—some he still hoped to prevent. But this vision? This one felt different. This one pulled at something deep inside him and stole his hope, because it could mean he may never be happy. It could mean that even if he lived through this journey, it would be all for naught.

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His thoughts. The vision. Rem's attitude.

It all came together to form anger and fear. Anger that he had no control about the things he said. Fear of the stories he'd heard about Leire. Anger of what would happen to him if what he said really came to be.

The dread and enmity took over Luca's emotions and bubbled out of him. Luca's body shivered, and all the affection he felt dimmed. He pulled the neckline of his new shirt down until he exposed the dark pink line near his neck. He looked at Rem and said things he didn't mean, things he didn't even believe. "You've done a really good job at protecting me so far."

Luca walked away. He didn't want to be near Rem anymore. The day had started so wonderfully—the reality of Rem's warm body next to his, stealing that kiss, experiencing Rem's kindness. All of it ruined by his stupid power.

Luca didn't pay attention to how far he walked, but soon found himself on the edge of town. More people were walking about and running errands now. Luca looked behind him. Rem hadn't followed him. Sticky juice from the natberry still in his hand covered his fingers. Luca took a moment to finish eating the sweet fruit. Once done, he licked his fingers, found a corner, and sat down to think. He'd said such a horrible thing to Rem. He flinched just thinking about it, and wondered if Rem would ever forgive him. There were things he had seen that hadn't happened yet, so that meant Rem had to forgive him. Right? Luca swore to himself and headed back to the inn.

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Rem opened the door only to see Niel still sprawled on his bed, still snoring. He glared at the obnoxious sorcerer, then made his way to where his things were on the bed he and Luca had slept in. He placed a small leather sheath he'd purchased on the bed, and started getting ready for the rest of the trip. He'd forgotten to clean his belt and swords the night before, the blood on them was dried and disgusting. It had been almost a year since his blades had tasted blood. Rem would be perfectly satisfied if his blades never tasted blood again.

He washed them in the water closet until they were spotless and safely back in their sheaths. Luca wasn't back yet. Thinking of the blue-eyed sorcerer just made Rem remember that stupid discussion at the market. Talking about Leire out of nowhere? What did that mean? What did Luca know? Rem couldn't shake the feeling that Luca was hiding something from him. He couldn't afford to trust him, even if a part of him wanted to.

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Rem knew he was supposed to be getting along with Luca. He needed the boy safe and sound and back in Nevenen in one piece; his life depended on it. He didn't have time for this nonsense. The more he thought about the conversation, the angrier he got. With no other outlet around, he grabbed the handle of the chest and threw the entire thing across the room.

Niel jumped up fast as a kheemah, and pushing his back against the wall, he dove his hand into his pocket for his foldable dagger. It took him a minute to realize that there was no danger. "In blood's name, Rem, if you wanted to wake me up, you could have just called me." He sat down. "Where's Luca?"

Rem shrugged. "I don't know."

"You don't—what?" Niel scrambled off the bed, pushing the sheets away with his legs. "You left him alone?"

"He stormed off," Rem tried to defend himself, but hearing Niel say the words struck a chord and made him realize that he may have put Luca in danger by simply leaving him alone. Mistake after mistake, that's all he did when it came to Luca. Make mistakes.

As Niel put on his boots, Rem ran for the door. He opened it and stopped short, relief flooding through him. Luca stood on the other side, looking startled.

"I'm sorry," Luca said.

Rem wanted to say he was sorry too, but the words wouldn't come out. The little ball of pride he held on to stopped him.

Niel smacked Rem on the shoulder. "Seriously, children, you made it sound like Luca had run away again." Luca stepped inside and Rem closed the door. Niel stretched and made his way to the water closet. "I'm going to take a bath. Who knows if we'll have another chance before making it to Nevenen. You can have one after me. You should start packing." Niel locked the small door and Rem heard the water running.

Luca sat on the bed they had slept in, looking around for something. "I don't really have anything except my red cloak," he said.

Rem watched as Luca reached for his Legion cloak. He wanted to understand Luca better, otherwise they would keep misunderstanding each other. They still had a few days until they got to Nevenen, and one of the first things Luca had told him was that they could possibly die in the span of those days. Rem had to admit that he had initially dismissed Luca's predictions as foolery.

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Speaking of love and death.

Those had just been words to startle him, words he willingly ignored, but now something made him hesitate. Luca kept insisting he saw the future. Rem had heard many names for the blood sorcerers that carried the power to see—augurs, seers, soothsayers, prophets. Each with its own level of power—its own level of notoriety. They reserved one name for the most powerful.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask.” Rem sat next to Luca. Water still ran in the background. “When the Piri clan attacked us, they called you a name. They called you an oracle. I thought I knew enough about how the Legion names their future tellers, and I thought oracle was the name given to the most powerful of them. No offense, but I haven’t really seen anything to indicate that you are that powerful.”

Luca looked far ahead, like he was trying to see something that wasn’t there. “The future is so full of maybes,” he said, tilting his head to look at Rem. “Abraham was the one that gave me the Oracle title. My parents told me I started having visions as soon as I could speak. That my eyes have gotten dark since I was a baby. They told me that when I was two, my grandfather wanted to take me to visit some friends, and I threw a fit so big he had no choice but to leave me behind. A horse trampled him just hours later.”

“You didn’t warn us about the Piri clan until they were right in front of us.”

Luca looked away. “Sometimes I can control what I see. Most times I can’t. When my eyes go dark, that’s random. Often times I only see flashes of things seconds before they happen. Sometimes I have dreams...” Luca choked out the last word and stretched his hand until his fingers closed around the hem of his cloak. “I don’t know how else to be.”

Rem wanted to pull Luca away from his cloak. Why did it feel like the world was wrong when Luca wore that red? When did such thoughts start crossing his mind? And why? Why should he care? A question popped inside Rem’s mind, perhaps one that should never be asked. “Luca, do you even want to be in the Legion?”

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Luca let go of his cloak and looked up at Rem.

“Of course he does,” Niel interrupted. He was lurking at the door of the water closet, dressed and looking refreshed. “You can’t choose to be in the Legion. The Legion chooses you. Luca was lucky enough to be born Legion. Do you know how hard I had to work to prove myself?”

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“I’m not talking to you, Niel,” Rem snapped.

Niel glared, and for a second Luca thought he was going to start a fight with Rem, but he stepped back, and ran a hand through his wet hair. “I’m going to make sure the innkeeper hasn’t forgotten I requested some items last night for our trip. Hurry up with whatever you’re planning on doing. We need to make it to the next village before nightfall.”

Niel shut the door behind him. Rem turned his full attention on Luca. “Do you like being Legion?”

Luca thought about it. No one had asked him that before. Not his mother. Not his father. Not even Abraham. There had never been any other option. Slowly, Luca shook his head.

Rem sighed and fidgeted on the bed. “Then how come you didn’t try to avoid me if you knew I was coming for you? Why did you wait in a room for me to find you? I have to take you back to them. Otherwise they’ll kill me.”

Every word Rem said felt like a little jab to Luca’s heart. It came down to that, didn’t it? One life versus another. And who would choose someone else’s life before their own? Especially, if it were someone they just met.

Luca stood, intending to leave. He didn’t want to talk about this. Rem grabbed his hand and pulled him back down on the bed next to him. “Tell me why.”

Luca wanted Rem to stop touching him. “Because I thought it would lead to a future that I don’t believe in anymore.”

“A future where I love you?”

Luca’s lip quivered. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. Rem never asked him about this in his dreams. “Yes.” Saying it, admitting it, felt like a huge clump had been released from his spirit. It felt like he was letting go of his hopes and dreams.

Rem leaned back on the bed and stared at the ceiling for a long moment. “What am I supposed to say to that? It’s ridiculous, Luca. In a few days we will arrive in Nevenen, and we won’t see each other ever again.”

“I know that. I know that.” Luca’s voice was tight and wounded. It would take time that he didn’t have to sort out every feeling he’d ever felt. Every feeling he’d ever clung to. “Some of the things I have seen—some of the things that made me believe—what I thought were visions of you loving me. They



have already happened, and they had nothing to do with you loving me. They were just misconceptions. My misconceptions.”

“Like what?”

Luca shook his head. “I don’t want to talk about it. Please, don’t make me talk about it.” He stood again and two visions played before his eyes. One where he walked away, and Rem stayed behind, a second where Rem grabbed his hand and pulled him down again. Luca started to leave, and with each step he wondered where the division between the two futures was. Would Rem let him go? Would Rem make him stay? Two steps. Three. He was out of reach. The bed squeaked, the floor creaked, and Rem’s hand closed around his and pulled him back.

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Niel casually patted the innkeeper’s hand. “I left a money pouch in the room by the bed. You can pick it up in an hour.”

“Understood.” Niel smiled and pressed his fingers against the man’s skin and waited until his eyes stopped staring blankly. “Anything else I can help you with, Mr. Sommerset?”

“No.” Niel stepped away from the man. “Just forget we were ever here.”

“Yes, sir.”

Niel released the man and raced back up the stairs two at a time to tell the boys to get moving. The sooner they left, the sooner they would reach Nevenen. Halfway down the hall he heard Rem’s voice and Luca’s shaky replies.

“I’m not letting you out of this room until you explain things to me, Luca.”

“That isn’t fair.”

“What’s not fair is keeping secrets from me, how do you expect—”

Niel rolled his eyes and reached to open the door, but something in the tone of Rem’s voice stopped him. Suddenly, he didn’t feel like interrupting. Niel lingered for a moment in front of the door, feeling like an eavesdropper. *Might as well start getting those supplies ready then.* If the boys wanted to have a heart to heart, they could go at it as long as they didn’t involve him. All Niel wanted was to make it back to Nevenen in one piece with Luca. He couldn’t wait to be back home.

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Luca shook his head, as if that would somehow help him sort out his feelings. Rem almost put a hand on Luca's shoulder, but stopped short and pulled back. "I'm trying to understand you, Luca. What you are. What you can do. What you want. You keep saying you see the future, but so far, you believed I would somehow magically fall in love with you. You didn't even notice the men who attacked us in Piri, and even I could have predicted that that Legion clan was going to attack us if I had looked up and spotted them before you did."

"You wouldn't understand."

"No, I don't."

"You don't believe I have a strong power."

"No."

Luca looked straight into Rem's eyes. "Then give me your hand."

Rem did so without even hesitating, which he wouldn't have done if some part of him didn't trust Luca, even if he didn't believe him.

Luca's hand was smaller, his skin a tad paler than Rem's. His fingers slowly moved against Rem's palm as he took a deep breath.

"An old woman is warming a cup of tea with her hand. She laughs when you call her Legion."

Rem snapped his hand back. "You see the past?"

Luca grabbed Rem's hand again, and Rem tried to pull away, but Luca held it firmly. Flashes of things and feelings he didn't understand or grasp rushed through his mind, and then he settled for something that would prove to Rem what he could do. What he could see.

"Trees. Water. It's raining. I hear the Simas flowing in the distance. A woman is carrying you. Her blonde hair cascades around you. She's running. Her breath comes in gasps. I don't know what she's running from."

"The woman puts you in the hollow of a tree. There is a man with dark hair behind her looking around, his hand on her shoulder. Blood seeps through his fingers. She holds your hand as she tells you something, but I don't know what it is. You don't remember. The man takes her place for only a moment, and then they leave. You wait for them. Play with the dead leaves inside the hollow. It stops raining, you get hungry, but still you wait for them to return. They never do."

Luca blinked, the past fading away in a fog. Rem's hand was an anchor leading him back to the world, back to the *now*. Tears spilled down his cheeks. Rem sank to the floor, like his spirit had left him.

Regret was the first thing that tugged at Luca's chest. He'd hoped to show Rem a memory from his childhood. Something happy. A memory so powerful it had a permanent place inside his heart. He'd never imagined it would be something like *that*.

"I'm sorry," Luca muttered, because there was nothing he could do to erase making Rem remember he had been abandoned.

Rem looked up. His eyes were red, the pain of the memory still fresh. "My mother was hurt?" He stood up and tightened his grip around Luca's hand. "Do you think they were trying to save me? That they didn't get rid of me?"

Luca shook his head. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know how to interpret what he'd seen. "I only told you what I saw."

"I remember my mother holding me and running. I remember her holding my hand. I remember someone telling me to wait, but nothing more. I don't remember it raining. I don't remember my father—my father—what did he look like?"

"You look a lot like him," Luca said, still shaken from the vision. "But you have your mother's hair."

Rem's demeanor changed. The pain disappeared from his face. A mixture of joy and relief replaced it. He wrapped his arms around Luca, hugging him tight, pulling him inches off the ground. "Thank you!" he said against Luca's ear. "I've spent my entire life believing my parents abandoned me, and you just told me they were trying to save me. They *did* save me."

That may be the truth, Luca thought, but it also may not be. Someone else could see the same memory and interpret it in a different way. He pushed the pessimistic thought aside; he didn't want to dash Rem's hope. Rem, who had lived suffering with the thought of being unwanted, now could hope that he was loved so much, his parents would sacrifice everything for him.

It was a much better memory. A life changing memory.

Even if there was the possibility that it wasn't true.

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## Chapter Ten

### *Monsters*

Rem took a quick bath and headed down to look for Niel as Luca took his turn. The inn was quiet in the early morning. Rem expected to find Niel sitting at one of the tables of the inn's pub, but he wasn't there. He spared a small thought of concern, but quickly dismissed it. Niel could take care of himself. If they were lucky, maybe he'd gone on ahead. Rem didn't care for traveling with the older sorcerer; he could take Luca back all by himself.

"Excuse me, young man." The voice came from a table to Rem's left. An elderly man sat nursing a cup of tea. He pointed at something next to Rem. "Would you mind bringing me some honey from the jar over there?" Rem grabbed the small golden jar from the counter and took it to the old man's table. "Thank you." The man shook with frailty, so Rem poured some honey inside his tea. The old man thanked him again and reached out to Rem with one hand. "Would you mind helping me up? I want to take this tea to my wife."

Rem extended his arm, and a set of frail fingers slowly grabbed Rem's hand. Rem tried to pull the man up, but he stayed motionless, his dark eyes staring at Rem. Something prodded the corner of Rem's mind, different than Niel, but somewhat similar. Rem tried to pull his arm back, but the elderly man held on tightly, his lips curving upward into a leer.

Rem wanted his hand back. The man was setting off all sorts of alarm bells, and when Rem looked down, he saw the man's fingernails lengthening.

A loud thud came from behind Rem. A chair fell, followed by a blur of brown and red. Luca desperately grabbed Rem's hand and pried it away from the old man, stepping between them, pushing Rem away with his entire body. The old man had a look of pure glee on his face, and he started laughing—nothing pleasant—a sound so creepy it sank under your skin and made it crawl. As he—it—laughed, because it was not human, its face changed from that of an elderly man to a young, jagged face with pale skin and dark hair. Its eyes were the only thing that remained the same, a striking green. Despite its amusement, the creature looked sickly, with dark bags under its eyes.

"You know what I am?" It asked Luca, who still stood between them.

"Soul taker, ghost, possessor. A devi."

The creature leaned back on its chair. "That, and many other things, human boy."

"You were trying to possess me?" Rem asked and rubbed his forehead. The tingle he'd felt inside his mind was gone.

"Trying, yes. But it's close to impossible to steal the body of one unwilling. Then again, I could have gotten lucky."

Rem tried to attack the devi, but Luca stopped him, using his body to block him. "That's what he wants, Rem. To find a weak spot so he can get in. A broken heart, a troubled heart. Look at him—the current body he owns is falling apart, he's desperate for a new one."

The smile died on the devi's face. "Smart little sorcerer. Well educated, but don't portray me as a thief. I make pacts, too. This body wanted to escape the island of Zemera, and now he's in Lenen. See? Wish fulfilled."

"You kept his body."

"I gave him a full week in Lenen as the pact stipulated. He may have changed his mind along the way, but once you make a pact..."

"You can't break a pact with a soul taker." Luca put his hand over Rem's.

The devi stopped smiling. "Leave me alone if you know so much, unless you want to make an arrangement, of course." The devi tapped his fingers against the table, his smile back in place.

Luca grabbed Rem's hand and pulled him away and back to their room. The water was still running when they stepped in. Luca turned it off.

"Thank you," Rem said. "I couldn't let go of his hand. Did you have a vision?" Luca nodded as he looked around the room. "Is this Niel's?" He picked up the small black sheath on the bed.

"No. That's for you." Rem took the sheath from Luca's hands and opened it up, exposing a dagger. "Just in case."

"You bought me a knife?"

"A dagger. It's a good blade in case you need to defend yourself." Rem put the dagger back in its sheath and handed it to Luca.

"Thank you." Luca slowly pulled the dagger from its sheath, inspected the little blade and the delicate design on the hilt. His fingers traced the little symbol. Jupiter.

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“Do you have all your things?” Luca asked.

Rem looked around. His belt and swords were secured around his middle. His money pouch was in his pocket. He nodded.

Luca opened the door. “Niel’s waiting for us by the stables.”

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Niel decided they would ride the rest of the way to Vesca, stop at Zilin for supplies, and eventually make it to Nevenen. The Simas was just a few hours from their current location, and they could follow it all the way to their final destination.

Luca was trying to shove his legion cloak inside the small knapsack that Niel had given him. It took some convincing, but Luca agreed to not wear the red cloak until they got to Nevenen, opting to hide it instead.

Rem had offered to help Luca, but he refused. So Rem silently stood by as Luca very slowly stuffed his cloak inside the knapsack. Niel’s voice caught his attention, and Rem watched as Niel spoke with the owner of a stable near the edge of town, saw him touch the man’s forehead and walk away with two mares. One had a dark coat, the other a reddish-brown coat.

Rem was certain he would never approve of Niel using his manipulative power, but he wasn’t going to complain to Niel about it—that was a waste of breath. Instead, he planned to tell Filina all the things Niel had done when he delivered him to her.

“We need three horses,” Rem reminded Niel when he was within earshot.

“Luca can ride with you.” Niel handed the reins of the black horse to Rem.

Rem wasn’t sure why, but he suddenly felt flustered. “Why me?” Less than an hour earlier, Luca had discovered more about him than anyone else alive—anyone except Leila, of course—and while Rem was extremely grateful Luca had given him a new perspective about his parents, it was still something he wasn’t ready to talk about. There was much to sort out inside his own head first. “Can’t he ride with you?” As soon as he said the words, Rem wished he hadn’t. He turned to Luca, who looked dejected, and with good reason. Here were two idiots fighting right in front of him about who had to ride with him. Rem ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “Never mind. He can ride with me.”

Niel pulled at the reins of his horse and rode off. Rem helped Luca get on the black mare, pushing him up and then climbing after him.

It was an uncomfortable ride. Every time Rem pulled on the reins his arms would brush against Luca's, and Luca would try to flinch away. Rem tried to start a conversation to break the silence, but he had no idea what they could possibly talk about. He didn't want to share his life as an orphan or thief, and he wasn't in the mood to listen to Luca's happy childhood as an Inception child. The minutes stretched into hours without a word between them. Having Luca so close reminded Rem of last night, and that just made the trip awkward. It had been so pleasant to wake up with someone next to him. Wake up to someone kissing him. Rem couldn't stop thinking about Luca's premonition. That they would fall in love, and he certainly wasn't in love, but damn if he hadn't felt butterflies when Luca's lips touched his. There was a new flutter of excitement when Luca talked to him, and Rem had to admit these little feelings for what they were. He liked Luca.

"I'm sorry, Luca." The words were arduous to say. "You know I have no problem riding with you."

Luca didn't answer immediately. Maybe he was still upset. Luca's hands tightened around the saddle. "It's okay. I'm used to it. People have turned away from me my entire life."

"Because of the Inception thing?"

Luca seemed to try and turn his head, but gave up. "Yes."

They reached a forest and the trail got trickier as trees started to block the path. Luca got quiet—it was clear he didn't want to talk about his role in the Legion. They were so different, Rem thought, he and this boy—different family, different choices, different paths. Rem started to think of what type of person he would be if he'd been born into Luca's world. Would he be like Niel? Would he be like Luca? Would he still be who he was right now?

Luca stiffened and straightened his neck to look ahead and around him. "Stop. I need to get down."

Rem complied, getting off the horse in one fluid motion, then helping Luca until his feet touched the ground. Luca walked off to a group of trees. Rem yelled at Niel to turn back, that they were taking a break. Niel complained the entire thirty seconds it took him to turn back.

"We took a break two hours ago. The plan was to keep going until we made it to Zilin." Rem just pointed at Luca. "What is he doing?" Niel got off his mare, tied her to a tree, and started browsing inside his knapsack for food.

Rem tied his mare next to Niel's and joined Luca at the edge of a small clearing of trees.

"I remember this place." Luca breathed out when Rem was behind him, and took a good look at the river, then at a group of trees a few feet away.

"Maybe on your way to Piri?" Niel sat at the base of one of the trees and bit into a large greenberry. "So happy we got some horses. My feet are still hurting from the walk to Veles. I think I got a blister."

"You need better shoes," Rem suggested. "A shop in Beset makes these great leather shoes."

Rem showed Niel the pair he was wearing, but Niel just glared. "Sadly, I didn't get the notice I was going to spend four days walking through Lenen, so I didn't bother to visit Beset for new shoes."

Rem shrugged, then dropped his knapsack and took a piece of bread to share. Luca was still wandering around, slowly going from tree to tree as if searching for something. One step to the right. Three to the left, and then he froze in front of one of the trees.

"Rem," Luca said carefully.

Rem joined him. He offered Luca a piece of bread while he chewed his own. Luca pointed to a large, dark oak tree with a small hollow in the middle.

It took a moment for Rem to see the tree, for his brain to make the connection. "That can't be..." Rem swallowed the bread and slowly went to the tree, touching it, his fingers curling. "Do you think it's the same tree?"

"What tree? Why are you talking about a tree?" Niel joined them at the small clearing.

"Rem was left here as a child," Luca answered.

"It may not be the same—" Rem let go of the hollow tree and stepped back.

"It is." Luca touched the tree and immediately removed his hand as if it had zapped him. His voice was very low and very careful. "There is sorcery in this tree."

Niel butted in. "Let me see." He touched the tree with all five fingers and waited three seconds. Then he put his hand inside the hollow, hovering it around. Finally, he snatched the half piece of bread from Rem's hand and tossed it inside the gap.



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“I paid for that!” Rem yelled, but quickly closed his mouth when he saw the empty hollow. “Where did it go?”

Niel reached inside and pulled out the bread, as if from thin air.

Rem shook his head in confusion. Luca reached out for Rem, but dropped his hand before it made contact.

Niel spoke in such a way it sent shivers down everyone's spine. “You're a Legion child, Rem.”

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## Chapter Eleven

### *Truth, Teeth, and the River*

“There’s no way I’m a Legion child.” Rem tried to keep calm. He stared at the tree, then at Niel who had said those words like they were nothing, at Luca who just stood there, silent. “I don’t have any magic. I can’t do anything.”

Niel shrugged. “I know some Legion families that have human children. It’s not that rare.”

Rem’s new theory that his parents had left him to save him started to crumble. What if he’d been abandoned because he was a failure? A powerless Legion child?

Luca was suddenly beside him. He gently wrapped his hand around Rem’s and squeezed once. “I know what I saw. I do think they were trying to save you.”

Niel grabbed a rock and tossed it into the hollow. “I agree. Why else would they hide you?”

Rem wanted to know that too, but he couldn’t get the answer, no matter how much he wanted it. The only people who knew were gone from his life. He had lived fifteen years without them. He could live the rest of his life without them. He was done with maybes.

Rem didn’t want to be here anymore. If he could, he would find an axe and chop down the tree. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t care where I came from, who I was, or what I could have been. It’s not me. I’m the person I am because I was left here, and nothing else matters to me. I don’t have any powers, so think what you want, but I’m not going to think about it because it doesn’t change anything.”

Niel seemed shaken and looked willing to say more, but he didn’t. “You’re right. It’s better to just forget about it, but if you ever want to try and find out who you belonged to, we can talk to Abraham. He may know something.”

“I don’t,” Rem decided. He stared at the tree for one more second before turning around. Luca followed him.

The horses were agitated by the time Rem reached them. He untied the reins of his black mare, trying to calm her down, but as soon as the horse was free,

she pulled hard on the reins and ran off. Niel was more careful untying his mare, but the same thing happened as soon as he freed her. Niel, true to form, swore up a storm.

Luca grabbed Rem's shoulder. "There's a xiger coming."

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Luca blamed himself for not seeing it sooner. He'd been so distracted when the forest suddenly started looking familiar—how it had become the small clearing he'd seen in Rem's memory. As soon as Rem had decreed an end to all discussion on the situation, Luca let his thoughts about Rem's past fade, and that's when he saw it—the deadly creature stalking them from just beyond the tree line.

The xiger slowly emerged from the shadows, revealing its mesmerizing green and black striped coat. Rows of its sharp teeth glistened. Its dark yellow eyes glowed. Its clawed paws left dark imprints on the dirt as it slowly approached. It was a majestically frightful creature.

Rem pulled out his sword hastily, and Luca stepped back. Niel ran. The xiger snarled at them, its sharp teeth snapping. Rem lashed at it with his sword, but he was just delaying the inevitable. The creature was as big as them, fast and fierce. One calculated jump, one swift attack with its claws, and it would all be over. "Niel! Help me!" Rem screamed as the xiger snapped at his sword.

"He left!" Luca yelled.

"He what?" Rem glanced at where Luca was pointing and saw Niel finishing crossing the Simas. He was safe on the other side.

Rem cursed. Some words that even Luca hadn't heard. The xiger moved closer, and Rem made a decision. "Cross the river, Luca!"

"I can't—"

"Go!"

Luca ran, but hesitated at the edge of the running water. Niel sat on the opposite riverbank, just lazily waiting for them. The water was quickly up to Luca's knees, impeding his speed; the water was cold, the current strong. He didn't dare swim, afraid the current would drag him away.

"You're taking too long!" Niel hollered when Luca was halfway across. "Why is Rem bothering with that xiger? Doesn't he know they're afraid of water?"

Luca stopped. The world faded, and he saw Rem still fighting the xiger while he waited for Luca to cross the river. Saw the xiger jump and sink its teeth into Rem's neck.

Luca turned around. "Rem!" he yelled, but Rem couldn't hear him. Not over the growls of the xiger and the noise of the heavy current. Luca turned around, making his way back to Rem. His pace was sluggish, the water reaching his thighs. The river was deeper than just a minute ago, the current faster. He wasn't going to make it like this. Luca nudged a rock with his foot and dove under to grab it. Rising, he aimed and threw it at the xiger. It hit its backside, distracting it and allowing Rem to block its deadly bite. Luca had more visions. One with him. Him standing exactly where he was right now in the middle of the river, Niel on one side, Rem on the other; the current rising suddenly, taking him away. Then a second, an alternate; Rem jumping in to save him; both of them being dragged by the river.

Two visions. Two possibilities—One where he died alone, another where Rem died with him.

It was going to end here then. He would never make it to Nevenen.

"Luca!" Rem's blade sunk into the xiger's neck. Blood gushed from the wound. Before Rem could finish it off, it gurgled some horrible noises, then turned and ran away.

Luca felt his feet sinking in the mud. He looked up to see Rem stepping into the river. "Stay there!" he yelled. "I'll come to you." Luca started making his way back to Rem—it was the only way to keep Rem safe—lying to him. The water was almost up to his waist. His pace slowed. His feet sank into the mud, and Luca went under. He swallowed water, but surfaced back up quickly, gasping. A cry escaped his lips. This was torture. He wished it were over.

Something hit the surface close to him.

"You're so slow, Luca." Rem was suddenly beside him, reaching for Luca's hand. "What are you doing? Move!" Rem's hand closed around Luca's and pulled him back to his feet, pulling him as they scrambled back to the shore. "This bloodless river is going to take us!"

They tried to hurry, but the increasing water slowed them down. Luca saw the vision with both of them drowning again and cursed himself for this useless gift. What was the point of having visions if he couldn't really change anything? If he failed at making Rem stay safely on the riverbank? This was the

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second out of the three incidents Luca had tried to warn Rem about, and this was the one that was going to kill them. Luca slipped on a rock and sank under the surface again. Rem pulled him up. "I'm sorry, Rem!" Luca cried. "Leave me! You might still make it."

Rem squeezed his hand. "I don't want to live with that for the rest of my life. Now move!"

Luca struggled against the water now up to his chest. Then they heard it—the legendary roar of the Simas and its deadly force. Saw the wave coming at them.

Rem swore and did the only thing he could. He wrapped his arms around Luca and held him tight as he dove under the water just before the wave hit.

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The current threw them around like ragdolls, almost pulled them up to the surface, but Rem intended to stay underwater as long as possible. Or at least long enough for the sudden wave to pass. The current threatened to rip Luca from his arms, so he held on tighter. Luca must have figured out what Rem was trying to do—he wrapped his hands around Rem's back and clung tightly to him.

The lack of air was burning his lungs. His senses were shaken by the tossing and tumbling. Rem held on tighter and tighter, but the river was stronger than their desire to hold on, and Luca started to slip from his grasp. Rem opened his eyes and saw Luca struggling to stay with him, his face full of panic, swallowing water.

He was going to lose Luca! The river was going to take him!

They needed to get out of the river. They needed to be free of it now!

A sudden blow of water pushed them down. Threw them against the rocks of the riverbed, and Rem couldn't see anything anymore.

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## Chapter Twelve

### *Betrayal*

There was water in his lungs.

Rem choked and coughed, the water rising like bile up his throat and spewing out. Air slammed into his lungs, and he sucked it in. Air. Life. He was alive.

A petite human body lay next to him. Still. Luca.

Rem crawled toward him, his body heavy with water, his clothes and cloak soaked.

“Luca...” His voice was hoarse—his throat raw.

*Luca. Luca. I promised I'd protect you. You can't die!*

His fingers hovered above Luca's mouth, just under his nose. There was no breath.

“Rem! Luca!” Rem heard Niel's footsteps just up the riverbank. Without thinking, Rem pulled Luca to him, wrapped his arms around Luca's body protectively, and held him close, while drawing his sword with his right hand. Niel appeared from the brush like an apparition. One that Rem really didn't want to see. “You're alive!”

“Stay away from us!” Rem pointed his sword at Niel—Niel, who had run as soon as the xiger appeared; Niel, who hadn't bothered to tell them xigers were afraid of water; Niel, who'd stood safely on the riverbank while he and Luca got dragged underwater. He didn't even try to help them. Like he wanted them to drown.

“Rem, is Luca breathing?”

“Don't come near him!” Rem snarled. He held his sword as high as he could manage, but it felt heavy in his hand. His body wanted to shut down so badly. “Luca?” Rem asked, stretching his fingers until they touched Luca's skin and found it cold to the touch.

He had lied to Luca just like his parents had lied to him. “*We'll come back,*” his parents had said to him. “*I'll protect you,*” Rem had said to Luca.

He just wanted Luca to open his eyes... Rem heard Niel running, closing the space between them, felt Niel's fingertips press against his forehead.

Rem blinked, the world became fuzzy, and he let go of his sword. Niel was there, glaring at him. "Give me Luca," he ordered. Rem was holding something—someone—Luca was lifeless in his arms. Rem gave Luca to Niel. Why didn't that feel right?

Niel laid Luca on the ground and placed a hand atop Luca's chest as he started chanting words Rem didn't understand. The fog in Rem's head was thick, his thoughts trying to find solid footing. It wasn't right that Niel had Luca.

*Don't touch him. Don't touch him. I promised to keep him safe. Me! Not you.*

Rem lurched up, but his body was still being pulled down by something unseen. A spell. The soaked clothes. His legs felt like stones. As if someone had put a giant rock on top of his shoulders. That bastard Niel had bespelled him again with his forsaken mind trick. Rem was going to kill him.

Every step was agony, his movements slow and painful as he fought the suggestion to stay put. Niel's entire concentration was on Luca, he didn't notice him approaching.

Rem pushed Niel away with all his strength. Collapsing on top of Luca.

"In blood's name, Rem! Don't you see I'm trying to save him?"

Was he? Had he? The fog finally receded. Rem didn't realize until then that he was holding Luca again, holding him as close as he could. Like a child clutching a precious possession when someone tries to take it away. What had come over him?

Luca coughed, water escaping his mouth. Rem turned him over so he could spit it out, so he could breathe. It was a few minutes before Luca stopped coughing. Rem never let him go. Niel just stood silently by.

"We didn't die," Luca said, almost gasping, he was so out of breath. "We were supposed to die."

Rem gently rubbed Luca's back. "Is that what you saw in your vision?"

"Yes," Luca cried. "We drowned. We died."

"No, we didn't." Rem wanted to hug Luca tight to reassure him he was alive.

"Then why do I see it? Why do I feel it? What's the point of me having these visions if they're not really real?" Luca was raising his voice.

Disappointment? It was all disappointment. “What’s the point if they don’t show me the possible good outcome? The one where we don’t die? What’s the point of seeing something seconds before it happens? Or years before it happens? Why did they show you loving me?”

Luca exhaled, his body shivering from the cold. He lay still in Rem’s arms, his breathing coming in slowly. Rem never let go. Luca’s last words echoed inside his head, and he watched the water of the river roar by and pretended Luca hadn’t said them.

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Rem dreamt of the rain. He dreamt he was young again. His mother clutched at him desperately. The rain droplets felt like ice on his skin, and they kept falling and falling until he was knee deep inside the flowing river. He wasn’t a child anymore; his mother was gone, and it was he who was clutching someone to him. Luca. The Simas came thundering down on them like a monster, and Rem woke up. His pulse thumped loudly in his ears, slowly calming as Rem realized it had been just a nightmare.

They had made it to Zilin late in the evening. Drenched and exhausted, Rem remembered walking inside the inn but nothing else. Niel must have tricked yet another innkeeper to let them stay in a room.

Rem turned his head slightly, and noticed he was close to the edge of the bed. The room was empty. The second bed was made, like no one had slept on it. There was warmth next to him. Luca was asleep in his arms again, his chest slowly rising and falling with each breath. Luca’s chest and torso were bare. Rem noticed he wasn’t wearing a shirt either. Their clothes were laid over the windowsill, drying.

Without thinking, Rem ran his hand through Luca’s hair, careful not to wake him up. Luca was warm, and Rem couldn’t help but get closer until his forehead gently touched Luca’s temple as the relief of escaping death overwhelmed him.

Luca stirred, but he didn’t wake. Something else tugged at Rem’s heart, something he hadn’t felt in a long time. He remembered the last time he’d woken up and found Luca kissing him, how he hadn’t felt any of the things he thought he would have felt. No urge to push him away. No urge to recoil. He felt all the opposite things, and he wanted to feel them again.

This time, he closed that small gap, and brushed his lips against Luca’s, slowly and gently. Luca stirred again, and this time he did wake, his eyes opening, that bright blue finding Rem.



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Rem stopped, the back of his fingers grazing Luca's face. He only hesitated a second before closing the gap again and again. Wrapping his arms tighter around Luca, he opened Luca's mouth with skill. He'd kissed enough boys and girls, and even one elf, to know what to do.

Rem allowed himself to be carried by the moment. Unthinking, he rolled Luca until he was on top of the younger boy, his kisses getting stronger, the warmth of Luca's bare skin spreading through his body.

Luca tried to say something, but his voice got lost while Rem kissed him. His hands squeezed at Rem's shoulders.

Rem finally took a breath and looked at Luca; there were tears in the corners of his eyes, and just like that, the moment was gone. Rem rolled back to his side, running a hand over his eyes. "I'm sorry," was the only thing he could get out, and it was such a weak thing to say.

Luca made a sound—a short catch of breath full of hurt. Rem turned his head and saw Luca covering his face with both hands while he tried as hard as he could not to burst into sobs.

Rem wanted to comfort Luca until the hurt went away, but he was the reason for it. How could he comfort someone when he was the problem? Rem stood and got dressed as quickly as he could. Luckily, the clothes were dry. "I'm going downstairs to find some food. I'll be back soon." Luca turned away to face the wall. Rem left—every step feeling heavy and strained.

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## Chapter Thirteen

### *Blood*

Niel wasn't in the downstairs area of the inn, but someone else Rem recognized was.

At a table near the far end, a young child was speaking with a man with dark hair and sickly green eyes.

Rem rushed to the pair, pulling the child away from the devi's grasp. The kid looked up at Rem. "Run home now." Rem patted his shoulders and the child ran. Rem reached for his dagger.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that if I were you. Zilin has a very well-known rule against brandishing weapons inside common areas." The devi flashed a smile, but it quickly vanished. "That's the second soul you've made me lose."

"That's a child. I should kill you where you stand."

"Trust me, blondie. I'd much rather take a grown soul, but—" The devi picked at one of its nails until it came right off. Rem flinched. "I'm running out of time." It flicked the bloody nail at Rem. Rem dodged it as goosebumps raised on his skin.

Despite the disgusting display, Rem realized something. This monster, this creature, was just like the xiger. It was just doing what it needed to survive.

"Do you have a name?"

The devi's brows rose. "Devi."

"Devi, the devi?"

"That word is the only thing I knew when I started to exist, so I ran with it." Devi looked around at the empty inn. "Not like I owe you any explanations. Go away if you're not going to kill me."

Rem hesitated. Was it really a good idea to leave this thing alive? Probably not, but it wasn't his place to choose what could exist in the world.

Rem headed back to the room to find Luca sitting by the foot of the stairs. He must have been watching Rem talk to Devi. His cloak covered his entire body.

"Is he one of the moments you warned me about?"

Luca shook his head. "No. He is—" He closed his eyes, reopened them. "He's no danger."

"But to someone else? Can you see whose life he will steal?"

Luca stared straight ahead. "Someone willing."

Rem sighed and sat next to Luca, leaving space between them. "Are you going to wear your cloak again?" Luca nodded.

Rem wanted to scoot over and tear that cloak from Luca's shoulders, but the last time he'd pushed his feelings on Luca, he'd made him cry. He would not do that again.

*Tell him you're sorry for jumping him this morning. Tell him you want to be forgiven. Tell him you want to see him again, even after tomorrow.* Rem opened his mouth, but closed it without saying any of the things he wanted.

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The innkeeper refused to take Rem's money when he tried to pay for the room, insisting that a man with ash-brown hair had already paid for it. Niel. Rem left some coins on the counter anyway. It wasn't nearly enough for the room, but it eased his conscience a little bit.

"Where are you headed this day?" the innkeeper asked.

"Nevenen," Rem answered, making sure Luca was waiting by the entrance.

"That's a long way from here, young man. How are you planning to get there?"

"I'm not sure." With Niel gone, it was really up to him to figure out how to continue the journey.

"Well, whatever you do, make sure you make it to a village before nightfall."

That caught Rem's interest. "Why?"

"There's a vampire roaming the forest between here and Nevenen. Some men have gotten killed."

Rem frowned. "Vampires are extinct."

"Saw one of the victims just a few weeks ago. Throat ripped out, arm torn from his body. People have gone missing as well."

"Animals could have done that." Rem shook his head; he didn't have time for this superstitious nonsense. "Thanks for the warning." He headed out, Luca

following, and they made their way to the stables. Maybe he could borrow a horse if he promised to pay it back later. He didn't have enough coins to afford one.

Niel was waiting next to the stables with a cart and a horse to pull it.

"No." Rem pointed at Niel, then grabbed Luca's hand and started walking around him. He'd been so naïve to actually think he'd gotten rid of the trickster. He didn't even care if he was supposed to take Niel back to Filina. All he wanted was for Niel to be as far from them as possible. "We're done with your lies and your cheats!" Rage boiled over Rem's emotions. Why couldn't Niel just leave them alone? Why didn't he just disappear? "We can't trust you. We'll get our own transportation."

"I didn't trick anyone for this!" Niel followed them. "I know you hate when I do that, so I've been working all night, asking for favors, getting some rio."

"How could we believe you?"

"Ask the people I helped."

"You could have told them to say whatever you wanted. Nothing you say is trustworthy."

Niel hesitated, and for the first time, Rem saw real shame cross Niel's features. His brows furrowed, and he pursed his lips. "I know that! Once people know what my gift is, they never see me the same way again. Not my friends. Not my parents. I didn't even dare tell Nana what I could do because I didn't want her to shun me, but she did it anyway. The Legion is the only place that accepted me. The only place I belong, and if Luca is not there by tomorrow, I can never return to them. I will do anything so Luca makes it safely back."

Rem didn't like a single word Niel said. They were all selfish sentiments and selfish words, but they were Niel's truth and the most honest expression from him since meeting the man. It was enough. Rem sighed, turned and tossed his belongings in the cart. Luca did the same, and they were on their way.

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They made good time, the day passing by languidly, the hours filled with simple stories and even chuckles. Niel took charge of the reins the entire journey, stopping only a handful of times to let the horse rest. It was impossible to make it to Nevenen before nightfall and the only village along the way was Nemas, close to the coast. Rem insisted they take the two hour detour, but that wasn't something Niel wanted to do. The earlier they made it to Nevenen, the

better. "Are any xiger's going to try and eat us if we spend the night in the cart?" Niel asked Luca. Luca blinked, startled by the question, but eventually shook his head.

When the sky started showing hues of pink, Niel stopped to make camp in a large clearing just a ten minute walk from the Simas. He tied the horse to a tree and left some food and water nearby. Luca and Rem started clearing a space so they could start a fire while Niel handpicked branches and leaves from the trees nearby. He never asked for help, carrying a handful of twigs each trip. Luca tried carrying some, but Niel told him he could handle it. He wanted to show the boys they could trust and depend on him, even if they only had one more day together.

The fire brought warmth and a sense of safety from the coming night, but it wasn't real safety. The sounds from the forest were more ominous than he'd imagined. It really was the middle of nowhere, hours from any village. Maybe it had been a mistake to ignore Rem's request to go to Nemas. It was too late for second thoughts. Rem made a small pile of sharp looking rocks, then filed his sword with one of them. It seemed that even with Luca's reassurance, Rem couldn't stop worrying about another xiger attacking them.

They roasted some meat over the fire and ate as the sky grew darker. Rem sat next to Luca, almost bumping shoulders with him. Niel sat away from them, giving the boys some space. He could tell they still weren't comfortable around him after the Simas incident. Luca was telling a story about his childhood, something involving his cloak, town children, and a tumble. Rem laughed as Luca told the story, and Luca smiled while telling it.

Luca must have been exhausted, because as soon as he'd finished dinner and his story, he lay down and fell asleep next to Rem, using his cloak as a blanket. Rem couldn't seem to stop looking at him.

"You want some advice?" Niel broke the silence, speaking softly so he wouldn't wake Luca. "Don't fall in love with Luca, Rem."

"I'm not falling in love with him," Rem answered immediately, but the forlorn look in his eyes betrayed his true feelings. It was none of Niel's business what Rem's feelings were. He remembered when he'd been young and in love. What a mistake that had been, but then again, he'd never looked at someone the way Rem was looking at Luca.

"Maybe not." Niel threw a log in the fire. "But your mind's starting to get full of him. I sensed it when I muffled your thoughts by the river." His eyes

were dead serious. "Luca is a Legion child, Rem. He was born into it. He will die a part of it. Whatever you are or aren't, you still don't belong in his world."

"Filina left," Rem said, still looking at Luca.

A picture of his nana smiling crossed Niel's mind. "My family wasn't born Legion. My grandmother joined them when she was young, saw their true colors, then worked really hard to leave her clan so that her children wouldn't be born a part of it. I completely ignored everything she taught me about them and joined them anyway."

"I thought you loved being Legion."

"I do. I did." Niel thought back on the night Rem interrupted the meeting. How he knew instantly he was caught and how no one had spoken up for him. Not even his friends. "I don't know anymore." Niel shook his head. "I thought they were my family, the ones that accepted me and my power, but not a single one of them volunteered to help me when I made a mistake. No one is here but you."

Niel knew those words were the truth as soon as he spoke them. Flashes of moments with the people who stayed silent crossed his mind, and he felt the hurt of it again. Sometimes the truth hurt like a bitch.

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Rem stared at the fire. It crackled and popped in a dance that kept him warm. Luca slept soundly close to him, his chest rising softly with every breath. If Rem wanted, all he had to do was extend his hand and he could touch him. There was so much to think about, but no time left to do it. Tomorrow, they would reach Nevenen, and they would all part ways. The last few days would become nothing more than memories, and perhaps it was better that way.

Niel was right. He and Luca did belong in separate worlds. It didn't matter if Rem's parents had been Legion, he still didn't have any powers. Rem would never be accepted by them. He could never join Luca's clan, even if he wanted to. His only option was to say goodbye, and he already knew it was going to be hard.

The horse whinnied. Luca suddenly opened his eyes, sat up, and looked around in alarm. He leaned forward, holding his head with both hands.

Rem went instantly to his side. "What's wrong?"

Luca raised his head quickly, and stared at a hedge just before the tree line. "The monster you told me to warn you about," he said slowly, pointing at the bushes. "He's coming."

Rem rose, looking toward the spot Luca was pointing at. Was it another xiger? Something else?

The figure of a man slowly emerged from the darkness. Its hair was dark silver, its skin the color of ash, and its eyes a bewitching red. Its feet moved as if they didn't touch the ground, and it tilted its head curiously. For a moment, Rem thought that Devi had followed them, but it wasn't. Someone from the fae? No. Rem remembered the innkeeper and his warning.

It couldn't be.

Rem pulled Luca behind him. "A vampire."

It was not possible. It couldn't be!

Of all the monsters in Lenen, vampires were the most lethal. Many legends told of victims and survivors who dared visit the forests after dark. Stories that had stopped being heard years ago, before Rem was even born. It was common knowledge vampires were real, that they once populated the forests of the country, and that fear and retribution initiated their extermination. People could get rich just by killing a vampire and claiming its bounty. In just a couple of years, the stories stopped being told, and the creatures became forgotten, extinct.

Niel leapt up and ran his folding knife across the back of his arm while he chanted a spell. He didn't get to finish. The vampire suddenly appeared in front of him, grabbing where Niel had cut himself, squeezing so hard Niel fell to his knees on the ground in front of the creature.

"So eager to feed me." The vampire smirked and ran a finger up the cut on Niel's arm, collecting blood, licking its finger in one fluid motion. Niel was trying to pull his arm away from its hold when the vampire dug its nails into Niel's wrist and twisted it until something snapped. Niel hollered in pain, his wrist a mess of red. "Stop screaming," the vampire ordered, and just like that, the screaming was replaced by an eerie silence. For a moment Rem thought the vampire had bespelled Niel, but one look at the sorcerer, and it was clear that Niel was using all his strength to keep his mouth shut. The vampire seemed surprised that Niel had obeyed him. Its lips moved slowly, "Your blood has magic. Legion blood. Sorcerers." It turned its head toward Rem and Luca. "Young and powerful always taste the best."

Rem stood as straight as he could, his sword and dagger in hand. Luca moved next to him, flaunting the Jupiter dagger Rem had given him. "Let him go!"

To their surprise, the creature did just that, and in the blink of an eye he was in front of the pair, reaching for them. Rem swung his sword at the creature. He missed. Luca screamed, and something sharp grazed Rem's cheek.

The vampire moved again to stand a few feet away. Rem stepped closer to Luca. How could he fight when they couldn't even see the creature move? The vampire was licking its blood-speckled fingers. One, two, three, four. Luca was putting pressure on his shoulder with one hand while blood seeped through the small gaps between his fingers. Rem touched his own cheek and felt the blood running down where the creature had cut him. The vampire spat the blood, making a face of disgust. "Children's blood always has a bad aftertaste. Disappointing. I really thought I had a feast just walk right into my territory." It cleaned the remainder of the blood with the hem of its shirt. "Very well." Its eyes settled on Niel. "A small meal is better than no meal."

Niel tried to stand, but slipped when his broken hand couldn't support him. Rem saw the fear in his eyes, and knew as well as Niel knew that it was pointless to run. Rem remembered the first time he'd heard a story about the sharp-toothed creatures. One of the men from the orphan house had just returned from a supply trip, shaken and wounded. Rem and three other boys hid under a table while they listened to his story of how a woman had appeared out of nowhere and woken them in the middle of the night—how she had opened his companion's belly and killed him.

Every child in Lenen grew up with stories like those. Rem did. Luca did. Niel did. Stories meant to keep wandering children safely in their beds at night. There wasn't a single story where the victim survived. Yet, even knowing this, Niel tried to escape. He crawled on his knees and one good hand until the vampire grabbed his ankle and dragged him back.

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Niel tasted dirt before the vampire turned him face up. The hand around his ankle grabbed him like a vice, and pulled him closer to the monster. It reached out and grabbed the collar of Niel's shirt, hoisting his upper body off the ground.

It happened in the blink of an eye, but for Niel it felt like an eternity, the world slowing until he saw every detail—the vampire yanking him closer, his fingers grasping at the dirt, looking into dark red eyes that stared at him. The idleness wasn't his imagination, the world really had slowed just for him. Maybe this was part of the vampire's power, to allow its victims a few seconds



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more of the life it was taking. Niel felt every breath he took, every heartbeat. The vampire blinked, and Niel could see every eyelash, every speck of ashen skin, and he wondered if the skin would break like dust if he touched it.

“Let go,” it spoke. Niel blinked, the spell he’d been in gone, and the world caught up with the moment. He wrapped his fingers around the vampire’s wrist and pulled on his power.

“You are going to release me. You are going to walk away. You are not feeding on anyone ever again.”

The vampire tilted its head just slightly then pried Niel’s fingers away from its wrist. Putting one of the digits inside its mouth, it bit down.

Niel cursed and tried to kick the vampire between the legs, so it slammed him against the ground once before hoisting him back up.

“You are still fighting. Stop.”

“I’m not going to let you kill me quietly.” The vampire slammed him to the ground again. Niel’s vision blurred; for a second he couldn’t breathe, and the world slowed down once more. His power was useless. His power couldn’t save him, nothing could. “Please, let me go.” There was no honor among the Legion to beg for your life, but Niel couldn’t care less about that. He wanted to live. He wanted to see what type of men Rem and Luca would grow up to be. He wanted to ask Nana Filina for forgiveness. He wanted so much more than just this.

The vampire didn’t say anything; it just exposed Niel’s neck and sank its fangs into the flesh.

The pain burned like a venom spreading through his body, numbing his senses. Niel heard Rem’s voice and saw the boys through the haze of his vision. Rem ran toward him, sword in hand, Luca behind him with the dagger. They ran as fast as they could, but for every step they made, it seemed the creature moved further away. They were trying to save him, even after he lied to them, abandoned them, manipulated them. He wished he could ask for their forgiveness as well, because he deserved this. Leading a life of cheating, not caring who got hurt, hiding his power, and using it on people. This was his penance. It was the balance the universe had designated for him. Niel tasted blood on his lips. As far as he was concerned, the universe could go screw itself.

Feeling for the folding knife in his pocket, Niel pulled it out and drove it down toward the vampire’s back. He felt the blade sink into flesh all the way to

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the hilt. The fangs pulled out of his neck. There was the weightlessness of being tugged forward, then suddenly he was released and hit the ground. The creature vanished as quickly as it had attacked, taking the dagger with it, and leaving Niel on the ground bleeding, wondering if he'd survive the night.

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## Chapter Fourteen

### *Goodbye*

“Niel?” Luca’s voice sounded distant, like an echo that was trying to pull Niel back into the world. Niel took a deep breath and regretted it instantly.

“Bloodless...” Niel felt Rem next to him. The boy really did not think things through before saying them, and Niel was hurting too much to snap something back. He was worried about something else.

Niel tried to look past Rem’s shoulders. “Is it gone?”

Rem was looking for something inside his knapsack. “The vampire?”

“Yes.” It hurt to move. It hurt to breathe. His neck pulsed in pain with every heartbeat. “You said they were extinct.” It wasn’t Rem’s fault that thing had found them, but he wanted to blame someone. He didn’t want to admit that even he had ignored his own advice of not traveling during the night. That even he had believed the stories of werewolves being banished to Zemera, and the last vampire dying at the hands of bounty hunters when he was just eight. “Why didn’t you warn me sooner, Luca?”

“Don’t blame Luca,” Rem said immediately. Luca shifted uneasily.

“I’m not. I just—Owww!” Rem moved his head up, and Niel felt something wrapping around his neck. Rem had torn out a piece of his cloak and was using it as a bandage. The hands holding his head were not delicate, and it was clear Rem had no idea what he was doing, but he was helping. Anyone else would appreciate the act of kindness, but Niel hated being dependent like this. Dependency just opened you up to letting the wrong person in.

“I think that’s as much as we can do right now,” Rem said as he tied a crude knot on the piece of cloak. “You need a healer. It’s pretty bad.”

“I can feel it,” Niel spoke through gritted teeth. “We need to get to Vesca. I know the healer there.”

“It’s more than a half a day’s trip. Even if we left right now, we wouldn’t make it until the afternoon. Turning back to—”

“No,” Niel groaned. “We have to be in Nevenen tomorrow for Luca’s ceremony. Just hurry and help me get on that cart.” Niel moved and his neck

pulsed, spreading pain through his entire body. Rem and Luca each grabbed one of his arms and helped him up.

"I know a closer place on the way to Vesca," Rem said as they slowly made their way to the cart. "I think the person who lives there can help you."

"Who?"

"Your great-grandmother."

Niel momentarily forgot the pain, and held on tight to Rem. "You are not taking me to Nana. We're going to Vesca."

Rem blinked. "We'll go to Vesca."

Niel relaxed and thought only of the pain he felt. The pain of having survived. It was a long way to the village he called home, and all he wanted was to close his eyes. Climbing on the cart was agony, and Niel wouldn't admit it, but he was happy Luca was there to help him, and that Rem was there to drive the cart. That they were taking him somewhere where he would get better.

They left the clearing in a rush. Niel kept a close eye on the brush, afraid to see a shadow, but there was nothing there. Even if he did see the vampire, there was nothing they could do to stop it, so Niel instead worried about another thing—his power when his blood was flowing. Every Legion member knew that their power changed with the flow of blood. It was also the best way to cast a spell that you weren't born with—healing spells, protection spells. Niel had always needed to touch the person he wanted to influence, and had never really tried to do it without.

Niel wondered... had Rem agreed with him to not go to Filina's house, or had he used his power without touching skin?

The side of the cart bumped against a tree. "Sorry," Rem said. "I've never driven a cart before. It's also pitch black."

"Just go slowly. You'll be fine." Niel trusted Rem to get him to Vesca, hoping he made it that far. "Luca," Niel's voice was raspy and strained. "I need you to help me close the wound. I think it's still bleeding."

Luca crawled closer to Niel. "I never learned how to heal," Luca admitted.

Niel's laugh was dry. "Inception children don't need to learn the basics, do they?" Luca looked away. Niel coughed. "Sorry. I didn't mean that. Do you have a blade? I have another folding knife in my pocket if you don't." Luca pulled out his Jupiter dagger. "Make a shallow cut somewhere on your palm."

Luca's hand shook, but he did what Niel said, and pressed the edge of his dagger against his skin until he bled.

"Just put your hand over the wound and repeat these words—*cerar senar lefar*. Think about healing. Think about making things better."

"*Cerar senar lefar*," Luca chanted the words over and over.

Niel sighed in relief, the magic easing the ache. It took him three months to master this technique, and here Luca was doing it on the first try. The adrenaline was gone, Luca's chants were like a lullaby. Niel sighed. He just wanted to sleep. He just wanted so badly to sleep.

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Niel released a long soft breath. "Thank you. That feels much better..." He closed his eyes.

"Niel?" Luca's voice rose in panic.

"What happened?" Rem pulled at the reins and took the risk to look behind him.

Luca put a hand on Niel's chest. "Nothing. Keep going. He just fell asleep."

Rem let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. Luca climbed over the small division and sat next to him. "You should get some sleep. I have the reins for now."

Luca remained silent, scooted until his body touched Rem's and rested his head on Rem's shoulder. "I should have said something."

Rem turned his head to look at Luca's profile. He was staring at the bright red cut on his palm. "You can't blame yourself," Rem said. "Niel will be fine, you'll see."

Luca glanced behind them and closed his eyes. "I see Niel. Then I don't. Like he will live, or he won't."

"Which one is it?"

Luca shook his head. "I don't know."

Rem had the urge to put his arm over Luca's shoulders, but he couldn't let go of the reins. There was nothing Luca would accomplish by worrying, or by wishing he'd done things differently. It was late, and they were tired. Rem had a sleepless night ahead of him, so he told Luca to go to sleep again, and this time Luca did, lying next to Niel.

The drive was tedious. The sound of the horse's hooves, a monotonous chorus. Rem paid close attention to any other sounds, but it was hard to hear. All he could do was trust the horse would get spooked if there was anything out there.

*"Children's blood always has a bad aftertaste."*

Rem remembered the vampire's words. Remorse came with the memory, because the second he'd heard them, he'd felt only grateful. It meant the creature wasn't going to kill them. It meant it wasn't going to kill Luca. Rem hadn't had a single thought of worry about Niel at that moment, and he had to accept that.

The full moon slowly moved across the sky until the dark gave way to hues of pink and purple. Rem started dozing off when, suddenly, Luca shook him awake.

"Let's switch," he said. Rem was so tired, he gave Luca the reins without hesitation.

Niel was still sleeping. The blood on his neck was visible even through the dark cloth of the cloak. Everything seemed more real, sitting here beside him. When he'd been driving the cart, it felt like whatever was going on back here was something he had no control over. If Niel died. If Niel lived. All he had to do was drive the cart.

Rem was careful not to nudge Niel awake as he settled down and fell asleep. His dreams were filled with turmoil—Luca kneeling on the ground wearing his red cloak, the Jupiter dagger in his hands, the blade covered in blood. Rem tried calling his name, but Luca didn't respond. Rem crouched next to him and took the bloody dagger from Luca's hands. "Whose blood is this?" Luca slowly untied the knot of his cloak until it opened and revealed the blood on his chest.

Rem opened his eyes. The sun was already out, it's warmth clear and present. Luca silently held the reins. They seemed to be going faster now, thanks to the light. Niel was awake, his eyes watching Rem as he sat up. His breathing was jagged as he tried to stay awake, his eyes drained of life. Rem imagined Niel dead in that cart, and knew that was something he didn't want to see. Maybe it was time to forgive him for abandoning him and Luca by the side of the river.

"I'm sorry," Niel's voice was a raspy whisper. "For making you steal from my great-grandmother. You wouldn't be here if it wasn't for me."

Rem looked at Luca. Two days ago he would have cursed Niel to kingdom come, but now...

"I forgive you." It was spoken so softly, Rem thought Niel hadn't heard him, until he saw a smile form on his lips as he closed his eyes once more. Rem never thought Niel could actually die; his spirit could carry him anywhere. But that smile, that look...? Rem moved closer. "You are not dying in this cart."

Niel tried to laugh. "I think I am. It feels so strange. Everything leaving me. It makes me want to let go, and it sucks because I really want to stay."

"Rem! I see the village."

Rem hopped over the division and grabbed the reins. "Stay next to Niel until we reach the healer's place." Luca jumped to the back and put his arms around Niel. Rem pushed the horse as much as he dared. He knew the poor creature was exhausted, but they couldn't afford to stop now. Rem ignored the gazes and complaints from the locals as he rushed through the streets. The healer's place was a small, single-story cabin with a small wooden sign on the front with the name Hasler, a drawing of a medicine bottle, and a red L on it.

Niel sat up with Luca's help. "I'll go alone. You two get some food at the pub." Niel reached for his knapsack, opened it up and pulled out a long red cloak. He tried to push Luca away and get out of the cart on his own, but he slipped and fell to the ground. Rem and Luca reached to help him. "No." Niel swatted their hands away. "I'm fine."

"You can barely stand."

Niel ignored Rem's words and slowly draped the red cloak around him, tying the knot loosely around his neck. Rem had almost forgotten how Niel looked in that red. How Niel was part of the Legion. "I'll be fine. Hasler is a very good healer. I know her." Niel tried to pat Rem on the shoulder, but something crossed his face, he doubled over and spat blood on the ground.

Rem swore and helped Niel up, yelling at Luca to get the healer. Niel still tried to stand on his own, muttering for Rem to leave, so Rem put one of Niel's arms behind his neck and dragged him inside the little cabin. It was a small space with a small waiting area that opened up to a room with a single table where patients could lie down. A bronze-skinned woman with dirty blonde hair was standing in the space between the two rooms, Luca was behind her.

"In blood's name, Niel, what happened to you?" Niel opened his mouth to reply, but just coughed up blood again.

“Put him on the table, now!” Rem and Luca did as told, the red of Niel’s cloak spilling over the sides of the table. Hasler put a tray of supplies next to them and sliced her palm open before untying Niel’s cloak and unwrapping the cloth around his neck.

The words that came out of her mouth were not pretty. Rem wished she’d told him what to do next, but she just placed her palm over the wound on Niel’s neck and started using her power. “Luca,” she said calmly. “Please grab one of the towels in the closet, and soak it in water so I can clean the wound.” Luca moved to the far end of the room. Hasler turned toward Rem. “When was he attacked? This wound isn’t fresh.”

“Last night,” Rem answered.

“You took too long to get here.”

“But I’ve seen—” Luca started to say, then stopped himself by biting his lip. He handed Hasler the wet towel. “He’s going to die?”

“He’ll live.” Hasler started cleaning Niel’s neck while she continued healing it. There were two dark punctures where the vampire had bitten him. “But these marks will never fade.”

“Bloodless!” Niel swore. His eyes looked livelier, and he tried to move, but Hasler put a hand on his chest.

“Stay still. I’m not done with this.” Niel stopped fidgeting. Color returned to his face. He touched the marks on his neck. “Tera,” Hasler looked at him. “Remember that favor you owe me?” She nodded once. “I want you to promise me that you never saw these marks on me.”

Hasler glanced toward Rem and Luca, her brown eyes vivid, then back at Niel. “I swear not to tell a soul.”

“You too,” Niel coughed, his eyes on Luca and Rem.

“I promise,” Luca answered immediately.

Rem hesitated. Not because he couldn’t keep a secret, but because he wanted to know why this needed to be a secret. There seemed to be something that Niel, Luca, and Hasler knew that he didn’t, and he wanted to know what it was. Luca tugged at Rem’s sleeve, and one look into those blue eyes was enough for Rem to know he would agree without even knowing what the secret was. Rem couldn’t resist brushing his knuckles against the fingers tugging at him. He turned to Niel. “I promise.”



Niel and Tera were talking in hushed voices in the healing room while Rem and Luca sat in the waiting room. Luca was looking through the small window at the children playing outside near a large napple tree, a forlorn look in his eyes. Rem silently watched him, and he realized this was likely the last day he would ever see Luca. Once Niel and the healer were done, they would leave for Nevenen and Luca's home.

"What are you thinking?" Rem looked past the window and watched three girls and a boy chasing each other around the tree and laughing.

"I don't remember the last time I was so carefree," Luca spoke. "When did I stop being a child?"

"We're technically still children." Rem put both hands behind his head and stretched. "It used to always bother me. How the world sees anyone under eighteen. Like we suddenly become different people the day of our birth."

"Are you saying you don't mind it anymore?" Luca looked at Rem. "Being seen as a child?"

Rem touched the edge of the tear on Luca's shirt just over his shoulder. "Not when it prevents a monster from hurting you. I didn't know how to protect you from it."

Luca made as if to get closer to Rem, then changed his mind and moved away. "I'm hungry," he said, changing the subject. "Can we go to the pub? I'm ready for this day to end."

Rem nodded and led the way while trying not to think about what Luca had said. He didn't think he'd ever been carefree.

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The pub was small, but it was quiet, and there was the nice scent of a cooked meal in the air. Luca picked a table in an empty area at the far end, while Rem gave the last of his coins to pay for their lunch—two bowls of soup. Rem patted the empty pouch inside his pocket. Having coins always seemed such a priority before. Or knowing where he'd sleep. Or where he would eat. Or what jobs he would do to earn more coins. He'd never allowed his pouch to have less than five rio inside it before.

Luca ate his soup quietly, his eyes closing with every taste. Like every spoonful held a secret he needed to discover.

Had it really been just three days since he met this boy? Had it only been two since he'd seen the rushing water coming at them? Just one since he kissed him? What would tomorrow be like without him?

“Luca,” Rem broke the silence, and Luca suddenly shut his eyes tight and shook his head like he had a head cold. “What did you see?”

What Luca said was the last thing Rem expected to hear. “Maybe we should say goodbye here. Nevenen is less than an hour away. I can just go with Niel.”

“My debt,” Rem said without thinking, and instantly knew how insensitive the words were. Such cold words. What did those words say about him when they were the first thing that crossed his mind? Hadn’t anything changed? All the little moments he’d shared with Luca. Did they mean anything at all?

Luca turned away. His voice was brittle and soft. “I should go. They’re waiting for me.” Luca stood, and Rem grabbed his hand. Luca closed his eyes for a moment, then looked at Rem. “Is there anything you want to say to me, Rem?”

*Don’t go, Luca. Stay with me.*

Rem imagined pulling Luca to him, stopping him. He knew Luca would stay with him if he’d only say the words. That Luca would love him, but he didn’t know if he could love Luca back the way he deserved. Rem had nothing to offer him other than roaming from place to place, working dangerous jobs for a few coins, and sleeping on beds of leaves or hay. Hunger when his pouch was empty.

Rem remembered Senum and Merina. How they pleaded with him to bring their son back. Merina’s eyes haunted him, and he suddenly remembered his own mother. This time he remembered differently though, not as a shadow or blur who left him behind, but as Luca described her. Sad and beautiful—leaving him so she could save him from some unseen evil. Rem didn’t want to be that evil.

“No,” Rem said, his fingers releasing Luca. It hurt more than he thought to say that word.

Luca blinked. There were tears in his eyes, and he swallowed hard. “Rem, do you remember when I said that there would be three incidents that would prevent me from making it to Nevenen? The Piri clan was the first, the river the second—”

“The vampire was the third,” Rem finished.

Luca shook his head. “It was never going to hurt you or me.”

Rem rose. “There’s one more?”

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Luca shook his head again. "This was the third. When you let me go," he said, his voice a shudder. He reached for the small black sheath with the Jupiter dagger and laid it on the table. "I won't need this anymore. Goodbye, Rem." He turned and rushed out the door, leaving Rem behind.

Rem's brain was trying to hurry and process it all. From the moment he met Luca, it had been nothing but strangeness and words. Luca hurting. Luca calling his name in the dark. Luca's smile. Luca's lips. Luca's tears.

Rem imagined never seeing any of those things again.

He ran after Luca, calling his name as he stepped out into the street. He saw the red immediately. Three cloaks. Luca wasn't alone.

"Rem," Abraham said. The Nevenen clan leader was imposing, and—Rem hated to admit—intimidating. Niel stood next to Luca. He kept his hood over his head to hide his neck. "I heard you were here with Luca, so I decided to pick him up," Abraham added as he put a hand on Luca's shoulder. Luca's eyes were cast down, his mouth a thin, unemotional line. "You've done well, child. Consider your transgression against my clan, forgiven." Abraham put the other hand on Niel who raised his eyes and mouthed thank you to Rem.

This wasn't it, was it? This wasn't the last moment he would spend with Luca. "Wait—" Rem started to say, but he felt the pull of power and Abraham, Niel, and Luca vanished before his eyes, leaving Rem alone, and a few townspeople murmuring about what they'd just seen.

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## Chapter Fifteen

### *The Inception*

Luca sat on the wooden chair in his room and looked into the small dirty mirror in front of him. His reflection stared back at him through the grime.

He couldn't get the image of Rem at the pub out of his head. He kept replaying the moment he saw Rem's fingers abandon his, and it brought a sad smile to his lips. A bittersweet feeling.

"Luca." Luca turned around to see his mother standing by the door. Her eyes were dark and sunken, her skin pale and wrinkled. Her lips no longer knew what it was to smile. When had she gotten so old and ugly? When was the last time Luca had heard her laugh? The day she put a small, child-sized red cloak over his shoulders and kissed his forehead. The day she picked him up after he'd fallen. The day before Abraham came to their door and told her he was an Inception child. "Niel's here to see you," she spoke softly, monotonously.

"He can come in." Merina let Niel in and closed the door, leaving them alone. He was still wearing his hood and only pulled it off once the door was shut. There was no bandage around his neck, and Luca could clearly see the bite marks. "What is it?" he asked. He'd never had a vision where Niel came to talk to him in this room. "Did Abraham forgive you?"

Niel's nervousness seemed to fade after hearing Luca's voice, and he moved closer until he was just behind him. Luca looked at Niel through the mirror. "He did, but—" Niel took a deep breath. "I've been looking forward to when he said those words for the past few days. It was all I could think about. If I don't belong with this clan, I don't belong anywhere. This is the home I chose—my family—but once he said them, I felt nothing. No joy. No relief. Like I didn't care what he said. It's so weird, isn't it? How quickly everything changes." Niel leaned against the mirror. "I think I discovered something new I can do. Maybe I can show you later." He glanced at the door. "I wonder what Rem is doing right now? I wonder what face he'd make if I told him I wanted to see my great-grandmother?"

Luca's heart skipped a beat at the mention of Rem's name. He couldn't allow himself to think about Rem anymore. "How's your neck?" Luca asked, taking Niel by surprise. The older sorcerer made sure his cloak was secure.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Niel whispered. “I’m just afraid of it. I can’t get rid of it.” Niel’s voice drifted as he touched his neck. “Luca, I know I haven’t been the greatest friend to you, but I hope someday we can be friends, that we could trust each other. It’s not because you’re going to be my boss from now on, but after what we’ve just been through... I kind of wish you were my little brother. One that, from tonight on, can order me around.” Niel laughed, his smile something honest. “I was wondering if you could see... Does this mark mean that vampire is coming back for me?”

“You think I’m going to inherit this clan?” Luca frowned, ignoring Niel’s question.

Niel shrugged. “I know Abraham is still far from dead, but he’s not getting any younger either. I’m actually looking forward to when you’re the boss. You will make a great leader, Luca. One I can trust.” He smiled and ruffled Luca’s hair.

“You really have no idea...” Luca’s voice became distant. “All this time, I thought you knew. It made me hate you just a little, but I can honestly say I’m sorry.”

Niel crouched next to Luca. “Sorry for what? I’m confused.”

Luca looked at Niel, and for the first time, saw Niel as a friend. The door opened, and Lorez stepped in. “Hey, Lorez,” Niel said amicably, but Luca could tell there was no friendship between them.

“Niel,” Lorez said bitterly. He didn’t return Niel’s amicability. “Make yourself useful and help me with these.” Lorez handed a set of chains to Niel.

Niel frowned as he grabbed the set of shackles. “What is this?”

“For Luca.” Niel opened his mouth to protest, but Luca stopped him, shaking his head. He showed his wrists to Niel while Lorez stepped back out.

“I said, what is this?” Niel asked.

Luca grabbed one of the shackles and closed it around his own wrist. “I’m not going to be Abraham’s heir, Niel. They’re going to kill me.”

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Rem stared at the large oak door and listened to the noise of the tavern inside. How had he ended up here? At some point between the blur of seeing Luca vanish and finding himself alone with nowhere to go, he had jumped on the next traveling cart to Nevenen, and made his way to The Rubi’s Nest.

It did not smell pleasant inside. This was a place for adults. Unlike when he'd visited before in the middle of the day, this close to night, the tavern was full of men and women drinking spirits and smoking pipes. Rem knew he wasn't welcomed here at this hour, but he needed to see Leila. It didn't take long for Leila to notice him making his way to the bar, and she quickly excused herself, grabbing his arm and tugging him to the outside of the tavern through a back door.

The first thing she did once they were alone was hug him. "I've been worried sick! I did some spying about the Nevenen clan after you told me you were looking for them, and heard what happened. I'm so glad you're alive. I don't know what I would have done if I'd lost you."

Rem hugged her back, needing the comfort like he needed to breathe. His emotions swirled, trying to overrun him. He told her everything. He told her about Luca and Niel. About the devi, the vampire, the river. About letting go of Luca's hand.

Leila was quiet for a minute, absorbing it all and looking like she was trying to find the right words. "Rem, do you have feelings for this Legion boy?"

Something tugged at his chest. Such a straightforward question, and he still wasn't sure. "I don't want to be the one who takes him away from everything he knows. What kind of life would he have with me? He would never be safe with me, and you know that, Leila. With me, there is nothing but running and hiding. He's better off with his parents. His clan. He will have it all there. They're even having an Inception ceremony for him tonight."

Leila looked like he'd struck her. Her eyes pained. "Did you say Inception?" Rem nodded. "You don't know?"

"Know what?"

"Rem, listen to me." She placed her hands on both sides of Rem's face, squeezing lightly. "Do you know what happens to the Inception children of the Legion?"

Rem slowly shook his head.

"They're sacrificed to the elders. Their blood is spilled and drunk."

That little jab of hurt in Rem's chest exploded. The world spun for a second, then he pushed Leila away and started to run. She caught up with him quickly, grabbing his arm and pulling him back.

"Where do you think you're going, Rem?"

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“Let me go, Leila! I can’t let them kill him.”

She held him back, then hit him on the chest. “There’s nothing you can do! Nothing, Rem. The sun will set in a few minutes, and that’s when it will happen. You will do nothing but get yourself killed if you go there. I won’t let you do that.”

Rem tried to push her away and run, but Leila tackled him and pinned him face up with her knees. She could keep him there all night if she wanted; Rem knew she could. She had always been stronger than him, had always protected him, even when he didn’t want, or need to be protected. That’s what family did.

Rem tried to roll her off him, but only managed to kick the dirt desperately. She was just going to wait until the sun vanished. Until Luca was dead. Rem wanted to scream. Luca was going to die. His Luca. Whom he swore to protect. “If it were me—” Tears stung at the corners of his eyes. “Would you let me die? Or would you run as fast as you could?”

Leila flinched and a swirl of emotions crossed her features—surprise, sadness, love. She released Rem. “Run,” she said, and followed behind him as they hurried to the barracks.

The sun was barely visible on the horizon. Knowing that its disappearance meant Luca’s death made Rem feel utterly powerless. He would give anything to be next to Luca right this second. He knew no matter how fast he ran, he wasn’t going to make it. Like a cruel joke of the universe.

He recalled the moment he put his legs over the windowsill of Luca’s room and fell face first, Luca’s eyes full of joy at seeing him. Luca, who acted surprised when Rem didn’t know him. Luca telling him to stay on the river bank when he knew the water was going to take them. Luca crying when Rem kissed him. Luca enjoying the soup like it was the last thing he’d ever taste. Did Luca know all this time that he was going to die? Why didn’t he tell him?

Rem tripped, his thoughts of Luca scattered, and the world became a blur. The magic he often sensed when members of the Legion used their power surrounded him, consumed him, and the world changed. Leila disappeared; the houses around him disappeared; and Rem found himself in a clearing next to three red-cloaked figures, Niel, and Luca.

“Abraham?” Merina asked.

Rem stared at his hands like they were not a part of him.

“Rem?” Luca called his name, and that was all Rem needed to snap back to the moment. He stood up and pulled out his sword.

“Let him go.” He pointed at Luca. Senum and Merina took a step back, while Lorez pulled off his hood.

Lorez raised his hand, and Rem felt the tug of power across his skin, but it vanished as soon as it had appeared. Luca looked around. His mother, father, and Lorez stood motionless like frozen dolls, their eyes unseeing.

Niel stood a few feet behind Rem. He'd made two very deep gashes all the way across his arms, and the blood was flowing freely in rivulets. He held his arms just below the elbow as high as he could so the blood would flow faster. “Hurry! I can't hold them for long like this. Senum and Merina maybe, but not Lorez. His power is similar to mine.”

Rem reached for the chains around Luca's hands, but Luca pulled away. “Why are you here?” he asked with fright. “How?”

“Luca...” Rem stared at his hands again, like he needed to feel real after what he'd just done. “You don't think I'm freaked out too? I just magically appeared here. I don't know what to make of it! Please. Don't be afraid of me.” Every word was a plea, a hollow in his soul. How come he didn't know he could do this? How could he have lived his entire life not knowing he could do this?

Luca shook his head. “I would never be afraid of you, Rem. But I can't go with you. You're not supposed to be here. It's not what I saw.”

“Screw the future. You expect me to leave you here, now that I know what they are going to do to you?”

“You know?” Luca took a step back. “You were never supposed to know.” Rem reached for him and Luca avoided his touch. “This is the future I want, Rem. Leave.” Cold. The words were so cold.

Rem felt the knot in his throat. “What? No. Not until you tell me why. I swear Luca, I will drag you away.”

“I will never forgive you if you do.” Rem heard the grief in Luca's voice and felt the conflict deep in his soul. He wanted to understand. He wanted to do what Luca wanted as well, but what Luca was saying made no sense. “This is the future I choose, Rem. Let me at least have that.”

Luca tried to step away, but Rem grabbed his arm and pulled him back. “How can you say that? Explain it to me then. Out of all the futures you see, out of all of the maybes, why choose the one where you die? Why—” Luca stared at the chains around his wrists and closed his eyes tight. Rem used the



opportunity to wrap his arms around Luca. "Why do you want me to leave you, Luca?" It was such a simple question. "I don't want to let you go anymore."

Luca shuddered in his arms, and his voice was like a song of heartache. "Because, this is the only future where you don't die."

Rem's face twisted. His heart lurched. Niel was in the distance, breathing hard.

"So what? What if I die? I have no one to mourn me."

Luca rested his chin on Rem's chest, and there his eyes brimmed with tears. Rem ran his fingers through Luca's hair. "Fifteen minutes," Luca said. "If you take me away now, it will only be fifteen minutes before they find us. They will kill you first, then they'll kill Niel. And they will make me watch it all before they kill me."

Rem kept running his fingers through Luca's hair and along the sides of his face. "Why would you give your life for me? We barely know each other."

Luca smiled wistfully, and he allowed himself to get comfortable in Rem's arms, bumping his head against Rem's chest. The horrible things in the world around them weren't happening. Luca's hands weren't bound. "Because I'm in love with you, Remier—Rem. In my dreams I only ever called you Remier."

Those were the words he'd been afraid to hear, what, deep in his heart, he'd known all along. "That's not fair, Luca." Something was squeezing at Rem's chest, and it wasn't the feeling of Luca's forehead. "It's only been four days. How can you fall in love with me in just four days?"

"I've been dreaming about you since I was a kid." Luca tilted his head up to look at Rem. "I've met you a hundred times, climbing through that window. A hundred more I've seen you standing next to me, saving me. I've dreamt of you smiling at me, holding me, kissing me, loving me, dying for me. How could I not fall in love with you?"

"That's really not fair." The knot in his throat was tighter. He took Luca's hand. "Run away with me. Now, while they're like this."

"No." Luca stepped back. "This is the only way to save you. To save Niel."

"Luca." The heartache of being torn between what Luca wanted and what he wanted increased. "I won't let you die for me."

"Do you love me, Rem?"

Rem opened his mouth, closed it.

Luca smiled, stood on tiptoe until his lips brushed against Rem's. "I love that you do that. That you are so bound by your vow of honor that you won't even tell me you love me if you don't know if it is true. Not even if it would make me happy or run away with you."

"That's not—" Luca put a finger over Rem's lips.

"You don't love me, Rem. How could you? We just met four days ago."

"But I want to save you," Rem choked.

Luca stepped back. "No. Let me die. Let me save you. Every time I told you a vision, and every time I warned you or didn't warn you, it was so this could happen." The chains clanked as he moved his hands until they touched both sides of Rem's face. "I'll tell you what I see, Rem. You become someone people look up to. You will fall in love. You will have children. You will live until you are old and gray, and you will forget about me."

Rem wanted to break the chains around Luca's wrists, to snap them in half. He wanted Luca's touch, his warmth. He remembered stumbling through a window and seeing those bright blue eyes, that wide smile. When was the last time someone had been happy to see him? He remembered the lightness of Luca's body as he pulled him to safety. The warmth of Luca's body when he slept next to him. The way Luca pouted when he bit into the napple. The fear that consumed him when Luca's skin had been cold as death.

*"Don't you feel anything when you see me?"*

*"We were supposed to die, Rem."*

*"I've seen you."*

*"Goodbye, Rem."*

Lorez blinked. Senum and Merina blinked. They seemed to be awakening from a trance. Lorez was the first to fully wake up. He raised his hand, and Niel slumped to his knees like something pushed him down. "Take your son to Abraham," Lorez ordered. Senum and Merina hurried. Senum grabbed Luca's arm and tried to pull him away, but Rem reached out and held Luca back.

Rem suddenly froze—like a million strings were wrapped around every inch of his skin, holding him back.

Senum pulled Luca away. Luca screamed and doubled over as he held his head in his hands in pain. When he opened them again, he looked at Rem in terror. "It changed. This isn't the future I want," he said, and tried to get away

from his parents. Senum stopped his struggling, hefted Luca over his shoulder and took him away. "Father, no!" Luca kicked as hard as he could. "Rem! Rem! Run!"

Senum, Luca, and Merina disappeared in the twilight, but Luca's screams could still be heard. Lorez moved his hand, it glowed and shimmered in the dark. Rem's body moved on its own, the strings had attached to his skin and were pulling him to do things he didn't want to do. His arms moved, his hands moved, and Rem couldn't control anything. Rem's neck moved downward, his eyes behaved as if pried open. He was holding Luca's Jupiter dagger, the edge pointed straight at his abdomen. Rem choked as his hand pushed the dagger in. His skin broke, he felt his insides being torn, but he couldn't stop shoving it in. His eyes couldn't stop looking at it. Lorez moved his fingers like he was controlling a puppet, and Rem pulled the dagger out, aimed for a clean spot on his belly and pushed it slowly back in. Again and again. Rem gasped, he coughed and tasted the blood now spilling from his mouth. The fourth time he pulled the dagger out, his vision blurred, and Lorez lowered his hand. Rem fell to his knees. He tried holding himself up with one arm while the other clutched at his midsection. He could only gasp painfully when he tried to breathe.

Lorez kicked him until Rem fell to the ground. He grabbed the Jupiter dagger from the dirt. "I'll make sure to tell Luca what I did, before we slit his throat." Lorez looked at Niel, who lay slumped on the ground, arms covered in blood, his eyes closed. Rem couldn't tell if he was breathing or not.

When Lorez left, Rem tried to stand, but slipped back down, powerless, dying.

He was dying.

Rem rolled on the ground until he could see the sky. The sun was almost down. Stars painted the sky. He tried to breathe again and choked with the blood in his throat. Niel's words when he was lying on the cart came back to haunt him. His body was letting go—wanted it. It didn't care if Rem didn't wish to go. Luca's cries rang in the distance, his name, being called over and over. Maybe he could reappear there, and take Luca away before he died, but he didn't know how to trigger his power. Rem needed more time. He needed more magic, he needed—a memory of green, sunken eyes jumped at him. A ghastly hand gripping his own. Devi. "*Leave me alone unless you want to make a pact,*" it had said. The warmth of life started to leave him. "I want to make a pact with you," Rem croaked. He lay on the dirt, stared at the sky, and pictured Devi in his mind. "I want to make a pact with you," he repeated louder, only he couldn't breathe. The sky didn't respond. "I want to make a pact with you!"

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Rem felt a pull like his body was being thrown. The sky vanished and was replaced with a wooden ceiling. The quiet was replaced by the sudden frightened cries of the patrons at an inn.

“Bloodless!”

“What in Jove’s name!”

Men and women crowded around Rem, looks of horror on their faces. Only one of the faces was familiar. Devi’s eyebrows rose in amusement, a leering smile appeared on his lips.

“I want to make a pact,” Rem coughed. “Save Luca from his Legion clan. Save Niel. Then you can keep this body to do as you please.”

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## Chapter Sixteen

### *Broken*

Niel felt warm, cold, and weak all at the same time. He smelled the earth underneath him, tainted with the scent of blood. He opened his eyes, the world whirled around him. His arms were killing him and slowly he recited *cerar senar lefar* as he ran each hand over the broken flesh, closing the wounds he'd made himself.

It took a while for the dizziness to fade. The wounds weren't completely healed; they remained angry red lines across his arms, but Niel couldn't wait for them to close. "Rem?" Niel called. He'd seen the boy standing close just a few seconds ago—surely he'd closed his eyes for only a moment.

The ground was disturbed where Rem had been standing and there was blood everywhere. He remembered Lorez forcing Rem to do something horrible. Niel shook his head. Had he passed out? How long had he been out?

A scream rang far off in the distance. "Luca!" Niel stumbled when he tried to run, his body weak from the blood loss. It felt like an eternity, but eventually the voices got closer and louder. One of them was Luca's.

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"Mama?"

Luca felt the cold chill of his mother's touch. Her power allowed her to remove every feeling, every sense. This was the worst nightmare he'd ever envisioned. The one in which his parents actively participated in his death. He'd seen it so many times he thought he'd be numb to it by now, that it wouldn't break his heart. But knowing something would happen wasn't the same as living through it.

"Hush, Luca. Be a good boy." She touched his cheek, but Luca felt nothing. His hands were raised above his head, the chains binding his wrist, tied to a tall post. "You won't feel a thing."

Luca pulled at the chains. The sound was just like a bell, reminding him of his visions. "Father? Where is Lorez?"

Senum turned around. "Who the hell was that boy, Luca? And why can he transport like Abraham?"

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“Where is Lorez?” Luca asked again, tugging at the chains harder.

“Here, boy.” The large man appeared at the edge of Luca’s vision. He stopped by Senum’s side. “Is everything ready for when Abraham comes?”

Senum looked small next to Lorez. “Almost. Luca is being uncooperative.”

“What did you do to Rem?” Luca yelled “What did—”

Lorez showed Luca his Jupiter dagger. The blade was covered with blood. “I’m sure you saw what I did. Now shut up! You’re going to die soon, too.”

He threw the dagger to the ground by Luca’s feet, and Luca stared at it while images flickered in front of him. All the possible futures he had seen, all the things that could be, so few of them left—then darkness—then nothingness. “You don’t know what you’ve done.”

Merina picked up the dagger and handed it to her husband. “Luca, Luca, why are you behaving like this? You are here to fulfill your destiny. It’s always been what you wanted.”

Her words were like stings to his heart. His own mother, the one who had sewn him a small red cloak when he turned five. Luca’s eyes watered. “If that is what you believe, then why do you need to tie me up?”

Merina pushed Luca’s bangs away from his eyes, her eyes no longer kind. “You’d better not act like this when Abraham shows up. Speaking of which...”

A red-cloaked figure was making its way to them. Lorez raised one hand, and the figure stopped for a second, then continued approaching. “Niel.” Lorez lowered his hand. “You’re a fool for showing your face after betraying us. How long do you think you can manipulate yourself and not succumb to my power?”

Niel removed his cloak and threw it aside. “It’s not too late to stop what you are doing. Merina. Senum. That’s your son.”

“We’re fulfilling Luca’s destiny.” Senum approached Luca with a blade in hand.

“You’re mad!” Niel bit his lip. “Even I, a thief and a liar, know this is wrong.” Lorez started approaching Niel. If he couldn’t use his power against Niel, obviously brute force would have to do. Merina pulled Luca’s shirt down a bit, exposing his chest, the skin above his heart.

There was a crack, a snap. The air changed, Merina and Senum screamed, and a chilly yet familiar laugh filled the air.

“This is so incredible.” The voice sounded distorted. It was Rem, but it wasn’t. “So many untapped gifts.”

“Devi,” Luca called.

Devi looked at Luca. His eyes were a sea of black mixed with a striking green. “You know my name—well—saves me some time. I can’t wait to take this body for a spin.”

“You.” Lorez pulled a long sword from the sheath on his belt. “I killed you.”

“This boy.” Devi looked down at his stomach, played with the bloody strips of torn cloth. “Yes, you did, but right before he took his last breath, he gave this body to me. All I have to do is kill you.” He pointed at Lorez. “You.” Senum. “And you.” Merina. He smirked. “Then I get to keep this body until it rots.”

Luca looked at his mother. “Mama you have to run. Father—”

“Senum?” Merina reached for her husband, but he shrugged her off. Instead, he gripped the blade tighter.

“We can still have our place in the Legion, Merina. It’s not too late.” He closed the gap between him and Luca, pressed the tip of the dagger against Luca’s chest.

Luca’s eyes widened. “No, Father, stop!”

It happened in a second. A second when a child is betrayed. A second when a child is alone. Luca had dreamed of this too—the moment he became an orphan. Merina’s spell faded, and with it came the grief and the fright.

Devi stood in front of Senum and Merina’s bodies. Nobody had seen him move. “Two down,” he said nonchalantly, then raised his head and searched for Lorez. He was far in the distance, trying to run. Niel was chasing him. “I hear others coming. I hear them saying your name.” Devi walked until he was in front of Luca and touched the bottom of Luca’s chin, tilting his head up so Luca would look at him. Devi’s fingers. Rem’s fingers. They felt hot to the touch, like a small burn. “So beautiful, even when broken, alone. This body feels strongly for you. It demands I protect you.” Devi broke the chains above Luca’s head with a single tug. He reached for Luca’s wrists and broke those chains as well.

Luca looked around him, saw the bodies of his mother and father, and the bile stung his throat, but he pushed it down. Reality was just another vision, he

told himself, except this one he couldn't change. He stepped back and let his power flow over him, the blood from the small wound his father had inflicted lending him strength.

"Our contract is fulfilled. Your life for his." Devi flexed his bloodied fingers, still testing his new body. He started to leave, but Luca suddenly reached for him and grabbed his right wrist. Luca held on tight, letting the fire where their skin touched, spread.

Luca shook his head. "Leave Rem's body right now!"

\*\*\*\*

Lorez became a smaller and smaller dot in the distance until he disappeared into the line of trees. Niel slowed, his body hurting at every muscle, his heart working double to refill the blood he'd lost. His running became a jog, then a walk. Lorez was nowhere in sight.

"What am I doing?" Niel took a minute to catch his breath. "I need to go back to Luca." He turned and caught a blur of red before Lorez punched him in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him. His blade flew from his hand and rolled in the dirt. Niel reached for it, and when his fingers touched the edge of the handle, he felt a sharp sting across his back.

Ignoring the pain, Niel rolled away from Lorez's blade, grabbed his short sword, regained his footing, and attacked, plunging the blade into Lorez's side as deep as he could. With his free hand, he reached for Lorez's face, the only skin visible. Niel wished he could use his power without touching, but he was spent, and it took his entire concentration to not fall into Lorez's spell. If the older sorcerer managed to take control of him, it would all be over.

The way Lorez had taken control of Rem. The memory came back to him, Lorez standing in front of Rem, and Rem taking a dagger to his own belly. Lorez was the reason Rem was now what he'd seen.

Filina once told him that family gave life meaning, and that family wasn't always the one you were born into. She told him that the day Niel informed her he was joining the Legion. At the time, Niel thought she was giving him her blessing—that even if she spoke nothing but ill of the Legion—she still supported his decision to join them. He remembered when he went to visit her a few months later, his new red cloak draped over his shoulders. She'd taken one look at him and shut the door in his face.

Lorez easily pushed Niel away, and Niel pulled the dagger out, sickened by the sensation. Niel had felt the blade of his dagger go into flesh before—into



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creatures and things he'd had to hunt or that wanted to kill him. It was a completely different feeling when it went into the flesh of someone he knew personally, someone he used to call a friend and more. It didn't matter that the friend was trying to kill him. He couldn't do it. He didn't want to do it.

How would Filina ever forgive him if he became a murderer?

That second of hesitation was the only thing Lorez needed to take his sword and run it through Niel's side—smiling as he did so—smug, knowing he'd won.

Niel gasped once, before collapsing to the ground. Blood seeped through his fingers as he covered the wound. Lorez raised his sword again, eager to deliver the killing blow.

Niel opened his eyes wide. One second Lorez was standing over him, the next he vanished.

At first, Niel thought someone had spelled Lorez away, maybe Abraham, maybe the thing Rem had become. Then he heard the crunching and the munching. Niel turned to the noise to see Lorez' body seizing and gasping as the vampire that had attacked them the day before ate him.

The scars on Niel's neck burned. It hurt worse than being run through by a sword. He knew how lucky he'd been to escape the vampire that night. They never left their food alive. Never. If they did, it was so they could eat you later. All the stories said so.

Niel tried to stand, but his right leg buckled beneath him, leaving him kneeling while he kept a hand over his open wound. The munching noises stopped. Lorez was dead on the ground. It was the last small pleasure Niel would get as he saw the vampire make its way toward him.

*"Tell my nana I'm sorry,"* he almost said to the creature, because he was going to die, and it was going to be today. By sword or vampire. He really wanted to ask Filina for her forgiveness. For all the times she tried to contact him and he shredded every letter. He wanted it more than anything, but he wasn't about to send a dangerous creature knocking at her door with his apology. Her forgiveness—that was something he'd never receive.

Niel raised his eyes until they met the vampire's. "Make it quick."

"Make what quick?" It stopped in front of Niel. "You are not dying." Niel looked into the creature's face. Its skin was more alive, now that it had fed. Less pale, its eyes still a haunting dark red in contrast with its ashen hair and dark clothes. Its features were those of a young man. It was beautiful.

“I’m not? But this...” Niel looked down at his body and his red hand.

“It’s a nasty wound, but it won’t kill you.”

“But you’re going to kill me.”

The vampire tilted its head. “I was thinking about it. But then I ate him, and I’m pretty full right now.”

Niel didn’t really feel fear, even hearing such things. This was part of the creature’s spell. It crouched so it could be face to face with Niel and tilted its head like it had never seen a human before. “Do you wish to die?” it asked. Its voice was like a melody of sorrow. “Your blood is leaving your body. I can make it leave faster if that’s what you want.”

“Go away.” Niel was tired of waiting. “I just want you to go away.” Niel closed his eyes, and waited for it to come—the pain, and then death. Sharp nails traced the scars on his neck. The leaves rustled, and Niel opened his eyes. The vampire was gone.

\*\*\*\*\*

Devi glared and nothing remained of Rem in that face. His eyes had turned the color of green fire, and the roots of his hair were starting to go black. “Remember,” Devi snapped, “the only reason you are not dead is because I keep my word.” Luca let go of Devi’s wrist and took one step back, but Devi grabbed his upper arm, and smeared the blood from his other hand on Luca’s cheek. “So powerful, and yet you couldn’t see this happening.”

Luca’s eyes shimmered with tears. Devi enjoyed seeing the suffering, the despair. His new body was strong and powerful. It would last for many, many years—years he could come back to haunt this boy. He yearned to see the human cry.

But Luca did not cry. The fear on his face faded. His eyes radiated certainty. No more doubts. No sadness. “Who says I didn’t?” he said, while quickly pulling his Jupiter dagger from inside his cloak, and opening a deep wound on the top of Devi’s hand. The words that left Luca’s lips were fast and ancient. Words the world hadn’t heard for hundreds of years. Words Devi probably hadn’t heard since he woke up in the earth, knowing nothing more than the name of what he was.

The spell surrounded Devi, weakening his hold on the body he’d taken, breaking every connection he’d carefully made. “Stop it! This body is mine!”

“This body belongs to Rem!” Luca continued the spell, the words spilling out faster, stronger.

Devi screamed. How it hurt! Worse than when he possessed the body. Worse than when he realized he was a living thing that needed a body.

Luca finished chanting the spell. Devi felt an unseen force rip him out of Rem's body and fling him far away, past everything he knew, to places he'd never been. Gone.

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Rem's body fell. Luca tried to catch him, but he only managed to not let Rem's head hit the ground. The night had gone quiet around them. Everything was hauntingly still, the only sound his own breathing.

"Rem?"

Everything hurt. His body. His soul. He tried to breathe, but the air refused to go in. Was this the future where Rem didn't survive? The future where having the devi forced out of him killed him? This moment was the culmination of everything he'd seen. He'd tried so hard to prevent Rem from following him, but once Rem had appeared in the clearing, he knew there were two possible futures left—the one where Rem survived getting the devi out, and the one where he didn't.

He was only twelve when he first saw Rem in one of his visions—this vision—a young man with fair hair lying dead at his feet. At first, Luca thought nothing of the dream. He'd dreamt of death before. Deaths of strangers, deaths of people he knew. A few times he'd tried to stop death, and always failed. Death had its own mind. Rem was no different, but then the dreams continued through the years. Changing, shifting. Different days, different dangers. Different ways in which Rem died for him, different ways in which they died together. It wasn't long before Luca started looking forward to the dreams, especially the ones where he got to know Rem, got to love him.

Luca held Rem's hand, and it was cold to the touch. "Open your eyes, Rem." He touched Rem's chest, but his heart didn't beat. Luca shook him from side to side, his throat tight. "Rem!"

Luca closed his eyes and concentrated. He tried to see five minutes from now, ten minutes from now. A month. A year. Ten years... but there was nothing. Rem's future was nothing. Luca had always thought that grief and pain were like a bubble, that once it popped, the sorrow that followed would be intense and quick fading. He'd been wrong. It wasn't a bubble, it was like rain, a drop of water falling from his forehead all the way down his body that only

got worse as it fell. No crying or screaming made the anguish go away. "Rem!" Luca cried. As if that would make a difference. As if that would make Rem open his eyes. It didn't, and for once, Luca was lost. "I don't know what to do. What do I do?"

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Rem heard the sound of his name. Someone was calling him. A woman.

He opened his eyes, and there she was. Her golden hair fell past her shoulders, her green eyes bright and sad at the same time. There was a cut on her cheek and a swollen lump under her left eye. She was holding Rem's tiny hand. "Remier, I'm sorry we have to leave you."

A man with long dark hair and gray eyes appeared behind her. Scratches covered his face. "Gianen, we have to go."

"I'm not done with the spell, Roper. Give me more time." His fingers touched her cheek gingerly, then he vanished. Gianen continued touching Rem's wrist, making soft circles on his skin while she spoke words he didn't understand. When she finished, there was a spiral on his wrist that slowly faded until, finally, it was gone.

"You'll be safe now, Rem. Your power will be hidden, and if someone tries to take your life, this will save it."

Roper reappeared behind her, and Rem saw his shoulder was bleeding. Gianen went to him quickly, but he stopped her before she tried to heal him. "Is the spell done?" he asked.

"Yes." Gianen stepped away and allowed Roper to take her place.

He reached out for Rem until his palm touched tiny fingers. "Grow up, Remier. Be strong. If we survive, we will come back for you."

Rem knew that these were his parents. That this was the last moment they had spent with him. This was a memory that he had locked away, somewhere deep inside his mind, and only caught glimpses of. His little fingers touched his father's hand. He cried for him as Roper pulled back, and Gianen started weeping as they threw red cloaks over their shoulders and left.

"Rem..."

Someone else was calling his name. Rem slowly opened his eyes. It was night and it was cold. He smelled the scent of trees and the forest. He took a soft breath and saw Luca kneeling next to him. Tears marked his face.

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“Abraham will be here soon,” Luca said to himself. “He’s looking for me. He needs my life to complete the ceremony.”

“I won’t let him have you.” Joves, it hurt to talk, like needles inside his throat.

Luca gasped. Shutting his eyes tight, he held the top of his head with one hand and saw what only he could see. When the episode was over, he slowly opened his eyes. “I see you.” His voice was hope, the sadness vanished. Luca laughed and smiled. Then threw himself atop Rem, kissing him once, twice, quickly, then slowly. “I love you, Rem.”

Rem grazed Luca’s cheek with the back of his fingers and knew he wanted to pull Luca closer, wrap his arms around him, and kiss him until morning, but it would have to wait. Luca turned his head like he heard something. “We have to go,” he said. “I don’t want the future where they find us.” Luca took Rem’s hand and pulled him up. Rem held tight to that hand, like an anchor, his connection to the world. He squeezed it and let Luca lead the way to safety.

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## Epilogue

Rem read the last line of the letter, crumpled it, then tossed it in the fire where it burned slowly to ashes. "Rem, I got the supplies you wanted," Leila called from behind the bar, putting a full satchel on top of the wooden surface. This early in the morning The Rubi's Nest was empty of patrons, so there was no one to comment when Rem grabbed the satchel without paying and hoisted it over his shoulder.

"I promise I'll repay you," he told his sister.

"I don't need or want any repaying. What kind of sister would I be if I didn't help my brother when he needed me?"

Rem kissed Leila's cheek. "I'll try to keep in contact with you."

"Are you sure it's safe for you to be here?"

"Luca said I would be, as long as I didn't stay more than five minutes after the man with the long beard came in."

"That specific?"

Rem shrugged. "As specific as he can be. Speaking of which..." The door to the pub opened, and an old man with a potbelly and a long beard walked in.

Rem quickly pulled the dark hood over his head, hiding his face. "Watch for my letters."

"I will." She touched his hand and waved goodbye.

Rem crossed the village square and passed the houses. No one gave him a second glance as he left, and Rem didn't look back, leaving Nevenen far behind.

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Luca saw Rem before he appeared from behind the trees.

"Did you hear from Niel? Hasler?"

Rem dropped the satchel and pulled off his hood. "Yes. I got his letter. He's still somewhere up north, hiding from the vampire. He asked if the vision had changed."

Luca shook his head. "No. It's still hazy. If Niel tries to hunt down that vampire, I see him dying, but if he just stays away..." Luca closed his eyes. He

thought about Niel. "It's hard to see. Undefined. I don't know what Niel's future is."

Rem sat next to Luca, their shoulders bumping. "Don't worry about it. I'll let him know the vision is unchanged the next time I communicate with him."

Luca rested his head on Rem's shoulder. The air was chilly. Winter would soon come. Rem grabbed the hem of his cloak and pulled it up until he could wrap it around Luca. Luca touched Rem's hand gingerly. "What's wrong, Luca? What are you thinking about?"

"There's so many places we could go. Temen, Zilin, Nemas. We could even leave Lenen. How much money did Ms. Sommerset give you?"

"Five hundred rio. She wasn't happy I had failed to bring Niel in the flesh, but she seemed satisfied with the letter I delivered."

Luca traced the spiral mark on Rem's wrist with his thumb. "Did Hasler find any magic in you?"

"No. She thinks I must have burned it all when this showed up." He touched Luca's fingers over the mark.

Luca looked up. Rem leaned to kiss him, but Luca stopped him with a finger over his lips. "Do you remember the premonition I had about Leire? It didn't come true. I thought I was going to die at the ceremony, so I thought that vision would happen before. But I didn't die, and Leire didn't come for me. That means it's something yet to pass, and I'm scared. Scared that wherever we go, I can't stop that from happening."

Rem shifted, and Luca stopped leaning against him. "Luca I—"

"I know you promised to protect me," Luca interrupted. "But I don't want to be scared anymore. I don't want to live waiting for something that may or may not happen, something that may be tomorrow, or twenty years from now. I've spent so many years just waiting for the day I'd meet you. Doing everything I could, not to see you die, and now that we are here together, I don't want to live thinking only of what could be. I love you, Rem. I want to spend my future with you, but I also want to spend now with you without worrying what could happen tomorrow."

Rem didn't say anything, and for a moment, Luca thought he'd said too much, expressed too much. But then Rem pushed away the bangs from Luca's face. "Do you know that your hair falls and covers your eyes when you talk? I rather like it."

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Luca concentrated on the warmth of Rem's fingertips on his forehead. "Rem, tell me something I haven't seen. Tell me something I haven't dreamed."

"How would I know what that is?"

Luca took Rem's hand. "I'll know when you say it."

Rem pursed his lips, like he pretended to think. There was no way he could know the things Luca saw. Then he smiled and gently touched Luca's forehead with his. "I love you."

A fleeting laugh left Luca's lips. He'd heard this before. Many times in dreams. He remembered every single one of the evanescent moments inside his own head.

Rem slowly pulled Luca toward him, wrapping his arms around him, kissing him once, twice, until Luca forgot how to breathe. And for once, reality was better than the dream.

**The End**



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## Author Bio

*Ashlyn has been creating stories from a young age. From turning purple and orange plush dragons into characters, to an endless collection of notebooks and word files. Ashlyn's favorite type of story is the one that tears at your heart, even more if it includes things that go bump in the night. Her love of fantasy, sci-fi, romance, and LGBT characters fill her stories.*

*Currently resides in Florida, balancing family, video games, and the constant battle between ADD and the desire to write.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Goodreads](#)

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# BONDED

By Sara York

## Photo Description

A naked man tightly holds a chain wrapped around the necks of two guys on their knees in front of him.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*My soul ached for command and love, and I was lost. Until I met them. We'd seen each other at different times but it wasn't until the night I almost killed myself trying to lift more weight than I should that our worlds finally collided. What started out as lifting partners and movie marathons turned into weekend jaunts across the city and every free moment spent together, a tension building up between us that left me holding my breathe. I'll never forget the night He took control and shattered our worlds, morphing our growing friendship into something more. I used to tell myself I would walk this earth lost and broken forever, but I know now my soul was waiting for Sir and Pup to save me.*

Sincerely,

Tonnya

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** Dom/sub, light BDSM, ménage, hurt/comfort, open relationship, established couple, switch/versatile

**Content Warnings:** Description of past self-harm: cutting

**Word Count:** 16,176

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# **BONDED**

**By Sara York**

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## Chapter 1

Chris Edwards stared at the note one more time before he wadded it up and tossed it across the room. Phillip, his lover for the last three years, had walked out, not even saying a proper goodbye. Chris had been traveling for work. The two-week trip to California had left them with little time to talk. The time zones exacerbated the distance, disguising the problems. He thought distance was the reason they hadn't talked or texted much while he'd been away, but now he knew Phillip had been leaving him.

Had Phillip told him it was over, he would have understood. Sure, he would have begged, but three years was worth more than a little note left on the counter. Chris bit down on his lip, trying like hell to stop the emotions that threatened to overtake him.

"Fuck!"

Yelling didn't help, so he grabbed his gym bag and a sweatshirt, hoping that lifting some weights would calm him. The place he worked out was only a mile away, but he was still in his dress slacks and button-down shirt. Instead of running or biking over, he hopped in his black Mustang and drove the short distance, cursing himself for not changing before leaving home. He'd been wearing the same clothes when he left California this morning because he had needed to stop by his office on his way home from the airport. He should have stayed and changed, but home reminded him of Phillip, and the last thing he needed to be thinking about was his boyfriend, now ex-boyfriend. Chris grimaced as he pushed open the door and flashed his ID card to the woman behind the desk at the gym.

"Hey Chris, haven't seen you in a while. Why don't you stop by after your workout? I'd love to talk to you. Maybe we can grab a drink before the night is over?" Maria smiled, giving him a lascivious grin as her gaze traveled up and down his body.

"Thanks, but I have an early morning. Once I finish here, I need to head home."

Maria had been working at the place since a week before Chris joined. She'd told him the story over and over again, always saying how lucky she was to have been here when he became a member. She thought he was single. It was easy to hide his relationship with Phillip since the man never worked out, and

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Chris never flirted with the guys at the club. It was no wonder Maria still flirted with him.

Naturally skinny, Phillip never needed to watch his weight. He wasn't packed with muscles, but Chris didn't mind his softness because it came with a sweetness that he loved. Three years ago, he thought sweet was what he wanted. If he were truthful with himself, he knew he needed something more. Part of him was glad Phillip had walked out. Accepting reality was harsh and made his stomach twist in knots, but they were drifting apart, and most of the issues in their relationship rested solely on Chris's shoulders.

For the last year, making love to Phillip left him less than satisfied. He could get it up and he'd had orgasms, but his soul had been left empty, craving something he couldn't quite grasp. Sweet from Phillip was nice, but he needed powerful too.

Chris undressed before grabbing his shorts from his bag. He caught his reflection in the mirror and stared for a moment. Primping prima donnas always turned him off, but he wasn't really primping, just gaging what was wrong with his body. When the locker room door opened, he acted like he hadn't been looking at the mirror and tugged on his shorts, pulling his shirt over his head before sitting down on the bench to put on his weightlifting shoes.

He wasn't bad looking, not really. Yet all of his working out and taking care of his body hadn't helped him keep Phillip. Maybe he wanted too much.

The guy who'd opened the door stepped around the corner, opening the locker opposite him. Chris ignored the man as he tied his shoes. He wished things were different but didn't know how to get his man back. During his relationship with Phillip, there were times he'd wanted his boyfriend to be more aggressive and take charge, but Phillip refused to take up that role. The emotions swirling through his belly were toxic. Chris hopped up to leave, ready to wear himself out in the gym so he didn't have to think.

"Wait."

The one word was spoken with authority, the tone commanding. Chris thought about ignoring the man, but he paused, stopping just before leaving the aisle between the lockers. He didn't turn to look at the guy. The way the man had spoken pulled at something deep inside of Chris. He drew in a deep breath, calming his emotions before he turned to stare at an amazing set of brown eyes that seemed to stare straight into his soul. Vulnerable and hurting, he didn't want this stranger to see the raw ache in his heart. He looked away, unable to look at the guy for long.

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“Yes?” Chris asked.

“You left your keys out.”

“Shit, I—fuck.” Chris moved to the locker where he’d stuffed his clothes and tossed his keys in. He took off, this time determined to hit the gym and lift heavy.

“Stop.”

Chris bristled at the command. He spun fast, his anger and pain at the surface. The look on the man’s face brought him up short. He didn’t yell like he’d intended. With a quick swipe of his hand over his face, he calmed. After he huffed out a breath to release the tension, he apologized.

“Sorry, I’m stressed. It’s been a bad—Was there something else?”

The man stepped around the bench and moved to stand right in front of him. Their gazes held. Chris realized how hot the man was the closer he got. Earlier, he’d ignored the guy, now he fought to keep his eyes on the other man’s face. The battle was lost, and he let his gaze dip low, taking in the muscled chest dusted with hair. Chris shivered, thinking about all that hair rubbing against his chest. When their gazes did finally meet again, Chris saw amusement in the dark brown depths.

“You didn’t lock up.”

Chris had no idea what this stranger was talking about until he pointed over Chris’s shoulder to the locker. He glanced back, letting his body follow his gaze so he could set the lock.

“I’m such an idiot.” The weight of the day crashed down on him. He leaned his forehead against the cool metal after snapping the combination lock closed. The last few weeks had been tough with the meetings and traveling. Then Phillip happened. He shouldn’t even be here.

The other guy stepped closer, his presence calming. “Maybe you should take it easy tonight. You seem distracted.”

The suggestion shouldn’t have made Chris angry, but everything else was pissing him off, just not this guy. Though his attitude was shot, and his emotions were even worse, he had no desire to tell the guy to fuck off. He bit his tongue and nodded, unable to speak. The guy moved out of his way, and Chris headed to the exit. Guilt filled him, and he swung back around, catching the stranger who had helped him staring at his ass.

“Um, thanks. I’ve had a bad day.”

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“What’s your name?”

Chris should have turned and walked away, but the gorgeous brown eyes held him still as the man approached, closing the distance. Power and control were twin forces this man wielded with ease. No one had ever affected Chris this way. Excitement bubbled for a second before he remembered why he was in such a foul mood.

“Chris.”

The guy stuck his hand out, and against his better judgment, Chris did as well. The contact was and wasn’t what he expected. This wasn’t a business handshake; that, he could handle. The touch was personal, the other guy’s hand warm.

“I’m Greg Peterson. I haven’t seen you here in the evenings before.”

Chris took his hand back, missing the contact. “I’m usually a morning guy. I... hell, I just need to work off some stress.”

“Just take it easy out there. You seem distracted.” Greg nodded toward Chris’s locker.

“I guess I am.”

“Be careful.”

Chris nodded and left the locker room, his mind on Phillip and their past. Normally, he lifted weights after stretching and doing a cardio warm-up. He wasn’t in the right frame of mind so he hopped on a treadmill and took off, running until sweat dripped from his brow.

He shut down the treadmill. After stepping off, he glanced around the gym, seeing few people were still there. In the back corner, he spied Greg watching him. His gaze was intense, and Chris felt like prey. A shiver snaked down his spine, and he turned away from Greg’s scrutiny.

His body was exhausted, and though his thoughts still spun, he felt that fatigue would pull him down, forcing him to sleep. Chris returned to the locker room, grabbed his bag, and headed out to his car. Disgust over his situation grew. Three years he’d put into his relationship with Phillip, and now it was over. The drive home was too quick, and he wished he’d ridden his bike. He needed more exercise to really be exhausted.

Sleep didn’t come easily, and he woke way too early. The gym was the best place to go, but this time he rode his bike over. After lifting and doing a bit of

cardio, Chris headed home to shower. At work, few knew he was in a committed relationship so he didn't have to tell many that Phillip had left. Only his division's secretary and a couple of women in advertising heard his sad story.

His days were spent working and his nights at the gym. Each evening he saw Greg but didn't talk to the man. On Friday, two weeks after meeting Greg, Chris was late getting off work and didn't head home first to change. He stepped into the locker room, thinking about Greg and his amazing body. It had been almost six weeks since he'd had sex or touched another man. Phillip had been distant before he left for his trip, then he spent three weeks being faithful. Since coming home, he hadn't wanted to hook up with anyone, but thoughts of Greg were invading his dreams and causing him to wonder what it would be like to be with him. Chris came around the corner, stepping into the row of lockers and ran right into a short, compact man. He reached out, grasping the arm of the other guy, trying to steady himself.

Light blue eyes stared back at him. Neither of them said anything for a long moment. Chris studied the guy, taking in the spiky blond hair and elfin features. The guy was hot, short, and small. He wasn't soft though. Chris could feel the hard biceps flex under his fingers.

"Sorry," Chris said.

"Trust me, it's my pleasure. I'm Liam."

"Chris."

They didn't move away from each other, which would have been the proper way to handle the situation. Liam's lips curved up into a smile, and he leaned in closer, his body almost brushing up against Chris's.

"I wasn't going to come out here tonight, but I'm glad I did."

Chris's face heated at Liam's words. He looked away and bit his lip. Liam's hand brushed down his arm, and he glanced back, not at all surprised by the heat in the guy's gaze.

"That was sexy. I'd like to see you biting your lower lip for other reasons." Liam winked, his hand flattening on Chris's chest.

He sucked in a breath and dropped his hold on Liam's arm. He couldn't flirt worth a damn after being devastated by his ex. Before he and Phillip had become a couple, he'd been great at picking up guys, now he wasn't sure what to do or say.



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“I-I should go workout,” Chris mumbled.

Liam cocked one eyebrow and looked him up and down. “Anytime you need someone to run into, come find me.”

Liam skipped past him and hummed as he left the locker room. Chris sank to the bench, his head spinning as he tried to will his body to come under his control. What the hell was he doing? He didn’t know the guy, and yet he was ready to march out to the gym floor and chase down some sexy man he wanted to do more than flirt with. He wasn’t out of his relationship long enough to be with another, and he sure as heck didn’t need to start up anything new.

Chris huffed out a breath and opened a locker. He undressed, then pulled on his workout shorts and T-shirt before slipping his feet into his running shoes. He grabbed his flat-bottomed weightlifting shoes before shutting and locking the locker. He headed to the workout floor, ready to expend some energy and exhaust himself. The treadmills on the end closest to the weight room were taken so he hopped on an open one and ran a half-mile before grabbing some water. He wanted to work on his overhead squat and improve his position.

The gym was busy for a Friday night. Usually, dates won out over gym time. At least they had for him when he was with Phillip. Actually, his ex had insisted he not go to the gym in the evenings.

When he stepped into the free weights area, he saw Greg spotting for Liam. Evil thoughts entered his mind as Greg helped Liam settle the bar in the rack. Liam sat up and gave Greg a sexy smile. Jealousy shot through Chris as he wished Liam’s smile was directed at him.

Chris picked an area opposite where Greg and Liam were and began working, positioning himself so he couldn’t watch Liam and get distracted by his body. He spent almost thirty minutes lifting, his earbuds in and his music turned up so he could ignore everyone around him.

After he finished lifting and stretched a bit, Chris went to the locker room and stripped. He wrapped a towel around his waist and headed into the showers. The hot spray relaxed him. Sleep had been coming easier, but he didn’t even attempt going to bed until he was totally exhausted. Working out twice daily was doing a lot for his body, but he was starting to lose too much weight. Soon, he’d need to take a break. He hoped his thoughts would calm enough in the next month so he could slow down.

Phillip still hadn’t talked to him. It was bullshit, but what the heck was he supposed to do when the guy wouldn’t even answer his phone? Disgust built,

and Chris shut off the water and grabbed his towel, scrubbing himself dry as he tried to excise his demons.

Once at his locker, he pulled on his underwear and the slacks he'd worn earlier. The waistband was loose, and he knew it was time to eat more and exercise less. He looked down and flexed his stomach, noticing that his almost six pack had turned into an eight pack. No wonder he was cold all the time; he had no body fat left.

Chris turned to pull on his shirt and caught sight of Liam. The man was already bare chested and was tugging his shorts low. He winked and grinned as he pushed his clothes to the ground. Liam kicked off his shoes and stepped over the bench, standing naked in front of Chris.

*Don't look, don't look*, he repeated in his head, but the temptation was too much. Chris glanced down, raking his gaze over Liam's tight stomach to his dick. He bit his lip as he stared at the neatly trimmed area. Unable to take his eyes from the growing length, Chris stopped breathing as he stared. He had no idea how long his gaze stayed on Liam's dick, but when he glanced up, he caught the cocky grin and raised eyebrow.

"Did you have a good workout?" Liam asked.

"Yes." Chris started breathing again, his head spinning as he thought about touching Liam's body, kissing his lips, staring into those luscious blue eyes as they explored each other.

"I was wondering if you'd join us for pizza?"

Normally, he would have automatically said no to pizza, but he'd lost so much weight, and he knew he wasn't going to add weight on by eating baked chicken and broccoli.

"Us?"

"Sure, you'd fit in nicely." Liam teased Chris's pec with his fingers, tracing patterns that left Chris dizzy with need.

Desperately trying to keep his gaze on Liam's face, Chris ended up closing his eyes. It was a mistake. Liam's lips brushed over his. Chris flashed his eyelids open and stepped back. Laughter bubbled out of Liam's mouth. Just then, Greg stepped into view, his eyes narrowing.

"Liam, give the man a break. Come here and get dressed," Greg growled.

Instantly, Liam straightened. He walked around the bench and pulled on his underwear, his gaze staying on the floor. Greg moved to stand beside Chris.

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“Sorry about that. Was he bugging you too much?”

“No, just asking me to go grab pizza with him.”

“Pizza?” Greg reached out and grabbed Liam’s arm.

Liam glanced over his shoulder. “Yes, Sir.”

“You invited Chris, did he say yes?” Greg asked.

“I didn’t answer,” Chris said.

“I asked Liam the question.”

Greg’s gaze drilled into Chris. At first, anger surged, then as Greg continued staring at him, he drew in a deep breath and let it go slowly. The draw to step closer to Greg was almost overwhelming. The man’s gaze traveled over Chris’s body, down to the loose waistband of his pants. Greg reached out, tugging at Chris’s belt loops. Not enough to drag him closer, but enough to show the gap his weight loss had created.

“How long has it been since you’ve eaten a decent meal?” Greg asked.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Chris looked away, embarrassed by his lie as much as he was embarrassed by his lack of control. Since Phillip left—no that wasn’t fair—since long before his ex took off, he’d been drifting. His drive was down, and his ambition had taken a hike.

“Look at me.”

Chris’s gaze shot toward Greg’s. He noticed Liam had finished dressing and had moved to stand close to him. His hand slid against Chris’s, and he wove their fingers together.

Greg leaned close and whispered in Chris’s ear, “Tell me the truth.”

The words were frozen in his throat. Liam squeezed his hand, and he glanced at the small man, glad to have his support. He turned back to Greg and opened his lips to speak.

“Weeks.”

“That’s not good. You’ve lost what, ten pounds since I first met you?”

“I don’t know.” Chris looked down and shook his head. “Maybe.”

Greg placed his fingers under Chris’s chin, forcing him to look up. “Liam and I are going out for pizza tonight; it’s our cheat meal. I want you to come with us.”

He had no excuse not to go. Liam lifted up on his toes and kissed Chris's cheek. Greg narrowed his eyes and watched Liam as he returned to his locker to grab his things.

Chris didn't want to get in between the couple. Actually, he hadn't realized they were a couple until this little exchange. Greg said he was going to take a quick shower, leaving him and Liam alone. He finished getting dressed, trying like crazy to ignore Liam. Chris had just slipped on his shoes when Liam stepped in front of him and straddled his legs.

"What are you doing?" Chris glanced toward the showers.

"Just having a little fun." Liam nuzzled Chris's neck, kissing below his ear.

The pressure in his body grew. Not only did his dick wake up, his lungs burned, and his head throbbed.

"You need to—"

"I know what I need." Liam bit down on Chris's earlobe.

The pain was just as delicious as it was erotic. He moaned and closed his eyes. This weekend, he'd need to find someone willing to let him blow off some steam, but he hated the club scene. There were too many guys being false. That's why he'd started the relationship with Phillip. Neither one of them liked the party circuit.

Liam jumped off of him and started pulling Greg's clothes out of his locker. Chris watched as Liam carefully arranged Greg's shirt, pants, underwear, socks, and shoes. A few seconds later, Greg showed up with a towel wrapped around his waist. Liam used a clean towel to dry Greg's shoulders, and then he began dressing Greg. The towel dropped, and Liam knelt in front of Greg. Chris couldn't breathe, couldn't think, all he could do was stare at Greg's fine ass. Liam was hairless, and Greg made up for it with a dusting of dark hair over every part of his body. The hair on his ass made Chris want to explore. His fingers itched to slide over the hairy crease.

Liam helped Greg into his boxers and glanced at Chris. The suggestive gleam in Liam's eyes sent a warning through Chris, but it was the type of warning he wanted to be closer to instead of running away from like he knew he should. Liam kissed Greg's hip, and his gaze dipped to Chris's crotch. The flirting was thick, leaving Chris uncomfortable. He should leave, but he wanted to see just how far Liam would take this. Greg would probably kill him. For self-preservation's sake, he should take off, find some guy to blow him, and never show back up at the gym at night.

Then Greg turned to him as he buttoned his own shirt. "I have just the place in mind. Do you want to ride with us?"

"How far is it?" Chris asked.

"It's a few miles, maybe fifteen minutes."

"Sure. Can we drop my car at my place?" Why had he suggested that? The smart thing would have been to tell them bye, but he wasn't being smart. Liam made him stupid, and then Greg added to his inability to make decisions for himself. He wanted Greg to tell him what to do. It was odd. Not at all like anything he'd experienced before.

Maybe it was hunger, or his attitude, but he didn't beg off like he should have. When he parked his car, he had a brief moment of clarity that was soon clouded by lustful thoughts of Liam and the way he'd bit down on his earlobe. This was a dangerous game, one he shouldn't be playing.

Dinner was nice, and Liam didn't touch or kiss him again. Actually, he ignored Chris for the most part. It was so different from how he'd been at the gym that Chris wondered if Greg had said something. After eating pasta, a salad, and a few slices of pizza, Chris said goodbye and caught a cab home. On Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, he skipped the gym in the evening and went for a run instead. On Thursday morning, he stepped on the scale in his bathroom, noticing he'd actually dropped twelve pounds since Phillip left him. Disappointed with himself, he made a plan for gaining back some of the weight. That morning, he skipped his workout and went to grab an omelet at the diner down the street.

He wasn't paying attention when he stepped into the place and didn't see Phillip. Had he seen his ex, he would have turned around and left. The place was packed, and there was only one table left which happened to be right beside Phillip. When Chris looked up and saw Phillip sitting at the table beside him, he froze.

"Chris, I haven't seen you in a while." Phillip spoke as though they were friends who just hadn't seen each other. His ex didn't acknowledge that he'd ripped Chris's heart out and shredded him, leaving him decimated.

The waitress came to take his drink order, and Chris almost left the restaurant, but rational thought had left him. He asked for eggs, bacon, and biscuits, determined to not let Phillip see how hurt he was.

Chris was searching for something to say when a tall man with dark brown hair approached Phillip and sat down next to him. It was obvious from the way

they leaned against each other they were a couple. The guy was sexy and had a great body. Chris wanted to cause a scene, telling everyone in the diner what Phillip had done, but he stayed silent.

The waitress brought over his juice, placing it on the table in front of him. "Here you go, hun. Would you like any water?"

"Sure." He sipped the juice, not even tasting the sweetness. Phillip and his new man were talking in hushed tones, and he did his best to ignore them. After he'd finished half of his juice, Phillip stood, tossing his napkin on the table. Chris wanted to be anywhere but at this restaurant. Phillip stopped at his table and dropped into the open chair next to Chris.

"It was good seeing you. You're looking fabulous. I'll see you around." Phillip leaned in close and kissed his cheek before hopping up and striding off.

His meal came, and he shoveled in the food, not even paying attention to what he was eating. The anger didn't lessen during his workday. By the time he sent his last email, he was so worked up he wanted a physical release.

After stopping at home to change into shorts and a T-shirt, he ran to the gym. Anger fueled his effort, and he pushed himself, running the mile in under seven minutes. He didn't slow down when he hit the stair-climber or the elliptical machine.

When he stepped onto the weightlifting floor, he ignored everyone around him. The first set of back squats were heavy, but he ignored the warning signs. He upped the weight and kept lifting. After finishing five sets, he moved over to the bench press, setting the weights for what he normally lifted. He lay down, closing his eyes as memories of him and Phillip raced through his mind. How the fuck could Phillip have walked out on him like that?

With an angry growl, Chris lifted the bar off the rack, realizing he'd made a mistake. His arms didn't hold, and the only reason he didn't kill himself was Greg was right there, his hands preventing the bar from rolling onto Chris's throat.

Greg reracked the weight. His mouth was turned down, his eyes blazing with anger. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

Chris shook his head, sitting up once he gained his breath. A warm hand squeezed his shoulder, and he glanced back, seeing it was Liam.

"Look at me," Greg commanded.

He tilted his head so Greg was in his view. "Don't ever lift like that again. What the hell would you have done had I not been here?"

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“I don’t know,” Chris mumbled.

“I do. You would have died.” Greg stood with both hands on his hips, his anger unabated. “You’ve been going nonstop since you showed up over an hour ago. Liam and I stayed because we both thought you looked off. You didn’t even acknowledge Liam when he walked past you on the elliptical.”

“Sorry,” Chris said, and ducked his head.

“It’s not going to be that easy. You’re coming to our place for dinner, and you’re going to talk. Come on, you’re finished here.”

“But—”

“Zip it. Liam, help him shower and get dressed.”

“I don’t have any clothes with me. I ran over.”

Greg stared at him, then Liam. “You’ve lost enough weight that you can fit into Liam’s clothes. He probably has extra, knowing him. You can wear his things.”

Liam’s hand was on his arm, lifting him up to standing. No one else in the gym paid any attention to them, for that Chris was thankful. Embarrassment made him cringe. He followed Liam to the locker room and into the shower. That they were sharing a stall didn’t hit him until after he was naked and Liam was washing his hair. Chris didn’t stop Liam as he washed Chris’s body, cleaning down his legs and up to his balls. When Liam gently washed his dick and sac, Chris closed his eyes, not even trying to stop his dick from growing in Liam’s skillful hands. After a few more minutes, the water shut off, and Chris opened his eyes. Liam was dripping wet, his gaze serious as he dried Chris’s body. He draped the towel around Chris’s waist before walking buck-naked into the locker room. The clothes Liam gave him were a little tight, but they still fit. Greg stepped out of the shower, not saying a word to either of them as he dressed.

Chris followed Liam and Greg out to their car and didn’t argue when Liam settled in the backseat with him. Numbness had set in at some point. Phillip leaving him had affected him more than he cared to admit. They’d been great together, at least he’d thought so, but now he wasn’t sure. Maybe it had all been a lie, and maybe he was so stupid he didn’t realize what an asshole he was. What had he done wrong?

Liam and Greg led him into their house. They gave him a glass of tea and settled him at the kitchen table. Liam busied himself with preparing food, and Greg sat down beside Chris.

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“Tell me, what demon is on your ass?” Greg asked.

“Fuck, I can’t believe it.” Chris shook his head, unsure where to start.

“Just talk. Tell me everything.”

So he did. Every little sordid detail—well almost every detail—was discussed with Greg as Liam made dinner. Soon, food was placed on the table in front of him. Because Liam had made the meal, he savored each bite. When midnight hit, he told Greg and Liam he needed to leave.

“Why?” Greg asked.

“You don’t need me bringing you down. I’ll call a cab.”

Liam wove their fingers together. “Stay, please.”

“I don’t know.”

“You can sleep in the guest room, if that makes you feel better,” Greg said.

“I don’t want to be a bother.” Chris didn’t like being an unwelcome guest. He’d suffered through that enough with Phillip’s parents and siblings.

“I’ll make pancakes in the morning,” Liam said.

“You’re going to fatten me up.” Chris patted his belly, but Greg batted his hand away.

“Please, you’re way too skinny as it is. You haven’t been eating because of Phillip. We’ll spend the day together tomorrow. I have tickets to the baseball game. I’d be disappointed if you didn’t go with us.”

After a few minutes of arguing, Chris finally agreed to not only spend the night but also the weekend. Liam flirted unmercifully, though they never crossed the line. He wanted to kiss Liam and hold him close, but he didn’t dare, not with Greg watching them so closely. It was like having a best friend again. He’d thought Phillip had been his friend, but now he looked back on it, they hadn’t really connected in months.

On Sunday night, he was sad to return home. Liam called him on Monday, but he was busy with work. They spoke on the phone on Tuesday and Wednesday, but Chris didn’t go into the gym. On Thursday, he took the afternoon off, planning on spending the day catching up on household chores. A little after one, Liam called him in a panic.

“I need help.” Liam’s voice was full of emotions, sounding almost like he was on the verge of tears.



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A sliver of fear wove through Chris. "Hey, what do you need?"

"Please."

"Liam, just tell me."

"Come to Greg's place. I need..."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Chris abandoned his plans of heading to the garden store and pointed his car toward Greg's house. His worry had only increased as he drove. Jumping out of his car, he raced up the walk and banged on the door. He was shocked when Liam yanked open the door and grabbed his shirt. Before he knew what was going on, Liam had him in the front entryway, his body pressed up against Chris's. They were kissing, Liam's hands roving all over him.

Chris pushed at his chest, ending the frantic kiss. Liam's eyes were wide, and a wildness shone in their depths. This was unlike anything he'd expected, and he wondered if he should call Greg.

"Please, help me feel," Liam begged.

Chris was surprised when Liam began clawing at his clothes. This was going to get out of hand soon if he didn't put a stop to the situation. He grabbed Liam's hands and spun him around, pushing him against the wall.

"Liam, stop!"

At first it looked like Liam hadn't heard him, then he drew in a deep breath before biting his lip. "Please, make me feel."

"Tell me what you mean."

"Let me show you." Liam led him to the bedroom, Greg's bedroom, and opened the door. On the dresser were three wooden paddles lined up from smallest to largest. Liam held up the biggest one before closing his eyes and ducking his head. "Make me feel."

"I don't understand what you want."

"I-I—" Liam glanced over to a table in the corner. Chris followed his gaze and spied a razor blade along with some napkins. He gripped Liam's shoulders and pushed him against the wall.

"What's going on?"

"I need—" His stare settled on the paddles. "Please."

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Chris went hot, then even hotter as Liam began stripping. He watched as Liam slowly revealed his body, noticing for the first time the lines at his hips. Chris had seen it on girls in high school but never any of the boys he knew. Maybe it was just because they hid it so well or the hair covered the lines, but there was no mistaking the marks. The razor blade on the table helped him deduce the facts.

When Liam was naked in front of him, Chris met his gaze. "Where?"

Liam bit his lower lip and moved to the bed, bending over so his hands were planted on the mattress. Chris picked up one of the paddles and cringed. He didn't want to hurt Liam, but cutting would make him hurt worse.

"Please," Liam begged, his voice no longer as desperate now that he was naked and bent over the bed.

"You let me go at my own pace," Chris said, as fear wove through him. Never before had he done anything like this. He'd watched porn, and there'd been a few scenes that were discipline based, but he didn't know if the sound effects were real or not. When he chose a paddle, he moved to stand behind Liam, smoothing his hand over the near hairless flesh.

Liam shivered, gooseflesh covering his legs. Chris gave a smack with his hand, and Liam moaned. He gave another smack and kept his hand on the smooth round globe. He smiled when Liam let out a long breath, his body arching into Chris's touch.

"I'm going to use the paddle now."

"Yes," Liam hissed.

Chris lined up, afraid he'd hurt the man if he struck him too hard. He didn't want to hit bone, so he placed the flat wood against Liam's butt cheek before pulling back to smack him.

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## Chapter 2

Greg had picked up his messages after the emergency meeting and cringed when he heard the four words from Liam. Usually he had some warning if his pup was going to go off the deep end. It had been a while, six months to be exact, and maybe he should have expected it. He'd been lazy, thinking that Liam's good mood would last.

The rush home had been stalled by traffic, and Liam wasn't picking up the phone. He had half a mind to call the neighbors, but he wasn't that desperate yet. Two years ago, he would have just called the cops if he'd received a call from Liam like that. Of course, two years ago Liam wouldn't have called, he just would have gone back to using or cutting.

The rules had been lessened as time went on, and he guessed he'd cut back too much. Maybe something had happened that he hadn't foreseen. This weekend they'd have to be very strict. Liam would lose privileges and many of the freedoms he'd come to enjoy over the last year.

When he turned onto his street, he noticed the car out front. He hoped to God it wasn't a dealer. The bastard wouldn't know what hit him. Anger churned until he pulled closer and realized it was Chris's vehicle. Greg calmed, his movements slowing as he got a grip on his emotions. Maybe Liam had done something good, channeling his negative feelings into something positive.

Greg settled even more on his walk to the front of the house, slowing his breathing and calming his racing heart. Liam needed Sir, not the out of control mess he felt like. He closed his eyes and counted backwards from five before sliding his key into the lock and letting himself in. Normally, he'd count backward from ten, or maybe even twenty if he knew Liam was in a safe environment, but five would have to do today.

The door closed silently behind him, and he heard the sharp slap of wood on flesh. His heart stopped hammering, and he took the time to catch his breath and get fully in control. Liam and Chris were talking, but he couldn't make out their words. The clap of wood against flesh sounded again, and Greg made his way closer to the bedroom while hiding from their view.

"More, faster," Liam demanded.

Greg flexed his fists. No way in hell would he allow Liam to be so bratty when he was giving the orders. He was ready to interrupt them when he heard Chris speak.

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“I’ll do this at my own pace. Don’t rush me. I’m in charge right now.”

The frustrated groan from Liam brought a smile to Greg’s face. His pup was being controlled, just like he needed. Chris probably had no idea why Liam had asked for this, but he was glad Pup had. He stood with his back to the wall and out of sight, waiting for the session to be over.

Chris paddled Liam three more times before he heard the sexy groan from Liam and the seductive *thank you, sir*, from Pup’s lips. Greg cupped his dick, filling out as he thought of the sex he’d have with Liam.

“Please, don’t go yet.” Liam’s words were cold water on Greg’s desire.

His pup planned on asking Chris to fuck him. For a second, he wanted to tell Chris to fuck off, but he actually liked the guy. He’d wanted to control Chris since the first time he’d seen him, but he doubted that Chris would go for their type of relationship. Also, not every man wanted to be dominated. He got mixed signals from Chris. Sometimes he thought Chris wanted to be controlled, other times, he was sure Chris was a Dom.

“What about Greg?” Chris asked.

“He’ll be fine with it.”

Pup knew him well. The sound of cloth being pulled off bodies had Greg growing hard. He unzipped his slacks and kicked off his shoes. Before he heard the condom packet rip, Greg was naked with cock in hand. He listened intently and heard the sounds of Liam settling on the bed before the sharp snap of the lube opening. Imagining Liam opening himself made Greg even harder.

Tonight, he might not have Liam, but he damn sure was going to possess Chris. Kisses followed by the sound of Liam rolling the condom onto Chris had Greg ready to act. He gave them another minute before pushing open the door. Neither man heard him or paid him any mind until he was right beside Chris.

Chris turned, and had Greg not been blocking his exit, he was sure Chris would be halfway across the room. Greg held him against Liam and slid in behind him.

“You’re fucking my pup, and I’m going to enjoy taking you right now. I hope you bottom because I’m not going to go slow.”

He expected Chris to put up some sort of fight, but the man sighed, relaxing a bit as he bent low, presenting his ass to Greg. It was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. Liam was on his back, his legs in the air. Chris had dropped low

so he was lying on top of Liam, his chest pressed against Liam's. Greg could see where the two men were joined. Chris's balls were pulled close to his body. His tight pucker flexed as Greg stared at him.

He lowered and licked from where Liam and Chris were one, over Chris's sac, to the soft flesh below his hole. Slowly, Greg slid his tongue over Chris's pucker, enjoying the moan from Chris.

Greg poured lube over his index finger and onto Chris's crack. The man flinched from the cold, and Greg chuckled.

"Bit cold?" Greg asked.

"Yeah," Chris moaned.

He slid his finger into the tight heat, letting go of a moan of his own. "I'm going to enjoy this. Hold still while I prep."

Liam caught his gaze for the first time since he'd entered the room. His pup was subdued, the normal playfulness and fun gone from his eyes. Greg bent low and kissed Liam, reassuring him that all would be okay.

After rolling on a condom, Greg lined up behind Chris and pressed against him. "Let me in."

Chris blew out a breath, and Greg could tell the difference immediately. He slid slowly into the snug channel. If Chris bottomed, it hadn't been recently. Greg began working his way in, claiming Chris as his own.

It didn't take long for the excitement to get him to the edge. It had been a while since he'd been with anyone other than Liam. The rules made it almost impossible to bring in a third unless Liam liked the guy. Finding Chris balls deep in his man left him with the strong impression that Liam had a thing for Chris.

He stared at Liam's face, loving the exquisite look of rapture on his pup's face. The grunts built, rising as a beautiful noise that pushed Greg close to orgasm. Every thrust in pushed Chris into Liam. Chris reached behind him, digging his fingers into Greg's flesh. They clung together, holding on as they drove each other wild. The pressure in his balls increased, and though he wanted this to last, he was lost to the passion. Greg clung to Chris as he dumped his load into the condom, his sweat-slicked body pressed in tight. Chris's ass constricted around his dick as he bucked below Greg. He saw Liam's face change as he came. The look he'd been waiting for appeared, and he knew Liam was no longer at risk.

Greg pulled out of Chris and hauled him up. He grabbed Liam's wrist and bent low, picking his pup up in a fireman's carry. Chris looked worried. Greg grabbed his wrists as he passed by the man.

"Join us in the shower." The words weren't a question, rather a command. He was pleased when Chris stepped into the stall and closed the glass door behind him. Cold water poured from the spigot first, and he waited to set Liam down until the water was warm. He and Chris worked together to get Liam clean, washing their bodies quickly once their charge had been soaped and rinsed off.

He dried Pup, then carried him to the bed, placing him in the center. Before he shut the light off, he spied the razor and went to retrieve it. Chris followed him out of the bedroom, his head low as he stood nervously in the entry to the kitchen.

Greg approached him, standing with his legs shoulder width and his arms crossed over his chest, emphasizing his pectoral muscles.

"I'm sorry," Chris whispered.

"For what?" Greg demanded.

"I feel like I shouldn't have—hell, I hit him."

Greg placed his hand around Chris's neck, asserting his dominance. "You didn't hit him, you paddled him. For Liam, there is a huge difference. One would break him, the other will save him."

"I feel so guilty." Chris shook his head and closed his eyes.

"Don't."

Chris snapped his eyes open. "But—"

Greg pulled him into a crushing kiss, stopping his flow of words. He moved his hand from around Chris's neck to his back, tugging him close and holding him there. After a long moment, Greg ended the kiss but didn't let Chris go.

"Trust me when I say this, you coming over and taking command of Liam saved him. I usually know when it's going to be a bad day, and I keep a close eye on him. I didn't have any warning this time. I don't know what happened, but something made him feel out of control."

"I noticed the razor and the line on his hips. He did that to himself, right?"

"His family is harsh. They expected perfection from him. When he came out, it was too much for his mom and dad. They said things to him that no parent should ever say to a child."

Greg dropped his arms from around Chris and moved to the other side of the kitchen, opening up the refrigerator and grabbing a beer. "You want one?"

"Sure."

Greg handed him a beer and grabbed two kitchen towels from a drawer. "Sit on these, otherwise you might stick to the chair. We'll probably be talking for a few hours."

"I'm hungry."

"I'll order us pizza. It's not a cheat day, but with Liam having issues, I don't want him to feel he has to cook." Greg called the pizza place and ordered salad, wings, and two pizzas.

After he hung up the phone, he settled in the seat opposite Chris and began speaking. "When I found Liam, he was near death. He was using heavily and people were using him. Liam wasn't in any shape to make decisions. He was cutting too."

"Damn."

"The wounds have healed, but the scars, external and internal, remain. He'd been tossed out of his parents' house after they belittled him. I found his stash of letters two weeks after I first met him. He'd had a rough night and invited me back to his place. I accepted because I was intrigued. He looked so lost and alone, but I didn't dare tell him that. Liam thought I was like the other guys. Not that I'm noble or great or anything like that. I've broken a few hearts and been jaded, ugly, and used people before. It's just with Liam I was different. He made me want to be better."

"I can see that."

Greg's stomach twisted, just remembering the words on the pages. "His parents ripped him apart in those letters. The pages were all tattered, the paper crumpled and grimy. It looked like he read them over and over again."

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The doorbell rang, and Greg pulled on a pair of sweats from his gym bag. Chris covered his dick, hoping the delivery guy didn't want to come inside. The food smelled heavenly, and Chris got up to help Greg after he finished with the delivery guy. He took the two plates Greg handed him and served them up salad. Greg grabbed a small tomato and offered it to Chris. He sucked it into his mouth, enjoying the sweet-tart taste.

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“Thanks.”

“I didn’t do enough at first. He got sober, then he backslid. I found him drugged out, lost in a haze at clubs, or in the bathroom bleeding. He needed more from me. Then, one night, I found him with a group of guys. They were planning on using him for fun. He was high as a kite.”

Greg took their plates to the table, and Chris followed. He moved to sit then stood back up looking around.

“Do you have any shorts I could borrow?”

“Sure.”

Greg handed him a pair of shorts from his bag, and he slid them on before sitting. “So what happened?”

“I put him on lockdown. He didn’t go to the bathroom without getting my permission. If he ate anything other than what I told him to eat, he was punished.”

“That’s harsh.” He had heard of relationships like that but had never seen one. It amazed him that Liam stuck around.

“Yes, I thought so too at first, then Liam received a letter from his parents. I read it over his shoulder. I saw his world fall apart as he took in each word, thinking that what they said was true. Before he finished reading the second paragraph I ripped it out of his hands. He complained and raced from the room. I found him in the bathroom ready to cut. I ripped the razor blade out of his hands and cut myself in the process. I was angry and hurt. He’d scared the crap out of me, and I sat on the toilet lid and pulled him over my knee, giving him a spanking that left my hand throbbing.”

“Wow.” Chris took a bite of his pizza, chewing thoughtfully as Greg took a drink. He hated feeling out of control. He could imagine how Liam felt. Not that he was as bad as Liam, but sometimes, especially recently, he wanted an external control to help him get through things.

“After that spanking, Liam crawled off my lap and dropped to his knees in front of me. I thought our relationship was over. I’d just spanked another man, and I was sure he would be pissed. But he wasn’t. Liam thanked me. He held my injured hand and cleaned it, apologizing for wanting to cut himself. We were cautious around each other for the next few days. Life returned to a semi-normal state, with me directing each day.”



He'd finished his first piece of pizza and started in on the second. His opinion of Greg was changing. He'd been annoyed by the man at times, thinking him too harsh with Liam, now he wasn't sure. "That's good. I'm glad it got better."

"It wasn't over by a long shot. Another letter came, and he cut. I wasn't at home to see the damage as it occurred. I found him in the bathtub, and I thought he had slit his wrists. He hadn't, but it scared the shit out of me. I laid down the law. He received daily spankings from me for a week. I withheld sex and allowed him no pleasure. I wanted him to know what would happen if he disobeyed. I felt like crap while I was doing this to him. But he got better. He thrived. It was a Liam I'd never seen before."

"Was he like what he is now, I mean when he's happy?" Chris had finished his food and wiped his mouth on the napkin.

"No, he was happier, but nothing like now. Anyway, I got lax again, thinking that life would continue on the way it was. But his mom showed up and ruined everything. I came home one day, and there she was sitting on my couch, berating Liam even after I got home. I told her to leave. She called the cops. It was messy for a few weeks. Liam was afraid to disagree with his mother, and for some reason, even though she went back home, he was a mess. Finally, when his mom accused me of abusing her son and cutting him, he spoke up, telling the cops that I'd done nothing. He broke down after that, and I had to rebuild him. Liam is fragile."

"So what do you think happened today?" Chris wanted to know more. He didn't like thinking of Liam hurting.

"I wish I knew."

They finished their food in silence, Chris's body heating as he thought of Greg taking care of him like he did Liam. But he wasn't as bad. Maybe a little self-destructive, but he wasn't cutting. He helped Greg clear the dishes and put away the pizza and wings. Chris went to the trash to throw away their napkins and chicken bones when he saw the crisp white sheet of paper sticking out from under some other trash. He pulled out the paper, seeing that it was an envelope.

"Greg?"

"What?"

"I think he got a letter."

Greg came close and stared at the envelope. "Well shit, it's from his family."

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“Is that why he called me?”

“Yes. I’ve been allowing him to get the mail. I’m going to have to stop letting him do that. He’s out of control.”

“I know how he feels,” Chris whispered.

“Excuse me?”

Chris shook his head and held up his hand. “Not to the depths he feels it, but being out of control, I know that.”

Greg stepped close, trapping Chris against the kitchen counter. “Tell me. I can help you.”

The urge to shut his eyes was almost too strong to ignore, but he kept his gaze on Greg. It was difficult to talk about how he felt. His words hung in his throat. Revealing the truth hurt. It would be easier to walk away from Greg, ignoring the pain residing inside. But there was Liam. He couldn’t walk away from him, not after what they’d just shared.

“When Phillip, my ex, comes around, I feel so worthless. I mean, I know I’m not that special, but I don’t understand why he left the way he did. But it’s more than just that. I don’t understand it.”

Greg slid his thumb over Chris’s cheek. “You aren’t worthless.”

“He walked out while I was on a business trip. He left me without even telling me.”

“You said there was more.”

Chris nodded and leaned his head on Greg’s shoulder. He stepped closer to the man, seeking comfort as he exposed his soul.

“Before, when I was with Phillip, I felt lost. I couldn’t connect during sex.”

“You’re telling me this for a reason. What do you want me to do about it?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think you do know.” Greg took a step back.

The distance between them was too much. Chris tried to close the space, but Greg stuck his arm out, keeping them apart. He searched Greg’s eyes, looking for answers to questions he didn’t even know to ask.

“Please.”

“You need to give me more than just please. Tell me exactly what you want.”

He turned away from Greg, his heart beating wildly. "Did you make Liam do this?"

"What, say what he needed?"

Chris nodded. "You're asking too much."

Greg's hands feathered down his arms, and his body pressed against Chris's. "No, I'm not asking too much. You're not giving yourself enough credit. You're stronger than Liam ever was."

"I need something to center me."

"Why come to me?"

Chris tore away from Greg's hold and spun around. "You won't help me?" Pain lanced Chris's heart. He'd trusted Greg, and now he wasn't willing to help. It hurt.

Greg's lips went thin, and his eyes narrowed. "Sit down at the table right now."

The urge to tell Greg to fuck off almost made the words fly from his lips, but he gritted his teeth and sat, anger swirling in his belly. Greg took the seat across from him, his frown severe.

"I'm not going to let you get away with some of the stuff I'd let Liam get away with."

Chris blew out a breath and nodded. He understood that much. Liam had been hurt terribly, Chris just wanted a bit of control.

"You're right. I'm sorry."

"First, let's address your eating. You've lost too much weight, and you've not put any back on. If you agree to this relationship, I'm in charge."

Chris cringed. Giving Greg this much control felt wrong. But he wasn't able to deal with everything. Hell, he was weaker because of the amount of muscle he'd lost. Someone on the outside may look at the restrictions Greg placed on Liam and think he was an abusive jerk. After hearing what Liam had gone through and seeing how Greg was helping him, he knew submitting to Greg would only help him in the long run.

With his mind made up, Chris stood and moved to stand beside Greg. The man turned in his chair, and Chris dropped to his knees and ducked his head, staring at the floor.

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“Please, Sir, I need your help.”

Greg's hand gently brushed through Chris's hair before smoothing down his cheek and under his chin. Chris obeyed the pressure under his chin and lifted his face to stare into Greg's eyes. Hope filled him, and he relaxed for the first time in months.

“I'm happy you've agreed to this. There will be rules, and I'll expect more from you than I expect from Liam. You'll also need to be willing to help Liam like you did today. He needs stability, and if you're not willing to give us at least a year, you need to walk away now.”

“No, Sir, I'm not going to leave. I promise to stay with you for at least a year.”

“Good. And maybe you'll want more. I want you to move in with us this weekend. Do you own, or are you renting your place?”

“I'm renting.”

“When is the lease up?”

“Four months.”

Greg nodded and ran his thumb over Chris's lips. “I want your lips on me again real soon, but first I need to check on Liam. Come with me.”

Chris followed behind Greg, loving the way his sweats clung to his hips and hugged his ass. He wanted to run his hands over Greg's fuzz covered globes. Greg glanced over his shoulder, then stopped suddenly and spun around. He pressed Chris against the wall, his leg wedging between Chris's.

“Were you looking at my ass?”

Fear pinged around his brain, and he nodded. Was Greg really angry at the way he was ogling him?

“Words, use your words. I want to hear your voice. It gives me pleasure to listen to you speak.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Yes, Sir, what?”

“Yes, Sir, I was looking at your ass.”

Greg ground his hips against Chris's. “After I make sure Liam is okay, I'm going to let you get real friendly with my ass.”

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“Thank you, Sir.”

The growl from Greg's throat made the hair on Chris's arms stand up. He reached out and placed his hand on Greg's hip. They stared at each other for a long moment before Greg placed a kiss on his forehead then stepped away and opened the bedroom door. Chris glanced in around Greg, seeing Liam still sleeping peacefully in the center of the bed.

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Greg's heart filled with pride as he stared at Liam. His man had handled the situation. He'd have to discipline Liam and change a few rules, making it harder for him to fall into depression and hurt himself. After he was sure Liam was really asleep, he stepped out of the bedroom, closing the door quietly.

His dick was half-hard at the thought of Chris doing things for him. He grabbed Chris by the back of the neck and directed him over to the couch. The man was very pliable for someone who'd never been in this type of relationship before. He wondered if Chris was a natural sub hiding in a vanilla relationship.

“I want you to prove how much you want me. Show me how dedicated you are to me and Liam.”

“Yes, Sir.” Chris dropped to his knees and tugged at the waistband of Greg's sweats, pulling them down his thighs and over his knees. Greg stepped out of the pants, and Chris folded them carefully, placing them on the couch. Tentatively, Chris ran his hands over Greg's legs, moaning as he leaned in close, placing tiny kisses on Greg's thighs.

Chris was so hesitant at first that Greg wondered if he really wanted to be with him. Then Chris looked up, his eyes full of desire. Chris didn't look away as he ran his hands up Greg's legs to his butt cheeks. The shudder was evident, and Greg grabbed hold of Chris's hair, holding his head still.

“Why did you shake like that?”

Wide-eyed with red lips and pink cheeks, Chris stared up at him and bit his lower lip. “I've wanted to touch and play with your butt since I saw how hairy you were. Just being allowed to run my hands over you like this is enough pleasure to last a long time.”

Greg dropped to the floor and kissed Chris long and hard, pushing him back to the carpet so they lay side by side. When he ended the kiss, he slowly traced the curve of Chris's cheek.

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“You’ve pleased me today. The way you took care of Liam and how you admitted that you wanted to submit, it’s beautiful. I’ll allow you to do what you want with my ass today. Except I’m fucking you when you’re finished, you understand?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good, now show me what you’ve got.”

Chris turned him onto his stomach and began kissing just above his knee. Chris’s tongue traced slow patterns over his flesh. The way Chris was kissing him, worshipping him, was going to push Greg over the edge if he wasn’t careful. It had been a long time since anyone had tested his mettle this way. Liam was compliant in bed and never took a dominant role. It would be interesting blending Chris into their family.

The slide of Chris’s tongue over his crack made his dick jerk. He closed his eyes as he fought for control. Then Chris reached around and grasped onto his cock, and the pleasure was too much. He bucked and then turned over, pushing Chris off him. He squeezed the base of his dick, forcing his desire to go down.

“Fuck, that felt too good.”

Chris smiled and crawled close, his gaze predatory. Greg liked the game. He held up a hand and stalled Chris’s progress.

“Stop.”

The look of shock on Chris’s face was priceless. He didn’t have time right now to delve deeper into Chris’s psyche and see how far he could push him since he needed to be available for Liam if he woke. Greg wanted to tie Chris down and test him, pushing him to full obedience.

“Lean over the couch cushions and don’t touch yourself,” Greg growled as he pushed Chris’s shorts to the floor.

“Yes, Sir.”

Chris spread his legs wide, his ass offered up for Greg’s taking. For a long moment, Greg didn’t move, just stared at the beautiful man before him. Greg had calmed enough that he could take a moment to run his hand over Chris’s flesh, savoring the silky skin. He cupped Chris’s ass and squeezed. Chris pushed back against his hand, arching into his touch. Any other day and he would have spanked Chris for moving.

“Are you ready?”

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“Yes, Sir.”

“You should still be loose from earlier.” Greg ran his thumb over Chris’s pucker, then pushed in. “Oh fuck, you’re so tight.”

A drop of precum leaked from his dick. He grabbed a condom and rolled it on quickly before lining up. After squeezing some lube onto the tip of his cock, he pressed against Chris’s ring of muscle. He waited a few seconds before sliding in, sinking into the delicious heat. He wanted more of Chris pressed against him, so he wrapped his arms around Chris’s chest and pulled him up so Chris’s back was plastered against his chest.

“Mmm, feels so good.” Greg pumped his hips, holding Chris close as he rocked into him. “I want to fuck you so many different ways. Next time, I want to see how far you trust me.”

“Yes,” Chris hissed.

“I want to blindfold you while we do this. Will you let me do that?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good boy.” Greg stroked Chris’s dick, twisting his arm to heighten Chris’s pleasure. “Don’t come until I tell you to.”

Chris’s ass clenched, and he sucked in a breath. Greg knew he wasn’t going to last long. The dirty talk, along with his directive that Chris couldn’t come, would push him over the edge soon.

Greg slowed and toyed with Chris’s nipples. Chris moaned and clenched his ass. Greg reached down and ran his thumb over the tip of Chris’s dick, smearing the precum. Chris gulped in a breath, his whole body vibrating.

“Really, don’t come,” Greg commanded.

“Please, Sir,” Chris begged.

“No, you hold that in until I tell you it’s okay.”

Sweat slicked their bodies, and he held on tighter, not wanting even an inch to separate them.

“So sexy. I bet I could get you to come over and over again when I tie you up. Would you like that?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good boy.”

Chris's ass flexed again, and he started bucking in Greg's arms. The man was ready to explode. Greg chuckled before biting down on Chris's earlobe. This was about as far as he could press Chris.

"Now, baby, come now." Greg whispered.

Chris bent forward, taking Greg with him as he leaned over. His ass clenched down on Greg's dick, increasing the pleasure. Chris shuddered as Greg stroked him. He felt the first pulse of Chris's orgasm before the cum shot out into his hand. The pulsing of Chris's body was enough to pull Greg over the edge. He bit down on Chris's shoulder as his orgasm hit. He pushed into Chris, holding on tight as he came. They stayed locked together for a long moment, his deep breathing calmed Greg as he held on tight. When he finally moved, Chris twisted around and frantically searched for Greg's lips. They kissed until Greg realized Chris was crying.

Greg pulled out and tossed the condom onto a stack of newspapers. He pushed Chris onto the couch and lay down with him, holding him close as he cried. After a few minutes, his tears dried, and he snuggled closer.

"Do you feel better?"

"Yes, Sir. Thank you."

Greg stood, and Chris did too. They made their way into the bedroom, holding hands as they walked. Liam rolled over and moaned. Greg's heart squeezed. He knew having Chris live with them would be good for Liam. It might take a few days to convince him everything would be okay, but Chris being in their house would make their home even more stable than it was.

"Hey," Liam mumbled.

"Go start your shower, I'll be in there in just a minute." Greg swatted Chris on the ass, loving how he jumped away from the sting.

Liam pulled the covers up over his chin and rubbed his face on the pillow. Greg didn't know how he'd gotten so lucky as to find this man. He was magnificent. Being able to see Liam go from being totally broken to a responsible man pleased him. That he had a part in that was amazing.

"Babe, I just need to shower then I'll be back."

"I'm sorry." Liam pushed the covers away and sat up but was unable to meet Greg's gaze. "I failed you."

"No, love, you didn't."



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“But I was going to cut myself.”

Greg sat on the bed and pulled Liam into his arms, holding him close. “You will be punished for bringing a razor blade into the house. And you’re going to have to tell me how you did it so we don’t have to deal with this again, but I’m proud of you. You called Chris and asked for help.”

“You don’t mind, do you?”

“No, I like Chris. He’s going to move in with us.”

“What?” Liam sat up, his eyes wide.

“I asked him earlier, and he said yes.”

Liam jumped out of bed, racing toward the bathroom. Greg was used to his impetuous nature, but this was more than he expected. He followed quickly, finding Liam with his arms wrapped around Chris. Liam looked at him and smiled.

“Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Liam dropped his hold on Chris and came to Greg, dropping to his knees and bowing his head. He reached out and touched Greg’s leg, his fingers a soft brush on his flesh. Chris came to kneel beside Liam. Having these two men in his care made his heart swell with love. He wasn’t in love with Chris yet, but he felt an immense debt to the man. Chris had saved Liam, or at least saved him some pain. Liam may not be suicidal any longer, but there was always that possibility. With Chris in his house, they could both help Liam to get beyond the problems his parents had created.

Greg sighed as Liam and Chris exchanged a look, then began kissing his thighs. He’d have to keep a tight rein on this pair, because judging by the way they were licking him and caressing him, they would wear him out.

“Liam, Chris.”

They both looked up, their faces serious. “Yes, Sir.” Their combined voices were strong, sure and full of promise.

“Suck me until I’m satisfied.”

He leaned against the door, staying upright as Liam and Chris sucked, petted, and loved on him, taking him to paradise along the way. The rest of the evening was spent on pleasure. He made sure both Liam and Chris ate enough food, then snuggled under the covers with the pair, sandwiched between Liam’s

sweet caresses and Chris's warm hugs. When he woke in the morning, he had a moment of panic. What had he done? Could he actually take care of two men? Liam wasn't easy and took a lot of his energy.

Chris rolled over and kissed his pec before standing up and heading to the bathroom. His smooth bottom looked so inviting to Greg. No matter how difficult it seemed, he couldn't give up this man, not yet.

Greg untangled from Liam and went to the bathroom behind Chris. He picked up the mouthwash and rinsed while Chris finished pissing. Chris used the mouthwash too, spitting in the sink while Greg pissed. They didn't know each other well, and he could tell Chris was a little uncomfortable. He needed to set this man straight now or their future would be limited.

"What time do you have to be at work?" Greg asked.

"Eight thirty."

Greg stepped in front of Chris and wrapped his arms loosely around his waist. "You have time. I want you to shower, and you can wear my sweats and shirt home to get dressed, but before you leave, I need to discuss a few rules with you."

Chris nodded, then leaned in and kissed his chin. "Thank you, Sir."

Chris moved to step away, but Greg stopped him. "You're adapting well to this arrangement. I figured you for a smart guy, but not this quick on picking up how to behave."

"I don't want to displease you."

"You've done well. Tell me, how do feel about Liam?"

Chris's face turned pink, and he closed his eyes for a moment. Greg worried what Chris would say for a moment. Then, Chris opened his eyes, his gaze intense.

"I'm falling for him, hard. I want to pamper him, pleasure him, and hold him close."

Though Chris's words made him happy, melancholy hit him. Part of him wanted to be the one Chris loved, but that was silly. Liam was amazing, and he deserved the love Chris would show him. Greg kissed Chris's forehead and stepped away, but Chris's hand on his arm stopped him. He turned back slowly.

"Yes?"

“Would you—” Chris bit his lower lip before smiling, his eyes filling with water.

Greg cupped his chin and ran his thumb over Chris's lips. “Tell me.”

Chris nodded, swallowing before speaking. “Do you think you'd ever feel anything for me?”

The question threw him. He stared into Chris's eyes, mesmerized by the pleading look. “Chris, how could I not care for you? You're amazing, and you submitted to me so beautifully.” A small smile turned up one side of Chris's mouth, and he tried to look away, but Greg held his chin steady. “Don't hide from me.”

“Thank you.” Chris moved fast, burying his face against Greg's chest, his arms wrapped tight around Greg.

He'd underestimated the pain Chris must have suffered. It would take weeks to get to the bottom of the situation. For now, he'd continue to take care of Chris as they both took care of Liam.

Chris showered and dressed in a pair of Liam's loose-fitting slacks. Before he left, Greg made Chris eat an egg and some bacon. Greg told Chris he'd arrange the moving company. They parted with a sweet kiss that left Greg more than happy. He was working from home because Liam was too fragile. When Liam came out of the bedroom at nine, the look on his face scared Greg.

“Come here.” Greg mulled over how he'd act, but he needed to stay firm. Liam moved to stand in front of him before dropping to his knees and bowing his head. Greg gently brushed his hand over Liam's head. “My love, tell me what you are thinking.”

“I messed up. I was going to cut myself.”

“Why?” He knew but he wanted to hear it from Liam.

“They sent a letter. I read it. I knew I should have let you take care of it, but I opened the envelope and saw their words. It all came crashing back on me. How worthless I am...”

Greg grabbed a fistful of Liam's hair and forced him to look up. He didn't feel close enough, so he dropped to his knees and held Liam's face still, forcing Liam to look at him. Never again would he allow Liam to wallow in the waves of self-hate.

“You are special. I won't allow you to think you're worthless. Do you know what Chris told me today?”

Liam shook his head. "No, Sir." He was on the verge of tears, but Greg didn't loosen his hold.

"He said that he was falling for you. Do you think Chris would fall for someone who wasn't special?"

"No, Sir."

"Tell me when you bought the razor blades and where."

Liam glanced away, but Greg squeezed, tightening the hold on his hair. He knew he wasn't hurting Liam; he'd done enough experimenting when he was younger. In the past, he hadn't been so careful, but with Liam, he was very careful.

"I picked them up when I went shopping at Target. I stopped by the hardware store and bought them."

He wanted to wrap his arms around Liam and cradle him close, but he knew going soft on the man wouldn't work. He'd tried that before, and Liam ended up backsliding. "What should your punishment be?"

Liam's brow furrowed, and he pinched his lips together. "I don't know."

"I know just the punishment. You are not allowed to touch Chris until Sunday morning."

"No, please. Anything but that." Liam clutched onto Greg's hand. "Please, I need him."

"No. You must learn that you're not allowed to hurt yourself. I know your parents have done things to you that were terrible, but you can't respond by cutting. Do you understand why I'm taking Chris away from you?"

Liam nodded. "I'm so sorry. I swear I'll never purchase razor blades like that again."

"Good. Now you can cook me breakfast and focus on cleaning the house. When you're done, you can help me prepare the guest bedroom for Chris. Since you're in punishment, he'll have to sleep in there tonight and tomorrow."

Liam hung his head, his shoulders shaking as he drew in a breath. "I shouldn't have even thought of cutting myself."

"No, my love, you shouldn't have. When will you realize that I love you more than life? You are special, and I need you healthy. If you were hurt or in a facility, who would take care of me?"

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“I didn’t think of that.”

“Liam, you’re an important part of my life. You need to respect that. Don’t cut yourself again.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Liam puttered around the house, cooking breakfast and lunch for Greg as he worked. At five, Liam started making a delicious smelling chicken dish. Chris called and said he would be there close to seven. He was at home, packing a bag. Greg stepped outside and told Chris about the punishment.

“Should I even come over?”

“Yes. I want to see you, and it will help Liam to realize that he needs to be responsible.”

“It’s going to be difficult not to touch him.”

“Aren’t I enough?”

“Yes, Sir, but I will miss kissing Liam.”

Greg smiled, happy with how quickly Chris answered. It was interesting bringing Chris into their lives. He hung up the phone and turned, seeing Liam at the window. Liam was unhappy with Greg’s decision to limit his physical contact with Chris, but it would teach him that he had to stay healthy.

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## Chapter 3

Chris showed up at Greg and Liam's place a little before seven. Greg pulled him into a mind-blowing kiss, stealing his breath and making him hard as stone. When the kiss ended, he had to fight to stay standing. Then Greg stepped away, and he saw Liam looking like a lost little puppy.

"Hi, Liam."

Liam sucked in a breath, tears streaking down his cheeks. Chris's heart broke, and he moved to be closer to Liam, but Greg stopped him. Anger and pain flashed in Chris, and Liam dropped to his knees, tears flowing freely.

"No, he needs to learn."

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to make you angry. I swear, I won't ever try to hurt myself again. This is so much more painful than anything else ever has been."

"I'm glad it's painful. I hope next time you remember that you can't hurt yourself. Liam, please help Chris take his bags to his room, but you're not allowed to touch him."

Chris had a difficult time keeping his hands off Liam. He understood why Greg was being so harsh. Liam needed to understand his boundaries and learn to be healthy even when there was no one around to help. They stowed his suitcase at the end of the guest bed. Liam stood off to the side, his eyes on the ground.

"Liam," Chris whispered.

His head snapped up, his gaze meeting Chris's. "Yes?"

"You're doing good. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you."

He wanted to touch Liam, but he would follow Greg's request and stay away from him. They both walked back into the den, the tension between them so thick Chris wondered if it were visible.

Greg stood with his arms crossed over his chest, his legs about shoulder width apart. "Chris, what did you eat tonight?"

"I haven't had time to eat." Guilt filled him.

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“Liam, fix him a plate.”

“Yes, Sir.” Liam moved to the kitchen, and Chris followed.

He sat at the table, waiting for Liam to bring him his meal. When Liam set the plate down in front of him, they both stared at each other. The desire to touch was strong, but Greg cleared his throat. Liam straightened and moved to clean up the countertop. Greg came to sit beside Chris, resting his hand on Chris's knee.

Chris ate slowly, savoring every bite. When Liam was done with clean up, he moved to stand beside Greg. Chris wondered if Greg was ignoring Liam on purpose. He felt bad for the man, but the seriousness of his behavior kept Chris from saying anything.

When he was done eating, Greg glanced at Liam. “You may clean up Chris's plate now.”

Liam's eyes went bright, and he moved in close enough to pick up Chris's things but not close enough to touch him. Greg slid his hand up Chris's thigh to his crotch.

“Take off your clothes, Chris.”

Being with Greg was different. Before, in every relationship, he and his partner bumbled around. Often, they would miscommunicate and not express their desires. He liked how Greg told him what he wanted.

Chris stripped off his shirt, then stood, unbuttoning his jeans. He slid the zipper low, watching Greg the entire time. Liam came close and knelt while watching him. But Chris wasn't stripping for Liam; he was taking it all off for Greg. Finally, after he kicked his shoes and socks free, he pushed his pants low, revealing his body to Greg. He liked the appreciative stare and the way Greg spread his legs and massaged his cock.

“Go stand in front of Liam, but don't let him touch you.”

Chris moved to Liam, his heart aching at the pain in the young man's eyes. Desire filled him and his dick grew, lengthening as he thought of Liam touching him. Greg came to stand beside him and ran his fingers over Chris's chest, pinching both nipples as he explored. Precum dripped and Liam groaned.

“Liam, learn this lesson well.” Greg turned Chris and pushed him up against the table, bending him over and sliding his fingers over his crease. Chris moaned and arched into Greg's touch. The sound of a condom package ripping

was music to his ears. The drizzle of lube was cooling, but it didn't deter his need. Greg pushed against his opening, sliding in slowly. The first flash of pain ripped through Chris, and he shuddered. Greg stilled while he adjusted. Then Greg slid in deeper, moving slowly, his fingers digging into Chris's hips.

Liam moved to the end of the table, watching intently. Chris reached out to him, but Liam didn't touch Chris. He hoped Liam knew he was wanted. Greg started moving, his pace slow and steady, driving Chris crazy with the deliberate strokes. Each thrust pushed Chris closer to completion. The delicious feel of pain-pleasure had Chris wishing it would never stop.

Greg changed his rhythm, pounding him hard. Chris held onto the table, letting Greg have his everything.

"Sir, I'm so close."

"Then come, my sweet boy."

Chris closed his eyes as his balls pulled tight. The pressure of Greg in his ass and thoughts of Liam staring at him left him shaking. His muscles clenched, and he tried to pull away from Greg, but the hold on him was too much. Chris held his breath as he gritted his teeth, falling over the edge, allowing his orgasm to hit. He shook from the aftershocks, unaware of everything around him, and was surprised when Greg emptied his load deep in the condom. Chris looked up, staring into Liam's beautiful face. He'd not left the kitchen, but he looked so sad as he watched.

Greg pulled out, caressing Chris's butt cheeks before tossing the condom in the trash. He gave Chris a towel to clean up his mess. Greg moved closer to Liam. Chris and Liam still stared at each other, then Liam dropped to his knees and turned his attention on Greg.

Chris watched as Greg gently caressed Liam's face and cupped his cheek. "It's your bed time. Go get ready for bed, and I'll come in to take care of you before you go to sleep."

"Yes, Sir," Liam said. He left the room without looking back at Chris.

Chris moved to stand beside Greg and placed his hand on Greg's arm. "Do you think he's okay?"

"I think so. He's learned a valuable lesson. I can tell by the way he's looking at you that he wants to touch you. As long as he behaves tonight, I'll allow him to kiss you tomorrow."

Chris hugged Greg, nuzzling his face in Greg's neck. "Thank you, Sir."



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“He’s a good man. I love him so much.” Greg’s voice shook as he spoke.

Chris leaned back so he could look into Greg’s eyes. “You’re really okay with me being here? I don’t want to intrude.”

Greg pulled him close and kissed the top of his head. “Yes, I want you here. This will take some getting used to, but I think it will be worth it. Now, for you, my sweet man, I want you to relax and take it easy this evening. I’ll be with Liam for an hour, maybe more. If you’re still awake when I’m done, we can watch a movie or something.”

“Sounds good.” Greg kissed him hard before swatting him on the rear and heading into his bedroom.

Chris could hear their conversation—well, Greg’s part of the conversation because all Liam did was whisper. He wanted to hold Liam and kiss him tenderly, but he would do what Greg asked, because he could see that the man only wanted what was best for Liam.

After unpacking his suitcase, Chris pulled on a shirt and shorts. He was about to plop down on his bed when he heard a knock.

“Come in.”

Greg pushed the door open and stepped into his room. He wore shorts and a thin T-shirt. “He was tired.”

“Is he okay? I mean, his head in the right place and all?”

“Yes. I’m glad you’re concerned. Do you want to watch a movie?”

Chris nodded, then saw Greg’s eyes narrow. He smiled and moved to stand in front of Greg. He held his gaze and dropped to his knees. “Yes, Sir. If that’s what would please you, then yes, I want to spend some time with you watching a movie.”

Greg tugged him up and draped an arm over his shoulder. “I like you, Chris.”

They snuggled together on the couch, Chris getting Greg a beer when he wanted one. It was easy to take care of Greg. He was nice and appreciated everything Chris did. When he’d been with Phillip, he’d been nice, doing things for his ex, but the appreciation hadn’t ever come close to how Greg was.

After the movie finished, Greg pushed him to the couch cushions and hung above him, staring deep into his eyes. “Tell me, Chris, why did you choose to come live with me and Liam?”

Chris reached up and smoothed his hands over Greg's chest. "I like how you treat me."

"Many would think you're crazy for allowing me to determine what you eat, or wear, or where you sleep."

"But you're nice, never cruel. I've watched you take care of Liam. You're right; he'd be lost, maybe even dead, if you didn't take care of him."

"So tomorrow morning, when he wakes up and I tell him he can kiss you, don't take it past the kissing stage. He's going to want you, I can tell by the way he was looking at you, but please, don't let him get out of hand."

"No, Sir. I'll make sure we're both good."

Greg kissed him, holding him close for a long time. After they made out, their lips red and swollen, Greg stood and took Chris to his bedroom.

"You may not masturbate tonight. I want you ready for me in the morning."

"Yes, Sir." Chris leaned in and kissed Greg's chest, holding him close for a few minutes.

"Good night, my sweet."

Greg left his room, and he groaned. No masturbation. How the hell would he survive? The thought of Liam and Greg cuddled close all night long left him aching. He moved to the bathroom, pulled off his clothes, and stepped into the shower, dousing himself with cold water. It kind of helped, but not really.

The next morning, he was on the verge of waking, his body warm from sleep, his mind telling him he needed to get out of bed, when he heard the shriek. It pulled him to near consciousness when the bedroom door burst open. Then Liam was on him, kissing his face, humping him, and touching him everywhere. Already sensitive from sexy thoughts of the three of them together, Chris felt his balls pull up tight. The next time Liam ground against him, he came, clutching tightly to Liam.

Their kiss broke, and Liam stared down at him, his eyes wide. "Wow, from us just rolling around?"

Chris flipped him over and pinned him to the bed. "Don't ever try to hurt yourself again. I need you too much to be kept from you."

Liam nodded. "Yes, love, for you I'll be better."

"I guess we'll be washing sheets," Greg said as he moved closer to the bed. "We have a lot to do today. Chris, we'll help you pack. Liam, just make sure to

bring a box of condoms and lube so when we take breaks we can have some fun.”

Liam pushed Chris off and knelt on the bed, his hands smoothing down Greg's chest. “Yes, Sir. Is there anything else you need from us this morning?”

“You two in my shower,” Greg growled.

Chris pushed the sheets down, then stripped them off the bed when he stood. Greg came up behind him and held him close.

“I guess you didn't masturbate last night.” Greg kissed the side of his neck and stroked his chest.

“No, Sir.” Chris leaned against Greg, allowing the man to pet and stroke him. It felt good to be adored like this. Liam began kissing his chest, moving down to his belly and lower. Greg stepped away and pulled Liam to standing.

“Not yet, later, when I say you can.” Greg's voice was firm.

Liam nodded and cut his gaze over to Chris. “Yes, Sir.”

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They were halfway finished with the task when Liam brought out a photo album. “Who's the guy in the photos with you?”

Chris looked over his shoulder, and his heart sank. It was an album Phillip and he had put together, jokingly saying that one they they'd show their kids how happy they were.

“Why the long face, love?” Greg asked.

“I really was so unhappy.” Chris took the album and closed it, placing it on the countertop where he'd put other things he planned on trashing.

Greg shook his head and picked up the album. “We're keeping this.”

“But—”

“No, you need to confront it. How do you expect to get over him if you don't face it?” Greg placed the album in a box and closed the lid. “Later, once the initial sting is gone, we'll go through it together.”

“Why are you so hard on me?” Chris asked.

“Because I want you to be strong.”

“So I won't need you?” Chris shot back.

“No, so when you submit to me, you'll do it because you love and respect me, not because you're searching for a fix to your problems.”

Greg's words stung. Liam moved to stand behind him, clasping his hand and weaving their fingers together. Greg was right. He needed Liam and Greg. Chris wasn't sure if he wanted them, but he knew beyond a doubt he needed the pair.

"It's okay, Chris. One year, just give us one year, and then you'll know what you want."

Liam plastered his chest to Chris's back, holding on tight. "I need you," Liam whispered.

Chris turned and cupped Liam's face. "I'm not going anywhere." They kissed long and hard until Greg moved to stand beside them and cleared his throat.

The kiss had left him dazed. Liam dropped to his knees and tugged Chris down beside him. He grinned at Liam as he worked open Greg's pants. The amount of sex he was having since getting involved with Liam and Greg was more than he had ever had. It was addicting. Once Liam had Greg's dick free, he didn't hesitate and started licking the tip. Liam reached for Chris's zipper and freed his cock, stroking him as they licked and sucked on Greg.

"That's it," Greg moaned as Liam pushed Chris out of the way and began deep throating Greg. Chris moved behind Greg and ran his fingers over the hairy ass. He leaned in and kissed the crease. Greg moaned and reached back, massaging his hand over Chris's shoulder.

Greg's butt cheeks clenched before he slammed into Liam's mouth, pushing Chris away for a short moment. Greg pushed Liam off him and stepped away.

"Wait, I want more," Chris whined.

Greg turned and was pinching the base of his dick, his face pained. "Liam, finish Chris off before you fuck him."

Liam nodded and pushed Chris to the ground before using his mouth and hands to rock Chris's world. He sighed and closed his eyes but felt something above him and opened his eyelids. Greg was straddling his face.

"Suck me," Greg commanded.

Chris was in heaven. He loved hairy balls and toned asses. It didn't take long for him to come, and then Liam was in him, using long deep strokes as he fucked him. No doubt about it, the sex with these men was amazing. Now, all he needed was the emotions to go along with the connection.

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Liam cried out and collapsed on top of him. Greg swung away from him and grabbed another condom. He rolled it on and pushed Liam to the side before lining up to claim him. He lifted his legs and spread wide for Greg. Their gazes connected as Greg pressed against his opening. This was what he'd been searching for. Greg took control of him so beautifully, leaving him fulfilled.

The three of them together were more like a symphony instead of just beautiful music. They worked well together. When Greg came, he sank low, his lips right at Chris's ear.

"And that, my sweet, is how it shall begin. You are mine, and I'll take care of you. Do as I ask, and you will be rewarded. Now help Liam clean up and let's go home."

Chris placed his hand on Greg's chest, keeping him close. "Thank you, Sir, for taking me in and making me a part of your family."

Liam lay down next to him, his head on Chris's shoulder. "I'm happy that you're with us. Thank you, Sir, for letting me have Chris."

A few weeks ago he would have bristled at the thought of someone else having him, but for Liam, he'd do anything. He could imagine that they'd run into a few bumps along the road, but he was willing to submit to Greg, because he knew bending his knee would get him more than he would ever have to give up.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Writing is Sara York's life. The stories fight to get out, often leaving her working on four or five books at once. She can't help but write. Along with her writing addiction, she has a coffee addiction. Some nights, the only reason she stops writing and goes to sleep is for the fresh brewed coffee in the morning. Sara enjoys writing twisted tales of passion, anger, and love with a good healthy dose of lust thrown in for fun.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# THE BOOK & THE ROSE

By Douglas Glen

## Photo Descriptions

Gif 1: Two men in their early 20s begin kissing at night in a floodlit area with one pinned up against a post or pylon. The man with his back to the surface begins with his hands on his lover's face and ends with his hands cupped around the other's ass pulling him into the kiss.

Gif 2: Continuation of first Gif showing a close up of the kiss. The lovers pull apart briefly and make eye contact.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*See those gifs? That was us, the night it happened. The night it all changed, and our precious time together turned into a trickle of "secret" texts and emails and God-I-wish-you-were-heres...*

*The memory of that last time together, of feeling his touch, and his strength and heat up against me, has kept me going through some hard times. And I know it hasn't been easy for him either, and we've both done the best we can to be strong. But... I need that man. So much.*

*I'm trying to figure out how to make things right so we can be together again. I think I've finally worked out just what needs to be done; it isn't going to be easy and could possibly be dangerous and pull me farther away from him. That's all right though; I know the best things in life are worth making it over and around every obstacle on the way there. Worth taking risks and giving it all you've got. And that man? There's no doubt in my heart that he's the best thing in my life.*

*Sincerely,*

*Rissa~(an M/M kinda girl)*

*P.S. Thanks to Kaje for helping me with the prompt!*

*Restrictions:*

*\*Historical, Sci-Fi/Fantasy, Steampunk & Paranormal*

*\*Little to No Sexual Activity*

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*Please Include*

*\*Dry Humping or Frottage Scene (I would prefer this scene to happen either “the night it all happened” or even before then and maybe shown thru a flashback but it can be negotiated)*

*\*Angsty*

*\*HEA or Strong HFN*

*Major Bonus Points if you include any or all of the following!*

*I'd prefer not to have a “no sex” story so getting sexin' stuff to happen in other ways with them apart may prove challenging*

*\*Self-Pleasuring Scene with some anal play*

*\*Sexting/Phone Sex*

*\*Gruff, Gritty & Raw (So the loving/tender moments are more 'AWWW')*

*\*A Surprise Ending could be fun!*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** masturbation, businessmen/lawyers, grief, homophobia, in the closet, men with children, reunited

**Content Warnings:** graphic violence

**Word Count:** 13,796

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# **THE BOOK & THE ROSE**

**By Douglas Glen**

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## Chapter 1

*Diada de Sant Jordi, 23rd April 2014*

It was not only receiving the out-of-print book, *The Mirror in the Mirror*, a labyrinth by his favorite author Michael Ende, that made Liam ecstatically happy, but also the inscription inside the front cover.

*Dearest Liam,*

*With all my love. You have filled a space in my life that I didn't even know existed until I met you. Every day I am with you only serves to increase my feelings. I want to be with you forever and make you happy. Please, will you marry me?*

*Yours,*

*Sergey*

The huge square was filled with hordes of locals and tourists who were jostling around the bookstalls and rose sellers. St. George's Day in Catalonia is the day of lovers. Traditionally, men give women roses and women give men books, although in these days of equality, women generally get the best of both worlds by getting both a book and a rose.

Liam had just arrived by train from one of his teaching gigs just outside the city. After emerging from the subterranean train station, his pale skin glistened with sweat, and the April breeze was still cool enough to provide some relief after the hellish conditions below ground. Liam stood by the police station adjacent to the central entrance to the metro and train station.

He was exactly six feet tall with short brown hair that could become curly if he allowed it to grow more. He had a handsome, oval-shaped face sporting the designer stubble that he did not particularly like, but kept because Sergey liked it so much. His green eyes were his best feature, and were appropriate to his heritage, as he hailed from the Emerald Isle. Although he was clearly not Catalan, the jersey wrapped around his waist identified him as not being a tourist, who in Barcelona generally wear the lightest clothing even on the coldest evenings.

He glanced at his watch and looked around trying to spot Sergey in the crowd. Failing, he pulled out his mobile phone and opened a chat application.

*Liam: Hey guapo! I'm beside the police station. Where r u?*

---

Sergey: *I'm walking up there now. I'm on Las Ramblas fighting my way through the people.*

Liam: *Ok. See you soon :-\**

He put the phone in his pocket and admired the Mossos d'Esquadra—the Catalan police force—talking outside the police station, perhaps about to enter for a new shift. Uniforms always seem to make people more attractive, and the Mossos were no exception. The pale blue shirt with epaulets and navy trousers with a red stripe up the side always seemed to be very well-fitting, and the boots served to transform any policeman from ordinary to extraordinary.

Liam had no criminal tendencies, but he thought to himself (not for the first time), *If you had to be arrested, at least in Catalonia you would have some eye candy to make it better.* He snapped out of his daydream and spotted Sergey, for whom he would refuse any Mosso's offer, walking towards him.

Sergey arrived wearing jeans and a Lacoste polo. Like Liam, he had a jersey wrapped around his waist. He was slightly taller than Liam, and had black hair and brown eyes with light brown skin that led people to mistake him for being Catalan or Spanish. He was very expressive, and when his smile lit up his face, you couldn't help but smile in return.

He smiled, put his hand on Liam's face, and kissed him, saying, "I hope that you haven't been waiting long. I had to go to a shop in the Gothic area."

Liam smiled back. "No, don't worry! I arrived just a few minutes ago and anyway, the view is easy on the eyes," he replied as he looked towards the Mossos. "Let's go and get a drink. Then we can go for a walk down Las Ramblas."

They made their way to the pavement terrace of Cafe Zurich. It was a little expensive, being firmly on the tourist trail, but like the Catalans, Liam and Sergey never worried about the occasional extravagance to celebrate fiestas.

Liam ordered a coffee and Sergey ordered a Cacaolat, which is a type of chocolate milkshake. Once the rather snooty waiter had brought them their drinks, Sergey reached into his backpack and extracted a silver gift bag. He handed it over the table to Liam who carefully took it out of the bag. He looked at the book, which was in mint condition and could almost be mistaken for being new.

Looking at Sergey in surprise he blurted out, "How did you find it?"

"I have my means," said Sergey with a twinkle in his eye.

Liam opened the book and was about to begin flicking through the pages when he noticed the inscription at the beginning in neat, blue handwriting. He looked at Sergey wide-eyed and silent, his awestruck expression not giving away whether he was happy or sad.

“Well?” asked Sergey smiling at him.

“Yes! Of course!” exclaimed Liam as he stood up, pulling Sergey up and kissing him, provoking a temporary silence from the tables surrounding them and looks from the throng of people walking along the pavement.

They sat down again, and Sergey pulled a smaller silver bag from his rucksack. He opened it and removed a small jewelry box, which he flicked open to reveal a silver ring. The ring had two parallel circular lines and a small diamond on one side. He grabbed Liam’s hand, and pulled it towards him, carefully putting the engagement ring on Liam’s finger.

“I’m so glad it fits. I had a lot of problems trying to measure your finger. Every time I put the measurement paper around your finger I thought you were going to wake up!” He grinned at Liam, who smiled and leaned towards him to kiss him.

“You sneaky devil! But I like it.” Liam took off the ring and examined it. On the inner part of the ring he realized that there was a picture of two roses engraved in the silver. “You thought of everything! Thank you Sergey! You’ve made me happier than I ever thought I could be.”

Liam then remembered it was his turn to give Sergey a book. He removed a package tied up with brown paper and string. Looking slightly nervous and entirely excited, he said, “I can’t quite top your book and rose, but I hope that you like it.”

Sergey carefully untied the string and opened the package. Inside was a boxed set of *The Sound of Music* with a book and Blu-ray disk. Sergey laughed at the brown paper and string, a reference from the song “My Favorite Things”, and sang a little of the song.

Liam pulled another package out of his rucksack under the table and when he sat up, Sergey met him with a kiss. The second package was again wrapped in brown paper tied up with string. Sergey unwrapped it, and inside, there was a box of roses and chocolates. Sergey had a very sweet tooth. He said thank you and kissed Liam again.

Liam paid the waiter for the drinks, and they decided to take a walk down Las Ramblas towards the port and the Maremagnum center with its shops and

restaurants. As they made slow progress through the crowds, walking down the pedestrianized boulevard past the human statues, florists, bird sellers and artists, they discussed their plans together.

Sergey had never told anyone in his family that he was gay, with the exception of his now thirteen-year-old sister. His family was very conservative, as were many people in Russia, and if he were to say anything, he risked being disowned. He did not wish to lose contact with his sister, so he'd decided not to say anything to his family until Veronika had left home, and his family would have less opportunity to interfere in their relationship. He still loved his family, but was conflicted knowing that his mother and father would not understand the way he was. This meant that Sergey's side of the wedding guest list would be limited to friends.

Liam, on the other hand, had a very supportive family, and he was sure that many would make the effort to attend. They also excitedly discussed location and a possible date for the wedding. "I would love to have a wedding with an Elvis impersonator in Las Vegas," suggested Liam with a mischievous half smile.

Sergey hit him playfully on the arm. "Over my dead body," he laughed.

"Maybe Ireland will legalize gay marriage soon. I think they're going to hold a referendum," mentioned Liam hopefully.

As they reached the bottom of Las Ramblas, Liam took Sergey by the hand and pulled him towards a jewelry shop. "I can't have you without a ring on. I want people to know that you have been claimed," he said gently.

In the store, a jolly, middle-aged woman with short black hair and glasses showed them pads of rings. Sergey's preference was for a thumb ring, which Liam agreed with, because he didn't want there to be anything traditional about his marriage to Sergey. They picked out a silver ring, and Liam asked the jeweler if it would be possible to engrave a rose on to the inner part of the ring, showing her his own. She agreed that this would be possible, but that they were quite busy at the time around the Sant Jordi festivities, and it would be a few days before it was ready.

They continued on to the Maremagnum center where they went to an Italian restaurant overlooking the port. They shared a warm salad with eggplant and parmesan, then had a pizza, each accompanied with a fine white wine. They talked about who they would tell first about their engagement, and whether Facebook status updates would be in order at some point. They also texted their

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closest friend in common, Francesc, who immediately called Liam's phone and congratulated them, making them promise to come to his apartment for a barbecue at the weekend. After some tiramisu, they decided to take a walk along the seafront to the Olympic Marina before heading home. Sergey would have to get up early the next day for his job as a Spanish/Russian interpreter.

As they walked down towards the sea in a quiet area, Liam grabbed and pushed Sergey against a lamppost, kissing him softly at first and then, after pulling away to look at him, he kissed him more passionately, exploring Sergey's mouth with his tongue. Liam put his arms around Sergey and cupped the curve of his ass, pulling Liam up to him hungrily. Sergey then took control, and in a smooth movement, flipped Liam around against the lamppost. They were completely oblivious to their surroundings, lost in each other, until a passerby on a bicycle gave a wolf whistle. They stopped and looked around and then at each other, smiling. They were almost breathless from the intensity of the moment.

They continued on their walk, eager to get home to their apartment in La Barceloneta, the small peninsula jutting out from the coast, and the fishermen's neighborhood of Barcelona. When they reached the apartment building, they got into the elevator and, as soon as the doors closed, kissed again. When they reached their floor, they practically fell out the door. Liam struggled to get his keys out of his pocket while Sergey continued to kiss him. Eventually, they got into the apartment.

They both rapidly helped each other to undress, and although the evening was now cool by Barcelona standards, the sweat on their skin attested to the feverish heat in their bodies. They stayed in the small living room, and continued to kiss as Sergey pinned Liam against the wall. They were both completely aroused, and as they kissed, they ground against each other trying to achieve friction.

Liam moved his hand down between them and wrapped it around both of their cocks, moving it at a slow pace along their lengths and squeezing to create more friction between them. As they continued to kiss, Liam's hand moved faster. Sergey gave a soft sob and breathed harder.

Sergey put his hands on Liam's face and angled his head, kissing him deeply, only stopping occasionally to breathe. Liam increased the rhythm of his movement against their cocks and felt Sergey's balls tighten. A moment later, Liam felt a hot stickiness on his hand. Sergey had wrapped his arms around Liam's body, squeezing him tightly and kissing him with even more fervor, as Liam felt his own seed join together with Sergey's.

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Their kiss slowly turned into an intimate embrace as they luxuriated in the afterglow of sex. As always during sex between them, no words were spoken. The intimacy and intensity of their physical union expressed more than words could ever say. After a calming shower together, they went to bed, and Sergey lay curled against Liam.

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## Chapter 2

*Ring ring.* Sergey picked up his phone, which was vibrating and ringing on the bedside cabinet, answering, “Hola, dígame.”

Liam stirred and saw that Sergey was sitting up with his back leaning against the headboard. He had a worried look on his face and was speaking in Russian. He continued speaking for a few minutes, his voice changing from loud and almost harsh to soft and gentle.

He pushed the end call button and turned to Liam. “It’s my parents. They’ve had a car accident. That was my sister, Veronika. She’s gone to the hospital with my uncle Viktor. I have to get back.”

“Sergey, I’m so sorry. Let’s book a flight for you,” Liam gently kissed Sergey on the cheek, leaving the bed and returning with his laptop. Together, they found a flight leaving at 9:30 with a connection in Moscow five hours later. They booked it and printed the tickets.

As Liam made them some coffee, Sergey made several calls to his uncle at the hospital to get news, but there was little forthcoming. Liam packed a suitcase for Sergey and called a taxi company to book a car to take them to the airport at 7:00am. Liam listened and did his best to reassure Sergey as he was pacing the small apartment. He thought of all the practicalities, and planned to call Sergey’s boss to inform him of what had happened, charged Sergey’s spare mobile battery, and prepared his documents and tickets in a pouch.

Finally 7:00 a.m. arrived, and they went in the taxi to the airport. Liam waited in the queue with Sergey to check in, and walked with him to security. He held Sergey in a tight embrace, softly uttering soothing words, and finally saying, “I love you”. Sergey went through the security and looked back at Liam once and waved.

Liam boarded the train back to Barcelona and used the time to call Sergey’s manager to advise him of the situation. He then called the agency that provided him with his English classes to tell them he would not be working that day, asking them to find a substitute teacher for his classes in the various companies he visited to teach English to employees. He then got off the train and took the metro to the station in Barceloneta and walked back to the apartment. When he got to the apartment, he undressed and went to bed.



Liam awoke with a dry mouth a few hours later. It was lunchtime and although he did not feel like eating, he had not had any breakfast and realized that he should eat something. He scavenged the contents of the fridge and produced a supermarket-bought couscous salad and some cottage cheese.

Picking up his phone and looking at the time, he guessed that Sergey's flight would be landing in Moscow anytime now. Perhaps he would get some news during his wait for the flight to St. Petersburg. He called their friend Francesc and explained what had happened.

"How awful! Especially after last night and the proposal. Let me bring over something to eat when I finish work," cooed Francesc in unusually subdued Spanish compared to his normal animated tones.

Liam made a short show of refusing the consolation, but knew that his efforts would be futile and eventually he gave in, agreeing to Francesc's visit at seven.

Liam had met Francesc when he first came to Barcelona four years before. Liam had just finished his degree in English and thought that it would be nice to teach the language abroad for a year. He was considering going to China—a popular choice among those wishing to travel—but an online advertisement had caught his eye and lured him to Barcelona.

Francesc had worked as the receptionist at the language school he taught in, and had become a great friend, taking the time to show him around Barcelona (as well as its gay bars), and integrate him into life there. He had even suggested that Liam start working as a freelancer, as he would earn more money, which he quickly found to be true.

It was through his freelance classes that he met Sergey, who'd wanted to brush up on his English to take the Cambridge Proficiency exam. Liam hadn't realized Sergey was gay at first until he saw him standing alone at the bar in the *Museum*, a popular Barcelona gay nightspot. Liam had initiated one of those awkward conversations that happen when you meet someone outside the context you normally do. Liam plucked up the courage to ask him on a date, and a few weeks later crossed the line from professional to personal.

Snapping out of his trip down memory lane, Liam received a text from Sergey about an hour after having lunch.

*Sergey: Landed ok. No news. Waiting for my next flight. Thanks for helping with everything. I love you. I'm going to try and sleep before the next fight.*

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Liam: *Ok. Hope the news is good when you arrive in St. Petersburg. No problem for the help. Love you and thinking of you always.*

Sergey: :-\*

Liam: :-\*

Liam spent the afternoon cleaning the apartment and worrying about Sergey and his parents. He was barely thinking about the proposal from the night before, which now seemed to have been a hundred years ago. Arriving a little later than 7:00 p.m.—as was customary for Francesc—he rang the doorbell, and Liam let him in. He put two bags of takeaway Chinese food on the table in the living room, kissing Liam on both cheeks and hugging him tightly. He was a little shorter than Liam, with black hair, a squared face, and glasses. He was slim and seemed to stay that way no matter how much junk he ate.

“I’m so sorry about what’s happened to Sergey,” Francesc’s concern was evident through his tone. “Especially at what should have been a happy time for you both. You’ll have to tell me everything.” His voice trailed off as he went into the kitchen as if it were his own. He returned with plates, glasses, and cutlery. He served the food and pulled out a bottle of wine. “If today’s not a day to drown your sorrows a little, I don’t know what day is.”

He sat down and asked Liam to tell him everything. Liam told him about the phone call the night before, and about making the arrangements for Sergey to go back home. Francesc listened and tried to reassure Liam that everything would be all right. They watched TV for a while, and Liam fell asleep on the sofa. Francesc cleared away everything from their meal earlier, found a blanket to cover Liam with, and quietly left.

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### Chapter 3

In St. Petersburg, Sergey arrived at the hospital in a rental car, and immediately called his Uncle Viktor who was there with Veronika. Viktor directed him to the right area of the hospital. They were sitting in a waiting room, and as soon as he entered, Veronika got up and ran over to hug him.

She started to talk, but Viktor barked at her harshly, "That's enough Veronika! We talked about this." Viktor then took Sergey by the arm and said, "Let's go and talk and have a coffee."

He led the way to a canteen in another part of the hospital and ordered two coffees. They sat down at a table. "I'm afraid the news isn't good, Sergey. Your father died this afternoon while you were in the air. Your mother is in a coma, and the doctors say that it is unlikely that she will wake up. At some point soon, we will likely have to make the decision to switch the machines off. I'm sorry. There's really no nice way to say it. I thought it best to tell you things as they are."

Sergey sat there for a moment, numbed by the news. He didn't feel sorrow, happiness, or any emotion at all... just emptiness.

"The crash was caused by someone running a red light. The driver in the other car died, too," Viktor continued.

After a long silence, Sergey finally spoke, "Does Veronika know?"

"Yes, she knows everything. She's taken it quite well up to now. She cried at first, but she seems to be okay now. Of course, in time we will need to make arrangements to ensure that she continues to be brought up in a suitable environment."

Sergey frowned for a moment, not understanding what the last sentence meant, but decided to let it pass.

"Can I see my mother?" Sergey asked with a blank expression in his eyes.

"Yes, let's go and see her now. I'll ask the doctor to come and speak to us."

Viktor led the way back to the waiting room.

Sergey sat down with Veronika and said, "I'm so sorry that you had to be here without me when this happened. I can't promise you that things are going to be all right because I don't know what all right is anymore. But I can promise that I'll do all I can to look after you."

Veronika started to cry a little, and Sergey hugged her, which seemed to be met with a disapproving look from Viktor. He had just appeared at the door alongside a doctor with a severe face who appeared to be in her fifties. Sergey left Veronika and promised to be back soon.

The doctor introduced herself as Dr Raykova. "Let's go and see your mother. Only one person can come into the intensive care unit at a time, so it's just you. Your uncle and sister can wait here."

She led Sergey into a room with various machines whirring and beeping, and a bed with the form of somebody under the covers. As Sergey drew closer, he saw that his mother had her head bandaged up and the only visible parts of her face had been severely bruised. He sat down on the bed and took her hand for a moment, saying "Mum" softly. In the movies, this always seemed to induce a flicker of the eyelids or some response that gave hope, but there was nothing. She was expressionless.

Dr Raykova put her hand on his shoulder and said to him, "I'm afraid that there's no chance of her waking up. We've done a lot of tests as well as a brain scan, and there is no brain activity. Normally in these cases, we switch the machines off after everyone has had the chance to say good-bye. If we can agree on when everyone can come to say their farewell, we can set a time."

Sergey turned to her, and at that moment, it seemed to hit him that his parents were dead. He started to speak, but all that came out was a choking sound. Dr Raykova sat down beside him and took his hand without saying anything as he started to cry.

After a few minutes, he said to her, "Let's do it tomorrow. We're not a big family. There's just me, my sister, and my Uncle Viktor. For the sake of my sister, I don't want this nightmare to go on any longer than it has to."

"I think that's best," she responded. She let go of his hand and quietly left the room.

Sergey kissed his mother and then headed back to the waiting room. Viktor and Veronika stood up as he arrived. He took Viktor aside and said to him, "I'm going to take Veronika home. I'm really tired after everything. I've told the doctor we'll say good-bye to my mother in the morning, and then they are going to switch the machines off."

"Are you sure that you don't want me to take Veronika?" his uncle asked with a tinge of concern in his voice.

Sergey shook his head, “No, it’s fine. She’s thirteen anyway. It’s not as if she’s a young child.”

Viktor nodded. “Okay. Unless something happens before, I’ll meet you here in the morning at 9:00. We’ll need to start making arrangements for the funerals as well.”

Sergey took Veronika by the hand, and they said good-bye to their uncle and left.

On the way back home, Sergey listened to Veronika’s account of what had happened. She had been at home doing her homework while their mother and father had gone shopping at the supermarket. She had been out to visit a friend’s apartment across the street and was worried when she got home three hours after they had left to find that they still weren’t home. Uncle Viktor called her shortly thereafter, telling her that he had received a call from the police. He went over and collected her to take her to the hospital.

She started to cry at the point when she explained what had happened at the hospital. Sergey reached over to his sister and squeezed her arm. A short time later, they arrived at the apartment building in the darkness, as it was late in the evening. They stayed in the car until Veronika had stopped crying.

Sergey asked Veronika to call the elevator while he removed his luggage from the car. Once they were inside, Sergey asked Veronika if she had eaten.

“Not since lunchtime,” she replied.

Sergey looked in the freezer and found Kotlety (meatballs)—his mother’s specialty and a real comfort food. He put it in the microwave and laid the table, which was at the end of a huge dining room. While they were waiting for the food to heat, Veronika asked Sergey about life in Barcelona and with Liam.

Sergey had told Veronika about being gay before he left to work in Spain as an interpreter three years prior. Nobody else, including their parents, knew he was gay. It would likely not have been well-received, especially by Uncle Viktor. He worked as a member of the city administration for the United Russia party of Vladimir Putin, who had signed into law an “Anti-Propaganda” legislation just the year before. They had always had a close relationship, and Veronika had never told anyone of Sergey’s secret. They were always in touch over Skype and often sent each other e-mails, so Sergey recounted things about his life in Spain that he had not yet discussed with her. The microwave beeped and Sergey served the last meal cooked by their mother that they would ever have.

After eating, their conversation continued for a while and Veronika told Sergey of the things that had been happening in her life. She also expressed concern at the antigay sentiment in Russia. She told Sergey that one of her classmates who was slightly feminine had ended up in hospital after being ambushed by a group of students on the way home from school. Sergey listened in dismay. Russia had never been gay-friendly, but the new propaganda law had made things take a turn for the worse.

For the moment, he decided not to tell Veronika of his proposal to Liam. Veronika went to bed and Sergey switched on the computer in his father's study. His father worked as a translator and interpreter on a freelance basis for several multinational corporations and had taught him and his brother to speak English, Spanish, and French.

When he opened the computer, he had to guess the password his father used. After four attempts, he was successful, using the name of the village his father had been brought up in. He switched on Skype and looked for Liam in the online users list. He found him and clicked on his name, hearing the familiar Skype ringtone and seeing the pop-up box in the corner of the screen. Liam answered and switched on the camera. He looked very tired, as if he had just woken up. Sergey explained what had happened, and Liam listened silently.

"I'm so sorry Sergey," Liam said gently. "Do you want me to come to be with you?"

"I would love you to come here, but it just isn't possible. Life in Russia is difficult and dangerous for those who are open. I wouldn't care, and if it wasn't for my sister I would take the risk. But if you came, I don't think I would be able to hide it."

Liam huffed, and although he tried not to show it, Sergey perceived he was a little hurt. "I just wish that I could be there, if only to give you a hug," said Liam.

"I know, I wish you were here too. It's late and I need to get to bed. I have a very long day ahead tomorrow. I love you."

"I love you, too, and I'm thinking of you every moment that you are away. Call me anytime if you need to talk."

The next morning, Sergey realized he needed to tell Veronika that today would be the final good-bye to her mother. He told her after they had finished a

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breakfast of cold cuts, cheese, and bread. She took it calmly, already knowing what would happen from the conversations she'd had with Uncle Viktor, and from seeing her mother's motionless and vacant body on the life support machines in the hospital.

They dressed and made their way to the hospital in the rental car. The day was bright with a crisp coolness compared to the spring temperatures in Barcelona. The journey was taken largely in silence. When they arrived at the hospital, they had coffee in the canteen with Viktor before Sergey went to see the doctor.

They agreed that Viktor could go in first to say good-bye to his sister-in-law, and then they would make an exception to the one-person rule and allow both Sergey and Veronika to be there when the machines were switched off. The doctor told him everything would be stopped so that there would be no beeping or other noises coming from the machines.

They went to the waiting room and Viktor went in to say good-bye, followed by Sergey and Veronika. Nothing had changed since the night before; his mother was still a shell of her past self, artificially maintained by machines. Veronika went to the head of the bed and put her hand on her mother's face. She began to cry, and Sergey put his arm across her shoulders.

After a few minutes, she turned to Sergey and said, "I can't be here when it happens. I'm sorry," and she started to cry again. Sergey walked with Veronika to the door, nodding to the nurse who was waiting outside. The nurse came in and switched the machines off one by one. Sergey held his mother's hand and sat on the bed. Finally, the nurse placed the stethoscope on his mother's neck and nodded to him to indicate she was gone. He got up from the bed and said good-bye, kissing her on the forehead.

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## Chapter 4

Liam called Sergey's manager once again to explain what had happened. He assumed Sergey would need to take his vacation time and asked if it would be OK for him to take two weeks off. His manager was very understanding, saying his father had died the year before and he understood that he would need some time to sort things out.

Liam thought to himself that speaking to his boss was at least one thing he could do for Sergey. He felt so helpless with everything else being so far away. He understood that it was very difficult in Russia to be open, but that didn't make him happy with the situation.

He also felt very grateful for the support of his family. He had decided not to tell them of the proposal at such a difficult time, but he was sure that they would treat Sergey like another one of the family. They had already met him several times in the capacity of being Liam's boyfriend, and they liked him very much, although he had been given the third degree in just about everything to make sure that he was good enough for Liam.

Back in Russia, after spending some time at the hospital, Viktor and Sergey went to visit the undertaker to make arrangements for the funerals, burial plots, and the 1,001 other things that funeral directors want to sell you when someone dies. Viktor agreed to pay for the funeral upfront, deciding to recover the costs later from the estate.

Normally in Russia, the bodies of the deceased lie in state in the family's house during the three days between their death and burial. In this case, they decided that—given they had been in an accident—this wouldn't be the best idea. They agreed to have just a church service and a reception. Although his parents weren't really that religious, as in most countries, everyone is religious in death whether they like it or not.

Over the next two days, Sergey busied himself calling his parents' friends to tell them the tragic news. His family was very small. His only surviving relatives were his sister and Uncle Viktor. He grew tired of going through the same conversations again and again, and felt sapped of energy and emotions at the end of each day. Veronika tried to help by luring him away from the phone every now and again to play a video game, or to go out and buy snacks and chocolate.



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On the night before the funeral, he called Liam and told him what was happening. It was a strained phone call for both. Sergey was distressed to hear Liam's voice so full of worry, and Liam was beside himself with concern about Sergey's emotional state and how he was holding up. He ended the call promising to call back the next evening after the funeral.

The funeral was well attended. There was a mix of personal friends, many of whom Sergey knew, and professional friends from his father's work as a translator and his mother's work as a research chemist, most of whom he did not know. He sat at the front, with Veronika in between him and Viktor.

The church service was mostly religious. Not religious himself, Sergey objected to the ceremony being hijacked to be used as just another sermon rather than honoring the dead. After the ceremony, they went to the grave in a cemetery on the outskirts of the city. The coffins were lowered into the ground as each of the mourners took a handful of soil and threw it on top. It was at this moment that the enormity of what had happened really hit Sergey, and as they walked back to the car, he wondered what the future would be like from this point forward.

At the reception which followed, many people shared stories about his parents. A man who was a good work-friend of his mother's gave, the appearance of being gay to Sergey. He didn't know for sure, but it made him wonder how his parents might have taken the news had he come out.

Before leaving to drive home, Viktor said that they had an appointment with his parent's lawyer the next morning at 10:00am. At home, Sergey prepared hot chocolate for himself and Veronika, who broached the subject of what would be happening to her, for the first time.

"What's going to happen to me?" Veronika croaked, stirring her hot chocolate.

"I don't know," Sergey replied softly, "I'm going to have to think about it. I love you and whatever happens, I'm not leaving you alone."

Before going to bed, Sergey called Liam and told him how the funeral had gone. Although during the funeral he had not been particularly emotional, on the phone with his lover, he broke down in tears and it broke Liam's heart. Liam listened to Sergey tell him of the love that he had for his parents, the experiences that they had shared, how his father's patient language tutoring had given him the opportunity to work abroad, and all the ways in which he appreciated his parents but had told them too little.

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Liam listened and wished he could be there with Sergey to hug him, hold him, and make it better. Sergey, exhausted after his emotional outpouring, decided to finish the call. He thanked Liam for being there and wished that words could express a hug or a kiss, but found them sadly lacking.

The next day, Sergey prepared breakfast and told Veronika she would have to stay home while he and Viktor went to the lawyer's. He also said they would need to discuss her return to school, perhaps the next day. "It won't do you any good to be at home thinking about what has happened. Getting back to normal will help you to get over it faster."

Viktor called to say he was outside, and Sergey put his coat on and headed out to meet him. The day was overcast and threatened rain. He got into the car and said hello. As he began to talk, Viktor hushed him. "Shh! I want to listen to the news," he spurted out, proceeding to turn up the volume of the radio.

Sergey sat back and played a video game on his phone to distract himself. He rarely listened to the news, neither on the radio nor on TV, and read a weekly digest online once a week. He was of the opinion that it is rare that one is able to influence the news directly, so why spend so much of your life listening to every detail?

They arrived fifteen minutes later at the lawyer's office, which was housed in a sixties, prefabricated tower block. They went into a subterranean car park and took a creaking elevator to the fourteenth floor. The secretary, whose desk was just inside the office door, informed them that the lawyer, Mr Valuev, would be a few minutes, and offered them a coffee while they waited. Liam accepted and Viktor declined.

They sat in the room and Viktor read a magazine about the economy while Sergey continued to play *Sweet Switch* on his phone. A few minutes later, a large man who appeared to be as tall as he was wide appeared at one of the doors leading off the waiting room and introduced himself as Nikolai Valuev. He ushered them into the office, expressed his condolences, and told Sergey he had dealt with his father for many years and regarded him not only as a client, but a friend. He had gone to the funeral, but was sorry he didn't have time to go to the reception.

Mr Valuev sat down behind his desk and indicated that Sergey and Viktor should sit in the chairs in front. He switched on his green banker's lamp and took a manila folder from one of the paper trays on the side of the desk. He opened the file and said, "Of course, the most important provision is what will

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happen to Veronika. Unfortunately, your parents did not anticipate dying young, so there is no provision in the will for her custody. In the eyes of the law, any suitable relative may assume the role of guardian for a minor. Have the two of you discussed this?"

Viktor quickly spoke up. "No, but I think that I would be best placed to take care of Veronika."

Sergey looked at Viktor and said, "I think that she would be best with me."

Viktor frowned. "Well, you're not here in Russia. You're off gallivanting around Europe and you have only been in Spain for a few years. You can't offer her the stability that she deserves. In any case, I don't think that any court in Russia would allow a homosexual man to take custody of a minor. I mean, who knows what sort of filthy perversions would go on in your house. I wouldn't want Veronika to be involved in that."

Sergey felt red heat rising to his face, but forced himself to remain calm. He knew he had to be careful if he were to save this situation. "What makes you think that I am a homosexual?" Sergey couldn't help but spurt it out. "I was on your parents' computer. Veronika's e-mail account was saved in the browser and I saw that you had been talking about living with someone called Liam," Viktor responded, raising an eyebrow.

Sergey frantically thought back to his most recent e-mails to his sister. He hoped that Viktor had not gone any further back into the history. "Liam is my flatmate, and yes, he is a friend. That hardly makes me a homosexual—not that there is anything wrong with being gay."

Viktor leant forward in his chair, looked Sergey in the eye, and said, "The fact that you say there is nothing wrong with it alone questions your suitability as Veronika's guardian. Anyway, you have a Visa to live in Spain, but she doesn't. You can't take her with you, Sergey."

Sergey ignored Viktor, turning his attention back to the lawyer. "Mr Valuev, please. I would like you to make arrangements for me to take custody of Veronika." Viktor cut in sharply, "If that's the case, I will instruct my lawyer to contest the proceedings."

Mr Valuev was silent for a moment, digesting the situation. "Well, evidently this matter will have to go to court. For the moment, Sergey is my client, so I will do as he has instructed."

He continued to read the will. They learned that a life insurance policy and the estate would be split equally between Sergey and Veronika, with her part

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going into a trust fund as per the law. A reasonable amount would be released to pay for Veronika's upkeep until she was old enough to control the trust herself.

When Mr Valuev had finished, Sergey told Viktor that he would take a taxi home, staying behind to speak to the lawyer in private.

Mr Valuev told him that unless Viktor attempted to get emergency custody of Veronika, pending a court case, she could stay home for now. Sergey signed some papers and asked the receptionist to call him a taxi.

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## Chapter 5

On his journey home, Sergey wondered how his life could change from such happiness to sadness and frustration in such a short time. He had to be fair to Liam and tell him that he would not likely be able to marry, or even be with him anytime soon, and although it would break his heart, release Liam from any obligation to him.

When he arrived, he found Veronika in the living room reading a novel in English. He explained what had happened with Uncle Viktor. Veronika was livid with anger. "How could he look at my e-mails? He didn't say anything to me!" Sergey made them lunch, and after they had eaten, went to his father's office and called his manager in Spain. He explained what had happened and that he would be resigning from his post. He apologized and offered to do a transfer of his work over the phone with whoever was taking over his position. He then spent the rest of the afternoon going through bills and other documents and calling companies to arrange the necessary changes.

When he knew that Liam would be getting home from work, he started writing an e-mail. He thought writing would be the best way to tell Liam what had happened. Emotional conversations had a way of going wrong over the phone, and you can't reread a phone call.

*Dear Liam,*

*I can't believe that our happiness could change to sadness so quickly.*

*As you will know, my sister Veronika is 13. There is nobody from my family other than my uncle who can take care of her. I want the best for my sister, and I know that she will only get that if she is with me.*

*My uncle will challenge my application for guardianship of Veronika in court, and that process could last up to 2 years. I know that we have talked about the anti-gay propaganda laws and other laws here in Russia. Suffice it to say that anything that could give the court reason to believe that I am gay could prejudice my application.*

*There are many types of love, and love for your family is important. My sister is the only family that I have, and I am all*

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*she has. My love for you is as strong as ever, and because I love you, I can't ask you to put your life on hold and wait for me.*

*You would be best to forget about me and move on with your life.*

*Love,*

*Sergey*

He pushed the send button and slumped back in the chair.

Liam got home from his final class at around seven and switched his laptop on as soon as he got in. He read the message from Sergey and pushed the computer away from him. "Fuck!" he shouted at nobody.

A few minutes later, the jeweler from Las Ramblas called him and told him that Sergey's ring was ready for collection. He wanted to throw the phone at the wall, but restrained himself. He knew that Sergey was only thinking of his family, but how could he want Liam to "forget about him"? He thought about the feeling of Sergey against his body, of his kisses and the warm feeling that he had whenever he was in his presence. He sadly thought of how empty his life would be without him.

A few days later, Sergey hadn't heard anything from Liam. He hadn't seen him on Skype and hadn't tried to initiate a conversation by phone or text, knowing that he needed to allow him time. He assumed the worst—that Liam had taken him at his word and accepted the break up. He knew it was unreasonable to ask him to wait, but that didn't make it any easier. He decided that if he didn't hear from him in a few weeks, he would phone him to make arrangements for the collection of his belongings by a courier company, as well as arrange for the payment of his rent and other obligations.

In the meantime, he had found a job similar to the one that he had in Barcelona working for an American outsourcing company. He cut off any relations with Viktor and made it clear that he no longer wanted to have anything to do with him while he was contesting his right to be Veronika's guardian. For the sake of his sister, he did his best to remain cheerful and create a routine.

Two weeks after he sent the e-mail to Liam, a package arrived at Sergey's house with postage from Spain. He hardly dared open it. Inside was a book, *The Neverending Story* by Michael Ende, and the ring that Liam had bought him on Las Ramblas. Inside the cover of the book was a message.

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*Dear Sergey,*

*I loved your proposal in the book which I will always treasure. I decided to get you another book. I hope it will be special for you.*

*I want the love that we have to be like the title of this book. When you proposed to me, I thought that I would burst with happiness. Although we aren't married, what sort of husband would I be if I ran at the first sign of trouble? If I have to wait 2 years, then so be it. As Kalyn Hemphill said in the film that we both like so much, Steel Magnolias, "I would rather have thirty minutes of wonderful than a lifetime of nothing special." And you, my love, are most definitely wonderful.*

*Loving you always,*

*Liam*

Sergey read the message and smiled with relief. He would call Liam later.

That afternoon, while Sergey walked along the street, his phone was stolen. The thief was brazen and grabbed the phone from his pocket, pushing him off balance before running down the street. Sergey shouted after him to no avail. He would not be able to catch up with the thief.

As soon as he arrived home, he went onto the Cerberus anti-theft app's website. He was relieved to find the app's report that the phone was still switched on. He deleted all of the personal data remotely. He was able to switch on the GPS tracking feature, and also asked the app to take photos every time someone unlocked the screen.

A few minutes later, he was shocked at what he saw when the app returned the location of the phone. It appeared to be Uncle Viktor's apartment. When the app returned a photo a few minutes later showing Viktor's steely eyes looking down at the phone, Sergey was shocked that his uncle would stoop to such deplorable tactics, presumably looking for evidence that he was gay. He instructed the app to lock the phone permanently.

If his uncle was prepared to stoop so low, he would need to take more precautions. At home, he wiped his parent's computer and installed an open source operating system. He encrypted the installation using a random password, and created accounts for himself and his sister. If the computer was stolen, it would yield little information, and even a virus would be unlikely

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given that few hackers wrote viruses for an operating system so infrequently used.

In the evening, once his sister had gone to bed, Sergey switched on his Skype and checked the contact list for Liam, hoping to get ahold of him, as it was midnight in Barcelona. He was online, so Sergey clicked the phone button to initiate the call. It rang with the customary ringtone, and a moment or two later, Liam's voice came through the computer followed by his image shortly after as he switched the camera share on.

Sergey said to him, "I love you more than ever," with an almost tearful waver in his voice.

Liam grinned and replied, "You got the package then?"

"Yes," said Sergey, smiling.

They talked about what had happened since they had last spoken. Sergey told him about the lawyer's meeting, Uncle Viktor, and the theft of his phone. They agreed they should be careful, and Liam suggested that they begin to use a more anonymous messaging service that would delete all chats if the conversation were to be found.

Their conversation rapidly turned to sex. Liam took his shirt off, revealing his milky white skin. Sergey did the same and told Liam how sexy he thought he looked. He talked about their first night together. They had gone to a comedy show in a theatre and had walked to Sergey's place together for a "nightcap". Once Sergey had served them both drinks, he sat down beside Liam on the sofa. He had taken a moment of silence in the conversation as an opportunity to move in for a kiss. Liam let Sergey move his tongue delicately into his mouth as they kissed more deeply and caressed each other.

After a few minutes, Sergey pulled Liam up by the hand and unbuttoned his shirt, still trying to kiss him in between buttons. He pulled his own T-shirt over his head and tugged Liam into the bedroom. He pushed him onto the bed and tore off his jeans. He then finally removed Liam's boxer briefs and got to work on his cock.

Liam moaned as Sergey expertly moved his tongue up and down, and in combination with his hand, created friction against his cock. Sergey turned him over and buried his face in his ass, licking and probing against his opening. Liam squirmed at the welcome intrusion, breathing rapidly.

Sergey finally whispered in his ear, "Please, can I make love to you?"



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Liam breathed, “Yes, please!” with an almost desperate note in his voice.

Sergey described the experience of that night from his point of view, and as he did, Liam inserted a vibrating P-spot stimulator from their toy box slowly into his ass after coating it with a squeeze of lubricant. As Sergey went on telling him how good it felt to be inside, both he and Liam were running their hands up and down their cocks.

Liam told Sergey how intense the feeling of him inside him was, and the electric current that ran through his body every time his cock rubbed against his prostate. The P-spot stimulator combined with his masturbation was doing its job, and Liam felt his ass clench around the toy as he came with a grunt. A moment later, Sergey came, and his seed actually hit the webcam he was using. They both laughed as a white blob moved down the image of Sergey on the screen, and he found some tissues to clean it up with before it reached the bottom. They said goodnight and both of them moved towards the camera in a kissing motion with their lips puckered.

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## Chapter 6

After a month, Liam moved apartments from Barceloneta to move in with Francesc. Without having Sergey to live with, the rent was too much. Francesc was fun to live with and would ensure that he didn't mope for not having Sergey there with him. Every time he received a message from Sergey or had a call on Skype, it made him almost as sad as it did happy. The connection both reminded him that he had a fiancé who loved him, and of his absence. Francesc knew of everything that had happened and even sometimes joined Liam briefly on their occasional Skype calls.

Sergey kept Liam informed of the proceedings with the courts, although it seemed that the judicial system moved slowly in Russia. The first hearing for the temporary custody of Veronika took place four months after his parents died. The hearing was short, and Viktor brought up his allegations of Sergey being gay, which were flatly denied by Sergey. The court asked if there was any evidence of this, and Viktor was unable to produce any. The court ruled that until the definitive hearing, Veronika would stay in Sergey's custody.

Viktor did not speak to Sergey as he passed him in the lobby of the court speaking to his lawyer. Sergey allowed himself the luxury of a smirk, which seemed to have the desired effect on Viktor, as his face reddened in fury.

Sergey and Veronika celebrated by getting takeaway pizza and enjoying a movie marathon. Once Veronika had gone to bed, Sergey texted Liam to tell him the good news. Liam was delighted that this first step had been overcome, but with the definitive court date not yet set and likely to be a long way down the line, he still lived in the day-to-day, as thinking about the future gave rise to dangerous hopes.

The Skype calls and text conversations served to keep their relationship alive across the miles. Liam and Sergey would text each other often, if only to say good morning or goodnight. They became experts at turning each other on using Skype or over the phone. At night, once Veronika had gone to bed, Sergey would lock himself in his father's study and connect to the Internet.

Sometimes Liam would already be naked when they connected, and sometimes he would be clothed, putting on a strip show by seductively removing his clothing piece by piece. Liam would take out the toy box that they had in Barcelona and use the toys on himself. Sergey found it more difficult to

behave in the same way as Liam on camera, but became an expert in talking dirty as Liam used the toys. His vivid descriptions of how he felt when he was inside Liam and pushing against him with his firm, strong body, helped to bring them both to the edge and push them over it.

A few months after the first court date, Sergey received a message from an old school friend on a social network that is more popular than Facebook in Russia. Aleksandr said he had noticed that Sergey was back living in St. Petersburg and suggested that they meet for a coffee. Sergey was lonely, and having left Russia straight after university, he had few friends in St. Petersburg; many of those he'd had in school had moved away to other cities or abroad. Although he definitely couldn't afford to come out to anyone given the stakes at play, he could certainly be social.

He agreed to meet with Aleksandr in a bar close to his house. When he got to the bar, he received a message from Aleksandr apologizing for being late. His son's mother hadn't yet returned from her job and was running a bit behind. He asked if Sergey could go to his house to meet him. Sergey replied saying yes, and made his way to Aleksandr's apartment. He walked into the building and climbed the dingy stairwell up to the second floor, but as soon as the door opened, he realized that this was a trap.

A woman in her twenties with brown hair tied back in a ponytail opened the door, and from behind him, what seemed to be two large men pushed him forwards. One grasped his arm and pulled it behind his back, causing Sergey to wince in pain. One of the men hit him across the back of his head, causing a sharp pain so intense that he thought he would pass out. He was pushed into the main room of the apartment and saw that there were many people around laughing and watching the spectacle. They shoved him to the floor in the middle of the room.

The woman who had answered the door spat on him and said, "Your uncle tells us that you are a filthy faggot. I don't know why people like you don't just overdose and cleanse the earth of their filth. If it's not enough to be a faggot, you want to corrupt a child and make her participate in your feculent, abhorrent lifestyle. Right now you are going to give us the passwords to your e-mail accounts, Skype, or whatever it is you use to communicate with your so-called 'boyfriend'. Maybe we can give him a special show on Skype."

Sergey remained silent and the woman slapped him across the face. "Talk, you animal, or by God we will make you talk."

One of the men kicked him in the face. He felt a tooth breaking in his mouth and a trickle of blood run down his chin. From behind him, the thug who was holding his arm behind his back pulled back on his finger, and he felt a snap that caused such intense pain he screamed out in agony. He knew he would not be able to take much more, so he gave in and gave the thugs the information they wanted.

After they had entered into his e-mail and found messages to Liam, they mocked him more and read out the messages. They also downloaded the text to the laptop they were using. Thankfully, Liam was not online. Once the woman deemed that they'd had enough, several of the men gathered around him and urinated on him while the thug behind him forced his head forward into their streams. Another beating followed, and he was dragged out into a car and, after a few minutes, dumped in the center of the city.

People stared at him as he walked home, knowing that a taxi or public transport would not let him on in his shape. He wouldn't go to the police, knowing that they would do nothing. Being gay automatically excluded you from the protection of the law and only left you open to harassment from the same.

Once he got home, Veronika met him, shocked at his injuries. She helped him to wash and get changed, then called a taxi to take him to the hospital. At the hospital, they put his finger into a splint and stitched and bandaged his other injuries. He would visit the dentist the next day.

When he got home, he changed all of the passwords on his e-mail accounts and Skype, and called Liam, who gasped at his appearance with a bandage around the top of his head. Sergey explained what had happened and broke down in tears. At that moment, Veronika came into the study and hugged him, sitting with him for the remainder of the conversation. Liam was horrified that something so terrible could happen to Sergey, and felt helpless being so far away.

In the following days, Sergey found it difficult to sleep and suffered nightmares of the ordeal that he had been through. He would wake up covered in sweat after reliving his bashing. Worse still, he had lost all hope for the future. He imagined that the court would take Veronika away from his care. The "evidence" gleaned from his personal e-mails would no doubt turn up in court. If that happened, he dared not think about what the future would hold for him. Up to two years of waiting would already be a long time for Liam. Nobody could be expected to wait the five years until Veronika turned eighteen and would no longer be under control of Viktor.

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He would never meet somebody like Liam again. Would he be confined to loveless hookups via mobile apps or in the dark rooms of underground clubs? Every time he'd worry that it could be another trap laid by the gangs who considered hunting gay men a legitimate pastime. Although he tried to keep a brave face for the sake of Veronika, inside he was tearing himself apart. In his darkest moments, he even wondered whether being gay was really a selfish choice as the politicians and religious zealots on the TV said. Maybe it would be better for Veronika to be with Viktor after all.

Liam noticed Sergey's decline on their Skype calls and even in the text conversations they had. The Sergey he knew was being worn down slowly by the assault, and he was worried he would give up hope. He knew that he needed to take action.

Liam wasn't sure how he could help Sergey, but he wanted to learn all that he could about the situation for gay people in Russia. He looked through human rights websites and those of gay organizations, and what he read wasn't good. There were horrific attacks occurring throughout Russia every day, with the attackers acting with apparent impunity. Leading politicians were talking about taking children away from gay parents, and there were even calls for those with HIV to have their fingerprints taken and kept on a national database. He did find some hope with some important figures speaking out, and found an interview in English with a lawyer who had some success in helping gay clients.

Liam called the offices of Olga Tcvetkova, and asked if it would be possible to arrange an appointment to speak to her on the phone. He was told by the receptionist that appointments did not normally take place over the phone. Liam explained that he was calling from abroad, and that he would be willing to pay for a consultation. It was agreed that he could have an hour-long consultation with Olga, so he arranged for the transfer of funds to a bank account provided to him in an e-mail after the call was finished.

A few days later, he had the call with Olga Tcvetkova and explained the situation that Sergey was in. She said there was little she could do as a lawyer. If Viktor established in court that Sergey was gay, it was very unlikely he would become Veronika's guardian.

"However," she said, "corruption is a way of life in Russia. If you were able to dig some dirt up on him, maybe you could use it. Being a member of the city administration, Viktor is a politician, and they are normally both more sensitive to public opinion and more likely to be involved in corruption. I can

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recommend a private investigation agency that is run by a dear friend of mine. He's a friend of Dorothy like you and I. I think that's how you say it in English, isn't it? However, I must warn you that the risks of getting involved with politicians are high. At the moment, Viktor only wants custody of Veronika. If he pushes further, Sergey could be fined a considerable amount for pushing propaganda on his own sister."

Liam thanked Olga for her time and advice, and proceeded to make more calls. He spoke to the detective, Daniil, whom Olga had recommended. He was a pleasant man whom Liam judged to be in his fifties. He readily agreed to set forth the investigations for Liam. The cost was considerable, but if today wasn't a rainy day, Liam didn't know what was.

Liam did not tell Sergey of his actions. He didn't want to give Sergey any false hope or have him implicated in any way as a result of his actions. He knew that in his present state, building up his hopes fruitlessly could be devastating. He read the reports that came in from the detective and received a call once a month to discuss them.

In the months that followed, Liam was on the verge of flying to be with Sergey even though he knew of the risk. With the assistance of Veronika, he persuaded Sergey to visit a psychologist whom he had found through the website of an LGBT organization. Although he was reluctant and cautious at first, he eventually began to have regular appointments. Gradually, the nightmares faded, and although he was more subdued than before, his mood did seem to pick up a bit. Though pessimistic about the hearing for Veronika, he felt better. Liam understood his worries, and assured him every time they spoke that however long they had to wait to be together, he would be there for him.

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## Chapter 7

The hearing for Veronika's guardianship was processed more quickly than expected. A little over a year after the death of Sergey's parents, the trial was about to take place. Sergey was sad and certain that he would lose Veronika. He had no doubts his uncle would produce evidence from his e-mails and other communications, which would sway the court in his favor. The source would be unimportant and denied vigorously; after all, he hadn't filed a police report about the assault, they would say.

On the day of the hearing, Sergey dressed in a nice shirt, tie and suit jacket. Veronika had to go to school, and he hugged her before she left the house, knowing it might be the last time he would see her for a very long time.

As she started to cry, he told her, "Whatever happens I'll be there for you, even if I have to wait until you're eighteen. We've set up the e-mail for your 'friend' from school, 'Julia', so you can send me messages any time as long as you're careful." Veronika appeared to have recovered and tried to put on a brave face.

At the courthouse, a formidable-looking woman with short gray hair and steel-rimmed glasses approached Sergey and his lawyer, Mr Valuev. She first addressed Mr Valuev in Russian. "My name is Olga Tcvetkova and I have been retained to represent Sergey at this hearing by someone acting on his behalf. Sergey will no longer require your services, but you will be paid in full for your efforts to date."

She turned to Sergey and said to him in English, "I'm a friend of Dorothy and I've been hired by a mutual friend of all of us."

Sergey was unsure what to say and was about to respond when a reporter from a local newspaper approached Olga and said, "You told me there would be a story this morning?"

"Yes, I'll hold a press conference after the hearing," Olga responded.

In court, Olga started speaking on behalf of Sergey. "Sergey feels that the immorality his uncle engages in renders him unsuitable to be Veronika's guardian." She withdrew an envelope from her briefcase and removed some A4-sized color photos. She presented copies to the judge and to Viktor's lawyer. "You will see in these photos that Viktor has been procuring the services of prostitutes, or perhaps better put, rent boys. It is doubtful that a

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minor would be safe in his custody, not to mention the immorality that Veronika might be exposed to.”

Viktor started to speak but was silenced by his lawyer and the judge. The lawyer acting on behalf of Viktor stood and said, “My client is an honorable man with a spotless reputation. I am sure that there is an explanation for these photos.”

Olga stood up and interrupted, “If it pleases the court, I have the other party in the photos available to testify to their veracity.”

Viktor’s lawyer sat down and briefly spoke to his client who was red in the face. He stood up and said, “My client does not wish to add any testimony to the hearing other than to say that that he is an upstanding, respected citizen, evidently victim of a hoax.”

After a short recess, the judge returned from her chambers. She summed up a statement that was heavily critical of Viktor. “More than anything to do with homosexuality, the use of sex workers is of particular concern. I cannot be satisfied that a minor would receive a good upbringing in the care of someone who would contribute to human exploitation and degradation.” She finally ruled that Sergey would become Veronika’s sole guardian.

Sergey breathed a sigh of relief and he suddenly understood what people meant when they said that a weight had been lifted from them. Once the hearing was over, Olga walked out with him and gave a short speech to the waiting press that she had invited. She handed each journalist the photos and assured them that they would be all over the internet before the end of the day, so she doubted that any meaningful attempt at censorship would be made. The journalists then pursued Viktor, who was by this time walking down the courthouse steps. He was bombarded with questions and fought his way to his car.

Olga took Sergey by the arm and said, “Come with me.” She brought him to her car and drove to the offices of the private investigators whom Liam had hired at her suggestion. On the journey, she refused to answer any questions. She whisked them through the reception area.

Inside, Liam and Francesc were having coffee with a thin man with gray hair and a small mustache. Liam got up out of the chair and Sergey stood there for a moment unable to say anything or even move. The events of the day had left him in a state of shock, and seeing Liam and Francesc left him speechless. Liam moved towards him and gave him a huge hug. He took him by the hand



and they went outside for a moment to get some fresh air. There was a small square with trees, benches, and a small pond, and they sat down on one of the benches beside the pond.

Sergey eventually regained the power of speech, and with a wavering voice told Liam how much he loved him. After looking around to check that nobody was in the vicinity, he gave Liam a quick kiss and for a few minutes they sat in silence watching fish swimming around in the pond. Liam then stood up and said softly "Let's go back inside."

When they returned, Liam introduced Sergey to Daniil. Francesc approached them and hugged them both together. They sat down and Liam explained what had happened. The fishing expedition on Viktor had yielded more than they could have ever hoped for. Liam had decided not to say anything to Sergey to avoid any chance that Viktor could find out about the plan.

The second stage of the plan had yet to be put into effect. Olga produced a ream of documents and got Sergey to sign them all. She sent an assistant to take the documents everywhere necessary. She then told Sergey to pick up Veronika from school with Daniil, and she, Liam, and Francesc would meet them at Sergey's house.

Once Sergey and Veronika arrived at the house, Francesc and Liam helped them to pack as much luggage as allowances would permit, and to mark any items they would like to keep. Olga explained to Sergey that the best solution was to get out of Russia while the press was swarming around Viktor. She would arrange for the sale of the apartment, and had already made arrangements for the transfer of all funds possible to a bank in Spain.

She drove them to the airport and hugged them all. She gave Sergey a certificate confirming that he was the legal guardian of Veronika, and counseled him to take care of it. He would need it later at passport control, and in the future for immigration. She said good-bye with a tear in her eye as she saw them to the security area. They boarded a flight to Frankfurt and stayed there in an airport hotel for the night.

In Frankfurt the next day, they got a connecting flight to Spain. When they touched down in Barcelona, coming down the steps of the plane Sergey felt like kissing the ground. It was strange how a foreign land could so quickly become home. Liam had arranged a short-term rental while they got settled back into life in Barcelona together, and they got a taxi there.

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They spent the first few days back in Barcelona simply relaxing and doing nothing. Francesc took Veronika out to see the sights of the city when he wasn't at work, and gave Liam and Sergey time alone.

During their first nights together they simply lay in bed, Liam spooning himself against Sergey. Liam wanted Sergey to initiate sex only when he was ready, and after all that he had been through, he realized that it might take time.

After a week, Francesc suggested to Veronika a night at his house with movies, popcorn and other treats. Liam wasn't hoping for anything so soon, but arranged a reservation at a restaurant to try and make it a romantic evening. During the meal, for the first time they contemplated the future together and managed to make some rough plans to make their new life work. When they got home they had a camomile tea before going to bed.

In bed, Sergey kissed Liam, everything moving at a slower and less demanding pace than their most lustful nights together. Eventually, Sergey reached his hand down to Liam's cock and felt the burgeoning erection. He whispered to Liam and asked him to make love to him.

Liam applied lubricant and entered Sergey, who was lying face down on the bed. He moved slowly while he kissed Sergey tenderly on the back of the neck. Sergey gave a soft moan as Liam finally increased his rhythm and then with a grunt he collapsed on top of Sergey. They lay there for a moment with Liam still inside Sergey before he gently pulled out. Liam then turned Sergey over. He took him entirely in his mouth, starting with a slow movement and gradually increasing the intensity. He felt Sergey's balls tighten before feeling a spurt of heat at the back of his throat. Afterwards, they lay together, and although their lovemaking had not been physically demanding, the emotional significance of their first sex in more than a year left them spent, and they quickly melted into sleep in each other's arms.

Two weeks later, they all boarded a flight to Dublin with Francesc. Liam's father collected them at the airport and greeted everybody with hugs. He was a talkative and jovial man, and asked many questions about the journey. Francesc was not used to speaking much English, let alone hearing such a strong accent, so Sergey and Liam translated parts of the conversation.

When they came through the front door of the house, they were greeted by a crowd of people spilling out through every open doorway. A banner was hung saying "Welcome Sergey and Liam". Several of Sergey and Liam's friends from Spain were there.

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The next day, they were married by an officiant in the garden of Liam's parents' house. In 2015, gay marriage had been approved by a landslide, allowing them to take advantage of at least marrying in one of their birth countries. Veronika served as a flower girl and Francesc was best man for them, presenting them with the rose rings they had bought for their engagement, which would also serve as wedding rings. There were roses everywhere, and the wedding cake was shaped like a pile of books to remind them that everything had started on St. George's Day.

One of the most important benefits for citizens of member countries and their families under EU law is the right to live and work in any other EU country. The marriage allowed them to get new immigration papers under the free movement laws for spouses, and supported children of EU citizens, for both Sergey and Veronika in Spain. Sergey was quickly able to get a job working both as a translator and interpreter for an agency. They had put their lives back together and had managed to set Veronika up in an international school that was heavy on their finances, but allowed her to continue with a multilingual education to follow in the footsteps of her father and brother.

On their first anniversary, Sergey and Liam went on a late honeymoon, leaving Veronika with Francesc who was pleased to take her shopping, to the cinema, and to treat her in many other ways. They went to Tel Aviv, which is famous for welcoming gay tourists, and enjoyed its many gay-friendly nightspots and day trips to the religious sights of the country and Dead Sea. Every night there was a romantic meal followed by more romance in the bedroom. On the last day of their honeymoon, they visited the City of Lod and the Church of Saint George where his tomb lies. Although the couple was not religious, they lit a candle to commemorate the good and the bad of a single St. George's Day.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Douglas Glen is originally from Northern Ireland but has lived in Spain for the last ten years. He currently resides in the city of Barcelona where he works in a job too boring to mention. He spends his free time reading mm romance, volunteering for a mental health charity, traveling, and enjoying the beach.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#)

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# BOUND

By Amelia Bishop

## Photo Description

A thin man, wearing only underwear, lies on his side in a low bed with a thin mattress. He appears to be sleeping, though daylight streams in through a window above him. No blanket covers him. A bottle sits on the floor by his side.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*When I was told I would never walk again and would be stuck in a wheelchair the rest of my life something inside me broke. I put up a cold and tough front to keep everyone at arm's length; it's easier that way. No one could ever love a man whose body is covered in scars, whose legs will never work again, who's lost himself.*

*\*\* This story can be m/m or m/m/m. I want this story to have a BDSM theme with the man in the wheelchair as the sub. And it would be nice to have more than one POV but is not necessary. An HEA/HFN is a must. Thank you.*

*Sincerely,*

A.J.

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** accountant, BDSM, disabilities, grief, hurt/comfort, physical therapist, switch, wheelchair

**Word Count:** 21,489

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# **BOUND**

**By Amelia Bishop**

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## Chapter 1

First came the beeping. Then a low humming sound, and some clicking noises like an old dot-matrix printer might make. Adrian opened his eyes to the fluorescent-lit hospital room and remembered. The crash, the pain, the confusion. He closed his eyes again and breathed, slow and deep. *Calm down. You're alive.* He moved his fingers, flexed his arms. Everything worked, but his whole body hurt like hell. He tried to move his foot, just a little to the left to ease the pressure from what felt like a tight bandage, and he couldn't. The foot would not respond. Neither would the other foot, or his knees.

Panic rose, and he forced himself to open his eyes again, to look down and make sure his legs were still there, that the pain wasn't phantom. He pulled off the thin white sheet covering him, saw the bandages, the thick plastic braces. Still whole, but totally fucked up. He tried again, watching his big toe where it protruded from the edge of a compression boot. *Move.* It didn't.

He tried to shift his torso, and though it stung in places it was operational. His hips worked as well. He clenched his ass muscles and the sheets under him shifted. *Okay, good.* But anything lower: his thighs, his knees, his feet, nothing responded. Maybe just all the bandages... the strange plastic cast-things? It made sense that his thighs wouldn't move, they were clearly seriously damaged. But his feet? His knees? He should be able to move them.

Adrian screamed, silently at first, his voice dry and unused. It built to an ugly panicked yell, not a sound to be proud of, not a sound he had ever made before. He flailed his arms, pulling out tubes, and ripping off tape. Something split on his shoulder. People rushed in. Nurses, doctors maybe.

When he woke again he was under a thicker blanket, the room dimmer, the overhead lights off. His mother sat in the chair at his side, reading.

"Mom." Just a whisper, but she startled, then raised her eyes to him and smiled.

"Adrian." She was at his side in an instant, cool palm on his cheek, red-rimmed eyes glistening down at him. "How do you feel?"

He winced. What a stupid question. But her expression was so pained, so nervous. "Hurt. What..."

"You were in an accident. On the highway. It wasn't your fault. A woman in a SUV... she was texting. She hit a man in a pickup truck, he hit you. She

died.” There was an obvious lack of sympathy in that last statement, and she swallowed hard before she continued. “You’ll be okay, they saved your legs. But... the doctors aren’t sure you’ll ever walk again.”

He stared at her, numb. Tears streaked down her cheeks, and her lip trembled. He nodded, but not because he understood or accepted the information she’d given him, only to acknowledge he’d heard.

After a minute, when he didn’t respond, she continued. “Chrissy’s here too, down in the cafeteria with Dad. I’m so glad you’re finally awake. We’ve been worried sick.”

He grunted some response, and his mother said something else, but he didn’t hear or care. *Never walk again?* Blood rushed in his ears, loud: like a bike engine, like a car crash. He closed his eyes and tried to calm down, to think.

“Shh, I know.” His mother leaned over him, wiping his tears.

They’d replaced his IV, but he ignored it. He reached up and pulled her to him, buried his face in her soft chest, and sobbed. Sometime later his sister and father arrived, and he cried again, with them.

The doctor came in then, interrupting their embrace. He smiled with grim apology.

“Adrian. Good to see you awake. I’m Doctor Hamill.” His eyes scanned Adrian’s body, his chart, the machines at his bedside. “Any pain?”

“A little in my shoulder, and my hip,” he admitted. He glanced down at his legs, bandaged and braced, and tried to ignore the fact he couldn’t feel them at all.

The doctor nodded and made a note in his chart, then peeled back the bandage on his shoulder and checked the wound there. “Looks okay, but this is a deep one. What would you say the pain is, one to ten?”

“If ten is the worst? Maybe a four.”

He smiled. “Okay.” He leaned in and made some kind of adjustment to one of the dripping bags. “If it gets any higher, let me know.”

Adrian nodded and looked away uncomfortably. He wanted to verify his mother’s words “never walk again,” but he feared the truth. Dr. Hamill pulled a plastic chair close to the bed and sat, leaning forward, elbows on his knees.

“You ready to hear this?”



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Adrian nodded and pressed his lips together. Tears leaked from his eyes. Dr. Hamill ignored that, and explained everything in a soft, even voice. Severed nerves, crushed bones, steel rods—most of the information was a blur. Adrian gave permission for another surgery, another attempt to repair the nerve damage. But in the end, “never walk again” was confirmed, with the usual “we can’t be one hundred percent sure” caveat.

Through all of it, Adrian kept himself relatively calm. He nodded, he cried, he questioned, but he didn’t freak-out. Until he woke in the night, his left calf tingling with pins and needles, and the back of his right thigh burning with pain. He had a good freak-out then. If he couldn’t move his legs, why should he be able to feel them? Dr. Hamill had explained that the feeling might come and go over the next weeks, but they weren’t sure he’d ever regain full sensation.

The weeks that followed were painful in every possible way. His back, arms, and legs, covered with gashes of varying length and depth, slowly healed. Several dozen cuts on his arms, shoulders, and chest were so deep that they lingered, and would no doubt remain as permanent scars. There were burned areas as well, though none large enough to warrant any kind of surgery. Just enough to leave more scars.

He moved to a rehab center, where he spent his days staring out the window and his nights sedated. All the tiny scratches on his face healed, and the bruises faded away. Physical therapists and nurses visited, forced him to sit up and do things he didn’t want to do. Doctors and psychiatrists visited, asked him questions he didn’t want to answer and told him things he didn’t want to know. His family visited, their perfectly whole bodies and reassuring smiles reminding him that he alone was broken.

He fought the release as long as he could. Going home meant starting the rest of his life. It meant accepting his broken body as unfixable. But after almost six months, against his wishes, he was wheeled out to the car where his father waited to take him home. To his own house. At least they’d granted him that. His mother would have preferred to have him stay with her, but every doctor had agreed there was no reason he couldn’t “function normally” on his own.

Visiting nurses and physical therapists would come, his food would be ordered, a maid service would clean. His small single-level house proved easy to remodel to meet his new needs. They gave him a motorized chair and a manual one, and a massive quantity of medical supplies he never intended to use.

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A few awkward visits from his friends, a dozen unreturned phone calls, several screens of ignored text messages, and finally people stopped bothering him. Alone, he didn't have to think about his old life.

But he wasn't always alone.

The maid was easy. She came twice each week, cleaned the entire house, did his laundry, and said nothing. She was kind and polite, and she understood. Adrian liked her.

His parents were horrible. Telling old stories, forcing him to talk. They visited almost every day until Chrissy intervened, seeing his discomfort, and made them limit their visits to three times each week, except for holidays or special circumstances. Chrissy didn't visit as often, but texted him throughout the day, every day. It was her way of checking on him, but it was less obtrusive than a physical visit so Adrian tolerated it.

The therapist was the real problem. He came Tuesdays and Fridays, and forced Adrian to move in ways he detested. Forced him to acknowledge his broken body. Worse, the guy was gorgeous. Young, tan, blond, serious eyes, and a wide white smile. Just the type Adrian would have flirted with before. His legs may be irreparable, but his cock remained fully functional, and it reacted quite strongly to Jim.

Jim noticed, of course. It was impossible to hide. But he was professional and said nothing, kept his eyes carefully averted.

After a few weeks, Adrian was able to control himself. He grew used to Jim's hands on him, accustomed to his voice and his smell and his laugh. He still fantasized about Jim holding him down and fucking him, but he managed to keep his dick in check during therapy.

It didn't help that Jim was the only nonfamily member he ever willingly spoke to. Or that Jim seemed happy to talk to him and happy to listen. He began to look forward to Jim's visits, to tell him way too much, to think of him as a friend.

"You should get out more, Adrian. Go for a spin around the block."

"Fuck that."

Jim smiled, good-natured as always, even in the face of Adrian's rudeness. "It would be good for you to get some fresh air, and to see people, and to learn how to use your chair on different terrain."

“Fuck that.” But Adrian was smiling now, too, and Jim laughed.

“Would you do it if I came with you? We could go right now, it’s nice out.”

Adrian pressed his lips together. Jim knew. He fucking knew how much Adrian liked him, and this shit wasn’t fair. Offering to extend their session, do something different and special. He wanted to say no, to say “fuck that” again, but angrily this time, and wipe that smile right off Jim’s cute face. But he opened his mouth and said, “Okay.” *You fucking bastard.*

Jim popped up like a freaking jack-in-the-box, his super-white smile wider than ever. “All right, man, great! Here, grab a jacket.”

Jim’s hands stayed in his pockets. Which was good because if he even touched the handle of the chair this little adventure was going to be over. Adrian maneuvered with some difficulty, navigating the curbs which had certainly not been constructed with a handicapped person in mind. Fucking irregular slants, telephone poles in the middle of the stupid sidewalks, grass growing where it shouldn’t be... obviously no one gave two seconds of thought to anyone who wasn’t on their feet around here.

“This is good. Could you do this once a week, on your own?”

“I *could*.”

Jim sighed, but his ever-present smile was still in place. “Will you?”

“I’ll try.”

Summer passed quickly enough, but the autumn was miserable. His mother and the doctors allied to get him off the sedatives, and forced him to learn to drive a handicap-accessible car. The white van sat in his driveway for five days. Getting back behind the wheel, alone, was too scary. Until Jim informed him, pleasantly but firmly, that he wasn’t making any more house calls.

“What if I have an emergency? What if I’m sick?”

“Then you probably wouldn’t be up for therapy, would you? You’d call the office to reschedule.” Jim’s typical blinding smile was in place, but his eyes were hard. He wasn’t going to let Adrian off the hook.

“Fine.” Adrian turned away in anger, but Jim’s hand on his shoulder calmed him.

“Hey, I know why you’re nervous about this. It’s totally understandable. I got in a fender bender a few years ago, and getting back on the road afterward

was a little tough for me. I can't imagine how hard this is for you. But it's been a year since the accident, and you only have to drive around town. You can do this."

Adrian blushed at the gentle words. *What a fucking baby, needing Jim to hold my hand through everything.* "Okay, you're right. Thanks."

Jim just patted his shoulder and walked away. He had obviously learned to quit while he was ahead.

Adrian became responsible for shopping for his own food, and his physical therapy appointments took place at an office. The maid still came, his sister still texted, and his parents still visited a few times each week, but otherwise he was alone.

As his body healed, his spirit degraded. A few friends still made an effort, but he put them off. He hated the look of pity in their eyes, the stilted conversations, the awkward greetings. Without the drugs he had used for so many months, sleep was difficult. For a few weeks, he drank himself to sleep, but Jim caught on and shamed him into quitting.

He was happy to realize that between the insurance settlement and his disability pay, he'd be able to keep the house and not worry about working. His company asked him back, offered to make adjustments to his office. He declined. He couldn't face those people the way he was now.

In late April, he ran into an ex-boyfriend at the supermarket, easily the most traumatic event since he'd come home. He held himself together through the awkward conversation, explained the accident, his recovery. He smiled politely and thanked Scott for his concern. Agreed that yes, they should get together for coffee sometime. Then he went home and lost his mind.

He avoided his bedroom, unwilling to climb onto the mattress where he'd actually fucked Scott two years ago. Instead he pulled his chair up to the kitchen table and poured himself a drink. The only booze he had left in the house was half a bottle of whiskey, which he didn't care for, but he drank most of it anyway. He let it burn his throat, welcomed the sick, dizzy feeling it produced in him. After the third glass, he sunk to the floor and cried. He mourned the relationship he'd lost and the ones he'd never have.

Self-pity overwhelmed him, and he moaned his pain into the linoleum. He'd never again walk into a bar or a club, never dive into the waves at the beach, never dance, never meet his buddies at the park for a run. No one would ever

desire him again. A lifetime of infrequent pity fucks was the best he could hope for.

When he thought he was done crying, he had to piss, and getting up proved a huge difficulty. His palm slipped on the tear- and mucus-slicked tile, and he bruised his elbow. He swore, lashed out, sent his chair rolling across the floor.

Then he had to drag himself to it: sobbing, frustrated, angry. He poured another drink when he finally got himself back in the chair, swallowing it in two gulps. He managed to piss mostly in the toilet, and collapsed on his bed.

The phone rang incessantly, but he ignored it, and tried like hell to stay asleep. He finally gave up and answered it at half past noon.

"Adrian, it's Jim. You missed your session; I just wanted to be sure you were all right."

"Fine. Sorry, hungover."

"You're drinking again?"

"No. Just one bad night. I'm fine." Jim was a good guy. Possibly his only friend, except of course he wasn't his friend at all, he was his therapist. He got paid to be nice, to take care of him.

"Okay. Let's reschedule. Can you come in tomorrow?"

"Sure. Same time?"

The next day he rolled in to the office ten minutes early. Becca wasn't at the desk. In her place was a guy with dark brown hair and a stubble covered chin. A very sexy guy. He flicked his warm brown eyes down at Adrian and smiled.

"Hi! Adrian?"

"That's me." Adrian looked away. Last year, when he was still whole, he would have smiled back, leaned onto the counter, kept his attention firmly planted on those sexy eyes. But not anymore.

Sexy nodded and clicked something on the computer. "Jim will be right out."

After his session, sexy guy was still at the desk. Jim walked out with him, but Sexy waved him off. "I'll get it."

Jim nodded and smiled, clapping Adrian on the shoulder before he turned to walk away. Adrian groaned. *Great*. He was as horny as a teenager lately, and

the old sweatpants he wore hid nothing. Now he'd have to try not to get a hard-on while he was making his next appointment.

Sexy's chocolate eyes sparkled at him. "You want Wednesday again?"

"No. I'm usually Tuesdays, this was just... I got bumped from yesterday for being a no-show."

"Okeydokey. Well, let's see if anyone took your spot yet." He winked, actually *winked*, at Adrian, and turned back to the computer, typed something, studied the screen. "You're in luck! Ten a.m. Tuesdays, all set. You need a card?"

"No. Thanks."

Adrian wheeled to the door, but before he could hit the handicap panel, Sexy jogged over and opened the door for him. He wore silky-nylon running pants that hugged his ass, and Adrian quickly moved his arm over his lap, hiding the evidence of his sudden arousal.

"Have a great day!" Sexy's eyes flicked down to Adrian's lap, then back up quickly.

"Thanks." His face flamed, and he sped to his van, luckily in the first parking spot.

Friday, Becca was back, and he wasn't sure if that was good or bad. He'd been sort of looking forward to seeing Sexy. That wink... probably just pity, or maybe he was the kind of guy who flirted with everyone. But it had been the first time anyone had winked at him since before the accident.

The next week Becca was there both days, and still no sign of sexy guy. He'd probably been a temp, or someone from another office filling in. Adrian chastised himself for caring. What did he think? That the guy would be interested in him? A skinny-legged, scar-covered, loser in a wheelchair? *Stupid*.

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## Chapter 2

The guy definitely had a boner. Had tried to hide it, too. Sometimes injuries caused weird reactions, though, so maybe it wasn't an "I want to fuck you" boner, just something the guy couldn't help. But he'd blushed when Nate had winked at him, and the way he lit up when Jim walked in was highly suspect. Over the next few days, Nate thought of the man often.

Thursday, Becca was still with her client, and Jim had gone to lunch. With no one in the office to see him, Nate pulled up Adrian's file and studied the details. He lived in town, alone, and came in twice a week. A Google search of his name gave no new information. He was just a man who'd survived a really bad accident. And got aroused easily.

Jim walked in carrying a bakery box, and Nate hastily closed the file.

"Hey, that for me?"

"Yeah, and Becca." Jim slid behind the counter and opened the box like he was showing off smuggled gems. "Pumpkin cheesecake muffins," he whispered reverently, eyes wide.

Nate sighed his appreciation for this great gift. "Wow. Dude, thank you."

Becca walked her client out, a young woman in a wrist brace. Nate closed the muffin box and slid it out of view. He helped schedule the woman's next appointment, and opened the door for her. When the three of them were alone in the office, they consumed the muffins in a silent frenzy, and then worked together to eliminate every crumb of evidence from the counter area.

"You guys are a terrible influence on me." Becca smiled as she opened a bottle of water.

Nate crushed the box into the garbage, buried it under yesterday's newspaper. "It never happened, Bec, it never happened."

Jim leaned his elbow on the counter and chuckled.

When Becca left with her next client, Nate turned to Jim. "Hey, that guy Adrian... what's his deal?"

Jim narrowed his eyes and tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

"Just, I don't know. What do you know about him?"

“Oh, man. You’re interested in him?” Jim shook his head, but he was smiling warmly. “He’s a nice guy. Varies between cranky and pissed off. I don’t think he gets out much, keeps everyone at arm’s length.”

“Hmm. Cute, though. Is he single?”

“Yeah, and I’d like to keep it that way. Half the stuff he does is only because he has a crush on me... I can’t give that up. If he gets a boyfriend, I’ll be powerless with him.”

“He that bad?”

“Let’s just say he’s never willingly done anything.”

Nate nodded slowly.

Adrian haunted him all week. The memory of those sad eyes, the blush when he saw Nate notice his hard-on, the way he wheeled himself away in shame and anger. A guy that strong shouldn’t be ashamed, and he was way too sexy to be alone. Maybe the erection was because he was horny? Maybe he just really needed to get laid.

Tuesdays Nate had off-site clients all day, but Adrian’s other weekly appointment day, Friday, he was off. A trade for working Sundays. He threw on jeans and a light jacket, and went to the office.

Jim groaned when he walked in. “Really, man? You’re going to do this?”

“He’s hot. I’m just going to ask. He’s not my patient, there’s no rule against it.”

Jim clicked his tongue and rolled his eyes, but said nothing. When Adrian came in, Nate watched his face carefully. *Yes, there it was.* A flicker of desire, excitement. Adrian shifted his weight in his chair, nodded at Jim, and began to wheel toward the therapy room. But he looked back at Nate a few times, as if he couldn’t help himself. Nate gave him a flirty smile, which wasn’t returned.

When the session was over Jim hung back in the hall, and Nate met his eyes in silent thanks. Jim smiled and ducked away, giving him some privacy.

“Hey, Adrian?”

Adrian was wheeling to the exit, and Nate had to jog and almost step in front of his chair to get his attention. He looked up, mouth tight, eyes flashing, waiting for Nate to speak.

“Can I ask you something?”



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Adrian rested his elbows on the armrests of his chair and waited.

“Would you go to dinner with me?”

Adrian’s shocked reaction was one of the saddest things Nate had ever seen in his life. Then it morphed into anger, and Nate raised his palms against it. “Hey, I thought—”

“Is this a fucking joke?”

Nate’s face heated. “No! Why would—”

“Leave me the fuck alone.” Adrian maneuvered around him and sped out the door before Nate could process what had happened.

Jim came out and stood by Nate’s side, and they watched Adrian drive away. “Sorry, man.”

“Jesus, he’s wound tight, huh?” Nate’s pulse was still racing from the rush of embarrassment he’d felt at Adrian’s reaction.

“Yeah, I told you. You going to try again?”

“You sure he’s gay?” That would explain things.

Jim nodded quickly. “Positive. He’s mentioned ex-boyfriends.”

“Must be me, then.” Or something to do with that shocked expression Adrian had worn for a minute there.

“No way, man. So? You trying again?”

“Damn right I am.”

“Good.” Jim smiled and slapped his back.

There was really no reason for him ever to see Adrian again. Their schedules didn’t overlap at all, and unless one of them went in on an odd day, their paths wouldn’t cross. But Nate wasn’t going to let Adrian brush him off so easily. At least he had to make it clear he was serious, that he was interested. If Adrian didn’t return the interest, then he’d let it go.

So the following Friday, he went to the office again. This time, he arrived while Adrian and Jim were in their session, and he waited at the desk, doing unnecessary paperwork until they walked out. When Jim saw him, he smirked and crossed his arms over his chest, leaning against the wall, watching Adrian.

Adrian froze. He stared at Nate with open contempt, and then moved to the door, a scowl marring his handsome face.

“Hey, wait.” Nate ran to catch up, and physically blocked the door. “Listen, you don’t have to go out with me. But I wasn’t joking when I asked you. I think you’re hot. I’m interested. If you don’t like me, that’s fine, but don’t treat me like I’m a jerk.”

Adrian’s lip shook, and for a scary moment Nate thought he might cry. But then, he straightened his back and firmed his jaw. “Fine. Sorry if I offended you. Can I leave now?”

Nate slumped in defeat. “Of course.” He stepped aside and let Adrian pass. “Offer still stands, though. Dinner. Anytime.”

Adrian didn’t turn, but his hands paused on the wheels for a few seconds before he continued to his van.

“I think he’s coming around,” Jim said from the hall.

“Yup. Just a matter of time,” Nate deadpanned.

He watched Adrian drive away, his scowling face visible through the windshield. Sheesh, the guy was a tough nut to crack. But every interaction only increased his attraction, and Nate thought about how he might get Adrian to open up. He couldn’t ask him out again, especially not at the office. Running into him anywhere else would be totally stalker-ish, and he wouldn’t do that. His only hope was that Adrian would change his mind and make the next move.

But two weeks went by with no word from Adrian, and Jim said he’d never mentioned anything during their sessions. Nate tried to forget about him. He responded to a message from a guy in his online BDSM group, Strictly-Men. He checked out the guy’s profile, verified his real name, and asked a few guys he knew in the group about him. Everything checked out, and another Dom Nate trusted vouched for him, so he set up a date.

They spent the night engaging in some really hot spanking play. But when the guy asked to see him again, for a nonplay date, Nate balked. The last three relationships he’d had were with guys he’d met through the Strictly-Men group, and none of those had worked out. Each moved way past what he was comfortable giving, or receiving, in the bedroom. When the play escalated beyond a certain level, he’d always backed down and lost the guy as a result. He made an excuse and left, promising to play again sometime.

Sitting on his couch, sipping coffee, his dog Star curled at his feet, Nate scrolled through the TV guide. Nothing but game shows, talk shows, and crappy movies. Daytime television sucked. He was grateful when the phone rang.

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“Nate, you busy?”

“Becca, hi. What’s going on, everything okay?”

“Not really. Jim just went home with a stomach bug, and his ten o’clock isn’t answering the phone. Jim says he sometimes runs errands before his appointment, so he’ll probably show up. I’ll cancel him when he gets here if I have to, but the guy only comes twice a week as it is, and he really shouldn’t miss a session. I’d do it myself but I already have a ten thirty. Any way you can come in?”

“I’ll be right there.”

“Wow, seriously? I thought I’d have to bribe you or something.”

Nate sighed dramatically. “How little you think of me. I’m hurt.”

Becca laughed, thanked him, and hung up.

He shaved, rushed through a shower, dressed in the first clean clothes he found, and hurried out the door. He watched the dashboard clock nervously. Already nine forty-five. If Adrian was early, would he leave before Nate got there? What would Becca tell him? He pulled into the parking lot, relieved the white van wasn’t there yet.

“Thank you so much, Nate. Jim was worried. He really likes this guy.”

“I know. I’ve met him actually. He’s a nice guy. Kind of sad, though.”

“Yeah, really sad. And angry. But he’s sweet, too. And here he is.” She lifted her chin toward the window where they could see Adrian’s van parking in the first handicap spot.

When Adrian got inside, he looked at Nate and his face went hard. He frowned and let out a little huff, making no attempt to hide his displeasure.

Becca darted her eyes back and forth between them, obviously worried. “Adrian, this is Nate, he’s filling in for Jim. Is that all right?”

“I guess.” Adrian rolled toward the therapy room.

Nate shrugged at Becca, who gave him a tense half smile in return. He followed Adrian into the room, and quickly opened his file to check what Jim had been working on with him during their last session. Adrian was mostly cooperative, and though he frowned and grumbled, he never openly complained. Nate carefully kept his hands where they belonged, and said nothing inappropriate. Asking him out again would be pushing it in any circumstance, but while they were working together, it was out of the question.

At one point, during a leg stretch, Nate's hand slipped from Adrian's knee, down over his inner thigh. He apologized and moved on, but he noticed Adrian's breath catch, saw his cheeks flush. He was interested, at least physically. So why was he hiding it? Did he think he was worthless now that he was in a chair? Or maybe he had some other issue, something else making him push Nate away?

It took real effort to remain professional. Adrian's fierce, determined look as he completed the exercises was sexy as hell. Not to mention the sight of Adrian's ass in his thin, tight, jogging pants: firm and high and all muscle. The scars that he could see on Adrian's arms, thick ugly marks over smooth muscles, spoke of a man who'd fought for survival and won. He'd worked up a sweat and still smelled fantastic. Nate tried to identify the cologne, but failed. He could only assume it was some combination of shampoo or soap, cologne, and natural body odor.

He wanted, badly, to ask Adrian out again. He decided that he wouldn't bring it up himself, but if Adrian started a conversation, then he could ask again without guilt. For the entire session, Adrian remained silent.

"Okay, great job today Adrian. I'll write up the notes for Jim, let him know what we did."

"Will he be back on Tuesday?"

"Should be. He went home sick, but I'm sure he'll be fine by then."

Adrian nodded, and Nate waited, hoping for more conversation but unwilling to initiate it.

"You were harder on me than he is." Adrian's brows drew together, forming a small line between them, and he stared at Nate intently.

*Was that a good thing, or a complaint?* "I thought you handled everything well. Were you uncomfortable?"

Adrian's mouth twisted in what almost looked like a smile, but he recovered quickly. "Not in a bad way. I was thinking maybe I could work with you again?" Adrian blushed fiercely but held Nate's gaze, his eyes nervous.

"I don't know if I can do that."

"Fine." He scowled and looked away, gave his wheels a strong push toward the door.

"Wait, Adrian." Nate had to jog to catch up, and was barely able to intercept him before he reached the exit. "I'd love to work with you, it's just..." He

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waited, hoping Adrian would meet his eyes again, but Adrian kept his gaze on the floor, his mouth turned down in a scowl. “Listen—the truth is I’m really attracted to you. I think you’re sexy and I’d love to get to know you better. It was hard for me to keep things professional today, and I don’t want to make you uncomfortable. So it’s probably not a good idea. I’m sorry. Plus, Jim would be heartbroken.”

Adrian chuckled at that and raised his face to look Nate in the eye again. “Jim doesn’t think I’m sexy, though.”

“Well, he has a girlfriend, so I’m not surprised by that. But he does like working with you.”

“Yeah, he’s been good to me.”

Nate moved closer, watching Adrian’s face closely. When Adrian didn’t roll back, he took it as a good sign. “You could go on that date with me, and we could call it an unofficial therapy session. I promise to keep my hands where they belong.”

He was sure Adrian was going to say no. The frown hadn’t returned, but neither had the smile. Instead, Adrian had that little line between his eyebrows again. “Okay. But it’s not a date. It’s a therapy session, even if it’s off the record.”

Nate’s head got light as he processed the offer. “Okay, great.”

“Sunday? My house.”

“I work Sunday, but I could come by after. Like five-ish?”

“Okay, cool.”

Adrian had relaxed, Nate realized. His hands were no longer locked on the wheels of his chair, but lay gently dangling from the armrest. His shoulders had fallen to a more natural angle, and the line between his brows had almost disappeared.

“So, since it’s not a date, should I eat first? Or could we order a pizza or something?”

Adrian smiled then, a beautiful thing. “I’ll make sure you eat. Since you won’t get paid, I guess it’s the least I can do.”

“Dinner is a totally acceptable method of payment.” Nate held the door open with a smile, and followed him out to the reception area, grinning like an idiot the whole way

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## Chapter 3

Adrian sat behind the wheel and took a few deep breaths. He'd acted cool with Nate, left with a smile and a casual "see you Sunday," but his heart had been racing and his palms had been clammy. He had to get himself together before he drove home. Nate stood behind the front desk doing something on the computer, and glanced at him through the window. If he waited too long, Nate would probably come out to check on him. That was enough to get Adrian out of there, fast.

At home, his adrenaline had evened out, and giddiness took over. He laughed, alone in his kitchen, ran his hands through his hair, leaned back in his chair, and let himself be happy. *He was serious, he actually fucking likes me.* Adrian looked down at his wasted thighs, squeezed his fingers over the bumpy, scarred flesh. Nate had felt them. Had touched them often during the session: once accidentally, but several times he'd needed to hold Adrian's legs in position. He'd never seemed surprised or disgusted by them. Adrian had watched carefully, but Nate's face stayed warm and his eyes affectionate the whole time. *He thinks I'm sexy.*

Over the next two days, Adrian's confidence waned. He doubted Nate's words. He replayed their session in his mind a hundred times, and began to see that what he'd thought was affection may have been only kindness. This could still be just a pity date.

Sunday afternoon, Adrian decided to keep the whole thing strictly professional. Not a date: an "unofficial therapy session," just like they'd said. He ordered pizza and salad, stocked the fridge with a case of beer, and waited. Nate arrived at twenty past five, and pulled a duffel bag from his car. *Therapy stuff.* He smiled.

"All right if I leave these here?"

At Adrian's smile, Nate placed his keys and cell phone on the coffee table.

Adrian moved to the back of the living room, to the large area rug he'd used for a therapy area with Jim, and got himself down onto the floor. Nate looked gorgeous; his T-shirt was tight across his chest, and his hair was mussed. He'd shaved closer than usual, but his chin was shadowed with afternoon stubble. Adrian wondered if he was hairy everywhere.

Nate took an exercise band from his bag and got on the floor with Adrian. "Tell me if this is too much, okay?"

Adrian nodded, but knew he'd never admit anything was too much. Especially not to Nate. A few times he came close: sweat broke out on his upper lip, his muscles strained, and he'd thought "I can't do this." But Nate took him just to the point of exhaustion, never beyond. Each time he stopped, and let Adrian rest, and praised his effort. For the first time since the accident, Adrian felt strong, and capable, and respected. Nate pushed him harder than anyone ever had, and the experience was exhilarating.

"Okay, I think that's enough for today. I want you to be able to move tomorrow." Nate smiled, kneeling on the rug, still holding one of Adrian's ankles in his hands.

Adrian grunted his agreement and moved to hoist himself back into his chair.

"Can I help?" Nate was holding a hand out, being friendly.

"No." That came out rougher than Adrian had intended, but he wasn't sorry. He could get himself into his own damn chair; Nate should understand that.

"I know you can do it, man, I'm only offering to help since I just kicked your ass here." A sexy smile, his head tilted to the side.

Adrian snorted out a laugh. "No thanks. Takes more than that to kick my ass."

"I bet." Nate turned and walked away, leaving Adrian on the rug alone.

He got himself up, and had to take a minute to catch his breath. Nate was in his kitchen, doing who knew what. But he wasn't standing nearby, waiting for Adrian to fall. Wasn't watching him, expecting he'd need help.

A shout from the kitchen broke into his thoughts. "Hey, is this for us? The pizza?"

"Yeah. There's beer in the fridge, too." Adrian wheeled into the kitchen. "Plates in that drawer, napkins over there."

"Can I make you a plate, or are you going to get all snippy?"

Adrian smirked. He deserved that, he supposed. "I'll allow it. Two slices please."

He'd thought maybe they should eat in the living room: put the TV on, take some of the pressure off. But before he could mention it Nate brought the plates to the kitchen table and sat down.

"So, how do you feel? Was that too strenuous?"

“No. I liked it.” Truthfully, it had been difficult, but he preferred it to the careful exercises and gentle coaxing of Jim.

“You could ask Jim to go harder, tell him you’re ready for more.”

“I tried. He... It’s not his fault. I’m pretty terrible to him, and I think he’s afraid I won’t do anything if he pisses me off. Plus he’s been working with me since the beginning. I’m sure he still thinks of me like I was back then. Weak.”

“No one who knows you could think you’re weak, Adrian.”

His breath left him in a rush, and he stared at Nate, who stabbed at his salad with a fork, oblivious to the impact of his comment. Adrian swallowed hard and collected himself before Nate could notice any reaction. “Well, maybe I’ll ask him again.”

“I could talk to him, if you want. I’m going to have to tell him about today, anyway.” Nate took another bite of pizza and raised his brows in question.

“Okay, sure. Or we could have another unofficial session, and you could do it.”

“Oh, I’ll give you as many unofficial sessions as you need, man. No problem.” He emphasized the word “sessions” and raised his brows, and Adrian chuckled.

When they’d finished eating, Nate accepted a beer, and drank it while Adrian cleaned up. He offered to help, but weakly, as if he expected he would be refused. Adrian tried to remember all the reasons he’d had for keeping this a “non-date,” all the possible ways this could go wrong. But when Nate suggested they hang out a bit longer, he couldn’t help agreeing. The thought of Nate walking out the door so soon was unbearable.

They watched some dumb game show where contestants had to navigate an almost impossible obstacle course, and though it was ridiculous, Adrian found himself laughing at it anyway. He had moved from his chair to the couch, in an attempt to seem more normal, and was intensely aware of Nate’s body sitting only inches away.

“You want another beer?”

“No, thanks. I have to drive home, two is my limit. Unless you want me to stay?”

Adrian looked away uncomfortably, felt his face heat. He did want that, so much it was embarrassing to think about. Nate moved closer, so that their



thighs touched, and ran his fingers over Adrian's neck, to his jaw. He turned Adrian's face toward him.

"Tell me if this is too much," Nate whispered, and moved in to kiss him.

The kiss was gentle, sweet, and soft. Nate kept his hand wrapped around Adrian's ear, his fingers buried in his hair. A little tip of tongue prodded in, and Adrian welcomed the intrusion. He relaxed into the kiss, grateful for it. He never wanted it to end.

But Nate pulled away, and looked into his eyes. "You okay with that?"

Adrian could hardly form words, but managed to nod and whimper something positive, and Nate smiled. "Good, 'cause I'm going to do it again." This time, the kiss he offered was deeper, harder, and even more to Adrian's liking.

He wrapped his arms around Nate's back, pulling him closer, and sucked Nate's bottom lip into his mouth. He was moaning, he could hear himself but he couldn't stop. Nate's hand crept along his stomach, over his hip, almost down to where he needed it. He tilted his hip in invitation, but the hand stayed where it was.

Nate moved his mouth away, trailed kisses down Adrian's neck, sucking and panting. "Damn, you smell so fucking good."

"Mmm." Adrian decided the best way to get what he wanted was to lead by example, so he moved his hand to Nate's cock and stroked it through the soft material of his sweatpants. Nate arched into his grip and sighed. And then, thank God, he returned the favor, slipping his fingers under the waistband of Adrian's pants.

Their mouths crashed together again, messy and rough, and they stroked each other wildly. Too soon, it went from deliciously exciting to holy-shit-I'm-there. "Stop, Nate, stop." Adrian locked his hand on Nate's wrist, pulled him away, and tried to halt his impending orgasm.

"Okay, sorry, you all right?"

"Don't wanna come yet." He closed his eyes, breathed out, tried to relax his abdomen.

"Ah, okay." Nate took his hands and guided them to his own cock, and Adrian gladly transferred his focus.

He stroked Nate as he kissed him, and moved his free hand under his shirt, across his chest, teasing his nipple and scratching down his ribs lightly. Nate

seemed to have no reservations about reaching orgasm too soon. After only a minute or so he pulled his mouth away and moaned, tightened his grip on Adrian's bicep, and shot all over himself.

Nate's expression changed from blissfully relaxed to intensely desirous, and before Adrian knew what he intended, he'd launched himself at Adrian, taking him into his mouth.

"Fuck, Nate." Adrian sucked in a breath, overwhelmed by sensation.

Nate swirled his tongue around Adrian's cock, then took him deep and swallowed over the head. He leaned back against the couch, light headed and dizzy, and tried to hold out as long as he could, to enjoy this. But it was too much, too intense, and he'd been too long without it. Almost instantly he was shouting and filling Nate's mouth with his cum, his hand clasp the fabric of Nate's T-shirt, twisting and stretching it out of shape. He expected Nate to back off, but instead he kept kissing, gently, with little sucking nibbles. When Adrian pulled away, hypersensitive, Nate moved to his hips, traced the scar there with his tongue, kissed his belly while he cupped his hand over Adrian's balls.

"Damn, get up here." Adrian pulled him up, and Nate complied with a sexy smile. "That was great."

"You are so fucking hot, man." Nate took his face in his hands and kissed him, and for a minute Adrian felt "so fucking hot." The way Nate looked at him, the way he kissed him: he felt whole and perfect.

Nate looked down, saw the cum all over himself and laughed. "Shit, let me clean this up." He hopped up, jogged to the kitchen, and returned a moment later with a damp paper towel. "Where did I get you?" He searched Adrian's shirt for cum stains, found one, and wiped at it.

It was a sweet gesture, really. Nothing Adrian himself wouldn't have done at one point. But now, it wasn't something he could do. Ever again. And the reminder was too much. He didn't feel "so fucking hot" anymore.

Nate saw the change and sat near him, paper towel wadded in his fist. "What? What happened?"

"Nothing. I'm fine."

"Bullshit. Listen, I know you were into that, so if you're going to pretend now that it didn't happen, and we're going to go back to being all distant and careful, I'm... well, I'm not cool with that."

"No. No, I'm okay." But he wasn't really, and his tone made that obvious.

Nate's face fell, his worried expression turned to hurt, and he pinched his lips together. "I see."

"Nate, I... I'm fine, really." He tried to sound more "fine," and laid his hand on Nate's thigh. "I'm sorry for being so fucked up."

Nate smiled, leaned in and kissed him. "You can talk to me, you know. I'm good for more than PT and blowjobs."

Adrian laughed, really laughed, and forgot his insecurity. Nate used the paper towel to dab at his own pants, and then leaned close to Adrian. "So, you have a job?"

"No. Not since the accident."

"What did you do?"

"I... I don't really want to talk about it."

"Seriously? Okay... Well, how about... Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

Adrian faltered. But that was an easy thing to reveal, and stupid to withhold. "I have one sister, older. Christine."

Nate nodded, and Adrian realized he was waiting for him to return the question. "How about you?"

Nate smiled wide. "Two brothers, younger. But they both live near my dad in Colorado. I only see them a few times a year."

Adrian nodded. He tried to think of something to ask that he himself wouldn't mind revealing. Finally Nate spoke. "Why is this so hard for you? What are you afraid of?" His voice was soft, and his face held no judgment or pity, just interest.

Adrian bit back the rude response he had been ready to spit out. Instead, he said nothing, and Nate sighed in frustration.

"Okay, I get it. But I'm not giving up, man. I saw you, the real you, for a minute there. I'm gonna get that guy back." He leaned back, so they were shoulder to shoulder, and handed the remote to Adrian.

Adrian found another show for them to watch, and when Nate clasped his hand, he didn't move it away. They chuckled at the television, and he soaked up Nate's gentle affection.

When the show ended, Nate got up and stretched. "I should go, I guess. My poor dog has been alone since noon."

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“You have a dog? What kind?”

“German shepherd. She’s a great dog.”

“What’s her name?”

“Star.”

“Nice name.” Adrian smiled, wishing he’d been more open earlier, now that Nate was leaving.

“Can I use your bathroom?”

“Down the hall, on the left.”

As he waited for Nate, Adrian moved into his chair. At least he could walk him to the door. Or roll him to the door, whatever. *Fuck*. He fought down the wave of annoyance at his condition. Nate obviously didn’t care, and acting like a douche about it was no way to get a second date. He smiled to himself, because he most certainly wanted a second date.

Nate’s phone chimed and lit up. For a second, the incoming message was displayed, and he leaned over to see it, curious. The logo that flashed on the screen made his breath catch in his throat. He hadn’t seen that logo in almost two years. Not since before the accident. He read the message quickly, but only the first ten words were visible in the preview.

Nate came walking in, and Adrian rolled away from the table, smiling to cover his racing heart.

“So, when do you want your next private session?” Nate scooped up his phone and keys, slipped the phone into his pocket without checking it.

“Sooner the better.”

Nate smiled at that. “Well, I don’t think two sessions on one day is a good idea, but if you want to make it a dinner date instead, I could see you on Friday.”

“I could do that.”

“Good. Can I take you out? Or is here better for you?”

“I can go out.” *With you. For the first time in two years.* Holy shit, what had he just agreed to?

“Awesome. I’ll pick you up at six, okay?”

“Okay.”

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At the door, Nate leaned down and kissed him, then whispered in his ear, "I'll see you Friday."

Adrian murmured his agreement and watched Nate leave.

He opened his internet browser with shaky fingers, and typed in the address of the BDSM group he'd been involved in before the accident. The logo he'd recognized from Nate's phone greeted him. Yes, he was over eighteen, yes he was already a member, yes he remembered his password. The message board had a few names he recognized, and lots of new ones.

No one named "Nate," but that wasn't surprising. Most people used their email as a username, or made up something. He located the thread title that had flashed on Nate's screen, and read all the posts. "*Doms wanted*" it was called. And a user named "*StarsGuy*" had posted that he was available, and instructed interested parties to "*PM information, real names only.*" There were a few more responses, mostly other guys offering their availability.

Adrian stared at the screen, thinking. Then he clicked his own profile page, double-checked the information. No photo, no real name, no address. Nate couldn't have known he was ever on that site. Had he met him once, at a party or something? He looked up StarsGuy's profile, and sure enough a photo of Nate greeted him. But he'd only joined last year. Long after Adrian had become inactive. So it was a coincidence. Not impossible, since there were only a few local BDSM groups, and just this one that was exclusively gay. But still, a hell of a coincidence.

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## Chapter 4

“My car, or do you want to drive?” Nate smiled at Adrian, who had clearly made an effort with his outfit: gray wool slacks, a thin sweater over a crisp shirt and tie, and shiny square-toed shoes. He looked great. Nate himself only had a few sets of “dress clothes,” reserved mostly for family functions and dates. Wearing sweatpants to work had its perks, but wardrobe-building wasn’t one of them.

“I can get in your car.”

Adrian seemed nervous, or maybe angry, and Nate decided to ignore it for now. Hopefully he’d loosen up as the night progressed.

The restaurant was half-empty, and since Nate had made a reservation they were shown right to the table. The waiter removed a seat so Adrian could remain in his chair, and took their drink order.

Adrian wore a small frown as he looked over the menu.

“You all right?”

“Yes, fine.”

Before he could ask anything else, the waiter returned with their drinks, told them the dinner specials, and took their appetizer order. When the waiter left, Adrian was still frowning.

“You going to tell me what’s wrong?”

“I said, I’m fine,” Adrian snapped, voice low but sharp.

“Well, you clearly lied. Did I do something wrong?”

Adrian sighed and ran his hand through his hair, messing up the perfect style. “No. You’re good. I’m sorry.”

“Hey, it’s okay. Is this hard for you, being here?”

Adrian looked across at him with shining eyes. “A little.”

“Okay. I get it. But listen, you’re doing great, you look gorgeous, you smell fantastic, and you are on a date with the hottest guy in the room. So calm down.”

Adrian laughed, as Nate had hoped he would, and shook his head. He took a sip of his drink and leaned back, frown gone. “What do you feel like eating?”

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“The salmon looks good.”

They shared the appetizer and nursed their drinks with not much more than small talk: what kind of exercises Adrian should be doing on his own, whether or not this had been an unseasonably cool spring, which movies would win at the academy awards. When Adrian seemed relaxed and happy, Nate risked some more personal questions.

“Tell me about your life before. What did you do?”

Adrian sighed, and the frown snapped back into place.

Nate recalled the look on Adrian's face after their first kiss. That guy was here, underneath the frown. Nate just needed to get him out.

“Keeping it a secret won't make it less painful. It'll just be one more thing I don't know about you. I wish you'd let me in.”

Another sigh, this time followed quickly by a long swallow of his drink. “Fine. I was an accountant.”

“Yeah? That's cool. So you could still work, if you wanted to.”

“I guess.”

“But you don't want to?”

“Not there. I guess I could work somewhere else, but I... I'm not ready for that.”

Nate nodded. If Adrian was this nervous on a date, how would he handle a job interview? Or meeting new co-workers? “I understand. But I bet someday soon you'll be ready. I bet you've done a lot even in the past few months.”

Adrian snorted. “Not really.”

“You're here with me. Would you have done this before?”

“I guess not.”

They were quiet for a few minutes, while the waiter brought their meals. Nate decided to keep pushing, to try to crack that shell. “So it was a motorcycle crash?”

Adrian froze, his eyes narrowed and his mouth twisted into a scowl. “I don't want to talk about that.”

“Ever? Or just right now?”

“Not ever.” Adrian's voice was loud and angry enough to attract the attention of a couple dining a few tables away.

Nate realized he'd crossed a line. Still, "not ever" was a problem. "I'll let it go for now." He smiled, and Adrian met his gaze with an angry stare.

He ate in silence until he thought Adrian had relaxed enough for more questions. "Did you have a boyfriend?"

Adrian closed his eyes, dropped his fork, and pressed his lips together. "No."

"Oh. Well... that's good and bad, I guess." He watched Adrian's face change, his mouth relax.

Finally, curiosity seemed to get the best of him. "Why is that good and bad?"

"Good because if you did, and he left you after the accident, well, that would be terrible. Bad because it would give you an excuse for being so difficult on a date." Nate smiled and finished his drink.

"Are you trying to make me upset, now? Is that what you want?"

He leaned forward, lowered his voice, looked Adrian in the eye. "I want you to talk to me. I want to get to know you better. I want you to realize I am not your enemy."

"I know that." Adrian picked up his fork again and took another bite of fish.

"Good." Maybe he should back off. Adrian was trying, and pushing too hard could backfire. "You ever been here before?"

"Once, a long time ago. My sister's birthday, I think."

"You have a picture of your family?"

Adrian hesitated, but dug out his cell phone and scrolled through until he produced a picture of his parents and sister.

"Nice. She's pretty. Your parents look happy."

"Yeah. They're great."

Nate kept the conversation light, back to safe observations and neutral questions. When Adrian declined dessert, they left. He stood nearby while Adrian got into the car, trying not to look concerned. Adrian flashed him an annoyed glance, and he knew he'd failed. "You want to go out for dessert? Somewhere else?"

"No. No, thanks."



Nate sighed. Too much pushing, maybe. He drove to Adrian's house, got his chair out of the trunk. Adrian frowned at him and grabbed the arm of the chair, pulling it out of his grip. Nate said nothing, waiting for him to get settled. Adrian got in the chair and immediately wheeled up the ramp to his house.

"Can I come in?"

"Sure." Adrian unlocked his door and pushed inside, not even turning to see if Nate followed.

"I know you can do things, Adrian. I was just helping, that's nothing to get mad about."

"I can't do things." His chin shook, and he turned away.

Nate froze, unsure how to react. With anyone else he'd offer some comfort, an arm around the shoulder or a gentle word. But with Adrian, that was likely to make things worse. "I don't know what to say, how to be with you without you getting angry."

"Then leave." His face had turned hard and cold again, his mouth firm.

"I don't want that. Do you?"

A short nod.

"Really?" No, he couldn't mean that. They'd had some fun, some nice moments.

"Yes. I'm sorry." He kept his face turned away.

His mind spun, what could he say to fix this? How could he get past Adrian's anger? He stared at the side of Adrian's face, his smooth jaw, recently shaved, and the carefully styled hair. He'd wanted this date. So why was he so ready to end it? Had it been that horrible?

"No, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I pushed you so hard. Sorry I moved too fast. And I'm sorry you're not ready for a boyfriend, Adrian, because I'd love to be yours."

He waited a minute, but Adrian never turned, never spoke. He kept his head tilted away and his mouth closed in the same tight frown he'd worn half the night, and so Nate left.

In the car, driving home, he berated himself for all his stupid questions and teasing. He'd known Adrian was fragile, emotionally. Known he was quick to anger. What had he been thinking? With his fucking stupid, cocky questions,

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thinking Adrian would be so easy to win. Well, he'd blown it now. If Adrian didn't make contact again, Nate would have to give it up. If Adrian wasn't ready for a date, or a simple conversation, there was nothing else Nate could do.

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## Chapter 5

Why had he thought he could go out on a date? That anyone would want him? That he could do anything like a normal guy?

Everything had been wrong. From the awkward transfer into Nate's car, to the restaurant that had clearly been chosen for its handicap accessibility, to the horrible probing questions. And Nate, skipping over the curb to fetch his chair, standing by ready to help, carefully closing the car door for him. *Ugh*. No matter how good Nate's intentions, it was unbearable.

Adrian tried not to cry, not to care. Tried not to think about how hurt Nate had sounded right before he'd left.

He took out his phone and texted Chrissy, as he'd promised to do. "Home safe. Date over."

Barely a minute later her reply came. "Why so soon? How did it go?"

He thought about what to tell his sister. They'd grown closer over the past year and a half since he'd been home, texting every day. She was his only friend, unless he counted Jim. He had to be honest with her.

"I couldn't do it. He was too helpful."

Chrissy would understand that. She knew better than anyone how hard this was for him, how insulting he found most people's urge to assist.

"Thought you liked this guy? You should have let him help you, bro."

"No thanks." Maybe she didn't understand, after all.

"You're going to need to let someone help you, someday."

"Not yet."

Instead of another text, the phone rang. "Are you all right?"

Hearing his sister's voice was too much. He sobbed into the phone, and told her the whole story. Every detail of the conversation, every move Nate had made, every rude response he'd given. Finally, Chrissy sighed, a deep sound heavy with frustration.

"You need to talk to him again. Apologize."

"What? How are you not on my side about this?"

“Ade, you acted like an asshole. What was he supposed to do? Let you fall onto the pavement? Of course he had to set your chair up for you! And I know you’ve been on enough dates to realize that talking about your past and your family is kind of expected. Seriously, it sounds like he was being really nice and you were a jerk.”

“He was pushing me, and he knew it.”

“People push you because they care about you. Would he have pushed if he thought you couldn’t handle it?”

*Fuck, she might be right.* Adrian flushed with guilt.

“You still there?”

“Yeah. Fuck, Chris, you think I was an asshole?”

“A little bit. Call him, or go see him.”

“I can’t. I don’t know if I want to.”

“Okay, well just think about it. You deserve to be happy. Text me when you decide what to do, or if you need backup, okay?”

“Okay.”

He changed out of his date clothes, getting more and more depressed. His righteous anger seemed ridiculous now, his pride infantile. He dug out his emergency bottle of sedatives from the bottom of his sock drawer, swallowed one, climbed into bed, and slept.

The next day he woke late, and groggy. But it was Saturday and he had nothing to do, so he stayed in bed. Finally at noon, his hunger got the best of him. He got up and answered his texts from Chrissy while he made himself breakfast. He spent the rest of the day thinking about how, or if, he should contact Nate. A call? A text? A visit? Or should he just cut his losses and move on?

Sunday, he wasn’t much better. He’d skipped the sedative, but hadn’t slept well. Betty, his cleaning lady, came in the morning, and he sat up and smiled, acted normal while she was there. After she left, he curled up in his bed and read a while. When the private investigator solved the case and professed his love to his assistant, he closed the book in disgust. Must everything be a damn romance?

He checked the time: three thirty. If he showered now he could be at Nate’s office by closing time. Or he could call, apologize, and ask Nate to stop by. Or

he could be really smart and do nothing. He'd be sad for a few days, but if he pursued this with Nate there was a bigger heartbreak waiting for him. Because as much as Nate thought he liked him now, it most likely wouldn't last forever. Maybe it was best to end this before it started. For the both of them.

But Adrian got in the shower anyway, and got dressed, and then held the phone in his hand, debating what to do. If he called, Nate would come. He was pretty sure. But something about that didn't sit right. Before his accident, he wouldn't have asked a guy to come over so he could apologize. He would have gone to the guy himself.

Driving to the physical therapy office, he second-guessed his decision. What if Nate wasn't interested anymore? His asshole behavior at dinner had made it pretty clear that his issues went beyond the physical. Maybe Nate had decided he was too much work? He pulled into his usual spot just as Nate was locking the front door.

Nate saw him pull up, of course, and stood behind the glass door with his arms folded over his chest, waiting, while Adrian wheeled up the low ramp.

"Come in." Nate held the door open, then locked it behind him and lowered the blinds.

"Hi. I had to talk to you."

"Okay. Well..." Nate sat on the small vinyl couch in the office's waiting area and patted the seat next to him. "I'll listen."

He smiled softly at the action. Not only was Nate willing to give him another chance, he expected him to hop onto the couch just like anyone else. How had he thought he should "cut his losses" and let Nate go? He managed to transfer himself to the couch with little effort, relieved the cushion was firm and high. "Okay, well obviously I was an asshole during our date. I'm sorry, and I really want another chance."

He'd expected Nate to smile, to forgive him with the same good-natured attitude he'd shown during all their other meetings. But Nate's eyebrows pinched together and his lips thinned to a hard line. Adrian's mouth went dry.

"I'll give you another chance, if you make me a promise."

"Okay." Adrian barely got the word out, and Nate looked up at hearing his scratchy voice.

"You have to be honest with me, tell me about yourself, and let me help you when you need it. I understand you keeping the rest of the world out, but if I'm going to let you into my life, I deserve to be in yours."

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“Did you rehearse that?”

“Yeah.” Nate chuckled. “Pretty good, right?”

“Yeah.” Even better, it meant he had hoped they would see each other again. “I promise, but it might be hard at first. Will you be patient?”

“I will.” He said it like a marriage vow, as he held Adrian’s hand and stared into his eyes, and they both laughed.

Then Nate leaned forward and kissed him. Adrian tried to let go of everything, he tried to let his walls down and trust Nate, tried to be himself.

“Stop it.”

He pulled away. “What?”

“Whatever you’re doing. You’re all stiff and nervous, thinking too hard. Jeez, man, I’m trying to slip you some tongue and I’m afraid you’re going to bite it off.”

“Sorry.” Adrian huffed out a little laugh. “I was trying to be more open.”

“Well, that felt like the opposite of open.” He smiled and ran his thumb over Adrian’s jaw. “Listen, I need to go home, let the dog out, and get out of these sweaty clothes. How about you order us some pizzas, I’ll stop for wine, and I’ll meet you back at your house in an hour? We can work on your open-mouth kissing technique.”

“Sounds good.” Adrian was already moving over to his chair.

Before he unlocked the door, Nate leaned down, kissed Adrian’s neck, and inhaled deeply. “Mmm, love the way you smell.”

Adrian clasped his hand on the back of Nate’s neck and held him close. He wanted to thank him for accepting his apology, to thank him for the dinner date he’d ruined, to thank him for trying. But he just kissed him instead, and said, “See you in an hour.”

Nate smiled and followed him out to the parking lot, waved at him from his car. Adrian drove home smiling.

He was just paying the pizza delivery guy when Nate arrived, brown paper bag in one arm. “Good timing.”

“Hey.” Nate leaned down and kissed him, and Adrian’s eyes misted with tears. So normal and natural, as if he was any other guy on a date, not some broken man in a chair. He looked away quickly, hiding his emotion.

Nate unpacked the wine bottles, and took out some plates. "Where are your wineglasses?"

Adrian took out the corkscrew and glasses, poured the wine, and they ate in the kitchen again. Nate talked about his day, telling a story about the hair salon next door to the therapy office: how a few of the stylists were always coming in and asking for medical advice, as if he and Jim and Becca were doctors.

"I mean, so far it's all been obvious stuff, but we're not running a walk-in clinic, you know? I just hope they never have any actual injuries over there!" He laughed and cleared away their empty plates.

Adrian watched him and sipped his wine. This was going well, easy and relaxed. He followed Nate into the living room and sat near him on the couch, didn't even flinch when Nate held out an arm to help him.

"So, tell me about your bike."

*Fuck.* Adrian froze, fought down the wave of anger. *Breathe.* Nate was still and quiet by his side, waiting, and Adrian forced himself to look into his eyes. What he saw there calmed him. Patience and kindness. He was serious, he hadn't asked to tease or to hurt; he knew this was difficult. Adrian closed his eyes, remembered the spot in his garage where he'd parked his bike, the hook where he'd hung his helmet.

"Yamaha Roadstar. A sixteen hundred. Dark blue."

"I don't really know anything about bikes. Is that a good one?"

Adrian laughed softly and opened his eyes. "Yeah. I mean, it's not a Harley, but... I loved it. I used to map out long rides on the back roads, spent at least one day each weekend riding all summer long. The day of the accident I was on the highway. It was warm, a freak warm day in December. I knew it would be the last ride of the seas—" His words ended on a sob. *It was the last ride, all right.*

"Okay, okay." Nate leaned down and scooped his legs up, folded them onto the couch. The move was so quick and smooth Adrian didn't have time to get mad about it. Then Nate pulled him onto his chest, and ran his hands over his back, and Adrian relaxed onto him. Nate said nothing, but was clearly waiting for the rest of the story.

"So I was on the highway, going to head down to exit 3 and explore the old farm roads. I never rode too fast, was always careful. I bought my bike because it was big, a cruiser. I just liked the feeling of riding. I was in the low speed

lane, and I felt something hit me. I just remember getting thrown, looking at the pavement from way too high. I don't remember landing, or anything else. I woke up in the hospital. They told me it had been a four-car pileup."

"You're lucky to be alive."

"That's what they say."

"Thanks for telling me about it." Nate kissed the top of his head, held him close.

After several minutes of silence, during which Nate drained his wine, Adrian sat up. His tears had dried, and he was done talking. He kissed Nate, wine still strong on his lips, and wrapped a hand around his back. This time, he wasn't trying too hard. His tongue danced with Nate's, and their bodies pressed together. Nate whimpered against his mouth, and arched into him, his arousal obvious.

"Can we go to your bed?"

"Fuck, yes." He moved to his chair as fast as he could, and Nate followed him down the hall. In bed, he had a panicky moment when he realized that Nate would see him naked. The lights were off, but it was still light enough outside that the room was fairly bright. He wanted to go lower the blinds, but Nate was already at his side, kissing him, urging him onto the mattress. He tried to slide under the blankets, but Nate stopped him.

"Clothes off, first." Nate was stripping himself, and barely looked at Adrian, assuming his cooperation.

Finally naked, Nate turned to him and realized he hadn't moved, hadn't taken off anything.

"What?"

"I don't..."

"Can I help?"

*No.* But he didn't say that. Instead he nodded and let Nate take off his socks. Nate's body was gorgeous, every muscle perfect. He was hairy, dark curls on his chest, a thick patch over his beautiful cock, and a thin covering on his thighs. He stood close and pulled Adrian's shirt over his head, then unbuttoned his pants and started to move them over his hips.

"Wait." Adrian covered Nate's hands. "I'm—"



“You’re fine.” Nate smiled and Adrian braced for the look of disgust that he was sure to receive when his legs were exposed.

Instead, Nate threw the pants to the floor, and touched his legs reverently. Nate’s strong fingers rubbed over his bumpy ruined thighs, tracing the straight surgical scars, palming the smooth patches where he’d been burned. Then he moved up, over his hips and torso, finding all the other scars and marks, acknowledging each one.

When he’d examined his whole body, Nate climbed on top of him, pulled the blanket over his back, and kissed him with just as much passion as he’d shown in the living room. It took a few moments for Adrian to get back into it, after the trauma of Nate’s inspection, but the kissing and rubbing did the job, and soon he was moaning with need.

Nate pulled away and asked, “What do you want?” Kissing his neck, squeezing a hand over his hip.

“I don’t know.” He’d always considered himself a “bottom,” really. And probably that would be easiest. Just let Nate roll him over, or hold his legs up. But he hadn’t been with anyone since the accident. Since a few months before the accident, actually. And he just didn’t know how it would be. If he was even ready for this at all. Maybe they could just suck each other off, take things slow.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” He answered immediately, and was rewarded by a proud smile from Nate.

“You have condoms? Lube?”

Adrian nodded, pointed to the nightstand. He closed his eyes, waiting. He did trust Nate, and he silently vowed to be accepting of whatever he did. If Nate held up his legs, Adrian would be cool. He’d have to tolerate some of that in bed, there was just no way around it.

But Nate shocked him by rolling the condom over Adrian’s stiff cock and mounting him.

“Holy shit.” He gasped in pleasure as he watched Nate lower himself, muscles flexing, the tight heat closing around him.

“This okay?” Nate’s voice came out low and thready; already he was half inside.

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“Mmm, yeah.” *More than okay.* His eyes followed every move Nate made, every flex and twist. Nate rode him slow, and with a little pivot forward at the end of each down stroke. “Oh God, Nate.”

Nate smiled and kept going, stroking himself with one hand, the other planted on the bed, his body leaning to one side. Adrian’s head spun, and he closed his eyes. He had to stop watching Nate’s abs flex and his balls bounce if he wanted to last. But with nothing else to focus on, the pleasure seemed more intense, and soon threatened to overwhelm him. He fought it, hard: squirming on the bed, blowing out deep breaths, calculating percentages in his head. But Nate’s relentless bouncing was too much. He tried to announce his orgasm, but all that came out was a broken shout, no real words. Nate knew what he meant, though.

Nate rocked up and down a few more times, then leaned back, and stroked himself fast. Adrian watched, still woozy and shaky, and sighed along with him when he came. Nate made sexy sounds—little moans and gasps—and Adrian just watched in awe.

The sun was almost down, and the last pink light filtered in and lit up Nate’s chest, glistening with sweat. God, he was beautiful. *I don’t deserve this kind of man.*

Nate got up, oblivious to Adrian’s worry, peeled the condom from him, pulled a few tissues from the box on the nightstand, and wiped him off. Adrian hid his annoyance. *Calm down, he’s just being nice.* Nate disappeared down the hall, going to the bathroom probably. He returned a moment later and lay down beside him, and Adrian tried to relax.

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## Chapter 6

Nate pulled Adrian on top of him, and hooked his leg around the back of his thigh.

“Ugh, Nate...” Adrian wriggled to the side, but Nate held firm.

“Stay here, please? You feel so good on me.”

Adrian groaned against his chest but stopped struggling.

He knew why Adrian wanted to move. He couldn't ignore the powerlessness of his legs in this position, not like when he was on his back. Well, tough shit. Maybe it would take some uncomfortable situations for Adrian to realize he wasn't interested in his legs, or what they couldn't do. He massaged Adrian's back, the muscles tight and firm, dropped his hands and kneaded his ass, hard.

“Oh God, that feels good.”

Adrian was completely relaxed on him, his whole body loose. “Ha! Now I know how to control you. Ass massage.”

“Yes. You cracked my code. Just don't stop.”

Nate laughed and kept rubbing. Adrian's butt was all muscle under his hands, the skin smooth. He pressed his fingers into the crack and smiled when Adrian arched up, allowing him better access. He ran his finger around Adrian's hole. “You want to bottom next time?”

“Yes.” Adrian sighed it into his chest. He may have even been drooling.

Nate chuckled and kissed the top of his head. “You should have said. We could have done that.”

“I know. What we did was great.”

“Yeah, it was.” He squeezed the cheeks in his hands, stretched his ass open. “You like to bottom?”

“Yes. Keep rubbing.”

“A bossy bottom, I see.”

“Mmm.”

He gave Adrian what he wanted, working the stiff muscles. “Good-looking guy like you? You must have had a lot of boyfriends.”

A soft chuckle against his skin, and Adrian tilted his hips in. "I had my share."

"What did you like? Guys like me? What was your type?"

Silence. Nate waited, unsure if he'd crossed a line, hit some unknown sore spot.

"I didn't have a type, physically. I liked guys with... common interests."

He laughed. "Bikers, or accountants?"

"Doms."

Nate's pulse sped. The room seemed extremely quiet all of a sudden. His mind raced as he tried to remember all their conversations, to figure out how Adrian might have known. "You... Did you know I—"

"Yes. The first time you were here you left your phone on the coffee table, and you had a PM alert from Strictly-Men pop-up. I saw the screen, and I knew." Adrian tilted his head, rested his chin on Nate's chest. "I used to be active in that group, before."

"No shit."

"Yeah."

The sun had set, and shadows masked Adrian's expression. Nate stared at his face anyway, trying to wrap his head around the coincidence that they were both in the same BDSM club. Then again, it did have several hundred members, so maybe the chances weren't that slim.

"So... about the group. What were you into?"

"I like things light. Spanking, bondage, teasing. Not a huge fan of real pain."

Nate smiled and continued his ass massage. "Me neither. And you're a sub?"

"Yeah. I looked you up. Your screen name said 'switch'. No preference?"

"I like Dom, I guess that's my preference. But I've subbed pretty happily too." He wrapped his arms around Adrian and rolled him over onto his back, straddled his slim hips. "Do you still want to play like that?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Yes." Their eyes locked, and even in the low light Nate could see the longing there. Not sexual, something deeper. This was a part of his old life, a part he could have back, a part Nate could give him.

“Ah fuck, Adrian.” Nate leaned down and kissed him, deep and hard, pressing his tongue into Adrian’s mouth with an aggression he hadn’t dared earlier. Adrian yielded, and moaned deep in his throat.

Nate thrust his tongue in roughly and Adrian took it, sucking it in, pursing his lips around it with a tight wet grip. As he fucked Adrian’s mouth with his tongue, he felt Adrian harden against his stomach. He reached down to stroke him, earning another little whimpering sound, and had to pull his mouth away.

They were both panting, staring at each other in the dimly lit room. Nate waited, unsure what the next move should be, afraid to go too far. Adrian moved his arms up and crossed his wrists on the pillow behind his head, never breaking their gaze.

A blatant invitation, and Nate accepted. He took one wrist in each hand, holding them down, and rocked against Adrian’s cock. Adrian moaned, threw his head back, and closed his eyes. *Beautiful.*

Nate whispered, “You want to come again?” into Adrian’s ear.

“Mmm, yeah.”

He stopped moving. “Ask me.”

Adrian opened his eyes and smiled. A wicked, naughty smile. He struggled to free his arms, tried to twist his hips, groaned his frustration. Nate held him firmly and waited, his own cock almost completely hard again as well.

“Please, Sir, let me come?”

*Damn that sounded sweet.* Nate rewarded him with more grinding, sliding their hard lengths together. He kept the contact firm and moved deliberately, giving Adrian as much sensation as possible. “This feel good?”

“Yes. Yes, Sir.”

“You going to come like this?” It had been less than an hour since their last orgasms, and even as turned on as he was Nate wasn’t sure he could get there again so easily. If Adrian could, he’d keep going. If not, there were other things they could try.

“Yes. Please.”

*Okay then.* He kept up the hard frotting, building speed. Adrian panted and twisted under him, made another effort to free his arms. Nate pressed harder against his wrists, and Adrian sucked in his breath with a little gasp. *You like*

*that, do you?* He lined up their forearms and leaned down, limiting Adrian's movement more completely. When he hooked his feet over Adrian's knees, holding his legs down, Adrian shouted.

At first he thought he'd made a mistake, that reminding Adrian of his legs had ruined the moment, but a burst of wetness on his stomach explained the shout and eased his worry. He thrust a few more times, then kissed Adrian's neck and released his hold.

He laid next to him, kissed his wrists where he'd gripped them, stroked his chest, and waited for his breathing to return to normal.

"Adrian?"

"Mmm. That was awesome."

"Yeah." Nate shifted closer and snuggled in to his neck. "Did I mention how great you smell?"

Adrian laughed. "A few times." He moved in and pressed a soft kiss to Nate's mouth. "Can you stay tonight?"

He glanced at the clock. He should get home and let out Star, she'd been alone for six hours now. "I have to get back for the dog."

"Oh, yeah. Star, right?"

"That's right. You don't like dogs?"

"I do. I did, I mean. It's just..."

"You can still have a dog. Or you can just visit mine anytime you want." Nate sat on the edge of the bed and leaned over, turning on the small lamp on the nightstand. Adrian squinted in the light, and then looked over Nate's naked body. He watched the change as it happened, watched Adrian's face go from soft and admiring to hard and resentful. "Hey, don't do that."

"What?" Adrian asked it sweetly enough, but he was frowning.

"You know what. You're getting sad, feeling sorry for yourself. I can see it in your eyes."

"You don't know me well enough to see that yet."

"Bullshit. I see that look all the time, man. On you, and on most of my patients." He picked up Adrian's right leg and held it in the air, bent the knee, pressed down. Worked through a series of stretches just like they were warming

up for a session. "At work I can't usually say anything, it's not my place. But with you? I won't let you fall down that hole, not while I'm here anyway." He gently dropped the leg, moved on to the left one. "You are beautiful, Adrian. Sexy and strong. Believe me?"

Adrian's frown had melted away, and he was watching Nate move his leg with patient affection. "Yes."

"Good. Let's talk about something serious, now... I canceled a date last weekend. With a guy from the group." At Adrian's raised brows, he explained. "Well, I'd made the date before our therapy session. Then after what happened with us, I know we didn't have any kind of agreement, but it just didn't feel right to go through with it. Anyway, the guy's limits page had sounded a lot like stuff you'd be into. Spanking: no marks, no broken skin. Rope play. So I was thinking, maybe you'd want..." He trailed off at Adrian's stormy expression. The scowling face and piercing eyes were not the reaction he'd anticipated. "What?"

"Take your name off the group list." Adrian's voice was angry and hard.

Nate let out a breath. Not angry about the play offer, then. Just unwilling to share. "Is that an order?"

"Please." His face reddened nicely, and Nate resisted the urge to cover it with kisses.

"As you wish." He gave in to temptation and kissed Adrian's frown, held his warm pink face in his hands. "A bossy bottom and a jealous sub. What have I gotten myself into?"

Adrian's eyes met his, and Nate's smile faded. Vulnerable, uncertain, hopeful, those eyes held him captive. *He trusts me. I could break him, and he trusts me not to.* "Only you, Adrian. I'll be yours if you'll be mine, okay?"

Adrian nodded, and his eyes shone. Nate kissed him quickly, deeply, to prevent any tears. He slipped an arm behind him, pulled him close. Kissed his neck, his shoulder, nibbled at his chest, rubbed his nose under his armpit, making Adrian laugh. He held him and cuddled him until there was no risk of sadness.

"Stop, I have to piss." Adrian laughed and sat up, pulled his legs over the edge of the mattress.

"Okay. I really do need to go home, now, too."

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He dressed while Adrian went to the bathroom, and then kissed him good-bye at the front door, promising to see him Friday for a redo of their restaurant dinner date.

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## Chapter 7

Adrian watched Nate's car reverse out of the drive with a mix of embarrassment and excitement. What had he been thinking, with that possessive bullshit? "Take your name off the group list." *Shit. What an idiot.* Then Nate had responded with his sweet promise, and kissed his worries away. *Don't get too excited. He could still disappear.* But a little voice in Adrian's head said he wouldn't, and he hoped it was right.

The week passed slowly, waiting for Friday. At his PT appointment Friday morning, Jim seemed unusually quiet. "You all right?"

Jim smiled his trademark shiny grin, but ran a hand through his hair nervously. "You like Nate?"

He was stunned a minute, then he realized, of course, they must be close. It was natural Nate would have told him. "Yeah. I do."

"Oh thank God." He seemed to unclench, and let out a deep breath.

"Why? You were worried?"

"He said you guys were... but then on Tuesday you didn't say anything, and I was afraid..."

"Wait, you were worried about *him*?"

"Well, yeah." He stared at Adrian as if the reason should be obvious. When Adrian just stared right back, Jim rolled his eyes. "You can be difficult, Adrian. And I think he really likes you."

"Nate's pretty tough. He can handle me."

Jim burst out laughing at that, and slapped Adrian's back. "I hope so, man. I'd love to see you happy."

*Well, if anyone can make me happy it's probably Nate.* He smiled and followed Jim to the desk, said "See you Tuesday," and went home. It was way too early to get ready for his date, so he watched TV, and attempted to distract himself. But in the back of his mind, questions tortured him. Would Nate leave him? Would he get sick of dealing with a boyfriend in a wheelchair? Would he be embarrassed to be seen with him? Would his family approve? Would he recover if Nate broke up with him? Finally he gave up and got ready for their date, and then waited in the living room, dressed and nervous, for an hour.

When Nate showed up he acted like it was totally normal to go out on dates, like he had no problem riding in someone else's car. Adrian tried to counteract his horrible behavior on their last date by being extra accommodating on this one. He asked Nate to help him into the car, allowed Nate to lead him into the restaurant, and smiled at the waitress even when she placed her hand on the handle of his chair while seating them.

"You're scaring me." Nate studied his face, and his eyes did seem nervous.

"I'm trying to be nice."

"Tell me about your family."

"What the hell kind of conversation transition is that?" Adrian held in his laughter, tried to act serious.

"Since you're in a 'nice' mood, I figured I should take advantage."

His smile spread, and Nate matched it. But he did answer the question, and told Nate all about his sister Chrissy, and her texting habits, and his parents with their well-intentioned but annoying visiting. He talked about his childhood, and asked questions of Nate, and before he knew it the dessert was done and Nate was paying the bill.

"We should split it."

"You get the next time." Nate smiled a challenge at him.

*Okay, yes. There can be a next time.* "Sure."

At his house, Nate came in and poured wine and kicked off his shoes as if they had been dating for weeks. He was equal parts thrilled and terrified.

"I have a serious question for you." Nate sipped his wine casually, but his eyes were determined.

"Okay, shoot."

"If I didn't want to play, would you still want to date me?"

"Uh, yes." He looked Nate over, to be sure he was serious. "Of course. Why?"

"I've had a few boyfriends that wanted more than I was comfortable with. When I stopped playing, we broke up. I want to know how important the lifestyle is to you."

Adrian shook his head. For some people, the lifestyle was just that. For him, it was important, and fun, but not essential. He'd never been in an uneven

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relationship, himself, and so he'd never judged. But knowing someone had hurt Nate pissed him off. Still, it was his gain that they had, so he dismissed his annoyance. "Well, considering I haven't had any kind of sex in over two years, it's not all that important." He moved closer and held Nate's hand. "I like it. I'm not going to lie. For a while it was pretty much the only way I liked to fuck. But even then I'd have given it up for the right guy."

Nate smiled, and Adrian knew he'd passed some kind of test. "So, then... let's talk about it. What do you like, specifically?"

"You want to see my profile?"

Nate nodded, and Adrian went to get his laptop, opened it to the site, and pulled up his page. A few clicks and he opened the private files he had ready to PM an interested Dom. He handed the computer to Nate and waited while he read it.

"Wow, this is all... stuff I could totally do. You the type who likes things to get more intense? Like is this going to get heavier as time goes on?"

"No. My limits page hasn't changed since I joined ten years ago."

"Perfect." Nate handed the laptop back, and Adrian took a minute to PM his information to StarsGuy.

Still, it was two months before Nate responded. Two months of dating, and learning about each other. He met some of Nate's family, and a few of his friends. To Adrian's relief, none of them seemed surprised or disturbed by the fact Nate was dating a guy in a wheelchair. Star was a fun companion, and often a tension breaker for them. When Adrian got too gruff and snappish, Star would place her head in his lap, and look up at him with her deep black eyes, as if she was scolding him. Adrian would apologize to Nate, and find some way to take the sting from his words.

The sex was good, just the way it was. At first he'd had trouble allowing Nate to hold his legs, or flip him around, or support his weight. But Nate tolerated his cranky comments, and learned how to coax him into compliance. He tried to let Nate in, tried to trust him. But part of him was still terrified of the day Nate would leave him. He kept their dates to no more than three nights each week, and was careful to remind himself they were only casually dating, no matter what his heart wanted. This way, when the end came he'd be ready.

Alone at his kitchen table one Friday at lunchtime, a text came through from Nate, *I'd like to try a scene tonight. You up for it?*

He replied immediately *fuck, yes*, and imagined Nate laughing when he read it.

A few seconds later, the response: *LOL I'll be there at four.*

When Nate showed up, carrying a large black nylon duffel bag, Adrian's stomach flipped with nerves. Was he ready for this? What if he safeworded? Would Nate want to try again, or would he give up on him? Would Nate go too easy on him?

"You look nervous." Nate dropped the bag on the floor and kissed him, looked at him with concern.

"No, I'm fine." When Nate cocked his eyebrow in doubt, he admitted, "A little nervous."

"Let's sit and talk."

Nate had printed the "negotiation" page from the resources section of the group site, and they went over it together. It only took a few minutes, as there were only a few areas which interested them both. Adrian chuckled at the list they'd created. "We're pretty vanilla, aren't we?"

"Yeah. That's fine with me though. I'm not into doing anything that requires first aid afterward."

"Me neither." He dropped the list on the coffee table and threaded his fingers together.

"So, what are you nervous about?"

"It's been a long time, what if I can't finish?"

Nate scooted closer to him on the couch and pulled him into a hug. "We can try. And whenever you want to stop, we'll stop. Then whenever you want to try again, we will. This is supposed to be fun, man. If it's not fun, we don't do it, okay?"

Adrian closed his eyes and relaxed onto Nate's chest. "Okay."

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Nate bound his wrists with long strips of cloth, secured one to each side of the headboard, leaving less than an inch of slack. Adrian pulled against the restraint, pleased by the sensation. His legs were similarly tied, and though the binding there was unnecessary, it thrilled him the most. He studied Nate's expression carefully, but not a flicker of amusement crossed his face during the tying of his ankles.

His cock had stiffened almost fully by the time Nate was done, partially as a result of the binding, and partially from Nate, his Dominant demeanor, his authoritative voice. When Nate stood at his side and spread lube over his cock, he hardened completely.

“You do not have permission to come. Understand?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Nate stroked him masterfully, bringing him quickly to the edge of orgasm. He would have warned Nate of his arousal, but at the perfect moment Nate dropped his hand and massaged his balls, then dove lower and pressed against his hole lightly.

He clenched every muscle from his lower belly to his ass, and rode out the teasing edge of pleasure. When Nate's hand returned, it was tortuously light, barely grazing the sides of his shaft, skimming over the head, his fingertips dancing over everything.

Adrian groaned with need, and Nate gave him a taste of more sensation, a few strokes that were just right, almost there, and then left him aching again. He growled with frustration and pulled against his bindings.

Over and over Nate took him to the edge of the cliff and back down again, never allowing him over the other side. He lost all pride and control, and shouted a demand at Nate, ordering him to stroke harder, faster. Nate ignored him. He fought against the ties, pulling and twisting, and yelled again, demanding more, now, don't stop. Nate dismissed his demands with a lighthearted comment. He knew Nate wouldn't stop, not unless he spoke the safeword, and so he was free to plead. Most Doms loved the begging anyway. He hoped Nate would, too, because at this point he couldn't control it.

Finally, when he was whining for release, Nate promised, “Almost.”

Nate removed the restraints from his ankles and pushed his legs up, exposing his ass, and forcing his sore dick against his belly. Then Nate was at his entrance, pressing in, and the stretch diverted his attention for a moment. He wondered briefly if they were skipping the spanking, but one look at Nate's face and he forgot all about that.

Nate's eyes were hooded, his breaths puffed out short and fast, his bottom lip shook, and his mouth formed a soft frown like it did when he was about to come. *You're just as gone as I am.* The thought made his cock ache even more.

Nate thrust with uneven rhythm, then seemed to gather his control, and shifted his weight to one arm, using the other hand to wrap Adrian's cock. "You may come, whenever you're ready."

"Th-thank you Sir," he managed to reply, as Nate's fingers massaged him. It wasn't a stroking motion, but more a squeezing, and he couldn't be sure if that was intentional or if it was simply the best Nate could manage in his current condition.

Either way, he was soon on the edge again, and this time, with the pounding in his ass and the strange pulsing around his cock, he toppled over, and screamed with the intense relief of it. His body shook, and he spurted like a geyser, covering himself with cum. Every thrust forced out a bit more, and Nate's hand continued to work him.

He expected Nate to come, too, but the pounding didn't stop. Nate's face was a tight grimace. *He's holding it in.* The first twitch of discomfort from his dick reminded him why. He'd agreed to this, said he liked it. And he did. But damn, right now he wanted it to end. Nate's hand teased and rubbed, stimulating his hypersensitive cock to another kind of edge, the one between pleasure and pain. He squealed and shouted, making some sounds he would never be able to re-create and would never want to. Finally, Nate collapsed onto him, and removed his hand, leaving his cock to recover untouched.

Adrian panted and closed his eyes, enjoying the gentle tingling coursing through his whole body. His skin where Nate laid on him was sweaty, and the untouched areas cool. He kept his mind blank and focused on the physical.

A minute later he was untied, wiped off, and snuggled in Nate's arms under the soft comforter. Golden light from the setting sun streamed in through his windows, filling his bedroom with a warm glow, and Adrian felt perfect: comfortable, happy, surrounded by beauty.

"I'm sorry I fucked that up." Nate was red faced, eyes downcast.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I didn't do everything: the spanking, the plug... Are you disappointed?"

"No. Nate, come on. That was great."

"I just couldn't—you just—man, you got me so fucking hot I couldn't think."

Adrian wanted to respond, but his heart was pounding and he couldn't stop smiling. He held in a giddy laugh. Had he ever made a Dom lose control

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before? Not that he remembered. But the only guys he'd dated long-term were either not in the lifestyle, or were much more serious, as Doms, than Nate.

There was something between them, something strong. It had made the scene more powerful for him, and obviously for Nate as well. He didn't want to think about it too closely, though. Because right on the heels of that heart-racing thrill of attraction and closeness and affection came the terror of knowing it would end. It would certainly end, and the deeper he let himself get, the more painful it would be for him when that happened. So he kissed Nate's chest and chuckled softly. "Got you so hot you couldn't think, huh?"

Nate laughed and squeezed him tighter. "Yeah. Gonna have to build up my tolerance to you, I guess."

Over the next few months, Nate did just that. They went on more dinner dates, and spent a lot of nights at home, watching movies or reading, snuggled side-by-side on the couch. He even slept at Nate's a few times, and found that with a few adjustments, he could manage his chair easily around Nate's house. Nate urged Adrian to do more, to take risks, and to try things he'd never considered. He went shopping at the mall, had lunch in town with some old friends, and even went to the beach, using a special fat-wheeled chair Nate borrowed from the office.

Adrian still kept their dates to three times a week, though Nate pressed for more. During those three nights, Nate spent time learning Adrian's body. He uncovered every kink, and soothed each insecurity. Their play did escalate slightly, but it was still tame as far as scenes went. And Adrian loved it. He loved Nate, if he was honest. But whenever a moment came that would be appropriate to say so, he changed the subject. And any time Nate got too serious, he made a joke or brushed him off.

Back before the accident, he'd have already said "I love you," a hundred times over. But "I love you" was too much like a promise, a commitment, a binding he both craved and feared. Once that line was crossed he'd be fully invested, fully at risk, and that seemed too much, now. The thought of someday losing Nate hovered always in the back of his mind. He might survive the loss of a casual boyfriend, but losing a love would destroy him. So he tried to pretend they were not in love. Sometimes, he even believed himself.

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## Chapter 8

Nate held Adrian's hands down, with one hand at the wrists, under the small of his back. With the other hand, he stroked Adrian's leaking cock, his touch light and teasing.

"Please, please harder."

He smiled, tightened his grip, and gave a few firm strokes.

Adrian moaned and arched his back "Yes... yes."

He pulled his hand away abruptly, leaned down, and sucked Adrian's nipple.

"Fuck!" Adrian's body shook and his cock bobbed wildly.

He stroked it again, barely touching, not nearly enough, and watched Adrian closely. They'd been at it for at least twenty minutes, and he'd brought Adrian to the edge of orgasm five times. His face gleamed with a thin layer of sweat, the top of his blindfold was dark with moisture, and his biceps flexed against Nate's hold. He could have pulled free, if he wanted to. Nate was slightly larger, but after almost three years of being chair-bound, Adrian's upper body strength far exceeded his slim stature.

"Ungh! Harder!"

"Watch it, bossy." Nate smiled and removed his hand entirely. Time to move on.

"Oh God!" Adrian's whole body jerked with need. "Please Sir, please let me come!"

Nate moved his other hand to reinforce the hold on Adrian's wrists, and waited for the moment to pass.

Adrian bucked and flexed, straining for some contact. A full minute ticked by, both of them panting in the silent bedroom. Nate's eyes stayed on Adrian's cock, waiting for the moment he could safely ask him to roll over. Too soon and he'd be creaming the sheets.

Finally, Adrian's breathing slowed and his cock rested on his hip. Still hard, but not so insistent. He pulled the blindfold off and met Adrian's gaze, leaned down and kissed his glistening mouth. "Okay, on your stomach."



He'd attached ropes to each of the bed's corners, fitted with padded cuffs. He made sure to secure Adrian's ankles properly, pulled his legs out, and clasped the ankle restraints on firmly. Just as he would do for any man. Adrian arched his back, and Nate slapped it down lightly. "Stay still."

Adrian's head dropped to the pillow, his face hidden.

Next, he secured the wrists. He ran his hands over Adrian's strong arms, down to his wrists, hooked the cuffs on, then shook them to be sure of their security. Splayed out like this, Adrian's body hid nothing from him. The thin, wasted thighs, the smooth well-muscled back, the tight biceps, bumpy with scars, straining against his ropes.

"Still, Adrian."

Adrian's back arched again, his ass lifted, and he moaned. Nate smiled and used the strap to deliver a sharp slap. Again, Adrian squirmed and tilted his hips up.

"Should I tie your back down, too? Is that what you need?"

"No, Sir." Adrian lowered his hips to the mattress obediently.

Nate heard something in that "no, sir," something encouraging. Something like pride. "Look at me. Should I tie your back down?"

Adrian turned his head, and again said, "No, Sir," but at the same time he twisted his back, so one hip lifted off the mattress, just an inch. His eyes held Nate's and the side of his mouth twitched up.

Nate turned away to hide his smile. *Such a brat.* He pulled a long rope from the play bag and threw one end of it under the bed. It took some awkward reaching, but he got it tied over Adrian's back, and placed the short paddle under it, aligned with his spine, to keep Adrian down. He tightened the rest of the restraints as well, pulling Adrian's arms and legs out as far as possible. He was really bound now, and Nate watched him carefully for signs of distress.

But his forehead was smooth, his mouth open, his eyes closed. His legs were far enough apart that his hole was visible, as was the thin strip of hair above it. He arched his back again, but impeded by the rope and board, he couldn't move more than an inch in any direction.

Nate squirted a large puddle of lube into his palm and let it drip onto Adrian's ass. He spread it around, over his cheeks. Then he reached under and coated Adrian's balls, stroked his cock, pulled it back so it stuck out between

his legs, the angry purple tip pointing downward. He thumbed at the slit and pinched the head, until Adrian moaned for mercy. He gave in, briefly, stroking the entire length a few times before returning his hand to Adrian's ass.

Adrian yelped when he slid his thumb into the tight hole, and arched his hips back as best he could. Nate fucked him with his thumb, roughly, knowing he wanted more, a deeper penetration. *Not yet.*

He picked up the wide leather strap, ran it over Adrian's back. A shiver followed its path. Without warning he delivered two sharp slaps to the recently oiled buttocks, and Adrian gasped. He let those burn for a minute, then gave two more. After those, the redness lingered.

Adrian's face was still smooth, his mouth still soft and open, his eyes still closed. Nate laid down three more hard spanks. This time they produced a low moan, and a little hip wriggle. He gave another slap to discourage the movement. Adrian's mouth had closed, but his brow remained uncreased. Nate decided to give him a short reprieve, and leaned in to finger his ass, slipping his long middle finger in as deep as he could.

Adrian groaned his approval, panted as Nate fingered him, and whined when he slid his finger out.

Three more strokes with the strap. Adrian's cheeks were deep pink now, glistening with lube. His cock jutted down between his legs, needy and neglected. Nate rummaged in the play bag for the vibrating sleeve. He took the bullet vibrator out of it, and set it aside. For now, the rubber toy alone would be enough.

Adrian was still slick, and the sleeve slid over his cock easily.

"Please, please fuck me, Sir."

"Not yet, bossy." He positioned Adrian's cock under his belly, right side up again, but pulled his balls down so they still peeked out between his legs. "Remember, no coming until I'm inside you."

"Yes, Sir."

Nate delivered another slap, harder this time, and Adrian hissed in his breath. Another, and another, and then Adrian was emitting a low needy wail. His ass had gone from pink to red, and Nate decided it was time. He rolled a condom on, squirted out a small amount of lube, coated himself. He squeezed the shaft in his hand. He'd been hard and dripping for as long as Adrian, at this point. He hoped he would last as long as he needed to.

He twisted the bullet vibrator to low speed, and reached under Adrian, slipping it into the sleeve. Adrian howled at the sensation. His cock was certainly oversensitive, after the earlier edging. The vibrating sleeve would give him release, but if he came too soon he'd be forced to tolerate the buzzing until Nate came as well, and that would be close to torture.

Nate wasn't going to make this easy. This was the part Adrian loved, and needed, Nate understood that. The longer it lasted, the better. He mounted Adrian, and slid in with a smooth motion. The grateful moan and gentle squeezing nearly sent him over the edge, and he had to lie still for a moment. He bit Adrian's shoulder lightly, and continued thrusting, grinding his hips against Adrian's ass.

The moans and whimpers turned to pleading, and Nate increased his pace. He wanted Adrian to come first, but not by too much. Last time, Adrian had admitted he'd almost safeworded at the end, to escape the vibrator.

Adrian was grunting, trying to hold out as long as possible, he knew. He slammed in hard and deep, again and again, holding Adrian's hips in his hands, pushing him past the point of control. Finally, Adrian surrendered, shouting into the pillow, spasming around his cock.

Nate was ready, but held himself on the edge, waiting. When Adrian began to thrash and pull at his restraints, growling, clenching his ass, Nate pounded into him, filling the condom. He reached under and pulled the sleeve off Adrian's tender dick, and tossed it aside. For a minute, he allowed himself to rest there, on top of Adrian, both of them sweaty and satisfied.

Running his hands over Adrian's body, he soothed and petted him, kissing and stroking every inch of his skin. He removed each restraint, and wiped the lube away gently with a warm wet towel. Adrian stayed in place, soaking up the attention, a soft smile on his face.

Nate put everything away, wiping down the strap and washing the sleeve first. Adrian would be happy to wait. When he returned to the bed, he coated Adrian's ass with lotion, and rubbed it into the sore skin. He kept his touch light over the hot, red flesh, and Adrian moaned softly. A glance at Adrian's face revealed he was still out of it. He'd be drifting and incoherent for a while. Nate kissed the small of his back and applied another layer of lotion.

Adrian slowly came out of subspace. Nate watched the change as it happened, smoothing his hands over Adrian's back the whole time. Adrian drew his arms in first, laying them under his head. His face lost that soft,

orgasmic look and fell into its usual expression. When Adrian shifted his hips, trying to get more comfortable, Nate knew he was back.

He lay on the bed, and pulled Adrian on top of his chest, a position he no longer complained about. "How you doing, bossy?"

"Uunh."

He laughed and kissed Adrian's forehead. "That good or bad?"

"Mmph."

He wrapped his arms around Adrian, and buried his face in his hair. "I love you."

Adrian froze, then pulled away slowly, looking into his eyes.

"I do. I don't care if you don't believe me, or if you don't want to say it back, or if it scares you. I love you, Adrian."

Adrian's face crumpled and tears sprang to his eyes. *Well, not the most ideal reaction.* He didn't really need to hear the words, though. He knew that Adrian loved him. He also knew that any talk of a commitment scared him, brought up all his self-doubts, all his fatalistic worry. But Nate was done hiding it, and he was ready to take their relationship to the next level.

"I am so in love with you. When something good happens, I want to tell you first. When I'm upset, you're the only person I need. I love talking to you, and kissing you. I love fucking you, and doing these crazy scenes with you, and just watching TV with you. I love how you trust me, and how you let me help you, and how you boss me around. You don't have to say it back, because I know you love me, too. But I'm not going to keep silent about it anymore. I love you."

Tears streamed down Adrian's cheeks. Nate kissed them away, and pulled him back into an embrace.

Then, in a raspy whisper at his ear, hot and wet, Adrian said, "I love you too, Nate. Oh, God, I love you too." He shook, shuddered out a sob, and dug his fingers into Nate's ribs. "But what if..."

"Shhh, I'm not going anywhere."

The next week, during breakfast, the doorbell rang. Nate jumped up to get it, while Adrian sipped his coffee with a suspiciously knowing smile.

"Hey! I'm John from Fence Pros." The man stuck out his hand. "We're here to set the posts, could you bring the dog inside?"

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“Uh, sure.”

“Thanks!” He turned and jogged down the steps.

Nate approached Adrian with his arms over his chest. “You’re putting up a fence?”

“Star shouldn’t be tied up so much, and I like you both here.”

He shook his head. “So bossy.” But he was smiling, and full of happiness as he went to bring in the dog.

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## Chapter 9

The “only three dates each week” limit had been blown months ago. Adrian now spent at least half the week at Nate’s house, mainly because he enjoyed playing with Star while Nate was at work. Lately, on Friday mornings, they took Star to the dog park, and then ate lunch out. One warm Friday, Adrian was cleaning up from breakfast, Nate still sipping his coffee, when the phone rang. Nate got up and paced the hallway as he talked, as usual, but since the house was small and quiet, Adrian heard the whole conversation.

“I understand, Lisa, but I still think it’s not fair... I realize that... The point is, it’s not my property, so I shouldn’t be responsible for... But I am, if they’re raising the rent, then that’s exactly... Fine. Okay, well thanks for talking to them anyway.”

Nate slammed the phone down in an uncharacteristic show of annoyance.

“What’s going on?”

“Ugh, that was the property manager. Fucking landlord’s raising the rent. Again. Coincidentally right after the city assessment came in, and the property taxes went up. So basically, I’m paying the increase. But I don’t have a lease, and so it’s either pay it or move out.”

“So move out.” Adrian’s heart pounded. He should think about this, shouldn’t rush such a big decision. Yet he couldn’t imagine a down side. Unless Nate said no. “Move in with me.”

Nate’s annoyed expression turned to shock, his brows shot up, and he looked at Adrian in surprise. “Seriously? You’d want me to live with you?”

“Well, yeah. We’re already together almost every day. I mean unless you don’t—”

“I’d love to.” Nate smiled and swooped down to take his mouth in a sloppy kiss. “On one condition.”

Adrian froze. “What?” *Anything*. He’d promise almost anything to keep Nate in his life, close to him.

“You need to put up a Christmas tree this year. Last year was terrible.”

Adrian laughed and pulled Nate’s shirt, dragging him back for another kiss.

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Nate turned his life upside down. How he'd thought living together would be easy, or fun, was a mystery to him now. First there were the renovations. Since Nate insisted on paying rent, and contributing to the household, there was extra money. And Nate decided the best use for it would be to convert the bathroom to a more handicap accessible space. Custom sinks, a bath with built in seats, and multiple showerheads. Next came a paved walkway around the yard so Adrian could go outside more often. Then a few doorways needed to be widened, so Adrian wouldn't bump his knuckles anymore. All good changes, Adrian hated to admit.

Then there were the "suggestions": Let's visit your parents at their house this week. Let's meet your old friends for dinner. Let's accept that invitation to my cousin's wedding. Let's go on vacation somewhere warm this winter. Over the next two years, they got more and more ridiculous. Finally, there was the worst one: "you should think about going back to work."

Though Adrian always said "no" quite firmly, in the end he found himself doing whatever it was Nate had suggested. To his horror, he usually enjoyed it, and was forced to concede it had been a good idea. The going-back-to-work suggestion was his biggest "no" failure. He fought it tooth and nail, but Nate refused to give up until Adrian had landed a part-time accounting job at a small local company. He found himself, after that first three-day workweek, full of stories and in a mood so great nothing could have brought him down, not even the "told you so" smirk on Nate's face.

So when Adrian got the idea to propose, he thought nothing of driving himself into town, rolling right in to the jewelry store, and asking for his and his wedding rings. He left with three tiny velvet lined boxes, and jangling nerves that had nothing to do with self-confidence. Still, he kept the boxes hidden in the bottom of his pants drawer for three months. He wanted to ask in the perfect way, at the perfect time. But after considering and dismissing dozens of proposal ideas, he realized he had to either make his own "perfect time," or just do it anytime, and hope for the best.

One Saturday in late August, he looked out on their backyard to see Nate bent over the flowerbed, weeding. A bag of mulch was propped in the wheelbarrow and Star slept in the grass nearby. The gardens looked better than they had in years. Even before his accident, Adrian had been no landscaper. But now the whole property stayed well-groomed, colorful flowers added interest and depth, and the grass grew lush and green. The path Nate had insisted upon installing wound around the yard, a smooth flat surface for his chair to

negotiate. He recalled all the afternoons spent reading in a lawn chair while Nate gardened. He dug in his pants drawer for those tiny boxes, and met Nate in the yard.

“Hey... can I talk to you?”

Nate looked up, concerned. “Sure, babe. What’s the matter?” He took off his gloves, and wiped his hands on the front of his jeans.

“Nothing, I just need to talk.” He led Nate to the little patio filled with matched chairs, a table, and a chaise where they had spent so many happy hours. Nate sat and waited. There was a smudge of dirt on his chin, and Adrian wondered if maybe this was the wrong moment after all. Maybe it was too casual, and Nate would be disappointed. But he didn’t want to wait any longer. “Have you ever thought of me as a burden?”

“Uh, no. Why?”

“Do you think I’m going to be a lot of work, when I get older? I mean, I’ll need more medical care, and—”

“Did someone say something to you? What brought this up?” There was an edge of protective anger in Nate’s voice, and worry in his eyes.

“I’m fine, I’m just asking. You’ve never treated me like a burden, and I just wanted to know if you ever thought it. I promise I won’t be angry.”

Nate sighed, leaned back in the lawn chair, and crossed his arms over his chest. “Well, now that you mention it... yeah, you are a burden, man. You’re constantly saying ‘no’ to all my best ideas, you never want to go out for sushi, and you don’t flush the toilet after you piss in the middle of the night. I don’t know how I stand it, actually.” He was trying to keep a serious expression, but his eyes danced with humor.

Adrian shook his head, smiling. “I love you.” He pulled one box out of his chair where he’d tucked it beside his thigh. “I want to spend the rest of my life with you as your husband, if you don’t think it’s too much to ask. Will you marry me, Nate?” He held out the little box, and Nate took it with a shaking, soil-stained hand.

He opened it silently, and his mouth dropped open. “Is this a wheel? Are those diamonds?”

“It’s a nautical wheel, like a rudder. Because you steer me in the right direction. But it also looks like the wheel of my chair. I thought you might wear it as an engagement... thing.”



Nate's eyes glistened with tears, shocking Adrian. Nate wasn't a crier. "I'd love to marry you." He choked on the words as he tried to clasp the thick chain around his neck.

"Here, I'll help you." Adrian reached up to do the job.

Nate leaned down and turned so he could fasten the necklace. Then stayed there to kiss him, the dirt on his chin rubbing off and drifting down Adrian's shirtfront. Tears still gleamed on Nate's cheeks, but his smile when he pulled away was beautiful and strong. "Wait here. I'll be right back."

Nate jogged into the house, and Adrian sat on the patio. *What the hell is he doing?* Star had lifted her head at Nate's exit, and she looked back at Adrian, sharing in his confusion but unwilling to get her old body up off the grass. "It's all right, girl. Daddy's coming right back." She lay down again, as if she understood him, and he smiled.

Nate returned a moment later and dropped to his knees in front of the chair, his elbows on Adrian's thighs. He held his own tiny box, and opened it for him to see. Inside was a small pendant, like a coin, with a lion in deep relief. It looked ancient, and there were some strange letters below the lion's feet that might have been Greek. "Is this a coin?"

"Yeah. It's really old. I was looking for a lion pendant, and I found this on auction online... anyway, Athena is on the back."

Adrian flipped it over to see a female profile beneath a battle helmet. He looked up at Nate for more information.

"I know it's corny. I thought of the lion because, well, you're a Leo. And also because of the strength, you're the strongest person I know. And then when I saw this, the coin, I thought of your job... and then Athena, goddess of mathematics and strength and warriors—it just seemed so perfect. It didn't come in time for your birthday, so I was going to give it to you for Christmas. But maybe you can wear it as an engagement thing, too?"

"I'd love that." He reached back and unclasped the necklace he always wore, and Nate slipped the pendant on.

They stared at each other, both smiling like fools, until Adrian blurted out, "I already bought our rings."

"No shit? Let me see them."

He dug them out of the side of the chair, and Nate opened his box like a kid on Christmas, so fast he almost dropped it. "I love it! Can we wear them now?"

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“No! We have to get married first.”

“Let’s just practice, no one will know.”

So they put them on, and spent the afternoon planning their wedding. Nate had some ideas, and Adrian shot most of them down. By the evening, they’d settled on pretty much the exact plan Nate had initially suggested: a few dozen close friends and family at a small beachfront hotel. The sooner the better.

In bed that night, he kissed Nate’s chest and relaxed in his arms, perfectly content.

“You know you didn’t need to get me an engagement present, right? I mean, I’m all for diamonds, but I don’t need any incentive to marry you. You could have just asked.”

“I know. It just seemed right. I’m always snapping at you and bossing you around and being difficult. I just wanted to show you that I appreciate what you do for me.”

“I already know that, babe. Just like how you love to be bound, but you always pull against your bindings. I think you just like to know they’re strong enough for you, that you can depend on them.” Nate held him close and kissed the scars on his shoulder, then started to lick them, in the way that Adrian knew meant he wanted to have sex.

He smiled and pressed himself against Nate, encouraging the idea. He was about to say, “You’re not a binding,” when he realized that was exactly what Nate was. Holding him tight, supporting him, forcing him sometimes to do what he needed to. Never failing him, no matter how he was tested or strained.

And as long as he was bound to Nate, Adrian was strong and free and whole.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*I write erotic-romance of all varieties: usually male/male, and often dipping into the paranormal. When I'm not writing, I enjoy hunting for shells at the beach, making all types of crafty-things, and consuming large quantities of rum.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# BRIGHT WATER, DARK SKY

By Augusta Li

## Photo Description

A digital painting of a very fit, moonlit man submerged to the waist in the ocean and with tentacles emerging around him.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*We're a fun loving people, a little blood thirsty, but what race isn't? We've discovered some humans have landed on our planet, not sure what they're expecting to find or what they're looking for. We guard our treasure well and the fun loving part notwithstanding we'll fight to defend what's ours. Amidst all this I'm trying to find my mate. He has to be somewhere.*

*Please no non-con.*

*Sincerely,*

*Elci*

## Story Info

**Genre:** science fiction/futuristic, speculative fiction

**Tags:** space travel/exploration, scientist, tentacles, mermen-ish, interspecies, opposites, underwater, action/suspense/adventure, soulmates/bonded

**Word Count:** 39,245

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# **BRIGHT WATER, DARK SKY**

**By Augusta Li**

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## Chapter One

Varuna appeared, at first, as a sapphire glimmer, a twinkle on Second Lieutenant Sora Wakahisa's screen, so small and flickering he worried, irrationally, it might be brushed away like a grain of sand. Stiff and restless in the chair behind his instrument panel where'd he'd spent the better part of each day for almost six weeks, Sora sat transfixed, staring at the slowly growing blue orb until his vision blurred, because nothing else existed to distract his attention from the claustrophobic bridge and the bluish light that made his teammates look like corpses. Space was nothing like he'd imagined as a boy, watching movies, reading books, or climbing to the roof of his family's shabby home and squinting skywards to see the stars through the pallid glow of the streetlights. Instead of blinding clusters of stars and brilliant, colorful celestial events, dead space surrounded them most of the time. No one who hadn't experienced the nothingness could comprehend the vast distances between bodies in space, he thought, the aching, empty loneliness that mirrored the rest of his life too closely.

But Varuna—Varuna was beautiful, like a jewel floating in the blackness with its sun behind it, backlighting the planet. Sora had never imagined a blue so bright and pure, most vibrant along the edges of the sphere where its star's light danced. No clouds of pollution hung over the planet, just a few white wisps of cloud that made the wide expanses of surface water look—impossibly—even more blue. Sora sat straighter in his chair and leaned toward the monitor, as if getting closer to the screen would hasten their arrival to the planet.

This was the mission he had waited for his entire career, the one with the potential to make the struggle through basic training and the academy worthwhile—a mission with real potential for a scientific breakthrough, a significant discovery. The thought of being part of it, of something that could alter history, made his heart flounder. He and the rest of the crew had traveled to the limits of known space, to a system only unmanned exploratory vessels and the hopelessly lost had previously visited. But that wasn't what quickened Sora's breath and made the few hours left until their landing almost impossible to bear.

Finally, the *David Glasgow Farragut* entered Varuna's atmosphere. The planet filled Sora's monitor with blinding blue, mottled, darker where the water

was deepest, but otherwise unbroken. The exploratory vessels had recorded a world of water, with few land masses large enough to register in the footage they brought back. Sora had tried to imagine what an entire world of water might look like, but the reality dwarfed his visions, and he couldn't resist grazing his fingertips along the screen.

"Establishing orbit," said their pilot, Steven Bennett, a man who made up what he lacked in stature with ego and arrogance. He had a high, nasally voice that grated along the edges of Sora's nerves. Sora usually left when Bennett came into the rec room or the mess.

Captain Kgosi unbuckled her safety harness and stood. She was a distant woman, concerned more with her duty than the happiness of her crew, but Sora didn't mind. He felt secure under her command, as she'd been a captain for almost a decade—his CO for five of those years—and certain in following her orders. That was all that mattered.

"Maintain orbit while we scan for a place to land," she said in a soft but authoritative voice, a tone that invited no argument. "Wakahisa, have you prepared a preliminary report?"

"Yes, sir." Sora stood, took a handheld tablet from the cargo pocket of his black uniform pants, and pulled up the notes he'd made based on the data from the exploratory vessels, as well as the testimony of sailors who'd found themselves in this vicinity after losing their way. The science was fascinating, but he'd done his best to distill it into terms his crewmates would understand—something he didn't usually do well. He had to remind himself not everyone onboard had three doctoral degrees and studies in a dozen extraneous disciplines.

He began reading. "Varuna. A planet about a third the size of Earth, with a gravity of about 1.267 percent higher. You may or may not notice the effects. The most likely side effects will be fatigue and muscle soreness."

The ship's physician, an older man with thinning red hair called Elliot Bonham, spoke without standing up. "I've prepared an additive for the water rations that should help, and if it's worse than that, I have medication."

"The planet is also warm," Sora continued. "The average temperature during the day is at least forty-three degrees Celsius, and the humidity is between eighty and ninety percent, but setting our suits' temperature gauges before landing should prevent our becoming uncomfortable. Varuna rotates very slowly on its axis, so the period of daylight lasts approximately 30.14786

Earth days.” He turned to his instruments and quickly ran the equations. “Based on my calculations, we have about 4.797 days of daylight remaining until night falls on the planet.”

“That hardly matters,” said Eloryn, one of several Shieferian crew members. Like her countrymen, she was small—about the size of a human twelve-year-old—pretty, and androgynous with large eyes and skin so flawless Sora still couldn’t reconcile it with reality. Silvery-gold hair reached past her hips, and a clear mask covered her mouth and nose to feed her the higher levels of oxygen and helium native to her world.

“I agree,” said Nualyin, a Shieferian science officer who had worked closely with Sora on previous assignments. Nualyin had once expressed an interest in Sora, and while Sora admired the man’s intellect, he’d been unable to get past how young he looked physically. They’d kissed, but even though Nualyin was over two hundred years old, to Sora it had felt wrong kissing someone who looked barely out of their teens. Fortunately, they’d moved beyond their disastrous attempt at intimacy and established a productive professional relationship. His cold pragmatism often tempered Sora’s excitement and wild theories, and Sora broke him out of his comfortable routine and forced him to consider other solutions. Now Nualyin said, “It isn’t as though we don’t have the capacity to produce artificial light.”

Sora held up the hand not holding his tablet, one finger extended. “The darkness is not the issue. It brings with it storms, some of which can be quite severe. Satellites have recorded hurricanes of level sixty-four and above on the Beaufort wind scale. Because of the atmospheric pressure, and the drastic imbalance of heat and cold while one side of the planet is in darkness so long, the clash of heated and cold air can produce pressure fronts—”

“Understood, Wakahisa,” Captain Kgosi said, sounding tired. “Thank you for being so thorough. We will try to get what we need and avoid these legendary storms. What other obstacles might the crew face during data collection?”

“There are large and dangerous predators,” Sora said. “They resemble the aquatic mammals of Earth in size, and some of them hunt in groups. Also, evidence indicates there may be an intelligent race inhabiting the planet. Of course, we have no idea of their disposition or culture. The planet’s weather interfered with satellite data collection. If I were to theorize—”

“We’d be here for another two hours listening to shit with no relevance to our mission, and that most of us can’t even fucking understand. I’m a pilot, and



I don't speak geek," the pilot, Bennett, said, looking to the other crew members as he flashed his teeth in a grin. A scowl replaced his smile when no one joined in on his joke.

"A hostile native population is not something we should ignore," Nualyin said. "Particularly if they are an unknown. What do we know of their technology?"

"Very little," Sora said, focusing on Nualyin's purplish-blue-gray eyes that were, if not kind, at least not hostile and the closest to familiar among those around him. "Satellites recorded sources of heat and energy, almost certainly manufactured, but the natives were elusive. Almost certainly, an advanced society occupies this planet, but we have no idea of their physiology or cultural values. Obviously, they are not as advanced as either of our societies, or we would have seen evidence of cities and structures."

"We should proceed with caution, then," Nualyin said.

"Why?" Bennett interjected. "They don't have interstellar travel. They're basically primitive spear chuckers, if they exist at all. I don't see what we have to worry about. Provided we're not tiptoeing around like a bunch of pussies."

Captain Kgosi cleared her throat. "Lieutenant Bennett, I will not tolerate your insults against other cultures or against the female gender. Kindly keep your mouth shut unless you have something useful to add to this conversation. Do I make myself clear, pilot?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Wakahisa, please continue."

Sora thought the captain looked tired; an ashen cast tinted her rich dark skin and her eyes were puffy and bloodshot, but she stood with her shoulders back and her chin held high, inspiring him to do the same as he continued with his report, describing all he had learned of the conditions on Varuna. As he spoke, his gaze wandered involuntarily back to the glossy cerulean marble on the screen above his station and he sighed with longing. "There could be life-forms down there unlike anything we've ever seen, a culture unlike anything we've imagined before. It only makes sense that they live beneath the surface of the water, and that's why we have no recorded evidence of their presence. Samples indicate a salinity similar to the oceans of Earth, Lazzo, Testracaracco, and Shiefierria, which we know are capable of supporting a great variety of organisms. As we all know, Varuna is home to elements previously

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undiscovered by our people, so it stands to reason its life-forms will be vastly different from those that evolved on our worlds.”

“An excellent segue into the reason for this mission,” Nualyin said, touching Sora’s elbow in subtle apology for the interruption. He pressed some buttons on Sora’s instrument panel, and a molecular diagram replaced the glorious vision of the planet. “Previously, the scientists, physicists, and theoretical astronomers among my race surmised every basic element had been discovered, that upon the creation and expansion of the universe into our stars and the planets their gravity pulled in, the elements had been distributed, if not evenly, at least rather equitably. In short, we predicted every known element was present on every world in some degree. For centuries, nothing contradicted this notion.

“The discovery of our error was a timely one—a gift of sorts. Silica, which is used on the hulls of our ships to protect sailors and travelers from the high levels of radiation in space, is not only heavy, but not completely effective. Radiation sickness must still be treated after long voyages, hampering our ability to make long journeys. Further, while it is one of the most common substances on many of the known planets, it is not an unlimited resource. The tiling on the ships must be replaced frequently, and supplies are running dangerously low.”

Nualyin changed the image to an opalescent lump of silvery metal covered in shifting colors like the inside of an oyster shell. “When a small asteroid containing this substance was discovered on a remote moon by the human explorer and astronomer Aurore Van der Veldt, she claimed she had been handed the Holy Grail, the Philosopher’s Stone of human legend, and she dubbed the new element Francesium, after her mother. It is truly a miracle element—stronger than any known, light of weight, resistant to tarnish, flexible, and mostly importantly, impervious to radiation. It is the solution we have been searching for, a way to make safe, fast, and durable ships and protect the people inside them. This heat-resistant material would allow us to fly closer to stars and travel much longer without stopping for maintenance. Until now, the element has been elusive, found only in small quantities. Varuna”—he flipped back to the image of the planet—“possesses a molten core of Francesium. The element is so plentiful on this world, it would sustain us for centuries. Literally millions of ships could be constructed, and they would last with minimal repair for decades, at least.”

Captain Kgosi nodded as she stood next to Nualyin. “This is a fact-finding mission. Our goal is data collection. Nualyin and Wakahisa will lead the away

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team, and they have a precise plan to collect the information and samples we have been sent to retrieve. Bennett will pilot the shuttle, and a team of security personnel will accompany you.” She turned to the pilot. “The science officers are in command in my absence, and I expect their orders to be obeyed. Anyone who discharges a weapon, except in matters of life or death, will find himself in the brig. The same holds for insubordination. I started my career as a pilot, and I assure you, I can fly this vessel, but don’t make me have to. Now, get a few hours of rest, prepare your gear and equipment, and be ready to board the shuttle at 0800 hours.”

The crew members filed out while Sora stood with his back to them, staring at the planet, until a hand on the small of his back tugged him out of his musings. He turned and looked down at Nualyin. Though the other man only reached Sora’s shoulders, he intimidated Sora, because while Sora couldn’t discern Nualyin’s desires and motivations, his gaze dissected Sora down to his spirit in seconds every time he looked at him. “As the captain said, you should try to get some rest.”

Sora often had a hard time relating to others, but Nualyin was the closest thing he had to a friend; Nualyin at least respected him as a scientist, and it was more than he got from the rest of the crew. Sora shrugged. “I won’t be able to sleep.”

“Why? Are you afraid?”

“No,” Sora answered honestly. “Well, maybe a little apprehensive, but not because of the planet. I don’t do well working as part of a team. I wish just you and me were going. The others—I’m leery of depending on them. What if they’re sloppy when collecting data or corrupt the samples?”

Sora wasn’t certain, but Nualyin’s smile might have been sympathetic, understanding. “It’s too much work for the pair of us, Sora. Besides, we can’t pilot the shuttle, and we may need the security officers.”

“That’s something else that bothers me,” Sora admitted. “I don’t like the idea of fighting. I’m not a soldier.”

“But you were trained in basic to handle a weapon and defend yourself,” Nualyin said. “You have the ability to protect yourself, at least.”

“Am I naïve to think if we approach the natives—if there are any—in peace and respect, we needn’t worry?”

“Yes, my friend,” Nualyin said. “But it isn’t a bad quality in one so young. It’s something to cherish, as it’s fleeting.” He paused and smoothed his silvery,

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almost lilac hair. “Sora, I have always understood the males of your species engage in physical intimacy without commitment, say, as a means of distraction or relieving stress. That there needn’t be an emotional element to it.” The tip of his tongue flickered out to touch the center of his pale, full lips.

“That’s not untrue,” Sora said. “But I’ve never found much comfort in it.”

“A shame.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No need for apology,” Nualyin said. “I must gather my things.”

As he departed, the automated doors swishing open and then closed, Sora slumped into his chair and continued to stare at Varuna. What worried him, what he hadn’t divulged to the other science officer, was the pull he felt toward that world, that pristine, endless ocean. He felt sure he’d find something there, almost as if it were waiting for him, and that was completely irrational. The irrational frightened Sora. He hated not being able to discover the source, follow the logical progression, and see the equation through to its inevitable and irrefutable answer. Nothing else could be quantified, considered as truth. Yet he longed for Varuna, and he couldn’t figure out why.

He supposed he’d find out soon enough.

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## Chapter Two

The storm front moving across the surface of the planet as if chasing the receding sunlight measured 47.892 kilometers across and contained three eyes of violently swirling cloud. Even hovering high above the world, Sora saw on his screen massive forks of lightning, bright against the encroaching darkness, opening neon fissures in the sky. They lit the water where they struck it until he swore he could see the structures—natural or otherwise—beneath the surface as he blinked away the jagged lines scorched into his retinas. He turned to the captain and the team assembled behind her.

“The storm is still 849.1246 kilometers from where we plan to land, but with it moving at a speed of between 36.7 and 41.43 kph—”

“I can outrun it,” Bennett said, curling up the left peak of his upper lip.

“It might be more prudent to find a different place to land,” Nualyin said, looking even younger and smaller in his dark gray uniform, black body armor, and knee-high boots, like a boy playing dress-up in his father’s gear. “Or wait out the storm.”

“There are other fronts following close behind it,” Sora said. Normally he would have been the first to agree with the other scientist—he’d enlisted because it was the only way to pay for his education, not for danger or adventure—but something about Varuna made him reckless, not himself. “It’s difficult to calculate with so many variables, but the weather could remain a threat for days, weeks even.”

“Holy fuck, Wakahisa, did you just side with me?”

Bennett rubbed heat across Sora’s usually nonexistent temper. He turned to the short, stout pilot and met his squinted blue eyes, saying, “I’m not siding with anyone, Lieutenant. I’m simply attempting to gauge what is best for our mission and our safety.”

Bennett snorted. “Just when I thought you finally grew a pair.”

“Waiting even a week is not an option, unfortunately,” Captain Kgosi said, all her attention on the storms flashing like the lights in a nightclub across the monitor. “Our supplies won’t last that long. We brought all we could carry, and we’re already down to just a little more than we need to make it home. We need to get this done, and as soon as possible. Bennett, can you really outrun that storm, or is that just your ego talking?”

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“I’m one hell of a pilot,” Bennett answered. “You know that, sir.”

“And very fond of yourself,” Sora added. “Too fond to risk yourself for this or any other mission.”

“Fuck me, did you just try to make a joke?” Bennett asked, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned a shoulder against the side of the shuttle.

“It’s an accurate assessment,” Nualyin offered without judgment or humor.

The captain stared at the three men she faced, her intense dark gaze meeting each of theirs in turn. After a few minutes, she said, “Do it,” and then turned on her heel and left the docking bay.

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“Hold on tight, ladies,” Bennett singsonged, shooting them a toothy grin over his shoulder. “I’m bringing her down.”

Their Head of Security, Dolores Rayez, shot the pilot a look that could’ve extinguished a sun. “You use ‘ladies’ as an insult again, you little troll, and I’ll file a report for harassment. Or maybe I’ll just wait until we see each other in a dark corridor somewhere.”

“Rayez, I’m touched. Are you finally accepting my offer of a hook-up?”

“I’d break you, little man,” the security officer shot back before a spot of turbulence returned the pilot’s attention to the helm and halted all conversation in the shuttle.

Sora instinctively reached to his chest to wrap his hands around the straps of his safety harness, even though he knew it would do no good. His teeth knocked together, and his ass bounced on the hard metal bench, hurting his bones. Next to him, Nualyin held his delicate mask in place over his nose and mouth, his eyes undecipherable.

Patches of minor turbulence plagued the rest of their journey to Varuna’s surface, and when they finally achieved a bumpy landing, Sora’s muscles ached from clenching, and he had a dull headache from gritting his teeth so they wouldn’t rattle as the little craft maneuvered through the choppy air. He forgot the discomfort instantly when the door to the shuttle lifted and rosy orange light spilled in in a wide shaft. The smell of all that ocean, the taste of the salt and seaweed at the back of his throat—he knew he’d always remember his breath of the glorious, alien air. Without considering his actions, compelled, almost, Sora unbuckled his harness and stood, his feet moving toward the steps of the exit almost on their own.

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A muscular arm across his chest stopped him. “Come on, Wakahisa,” Rayez said. “This isn’t your first mission. You know we have to secure the area first.”

He nodded and muttered an apology as she led her team of six out of the shuttle, but he didn’t return to his seat. He’d never be able to sit still. It seemed like hours until she returned and declared the area free of threats.

What he saw when he left the stuffy vessel made Sora forget his teammates, the mission... everything. The planet’s star had begun its slow descent toward the rounded edge of the horizon and spilled pulpy orange light in its wake, sparking the edges of the feathery pink clouds to blinding brilliance and making nets and cords of gold dance over the surface of the water. It looked like an elaborate piece of jewelry, everything cast from gemstones and precious metals, including the smooth, silvery stone he stood upon. As he wandered to the edge of the small island, barely big enough to hold the shuttle, powerful emotions—things Sora could only express in Japanese, his first language, even in his thoughts, flooded his chest and lapped against the edges of his heart and soul. Eyes stinging, he decided the only way to quantify this experience was that it made him glad to be alive, to be in this moment. It erased all thought of past or future and let him exist wholly in the present. But a moment or an hour later, the precarious state of unity with time sunk back below the surface of his mind, replaced by a throbbing melancholy as he wished he had someone special to share this with him, someone who he could turn to years later and say, “Do you remember what it was like?”

Instead of dwelling on things he’d rather not contemplate, he pushed them down and consulted the small computer on his wrist. The atmospheric makeup, barometric pressure, wind currents... all of it was as he had predicted. After a long last glance at the graceful spires rising from the water, gilded by the perishing light and in too regular a formation—it seemed to him without formal calculations—to occur naturally, he returned to the craft to help the others unload their gear.

They formed four teams led by Sora, Nualyin, Rayez, and Bennett. Each of them took a security officer along, and they left the additional two officers to guard the ship—their only means of leaving the planet. Each team member dragged his or her military-issued Personal Water Transport Vehicle into the frothy waves slapping at the edge of the islet. The water reflected the burgundy and scarlet staining the sky, reminding Sora of Homer’s wine-dark sea. Far in the distance, icy blue flashes lit the bottoms of the heavy clouds. Followed by his escort, a handsome, dark-skinned man named O’Leary, Sora straddled the

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seat of his PWTV, leaned his chest down, and stretched his arms to their full range to grasp the handles. He accelerated cautiously at first as he hadn't been on a PWTV in years, and then only in training. But as the vehicle gained speed, he gained confidence and soon began to enjoy himself as the warm wind raked through his spikes of black hair. Water sprayed up around him and splashed his thighs, and even though his uniform dried quickly, the damp cloth clinging to his legs felt good for a few minutes. Daring to go faster, he left a trail of foam and churned-up ocean behind him and smiled as flecks of it dotted his neck and face. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so free—probably sometime before he'd enlisted. But he had been trapped long before then.

With his special adaptations in molecular chemistry, biochemistry, genetics, and differential biology, the life Varuna might hold fascinated Sora most. If this amazing planet had yielded an undiscovered element, he couldn't even imagine what the flora and fauna might provide: food, energy sources, treatments for incurable diseases. With Nualyin as his conspirator, he'd devised a plan to allow him to explore while the others did the mundane work of surveying, recording, and collecting rock and water samples. Of course, their main objective was confirming the presence of the vast deposits of Francesium and compiling a preliminary report about the difficulty of mining and transporting it. As much as he hated politics, Sora was hardly a fool. He knew the Andromeda-Centauri Confederation he worked for wanted to stake a claim on the priceless element, and he suddenly had a vision of massive drills marring the perfect surface of the water. Leaning hard to the left, he veered from his planned path and took off at a high speed toward something he saw rising from the sea a few kilometers away.

It looked like a torii gate with a curved lintel resting above two columns, but it was huge: probably as tall as a three-story building. He checked his wrist computer. The water here was over 2.468 kilometers deep. Could the structures possibly extend all the way to the ocean floor? How? Who had made them? After gradually coming to a stop, he took out a small camera to record what he had discovered. When he zoomed in, he couldn't believe what he saw. Not one, but at least—he counted—six, no seven structures stood in a meandering line. He thought there might very well be more beyond the limit of his lens. How had the satellites not captured them? But then he knew. From above, they'd probably appeared as just slabs of rock in the water, maybe natural. Still, how had no one recognized the regularity of the pattern?

Sora felt blood in his cheeks the way he always did when poised on the cusp of an important discovery, and this discovery might be the greatest of his life.



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Chilly excitement poured through his veins as he wondered what he might find, and he gunned his PWTV's engines so hard the twin pontoons lifted off the surface of the water and landed with a loud splat before finding purchase and lurching forward. Who knew what he would find? Another new element, maybe an even more miraculous one? Something he could study and claim? Not that he wanted the glory. He had never wanted that, to be one of those celebrity scientists giving press conferences more often than working in their labs. He just wanted to *know*. It wasn't like anyone would give a new substance a stupid name like Soraium, but he didn't care. He'd had a fierce desire to understand how and why things were the way they were for as long as he could remember. Curiosity had been the one constant in his life. It was a fickle companion, though, leaving him lying awake and twisting with frustration as often as it satisfied him.

Chasing his curiosity as he'd done all his life, Sora skipped the few kilometers to the first gate, spending as much time moving through the air as across the surface of the water, until he had to turn sharply to avoid colliding with the massive column. He pattered in closer and removed his glove to press his hand to the heated stone. Electric zings moved through his palm and up his arm. Someone had made this; the concentric rings carved into it, making it resemble the swirls of a seashell, left no more doubt in his mind. He took a few more pictures before scanning the lintel with his computer, and it confirmed his suspicion. The entire structure was made of pure Francesium. If he had to guess, he'd estimate what he touched to be worth billions. He turned to call to O'Leary over his shoulder, but the man was nowhere to be seen. Sora realized he'd taken off so quickly, he had accidentally lost his partner.

He should backtrack and find O'Leary, he knew. The captain had been explicit that they were not to split up. But as he looked through the tunnel formed by the series of gates, he couldn't turn away. He had to know why they were here, how they had come to be here. The torment of wondering would plague him if he left now. Besides, his vehicle had a tracking device; he would be able to program it to lead him back to the shuttle. Setting his mouth in a determined line, Sora accelerated. This knowledge was too important to abandon, and these gates were leading him to something profound—he *knew* it. The torii gates of his ancestors marked the transition between mundane and sacred space, and Sora could think of no more appropriate description as he passed beneath the structures. He had moved into the unknown.

The sky grew dark and ominous as Sora followed his path. The world strobed in and out of existence, going from absolute black to blinding blue. He

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had to slow down so he didn't risk crashing. A few hundred feet in front of him, a bolt of lightning speared the water and split off, smaller splinters crawling over the sea's surface. For a fraction of a second, Sora could see kilometers into the depths, and he saw things moving far below him—large things. Something pinkish-white and porpoise-like arced out of the water. Sora thought he saw stunted legs extending from the shoulders, but the world had grown distorted, only perceivable between blue bursts. The tide was picking up, lifting his PWTV several feet into the air on the swells. A few times, a crest broke over him and doused him. He had to steer carefully, his fists tight on the handlebars, to keep from capsizing. A strong swell hit his left side and slammed his right into one of the gate pillars. Metal screeched, and his head went fuzzy from the impact.

By the time he righted the vehicle and shook the haze from his brain, the rain had started, hard right from the beginning, like nails shot from a gun and into his flesh. Squinting, he pressed his chin to his chest, but it did no good. He'd never seen such a rain. In seconds, the fat droplets bouncing off the sea formed a silvery curtain around him. The sky seemed to melt into and become the water until he could no longer discern the boundary between the two. Sputtering, choking on the copious amounts of rain beating his face like fists, he reached for the PWTV's control panel to program it to return him to the shuttle, but he couldn't see what he was doing. After swiping at his eyes and shedding water for a brief moment, he tried to push the rescue sequence from memory. The vehicle sputtered and hopped a few feet through the tiers of water. Another wave hit Sora from the right, knocking him on his side until the machine bobbed and righted itself.

He was in serious trouble. Even if he could see through the solid wall of water and program his PWTV, he doubted it would make it through waves rising probably nine meters into the air. They towered above and around him, blood-dark walls tipped with contrasting froth. Sora remembered his life-mask and reached into the compartment between his legs, but before he could locate it, a volley of splintery lightning struck in a ring around him, frying his vehicle's computer controls. He switched to manual and threw his body hard to the left to steer the craft away from the worst of the storm. In the distance, clear, red sky teased. If he could make it, he would be all right, and so he directed all his concentration into steering the PWTV between the worst of the waves. The mask, the homing beacon, and the rescue button could wait. He had to make it to that patch of open air. He pushed the vehicle hard as the clouds seemed to chase him as though they had a personal vendetta. The rain felt like shrapnel against his back.

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Trapped within the storm, Sora had no idea which way he was going. Despite his aptitude for science and mathematics, he had an abysmal sense of direction. He'd gotten lost in his tiny ghetto of a hometown almost until he'd left for good. With silver and red swirling like radio static around him, he didn't stand a chance. Before he could react, a huge wave, probably thirty meters, rose from Varuna's surface and crashed like vengeance upon his head. The force of the water knocked him back, and he didn't have the strength to maintain his grip on the handles of his craft. The curl of the breaker pushed him into the alien sea, and saltwater filled his mouth and nose. Sora coughed it out, red-tinged bubbles crowning out of his mouth, rising as he sunk. He paddled with his arms and legs, his underwater training kicking in. He fought. His lungs burned with the lust for air, but the currents pulled him deeper and deeper, somersaulting him and tossing him around like a piece of driftwood. Though he clawed for the smeared clouds he saw above him—so close—just a kick and a reach away—he dropped like lead. No. He'd found something here, maybe something he'd been seeking without even knowing it. He had answers to decipher, puzzles to put together—things to *know*. He couldn't die. Not now.

Fuzzy gray flowed in at the edges of Sora's vision. It didn't look so different from the rain, and for a moment, he felt content, comfortable in his fate. But only for a second. He wasn't finished, and with a hard kick and a downward push of his arms, he broke the surface and gulped in air even as he puked up ocean water. Slowly, he began to swim, a slow crawl through the driving rain toward the brighter sky. He would make it. He had work to do.

Sora made it a good distance—or so he'd thought—when a fresh fan of rain flicked him back as if he were an insect, and another wave lifted him, carrying his body atop its frothy crest, until it slammed the back of his head into one of the gates. For a second he was angry, felt cheated, and then the velvet darkness wrapped him up and took it all away.

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## Chapter Three

Sora woke from a dream about his mother and three older sisters making rice balls, to the worst headache he'd ever had. He couldn't remember where he was, and for a terrifying moment he thought he'd had too much to drink and put himself in danger of missing his Comparative Astrophysics final. Tines of panic poked through his chest, and he sat up with a gasp, already trying to formulate an excuse his professor hadn't heard a hundred times before. It didn't take him long to realize he wasn't in his bed at the academy; his uniform hung in tatters, and it was drenched. He was hot, which meant the suit's temperature regulation system had been damaged, in... in his accident. In the storm. Slowly, disjointed memories of huge waves and rain like artillery fire returned to explain why he hurt from the tips of his toes to his eyelashes. But he was alive. He didn't expect to be, and honestly, it made no sense. He'd been sinking, drowning in the open ocean with no land for kilometers. Maybe he'd been lucky enough to wash up on whatever surface he now occupied, but as a scientist, he didn't believe in luck—or coincidences. No, his mind told him there was a logical explanation for why he was here and not dead at the bottom of the ocean.

After his vision adjusted to the sanguine gloom as much as it likely would, Sora tried to survey his surroundings. He didn't stand up; the silver glimmers circling his sight like electrons told him that could end badly. The rain had stopped at his location, but he could see staccato bursts of light in the distance—far in the distance. The thick, reddish fog prevented him from discerning much about the immediate vicinity. He was on a smooth slab of rock—likely more Francesium—dotted with water-filled pockets. Carefully, he half crawled, half dragged himself to the edge of one about the size of a bathtub, but rounder. Along the edge, some lime-green moss or lichen grew, glowing with bioluminescence. Inside, tubular lavender organisms wavered lazily, the fringe around their bulbous crowns fluttering in the water lit up by their natural glow. Brilliant white fish only the size of Sora's fingertip swam in schools, and snakelike creatures shining neon pink curlicued among them. It was beautiful, and Sora wished he had his camera, or better yet, some specimen jars. But along with his PWTV, they'd probably been dashed to bits and scattered on the tide.

Which begged the question: How would he get back to his crew, the shuttle, and the ship? But in that moment, looking out over the sea of Varuna and seeing patches of glowing water in every imaginable color, understanding the

hows and whys of the bright water and what waited beneath it seemed a more immediate conundrum to Sora. Getting home he could worry about later. This opportunity might never come again. Casting his gaze around, Sora hoped to find a branch or a stick he could use as a crutch. But on a planet without enough dry land to support trees, he was unlikely to find one. There was nothing for it. He rocked onto his knees and stood slowly, waiting for the vertigo to pass before daring a few steps.

This land mass seemed larger than the one where they'd landed the shuttle, and the place where he stood looked like a narrow beach surrounding higher ground. The mist made it hard to be sure, but it looked like a single peak rose steeply into the darkening sky.

*Are there birds on this world? Sora wondered. Is there enough land to support birds, or am I projecting what I'm familiar with onto this place? Maybe the life forms are like nothing we've imagined. Maybe they're all marine. But then, something or someone built those gates, and they're above the surface of the ocean. Maybe they're very old, built by an extinct civilization, built at a time before water covered everything. Maybe it was climate change. Earth lost over 30.772 percent of its habitable land due to planetary warming a few centuries back. Maybe the same happened here, and maybe it destroyed the people who built those gates.*

There was so much to study here. In his head, Sora was already drafting a proposal to be funded to come here, set up some sort of floating base and laboratory, and learn all Varuna's secrets. In addition to a team to assist him in studying the chemistry and biochemistry of the world, he'd need an archeologist, a forensic anthropologist, and a zoologist, bare minimum. All of them would need research assistants, but using doctoral-level interns could reduce the budget. He'd have to crunch numbers and get someone better with words to help him express how much the Confederation could benefit from his expedition, but the heat of excitement already pinched at his cheeks as he explored as best his aching body and throbbing head would allow.

Up ahead was a larger lagoon being fed by a stream tumbling lazily over the steep rocks abutting it on one side. Sora wondered if that water was fresh as he was thirsty. It was hard to gauge how long he'd been unconscious, but based on Varuna's long periods of light and darkness and the slow shift between them, it might have been as much as ten to twelve hours. Above him, the stars looked like smears against the rusty, dark sky, while the water glowed with all the colors of the spectrum, as if the world had inverted—bright water, dark sky.

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Yet somehow, he felt he was where he needed to be. He had never bowed so much to instinct or fleeting whimsy before in his life. He'd always had a plan, a series of steps—to escape poverty, to get out of the ghetto, to get an education, and maneuver himself into a career where he could explore the mysteries of life and the universe and feed himself while doing so. Right now, he was just wandering, and he needed something to drink.

Reaching down, Sora tried to turn on his wrist computer. At first it didn't come to life, so he tapped the screen a few times—very scientifically—and it blipped twice before powering up. He touched the icon for the flashlight, and a beam of light appeared above the back of his hand. It reflected off the mist and hampered his vision as much as it helped, but it comforted him in the irrational way light did for all humans, and so he left it on.

When he reached the edge of the pool, Sora knelt down in the curly, blue-and-green striped rushes and cupped his hand. Before he could scoop up water to drink, movement at his left caught his eye. His training kicked in, and he reached for the weapon the ACC required him to wear at his hip, but of course, it was gone. Sora crouched down as he regarded the form halfway submersed in the water. It looked like a man.

A wind coming in off the sea herded most of the fog off the lagoon and uphill, and the newly risen moon illuminated the area like a spotlight. There, occupying the brightest beam of light like the star of all of Sora's fantasies, was a man reclining in the water, his elbows angled behind himself to support him on the rocky lip of the pool. He was a big man, beautifully proportioned and muscular without being bulky, more definition than size. Sora's gaze wandered down the languid curve of his torso, between his defined pectorals and along the gully between his abdominal muscles, then over to the defined V above his hips. Sora loved that part of the male anatomy. Right now, it, along with the kilometers of bronzed skin, the shiny dark hair, the high cheekbones, squared chin, intense dark eyes—the color impossible to determine in the rubicund gloaming—and the lips that looked evolved for the express purpose of kissing, dragging along flesh, and suckling skin, made Sora dizzy.

Or maybe it was something else.

His head pounding and his vision regressing to a swarm of colliding comets, Sora dropped to his knees and covered his eyes with his hand. As he moved his fingers through his hair to the back of his head, he winced at the pain and felt the large lump on the base of his skull. He was suddenly tired, and he realized he was probably concussed, maybe even hallucinating. Obviously

hallucinating. What else could explain the man of his dreams lounging, surrounded by a menagerie of bioluminescent creatures in every color, on an alien world?

But when Sora dropped his hand and opened his eyes, the man remained. He'd moved closer, and he looked concerned.

"Is this your home?" Sora asked, his own voice sounding distant and distorted. "Are you a native of this world?" Then Nualyin's warning returned to him. "Are you going to hurt me? I'm not a soldier; I'm a scientist, and I'm unarmed. I don't mean you any harm."

The man spoke in a low baritone, the unknown language growly and guttural but the tone non-threatening. Though Sora didn't understand his words, he couldn't misinterpret the swipe of his hand, offering Sora a seat next to him in the lagoon. At least it wasn't an attack, and there was no hostility in the man's expression. Sora needed to sit down somewhere before he fell over and earned himself another bump on the head, so he dropped his bum to the ground to unlace his heavy, steel-reinforced boots. When he got them off, he unbuckled his armored vest, shrugged it off his shoulders, and let it fall. The rest of his uniform was in tatters, and it practically fell from Sora's body. The look on the other man's face as Sora climbed over the rocks and lowered himself into the water in nothing but his snug underpants was unmistakable appreciation.

The warm water smelled of salt, sulfur, and minerals. It felt good on Sora's battered body as he sunk into it, giving it his weight, letting it take some of the burden of Varuna's heightened gravity from his bones. It enticed him dangerously toward sleep, and if sleep seemed more imperative than the gorgeous creature only a few feet away, Sora certainly had a head injury and had to stay awake. He had to hydrate himself, so he brought some water to his mouth and sipped. It was too salty; it would do him more harm than good, and against his fierce desire to swallow it anyway, he spit it onto the ground.

After carefully positioning himself on the rocky ledge next to his host, he turned to the stranger. "Do you live here?"

The other man responded in that low, rumbling purr that tumbled down Sora's spine to his belly, tumbling around there and stirring all kinds of things in Sora. He still couldn't understand a word, but he liked listening. The cadence lilted, reminding him of an Asian language—Cantonese, maybe, if he had to assign a parallel.

Sora's head was a mess, his thoughts jumping and touching down as erratically as the lightning on the water. That, though, could be predicted



mathematically—it had a pattern even if not an immediately obvious one—but a rattled brain...? Sora shook his head. His companion regarded him with one brow arched in a very human expression. Why had Sora thought he wasn't human? He certainly looked it. Sora decided to start the interaction over. He met the other man's eyes as he touched the center of his bare chest. "Wakahisa Sora," he said, carefully enunciating each syllable as he bent his waist in a small bow.

The other man understood, and he touched between the subtle mounds of his chest muscles. Sora noted their mutual absence of body hair. "Ch'Marsam-muk."

The sounds weren't so alien, and Sora repeated them easily as he laid his hand over the other man's. Then he wrapped his fingers around Ch'Marsam-muk's and brought his hand to his own chest. "Sora."

"Soo-rah."

"Soar-rah," he corrected.

"Soar-rah." He touched the corner of Sora's mouth with a finger as Sora smiled. Sora couldn't follow the words he said afterward, but he looked happy.

"I'm happy too. Happy to meet you." Sora set his computer to record both audio and visual, and then he drew his finger along the upturn of his mouth. "Happy."

"Happy, Sora." The other man ran his finger along Sora's lips, and Sora shuddered beneath his touch. "Happy, Ch'Marsam-muk."

"Ch'Marsam-muk, I know you can't understand me, but I have to talk. I have a concussion, and I have to remain conscious, so please forgive me if I just babble. Help me learn your words. Tell me happy." He traced the other man's lips with his pinky. They were slick, hot, and supple beneath his touch. Springy. "Happy?"

"Phi-ket," he said, grinning wider, his lips stretching taut beneath Sora's fingers. "Phi-ket, Sora?"

"Phi-ket, Sora," Sora replied. "Remarkably, under the circumstances."

For the next hour or so, they engaged in a game. Sora touched things—his eyes, a rock, the water—and said his word for them, and Ch'Marsam-muk followed suit. He ran his fingers over the gem and shell-studded Francesium jewelry Ch'Marsam-muk wore and named: "ring, bracelet, pendant." They



stretched their arms up to indicate the moon, stars, and clouds. Their play descended to silliness soon, with them mimicking laughter or tears, stomach aches and the annoyance that made one throw up his arms, all the while trading language.

And touching each other. At one point, Sora realized only half a foot of space separated their bellies, and Ch'Marsam-muk's hand furled around his neck while his own hand wrapped across the other's elbow. Though they could barely communicate, it felt like they had been friends for years. Sora pointed to his belly button and said, "Navel." He was running out of things in the vicinity to name. Ch'Marsam-muk looked perplexed, grasped Sora's wrist, and guided Sora's hand over his own smooth, taut stomach—one with no belly button present.

"Ch'Marsam-muk. Navel. No, Sora."

"No, I can see that," Sora said, distracted by the firm sinew he touched, the soft skin, the smoldering dark eyes boring into his gaze. No naval meant no umbilical cord, which led him to wonder how these people reproduced. Did Ch'Marsam-muk have the same organs as a human male? Emboldened, maybe because of his injury, he let his hand drop lower, tracing the glorious Apollo's Girdle he's seen and then circling around to the man's hip. The peak of bone and the muscles cradling it were familiar but then, when he dropped his fingers a few inches lower, he felt something smoother than skin, undulating, more fluid than flesh, and he drew back. His companion canted his head, reached out, grasped Sora's wrist, and guided it back to his hip as their gazes locked. Sora moved through the water until their bellies grazed, and he slid his hand down, compelled as much by lust as curiosity.

When he got past the muscular belly and prominent hip to where the thigh should have begun, the texture changed from the subtle catch of wet skin and pores to something smoother, something that felt like glass under his fingertips, but softer, thick with muscle and warm and alive. Sora slid his touch lower until he could wrap his fingers around a boneless appendage as wide as his forearm. It pulsed with strength and flexibility as he found the spongy suction cups on the back side with his fingers. *Amazing*, he thought. Ch'Marsam-muk, a gorgeous man on top, had lower limbs resembling a cephalopod—an octopus or cuttlefish. Even more amazingly, Sora didn't find it bizarre, and it didn't douse the warmth he felt when he looked into the man's orangish-brown eyes and saw his full lips curling into a smile. He did wonder how much he could explore without risking impropriety or violating some culture more, but then

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Ch'Marsam-muk reached for him and dragged his hand down Sora's thigh until he could cup the bony globe of Sora's knee.

"Do I seem strange to you?" Sora asked. "We're very different, and yet..." Ch'Marsam-muk had been, from the beginning, open and friendly. Sora got on with him better than he did with most. He hadn't once been afraid. Despite his throbbing head and the sporadic waves of nausea he battled, he'd had a good time, enjoyed himself more than he had in recent memory. He took a chance and reached out with his foot, grasping Ch'Marsam-muk's shoulder when he stumbled and drawing a chuckle from the other man. Yes, to Sora, he was still a man—his humor, intelligence, hospitality, and charm made him so.

With his toes, Sora felt out the tentacles coiled on the floor of the lagoon, lying in lazy loops and twists, powerful muscle temporarily relaxed. He estimated those tentacles to be twelve to fourteen meters in length, maybe more. Ch'Marsam-muk would be a strong swimmer, and fast. Sora held to him with one hand and reached down with the other. He wrapped one of his tentacles around Sora's wrist and twined it up his arm, while another curled up his leg, wrapping it completely and squeezing like a constrictor. With one of his own species, it might have been pleasant, but the pressure hurt Sora and he hissed. His companion muttered what was certainly an apology and loosened his grip as he wound another of his smooth appendages around Sora's waist, encircling it twice and drawing Sora closer, almost into his lap. A few inches below the water, the tentacle looked like wet silk, opalescent silvery-blue with shifting lavender hues. Where it pressed to Sora's belly, it took on a golden-brown cast, reflecting his own complexion. When he reached to touch the place where their bodies met, Ch'Marsam-muk exhaled a puff of air into Sora's fringe, and goose flesh broke out over Sora's skin.

When another shaft of moonlight broke through the thinning clouds, Sora saw a mottled pattern on the limb holding him so intimately. It resembled fine marble. He ran his finger up its graceful curve until he reached the web of skin connecting it to the next tentacle. That skin, while tough, was an almost translucent soft heather-gray, like thin mist at twilight. The underside of the limb was white and pearlescent, dotted with pinkish suction cups that distended slightly before affixing to Sora's flesh and pulling it up, suckling it and imparting a sensation like nothing he had ever felt. With his eyes rolling back, his lids fluttering, and his body quickly turning to gelatin, Sora went limp and let Ch'Marsam-muk hold him up in the water, wrap him with his strong appendages that almost completely covered Sora's flesh, but without making

him feel restrained. It was a meeting, an embrace—not a prison. Feeling the strength around him, the gentle caresses of fingers and slippery enticing appendages, Sora thrust his hips involuntarily. The suckers pulled at his skin, producing a pleasant sting and tearing a ragged moan from Sora's throat. Some cephalopods, he recalled, through chemoreceptors, could taste what they touched with their suction cups. Sora trembled at the thought that Ch'Marsam-muk was kissing him, sampling his flavor, with a dozen hungry little mouths.

Opening his eyes, Sora moved his hand over the other man's shoulder and up his neck to cup his cheek and chin. He stared at Ch'Marsam-muk's angular face, and his dark eyes sucked Sora in like black holes not even light could escape. "Can"—Sora sucked in a breath and tried to quiet the buzzing in his head—"can you taste me?"

Ch'Marsam-muk asked a short question as the silky, blunted tip of one of his tentacles moved up and down Sora's spine, soothing the tension in Sora's muscles and making Sora feel even more like an invertebrate.

"Taste," Sora said. He extended his tongue and touched the tip with his finger, licking along the pad as he stared into the other man's eyes.

"Taste Sora." As Ch'Marsam-muk took Sora's face in both hands, a tentacle draped over Sora's shoulder, and the end bumped against his nipple until one of the suckers found it and drew it in. Sora gave a sharp cry and pressed his lips against the other man's, tasting, drinking in his flavor until his mouth opened to allow Sora's tongue entry. Winding his fingers in Ch'Marsam-muk's dark hair, Sora lapped at his teeth, his long, sharp bicuspid, and suckled his bottom lip. Finally their tongues met, and Ch'Marsam-muk's twisted around Sora's and held it until Sora broke free. He pulled away and swallowed air until the stars in his vision dimmed, and then he crashed their mouths together again, cresting his tongue into the other man's mouth and taking control. Ch'Marsam-muk played along for a little while, but he didn't submit. The bumping and thrusting of their tongues as they grasped with their hands was more of an elaborate dance than a battle.

Breaking contact, Ch'Marsam-muk growled out Sora's name followed by a string of slurred words in his own tongue.

Sora raked his nails down Ch'Marsam-muk's chest, leaving eight darker lines against his bronzed skin. "Sora is what? Receptive? Aroused? Can you taste that? I bet you can, the pheromones pouring off me. You're not wrong. I don't know if this is a good idea, and I can't ponder the implications... But

you, you're good. Kind. You could overpower me, but you don't want to. That's obvious, and I... I think too much sometimes. Talk too damned much." He grabbed Ch'Marsam-muk's hair in both hands and brought their faces together again.

Though they could barely communicate verbally, Ch'Marsam-muk seemed to read Sora's body. He released Sora's leg from his tentacle when Sora wanted to lift it and wrap it around his hip, and cupped Sora's ass to support him as they kissed hard and rocked against each other. Ch'Marsam-muk loosed his hold at the exact moment Sora shifted to straddle his lap "I want you," Sora panted. "Want. Need. That's a critical concept. Please understand."

Ch'Marsam-muk growled out a few short syllables as he cradled Sora's face and inclined Sora's head to lick and suckle up the side of his neck. Sora's head lolled to the side as he opened his legs in offering, pushing the erection his wet cotton briefs barely contained against the other man's ridged belly. Sex had never been like this for him before, never been a frenzy of need and animal passion. Before, it had been a compromise—ten minutes of doing something another man liked in exchange for his own release. It had been something men expected after he'd dated them a while, and he didn't dislike the act, but he never burned for it until he could think of nothing else. It never brought him to that place where future and past ceased to exist, and there was only the moment. This—this was mutual, and it stole his reason. Being wrapped up in miles of cool, satiny flesh over dense, flexible muscle that wanted nothing but to touch, discover, and pleasure him, being touched everywhere at once, his whole body stimulated—he thought he'd implode.

And he trusted. That was rare for him, even after months in a relationship. He'd been hurt too many times before, been judged too much trouble, too married to his work. None of that mattered now; they'd made friends, and they wanted each other. Sora didn't care about the rest. Ch'Marsam-muk's chest was hard against him, his lips and tongue savage and gentle at the same time, his tentacles liquid, surrounding Sora, drawing him in until he drowned, erasing everything else. Sora lapped at the roof of his mouth. He couldn't get his fill of the other man's taste. But then a beeping distracted him, followed by a trio of bright lights growing larger as they sliced through the wispy remains of the mist.

The two of them broke apart as Nualyin's crackly voice sounded from Sora's wrist. "Lieutenant Wakahisa, we have located your position and are coming to extract you. ETA five minutes. Be strong, Sora."

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He'd forgotten all about getting home, forgotten home was anywhere but here. With panic like icy poison in his veins, he turned to Ch'Marsam-muk. "You should get out of here. Hide. I don't know what the others will do. I do not trust most of them. Go now." He pointed to the open sea as the three lights grew bright enough to blind them. "I have to consider what to tell them. Go!" he shouted.

The other man took the hint, climbed from the pool, and moved gracefully across the beach, raised up a few feet on his muscular limbs, pulling himself with the ones in the front and pushing with his back tentacles. He shot Sora a wistful glance over his shoulder and touched the center of his lips before diving into the water. Soon the cascade of bubbles dispersed, and nothing remained as evidence of Ch'Marsam-muk's presence. Sora had just enough time to dress and lay on his back at the edge of the water before a PWTv sputtered to a stop, feet slogged through the surf, and Nualyin crouched beside him. "Sora, are you hurt?"

"Yeah, head injury," he said. "Concussion."

"We'll get you to the medical bay," Nualyin said. Then he leaned down and whispered near Sora's ear. "Don't say anything until we have a chance to talk. You're in a lot of trouble, but we'll come up with a way to get you out of it. Just don't talk to anyone until we can make plans. Pretend you don't remember anything. Act disoriented if you have to."

Security officers loaded Sora onto a gurney and strapped him down, and as their vehicles dragged it across the water, he let his eyes close. He was too exhausted and too hurt to contemplate what had just happened or what would happen when they returned to the station. He let his arm drop off the side of the stretcher so his fingertips skimmed the warm surface of the water. Stars streamed by above him until he couldn't hang on to consciousness any longer.

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## Chapter Four

Sora didn't remember most of the journey home, as he'd spent it sedated in the ship's sick bay. To his surprise, he'd been released when they'd reached the space station instead of locked in the brig. Captain Kgosi made it clear there would be a formal investigation of his actions on Varuna, and likely disciplinary action. Nualyin assured Sora such proceedings usually took months, and that they'd have ample time to formulate a defense. He also told Sora they could likely avoid any permanent reprimand since Sora hadn't intended to cause any harm or hamper the mission.

Sora spent most of his time in his laboratory, analyzing the molecular structure and genetics of the few samples his team had been able to secure. Daily messages reinforced his fear that all his superiors cared about was the Francesium, though. So far, Sora hadn't shared his experience with Ch'Marsam-muk with anyone—not even Nualyin. But as the time to report to the council drew nearer, he knew he would have to say something. Taking the element from a dead, uninhabited planet was one thing, but he knew it belonged to Ch'Marsam-muk and his people. They were a sovereign race, intelligent and at least somewhat civilized, and the tenets of the ACC forbid plundering resources from an evolved people. As much as he hated politics, the maneuvering of the privileged, and the useless power struggles between people who called each other allies, Sora might be the only voice defending Ch'Marsam-muk and his countrymen. He had to make sure he was heard, and he knew it wouldn't be easy. Not only the Alliance wanted its hands on the miracle element; several wealthy and powerful corporations had already put in bids to mine and process it.

He flopped on the narrow cot in his quarters and laced his fingers behind his head. In the medical bay, Sora had transferred all the data from his wrist computer to a small storage device he could conceal easily. That information was his secret weapon, but more than that, it was... special to him. Intimate.

"Lock the door," Sora said. A series of beeps confirmed his command had been carried out. "Play footage Wakahisa 925. Password Bright Water 8888."

The monitor on the ceiling glowed blue for a few seconds before it began playing the footage Sora had recorded on Varuna. The visuals were practically worthless, blurry, and showing mostly wet stone and water. Now and then, they caught a flash of bronzed skin, and once, toward the end, they'd captured

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Sora's hand touching the end of one of Ch'Marsam-muk's tentacles. It wrapped around his wrist and twined over his arm, but Sora still thought he could call it a handshake and be believed. The audio was crystal clear though, and Sora had listened to it until he'd memorized it. He'd also fed all the data he'd collected into a sophisticated program. Using the words they'd spoken in common, the program worked to decipher some of the other things Ch'Marsam-muk had spoken. It would be another secret weapon if Sora needed it. When it came time to plan the next expedition to Varuna, his superiors would surely include him as the only one who could speak the language of the natives.

And Sora wanted to go back. He'd dissected his motives so many times he could barely find a place to make a fresh cut that wasn't covered in scar tissue. Was it wrong what he had done, somehow unnatural? Why had he enjoyed it so much more with an alien creature than he ever had with a man of his own species? Statistically, even if he returned to the planet, he'd likely never find Ch'Marsam-muk. Why did that hurt? Eight months ago, when Sora's long-term lover, David, had screamed and stomped around their quarters, packing his things and saying Sora would never have any passion except for science, Sora thought he was probably right. It had smarted, and their suite had seemed quiet afterward, at least for a few days. Sora had chalked it up to a failed experiment, and when experiments failed, scientists changed the variables and tried again. So why did the thought of never seeing Ch'Marsam-muk seem so much more devastating than losing David? Had he fallen into the old cliché of lusting after someone he could never have—for dozens of reasons if not hundreds—so he wouldn't actually have to do the work? Take the risk? Was he so afraid of exposing his heart, loving and being loved, that his subconscious had chosen someone impossible?

He didn't want to lie here, watching the footage he'd recorded over and over again while his thoughts moved in circles that got him nowhere. Sora got up, went to his closet, and selected some civilian clothes, something understated but a little provocative. After showering and toweling his black hair dry into irregular spikes and leaving them messy and erratic—Nualyin had been the one to convince him to stop gelling it back—he shaved, brushed his teeth, and splashed on some cologne, even optimistically dabbing a few drops above his sparse pubic patch. Then he pulled on snug burgundy trousers—no pants underneath, for the first time—with a slight sheen to the fabric and a tight black shirt with a zipper running diagonally down from the armpit and a sheer panel over the belly. The dark colors flattered his lithe musculature and golden complexion, and the heeled boots he chose made him a little taller. A silver belt



slung over his hips echoed the heavy chain around his neck. He decided against mascara; he didn't want to look like he was trying too hard, and lots of fellows complimented the almond shape of his eyes. He didn't need cosmetics to try to make them look larger or rounder. Sora wasn't vain, but he was objective, and he knew he wouldn't spend the night alone if he didn't want to.

Sora took the shuttle to a section of the station frequented by the gay crewmen and civilians. It was a Saturday, and men and some women filled the arcade and the open clubs and cafés. Supported by steel beams and glass, the curved top of the arcade stood open to space and the stars. Sora wove among the revelers, his hands in his pockets, assessing the men leaning against the outside walls of buildings, or on the posts providing muted amber light. He appreciated many of them and most returned his attention, but the night was young, and he would weigh his options. So far, no one drew him as the lights from the clubs flashed in neon colors around him and music pounded in conflicting beats.

Sora chose a club and went beneath the polished steel arch and inside. Men in various degrees of undress bounced and undulated to the loud music—the kind of generic, quick-tempo electronic stuff all these places played. Sora ordered a drink at the bar and leaned his elbows and back against it as he watched the men. Before long, a tall, broad man with speckled porcelain skin and buzzed red hair came to lounge beside Sora, smiling over the frothy head on his ale. “Buy you a drink?” he shouted, leaning in.

Sora smiled back. The man was attractive—his type, with his wide shoulders and impressive biceps—but Sora's attention already wandered. He lifted his glowy chartreuse beverage. “Just got a fresh one, thanks.”

“Do you want to get out of here?” the redhead asked, his beer-scented breath ruffling Sora's air. “Go into the bathroom?”

“I don't think so,” Sora said. “I appreciate the offer.”

With another grin, the man raised his glass in salute. “No problem. Maybe another time.”

The redhead disappeared back into the throng. That was how these places operated. The other man would try again until someone accepted. It probably didn't much matter to him who it was; it didn't to most of the men who came to these clubs. It did to Sora. He didn't expect to find his soul mate here, but he wanted a man who wanted *him*—not one who would accept any accommodating body. None of the men who came up to him with offers of



drinks or more fit those requirements. Sora turned away six more men who happily moved to their next attempts and forgot him.

Soon someone tapped his elbow, and Sora turned. A smaller, slender man, closer to Sora's size, flashed him a grin full of white teeth. "You're cute," the shirtless blond said with an overdone lisp. "You have really nice lips." He traced Sora's mouth with his finger, and Sora recoiled. "What's wrong, baby?" The man's face flashed orange, then purple, then blue, the light reflecting off the rows of rings in his ears and making the sweat coating his chest and torso sparkle.

"I don't know," Sora said. It had something to do with the colored light bursting in the darkness, and with this man touching his lips. It made his gut clench. "Excuse me, I need to get out of here."

Sora abandoned his drink, pushed his way through the crowd, and dragged a breath in when he made it back out to the arcade. What had he been thinking, coming here? He wasn't into casual sex, never had been. But what had happened with Ch'Marsam-muk had been casual, hadn't it? They'd barely been able to speak to each other. For all Sora knew, physical affection meant nothing to Ch'Marsam-muk's people. A few more men came up to Sora as he wandered toward the archway leading out of the arcade, but they seemed increasingly desperate, and they just made him want to be alone. Maybe he should just forget about the whole thing, lead a life of celibacy, masturbate when he needed to, and keep to his lab. It was where he was happiest, where he found the fulfilment the arms of anonymous men failed to give him.

It was where he would go now. It would take him about an hour, but he would walk. After he passed the larger arcade where the straight inhabitants of the station wiled their evenings away, he was on his own, moving past gated-up shops, his heels echoing through empty corridors until he reached the research wing. He stood on the circle in front of the double doors so the beams could scan his height, weight, body temperature, and DNA. Within seconds, the doors opened with a soft brush, and lights turned on as Sora entered the hallway. He moved past dozens of numbered doors toward his laboratory: number eighty-eight. He had some simulations running based on the DNA collected on Varuna. Various algorithms would predict what each life form might evolve into based on various scenarios. Sora also wanted some insight into the geological history of the world, and so he had programs running to analyze some of the fossils and minerals they'd found. The simple act of wondering what had developed in his few hours of absence distracted and soothed him.

Then he heard voices up ahead, around the corner. Surprised, he froze and muttered, "Dim lights." Responding to his voice signature, the lights blipped out. Only the reflective orange strip along the bottom of the wall let him see his way as he crept closer, cursing his silly boots and the clacking of their heels on the tiled floor.

No one should be here. Station security didn't patrol this area since it was practically impenetrable, and few, if any, of the other scientists worked this late. Beyond that, the tone of the two men talking gave Sora the sense of something below the board, illegitimate. There were a lot of valuable secrets in this part of the station; Sora kept plenty of his own in his lab, and he doubted any of the scientists reported all their findings to their superiors. As he crept closer, he wondered if he was in danger. He had no way to communicate with security and nothing to defend himself. He'd been trained as a soldier, but some people made violence their careers and relished it while Sora found it a necessary evil. It would be better to remain undetected, so Sora hugged the corner and kept his breathing shallow as he listened.

He recognized the first voice right away—smarmy, unctuous, high, and nasally—as the pilot, Steven Bennett. Why would he be in the research wing of the station? The other man sounded cold and manipulative; his flat voice chilled Sora's blood as he squinted, as if that would help him hear better. It was the voice of a man who could read a weather report from his wrist computer while he slowly crushed a kitten under his heel. Sora cursed himself for not bringing his own wrist computer so he could record the conversation, but most people looking for a night of anonymous sex didn't want a reminder in the morning.

"It would be in our best interest to convince the Alliance to see things our way," said the unknown man. "Securing their backing will cut our expenditure and increase our profits, which will mean a larger payoff for everyone involved in our cause."

"We might have a hard time with that," Bennett said. "I saw the people living on that world. They're advanced, a sovereign race. The ACC will have a problem with that. And the pretentious fucking Shieferians are worse."

"Lieutenant Bennett, do you have any idea of the fortune that stands to be made for whoever secures the mining rights to that insignificant rock?"

"Of course I do. I'm just saying it won't be easy. What are you suggesting, Rourke?"

“As I said, our best option is swaying the ACC leaders to our way of thinking. We can do that best by convincing credible scientists to speak in our favor. You are acquainted with some of the top ACC researchers, are you not?”

Bennett snorted. “I guess. That little fairy Nualyin and that awkward fuck, Wakahisa. They’re both faggots. Nualyin is old and smart, but Sora... I might be able to pretend I’m interested in him and bring him over to our side.”

The idea made Sora want to throw up, but if it made him privy to their plans, he would try to pretend, because whatever they were planning wasn’t good. Something that had to be discussed in secret, in the middle of the night, never was—especially something that involved huge amounts of money.

“Good,” the man called Rourke said. “We’ll try that first. Wakahisa is highly respected. His voice would mean a lot for our efforts.”

“I’m not sucking his dick,” Bennett bit off. “I’m not a queer. I have a line I won’t cross.”

Rourke grunted. “News to me. Just remember the sums we’re considering as you... interact with Wakahisa.”

“And if Sora doesn’t take the bait?” Bennett asked.

“So you doubt your appeal?” Rourke blew air through his teeth. “I never thought I’d live to see the day.”

“Pfft. I’ll handle Sora. He’s a clueless prick. A lab geek. The pilot thing will totally get his dick hard. He’ll wallow in my attention, but I still like having a backup plan. I don’t want to go into this with no way out. I won’t be happy being left with nothing if this falls through.”

“We have a Plan B, Lieutenant, but it isn’t a pretty one. P.L.C. Enterprises will secure that Francesium. If you aid us, you’ll be compensated. Just be sure you’re one of the pilots on the returning mission to Varuna, in case...”

“I’ll do that,” Bennett said. “I’ll do what I have to do. Just make sure you do your part, Rourke.”

“Oh, we have. We’ve bought off several high-ranking officials of the ACC. At least some of the advocates we need are assured. Do what I have requested, Lieutenant Bennett. Don’t get creative. Get us our scientist, and make sure you’re on the next expedition to Varuna, in case we have to default to Plan B.”

“I’ll do that. Sir,” Bennett said.

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Their footsteps approached Sora's hiding place. Scurrying, he made his way to the closest door and pressed his fingerprint to the lock to open it. The door swished, and Sora hurried in to camouflage himself beneath the broad leaves of the ferns. The air was heavy and hot, and the smell of the plants and soil dominated. Two sets of boots moved past the lab, and after a wait of a quarter hour or so, Sora felt safe to leave. Sweat coated his face and darkened his club clothes, but the heat was only a partial perpetrator.

He should have known something like this would happen. Whenever something held value, people would fight over it. He wondered how far they would go, how many people were involved in this plot. What was Plan B? Sora could imagine it had something to do with taking the Francesium from the natives of Varuna without trading for it fairly—or even securing their permission. Sora would have thought violating a core value of the ACC would be impossible, but with the right amount of money behind them, they might succeed.

Sora walked back toward the shuttle that would take him to his rooms, rubbing his arms even though he wasn't cold, thinking. He wondered how deep this ran, who he could trust. Nualyin? No, he wouldn't share what he had heard with anyone yet, and he would respond when Bennett tried to recruit him. Playing along was his best option for finding out what they were up to. A pseudo-friendship with Bennett would give him access to the man's communication devices and private records. The idea of feigning a romance made him shudder and want to retch, but Sora knew he had to do it. For whatever reason, this had landed on him, and he couldn't stand to the side while greed potentially destroyed an entire world and race of people—and all they stood to learn there.

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## Chapter Five

They were close to bringing the tchallit down. A river of blood followed the huge predator as Ch'Marsam-muk and his companions on the dangerous ritual hunt swam after it. Ch'Marsam-muk spun in the water and dived to avoid a tail three times the length of his body and covered in spikes as long and sharp as the trident he held. One of them nicked the end of his tentacle, and his blood mingled with all the rest flavoring the water. It stung but would result in no lasting damage, so he turned to his back and pushed with his tentacles, shooting himself through the fouled water and beneath the massive creature. A cloud of blood bloomed when he drove his trident into its belly, and the animal thrashed, beating with its tail and paddling with its clawed front legs to escape.

Ch'Marsam-muk darted to the side and away from the tchallit's desperate, erratic movements. Two other hunters swam to cut it off and then drove their weapons into opposite sides of its elongated snout. It opened a mouth large enough to swallow one of them whole, revealing rows of razor-sharp teeth and expelling more blood. Another of their party of six struck the creature in the shoulder, immobilizing its leg on that side and making it list to the left. The tchallit landed hard on the ocean floor and slid, tearing up plants and raising a cloud of sandy soil. Four men converged over it and drove their tridents down into its pallid, whitish-green flesh. The hunt would end in victory, which would mean feasting and festivities, as well as an auspicious start to the meeting of their council.

Just when it looked like they'd vanquished their prey—one of the most lethal animals in the ocean—the tchallit drew a final burst of strength, raising its tail, swatting one of the men away, and sending him somersaulting through the rust-tinged water. One of the others narrowly avoided the snap of its jaw. Amazingly, the creature managed to hoist itself off the sea floor. It lurched and swam a few hundred yards, faltering and zigzagging, dragging its useless claw beneath it. The men scattered to avoid the flailing. Two of them threw their spears through the water, and found their marks. Ch'Marsam-muk knew the best way to avoid anyone else getting hurt would be to finish this thing as quickly as they could. Taking a chance, he brought his tentacles together hard and shot himself up through the water, to a clear patch above the smear of blood. At the last minute, he twisted his waist and swam above the tchallit. The others continued their relentless assault, keeping the creature's attention focused on them. Ch'Marsam-muk gripped his heavy spear, almost the length

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of his body, in both hands. With all the strength he could muster, he drove it down into the top of the tchallit's head. He felt the vertebrae between the skull and the spine break beneath the tines of his weapon, and he gave another push and twist, his muscles screaming.

Though he tried to keep his hold on his weapon, the death throes of the creature tossed him off as if he were a guppy, and he cartwheeled through the water until his back struck a spire of rock. He slid down it until his tentacles touched the ground. He held tight with his suction cups and waited for the spinning in his head to subside. In the distance, the tchallit had finally fallen still. Ch'Marsam-muk swam in that direction. The tides had started to push the blood away from them, making it easier for him to see. He pulled his trident from the creature's head and secured it onto his back. With the exception of the man who'd been struck by its tail and injured, they took the hooks and tough hide ropes from their waists. After driving the serrated hooks into the creature's thick, meaty muscle, they began their arduous journey back to their village.

It was a long, difficult swim, and by the time they reached the city of stone, metal, and coral structures, deep below the surface of the sea, Ch'Marsam-muk's body trembled, and he couldn't drag himself any farther. He let his cramped fingers unfurl from the hide rope and sunk down, arranging his tired tentacles around him and leaning against a slab of reddish rock sculpted into a porpoise. Lacy purple leaves surrounded the statue's base and meandered off beneath the arch marking a garden's boundary. Hungry, Ch'Marsam-muk broke a few off and enjoyed their crunch and salty, bitter flavor. People came out of the irregular, round structures made to resemble the natural formations of rock and coral in their part of the sea to congratulate the hunters by rubbing their faces against them and stroking their tentacles. Some started to clean the tchallit carcass while others brought seaweed to wrap and season the meat.

After he recovered enough of his energy, Ch'Marsam-muk swam slowly through the village and beneath the arch to his living area. He took a fish from the string hanging from the ceiling and bit into it as he moved into the small alcove where he slept. Lined in soft, fragrant plants, lit by glowing blue pods, and warmed by channels directing the heat of the planet's core, the room was barely large enough to contain him. But that was how his people liked to sleep: close and cozy. Ch'Marsam-muk pushed away his longing to have someone to wrap up with him, someone to hold him and twist his tentacles around him until they tangled up so neither could tell where he ended and the other began. They would take on each other's colors, and their tentacles would produce soft light

from their contentment. But that only happened with mates, and Ch'Marsam-muk hadn't found his yet, so he curled his tentacles around himself and rested his cheek on his tucked-up arm.

Alone or not, he needed to get some rest before the council met. As a warrior, he was expected to be there, and warriors from some of the other tribes would be attending as well. Things would likely get heated. He knew what they would be discussing, and he had to be ready to make the others see reason before they made a terrible mistake.

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"We must defend what is ours," growled one of the warriors from a nearby tribe. Nearly all the other men and women who had come to the spit of land and reclined on the carved benches with their tentacles dangling into the channel that brought water from the sea agreed—and loudly.

Ch'Marsam-muk waited for them to quiet down before raising the large shell that indicated he wanted to speak. "We are jumping to conclusions. The sky people have left, and we don't even know if they are planning to return."

"We must be ready to protect ourselves if they do," a woman with emerald-green tentacles and yellow hair said.

"Defend ourselves against what?" said Qu'Eltektan, a friend and supporter of Ch'Marsam-muk. "The sky people have only been here a few times, and those that did not die have left and taken nothing with them. It's premature to plan to attack them without knowing what they want—if anything."

"Besides," Ch'Marsam-muk said, "these people have machines far beyond anything we possess. Not only might we face defeat if we attack them, we would be losing the chance to learn from them. Perhaps we can make friends with these people. If they share their secrets with us, we could have machines that would carry us into the sky."

"No, I do not believe they would come here if they wanted nothing," said the woman. An important leader and warrior from a distant village, she'd introduced herself as T'Maarla-deem, Ch'Marsam-muk thought he recalled. Her opinion would be respected; others would follow what she said next. "If we kill them, we can take their sky machines for ourselves. Why should we allow them to come here? They have not asked our permission or introduced themselves. Who here would enter another village without being invited? That's an act of war. These people from the sky have no decency."

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Ch'Marsam-muk had to reveal what he'd been keeping secret ever since it happened the previous night. He hated to do it, and he wouldn't tell them everything, but if it would prevent hostilities between his people and Sora's, he could not be silent. Besides, he saw much possibility in learning to build and use the machines Sora's people possessed. "I met one of these sky people, the last time it was dark. I found him sinking into the water, and I knew from those that had been here before that he would die if I didn't take him back into the air, so I carried him to a small island, and I spoke with him. He tried to teach me his words, and I taught him some of ours. It was clear he wanted to be friends. He was a delicate and gentle man, and he smiled often. He never even raised his voice to me. The sky people are not so different from us. Their words may be different, but their feelings are the same."

"They are nothing like us," snarled a big warrior with a deep, puckered scar across his chest and bones knotted into his hair. "I for one don't want them here. They are strange, they're ugly, and I don't want them around my mate. And if we ever choose a hatchling from the breeding grounds, I don't want them around my children. Many of us feel the same way. We should drive these people off and make sure they never return."

"You assume we can do that," Qu'Eltektan said calmly. "I have swum close to the crafts that brought the sky people here. They're thick and metallic. A trident or a sling won't penetrate them. They have machines that can carry them across the surface of the water far faster than any of us can swim. To repeat, these people can fly!"

Ch'Marsam-muk listened as the council continued to argue. He had said all he knew to say, and he couldn't understand the hatred some of the warriors felt. Among his people, it was common for fighters to demonstrate their prowess by defeating dangerous enemies—like the tchallit. Ch'Marsam-muk also knew that at the conclusion of the meeting, even though they all agreed they would prepare to fight but that they wouldn't attack the sky people unless provoked, that many of the warriors had other plans. He could see in some of their faces that if they had the chance, they'd kill the visitors, for boasting rights if nothing else. He could do nothing but try to warn Sora. But he didn't know if Sora would return. His people might send someone else. He'd already reconciled himself to never again seeing the small, beautiful man with the amazing lips and sparkling eyes, and the two strange, bony tentacles. At least he'd tried to.

Qu'Eltektan rubbed his forehead against Ch'Marsam-muk's cheek. "I am glad that's over, but I don't think we got anywhere. We'll have to keep trying



and hope the others will see reason. Why didn't you tell me you met one of them?"

"It really didn't seem important until now," Ch'Marsam-muk lied. He had thought about it, recreated the events in his mind, every day since it had happened. And his friend knew him well.

"Well then. Keep your secrets, Ch'Marsam-muk. They're yours to keep. Do you want to go to the Pho?"

He thought about going to the large reef where they held wrestling matches and other contests of strength and skill, and where, in the waters beyond the pitted islets, unmated men and women could find as many anonymous partners as they wanted and writhe in the surf wrapped in each other's tentacles. Now, with a new night slowly falling, both the reef and shore would be lit with glass orbs powered by the planet's heat and a variety of bioluminescent plants and animals. Lichen would be glowing on the rocks. Ch'Marsam-muk had been there many times, often pairing with four men or more before he exhausted himself. But for the last several nights and days, he'd been unable to muster the motive to go. Maybe he was getting old, but he was ready to find a special man, one who meant more than lips, tentacles, fingers, a mouth, a cock, and an ass. He wanted to find his mate, and he'd been trying, but he hadn't felt that sense of instant connection with another man. He hadn't found anyone he'd known, right away, anyone he could spend the rest of his life with. Well, just...

"Not tonight," he said, twining one of his tentacles around his friend's and tasting Qu'Eltektan's saline and shellfish flavor. The musk told him Qu'Eltektan was very eager to go to the Pho and find a female or two. "I think I want to be alone. To think. You go on. We'll see each other soon."

With a nod, Qu'Eltektan dove into the channel between the benches and slapped his tentacles together to propel himself back toward the open sea. Against the darkening sky, the foam he churned up stood out bright and white, and below him, teal, purple, and chartreuse shifted and overlapped as the flora began to glow.

Ch'Marsam-muk pushed off with his tentacles and arced his body into the water with barely a splash. Returning to the water and the ease of movement it allowed always felt like a great relief. The flaps at the back of his throat and beyond his nostrils shut and sealed. The gills on the sides of his neck opened and pulled water in, providing him a burst of energy as he swam through a patch of high, bright magenta grass. It tickled his chest, belly, and groin and

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released a school of bright yellow fish. Next he moved through a rocky trench filled with tapered pods larger than his head. His movement caused them to open their six petals and spill lights across him, and he swam through rippling pools of gold, turquoise, and lavender light. If he stayed, his tentacles would absorb and reflect the colors of the blooms, his skin take on a subtle cast, and his eyes would change to match. But he didn't linger. He wanted to reach his destination, not that he thought it would do much good.

It took hours of hard swimming, but he finally reached the hilly island where he'd brought his man from the sky. He came back here from time to time, thinking that if Sora did return, he might come back here too. Maybe it was silly; maybe Sora's people didn't seek mates the way his did. Maybe Sora had already forgotten Ch'Marsam-muk. He went ashore, settled his tentacles around him, and looked up at the first stars glimmering against the burgundy sky. For a while, he tried to imagine what it was like where Sora came from. Sora wasn't designed for swimming, and his people died if they stayed under water too long. Maybe they had no ocean. Maybe everything was made from the same dull metal as the machines that had carried them here. Maybe they had no world and just lived up there in the sky, among the stars. Maybe they had come in search of a home.

But if they returned, some of his people would try to kill them. They might succeed. Somehow, Ch'Marsam-muk had to make sure that didn't happen, for the sake of both civilizations.

He sat a while longer and contemplated the stars and constellations, how many different kinds of people and things might be out there among them. He, none of his people, had imagined anything existed beyond their world until ten cycles of dark and light past. Now, he wondered if they—if he—might one day get to travel into the stars, if he could be more than a simple warrior and craftsman. That took his thoughts to places he didn't want them to go, and he dove back into the water, which was lit with every imaginable color now. He fanned his arms and swam hard, going deeper and deeper, as if he could escape the memory of that little man with the pair of thin, bony tentacles. He disagreed with the others. Sora's appendages had been unfamiliar, different from his own, but hardly ugly.

In a deep, narrow trench, among some pale green, triangular ferns and fat orange tubes topped with long fringe, he found a bed of flat ylon shells. Normally he collected them in a net and brought them back to his house where he could harvest both the meat and the gems they sometimes held. He had a

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tool for prying them open, but if he really worked at it, he could part the ribbed, pinkish-gold shells with his hands. It made a nice distraction.

The first two shells contained no jewels, but he was hungry, and ate the slimy but flavorful animals living within them. He found a small cloudy gem—blue, the most common color—and then some irregular greenish ones, nothing special, but he could polish them and make them into small rings or necklaces good enough for trade. He discovered some pearly white gems, but then the next several shells were empty. He hadn't brought his belt or hide pouch, and he had almost as much as he could carry in one hand, so he considered giving up and making the long journey home. Then he noticed probably the largest shell he'd ever seen, partially buried in sand and gravel. It took him a while to dig it out, and even longer to force the stubborn thing to give up its treasure.

And what a treasure it was, like nothing he had ever seen: a red rare gem, perfectly round, of flawless clarity, and big enough to occupy his entire palm. It pulsed with its own light, much like the vegetation around it. Ch'Marsam-muk had heard of such a thing, but he'd never been fortunate enough to find one. He knew exactly what he would make from it, even if he never got to deliver it.

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## Chapter Six

Sweat dripped down Sora's forehead as he stood to give his report. Hundreds of people, all important scientists and high-ranking officers of the ACC, as well as CEOs from influential multi-system corporations sat on the rows of padded chairs in the semicircular room, looking down at him. He had to walk a fine line. While he had to convince his superiors not to send mining excursions to Varuna tomorrow, he had to at least pretend to further the agenda of his new "friends" Bennett and Mr. Rourke of P.L.C. They wanted him to claim the planet held no intelligent life and that operations to retrieve the Francesium should begin as soon as possible. Sora was to convince them with as much scientific language as possible that the life forms picked up on their satellites were merely fish and porpoises, and that the evidence of civilization had been left by a long-extinct race.

Uncomfortably hot in his dress uniform, Sora delivered a banal account consisting mostly of chemical compositions and figures. After twenty minutes of speaking, he felt like he'd run a marathon and gratefully collapsed into his chair next to Nualyin. Nualyin touched the paper-thin screen in front of him and slid it in front of Sora. *What was that, Wakahisa? You told them nothing we discussed.*

Sora just shook his head.

*I'm not letting this go.*

Sora ignored him. What else could he do?

An admiral, a redheaded woman Sora hadn't met, stood and said, "We'll now open the floor to questions for the research team."

Rourke approached one of the podiums with a microphone. "My question is a simple one, Lieutenant Wakahisa. Based on your findings on the planet and your analyses after returning, what is your proposal? My company is prepared to leave for Varuna and begin mining operations immediately. To get the Francesium to the ACC, where it can start doing good. For all the people of the Alliance. Can you give the go-ahead?"

Sora stood and spread his hands over the table's cool surface. He knew it might come to this, and that he'd have to break the illusion of conspiracy he had shakily maintained with this snake. He'd endured Bennett's assumptions that touching Sora's hand once in a while gave him the right to put Sora down

and tell him what to do, all in the hopes of discovering their Plan B. He couldn't do it any longer, not in front of all these people who needed to hear the truth. "I cannot, in good conscience, advise going ahead with mining. Instead, I propose another excursion to Varuna, a fact-finding mission—"

"But you've already been on a fact-finding mission," Rourke said, his frustration oozing through the cracks in his false sweetness like an infection. "You have confirmed the presence of the element. What more do you need to investigate?"

"The people living on the planet," Sora said. A collective gasp rose from the assembly like a cliché out of a bad movie. Sora waited for the mumbled conversation to fade.

"There's no evidence of that," Rourke said, sputtering. "Nothing concrete. It's all speculation based on some structures that could have been built by a dead civilization. I mean, there's no real evidence..."

"Actually, there is." Sora used his computer to dim the lights and pull up the footage he'd recorded to the screen behind him. "One of these men saved my life the night I was separated from my team and caught in the storm. I spoke with him. He was wearing jewelry, probably made of Francesium, which indicates use of tools, metallurgy. These people are evolved, a sovereign race, which means we cannot simply plunder their resources. Which means, we must make contact with them and negotiate terms of trade. Please, esteemed colleagues, decide for yourselves."

He played the hour's worth of footage, and when it ended, the assembly sat in stunned silence. Rourke, still at the mic, pointed at Sora and said, "This proves nothing! You could have filmed this nonsense in the pool here on the station and falsified the time stamp."

Sora couldn't believe even Rourke would sink so low. "Are you honestly calling me a fraud?"

"It's a little suspicious that you waited until now, over a month later, to share this momentous discovery. Why is that?"

"Why indeed?" Captain Kgosi said. Sora swore he could see steam rising from her close-cropped curls.

"I wanted to have a chance to study the file before reporting," Sora said. "I wanted to make sure I wasn't presenting any false conclusions."

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“What false conclusions could we draw?” the captain almost shouted. “You made contact with an alien being and you didn’t report it. That’s a serious violation, and you know it.”

“You may discipline your crewman another time, Captain Kgosi,” the admiral said. “Whether it was withheld or not, this footage clearly shows we cannot go to Varuna and begin mining.”

“If it’s even authentic,” Rourke protested.

“There’s one way to find out, isn’t there?” Sora leveled his gaze at the man. Rourke was about to find out Sora wasn’t the awkward and callow man he’d pretended to be. “By going to the planet and making contact with these people! If you want to get your hands on what they possess, you’ll have to trade fairly with them. I’m sorry if that will cut into your company’s profits, but it’s one of the core tenets of the ACC.”

“The lieutenant is right,” said another of the admirals. “We need to organize a fact-finding mission, and as soon as possible. We need to learn much more about this world—and its people—before we can consider obtaining the Francesium. Everyone but the senior officers are dismissed. We’ll meet again tomorrow at 0730 to discuss the excursion.”

Sora gathered his tablet with shaking hands. He had something else he needed to say, because he had to make sure that mission included him. “Sirs. I have studied this footage. I-I can speak the language of these people, at least on a rudimentary level. I’m the best person to negotiate with them.”

“You are hardly in a position to demand anything,” the captain said. “I want you out of my sight, and in your quarters until your disciplinary hearing this afternoon. Go, before you make me really angry. I’m very disappointed in you, Lieutenant.”

“Even me,” Nualyin said as he walked beside Sora down the long aisle. “You even lied to me about what happened.”

“I didn’t lie,” Sora protested feebly.

“A lie of omission, then.” Nualyin was angry, angrier than Sora had ever seen him. His breath misted the inside of his delicate mask. “Which means you don’t trust me.”

“I couldn’t trust anyone.” Sora looked over his shoulder. He half expected Bennett to approach him, maybe even hit him. He’d just cost the pilot millions, maybe billions, not to mention what he had done to Rourke’s bottom line. “This

goes deep, Nualyin. I-I need help. Your help. But we shouldn't talk here. I don't even know where we'll be safe. I suspect my lab's been broken into, and some of my communication channels hacked. My quarters might be bugged. Yours might be too."

"You're sounding paranoid, Sora."

"Believe me, I have reason. Come with me, and I'll tell you what I can. I'm sorry I didn't do it sooner. I was afraid, but I'm really in trouble now."

They left the administrative wing of the station and took the shuttle to the large botanical garden at the center. After wandering a good distance into it, only grass, trees, and beds of flowers surrounded them. They could have been in a park on Earth. Nualyin went to a tree and sat in the grass. Being near plants and soil gave his people great pleasure, and he looked uncharacteristically enrapt as he lifted his mask and took a deep sniff of the air. Sora sat down beside him and took a pad of paper and an old-fashioned lead pencil from the cargo pocket of his uniform pants. Quickly, but careful to include all the relevant details, Sora wrote about what had happened on Varuna, what he'd overheard in his lab, and all the interactions he'd had with Bennett and Rourke since. He told Nualyin how they'd wanted him to lend scientific credibility to their plans to strip-mine Varuna bare, how he'd played along as best he could.

*Plan B is something very bad. It's their alternative to just taking the Francesium and getting around trading for it fairly. I don't know what it is. I wasn't able to find out, and now I never will.*

*Oh, we might, Nualyin wrote. But you have to trust me. Sora, I am your friend. I thought you knew that.*

*I was just confused. I regret it. What do we do?*

*I am very old by your standards. There is little I have not seen before, and these men are not likely to fool me. I will find out what they're planning. But for now, we must destroy this piece of fiber. Then, you need to get to your disciplinary hearing. It's imperative that you are on that mission, and I plan to see that you are.*

"Nualyin, thank you," Sora said in a voice soft with shame. "I thought... I worried that you resented me because you were interested and I wasn't... and I didn't trust you for that reason."

Nualyin just shook his head. "Sora, my people assign no emotional relevance to the act of intercourse. It's just a pleasant way to pass the time for

us. With our long lifespans, most of us never reproduce, and we certainly don't build lives around sexual partners. I suggested we might have fun, but I wasn't offended when you weren't interested. We are very different, physically, and I know that can be hard for some people to reconcile. Forgive me, but my people are not as petty as some of yours. I don't hold you assigning your experiences with men of your species to me and my motives against you, but it simply isn't that way. You must always remember not to project your experiences onto others, especially those of other races. Now, we need to get to that hearing. Showing up late won't aid your cause."

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In contrast to the cavernous room where he'd delivered his report, the room where Sora's hearing would be held was small, too warm, windowless, and paneled with dark wood. Captain Kgosi sat between two admirals, a silver-haired woman and a dark-skinned mountain of a man with drooping jowls that made him resemble a bulldog. His eyes, though, were as sharp as a feral cat's.

Sora felt strangely calm and detached as the admiral with the silver hair read the charges against him: violating a direct order, compromising a mission, insubordination, and withholding pertinent information.

"Wakahisa, I cannot express how disappointed I am," Captain Kgosi said. "Until this mission, you were solid, a team player, and someone I could depend on. Now I just don't know. What do you have to say for yourself? Can you justify your actions?"

Nualyin consulted his tablet. "Sir, we have no way of knowing how the gravity on Varuna affected Lieutenant Wakahisa. It might have caused disorientation, possibly even hallucinations. Further, we can't rule out an unknown catalyst having an impact on his mental state, even before the head injury. Quite possibly, a toxin, or an allergen native to the planet—"

The captain held up her hand, and while he looked offended, Nualyin fell silent. "I want to hear from the Lieutenant, Nualyin. Sora, to use the vernacular, what the hell?"

Sora met her gaze. He had nothing but respect for the captain. "Sir, part of this was a mistake. I didn't mean to separate from my partner. I noticed a phenomenon I felt I should investigate, and I suppose scientific curiosity compelled me. It wasn't until much later that I noticed I had separated from Officer O'Leary. I turned back to try to find him, but I was caught in the storm. I never intended to cause difficulty, disobey an order, or compromise our



mission. My actions might have been rash, and for that I can only apologize, but they weren't malicious."

"And how do you address the charges of withholding information, Lieutenant?" the bulldog asked. "Certainly not a rash moment of scientific curiosity there."

"No," Sora admitted. "A poor decision in retrospect, but one that seemed the best choice at the time. We all know this planet—and the element it contains in such abundance—is polarizing people. Some see Varuna as nothing but a cash cow, sir. I could not let it be exploited, and I had to think how best to avoid it."

"And you couldn't trust your CO, Wakahisa?" asked the silver-haired admiral.

"With all due respect to the captain," Sora said, "I wasn't sure. Look to history. Our species has done terrible things to gain wealth."

"We're not clueless, Sora," Kgosi said. "We all know the vultures are circling Varuna, and before you mention it, we know they've infiltrated our ranks. But not in this room. That I can assure you, Lieutenant."

"Yes sir," Sora said. "But our enemies are powerful."

"Don't we know it," the captain said, shaking her head. "But the matter that brings us here is not the corporations looking to exploit Varuna. It's your misconduct."

"Sir, Lieutenant Wakahisa may have been under the influence of an alien substance," Nualyin said again. "We have no proof to the contrary."

The captain smiled. "Your loyalty to your friend is admirable, Nualyin. But again, I want to hear from Sora."

Sora shook his head. "Sir, I did what I thought best at every turn. In hindsight I could have done better, and I'll accept whatever punishment you hand down." He looked up and met her gaze. It seemed to have softened, or maybe that was wishful thinking. "Strip me of rank, give me a formal reprimand, anything. But please, let me go back to Varuna. My interest is scientific, altruistic. I am the best person to liaise with the natives. I'm the only one who's actually spoken to one of these people. Throw me in the brig when the mission is over if that's what you feel I deserve, but let me do this."

"Duly noted." Kgosi conferred with the admirals in whispers for an agonizing quarter of an hour or so while Sora held Nualyin's hand beneath the

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table. Damn it, if they wouldn't put him on this mission, he'd stow away. Anything. He had to get back to that planet; he might be its only advocate. Finally Kgosi lifted her head. Sora and Nualyin stood at attention. "We are in agreement. Lieutenant Wakahisa, your actions, while ill-advised, held no malice against the ACC. In fact, we agree you acted in the Alliance's interests. You will maintain your current rank with a verbal warning. You will lead the mission to Varuna, but Sora, you listen to me. You put even a toe out of line again, and you'll be cooling your heels in the brig. Now get out of my sight and go do something useful."

"Thank you, sir." Out of an old, ingrained habit, he pressed his palms to the outsides of his thighs and bowed to his captain. "Thank you."

"Get out of here," Kgosi repeated.

Nualyin grasped Sora's elbow and led him from the room. "I'd call that a victory."

"I appreciate your support," Sora said. They made their way down the deserted hallway. "I'm sorry I underestimated you, and your friendship. Want to get some dinner?"

Nualyin opened his mouth to speak as they turned the corner, but three men, their faces covered in black masks, intersected them and raised their weapons. The implications were clear: one of the admirals was a traitor. It couldn't be Captain Kgosi. Nothing else explained the hit team arriving so quickly. Nualyin leapt in front of Sora and spread his arms, but it did no good. The next thing he knew, Sora lay on his back with Nualyin sprawled across his chest while the assassins surrounded them. He tried to lift his head, say something, but a boot heel connected with his nose. His eyes streamed, he tasted blood, and then everything went black.

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## Chapter Seven

Sora woke to a headache and horrible cramps in his triceps and shoulder sockets. He opened his eyes to Nualyin looking down at him. “Where”—he coughed to clear his throat—“where are we? What happened?”

“We’re on the lowest level of the station, in a storage closet.” Nualyin canted his head toward some buckets, buffers, and cleaning supplies. “When they knocked you out, I feigned unconsciousness, hoping they wouldn’t restrain us.”

“A good idea,” Sora said in a thick voice. Something filled his sinuses and clotted in his nose—probably blood. He wiggled the bridge of his nose. It wasn’t broken, but it hurt like crazy. “What now?”

“The men who attacked us will probably be returning to kill us any minute now.”

“Why haven’t they already?”

“What, in the middle of the hall of the administrative wing?” Nualyin looked at him, as he often did, like an indulgent parent. But Nualyin had protected him, jumped in front of weapons to shield him, so Sora couldn’t be annoyed.

“What do we do? We don’t have any way to defend ourselves.”

“That isn’t true,” Nualyin said with a little smile. “We’re scientists. We have our minds, our creativity. Do exactly what I say.”

“And we’ll live?” Sora didn’t want to die in a closet, without getting to look at the glowing water of Varuna again. He wondered what it said about him that discovery, exploration was the loss he felt, rather than family, friends, or any human relationship. Suddenly he wished he’d communicated with his mother and sisters. He hadn’t spoken to them since he’d left for basic training. It hadn’t seemed that important.

Nualyin winked. “We might.”

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Sora lay on the floor, writhing, moaning, and clutching his stomach as the door to the closet opened. He didn’t look up, but watched in his peripheral vision as the silver-haired admiral entered, flanked by two armed men, and Nualyin leapt to his feet and spread his arms. “Get back!”

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“What’s going on here?” the admiral said. “What’s that horrible stench?”

Sora had made himself throw up, and in the tiny space, it reeked.

“Wakahisa was keeping more secrets than any of us knew,” Nualyin said. “He caught an alien disease on Varuna, and he chose not to tell anyone. He thought he could find the cure himself, and now he’s bleeding internally. His organs are basically disintegrating inside him.” He gave Sora’s backside a nudge with his small foot. “He is also highly contagious, at least to humans. He confessed to me that some men he associated with in the station’s clubs are already sick. My people may or may not be resistant, but quite frankly, I’d rather you shoot me than be subjected to such a long and agonizing death. I—”

Nualyin retched and threw up over his chest. Sora didn’t know how he made it seem so natural; he’d had to crouch in the corner with his fingers jammed down his throat to manage anything. Nualyin swore in his language as he dropped to his knees and howled with pain. “The whole station is at risk. This is going to kill us all!”

When the three of them backed away, Sora slid an aluminum mop handle across the floor to Nualyin. The Shieferian used their enemies’ distraction to attack. Rising, Nualyin swung the metal bar and struck the nearest merc in the belly, then the head, knocking him to his back and sending his gun sliding across the floor. Nualyin crouched behind a stack of buckets to avoid the other merc’s fire while Sora dove to reach the discarded gun. He hated wielding the weapon, but he had been trained to use one, and he did. With his back pressed against the wall, Sora fired at the second merc and hit him in the shoulder, making him drop his weapon. Leaping from his cover and over the body of the man he’d beaten unconscious, Nualyin drove the mop handle into the second soldier’s thigh, piercing his flesh and dropping him. The other scientist struck the merc’s head with a sickly thud, and the hired warrior fell facedown.

The admiral pulled a small gun from inside her blazer and trained it on Nualyin. The red dot against his forehead glowed brightly in the darkness, and Sora dropped his gun and held his hands out.

“You boys are pretty clever,” the woman said, “but I’m afraid I can’t let you stand in the way of me making enough money to buy my own continent.”

“You betrayed everything you swore to defend for money?” Sora shouted. “You’re a disgrace! How are you going to look at yourself in the mirror?”

She sneered, her wrinkles deep and shadowed as the lamps in the hall shined at her back. “I’ll look in it and see a very rich woman, Lieutenant. But it won’t matter to you. You’ll be dead.”

Sora crossed his forearms over his head as the admiral raised her weapon. He had no idea how to escape. It was over. "Let Nualyin go. He's a brilliant scientist, and he'll aid your cause. His voice will add legitimacy to your side."

"Our side won't need legitimacy soon enough." The admiral stepped forward and pressed the barrel of her weapon to Sora's temple. "You fool. You had your chance. You could have been one of the elite, but you had to grow a conscience for a bunch of squids slithering along the floor of Varuna's ocean. You'd deny your own people needed resources for a bunch of hideous monsters."

Swearing in Japanese, Sora drove his fist into her crotch—his last act of defiance. The admiral expelled a grunt, doubled over, and staggered back. She raised her weapon, and Sora raised his chin. "Remember the honest man you killed as you spend your money, you filthy traitor." His last thoughts were of Ch'Marsam-muk moving gracefully through the pure waters of his world, and that he hoped Nualyin had the good sense to run through the open door and escape. Then he closed his eyes, balled his hands into fists, and waited.

A pop and whoosh sounded as the weapon discharged. Sora expected pain, but it didn't come. Cautiously, he opened his eyes. Smoke poured from a hole in the admiral's chest, and she looked somewhere between constipated and stunned before she collapsed. Behind her, Captain Kgosi replaced her weapon in the holster by her hip. Sora dropped his face into his hands and struggled to breathe, thankful he'd already thrown up everything in his stomach.

"Captain—how... Why are you here?"

She offered him a hand up, and he stood on watery legs until he could lean against the wall. He was cold, and it was hard to breathe.

"I needed your signature on some forms," Kgosi said. "I tried calling you on your comm but you didn't answer. When I went to your quarters, a shady-looking son of a bitch told me you had packed up to move out. All your things were in boxes. Well, I'm a lot of things, but a damned fool isn't one of them. I knew how much the mission to Varuna meant to you, and that you'd never go AWOL and risk missing being a part of it. Not after the way you fought for it in your disciplinary hearing. First time I ever saw that side of you—the warrior. When I found Nualyin missing too, I traced your biosignals to this closet."

"Good timing, sir," Nualyin said. "Come into the closet with us."

"Why?" she asked.

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“Because we can trust you, and we need all the allies we can get. And, if the traitors brought me and Sora here to kill us, they obviously aren’t recording this area. We can tell you what we know without the risk of being overheard.”

Captain Kgosi stepped into the supply room, and they related the information they had.

“Damn,” she said.

“We can’t trust anyone,” Nualyin said. “We should dispose of these bodies and pretend we don’t know about the conspiracy. Let the traitors think their people simply disappeared, the same as they wanted to do to Sora and me. Feigning ignorance is our best chance at learning more. Though I think the time has come to search more aggressively. What did the admiral mean when she said they wouldn’t need the illusion of legitimacy?”

“We have to find out what Plan B is,” Sora said. “If they’d go to these lengths to keep us off the mission...”

“Understood,” Kgosi said. “I’ll see to this mess. I have at least a few people on my crew I can trust. You two, get ready to depart. Do what you can to gather intelligence, but don’t risk your lives.”

“Yes sir,” Nualyin said.

“Thank you, sir,” Sora said. “It’s good to have you in our corner.”

“It’s the right corner to be in, Wakahisa. Get going. Double time. I’m tasking you two brilliant minds with finding out what our enemies are planning while I get ready to stop them. Watch your backs, boys.”

“That we will do,” Nualyin said as he looked at Sora. “We’ll be watching every shadow.”

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## Chapter Eight

Walking up the ramp to board the ship and knowing he was surrounded by traitors was the hardest thing Sora had ever done. He couldn't seem to summon the unexpected courage he'd found at the meeting, and he didn't know if he, Nualyin, and the captain would be enough to save a world from a threat they hadn't even uncovered yet.

He and Nualyin had volunteered to share quarters even though their rank afforded them private rooms. They'd had the captain switch their room assignments at the last possible moment under the pretense of setting up a mutual workstation and sharing equipment. As soon as the door closed behind them, they took out scanners to check for listening devices. For the next several hours, they tore apart the tiles in the ceiling, the wall panels, and the metallic tiles on the floor until they were absolutely certain they weren't being watched. By the time they finished, they were both covered in sweat and dust. Nualyin collapsed cross-legged on the floor, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. "It seems our ruse was successful."

Sora crouched down to face his friend and chuckled, more to release the tension he'd been storing than because he found the situation especially funny. "They probably bugged the wrong room. I hoped they're treated to a pair of horny ensigns who make a lot of noise."

Nualyin tilted his head to the side. "You're funny. I didn't notice your sense of humor much before, or your bravery. What you're doing takes a lot of courage, Sora. I'm honored you finally included me. And before you say anything, that is not my clever way of reminding you that you didn't trust me. I understand why you did it, and I don't hold it against you. I just want you to know I admire you. There's a bit of a warrior in you."

"We should get to work," Sora said, his cheeks warm and a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. He'd dismissed the comment when the captain had made it, because he'd always considered himself the furthest thing from a warrior. It surprised him that the person who knew him best would see him that way, and even more that he took it as a compliment. "Bennett is the only confirmed conspirator. We should monitor all his communications."

"It will be simple enough to hack into his ACC comm, but if he's doing something below the board, he'll have a secure line, a separate comm device,

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probably in his quarters. As the main pilot, he'll be occupied for at least a few hours with takeoff and plotting our course."

"Then we should hurry," Sora said.

As mechanics finished the preparations to the ship, crewmen boarded, and workers loaded cargo and equipment, Sora and Nualyin blended with the throng and tried to go unnoticed, which wasn't hard in a sea of people all wearing the same gray uniforms. On their way, they saw Bennett on the bridge, wearing a cocky smile as he leaned one hip against his control panel. They made their way to the lower deck and Bennett's private room. Neither of them would have a problem overriding his voice-activated lock, but the four men standing in front of his door were another matter.

"The lab's two decks up, boys," one of them said.

Sora and Nualyin looked at each other, and Sora swore Nualyin knew what he was thinking: these men, while they wore ACC uniforms, had an air of hired muscle. They turned and went back the way they'd come. What else could they do?

Back in their quarters, Sora dropped to the edge of the narrow bed, and Nualyin sat on the one facing it, his elbows on his spindly thighs. "We could ask the captain to order a search of his room," Sora said.

Nualyin shook his head. "Even if we find something, he'll stop using it."

"I'm a chemist. I can fabricate a gas containing a sedative and pump it into the hall. We can get into the room after the guards are unconscious."

"Same problem, Sora. He can't know we know. Don't you think attacking four men outside his quarters will rouse his suspicions?"

"Damn." Sora gripped the edge of the stiff mattress as the ship shimmied and rumbled into takeoff. He scooted to lean his back against the wall and braced for the inertia, closing his eyes against the pressure building in his head. He was frustrated; he almost wanted to cry. He'd run out of ideas, and if they didn't figure out what their enemies had planned, they wouldn't be able to stop them. "I never wanted this. I didn't want to be a soldier. I'm not cut out for fighting, or for all this deception."

Stumbling a little, Nualyin crossed the few feet of space and joined Sora on the bed. He draped his hand over Sora's knee. "Why did you enlist?"

"I grew up poor," Sora said. "Not just a little underprivileged. We lived on a quartz and silica mining colony barely the size of Earth's moon. My father



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worked in a quarry; Mom made a little extra by doing laundry out of our little hovel. Everything extra we had went for a small computer so me and my three sisters could go to school. The more I learned, the more I wanted to know. I needed it, to know why things are the way they are. Enlisting was my only option for an education. ACC accepted me at fifteen, and I had my first degree by eighteen. I wanted to study for another—and that meant signing a twenty year contract. I've served eleven years, and it hasn't been so bad. Now... now I don't know if it was worth it. I don't want to fight."

"Sora, it's worth it," Nualyin said. "If you hadn't enlisted, think of all the experiences you wouldn't have had. You never would have set foot on Varuna. The people on that planet are lucky they got you—an honorable man—and not someone else. Remember that. And remember that fighting for something worth fighting for isn't the same as seeking out violence for baser reasons, or to prove something."

Sora took a deep breath and held it in his lungs for a second as the flight pattern of the ship smoothed out. His little meltdown dissipated, and he felt slightly ashamed. He turned to Nualyin and looked into his big eyes. "You've been a good friend to me. Thank you. You're... one of the few people who means anything to me."

"I appreciate that. Now tell me. After we're on course and our esteemed pilot doesn't have much to occupy his attention on the bridge, what will he do?"

Sora snorted. "Put the ship on auto, assign one of the junior officers to monitor it, and go get drunk in the rec room. He does it on every mission. That and harass the female officers and crew."

"And if one of the female officers took him up on his offer, she could get into his quarters."

"She'd have to be in there alone to search for his comm device," Sora said. "Besides, I don't think I could ask anyone to... Wait. I'm a chemist..."

"Yes, you are," Nualyin coached.

"She could inject him with a sedative..."

"And if he'd been drinking, he'd never know he didn't just pass out," Nualyin said. "I can make a small device that she can place on his communicator to piggyback his signal back to my wrist computer. Now the question is, who can we trust to help us? The captain?"

“No,” Sora said. “Not even Bennett is arrogant enough to think Kgosi would give him the time of day. What about Rayez?”

“Same problem. What about one of my people? They’re loyal.”

“No,” Sora said. “Bennett’s a boob man. I heard about it at length when he pretended to want to date me.”

“Then Rayez is all we have,” Nualyin said. “You’re human, so you’ll have a better understanding of this than I will. How can she convince him she’s willing to... attempt breeding?”

“She could pretend to be drunk,” Sora said. “Bennett is too self-absorbed to know she doesn’t usually indulge on missions. He only has to believe there’s enough of a chance for her to get into his room. We have to try. Get started on your device, and I’ll go find her.”

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“Stop pacing, Sora. It isn’t doing any good.”

“What time is it?”

Nualyin sighed. “2217. Nineteen minutes from the last time you asked me. Sit down. Maybe you should have a drink.”

“I’m just worried. I won’t forgive myself if something happened to Lieutenant Rayez.”

“Do you honestly think Rayez has anything to worry about from Bennett?”

The door chimed, sparing Sora from thinking about what might happen if Bennett asked his four guards to join in the fun. He hurried to give voice authorization, and Lieutenant Rayez stomped into the room looking very displeased. She was wearing her uniform pants and a snug white tank top that showed off both her muscular figure and the colorful tattoos covering both her arms. She’d swept her caramel-colored hair into a bun and applied mascara and a little reddish lip gloss, something Sora had never seen her do. He could certainly see how a man who liked the company of women would appreciate her. “You bastards owe me a drink. Or twenty.” She flopped down on Nualyin’s bed and folded her hands behind her head.

“Were you successful?” Nualyin asked.

She shot him a look so full of daggers Sora expected to see blood. “After an hour of enduring that little troll trying to feel me up, yes. I found his comm

device attached to the frame of his bed, and I attached your gadget just the way you told me to.”

“And Lieutenant Bennett?” Sora asked.

“Left him facedown in his lav. He, uh, may have had an accident. He wasn’t smelling so good.”

Sora met her gaze and grinned. “That makes sense. I put a laxative into the sedative you injected him with. I thought if he... ah, soiled himself, he’d be less likely to talk about the incident with someone who might get suspicious. Believe me, he won’t be mentioning tonight if he wakes up tomorrow with diarrhea in his pants.”

“Can I get out of here?” Rayez asked, sitting up. “I could use a drink and a real man. But first, a long shower.”

“Sure. Thank you, Lieutenant Rayez,” Sora said.

“I’m not letting you welsh on those drinks, Wakahisa,” she said over her shoulder as she left the room.

Nualyin hooked his wrist computer into the monitor on their wall. “Get comfortable, Sora. This will have recorded everything since Bennett established the link. We have a few hours of footage to go through.”

Six hours later, they lay on Sora’s bed, nursing paper cups of terrible coffee and sharing a pillow. In all that time, they’d heard only a few snippets that made any sense at all:

“Can you confirm the payload is onboard?”

“Affirmative,” Bennett had responded.

“You know what to do upon arrival,” a gravelly female voice responded.

“We need to find out what the payload is.” An involuntary yawn punctuated Sora’s words. “It must be weapons. Missiles? Why?”

“That would be exceptionally difficult to hide, even with the aid of several coconspirators,” Nualyin said. “What’s the weight of the ship?”

The current weight of the *Tempest* is 7,350.39218 metric yonnes,” the computer voice responded.

Nualyin sat up in bed, looking much more alert. “We’re about 3,600 kilograms too heavy.”

“3,602.735, give or take,” Sora said. “That’s not enough weight to account for many missiles. What else could it be? What could they have smuggled onboard that would further their agenda? I mean, they want to mine the Francesium from Varuna without trading for it fairly. What could they have brought that would make that possible?”

“I don’t know,” Nualyin said. “3,600 kilos. Clever. It isn’t enough to be noticed. Well, I guess we should pull up a schematic of the ship and check it over, centimeter by centimeter.”

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“Oh my god,” Sora said. “I found it, or some of it. The extra weight.” Over the past five weeks, their duties had cut into the time they had to search for the mysterious payload. Captain Kgosi had accommodated them as much as possible, and any more would have put up red flags, so they sacrificed their sleep.

“Where?” Nualyin asked.

“The last place we would have thought to look. The food banks. 3,200 kilos of extra weight. We need to get down there and find it.”

“Let’s go.”

They had no trouble getting into the coolers; no one needed a security clearance to access the bags of rice, blocks of cheese, frozen meat, and long stretches of freeze-dried vegetables. Using the lights on their wrists, their breath freezing in clouds around them, they searched for anything abnormal—for hours. Finally Sora pushed his way past a curtain of cattle carcasses. “I found something!”

Nualyin joined him. “What?”

Sora pulled a plastic sheet away to reveal a row of metal canisters. “This doesn’t look like food. Should we open one up?”

“Absolutely not,” Nualyin said. “Get a hand truck, and call the captain. We’ll analyze this in the lab, while it’s isolated and we’re safe.”

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Nualyin swore in his native language as he sat with Sora and Captain Kgosi behind a protective pane of glass as a robotic arm opened the canister and the computers analyzed its contents.

Sora looked at the figures and molecular diagrams flashing neon green across the glass. He couldn't believe what he saw; it made it hard for him to breathe.

"What is HC-I91?" Captain Kgosi asked.

The two scientists looked at each other. Nualyin spoke. "It's... a biological weapon developed by my people about a hundred years ago. It isn't something we're proud of. When we realized how devastating it was, how contagious, we banned it almost immediately. This is probably the most deadly disease we have ever encountered."

Sora shivered and swallowed the bile that rose in his throat. "What would happen if all the HC-I91 onboard were deposited into the waters of Varuna?"

Nualyin met his eyes. "It would kill every living thing on the planet... but it would look like a native disease. A plague, unless someone knew to test for it." He swore again. "We need to get everyone off this ship. If even one person was exposed, a kitchen worker or a janitor, they could kill us all. We need to quarantine anyone who could have come in contact with this, screen them for symptoms, test their DNA for possible corruption, and then take the escape pods to the planet."

"That's rather reactionary," the captain said. "Are you honestly asking me to abandon this ship?"

"I assure you, it isn't reactionary. I was alive when this weapon was in development. In six months, it swept across an entire planet and killed everything—almost a billion of my people. It attacks at a genetic level and breaks down the DNA of any organism exposed to it. That world is dead; we won't go anywhere near it. Get these people off this ship now. The escape pods will take us to Varuna. In the meantime, we should—"

There was a deafening boom, and the ship shook and pitched to the left, knocking all three of them off their feet. They landed in a pile—Sora sprawled across the captain and Nualyin against his chest. The ship continued to lurch as the lights changed from innocuous fluorescent to angry, blinking red. High-pitched sirens wailed at rhythmic intervals. Kgosi got to her feet, pressing her hand to the wall as she shouted, "What the hell?"

"Hull breach," the computerized voice announced.

"Where?" Kgosi asked, swiping at the blood coming from her hairline.

"Deck fourteen," the computer answered. "Food storage."

“Seal it off!” Nualyin screamed, his voice cracking. “Computer, seal that area!”

“Left thruster inoperable,” the computer said. “Life support at forty-seven percent.”

“Seal decks twelve through fifteen!” Nualyin shouted. “Now! Emergency override Nualyin 18642.”

“Decks twelve through fifteen sealed.”

“Jettison all contents of decks twelve through fifteen into space,” he said through clenched teeth, a single tear running from each of his eyes.

“Lieutenant!” Kgosi shouted. “What about the people on those decks?”

“I will mourn their spirits,” he said, “but if any of us are going to survive, it must be done. I have seen what this plague can do firsthand. Believe me, if they’ve been exposed, we’ll be doing them a favor. I do not do this lightly, Captain. We have no choice.”

“Do it.” She said her security override.

Sora pictured all those people, going about their day one moment, losing their life support and being pulled out to die alone in space the next. He doubled over and threw up. “If there’s any justice, Bennett and the rest of the traitors are dead.”

Nualyin grasped Sora’s elbow and helped him to stand, a hard, dangerous look in his eyes. “Sora, the traitors certainly fled the ship before they blew up the food storage area, probably remotely from the safety of a shuttle. They wouldn’t risk their own lives, even if they are willing to sacrifice their own people to cover up what they were trying to do. Clearly, they had no choice but to destroy the evidence. But shuttles can’t make the journey home, which means they went to the planet. We’ll see them again. Right now, we need to stay alive so we can bring them to justice—for everyone who just died because of their greed.”

Sora wiped his nose and lifted his chin. No more crying. It was time to fight, and he wanted it. He wanted to bring Bennett down with his own hands. “We need to get to the escape pods. Get to Varuna.”

“Where there’s no fresh water or shelter,” Kgosi said. “How will we survive?”

“Radio for a ship to retrieve us,” Nualyin said. “But do it quickly before we lose power. I need to get some equipment. I have to screen everyone before

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they leave the ship. One infected person could destroy Varuna—and all of us. We need to get everyone viable to the planet to await extraction.”

“That’ll take six weeks!” the captain protested.

“Our chances are better than if we stay here,” Nualyin said. “Sir, we have to get off this ship. We have to set it to self-destruct before it is within range of the atmosphere of any life-sustaining planet. Whether you agree or not, I’m taking Sora and abandoning ship, because we’ll die if we don’t. You won’t be here to level charges of insubordination.”

Sweat sparkled on Kgosi’s angular face. “Fine. Do it. If you boys are the praying type, it wouldn’t go amiss. We’re fucked no matter what we do, aren’t we?”

“Bennett and P.L.C. did this,” Sora said. “If Varuna is a dead world, they can mine the Francesium to their heart’s content. This is their Plan B.”

“It doesn’t matter, Wakahisa,” the captain said. “We’ve got a snowball’s chance in hell of living long enough to tell anybody, and if we die, they’ll just try again.”

“That means we can’t die,” Sora said. “I—I’m ready to fight. This is worth fighting for.”

Nualyin reached up to pat Sora’s shoulder. “Let’s get going. We’ll save as many as we can.”

“And hope it’s enough,” Kgosi said. “Just, just do the best you can.”

“We will. We’ll see you on Varuna, sir,” Sora said. “The natives, they’re good. Ask them for help if you need it.”

She shook her head. “I hope you’re right.”

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## Chapter Nine

The stars were falling from the sky, little specks of light fountaining out from a spot near the edge of the crescent moon. Ch'Marsam-muk thought the phenomenon must have something to do with the sky people. Some of his countrymen—the water people—wouldn't be happy they had returned, but Ch'Marsam-muk felt a thrill he didn't want to acknowledge, a hope he didn't dare trust. Then, as he watched, something bloomed in a series of red and orange explosions, something like the luminous flowers opening at motion, but more violent—destructive even if it was beautiful. He dived from the spit of rock he'd been curled upon, cut the surface of the water, and swam in the direction of the descending stars.

Others had come to investigate the occurrence. Hundreds of people gathered, their chests and heads poking out of the sea while their tentacles churned beneath it to keep them afloat. A bright star, bleeding a trail of purple and magenta, arced down and hit the water with a magnificent splash. Ch'Marsam-muk swam toward it, joined by many others, as more stars, streaming prismatic tails against the dark sky, fell into the water.

By the time he reached it, the others had drawn a sleek metallic pod from the water to a strip of rock. Using their tridents, they pried it open. Probably twenty sky people were inside, shoulder to shoulder, restrained to the walls by bizarre harnesses. One of them, a female, held her hands up, palms out, and spoke quickly. Ch'Marsam-muk recognized only two of the words she said: Wakahisa Sora. These people had something to do with Sora, and that was enough for him to turn and defend them against those who had raised their tridents or readied their hooks or slings.

"These people need our help." Ch'Marsam-muk said. "They are defenseless. Only a coward would attack them."

"They do not belong here," one of the warriors shouted. "We should kill them."

"You will have to go through me," Ch'Marsam-muk said. "It is not the way of a warrior to kill innocents asking for hospitality. They're not threatening us. They couldn't if they wanted to."

One of the female warriors swam up beside him. "Get the sky people to the rocks, where they can breathe the sky. They'll die if we take them beneath the



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water. I have seen it before. The first time I encountered a sky person, I tried to take her to my home, but she died after a few moments in the sea.”

Maybe a few kilometers away, another of the sky people’s pods hit the water. Ch’Marsam-muk swam toward it as fast as he could go. Since he beat everyone else to it, he had to drag it ashore on his own. It wasn’t easy, and left him perspiring and heaving for breath, but he managed. The door to the metallic bud unfurled, and he scanned the faces of the people within. His attention caught on one of them, a beautiful man, gold edged in black, the most magnificent lips he had ever seen. Sora. He remembered trading words, learning to pronounce his name. Sora. Ch’Marsam-muk touched his cheek, and he opened his eyes. He smiled. “Sora.”

The man coughed. “Ch’Marsam-muk.” Sora didn’t seem hurt as he unbuckled his harness and took a small pack from beneath his seat, but there was a darkness behind his eyes that hadn’t been there before. He reached out with his small, graceful hand, and Ch’Marsam-muk didn’t hesitate to help him from his pod. Sora leaned in and said, “Can we go somewhere and talk alone, where others won’t hear us?”

“You have learned my words?” He liked hearing them coming from Sora’s lips, the growl they made in his throat and the rumble in his chest.

“Some of them. Can your people help mine? We had an”—he paused as if he didn’t know the word for what he wanted to express—“our”—he squinted his eyes in frustration, and Ch’Marsam-muk rubbed his face against Sora’s. His skin was cool and smooth, and Ch’Marsam-muk wanted to taste him again.

“Many of us will help you, Sora, but...”

“What is it?”

“We should talk alone, as you said.”

“Give me a chance to explain to my leader, or I’ll find myself in trouble again.” Sora went to speak to a formidable-looking female and a creature who barely reached her chest. A few moments later he returned, smiling, and said, “Let’s go.”

“Can you swim?”

Sora laughed, a sound as bright as the sunlight on the water. It drove some of the shadows from his expression. “I’ll never keep up with you.”

“I can help, then.” He slid across the rock and came to stand behind Sora so he could cross his arms over Sora’s narrow chest. Sora felt small and fragile in

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his arms, but the way he curved against him, fit with him, his back against Ch'Marsam-muk's belly and his lean backside pressed to his groin, made Ch'Marsam-muk feel like he glowed. He leaned his face down next to Sora's ear and couldn't resist letting his tongue dart out to taste the moisture on his skin. He tasted of fear and excitement, purpose, courage, and regret—not so different from a water person: salty and male. “Do you trust me, Sora?”

The question seemed to surprise Sora, and his scent changed, grew muskier, as he said, “I do.”

Holding him tight with Sora's back against his chest, Ch'Marsam-muk lowered them into the water and started swimming. Sora's bony tentacles dangled and fluttered against him, grazing his tentacles and making him curse the coarse material coating Sora's body and denying him the taste of Sora's skin through his suction cups. But maybe soon—Sora had been receptive to him before, and Ch'Marsam-muk could still taste Sora's arousal on his lips. He swam faster, eager for them to be alone and away from the eyes of others. At first, Sora clung tightly to Ch'Marsam-muk's arms, but gradually he seemed to become more comfortable. Then he laughed, spread his arms wide, and threw his head back as his chest cut through the water and the spray splattered his face.

“I feel like I'm flying!” Sora shouted. “You're fast!”

Since Sora was enjoying himself so much, Ch'Marsam-muk passed a few islets on which they could have stopped to talk and swam as fast as he could, leaving a thick wake of froth behind them and making their hair stream in the breeze. He didn't stop until he grew too tired, and then he brought them ashore on a crescent-shaped spit of land covered in glowing pink ferns and fat, striped rushes. It bathed them in rosy light as they found a place to sit down facing each other.

“I hope you'll be able to stay until the sun rises on our world,” Ch'Marsam-muk said. “It's very beautiful, and I'm sure you are beautiful in the light.”

Even in the low light, he could see Sora's cheeks darken, and he lifted up his tentacles and pressed a suction cup to Sora's cheek to taste his pleasure. It was sweet and addictive, almost intoxicating, and Ch'Marsam-muk let two more of his cups affix to Sora's neck.

“Do I taste good to you?”

“You taste amazing, Sora. I have thought about you often since I saw you last.”

“I have thought about you too. I hoped I might see you again. I’m glad I had the chance. I just wish it was under better—” He said a word Ch’Marsam-muk didn’t understand. His flavor conveyed fear, maybe even dread, and Ch’Marsam-muk left off his flirting. “I really need to talk to you, and then I need to get back and make sure my people are all right.”

“Yes. Please tell me what you need me to know.” Ch’Marsam-muk started to move his tentacle from Sora’s face and neck, but Sora grasped it with his little hand and held it in place.

“Leave it there, if you don’t mind. It makes me feel safe, reminds me that I’m doing the right thing.”

Ch’Marsam-muk was happy to agree.

Sora touched a ledge of silvery rock. “This is very valuable to my people. It’s why we came to your world. Most of us hoped we might have something we could trade you for it, but some of us, and I am ashamed to have to tell you this, wanted to take what belongs to your people without giving anything in exchange. I have been fighting for you, Ch’Marsam-muk. Fighting as hard as I know how to make sure you are treated fairly. On our journey here, me and my friend, Nualyin, learned some of these people had brought a terrible sickness onboard. They planned to use it to kill your people so they could take what you had. We stopped them, but at the cost of a great many of my people’s lives.”

“You did this for us?”

Sora nodded, and a tear traced a silvery path down his cheek. “Yes. And I would not change a thing, but the people who want to hurt you may still be here. I wanted to tell you this when no one else could hear because I truly hope our people can be friends. If your people think mine are here to kill and steal from them, that will never happen. I promise you, most of us don’t feel that way.”

“Some of my people don’t want yours here,” Ch’Marsam-muk admitted. “Most of us, like me, see your flying machines and all you can do, and we hope we might learn from you. Your people must be careful as well.”

Sora reached out and grasped both of Ch’Marsam-muk’s hands. His eyes were different when their gazes met—hard as gems and burning like stars. Determined. The eyes of a warrior. “Ch’Marsam-muk, we must both work to make sure our people don’t start a war. We—you and me—can do this. We must.”

“We will, Sora, because I do not want to be your enemy. I want very different things from you. Do you want them from me?”

Sora stroked his face, let his fingertips graze down Ch'Marsam-muk's neck, over his shoulder, and along his arm. The brush of his skin felt like lightning against Ch'Marsam-muk's flesh, and he wanted to tear that silly material from Sora's body, drag him into the water, and take him again and again.

But Sora voiced the same concern Ch'Marsam-muk felt. “I don't know what they are. We're very different. I don't know what physical intimacy means to your people, if it's the same as what it means to mine. I don't know if it's even possible for us to connect in that way, but... I'm willing to explore it. I want to.”

Ch'Marsam-muk took Sora's face in both hands and brought their mouths together. He pressed his tongue past Sora's small blunt teeth and into the warm, sweet recesses of his mouth. He thrust his tongue against Sora's, and Sora thrust back. Their tongues crested and crashed together like tidal waves, and Ch'Marsam-muk growled. This man, even with his weak, bony pair of tentacles, was everything. Perfect. Ch'Marsam-muk didn't want a passive partner, one who would submit to his strength, and Sora gave no hint of submission as their tongues wrestled and gradually found a rhythm. They abandoned the contest and left it at a draw to taste and explore, licking and nibbling at each other's lips, roaming their hands over each other's bodies. Sora definitely had the advantage there, as nothing covered Ch'Marsam-muk's flesh but a necklace and the cuffs he wore below his shoulders, and Sora took full advantage. He ran his hands down Ch'Marsam-muk's chest, over the bumps of his belly, to the sides of his waist, and up his back. His nails dragged pleasantly across Ch'Marsam-muk's shoulder blades as his arousal poured from his skin into Ch'Marsam-muk's suction cups.

Eventually they broke apart, Sora's breath gusting over Ch'Marsam-muk's swollen, tingling lips. “We need to get back,” Sora said. “As pleasant as this is, we might be all that stands between our people and war.”

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Ten or so hours later, with the help of the water people, Sora and his crewmates got all his people to land and set up with the scant shelter they could build by cannibalizing the escape pods. The packs installed in the shuttles for each passenger would provide them with two weeks worth of dehydrated food and fresh water, as well as basic medical supplies and a weapon.

“It’s not going to be a picnic waiting out six weeks here,” Captain Kgosi said.

“But we will survive,” Nualyin said. “We’re in the dark phase of this hemisphere of the planet. We can rest assured it will rain. We can collect enough water to keep ourselves alive. In the meantime, let’s accomplish what we can. Sora, can you arrange for the leaders of these people to come here and meet with the captain?”

“I can try.” Sora looked over his shoulder, at Ch’Marsam-muk treading water and waiting amongst a group of his people. “I’m not sure how their government, if they have one, is structured.”

“I’ll settle for a lack of open hostility for now,” Kgosi said. “We’re at a disadvantage, and they could wipe us out if they wanted to. Negotiate for the opposite outcome, Wakahisa. And if you can score us some food that doesn’t come out of a tube, I’ll remember to send you a card on your birthday. Fuck, what a mess.”

“I’ll do what I can, sir,” Sora said. “We need to be alert, though. Bennett and the other traitors are somewhere on this planet.”

“Well maybe your friend can help us find them,” the captain said. “Sora, you’re all we have. None of us can talk to them, and you seem to have made at least one friend. Use that. Tell them if they see any human in a shuttle to be careful and report back to us.”

“Yes, sir.” Sora turned toward the white foam gathering at the edge of the island. He wanted to be alone with Ch’Marsam-muk, wanted to feel safe and apart from this horrible conflict the way he did when they were together. He waded into the strong tide until it slapped against his chest and tried to push him back. He wanted to go forward, so he fought it, kicking and fanning his arms. A large wave crashed over him, dousing him, but he swam through it. When he reached the open ocean, the water grew calmer, though the swell of the waves lifted him up and down as easily as if he were a speck of foam. He let it carry him until Ch’Marsam-muk swam up to him and took his hands. “Sora, can you come with me? Do we need to talk more?”

Sora gripped his waist so he wouldn’t have to kick to keep himself afloat, and Ch’Marsam-muk twined a tentacle up his leg, squeezing hard. “Are you mine now?”

“We have things we must do,” Sora said, “but for a while, for a few hours, yeah. Yours.”

As he followed Ch'Marsam-muk onto a beautiful island, Sora didn't know if fear or excitement made his hands shake and his legs feel like pudding. He took a deep breath. He could still say no, but he found he didn't want to. While he didn't know what was going to happen to him, he knew it wouldn't be anything he didn't desire. Ch'Marsam-muk wouldn't force him; he had no doubt of that.

A few feet ahead, the other man glided slowly across the rock, his tentacles moving in a roiling mass beneath him and putting off a soft purplish-blue glow that accentuated their mottled pattern. Sora thought it looked magical. Ch'Marsam-muk looked over his shoulder as if checking to see if Sora still followed. When their eyes met, he grinned shyly and averted his eyes, clearly as nervous as Sora. It whisked away the last of Sora's apprehension and he chuckled under his breath.

They came to a kidney-shaped pool fed by some silvery rivulets tumbling over lavender rock shot through with glimmering veins of Francesium. Bioluminescent pink lichen carpeted the rocks and reflected off the rippling surface of the water. Turquoise-hued ferns, striped rushes, and flat, yellow mushrooms the size of dinner plates surrounded the tarn, all of them adding soft pastel light. Ch'Marsam-muk swung his tentacles over the rocky ledge and eased himself into the water. The multicolored lights reflected off his skin, accentuating the definition of his musculature.

Sora sat down on the rocks to unlace his boots, his back to the water. Then he kicked them off and turned. Ch'Marsam-muk watched him, his eyes glittering with the colors of the exotic life around him, as Sora slowly took off his clothes. He left his emergency pack and weapon on a rock, got to his boxer briefs, and hooked his thumbs in the waistband to drag them down his thighs. Ch'Marsam-muk licked his lips as Sora lowered himself into the water. They looked at each other for a few seconds, and then they came together as if compelled by gravity. Their lips met, then their tongues. Ch'Marsam-muk wound a tentacle around each of Sora's legs, gently urging them apart, lifting his feet from the floor of the pool and suspending him. Another pair stretched over his back, looped over his shoulders, and trailed down his chest. Their suckers affixed to his skin, pulling the flesh up. Sora moaned into Ch'Marsam-muk's mouth at the feeling of being kissed all over by dozens of adept little mouths.

He burrowed his fingers into Ch'Marsam-muk's hair and inclined his head to kiss and nibble up and down his neck. He, too, wanted to taste, and he did:

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salt, arousal, skin, and male musk. Sora ran his tongue from one side of Ch'Marsam-muk's jaw to the other, then down his neck, where he sank his teeth into the dense muscle at the base. All the while, he circled his hips and ground against the other man. He had never been so aroused, so willing to test his boundaries with a lover he trusted. He realized he'd never trusted a lover before, not fully, not to the point where he didn't try to analyze their motives as well as his own, but he let it go. He didn't need his mind for this. This—it came from somewhere deeper.

A tentacle wrapped around Sora's neck, and the suckers plucked at the skin of his throat as he worked his legs, trying to get one around Ch'Marsam-muk. The other man intuited his needs, just as he had before they could even share language, and released the hold on Sora's right leg. Sora draped it over the other man's hip and squeezed, pulling them tighter together so he could feel the swell at Ch'Marsam-muk's groin. He reached down, searching for a cock, but finding only smooth, slick flesh. "How do you..."

"I'll show you," Ch'Marsam-muk said, "just not yet. You taste so sweet, Sora. Like sunlight and the sky."

With his tentacles, Ch'Marsam-muk lifted Sora out of the water and over the rocks along the perimeter. He lowered Sora back gently into a patch of ferns and then surged on top of him, kissing him again, wrapping him in his tentacles, covering his limbs and torso almost completely. The suckers pulled at Sora's skin, drawing his blood to the surface. As much as he tried to return the attention, the reverence Ch'Marsam-muk showered on his body, his hands and fingers couldn't cover as much ground. Sora found it difficult to do much but lie there, draped in the wet appendages, wrapped in them, his skin sucked into them. Suckers tugged at every inch of his body. Sora wished he could taste his lover like that, so he closed his lips over the flesh below the corner of Ch'Marsam-muk's jaw and sucked it into his mouth, lapping at it, biting the skin, drawing it between his teeth.

Sora stretched his arms over his head and arched his back off the ground as the taste of the other man burst across his tongue. He shifted his other leg so Ch'Marsam-muk could settle between them. His weight and the embrace of his tentacles felt amazing. Sora dragged his lips back up Ch'Marsam-muk's neck and brought their mouths back together, teeth scraping and tongues bumping and twisting furiously. Sora's lips, slick with saliva, swelled and throbbed, but he wanted so much more, to taste and experience the other man the way Ch'Marsam-muk could know his flavor, the changes in mood leaking from his



pores. He furled his fingers around the tapered tip of a tentacle and brought it to his lips.

Ch'Marsam-muk pushed himself up on his hands and withdrew his mouth from Sora's, though his suction cups continued working against Sora's skin, feasting on his body wherever they came into contact with it. He watched as Sora held his glowing tentacle to his lips and flicked his tongue out for a tentative lick. It tasted as he'd expected—saline and slightly fishy, a unique and unfamiliar flavor, but not an unpleasant one. Ch'Marsam-muk's appendages tightened around Sora as Sora swirled his tongue around the end of the tentacle, licking up and down and around the circumference of the blunted tip. When the pressure became too much, too restrictive, Ch'Marsam-muk knew before Sora even had time to gasp. Loosening his grip, he watched Sora lapping at and suckling the end of his tentacle with its lavender glow reflected in his eyes.

Sora flipped the tentacle in his hand so he could get access to the underside. He found one of the small suction cups about six inches up and pressed his tongue against it. It constricted around his tongue in an answering kiss and Ch'Marsam-muk's light increased. He repeated Sora's name in a harsh whisper as his tentacles roamed over Sora's belly, finally grazing his erection. Sora groaned and circled the suction cup with his tongue while one lower down attached to his skin where his inner thigh met his pelvis. He tried to open his legs a little wider, but he was too tangled in tentacles to do much more than let himself be positioned. Since his partner seemed to intuit what he wanted and needed as soon as the desires formed in his mind, Sora didn't object.

"You taste good," Sora said, swirling his tongue around the tip of the tentacle. "I wondered how you would taste." He reached up and circled Ch'Marsam-muk's mouth with two of his fingers before pressing them gently past the seam of his lips, along the hot velvet of his tongue and up to explore the ridges of his palate. Ch'Marsam-muk sucked and licked at them, his lips puckered and cheeks hollowing. Their eye contact never broke as Sora drew the tip of the tentacle into his mouth and sucked it hard. Ch'Marsam-muk pressed deeper, into his throat, and Sora pinched his eyes shut against the sting as he waited for his gag reflex to relax. Ch'Marsam-muk seemed to know when he could proceed without hurting Sora, and he waited until Sora acclimated to the sensation before pressing in further, letting his tentacle wriggle into Sora's throat. At the point where Sora couldn't spread his lips to accept the increasing girth, Ch'Marsam-muk stopped. Sora felt one of his suction cups, and he massaged it with his tongue as the other man swirled his tongue along Sora's



fingertips. Sora swallowed around the tentacle lodged so deep in his throat. It was an odd sensation, but the idea of Ch'Marsam-muk tasting and experiencing him in ways and places no one ever had was the most intimate and arousing thing he'd ever known.

Sora circled his hips as they sucked on each other, but he didn't have much range of motion. He tried to imagine how amazing it would be to have tentacles himself, to twine them along and weave them into Ch'Marsam-muk's. His throat was starting to feel raw and stretched, and the corners of his mouth stung. But where the tentacle met his lips, it had taken on their dusty dark pink color, and the luminous hue moved in shifting tendrils up the rest of the appendage like glowing dye dispersing in water. The tentacles, draped over his torso or wound around his limbs, took on the golden color of Sora's skin, the brightness increasing until ochre and pink swirled and blended all through Ch'Marsam-muk's limbs, surrounding them in a cloud of soft light. Sora's heart beat hard. His belly fluttered and his ass contracted as he ran his fingers over the marble pattern of the tentacle in his mouth. The tension at the root of his body was becoming unbearable, and his ravaged throat had reached its limit as well. With a slight tug, he encouraged Ch'Marsam-muk to remove it. Sora removed his fingers from the other man's mouth, and Ch'Marsam-muk leaned over him, dropped light, impossibly gentle kisses on Sora's eyelids, nose, cheeks, chin, and lips. The heat of happiness and contentment combined with lust and want filled Sora's chest, and as if fueled by his emotions, the light brightened.

"Beautiful," Sora breathed, grazing his hand over one of the tentacles while wrapping the other around Ch'Marsam-muk's back to hold him where he wanted him. "The light. Does this always happen when your people make love?"

Ch'Marsam-muk petted Sora's cheek with the back of his hand, his face looking soft in the glow. "No, not always. It takes both of us to make it—two sets of very strong feelings to alight it. It's made of me and you and our joining. This is special to my people. To me."

"To me too," Sora said. "I want more of it. More of you."

"I want that too," Ch'Marsam-muk said. "To know you in every way I can."

"I have to prepare myself," Sora said. Ch'Marsam-muk released him, and he felt incomplete and wrong, as if he'd lost his own limbs and not just the contact of the other man's. He went to his emergency pack, found the first aid kit, and took out a tube of ointment. He wasn't sure exactly what might happen

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between them, but he knew what he wanted, and he wanted to be ready. With one hand, he pulled his cheek aside so he could insert the tube's slender nozzle into his anus. He was glad he stood outside the limit of Ch'Marsam-muk's light, as this was a little personal. But that was silly, considering the ways he hoped the other man would touch him. He looked at the man, watching him from the pool, a few of his tentacles dangling into the water, his glow fading with the distance between them. Sora squeezed, and the surgical-grade lubricant filled his cavity, thick and cold. He removed the nozzle and smeared some more of the lubricant around his tight bud.

At the edge of the pool, Sora knelt down facing Ch'Marsam-muk, wrapping his hand around Ch'Marsam-muk's cheek. He stretched his neck for a slow, reverent kiss that quickly devolved into desperate nips, grunts, and slurps. Sora burrowed his fingers into Ch'Marsam-muk's hair as Ch'Marsam-muk wrapped a tentacle around Sora's waist and pulled them together so their chests pressed close and Sora straddled the undulating limbs beneath him. One of them wrapped around his balls, twisting and squeezing, stretching his sack, and another wrapped around his erection, one of the suction cups affixing to the head and milking his slit. A third tentacle slithered between cheeks and along his crevice, the tapered end circling his rim, just barely pressing against his opening. Sora threw his head back and growled with need.

"Ch'Marsam-muk, I need to touch you too." Pressing hard, he dragged his hands over the firm planes of the other man's pectorals and down the ridges of his belly. Continuing down, he found the peaks of hipbones, the mound of a pelvic bone, and a swollen mass just below it. He massaged it and watched Ch'Marsam-muk's eyes darken and his lips go slack. His peach-pink glow brightened everywhere their skin made contact. Sora plucked at his nipple with his other hand, squeezing the hard bead between his thumb and finger and making the other man's glow flare. He liked being able to have that effect on Ch'Marsam-muk, see how the other man reacted to his touch. He wanted more of it. His cock bounced, and Ch'Marsam-muk squeezed it hard, just at the razor's edge of pain. "We're different. You have to guide me a little, show me what to do. I want touch you, give you pleasure."

"We're not so different." Ch'Marsam-muk took Sora's wrist and guided his hand. His swollen flesh pulsed, and Sora felt a slit at the center of the bulge. He teased it with his fingers, dipping inside, fascinated. Soon he found a familiar hard length and eased it out of its protective pouch. It was much larger than a human penis, the same mottled purplish-gray as his tentacles, and thicker at the

center, though the tapered head was almost as big as Sora's fist. Sora just managed to wrap his fingers around it and stroke. Ch'Marsam-muk reciprocated, and they wriggled closer to kiss sloppily as they fondled and discovered each other. His tentacle pressed against Sora's opening more insistently. "Sora, I want to touch inside you. Taste you and feel you inside."

"Yes." Sora bore down to open and relax. Even with the lubricant and the thin layer of slick coating Ch'Marsam-muk's tentacles, he cried out at the penetration. The burn and stretch were more intense than anything he had ever felt, and he began to tremble even though the other man paused. "Put me on my back," he panted against his partner's lips. "It's... too much. I can't do it this way."

Ch'Marsam-muk carefully lowered him into the ferns again without letting their bodies separate. Sora spread his legs wide and held his knees up alongside his ribs until Ch'Marsam-muk wrapped his thighs in his tentacles and took over, holding Sora in place, keeping him splayed and exposed. Breathing hard, Sora gripped the tentacles wrapping his legs and held on tight. In this position, the intrusion was more bearable, and he started to relax as Ch'Marsam-muk knelt and settled between his legs. Watching Sora's face, caressing Sora's chest with his hand, he pushed in a few more inches, and then a few more. Sora let out a long, low groan, sweat springing from his pores as the tentacle moved within him, far deeper than a human could ever accomplish. Reaching up, caressing Sora's neck and face, Ch'Marsam-muk pressed in deeper and deeper still, the increasing girth of his limb stretching Sora to the limits of what he could endure, but he continued, petting Sora and saying soothing words as he snaked the appendage far into Sora's insides. Sora felt it in his belly, rippling as it coiled farther and farther into his guts. There was pain, but it surprised Sora how intimate it felt, how much it aroused him, to be filled in a way he had never imagined. He had never been so open to or joined with another man as he was now, sprawled out beneath the alien stars with Ch'Marsam-muk's tentacle looped deep inside him and his brilliant light bathing them both.

Sora didn't dare move, afraid he might hurt himself, but he gave the limb invading his body a small squeeze. Ch'Marsam-muk growled and said, "Sora, I can't believe how it feels to join with you like this, for you to give me your body, your everything. You are everything. Everything." He dipped down to kiss Sora savagely, using one tentacle to stroke Sora's cock back to stiffness as he withdrew the one inside him partially. It was still buried deeper than a human could accomplish, but at a depth where he could move it in and out without risking injuring Sora.

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Sora shook all over, his body numb and electrified at the same time. He squirmed and moaned rhythmically in time with his partner's thrusts. He clutched Ch'Marsam-muk's shoulder and dug his nails in. His senses became acute; he felt the little undulations of each suction cup against his skin, smelled the sea in his lover's hair, swore he could taste the other man's arousal on his lips. Something inside him shifted, and emotion filled his chest until he wanted to cry. He rested his heels on Ch'Marsam-muk's shoulders and kissed him until he thought his lips would bleed, but he didn't care.

The tip of another tentacle pressed at the slack rim of Sora's opening, and a shimmer of worry rippled through him, making him stiffen a little. He could say no, and he knew Ch'Marsam-muk would respect his wishes, but in his euphoric, hyper-aroused state, he didn't want to, and he even tilted his pelvis up in invitation.

"Sora, my wonderful little Sora, thank you." Ch'Marsam-muk pushed past the slight resistance of Sora's ragged opening, and Sora cried out. He couldn't help it. It hurt, felt like being torn in half, and he almost begged Ch'Marsam-muk to stop. But as his partner kissed softly across his flushed face and proceeded with careful patience, the pain ebbed to a dull edge that complemented the pleasure, intensified it. Ch'Marsam-muk began to thrust. The newly inserted tentacle rubbed Sora's prostate, and his seed drizzled his belly as he wound tighter and tighter toward what promised to be the most explosive release of his life. He felt like a star collapsing in on itself, his atoms compacting under the increasing gravity, the pressure growing, growing toward a fantastic supernova.

"Come here," Sora panted. "I need to touch you. I need to be touching you when I come, and I can't hold it much longer. I need to be touching you and tasting you, and I need you to hold on to me, because I'm going to fly apart."

"I'll hold onto you, Sora. I'll wrap you up and keep you with me as long as I can. Keep you safe. I'll hold on, so you can fall apart without worrying. Let go. Let it all go. Do that for me."

It wasn't something he'd ever been able to do, Sora realized. He hadn't felt safe, even in the moment of release, to let himself break open in front of another man, to expose his core, his naked pleasure and vulnerability, let his molecules go shooting out into the universe. He'd always kept part of himself guarded, kept close, hidden in the dark, until now. Now, he couldn't, because Ch'Marsam-muk's light was everywhere, wrapped around him, nestled inside him. He had never felt such abandon, such freedom.

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Ch'Marsam-muk slid closer, pushing his tentacles deeper into Sora and lining their cocks up. He wrapped his tentacles around both of their erections, and Sora put his hand on top. As they kissed, stroked, thrust, and rocked together, the tide came in and crested over them, cooling Sora's burning flesh. It receded and lapped against them again, matching their rhythm, until with a cry, Sora came until everything went black. Everything disappeared except the waves of pleasure crashing through his body, and the smell, taste, and weight of the man on top of him. His light. His body inside Sora's, and Sora's clenching around it as he trembled all over, fresh surges of ecstasy moving through him until he felt liquid, spent, shedding his light and energy into Ch'Marsam-muk and taking his energy in return.

"Sora!" Ch'Marsam-muk squeezed him hard in his tentacles, his restraint stolen by the release that erupted from his coiled tentacle and Sora's shuddering hand. It shot over Sora chest and hit him in the chin. Sora hurried to scoop some up with his fingers and lick it away. Ch'Marsam-muk lapped at his lips. "How do I taste?"

"Of the sea. Of light and passion and honesty. Alive. Atomic." He said the last word in his own language, because he didn't know a word to express how he felt they had touched and connected, somewhere on the molecular level. "Wonderful. So wonderful."

They slowly disengaged, and Sora feared he had made a horrible mistake. But no. He hurt and his muscles shook with exertion, but he would do it again. Ch'Marsam-muk scooped Sora's smaller body into his arms and carried him toward the pool, which was good, because Sora wouldn't be walking anywhere until he got some rest. "I have been out of the water too long," Ch'Marsam-muk said, setting Sora at the edge of the water and lowering himself in with a sigh. "You can't sleep here with me, can you?"

"No." Sora felt more regret than he expected. Before, he hadn't liked pillow talk and cuddling after sex, but had preferred to just go to sleep, left alone. Tonight, though, the thought of not sleeping next to this man, of breaking contact, made a knot form in his chest. "And you can't sleep out of the water. We can't be together." Not in any permanent way. Like light, Ch'Marsam-muk would move over and through him before continuing his journey. Only the gravity of a black hole could keep light from escaping, and Sora was just an ordinary man.

"I can't let you away from me yet," Ch'Marsam-muk said. "I can't stop touching you. Lie down here." Sora stretched on his back in the ferns, and it

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was surprisingly comfortable, the lacy edges of the plants soft and cool against his skin. “My people normally find a small space underwater where we can sleep curled up, but I can’t do that, not if you can’t be with me.” He sprawled out on his chest, perpendicular to Sora, his head on Sora’s belly and his tentacles filling the pool behind him, glowing softly, illuminating the water.

As Sora absently combed his fingers through Ch’Marsam-muk’s hair and toyed with the edge of his ear, he remembered something he’d wondered. “The light you make—”

“It’s made from both of us, our coming together joyfully.”

Sora nodded. “You told me it doesn’t always happen when your people make love. What’s the”—he didn’t know a word in the sea people’s language for *variable*—“what’s the reason why it happens sometimes and not others?”

“It happens between mates. When we find the one we want to share our life with. When that person feels the same.”

“But that’s not possible. We could never live together. I need the sky and you need the sea,” Sora argued, as much against himself and the feelings growing in him as the other man’s words.

“The sea and the sky meet,” Ch’Marsam-muk said sleepily.

“But only at the edge.” Sora continued brushing through his hair as he watched the stars, his thoughts carefully skirting the idea of mates and partners, of sharing lives, because what he suddenly wanted and what was possible—physically and otherwise—couldn’t be reconciled and promised hurt in the near future, for both of them.

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## Chapter Ten

Ch'Marsam-muk held Sora's tiny body against his chest in the pool, carefully supporting Sora's chin so he didn't sink beneath the water as he slept. He ran his other hand through Sora's wet hair and down his slender back. His little Sora. His arms and tentacles—legs, he had said they were called—were so delicate and thin, but they held strength. Sora held more strength inside than Ch'Marsam-muk suspected Sora realized himself.

After they'd slept for a while, Ch'Marsam-muk had left him to catch some fish. They had eaten them, Ch'Marsam-muk according to his own way, biting into the flesh, and Sora using a small knife to peel the skin from his and carve off little strips of meat. Sora drank water from a clear container in his pack, and Ch'Marsam-muk drank from the sea. They made love, licking and sucking each other's cock because Sora claimed he was too sore to do more, to be entered again. The memory made Ch'Marsam-muk smile and spark with pinkish-gold light. Sora's body would adjust, and he would get used to it. As for himself, Ch'Marsam-muk would have to adjust to the idea that since Sora didn't have tentacles like his, Sora couldn't reciprocate. He would miss it, but this was the man meant for him, his mate, the one he had been waiting for. Of that he had no doubts at all.

And he would protect Sora, see to his happiness. It was a man's most important duty in life to take care of his mate. Ch'Marsam-muk squeezed the back of Sora's neck, the tight muscles between it and his shoulder.

"Feels nice," Sora muttered against his chest.

"I thought you wanted to sleep."

"I thought I did," Sora said, nuzzling Ch'Marsam-muk's collarbone with his cheek. "It was strange to go to sleep last night and wake up to more night. It threw me off a little." He sat up, stretched his lithe arms over his head, and turned to face Ch'Marsam-muk, resting his wrists on Ch'Marsam-muk's shoulder. Sora kissed him and smiled. "I didn't expect to feel the way I did when I woke up. I've been with other men, quite a few, to be honest. The heat of passion is one thing, but the next morning, it's usually gone for me. Sometimes I feel like I made a mistake, and at the best times, I feel detached, ready to move on. Like it was nothing special."

"It's usually the same for me," Ch'Marsam-muk admitted, stroking Sora's lower lip with his thumb. "Not anymore."

Sora blew out a warm puff of air and frowned. The downturn of his lips stabbed at a place deep in Ch'Marsam-muk's belly. "We're star-crossed lovers if ever there were any."

Ch'Marsam-muk tried to picture stars crossing, and the only image he could summon was of two falling stars streaking across each other's path. It was a beautiful picture, and he didn't know why it would make Sora look so sad. Touching Sora's cheek, he said, "I don't understand."

"It's an expression among my people. It means it's impossible for us to stay together, that we're in a terrible situation."

"You're my mate and I'm yours."

"It isn't that simple," Sora said. "I can't stay here with you. I won't survive. Even if I could, I have... duties. I have to make sure the people who tried to hurt you don't try again and stop them if they do. I have to make sure you and your world are protected, treated fairly."

"Then take me with you."

Sora shook his head. "My world is very different. There isn't enough water for you to move around in. You'd be stuck in a pool much smaller than this one. I can't stand thinking of that, of you not being free to swim. This is your home. I don't know if you would like mine."

"We'll find a way." Ch'Marsam-muk pulled him close. "I'll fight for that. For a future with you. Will you fight, Sora?"

"I'll try."

Ch'Marsam-muk wrapped his fingers around Sora's chin and tilted his face so they could kiss. The subtle brush of their lips sent tingling pleasure all through his limbs, made light pour from his tentacles until the pool glowed as bright as day. Completed, as if he found something he hadn't known had been missing. He wouldn't lose it again, no matter what. "I love you, Sora."

"How can that be?" Sora panted against his lips. "You have only known me for two days, maybe three. I can't tell with the sun not coming up."

"I knew that first night, when we traded words. The way you make me glow can't be denied. You make me light up. Look at it. It wouldn't happen if you didn't love me."

"I never thought I could love anyone," Sora said. "I'm not even sure I love my family. I haven't spoken to them in years, and I don't even miss them. Not often, at least. But I miss you the second we aren't touching. Is that love?"



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“It must be.”

“It scares me,” Sora said in a shaky whisper. “I’m scared of what it will do to me if I lose this.”

“I won’t let anything hurt you, ever,” Ch’Marsam-muk said.

“The scary thing about that is I believe you,” Sora said. “And I never believe anything without concrete proof.” He smiled, and they kissed. Ch’Marsam-muk held him and spun him in the water. Joy and arousal poured off Sora; Ch’Marsam-muk tasted it where his tentacle wrapped around Sora’s ankle. He wanted Sora, wanted to mate with him properly this time, to put his cock inside him and feel Sora’s cock in his own body. He was just about to suggest it when splashing along the shore drew his attention. Six of his people came onto the island as he and Sora pulled away from each other. Sora stumbled out of the water and started dressing as Ch’Marsam-muk went to speak with the group of warriors. He could tell something was wrong. “What is it?”

“We’ve been attacked,” said a fierce-looking female with tentacles the same bright orange as her ropey tendrils of hair. “A group of sky people in a flying machine attacked us with their weapons, killed some of our people. Those among us who don’t want the sky people here needed no further excuse. They have gone to the islands where the others, the sky people who came in the falling stars, are living. They have them surrounded and are planning to kill them all. We cannot talk them out of it, and the sky people are barely holding them off.”

“We have to hurry.” Sora came up behind Ch’Marsam-muk and wrapped his arms around his neck. “I’m the only one who can speak both our languages, so I have to get there, try to negotiate. Go.”

“Hold on,” Ch’Marsam-muk said. “I’ll be swimming fast. The rest of you, find as many warriors as you can who will side with us. We have to protect the sky people. They—at least most of them—want to be friends, and they have much to offer us. We can’t let a few angry and hateful people spoil that possibility.”

The warriors dove into the churning surf and disappeared, and Ch’Marsam-muk followed, swimming as hard as he could without submersing himself. Sora wrapped his legs around his waist, and Ch’Marsam-muk hated the scratchy stuff Sora used to cover his skin, the heavy things at the ends of his tentacles—legs. He couldn’t understand why a man like Sora would want to hamper himself and hide his beauty, but they had more important things to worry about.

Over a hundred people surrounded the cluster of islets where the sky people lived, waiting for their people to come and take them home. A few dozen of them stood with what Ch'Marsam-muk assumed were weapons in their hands, guarding the others, who huddled together between them, stinking of fear. Ch'Marsam-muk stopped a fair distance from them. He didn't want to put Sora in danger, but Sora leaned over and said, "Can you get us closer? Get me between them?"

"Will you be safe?"

"You'll keep me safe," Sora said. "I trust you with that. Trust me that I can talk to these people. I need that, because I'm afraid. There's a lot on my shoulders."

"I don't doubt you, Sora. You're one of the bravest men I've ever met." Ch'Marsam-muk swam to the edge of the sea warriors. When they pointed spears and tridents at him, he held up his open hands. "Let us pass. We only want to talk. This man speaks the language of both the sea and the sky. We can be allies, friends with these people."

"No we can't!" someone shouted. "They have no right to be here! This is our world."

"Their people attacked and killed ours," another warrior yelled.

"Those people are traitors and enemies." Sora's strong, clear voice rose above the din. "My people, the ones here, want to see them pay for what they've done as much as yours. Please, let us work together to make them pay for their crimes. At least hear what we have to say."

"Why should we trust you?" one of the warriors shouted.

Sora let go of Ch'Marsam-muk's back and moved slowly through the water, past the stunned warriors. He waded ashore and stood with his arms stretched out at his sides. "We don't mean you any harm," he said in the language of the sea people. "We are strangers here, but we respect you. Everything on this world belongs to you, and we won't take it from you. I won't let that happen. We want to make friends, to trade goods and ideas. We can improve each other. Please. All I want is to talk. If you attack us, those sky people in favor of taking what is yours will use it as evidence of hostility. Work with us, and they'll have no excuse to steal your resources. Please, at least let us talk."

Ch'Marsam-muk was so proud of his little mate that his heart swelled. The rest of his people lowered their spears and tridents as Sora climbed ashore. He

gestured to his comrades, and they lowered their weapons. "I invite your leaders to come ashore and speak with mine. We are a fair and equitable people, and if you treat us with respect, we'll return it. I truly hope we can help each other. We won't know if we can find common ground unless we talk. If you don't like what we have to say, you can kill us later. We all know my people won't survive without the help of yours. We just want your help, and to make friends."

Ch'Marsam-muk waited, his hands balled to fists beneath the water, as his people talked amongst themselves and Sora's people waited. Sora looked small and vulnerable, alone on the beach, the only thing standing between the two cultures clashing. Slowly, some of his people came ashore. Ch'Marsam-muk wished he had a weapon, in case he needed to defend Sora. But one by one, their people came together, reaching out tentatively, touching hands, trading words with Sora translating. Warriors from the most powerful clans met with the men and women who presumably led Sora's people. Soon, they were sitting on the ground in clusters, between the metal pods the sky people were using as shelter. They talked for hours, and soon all of them smiled, but no one as much as Sora. It made Ch'Marsam-muk feel hopeful as he stayed on the sidelines, out of the way. If their people became allies, there might be a chance for him to stay with Sora.

The meeting lasted for hours, and then some of the sea people left to catch fish. Sora came up to where Ch'Marsam-muk lounged in the shoals. He put one hand on Ch'Marsam-muk's shoulder and pushed his messy black hair out of his eyes with the other. "Your people are gathering food for us," Sora said. "Sharing this meal is a huge step, a turning point."

"You did well," Ch'Marsam-muk said, draping his hand over Sora's. "I felt proud watching you, proud of being with you."

Sora grinned and averted his eyes, adorably modest. "I hardly did this alone. I'm just happy it went so well, that no one got hurt. I almost can't believe it didn't come to violence. We—our people—are very different, but in some fundamental way, we can connect. That's important. And it's a beautiful thing."

The sea people returned a few hours later with crustaceans, fish, seaweed, and other edible plants, which they piled up at the center of the sky people's makeshift camp. They brought glowing purple and turquoise strands of vines up from the darker depths of the water, and together, the people of the water and the air strung them over and between the pods to provide light. Clouds moved in, bringing a mild drizzle, but it didn't douse their joyous feast. They sat

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together, sharing food, trading words. Sora conveyed his people's desire to take away some of the silvery rock so plentiful on their world, that it was useful to them, and his leaders seemed receptive when Ch'Marsam-muk and his people expressed their wishes to trade the stone for knowledge.

"We'll relay your terms to our leaders when we return home," Sora said. "With any luck, we can set up at least one station here, a place where our people can come together to talk and teach each other. Others, people who can make those decisions, will have to come here and talk to your leaders, but I know we can work something out."

"And when this station is built, you'll return to teach us about your machines," Ch'Marsam-muk said.

He tasted Sora's uncertainty through the tentacle he had draped over Sora's wrist even before Sora turned to him with pain in his eyes. "I can ask to return, but the way our leaderships works means others will make that decision. If the mission isn't considered"—he said a word Ch'Marsam-muk didn't understand—"er, important, I might be sent where my talents are more needed."

A creature smaller than a child, one with enormous eyes and long, silvery hair, wearing a clear mask over his mouth and nose, said something to Sora, and Sora nodded. They exchanged a few words, most of which Ch'Marsam-muk didn't understand.

"What does he say?" Ch'Marsam-muk asked.

Sora forced a smile. "Nualyin says that if the situation here is stable, it's very unlikely I'll be stationed here. My skills will be needed elsewhere."

"Sora, no. That can't happen. We belong together, and you know it."

"My leaders may not agree."

"Well then, tell them you won't do it. Refuse. Come here anyway."

"It doesn't work that way in my world," Sora said, frustration creeping along both his skin and his tone. "I could be put in prison for refusing to follow my orders."

"I won't let that happen," Ch'Marsam-muk said. "I swore to protect you. I'll protect my mate."

Sora snatched his hand away, and Ch'Marsam-muk felt it like a blow to the gut. "You don't understand."

“I didn’t mean to make you angry,” Ch’Marsam-muk muttered. “I just don’t want to lose you. We—my people—mate for life. You’re it for me, the only one who can make me whole.”

“I-I’m sorry too,” Sora said. “But first off, I didn’t know that when we agreed to... explore together. I didn’t knowingly accept that responsibility. I never understood what we did would have such a profound effect on our, on your life. Your future. I feel a little deceived.”

Ch’Marsam-muk’s heart plummeted into his churning belly. “You don’t feel the way I do.”

Sora rubbed his eyes with his thumb and finger. He didn’t look at Ch’Marsam-muk as he spoke. “It’s different for my people. It’s something we think about, decide to try, not something that just happens to us. It isn’t so instant. If we want to spend our lives with someone, we make an effort. It’s gradual, and it’s something we choose.”

“And you don’t choose me.” Ch’Marsam-muk couldn’t look at Sora. The nausea churned inside of him like he was going to be sick, like his heart had been ripped out and shredded by a trident, then thrown into the salty water.

Sora sighed. “It isn’t that, necessarily. But there are differences in us, in our worlds. I’m just trying to explain—”

Screams cut off whatever he intended to say, and a beam of light sliced through the mist and light rain. People from both worlds got to their feet and scrambled for weapons. Sora drew the small metal wand he kept in his belt and moved in front of Ch’Marsam-muk. Around them, little pops sounded and people fell, bleeding.

“Sora, get down!” Ch’Marsam-muk yelled.

Ignoring him, Sora ran through the panicked people, to the edge of the water. Ch’Marsam-muk followed. Whether Sora wanted him or not, he would protect his mate—with his life if he had to. He preferred that idea to the thought of spending the rest of his days alone.

Just as Sora splashed into the sea, a large, metallic craft touched down on a small island facing theirs. A door opened and men, light, and shouting poured out. They aimed their weapons and more people—sea and sky—fell.

“Get into the water!” Sora shouted in the language of the sea. “Get out of here! It’s my people these traitors want to kill, not you!”

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“But without you to tell the others what happened here, those people will go free, and they’ll try again!” Ch’Marsam-muk said. “We’ll lose everything we have built here! We should fight together.”

Sora turned, his eyes blazing. “They want to kill us to cover up what they did! I don’t want you to die. Get out of here.”

“You’re my mate,” Ch’Marsam-muk shouted. “It’s my duty to protect you.”

Sora shoved him hard in the shoulder. “I’m not your mate! Get out of here!” He turned away and ran to the center of the camp, yelling to his people, motioning for them to get to the center of the settlement, where they had the cover of their pods. Ch’Marsam-muk waited for him to turn back, to say something else. When he didn’t, he dove into the water.

“Follow me,” Ch’Marsam-muk shouted to the dozens of warriors hurrying to escape the island. He dove to escape the attack carpeting the surface and swam hard, the sounds of the battle reverberating through the water around him. When he made it a safe distance, he arced up and pushed, breaking into the sky. Heads and shoulders popped up around him, dozens of them, most of the warriors who had been at the feast.

“What’s happening?” said the female warrior with the orange hair. “Why were we attacked?”

“I don’t have time to tell you the whole story,” Ch’Marsam-muk said. In the distance, he heard screams, the sounds of the sky people’s weapons. The acrid odors of blood and smoke reached him even at this distance. “We have to help them!”

“Talking is one thing,” another warrior said, “but being killed for these strangers is asking too much.”

“These people wanted to destroy our world,” Ch’Marsam-muk argued desperately. “Sora and the others stopped them, and now they want to kill Sora so what they tried to do won’t be found out. If that happens, they’ll return. They want to take what belongs to us, and if we don’t fight, they’ll succeed. Sora and the others lost friends, risked their lives to protect us. They stood to gain nothing by treating us fairly, fighting for what was right. Can we do less? I cannot.”

“What would you have us do?” said the orange-haired warrior.

“The sky people have weapons that are superior to ours,” Ch’Marsam-muk said. “But we outnumber them, and they think we have retreated. I have an

idea. These traitors want to paint our people as savage and bloodthirsty. I say we prove them right.”

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The sea people stayed to the depths almost until they reached the edge of the island, and then they surfaced silently. All of them were hunters, and the darkness and rain aided their efforts. They used it, moving onto the island without detection. The traitors were overconfident; they hadn't even posted guards.

At the center of the camp, they found a group of about twenty people surrounding the rest. Sora and his friends knelt in a group, while the others stood with their weapons pointed. Ch'Marsam-muk raised his hand, and his people paused. As they watched, a short, stocky man who seemed to be a leader among the attackers, fired his weapon at a woman's head, and it exploded in a red cloud before her body fell. “They're executing them,” he whispered. “Killing them unarmed. We cannot wait.”

Ch'Marsam-muk hadn't brought a weapon, but that wouldn't stop him from defending people who had proven friends—from defending the person he loved. He moved behind the closest man, reached up, wrapped a tentacle around his neck, and snapped it. He held the body in front of him as a shield against the sky people's weapons. Their fire struck the body and pocked it with small wounds. Ch'Marsam-muk threw the corpse at the next man, and it knocked his enemy down, pinning him until Ch'Marsam-muk had the chance to punch him in the side of the head and knock him out. With a tentacle, he swatted the unconscious man's weapon away from his hand.

Probably six of his people had managed to sneak up on one of the traitors and bring them down, but now the enemy knew of their presence, and they were well trained. They clustered together, back to back, and aimed their weapons. Ch'Marsam-muk dodged their fire, leaping behind one of the pods, but the warrior next to him was hit and fell to the ground with a wide, smoking hole in his chest. His spear fell from his hand, and Ch'Marsam-muk picked it up. He peaked around the edge of the pod, got one of the traitors, a woman with coloring similar to Sora's, in his sights, and threw his weapon. It struck her in the chest, embedded deep. Just in time, he ducked behind the pod to avoid her companions' weapons.

Sora yelled something to his people in their language, and several of them shouted an obvious agreement. Though they'd clearly been stripped of their

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weapons, the sky people rebelled against their captors, rising up to attack them with their fists and feet, tackling them and drawing them into the pool of their superior numbers. Weapon-fire sounded, and in the writhing mass of bodies, Ch'Marsam-muk couldn't tell who had the upper hand. Those traitors who hadn't been pulled into the melee yelled to each other and pointed in Ch'Marsam-muk and his warriors' direction. He had relinquished his weapon, so he picked up the only nearby object he could use to defend himself: a sharp rock made of the substance these cowards wanted badly enough to massacre their own kind and poison an entire world. Keeping to the cover of the pod, he drove the stone into the head of a yellow-haired woman as soon as she appeared around the corner. It crushed her skull with a sickly thud.

The female warrior with the red hair swung her trident, knocking the weapon from her enemy's hand. Then she struck the man in the face and stabbed him in the side. Blood spurted from his mouth and splattered her as he fell. Another of the traitors trained a weapon on her, but she threw her trident and struck him square in the face. Before she could get to cover, one of the traitors fired on her, hitting her in the chest and shoulder. She fell with a ragged cry as two men surrounded her, their weapons aimed at her head.

Ch'Marsam-muk pushed off with his tentacles and tackled the man closest to him. He didn't have a chance to see if his comrade had escaped as he scuffled with the big, dark-skinned man. Ch'Marsam-muk wrapped a tentacle around the hand that held the weapon, jerking back and snapping the man's bone. His arm hung useless. For all their knowledge and deadly machines, the sky people were frail compared to his own. But some of them knew how to fight. The man beneath Ch'Marsam-muk struck him hard in the side of the head—hard enough to rattle his teeth and send him sprawling on his back. Before he could get away, the man straddled him, a knife in his uninjured hand. Just in time to save himself from being stabbed in the face, Ch'Marsam-muk reached up and grabbed the man's arm. People shouted and scuffled at the edges of his vision as he fought to push his enemy off. The man was strong. His blade sliced through the tentacle Ch'Marsam-muk lifted to protect his head, and blood poured into his face, making him sputter. His enemy made another cut, close to overpowering Ch'Marsam-muk. Even the tentacles Ch'Marsam-muk wrapped around the man's waist and shoulders couldn't pull him off as he clamped his knees down against Ch'Marsam-muk's ribs.

Then something struck the man and he flew off Ch'Marsam-muk. Ch'Marsam-muk scooped the blood out of his eyes, rolled to his belly, and



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pushed himself up in time to see Sora aim his weapon at the dark-skinned man's head, and with cold eyes, fire it. The man's skull burst, spraying Sora's legs with blood, brains, and chunks of bone. Just as Sora turned to offer Ch'Marsam-muk his hand, the short man pressed a weapon to the back of Sora's head. Sora dropped his weapons and raised his hands. The man yelled something and Sora yelled back. Ch'Marsam-muk couldn't understand them, but he recognized their anger, their hatred. He knew this man meant to kill his mate. Even if the short man couldn't escape, he would take Sora with him. Ch'Marsam-muk couldn't let that happen.

"Sora, trust me! Drop down and cover your head with your hands!" For a few agonizing heartbeats, he waited to see if Sora still believed in him. When Sora crouched, his head between his knees, Ch'Marsam-muk whipped a tentacle and hit the short man in the waist. He landed hard on his back, and his weapon flew from his hand. At the edge of his vision, Ch'Marsam-muk saw the dark-skinned woman with the short hair scramble for the gun, but he never saw if she found it. Ch'Marsam-muk moved around Sora and drove his fist into the short man's face, snapping his nose and making blood spurt into his mouth. He hit the man again, blackening his eye. "How dare you threaten my mate? I'll kill you!" He smacked the man with the back of his hand as he wound a tentacle around his neck, squeezing until the man sputtered and choked and his face turned an ugly bruise-purple. In his anger, he was barely aware of Sora grabbing his shoulder and shaking him—yelling. Upset. His mate was upset.

"Please," Sora panted, "please don't kill him, Ch'Marsam-muk. He doesn't deserve to get off that easily. He needs to face what he has done. We need him alive, as proof of what he and the others tried to do. I want to see him go to prison for the rest of his life."

Ch'Marsam-muk shook his head to dispel his instinctive rage. Around him, bodies—sea people and sky—laid on the ground, blood running in rivulets as the rain increased. He hit the man again and knocked a few teeth loose. Then he moved away. Sora's people restrained the short man and the few others who had survived the ambush. Ch'Marsam-muk stood facing Sora, watching his bruised and rain-spattered face for any indication Sora had changed his mind about their being together. Sora just knitted his brows, held his ribs, and breathed through slightly parted lips. A trickle of blood meandered down from their left corner and dripped off Sora's chin. "Sora, do you have anything to say to me?"

"I—thank you."

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Ch'Marsam-muk squeezed his eyes shut, turned, and left the camp. He had his answer, and he dove into the sea and swam away, away from all of it. He wished he had never set eyes on the sky people.

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## Chapter Eleven

An entire cycle of light passed, then a cycle of darkness, and another cycle of light. The day was dying with a soft flourish, in a wash of rosy light and purple clouds edged in gold. Arms spread, Ch'Marsam-muk let the swell of the tide lift him as he watched the sky people. They had constructed a huge metal island, bigger than any Ch'Marsam-muk had ever seen, large enough for several shuttles and a few long, rectangular buildings. The edges sloped into the water so the sea people could come ashore, and furrows had been formed and filled with water so they could move easily around the station. Even now, groups of them moved over the slick surface, talking to the sky people, learning about their machines beneath the rows of round light the sky people powered with the planet's heat. Some of their machines dug far below the ocean, mining the element they needed, which they called Francesium. There was talk of sea people joining their crews, joining them on their journeys into the stars. Once, Ch'Marsam-muk would have been the first to ask to be included on those adventures.

Once.

Now, he just skirted the edge of the station, watching the people, watching in case Sora came back. After all this time, his mind knew Sora had meant what he had said about not wanting to share Ch'Marsam-muk's life, but his heart couldn't quite let go of hope.

Sora's tiny companion had been right: Sora was too important, too intelligent, skilled, and brave to be wasted on the out of the way rock the sky people had dubbed Varuna. The more he learned of the worlds beyond the stars, the more Ch'Marsam-muk understood that his was primitive, backward, and unremarkable except for the Francesium. If not for that substance, the sky people would have likely ignored his world completely.

Maybe that would have been better.

But no, he was being selfish. His people stood to learn a lot, to advance their culture, with the help of their newfound allies. But his pain still felt so fresh; the places where part of him had been torn away still oozed and bled. Leaders of the sky people had come to negotiate terms of trade, and though he had been invited, Ch'Marsam-muk declined to sit on the council. He rarely interacted with them except to trade the jewelry he made for the useful things the sky people offered. He couldn't believe what value they placed in his work.

Swimming in a slow, lazy ellipse, he turned away from the station. He had heard rumors of plans to build others, as well as structures beneath the water where the sea and sky people could live and work together. Right now, he just wanted to forget about them. He thought about going to the Pho, finding a man and at least sating his physical desires, but in the end it seemed like more trouble than it was worth. Instead he went home, crawled into his alcove, wrapped his tentacles around himself, and slept until he could force his body to sleep no more.

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Much later, in the quietest, darkest part of the night, Ch'Marsam-muk sat on a little islet, using a coarse file to polish a bracelet he had made. Aside from the rhythmic lap of the waves and the harmonious rasp of his tool, silence surrounded him. Heavy gray clouds covered the sky, but the radiant plants and animals beneath the water gave him plenty of light to see his work. The sea all around glowed with shifting panes of cerulean, lavender, rose, and chartreuse.

A low hum sounded in the distance. He recognized it as one of the sky people's engines, and not long after, he saw the beam of light from one of the little machines they used to skim along the surface of the sea. He put his work into the tchallit-hide pouch on his belt and slithered a little farther into the water, where the pink- and gold-stained foam could break over his tentacles and soothe his drying skin. He considered diving—he had been avoiding the sky people and didn't feel like speaking with one. Besides, he had been out of the water too long already, and the skin on his lower appendages felt tight. Instead of leaping to arc below the surface, he just waded in until the water reached his chest, watching.

The white light bounced across the churning sea, and the high-pitched whine of the machine grew louder. It sped past the island without slowing down, and just as Ch'Marsam-muk was about to submerge himself and swim home, the vehicle turned sharply and doubled back, stopping a few dozen feet from the shore of the island and focusing its light directly on him. Shielding his eyes and squinting against the brilliance, he watched the rider dismount the machine, clumsy in his haste. As the small man paddled and sloshed through the water, Ch'Marsam-muk wondered if he should draw the slender dagger from its scabbard by his hip. Something made him hesitate—something familiar in the way the man moved.

When the man got a few body lengths from Ch'Marsam-muk, he stopped, probably just able to touch the ocean floor with his feet. The spume sprayed his

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face and wet his dark, uneven spikes of hair as he pulled the mask and goggles from his face and threw them into the surf, forgotten. With something between a laugh and a sob, the man launched himself at Ch'Marsam-muk, taking Ch'Marsam-muk's face in both hands and kissing him so hard the bang of their teeth and the collision of their tongues actually hurt. Ch'Marsam-muk kissed back, winding Sora's small body in his arms, his tentacles, the taste and feel of him like the memory of a dream, but as comforting and familiar as if he had experienced them only hours ago. They kissed until their lips swelled almost to splitting and both of them gasped for breath. Sora wrapped a leg around Ch'Marsam-muk, and, pushing against his chest, guided him until he collapsed on his back on the island, with Sora sprawled on top of him and both of their lower limbs still in the water.

"I've been out looking for you," Sora said between nips and pecks that covered Ch'Marsam-muk's face, neck, and shoulders. "Why didn't you come to the station?"

"I didn't think you were planning to return," Ch'Marsam-muk said, moving his tentacles up and down Sora's body, desperate to feel the lean cords of his muscles and taste his soft skin. "So I had no reason to go there."

"I'm here now." Sora circled his hips, grinding his erection against Ch'Marsam-muk and making Ch'Marsam-muk's genitals swell within their pouch.

"Did you come back because of your orders, or because of me?"

Sora ran his nails down Ch'Marsam-muk's chest, using one to graze his nipple. "Do you really want to talk right now?" They kissed again, hard and desperate, before Ch'Marsam-muk broke contact and held Sora at arm's length, or as best as he could with Sora clinging to him and wrapping his legs around his waist.

"We have to talk," Ch'Marsam-muk said. "Because if we do this, it means you're mine. I don't want you to feel surprised or deceived. It will mean we're mated. If you give me your body, you're giving me everything. You and me, forever. Are you sure that's what you want?"

Sora didn't hesitate. "Yes. I have thought a great deal about this and... Yes. You're what I want. All I want."

"And what if you won't be able to stay?"

"I'll be able to stay, mostly," Sora said. "I may have to return to the space station now and then to give a report or something, but I'll come back. I'll see

to it. I convinced them they need me here, and by the time that isn't true anymore, I'll have a way to take you with me. Nualyin and I are already working on ways for your people to travel into space. We just need to devise a way to keep you wet." With a mischievous grin, Sora dragged his tongue from Ch'Marsam-muk's chin to the corner of his eye. "I have been very unhappy without you. Even with the chaos of Bennett and the investigation, and then the trial, which took forever, I have been able to think of little else."

"You took my heart with you when you left, Sora."

"I'm sorry," Sora said, flicking his gaze away. "It was necessary, and I was confused."

"But not now."

"Not now." Sora met his eyes again and smiled. "Not even remotely."

"Say it." Ch'Marsam-muk wanted to start on the closures of Sora's uniform jacket and free him from the coarse, heavy material, but he needed to hear the words first. "Tell me you want us to be together, that you'll be my mate."

"Yes, I want to be your mate. It might not be easy for us, but I want to do whatever we need to do to stay together."

"Sora, take your clothes off."

Sora unlaced his boots and then stood slowly, his feet beside Ch'Marsam-muk's hips as he toed them off and kicked each one a little way up the shore, out of reach of the water. With his gaze never leaving Ch'Marsam-muk's, he unbuckled the flexible black armored vest and tossed it on the beach, followed by his bracers and his tool belt. Slowly, a button at a time, he started on his gray jacket. Beneath him, Ch'Marsam-muk ran his hand up Sora's thigh. As alluring as it was to watch Sora tease him, his lips full and dark and his cheeks coloring, Ch'Marsam-muk wanted to hurry this along. He wanted Sora's skin, his taste. To his surprise, Sora put a bare foot at the center of his chest and pushed him back down, holding him there with the hungriest, most decadent smile Ch'Marsam-muk had ever seen. When he tried to slip a tentacle over the swell of Sora's ass and into the waistband of his trousers, Sora swatted him playfully away and wagged a finger at him.

Sora taking charge, taking what he wanted, sent a thrill through Ch'Marsam-muk, and veins of luminescence appeared along his tentacles, a purplish-blue that would change to rosy gold as soon as he touched Sora's flesh. He lay panting, writhing, licking his lips and wishing they were Sora's as

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Sora undressed slowly, exposing a strip of golden-brown flesh at a time, until he finally pulled his white undershirt over his head and stepped out of his snug black briefs. Ch'Marsam-muk moved a tentacle a few inches up the back of his calf, just far enough to affix one of his suction cups and taste the need and arousal pouring off Sora like a storm. That lust flowed into Ch'Marsam-muk, increasing his own, making his glow flare, and he ground out, "Sora, come here."

Sora did, but instead of straddling Ch'Marsam-muk and lowering himself down as he expected, Sora stepped forward and wound his fingers into Ch'Marsam-muk's hair. His rose-brown erection curved a few inches from Ch'Marsam-muk's nose, its musk strong and alluring and its redder head peeking up from the hood of skin. Sora looked down expectantly, clear in what he wanted, and Ch'Marsam-muk was only too happy to comply.

He rubbed his cheek against the patch of thin hair framing Sora's cock, the scent intoxicating. As he ran his hands up the back of Sora's legs, he wrapped his tentacles around them. "I'll hold you up, Sora." He lapped up the underside of Sora's erection, and Sora shivered and moved his hands down to grasp Ch'Marsam-muk's shoulders. "You're going to need me to hold you up, because I'm going to make you fall apart tonight. I'm going to make you glad you're my mate, make you never want another man again, because you'll know nobody can touch you like I can, know what you want the way I can. I'm going to prove that to you."

"Go on," Sora said, curving his hips, pushing his cock to slide against Ch'Marsam-muk's face. Ch'Marsam-muk licked up and down it, tugging the skin of the hood with his lips and teasing the slit with his tongue before letting it slide into his mouth. He sucked hard on the head, and Sora cried out as his flavor speckled the back of Ch'Marsam-muk's tongue. He had never tasted anything so wonderful, richer, stronger, and more complex than the taste of his mate's skin. He wanted more of Sora, wanted Sora shooting into his throat and crying out to the stars, wanted Sora to see how much he adored him. Moving his head forward, he took Sora deeper as he slid a tentacle up and wrapped it around Sora's balls, tugging on them until he earned a soft hiss of surprise, just on the edge of pain. Sora liked that, he'd learned, but it was a fine line, and he had to be careful. "Oh, that's good. It's so good. How can you... how can you just *know*?"

Ch'Marsam-muk wouldn't pause in his task to answer. Sora would learn soon enough what it meant to be his mate; he'd learn that his happiness, his

pleasure, meant everything to Ch'Marsam-muk. That he would live to make Sora tremble with pleasure like this, every day, every chance he got.

As he sucked Sora slowly, bobbing his head and running his tongue along the underside of Sora's cock, he twined one tentacle up his chest to affix a sucker to his nipple. He closed his eyes, listening to Sora's fragmented breathing and sweet little moans. He didn't need to see to know their essences mingled, producing an aura of pink-purple-gold light around them. He felt the change in his limbs as he wound them around his lover's body, tasting every shred of him that he could, tasting his abandon, the freedom he found in these moments, the joy. One of his tentacles snaked between Sora's cheeks and nestled into the heat of his cleft. Sora hadn't prepared himself, but with Ch'Marsam-muk's slick natural coating, if he took his time...

"Yes," Sora said in a draining exhalation. "Yes, I want that. Please."

Ch'Marsam-muk proceeded slowly, carefully, waiting for Sora's muscles to relax, gauging his comfort through the tension in his body and the taste of his skin. At any hint of worry or pain, he hesitated, giving Sora time to acclimate to his penetration. They read each other well, more easily with every moment they spent connected, and Sora opened to him. His back arched, pushing his cock deeper into Ch'Marsam-muk's throat as Ch'Marsam-muk pushed farther up inside him. Sora's muscles clenched down around his tentacle; his seed exploded into Ch'Marsam-muk's throat, and he screamed in a language Ch'Marsam-muk had never heard from his lips before. As he had promised, Ch'Marsam-muk held him up as Sora shook hard, his legs going slack, feet curling and lifting off the ground. Sora let himself go, vulnerability and trust spilling from his pores. "I-I have never felt so free," he panted. "I've never felt like this. Thank you for letting me feel this. I-I love you."

Ch'Marsam-muk let Sora's softening cock slip out of his mouth. He took a few moments to drink in the sight of his beloved, beautiful mate, wrapped up in tentacles mirroring the color of his flushed skin—Ch'Marsam-muk's tentacles wrapping his legs, his arms, his chest, his balls... disappearing into his ass, enveloped in the twisting heat of his rippling, clenching insides...

"Sora, I need you now. Need to mate with you. Claim you. Do you want me to put you on your back?"

"No," Sora said. "Stay right there."

Reluctantly, Ch'Marsam-muk lowered Sora's feet to the ground and slid his tentacles off of him and out of him, bringing them to rest in the water below



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them. Sora sat straddling him, digging his fingers into Ch'Marsam-muk's genital slit and pulling his cock free. It glowed brighter than the rest of him, pulsing pink and purple with his heartbeat. Sora wrapped his hand around its base, leaning forward to kiss Ch'Marsam-muk as he lowered himself down. His tongue pierced Ch'Marsam-muk's mouth as Ch'Marsam-muk speared up into his slicked and willing body. They kissed softly for a few moments as Sora took him all the way in and adjusted to the sensation. Then Sora began rocking slowly, shifting to find the best angle. Ch'Marsam-muk indulged him, resting his hands over the prominent bones of Sora's hips.

"You're so beautiful," he grunted, his voice rougher than he expected. "Sora, I can't hold off much longer."

Sora fell across his chest, kissing him hard, sucking and gnawing at his lips and tongue as he thrust down with his hips, faster and more urgently. Ch'Marsam-muk pushed up to meet him, and they moved together, growling and panting into each other's gaping mouths. The radiance of Ch'Marsam-muk's body, fueled by his mate's love and pleasure, sealed them in a shimmering, opalescent bubble. They clasped and clawed at each other, Ch'Marsam-muk coiling Sora in his tentacles, as they moved faster and harder, both of them seeking completion.

Ch'Marsam-muk wriggled a tentacle between them and wrapped it around Sora's cock just as Sora's inner muscles clamped down on him. Through his suction cups, he tasted Sora's sweet release, and it made him explode.

"Sora! Sora, I love you. I love you so much." His body shimmered with light and energy, and then he let it go, giving it to Sora, to the sky and the universe, seeing bursts of color in his head, feeling nothing but Sora against him, their hearts hammering together, lips entangled, breath mingling.

After a while—he couldn't say how long—the light surrounding them dimmed to something softer than an exploding star, and Sora rolled off him with a groan.

Ch'Marsam-muk rolled to face him, stroking his cheek. "Are you hurting?"

Sora chuckled, a sweet, satisfied sound. "Not in a bad way. It's been almost four months—ah, two days and two nights—for me. And you, my friend, are a big guy." Sora kissed him, and Ch'Marsam-muk felt his smile against his lips. "I'm a lucky, lucky man. I love you."

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## Epilogue

Ch'Marsam-muk woke with his head on the padded, inclined slope of the tank where he slept, sometimes with Sora. They always fell asleep together, but the water did funny things to his mate's skin, made it swell and wrinkle up, so Sora often left the water for the bed beside it, just as Ch'Marsam-muk often left the bed if he fell asleep there and started to dry out.

This morning, Sora stood in front of the small stove in their quarters, cooking something that smelled fantastic. Ch'Marsam-muk had developed quite a fondness for the drink the sky people called coffee. Even its scent helped wake him up, but it had nothing on the sight of his mate in only his tight briefs—light sky-blue—clinging to the crescents of his taut backside. Sora had headphones in his ears, and he hummed and shook his delectable little bum as he stirred the contents of the pan. As always, Sora wore the necklace Ch'Marsam-muk had made, the one with the glowing red gem at the center and the three blue beads on either side. He never took it off, not when he donned his uniform, not even in the shower. Especially not when they made love.

Ch'Marsam-muk crawled out of the tank and let the mat around it absorb the water from his tentacles. He moved behind Sora and wrapped a tentacle around his waist, tasting the remnants of Sora's sleepy contentment along with his excitement for what awaited them. Sora flinched with surprise, but then he turned his head, smiled, kissed Ch'Marsam-muk, and pulled the buds from his ears. "Good morning, my love. I made us some breakfast."

"It smells great, and so do you. Care to come back into the water with me?"

"Sure, after we eat. I made French toast, and bacon and eggs. You'll like this. You'll like it more before it gets cold."

"All right, Sora. Thank you for cooking for me." Ch'Marsam-muk moved to the table and situated himself on one of the stools. Even after these last few years, it felt strange, perching there with his tentacles twined around the stool's base.

Sora poured coffee and sat across the small table from him. After they ate, Sora moved to the wide, flat monitor on the wall above the sofa in their small sitting room on the ship where they'd been living for two of the sky people's—two *human* years. He pushed a few buttons and an array of stars appeared on the screen. At the center, near the brightest star, was a small red glimmer.

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“There she is, Ch’Marsam-muk. Patala. The farthest our people—any of them—have ventured into the cosmos. There’s life down there. What do you think it will be like?”

Ch’Marsam-muk pressed a button to bring the view of the planet closer. It looked like a polished red jewel bobbing in a black sea, very much like the gem his lover wore around his neck. Ch’Marsam-muk wondered if there was meaning in that. He’d wondered a great deal about the meaning of his existence since he had left Varuna with Sora. Before, he had never questioned his place in the universe, but before, the universe had ended at his world’s horizon. Sometimes, it made him feel lost and insignificant.

“Whatever is down there, you’ll see it’s treated fairly,” Ch’Marsam-muk said. That was one thing he could trust in, along with knowing he would never be insignificant to Sora. He wrapped a tentacle around Sora’s ankle and held him, feeling more grounded.

“I’m excited,” Sora said. “Are you?”

Ch’Marsam-muk considered. “I am. We’re going down there together. We have always done great things together, my Sora, and I trust we always will.”

Sora reached across the table and took Ch’Marsam-muk’s hand. “Together, then. Greatness, exploration, and discovery. Me and you.”

“Together.” Ch’Marsam-muk kissed the back of Sora’s hand. “No matter where we go or what we find. Always.”

*Always.*

**The End...**

...For Now

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## Author Bio

*Augusta Li isn't terribly exciting. When not writing, drawing, or making costumes, Gus can usually be found on Xbox live, watching anime, reading, or playing with the cat.*

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[Tumblr \(NSFW\)](#) | [Tumblr Roleplay Blog](#)

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# BROKEN PHOENIX

By Edmond Manning

## Photo Descriptions

Photo 1: A shirtless, slender man with hard-taut muscles gazes thoughtfully ahead. Around him, singed and burned feathers waft to the ground. His short red hair either burns with orange-dancing flames or perhaps catches the raw yellow sunlight, giving him a fire-roasted appearance. His raw sensuality simmers, as if the air around him is charged with electricity and yet refuses to ignite into passion.

Photo 2: A tranquil, lavender-shirted man holds a book in his right hand and a lantern in his left. He's young, mid-twenties, a thin man. His tight black pants and elegant dress shirt convey a sense of timeless style. Pages seem to leave the book and fly away, as if magically lifted by the wind. Despite the floating pages and the bruised blues and greens in the dangerous sky before him, the man with raven hair and a dark purple streak remains calm, absorbed. Around him, delicate flowers blossom with long, curled petals, as delicate and strong as this man himself.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I'm a phoenix (pic 1). Unfortunately, I'm a pretty terrible phoenix. I can't seem to control my fire. I lose my feathers (I could give you my father's lecture on that word for word, I've heard it so many times). And worst of all, my tears don't heal. I've pretty much been a hermit since my clan kicked me out ten years ago.*

*The other day this man came to my cave claiming he needed a phoenix to help him with his quest. I was so startled I lit half my clothes on fire and scared him away. I can see him climbing the trail towards my cave again. What in the world does he want?*

*Pic 2 is the third undersecretary to the royal historian (or some similar underling position within the royal court) and discovered something he shouldn't have. He can't tell anyone or he will be killed so he has to fix it all on his own... except maybe for the help of one hermit phoenix.*

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*I prefer plot to sex (rather have no sex than be overwhelmed by it) and I'm pretty vanilla when it comes to that sex. I absolutely hate stories where the major conflict is a "Big Misunderstanding" between the MC's or stories where the MC's just can't be together for some "Big Reason." Other than that have fun. Feel free to alter the basic appearance of the MC's—it is more the feel of the pics that I care about than hair color/eye color/build/etc.*

*Thanks!*

*Kathleen*

### **Story Info**

**Genre:** science fiction, fantasy

**Tags:** phoenix, magic, quest, fairy tale, humor, adventure, HEA, shifter

**Word Count:** 33,372

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# **BROKEN PHOENIX**

**By Edmond Manning**

## Chapter 1

### *The Chittering Truth*

*I am eternal.*

*I am fire incarnate.*

*Hear me, oh great blackness boasting six trillion stars, hear my devastating, all-consuming screech, tearing asunder the trembling universe. The scalding magma of a thousand suns rages within me, whistling over each cell, gasoline-filled cells, the molten orange powering my veins, flowing like magma from a thousand—*

*Dammit.*

*Flowing like magma from a thousand—*

Damn. Nothing.

Not even a spark.

I shake my arms but they don't even feel warm.

Sniff the air. Nothing. Not even the smell of burnt hair or feathers.

Damn it. I guess I should try again.

*I am eternal. I am fire incarnate. Hear me, oh great blackness—*

You know what? Forget it. I've been meditating for an hour and a half. Nothing. Fanaqua this. I want a Diet Mountain Dew. Well, I'm down to my last two. I should save them for a special occasion. Another damn it.

I untangle myself from the lotus position and rise, shaking out my legs and stretching from side to side. I peer out my mountain cave's nearest portico, a carved opening large enough to jump through. Though tempted to leap, I lean against a marble pillar, watching the clear lavender sky, the orangine hues coming from the east horizon, suggesting another day without Amber's mountain rains. The second sun's ascendancy was rapid this past spring, which always means less rain. But less rain has its advantages, like dtandiart bushes sprawling tentacles which don't grow as far and the introod trees are not nearly as invasive, both of which make the earth more passable. Although it's impressive when one hundred introods spring up overnight, after a big storm six feet tall and attempting to lure prey near with their seductive leaf-song. I miss hearing packs of introods singing this summer.



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I gaze out, seeing the greenish-blue hue of other tree varieties, the rich yellow-greens of the dtandiart bushes, their thick tentacle-like arms stretched upright, braying in the wind or crawling over the kelly green soil. The lavender sky and green cheer me despite my failure to blaze. Meditating was a longshot. Who am I kidding? I will never blaze. I am Gio, the phoenix who does not burn. As far as anyone in the phoenix clan knows, the only one on record.

They call me the Broken Phoenix.

Shame burns. Disappointment burns. Exile burns.

But Gio does not.

Stop. This feels hollow. I'm so *over* feeling sorry for myself that I cannot even shame myself properly. I was ashamed for many years. But I am determined to not feel that anymore. I am who I am. Broken Phoenix or not, I actually like my life.

I will spend the afternoon coasting in phoenix form, gloasting the breezes with my wings stretched wide, eyes turned inward, turning and falling, feeling the coarse textures on the air guiding me, revealing the vague stories of kingdoms far below. I will gloast stories that interest me in the air, find an intriguing strand and trace the story. Later, I will gather mosses for cooking and rip the flesh from a marrok tree for my dinner. Maybe whip up a casserole.

*Tyarano, ma'jegere* as Father would say. This life is wings.

This life I've created for myself is totally wings, except I cannot blaze.

But yesterday, *yesterday*, I spontaneously combusted. When the fire ripped through me I almost peed myself for joy. That was something, right? A fire which begins the blazing? A breakthrough I had hoped meditation would somehow allow me to repeat today, bring on the fire. Last time I caught fire was more than six years ago when an introod tree almost killed me. Before that, five years? Yes, my math is right. I know I spontaneously combusted the year before the banishment. That half blaze bought me an extra year's reprieve, the council believing I was a late bloomer. Of course, they had been saying I was a late bloomer for several years by then, but this renewed their faith. But as more time passed, and those phoenix six years my junior blazed, it was harder to believe I was just a "late bloomer". They administered science tests, blood tests, even tried magical uncovering spells. Father put me on a flaxseed-based diet and once we cooked an introod, hoping that would somehow cause a chemical reaction inside me, but I threw it up an hour later. Disgusting. No one could explain why that hopeful flame never came for me.

With Father's sad permission, they performed the banishment ceremony and I danced out of the circle. I played my role, the happy banishee, and danced into the darkness, right out of my home on the Mackwell Plains. Clan custom insisted I leave in human form rather than fly away. I couldn't blaze but I could still assume bird form and fly but nooooooooo, they really want you to feel impotent when they banish you, I guess. I can't believe I participated in the dance, agreed to my "happy banishment". I was young and stupid. I should have told them off, told them they were fire bigots—

No. No, that's not productive either. Not shame. Not blame. They did what they had to do. If I had blazed at the appropriate age, I might have been one of those phoenix in the crowd saying, "It's not right... it's not right... banish him."

I get it. If fates were different, I could have been one of them. *Siearto me siearto* as the poets say.

I remember my last minutes among them, trying to recall details of the feast, the smells, who came to say good riddance and those who came to whisper, "We're sorry." Father warned me that if I did not find the cosmos it would never burn its version of eternity inside me. What a shitty thing to say as you're banishing your son. I know he was sad and I know he cried but the *best* advice he could give me, his youngest son, was to not give up looking? Yeah, well, I searched for the cosmos, Father. Searched hard. Tried every quack medical and paranormal attempt to blaze and you know what?

Fanaqua the cosmos.

And fanaqua you, Father. Fanaqua *you*.

I don't even know why I care.

I like the life I built for myself. I like the human form I sculpted, made strong by running through the woods, dodging the dtandiart bushes as they grasped for my legs. Leaping and twisting away from vegetational pursuits. On any forest trip I could have assumed phoenix form and flown to easy escape, but I preferred the challenge, the woods with their chlorophyll traps and trees that could squeeze the life out of you. I am strong as a human. The fire may not burn through me, but I am ripped. I like the curve of my human muscle. Assuming the human form pleases my sensuality.

Although what good is sensuality when you never get laid?

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I was strong when they banished me from the tribe and I grew stronger on my own. I do not miss them anymore, the cries of garnichula at night, the lazy sway of a thousand phoenix catching the winding night breezes so that sky creatures can sleep while aloft. Okay, I do miss that. I do.

But why did I burn yesterday? What happened? Granted it was not a blaze but the first step to blazing, so ordinary for a phoenix remains a big deal to me. I *spontaneously combusted*.

It could not have been the visitor, the under man.

I am vexed to remember his role in this, how I spontaneously burst into flames while he spoke to me.

Was he magic? Did he bring magic with him? I did not smell it, I could not see its hovering influence before my naked eye. I didn't think so. He shrugged, and I burst into flames. Had I not been so thrilled, so surprised, so utterly confounded to find myself engulfed, I'm sure I would have felt mortified he witnessed such an intimate encounter. As embarrassing as that may be, still I would do it again. I would never discourage the fire, could not, considering so many years had passed since the last one.

He shrugged and I burst into flames.

I must remember all that he said or did not say. Perhaps there is a clue as to why I blazed.

He approached my skyward dwelling appropriately, which couldn't have been easy. I'm three hours from the nearest town, and even that's not exactly city-sized. Up a mountain thick with forests. Not everybody can handle the forest. When he arrived, he showed the proper respect by not looking into my home, but rather sat cross-legged a good three hundred feet away from my carved out cave, sitting amidst gossiping bluebells, a safe distance from the long-necked tulips. But we both knew he had come to see me. No human makes that trip by accident.

Our social customs feel even more important at higher elevations, especially as those who soar the highest often have the sketchiest reputations. If a human treats you poorly on your first encounter, it reveals much about who they will be with you. I observed him in his sitting, watched him, and tested him by going about my business. When he demonstrated the patience of three hours, I decided to grant him audience. I approached him without word, stood before him, and led him to my home for food.

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Though I tried to hide my first impression, my heart circled itself twice when I looked at him up close and saw he was a flirrant. Absolutely glazing was he, he of slender build and strong arms. He was soft like newborn hannieanae, so sweet and pure, but he possessed strength in his body. I thought to myself, “He is known to work. He is known to running the forest”. His powerful legs. I could see their muscles ripple under the strange half-pants he wore. But his face was soft and welcoming. I had not seen a flirrant in many years. A cute one, too.

He sat beside me on my dwelling's floor, observing the custom of eating the first course before broaching words. He sat without staring. Glanced around. Waited patiently. It was my obligation to silently invite him to my home and offer him the first course. His obligation to keep his quiet. We shared a twinar melon, a richness of wet, sloppy fruit that made both of us grin despite our lack of words. We laughed at each other, the juices running down our chins and I felt at ease, at ease with this delicate flirrant, a slender and sensual flirrant. The scent of him was blackberries.

He wore a canvas-brown shirt, the dress of a peasant when they wish to draw attention to their social situation. Usually worn to make a political statement or ask for an extension on loans. But it's considered a statement, a brown shirt like that, to indicate subservient relationship. For such an obvious political garment, he really made it sexy, the top draw string untied and his hard biceps visible under the sleeves.

I tried not to stare at his coal-black hair but I do love the human hair, hair without feathers. His was short in some places, spiky and pointing outward with longer locks strategically placed as is the current fashion. I know the fashions. I do not live among humans but I smell their fashions when I fly low. The air sings.

Custom dictates host and guest remain silent until after first course. The exceptional guest waits until after the host has spoken. Only those schooled in the highest culture of manners do not speak until specifically *invited* to speak. He stayed silent until I invited him to speak. I was impressed by his manners, the long spikes in his human hair, his shimmering shirt. But I did not understand the half-pants he wore. He perplexed and fascinated me.

And then he asked me to accompany him on a quest.

I barely heard the details, only that *a phoenix was needed*. I had never been invited to quest, not by anyone, and asking a phoenix is pretty standard fare if

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you're crossing borders traveling to seascapes beyond the carnivorous woods. Back in the clan, Old Gravatar has been said to be *invited* on twenty-three quests in his long life. He only turned down eight requests. He was adventurous. *To be invited on a quest.* A dream I could never know.

I tried to enjoy the moment, feel the quest energy come through me but I couldn't. As noble as his manners, as attractive as this flirrant was to me, I could not accompany him, not me. I would not deceive him and honestly, every person we encountered would know I was a false guide. I wanted to feel happy but my shame overpowered me. I had to interrupt him.

I said, "Stop. You're asking the wrong phoenix. I cannot blaze. I cannot even ignite myself."

I felt embarrassed to say the words aloud. I had not spoken of it for years.

He shrugged.

"I am Gio, the broken phoenix."

He said, "Yes, I know."

I did not understand his reaction as if it did not matter to him, my failings.

I said, "You do not understand. I am broken. My tears do not heal. No blazing."

He shrugged again.

I burst into flames in front of him, like an uncontrollable teenage boy discovering orgasm and I reveled in the intensity, the heat that does not burn, the fire of a thousand suns coursing through me, knowing me. I ruined my shirt. Singed the feathers down the back of my neck. Then, I threw myself out the nearest carved portico, fleeing him on the wind. I had hoped my phoenix bird form would turn the fire into a blaze but the fire disappeared.

I coasted in phoenix form, wings spread and waiting for further incendiary. Although the lavender sky welcomed me, I did not blaze. I did not blaze.

He was gone when I finally returned, the flirrant, which was just as well. For a phoenix to blaze in front of another—human or any other species—without provocation or need is, well, an intimacy like that is not for a stranger's eyes, especially a handsome flirrant who says he does not mind your faulty powers.

I do not believe my blazing yesterday had anything to do with his presence. He shrugged. Would I have myself believe I blazed because he *shrugged* at me? No.

Perhaps it was something I ate.

But yesterday, did I not eat what I always do? Did I not dine on ripe raspberry leaves and the curry made from stems of bankoo? I am confident I did not poison myself. Curry's easier to make than spaghetti. Did I eat a trunkle berry and forget it? Did I, *I don't know*, breathe differently yesterday? I've been guessing possibilities for the spontaneous fire for the past twenty hours, the dog moon is almost halfway cleared through its two-day cycle. If I didn't eat anything different and my routine was close to every day's routine, could it possibly have been the well-mannered guest and his shrugging at me? The under man from the government?

No, I don't think so. He shrugged at me and I caught fire. That's not reasonable. That makes no sense.

I will never know.

He was gone when I flew back home. I checked every room but he left no trace of his presence.

Probably just coincidence anyway.

Shaking myself from this reverie, I look around to see if there's any required housekeeping. My pantry is stocked full, full as I keep it anyway. House looks clean, clean enough at least though I should scrub the lilyflowers again in the next few days so they don't bloom prematurely. I smile with satisfaction. My mountain cave is cozy, five full-sized rooms carved and polished out of Mount Amber marble. Marble-carving is an excellent hobby if you're banished and trying to cope with the world while simultaneously spending thousands of hours alone. I'm proud of the home I created in this mountain. Every luxury I could imagine I have, a flowing stream near the kitchen and a natural springs hot tub. I am happy here.

But I'm also exhausted from my meditation attempt to blaze and decide to reward myself with a fly around Mount Amber. I cross my living quarters, enjoying the polished marble against my bare feet and head to the terrace, standing naked before the afternoon suns. The peach sun glows brightly, the yellow sun less so, a dimming burnt yellow. I take a moment to stare at its beauty, the rawness, the dying star which is not dead. I say the prayer of our people, gratitude for the light from one sun, the heat from the other and we

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praise the dog moon for its intercession. The words are rote to me, a children's prayer but I like to express gratitude before jumping off a mountain cliff.

I spread my arms, look to admire my naked human form, my sinewy muscles, the bulges of my arms and legs from working myself in the forest below, and I leap.

*I leap.*

To gloast is to taste the air not the physical taste but the weight of it, the history of it. To gloast is to taste the world below, the heat and emotions and dramas rising from the planet surface and the currents brought into their lives. To gloast is to hear the dangerous forests and comfortably elude their siren songs, calling crawling animal life to come closer, closer, to be snatched up and devoured. The air is gourmet, a chunky stew of smells and history and things stirring. To pick a single story strand and follow it for fifty miles, well, is anything better? To sleep on the air, to catch the spiraling drifts is to know the news in a hundred miles each direction, the shared news of the world.

Gloasting is smell and choice and research and abandon, flying is—

Empty.

The taste is empty. There's nothing to the taste of this air, no thickness. Even the vegetation is silent. Something is very wrong. I assume wrong with me, something is broken in me, my ability to sense the world, to scream through the world by reading the air. What's wrong? Have I broken even further? What's next, my beak falls off?

I fly farther, beyond my comfortable routes, soaring lower to the point where hungry introod trees smell me as potential food. I'm too high for a dtandiant bush to snag me but I can usually hear their soft hum, their contented humming as they wait for food. Nothing. Why not?

My wings feel fine and I sense no dimming consciousness in me. What if it's not me?

What is wrong with the world?

Where is the story of our days, the stories of mountains and rivers and weather, stories I barely hear anymore so regular and constant are they, the songs of the planet's history? I forget to listen to them, old stories, because of so many new delicacies appearing every day. I fondly remember the time I took a vacation to follow the story of a meteor crash from three thousand years ago, following the story on the wind for hundreds of miles. That was a great gloasting vacation. Good story.

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Where are the stories? The air has no taste.

My sight is not fantastic in the sky, eyes turn inward, but I can make out enough shapes and distance to fly low and not get snagged. This is true for other winged creatures, the ones I speak with. They can flirt with introod trees. The chlorophyll traps in forests pose little threat.

So why do I sense a chittering truth trapped below me?

I circle down, still confused by my inability to read air, not trusting this sensation but it's true, a chittering truth lay trapped on the earth below. These little yellow birds dart the sky more cheerfully than other wingeds. They flip around nimbly on foot unless injured. They're never food for hungry forests. How can this be?

I circle the airspace a few times, trying to read any waves coming from the ground, a sense of panic from the chittering truth. But there is none.

I croak out an inquisitive scraw, curious to know if my fellow winged requests help. The reply comes almost immediately.

"No, thank you, thank you, Broken Phoenix, I'm fine, I'll die here and that's fine did you read the wind today or rather lack of read can you believe there's nothing to read no future or present I was interested in the happenings of a village a few miles from here, some problems they were having with sanitation of water they intended to fix with magic rather than labor which means there's always a curious fight between humans and their dusty understanding of magicks but there's no news from them, no news on the wind nothing is happening and what is the point of flight when there is no future because Broken Phoenix, there's no future."

It's not surprising that chittering truths fly alone. This one is exhausting, like all the others, and it's hard to know what truth they're revealing in the incessant warbling. Even now, it won't stop, well, *chittering*. I find myself confused, trying to understand its message about the nearby villages, the stories it was following and how they're all irrelevant. But it's good to know I'm not the only one who cannot read air today.

It's not just me who is broken.

But this isn't exactly good news. In fact, the reality now terrifies me, this confirmation that something's wrong with the very air around me. I need to get home and contemplate this. Start asking other wingeds if the air is wrong. Or



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rather, *not there*. Where is our air? Gloasting is for gathering data. I prefer my human form to digest it, uncover what it means. I should get home. Ironically, not much data to digest today. What could possibly be happening? Who can steal the very air itself?

I'd like to rescue this chittering truth, this little winged brethren who inexplicably landed on the earth near a number of forest dangers, most notably a dtandiart with its tentacles inches away from the birdie. I caw, a piercing warning screech but it's too late and the chittering truth is seized.

It cries out in a shrill voice. "I don't mind dying there's no point to flying, no living with no future but you will regret eating me I don't think a dtandiart's digestion can handle a creature of my—"

And that was the last truth it told.

I am greatly disarmed by this unnatural scene, the chittering truth who refused to live because it could not gloast the air as all winged creatures do. I dart up to get my bearings. I fly farther than I realize, which is no problem I guess, because it gives me time to study the landscape. I see another chittering dead on the ground, presumably spit up by a dtandiart bush, picky eaters whose grasp for food exceeds their taste buds. They are killers without discernment, sometimes camouflaged in their surroundings by the rotting piles of food they killed and refused to eat. The air reveals nothing, no stories from the purple forest, the neighboring treeless forest, and when I glide, I sense no temperatures, no hot and cold stories in the air. This is some serious fanaquing shit.

By the time I reach Mount Amber, I am full of sensations, or lack of sensations. Full of data or lack of data from the empty currents. I remember layers of air I had long forgotten, the geological story of Amber Mountain always in the background, a low rumbling in the air. I am eager to collapse in human form, eat some leftovers, and perhaps head into the forest myself on foot, for exercise and to learn of any other changes.

If I were civilized, living among my kind, I would land majestically, perch with dignity or flap myself silly, hovering until my legs reached down and touched the polished mountain floor.

Fanaqua that. I'm a bachelor.

I zip right through my center window, the best entrance from this angle and I stretch into my human form, face down and collapse the final three feet onto

the bed, sprawled naked. Just the way I like. What happened out there? Why couldn't I read the world?

I hear an unexpected noise behind me, a clearing of a throat.

A creamy voice I recognize from yesterday says, "That's quite an entrance."

I leap up, shocked. What? Who? I face him, the under man from the government, the one from yesterday. The flirrant with the spiky black hair and the beautiful lips. He does not wear his peasant garb today.

Oh. Did I know he had beautiful lips? Did I think that yesterday?

"I didn't realize phoenix were hung," he says, nodding toward my nudity.

I look down and see its thickness. "Not all phoenix. I am, I guess."

What an odd flirrant, so direct and nonplussed. And why the hell is he in my home?

"Strange under man, why are you back in my home?"

"The quest," he says. "The one we discussed yesterday."

I study him as I did yesterday while we ate and did not speak. He is handsome and I am attracted to him, I know that now. I know that. Could—could that be the source of my fire, this attraction? His eyes are different from most humans, a gentle curve upon them. I've never seen curved eyes. I enjoy his slender frame. He dresses as a man who understands fashion as well, nicer clothes than mine, a shimmering antherixal blue, almost the pale shade of a winged's egg. I love antherixal, a shade that almost floats off the color itself. He wears longer pants today. I cannot see his leg muscles. These are sturdy pants, a fabric unknown to me.

I say, "Today you do not wear half-pants."

He glances down. "Today I wore pants for traveling. These are called jeans."

"I do not know them. What tailor made them?"

He smiles. "These are from Eddie Bauer."

"I do not know Eddie Bauer."

"I imagine not. Do you spend most of your time in human form naked?"

"Yes."

“Ah,” he says. I see him look at my sex again. “Well, *that* shouldn’t be too distracting.”

His tone is hard for me to read, serious or not, I do not know. There is a slight twist to his meanings that is confusing. I like it. None of which matters or answers why he’s here.

I say, “Why are you in my home?”

“Yesterday, I approached you about a journey to be made with me. A quest. We didn’t finish the conversation.”

He hesitates.

I blush, remembering. “I apologize. It was far too intimate an expression—”

“No,” he says. “Don’t apologize. I loved it.”

Now he blushes.

He says, “You were beautiful and calm and then suddenly your entire body was engulfed in these stunning, orange flames, twisting in a way I’ve never seen fire do. I loved it. I mean, my cock got hard.”

He stutters a laugh and I can tell he did not mean to share that.

I fear I cannot tell who is more embarrassed at this point, me for my overly-intimate beginning of a blaze or him for having gushed as its witness.

“This is awkward,” he says sheepishly.

“Actually, I’m glad you witnessed what you did,” I say, trying to sound sure of myself. “I told you I could not blaze and my tears do not heal. You witnessed it first-hand.”

“But you *did* blaze.”

“No, I did not. I burst into fire, that’s not the blaze.”

“What is a blaze? What happens?”

“To be consumed by fire is the same as getting wet when submerging in a pond. *Getting wet* is not swimming. Fire is only the first part of blazing.”

“Okay, well, what happens when you really blaze?”

I have no problem answering the truth. “I do not know. I have never blazed.”

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“But surely the other phoenix told you—”

“Never. It is forbidden to discuss how the blaze works with those who have never done so. Doing so may interfere with their natural self-discovery of the first blaze. To tell details to one who cannot blaze is to curse him for life. This is equivalent to the heinous human crime of murder times twelve. With an axe. And making them into sausage afterwards.”

“That’s unbelievably disgusting.”

“Good. I am trying to dissuade you from this notion I can somehow help you. I know nothing about blazing.”

I pause, embarrassed. Why did I just say so much? I cannot seem to stop talking. He makes me nervous.

“There is speculation among my people that when I was young an older phoenix must have accidentally described the process to me which is why I never blazed myself. It’s not true, but a cloud of suspicion falls over my father to this day. My brother, former friends who could blaze. All were impacted. This has never happened to a phoenix before, and it drove the community apart, the suspicion that someone told me how to blaze which is why I can’t.”

*Great Vantaros, I cannot quit talking.*

“But nobody told you anything.”

“No. Yesterday was the third time in my life and that was just the beginning of a blaze. To the ironical gods, yesterday after your arrival in my front yard I wore clothes. I never wear clothes. Then, I set my best shirt on fire. A true phoenix doesn’t burn off his clothes and singe his feathers. He is consumed. Those phoenix in the Daisy class can reassemble their original clothes. It is whispered they can command the molecules themselves to reassemble. Now, *that’s* a blaze. Of course, nobody really talks about it. There’s less prohibition around class talk than blaze talk so sometimes you’ll catch an old phoenix sharing her suspicions about what makes tulip class. Tulip class are the true phoenix.”

“A true phoenix,” he says and smiles. “I don’t believe you even know what that means. Do you know where the blazing comes from or why your tears allegedly have healing properties? And do you even know why your clan assigns ridiculous class rankings named after flowers?”

I'm afraid I'm a little defensive in my reply. "I know everything my people know. I was taught in all ways of my ancestors, the shared knowledge. I can read the winds."

The memory of this afternoon's unsuccessful flight soars through me again. I do not have time to dissuade this flirrant from my home.

"I require time alone," I say, leaving the bed and crossing the floor. "I apologize I cannot be the phoenix you need for your quest, your adventure. A phoenix is only as good as his abilities to guide and protect you. I advise you travel to the Mackwell Plains to gain audience with the phoenix clan and be paired with the one who is best suited."

"I did. None of them were suited to me."

He surprises me. Few actually venture to Mackwell Plains. And while it unlikely he saw anyone I knew, I wish him to speak more of his adventures there. Always love news from home.

"What did you find? Which phoenix gave you audience?"

"None. They refused to hear my quest. I was unworthy."

This shocks me. "Wait, did you say you were *not* worthy or unworthy."

"Unworthy," he says. "They wouldn't hear my quest request because I am unworthy."

The phoenix are fair. Phoenix can see beyond a man's sins to assess the golden heart within. Very few are turned away for being unworthy. In fact, it is considered a disgrace to the phoenix to label someone *unworthy*, which means he must have done something incalculably evil. Or he's an outsider. Maybe just an outsider. He doesn't look super evil. He's cute.

And unworthy or not, I am rude not to offer him a beverage in my home, especially after his adherence to proper ritual yesterday.

I say, "I offer you sweet beverages or sour."

He responds with the appropriate etiquette. "As you wish and feel are plentiful."

I head into the kitchen area. "Your manners are excellent. You cool with sour?"

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He says, "Yeah, great. Atremia if you have any. And I've studied your customs for many years. Are you curious why I was unworthy?"

"Yes, of course. But I wish to discern for myself before I ask you questions. I'm guessing you're an outsider. You just used the phrase *your customs*, which suggests these customs are not native to you. Outsiders are awfully rare but do sometimes show up. Usually they come to the Mackwell Plains for a "take me home" quest. Very infrequently, like once a generation. They are always refused as unworthy. In that unique situation, it's nothing personal."

He bows his head which means he intends to contradict me. "You do not speak truth, Broken Phoenix. Once, a millennia ago, an unworthy was granted a phoenix for a quest. I know it's true. I read it in a book."

"Stop." I hold up my hand. "I cannot hear this filth."

The flirrant smiles. "To know if I speak true, could you not assume your phoenix form and circle your mountain-top home to read me on the wind? To gloast my story?"

"Normally, yes. But my abilities seem to be broken. Something is wrong with the air. Yet that cannot be. I mean, you can't *not have* air one day. It doesn't just go away. The only reasonable explanation is that something else is broken in me. But I met a chittering truth who couldn't read the air either. Little guy just stood there and waited for a dtandiart bush to twist its head off."

"Yeah," the handsome flirrant says sadly. "Chittering truths do not handle bad news well. But the problem is not your abilities. The problem is this world will die in three days. There's no future left to read. The planet has begun shutting down."

I stop pouring atremia into small bowls.

I frown. "This cannot be. You are wrong. Who did you say you represented? I know you are an under man."

"Yes," he says. "I am. I am an under-under-undersecretary to the royal historian, Lorgan Smirothing. I work in the royal library of Tibbits, throne land to King Nestar and Queen Llywell—"

"Yes," I say, cutting him off. "Many kings and queens below. They all have kingdoms. Very important, I'm sure. And they have *books*, I take it?"

"Yes."

This is odd. He has no power. An under-under-undersecretary is no use to anyone. You wouldn't send someone of his rank to initiate a quest. So, who sent him? Why is he here?

I say, "Usually, only the lowest of the low are sent to work in libraries. The criminals. Those with no future."

"Yes, that's true," he says in a tone that is cheerful.

I finish pouring his atremia into our bowls and sprinkle crushed radish on top. Always nice to add a garnish.

"And if I'm not mistaken, the relative court power of an under-under-under..." I say, letting my voice trail off.

"Yes, I have no power," he says with the same brightness. "It's a terrible position. No hope for advancement, minimal financial incentive or opportunity to attend court graces. Just read books. My job is to read many, many books."

"I am sorry," I say, and I do feel sorrow for his predicament. He must have killed many to be punished so mercilessly.

"Thank you for your empathy," he says.

Again, he is hard to read. He does not seem sorrowful.

He might be insane. A horrible judgment placed upon him as heavy as this, *book reader*, can sometimes break a man. I have spent time wandering through kingdoms during my banishment. I know what humans value and who they do not. A book reader, three-times an under has no reason to feel pride. But he does not seem distressed, so insanity is on the table.

I set the bowl in front of him and say, "You seem to not mind your cruel fate. Book readers I have seen are often the most miserable of wretches."

"I shall tell you a secret," he says. "The first of many. I love what I do. I *love* reading books."

Great Vantarass, he is insane.

He astonishes me again, this odd flirrant with his creamy skin and slight slope to his eyes. I find myself liking him more for his reckless confession, even if the confession itself sickens me. He nods to the left of him, nods to the right, the appropriate expression of gratitude before he takes a deep sip.

"This is delicious," he says.

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“*Pinalto ad yiirmatano*,” I say.

“Yes, thank you,” he says, “Honor to honor. Though I never get why that response is appropriate to a compliment.”

I shrug. “I dunno. Just something people say.”

“No, I get it. It’s a saying. But in every other context, *honor to honor* means something different, to exchange a piece of your private soul with another’s soul—”

“Is this why you’re here? To argue empty phrases people say to be polite?”

“The quest,” he says. “Thank you for getting us back on track. From these books, I discovered the world will end in roughly three days. I’m not a scientist, but my translation of ancient Sarini is better than the average bear. I tried to discuss it with two other readers but they refused to hear me out. One threatened to extinguish himself if I explained further and when I did explain further, he threw himself out a window. He did not die, but he broke a leg. And a dtandiart tried to suck his brain out of his ear while he lay there. It took four minutes for a medical technician to arrive.”

“Medical technician,” I say. “It’s an odd word. I basically get your meaning. A healant.”

“Yes. Sorry. Your language is the third one I’ve learned since arriving,” he says. “I don’t know the words for everything.”

He smiles bashfully, yet his command of the language is spectacular. I knew a few phoenix he could teach in the ways of words and their polite construction.

I *like* this flirrant. I do.

I smile and say, “Your language skills are impressive. Good grasp of manners. I’ve decided you’re a foreigner. Outsider. Most people around here are never that respectful. Obviously, that’s why you’re unworthy. But outsiders are really, really rare.”

He smirks at me. “Not that rare. We try to keep a low profile because you guys don’t like to hear about us. But trust me, there’s a number of us outsiders here in your land. We tend to avoid each other to better blend in, but we sometimes need to see each other, to feel less foreign for a little while. We call what you’d describe as secret meetings, but we’re not planning an uprising. Sometimes we just get together for an old-fashioned game night.”



I did not know this thing about foreigners, that they are here and more numerous than we thought. I guess I've never really thought of the foreign land they come from. There are many parts of the world unknown to me. Some of them must have foreign lands. I do not read their stories in the air. If I did, perhaps I would know what is a *game night*. Maybe sex games?

"I did not know," I say, feeling a little ashamed. Disdain for foreigners is one of the oldest prejudices and while it is fading, it is not gone. Especially among the phoenix. We hold a real grudge about that for some reason.

He says, "I would have never revealed this truth about our secret game nights but with the world ending in three days, it hardly seems worth hiding."

Can this be real? Three days?

He sips and then speaks again. "The whole thing was pretty terrible. I had never tried to talk directly to an under-undersecretary before. There's an intense hierarchy of submitting news to the wind, which is complicated by direct communication, so we avoid it. But this seemed important, so I tried and he threw himself out a window. When I attempted to explain myself to the royal historian, he threatened to have me killed. I didn't realize the consequences were so severe."

"I'm not surprised he jumped out a window," I say. "Doomed to a life of reading books."

"I will never understand why you people think it's a fate worse than death," he says. "Where I am from, people read all the time. They read books for pleasure."

"Pleasure? What kind of twisted mind convinces them reading is pleasure?"

"No one," he says. "They read because they enjoy making meaning from the words and images on the page."

This alarms me more than I can say, that he would take pleasure from such diabolical tortures. Perhaps I should feel threatened by him. Only a perverse man could smile at the cruelty of reading books. I no longer feel charitable, whether I am attracted to him or not.

"Who are you? Why have you returned to my dwelling?"

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“My name is Edgar Kohn. Although here, I am known as Kohntali. I told you yesterday my reason for intruding into your private life. I need your guidance. I need you to accompany me on a quest.”

“You need a broken phoenix on a quest to save the world which ends in three days?”

“Something like that, sure. It’s a quest where we find things and go to mysterious places. Questing type stuff.”

Is this why I can’t read the air? The world is ending? Can this be true?

He finishes drinking the atremia and says, “That radish is a great touch. Very nice finish.”

He is funny so I laugh. He has disarmed me again. “Thank you. You are very calm for a man who knows the world will end in three days. And what kind of assistance would you like from a phoenix who cannot blaze?”

He stands and looks at me with an odd expression. He says, “You really don’t understand much about the phoenix abilities, do you?”

He makes me nervous inside. I feel like a damn chittering truth around him.

Instead of answering, I ask, “What do you know of the phoenix? What abilities?”

He walks closer to me. “If you come with me, I’ll explain secrets long forgotten.”

“No,” I say, stepping backward. “The phoenix would never tell you the clan tales.”

He’s so near me and so warm. His smile is so beautiful.

“You’re right,” he says smiling at me, a beguiling, powerful smile. “They did not reveal secrets to me. I learned these secrets on my own.”

His presence near me makes me feel warm.

He puts one hand on my arm. “Secrets revealed in *books*.”

I burst into flames.

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## Chapter 2

### *The Mountain Dew Quest*

I'm going on a quest.

As my flames extinguish, my mind is instantly made up. *I almost blazed!*

I examine my stomach, my nuts, the fire is gone and only the smell of singed chest hair remains. At least I wasn't wearing clothes that time. I don't want to show him the insane joy I feel at having *almost* blazed twice in two days. This is amazing, but I've got to play it cool.

"So," I say, brushing the ash off my shoulders. "We're going on a quest."

He looks at me with mild concern. "Your head's still on fire."

"Oh. Yeah."

My god, how embarrassing.

I say, "Unless I switch to phoenix form it just sort of burns itself out eventually. Sorry for the smell of burnt feathers."

I'm trying to impress him but goddamn it, *I caught fire again*—second time in two fanaquing days! Not a full blaze, but twelve-year-old phoenix have this same sensation in the middle of the night and when his or her head catches on fire, everyone nods knowingly and says, "The time is coming." This is the most promising omen for me in *years*, a fact that is now tempered only by the realization the world ends in three days.

Shit.

I say, "Will you excuse me for a moment?"

He smiles and nods. I walk to my terrace, plunging over the western ledge, falling at increasing speed and since today I have no time to play, I switch to phoenix form immediately and circle the mountain top to taste what I can. Nothing. Fanaqua. I spread my wings as far as tips will go to take a moment to celebrate the fire, the glorious fire. *Twice in two days*. That means something.

It fizzles out, but I'm too optimistic to be saddened by this detail. Twice in two days.

And I'm going on a quest.

“You go where you go,” as my older brother would tell me when I complained about his night drifting. He would wake up miles further from the clan than was prudent. I would chase him down, chastise him and accompany his flight back toward the plains. I worried about him playing the bad boy, and to the ironic gods, he’s now a respected Tulip class phoenix and I’m the banished one.

*You go where you go.* Good advice for me.

I don’t want to be a bad host, so I return quickly, making sure to flap frantically to stabilize myself and angle toward the terrace. No need to fly in through the window like a savage. Poor guy has seen enough today.

And he’s a foreigner. I forgot to ask which shore or plain.

I stroll across the terrace to greet him again. “Still nothing in the air. As in, *there’s no air* outside.”

He shrugs. “Planet’s shutting down.”

“Okay,” I say. “Let’s do this quest thing to save the world. I’m in. But before we go, if the world really is ending in three days, I would like to drink an elixir. You might enjoy this. It’s a rare luxury, something my brother brought me secretly a few years ago. Its name is Diet Mountain Dew.”

“Mountain Dew?” he says, eyes widening.

“*Diet Mountain Dew*,” I say, repeating the words as it was taught to me.

“May I see it?” he says, his face still surprised.

I present the final two bottles. The bottles are naked and the neon green liquid glows through the strange material. He holds it up and examines it. He could not have ever seen this particular treasure. My brother assured me it was rarer than a Tharlanian egg child. Darwin wouldn’t lie. He’s the only one in the clan who secretly visits me every few years.

“Holy shit,” the under man says. “It’s Diet Mountain Dew.”

I am proud he is impressed. “If you like, you may consume—”

Before I can explain the painstaking ritual to crack the delicate seal, how it’s a good idea to roll the bottle on its side slowly, back and forth, to ease in opening the difficult top, he twists the cap in one quick stroke and chugs the bottle.

*My god.* He’s going to kill himself.

He continues to chug it, gulp it down and I am awash in equal parts horror and rich admiration.

I can't even drink two capfuls without getting completely drunk.

He finishes half the bottle in one pull. I am convinced I will clean up his vomit momentarily. But instead, his face finally turns to greet mine with the most astonished delight.

"My god," he says. "I never thought I'd taste this again."

He immediately guzzles the second half of the bottle, and I think I might pass out from a drunken contact.

Who is this insane warrior? Who would dare death by guzzling the green elixir this way?

The bottle is empty.

My god.

He will now die. How can he *not* die?

"This quest is gonna be great," he yells and shakes the bottle over his head. "*I just sucked down a Dew.*"

He has now caught my attention, this warrior flirrant. "What is your name, again?"

"I am Edgar. Actually, I'd like it if you called me Edgar. Nobody around here does. They put on *tali* at the end of my last name to make sure everyone knows I am lowly in station."

"Yes, they do that."

He says, "And your name is Gio, right?"

"I am Gio, the Broken Phoenix."

"How about we just go with Gio for now? I'm not convinced you're broken."

I don't know what to say to this. He is insane and knows secrets and drinks a Diet Mountain Dew in two massive gulps. He's not real, this one. I've never seen anything like this. He's the third person to visit me here in the past six years, so it's not like I know a lot of full-humans for comparison, but this guy is a fanaquing nut job.

My preparations for departure are few. In fact, all I need is good shoes. That's important. Maybe a cape for warmth, depending on how plentiful the

warming rocks are. I feel a bit foolish, headed out on a quest with the handsome flirrant who I must now admit, makes me want sex. I want him for sex. I had sex many years ago. But long has it been since I quivered for sex. I am sure quivering now.

“Hey, wanna wrap that sausage?” he says. “I like looking at it, trust me. But it’s a distraction. I can’t be checking you out while we’re crossing the purple forest trying to avoid killer plants. At least put on a jockstrap.”

“I can wear a jockstrap,” I say. “I have those. I was hoping you would notice my quivering. My hardness that was growing.”

I am done feeling nervous around him. I have made my decision.

“Trust me. I noticed.”

“So are we of the sex? I am a flirrant, too, Edgar, and I invite you to sexual relations. Yes?”

“Yikes, buy a guy dinner first, will ya?” Edgar says, smiling and admiring my nakedness.

I enjoy his look of affection. “We are direct, the phoenix. I make no apology. When we decide, it’s decided. When we want something, we want it.”

“Don’t worry,” Edgar says. “I’m interested. I want it. Just not now. World ending? Remember that part?”

“Yes, about that. I have questions.”

“Pack your stuff,” Edgar says. “We can talk as we head down the mountain and into the forest.”

I grab my red cloak instead of the green one. I like the green one better but if I accidentally blaze again, I’d rather not destroy my good cloak. Oh wait, it doesn’t matter anymore. World is ending. I honor his wishes and wear a jockstrap, the red one to match my cloak. Hey, I know a little about fashion, too.

“I’m ready,” I say. “Let’s go.”

He licks his lips and I think he finds my appearance favorable. Through his rough-fabric pants I can sense he is quivering too. Maybe the drunken elixir helps his quivering.

His eyes find my remaining bottle. “Maybe we should bring the Diet Mountain Dew.”

My suspicions are that Diet Mountain Dew makes him horny. We're bringing the bottle.

I am so surprised by his guzzling I forget to drink a capful of mine. I pick up the bottle and toss it to him. He catches it and puts it inside his satchel, which had been sitting in the corner of my room. I hadn't even noticed. He wraps the satchel over both shoulders so the weight is at his back. Makes sense. Easier to dodge trees that way.

We take the trail down my front yard and into the forest. We concentrate on our navigation, staying on the winding stone paths. We are safe while we are on them, free from common crawling forest attackers. But these paths are hundreds of years old and stones get dislodged. Old roads require maintenance, which doesn't always happen, especially in small hamlets with a limited budget for roads and transportation. Not enough come this way to make it worth it to repair these paths.

When vines throw themselves at him, he extracts a blade and cuts them. They retreat.

An introod tree here and there impedes our progress and a bermolyte attacks, which he dispatches before I can aid him. Impressive. Bermolytes have four eyes per branch. They can usually anticipate counterattacks.

Our concentration is rewarded. After an hour's work navigating, we merge with a more direct forest path, the wide section of the trail where we can walk side by side and speak. The further we are from the trail edges, the safer we are.

"You fight the forest well," I say. "Your agility impresses me."

"Thank you," he says. "*Pinalto ad yiirmatano.*"

I nod and say, "Honor to honor. I would ask how you trained and got so good. Some locals never get used to the forests and avoid them as much as possible. If they travel it's only underground. But first, I think we should discuss bigger issues."

He shrugs. "Okay. Shoot."

I like his nonchalance. I say, "Why is the world ending?"

"The dying sun. It's about to go supernova."

"But it's been about to go supernova for centuries. A thousand years they say."

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“Well, okay, but *now* it’s time to go. You guys knew it was dying. You have a million songs about the dying sun. So guess what? It’s *dying*.”

“But so suddenly?”

He drops his head indicating disagreement. “No, not suddenly. Books have been written calculating the dying sun—”

“Do not speak to me of books unless you want me to throw myself out a window.”

He chuckles. “If you jumped out a window, wouldn’t you just turn into your phoenix form?”

“Yeah, but symbolically, it’s still a pretty big gesture.”

I don’t know why I am so silly with him, so ridiculous and pleased to earn his chuckle

He says, “Four hundred years ago, the people of this planet created a mechanical system to regulate the dog moon’s orbit.”

“Yes, but that had nothing to do with the dying sun. The dog moon’s orbit was breaking up.”

“Actually, your dying star was slowly drawing it out of orbit. I’m saying, your books discuss the dying sun a lot. But then you guys got into this hate relationship with your books and basically forgot you’re supposed to be preparing for this event. It’s all right there. Your sun has been dying for centuries. The final days are here, Gio. Three days.”

“The sun will explode?”

“I guess. All I know is that the yellow sun’s influence—similar to its influence on the dog moon—reaches your planet in a few days. So whether the star blows before the weekend or three years from now, or four hundred years from now, I can’t really say. I’m not a scientist. Either way, there’s enough radiation or an actual explosion that means life on this planet is over. In three days.”

“That seems impossible.”

“I don’t want you to jump out a window on me, but I have confirmed in certain source material that it’s coming. Signs are aligning. Hey, look ahead—a griiknar patch. They shouldn’t be blooming right now but they can grow across the stones and dim the heat or—”



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"I know that," I say, with a little edge. "I lived here my whole life, not like you, outsider."

I'm not really mad at him. But I am rather attached to this world and he's convincing me it's over.

Now I feel shame. I say, "I do not feel the sharpness I felt a moment ago."

He says, "Cape."

His response indicates we can move forward without discussing my sharpness any further. A gesture of kindness in honoring my privacy. I soften to him further. He is a good one.

I say, "What signs? How sure are you?"

He says, "The air stops being air. The planet starts shutting down. Haven't the introod trees seemed sluggish to you? I fought off a bermolyte a few minutes ago and its attack was slow. Those things strike fast."

"Maybe. But a bermolyte's sluggishness can depend on time of day, the suns' combined heat, how recently they fed. The hot and cold stones. Could be anything. What else?"

"How about the air being gone? Doesn't *that* seem significant?"

He's right. Water cannot not be wet. Soil cannot not be green. You can't separate that out. The air is... well, the air. It's not possible to take away its weights and sounds and stories. The texture. The strands. No gloasting? That can only be bad on a global level.

I say, "There appears to be an introod grove ahead which may cause us a slight workout. But answer me this. Why did no one listen to you?"

"I'm an under-under-undersecretary," he says, and points to the introods. "Plus, I am a foreigner. Plus I tried to talk books with someone which is an offense punishable by death. And I'm a flirrانت."

I scoff. "Flirrانت? You may have mistakenly used the wrong word. Being a flirrانت is almost a preferred life condition. That should have raised your credibility."

"It did," he sighs. "You're right. I just said that because I was feeling sorry for myself and some leftover homophobia from my old world crept up. Surprised me. Sorry. Here, flirrانتs of all variety are honored. But the fact that I love books—"

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“Stop talking,” I say. “Seriously. I don’t want to hear this.”

“Nobody does,” he says and his voice sounds lonely.

I was too harsh on him. It’s a strange, disgusting habit, but there are worse vices. Not many, but a few. It must be a hard life for him, to love something so many of us despise.

I say, “I have been rude about your book loving. I apologize. What do your books say of phoenix abilities.”

“Let’s handle these introods first,” he says and stretches his arms.

We fight the trees by letting their weight and slow bulky movements do the work. We race between them nimbly, letting them punch each other with futile attempts to make us their late lunch. People get killed by introods all the time, usually from accidentally wandering too close or attempting to taunt the introod into action. But Edgar possesses style and grace leaping over their trunks and sidestepping harsh branch blows, making this dangerous exercise look like a dancer’s warm-up routine. He looks so supple and sexy.

“I would have sex with you,” I cry out, midway through the grove.

“I would have sex with you too,” Edgar yells in reply. “Just not right... now.”

Another twenty minutes later, we clear the dtandiart bushes just beyond the introod grove, a grove which seemed much longer and thicker than it first appeared. We walk side by side for another few minutes, scanning for threats.

I like his voice and hearing his odd ways of answering, so I start another conversation.

“Where do we head? What’s the first step in our quest?”

“We need juice from a crocodile’s eye,” he says.

I frown. “I have no fanaquing idea what you mean.”

He says, “No, no, not crocodile. It’s like that word. *Cronocodille*.”

“Oh, well, why didn’t you just say that?”

“I tried.”

That should be easy to retrieve. Cronocodille Eye is the wetness in a cliff’s rock flowers, the baked wet sunlight in its delicate pink folds. I can fly to those. Easy.

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I say, "What else?"

Edgar says, "Oh, well, there's a spell. But we can't do the spell from just anywhere. We have to find the castle that's secluded in the purple forest. It's called the purple castle but it's not really purple in color. More like grey stone and bluish-indigo mortar."

I say, "Must be an old stone construction, like a thousand years. Dark blue suggests the sap of the indigenous trees. People stopped using that sap for construction hundreds of years ago."

"Yes, it's old. Ancient power. It will strengthen the spell I'm attempting. But the path to get to it may take a full day. There are a couple curses along the way we have to temporarily unjinx."

"Unjinxing magic?" I say, raising my eyebrow. "I thought an under-under-under—"

"Yeah, well, just little magicks. Spells of convenience. I can't do serious magic, not like people magic. More like parlor tricks."

"I do not know parlor tricks," I say. "But you seem awfully modest about this. Tell me, Edgar Kohntali—"

"Edgar is fine," he says.

"—what's the mightiest spell you ever did."

"Oh," he says, blushing, and I find him adorable. "Well, there was a time when I had a mouse in my dwelling, a stubborn mouse—"

"We're beginning a quest together," I say, "Probably not a great idea to lie to a phoenix, minutes after surviving our first minor battle together."

He scowls. "Fine. I enchanted myself to be able to translate ancient Sarini."

"Whoa," I say. "People magic. That's... that's advanced."

"I didn't use people magic," he says, "I used language translation magic. It's a lower order. I created an invisible reading cloak around me and used a blending spell to splice it to me permanently. It's less risky than people magic and accomplishes the same thing for about half the spell power."

He is clever. I would not have thought that kind of magic would work.

I say, "Yes, and a binding spell is less trouble if you get caught. People magic is only to be practiced by mages. Not under-under-undersecretaries. I

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must say, from what little I know, it's extremely hard to accomplish language translation spells. A bold claim."

He buzzes his lips into a strange three-part sound, the low tone conveying emotion, the middle message his words and the highest frequency conveying the vulnerability of the message, the heart of the conflict and fear that lingers.

"No need to show off," I say. "I get it. You speak ancient Sarini."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to brag. I just wanted you to know I told the truth."

I chuckle. "I was teasing you. Well, mostly. Yesterday when you were at my home, I did not sense magic around you. No lingering trace of spells."

"Yeah, well, people get nervous when a foreigner practices magic, so I created a scrubbing spell that auto-executes after each spell. Essentially it clears my magical browser history immediately."

"I do not understand."

"I wrote a spell that eliminates traces of magic. It runs after every spell."

"You are clever with magic."

"Not really. It's just the lower-tier spells."

"You are too modest. I've never heard of someone accomplishing people magic outcome with a lower level magic. And spells that automatically execute sounds tricky. But honestly, I would rather talk about a sexual relationship. Is it okay to discuss our sex at this point?"

"Save it," he says. "And trust me, I am not being a cock tease. I will put out because you're fucking hot, Gio. And I like you."

I say, "There are things I want you to know about sucking my penis."

"Buddy, I am sorry but sex talk is over for now," he says. "Or I will drop to my knees. And we don't have time."

After a moment he says, "Though I am curious, so let's talk about your dick later. For now, we should think about the purple forest. I know a path so maybe by tomorrow morning—"

"Sooner," I say.

Edgar says, "Sooner than what?"

"We will arrive sooner than tomorrow morning. I now remember the castle of which you speak. I see it when I fly."

I stare at the paving stones, looking for a special combination. I believe they were on this path. Isn't this where I've seen them? I'm pretty sure. The forest is full of shortcuts, available only to those who align the right combination of stones. Humans have a hard time reading stones. It's not like the shortcuts are secret but people rarely figure out how to take advantage. I can see the energy of many things, including rocks. When I visit town for supplies, I get so focused on running my errands I forget to explore the many paths like these. I should stop and take a shortcut sometime. Explore somewhere different. Maybe next week—

Oh wait. World's ending.

"Here it is," I say, moving two stones toward each other and a third adjacent and touching at the right angle. It's interesting the makers of this shortcut chose two hot stones and one cold. Usually it's the other way around.

The gateway opens and though we must pass a few trees to reach the front gates, within a long minute we're standing in the purple castle's courtyard.

"There it is," I say, and he looks astonished.

For the first time since I met him, he looks unable to speak.

"I know where to find some good Cronocodille Eye around here," I say. "There are cliff walls not far."

Edgar looks alarmed by this news. I can't fathom him.

He says, "Those cliffs are four hours away. We could go tomorrow."

"That's flying southernty. Northernty is only ten minutes."

"Nobody goes north," he says.

"*Northernty*." I hate to correct his pronunciation but he's a smart guy. I'm sure he appreciates the feedback. "And you're right, nobody travels Northernty by foot. Or by mountain travel. Not worth it. But by flight, it's only a few minutes."

"Shit," he says, "we could be doing this spell within the hour."

Why doesn't he seem happy about this?

"Yup," I say, "I'll go get the Cronocodille Eye and you get the spell set up inside the castle. I sense prevention access spells nearby but I know you can get inside because you volunteered you had seen the interior walls."

"I sure did, didn't I," Edgar says and he winces.

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“Are you in pain?”

He looks at me and smiles. “No. Not at all. This is just happening faster than I expected it to. A *lot* faster.”

I say, “You have a carrying vessel for Cronocodille Eye, I assume?”

“Yes,” he says.

He takes his time unpacking the small cassilar so I look around, appreciating the rich privacy and scenery. A lake separates us from the castle, okay, a pond. But maybe somewhere between a pond and a lake for its size boasts duffer fish and they melt in your mouth like butterlangho, sweet and creamy. I could eat duffer fish all day. After the world is saved I should cook some up for us. That might impress him. I like the idea of impressing him.

The castle itself is shiny grey stone and rich blue seams, almost glowing in this odd light, the two suns partially veiled by the gilliglack trees, their wide palm branches providing a decent cover. Gilliglacks are benign, almost indifferent to people. You only get a rash if you touch them. I like this space. I should look into this as a summer cottage.

As he fumbles in his bag, I admire the lake, the shaded yard area, the glowing sunworm spots making the southern side warm and rich in luxury. I strip off my jockstrap and unseal the clasp holding my cape in place.

He hands me the cassilar and I put it in my mouth. Hard to say goodbye this way but I’m only gone for ten minutes, no need to make a scene.

“Got naked I see,” he says with a sexy smirk.

I wink.

He watches me as I take off, a light jog away, and maybe I’m showing off, just a little, as I pick up speed, really start into a full run, right toward three introod trees who lazily rouse from what must be a deep sleep. They probably don’t see much food around here. But they rise to the occasion, beginning to pull themselves into full crushing weight and I could have been gone by now but my imminent danger is more glamorous this way. The introods wind up to blast me and I transform into the phoenix bird, soaring beyond their power in seconds.

That was fun.

The cliffs aren’t far. The flight isn’t challenging. Boy, this is the easiest quest I think I could imagine. I should be back home before dinner. A castle. A

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spell. Some Cronocodille Eye. He wasn't kidding about practicing low level magic. But how can a spell this weak save the planet?

What if the planet really ends? What if the spell is not successful?

I think about my father, my brother, two sister-cousins, and a father brood of four other phoenix who helped raise me and Darwin. My big brother, Darwin, a Tulip class phoenix. Who would have expected that big idiot to grow into a man so gallant and strong, such a friend to collective phoenix life? He is the best phoenix I know. I miss the shit out of him. I will miss him even more if the world explodes. And his brood. He carried wind of them to me so I might know their stories from the Mackwell Plains. We swam the sky together so I might learn of his joyful life there. Happily married. Loves his kids. And I learned my big brother misses me every day of my banishment. It makes me sad to think I have nieces and nephots who have not smelled my wind.

And Father. I love him too.

My banishment was as painful for him as it was for me. Nobody spent more time trying to train me to blaze than him. Although I see him in a kinder light most days, I still alternate between loving him for not giving up on me all those years and hating him for failing me. I focus on his terrible parting advice but I honestly don't hate him. But I wish he hadn't failed me. Or I hadn't failed him. One of the two. Our fires should dance as a father and son on the northernty Mackwell winds.

I miss my dad. I miss his shitty lectures and constantly avoiding my questions about what it takes to actually blaze. I think I hated him for protecting me, keeping that hope alive I might one day figure it out. I blamed him for my banishment though I knew how much it cost him. I miss him now.

I want to say, "Sorry Dad. It was never your fault. Your son is the broken phoenix."

I circle the Cronocodille's natural trellising along the cliff walls, seeking vine holds where I can regain human form and harvest the golden liquid. It's not hard to spot a dozen handhold possibilities. I've got to consider a sound trajectory when I push myself off the cliff and fall into my phoenix bird form. This isn't hard as long as I'm not stupid about it. Keep my focus clear.

I transform and remove the cassilar from my mouth.

With my fingertips, I chase each wet rivulet around its pink petal palace until it quivers and surrenders, slithering into the cassilar. Golden and thick, the

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liquid spills around its container until I have half-filled the bottle. I have heard this substance intensifies spells. Where did I hear that? Did I hear that in the air once when gloasting this way? Maybe it is so. I don't usually read magic in the air. Boring. Would that I could search the air right now for confirmation, but I flew to this destination blind of any news.

I hate this lack of air. It's unnerving.

It was almost a relief to switch forms and be human. As a human I do not notice the air except as something to breathe. But today in phoenix form, the world tastes dead. The foreigner named Edgar can't possibly be wrong in his assessment. It's happening. I now know with my gut he is right, this handsome flirrant.

But we'll have sex before we die, which is nice. I miss sex.

By the time the cassilar is full and I am ready to fly back to Edgar, I am quivering again and it feels good, so good to anticipate upcoming sex. After putting the bottle in my mouth, I throw myself off the cliff and let myself fall a goodly distance because I almost dread assuming the phoenix and tasting dead air.

The air. Where did it go?

I return to the purple castle, eager to be at his side. I circle the perimeter and he's not outside, which is what I expected. If the air would tell me which room, I would go to him but I apparently must assume human form and walk around looking for him, like a calf at market. So uncivilized. But this is the world now, an airless world until it ends in a few days.

I assume human form, drop to my feet with no problem and take the cassilar from my mouth. Filled to the top. And this is the good stuff. It's glowing.

I am going to assume the spell must be performed in the biggest, most powerful spell chamber in the castle, so I will look there first. The bedroom.

The castle is gorgeous this late afternoon, the walls cool and illuminated by two suns, the peach glow giving a sultry, surreal quality to the indigo. The temperature feels normal, the walls are cool and well lit from rocks in the walls, fat polished crystal that glows softly from within. I have these rocks installed in my own place. Their light is soft and romantic unless you tap them to get them to go brighter for a while.

As I approach the main staircase, the curling majestic beams carpeted with lush white fabrics, I stop dead in my tracks. A horror is there on the floor, two horrors, stacked one on top of each other.



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Books.

I walk around them, giving them wide berth, trying to pretend that they're not signs of the end times. He must be near. I'm surprised to think he carried both books here because they were almost larger than his satchel it would seem.

I turn the corner and find a staircase to the upstairs, a winding, curving thing, thick marble slabs with a vein of purple and polished steps—more books? My god, it's like a plague of them. Two more on the steps a few above the first one. Obviously, he didn't carry all these books today. What's happening? Was this castle abandoned because of this plague of books?

I avoid them, contemplate turning to phoenix form to avoid them altogether but I don't want to taste the dead air. It's too depressing.

He's upstairs, I know, I feel him. As my chosen mate, my vibration knows where he is. And he is near. He is supple and naked and ready.

I throw open the main doors of the bedroom, the rich carvings illustrating a history from long ago. The images are dead to me because I would never learn to read them. Why would I, when the air contains the story but in richer senses? But their stories are not carried in the air any longer. I can't think of anything worse.

"Hi," he says, smiling as if bashful and nervous.

He is naked.

His body is slender, which I like. But his muscles are lean and strong. His cock pouts over his balls the way I like, a thick black bush, rough and untamed, so unlike his glamorous hair, which I think he has fixed up to be extra spiky and the long winding tail that comes in front of his ear, which is meant to be seductive.

I know it is meant to be seductive because it worked and I am seduced.

"The sex," I say, and let him see my quivering.

"Yeah, about that," Edgar says and walks toward me, so only a few feet separate us. "We should talk first. I think I might be forced to explain a few things to you. This quest didn't exactly go as I had planned."

"This I do not understand. Have you already performed the spell? And more importantly, are we having sex?"

"I hope so," he says, "I hope we have sex. But I have to explain some things, some small fibs I may have told regarding the end of the world and this, um, quest."

“A fib,” I say, “Like the soft part of the goat children fight over at holiday time?”

“No,” he says, “not that. A fib is a lie that you don’t want to call a lie because calling it a lie sounds worse and I like you and I don’t want you to hate me.”

He is crazy with his words. I love his strange demeanor and bashfulness while also admitting he is a liar.

I say, “You should kiss me before you tell me this fib. Because if I hate you afterward we will not have sex. But I can still masturbate later thinking about this kiss, and how we kissed while we still liked each other.”

“Can’t fault your logic,” he says and steps into my arms.

Our kiss is exactly what I would want a kiss to be, firm lips, soft ass in my left hand, and an arm around his strong back. I like the scent of him, the up close smell that is sometimes hard to inhale with so many stories in the air. But without air, I smell the animal scent of him, sweaty from our exertion getting here. The kiss lasts and then lasts *longer* and I love the squirming as we kiss, different from any other human I have kissed.

When we break he says, “Damn.”

“We should kiss again if what you’re going to tell me is very bad,” I say because I want to kiss him and kiss him now.

We spend the next quarter turn of the dog sun making out in the bedroom of the purple castle.

“My lips are pleasantly sore,” I say after we break our last embrace.

We now lie horizontal on the king’s bed with surprisingly soft bedding. This room is not dusty or worn. Fresh flowers snap at us from the corner, silently, almost swaying. The room is... decorated.

“Where are we?” I say, finally allowing my attention to these details to formulate. “What is this place? Why isn’t it dusty and old?”

Edgar looks sheepish, panting slightly from our last kiss.

I ask, “Do you live here?”

“Sometimes,” he says. He grins at me.

After a moment of my staring at him he says, “It’s kind of a getaway cabin for me. I don’t get here too often, usually only with vacation time. It takes me

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roughly fourteen hours to reach the castle, depending on the season and rains. How the hell did you do it with stones? How did you create that shortcut path?"

"The purple forest is full of shortcuts created generations ago. Most forests are. You have to know which stones open the combination. I could feel them pulsing differently, enough to recognize a hidden message. I would assume there are many shortcut paths to this castle. You happen to take the longest path to get here. Why did this shortcut displease you?"

"I love the cardio of running through forests," he says, "But fourteen hours is a little excessive. I thought we would have arrived here midday tomorrow and be exhausted. I was counting on that. And yes, did a little interior decorating."

"Well, you couldn't have much decorating instinct if you left books lying around. Are you trying to keep people *away*?"

"Yes," he says.

"Oh," I say, surprised by his ingenuity. "Well, it almost worked with me. But I wanted to see you."

We sit up on the bed and kiss a little more.

He sighs. "I have to tell you something. It's probably going to make you mad."

"Okay," I say.

But I am not okay. I do not want to hear news that will make me like him less.

"The world is ending," he says glumly.

I wait to see if he wishes to explain more but he does not.

I say, "I feel like we covered that."

"No, I mean it. There is no spell that will save the world. It's a dying star. It's science. You can't un-supernova a supernova. The world ends."

"I don't understand. What is our quest?"

"There's not really a quest," he says and looks away from me. "The quest was more for you and I to spend time together. I figured it was slightly possible your blaze could be triggered by the end of the world or maybe your survival instinct. Or maybe not. Who knows? Maybe we just die together. If you didn't want to go on a quest with me, I'd just go die in town. Get drunk on rabblegots."

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I frown. "How would a rabblegot get you drunk exactly?"

"I dunno," he says, "but I get drunk on them."

He fascinates me, this odd one. So far, I don't hate him.

He looks at me earnestly and says, "I stole a few glances yesterday while you walked around your yard ignoring me ignoring you. I thought you were smoking hot. And then I thought, okay, even if he doesn't blaze at the end of the world at least we'll be spending time together. Maybe even, you know, fananguing."

"I wish to fanaqua," I say. "I still do."

"Really? Even after I lied about there being a quest?"

I shrug. "The world's ending. If you say there's nothing we can do, I believe you. I'm flattered you thought I could blaze. I don't think I will, but thanks. Nobody's had that kind of faith in me for a long time. It's comforting. To be believed and loved at the end of the world."

"Well," he says, "Love is a strong word. I do like you a lot."

"I am in love with you," I say. "I don't understand why you wouldn't just say it when you feel it. We phoenix know when we cross paths with a mate. Edgar, it's *you*. When I say I want sex with you, I don't mean sex in the next ten minutes, I mean *for our lives*. Although the next ten minutes works too."

He looks at me and I look at him with a surprising tenderness in both of our eyes.

"I am afraid to say 'I love you,'" he says, taking both of my hands. "It's hard for humans to just say it and mean it and let it be what it is, just hanging there as a verb."

I pull him into me. "I love the way you talk funny. You have a beautiful accent. I understood very little of it, though."

"I have some commitment issues, I guess," he says. "Given I was ripped from my home world against my will, I'm a little slow to make attachments. But I have done some work on this. And I promise when the moment is right, I will say the words, 'I love you.' When I'm ready."

This I understand.

He continues. "It's not easy for me to *say* it. But I want you to know I have strong feelings for you and I'm trying to figure them out before the world ends."

"I love you, beautiful flirrant," I say. "And I can wait until you are ready to speak words as such."

We kiss again, a shorter kiss, less seductive than the others but this kiss confirms we still like each other and more kisses will follow.

The castle walls glow a darker blue, the dog moon blocking peach's evening glow. The room is darker now, slightly darker than when I entered.

I ask, "Are there any magic spells that would save the world?"

"None that I found," he says.

He climbs into my lap. I crave him now with a savage hunger I have not known in many years. I suppressed that desire, sure I would never have need of this hunger again. But he sits in my lap and our bodies touch and I feel warmer, my whole body warmer.

Edgar says, "I read... um... I looked many places for spells or possibilities. But I did not find anything, even in forbidden magic books."

I look at him in a knowing way when I hear him say, *forbidden*.

"I know, I know," he says, rubbing against me. "An under-under-secretary should not have access to such books."

My penis is thick and rubbing against him, his backside, the pleasure which I crave is to be inside of him.

The ogular-shaped cassilar brushes against my thigh and I remember its presence as we break from an intensifying kiss.

"What of the Cronocodille Eye?" I ask. "Why did you send me for this?"

I dig out the bottle from half-buried in covers and puzzle over it between us, looking at the thick and oily, glowing gold liquid slowly stir itself.

He takes the cassilar from my hands and opens the top. He pours it into his own hand. "It makes really good lube."

He uses his soaked hand to stroke my hard cock and I am shocked by the sensation, his hand, the warm liquid, and the feeling of him stroking me to the base. The Cronocodille Eye oozes down my hard vibration and then swirls around, heading back up, like fingertips along my hardness.

I gasp.

I've never considered using it this way!

He raises himself, positions himself to let me engorge him, fill him, and I think I may explode from the contemplation of being inside him. His dark quirky hair, the long shard that hangs in front of him, his smooth and supple body, the richness and ampleness of his ass cheeks as they separate for me.

“Are you ready?” I say, half-huffing as well as speaking.

“It’s the end of the world,” he says, and the tip of me slips inside him. “I left home prepared.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

He laughs. “Don’t worry. When I find a smaller-sized branch from an introod tree, I use it as a dildo. No splinters and it vibrates. I’m ready for you, big Gio.”

He slowly slides down me—all of me—and I swear, it’s the Cronocodille juice we’re using for lube but he glows for me, power and light and life and he moans, he moans, he tilts his head back. He took me all at once, *all at once*, a huge fantasy for me I never dreamed would come true.

*My god—the fire!*

Life explodes out of me, prematurely, I was not ready for this, and everything screams with the magma, the fire of life, my cells burn in agony and relief, their true function awake and aware. In a searing white light that swallows me full, I blaze and scream, the air of life ripped from me—

—and just as quickly returned.

I gasp, clutching him, holding him, falling backwards into hard crunchy needles and I can’t help but buck my hips upward, the throes of orgasm demanding I obey my body’s will.

I think he was pleased as well because I see his juice fly past my face and he screams, hands clutching my chest, which makes me love him, this golden flirrant who does not hide his love for sex, his passion for our union—in... the...

“Where the hell are we?” I ask, looking around.

Everything’s wrong. The orange-tinted planet glow is absent yet we’re outside. The sun is powerful bright, I can feel it without seeing it. Bright yellow. The prickly green all around us is not a king’s bed, nor are we inside the purple castle. We’re surrounded by people and more people and a little stone bridge over a river or water way, people standing on the bridge.

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They're staring at us.

"Where are we?" I ask again, truly scared.

The air smells of life again, jarring, loud, screechy and too many undecipherable strands. I have not studied this air, not ever. My senses are overwhelmed. I cannot breathe.

Edgar gasps, still riding me, and looks around with elation. He throws his arms over his head and screams loudly, as if self-pleasuring himself a second time, the scream is that joyful. He can drink an entire bottle of Diet Mountain Dew and self-pleasure himself a second time that quickly? Is there nothing he can't do?

He screams again and laughs. He yells, "*Where are we? Central Park! We're in Central Park in New York City.*"

People gather to stare at us. Some turn away in disgust and fear.

Did he say park? I look around and finally see the horror everywhere. The peoples' disgust and fear makes sense.

The slaughter will begin at any second.

"*Great Vantaros,*" I say, sitting up best I can. "*Edgar, look at the size of these trees.*"

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## Chapter 3

### *Home*

I sip my sewer-tasting beverage, hoping as little goes into my mouth as possible. I try to make my face seem it tastes delicious. Edgar coached me on my faking enjoyment. But I hate coffee. If I am to sit among them and blend in, I must pretend I love it. Edgar suggested I try something else on the menu but I insisted I keep drinking coffee. I want to fit in with my new home. Gah, this tastes like garbage.

Edgar's coming. I feel him.

He's not far, just outside this shop of coffees. One of the hundreds of disturbing establishments around the city. I try to pretend they don't bother me, all the people reading books around me. I've given up counting how many we pass on benches or waiting for transportation. *Readers*. I am trying very hard to remain calm. Edgar is near and that is comfort enough.

He and thirty other people come in, well, maybe not thirty but there is always a rush to come in and a rush to get out and people rush when they sit here. He smiles and from the entrance way offers me a small hand wave.

He approaches and kisses me on the lips. "Seriously, just order tea or a soda or something. Nobody *cares*."

"Don't give me away," I say in a soft growl. "I don't think anyone suspects anything. I have drunk almost a quarter of this mug."

"It's not the coffee that's going to give you away, Gio. It's constantly staring at everyone to see if they *notice anything*. That's what's creepy. The only thing they notice is you staring."

He is teasing me. I'm getting better at knowing this.

I say, "How are your parents?"

"Good, good," he says. "Funny how being missing for almost twenty years changes your attitude about homosexuality. It's still shocking to me how they've aged."

"Your parents are elderly. It seems they are weak."

"They're just in the 70s, which is how people are in their 70s. Gio, on this planet we get old."



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“We get old on our planet too.”

“Not as fast as here. Trust me. I think more than twenty years passed on your planet and I’ve only aged about six years. I’m not trying to be snippy. I’m just sad about my folks and how many years we lost.”

I wonder if I spoke too frankly again. The world of New York City remains alien to me, even after almost a month. I don’t understand the very most basic aspects of living. Is this how it was for Edgar when he came to my world? I don’t like it here.

But it is home.

My world blew up a few weeks ago, I guess. I never thought I’d miss chittering truths and introod trees. The trees on this world are ridiculous. They don’t even attack. Though I hold suspicious of oak trees. It seems to me they are only biding their time.

I try not to repeat our discussions, the decision not to go back. We were so lucky to escape it didn’t even dawn on us until a week later to worry about getting back. I guess we panicked.

He brought things. I nod at the bag near his feet. “What’s with the duff?”

“It’s called a *duffel bag*.”

“Yes, I know. I was attempting to show off I knew the word so well that it I could pronounce only half of it and be cool. This is what cool is, right? We talked about this for hours. I am trying to be cool.”

“It worked. You are very cool. And are you going to finish your coffee?”

He takes mine and sips it.

“Gross, this is ice cold. How long have you been sitting here?”

“All afternoon.”

He says, “I can’t drink that. I’ll be back in a minute. And the duffel bag is a surprise. I will show you what’s inside later.”

He kisses me on the lips as he leaves for the counter, which is a custom I like and do not have back in our home. Well, former home. My home.

Which is gone.

The surprise of it punches me in the stomach again. This is the worst part of drinking coffee. When I taste it I remember all the things back home that I miss.

I miss the most ridiculous things from my home, my green cloak and the smell of the night rose wafting in from the terrace. I miss my bankoo curry, though Edgar introduced me to Thai curries. They're okay. Bland. I miss collapsing on my bed, planning my next carving project, a thousand smells I've gloasted so well. I miss my family.

Unfortunately, the more I miss my family, the more I do not like his parents. They were kind to me. But they were mean to him for many years and while he forgives them for that, I'm not sure I do. I will try. They were embedded within a culture that inexplicably denies flirrrants. And they do seem to want him to be happy which softens them to me. They all were very sad at the first reunion with their son. Though I had resolved to hate them for as long as we live on this planet, their happy anguish to see him alive and well broke my heart.

I do not want to think about them. Or my father. Or my brother.

Edgar returns soon. "I got mine in a to-go cup. Wanna get out of here and walk around?"

"Yes. How were your parents?"

"Good," he says vaguely. "It was emotional."

He does not wish to discuss more. I can sense this. I will say something to please him. "Your parents were kind to give us money to live in this city until we get our own cave."

"Yes," he says. "They were very generous. Beautiful place for us to live in. They really wanted to make up for past hurts."

He picks up the duffel bag and says, "Let's walk. You cool?"

"I am definitely cool, Duff."

He laughs and leads the way. We navigate around tables and *oh no, book reader*. Do not show fear.

Once we are outside, I maneuver around two book readers at one table and breathe easier when we make it to the sidewalk.

"I liked your cave," Edgar says. "Spacious. I walked around while I waited for you to return. Hot tub. Beautiful pantry, everything carved out by your own hand. It's absolutely gorgeous. I love the room with the pillows and silky fabrics draped around, the round room."

"Yes," I say and feel beautiful sadness because I miss that room most of all.

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And somehow Edgar understands.

I love him. I love my Edgar. He is my light. He is unselfish with me and he understands my strange adjustments. When I first arrived, I attacked two trees before they could attack us. He waited with patience until I tested these trees, unclear why they did not move toward us with a malicious nature. He does not mind my eccentricities. When people point at the feathers that sometimes protrude from the back of my head, he looks at them and says, "It's cool, isn't it?" I thought he made this small talk chatter to cover his shame for my unusual appearance. But I saw his glow and knew that he liked it when people thought I was sexy the way *he* thought I was sexy. He loves me. And the sex. I like the sex with Edgar. Very much. I chose well in choosing a mate.

But I'm not crazy about this world.

The air is undecipherable, so much chaos and screaming, crying and lunging, the air lunges in this kingdom of New York City. The air is aggressive toward wingeds and the song it sings is a loud, gloating affair. I find unlimited strands of quiet sophistication, lives of dignity which exist inside this monster, but those strands are harder to find in the skyscraper air. In short, this air sucks for gloating.

It is difficult to live here, requiring documents and people numbers. Magic is duller in this world. Very few traces of magic. This sucks. Fanaqua you, New York. But it is home now and I must be grateful we're not trembling in each other's arms as our dying sun goes supernova. That's a plus.

Another downside is that I cannot blaze. Not without risking going back to my planet, or what used to be my planet. If I go back, I may never be able to make it here again and though he has not said I love you, I know neither of us could bear to be apart. To the ironical gods, I now know how to trigger the blaze. *I can blaze*. Only, I can never do it again or risk our union.

I say, "Babe, I thought of something else I wanted to further discuss while you were with your parents. Why are there no phoenix here? Why just me?"

"I don't know," he says. "I don't know how this works. Not the science or magic behind this or anything. I read a theory in the book about phoenixes. Don't cringe. I saw you cringe when I said *books*."

"I cringed because you called us *phoenixes*."

He laughs. "Quit correcting my grammar. But the book hinted at how when a phoenix blazes you have the capacity to travel between physical space. The

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book theorized a phoenix blaze creates controlled chaos. On one level, it's a physical explosion within a limited blast range. On another level, it's exploding molecules of time and space. The walls of physical realities, or dimensions, or whatever, are weaker between explosions, because all those electrons are vibrating so fast and matter somehow slips through. So when you appear to disappear on your planet, you actually blink into existence here."

We have discussed this. This was the theory we discussed.

I say, "Yes, but why are there no other phoenix *here*. Why did not others escape the dying planet? Why haven't I felt any phoenix in the air?"

"I don't know," he says and he looks at me. "But I'm pretty sure your older brother Darwin was here at some point. Picked up some Diet Mountain Dew on his last visit, perhaps?"

"Yes, it would seem so. I would ask him."

It cheers me to think of Darwin popping into this world one day. We could fly—

Oh wait. That will never happen.

Our planet exploded in the supernova.

The sorrows fall into me again. I know now I will simply feel this grief for all my days. I must compose phoenix songs for a race that no longer exists. They may have banished me, but I will never banish them from my heart. I will miss them all my days.

"I have a guess as to why he would bring you Diet Mountain Dew every couple of years," Edgar says. "It's just a guess."

"Yes?"

"I think he was trying to get you to think about or somehow remember this world. Like maybe drinking something from this world would spark a biological memory in you. My guess is he brought you these because it was the closest thing he could give as a hint."

My heart breaks twice, once for Edgar believing the best in my brother. And also for Darwin, my older brother who never gave up on me. Even after banishment.

"I'm guessing other phoenix besides your brother were here," Edgar says. "We have images of phoenix in our mythology, in our stories throughout history. No one has ever documented seeing a real phoenix but what if you're a

*visiting* species, like you're here for a while and pop out again? I'm fairly confident others of your kind were here. I believe I came to your world when a visiting phoenix blazed in the bank where I worked as a teller."

I frown. "I didn't understand the bank part."

"We haven't discussed the world of banking yet," he says. "We're still working on language and government."

I nod. "I have more questions about government. I think I must be understanding it all wrong."

"Can we discuss it later? The bank is only a few blocks from here. That's why I wanted to have coffee at this place today, so we could walk by there. I want to see it."

"Yes," I say, "I would see it too. If a phoenix blazed there, I will know. The story will be written on the wind."

"It was a long time ago," he says. "You may not be able to read the story after so many years."

"Bitch, *please*," I say, "A phoenix as cool as me can gloast the story long after it was written."

He chuckles. "As I."

I say, "Did I use it the right way? I said the *please* much slower, like you suggested."

"You did good, sweetie."

He kisses me and I am happy. I have chosen a mate well. This pleases me.

"I will carry the duffel bag for you," I say. "For a while."

"Sure, thanks. But no peeking."

"I will try," I say in a voice which is meant to use sarcasm. I dislike sarcasm. But I am in this world now and this is how they often communicate. I must learn to appreciate this place and see beyond its grubby, unmagical sidewalks. Ugh. Sidewalk. I'd rather fight three dozen introod trees at once than transform into phoenix above a New York sidewalk covered in black gum and thousands of footprints. I made that mistake once. The stories were disgusting.

In the street, I smell the foul air, try to resist choking.

Now we can hold hands and we do so, walking down the unmagical sidewalks, the sunlight from the creepy single sun waving to us through the green, non-killing trees.

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“Gorgeous day,” he says.

“Yes,” I say.

I can see the appeal, I guess. In a way.

He says, “I can’t believe how much the world changed while I was away. You would not believe how much more open it is for gays now. I mean, I’ve been reading articles on the interweb. We did not have much of an interweb in 1997. Some but not like today.”

“Gays?”

“Flirrant.”

I nod. I knew that word. I just forgot it. *Gays*.

I see the horror ahead and on our right, so I switch sides with him. It’s not chivalrous, I know, but he doesn’t mind walking closer to it. Hell, he might want to go inside.

“It’s a book store,” he says. “You’re going to have to get used to them. They’re a lot less of them around than I remember, but still. You can’t always turn and go around the block the other way just because of a book store.”

“I can. I will.”

He points at someone walking toward us and says, “Oh look, a book.”

“Not funny.”

He teases me, pretending to drag me toward it and I pretend to be scared for a second. I break away and jog a few feet forward, which dislodges a feather. It wafts to the muddy ground near the gutter.

Ugh. The garbage in this city.

We hold hands again and continue up the street, walking in silence. He is quiet, being back here in New York, his former home before our land.

“Here it is,” he says. “This is where the bank is. Or was. I guess they tore it down after the explosion and built something else.”

I set down his duffel.

The space is another type of commerce and I honestly can’t tell what it is, they all seem to do such strange and different things. We stand in the shade and I can’t help but glance up nervously at the tall trees around us. I still do not trust them.

"I'm going to change form," I say, "to confirm the other phoenix presence. It may take a few minutes to isolate the story in the air. So many stories. Everything is thick and loud."

He looks up and down the street. "Is that a good idea right here?"

"I'll jog down into that down steps, those cement ones. No one can see from the sidewalk. Don't worry," I say, kissing his forehead. "I'm only gone for a minute."

I strip off my tee shirt and drop out of my half-pants, the shorts as he describes them. Kick off my shoes. I'm naked now.

"I never get tired of this," he says and kisses me on the lips.

"Careful," I say in a slight warning. "I've recovered my energy since this morning."

"Yeah," he says, "That was hot, naked man. Now hurry. There's a good lull in pedestrian traffic."

I break into a slight jog, not because I need to but I'd like a little momentum to work with when transform so I can swing out of the entryway. Seconds later I race down the concrete steps, two at a time and flash into phoenix only a foot away from the iron grill in front of the door, circling upward, out to the street level, up around the building and then gliding back to him, falling to the ground.

I transform back to human behind a parked van. There are people on the sidewalk, but I think they were too far away to see much.

I scramble to put on my clothes. As soon as I am decent, we step back onto the sidewalk. We look at the building again.

I say, "Yup. A phoenix blazed here. You said it's many years ago, right? Well, this guy targaroooots this place. His blaze feels like yesterday. No question. What the hell happened?"

"Targaroooots?"

"It's like... stink but without the negativity of smelling bad. A strong mark. Think of it as the smell of 10,000 turgles."

"I love turgle soup," he says, excited.

"I used to make a really good turgle soup. I would make you some."

I wish I could have cooked for him back home. That hits me again. World is dead. Shit.

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"I can live without turgle soup," he says.

I am grateful for his implication, that he could not live without me. We kiss. Once we stop, he takes my hand and we look at the building.

He says, "I had just showed up for work about ten minutes earlier. Half hour before the bank opened. Me and another lady, Deidre. I remember she was really funny. Anyway, she was down in the vault area, turning on lights and turning off security measures. I had begun unlocking my drawer, getting it ready and wondering where my other coworker was. She was late."

I wait for him to continue.

"A chandelier in the lobby exploded. I didn't see it, but when I looked up, a second one exploded. But it wasn't a chandelier. I think, I mean, I'm *sure* it was a phoenix. And when it returned to your world, it somehow dragged me with it. Could have even been your brother, for all I know. I never saw the phoenix again. I woke up on a stone path, a wide one, which was incredibly lucky because there were two dtandiart tentacles testing the stones trying to get to me. Fanaquing bastards."

"Fucking bastards," I say correcting him. "This is our world now. You should say *fucking*."

He says, "Anyway, that's when I started living in your world. I met other foreigners and we shared our stories but nobody was sure. Until I started reading the book I mentioned, *The Phoenix Tail Feather*."

I say, "I am trying to get used to loving a *book lover*, I am. But if you keep—"

He says, "It's a book about the best sexual positions with phoenixes."

"Phoenix," I say, correcting him. "There's no plural. We are one. *Sexual positions*?"

He smiles at me. "Yup."

I say, "Perhaps I can get used to books."

This makes him laugh, though I can't imagine why.

"Was his dick inside you?" I ask. "This other phoenix?"

He searches my face for what I do not know.

"No," he says. "I was across the room. I looked up at the last second and saw the chandelier explode and everything went white, like though a white hole."



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I saw that whiteness when I blazed. *A real blaze*. A month has passed and I'm still thrilled about the event what brought us here. I should get drunk around my people to celebrate. But of course, I can't.

"You rode his blaze," I say, "As you rode mine. But you were across the room. You were not near him?"

"Not even close. Basically, the distance between this tree right here and those front steps."

I ponder this. Most phoenix have a two foot range, the all-consuming fire. My mother knew a female phoenix, Tulip level just like Darwin, who used to blaze seven feet in perimeter. Well so she said. Mom said she was a bit of a drama queen. Never actually saw the blaze extend seven feet. We used to laugh about it when I was small. Seven feet. But if Edgar stood across the room, this one, this anonymous phoenix blazed a lot more than seven feet. More like, twenty feet. That's unheard of.

"His blaze was twenty feet," I say, "It was an enormous blaze."

Edgar squeezes my hand. "Don't worry, babe. I'm just as happy with yours. I'm not a size queen."

"I don't understand *size queen*, though I can think of a half-dozen interpretations, all related to underground tunnels."

"*Underground tunnels*?" he says and laughs. "That's perfect. I will explain this to you later but let me enjoy this joke on my own today."

He leans in closer and we kiss, the warmth and love pouring from him, richness on the air between us, the only story I will indulge while our lips are pressed together. We break and he looks into my eyes with a great sadness.

He looks across the street at the former business where the phoenix blazed twenty feet. He turns back to me.

"I want to go home," he says. "I want to go back to our world."

I crinkle my brow. "We are home."

"This isn't home. I don't belong in New York anymore. Life's not much fun without a couple introod trees trying to kill you a few times a week. I love it there."

"Go home? The planet was dying. Actually dead now, for almost four weeks."

"It was. It is. I realize we'd be going home to die, but c'mon, we can think of something when we get there, right? Some last minute plan to save the planet? Time travel is a possibility, right? We could show up before the planet explodes."

"How's your magic in New York?" I ask and cross my arms.

"Not great, not great," he says. "I enchanted myself to read Spanish, another translation spell. It didn't work quite right. I can't get verb tenses correct. I had to use rosemary as a substitute ingredient since there's no flabma on earth. Well, there might be but I don't know its earth name."

"Okay, so between your faulty, low-level magic and the one-and-only broken phoenix, what do you think we can do to save the dying sun?"

"I don't know," he says and looks into my eyes. "But this isn't home."

I love him. I *love* him. I chose my mate well.

"Look," he says, "You can blaze. You're not broken anymore. And maybe you never were. You said this phoenix who can blaze twenty feet wide right?"

"Yes, but that can't be right."

"Or maybe it can. Do you know where the phoenix class system comes from? Tulip? Daisy? Petunias?"

Every phoenix in school knows this. "They named our classes after flowers to make us seem fierce. You can slice open arteries with a tulip."

"Yes, but before the class names. Before classes. There were different division among the phoenix. I only found this in one paragraph so I can't verify it against anything else, but there were phoenix with different abilities."

"What abilities?"

"The book was vague. It hints at time traveling powers but then in the next paragraph goes on to discuss anal pleasures. It's a *sex* book. But it's the only book I've seen about your clan. Maybe you could, I dunno, time travel to the past and find me a book about phoenixes and then time travel a few years to the future to get it to me so I can read it and be ready by the time you and I meet for the first time—"

"Stop. This is making my head hurt. Also, I don't know how to time travel."

"Honestly, I don't know what I'm talking about," he says. "I know only vague clues from this book. What if you were never broken? What if you were

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always just differently-abled? Maybe not all phoenix can make it to other worlds. I don't know. We know of one phoenix with a giant blaze, possibly your brother. But there are other powers. Do you know what *icy fire* is?"

"No."

"Neither do I. It was only mentioned once. It's either super important or it's a way of pleasuring phoenix balls. Not sure."

"Let's talk more about pleasuring the balls."

"I'm serious," he says, "the sex is linked to the abilities, it's all interconnected. I don't know if time travel is real. I don't know if you can do anything. But don't you want to be with your family when you go? Don't you want to fly the Mackwell Plains once more before they disappear forever? Show them you can blaze?"

"Yes," I say softly. "I want to go home. But what about here? After your long absence, you are finally here in New York City. Your parents accept you at last."

"I love New York," Edgar says and looks at me with his almond-shaped eyes I love so well. "But my home is with you. This morning, I told my parents we're going back. We're starting a new quest."

The same feelings rush over me as when we are naked and I am inside him, the heat, the fire, the possibility of blazing. I have blazed. *I blazed*. We kiss a sensual extension of our love for each other, this strange and wondrous person in my life. I am a flirrant in love.

He pulls away from me, grinning, touching my chest and feeling the heat under his hand. We smile sexy smiles.

"I want to sex you," I say.

"I want to sex you back," he says.

He holds up the duffel bag. "This is full of stuff to take home. That chocolate you like. A good pair of shoes for me. Souvenirs for your nieces and nephots."

"I approve," I say. "But they might be dead. We must face that. Everyone is likely to be dead. The planet gone. We will show up and die in space dust."

"They're alive. Believe it. We'll find them."

His hope is infectious. We're going home!

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“My nephott will smell my wind,” I say proudly.

Edgar laughs at this, putting his hand over his mouth to cover it up.

I love to watch him laugh.

I pick up the duffel bag and we walk to the corner. He balances his empty paper cup with coffee residue atop an overflowing garbage can. I am so glad we're fucking leaving New York.

I say, “When do you want to do this?”

“Today. I say the sooner the better. I'll carry the duffel for a while, babe.”

We transfer the bag to his hand and we take each other's free hand again. He says, “I have an idea about how to go home and trying to get back on the exact same day. Maybe even earlier. I know a spell.”

*We're going back home!* I feel more charitable toward New York City as we walk together, forgiveness at the air which stinks of rotted, un-lived lives, the unsafe chemical stories told boldly alongside the screaming strands. I could get used to the noise, the texture of this air. New York may not be a terrible place to visit. But I wouldn't want to live here.

“Here's what I've been thinking,” Edgar says, and we shake our heads politely at a street man who wishes to sell us food items from the metal box. “We don't know how this works exactly. If you could talk to other phoenix, you'd know if you show up in the same spot you left at the same time or if you can choose your destination. But we don't know that, right? After all our conversations during the past month, neither of us understand it. So maybe we ought to recreate the same conditions as the first time. I think you should blaze at the same location where we arrived in Central Park.”

“Yes. This makes sense. At least until I can ask other phoenix for better understanding.”

He explains the logic again but I do not need to hear it. He needs to say it, to rehearse why he thinks it works the way it does but I already trust and believe him.

We wind our way toward the park, which is still a long walk away. I can smell its distance, the story of the park, a place with centuries of untold stories. So many buried corpses in that earth, underground, it's a wonder there is any room for trees.

He squeezes my hand and we walk in sunlight.

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“What about your parents? Are they happy with this?”

He seems sad. “No, not at all. But they tried to understand. They know we’re together but they are worried you brainwashed me or I’m in love with the wrong world. It’s difficult. But we hugged and cried. I tried to explain why I love it there.”

We do not speak for a few moments. I know what it’s like to miss family.

This makes me think of his parents again. “I would ask you this. Many years ago, why did they have a problem with you’re being a flirrnt?”

“*Because* I was a flirrnt.”

“Yes, but why? Had you done murders as a flirrnt or somehow disgraced them?”

“No. I was a flirrnt. That was enough.”

“Yes, but *why* was that a disgrace?”

“I don’t know,” he says and he is thoughtful. “In this world, being flirrnt is hard for many. My parents’ hearts changed in my years of absence. They forgave me.”

“Forgave you for being a *flirrnt*?”

He sighs and says, “Yup.”

I am incredulous.

I must understand the words wrong. He keeps insisting it was because he was a flirrnt but that can’t be right. Flirrancy is a badge of honor at home. My father’s pride at learning my own flirrnt nature was celebrated with a feast on the Mackwell Plains. A flirrnt phoenix is an incredible omen. Of course, he had reason to grow ashamed when I refused to blaze. A *flirrnt* phoenix who cannot blaze was probably even more humiliating for him, all that wasted promise.

“We said our goodbyes,” Edgar says. “And they love me again. I can live with this.”

He is quiet, my Edgar, my mate. My chosen mate.

Our Central Park destination draws near. I smell a store of books two blocks ahead so I suggest a detour, something that will not put us in its direct path. Edgar agrees and we amble under the leafy streets as I attempt to cover my nervousness among so many trees. Edgar points out the cement caves he likes,

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and I like some of them too, their architecture intriguing enough for me to get some ideas for future marble carvings. Okay, so parts of New York City are beautiful.

We reach an entrance of Central Park a few moments later. I have to wonder about his commitment to leave his world behind. I stop before we cross the gate into this wondrous park, the land where vegetation and humanity cohabitate. Truly, I do not give this city enough credit for its many delights.

I say, "Are you sure?"

He says, "I'm sure. I love New York in the spring, but this isn't home. I miss too many things. Like turtle soup with cheenas and the roasted bankoo stems. I love my crappy apartment with windows that don't have screens or glass panes or even *locks* on the front door because there are no bugs and no concept of personal crime. I mean, I *love* it there. Except for the lack of Mountain Dew."

He nudges me and we laugh quietly, crossing under the gate.

"*Diet* Mountain Dew," I say, playing along.

We stand in Central Park. He tugs me in the direction of a path and I follow.

He says, "I wanted to visit the bank where I disappeared, where I was accidentally abducted. I thought if I looked at that location and felt relief at being in New York, maybe I was not meant to live in your world. But the feeling that emerged was a longing, a happy remembering of how I came to be. Not all outsiders love your world the way I do, but I prefer it."

"And our foreigners, our unworthy—"

"Probably, yeah, some came back with a phoenix. Two *maybes* I know of, one for sure. Our games night group considers me a *maybe* because I didn't actually see a phoenix when I woke up. It was long gone."

I say, "You wish to return to a world where you are a foreigner who is not respected and made to read *books* as an under-under-under—"

"There's no place like home," Edgar says. "Besides, you can blaze now. I figure we can come back and visit my parents every once in a while. Maybe visit the Met and catch a show. My mom told me I should see *Wicked*."

He tells me of other New York landmarks he wishes to see, tempting me to encourage him to stay but I cannot. Our life is together. Our home is my home. Plus, the sex.

I say, "One more time. I must ask you, are you sure? Our world may not exist. We may blaze into nothingness."

"You know I went to the dentist a few days ago," he says. "I hadn't been in dozens of years. You guys don't have teeth problems on your planet."

"Why would we have problems with our teeth?"

"That's not the point. My point was while my mouth was open and he was filling my two cavities, I thought to myself 'This is so we can go home.' That's how ready I am to leave."

Okay, he's sure.

"We should celebrate," I say, nodding toward a vendor. "With a giant premel."

"Pretzel," he says. "And I agree."

We take turns biting it, sharing it, him laughing at my method of chewing and I am tempted to run away with the premel, turn into phoenix and taunt him by flying away with it, but he has cautioned me about turning too often in public, how it is simply not done. I don't see many other New Yorkers demonstrating the sophisticated good manners he thinks we should follow, but he's probably right. We shouldn't draw attention to any of our differences. Not in this world where you can be banished for being a flirrant.

We linger together, enjoying this afternoon, our last afternoon in New York, both of us gradually growing distracted as we grow near to the spot where our New York story began.

"How faithful do you think we must be to recreate the circumstances?" I make sure he sees my hungry leer. "Do we recreate the sex? I am quivering already. Premels make me horny."

He laughs. "It was quite a scene when we first arrived, remember? Let's just stand close and kiss. We will see if that's enough. But if nothing happens... maybe."

I like the way he teases me.

During the days after our arrival, Edgar worried we could not have sex or I would automatically blaze. I assured him that I could perform sex and not blaze. Now that I understood how to call all my cells to action, I knew how *not* to. It would not come unbidden as it did the first time we made love. Of course, there was only one way to prove this was true and I smile at the memory of those intense few days.

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“Maybe we should sex again on the spot,” I say, “to increase the odds.”

He laughs and squeezes my hand.

We are not near the spot, or rather, it's barely come into view but is still a great striding distance. But soon I will blaze and while I am confident now in my abilities to do so, our blaze could mean both of our deaths. Our world, the one we're so eager to return to, most likely is gone. I do not know how to time travel.

A screeching reaches my ears and I'm *sure* it's a tree attack for I do not trust these alleged pacifists, I do not trust them. My keen eyes jump from tree top to tree top, but I see no attack formation, just Edgar covering his ears with his hands. He swears.

“It's them,” I hear someone yell and humans emerge, jump into action, a woman in an exercise suit who appeared to be stretching now runs toward us, two men who I noticed arguing over a book, drop it and pull out black cylinders from behind them, running in the same cautious manner. At first I thought they were running from the book, a sensible decision.

“Run,” Edgar cries, and jerks my hand, dragging until I match his pace.

I run with him at my side. We run straight for the spot where we appeared in New York.

I say, “What is happening?”

He runs faster so I run faster.

They will catch us, it seems, and if not the woman in jogging clothes who also holds a black cylinder now, there are others running toward us from the opposite direction. We will not reach our clearing.

“Phoenix form,” Edgar says, yelling.

He lets go of my hand and I need no further prompting.

I soar into the sky, gloast the air and instantly these peoples' story is clear—a story so aggressive that I barely need to count seconds before I grasp their intention. They mean us harm. Our arrival in this world a month ago was noted and studied with machines. Geiger counters, too, though I do not know what a Geiger means. If I had time I would search the air for this explanation. These people work for a body of regulation, Edgar's explanation of *government*, actually though I am sure I did not understand his explanation correctly. The way he had described it sounded impossible for anything to get accomplished.



The air tells me two different government organizations work together with the same intention, to stop the phoenix presence in this world. I am not the first phoenix they have tracked, the texture of this story leading to another strand of air with *that* explanation, but I have no time for that now. Just enough to know I'm not the first they put down.

They're here to kill me.

"He's getting away," someone cries and it's harder to hear words in this form, non-winged words so I do not understand the garbled instructions that come next. I have enough information and soar back toward Edgar so I may join him in flight. Or rather, in blaze. I can get us out of here. I do not know if proximity to our original location is important or the consequences of blazing from a different location. I don't understand how any of this works. *I wish I could speak with Darwin.* But fuck it, we're doing it now.

"Stop them," another voice cries out and there is garbled yelling on mechanical devices, too.

I soar over Edgar's head, racing to human form thirty feet in front of him so he can run into me like crossing a finish line. When he collides with me in fifteen seconds, I will blaze. I face him, arms open.

*I'm ready for you, Edgar.*

Loud bangs change the look on his face. The bangs result in Edgar leaping forward immediately, falling hard into earth five feet in front of me and he throws the duffel bag with his souvenirs into the dirt.

I leap forward and drop down beside him, terrified what this means, the bangs and the redness growing from his midsection. I turn him over, my fear doubling over to see his beautiful face so unnaturally distorted.

"Oh my god," he says when his eyes open, "I had no idea how much this would hurt."

"Edgar," I say, shaking him gently, like I do when I wish to wake him for middle of the night sex. "Edgar, what is this?"

"I've been shot," he says and he seems just as surprised as me. "This really fucking hurts. Oh my god."

I may not know what getting shot is, but I know it's bad when the blood comes out, so yeah, this must be pretty fucking bad. The red is spreading. The fleeting thought races through me, *he loves me!*

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“Secure them,” says a voice.

All the running people grow nearer, hard clomping feet just a dozen feet away.

I throw up a perimeter of phoenix fire, which I did not even know I could do but I need time with Edgar to discuss our next steps. The fire will dissuade them, but probably only temporarily if they don't already know how to cross it. How did I do that? Can't think about that now.

“Go home,” he says and already his face is paler.

I do not like this. Now, I am scared.

“Edgar,” I say, my voice softer, “Edgar.”

“Go home to your family,” he says, “break wind for your nephott.”

He tries to smile but winces. “On television, getting shot looks like no big deal.”

“Edgar,” I say and it seems that's all I'm able to do, is repeat his name.

“You are so beautiful,” he says, his eyes glazing over. “I love your singed feathers.”

“Pinalto ad yiirmatano,” I say more out of instinct than a true desire to follow appropriate social norms.

“Yes,” he says and I see the light in his eyes fading. “Honor to honor.”

I scream, scream into the city, my cry rising, my tears flowing because I know what's happening now. He's dying. I scream and the world becomes nothing but flames, the whiteness, the trembling universe.

I am fire incarnate.

I am eternal.

And I love him.

Life explodes out of me and everything screams with the magma, the fire of life, my cells burn in agony and relief, their true function awake and aware.

If Edgar dies, this world will burn.

The searing white light swallows me.

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## Chapter 4

### *The Mackwell Plains*

I wake up and turn my head to see the tentacle of a dtandiant, fuzzy to my eyes until it grows into a more solid shape. It's not attacking me, which is odd. It's not even snaking along the earth toward me.

My head hurts.

"Hey," says a voice connected to head leaning over me. "We have a good news-bad news situation here. Which do you want first? The good news?"

I recognize the spiky hair, the one strand before his ear and the blackberry smell of him, the sweat of his recent exertion. I love his scent when he sweats.

It's Edgar.

I shake my head and scramble to my feet, needing to feel his arms around me to assure me he's okay. I wrap myself around him and start crying.

He speaks into my ear, "It's okay. I'm *okay*, Gio."

I cry into him and I am both proud and ashamed of this cry, its intimacy is embarrassing but I am proud to have his love and my tears will show him that. He kisses me, his lips reassure me, he is here and he is mine and we are together as we will always be. We break and yet position our mouths close together, so we may resume kissing at any second.

"I'm okay. My boyfriend has healing tears," he whispers into my mouth. "And they're great for my complexion."

He makes me laugh. I squeeze him.

"Remember the little blemish I had," he says, pointing at his forehead to the spot.

"Yes, I told you about it."

"Yes," Edgar says and chuckles. "Gotta love that phoenix honesty. It was probably from eating New York street vendor food. But you'll notice it's gone now. You're good for my complexion."

We kiss more until I feel sure he's not dying, until I feel his body living and strong and completely dressed for this world. How did I not notice his dress, his durable jeans and tight-fitting shirt, his version of workout clothes?

I am naked.

I don't mind. I like naked. But I did like those jeans Edgar purchased for me in New York. I did love their incredible softness against my muscle, worn out before even purchased. I did not understand how they made jeans magic.

Lightning strikes behind us.

"Okay," he says, pulling away. "I think we should hear my good news-bad news scenario. There's more good news than bad news, so let's try to focus on the positive."

"Let's hear it."

"I think we're back the same day. We're on the shortcut path to the purple castle. You time traveled."

I look around. I think he's right. The dog moon is only an hour or two later from when I blazed inside him and wow, that was *fantastic* fucking sex. I think I like the word fuck better than fanaqua. I like it. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Maybe," I say. "We don't know if I time traveled or all phoenix come back to our world soon after they left it. I only know that's what happened to me this one time."

Edgar says, "Good point. Also good news, the world didn't end yet. And I think you probably noticed we're not being attacked by dtandiart, which basically should be considered good news."

I do not like the hopeful quality in his voice which suggests perhaps the bad news is worse than he let on.

"You do not look happy. What is the bad news."

Edgar nods. "Bad news is I think it means all plant life is dying. Quickly. Also under the bad news heading, is my calculation about when the world ends. That may have been off by a day. Or two."

"Off by two days?"

"Hey, I was calculating the *exact* day for a dying sun in a language where I am not a native speaker, so I think a two day variable sounds like an awfully tight margin. Considering nobody else on this damn planet was paying attention."

I laugh and he laughs next because we are fun together. So what if the world ends in a few days or hours? We are in love with each other, right now, this

second. And we love being in love, hands joined together standing before a dying sun.

I say, "So the world ends *today*."

Edgar flinches. "Maybe. I'm not a scientist. But I'd say a dtandiart not trying to eat your head is a pretty bad sign. Those dudes would eat their own tentacles."

I nod. "Yes, someone wrote a song about that twenty years ago. It was humorous and also a metaphor. Very popular song."

"Your music here sucks," Edgar says, shaking his head. "I'm not trying to start a fight. I'm just saying—"

"Well, if you're not trying to start a fight, lover, quit saying our music sucks. I listened to your Madonna. I do not find her favorable."

"Bitch, pleeeeeeease," he says. "You do not want to *dis* Madonna."

"I understand now why you stretch out the please," I say. "This makes more sense."

He nods. "It's more effective. But talking about music from my world reminds me I brought you a welcome home gift."

He turns around and presents me with the jeans I love. "Welcome home to our dying world, babe."

I love these jeans. I hold out my hands and say, "I love you."

He blushes and says, "We have to get you to the Mackwell Plains. I have a plan."

"Is that the good news?" I say, hopeful.

"No, the good news is we should make pretty good time getting there without the forest trying to kill us. And if you know some shortcuts with paving stones we could be there in three hours. The bad news is that it might be too late."

I slip on the jeans, loving the raw fabric under my balls, caressing my ass. I have discovered on our visit to his world that soft, comfy jeans is the equivalent of having sex with your clothes.

He picks up the duffel bag and says, "We should leave right now. We can't waste time."

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We start running the forest, and immediately I contemplate flying, which would be faster. But he's at my side, *alive*, and I love him, so I don't care if the world's ending, I want to be by his side. We race in a way we normally cannot run through a forest, even running on the narrower paths and I suddenly understand the appeal of this New York hobby called jogging. It's actually kind of pretty around here when the trees and shrubs aren't out to kill you.

We jog through what might be considered our Central Park. I must admit I liked the park with the non-murdering trees. And the premels. And the many clothes.

Is it possible that I will actually miss New York?

"Do you know where you go when you blaze?" he asks, his voice irregular.

"I do now," I say. "I go to your world. Or a world. We don't know if it's consistently the same one. I don't know if it's in our universe or another dimension or one of the other possibilities we talked about. I would have to blaze more to know for sure. Or talk to other phoenix."

This excites me, the idea of finally being able to discuss the blaze with my own people, to be part of the greater community in a way I never was before. I am an equal again. Possibly *unbanished*!

I feel the stones pulsing underfoot but their light is faint. I don't understand why.

"There's a shortcut in about a mile," I say.

"Great," he says. "Let's take it. But where do you *go* between our planet and my birth planet. What happens in between?"

"Between what?"

"That's what I'm asking. Is there a between, a *space* in between."

"I don't understand what you're asking, sweetie."

Edgar slows his pace so we are still jogging but not sprinting now, conserving ourselves to keep the pace steady. He says, "Let me catch my breath for a second."

We keep at a steady pace, and I pay attention to the rocks. They're flickering, their presence their coolness and heat are flickering. That's never happened as far as I know. Not ever. Not even in clan stories.

"When you blaze," he says, "first you are consumed by fire. It's beautiful. It's like your face is sculpted and washed by these flames. The fire gets hotter,

almost unbearable, and then you're not *you*, and then you're you again. Once again, your face sculpted in flames and then it dies down a little and your eyes glow red and orange, then liquid yellow, and it dials down, the fire. You become human again. Or phoenix bird, whichever form you took before you blazed."

"I'm not sure where this is going."

"There's a split second where you're not you, not human. Not phoenix form. You're nothing but white fire. Where are you when that happens? What is that place? I've only experienced this twice with you but I memorized every detail."

"Memorized every detail?"

Edgar laughs. "Yeah, I memorized how it felt. I jacked off to it twice. It's incredibly sexy."

"Well that's kind of weird," I say. "I didn't know you were into *kink*."

He laughs. "I'm pretty vanilla. But that space in between when you're nothing but white fire. What is that? *Where* is that?"

I guess I know what he's talking about. I feel that space in me but it's hard to describe or define, it's like roller skating on marbles, everything falling over and racing too fast, fire and oxygen in competition with each other.

"That space," he says. "Think about it."

It must be connected to his big plan. I will contemplate this. I will also ask Darwin. *Darwin!* I get to see my big brother again.

We reach the shortcut while I am puzzling his riddle and I count five stones necessary to activate this shortcut. It must be a longer road through the shortcut. The stones flicker to not-alive for a long enough time I have to rub my eyes. Did I just see that correctly? They light up again, not *light* exactly, but the light within them reveals the truth of the heat. The truth of their chill. I've never seen them *not* have light from within. We studied dying stones in school, in biology, but I've never seen a whole section of path just blink out.

This world is dying quickly.

The path opens again. Some instinct tells me we must run fast.

"Full speed," I say. "The stones are flickering their glow-light. They are not supposed to do that."

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He breaks into a run.

We race the path and I don't know why because stones aren't flickering right at this second. But they could and what happens to the shortcut if we're on it? Do we flicker out of existence?

The phoenix clan sings about everything that happens on this world and there are no songs of flickering stones. This is not good. This is really bad. I see the shortcut's end and yet it feels far to me, maybe because rock light flickers and my feet don't touch anything. I stagger but recapture myself and Edgar bursts into a faster speed.

"What the fuck was that?" he says and then focuses on running.

"Keep running," I scream.

The end is near, the shortcut end. Maybe the *end* end, too. We race in competition and the rock flickers slightly, and Edgar stumbles until I catch him.

We race as fast as we can.

I could assume phoenix form if the rocks fade but I don't know where I'd be, how many hundreds of miles away from the destination and what about Edgar? Could I carry him? He's slender but I wouldn't even try to carry my *groceries* in phoenix form, so I dunno if I could save him. Well, other than to cry over him, I guess. I guess that works now. Barely had a chance to celebrate my tears can heal.

We leap across the final stones like diving into a pool and the shortcut path doesn't close behind us. We roll to our feet, scramble to the middle of the path though there is no need. No vegetation attacks us but our instincts took over. Maybe I worried us over nothing. The rock lights seems to be stable.

"See?" I say, "The planet may have more time—"

The path closes and the rocks flicker dead. They do not come back on and somehow I know they're not coming back on. Not ever again.

While he's panting on his knees, I say, "Babe, not to alarm you but the whole planet's rock system is dead."

"Okay," he says, catching his breath, and standing. He breathes heavily before attempting to speak. "We can handle this. We can do this. Rocks are dead."

He looks at me. "You have to fly. We don't have time for running."



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“But you haven’t told me the plan.”

“I know. No time. You go there first and convince them to put you in charge. I’ll show up and explain the plan.”

“Show up how?”

Edgar says, “Travel spells. I think it’s time for people magic. I think I’m going to graduate myself to that level right now. I’ll get there in like, three or four jumps. And without being attacked by the forest the jumps will be less dangerous. Go. See you there.”

I lean in to kiss him and he pushes me away with a playful grin. “I’ll carry your jeans. If you save the world, I’ll give them back. Go.”

“Promises,” I say and shoot him a look, reminding him of a former conversation, a playful time last week when we sparred with our words over New York pizza. We played together. We had what he called a *date*.

I am a broken phoenix in love.

I slip out of my jeans, and I know he will bring them to me because we are in love and this is what you do when you love someone else, you pick up after them and care for them. I have that with him.

I burst straight up into phoenix form and sail fast on the dead air.

The air smells deader, worse than before, as if before were emptiness and the emptiness has been replaced with the smell of decay. This world is not long. Lightning strikes the countryside with an alarming regularity, planting an introod tree with each strike. But the trees are dead, so I guess a lightning strike is somewhat of a hollow gesture right now.

It’s odd navigating toward the Mackwell Plains with no air in the sky. For a split second I worry I won’t be able to find my way back there, so long ago was my banishment. Normally, I’d pick up threads in the sky and read the stories of my destination, see who and what has influenced the story of Mackwell Plains recently. Get caught up on the news from home. But with no stories, I just fly hard, fast, and then angle at the appropriate times. I guess you never forget the way home after all. But this is an absurd way to fly, doing nothing but flapping your wings. What’s the point of that?

I don’t know how much time passes because I keep worrying about Edgar but to the left of me I see a yellow puff of smoke rise from above the tree tops and I breathe with relief. Yellow magic is the cheapest. It’s the most unreliable,

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but probably as much as an under-under-undersecretary can afford. He's smart, Edgar. I bet he figured out ways to use magic from books that nobody else has discovered. *He's coming*. That smoke means my mate is coming with me to the Mackwell Plains.

It's hard not to feel a little giddy because I'm coming home with a plan to save our planet and unless someone has another plan, I could really be the hero here. No, don't think like that. I don't want to be a hero. I want to be unbanished. I want to feel loved and welcome by the clan of my people.

Now that the cause for my banishment no longer exists, I wonder if they will still think I'm diseased and broken now. Am I still tainted or am I accepted now that I can blaze? Will I be welcome? Of course I will. Right?

*There it is—the Mackwell Plains!*

My heart swells and a thousand small memories rush back into me, hundreds of nights sleeping on the currents, hearing the cries of garnichula at night. I miss Aarnos Lake and the forest of perches. Our plains extend for hundreds of miles but I see the center of activity is right where I'd expect it. From this distance I can already see the black multitudes on the horizon, the enormous phoenix tornado raging over the Mackwell Plains dead ahead, a mile thick of swirling currents and always rising, swirling, touching the earth and the funnel swerving to the next unpredictable destination. God, I missed home.

They are in deep conference, thousands upon thousands of phoenix riding the swirling currents to create a black tornado of conference activity. It strikes me odd they still create a tornado for conferencing when there's no air to read, no data to stream through its vortex. What exactly are they reading? I'm not going there. That's a waste of time.

I want to fly to farther inland but I am still of the banished and it would be great dishonor to land near Father's home. Even on the day the world ends, I'm still tiptoeing around my father. Figures.

I need a crowd.

I will create the crowd in my brother's home area. The stories he brought me on the wind fed me his location and though the story is not in the air, my memory of it will guide me. Maybe Father will be with him. The world is ending. Time to gather.

I blaze, which is no big deal because everyone here blazes, but not like this, not in the pattern I blaze, a start stop combination of turning up intensity but not

crossing over, funny how I know that phrase, *crossing over*, though I have not given much thought about Edgar's question. Crossing over into *where*?

My blaze attracts attention, the right attention—strangers and hopefully some from my brother's clan will get him word—since I looped around his airspace twice before landing near a perch fountain. I accept a visitor's perch and transform as others come to me. Some naked, some clothed. A few circle me in phoenix form, giving me a wide berth.

Wow, his perch town remains gorgeous, the half-buildings and towering black perch poles for clans to congregate. I see small fires, dinners cooking perhaps, and the great expanse of open space phoenix use for school. This place looks even better than before I left. Better than his stories. My brother is doing well for himself.

I spread my wings so all can see who I am and hear my name circulate over and over.

“Gio!”

“Gio returned!”

“It's *Gio*.”

Others draw to me first, already angry and jabbering, demanding why I distract with my return when so many important things are transpiring. As they get closer, they also get quiet, not brave enough to confront me directly, but enough bravery to bitch about me openly when they thought I might not hear. I resist answering them or acknowledging, poking my head over theirs, peering around them to see if—there. There's Darwin!

I see him running toward me, running full speed and I worry he will attack me.

As he reaches me I say feebly, “The world is ending.”

He tackles me, hugging me, squeezing me until I must transform into phoenix to escape his impossibly tight grasp.

“Brother,” he says, pulling away from me and I see the silver-lined tears in his eyes.

I wonder what his tears would heal if they fell upon me?

“Brother,” he says again this time with true jubilation.

I feel raw ecstasy just to see him, too. It's been several years.

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We hug and laugh. He says, “You’re *really* here!”

“He is the broken phoenix,” says a voice in the small crowd near us.

“He was banished.”

“He is not unbanished because the air is dead.”

The noises in the crowd escalate, complaints of my presence and discussion of what is to be done. Why is it always the biggest complainers who show up in crowds first?

“Quiet,” my brother says and they somewhat obey.

He puts one arm around my shoulder and turns me toward them. He says, “My brother is home.”

The pride in his voice is obvious.

Darwin says, “He’s home because—”

He turns to me expectantly.

I blush and say, “Because the world is ending.”

He turns and yells to everyone, “Because the world is—wait, what? Are you sure?”

The crowd stirs. I can sense fear, not from any phoenix indicators or its presence in the dead air but just by their faces and their resistance. I think living in New York helped attune me to reading peoples’ reactions. Huh. I think I might actually *miss* New York City.

He says with surprise, “When?”

I feel bad telling him this but I suppose I have to. “Later today. Or now. Maybe, you know, *right now*. It’s a little hard to predict within a few days accuracy. Don’t worry, I’ll handle this.”

I step forward.

“Phoenix of the Mackwell Plains,” I say loudly, making my voice boom.

I hear someone in the crowd near me not-too-quietly-mutter, “Drama queen.”

I hold up my hand. “Bitch, please. I know of which I speak. The dying sun is... dying. You know this. The air is dead.”

A great deal of scratchy noise reacts to this observation, some of it angry, some of it directed at me as if I killed the air.

“The forests are dead. I just came from one and a dtandiart did not try to eat my brains or rip off my arms. The stones no longer pulse hot and cold. You know these changes. And you can feel what they mean. After all, how can the air not be air?”

“It’s being debated,” says one, a young one near the front. “The great swirl considers these temporary changes. A council of thousands.”

“Not temporary changes,” I say loudly. “The planet is dying. We have to save the planet. It’s up to us. You have to follow my lead.”

A slight ripple of laughter passes through the crowd.

My brother’s arm is still around my shoulder, though I suspect he may have wished he didn’t align himself so closely with me. I don’t think this will help his popularity, and he seems pretty popular.

“Are you fanaquing with us?” cries an older phoenix and her voice carries. “Are you fanaquing shitting me?”

Another phoenix says, “No one will follow you, Broken.”

“The world is not even ending,” someone says but this remark doesn’t get much support as I would think.

Our planetary situation is grim right now and everyone knows it. They don’t need me explaining a planet shutting down to draw that conclusion themselves.

The same phoenix says, “No one will follow you, Broken Phoenix.”

“I will follow him,” my brother says, squeezing my shoulder. “I will follow Gio.”

An anonymous voice says, “Gio the *broken* phoenix.”

“I will follow him,” Darwin says and the love I read around him makes me feel sad and love him more.

Darwin breaks away. “He respected the banishment placed upon him. He danced out of here like a champ although Father and I withdrew to cry like a pair of fawnlings who missed their egg. He was stronger than us. He lives an amazing life on his own, one without hatred for what we did. He is beautiful. He’s a goddamn flirrnt, which says something to me. A *flirrnt*, people. And he stayed away ten years respecting the banishment. Since Gio left, we banished two other phoenix for horrible, miserable crimes. Those two came sniveling back, crying and begging for unbanishment. Not Gio. Gio *lived*.”

They seem chastised by my brother's speech. I don't care if the world is ending right now because my big brother loves me so well. He always did.

"If he's back in the Mackwell Plains today," Darwin says, "it's because we're all in danger. And he wouldn't have come back unless it was to save us because he's better than all of us combined. And it doesn't fanaquaing matter that he can't blaze."

Oh. I assumed my brother saw me in the sky. He doesn't know I can blaze?

I should explain that. "Uh, Darwin?"

"*We will follow him,*" my brother screams and allows himself to catch on fire, only to make his point stronger. "We will execute his plan."

The crowd is stunned into silence and my brother's fire diminishes, a few burnt feathers wafting to the ground, another subtle way of making a point with our people.

Someone yells, "Are you out of your mind, Darwin?"

After this first comment, many jeers follow, laughing at Darwin, laughing at me, maybe just laughing to experience some relief from worrying about the world-ending signs all around us. Maybe they just need a break. I hear a few random comments.

"Like we'd follow a banished."

"This is insane."

A shrill voice says, "It's not Darwin's fault. Gio is family and you're always biased with family."

Darwin argues with one or two, tries to convince them one-on-one and even his close friends seem to back away. He comes to someone his own age, someone who I vaguely recognize from before my banishment. Might have been a classmate of his. Darwin puts his arm on this man's shoulder and says, "Friend."

The man shifts uncomfortably and glances at me. "He's *banished*, Dar."

Darwin backs up and yells loudly to cover the din, "Wait, wait. Let us hear his plan. We haven't heard the plan."

He repeats this, over and over, and a few people pay attention, listening to him yelling about the plan, the *plan*. Nervously, I glance at the crowd as it grows denser, packing more phoenix together. They're not exactly a fun and

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friendly bunch. They might need a scapegoat right now. Another deflection of the crushing reality of imminent extinction.

At that moment, a yellow flash of smoke catches my eye near homes, private homes, a quarter mile away. Maybe closer. Edgar?

“Tell them the plan, buddy,” my brother says, clasping me on the back. “Tell them why you came back and what you think we should do.”

He steps in front of me and yells again, “*Listen to the plan, then decide. Gio returned to us in troubled times, a flirrant phoenix who dares to speak the truth we know in our hearts. The planet is dying.*”

Wow, talk about drama queen. I know where I get it now.

“Okay, brother,” he says, stepping back. “Tell them.”

Well, this is awkward.

“I don’t have a plan,” I say, whispering to him. But whispering isn’t whispering because there’s so much crowd noise I have to almost yell it to be heard at all. “*There’s no plan.*”

Okay, that was definitely heard. That definitely got caught on the wind. The story will circulate. Why does a crowd always get silent that split second before you say something you don’t want anyone to hear?

Darwin stares at me in alarm.

Even the crowd appears surprised, no one speaking for a moment.

“Shocker,” says a voice, one who has spoken before. “The broken phoenix has no plan but wants us to follow him.”

“No wonder he was banished.”

“I should be home making dinner,” says another voice. “Not listening to this horseshit.”

Voices grow louder.

My brother turns to me, “Gio, seriously. There’s no plan? Did you see me stick my neck out?”

“I did. And I’m grateful. I love you, Darwin. I’m traveling with someone, my life mate who has designed the plan.”

He eyes me warily. “Dude, you really shouldn’t gather a crowd without first having a *plan*.”

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He's right and I'm embarrassed, so I change the topic. "How's Dad?"

Darwin jerks his head at me again. "Did you just say you were *married*?"

At that moment, a small crowd pushes through our dense crowd, phoenix traveling single-file or two side by side, forcing someone through them. I'm happy to see who it is.

The phoenix at the head of this little procession says, "Make way. Make way. An unworthy just crashed into the interior of a phoenix home."

The crowd groans with outraged disgust and part to let the unworthy through. His hands are bound with twine and someone else carries his New York duffel bag. I don't even think I stopped to consider how it blazed with us from New York. It was a good six feet away when I exploded. Was my blaze that wide? Impossible. Yet here it is. I must present Darwin with my gift for him. But right now, I'm just thrilled to see Edgar.

I grin. "Hi, babe."

Edgar smiles back at me and says, "Well, I got here."

I want to kiss him. I move toward him in the crowd.

"*You got here?*" says a large phoenix, broad of chest who hasn't spoken up until now. But I've watched him grow angrier and angrier. "Great Vantaros, Unworthy One, why didn't you just go shit in our temple? I mean, c'mon, man. That's how disrespectful your '*I got here*' was."

Edgar says, "I am very full of houses. I'm *sorry*."

No one responds to the *full of houses* comment, rejecting his attempt at diplomacy.

Other phoenix grumble, I don't think they're going to forgive him for this. Not an unworthy. He makes his way through the crowd toward me. They jostle him, make it harder for him to get around, not actively stopping him, but nobody makes his crossing to me any easier. I'm ashamed of them in this moment, ashamed how they treat my true love. If this is what it means to belong, suddenly I feel lucky to be banished.

My brother says, "Who is this, Gio?"

I say, "This is Edgar Kohn, my mate."

"We have something for you," Edgar says as he draws near indicates the bag should be brought to him. There is no question someone will bring it.



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Because I have vouched for him, even though I am banished, they will not harm him. They'll just banish him like they did me. I pull apart his twined hand constraints with fire droplets, a small bit of heat that nobody sees but him. I wish to savor the joy and surprise on my brother's face.

Edgar unzips the bag and digs around inside.

Darwin wrinkles his nose. "He's unworthy. Why on earth are you mated with an *unworthy*."

"That's prejudiced," I say, "and we're going to work on that after we get done rescuing this dying sun. And it's damn rude of you to say that to him, Darwin, considering you might have been the one who brought him to our world."

Edgar produces our surprise gift and hands it to me. I turn and hand the eight-pack to my brother, proudly displaying proof of my blazing. I put up my knuckles for punching.

I say, "Do the Dew, bro."

Darwin scrunches up his face. "What the fanaqua? What—"

I turn to Edgar. "Did I say it right? Did I say the word *bro* in the appropriate way?"

Edgar gives me two thumbs up. "Perfect. It was epic."

Darwin is at a loss for words. He looks at me with naked hope and joy. "You blazed?"

"I blazed."

We both burst into flames at that moment, hugging and sobbing, because this means we can be family again.

The crowd around us makes noises but I see nothing but my older brother.

"Get my father," Darwin roars when his flames stop.

I command mine to stop, too.

Edgar leans in and says, "Your head's still on fire."

Oh, right. I douse it. I might always be a little broken. That might just be who I am.

"So many questions," Darwin says. "So many."

I blush. "Enjoy your Diet Mountain Dew."

"This stuff," Darwin says, "I hate it. I can't stand it. I only brought it to you because it's such a peculiar taste from that world, so wretched that I thought it might awaken something in you."

"Edgar figured out why you were doing that. Because you loved me."

Darwin's eyes fill with tears and we burst into happy flames again, hugging each other.

Edgar pokes his head into our mutual fire. He says, "Brothers, I feel like a tool interrupting your reunion. But the world's ending. Pretty quick."

I have strong desire to sex Edgar right now, in front of everyone, this man whom I love.

I grab Edgar and kiss him, let them see me love him all of him and he kisses me back.

I hear phoenix groan in disgust. "Gio, you're a *flirrant* and he's *unworthy*. Have some self-respect and make out with a *dtandiant* instead."

Other complain in unison, throwing jeers at us.

When we break from the kiss, Edgar glances over the crowd that despises him. "Did you convince them to follow you?"

"No," I say. "Not one bit. They're not interested."

"Oh," he says with alarm. "Oh shit."

Darwin confirms with a quick summary for Edgar.

I say, "Maybe *you* could try to convince them."

He looks around us at the unfriendly faces. "I don't see them as particularly open to a cheerleading speech from an unworthy who magicked into a private home. I guess I could try."

"Maybe," I say. "What's your plan. Tell me your plan for saving the planet."

Darwin turns and yells to the crowd. "*He has a plan*. The unworthy has a plan to save us all. Give us your attention. *The unworthy has a plan*."

The crowd grumbles loudly but settles down.

Edgar nods nervously. "I'm going to do a magic spell. If I'm right, it's going to confirm what I think you should do. Stand back."

Darwin yells to the gathered phoenix, "*His plan involves magic*."

Someone in the crowd yells, "There's no magical residue on him. He can't do magic."

I step back and put an arm across Darwin so he steps back as well.

Edgar says, "Twenty-two Fargo."

A small puff of smoke appears near our feet, a green one, and a green arrow is outlined. It chugs straight up. Up, up, up. As spells go, it's fairly unimpressive.

In silence, everyone watches the green pointing arrow jerk upward. Up, up, up. There it goes.

Darwin says, "Okay, we're ready. Do the spell."

Edgar says, "I just did."

The green arrow, now above our heads, continues its trajectory.

"No," Darwin says, "The *real* spell."

Edgar says, "That was it. It's a next step spell."

Darwin says, "I *know* it's a next step spell. Every boy phoenix who wishes to kiss a girl learns that spell, asking the arrow to point at the object of his affections."

The crowd grumbling grows louder.

"Was that it?" someone yells. "A playground spell?"

Edgar seems uncomfortable. "It literally suggests the next step you should take. And I think it just told us what to do."

"Guys," says Darwin, looking nervously around the crowd. "You know, I hate to sound critical, but you two are really breaking my balls today. I look like an idiot."

"That couldn't have been magic," someone yells from the crowd. "There's not a trace of magic around him. Anywhere on him."

Edgar says loudly, "I can explain that."

"What's *Fargo*?"

Edgar says, "I name and number my spells to keep them organized. And I use trigger words unlikely to be spoken aloud in this world."

"He's not magic," someone says. "That wasn't magic. Read the air around him."

"I have a plan," Edgar says loudly, temporarily silencing them.

He looks at me. "The short version is this: fly up."

I say, "I don't understand."

"Well, the arrow pointed up. Straight up. I think when you blaze, you might go into outer space. But not *normal* outer space. It's white, right? I think it might be outer space or inside a star or... I dunno. Off-planet at least. I think your power comes from out there."

Lightning strikes closer, inside the Mackwell Plains. That doesn't happen. It's not supposed to happen *ever*. The tornado of phoenix swing dangerously to the right, erratically. They're not accomplishing anything out there and they know it.

I say, "Edgar, I think I missed part of your plan. I was thinking about the lightning. What was your plan after 'fly up'."

Edgar grimaces. "No, that was the plan. Fly straight up as far as you can go. Maybe go into space."

"*That's* the plan? Fly up?"

I know I'm speaking louder than I intend to but I think we're in the final moments. It may not matter who hears what for much longer. Muttering resumes around me and the phoenix move in closer. One is so indignant he ignites on fire. Everyone observes his flames and then turns away while he sorts it out. The rumor circulates the crowd that the big plan is to 'fly up.' There's some grumbling.

"Fly up," someone shouts. "*Fly up*. Someone get me a brick of dung to throw."

Edgar notices the intensifying anger around us. He says in a loud voice, "The book implied you phoenix have power over time and space. Other ancient powers were hinted at. What if the phoenix abilities are more than you know and blazing is just a side effect? You could stop what's happening."

"Is he somehow blaming *us* for this situation? We didn't do enough?" says one voice.

"He read a book?" someone says. "The lying-about-magic unworthy is also a *book reader*?"

"Fanaqua *that*."

The word *book* travels through the crowd, being repeated until a familiar voice yells out, “Well, that’s shit number two in our homeland today. The unworthy who landed in a private phoenix home is also a book reader. This visit keeps getting better.”

“Would you like to meet my elderly father clan,” someone shouts, “So you can shit on them?”

The phoenix around us twitter, laugh nervously while glancing around the darkening landscape.

“What’s the name of the book?” someone yells in a jeering tone.

Edgar stares into my eyes. Loudly he says, “*The Phoenix Tail Feather*. It’s a book about making love to phoenixes.”

This revelation leaves the crowd stunned into silence. Three burst into flames and appear to pass out.

The noise starts all at once, yelling random comments.

“Aw, c’mon!”

“Book reader!”

“*Filth*.”

“Did he call us phoenixes? *Learn the language, asshole.*”

“Fly up,” I say, looking into his eyes.

He says, “Fly up.”

He smiles and I smile. I love him.

He says, “Before the world ends, I want to tell you something.”

I wrap my arms around him.

The phoenix around us yell and make noise, probably just as much out of fear for what’s coming as outrage at the unworthy. Darwin steps to the crowd and tries to argue for patience, tries to argue no offense was meant, giving us a short break from their hostility.

Edgar says, “I wanted to say it when we were a pretzel in Central Park.”

“That was a good premel.”

He says, “Yeah, I know. I didn’t want to ruin the moment by bringing it up, but after getting shot, I regretted I hadn’t said it. The pretzel moment was perfect. Just like this one.”

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“Yes?”

My mouth finds his. Phoenix in the area groan in horror and disgust.

“The broken phoenix is making out with an unworthy,” someone cries and a ripple of disgusted laughter spreads nearby.

“This is unbelievable,” cries the same outraged phoenix, standing on a perch to make himself seen. “He’s like the *worst* unworthy ever.”

I jerk my head toward him. “Ignore that idiot.”

“I only see you,” he says smiling. “The thing I wanted to tell you...”

He leans in closer and I hear a vague scream in response to more lightening and loud noises, an impressive cracking noise close enough to seriously alarm everyone but I refuse to look over my shoulder. If this is the end, I want to die staring into his eyes.

Edgar says, “Gio, I have no regrets. This is the best world ending I’ve ever been to. After I arrived, I was all alone. For years. And while I came to like this world better than my own, I would never forget losing everything and everyone I had loved back there. Better to never love than lose it all again. I never wanted to feel that lonely and lost again. But we are meant to love, even people on a planet with a dying star. I can’t deny it. I love you. Now and forever, I *love* you, Broken Phoenix.”

Our lips almost touch when the flames spiral out of me, exploding like a bomb igniting all of the phoenix near us, dozens, then hundreds, the fire burning hard but not yet blazing us to the other side. We’re still here. The racing fire streaks from phoenix to phoenix across the plains until I see the tornado catch fire, pushing them off course, and the blackness of all those phoenix in the sky far away instantly transforms into a funnel of light.

I am beyond shocked.

Clan custom dictates no more than three phoenix ignite at any one time. It’s considered rude. But now thousands burn across the Mackwell Plains. I can’t see them with my eyes. I see them with my fire.

I feel Edgar’s fingers tap the underside of my elbows and I rocket straight up, spiraling faster and higher than I have ever flown before and I would perhaps feel dizzy by this if I didn’t love it, embrace it, fall into it as the earth disappears below me, so far already, so far, and nothing but sky, lavender, then mist, then the twirling clouds which circle the planet, debris from the dog

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moon's friction with our peach sun. I see the curve of the planet at this height and only seconds passed since he kissed me and told me to fly up.

There it is. I see the black space and the trillions of stars.

My fire fights for oxygen this high where there is none, the flame still pounding off me and I find myself still rocketing toward the black, higher, then higher, and then...

Then not higher.

I stop accelerating. The lack of oxygen has an impact, as in *I'm not burning*, I'm not burning, the blaze can't burn without fire. I reach the peak, the tip, the highest arc, because I start slipping back, back toward the planet, the planet curve so amazingly far away, me stuck in this thin layer of atmospheric crud. A moon rock spins near me, sails by me actually, at a remarkable speed. And I start falling.

Outer space is so close—I'm touching it, really.

But I'm not going into space, Edgar.

I want to tell him about this, how confident I was he was right about this and the fire felt right, this intensity that was enough to fuel me this high. *It was the right decision*, I want to tell him, because I don't want him to feel bad when I am crushed falling from the sky. My human form is involuntarily restored and there's so little oxygen this high I gasp fruitlessly. I feel the pressure of space working against me, beginning to crush me, daring me to come closer and feel the final squeeze.

It was the right call, Edgar.

I start to fall, fall to the planet surface. Slowly. A tiny pebble whizzes through my leg and due to its rocketing velocity, it rips through my flesh as if I were made of water. Drops of blood appear out the other side of my calf, the liquid hovering in the air as if not sure whether to orbit the planet or burn up in re-entry. I think this must have hurt but I can't tell because I'm falling and not breathing, falling and gasping and I realize I'm going to be pulverized by moon rocks long before I hit the earth unconscious. So that's how I die.

I'm falling but my descent hasn't picked up full speed yet, the air's too light. I am starting to move so the last thing I see at this height is another phoenix pop into an almost full stop near where I did, the same general coordinates, and I see the surprise on my older brother's face as we make eye contact for our final few seconds alive.

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My descent picks up speed. I feel my legs burning into nothing, the atmospheric fire rising to meet me.

I guess the broken phoenix won't be saving the world. I wasn't good enough.

The last thing I will see is my older brother dying, the one who gave me green elixir from another planet, hoping its exotic taste would somehow trigger my blaze. I never even got to ask him how blazing work. Do all phoenix go to that world? Just me and him? Dad? I'll never know.

He's dying.

I'm going to die first, picking up speed, my body limp and scorched. Oblivion seems like a good idea, preferable to watching my brother die, thinking of his children hating me from the ground in their final minutes alive, everyone hating me the last few seconds for I gave false hope and killed—oh no! Two more pops as other phoenix emerge, following my brother's lead and in doing so discover this deadly limitation.

Turns out oxygen doesn't burn in space. Who knew? Well, I guess everyone. I knew that. But I guess I got caught up in the idea of saving the world and forgot. Well, fuck.

I pick up greater speed. The heat becomes more intense as I begin to burn in reentry. My arms will burn away in seconds and I will blink out of existence. Right before I die I spread my arms as if to fly because the best thing I have ever done is to fly, to gloast the stories of the world.

I spread my arms and almost flap them, a silly gesture in human form, and fire consumes them, a slick burn, wetter, like fire is a liquid, thick and oily, not oily, but maybe luscious like a cream, which makes me think of using golden Cronocodille as lube.

This fire is creamy, it's golden, it's slicker than normal. This fire is richer, deeper, it's a different texture than oxygen fire and oh, *oh*. What's happening? I swoop up, no longer falling because I'm in burning phoenix form again, the fire like liquid, creamy and soothing. The fire is... it's icy.

The icy fire.

*I'm not dying.*

More important, I can read the air again. I'm flying into no-air, beyond the atmosphere. I don't even have to flap my fire wings to move, I just glide with intention.



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I'm hearing stories, feeling and tasting the air, gloasting its history but it's not the *air*. It's space.

I'm gloasting outer space.

Space has stories. I can read space. I had no idea.

Space is packed with them actually, the stories of planets and faraway travelers who passed this way in big ships, stories of things witnessed: geological, astrophysics, and otherwise. The stories are bigger. We are part of this galaxy's story, the story of the dying sun and our planet's anguish.

I cannot see Darwin but he dies near me and returns as this delicious icy fire. I feel his death but I do not fear it. This feels right. The icy fire.

What happens when I flap these—I skid hundreds, then thousands of miles across the darkness, smearing the blackness boasting six trillion stars. The fire streaks behind me, trailing me and I see Darwin's cosmos fire blazing, his wider than mine, scouring the cosmos, rocking hundreds and thousands of miles in an instance. Where did he go?

Wow. We can really move out here.

This fire is so different, so searing and so creamy, I slide a thousand more miles before deciding which direction to take. Space is not... it's not space, it's different than I expected.

*I am eternal.*

*I am fire incarnate.*

I explode into forty directions at once. My brother's blaze is now a speck that may as well be a distant star's explosion and I instantly know he discovered this latest ability, to travel multiple directions at once. I hear other pops behind me, phoenix exploding into the atmosphere, dying, and finding the creamy, icy fire in deep space.

More popping.

Screaming into the vacant universe we rise, a handful, then hundreds and soon thousands of phoenix, maybe *every* phoenix as soon as word gets out that it's a different fire out here, but it's still fire and we remain fire's deliriously intoxicated servants. I know how we save our planet.

I know now.

We explode in every direction seeping through galaxies, flying as one unit while simultaneously our awareness spreads like dtandiart tentacles, like the

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slippery wind blowing across this tiny universe, all of us light and fire. It's intoxicating. I wish I could tell Edgar. I will soon enough.

Faster and faster until stars are a blur, a trail of white light, always light and the streaks come together until I am flying through nothing but white light. The whiteness between all worlds.

I feel my love for Edgar and explode even further, touching worlds I am destined never to see again.

The first response comes from someone, I don't know where she is, somewhere a billion miles from me and she vibrates her message through all of us, asking, "Here?"

It's not the right place, there's another planet too near her location, potential for life in 40,000 years. That planet may not ever evolve under the right conditions, but we cannot know. Which means we cannot crowd their meager opportunity for life in this universe. Life is too precious.

"Here?" suggests another phoenix. This location would work but our planet would forever be twenty degrees colder year round. Species would die. The majority would live but we can't be sure of the impact. The suggestion came from five galaxies away. Don't know that phoenix either.

Though I am nowhere near our dying sun, millions of physical miles away from me, I feel it, I feel our sun breaking apart. It's happening now. A wave of radiation blows through our galaxy, destroying everything in its path.

You'd think with so many of us racing through space, bending time, many voices would yell out potential opportunities but the universe isn't as big as I thought and there are too many opportunities for life we have no right to extinguish.

My brother's confident voice says, "Here."

The idea of Darwin is a concept, a feeling that's far away but I feel his flame on my chest, nuzzling me, visiting me in my banishment yet none of that matters because he found the perfect spot.

They wait for my command.

With a whisper, I say, "Do it. Move the planet."

The universe explodes because we're rewriting the symphony, the celestial song of life unbroken describing worlds unseen, life unknowable. The Great Musician planned sad underscores to mourn our extinction and while saving

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ourselves is not a crime, it is to be *celebrated*, the Great Musician must rewrite the universe's song to balance these new notes with something unanticipated. I don't even know what all that means but we rewrote the fabric of all things big and small.

It's over.

We're safe.

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## Chapter 5

### *Cherry Sunsets*

I would collapse because I'm tired as shit right now. But Edgar's back home and I really do want a Diet Mountain Dew. Of course, if my brother won't drink them, it seems a shame to let them go to waste.

The unspooling of our vast network across the universe happens very quickly, almost instantly, all of us skating through stars toward the new home, the home we love but also looking with curiosity at these cosmos because our neighborhood just got a lot bigger. We phoenix might be more than we realized. We might be more.

The furthest away will take minutes to reach our planet, and those only a few million miles away will get there in seconds. Time is different out here, hard to define or describe. There is less time, but no exact time. I don't understand. There is much I don't understand.

When I reach our planet, I observe those entering the upper atmosphere and see them return to human form in the oxygen-poor environment, just beyond the moon debris. We left the dog moon behind, but kept the orbiting rocks. Interesting. Once in human form, I see them burning up in re-entry, the icy fire replaced gradually with oxygen fire. Instinctively I know this is what those who now burn saw happen moments ago with those who reached the planet before them and I plan to follow suit.

I witness thousands of phoenix drifting into the atmosphere before me, besides me, feet pointing down and letting go. The transition is graceful and oxygen-based fire feels like an old sweater, the one article of clothing I love to wear for sheer pleasure. I can't believe I could never enjoy the blazing until now. It feels so right and so natural.

Hundreds of us rejoin the planet, a shower of comets racing across the atmosphere. Thousands.

I would hurry to tell Edgar his master plan to save the planet, *fly up*, worked. He saved us all. But he knows. All of creation knows. The phoenix in the sky swing around dazed and confused by joy, already creating dances to commemorate what happened out there. I float leisurely, relaxing into this, this air, this amazing fresh air the new songs already beginning, the new sun filling us with new tales, this one a different color from our old sun.

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It's red-tinged, this new sun. Stunning. Odd.

More spontaneous dancing begins hundreds of feet over the Mackwell Plains, everyone participating as everyone returns. Every phoenix that could blaze was there, I can see immediately there are no phoenix who did not participate. We *all* did it. We moved the goddamn planet. Who knew we could do that?

I spiral down, happy to see the rocks lit, though dimmer than I am used to. The colors are different, pinker, everything a different hue. I wonder how this will impact our world, having a different sun so many billions of miles away from our old home. Tyarano, ma'jegere as Father would say. *This life is wings.*

Not hard to find Edgar as he's the only one I see on the Mackwell Pains. Everyone's in the sky. Even pre-blazing phoenix fly and dance around with joy for reasons they don't quite understand. I wish for my jeans, the soft and faded ones. I command them to form around me and they do. How nice.

The patterns above me break open and one phoenix swirls lower, performing a dance expressing deliriousness, insanity, the "holy fucking shit" of dancing, and I see that I know this blaze, it is similar to my own.

My father.

The reunion between a father and son is scripted and full of social customs to allow each to confirm the other's intention, the humility and the willingness to accept each other as is. It could take an hour before we actually hug. I look forward to the hour-long ritual, the anticipation of seeing my father up close.

I drop to the planet and transition into human form so we may begin. Edgar is not terribly far, as was my intention. I put a hand up and he nods, smiling. Edgar and I have time for our reunion. Delaying it only proves we both knew it was inevitable. He grins at me and my heart leaps around itself twice.

*My love!*

Father drops into his form. He seems much older than I remember him.

I drop to one knee and spread my arms apart, ready to begin. I am surprised to look up and see him running, running to me and his face as broken as mine when I was banished. I stand. He throws himself into my arms.

"The ritual," I say.

He says, "Be quiet."

We stand like this for a very long time, me shocked and learning his smell again, the smell of my beloved father. I cannot tell if he cries or not because he

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is buried against me and will not move. He feels different. Maybe the bones of his back are sharper. He is older.

Finally, I say, "Dad, this is getting weird."

He laughs and pulls back away from me, wiping his eyes.

He stares at me and I stare at him, looking to see something in him.

He says, "The banishment. Go."

I transform immediately and he bursts into flame. The story screams in the air around him, defining him, defining the last ten years of him, his son, the broken phoenix, alone in the world. I gloat his deep sorrow, reviewing the experiments he did in my absence he thought might promote my blaze, his secret conversations with Darwin before Darwin visited me. Father attempted to persuade the phoenix to undo the banishment. He has lived as a pariah among his own people, just as banished as I was.

I jump back into human form.

"You told me to search the cosmos," I say to my father as I approach him. "That was your parting advice. What did you mean?"

"Was it?" he says. "I was dead inside that day, the idea of no Gio in my life. It was a funeral day and I don't remember anything that came out of my mouth. I am sorry, my son, I did not have wisdom for you. I was dying inside."

We hug each other again and cry, then catch fire, then stop, preventing a blaze. Today's pretty emotionally draining and although the joy of our reunion will last for the next year, I am sure, we both could use a break.

"Father, I have so many questions. I do not understand how the blazing works."

"Questions will be answered. But look at the celebration in the sky. Questions can wait."

Another burst in the sky shows phoenix all around one, swirling, welcoming, making space. My father looks up. We both begin to laugh.

"I need to greet my other son," he says. He looks into my eyes. He puts his hand on my shoulder. "Both my sons saved the universe today. *Both*. What a day for a father. What a day."

"Go get Darwin," I said.

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“Join me,” he says. “Fly with us.”

“Maybe later. I must reunite with my life mate.”

My father's grin grows wider and tears come out of his eyes. “You're married?”

We hug again. He wants to meet Edgar but I insist Edgar and I must have a moment to reunite ourselves. Father agrees. He takes off into the sky to greet Darwin. Other phoenix dance around Darwin, retelling how he found this destination, how he exploded and showed them the way to icy fire.

“Welcome home, bro,” I say, looking up.

Darwin is the hero. He found the new location. He will lead them now.

I'm so happy for him and I'm even happier for *me* that this does not fall to my responsibility. I did not like how they treated Edgar, whose only goal was to save us all. I can't live with these phoenix. I need a private home with my sweetie. I guess I will self-banish myself with occasional visits.

I walk to close the thirty foot distance between us. We stand before each other near the perch fountain in my brother's area, rich in admiration and joy and love, almost a physical presence between us. I take his hand.

I say, “By the way, I was in such a hurry a few minutes ago, I forgot to tell you something.”

“What's that?” he says, allowing himself to move closer.

“I love you, too.”

We kiss.

Above us, the phoenix recreate the experience, immortalizing the story of our people in dance and complicated swoops. I hope they do not fail to include the unworthy who saved our world. Edgar and I break our kiss and we both scan the skies. Ah, I see they include his name and describe his strange hidden magicks, revealing their own hubris in ignoring him. I am touched by their honesty. We can be idiots but we phoenix are first to admit when we are wrong. Already, I recognize the meaning of the pattern I see above me, broadcasting the words “Fly up.”

We touch our heads together.

“They are dancing the words, *fly up*,” I say. “You are a hero.”

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“You are my hero, Gio.”

God, I wish to get drunk with him on Diet Mountain Dew.

We look to the sky again, watching the dance.

“What’s the symbol over there?” he asks, pointing.

“Oh, that? It’s old. Dead language. It’s used rarely except to signify the importance of a story. It’s impact. Your story is a big one, hon. You saved the world with that tiny next step spell revealing an arrow pointing up.”

“I’ve seen that symbol before,” Edgar says, “Inside the temple under the purple castle.”

“The purple castle? There’s a *temple* under that?”

He says, “A temple with a prophecy.”

He smiles at me in a crooked way causing me to realize my life with him is going to be very interesting. We will have more adventures together.

“The new sun is pretty,” he says, shading his eyes. “I think we’re gonna like having cherry sunsets.”

I do not understand why he does not sound happy.

“What’s wrong?”

“Well, look at it,” he says, throwing his arm in its direction, as if I could not see it. “None of my outfits look good now. I picked out my clothes for best effect under a peach-colored sun. Not cherry. I *literally* have nothing to wear under this sun.”

I like his silliness and laugh. I glow from the inside because he is happy and he my mate and I am his. I am going to suggest we share some Diet Mountain Dew. But first, I hold him in my arms.

I say, “Next, we must decide which one of us gets pregnant.”

“We can do that?” Edgar asks, his eyes wide.

I wrap my arms around him. “Baby, we’re flirrant. We can do anything.”

“I’m glad you’re feeling open to new possibilities,” Edgar says, smiling mysteriously. “Because I like your mountain top cave and am happy to move in with you but we’ve got to put in a library.”

I frown. “What is a library?”



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“A room dedicated to holding books.”

I gasp in horror.

His lips dive for mine as I burst into flame.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Edmond Manning has always been fascinated by fiction: how ordinary words could be sculpted into heartfelt emotions, how heartfelt emotions could leave an imprint inside you stronger than the real world. Mr. Manning never felt worthy to seek publication until recently, when he accidentally stumbled into his own writer's voice that fit perfectly, like his favorite skull-print, fuzzy jammies. He finally realized that he didn't have to write like Charles Dickens or Armistead Maupin, two author heroes, and that perhaps his own fiction was juuuuuuuust right, because it was his true voice, so he looked around the scrappy word kingdom that he created for himself and shouted, "I'M HOME!" He is now a writer.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Facebook](#)

*Links to my three (3) books:*

[King Perry](#) | [King Mai](#) | [I Probably Shouldn't Have Done That](#)

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# BROMANCE TO ROMANCE

By Elizabeth Daniels

## Photo Description

A young man stares at the camera wearing a white T-Shirt and black-rimmed Ray Ban eye glasses. Facial hair covers his chin and upper lip. Tattoos of a skull and flower are visible on his neck. His look is vulnerable, sincere, and wanting.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I'm a grad student at \_\_\_\_\_. I'm looking for love but sometimes it's hard to find guys that want more than a hook-up. Will I find the love of my life on this gay dating site? Or is he already on campus? I snapped this photo via my web cam—is it for my online dating profile or am I sending it to a special someone? What will he think of the tattoos under my shirt? Can he bring out the romantic side hiding behind my glasses? How do we meet and find our HEA?*

*No BDSM and light on the angst please. Also I like cuddle times. :)*

*Thanks!!*

*Sincerely,*

*Julia*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** friends to lovers, phone sex, first love, college, nursing informatics, slow burn/UST, helpful friends, non-explicit sex, tattoos

**Word Count:** 19,587

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### Acknowledgements

To Julia—I hope what they say is true and that the third time is a charm. Thanks for the great prompt and the chance to write these boys.

To the LLUMAS who saved me when I was drowning and to Lori who encouraged me to write phone sex at my desk. xoxo

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# **BROMANCE TO ROMANCE**

**By Elizabeth Daniels**

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## Chapter 1

Dan Foster sat in his apartment at his kitchen bar flipping through the apps on his phone. Another Friday night would be spent alone, and it depressed him more than he cared to admit. He could have jumped on the invite for a boys' night out, but the drive down the I-5 was never fun, and with the way Malcolm drove, he would need to have an IV of vodka to survive. Normally, he would wait until his roommate and best friend, Drew, got home and see if he wanted to hang out, but it was Drew's late night at work, and Dan was getting antsy.

He looked at his phone for the time; it was only 8:47 p.m., and nothing happened this early on a party night. If he was going to do this, he needed to make up his mind and get ready. The words of his late grandfather came to mind: "If the barn needs painting... paint it!" He decided his love life was the barn, and even though his grandfather had been talking about women and makeup, Dan's life needed a new coat of paint.

Dan went to the cupboard next to the fridge, pulled out a bottle of Glenfiddich, and grabbed one of the few glasses that wasn't a jar. He needed the strong stuff if he was going to do this: put himself out there again. He wasn't worried about going out really. Hell, he wanted to go out and meet people—meet the love of his life actually and have a romance to end all romances, but it was going out alone, without a backup plan or anyone to fall back on, that required the liquid courage. Maybe the night would be dull, and he would leave minutes after he walked through the door or maybe this would be a night he would never forget. Dan was certain it would be the former, but the chance at an unforgettable night, even for an introvert, was a dangerous temptation.

Dan poured two fingers of the whiskey into a lowball glass and walked to his small bedroom. He stood in front of his closet, staring at the color-coded clothes hanging on matching wood hangers. The order of his closet calmed him as he was able to see each piece easily. He decided that comfortable but appropriate would be the best way to go—he selected a pair of dark denim jeans, vintage Black Flag T-shirt, and a pair of age worn Doc Martens. He wouldn't make any other decisions until the liquor settled in his system and he felt in the right mood. Dan wasn't sure how this was going to go tonight, but he laid his outfit on the bed and went to get ready.

Stepping out of the shower, Dan wiped the steam off the mirror and looked at his reflection. "You're one lonely boy, and you're not on Gossip Girl." Dan

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laughed at his knowledge of pop culture shows targeting teenage girls. At least he had the background knowledge of the books from his cousin, aptly named Serena, that Chuck Bass was gay in the books. Dan thought it was a shame they didn't stay truer with the show, he might have paid more attention. Dan went to his room to finish getting ready.

Dan checked the time and gave himself a once-over in the mirror. His clothing was decent enough to be a "going out" outfit in the warm weather and showed off his tattoos. Though they weren't for public consumption, he hated attempting to hide them.

Stepping out the front door, Dan turned and slid the deadbolt into place. He was ready to go. The Backdoor was only a mile from his apartment, and the warm air from the Santa Ana winds bringing a breeze to the dry air was welcoming. Dan walked along the busy street, humming along to a mash-up of songs filtering in and out of his head, and he listened to the sounds of traffic. He wasn't a gearhead or whatever they were called now, but there were enough cars around where he grew up that he could tell certain ones apart.

He walked to the corner and pressed the button to cross the intersection that led to the bar. Dan watched as a blue diesel truck pulled into the garage across the street. He couldn't help but gawk as it circled the parking lot and came to a stop, its grill facing the bar and looking like it was smiling. The truck brought back a memory, and Dan was instantly transported back to his father's truck, chatting to other truckers on the CB radio, trying to use the lingo and pretending he was older than he was.

"Ten-four, good buddy. Roger that, Smokey. A bandit is on your tail. Over and out."

Dan chuckled as he mumbled to himself, shaking his head, knowing what he said meant nothing at all, but it was still fun to play pretend. He was waiting for the light to change when the engine of the truck was silenced, doors were opened, and he heard voices. He couldn't help but stare as three men exited the cab. In the light from the street lamps he could see two were older, and the third man looked like a fallen angel. Where the hell did they come from? Dan hoped they were not stopping to get something from the convenience store, but that they would turn north as that would put them right in his path. The sound from the accessible pedestrian signal let him know it was okay to cross. He tore his gaze away from the men and headed toward the bar.

The deep bass of the music was pulsing through the walls of The Backdoor when Dan arrived at the entrance. The line was longer than he'd thought at first

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glance, not being able to see it from the street. An adorable young boy was perched on a stool at the door, checking IDs. Huh? He must be the new bouncer. The boy was slim with platinum blond hair; he wore a pair of jeans so tight he must have been poured into them with a black T-shirt that had so many holes through it that it hardly qualified as a shirt at all and the tallest pair of silver boots he had seen on a man, woman, or drag queen.

Dan watched the line as each person walked through the door until an unruly customer, refusing to show ID, began to argue with the boy. Dan was sure a fight was going to break out, and the customer would take the boy down, when a sound like a wounded animal pierced through the commotion.

He looked around the crowd of bodies to see a man, a large man with dark skin and a shaved head, wearing more leather than Dan's vegan heart could take, holding the customer by his arm and pulling it behind his back at a terrible angle. The man in leather leaned in to whisper in the customer's ear, and his body went slack. *Whoa. What was that?* Dan wasn't sure and was not about to ask either. The customer reached into his back pocket and produced his wallet and ID. The bouncer took out a flashlight, passed it over the ID and then over the customer from head to toe with an impish grin. He handed the ID back to the customer, but when he tried to pass, the bouncer stopped him with his arm across the entrance and a shake of his head. The customer stared as the bouncer grinned, pursed his lips like he wanted a kiss, and pointed to his cheek. *I guess this is the cover charge tonight?* The customer blushed and leaned over to give the bouncer a quick peck on the cheek. The boy beamed and removed his arm from the entrance. As the customer passed, the bouncer gave him a smack on the ass so hard the sound made a snap, and the line waiting to get in let out a collective gasp followed by a round of applause. The bouncer hopped off his stool, performed a deep curtsy and returned to his perch and his job.

Dan nodded and grinned as he made his way through the line and up to the door.

"Ooh, look at you," the bouncer crooned and pointed at Dan's body. "Who was the lucky boy that used you to prove they could color within the lines?"

Dan shook his head. Comments about his tattoos were par for the course no matter where he went. "It was more than one."

The bouncer clapped his hands and threw his head back with laughter. "You, my colorful one, get in free for that comeback." The bouncer turned and crooked his finger at the dark-skinned man in leather. "Bobby, make sure this hunk of a walking coloring book gets his drinks on the house tonight."



“You can’t do that, Noah.” The dark man gave the bouncer, Noah, a hard look and shook his head.

Noah patted the man’s cheek. “Oh, Bobby. You poor daft man.” Noah sat up straight on the stool, stretched out his leg and pressed his foot against Dan’s chest. “Do you need to see the bruises on my knees?”

Dan was amazed by the blush that crept up the man’s dark neck and stayed on his cheeks.

“I didn’t mean...” Bobby faltered.

“Those bruises mean I get to do whatever the fuck I want, when I want and tonight, this gorgeous flower-necked bastard gets his drinks for free.” Noah waved his hand in the air in dismissal. “Now off with you and make it so.”

Bobby hunkered off into the bar and Dan looked down at the booted foot perched on his chest and up to the man it belonged to. “Uh, your foot, Noah?” Dan inquired. “You want to move it?”

“Not yet. ID, please.” Noah smirked as he made his request.

Dan handed over his ID and tried to move back to dislodge Noah’s foot, but the door frame was against his back impeding his escape. His efforts did not go unnoticed and Noah pressed the heel of his boot against Dan’s chest.

“Shit that hurts.” Dan hissed.

“Tsk, ts, Daniel. Trying to get away so soon?” Noah shook his head. “You’re a naughty boy, aren’t you?” He inched his booted toe up and under Dan’s chin. “Don’t suppose you’d kiss it to make it better?” Noah asked with a pout.

“Not my kink, Noah.” Dan lifted the bouncer’s foot and slid out from under it. “Not tonight, anyway.” Dan moved quickly and snatched his ID out of Noah’s hands. “Thanks for the drink!” He blew the bouncer a kiss and turned and walked into the bar.

He stood in the entrance to the bar and clicked the heels of his Doc’s together, summoning Judy Garland for good luck. He would need it.

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Dan grabbed his beer and swiveled the bar stool around to scan the growing crowd of the bar. He didn’t know why he was here tonight. Every time he came to The Backdoor for a drink it ended the same way; lame pick-up lines from

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even lamer guys who wanted nothing more than a lame hookup that often left Dan alone, empty, and with a wet spot in the most unfortunate places.

The atmosphere hadn't changed in years. The bar was the oldest business in town. It had been around long before Dan was born and was run by the same lesbian couple who opened it decades ago. As gay bars go, it wasn't fancy. It was functional. It had a long walnut-topped bar with a brass foot rail, small dance floor, an old fashioned jukebox, half-moon booths tucked away in dark corners with ample room to get comfortable, and two pool tables for those who liked to use phallic symbols to flirt.

The clientele of The Backdoor was of the college variety or those who have been in the area long enough to know it wasn't the hippest choice in town, but a place where everybody knew your name. Drinks were cheap, the staff was accommodating with a smile, and if you were lucky, a guy could see the inside of the most used stall in the men's room.

As cliché as it was, sex of all types happened in the bathrooms at The Backdoor. There may be no sex in the champagne room, but boys got it on in the first stall to the left. The Backdoor's name was tongue in cheek, yet even after several cases of hate crime vandalism, the owners never changed it.

Dan tipped the cold glass of beer against his lips and paused as a dark-haired guy caught his eye. Dan gave him the usual head to toe once-over and almost choked on his beer as the guy grabbed his crotch, thrust against his hand, and wagged his tongue. Seriously? Dan grimaced behind his glass, raised his eyebrows, and shook his head in a subtle brush off of Mr. Nasty across the room.

"Nice ink." Dan flicked his eyes towards the voice with the compliment.

The urge to whistle at the man leaning against the bar next to him was overwhelming. He was tall, taller than Dan's five feet ten inches, and his skin was a warmed golden tan but not from the sun. This was natural and the urge to see if it tasted as good as it looked made Dan smirk. The guy had dark hair cropped short, thick eyebrows over long lashes, and dark chocolate-colored eyes. If this wasn't dessert laid out in front of him... Dan chuckled as a cheesy pick-up line came into his head. Now was not the time to turn into a hypocrite.

"Uh, thanks." Dan nodded and raised his glass in salute.

The man grinned, showing off a straight row of impossibly white teeth. Dan tried to keep his thoughts neutral and not let his odd turn-on by excellent teeth take over.

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The man put out his hand. "Thomas."

Dan looked at Thomas' hand and up to his face, trying to read the guy. "Dan." He placed his hand in Thomas' and received a very firm albeit dry handshake. No spark. No feeling in it at all.

"Nice to meet you, Dan." Thomas smiled as he slowly pumped his hand up and down. "You come here often?"

"Are you trying to hit on me?" Dan pulled his hand back. "Because you know..."

"What? Oh, no. No. I'm sorry." Thomas fumbled over his words and turned toward the bar.

Dan studied Thomas as he caught the bartender's attention and ordered a gin and tonic. Well then. Thomas wasn't giving anything away with his drink choice, but Dan liked that he ordered out of the norm. Most patrons of The Backdoor, like himself, directly ordered beer and didn't bother with mixed drinks. Even the simple ones.

Thomas grabbed his glass, turned back to Dan, and gave him a nervous grin.

"So, Tommy." Dan attempted to draw the attractive man into a conversation.

"It's Thomas."

"Right, Thomas. What brings you here tonight?" Dan asked.

"I'm meeting a friend for drinks."

"Oh really? Good friend?" Dan inquired as he scooted an inch or two off his stool and closer to Tommy.

"Best friend and more."

"How nice. So where is the strapping lad?"

Thomas pointed across the room, and at the thin, lanky blond boy walking out of the restroom. Dan would be surprised if the boy was old enough to get in, let alone get a drink without being carded.

"You like 'em young, eh Thomas?"

Thomas turned his head and gave a look of disgust to Dan. "That," he pointed to the blond twink walking toward them, "is my little brother."

Dan cringed. "So, you're not here looking for a date, then?" Dan gave Thomas an animated smile, raising his eyebrows and widening his eyes in a cartoonish fashion. "With a boy?"

“No,” Thomas answered.

“So... you’re not gay, I take it?” Dan asked.

“No,” Thomas replied deadpan.

“Okay then. Have a nice time visiting your little brother.” Dan eyed the young man as he walked up and threw his arms around Thomas’ neck with abandon and squealed when Thomas picked him up and spun him around.

Hmm. So that’s how it is in their family, he thought. Brotherly love at its finest and oddly close as well. Dan shrugged and slid off the barstool. He gave Thomas three pats on the back and said, “You two have fun catching up and,” he raised his glass, “all that comes with it.” Dan nodded to them both and slinked off before he started rewriting *Flowers in the Attic* with a hunk of an older brother who had dark features and his twink of a kid brother with long limbs that wrapped around his waist and the things they do while their mother wasn’t around.

“I so need to get a boyfriend and get laid properly on a regular basis,” Dan mumbled.

“I can help with that,” a voice said.

Dan looked up and realized he’d walked straight across the bar and almost directly into the chest of Mr. Nasty. “Oh, um... thanks for the offer, but not if we were the last two men on earth and male pregnancy was a reality.”

Mr. Nasty blinked and cocked his head to the side. “Male pregnancy? You mean like sea horses?”

“Huh?” Dan was busy scanning the bar for someone to spend the night with, either having sex or planning their next fifty years together. He preferred the latter but after his latest dry spell, he wasn’t about to be picky. Where was the triad he saw on his way here?

“Guys getting pregnant. Is that a real thing?” Mr. Nasty asked.

Dan huffed. “Oh yeah, well, at least in books it is. They call it mpreg. I have a friend I could hook you up with. She loves the stuff,” Dan answered, not looking at Mr. Nasty who had moved closer to him, or so the change in smell indicated.

“You wanna read me a bedtime story, pretty boy?” Mr. Nasty rasped.

Dan turned and faced the guy. “Look, I really don’t want to sound like an asshole, but you’re not my type... okay?” Dan gave a tight-lipped smile to soften the sting of rejection he was serving up.

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Mr. Nasty took the hint and walked away to try his sick game on the next guy. Dan wasn't much in the mood to see who he could chat up now after his short and shot-down attempt at flirting with the one straight boy in the bar. Figures that it would happen to Dan on the night he decided to put himself out there again. This crowd, this endless scene of hookups and one-night stands weren't for him anymore. He was getting bored with it. Even if the sex was good seventy-five percent of the time, he just wanted more. The problem was, Dan wasn't sure how to go about getting the more he wanted.

Draining the last of his beer, Dan set his glass on the table and pulled his phone from his back pocket. He swiped across the screen and saw a text from Drew.

D-bag: *Hey, I am home early? Where are you?*

Dan smiled at the text. He was happy it was Drew and really happy he was home early. Some boys liked to go out all the time, but Drew was the perfect roommate and the best friend Dan had ever had. Drew was more of a homebody than Dan was, though Drew was more outgoing in new situations. Funny how their personalities flip-flopped the way they did. Their friendship was pure, it had been from the moment they met at freshman orientation as undergrads. It was comfortable and easy and tonight, after Dan's failed attempts to find romance or anything worthwhile at the bar, Drew was what Dan needed.

DannyBoy: *The Backdoor.*

D-bag: *God, Dan. Is that figuratively, literally or are you at the bar?*

DannyBoy: *:o/*

D-bag: *That bad, babes? Come home.*

Dan knew that no matter what or who he did, Drew would be there for him.

DannyBoy: *See you in ten!*

Dan slipped his phone back in his pocket and caught the eye of Noah on his way out. Noah gave him a nod and a wave and Dan walked out the side door of the bar to make his way home for some serious Drew time.

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## Chapter 2

“That’s it! I give up. I’m becoming a spinster. I’m buying a cottage, learning to knit, and building a cat sanctuary in the backyard.”

Drew Baxter watched as his best friend and roommate walked through the door of their apartment and flopped down on the sofa with his head in Drew’s lap. Drew adjusted his tablet and made room for Dan.

“Get off my lawn you hipsters!” Dan yelled, pointing his finger at four different spots on their kitchen wall.

“Do I sound the part?” Dan asked, tipping his head back against Drew’s thigh to look at him.

Drew looked down at his friend. His light brown, almost blond hair was smashed against his thigh, the strands taking on the light from the lamp and making it look as if the blond streaks were sun-kissed. Dan wore black-rimmed glasses that framed dark brown eyes, his nose sloped and turned up at the end, and scruff covered every pore of his face it could. The spots that were left bare surrounded lips that were a color whose likeness only existed in a sixty-four box of crayons...

“Earth to Andrew,” Dan said in a singsong voice.

Drew snapped out of his dreamy examination of Dan’s face and blinked to clear his vision. “Sorry, Dan. Hipsters. Your lawn.” He cleared his throat and adjusted his position to jar Dan’s head lower on his lap and not so close to his growing erection. “Yeah, you totally sound the part.”

Dan sighed, turning his head and resting his cheek against Drew’s thigh. “I had the worst night, Drew.”

Drew lifted his hand, placed it on Dan’s shoulder and started to rub it in small soothing circles. Just like he did every time Dan came home like this. Just like every time he consoled him over some asshole who either fucked him or fucked him over. Just like every time he wished he was touching his best friend like this—as more than a best friend.

“What happened, Danny Boy?” Drew asked, knowing full well what the answer would be.

“I hit on a straight boy,” Dan replied with an exaggerated sigh.

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“And what’s different about this time?” Drew inquired.

Dan sighed. “This one was gorgeous.” Dan curled his legs up and wrapped his arm around Drew’s knees.

“So what happened?” Drew ran his fingers from Dan’s shoulder up to his neck and traced the outline of the flower tattoo placed there years ago.

“Nothing happened. That’s the point. He was straight.” Dan slapped his hand against Drew’s thigh.

“How’d you find that out?” Drew asked, even though he did not want to know the details. He loved being Dan’s friend and go-to with all the woes of his love life, but there was such a thing as too much information.

“I asked.” Dan pitifully offered.

Drew laughed. “Nice moves you got there, Foster.”

“It’s hopeless. I *am* hopeless. Why can’t I just enjoy the hookups and be happy?”

“Because hookups aren’t real?” Drew answered honestly.

“The sex is real,” Dan stated.

“Yeah, but what do you get after the hookup?”

“Fucked,” Dan said.

“Exactly. Before, during, and after.”

“What do I do? I just started grad school. It’s not like I have a career, yet. I work at a coffee shop where I wear a hairnet and an apron and get looks if my tattoos show.” Dan’s self-pity was reaching a crescendo.

“Which are pretty hard to hide,” Drew stated.

“You’re telling me. You’d think by the year two thousand fourteen, seeing a dude with ink on his skin wouldn’t be a problem. Hell, half the kids that come in have more ink and piercings than I do, and I bet you my grandfather’s Mini Cooper the majority of them have ink for status and not for any real meaning.”

Drew began to massage Dan’s shoulder to get him to relax. “First, your grandfather’s Mini is only a model and not a car, so you aren’t betting much. Second, your tattoos are part of you. It’s the full package, and if people don’t like that, they can kick rocks.”

Dan kissed Drew’s knee and turned to lay on his stomach with his head turned toward Drew and his cheek against his thigh again. “Tickle my back,

Drew,” Dan asked, his voice strained. “Help me, my one true and dearest friend, please. You’re my only hope.”

“Flattery and Star Wars geek talk will get you everywhere.” Drew chuckled and ran his fingers over the soft strands of his best friend’s hair.

“Why can’t all the boys be like you, Drew?” Dan sighed.

Drew took a deep breath and held it. He wanted to tell Dan that the boys didn’t have to be “like” him, they could “be” him if only Dan would take a second look at him. A look that went beyond friends and into something more. “You know they broke the mold when they made me and they forgot to add the potential for romance and boyfriends.” Drew hated that line. He *was* boyfriend material, and he *was* romantic. For fuck’s sake, he was so romantic it hurt to sit on this couch with his best friend, the best friend he had been in love with for more than four years, and pretend this was nothing more than just friendship. How did he end up here? This wasn’t his usual deal, to pine after the one he couldn’t have. He’d had boyfriends in the years since he and Dan became friends, but they never worked out. Either Drew gave up or they realized they would never measure up... to Dan. Drew was lucky his list of exes never let Dan in on this bit of trivia.

Dan sighed and rubbed his cheek back and forth against Drew’s leg. Drew began drawing lazy circles up and down Dan’s back as he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. These were the moments he loved and hated. The closeness he has with his best friend was amazing, but it was times such as this where Drew wanted to open his mouth and tell Dan everything in his heart.

He couldn’t do it though, he never could. All he wanted was to have his best friend in his life, forever, and if he crossed the friendship line, and they lost what they had—Drew would be devastated.

Dan shifted on the couch and brought his hand up to his mouth as he yawned. “I’m getting sleepy.” He raised his head and brought his right hand up to Drew’s arm, giving it a brief squeeze. “You ready for bed?”

Drew rested his head against the back of the couch, counted to three and looked down at the relaxed male body against his. Was he ready for bed? That was a loaded question. He smiled at Dan and pushed his hair behind his ear.

“Sure. I have to get up early for my flight to Denver, anyway.”

“You’re leaving tomorrow?” Dan asked as he took Drew’s hand and rested his cheek against it. “What am I going to do without you for an entire week?”



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Drew wanted to tell Dan to come with him so bad the want physically hurt. He wanted to show Dan the beauty of Colorado: take him to the 16th Street Mall, drive out to the Garden of the Gods, and go for a workout at Red Rock Canyon Amphitheater, where later they could pretend to be Bono and Larry Mullen Jr. on the stage. He wanted this to be one of many trips they could take, but Dan always insisted those were boyfriend things to do which Drew always argued was a stupid reason. They were best friends, and friends traveled together. "You could find a new best friend," Drew suggested.

"Never! You and I have the best bromance ever, baby." Dan sat up and turned his body toward Drew. "You know you are irreplaceable to me." Grabbing Drew's tablet, Dan stretched across Drew and set it behind him on the sofa table. Drew attempted to be sly about turning his head and breathing in the scent of man, sweat, and the citrus cologne Dan wore. Dan pulled back and took Drew's hand in his. "I'm worried about my waistline with all the take-out, drive-thru, and ramen noodles I'll consume the week you are gone." Dan patted his flat stomach. "Your healthy cooking keeps this fabulous figure."

Drew blushed and chuckled at the compliment; he liked cooking for him and Dan. He felt as if they were a couple when he did... he really needed to stop thinking that way. They weren't a couple and wouldn't be. Not if Drew didn't take the chance to find out if they could be, anyway.

Drew patted Dan's stomach and flushed at the touch. It shouldn't have made him feel anything more, but it did. Drew sat up quickly, yanking Dan with him as he stood and dropped Dan's hand.

"Bed," Drew cleared his throat and nodded. "We should go to bed." He started walking across the living room heading down the hall to his room.

"Drew!" Dan yelled from behind him, but Drew didn't stop. He needed to get out of the same physical space as Dan before he did something stupid. What the hell was wrong with him? What was different about tonight that he wanted to push the boundaries of their friendship? Fuck. He needed to...

Drew was stopped in his thoughts as a firm grip on his hand tugged and pulled him back against a hard and warm male body. Drew opened and closed his jaw in an attempt to control the verbal vomit that was begging to be projected across the room. Strong arms circled him from behind, wrapping around his chest and holding him tightly, his back to Dan's front.

"What's wrong, Drew?" Dan whispered, his mouth so close to Drew's ear he could feel the warmth of his breath, and it sent shivers through Drew's body down to his toes. Why did Dan have to sound so damned concerned?

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“Nothing. Just have a lot to do before the morning flight,” Drew lied.

Dan dropped his arms from around Drew's chest and let his hands rest lightly on Drew's hips. Drew inhaled a ragged breath as he slowly turned around to face Dan. The sincere concern was written all over his best friend's face, and Drew was lost. He was lost, and he was screwed, and he was done being passive.

Dan shrugged and sighed. “Okay then. Good nig—”

Drew cut off the words coming out of Dan's mouth as he clumsily pressed his lips against Dan's. Dan let out a startled gasp at the contact, and Drew pulled away. He searched Dan's eyes that were wide with panic and something else Drew wasn't prepared to name. He pressed his chest against Dan's, walking him back until he was against the wall and raised his hands to cup Dan's face. He gave Dan their usual kiss goodnight: one kiss on the forehead and one kiss on each cheek, but Drew didn't stop there. He kissed his way from Dan's cheek and along his jaw until he came to a pair of slightly parted lips that he had to taste. Drew looked up to see Dan watching him and with his eyes open, he pressed his lips against Dan's again. This time, there was no gasp at the contact, and Drew slid his hands from Dan's face. One hand slid back to hold Dan's head and bring it in closer as the other wrapped around his waist. Drew closed his eyes and slanted his lips over Dan's, and when Dan's hands finally made contact with Drew's body, resting on his shoulders, Drew flicked his tongue against Dan's lips, licking at the seam and asking for entrance. He didn't have to wait long. Dan opened up and thrust his tongue inside Drew's mouth, making a sound that was part whimper, part moan, and part porn star.

Drew was intoxicated by kissing Dan and having him kiss back. There was nothing friendly about the kiss. Their tongues dueled for domination, and hands were roaming over each other's bodies as if they had more than two appendages. The feel of Dan against him this way had his dick throbbing against his zipper. This wouldn't be the first time he got a hard-on while kissing Dan, but this wasn't one of his wet dreams. This was reality, and Dan was real, and what the fuck were they doing?

Drew pulled away from Dan, panting as he looked at his best friend slumped against the wall next to his bedroom. Dan's lips were red, swollen, and glistened with moisture in the low light of the hallway. Drew fought the urge to dive back in for another kiss when he heard his name coming from Dan's mouth in a breathless question.

*Way to fuck up your friendship, Baxter.*

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He stood tall, smoothed his hair down and walked toward his door. He stopped just inches away from Dan and raised his hand. Dan watched Drew, his eyes full of questions and maybe a bit of wonder, but Drew didn't touch him. He clenched his fist and opened his hand. He gave Dan's shoulder two light and friendly smacks and muttered, "Night, Dan."

Drew didn't wait for a response. He opened his bedroom door, walked in and shut it slowly, pushing it until he heard the click that meant it was good and closed. He leaned against the door, taking slow and deep breaths as he brought his hands up and covered his mouth. Drew couldn't stifle the small laugh of excitement that passed as he played back what had just happened. He'd kissed Dan. *Oh. My. God.* He'd kissed Dan, and Dan had kissed him back, and he was leaving in the morning for a week.

Drew felt boneless as he let his body slide down the door until his ass hit the floor. He had kissed his best friend tonight. The best friend he'd been in love with for the last four years. The best friend that had no idea Drew felt the way he did about him. This would be the worst seven days of his life.

Drew balled his hands and pressed them against his eyes. He couldn't dwell on this. He had to pack and get ready for his flight and the presentation of the new defibrillators for patients with tachycardia.

This thing with Dan would have to wait. After all, Drew had waited four years for anything to happen. What was one more week?

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## Chapter 3

Dan stared at the closed bedroom door of one Drew Baxter, best friend and hot as hell kisser. Lifting a shaky right hand, Dan touched his lips, pressing against them and letting a smile spread under his fingers as he thought about the kiss.

He knew something was off with Drew when he came home that night. Dan was his usual self-absorbed self, but where in the past Drew would offer him an encyclopedia of ideas and advice on his love life, tonight he had been almost abrupt. But this kiss? Dan wasn't expecting that and would never have expected it. Sure, they kissed as friends every night when they said good night, but what Drew just laid on him was not a friendly kiss, and Dan wanted more. Fuck yeah, he wanted more.

Dan wanted to pound on Drew's door and demand that he talked to him. What was wrong with the guy that he shoved his tongue down Dan's throat then walked away? No explanation at all, just a damn bro pat and he was gone. Maybe that was a good thing? A little space would do them good, but a little space wasn't what his libido wanted at the moment. His little Dan wanted to meet little Drew, have a sleep over and do naughty things with each other.

As impulsive as Dan wanted to be, he knew this was not a situation that should be decided with his dick. You didn't throw away four years of friendship with the most brilliant, humble, and—he just now found out—sexy as hell best friend he'd ever had, over a kiss that made his knees weak.

Dan pivoted on his heel and turned from Drew's door. Nothing would come of him staring and willing Drew to talk to him. Dan set his alarm for the butt crack of dawn to get up and confront Drew before he left for Colorado. Left for a week. Leaving Dan alone with his thoughts for a week could be a recipe for disaster.

Walking the four steps down the hall to his bedroom, he opened the door and looked around the room. Everything was the same: the bright blue blanket on his bed, the pile of ridiculously priced textbooks on his desk recently bought to start his first semester at grad school, and the same four walls with the same posters of his favorite indie rock bands... but it was all so different now. The walls seemed taller, the room a bit bigger, and every color his eyes took in was

vibrant. It was like he was tripping on a drug, a drug that was Drew, his best friend. This feeling was the best high ever.

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Dan's high fell short when he woke to the sound of his alarm, jumped out of bed, wrenched open his door, and walked into the crisscross of duct tape across the frame. He batted at the tape, wincing as he pulled the pieces off his arm hair and the frame. *Fucking, Drew!* His friend loved to play pranks on him, and this was not the way Dan wanted to wake up. Frankly, the way he wanted to wake up had to do with the jizz that was making his boxers stick to his stomach. What was up with shit sticking to him?

Removing what he thought was all the tape, he looked up as something tickled his head. There was a piece of paper, yellow and long, like the ones Drew used for his seminar notes, hanging from the top of the door frame. Dan reached up and gently lifted the paper and tape so as not to lose any of what could be on it. He looked over the familiar chicken scratch of Drew's handwriting and slammed his fist into the wall at the first letters of the fucking note.

*Dan,*

*When you read this, I'll be gone. I'm leaving on a jet plane to catch a rocky mountain high and any other cheesy folk songs you can think of where people leave the ones they, um... like.*

*Bad timing is bad timing, and we have some seriously bad timing. I don't know what to tell you about last night, but I'm not sorry. I will never be sorry. I have wanted to do that for four years, and I am not sorry.*

*I have a meeting before I check into the hotel in Denver at three. I left my itinerary for the conference next to the coffeepot—which is ready for your morning cup, just turn it on.*

*I'll call when I can.*

*I hope you answer.*

*Always,*

*Drew*

Dan crumbled the note in his hand and threw it against the wall. *He was gone?* Drew left already? Dan couldn't decide if that was a dick move or the

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best thing for the situation. This whole deal was confusing, and the only thing Dan could decide was that he wouldn't decide anything until he had caffeine flowing through his system.

Walking down the hall, he stopped and turned on his right foot, bent down and picked up the note. As much as it hurt that Drew would leave before they had a chance to talk, Dan couldn't bring himself to dismiss his words that easily. He'd never received a note, a love letter, or anything close to it before. At first, he'd felt pissed off—after all he did get up earlier than he had to for any class to catch Drew before he left—but those words “I am not sorry” were flipping around his brain all the way down to his stomach.

He needed coffee. Fast.

Dan walked into the small kitchen of the two-bedroom apartment he and Drew shared. They'd found the apartment their senior year as undergrads and knew it was perfect for them. A few blocks away from the UCLA campus and close to the trendy area of Westwood, it was easy to walk where they needed to go and yet not too far away if they wanted to go to the beach, the lake, the mountains, or even the desert. Variety was what Dan loved about California; it had the best of everything you could want. If you could afford it at least.

He inhaled as he walked toward the small counter and let the smell of freshly ground coffee take over his senses. Dan turned the coffeepot on, leaning his elbows on the top, as he laced his fingers together and rested his chin on them.

Drew Baxter had kissed him. No. Drew Baxter had kissed him like he had never been kissed before. Who knew Drew had that in him? All these years they'd known one another, Drew seemed to be the mild-mannered boy who studied Registered Nursing, not to become a nurse but a Nursing Informatics Specialist, to teach nurses the new technology that would enrich their careers. He had always seemed to be a step ahead of everyone in school, always knowing what he wanted and where he was going. Unlike Dan, who wavered between majors before he decided on Environmental Engineering and stuck with it. Drew was the rock that Dan anchored himself to, a friend he could count on to listen when he needed help with anything school-related and to just be the guy Dan liked to hang out with. Sure, they had their moments together, Dan thought as he let his thoughts run wild and began examining each small moment between him and his best friend to see if he missed something along the way.

*I have wanted to do that for four years, and I am not sorry.*

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Dan poured himself a cup of coffee, taking the first sip black as he always did, just to see if today would be the day he would give in and not need his vices. Cringing at the bitter taste, he spun around and grabbed his creamer out of the refrigerator, pouring enough into his cup to change the coffee to a lighter color, and pulled the dropper out of his liquid Stevia, emptying the entire contents into his cup.

“What can I say?” Dan spoke to the empty room as he stirred his coffee with a silver spoon. “I like my coffee how I like my men; strong, tan, and sweet.” He shrugged as he began a conversation with himself and took a long drink of the sweet nectar given to him by the god-like man that was Drew.

So Drew had wanted to kiss him for four years and he wasn't sorry about it. Dan wasn't either, but his best friend had a bit of explaining to do. Dan needed answers and a follow-up visit of Drew's lips on his.

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## Chapter 4

Drew flipped his phone over and over again as he waited in line at the rental counter in the Denver International Airport to pick up his car. He went over his morning as he waited. He knew it wasn't the best thing to sneak out of the apartment the way he did, but he wasn't ready to deal with Dan yet. He wasn't ready to face what he had done to their friendship. The impulse to write the note hit him as he was getting coffee ready for his best friend. He made Dan coffee every morning as he was up long before Dan was most days, but this morning, it had been a bit of a peace offering.

He had been lost in the sound of the coffee beans grinding and began writing the note in his head. The words came easy, and he imagined him speaking them directly to Dan. Of course that led to a fantasy of Dan leaping in his arms and declaring he had felt the same for the last four years. Dan shook his head. That was another one of his wet dreams. He was sure he would get the "I love you, but I'm not in love with you, dude" speech from Dan, and Drew was more than certain that could wait until his conference was over.

Drew dropped his phone as a body slammed into him from behind. He cursed as he knelt down to retrieve his phone and its parts that were now separate from each other.

"Dammit."

Drew heard the muffled word and craned his neck to see who it came from.

"Excuse me. I'm so sorry." He heard from behind him.

Drew looked up as a well-manicured hand reached out to help him up. He'd expected someone larger by the body blow he'd endured. He wasn't expecting his gaze to follow the hand up to the kindest face of a woman with bright red hair standing over him.

Drew placed his hand in the woman's and used the strength in his thighs to push himself up. "It's okay," he said. "Things happen." Pulling himself up to a full standing position, he towered over the woman. He gave her hand a light squeeze and pumped it up and down. "My name's Drew."

The smile that came across her face was breathtaking. Not that Drew was into women, but he appreciated beauty when he saw it, and this woman was nothing short of beautiful.



She tilted her head to the side and nodded. "Nice to meet you, Drew. I'm Samantha, but friends call me Sam."

Drew smiled back, it was hard not to when the smile reached her amber eyes and met his. "Should I call you...?"

"Sam. You can call me Sam. If you call me Samantha, I might think you want to put me in time-out or send me on a coffee run."

"Okay then, Sam," Drew chuckled and put the pieces of his phone back together, pressing the button on the right side and holding it to turn it back on. "Are you here on business?"

Sam shook her head. "Nope, I live here."

"Ahh. So how is it we've collided in line for rentals, then?"

Sam blushed. "I really am sorry about that." She looked down and slipped off one of her shoes. "My heel snapped, stupid cheap knock-offs." She waved the shoe in front of Drew's face before she placed her hand on his shoulder to stand on one foot and put the broken shoe back on her foot. "I guess now we have a story to tell our grandchildren about how we met though, don't we?"

Drew choked on air at her statement. "Um, Sam..."

"Oh, I did it again! I didn't mean in a romantic way." She held up her left hand and wiggled her fingers; a platinum wedding set with an impressive diamond caught his eye. "I'm married. I just mean, we would have a story to tell our individual grandchildren. Stranger body checks you in line at DIA as you wait to pick up your rental and bam, you met your best friend for life."

Drew couldn't help but laugh as she rapidly fired her explanation at him. "In that case, yes, we would have a story to tell our grandchildren." *Grandchildren?* That word brought up thoughts of Dan, who had managed to escape his mind as he dealt with his new best friend, Sam.

"Uh oh. I know that look." Sam punctuated her statement by placing her hands on her hips and tapping her fingers against her orange skirt. "Who has you tied up in knots?"

"It's that obvious?"

"Oh honey. It's written all over your face."

"Next in line, please," The clerk at the counter called out.

Dan looked over his shoulder. "That's me."

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“You go on. I’ll be here. I’m in line after all.”

Dan walked toward the counter. “Why are you in line?”

“Some bastard rear-ended me in the Target parking lot. I’m here to get a rental until my car is fixed.”

“Jesus. Are you okay?” Drew asked.

“I’m fine. It’s Betsy that took a beating.”

“You named your car Betsy?”

“Of course. Don’t you name,” Sam waved in the general vicinity of Drew’s body, “things that are important to you?”

Drew laughed out loud, a full-body laugh that pinched his stomach. “This is not the conversation I’d ever imagined having in line, in an airport, with a woman, waiting to get a car.” Drew turned to address the clerk about his car when the pleasant smell that was overtly woman hit him before the soft whisper caressed his ear.

“See, a story to tell our grandchildren,” Sam whispered.

Drew signed the papers for the rental and took the keys from the clerk. Turning on his heel, he faced Sam. “You want to grab some coffee with me?”

She smiled and held up her hand to the clerk as a signal to wait. “Let me add some Bailey’s to that coffee and you’re on!” Sam walked to the counter and said over her shoulder, “You can tell me all about the knots, and how we can set them straight.”

“Um, straight isn’t the word I would use for this situation,” Drew admitted.

Sam slipped the keys and paperwork off the rental counter and gave Drew a patient smile. “Honey, that was obvious too.” She looped her arm through his. “Let’s get caffeinated and inebriated and you can tell me all about him.”

Drew crooked his arm and nodded. “Sounds like a plan, Sam.”

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“And you snuck out before talking to him and left the state?” Sam asked, her voice louder than it had been over an hour ago when they got to the coffee shop. The girl sure had a way of getting what she wanted, and she pulled the entire story out of Drew about his four-year crush on Dan.

“Well, yeah. What was I supposed to do?” Dan shrugged.

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“Um, try slipping into his room, his bed, and then his heart?”

“You think the way to Dan’s heart is through sex?” Dan asked skeptically.

“Drew, dear, I think the way to every man’s heart is through sex.”

“You have a point there,” he admitted.

“But honestly, why did you run?”

“I didn’t...” Drew was cut off by a look from Sam that he now knew meant to cut the bullshit and man up. “I didn’t run. I flew?” Drew shrugged and internally squirmed under Sam’s gaze.

“Fine. I left. I ran. I couldn’t deal with the look of pity that would be in his eyes when he looked at me. I’ve seen Dan cut and run with guys. I wasn’t ready for that. Besides, I did leave a note.”

Sam sighed. “You left a love letter. One that would turn anyone into a puddle of goo when they read it.”

“Goo? That sounds gross.”

“Goo is good. Trust me on this.” Sam raised her coffee in salute and reached into her purse hanging on the back of her chair and produced yet another travel-sized bottle of Bailey’s Irish Cream.

“Are you sure you should be drinking when you just got a rental car?” Dan asked.

Sam waved him off. “Lou works at the restaurant in the hotel. I texted him earlier and told him to meet me here and drive me home.”

“Your husband seems like a pretty awesome guy.”

“He is, and he knows when I meet someone, and they need some Sam time, there is nothing he or I can do about it.”

“Is this something you often do? Pick up strange men in airports and liquor them up in hopes of getting them to spill their sorry excuse of a love life to you?”

“Yes and no. First, you haven’t touched a single drop of alcohol.”

“I have a meeting,” Drew checked his watch, “in an hour and a half. I can’t. But trust me, I would love to drink miniature bottles of booze with you.” Drew leaned forward and whispered, “Where’d you get those anyway?”

“Don’t ask.” Sam smiled and winked. “See. You need some Sam time. I do the drinking, and you get the therapy. It’s a win/win situation.”

Drew nodded and thought about the situation he was spilling to a complete stranger who felt more like the sister he never had. Funny how fate throws people into your life when you least expect it but need them the most. He hadn’t planned on Sam, but he was thankful the universe decided to throw her at him. Literally.

“I’ve now heard all about the one and only Dan Foster, and now I want to see a picture. I know you have one.”

Drew smiled sheepishly. “I do, but only one. I told him to send me a picture, so I could separate his calls from the numerous other Dans that I talk to on a daily basis.”

“Nice pick up line. You couldn’t have just asked your best friend to send you a picture for his contact?”

“Nope. Not with Dan. He is special that way.”

“Okay, then. Lemme see him.” Sam stretched out her hand and wiggled her fingers impatiently.

Drew pulled his phone out and swiped the screen to unlock it. He was about to scroll through his contacts when Sam reached across the table and took his phone from him. “Hey!”

“Drew, I don’t need you to show me where he is. I bet he is an icon on one of your desktops...”

Drew stilled as he watched Sam’s manicured finger slide across his phone, once, twice, and then she looked up at him with a knowing smile.

“Dan Foster... wow! I knew you said he was good looking but this, even this needy expression he has in this picture—”

Drew cut her off. “Needy? You think he looks needy in that picture? I think he looks like he is trying to sell something.”

Sam looked at the picture on his phone and tapped the screen. “Did he take this for you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Does he use this for anything else, like Facebook, or Twitter?” she asked.

“Not that I know of. I asked for a picture, he took it, and that’s what I got.”

Sam tapped the screen again. “You need to call your boy.”

“He’s not mine.”

“He is. More than either of you realize. Pictures can say so much. You know they used to say when you took a picture, the camera would steal your soul.” Her gaze locked on Drew’s and the lines around her eyes crinkled as she looked at him. “I think his soul’s lost, more lost than he knows, and it’s because you have it.”

Drew reached across the table and snatched his phone out of her hands. “Sam, you have no idea what you are talking about. Dan isn’t like that to me, never will be. Let it go.”

He shoved his phone back into his pocket and slouched down in his chair. How could she say that? What did she see that he hadn’t noticed all these years, and was she right? Could one picture taken with Dan’s webcam show anything about a person that he himself had missed, being glued to his side for four years?

“I’m sorry. I overstepped a line there, didn’t I? I just call it like I see it and Drew, that picture says so much. You should call him.”

“I told him I would,” Drew stated.

“Do it now.” Sam pressed.

“Look, I know I have been open with you about this whole situation, and I do appreciate your willingness to talk with me about it, but you don’t know Dan. You are way off on this, trust me.”

“You’re right and I apologize again. I will just say this and then drop it. Don’t wait for what you think is the right time. Had you waited for the right time to kiss him, you never would have. Love and emotions aren’t rational. Overthinking can lead to being lonely. That’s just my opinion.” Sam shrugged. “Did I tell you it took Lou and me three years to get our act together?”

Drew shook his head.

“Well, his act. He stood me up at least a dozen times over the three years we tried to get together.”

“Three years? What made it finally work?” Drew asked.

“He asked if he had a chance with me.” Sam’s face changed with her answer, it softened and the love she had for her husband was palpable.

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“That’s it?”

“That’s it. The vulnerability that came through with that simple question hit me in the solar plexus, and I never looked back. Sometimes, it’s the honest admission that does the most damage when you are breaking down the walls, and you want that kind of damage.”

Drew nodded as Sam talked about the struggles she and her husband had in the three years before they finally figured out their relationship. It wasn’t easy for them and yet, where they are now seemed to be amazing. He couldn’t help but let his mind wander to him and Dan in the future. Would they be this happy in twelve years? Would they be the older and wiser men, counseling the younger generation about giving in and giving it all for love?

He wasn’t sure about anything, not right now. He had a meeting with the distribution company of the new defibrillators and his promised call to Dan after he checked into the hotel.

He’d never both dreaded and looked forward to a call more in his life.

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## Chapter 5

Dan buttoned the fly of his jeans, shoved his arms into the T-shirt hanging around his neck and walked out of his room. He'd spent the morning going over everything he could remember about his friendship with Drew and wondering where he'd missed the signs. The signs that his best friend wanted to shove his tongue down his throat.

The remembrance of the short, but intimate and passionate kiss caused blood to rush to his dick, and he reached down to adjust himself. He was getting a hard-on thinking of Drew, which was new, but not strange. He loved his best friend. Dan couldn't imagine having a day with Drew not in his life, but could a single kiss, a kiss that he felt down to his toes, be the start of a relationship?

Dan walked to the living room and grabbed his phone. The blinking indicator light showed he had a missed call. He glanced at his watch. It was too early for Drew to have called, yet when he swiped the screen, the missed call was from his best friend.

*Miss me already, baby?* Dan smiled as the thought crept into his head. Dan typed in the password and listened to his voice mail. Muffled sounds came through, followed by sounds of a crowd, and then he heard Drew's voice.

*"Sam, you have no idea what you are talking about. Dan isn't like that to me, never will be. Let it go..."*

*Sam?* Dan's fists clenched at his side. Who the hell was Sam and why was Drew talking to him about Dan? What did he mean, Dan isn't like that to him? Shit. What the hell was that about? Dan pressed a button to listen to the message again. There was another voice after Drew's statement, but Dan couldn't make out what was being said, and then a sound like a phone being put away, and the call ended. Great. Just what Dan didn't need on top of Drew and this kissing business; more fuel for his insecurity to latch onto. He sighed. He needed to talk to someone, but the sad thing was that the person he would normally take his boy problems to was the boy that was causing the problem.

Deciding therapy and a drink were in order, he knew just where to go.

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Walking into The Backdoor in the middle of the day was something Dan had never done before. He could have gone anywhere else for a drink, but

considering the night that ended with a kiss began here, it felt fitting. He walked toward the bar, slid onto one of the many empty stools and let out a shocked gasp when the not-so-flashy version of Noah, the bouncer, popped up from behind the bar.

"The flower-necked bastard returns. Did you come back for me or just my ass?" Noah shook said ass for emphasis. Dressed in a light pair of jeans that weren't cutting off his circulation and a white V-neck T-shirt, with his hair free of product and his face clean and fresh, Noah was almost unrecognizable, if not for the telltale attitude the man possessed.

"Neither... You bartend too?" Dan asked confused.

"I perform so many jobs here your tattoos would fall off trying to keep up," Noah answered with a wink. "You here for a drink, gorgeous?"

"Yeah." Dan nodded. "I'll take a Newcastle."

Dan watched as Noah grabbed a glass and pulled the beer, tipping it at just the right angle to give it the perfect head and slid the glass in front of him.

Dan took a long drink. "Perform? You said you performed jobs here?"

Noah rose on his toes and leaned over the bar. He was so close Dan could feel his breath across his face. "A private show will cost ya." He fell back on his feet and began doing whatever it was bartenders did behind the bar when they weren't slinging drinks.

"Thanks for the offer, but I'll take a rain check."

Noah shrugged. "Your loss, boy. So what brings you in...?"

"It's Dan, my name's Dan," he insisted.

Noah nodded in compliance. "What brings you in, Dan?"

"A boy," Dan admitted.

"Oh, sugarplum, isn't it always?"

"Yeah, but this one is different," Dan declared.

Noah hooked his foot in the rails of the stool behind the bar, pulled it toward him and sat ramrod straight, crossed his legs and folded his hands in his lap. "Tell Uncle Noah how?"

"Uncle?" Dan asked incredulously.

"Want me to make you say it?" Noah gave a grin that Dan would call creepy if the guy weren't so off-the-wall adorable.



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Dan took a drink to steady his nerves, the nerves that became noticeable each time he now thought about Drew. He took a deep breath and let it all out. "No. This time it's different because the boy is my best friend, and I kissed him. Well, he kissed me, and I kissed him back and he left before we had a chance to talk even though I got up early to talk to him before he left, but instead I got trapped in a web of duct tape..." Dan took another drink, "and a note, the best note that I've ever read from Drew telling me that he was gone, and that he wasn't sorry about the kiss. That he had wanted to do it for four years." Dan slapped the top of the bar. "Do you know how long we have been friends? Four fucking years. Four years of us being closer than I imagined I could be to another person. Four years of him wanting to kiss me and instead becoming my hag when it came to my love life. Four years of..."

"Of what, Dan?" Noah asked.

Dan peered into his glass, searching for an answer. Noah waited, not uttering a word. Eventually Dan looked up and met the bartender's eye. "I don't know. That's the problem." Dan tipped his glass and drained the last of the beer, setting it down on the bar with a loud thud. "And I don't know what would have happened if he had tried something more."

"I get that," Noah replied with a nod.

Dan raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips at Noah's reply. He tilted his head toward the glass in a silent indication that he wanted another beer.

"You get what?" Dan inquired, taking the beer from Noah and sipping it. Noah didn't take his seat again. Instead he leaned his hip against the counter and looked intently at Dan.

"I get your problem. You want your best friend but are pissed you didn't make the first move."

Dan choked on his beer and sprayed it across the bar. "I what?"

Noah grabbed a wet cloth and wiped down the bar top as he shook his head. "It's not rocket science, sugar. You two have been stuck in foreplay for four years. I am surprised your blue-balled bromance hasn't blossomed to a romance before now."

Dan stared at Noah, wide-eyed. Had they been stuck in foreplay all this time? Dan went over a few memories and realized they had everything he wanted in a relationship outside of sex. Drew was his best friend, he was his partner in more ways than he could count on his fingers *and* toes. They even

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had an intimate relationship, but they weren't having sex. How did he miss all of this? Was he that arrogant and selfish that he couldn't see what was right in front of him? His mother used to tell him the best place to find your true love was in your backyard, yet Dan didn't have to look further than across the hall from his own bedroom.

Thumping his head down on the bar, he sighed, "I'm such an idiot."

"We've all been there, trust me. It's the rite of passage, and you're pulling that boat into the harbor to dock."

Dan raised his head and looked at Noah. "Did you just use boats as a sexual euphemism?"

"You took it as one, so run with it."

Dan's reply never came as his phone vibrated in his back pocket, and the familiar opening riff of "I Believe in a Thing Called Love," by The Darkness played through the reverent silence of the bar.

"Seriously?" Noah exclaimed as Dan pulled his phone out of his pocket and grinned, knowing the new ringtone was assigned to Drew.

"What? It's Drew." Dan shrugged.

"You are so whipped," Noah laughed and tossed the wet cloth at him.

Dan swatted at the cloth, flipped Noah off and swiped his phone to accept the call.

"Finished with Sam already?" he asked Drew as a greeting.

"How do you know about Sam?" Drew inquired.

"You should lock your phone better before you butt dial me when you're picking up dudes on work trips..." Dan felt his face flush as Drew's response to his taunt was laughter. *So that's how it's going to be?* "Look, Drew, I don't have time to talk, I was just having a drink with No—"

"Would you shut up for a second," Drew demanded. "You get ideas stuck in that overactive brain of yours and never let me finish a sentence."

Dan huffed and flipped Noah off again as he walked around the bar and tried to press his ear to Dan's cell phone to eavesdrop on his conversation.

"Shutting up now." Dan pouted.

"Good. Dan, Sam is a girl, believe it or not. I met her in line at the airport waiting for my car. She's a married woman of twelve years, whose husband would kick my ass if I had the thought to switch teams for her."

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“Why’d she have your phone?”

“I was showing her what you looked like,” Drew offered.

Dan’s face flushed with heat again for a much different reason, and he bit his lip. “You were showing her me?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?” Dan held his breath waiting for an answer.

“Because you were the main topic of conversation from the minute she body checked me, and she wanted to know if the visual matched my infatuation.”

Dan hooked his feet into the rungs of the bar stool and swiveled his seat back and forth. “Drew Baxter, you sure know how to flatter a guy. Do you know that?”

Dan heard Drew’s exhale through the speaker and leaned into it as if Drew were next to him and not thousands of miles away.

“No, but it’s nice to hear. So um... you got my note?”

“I did, and even though you kiss like all my fantasies rolled into one, I’m pissed that you left before I got up. Dammit, I set my alarm and was prepared to watch the sunrise just to see you before you left.”

“Jesus. If I’d known...”

“Well, now you do, and now you are gone for an entire week, and you left me with what? A goodbye kiss?”

“It wasn’t goodbye.”

“What was it?” Dan asked.

Drew sighed. “Dan?”

“Yeah?”

“Do I have a chance with you?”

Dan smiled and chuckled as Noah nodded to him and walked away. Sliding off the bar stool, he walked toward the pool table and ran his fingers along the felt, taking the eight ball and rolling it into the corner pocket.

“Keep talking like that and hell yeah, you do.”

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## Chapter 6

Drew was elated that the phone call with Dan had gone better than he'd hoped. Dan said he had a chance with him. Sure, Drew had stolen the line from Sam and the story about her husband, but it was an honest question. He wanted a chance with Dan, and he was tired of being docile about it. It was time Dan saw him as a man and not just his best friend. It was time for Clark to become Superman and sweep his best friend off his feet.

All Drew wanted to do was get home and see Dan. Right now, though, duty called. His time was taken up with meeting on top of meeting, presentations, conferences, and networking. How was he supposed to concentrate when all he could think about was his best friend and how his lips felt beneath his own?

Drew loved his job, and this was the first time he was having trouble focusing. The representative from the makers of the new defibrillators described in detail how the machines would improve function within hospitals but were easy enough to use and should be placed in schools as well. It was important stuff, but his mind kept wandering to dark, tousled hair and how soft it felt under his hands. He perked up at the mention of schools. His cousin had a rare heart condition, and he knew he would feel safer if the nursing staff had access to help her and other children if the need arose, and emergency personnel wasn't there in time. Briefly, he let his mind focus on something other than Dan. Thankfully, the meeting concluded earlier than he expected. His fingers itched to dig his phone out of his pocket and call Dan back.

Drew knew Dan had an aversion to romance and thought Drew wasn't romantic at all. His best friend was in for a surprise when he got home. Home. It would be a long week before he could get home and back to Dan to... to do what, he wasn't sure yet. A short phone call wasn't the right way to figure out what happened now. Where would they go now that Drew had done what he had dreamed about and kissed Dan? He closed his eyes and thought about that kiss, about Dan being hot, soft, and yielding under Drew's mouth. He wanted Dan compliant underneath him, begging Drew to be inside him... or begging to fuck Drew. He wasn't going to be picky about whose dick went where. He just wanted them to be together.

Taking the elevator up to his floor, he walked down the hall in a daze. Thoughts of sex with Dan were par for the course, but they never had the possibility of becoming reality. Until now. Now, Drew had these fantasies and

this list of all the things he wanted to do with Dan and to Dan—both in and out of bed. He picked up his pace to get to his room before his erection and wet spot were visible to conference goers.

Using the key card, Drew unlocked his door, entered the room, and tossed his bag and laptop case on the bed. He followed his belongings as he flopped face first onto the hard mattress, grabbed a pillow, and screamed out his sexual tension. He had a list of things he wanted to do with Dan, but they hadn't breached that topic yet. Hell, they'd barely talked after the kiss, but Drew had hopes. Hopes that he was willing to do whatever it took to make this thing with Dan a reality. Dan said he had a chance, and he wondered if the chance included dirty talk or was it too soon for that. He groaned into the pillow, rolled over, and tossed it across the room as he sat up and took in his surroundings.

The room was typical for a standard hotel room. It had a queen-sized bed, a small table with two chairs, a bedside table with—Drew opened the top drawer of the table and nodded at the lack of religious literature that used to be present in hotels—a hotel phone on top, and a flat screen television shut inside an oversized armoire.

Drew pushed himself off the bed and stood, placing his hands on his hips and pressing forward to relieve the tension building in his back. This thing, this possibility of something more with Dan, was far too new and unexplored for him to stress out over. He knew something would happen when he got home, but he was in Denver to do a job, his job that he enjoyed and got a great deal of satisfaction from. Drew needed to focus on work first and Dan later.

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Drew walked into his hotel room, shrugged out of his jacket, and threw it at the wall. This day had been too long and too frustrating to deal with. The conference had been moving swiftly until it reached deadlock between contracts, insurance providers, and people who really had no business adding their thoughts in, when they had no idea how the health care system worked. Sure, health care was a business, but where Drew was concerned, patient care came first. Preventive measures were first priority, and then they dealt with the monetary aspects. If they'd just kept quiet and listened to his presentation, they would have seen where he was going. Being cut off like that, not being able to finish a damn sentence, had him thinking of Dan in many ways.

He needed to talk to his best friend.

Loosening his tie, he walked to the bathroom to take a shower. He had to wash this day off and let the warm water roll over his muscles to relax him,

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then he would call Dan. Drew smiled as he pulled the curtain back and turned the faucet on. This had been the longest week in a long line of long weeks. He normally thrived at conferences, but this one, he was off his game. It could be the personal connection he had with the defibrillators, or it could be how confused he was with this situation with Dan.

Stepping into the shower, he turned and lowered his head, letting the hot stream of water pour over his tight and tired muscles. His mind wandered to thoughts of Dan a good number of times throughout his normal daily routine. They were best friends, and they lived together, yet Drew kept his dirtiest thoughts about Dan confined to his private moments. Moments when he was alone and could let his mind take a turn to the erotic possibilities. This week though, he couldn't get his mind out of the gutter and off Dan to fully concentrate. Drew loved his job, but Dan was becoming a distraction in the worst way.

Drew quickly washed the day away and toweled off after the shower. Pulling on a pair of boxers and nothing else, he grabbed his phone off the counter and made his way across the room. Staring at the bed, he wanted nothing more than to curl up under the covers and sleep until the alarm blared its warning, and he could be on his way home. Home... the thought of going home to Dan was punctuated by the phone vibrating in his hand. Drew turned it over and saw the familiar face of Dan gracing his screen, and he smiled. He thought for a second about Sam's analysis of Dan's picture and wondered if it was true.

"Speak of the devil," Drew said as he answered the call.

"Hey, Drew. I'm sorry, are you busy?" Dan asked.

"Nope, just got out of the shower. What's up?"

"Oh, you said 'speak of the devil,' so I thought you were with someone." Dan's voice was soft and unsure.

Drew chuckled. "Ah, no. Alone. I was just thinking about you."

"You were?" Dan asked

"Yeah, I seem to be doing that a lot the last few days. More than usual, actually," Drew confessed. "I hope that isn't too creepy to hear. That I think about you?"

"No." Dan sighed. "I mean, I think about you too, always have. It's just now the thoughts are different."

“How so?” Drew asked as he crawled onto the bed and lay back against the pillows.

“Well, like tonight, when I was in your room.”

“You were just hanging out in my room?” Drew probed.

“Would it be odd to say that I missed you?” Dan replied.

“No, I like the sound of that.”

“I went to your room to talk to you when I got home from work and forgot you weren’t home. Force of habit, I guess,” Dan stated.

“Yeah.” Drew exhaled with his answer.

“But when I walked in, your smell was there. I mean, it’s your room, so it should smell like you but that smell, Drew, your smell. It was as if I was wrapped up in the biggest hug, and I didn’t want to leave. So I kinda, um... grabbed that blue hoodie you wear all the time and took it to my room.”

“Okay...”

Dan continued his story as if he hadn’t heard Drew respond. “I took a shower to wash the smell of the coffee house off me and... you might think this is weird.”

“What’s weird?”

“I’m in bed right now, wearing it.”

Drew shifted on the bed, sliding his free hand down his chest to his thigh and spreading his legs as his cock twitched and filled at Dan’s confession.

“Wearing it and what else?”

“Nothing, just my boxers.”

“Why would I think that’s weird? I think that’s hot.”

“Drew?” Dan whispered his name.

“Yeah?”

“I miss you. Fuck. This is so new and not new, and you aren’t here and I miss you and your smell. God. It’s on your hoodie and smelling you and hearing your voice...” Dan’s sharp inhale went through Drew like fire.

Drew groaned and raked his nails up the inside of his thigh, cupping his balls and rolling them between his fingers, giving them a slight tug.

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“I wish I was there.”

“I wish you were here too. I can’t stop thinking about that kiss.”

“Me either,” Drew admitted. “Hey, Dan?”

“Drew,” Dan whispered his name.

“Touch yourself.”

“Yes,” Dan hissed.

Drew lifted his shoulder and pressed the phone against his ear to hold it in place. Sliding his hands under the waistband of his boxers, he dug his heels into the bed, lifting his hips and shoving his boxers down his legs. Using his toes, he untangled them from his feet and kicked them off and across the room. His cock was free, hard and resting against his stomach—Drew ran his forefinger around the tip of his cock, catching the bead of pre-cum that had formed and brought it to his mouth.

“Are you hard, Dan?” Drew asked as he brought his fist around his dick and started to stroke from root to tip, curving his palm over the head and pressing before sliding it back down.

“Fuck, yeah,” Dan panted. “Tell me I’m not in this alone.”

“Never, Danny Boy. Never,” Drew declared. Increasing the pace of his strokes, he spread his legs out farther and felt the cool air against the curve of his ass. Drew brought his left leg up, as close to his hip as he could, the stretch of muscle in his thigh provided a comfortable pain against the pleasure he gave his dick.

“Tell me what to do.” Dan’s voice had gone deep, husky, and needy.

Drew had never heard Dan like this, and the sound of his voice alone was going to make him come long before he was ready. Drew had never imagined Dan to be slightly submissive despite his flirty attitude, and now that he was asking for direction, it made Drew’s cock harden further.

“What are you doing now? Tell me.”

“Stroking my dick,” Dan groaned. “Over my boxers.”

“Stop,” Drew instructed.

“W-what?” Dan stuttered.

“I said stop. Take your hand off your dick. Put your phone on speaker and set it on the pillow next to you.”



Drew listened to Dan huff on his end of the phone and could tell that he'd put it on speaker when he replied.

"Done. Now what?" Dan panted.

"Breathe."

"Fucker," Dan huffed.

"Not yet," Drew promised.

"Stop teasing me and tell me what to fucking do," Dan hissed. "Please."

The "please" pushed Drew's resolve over the edge. He wanted to draw this out and make Dan beg, but he was begging already, and Drew wasn't sure if he was in the right frame of mind to truly dominate. He was too turned on and too needy himself.

"Slide your hands into your boxers and do not touch your dick."

"I hate you," Dan whined.

"No, you don't," Drew insisted.

"No, I don't. I want you."

Drew grunted at Dan's admission. "Shove your boxers down your thighs and all the way off. Now push up on your elbows and tell me what you see."

"I see my dick, and it's hard. Harder than I think I have ever seen it. Fuck, I want to touch it. I want to imagine it's you..."

"Stop." Drew's response served a dual purpose. He needed Dan to shut up, and he needed to get a hold of his emotions. They were going to do this. This was one of Drew's fantasies, and he was quickly losing his shit over Dan being so fucking obedient.

"Lean back and pull the hood of my hoodie up. Can you still smell me?"

Dan's groan was the only answer Drew received.

"Good. Bring your right hand to your mouth, rub your thumb over your lips and press down hard on your bottom lip." Drew put his phone on speaker and set it next to him, mimicking the moves he was giving to Dan. "Now open your mouth, lick the tip of your thumb, and slide it into your mouth and suck."

Drew heard telling sounds through the phone that let him know Dan was doing what he was told.

“Get that thumb nice and wet, Danny Boy. Swirl your tongue around the top before popping it out of your mouth, and I want to hear it, so suck on it... hard.”

Drew could hear Dan's moans as he sucked on his own thumb, and it was driving him crazy. Knowing Dan couldn't see him, he slid his hand down to squeeze his dick and gasped as his cold hand touched the heat of his shaft.

“Who knew you could be so bossy?” Dan asked, his words coming out of the speaker.

“Who knew you wanted me to be?” Drew replied. “Fuck, the sounds you make, Dan.” Drew squeezed his dick again and ran the tips of his fingers lightly up and down his shaft. “You make me crazy, and you're not here.”

“I want you so bad. Tell me, Drew. Tell me what to do. God, I want to touch you. I want to touch you, as you touch me, as you fuck me. I've never wanted something so bad.”

Drew was quickly losing control with each word Dan spoke. He was supposed to be the one in control. He was always in control when it came to what he wanted with Dan and at this moment, he was tired of being in control.

“Fuck it,” he said. “Dan, do you have lube close by?”

“Right here,” Dan answered.

Drew chuckled. “Were you going to get off without me?”

“No... it's why I called. Your smell, it turned me on, and I got so hard... I want to come so bad.”

“Dan...” Drew breathed his name as if it were his confession. “Come with me then. Lube that hard cock up and grip it. Use both hands and fuck that fist.” Drew reached under the pillow where he'd stashed the small bottle of lube on the off chance he had the energy to jack off. He poured lube over his dick, gripped it, and began stroking his cock as he heard the sounds Dan was making.

“Yes, fuck that feels so good,” Dan groaned. “Baby, it feels so fucking good.”

Drew was lost with the endearment. “Yeah, lift your hips, drive that cock up and down through your fist. I want to hear it. Don't you hold back on me, I want to hear it—I want to hear you get yourself off.”

“Are you—”

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Drew moaned as he pumped his fist along his shaft, squeezing at the top and rubbing the palm against the head, pressing down before he slid his hand down and up again. Reaching down with his free hand, he rolled his balls between his fingers, pulling on the loose skin of his scrotum as he raced toward his orgasm. His sac tightened, and his balls pulled up close to his body. "Yeah, I am, and I'm thinking about you while I stroke my dick, Danny Boy. Thinking about you riding me, watching your face as you fuck yourself on my cock, and I stroke yours as it bounces in front of me. I want to see your face as you lose control when you come and shoot all over my chest and up to my mouth. I want to taste your come. I want you to lick it off my chest and feed it to me from your tongue." Drew was rambling, releasing words he'd only thought in the dark corners of his mind when he let himself imagine sex with Dan.

"That's," Dan panted the words, "so fucking hot. Oh my God. I'm close, so close."

Drew was close too. He stroked his cock faster, lifting his hips off the bed as he dug his heels in. "Me too. Come with me, fuck, now..."

Drew felt the rush of orgasm through his balls as he tossed his head back, stroking his cock furiously, and came harder than he thought possible. The orgasm shot through him, making him shudder and his abs contract. It never seemed to end as he stroked his cock, slowing down as each spurt of semen hit his stomach and chest. He lost track of Dan's sounds as he came. They were muffled, and he wondered what Dan had done, he wondered what he looked like coming. Drew turned his head toward his phone and could hear what sounded like whimpering coming from Dan's end.

He shook his head at the sound. "You still there?"

Dan laughed. "Nope, I am floating on the highest high I have ever been on and don't plan on coming down anytime soon. I feel fucking fantastic."

"Yeah, that was more than I expected," Drew admitted. The bliss of orgasm let his words flow freely. It felt good to be honest with Dan—about everything.

"It was."

Drew grinned. "What happened to you at the end, I couldn't hear you?"

"Um... I turned my head," Dan answered.

"Oookay?" Drew dragged out the first syllable.

"I turned my head into the hood of your sweatshirt, to um... smell you when I came. It made it feel like you were closer to me."

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“Jesus, Dan. Do you know what you do to me?” Drew asked.

“Honestly, I didn’t. But I’m starting to get an idea,” Dan admitted and quickly turned the conversation away from their first sexual experience together to when Drew was coming home.

Drew was glad for the distraction though his limp dick was now resting against his thigh, and his semen was drying on his chest. It didn’t matter as long as Dan kept talking. Cleaning up could be done anytime. This new open and easy Dan was something Drew refused to let go of.

They talked for several minutes before Drew yawned. “Sorry, it’s been a long day.”

“I guess I should let you go and get some sleep,” Dan supposed.

“Yeah, I have an early meeting tomorrow. The last one and then I can get the hell out of Denver.”

“Drew?” Dan asked in a careful tone. “Can I pick you up at the airport?”

As if Drew would ever say no to that. “I’d like that. I’d like that a lot.”

“Okay, send me your flight information in the morning?” Dan suggested.

“I will. Goodnight, Dan.”

“G’night, Drew. Sweet dreams.”

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Five days of conferences, meetings, luncheons, and business dinners and Drew was exhausted. This morning’s last meeting with the company had an excellent showing, and they had scheduled plans for installation of the new defibrillators in hospitals, private medical offices, and at least a dozen school districts on the west coast alone. Despite the frustrations that had made up yesterday, the conference was ending on a positive note.

Drew zipped his suitcase closed and did one last check of his hotel room to make sure he hadn’t missed anything. Satisfied he hadn’t, he pulled his phone out and sent a quick text to Dan, letting him know what time he would be arriving in Los Angeles.

His stomach did somersaults, remembering last night’s conversation with Dan and what they’d done. Going back to how they were was pretty much off the table, he concluded, picking up his baggage.

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Drew gripped the handle of his suitcase so hard his fingers were going numb. Phone sex with Dan had been amazing. It was quick, quicker than his usual solo sessions, but where in the past, he had visions of what Dan would say or do, the reality surpassed it by miles. Dan's voice, his moans, the gasp followed by the quiet muffled way he said Drew's name as he came and, fuck, the admission that he had turned his head into the hoodie to breathe in Drew's scent. The sounds Dan made as he came were embedded in his memory, and he wished he had a recording of it. At the thought, Drew smiled. Soon he wouldn't need a recording, and that made him eager to get home and... what?

The week apart hadn't been as bad as he thought. It gave them time to talk and be friends without the elephant in the room—the kiss and the swift change in their relationship. The kiss was always in the back, middle, and front of Drew's mind, and yet it wasn't clouding and ruining what he had with Dan. The phone sex was an additional animal to the Drew and Dan zoo they were building, and yet Drew wouldn't change it for the world. He prayed once he got home, and they were in front of one another, things wouldn't be awkward.

A guy could only hope.

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## Chapter 7

Dan checked the time again, as he bounced back and forth on his toes, waiting for the passengers of Flight UA781 to come through security. His stomach was a mess, and his mouth had gone dry when the first passengers came out. He wished he could have met Drew at the gate. He wanted to surprise him when he got off the plane and not just wait for him at baggage claim.

The first sight of his best friend made Dan's breath catch. It was like one of those cheesy romantic movies that Dan secretly loved, where the people part and cease to exist, and all he could see was Drew walking toward him in slow motion. Drew's walk was confident, his back straight and his carry-on slung over his shoulder. He stood and scanned the room, until his gaze landed on Dan and he smiled.

Dan felt his knees weaken at the smile, and he summoned the energy to smile back as the familiar feeling of Drew coming home meshed with the rush of a first date. Drew didn't know it yet, but today *would* be their first date. Dan had spent their week apart cleaning the apartment from top to bottom and consulting his mother on a romantic dinner for two.

The lunch date with his mother had proved to be eye opening. Dan always had an honest and open relationship with his parents about his sexuality. He'd told them, at an early age that he wanted to kiss boys and not girls, and they accepted it and had never thought differently of him. Dan knew he had the support that many didn't get and, at times, he was arrogant and selfish about those who struggled with coming out. He'd made a mistake with Jonathan, a younger boy he'd met at college who was living with his uncle after leaving his very religious family. When they'd first met, Dan swore Jonathan was straight but after a few cuddles on the couch watching movies and Jonathan offering to massage Dan's sore hamstrings after a tough Cross Fit workout, he'd thought differently. The boys had a troublesome relationship; Dan wanted Jonathan and couldn't understand why Jonathan wouldn't simply come out and be his boyfriend. Jonathan's fear of being completely disowned by his family for having feelings for a boy clouded the feelings he'd had for Dan, and Dan had ended all contact with him. He did keep the last letter Jonathan wrote to him, thanking him for accepting him and being his friend when no one else would. The last lines of the letter were committed to his memory and made Dan sad when he thought about them—"I will always be glad we met. I love you and

hope we can still be friends.” That letter was written almost three years ago. Dan had never spoken to Jonathan again.

When Dan’s mom had met him at the café for lunch, she’d barely sat down when he blurted out his news.

*“I kissed Drew!” he told her.*

*“It’s about time, Danny.” She smiled and waved the waitress over to get a glass of iced tea.*

*“What do you mean ‘it’s about time’?”*

*“Oh, son. The two of you have been flirting with each other since you met.”*

*Dan stared at his mother as if she’d sprouted two heads. With that statement, she might as well have.*

*“We what? What are you talking about, Mother?”*

*“Do you remember when you brought Drew home?” she asked.*

*“Of course. It was the first weekend after we met at school.”*

*“Yes, you walked through the door with a smile plastered on your face, holding the hand of a tall and good-looking young man and declared him your new best friend.”*

*“So? What about that says we were flirting?” Dan requested.*

*“Dan, my dear. Listen to me and know that what I’m going to say, I say out of love because I’m your mother, and I only want the very best for you.”*

*Dan sat back in his chair and folded his arms over his chest. He didn’t like it when his mother offered a disclaimer before she told him something. It was a sign that what she was going to say, he wouldn’t like. He clamped his mouth shut and nodded for her to continue as he started to tap a rhythm out with his foot.*

*“Drew is in love with you. I think he may have been in love with you since you met. It’s not a bad thing to love your best friend. Your father and I were friends before we became lovers—”*

*“Mother!” Dan had heard his mother talk about her sex life. When it came to his, they danced around the subject of sex and being safe, but he’d never heard his mom refer to his dad as a lover. He scrunched up his face at her in disgust.*

*“Oh, please. How do you think you were born?”*

---

*"I know about the birds and the bees, but lover? Really?"*

*"We were talking about you, son. Not me. Now where was I?"*

*The waitress picked the perfect time to interrupt them as she arrived with his mother's drink and asked if they were ready to order.*

*Dan's mother took her time ordering, and he began to lose his patience. The waitress walked away, and he glared at his mother.*

*"Don't you dare give me that look, young man. You're neither too old nor big to turn over my knee." She laughed as she handed out the empty threat.*

*"Mom, please. I'm dying here. Drew kissed me, and I kissed him back, and I've been going in circles trying to figure out how I missed this. How did I miss him?"*

*Reaching across the table, his mother took his hand in hers, the contact calming him slightly. "Dan, you have always been a selfish child." She shook her head when he opened his mouth to speak. "I'm not dressing you down, son. It's your way. You're focused and most of the time, that focus lands on you and what you want or need. That is not always a bad thing. You're driven by your focus, and it has paid off in many ways with school and your ambition. But, my dear, dear son, when it comes to love and matters of the heart, you're clueless."*

*"I've had boyfriends." Dan defended himself. "Lots of them."*

*"And that is my point." She squeezed his hand. "What's the longest relationship you've had with a man?"*

*Dan lifted his chin to answer back with a smart-ass comment and stopped. What was the longest relationship he'd had? Most of the men were hookups or casual sex, but there hadn't been anyone long term since the rather screwed-up relationship with Jonathan, and that relationship only lasted a few months.*

*He slumped in his chair in defeat. "Oh my God. Mother, I'm a slut."*

*Pulling back to cover her not-so-quiet laugh, his mother grinned. "I wouldn't use that word, but since you offered it."*

*"Thanks a lot!" Dan grinned back. He loved how easy it was to talk with his mother even if she was calling him names.*

*"Now, how long have you been friends with Drew?" she asked.*

*"Four years."*



*“Who do you go to when you have problems with school, work, friends, boys...” She trailed off with her list.*

*Dan shrugged. “Drew. He is my best friend. Who else would I go to?”*

*“Now ask yourself, how many serious relationships has Drew had since you’ve lived together?”*

*Dan had to think about that. There were a few guys, but it always seemed like when Dan met them, they didn’t come around anymore.*

*Dan said. “I don’t have an exact number, but not many.”*

*“There’s a reason for that. Look inside yourself and take a good look at Drew. You will see it when you’re ready.” His mother gave her last bit of advice as the waitress returned with their lunch, and they ate in companionable silence, only talking when necessary.*

And now Dan stood, watching his best friend walk toward him, smiling softly. Seeing clearly for the first time, he noticed the look of insecurity that washed over Drew’s face before he schooled his features to reflect nonchalance.

Not thinking about what he was doing, Dan walked straight up to Drew, threw his arms around his neck, and pressed his lips against Drew’s. Dan felt Drew stiffen at the first touch, and then arms wrapped around Dan tightly, pulling him closer to the warmth of Drew’s body, and he melted into the kiss. Dan pulled back and looked into the hooded eyes staring back at him. “Welcome home.”

Drew’s smile reached his eyes and lit up his face. “If this is how you greet me when I go away and come back, remind me to leave more often.”

Dan smacked Drew on the chest and shook his head. “Don’t talk about leaving, again. At least not the way you left me this time.”

Drew’s face dropped, and he ran his hand up Dan’s back to cup the back of his neck, pulling him close, so their foreheads touched. “I’m sorry. Forgive me?” Drew whispered.

How could Dan fight against the tender touch and soft plea from Drew? “Of course.” He looked at Drew from under his lashes. “Of course. You ready to get home?”

Drew smiled again, and Dan relaxed against him. “More than you know.” He stepped back and took Dan’s hand, twining their fingers together, and nodded at their linked hands. “Is this okay?”

Dan's heart sped up at the touch, and he looked at their joined hands. The perfection of them together was overwhelming, yet he managed a smile at Drew. "More than okay." He tugged Drew's hand to get him walking toward the escalators that would take them down and out of the busy airport. Dan wasn't one for public displays of affection, but he found he couldn't stop touching Drew. They walked onto the escalator and on their descent, Drew looked up at him, and Dan reached out to brush a stray hair off his forehead.

"I missed you," Dan said before his brain could catch up with his mouth.

Drew stared back at Dan and the heat in his gaze made Dan blush. "You have no idea how many times I've wanted to hear you say that."

\*\*\*\*\*

Dan drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he drove back to their apartment. His hands were sweaty, and his heart was racing. He went over the details regarding the preparation for Drew's homecoming. The food was ready, the table was set, he'd placed the remote for the music close for when the mood needed it, the wine was chilled, and Drew was here. He whistled as his nerves got the better of him.

"Are you okay?" Drew asked and placed a hand on Dan's thigh, giving it a squeeze.

Dan nodded, not quite able to speak at that moment, and made the last turn into their apartment complex. He turned his head quickly toward Drew, giving what he hoped was a reassuring smile, and parked his car. Turning off the engine, he pulled his keys out of the ignition and sat back with a sigh. He pressed his head against the seat and turned to find Drew looking at him. His eyebrow was cocked over his right eye, and a smirk played across his mouth.

"What's up, Foster?" Drew asked with a cocky raise of his head.

"Up? What would be up? Just getting us home, safely. Two boys. Two boys who are best friends, who have kissed and had um... hot phone sex and who kissed again and held hands and we are home now, and you are here, and I am here and—"

Dan's rambling was cut off by the press of Drew's lips against his. He twisted in his seat and returned the kiss. He rose, trying to crawl across the center console and directly into Drew's lap, when a sharp pain dug into his hip and stomach. "Fuck!"

He felt Drew's laugh against his lips. "I like how eager you are for me and how safe you are playing things." Drew reached down between them and pressed the release for Dan's seat belt. "But let's take this inside."

Drew placed a light kiss on Dan's forehead and turned to open the door, exiting the car. Dan watched as Drew got out, noticing how the jeans Drew wore clung to his thighs and that Drew had a really nice ass. *How had he missed that before?* Shaking his head and exhaling to shake the nerves that were threatening to drown him, he got out of the car and followed Drew up the stairs to his apartment. He crossed his fingers and said a prayer to St. Anthony, hoping the patron saint of lost souls wouldn't mind the prayer and Dan currently being without religion. He needed all the help he could get tonight.

Dan raced up the stairs to reach the door before Drew. He turned and smiled at the questioning look on his friend's face as he took his keys out of his pocket. Snatching the keys from Drew's hand, Dan pressed his back against the door, fumbling with the doorknob as he turned and tried to get the key in. He gave Drew what he hoped was a seductive smile. "Let me. I have something to show you."

"I knew you were up to something, Danny Boy." Drew rocked back on his heels and waited for Dan to unlock the door.

Dan watched Drew's face as they walked into their apartment, waiting for a sign that it was too much. That Dan's attempt at being romantic and creating a semi-new space for them to move from a bromance to an epic romance wasn't overdone or too cheesy. He ground his teeth together as he waited for Drew to take it all in. He didn't have to wait long. The door was barely closed when he was pushed against it, and Drew's body pushed against his and his mouth slanted over Dan's. Drew's tongue licked at the seam of his lips, and Dan opened for him easily. This kiss, it was different from their first, but no less intense. This time, Dan was as active as he could be until Drew grabbed his hands and brought them high above his head, pinning them to the door.

"You did this for me?" Drew asked, as he linked their hands together and rubbed his nose along Dan's jaw.

"All for you." Dan was having a slight problem responding as the blood left his brain and went straight to his dick. He was glad he'd ordered a dinner that still needed to be heated in the oven, he was certain dessert would come first tonight.

Drew nuzzled Dan's neck, tickling as Drew inhaled. "I missed the way you smell too," Drew whispered.

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He grabbed Drew's face and brought them nose to nose. "I know we have a lot to talk about and we should be adult about this whole thing..."

Drew nodded and pressed his forehead against Dan's. "But?"

"But, fuck it. Take me to bed, Drew." Dan pushed at his best friend and started to unbutton his jeans and laughed at Drew's face as he walked backwards, stripping his clothes off as well.

"First one to bed gets to top?" Drew teased and turned and raced toward his bedroom.

Dan laughed and whistled as he slowly removed his clothes and took his time walking to the bedroom.

"You're so predictable," Drew said when Dan finally made his way into the room. Laid out on the bed, naked and hard, Dan's mouth went dry, and he could only stand and stare.

"Tell me what to do, Drew..."

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## Epilogue

*One year later...*

"Are you sure about this?" Dan yelled from the bathroom. Struggling with his tie, he gave up and turned to look at Drew who stood in the doorway, arms folded over his chest and a wide grin on his face.

"About you or you wearing the tie?" Drew teased.

"Knock it off. I'm serious, Drew. I think this is a big deal, you know, and I don't want to screw it up."

Dan stared at Drew in wonder. They had been friends for so long and one kiss, one simple, sexy, mind-blowing kiss changed it all. He wished they hadn't wasted four years, and yet he was also thankful that they had. His new take on romance had him believing that things happened for a reason, and just maybe the reason they were friends and not lovers all these years was to build the foundation of their relationship. The last year together had been better than he could have ever imagined. Who would have thought the love of his life would be his best friend?

"You could never screw it up, Danny Boy," Drew said as he walked in the bathroom and started to fix Dan's tie.

"This promotion is huge, and I want your celebration to be amazing, as amazing as you are." Dan watched Drew as his long fingers expertly tied his tie in a Windsor knot that had the stripes in perfect alignment, satisfying and quieting his busy mind.

"You know, a simple night at home with just the two of us would be wonderful and perfectly fine for me," Drew said as he smoothed Dan's tie and pulled his vest over his chest and buttoned it. "You look gorgeous."

Dan turned to the mirror and looked at the reflection staring back at him. He and Drew made a damn good-looking couple in their suits. He grinned, thinking they looked even better out of them. Their styles were complete opposites, but they complimented each other just like their personalities did. Dan had always been looking for the one who would be exactly like him and having this past year with Drew, he knew that would be more than boring. He loved that he liked his romantic comedies and Drew tolerated them. Just as Drew loved football, and Dan tolerated the sport... though he gave great commentary on the tight ends as they bent over before the snap of the ball.

The last year had not been full of roses and unicorns dancing under rainbows, but learning to be friend, lover, and boyfriend to Drew had been the best education ever. Dan had found that your best friend could still be your best friend even when you were getting it on, and that getting it on with your best friend was... the best. Dan couldn't imagine it could be the way it was. There was no holding back with Drew, and he knew everything there was to know about Dan. Sure, at times that was a pain in the ass, being known so well—so Dan made sure to surprise Drew as often as he could. Like tonight.

“You ready to get your party on?” Dan asked as he shook his hips.

“Keep moving your hips like that, and we won't leave the apartment.” Drew's gaze had fallen to Dan's hips and slowly made its way back to his face. He smirked and cocked his eyebrow. That look was a temptation, but he wouldn't give in, Dan worked too hard to pull this night together.

“The only back door you will be seeing for the next few hours, my love, will be that of the bar. We have a date.” Dan stood straight and crooked his elbow, offering it to Drew.

“As you wish,” Drew bowed and took Dan's arm as he rose.

“Quoting *The Princess Bride* will get you nothing but blue balls...” Dan said as he patted Drew's hand that rested in the crook of his arm, and they walked out of the bathroom, making their way through the apartment.

“I had four years of that, I think I can handle a couple of hours.”

“Never going to let me forget that, are you?” Dan stopped walking before they opened the door to head to the party.

Drew placed his free hand on Dan's cheek and turned his face so their eyes met. “I will never forget it, Dan. I don't want to. It got us to where we are now, and I will never forget that. I will tease the hell out of you for it, for the rest of our lives, but I will never forget it.”

Dan blushed at Drew's words. No matter how hard he tried, he would never be as romantic as Drew, and he loved the man for it. He turned his head and kissed Drew's palm. “Then never let me forget it.” Dan smiled. “I love you, Andrew Baxter.”

Drew removed his hand from Dan's arm and placed both hands on his face, bringing their mouths together in a soft and promising kiss. “I love you too, Daniel Foster.” Drew kissed Dan's forehead and each cheek before he spun him around and smacked his ass. “Now take me out and get me drunk.”

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Dan laughed as they walked out of the apartment and headed toward the car. The night was young, and so were they. Dan and Drew had the rest of their lives to spend together, but tonight would be spent with friends; friends that were once new and helped get both men's heads straight. Dan was expecting Noah and Sam to become fast friends, and he feared for the poor boys of the bar who were pining over crushes. Friends who were important to them. *After all, there was nothing more important than friends*, he thought, looking at Drew.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Elizabeth Daniels is the possible made up persona of a girl who loves love and loves to read about love.*

*Elizabeth is a wife and mother who lives in the desert valley of Southern California surrounded by gorgeous mountains that are covered with bright orange poppies every spring. She shuffles a home full of boys and finds it unnerving to be the minority in the house most of the time. She loves animals, doesn't eat them, and has rescued the three canines that lay at her feet as she writes.*

*She recently took her love of boys who love boys on a challenge to let the characters out of her head and tell their own stories.*

*She is taking a chance at this thing called writing, when she is not busy being lost in a book.*

*She may be crazy.*

*She may be brilliant.*

*She may be trying not to talk about herself in the third person because it's pretentious and creepy.*

## Contact & Media Info

*You can contact, stalk and/or follow Elizabeth on:*

[Email](#) | [Blog](#) | [Goodreads](#) | [Twitter](#)

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# BUDDING LOVE

By Adara O'Hare

## Photo Description

An illustration in the style of Japanese manga artwork features a young Asian male, nude from the waist down, blushing in embarrassment as thick green plant tentacles hold him aloft, binding his arms behind his back and spreading his legs wide. A wide tentacle protruding from the center of a large pink blossom penetrates his anus. Three smaller yellow tendrils, also from the center of the flower, reach toward his erect cock.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I can't believe I let my cousin drag me to this party. He told me I was invited too, but that just can't be right. This is the event of the year. Only the most important, wealthy, influential people are invited to attend, and I'm just a geeky little nobody...*

*So you can imagine how surprised I was when our names were checked off the list and we were ushered inside. Wow. This kind of thing really isn't my style, but I have to admit that I'm impressed. But most of all, I'm intensely curious about our host. I've caught glimpses of him throughout the evening, mingling with all his well-to-do guests. But the chances of actually getting to meet him are pretty much nil. And now that I've seen him, that might not be such a bad thing. He's not what most people would call handsome, but there's something about him that's pushing all my buttons. If I tried to talk to him, I'd probably just end up stammering and stuttering, and making a complete fool of myself.*

*That's why, when my cousin made his move to join the crowd around our host, I decided to make my escape instead. Well, that and I was also bored to tears and intensely uncomfortable, standing around in my borrowed dress clothes, feeling like a complete outsider. So I decided to explore the grounds for a while, to kill the time.*

*HUGE mistake.*

*The big, beautiful greenhouse at the back of the property immediately caught my attention. The fact that it was locked? Pfft! No problem! I've got*

*skills... which I'm now regretting. Why, you ask? Because this is what my nosey self has wandered into (see picture). Goddamned mutant alien plant, luring me in like a bee to honey with that enormous flower! This is not how I imagined my first time to be! How on earth am I going to get out of this? And did I just hear the sound of footsteps coming this way? I know I locked the door behind me, so who the hell is in here with me?*

*Someone who must have the key...*

*Oh... shit.*

*Please make his first time memorable and very pleasurable, dear author! Hot, erotic and very explicit is what I'm hoping for, with some strong, romantic overtones. (I don't want straight-up porn/erotica). And it would be great if the host was to join in at some point, so we have a sexy threesome going on! In the picture he's shocked, angry, and more than a little bit scared, but I'd like that to gradually change. But please do not include aphrodisiacs (from the plant or otherwise). I want him to enjoy what's happening without any mind-altering drug/chemical coercion.*

*I love kinky sex content (obviously!), so whatever you want to include, in terms of kink, is fine by me! Just keep in mind that this is his first time, so anything too extreme would be a bit off-putting and very unrealistic, like massive penetration. But some sounding with the plant's tendrils would be very hot!*

*I imagine this to be a futuristic setting, with a greenhouse full of strange, alien vegetation. The MC in the pic is Human, but maybe the host could be an alien species? (I do love interspecies pairings). But if you'd like to go with something different, that's fine!*

*And please give this a HEA ending, or at least a strong HFN with the distinct impression that these two (or three? Haha!) are well on their way to having a romantic relationship.*

*Sincerely,*

*C.M.*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** science fiction

**Tags:** aliens, shifters (non-wolf-cat), interspecies, virgin sex, tentacle sex, ménage, m-preg, sounding, bonded mates, betrayal, HFN

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**Content Warnings:** possible rape trigger (an alien does not understand it does not have the consent of its mate. It stops when commanded before anything more than non-consensual fondling occurs), dubious consent

**Word Count:** 25,553

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### *Acknowledgements*

I have to give a gigantic thank you to Lor Rose, who kicked my ass in beta and told me to make this story better, and by doing so, almost completely changed the story I ended up telling. There is more to the story than what is here, and yes, I'll get around to telling the rest of it, someday.

Thank you also to C.M. Roberts for the amazing prompt that inspired the whole story, and to my other betas, Vicktor and Nox. And finally, thank you to all of the Goodreads M/MR moderators and volunteers who make this event what it is. I couldn't have done this without all of you.

# **BUDDING LOVE**

**By Adara O'Hare**

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## Chapter 1

*Earth Year: 2307 A.D.*

*Standard Galactic Cycle: SGC 8961*

“Tell me why I’m attending this gala again?” I asked miserably, looking at my watch for the third time in as many minutes.

“To appease your father by making industry contacts so you can effectively take over the family export business from him once you graduate from university next year,” my cousin replied, no trace of remorse in his voice.

I sighed once more, staring into my wineglass. I opened the cufflink of my right sleeve and rubbed roughly at the mark on the inside of my wrist, trying to keep it from noticeably bothering me. The fabric rubbing against it had been driving me nuts all night and I needed it to stop; I wore long sleeves as little as possible to keep anything from rubbing against that sensitive skin.

I put on the suit and tie tonight out of an overdeveloped sense of duty, true to my Japanese heritage of self-sacrifice: Never mind my own dreams and goals because they don’t match my father’s needs for the family business. I had always been fascinated by the mysteries of the extraterrestrial, but I never had any time to devote to studying planets, cultures, or creatures. Intergalactic Trade School took up all of my time.

My cousin said, “At least try.” He wandered to the other side of the room to stand with the group surrounding our host for the evening, Aethos.

Aethos belonged to one of the more humanoid races known as Sirynthalians. He stood out from the group of Earthlings surrounding him because of his pale golden skin that had a strange shine to it, his diamond-faceted orange eyes, and his naturally indigo-colored hair, a color which Earthlings had only ever been able to get out of a bottle of dye. Aethos certainly wasn’t the only extraterrestrial in the room, but he was definitely the most striking, and he knew it. He oozed charm, but also a touch of excitement and mystery. Anything alien held mystery, but Aethos was well-known on Earth for being aloof.

I found Aethos attractive, even if he was extraterrestrial, or maybe because he was extraterrestrial. I’d let him have my virginity in a heartbeat if I thought he wanted it—I was sure we could find some way to work around the acidic

quality of his species' skin—but he hadn't even noticed me sitting awkwardly at this table all night long. Why would he? Earth's elite investors and tradesmen surrounded him, hoping to gain his ear for even a few minutes, hoping he would share his intergalactic influence. I was only a university student; I had nothing to offer him.

Okay, that wasn't entirely true. I had the knowledge of my father's business and his export contacts—the same knowledge my cousin was probably offering to Aethos at that very moment.

Why was I here?

My cousin laughed over a glass of champagne, though Aethos was as aloof as always. The news media dogged him quite often for being so stone-faced all the time. I had always wondered if perhaps his species didn't smile as opposed to assuming he hadn't found anything pleasant enough to warrant a smile.

Finally, too ashamed of my pathetic inability to meet my social obligations, much less my family's expectations, I gave myself a derisive snort, pushed the wineglass aside, and left the residence to take in the grounds of Aethos's estate. At least that would give me some pleasure.

I had been to visit Aethos's estate once before in my life, roughly nine years ago. Right after the greenhouse had opened, my school's entire elementary sixth-year grade-level had taken a field trip to see Earth's largest private extraterrestrial greenhouse and botanical gardens. I remembered being fascinated with all of the alien plant life because it seemed so much more fantastical than our own. I liked imagining the places the plants came from and what it would be like to go there.

I rubbed at the mark on my wrist again, remembering when I received it during that field trip. I had been looking around at all of the plants and hadn't noticed a small green vine reaching out for me. A small orifice had nipped at the skin on the inside of my wrist, leaving the red, lamprey-like circular bite I still bore. At the time, I had been scared about toxins in my blood; the greenhouse had warnings all over it about not touching the plants because they could be deadly. I had freaked out and run to my sensei, who in turn had gone to Aethos. Aethos had assured me I was safe from that particular plant, and that was the last we spoke of it because another emergency had required his attention—a fast purple vine had touched one of my classmates, causing her to asphyxiate.

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The only change I ever noticed after the mark appeared was to the sensitivity of the skin there. After the onset of puberty, even the slightest wind blowing across the mark would cause full-body shudders and would stiffen my dick more than was publicly appropriate. I had taken a lot of ribbing in the locker room during gym classes the following year as I learned how to control my body. Eventually I figured out I had to rub the mark more roughly—not fast or painfully, but more pressure than gentle brushing—to keep the sensations from causing an inappropriate hard-on. And bonus, when I rubbed the marked skin myself, I learned to use it to trigger my own inner calm and focus.

I rubbed at my wrist without conscious thought anymore. Even now, walking outside in the cool night air, I rubbed the mark with my thumb to keep the wind away from it. I supposed holding hands might one day become an issue, but I didn't have anything to worry about for the time being. Holding hands required someone to hold in the first place.

I wandered slowly toward a blue-green glow behind a hill on the opposite side of the main residence. As Earth's number one off-world importer, Aethos afforded a massive estate. I read somewhere his estate contained a forested mountain and a small lake in addition to the main residence, botanical gardens, and greenhouse. I hoped the light might be the greenhouse. The late hour meant it should be blessedly empty.

As I passed an entryway, a couple of his guards watched my progress but thankfully didn't detain me or herd me back inside like I had expected them to. I found that rather odd. Did Aethos always allow people to wander around the grounds freely when they visited his estate? Was the freedom only for tonight? I shrugged my shoulders. Either way, it worked to my advantage tonight.

It took me fifteen minutes to walk the distance and climb the hill. As I topped the hill overlooking the greenhouse from above, I drew in a breath. The vastness of the reinforced glass building built behind the hill stunned me to a standstill. It was even more enormous than I remembered it being; the size easily topped that of the residence itself, already one of the most notable homes in Japan. The greenhouse was wide and flat, and at least two to three stories tall, though only one floor existed. Seeing it from this distance really drove home the fact some of the plants were gigantic and needed that much space. It shined wonderfully colorful at night, a gorgeous menagerie of alien plant life.

I didn't see any guards around the outside—or any security cameras, not that I expected to see those—which seemed even odder. Then again, the whole



building was Aethos's private collection, and he rarely allowed visitors on his estate, so maybe they weren't necessary. Besides, what idiot was likely to leave the expensive gala Aethos had thrown to walk all the way to his greenhouse?

Other than this idiot, of course.

I snorted softly in amusement, smiled to myself, and walked the rest of the way to the building.

When I tested the door panel, it slid aside with ease, not making a sound. Stepping inside, I slid the panel shut and looked around the small glass foyer. A small cabinet sat in the corner, and atop it, I recognized a small black infobox. The blinking green light indicated data to download. As I neared, my watch beeped at me; its display showed a push request to download the greenhouse digital catalog to my personal storage. Assuming the catalog contained data on the species of flora, I decided not to download it. I only wanted to peek at them, not write a dissertation.

I opened the cabinet to find first aid supplies and lots of vials of liquid. On the wall, a giant biohazard sign written in several languages, including Earthling, warned visitors, *"Do not touch or taste the plants. Do not let them touch or taste you. Be wary of strange smells as some of these plants produce aphrodisiacs, noxious fumes, and toxins which can cause hallucinations, paralysis, and/or death. Read all warnings before entering a section. For your safety, do not visit any section alone."*

I remembered these warnings from my previous visit. I didn't remember the "taste" warnings being there nine years ago, but otherwise they seemed unchanged. Duly noted, I blatantly ignored the last one and slid open one of the three available sectional doors to enter the greenhouse proper. I gazed in silent wonder at the garden of exotic plants and genuinely smiled. I had no idea what any of them were or where they were from, and I didn't see any tags. Had there been labels in the past? Maybe a private collector didn't need to mark his own stuff? I didn't mind anyway. I liked using my imagination to make up my own stories for the plants.

They were all so incredibly beautiful. This plant was tiny as a dewdrop and iridescent, sparkling like a multi-colored jewel; I had trouble focusing my eyes on it for very long. Another one was spiky as an ancient cactus but actually soft like Prairie Smoke. Another was a fascinating shade of burnt orange with neon green speckles and bright blue veins curled into three colossal towers, capped with a mottled brown and yellow bell blossom that appeared ready to fall over

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and swallow me whole. In the rafters, multiple brightly-colored vines tangled with each other through metal filigree and clung to wooden crosshatch trellises. Baskets and planters hung from the ceiling. The room smelled of dirt with a sweet undertone of fragrant blossoms.

I drifted carefully between the rows of tables and shelving, gaping in awe while being vigilant not to touch any plants or let them touch me. I was uncertain which ones were poisonous or venomous to me and didn't want to end up some alien flora's next source of sustenance. The thought made me shudder in revulsion.

Maybe roaming a building full of potentially lethal plants by myself wasn't my best idea, but I enjoyed the quiet infinitely more than the crowded ballroom of strangers. After all, wallflowers could enjoy the greenhouse too, right?

I chortled at my own bad joke, the sound loud in the quiet. It echoed slightly off the walls and high ceiling. Following my laugh, plants quivered all around me, the room's acoustics amplifying their rustling to sound similar to maracas. The unnaturally amplified noise unnerved me more than I cared to admit, so I decided it was time to check out a different section of the building.

I skimmed the environmental warnings for the next sector. The plants there thrived in carbon dioxide-based environments; non-carbon dioxide-breathing species should wear an appropriate mask before entering the section.

A movement in the corner of my eye snagged my attention. A dark purple vine quickly slithered its way toward me along one of the rafters overhead. Remembering the girl who had asphyxiated after a purple vine had touched her, suddenly the fact the next room contained primarily carbon dioxide didn't seem to matter to me as much as it should. At least there might be another oxygen-based environment on the other side of that section. I would surely die if that purple vine touched me with no one else around to provide aide.

Decision made, I took the deepest breath my lungs could hold, opened the door, and ran through it, slamming it shut behind me. Only after the purple vine smacked into the glass door did I notice the oxygen masks on the wall of the room I had just evacuated. I smacked my forehead against the glass in frustration.

I wasn't certain if even my ancestors could keep me from dying out of sheer stupidity tonight.

Thinking this section couldn't be *that* big and I could make it, I ran down the aisles quickly but carefully, not examining the dazzling plants I had never

seen before and which deserved more of my attention. I had to find an exit and trust I could breathe the air there. Or at least find an oxygen mask. I kept following the tables and shelves along the aisle nearest to the wall, hoping to stumble across an exit. Why couldn't I find an emergency exit when I actually needed one?

As I ran, spots slowly began to swim before my eyes. I tried to blink them away, but they wouldn't clear. The blackness crept into the edges of my vision. Becoming dizzy as I used up the air I had taken in, I missed a step and stumbled, knocking into the table at my side and getting dangerously close to one of the plants. I think it was an unusual shade of violet-blue.

My head began to throb.

I truly started to believe I wouldn't make it out of the greenhouse alive. The more quickly I moved, the more oxygen I used. I could feel my heart in my throat beating rapidly from adrenaline-fueled fear.

I finally realized how stupid I had been to come to this place, and to run in here instead of taking my chances with the purple vine and going back out the way I had come. I had put myself in a catch twenty-two I might not make it out of. I needed to slow down to keep from touching the potentially hazardous plants, but I had to keep moving quickly if I wanted to find an exit before I passed out. I wanted to cry, but I held back the tears because my vision was already so blurry I could barely see in front of me.

I swayed dizzily and leaned against a table. I swallowed the air in my mouth to keep from opening it and sucking in even more carbon dioxide. My body wanted me to inhale deeply, but I knew I couldn't. Fear tried to paralyze me, but the encroaching darkness drove me faster, stupidly stumbling forward with my hand on the table railing beside me, hoping I didn't touch any of the plants.

The headlines tomorrow would read

**Yoshida Exports Heir Dead At 20  
From A Fatal Case Of Idiocy.**

I didn't want to die.

My hand felt a corner on the railing, and I turned toward it. I reached in front of me and felt the smallest glimmer of hope as my hand touched the latch of a door. Maybe I could get it open.

I needed it to open.

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At that point, I didn't care if it was a broom closet so long as I could breathe the air inside. Unable to read the posted warnings anyway, I fumbled at the latch with clumsy fingers.

It didn't open.

I could only see a faint glow in front of me. I could hardly think because my head hurt so much I wanted to cry.

No, I wanted to *breathe*.

Desperation drove me to keep trying. I sank to my knees with my left shoulder to the door and braced my right foot against the frame, pushing with my leg and pulling back on the latch with whatever strength I had left. The panel gave way suddenly, and I fell backward with it, hitting my head against the other side of the doorframe. More pain blossomed in my skull, and I gasped in surprise. My lungs heaved in the surrounding carbon dioxide.

I leaned sideways into the room, falling over and landing in a heap on the other side.

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A herd of wild boars stampeding over my head could not have hurt more than the migraine I suffered through as I woke. I curled into the fetal position and cried in sheer misery, wracking sobs which made the throbbing in my skull ache even worse, but I couldn't stop my body from trying to draw in more air. I wanted to die, my head hurt so much.

I didn't know, and couldn't bring myself to care yet, how long I had been unconscious. I cracked open one eye and then wished I hadn't as more agony lanced through my optic nerve straight into my brain. Without thinking, I groaned aloud, having forgotten what the sound might trigger around me. Enormous relief slowly replaced the receding pain as I took in more oxygen. I took a chance and tried to open my eyes again. This time the glowing lights were tolerable. It took a few moments for my eyes to focus on the room, sideways as it was.

I was on the floor, facing the door. Somehow it had slid shut. That had probably saved my life, or at least prevented further brain damage. (I had to face the fact that I must have already been brain damaged to have ever thought to try what I had just done.) Were the doors automatic? They might have been, for all I knew.

I closed my eyes and let the pounding of my heart subside. I had made it. Mentally, tomorrow's headlines changed to read

**Yoshida Exports Heir Learns Valuable Scientific Lesson  
in Alien Greenhouse: Earthlings Breathe Oxygen.**

I laughed—an unusually high-pitched bark that sounded somewhat hysterical to me—which turned into a coughing fit that made my head throb some more. I groaned again.

Unexpectedly, I felt something—maybe a hand?—slide up and down my back. It soothed me and helped to calm my racing heart. It felt nice, but... I hadn't thought anyone else was here. Maybe Aethos *did* have security cameras in this place after all.

I slowly rolled over onto my back, keeping my eyes closed for a bit longer as my mind came back online. The stroking touch moved to my sides and chest, continuing to... pet me. I couldn't find other words for how it felt. The touch started to unnerve me; the placement felt too familiar, but something else was off as well.

Something encircled my right wrist, maybe taking my pulse? That made sense to me. Whoever it was rubbed against the mark there tentatively. The touch was too gentle, and I shivered involuntarily with the sensation. Typical for me, the tingle shot straight to my dick, which began to rise. The only thing lacking to top off my embarrassment this evening was a stiff dick, but I was too exhausted to fight my reaction like usual.

"Don't," I slurred, still somewhat groggy from the killer migraine. I couldn't quite find the words I really needed to express my unease or apologize for the inappropriate reaction. I did try to pull my arm away from the light caresses rousing my cock over my mental objections, but my rescuer was stronger than I was and continued to hold my forearm in place while caressing the mark softly. My cock throbbed. I moaned and opened my eyes to look at him or her, but I didn't see anyone hovering over me as I expected to.

A sudden tantalizing pressure rubbed against my cock like a snake slithering alongside it, muscles undulating as it moved.

I squealed and startled bolt upright, eyes open wide and unblinking. The bright room swam dizzily in and out of focus. I tried to pull my right hand up to my eyes to combat the vertigo, but whoever had my wrist wouldn't let go, so I had to use my left hand instead. Everything spun around me for several

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long moments while someone continued to grope my happy-to-oblige dick. I was simultaneously excited by the stimulation (and by the idea someone wanted to touch *me*) and aghast that someone would fondle me without permission.

The room slowly righted itself. I looked around for someone—anyone—but the room was empty except for me and a gigantic plant with a singularly humongous white saucer blossom, big enough to eat me. The outer edges of the petals were rose pink.

Mouth agape in bewilderment, I looked down at my forearm and stared obliviously at a thick green vine wrapped around my wrist. The end of it brushed back and forth across my mark in a gentle but constant stroke which matched the throbbing in my dick. I blinked rapidly in confusion before looking down at my crotch, where another vine proceeded to open my pants. A third rubbed alongside the visible ridge of my erection, like a snake, as it worked its way beneath my shirt and up my chest.

Then my brain finally kicked in, and I screamed.

I flailed, arms and legs moving all at once. Or rather, I attempted to flail, but a dozen other tentacle-like vines shot out from the root of the plant to wrap around my arms, legs, ankles, and torso, hindering my movements. Fueled by adrenaline once again, I attempted to thrash even more, throwing my weight to the side to try to free myself from the plant's grip.

In response, it held me aloft in midair.

I shrieked again, higher this time.

And again.

I couldn't bring myself to stop screeching. My throat burned as I went hoarse. I couldn't move. I was certain I would have emptied my whole bladder on myself if my dick hadn't still been so hard. It should have been well on its way to deflating, but the damned vine kept touching my wrist, like it knew exactly what that touch did to me.

Another vine wrapped itself around my throat. As it tightened, I stopped wailing and stilled. I couldn't look down now, couldn't see what the plant intended to do to me. I felt rather than saw it coil around my cock.

Anticipation knotted around the sour fear already churning in my gut. I wanted to throw up, but I wasn't certain I could move enough for the bile to clear my mouth. I choked back the nausea, tears streaming down my face. I closed my eyes as I waited for the plant to continue...

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“Sssilannahsh shorzihsssh!”

The hissed alien command reverberated through the room. The vines released me instantly, and I crashed unexpectedly to the floor, twisting my ankle as I landed on the dirt.

I sat, stunned, until the pain finally registered, lancing up my leg and pounding through my ankle.

“Swell,” I muttered to myself.

And yeah, it probably would swell.

And with that stupid internal joke, I started laughing hysterically. Leave it to me to crack stupid jokes when a plant had nearly... I hadn't even noticed the room was covered with dirt until a moment ago. How could I have missed that? Just because a plant had tried to...

The room spun around, and then... nothing.

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## Chapter 2

When I woke on my back, something was touching my ankle. I jerked away hard from the touch, intending to get as far away from the plant as possible, and ended up nearly rolling off a daybed before I caught myself. My ankle throbbed dully with the movement, and I remembered I had landed on it wrong when I had fallen to the ground.

“You should keep your ankle elevated, Kazuo.”

I looked around, surprised to find myself in a lounge—not in the greenhouse—which explained why I was on a daybed, but not how. Daylight filtered through the window. How long had I been out?

I exhaled in relief, only now realizing how much I had tensed to begin with. My shoulders ached with the strain of holding me over the edge of the daybed. I rolled my head from side to side to loosen the muscles and pushed myself up some.

Orange eyes peered down at me from the end of the daybed. Aethos had been examining my ankle. He was in different clothing from his gala attire, and he wore thin, semi-transparent gloves of some sort. I placed my ankle back on a small stack of pillows where it could remain elevated. Aethos picked up a small jar of some transparent goo and slathered a glob of it carefully around my ankle. I felt coolness settle into my skin and the throbbing eased a bit, so I settled back onto the cushions. Aethos removed the gloves and set them aside.

“I am no doctor, but I believe it is only sprained. It did not swell very much. Your ankle should heal completely in a couple of weeks, provided you are not too aggressive in your activities.”

I had heard news feeds of Aethos speaking in his Sirynthalian-accented Earthling. I knew beings of his species accentuated and drew out any “s”- or “th”-like sounds when they spoke Earthling, and I had generally understood him in those news feeds, but hearing him speak to me directly, I had some difficulty understanding him. He didn’t lisp so much as hiss, slurring words and sounds together, making them tricky to distinguish from one another.

“I can call a doctor if you would like another opinion,” he added.

I bent my ankle ever-so-gently to test how bad it was. It throbbed a bit, but I found the faint pounding bearable. I thought I could manage to stay off of it for a few days.



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“Thank you, Aethos-sama, but it doesn’t hurt too badly. I will manage.”

“Very well, Kazuo.”

I grimaced at hearing my given name said so casually, without any title. In business circles, failing to use appropriate titles was a huge slight when speaking with others. The lack of title indicated either a lack of acknowledgment or agreement with one’s rank, or a level of familiarity between the speaker and the subject which Aethos and I did not share. Either possibility made me uncomfortable.

“Forgive me, Kazuo. I meant no disrespect. My world does not use family names or titles. In my home, I speak as I would on Sirynthe. If it is not too difficult for you, please allow me this indulgence. And you may do the same.”

I started to object but then cut myself off. This was his home, and I was an unexpected—likely unwanted—guest. I had no real reason to object other than my own discomfort, and I found asking him to accommodate me in his own home out-of-line on my part. Knowing his reasons, I could overcome my discomfort. “Of course, Aethos-sa—Aethos.”

The name felt foreign and improper, too intimate for such a casual acquaintance, but Aethos smiled at me—he really could smile—apparently pleased with my effort. Seeing him smile was worth enduring any discomfort of impropriety, maybe even the whole of my misadventure in his greenhouse. He was even more striking when he smiled.

“Thank you for obliging me, Kazuo.”

“I—Do you remember me?”

“You remember, do you not? It is difficult to forget the day I had to shut down public access to my greenhouse. The parents of the young lady sued, of course, and I still pay for her treatments to this day. She was quite unfortunate to have tangled with the Ynthazniard Snarlwrot and to have had such a violent reaction to it. I was, however, very much distressed to not spend more time with you discussing your own altercation, but such could not be helped. Her need was greater than your own at the time.”

I hadn’t heard anything about my classmate in years. In the last update I had heard, eight years ago, she was still in the hospital. Her parents had moved her to an extraterrestrial treatment facility on another continent, and her friends stopped receiving updates after that.

“I never had the chance to apologize to you all those years ago for touching your plant. I didn’t mean to.” I hadn’t even been turned toward it at the time.

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“I am aware, Kazuo, but there is no call for apology. I watched the security feed many times. The plant... it chose you, not the other way around. I did not see you doing anything you should not have.”

“Thank you for understanding, nonetheless,” I replied. Aethos came around the end of the daybed and sat on a small ottoman next to it. “If you don’t mind, what time is it?” I asked.

“Late morning. Not quite eleven.”

I startled at the late hour and struggled to sit up.

“I’m late for work. My father will—”

“Your father has been notified you sprained your ankle and will be my guest for a few days while you recover. He apologized profusely for the inconvenience of your stay and thanked me for my hospitality while making sure I knew he was fully at my disposal should I require anything to assist you. He was the epitome of politeness.”

“I’m sure he was,” I said bitterly. “I have no doubt he assumes I will use my time here to convince you of the great benefit a partnership with his company will produce, and I will return home with, at the very least, a gentlemen’s agreement. He doesn’t actually care about me, only his company.”

My assessment of my father might have been harsh, but time and again he had proven to me the company would always come first with him, and I was a distant fifth or sixth on his list. Like the time he missed my judo championship bout to meet with Aethos to discuss trade agreements. Or the time he had promised to take me on vacation, just the two of us, but canceled to fly overseas to meet with a visiting dignitary of a new species. I had no doubt if I returned empty-handed after my extended stay, he would look at me as an even bigger failure than if I had gone to work today with nothing more than a few choice stories from last night.

“You do not believe his words?”

“Did he ask how I sprained my ankle?”

“No.”

“Then I stand by my statement.”

“If he desires an agreement, should you be telling me such things about your company president?”

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“Of course not,” I responded candidly. “But I’m not here now as a sneaky excuse to talk business, and I would rather you understand that about me than assume I trespassed last night to garner an invitation to stay longer.”

“I see. Very well, Kazuo, we will discuss a subject of a different nature, if you are agreeable. It will eventually lead into your evening escapade, and the one past, which we did not have a chance to discuss years ago.”

I cringed as though Aethos had scolded me for a nine-year-old transgression, but he had said I hadn’t done anything wrong back then. Perhaps it was residual guilt on my part.

“Certainly, Aethos-s—” I stopped abruptly before the title slipped out and smiled a bit sheepishly at him. I needed a while to get used to that idea.

“Did you know that when I sent the invitation to your company for my dinner party last night, it was addressed specifically to you?” he asked.

I knitted my eyebrows together. That was certainly *not* how the invitation to the gala had been presented to me by my father. My father had brought my cousin and me into his office to discuss the impact of attending the gala and the networking opportunities it would present the company. He had presented the invitation to my cousin and said I should go along also to make contacts. He had made it sound like he was bestowing on me a huge honor by allowing me to attend the gala as my first industry networking experience. I should have known better. I filed it away as another example of how his company was always more important than I.

Plus, I didn’t follow how the question was supposed to lead us into discussing what happened last night.

“I did not,” I finally replied.

“Your father also contacted me directly to request I... *reconsider* my choice of representative for his company. When I refused, he asked if he might send along a second associate. As you are well aware, I agreed.”

By his emphasis on “reconsider,” I assumed Aethos meant my father tried to convince him I was not suitable to represent the company and my cousin would be a better selection. But why had Aethos specifically requested me in the first place?

“Why me?”

“Because many years ago, one of my plants tasted you, and it is time we met again. I have kept an eye on you.”

“Why?” I didn’t like the sound of that. If the plant was as safe as he had told me, why did he need to meet with me again? Had he been hiding something about the plant all these years? All kinds of horrific possibilities began to spin through my head: disfiguration, dismemberment, death... “Has something changed? Was it a slow-acting poison that only kills after ten years? Am I going to—?”

“Calm yourself, Kazuo. There is nothing wrong with you as a result of either encounter. As I told you then, the plant is not venomous. It can choose to produce poisonous sap if it wants, but you did not ingest anything, so you have nothing to fear, then or now. I will get to my reasons soon.” Before I could respond, he asked me another question. “Were you aware I had never before held one of those parties on my estate until last night?”

The abrupt switch left me off-balance. Where were these questions headed?

However, for the question about the location of the parties, that answer I knew. My father had spoken to my cousin and me at great length about how rare an opportunity it would be to be inside Aethos’s home. All the more reason, in his mind, for me not to attend, I supposed.

“My father did make me aware of that detail,” I responded.

“Excellent. Given the lack of access the public has had to my home, do you believe I would allow anyone to wander the grounds unescorted?”

“Um...” I had wandered the grounds unescorted. Was it a trick question? Should I answer based on my experience or based on his leading phrasing? “No?”

“Very good. Finally, given the hefty expense of electricity for such a building, do you think I typically leave the lights on in the greenhouse at night?”

I groaned out the “no” as I finally started to piece together the picture painted.

“Then why, Kazuo, do you think you managed to get into trouble in my greenhouse last night?”

“I... I...” Why would he allow me to do those things, unless... “You wanted me to,” I accused.

“I anticipated your desire to visit the greenhouse again, yes. And I suspected you would be too proper to wander away if you believed my attention focused

on you, so I held the party here to appear otherwise occupied. The other events were... less fortunate, shall we say?"

"‘Less fortunate’?" His lack of acknowledgement for the part he played in my near-death experience outraged me. Sure, I had made some stupid decisions, but he went through an enormous amount of effort to get me back into his deathtrap of a greenhouse. How did he know me so well he understood I wouldn't have left the party if I thought I would be missed? And, if he hadn't left the lights on, I probably wouldn't have ventured up that hill searching for the source, expecting to find the greenhouse. "That's all you have to say? You... you stalked me so you could what? Understand how best to lead me back to the greenhouse? And then one of your plants tried to—to rape me, Aethos!"

"Rape from your perspective, perhaps. While your lack of consent was quite apparent to you, it was not so to the plant. It is intelligent and understands Earthling speech, but it did not have experience with Earthling screams. Thus, it was unaware that your screaming constituted a lack of consent. From its perspective, it was finally about to mate with the one it had chosen years ago and had waited—"

"IT'S THE SAME PLANT?" I sat up and screeched the question at Aethos at the top of my lungs.

"—patiently to meet again. Had you clearly said ‘stop touching me’ or ‘let me go’ or given some other understandable directive, instead of slurring one so vague, the plant probably would have complied." More to himself, he added, "That is difficult to determine when they are in heat, though. They are a bit less inclined to acquiesce to requests the further they are into their mating cycles."

I laid back down on the daybed and stared up at the ceiling, unable to look at Aethos. The haze I saw in that moment had nothing to do with a lack of oxygen. My whole body shook with seething rage.

He had allowed the whole scenario to happen instead of treating me like any other guest. He had encouraged me to seek out the greenhouse alone by leaving the lights on and telling his guards to leave me alone. That he could sit there and calmly debate whether or not rape was actually rape if one party didn't know it was raping the other party stunned me to silence. I could not find adequate words to argue with him, so instead, I ground my teeth together and clenched my hands into fists, my nails digging small, crescent-shaped marks into my palms.

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But the more silence that passed—the more I processed his comments—the more I began to rationalize them: Maybe where Aethos came from, a being's ignorance meant all should be forgiven, regardless of the slight to the other party? I had no concept of a societal structure where ignorance could excuse even the most heinous of crimes against another, but that didn't mean one didn't exist somewhere. Was that what I was dealing with? If one didn't know something was wrong to begin with, how would one know to avoid it? Or even what to look for, like screaming? Was that even the question at hand?

Why did I suddenly feel like I was in the wrong when my body—my psyche—had been violated? Feeling how I felt was *not* wrong.

It was too early in the day for such a philosophical crisis. I wanted to roll over, put my back to Aethos—figuratively and literally—and ignore the whole episode. And as soon as my ankle was tolerable, I wanted to go home to my normal, pathetic life. I did not want to think about the plausible innocence of a guilty alien plant which might not have meant to violate me as it had.

“Why do I care about the plant's perspective?” I finally asked calmly after my internal struggles abated.

“So you can make an informed decision,” Aethos replied.

“On?”

“Whether or not to mate with the plant.”

I lay there, utterly speechless, mouth agape like a fish out of water. I could no longer fathom how Aethos's mind operated, because whenever he spoke, his words never went in a direction I could anticipate. I could not comprehend how he believed even the tiniest possibility existed that I might “mate” with a plant. Of all the hundreds of sexy intergalactic alien fantasies I had daydreamed, in not a single one did the possibility of “mate with a plant” *ever* cross my mind.

I sighed as my headache returned; keeping up with Aethos mentally exhausted me. I closed my eyes and rubbed my temple with my fingers, trying to get the pounding behind my eyes to release me. Instead of attempting to follow his logic, I asked him to tell me directly.

“Why would I ever consider the idea of mating with a plant, Aethos?”

“It will die if you do not.”

“Excuse me?” I didn't believe my ears. He did not say—

“The plant will die, within a couple of days most likely, if you do not allow it to mate with you. When it tasted you nine years ago, it bonded to you,

regardless of whether or not you bonded with it. The plant has finally reached its first mating cycle. If it does not mate during its cycle with its bonded, it will die.”

“So it should mate with someone else!”

“It will not accept anyone but you, much to my frustration.” His voice warbled more than normal. Was that anger? I didn’t have enough experience with him to know his tones of voice or his moods or how they manifested. “It chose you, Kazuo. Now you must choose, and soon.”

“I can’t ‘mate’ with a plant, Aethos. I can’t. It’s—it’s—it’s *a plant*.”

“On other worlds, the line between flora and fauna is not as distinct as it is on Earth. On Earth, a plant cannot taste as an animal, nor can it mate with an animal. This plant can and does, and it does so much more than that. It is a very rare and highly guarded prize to be selected by one, more so even than any Earthling can comprehend, because your world is so new to the Intergalactic Assembly of Worlds. It gave *you* the choice, Kazuo, and it will never choose another. Not only this once, but for the rest of its life—or yours—either you will mate with the plant during its mating cycles, and it will live, or you will refuse, and it will die waiting for you. Consider carefully, because you will live with the consequences of your decision for the rest of your life.”

As Aethos stood up and crossed the room to a dresser, the ramifications of Aethos’s words punched me in the gut. I would be responsible for this creature’s life or death. I didn’t want to mate with it—because *eww! A plant!*—but I didn’t want it to *die* either. Why did I have to be responsible for its life or death? I didn’t want this decision. Why couldn’t it have picked Aethos instead of me?

Aethos opened the top drawer of the dresser and removed an infobox from inside. He fiddled with something and then brought the box over to me. My watch beeped with a push request for “security recording.”

“I think you will find this security recording from last night... enlightening.”

I accepted the request and downloaded it to my personal storage for review. Aethos then crossed the room and placed the box back in its drawer. He walked to the door and slid it open, but he turned toward me before he exited.

“For the record, Kazuo, I did not save your life last night. It did. Consider that in your decision as well. If you decide to help it live, I will tell you more about it and what to expect.”

A door sliding shut had never sounded more like the hum of a prison cell in my life.

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In the next few hours, I watched the whole twenty-minute security recording over and over. Each time I saw something new, but every time, I saw the same thing...

The plant had saved my life. Consciously. Not a fluke.

The greenhouse recording started from inside the plant's room a few seconds before I banged into the glass door panel from the outside.

The plant calmly stretched across its room, vines resting everywhere across the floor, walls, and ceiling. The recording clearly showed me stumbling outside of the room through its glass walls. When I thumped into the door, the vines recoiled from the disturbance and wiggled. The whole plant quivered from petals to leaves. I dragged my hand across the door latch. The recording clearly showed the latch to the room locked from the inside.

The first time I had watched the recording, I had needed to bite down on the rolling nausea that swelled in the pit of my stomach after I first noticed the locked mechanism. The plant controlled visitors to its room.

I pulled on the latch to no avail and sank to my knees outside the glass door. My chest lifted as though I breathed heavily, but my lips remained firmly clamped. The vines crept back to the door, resting on the glass again as I turned sideways, braced my foot against the doorframe, and pulled the latch toward myself. The muscles of my neck pulled taut. I squeezed my eyes shut, my face a grimace with the strain of desperation.

One of the vines flicked up the release, unlocking the door. The panel slid open quickly under my exertions, and I fell backward into the other side of the doorframe, smacking the back of my head and landing on my ass. My mouth and eyes opened in surprise, but my chest continued to heave.

As I relived the events displayed, I breathed heavily in sympathy to the memory. I still vividly recalled the inability to inhale air. I rubbed the heel of my hand across my sternum to relieve the phantom pains there.



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I leaned sideways into the open doorway and used my arms to pull my body partially inside before my arms collapsed beneath me. When I didn't move any further, the vines wrapped around my arms and legs and rolled my body the rest of the way into the room. They then pushed the door closed. As a loud rushing sound filled the confined space for around fifteen seconds, a vine flicked the lock and started to pull away from the door, but then it... hovered, paused. Then it flicked the release again, unlocking the room.

The only way my mind wanted to interpret the scene was to believe the plant had made a decision, thought about it, and reconsidered. But plants didn't have conscious thought, so my interpretation of events didn't make any sense to me. It wasn't possible. My interpretation had to be wrong.

For the next several minutes on the recording, the vines brushed over my body, everywhere. I trembled again in phantom memory of those vines caressing me as I watched them tousle my hair and wrap around my limbs, snaking around and under my clothing. Watching the recording objectively, I didn't understand why the plant inspected me. What purpose did it serve? Was it assessing my vital signs? Learning what I looked like? Tasting me again?

The thought of being tasted again renewed my tremors.

As I began to stir and cry, the vines withdrew to a safe distance. I curled into a ball and convulsed bodily. I groaned. The vines crept nearer to me slowly. I laughed and coughed. A vine stroked along my spine. As I rolled onto my back, the vines moved to massage my sides and chest.

I shivered in real time as I watched. If I closed my eyes, I could still feel their caress—petting. I had thought someone was petting me at the time. The recording seemed to confirm that assessment.

A vine wrapped around my right wrist and touched the mark there. Not only did I shiver bodily at the touch, but the plant did as well. All of its vines trembled slightly as my erection took shape within my dress pants. I said "don't" as the plant held my arm when I tried to pull it away. I moaned softly, the sound vaguely erotic. The vines reached over and one pressed along the ridge of my cock. I squealed and sat up dazedly. A few heartbeats later, I screamed. The vines nearby wound around

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my limbs and chest, and I struggled. The plant lifted me from the ground, the thick tentacle around my torso bearing most of my weight. I shrielled some more until a vine wrapped around my throat and then I fell silent.

Aethos finally burst into the room and shouted... something. The plant let go of me abruptly, and I fell. My ankle turned awkwardly beneath me. I sat silently for a moment until I muttered something and a crazed look entered my eyes. I shrieked in incomprehensible laughter.

I looked like a lunatic who had snapped.

I swayed and crumpled into a heap. Aethos spoke more to the plant in a strange hissing language I didn't understand. The blossom tipped over and twisted away from the camera. The vines withdrew and coiled beneath the leaves at the root of the plant.

By the dipping of the blossom, it looked like it had been chastised, but how could a plant understand such an emotion? Surely that was me placing Earthling emotion where nonesuch existed. I also wondered if it was only my imagination or if the petals of the blossom looked slightly darker—pinkier—than they had at the beginning of the feed.

Aethos had one of his guards place an oxygen mask on me. Another checked my pulse—using my left wrist at Aethos's instruction—and picked me up in an over-the-shoulder carry. Oxygen masks all in place, they exited the room with me, Aethos closing the panel behind everyone. The loud rushing noise returned, and the plant uncoiled a vine and stretched to the door, locking it. The blossom tipped toward the ground, looking like the weight was too much for it to hold upright any longer.

The recording blinked off again.

Aethos... He knew enough about me to know to order the guard to use my left wrist. From that alone, I believed he really had been keeping tabs on me for all those years. There was no telling what else he already knew about me. Any trust I had left in him before seeing the recording had been obliterated as I watched it.

But the plant... Aethos's words had made me susceptible to seeing what he wanted me to see. I personified its actions, whether I should have or not. I noticed little things and made them mean something: The full plant-body shudder when it felt the mark at my wrist indicated acknowledgment it had found the one it sought. When it wrapped around me as I screamed, the tip of each vine continued to stroke me, as someone holding your hand might do with their thumb. The blossom dipping at the end felt like sadness, like it had been defeated and its prize—mate, according to Aethos—had been taken from it, and watching the scene thinking that way made me sad for it too. Even knowing its prize was me.

After I had watched the recording through a few times, I paused it on the scene prior to my screams, as the plant tentatively reached for my rising erection. If I ignored the fact it had been a plant, ignored the fear and uncertainty I had felt during that moment when I didn't understand why someone was touching me so intimately, and focused on how the touch felt... If I thought about a *person* desiring to touch me that way, and me also desiring that touch, I could remember my body's reaction and being so incredibly turned on.

I lay back on the daybed and closed my eyes.

*He held my wrist down with one hand, rubbing his thumb gently over the mark there, driving my body wild with need. My cock sought friction. At first, he denied me. He ran his other hand beneath my suit jacket, over my shirt and across my pec, and then fumbled with the buttons to open my shirt. As he revealed my nipples, they pebbled beneath his touch. If only he would lick them. Or kiss me. Or nuzzle me behind the ear.*

*He popped the button on my dress pants with more ease and drew down my zipper, deliberately brushing against the length of my filling cock. I lifted my hips to feel him press down and rub back and forth. I moaned and opened my eyes to look into his.*

*Instead of his face, a gigantic pink blossom loomed over me, yellow pistils wiggling like mandibles only inches from me. I squealed and backed away, up against the wall. The scene zoomed out, the plant now far, far away from me across the room.*

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*Time sped up unnaturally. The petals wilted, losing their pink color as they faded to brown. The blossom slumped to the side onto the ground and flattened. Deep wrinkles formed as the petals dried out and fell off. I watched in horror as the vines struggled to move. They reached toward me. The tips of the vines desiccated—gnarled—slowly back to the roots. The leaves turned brown and fell away. The stem tried to lift up the center one last time as it shriveled. It leaned toward me, nearly dead...*

I awoke with a distressed yell, my body covered in sweat and my clothes and hair sticking to me. My heart thumped wildly and felt stuck in the middle of my throat. I couldn't swallow the lump lodged there.

I had my answer for Aethos.

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## Chapter 3

"I can't let it die."

Aethos had barely entered the room to check on me before I sat up and blurted out my answer. He directed the electronic cart carrying my dinner over to me. My stomach rumbled in agreement with that plan. I hadn't eaten anything since the gala the night before.

"I anticipated as much," he replied. I frowned at him.

"But I don't think I can bring myself to... you know," I finished, flustered. I felt the heat of embarrassment rising in my cheeks.

"If it makes you feel any better, you likely will not have to do much. The Amorphophallus will take control and see that what needs to happen happens."

"Is that what it's called?"

"The name of its species. I have not named the plant. When I speak to it, I refer to it as 'you.'"

"So it really does understand you? What do you say to it?"

"Most often, I speak of you, because that is what it wants to know about. This is why I have kept an eye on you all of these years."

Great, so not only did Aethos know way more about me than most beings, but the plant already knew a lot more about me than I knew about it.

"What...? How...? Oh, for goodness... Aethos! I don't even know how to start asking questions about this!" I crossed my arms over my chest and pouted.

"You do understand the process of mating?" He huffed a couple of quick hisses of air, making a sound similar to water sizzling on a rock. I was fairly certain he was laughing at me, the bastard.

"Yes!" I would die of mortification if Aethos started a discussion on the basics of sex with me. I wasn't completely clueless. I had experimented on myself with more than my hand. Besides, he wasn't even an Earthling!

"Then I shall explain how it will be different, to begin with. And you shall eat your dinner and listen."

Eat dinner while an alien I had been infatuated with for several years—who turned out to be a creepy stalker—spoke candidly to me about my soon-to-be

sex life with a plant. My hunger won out over my dread and embarrassment. I would figure out how to keep the food down.

I nodded to him to continue and picked up my utensils.

“When an Amorphophallus mates, it needs genetic material—in this case, your semen—to complete the mating process and pollinate. Causing you to ejaculate and collecting your semen will be its primary goals.”

Okay, so somehow it was going to jack me off. That didn't sound too bad.

“However, your natural semen is not compatible with its pollination process, so first it will need to modify your semen. It does this by inserting a small, biodegradable pit into your sperm sac via a very thin yellow filament.”

I choked on a chunk of meat and started hacking and thumping my chest with my fist to get it to dislodge. I grabbed the glass of water and took a big swallow to soothe my abused throat. Aethos continued as if nothing was wrong.

“Once it has inserted the pit, the stigma will envelop your penis and cause your ejaculation. It will look like a small mouth on the end of the thickest tentacle. It was the stigma which tasted you all those years ago.”

So, if it involved the “mouth,” did that mean it was going to give me a blow job instead of a hand job? Er, vine job?

The queasy feeling returned. I stopped eating and thinking and closed my eyes until the queasiness passed. Aethos kept going.

“Once it has collected your modified genetic material, pollination should occur, and it will survive until its next mating cycle. The mating can end at that point,” Aethos finished.

“You mean it doesn't expect me to reciprocate?” I joked, trying to lighten the serious tone. Aethos apparently didn't get it. He was strangely quiet for a few heartbeats before he answered.

“I believe it will... eventually enjoy reciprocation on your part, but for this first mating, no. Reciprocation would prove difficult.”

I wished I could read his facial cues better, because I didn't know whether the face Aethos made now was more Earthling or Sirynthalian. His eyes angled and squinted in a way not normal for him. If it was Earthling, I would say he looked mischievous, like he was hiding something—at my expense.

“But I don't think I can let a plant do those things to me.”

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“So, stop thinking of it as a plant, Kazuo. Think of it and talk to it as though it is a person. In fact, you should begin thinking of it with Earthling gender pronouns. He is intelligent enough to understand you. Tell him about you, like you would with anyone you want to get to know you and what you like.”

Aethos made the statement off-handedly, as though thinking of the plant as not a plant would be such an easy thing to accomplish. Though, thinking on it, wasn't that what I had done in the dream? Before it had turned into a nightmare, anyway. Maybe I could close my eyes and imagine.

“But the sex...”

“Tell him what you like, or even better, show him what you like. If you like your ass played with—” Aethos looked me directly in the eye, and I flushed pink. No point in denying it; he probably knew from stalking me. *Creepy*. “—then tell him. Allow him to experience you pleasing yourself, and then allow him to touch you and learn.”

Nope, that wouldn't be embarrassing at all, particularly knowing that Aethos would record the whole thing.

“You'll turn off the recording?”

“Of course.”

I wished I could pinpoint how I knew he was lying to me. I couldn't prove it definitively, but I had absolutely no doubt that he would have never agreed to turn off the security feeds, no matter how intimate the moment. His answer showed me his lying face looked exactly like his normal face. I supposed knowing that was better than not knowing that. It meant I would never be able to trust a thing he said to me. But he did seem to want the plant—him—to live, so maybe Aethos would be truthful about it—him.

Sure, easy, switch to a gendered pronoun and suddenly no more problems exist. I closed my eyes for a moment to focus.

I wondered what he would do with a recording of me and his plant having sex. Aethos seemed to already know what I liked to do to myself in (what I had thought was) private. Maybe he wanted to keep it to watch? Maybe he wanted to show it to others? Would he try to use it for blackmail? He didn't seem like the type, but I didn't know much about him outside of his typical business dealings.

Did I have a choice in the matter? Should I use Aethos's need for me to do this as leverage to make sure he didn't record us? I didn't think I could hold up

to my end of that ultimatum, though, if he called me on it. I couldn't bring myself to hold someone else's life hostage, so I would have to deal with the consequences. I frowned in unease.

"In the recording," I asked, "it looked like the petals were pinker at the end than they were at the beginning. Was I seeing things, or did that happen?"

"You have a good eye. Indeed, he was more pink by the end of your encounter. I suspect that being near his aroused mate sped up the chemical reactions of his mating cycle, increasing his heat. The farther into heat he is, the more pink will show, and the less rational he will become."

"What exactly does that mean?"

"I am given to understand that to the *Amorphophallus*, being 'in heat' is quite literal. The chemical which causes the pink also causes a burning sensation inside his tissues. The more the chemical builds up, the worse the burn feels to him, the more pink he becomes, and the fewer faculties he has to remember things such as gentility with his mate. The chemical will build up to toxic levels, which will eventually kill him if he does not mate and achieve pollination. The pollination cycle apparently releases a different chemical which will dissipate the other."

"But even though he's burning up on the inside, he won't choose another, even simply for relief?"

"Even if he wanted to, which he does not, assuming he is anything like the rest of his species, it would do him no good to mate with another. When he tasted you as a seedling—apologies, as a youngster—he bonded chemically to you. The chemical heat he suffers is genetically coded to you, hence why only pollination by you will dissipate it."

In other words, there would be no getting out of this: sex with... him, or his death. I sighed heavily.

"How do you know how any of this feels to him? You said he has a mouth. Does he actually speak?" If so, not speaking to me while trying to mate with me was fairly rude, in heat or not.

"No, he does not speak at present. Though, I expect he will learn from you." Aethos's eyes took on that odd squinty aspect I saw before, and he seemed to emphasize the words "from you" with a harder edge than necessary. Was he upset with me for something other than trespassing in his greenhouse? "With me, he wiggles vines in certain ways to communicate simple answers. The rest



of my knowledge of Amorphophallus biology comes from my twin brother, who is mated to one.”

“Oh.” I hadn’t known Aethos had a twin brother. I wondered briefly if my father knew. Maybe the emotion I had registered earlier from Aethos was jealousy. He wanted what his brother had, but the plant—he—chose me over him? That made sense.

The plant needed a name. A name would help me to personify it—him.

“You said you hadn’t given him a name? May I?” I asked.

“It is your right to do so, as his mate,” Aethos replied. I definitely thought I heard bitterness, or maybe even resentment, in his tone that time. Damn his accent for making it harder to pinpoint his emotions.

“If I go see him, will he try to mate with me as soon as I enter the room?” That would ruin the whole illusion I wanted to create to be able to go through with this ordeal.

“Possibly, but probably not, not after the way things ended last night. During the session, however, yes, it is likely to happen. It will be difficult for him to stay away from you, and he will not want to let you go again without mating. Knowing what he is going through, can you blame him?”

I felt guilty about not being more comfortable with the whole situation, but in fairness to myself, switching mentally from looking for a male humanoid to take my virginity, to preparing for a plant to do so was a huge paradigm shift, and not the sort of thing that typically happened overnight. Just because I didn’t have longer than a day, maybe two, to get used to the idea didn’t mean I would suddenly welcome it. The plant—he—wasn’t the only one going through a major change.

*Sakura-chan.*

I wanted to name him Sakura-chan. It was a feminine name, but it fit so well, I suddenly couldn’t think of him as anything other than Sakura-chan. Sakura blossoms ranged anywhere from mostly white to deep pink.

“Does it need to be tonight, Aethos?”

“The longer you wait, the more difficult it will be for him to heed your wishes. If you seek my personal opinion, I believe you should choose tonight. I believe it will be easier on both of you. Tonight, you might have some time to talk to him first, to become accustomed to his touch before the process begins. If you wait, he may not be strong enough to give you such an option.”

Still queasy, I couldn't bring myself to eat anything further, so I pushed the cart aside. Aethos escorted it to the door and set it out in the hallway before coming back to sit on the ottoman next to me.

"What about my ankle?"

"We will wrap it in a stabilizer, but you must ask him to be careful with it. In all probability, he will be mindful of your ankle tonight."

Either I chose some discomfort in my ankle and my sensibilities tonight, or I chose much worse unpleasantness tomorrow if Sakura-chan couldn't hold himself back for my sake. Not much of a choice. I scrubbed a hand over my face and ran it through my hair. I wasn't ready for this—I wasn't sure I would ever be ready for this—but I agreed with Aethos on the timing, assuming he had told me the truth about the mating heat's effect on Sakura-chan.

Naming Sakura-chan really did make it easier for me to think of him as humanoid.

"Will you watch the security feed live?" I was already certain he would, whether I wanted him to or not.

"Yes. It will be best for your safety, Kazuo. While I do not expect him to harm you intentionally, I do not want any more unintentional developments to occur."

I mentally heard his sentence end with "like the one from nine years ago."

"I agree. If I call for you, will you come?" I asked him.

"Of course, Kazuo. What would you have me do?"

I hesitated in answering. "Hold me. Maybe run your hands over my body." I blushed. "Maybe... kiss me?"

I couldn't look at him, so I looked down. I felt heat radiating from my face as if I had been out in the sun too long.

"Kiss you? Logistically, that would be difficult, Kazuo, and probably painful given the typical Earthling reaction to my skin. But why would you need me to kiss you?"

"I... I want to be kissed, to feel... like it's a special moment between us—me and him—and not just a requirement. And I... you're attractive, and I have wanted..."

I couldn't finish the sentence, because I couldn't bring myself to say the words, to describe the fantasies I had had about Aethos when I was an

adolescent. I'm not sure I could have felt a lit match next to my face at that moment. But I did feel the burning imprint of his fingers on my jaw as he forced me to look in his eyes. When he let go of me, I rubbed a hand over my chin where his fingers had been, trying to smooth away the burn of his touch, but I didn't look away.

"You have wanted...?" he repeated, leaning toward me, crowding me against the back of the daybed with one hand on the cushion between my right arm and my hip. He couldn't lean any further forward without climbing onto the daybed with me. His gaze and posture were exceptionally predatory, so why did my dick choose that moment to stir?

"I... um... I..." I swallowed, finally whispering, "Don't make me say it, Aethos."

"Did you wish to mate with me, Kazuo?"

"I..." Even knowing what I knew now of his stalking habits, the thought still appealed to me at a purely visceral level. "Mate?" I squeaked. "I'm supposed to mate with him, though."

"If you ask me to come into the room with the two of you, may I join in to climax, or am I just a body for you to use?" Aethos clarified.

This conversation wasn't happening. I was still dreaming and this was another of my wet dreams. I shifted against the back of the daybed as my interested dick slowly filled.

"I—what about what he wants?"

"They are very possessive and protective of their mates, particularly while mating. He may not want to let me in the room with you. You may have to persuade him to allow me in at all. What do *you* want, though?"

He wasn't quite close enough to my face for me to feel his breath as he spoke, but I still shivered. I didn't mind the idea of Aethos climaxing with us. I found it incredibly provocative and sexy.

"I—you can climax, as long as you don't interfere?"

"Very well, Kazuo. If you request, I will assist but not interfere. Until you ask for me, I will remain in the foyer of the greenhouse."

Aethos leaned back, and I exhaled and relaxed into the back of the daybed, releasing the tension in my shoulders which had been holding me away from him. I wanted to adjust my dick inside my pants, but I didn't want to call attention to my arousal either.

“If he might not want to let you into the room, why did he unlock the room last night after he locked it?”

“He knew I would be there soon. No one but I had ever been in his room before you stumbled upon it. He knew I would be... concerned.” Aethos replied.

“Oh.” Concerned for which of us? “Anything else I should know?”

“I believe you know enough to survive.”

Subterfuge. The more I saw the squinty look, the more my brain translated it to “subterfuge.” Every time I wanted to begin to believe in Aethos, to trust him, he did something to invalidate that feeling. The phrase “enough to survive” made me feel as though there was a lot he wasn’t telling me that I needed to know. I felt like he was playing a game with me, and I didn’t know any of the rules.

“That’s reassuring,” I responded, my tone laced heavily with sarcasm. I assumed Aethos had had enough dealings with Earthlings to understand it when used on him, or he wasn’t much of an interstellar businessman.

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Aethos and I waited outside the door to Sakura’s room. Instead of the mostly white blossom I had seen last night, the petals were a faint but solid pink and the edges of the petals, particularly toward the center of the blossom, had darkened to fuchsia. It was a stunningly beautiful plant. I recalled Aethos’s explanation of the pink coloration and winced in sympathy. Poor Sakura must be blazing with heat, as pink as he was. Waiting would not be easy for him.

I shivered, slightly chilled by the night temperature. Knowing I would soon need to be naked, I hadn’t worn anything but my pants and the black stabilizer fabric which encased my right leg from toe to mid-thigh. I also had on an oxygen mask, primarily out of necessity, but also so I could pay attention and learn the route instead of running blindly.

Not that I could have run on a sprained ankle. Aethos had given me a float-board to move around on more easily. I sat and kept my bad ankle propped on it, and I pushed with the other leg to move myself around.

Aethos was about to knock on the door when I stopped him.

“Does he always keep it locked?” I asked. The mask muffled my words, but Aethos nodded.

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“Usually, except when I approach, yes,” he replied. Aethos had mentioned on the way in he could breathe in multiple environments, including helium, oxygen, carbon dioxide, and nitrous oxide, so he didn’t need a mask. The environmental sections of the greenhouse made more sense knowing that Aethos could wander through all of them without environment-related repercussions.

“Did he know it was me when he unlocked it last night? Or was he only saving my life? Or—”

“I do not know, Kazuo. You will have to ask him that yourself one day, assuming he learns speech.”

I frowned at Aethos and nodded. “I’m as ready as I’m going to be.”

Aethos knocked and waited. A vine beside the door flicked open the locking mechanism and pushed the panel aside. I took a deep, steadying breath and crossed into the room. Aethos closed the door behind me. I heard it slide into place and then the frame hissed as it sealed around the door. The loud rushing sound I had heard on the security feed occurred again as oxygen pumped in to stabilize the air. The sound subsided. I took off the mask and took a tentative breath. When I didn’t choke, I sighed in relief and turned the mask off.

Multiple vines started to surround me, reminding me I had something I needed to say.

“Wait. Please. I know that won’t be easy for you—Aethos explained some of what you’re going through, and I understand you’re in pain—but I have some things I need to say, and I need you to listen and understand. After that, we’ll see what happens.”

One vine tapped against my forearm, the signal for “yes” according to Aethos. Two vines meant “no.” Three meant “I don’t know,” and four meant “I don’t understand.”

I turned off the float-board, and it settled slowly to the ground. I moved my butt off of the side of the board so only my stabilized ankle still rested on it.

“I need to talk for a while first. I... I’m not comfortable with the idea of mating with you yet. I know you’ve been thinking about this—about me—for years, but I only found out a few hours ago, and I haven’t had time to adjust to this yet. I don’t want you to die, and I want to help you live, or I wouldn’t be here, but the idea of somehow mating with a plant is so foreign that—that I can’t, yet.”

The leaves of the plant shook, and the blossom slumped downward some. It reminded me of a child pouting, so that's how I chose to interpret the movement. I smiled at the thought because it amused me. Then I remembered I would be mating with that "child" and I stopped that train of thought, but not soon enough.

*Eww.* Not the way to become okay with the situation.

"Aethos suggested I stop thinking of you as a plant and treat you as a person I want to get to know. So I'm going to try that. I'm going to close my eyes and talk to you as if I'm talking to a new friend who interests me. And I want to call you Sakura-chan. Well, Sakura, anyway. The -chan ending is a title of endearment. Sakura is the name of the blossoms from one of the types of trees here on Earth. They're very beautiful, and they range from white to pink, so it fit. I hope that name is okay with you."

One vine tapped my forearm in a "yes." I smiled because he actually approved of the name I selected for him.

I continued speaking, keeping my eyes closed and reliving the memories of some old stories that I thought would help Sakura get to know who I was—things that Aethos wouldn't have been able to tell him about me. I told Sakura to be cautious with my ankle and that's why I had the float-board with me. I talked about the mark he had given me all those years ago, and I laughed at some of the problems it had caused me during school. I spoke about the times I had wished for someone to hold and who would've held me and cuddled me too. And then I spoke about some of my sexual experimentation, because it was an easy way to tell Sakura about some of the things I liked without stripping and demonstrating the sorts of things I had put in my ass.

I knew it would happen eventually. Somewhere around the sixth or seventh story, maybe an hour after I had entered the room—I hadn't been tracking the time—one of his vines touched the back of my right hand, similar to a caress, though not quite the same as a thumb felt. It started to wrap around my wrist.

"Please don't play with the mark yet, Sakura-chan. I'm not ready to be aroused that fast. Try something else first."

The vine left my wrist and came up to touch my cheek. Another brushed across the back of my neck and up into my hair. And though I wanted those touches to feel comforting, they were... off. They felt wrong. Vines didn't feel like hands.

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Multiple vines wrapped around my upper body, slowly tightening into something like a hug. But in my head, his vines didn't feel enough like hands or arms, much less an actual body, and this time I didn't have the fuzziness or numbness of oxygen deprivation to trick my mind. The touches didn't feel humanoid enough. His vines around me felt like an approximation of a hug, but their writhing broke the mental illusion. And, there was no warm body in front of or behind me attached to those "arms" encircling me.

My chest constricted in a way that had nothing to do with the vines holding me. Holding me up? Holding me together? Maybe both. I opened my eyes. I thought maybe the pink petals had darkened a touch more since I had entered.

"Sakura, wait. I..." At the word "wait," the vines slackened and drooped to the floor. They didn't pull away from me, but they didn't hold me either. I could almost feel Sakura's despondence. Or maybe it was my own I felt. Tears pricked the corners of my eyes as I petted the vines lying across my lap sympathetically. I expected to feel some of the heat within Sakura, but the vines felt cool to my touch. I felt worse knowing that he endured such pain so I could become comfortable with our mating, and I still couldn't bring myself to do it. I felt like such a miserable failure to be unable to save him by myself, to handle the situation on my own, to have to ask for help. I took a deep breath.

"I need Aethos. I need help with this. Please, Sakura? Please let Aethos come in and help me get in the right frame of mind." Sakura tightened his vines around my torso again, and I desperately wanted a body to lean back against. "He promised he wouldn't interfere with us, and I really need this."

One of the vines reached up to stroke my cheek before moving to the door to hit the lock release. I hadn't even noticed it had been relocked until he did that.

I sighed, a mixture of relief and frustration filling my chest. I still didn't really trust Aethos. I still had the nagging suspicion he had hidden things from me—important details. But, I did trust his desire to help Sakura, and that had to be enough for me to rely on tonight.

"Thank you, honey." The endearment slipped out without even thinking about it. "Would you hug me until he gets here?"

The vines tightened slightly more around me. I lifted my forearms and crossed them over my chest, gently holding on to his vines as much as I could. I wanted to feel more than spaghetti noodles in my arms.

A knock on the door startled me. I looked up to see Aethos standing outside the door.

Naked. Aethos was *naked*.

My eyes went wide as saucers and my mouth went slack as I drew a surprised breath. He pointed at me and made a motion. I blinked, my mind completely blank of intelligent thoughts as I took in the sight of his body.

His naked body was quite different from mine. My eyes immediately locked on to the complete lack of genitalia between his legs. He had no slit, no protrusion, no nothing visible from the front but smooth skin between his legs. The next things I noticed were his thighs; they were massive. I don't think I could have encircled either of them with both of my hands. His inner thighs also bore a strange rippled ridge. I wondered how he walked without rubbing those together. The rest of his body was skinny, which I had already assumed from seeing him in clothing. He wasn't bony, but he did lack defined musculature on his torso. He was flat, and also completely hairless but for the indigo blue on top of his head. His body was extraordinarily shiny, like he'd rubbed oil all over himself, and his hair was strangely pressed flat to his head instead of being fluffy, like it normally was.

But none of that explained why Aethos was naked. We hadn't discussed clothing because I hadn't seen the need to. I had assumed he would wear his normal clothing, because how was he supposed to hold me if every touch burned my skin like acid?

It took a moment for my brain to register the motion he made as "close your mouth" and to remember the room outside contained a different gas. I shut my mouth, took a deep breath, and nodded to Aethos, who opened the door and stepped inside. The door sealed and the rush of air began. Aethos advanced until he stood over me, and I had to crane my neck to see him.

"You're naked," I stated after the rushing sound stopped.

"I anticipated your desire," he replied. I blushed, only mildly peeved at the assumption. I *had* told him I found him attractive earlier.

"But why are you naked? How are you supposed to hold me and not burn me?"

"Technically speaking, I am not. I have on a thin, transparent membrane bodysuit. Only my eyes and mouth will be uncovered. Such a garment aids coupling for species which cannot come into direct skin contact. I can mostly



feel through it, but your skin will not burn.” He began to pull on a pair of thin, soft-looking gloves. I recognized the fabric as crushed velvet. “Have you and...” He paused, searching for a word. “...you and Sakura, changed your minds?”

I stroked the vines wrapped around me.

“No.” Those vines contracted around me again, this time somewhat painfully. “Sakura-chan, please.”

Two vines loosened themselves from around me and reached up to tap Aethos on the forearm, Sakura’s signal for “no.”

“Then do not concern yourself with me. I will manage my pleasure separately from assisting in yours. I am here to help you mate with Sakura.” He stepped around and sat down behind me, one leg to either side of my body. His arms wrapped around my shoulders, above Sakura’s vines, and he spoke low in my left ear. “Is this what you needed, Kazuo?”

Heat passed through the membrane and into me. I leaned back into the solid body behind me, my head on his shoulder. It felt right, so much better than before. It was exactly what I needed.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Scoot up and back so you are sitting astride me instead of in front of me, Kazuo.”

I complied, straddling Aethos’s thighs, and he hissed. I wasn’t sure if that was good sign or a bad one. I turned my head into the crook of his neck.

“Aethos, are you okay?”

“I am fine. Are you comfortable, Kazuo?”

I was, mostly. The strange membrane he wore felt slippery, as if Aethos had coated himself in a lubricant.

“Yes. What do I—?”

“Sakura, undress him,” Aethos ordered. “And be careful with the ankle, please. Do not remove the stabilizer.”

The order from him sounded so natural, and yet I wasn’t sure why he should be the one directing my mating to Sakura. Then again, the only idea I had of what would happen to me was what Aethos had told me, so it didn’t make sense for me to direct. That left Sakura. I supposed if Sakura took issue with Aethos’s orders, he would let Aethos know somehow.

Sakura withdrew the vines around my midsection to comply. As before, I looked down to see small vines working open the panels of my pants. Once open, Aethos released his hold on me and slid his gloved hands down my sides, inside the fabric and beneath my buttocks. I recognized the softness of the crushed velvet—I had a jockstrap made of it that I wore when I needed to feel sexy—and I shivered in his hands. My cock certainly also recognized the sensation as Aethos lifted my body just enough for Sakura to slide the pants off my legs.

When Aethos lowered me gently onto his thighs, the slick membrane made me feel like I was going to slide off of him. I cursed my bad ankle for making me keep my right leg stretched out in front of me instead of being able to curl it underneath me so I could kneel properly, straddled across him as I was. However, it did feel strange to have a male body beneath me but not feel the evidence of his arousal, though his thighs were as solid as my erection had ever felt.

I inhaled sharply as a gloved hand wrapped itself around my balls, which hung low between his spread legs. Too many sensations spun in my brain as I tried to sort through them all. The fabric I knew, but someone else's hand massaging my sac was an entirely new experience—a touch I didn't control. What I wouldn't have given in that moment for my sac to be clean-shaven so I could feel that velvety softness directly on my skin.

The other glove slid around front, up my abdomen and chest, and stopped around my throat, pushing my head back against his shoulder. I reveled in the soft glide across my skin, but when that hand stopped on my throat, I relaxed completely into his arms and sighed happily. I felt freed. I needed to float away, to not think, and Aethos could give me that gift because I had given him control first.

“Nnngh.” I could only manage incoherent sounds. “Aah-aaaah.”

Vines wrapped firmly down both of my forearms, the tips ending at the wrist. Sakura brushed across his mark on me, and my already stiffened cock stood rigidly, the foreskin revealing the whole head. I moaned and shifted my legs wider, grinding down on Aethos's thighs and arching more off his chest. He hissed again and leaned back more, drawing me back with him. I didn't feel like I would slide off any longer.

“That is it. Give in to how we make you feel. Fly, Kazuo.”

I already found Aethos's accent quite alluring (if sometimes hard to understand) when he spoke naturally, but in the heat of my passion, I found hearing Aethos speak incredibly seductive.

"I wish you could kiss me right now, Aethos. I want my mouth and my ass both to be full."

He made an "unngh" sound that could have been either satisfaction or dismay; I couldn't tell. In the back of my mind, I vaguely hoped he didn't resent my request for help, but this worked for me in a way my imagination alone had not.

Sakura coiled a vine around my dick and thoughts fled as I attempted to hump that coil. It didn't feel like a hand, but through the haze of lust, it didn't matter at all. Aethos grunted and pulled away the tentacle wrapped around my shaft. I whimpered at him in frustration. In retaliation, he stroked my inner left thigh with his softly gloved fingers.

"Ah ah ah, Sakura. Kazuo is a young man. If you play with his dick too soon, he is likely to climax before you are ready. Nibble his anus while you finish preparing him. Penetrate him, if you like," Aethos instructed.

I frowned slightly at Aethos's instructions and groaned to hide it. As much as I wanted those things to happen—I wiggled in anticipation, my cock bobbing with my movements—his orders felt like unnecessary interference. Was he actually helping us? I was beginning to think Aethos's control of the scene was more for his benefit than my own or Sakura's. I didn't think either of us needed to be commanded.

Or maybe Sakura liked to be commanded and I was in the middle of the two of them? That possibility made my heart clench and stomach tighten more than it should have, and I shoved the thought aside quickly. I didn't want to be reminded of their relationship in the middle of this moment.

I was a virgin in the sense of playing with others, but I had experimented with lots of toys in my ass before. However, the thickest of Sakura's tentacles was roughly four inches in diameter and a little larger than any dildo I had used on myself. On the end of it was the mouth-like orifice of his stigma. Sakura's stigma nipped and sucked gently at the skin between my cheeks. It rubbed gently against little hairs. It also felt like it slicked me up slowly with some sort of natural lubricant oozing from the tissue. I could feel the slickness on my ass against the cool air, and I was suddenly overcome by nerves. I shivered with the realization this was about to happen and I would no longer be a virgin.

Soon, the stigma began lapping at the tender skin of my sphincter, and I didn't know what to do with myself. No toy I had ever played with came close to the sensation currently crawling across my skin, making me moan loudly in enthusiasm. I closed my eyes and put my arms over my head to lock my hands behind Aethos's neck, trying not to claw through the membrane but needing something to hold on to as I soared on the sensation of being rimmed for the first time.

"Yes! Yes! Sweet, merciful Sakura, I want you inside me, please!" I begged. "Please, oh please, honey, I need you inside."

Aethos began to fondle my balls again. As Sakura pushed slowly inside my slickened ass, I almost missed a light touch to the tip of my cock. I would have ignored it to focus completely on the gentle movement in and out of my sphincter, but I felt an unnatural stretching sensation easing down my dick. I opened my eyes to see a thin yellow filament pushing its way inside the slit.

Aethos had warned me about this part, but I'd never put anything inside my dick before. Though the filament was the smallest I had seen from Sakura, I began to feel the pinch as it pushed farther in. I whimpered and shook my head side to side rapidly because I didn't want this, even though I knew it was necessary for Sakura. I tried to back away, but Aethos kept a tight grip on my balls; as I pushed backward, he held my balls in place, pulling the skin taut. The juxtaposition of the usual softness to the uncommon strain distracted me. I yelped and stopped trying to flee. After a moment, I became accustomed to the stretched feeling, though the pinch remained uncomfortable but bearable.

I made an unhappy face and wiggled in vexation. Aethos tightened the hand against my windpipe ever so slightly until I settled and whined in uneasiness.

"It may be easier if you do not watch, Kazuo."

But I couldn't force myself to look away, even as I whined uneasily. A very small lump worked its way through the inside of the yellow filament, similar to a snake which had swallowed a mouse whole. When it reached the tip of my cock and started inside, the pinching pressure increased to a burn.

At that same moment, Sakura discovered my prostate and nudged. The agony in my dick mixed with the ecstasy inside my ass, and I keened, unable to figure out which unescapable sensation to focus on during the most profoundly painful and pleasurable moment of my life.

The small lump reached the base of my cock and stopped. I tried to grab my dick to jack off to force it out, to alleviate the painful burning, but the vines still

wrapped around my forearms pulled my hands away. I groaned in frustration and arched up, putting pressure on my bad ankle and causing that new pain to mix with the other. I cried out in distress as I fell back against Aethos and clawed at his neck again.

Sakura continued thrusting in and out of my ass, teasing me by sucking on my prostate at the end of each thrust. Experiencing that skill alone was worth the pain; I endured the awful pinching and burning to feel Sakura massage my prostate with his stigma.

“Give—” Aethos panted heavily. “Give it a moment to dissolve and enter your testes, and the pain will fade, Kazuo. You are almost to the end.”

I didn't know whether I wanted this torture to end or continue. Everything swirled together confusingly in my head.

Sakura pulled out of my ass, and I missed the feeling of him within me immediately. I whined “no” and writhed on Aethos's lap, trying to get that feeling back.

Aethos spoke quietly in his native language. It sounded like it was more to himself than it was to me, and I found it so incredibly sexy that he was so far gone he couldn't remember to speak Earthling. His harsh breaths sounded loud in my ear. I really wanted that kiss, but not enough to tolerate a burning mouth to go with my burning cock.

Sakura wrapped strong vines around our upper thighs, lashing me tighter to Aethos, who groaned loudly in what sounded like a foreign curse. All at once, I felt several slight stings on the underside of my legs where they met my ass. Then Sakura's stigma began to suck my glans inside it, and the stings faded to the cool sensation smoothing over my heated flesh.

My body slicked with sweat, and I wondered if the strange heat suffusing my skin was similar to what afflicted Sakura. I was glad Sakura had lashed me together with Aethos so I didn't have to worry about sliding off of the membrane.

The stigma inched slowly down to the root of my cock, wiggling, massaging, sucking. I started chanting “ah ah ah ah ah ah” louder and louder, over and over. I was right on the edge of climax...

A piercing pain shot through my balls and radiated through every nerve in my body. I screamed as my sac pulsed unnaturally. I couldn't hear much of anything but the rush of blood in my ears, but I swore I heard Aethos say, “Sakura, don't.”

I hoped Aethos meant “don’t” as in “don’t pull away from Kazuo; the scream isn’t what you think it is.”

For the briefest instant, time stopped. I couldn’t tell pain from pleasure any longer. I teetered on the edge of orgasm as the unknown pain slicing through me balanced perfectly with the incredibly pleasurable suction surrounding my cock. And then time moved and the scales tipped as his stigma sucked the last of the pain away. I howled in unfathomable pleasure as I came hard. I shot fountains of cum into Sakura’s greedy mouth, more pulses of semen than I had ever shot before. They kept coming, and Sakura kept sucking until I groaned from sensitivity and tried to back away.

Pain spiked in my balls and thighs again, and I shouted and thrashed on top of Aethos, forgetting about my ankle until I thudded it on the dirt and more pain radiated up my leg than down it.

“Sakura, let me go. Ow, it hurts! Let me go, let me go!”

Sakura withdrew from my oversensitive dick and released the vines tethering me to Aethos. I used my good leg to scoot forward and slide across Aethos’s rigid thighs and onto the dirt next to his left, escaping the tiny, needle-like spines. Exhausted and sweaty, I lay there breathing deep and steady to slow my heartbeat. I reached for his gloved hand and twined his fingers with mine.

Aethos made a strange sort of choked noise. He, too, breathed heavily. He let go of my hand and sat up to remove his gloves and lift the membrane from his forehead, over his hair. It made a squelching sound as it peeled away from his skin. After our exertions, his hair was sweaty and matted, like mine, only with less dirt in it.

He rolled partially on top of me, thrusting his right leg between mine, trapping my leg between his. I swore I felt something stiff between his legs this time. Humming my right leg, he grasped my head in both his hands and thrust his tongue—his really long, thin tongue—into my mouth. I didn’t expect the kiss, so I squeaked in surprise before engaging him. Then I closed my eyes and kissed him back with everything I had wanted during sex. My tongue dueled with his, but he won; he controlled when he pulled back to breathe and when to dive in deep again. I brought my hands to his chest and ran them up to his neck and through his hair. Aethos softened the kisses down to nothing and pulled back enough to see my eyes as I looked up at him.

As much as I hated reality for intruding, my brain started asking questions I wanted to ignore for a while longer. What had happened before I came? When I

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came? Wasn't it supposed to burn if Aethos touched me? I took a breath to ask the first question when Aethos put a finger to my lips.

"Not yet, Kazu. I will explain, but not yet. Let us go to the residence and clean up. Then I will tell you what happened."

I furrowed my brows in concern, but I nodded my assent. "Kazu?" I asked, somewhat amused. No one had called me Kazu-chan in many years; I think not since my mother had passed on when I was eight.

"Yes. Kazu."

Aethos spoke briefly with Sakura in his own language, petting one of the vines he had picked up. It was an intimate gesture that spoke volumes about their relationship that I hadn't realized. After a minute of discussion, he switched to Earthling.

"You already look better. I will check on you tomorrow morning, dear." To me he said, "Shall we go clean up?"

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Aethos helped me float back to the main residence. Much to my gratitude, I did not spot a single guard the entire way back. Neither Aethos nor I had chosen to bother dressing for the return trip. On the way back, I had wavered on whether or not I should ask Aethos to stay with me when we returned, but ultimately the idea felt clingy and I thought I could use the time to think.

Instead of the room with the daybed I had woken in earlier, Aethos showed me to a more private suite where he had arranged for me to stay for the duration of my visit. Inside were eight large boxes and one smaller box stacked along the wall, addressed to me. Confused, I opened one of the large boxes to find more than two dozen of my business suit jackets, dress shirts, and pants neatly folded on top of several boxes of dress shoes. Apparently, my father had been good to his word and sent over my clothing, though it looked like he might have packed my entire wardrobe and then some. One of those large boxes would have been more than enough to contain what I should need for this visit. But eight?

The rest of the large boxes included more of my clothing, as well as electronics. I randomly pulled out short-sleeved shirts, sweaters, undershirts, swimwear, jockstraps, briefs, shorts, multiple types of socks, heavy wool coats, windbreakers, running shoes, hats—I never wore hats—and electronics for any purpose I could think of: communication, recording, security, entertainment, and of course, business.

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The box that befuddled me the most was the one containing several years' supply of toiletries: toothpaste, deodorant, soap, tissues, painkillers, everything I could think of—including toilet paper. Why had my father packed toilet paper? Did he think Aethos would make me wipe my ass with my hand? It just didn't add up.

The smaller box I had saved for last. It contained my sex toy collection. I blushed and closed it quickly before anyone saw inside. Not that anyone was in the room with me, but if Aethos had security watching the greenhouse, he probably had it in the main residence as well.

I was mortified that anyone had seen my toys, much less packed them into a box and shipped them to me here. But the ultimate question was why? I didn't need all of this. I had a sprained ankle, not a broken back. This went far beyond being prepared for any occasion. It felt like my father thought I was moving in.

I shook my head and stopped trying to figure out the logic. At least I finally had something clean to wear.

Once I stopped thinking about the mystery of the clothing, my mind turned to other mysteries. It churned with reliving the evening and my unanswered questions and all the possibilities that weren't very likely but were all I could think of in my limited experience. Maybe Aethos could touch me because his body chemistry changed during sex? Maybe Sakura did something when he bound us together? Why did I keep feeling spiking pain during sex? Was that normal? Did I have to go through that every time I needed to mate with Sakura?

I cleaned up and dressed rapidly. About the time I had wondered whether I should go to look for him, Aethos knocked on the door to my suite. I hadn't even finished closing the door before I couldn't contain my curiosity any longer.

"What on Earth happened there at the end, Aethos?"

"I am sorry, Kazuo-san. I tried not to," Aethos hedged. He turned and stood facing me but not looking at me.

I instantly noticed his use of a title. The only reason I could think of that he would use it now, after we had agreed not to, was because he felt shame for something. But I had asked him to help, and Sakura had agreed, so he had no need to feel shame for enjoying our time together to his own completion, if that was what had happened. It didn't make any sense to me, but things rarely had these last twenty-four hours.



“You tried not to what, exactly?” I asked as I sat down on the bed and propped up my ankle on a couple of pillows.

“I tried not to interfere in your mating with Sakura. I told Sakura I was too close, that I needed to back away from you. And that was when he bound us together, preventing me from escaping or holding back.”

“I don’t understand, Aethos. Holding back? What, your orgasm?”

“My mating spike.”

“Your mating spike?” I remembered the spiking pain in my balls. “You mean a literal spike?” My voice rose at the end.

He nodded. “I could not hold back the spike, and when it protruded from my skin, it pierced through the membrane and one of your testes. I flooded you with my... semen is the simplest reference you have. I tried to warn Sakura not to drink, but he ignored me. And so you climaxed and released both of our fluids into Sakura.”

Mind reeling from the potential implications of everything Aethos had said, I tried to pick the one important item to focus on.

“Did the mating with Sakura work? Is he safe?” Was I safe?

“It will affect him, but I am uncertain how. I seriously doubt such a triad mating has ever occurred before amongst his species. His color appeared to lighten some before we left, though, so I think maybe pollination was successful and he is on his way to recovery. I have the guards watching him around the clock tonight for anything unusual. If he starts to pinken again or if anything out of the ordinary occurs, the guards will fetch me without delay.”

I nodded, grateful for the precautions Aethos had already taken.

“So, you accidentally mated with me? After you said you wouldn’t interfere?” I hadn’t agreed to have sex with Aethos, but I had given him permission to climax if I asked for him. After the unusual request I had made of him, I could understand an accident in the heat of the moment. That didn’t mean I knew how to feel about it, though. Sex with him hadn’t been anything like I had fantasized, that was for certain.

Aethos flushed orange. “I beg you a thousand pardons, Kazuo-san. It was most unintentional.”

That explained his shame.

“So when you say ‘mated,’ do you mean we had sex, or do you mean you may fall over dead if we don’t have sex regularly?” I asked.

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Aethos huffed short hisses of air, a laugh, based on my experience.

“We do not share any bond in the way Sakura bonded to you. It was only sex,” he replied.

His accent made it difficult for me to determine anything about his mood through his tone of voice. Hearing him say “it was only sex” hit me in the chest though. I had thought by the end that maybe we had shared more than the pleasure of sex. Neither calling me “Kazu” nor that kiss at the end had been necessary to the mating process with Sakura. It felt like there had been desire in that kiss on his part as well, not only mine.

“Am I going to suffer any side-effects of having had sex with you? Oh, and how was it we were able to touch and kiss without burning me?”

The orange flush deepened on his skin.

“I am not aware of any potential side-effects of Sirynthalian–Earthling mating, except for perhaps the pheromonal euphoria we inject during climax, but I am uncertain how that affects Earthlings. When a Sirynthalian approaches climax, one large spike appears between the legs, roughly below where your testes connect to your body. Once injected into our mate, the spike releases our genetic material to impregnate. You may have also noticed my thighs—”

“Your thighs are enormous!” I interrupted.

“What you saw as an enlarged Earthling thigh is actually our genitalia, which remains below the skin. It thickens with blood as we become aroused and—”

“Wait... You’re telling me your cock is your... thigh?”

“For lack of a better way to describe it to you, yes,” Aethos responded. “When aroused, a small ridge emerges on our inner or upper thighs. We use those smaller points to inject the pheromone I mentioned. It prolongs our enjoyment of climax. The pheromone injection to your bloodstream allowed me to kiss you, as you said you wanted.”

I tried to wrap my head around all of that information. I had asked him to kiss me; that was true. I just hadn’t known what all it would involve.

“That’s a lot of spikes for it to be enjoyable.” I said it more to myself than to him. But some of the events started making more sense now, like the grunts when I moved on top of him, and when Sakura bound our thighs together.

“The smaller marks will be on the backs of your thighs and buttocks because you were on top of me. That ridge can move to the side of the thigh where we need it.”

I tried to wrap my mind around Sirynthalian sexual pleasure involving the spiking pain I had felt, but I failed. “Do you enjoy the pain of the mating spike and the other ridge?”

“There is no pain for us when we inject our own kind.”

“No wonder,” I muttered.

I still felt shaky and uncertain about Aethos’s accidental spiking. I had wanted him to join us—I had needed it, to be honest—but now Sakura might suffer from unknown complications, which was exactly what shouldn’t have happened. I felt guilty because I had enjoyed Aethos being there with us. I could do without the pain radiating out from my balls, but I...

I had caused Aethos to orgasm unexpectedly, and that pride was a powerful emotion. I wanted to keep that moment.

I didn’t want to hurt Sakura, but the problem was I didn’t know what he expected of me now that the first mating was out of the way. Supposedly the plants were possessive about their mates. Did that mean I was never allowed to have sex with anyone else? Would sex with a plant be my only option for the rest of my life?

Maybe one day I would learn to enjoy the feel of vines instead of hands and arms and body, but right this second, I shuddered to think of a sex life without humanoid touch. I didn’t think I could live without it. I felt trapped by my decision.

“So, what happens now?” I asked.

“We wait until morning to see how our unusual mating affected Sakura. Then I suspect you will have more questions.”

I nodded. It seemed around Aethos, I always had more questions than answers.

“Have I answered all of your questions, Kazuo-san?” Aethos asked quietly, using my title again.

A few hours ago, it had felt uncomfortable and unnatural to hear Aethos say my name without a title, and now I ached for him to stop using it again, because I knew it meant he felt something was wrong between us. I didn’t want there to be. I wanted to be able to trust him.

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“Call me Kazuo, Aethos, please.”

“If you find it acceptable for me to do so, Kazuo.”

“I do have another question. What does Sakura expect of me now that he and I have mated? Am I allowed to have sex without him, or am I his alone for the rest of my life? I don’t know what’s appropriate.”

“Before tonight, I would have said you would be his alone after the mating. But, tonight, Sakura surprised me. I honestly do not have an answer for you.”

I reached for Aethos’s hand before I remembered it might hurt to touch him. When no burn came, I asked, “How long do we have before that pheromone injection wears off and touching your skin will hurt me again?”

Aethos looked down at me. “Maybe two hours. It depends on your body.”

“That’s long enough,” I replied and pulled Aethos down into another kiss. I could feel the acid in my stomach already beginning to gnaw at my insides, but I selfishly wanted the contact tonight, and I hoped Sakura would be willing to forgive my insecurity.

Aethos held himself stiffly above me as the kiss began, but as it lingered, he relaxed his body and returned the kiss. He pushed me back on the bed, arms to either side of my body, pinning me beneath him.

“This time, though,” I added, “don’t spike my balls.”

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## Chapter 4

I woke in the softness of comforters in my own room. Aethos had insisted on helping me change the sheets once we had finished having sex in my room. He thought the oils from his skin might end up burning me in the middle of the night, whereas I thought he was being overly cautious about indirect contact. As much as waking up in the morning curled around his naked body would have been nice, it wasn't practical for us, sadly. Cuddling and seeking morning sex were the only things that could have made waking up this morning even better.

A knock at my door caused me to sit up. Aethos entered, wearing a very elegant ensemble. He looked exceptionally overdressed for the morning after.

"Good morning, Kazuo. Please make yourself presentable. There is someone you need to meet waiting in the reception room."

"It's too early for a business meeting, Aethos." I moaned the complaint as I lay back down and covered my head with the comforter.

"I assure you, this is not business but pleasure. Come naked, if you like, but be downstairs in ten minutes or I shall bring him here, regardless of your state of undress or cleanliness."

I peeked out from the comforter at him, arching an eyebrow at the mild threat and the unusual suggestion of presenting myself naked. Who on Earth could I need to meet where being naked might possibly be acceptable? As far as I was concerned, the only two beings who should see me naked were Sakura and Aethos. I would much rather go check on Sakura first thing this morning than meet a stranger.

"Aethos, I want to check on Sakura first." I felt a twinge of guilt for not thinking of Sakura sooner.

"You know better than to keep our guest waiting, Kazuo-kun. It would be exceptionally rude."

I pouted and frowned at the chastisement and the use of a diminutive title. Then I noticed the squinty-eyed face again. Aethos had *very* squinty eyes this morning. I narrowed my eyes at him, but I did as he requested. After taking care of my typical morning functions, I dressed quickly in some casual wear my father had sent over.

Aethos led me on the float-board to the reception room where an unusually colorless, thin, and quite naked young man waited for us as he leaned back in a chair, legs spread. He looked to be around my age and mostly Earthling in body but not in appearance. Everything about him was white, from his hair to his toenails. He was hairless except for the fairly short hair on his head and his eyebrows. His skin had the same strange shine to it as Aethos's, and his eyes had the same diamond-like quality, only more so for their pure, sparkling clarity.

As I examined him, his dick began to plump between his legs. His thighs seemed to thicken as well. His face showed a strangely vacant expression, as if he was without any thoughts.

“Who...?”

I didn't want to believe what my eyes were trying to tell me, but this young man appeared to be a Sirtythalian–Earthling hybrid, except for the unusual white coloration which wasn't native to either of our species. An Earthling might make an assumption he was albino, but even albinos had pink eyes because of the blood vessels within them.

“Kazuo, meet the birth-parent of your—our?—future fruit.”

“Sakura?” I asked incredulously. It wasn't possible. If it was Sakura, I expected some sort of reaction or recognition from him, but the young man continued to stare at me blankly, tapping a finger against the arm of the chair. The only reaction I saw from him was the continued swelling of his sizable dick and thighs. Maybe a hybrid could have two sets of genitalia? It was the only idea I could come up with to fit what I saw in front of me.

I looked to Aethos for an explanation.

“Did I forget to mention the Amorphophallus's ability to use the genetic material of its first mating not only for pollination but also to shapeshift into the species of its mating partner? Or, in this case, partners. He is still getting used to his new body,” Aethos answered. He looked and sounded not the least bit guilty, that I could tell.

I whipped around to look at him.

“You... you... unbelievable bastard!” I roared at him. “How could you not tell me that?”

I shook with anger. If the fire in my eyes didn't give it away, the fact I had cursed at him was evidence of my fury—I rarely cursed—but Aethos had gone

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too far. He had been keeping details from me for years, and I was tired of it. If I had known sooner, I might have gotten used to the idea of mating with a plant, been able to think about and focus on who Sakura would become. I might have been able to mate without... *without his help*.

It could have changed everything that happened between us, the three of us.

Understanding dawned. His twin brother had an Amorphophallus mate, and Aethos wanted that for himself as well. He had thought Sakura would be his all those years ago, until Sakura chose me when he wasn't looking. And he still wanted Sakura, at whatever it cost to keep him.

"It was all on purpose, wasn't it? Everything after Sakura marked me, up to the point of not telling me about how you mate and then feeding part of yourself to him. You still want him for yourself, and you used me."

I spat the accusation at him with all the venom I had. I had been a pawn—a means to an end—and I felt the need to heave up my non-existent breakfast. I had wanted to trust Aethos, but every single moment had been a lie.

Aethos's skin tinted toward orange, his guilt showing on his body as I called him on his deceit.

"I..." he hesitated. "I did tell Sakura not to drink from you once I had..." He trailed off under my withering stare.

"Pang of conscience, Aethos? Or more likely you knew Sakura wouldn't stop at that point, no matter your warning. You wanted him for yourself, but that was out of the question, so you hid details from me so events might unfold as you wanted, regardless of what either Sakura or I might have wanted otherwise. We didn't need you, so you made us need you."

Aethos flushed bright orange, I suspected not only in guilt but outright shame. Sakura stared blankly as he looked back and forth between us. I didn't know whether he understood us or not; I thought he might not know how to interpret sound in this form, being so new to it. I really didn't know much about him or his biology, obviously. I rubbed the bridge of my nose in frustration. I didn't know whether to be angrier with Aethos's duplicity or more saddened by the loneliness that led him to do it.

And I had no idea where that left us after last night. His duplicity hurt in ways I hadn't expected. I had thought his spiking me was an accident. After having sex with him again last night, I wanted to believe him, to trust him. Apparently I had been wrong to believe sex meant something more to him. I

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had been so naive. Now I wanted to slap him, to claw at his chest until he bled. I wanted to make him hurt the way I hurt, so the betrayal could eat him the way it was eating me. I wanted all the lies to stop.

“I’m tired of the half-truths and lies of omission, Aethos. What really happens now? Try telling me the whole truth for once. Does Sakura need you to continue mating with him too now that he’s had our genetic cocktail, or have you affected how he’ll look for the rest of his life and that’s all?”

“I—I honestly do not know, Yoshida-sama.” No longer using my given name and adding an elevated title was a clear and unmistakable sign of his shame. “What I told you about the uniqueness of the triad is true, to my knowledge. There is no way to know how the mixture of our fluids will affect him, because I do not believe such an event has occurred before in the history of the species. We need to go to his homeworld. There are people there, an entire council which regulates access to the species. They are the experts on Amorphophallus biology, mating, and reproduction. If anyone will have answers, they will, but I do not think they will have these answers.”

“So we go make sure Sakura’s healthy and nothing unexpected is going to happen to him, and then come home?”

Aethos shook his head. “Once they know about him, they will never allow him to leave his homeworld again. That was why I hid him in my greenhouse on this world the whole time. Earthlings know nothing of his kind, their history or their abilities. As a mate, you will be free to come and go, but because mating cycles can happen unexpectedly, mates typically never leave the planet again either. Others may visit, but the unmated may not stay.” He paused. “I—I do not know what that means for me, Yoshida-sama. Technically, I am unmated, but I may or may not be necessary to the survival of an Amorphophallus. We probably will not know the answer to that until his next mating cycle.”

“And you didn’t think perhaps I needed to know I would have to leave my home forever before I made my decision to mate with Sakura?”

“Would that knowledge have changed your decision to save his life?” Aethos asked.

I didn’t have to think about it to know the answer was no, I would not have changed my decision. I declined to answer the question, however. I suspected Aethos meant it to be rhetorical anyway.

“You could have told me, Aethos,” I whispered. “I would have understood. I had no pre-conceived notions of how this should have happened.” Everything



caught up to me in a sudden rush of emotion. Angry tears welled up in the corners of my eyes. “You didn’t have to deceive me. Now, I... I—”

Sakura made a strange noise and we both turned to look at him. I had forgotten he was there. He looked at me and tried to use his throat again, but all that came out was an awkward hacking sound. He reached out for me, attempting to sit up in the chair. His erections had vanished during the conversation.

I floated over to the chair where Sakura sat and reached down for him. He lifted his arms up but didn’t grab a hold of me, so I pushed his arms closer to my neck and folded his hands around until he got the right idea and held on to my neck for support. Then I lifted his body and helped him move over to the sofa. After Sakura sat in the middle, I lowered the float-board and pushed myself up onto the sofa from the floor. I sat on Sakura’s right and turned to face him.

He was so very alien and so very beautiful. I reached up to touch his face, and then thought better of it and touched his shoulder first. Though Sakura’s skin shone like Aethos’s, my fingers didn’t burn as they held him. Satisfied my touch would not pain either of us, I brushed my hand up and down Sakura’s arm before lifting it to his cheek and drawing it back into his soft hair. I smiled at him, my eyes still a bit watery, and pulled him into a hug.

Sakura sat still in my arms for a few moments and then squirmed until I released him.

Sakura reached out for Aethos, who—guided by Sakura’s hand—sat down to his left side. Sakura looked Aethos in the eyes until Aethos started to shake silently. He appeared to be crying without either the sound or the tears. Aethos put his head on Sakura’s shoulder. Sakura slowly rubbed Aethos’s leg above the knee. I thought he wanted to comfort Aethos until I remembered that Aethos’s genitalia hid below the surface of his thighs. Aethos gasped and looked Sakura in the eyes again.

“Do you mean it, Sakura?”

Sakura tapped one finger against Aethos’s forearm. Yes.

I had no idea what had just happened.

“He forgave me,” Aethos said, as if I had asked the question aloud. His voice sounded rough, like he had been yelling at the top of his lungs, abusing his throat.

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“How do you know that?” I asked him, skepticism evident in my voice.

“As far as we know, he has no need to mate with me outside of his mating cycle, and even that is questionable. He has no need to touch me to arouse if he no longer wants me around except out of necessity. He does not have to accept me in his life, but he wants me in it still.”

Aethos got all of that from Sakura looking at him and caressing his thigh? Their understanding of each other was obviously much deeper than I had even begun to imagine, and knowing that upset me. I felt like I had walked into the middle of someone else's relationship and become the third wheel, and I didn't understand where I stood with either of them. Was I the one in their way because Sakura made a mistake nine years ago?

I ran a hand down my face to try to hide the quiver of my lips, but the tears in my eyes gave me away.

Sakura turned back toward me, but Aethos said to him, “Let me.” To me, he said, “I forget sometimes you are as young as you are, Kazuo-san—”

“Stop using the fucking title!” I shrieked. “Stop hiding behind propriety and be honest with me!”

Sakura put a tentative hand on my shoulder, and it was like he sapped the anger from my body until all that was left of me was a quaking, teary mess wondering where I fit into this turmoil. Sakura used his other hand to wipe at a single tear rolling down my cheek.

“I betrayed your trust,” Aethos tried again. “I am well aware of that. When all of this began, I didn't think you were important. You were in the way of my happiness—my life with Sakura—and that was all I cared about. I brought you here for Sakura's sake, and for no other reason.”

I stared at Aethos in mute horror, more tears now spilling down my cheeks as he confirmed the thought that he had used me as his only means to continue to be with Sakura. I wanted to back away from the two of them, but Sakura grabbed my hand and held onto me. I looked down at that connection and processed it as comfort, but not love. I choked back a sob.

“But I underestimated his intelligence, Kazu. All this time, I thought Sakura had chosen you for himself. And all this time, I have been wrong. I finally figured it out. He chose you for me as well.”

I almost stopped listening when Aethos said he had been wrong. It took me a moment to process what he had actually said. I couldn't hold back the next sob as I asked, “How could you know that?”

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Aethos looked at Sakura and smiled at him before looking back and smiling at me. “Because I had no intention of wanting anyone other than Sakura, and he knew that. And then last night, you charmed me with your sweetness when you took my hand—not once, but twice—and I realized I want the both of you, Kazu. I want you now as much as Sakura did from the day he marked you.”

Sakura looked like he was about to tap my forearm, but as he reached toward me, his finger elongated, thinning and curling and turning green. I stared in awe as the finger-turned-tendrill wrapped around my forearm. Suddenly, Sakura’s other four fingers on that hand elongated as well, each wrapping around me somewhere. As quickly as his fingers had become vines, they shrank back into pale fingers. Sakura held his hand up and splayed the digits apart, examining them. Then he finally tapped a single finger on my forearm.

After that stunning display of non-Earthling ability, it took me a few heartbeats to remember what Aethos had just said, what Sakura was agreeing with.

Finally processing everything, I hugged Sakura tightly, relieved I wasn’t the unwanted third wheel I had begun to believe I was. Aethos joined the hug from the other side of Sakura. I was never so glad for clothing as I was in that moment as he touched me, included me.

“I am sorry, Kazu. After last night, I did not wish to betray you further. But if I had told you last night about Sakura’s shapeshifting, you would have been this upset with me last night, without the benefit of Sakura to confirm or deny details. These last revelations had to play out this morning, with Sakura present. I was uncertain you would still be willing to accept me once you knew the truth. But, I swear to you now: No more deception or half-truths. That is, if you can find a way to believe me now?”

I wanted to. I really wanted to. The moment he said it, I had wanted to believe him—I had felt such relief. But I didn’t trust that emotion. I didn’t trust him. Too many actions disproved his words: Leading me to the greenhouse, omitting information like the mark meant I had to mate with the plant and might eventually have to live off-world for the rest of my life, lying to me about not interfering in our mating when that was what he wanted more than anything. I couldn’t bring myself to believe that his lies had come to an end.

But for Sakura’s sake, I lied. I sat up, tried on a watery smile, and nodded mutely at Aethos. I didn’t trust my voice not to betray me in that moment. I had not forgiven him, but I needed them to think I had.

“Thank you, Kazu. You have no idea how much your forgiveness truly means to me because you are the one to whom I have done the greatest wrong, and you are the one with the most reason to hate and distrust me. I am certain we will speak about this more at length. However, today we have much to do before we leave tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? Does it have to be so soon?”

“Yes. The trip to the planet Aroid takes around three months, and I am uncertain how long Sakura’s fruiting cycle will be. He might be ripe by or before the time we arrive,” Aethos answered.

“Ripe? What do you mean?”

“Ready to give birth, Kazu. Only, with plants, they bear fruit.”

“Sakura is... he’s pregnant? With fruit?” I asked, feeling quite stupid.

“With your baby. Or perhaps our baby. That is still unknown,” Aethos replied. “What exactly did you think ‘pollination’ meant all this time?”

I gaped at Aethos disbelievingly. “I don’t know! But not that! I... Plants and Earthlings can’t have babies together in my experience. I didn’t even think about it. Why would I ever think that?”

“I introduced him to you as ‘the birth-parent of our future fruit,’ Kazu.”

“I didn’t know that meant he was already pregnant with a baby! You said ‘fruit.’ And he hadn’t been humanoid before that.”

Aethos rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger in a very Earthling gesture of frustration. He took a deep breath.

“I am sorry, Kazuo,” he responded in a calmer tone. “I should have checked for your understanding sooner. Let me use more Earthling terminology: When in heat, Sakura must have sex with you until he becomes pregnant. The beginning of his pregnancy releases the hormones which relieve the mating heat. At the very least, Sakura was pregnant with your child before we left the greenhouse last night.”

Sakura tapped one finger against my forearm. Yes.

If I hadn’t already been sitting down, I would have fallen over. As it was, I suddenly felt exceptionally light-headed. I leaned my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes until the dizziness subsided.

I was about to be a father. At only twenty years old. What did I know about being a father? My own had practically ignored me for years.

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Aethos continued talking as if he hadn't upended my world. Again.

"You need to pack and say goodbye to your family and friends. They will rarely be able to visit you due to the length and expense of the trip. Sakura will go with you to your room and continue to work on his movement and balance. I need to put my business affairs in order. I have an emergency board meeting tonight to hand over control of my company."

Aethos's issuance of orders on what I should do with my life grated on my nerves, but I tamped the feeling down for Sakura's sake.

"Why would you do that if you're not sure whether you'll be allowed to stay with us on his world?"

"Because this is what I have wanted for years. I would rather not have the business as a loose end which the council might use against me to ask me to leave. I can easily build another company. This opportunity comes along only once."

"Then who will take over Aethos Imports?"

"It will be merged into... Yoshida Exports."

"My father?" I couldn't even articulate the rest of my question.

"He understands my import business. All he needs are the contacts and help understanding the export regulations of other worlds. He is a very capable businessman, so I am certain the board will agree with my decision to merge our company with his."

I laughed ruefully. "So he gets something out of my being here after all."

"He loses far more than he gains, Kazu."

"What does my father lose?" I furrowed my eyebrows in bafflement. "You're about to give him everything he's wanted and worked for, for years."

"His son, Kazu. He loses you."

"My father hasn't cared about me in years," I scoffed.

Aethos tinged toward orange again. I was beginning to despise whenever his skin turned orange, because so far it had always meant he'd hidden something significant from me. I cringed as I braced myself for this new revelation.

"That may be my fault as well," Aethos said.

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I found that hard to believe, but I waited for the rest.

“Your father has known your fate since the day after Sakura marked you. I spoke with him at length, explaining the events which would eventually unfold. Your father has known for nine years this day would come. And he knew you well enough then to know what choice you would make; he knew you would decide to save the plant, and your mate would ultimately take you away from here permanently. Why do you think he sent over so many clothes and other things for your recovery?”

I hadn't braced enough. In a matter of a few sentences, Aethos turned everything I thought I knew about my father upside-down. I couldn't even begin to think of a response to that. My whole life from eleven onward suddenly felt like a lie, like a shadow of what those years should have been, and that made me want to put my fist through the wall.

“Everything he has done since that day was to help prepare you for this time. He made sure you were exposed to several alien cultures, he sent you to Intergalactic Trade School, and he made sure you learned the Intergalactic Trade language. But, I think he also chose to cut out early on his personal ties with you, to make it easier for you to leave when the time came. And to make it easier for him, as well,” Aethos finished.

I opened my mouth to deny the possibility. My father had neglected me time and again, and I had a dozen memories of disappointment I could bring to mind instantly. But of all those memories, I could not remember a single disappointment that had happened before I turned eleven—before I had been marked by Sakura.

My stomach dropped through the floor, and I started to breathe too rapidly. My head throbbed behind my eyes, and the world began to swirl in a kaleidoscope of color to rival Aethos's greenhouse.

Aethos had, in fact, single-handedly changed the course of my entire life, from his greenhouse and his alien plant on down to the majority of my relationship with my father. But my father's decision was not Aethos's fault. For all the supposedly good things my father had done for me during those years, the selfish bastard had also cut off our relationship prematurely to save himself some pain when I would have to leave. I was furious he had left me flailing as a teenager when I most wanted and needed his approval, and I was profoundly confused as to whether or not he loved me now and had loved me all these years.

My chest constricted, and I put my head between my legs to try to force the nausea away. Sakura rubbed my back, and for a time I leaned into him and focused on that sensation instead of the implications of what Aethos had told me.

“You should go see him today, Kazuo. It may be your last opportunity.” I felt the sofa redistribute as Aethos stood. “If you would like breakfast, speak with the kitchen staff. If you need help getting Sakura to your room, you need only ask. If you...” He hesitated. “If you still need me, I will be in my office.”

He lingered in the room for a few moments. When I did not look at him or speak, Aethos exited quietly.

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Aethos mostly left me alone for the rest of the day, coming to check on us only once it was time for our evening meal. I had done as he suggested that morning and taken Sakura upstairs to practice standing while I packed. I should have used the opportunity to speak to Sakura, to tell him more about me, but I had been too self-absorbed in the things I planned to say to my father.

When I went to see him, my father had tried to brush me off at first. After I had furiously stormed past his secretary into his office, he had put down whatever he was working on and listened to me rail at him for all those years I had thought he didn't love me any longer. He had taken it stoically while I cried in front of him, but I saw the moisture in his eyes.

The bastard had loved me all that time. And that made it worse when I had to say goodbye. He had offered me his hand, and in spitefulness I had pulled him into a bruising hug and made him feel every stuttered breath as I said goodbye to him. He then patted one hand against my back, and I pulled away and called him a bastard to his face before I walked out.

Drained from my encounter with him, I hadn't even tried to say goodbye to anyone else. I hadn't had it in me to go through any of that a second time, much less more.

Aethos left us alone at bed time as well, for which I was supremely grateful. I wanted to spend some time with Sakura on our own. I happily curled around Sakura and cuddled with him. His body was cool, like his plant form had been, whereas my body could heat the bedding like a self-contained furnace. We balanced each other well in that respect. After a little while, I nibbled and sucked just below Sakura's ear until he rolled to face me.

Then I taught him how to kiss. Though I started slow, Sakura soon mashed our mouths together and explored me with his tongue. I had to teach him not to bite down too hard, too.

When our erections swelled and bumped, I rolled partially on top of him and pressed my body closer, teaching us both the pleasure of grinding together as we kissed languidly, building up the slow burn toward an inferno. When the kisses turned rough and the friction between our bodies threatened to undo us both, I covered his hand with my own and taught him to stroke us together to climax.

As I curled an arm over his chest to fall asleep, I realized the previous night with Aethos had been about physical connection; I had wanted it to be more than that, but it hadn't turned out that way. This night with Sakura had given me the emotional connection I sought. I needed.

Aethos found Sakura and me entwined like that in the morning when he woke us to get ready to leave. He had a look on his face I had never seen before, a dullness to his orange eyes that made my chest ache unexpectedly. His words to us to get dressed were unusually clipped.

Maybe he recognized I hadn't completely forgiven him. Perhaps he was sad he couldn't sleep with us because of the direct skin contact issue. Or maybe he felt left out because I was actually Sakura's mate, though I had the feeling the resolution to that situation had yet to play itself out.

Once we reached the Earthling spaceport, Sakura and I floated together, following Aethos through the crowd. My arm hugged Sakura's side as we passed through for the last time. Sakura still needed some help with his balance, but he had improved significantly in only a day. "A fast learner," Aethos had called him. (Given Sakura's performance in bed last night, I had to agree.) For today, the float-board was faster than walking.

Since my arms were full as we floated, Sakura was kind enough to rub the mark on my wrist firmly for me. And to mess with me every so often, he would brush it gently instead, and I would groan quietly into his ear, the evil tease.

I had thought my last moments on Earth might be bittersweet, but in truth, I was relieved to leave behind the expectations of my old life, and looking forward to something new, something extraordinary. Life with Sakura—and a baby! And maybe, just maybe, even Aethos (if he proved I could trust him)—would be an incredible new adventure... and a scary one. Maybe I would get bored at some point, but it was hard to imagine that ever happening.



On the way to our port, Aethos stopped for a moment to buy a news feed. When it came time for him to download it, he moved aside and looked at me.

“You should save a copy of the news from today, Kazuo-san.” I winced inwardly at the title, but we were out in public. “For the sake of nostalgia if nothing else. It is your homeworld. It is a part of you.” I started to object that I didn’t want it, but Aethos insisted. “Please, Kazu,” he whispered.

I relented and moved closer until my watch beeped. I downloaded the feed without opening it.

“Would you mind reading me the business headlines, Kazuo-san?” Aethos asked.

If the complete lack of subtlety in the question hadn’t given Aethos away, the squinty eyes would have. Apparently there was something I needed to see.

I selected the feed for the business section and opened my mouth to read as Aethos had requested, but no sound came out once I saw the main headline.

## **AETHOS IMPORTS AND YOSHIDA EXPORTS TO MERGE IMMEDIATELY;**

### **IMPORT TYCOON AND YOSHIDA EXPORTS HEIR UNITED IN NEW OFF-WORLD VENTURE**

Tokyo, Japan – In a completely unexpected move, Yoshida Exports and Aethos Imports announced the merger of their two companies under the new name Yoshida Import-Export. President and CEO of Yoshida Exports, Yoshida Ichiro, said in his company’s press release that the suddenness of the merger was prompted by an unusual and immediate off-world opportunity which would require the attentions of both the Aethos Imports President and CEO, Aethos, and the expected Yoshida Exports heir, Yoshida’s son, Yoshida Kazuo. When questioned, Yoshida would not elaborate further on the off-world opportunity involved.

“I will miss my son,” Yoshida said. “He has been groomed for an opportunity such as this, and I have no doubt he is the best person for the position. Though he will be off-world, likely for the rest of his life, he will have Aethos to guide him. I could not leave him in better hands.”

With the union of two of the biggest independent players in the Import/Export industry, competitors are struggling to determine

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what such a merger will mean to their bottom lines. Yoshida Import-Export now holds the largest market share in its industry on planet Earth.

I amended my earlier thoughts: Learning the truth about my father was truly bittersweet.

I sniffed and wiped the couple of tears from my cheeks before I looked up at Aethos. He and Sakura smiled at me.

I loved Sakura's smile, now that he actually had one. I smiled back at them.

"What does it say, Kazuo-san?" Aethos prompted.

Deadpan, I replied, "It says, 'Import Tycoon And Yoshida Exports Heir Impregnate Alien Flower, Symbol Of Their Budding Love.'"

Aethos hissed a laugh.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Adara O'Hare is a geek in writer's clothing—a mild-mannered website designer by day, and a wife, mother, reader, and sometimes writer by night. Adara is an avid reader who writes on occasion, mostly for her own enjoyment.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# BUSTED

By Sofia Grey

## Photo Description

A young man, naked from the waist up, is bound by handcuffs and chains. His face is hidden in shadow, but he looks relaxed and passive. Another man stands behind him, one hand on his chest, the other dipping into the waistband of his jeans. The lighting is harsh, against a dark background.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

C'mon, he said.

Please? It's not as if it's hard work.

You know I'd always do it for you if you needed my help.

Please? I really need an assistant.

*So now here I am. Trussed up... on display. All those things I said I'd never do. Well, at least what I always told myself I would never do. I just liked looking at this kind of thing. I didn't really want to participate... Did I? Well if that's the case, why am I more turned on than I've ever been in my life? And why do I feel as if I've finally come home? Especially with the way that super-sexy guy is looking at me.*

Sincerely,

Shaz

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** gay for you, athlete, tattoos, photographic model, light hearted, hint of kink, businessman, student

**Word Count:** 16,779

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*Acknowledgements*

Thanks to Allyson, Janet and TigerLilyReader for their excellent critiquing and beta-reading, and to Sotia Lazu for not only editing at very short notice, but also creating this wonderful cover.

Shaz – I loved the prompt and hope my story meets your approval!

And a huge heartfelt THANK YOU to the consistently wonderful Mods and behind-the-scenes-worker-bees that organised this event.

# **BUSTED**

**By Sofia Grey**

## **Prologue**

He Obi-Wan'd me. I couldn't refuse.

And that was why I now stood half-naked, with chains around my wrists, in a disused warehouse, while a pair of gay models were feeling me up. And somehow, even though I was completely straight, I sported the biggest hard-on I'd ever known.

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## Chapter 1

### *Five hours earlier*

I knew it was Saturday, and that meant I didn't have to scramble out of bed at the crack of dawn to make my gym class. Instead, since I had no lectures to attend, I could take my time in the shower, eat a leisurely breakfast and then stroll down to the gym for a good workout. I didn't have any clients on a Saturday, and my time was all my own. I loved Saturdays.

If everything went according to plan, I might get some groceries, bribe my housemate and best friend Nick to go out for the evening, and *then* persuade Amanda to come for dinner. Or Jenna. They both had merits.

I *shouldn't* have been woken while it was still dark. I tugged the duvet higher and tried to cling to my sleep, but it was no use.

"Come on, Dan. It's important."

I cracked one eye open and squinted at Nick. "It's Saturday."

"Yeah, and I've got the calendar shoot." Usually, when he talked about The Calendar Shoot, it was with excitement. After all, it was the biggest piece of work to tumble in his direction, and his fledgling photography business would suddenly be big news when it was printed. Now, though, he looked anxious. Stressed.

"Wassup?"

He sank onto my bed. Well, technically it was his spare bed, in his guest room, but he insisted it was mine for as long as I wanted. "Fuckin' rotavirus."

"Huh?" I lifted my head and, with a sigh, pushed myself into a sitting position. Scrubbing my hands across my face, I tried again. "What's wrong with your computer?"

The look he gave me was scathing. "Rota. Virus. Half my models have got the shits."

"Oh."

"I've only got the warehouse for today, and there's no chance of an extension 'cause they're demolishing it next week. The guy that was coming from the magazine to be my assistant is sick as well." He blew out a breath, then tugged on his shaggy blond hair. "I need you, Dan. I *know* it's Saturday,



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but..." *Oh no, please don't say it.* "Obi-Wan Kenobi, you're my only hope." *Fuck.* He said it.

Since we'd first become friends in the schoolyard at the tender age of seven, Nick and I had only ever Obi-Wan'd in times of dire need. Emergencies. I could no more refuse him, than I could avoid going home for Christmas dinner. Non-negotiable.

My plans for a lazy day were being crumpled up and tossed into the waste paper bin. "What do you want me to do?"

Relief washed over his face. "Thanks, Dan, you're the best. I need you to be my assistant and—uh—do a little modelling. I'm juggling the others round, but I'm three short, and... you know." He shrugged.

I'd stepped in as a model for him lots of times before. It was the least I could do since he let me live rent free, while I studied at Uni. It was also good publicity for my part-time work as a gym instructor and personal trainer.

"Gimme time to shower. Do I shave, or do you want scruff?"

He was already on the way out of my room. "Scruff," he called over his shoulder. "And be quick. I'm leaving in ten minutes."

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## Chapter 2

Nick bumped the van over loose gravel and pulled to a halt outside the abandoned warehouse. It had been a busy part of town forty years ago, with a car manufacturing plant, a couple of smaller factories and a dozen of those hulking buildings. That was the only one left in the desolate wasteland that was once a thriving neighbourhood of Wellington.

“You sure this is the best place for the shoot?” The huge metal sliding doors were orange with rust, and in the weak pre-dawn light, I could safely say it was the ugliest building I’d ever seen.

“Yep. *Industrial* is exactly the feel I want, and this is perfect.”

We were the first to arrive, but as I hauled bags of cameras, lights and cables, a colourful station wagon parked next to Nick’s van, and then a shiny silver Audi pulled up behind. They looked startlingly out of place, as did the guys who climbed out of the first car.

I had plenty of gay friends. It was impossible to go to Uni these days and not have a diverse set of study partners, but these guys were... *Camp* was too soft a word. *Outrageous* might be closer. They tiptoed over the gravel with squeals of alarm, and tossed insults back and forth as they went. Five gay models, and I was about to join them. I sighed. This wasn’t the first time Nick had neglected to tell me about my fellow models, and would probably not be the last time I had my arse felt up by them.

I thought longingly of Amanda and her enormous tits, and Jenna with her dancer-worthy legs, and resigned myself to the day ahead. There were more bags of gear than usual—some of them decidedly heavy, even for me. I ended up dragging the last one across the grimy concrete floor once I got through the doors. It made a dull clinking noise when it moved, and I grunted as I shoved it into position underneath the window.

“What the fuck is in here?” I stood and swiped my arm over my forehead. “Feels like a dead body wrapped in chains.”

Nick glanced up from his clipboard. He stood in the open doorway with the Audi owner, a man I’d instantly nicknamed Suit-Guy. They pored over Nick’s plans while I did the lifting and shifting. Already, two of the models had managed to brush against me, one stroking my butt and the other touching my arm. It was going to be a long day.

“Yeah, gimme a minute, Dan.” He went back to his run sheet and tapped the clipboard with his pen, while he explained something to Suit-Guy. In complete contrast to the models in their flamboyant skintight leather pants and flimsy shirts, Suit-Guy looked glossy and well-groomed. He’d be representing the magazine, and therefore paying for this gig. I knew without asking that we had to treat him like God, and I instantly felt bad for interrupting Nick.

Curiosity raging, I bent over and unzipped the holdall. I’d no sooner got the zip moving, than I had that weird prickly neck feeling, as though someone was watching me. Probably one of the models ogling my ass again. I glanced over my shoulder and, instead, saw Suit-Guy staring at me. He averted his eyes, but I’d already seen him. He stood there, looking as out of place in his expensive suit as I would be if I crashed a boardroom meeting.

I looked back at the bag, tugged a piece of cloth out of the way and paused, the breath leaving my lungs in a shocked gasp. *Whoa*. I was right about the chains. And handcuffs. Leather bands, a coil of soft-looking rope and—sweet baby Jesus—that looked like a flogger.

A dark heat filled my gut, and I blinked and swallowed. What the fuck? Not. Into. That. Shit. All the same, I had to stick my hand inside the bag and feel the rope, silky to the touch. My fingers glided over the coils, and it felt nothing like I expected.

Unbidden, memories flashed through my head. A chick I’d been shagging had asked me to tie her up once, and I’d refused. I’m not into kink. She’d been persistent though, and had insisted we watch a DVD of a couple getting it on with what she called ‘light bondage’. Yeah, right. I dumped her and moved on, but weeks later another girl I was with had found the damned DVD and wanted to watch it.

She’d grinned at me, and twirled the plastic case in her fingers. “Want me to tie you up, Danny?” I’d sent her packing and moved on again. What was it with girls? Never satisfied with regular sex. They always wanted more.

Beneath the rope lay more coils, all in gentle pastel shades, all the same texture, and all inviting to the touch.

A hard pinch on my butt jerked me back to the warehouse, and I shot upright and zipped the bag again. “Play your cards right, and I’ll be the one to tie you up,” the tallest and most effeminate of the models cooed into my ear. “I’m good with my hands.”

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“I don’t think so.” I smiled to take the sting out of my words and turned to look at Nick, hoping he might sense my Come Rescue Me mental call. No such luck, but Suit-Guy was watching me again. As before, he rapidly shifted his gaze back to Nick’s clipboard. Everything about him, from the rigid set of his shoulders, to the masculine stance with his arms folded, semaphored his discomfort at being there. I knew how he felt.

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## Chapter 3

I'd been Nick's gofer enough times to have a broad idea what to do. Trying to ignore the bag of kinky shit, I turned to the stack of boxes and began to unpack the lights. I guessed the electricity had long since been cut off, and the only light we had so far was the morning sun creeping through the filthy windows. The models were huddled together over their own clipboard, and I was able to work unimpeded by them.

Nick had a complicated set of heavyweight car batteries and even a small portable generator for setups like this. Before I went much further, I needed to know how much light he wanted for the shoot. When I approached, he looked up and beckoned me over.

"Dan, this is Mr. McKenna, our client."

Suit-Guy held out a hand to me. "Please, call me Jamie."

My hands were grubby after hauling bags—and *touching the ropes*—and there was that awkward moment when I thought about first wiping my palm on my jeans.

Close up, Suit-Guy—Jamie—was taller than I'd thought, his shoulders broad inside the sharply cut jacket. His short dark hair was immaculate, and the crisp white shirt looked pristine beneath a pale grey tie, but his smile was friendly. Even his teeth were perfect, straight and white. Standing beside him in my faded jeans and a distinctly dusty black T-shirt, I wondered if he really wanted to shake my hand or was just being polite.

The moment dragged on, Jamie waiting while I dithered. Fuck it. I accepted his outstretched hand. His palm was cool and dry, his grip strong and confident. And that was when I noticed the cut on his chin. It was so tiny, I wouldn't have seen it if the sun wasn't on his face, but he must have nicked himself shaving this morning. For some reason, the fact that he wasn't perfect was a relief.

I looked further up and properly saw his eyes. What colour were they? Not quite blue nor green, they reminded me of a gemstone I had on my windowsill back at Nick's place. A girl had given it to me, her name long forgotten. It had a funny name, something like Labrador? I was racking my brains when I realised I was still holding his hand.

Okay, this was awkward. I freed myself and tried to remember what I wanted to ask Nick. Oh yeah, the lighting. I didn't get a chance to speak.

“Mr. McKenna is from the Piermont Group.” Who? I’d never heard of them, but Nick seemed to think it was important to mention. “He’s keen to see how we work. Do you mind if he shadows you while you set up the gear?”

Once again, I couldn’t very well say no.

I scrambled to get back on track. “Umm, do you want me to fire up the generator? What kind of lighting do you need?”

“Yeah, we need Jenny.” Nick examined his watch, stared into the recesses of the warehouse and then back at his clipboard. “First set against the wall with the pipes. I want it to look harsh and contrast-y, so we’ll start with the floods.”

He continued to issue instructions, while I dug into the boxes and found everything he needed. Minutes later, I crouched over the ancient generator that Nick had bought second-hand, and tried to coax it to life. This Jenny was a lot like my current hook-up, Jenna. They were both temperamental bitches.

Call-Me-Jamie hunkered down next to me and poked at a switch with his finger. “Looks like the plugs need changing.” His voice was as smooth and confident as the rest of him, and I agonized briefly about him getting an oil stain on his pinstripes. We had to look like a professional outfit, not some cowboys with third-rate kit. All the same, his knowledge might be useful.

“Jenny’s heading for the scrap heap,” I said. “But she’s all we’ve got for today. Do you know much about these?”

Bluey-green eyes twinkled back at me. “Not generators so much. But motorbikes, yeah. I usually have one in pieces on the kitchen floor. Current one’s a classic Ducati.”

I stared at him with new respect. “Bet your wife loves that.”

He shrugged and peered at Jenny. “Nah, I’m single. It’s easier.”

Yep, I was on board with that idea. “Cousin of mine used to be a biker. He had a Triumph Bonneville from the 70s, and man, it flew along. I was gutted when he sold it and bought a Volvo instead.”

Jamie grinned at me. “Let me guess, he got married?”

“Yep.” I took a deep breath and pulled the starter again. Jenny coughed, spluttered and did nothing. “You lousy piece of crap,” I muttered under my breath. “Just work, damn you.”

“Hold on.” Jamie stood, shrugged off his suit jacket and, after a moment’s hesitation, laid it on Nick’s kinky-bag. Before I could stop him, he unfastened

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silver cufflinks and dropped them into his pocket, and then rolled up his sleeves. With the jacket gone, a dark tribal tattoo on his upper arm was just visible through the fine cotton of his shirt.

Shit. It seemed wrong, getting the client to fix the gear, but it didn't take long. A few minutes later, he stood again, oil smeared across both hands. "Try it now."

He truly was a God. Jenny roared to life and sat there, purring like a kitten.

Jamie grinned at me, looking way more approachable than he had earlier. "Like I said, she needs her plugs changed, when you get a chance. Do that, and she'll keep running for ages."

"Thanks." I needed to get something to wipe his hands on. I dug into a nearby bag and came up with a towel and a packet of baby wipes. "Really, I appreciate your help."

"No worries. If you want the honest truth, I feel a bit out of place here. I'm covering for a colleague, and I'm more used to sitting behind a desk." He ran a hand through his hair, which immediately fell back into place. He was buff enough to be a model himself, but with a harder, more sophisticated edge. "Hey, if you want to see my Ducati sometime, flick me a text. I'm always happy to show off my bikes to an enthusiast."

Was he hitting on me? Nah. He wasn't gay. I'd stake my student loan on him being straight. We were just two guys discussing bikes and engines, and other manly stuff.

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## Chapter 4

For the next hour, Jamie helped me trail cables across the floor and drag tripods, lighting gantries and umbrellas into position. Nick had been horrified at first, but Jamie insisted he wanted to get involved, and I was glad of the help. I wouldn't let him do the dirty work, though. After all, I was in jeans and not a suit. He told me about the dog he'd adopted (some mutt that had taken up residence in his yard), his sister (married with two children) and the gym he used (on the opposite side of town to mine).

He laughed when I told him my confusion over the rotavirus outbreak, and how I'd instantly assumed Nick had been talking about software, since I was studying IT and programming. I talked about my plans for developing games, and he offered to beta test the one I was currently working on. Turned out he was a fan of first-person-shooter games too.

By the time we finished, Nick was ready to start.

Two models stood bare chested, leaning against a grimy section of wall, and Nick lined up the shot. "Okay, guys. Do your stuff." They began to kiss, while I adjusted the height of the spotlight and, on Nick's command, the intensity of the light. His camera clicked. Paused. Clicked again. The models continued to suck face, and I glanced across at Jamie to see how he was coping. He gazed at them, totally impassive, his arms folded across his chest again.

After every picture, Nick checked how the image looked on the monitor, before making a tiny adjustment and reshooting. The lighting was tricky, and it took a few minutes before we had it lit to his satisfaction. Even then, he still wasn't happy.

"Oil," he muttered. "We'll try oil." He meant baby oil, and I tossed the bottle to the models to apply for themselves. Jamie's eyes widened when they resumed their kiss, their arousal clear in the new bulges in their pants. Nick was pleased, and his camera fired off a long sequence of shots in succession.

The models were oblivious. They slipped and slithered their hands over their gleaming chests and bellies, before digging them into each other's hair. The kiss was slow, languorous and strangely hot. It was as though they'd forgotten they were standing in front of a camera—and an audience. I had to hold the spotlight in position, but I didn't want to watch them making out. It looked too real, too private. I fixed my gaze on the pipes above their heads, but I couldn't help it. I had to sneak another look.



It was odd to watch two guys making out. Although they took their time, they kissed hard, with a rough edge. Chicks always wanted soft and gentle, and I wondered for a fleeting moment how it'd feel with a partner who wasn't so fragile.

We worked through the next six scenes in a variety of poses, and then Nick beckoned me across. By this time, Jamie was getting involved in each shot, holding lights, handing over the oil, wet wipes and tissues, and generally getting his pristine hands dirty again. He took the opportunity of the break to make a phone call, and I went to see what Nick wanted.

My response was a solid *no*.

I'd agreed to model, but I hadn't agreed to being chained up. My throat tightened, and my heart thudded. *Restrained*. I wiped my suddenly sticky palms on my jeans. "No," I repeated.

"Aww, come on," he wheedled. "I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important. And you said you would..."

"I didn't say yes to *that*." My heart beat faster, the words sticking in my dry mouth.

"I'll keep your face out of the shot. It'll just be the neck down." He gave me a sad-eyed look. "Please."

Why was I getting so stressed? I tried to think clearly through the fog that filled my head. It was just a picture. Nothing more than I'd done lots of times before. *Chained*. Fuck. A flare of dark heat unfurled in my stomach.

The little devil sitting on my shoulder dug in his claws. *You might enjoy it*. No.

*Scared*, the devil taunted. No.

Nick waited, his fingers tapping against the tripod, his eyes worried.

"You keep my face out of the shot?"

"Yes."

"Fuck." I sucked in a rapid breath, my chest now tight at the idea. "Let's do it."

"You have to lose the shirt." Nick walked me to the position he'd marked then turned to dig into his kinky bag. I'd worked bare-chested for him many times—hell, I was proud of my toned abs—but I'd never felt as exposed as I did now.

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The rattle of chains made my spine prickle. I stared at Nick, his arms full of metal links, and I swallowed hard.

“Hold out your wrists,” he said.

I stood alone against a filthy wall, hints of age-old graffiti still remaining, with two of Nick’s spotlights dazzling me. I blinked, squinting to see beyond him, but it was all a blur. The lights blasted out some serious heat too, and I felt a trickle of perspiration break out on my forehead. Mute, I lifted my hands.

The chains were cold. Heavy. *Menacing*. I gulped and tried to breathe through the clattering of my heart. Nick looped them over my wrists, around my back, up to my throat, and down again.

They made a bright chinking noise when I shifted position, and I moved again. They didn’t sound scary, but the feel of them was... dangerous. *I’m helpless*. Liquid heat flickered through my veins, and I tried to suppress it. It was just the lighting.

“I need a few minutes to set this up,” announced Nick, and with one click, dimmed the spotlights to a dull glow. I blinked a couple of times as I adjusted to the light levels, and the first thing I saw was Jamie’s face.

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## Chapter 5

Jamie stared at me, his expression unreadable. I felt like a bug under a giant microscope, but then he licked his lower lip, just a flash of movement, and I saw heat in his eyes. It was unmistakable. Before my confused brain could process his reaction, he glanced away, shuffled his feet and fiddled with his phone. The moment was gone.

Nick spoke to him, and Jamie moved to shift one of the lighting rigs, standing side on to me. He was silhouetted against a spotlight, and I idly stared at the contours of his body. I knew he worked out, and he looked very toned. Taller than me, he had more muscle and a sturdier build.

Another model stepped up next to me—the tall one who'd offered to tie me up. Great. I hoped Nick didn't expect us to snog. No, he wouldn't. If he was keeping my face out of the shot, there'd be no point in us kissing.

"Hello, handsome." The model, Glynn, placed his hands on my bare shoulders, and I jumped. "You're twitchy," he murmured, "but quite delicious. I'd love to corrupt you."

"Not a chance," I croaked.

His hands skimmed down my arms to rest lightly on top of the chains. They chinked with the movement, and he dug his fingers into the links. "I could tie you in knots, and you'd love every minute. Don't tell me you never imagined this. All bound up, with someone else calling the shots."

My heart juddered, and I fought to stop listening to him. It was no use. While Nick adjusted his camera and Jamie watched, Glynn whispered into my ear, "I can reach your nipples." His fingertip skated up my chest to draw a lazy circle around first one nipple and then the other. I couldn't help it; my breath released in a burst, and Glynn hummed his approval.

I wouldn't react to him, to *this*. I stared beyond the lights and found Jamie. Focus on him. Straight and as masculine as you could wish for. *Bet he'd look good in this picture*, the devil in my head whispered to me again. *Standing here with you, his hands on your skin.*

Jamie stood there, one hand fisted at his side, the other splayed on the light stand, his fingers sliding up and down in a tense, stiff movement. I'm not sure he even knew he was doing it.

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*I wonder if he jerks off like that.*

Fuck. I had to stop thinking. I had to wait for Nick to set up the shot and then get the fuck back to the shadows. Another wave of perspiration broke out on my forehead, but now I couldn't lift my hands higher than my waist, so I couldn't wipe it away.

Jamie moved to the side, dug into a bag, and I realised Nick had asked him to pass across the baby oil. No, I wailed silently. I didn't want Glynn to rub oil into my chest.

*You'd let Jamie do it. The devil cackled. You'd let him slick you up with oil.*

I felt Glynn's hard-on nudging me and did my best to ignore it. Nick was invisible behind the lights, his camera clicking, and I found I was staring at Jamie again.

Glynn took his time sliding warm fingers over my skin, burning and teasing. Over my nipples, making my stomach clench at the intimate contact, down my abs and skirting across the waistband of my jeans. The molten heat in Jamie's eyes was unmistakeable, and I held his gaze, silently daring him to look away first. It was as though I'd stepped into an alternate dimension, one where I stared at a man as if I wanted him. *I don't do this.*

When Glynn's fingers danced over my crotch—as if I'd need oil there—I sucked in a breath and tried to will my dick to stay still. It ignored me. What the hell was I thinking? And if I wasn't completely mistaken, Jamie was getting turned on too. He shifted his stance and gave a rapid tug at his trousers.

"I'd tie you to my bed," whispered Glynn, hot breath flashing across my ear. "And then I'd lick every gorgeous inch of you." More oil dribbled down my shoulder, and I bit my lip to hold back a groan. A mental image of Jamie, shirtless, burned onto my retinas. Jamie trickling oil onto my chest. "Have you ever had a man blow you before?"

I tried to say no, but my tongue had given up working. It felt thick and useless in my mouth.

"Girls don't do it properly. They're too soft." Holy mother of God, I wanted him to shut up.

"Imagine the best blow job ever."

I tried to summon a mental image of Jenna. No, she whined about taking me in her mouth. Said I was too big. *Amanda.* She was good on her knees.

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“Now think about someone who *knows* what they’re doing. Taking your cock right to the back of their throat and then more. Stroking the sensitive skin under your balls at the same time.”

I couldn’t help it, I shivered at the idea. When I trembled, Jamie sank his straight white teeth into his bottom lip and tightened his hand around the rig.

*How would his mouth feel?*

“Okay, Dash, you join in now.” Nick’s words sank in as Dash, a tall Scandinavian model, stepped forward. He had no qualms about flattening his hands on my thighs, dangerously close to my crotch.

*What if they were Jamie’s hands?*

“Well, Glynn.” His deep voice rumbled through me. “Is he hot for you or for me?” He stroked one finger over my zipper, and I shuddered, my cock straining against his touch. I gazed ,helplessly, across the floor and found Jamie staring back at me, dark, intense and dangerous.

I’d never been so hard in my life.

I was so screwed.

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## Chapter 6

Time seemed to expand. It felt as though I stood there for hours, Glynn and Dash touching me, rubbing against me, whispering into my ears, and then kissing each other with me sandwiched between them. In reality, it was less than fifteen minutes of sweltering, dazzled under the spotlights. Every click of the shutter captured my exquisite agony in high resolution. I could hammer nails with my cock, and there was no way Nick could miss it through the lens. It throbbed painfully against my zipper, and I could do nothing but wait until the shots were finished.

As soon as it was over, I'd be dashing to the bathroom... if there was one. Christ. How long did it take before blue balls set in?

Every touch from Glynn and Dash, every breath and every whispered suggestion made me ache for Jamie. I had to be crazy.

*He wants you*, murmured the devil. *You can see it in his eyes*. It shouldn't matter. I didn't want him. I *couldn't*.

"Okay," called Nick. He flicked a switch and the lights dimmed. "That's great. We'll take five minutes and then move on to the next set." He appeared in front of me, a huge and happy smile on his face. "Thanks, Dan. I definitely owe you one."

It was over? Nick loosened the chains, and they fell away with a dull clatter. Glynn spoke to Dash, and they walked back to the other models, glugging on bottles of water as they went. I'd just had the single most erotic experience of my life, but nobody had noticed. I felt dazed, adrift on a sea of unfamiliar emotions. Where was Jamie? I rubbed my wrists and scanned the warehouse, looking for him.

There he was, near the doors, water bottle in hand. I had to speak to him. What would I say?

Uncertain, I scratched my neck and tugged my T-shirt back on. It stuck to the oil smeared over my torso and clung to my skin. Great. Now I was dusty and sticky, and still with a hard-on lodged in my pants. I dug up an awkward smile for Jamie. "Hey," I managed, and then dried up.

He nodded back, his face impassive. Had I imagined the molten heat in his eyes? And was I pleased that he'd been turned on by me, or scared? After all, I wasn't gay. The idea was absurd.

Jamie cleared his throat, then stuck his hands in his pockets. He wouldn't meet my eyes. Fuck, this was weird. We'd been chatting like mates an hour ago. He cleared his throat again. "That was, uh, hot." He hesitated, but then carried on. "I don't know if you're interested, but I've got a friend who, uh, makes films. He'd give you a screen test if you like. If I ask him." He glanced directly at me, then his gaze skittered away again.

*Films?* My brain processed the word slowly before it kicked me in the balls. Films that involved gay men getting naked. He was suggesting I took part in a *porno*? I took a step backward, and another. Christ, no. I didn't know whether to laugh at his offer or to punch him in the face. *I'm not gay.*

I settled for shaking my head. "No thanks." The words rushed out of me, but I couldn't say anything else. I wanted to stomp my foot and wail like a small child. *I thought you liked me.* I couldn't speak to him, didn't want to look at him. What the fuck had I really expected?

Shaking my head in disbelief, I stalked back to Nick. "What's next on the run list?"

For reasons I couldn't understand, I was angry. I shifted lights and umbrellas, swept sections of the floor and rummaged through Nick's bags for props, while silently seething. Jamie had excused himself, thanked Nick for the opportunity to watch the calendar shoot and left in his shiny Audi. He hadn't said anything more to me. We hadn't swapped phone numbers, so I guessed he no longer wanted to beta test my game or invite me to see his Ducati. Why did that piss me off? Fuck if I knew.

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Back home, hours later, I helped Nick unload the last of the bags and finally headed for the shower. The minute the hot water splashed onto my shoulders, I remembered Glynn trickling baby oil on them, and *that* made me think of Jamie. The look in his eyes. The way his hand clenched as he watched me. My stupid, confused cock reared up again.

I'd be seeing Amanda later. Jenna was busy, and since Nick had invited his girl to the house, I'd go back to Amanda's and get some action there. That was hours away though. I had plenty of time for a wank.

With my feet planted firmly on the tiled floor, I leaned against the wall with one hand and grasped myself with the other. I needed release, and fast. I squeezed hard and slid my wet hand up and down my shaft, rough and needy.

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Glynn had been right; girls were too soft. They handled my dick like it would break at the slightest touch.

*Jamie would know what to do.*

Fu-uck. Just the thought of him had my heart pounding and the breath catching in my lungs. I pictured his hand on my cock, and my knees went weak. He'd be firm, on the edge of rough, just how I liked it. I yanked harder, feeling the burn, revelling in the tingling down my spine. My balls ached, and I pulled harder. That was better. My lungs were tight, heart banging against my ribs, and when I closed my eyes, it was Jamie's face I saw.

I came over my hand in a sticky mess and stood there, legs trembling and pulse racing. Amanda. Think of Amanda. "I'm not gay," I whispered to myself.

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## Chapter 7

Amanda draped her arms around my neck, and we swayed to the slow bass beat reverberating around the club. She wiggled closer and brushed her tits against my chest, smiling at me as she did so. Normally, my dick would be half-hard at the prospect of getting into her pants, but tonight... it lay sad and soft. Uninterested.

Maybe I was tired. I'd hauled lots of kit for Nick today. Maybe I was getting bored with her. When she disappeared to the bathroom for yet another eternity, I chugged my beer and let my gaze roam around the dance floor. Lots of girls showing lots of flesh. This was where I'd picked up Amanda in the first place. None of them appealed tonight.

I was tired but edgy too. It was an unsettling combination, and when Amanda suggested we go back to her place, I leapt at the offer. She was all over me in the cab, telling me in that breathy voice of hers that we'd been dating for weeks. Shit. I hated it when chicks got clingy, and it was enough of an excuse to let her down gently. When we reached her apartment, I gave her a quick peck on the lips and murmured some excuse or other before climbing back into the cab.

What was wrong with me? She'd been a sure fire thing tonight. Right now, I could be shagging her, but I sped through the darkened city instead. I leaned forward and snagged the driver's attention. "I've changed my mind. Can you take me back to the club please?" I needed a new distraction; that was all.

It was a couple of hours and several beers later, before I admitted the truth to myself. I was looking for Jamie on the dance floor.

I went home alone.

Lying in bed, failing to block out the noise from Nick banging his girl, I tried to get back to sleep, only to have blue-green eyes following me. My dreams were disjointed, but intense, and all featured Jamie. Christ, I couldn't get away from him.

When I staggered into the lounge in the morning, foul tempered and hung over, the first thing I saw was the gemstone on the windowsill. Labradorite—that's what it was called. It glittered in the sunlight, and I picked it up to look at it more closely. I'd been right. Jamie's eyes were the same colour. And why the fuck was that important?

I avoided Nick and his girl, didn't call Amanda back and decided not to answer Jenna's text. I had sessions booked at the gym today, both group classes and personal clients, and even though I felt anything but sociable, I had to be polite—if only for the sake of my student loan.

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Sunday didn't just drag; it was never-fuckin'-ending. In between classes, I ran myself to exhaustion on the treadmill and pumped free weights until my arms were shaking. While I still didn't feel in the mood for pleasant conversation, at least I'd worked off most of my foul mood. I was able to sit down with Nick and show interest in the initial cut of the previous day's pictures.

He flicked through them on his laptop, pointing out the highlights. I grunted where necessary, asked questions when he fell silent, and generally managed to limp through them all. The shots of me with Dash and Glynn didn't seem to be there, and my spirits rose. Maybe he wasn't using them.

Yeah, right. Nick beamed at me. "Guess which one I'm proposing as the cover shot."

*Fuck.* It was me. Gleaming under the lights, chained hands fisted, my face averted from the camera and just my chin on show. My hard-on wasn't visible, thank God, but from the way I leaned back against Glynn, his hands plastered across my chest, I appeared to be in ecstasy.

"You're kidding me."

"What do you mean?" Nick's surprise looked genuine. He gestured toward the screen with his thumb. "It's perfect. Easily the best picture from the day. The imagery. The background. The lighting. It's flawless, Dan. It might even be the best I've ever taken. You're going to be the cover model for the BUSTED Calendar." He gazed at it, a man besotted, and my heart sank. I'd never be able to escape it now. As if I needed any more reminders of Jamie.

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After another night spent tossing and turning, with sporadic dreams of the best blowjob ever, complete with blue-green eyes gazing at me, I was wrecked on Monday morning. It was back to my usual weekday routine, and I made the gym on time—*just*—and took my early bird wake-up class. This was filled with young, nubile office workers and plenty of clinging Lycra, but they did nothing for me. Not today.

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Even with a healthy dose of porn the night before, the only idea that made me hard was the thought of Jamie touching me, and *that* was disturbing. I'd talk to Jezza, one of my gay friends, and see what he thought. He'd tell me it was just a reaction to the photo shoot, nothing to worry about.

The class finished on time, I hurried through my shower and had fifteen minutes to spare in my race to get to my first tutorial of the day. Jamie had mentioned his gym, in the opposite direction to Uni but within walking distance, and I knew there was a great coffee shop on that street. Yep, I used good coffee as an excuse to walk past his gym, on the slimnest of chances he might be coming out at the same time.

I'd already figured it out. I had to see him, see if he had the same effect on me now, as he did in the warehouse. If I bumped into him and felt nothing, I could laugh off my unsettling feelings and resume my life as normal. I refused to contemplate the alternative, that I'd see him and want more. That wasn't going to happen. And besides, he'd offered me a role in a porn flick. That still pissed me off. He'd written me off as gay, and obviously couldn't handle it.

*What if I am?*

I slowed my pace to a dawdle and tossed the idea around in my head. I still liked girls, so maybe I was just bi-curious. I'd never been attracted to guys before—or one man in particular. A guy who couldn't wait to get away from me.

Queuing for coffee, I took a position where I could see the entrance of the gym and watch the clients come and go. I tried a little experiment. Did anyone make me hot?

None of them. Not the girls in short skirts or the guys with tight butts. None of them had the same precision-cut hair, the eyes that haunted me.

If I lurked any longer, I'd be late. I headed for Uni, swigging my coffee as I went.

Jamie hadn't been there, and I couldn't decide if I was relieved or disappointed.

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## Chapter 8

I detoured past Jamie's gym again on the way to take my evening group classes. This time it was raining, and the coffee bar was shut, so I ducked inside. As luck had it, I recognised the chick on reception.

"Hey, Shaz, how are you?"

She smiled to see me and smoothed back her glossy ponytail, sweeping away a few blonde strands from her forehead. "Hey, Dan. Did you hear we're looking for an extra instructor? Are you interested?"

I didn't know about it, but I wasn't sure I'd apply. Tempting though it was to think of working in Jamie's gym, to maybe even work out with him, he'd not be impressed. He might think I was a stalker.

"Naw." I gave her a lazy smile. "Just checking out the competition."

"Pfft." She perched on the edge of the desk and sat there, legs crossed, toes twitching to the low beats pumping through the gym. "Stealing one of my best clients. I'm not impressed."

Huh? I had a new client yesterday, but she'd just moved to Wellington, so it wasn't her. "Who are you talking about?"

Shaz rolled her eyes. "You act so innocent."

I shrugged.

"Jamie McKenna—as if you didn't know."

For a second I couldn't breathe. "What?"

"He was asking if I knew you. If you were any good as a trainer." Holy. Fuck. My brain spun in circles, and I almost missed her next words. "I told him you were pretty, but clueless." She grinned and tapped me on the chest. "Really. What do you have that I don't?"

A cock. Obviously.

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I ran to my own gym, breathless with excitement. *Jamie had been asking about me.*

Maybe he wanted to talk about the porno again. I slowed my pace. Ah, that wouldn't be good. Modelling was one thing, but a film? Nu-huh. I wouldn't even consider that for Nick, no matter how much he pleaded.

I'd been so wrapped up in my fevered imaginings, I hadn't noticed how hard it was raining until I charged into the gym and collided with another trainer, Louis. "Jeez, Dan. You're soaked." He made a big show of shaking off the water droplets. "Better dry off quick. You've got potential new clients waiting in the office."

For one giddy moment, I thought he meant Jamie. But "clients", *plural*, most likely meant another couple of chicks for my early-bird group. I sucked in an unsteady breath, snagged a hand towel from the pile beside the counter and mopped my face, before blotting my hair and taking off my jacket. Focus, Dan. More clients meant a quicker route to clearing my student loan.

I craned my neck to look past Louis, and saw a glimpse of bright blonde hair in the office. Yeah, more early-birds. Getting rid of the towel bought me another minute to tamp down my excitement over Jamie. I'd savour that later. With a confident smile firmly in place, I strode into the small office, ready to charm a couple of girls and sign them up for my group.

"Hi, I'm..." The words stuck in my throat. Sitting on the sofa was a tall, slim blonde, right next to Jamie. "Daniel Boisseau," I croaked.

Every part of me felt stuck in treacle. My lungs were tight and struggling for air, my feet were glued to the floor, and I think my mouth probably hung open for a moment.

The blonde flicked an amused glance at Jamie, then held out a hand to me. "Kate McKenna. Nice to meet you."

*Whaaat? McKenna?* Was she his sister? He'd said she was married, but she didn't wear a ring. I stood there like a prick, gawping at her, while I tried to pull myself together to shake her hand.

"Hi," I managed, my gaze veering straight to the man beside her.

"Hey, Dan." Jamie's voice reverberated through my nervous system and ignited a flaming ball of lust in my guts.

*Christ.* I hadn't imagined it. My dick twitched, and I sent it a severe *stay down* message. *Say something, Dan, don't just stand there.* "Hey, Jamie."

I knew I *should* be asking what they wanted, how I could help them, but I was useless. All I wanted to do was gaze at him and wonder for the millionth time if this searing attraction was as one-sided as I feared.

Luckily the blonde—Kate—seemed to have a better handle on things. "So," she drew out the syllable, and I dragged my attention back to her. I could feel

my cheeks burning under Jamie's gaze. "My cousin here is trying to persuade me to join a gym. What classes do you have here?"

*Cousin?* I glanced at Jamie again, another wave of giddy excitement washing over me. He stared back, a hint of a smile on his face. "We, uh, do group classes, and smaller private ones," I said. I had to stop, to wipe droplets of rain from my forehead. "What are you looking for?"

"Spin, pump, aerobics, maybe some Zumba. I like the idea of kickboxing too."

"Uh huh." Was it hot in here? More water threatened to drip from my hair, and I swiped it away.

"Mixed martial arts, track circuits, and body slam. How about yoga?"

"Uh huh," I repeated. She could have been reciting knitting patterns, for all the attention I was paying.

"Personal safety, bloodletting, and baying to the full moon?"

Now I looked more closely, her eyes were similar to Jamie's, only darker. "Uh—what?"

A mischievous smile played on her face. "I was starting to think you weren't listening."

Shit, I was screwing this up big time. Whatever my feelings for him, she was a potential client. "I'm sorry, I was—uh—distracted."

"Yes, I could see that. I'm serious about joining, you know."

I scrubbed both hands over my face, dug deep, and tried hard to focus on her. "I apologise. Tell me again what you're looking for. Maybe we should do the guided tour first, and then you can make up your mind." I snuck a quick glance at my watch and groaned silently. "Look, I'm giving a class in a couple of minutes. Let me get my colleague to give you the tour, and he can walk you through the timetable."

"Oh." Her face fell. "Okay."

I could see Louis tapping his watch and pointing to the room I was due in, and I still needed to get changed.

*Please don't go.* I couldn't ask them to wait for an hour.

"Can you come back tomorrow?" In my head, I called up my schedule. "I'm here in the evening."

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A stream of clients made their way across reception from the changing room. *My class*. Louis gesticulated some more, and I knew I had to go. "I'm sorry, I have to get ready and then get to this class. So tomorrow? I'm here all evening." Would Jamie come back with her? Was he just satisfying his curiosity about me? And did I leave him wanting more?

"Okay." She nodded. "I'll come back tomorrow."

Bitter disappointment soured my mouth, and I had to fight to keep a neutral expression. I snuck another look at Jamie, but he was gazing into the depths of the gym, a blank look on his face. *Bored*. Well, that told me everything I needed to know. With one final awkward smile at Kate, I shot out of the office to the staff changing area, and then hurried to my class.

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## Chapter 9

I pushed myself hard in the spin class, pedalling like a maniac on my static cycle, to the bemusement of my clients. I'd fucked up tonight. I needed to make every muscle ache, to leave myself so exhausted that I might get some sleep. I had a test at Uni in the morning, and I needed to be fresh. Hah. Fat chance of that. I already knew I'd spend another sleepless night moping over Jamie. And just when did I turn into such a whining bastard?

My legs ached, and perspiration oozed out of every pore, as I staggered into the staff changing room and dropped onto a wooden bench. I sank my head in my hands. What a God-awful fuck up. It might have been my one chance with Jamie, and I'd behaved like a witless moron.

The door made a quiet snick, and my heart sank even further. An audience. Just to put the icing on the crap-cake of my day. With a weary sigh, I lifted my head.

Jamie stood there.

He leaned against the wall, hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans and a wary look on his face. Hope flooded my chest, and I looked him up and down, scared for a second that I was hallucinating. Dark jeans. Grey zipper hoodie. Baseball boots.

Casual gear suited him every bit as much as the pinstripes had. As I stared, he shoved a hand through his immaculate hair and messed it up a little.

Silence hung between us, although he must have been able to hear my heart pounding. It echoed in my temples, loud enough to hurt. I shook my head, but the vision didn't disappear.

"What are you doing in here?" My voice came out as a squeak.

His lips tilted in a wry half smile. "Kate wanted to join a gym."

"Why this one? Why not yours?"

He scratched at the light stubble that covered his chin. "Yeah, no." White teeth caught his lower lip. "You want me to be honest?"

My lungs were squeezed so tight, a nod was all I could manage.

Jamie sighed, stared at the floor, then he looked directly at me. "I can't stop thinking about you." His cheeks darkened, but he didn't look away. "I know



I'm not what you'd be interested in. I'm not into kink, not even a little. But... yeah." He blew out a harsh breath and then gave a short laugh. "It seemed like fate when Kate asked me to recommend somewhere." He gave an awkward shrug. "There aren't many Daniel Boisseaus in town. Not working as personal trainers. You weren't hard to find."

"Wait." I held up my hand. "Just rewind a minute." I replayed his words in my head. They made no sense. "You're *gay*?"

Horror filled his beautiful eyes, and he tensed. "Shit, yeah. I thought you knew." He scrubbed his face with rough, jerky movements. "Fuck. I didn't mean to offend." His smile was uncertain. "Look, I'll go. And—uh—yeah. I'm sorry." He turned on his heel, shoulders hunched.

"No." I had to stop him before he disappeared. "I don't understand what you mean. What you thought." I was babbling and I tried to speak clearly. "What did you think about me?"

Jamie didn't move. "I couldn't miss how turned on you were." His voice was low and husky. It soothed my clattering heart and vibrated through me, more sensuous than any girl's. "You were so clearly into the bondage and submission, and I just don't do that. And I thought... if that's what you need, I could try it. For you." He sighed. "But, yeah, I read that all wrong, didn't I?"

*I was turned on by you.* Time seemed to stop again. I stood at a crossroads, where I could either stick to what I knew or take this terrifying leap into the unknown. If this had been a cartoon, there would have been a signpost over my head or maybe a giant flashing light. *This Way*, it would urge.

*Jump*, urged the devil on my shoulder. *Say something.*

"No," I whispered. "I don't do that."

Jamie's shoulders slumped even further, and he took a step toward the door.

"I mean the kinky shit," I said.

He paused.

Fuck, this was difficult. I sucked in as deep a breath as my parched lungs could manage. "*I've never done this before.*" I tried again. "I've never done this before, but I think I want to." This was the point of no return. I clenched my fists on my knees. "With you."

I thought Jamie would never turn around. I sat on the bench, in an agony of uncertainty, dripping with perspiration and probably stinking to high heaven. *Please say something.*

Aeons later, he blew out a noisy breath and looked over his shoulder at me. "Am I about to corrupt a het?" His lips quirked into a crooked smile, and my heart nearly leaped out of my chest.

"I guess so." I stood and smiled in return, and felt my lungs easing, the fear being nudged aside by anticipation. "Can we talk about this?"

"Christ, yes." He walked toward me and stood there, a devilish grin on his face, eyes twinkling and a tiny dimple flashing in his cheek. "Did you think I was about to tackle you to the floor?"

Part of me felt relieved. "I need a shower before I do anything."

Jamie's eyes burned with the same molten heat as I'd seen in the warehouse, and I swallowed hard when he stepped even closer. He stuck his hands back in his pockets. "Fuck, Dan, you look good enough to eat. I daren't touch you. I wouldn't be able to stop."

I stared back at him, a thousand questions swimming in my head. There was so much I wanted to know, and I didn't know where to start. "Do you want to go for a drink? When I've showered. You could, um, wait for me."

"If I stay here, I might embarrass myself, knowing you're in the shower." He palmed his crotch, and I tracked the movement to see the outline of his very hard cock pushing against the denim. Instead of being nervous, like I'd imagined, I felt my dick rear up.

I nodded, speechless at the torrent of lust pulsing through me. Another long moment passed with us gazing at each other.

Jamie blinked and stepped back. "I'll wait. Outside."

The devil in me piped up, and this time I gave him voice. "I should tell you, it wasn't the bondage that turned me on in the warehouse. It was you."

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## Chapter 10

Jamie opened his eyes wide at my confession and groaned softly. “You seriously expect me to walk away from you now, after saying that?” He covered the short distance between us and stood in front of me, his breathing ragged. “You are so fucking hot, and you don’t even realise it.” I gazed back, excitement bubbling in my veins. I was going to kiss him. Kiss a man. Kiss *Jamie*.

“Just one taste, Dan.” His gaze searched my face. “And then I promise I’ll wait for you outside.”

He was the same height as me. It would feel odd, not leaning down for a kiss, and close up, he smelled good. Really good. Woody and outdoorsy, he reminded me of a summer garden after the rain. I inhaled and held the fragrance in my lungs. I could no more back away from this man than I could fly to the moon, but it felt right.

Amazingly so.

Should I touch him? Was he waiting for me to make the first move? He moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue, his breath unsteady, and it hit me. Jamie was nervous too. I had no idea if he was wildly experienced, but he seemed to be as affected by me as I was by him. It gave me courage.

I closed the gap and placed one hand over his chest. His breath hitched, and I felt his heart thudding underneath my palm.

He stood completely still, hands clenched at his sides. “Touch me,” he whispered. I complied. I lifted my other hand and, tentative, placed them both on his firm chest. He was hard planes and muscles instead of soft curves. Dark heat filled my guts.

“You look different without your suit.” I fingered the zipper of his hoodie. “Can I?”

“You can do whatever you like.” His voice came out strangled. I nodded and jerked down the zip, uncovering a grey Nirvana T-shirt beneath. The cotton was soft to the touch and moulded to his chest, fitting him like a second skin. Warmth poured from his body, matching the blaze in his eyes. In contrast to his rapid breathing, I felt strangely calm. I’d thrown myself off the precipice and was now freefalling, with no idea of where I’d land.

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I wanted to touch his skin. Leaving one hand over his heart, I lifted the other and cupped his cheek. He huffed out a breath, and I felt his chest judder, but his face drew my attention. His chin was prickly with stubble. *Exciting.*

When I gently dragged a fingernail over it, he groaned and closed his eyes. “You’re killing me, I have to tell you.”

Now or never. I leaned across the gap and brushed my lips over his. Jamie’s eyes opened instantly, fever bright. His mouth was soft, chin was rough. Completely different to kissing a chick. So many textures. I kissed again and turned up the heat, and Jamie responded.

“Fuck, Dan,” he whispered. “Don’t stop.”

I did what I’d been dreaming of. I pushed him against the wall of the changing room and pressed my lips against his, hard and needy. He moaned into my mouth, his tongue flicking against my teeth, and then he nipped my lower lip. It stung, but he licked it away, the soothing gesture making my knees weak. I had his T-shirt bunched in one hand while I dug the other into his perfect hair and mussed it.

Every part of me felt alive in a way I’d never known before. It wasn’t just that my dick was like granite; it was as though I’d shoved my fingers into an electrical socket. My skin tingled, my heart raced, and even my sense of smell was keener. All from one kiss—and what a hell of a kiss.

Before I registered what he was doing, Jamie spun me around so it was my back against the wall and him in charge. Warm hands cupped my face, his thumbs brushing my cheeks. “I’ve wanted to do this since I first met you.” He angled his head, slanted his mouth and pressed it against mine. Slow, firm and dominating. I wanted to melt into him, to capture the moment for posterity.

From the fuzzy and totally distracted back of my brain, a warning light flickered on and off. Something I had to remember. Jamie’s tongue dancing with mine drove everything else out of my head, and it was only when he lifted his head that my memory kicked into gear. We were in the changing rooms.

Reality slapped me in the face.

*Louis might come in at any moment.*

And while this might be the hottest kiss I’d ever had, I wasn’t sure I was ready to come out just yet. Not to my nosy colleague.

Jamie must have sensed my hesitation. He dug his fingers into my hair, pressed a sensuous, fleeting kiss on my lips, then stepped back and dropped his

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hands. "This isn't the best place, huh?" His smile was sweet and rueful at the same time.

"I need to shower."

"I'll wait outside."

I'd only just stepped into the shower, when Louis came in, clattering the gear in his locker and being as noisy as usual. "Hey, Dan. Fancy a pint? The chicks from my yoga class are heading up to Macs Brewery." He stuck his head into my cubicle. "There's a set of twins. They're so bendy, they'll be awesome in the sack."

Another time I would have said yes.

"Nah, mate." *I've got a date with a guy.* I'm going for a drink with the guy I just kissed. *I'm quite possibly going to have wild gay monkey sex tonight.* I contemplated the replies and discarded them all. "I've got a test tomorrow morning. I'm going home to study."

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## Chapter 11

Jamie was waiting by the entrance when I emerged from the changing room, my backpack slung over one shoulder. My clients and other gym users were all coming and going too, and the reception area was busy. A couple of girls from my spin class surrounded me, their faces flushed and smiling. “Hey, Dan. Good class tonight.”

I nodded and smiled back and tried to push past without being rude. “Thanks. Same time next week?”

“Definitely,” they chorused. The taller of the two reached out and placed her hand on my sleeve. “We’re going up to the waterfront, maybe Foxglove. D’you fancy joining us?”

“Sorry, I’ve got plans.” Just thinking about what those plans might include set my heart racing, but I managed to sound regretful. Polite. I looked over their heads and caught Jamie’s gaze, steady and intense. Escaping the throng, I moved to his side, hoisted my pack higher onto my shoulder and gestured toward the exit. “Ready?”

Jamie quirked an eyebrow at me. “Is it always like this?”

“Nah.” We walked side by side to the doors, and it took a few steps before I could speak without sounding like a complete idiot. “So, uh, where are we going?” The rain had eased now. We could walk somewhere without getting drenched.

He shrugged, looking completely comfortable. “Where do you fancy? Macs Brewery is good, or we could go on the waterfront. Plenty of bars there.”

I hesitated. Not Macs, in case I bumped into Louis. “Yeah, waterfront’s good.” I’d been to bars and clubs with mates, too many times to mention, but this just felt weird. We weren’t going for a drink as two guys to eye up the chicks. We were going on a *date*. Would he want to hold my hand? Kiss me in public? I broke out in a cold sweat.

“So how are you finding Uni?”

I mentally thanked him for tossing me a safe conversational topic as we strolled along the still wet sidewalks. “It’s harder than I expected, going back as a mature student. I mean, I’m only twenty-five, but I’d got used to having a full-time job, and now I’m juggling a student loan with part-time work. It’s good though.”

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“So why did you do it?”

“Eh, I didn’t want to be stuck shuffling paperwork forever. What do you do? Nick didn’t say much.”

“I shuffle paperwork, mostly.” I glanced at him to see if I’d offended, but he looked unruffled. “I look after marketing and communications for the Piermont Group. They’re into publishing, hence the calendar shoot, but they do other stuff as well. Some finance and media, and they’re getting into the energy sector.”

It all sounded light years away from my life. Mine revolved around sweating in a gym and pouring all my creative energy into programming. Add in side helpings of beer, pizza and chicks... Jamie didn’t look much older than me, and yet his life was organized. Successful. I shifted my backpack and picked up my stride.

Now was the time to ask him about the porn flick. I needed to clear the air on that score before we went any further. “Do they make movies? You mentioned a porn film.”

“I *what*?” He stopped walking, and I paused and looked back at him. He stood there, eyes wide and a smile breaking over his face. “Did you think I meant a *porn* role?”

My cheeks burned, and I was glad of the shadowy street lighting. “Well, yeah.”

“God, no.” He laughed aloud. “I’m surprised you didn’t punch me in the face.”

I felt my lips curving in an answering smile. “I nearly did.”

“That’s hilarious.” He started walking again, and I matched his stride. “I’ve got a mate who makes regular films, with an indie studio. I know he’s casting at the moment for a short flick, and so yeah, I was serious, if you’re interested.”

By this time, we’d reached the cluster of bars and cafés that sprawled across the waterfront area. I headed for one of my favourites, the Chicago Sports Bar, and Jamie followed my lead. Despite it being a wet Monday evening, it was busy, and I saw a few familiar faces. Foxglove and Macs were great pickup places, the girls flocked to them, but the Sports Bar was a guy-oriented drinking hole.

*It’s not a gay bar*, mocked the devil, piping up again. *Are you trying to make him uncomfortable?* No. Of course not.

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“My shout,” said Jamie, reaching into his back pocket. “They do Gold Medal on tap. You want one? And if you’re hungry, I could get some nachos.”

I was starving after my spin class. And I loved their nachos. “Works for me.” When the barman greeted Jamie by name and said he’d rush the food order through, I had to smile at my assumptions. It sounded as though he came here as often as me.

“Something funny?”

The tightness in my lungs eased a little. “Nah, it’s all good. At the risk of sounding like a corny pick-up, do you come here often?”

He shrugged easily. “We use the upstairs a lot for corporate events. I like the vibe in here.” He grinned at me, a mischievous look in his eyes. “And besides, they have some great arcade machines.” Oh yeah. I’d been dead wrong.

Over the next hour, while we laser-blasted aliens, gunned down zombies and wove our sports cars around a variety of F1 racing tracks, we did some classic male bonding. A love of sci-fi movies: *check*. Beer over wine: *check*. Bacon sandwiches on plain white bread: *check*. Fitness: *check*.

For the moment, the elephant in the room stayed out of sight, but I knew we’d have to talk soon.

If I didn’t know Jamie was gay I would never have guessed. The way we clicked over a giant dish of nachos pushed him firmly into the could-be-mates category, and I was more confused than ever.

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## Chapter 12

"I need to get home soon." Jamie pushed away his empty tankard. "Monty's been stuck inside all day, and I want to give him a walk."

I nodded and glanced at my watch. A shade after nine. "Yeah, I've got a test tomorrow morning. I planned to get an early night."

"So." There was a pause, then Jamie met my eyes. "Do you want to talk first? You can ask me anything you like."

For one bizarre moment, I'd actually forgotten why we'd gone out. I'd been too busy making friends with him. "Um, where do you live?" His brows furrowed, and I hastened to explain. "I'm off Tinakori Road, in Thorndon. We might be heading in the same direction."

"Kelburn." He only lived a few kilometres from me, but on the other side of town.

The bar was noisy and full. There's no way I could talk about gay sex, when I might be overheard at any moment by someone I knew. "You walking home?" He nodded. "Let's talk outside."

It was drizzling when we left the bar, but it was mild. Without speaking, we set off in his direction. He stayed quiet, waiting for me, I guess. Jesus. Where did I start? "You, um, always been gay?"

"Yeah, I think so. My first time was with a boy from college, but after that I went with girls. They never did it for me, though. It felt like I was missing something." He huffed out a breath. "My parents are old school, and my Dad can't get his head around it, so I tried to be straight. But yeah, it wasn't me. I'm discreet, and I don't flaunt my boyfriends in their faces, but it's awkward. They still ask me if I'm going to settle down and get married one day."

Shit. That had never even crossed my mind. I had a mental vision of me coming out to Mum and Dad. How could I tell them? Was there ever a right time? And wasn't I getting ahead of myself? One kiss didn't make me gay. *Even though you want more?*

"You got a boyfriend at the moment?" My voice stumbled over the word *boyfriend*, and I mentally slapped myself. I sounded like a jerk.

"I'm hoping to have one soon." Huh? I snuck a glance at him as we strolled along the quiet street. He shrugged when he met my gaze. "I like you, Dan. A lot. I'd love to corrupt you." This was accompanied by a teasing grin.

Just like that, the tone of the evening changed. His words reverberated through me, and the memory of our kiss ignited the lust that had stayed quiet up to now. I wanted him. I just wasn't sure what to do about it. I felt as tongue-tied as the first time I ever asked a girl out.

"Have I scared you off?" Jamie's voice was serious. I stopped walking and leaned back against the nearest shop window. He turned to face me, hands in his pockets, stiff-shouldered as though bracing himself for a blow.

"No." I rolled the word on my tongue. "I'm just, uh..." I hesitated, trawling my head for the right words.

"Nervous?" His lips tilted with a hint of a smile.

I sucked in a quick breath. "Yeah." The smile grew, and his dimple flashed at me again. I flattened my hand over my rising dick. "And horny."

Jamie let out a juddering breath. "Come back to my place. I can take care of that for you." He nudged at a soggy bundle of leaves with his toe. "No strings. And if you decide it's not for you, no harm, no foul. I'll stay out of your way."

I swallowed hard, and pushed down on the ball of anxiety in my stomach. I liked Jamie. I *trusted* him. If I walked away now, I'd always question if I'd done the right thing.

The walk up the hill to Kelburn passed in a blur of wet streets and sporadic conversation. Every part of me was viscerally aware of the man by my side. The way his shoes splashed carelessly through the puddles. The arm that brushed against mine. His rumble of laughter when I made a joke. I thought of the tattoo I'd seen beneath his shirt. Did he have more ink? I had a colourful snake across my shoulders, which he had to have seen at the shoot.

I was breathless when we stopped outside a tall, thin house, but it was nothing to do with climbing up the hill. My brain had gone into overdrive, hurling all the questions at me that I'd failed to ask Jamie. Was it safe? Would it hurt? Would I suddenly start wearing rainbow T-shirts and growing a 70s-style moustache?

He opened a latched gate, closed it carefully behind me and dug into his pocket for keys so he could open the door. A blur of fur and paws skittered down a corridor and leapt up at him, ignoring me.

"Hey, Monty. Good boy." Jamie reached to the side and flicked a switch, and the corridor bloomed with soft lighting.

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Monty was a mutt. Part Labrador, part German Shepherd, part something hairy, he had enormous ears over soulful eyes, and a thick bushy tail that beat against my legs. His cold, black nose searched my hands and sniffed my crotch before Jamie hauled him back.

“*Monty.*” He sounded scandalized but then blasted me with his sexy smile. “I wanted to do that.”

I laughed. It was hard to stay nervous with this bundle of energy pawing at me. I’d always wanted a dog, and he was cute. “Did you say he needed a walk?” I gestured to my damp fleece. “We may as well go now. We’re wet already.”

The look he gave me was scorching. *Oh yeah.* His low growl made my already hard dick even more like a cricket bat in my pants. “There’s something I need first.”

Dog leash?

Jamie curled his fingers in my jacket and tugged me into his body. *Oh.*

“This,” he whispered, and closed his mouth around mine. Heat, strength and passion roared into me, and I grabbed his shoulders before my knees gave way. Fuck, the man could kiss. Too soon, he lifted his head, gave me a wicked smile, and rubbed his thumb over my lips. “Thank you. For coming.”

Through the fog of lust, my smart-ass mouth triumphed. “I haven’t yet.”

“You will. I’ll make sure of that.”

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## Chapter 13

Fifteen minutes later, we were back at Jamie's house, and this time we made it into his huge kitchen, where he did indeed have a Ducati in pieces on the floor.

While Jamie gave the dog fresh water and biscuits, I crouched and examined the motorcycle laid out on a thick sheet of plastic. "This is a beauty. What are you doing with it?"

"Rebuilding the engine. I need another couple of weeks before it's done."

I trailed my fingers over a shiny section of chrome and then straightened up. "Then what?"

He shrugged. "Haven't decided yet." He leaned against the stove, arms folded, and eyes wary, but with a smile not far away. I liked making him smile. "So, Dan. You want the five-buck tour or the ten-cent option?"

My teasing, "Haven't decided yet," made him laugh, and his dimple flashed. He grabbed my hand and led me through an archway into a tidy lounge, where he released my hand again.

"Why don't we start here?" His low voice made me shiver, and his eyes darkened. "You know, I think the tours have finished for today." Without taking his gaze off me, he slid the fleece jacket from my shoulders and down my arms, before dropping it to the floor. His hard-on was visible inside his jeans, and I had to touch him. Needed the contact. When I pressed my palm over his zipper, his cock bucked, and he groaned, the noise igniting something deep inside my chest.

I wasn't scared any more. I knew he'd look after me. I took a slow, deep breath and then reached behind me and tugged my T-shirt over my head. "You now," I whispered, my voice deserting me. "I need to see you."

Jamie dumped his hoodie and then his Nirvana shirt, and I stared at his bare chest. More muscular than me, but perfectly sculpted, he should have been the one modelling for Nick. I ghosted my fingertips over the tattoo, a detailed series of curves and loops, and he groaned.

"Why d'you have a snake on your shoulders?" His voice was strained, but that might have been because I was running my fingers over his chest and circling his nipples. They were small, brown and firm, and from somewhere in the recesses of my brain, I knew I wanted to lick them.

“Huh?” I wanted to lick his ink too. Like me, he wasn’t very hairy, and now I thought of licking, I let my fingers skate down his abs and to the start of his happy trail. Would I give him a blowjob tonight? How would that feel?

“The snake tattoo?” He swallowed hard, and I watched his Adam’s apple bob, fascinated by his body.

I pressed my lips to his ink. “I was born in the year of the snake.” I licked his skin and felt him tremble. He tasted like he smelled: clean, woody and unbelievably good. “Were you born in the year of the tribal wars?”

“Smart ass,” he whispered. “And now it’s my turn.” As long as *his turn* included getting naked, I was fine. I’d seen other cocks before, usually in the changing rooms, but I’d never burned to see one before. *This one*. To see if it was as hard as mine. To see the effect I had on him.

I nearly climbed out of my skin when he pressed hot lips to the base of my throat and dug his teeth into the sensitive nerves there. “Whoa,” I gasped for air, and he hummed approval, before kissing his way down my chest. My dick ached, and I knew I wanted his lips wrapped around it. Maybe he could read minds. He unfastened the button on my jeans and slid his fingers into the top of my boxers. Jesus H. Christ. If he touched me now, I’d come in my pants.

“Tell me if you want me to stop,” he whispered against my ear.

Stop? That was the last thing on my mind. I managed a grunting noise. It was my way of saying, *please God don’t stop, don’t stop*, and he understood. In a graceful move, he dropped to his knees in front of me and smiled, his blue-green eyes molten with desire.

There were no words in my head. I stared, mute with longing, and he slowly tugged down my zipper, and dragged my jeans down my legs. My cock made a nice tent inside my boxers, and he played first, teasing me, running one finger along the waistband. What to do with my hands? I cupped his head and ran my fingers through his hair. Damp from the rain, it was cool and soft. The opposite of his mouth.

Moist heat enclosed my cockhead, and I groaned, digging in my fingers, before relaxing them again. I couldn’t get any air into my lungs until I remembered to breathe. Holy fuck. This was like no blowjob ever before. I don’t even know what he was doing, but his mouth, his tongue, his fingers... oh God, I just bumped the back of his throat, and he still kept taking me in.

When he moaned, it vibrated through me, setting every nerve on fire and ratcheting the About-To-Come-Meter up to a strong DEFCON 3. I wasn’t

going to last much longer. I'd never seen anything hotter. Jamie, half-naked and on his knees, one hand around my dick, the other—ahh, cupping my balls—and his nose pressed into my groin. How did he *do* that? Could I do that for him?

As I stared, my heart pounding and every drop of blood in my body racing to my cock, he shifted his hands. One still caressed my aching balls, but the other meandered across my butt to circle my asshole. Fear and anticipation rushed through me. Nobody had ever touched me there. I'd fucked a few girls in the ass, but my own hole was pure and virginal.

I whimpered when Jamie moved his head back and my cock slid from his lips. "Has anyone ever...?" He left the sentence unfinished, but I knew what he was asking.

"You're the first."

He blinked, flashed me the sexy smile that I already adored and slowly lifted his hand to his mouth to suck on his fingers. My stomach clenched at what he might do, and my heart sped up. Was he...? Fuck. *Yes*.

He stroked and teased, and when he finally pushed one finger inside me, it didn't hurt at all. I was so surprised, I forgot to be nervous and, before I knew it, I was impaled on two fingers while he sucked my cock deep into his mouth again.

DEFCON 3 leapt to DEFCON 1, a hair's breadth away from imminent detonation, and then Jamie touched something inside me, and I exploded. "*Oh my fucking God.*" There was a single moment of clarity, when I wondered if I could come in his mouth without him choking, and then my body took over. I came so hard, I'm surprised I had bones afterwards. If he hadn't been holding on to me, I'd have collapsed to the floor.

He kissed my lips, and I tasted myself on his tongue. I'd have done anything Jamie asked at that moment. Going to bed with him was the easiest decision I'd ever made.

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## Chapter 14

I awoke to an arm draped over my stomach and the novelty of a hard cock pressed against my butt. Not unpleasant. In fact, I mused, I could get used to this. The next thing I registered was a cold, wet nose bumping against my chin, and the muffled beeping of a phone. My phone.

Jamie's bedroom was still dark, but I had a moment of panic. Was I late for the gym? I thought hard. No, it was Tuesday, and I didn't have any clients this morning. I did have a test at Uni, but that wasn't until later. Much later. Ignoring the repeated beeps, I flicked on the bedside light and rolled over to gaze at Jamie. *My lover.*

His eyelashes were ridiculously long, and his face was thick with stubble. Like mine, probably. I scratched my chin. Yep. How would he feel to kiss now? Memories of the night before rolled through my head. We'd fucked several times. Sure, my ass was a little sore this morning, but nothing that would stop me taking him again. My dick was keen to party, and I rubbed my hard-on against Jamie's. Who'd have thought rubbing my cock against another one would be such a turn on?

We'd done that a lot. And kissed. I'd given him probably the sloppiest blowjob in history, but he'd claimed to love it. I just needed more practice, and this might be an ideal time. I closed my hand around his cock and waited for his eyes to flick open. Behind me, I heard the rattle of Monty's claws on the wooden floorboards and a soft whine. And another beep.

Hooded eyes regarded me, and the most delicious smile in the world made an appearance. "Morning," he muttered, his voice rough with sleep. "Is that your phone?"

"Yeah. It won't be important." It would be Jenna. Or Amanda. Or Nick. All of whom could wait. I leaned into him, about to kiss the fuck out of him, when his eyes opened wide and he pushed himself upright in bed.

"What day is it?" He fumbled on the bedside cabinet for something, picked up his watch and peered at it.

"Umm, Tuesday. I can stay a while if—"

"*Fuck.*" Jamie threw back the duvet and slammed his feet to the floor. "It's fucking Tuesday. I'm late. Un-fucking-believably late."

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“Late for what?”

He was already in the en-suite bathroom, and I heard the shower begin. I scrambled out of bed and padded in his direction. He was gorgeous in the shower, water cascading over his muscles, and his face scrunched up and covered in soap bubbles. I leaned against the bathroom door and stroked my cock. “Late for what?” I repeated.

“I’m due on a seven a.m. flight to Auckland. I have a Board Meeting every Tuesday.” *Oh.* I glanced at my watch to find it was already six-fifteen.

“Will you make it?”

“If I hurry.” The water turned off, he grabbed a towel and began to rub himself haphazardly. He paused and focused on me. “I’m sorry, Dan. I’d love to stay and have a lazy breakfast, but there’s no time.”

Disappointment pooled in my gut, but I fixed a smile on my face. “No worries. Do you want me to feed Monty? Give him a walk?”

Towel abandoned on the rail, he brushed his teeth, the muscles in his back flexing when he leaned over the basin. “I couldn’t ask you to do that.” He spat, rinsed and spat again, then turned to face me. “But thanks anyway.” He stepped toward me, looped one arm around my neck and gave me a minty-fresh kiss. All too soon, he broke off. “If you could give him some dry mix and water, that would be awesome. Thanks, Dan.”

Was he brushing me off? No, he just had work to do.

Jamie stood in front of his closet, riffling through coat hangers. His boxers clung to his still damp ass, and I smiled at the memory of what we’d done the night before. I’d fucked his ass, and it’d been the best thing ever. “Can you let yourself out? The front door will lock by itself; you don’t need a key.”

“Uh, sure.” I felt decidedly underdressed. Jamie turned to me while buttoning up a pristine white shirt, a charcoal grey tie already looped around his neck.

“I feel bad about this.” He paused and held my gaze. “You push everything else out of my head, Daniel Boisseau.” He seemed about to say more, but then closed his mouth and continued dressing.

Two minutes later, the front door banged, and I heard the roar of an expensive car. His Audi. I watched from the bedroom window as he roared up the street.



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I sank onto the bed and fondled Monty's ears. This morning wasn't what I'd expected. I'd just spent the most erotic, most sensual night of my life, and he'd barely acknowledged it. "Does he do this a lot?" I asked the dog. "Maybe he's not good with mornings." My phone beeped again, and I picked it up and read the text. It was from Nick.

*I guess you hooked up. Amanda was looking for you, but I told her you were busy. Good luck with the test. Let me know if we're celebrating or drowning our sorrows tonight.*

I thought I'd told Amanda we were over? I lay back on the rumpled bed, inhaled the musky smell of my sex marathon with Jamie, and realised a few unpleasant things: I didn't know when he would be back; I didn't know if he'd want to see me again tonight; he'd corrupted me, but hadn't made any promises about a replay; I didn't have his phone number, so I couldn't even text him.

How many times had I flown out of a girl's bedroom on some flimsy excuse or other? How many of them had been left puzzling over whether they'd see me again? Too many. And now I was in that same situation, it sucked big time.

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## Chapter 15

Nick and I finally caught up in the late afternoon lull after Uni, and before I hauled ass to the gym for my evening classes. He breezed in, dumped his messenger bag and sank into a seat at the kitchen table.

“Well? How was the test?”

“Yeah, it was fine.”

“A pass?”

I pretended to look shocked. “Do you seriously think I’d fail? No faith, dude.”

He laughed, we high-fived, and I dug into my bowl of cereal again. I liked eating cereal. It was quick, didn’t need cooking and was light enough on my stomach before I exercised. Having a mouth full of food also meant I didn’t have to make conversation.

He ignored that. “Who did you pull last night? Not that stuffy Jenna again. She’s way too high maintenance.”

After spending the entire day trying not to think about Jamie, I’d arrived at a few conclusions. It might’ve just been a one-off. He might be the only guy that cranked my motor, and thus—in a true Sherlock Holmes deduction—I might not even be gay. Bi-curious was a better label. I’d scratched that itch, and now I could move on. All of these meant I didn’t have to fess up to Nick, and so I just shrugged and carried on stuffing my face.

Nick tapped his forehead and sighed. “I nearly forgot. Jamie McKenna was asking about you today.”

I nearly choked on my crisped rice. Nick waited until I’d stopped spluttering before he continued. “He said he’d been talking to you about a film role, but didn’t have your number.”

My phone had been silent all day. He hadn’t rung or texted.

“Did you give it him? My number?”

“Naw. I wanted to check with you first. D’you think he’s talking about a skin flick?”

*Not any more.* “No, it’s for real. He’s got a mate that makes movies.”

“Oh, right.” There was a long pause while I waited for Nick to say something meaningful. “Would you want to do that? I heard he’s gay. It might be some arty boy-on-boy flick.” He grinned at me. “You’d never get it up for another bloke.”

It was the perfect opportunity to say something.

I kept quiet.

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Emerging from one of my classes, I saw a flash of bright blonde hair in reception and recognized Jamie’s cousin, Kate. She’d promised to come back for the tour this evening, but on her own, it seemed. There was no sign of Jamie. We shook hands, and then I led her into the weights room and started my spiel.

She waited until I stopped before she spoke. “What did you think of my cousin?”

*What?* I stared, my cheeks heating under her gaze. Did she want a rating? How many times he made me come? How the fuck was I supposed to answer?

She sighed and tried again. “He likes you.”

“He said that?”

“Well no, not in so many words. But he rang me today and insisted I come tonight.” Her smile was so similar to his, and I found myself looking at her cheeks to see they shared a dimple. “He wanted to ring you, but didn’t have your number.”

*Oh.* I scratched the back of my neck and tried not to blush. Impossible. “Did he, uh, say what he wanted?”

“Something about a film. And that he wouldn’t be able to tell you more until he’s back in town.”

My stomach plummeted to the floor. It was a struggle to keep a neutral expression on my face. “Do you know when that might be?”

“He had to go up to Auckland for a meeting, but the bad weather meant his flight home was cancelled. He’s hoping to come back tomorrow.”

*I might see him tomorrow.* Excitement unfurled in my belly. “Hang on, what about Monty?” I asked.

Kate gave me a smug smile. “You’ve met him, haven’t you? *Monty.*”

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“I might have.”

Her smile widened. “Let’s cut to the chase. Here’s his phone number.” She handed across a glossy business card. “For God’s sake, please give him a call. And don’t worry about Monty, I’m looking after him.”

She made it sound easy. Standing in the spin room, which was guaranteed to stay empty for at least ten minutes, I entered Jamie’s number into my phone and then agonized about dialling.

I was behaving like a moron. He wanted to speak to me. I pressed Call.

It dropped straight to voicemail. “*Hi, this is Jamie McKenna. I can’t take your call right now, but leave me a message and I’ll get back to you.*”

Fuck. I hated voicemail. I disconnected and then felt like a dickhead. We’d spent a large part of the night before exploring each other’s bodies with our mouths and our hands. How hard was it to leave a simple message?

I ended up composing a text.

*Hi, this is Dan Boisseau. Kate gave me your number. See you when you get back to town. PS. Kate’s looking after Monty.*

I added a smiley face, reread it six times at least, and then pressed *Send*.

I took my class and picked up my phone as soon as I could, but there was still nothing back from him. Maybe he was entertaining customers? Or maybe he didn’t want to speak to me after all.

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## Chapter 16

When my classes were done, I rang Nick and arranged to meet him in town. I had no lectures on a Wednesday morning, and only one personal client, so I could safely have a few drinks without fear of oversleeping. *Like Jamie did.* I shook my head to banish *that* thought and headed up to the Chicago Sports Bar, where Nick assured me he had a pint already waiting. Several pints in fact. We celebrated my good test result and were engrossed in a cut-throat game of Zombie Invasion, when my phone vibrated in my pocket.

I dug it out and answered without checking the caller ID.

“*Dan.*” Fuck me, it was Jamie.

I abandoned the weapons controller on the game console and stepped back from the machine, to Nick’s astonishment. We’d been playing a team game.

“What the fuck, Dan? I’m getting wasted here.”

I ignored him and pressed the phone to my ear. “Hi, yeah, it’s me.”

Hearing Jamie say my name made me mushy inside. He’d moaned, shouted and crooned it the night before, and now, like Pavlov’s dog, I reacted automatically. My dick was hard. I blew out a breath and wove through the crowd to find a quieter spot.

“Kate told you I was delayed in Auckland?”

“Yeah. Bummer.”

His soft laugh made my spine tingle. “You could say that. Hey, where are you? Sounds noisy.”

“Chicago Bar. And yeah, it’s busy tonight. There’s a boxing match on later.”

“Ah, right.” There was a pause. “Dan, I’m sorry I had to run out on you this morning. Last night was pretty special. I’d like to see you again.”

He would? My doubts from earlier were being edged to one side, a quiet optimism sliding into their place. “Yeah,” I said gruffly. “I’d like that too.”

Jamie made a frustrated noise. “I have to go. Catch you later.”

I stared at my phone. The call had ended. What had happened at his end to make him cut off so quickly? I shrugged to myself, tucked the phone into my

pocket and headed back to Nick. He'd abandoned the zombies and waited at the bar for me.

"Dude. We were doing so well."

"Sorry." I held up a hand to get the barman's attention, but he ignored me. "Wanna have another go at the zombies?"

Nick's attention was focused on the entrance. "Later. You'll never guess who just walked in."

I continued sending feeble Jedi Look-At-Me messages to the barman. "Who?"

"Jamie McKenna."

*What the fuck?* I spun around, and there he was, striding through the crowd toward me. Forgetting Nick, I grinned at Jamie. "I thought you were in Auckland."

His answering grin made me weak at the knees. "I drove to Hamilton and flew down from there. I'd just found a parking space when I was talking to you."

"Um, hello?" Nick broke into the conversation. "Do you want to join us for a pint, Mr. McKenna?"

Jamie looked at Nick and then back at me. "Actually, I'm going to head home. I've had a long day. I don't want to interrupt."

Nick looked baffled, and Jamie looked tired. *Exhausted*. Little lines cut into his brow, and there were shadows under his eyes. The drive to Hamilton would have taken a couple of hours, and then he'd have had to wait for another flight. All so he could get home tonight.

With a sharp awareness, I knew this was another precipice. I could say goodnight to Jamie and watch him walk out, or I could be honest with Nick, my bestie. I owed him that.

I sucked in a steadying breath and stepped forward to stand next to Jamie. "Do you want me to come?"

Heat flashed in his eyes, and I felt it like a tidal wave. "I'd love to make you come," he murmured in an undertone, and I snorted with laughter.

"I'm, uh, going home with Jamie. I'll see you tomorrow." I stared into Nick's eyes and saw them widen with understanding.

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“Dude.” He wagged a finger from me to Jamie. “You and Mr. McKenna?”

“It’s Jamie.” I spoke for him. “And yeah. It’s kinda new.”

My best friend gazed back at me for an age, and then grinned and held up the remains of his beer. “You still owe me a pint. I’ll collect another night.” I should have known he wouldn’t judge me, but it made my heart sing to see his easy acceptance.

The evening felt good, and I knew the night would be even better.

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## Epilogue

Christmas Day was hot. The sun blazed down from an azure blue sky, and like most of the party, I tried to find a patch of shade in my parents' garden. Dad flipped steaks on the grill, Mum unloaded bowls of salad, and my job—as always—was to make sure everyone had drinks. This was the one time of year the Boisseau clan got together. My entire extended family was here, as always, but with a difference this time: Jamie stood by my side.

We'd gone to his family in the morning, and now he was here, with mine. Dad was still a little unsure how to refer to Jamie. He struggled with calling him my *boyfriend*, and so we settled on *partner*. They'd become friends though, ever since Jamie fixed Dad's ride-on lawnmower, his pride and joy. Mum had been brilliant. My three brothers had given up with their jokes and accepted that Jamie was a *Top Bloke*, while my little sister thought he was *just yummy*.

That could have been because she adored Monty, but I agreed with her.

Jamie *was* yummy. And he was all mine.

## The End



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## Author Bio

*Romance author Sofia Grey spends her days managing projects in the corporate world and her nights hanging out with wolf shifters and alpha males. She devours pretty much anything in the fiction line, but she prefers her romances to be hot, and her heroes to have hidden depths. When writing, she enjoys peeling back the layers to expose her characters' flaws and always makes them work hard for their happy endings.*

Music is interwoven so tightly into my writing that I can't untangle the two. Either I'm listening to a playlist on my iPod, have music seeping from my laptop speakers, or there's a song playing in my head—sometimes on auto-repeat.

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