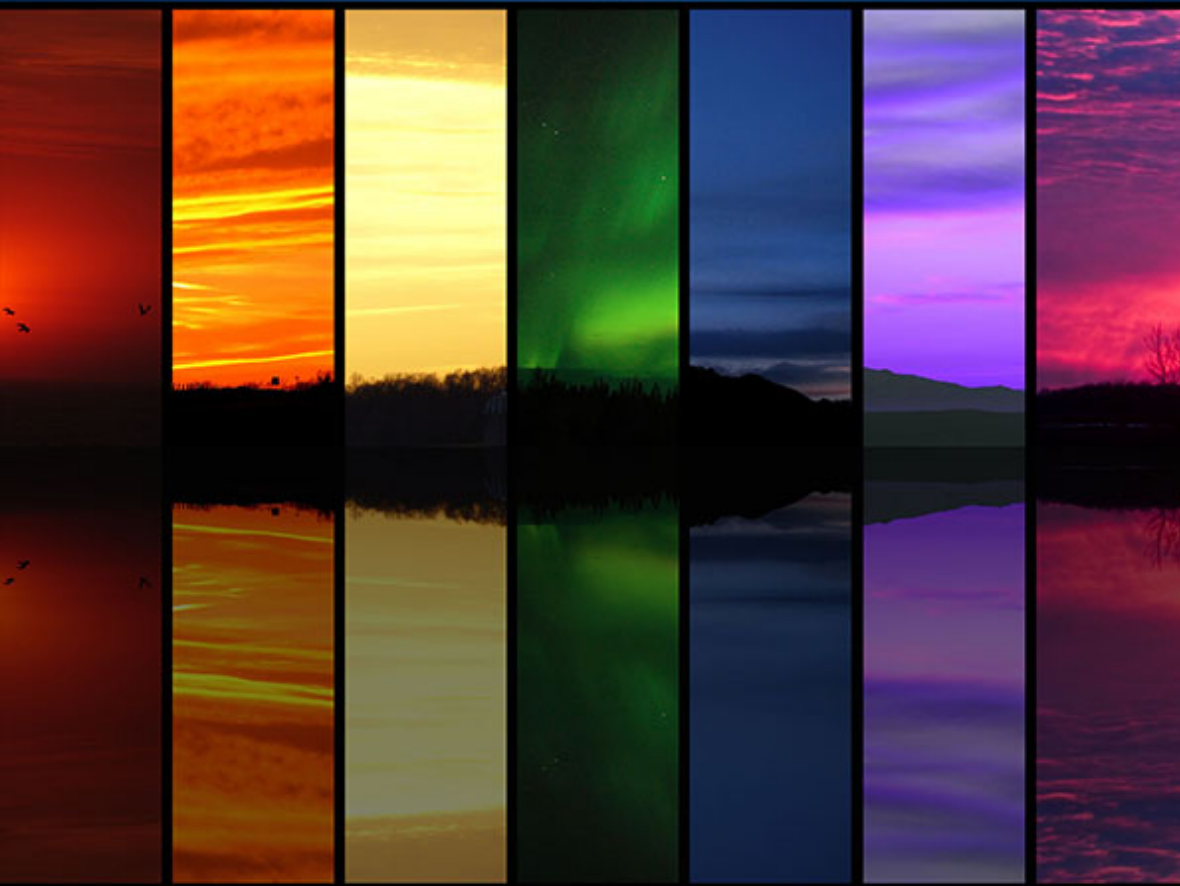


Don't Read in the Closet Event 2014



LOVE'S LANDSCAPES  
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 5

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance Anthology*

## Volume 5

### 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 5.

### 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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# CONSORTING WITH DRAGONS

By Sera Trevor

## Photo Description

A portrait of a beautiful young man with shoulder-length red hair and intense amber eyes. He wears a cloak with long spikes on the shoulders. Behind him is a silhouette of a red dragon.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*It has been nearly 300 years since the last Lord of Drae chose a male consort... so what am I doing here at the capital, dressed in clothes finer than anything I have ever seen, and undergoing three months of (incredibly boring) testing by the Lord's minions?*

*Well, to be honest, it is all my father's fault. Or my father's lack of ability to win at anything, ever. Not at life, not in love, and most certainly not at the gambling tables. While I can do nothing about his life, nor his love, he seems to think I can do an awful lot about his gambling debts. Mainly, he can sell (er... marry) me off to the highest bidder and happily go on sinking my mother's land, title, and general good name into the ground he buried her in.*

*Trouble is, I'm not really worth all that much to anyone carrying a purse, let alone wanting a husband. But if I was unique, if I had done something very few could ever claim to have accomplished (or, realistically, tried to accomplish)... well then, maybe I'd be worth something. To someone. Somewhere. Or, at least my father hopes. Personally, three months free of my father sounds like a rather nice vacation. Three months of good food, free clothes, fine surroundings, and one flirty guard. Yes, that sounds just lovely.*

*It has been nearly 300 years since the last Lord of Drae chose a male consort... and neither fire nor fate is going to change that any time soon. Or so I thought...*

*(um... not a lot of restrictions on this. I only require a dragon or two, a flirty bodyguard, and some type of HEA or HFN. Also, if you can make it funny, I will love you forever.)*

Sincerely,

Carrissa

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** fantasy

**Tags:** humor, age gap, non-explicit, royalty, magic users, soul mates

**Word Count:** 41,072

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### *Acknowledgements*

I would like to thank my betas, Jessica and Roger, as well as my extremely supportive husband. I would also like to thank the terrific team behind the Love's Landscapes Event, and the posters over at the Love's Landscapes Author Support Thread. You all have made this such a wonderful experience! Lastly, I'd like to thank Carissa for providing me with such a wonderful prompt—I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it!



# **CONSORTING WITH DRAGONS**

**By Sera Trevor**

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## Chapter One

Jasen sensed the dragons before he saw them.

He couldn't have explained it if someone had asked him. One moment, he was dozing in the carriage, not quite able to fall asleep due to his father's monstrous snoring, and then suddenly there was a *warmth* in his chest. It radiated outward with each beat of his heart, until his whole body was filled with it. The feeling pulled him to the window. When he looked out, there they were—dragons. Or not there, exactly—they were off in the distance, flying over the city of Draethenper, their silhouettes dark and enormous. There were two of them, moving in a slow, unearthly dance, weaving in and out of each other's paths with a grace that should be impossible for creatures of their size. The sun was low in the sky, melting into oranges and reds as warm as the feeling in his chest.

Jasen was moved in a way he had never been before. For some unfathomable reason, he decided to try to share the moment with his father. "Dad," he said, nudging him. "Dad, wake up!"

The man continued to snore. After poking him a few more times, Jasen finally resorted to giving him a hard slap on his enormous stomach. He let out a loud snort as his eyes shot open. "Wha-what?" he slurred. "What is it?"

"Come look," Jasen said, gesturing out the window.

Slowly, his father complied. It took a few moments, but a grin tugged at his lips at last. Jasen smiled, too, pleased to share a nice moment with his father for once, but then his father said, "A-ha! We're nearly at Draethenper, then! Excellent timing—we're almost out of wine!"

Jasen sighed. He should have known better than to try. "I meant the dragons," he said. "And we've only been on the road for two hours—how can you be out of wine already?"

"Well, a lot of it has spilled, hasn't it?" he said, a touch defensively. "It's damn difficult to pour wine with all this jostling and bumping."

"You're drinking it directly out of the bottle."

"Of course I am *now*. I've learned my lesson, haven't I? Now, where did that damn thing run off to?" He patted around until he found the bottle he'd

been working on before he'd nodded off. "Ah, here it is!" He took a swig, then offered it to Jasen.

Jasen looked at the last swallow in the bottle, no doubt made up of his father's spittle as much as wine. "No, thank you."

His father shrugged and finished it off. He smacked his lips. "How much longer before we're there, do you think?"

"I don't know. An hour or so. If it's any longer, I'm sure you could lick the floor—that ought to sate your thirst, at least for a little while."

His father put a hand over his heart and rolled his eyes to the heavens. "Ah! You wound me, son! Can you blame me for being nervous, sending my only child out into the world, all on his own?"

Jasen scowled. "This was your idea."

"You didn't exactly collapse in despair when I suggested it." He clapped Jasen on the arm. "Cheer up, son! This will be good for you."

"Oh yes, my best issues are at the front of your mind, I'm sure. The fact that you'll make a fortune auctioning me off is just a pleasant afterthought, right?"

"Oh, come off it. You want this, too. And just think—you'll no longer have all those girls bothering you, trying to get you to marry."

"I suspect they bothered you more than they bothered me, what with how their fathers kept trying to get a marriage price out of you. A bit deluded of them, I thought. Especially since you gambled away the manor Mother meant for me."

"I'm going to win it back," his father sniffed. "It's true, my luck has slumped in recent days—"

"More like years," Jasen mumbled.

"These things come in cycles, my boy! The wheel will turn."

There was little sense in arguing about it with him, so Jasen said nothing. He ran a hand through his long, red hair, then rubbed his face, trying to banish his weariness. They were on the last part of a journey that had taken two weeks; their home in the back province of the kingdom of Grumhul was as rural a place as one could imagine. They had left their horses and more rustic carts at the last inn; his father had insisted on renting a fancy carriage for their grand entrance into the city. Not that anyone was going to see them; his father had

gotten so distracted by a game of cards that they left two hours later than they were supposed to.

They were journeying to Draethenper, the city at the heart of the Draelands, which was itself the largest kingdom of the Allied Realms. Each year, dozens of eligible noble young women and, less frequently, young men were invited to Court to try to find a husband. Over a grueling three months, they would be poked, prodded, and polished to make them as attractive as possible to potential suitors, who would arrive in the last month to begin their search for either a bride or a lord consort, as the eligible young men were known. A grand ball was held at the end, where all engagements were announced (and marriage prices negotiated with the fathers of the brides- and lord-consorts-to-be).

And now, Jasen would be among them. It wasn't a thought he relished. He'd tried to keep his interest in men a secret, but the illusion rapidly dissolved one day when his father caught him on his knees in front of Hans, a stable boy. After that, all of his many other exploits came to light. To his surprise, his father was delighted at the discovery. While not as common as a marriage between a man and a woman, men did sometimes marry other men. The reason Jasen had dreaded his father's discovery was that a first-born son was discouraged from forming such a marriage, since they were expected to continue the family line. There was also the matter of the low birth and sheer volume of his chosen partners. But the surprise at his father's acceptance vanished when he suggested that Jasen present himself at Court as a potential lord consort, which explained everything. He meant to sell him to the highest bidder.

Well, that wasn't completely fair. His father was right that Jasen hadn't put up much of a fight; he could have refused, if he wished. For men who preferred other men, there was always the choice of either taking a lord consort or becoming one. However, thanks to his father, Jasen had no money or land. After his mother had died when he was twelve, his education had trickled off to next to nothing, leaving him unqualified for pursuing any of the professions deemed suitable for men from noble families. Neither did he possess any magical abilities; almost no one in Grumhul did. His one advantage was his striking good looks: he had long, red hair of an unusually vivid hue, brilliant amber eyes, lithe limbs, and fine facial features with lips whose natural resting state was an exceptionally sexy pout. He desperately wanted out of Grumhul, and with beauty as his only advantageous trait, Court was his best bet.

They rode in silence for a little while longer. Jasen kept his eyes trained on the dragons, who remained soaring above the city until the light began to fade. They flew off then; Jasen wondered where they had gone. Dragons were their own creatures, not under the control of men. They could go anywhere—anywhere at all. Jasen wondered what that was like.

“The sun’s almost set,” Jasen observed. “We’ll be lucky to get into the city at all at this rate.”

His father waved his hand. “It will be fine, I’m sure. Are you eager to get there?”

“I’m eager to get out of this carriage.”

“Oh, come now! Surely you’re at least a tad excited?”

“Not really.”

“Ah, you’re nervous. You shouldn’t be. You’d be a fine catch for any suitor—I suspect you’ll have your pick of them!” He stroked his beard. “I think you should try for an older man. Much older, in fact—someone who is up to his ears in gold and dying for someone to spend it on. And just think—if you find one old enough, you probably won’t even have to bed him that often!”

Jasen groaned and put his hands over his face. “I don’t want to talk about this with you.”

“What? I’m just being practical.” He stroked his beard some more. “Even if you find someone too old for frequent sexual congress, you might still want to emphasize your—ah, *experience* in bedroom matters. I imagine that would be very exciting to a man looking for some fun in his twilight years. You could describe your exploits to him—send him to his grave a happy man!”

“Please stop talking,” Jasen mumbled from behind his hands.

His father, apparently, did not hear him, for he continued on. “I know that traditionally, the Court promotes purity, but believe me when I say that there are plenty of men who have little interest in such things. Why, the very first day I met your mother, we—”

“*Dad!*” Jasen shouted, removing his hands from his face. “I have no desire to hear about whatever you and my mother got up to, and I also have no desire to talk about any of the rest of it, either!”

His father held up his hands. “Sorry, sorry,” he said.

Jasen got to enjoy five whole minutes of silence until his father started up again. "If an old man doesn't appeal to you, you could always set your sights a little higher." He waggled his eyebrows.

"I have no idea what you're on about."

"The king, my boy—the king!"

Jasen stared at him. "The *king*? You're mad!"

"Am I? He's still a virile young man—thirty years of age at the most. And it's been two years since the queen's death. He must find a spouse."

He was right. King Rilvor held two titles—not only King of the Draelands, but also the Lord of Drae, the human who was linked most closely to the dragons, and who by virtue of that fact was the supreme leader of all ten of the Allied Realms. All human magic depended on that link. While all of the royal family shared in this connection, it was the Lord (or the Lady, when there was a queen) who bore the brunt of it. It was a position of incredible power, but also incredible strain. He needed a partner to help ease his burden. If the Lord of the Drae grew too weak, humans would lose their powers. It had already started to happen; those who were dragon-blessed with magical abilities reported a weakening of their powers. Pressure was mounting for him to remarry, and in all likelihood, he would find his future spouse in this season's Court.

Even so, the possibility that the king might choose *him* was laughable. "Yes, the *queen* is dead," Jasen said. "And she was a woman."

"So? There are many men who enjoy the favors of both men and women. And I've heard rumors."

"The Lord of the Drae always marries a woman. He has to produce heirs."

"He has four children already, and siblings with children of their own. There will be someone to take his place when the time comes. And it's not unknown for a Lord of the Drae to have a lord consort instead of a queen. There was King Athert."

"That was three hundred years ago, and it hasn't happened since!" Jasen said. "And even if he did have an interest in men, do you honestly think the king would choose a man of the lowest level of nobility from the most backward of the back kingdoms to be his lord consort?"

"Don't sell yourself short, son!"

“This has nothing to do with selling myself short and everything to do with having a firm grasp on reality! The Lord of Drae hasn’t had a male consort in three hundred years, and neither fire nor fate is going to change *that* any time soon! Now kindly *drop the subject*.”

His father shrugged. “All right, son, as you say.” And then he added, under his breath, “But stranger things have happened, is all I’m saying.” They lapsed into silence after that.

It took even longer to get into the city than Jasen had anticipated. His father had decided not to hire a driver for their expensive rented carriage in order to save money. He figured that their footmen, Rodrad and Garyild, could handle it well enough, but he had been wrong. Garyild was partially blind and Rodrad’s hands were arthritic, so they settled on a system in which Garyild held the reins and Rodrad shouted directions. It was amazing that they’d made it as far as they had already without an accident, but their luck eventually ran out; they ran straight into a mud-filled ditch. It took all four of them to free the carriage from the deep mud patch, and by the time they were done, they were all filthy from head to toe. They also discovered a wheel had been knocked out of place and had to be repaired. And since it was dark and none of them possessed magical ability, they had to do the whole thing by lantern light.

Miraculously, they figured it out, by which time it was two and a half hours after sunset. Then, after the carriage was repaired but before they got back on the road, Jasen and his father got into a shouting argument that had begun with Jasen insisting that he should take over the driving, which his father forbade on account that it would make them look unsophisticated. From there, Jasen demanded to know why his father had chosen their two oldest servants to accompany them. After some hemming and hawing, his father confessed that he didn’t trust Jasen not to “lose control” of himself with the younger servants, which Jasen felt was *ridiculous* and *insulting* and... well, also somewhat true, because he actually had slept with quite a few of them—it wasn’t his fault that there was nothing else to do in their backward hellhole of a province, and besides, he thought his father was thrilled that he was such a big slut. And then his father roared at him that Grumhul was the home of the best people in the world—so what if they weren’t fancy, they had *heart* and he should be proud of his heritage. Jasen countered by pointing out that if his father was so proud of their heritage, why had he insisted on the fancy carriage in the first place... And so on, for another half an hour.

---

All told, it was well past ten in the evening by the time they arrived at the city gates. The guards almost didn't let them through; no one was supposed to be admitted after dark. His father blustered and threatened, throwing around his title of the Baron of Hogas in the kingdom of Grumhul, as if that were somehow impressive. Incredibly, it worked, and soon their fancy carriage, now covered with mud, was on its way to Strengsend, the grand palace of Draethenper. The palace itself was actually only one part of Strengsend; there were dozens of different structures, gardens, and several acres of land known as a draemir, a sacred site set aside for any dragons that happened by.

The scene from the city gates played out again at the palace gates, but they made it through there, too. Going through the palace gates was like stepping into a dream. Even though it was night, the whole place was lit by dragon lights—glowing globes that were enchanted by the dragon-blessed to provide light. He'd always imagined them to be something like torches, but the light they provided was a much softer, almost unearthly glow. The grounds were beautifully manicured—strange but beautiful trees, each of a unique shape, lined the main road, along with neat rows of the most beautiful flowers Jasen had ever seen. He could only imagine what it all must look like in the light of day. In the distance, he could see the magnificent palace. And he knew that beyond the palace, out of sight and up against the Ashfell Mountains, was the draemir. Jasen wondered if the dragons he saw earlier were there now.

The palace was actually four large structures, which were known as the wings. The consorts were housed in the East Wing. His father would spend the night in the West, where the families and suitors were housed. He would only be there for the night, however; the next day, he would make his way back out of the city to stay with a cousin of his for the three months until the suitors and families were received once again.

Once the carriage had stopped, Jasen made to get out, but his father put a hand on his arm. "Wait," he said. "I'd like to have a word with you, before we say good-bye."

Jasen resumed his seat and crossed his arms. "Well?"

His father sucked in a breath, then let it out in a long puff. He looked at his feet, then the ceiling, and then, quite forlornly, at the empty wine bottle. Jasen rolled his eyes and made to get up again, but at last, his father spoke. "I know I haven't been the best of fathers, especially after your mother passed, but—well, I did the best I could. Maybe it wasn't good enough, but there you have it. You're my son, and I want you to be happy."



At that, Jasen let out an incredulous scoff. "Oh, of course. And if I could be *happy* as well as netting you a fortune, so much the better. Am I right?"

"And what's wrong with wanting that?" his father said. "We need the money."

"*You* need the money. I bet the day you found me sucking Hans's cock was the best day of your life, because that meant you could sell me to fill your coffers. You pissed away Mother's fortune, and now you're using the next generation to do it again."

He expected his father to start in with excuses, but he said nothing, merely looking down at his hands folded in his lap. "You're so much like your mother," he murmured. "She was always right about me, too."

"Oh, masterfully done," Jasen sneered. "Self-deprecating, with a mention of Mother to boot." Jasen fastened his cloak; he'd cleaned the mud off of his face and hands as best he could, but his clothing was still a mess. He hoped that his cloak would hide the worst of it. "Just so we understand each other—if I do manage to marry some rich old goat, you are not getting a single copper beyond the marriage price, no matter how much you blubber."

"Of course, son," he said, his shoulders still slumped. Just when Jasen began to feel a twinge of regret, his father continued. "I won't impinge on your generosity. Find a husband, and be happy. Don't spend even a single moment thinking of your poor old father, all alone in an old rotting castle, perhaps going hungry—starving, even..."

Jasen bundled up the ends of his cloak, shoved it against his face, and screamed. After a few moments, he removed the cloak and took a few deep breaths. "You know, you almost had me there for a moment."

His father peeped upwards. "A little too much?"

"Just promise me you won't gamble away the marriage price before I even find someone."

"I swear on your mother's grave."

"Swear on that wine bottle," Jasen said. "I'd believe you then."

Jasen swung open the door to make a dramatic exit—only to have it slam into Rodrad, who had been struggling to get Jasen's trunk from the top of the carriage. The trunk went sailing after him.

“Rodrad!” Jasen said, scrambling from the carriage. The man was laid out on the ground, moaning; Garyild was beside him. The trunk had burst open; all of his things were scattered everywhere. “Are you all right?” He turned to Garyild. “Did the trunk hit him?”

“No, m’lord,” Garyild said. He paused. “At least, I don’t think so.”

Rodrad struggled to sit up. “No, m’lord, it didn’t hit me. Just had the breath knocked out of me—I’ll be fine.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes, m’lord. Just need a little help getting up—”

Jasen went to his side, and together, he and Garyild helped him to his feet.

“Everything all right out there?” his father shouted out of the window.

“Why don’t you get your fat ass out here and see for yourself!” Jasen shouted back.

—and then he noticed that the doors of the hall had opened. A handsome young man in uniform stood staring at them. “Can I help you?” he asked.

Jasen tried to respond, but he felt as if he were choking on something. It was probably humiliation, if he had to take a guess.

While he tried to compose himself, his father burst forth from the carriage. “I am Draul, Baron of Hogas of the kingdom of Grumhul,” he said. He sounded not the least bit embarrassed. “And this is my son, Lord Jasen. He’s here for Court.”

Remarkably, the man did not laugh or sneer at them. “Of course, my lord,” he said with a bow. “We have been expecting Lord Jasen.” He paused. “Although we didn’t quite expect him at this time of night.”

“We had carriage trouble, didn’t we?” his father bellowed.

“Yes,” said the man, looking over at the carriage and their filthy clothing. “I can see that.”

“Then why are you so surprised we’re late?” His father thrust his chest out and leveled his best haughty stare at the guard. “Well? Aren’t you going to have someone see my son to his room?”

“Yes, my lord. I’ll see Lord Jasen to his room myself. I imagine you and your servants will want to retire yourselves, now that you’ve seen Lord Jasen

here. Don't worry about the trunk," he said to Garyild and Rodrad when he saw them trying their best (and failing) to clean up the mess. "We can take care of it. In fact, why don't I send someone up to show you the way to the West Wing? I know the grounds can be confusing."

"Grand, grand," his father said. He turned to Jasen. "Well, good night. I can come by in the morning to say good-bye."

"That won't be necessary," Jasen said, keeping his tone as neutral as he could.

His father's face fell. "No, I suppose it won't. Good-bye, son."

Jasen turned his back and made his way up the steps, where the man waited for him. He crooked his arm; Jasen was puzzled for a moment before he realized that he was meant to take it. He had an urge to look back, but managed to suppress it. He and the man stepped inside, the door closing itself behind them.

When they entered the hall, they immediately walked up a small staircase covered in pristine red carpet, which became considerably less pristine as Jasen tramped across it. At the top of those stairs was a room with two enormous pillars on either side of the room supporting a high ceiling, and... more stairs. A lot more stairs. There were two enormous staircases, one to the right and one to the left, that curved around in a grand arch, leading to a large, ornate door. It seemed to Jasen that two staircases were excessive, given that they led to the same place.

There was a hallway running through the center of the stairs; chairs were situated here and there in front of the doors. Why? Did they assume a visitor might need to rest before summoning the energy to walk into the next room? Given all the hiking that was necessary to get around the place, maybe he wasn't too far off.

"Welcome to the East Wing," the man said. "I am Larely, by the way. I am the junior officer in charge of security."

"Pleasure to meet you," Jasen mumbled, keeping his gaze on his dirty boots.

"Are you injured?" Larely asked.

Jasen looked up at him, confused. "No. Why would you think that?"

"You were obviously thrown from your carriage," he said.

"Oh—no, I wasn't. I had to get out to help when we got stuck in the mud."

---

The guard looked at him in surprise. "You helped?"

"Of course I did. We weren't about to get out of there otherwise, were we?"

"I suppose not," the guard said, smiling. "But most of the nobles I've met would rather sit in a carriage all night than get dirty."

"I suppose that's easier to do here in the Draelands, but in Grumhul, we don't have magic. Things don't get done with a snap of the finger; we have to rely on each other to—" Jasen stopped abruptly when he realized that he sounded *exactly* like his father. "Besides," he continued in a cooler tone, "maybe I like getting dirty."

Larely burst out laughing. "I hadn't considered that a possibility." He gestured to one of the chairs. "Please, have a seat. If you will excuse me for a moment, I need to see that your father and your things are taken care of. Won't take me but a moment."

Jasen was going to protest, given the state of his clothing, but the guard obviously knew and had offered him a seat anyway. Jasen did as he asked. Larely disappeared behind one of the doors.

Jasen fidgeted in the chair. Not that it was uncomfortable. Actually, it was a bit too comfortable. The furniture in his own home tended towards the hard and wooden side. The creak of the opening door startled Jasen out of his thoughts. Larely had meant it when he said he'd be quick, it seemed. "All settled," he said. "I'll show you to your room now."

"You're a guard, aren't you?" Jasen asked.

"Of a sort."

"The sort who shows people to their rooms and arranges for carriages?" Jasen asked. "It isn't generally what guards in our country do."

Larely laughed. "Nor in ours, but I'm a special case. The truth is that there is very little to protect you from, so I like to keep myself busy. Otherwise, I might end up like Captain Ingo."

"The senior officer of security?"

"Yes. He's a hopeless drunk. Not that I blame him; it can get a bit boring here. I joined the guard because I was hoping that it would be less tedious than working at my father's vineyard, but that sadly doesn't seem to be the case." He gave him a sly look. "Although there is the occasional moment of excitement. I *am* called upon to rescue consorts sometimes."

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Jasen eyed him skeptically. "From what?"

"From themselves," he said with a wink. He offered his arm again. Jasen took it. It was strange to be led around this way, but he supposed it was all part of the decision he'd made to come here. He was a consort-in-waiting—creatures who were apparently very delicate and requiring of special care. They walked back to the staircases, ascending up the one on the right. As soon as they walked through the large door at the top, the hall split three ways—a path to the right, one to the left, and one straight ahead. They took the path straight ahead, passing dozens of doors spaced closely together. They passed them all by and went up yet another flight of stairs.

Jasen considered himself fit, but even he was a little winded by the time they reached the top. At long last, Larely stopped in front of a door; a small placard with his name hung on it. "Here we are," he said, opening the door. "I've arranged a bath for you, and your things should be sent up shortly. If you should need anything else, ring the bell."

"Thank you."

"Orientation is at three," Larely continued. "A valet will be up in the morning to help you dress." He paused for a moment. "And if you ever need anything the servants can't provide, just ask for me."

"That's too kind," Jasen said.

"Not at all," Larely said. "Nothing would please me more than for you to keep me busy."

It was a testament to how out of his element Jasen was that he hadn't picked up on the flirtation until just then. "I'm sure I'll think of something for you to do," Jasen said, flirting almost by reflex.

Larely held his gaze for a moment, a sly grin on his face. "Good night, my lord," he said with a small bow and a more formal intonation, but the sly grin didn't waver.

Once he was gone, Jasen went into his room and shut the door. The room was not quite as small as Jasen had expected. It was lavishly decorated in reds and golds. There was a bed on his left, and a dressing screen and full-length mirror on his right. In the center was a small table and two chairs.

He investigated behind the dressing screen; there was a bright copper tub there, with bottles of soaps and oils laid out on a table beside it. There was a

rack with a dressing gown and a few fresh towels. As he approached it, steaming hot water began to fill the tub. He jumped back, startled, but regained his composure. It wasn't as if he'd *never* seen magic before; it just had never been quite this casual. Jasen had forgotten what even servants in the Draelands could be capable of.

Jasen removed his clothing as the tub filled. Once it was finished, he eased into the water. It was heavenly; a full, hot bath was a rare treat. He reached for one of the bottles and dumped some of its contents into the water. A sweet floral smell filled the air. He washed himself, including his hair, then lay back and enjoyed the warmth. When he was finished, he dried himself and put on the dressing gown.

There was a knock on the door. It was a servant who had Jasen's trunk floating behind him. Jasen tried not to stare as the servant directed his trunk into the room, then collected the tub with another movement of his fingers. He wondered if the servant was dragon-blessed, or if the items themselves had been put under enchantment.

When the servant was gone, he retrieved a night shirt from his trunk. After he slipped it on, he climbed into bed. He should have been tired enough to fall asleep right away, but his thoughts kept him awake for some time. He had been so sure he was ready to leave everything about Grumhul behind, but now that he was here at the palace, he missed it. Already he felt out of place. That was probably only going to get worse. He shut his eyes and tried not to think about it. Instead, he thought about the dragons, remembering their smooth, intricate dance in the sky. Gradually he relaxed, and soon he was asleep.

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## Chapter Two

Jasen woke up just before the sun rose. He'd always been an early riser, and being in an unfamiliar environment made his sleep uneasy. Since there was no point in lying in bed, he pulled on his dressing gown and got up. He discovered a few sweet biscuits in a jar on his bedside table, so he grabbed a few and sat down at the small table by the window. It might have been tiresome climbing all those stairs, but the view from this high was spectacular. He was facing east, so he got to watch the sun slowly illuminate the palace grounds. His attention was especially drawn to the famous Bedrose Gardens, known throughout the realm for their fantastic array of exotic flowers, breathtaking fountains, and gallery of topiary wonders. He would very much like to see it, so he decided to get dressed and go for a walk. The gardens were not far from the East Wing, and he didn't imagine they'd send breakfast up for another two hours. Surely he'd be able to slip out and slip back in again without anyone noticing.

It didn't make much sense to get dressed up in finery just for a walk, especially if he wanted to go exploring. He selected a tunic and long trousers from his trunk—the sort he wore when he went for hikes in the swamps of Grumhul. He tied his hair back, pulled on some boots, and then he was off.

He walked down the stairs as quietly as he could. He figured there had to be some way for the servants to get around, and after some searching, he discovered a partially hidden staircase that led down to the kitchen. The kitchen was already bustling—no doubt it took a lot of work to get the whole hall fed. A few servants looked at him in surprise, but he quickly escaped through a door which lead outside.

Jasen started off toward the gardens, but on his way, he felt a strange pull. That warm feeling he'd had in his chest when he'd first seen the dragons bloomed inside him again, and almost before he knew it, he found himself heading towards the palace instead, and when he reached the palace, he kept going—up a trail and straight into the draemir.

It did not occur to him to question this decision, or even consider it strange, but neither was he in a trance. He made his way past the palace, up a path which led towards the base of Ashfell Mountain. It was a bit of a hike—a good three-quarters of an hour passed before he finally stopped walking as he reached a clearing. Just beyond him was a forest, and beyond that, the

mountain. A brook ran by; he bent down and took a long drink. As the cold, sweet water hit his stomach, he suddenly realized how strange it was for him to be here. Why had he climbed all this way?

He was actually starting to get a little disturbed about the whole situation when suddenly, he saw something come towards him from the forest. There was a vibration in the ground that matched a rumble in his heart. He gasped as the fire in his chest bloomed again, much stronger than before. As the feeling washed over him, the enormous figure stepped out of the trees. A dragon, its scales shining as red and bright as rubies in the morning sun.

Jasen had known, of course, that dragons were large creatures, but now that he was standing near one, he realized that he had not truly appreciated what that meant. Never in his life had he felt so small, but at the same time, he felt as if his world had expanded a hundredfold. His life and everything he knew to be true was called into question in a joyous way. Every doubt, every petty fear, every care of his life grew as small to him as he must seem to this dragon. It was wonderful. It was terrible. He would never be the same.

The dragon approached him slowly. He lowered his massive head until Jasen found himself looking into one enormous eye that was the same amber color as his own. At once, they knew each other's names.

*Tasenred.* That's what the dragon was called.

Jasen reached out one hand and touched the dragon's snout. A jolt went through him; every nerve in his body sang. The dragon blinked, then folded his legs underneath him and laid down on the ground with an earth-shaking thud. Jasen let out a startled laugh. "Are you tired?" he asked the dragon. The dragon blinked at him again. Jasen sank down as well, putting his arms around the dragon's neck, his face up against the smooth, warm scales. It felt like the most natural thing in the world to do. "Me too," he said. "It's taken me so long to get here..."

Jasen turned over and leaned against Tasenred's neck, closing his eyes and soaking in the sunlight that grew stronger with each moment. Some time passed, but Jasen couldn't be sure how much. He was disturbed from his rest when the dragon lifted his head, turning his attention to something. Jasen sat up and looked as well.

There was a tall man at the edge of the clearing. His black hair hung loose to his shoulders, and his face was covered with a neatly trimmed black beard.



He wore a red tunic and breeches. Over these he wore a Drae's cloak, which was a ceremonial garment often worn by draeids. It had dragon's teeth on the shoulders and was clasped with a bright red jewel known as a dragon's tear, and lined with dragon scales. The elements of the cloak were gifts from dragons, as dragons shed their teeth and scales often. He was a draeid, then. Draeids and draeidesses lived in monasteries and nunneries among the people, but they also ventured into the draemirs often for personal meditation and communion with the dragons.

Jasen had no idea what to say; fortunately, the man spoke first. "I've never seen him take to someone so quickly." He had a slight accent—something eastern, but Jasen was too ill-traveled to place it exactly.

Jasen continued to sit there stupidly for a moment, realizing that he should probably say something. "Am I in trouble?" was what he came up with.

A small smile passed over the man's lips. "If Tassenred wants to meet you, who am I to tell him no?" He came and sat beside Jasen. Tassenred let out a rumble that sounded pleased; he lay his head down again. Jasen examined the man more closely now that he was near. He had an aquiline nose and sharp cheek bones, giving his face a certain harshness, but his eyes were the same friendly blue of the sky on a clear summer day. Jasen couldn't quite guess his age; he seemed not too old, but there were a few streaks of gray in his hair.

"If someone had told me a week ago I'd be consorting with dragons, I would have laughed at them," Jasen said. "I'd never even seen a dragon until yesterday."

The man cocked his head. "You mean up close?"

"I mean at all. We don't see dragons very often where I'm from."

"Ah, I see. And what brings you to the Draelands?"

"I'm here for Court. What?" he said at the surprised look that came across the man's face. "Why do you look so shocked? Am I that shabby-looking?"

"Not at all," he said. "It merely surprises me that you are here without an escort. Lady Isalei is strict about her charges."

"Who is Lady Isalei?"

The man gave him a further look of confusion. "She is the keeper of all the aspiring consorts. Surely you met her when you arrived?"

"I was late," Jasen mumbled. "I suppose that means I *am* in trouble, after all."

The man waved his hand. "Do not let it concern you."

"Oh, I won't," Jasen said. "Being in trouble rarely concerns me."

"I am glad to hear it," the man said, laughing. "What's your name?"

"Jasen," he said. "Of Grumhul," he added quickly under his breath.

"Grumhul?" the man said, unfortunately catching that last bit. "You *are* far from home."

"And thank the gods for that," he muttered.

"You don't like it? I find it to be very beautiful."

"You've been?" Jasen said, surprised.

"Not for many years," he said. "But I do fly over it from time to time."

"What, on a dragon?" Jasen said. "Really? You do that?"

The man smiled. "Yes."

Jasen put his hand on Tasenred, feeling the slow rise and fall of his breath and the smoothness of his scales. He imagined climbing onto his back and soaring across the realms, seeing everything so small beneath him as they went anywhere, everywhere... "I wish I could become a draeid."

"And why couldn't you? You have already passed the first test of the priesthood—a dragon has called you. And you are not yet married."

Jasen sighed. "There's one major problem."

"What is that?"

"I could never take a vow of celibacy."

The man laughed long and hard. "I admire your commitment to principal. There are many draeids who do not take that vow seriously."

*Like you?* Jasen almost asked, because Jasen thought he detected a hint of flirtation in his voice—which wasn't entirely unwelcome, to be honest, but the last thing he wanted to do was be caught compromising the morals of a draeid on his second day here. He just smiled instead.

Jasen settled back against the dragon and shut his eyes, enjoying the rise and fall of the dragon's breath. He could swear he felt his heart beat in sync

with that breath, but that really would be insane. It had been ages since anything felt this *right*. He briefly wondered if maybe he was being called to be a draeid, but he quashed that thought almost as quickly as he had it. He'd make a terrible priest.

"We should get you back," the man said after a few moments. "They are probably looking for you."

Jasen was about to protest when Tassenred did it for him, letting out a long, low grumble.

"Apologies, Tassenred," the man murmured to the dragon. "Duty calls, for all of us."

The dragon let out a snort, then began to move. Jasen and the man both got to their feet. Tassenred turned his head to Jasen once more, blinking his amber eyes. Jasen put a hand on his snout for one last touch. And then the dragon was moving—when something as large as a dragon moved, it was always an event. Jasen nearly stumbled as he moved out of the way; the man helped steady him. Tassenred only spread his wings when he was well clear of them; a moment later, he was in flight. The wind whipped into Jasen's eyes, causing them to tear up. At least, he blamed the wind.

"It is always hard to see them go," the man said.

Jasen gave his eyes a quick swipe, feeling a bit embarrassed. "All right," he said with a sigh. "Let's go find out exactly how much shit I've gotten myself into."

They began their hike back down the same path Jasen had come up earlier. The sun had climbed higher in the sky—it was probably around nine o'clock.

"Are you cold?" the man asked.

"No," Jasen said. "I'm quite enjoying the weather, actually."

"But perhaps you would like to borrow my cloak, all the same."

"Why?"

The man cleared his throat. "Ah, you are a bit underdressed for a lord consort."

Jasen looked down at his tunic. "Am I supposed to get into full dress every time I want to take a walk? That doesn't seem sensible."

"I'm afraid we are preoccupied with ceremony in the Draelands, to our detriment. For a lord consort, to be seen in nothing but a tunic might be considered a bit..." He searched for the right word, "provocative."

"Oh," Jasen said, feeling his face color a little. He didn't want to seem as if it bothered him too much, so he added, "I'm not usually provocative by accident."

The man raised an eyebrow. "You are sometimes provocative on purpose, then?"

Jasen gave him a sly grin in response. The man laughed. Their eyes met for a moment.

Jasen accepted the cloak. "Thank you," he said, breaking eye contact. He *really* didn't need to be flirting with a priest, but as usual, he couldn't seem to help himself. As he put the cloak over his shoulders, he felt a pulse of heat surge through him. He inhaled sharply.

"You felt something?" the man asked, surprised.

"Yes," he said. "Something warm..."

The man gave him a long, considering look. "That is very interesting," he said finally. "Not everyone can feel it. Are you dragon-blessed?"

"No," Jasen said. Throughout the realms, people often brought their children to the draeids in hopes they might be dragon-blessed and gain a magical talent. However, Grumhul was a land of swamps; they had no place to make a suitable draemir. Grumhulians were of course welcome to bring their children to the draemirs of neighboring kingdoms, as Grumhul was a member of the Allied Realms. However, the general consensus among Grumhulians was that if the dragons weren't interested in visiting them, then they weren't interested in visiting the dragons, magic be damned.

"Even the dragon-blessed don't always feel the power in a Drae's cloak," the man continued. "It usually takes someone of enormous power to connect to it."

Jasen looked down at the cloak. He touched the jewel clasp lightly and felt another pulse of heat. "Oh," he said stupidly, because he couldn't think of what to say. Power? *Him*? "Should I take it off?"

The man shook his head. "No," he said with a smile. "It suits you."

They continued their hike. As they moved, the power Jasen had felt initially began to fade. He had so many questions about what it all meant, but he wasn't sure how to articulate them even to himself. "Will he be back?" Jasen asked after a little while. "Tasenred, I mean."

The man cocked his head. "He always comes back."

"I mean, before I have to leave in three months."

"And why are you so sure you will be leaving?" the man asked.

Jasen snorted. "Oh yes, I'm sure the king will meet me, fall madly in love, and beg for me to be his consort. Then I'll spend the rest of my days splitting my time between frolicking about the draemir and lounging in the palace, eating strawberries."

"Stranger things have happened," the man said.

"Funny," Jasen muttered. "That's exactly what my father said."

"You disagree?"

"I'm sure *stranger* things have happened, but that doesn't make my likelihood of marrying a king any greater, does it? And frankly, I'm not sure I find the thought very appealing."

"Oh? I doubt your cohorts would share that opinion," the man said. "Especially this year," he added under his breath.

"They can have him."

They walked in silence for a little longer. "Has—" the man started to say. He broke off to clear his throat. "Has the king offended you in some manner?"

"What?"

"You said you found him unappealing."

"Oh, no!" Jasen said, suddenly aware of what that must have sounded like, especially to a draeid. The king was also Lord of the Drae, after all, and therefore the head of the priesthood. "He's a wonderful ruler—I am his loyal and faithful subject, naturally!"

The man waved his hand. "Yes, yes, but you still would not marry him."

"Well, no. I mean—I'm sure he's a very nice person."

"Perhaps you think he is ugly."

"I wouldn't know," he said. "I've only seen him once, from a distance. He came to Grumhul on his tour of the realms when he was crowned." Jasen remembered it only vaguely; he'd been only eight years old. He recalled thinking the king looked much too young—he was still a gawky teenager at the time, and he didn't seem very regal. In fact, he seemed terrified. "Besides," Jasen continued, "that was a long time ago; I'm sure he looks different now."

"Then frolicking in the draemir and eating strawberries does not appeal to you."

"Of course it appeals to me," Jasen said, giving his companion a puzzled look.

"Then why don't you want to marry him?"

"Well, it's an awful lot of responsibility, isn't it? I'm not sure I'm up for it."

"Why?"

"I grew up in Grumhul. The journey here has been the most I've ever seen of the world. I have no education to speak of, no manners, no experience in anything other than—" He was about to say *in bed*, but stopped himself. "—well, let's just say no experience in anything important. I can't even dress myself properly, apparently."

"I do not think any of those things would matter to the king."

"Well, the issue is not whether or not *I* would want to marry *him*, is it?" Jasen said. He liked the man, but he was starting to feel as if he were having a conversation with his father. "The question is whether *he* would want to marry *me*, and I doubt that very much. There hasn't been a male consort to the Lord of the Drae in over three hundred years. No, I won't marry a king. I probably won't even marry a lord; I'm not sure anyone would want me."

"That is not true. Anyone with eyes would desire you. Anyone with a heart would want to make you his. And anyone who would dismiss you because you do not conform to meaningless manners and rituals is a fool."

Jasen blinked, feeling almost dizzy at the sudden turn in the conversation. Certainly, there had been a few flirtatious moments between the two of them, but that last line had been surprisingly intense. He wasn't sure how to respond. By that point, they had reached the palace grounds again. While Jasen was trying to think of some reply, he heard a shout. He saw several guards coming their way, moving at a swift pace. One of them was Larely. The man leading them was an older man with a bulbous red nose.

“That’s him,” he heard Larely tell the older man.

When the guards reached them, they all bowed deeply. “Your Majesty,” the older man said.

There was a split second when Jasen wondered why this man was calling him “your majesty” before the truth clicked. He looked at his companion, his mouth dropping open in shock.

The king made a motion for them to rise.

“I see Your Majesty has found our stray!” the older man said with forced joviality, but he looked a little frenzied. “I assure you, we are not in the business of losing consorts. I personally see to the safety of all of the lord consorts and ladies under my protection!”

The king waved his hand. “The fault lies with no one, Captain Ingo,” the king said. “The dragon called to Lord Jasen. I am certain Lady Isalei will understand.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

The king turned to Jasen. “And now I must return to my duties, and you to yours. I have enjoyed our conversation.”

Jasen stammered unintelligibly for a few moments, hoping he’d think of something to say, but his mind remained stubbornly blank. He began to fumble with the clasp of the cloak. “Your cloak—you’ll want it back—”

The king took one of Jasen’s fumbling hands in his own and kissed it. “Keep it,” he said. “You may return it when I see you again.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Jasen said.

A touch of sadness came into the king’s eyes at that. He gave Jasen a slight bow, nodded to the captain, and then he was gone.

Once the king had retreated, Captain Ingo turned his gaze to Jasen. All joviality had left his face. “I see *my lord* has not been informed of the rules,” he said nastily. “You are not to leave the building without an escort. Ever. Do you realize how bad I would look if something were to happen to any of you?”

Jasen was about to ask him what he thought could possibly happen to anyone on a simple walk around the grounds of a well-guarded palace in a realm that hadn’t seen war in over a century, but decided he should perhaps not escalate the situation. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize,” he said instead.

The captain humphed. "Well, Lady Isalei will straighten you out soon enough." He turned to Larely. "See him back to the East Wing, and make sure he stays there. I have other business to attend to."

"Yes, sir."

They set out their separate ways. When the captain was out of ear shot, Larely turned to him and grinned. "Well, you certainly don't waste any time, do you?"

"It isn't like that!" Jasen said. "I thought he was a priest!" As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Jasen slapped a hand to his forehead. That didn't sound any better.

Larely laughed. "Might I ask why you are wearing the king's cloak?"

"I forgot mine," he mumbled.

Larely looked at him more closely. "Are you wearing anything under there?"

"A tunic and trousers, same as I wear when I'm at home," Jasen said defensively. "No one told me that I had to be dressed up for a simple walk!"

"Especially when you planned to get dirty."

"And what is *that* supposed to mean?"

Larely gestured to his trousers, which were smudged with dirt. "Your clothes."

Jasen's face colored. "Oh."

Larely laughed again. "Some advice—you don't have to wash behind your ears, but you ought to stay clean where people can see you." They were now upon the East Wing, but before they got any closer, Larely pulled Jasen to the side of the road, behind a tree. "Speaking of which, you should probably take that cloak off."

"Why?"

"If your, ah, competitors see you walk up in the king's cloak—well, we might as well paint a target on your back."

"...Target?"

"Oh, yes. It's a vicious crop this year, seeing as the king's up for grabs. Most of the lord consorts and ladies would give their left buttock to have a



private audience with the king; if they catch on that you've already managed it, no telling what might happen."

Jasen hadn't even considered that. Numbly, he fumbled with the clasp. He felt a pang of loss as the cloak slipped from his shoulders, but he managed to hand it to Larely.

Larely undid his own cloak and handed it to Jasen. "Here you are, you can wear mine. But next time you leave your room, make sure you're fully dressed!"

Instead of taking the cloak, Jasen leaned up against the tree. He dug the heels of his hands into his eyes and took a few deep breaths.

He felt a gentle touch on his shoulder. "Here, now," Larely said, his teasing tone gone. "Are you all right?"

Jasen removed his hands. "I'm fine," he said, and tried to mean it. There were too many contradictory emotions running through him. The elation he'd felt with Tassenred had rapidly faded, leaving only embarrassment over his mistakes and confusion as to what his encounter with both the dragon and the king had meant.

"I might have overstated the danger a bit," Larely said. "They are just young lords and ladies, not throat-cutting assassins. No need to be frightened."

"I'm not frightened of them," he said. "I'm frightened of my own amazing capacity to make a complete fool of myself." Jasen gave his temples a vigorous rub. "How did I not know he was the king? He must think I'm an idiot."

Larely snorted. "With the way he was looking at you, I don't think 'idiot' was what was going through his head."

"That's almost worse," Jasen said with a groan. He liked the man well enough, but his kingly station was more than Jasen thought he could handle.

Larely gave him a puzzled look, but didn't press him. "Let's get you inside." He offered the cloak to Jasen again; this time he put it on. Larely draped the king's cloak over one arm and offered the other to Jasen. Jasen took one last deep breath before taking his arm. He forced a smile he didn't feel; he would walk into the East Wing as if he belonged there. No more mistakes from here on out. He would be proper. He would be well-behaved. And hopefully, the rest would work itself out.

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## Chapter Three

Jasen and Larely entered the East Wing through the servants' entrance, wherein Larely spirited him up to his room as discreetly as he could manage. He discovered that someone had gone through his trunk and hung up all of his clothing. Jasen realized it was probably the work of the valet that Larely had mentioned would be sent to him, but there was no sign of the man.

A short time after he'd returned to his room, a young woman arrived with a tray of tea. There were biscuits, fresh fruit, two kinds of cheeses, and slices of thick, flavorful bread—all of it of much higher quality than even the finest dinners at Grumhul. As he ate, he gradually relaxed. There was so much going through his head, but he did his best to mute it.

It was still several hours from orientation, so Jasen decided to take a nap. He was awoken after about an hour by a knock on the door. The valet had returned. He was a young, serious man by the name of Dennack. He had brought some additional clothes with him.

“What are those?” Jasen asked once he was in the room.

“I had taken the liberty of going through your wardrobe when you were away. It appears my lord was missing a few vital articles of dress. I had heard there was an accident with your trunk. Perhaps they were lost?”

Jasen had gone through his trunk earlier and hadn't noticed anything missing. He looked at some of the items Dennack had brought with him, which included a jacket, shirt and breeches. “I know I have those items,” he said. “They're hanging up in the closet!”

“Ah yes,” Dennack said. He looked a little embarrassed. “I thought my lord might want to sample a few items that were a little more... modern.”

And now Jasen felt embarrassed as well. He knew Grumhul tended to be a bit behind the times where fashion was concerned, but hadn't realized it was quite that bad. “Right,” he muttered. “Well, let's get on with it, then.”

Jasen began to strip out of his tunic and trousers while Dennack arranged a few things. He was not used to being dressed. He technically had a valet at home, but the man was next to useless. Besides, Grumhulians rarely stood on ceremony and tended to dress simply.

Once he was down to his smalls, Dennack approached him with something that took Jasen a moment to identify. "Is that a corset?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And I'm supposed to wear it," Jasen said. It was a stupid thing to say, but he was having a hard time wrapping his mind around the idea. Only women wore corsets in Grumhul.

"Yes, my lord." Dennack slipped it around him. Jasen allowed it—what else could he do? "My lord might want to hold onto something," Dennack said as he gathered the laces.

Jasen took a hold of the bed post as Dennack began to pull. After one overly enthusiastic tug, Jasen yelped. "Stop!" he wheezed. "I can hardly breathe!"

"My apologies, my lord."

"Loosen this immediately."

Dennack loosened the garment a little, and then a little more at Jasen's insistence. Next came the stockings, which were made of very fine silk. After that was the shirt, which had more lace at the sleeves than Jasen had ever seen. It was patently ridiculous, but Jasen bore it as best he could. A beautifully embroidered waistcoat followed.

It was when they got to the breeches that they ran into trouble. As soon as they started to put them on, it became clear to Jasen that Dennack had not brought the proper size.

"I assure my lord that they are the correct size," Dennack protested. "I measured my lord's other clothing and had our dragon-blessed tailor make the adjustments—"

"Well, he made a mistake," Jasen snapped. "Obviously."

"If my lord will lie down on the bed, it will make it easier."

"I will do no such thing. I can barely move as it is! I'll wear my own breeches."

Dennack looked over at Jasen's clothing in dismay. "As my lord wishes," he said. "But then the other clothing will not match."

"Then I will just wear all of my things," Jasen said. He didn't care how unfashionable they were; until he could get things to fit properly, he wasn't going to subject himself to torture.

He undressed as Dennack got his perfectly serviceable suit from the closet, which was made of a very nice brown velvet that was only a little worn in places that no one could see, really. When he was dressed, Dennack presented him with the most ridiculous pair of shoes Jasen had ever seen. They were impossibly high. "How am I supposed to walk in these?" Jasen asked.

"It takes some practice," Dennack said. "Please, my lord."

Jasen was going to refuse them, but Dennack looked so miserable that he put them on. By the time all of this was finished, three o'clock had arrived. Dennack lead Jasen down all of the complicated stairs to the first floor. A crowd of young lords and ladies were entering through the giant doors under the staircase. Dennack gave Jasen a bow, and abandoned him to his fate.

Jasen followed the crowd past a long hallway; at the end were two larger doors which opened into a modest, but elegant, ballroom. Servants circulated amongst them with trays of treats, but there was no place to sit down. At the back of the room was a platform that held the only furniture in the room—several fine chairs, on which sat several distinguished looking older ladies.

As Jasen's gaze left the platform and went back around to his compatriots, he immediately regretted his choice to ignore Dennack's fashion advice. Everyone was dressed in the highest of fashion, particularly the women. He'd never seen such elaborate dresses or hairstyles. The women wore dresses with skirts padded to a wide width around them, which made their waists look impossibly small. Rich fabrics flowed down over their backs, around their hips—everywhere, really. The hairstyles of the women were something to behold—tight, cascading curls for some, ridiculously tall hairstyles on others. Some wore wigs, while others seemed to have their natural hair, but it was all elaborately done.

As for the men, they wore fitted frockcoats that pinched in at their slim waists, then flared outward into a full skirt. They had fussy lace cuffs and lace at their throats. Their breeches were, indeed, as tight as the ones Dennack had tried to persuade him to wear. Bows were tied at the knees of some. The men's hair was somewhat more subdued, although there were still wigs and curls here and there. Their shoes were heeled, some even higher than his own.

Absolutely none of them wore anything remotely in the style of Jasen's own clothing. It appeared that he wasn't the only one to notice how sorely he stood out. People were sneaking looks at him out of the corner of their eyes. Everyone seemed to have hand fans, which they would open as Jasen passed by

in order to hide their faces and murmur to each other. He heard a few snickers. He tried to tell himself he didn't care, but it wasn't working very well. He wished he had a fan for himself so that he could hide his face at least.

He was trying to duck away from a particularly mean-looking crowd when he stepped wrong and stumbled. He would have fallen to the ground, but instead he crashed into someone. A strong, feminine arm caught him and helped him regain his balance.

"I am so sorry!" he stammered. He looked up, expecting to see a sneering face, but the look on the lady's face was more amused than anything else.

"No trouble," she said. "I'm sturdy."

And she was. She was very tall for a lady—much taller than Jasen. She didn't hunch over the way some tall women did, as if apologizing for their height. Instead, she stood with her shoulders thrust proudly back. She had a strong jaw and dark hair that was done up in a style so elaborate that he wasn't sure how the whole thing was possible. Her dark eyes sparkled with good humor.

"Thank you," he said.

"These shoes take a bit of getting used to," she said. "I was so terrible at walking in them as a girl that my governess didn't let me take them off at all, even for bed, for two whole months."

"Why do they insist on them?"

"I think it's because it makes it harder for you to run away if an amorous lord sets his sights on you. It doesn't work, though—I can run faster in these things than most lords can run at all."

"That's terrible," Jasen said. "About making it so you can't run."

"Welcome to courtly fashion."

"I wouldn't welcome me quite yet," he mumbled, gazing down at his own clothes.

She laughed. "You're Lord Jasen, aren't you?"

"Er, yes," Jasen said. "My reputation precedes me, I take it."

"Oh yes. Your entrance last night was all the talk at breakfast—as was your absence from the dining hall."

Jasen rubbed his neck. "Ah. I was hoping that would escape notice."

"Nothing escapes notice around here," she said. "Speaking of which—is it true that you fell into a trance, ran naked into the draemir and fell into a swoon in front of a dragon, and then the King had to carry you back draped in his Drae's cloak?"

"I wasn't naked!" Jasen protested. "And I didn't swoon!"

The lady let out a long, delighted gasp. "So it *is* true!"

Jasen was saved from having to answer by the blast of a trumpet. Everyone fell silent at once. After a brief fanfare, a very small old woman in simple but elegant clothes mounted the platform, walking in front of the seated ladies until she was front and center. Her mouth was a firm, thin line, and her dark gaze was as sharp as a dagger.

"Presenting the Lady Isalei!" the trumpet blower announced.

Everyone applauded enthusiastically. Once the applause had died down, the lady began to speak. "My lords and ladies," she said in a deep, clear voice, "I am happy once again to greet you, and trust you have settled in."

There was a murmur of *Yes, my lady* from the crowd.

"I am pleased to hear it," she said. Her mouth did something—widened a little, turned up at the corners. Jasen thought it might be a smile. "You all come from the finest families in the Allied Realms. You have received the best training at the most prestigious schools. And truly, you are a fine-looking lot. Young. Beautiful. Fashionable."

There was a pause. Her mouth snapped back to its previous shape. "Well, I am here to tell you that none of that is good enough. You may have been the jewels of your little realms and provinces, but this is Strengsend—the most spectacular palace the world has ever seen, and you are all as temporary and unimportant as a single daisy in the Bedrose Gardens. It is true that you are new blooms, but blooms fade—more quickly than any of you realize.

"And so, we have very little time to shape you into something less flimsy than a flower. The suitors arrive in two months. They are expecting to be charmed, dazzled, impressed. And they are looking for more than a pretty face. A pretty face they could get at any of the finer brothels. No. You are to be wives and lord consorts. Those are positions of great responsibility, and I expect each and every one of you to take this matter very, very seriously. The

entire course of your life is to be determined in these next few months. I will not be easy on you, but in the end, you will thank me. No matter how polished you think you are, I promise you, you still need work.”

“Some of us more than others,” Jasen heard from someone nearby. It came from a pretty blonde girl at the center of that mean-looking crowd he’d been avoiding. Their eyes were all turned to Jasen. There was a smattering of laughter.

“Princess Polina,” Lady Isalei said. “How nice to see you again. This is your third year with us, yes?”

The blonde girl flushed and covered her face with her fan.

“When I ask a question, I expect an answer,” Lady Isalei said.

“Yes, my lady,” she squeaked.

“Hmmm. Even the loveliest flower won’t carry on for *four* seasons. Something to think on before you make disparaging remarks about others.”

“Yes, my lady,” she said. As soon as Lady Isalei turned her attention away, Princess Polina shot Jasen a venomous glare, as if the scolding she received had somehow been his fault.

“We will now begin our assessments of your strengths and deficiencies.” She gestured to the ladies behind her. “This is my council of ladies, each of whom is accomplished in her own right. They are here out of the goodness of their own hearts in order to help you achieve what they have achieved. You will not disrespect them by telling them lies. Answer our questions honestly so that we can do our best to get you into the best position possible. The potential for failure is great—but the rewards of success are even greater. Once you have been evaluated, you may take your leave.”

With that, all of the ladies stood and filed off the platform. Behind each of them floated a scroll and a quill.

“Lady Isalei likes to make herself seem more terrible than she really is,” his companion said. Jasen jumped at her voice. She laughed, but not unkindly. “You see? She’s in your head already. Relax. It’s not as dire as she makes it out. She acts like the lords who come here looking for marriage are some god-like beings with lofty standards. Actually, most of them are looking for a pretty face and a father-in-law with deep pockets.”

“Why all of this, then?”

“Because no one wants to admit that picking out a bride and picking out a whore are basically the same thing.”

Jasen, as a Grumhulian, was not easily scandalized, but even he was shocked at her bluntness. “What’s your name?” he asked her.

“I’m—”

“Lady Risyda,” finished a stern voice from behind them. They whipped around to see Lady Isalei looking up at them, her paper and quill floating behind her.

Lady Risyda curtsied. “Yes, my lady,” she said. If she was nervous that her last statement had been overheard, she didn’t show it. “It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“You know I detest lies,” she said, but there was the smallest hint of a smile at the corner of her lips. “I assume you still possess the many faults you exhibited at Court last year?”

“Oh yes,” she said cheerfully. “In abundance.”

Lady Isalei humphed. “Have you worked on expanding your magical talents?”

Lady Risyda nodded. A look of concentration came over her face. She thumped herself three times in the chest, then opened her mouth. A small puff of smoke in the shape of a heart emerged from her lips.

“Clever,” Lady Isalei said dryly. “I’m sure that will command the respect of your servants once you are head of a lord’s household.”

“I can make it in the shape of a riding crop,” she said. “Or maybe a dismissal with no references, although that might be a little abstract.”

Lady Isalei sighed. The quill began to scrape on the page. “Your dress and bearing seem much improved this year. And how is your archery?”

“Splendid. I won first prize at the Lady’s Archery Tournament last summer.”

“Good, good,” Lady Isalei said. “Your languages?”

Risyda made a long, incomprehensible reply that was to Lady Isalei’s satisfaction. “And what about your licentious habits and poor attitude?” she continued.



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“I’ve kept up with those as well, my lady.”

“I know you think you’re very clever, and it’s true you can be amusing. That’s a fine quality to have. But if you are not careful this year, you are going to amuse yourself into a very grim situation. This is your third year. You must make a match, or resign yourself for spinsterhood in your father’s home. Which is it to be?”

Lady Risyda didn’t answer right away. “I could always become a draeideess?”

Lady Isalei snorted. She tapped her chin in thought. “Lord Angunto of Adonver will be here this year,” she said. “He’s a fourth son, but doted upon by his very wealthy father. He’s good-looking and athletic, and very sweet-natured. He’s also a bit dim, unfortunately, but then what are consorts for if not to add support where their husbands are weakest? I will arrange for a meeting.”

“Thank you, my lady.”

Lady Isalei gave her a curt nod, and then turned her terrifying attention to Jasen. “And you must be Lord Jasen,” she said.

Jasen bowed. “Yes, my lady,” he said, hoping he didn’t sound too stilted.

“Of Grumhul.” She said it as if she had the same opinion of his homeland that Jasen had.

“Yes, my lady,” he mumbled.

“That means you were educated at Rodkiner Academy, yes? That’s the nearest, I think.”

“Ah, no.”

“Verar, then.”

“No, my lady,” Jasen said. “I was educated at home.” Which was partially true. He’d had tutors until he was twelve. Then his mother had died, and his father found better things to spend his money on.

The lady pinched the bridge of her nose. “I see,” she said. She looked him up and down. “Hair, face and figure are good, although a complete new wardrobe is needed,” she muttered to the floating quill, which scratched away on the parchment floating beside it. “Have you any special talents?” she said, addressing Jasen again.

“Talents?”

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“Perhaps you possess some magical ability.”

“No.”

“Athletic skills?”

“I’m good at mudball,” Jasen said.

It took a moment for the lady to absorb that information. “Mudball is not quite what I had in mind,” she said. “I mean something of a more sophisticated activity, such as riding, archery, or fencing.”

“Oh. Then no, not really.”

“Perhaps you are well-read and can converse on many interesting subjects.”

“No.” With every no, Jasen’s voice got smaller and smaller.

“Musical aptitude? Painting? Dance, perhaps?”

Jasen shook his head to each one.

Lady Isalei shut her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. “And how, then, did you make your way to us?”

“Someone lost a bet.” Which was true. His father, in a rare instance of good luck, had beat one of the royal recruiters in a game of cards. The man had no money left, so he’d given him a place for Jasen at Court.

“A bet,” the lady echoed. The quill quivered beside her expectantly. “Make sure his breeches are extra tight,” she told it. The quill obediently scratched that down. “That will do for a start,” she said to Jasen. “I would like to meet with you privately later on. You have a lot of catching up to do. I would also like to discuss some... rumors I’ve heard.”

Jasen felt a lump in his stomach. “Yes, my lady.”

She nodded to both Risyda and Jasen. Jasen stared miserably at his horrible shoes. He was startled out of his self-pity when Risyda whacked him with her fan. “Bow,” she said out of the corner of her mouth as she curtsied. Jasen did so with such force that he nearly toppled over; Risyda thrust a hand out and steadied him. When Jasen looked up, he saw Lady Isalei’s lips turn up ever so slightly. “Good afternoon to you both,” she said.

Jasen thought the torment was over, but Lady Isalei had not walked three steps when she was confronted with the blonde princess from earlier. “My lady,” she said, curtsying. “I must apologize to you for my unseemly outburst. I

don't know what came over me... the heat of the room, perhaps. It's making me dizzy—I am not myself!"

"Of course, Princess," Lady Isalei said coolly. "Perhaps you should apologize to Lord Jasen."

"Oh, yes, of course," she said. She curtsied in his direction. "My deepest apologies, my lord."

"Ah—thank you." Jasen hoped that was the right thing to say.

Lady Isalei nodded. "I'm sure I will hear no more of trouble between you—any of you," she said with a pointed look as Risyda.

"Yes, my lady," they all said in unison. The Lady Isalei nodded again and left.

Jasen looked back over at the princess. He couldn't figure out why she was baring her teeth at him; then he realized it was probably meant to be a smile. "Silly me," she said. "We aren't even properly acquainted. I am Polina, Princess of the realm of Igtasnia."

"Fifth Princess," Risyda said. "That is the proper address for your people, right, Polly? Because you have four older sisters. Older, successfully situated sisters."

Even more of Polina's teeth became visible. "Yes, Lady Risyda, you are correct."

"Polly and I studied at Enoqua Academy together," Risyda continued.

"Yes, we are old friends," Polina said to Jasen. "And I *so* hope that you and I can be friends as well!"

"Of course."

"Well! So pleased we could have this little chat, but I must be off."

"Always a pleasure, Polly!" Risyda said. "Don't trip on your gown on your way across the room, like you did last year!"

The Princess opened her fan with such force that it sounded like the crack of a whip, then sauntered off across the room.

"I love winding her up," Risyda said with a grin. "No one spins quite as spectacularly as the Princess if you do it just right." Before Jasen could respond to that, she took him by the arm. "And now that we've been evaluated, we are free to go, so you're coming up to my room."

"I... that is to say," Jasen stammered. "I'm very flattered, but I don't think—"

She whacked him with her fan. "Not in *that* way. I need to hear every single detail of what happened this morning, and you are going to tell me."

Jasen wanted to protest, but he realized that it was probably futile. She was remarkably strong. Besides, he could not wait to get away from the crowd, and he didn't relish sitting in his room alone. And so he allowed himself to be whisked away.

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They made their way up the winding stairs to Risyda's room, which was quite a bit larger than Jasen's own. In addition to the small table with two chairs that Jasen had in his room, there was also a lounging sofa.

The first thing Risyda did was sit down on the sofa and kick off her shoes. Jasen followed suit, taking one of the chairs.

She let out a long sigh and wiggled her toes. "The one nice thing about those blasted shoes are that they feel so good to take off."

Jasen made a sound of agreement and rubbed his foot. He was pretty sure he had a blister.

"Now if only I could undo my hair. And my corset. Not 'til the end of the day, sadly." She sighed. "Oh well." She gave Jasen a mischievous look that he was already growing accustomed to. "I do have something that will ease our discomfort a little."

She went over to her bed, got onto her knees, and pulled out a box from underneath it. She brought it back to the sofa and opened it. Inside was something that looked like a bottle, along with some long tubes. She screwed the tubes onto the bottle and set it on the floor.

"What is that?" Jasen asked.

"A hookah," she said. She pulled out a small pouch. "And this is kara weed. Have you ever tried it?"

"I've never even heard of it."

"You really are a rube, aren't you?" she said.

Jasen didn't take offense. After all, he was.

“You’re going to love it,” she said, packing the contents of the purse into the contraption. She concentrated for a moment; a burst of flame sprang out of her finger and lit the weed. She sucked one of the tubes, inhaling the smoke. She lay back on the sofa as she exhaled the smoke through her nose. “Mmmm. Now that is much better.” She offered one of the tubes to Jasen. “Your turn.”

Jasen took the tube. “Could we get in trouble for this?”

“Don’t tell me the man who sneaked out of his room to go frolicking with dragons is worried about a little kara weed.”

“You have a point,” Jasen said. He sucked in some of the smoke, then fell into a coughing spasm.

Risyda got up and patted him on the back until it was over. “I probably should have given you a little more instruction. Here, like this...”

A few puffs later, Jasen got a handle on it. He felt wonderful all over. He’d never cared for wine or spirits, which always left him dizzy and sick. This, however, was just a comfortable buzzing feeling. He found himself sliding down to the floor.

“Well? How do you like it?”

“I feel like I’m covered in bees,” Jasen said. “Nice bees. Bees that feel good.”

Risyda laughed. “See? I told you.” She inhaled another puff, then let it out in a few perfect rings. “All right,” she said after another hazy few moments. “Let’s get the getting-to-know-you bits over with. This is me: rich merchant father, I’m the youngest daughter, we don’t like each other, et cetera. He has been training me my whole life to fetch a good marriage price. I can’t decide whether I want to marry so I can escape him or screw him out of the gold he so desperately wants. Now you go.”

“Um, all right. Dead mother, drunk and gambling addicted father. Same sort of deal with the marriage.”

She beamed. “I just *knew* we would have a lot in common.” She rested her chin on her hand. “Now, to more interesting matters. Just what exactly happened this morning with you and the king?”

Jasen only hesitated for a moment before the whole thing came spilling out. He knew he should be more cautious over who he trusted, but the kara weed

made him feel so relaxed and he desperately needed to sort through what happened. When he was finished, Risyda contemplated everything he'd said for a few long moments, puffing thoughtfully on the pipe. "You're going to marry the king," she finally said.

Jasen groaned and fell back on the ground, one arm flung over his face. "I don't want to marry a king!"

"Why not?"

"I don't know anything about... well, anything! And to be the consort to the Lord of the Drae? To have the entire fate of the magic of the Allied Realms resting on whether or not I'm properly supportive? That's a nightmare, not a dream come true."

"I hadn't thought about it that way," she said. "But what can you do? He's already decided he wants you."

"You don't know that. You *can't* know that."

She waved her hand. "Of course I can. I have spent my whole life training to catch a husband. I know the signs."

Jasen sat up and took a few morose puffs until he felt a little better. "What am I going to do?"

"You're going to have to make yourself utterly repulsive. Fortunately, I'm an expert on that as well."

Jasen frowned. "I don't want to be repulsive to him."

"Oh, no," she said. "Don't tell me you like him?" Jasen just gave her a miserable look. She took a few more contemplative puffs. "Well. This is all deliciously complicated."

Their conversation was interrupted by a knock of a strange rhythm on the door. Jasen sat straight up, the pleasant buzzing feeling rapidly fading in sudden panic. "Quick! Get that thing back in the box—"

Risyda waved her hand as she stood up. "Don't worry, it's fine," she said. She weaved her way to the door and opened it a crack. "Hello!" she said cheerfully.

"Fucking hell, Risyda, I can smell you all the way down the hallway!" said a familiar voice. "I know you can control it, so why aren't you?" The door opened a little more, revealing Larely.

“Sorry, sorry,” Risyda said. She waved her hand; the smoke swirled into a ball in the middle of the room. Another wave and it disappeared with a small *pop*. “Better?”

“Yes, but it isn’t even dark yet. Can’t you wait until everyone’s asleep at the very least?”

“You worry too much. Everyone’s still at orientation.”

“Just the same, you could really get into...” He trailed off when he finally saw Jasen. “Oh no,” he said. “The two of you are friends now?” He put a hand over his face and groaned. “My life is about to get exponentially more difficult, isn’t it?”

Risyda batted her eyelashes. “Do you want to come in?”

Larely looked over his shoulder, then slipped in the door, shutting it behind him. “Just for a moment.”

Larely crossed his arms and looked down at Jasen. “Haven’t you already been in enough trouble today?”

“Don’t let him lecture you about trouble,” Risyda said. “He is a very naughty guard.”

This struck Jasen as the height of hilarity; he tried and failed to suppress a surge of unmanly giggles. Risyda joined him.

“Oh, shut up, both of you,” Larely said, but it was good-natured. He grabbed one of the hoses and took a quick puff.

“Keep it to—” he started, but had to stop as a coughing fit overcame him. That made Jasen laugh harder. “Keep it to night from now on,” he finished after he got a hold of himself.

Risyda saluted. “Aye-aye, captain.”

“I mean it,” Larely said. “You could get sent home.”

“We’ll be good, I promise,” Jasen said.

Larely scoffed. “Oh I doubt that very much, but try not to get caught.”

“Keep clean where they can see me,” Jasen said, echoing Larely’s earlier words. “Got it.”

“At your service, as always,” Larely said with an overly lavish bow. He winked at Risyda, which was interesting. Jasen had thought that Larely had

been flirting with him earlier, but maybe he'd misjudged the situation. The two of them seemed awfully close.

"I should go," Jasen said. "I actually don't want to go back to Grumhul just yet." He fumbled for his shoes. It took him a few moments to get his balance when he stood.

Risyda helped steady him. "Are you sure you can get to your room all right?"

"m fine," Jasen muttered. And he was, mostly.

But when he left her room, he almost immediately lost his sense of direction. He ended up going down when he should have gone up, and left when he should have gone right, and after wandering around for a little while, he realized he was hopelessly lost. The pleasant buzzing feeling had transformed into a raging headache.

He found a staircase and managed to get back up to the second floor, but only after nearly breaking his neck falling down. The thought of having to go up yet another set of stairs was too daunting to consider. He was just considering trying to make his way back to Risyda's room, possibly on his hands and knees, when he turned a corner and ran straight into Larely. Jasen stumbled and would have fallen, but Larely caught him. "Steady now," he said, helping him regain his footing.

"I hate these shoes," Jasen said passionately. "And all these fucking stairs. Why are there so many? And these halls. And all these doors that look alike."

"You're lost, aren't you?"

"A little."

"Then I'll show you back," Larely said, linking his arm with Jasen's. This time, Jasen was grateful for the support.

They reached Jasen's room. "Here you are. Again." Larely grinned at him. "This is the third time in twenty-four hours I've shown you to your room. Do you think it will stick this time?"

"I would say yes, but I really can't be sure."

Larely laughed. "That's fine. I don't mind rescuing you."

"*Rescuing* me?" Jasen scoffed. "Well, I wouldn't quite put it like that."

"Whatever you say, my lord," Larely said with an ironic little bow.



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Jasen considered him queasily, trying to decide if he was flirting or not. His mind was much too muddled to make sense of anything at the moment, so he muttered his thanks and stepped through the door. Once inside, he took off his shoes and lay down face first on his bed. He rolled over eventually and rubbed his face vigorously. A thousand thoughts swirled in his head. He had thought that he wanted to be away from Grumhul and his father more than anything else, but this was turning out to be far more complicated than he had anticipated. Was becoming a lord consort somewhere outside of Grumhul what he really wanted? Was it something he was even capable of doing?

Eventually, he got up and splashed his face with some water, trying to banish the last of the kara weed's effects. He would be expected to dine in the dining hall tonight. The thought of facing all of the lords and ladies again made him queasy, but at least he had Risyda now. He decided to try to put aside his larger doubts and just make it through the evening intact. He could worry about the rest of it tomorrow.

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## Chapter Four

Early the next morning, Jasen was awoken by a knock on the door. Though he was an early riser, even he hadn't gotten out of bed yet; the sun was barely up. Groggily, Jasen pulled on his dressing gown and answered the door. An impeccably dressed servant stood before him. He was an older man, with large cheeks and bulging eyes that made Jasen think of a toad.

He gave Jasen a small bow. "Good morning, my lord. I am Rotheld, and I shall be your valet for the remainder of your stay."

"What happened to Dennack?"

"Lady Isalei determined he was not up for the challenge."

"Oh," Jasen said faintly.

The man stepped inside, brushing past Jasen. He snapped his fingers; a whole rack of clothing followed him. "Would my lord like to begin dressing for his morning appointments now?"

"Now?" Jasen said. "But the sun is barely up!"

Rotheld took a deep breath and let it out through puffed cheeks. "To dress properly takes time, my lord."

There was something about Rotheld that told Jasen arguing with him would be futile. "Of course," Jasen mumbled meekly.

They started with a shave, which was actually rather relaxing. When they were finished, Rotheld searched through the rack of clothing, occasionally looking at Jasen as if he were an interesting problem to solve, then back to the clothes again. He at last selected a deep emerald green suit. "Is my lord finished?"

Unfortunately, he was. He went behind the dressing screen to change out of his night shirt and into his smalls. When he was finished, he went back to Rotheld, who was holding the dreaded corset. "Is that really necessary?" he asked.

"A trim waist, a straight back, and strong shoulders are the ideal form of masculine beauty," Rotheld said firmly.

Jasen wanted to point out that his waist was already very trim, but realized that it was probably futile. He subjected himself to the lacing; fortunately, Rotheld was gentler than Dennack had been. It was still uncomfortable.

Next, Rotheld helped him into a white shirt. "I like this," Jasen said once he had it on. "Much less lace on the cuffs than what Dennack tried on me yesterday."

"My lord has a natural beauty," Rotheld said. "I think items of a more subdued style would be appropriate."

The stockings went on next, and then, the breeches. It took ten full minutes to squeeze him into them. While Rotheld was lacing them up in the back, Jasen had a thought. "How am I supposed to relieve myself in these?"

"With assistance," Rotheld said.

The waist coat and jacket were easy compared to the rest. Rotheld added a cravat of lace around his neck. Rotheld then bade him to take a seat. He got out a brush from a kit he'd brought with him and ran it through Jasen's hair. Jasen was nervous about what he was planning to do with it, given the elaborate styles he'd seen yesterday, but after some thought, Rotheld merely tied it at the base of his neck with a simple ribbon.

Last were the hated shoes. He helped him up and steadied him when he wobbled. "We shall practice your walk later," Rotheld said.

"We shall?" Jasen asked with a sinking heart.

"We shall," Rotheld repeated firmly. He gave Jasen a gentle push towards the mirror. "Go see yourself," he said, his tone somewhat softer.

Jasen teetered over to the mirror and was stunned by what he saw. Gone was the unkempt boy from Grumhul; in his place stood a polished, beautiful young lord consort. He could barely believe it was him. For a moment, he didn't feel like an impostor.

Rotheld stepped behind him. "Is my lord satisfied?"

"Yes," Jasen said.

He handed him a fan, which fastened around his wrist. "Then it is time for your meeting with Lady Isalei."

"What, already?" His stomach did a flip. He took one last look at himself, trying to glean some confidence from the handsome young lord in the mirror. He wasn't sure if it worked.

They walked down to the main floor, where they went under the stairs and down the hall, stopping at the last door on the right. Rotheld led him inside, bowed, and then took his leave. The room was a small parlor, very warm and cozy. There was refreshments set out for two. Jasen wasn't sure what he had been expecting, but this wasn't it. He felt like he was there to catch up with a doting aunt rather than endure an interrogation.

The lady herself, however, wasn't there, but she arrived shortly after. Jasen rose when she entered. "My lady," he said, bowing.

"Good morning, Lord Jasen," she said with a nod. "I trust you slept well?"

"Yes, my lady."

They both took their seats. Jasen dredged up some ancient memories of etiquette and poured out the tea, as was expected of the younger person in a private setting. "So you do have some manners," she said. "I'm certainly glad to see it."

"Yes, my lady." He was too nauseated to drink himself, so he fiddled with his fan under the table.

She took a sip of tea. "If you grip that fan any tighter, it's going to break."

Jasen hastily released the fan. "Yes, my lady."

She waved a hand. "Let's dispense with the *yes-my-lady's* for the time being. You needn't be so nervous. I'm here to help you. You are not the first young lord consort who was rough around the edges. Tell me the education you do have, and we'll work from there."

"I had tutors in reading and religion, as well as court manners," he said. She raised an eyebrow. "Until I was twelve," he finished. "My mother died, and my father was somewhat lax in continuing my education."

"I see," she said. "And you've had nothing since then?"

He shook his head.

She sighed. "Well, it's a challenge, but I've worked with rougher. Let's have a spot to eat before we continue, shall we?"

Jasen thought he was too nauseated to eat, but he discovered that a few biscuits and a cup of tea helped settle him.

"Now, then," the lady said when they were finished. "I am going to ask you a few questions, and you must answer me with complete honesty. If you are not

honest with me, I will have you removed from the Court and back on a cart to Grumhul before you have time to blink. Am I understood?"

The lump in Jasen's throat felt too great to speak, so he simply nodded.

"Were you really called by a dragon yesterday morning?"

"Yes, my lady. I had decided to take a walk in the gardens, but before I knew it, I found myself in the draemir. Tassenred was waiting for me."

"And then you met the king."

"Yes, my lady." He paused, and then the rest came tumbling out. "But I didn't know who he was at first, truly! I would have never spoken s-so carelessly to him if I had known. And it really isn't uncommon for men of noble birth to dress simply in Grumhul—I didn't know I'd be considered half-naked!"

The lady blinked at him in an expression Jasen couldn't quite pinpoint. She sat back in her chair and was silent for a moment. "Well, Lord Jasen," she finally said. "You are either the most naive consort I've ever seen, or the cleverest. The king has already requested to see you."

"Oh."

"*Oh?*" Lady Isalei said. "You have netted the largest, most sought after prize of the entire Court with barely any effort, and that's all you have to say?"

Jasen felt a surge of irritation at that word—*prize*. As if all of this were just a game, and none of them were people. "It wasn't 'barely' any effort," Jasen said. "It was *no* effort at all. I didn't set out to seduce the king. I went for a walk. I had a conversation with someone I met. That's all."

"I see," she said. "Am I to take it that the king's attention is not welcome?"

Jasen didn't know what to say. He felt like he was being asked to make a decision that would affect the rest of his life, and he simply wasn't prepared for that. He was claspng at the fan again, gripping it so tightly his hand hurt. "I did not say that," he finally said.

The lady considered him for another moment. "I was going to impress upon you that the role of lord consort to the king is not one to be taken lightly, but it seems to me that is something you don't need to be told."

He looked up at her miserably. "No, my lady."

She sighed. "There is so much that rests on the shoulders of the lord consort to the king. It is not only his desires that matter. The fact that you are male is

going to concern many people. The fact that you have no experience in courtly politics will concern even more. But if a dragon did call you, as you say, and the king feels so strongly already, we must do our best to make you fit the role. Our first priority will be to improve your etiquette. The rest of the lords and ladies have had years of training; their time here in the next two months is meant only to polish their skills. You, however, are going to have to have more extensive instruction. I will arrange for you to meet with private tutors. Once your manners meet my approval, I will arrange for you to meet with the king.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Lady Isalei rose. Jasen got to his feet as well, grateful that the interview was almost over. “You are a curious person, Lord Jasen,” the lady said. “I feel I may have misjudged you.”

“I don’t think so, my lady,” Jasen muttered.

“You may go refresh yourself now. Your first lesson starts in one hour. You will be meeting with Lady Toran, who will instruct you in the finer points of courtly manners. Rotheld will escort you to her.”

Jasen bowed. “Thank you, my lady.”

Jasen left the room. Rotheld was waiting for him. His stomach was churning; he felt nearly faint. This wasn’t at all what he had bargained for. He found himself wishing fiercely for the swamps of Grumhul, where he was well-liked, and there were no rules, no one to impress, and where nothing of great importance ever happened. He now realized that he had escaped one prison only to find himself ensnared in a different sort of cage, one that was worse because it was unfamiliar.

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The next two weeks passed by in a blur. There was not a single moment of Jasen’s day that was not structured. He awoke at dawn to begin the long process of dressing and grooming, after which he met with Lady Toran for two hours to drill him on his etiquette. He had a brief break before music lessons, which he attended with several other lords and ladies. He’d never picked up a musical instrument in his life, and couldn’t begin to guess why this was a skill deemed important. After that was a quick luncheon, and then dance lessons, followed by diction, discourse and literature. He was equally inept at all of them.

Dinner afforded him a longer break, but it was not exactly a restful experience. Word of the king’s interest in him had spread like wildfire, and just

as Larely had predicted, it made him exceedingly unpopular. Princess Polina seemed especially put out. Jasen wasn't sure how to handle it all. He wasn't used to being disliked. He wasn't used to having to impress.

After dinner, he received more private tutoring, and then rounded off the night with their "leisure" time, which was not actually leisure because they were expected to lounge around with the other lords and ladies and practice their conversation, or read aloud to one another from classic works of drama and poetry, or work on their needlepoint, or practice their dance, or any of the other dozen little ways in which proper lords and ladies were supposed to amuse themselves and their suitors.

Finally, at nine in the evening, he was permitted to retire. Only he didn't, most nights. He waited for Rotheld to leave him, and then he would sneak to Risyda's room. Sometimes it was just the two of them, but occasionally, Larely would join them. Larely was an invaluable coconspirator; he always made sure Jasen got back to his room undetected (not that there was much security other than Larely himself).

He wasn't used to this much activity. In Grumhul, days passed by lazily with very little happening. Here, every moment was bustling, as if there couldn't possibly be enough hours in the day to get everything done. The fact that it was all so senseless and shallow made the urgent nature of it surreal. If Jasen had even a minute to think about it, he might have rebelled, but there was no time to stop and consider anything. Perhaps that was the point.

In spite of all of the demands on his attention, he still found his mind wandering back to the king and the dragon. The king, who wanted to see him. Tassenred, who had called to him. Jasen often had a difficult time understanding what he was doing at Court, but when he remembered them, he felt like maybe he shouldn't give it up. *They* thought he belonged there.

But as the days wore on, and the king didn't send for him, Jasen began to wonder if he was right in that assessment. Perhaps the king had heard about his horrible incompetence and changed his mind. Jasen tried to tell himself it shouldn't matter. They had only spoken for a short time, and what he had told Risyda about not wanting to be lord consort to the king was true. But there was a difference between not wanting to be the king's consort, and not wanting the man himself. Jasen was no stranger to sex, but the brief time they had shared had been *different* in a way that made him both uncomfortable and elated. He wanted to speak to him again, at least once.

It was in the third week that Jasen finally snapped out of the shock of it all. He could even pinpoint the exact moment that it happened. It was during their evening socializing period. He and Risyda were in the Swan Parlor pretending to read. Across the room were Princess Polina and a few of her cohorts, who were sitting by the window. Jasen tried not to listen to them, but the inanity of their chatter was too annoying to ignore.

“I had another prophetic dream last night,” Polina was saying.

Lord Banither, one of Polina’s most ardent toadies, gasped. “Another one, Princess? You must tell us what it is!”

“I am lying in a field,” she said. “The sky darkens suddenly—there is something passing above me...”

“A dragon?” squeaked Lady Lalan, another of her friends.

“Yes,” Polina said dramatically. “It was the same dragon that gave me the gift of prophecy when I was but a child. She lowered her noble head and looked into my eyes, and then suddenly I felt something on my brow—something heavy—but I couldn’t see what it was...”

“A crown!” Banither said.

Polina fluttered her fan. “Oh, do you really think so?”

Risyda let out a snort of laughter. Polina glared over in their direction.

“It looks like it will rain tonight,” Polina said loudly. “I certainly don’t care for this unseasonably cold weather! Although I imagine it must be a comfort for you, Lord Jasen, as I hear it rains often in Grumhul. Tell me—is it true that your people bring their livestock into their homes when it rains?”

“Only when there might be mudslides,” he mumbled.

Polina and her friends giggled.

“Why do you think that’s so unusual, Polly?” Risyda said. “Don’t you keep animals in your homes, too?”

“Animals in *our* castle? How ridiculous! Lady Risyda, dear, I’m worried about your mental faculties.”

“You were just regaling us earlier with stories of all your precious little doggies. You know, those fluffy little things that are always yapping and nipping at people’s ankles. It’s so cute the way they think they’re threatening.”



“That’s different,” she snapped.

“Even useless animals are still animals,” Risyda said.

Polina’s fan started waving so quickly it was a blur. Risyda and Jasen shared a secret grin.

Silence descended upon the room. Polina’s friends tentatively began to chatter again, but the foul mood of their leader made their talk strained. Eventually, Polina stood up and yawned dramatically. “Dear me, I am tired this evening. Perhaps I should retire early. After all, I want to look my best for my audience with the king tomorrow.”

Jasen whipped his head up. He felt his mouth hanging open, so he shut it with a snap. Polina gave him a sly look out of the corner of her eye, but continued to address her friends. “They say that I am the exact image of the late queen...”

It was at that exact moment that Jasen stopped caring. He put his book down on a chair and left, heading back to his own room. For once he was glad of all the stairs; he imagined each stair was Polina’s face. He was halfway up the first flight of stairs when Risyda caught up with him.

“You shouldn’t let her bother you,” she said. “The king makes sure to call on at least one consort from every kingdom, and Polina’s the highest ranking from hers. It isn’t as if he asked to see her specifically.”

“I don’t care.”

“Right,” Risyda said. “That’s why your face is bright red and you’re stomping up these stairs.”

“Lady Isalei said he wanted to see me, and yet Polina of all people is meeting him before I do. Why?”

Risyda bit her lip. “You don’t know that he hasn’t asked for you again. Lady Isalei probably just wants you to make the best impression possible.”

“Or maybe she’s decided I’ll never be suitable enough to see him.” He turned away from her. “Or perhaps he’s changed his mind,” he said quietly. He resumed his march up the stairs.

Risyda followed him. “I thought you didn’t want to be his consort.”

Jasen stopped abruptly. “I don’t!” he snapped. “And I don’t want to be here. I will never be any good at this. I might as well give up now. I’m going to

arrange for a carriage tomorrow to go to my uncle's. My father can think of some other way to pay off his debts. Maybe he'd like to come here and win himself a rich husband!"

Risyda put a hand on his shoulder. "You aren't here just for him, any more than I'm here for my father. Even if you don't end up marrying, the Court is a good place to be. It gets you out. It teaches you things. It's all rubbish, but it's rubbish you need to know if you ever plan to get out of Grumhul." She smiled. "And besides, I'm not going to let you abandon me here. Come on. Let's go back to my room."

Jasen let her lead him back to her room. She pulled out her hookah and let Jasen take a big puff. Some of his tension left. He lay on his back on the floor and stared at the smoke that swirled around them. The thing he liked best about kara weed was that it made anything other than the moment he was in seem unimportant. Risyda took her own puff and then spread out on the sofa, laying with her head hanging backwards off the edge.

They smoked for a while. Eventually, Jasen asked, "Is she really dragon-blessed with premonition?"

Risyda snorted. "Of course not. Premonition is the one dragon blessing that a person can claim without any proof. Most people who claim to have it are frauds."

Jasen watched Risyda puff different shapes of smoke out of her mouth for another few hazy moments. "What does it feel like to be dragon-blessed?"

"Do you mean in general or when it happened?"

"Both."

Risyda took a few moments to answer. "I don't know how to describe it," she said at last. "I was awfully young at the time—only six years old. The draeids took me to the draemir along with a few other children. We prayed for a while, but it didn't seem like any dragons were going to come. We were about to leave when she came—a white dragon with purple wings. I felt a warmth like nothing else—it seemed to come from inside me. The draeids brought us up to the dragon and we all touched her. I felt a spark."

"And then you had your powers?"

"Not at first. It was a few weeks before they manifested. I set the tablecloth on fire at dinner one night. That was quite a disaster." Risyda rolled over and

gave him a searching look. "Why are you asking? Did something like that happen to you?"

"I don't know," Jasen said. "Maybe. But I haven't noticed anything unusual. And don't you have to be a child to be blessed?"

Risyda shrugged. "I'm not an expert by any means, although there is a difference between being blessed by a dragon and being called by one. The experiences feel similar, but they mean different things. Being dragon-blessed means you're given an ability. Being dragon-called means that a dragon is requesting your service."

"Have you ever met anyone who was called?"

She hesitated for a moment. "I was, once."

"You were?"

"Yes, when I was fifteen. I woke up one morning, and before I knew what was happening, I grabbed my horse and rode straight to the nearest draemir. It was the same dragon that blessed me." She looked down at her hands, seeming uncomfortable for once. "I've never told anyone that before."

"Why not?"

"I didn't want to be a draeidess. An austere life of self-sacrifice isn't something that I find very appealing." She lay back on the sofa again, staring at the ceiling as she puffed some more. "Then again, becoming a wife doesn't seem appealing to me, either."

They smoked gloomily for a while until there was a familiar knock on the door.

"Thank the heavens," Risyda said. "Maybe Larely can cheer us up."

Risyda opened the door to let him in. He was carrying a small bag.

"Well, you two look glum," Larely said. "Is the torturous existence of a noble wearing on you?"

"You have no idea," Risyda said. "What's in the bag?"

Larely pulled out a bottle. "Colderberry wine," he said.

"Oh, I could kiss you!" Risyda said. And then she did—a wet, sloppy smack on the cheek. Larely blushed a little. Jasen supposed that answered the question of whether or not Larely was flirting with *him*. He felt relieved. Had he been in

Grumhul, he probably would have tried to jump into bed with him already, but the whole business with the king and his lessons and the dragon had left him too upside down for trysts.

They passed the bottle around as they chatted. Larely and Risyda seemed to not have any troubles, but after a couple of swigs, Jasen began to feel sick. He never could hold his liquor. "I'm going to bed," he said, struggling to his feet.

"Are you all right?" Larely asked. "I can help you back to your room."

Jasen waved him off. "No, I'm fine," he said. "You two have fun."

"Wait," Risyda said. She went to her bedside table and pulled out a small pouch. "Take this in the morning. I had it made by a dragon-blessed healer. It banishes wine-induced illness."

"Why don't I just take it right now?"

"Because I'm having a premonition," she said dramatically. She shut her eyes and put her fingers to her temple. "Yes, it's becoming clearer... I'm seeing you, tomorrow, desperately ill. Your valet will witness your illness and declare you unfit to go to lessons. So ill, in fact, that you must not be disturbed for the entire day. But maybe not too ill to sneak out for a while."

Jasen grinned. "My lady, your gift is truly awe-inspiring. I think you may be right."

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## Chapter Five

The next morning, Jasen felt as ill as he'd imagined he would. He warned Rotheld, who insisted that getting up and walking around would make him feel better. He soon changed his opinion when he tried to tie Jasen into his corset. On the first pull, Jasen was colorfully sick all over the floor. After having to clean that up, Rotheld retreated without further protest, nodding in agreement when Jasen said he didn't think he'd be up for lessons, or for taking any luncheon, either.

Once he was gone, Jasen mixed up the powder Risyda had given to him in a glass of water and drank it. He felt better almost immediately. He took out his forbidden tunic and trousers and got changed. He knew his flaming red hair made him too recognizable, so he added a knitted cap that laborers often wore; this wasn't the first time he had thought of escape, and so had asked Larely to smuggle him one earlier. Once he thought everyone was up and out for breakfast, he made his way down the stairs and out the servant's door, and just like that, he was free.

The day was bright and beautiful in the way it often is after a good rain. He breathed in the cool, sweet air. As much as he loathed to admit it, Polina was right about one thing—it did remind him of home. He walked about aimlessly for a little while, not sure of what to do. Part of him wanted to go to the draemir, but he felt it was too chancy—he didn't want to draw attention to himself. Besides, he knew there were no dragons there today; somehow, he was sure if there were, he'd be able to feel them.

He decided to go for a walk in the Bedrose Gardens. While the lords and ladies were often allowed to take strolls in the gardens, there were many areas they weren't allowed to explore for fear of getting their fine clothes dirty. Back in Grumhul, Jasen spent a lot of his time outdoors, going wherever he pleased; no one was ever too fussed about getting dirty, because mud was an inescapable fact of life in Grumhul.

He left the path, climbing through bushes and trees to get to the gardens off the normal trails. He marveled at all the beautifully chaotic wildflowers as he watched birds glide between trees, singing songs that Jasen had never heard before. He even found the orchards, which had trees bearing several kinds of colorful fruit. He grabbed a few for a snack before heading off to explore some more.

Eventually, he made it back to the more populated area of the gardens. He heard young voices calling to one another. Curious, he followed the sounds until he came upon a field, where twenty or so well-dressed children were playing a game. All of them except for one. A girl who looked to be about eight years old sat on the edge of the field near a pile of rackets and balls. She had hair so blonde it was nearly white and large blue eyes, currently wet with tears.

Jasen approached her. "What's the matter?" he asked.

She gave him a wary look. "They won't let me play," she said. "They say I'm too little."

Jasen looked over at the other children, who were batting a tiny ball back and forth over a net with delicate-looking rackets. "It doesn't look much fun to me, anyway," Jasen said.

"I wanted to play catch-a-ball, but they say that it's a game for babies."

"I'll play with you," Jasen said.

She wiped her nose with the back of her arm. "Really?"

"Really."

The girl got to her feet and picked up a medium-sized leather ball.

"So how do you play?"

"You don't know how to play catch-a-ball?" she asked, her earlier wariness returning.

"I'm, um, not from around here," he said, which was true enough.

That seemed to satisfy her. "Well, all right. You throw this ball to each other, but you back up a little every time so it gets harder. Whoever misses a catch or doesn't throw the ball far enough loses."

That didn't sound like a much more interesting game than the racket one, but Jasen didn't say so. The girl tossed the ball to him, which he easily caught. It was a little lighter than the balls they used in Grumhul to play mudball, but about the same size. He dropped it on the ground, rolled it into the crook between his foot and ankle, and then popped it into the air, catching it on his back between his shoulders.

The little girl's mouth dropped open in astonishment. "That was amazing!"

Jasen grinned. "Thanks," he said as he let the ball roll off his shoulder.

“Do it again.”

So he did. After that, he juggled the ball between his knees before sending it sailing up into the air again. He bounced the ball off his head before catching it in his hand. The girl applauded; he took a bow.

“Can you teach me how to do that?” she asked.

“Well, unfortunately it takes a bit of practice. But I can show you the basics of mudball, if you want.”

“Mudball?” she said, screwing up her nose. “What a terrible name for a game.”

“Names can be deceiving,” he said.

“And what’s your name, then?”

Jasen hesitated. “It’s Jay.” He hoped she wouldn’t ask where he was from; he’d like to make sure it didn’t get back to anyone that he’d been here.

“That’s a very good name,” she decided. “My name is Erada, and I’m eight years old.”

The name sounded vaguely familiar, but he couldn’t quite place it. “It’s nice to meet you,” Jasen said. “Come on—let’s go to that end of the field there.”

Jasen began to teach her basic volleys and kicks; fortunately, her shoes and her dress were much more sensible than the usual courtly clothing. She was a quick study, and soon they had a good volley going back and forth. She tired of it eventually and asked him to start doing tricks again. He was happy to oblige her. Back in Grumhul, he used to play mudball every day, but had abandoned it during the last year or so. He hadn’t realized how much he had missed it.

After a little while, Jasen became aware that all of the other children had stopped their game and had crossed the field to watch him. He did an exceptionally tricky kick. They all oooh’d appreciatively.

“What are you playing?” asked one tall, serious-faced boy of twelve. He resembled Erada, so Jasen guessed that he was her brother.

“It’s called *mudball*,” Erada said loftily.

“Can we play?” asked a dark-haired girl.

“What do you think?” Jasen asked Erada. “Should we teach them?”

Erada gave it some serious thought. “All right, I suppose so,” she said.

Jasen marked out two goals and explained the game (which wasn't that complicated—it involved kicking the ball into the other player's goal), and after briefly teaching them a few moves, they began to play. It was awkward and slow-going at first, but the children caught on with surprising quickness. Soon they were laughing and running along the field. Jasen forgot about his worries and lost himself in the game. After some time, they all stopped to rest. Jasen learned a few of their names—the serious boy was called Ados and was indeed Erada's brother. They thankfully didn't express a lot of curiosity as to Jasen's identity.

"Why is it called mudball?" Ados asked as they all got up to resume their game.

"Well, where I'm from, there's a lot of mud. Usually, we coat the ball in mud to make it more difficult to kick, and then the field's usually muddy, which also makes things slippery."

"That sounds like fun!" Erada said.

Jasen grinned. "It is."

Ados looked thoughtful. He raised his hands, and suddenly water began to gather in the air. He made a gesture, and it all came crashing down on the field. He picked up the ball and rolled it in the newly created mud. "There," he said, his face deadpan. "Now it's mudball."

Jasen couldn't help but laugh. They all rushed out again, getting themselves thoroughly muddy as they played. The children shrieked with joy as they slipped in the mess. Jasen hoped they wouldn't get into too much trouble for messing up their clothes, but what kind of monsters would deny children the joy of getting well and truly dirty once in a while?

The game soon devolved into a mud fight. They were having so much fun that none of them noticed they were being watched. Erada had just pounced on Jasen and was smearing mud onto his face when Jasen heard a throat being cleared. There, standing beside them was an older woman who looked as if she was about to explode with outrage—and the king. Jasen froze.

Erada followed Jasen's gaze. "Hello, Papa!" she said.

"Papa?" Jasen echoed faintly.

"Children!" the woman said. "I am extremely disappointed in you! Is this the way proper young lords and ladies behave? Stop this foolish nonsense at once and line up!"



The children did as they were told. "Aren't you ashamed?" the woman continued. "Just look at you! Look at the state you're in! What could have possessed you? Who is responsible for this?"

The children all looked over to Jasen, who remained sitting in the mud. He had hoped the woman and the king would remain distracted enough that he could sneak away, but that now seemed unlikely. He stood up and kept his head down.

"And who are you, young man?" the woman said.

Before he could answer, the king said, "Lord Jasen? Is that you?"

Jasen wished that he could sink into the mud and disappear, but since that wasn't an option, he gave him a little bow. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"What are you doing here?" the king asked.

"...playing mudball?"

The king began to laugh. The sour-looking woman glanced back and forth between the two of them, an uncertain look on her face. The king looked to his daughter. "Did you all get plenty of exercise?"

"Oh yes, Papa, and we had so much fun, too!"

The king turned his attention back to the woman. "Well, Madame Certia, it seems your new program is a success, yes?"

"I suppose so, Your Majesty," she said. "But how are they to return to their lessons in such a state?"

"Perhaps lessons can be put off for one afternoon," the king said. He turned to the children. "Although you children should be more mindful of your play in the future."

The children bowed and curtsied while murmuring their agreement, but they were all exchanging excited looks. The reward of canceled lessons didn't seem like a good motivator for behaving better in the future, but Jasen wasn't about to protest.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Madame Certia mumbled. She clapped her hands. "Straighten up, children!" she said. "You may not have lessons this afternoon, but you will still conduct yourselves with proper decorum! Follow me—straight line, if you please!"

The children began to follow Madame Certia off the field, which left Jasen standing alone in the muddy field. The king bowed slightly to him and offered his arm.

"I'm going to get you all muddy," Jasen said.

The King smiled. "I do not mind."

They followed Madame Certia and the children off of the field and down the main path. Jasen held the king's arm stiffly at first, not sure exactly how he should be acting. He didn't even dare look at the king, keeping his gaze fixed instead on the ground.

"And how did you manage to escape Lady Isalei today?" the king asked eventually.

Jasen sneaked a look at his face. He was smiling at him, his kind blue eyes dancing with amusement. Jasen couldn't help but smile back. "Oh, I'm very ill today," he said. "Too ill to get out of bed, in fact."

"I am sorry to hear it."

Jasen had a sobering thought. "Someone will probably spot me if we walk along the main path."

"That is most likely so," he said. "Perhaps we should not enter by the main path." He stopped. "Wait here for a moment."

The king went ahead, catching up with Madame Certia. While he spoke to her, Erada peeked at him from the line and waved, a big grin on her face. He waved back. A few moments later, the king returned to Jasen's side. "Now then," he said, offering his arm again. "Which path shall we take?"

They ended up winding back around towards the orchards. "I was supposed to be more refined the next time I saw you," Jasen said as they walked.

"I am glad to find you unchanged."

Jasen almost didn't continue, but it wasn't as if he had much to lose. "I was thinking that you didn't want to see me."

The king stopped. "Why would you think that?"

"It's been three weeks since we first met, and I hadn't heard anything."

"Surely Lady Isalei told you I wanted to meet with you again."

“She did, once, but then said nothing after that,” Jasen said. He paused before continuing. “And then I heard you were meeting with others...”

The king took a deep breath through his nose and let it out slowly. “Lady Isalei,” he began, “is a very wise woman, in many ways. I rely on her advice for the finer points of courtly manners, and none are more knowledgeable than she in matters concerning marriage matches. However, she and I are having a... disagreement at the moment. As a compromise, I agreed to entertain other guests before you, for appearance’s sake. There is much that is delicate about this situation, as I am sure you understand. But that was with the understanding that I would see you again once I had fulfilled what she considers my political obligations.” The king took his hand. “She was to tell you of my strong and deep desire to meet with you again. It seems she did not properly convey that sentiment.”

Jasen hadn’t been fully aware of the tension he’d carried in his heart until the moment when it was released. He felt so light that he might float away. “No,” he said with a small smile. “She didn’t.”

The king smiled back, and then tucked Jasen’s hand back into his arm. They resumed their walk, taking their time as they strolled through the trees. “Was my meeting with other lords and ladies what prompted your, ah, ‘illness?’” the king asked.

“Maybe a little,” Jasen admitted. “It’s also been a bit of a shock being here. Things in Grumhul are much different.”

“I remember,” the king said. “I have only visited once, when I took a tour of all the Allied Realms when I was crowned king. I enjoyed my stay there more than any other. I am very fond of your Queen Urga, but she is also restless in the Draelands, especially during Court.”

“My mother and Queen Urga were good friends,” Jasen said. “I have a hard time imagining her here, too. Especially in the middle of hog-breeding season.”

The king laughed. “Yes, she always said she preferred the hogs of Grumhul to the ones of Court, which did not seem very fair, but she is a plain-spoken woman. I admire that in her.”

“Really?”

“Why does that surprise you?”

“Well, I didn’t think that anything Grumhulian was much admired outside of Grumhul.”

“Perhaps by some,” the king said. “But I am not among them. I wish there was more of Grumhul in the Draelands.”

Jasen nudged him with his shoulder. “I could always teach you how to play mudball.”

The king laughed. “I am a bit too old for mudball, I think.”

“You’re never too old for mudball. Even my dad plays sometimes. Besides, you aren’t that old, are you? Maybe ten years older than I am?”

The king was silent for a moment. “How old are you?”

“Twenty.”

“I had been a king for three years by your age,” he said. “I was a husband the next year, and a father the year after that. I was a widower at twenty-eight.” His gaze was now fixed off in the distance. “I feel older than my years.”

“I’m sorry,” Jasen said.

The king patted his hand and turned back to him, his expression light again. “Do not apologize. I could use the reminder that I am not an old man.”

“Glad I could help.”

They continued on for a while. “I have not visited these orchards in some time,” the king said. “I must confess I don’t remember which path leads out.”

“Oh, I came in from that direction,” Jasen said, pointing to the right.

The king squinted. “Where is the path?”

“There isn’t one.” Jasen took the king’s hand and pulled him towards the bushes. “Come on—it’s not that difficult a walk, and there’s a wonderful view.”

They worked their way through the brush to the wildflowers. Jasen took a moment to breathe and to feel the sun on his face and the fresh air all around him. The enjoyment only lasted a few moments; he would be back at his lessons soon, bound up in the suffocation of it all again.

“Is there something wrong?” the king asked.

“No,” Jasen said, and then, “Well, yes. I’m not relishing going back.”

“Why is that?”

“I’m not used to being so... monitored. They make you feel like a child. And there’s so much that I’m expected to do, and I can’t make sense of any of it. There are so many rules.”

“And you do not do well with rules.”

“I’m not used to having them! Or at least, the ones in Grumhul make sense: don’t go off in the swamp alone. Avoid spitting directly in people’s faces, even if you don’t like them. Try not to drag your sleeve in your soup. All sensible. But here, there’s a thousand things you must do, and each and every one of those tiny things holds equal weight, even though there isn’t any reason behind it that anyone can explain to me. And then there’s the uncomfortable clothing, and history and politics and music and dance and it’s all foreign to me, and the others laugh at me and I don’t know how to deal with it—any of it! I *don’t!*” He realized, with mortification, that his voice had become loud and high, and he was not so much breathing as panting.

The king considered him. “Perhaps we should sit down for a moment.”

They sat down on a grassy slope. Jasen had calmed himself by that point, but now he was overcome with embarrassment. He rested his elbows on his knees and held his head in his hands. “And now I feel like an idiot. You just finished telling me about the enormous pressures you’ve been under since you were three years younger than I am, and here I am complaining about having to learn the waltz and how to make boring conversation. I’m sorry.”

“Yes, but my responsibilities were always meaningful to me,” the king said. “It must be maddening to feel so much weight over what you see no value in. Perhaps it would be easier for you to think of it in this way. The Allied Realms are allied, but not identical. Learning courtly manners eases tensions between cultures, because everyone knows the same rules.”

Jasen blinked. “I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“It is a problem I have contemplated for many years,” the king said with a smile.

Their eyes met for a moment. Jasen looked away, tucking a strand of hair behind his ear. “I don’t know what I should call you,” Jasen said. “Your Majesty?”

“Perhaps in the company of others,” he said. “But it would sadden me greatly if you called me that in private. My family simply calls me Rilvor. I would like for you to call me that as well.”

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“All right, Rilvor,” he said.

They gazed into each other's eyes for a moment. It was at this point with other men that he might initiate a kiss (or more), but so much about this situation was beyond him. It wasn't only the king's status. He was also older than Jasen was used to, and his interest was much deeper than a simple roll in the hay. None of his previous sexual partners had ever looked at him with a gaze quite like that. He might as well have been a blushing virgin with the way it made his heart flutter.

Jasen stood up. “We should get back. They might start to miss me.”

Rilvor stood as well. “You should not concern yourself too much with Lady Isalei's displeasure. I can always speak with her.”

“I would rather you didn't,” Jasen said. “Our first meeting in the draemir made me a combination of a laughing stock and someone to be envied. It would be easier on me if no one found out about this.” Jasen slapped a hand to his forehead. “Except, of course, Madame Certia and the children already know. *Damn.*”

“Madame Certia will say nothing,” he said. “And sadly, there are many nobles who barely speak to their children.” He paused. “I had not considered the problems I might be causing for you. I apologize.”

“Why would you? It isn't your fault.” He thought about it for a moment. “I think a more formal meeting between us would alleviate some of the resentment. It would seem less like I'm using stunts to get your attention.”

“That I will most happily arrange.”

They eventually made their way out of the gardens, where the king bade him a quick good-bye, lest they attract too much attention. Jasen timed his return to the East Wing to coincide with the time most of the other consorts would be in lessons; he was able to slip back up to his room without anyone noticing. He bundled up his dirty clothes and shoved them under his bed, then changed back into his night shirt. He rang the servant's bell to request a bath.

As he waited for the bath, part of him felt dizzy with giddiness, but another part of him sunk even further into despair. He had almost managed to convince himself that he was indifferent to the king's affections, but the more he talked to him, the more he became aware that wasn't true. He liked him. He more than liked him. He *wanted* him in a way that he'd never felt before. Attraction was

one thing—he was accustomed to that. But this wasn't a gossamer-thin strand of physical desire that broke apart the moment that desire was satisfied. There was more to it. It elated him. He wanted to explore it more.

But why, oh why, did Rilvor have to be the king?

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To Jasen's relief, his adventure in the garden seemed to escape notice, and the next day life continued as usual. The next afternoon was archery practice, which was an activity Jasen actually enjoyed. The tutor had them work in pairs. Since Risyda was an expert and Jasen was good enough to not require much instruction, the tutor left them to themselves.

"So how was your day off?" Risyda asked as they settled at their target.

Jasen didn't know how much he wanted to say when others could overhear. "Interesting," he decided on.

"That's a mysterious answer."

"Later," Jasen promised.

Polina and Banither approached, choosing the target beside them. They began to speak a little more loudly than was strictly necessary.

"Oh Princess, will you tell me all the details of your visit with the king again?" Banither said. His eyes flickered over to Jasen and Risyda.

Polina giggled. "I've already told you a hundred times, it seems! Surely it must bore you."

"Oh no! It is too thrilling! I hang upon your every word!"

"All right, then!" She began to drone on about how she met with him yesterday morning and about the immediate connection they had felt. On and on she went as they all practiced their shots. Jasen tried to keep a straight face, but when Polina got to the part where her meeting with the king had supposedly gone on well into the afternoon, he couldn't help but laugh a little.

"What?" Risyda said.

Jasen looked over to the Princess to make sure she was still prattling on. "She's lying," he said. "There's no way she could have seen him in the afternoon."

"How can you be so sure?"

Jasen dropped his voice. "Because I was with him," he said, unable to keep a grin off of his face.

Risyda let out a delighted laugh. Polina stopped talking and looked over at them, eyes narrowed. Risyda waved to her. "Good morning, Polly!" she said.

"Good morning, Lady Risyda," she replied after a moment's hesitation. She looked back and forth between Jasen and Risyda's cheerful expressions. "I was just telling Lord Banither about my meeting with the king yesterday."

"We heard you," Risyda said.

"Oh."

"Well?" Risyda said. "Aren't you going to finish your story? I am *dying* to know exactly how many times he called you beautiful."

"I was done with my story," she sniffed. She notched an arrow and shot. It barely hit the target.

"Missing the mark, as usual," Risyda said.

Polina's face flushed. She grabbed another arrow, notched it, and concentrated. This time, she hit a bull's-eye. She looked back to Risyda in triumph, her face still red. "There. What do you think about *that*?"

"I think that you should try to shoot straight more often," Risyda said. "You might actually accomplish something."

"Like what? Becoming the Ladies' Archery Champion, like you?" Polina spat. "What a small, stupid goal. And what a stupid sport this is." She threw her bow on the ground, gathered her skirts, and stormed off. Banither scrambled behind her.

"Why do you two hate each other so much?" Jasen asked when she was gone.

Risyda shrugged. "I don't hate her. We used to be friends when we were children," she said. "Then one year, she decided I wasn't her friend anymore. She said I didn't take our mission to find a husband seriously enough. I mean, she was right; it was probably better that she ended the friendship when she did." Risyda notched an arrow and shot; it went wide. "That was a terrible shot," she said. "I suppose you can't win them all."

For a moment, she seemed incredibly sad. Jasen wasn't sure what to say, but then Risyda was back to herself again, giving him a sly smile. "So! I don't think I can settle for *later*. Tell me everything."



Jasen looked around. Now that Polina and Banither had left, they had a cushion of a target on each side of them. He didn't think anyone would overhear, as long as he kept his voice low. "Well, it all started with a game of mudball..."

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After archery, Risyda left for her language lessons while Jasen went to practice dance. The weather had returned to its normal warmness for this time of year, and going straight from the archery to dance left Jasen feeling overheated and short of breath. His damnable corset was only making things worse. He was allowed a short break before luncheon. He headed out for a secluded, shaded spot he'd previously found behind the East Wing. He went there whenever he had a moment to grab a few moments of solitude.

On his way there, he ran into Larely. "Oh, thank heavens," Jasen said when he spotted him. "I need you."

"You need me?" Larely echoed. "For what?"

Jasen grabbed his arm and pulled him behind a tree. He took a quick look around to make sure no one else was there, then shed his jacket and turned around, bracing himself against the tree. "Undo my breeches," he said.

Larely sputtered. "What?"

"Quickly, before someone sees us!"

It took a moment, but Jasen soon felt Larely's hands on him, undoing the laces. Once he had them open, Jasen shimmied the breeches around his hips. "Now unlace my corset—not all the way, because I'm not going to have time to take it completely off. Just loosen the laces a little."

There was another moment of hesitation, but Larely complied. Jasen took a long, deep breath of relief. He turned around. "Thank you, I feel much—"

But he didn't have the chance to finish that sentence, because Larely's lips were suddenly pressed against his own. He put his hands on Larely's chest and pushed him away. "What are you doing?!"

Larely looked as confused as Jasen felt. "I was kissing you?"

"Why?"

Larely's face was already flushed, but it grew an even deeper shade of red. "You said you needed me, and then you pulled me back here and asked me to undress you!"

“I didn’t mean it like that!”

“Well, what was I supposed to think?”

Jasen had to admit that Larely’s reading of the situation was not unreasonable. “But... I thought that you and Risyda were... intimate.”

Larely furrowed his brow. “Why would you think that?”

“She kissed you the other night.”

“What, when I brought the wine? She was just teasing me—you know how she is!”

“Why did you blush?”

“I blush at everything—I have very fair skin! And you would, too, if Risyda kissed you—it’s embarrassing, like being kissed by your sister. She knows I like men.” Larely rubbed the back of his neck. “And I thought I made that clear to you as well.”

“I thought that you were just a naturally flirtatious person,” Jasen said. “I wasn’t sure it was directed at me in particular.”

“Well, now you know,” Larely said shortly. “I take it that this means you aren’t interested.”

Jasen shook his head. “If things were different, maybe. But—there’s the king...”

“I thought you said that you didn’t want to marry the king.”

“It’s complicated,” Jasen mumbled.

“Not that complicated,” Larely said. “Of course you would marry a king if you got the chance. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? It was very stupid of me to think that someone like you would stoop so low.”

Jasen wanted to protest that nothing could be further from the truth, given his past escapades, but decided that wouldn’t be very helpful in this situation. “I’m sorry.”

“There is nothing to be sorry about, *my lord*,” Larely said with a bow. “I won’t bother you any further.” He turned and began to leave.

“Wait!”

Larely turned back. There was a tiny bit of hope in his eyes, which made Jasen feel even worse. He turned around. “I need your help getting dressed again,” he said apologetically.

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Larely stalked over to him and did up his corset and breeches again. When he was finished, Jasen turned around. "Larely, I—"

"Don't," Larely said. "Just—don't." He turned and left for good.

Jasen slid down to the ground and put his hands over his face. He felt like screaming. Every time things started to look up, something happened to remind him of his propensity for making messes. How was he going to explain this to Risyda? And poor Larely. He gave his face a vigorous rub. It was probably time for him to go inside; the last thing he needed today was to make more trouble.

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## Chapter Six

Jasen didn't say anything to Risyda about what happened with Larely; in fact, he avoided her entirely that night, claiming a headache. The next morning, Lady Isalei called him to her parlor to extend an official invitation for an audience with the king, to be held the next day. It might have been Jasen's imagination, but it seemed that she looked at him with a certain scrutiny, as if she knew that something had happened but had no way to prove it.

Although he didn't say anything to anyone, the news of his meeting with the king had already spread. Polina made especially sour faces at him during dinner and loudly explained to her cohorts how much she admired the king's dedication to fairness, seeing as he made time for even people from "the lesser realms."

Polina's nastiness and the situation with Larely put a damper on his excitement at seeing Rilvor again, but fortunately one of those situations resolved itself that night. Larely approached him as he was about to retire for the evening. Risyda had already gone upstairs. "Hello," he said. He seemed sheepish.

"Hello," Jasen said back.

"I'm an ass," Larely said. "A great big giant ass, and I'm sorry for yesterday."

"You don't have to apologize."

"Of course I do. I said some very unfair things." He paused. "I hear you're off to see the king tomorrow."

"Yes."

"Is it what you want?"

"Yes," Jasen said. "It really is."

"Then I'm glad for you." He handed him a bottle. "Here—an apology gift from me. It's Yarlian wine—a very fine vintage from my father's vineyard."

Jasen accepted the bottle. "Thank you," he said. "Why don't you come up to Risyda's and have a glass with us?"

"Not tonight," Larely said. "Some other time, maybe."

“Oh. All right, then.”

Larely smiled at him, although it was a little strained. “Good night, then.”

“Good night.”

Jasen headed up to Risyda's, the wine bottle feeling heavy in his hand. He couldn't help but feel he'd lost a friend. Maybe that would change later. He decided against telling Risyda. They had a lot of other things to discuss, after all. His stomach did a little flip just thinking about what was in store tomorrow. Would an official visit be different from their meetings before? Would he make an ass of himself? Tomorrow seemed both too far away and too soon.

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Jasen awoke early the next morning to prepare. A breakfast was sent up to him, but he was too nervous to eat. Even the unflappable Rotheld seemed fussy rather than efficiently meticulous, which Jasen thought was rather sweet. They selected an outfit together. Since it was a morning appointment, they decided simpler was best. The outfit they settled on was a deep blue, with only a little lace trimming and a modestly flared frock coat. They argued over the shoes; Jasen won and wore a pair with only a slightly raised heel.

Finally, a valet arrived to escort Jasen to the king's private apartments. He hadn't been in the palace proper yet. When they stepped into the front hall, it was all Jasen could do not to gape. The high ceiling was covered with the most beautiful murals Jasen had ever seen. They depicted the Drae, which were the central figures of their religion—the beings that were half-human, half-dragon, who had both the magical abilities of dragons and the reason of men. They were too powerful and too reckless, however, and the gods split them apart into separate creatures, and it had been that way ever since. The stories had always seemed distant to Jasen, particularly since there were no dragons in Grumhul, but the murals were so clear and so lovely that he felt the truth of it for the first time.

They wound their way up some stairs and through some halls until at last they reached the king's apartments. The receiving room was dazzling to behold. There was gold everywhere, etched into the walls in swirling patterns and gilding the frames of the paintings that were hung everywhere. Even the furniture seemed more like works of art than things to be sat upon. Jasen wasn't sure he could even find the courage to speak in such a place—even the rugs seemed better than him. Fortunately, the valet led him past that room and into another, less formal area.

To Jasen's surprise, he saw not only the king, but his children as well—Ados and Erada, and also his two youngest daughters: one a sweet-looking girl of five with blonde curls, and the other about two years old, who was the only child who shared her father's dark hair. Rilvor was tickling the littlest girl, who was howling with delight. All five of them looked up as Jasen was shown into the room.

Erada beamed and ran up to him. "Hello, Jay!" she said, but then stopped. "I mean, Lord Jasen." She curtsied.

"It's nice to see you again," Jasen said. He looked over at Ados. "Both of you."

Rilvor picked up the youngest and took the other girl by the hand. "I wanted you to meet my other daughters. This is Denas," he said, indicating the five-year-old. "Denas, say hello to Lord Jasen."

Denas hid behind her father's legs, but managed a very soft, "Hello."

Jasen bowed deeply. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance, My Princess," Jasen said with great seriousness. When she peeked out at him, he stuck his tongue out at her. She giggled.

"And this is Ayera," he said, holding the little one closer to Jasen.

"Hello to you, too," he said. She cooed at him, then slapped him in the face and squealed.

"Believe it or not, that means she likes you," Rilvor said.

"We're going to see a puppet show!" Erada said.

Jasen looked to Rilvor. "Are we?"

"It is not a traditional audience between a consort and the king," Rilvor said. "But I thought perhaps you would not mind."

Jasen grinned. "I can't think of anything I'd rather do."

Soon afterward, the puppet players arrived. Erada insisted on sitting next to Jasen the entire time. She fell into fits every time the puppets did something funny, rocking back and forth with laughter and pulling on Jasen's sleeve to make sure he got the joke. Ados was more dignified, but even he started laughing towards the end. There was a nurse present to help with the little ones, who naturally paid less attention to the entertainment, but Rilvor tended to his younger children as much as the nurse did. It resulted in a lot of interruptions, but Jasen didn't mind.

Afterward, Rilvor sent the children off with their nurse, and he and Jasen had a private luncheon. By that time, all of Jasen's nervousness at playing the perfect consort had vanished, and he was actually able to enjoy Rilvor's company. They didn't talk about anything in particular, but it was very pleasant. Their time together was over much too quickly, but it would not be proper for him to stay much longer.

However, the king only waited a day before extending another invitation. He took Jasen riding, which was a relief since Jasen was permitted to dress in slightly more comfortable clothing. Best of all, he could leave his accursed heels behind. Jasen wasn't a very good horseman—the terrain in Grumhul was either too rocky or too swampy for riding. But the grounds of Strengsend were smooth and easy to ride. They even ventured up to the draemir, although no dragons were there.

They saw each other again a few days later, and then again after that. After two weeks of it, no one could ignore the king's obvious favor. Jasen was prepared to be made even more of a pariah, but instead, something strange began to happen. First, the snickering and the whispering disappeared. After that, he was occasionally greeted by some of the others outside of lessons. People began to try to sit near him during dinner; one night, a minor fight broke out when Lady Treburess of Nodini slipped into the chair beside him right as Lord Radvor of Lyeril was about to take it himself. The only person who seemed determined to continue to ostracize him was Princess Polina, but as more people flocked to Jasen, her own circle began to dwindle.

Jasen was baffled, but Risyda didn't find it strange at all. "It's clear that you're the king's favorite now," Risyda explained as they played cards one evening in the back of the Swan Parlor. "Before, it was at least somewhat plausible that someone else might catch the king's eye, but there's no contest now. Most of the others figure that their strategy should now be to get in good with you before your engagement is official."

"That's so cynical."

Risyda shrugged. "They have their own matches to make. Only the most deluded really thought they had a chance with the king. Speaking of which..."

Jasen followed her gaze to the door, where Polina and Lord Banither had entered. They settled in chairs by the fire. Polina had a bit of needlework, and Banither had a book.

"I had a dream last night," Polina announced. No one paid her any mind, but she kept on as if she had her usual rapt audience. "I sprouted wings and flew through the air. Beside me was a demonic figure—his red hair like fire. He was covered in mud and was dressed in rags—extremely unfashionable rags, at that. Then an elegant angel with a noble crown flew between us. The horrid little goblin made a grab for him, but he was so clumsy that he fell to the earth. The angel took my hand, and we gracefully flew away. What do you think it could mean?"

"I'm sure I don't know," mumbled Lord Banither, who did not look up from his book.

"Well it must mean something," Polina snapped.

Lord Banither looked up at last—only to look right past her to Risyda and Jasen. "Lord Jasen!" he said, standing up. He strode over to the two of them. "I did not see you there! My apologies—you must think me so rude for not greeting you! And good evening to you, too, my lady," he said, bowing to Risyda.

Risyda batted her eyelashes. "Always a pleasure to see you, my lord," she said with exaggerated sweetness.

If he noticed any sarcasm, he didn't show it. "Cards!" he exclaimed. "How amusing! What game are you playing?"

"Omiss," Jasen said.

"Ah! A game I enjoy. It allows for three players, does it not?"

"It does," Risyda said. "But it is ever so much more amusing with four." She raised her voice. "Why don't you come and play with us, Polina?"

"Cards are a plague on polite society," Polina said with a scowl. "They lead to gambling and moral degeneration!"

Risyda shrugged. "Suit yourself." She turned back to Lord Banither. "Why don't you join us?"

They dealt Lord Banither in and played a few hands; Jasen won them all.

"Ah, Lord Jasen! You have beaten us again!" Banither said. "Truly, you have great talent at this game!"

"That's strange," Risyda said. "I believe that you have something of a reputation as a master player yourself, and Jasen only learned two months ago."



Banither waved his hand. "What is experience when faced with raw talent?"

Risyda rolled her eyes and dealt the cards again.

"I was just reading the most interesting book about Grumhul," Banither said to Jasen. "How charming it sounds—such a wild, untamed landscape!"

"It's mostly swamps," Jasen said.

"Yes, and that's the charm! So much in my own realm is manicured and tamed, the land perverted from its original natural state. Are you familiar with the works of Denrodo?"

"I'm afraid not."

"He is a most interesting natural philosopher. I will have to lend you some of his works."

"Thanks," Jasen said.

They played for a little while. "I heard that you and the king took in a most amusing play the other day," Banither said in a forced causal voice.

"It was a puppet show for his children," Jasen said.

"Ah," Banither said.

The conversation lulled, so Banither tried again. "The king has a cousin—Tinaris, I believe his name is. Does he ever speak of him?"

"No."

"Well, I hear he is coming to Court in search of a consort," Banither said. "And I also hear that he has a keen interest in natural philosophy. Perhaps you might mention that it is an interest I share?"

Risyda hid her face behind her cards to hide her snickering. Jasen gave her a kick under the table. "Certainly," he said.

"Splendid!" Banither spread out his cards. "Oh dear, what a hopeless hand! I am afraid I have lost again." He yawned dramatically. "I am so tired—that must be why I'm playing so poorly. I suppose I should turn in for the evening."

"So nice playing with you," Risyda said, still all sweetness. "And you too, Polina!"

Polina gave her a suspicious look. "I didn't play."

"Oh, you played," Risyda said. "You just didn't play Omiss." She stood up. "Perhaps we should turn in, too, Lord Jasen."

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“Perhaps we should.”

Polina didn't budge from her chair as the three of them passed. Banither managed a muttered “good night” to her, but nothing more. She kept her gaze fixed on her needlework, but Jasen noticed a tremor in her hand. Her face was carefully blank, although Jasen could have sworn her eyes looked wet.

“So what game were you playing with her?” Jasen asked Risyda once they were on the stairs.

“Oh, just a game of ‘How Do You Like Us Now.’ We won, just so you know.”

Jasen couldn't share in Risyda's glee. “I feel sorry for her.”

“I invited her to join us,” Risyda said, a little defensively.

“So you could make fun of her up close?”

“I would have been nice to her!” At Jasen's look, she added. “Really. She was my friend once. I wouldn't mind it if she was again, if she would let go of all that bitterness. There aren't any hard feelings on *my* part.”

“You don't act like it.”

Risyda opened her mouth to protest, and then shut it again. “You may have a point,” she allowed.

They reached her room. “Will you be visiting tonight?”

“No, I don't think so. I'm exhausted.”

“All right then. I'll see you tomorrow.”

Jasen returned to his room and found Rotheld waiting for him. Rotheld performed their nightly rituals of undressing and light grooming. He poured Jasen his usual cup of herbal tea, and then left. Jasen drank the tea and breathed in deeply; he felt himself relax as the stresses of the day left him. After he was finished, he climbed into bed.

He had just managed to drift off to sleep when an urgent banging on his door startled him into wakefulness. He managed to drag himself out of bed and pull on a robe before staggering over to answer the door. To his surprise, he saw Polina standing there, wearing only her dressing gown. She looked very small without her shoes and her usual elaborate hair. She was swaying a little.

“Princess,” Jasen said. “Is there something wrong?”

“Yes,” she spat. “You. You’re wrong. Everything about you is wrong!”

As soon as she spoke, Jasen smelled a bit of alcohol on her breath. “I think maybe you should go back to bed,” Jasen said as gently as he could.

“No! I have things to say to you! Do you know how long I have trained for Court? *Do you?*”

Jasen shook his head.

“I have been in refinement school since I was eight years old. Eight! And I have worked hard. I know all the rules. I know all the dances. I can play the flute as beautifully as a bird’s song. My needlepoint is without peer. I am well-read, able to converse on any subject. I work hard to make myself lovely to look at. My sense of fashion is impeccable.” She blinked her eyes rapidly. “None of that comes easily to me. I spend every moment of every day *working* for this. And then you come in here and do everything wrong, but somehow, everything falls straight into your lap. How is that fair?” She wiped one eye with the heel of her hand.

Jasen reached out to touch her arm. “Don’t cry.”

She jerked away from him. “But you haven’t won yet,” she sneered. “Oh no, you have *not*. Everyone knows that when the queen was alive, the king had his boys on the side. But all they were to him were pretty little distractions, good enough to warm his bed and keep him amused, but not good enough to bear a crown and share his burden. And that’s all you are. A pretty little distraction. The king will grow bored with your innocent country boy act, and then he’ll come to his senses and realize that he needs someone who is his equal. And that certainly isn’t you!” She gave him a triumphant look, and with that, she marched away.

Or at least she tried to, but then she tripped and fell flat on her face. Jasen got to his knees beside her. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine! Get away from me!” But she started to snifle.

“I’m not trying to beat you,” Jasen said. “None of this is a game. You have to stop thinking of it like that.”

She laughed through her tears. “If you think that, then you really are a simpleton.” She dried her eyes on her sleeve and got to her feet, waving away Jasen’s attempt to help her. She staggered off down the hallway.

Jasen went back to his room and shut the door. His relaxation from earlier had vanished. What had she meant about the king and his “boys?” Not that he was one to talk, given his own sordid past, but it seemed incongruous with the man he knew. He got back into bed, but he couldn’t fall back asleep. Was Polina right? No, she couldn’t be. He could *feel* their connection. But no matter how hard he tried to banish the thought from his mind, it kept nagging at him. He lay awake for a long time before finally falling into a fitful slumber.

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Jasen arrived at Rilvor’s apartments the next morning, dressed for another session of horseback riding, as he had been instructed. Three of the children and their nurse were there, as they often were when he and Rilvor met in the morning. Little Ayera and Rilvor himself were missing.

Jasen gave the girls each a hug and exchanged a handshake with Ados. He thought back to Polina’s claim about Rilvor’s “distractions.” Surely if he felt that way about Jasen, he wouldn’t have made him so involved with his children?

Erada tugged at his hand. “Papa has a surprise for you!” she said. “You’re going to—”

“Erada!” Ados interrupted. “It won’t be a surprise if you tell him!”

“Oh, right,” she said. “You’re going to have so much fun, though! I wish I could go too—Papa said maybe next time!”

Rilvor emerged from one of the back rooms with Ayera in his arms. “Good morning,” he said to Jasen. He had this way of looking at Jasen even during the most mundane pleasantries that always made Jasen feel a little heated.

“Good morning,” he said back.

Rilvor handing Ayera off to the nurse, who also took Denas by the hand. “I will see you all for dinner,” he said to the children. “Pay attention to your lessons—I will be asking you about them.”

“Yes, Papa,” Ados and Erada said in unison.

After the children had gone, Rilvor picked up a large basket.

“Is that my surprise?” Jasen asked.

“Part of it.” He offered his free arm to Jasen, who took it.

“Where are we going?”

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“As Ados said, telling would spoil the surprise, wouldn't it?”

They made their way out of the palace. To Jasen's annoyance, Polina's words were still echoing in his head. He pushed them out as forcefully as he could manage; he wasn't about to let her ruin his day. They headed not for the gardens, but for the draemir instead. All at once, he felt a familiar heat pulse through him. “We aren't going to ride horses, are we?” Jasen said.

“Ah!” Rilvor replied in mock despair. “You have ruined your own surprise!”

Jasen forgot his doubts for the moment, giving himself over to the excitement of seeing Tassenred again. As they entered the draemir, he looked up and saw the silhouettes of two dragons speeding toward them, growing larger and larger. The dragons lit down in the field in front of them; the ground shook with their weight. One was Tassenred. The other was a silver dragon, longer but with finer features.

Rilvor approached the silver dragon. “This is Worja,” he said. “Tassenred's mate.” The dragon lowered her head to nudge Rilvor affectionately.

Jasen put his hand on her. She had blue eyes, like Rilvor. “You're beautiful,” he said to the dragon.

He heard a loud snort from directly behind him. He jumped and whirled around, laughing in surprise as he was confronted with Tassenred's large face. He put his arms around his neck. “And I am so glad to see you,” he said.

He turned back to Rilvor, whose eyes were sparkling. “Shall we?” Rilvor said.

Both of the dragons lay their bodies on the ground. Jasen found it a little difficult getting onto the dragon's back, but once he was there, he knew precisely where to sit and how to hold himself. As soon as he was settled, Tassenred began to move, first at a lumber, and then more and more quickly, until at last, they were in the air. Jasen belatedly realized that in his eagerness to get on the dragon, he hadn't asked Rilvor where they were going or if he was supposed to do anything to steer. Of course, it didn't seem likely that anyone could steer a dragon, and he decided he would simply trust that Tassenred and Rilvor knew what they were doing.

He watched as the ground became smaller and smaller. The view from the air was breathtaking; he'd never imagined land could look like that. They

soared away from the city, over the lands. The higher they got, the smaller things seemed, until Jasen felt as if he were a giant, or a god. Rilvor and Worია kept pace beside them. Even though he couldn't see him very well, Jasen felt a *connection* with Rilvor that was strong and strange and full of a joy he didn't know was possible to feel.

Eventually, they flew back towards the Ashfell Mountains, but instead of landing in the draemir, they continued to the mountain, up the side and down to a valley in between the mountains, where they landed. Jasen looked around in wonder at the beauty of the place. The flowers were so numerous and varied that he felt as if he'd stepped into a rainbow. A brook eased its way across the ground. He had thought the draemir and the gardens were beautiful, but this was even more spectacular. It was like an entirely different world.

He slid off of Tassenred's back and saw Rilvor dismounting as well. As soon as they had deposited their passengers, the dragons took off again, dancing around each other in the sky just as Jasen had seen them do on his arrival to the city.

Jasen was speechless for a little while, soaking up the beauty around him. When he did speak again, he said, "I do hope they plan to come back for us." Which was a rather uninspired thing to say, but he didn't think any words he said could do justice to what he truly was feeling.

"They will," Rilvor said. "They simply wanted some privacy for a moment."

Jasen looked at Rilvor. "Can you tell what they're thinking?"

"In a way, yes," he said. "But it's a bit more complicated than that. Dragons don't think the same way we do—they communicate in pictures and emotions, mostly. Dragons' minds are all linked to each other. I am party to that link. They do occasionally use human words, for our convenience. Tassenred and Worია are their 'human' names."

Rilvor still had the basket in his hands from earlier. He set it down and pulled out a blanket, spreading it over the ground. Next, he began to take out a variety of scrumptious-looking foods: breads and cheese, fine pastries and fruit, carved meats and pickled vegetables. There was also a bottle of wine and two wooden chalices.

Jasen sat down on the blanket. Rilvor offered him some bright red fruit. "Strawberries," he said. "As you requested."

It took him a moment to remember their first conversation. "Oh!" he said with a laugh. "I did say I wanted to lounge around eating strawberries, didn't I? But the truth is I've never actually had one. They don't grow in Grumhul. I just always imagined it was something luxurious people would eat." He took the strawberry and put it in his mouth.

"What do you think?"

"Sweet," he said. "But still a little tart. I like it."

Rilvor poured Jasen a glass of wine. They began to eat. When Jasen was finished, he lay out on the blanket with a happy sigh, staring up at the clear blue sky. "This is wonderful," Jasen said. "Better than wonderful. It's worth every moment of elocution lessons." He considered it for a moment. "Well, maybe not *every* moment."

Rilvor laughed. He stretched out beside Jasen, and Jasen suddenly became aware of his body, just inches from his own. He turned over on his side and met Rilvor's gaze. "This doesn't feel like an approved audience-with-the-king sort of activity."

"You are correct. Someone recently taught me that rules should occasionally be broken."

Jasen smiled. "That's probably the first time I've ever taught anyone anything."

"How are your lessons going?"

"All right, I suppose," Jasen said. "Although I feel like I'll never learn it all."

"No one does," Rilvor said. "I feel as though I am still learning myself."

Jasen groaned. "If you still haven't learned it all and you've been at it since childhood, then there's no hope for me!"

"True, I was trained in courtly manners as a child," he said. "But I did not live in Strengsend until I became king."

"Really? Where did you live, then?"

"In Rakon, with my mother's family."

"Why?"

"I wish I could be certain," he said. He paused for a long moment. "I think she might have been dragon-blessed with prophecy and sensed there would be

tragedy for us at Strengsend. As I'm sure you know, my parents and older brother and sister died of the plague, which is how I came to the throne. I think she might have known it would happen, but she couldn't keep my father from the Draelands. She kept my brother and sister away as long as she could as well. It always hurt me—I thought she did not want us. But after she died, I began to wonder..." He trailed off.

"I'm sorry," Jasen said.

Rilvor came back from his reverie. "It was a long time ago," he said with a reassuring smile. "But to my original point. I was not completely prepared for life at Court in the Draelands. Not that my education had been lacking, but there were still many small things I did not understand. And of course I was hit with the full brunt of the powers of the Lord of the Drae. I could not hold it on my own, so I had to get married almost at once to a woman I barely knew."

"Can you hold on to it now?"

"For the moment, yes," he said. "Although that will change."

Jasen sat up. "You have to be married this year," he said. "Don't you."

"Yes. I cannot put it off longer." Rilvor sat up as well. "Why does that trouble you?"

"I didn't say it did."

"You did not have to say it."

Jasen didn't feel like talking about it, but Rilvor kept looking at him in expectation. "The Lord of the Drae hasn't had a male consort in over three hundred years," he said eventually. "I'm sure there's a reason for that."

"Do you think that I would choose someone besides you?" Rilvor said, sounding startled. "If I have done something to make you doubt my affection for you, please tell me at once!"

Jasen rubbed the back of his neck as he struggled to find the right words. "I heard that when you were married, you had... other companions. Male companions. Is that true?"

The king took some time to answer. "As I said, I barely knew my wife before we married. I did grow to love her, but as a friend and the mother of my children. My preference has always been for men, not women. We had an arrangement to seek our pleasures elsewhere. This is not unusual, and in other



circumstances, it might have worked. But I am Lord of the Drae as well as king. I must be able to draw from my spouse, and that was difficult on both of us.”

He put a hand over his eyes, overcome by some sudden emotion. Eventually, he spoke again. “I am afraid that’s what made her ill,” he said, so quietly that Jasen strained to hear. “I am afraid that I killed her.”

Jasen put a hand on his shoulder, not sure of what else to do. The king took a few deep breaths, composing himself. When he looked at Jasen again, his eyes were wet. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“Don’t be,” Jasen said.

Rilvor took Jasen’s hands in his own. “Before I met you, I had resigned myself to closing my heart to the possibility of true love forever. I would try to find joy with my children and my people, but I felt my own heart would remain broken from the losses I’ve endured. But now you have given me hope. I do not want you as merely a companion. I want you as my partner, my life-mate, my second heart.”

Jasen felt dizzy. “Are you proposing to me?”

“I suppose I am,” he said with a small smile. “Do you want me to say the words?” Since Jasen found himself too flummoxed to respond, Rilvor pressed on. “Will you marry me?” he asked.

Jasen opened his mouth, trying to will himself to give an answer. “I don’t—I wasn’t prepared—I mean, we haven’t even kissed yet.”

Rilvor moved closer to him. “No,” he said, “we have not.” He released his hands so that he could cup the back of Jasen neck, threading a hand through his hair as he moved even closer. “Have you ever been kissed before?” he murmured.

Jasen couldn’t make sense of the question at first—it seemed like a bizarre thing to ask. But then he remembered he was supposedly a chaste young consort-in-training, and perhaps the king had mistaken his undoubtedly still panicked expression for the nervousness of someone inexperienced in the physical side of love. In truth, Jasen had had his first kiss at fourteen, and it was all downhill after that. In the past year alone, he’d had four different lovers—all young men like him with nothing as serious as marriage on their minds, but cheerfully interested in exploring what their bodies had to offer.

He opened his mouth to reply, his mind reeling as he tried to think of a way to explain it all. To his completely shock, what came out of his mouth instead was, “No.”

“May I have the honor of being your first?”

Jasen gave a vague nod. And then, Rilvor's mouth was pressed against his own. It was closed-mouthed at first, but that didn't last for long. All of the insecurities and doubts Jasen had felt began to melt as the kiss deepened. He felt heat, everywhere—on their lips, inside his body, all over his skin... Rilvor wrapped his arm around Jasen's waist, and suddenly Jasen forgot that he was supposed to be new at this. He surged forward, only thinking of getting more. The heat grew, and grew more—he was so hot that he had to pull back to gasp—

—and his gasp turned into a surprised shout. They were engulfed in flames. Or at least, that's what it seemed like at first. But the flames weren't burning anything; they were just *there*, licking the blanket and the surrounding grass.

Rilvor's eyes had been closed, but they opened at Jasen's outburst. He seemed as startled as Jasen at first, but seemed to accept the situation much more readily. He even smiled.

“Why are you smiling?!” Jasen shouted. “We're on fire!”

Rilvor reached out a hand to one of the flames; the light glowed on his skin, almost as if he'd scooped out a piece of it. “We are not on fire,” he said. “This is something else.”

Jasen stared at the light on Rilvor's hand, then back to the silently burning flames. He touched one himself; it was warm, but not scorching. “Is this part of your magic?”

“No.”

“How can you be so calm if you don't have any fucking idea what this is?”

“Because if it is not my magic, then it must be yours.”

Jasen's mouth dropped open. “Mine? But I'm not dragon-blessed!”

“It appears that you are.”

Jasen stared at the flames around them, which began to flicker out as if a breeze were blowing through. When they were gone, nothing had been damaged. In fact, it seemed like the grass was a little greener... but maybe he was imagining that.

Jasen had always secretly wished for magical abilities, but now that it seemed as if he had them, he wasn't sure what to think. He felt Rilvor's hand on his shoulder. "You seem troubled," he said.

Jasen met Rilvor's concerned gaze. "A lot has changed since this morning," he said finally. "It's a bit overwhelming."

"Of course," Rilvor said. "Perhaps you need some time to think on it."

"Yes," Jasen said, grateful that he understood.

Rilvor gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Take all the time you need," he said.

Just then, the sky darkened as the dragons returned. Rilvor and Jasen gathered their things as the dragons landed. They approached their respective dragons. As Tassenred lowered his head, Jasen looked into his enormous, golden eye. "What did you do to me?" he said under his breath.

Tassenred blinked, but offered no answer.

Jasen didn't mind too much—he wasn't sure he could handle any more life-shattering information. He got up on Tassenred's back, and then they were off again, back to Strengsend. He started to think that he was looking forward to some normalcy, which was insane. Nothing was normal in his life any more. It might not ever be again. And he didn't know whether he was excited or frightened by that prospect.

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## Chapter Seven

Jasen was in agony the rest of the day, waiting for night to come so that he could tell Risyda everything. He had to stop the story when he got to the part about how he'd told Rilvor he'd never been kissed before, because Risyda started laughing so hard she went into a coughing fit.

"I'm glad you found my pain amusing," Jasen mumbled.

"Why in heaven's name would you tell him that anyway? Especially after he confessed that he and his wife both kept lovers on the side."

"I don't know!" Jasen said miserably. "It's just that he had been talking about how having different lovers may have doomed his wife, and then he just assumed that I was a virgin, and it just didn't seem like the best time to correct him."

Risyda passed the hookah to Jasen. "Here. Have a few puffs and *relax*," Risyda said. "Think about it—how would he find out that you weren't entirely truthful? It isn't as if he's going to bump into any Grumhulians here. Besides," she added. "Now you have your way out, if you want it."

"What do you mean?"

"Let him find out the truth somehow, and then you'll be off the hook for the marriage."

Jasen took a few morose puffs. "I don't want off the hook," he said.

"A ha!" she said. "I knew it. You *are* going to marry the king."

Jasen groaned and buried his head in his hands. "I don't want to marry the king. I want to marry Rilvor. Do you think I can get him to abdicate?"

"I'm afraid it doesn't work like that," Risyda said. "The Lord of the Drae is a position that only ends with death. So unless you want to marry a corpse..."

Jasen aimed a kick at her, but missed. She laughed and grabbed the pipe, taking a deep puff. When she had finished, he spoke again. "There's more," he said. "I have a magical ability now."

Risyda sat up straight. "No!" she said with a delighted gasp. "Really?"

Jasen nodded.

"Well, come on—what is it?"

Jasen explained what had happened with the strange fire.

“Hmm,” she said. “Interesting. Do you think you can do it again?”

“I don’t even know how to try,” Jasen said. “We don’t have magic in Grumhul, remember?”

“All right, quick lesson,” she said. “Abilities are regulated through your emotions. I was blessed with fire, which means my ability stems from the more active emotions—my instructors kept trying to get me to use passion or righteousness or some other such nonsense, but for me? Anger is the key.” She held out her finger. “I dredge up a memory, concentrate, and then—” A flame burst from her fingertip. “It takes practice to control, but once you find your trigger, it gets easier.”

Jasen put up his own finger. The kara weed was making him a little woozy; he wasn’t sure if he could feel anything strongly at this point. “Should I try to be angry?” he said.

Risyda shrugged. “You said it was some sort of fire; it seems reasonable it might work.”

Jasen thought very hard about some of Polina’s nastier comments, but nothing happened. “It’s not working.”

“Maybe you aren’t thinking of something strong enough,” she said. She looked to her own finger, where the flame was still burning. “Like—think about your father. Think of how he’s using you. Think of all the slights, the sneers of disappointment, the utter dismissal of your worth beyond what price you could fetch—” Her flame suddenly burst larger and hotter, flames shooting upward nearly to the ceiling. She cried out and shook her finger. The flames vanished, but there was a dark smudge on the ceiling.

“Well, that was unexpected,” she said, her voice shaking a little. “That hasn’t happened to me in years. Particularly since the queen died. Magic started taking more effort after that; I usually don’t overshoot that much.” She looked at her finger. “Damn. It’s been a while since I’ve burned myself.”

Jasen leaned forward. “Is it bad?” he asked.

“Not terribly so. I should probably still bandage it.”

The strange heat that Jasen had felt before began to bloom in his chest again. Without thinking, he took Risyda’s hand in his own. Flames flickered

from his hand to hers—warm, but not burning. Her finger faded from an angry red back to its normal tone. She took her hand from his and held her finger up; they both gazed at it in wonder.

“Did that really happen?” Jasen asked.

“I think so,” she said. “Or else Larely got ahold of some especially high quality kara weed.” She grinned at him. “Healing. That’s a rare one.”

*Healing.* His mind went back to his last conversation with Rilvor, and how he had talked about his broken heart. It wasn’t a literal injury, but the man was clearly wounded. Was that why Tassenred had given him this ability?

A knock on the door startled both of them—it was Larely’s characteristic knock. Risyda weaved her way over to the door and opened it, letting him in.

“Larely!” she said. “Glad to see you! Jasen’s here—it’s been forever since it’s been the three of us, hasn’t it?”

Larely stepped in, and gave Jasen an awkward wave. “Hello.”

“Hello,” Jasen said. He was surprised to see him; he’d thought after their last meeting that Larely wouldn’t be joining them anymore. He was glad to see otherwise.

Larely wrinkled his nose. “Did you set something on fire in here?”

“Only my finger,” Risyda said. “But Jasen fixed it.”

“...how?”

“Oh, he was dragon-blessed,” she said.

“Since when?”

“This afternoon. Also, he’s getting married.”

“*Risyda!*” Jasen said, throwing a pillow at her.

“Married?” Larely echoed. He turned to Jasen. “Really? To the king?”

Jasen bit his lip. “It hasn’t entirely been decided yet,” he said. “And it’s supposed to be a secret,” he said, shooting a look at Risyda.

“What, like we weren’t going to tell him?” she said with a shrug.

“Well, congratulations,” Larely said with a forced smile. “I should be going. Captain Ingo is slightly less drunk than usual—he might actually notice I’m not doing my duties. I just stopped in to say hello.”

“But you just arrived!” Risyda said. She looked back and forth between the two of them, as if noticing the awkwardness for the first time. “Have I missed something?”

“Good night,” Larely mumbled in place of a proper answer. He shut the door.

Jasen got to his feet. “I should go, too.”

“Oh no, you don’t,” Risyda said. “What happened between you two?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Jasen said. He slipped out the door before she could protest any further.

Jasen saw Larely just as he was about to disappear up the stairs. “Wait!” he said as he scrambled to catch up with him.

Larely stopped at the foot of the stairs. “Yes?” he said when Jasen caught up to him.

“See me back to my room?” he asked, hoping for another few minutes to figure out what to say.

They said nothing on their way up the stairs. By the time they reached Jasen’s room, he still hadn’t decided what he wanted to say.

Fortunately, Larely spoke first. “Is it what you truly want?” he asked. “Marrying the king, I mean.”

“I think so,” Jasen said. “I mean—I’m still not sure about the whole marrying-a-king part of it, but I—” He choked on the words, but eventually pushed them through. “I love him.” He felt a little dizzy. It was the first time he’d said it out loud, but he realized it was true.

“Then I am happy for you,” Larely said. “Truly.” He gave Jasen one of his familiar grins. “I don’t know if I’m going to ever get used to calling you ‘Your Majesty’.”

Jasen paled. “Oh gods, I hadn’t even thought about that.”

Larely grinned. “I suppose I’ll just stick with ‘my lord’ for now.”

“Or Jasen,” he said. “Are we still friends?”

“Of course we are!” Larely said. “Can you blame a man for needing a little time to mend a broken heart?”

“I broke your heart?” Jasen said, alarmed. Had Larely really felt that strongly about him?

“Well, perhaps ‘break’ is too strong,” Larely conceded. “But it was a little bruised.”

“Is it better now?”

“It is.”

Jasen smiled. “I’m glad.”

They said their good nights. Jasen changed into his night shirt and climbed into bed. In spite of the chaos of the day, he found falling asleep much easier than usual.

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It was several days before Jasen saw Rilvor again. This time, they actually did go horseback riding, stopping for a luncheon in one of the gazebos of the Bedrose Gardens. They kept their talk light at first, not referencing either the proposal or Jasen’s newly discovered magical abilities. But the weight of what had happened was too much to ignore, and eventually their light talk petered out.

Jasen was the one who broke the silence. “I discovered what my blessing is,” he said.

“You have?”

“Yes. A friend of mine hurt her finger. I was able to heal it.”

Rilvor seemed taken aback. “That’s an exceedingly rare ability,” he said.

“That’s what she told me.” He pushed his food around his plate.

Rilvor gave him a searching look. “Is there something the matter?”

Jasen put down his fork and sighed. “I just never expected any of this.”

“What did you expect?”

“I don’t know. I came here to marry a lord, I suppose, but I never imagined there would be so much for me to learn, or that I would be dragon-blessed. And I certainly never expected to have a marriage proposal from a king. I’ve never done well with responsibility, and now I feel like the fate of the entire Allied Realms has somehow fallen into my lap.”

Rilvor was silent for a moment. “I must confess that it had not occurred to me that if I found someone, he might not want me,” Rilvor said eventually. He gave Jasen a sad smile. “I have never considered myself arrogant, but perhaps I was wrong.”



“No, no!” Jasen said, taking one of Rilvor’s hands in his own. “It isn’t that I don’t want you! I just don’t want the rest!”

Rilvor looked down at their joined hands. “But I cannot be separated from the rest,” he said gently. He gave Jasen’s hand a brief squeeze before pulling it away. “You will have to make a choice. I will understand if you decide it’s too much for you.”

Jasen felt a pang in his heart. “And if I refuse you, what am I supposed to do? Marry someone else? Go back to Grumhul and forget any of this ever happened? Forget that I fell in love with you? I can’t do that, either!” The words were out of his mouth before he realized it.

Their gazes locked. “You love me?” Rilvor said.

There was no sense in denying it. “I do,” he said.

Rilvor was out of his chair in an instant; he pulled Jasen to his feet and kissed him. Jasen threw his arms around him and kissed him back. It was everything it had been before, and more. For the moment, there was nothing but their lips against each other’s and their bodies crushed together. Jasen worked his hands under Rilvor’s frock coat, ready to slip it off his shoulders. He might have gotten somewhere if they weren’t interrupted by someone politely clearing his throat.

It was one of the king’s valets. “Pardon, Your Majesty,” he said. “But there are several lords and ladies approaching; they are scheduled to take luncheon here.”

They were both reluctant to part. “We can go back to your apartments,” Jasen said hopefully, but was not surprised when Rilvor shook his head.

“It would not be proper,” he said, extracting himself from Jasen’s arms. “Especially if we aren’t betrothed.”

That dumped a bucket of ice water on Jasen’s desire. “No, I suppose it wouldn’t,” he said.

Rilvor looked as if he were going to say something else, but decided against it. He offered Jasen his arm. “I will escort you back to the East Wing.”

They were quiet much of the way back. The erotic energy hadn’t entirely dissipated; Jasen was very aware of the way their arms touched, and the closeness of their bodies. His normally healthy sex drive had been smothered under the burdens of his training, but he felt it roaring back to life. It seemed

monstrously unfair and borderline insane that he should have to agree to marriage before they could even properly touch each other.

When they reached the East Wing, Rilvor kissed his hand. "I enjoyed our luncheon," he said. "It would please me if you would join me again tomorrow."

Jasen felt a spark of irritation at his formal tone—as if moments before they hadn't been wrapped in each other's arms. "What, for another horseback ride?"

"If you like."

"Fine," he said, perhaps more shortly than he intended.

Rilvor looked at him in puzzlement. "If there's something else you would like to do..."

"There is, actually, but I don't think you'd go for it," Jasen said. "I'll see you tomorrow, *Your Majesty*."

Jasen marched off to the front door, not looking back. He felt guilty almost as soon as he was inside. He sighed. Why was everything so complicated here? He would have to apologize tomorrow.

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Jasen did apologize, vaguely, for his ill humor, but left the exact cause unnamed. After a rather terse ride, Rilvor invited Jasen to dinner with himself and his children. He wondered if Rilvor had brought the children in as defense against Jasen's foul mood. It normally would have worked, as he enjoyed being with the children. But as they were eating, Jasen was suddenly struck with the thought that if they married, he would be a second father to these children. He nearly ran from the room screaming. It wasn't that he didn't care for them. In fact, he was already growing to love them, but it was one more responsibility that he had to consider. Could he be a good father? And he was only seven years older than Ados, which was a disquieting thought.

His mood didn't improve in the coming week. Every night in Risyda's room, he talked and talked around the question of whether or not to accept the proposal. One night, he talked about it so much that Risyda fell asleep in the middle of it. He didn't blame her; he was exhausted by the subject himself.

To add to the stress, the suitors would start to arrive within the week. Everyone was in a tizzy over it. Polina especially seemed to be losing her mind. Her hairstyles kept getting bigger, her waist smaller, her dresses wider, and her

shoes taller. Jasen wasn't sure how she was able to move. It was hard not to get swept up in the excitement of it, even though Jasen knew he wouldn't be fishing for a husband.

Jasen didn't see Rilvor again for a few days, as he had some kingly duties to attend to. That was fine with Jasen; he needed all the time he could get to think. But when Rilvor finally invited him for luncheon, he still had no idea what he was going to say.

Rilvor greeted him warmly, but Jasen couldn't quite return the enthusiasm. They made some small talk, but soon lapsed into silence.

Rilvor twisted a ring on one of his fingers. "Have you thought about what I have asked you?" he finally said.

Jasen wasn't sure how to begin. "I've only kissed you twice," he replied at last. "I don't think I can agree to marry someone I've only kissed twice."

"But that is an easy problem to fix," Rilvor said with a smile. "I can kiss you now."

Jasen's gaze went to where he knew the servants were standing nearby, even though they were discreetly out of sight. "I don't mean the sort of kiss you can do in front of other people."

"Ah," Rilvor said.

"Let's take the dragons again," Jasen said. "Out to the valley where we went before."

Rilvor shook his head. "The nobles will be arriving soon; I don't have the time to disappear for that long."

"The gardens, then," Jasen said. "Everyone knows you take a walk by yourself every day. Meet me in the wildflower field tomorrow. You can escape for at least an hour."

"I am not sure that is such a good idea," he said. "If we are married, there will be plenty of opportunities to—"

"But we're not married," Jasen interrupted. "Not yet." He rubbed his face. "I just want some more time where I can be with you as Rilvor, not as the king. A half an hour. Another kiss. Give me that, and I can make my decision."

Rilvor was silent for a few moments. "All right," he said. "I will meet you."

Jasen ventured a smile. Rilvor smiled back. The tension dissipated, and they were able to finish their meal in better spirits. Jasen knew that his demand was a little silly, but he couldn't say yes all at once. He had to work his way up to it.

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Since lessons were over, Jasen found it relatively easy to slip away at the time they had agreed upon. He wore the work clothes he'd donned on his last escape, which had the advantage of being both inconspicuous and easy to remove.

Rilvor was already waiting when he arrived. Jasen very nearly tackled him; they half-fell to the ground, with Jasen landing on top of him, his mouth already pressed against Rilvor's.

Rilvor let out a muffled laugh. He tried to say something, but Jasen shushed him.

"No talking," he said. "Wastes times."

He brought his mouth to Rilvor's and kissed him again, and again. The kisses started out shallow at first, but soon grew more heated. Jasen pulled back and tore off his cap, throwing it to the ground. His hair fell in a curtain around them as he leaned down to bring his lips to Rilvor's again. After a brief kiss, he traced his mouth down Rilvor's neck, relishing the wonderful masculine scruff of his beard against his skin.

Rilvor let out a moan that went straight to Jasen's cock. Jasen sat up so he could whip off his tunic. He could feel Rilvor's hard cock against his ass, so he began to rock, just a little. Rilvor gasped, and then groaned so deeply that Jasen could swear he could feel it reverberate throughout his whole body. Rilvor grabbed Jasen's ass.

Jasen abruptly dismounted at that. It had been so long since he had release (well, release with another person present, at any rate) that he was afraid of embarrassing himself. He was about to tell him that he just needed a moment to catch his breath when Rilvor was suddenly kneeling in front of him and grasping his hands in his own.

"I beg your forgiveness!" he said. "I am moving too quickly for you—I assure you that I did not mean to lose control and touch you as I did—"

"What?" Jasen panted, and then remembered his supposedly virginal status. "Oh, no! It was fine! Better than fine. I just—"

Just then, they heard someone approaching. They both froze for a moment, but Jasen had the presence of mind to dive into some nearby bushes. It was not the first time he'd had to avoid being caught in a compromising situation.

"Oh, Your Majesty!" said a familiar, treachery voice a few moments later. Jasen peaked out of the bushes and sure enough, there was Polina.

"Princess Polina," Rilvor said, sounding impressively composed. "What are you doing so far off the path?"

"Oh, my apologies, Your Majesty!" she said. "You must come here often for privacy and personal reflection, and here I am disturbing your peace. I was taking a walk, you see, and I became so engrossed in the beauty of the gardens that I quite lost my way!"

Rilvor gave a quick glance to the bushes; Polina did not seem to notice. "I would be happy to show you the way to the main path, Princess."

She batted her eyelashes. "Oh, Your Majesty, I would be most grateful!"

Jasen felt equal parts annoyance at and pity for Polina. It was a ridiculous story—they weren't *that* far from the road. Her motives were so transparent; surely she didn't think Rilvor really thought she was lost. He hoped Rilvor would be able to get rid of her quickly. They started to leave, but then Polina dramatically stumbled into Rilvor, who had no choice but to catch her. "Oh!" she wailed. "Oh, how embarrassing! It's these shoes—I simply can't walk in them properly!"

"They do seem uncomfortable," Rilvor said kindly as he helped to right her. "Shall we continue?"

"Thank you, yes." They didn't make it more than two steps before she stumbled again. "Ah! My ankle! I fear I have twisted it!"

"Perhaps you should sit down," Rilvor said.

"Your Majesty is so gracious!"

He sat her down on the grass, positioning her with her back to Jasen. "Perhaps I should summon someone to assist us," he said.

"Oh no!" Polina said quickly. "That is—I am sure if I rest a moment, I will be able to walk again. With your assistance, of course."

Rilvor glanced again at Jasen and gestured slightly with his head, indicating that he should leave. But Jasen wouldn't be able to move without her hearing him, and besides, he wasn't going anywhere without his tunic and cap.

There was an awkward silence. Polina chose to break it with a shrill gasp. "Oh my, I just noticed my clothing! Oh, it's too embarrassing that you should see me this way!"

"I do not see anything amiss," Rilvor said.

"My skirts," she said. "They don't match! At all! Oh, you must think me very hopeless!"

"You have always seemed to me to be a very elegant young lady."

"You are too kind, Your Majesty, but it simply isn't so. I'm very clumsy and unpolished and—and I so desperately need someone to show me what to do!"

"I am certain that is not true," Rilvor said.

"It is, though! Why, just the other day, I..." She trailed off. "What is that?" she asked.

Jasen couldn't see what she was referring to, so he very carefully moved some of the branches out of the way. It was his tunic. Just then, one of the branches snapped. Polina whipped her head around. Jasen tried to hold still, but it was no use—she'd spotted him.

Since there was little sense in staying crouched in the bushes, he stood up. "Hello," he said.

Polina looked back and forth between the two of them, her mouth a perfect *oh* of surprise. "I was not aware that—I mean to say, I did not know you were—" She looked over to Jasen again. "Not alone," she finished lamely.

"Princess, I would be most grateful if you did not mention this to anyone," Rilvor said.

"Of course, Your Majesty," she said. She got to her feet. "My ankle is much better now. I believe I can find my own way back. Thank you for your kindness." She dipped a brief curtsy and fled.

Once she had gone, Rilvor went to Jasen and offered him a hand, helping him out of the bushes. He handed him his tunic. "Perhaps this is not the best time for this, after all."

"Perhaps not," Jasen was forced to admit.

"Was that a friend of yours?" Rilvor asked.

“Not precisely,” Jasen muttered. “Will it cause a big scandal if this gets out?” he said more clearly.

Rilvor turned him around. “Only if we are not to be married,” he said. He gave Jasen a look of anticipation. Jasen was suddenly reminded of the very first time he’d seen him, when he was only seventeen and newly a king. It was like he was that awkward young man again. Jasen felt a surge of tenderness.

“Then I suppose we should get married, then,” Jasen said.

It took a moment for Rilvor to absorb that. He let out a laugh of joy and pulled Jasen to him, picking him up and spinning him around. Jasen couldn’t help but laugh, too. And then they came together for a kiss, their arms wrapped around one another.

They had to break away at last, but they kept their gazes locked. Jasen could feel his heart in his throat. It really was going to happen. There was a feeling so large inside of him that he couldn’t classify it—something both joyous and terrifying. When they kissed again, Jasen felt the sorrow of one story coming to an end—his life in Grumhul, his father and his old friends and lovers and what he now realized was a mostly carefree life. But there was also the excitement and joy of a new beginning—one he would be starting with a man that he... that he loved.

Rilvor brushed his hair back from his face. “On our wedding night, I will kiss you as much as you like.”

“I hope there’s more to it than *that*.”

Rilvor laughed. “There will be. I know what it is to be young and impatient, but it will be worth the wait. You deserve to have your first time to be more than rolling around in the bushes.”

The joy Jasen felt took on a queasy quality as he was reminded of his lie. “My first time,” Jasen mumbled. “Right.”

If Rilvor noticed a change in his mood, he didn’t show it. He kissed his cheek, and then pulled away. “We should go.”

“I don’t think it’s fair that I should decide to spend the rest of my life with you one minute, and then have you leave the next.”

Rilvor brought Jasen’s hand to his lips. “We will have the rest of our lives.”

That was true enough. Still, it was difficult to watch him go. Rilvor left first. Jasen waited a good ten minutes before leaving himself in the opposite

direction. Now that he was alone again, his mind began racing as he thought of all the hundreds of implications this decision had. Oh, his father was going to be insufferable about this. Risyda, too.

Then there was the matter of Polina. His mouth settled into a grim line. He had to talk to her.

He knew that Risyda was going to want to hear every single detail and wouldn't rest until she'd wrung them out of him, so he decided he'd wait until they were alone in her room that night to tell her. Just before they retired, he told her that he had something he needed to do, and that he'd meet her later. He then went in search of Polina. She was still awake, sitting alone in one of the parlors with some needlework in her lap. She seemed surprisingly calm.

He stood over her for a moment, trying to work out what to say, but she spoke before he had the chance. "You don't need to worry about me telling anyone what I saw," she said, not looking up from her work. "I won't."

"Ah, thank you," Jasen said awkwardly.

"It isn't a personal favor," she said. "What possible gain would it be to me to anger the king?" She continued her work, still not looking at him. "You're to be married, aren't you?"

"Yes."

She nodded and said nothing more for a few long moments. "I suppose he loves you very much," she said.

"He does," Jasen said. "And I love him, too." Jasen made a sound of exasperation. "I don't understand you. I know you don't love him. Why do you want to be queen so badly?"

Polina didn't respond at first. "I have four older sisters," she finally began. "Two of them are queens. One is a duchess. The other is a powerful draeideess. My oldest sisters were swept up their very first stay at Court—in fact, they each had multiple suitors battling over them. My draeideess sister exhibited extraordinary magical abilities from the moment she was dragon-blessed. I, on the other hand, am in my third season at Court. I have not had a single proposal. I have no magical abilities at all. And I have tried. I have tried so very hard. I thought that maybe if the Lord of the Drae wanted me, then..." She trailed off, looking down at her needlepoint. "You know, my needlepoint instructor said I had the nicest, most precise stitches she'd ever seen. What a useless talent to have."



“You wouldn’t be happy,” Jasen said. “Believe me, if I could take Rilvor and leave the Lord of the Drae, I would.”

She laughed bitterly. “Ah, so I should not envy you for becoming Lord Consort because you have found pure and true love. That’s like saying I shouldn’t envy your wealth because of your incomparable beauty.”

“You’ll find someone of your own,” Jasen said hesitantly.

“No, I won’t,” she said. “Do you want to know why?” At last, she looked up at him. “It’s because I’m not a very nice person. It doesn’t matter how wealthy I am, or how beautiful, or how fine my manners are. I’m unpleasant. No one truly wants to be around me. And so I’ll be alone.”

Jasen had no idea what to say to that, but fortunately, Polina didn’t seem like she was expecting an answer. She gathered up her needlework and left the room.

For the second time that day, Jasen watched Polina leave. He wasn’t quite sure what to make of it, but he shook it off. Polina’s emotional well-being wasn’t any of his concern. Right now, he was going to have a much-deserved celebration with his best friend.

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## Chapter Eight

The time came at last for the suitors to arrive. Now that lessons had ended, everyone devoted their full attention to preparations for the welcoming ball. A certain hysterical air had settled in on the East Wing. Even Jasen and Risya were not completely immune to it.

“So are you looking forward to meeting Lord Angunto?” Jasen asked her one day as they sorted through her dresses.

Risya rolled her eyes. “I feel as if I’ve met him already, the way Lady Isalei has been pushing him on me.” She frowned at her closet. “Do you think blue for the welcoming ball?”

“Why would you ask me?” Jasen said. “My sense of style is not exactly famous.”

Risya laughed. “That’s going to change once you become Lord Consort of the Drae. You could wear a potato sack and the rest of the nobility would follow your example.

Jasen sighed. “Arbiter of style. Yet another job I didn’t know I was signing up for.”

Risya grinned slyly at him. “I am so glad I have no other friends to tell your news to,” she said. “I’m not sure I could keep it in.”

“You won’t have to for much longer.” A sudden, terrible thought came over Jasen. “And then you’ll be leaving. I hadn’t even thought of that.” He slumped down on the sofa. “I’m going to be all alone.”

“You’ll have Larely.”

Jasen made a non-committal noise at that. He knew that Risya knew that something was fishy between them, but Jasen had thus far dodged her attempts to pry it out of him.

“And of course, you’ll have your one true love,” she continued.

“Yes, but that’s not quite the same as a friend, is it?”

She threw a glove at him. “You aren’t losing a friend, either. It isn’t as if we’re to be ever separated, like tragic lovers. We’ll see each other again.”

"I suppose," Jasen said, although he didn't feel much cheered. He stood up. "I should go," he said. "My father arrived last night and I'm supposed to see him for dinner."

"Does he know yet?"

"I don't think so." Jasen rubbed his face. "He is going to be even smugger than you were when he finds out."

Risyda laughed. "What tragic problems you have, Lord Jasen. Go then."

Jasen left to return to his room. When he arrived, he found Captain Ingo waiting for him. "The Lady Isalei wishes to see you," he said. He seemed strangely hostile.

Jasen gave him a puzzled look. "Why didn't she just send Rotheld?"

"Because I wanted to see you there myself," he growled. He didn't so much as offer his arm as take Jasen's, gripping him as he would a prisoner.

The captain led him to Lady Isalei's parlor. She was sitting ramrod straight in her chair. No cozy tea was set out. "Lord Jasen," she said, "have a seat."

Jasen did as he was told. "My lady," he said, "is there something the matter?"

She regarded him coldly. "What is the nature of your relationship with the guard Larely?"

The question took Jasen completely by surprise. "We're friendly," he came up with eventually.

The lady's look grew even colder. "I suppose that is one way to put it."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Then I will be blunt. I have discovered your affair."

"Affair?" Everything seemed to suddenly grow dimmer. "We haven't had an affair!"

"He has been seen coming to and from your room late at night. Do you deny it?"

That was true, but how could he explain it without getting into a different kind of trouble—and without dragging Risyda into it? "I-It isn't..." But there was nothing he could say.

"So it is true."

“No! I mean, yes, he did come to my room, but I never let him in.”

“And why was he coming to your room, then?”

“I like to go on walks at night,” Jasen finally said. “I know it isn’t allowed, but I thought if he came with me for—for protection, it would be all right.”

“And did Lady Risyda also enjoy these walks?”

Jasen’s eyes widened. “Why would you ask?”

“Because you and Larely both were seen coming to and from her room.”

“By who?” Jasen said, suddenly angry. “Who saw these things?”

“That is not your concern. Answer my question.”

Jasen tried to think of how to answer. Should he deny her involvement entirely? Or would that make things worse? “Yes, she did,” he said. “For walks. Do you think the three of us were having at it—is that what you’re suggesting?”

He had the satisfaction of shocking her, but that was grim comfort. “No, I am not,” she said. “I found kara weed in Larely’s possession. I know of Lady Risyda’s habits, and now I know where she was getting it from. It is forbidden, naturally, but I was willing to overlook that small vice. However, if she knew about your affair with Larely, especially after the king began to court you—well, that is a different matter. Did she know about the two of you?”

“No, because there was nothing to know!” Jasen exploded. “We smoked kara weed together—the three of us. But that was the extent of it!”

“I wish I could believe you,” she said. “I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt. But I received some information this morning that cast your behavior in a different light.”

“What does that mean?”

“Having inappropriate relationships with servants is a bit of a pattern for you, isn’t it?”

There was a roaring sound in his ears. Everything around him seemed very far, as if he were falling down a pit and watching the world shrink away. “Who told you that?” he whispered.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s true, isn’t it?” When Jasen didn’t reply, the lady continued. “I am sorry that it came to this. You will understand that I must dismiss you from Court.”

“But you can’t!”

“Of course I can.”

“No! You don’t understand. Rilvor and I—” He stopped, stumbling over his words. “I mean, the king and I, we’re—he asked me to marry him!”

Lady Isalei regarded him for a long moment. “And do you think,” she said slowly, “that once he learns this information, he will still want you?”

It was true. He had lied—several times, in fact. And once Rilvor knew that, would he believe him when he said that he and Larely were never involved? “I don’t know,” he said.

Lady Isalei looked on him with something close to pity. “The others will be told your father became ill, and you had to accompany him home,” she said.

“What will happen to Larely and Risyda?”

“Larely has been dismissed. Risyda will be going home as well.” She stood. Jasen struggled to stand as well, although he felt his legs might give out at any moment. “This is for the best,” she said. “It is clear that the position of Lord Consort would have been too much for you. It is a special burden to bear.”

In that moment, Jasen suddenly realized that the burden was already his. He had denied, shied away from it, claimed that he didn’t want it for weeks—but it wasn’t true. He thought about the healing flames that danced from his fingers. His body had already accepted it, even if his mind had not. It was his responsibility.

And he had already failed.

“Your father has been summoned,” she said. “Rotheld has packed your things. The two of you will leave as soon as he arrives.”

Jasen walked out of the room in a daze. Captain Ingo was there with a bewildered Risyda. “Jasen! You look like death! What’s happened? Why are we being called like this?”

“She knows,” Jasen said.

“Oh, is that all?” Risyda said. “Don’t worry too much—I’ll have this all taken care of. It’s not the first time I’ve—”

Lady Isalei’s voice interrupted her, calling her in. Risyda gave him a reassuring smile as she entered the room. He hoped they’d let him see her again before he left.

When he turned away from the door, he was confronted with Captain Ingo's sneering face. "Larely was a good lad," he said. "Had promise. And that's all for nothing now, because of you."

"I'm sorry," Jasen said in a small voice.

"Now shall I show you back to your room, *my lord*?"

Jasen made the trip back up the stairs for the last time. As Lady Isalei had said, his things were all packed. The clothes he'd arrived in were laying out on the bed. "My lord will want to change before his journey," Rotheld said.

Of course. These weren't his clothes, after all. He held his arms out and let Rotheld strip him, as he had gotten used to over the past three months. Usually when the laces from his corset were loosened, he felt a sense of release as he could breathe freely at last, but not today. He felt like he would never breathe easily again.

When he was changed back into his old Grumhulian clothes, Rotheld bowed and left, leaving the door open behind him. Jasen was glad he said nothing else; enough of his dignity had been stripped that he didn't care to dwell on it with someone else. It was only after he'd left that he noticed a tea with all of his favorite foods had been laid out on his table for him. He almost smiled. He sat down and tried to enjoy his last Draeland biscuit.

But even that small pleasure was denied him. No sooner had he taken a bite than a shadow darkened his doorway. For a moment he thought it was Risyda, but it was Polina instead. She folded her arms over her chest as she looked at him, her gaze cool and knowing.

"How?" Jasen asked simply.

"Your father arrived last night. I had a cousin of mine see what he could get out of him. I thought maybe there would be something I could use against you, but I honestly wasn't expecting to have it handed to me quite so easily."

Jasen shut his eyes. He tried to feel angry at his father, but found that well empty for once. Perhaps it was for the best, as Lady Isalei said. "And what about Larely?"

"Was I right?"

"No."

"Surprising, given the way he looked at you." She shrugged. "It didn't matter if it was true or not. It just had to *seem* true. And it seems like I've

gotten rid of Risyda as well. I hadn't even been aiming for her." Instead of sounding smug, her tone was strangely flat.

"The king will never chose you," Jasen spat. "You'll never be queen!"

"I know that."

Jasen blinked in surprise. "Then... why?"

"I told you," she said. "I'm not a nice person." And with that she left, her shoes clicking down the hall.

Jasen sat staring dully at his tea. His appetite was now completely gone. Some time later, he heard footsteps again—high shoes, so not a guard, and they were stomping. Risyda appeared, looking breathless. "This," she said emphatically, "is *bullshit*. She has nothing—no proof of anything going on between you and Larely except for rumors. And she admitted as much, but said that you all but confessed! Why would you do that?" She paused. "Is it true? About you and Larely?"

"Of course it isn't true!"

"Then why are you sitting there slumped over like you've been found out?"

"Because the other parts were true. About the lovers I had in Grumhul."

"How did she find out?"

"It was Polina. She had a cousin of hers get my father drunk."

"That bitch."

"She did me a favor. It would have been a disaster. I don't have what it takes to be Lord Consort of the Drae."

"Aren't you at least going to wait to hear the king's opinion on the matter?"

"He'll agree once he finds out."

"How do you know that? Don't you want to hear it from him, or are you just going to let them cart you off like a criminal?"

"They aren't carting me off," Jasen said. "I want to go home."

"So that's it, then?" Risyda said, her voice rising. Her face was flushed. "You'll just leave?"

Jasen shrugged.

"But you can't!"

"I can," Jasen snapped, "and I will. It's over. You can either shut up about it or leave me alone."

Risyda took a step backward. For the first time since he'd met her, she looked hurt. "I'll leave, then," she said. And she did. He wanted to call after her to apologize, but he felt too miserable to move. Jasen slumped over in his chair, burying his head in his arms, willing away tears.

Some time later, a guard he didn't recognize arrived at his door. "Your carriage has arrived, my lord," he said. Jasen somehow got to his feet and followed the man downstairs. His father was waiting for him outside the carriage, his hat in his hand. "O my son," he said, his brown eyes watery.

Jasen couldn't bring himself to be angry. It was Jasen's own lies that got him into this mess. He walked up to his father and hugged him. "I missed you," he admitted. And it was the truth. His father was insufferable at times, but he was still his dad.

His father was surprised for a moment, but returned the embrace. "I missed you as well."

Jasen pulled back. "Let's go home."

As they got into the carriage, he waved to Garyild and Rodrad, who were sitting at the front along with another servant—presumably there to drive them until they reached the inn at which their own horses were stored. It was good to see them as well. He tried to focus on the good that he could see in order to avoid the creeping sense of loss that filled him.

"I am surprised you're speaking to me," his father said as they got settled. "Curse the wine! And curse those slippery eels at Court! I swear I will never drink a drop again! Not one!"

Jasen spotted a wine skin on the seat beside him and grabbed it. "This is half empty," he pointed out.

"Well, not a drop *after* that's empty," he said. "They filled it up for me without asking. Doesn't make sense to waste good wine."

Jasen undid the cap and took a long swig, then passed it to his father. His father took a demure sip.

Jasen didn't look out the window until after they were out of Strengsend. He even resisted until they were out of Draethenper altogether. But when they were gone, he couldn't resist taking a look back. The city was as beautiful as the first



day he saw it. Maybe even more so, now that he knew it contained Rilvor, and his children, and the dragons, none of whom he would ever see again. He slumped back into his seat, despair filling him.

“What’s wrong, son?” his father asked as he took another drink.

“I was going to marry the king,” he said.

His father spit out the wine. “*What?!*”

Just then, a shadow fell over them, like a cloud passing overhead. But it wasn’t a cloud, for Jasen felt warmth in his chest, stronger than it had ever been. He heard the horses whinny and balk, and a moment later, the ground shook. Jasen stuck his head out the window; Tassenred had landed in the road ahead of them.

He opened the door and got out of the carriage. His father also got out, his mouth hanging open in awe. Jasen half-walked, half-ran to the dragon; he couldn’t decide if he was happy to see him or angry at him for starting him down this path to begin with. “I know you think that I can heal him, but I can’t!” he shouted. “You chose the wrong person. I’m not fit. I can’t do it! Find someone else!”

Tassenred didn’t budge. He lowered his head until his snout was within reach of Jasen’s touch. He found himself staring into one golden eye, as he had the first time they met. The warmth in Jasen’s chest flared again, along with an ache to touch the dragon, just one more time. Jasen put a hand on his snout. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I tried, but I can’t. I just want to go home now. Please.”

The golden eye blinked at him. Then the dragon lowered his head further. He wanted him to get on.

“What’s going on?” his father shouted.

Jasen looked back at the carriage; the others were staring at Jasen and the dragon with gobsmacked looks on their faces. He looked to Tassenred, then back to his father. “I’m going home,” he shouted back. “I’ll see you there.” Then he climbed onto Tassenred’s back and they were off, soaring in the sky for one more flight.

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He wasn’t sure how long they flew. He lay with his whole body pressed against the dragon, his face resting against the smooth scales of his neck as

comfort and warmth pulsed through him. Time seemed to stand still. There was nothing but him, Tasenred and the sky.

But as with everything, it had to end eventually. As Tasenred began to descend, Jasen lifted his head from his neck and became more aware of his surroundings. The land below them was beautiful, full of marshes that were green and wet with life. As they got closer, he realized that it was Grumhul. Rilvor was right; it did look beautiful from the air.

Tasenred circled for a while, looking for a place to land. Finally, he found a patch of dry land that was large and clear enough for him, although the landing was very awkward. Jasen slid off of his back. "Sorry," he said. "I suppose there's a reason your kind doesn't come around here often."

He stretched, breathing in the deep, marshy smell of home. By the position of the sun, he could tell they'd only been flying for a few hours. He had heard that travel on dragonback was quick; he never thought he'd have the opportunity to experience it firsthand. It was amazing that a journey that took so long by land could be covered so quickly in flight.

Now that he was off of the dragon's back, the real world began to crash in on him once more. He sat down on the ground and drew up his knees. "Thanks for the ride home," he said to Tasenred. He felt a little guilty about leaving his father like that. He was also going to have to answer a lot of questions to his fellow Grumhulians. His arrival by dragonback would probably be the talk of Grumhul for at least the next decade. Some were probably already on their way here, if they'd seen them land.

He rested his head on his knees for a few moments, then took off his boots and his socks. He stood up, walked over to the marsh, and plunged his feet in the muddy waters. He sighed with contentment. "My feet have been aching for months. Good old Grumhulian mud does wonders for achy feet, you know." He squished the mud between his toes. "I shouldn't have ever left here. This is where I belong. There's not much to it, but I was happy here."

Tasenred blinked at him.

"Well, all right, maybe I wasn't happy here, either." He rubbed his face. "It seems that I don't belong anywhere." He drew up his knees and put his head on them. "But that isn't really true, is it?" he said. "Because I belong with him." The loss of it finally hit him with its full force, and Jasen began to weep.

Tasenred nuzzled him with his snout; Jasen turned and put his arms around the dragon's neck. He wept until there was nothing left in him. Eventually, he

released the dragon and turned around to lean against him. The hard edge of his despair had softened, but now he felt empty. "It doesn't matter, though. He won't have me. And he shouldn't, because I do everything wrong. I could never be Lord Consort of the Drae. I couldn't bear the weight of that responsibility, don't you see?"

But as he thought about it, he realized that wasn't entirely true, either. If the weight had truly been overwhelming, shedding it should have left him feeling free. But he didn't feel free; he felt unmoored, like a ship being tossed in a storm. It was then he realized that weight wasn't always the same thing as a burden. It could be an anchor—what held you secure in a world that was often chaos.

But what use was that realization now? Everything was still ruined. Except—he hadn't even given Rilvor the chance to forgive him. He'd just run away like a coward. He owed it to both of them to see if they could work through it.

He stood up. "Will you take me back?" Jasen asked Tassenred. The dragon lowered his head. Jasen was just about to climb on when he saw something in the sky, growing larger as it moved towards them. It was a dragon. A familiar dragon.

Rilvor had come after him.

Woria had the same trouble landing as Tassenred had, especially with Tassenred taking up so much space. Tassenred ended up with his feet in the mud as well. Rilvor nearly flew off of Woria's back and ran towards Jasen, straight into the swamp. Before he could think of how to react, Rilvor grabbed him into a tight embrace. "Jasen," he said, his voice full of emotion. "My darling. My love. Why did you run away?"

Jasen pulled back, looking at him in bewilderment. "But... didn't they tell you?"

"About the guard? Yes. I knew it was false. I knew that even before I talked to him. I talked to your friend Lady Risyda as well."

"You talked with them?"

"Yes, and I have made sure neither of them will receive any punishment."

"But what about the rest?"

"About your past lovers? I do not care. I told you I had my own. Why should I care if you did as well?"

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“I lied to you.”

Rilvor actually smiled. “Perhaps you were under the impression that it mattered to me, and if that is the case, than the fault lies with me, not you.”

“Truly?” Jasen said.

“Yes, truly!”

Jasen felt relief flood through him. “Are you sure you still want me? I’m impulsive and ill-mannered and a mess in general.”

“Do you not see that is exactly why I need you?” Rilvor said. “I am surrounded on all sides with proper and correct, and it is suffocating me.”

“But the others—”

“Hang the others! If they want magic in their realms, they must accept that the Lord of the Drae must look after his heart more than their social niceties.” He tipped Jasen’s face up. “*I need* you, Jasen. I love you. Please, will you come back with me?”

Jasen’s heart felt like it could burst. “Yes,” he said, putting his arms around Rilvor’s neck. “*Yes*.”

And then they were kissing, so caught up with one another that they might as well have been one person. Warmth flared all around them; when they parted, they were both glowing with Jasen’s strange fire—a fire that healed rather than burned. Like him, it was a fire that didn’t behave the way it was supposed to.

And that was what made it work.

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## Epilogue

The wedding was full of as much pomp and circumstance as one would imagine. He and Rilvor survived it. It seemed as though they had barely said their vows when they were ripped apart again at the reception, both of them inundated with well-wishers—or at least, those who wanted to seem as if they were wishing them well. Jasen knew that many still thought the king had made a foolish choice, but the formerly weak magic across the realms had already sprung back, twice as strong as it had been before—that shut up even the greatest skeptics.

His father made a predictably embarrassing spectacle of himself; he kept clapping Rilvor on the back and calling him his “son.” Rilvor didn’t seem to mind; he actually said he found Jasen’s father “charming.” Jasen loved his father, but he was glad that he was going to be charming from a distance. After the wedding, they were sending him back to Grumhul with all the riches he had dreamed of—along with an extremely stern royal accountant, who would make sure his father didn’t lose any of it. They were also sending along a team to help renovate their old castle. He and Rilvor planned to make Grumhul their home away from home. After all, it was just a short dragon’s flight away.

Jasen managed to pry himself away from it all to find Risyda. She’d arrived a few days ago, but they’d barely had time to speak with all of the preparations. In spite of the king’s pardon, she had opted to leave Court. When he and Rilvor had returned, she had cursed him out mightily before forgiving him, and they’d parted on good terms. He finally spotted her by one of the buffet tables, wearing the traditional red garb of a draeidess. Her decision to turn to a religious life didn’t surprise Jasen as much as he thought it would. After all, he knew firsthand how difficult it was to deny a dragon.

They ducked into a corridor. “Good job up there,” Risyda said, grinning. “You only looked like you were going to faint once. Maybe twice. And the party is absolutely splendid.”

Jasen grinned back. “Has all of this made you miss the decadent life?”

“Not in the least,” she said. “By the way, I didn’t get to tell you earlier that I stopped by to see Larely on my way to the palace.”

“You did?” Larely had decided to give up his position as a guard and go to work at his father’s vineyard. “How is he?”

“He’s doing really well,” Risyda said. “He wished he could have been here.”

“I’m glad to hear it. And I haven’t had the chance to tell you—I received a letter from Polina.”

Risyda smirked. “Don’t tell me she was groveling for forgiveness so she could come back to Court. Or no—actually, *do* tell me she was groveling. Tell me every pathetic detail.”

“She left Court of her own volition,” Jasen reminded her. Polina had packed up and left immediately after her final confrontation with Jasen. She’d been gone before Jasen and Rilvor had returned. No one heard from her for weeks. “She did ask for my forgiveness, but I wouldn’t say she groveled. She’s joined the Sisterhood of the Dragon.”

“No!” Risyda gasped. The Sisterhood was an order of nuns who, although not dragon-blessed, desired to live a life of religious service. They were famous for their renunciation of everything “worldly,” leading lives even more austere than those of the draeids and draeidesses. “Are you sure it wasn’t some sort of joke?”

“You know that she doesn’t have a sense of humor,” Jasen said with a grin, “and she was sincere. It was a very nice apology, actually. It seems like she’s found some peace.”

“Well, good for her.” Risyda looked thoughtful for a moment. “Perhaps I should go visit her.”

“I think she would like that.” Jasen glanced into the main hall again. He sighed. “I should get back. I have many more hands to shake and ass-kissings to endure. You will be coming tonight, won’t you?”

“What kind of question is that?” Risyda said, hitting him on the shoulder. “Of course I will.”

After the human festivities concluded, Rilvor and Jasen were going to the draemir for their Drae Wedding—a much more important affair than the human one they had just endured. It was there that Jasen and Rilvor’s bond would be magically sealed. Only those who had received a dragon’s call were permitted to attend.

The reception ended at last. He and Rilvor retired to the royal apartments—which were Jasen’s apartments, too, now that they were married. As soon as

they were alone, Rilvor swept him into an embrace. "How are you faring?" he asked.

"Better, now that it's over."

"It isn't over yet," he said.

"Yes, but it's no hardship to be around dragons. Especially since we won't have to wear all of this ridiculous nonsense."

"No, we won't," Rilvor said, his voice deep. He trailed a hand down Jasen's back, brushing his fingers against the lacing of his breeches.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. It was the children with their nurse. Rilvor and Jasen parted reluctantly. They had waited this long—a few more hours wouldn't make much of a difference. Besides, Jasen was glad to see the children; it was nice to have a little time to celebrate as a family. The servants brought up a light meal, and then the children were taken off to bed.

Afterward, he and Rilvor stripped out of their fine clothes and changed into more primitive garb. Jasen wore a newly made Drae's cloak, made from Tassenred's teeth and scales and clasped shut with a bright red dragon's tear. When they were ready, they made their way to the draemir. They were accompanied by a procession of dozens of draeids and draeidesses; he spotted Risyda, who gave him a little wave.

Dragon lights were lit all over the draemir, giving it an unearthly glow. And even more unearthly were the dragons in attendance—dozens of them crowded in the grassland, more perched on the mountains, looking down. Tassenred and Worja stood with Jasen and Rilvor as they intoned their vows in the ancient language. And when the last word was said, they embraced, all of the dragon lights grew brighter and brighter until it almost seemed like daylight. Jasen felt the magic flow between them, binding their souls together. They were bound, yes—but not chained. In fact, he had never felt so free.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Sera Trevor received her B.A. in English Literature, but couldn't help but notice the lamentable dearth of hot guy-on-guy action in the Western canon. Fortunately, she discovered that the internet is teeming with what the classics lack. She's thrilled to add her own books into the mix. She lives in California with her husband and two children.*

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# CONTRARY INSTINCTS

By Ava Penn

## Photo Description

A thin, frail young man with short, dark hair curls into the embrace of another man whose chest he is being cradled against. The unconscious man has his left hand placed against his protector's neck, like he needs an anchor. The man holding him is awake, staring at a point in the distance. His thick curls aren't long enough to hide the protective expression he wears, emphasized by his hand on the other's shoulder.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*He needs a keeper. Look at him! His hair buzzed to his skull so short I couldn't run my fingers through his curls anymore. I'd ignored his threat to cut them off after the last time I'd held him still with those soft tendrils. The bones of his face were stark without his hair to hide behind. His hips jutted like knives and his long arms were stick thin. They were surprisingly strong as he curled into my warmth, though.*

*Somehow he'd gotten away from the family, attempting to live a life different from the one he was born to. He had to know I'd come for him eventually. I found him shivering in the driving rain, too lost in a haze to fight me when I scooped him up.*

*He always fought me.*

*See, I knew he loved me, and damn did that piss him off. Because if he loved me, then he'd given in to his instincts... and that was the last thing he'd ever do. But I needed him too much to ever let him go again. Now I just had to convince him to come back home.*

*Sincerely,*

*Alicia*

## Story Info

**Genre:** fantasy, other world

**Tags:** mage/sorcerer, Viking/Celt/Barbarian, first time, hurt/comfort, soulmates/bonded

**Content Warnings:** incest

**Word Count:** 8,220

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## CONTRARY INSTINCTS

By Ava Penn

*Lyle*

Lyle felt the darkness envelop him, knowing the danger of relaxing into the embrace it offered. That was the problem with being a Cathach, a son of The Morrígan. It was too easy to lose yourself to the dark—to *become* dark.

He had lived on a precarious edge since the dawn of his thirteenth year. Most Cathachs who lived as long as he had had found an Anamlia within four years of their darkness rising to the surface, but Lyle was in his twenty-eighth year and still had no Anamlia—at least not officially. Thoughts of Dustyn pulled him out of the shadows. Dustyn was the only Anamlia he wanted. Anamlia were the most sacred of his people; and as such, they were free to choose which Cathach to bond with, if they wished to bond at all.

A wisp of sound drew his attention; and all thoughts, even those of Dustyn, evaporated as the darkness laid claim. His dagger rasped free from the sheath at his waist. In mere seconds the pool of blood was spreading until it touched his boots, blacker than the starless night sky above him.

*Dustyn*

Dustyn trudged forward, despite the lack of energy to do so. He had been at the mercy of nature for almost two weeks now—almost as long as Lyle had been gone.

There was plenty of water to be had, since he had followed the river; but Dustyn couldn't hunt and had never learned to identify edible greenery. He had managed to stretch the food he had packed until about three days ago, but this morning's violent protest by his empty stomach was a harsh reminder of his ill-thought decision to run away.

The soft *clip-clop* of hooves on the road startled Dustyn, and he tripped over a root on the footpath. A failed attempt to push himself off the ground had him groaning in defeat. When a pair of arms slid under his shoulders and knees to haul him up, he didn't protest. He was gently laid across the horse's back, and he let the rhythmic motion of the animal's gait lull him to sleep.

Dustyn awoke to find himself in a bed, a real bed. Not a pile of leaves, or a patch of thick grass. For a brief moment he panicked, thinking that he was back home. He looked around frantically, taking in the unfamiliar surroundings, and relaxed with the realization that he was still free.

“Can you eat? I’ve saved some broth for you, if you can’t keep food down.” The feminine voice preceded the appearance of its owner from the shadows in the corner of the room.

“I can eat.” Dustyn’s reply was tentative. Only a Cathach could cloak themselves in shadow, and he didn’t want to be near any Cathachs. His upbringing overrode his desire to flee as he spoke again, “Thank you.”

“It was no trouble.” The woman walked away and returned seconds later with a bowl and spoon. “You have no need to be wary of me, Anamlia. I have a Soul-Healer already.” She handed him the stew and retreated to sit on a stool in front of the unlit fireplace.

“I’m that obvious?” Dustyn asked, after swallowing the first mouthful of the wonderful dish.

“I’m just good at reading people. After you eat, I’ll give you a change of clothes and some more supplies. You can stay here for the night, but that’s all.”

“I’m grateful for your care.” Dustyn bowed his head as the woman departed, and then finished eating his stew.

*Lyle*

“What?” Lyle growled the question, barely managing to restrain a worse reaction to the news.

“He’s gone.” His mother made the statement so calmly, like it was not worth worrying over. “A few days after you left, Marlow went to fetch Dustyn for the morning meal; and his room was empty.”

“Where did he go?” Lyle forced the words out through his clenched teeth.

“I haven’t a clue. He didn’t even have the decency to leave behind a letter. Your youngest brother never has been the most thoughtful person.” Her opinion was emphasized by the disgusted curl to her upper lip.

“Has nobody looked for him?”

“Why should we? It’s his choice as an Anamlia. No one can force him to do anything he doesn’t wish to.”

"Maybe not, but we could at least talk to him. I'm going to find him; and if he won't come back, then I won't either. Goodbye, Mother." Lyle stalked from the library and slammed the door behind him. What an infuriating woman his mother could be! Had she no love for her son?

Marlow stepped in front of his path as Lyle made his way back to the front door. They didn't say anything for a moment. Instead the two stood facing each other, studying one another.

"You're going to look for him?" Marlow broke the taut silence first.

"Of course I am. Obviously no one else is, and he won't survive by himself. If he doesn't want to come back, then I'll escort him where he wishes to go." With that, Lyle shoved his eldest brother out of the way and yanked open the door.

"He left because of you."

Lyle stopped dead in his tracks. "What?"

"Dustyn left because he doesn't want to be an Anamlia. He doesn't want to be bound to a Cathach."

"What in the nine hells does that have to do with me?"

"Nobody else may have noticed, but you don't ask anyone else to restore you anymore. For the past two years, you have only asked Dustyn. He noticed, and so did I."

"So?"

"You've turned down every Anamlia that has ever approached you, Lyle. You're twenty-eight. It shouldn't be like this. One of you needs to decide. Just remember that." Marlow turned and walked away. Lyle knew Marlow wouldn't say anything more on the subject. He also knew that he was right.

Most families were graced with one Anamlia every three or four generations, but not his family. No. In his family, *he* was the anomaly. Lyle had been born a Cathach when his mother's side of the family, his brothers, and his sisters were all Anamlia. It was only thanks to their constant presence that he hadn't yet been consumed.

Fortunately his horse hadn't yet been stabled, so it only took a few minutes before he was on his way to town for some food for another trip.

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*Dustyn*

This was infinitely worse than the sun bearing down on him day after day. If he had thought this through at all—instead of being his reckless, impetuous self—then he would have waited to leave until the rain season was over rather than just beginning. Day two of the rains had him soaked through to the bone, feeling like he would never warm up from the chill of the water. He was having trouble focusing on his thoughts to top it all off.

Dustyn was grateful he still had some food from the woman who had helped him several days ago. He planned to be smarter this time and keep his food supply restocked regularly. Now, if only he could find a way to dry off and warm up. The next village should be less than a day away. He could find a room at the inn there, right?

A violent shiver caused his knees to give way, leaving him to kneel in the mud on the side of the road. Absently, Dustyn realized that he couldn't feel the ground beneath his knees. He reached out with his hands and wouldn't have known he was touching it if his eyes didn't see it happen. He knew that wasn't good but couldn't quite remember why. Did it matter? He decided it really didn't. Dustyn rolled to his side. He could get to the village when he woke up. Sleep sounded like a good idea right about now.

*Lyle*

Lyle couldn't tell which was racing faster, his heart or his horse. The rain season had started the afternoon he set out to find Dustyn; and knowing that thoughtless prat the way he did, Dustyn had probably forgotten to pack a rain slicker. Which meant that it was entirely possible he had been wandering around unsheltered in the rain for the past two days. Wonderful. It was a good thing Lyle had packed extra blankets in the saddle bags because he knew he was going to need them.

A figure collapsed across the road in the distance. Lyle's heart stopped beating at the exact same moment that he urged his horse on faster. He prayed to Diancecht that it wasn't Dustyn. The reins went slack in his grip as he slid from the saddle, stumbling in the mud.

His hands shook; his strength draining out of him at the sight. Lyle drew the shadows to himself. He needed the help to pick up the prone form of his youngest brother. With more effort than he should have needed, Lyle laid

Dustyn across the saddle. He took only enough time to throw a blanket over him before he ordered the horse forward.

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### *Lyle*

The town had been just over the hill, praise the gods. It had been a simple matter to find the inn and rent a room. Lyle waited impatiently as the innkeeper hauled hot water to fill the tub in their room. Didn't the man understand that time was precious? That Dustyn might catch his death if he remained cold for much longer?

"That was the last bucket. Please, let me call the Sage." The innkeeper wrung his hands nervously, pleading with Lyle.

"He'll be fine in my care. Thank you." Lyle made the dismissal clear by gesturing to the door. After the man had left, he began to strip the wet clothes from his brother. Some color had returned to his face after Lyle had sat in front of the fire with him while he waited, but Dustyn was still unconscious.

With great care, Lyle lifted his brother in his arms and stepped into the tub. He cradled Dustyn close as he washed the rain and mud from them both. With each passing second, the cold skin against his body warmed. A twitch of movement was the first sign that Dustyn was close to coming around.

Lyle smoothly slid out from beneath his brother and stood, still holding him above the water by his arms. It took no small amount of maneuvering to snag a blanket to dry their bodies with while keeping Dustyn from slipping beneath the water. With the blanket tossed over one shoulder, he pulled his brother out of the tub, taking note for the first time that afternoon of the loss of weight.

Lyle gently wiped away the lingering droplets of water. It worried him that where his brother once had smooth planes of sleek muscle, he could now see the sharp jut of bone and joints. Was Dustyn not eating? Had he been ill? Almost as worrisome was the loss of his plentiful, silky curls—though Lyle knew the reason for their absence.

"Wh—" Dustyn's speech was abruptly cut off by a coughing fit, but Lyle was just glad he was conscious again. He rubbed his back until Dustyn could speak again. "Where...?"

"Shhh. We're in Benlamora." Lyle stroked his fingers along Dustyn's cheek, soothing him.

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*Dustyn*

Dustyn struggled to open his eyes. His lids felt leaden, too heavy to lift. Tears gathered at the corners of his eyes, and a face materialized in his blurred vision as he finally gained a sliver of sight. "Lyle?"

"Yes. Were you expecting someone else?"

He was forcing his eyes open more while trying to gather his thoughts and memories. Lyle shouldn't be here. Dustyn was supposed to be alone. "No. There shouldn't be anyone else. You can't be with me."

Dustyn felt Lyle flinch at his words. The hands drying his hair with a blanket fell away; and his brother leaned back, putting distance between them though he was sitting on his lap. The shadows at the edges of the room deepened.

"I need you to heal my soul." Lyle's words were a soft whisper, but Dustyn heard them easily in the silence.

"If I refuse?" That's right. This was why Dustyn had left in the first place. He was tired of bearing the burden of healing Lyle from his Cathach duties. Why hadn't his brother just accepted an Anamlia already, instead of relying on family to heal him? Why did he continue to force Dustyn to do it?

"Would you damn me so easily?" Hard, unyielding eyes fixed him with a glare so cold it chilled him in a way the rain had not.

"No, I... Not yet." Dustyn dropped his chin to his chest, trying to stifle the familiar ache slithering around his heart. Didn't Lyle understand how hard this was for him? There was a reason that Anamlia's bound themselves to a single Cathach.

"You really did it." Lyle's warm breath tickled across the shell of his ear as his brother leaned forward once again. His calloused hands caressed the shorn hair on his head.

"I told you I'd cut my hair if you held me by it. You never listen to me." Dustyn couldn't help jerking his head sharply from Lyle's touch.

"I'll just have to hold you another way then." Lyle shackled Dustyn's wrists in his unbreakable grip before he even started speaking.

In the next moment, Dustyn found himself laid out across the blanket on the floor and pinned with the weight of Lyle's body atop his. Muscular forearms



landed on the floor next to his head. Dustyn tried to turn his face away, but was impeded by the block made with his brother's arms.

"Damn you, Lyle! Why does it have to be like this? Can't I perform my duties in a manner of my own choosing?"

*Lyle*

"No," Lyle replied curtly and silenced further protest by sealing his lips against Dustyn's.

Without a single moment's delay, the darkness surged forward. Lyle could feel it writhing inside his soul. He fed it to Dustyn, angrily, through their kiss. As the shadows ebbed from him, Lyle was flooded with the peace of knowing his soul was being restored to a whole state. The peace never lasted long though. It was always inevitably overtaken by desire.

Lyle broke the kiss, gasping for air. Dustyn had slipped back into unconsciousness. His body was already processing the darkness, breaking it apart and returning it to the collective energy around them.

A sliver of guilt settled uncomfortably in Lyle's throat as he pulled Dustyn onto his lap again. He didn't have to kiss him in order to heal his soul. It could be as simple as holding hands or letting Dustyn place his open palm over his heart. That was how the rest of his family used to perform their duties as Anamlas. Both methods took much longer, but they were also much less intimate.

The fire crackled merrily, and Lyle stared into it as though he might find an answer to his unasked question. He was unsure of himself. Should he continue as he had up to this point, living an abnormal existence; or perhaps it was time to let the darkness possess him body and soul?

*Dustyn*

Dustyn screamed at Lyle to come back. His brother walked forward into the looming darkness, not even sparing a glance over his shoulder. The wind picked up; and Lyle's figure began to dissolve, particles swirling in the violent air current until the bare skeleton crumpled to the ground. Blackness spread across the white bones from where they touched the earth.

This was the fate of a Cathach whose soul was claimed by darkness. This was the fate of a Cathach with no Anamlia to heal the wounds inflicted on their spirit by their duties. Dustyn knew that as surely as he knew that Lyle would leave him. Lyle had to if he wanted to continue living.

Dustyn bolted upright with a sob caught in his throat. It was just a dream, a night-terror. Lyle lay peacefully beside him in the bed. One way or another, Lyle would be gone someday. Either he would wither and die when the darkness claimed him body and soul, or he would accept an Anamlia.

Despair warred with fear to seize hold of his battered heart. Dustyn had always thought it a myth in school, that Anamlia possessed an instinct to love the one that needed them the most. Yet, people as a whole possessed an instinct to avoid things that could hurt them.

Dustyn succumbed silently to the tears waiting to be released. He ran from his brother because Lyle could hurt him, break his heart. He loved his brother because Lyle needed him. If Lyle accepted an Anamlia, he wouldn't need Dustyn anymore.

\*\*\*\*

*Lyle*

"Get up," Lyle barked gruffly at Dustyn. He hated mornings. They always came so damn early in the day.

"Wha—Why?" Dustyn's mumbled reply was muffled by the down pillow.

"We need to eat. Now get up." Lyle knew he was taking his exhaustion out on Dustyn, but he couldn't help it. He had slept for shit last night. Dreams of his little brother walking away had tormented him the entire night.

Dustyn sat up and lobbed his pillow at Lyle. "You could be a little nicer! I almost died yesterday."

"It's your own fault. Who told you to take off by yourself in the rain season? You never think!" Lyle's control slipped a little as his voice edged toward a yell. "Get dressed so we can go and eat."

Lyle slammed the door of the room behind him. He had come up with a plan last night while watching Dustyn recover from the effects of healing his soul. The first part of the plan definitely involved food, since Lyle hadn't stopped to eat yesterday. The second part relied on Lyle's ability to talk some sense into his brother.

*Dustyn*

Dustyn pursed his lips and huffed before flopping backwards on the bed. Lyle was right. It really was his own fault. He wasn't about to back down from

his decision though. He would leave Galmor no matter what it took. He needed to be somewhere that nobody knew he was an Anamlia, somewhere with no Cathachs.

Dustyn carefully got out of the bed, not quite trusting his body to be strong enough yet. Between passing out in the rain and healing Lyle's soul, his body had been pushed to its limits. Sometimes Dustyn found himself wishing he was stronger, like a Cathach. Today was definitely one of those times.

It took longer than he wanted to get cleaned up and dressed. The hallway stretched before him in a seemingly endless distance as he stepped out of the room, letting the door swish shut. One step at a time. All he had to do was take one step at a time.

By the time he reached the buzzing space that was the dining room of the inn, Dustyn was holding back a cold sweat. He turned his head to look for Lyle, and blackness teased the edges of his vision. He lurched forward once he spotted his brother sitting against the wall closest to the counter. It took an eternity to make his way along the counter and drop into the seat across from Lyle.

"Took you long enough," his brother griped after taking a drink of his ale.

"I'm still recovering, bastard." Dustyn leveled a glare at his brother that used to result in Lyle leaving him alone. Sadly, it no longer held the same power.

"Like I said, your own fault." Lyle waved a hand for the barmaid to come over and took another swig from his mug.

"Not entirely. You could have waited to be healed."

"How sure are you of that, little brother?"

"Well," Dustyn began to reply but Lyle barreled on.

"I'm twenty years and eight. I was called to the darkness at thirteen. For fifteen years, I have survived with no Anamlia bonded to me. For fifteen years, family has taken on the duty of healing my soul from each wound suffered by the slaughter of the dread-ogres that prowl Galmor. For fifteen years, the shadows have taken their toll on my body as I subsisted on minimal soul healings. Does *this* look like I could have waited?" Lyle thrust his hand forward, palm down.

Dustyn couldn't suppress his gasp of surprise and sorrow. His brother's nails were almost entirely black and the skin around them was taking on a dark grey tinge. The darkness was staking its claim on his body, just as it had staked its claim on his soul. Except, a body could not exist as shadow.

*Lyle*

Lyle watched Dustyn's expression morph from petulant to heartbroken in a matter of seconds. Maybe now his little brother understood the severity of the situation. He hadn't wanted to use the threat of the darkness overtaking his physical body to force Dustyn to pay attention, but something had to be done.

"Lyle," Dustyn choked on a sob before continuing, "why didn't you say anything before? Go home. Go to the guild where they can find an Anamlia for you."

"No. If you have your mind made up to leave, I'll see you to where you wish to go. That will be the last thing I do." He had intended to make Dustyn see reason, to claim him as his Anamlia. So where had those words come from?

Lyle shook his head at his own foolishness. For his constant chiding of Dustyn about being selfish, he really was no better. In the end, he would rather claim his little brother for himself than see Dustyn happy and succumb to the shadows. So, he figured it was a good thing that he came to his senses and offered to escort him to safety instead.

"Brother, please. I can make my own way just fine. You need help." Dustyn's expression was heart wrenching as he pleaded with Lyle. "You can't die. You can't!"

The few other patrons in the dining room all turned to stare at them. With his shout, tears began to fall from Dustyn's amber eyes. At the first broken sob that spilled from his lips, the patrons turned back to their own business.

"I'll do what I damn well please. It would be worse for you to catch cold and waste away or get killed by a dread-ogre than it would be for me to pass into the darkness. You've made up your mind, and I've made up mine. Now stop your bellyaching and eat." Lyle slipped into his role as the elder brother when the barmaid arrived with their morning fare.

*Dustyn*

Dustyn poked numbly at the food in front of him. He couldn't comprehend that Lyle had decided to just... die. It made his dream from last night a possibility that was suddenly all too real.

An hour later, Lyle was hauling him from his seat insisting that they get ready to leave. Dustyn had taken a handful of bites from his meal. His stomach was churning too violently with guilt and sorrow to have really eaten.

"I packed an extra slicker for you. Gather your things while I see about purchasing more food." Lyle ordered after ushering Dustyn back into their room.

Dustyn wandered about the room, but most of his stuff had remained in his traveling pack. When Lyle returned, he was sitting on the bed with his head in his hands. He forced himself to stand and follow his brother out the door.

"I've purchased a horse for you. It will make the journey faster, since you can't ride in front of me like when you were younger."

"It's not like I've grown much since then, just an inch or two at most."

"All the same, with the amount of food we'll need to carry to cross the forest out of Galmor, this way will be better."

Dustyn merely nodded. He couldn't think of a good argument for riding on the same horse with Lyle. If anything, he should have been thrilled to have his own horse.

He vaulted up onto the riding blanket and let his horse follow Lyle's out of the village. By the time dusk fell, they were well away from the little town. Lyle set up a shelter for the night and informed Dustyn that tomorrow they would reach the border of the forest. Dustyn knew what that meant.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Lyle*

Lyle shifted uneasily by the struggling fire. A week into their journey and the rain season had come to an end, leaving everything damp yet cleansed. It had taken too long to find enough dry tinder and kindling to start a fire with, and the sun's warmth had already faded.

He flicked a worried glance at Dustyn. Since the morning that Lyle had made up his mind to escort him through the forest, his little brother had been despondent and listless. The closest he had come to seeing a smile was when a hummingbird had landed on Dustyn's finger yesterday afternoon. Unbidden, a memory swirled to the surface of his thoughts.

*"Lyle!"*

*The shout came from the orchard behind their house, the voice bright and innocent. Lyle turned and ran toward the trees, following the sound of childish giggles. His gaze raked through the branches above him as he passed.*

*"Catch me," Dustyn laughed before leaping down from the crook he was standing in.*

*"Oomph," Lyle grunted as he tumbled to the ground under the slight weight of his youngest brother. He hadn't quite had enough warning to brace himself for the impact. "Don't do that. You could have been hurt," he scolded Dustyn.*

*"But I wasn't. You were there to catch me."*

*"I'll always be there to catch you." Lyle couldn't help smiling and wrapping Dustyn up in his arms.*

Things had been so much simpler when he was twelve. There was no reason to worry about his future or his soul. His only cares had been tending the orchard, the horses, and looking after Dustyn.

A sharp crack had him leaping up from his seat. He ached to extinguish the fire in order to give strength to the darkness around him, but he couldn't because Dustyn was there. The next best solution would be to walk away from the circle of light provided by the weak flames.

"Lyle?" Dustyn's voice was timid, shaky.

"I'll be back. Stay by the fire." With those words, Lyle slipped into the shadows of the forest.

His senses expanded so that he could feel, hear, and see everything that the dark around him covered. The only area within miles that was blind to him was the fire where he had left Dustyn. To his right, the presence of a dread-ogre was slowly shuffling forward.

Lyle took to the trees. Not only would it afford him more silence, but it was faster. The closer he came to the dread-ogre, the closer the darkness within him rose to the surface. The large, lumbering creature finally passed underneath the tree he was in.

Lyle pulled his dagger and dropped from the branch. His free arm wrapped around the dread-ogre's neck, pulling its head back to expose the vulnerable throat. A mere sliver of moonlight glinted on the blade of the dagger as it sliced through the thick skin.

The creature fell forward with a soft whump. Lyle wiped the dagger in the grass and smoothly slid it back into its sheath. The night grew darker still as a thick cloud blotted out the feeble rays of the waning moon; and Lyle felt the same effect deep in his soul, knowing it would show on his body.

### *Dustyn*

Dustyn shivered in the humid air of the night. He'd known that at some point they would come across a dread-ogre. It was impossible not to when traveling through the forest surrounding Galmor.

A growl from the edge of the firelight startled him. He stood and edged closer to the fire. If it was just a small predator, he could grab a lit branch to swing at it. If it turned out to be a dread-ogre, he planned to dash into the shadows where he could alert Lyle.

As his brother's form emerged, he instantly noticed that something was wrong. Lyle's movements were too sinuous, too smooth. Dustyn scrambled backward and tripped over the log he had been sitting on. His brother's eyes glinted like obsidian in the light of the fire.

Lyle dropped to his knees right in front of him, and Dustyn could see the inside edges of his brother's lips turning black. Left hand shooting out to grip Lyle's, Dustyn forced open the energy channel that would allow him to absorb the darkness from his older brother. Still, the black tint spread outward until Lyle's lips were half covered with the unnatural coloring.

"No, no, no. Please, no!" Dustyn whispered fervently, sliding his other hand under Lyle's shirt to rest above his heart.

Lyle merely stared off into the distance. Dustyn knew he was too far into the grips of The Morrígan to try to bring himself back. The fire beside them was growing weaker and beginning to sputter, while Lyle's lips were now entirely black.

"Damn you!" Dustyn surged to his knees, pushing his older brother back and down to the ground in the process. He kept his hands in place as he brought his lips forward to tentatively touch Lyle's.

The taste of forest shadows, moonlight, and blood lingered on the dark lips. Dustyn had to admit it was an addicting taste, almost as addicting as Lyle himself. With a groan, Dustyn gave in to the attraction he had denied for so long. He forced his tongue past Lyle's pliant, but unresponsive, lips and past his teeth.

The darkness in his brother roared to life without warning, charging into Dustyn in an effort to possess him as well. The current of shadows began to ebb, and Lyle's hand came up to cup the back of his head lovingly.

Dustyn was dizzy from lack of air when he drew back to look at his brother's face. Noting that Lyle's eyes had returned to their rich chocolate, Dustyn smiled and collapsed against the strong form. He snuggled against Lyle's warm chest and let his eyes drift closed.

*Lyle*

That had been too close for comfort. Lyle didn't even remember making his way back to camp. The darkness had almost won.

He stared down at his brother, curled against him like a scared child seeking comfort. That was exactly it though. Dustyn had been scared. Lyle had felt it in the way his hands had trembled, had seen it in his eyes before Dustyn kissed him.

He sat there for gods only knew how long, just holding his youngest brother close. When Marlow had told him to choose, he hadn't put any credence in the warning. Yet as the first rays of dawn brightened the sky above, Lyle made up his mind to stand by what he said in the pub. He would see Dustyn wherever he wished to go and then let The Morrígan claim his being.

He shifted Dustyn off of his lap and began to clean up the camp. When all was ready for traveling again, he took a moment to think about the problem of keeping an unconscious Dustyn atop a horse. Hoping that the horse he bought in Benlamora was well trained, Lyle hoisted Dustyn's prone form across its back. He took his own seat on his gelding before calling the other horse over so he could lift Dustyn up onto his lap once more. Lyle gave the order for his horse to walk forward, knowing the other would follow.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Dustyn*

Dustyn knew he was dreaming again, although this time the dream was really a memory.

*"Lyle! Lyle, watch this!" Dustyn waved at his older brother from the top of the waterfall. Once he had caught his attention, Dustyn brought his hands together above his head and dove toward the crystal clear waters below.*



*The pool was not as deep this spring as he was used to, and Dustyn injured his wrist trying to slow his momentum. A strong hand grabbed him by the arm from above and pulled upward. He surfaced and was met with an angry glare from Lyle.*

*“Fool!” Lyle shook him by the shoulders. “You could have hit your head and drowned. What were you thinking?”*

*“I thought it was safe. Besides, if I had hit my head you would have saved me.” Dustyn smiled at the brother whom he adored.*

*“Don’t you understand that I won’t always be there to save you? I’m a Cathach. I’ll have to go away on hunting trips. Someday The Morrígan may claim my body for the shadows. You can’t expect me to be at your side forever.”*

*Dustyn held back his tears until they were safely back home.*

Though the memory was from twelve years ago, it was just as painful now as it was back then. The tears came again, falling from sleeping eyes.

*Lyle*

This was surely torture. Perhaps it was the price The Morrígan was making him pay for being deprived of his body the night before. The way Dustyn’s hip rubbed against his groin with the gait of the horse was having a predictable effect on him.

By the time nightfall was only an hour away, Lyle was in pain from the sustained arousal. He was once more thankful for the training of the horse he purchased as he transferred Dustyn to its back. It took a few moments of deep breathing before Lyle could bring himself to stand upright after dismounting.

Trusting the horse to not wander off with his little brother, Lyle began gathering tinder and kindling. He readied the space for their camp and made sure to clear a spot where they could sleep. Just as he finished, Lyle heard a soft thud from where the horses were.

“Ow...” Dustyn’s groan calmed Lyle a little. That meant he was awake. “Where are we?”

“We’re almost out of the forest. I carried you on my horse while you were unconscious.” Lyle turned to guide his brother to a seat by the fire he was about to start.

“Your lips?!” Dustyn gasped and dropped to his knees. “They’re still black...”

“Don’t concern yourself with that. Sit down.” Lyle was unnerved by his brother’s reaction. Shock and sorrow had been all too clear in his expression. “Once the fire is started, I’m going to see if I can hunt some small game for dinner.”

“No! Don’t, please don’t...” Dustyn’s hands were clinging to him, balled into fists at the hem of his shirt.

“We need to eat.” Lyle jerked forward, pulling his shirt free.

“I can catch fish if there’s a stream nearby. Please... You can’t...”

“It’s just going to be a rabbit or two. The Morrígan won’t ask her due for just that.”

The fire crackled as it greedily spread to the kindling. Lyle didn’t say a word as he walked into the forest. He thought he might have heard Dustyn sob, but he needed to find game before it grew too dark.

### *Dustyn*

Dustyn hugged his knees close to his chest. How could he ever have thought he would be able to leave Lyle? There had been a time, before the waterfall incident, when Dustyn had believed he could stay at his brother’s side forever.

He had been naïve enough to think he could even stay with him after Lyle bonded to an Anamlia. That day had shattered that illusion into countless shards. That was the day he had decided that if he couldn’t be with his brother, then he didn’t ever want to be bonded to a Cathach.

The thing was, Dustyn had always believed his older brother would bond to an Anamlia. He had reasoned with himself that settling for a mildly happy existence was better than suffering every time he would see Lyle smile at his bonded Soul-Healer. It had never occurred to him that Lyle would choose to fade into shadow.

As the different strings of thought wove an intricate web within his mind, Dustyn resolved to change the outcome that Lyle had in mind. He walked over to his brother’s gelding and searched for the knife Lyle had been given by the Guild when he turned thirteen. He pulled the wickedly sharp blade from its sheath on the saddle. The last ray of sunlight reflected briefly off of the black, stone blade.

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*Lyle*

Lyle tied the legs of the fourth rabbit in the same rope as the others and tossed it back over his shoulder. The catch had been quite simple, really. He had been lucky enough to happen upon the little animals grazing on clover in the shade of a tree. It only took a thought to bend the shadow to his will, trapping them all.

He mulled over Dustyn and the careless nature that was his trademark. Lyle decided that before dissolving into the darkness permanently, he should find someone to protect his brother in his stead. Would that really work?

No. There wasn't a person alive, save Lyle himself, who could keep his youngest brother in line. Who said that he had to let The Morrígan claim his life after they were free of Galmor and the forest surrounding it? Nobody. He could claim some freedom for himself after this. He could claim Dustyn for himself.

That was what he had intended to do all along, wasn't it? It had been the dumbest, random loss of common sense that day at the inn when he vowed to see Dustyn to safety and then leave. He internally despaired the time he had lost trying to be the sensible, protective older brother as he walked back to the camp.

*Dustyn*

Dustyn shivered while the rabbits cooked on a spit over the fire, but he wasn't cold. He was anxious. Lyle had come back from hunting with a different air about him than before. Lyle was obviously deadly as a Cathach, but only to dread-ogres and other threats to their land. Now, Dustyn felt a sense of danger focused on him.

He watched his brother move about with determined, precise efficiency. Once, he caught Lyle looking at him. The effect was like that which a wolf's gaze might have on a fawn. A thrill shot down his spine, causing his heart to race.

Yet, through the process of serving the rabbit with some of the bread they carried, and through the meal itself, Lyle didn't say a word. He didn't give any indication as to the change in his demeanor. It was only when Dustyn lay down on his side of the bed of blankets, clutching Lyle's dagger where he had hidden it earlier, that his brother finally acted.

Dustyn felt Lyle's strong arms enfold him in a possessive embrace from behind. Hot breath feathered across the back of his neck, inducing another

shiver to ripple through him. The sudden caress of Lyle's tongue down the side of his throat made him jump.

"Give in," Lyle whispered in his ear.

"To what?" Dustyn panted, trying to clear the haze filling his head. There was something he meant to do.

"Your instincts. Give in to them. Give in to the instinct that makes you love me. You can't run from me after all, can you?" Lyle was tormenting Dustyn both with his words and his hands as his fingers began to slide up underneath Dustyn's shirt.

"You sound—ah, so sure of yourself." Dustyn's reply was interrupted by a sharp gasp when Lyle lightly pinched one of his nipples. Speaking was impeded by the rapid breaths caused by his excitement, and coherent thought was quickly slipping away. Those devilish hands roved all over his torso, teasing and toying with his most sensitive spots.

"That's because I'm going to tie you up if you ever try to leave again. You're mine. You've always been mine." Lyle bit at the tender spot where Dustyn's neck and shoulder met to accentuate his claim. "Nobody else can ever touch you the way I do. Do you understand me?"

Dustyn could only nod, too delirious with the painful pleasure of his brother's attentions to his body. He thrummed with a buzzing, excited energy. Dustyn wanted to push Lyle over the edge. It wasn't fair that he was the only one losing control.

*Lyle*

Lyle groaned when his little brother pressed back against him, wriggling in the most evil way. A smaller hand pressed over his and guided it down the smooth skin under his palm. He could feel the quivering of Dustyn's muscles as their hands moved past navel, hips, and the waistband of his trousers.

At the same time Lyle wrapped his hand around the erection begging for his attention, he licked from Dustyn's shoulder up towards his delicate jawline. His brother took the hint and turned his head to meet Lyle in a smoldering, desperate kiss. Hard, demanding lips met soft, yielding ones.

Possessive nature blotted out any protective instincts still residing within him when Dustyn abruptly pushed Lyle's hands away. He let out a low growl and reached, out of habit, for the curls that were no longer there. The growl changed to a strangled moan as Dustyn straddled him.

A flash of moonlight was the only warning Lyle had before the tip of his obsidian dagger cut into the palm of his left hand. The blood welled up quickly, and he resisted the urge to clench his hand in a fist. Speech failed him when he saw Dustyn press the tip of the dagger to his own left hand. In one swift motion, he flipped Dustyn back onto his back and pressed over him.

“You’ve no idea how little patience I have left. There won’t be any going back.” Lyle’s words were hard but his touch was soft as he began to undress his brother.

“That’s okay,” Dustyn whispered. “I can’t let you leave me.”

“I was just trying to do the right thing, as your brother.”

“You were?” Dustyn blinked, wide-eyed, and pressed a hand to Lyle’s chest.

“It’s what I should have done. I’m a horrible brother.” He grinned bitterly.

“You’re not! You’re a good brother,” Dustyn argued.

“If I were a good older brother, I wouldn’t be doing this.” Lyle pressed one finger into the tight pucker that he had exposed.

### *Dustyn*

Dustyn let his head tip back to expose his throat, lost in the sensation of Lyle fingering him. His cock twitched when the finger inside him brushed against a sensitive spot. Lyle must have noticed, because he touched it again.

With a moan, Dustyn gripped his cock with his right hand. He began slowly jerking himself to the rhythm of Lyle’s ministrations. His lips parted in silent invitation, and he raised his left hand toward Lyle.

His brother immediately twined the fingers of his own left hand between Dustyn’s. A burning heat spread from where their palms touched, their blood mingling. It was not an unpleasant sensation, but Dustyn had never realized how powerful it would be.

“I bind your soul to me through blood. Just as your soul belongs to The Morrígan, part of it is mine to keep, so she can possess you no longer.” The words flowed not only from Dustyn’s memory, but also from his heart.

Lyle withdrew his finger, leaving Dustyn feeling empty. After a moment though, something wider and hotter pressed against his entrance. It burned uncomfortably as the ring of muscle began to stretch farther than it had for

Lyle's finger. The burn morphed into sharp pain, making Dustyn's breath shallow and forcing a tear to leak from his eye.

"You bind your body to mine by entering me. Your body belongs only to me, and The Morrígan can have no part of you." Dustyn struggled to recall the words through the fog of pain and forced them out with the little breath he had left.

"I bind my soul to you through blood. I bind my body to yours by entering you. This son of The Morrígan is your bonded partner for as long as I continue to live." Lyle leaned in to kiss Dustyn after uttering the bonding words. When he pulled away Lyle asked, "Are you ready, or do I need to wait a bit longer?"

The passion of the kiss had eased away some of the pain, so Dustyn replied, "I'm ready."

Lyle's hips snapped forward, burying his shaft deep inside Dustyn. He couldn't help but wince, and was thankful when his brother didn't withdraw immediately. Their left hands were still joined, but Lyle brought his right hand to wrap around Dustyn's where it was still curled around his softening dick.

Lyle started to glide their joined hands up and down, making Dustyn hard again. When he began to moan and pant, writhing beneath his brother, Dustyn felt Lyle slide out from within him. He keened a protest that was cut short when Lyle surged back in.

The pace was slow at first, but it built rapidly until Dustyn felt like he was going to fly apart. Lyle suddenly shifted back, and the head of his cock rubbed against that spot inside. Dustyn incoherently babbled his pleasure, but his brother seemed to understand anyway and remained in that exact position as he pistoned in and out of him.

The friction coiled inside him, filling him to the brim with restless ecstasy. White spots exploded across his vision as he came hard, shooting his seed up onto his chest and clenching his ass. He felt Lyle follow in the next instant, and he was further aroused by the feeling of his brother's semen spilling inside of him.

*Lyle*

Lyle collapsed on top of Dustyn, kissing him in satisfaction. Dustyn would always be safe now. Lyle would never have to leave his side again, at least not until he died. Death was a distant possibility now instead of impending reality.

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He found himself smiling as he thought of the years stretching ahead of him, the decades. Dustyn was his now, and he knew that some things would change while others would not—for instance, Dustyn's penchant for fighting with him.

"You're heavy. Get off me already." Dustyn glared at him.

Lyle chuckled, and it turned into full-blown laughter when the glare intensified and was accompanied by the strike of a small fist to his bicep. He worked his arms under Dustyn and rolled over onto his back. With a roll of his hips, a gasp drifted into the night and Dustyn's eyelids fluttered closed. It was a good thing Lyle knew how to distract his youngest brother.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Ava Penn is an incurable bibliophile with a passion for food, romance, and nature. This often shows in most of her writing. Other interests include anime/manga, video games, horses, and Amtgard. She loves to hear from readers, so feel free to get in touch.*

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# THE COURT OF LIGHTNING

By Amy Rae Durreson

## Photo Description

Two soldiers stand side by side in the mist. One, with dark hair and very pale skin, looks stern. He is dressed in black. The other, in a leather vest, is leaning on a post, looking more relaxed. He has white hair and darker skin. Despite their differences, the two are clearly friends.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I'm the one with the tattoos and white hair. I've been part of the King's army for the past 10 years and for the last few I've been commanding a unit at the border beside my frigid friend here. I want to kiss the frost off of him but I'm not sure I'd survive once his shock wore off.*

*Can you help me please author? I'm dying over here!*

*Please no ménage, cheating, BDSM, or simpering virgins... THANKS!*

Sincerely,

Gwendolyn

## Story Info

**Genre:** fantasy

**Tags:** spies/secret agents, action/suspense/adventure, magic users, friends to lovers, sweet/some sex, engineers, light violence

**Word Count:** 39,742

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# **THE COURT OF LIGHTNING**

**By Amy Rae Durreson**

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## Chapter One

Shan stood by the old Coast Guard station above Porthleven and watched the last paladin of the Court of Lightning come flying back from the occupied territories.

Tirellian had, not for the first time, extended his mission to the last possible moment. The sky behind him was already dark, and the setting sun shone on his outstretched wings, making the glossy spellsilk gleam with all the colours of sunset—golden, red and violet. Then Tirellian banked in to land on the platform in the shadow of the station, and all the colour faded from his wings, until they seemed grey beneath the midnight fall of his braided hair.

Shan came forwards to pull him into the station, seeing how his friend was turning to squint at him. The flying goggles everyone in the Shadowflight wore were good for guarding against dazzle, but didn't cope well with sudden drops in the light. He'd have to do something about that soon, once he was done with all the siege weapons and folding bridges the army currently had him designing.

"It's me," he said. "Come out of the wind."

Tirellian pushed his goggles off and said, "Arashan."

He was the only one who used Shan's full name, and the sound of it in that accented, slightly guttural voice, always sent shivers up Shan's spine.

"The one and only," he said brightly. "Welcome home, Sparky."

Tirellian looked faintly irritated, although he let Shan lead him inside. "I have a name."

"I'm just a simple country boy, Sparks. Your name has too many syllables for me. Makes me bite my tongue."

"Yet you can say 'syllables' without hesitation." Inside, in the single brightly lit room, Tirellian shrugged to make his wings fold down neatly (something very few flyers bothered with, even though neglecting it tangled the silk) and cancelled the spell. The spellsilk shimmered and vanished, and he tapped the knot in the middle of his harness to make the spines of his wings fold down, the thin flexible wood which formed the stiff frame for his gliding wings telescoping into two short tubes strapped to Tirellian's back.

Shan went to help him remove the harness.

“I can do it.”

“If you mean to tell me that your hands aren’t numb—”

“Not entirely,” Tirellian said, but he held his arms out and smiled faintly. Someone who didn’t know him wouldn’t have noticed it, but Shan knew. In the years they’d been working together, he’d learned to read those slight shifts of expression.

The other flyers called Tirellian the “Ice Knight”, although never to his face, not since Shan had explained to them exactly what Tirellian had lost to the Court of Ice and how very offensive he himself found the name. There wasn’t a flyer in the Corps stupid enough to deliberately piss off their very own artificer, not when he was the one who had designed and now mended and maintained their wings, and so Tirellian was no longer subject to cruel nicknames.

The closing of his eyes and the faint curve of his mouth meant that Tirellian was very glad to be back. He had been gone a month, vanished behind enemy lines, back in the country of his birth, to seek out information, sabotage the occupiers, and carry vital messages and funds to the resistance. He was thinner than he had been, Shan noticed as he worked the buckles loose, and he tensed whenever Shan’s knuckles brushed his skin. Shan wished he could tell Tirellian that he had time to rest, to mend his tattered nerves and eat heartily, but they were still at war. This quiet green headland seemed peaceful enough, but the Guersyn Peninsula, the cliff-edged moorland home of the Court of the Wind, was the last free region in the Seven Courts (last save the Isle of Time, that was, but the Isle kept its own counsel and was never touched by war). Shade, Earth, Flame, and Lightning had all fallen to Ice’s army and cold magic. Fifty miles to the south, his countrymen were dying on the frontline, freezing to death although the spring solstice was long past. What they did here was less bloody, but just as vital. Without the intelligence won by the spies of the Shadowflight, the Court of Wind too would have fallen years ago.

The last buckle was stiff, the leather tightened by salt, and he wondered why Tirellian had been forced so close to the waves. He worked it free, and the straps fell into his hands. Undone like this, they were mere ribbons of leather. Shan rolled them neatly around the wooden tubes, locking the buckles against the catches designed for that purpose, and tucked them under Tirellian’s belt. Fastened up like this, they were more compact than a sword, discreet enough to be carried secretly across enemy land in a pack or sheathed like a dagger.

With Tirellian's wings gone, Shan was suddenly aware of how close they were standing, his hand on his friend's hip and their bodies almost brushing. Tirellian's eyes were closed, and his lips were parted. He was swaying slightly on his feet, and Shan thought his friend might have fallen asleep standing up.

"Wake up, Sparky."

Tirellian's eyes opened, and Shan caught his breath, startled yet again by how lovely his friend was. Long ago, as a child on the moors, he had heard stories of the two loveliest and most accomplished women in the Seven Courts, the Duke of Asterope's twin daughters, whose father was rumoured to have created them from jet and silver and moonlight. He remembered that old tale sometimes, when Tirellian caught him off-balance.

Shan knew better, though. He, like everyone, knew how that story had ended, with the old Duke living just long enough to see his daughters married to kings and his son made the youngest, and last, paladin of the Court of Lightning, and how one daughter had died, frozen to her throne, and the other lived still, far from home, with only her older brother to remind her of the land and family they had left behind. However they looked, Tirellian and his sisters were as human as the rest of them. They had a mother once, and he knew her name, had heard it choked out once, on a night when there seemed to be no hope of surviving, out there on the line when the fire came falling out of a storm-bruised sky.

Tirellian did not have the breathtaking grace of his royal sister. He was too dangerous for that. Everything about him was stark and lean: his long black hair, his towering height, his high-boned face, and sombre disposition, but his eyes... His eyes were the same soft blue as the haze over the sea on a summer's morning, promising glorious sunshine to come.

Not for the first time, Shan considered leaning forwards that last inch and kissing him. Tirellian's pale mouth would taste like lightning, he thought, sharp and dazzling.

But Tirellian had never done anything to indicate he would welcome Shan's kiss, so he merely stepped back and said, "We should head out. Our day's not done."

"No?"

Shan lowered his voice, although there was no one else here to overhear them. "Your sister and her husband are here. They want to meet with both of us."

Tirellian's eyes widened slightly. "From your choice of phrasing, I assume this is not an official visit."

"Very few people are aware they're here."

"We should hurry then, so they can return to safety the sooner."

"We need to wait for the change of the watch. I'm taking a shift."

"Fortuitous timing."

Shan rolled his eyes. "I knew you were due back, idiot."

Tirellian's smile deepened, and he leant against the sill of the north window, his pose a little less stiff and proper. "It's good to be back."

That he would think to say it was a sign of how far he had come. The paladin Shan had first met, back on the line, ten winters ago, had been too driven and reserved to even notice the overtures the other soldiers, and later the flyers, had made towards him. He had met every comment with polite and correct formality, never unbending or showing the faintest sign of weakness or vulnerability. Over that first hard winter, the others had given up, but Shan had stayed fascinated by the grim foreigner with heartbreak in his eyes, and Tirellian had slowly started to respond to him.

"Glad to have you back safely," Shan said and reached out to touch Tirellian's forearm lightly, wary of startling him. Most of the flyers came back brittle after weeks pretending to be someone they weren't and always bracing for discovery. Some of them didn't come back at all, and he wished he dared do something more than this quick touch to show Tirellian how glad he was to see him alive. "Any damage?" he asked.

"To me or your mechanisms?"

"I've already checked your wings."

"In which case, nothing significant."

"By your definition of 'significant' or by mine?"

Tirellian shot him a slightly sheepish look. "Yours."

"Good."

Tirellian glanced out the window. "I see a light on the path."

Shan snorted. "Lazy. Sun's not done yet."

"It is below the ridge. Not everyone has your highland vision."

They both watched the hunched figure of the new watch guard come creeping up the cliff path towards them. In happier times, this station had watched for ships in trouble on their way into Porthlevin's small but sheltered harbour. Now it served a double purpose. Its guards still scanned the channel, although now they watched for possible invasion fleets, and its elevated position made it a perfect launch station for the Shadowflight.

The duty guard was old Karel, one of Shan's ground crew. He nodded to them as he came in. "Evening, Shan. Welcome back, your grace."

Tirellian looked a little disapproving at the informality. "Good evening Corporal-Artificer. Have you come to assume the watch?"

"No, he's here for a social chat," Shan said, chuckling. "Watch is yours, Karel. There are nut biscuits in the tin under the window seat and they're fresh today. Brought them up myself."

Karel's lugubrious face brightened. "You're a gent, Shan. Get off now, before the light goes."

As they headed down the path, buffeted by the wind off the sea behind them, Tirellian commented, "You still aren't much for military protocol, are you?"

"We're all just people, Sparks."

"And you are that man's commanding officer. You shouldn't encourage his familiarity."

Shan sighed. He would never understand all the courtly scruples and proprieties that Tirellian took for granted. Wind had never been as formal a court as Lightning, and he had never even been a courtier. "Karel's from my home village. I've seen him in his cups, and helped him feed his horses when he broke his leg, and he never let on to my dad that I was skiving off my studies that time when he caught me in the hayloft with his nephew after the harvest dance the year we turned fifteen. Half the artificers in the army trained or worked up on Glasmoor. I can't be calling my own people by their rank, can I?"

Tirellian sighed and then said, "You neglected your studies for a boy?"

"Have a heart, man. I was fifteen, and Clem tempted me with cider and promised he'd suck me off."

Tirellian looked faintly scandalised. "At fifteen?"

Shan sighed. It was one of life's great injustices that somebody who looked like Tirellian was the most prim and prudish man he'd ever met. The silent discomfort he exuded at every bawdy story or mention of sex took half the fun out of it. There were times, of course, when it also felt like a challenge, because the idea of his proper paladin finally losing control had kept him warm through many a lonely night. He tried not to let his fantasies stray that way, because it seemed obscene, but the curiosity became more of an itch with every month. One day, he would see Tirellian's guarded formality shatter into passion, and it might just be the best day of his life. He needed it, like he needed to believe that one day they would win this war.

He just didn't have the faintest idea how to get either of the things he wanted. He didn't know how to court Tirellian without scaring him away, and he was only an artificer in the end, no matter how important his inventions.

"This Clem...?" Tirellian said hesitantly, his lip curling a little on the name.

"Moved away a few years later." Shan sighed. "I heard he went down in the mud at Trevilley, poor bastard."

"I'm sorry," Tirellian said. The wind came off the sea in a sudden hard gust, whipping their hair forwards and pushing Shan a little off balance. Tirellian steadied him, and they both reached out for the guide rope. The path up from the village was a pleasant climb on a sunny day, but flights went out in all but the worst weather, and so they had put up a rope along the side of the path, hammering metal stakes into the rough-toothed rocks of the headland. Shan had been glad of it more than once: the mouth of the inlet was a long way below and edged with jagged rocks. The sea roared in on all but the mildest of days, hurling itself at the rocks in great plumes and flashes of spray. Only the luckiest of men survived a fall from these cliffs.

"What news from the front?" Tirellian asked over the wind, as if they were merely strolling along a quiet beach (at sunset, hand-in-hand, Shan thought wistfully, with the last heat of a summer day still lingering beneath their feet). He'd be damned if he ever admitted to such a sentimental fantasy, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to indulge once in a while.

"Third army held the Penrose Pass against a big incursion, but the attempt to take back the river towns failed."

Tirellian sighed. "I heard about the latter, but not the former." He shook his head, eyes distant. "Damn."



Shan nodded, not needing to say more. They'd spent the first year of the war out in the trenches to the south, fighting an impossible battle to protect the wealthy towns on the plain around the River Ledden, which had once been their border with the Court of Earth. The armies of the Wind had been pushed back into the moors and hill country in the northern wilds of their headland, easier to defend but harder to survive in. This was goat and sheep country, except for the fishing ports along the coast, and it was hard to feed all the evacuees from the thin soil.

They had come around the side of the cliff now, and were suddenly out of the full blast of the wind. From here, Shan could glimpse the lights of the village below, and the artificers' camp stretching up the sides of the valley beyond, the tents gleaming in the last light. The river looked still and serene, its pebbles exposed at this tide. The river came down out of the moors in a steep rush here, and then dug its way out of the land in a zigzagging course which left the village itself completely sheltered and hidden from the sea. The harbour, which had once supported a profitable trade across the channel to Lightning's Zephyrport on the opposite coast, was tucked between the village and the first bend in the river.

"Are they in the camp?" Tirellian asked.

"The inn." Shan grinned at him. "If you're trying to be discreet, don't stay with a load of nosy artificers who can hear gossip floating by on the breeze."

"Wise advice."

"I'm full of it," Shan said brightly. "I'm a proper sage, I am. People used to travel from miles around to lie at my feet and await the pearls of wisdom dropping from my lips—"

"I see you have been drinking too much in my absence," Tirellian said. "Or perhaps you are eating too richly at night, to have such nonsensical dreams."

"You're the only one who could ever drive me to drink, Sparks," Shan said, clapping a hand to his heart and batting his eyelashes at Tirellian. "Just think, your brawn and beauty, my undisputed brilliance: we could take over the world!"

"Undisputed?" Tirellian repeated drily. "Clearly, it is past time I came home. Someone needs to keep you humble."

Shan took the word *home* and savoured it without comment. "You just couldn't stay away from me any longer. Admit it, you missed me."

“Certainly. I grew weary of mending my own harnesses.” The sideways look meant that was a joke, though, so Shan just pouted at him.

“You only want me for my toolkit.”

Tirellian blinked. “I’m not sure I want to know where you plan to take that innuendo.”

“You don’t want to hear about the size of my—”

*“Arashan.”*

Shan took pity on his blush and let it go. “I hope your honoured brother-in-law has left us some dinner. I’m starving, and you must be worse.”

“I am hungry,” Tirellian admitted, “although not quite enough to imply that my royal brother is a glutton.”

“I did not!” Shan protested and then reconsidered his words. “Don’t even think about repeating that.”

“But I hear he likes to know the ordinary soldiers’ opinions of their leaders.”

“And if you’d like to have blankets on your bed tonight, you’ll keep quiet,” Shan said, laughing despite the threat. Neither of them meant it, and he was beginning to relax for the first time since Tirellian flew out. It was never so bad at the start of a mission, but the last few days of waiting were always hard.

They walked the rest of the way to the village in idle conversation, and Shan glanced up more than once to see Tirellian looking around and smiling. Perhaps he had meant that “home”, after all.

The inn was the biggest building in the village, a solid, whitewashed building with thick walls. A soldier stood just inside the door, his insignia removed but his eyes sharp. He saluted Tirellian as they came in and said softly, “Their majesties are in the upstairs parlour, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, Major.”

As they walked up the narrow stairs, Shan asked softly, “How could you tell his rank? He wasn’t wearing—”

“I know the name and rank of every man in Arellia’s guard.”

Of course he did. He probably also knew their personal histories, family connections, and service records as well. There wasn’t a more overprotective brother in the Seven Courts.

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Another two guards stood outside the parlour door. They ushered Shan and Tirellian in, and closed the door behind them.

The King of the Wind came striding across the room towards them, his smile bright and impatient. Shan bowed, but King Lyr didn't bother greeting them.

"Finally, you're here," he said. "How long does it take you to get your wings off, Tir? No, don't waste time answering. Come in, sit down, listen. We have a problem."

Behind the king, Queen Arellia cleared her throat and said, her smile a little more obvious than her brother's, "Remember to stop and breathe, husband, and let him speak too."

King Lyr snorted. "Makes me inefficient, love. Ah, Master Shan, join us, join us. Tir, good flight? Good mission? Excellent. Now let me tell you how we are completely and utterly fucked."

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## Chapter Two

Tirellian wasn't listening. Instead, he crossed the room to meet his sister, cupping her face in his hands as she stood on tiptoe to meet him.

"Arellia," he said softly.

"Tirellian," she murmured back, and he pressed his forehead against hers. Neither of them spoke, though they both seemed to shine a little brighter with relief. Side by side, they took Shan's breath away. He didn't understand how two people could exist in the world with no visible flaws between them.

He had a fair idea of what their childhoods had been like to make them so pristine and gracious, from the endless parade of tutors and biting critiques of everything from their learning to the way they spoke and moved. He knew how their father had chosen near identical names for his twin daughters and dressed them alike, not because they enjoyed it but to attract the attention of potential suitors. He had watched as Tirellian regarded every extraordinary deed he had ever performed not with pride but to identify what he should have done better.

It all made him secretly glad that the Duke of Asterope was dead. Repeatedly punching your best friend's father in the face wasn't a good idea, but he wouldn't have been able to stop himself. Seeing his queen just made him want to protect Tirellian more. Tirellian seemed like the perfect knight, but Arellia looked so delicate she could break. Seeing them together forced Shan to see that fragility in his friend as well.

She was, however, as strong as steel, and he reminded himself that Tirellian was too. They had both survived their upbringing and the loss of their Court. He didn't really need to wrap them both in his arms and keep them safe from every sharp breeze and unkind word.

He wanted to, though, for Tirellian, at least. Arellia had her own protector.

"Damn," his king said softly, shaking his head. "You forget, don't you, how alike they are?"

Shan wasn't sure what to say to that. This was his king, and he still found it deeply uncomfortable to have to chat to him like a friend. Kings weren't supposed to be like ordinary people (and King Lyr wasn't ordinary at all, which made casual conversation all the harder).

“You look tired,” Tirellian murmured in his own dialect and directed a narrow-eyed look at King Lyr. “She looks tired.”

Queen Arellia sighed slightly and tapped his cheek with her fingertips. “Stop that.”

“He’s supposed to be looking after you.”

“I am a grown woman. More importantly, I love him. If you damage him, I will be very cross.”

“Only *cross*?” the king grumbled. “Ten years of marriage, and that’s all I get?”

“More than you deserve,” Tirellian stated, and then winced as his sister smacked him again, a little harder.

“Honestly,” King Lyr said to Shan, in a loud whisper, his eyes bright with mirth, “you grant a man asylum, and he thinks he can threaten you for the rest of your lives.”

“There is no point looking to him for sympathy,” Tirellian said loftily. “Arashan is on my side.”

The king rolled his eyes. “He’s part of my court. He’s supposed to be loyal to me.”

This was why ordinary men shouldn’t socialize with royals. There was too much risk of diplomatic incidents over the dinner table.

The queen rescued him by pulling away from her brother and moving towards him, saying, “Have you both eaten yet? Please, join us.”

Tirellian’s mouth twitched, and Shan glared at him meaningfully. The king always brought out the worst in Tirellian, and he didn’t want to be caught in the middle.

“So,” the king said, “now you’ve got the obligatory threats out of the way, let’s get on with business. Have either of you seen the latest intelligence report yet?”

“I’ve had the summary, sire,” Shan said, “but not the detail, and he’s not had the chance. Is this about their new war machines?”

“Among other things. What do you know?”

“From the report and the rumours among my people, it sounds like the Court of Ice finally got a competent artificer. I’ve heard stories of lightning-

powered siege towers and automated flying machines. Nothing compared to what we have, but closer than anything we've seen before."

"That's not the worst of it." The king extracted a page from the papers spread across the table and passed it to Shan. "This was drawn by one of my spies in Fromebridge, who's been watching the roads between Earth and Shade. He smuggled it out at great risk. He claims it is made of metal, has been walking across the Court of Earth, and that it can summon up enough lightning to set fire to entire villages in one strike. Is that possible?"

Shan looked at the sketch. It was rough and rushed, and it took him a moment to make sense of the picture. The device looked like a skeletal insect of some kind, many-legged and with two protruding antennae at the front of its head, with a jagged light between them which the artist had labelled "lightning." It took him a moment to realize that the little squiggles by its legs were supposed to be trees and houses.

Considering it, he said slowly, "I could build the frame and fit a lightning generator on it, yes, but what's powering it? The sheer weight of it would be prohibitive. Even if I had a very good lightning mage like Tirellian, his entire strength would only drive it fifty steps or so before he was drained. Unless they've suddenly invented a new conversion engine, I don't see how—"

"We know where they're getting the power from," King Lyr said grimly, "though I'll leave that to my next guest. It's a plausible machine, though?"

"Yes, but it's a significant improvement on what we've seen of their technical prowess. I'd say they'd found a new artificer, someone more creative and technically competent."

"That's the other intelligence we have now. It's the same artificer they've been using for the last ten years, but we finally have a name for her. Daedalia Teichoma."

"Aunt Didi?" Shan said incredulously and then thought about it and felt sick. "Seven save her."

"You knew her, Master Arashan?" the queen asked, leaning forwards.

"She taught at my father's school." He could remember her, laughing raucously as she leaned back from the anvil, sweat beading on her brow from the heat of the forge and making her hair stick to her forehead in tight, dark curls. She had been maybe fifteen years Shan's senior and had first come to

Glasmoor as a foreign student and then stayed to teach. He had adored her unconditionally when he was ten and respected her as an honest and great-hearted mentor when he was fifteen. "She went back, when Ice invaded, to help defend her own court."

"The reluctant artificer," Tirellian said, surprising Shan, who hadn't realised that story had spread to the flyers. The artificers had speculated for years that whoever was designing Ice's war machines was deliberately sabotaging them. The flaws in every design were too subtle and fortuitous to be mere chance, many had argued. A non-artificer wouldn't notice it, but it had become a legend among his men as the war got worse. "Thank the reluctant artificer," they had said jokingly every time one of Ice's machines wore out quickly or jammed at a crucial moment. Had it all really been Aunt Didi?

"We don't think she's been replaced," the king said, his voice brusque with sympathy. "Something has changed, though. For some reason, she is now cooperating fully. We're afraid—"

The light in the room changed suddenly, and the king stopped mid-sentence. As Shan caught his breath, light came spilling in the windows, silver-bright and shimmering. It was like looking through a waterfall at the sun, Shan thought, dazzling in every direction, and it brought with it the sense of a cool breeze in a summer heatwave and the moment when a gathering storm finally broke and the pressure of the air lifted away.

Then all that light condensed, first to a column and then into the form of a woman, a small, white-haired girl with arching wings of light.

Shan slid off the chair onto his knees, his heart catching in his throat. Beside him, Tirellian dipped to one knee, and the king and queen knelt too. It was impossible not to, when so much light and power was pulsing in the air around them.

This was the Sylph of Wind, he knew without having to be told, and had to choke back another wave of sheer panic. Ordinary men weren't supposed to set eyes on the Sylph. Only kings could call her. Shan had never anticipated that he would meet the Sylph.

"Are these the paladin and the inventor?" she asked the king now, her voice a little too high and fluting to be comfortable for human ears.

Six hundred years ago, all the lands that were now the Courts had been part of a vast and dark Empire. The Empire had enslaved seven great spirits,

siphoning off their power to rule the known world, but they had not been unopposed.

Revolutionaries had freed the seven spirits, and in gratitude the Seven had formed a pact with mortal men: they would be free from any attempt at enslavement and in return each granted a measure of their power to their rescuers and their descendants, to use as if it were their own (even Shan could whistle up a wind if he had to, although he preferred to work with his hands and his ingenuity).

“They are, madam,” King Lyr said. Peering at him through the Sylph’s light, Shan suddenly noticed the ring on his hand, and how the Sylph’s light was reflected in its pale stone. The Seven had each bequeathed one of their rescuers the ability to summon them in a time of need, a ring to be passed down through the ruling bloodlines. There were seven rings for seven courts, but mortal kings rarely called upon their debt, wary of the line between requests and orders. No one wanted to be the one who broke the Great Pact and deprived the Courts of all their magic.

“Have you told them? Have you told them everything?” The distress in her voice broke through Shan’s awe, and he looked up to see she was wringing her hands. Her fingernails were bitten to the quick, and that suddenly made him look at her differently.

If you ignored the flare of light and power, she looked like girls he knew. White hair, like his own, was not uncommon up on the moors, and the folktales said it meant you were descended from the Sylph and one of her human consorts. Shan had always scoffed at that one, but he could see a hint of familiarity in the line of her brow and set of her chin too. She looked about nineteen, and he imagined his cousin Menna at the same age and suddenly saw the likeness.

It made the weight of her power in the room a fraction less terrifying, and he managed to pull together his scattered thoughts enough to listen to her.

“...partway through the telling, madam,” King Lyr was saying.

She turned towards Shan and Tirellian, stretching her hands out. “Please, please save my sister.”

Shan felt Tirellian snap to attention beside him and held back a wince, wondering if she’d deliberately chosen the one plea Tirellian would never ignore.



“We are your servants, revered lady,” Tirellian said, and it was easy for him to sound cool and collected. He’d probably been taught spirit etiquette since the age of five.

“My brothers and sisters and I have not been part of this war,” she said, “though we have wept to see our dear friends fighting each other. One by one, we have been forgotten. My sister Undine lies below the ice, and no one in the Court that was once Water recalls her. The others have been neglected too, but I have been blessed by my human friends, and until lately, people were still willing to talk to my sister, whom you would call the Sprite of Lightning. Last month, when I went to speak to her, she turned me away. I returned a week later and found her occupying that iron monstrosity.”

“*She’s* what’s powering that machine?” Shan interrupted, forgetting all his manners. The power human mages wielded was only a tiny fraction of what the Seven controlled. No wonder they could make the machine move.

“Yes!” the Sylph cried, turning to face him. “But we don’t do that! We *never* take part in war. It’s part of the Pact: you *can’t* ask us for that. She told me, when I found her, that she was there willingly, that the Pact was not broken, but why would she allow herself to be chained again? I asked her, and she would not answer, and now she is hiding herself from me, and I cannot find her to ask more. Please, help her!”

If the Pact was broken, the Seven would depart and take their magic with them. Everything which relied on magic, from the Shadowflight’s wings to the pumps and filters that drew clean water out of the Court of Fire’s sulphurous wells, would stop working. Horrified, Shan swallowed past the lump in his throat and said, “What do you want us to do?”

“Someone who is a blood relative of the King of Lightning needs to retrieve his summoning ring and call the Sprite,” King Lyr said.

“I would go,” Queen Arellia said. “Great-grandfather ties us to the royal bloodline, and it’s—it’s Aillera’s ring now, but...” She trailed off, blushing and looking uncomfortable.

“You may as well tell him,” the king said, with a chuckle. “He may be less likely to punch me in front of one of the Seven.”

The Sylph smiled at that, a little of the fear easing her face, and lifted her hand to cover a giggle. “Oh! Oh, wonderful.” It made her sound like Shan’s cousin Menna again, and he looked at her, trying to push aside his awe. She

might seem like a creature of light and power, but Menna had always looked demure too, and she had been a proper hellion as a child and even now, although marriage and motherhood had sobered her a little, she never backed down from a fight and was, of all Shan's many cousins, the most fun to get drunk with at a reunion.

Tirellian looked at his brother-in-law narrowly. "What?"

"I'm pregnant," Queen Arellia said, ducking her head shyly, and then added, with emphasis, "And I feel *wretchedly* sick all the time."

"Don't tell *him* that," the king said hurriedly, and she smiled at him fondly.

Shan tried to pretend he wasn't there. He wasn't part of this family, and it was very private news until they announced it formally. All the same, he felt a rush of relief. For the last six years or so, the royal couple's fertility had been a matter of open speculation, and he knew from what Tirellian had let slip that Arellia wanted a child with all her heart. He couldn't begin to imagine how awful the weight of expectation must have been, but he could tell she was happy now, from the shine in her eyes and the unguarded warmth of her smile.

That wouldn't necessarily be enough to stop Tirellian from punching her husband. Shan turned to face him and caught his breath again.

Tirellian was smiling, as Shan had never seen him smile before, without restraint or self-consciousness. His cheeks were rounded, his eyes creased and joyous, and he suddenly had (oh, Sky save Shan's leaping heart) dimples. He looked purely and unreservedly happy, and Shan wanted to wrap him up and take him away and find a way to keep him like that forever (with kisses. There definitely needed to be kissing involved in that process and preferably some mutual nudity as well, and maybe even a bit of rubbing and thrusting and... Actually, on reflection, he didn't want to get hard in front of his king and their Sylph, so he needed to stop this line of thought right now).

Tirellian scooped his sister up in another tight hug, murmuring something into her ear that Shan made no effort to hear. Then he frowned at her. "Why are you taking the risk of riding all that distance?"

"Because I am an adult woman capable of making my own decisions," she said tartly, "not a walking womb, whatever delusions you and my husband seem to be suffering." Then she flushed and added, looking at the Sylph. "I'm sorry. That was rude of me, and you shouldn't have to listen to our family squabbles."

"I am not offended," the Sylph said and giggled again. "Not at you, dear. You, young Lyr and your paladin friend there, need to listen more and nag less."

"Sorry, Madam. Sorry, Ara," said the king meekly and then grinned. "It's all Tirellian's fault. He's so overprotective; I just can't help following his bad example."

Tirellian gaped for a moment, speechless, but the Sylph said, clearly amused, "A king should have more willpower, dear. I told you that when you were five."

The queen pulled away from her brother and shot Shan a sympathetic glance. "We're making you uncomfortable, Master Arashan. Forgive us. We think of you as family."

"I'm honoured," Shan said, and lunged for a less awkward subject. "The ring?"

"Aillera's still wearing it," Tirellian said and came to sit down again, sinking into the seat beside Shan. He looked sad again. "We've had confirmation of that from numerous reports. I haven't—haven't been to see for myself."

Shan pressed his hand surreptitiously against Tirellian's leg, trying to offer some small comfort. Queen Aillera still sat by her husband's side in the Court of Lightning, the rumours said, both of them encased in ice by their conquerors.

"I'm sorry to ask," King Lyr said, "but—"

"You want me to retrieve it from her and summon the Sprite."

"Yes!" the Sylph cried. "She'll come for you. The Pact still stands, and, by its terms, she must answer your questions."

"At the same time," the queen said, "there is still the matter of this artificer. We know they are using the old lightning farm in the capital as a manufactory to develop their war machines. None of our spies have the technical knowledge to really explain to us what is being produced there. We need a trained artificer to go there and make accurate observations."

"And, if possible, to find out why the reluctant artificer has started to cooperate and extract her. Or..."

Tirellian nodded, but it took Shan a moment and then he felt sick. He knew the Shadowflight carried out assassinations, of course, but he couldn't put that together with his cheerful memories of Daedalia Teichoma.

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“You want me to recommend one of my men?”

The king and queen exchanged glances. Then King Lyr said, “Not this time. I know we pulled you off the front line once we realized we needed your mind too much to risk you, but circumstances have changed.”

“We sought a future reading from the Shrouded Isle,” the queen said, “and they actually granted us speech with one of the Oracle’s acolytes. She said that you must be the one to go, Master Arashan.”

“She didn’t say whether that would be enough to make the mission succeed,” the king grumbled, “because why be useful when there’s an opportunity to be cryptic? She was, however, pretty clear that both missions will fail without you. Prepare your wings, gentlemen. You’re both crossing the channel tomorrow.”

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## Chapter Three

It wasn't quite that simple, of course, and there were hours of discussions yet to come. Shan kept quiet through all of them, holding the idea of going behind enemy lines carefully in his head.

He wasn't a coward, he reminded himself. He had been in the trenches and acquitted himself with honour, as much as anyone could. It was just that he had grown comfortable in this new role, always supporting from behind the scenes. He couldn't imagine going into that strange place, to another country where the slightest mistake could mean his death. He didn't want to go.

And that was cowardice, he knew. Brave men and women flew across the Channel every day. He'd watched them go. Tirellian did it. What made him so different? If they could all serve their country in this way, so could he.

"I have a suitable cover identity," Tirellian was saying. "A well-established one as a mid-ranking recruiting officer from a wealthy background. It allows me to travel with relative freedom, but we'll either need a reason for Arashan to be travelling with me or we'll have to separate and meet in the capital."

"How fluent is your eastern dialect?" the king asked Shan, in that tongue.

"I can speak it, sire," Shan replied in dialect, "although not like a native."

"He'll pass for a west coast fisherman, although not for an educated man," Tirellian said, irritating Shan. They hadn't all been brought up to speak six languages. "My assessment is that it would be better for us to travel together, if we can find a suitable cover story. It's not a friendly country for those who do not know it and have not been trained as the Shadowflight are."

"Agreed," the king said. "So, why would a recruiting officer be travelling with a fisherman?"

"He could be a servant," the queen suggested. "A groom or valet."

"I don't know anything about horses," Shan said apologetically.

"And we don't have time to make him into a plausible valet, do we?" the king said.

The Sylph clapped her hands together. "He could be a pleasure slave!"

Shan was taking a sip of tea, which he promptly choked on. The king thumped him on the back with a snort of laughter.

“The Lords of Ice keep them,” the Sylph said enthusiastically, “and you’d be so pretty together.”

Queen Arellia took a look at Shan’s scarlet cheeks and her brother’s suddenly poker-stiff back and bit her lip, before saying, “I think they may be too shy to make it convincing, madam. Perhaps some other sort of leisure activity might...” She trailed off, pursing her lips, and then said thoughtfully, “Your father was a toymaker, Master Arashan. The best in the Seven Courts.”

“That was his reputation, yes, highness,” Shan said.

“I remember a doll’s house,” she said, her eyes going soft, “where you turned a crank on the side and everything moved. The maids served tea, and the birds on the roof lifted their wings, and a cat pounced upon a mouse in the kitchen. It was the most beautiful thing we ever owned.”

He remembered that doll’s house, the months that had gone into making it and the princely sum his father had charged the buyer. He had assumed it had vanished into a royal court. “I know it. There was a little boy swinging off the apple tree in the garden.”

“With white hair and a half-eaten apple in his hand,” she said, and her smile suddenly brightened again. “It was supposed to be you?”

“It was,” he said and added impulsively, “My father is retired, but he still takes some special commissions. I am sure he would make another one for your child.”

She smiled at him. “Thank you. Can you make toys too?”

“Not like my father could,” he said, “but it was what I was training to do, before the war came.”

She turned to Tirellian. “I heard there will be a patronage fair in Kerauton this year. Is your recruiting officer the type to win himself the favour and attention of the powerful by sponsoring a talented unknown to get there?”

“He could be,” Tirellian said and nodded. “Certainly it provides us with a pretext for travelling.”

“What’s a patronage fair?” Shan asked, feeling stupid.

“Ice and Lightning never had academies like you do here,” she explained. “Individual members of the nobility were in the habit of offering support to the gifted in return for a contracted number of years of work. It became somewhat

formalised over the years, and there were fairs annually where people competed for the patronage of the wealthiest.”

“And the rich tried to get the brightest and the best for bargain prices,” Tirellian added dryly. “Father used to go shopping for tutors once a year.”

“And you think there is a demand for toymakers?”

“Oh, yes,” the king said. “Ice is courting the Gemell Confederacy. They want to convince the Gemmies that they are civilized, rather than mere conquerors, and they’ve been conscripting artists and composers all over the occupied territories. Any kind of gifted non-military craftsman is in demand right now.” He nodded to himself. “Maybe that’s why the Oracle named you.”

“It’s unwise to second-guess the Court of Time,” Queen Arellia reminded him firmly.

They left not long after that, after the queen pleaded tiredness and the Sylph left, making the room seem dull in her absence. Tirellian was tired too, and his steps were slow as they walked back down the riverbank to their lodgings. Echoes of distant voices came murmuring on the wind to Shan’s ears, words spoken by people in the village, but he chose not to listen. Just because you had such a gift in your bloodline, didn’t mean it was polite to use it.

Strictly, they were both Colonels, though Shan forgot it most of the time. He wasn’t exactly coming up with battle plans, and the Shadowflight all operated independently. Tirellian’s rank was as much in recognition of his unique position within the court as anything else. The rank, however, meant they were entitled to a private barracks room each. In such a small village, that was problematic, and since Tirellian was often away and Shan too often travelled to other Artificer units, they had taken pity on their harried quartermaster and allowed him to just put an extra cot in Shan’s room for the times when Tirellian was here. It was still a thousand times better than the dugouts they had shared in the trenches, and they were quite used to sharing space.

And if there were times when Shan secretly wished it was a much smaller room and they had to share that space even more closely, that wasn’t something he needed to tell anyone. Tirellian wasn’t interested, and Shan would respect that. He had tried flirting when they first met, and Tirellian had met every overture with discomfort or embarrassment. In time, Shan had given up. Tirellian’s friendship meant too much to him.

Tonight, Tirellian stumbled into his flimsy bed with very few words more, and Shan was left lying awake. In the warm inn parlour, all the talk of patronage fairs and false papers had seemed exciting and plausible. Now, lying between cold sheets with the only sound the soft sigh of Tirellian's breathing in the other bed, he felt fear creeping over him again. He knew, better than anyone, how many of the Shadowflight never came home. First missions were the worst: so many inexperienced flyers were caught and executed. Those who survived that had a better chance, but even the most canny and experienced flyers weren't immune.

And then there was the country itself. He had never been outside the peninsula, hadn't even left Glasmoor until the war began. Now he was expected to go somewhere as strange as the Lightning Realm, and not for mere trade or exploration, but to lie his way past people who would kill or capture him if they had the faintest hint who he was. The very idea made him feel sick.

He *was* a coward.

Turning in his bed, he put his back to Tirellian and knotted his fists in the pillow, trying to slow his breathing and calm the knot around his heart. It was a long time before he fell asleep.

And then, of course, he dreamed.

He was in the trenches, not far from Pira's Corner, pressed against the side as the wind roared over. He couldn't hear anything but the scream of the gale summoned by weather workers behind his own lines. The side of the trench was slick beneath his hands, still sludgy from the wave of water that had come raging across No Man's Land to destroy the last company to hold this stretch of the line. Something as hard and cold as bone was pressing at his palm through it, but he didn't look. Five months in, and he had learned never to look.

The wind went quiet, wrapping them in a silence that was so eerie and blanketing that it felt like a blow. That meant that the weather workers thought they had incapacitated the enemy, and it was the sign to move. Shan went up the side of the trench, pulling himself hand over hand through that terrible silence, aware that others were moving with him all along the line.

*Go fast, they'd been told, before the enemy can recover,* but whoever had devised that strategy could never have seen the land beyond the wire. The green fields of the Ledden Valley had become hell. Earth mages had torn the barren ground apart into cracks and craters as they lashed out to bury Wind's trenches,



and then Ice had sent freezing water to slick over the wreckage. Every step was a slide or a stagger, and when you fell, as everyone did, it was into deep, freezing mud. The few remaining trees were blackened skeletons, lightning struck and charred by fire, and the air tasted bitter. There were bodies in the murk too, and he couldn't tell which side they belonged to, not under the thick gray-brown coating of the mud, the endless, terrible mud.

They were two-thirds of the way across when the spitting cough of the Fire Court's liquid fire siphons sounded. Shan threw himself flat but the man beside him was not so lucky. Liquid fire hit him in the chest, clinging in sticky clumps as it began to burn. Shan grabbed his leg and tried to pull him down into the mud, but he was already screaming, his agony drawing more fire, rocks and grenades landing around them to send the wet earth spewing up in dark waves, and Shan dug frantically into the mud, because after the fire would come the lightning, and all the while the man beside him was staggering and screaming, his voice shrill against the thick gulp of the fire siphons and the trembling sigh of the catapults—

He woke on a choked scream, kicking the sheets away from his feet, and went to claw at the weight on his shoulder before he realized it was Tirellian's hand.

"You are in Porthlevin," Tirellian said, his voice slow and steady. "At the headquarters of the Shadowflight. You are safe. You are safe."

Shan took a fast, shuddering breath and then a second slower one. Then he managed to say, "Tirellian."

"Arashan," Tirellian replied, but didn't move his hand. They'd done this for one another before, been the anchor to reality when a nightmare hit.

"I know where I am," Shan said hoarsely, which was the sign for Tirellian to move away. Shan was hyper-sensitive enough that he could almost feel Tirellian's hand moving through the air, and so he wasn't surprised when tiny, dancing threads of lightning sparked off the ends of Tirellian's fingers, reaching out to fill the corners of the room with light.

"Trevilly," he said, and Tirellian nodded wordlessly. He had been there too. His had been the first face Shan saw when he dragged himself back through the mud to his own trench, concussed and bleeding, but a survivor where none had been expected.

"Candle?" Tirellian asked.

“Please.”

Tirellian snapped his fingers around the wick so lightning leapt out to light it. Shan had always thought it was a neat trick, but he didn't have the energy to beg his friend to repeat it now. He just shuffled across on the bed, making a little more space for Tirellian to sit beside him. The warm light of the candle was comforting in the heavy darkness, but he wouldn't be able to sleep for a while.

His shirt was sopping, wet through with nervous sweat, so he stripped it off and hurled it onto the floor. He'd pick it up in the morning, before Tirellian started stepping over it with pointed glares, but he couldn't stand the clammy thing right now.

“You added another tattoo,” Tirellian said softly and his fingers ghosted across Shan's back, tracing the new black segment.

Shan's breath caught in his throat, his body going alert for a different reason. “Yes,” he said, aware it came out husky. “I had to go south to consult on observation balloons, and I stopped for the next piece on the way back.” It was only a small segment, smaller than his little finger. He hadn't expected anyone to notice.

“Is it the start of a wing?” Tirellian asked.

“Yes.” One day, when the design was fully done, Shan would be able to lift his arms and display a diving bird marked across his back, its wings curling up around his arms. Each new tattoo was like a new tile in a mosaic floor, building towards the final image. He had first imagined it as a common soldier too poor for more than a small addition at a time. Now he could have probably afforded to finish it in one stinging session, but he chose not to. He liked to think he would live long enough to see it done at a slow pace.

Now he wondered if he should have just emptied his pockets two weeks ago.

“Your life is full of wings.”

“Naturally,” Shan said and bit back a sigh as Tirellian pulled his hand back. “I'm sure we could start you off with a little lightning bolt or two. On your shoulder, perhaps.”

“No, thank you,” Tirellian said and swung his legs onto the bed to curl up beside Shan. “Do you want the blanket?”

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“I will,” Shan said, but tossed the other half across Tirellian gladly. This was another thing they did without ever discussing it. There was no better cure for nightmares than another person within touching distance. As a boy, he’d never imagined that you could share a bed chastely with someone you desired, but he’d shared close quarters with many people since, and the knowledge that Tirellian would be right there until morning eased some of the remaining tension from his body. Tirellian was already pulling the blanket up, his eyes falling closed, so Shan leaned over him to snuff the candle and then slid down against the pillows.

He fell asleep for the second time with Tirellian’s breath stirring softly against his neck and did not dream again.

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## Chapter Four

He woke up the next morning uncomfortably entangled in paladin. Tirellian's knee was screwed against Shan's back, his elbow was rammed under Shan's ear, and his fingers were curled into his armpit. His hair had clearly come out of its braid in the night, because Shan had a mouthful of silky locks. The bastard was snoring too, right against Shan's neck.

"Good morning to you too," Shan muttered and tried to extract himself.

Tirellian growled in his sleep and locked his other hand in Shan's hair.

"Wake up and let me out," Shan told him. "I need to piss."

Tirellian opened his eyes a crack, making a vaguely irritated sound and rolled away, thumping down against the mattress and clutching the blanket to his chest instead.

"It's a good thing I love you, Sparky," Shan told him and staggered out of bed.

By the time he came back, Tirellian was fast asleep again. His hair was sticking up and his cheek was creased from the pillow, and Shan stood for a while and just looked at him, letting fondness roll through him. Then, because he knew exactly how irritable Tirellian would be all day if he knew someone had seen him at less than his best, he dragged fresh clothes on, shaved, and staggered out to charm the cooks in the mess tent into letting him take breakfast away.

They lingered over breakfast, but then it was all reporting to collect supplies and papers, and taking his own wings out of storage. Tirellian eyed the well-worn tanishwood tubes with interest and said, "I have never actually seen you fly."

"I don't much, these days." The first prototype of the wings had been a journeyman project, before the war. He had envisaged them as the kind of toy that adults bought as much as children. He hadn't even thought that they could have a tactical function, not until years later, stuck with Tirellian in the middle of No Man's Land as wind and fire and hail screamed overhead, trapping them in the dubious shelter of a deep crater. He had babbled nonsense for two days, waiting for the bombardment to stop as they eked out their small share of water.

He hadn't expected Tirellian to drag him to the capital on their next leave, let alone the moment when he found himself unexpectedly standing in front of his king and queen as Tirellian said serenely, "This is my friend. He knows how to make men fly."

The ultimate consequence of that conversation had brought them here. Men flew in the south too, weather workers gliding above the lines to dodge lightning and drop destructive spells on the enemy lines. Flight, dangerous as it was, had become their greatest advantage.

It was a long way from the fun of that first swoop into the air, though.

He dashed off a few last notes on his latest project (mass-producing spellsilk patches that imitated the structure of spiderwebs and could be used to pin back the crumbling sides of trenches in an evacuation) and wrote a note to his father asking him to consider taking a doll's house commission from the queen.

Then he changed into the clothes he had been supplied, a plain enough set of work clothes which looked like what he would wear here, except for the use of cloth laces instead of metal buttons.

"Less risk of attracting stray lightning," Tirellian explained and came to show him how to tie them. He was already dressed in the uniform of the Ice Guard, stark black and silver, and looked even more forbidding than usual.

They walked up through the village, and Shan was very aware of the curious stares they were getting. This was the only place on the peninsula where Ice Guard uniforms were regularly worn, but the wings in Shan's hands as well as Tirellian's drew comments. Up in the station, they both pulled on thin flying suits of waxed cotton to protect their disguises and put their wings on. Shan checked Tirellian's harness, as he did before every flight, and then held out his arms so Tirellian could check his. Up here, in the white, sunlit room, he was beginning to feel afraid again, and he took a deep breath and thought about the flight, only the flight.

Their launch crew was waiting, with the usual package of supplies already fastened below its own arching and rigid wings. They stood by while first Tirellian, and then Shan, triggered their wingframes.

The tanishwood hissed out, catches snapping into place as the wood, paper-thin and stronger than steel, telescoped out to form two triangular skeletons on each side of their bodies. The clasps were meant to snap into place

automatically, but the ground crew checked each one, a luxury they wouldn't have on the other side.

Tirellian clipped the tether of the supplies to his back harness and stepped forwards first. "We will land ten miles inland," he said. "There is a landing strip cut into the forest, just west of the town of Kerammion and beyond the River Glaukistou. From there, we ride to a safe house in the mountains and then take the road east in the morning. Follow me closely."

Then he triggered the spellsilk, lightning shimmering around his fingertips, and the silk suddenly surged out of a single thin thread to fill the framework of his wings with taut, undyed cloth that gleamed in the sunlight. A second thread expanded to swathe his body, a cradle that would support him in the air.

Tirellian grasped the forward struts of his wings, where they curled down over his shoulders, and turned towards the cliff top, pressing down on the struts to bring his stiff wings up to meet the wind. Already they were lifting him, and now he ran, striding faster and faster towards the granite ledge at the end of the cliff.

And then he was away, his body straightening and his wings rising. He swung out and up, shifting his body to cross back over the edge of the cliffs and then out to sea again, riding the upthrust of the wind against the cliffs to rise higher and higher.

Shan was waiting, counting zigzags and watching the cargo glider jerk and then rise behind Tirellian. When the sky was clear, he triggered his own silk and ran.

He had never launched over the sea before, and for a moment he was spellbound by the clear jagged tumble of the rocks and the waves leaping between them in flares of shining spray. From here, he could see the rocks below the water, brown and silver and gleaming, the fish darting between them, the seals basking in the summer heat.

Then he remembered that this was not a pleasure flight and shifted his weight to turn into the wind, rising and rising until the Coast Guard station shrunk into a small white square below him.

Tirellian was hanging in the air, waiting for him. As Shan rose closer, he nodded and then leaned forwards, pushing himself out across the sea. It was a good day for flying, with a steady wind and the sun shining down brightly. He had been wondering how far they would fly over open sea, but Tirellian steered

a course which crossed over all the rocky granite outcrops in the sea. Each one sent them rising again.

Over the last, a deserted rock half a mile long and inhabited by screeching gannets, Tirellian rode the rising heat higher than Shan would have risked, circling up and up. Shan followed, and when they pitched forwards out of the warm air, it wasn't long before he understood.

The air was growing cold, for all it was summer. Looking ahead, Shan realised that the white line ahead of them wasn't just the glare of the sun on the horizon. It was the other side of the channel.

The water below them took on an oily sheen, moving in slow, glutinous waves. The waves rolling towards the land seemed to be moving below, not across, the surface of the sea, lifting in slow heaves but never breaking. There was a little boat pushing along the coast, a fishing boat rather than a warship, and he could see the birds wheeling behind it, diving towards its decks. It was moving slowly, and he had to watch it for a few moments before he understood why.

The sea was freezing in its wake, the path it had forced through the thin surface air sealing up again slowly. He wanted to swoop down to see what they were catching. Were they fishing through the ice or were they after seals?

He stayed high, though, so he would look like nothing but the shadow of a bird to them.

The Lightning Coast was lower and less dramatic than his own cliffs, soft ridges sloping gently towards the sea. The low cliffs were chalky, but they looked yellow in comparison to the downs above, which were deeply swathed in snow.

It wasn't until he saw the first tiled roof showing barely above the surface that he realized how deep it lay, and he shuddered. It was an endless gleaming plain below him, and he watched his shadow crossing it with a superstitious shudder. What else lay beneath that pristine surface?

They were losing height badly by the time they reached the edge of the forest, and they both leaned forwards hard to increase their speed. When Tirellian banked and turned, Shan followed him with relief.

The landing ground was so far from the edge of the woods that it could only have been seen from above. Its edges weren't quite square, and it wasn't until

they came down, stumbling to a halt in great plumes of dust-fine snow, that he saw why. From the ground, it looked like a natural clearing.

There was a little wooden hut set just within the edge of the trees, and Tirellian folded down his wings and strode that way. Shan followed, suddenly aware of how stiff he was, and how cold his hands were.

“Bring the cargo pack in,” Tirellian said to him, in dialect. “I’ll start a fire.”

Shan nodded and staggered off to get it. The snow was compact beneath his feet in most places, only pressing down an inch or so, but twice he stepped forwards and went down into it to his hip and had to drag himself out again. The pack wasn’t heavy, but it was awkward and took some wrestling to get it inside.

Tirellian had started a fire in the small stove and stripped off his overalls, hanging them up to dry. He was now crouched over some odd metallic apparatus in the corner.

“Here’s the box,” Shan said, trying to sound cheerful for the sake of his own spirits. “Where do you want it?”

Tirellian whirled on him and snapped, “Language!”

Shan blinked, and only then realized that he hadn’t been speaking dialect. “There’s no one to overhear.”

“Always assume there is,” Tirellian said, his voice steady. “From the moment your feet touched the snow, you became Arachanni of Zephyrport, a fisherman and toymaker. You must be him now, whether you think we are watched or not.”

Shan was about to apologize, but then thought again. In his best dialect, he dashed off a sloppy salute and said, “Aye-aye, Captain.”

“Don’t cheek an officer, peasant,” Tirellian said, but smiled a little, some of the tension going out of him.

The mechanism in the corner let out a sequence of short and long squeals. Tirellian tilted his head, listening, and then sighed with relief. “That’s the correct countersign.”

“From where?”

“There are wires leading under the ground. They convey lightning, which the device turns to sound. And, no, I don’t know how it works. My apologies.”



Shan closed his mouth on his question in disappointment. "So, you sent a lightning message to..."

"The local resistance, to announce our arrival. If they hadn't replied correctly within a set time, it would mean this position had been compromised."

"Now what?"

"We wait. We need to hand over our supplies, and they will advise us of any changes to safe houses. They also have horses."

Shan nodded and stripped his coveralls off to hang up beside Tirellian's. He staggered over to the stove eagerly, holding out his numb hands to thaw. "That's nice. Hard luck for you, to only get one day back in summer."

Tirellian shrugged slightly. "We do what we must. Do you know what this small box is?"

Shan craned to see without moving away from the stove. "My tools. I'll make up some samples as we go, in case anyone asks to see my wares."

By the time they heard the jingle of harnesses outside, the stove was burning well, and Shan was beginning to warm up. Tirellian rose and went to the door, his hand on his sword hilt, and peered out through the crack. He opened it quickly, and a stranger stomped in.

He was a man in his fifties, with tired eyes. He was huddled into a thick fur coat, with a hat pulled down over his ears. He waited until the door was shut and said, "Your Grace. Back so soon?"

"As duty demands," Tirellian said gravely. "We have the weapons drop. Are the roads safe?"

"There are extra patrols on the west coast road, and we lost the safe house in Iktinost. You're safe to go up to Kersmeta Tor tonight, though."

Tirellian nodded. "Do you have cold weather clothes?"

"With the horses. New lad?"

Tirellian ignored that to say, "I'll help you bring it in."

If someone had told him this time yesterday that he'd be glad to wear fur-lined trousers and two layers of coats, Shan would have thought them mad. He'd been building a nice tan running around Porthlevin this week.

The stranger saw him shivering and said, "First crossing?"

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“Is it obvious?” Shan asked.

“You’ll get used to the weather in a day or two.” He shook his head slightly and then asked, a note of longing in his voice, “Tell me, are the flowers blooming on the other side?”

“All over the headlands,” Shan said.

“My daughter’s twelve and she’s just too young to remember what summer looks like,” the man confided and then added viciously, “Damn these bastards. Damn them all.”

Shan was still trying to imagine that when they rode out. The woods were lovely, all stark lines and icicles hanging in shimmering falls, but they were deep too, and the only sound was the pad of the horse’s hooves, the sigh of the wind, and the occasional crack of distant branches breaking under the weight of the snow.

Before they even left the woods, the road divided. Their contact rode off in one direction, and Tirellian led them slightly to the south, up a steeper, narrower track. It was only once they had gone that Shan realized he had never exchanged names with their helper.

“Wiser not to,” Tirellian said when he mentioned that. “If you don’t know a name, you can’t be forced to share it.”

“How do you live like that?” Shan wondered.

“Better than giving up and not fighting back.”

“Yes,” Shan said and shuddered again. The sun was beginning to drop and the shadows stretched out in long, gloomy spears. He couldn’t quite see the beauty in this cold landscape anymore. It was too stark, too lacking in life and colour. “What do people eat?”

“The rich have glasshouses, where they can grow some fresh vegetables to trade. There are still animals in the woods, although they are leaner and vicious now. By the coast, there are seals and occasional whale hunts.” Tirellian looked around and said, his voice weary, “These were beech woods once. Have you ever seen how green beech leaves are in spring?”

“They don’t grow west of here,” Shan replied, remembering in time to be vague, in case there was some invisible enemy lurking in the trees listening for incongruous place names.

“No,” Tirellian said sadly. “No, they don’t.”

After being frozen for a decade, would they ever revive here? Shan didn't say it, but he saw how Tirellian's eyes lifted to the thin dead-looking branches overhead.

The safe house turned out to be a tall and chilly building on the road up to an abandoned slate mine. It stood among mounds like a sentry, its narrow windows dark and shuttered. Inside, it was mostly empty, but Tirellian led him through to a room at the back, which faced straight onto the slate heap behind.

"Our lights won't be seen if we use this room," he explained.

Shan nodded mutely. The day seemed to have been going on for longer than any day should. After the flight and the ride and stabling the horses, he was too tired to think about safety precautions. Dimly, he knew he'd have to learn and fast, but he was willing to just let Tirellian do everything right now.

"Sleep for an hour," Tirellian said, gesturing towards the wide pallet by the wall. "I'll wake you when food is ready."

"Food?" Shan said hopefully.

"In time."

He didn't quite fall asleep, but he dozed, his eyes half-closed, watching Tirellian move quietly around the dimly lit room. There was a stove here too, and Tirellian lit it and went out for more wood. There was snow in his hair when he came back in, and Shan could hear it if he tried, a slow sigh against the window, quieter than the steady roar of the stove.

"Smoke?" he murmured.

"A necessary risk," Tirellian said, "but with this wind it will go out over the mine. Go back to sleep."

Shan closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them there was a pan steaming slowly on the stove and the smell of oats and honey warming the air. Those had both been in their packs, and he supposed it would be hot, even if it was an odd meal for an evening. Tirellian was standing over the pan, stirring it gently. He had bundled his long hair back out of the way and was frowning down at the pan. Had he once been instructed in how to make the perfect porridge, Shan wondered idly. He had never seen the man cook before; on the rare occasions they had needed to prepare their own food, he himself had always just made them sandwiches.

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It felt very domestic, and he reflected idly that he and Tirellian had been sharing living space for the best part of a decade now, in dugouts, tents, and barracks.

Sitting up and stretching, he pointed it out. “Do you realize we spend more time living together than most married couples?”

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## Chapter Five

Tirellian nearly dropped the wooden spoon, only stopping it from knocking the pan over at the last second. Colour had risen in his cheeks, and he stirred the porridge silently and vigorously for a few moments before he said, "You're awake then?"

"Afraid so," Shan said, biting back pleased laughter. He hadn't expected that kind of reaction. He went over to the stove and nudged Tirellian with his shoulder. "Smells good."

"I hope it will be to your satisfaction," Tirellian said stiffly. Oh, extra formality. Shan must have really flustered him.

Guiltily, he said, "I'm sure it will be perfect. Thanks for letting me sleep. I've obviously been getting slow and lazy in camp. You'll have to bully me back into battle-readiness."

"Your fitness seems quite adequate to me," Tirellian said and stirred hard again, not meeting Shan's eyes. "If you would be so kind, there are bowls in the cupboard."

Shan sighed, but set the table up. The chairs were old, but their backs had been painstakingly carved and polished once, flowers and lightning bolts cut out of the wood. Someone had put some love into the furnishings of this place, though it was all now scuffed and well used enough to show that many people passed through here. He wondered what had become of the people who lived here and whoever had taken the time to make a simple chair lovely as well as functional.

"Tell me something about this place," he said impulsively, as Tirellian set the bowls down. "Something you want me to know."

"Are you inquiring about this house, the local area, or the country as a whole?"

"Up to you. I don't want a schoolroom lecture. Just tell me something interesting."

Tirellian ate his porridge, obviously pondering it. Shan ate too and was mildly amused to find it was rather lumpy porridge. He was so used to Tirellian excelling at everything that he found it almost sweet that he couldn't do this

(he'd stopped trying not to be ridiculous over Tirellian years ago, so he had no shame in adding this to the ever-growing list of endearing things he treasured).

Then Tirellian said abruptly, "The miners sang."

He didn't say anything more and after waiting for a few minutes, Shan prompted, "Sang what?"

"Folk songs, hymns. It's not what they sang that mattered. It was where."

"So where did they sing?" Shan asked, propping his chin on his hand to listen.

"In the mines," Tirellian said. "Each family worked their own section of the mine, leased it from the owners for a half-share in what they brought out—"

"Ouch."

"I doubt mine owners on the peninsula are much kinder."

"Worse," Shan said. "It was a political issue, just before the war came, I remember. Get to the singing."

"All these families, working beside each other, would collect up the waste stone and build themselves a cabin, down there inside the mountain. They would all go and sit inside together for their meals and to exchange news. And they would sing over their supper. There were contests between different cabins, and the winners would represent their mines in regional competitions. It was a hard life, but they sang." He shook his head a little. "They sang."

"How do you know so much about mines?"

"My father owned one." Then his voice softened, and he added, "I wanted to be a miner once. I liked the idea of the singing."

"Can you sing?" Shan asked.

"I was taught to," Tirellian said and then grimaced faintly. "Unfortunately, I was the despair of my singing teacher. I'll never have more than a passable voice, and that took some time."

"We can't all be good at everything," Shan told him heartlessly.

Tirellian looked mildly disgruntled.

Rising to his feet, Shan said, "Before I get tired again, I want to start preparing some showpieces. I didn't want to bring in any outside materials. What can we buy or scavenge here?"

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“I don’t know what kind of materials you would use.”

“I’m thinking puppets and small automata. You can easily put together something that looks flashy even with simple materials. Maybe a couple of tilt mazes, although they take longer. How much capacity will we have to carry finished pieces?”

“We’ll be leaving the horses once we reach Kerammion, and taking the mail coach from there. We should be able to buy extra cargo space. Not many travel long distances now.”

“I’ll start with parts tonight then. I’d have them in cast tin at home, but that’s beyond our resources here. Wood, some wire, scraps of cloths, maybe some bits of slate for weights and decorations. I can do a lot with that, and they’ll fit into saddlebags until we have space to carry finished parts.”

“I remind you that we don’t actually intend to set up business here. It merely needs to be enough to convince any observer. Do try not to make enough that we need to hire a shop.”

“Live the lie, you told me,” Shan said cheerfully. “Is that wood all needed for the fire, or can I pick through it?”

“There’s a wood store in the yard,” Tirellian said, rising to his feet. “How much do you need?”

“Quality is more important than quantity,” Shan said.

He ended up spending the evening whittling cranks and gears and cams of varying sizes, imagining all the things he could do with them. There had been a little thin board leaning against the back of the store, but not enough to start making casings. Tirellian had seemed confident that they would be able to buy more and better later, so he left it until he had a good pile of puppet limbs and heads to add to his pile. By then Tirellian had gone to bed, and Shan picked up the thin board again. Laying it out, he grinned to himself. He knew what he could do with this. It might not look as pretty as the ones he’d made as a journeyman, but there was just enough wood here for a simple puzzle box.

He sketched out the shapes quickly. Cutting them took a little longer, and he took the time to smooth and sand the wood. He might not be able to paint or stain it, but he could let the wood’s own beauty shine through. Putting it together was easy enough, although he remembered spending hours sweating over the first one he had ever made. It looked innocent enough when he was

done, a little box with raised panels on its front, but he defied anyone who didn't know the trick to open it.

Sliding it open himself, he idly pondered putting a surprise for Tirellian in it. If they had been at home, Tirellian's door key would be entertaining, or his bootlaces, but that seemed a little foolhardy here. In the end, he stuck a few bits of slate in the corner to make a cabin and made a very simple wooden miner with a little slate headed hammer to stand beside it. He could probably have rigged the hammer to move, but he was suddenly aware of how very late it was, and he would regret it tomorrow if he became too much of a perfectionist. Tidying his tools away and packing up the parts and leftover materials into separate bags, he looked towards Tirellian.

He had spread across the whole bed again, snuffling into the pillow. Shan shook his head, amused, and put the lantern out. His family had been wealthy enough that he had a room of his own as a child, but he had gone top-to-toe with an endless stream of visiting cousins. Tirellian had clearly never needed to learn to share his space.

Crawling in, Shan muttered, "Shove over, Sparky."

Tirellian grumbled, but inched back, taking the blanket with him. Shan wrestled that out of his grasp too, and wasn't really surprised when Tirellian immediately lunged after it, almost elbowing him in the face. Awake, his paladin was so polite it hurt to watch; asleep, he was a grabby bastard. Over the years, Shan had been forced to share with him numerous times, and it was never a comfortable experience.

"Share," Shan said mildly.

Tirellian opened his eyes, and then obviously woke up. Sighing, he slumped back into his half of the bed, clutching his bit of blanket under his chin.

"You were up late," he said.

"Done now. Don't let me wake you up."

"Mmm." He went quiet, and Shan assumed he had gone back to sleep. Then Tirellian said, his voice soft and sleep-muzzy, "I'm not your husband."

"You're not my wife, either. So?"

"You said we were as good as married."

"It didn't mean anything," Shan said, sighing. Was it still bothering him? Nice to know the idea was so awful. "Mind you, if we'd been having sex all



these years, we'd probably qualify as hearth-wed by now. I could divorce you and claim half your wealth."

"I don't have any wealth."

"Oh, we'd have to stay married, then." He probably shouldn't be talking about this when it was this late, especially now Tirellian had gone tense behind him. He'd thought that about hearth-marriages before, but never been stupid enough to say it. The idea was one of the little things that he tucked away behind his heart, to comfort and torture himself. If Tirellian had ever shown anything other than awkward discomfort at the subject, Shan would have seduced him years ago. A hearth-marriage might not have the formal ceremonies and contracts of a proper wedding, but it was still legally valid. He could quite happily just ease into something lasting.

"My father would be turning in his grave," Tirellian said, sounding a little more awake. "I was formally betrothed when I was four, to the ten year old daughter of the Earl of Pyrgastarin."

"An older woman. You daredevil."

"My father bought his way out of the engagement three years later, once he was more influential than the earl. After that, it was General Atreusa's granddaughter, and then he broke that in favor of..."

"How *many*?" Shan demanded, caught between horror and hilarity.

"Four, in the end. After the twins married, though, I don't think anyone but an empress would have satisfied him."

"So are you still engaged?"

Tirellian sighed. "Thalassia and Choralis are dead. Iliariane was taken back to Ice by one of the generals after the invasion. She's his fourth wife now, from all I heard. I don't know about Kleomartis. The Earl of Pyrgastarin was out of favour, and they were all on their country estate when Ice marched on the capital. She may have survived."

It had only been meant as a light-hearted question, but now Shan regretted it. Shivering, he tried to think of something to say.

Tirellian, after a moment, relinquished a little more blanket. If it was an apology, Shan would take it, but he wasn't sure he was going to sleep well now. "I'm afraid of this country," he admitted softly.

"I wish you didn't have to be," Tirellian said sadly and then added gravely, "I'll look after you, Arashan."

"Piss off," Shan muttered. "I'll look after myself."

He was rewarded with a low chuckle, and then Tirellian drifted back to sleep.

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He woke with his face in Tirellian's armpit, locked there by Tirellian's arm around his head. Extracting himself, he forgot where he was until his feet hit the cold stone floor.

He tried to keep the resulting bout of hopping and swearing to himself, but he woke Tirellian anyway.

Shan started breakfast before Tirellian could offer, taking full advantage of standing next to the stove to get some heat into his bones. It had snowed again overnight, and the windowsill had another layer of fresh snow. Now, by daylight, he could see how the layers below had compacted into wrinkled layers of ice which refracted the bright sunshine into long shimmers across the slate floor.

Tirellian was turning the puzzle box over and over in his hands, frowning at it. "Is this a toy?"

"It's a gift," Shan said, biting back a grin, "if you can open it."

The *click-click* of sliding panels accompanied the rest of his cooking time and most of breakfast.

"Want me to tell you the solution?"

"No," Tirellian said, and went back to it.

"It only takes nine moves."

Tirellian glared at him. "Then I will work out what those moves are."

By the time they were packed and ready to go, Shan was feeling a little guilty. "There really isn't anything much inside."

Tirellian looked a little worried. "You can't take back a gift, Arashan."

"I never would," Shan said, and didn't even try to hide his amusement. "Good thing I *didn't* put your bootlaces in it, though."

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Tirellian's eyes narrowed. "A hearth marriage would require somebody to live with you for years without killing you, wouldn't it?"

"Good thing you love me, Sparky," Shan said lightly, "or I'd be facing an eternal bachelorhood."

"I will never understand your sense of humour," Tirellian muttered, but he put the puzzle box away in his pack very carefully and then swung up into the saddle. "The day awaits. Let us ride."

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## Chapter Six

They had been riding a couple of hours before the track down from the mine joined a real road. Shan sat up a little in his saddle, bracing himself to be challenged, but there was no one in sight. The snow was churned up, and there had clearly been horses passing this way lately.

“Relax,” Tirellian said. “Remember that you are under my protection.”

“And that matters because?”

“Because people fear me,” Tirellian said coolly. His seat in the saddle had changed too, less rigid and more casually arrogant. “Don’t you know who I am?”

“Captain Asterian of the Ice Guard, sir!” Shan said and snapped a mock salute.

“That could get you lashed if you do it to the wrong sort of officer. For your information, *I’m* the wrong sort of officer.”

“So I can be confident that you will protect me and afraid of you at the same time.”

“You’re learning, Arachanni. Good boy.”

“That,” Shan said, although the sneering tone had sent a shiver down his spine, “is a bit too much. Don’t get used to this, Sparks.”

“Don’t use nicknames.”

Shan nodded vigorously and made an effort to remember that too. How did Tirellian manage to keep track of all this without being afraid all the time?

When they came round the next corner and saw a party riding towards them, Shan did his best to conceal his curiosity, but he wanted to look at the ordinary people of the Lightning Realm. He wanted to see how years of conquest had changed them.

He had expected them to look at the uniform Tirellian wore with anger and was ready to face hostility. Instead, as soon as they saw him, they all fell to one side of the road, averting their eyes. They didn’t stop, but they rode past silently. It was as if they were riding on two different roads, rather than being so close Shan could smell the damp fur of their coats. Their shoulders were all tight, and he saw how their knuckles clenched on the reins.

They were looking at him, he realized, although they dared not raise their eyes to see Tirellian.

They were looking at him, and he could read the hatred in every gaze.

He hadn't thought through all the implications of pretending to cooperate with a fake Ice Guard, but now it hit him, so hard he went cold. To them, he looked like a collaborator.

He felt it more when they arrived in Kerammion, and Tirellian escorted him around the marketplace. Shan didn't know how to talk to merchants without smiling and joking. Here, people smiled at his jokes, but they were sick, bitter smiles, and their eyes were flat and cold, watching every breath Tirellian took behind his shoulder. He found it hard not to keep looking at the centre of the market square, where three bodies were hanging from a high gallows, snow heavy on their shoulders. All three had been branded across their faces. Shan didn't know why, but he could guess. He'd read all the reports on how the Ice Guard treated resistance fighters.

Once he'd seen that, he kept noticing more. He saw how hungry people looked and how little food there was on sale. He noticed the child with missing, frostbitten fingertips, and the people who moved through the crowd with cocky, brittle arrogance, wearing Ice's colours pinned to their sleeves or collars.

There was a beheaded statue over the frozen fountain, its head smashed into jagged fragments. The etched lightning up its arms told him it must have been of the Sprite of Lightning.

Everywhere in the crowd, he could hear coughing, the slow rattle of diseased lungs, and the wet hack of infection.

Tirellian paid a boy extra to pack up the chest he purchased and carry it to the coaching inn.

"You shouldn't flash your cash," Shan said. "You'll get robbed."

Tirellian sneered, and it was so unlike his normal expression, so empty of the subtle humour that usually lit his face, that Shan shuddered. "Who would dare? There would be retaliation."

The coach, when it came, was a rickety, rattly thing. By silent arrangement, the four other passengers left the padded part of its bench to him and Tirellian. Nobody spoke to them, or to each other.

After a few jouncing miles, Shan had had enough. Resting his cheek against his palm, he propped himself against the window and asked Tirellian, "Any reason I shouldn't sleep, Captain?"

"Do as you wish," Tirellian said coolly. "No one will trouble you."

That made the atmosphere in the coach even worse, and Shan closed his eyes and willed himself to sleep.

He wasn't quite tired enough, and he kept jolting back awake as the coach jerked along the icy roads, catching new glimpses of the countryside: cascades of flaking slate scattered across snowy slopes, little villages where the snow piled up behind the houses. The road was dug deep into the drifts, with sullied flat walls gleaming dully on either side of the coach.

After a while, it took on a nightmarish quality: the bluish-tone to the light, Tirellian's expressionless face, the silent loathing of the other passengers. When the coach finally drew up outside another inn, Shan stumbled out gladly.

This was a bigger town, on flatter ground, and the inn was a sizeable place. They were given a room without demur, and the porters carried their luggage up silently. As soon as the door closed behind them, Shan sank down on the bed.

"We overnight here," Tirellian said. "The coach leaves again two hours after dawn. We stop again in Daschion and then Rhodiosson the night before we reach the capital."

"Right."

"I'll order food," Tirellian said, and there was a little hesitancy in his voice now. "Arachanni?"

The false name stung, although he knew the necessity. "Don't."

Tirellian sat down beside him, the mattress dipping beneath his weight. After a moment, he put his hand on Shan's knee. He was warm, which seemed impossible in this cold country, and Shan leaned towards him slightly, craving comfort. To his surprise, Tirellian wrapped an arm around his shoulder, letting him lean.

Shan wanted to ask how he coped with this. How could he stand to be hated when he was really a hero? How could he keep coming back to let people believe the worst of him?

It wasn't a safe question, though, so he just turned his face against Tirellian's shoulder and pretended it was another bad night, and that this was a nightmare he had woken from now.

He clung to that idea all evening, after eating the meal Tirellian insisted on ordering (more gristle than meat, and the broth bulked out with pale and clammy root vegetables). Shan finished it all, and then set to work on his demonstration pieces, putting together parts with slow care. He didn't bother with painting the models, not when they had no time to let his work dry, but he carved them, making full use of the natural grain and variations in the wood.

Tirellian left him to it at first. He disappeared down to the bar, and did not come back until long after dark, smelling faintly of beer. He closed the shutters and then sat down on the bed, loosening his collar and watching Shan.

"It's artistry," he said at last.

"It's mechanics," Shan replied, coaxing the last cog into place. Reaching out to test it, he turned the handle on the side of the box, and on the top, five dancers began to turn and bob at different speeds, their wooden hands almost but not quite brushing. Satisfied with the workings, he set to fitting side panels over the machinery. Next would be simple costumes for the dancers, made from scraps of old dancing dresses that had come from a rag stall in Kerammion. Nothing he used was unaffordable for a village lad with a moderately wealthy sponsor, but that meant he had to display his skills in the craftsmanship.

He had let Tirellian move them both through the day, trusting in him to protect them both from this unknown country. Now, he was tense with the need to do something, even if it was a small thing. He was good at making and inventing, not spying and scheming, so he could at least pour himself into this. It was only a tiny part of the mask they were hiding behind on this cold journey, but it was something he could do that Tirellian could not. It pulled at him now, the need to prove that he could be a part of this, that he was a help in this mission rather than a mere piece to be moved across Tirellian's board.

"Art," Tirellian repeated, and after a moment Shan heard the slide and click of the puzzle box again.

He finished two more pieces that evening: another wind-up toy, this one full of soldiers fighting wolves with snapping jaws and a tilting maze set into a round tray, with tiny bells fitted between the layers that rang when the ball passed certain points in the maze.

In here, focussed almost entirely on his work, he was starting to forget where he was and what they were doing. This was what he had imagined his life would be, crafting things that gave joy. Even Tirellian's presence didn't quite shatter the illusion. Tirellian was an essential part of his life, even this quiet fantasy. Let Shan be just a toymaker, albeit one who took commissions from royalty, and Tirellian could be an ambassador or a royal guest. Shan couldn't imagine any alternate history where he and Tirellian wouldn't be friends.

Inside the room, seeing only the slow fall of snow outside, he could imagine that they were in the capital at home, in the kind of lodgings a respected craftsman might be able to afford in that cramped, steep little city.

It was only when Tirellian tensed at the sound of steps in the hall outside that Shan remembered where they were. He paused in his work, and pursed his lips in case he needed to whistle up a sudden wind.

But the footsteps passed, and Tirellian relaxed again. Shan was left tenser than before, though, second-guessing every sound. He had to remind himself that their job was to reach the capital safely, without doing anything which would make them noticeable. He wasn't hiding in here, no matter what it felt like. It wasn't cowardice which kept him at this table, merely necessary caution.

He wondered, though, what Tirellian had learned tonight, just by listening quietly in a place where no one looked for spies.

The click of Tirellian trying to solve the puzzle box slowed and eventually stopped. Shan glanced over to see if he had solved it.

He hadn't, merely put it down beside the bed. Now he was stretched out along the bed, his cheek propped on his hand. He was watching Shan, his eyes soft and tired.

"Given up?" Shan asked, smiling at him.

"I am merely stopping to think," Tirellian said. Then his mouth curved slightly, and he added, "until morning."



“Sure you don’t want me to tell you how to open it?”

“Utterly.”

Shan turned back to his work. It was several minutes later when Tirellian said softly, “You shouldn’t be a soldier.”

“We’re at war. I have no choice.”

“But you should be doing this,” Tirellian said, sounding almost angry. “You should be able to make beautiful things.”

Shan turned round to face him again, nonplussed. “They’re just toys.”

“Exactly.”

Shan looked at him, at the weariness in his eyes and the uncharacteristic slump of his body. “You’re tired. It’s making you sentimental. You should sleep.”

“So should you.”

“Soon,” Shan promised. “I just need to finish the costumes on this.”

Tirellian huffed irritably, but Shan heard him stripping off some of his clothes and settling into bed.

He was asleep by the time Shan slid the cover over the lamp where trapped lightning danced brightly along a coil of wire. Shan toed his own shoes off and stripped down to his shirt and drawers, shivering a little. He was too cold to think about it as he slid into bed beside Tirellian. It wasn’t until he reached up to close the lamp above the bed and then huddle against his warmth that it hit him how intimate this was. If they were lovers, they would sleep like this, curling against each other to share warmth.

Tirellian stirred slightly, his breath sighing warmly against Shan’s neck. Shan wasn’t quite tired enough to slump straight into sleep, and he wasn’t shaking from the aftereffects of nightmares, either. This time, breathing in the familiar scent of Tirellian’s body and feeling the warm brush of his skin where their legs brushed, he couldn’t stop himself from imagining what it would be like to be Tirellian’s lover.

How many kisses would it take before Tirellian’s stern posture softened? Would his snow-pale body flush as Shan pressed against him? Would he gasp or cry out when Shan slid down the bed to suck his cock? Would he be

controlling, shoving Shan down to fuck him hard, or would he surrender everything?

Shan was getting hard, warm shudders sliding through him, and he had to stop. He couldn't do this while Tirellian slept obliviously beside him. It was crass, and he knew Tirellian well enough to be sure he would find it invasive and humiliating. That meant that Shan couldn't reach down and touch himself, not now. He had to simply clench his fists in the blanket and lie still, hoping Tirellian would not wake until his lust had subsided.

He eventually slid into sleep like that, arousal still washing through him, and he dreamed of sex, of the hot press of body against body, sweat-slick skin sliding against skin, of how it felt to move inside someone, feeling them shudder and groan beneath him, and in his dreams he fisted his hands in long black hair and fucked Tirellian until the dream faded and restarted, a tissue of forbidden, impossible moments.

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When he woke the next morning, he had turned onto his front, and Tirellian was slumped across his back, chewing the shirt over Shan's shoulder. By the extent of the damp patch on Shan's shirt, he had obviously been drooling for some time.

Was he a paladin or a puppy?

Shan committed that useful taunt to memory for when they got home, wriggling round enough that he could breathe. Tirellian snorted indignantly in his sleep and clutched him tight again the moment they were settled, his arms locking across Shan's back. It wasn't personal, Shan knew. Over the years, he had watched Tirellian sleep countless times, and he always clung to something, a blanket or a pillow or the person nearest to him. It was, however, close enough to Shan's fantasies that he curled a little closer, letting his eyes fall shut again, and allowed himself to sink back into dreams.

When he woke properly, Tirellian was gone. Shan stumbled out of bed, swearing at the cold, and pulled his outer clothes back on. He noticed that the toys on the table weren't in quite the same alignment as they had been and chuckled. Even fierce paladins couldn't resist turning a lever when no one was watching.

He packed his work back into the chest carefully, and went out to look for Tirellian.

He was in the inn yard, his arms folded as he watched the movement of people along the street outside. In the dull daylight, Shan could see that the town had a bleak prettiness, sloping roofs white with snow and black, iron streetlamps dancing with flickering lightning. The houses were all decorated with metal railings and carved shutters, painted with cheerful patterns: lightning bolts, sunbursts, flowers, girls dancing in flaring skirts. The paint was peeling and faded, though, and long icicles reached down from every roof edge and gutter. In places, the edges of the roofs were ragged, and Shan wondered how many had collapsed below a weight of snow they had not been designed to carry.

“Shall I send the boy up for the chest?” Tirellian asked.

“It’s all packed,” Shan said. “And good morning to you, too. Any chance of breakfast?”

“I would avoid it, if I were you. It would merely be the leftovers from last night’s dinner, freshly fried.”

Shan’s stomach lurched a little. “At least they have oil.”

“Yes,” Tirellian said slowly. “Although—”

“No more,” Shan said hurriedly. He wasn’t a fussy eater, not after years in the army, but he had also learned to listen to veterans’ advice when it came to food.

Tirellian flicked a tiny smile his way and then went off to sort out their baggage, leaving Shan alone. It was a strange feeling, unnerving and exhilarating, to stand here and breathe in the air of another country, watching people who seemed both perfectly ordinary and entirely strange to him. He wanted to talk to them, to find out how they lived and what they loved, to listen to their stories and become part of them.

It wasn’t a time for honest travellers, though, so he just stood and watched. Eventually Tirellian came back, carrying two steaming mugs. Shan took one, nodding thanks, and clutched it carefully, only now realizing how cold his hands were.

It was some kind of tisane, faintly sweet, and it warmed him nicely. Even after he was done, he kept the mug in his hands, letting the warmth sink into his fingers. Tirellian drank more slowly, his eyes distant. Then he said, so quietly that no one else could have heard them, “I remember stopping here once, as a

boy. There are fields and orchards, or there were, outside the town, and the factories here made jam and bread and sweets. I remember that the streets smelt warm and sweet. There was a girl in the kitchen who gave us little cherry pies shaped like stars while we were waiting for the horses to be changed. Ailerra got jam all down her skirt, and Arellia and I had to stand in front of her so that father wouldn't notice."

Shan looked at the grey and white landscape again and reached out to touch Tirellian's exposed wrist with his warm fingers. Tirellian shuddered a little and turned his head to smile at Shan, a little of the sadness fading from his eyes.

Then the coachman came out of the inn, the passengers began to move forwards, and everything else was put aside in the bustle of loading up. Soon they were on their way again, heading along a steadily busier road towards the city of Daschion.

The inn in Daschion was full to bursting with a contingent of real Ice Guard troops stopping overnight on their way to the southern border. They were all Fire soldiers, from the Ash Mountains that lay between the Court of Lightning and the delta, and Shan peeped at them with fascination as Tirellian argued with the innkeeper. They were handsome, men and women alike, with dark complexions and long, curling, black hair. Most of them wore little pieces of jasper and carnelian, as piercings in their ears or lips or dangling from pendants, and tiny flames danced within the rock. They were all dressed in a pared-down version of the uniform Tirellian wore, sleeveless black leather vests and leggings, thick-soled sandals that laced up their legs, and heavy belts that jangled with multiple weapons.

Shan had heard stories about the Court of Fire all his life, how they were the greatest metalworkers in the seven courts, and how their warrior caste were not just fighters but acrobats, fire dancers who did not feel the cold.

For a moment, looking at all those lithe, leather-clad bodies, that was a very interesting thought indeed. Just how flexible was the average soldier, and how willing would they be to provide him with data for comparison by, say, stretching all over his naked body and...

One of the women caught him looking and winked at him cheerfully, nudging her friend. They all glanced his way on a wave of laughter, and Shan looked away hurriedly. There was trouble he didn't need. How did people who burned so brightly go about serving Ice?

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Tirellian appeared at his shoulder, looking distant and forbidding again. “They can’t even put us up in the stables, but there’s one bed left in the dormitory in the attic. I don’t like it, but the next nearest accommodation is a long walk away. It’s late, and this city isn’t safe after dark.”

“We can take turns to sleep,” Shan offered.

“We may need to,” Tirellian said grimly.

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## Chapter Seven

The dormitory was a dim and draughty space. The bed they had managed to claim was just a narrow pallet on the floor, one of forty. The other men in the room watched them make their way across the floor with bitter, suspicious eyes.

It didn't feel safe. Fear of reprisals might stop anyone from attacking them in the open, but here where they were outnumbered and vulnerable, things could be different. Settling down at the end of the bed, Shan eyed their escape routes carefully. They were beside a wall, which was both a blessing and a potential hindrance, and there was a window three pallets away.

Many men were already sleeping, but others had clearly come up here to get away from the troops in the main inn. They sat in small groups, talking quietly, their shoulders hunched and their voices soft.

"You sleep first," Tirellian said softly.

"Not well, I suspect," Shan said. He managed to lie down, though, very aware of Tirellian sitting beside him. He did detach his dagger from its place on his belt and grip the hilt in his hand. If someone came at them, he would be able to lash out dangerously.

"You don't need that," Tirellian murmured.

"It'll help me sleep."

It didn't, though. Instead, he just lay there, eyes closed, and listened to the sounds around him. Tirellian's breathing was steady above him, but the murmured conversations were hard to understand. He could speak and understand the dialect well enough, but he had to concentrate to do it. Like this, every word sounded alien, and he was very aware that he was far from home.

Tirellian's hand fell warmly on his shoulder. Shan breathed in and, eventually, slept.

He dreamed of the trenches again, of earth rising up and spilling down, dry grit covering his arms and mouth as lightning crackled. He came awake whimpering, and it only helped a little to hear Tirellian speaking, his voice soft, urgent and incomprehensible.

Someone else was there, voice aggressive and challenging, and Shan took in a sharp breath and did his best to listen.

“Your opinion is not needed,” Tirellian was saying, in dialect.

“What the fuck are you doing to him, traitor?”

Shan dragged himself upright, using Tirellian's knees, and turned to look at the stranger. He was still too shaken to tell whether this man wanted to hurt or help him, but he managed to spit the right language out of his mouth. “I am awake. I know where I am.”

“Daschion,” Tirellian said warningly.

“Daschion,” Shan agreed. “Not on the line. You are with me, and I am safe.” Then he looked at the stranger and made himself smile, a stiff teeth-baring grimace. “Thank you for your concern, but I am in no danger. It was only a memory.”

He could see the man's face now, lit by a faint shimmer of lightning. He was an older man, and there was genuine concern in his eyes as well as mistrust.

“Thank you,” Shan said again, and made it more natural now. The cover story they had worked on was coming back to him now, and this was a moment to display it, if ever there was one. He turned to Tirellian and said, “Sir, I don't think I'll sleep again. You rest.”

Tirellian continued to glare at the stranger. Then he nodded shortly and lay down, resting his cheek on Shan's thigh.

The stranger was still lingering, watching them with a note of confusion. Shan wanted him gone, and he wanted someone to look at them as if they weren't scum, so he wove a lot of truth into a small lie and said, “Whatever you think of him, he made sure I got home unbroken. Not every officer would.”

“You have a name, soldier?”

“Arachanni,” Shan said flatly. “You?”

“Geronthor.”

“Like the eagle-bearer in the old poem,” Tirellian said quietly. “I had a pet bird, as a child, that I called Aeta.”

Shan, who knew perfectly well that Tirellian had never been allowed pets, had to hold his face still at that extraordinary statement. It took him a moment to notice the same careful non-expression on Geronthor's face.

"I will always remember," Geronthor said, "the scene where the eagle flew too close to the sun."

"Burn," Tirellian said, "oh, wings of fire, for the man who knew me is gone, gone to dust and I must become ash before we meet again."

Geronthor nodded slowly and then said, his voice perfectly polite, "I hope your nerves do not trouble you further, Arachanni. Goodnight."

He disappeared back into the murk of the dark room, and Shan's eyebrows rose. Tirellian sat up a little and breathed into his ear, so softly Shan could barely hear him, "I believe we just made contact with the local resistance. Our sleep will be untroubled now."

Shan rolled his eyes and murmured, "Lucky for you. Go to sleep."

The next morning, while they were waiting for the carriage, Geronthor appeared beside them again. He was dressed in rough plain clothes, ready for a day's work. He leaned on the wall, ostensibly waiting for the line of soldiers to march out of the inn yard, and said very softly, "Where do you fly?"

"Heartward," Tirellian said, angling his head so it looked like he was talking to Shan. "News of the road?"

"Extra patrols in readiness for the patronage fair. Heard they even have some real Ice Knights out there."

"Troubling, if true," Tirellian said, and his frown did not fade even after Geronthor left and the coach drew in.

There were less people on the coach today, only three others, and there was space for Shan to stretch his legs out. He was beginning to adjust to the travel, and he took a little more interest in their surroundings today. The mountains were far behind them now, and they were in flat country. The towns were closer together, and buildings clustered along the roads in between. He could see the big square blocks of manufactories from miles away, and spearlike lightning towers rose in clusters from the plain. He didn't have the affinity to work with lightning, but he had heard that its harvested power could be turned to all manner of fascinating ends. If any genius ever invented a way to harness it for ordinary artificers to use, he would be one of the first to start experimenting.

"You're drooling," Tirellian commented. He had acquired an official newspaper that morning and was reading it with a mildly sceptical air.



Shan was supposed to be an impoverished artificer, so he had no qualms about answering. "Of course I am. Have you any idea what I could make if I had a proper manufactory?"

"I dread to think," Tirellian said and retreated behind his newspaper again.

Shan pressed his nose back to the window and went back to daydreaming. If he had a reliable power source and the manufacturing base to make proper engine parts, he could build more than just gliding wings. Powered flight, in heavier than air machines, could change the whole course of the war. Beyond that, it would be *glorious*.

They drew nearer and nearer the lightning farm, until the towers cast long shadows over the snowy fields on either side of the road. Then the coach stopped.

They sat there for a while, not moving. At last Tirellian folded his newspaper and asked mildly, "Should I speak to the driver?"

"What, don't you know about this?" One of the other passengers said bitterly. "Your lot came up with the rule."

"Enlighten me."

"No one passes within a mile of a lightning farm without having their papers checked." The man grimaced. "Between the army and the resistance calling lightning down on things, it's getting impossible to make an honest living."

"Is it?" Tirellian said with such excruciating politeness that the man went quiet again.

Shan was trying not to look worried. They had fake papers, but were they convincing enough for a proper examination? Tirellian looked unworried, so he tried to keep the same level of calm, and just asked hopefully, "Do you think they'll let us near enough to see the mechanisms?"

"No," Tirellian said. "Don't try to get a closer look, please."

Shan was about to retort when the driver knocked on the door and told them they had to line up with their papers ready. At first it was a relief to scramble out and stretch his legs a little.

Then the air began to grow even colder. His breath went from merely steaming to a cloud, and his fingers began to hurt, not merely a sting of cold air

but a bone-deep ache that felt like all the blood in his veins was growing cold and slow. He began to shudder, cold rolling through him with slow malice.

“Ice Knight!” Tirellian breathed, and he and all their fellow passengers blanched.

Shan looked up at the group of soldiers approaching them. One of them walked apart from the others, who flanked him at a distance. Even from here, Shan could feel the cold rolling off the lone soldier.

He wore the black uniform of the Ice Guard, but his colouring was different from anything Shan had seen before, sallow-skinned with a blue sheen to his black hair. As he got closer Shan saw the colour of his eyes, a too-bright shade of verdigris, empty of all feeling. By then, they were all shivering, teeth chattering, and shoulders jerking.

The Ice Knight pointed to the coach and said, “Search the luggage first. Travellers, have your papers in hand.”

His voice sent shudders down Shan’s spine, like nails on slate or the wind keening along icy windows.

They had to wait until the soldiers went through all the luggage, opening every case and rifling through the contents. They seemed particularly interested by Shan’s toys and brought them over for the Ice Knight to examine. He did not seem in the least amused by them, although he turned the handles with his fingertips. Watching him, Shan saw that his fingers were webbed. At last, he looked up and asked, “Which of you is the artificer?”

Shan stepped forwards, aware of Tirellian going still behind him. “I am, sir.”

“These are your designs?”

“Yes, sir.” The knight was the most terrifying thing he had ever seen, cold in a way that went far beyond mere winter. Shan had to remind himself that he was the best artificer in the seven courts and had supped with kings. He had no reason to feel small and afraid.

“You are not in uniform. You do not work for the army?”

“No, sir. I am travelling to the capital to seek a patron.”

“You have funds for the journey?”

“He has a sponsor,” Tirellian said, stepping forwards. He didn’t touch Shan, but he was close enough that Shan could feel his body heat.

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“You, Captain...?”

“Asterian, of the Forty-Third. And yes, sir. His talents were being wasted as a fisherman.”

“I commend your investment. Bypass the fair. You should both report directly to General Haimursu in Kerauton. You should arrive in two days, correct?”

“Barring accidents,” Tirellian said.

“I shall inform him of your existence. He will be expecting you. If you know of any other neglected artificers, Captain Asterian, you should arrange to have them transported to the capital immediately. Now, papers.”

It was not until he tried to step forwards to present his papers that Shan realized that the ground beneath his feet had changed. The previously soft top of the snow had become ice, slick and hard. He slid, and barely recovered. Once his papers had been examined and returned to him, he retreated gingerly, scanning the ground.

An ever-widening circle of ice was still spreading outward from the Ice Knight's feet.

It was a relief to them all when they were finally allowed to return to the carriage. By then, Shan felt so sick and drained he could barely shiver. Back in the coach, he didn't even have the energy to look out the window. Instead, he leaned against Tirellian. Once they were well away from the checkpoint, he managed to ask, “What *was* that?”

“A knight of the Ice Court,” Tirellian replied. His gaze flickered upward, and Shan realized that the lightning lamps fitted to the ceiling of the coach had gone out. Tirellian reached towards them, lightning shimmering from his fingertips to fill the glass lamp cases and light the interior of the coach again. The other passengers all looked relieved, but it didn't help Shan much, and there was no way he could call a wind to comfort himself, not without sacrificing the whole mission.

“I feel so cold,” he said, aware it sounded pathetic.

“You're not the only one,” the woman opposite him said. The presence of a real Ice Knight seemed to have pushed aside most of their hostility, and she smiled at him weakly. Tirellian probably didn't seem all that hateful in comparison.

"Feels like I've got ice in my veins," Shan told her, pressing his hands into his armpits more tightly. "Never felt anything like that before."

"I have," the man who had grumbled before said abruptly. "There was one of them stationed up in Statishon last winter, after the resistance started hitting supply trains up there."

Shan didn't meet Tirellian's eyes. They'd lost three of the Shadowflight and a whole resistance cell in Statishon, and no explanation had ever reached them of why. Now they knew.

"What you feel," Tirellian said slowly, "is their frozen hearts."

"What does that mean?" Shan said.

"You know the stories of the blight."

"Lo," the woman said, "in the fourth century after the Pact, a blight came upon the Court of Water, and they turned their backs upon the sea, their home, and drew up their ships upon the sand, and ever after became not water, but ice." She caught the looks everyone was sending her and said, with a note of defiance, "That's how my gran told it, and she was alive at the time."

"Blight is an impolitic term, perhaps," Tirellian observed, a note of warning in his voice. "Nonetheless, the story is correct in essence. Something terrible happened to the Court of Water. The marshes and the rivers are all long lost below the ice. I have heard that the only humans who survive in the delta are those who descend directly from the Undine, and the water in their souls has become ice. What you feel when they draw near is that coldness within them, reaching out to spread that ice further. Ice follows them, freezes the ground below their feet and washes over anything they touch too long. The oldest of them even wear it, until it closes in too close around them and traps them within the heart of their own power."

"But lightning can't freeze," Shan said quietly. "Your souls are safe."

Shan knew the rest of this story. With their land frozen, the surviving Ice Knights had been starving, until they began to march on other courts.

"You must be used to it, though," the man said to Tirellian, a little belligerently, "working with them as you do."

"They work through agents, for the most part," Tirellian said. "I have rarely seen a Knight face-to-face. They cannot live among ordinary men without freezing them to death."

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“So our souls are safe, but our extremities aren’t,” the man quipped, laughing a little nervously.

“I have seen an Ice Knight freeze the fingers from a woman’s hand by touching her,” Tirellian said, picking his newspaper up again. “I would not jest about them, if I were you.”

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## Chapter Eight

By the time they disembarked in Rhodiosson, Shan had managed to coax their fellow passengers into actual conversation. He had been careful with his own backstory, and Tirellian's silent presence had stopped them from pressing him, but he felt like he knew them a little, and it buoyed his spirits. He needed people around him, and just hearing about their lives and families had energized him again. He suspected he might regret it in future, when he started putting faces to the nameless dead in the Shadowflight's reports, but he would deal with that day when it came. When the others disappeared into town, he was sorry to see them go.

They got a room without any problems at this inn, and it was a good one, tucked over the kitchens with a roaring fire of its own. For the first time since they had crossed the channel, Shan was actually looking forwards to getting undressed.

"The innkeeper said they could bring bathwater up," Tirellian informed him. He looked tired and drained.

A bath sounded tempting, but it wasn't what Shan needed most. "What's the risk of going down to the taproom for a meal? I could do with some company."

"More people?" Tirellian asked with a shudder. "Well, you managed well in the coach today. Drink cautiously and be careful not to relax too much, and you should be safe."

"I wasn't planning to drink at all."

"Teetotalism is just as suspicious," Tirellian said. "Maybe I should come with you."

"Stay here and have your bath," Shan told him. "I'll be fine."

It was a sign of how tired Tirellian was that he didn't argue any further. Shan understood. The encounter with the Ice Knight had left him feeling more exhausted than three days under heavy fire. He needed people to restore him. Tirellian needed quiet.

Downstairs, the taproom was busy, murmurous with conversation. Shan pressed his thumb against his purse and made his way through the crowd to the bar, listening to hear what the locals were ordering (a trick that Karel had taught him years ago, not for subterfuge, but to avoid crap beer).

Drink ordered, he asked about food.

“Certainly, sir, but you’ll be troubled to find a table,” the barmaid said. “There’s the parlour for guests, but we’ve got foreign folks in there already, and you might not be wanting to—”

“What kind of foreign?” Shan asked, his stomach clenching at the thought of more Ice Knights.

She sniffed. “Fire. Strutting around half-naked.”

“Ah, but is it a pretty kind of half-naked?” Shan asked, winking at her. “Or the type to put me off my appetite?”

She laughed at that. “No trial to the eye, to be fair. If you’re willing to sit with outlanders, that is.”

“For a seat and a comfortable meal, I’ll sit with anyone,” Shan said lightly, but he was more interested than he let her see. He’d never met anyone from Fire, and the image of those confident, hearty soldiers from the night before returned to him. He was curious.

“Curiosity,” his father had told him once, on one of the many occasions he had been called upon to extract his small son from the artificers’ workshop, “is only a virtue if well-directed.”

Well, this was an *interesting* direction, at least.

The parlour was only a small room, with one big round table and seats along the walls. A man and a woman were sitting there, partway through their meal, and they looked up as Shan came in, falling silent.

They were both around his age, with a hint of life well-lived to their faces. They were good-looking too, in the same warm, dark way as yesterday’s soldiers. Was everyone in the Court of Fire beautiful, or was it just a requirement for their soldiers?

“Sorry to disturb you,” Shan said. “I’m staying upstairs, and there’s not a table to be had in the bar.”

“Join us, do,” the woman said. “More the merrier.” She had a soft, lilting accent, with slow vowels.

“Thank you,” Shan said and slid in beside them. “Is the food good?”

“Surprisingly so, for a roadside inn,” the man said.

"We were rather impressed by how warm the rooms were too," Shan commented and eyed their bare arms. "Though I doubt that's a factor for you."

"Not so much, no," the man agreed with a chuckle. "Though I do miss the floors at home. In Etnarra, we build straight onto the rocks, where the heat rises through them."

"Etnarra," Shan said, trying to remember his geography. "That's to the far east, right?"

"Almost snug with the border. You're well-informed."

"Oh, I always wanted to travel," Shan said lightly.

"Man after our own hearts," the woman said. "Where are you from? I don't recognize your accent."

Damn. "I'm a west coast boy. You know Zephyrport?"

"Been there once," the man said. "Small place."

"And I'm not even from Zeph'port itself. As you go up the coast, there are coves—"

"And each one has its own village, and beware the man who mistakes one for another!" the man said, laughing. "You *are* far from home, my friend. What in the world brings you inland?"

"Looking for work which doesn't involve freezing my hands off on a fishing boat."

"We're trade factors," the woman said, "setting up supply chains for the garrisons around the capital. I'm Sofia, and my brother here is Markus."

"Arachanni."

They glanced at each other, so fast he wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't already been on edge. Then his food arrived, and they went back to the inconsequential chatter of chance-met travellers. Shan was very careful now, and he was relieved when he looked up to see Tirellian standing just the other side of the doorway into the taproom, leaning against the bar casually enough that it could have been coincidence.

Markus had been taking the lead in the conversation as they finished the meal, leaning forwards to smile at Shan. His flirting wasn't subtle, and Shan returned it with a distant amusement. It was a fun game to play, but he had no intention of being charmed into letting any secrets slip. These two might seem



friendly, but they were in the service of an enemy army, and he wasn't going to forget it.

When their food was cleared away, Markus ordered them all another drink. Then he leaned back and asked, "So what's your trade, friend Arachanni? No fishing to be done inland."

"And that's reason enough to move," Shan said, chuckling. "No, I have talented hands."

He managed to say it with a straight face, but Markus spluttered a little over his drink and Sofia rolled her eyes. When Markus had recovered his breath, he leaned forwards, his eyes hot and intent, and murmured, "Oh, really?"

Well, that was nice. Shan wasn't going to follow through, but there was no harm in a bit of mischievous flirting. "I do like to get my hands on a nice bit of wood." Then he grinned, deliberately making it a little mean. "And then I carve little chunks out of it. I make toys, and there's not enough cash to spare for that to be a profitable trade along the coast."

"You're an artificer?" Markus said, and the flirtatious note had gone from his voice. Again, he and Sofia exchanged a quick look.

"That's a grand title for what I do," Shan said lightly. "I make puppets and spinning tops, not war machines."

"Don't do yourself down," Markus murmured, but his flirtation had become mechanical now. Then he pulled himself together and leaned forwards again, the warmth back in his voice, "So, Arachanni, do you have a sponsor?"

"Yes," Tirellian said coldly, "he does." Then he was there at Shan's back, his hands sliding down over Shan's shoulders in a way that pushed the meaning of "sponsor" to its absolute limit. His hair, still damp from his bath, swung forwards to brush Shan's cheek like a cold kiss, and the air crackled a little around him, as if a storm was about to break.

"So I see," Markus said.

Shan flushed, part with embarrassment and part with surprise.

"If you have eaten, Arachanni," Tirellian said, and even his voice was softer than usual, "we should return to our room. We leave early tomorrow."

"Er," Shan said, "yes, of course. Ah, it was nice to meet you both. Safe journey." Tirellian was pressed against his back, a line of warmth that was far more appealing than Markus' bared muscles.

“Why, the pleasure was all ours,” Sofia said, shooting an amused look at her brother. “Good luck on the road.”

“Same to you,” Shan said, and let Tirellian pull him out of his chair. “Good night.”

Tirellian steered him up through the inn with a hand on his back and a glare which sent people scuttling out of their way. It was quite flattering, or would have been if it hadn't all been part of an act, and Shan let himself enjoy it.

As soon as they were back in their room, he pulled away, remarking, “I didn't think you had it in you, Sparks—”

“Don't use nicknames!”

“Sorry. There was something a little off about those two. I don't think they were just setting up supply chains, whatever they claimed.”

“You were flirting with him.”

“I flirt with everybody,” Shan pointed out, laughing as he toed his shoes off. He tossed his jacket down on the back of the chair and turned to grin at Tirellian. “I even flirt with you, and that's a long road to nowhere. It's not like I...”

He trailed off, realizing with a sudden shock that Tirellian looked genuinely upset.

“You shouldn't,” Tirellian bit off. His fists were clenched against his sides, and his back and shoulders were so stiff Shan could have used them as a ruler.

“Flirt with you or flirt with anyone?”

Tirellian didn't answer, but Shan had caught his tension. His own body was tightening, his breath coming fast, because this couldn't possibly be what it looked like.

“Or is it just that you don't want me to flirt with anyone else?”

Tirellian looked away. He swallowed hard and then said, his voice stiff, “Certain behaviours are inherently risky in a situation such as—”

“Tirellian,” Shan said softly and went forwards towards him. It felt like he had been waiting for this since the beginning of time, and he was both terrified and exultant. “Look at me.”

“Don't use my name.”

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“Don’t change the subject.”

“You need to stay safe.”

“I have you to protect me.” Shan reached out and laid his hand along Tirellian’s jaw. “Look at me.”

Tirellian turned his head stiffly, and Shan saw the truth in his eyes. Tirellian was finally looking at him as if he was the best and most terrifying thing in the world.

Shan kissed him.

It was a very simple kiss, just the lightest touch of lips to lips, but Tirellian startled in his arms as if he’d been stung. His mouth opened uncertainly under Shan’s, and then he pulled back, his whole body clenching tight.

He didn’t go far, though, just back far enough that Shan could see the panic in his eyes.

“Easy,” Shan said, and ran his hand through Tirellian’s hair to stroke his shoulder. “It’s just me.”

“Exactly,” Tirellian retorted, and his voice was actually shaking. Seven save them, but nobody had reacted to Shan like this since he was a teenager, and that had probably been more about the fact that they were teenagers rather than anything else.

Shan wasn’t feeling much less shaken himself, but Tirellian was almost frightening him. Gently, he said, “May I kiss you again?”

Tirellian closed his eyes, lashes sweeping across his cheeks, and nodded sharply.

Shan kissed him as gently as he knew how, spreading his hand across the back of Tirellian’s neck and keeping his lips as feather-light as he could. Tirellian still shook against him and then, suddenly and gracelessly, kissed him back.

By the time their lips parted again, Shan had a pretty good suspicion of why he felt like a teenager again. It was absurd, and heartbreaking if he was right, but he had to know, before he pushed this any further.

“Don’t be angry, if I’m wrong,” he said, “but have you ever been kissed before?”

Tirellian opened his eyes, looking indignant. “Of course!”

Shan waited, because he knew that tone. It was exactly the same one Tirellian used when faced with any new challenge.

Tirellian closed his eyes again and admitted softly, "A stable boy when I was sixteen. My father caught us and fired him the next day. My fencing master, when I was twenty... He kissed me goodbye, the night before I left to take Arellia across the channel to her wedding."

"What happened to him?"

"He was killed defending Aillera."

"I'm sorry," Shan said, rubbing circles on Tirellian's shoulders. "I'm so sorry."

"He was a good man. I liked him."

"I'm sure he was a very good man, then." Shan cleared his throat and asked delicately, "Since you came to our court?"

Tirellian leaned forwards, hiding his face against Shan's neck. Then he shook his head quickly.

"Why not?" Shan demanded. He knew that Tirellian didn't make friends easily, but surely he couldn't be that fussy.

Tirellian sighed, the most forlorn sound Shan had ever heard from him, and said very quietly, "Nobody likes me."

"Of course they do," Shan protested, and then wondered. He'd heard the jokes about Tirellian, about the knight so perfect he had dispensed with all human feelings. No one he knew actively disliked Tirellian, but he wasn't sure any of them got to see his human side.

"I am respected," Tirellian said. "In places, feared. Not liked."

"I like you."

Tirellian looked up then and smiled at him, a little uncertainly. "Yes. Yes, you do."

"With the obvious exception of my aged parents, there is no one in the world who matters to me more than you."

Tirellian stared at him, his eyes widening. Then he shook his head a little, doubt shadowing his eyes.

"No," Shan said. "Don't do that. It's true."

“You’re being kind.”

“I’m being honest.”

“You’ve had other lovers.”

“Because it relieves the time,” Shan said with a shrug. “I never thought you’d look my way. You didn’t seem interested.”

Tirellian’s frown deepened. “You never asked.”

“Didn’t want to scare you off. I like being your friend.” Shan leaned forwards and kissed him again, before he could take that the wrong way. “I would rather be your best friend than the ex-lover you cannot stand, but I would also rather be your lover than your friend. Does that clarify things?”

“Not in the least,” Tirellian complained, but he was relaxing a little.

“If you’re not interested, tell me,” Shan said. “I will always be your friend.”

Tirellian considered that. Then he wet his lips and leaned forwards, pressing his mouth to Shan’s. It was an awkward kiss, but its intention was clear.

“Thank fuck for that,” Shan breathed when they parted, and Tirellian smiled, rolling his eyes a little.

“So crude.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” Shan promised, leering with relief.

Tirellian smiled again, but he was blushing, a flush of pink across those pale cheeks. Well, that was the next awkward question, wasn’t it? A mere two kisses implied the answer, but...

“Anything more than kisses?” Shan asked softly. “Even with girls.”

Tirellian’s expression went a little more distant. “My father considered bastards to be even worse than catamites.”

“Lovely,” Shan said. “So, you’ve not...”

“Hilarion, my tutor... we had that one night.” Tirellian ducked his head again, and Shan suddenly wondered what would have happened if he’d started reading every bit of distance or discomfort as shyness years ago. He should have done. He knew Queen Arellia was shy: you only had to speak to her in person to recognize it. Why hadn’t he applied that knowledge to her brother?

“I am aware that you are looking for more experience in a—” Tirellian began, his voice stiff.

Shan pulled his face up and cut him off with a kiss. Then he said, "What I've been looking for in a lover, for the last ten years, is the ability to distract me from you."

He'd never seen Tirellian come so close to gawping. "Ten years?"

"Yes."

"You are just saying this to—"

"How is it that you are the only person in the court who doesn't know this? My engineers have a book open on us."

"That we'll become lovers?" Tirellian demanded, looking scandalized.

Shan snorted. "No. The odds are currently six-to-one in favour of us having been secretly married for the last three years."

"What?" Tirellian said blankly. "Married?"

"Married," Shan said, laughing a little at his expression. "Oh, your face." He dropped a kiss on the end of Tirellian's nose, which just made him look more bewildered, and carried on, "Everyone knows what a fool I am for you. My mother always includes extra cakes in her food packages just for you. Your brother-in-law invites me to family meals, which I could do without, to be honest, because I find his company nerve-racking. Even complete strangers ask me about you. The only person in the whole court who doesn't know that I'm stupidly in love with you is *you*."

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## Chapter Nine

Then he realized what he'd said and swallowed hard, waiting for Tirellian's reaction.

It came slowly, a widening of Tirellian's eyes, his face twisting in a way that suggested first pain and then astonishment, and then a slow shudder as he released his breath and his mouth curled up in joy.

And then, so suddenly he didn't see it coming, Shan found himself tackled to the bed. Pressed down under Tirellian's long body, he just had time to see how bright his friend's—his lover's—eyes were before Tirellian was kissing him eagerly. Shan rose up into it gladly, wrapping his arms around Tirellian.

By the time the kiss gentled, they were both breathless. Shan's heart was racing, and his whole body was alert to Tirellian's presence. He was so hard it was getting in the way of thinking clearly. He needed more than fully clothed kisses, and he had to bite his lip to hold onto his restraint. Rather than tear both their clothes off, he lifted his hand to slip under Tirellian's hair, tracing a line down the side of his throat.

Tirellian shuddered. Ten years since someone last touched him with longing, and even then it had only been brief. No wonder he clung to Shan in his sleep. How had he coped? How overwhelmed must he be now?

Shan forced himself to stay tender rather than ravenous, trailing kisses across Tirellian's jaw and down his neck.

"I'm not going to break if you touch me," Tirellian said.

"I might," Shan admitted and dropped his head back so he could see Tirellian's face. This was what he had dreamed of for so long: his Tirellian with flushed cheeks and swollen lips, his blue eyes wide and pleased.

He panicked for a moment there. What if this was a dream? "Pinch me?"

"Really?" Tirellian asked, a note of distaste in his voice.

"No, no, just tell me I'm awake."

"You are awake," Tirellian said and leaned forwards to kiss him again. The kiss felt real, in the way only kisses could, damp and rough-lipped, catching a little on the corner of Shan's smile. Not a dream, then.

Then Tirellian sat back and peeled his shirt over his head.

“What are you doing?” Shan squeaked.

“I am certain you have seen a man undress before,” Tirellian said from behind his shirt, his tone entirely matter-of-fact. He emerged, tossing it aside, and looked down at Shan with a faint smirk. “I’m also certain you have seen me without my shirt more than once.”

“The context was different,” Shan managed, locking his hands flat against the mattress so he didn’t just reach out and grab. Tirellian, kneeling over his hips, was breathtaking. Out of his clothes, he no longer looked like a perfect monochrome doll. He had a soldier’s body, muscled and scarred, and every mark and flush showed starkly on his pale skin. His hair tumbled loosely over his shoulders, the ends brushing raggedly against his nipples, which were flushed and peaked.

Shan wanted to put other marks on him, with his lips and teeth and nails, and the thought was shaming and arousing in equal measure because Tirellian, his beautiful paladin, was so close to being a virgin that Shan couldn’t even imagine all the things he had never felt. Ten years since someone had run their hands up that broad chest and maybe closed their teeth gently around those pink nipples. Had that one lover ever traced his tongue down that thin dark line of hair that led down Tirellian’s belly? Had he ever gently pushed the flaps of his breeches and drawers aside to pull his cock out and swallow it down? Perhaps he had done little more than kiss Tirellian’s pale mouth.

It was a fucking tragedy, and it was terrifying. Shan had never considered sex as a responsibility before, but suddenly every touch seemed heavy with significance. Tirellian deserved for this to be beautiful, and that was making Shan feel as awkward and clumsy as if he was almost untouched too.

Tirellian’s smile was beginning to fade, so Shan swallowed hard and confessed, “I don’t know where to start.”

Tirellian considered it, while Shan gazed up at him, arousal prickling under his own skin. Then he said, shaking his hair forwards a little, “You could take your shirt off too?”

Shan sat up, reaching out to push Tirellian’s hair back. “I could do that, yes.” He pulled his own shirt off and held his arms out, grinning when Tirellian breathed in sharply. “I’m all yours, lover.”

He wasn’t expecting Tirellian just to wrap his arms around him and pull him in close. Shan held him back, and the noise of pure satisfaction Tirellian made was a reward in itself. It wasn’t the quick fun writhe of body against body



that Shan was used to, but it was strangely satisfying, skin against skin, feeling Tirellian's heart thundering against his, their breath rough against each other's necks. Slowly, as they held each other, his desire changed, sinking deeper within him until he wasn't just desperate to touch and suck and fuck, but he needed Tirellian, needed him in his bones and gut and heart.

When Tirellian pressed his lips to Shan's throat, careful and hesitant, it was Shan who threw his head back and tightened his grip on Tirellian's hips, need sparking through him. When he slid his hand up Tirellian's spine and Tirellian arched his back, Shan felt it too. He knew why Tirellian was reacting like this to every touch, but he couldn't explain why he was shaking and shuddering too. When Tirellian touched him, it felt better than anyone else ever had, not because his hands were more skilled, but because this was Tirellian, whom he had known better than anyone for all these years, Tirellian, whom he had yearned for, Tirellian, whom he loved.

Even so, he was startled when Tirellian reached down to undo his breeches, the side of his hand brushing Shan's erection through the cloth.

"You're sure?" he breathed and took a deep breath so he could add, "You don't have to."

"I've touched a cock before," Tirellian said and then added, at Shan's raised eyebrow, "I'm inexperienced, not a eunuch. I have touched myself frequently."

"There is that," Shan said, imagining that too vividly for comfort. "Oh, yes, I'm sure. Yes, um."

Tirellian's hand pushing down his breeches brought him back to the present, and he caught Tirellian's wrist. "It's not the same when it's someone else's."

"I know that. I have done this before. Once."

That calm tone really wasn't helping. Shan had a nasty feeling he was going to get flustered every time Tirellian used it from now on. Releasing Tirellian's wrist, he said, "You too. Both of us."

Tirellian nodded and they both scrabbled the rest of their clothes off. Shan managed to get naked first (at least there was some benefit to experience), and he sank back against the pillows happily to admire Tirellian as he turned around.

Nobody had ever looked at him with such an expression of wonder, and that sent another pulse of need throbbing through his balls. He spread his legs a

little to relieve some of the pressure, and Tirellian wet his lips again, reaching out to trace his finger up Shan's cock, so slow and teasing that it made Shan groan in frustration.

To show Tirellian what he wanted, he reached out himself, closing his hand around Tirellian's cock. It was as long and lean as the rest of him, damp and flushed at the head. Shan wanted to taste it, too, wanted to feel it pressed against, and inside, him. For now, though, he just wanted to touch, so he smoothed his hand down slowly and then up to squeeze around the head, feeling it nudge slickly against the bend of his palm.

Tirellian had been shaking under his hands for so long that Shan wasn't expecting him to suddenly snap his hips forwards, choking on a cry. Then his cock was spilling warmly into Shan's palm as Tirellian gasped and shook and then curled forwards, throwing his arm across his eyes.

He stayed face down for a few moments. Just as Shan was beginning to shift from smug delight to worry, he turned over and said, "I am sorry."

"Nothing to apologize for," Shan said, leaning over to kiss him. Tirellian rose into the kiss, much more confidently than he had before, and Shan was amused to feel how fast he was learning to excel at this, his kisses already less clumsy and more demanding.

"I was too fast," he said when Shan finally pulled back.

"You were stunning," Shan said, and nudged him across on the bed. "Felt good, though?"

"Yes," Tirellian breathed, so ardently that Shan's own cock twinged, demanding his attention. He reached down to touch himself, still watching Tirellian's face.

"Never been that good," he murmured, aware that his voice was softer and rougher than usual. "Never seen anything like you, so beautiful, Sparks, so lovely, best thing I've ever seen..."

Tirellian was leaning over him now, watching raptly. As Shan's breath caught, he reached down and pushed Shan's hand away. "Let me."

Shan did, pushing his hips up to meet Tirellian's hand. "Oh, yes, like that."

Tirellian leaned forwards to kiss him, his hair falling around Shan's face in dark waves, stroking his cheek as Tirellian kissed him and touched him.

They were still kissing when Shan came, sinking back into the mattress as he spilled across Tirellian's hand.

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The next morning he woke, as usual, grasped tightly in Tirellian's arms. For once, it wasn't uncomfortable. Oh, admittedly Tirellian had a firm grip on his bare ass, but the body part prodding Shan this morning wasn't all that unwelcome.

Chuckling, he murmured, "You awake yet, Sparks?"

"No," Tirellian groaned and then he obviously woke up because he went stiff in Shan's arms.

"Easy," Shan murmured. "The world hasn't ended."

"But we're... Did we... Oh, we *did*."

"We did," Shan agreed. "It went rather well, I thought."

"Yes," Tirellian said uncertainly and went quiet.

Shan bit back a huge sigh of disappointment and wriggled out of bed. Shit. There went all his stupid daydreams. "Don't worry about it. Never happened, right? I'll get us some breakfast and you can..."

"Stop it," Tirellian said irritably. "I'm trying to think."

"Think?"

"Exactly." He peered out at Shan from beneath unusually tangled hair. "No more, no less. Don't run away."

"I'm not," Shan said, pulling his clothes on. "I'm just getting breakfast. I'll check the coach times too. Then you've got plenty of *thinking* time."

"That wasn't how I meant it," Tirellian said, but Shan was heading for the door. This wasn't going to be something he could debate in Tirellian's rational way, weighing up advantages and disadvantages, and he didn't want Tirellian to see he was upset.

What had he imagined, he thought bitterly as he stomped downstairs. That a few hours of tame but heartfelt sex would win Tirellian's adoration forever? As if his paladin was that simple a man.

Or maybe Tirellian wasn't even his paladin anymore. Maybe he wasn't even Shan's friend.

He ordered breakfast and headed out to the courtyard. There were regular coaches from here into the capital, he was told, one every couple of hours. He memorized the times and then turned to head back inside, his steps slowing.

“Arachanni!”

It was Markus, from dinner the night before. It seemed a long time ago, but Shan paused long enough to nod good morning.

“Can you spare a moment?” Markus said. “I’d like to speak to you in private.”

Shan sighed, but let the man pull him around the side of the table. He had been flirting shamelessly before Tirellian dragged him away, and he probably did owe an apology.

Markus beat him to it, his voice sincere. “I’m sorry. Last night, I didn’t realize that you were already spoken for.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Shan muttered. “I should be the one apologizing. I should have made it clear that I wasn’t serious.”

Markus looked uncomfortable. “Far be it from me to pass comment on someone else’s relationship, but there are sponsors who won’t demand that kind of relationship from you.”

“It’s not like that,” Shan said furiously.

“If he’s forcing you, you can—”

“Markus, we’re in a rush. Hurry up.” It was Sofia, and she had appeared behind Shan. By daylight, she looked far too dangerous to be a mere trade factor, and Shan’s suspicions flared. He went for his knife.

Behind him, Markus said quietly, “I wouldn’t do that if I were you, Arachanni,” and he felt cold steel press at his neck.

“I don’t know if you’re a collaborator or a good man with terrible taste in lovers,” Sofia said, “but you’re too valuable for us to let you ride off alone. I’m sorry.”

And she came at him, reaching out to cover his mouth before he could shout for help. As she did, Markus shifted behind him, his arm coming around Shan’s throat and squeezing tightly. Shan fought back, but he wasn’t fast enough, and soon his vision blurred, and his chest began to burn.

As he slipped into unconsciousness, he wondered how this was going to affect Tirellian's "thinking".

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## Chapter Ten

He woke up in a hard bed, with light slanting into his eyes. As he sat up, his head throbbed, and he bit back a groan, blinking shadows away. He was in a little wooden cabin, like the one he and Tirellian had used when they first landed. He wasn't bound or chained, but his feet were bare, and there was no sign of his shoes. Wincing, he staggered to the window.

Snow-heavy trees stretched as far as he could see.

Opening the door, he found his cabin was one of five, loosely circled around the edges of a clearing. There was a big fire burning in the centre of the clearing, with a sloped canopy over it. Stumps surrounded the fire, obviously makeshift seats, and there was a haunch of meat cooking over it, the scents drifting towards Shan.

There was no sign of Tirellian, and he obviously wasn't in the city any more.

One of the figures sitting by the fire turned at the sight of him, and then rose to walk towards him, hands outstretched. It was Markus.

"How are you feeling?" he asked. "Sorry for the rough treatment. If I give you shoes, will you promise not to run?"

"Where the fuck am I?" Shan demanded hoarsely. "Where's—" He stopped himself before he blurted out the wrong name, struggling to remember Tirellian's false identity past his aching head.

"Your Ice Guard watch dog? Still in Rhodiosson, I hope. Sofia was laying a false trail for him. You can relax now, Arachanni. You're out of danger."

"You're out of your mind," Shan snapped.

Markus looked worried. "Did you not even realise...? Come and sit by the fire. We'll explain."

Shan put on the shoes Markus offered him and followed him to sit on one of the stumps, wincing. His whole body ached. Markus sat down beside him, smiling hopefully, and waved at the man on Shan's other side. "This is Eagle. He's in charge here."

"Eagle?" Shan repeated sceptically.

The man glared at him. He had bristling brows and a long fierce face, and he didn't look particularly happy to have Shan there. "What, you thought we used our legal names in the resistance?"

"In the..." Shan rubbed his aching head. "Somebody tell me what is happening here. Please."

"You were heading for the patronage fair, weren't you?" Markus said. "What you won't have realized is that it was all a trap. They're hunting artificers."

"In which case, what a good thing we weren't actually going there," Shan muttered.

"What?" Markus said.

"We know that," Eagle said. "We intercepted a message from that Ice Knight you encountered on the road. The general he was sending you to is the one in charge of the artificers in Kerauton. You would have been chained in the manufactory before dusk."

"Wasn't actually going there, either." Shan looked up, wincing as he eyed the sky. It was late afternoon already. Tirellian had probably started leaving little trails of electrocuted collaborators behind him by now. "Do you people not talk to one another?"

"You people?" Eagle repeated coldly.

"The resistance," Shan said. "We made contact with Geronthor in Daschion. Didn't he send word? Oh, I'm supposed to say something cryptic about an eagle in a poem here, right?"

"Never heard of him," Eagle said brusquely.

"Wait, what?" Markus said. "You're not collaborators?"

"No," Shan said shortly. His aching head made him sensitive to every murmur of the wind, and he thought he'd heard something. "Shut up for a moment."

Eagle scowled, but Shan was listening to the wind. He didn't usually reach for this magic, not when he could make things that worked more reliably, but it was part of his birthright, and the wind was bringing him interesting news: a soft footfall, a creak of a branch underfoot, a sentry gasping, and the faint sizzle of lightning.

"You have company in the woods," he said, still listening intently. "Not sure it's friendly."

Eagle made quick hand gestures to some of the other men and women around the fire, and they rose to their feet. Shan kept listening, and then relaxed at the sound of a voice.

"Take me to your camp," Tirellian whispered dangerously a mile away, "and I may not kill you."

Shan sighed. "Not much of a false trail, clearly." Then he summoned a breath of wind to dance by his lips and said into it, very clearly, "Do not kill them. They are the resistance. I am safe."

Then he scooped his hand behind the air that had received his words and flung it out in Tirellian's direction.

"What was that?" Markus demanded.

Eagle was staring at him. In response to Markus, he said shortly, "Wind magic. He's Shadowflight."

"Really?" Markus said, staring. "Damn."

"Yes," Shan said shortly. "And we had essential business in the capital."

"Wouldn't risk it now," Eagle said and smacked Markus around the back of the head. "Fucked up, Firebird."

"Piss off," Markus said, still staring at Shan. "Well, that explains the accent, I suppose. Who's your friend? West Coast Republicans or Slate Guard?"

They were both the names of resistance groups, but Shan hadn't quite realized until now just how independently they all operated. No wonder the Shadowflight muttered about the resistance so much.

"How about we wait?" he said. "And he can tell you himself."

"What's your target in the capital?" Eagle asked. "Manufactory?"

"That's one of them. What's all this about them collecting artificers?"

"The one they've been using has suddenly started cooperating. From what we've heard, they don't trust her. They're collecting students to extract as much as they can before they kill her."

Poor Aunt Didi.

"Any idea why she's turned at last?"



“Nope,” Eagle said and looked up at the sound of steps in the snow.

Tirellian emerged from the tree line, escorting five men in front of a web of sparking lightning. He looked grubby, bruised, and extremely bad-tempered. It wasn't until he saw Shan and Markus that he cast his lightning away and came stamping towards them.

“Now slow down,” Markus said, rising to intercept him. “We want to know exactly who—”

Tirellian hit him, hard enough to send him crashing backwards over the nearest log, and then advanced on Shan.

Shan rose to meet him, but still wasn't ready for Tirellian to drag him forwards and kiss him so hard it left his lips stinging when Tirellian drew back and turned to face Eagle, his face still drawn with rage.

“Now may I kill someone?” he asked Shan, his voice so perfectly polite that Eagle went still, and Shan shuddered happily.

“No,” he said, and then added, just to be a bastard. “Feel free to hit Markus again, though. That was fun.”

“Fun?” both Markus and Tirellian repeated incredulously. Then Tirellian turned to glare, and Markus shuffled a little further away.

“Definitely,” Shan said. His throat still hurt, after all. “I don't think Eagle is to blame for this, Sparks. Come and sit down and see if we can salvage this thing. If nothing else, we can get some intelligence from these folks. I never knew there was much of a resistance movement in Fire, for instance.”

“We haven't been able to establish a reliable contact,” Tirellian said, but he stood back, some of the ire fading from his face.

Shan sat down on one of the logs again and patted the one next to him. Tirellian sat, and Shan reached out to touch his leg, feeling the fury still quivering through him.

“You are?” Tirellian said to Eagle.

“Eagle, of the Free Lightning Brigade.”

“You have a contact in the Shadowflight?”

“Codename Wyvern, but only since a month ago.”

Wyvern was Flight Lieutenant Zennor. Shan recalled flight schedules and nodded. “He was due in a day after we left. You're a new organization, then?”

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“Some of us were in the Kerau Brigade.”

“Ice Guard smashed them up in the spring,” Tirellian said to Shan. “Hung half of them and burnt two villages to the ground in retaliation.” He shot Eagle a long scowl. “We had disengaged by then. They had no regard for security protocols.”

“We’ve learned better,” Eagle said bitterly.

“I would hope so.”

“Be nice,” Shan said quietly. He looked to Markus. “What’s your involvement?”

“Similar to your own, I should think. Like the Shadowflight, we’re trying to establish a relationship with other resistance groups. We’re well connected with the Root Network in Earth and the Dark Brotherhood in Shade, but things aren’t so clearly organized here in Lightning. We’ve been having trouble establishing useful contacts.”

“We have that in common, at least.”

“What I want to know,” Markus said, “is who you are? You don’t speak like a local resistance fighter, but you use lightning. Halfblood?”

“No,” Tirellian said flatly. “Codename Paladin.”

“Subtle,” Shan muttered at him.

Tirellian narrowed his eyes. “And this is Ragdoll.”

“I am?” Shan said. He hadn’t realized he had a codename. “Who comes up with these?”

“My sister.”

“Oh. In which case, I love it, clearly, and you don’t need to hit me.”

“Better,” Tirellian said, and a tiny smile ghosted across his mouth.

“You’re Paladin?” Markus said, a note of excitement in his voice. “Even in Fire, we’ve heard of you. They say you flew the length of the Aster Canal and blasted every lock gate open until it drained into the sea, and that you were personally responsible for depriving Governor Lauluvi of six successive shipments of his favourite brandy until he went mad and froze himself into a pillar of ice.” He eyed Tirellian skeptically. “Mind, I did hear that you were so handsome that all of General Tanssimur’s dancing girls tried to run away with you—”

"No," Tirellian said flatly, as Shan leaned heavily on his thigh and snickered.

"Well, you're not invisible or ten feet tall, either, so not all the stories are true. Are you really married to the Master Artificer of the Court of Wind?"

"Told you so," Shan said sweetly and then went back to laughing.

"Though if Arachanni here is... Oh, *fuck*." Markus looked round frantically. "I'll shut up now. I trust Eagle here, but not all of his men are so canny, and... What is the King of Wind *thinking*, sending you here?"

"King Lyr," Tirellian started sharply, but Eagle cut in.

"In this, all my men will be loyal to the death."

They all turned to look at him. He was staring at Tirellian, his eyes wide. He looked much younger with such an expression. Slowly, he said, "Paladin, I have never seen your face before, but I have looked upon the frozen queen where she sits in Kerauton. You can only be the lost paladin."

"The what?" Markus asked.

"They say," Eagle began, his voice slow and reverent, "that there was one paladin of the Court of Lightning who did not die when Ice came. Brother of the queen, last living descendant of the house of Levin, great-grandson of King Brontellian." He slid off his stool, dropping to his knees as he drew his sword and planted it in the snow in front of Tirellian. "My king."

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## Chapter Eleven

"I am not a king," Tirellian said. He didn't sound surprised, although he did look more than a little annoyed. "I am a knight. Take your seat again."

"And when you come to your throne, sire, we will know you fought beside us for our freedom."

"Get up," Tirellian said irritably and sent Shan a pleading look.

Shan took pity on him. "He is glad of your service, friend Eagle, but we are far from the day where we can think seriously about retaking the throne."

"*Arashan!* Do *not* encourage him!"

Shan grinned at him unrepentantly. "Now, to return to our original mission, we need to get into the city, to the palace and the manufactory. How far out are we and have we any chance of getting there before the gates are shut?"

"They were going to seize you at the gates," Eagle said. "We can take you in the back way, though."

"There's a back way into Kerauton?" Tirellian asked.

"Yes, sire. Well, more of a low way."

Tirellian sighed. "Sewers?"

"I'm afraid so, sire."

"When can we be there?"

"We can bring you up into the palace courtyard sometime around midnight, if we leave soon."

After that it was all bustle, apart from a few minutes when Tirellian crowded Shan back into the hut where he had woken up. "Are you well enough to ride?"

"I've been better, but I've been a lot worse. I can do this."

"If we had even a slight hill, I would suggest we fly in. I have our wings."

"Good. The rest of our stuff?"

"I left everything save your tools." He looked guilty. "Even your toys."

"They were only for decoy. I can make more."

"I kept the puzzle box."

Shan had to laugh. "I assume that means you haven't solved it yet."

"No, but that wasn't why I—"

He looked so put out that Shan kissed him. Tirellian sighed against his mouth and gathered him in.

They were interrupted by someone clearing his throat. Markus was leaning in the doorway. "Paladin, Eagle wants to talk to you about routes."

He waited until Tirellian was gone and shook his head wryly at Shan. "My original apology still stands. I really shouldn't have flirted with you."

"Forget about it."

"Not until my nose stops aching," Markus grumbled. "He hits hard."

"On which subject, where's your sister?"

"I don't know," Markus said, looking worried. "She should be back here by now."

By the time they were ready to leave, though, Sofia had still not appeared, and so Markus joined their party.

"We have a safehouse in the city," he explained. "That's our rendezvous."

It was a long ride, through dark woods, though Shan was glad there was no moon when they came out in the farmland around the city. From here, Kerauton looked like a dark blot on the landscape, dense and shadowy.

It was small enough to still have walls, although the manufacturing district spilled out beyond the east gate. Eagle took them in through a culvert outside the west wall. Their pathway was over frozen sewage, which creaked greasily below their feet as they slid in carefully. After what seemed like hours, the pipes grew warmer and wider, and Eagle led them up onto narrow side platforms over stinking water.

Markus left them not long after that, padding off into the sulphurous darkness with only a tiny floating flame to light his way.

They continued onward, until Eagle signalled a halt. "Are you sure you don't want me to come with you, sire?"

"I am certain," Tirellian said. "Get back to your people and take no foolish risks."

Eagle nodded and pointed upwards, sending a flash of lightning to light the bottom rung of the metal ladder. "You'll come up within the palace walls, behind the old kitchens. There are patrols that pass through the palace at night, but they also cover the square outside and are infrequent. You should be able to avoid them."

"Thank you," Tirellian said and, at Shan's subtle prod, added, "You have been of great service."

Then, with Eagle gone, they climbed up. The grate at the top of the sewer took some loosening, but they came out at last into a snowy courtyard. They both moved instinctively for the shelter of a doorway, and Tirellian looked around for a few moments before he nodded. "This way."

Shan followed him, keeping his steps soft and trying not to peer around too curiously. Tirellian had grown up here, he knew, during the seasons he and his sisters did not spend on their estate in Asterope. Was it bringing back hard memories?

A patrol drew near, their lamps glinting in the window glass. Tirellian pulled them both into a side room, listening intently, but the patrol did not even try the door.

After they had passed, Tirellian led on with more confidence. Shan soon lost track of where they were. This palace was nothing like the royal castle at King's Isle, which was ancient and poky and barely large enough to house the royal family and some key advisers. Lightning's palace felt like a small village in itself by comparison.

They came at last to a large antechamber, surrounded by windows. Shan could glimpse the lights of the city outside, a spread of dim lights reaching towards the horizon.

Tirellian drew in a sudden, furious breath. Shan looked to see what had upset him and saw a signboard propped against the wall. It announced opening times and prices.

It took a moment for Shan to understand. Then he asked softly, "Is this the throne room?"

"Yes. My sister is not an exhibition for public display."

Shan touched his shoulder. "They're stupid to make her one. Your people are proud, and they don't forgive an insult. If Ice have forgotten that, they will regret it."

Tirellian nodded and strode forwards. As he got closer to the great doors, though, his steps slowed. He came to a halt an arm's length away.

Then he said, his voice uncertain, "I don't want to go in."

"Of course you don't," Shan said. "Do you want me to go alone?"

"No," Tirellian said, squaring his shoulders. "I have to see."

It was Shan who opened the doors though, and Shan who stepped in first.

He caught his breath. The moon had come out, and pale light spilled in through the glass dome in the ceiling. It washed across the marble floor and gleamed on the great crag of ice that stood at the end of the throne room.

Within the ice, the king and queen of Lightning still sat enthroned.

They wore their robes of state and all their regalia. The king was in the process of rising to his feet, his hand pressing down on the golden arm of his throne. The queen had one hand outstretched, a ring shining around her finger, within the ice.

She didn't look exactly like her sister, to Shan's surprise.

She looked younger, a mere lovely child beside Queen Arellia's beauty. No wonder, really. She had only been eighteen. She had the same dark, curling hair, though, and even through the dulling of frost, he could see her eyes must have been the same blue as Tirellian's once.

She didn't look afraid. Her face was bright with defiance, even after all these years.

Tirellian moved forwards past him to collapse at the foot of the ice. He covered his face with his hands.

Shan went to him, kneeling beside him to embrace him awkwardly. He could feel Tirellian shaking against him, his breath rasping out suddenly.

"Tirellian," Shan said, not sure what to say. Was his proud lover weeping? "Sparks. I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Then, because Tirellian was still shaking, he added their old promise. "You're safe. You're with me."

Tirellian let out a single sharp gasp, and dropped his hands, pressing his face against Shan's shoulder. His fists locked into Shan's shirt, and his breath broke again, around a word.

"Aillera," he was saying, "Aillera. I promised. I promised."

"Promised what?" Shan asked, stroking his hair, his shoulder, any part of his lover he could reach.

"To protect them."

"You couldn't be in two places at once, love."

"I *promised*."

"You were there for Arellia. You didn't break your word."

"Aillera needed me more."

"You couldn't know that."

"I should have done," Tirellian said bleakly, but his grip on Shan was loosening, and he pulled back to stand up slowly.

For a long time, he just stared at his sister's face, barely blinking. Then he reached out towards the ice, touching his fingertips to it, a mere impossible inch separating him from his sister's hand.

"Aila," he said softly and looked across at Shan. He was still weeping, tears sliding down his face and making his voice crumple and crack. "She was always brave, you know. People thought she and Arellia were the same in character as well as in looks. Even father couldn't tell them apart, but they were so different. Aillera was always the boldest of us all. She dared us to live for ourselves as well as the family. Whenever we broke a rule, it was her idea, and she could laugh, Arashan. She had the brightest, loudest laugh I've ever heard."

"I'm sorry," Shan said. "I'm so sorry."

"I miss her."

"I know."

"How can Arellia and I be in a world without her?"

"I don't know," Shan said and closed his eyes. This next task would be the more awful the more he imagined her as Tirellian's beloved little sister. "Sparks, I have to cut into the ice."

Tirellian nodded.

"I may have to cut her."

"Don't tell me."

"I won't," Shan said and kissed his cheek. "Don't watch."



He had an ice saw and a small blowtorch, and he set to work doggedly. He was determined not to touch her flesh unless he had to, which meant shearing off layer after layer of ice while Tirellian kept watch. At last he got close enough to her hand that he switched to the torch, melting the ice around her.

When icy water began to drip off her fingertip, he swallowed hard and kept at it, even more carefully. At last, her middle fingers were free of the ice, although they still stood up stiffly.

"Tirellian," he said softly. "Can you manage to touch her hand?"

"I want to," Tirellian said and came across the room swiftly. It took a little coaxing to ease the ring off her finger but then Tirellian grasped her cold fingers with his warm hand, bowing over it.

"If the ice could all be thawed..." Shan said hesitantly. He'd heard stories about people trapped in snowdrifts who came back from seeming death.

"She's been frozen for a decade," Tirellian said bleakly. "Her heart no longer beats. There is no breath in her lungs. She is dead." Gently, he kissed his sister's hand and then stepped back. "Give me the ring."

Shan handed it over and Tirellian shoved it on his own finger with a shudder. Then he turned and stalked out of the room without looking back.

Shan had to run to keep up, grabbing his tools but leaving the mess of shorn ice behind. Tirellian stalked through the palace at full speed, not hesitating in his path.

"Where are we going?" Shan gasped.

"Somewhere the patrols can't enter," Tirellian said shortly and swerved up a spiralling flight of stairs, taking them two at a time.

They ended up outside an elaborate door. It had no handle and no obvious keyhole, but the entire front was covered with an ornate and complex enamelled design, a huge shield with a crest of starred lightning. Shan knew that crest. He had seen it on some of Tirellian's belongings, the few scraps he had brought with him on what had been intended as a short trip away from home.

It was the crest of the Duke of Asterope.

Tirellian lifted his hands, calling lightning, and threw it out with quick, almost heedless grace. It hit point after point on the crest and wherever it hit it lingered and sent out lines, until a second inverted crest had formed.

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After the seventh strike, there was the distinct sound of locks clicking, and the door swung open.

“Your father didn’t care for visitors, did he?” Shan commented, following Tirellian in.

“He quite enjoyed making people wait.” Tirellian pushed the door shut behind them, and Shan heard the locks engage again.

The room they were in was dark, and Shan only got a dim sense of heavy furnishings and thick curtains. Tirellian walked across it without hesitation, though, throwing open one of the curtains to let the moonlight in. “This one only overlooks my father’s courtyard garden. No one can see into it from anywhere else in the palace.”

“What about light?”

“A risk, but a small one. Not much escapes, and it would be near impossible to find the source from outside.”

“Well, then,” Shan said, trying to make it sound casual. “Shall we call the Sprite?”

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## Chapter Twelve

Tirellian lifted his hand, where the ring gleamed dully in the moonlight. Then he knelt, still holding his hand aloft, and said gravely, “Lady of Thorned Fire, your servant begs an audience.”

Shan knelt too, pressed back against the wall.

For a minute nothing happened, and Shan wondered if that had been enough of a summoning. Then he realized that the sky was clouding over.

When the first bolt of lightning hit the skylight, he jumped, even as thunder ripped the sky apart above them. Another strike and another and another went rushing over the glass, each one making the hair on his arms stand up on end and his heart leap.

The fifth strike came through the glass, not shattering it but passing through it as if it was insignificant. It hit the floor in front of Tirellian, and he jolted back even as the light splintered up to form a shape.

The Sprite of Lightning was a thinner, fiercer creature than Wind’s Sylph. She was as dark-haired as Tirellian and his sisters, and Shan could see a little of them in her, but her hair was cut raggedly short, and her eyes were fierce. Lightning danced in a crown around her head, and wreathed her arms like bracelets of shining wire.

“Tirellian of Asterope,” she said, sounding surprised, and her voice was deep and thunder-rough. “I never thought to be called by any of Levin’s bloodline again.”

“Yet I have the right to call, madam,” Tirellian said, and Shan wasn’t sure how he had the nerve to sound so calm.

The Sprite nodded sharply. “More than any other. Your living sister, does she remember me?”

“Always, madam. As do I.”

“At least someone does,” the Sprite said. “You all left me, Tirellian. Everyone who calls my name now is merely human, and so Ice can hurt them.” She clasped her hands together tightly. “They’re hurting our people, my paladin.”

“We fight back,” Tirellian said.

She shrugged irritably and glanced around. When she spotted Shan, her eyebrow rose, and she said sharply, "A child of Wind? Is that why you've come at last, Tirellian? Because my sister came crying to your royal brother?"

"It is not the first time I have come home. It is the first time one of the Seven partook in an act of war. Madam, do you need saving?"

"No!" the Sprite snapped, so fiercely that Shan winced. Then she continued, "Not *me*. I'm not the one."

"Who does need help, then?" Shan asked. He didn't think the Sylph would be happy with her sister if he got turned into a scorched patch of floor tile, and he wanted to be part of this conversation.

"Daedalia!" the Sprite cried. "My Daedalia!"

Aunt Didi? Exchanging a puzzled glance with Tirellian, he asked, "The reluctant artificer? *That* Daedalia?"

"She fought them so long," the Sprite said, light rising from her hair in flowering sparks. "She was so very brave, my Daedalia. And now they have locked her away, and they're *hurting* her. I cannot bear it."

The Sylph had taken human lovers, Shan knew, and the Ice Knight he had seen was clearly a descendant of the Undine. Why shouldn't the Sprite?

"You love her," he said, and Tirellian looked startled.

"Yes," the Sprite cried, and then she lowered her head. "But I was such a fool. I visited her too often, and they found out and now..." She was weeping sparks now, each one glittering in her eyes before it tumbled down her cheeks.

"That's why you're powering their war machine," Tirellian said. "Because they're holding her hostage?"

She nodded, "I hate it! It burns me. What they'll do to her, though..." She shuddered, light flashing all around her.

"But why is she cooperating suddenly?" Shan wondered aloud.

"They show her pictures, false pictures, of what they're doing to me!"

"Can't you tell her they're lies?" Shan asked.

"Do your stories say I'm stupid, Wind Boy? I cannot reach her. They have sealed her within a room of ice, and I cannot pass through it. I can see her, but I can't reach her. Their ice is too thick and cold for my power to pass it! Every time I try to melt my way through, they just forge more ice between us."

“We have been sent to try rescuing her,” Shan said. “Will you help?”

The Sprite went quiet. Then, very slowly, she shook her head. “Two human men against the Knights with Frozen Hearts? You have no hope of success. If I am seen with you, they will punish her so badly. I can’t. I can’t!”

“Madam, the people of the Seven Courts—”

“Why should I care for them?” she demanded. “My pact was with your kin, and you are all dead or have abandoned me. Only Daedalia still speaks to me like Levin did. She was the only one who didn’t demand I save them when they had no right to even speak to me! I won’t let them hurt her!”

And then, with another dazzling flare, she was gone, arcing back through the roof.

Shan blinked after images out of his eyes and said, because sarcasm seemed like the only answer, “So, that went well.”

Tirellian ignored him to stalk out of the room. Shan groaned and followed him. He couldn’t see a thing, and he kept stumbling over furniture and walking into walls. Eventually Tirellian must have reached back in annoyance, because his hand closed around Shan’s wrist and he snapped, “Just walk with me.”

They ended up in another dimly lit room, this one a bedchamber. Shan couldn’t see enough of the furnishings to guess any more about it, but Tirellian released him to go straight to the bed. He threw himself down on it, rolling over to face the wall, his back to Shan.

Shan sighed and climbed in after him, throwing an arm over his waist. Tirellian shrugged irritably, but Shan wasn’t going to let go.

“So, saving Aunt Didi just became our more important mission,” he said. “Any ideas on how we get her out of a room made of ice? I don’t think my blowtorch is up for that much of a challenge.”

“Not now,” Tirellian said. He sounded so miserable that Shan dropped the subject and just kissed his neck.

“Don’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because there’s no point,” Tirellian said bitterly. “Sex is just a way of filling the time, and love doesn’t do anything.”

"It's a very pleasant way of filling the time," Shan said, trying to jolly him out of his misery.

"Don't bother, Arashan."

"I hate to see you despair," Shan said. "You may scorn love, but it's what I feel for you, and I don't want to see you suffer."

"And what good did that do the Sprite and the artificer? They're both so afraid of seeing the other one hurt that they're willing to drag the whole world down with them." Then, more softly, he added, "What good did it do Aillera? I've heard enough to know she had time to escape. She chose to stay with her husband. Love killed her."

"Ice killed her," Shan said. "Love stood beside her and fought back."

"And *lost*. If that is all love can do for us, what is the point? We shouldn't waste our time on it or suffer for it."

Shan could have argued further, but he didn't think Tirellian would listen. Instead, he just curled up behind his lover's back, sharing his warmth, and asked, "What do we do now?"

"It's almost dawn. The palace is open during the day, and I expect there will be a furore over our theft of the ring. No one will check in here, though."

"So do we move now or hide out?"

"Hide out. We don't have time to get inside the manufactory tonight."

"Have we got food and water in here?"

"Eagle left some in the packs he gave us."

"He's not a bad sort, for a revolutionary," Shan remarked cheerfully. "Tell me, did you know that you were that close to the throne? You didn't seem surprised."

"I've heard the notion before. It's ridiculous."

Shan hummed slightly and then asked cautiously, "Does anyone at home know? Your sister? King Lyr?"

"No, and I'd appreciate it if they didn't."

"Markus did have a point, you know. If you are the rightful king of—"

"I'm not."

"But if you were, then we *are* both too valuable to be here."

"Hence Lyr does not know."

"Thought so," Shan said smugly.

"Will you hush and let me sleep?"

"Oh, are we sleeping now?"

"Yes."

"Only if you let me under the blankets too. It's freezing in here."

"It's freezing everywhere," Tirellian said, but he shifted enough to let Shan shrug off his outer layers and squirm under the covers before he did the same. Almost immediately, despite his angry words, his hands shot out to latch onto Shan, gripping him tightly.

Shan sighed and pulled him close, sharing warmth. Tirellian didn't touch him beyond the grip on his shoulders, but he did let out a long, sighing breath. When he slept, Shan stayed awake a little longer, thinking of fierce women, both the ones in ice and the one made of lightning. Then, wearily, he lay his head against Tirellian's hair and went to sleep.

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The next morning he was woken by sunlight and the sound of banging from elsewhere in the palace.

"Are you absolutely certain they can't get in here?" he asked sleepily.

"Absolutely," Tirellian said and then put an arm around him, a little uncertainly. "We're safe, and I'm sorry. I was very rude last night."

"Sparks, did no one ever tell you that it's unhealthy to be too polite?"

"No, but it explains a great deal about you."

Shan opened his eyes a little more to glare, and was met by Tirellian's cautious smile. He leaned forwards to seek a kiss, but Tirellian pulled back, looking troubled.

"Still thinking?" Shan asked lightly, though his heart clenched. "That's almost as bad for you as good manners."

"I'm just not certain..." Tirellian began and then trailed off, frowning. "Love, it's like lightning."

“Not for everyone, though it can strike that fast. For some of us it grows over time.”

“It was not intended as a romantic simile.”

“Sorry,” Shan said and propped his chin on his fist, trying to look studious. “I’m listening.”

“It has claws. It can blaze through you and be gone, or it can burn you. Or stop your heart.”

“Are we animal, vegetable or mineral in this metaphor, because the effects vary significantly?”

Tirellian narrowed his eyes at Shan.

Shan grinned back, and then said softly, “Or it can be a bright light in a jar to comfort you. Or it can be the thing that fills you with strength and power.”

“You’re stretching the metaphor.”

“So were you,” Shan said amicably. “Me, I think love is its own thing, and it has countless faces. If it makes us happier and stronger and more glad to be alive, it’s a good thing.”

“But people die for love, all the time.”

“On the whole, they don’t,” Shan pointed out. “You just live the kind of life people write epic poems about. Most of us just live for those we love instead. And even if they do, that’s not the entirety of the thing.”

Tirellian frowned again. “Your definitions are very vague.”

“They’re meant to be,” Shan said and sighed. “So, I take it we’re not going to spend the day we’re locked in here hiding out in bed.”

Tirellian blushed.

“You said it yourself. It fills the time.” Shan reached out to run his knuckle down the side of Tirellian’s neck.

“That hardly seems meaningful,” Tirellian said, looking disapproving. That didn’t stop him from shuddering slightly, though.

“Not everything’s meaningful, Sparks. Sometimes we’re allowed to just have fun.”

“Fun?” Tirellian repeated, as if he’d never heard the word before, but he was already moving to push Shan down against the pillows.



“Fun,” Shan agreed, throwing his arm up around Tirellian’s neck. “Come here, you.”

And then, just to be obnoxious, he reached under Tirellian’s outstretched arm and tickled him.

Tirellian yelped surprise, flailed, and almost fell off the bed. Shan grabbed him in time, rolling him back onto the bed and capturing his wrists above his head.

“Why, Paladin,” he said, not even trying to hide his glee, “are you ticklish?”

“No,” Tirellian said unconvincingly, and Shan went for his belly. Tirellian tried to squirm away and failed, batting helplessly at Shan’s hands as he writhed and hiccuped protests. Then, in a spluttering rush, he began to laugh, his face creasing as the giggles fell out of him in snorting bursts.

“Stop it,” he said weakly. “Ar-Arashan. I...” And then the laughter overwhelmed his voice, and he collapsed back against the pillows, tears running down his flushed cheeks.

Shan kept feathering his fingers across Tirellian’s taut belly, but with the other hand he worked Tirellian’s clothes open. The first stroke to Tirellian’s cock made his giggles turn into gulps, and Shan chuckled.

“See,” he said, stroking Tirellian. “It can be fun. It can be happy.”

“This,” Tirellian gasped, “isn’t a—*oh*—recognized rhetorical—*Arashan!*”

Shan had to kiss him, needing to catch some of that surprised pleasure against his own lips. He was taken by surprise when Tirellian suddenly surged up to grab him and wrestle him down, trapping him in a tangle of half-clothed limbs.

“I find myself wondering,” Tirellian said with admirable calm for someone who was rutting slowly against Shan’s belly, “if I am the only one with this particular vulnerability?”

“What?” Shan asked, entirely distracted by Tirellian’s warm weight and the loveliness of him smiling in the morning sunlight.

Tirellian’s smile curved into a smirk. “Are you ticklish too, Arashan?”

“Me?” Shan said, widening his eyes innocently. “Of course not.”

“Liar,” Tirellian said and pounced, his eyes bright with delight.

Much later, lying naked in the sunshine, Shan finally took notice of their surroundings. It was only the laziest of observations, because Tirellian was currently using his tongue to trace over every bit of ink on Shan's back.

All the same, he finally took in the swords mounted on the wall, the shelf of military textbooks, and the little wooden soldier tucked behind a framed sketch of Arellia and Aillera. It was a very plain room, but there were little hints of personality here, in the choice of colours and fabrics around the room. Everything was functional, but made to be beautiful too.

"This was your room?"

Tirellian's lips stilled against Shan's spine. Then he murmured, "Yes."

"Good," Shan said vaguely. "Good. You should come home with me next time we get leave. My mother was asking after you last time she wrote."

For a long moment, Tirellian neither moved nor spoke. Then he pressed a long kiss to the back of Shan's neck and said, his voice a little rough, "Yes, of course. *Arashan*."

"Tirellian," Shan murmured back, because nothing more was needed.

Later still, they finally staggered out of bed, weak-kneed and thirsty. Tirellian revealed an entire kitchen to him, its hanging pans dusty and dry, unidentifiable food crusting in the cupboards. The big table was clear, though, and they sat there to eat the rations Eagle had left them, Tirellian looking more uncomfortable to be there than Shan was.

"What now?" Shan said. "How do we get out of here?"

"That should be obvious," Tirellian said. "There are towers in this palace, higher by far than any other building in the city."

"We can fly to the manufactory?"

"Of course," Tirellian said loftily. Then, as Shan rolled his eyes, he unbent enough to admit. "I am not sure how to go about our mission once we arrive, of course, but we have the rest of the afternoon. If you have had enough of this fun of yours, perhaps we could strategise?"

"As if you didn't enjoy it just as much," Shan said, and Tirellian went pink again.

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## Chapter Thirteen

There were more patrols tonight, but the vastness of the palace seemed to swallow them up, and Shan and Tirellian made their way to the tower unchallenged. Standing up there, with the wind buffeting his face, Shan was reminded again how strange it was to be in a flat country. The lights of Kerauton stretched below them in long lines, never curving to rise over or around a hill. The brightest spot in the city was the manufactory. Its windows were shining with the white glow of harnessed lightning.

“When do they stop for the night?” he asked.

“They don’t,” Tirellian said, “but I’m told their secretarial staff go home at dusk. Eagle showed me the plans. The offices are on an upper level, and we can move through them to access remote parts of the manufactory.”

“That seems like an overly obvious flaw in their security.”

“It was built before the invasion, and they know our wings won’t carry us this far inland.”

“I love it when the other side are certain of something I can prove wrong.”

“Don’t fall into the trap of arrogance yourself,” Tirellian warned, pulling his harness on. “There are at least three Ice Knights in there, along with a large contingent of the Guard.”

Shan sighed and began to strap on his own wings. “Do we have a realistic chance of getting her out tonight?”

“If we can, we will,” Tirellian said, “but not at the cost of our own lives. If we merely learn what we need to return in force later, that is enough.”

They checked each other’s wings, and Tirellian lifted his hand to the wind. “Can you whistle it round? It is to our advantage to spend as little time in the air as possible.”

Shan nodded and reached out to the wind. Pursing his lips to whistle for its attention, he raised his hand to indicate the change of direction. He put his willpower into the spell, as well as his need, and it responded to the Sylph’s blood within him and began to shift, blowing steadily out of the east.

Tirellian spread his wings, activating the spellsilk, and stepped back to the far edge of the tower. As Shan stepped aside to call his own silk into place, Tirellian ran into the wind.

Shan followed him, more closely than he would usually, and took the higher air. In tight formation, they coasted down across the rooftops of Kerauton, their moonshadows flashing across the snow-covered roofs.

There were patrols in the streets below, knocking on doors and searching gardens and sheds, but each set flickered out of sight as they crossed the next line of roofs, and none of them looked up. Their actions had obviously stirred up a nest of hornets, though, and Shan hoped their escape plan would be enough. Wings would only get them over the city walls, and it was going to be a long run back to the coast.

The roofs of the factory were long and gently sloping. They were dark and runnelled with water. Whatever was happening in there was producing enough heat to keep the roof clear of snow.

There were a succession of low platforms, each with a sloped door leading down and a stack of brooms lashed to their surrounding rails. Tirellian directed himself towards the centremost, shifting his body to land on bent knees.

Shan's landing wasn't quite so elegant, but he was soon folding his wings again.

Looking across the roof, Shan glimpsed movement on the next platform.

"Tirellian!"

Tirellian swung, lifting his hand to call lightning, but the man on the other platform suddenly darted forwards, lighting a flame before his face.

It was Markus.

Tirellian lowered his hand, and Markus pointed at the door and then to the roof between them. He slipped away then, and Shan turned his attention to picking the lock.

It was barely worth the effort, and soon he and Tirellian were slipping down a spiralled wood and metal staircase. The first doorway that led off it took them into dark offices.

No one was there, though floor level windows glowed. Creeping nearer, Shan glanced down into the heart of the factory. Lightning hung in spitting webs, and there was machinery moving in every corner. Workers in thick goggles and heavy overalls were crawling between steel ribs and serrated jaws to piece together huge, warlike creatures of steel and wire.

Up here, the rooms were empty, all the light jars covered. The rooms were cramped, and as they moved, piles of papers stirred on the desks in their wake.

They met Markus in the third room, all three of them fading back from the window side of the room to meet.

“Seen anyone up here?” Markus asked.

“Not a soul,” Shan said. “Why are you here?”

“Sofia’s here,” Markus said grimly. “I followed her trail all the way from Rhodiosson. They took her on the road, from what my sources say.”

“Any idea where she’s being held?”

“One of my informants overheard them taunt her about a cage of ice. That’s what I’m looking for.”

“Unless they have more than one,” Shan said, “that’s where they’re holding their artificer too.”

“There’s space enough in here,” Tirellian said doubtfully.

Shan wasn’t so sure. “They’re cramped down there. I wouldn’t want to operate that many devices in such close proximity. Suggests they’re tight for space.”

“Better to share the hunt than interfere with each other,” Markus said, and Tirellian nodded.

“Further in,” he said, and they moved off again, creeping through the offices and peering cautiously down at the manufactory floor at every opportunity.

Soon the air grew cold, and fewer and fewer of the offices looked like they were used. Ice coated the windows, concealing the floor below, and hung in thick stalactites from the ceilings. Their breath began to rise in pale clouds, and even Markus started to shiver.

There were patterns in the ice, strange geometric shapes with jagged joins. The light from below caught in them, making them shine brightly against the dirty glass.

“That is how they write in the Court of Ice,” Markus breathed. “He has marked his territory.”

“Who has?” Shan asked.

“The General. They get like that, as they grow old. They grow possessive and obsessed by strange rituals.”

At last they reached a room that was nothing but ice. There was a doorway at the end, to another stairway, but a thin pane of ice sealed it. The windows were completely covered.

“We have to go down,” Tirellian said, frowning. “You, Fire Knight, can you break through that?”

“Easily,” Markus murmured, “but I’d rather see what we’re getting into first. Anyone got a coin on them?”

“I have,” Shan said and dug it out of his pocket. He tossed it to Markus who caught it and clenched his fist around it. Then he crossed to the window and pressed the coin against the glass.

“That might work on a frosty day,” Tirellian said. “I hardly think—”

Markus pulled the coin away from the window, revealing a neat hole slanting down through the ice. “I have a little more heat at my disposal than you do, Paladin.” He gestured Shan forwards and went to press the coin to the glass twice more.

Peering down through the narrow peephole, Shan couldn’t make sense of what he saw. For a moment, he thought Markus hadn’t broken all the way through the coating over the window. Then he realized the floor below was coated in ice. It curled across the floor in stiff waves, full of glittering reflections of caged lightning.

It wasn’t until he saw movement within the ice that he realized what he was looking at. There were bubbles in the ice, bubbles large enough to form sealed rooms. He could see people within them, though the ice blurred their forms enough that he couldn’t tell from here whether he was looking at Sofia, Daedalia, or Ice Knights.

“How long can people survive in there?” he asked. “If that’s them, we may need to abort and come back with a greater heat source.”

“You think we’ll get this close again?” Markus hissed.

“Our first priority,” Tirellian reminded them both, “is to confirm where our targets are being held. That confirmation has not yet been made.”

“So do we go down there or try to find a better viewpoint from up here,” Shan asked, rubbing his arms. The air in here seemed to be getting steadily

colder, biting at his exposed cheeks and wrist. Tirellian was shivering too, and even Markus' bare arms were goose-pimpled.

"We should move anyway," he said. "We can't stay still if it carries on getting colder like this."

"Colder," a fey, eerie voice sighed behind them. "Colder and colder and colder."

They all startled away from the window, turning around. They weren't fast enough. The Ice Knight behind them was already stretching out his webbed hand, his too bright eyes gleaming. Ice curled out of the walls at his gesture, looping around Tirellian's wrists and coating Markus' hands. It came up Shan's legs, encasing him in ice from toes to waist.

"Colder," the Ice Knight sighed again.

He looked like the older brother of the Knight they had met on the road, with the same blue-green coloring, but this Knight wasn't just freezing the ground below his feet. Ice covered him, in thin, crackly layers that flaked when he moved. His hands were covered in ragged layers of it, peeling like burnt skin, and it crept across his cheek, digging into the skin so hard it was edged with bloody scabs.

He reached out towards Markus with that cold hand, stroking his bare skin with a hint of yearning in his too bright eyes. "Colder, but not cold enough."

"Strike him, Paladin!" Markus yelled, flinching.

Tirellian tried, but the lightning he called merely hit the Ice Knight's frozen armour and flashed against it. The ice melted a little, but the lightning did not touch the knight within it.

Shan whistled for a wind, with all the urgency he could summon.

It took time for the wind to rise, though, and already the Ice Knight was lifting his hands again.

And the ice rose too, piling up on every side of them into high walls. It closed over their heads and then they were sinking through ice, their bubble moving in reaction to every shift of the Ice Knight's hands, ice creaking and sliding around them.

They were descending towards the factory floor when the wind Shan had summoned hit the roof. It punctured through the thin sheeting, peeling it back

and smacked into the upper levels of the factory. Chunks of ice and wall and metal stairway suddenly came collapsing down towards them, smashing around their bubble of ice, battering it until they stopped descending smoothly and began to roll and tumble.

When the crashing and rolling stopped, they were lying in a pile of debris, their bubble smashed open. Shan was still trapped in the ice, though Tirellian had one wrist free. Markus was crawling away from them, looking dazed and bloodied.

The Ice Knight was crumpled against the ground, his patina of ice cobwebbed with cracks. For a moment, Shan hoped they'd finished one of the bastards off at least, but then he stirred, rising to his hands and knees and grabbing for Markus as he crawled past.

Markus kicked him in the face, hard, and the Knight murmured, "Not hot enough, but too, too cold."

Shan could see what Markus was aiming for now. On the other side of the debris pile, a thin sheet of ice, as clear as a window, separated Sofia from them. She was shouting something, her face tight with alarm, but the ice muffled her. Beyond her, deeper into the ice, there was another room and another woman.

It took a moment to recognize her. The Daedalia he had known had been tough and energetic, bright-eyed and young. This woman looked old, her cheeks thin, her face haggard, and her hair shot through with gray.

She was watching what was happening with sharp fury though, that intent focus unmistakable.

A great spar of white ice stood between them and the cells, and Markus lunged out of the Ice Knight's reach to start crawling around it.

"Stop!" Tirellian shouted suddenly, and Shan's breath caught too, seeing what he saw.

That spar of ice was moving, turning towards them slowly. It spun smoothly around, as if it were mounted on wheels, but there was only glassy ice below it, shifting and reforming so fast it looked as flowing as water. As it turned, it became obvious that it was no mere spar.

It was a throne, rising out of the ice in flat panels. A man sat in it, but unlike the King and Queen of Lightning, this frozen throne was not his tomb. Ice covered him, not in flaking layers, but formed into thick armour. It contained



him utterly, guarding every piece of his skin, but he lived inside it, his verdigris eyes bright and dangerous.

A sword and a sceptre of gleaming metal speared into the ice beside his feet. Ice curled and grew beneath his hands where they gripped the sides of his throne, cascading down to add to the spar below him. Shan wondered whether the throne had once been level with the ground.

“Paladin,” the Ice Knight who had brought them said, his voice sad. “Colder and colder.”

“Gramercy, Sir Hullu,” the enthroned man said, his voice booming through a thin grille in the ice over his mouth. “You have done well. Stand guard now.”

“Colder and colder,” the Ice Knight said, but limped off to stand behind them, his arms stiff at his sides. He did not seem to realize there was blood seeping slowly into the ice over his forehead.

“I am General Haimursu. I have been wondering how long it would take the resistance to pay me a visit.”

“Do forgive our tardiness,” Tirellian said. “I hope we didn’t keep you waiting too long.”

“Not at all. I wasn’t expecting any serious attempts for another day or two, Sir... Paladin, is it?”

Tirellian did not answer.

The General smiled, his mouth barely moving against the ice. “Not a Paladin of Wind, despite your arrival from the air. Can it be that the Last Paladin of the Court of Lightning has finally arrived before me?”

Tirellian inclined his head politely. “Unfortunately, you have the advantage over me. Your name and reputation have not travelled so widely that I ever heard your name.”

“You should know me, Paladin,” the General said. “I was the one who froze your sister into her throne.” He lifted his hand to stroke the arm of his own seat. “I do not think she finds it as comfortable as I do my own.”

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## Chapter Fourteen

Tirellian's posture stiffened even further. He said nothing, but Shan felt the air tighten around them.

Markus was moving again, shuffling away from the foot of the Ice General's throne. He still looked stunned and mazy, but his eyes were clearer than they had been. He glanced at Tirellian and then at Shan, before looking back at his sister. Then he flicked his hand towards each of them in turn. Shan saw the point of heat roiling through the air towards him, but he didn't feel it strike. He could barely feel his lower body now, encased as it was in ice.

"Since you are here," the General said to Tirellian, "I assume you are the one who stole the Sprite's ring from your sister's hand." He held out his own hand, in its gauntlet of ice. "Give it to me."

"No," Tirellian said, his voice sharp with disdain. The ice that bound his left wrist was wet now, losing its shape and shimmer.

"Do you think you can defend yourself against me?"

"I think it is of no use to you," Tirellian said. "You have none of the Sprite's blood in you."

Seeing that wet gleam made Shan test his own bonds. The ice moved around him and he started to squirm, trying to work himself free. As he moved, he looked around, trying to spot some way to escape. The General certainly didn't look particularly fast or manoeuvrable, wrapped in that much ice, so they could quite possibly evade him if they got into the maze of machinery.

There was debris everywhere, broken spars of wood and metal, and artificers' equipment caught amongst it, wirecutters and saw blades and even a great sledgehammer wedged in the slurry not far away. Above them, the roof gaped open, a metal beam hanging from the end of the office level, its ends twisted where the falling roof had hit the ice-heavy chains that still held one end in place.

"I need none," the General said. "If I defeat you and break you to my purpose, you will breed me enough spawn of royal blood to make the ring worth keeping."

Tirellian sneered and said, very precisely, "If."

Then he swung his free hand round, slamming his fist down on the ice that bound his other wrist. It splintered, and Tirellian drew his sword, leaping not towards the general, but towards the Ice Knight behind him, who was watching them through his vague eyes.

The Knight pulled ice up in a wave, raising it between himself and Tirellian, but he wasn't fast enough. Tirellian's sword flashed down, biting through the thin ice the Knight wore and slashing down through his shoulder and into his chest. The Knight cried out, a thin, shrill sound that stung Shan's ears, and then slumped forwards, ice spilling from his open palms in sudden blooms and curls.

When Tirellian dragged his blade free, it was red with blood and steaming in the chill air. The blood darkened fast, falling off his blade in red shards as he swung to face the General.

The General was moving now, rising slowly to his feet and reaching out to seize the sword that stood beside him. Tirellian's eyes narrowed, and lightning flared out from the end of his sword, rooting itself at the top of the General's greatsword until the hilt slumped and melted and the edge of the sword softened into a molten slide.

Tirellian still lunged forwards to meet the general, but his sword did nothing but strike a spray of ice out of his armour. The General lunged forwards, ice rising around Tirellian's feet to trap him, but he danced sideways, striking again.

He wasn't running, though he could have done, and Shan realised why too late. Struggling out of the now-weak cage that held him in place, he grabbed for the sledgehammer and sent it sliding across the ice towards Tirellian. "Sparks! Break him!"

Then he had to duck himself, as a shower of ice shards came shooting towards him, spitting out of the ends of the General's gauntlet.

Crouched behind rubble, he didn't see what Tirellian did with the sledgehammer, but he heard the crackle and ring of ice breaking. Looking around frantically for a weapon of his own, he was reaching for a length of broken pipe before he thought again.

He was a soldier, but he was also an artificer. In fact, he was a much better artificer than he was a soldier.

He forced himself to look at his surroundings differently, not people and panic and Tirellian, his Tirellian, fighting for his life. No, Shan forced that aside, although it wrenched his heart to do it.

Fire Knights, two, Ice General, one, Lightning Paladin, Artificers (one trapped), ice, rubble, metal beams, tools: here were the things he could put to use.

“Get your sister out!” he snapped at Markus, grabbing the metal cutters from the pile. “Then break the reluctant artificer free.”

Then he began to climb, scrambling up the heaped rubble towards the hanging beam. As he struggled upwards, he caught glimpses of the rest of the manufactory, more frost-wrapped figures moving slowly towards them, and black-uniformed soldiers running. It made him hurry, grabbing at handholds recklessly.

Below him, Tirellian was pounding at the Ice General, using the ice beneath his feet to slide around him. The General had created a weapon of his own now, a thick staff of ice that he swung at Tirellian. His frozen armour was cobwebbed with cracks but not yet broken.

The rubble slipped below Shan's feet, cascading down towards the fight. It struck Tirellian a glancing blow on the shoulder, and he slipped, skidding clumsily across the ice. The General laughed and went after him, but Tirellian closed his hands on the shaft of the sledgehammer again and swung it up, grunting with the effort.

It smashed into the General's gauntlet, hard enough to make him snatch his hand back.

Shan could almost reach the end of the beam now, and he leapt for it, reaching out.

It was ice-cold, and he couldn't close his fingers over it fast enough. For a moment, he teetered atop the rubble, poised to fall, like the debris, into the fight below.

Then he threw himself forwards, as if he was leaping for the wind, and pulled himself up onto the beam.

He scrambled along it, leaving skin behind, and it swayed and lunged under his weight. It was still linked to the chains at the far end, though, and it did not fall.

When he reached the chains, he realized he could not cut them unless he straddled the beam itself. He gulped, imagining the weight of ice and metal crashing onto him if they fell together.

Tirellian cried out harshly, a sound of shocked pain, and that was it. There were some things, some people, who were worth death or agony. Shan set to with the metal cutters, sawing his way through the icy chains.

When the last one parted, he lunged for the ends, waiting for the beam to fall.

It didn't and he looked along it to see that new ice had come curling up from the battleground below, closing around the far end.

Shan took a firmer grip on the chains, wrapping his whole body in them, and yelled, "Markus!"

Down below, away from Tirellian's fight, Markus and his sister stood on either side of a wall of ice, their glowing hands pressed against it. At Shan's cry, Markus looked up.

Then he raised his hands, leaving Sofia alone, and the metal beam began to heat, first dripping icemelt and then glowing a brighter and brighter red.

It was hot enough to sting Shan's cold legs where he dangled above it, but he was watching the end.

When it finally began to shift, heaving out of the ice, he yelled, "Tirellian! Back!"

From there, he could only watch as it tipped and plummeted. Tirellian was already racing back towards Markus, his sledgehammer abandoned.

The General couldn't move so fast, and he was still right below Shan when the glowing beam hit the ice below with a sharp sizzle. Then it crashed down, breaking across the General's ice staff and shearing within a hair's breadth of his face. The ice that masked him hissed and then went dripping down his cheeks, but the beam did not hit the General himself, not quite.

He fell back though, frowning as he raised his icy hands to smooth across his bare skin, trying to patch his melting armour.

"You cannot, and will not, coerce the Sprite," Tirellian said, gesturing to Markus sharply.

He went crashing back to Sofia, even as she reached through the ice, breaking the wall open. Markus leapt into the cell beside her, pulling her to the back wall where Daedalia was watching through the ice, her face flushed as she shouted something none of them could hear.

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The General barely seemed to notice, glaring as he was at Tirellian. "I will break all Seven to my will."

"You are willing to be the one who breaks the Pact?" Tirellian said. He was breathing hard and weaponless, and Shan, clinging to the chains with all his might, could only watch the Fire Knights melting their way through to Daedalia and hope that Tirellian understood what he was doing.

"Willing?" The General said. "I would welcome it!"

"Welcome the end of all our magic, even though it sustains you? The Undine's blood runs in your veins too."

"And so I am cursed," the General said. "Let the pact be broken, so that this curse may be ripped out of me. End it, and let the Ice melt."

Sofia cried out in triumph, slamming her hand into the ice. It shuddered and then bowed, breaking the wall that held Daedalia Teichoma imprisoned and separated from her immortal lover.

"Call her!" Shan yelled, but Tirellian was already raising his hand, the ring glinting as he retreated into the shelter of the ice cells.

"Lightning!" he roared, his voice echoing. "Great Sprite, I summon you!"

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## Chapter Fifteen

The first lightning bolt seared past Shan so closely that he braced himself to be caught in its side-flares. From above, he saw the moment when it hit the metal beam below, lighting it up in one great flash that danced along it.

Then it was not just the beam that was shining, but the ground around it. Where the Ice General's armour had melted, lightning blazed through the water, flashing and burning as the air around them roared and broke, over and over until Shan couldn't hear anything at all.

The lightning kept flashing down, and he hung in the air, surrounded by silent light and fire until he had to close his eyes lest it burnt them from his skull.

When he opened his eyes again, the lightning had slowed but not stopped. Now it clustered below him, dancing around the Sprite of Lightning like a deadly snowflake. She was directing it at the Ice General, lashing strike after strike into him until his body jerked and shuddered against the wet ground.

The ice below her was melting too, filling the floor with a spreading deadly pool of roiling water.

In the ice caves, Daedalia Teichoma took a slow stumbling step forwards. She was moving slowly, her steps weak and hesitant, but she looked determined. As she came forwards, Markus offered her his arm and he and Sofia helped her to the edge of the cave, just above the water.

She spoke, but Shan was still too deaf to hear what she said. It drew the Sprite's attention, though, and she turned her face away from the dead general, leaving him to float in the shallow water, his hair spilling through it like seaweed, and his webbed hands spread wide upon the surface of the water.

Daedalia held her arms open.

The Sprite let her lightning fade and then went flashing through the air towards her lover. Shan winced, certain he was about to see Daedalia burnt up like the general.

By the time she reached her lover, though, the Sprite was back in her human form, and she looked like a skinny girl as she wrapped her arms around Daedalia's neck and kissed her fiercely.

Well, that was sweet enough to warm his heart, but his whole body was feeling singed and achy and he wasn't sure how much longer he could hang onto these chains.

"Tirellian," he said, and it was strange to feel his mouth shape the word when he couldn't hear his voice.

Tirellian was already looking up at him, though, his face worried as he spoke urgently.

"Help," Shan said optimistically. "I don't know how I'm going to get down. Am I being loud enough for you to hear me?"

He did hear a sudden low giggle, and then the wind bounced around him lightly, making the chains sway. Shan shut his eyes as the manufactory spun below him.

This time when he opened them, he was looking at the Sylph of Wind.

"You're a puppet!" she said, giggling again as she floated in the air beside him. "Like the ones you used to make!"

"Madam," Shan said. "I don't suppose..."

She held out her arms to him, smiling. "Come here, dear. I'll take you down to your paladin. Look at his sweet face, Arashan. He's fretting, bless him."

Shan slowly disentangled himself from the chains, first his legs and then his left arm. When he was only hanging by one arm, he looked back at the Sylph to be sure she was ready.

"Quick, quick," she said, and he let go of the chains.

She scooped him up in her slender arms, and skimmed down towards the floor as if they were simply gliding on a summer's day. She almost landed in the water, but then she dipped her toe down into it with a grimace, stirring up blue flashes, and said, "Maybe not."

Another quick swoop brought them to the ice cave, and she let go of him with a chuckle.

There was no ground beneath his feet, and he almost fell back into the water.

But Tirellian was there, his arms closing around Shan so tightly it almost squeezed all the breath out of him. He could hardly complain, though, not when



he was holding Tirellian just as tightly, pressing his hands against his lover's hair as Tirellian clutched at him, gasping into his neck.

"I can't hear," Shan said, but Tirellian kissed him then, his mouth hot and urgent, shaking with sobs as he pressed his lips to Shan's.

The Sylph came flitting back after a few moments, still laughing as brightly as a summer's day. She turned over in midair, hanging upside down, so she could drop a quick kiss on Shan's forehead.

Sound came back to him with a low boom: crackling air and rushing water, excited voices, shouting deeper in the factory, and Tirellian, gasping over and over, "I love you. I love you."

"I love you too," Shan said, and this time he dragged Tirellian into a kiss.

It was Sofia who interrupted them.

"Sweet as this is," she said. "We're still not out of trouble. As soon as those guardsmen cross the water or find an archer—"

The Sylph blew a raspberry. "They can *try* to shoot at me. No, no, you're right. Time to go. Sister, put your pretty artificer down and take my hand. Arashan, here."

She stretched out an imperious hand towards him, and he took it uncertainly.

"Join up!" she cried, and Tirellian grasped his other hand, reaching out towards Sofia. Within moments, they had formed a loose ring. Across from him, Daedalia looked up and said, finally looking at him, "Shan? Is that you, boy?"

"Later!" the Sylph cried, the wind lifting her white hair. "See, sister, I told you that you'd be glad I came to help!"

"Get on with it," the Sprite said, rolling her eyes.

The Sylph laughed again, bright and bold and loud, and suddenly they were rising through the air, floating up towards the gaping hole in the roof.

"This," she said to Shan conversationally, as they rose up over the city, "is proper flying, isn't it? Though I do think your wings are charming, dear."

"Thank you," Shan said and caught a little of her excitement. "My next project is powered flight."

"I have some thoughts on that," Daedalia said, her voice a little rusty from disuse. Some of the old life was coming back into her face. "I've been designing things in my head for years, things I could never put on paper."

"Come home with us," Shan said. "Your old rooms are waiting in Glasmoor, and we have work for you, when you feel ready."

"She doesn't have to work!" the Sprite said fiercely. "I will look after her!"

"I like working," Daedalia said firmly. "At least when it's for the right people."

The Sprite pouted.

Soon they were descending into the clearing where Eagle and his resistance fighters camped, everyone running to meet them with shouts of joy and shock.

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It took two weeks to get home, even with the help of two of the Seven. None of them had come out of the fight in the manufactory unscathed, and Ice Guard patrols were scouring the countryside for them. Eagle's brigade dispersed fast, vanishing back into the woods and fields, and Shan, Tirellian, Daedalia, Markus and Sofia spent an uncomfortable week sharing a rather damp hidden cellar just outside Rhodiosson. It gave Shan time to talk to his old teacher, and he watched happily as she began to look healthier.

Tirellian spent the days in deep conversation with Markus and Sofia, and Shan was certain that the Shadowflight would be flying further south in future, into the Court of Fire.

The Sprite spent the time fussing over Daedalia, showering her with affection and strange gifts that glowed brightly and smelt like ozone and fresh rain.

"Never thought I'd see worse than old Salamander in one of his flaps," Sofia commented idly. "Think it comes with immortality, the temperament?"

"I think that's not a conversation I'm going to have while I know my Sylph is listening," Shan said, and was unsurprised at the soft giggle that sounded by his ear.

Then, at last, things calmed down again, and they left the Fire Knights and the resistance to head for high ground. The Sylph had offered to carry Daedalia, but both Shan and Tirellian wanted to fly.

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When they did open out their wings, it was to a perfect wind, one that would carry them all the way home without hesitation. The snow was crisp beneath their feet, but the wind was coming out of the west, warm and soft.

Tirellian began to run, lifting his shoulders to meet the wind, and Shan followed him, throwing himself into the welcome embrace of the air, and rising, rising beside his own paladin, to fly west, out of the frozen Court of Lightning and back towards summer.

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## Chapter Sixteen

It took Shan a few days to adjust back to the heat of summer. Every time he looked out of a window, he caught his breath, fascinated by the green rise of the Isle of Kings and the bright sea curling against the foot of the cliffs.

They were still in the capital, where everything they had done and discovered needed to be reported to and discussed by what seemed like an ever-increasing group of generals and councillors. There had been a medal ceremony, which was merely awkward, and much discussion of future projects.

The Sylph had flitted off to the west after a day. Daedalia was on her way back to Glasmoor, with the Sprite as her fierce protector. Shan had entrusted them with bulky letters to his parents. He wanted to visit them soon, not least so that they could make Tirellian feel part of the family.

Other tasks were harder. After the medal ceremony, Tirellian had gone to talk with his now visibly pregnant sister. King Lyr and Shan had left them to speak alone, but Shan had glanced back to see the tears shining on her cheeks.

It was dusk, a warm summer's evening that stretched out softly into the night. He went wandering across the Isle of Kings, out of the castle and out to the rocky, windswept end of the isle. No one lived here now, not when the main castle had a well and was hit less often by storms, but there were the soft remains of ancient houses under the turf, and he picked his way through them idly, listening to the birds sing passionately in the grass and the surf sigh comfortably far below.

At the furthest point of the isle, there was a simple watchpoint, just a low wall and a simple shelter. No one was there, although he could glance down the coast to see flags flying in the Coast Guard stations on the neighbouring headlands.

From here, on a clear evening like this, he could see the distant rise of the Lightning Coast, faraway and pale. What was happening there now, he wondered, in the quiet grey towns and deep in the snowy forests? It was strange to be back home, and to let that other country, the cold quiet place where he had witnessed wonders, fade into just another piece of the past.

He stayed out there as the evening faded, even when the air cooled enough that he regretted wearing a sleeveless vest (and that made him think of Fire

Knights, blazing among ice, and wonder what names Markus and Sofia were using now). At last, he sighed and straightened up, rolling his shoulders out and preparing to turn in.

“You look like you’re enjoying the view,” Tirellian said, right behind him.

Shan jumped, yelping. “Shit, Sparky, warn a man that you’re there.”

“I’m always here,” Tirellian intoned and then smiled, very slightly.

“You are very lucky that I love you,” Shan told him sternly and that smile widened.

“I had to tell Arellia where we’d been,” Tirellian said abruptly. “I had to tell her that Aillera is still trapped.”

“I’m sorry,” Shan said, and turned around to put his arms around Tirellian. “It must be hard for her.”

“She feels it more, I think, because...” Tirellian made a vague curving gesture and then just folded his arms around Shan.

“That makes sense,” Shan said. Aillera would never have a child. She was caught in time, whereas her twin had kept living and changing. He couldn’t imagine how strange and sad that must be.

Tirellian hummed agreement and leaned on Shan a little. After a few minutes, he inquired, “Are you intending to let go at any point?”

“No,” Shan said as cheerfully as he could. “This is part of it. I get to comfort you.”

“And if we fall off the side of the island trying to walk back in the dark, where is the comfort? I would rather go to bed.”

Shan laughed and looked up to waggle his eyebrows at Tirellian. “Whatever you want.”

Tirellian, to his disappointment, didn’t blush. Instead, he merely said gravely, “I want you. Naked.”

Shan let out an exaggerated sigh. “Oh, Sparky, I’ve corrupted you. I feel guilty.”

Tirellian looked vaguely irritated. “Inside now, Arashan, before night falls.”

So Shan let his lover take his hand and lead him back across the green and flowering clifftops, their hands warm against each other.

The next morning he was woken by a familiar *click-click-click*.

“Not solved it yet?” he murmured, laughing against Tirellian’s side.

“I will find a puzzle you cannot solve one day, Arashan.”

“Good luck,” Shan murmured and nuzzled a kiss against Tirellian’s belly.  
“Mmm.”

“You’re distracting me.”

“It’s more fun that way.”

“You don’t want me to solve this, do you?”

“I’d rather you concentrated on something more press—”

“Oh,” Tirellian said, his voice so honestly startled that Shan sat up, pushing the sheets off his head.

The puzzle box sat open on Tirellian’s palm, displaying the rather scrappy little miner and his hut. In the clear light of morning, it looked like pretty rushed work and Shan grimaced.

“You made me a miner,” Tirellian said.

“You’d been talking about them. I did warn you it wasn’t anything special.”

“You listened to my story.”

“Yes,” Shan said, biting back his apologies to press his cheek against Tirellian’s. Perhaps it wasn’t such bad work, after all. “Always.”

Tirellian looked down at it silently. At last, he said, “Can you show me how to close it?”

“You want to try again? Was it just a fluke of luck or did you work it out?”

“I want to put something in there. For safekeeping.”

“Oh?”

Tirellian slid the Sprite’s ring off his finger and tucked it into the box, behind the miner. “There.”

“You have the right to wear it. No one more so.”

“I don’t want it,” Tirellian said softly.

“But you want to keep it safe?”

“Yes.” He studied it, tilting the box in his hand. “One day, perhaps, if this war ever ends, I may take it out, for myself or one of Arellia’s descendants. Not now, though. They don’t need a king now.”

“They’ve got something better,” Shan said. “The Court of Lightning has a paladin. I can’t think of anything better.”

Tirellian tipped his head, a little abashed, but then said, “I am going to have to put up with endless flattery, I see.”

“Endless and sincere flattery,” Shan corrected and took the box from him. A few quick clicks had it sealed again. It looked unremarkable, in his hand.

Tirellian took it from him and put it down on the bedside table. “We can take it home with us to Porthlevin.”

“Home,” Shan murmured. It was time now. Surely the king had heard everything they could say. It was time to go home and get back to work. There were devices to build and flying machines to design, and the Shadowflight still needed to go soaring out from the high cliffs.

“Yes,” Tirellian said, and then turned to press him down against the pillows. “Now that is solved, I think we should concentrate on other things.”

“Oh, really?” Shan said, grinning, and reached up to pull his paladin down into a slow and easy kiss.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Amy Rae Durreson has a degree in early English literature, which she blames for her somewhat medieval approach to spelling, and at various times has been fluent in Latin, Old English, Ancient Greek, and Old Icelandic, though these days she mostly uses this knowledge to bore her students when they foolishly ask why English spelling is so confusing. Amy started her first novel nineteen years ago and has been scribbling away ever since. Despite these long years of experience, she has yet to master the arcane art of the semicolon. Her first full-length novel, epic fantasy, Reawakening, was released by Dreamspinner Press in January 2014.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# CRUEL TO BE KIND

By Kim Dare

## Photo Description

A naked man lies on the floor in a dark space. He has a muscular build and several tattoos. A light shines down on him from above. He appears to be deep in thought and is holding one hand up so the light shines through his fingers.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I would like a TPE tale. I'd like the characters to have some depth and this lovely boy looks to be a bit melancholy about something. I LOVE angst! There isn't much on the BDSM spectrum that I don't enjoy, but I beg of you no scat. I'm not picky about the setting-dystopian, paranormal, contemporary, tentacles whatever.*

*Blow my mind please. :)*

*Sincerely,*

*~Wench*

## Story Info

**Genre:** paranormal

**Tags:** vampire, BDSM, paddling, friends to lovers, bondage, dominance, submission, masturbation

**Word Count:** 10,787

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## CRUEL TO BE KIND

By Kim Dare

The door creaked open. Xander's blindfold made it impossible for him to see who'd entered the room at the back of the club, but that didn't matter. When footsteps sounded against the bare concrete floor, he had no doubts about who was striding rapidly toward him.

Xander pushed his tongue against the ball gag wedged between his lips, but the damn thing remained stubbornly in place. It stretched his jaw wide open, preventing him from offering up a single word in his defence.

Hands shoved against Xander's chest. He stumbled back several paces. With his wrists cuffed behind him, he couldn't reach out to balance himself. His shoulder hit a wall, and he slumped against it.

He tried to curse, but the gag turned his words into a weak little mumble.

Sudden unease spiked inside him. It was Malone, right? Of course it was. It had to be Malone. If it wasn't... Xander swallowed as best he could around the gag and did his damndest not to give in to panic.

The guy grabbed Xander's shirt and pulled him away from the wall before slamming him back against it. "Have you lost your mind?" The words were snarled in his ear, anger dripping from every syllable.

Xander let out a muffled sigh and leaned more easily against the wall. His gamble had paid off. When Malone had found out about his offering, he'd come to accept it himself, rather than let one of the other vampires who belonged to that particular blood-club claim him.

"Well?" Malone demanded.

Xander mumbled around the gag, not trying to get any actual words out, just gently reminding his friend that he couldn't answer until someone took away the gag.

"You offered yourself?" Malone bit out.

Xander closed his eyes behind the blindfold and pictured his friend. Furious was a good look on him, it always had been—and Xander had been given plenty of opportunities to admire that particular aspect of Malone's personality.

In debates at the students' union while they were at university, in countless meetings since they'd gone into business with each other after graduation—Malone's anger at the world's stupidity had been a constant aspect of Xander's life for over five years.

Malone's anger being directed at Xander—that was a less familiar sensation. He shifted uncomfortably against the wall. Malone didn't get angry with him; he got angry with other people on his behalf all the time, but not actually with him.

It would be worth it, Xander reminded himself. No matter how much he hated Malone being pissed with him, if his plan paid off it would be worth some temporary discomfort.

"Well?" Malone demanded.

Xander mumbled behind the gag once more. His jaw ached, but he wasn't under any illusions now. It would stay in place until Malone decided to ask a question that wasn't rhetorical. If he was half as livid as he sounded, that might be a while.

Without warning, the blindfold was torn away from Xander's eyes. The light from the fluorescent tubes running along the ceiling was harsh and glaring. Xander winced and tried to shy away from it.

Malone grabbed his chin and forced his head back. Xander peered at him through half-closed eyes until his vision finally adjusted. Sharp, blue eyes, pale blond hair and more anger than any one expression should be able to contain.

"You offered yourself?" Malone snarled again.

Xander nodded as far as Malone's grip on him allowed. It wasn't far.

Malone snatched his hand away, turned on his heel and strode across to the far side of the room. He was wearing an evening suit. He must have been out somewhere nice when he got the message about Xander's offering.

"That's what you want, to be a toy for a club full of vampires?"

Xander watched him pace.

"Answer me!" Malone snapped. "Is that what you want?"

Xander shook his head.

Malone's expression cleared. He rushed across to Xander's side. Undoing the gag, he carefully eased it from Xander's mouth.

“One,” Xander whispered.

“What?” Malone absentmindedly wiped Xander’s mouth and caressed his jaw as if trying to soothe the ache the gag had put there.

Xander cleared his throat and licked his lips. “I don’t want to be a toy for a club full of vampires, just for one.”

Malone’s fingers froze. His eyes narrowed. “I told you I’m not interested.”

*Yet here you are...* Xander met Malone’s eyes for a moment.

“I didn’t decide not to take you up on your invitations for my own benefit,” Malone growled. “You don’t want this.”

“If I didn’t want it, I wouldn’t be here.” He would never have taken the risk if he hadn’t been desperate. But all his previous attempts to gain Malone’s attention as something other than a friend and business partner had failed within the first few seconds.

Malone spun away. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” His pacing took him across the room and back several times. His movements were sharp and lacked their usual easy grace. “You think it’s a nice little game. It’s not.” He turned to glare at Xander. Their eyes locked. “I’m not a nice man, Xander. You should know that by now. Vampires aren’t nice people—least of all to the humans we feed from. It’s not polite. It’s not romantic. We use humans—we take what we want from them, then we throw them away.”

Xander remained silent. It wasn’t anything he hadn’t heard before. Malone had made it all very clear when he informed him that he had no interest in screwing him, or feeding from him, or dominating him in any way. He’d laid out his disinterest in precise and graphic terms. And, he’d been lying.

Xander saw it in every line of his body. Malone wanted this just as much as he did. If Xander could just convince him to give it a chance, everything would be fine.

Malone pushed a hand through his hair, shoving the blond strands back off his face. “I’m going to untie you and take you home. You’re never going to come here again. We’ll forget this ever happened.” He nodded to himself, obviously thrilled with his plan.

“No.”

Tension flooded Malone’s body. “What?”

Xander took a deep breath. It wasn't something he ever remembered saying to Malone before that night, but he forced himself to repeat the word. "No."

Malone stalked toward Xander, his gaze intense, his eyes unblinking.

"I'll come back," Xander said, more softly than he intended. "If you throw me out, I'll come back another night."

Malone frowned. "Are you trying to blackmail me?"

Xander tightened his hands into fists behind his back. "Yes." That was exactly what he was trying to do.

For once, Malone seemed to be speechless.

"Twenty-four hours. That's the deal, isn't it? Whichever vampire accepts an offering from a human, he can do whatever he likes with him for twenty-four hours. Give me that long to show you I can do this, and I'll accept whatever decision you make at the end of it." The time he'd spent practicing in front of the mirror held him in good stead. He sounded perfectly calm.

"And if I don't?"

"I'll find a vampire who will."

Malone remained very still for several seconds. "If you had any idea what kind of man you're dealing with, you wouldn't have put that image in my head before handing yourself over to me."

He grabbed Xander's arm. Without uttering another word, he half-led and half-dragged Xander out of the room.

The club was far more crowded now than it had been when Xander had first arrived. Malone rushed them through the main rooms so quickly Xander could barely keep his feet, let alone take in the blur of people they hurried past. Outside, Malone roughly shoved Xander into the passenger seat of his car, before throwing himself behind the wheel.

They screeched out of the club's car park, and Malone turned to the left. That was the opposite direction to Xander's house. Xander's worst fear evaporated. Malone wasn't following through on his threat to take him home. He was actually going for it. This was really happening.

Not a single word was uttered until Malone pulled up outside his house—a modern building full of harsh lines and razor-sharp edges.

"You have a safe word," Malone finally announced. "It's stop."

Xander nodded.

“If you’ve got any sense, you’ll say it now, and we’ll forget all about this.”

Xander remained silent.

Malone’s grip on the steering wheel tightened. “You’re not just playing with fire, Xander. You’re playing with a vampire. And you’re risking far more than a few burns. Whatever you think it will be like to submit to me, you’re wrong.”

Xander’s hands were still cuffed behind his back. That was a good thing. It was the only thing that stopped him from fidgeting under Malone’s glare.

Finally, Malone got out. Rounding the bonnet, he jerked open Xander’s door and hauled him into the house.

The moment the door slammed shut behind them, Malone shoved Xander against the wall and pinned him there, with his cheek pressed hard against the cold paintwork. Xander’s heart rate doubled as Malone tugged at his cuffs, yanking his arms into an uncomfortable position as he undid the restraints.

“You really want to know how a vampire treats his toys? Fine.” Malone spun him away from the wall and flung him into the middle of the room.

Xander stumbled, but he managed to stay on his feet. There were faint red marks around his wrists where the cuffs had cut in. He stared at them, wondering if those kinds of marks were going to become a regular feature in his life. He could only pray that they would.

“Strip,” Malone snapped. “Now. Keep me waiting, and I’ll cut your lucky T-shirt straight off your back.”

Xander hurriedly tugged his T-shirt over his head. Lacking anywhere else to put it, he dropped it on the floor at his feet. Toeing off his trainers, he undid his jeans. Obeying Malone was important. Proving he could keep up was important too. He got himself down to his bare skin in record time, taking off his watch and dropping that on top of the pile.

Malone kicked aside the discarded garments and slowly circled Xander. He was still fully clothed. His tie wasn’t even crooked.

Xander glanced down at his own naked body. His cock was more than half-hard. It generally was whenever Malone was around. But, his erection was usually hidden behind his own clothes. Xander glanced at Malone’s fly, hoping

to see a reassuring tent there, but Malone's pacing took him out of his line of sight.

"From this moment on, you can forget whatever you think you know about yourself," Malone said. "Everything you think you are is irrelevant. You're mine. For the next twenty-four hours, the only thing that matters is what you can do to please me. You're not a person. You're a toy. A snack."

Xander's throat went dry. His cock got harder. Unable to summon a word, he just nodded.

"And there are two things I want more than anything," Malone went on. "For you to realise that you made the worst mistake of your life when you did this and for you to never make such a stupid mistake again. You're going to regret this, Xan. I'm going to see to that."

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Malone moved around to face Xander head on. He stared straight into his eyes for several seconds, praying that the warning would spark some hint of self-preservation within his friend.

Nothing.

Malone ground his teeth together.

Cruel to be kind. That was the only way at this point. It would be kinder in the long run if he was cruel now. The sooner he showed Xander what submitting to a vampire was really like and got him to say his safe word, the sooner this would be over, and the better it would be for them both.

Stepping back, Malone ran his gaze up and down Xander's body trying to work out what would make Xander realise his mistake most quickly. He could take a whip to him—not for a flick of the wrist 'isn't this hot and kinky' kind of whipping. He could throw the real thing at him—a true punishment designed to make a man determined never to warrant a punishment again. Xander definitely deserved it for putting himself at risk this way.

Malone bit back a frustrated growl. It was impossible to be objective. All that bare skin made his cock rise and his teeth tingle in expectation.

Damn it, vampires weren't designed to respect the idea that some people were off limits—even when those limits were self-imposed. He'd wanted him for so long. Xander had been offering himself up on a damn platter, and he hadn't even let himself have a taste. And now...

Almost without realising what he was doing, Malone stepped closer. He'd seen Xander's tattoos so many times; he'd watched their number gradually rise.

He'd seen the depth of muscle Xander carried increase too. Xander wasn't a skinny little computer geek anymore. When they'd first met, Malone had been so much broader across the shoulders, so much stronger than him. Now, Xander was all muscles and tats. It was only Malone's species that gave him an advantage. Well, that and a natural ruthlessness that Xander had never successfully cultivated, no matter how tall, dark and tough he'd managed to make himself look.

Malone ran his fingers down Xander's arm, following a line of black ink from one end of the pattern to the other. He'd picked that one for him the previous year. Xander had asked for his advice on what sort of tattoo to get and, God help him, Malone had given it—knowing that Xander had always followed his advice like it was an order.

Malone had gone online and searched through pictures all night trying to find the perfect design. He'd jacked off at the idea that he was marking Xander as his own. But, he'd never actually touched the tattoo before, never risked it.

The room remained entirely silent as Malone helplessly moved on to the next tattoo that graced Xander's skin. That one was older. Xander hadn't asked him to pick it as such, but he'd shown it to him and asked for his approval. And Malone had known that if he'd said he disliked it, Xander would have abandoned any intention of using it.

Slowly, almost as if he was in a dream, Malone walked around Xander to study his back. He mentally pictured the whip marks he could layer there. How many could he put in place before Xander begged him to stop?

They wouldn't be as permanent as the tattoos, but they would be entirely Malone's marks, and they would be on Xander's skin, under his skin, breaking his skin, maybe even leaving scars that would last as long as any ink.

Cruel to be kind. Malone mentally cursed himself. Cruel because it came naturally to a vampire was more like it. He shook his head, but it was pointless denying the truth. Kindness wasn't something he'd ever been accused of, wasn't something any of his species could be accused of.

As Malone stared at Xander's back, pictures played through his mind, memories of what he'd seen other vampires do to humans over the years. Maybe Malone was as much a bastard as any other vampire, but he was damn sure that Xander was never going to end up stuck in that sort of life.



He grabbed hold of Xander's arm and marched him up the stairs. Xander had been to his house lots of times. There were only two rooms he'd never been permitted to set foot in—Malone's bedroom and his feeding room. It was time he saw the latter.

Unlocking the door, Malone tossed Xander inside. He hit the light switch as Xander staggered into the middle of the room. Righting himself, Xander looked at his new surroundings.

Malone slammed the door. For a full minute, Xander's attention remained on the various kinky toys and implements that filled the room, then he turned to Malone. He seemed to realise that some sort of response was expected.

"You've never hidden what you're into, and I'm not exactly a virgin," Xander said, oh so calmly.

"What?" Having Xander in that room was doing nothing to make Malone feel the least bit calm.

"I'm not shocked. I'm not going to freak out."

"You've never done anything like this before." Malone met Xander's eyes and dared him to deny it.

"I've jacked off thinking about leather ever since I met you."

"You've never done anything like this with another man," Malone repeated.

Xander remained silent for too long. By the time he finally spoke, Malone had already worked out three separate ways he intended to kill whoever had dared raise a whip to Xander in the past.

"No," Xander finally admitted. "I've never submitted to anyone else. I've never wanted to submit to anyone but you."

Malone carefully unfurled his hand from the tight fist it had formed.

Xander turned his attention back to the room. "Do I—?"

"You do what you're told."

Xander smiled slightly and nodded his acceptance.

That was bad. Xander smiling was bad, Xander thinking this was a good idea was bad. He didn't want Xander to be happy in that room. Determined to never set foot in a vampire's feeding room again, that was the aim, wasn't it? Xander's presence wasn't helping Malone think at all clearly.

The room was all set up. A thick chain hung from the beam in the ceiling. A pair of heavy-duty cuffs was suspended from the last link. Malone stepped up to them.

“Come here.”

Xander obeyed.

Malone quickly fastened the cuffs around his wrists, trapping them high above his head. He didn't pause to admire the view, but strode quickly to the toys hanging from row after row of hooks on the wall.

Harsh enough to make Xander regret this. Mild enough that he wouldn't be afraid of him at work next week. Painful enough for him not to want to submit to a vampire again. Gentle enough that Xander wouldn't flinch from him when this was over.

Malone closed his eyes and tried to pull his thoughts into order. It was impossible. He wanted Xander too much. He'd always wanted him too much. That was the damn trouble. No other human could make him feel so out of control inside his own skin, or make him feel less able to keep his inner bastard in check.

Malone grabbed a toy from the top row at random. A paddle. It would do.

He turned around. Xander's eyes went straight to the toy. It was nothing special. A handle attached to a surface about twice the size of Malone's hand, covered in black leather. It was heavy, but that meant very little. Malone had had plenty of practice. He knew how to bring it down so it landed just as harshly or as gently as he wished.

“You remember your safe word?” Malone demanded.

“Yes.”

“You're an idiot if you don't say it within the first five.” Malone stepped up alongside Xander and rested the paddle against his arse.

Xander jerked. His buttocks tensed. Malone gave him a second to speak up. Nothing.

Malone lifted the paddle and brought it down hard against Xander's left buttock. Xander gasped. The chains above his head rattled. He failed to utter his safe word.

Malone landed a symmetrical blow against Xander's other buttock. The sound of leather meeting flesh echoed through the room. Two neat red marks

blossomed in the paddle's wake. Malone's cock hardened as he applied the paddle twice more, just a little lower, spreading the colour over Xander's skin.

Another two pairs, hard enough for Malone to be sure that Xander wouldn't enjoy the sensation, controlled enough that he didn't risk any real damage. A fifth pair of spansks, then a sixth. He found his rhythm and settled into it, allowing enough time for Xander to speak up, but not enough for him to recover in any way before another blow from the paddle demanded his attention.

For what seemed like forever, Xander took it like a pro, barely a reaction, not a single sound. Finally, his control started to crack. His stubbornness couldn't last forever. He jerked, tugging hard at the cuffs as he tossed his head back.

Malone studied him through narrowed eyes. "Do you know why vampires like to spank their toys?"

"Kinky," Xander gasped. Apparently unable to remain still as he fought to process his pain, he twisted beneath the cuffs.

"No. It's all about the adrenaline, the endorphins. They taste nice. We don't play games with lovers, Xander, we prepare our food." Two more spansks with the paddle. "Season the blood until it tastes just right."

Another two, lighter this time, but applied where Malone most loved to spank someone—against the sensitive strip of skin where thigh merged into buttock.

Xander let out a muffled yelp. He closed his eyes. "Thank you."

Malone paused. "What?"

"For telling me." Xander opened his eyes. His voice was rough, but he was making an obvious effort to speak evenly and clearly. "The more I understand, the better chance I have of pleasing you."

"You don't like this," Malone ground out. "There's no masochism in you."

"Submission." Xander swallowed. "There's submission in me."

"That's not the point."

"I like doing what you want. I don't know if I'll ever like being paddled, but I'll always love knowing that you enjoy paddling me." As hard as he obviously tried to control it, he couldn't make his voice entirely steady. "I can enjoy that. I can get off on that."

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“You don’t have permission to get off!”

Xander smiled slightly. He parted his lips.

“If you thank me for telling you that...” Malone trailed off. What would he do if Xander said it—paddle him? Whip him?

As his mind raced, Malone absentmindedly stroked Xander’s arse, palming the sensitised skin. When Xander moaned in approval and pushed back against his hand, Malone jerked away from him. Damn it, how far did he have to take things to convince Xander this was a bad idea?

Malone looked down at the paddle. He owned far harsher toys. But if Xander knew he’d enjoy using them on him, then would that make him take it like it was a damn gift?

Malone took a deep breath. When he looked up, he met Xander’s eyes. That was it. Xander wanted to feel a connection. He wanted Malone to be happy, to be pleased with him. It was what he’d always seemed to want for as long as they’d known each other. Pain was only a good thing to Xander when it brought them together.

It took every scrap of self-control Malone possessed, but even as he held his friend’s gaze, he bundled up everything he felt for Xander, everything that made him want to treat Xander like a person rather than a blood supply, and he put it in a box. He pushed the box right to the back of his mind and locked it away.

Xander frowned, as if he could sense the change without Malone needing to move a muscle or utter a word.

Malone broke eye contact. A moment later, he lifted the paddle. He brought it down sharply. He gave Xander just enough time to speak up between each blow, but that was the only allowance he made.

He was pushing the right kind of chemicals into Xander’s bloodstream now, nothing more. There was nothing friendly about it, nothing erotic, either. He was getting dinner ready. That was all Xander was, all Malone could allow him to be.

Standing alongside Xander let Malone keep half an eye on his expression. No fear. No anger.

It hurt. It had to hurt him, but he still took it all like a damn reward.

Xander gasped. He jerked. He closed his eyes and bit his lip so hard he risked drawing blood, but he never gave any indication that he wanted Malone to stop.

Stubborn bastard. Any other human with Xander's level of experience would have spoken up by then.

That was another reason why Xander should never be allowed to play with leather. He never had any idea when to say enough was enough. Malone always had to make those decisions for him. It was Malone who set his schedule so he didn't work too hard, Malone who made sure he didn't stress himself out when they were going for a new engineering contract. It was Malone who looked after him, Malone who owned him.

He'd owned him for years, but it had never been clearer in that moment that Xander really would let him do *anything*. It was everything Malone had ever wanted, and everything he'd ever been afraid of, wrapped up in a stunning parcel and left bound in his feeding room for his enjoyment.

Malone's heart raced. His cock ached. Lust, need and primal fear all rushed through him, mingling together and making his mind spin. He tossed the paddle aside. It landed with a bang on the far side of the room. Xander jumped. His chains rattled.

Malone stepped in front of him. "Say no." If Xander said it, Malone would be able to stop, but if he didn't say it...

Xander met his gaze. His breathing was ragged. He refused to speak.

Malone caught hold of his jaw and pushed his head back, baring his neck.

"Yes," Xander whispered.

It was too much for Malone to resist. He put his lips to Xander's jugular. His teeth sliced cleanly through his skin. Xander arched, pushing his torso against Malone's, rubbing their bodies together.

Blood filled Malone's mouth. He swallowed it down, greedy and desperate to take Xander and make him part of himself. Blood, body, soul, he wanted it all.

Hunger rushed through Malone. He sucked harder at the wounds, drinking Xander down. With every moment that passed, he expected to taste his fear. It was only to be expected. Every human was afraid the first time a vampire fed from him. But, somehow, Xander wasn't. Malone tasted his pleasure; he tasted

his submission, his relief. There was pain there too, and not just a touch. The paddling had hurt him. But the pain was wrapped up in everything else, and just made him all the more perfect. Malone had never tasted that kind of trust. One drop made him an instant addict.

Xander whimpered with pleasure, tipping his head even further back in offering. He wasn't proving a point now, he wasn't getting through an ordeal to please another man, he loved this in its own right.

Growling with frustration, Malone forced himself to break the bite. The wound began to heal the moment his teeth ceased to pierce his skin. Malone ran his tongue across it, helpless to stop himself relishing the final taste.

He pulled back. Their eyes met as they each fought for breath.

Xander swallowed. He licked his lips. His desire for a kiss was obvious. For a long time, Malone stared at Xander's mouth. Over the years, he'd spent almost as much time thinking about kissing him as he had about biting him.

A kiss, a gentle word, a snippet of praise and Xander would let him feed from him for the rest of his life. He'd let him do *anything* with him. Malone would have everything he'd ever wanted, and Xander would spend the rest of his life at his beck and call.

Cruel to be kind.

Malone reached up and undid the cuffs from around Xander's wrists. Not one touch, not one word. Malone turned on his heel and strode out of the room. He slammed the door behind him and stormed into the neighbouring room—his home office.

The computer took hours to start up. Finally, he was able to punch in the right code. An image appeared on the screen.

Xander still stood in the middle of the playroom, just where Malone had left him.

Malone had left so many men in there on other nights, usually after he screwed them as well as fed from them, but even so. That night was the first time he wanted to rush back in there, grab a man, and take him to his bedroom, take his dominance over him into every facet of his real life.

Eventually, Xander moved. He touched his neck where Malone had fed. He reached back and rubbed his sore arse. He winced at the latter. A few minutes passed, and Xander started to look around him. There were no windows, only

the skylight in the ceiling. Three doors led out of the room. Two were locked. Xander found the third one and the en suite. For a few moments, he was out of Malone's sight.

When Xander re-entered the room, Malone studied him carefully. He looked remarkably relaxed for a man who was supposed to be freaked out. He went across to the bondage bench on the far side of the room and settled himself on his stomach, apparently more than content to have a nap while Malone was elsewhere. Damn it, business meetings panicked Xander more than the feeding had.

Malone bowed his head. He still had most of his twenty-four hours left. If Xander hadn't come to his senses by the morning, Malone would stop pulling his punches, stop babying his friend and show him how much of a bastard a vampire could really be. Everything would be fine. It would.

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Xander woke with a jolt. He tried to jerk himself to his feet. A hand grabbed his shoulder just in time to stop himself from falling off the... He stared at the thing he lay on for a few seconds—the bondage bench. He looked up at Malone.

"You're leaving for work in fifteen minutes, if you're not dressed by then, you're going as you are." He strode out of the room without giving Xander a chance to answer.

Xander twisted around and perched gingerly on the edge of the bench. His buttocks were still far too sensitive. Sitting behind a desk wasn't going to be pleasant. Xander shifted on the bench. He frowned slightly. Actually, the worst of the pain seemed to have faded during the night.

It was nothing like the intense, blistering heat that had come just after the paddling ended. Over the last few hours, it had turned into an ache that made him want to squirm as much as it made him want to rush to his feet. It was possible that sitting behind a desk was going to be an exercise in frustration rather than endurance. His cock hardened at the prospect.

Xander glanced toward the door his friend had left through. Malone was pissed off, but he was always pissed off pre-noon. Pre-coffee he was damn near murderous most days. Xander quickly hurried through his morning routine. At some point, Malone had deposited a set of Xander's clothes on top of the cage in the playroom.

His trousers rubbed against his arse as he pulled them on. Xander bit his lip and raised an eyebrow. If he got through the day without coming untouched, it would be a minor miracle.

He was just straightening his tie when the door swung open. Malone was dressed for work too, although it was supposed to be his day off. It seemed diplomatic not to mention that fact.

*Get in the car. Hurry up. Get inside. Start with the Hatfield project. Take a break. Eat your lunch.* The orders came thick and fast, each one issued using the minimum number of words and none of them betraying the least hint of emotion in Malone's part.

Xander smiled slightly to himself. It was quite sweet, really.

"What are you grinning about?" Malone demanded.

Xander glanced up. Malone was standing in his office doorway. He'd spent a hell of a lot of time there that day. Xander was no longer sure if his persistent desire to squirm in his chair came from the residue of his spanking or if it had more to do with Malone constantly staring at him.

"You think that ordering me around is going to make me regret wanting to submit to you."

Malone stopped in front of Xander's desk. "It will."

Xander glanced up at him. "You've been ordering me around ever since we met, and I've let you. For the last couple of years, I've been actively encouraging you."

Malone's fists came to rest on Xander's desk. "What?"

Xander turned his attention to his computer screen. "I like it. I like you telling me what to do. I always have. I'm not sure how that could be news to you."

Malone stared at him as if he'd lost his mind.

Xander's heart raced faster and faster, but he did his best to appear calm. "You think I don't know what kind of dom you are, Mal. But I know exactly what kind of orders you'll give me and exactly what you'll do with any control you have over me. I know, because I've been submitting to you for years."

For once, Malone seemed to be completely speechless.



“You’re the reckless one,” Xander reminded him. “I don’t rush into anything. I know what I’m doing. I know what I’m getting myself into, because I’m most of the way there already. The only thing that will change if you decide you want me as a submissive is that you’ll boss me around when we have sex as well as the rest of the time. I’m all in favour of that.”

For a moment, Malone’s eyes were full of emotion. Then it disappeared. The walls came down. That was bad. It didn’t usually happen when Malone was talking to him, but Xander had seen it happen when he was talking to other people.

He just had time to mentally brace himself before Malone’s words hit the air.

“And what? You thought that just because I found it convenient to boss you around when we’re at work, you’re somehow my ideal submissive? Grow up, Xander!” Malone looked him up and down with obvious contempt. “I never gave a damn about the decisions I made for you. It was just a game that passed the time—seeing what I could convince you to do for my amusement. That’s all ordering you around will ever be to me. It’s all *you* will ever be to me, a game—one that I’m already bored with.”

Malone turned on his heel and strode out of the room. He slammed the door behind him. Xander took a deep breath and let it out very slowly, his attention never straying from the door.

It was a lie. Deep down, in a place that was all about instinct, Xander knew that. He had logical evidence for it, too. What he’d seen with his own eyes was more important than a few words Malone threw at him because he was angry.

It was a lie, but Malone had always been a bloody good liar. He had a way of making things sound true and to hell with reality. Xander took another shaky breath.

He wasn’t wrong about Malone. He wasn’t.

The fan on Xander’s computer whirled away, the file he should have been working on remained open. Xander continued to stare at the door.

He had no idea how much time passed before it swung open again. Malone stared across the room at him.

“Shut down your computer. Get your jacket. We’re leaving.”

Xander did as he was told, just as he had so many times. He could feel Malone watching his every movement, as if expecting him to do something weird and wonderful.

Xander waited for the computer to wind down, switched off the point and picked up his jacket. He looked across to his friend.

Malone walked away without a word, apparently having decided that Xander would follow along behind him obediently enough without a specific order. He was right.

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Malone stared at the image on the computer screen in his home office. Xander was naked. He lay in the middle of the feeding room floor, directly under the skylight. As Malone watched, Xander lifted one hand and let the last rays of the sun caress his fingers.

He was stunning. And he was in Malone's feeding room. And he was so bloody unshakable. If a paddling hadn't convinced him to run away, being told exactly how little Malone cared about him should have done the trick.

Everything he'd said had been a lie, of course, but it still should have worked. It still should have made Xander storm off, or take a swing at him, or *something*.

Malone pushed his fingers through his hair. He was losing his mind. Meanwhile, Xander had never looked more composed or more at peace with his place in the world. He'd stripped and gone into the playroom as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Malone cursed himself. He cursed his entire species. He cursed his father, his mother and every member of his extended family. He cursed every vampire he'd ever seen screw over a human just because they could.

But, he couldn't bring himself to curse Xander. He couldn't convince himself to remain separated from Xander for another moment either.

He pushed the feeding room door open so hard, it slammed into the wall behind it. He expected Xander to jump, but he sat up almost serenely, bending his knees up in front of him and looping his arms loosely around his legs. And he just remained on the floor in the middle of the playroom and waited. For another order? Another insult? Another paddling?

The only thing Malone saw in him was pure acceptance of whatever his so-called friend chose to throw at him.

“You need to say no.” It sounded to Malone as if his own voice came from a long way away. “You need to say it now.”

Xander didn't even blink, let alone speak.

“You need to realise that this isn't what you want, and you need to tell me that, because once I've got you, Xan, I won't be able to let you go.”

“You've had me for years,” Xander said.

Malone closed his eyes. “Not like this, not like I will if you refuse to walk away now.”

When he opened his eyes, Xander was still there, still looking so bloody accepting.

“Why the hell do you trust me so much?” Malone demanded.

“Because you've proved that I can. You've never made a bad decision for me. You've never taken advantage of the fact I like to follow your lead.” He glanced down for a moment. “You've always done what's best for me, always.”

“It won't be like that anymore,” Malone said. He crouched down in front of Xander, damn near begging him to understand. “You talk about handing your sex life over to me as if it's the same thing as letting me decide which restaurant we take a client to, as if I'll treat it like giving you advice about which car to buy. I won't.”

Xander's tranquillity didn't waver for a second.

“Once I'm feeding from you, once I'm screwing you, I guarantee I'll take advantage of you. I'll do what I want. I'll do what's best for me, always.”

Not even a blink.

Malone's palms turned slick with nervous sweat. “I won't treat you the way you deserve just because we were friends first. Even if I manage to think of you as my boyfriend rather than a snack—which is a hell of a long shot for any vampire—I'll still be a bastard about every single decision to do with sex, and I'll enjoy every moment of it. I'll be selfish and demanding, and insist on everything being the way I want it. I'll use you over and over again, and most of the time I won't even let you come when I'm done with you.”

Xander took a deep breath. “Okay.”

Malone's heart raced. Blood pounded in his ears making his own words difficult to hear, but he forced them out regardless. "I'll put you in chastity for months on end. I'll find out your every kink and use them all against you. I'll keep you on edge and frustrated. I'll use every part of you and leave you panting with need when I walk away. I'll collar you and never let you take that collar off."

Xander swallowed. "Promise?"

Malone shook his head. "Xan..."

"Do you really think I've been imagining you as the kind of lover who'll buy me flowers and put me on a pedestal?" he asked. "I know you. I know what you'll be a bastard about, and I know where you'll draw the line."

Malone closed his eyes, blocking out the sight of Xander sitting there, looking so strong and so submissive at the same time.

"You think I'm saying I'll put up with you being in charge and making me jump through hoops, but it's not like that. It's what I want. Bloody hell, Mal, I want it enough to stand up to you for the first time in my life. Doesn't that tell you something about how much I want this?" His words were composed and determined, but his carefully modulated tone did nothing to hide his desperation. By the time he finished, he was gripping his own fingers so tightly his knuckles were all white.

If anyone was going to hold any part of Xander that tightly, it should be Malone, no one else. He took hold of Xander's wrists and tugged his hands apart. The moment he saw his own grip wrapped around Xander's skin, he was mesmerised. He couldn't help but stare.

"I've wanted to belong to you for so long," Xander said.

Malone gazed into Xander's eyes for a long time. Xander had never pushed to get things his own way. He'd never liked admitting what he wanted, let alone demanding that what he wanted should come first.

Malone looked down, and that was the moment that he realised that this was one battle he wouldn't win—that it was the only battle in his life that he had no interest in winning.

Xander wanted this. Xander wanted to submit so much, he'd actually stopped submitting for long enough to make that crystal clear. No one could have asked him to do anything harder, and he'd done it all on his own without any help from Malone.

“You don’t belong to me. You’re not wearing my collar—yet.” He paused for a moment to let that final word sink in. His mind raced. If they were really going to do this... If Xander really was going to belong to him for the rest of his life, they would do it properly and start as they meant to go on... “There’s one more thing you have to do before you can belong to me.”

Xander nodded, obviously willing to do whatever the hell it was. Malone smiled slightly. No survival instinct at all.

Malone stood up. Xander started to do the same.

“I didn’t tell you to move.”

Xander froze.

“Stay there, but get on your knees.”

If they really were going to do this then...

For a moment, Malone’s mind was a complete blank. He’d been trying to stop himself fantasising about Xander for so long, his brain refused to go there. He looked at his feeding room as if he’d never seen it before.

There were so many things he wanted to do with Xander, he didn’t know what to pick. Treating him like every other person he’d brought to that room was unthinkable. Imagining himself being any other way with a lover was impossible. But, there again, he’d never cared if any of the other men who he’d brought to that room had a survival instinct. He’d never wanted to protect them—from the whip or from his inclination to be a bastard.

He looked across to Xander. He knelt there, still outwardly calm, but when their eyes met, the need burning there was so clear. Xander needed him to make the decision, to show him that everything was fine and that he would look after him no matter what. He also needed to know that Malone had been telling him the truth when he’d told him what their sex life would be like.

Malone’s gaze came to rest on an object propped up in the far corner of the room. He smiled as a version of the future came gradually into focus within his mind. It was time for Xander to really *see* what he was signing up for.

Picking up the large mirror, he carried it across and propped it up against the spanking bench so it was directly in front of Xander.

Xander looked from the reflection to Malone and back, obviously waiting for an explanation.

“Once my collar goes around your neck, you’ll need my permission to come.”

Xander nodded his understanding.

“You won’t have the right to jack off whenever the hell you feel like it. You won’t be allowed to touch your cock at all, unless you’re washing it or aiming it. And if I think you’re taking advantage of my generosity in letting you do either of those two things, you’ll lose those exceptions.”

“Okay.” The word was barely whispered, but it was filled with relief, not fear.

Malone stood over Xander, staring down at him. Xander tilted his head back in return, peering up at him.

“Look at the reflection, look at your cock.”

Xander obeyed.

“Put your hands behind your back, I don’t want you touching it yet, just look.” Malone smiled. “If you go through with this, this is the last time you’ll ever look at your cock and know it belongs to you.”

Xander swallowed.

Malone stepped behind him so he could see the reflection. So strong. So much muscle, so many tats, and he was Malone’s—or he would be soon.

“Do you like getting yourself off?”

Xander met his gaze in the reflection. “Yes.” Complete honesty.

Malone’s cock stiffened behind his fly as he watched Xander’s erection harden and rise. “Will you miss being able to do that whenever you want?”

Xander licked his lips. “Yes.”

“This is going to be the last time you’re ever going to be able to jack yourself off and know you’ll be allowed to come at the end of it.”

Xander glanced down at his erection. Malone’s gaze never wavered from Xander’s face.

“Go ahead. It’s still yours, for now. You can play with it a little.”

Xander slowly took one hand from behind his back and wrapped his fist around his cock.

Adrenaline spiked in Malone's veins. "That's right," he encouraged. "That feels good, doesn't it?"

Xander nodded.

"Keep it nice and slow. There's no rush. You want to have a good memory of your last guaranteed orgasm. Make it last."

Xander shuffled his knees against the floor, but he seemed to be turned on rather than worried about it all. He took a deep breath and moved his hand more slowly, giving control of his last moments of freedom to Malone without a single hesitation.

"Good boy."

Xander's attention jerked up to Malone. Their eyes locked together. That was it, what Xander wanted more than anything else. Praise. For his master to be pleased with him. Maybe Malone had been wrong to say there was no masochism in him, but Xander had been right when he set out his stall as a submissive.

Malone's smile turned crooked as he turned away from him. Maybe being a bit of a bastard was acceptable. With a man who got turned on by being told he might never be allowed to come again, perhaps being a bit of a bastard was actually a good thing.

"Keep going as you are," he said. Somehow, he managed to sound casual. Going to one of the cabinets in the corner, he opened a drawer and found the first thing he wanted. The other item he required was in a different drawer—a locked drawer. He put the second item in his pocket, but he kept the first one in his hand when he went back to Xander.

He was still stroking his cock very slowly, but all his attention was on Malone rather than himself.

"Focus." Malone crouched down behind Xander and met his gaze in the reflection.

"Sorry."

Malone rubbed his hand over Xander's tightly cropped hair. "You're forgiven," he said, with an easy smile.

Xander smiled back, as if all was right with his world.

"You know, it's not just your cock that will belong to me when you're wearing my collar. Do you like playing with your balls when you jack off?"

Xander nodded.

“Go ahead.”

Xander took his left hand from behind his back and cupped his balls. Moving his fingers, he rolled his sac against his palm.

“Good?” Malone asked.

Xander nodded again.

“Do exactly what you’d do if you were on your own,” Malone whispered in his ear. “I want to know what you used to do when your cock belonged to you.”

Xander whimpered.

Possession. Yes, Xander loved that. Malone looked over Xander’s shoulder, watching him play with himself. His strokes were getting firmer now. His hips rocked as if he found it impossible to keep them still. “Good boy.”

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Xander relished the words. He wanted to look over his shoulder and face his friend properly, but he killed the instinct and went back to staring at the reflection of his cock, just as Malone had ordered. Everything was still so fragile. It was still so difficult for him to believe that Malone was actually giving in and accepting his submission, taking any kind of risk with that was courting insanity.

“What do you think about?” Malone asked.

“You.” He hadn’t come thinking about anyone else for years, and now Malone was right there, and this was actually happening.

“Me doing what?” Malone asked.

“Screwing me, tying me up, spanking me, feeding from me, ordering me about, all of it,” Xander stuttered out.

Malone smiled, but he still didn’t reach out and touch Xander. He kept one tortuous inch of air between them the whole time.

“There’s another part of you I’m going to own when you’re collared.” Malone dropped a tube of lubricant on the floor within Xander’s easy reach.

Xander stared at it for a long time, not about to take the initiative if waiting patiently might inspire Malone to make the decision for him.



“Since it’s your last chance to finger your arse whenever you want, it would be a crime not to, wouldn’t it?” Malone’s words were softly spoken. As close as his lips were to Xander’s ear, it felt like they were whispered directly into his mind.

Xander nodded. He reached for the lube. His hands were shaking. The top wouldn’t come off.

“Let me do that for you.” Malone deftly took off the lid and squeezed a generous amount of lube onto Xander’s fingers.

“Thank you.”

Malone chuckled. “You’re welcome, pet.”

Xander looked over his shoulder. Malone was just a fraction of an inch away. It would have been so easy for one of them to lean forward and bring their lips together in their first ever kiss. Xander didn’t dare. Malone just smiled and refused to do it because he could, because he knew what Xander wanted and it amused him to deny the request.

Xander looked at his slicked fingers. “Do I need permission to move?”

“Not this time.”

Xander clumsily rearranged himself so he could lie back on the floor and reach down between his legs. He moaned as his fingers slid against his hole, not so much from what he was doing, as from feeling Malone watching him do it.

He stared up at Malone, watching Malone watch him. He slid one finger inside his hole, working it back and forth before replacing it with two. Malone’s gaze never strayed from him. Rocking his hips, Xander pushed himself onto his fingers again and again.

He bit his lip to try to keep back a moan of pleasure as he rubbed his fingertips against his prostate. Heat rushed to Xander’s cheeks, making Malone chuckle again. It wasn’t a harsh sound. It sounded less like Malone was making fun of him and more like Malone was getting into his stride and really starting to enjoy himself.

“That’s enough. Back as you were.”

Xander blinked up at him. His fingers felt good inside him, he had no desire to stop unless they were going to be replaced by Malone’s cock.

Malone didn’t say anything else. He finally seemed to realise that he didn’t have to, that Xander would soon obey him of his own accord. He was right.

Xander gave up what he wanted. Twisting around, he got himself back onto his knees.

He was so hard, he thought he might come from a single touch. Whether it was official or not, he already felt like his cock belonged to Malone. He couldn't risk touching it without permission.

"You can go back to what you were doing," Malone offered.

Xander stroked himself very cautiously, very lightly, half-terrified that he would make himself come before Malone wanted him to.

"What about here?" Crouching down behind Xander once more, Malone reached around him and ran his fingers over one of Xander's nipples. "Do you play here when you think about me, too?"

Xander shook his head. A shudder ran through him, but that was because it was Malone's touch. It had nothing to do with where he was touching him.

"Never?"

Xander shook his head. "Never saw the point."

"That's okay. I'll put clamps on you. Get you nice and sensitive and teach you to love it."

"Thank you," Xander whispered.

Malone moved his hand up to Xander's shoulder and casually caressed his skin. "You know when you're in bed and you're half asleep, do you ever just reach down and tug on your cock a few times, just because it feels good, just because you can?"

Xander nodded.

"You won't be allowed to do that anymore."

Xander took a deep breath.

"And when you're in the shower and your hand's all soapy?" Malone whispered into his ear, with obvious relish. "Never again." It sounded as if he'd finally realised that it was okay for him to want to twist the knife a little.

Xander bit back a whimper and helplessly rocked his hips as every description of not being allowed to come in the future made him all the more desperate to come right then.

“You’re going to be the one to decide when my ownership of you starts, Xan. As soon as you come, that will be it. You’ll be mine, from that second on, and God, I hope you know what you’re letting yourself in for.”

Xander nodded.

“It’s going to be the last decision you ever make. So, if you’re sure, then go for it, Xan. If you really want to belong to me, show me. Come.”

Xander tightened his grip. He was so close to the edge, it only took him a couple of strokes. Pleasure exploded through him. He thrust his hips, pushing his cock into his hand. His eyes fell closed. Suddenly, something wrapped around his neck.

Jolted out of his pleasure, Xan dropped his cock and reached for his throat. His gaze landed on the mirror. The silver chain around his neck tightened as Malone tugged on it, then slackened as Malone finished fastening the collar in place.

Malone slid his hand around Xander’s throat and jerked him off balance. Still reeling from his orgasm, aftershocks rushing through his body, Xander reached back and tried to grab hold of Malone to steady himself.

Malone didn’t seem to care what he was trying to do. He pushed Xander’s head to one side, forcing him to bare his neck, and he bit.

Another explosion of pleasure so soon after his climax was almost too much. The world wove in and out of existence around Xander as Malone sucked against his neck.

His cock hadn’t even had a chance to start softening after he came. He was in no way ready for the kind of bliss Malone’s bite brought with it. He whimpered with frustration. If Malone noticed, he showed no sign of caring. That realisation only made Xander’s cock ache all the more.

He felt Malone’s free hand move between their bodies, but he was far too pleasure-addled to make sense of what Malone was trying to do until he felt Malone’s freed erection rub against his buttocks.

Malone broke the bite. He pushed Xander forward. Xander only just managed to reach out in time to stop himself from landing face first on the floor. Malone shoved Xander’s legs apart. Xander looked over his shoulder and saw Malone slicking his shaft, but he didn’t have time to get his knees underneath him. Malone covered Xander’s body and pushed inside him, rough and determined.

Xander gasped. He scrabbled at the floor trying to gain some sort of purchase on the smooth floorboards.

“Mine.”

Xander stilled. He dropped his head and let his forehead rest on the floor. “Yours.” Relief rushed through him at the word.

Apparently, that was the only conversation Malone required from him. He rocked back and thrust into him. His every movement was jagged and impatient. There was no holding back, no polite concerns about his lover's comfort or the fact Xander's buttocks were still sore after the previous night's paddling. Malone was all about taking what he wanted now.

Xander lifted his head and peered at the reflection. Malone was still mostly dressed. His hair was falling forward into his eyes. He didn't look up at the mirror in return. His gaze remained fixed firmly on the collar around Xander's neck.

It was far too soon after his own orgasm for Xander to enjoy sex on his own behalf, but he knew deep down in his soul that it was never the wrong time for him to love being pinned beneath Malone. Possession, dominance, ownership. It was about far more than an orgasm could ever be.

Malone gripped Xander's shoulder and used it for leverage as he pushed into him again, harder and faster than ever. He yelled out as he came, a harsh triumphant sound. Xander stared at Malone's reflection, watching ecstasy pass across his face.

As his pleasure faded, all Malone's energy seemed to leave him, he slumped against Xander, making no attempt to support his own body and not crush him.

A fair amount of his weight seemed to come to rest directly on Xander's recently spanked arse. Xander took a deep breath and let it out very slowly. A second later, Malone did the same.

“You are by far the most infuriating, amazing and *inconvenient* man I've ever met,” Malone bit out. When he spoke again, his voice was quieter, almost confessional. “Making your decisions was never convenient, Xan. It was delicious and addictive, but it was never a game to me. You know that, right?”

Xander closed his eyes. “Yeah, I know.” But, damn, it was still good to hear Malone admit it.

“I should never have said that to you.”

Xander smiled, his cheek moved against the floorboards. "You've lashed out worse at a temp who brought the wrong coffee order back."

"Other people, yes—not you. I won't do it again."

"Okay."

For a long time, the room was silent. Malone seemed to be lost in his thoughts. He made no effort to move. The residue of Xander's spanking stopped feeling tingly and started to throb. His left foot fell asleep. His shoulder started to cramp.

Eventually, Malone pulled away, and as soon as he did, Xander wanted him back, no matter how sore it might make his joints.

Xander put his hands on the floor either side of his body. About to lever himself up, he hesitated.

Malone's clothes rustled. A full minute passed. "You can move."

Xander pushed himself up onto his hands and knees, then sat back on his ankles.

Malone stood next to him, looming above him. "I meant it when I said I wouldn't say anything like that to you again."

Xander tipped his head back and looked up at him. "I know." It wasn't in Malone to want to hurt someone he owned that way. Hell, even backed into a corner and making a last ditch attempt to escape, he'd pulled the punch, stopped himself short of saying a hundred things that could have hurt Xander more deeply.

"I meant it when I said I'll keep you frustrated for months and only ever let you come when I want to watch you do that, too."

Xander smiled. "I know." That kind of cruelty was a different thing altogether. Malone had that in spades.

"You'll hate me." The words were completely expressionless.

"No," Xander said, very simply. "I'll love you."

Malone closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he looked pissed off. He tugged Xander up onto his feet.

He didn't give Xander a chance to say anything else. The kiss was fierce and possessive. Malone kissed like he needed to conquer the world to balance

out any weakness he might have shown. Xander parted his lips, welcomed him in and thrived on having every scrap of control taken away from him.

Breaking the kiss as suddenly as he'd started it, Malone grabbed Xander's wrist. He tugged him out of the room and along the upstairs landing toward his bedroom. They were halfway along the corridor when Malone gave in. "I love you, too." They were thrown down like a challenge, issued without any eye contact, and they were perfect.

Xander smiled at the back of Malone's head. He'd never had any doubt that Malone would say it back once he'd said it. He'd never doubted it would be the truth, either.

In a way, perhaps, it had been cruel of him to admit how he felt out loud. Malone was still coming to terms with accepting him as his submissive and really didn't need anything else thrown at him.

But at the same time, Xander knew deep down he'd been right to give control of that knowledge to Malone along with everything else. Perhaps it was cruel, but sometimes a man had to be cruel to be kind, right?

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Kim is a thirty-year-old bisexual submissive from Wales (UK). First published in 2008, she has since released almost 100 BDSM erotic romance titles ranging from short stories to full-length novels. Having worked with a host of fantastic e-publishers, she has just moved into self-publishing.*

*While she has occasionally ventured towards other pairings, Kim's first love is still, and probably always will be, Male/Male stories. But, no matter what the pairing, from paranormal to contemporary, and from the sweet to the intense, everything she writes will always feature three things - Kink, Love and a Happy Ending.*

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# CUP OF TEA AND A FEW BROKEN RULES

By C.C. Jaz

## Photo Description

Two men lie side by side, embracing one another. One of them has black ropes still tied around his wrists and ankles while the other holds him protectively.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*Please help telling our story! How did we meet, what happened that brought us to this place:*

*What is it that always brings out my dominant side? Just looking at you and I'm there. All this beautiful skin, coupled with my dark restrains—it gets me going and wanting to have you at my every wish. And you are with me, every time. So beautiful! And afterwards—so good to be with you, next to you, feeling every breath you take, breathing in your smell, the one that's totally you, giving me peace. But what's even more wonderful is getting to be held by you, your arms around me. So good to have you near me.*

*Yes, we are in tune, belonging together.*

*Really?*

*Sincerely,*

*Anke*

*P.S. May I ask for contemporary, please?*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** hurt/comfort, enemies to lovers, men with pets, mentioning of power-exchange

**Word Count:** 42,973

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## CUP OF TEA AND A FEW BROKEN RULES

By C.C. Jaz

*Nearly choking on my own panting breaths, my whole body shivers at the excellence of your questionable skills. Maybe anyone could have those skills. Maybe everybody does. Maybe anyone could touch me the way you touch me, but no one ever has. Not like this. Not in this selfish, rude, completely ignorant way, like right in this moment the only purpose for my existence in your bed is to wither and moan, be loud and do what I'm told. It is even more surprising, that right in this moment I want to do exactly what is expected of me. So touch me like you touch me, touch me so that dull ache erupts soon after, painful at first and quickly fading. It feels like blind, raging lust, the only type you give me. There's no other way for your touch; anything else would demand control and you have none to spare, you tell me. None to spare for pleasantries.*

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The universe was targeting Bailey. Clearly. Had it been impartial, Bailey wouldn't now feel like something had died in his mouth, and his back wouldn't be hurting, and his head wouldn't be aching. But since he was experiencing all of the characteristics of a devious hangover, it was clear the universe did not see eye to eye with Bailey on something.

The fact that he was suffering from a hangover for the first time in over three years wasn't the worst part. The worst part was that while his slightly drunken mind had gone haywire somewhere between sipping his beer and collapsing in bed, Bailey hadn't done a single thing to stop things from devolving. That was why he now woke up in someone else's bed with someone else's pillow tucked over his head and someone else's snoring ricocheting between his eardrums.

Tempted to close his eyes and pretend this wasn't happening, Bailey stayed still for a second, breathing through his nose and hoping yesterday's dinner wouldn't come up. After a while, as he fought to get a clear image of his surroundings, Bailey rushed into self-loathing and accusations, because he'd known this would happen. By the time he'd had his first shot seasoned with lime and salt, he should've gone home, because nothing good came out of

shots. Ever. It could only get worse from there on. And unfortunately, unlike so many people who said they just magically lost all recollections of things they'd done while under the influence of alcohol, Bailey's memory was crystal clear. This was why he now slid out of the bed and straight to the floor, never even bothering to look at the man still blissfully unaware of the tremendous aftermath just waiting to be tackled.

Crawling on the floor and hunting for his clothes, Bailey determinedly pushed away every image rushing into his mind. He didn't really need to remember how they'd made it from the club into the bed, and he especially didn't need the reminder of what could only be described as the most lusty few hours of his life. Generally speaking, lusty was good. If you asked Cam, she would say the human race would die without lust and it was only healthy to let the steam out every now and then. Bailey wasn't Cam, though. Bailey did not think getting drunk and jumping into bed with someone you didn't really know—and in this case could not stand—was a good thing. Just thinking about what had happened a few hours earlier made Bailey convinced he would never, *ever*, touch a bottle again. Unless it was water. Or soda. Or some very expensive brand of champagne, because no one said no to that, right?

Bailey's shirt was under the bed. He found his jeans under the nightstand and his left shoe was in the corner of the room. He maneuvered silently around the room, yanking on his sock with one hand while he sneaked into his shirt, and all the while his eyes scanned the room to locate his boxers. He could live without his other sock, but leave his underwear behind? Absolutely not.

Eventually his boxers appeared from under the blanket draped across the floor. Bailey was in the middle of covering his lower half when the lump under the sheets stretched across the bed and slowly turned over. The next few seconds were agonizingly slow; Bailey stood frozen, one pant leg pulled on while he squeezed the waistband of his jeans and stared at the man moving on the bed. Watching his latest piece of trouble balance between sleep and awareness, Bailey wondered how stupid people really were. If this was what those awkward morning afters were like, why on earth would people voluntarily get themselves into these situations? Bailey would not seek a repetition. Oh no, absolutely not. Casting a quick look towards the ceiling, he made a small prayer and promised to be good in the future if only he could get out of this one without being seen. He also decided that the next guy he slept with would be someone fit for more than a few hours of sex. He wouldn't go as far as to say he'd wait for "the one", because in the light of recent events he

only seemed to draw in the jerks, but at least he could pick the best out of the scum.

The man on the bed was definitely not in the top three. Or top ten. The only enviable top-list he reached was the list of sex-on-legs. It had to be another one of the universe's ways of screwing with Bailey, that the first guy he ever slept with without dangling in months of relationship was this one.

Maybe he was a bit vain after all, he thought while slowly continuing to dress himself. He'd once sworn he would never fall for pathetic pick-up lines or those long gloomy glances, but seeing how he'd done pretty much just that the night before, he was obviously as easily manipulated as everybody else.

Bailey's nightly host didn't wake up but drifted off to sleep instead, leaving Bailey to gather his belongings from the floor. He found his wallet, his keys, and phone and even located that one missing sock. What he didn't find were his sunglasses and lip balm, both of which he was slightly obsessed with but still valued lower than his dignity, so he decided to leave them and head out instead. Vanity sneaked up on him when he was at the door, tempting him to take a quick look since he probably—*definitely*—wouldn't get another one anytime soon. Or ever, if it was up to him.

Quietly he opened the bedroom door, sneaked out and only then peeked back inside. And yes, it was every bit as good as he remembered. The wrapping, anyways. The inner being of the man still in bed was rotten and spoiled, and Bailey wanted nothing to do with that. But inches after inches of deeply tanned skin and limbs muscled just so were not nearly as appalling as he hoped they'd be.

After wandering over long limbs and peeks of naked skin over narrow hips and admirably well-shaped chest, Bailey's gaze finally landed on the man's face. Watching him now with sleep softening his looks and turning his features into something resembling amiable, it was almost impossible to remember the arrogant, self-sufficient, egoistic grin he wore ninety percent of the time. Emphasis on *almost*. Luckily Bailey did remember it, perfectly aware he'd probably see it the next time he'd be faced with this man. That was why it was ultimately so easy to turn around and walk out, the tang of sex and cigarettes following him all the way out to the street.

Now Bailey regretted leaving his shades behind. The sun was seriously messing with his eyesight.

The base, as Camille's parents' guesthouse was known these days, had gone through a major makeover. Six months ago, before any of this house renovating started, there had been a pool table and a widescreen TV and other things Caden missed these days. Now there were leaflets and flip-charts and notes on tabletops and doorframes, as if anyone actually read through what was written.

When Caden got to the guesthouse on Sunday afternoon, the space looked even more chaotic than the last time he'd been there. The second he stepped inside, he had a feeling he was what caused the chaos.

"You're late." Ethan walked up to him, sighing listlessly. "Bailey's been going mad."

"Really?" Caden folded his sunglasses and hung them on the neckline of his T-shirt. He had another pair hidden in the front pocket of his jeans, just waiting to be passed on. "When does he *not* go mad?"

Ethan snorted, glancing around. "Camille and Rudy are coming later. I think Bailey wanted us here before they show up." "Us" being four people who, apparently, were all feeling Bailey's bad mood. Caden refused to take any blame on that; if anything, Bailey's mood should be superb after the attention he'd received during the night.

As if on cue, the blond swooshed into the room, a stack of small brochures held in his arms. Nothing was left of the drunken lust Caden had seen hours earlier. "You're forty-five minutes late." Nothing was left of the throaty moans either. Pity.

"What can I say...?" Caden smiled pleasantly. "I slept in... I was up all night."

Bailey blinked, hands still moving while he lowered the stack to the table placed in front of the window. "Well..." He cleared his throat before obtaining that holier-than-thou expression Caden really hated sometimes. Now it just managed to amuse him. After all, he'd had a glimpse of the sinful side of Bailey. And wasn't that side a feast for the eyes. And ears. And various body parts.

"That is no excuse," Bailey said sharply. "I expect you to be more punctual from now on."

"Oh, I will. I promise to come on time whenever you want me to." Oh, but it was fun. Bailey inhaled deeply, looking for a second like he didn't know how to act or what to say. It was so funny Caden nearly felt sorry for him. Nearly.

The only reason why he didn't was the quick recovery which told him Bailey could wipe certain things off his mind just like that.

Jenny asked something Caden simply couldn't register, and Bailey was soon in conversation with her. Ethan snatched a note from the bureau placed near the door and rolled it between his fingers while watching Bailey. "They were talking about something with flowers before you got here."

"Anemones." Jeffrey now came to stand next to Ethan, looking distressed. "I swear I'm learning things I never knew before."

"What's the rush, anyways?" Ethan sighed and tossed the note back on the bureau. "The house's missing walls, and they're already talking about flowerbeds?"

"Please, don't start that conversation." Jeff shook his head. "I made the mistake of asking about it, and Jen gave me a speech about contracts and appointments and how planning ahead will pay off at the end..." He shuddered. "Just the thought of the list of things there's supposedly still left to do..."

Caden didn't know of the list; he hadn't bothered to check. He received the endless amount of emails sent to them, but usually he didn't read them. He would be a good boy and help out when help was needed, but other than that, he was not going to stress himself over someone else's house project. Fortunately for them all, Bailey seemed to like stressing over things like that. That was probably why he now glared sourly across the room. "Would the three of you like to participate or did you just come here for the food?"

Both Ethan and Jeff straightened up, like someone had just added an inch or two of length in their spines. Bailey wasn't fooled, though. He shook his head, looking positively displeased. "Fine... there're burgers in the kitchen. You've got fifteen minutes."

Ethan was the first to follow the order. "Thank you, sir." He was soon followed by Jeff, who from the looks of it tried to explain his lack of concentration to Jenny. Caden wasn't hungry so he stayed behind. A few moments later Bailey noticed this as well.

"Aren't you going to eat?"

Caden shook his head and finally left the door. "Nah... I had a late breakfast." Two cups of coffee wasn't really breakfast but if it was up to him, he'd skip breakfast altogether and not leave bed until it was time for dinner.

With each step Caden took, Bailey took one back. It was silly, since nothing was going to happen, but Caden was glad he got some sort of reaction from the guy, other than the spiteful remarks that were quite typical by now.

“You left early,” he said nonchalantly and made a production out of straightening the piled brochures on the table.

“Can we not talk about this here?”

“Why not?” Caden glanced towards the closed kitchen door. “They won’t hear us.”

“That’s beside the point. I just don’t want to talk about it.” Bailey stared back stubbornly, his hazel eyes firm on Caden. “Ever.”

“I think it’s something that should definitely be addressed.” Caden ran his eyes over Bailey’s appearance, his dark green long-sleeved tee and white loose pants fitting in perfectly next to the flower-pattern curtains and light yellow rugs. “Or do you often go home with someone and simply vanish in the morning.”

“That is none of your business,” Bailey said formally.

“And why’s that?”

“Because it’s personal.”

Caden chuckled softly, cocking his brow. “I had your cock in my mouth less than twelve hours ago. Now *that’s* personal. This is debriefing.”

Bailey’s eyes widened as if Caden had just said something completely horrendous. “You’re disgusting.”

“That’s not what you said last night.” Caden leaned a little closer, now definitely in Bailey’s personal space. He lowered his voice, eyes held on Bailey’s. “Oh, Caden. That’s it, Caden. Right there, Caden,” he drawled, aiming for the specific tone Bailey had used quite skillfully. Bailey didn’t seem to appreciate the rendezvous. He shook his head quickly and took a step away from Caden. “Shut up, right now.”

“No... I don’t think you said that. What you did say was—”

“I was drunk, so whatever I said or didn’t say really doesn’t matter.” Bailey started to fix the table, organizing the brochures and other papers he’d probably brought earlier.

Caden stood still, watching the man work. "You were not drunk. Tipsy, maybe, but not drunk. I wouldn't have slept with you if you'd been drunk. That would be irresponsible, and I don't swing that way."

"Either way, I was not thinking straight last night." Bailey stood up and turned towards Caden. "I would appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone what happened." Well of course he would. They'd been at each other's throats for as long as Caden could remember, so no wonder Bailey didn't want this to become the next rumor for their close set of friends to gossip about. Caden wasn't too fond of gossip either. It was other things he liked.

"You know what's funny?" he mumbled absently. "Ever since I saw you for the first time, I've had this desire to just bend you over and give you a good old spanking. And what do you know, it almost happened."

Bailey's eyes widened, his full but never pouty lips parting. "What? You didn't—"

"Oh, I know." Caden waved his hand dismissively. "It was really just a little slap but still..." He watched Bailey's face turn scarlet, unable to hide what the sight did to him. "I never would've thought that's something you get off on."

"I did *not*—" Bailey began, but then shook his head. "Last night... I..." He shook his head again, as if to straighten his thoughts. "It shouldn't have happened. We... this... never should've happened."

Caden stepped closer when Bailey went to move away. He didn't make the mistake of touching the man, but apparently it was enough that he suddenly stood so close. Bailey stilled, first looking away before his eyes met Caden's. "Tell me it didn't feel good," Caden said quietly. He'd had enough one-night stands to know how sex could literally mean nothing, and this wasn't about bonding for life. He just wanted recognition, something that told him he'd managed to give something to someone instead of take something away. "Tell me you didn't like it, and I'll never bother you again." That was a lot to promise since bothering Bailey was one of the funniest things Caden could think of. Right now though, with this completely new and absurd aspect of their relationship, Caden decided to do the right thing. Or at least try.

Bailey didn't answer. He just stared back with those deer-in-headlights eyes of his, looking like someone who had very little brain activity going on. That was enough of an answer to Caden.

He pulled the folded shades from his pocket and held them out for Bailey. "You forgot these."

Bailey glanced at the glasses, then took them carefully so that there was no contact between his skin and Caden's. "Thank you," he said politely, always so polite, and stepped back. "For returning them."

"You're welcome."

Bailey opened his mouth as if to say something, but then Cam barged in, her arms braced beneath small bags and boxes. Bailey quickly stepped back, eyes downcast and evading Caden.

"Oh, hi." Cam smiled breathlessly and rushed to the table where she lowered her carryings. "Are you two the only ones here?"

Caden nodded towards the kitchen and took a deliberate step back. "They're eating."

"Right... food comes first." Cam stood in Caden's way so that it was impossible for him to have a clear view of Bailey. What he did see told him the conversation was over, and Bailey had already returned to his normal mode; always the busy beaver.

"Rudy's bringing in paint samples and fabrics and stuff. We got a discount on the fabrics, so I was thinking maybe we could go a little overboard with the tiles in the bathroom."

Caden stood and watched while Bailey engaged in a conversation with Cam. Quickly the two started their sixth sense communication which consisted of a lot of words and gestures an outsider couldn't understand, something they probably did without even realizing it. Caden was spared from standing there like an idiot when Rudy came in, his face twisted into an agonized frown.

"Mind giving me a hand?"

Caden took a few of the stacked fabrics from his friend's hands and carried them to the table. Sideways, he glanced at Bailey and found the man looking back. Quickly Bailey's eyes averted, a worried frown on his face. So he thought Caden was going to make things difficult for him.

Silly Bailey.



Bailey had met Caden for the first time on his twenty-fourth birthday. His first impression of the guy had been pretty superficial, nothing but the looks and perfectly sustained appearance catching his attention. The blooming attraction had withered and died the second Caden had opened his mouth; it was easy to replace every word with “me, me, me”. Bailey had never in his life met a person with such an over-bloated ego, and those hormone-colored shades had dropped and shattered right there and then. Of course, for every guy who found Caden obnoxious, there was at least a dozen who found him irresistible, and no matter how obvious Bailey’s dislike was, Caden thrived on the attention and admiration of those who drooled over his very existence. During the past four years, Bailey had laughed himself sick watching the endless line of men all sizes and shapes trying to win over Caden’s heart. Someone should probably tell them that Caden had no heart and the only organ willing to warm up to them was the one hanging between his legs. Bailey had lived through and eventually ended a relationship of his own, for the first time ever feeling a little uncertain in Caden’s presence, because being alone was suddenly a frightening thing, and someone with such confidence as Caden only made the terror worse. And true to his being, Caden had made the most of Bailey’s post-committed state, having no mercy when it came to reminding Bailey of the things he lacked now.

Maybe that was why he’d been stupid enough to wander off into the wrong bed. Maybe *that* was why it had been so incredibly good. Maybe cheap sex was better than no sex at all, and maybe a random, unfamiliar body, in this case a body with delicious details but filthy habits, was better than nobody at all.

“I’m on the rebound.” Bailey stared at his reflection, hair sticking up and toothpaste smudged around his lips and his left eyelid puffy and red after he’d passed out on the bed with his head nearly swallowed by the pillows. “That’s gotta be it.”

Why else would he think sleeping with Caden was a good idea? Had been... whatever. Not that he thought that, because seriously, it was the most idiotic thing he’d ever done. But theoretically, if he thought it was a good thing, it was only because of what he was doing, not because of who he was doing it with. Besides, wasn’t rebound sex just a way to ventilate? Move on and find substance that had been yanked away by cruel ex-partners.

Bailey rinsed his mouth and fixed his hair, all the while thinking how one time did not predict years of behavior. Everybody was allowed one or two

mistakes. This was his first one. And he had been drunk, or tipsy like Caden said. Either way, his judgment had been lacking, therefore he couldn't really be held responsible for his actions.

By the time he'd gone through his morning rituals, Bailey felt a lot better. One time never killed anyone. Not even if that one time consisted of a number of individual times. *Many individual times*, he thought absently, wondering why this was the first time he'd ever spent the entire night doing nothing but rolling in the sheets and seeking contact with someone equally naked. Then an image of Caden's admirable nakedness flashed through his mind, and Bailey shook it off quickly. No need to go back there.

Forty-five minutes later, he was in the hall of Cam's house. Technically it was also Rudy's house, but recently he'd lost interest in anything other than the budget, so Bailey figured it was safe to say the true mastery over the premise belonged to Camille. It was a standard two-story detached town house, layers of moss and sand giving a nice shade of age on the outside while the inside of the house looked pretty destroyed. The renovations had started weeks ago and right now, every room and corner looked unfinished, but that did not mean Cam would let anybody slack on the job. She'd originally asked if they'd help with the painting and moving in furniture and things like that, but after going through one rug shop after another and haggling for overpriced kitchen cupboards, it was safe to say Bailey was doing a lot more than his share. Still, the look on Cam's face as Bailey reached the second-floor bathroom was what made it impossible for him to say no; she looked like a part of her life had just returned to her, all smiles and hugs the second she bounced up from the floor.

"Have you had breakfast already?" she asked while pulling away. Her hair was braided, a denim overall making her look very down-to-business and ready-to-get-her-hands-dirty, but the large golden earrings and that skillfully laid makeup told Bailey she was ready to make an appearance if needed.

"I brought some coffee and bagels and stuff like that with me." Cam left the room, pulling Bailey along. "The guys are coming here in about an hour, and I know by noon they'll bitch about being hungry so that's taken care of."

"Who's coming, exactly?" Bailey had thought he'd get a Caden-free day, and now the prospect of spending even a few short moments with the guy dropped his mood.

"Everybody." She picked up a few discarded cardboard sheets on her way downstairs, speaking over her shoulder. "I thought we'd move all this crap

outside so that when the dumpster gets here on Monday, we could just clear everything out quickly.”

All Bailey heard was “we”, and he realized he wouldn’t have trouble coming up with stuff to do for the next week or so.

They’d cleared the hall by the time “everybody” got to the house. Bailey was only partly aware of the pats on his shoulder and greeting smiles. What he was more than aware of was Caden’s presence the moment the man stepped into the room. They shared a casual “hey”, then went to work, but all the while, Bailey’s focus wavered between Caden and picking up junk from the floors.

Usually they’d remain on their own parts of the working site and only bother acknowledging each other if one did something irritating enough for the other to notice. Now Bailey’s eyes trained across the room, across the back yard, across whatever length of distance there was between them, and every single time Caden was looking back. Bailey would look away and then a few moments later their eyes would meet again. This went on through the entire day. No matter how hard Bailey tried, he couldn’t convince his brain to work properly and focus on work. Just knowing Caden was somewhere in the house, at times out of Bailey’s sight and at times standing right next to him, made Bailey’s instincts super alert. Bailey tasted none of his bagels or the onion rings he ate with sour cream after they ordered dinner later that day. His focus was on everything except his food; on the way Caden practically moaned at the taste of his burger, or how the man licked the tips of his fingers clean after finishing his dinner, or how the hem of his black punk-shirt rose dangerously high while he raised his arm to sip his can of soda.

It was safe to say Bailey’s libido was racing by the time he headed home. He barely managed to stay civilized while saying his farewells to Cam and Rudy who stayed at the house, the couple already making plans for the next day. Eventually Bailey got out, sweaty and headachy and with sore muscles. And the first thing he saw was Caden leaning against the side of his car parked at the curb.

Caden’s arms were crossed over his chest, the dusty shade of his black shirt continuing down along his black jeans. He was sort of grunge with a blend of punk rock, a choice of style Bailey personally found very troublesome. It had to be a real task to make that look work, yet Caden somehow managed to do it without any noticeable efforts.

Walking down a few steps, Bailey peered at Caden. "Didn't you leave like an hour ago?"

"I got caught with Jeff. Then I thought I'd stick around for a while and see if I could offer you a ride." With that cheeky grin painted across his features, Caden looked every bit like the player Bailey knew he was. At the time, Bailey was only worried Cam might look out of the window and see them on the street.

"Thanks for the offer, but I'll walk." He skipped down the rest of the stairs and was totally prepared to head down the street, but the frown of concern on Caden's face prevented him from moving any further than the pavement. "It'll get dark soon. Sure it's safe to walk alone at this hour?"

Bailey glanced around, then up at the light blue sky. "It won't be dark for another couple of hours."

"Still... wandering around the city all by yourself... sure you wanna risk it?"

Bailey was fairly sure it was safer than getting in the car with Caden, and still, *still*, he just stood there, his feet refusing to follow a simple order to move. "If I go back inside will you be gone by the time I come outside again?"

"That depends..."

"On...?"

Caden shrugged motionlessly, dark eyes narrowed slightly, but the intensity in his gaze hadn't changed once throughout the entire evening. "On whether or not you really want me gone."

Bailey snorted disbelievingly. "You got some nerve."

"Admit it..." Caden stood up, hands lowered by his sides. He was a good couple of inches taller than Bailey, but his height had nothing to do with the spell he seemed to bind around Bailey. It was the way he looked at Bailey, the way his gaze seemed to sneak beneath Bailey's jeans and cotton sweatshirt and lick him all over. "You think I'm charming."

Bailey tilted his chin up and smiled kindly. "I think you're delusional."

Caden nodded shortly, his barely-even-a-smile expression radiating poorly concealed amusement. "And charming." And he was, though Bailey couldn't say why. He didn't like arrogant men, or men who made him irritated, or men

who barged into his life and made living a challenge. But Caden *was* charming. And while this little detail annoyed the ever-living crap out of Bailey, he couldn't deny the attraction.

"Do you always like bullying people until you get what you want?" he asked curtly, causing Caden's brows to rise towards his dark hairline.

"Me?" he marveled. "Bullying? No, no... you misunderstood." He spread his arms almost ceremonially. "I'm only here to escort you home."

"Right..." Bailey tilted his head to the side, aiming a displeased glare at Caden. "Didn't I just ask you to relocate yourself?"

Caden frowned thoughtfully. "No... you asked if I would, and then I asked if you really wanted me to. Which, by the way, you failed to answer." The man stepped closer, then closer still, the tips of their shoes probably touching by the time he stopped moving. "Now what does that tell you?"

Bailey could smell cigarettes and sweat and dust, and he didn't like any of those separately and especially not together, but somehow they worked well with his system now.

"You may drive me home," he said firmly. "With no detours."

Caden's lips curved up into what could only be described as the most devious expression Bailey had ever seen on anyone. "Of course not."

Even as Bailey got in the car, his brain kept shouting commands he completely failed to obey. That's how stupid he really was.

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Regardless of the stiffness in his back and the annoying strain in his neck, Caden's mood couldn't have been better. It was the kind of rush you get after a really hard workout when your body's feeble and pumped up at the same time. With no problems whatsoever, Caden got up after his favorite type of physical exercise and wandered into the kitchen. He could hear the litany of curses he left behind and couldn't help but to smirk at the sight welcoming him once he returned with a bottle of water. "That was fun." He wouldn't have minded a shower beforehand but hey... Caden was never one to complain.

"Oh my god."

He leaned against the doorframe and opened the bottle. "I mean..." He shrugged and sipped the water. "Could there be a better way to finish off a weekend?"

Still on the bed, Bailey's head was hidden under a pillow he kept squeezing against his face. "Oh my god!" It sounded funny coming through the pillow, but Caden figured the guy had some adjusting to do. Perhaps Bailey wasn't used to expressing himself in such sexual, liberated ways. God knows the guy he used to date was stiff as wood and not in a good way. That guy probably didn't do sex before ten p.m. and definitely not on top of the covers.

Caden sipped his water and stepped up to the bed. After listening to Bailey's pathetic whines through the pillow, he simply yanked it off and threw it on the floor. With a pleased smile he looked down at Bailey. "Ready for that debriefing now?"

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Well, this wasn't working.

For the fourth weekend in a row Bailey found himself sprawled across Caden's bed, his limbs nearly numb after unfolding from the tangle Caden had somehow managed to twist him into. Caden had left the bed as soon as his cock had started to soften, which was about ten minutes ago, but Bailey feared he was permanently incapable of moving. All he could do was stare up at the ceiling and damn himself.

Apparently one time wasn't enough. Or two. Judging from the approximately fifteen different ways Caden could turn Bailey's brain into mush, Bailey wasn't only easily manipulated. He was really, *really* stupid as well. And without any self-preservation.

An unopened bottle of water appeared in his line of vision. "You want some?"

Bailey glanced to his side and immediately closed his eyes, his hand held tightly over his eyes. "Please put some clothes on."

"Why?"

"Because you're naked!" Was this guy dumb or something? Bailey breathed deeply, to calm himself, and quickly felt around his own body which, luckily, was covered. And apparently Caden still stood by the bed instead of running to his closet and covering his shameless yet well-defined body. "I think you've seen me naked before."

Rolling his eyes behind closed lids, Bailey sighed deeply. "We're not having sex right now." Soon he felt a small tug on the sheet spread hastily over

his body. "We could be," Caden murmured, probably aiming for seductive, but at the time, he only managed to provoke Bailey's bad mood.

Still clutching his left hand over his eyes, Bailey held on to the sheet with his right. "Clothes. Now." Nearly holding his breath, Bailey listened carefully until he heard the heavy sigh—a sign of frustration, perhaps—and sounds of clothes getting pulled from the closet. Bailey released a soundless breath of relief. Maybe he could handle himself if Caden was dressed. Hell... maybe he could handle *Caden* if Caden was dressed. Bailey risked a quick peek and realized there was no such thing as handling happening here. Caden might be dressed—if a pair of jeans that should've been burned years ago and a washed-out band shirt from the glory days of some '80s rock band classified as clothes—but he still radiated such sex appeal Bailey decided it was best if he concentrated on other things than Caden's enviable characteristics.

"Mind giving me mine too?" he asked, hand still held over his eyes. He had a vague idea where his clothes were, but right now he was not going to run around the apartment and hunt for them, seeing how they most likely were not in the bedroom. Still, something soft landed over Bailey's arm and once he investigated the garment tossed his way, he realized it wasn't his. It was Caden's. The idea of wearing it was severely disturbing. "*My* clothes," Bailey repeated slowly and held the shirt as far away from him as possible while he held it out for Caden.

Bailey's boxer briefs were flung on the bed. "Your shirt's in the washer." Caden glanced over his shoulder. "Pants too." He rolled his eyes when Bailey was about to ask if the program was correct. "Yeah yeah... no bleach, no tumble-dry... yadda yadda yadda." The man picked up the bottle he'd left on the nightstand, opened it and took a long sip.

The insult about Bailey's reasonable and totally justified concerns for fabric maintenance didn't bother him nearly as much as Caden's staring did. "Could you turn around?" he asked, locking eyes with Caden who frowned.

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to get dressed."

Caden lowered the bottle, still standing by the bed. "You've got to be kidding me."

"No, I'm completely serious. Now, please turn around so I can get dressed."

They stared at one another, Bailey remaining perfectly calm while Caden's expression turned more and more disbelieving by the second. Eventually he turned around, shaking his head. "Don't you think this is a little ridiculous?" he asked over his shoulder while Bailey squirmed into his briefs. "I have seen you naked, you know."

"That's completely irrelevant."

"No, no... see, I like you naked." Caden nodded, probably to himself. "In fact, I like you a lot better naked rather than with your clothes on."

"That's gross."

"Yet true." Caden glanced over his shoulder. "Can I turn around *now*?"

Squirming into the shirt, one too black, too old, and definitely too Caden for his taste, Bailey sat up against the bedpost, folding the sheets over his still-naked lower half. "Yes, you can turn around now." Bailey pretended not to notice the eye-rolling once Caden saw the modesty placed on the bed. Bailey might be willing to interact in sexual activities with this guy, but there was no reason for him to continue that odd behavior once the deed was done. Therefore, he had no reason to lounge around naked. Apparently, the guys Caden usually had in his bed didn't mind doing just that.

Bailey had other things in mind.

"We need to make some rules."

Caden had emptied the entire bottle by now and was screwing the cap back in place while frowning down at Bailey. "What rules?"

Bailey gestured around. "About this."

"About *what*?"

Praying for patience, Bailey sighed deep. "This arrangement of ours." Sometime during the past few weeks Bailey had realized this situation they were in might not pass by as quickly as he'd hoped, and the best way to handle more or less permanent phases was to set firm rules. That way there would be no nasty surprises or unwanted turn of events. Unfortunately Caden didn't seem to think that way.

"Why would we need rules?" he asked, frowning. "Rules with something like this cross badly with the whole concept of 'casual'. You're spoiling the casualness."



“Trust me, it’ll be better this way.” Bailey could work with this sex thing, but the true trouble of this arrangement wasn’t the one standing by the bed. It was the one now jumping on the bed and then glaring maliciously at Bailey.

“Rule number one: keep that thing away from me.”

Caden huffed offensively, glaring at Bailey, while he circled the bed and picked up that fifteen-pound monster seriously intruding on Bailey’s personal space. “Do not listen to him, Kitty.” The more he said it, the more absurd it sounded. Bailey stared at the cat and its completely delirious owner, unsure whether he was bothered by the feline breathing the same air as him or the untypical expression of *fondness* emerging into Caden’s repertoire every time that monster was in his sight.

“That thing doesn’t like me.”

“No,” Caden said firmly and sat on the bed. “You don’t like her.”

Bailey was sure it was impossible to like that fluffy, mean-looking thing now happily clinging to the front of Caden’s shirt. The “cat” was in need of a diet, an attitude change, and behavior therapy. The fact that Caden called it Kitty only made the monster look more and more vicious.

“I like animals, just so you know. It’s that thing that doesn’t like me.”

Caden snorted and leaned back against the bedpost, gently combing his fingers through the monster’s long smoky-white fur. “She’s got standards.”

“Then apparently you do not.” Bailey scooted to the edge of the bed, careful not to lose sight of the monster. He hadn’t complained about the more recreational scratching Caden occasionally did during the night, but he didn’t want those killer claws anywhere near him. “So long as that thing doesn’t try to make acquaintance with me, I’m happy.”

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem.”

“Good. Now...” Bailey crossed his legs beneath the sheets and turned slightly towards Caden. “Rule number two: you cannot, under any circumstances, tell anyone about what’s going on.”

“Like I would ever voluntarily throw myself to the wolves.” The man glanced at Bailey, smirking apologetically. “No offense, but getting associated with your nitpicking isn’t something I’d volunteer for.”

It was Bailey’s turn to stare wide-eyed. “My nitpicking?”

"Believe me, you're the most fastidious person I've ever met." Caden frowned thoughtfully. "You should probably try to work on that."

"I am not fastidious." Bailey crossed his arms over his chest and fixed his posture. "I'm just... punctual."

Caden nodded agreeably. "Aha." He nodded towards Bailey. "Is that why you sit there with your nose stuck up, looking like someone just pissed in your cereal?"

Bailey gushed. "That phrase is disgusting."

Caden chuckled. "You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Complaining. Whining. That phrase is disgusting." Caden mimicked Bailey so it was almost funny. "It's not supposed to be appetizing, you know." They held eyes for a few seconds, during which Caden's eyes narrowed slightly and he obtained a calculating tiny grin. "Why did you and that guy break up?"

The change in subject was so sudden Bailey's mind went blank for a few seconds. "What?"

"That guy you were with... what was his name... Lloyd, Larry..."

"Liam." It didn't hurt to say the name though Bailey had avoided the topic quite skillfully since their break-up a couple of months ago. Not that he was hurt or anything.

Caden snapped his fingers. "Liam! Yes, him." He looked strangely serious while turning his eyes on Bailey. "Now that guy..." Caden shook his finger in a lecturing manner. "Boring as hell. Weren't you guys together for quite long? A year or something?"

Bailey shrugged dismissively. "Nineteen months." Not that he'd counted.

"Right. Must've felt at least twice as long. No wonder you're a little too self-conscious. Even I would be if I'd been dating a stuck-up like that guy."

"I liked him," Bailey mumbled defensively. No need to say he wasn't self-conscious because he was, even more so after every time he woke up in Caden's bed. It seemed he was acting completely unlike himself these days.

"Oh that's sweet," Caden cooed. "You *liked* him. You went out with him for a year and a half and all you have to say is you *liked* him? Shouldn't there be something a bit more there, like... I don't know... love?"

“Love?” Bailey shook his head with a mocking chuckle. “And what exactly would you know about that?”

Cade hissed quietly. “Harsh.” Then he leaned back against the bedpost. “But true. Why love anyone else when there’s so much to love about me?”

There it was, the simple essence of this man. And Bailey still found it repulsive though under different circumstances that quality turned him on like mad. “Do you have any idea how self-centered that sounds?”

Caden shrugged dismissively, hand continuing the lazy strokes over the beast’s fur. “I never claimed to be modest.” A cunning sharpness returned to his eyes. “So why did you and Liam break up?”

It was Bailey’s turn to build up his defenses. “That’s none of your business.”

“Oh... touchy.” Caden grinned mockingly. “I always thought you and that yuppie were a perfect match.”

“He was not a yuppie.” Why did he bother? It was stupid to think Caden would appreciate things like sophistication or consideration in other people. He sure as hell had none of those attributes himself. “Besides, my past, current, or future relationships and whatever people I date are none of your concern, so I’m not going to talk about this with you.” The fact that thinking about Liam was still a little hard on Bailey’s nerves had nothing to do with his reluctance towards talking about the man. There was simply no point in talking about it with Caden. “Off to rule number three...”

“Enough with the rules.”

“Rule number three...” Bailey continued as if he hadn’t even heard Caden. “This, whatever this is, stays in the bedroom.”

“You’re just stating self-evident facts,” Caden said sourly, looking like the topic itself was boring enough to lull him to sleep. “Sex with you is surprisingly enjoyable, but apart from that...” He shrugged, looking distracted. “Let’s just say you’re not exactly my type.”

“Shocker.” Bailey smirked dryly. “At least we’re on the same page about something.”

“That’s a first.”

Bailey leaned his head back against the wall, suddenly feeling too tired to continue the list of rules he had planned in his head. They still had to talk about

public innuendos which seemed to be Caden's favorites, and the frequent phases of nudity that happened in Caden's home. Bailey didn't oppose nudity; he just didn't like anyone shoving their naked selves in his face. Those were all issues he could attack some other time. Right now he was more interested in getting properly dressed, getting fed, and getting sleep. The order of things was secondary.

"Why are my clothes in the washer?" he asked, now annoyed by the lack of clothing. "I should start getting home."

"Tomato sauce," Caden commented shortly. Bailey nodded when he remembered the pizza box which had landed in his lap the second Caden had squeezed his ass earlier that day. Or was it last night? "Oh, right."

"You can sleep here." Caden stood up, that fluffy beast still tangled around his arms. "We gotta head to the supply store in the morning, right? It'll save me gas, not having to pick you up."

"I can't sleep here."

"Why not?"

"Because you snore." It was quite awful really. Like someone was sawing logs next to Bailey's ear. "And you have no milk."

"What the hell does milk have to do with it?"

"I need my morning coffee, and that tar you claim to be coffee can't be digested without at least a gallon of milk."

Caden lowered his beloved pet to the floor, shaking his head. "God, you're high-maintenance. No wonder Liam took off." Bailey was left watching Caden's departure as the man left the room. It was true, it had been Liam who had left, and however much Bailey wished he could say Caden's comments didn't bother him, they sometimes did when they were so perfectly aimed. It was a good thing he was left alone for a moment, otherwise Caden might've noticed how he'd managed to find another way to get under Bailey's skin. That was not ammo Bailey was willing to give to this guy.

A few minutes later Caden appeared by the door, his phone in hand. "I'm gonna order in. Thai. You want some?"

Bailey's brain said no, but his stomach growled a very demanding yes. "Yeah, why not?" He wanted to get out of bed but the thought of walking

around half-naked was disturbing enough to cripple him under the sheets. Caden seemed to notice this as well.

“Are you gonna stay in bed the whole evening?” he asked, seemingly casual, but there was no mistaking the intrigued tone. Bailey shrugged, mind racing to come up with a clever plan to get himself out of Caden’s bed.

“Oh... I know.” The phone rattled on the nightstand as soon as Caden reached the bed. “Bailey’s feeling a little shy,” he cooed, now standing at the foot of the bed.

Bailey sighed, rolling his eyes at Caden’s peculiar smirk. “I’m not feeling shy. I just don’t see any reason in strutting around like someone else I know.” He soon realized Caden didn’t care for his explanations, and Caden especially didn’t care for any halfhearted insults. The man leaned over the bed, hands close to where Bailey’s feet were under the sheets. And then those hands were beneath the light fabric, climbing up along Bailey’s calves while Caden lowered himself onto the bed. “We don’t have to leave the bed.”

“I thought you said you were going to order food.” Stupidity kicked in, and Bailey didn’t even try to move when Caden crawled closer, soon looming over Bailey and leaning so close Bailey could smell the scent of freshly smoked cigarette on Caden’s breath. “I can always do that later.”

Still fighting for control, though the simple idea was insane when this man was concerned, Bailey held still, refusing to look away. “Don’t you ever think about anything else but sex?”

“What can I say...? I’m an opportunist.” Gruff denim scratched against Bailey’s sensitive skin when the sheets just slipped off and suddenly walking around half-naked wasn’t nearly as terrifying as being in bed half-naked. At least while walking he was doing something other than being mounted by Caden. Not that there was anything particularly bad about being mounted by Caden. It was surprisingly enjoyable.

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Caden had always appreciated his privacy. Even when he was younger and his siblings had made it impossible to actually have any privacy in the house, Caden had always found a way to excuse himself. It might’ve not always been polite, but at least it got the job done. When he’d left home at the glamorous age of eighteen, he’d relished the thought of living his life the way he’d wanted to live it—without anyone’s nagging disturbing his plans and ideas of how

one's life should be lived. Stubbornness had led into months and years of living from hand to mouth, at times bunking on someone's couch when he'd been stupid enough to blow all of his money on things other than bills and rent. Stupidity had taught him to stick with what he wanted, regardless of the momentary tough spots. He still valued his freedom higher than the possibility of the finer things in life. And somehow, during those rebellious years, he'd met Ethan, and Ethan being the social butterfly that he was, it hadn't taken too long for their group of two to expand into this weird cluster of people they were these days. At times it was almost suffocating being surrounded by people who expected everybody's business to be their business and sometimes the herd mentality got on Caden's nerves, but he still appreciated his friends.

For now, Caden was left to his own company in the backyard with nothing but lunch wrappers keeping him company. Jeff and Jenny had left about an hour ago, but Caden expected them to be back later that evening. From the sounds coming through the open back door, he could tell there were still some busy beavers left in the house. Cam's voice rang louder than anyone else's, her high-pitched tone giving sharp yet gentle instructions about tapestry and wall paints. It made Caden smile; he bet Rudy never knew what he was signing himself up for when those two tied the knot two years earlier. It had been a nice wedding. Small, accompanied by only close friends and family members. Cam had spent an insane amount of money on flowers, but other than that, everything had been pretty low-key. There was nothing low-key about the plans made for the house. Caden only hoped the couple wouldn't change their minds within the next year and decide they wanted to move again. Caden would not sign up for that.

Fast-paced steps intruded on Caden's solitude, the forthcoming encounter dampening his mood. Glancing over his shoulder, Caden saw Cam tap her way through the barely finished porch and then down the stairs. Her hair was a mess, her bright red overalls colored with dust, and it said something about her state of mind that her eyes were practically gleaming at the sight of Caden's soda cup.

"Is there still ice in that?" She nearly flew across the yard, which was saying a lot with her rounded belly. No really, it was bordering gigantic. Caden nodded, barely able to hide his amusement. "Some." He handed the cup to Cam once she slumped in the chair next to his.

"I hate summer." She literally tore off the cap and didn't seem to mind the left-over soda drizzling on her fingers when she tipped the ice on her palm. "I

seriously hate the summer.” She brought up her hand, sighing when cold ice hit the skin on the side of her neck. “Oh, but this is good.”

Caden watched her pleasurable rubbing session, vaguely aware of the moan-like sounds she was making. “I’m pretty sure this is what some men call a fantasy.”

Cam looked at him, ice melting against her skin and water glistening down along her neck. “I’m sweaty, I stink, I’ve got putty all over my hair, and I look like an obese whale. There are no men in this world who would find this even remotely appealing.” She waved her hand over her grown abdomen, then sighed and dropped her hand while the other continued relieving whatever symptoms the heat produced on her system. “Plus Rudy keeps treating me like I’m handicapped, so I’m officially not good for anything.”

Seeing how Caden had never been pregnant, and he’d never had the dubious pleasure of being in any way involved with a woman in such condition, he had very little leverage for sympathizing. He did, however, see the logic in Rudy’s opinion. “Cam... you’re six months pregnant.”

She glared at him. “Do you think our ancestors would rest on their laurels? Is *that* how great nations were made and hardships were overcome? No, it was not.” She looked so severely pissed off Caden didn’t have the balls to tell her renovating a house and building nations weren’t one hundred percent compatible. Instead he decided to play it dirty, aiming directly at Cam’s weak point. “You’re probably right. But I can understand Rudy’s point too.” He shrugged when Cam glared at him. “See, it’s love that makes him act a little overprotective sometimes. You and the baby are the two most important things in the world for him. I can’t even imagine how he’d feel if something happened to either one of you.” Casually he stretched his arms before folding them behind his head.

Cam stared at him, looking irritated. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing.”

“And what is that?”

“Being... you,” she muttered, pointing a finger at Caden, but the annoyance slowly melted away, leaving her looking tired and worried. “I know he only means well.” She glanced over her shoulder at the house, both hands now folded in her lap. “I just want the house to be ready for the baby, and I feel like we’re running out of time.”

“It’ll be ready.” Caden nodded when Cam looked at him concernedly. “Just trust me when I say that the house will be ready by the time you carry that cute little baby of yours home from the hospital.” It was a lot to promise, but Caden never went back on his promises. He decided he should read those emails ASAP. He cocked his brow, staring back at Cam. “Will you stop worrying now?”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine.” She looked down at her stomach, right hand brought over her round belly protectively. “I just hope our little girl won’t make a sudden appearance.” She smiled warmly. “She’s moving. It’s like she knows whenever I’m talking about her.”

“I think she actually can.”

Cam nodded, then looked up. “Do you wanna try?”

“Sure.”

She reached out her hand, took hold of Caden’s and placed it against her belly, directly above where Caden imagined her bellybutton being. He was hesitant to add any pressure, which apparently was funny to Cam. “You have to push a little bit.” She pressed Caden’s hand tighter against her belly, moving an inch or two to find the right spot. At first there was nothing, and then Caden felt the tiniest little flutter right beneath his palm. It felt like something drawing an invisible line across his palm, the sensation so frail he could barely breathe because of the fear of losing it.

“Wow.” He turned sideways on his chair, completely mesmerized by the feathering brushes beneath his hand. It was a baby, an actual living creature floating inside someone’s belly. Knowing it was totally different from actually feeling it. “That’s crazy.”

“I know, right?” Cam’s hand swept down along the side of her stomach. “It felt surreal with the test and the doctors and ultrasounds but when I really felt her for the first time, I realized there’s really someone in there.”

Caden looked at her, at her downcast eyes, moist and blue. Bailey might say Caden didn’t know much about love and maybe that was true, but it was impossible to overlook the infinite mother’s love beaming from Cam’s eyes. That he knew. That he would’ve recognized anywhere.

“You’re gonna be a great mom,” he said, unprepared for the intensity in Cam’s eyes when she looked at him. “And your baby is gonna be one lucky kid to have parents like you and Rudy.”



Cam stared back, immobile, until her bottom lip started quivering and the moistness in her eyes turned into a gentle waterfall. "Damn..." She sniffed and fished out a paper napkin from the pocket of her overalls. "I thought I could go one day without bawling my eyes out, but apparently not."

Caden chuckled, feeling a little bit emotional himself. "I guess it comes with the territory."

Cam laughed quietly, wiping her eyes. Caden pulled back at the sound of approaching footsteps. Rudy skipped down the stairs, frowning concernedly at the sight of his crying wife. "Hormonal or due to the circumstances?"

"I'd say more of the first."

Rudy's hands stroked along Cam's shoulders when he reached the chair. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Cam nodded and looked up at him. "I'm fine. Just my daily dose of water works." She smiled meaningfully at Caden before standing up. "But maybe we should all go home." She nodded at Rudy's surprised expression, squirming under his arm and tightly against his side. "How about we call it a night and tomorrow you guys can come here and do whatever you do, and I could maybe go shopping for curtains or something?"

"Curtains?" Rudy seemed confused. He glanced at Caden, then at Bailey who now stood at the bottom of the stairs. His eyes drifted back to Cam who didn't seem to notice her husband's confusion.

"Curtains and rugs and pottery. Stuff like that. If Bailey could come with me?"

The blond at the end of the stairs nodded, looking way too pristine and clean in his spotless jeans and striped tee compared to the rest of them. "We can go. Just don't go overboard with the rugs." He leveled a meaningful glance at Rudy. "You two should definitely have a talk about the budget."

Cam frowned sourly. "Spoilsport."

"Budget." Rudy nodded slowly. "Okay, we'll talk about that." He looked around, then turned to Bailey. "Are you heading home? We could give you a ride."

Privacy aside, Caden figured this was the perfect moment for him to step up and have a say. "I can take him home." It wasn't Cam's and Rudy's surprised looks that made him smirk; it was Bailey's shocked one. "I think we can

manage a ten-minute drive without killing each other.” Caden shrugged and picked up the wrappers from the ground next to his chair, all the while looking at Bailey. “And if you get really difficult, I can always gag you with dirty gym-wear and tie you with the seatbelt.”

Bailey made a nauseated groan. “Repulsive, but nothing I wouldn’t expect from you.”

“I’m glad I manage to I meet your expectations.” Seeing Bailey blush, even if it was just a little bit and so, so small it was hardly noticeable, sent chills of excitement through Caden. Who knew halfhearted flirting could get to Bailey this badly?

“It’s a good thing my expectations aren’t any higher,” Bailey mumbled and shot a meaningful glare at Caden. Then he turned to Cam. “Call me in the morning and we’ll go pottery shopping.”

She looked surprised. “You’re going with him?”

“You need to go home *now*, and he lives in my direction anyways. I think I can bear his company for a few minutes.” He all but stuck his nose up before heading back inside. Maybe he didn’t know what kind of a rush Caden got from that.

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At three in the morning Bailey woke up, hands instinctively spread across the sheets and finding nothing. He frowned, barely awake, and turned over, eyes blinking open and looking for something that was missing. He smelled detergent and blackcurrant moisturizer and cut grass, and something from his dream tried to push to the front and mingle with reality and he just wouldn’t let it.

“Caden?” It was a pathetic try, especially since Bailey’s throat was so sore he couldn’t even make a decent sound, but it felt weird that Caden would just leave because he never left until in the morning. There was no answer. Bailey sat up, listening carefully, but all he heard were distant sounds of cars and traffic.

Struggling to his feet, he pulled the sheet along and wrapped it around his flannel-covered body; pajamas were a must whether or not he was alone. Still, the layer of thin cotton gave a tiny bit more warmth, and Bailey tried to convince himself he felt better though in reality he didn’t. He still felt cold and

a little sick and very, very tired. He only felt a little bit better when he got to the living room and saw Caden sitting on the floor in front of the TV, every single one of Bailey's DVDs piled on the coffee table.

"I thought you left." It came out a little sharp, but Bailey really had thought Caden was gone. The man looked up, smiling lopsidedly. "Aren't you sweet to come check up on me."

"Don't flatter yourself." The couch was soft under Bailey's weight, and he nestled in the corner, watching Caden continue skimming through the DVD covers. "What are you looking for?"

"Something worth watching."

"At three in the morning?" Bailey stretched his legs along the cushions and got comfortable. "It's nothing violent, is it?"

"The most violent flicks in your collection are nature films where lions attack baby impalas." Of course Caden thought it was funny, while Bailey liked to think educational films were much more insightful than those action movies Caden apparently liked to watch. "Nature documentaries are interesting."

Caden nodded. "So are all of those TV shows where they show liposuction or open heart surgery, but I still don't wanna watch that in the middle of the night." He put the disc in the player and stood up, casually leaving the DVDs on the table. "Move over."

Bailey barely had time to pick his feet up before Caden sat on the couch. "Aren't you going to clean those up?" he asked, gesturing towards the table.

Caden shrugged, eyes on the TV when he picked up the remote from the coffee table. "I'll do it later." He leaned back, slumping like he had every intention of taking up all the space on the couch. Bailey tried to fit comfortably in the corner, but after a while he realized it wasn't happening, so he remained uncomfortably in the corner instead. Caden fiddled with the remote and tapped the DVD cover against his denim-covered thigh, and the tapping was driving Bailey insane. "What did you pick?" He nearly yanked the cover from Caden's fingers, prepared for something even remotely adventurous or scandalous. That was not what he found. "Turtles?"

Caden glanced at him, nodding. "Yeah. Turtles are cute."

"You just said you don't want to watch nature documentaries in the middle of the night."

“No... I said I don’t want to watch liposuction in the middle of the night.” With a disappointed sigh Caden frowned at Bailey. “Really, you should start paying attention.” Moving casually and with such effortless speed Bailey’s mind couldn’t keep up, Caden placed Bailey’s feet on his lap, with sheets and all. “And *please* stop fidgeting. I’m trying to watch a movie.” Underneath the sheet his fingers stroked absently over Bailey’s ankle, like Caden wasn’t thinking about what he was doing. Bailey was. He was thinking about nothing but what Caden was doing. It felt weird and nice and wrong, and Bailey felt the urge to fidget some more, but he resisted the temptation and practically froze on the cushions.

They stayed that way for a good twenty minutes; Bailey’s feet in Caden’s lap, Caden’s fingers turning Bailey’s brain into jelly, and Bailey’s concentration wavering between the TV and the man sitting on the couch with him. Then awful, awful things started happening on the screen, and Bailey had to look away. Caden of course noticed this, frowning at first and then chuckling amusedly when he realized what it was Bailey didn’t want to see. “You know the baby turtle dies, right?”

“Shut up, Caden.” Of course Bailey knew. “I just don’t like to watch it.”

“It’s the way nature works. I can’t believe you’re getting emotional over it.”

“I am not.” He had maybe shed a tear or two the first time he’d seen it and even now he felt like seeing an animal die was a little too much, but that was just because he was tired. And sick. It had nothing to do with being emotional.

“I bet you cry over every natural disaster too,” Caden said teasingly.

He was good at diverting Bailey’s attention from the TV, but getting irritated didn’t work well with Bailey’s headache. “I do not cry. But yes, I get sad. It’s tragic. I suppose nothing touches your soul enough to scrape up a decent emotion.”

“On the contrary.” Caden waved the remote in Bailey’s direction, like a lecturing teacher. “I get sad too. But it’s pointless to dwell on the bad stuff when there’s so much good stuff happening at the same time.” Gently he tapped the remote against Bailey’s knee. “You just like to see all the crappy things going on. You’re a pessimist, Bailey. That attitude will give you a heart attack.”

“Your company is giving me a migraine.”

Caden smirked at the snarly comment until he apparently noticed Bailey's pained frown. "You're not joking, are you?"

"About your company—"

"About the migraine. Do you have anything for it?" He was already getting up, first dropping the remote on the table and then gently moving Bailey's feet from his lap. Bailey didn't like being fussed over, and he did his best to push Caden's hands off of him. "I can do it myself."

"You're pale, and you look like you're about to throw up, so could you just for once let me do something for you without an argument?" Caden's annoyed stare looked so comical Bailey bit his tongue not to laugh. He scooched up in the corner of the couch and wrapped the sheet tightly around himself.

"In the kitchen. Second shelf next to the fridge."

Caden nodded theatrically. "Thank you."

A few minutes later, he returned with the medicine and a glass of water. "One pill, two pills?"

"One." It was heartwarming, being nurtured this way, though Bailey would've preferred someone else doing the nurturing. Still, he didn't complain when Caden handed him the medicine and the water, all the while watching Bailey closely as he swallowed the pill and emptied the glass.

Caden stood by the couch, looking prepared for any physical task. "Now what?" he asked, as if waiting for further instructions.

Bailey lowered the glass on the table. "It's just a migraine, not brain damage. I'm sure I'll survive."

Nodding, Caden eased back on the couch, still keeping an eye on Bailey. "Shouldn't you be sleeping?"

"In your charming company? Not a chance." Bailey smiled cheekily, awarded with Caden's mocking grin seconds later.

"You keep that up, and I'll ignore your handicapped state."

Rolling his eyes, Bailey snuggled on the couch, no longer bothered if his toes poked against Caden's thigh. "Could we just watch something else?" He'd had enough of dying baby animals. His current state couldn't handle any more tragedy.

Caden stood up and got the disk from the player. "Comedy? Or how about this..." he read through the cover and grimaced. "No... that's a chick flick."

"There's another documentary..." Bailey suggested sheepishly. He ignored Caden's eye roll. "It's about chimps."

"More lost lives among nature's cutest creatures?"

"It has a happy ending. And no one dies."

Caden stared back, smiling absently. "Fine." He started going through the DVDs, mumbling to himself. "We'll watch that one." He didn't look too pleased, but by the time the movie was playing and Caden was back on the couch with Bailey's feet on his lap and his hands were gently massaging Bailey's ankles, he didn't look too bored. Or irritated. By the time Bailey relaxed and didn't lie stiff next to the man, *then* Caden looked pleased.

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For the second time within a week Caden stared at that green door, only this time he had nothing but good intentions in mind. Bailey obviously didn't think so. His face went white the second he opened the door and saw who was standing on the other side. "Oh... it's you."

"Hello to you too."

"Caden, really, I am so not in the mood for this today." Bailey leaned against the door, looking like someone had wiped the floors with him. His skin was pale, his nose was red, and something weird was going on with his eyes because Caden had never seen eyes as puffy as Bailey's.

"Yeah, I can see that." Caden made a small "*tsk*" sound and shook his head. "You look like shit."

"Thank you," Bailey said sourly. "So, please, just go away. I'm not in any condition to entertain you tonight."

"What's with you and misunderstanding things?" Caden shook his head disappointedly. "I came to rescue you from your awful state." He held up the paper bag he'd brought along.

Bailey furrowed his brow. "You cannot bribe me."

Caden whisked up his most irresistible smile. "I'd like to remind you that I don't need to bribe you to get what I want. If I remember correctly, you're quite capable of giving it willingly." With a more reconciling tone he continued. "Seriously though... I got you ginger tea and oranges."

The frown on Bailey's face smoothed a little. He glanced at the bag, teeth chewing on his bottom lip. "Ginger tea?"

"Ginger and honey, actually. You like that one, right?" Caden passed the bag to Bailey who took it without arguments.

Bailey peeked in the bag. "Who's the popcorn for?"

"Me. I don't like oranges."

Bailey looked at Caden, soon shaking his head before he stepped back. "Fine. But if you start groping me I'll kick you out." Before he left the foyer he glanced over his shoulder. "Shoes and jacket by the rack. You're dripping wet." Then he sailed off, from the sounds of it attacking the first of the seven oranges Caden had bought him.

Caden kicked his shoes off and tossed his jacket over the rack—it probably landed on the floor—before following Bailey. He frowned at the vacuum cleaner left in the corner of the living room. "You're not gonna start cleaning, are you?"

Bailey was in the kitchen, the paper bag emptied and now neatly folded on the table while he busied himself with a small kettle. "I already started. I'll finish up later." He sniffed a few times, then grabbed a paper towel from an ambitious pile stacked on the table and blew his nose. Caden watched Bailey toss the paper away, wash his hands by the sink, and then continue preparing the tea, all the while sniffing and sneezing like something was buzzing in his nostrils.

"Okay... how about you go sit down."

Bailey shooed Caden away when he tried to take the kettle. "I can make myself tea."

"No doubt you can do a whole lot of things, but you really look like shit, and since you're dumb enough to clean this place when you're sick, how about I make you tea before you pass out on the stove." Caden took the kettle from Bailey and pushed the man out of the kitchen. Bailey didn't like this. In fact, Bailey looked like he might cough slime all over Caden.

"Do not boss me around in my own kitchen."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Caden handed the oranges to Bailey. "I'm only helping."

Bailey took the fruits but remained by the door, looking suspicious. "You don't *help*. You invade and bully and order people around." Then he frowned, looking around worryingly while taking a small step back. "How'd you know I was sick, anyways?"

"Cam told me." That was true. Hopefully Caden hadn't let out any carefully hidden secrets while fishing out the reason for Bailey's absence. Caden glanced over his shoulder and saw Bailey looking really worried. "She seemed convinced I was only interested in where you were because now I had no one to bug."

Bailey's brow arched. "Told you." *Sniff-sniff-sniff*. "We see right through you," Bailey said victoriously, waving his hand in front of Caden. Then he coughed quietly, very Bailey-like and stepped further back. "Just don't break anything."

Caden snorted dismissively. "I think I know how to use your stove."

Five minutes later, the stove was the least of Caden's problems. It was the microwave oven he didn't know how to use. It had like a thousand buttons, and he was sure if he pressed the wrong one, his popcorn would turn into ash. He didn't even think about asking Bailey for help, because that was like asking for help while changing tires; not something Caden did.

"Everything okay in there?" Bailey asked from the living room.

"Yeah." Caden shoved the popcorn package in the microwave and picked a button at random. Hopefully it wouldn't lead to an explosion. "Do you want sugar in your tea?"

"Yes, please. Three-quarters of a teaspoon."

Caden shook his head while searching for the sugar. "Three-quarters..." He only found a bag of sugar in the cupboard and if Bailey expected him to use some fancy measuring thing to add exactly three-quarters of a teaspoon, too bad. Caden added some, perhaps too much, and stirred the sugar in the tea while waiting for his popcorn to finish. Amazingly they didn't turn into ash, but it took another few minutes to find salt in Bailey's perfectly organized kitchen. Everything was spotless and clean and shiny, even the double-sink. Caden's flat never looked like this, not even on a good day and especially not when he was sick. When he was sick, his apartment looked like a disaster zone.

When he got to the living room, Bailey was curled up in the corner of the pale gray sectional parked in the middle of the living room. He'd placed a few



paper towels in his lap, orange skins neatly layered on top of them. He smiled briefly when Caden handed him the tea. "Thank you." He took a cautious sip, maybe to eliminate any burns or to smell any added poisons before he'd digest any. Apparently it wasn't too sweet because he didn't spit it out. There were no high praises either, but Caden considered a civilized "thank you" as a sign of approval.

Caden sat on the other end of the couch and tossed his hoodie aside. He had chucked the popcorn into the first plastic bowl he'd located in the kitchen, and now that he plopped the bowl on his lap, Bailey shot him a firm glare. "Don't crumble those all over my couch."

"And here I was thinking I'd just flip them on your cushions."

"And please don't leave any greasy prints on the upholstery. I can't even begin to explain how difficult it would be to clean."

Caden leaned back against the corner of the couch, watching Bailey chew down a piece of orange. "I am housetrained, you know."

Bailey smiled crookedly. "If you say so." He sank deeper against the couch, a green quilt spread over his bent legs and the enormous black-and-white striped sweater pooling around him while he continued munching down his oranges. He looked completely off, not at all like himself, but then again Caden wasn't an expert on how people usually looked when they got sick. The last time he'd even had a flu was years ago, and he usually tended to avoid anyone who was sick. Why this time was different, Caden wasn't sure. He didn't care enough to actually ponder on it.

"Why are you here, anyways?" Bailey asked after they'd stared at some sitcom running on TV for a few minutes. Caden shrugged, crunching a mouthful of popcorn. Bailey turned, now facing Caden with his back leaned against the corner of the couch. "Why are you being so *nice*?"

"I can't be nice?"

"It's suspicious. And very strange."

"Oh, come on." Another mouthful, then chewing. "I'm considerate and caring. It's normal for people to worry over the well-being of their fellow citizen."

Bailey stared back blankly. "Last year when I had that nasty sinusitis you kept making elephant noises every time I sneezed."

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“Oh yeah...” Caden nodded. “I did do that.”

“Yes. That’s how considerate you are.” Bailey sank even deeper into the cushions until he almost lay on his side on the couch. “Whatever the agenda is here, can you not attack me while I’m defenseless?”

“Now would I ever attack you?” Caden asked but soon nodded when Bailey just stared back. “Okay, I promise not to take advantage of your defenseless state.”

Apparently satisfied with the response, Bailey sighed and turned on his side. “Thank you.” He put the leftover oranges and skins and towels on the coffee table and fussed for a while, his woolen sock-covered feet poking against Caden’s thigh, before he settled under the quilt, head resting against the pillow tucked in the corner of the couch. Then he fell still, so still Caden had to watch really carefully to make sure Bailey hadn’t passed out immediately.

“You shouldn’t clean around the flat when you’re sick,” he said after a while.

Bailey’s heavy breath sounded funny through the quilt. “No one else’s is gonna do it for me.”

“You can do it when you’re *not* sick. When you’re sick, you’re supposed to rest and avoid any physical stress.”

“Dust irritates my sinuses.”

“No one gives a shit about your sinuses when you die of myocarditis.”

Bailey snorted amusedly. “Listen to you, doctor.”

“Make fun all you like, Bailey. I’ll be sure to remind you of this when you lie in a hospital bed with tubes and catheters attached to your body.” Caden continued emptying his bowl, nothing but the TV keeping him company while Bailey remained quiet.

After a moment the man sighed deeply and pushed the edge of his quilt lower. “I’m not *that* sick. It’s just a common cold.”

Caden shrugged, never taking his eyes off the TV. “I’m sure that’s what all the twenty-something-year-old men and women said before they got rushed to the hospital for—”

“Alright!” Bailey snapped, glaring at Caden maliciously. “I won’t clean when I’m sick. Happy now?”

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Caden nodded, smiling pleasantly. "Very."

Bailey sighed huffily and stretched his long legs so that the next kick against Caden's thigh was definitely premeditated. Caden didn't say a word about it, though. He figured being sick was not Bailey's favorite thing in the world and therefore he had a right to be pissed off. Not that he was the life of the party on any other day.

Caden stared at the TV, completely oblivious to any of the actors or even the name of the show he was watching. The longer he watched it, the less sense it made, and after three commercial breaks he was ready to watch something else. He looked at Bailey, prepared to ask if they could possibly change the channel, but it seemed the tea or the added vitamins from the oranges or just overall exhaustion had won over. Bailey probably wouldn't care if Caden switched the channel, because Bailey was asleep.

This was a whole new problem for Caden. Though they'd had sex many, *many* times by now and even shared a bed while sleeping, Caden had never actually seen Bailey sleep. It shouldn't have been such a big deal, but for whatever reason it was. Technically Caden no longer had a reason to stick around, since his host was floating in whole other levels of consciousness, but at the same time Caden felt it would be rude to just up and go. And that thought led him into thinking, since when did he care about whether or not something was rude.

Frowning and still watching Bailey, Caden tossed a few kernels in his mouth. His mind was racing with all sorts of pranks he could pull on Bailey now that the guy was oblivious to things around him. But no, that would be very immature. And impolite. And somehow it felt pointless, because no matter how in favor of practical jokes Caden was, a sleeping Bailey didn't rouse such desire for pranking as an awake version of the man did. Sleeping Bailey was actually kind of... cute. In a very illogical, contradictory kind of way.

Bailey didn't snore. Neither did he drool on his pillow or make obnoxious faces like some people did in their sleep. He just looked all Bailey. A little less snappy and demanding and difficult Bailey. Actually, the more Caden thought about it, this Bailey might even win over naked Bailey. Then Caden reached a certain point of thinking about it and decided that nothing won over naked Bailey.

Still, the man, like he was now, was pretty easy on the eyes. Not that there was typically anything wrong with the way he looked, but at least now Caden

could look without being told he was staring or that the way he looked at Bailey was weird and suspicious and he should definitely stop. So Caden didn't stop looking. He forgot about the TV and the sitcom, and the popcorn was tasteless in his mouth as he became completely transfixed by details, like how light Bailey's eyelashes were or how pale freckles were visible now that he was still and Caden could look without disturbance. Bailey's hair was frizzy, and the puffiness of his eyes was even more noticeable now that they were closed. And he still looked good. Caden had always noticed the good looks, but before, mentioning it would've resulted in insults and bickering so he'd skipped the compliments and kept their conversations strictly argumentative. It had proven to be entertaining, at times even thought-provoking like they'd now realized. Still, Caden was a prankster at heart, and regardless of his earlier promises, he couldn't quite bypass an opportunity such as this.

He picked popcorn from the bowl, evaluating his chances of living through this before he tossed the kernel through the air. It landed on the top of Bailey's head, like a tiny crown over strawberry blond hair. Caden threw another, this time aiming a little lower. The popcorn bounced off of Bailey's cheek and rolled onto the floor. Caden made a mental note to pick it up before he left.

After decorating Bailey's hair with a few snacks and completely polluting the floor in front of the couch, Caden finally managed to aim correctly and the last popcorn in the bowl hit Bailey on the nose. "Score!" Caden cheered in a whisper, arms raised above his head in a victorious gesture. Bailey sniffed quietly and curled deeper inside the quilt, his nose wrinkled before he coughed in his sleep.

Caden refused to feel guilty. He did, however, make himself useful before he left.

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Bailey jerked from his sleep, unconscious one moment and hyperaware the next. His throat felt swollen and thick, making swallowing the second most painful thing to do. The most painful thing to do was moving. Bailey's body didn't like it. His brain, on the other hand, didn't like not seeing Caden, because Bailey had no idea how long he'd been sleeping and for all he knew Caden could be lurking behind the curtains or something and scare him to death.

A quick investigation proved that Caden had left. Bailey didn't know how he felt about it; it was nice of the man to bring him tea, but at the same time Bailey liked his privacy and Caden just randomly stopping by messed with Bailey's plans. And Bailey did love his plans.

Bailey was even more confused when he found the dishes in the dishwasher and what was left of the oranges neatly in the trash bin. It was oddly heart-warming that Caden had cleaned up after them; he probably knew Bailey would do it himself. Somehow it was so sweet Bailey couldn't stop smiling. Then later that day Cam stopped by, and Bailey remembered why he sometimes hated Caden's sense of humor.

Cam looked at him weird when she stepped inside. She brought up her hand and yanked something off of Bailey's hair. "Is this popcorn?"

Yeah... Bailey didn't like that.

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Caden wasn't as immune as he'd thought. By Monday afternoon he felt like he'd swallowed sandpaper. He felt almost shitty enough to go and buy that ginger tea for himself, but he still held on to his two pots of coffee per day and hoped all the caffeine he rinsed his insides with would eliminate the germs.

He met Rudy after getting off from work, though he'd briefly thought about canceling due to his sudden spring cold. However, since he'd promised he'd help Rudy pick up the slate tiles for the backyard, Caden's conscience wouldn't let him slide.

By the time Caden got to the store, Rudy had already dealt with the paperwork and was waiting by the loading zone to get his order. "Sorry I'm late." Caden stopped by the pickup and leaned against the truck, his headache reminding him of its existence.

"That's cool. There was some mix-up and they're making calls." Rudy checked his watch, cursing under his breath. "I thought we'd get started with this today, but if they have to call the main office and everything, this is going to take longer than I planned."

"Well, I'm not in a hurry, so..." Truthfully Caden was glad; maybe he wouldn't have to carry anything heavier than a pillow.

To avoid thinking about his shitty state, he started up conversation about the house and the never-ending list of things still left to do. Apparently Cam now allowed Rudy to take care of the yard while she was happy finishing with the walls and décor. Caden listened to Rudy explain the layout for the slates and the approximate time it would take to have the backyard finished, but most of what the man said went in one ear and out the other. Eventually his distracted mind was noticed by his company.

“Are you okay?” Rudy asked and lifted his sunglasses from his face. Caden nodded. “Yeah, I think I just caught a cold or something. I’ve been feeling like crap all day.”

“You should’ve called. I could’ve asked Jeff to come along.”

“No, it’s cool. Fresh air heals everything.”

Five hours later Caden nearly crawled inside his apartment, nothing but sleep on his mind. He was tempted to call Bailey and demand immediate attention since it was Bailey’s fault that Caden was sick. If it wasn’t for Bailey’s stupid flannel pajamas and pathetic condition, Caden could’ve resisted staying for as long as he had. That, of course, was a lie, because it was the chance to be in Bailey’s presence that made it so hard for Caden to resist the temptation. Still, Caden would’ve liked to be in prime condition instead of feeling like someone had scooped out half of his muscles and left him to suffer a slow death.

By Tuesday afternoon his boss told him to take the rest of the week off. Caden thought this was a little excessive since he’d probably be on his feet by Thursday. Still, permission to lounge around resulted in undisturbed sleep and one whole day of nothing but lying on his back on the couch and watching movies which didn’t require any active thinking. It also resulted in him totally ignoring laundry and cooking and making sure he’d have food in his fridge. Luckily he managed to feed Kitty—she would claw his eyes out if she didn’t get food—and clean the litter box. Other than that, Caden remained immobile. That was until his phone rang early Wednesday evening and a few little letters flashing on the screen managed to brighten up his spirit tremendously.

“I hope you’re calling to beg for forgiveness,” he rasped without bothering with any “hello, how are you”.

“I wouldn’t go that far.” Bailey sounded very reasonable, but then again he always did. “But yes, I heard you got sick, and I kinda feel bad because you probably got it from me.” The man spoke very quietly, which told Caden that Bailey’s location wasn’t the most suitable. “Are you at Cam’s?”

“Yeah. Rudy said you weren’t feeling well when he saw you on Monday.”

“That was nothing. Since then I’ve started coughing up blood and phlegm.” That wasn’t true and Caden felt good about his little white lie right until the point where Bailey started talking again, sounding alarmed. “Please tell me you’re joking?”

“I am.”

“Asshole.”

“Oh... he cusses. I’m shocked.”

Bailey sighed heavily. “Clearly it was a mistake to call you. Have fun choking on your mucus.”

Caden chuckled, feeling revived. “Oh don’t be like that. I’m crippled by whatever virus is rampaging through my system. Let me have some fun.”

“Why does it always have to be at my expense?”

“Because it makes it twice as good.” Really it was because no one else would strike back as hard and quick as Bailey, but there was no reason to say that out loud. Instead Caden searched for his charms, the ones that didn’t work too well when he was sick. “Do you wanna make me feel better?”

“Does it include nudity or audacious suggestions?”

“Sadly, no.”

“Then what?”

It would’ve been nice if Bailey sounded even slightly excited instead of bored. But Caden wasn’t picky. He’d take what he could get. “I wouldn’t mind some company.” Did that break the terms of their agreement? Probably not, though Bailey had a way of twisting everything around so that anything could seem wrong and screwed up at the end. Now the man stayed quiet for a while, and Caden found himself eager to hear the response.

“I guess I could come over.” Muffled speech invaded the quietness on the line, and Caden heard Bailey say something to someone standing nearby. Then the background went quiet. “I’ve still got some things I promised to help Cam with, and then I have to stop by at home. So... couple of hours?”

“It’s not like I’m going anywhere.”

“Yeah... I guess you’re not.” Though Bailey sounded apprehensive, Caden’s mood was skyrocketing towards giddy. Maybe he had a fever. Or maybe he was just glad he could use his late spring cold as an excuse to lure Bailey into his personal space.

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It was nearly seven o’clock by the time Bailey got to Caden’s apartment. After leaving home, Bailey had stopped by the grocery store to get some tea—

he doubted Caden had any—and milk—Caden probably didn't have that either. He also bought a specific type of ice cream and cookies. He didn't want to think about how exactly he knew which ice cream and cookies Caden liked, and he especially didn't want to think about why he cared enough for the man's current condition to actually go through the trouble of buying him some. Now he felt like an idiot for buying anything at all. He felt like he'd somehow invited himself over though he really hadn't done that. Caden being sick should be the perfect reason for Bailey to stay away, and yet here he was, waiting outside the door for Caden to appear and let him in. Appear looking like a wet dream, to be precise.

Bailey stared at the man standing by the opened door, dressed in old, ragged sweats and a T-shirt which looked wrinkled and old. "How come when you're sick you look like that, and when I'm sick I look like death warmed over?"

Caden shrugged very slightly, looking like he'd just climbed out of bed. "What can I say... some people are just born with it." The grin on his face was lazy and drowsy and just the right thing to plant all sorts of ideas in Bailey's head. To avoid getting completely lost in those ideas, Bailey thrust the bag at Caden. "Compensation. Cookies and ice cream." He sneaked inside carefully, so that he wouldn't end up rubbing himself up against Caden, who closed the door. "Aren't you sweet?" That drowsy smirk turned into a genuine smile when he saw what was in it. Needless to say Bailey didn't need to see that smile. That smile went straight to his head.

"Yes, well..." He was *not* stuttering, though he had to look away to get his thoughts back in order. "I brought tea too."

Caden grimaced and left the foyer. "I'm not a tea-person."

Bailey followed soon after. "It'll make you feel better, I promise." Bailey's optimistic spirit suffered a minor setback when he reached the living room. He couldn't walk any further, let alone continue speaking.

Caden looked over from the couch, then glanced around when he saw Bailey's frozen stance. "It's like my survival kit."

Bailey stepped up to the small square table placed between the couch and a matching armchair and picked up a crumbled hamburger wrapping which had leaked something green and spotty on the table. "This is your survival kit?"

"Fast food works wonders when you're sick."



"I'm not talking about the food." Bailey gathered used tissues from the table. "I'm talking about the missing biohazard tags you should've put on your front door."

"I don't think there're any dangerous germs living here." Caden shrugged and slumped on the couch.

Bailey looked around, physically hurting at the sight of disorder. He paused by the couch, trying to remain calm and composed. "How about I make you tea?" He held up the bag. "Would you like ice cream or cookies?"

Caden glanced at the bag. "Cookies. Ice cream for dessert." Then he wiggled his brows, and it was so lame Bailey had to bite his cheek not to laugh out loud. To prevent any such atypical behavior, he escaped the living room and managed to swallow his moan when he saw the mess in the kitchen.

It wasn't filthy. It wasn't even dirty. There was no food on the floors or stains on doors or walls. It was just so messy and disorganized, Bailey couldn't understand how anyone could navigate through such chaos. It took him a few minutes to clear enough space to get the tea started and even longer to find a cupboard with bowls and plates. Still, he didn't say anything about it when he took a plate of cookies into the living room, accompanied by a glass of milk. Caden frowned at the glass. "I didn't know I had milk."

"You didn't." Bailey lowered his offerings to the table in front of the couch. "I brought it with me. Just in case I happen to drink coffee here."

Caden nodded, a weird, lazy look on his face. "Morning coffee?"

"What? No. Not morning coffee. Just... coffee." Bailey stepped back from the table. "I'm not going to stay over."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. You said no nudity or audacious suggestions."

Caden sighed and picked up the plate from the table. "Yeah, guess I did." He munched the first cookie, and Bailey almost told him to watch for those crumbs until he realized it wasn't his couch. Caden could sprinkle the cookies all over the furniture if he wanted.

"So what's this all about? Are you feeling guilty?" Caden asked.

Bailey shook his head and headed back towards the kitchen. "No. I'm just returning a favor." He heard Caden chuckle but didn't turn around to see if the

man was laughing at him or at something Bailey had said. The man sounded kindly amused when he spoke. "In that case I should probably tell you I gave you a handjob when you were sleeping."

Two months ago Bailey would've been outraged. Now he just smiled. "I'm pretty sure I would've woken up if you'd done that." Caden's answer was another throaty chuckle, and Bailey realized the smile lingered on his face all through tea preparations. While he searched for a mug, and a spoon and sugar in case Caden wanted some added with the honey, Bailey cleared the tabletops without even really thinking about it. It took no more than a few minutes, and the kitchen looked a lot better, though it still had Caden written all over it.

"Tell me if it needs sugar," Bailey said once he took the tea to the living room. Caden sat up and took the mug, sniffing it suspiciously. "What is it?"

"It's the same brand you got me. I just put in a little bit more honey." Bailey started gathering wrinkled tissues and wrappers from the table, picking up two empty soda cans and an empty bag of tortilla chips. He cleared the space around them while Caden silently sipped his tea. Apparently it didn't need any sugar. After a while he noticed Caden watching him intently. Bailey stood up, suddenly feeling foolish. "I thought I'd just clear away all this stuff."

"Right..." Caden put his feet on the coffee table, again something Bailey wanted to comment on, but he just sighed deeply and reminded himself that this was not his home. Caden cocked his brow while watching Bailey. "So I've got my very own maid now?"

"Don't push it," Bailey muttered and took the trash into the kitchen. The trash bin was full by the time he was done, but Bailey refused to feel obligated to take the trash out. Instead he went back into the living room, prepared to sit on the armchair, but Caden grabbed a hold of his hand, nearly tripping Bailey on the floor. "What...?"

"Come here." Caden pulled Bailey onto the couch, apparently not to grope or harass him, but before Bailey managed to bounce back up and retreat to the chair, Caden had placed his mug on the coffee table and fell on the couch with his head in Bailey's lap. "Now this is good."

Bailey, who hadn't expected this and wasn't sure if he appreciated such closeness all of a sudden, sat frozen and stared down at Caden who seemed very pleased with himself. "What are you doing?"

"I'm sick."

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“Well, obviously.”

“I’m in need of tender, loving care.” Caden twisted his face into a pitiful frown, probably aiming for puppy-eyes.

Luckily Bailey was immune to looks like that. “You’re in need of intensive therapy. Really, Caden, get off of me.”

“You can’t really be that cruel.” Instead of following simple instructions, Caden stretched and turned on his side, looking *very* pleased with himself. Too bad he also got *very* close to Bailey while moving around.

“Caden?”

“Mmm...”

“Get your face off my crotch.”

It seemed like it was too hard to complete, but eventually Caden turned around, sighing laboriously. “Always with the complaining... jeez...” He looked up at Bailey. “Can’t a man rest for a second?”

“I never told you that you couldn’t rest, but don’t expect me to be your mattress.”

“Just the pillow, Bailey.” Caden flashed that smile again, a shallow dimple forming on his right cheek, and dark thick brows arching, so that for a second he looked almost... tender. “You make a great pillow.”

Bailey wanted to say he didn’t care, but instead he just sat there, staring down at Caden who looked back with those dark brown eyes of his. Their agreement did not cover this. There was no clause that said they were to feel obligated to check in on each other, in case one or both of them got sick. Bailey hadn’t felt obligated. He’d just felt bad. And sort of responsible. And for some reason, when he’d thought of Caden being stuck at home alone with nothing but tissues to give him comfort, Bailey had *wanted* to come by. To be there. To see if maybe there was something he could help with. He hadn’t planned this, and he definitely wouldn’t have volunteered to act as a pillow, but now he couldn’t say no. Not when Caden kept looking at him like that; like the man was just waiting for him to shove his host to the floor.

Bailey went back to the rules but still couldn’t convince himself to get up and leave. This felt too nice to be tossed aside. The weight on his lap, the weight against him. Having someone next to him, when it had been a while since he’d really had anyone with him. Even when Bailey and Liam had still

been together, it had often been days and days without feeling close to someone. Now there was Caden—Caden who was a jerk and insolent and rude and half the time made Bailey so mad he wanted to break something.

Did rebound sex cover momentary streaks of affection? Bailey didn't know. He'd never had a rebound kind of thing before, so the rules were a little hazy, but he had a feeling this wasn't what they'd originally planned.

Still trying to keep things from getting totally out of hand, Bailey reorganized his thoughts and returned to matters he felt needed to be dealt with. "Cam came by later."

Caden frowned, like he'd been thinking about other things too. "Huh?"

"After you left." When this information didn't seem to spark any worries, he continued matter-of-factly. "She could've showed up while you were there."

"But she didn't."

"She could've."

"But she did not."

Caden didn't seem one bit worried. In fact, he looked even more relaxed than he'd been before. Bailey couldn't understand this. "I think we should be more careful."

"I don't think we could be any more careful, even if we tried." Caden smirked lopsidedly, again managing to throw Bailey off. "Stop worrying all the time, Bailey. Just have fun for a change."

Didn't he understand how absurd that sounded? Have fun for a change? Bailey wasn't completely foreign to the concept of fun, but he would never sacrifice his personal dignity and pride just to have a few hours of physical fun. If people found out, if they really knew what Bailey allowed Caden to do to him, they would never look at him the same way. He didn't want to become one of those guys he'd always looked at with pity, thinking how they'd just burn their fingers while playing with Caden.

Bailey blinked when a sudden touch on his cheek snapped him out of his distressing thoughts. Caden had brought his hand up, his fingers barely caressing Bailey's cheek, before the touch was already gone. "Really. Stop worrying." Then Caden turned fully over on his back, legs stretched over the armrest of the couch, and head turned to the side. He watched TV, while Bailey

watched him, feeling misplaced. His cheek tingled, where Caden had touched him, a ghostly sensation of a burn still left on his skin.

Slowly Bailey relaxed, even watched TV for a few moments, but whatever movie Caden had picked, it wasn't something Bailey would've chosen, so Bailey's eyes trailed across the room instead. He was a little pedantic when it came to order, but Caden wasn't a slob. His home was always clean, if only a little disorganized. There was cat hair everywhere, but that probably couldn't be avoided. For now, the creature named Kitty remained unseen, so Bailey didn't need to worry about getting rubbed up against by that furred monster.

Eventually he trained his eyes back on Caden, who seemed content resting his head on Bailey's lap. "Did the tea help?" Bailey asked just to fill the silence.

"Yeah. Still tastes like crap, though." Caden didn't move, didn't take his eyes off of the screen. He sounded a little groggy, his voice raspy in a way which told Bailey that Caden's throat had to be pretty sore.

"I could make some more if you want."

"Maybe later?" Caden glanced at Bailey quickly, then looked away when Bailey nodded. Maybe later.

Seconds ticked by, minutes which felt impossibly long. It was uncomfortable to be that comfortable in silence, like it was okay to not say a word and just sit there and watch TV, though Bailey wasn't even watching it. He just stared at the screen without seeing a thing, subconsciously noticing things around him. Things, like how the spider plants in front of the window seemed to radiate electric green when the reddening sunrays peeked inside, or how the ashtray on the small round table beneath the window was empty, and how there wasn't even a whiff of cigarette in the air. All he smelled was the last of the tea and something like furniture polish, and the scent he recognized, floating up towards him. Minty and crisp, probably shampoo. Bailey looked down and realized he'd moved, though he hadn't noticed doing so. His left hand was brought up, fingers alternating between combing through Caden's short, dark hair and sweeping over his stubbly cheek. It took a few seconds for Bailey to realize what he was doing, even longer for him to stop. He pulled his hand away, confused and perhaps a little alarmed. Since when had he been so bold?

"Why'd you stop?" Caden asked but didn't move to look up. After a moment he tucked his shoulder against Bailey's thigh. "Come on... it felt nice."

He said it so casually, like it was nothing at all. He said it like it was the most natural thing in the world for them to lounge on the couch like this, for him to rest his head in Bailey's lap, and for Bailey to touch him so tenderly. Bailey was sure it wasn't that casual. He was sure it wasn't nothing at all and definitely not the most natural thing in the world, but still he lowered his hand, unable to come up with any reason why he shouldn't. His touch was hesitant at first, like he was testing whether it felt as nice as he remembered, but soon he found the rhythm, the tips of his fingers brushing gently over Caden's scalp before sliding to his cheek.

Bailey could easily see how this was comforting for Caden. He just didn't understand why it was so comforting for him.

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Within the next week and a half, Caden remembered why exactly he sometimes wished he was a hermit. His once-in-a-decade spring cold had faded largely thanks to that nasty tea for sure, and after returning to work, and continuing being a friend to those who seemed too lazy to build their own backyard porch, Caden was thankful when Rudy informed him that the upcoming weekend was renovation-free. No offense to the couple, but Caden felt like he'd spent all of his spare time checking measurements or attaching nails to wood. He liked physical work, but enough was enough. That was why a lazy day at the beach fit into Caden's schedule more than perfectly; nothing but sun, sand, and half-naked people.

"I do love summer." Caden leaned back on his towel, bathing in the sun while watching men and women of all ages stroll around the beach. A poorly hidden snort a few feet behind him brought a smile to his face. He glanced over his shoulder at Bailey who was sitting on a blanket under one of the few trees growing by the shoreline. "What was that?"

Bailey shrugged. "Nothing." He sat cross-legged in the shade with a book in his lap, a cap on his head, and sunglasses on his nose, with too much clothing for the heavenly weather they were granted. "That was just very predictable." He flipped a page, smirking sourly at Caden. "You'd love winter too if people didn't wear so many clothes."

Staring back for a few seconds, Caden turned sideways to Bailey. "A human body is a beautiful creation. What's not to love?"

Again Bailey shrugged, but this time he didn't answer. He remained silent in that stone-like position, the book cradled in his lap. Unlike others present,

Bailey was covered from head to toe. His pants were loose and sort of floaty, but they still reached his ankles, and the shirt he had on, however light and summery, still had sleeves long enough to cover Bailey's arms down to his wrists.

Glancing around, Caden noticed Ethan and Rudy by the volleyball net. Apparently they were discussing rules for the upcoming game with a few people, Caden didn't know. Chances were, the game would end disastrously; Ethan was a really poor loser. Too bad he also sucked at any type of team sports. It was fun to watch, though. Cam sat on a bench nearby, playing with her phone. Jenny and Jeff were still queuing by the ice cream cart, from the looks of it, having trouble deciding what to buy. For a second Caden was tempted to join them, having a sweet tooth of his own, but then he looked at the miles-long queue and decided it wasn't worth the trouble.

He glanced over his shoulder at Bailey who seemed completely focused on his book. "Hey."

Bailey looked up, the shades hiding his eyes from Caden. "What?"

"Come sit here with me."

Bailey lowered his glasses, frowning, before he pushed the shades back in place and looked down at his book. "No."

"What do you mean 'no'?"

"I mean, no, I will not come sit there with you." He waved off a tiny fly, face twisted with irritation. You would think he didn't like to be outdoors. No... he really *didn't* like to be outdoors.

Caden watched Bailey's soundless fretting for a moment, then stood up and grabbed his beach towel. Bailey looked up when he slumped on the blanket next to the man. "What are you doing?"

"Keeping you company."

Bailey took his glasses off, squinting at Caden. "I have a book to keep me company, so feel free to run off."

"Now would a friend do that?" Gently Caden tapped the tip of Bailey's nose, causing the man to jerk back. His hand was slapped away.

"Keep your hands off of my face."

"Would you like them better on your ass?"

Wide-eyed, Bailey stared back, first going white before his whole face obtained a pretty shade of pink. He shoved the glasses back on his nose and scooted all the way to the other edge of the blanket. "I'm going to pretend I didn't just hear that."

Caden leaned back on his arms. "I can say it louder if it'll help."

"Shut up, Caden." Bailey peered around. "Someone might hear you."

"In this cacophony? I doubt it."

Bailey huffed indignantly, shaking his head. "There is no reason to be crude." He turned a page and held his posture perfectly while focusing on his book. Caden watched him for a while before glancing around. There were dozens of half-naked people walking around, and still his eyes soon drifted back to Bailey. Bailey, who was dressed just as modestly as he always was, and still he managed to captivate Caden's attention. Maybe it was the knowledge of what hid under that modest front that made Caden so sensitive to even the smallest things in Bailey's repertoire. There was something sensual and undeniably sexy hidden beneath that righteous exterior. Caden had a feeling not too many people had seen that side of Bailey.

Caden sat up straight and tugged on the leg of Bailey's white pants. "Why do you wear these?"

Bailey looked up, frowning. "What? Clothes?" he asked. "Because I'm pretty sure there's a law that states nudity in a public place is punishable."

"On the beach, Bailey," Caden spoke slowly, like he was talking to an idiot. "We're on the beach, and you sit in the shadow, covered from head to toe. Why?" He smiled teasingly, leaning a little closer. "Don't tell me you're feeling shy? Because I can assure you, there is absolutely no reason for that."

Bailey frowned and brushed the side of his cap, as if to make sure it was still in place. "I get sunburns."

"Ever heard of sunblock?"

"Ever heard of thirteen hours at the ER for second-degree burns after a day at the beach, regardless of sunblock?"

Caden's smile drifted off. "You got burned that badly?"

"Yes."

"When was that?"



"When I was sixteen." Sighing heavily, Bailey closed the book and pulled off his shades. "I do use sunblock, SPF fifty. If I went around wearing nothing but trunks and got in the water, I'd look like a cooked crab by the end of the day. You get a flawless tan, I get blisters. And a sunstroke. Plus I'm allergic to horseflies, so that's another reason why I try to stay away from the water. Anaphylactic shock on top of sunburns is not my idea of a fun day at the beach."

"Anaphylactic shock? Have you ever had one of those?"

"No. But I don't want to risk it just to find out whether or not I'd get one." Bailey squinted and looked around, the sun apparently working its magic regardless of the sunblock.

"You still get freckles." Caden gestured at Bailey, once the man looked at him. "There's like twice as many now compared to how many there were in the morning." His hand moved on its own volition, fingers sliding over Bailey's cheek. He imagined he could feel every freckle on warm, heated smoothness, like spots of tiny mocha paleness sprinkled over Bailey's skin.

Bailey looked confused for a few seconds, before he pulled away. "Don't do that." He put the sunglasses back in place. "We're in public."

Caden looked around, a little confused himself. No one seemed to have noticed, but his own behavior was slightly shocking. Pick-up lines could always be blamed on stupid jokes and being irritating for the sake of being irritating, but touching where touching wasn't necessary would cause nothing but trouble. Still, Caden was itching to touch some more. Ever since they'd stayed up all night and watched stupid nature documentaries, and Caden got sick, his motives had changed. Drastically. He still liked the annoyed version of Bailey, because there were only a few things better than bickering with Bailey, but seeing the man humming with contentment after a little caretaking was a whole new thing for Caden. Maybe Bailey was fastidious, but he wasn't immune to gentle wooing. Or whatever the hell it was called.

Underneath the cap, Bailey's brows drew into a frown. "You're staring at me."

"Am I?"

"Yes. Please stop." Bailey turned the page, sighing deeply, before he leaned over the book again. And Caden still wouldn't stop staring. He didn't want to, so why should he?

“Will you go home with me tonight?” he asked after a moment. No teases, no provocation thrown back and forth. Just a simple question. He didn’t even think about what they might or might not do later that day; he just wanted Bailey to go home with him. “Maybe stay the night?”

Bailey was still seemingly preoccupied with his book, but Caden recognized the way he kept chewing his bottom lip; it was something Bailey did to distract himself from distracting things. Going with his instinct, Caden pushed the topic a little. “I’ve got oranges.”

Bailey’s lips twitched, but he remained almost stoic. It was the twitch Caden went with.

“I’ve still got that tea, too.” He nudged his shoulder against Bailey’s, smiling when Bailey’s lips quirked upwards. The man was so easy sometimes.

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It was like *déjà vu* minus the snoring.

Bailey woke up with a sore back and something which felt an awful lot like a pre-stage of a headache, not in his own bed but in Caden’s. This time he was the one on his back, but Caden was right next to him, arm flung across Bailey’s waist, and stubbly chin pressed against the crook of Bailey’s neck. Bailey ignored the way his own hand was curled over Caden’s arm, and he especially ignored the way his lips wanted to smile the second he recognized the scent of Caden’s shampoo.

Stupid, stupid instincts.

Sliding out of bed wasn’t as easy as Bailey remembered it being. He didn’t accomplish it nearly as gracefully, and again he was in danger of falling to the floor. He managed to get out silently, though, and as he started to gather his clothes, Caden was still asleep. By the time Bailey had pulled on his boxers and searched blindly for his shirt, Caden started moving. First slowly, lazily, before he seemed to realize the space next to him was empty. Even in the poor lighting Bailey saw the frown on Caden’s face as the man rolled onto his back and lifted his head, eyes barely open and probably seeing very little. “Bailey?”

“I didn’t mean to wake you.” Bailey pulled on the shirt, uncomfortable being caught like this. “Just go back to sleep. I have to get home.”

“What time is it?” Caden rubbed a hand across his face and propped himself up on his elbows. “It’s Saturday. Come back to bed.” He held out his hand,

probably expecting Bailey to take it, but when Bailey continued looking for his clothes, Caden's hand fell to the bed. "Bailey?"

"Yeah?"

"That's my shirt." Caden pointed at Bailey, who glanced down on himself and recognized Caden's gray-printed tee. He should've known, he figured. It was too long and too soft and too everything, and now Bailey felt even more awkward, standing in the middle of the bedroom with nothing but a shirt and boxers on, and Caden was going to watch him take the shirt off.

"No no no..." Caden reached out his hand, when Bailey grabbed the hem of the shirt. "Leave it on and get back here." Quickly he grabbed Bailey's hand, tugged him closer and yanked him onto the bed. Jeans and other pieces of clothing tangled around Bailey's feet, crippling him for a few seconds, but Caden looked victorious once Bailey lay on the bed. He looked even happier with himself, once he rolled on top of Bailey. "Now this is better."

Bailey lay limply and pretended not to notice how eagerly Caden pressed his body against Bailey's. "You're suffocating me."

Caden chuckled and nuzzled his face against Bailey's cheek. "No I'm not." His hand crept up underneath the hem of the shirt, fingers sliding against Bailey's side. It tickled and gave him goose bumps, and he wanted to laugh a little, but instead he sighed listlessly.

"You're too heavy."

"I know I'm not."

"Seriously, Caden, I can't breathe."

"Oh... am I making you breathless?" It was insane how egoistically someone could say things like that, like Caden actually thought he was that good and gorgeous and fantastic and still, now that Bailey kind of knew the man, he knew Caden didn't really think that. He just wanted Bailey to think he did. Just like Bailey wanted to keep up the act and not give in, though on the inside his flesh and bones and blood were all waiting and willing and ready. Caden did it that easily.

Bailey let out a smile, just a small one, and Caden's wandering touch stilled, brown eyes looking black through the darkness. Caden's weight felt so okay and comfortable on top of Bailey, when the man just stayed there, watching Bailey. "I like this on you," he murmured, tugging on the hem of the shirt. "It's hot."

“It’s cotton,” Bailey retorted dryly.

Caden nodded his agreement, fingers still playing with the shirt. “It’s sexy.”

“It’s faded and worn and too big on me.”

Leaning down, Caden nudged his lips against Bailey’s. “It’s mine.” Another nudge, this time a little more persistent, Bailey’s lips parted briefly before Caden pulled back. “It’s on you.” Now it was a nibble, sending sweet shivers all the way down to Bailey’s toes. “You do the math.” Stupidly possessive comments like that should’ve told Bailey to walk out and stay gone, but instead he wanted to curl into a ball and stay in Caden’s bed for as long as he was allowed to, maybe wear something else of Caden’s and get to hear more stupidly possessive things. Hearing it made him feel hot, it made him feel sexy and almost too irresistible and wanted. The way Caden looked at him, eyes dark and heavy-lidded and lips capturing small bits of Bailey’s mouth every now and then before the man pulled away, made Bailey’s odd side push out, and the familiar part of him slid quietly into the back. He didn’t shy away from Caden; instead he welcomed it when the man leaned down. Sometimes it provoked passion, hard and quick and heated. Sometimes it smoothed everything out, until everything around him was soft and mellow and floaty. Now it was the latter.

Still tired and sleepy after forcing himself out of bed too quickly, Bailey relished Caden’s warmth, loving the feeling of being surrounded and held. What could’ve turned into a raging competition of whose self-control lasted the longest, now mellowed down to small pecks and slow lazy nudges and caresses, neither of them in a hurry to start anything. It was the perfect way to start a day, slow and time-consuming touches waking nerves and senses to a new day and better things. With this start, it couldn’t possibly be worse than the one before.

Bailey realized he liked his things just the way they were. It was hard to imagine anything better.

The thought paralyzed him for a moment. Caden’s lips brushed over his, fingers still wandering beneath the shirt, but for a second or two Bailey was numb to any touches. His mind raced around the room, around him and Caden and the way they were, around the collection of clothes tossed on the floor and all those million little things Bailey had forgotten to do that weekend, because he’d been too preoccupied by Caden.

Above him Caden’s eyes looked at him intensely, the gaze so steady and firm, Bailey could literally feel Caden’s mind work around any possible issues

and then pick the most probably one. "Everything okay?" he asked, fingers sweeping along Bailey's jaw before another small kiss was placed on his senseless lips.

Bailey nodded, then shook his head. "I need to get up." Caden's weight was suffocating now, like tons and tons of immovable mass dropped on top of Bailey. He pushed Caden away, his hands feeble and weak. If it was solely up to his performance, he probably wouldn't have gotten anywhere, but Caden pulled back and rolled over to his side, giving Bailey room to move. Immediately he got up, something like longing aching painfully inside him when Caden was no longer there.

When Bailey closed the bathroom door behind him and switched the lights on, the fluorescent lamp above the sink flickered before casting a steady glow around the bathroom. He washed his hands, hoping ice-cold water would bring sense back into his head. Then he washed his face, once, twice, before pushing his wet, cold hands beneath his borrowed shirt and pressing his palms flat against his aching sides. He felt like his heart would race out of his body any second now. His pulse was insane, hammering against his chest, his ribs, and lungs and spine.

Staring at his reflection, Bailey saw the paleness of his skin, his complexion almost gray now that he was fully awake. He hadn't felt this confused and lost in years, not since his stupid teen years when hormones ruled over common sense and made people act stupid. The hollow weight in his chest wouldn't let go, no matter how tightly he pressed his hands against his body. It stayed and multiplied, and all the while his feet wanted to turn and walk back into the bedroom, climb back in bed and not move. But that was not his place, so why did he want it so badly?

One night, months ago, came to mind, one phone call and casually spoken words Bailey had never really understood, but now they were crystal clear. Words telling him it wasn't working, saying they should end it because going on would be like fighting a lost battle. Bailey hadn't understood why, he couldn't have wrapped his mind around something so simple, because to him there was always a way, but Liam hadn't given him the chance to find that way. Now he understood, if not for anything else then for that carefully hidden part within himself that still believed in happily-ever-afters. Somehow he'd managed to con himself into thinking this secret getaway of his could actually last; that those smiles and touches he saw and felt night after night right outside that door would be his for good.

Lowering his hands to the side of the sink, Bailey inhaled slowly, exhaled even slower. Outside the door he could hear Caden moving around, sounds of a zipper and closet doors and springs on the mattress piercing through Bailey's head, so loud he wanted to press his hands to his ears and pretend there was nothing but quietness. Just the thought of walking out and seeing Caden, Caden with his irritating grin and carefree attitude, made Bailey cringe. Caden with his stupid dimple and prickly stubble and calloused palms and all those annoying habits Bailey hated so much, and still he didn't mind any of them. And he couldn't, though he tried, understand how things had come to this. His simple and easy no-strings-attached route to casual freedom had turned around and morphed into emotional chains, ones he feared he couldn't shake off as easily as he'd thought.

A knock on the door made him jerk against the sink, his hand grasping the white porcelain when he turned to look at the door.

"Bay?" Caden knocked on the door again, quietly speaking through the wood. "Everything okay?"

Bailey stood up, casting one more look at the mirror, before he walked to the door and pushed it open. "Yeah, I'm fine." Caden's eyes searched his face, a small furrow between dark brows. Bailey didn't dare to look at him for too long, because everything would've showed on his face. Instead he stepped past Caden, prepared for the typical teasing chuckles and comments, and fearing he couldn't strike back. Caden didn't chuckle. He didn't say anything. His hand caught Bailey's wrist and held him in place, two steps placing Caden back in front of Bailey, and one more taking them back to the situation Bailey had run away from earlier. Chest to chest, fingers entwined for a second, before Caden's hands slid up along Bailey's arms.

"You're ice-cold," Caden murmured against his hair. Bailey closed his eyes, dwelling on the comforting touches placed all over his body. It felt safe, though he knew it wasn't, and it was stupid of him to trust in this. Still, he didn't move away when Caden nudged him closer, hands sliding over Bailey's arms and back. It may have been the kind of touch he needed right now, but it felt wrong, like a fraud. It felt like cheap condolences, seconds before infatuation would wear off, and Bailey would once again be just Bailey, not something exciting and thrilling and desirable. Just common, old, neat-freak Bailey with too many ticks and issues.

Pulling back, Bailey painted a neutral but civil smile on his face. "I think it's the flu... maybe it isn't fully gone yet."

Caden's hand lingered along Bailey's arm, like the man was reluctant to let go. "Back to bed then." Practically ushered to the bed, Bailey reveled in the feeling of Caden's body pressed tightly against his once they reached the sheets. He couldn't stop himself from dwelling on how good it felt to be this close to someone, though he knew it would only hurt him in the end. After all, Caden had made it clear from the start, Bailey was not his type. Why should that change?

Encircled and held, it took very little time for Bailey to drift off to sleep. Even as sleep took over, and the bright morning light left behind reality cold enough to hurt Bailey to his bones, he imagined the soft sweeps of lips against his temple, and quietly murmured words he couldn't make sense of, but he still heard them right to the bottom of his core.

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For what felt like the hundredth time within the past hour, Caden found himself by the bedroom door, looking over to the bed where Bailey was still fast asleep. He was sprawled across the sheets, his left arm hanging off the mattress while his right was tucked tightly under the pillow beneath his head. He'd lain like that since he fell asleep hours earlier; soundless, motionless. He never snored, never made those weird sounds people sometimes make in their sleep. He just lay still, calm and relaxed.

Caden could've watched him for hours.

Coming face to face with something this raw was new to Caden. He wasn't ashamed by his past, by the number of men he'd had in his bed, but for the first time he felt he could've gotten something a lot better if he'd just waited a little longer. Ethan always joked about how picky Caden was, how no one was ever good enough for more than one night but it wasn't really about that. None of them had caught his eye for more than a few hours. Where was the harm in that? He never lied, never promised anything more than what he was willing to give, and that seemed to be okay with them. Now the thought of picking up a random guy with the right looks left him completely cold. He had everything he needed in his bed right now.

Turning away from the door, Caden rubbed a hand across his face and headed to the kitchen. Kitty moped on the couch, severely devastated that she'd

been denied access to the bedroom, but while Caden didn't mind the cat hair, Bailey did. Therefore Kitty would just have to learn to stay away. Caden would rather endure her pouting than Bailey's.

On his way to the kitchen he picked up a handful of clothes and other random things from the floor. Bailey's sunglasses were squashed, and Caden tossed them in the trash, trying to remember whether it had been him or Bailey who'd stepped on them once they'd gotten inside and literally raced to the bedroom. Probably Caden. It had been him chasing Bailey, not the other way around. Around the living room, around the bedroom, around the bed... hours and hours and hours. Who knew behind that stoic front was someone that playful?

Empowered and oddly chipper, filled with the memory of the night before, Caden started breakfast. What had happened early in the morning cast a dark shadow over good memories; Caden wasn't one hundred percent convinced Bailey's mild case of meltdown had anything to do with the flu, but he knew better than to start pushing. All he could do was hope Bailey would tell him if the man felt it should be talked about. For now, all Caden could do was wait.

He didn't bother trying to keep quiet, because Bailey wasn't exactly a light sleeper, and even if he did wake up, Caden wouldn't mind the company. Turned out this was one of those mornings where Bailey snapped out of it the second Caden started making noise. Too bad Bailey wasn't a morning person either; Caden was prepared to find a pissed-off Bailey standing by the kitchen door. Instead what he got a few moments later was a drowsy Bailey who looked adorable with his baffled demeanor. "Are you trying to wake the whole house?"

"Good morning to you too." Caden liked the look on Bailey, especially with his clothes replacing the ones Caden had gathered from the floor.

Bailey tugged on the hem of Caden's T-shirt, looking uncomfortable. "I still couldn't find my clothes."

Caden nodded towards the living room. "On the chair." With a smile he continued. "Folded and all."

"Thanks." Not acting like himself, Bailey hesitated by the door, as if he wasn't sure if he should get changed immediately. Caden didn't mind seeing his clothes on Bailey, though they did look a little off. Black was not Bailey's color for sure. Still, the whole package looked good in Caden's eyes.



He reached out his hand before Bailey stepped into the living room and pulled the man inside the kitchen. "This looks good on you," he said and tugged on the hem of the shirt draped across Bailey's upper body. Hazel eyes rolled in their sockets, as if Bailey thought Caden was insane. He was sure, he wasn't. "It's still sexy." Never giving Bailey a chance to respond, Caden leaned in and pecked Bailey's lips. It was dry and close-mouthed and very chaste, until after a second or two Bailey's lips quivered barely noticeably, and it turned into moist and open-mouthed and very sensual. With a little morning breath and so lazy it couldn't possibly match what Caden had in mind, Bailey's mouth was still better than anyone else's, and Caden couldn't have asked for a better good morning.

It would've turned into hot and borderline hazardous if it wasn't for the demanding rumble vibrating somewhere beneath Bailey's windpipes. Caden pulled back and watched Bailey frown awkwardly. "Starving, yes." Bailey didn't move to step away, though. Instead he remained where he was, standing in the circle of Caden's arms. It was still strikingly obvious, he wasn't comfortable being there, that this much closeness was not okay with him, but Caden figured the man was willing to work on it since he didn't run out.

Bailey insisted he'd make his own breakfast. Caden allowed it, until after a while he realized Bailey's picture-perfect habits didn't spread out into the kitchen.

"How can you not fry an egg?"

"Your pan is crap."

"My pan is perfect. You just don't know how to fry an egg."

"I *do* know."

"Then why is it black?"

Bailey huffed indignantly and stepped away from the stove, gesturing towards the mess on the frying pan. "Fine. You do it then." He crossed his arms over his chest, face twisted with haughtiness.

Caden chuckled quietly and got rid of the mess Bailey had managed to create in less than five minutes. "You have two hundred cooking books, and you don't know how to fry an egg? How is that possible?"

"Are you absolutely sure you made your point clear?" Bailey asked. "You don't want to say it a couple more times? Bailey doesn't know how to fry an egg. Fine, you're right. I don't know. Happy now?"

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"I was only curious."

"No. You just wanted to rub it in."

Shrugging, Caden placed the cleaned pan back on the stove. "Maybe that, too." A little bit of butter and one egg with a bright yellow yolk spread beautifully on the pan. "But it's nice to know you don't master everything."

"Yes, I do."

"Bailey..." Caden smiled gently and tapped Bailey on the shoulder. "If your nutrition depended solely on yourself, you'd starve to death."

"That is not..." Bailey closed his mouth, glowering at the pan. After a while he shrugged nonchalantly. "I know how to cook a little bit."

"Yeah, mac and cheese. That's about it."

"And Bolognese sauce."

"From a can."

"And curry chicken."

Now Caden laughed out loud. "Oh, come on!" He glanced at Bailey. "You did not make that yourself."

"I did too." Bailey stared back stubbornly but eventually lowered his eyes when Caden wouldn't budge. With a shrug, Bailey nestled against the counter. "I might've had some help." He fidgeted with the hem of the shirt, embarrassed. Caden thought that was endearing. And cute. And sort of disconcerting too, if you really thought about it.

"No one expects you to be perfect at everything." He picked up a spatula from the counter and flipped the egg onto a plate. "No one expects you to be perfect at *anything*." No one but Bailey, but it was pointless to say that out loud. "Perfect is no fun. I'd have a lot less chances to make fun of you if you weren't so flawed." He pushed the plate in front of Bailey, trying really hard not to look proud once his fried egg turned out pretty and un-burned.

Bailey looked down at the plate. After a moment he peeked up, chewing on his bottom lip. "Can you make me another one?"

Caden glanced at the plate, then up at Bailey. "What's wrong with this one?"

"There's nothing wrong with it. It's just..." He grimaced. "The yolk... I don't like it when it's all runny." He looked at Caden like there was some logic

to his mood swings, and Caden tried really hard not to point out how Bailey was actually really irrational, though he was determined to prove to everyone he wasn't.

“Why didn't you just say that before?”

“Because you had to prove to the world that you're a manly man who knows how to fry a perfect egg.” Bailey smiled affectedly sweet and gave Caden's cheek a pat. “Yes, Caden, it turned out wonderful.” He dropped his hand. “Now can you make me one that's fried on both sides?” With a lot less pretence, he smiled this fleeting little smile of his, Caden saw too rarely. “Pretty please?”

Maybe it was the playfulness or the teasing or the way Bailey managed to knock Caden down from his self-proclaimed pedestal and make him feel ten feet tall at the same time, but something dwelled in Caden's chest when he now looked at Bailey. Bailey in Caden's kitchen on a Saturday morning, wearing Caden's shirt and sweatpants that were too big and woolen socks that were constantly sliding off. Bailey being there without the typical hurry to get out and go home.

“Just one?” Caden asked absently. He was only partly focused on Bailey saying he'd like two, please, and more focused on Bailey moving two steps away to start the coffee. At Caden's he made it extra-strong, though Caden knew Bailey didn't really like it that way, and Caden had been thoughtful enough to start packing his fridge with milk though he didn't drink it himself. Bailey had noticed, but he hadn't asked about it, just like Caden hadn't asked why Bailey insisted on making coffee he didn't like.

Bailey liked his eggs. He actually said so. He said no when Caden asked him if he wanted toast and seemed content munching down his breakfast moistened with apple juice and tar-like coffee mixed with skim milk. Caden's kitchen was tiny, seeming even smaller with the table in there, and the whole scene was so cozy, it should've given Caden goose bumps. Instead it made him calm and oddly comfortable. Knowing that the man sitting across from him caused the comfortable sensation probably should've set off some sorts of alarms, but it didn't. It was just weird. Not scary, not paralyzing. Just weird.

Caden probably would've dwelled on what he was feeling, why feeling that way felt like it did, but Bailey's reactions took away the pressure of contemplating numerous what-ifs. The man had a whole variety of comebacks for whatever comments Caden made and like always, he didn't shy away from

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using each one, but underneath that, buried somewhere miles deep, were other things Caden hadn't noticed before. Bailey seemed confused when Caden poured him more coffee. He was quiet for eleven whole seconds when Caden said he could go back to bed and take a nap while Caden cleared out the dishes. Eleven seconds was precise. Caden counted. Bailey seemed thrown off by any possible signs of genuine kindness. Other types of kindness they'd done, and it was fun too, but for now, Caden had absolutely no desire to act petty or vindictive. He just wanted to be nice. Bailey didn't seem to understand this, or he just didn't know how to act around people who were trying to do nice things for him. Seeing him stumble through their first actual shared morning after convinced Caden that the guys Bailey had dated in the past were all jerks. Bailey took independence to a whole new level, but Caden could see how he liked a little pampering. If Caden could see that, how could others not?

Within the next few days little things grew into huge entities. Bailey's absent smile when he found his favorite brand of apple juice in Caden's fridge, or the silence that followed when he woke up in the morning, held tightly against Caden who had been awake forever just waiting for Bailey to wake up too. Random late-night visits quickly turned into phone calls and not-so-random appearances right after work, Caden becoming more and more familiar with Bailey's home as he started spending time there as much as Bailey spent time in his.

All the while, the wariness in Bailey's behavior remained, at times almost disappearing when Caden did something he didn't really think about, but that obviously pleased Bailey. But it was still there. The only times Caden couldn't see it was when he had Bailey stripped of his typical protective layers, sometimes in the middle of the night when the air around them was scorching hot, and it was almost painful to breathe. Bailey was quiet, just like he always was, but Caden had learned to read those tiny signs which marked his path and told him when he'd found the right touches and tender spots. It was the shuddering breath when Caden held Bailey down on the bed, controlling and waiting for shallow obedience, or the way Bailey's nails dug into Caden's back hard enough to hurt barely seconds before crippling pleasure. It was the weak squeeze minutes after the frenzy was over, and the way Bailey instinctively followed in his sleep when Caden moved to get out of bed. And every time, every single time, Caden wished he could have Bailey like that every hour of the day, without worries and concerns corrupting him, because Bailey was gorgeous like that. He looked unlike anything Caden had ever seen before, and

without a doubt Caden knew this was a side of the man no one else had ever seen. It was all Caden's.

But then morning came, and Bailey woke up, silent and distant, and Caden didn't know how to break through that. He didn't dare demand explanations or reasons, because he feared at the end he'd have nothing. Not even the crippled version of Bailey. So it went on, fragmented and frail during the day but so strong and overruling during the night that it was impossible to remain whole while it happened. And Caden, who had never wanted to commit to anyone and who'd always appreciated his freedom more than anything, found himself desperate for that very commitment he'd always looked down on. It toyed with him, that desperation. It played games with his mind and made him feel ten feet tall in the wake of Bailey's every smile. Every time he saw Bailey, it made his heart skip a beat and chant words like "beautiful" and "perfect" and "lovely". Impossible, stubborn, and neurotic were right there with those slightly more adulatory words. But it wasn't about the characteristics or the looks, though Caden definitely appreciated Bailey's looks. It was something on the inside of Bailey, something Caden couldn't see, but he felt it stronger than he'd ever felt anything.

What could it be... what could it be?

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It got more and more difficult, the more times Bailey woke up in Caden's bed with Caden's arms wrapped around him. Each time was strange for Bailey. He knew where he was, who he was with, but he couldn't pull away and slide away to a safe distance. Being held felt too good. He hadn't realized he missed being close to someone like that; he and Liam had rarely slept this close to one another and when they had, Liam had usually been the one to pull away, saying he got too hot, and it was uncomfortable. Now Bailey was cradled so close to someone, he was sure he'd never been held this closely before.

Lying on his back, Caden's arms were secured lightly around Bailey's shoulders, his breath washing warmly over Bailey's temple in time with Caden's exhales. His chest felt solid and warm beneath Bailey's cheek, the steady beat of his heart echoing softly in Bailey's ears. This was something new, something *they* hadn't done before, and for the first time during their joined adventure, Bailey had no idea what to do. Even when physical closeness and intimacy had been difficult for Bailey to digest, he'd still had his rules to cling to, in order to come to terms with what was happening. Now the rules had

all been broken, and he didn't know what to do. He just lay limp, nestling in the warmth of Caden's body and the mellow scent of mint floating from the skin beneath his.

The longer it went on, the more sensitive Bailey became to Caden's moods. Behind the nature of the jokester were so many layers of intensity and passion, Bailey swore it would take him a lifetime to find his way through it all. This odd union of theirs might have started off as something simple and insignificant. Now it felt like an actual relationship, except for the part where no one knew, and they were still sneaking around, pretending to hate each other's guts. It had gotten to a point where Bailey was in danger of bringing Caden up in every conversation he had, and talking about his pastime activities was really difficult without mentioning Caden, because it seemed Bailey didn't do anything without the man anymore. Weekends had expanded into weekdays, and Bailey could no longer remember the last time he'd slept alone. His home, his own private box in the craziness of the world, was permanently infected by Caden's habits and antics; there were dirty socks under Bailey's bed, and coffee cups left on the counter, and someone else's keys ending up in his pocket when he left for work in the morning. It was physically painful for him to walk into a room with Caden in it and not go up to the man. Every time this happened when someone else was there, Bailey had to turn away and explain to himself why he couldn't do what he wanted. Lately, though, his explanations had been less and less convincing.

Being in the presence of other people was a struggle, not only because Bailey felt a physical need to be close to Caden, but because Caden seemed to feel the same way. The only difference was that he sometimes forgot why they shouldn't let it show. He might accidentally stroke his hand along Bailey's back or lace their fingers together if they stood close to one another, and every time Bailey shied away, searching for control while his heart pounded in his chest because he feared someone might've seen them. As days went by, Caden's response to Bailey's retreat grew more and more ill-tempered, but what pushed the man over the edge was Cam's not so discreetly placed comments about all of the wonderful, single gay men just waiting to get caught by Bailey. It was probably the most awkward Sunday dinner Bailey had ever been to. Cam was practically vulgar while explaining why exactly Bailey should start dating again, and all the while Caden sat across the table from him, looking like he would break something if the conversation didn't end soon. Those comments became more and more regular, and the longer it went on, the more agitated

Caden got. Afterwards, when they were behind closed doors, and there was no one to witness what really kept Bailey from agreeing with Cam's suggestions, Caden proved to himself, but most of all to Bailey, that there was very little left of Bailey for anyone else to feast on. Time and time again he became a mindless puppet for Caden to play with and not once did Bailey protest. It got to a point where it was almost like a game, where he'd provoke Caden more and more just to see how far he could go before he'd crossed the line, and each time he'd lie breathless and sore afterwards, so completely saturated with Caden's scent and touches, it was positively sickening. And Bailey loved it. Shouldn't that have told him they were heading for disaster? Yes, definitely. Still Bailey failed to read the signs, and he was stunned silent on one Saturday morning when Caden was yet again spending his time running his hands all over Bailey, quiet murmurs bringing a smile to Bailey's face and a dangerous lightness in his heart.

"Bay?"

"Mmm?"

And then a few simple words brought him crashing down, like someone had just told him his life was ending.

"You know I'm falling for you, right?"

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The second he said it, he knew it was a mistake. Bailey went stiff next to him, the smile Caden hadn't seen but had felt oozing through every pore in Bailey's body vanished in thin air just like that. He probably should've said something to ease the discomfort, but Caden had never been one for courtesy. "It shouldn't come as a surprise." It tasted like acid on his tongue, the bitter tone sharp enough to cut through paper, but once it was out, Caden realized he didn't even want to take it back.

Skin crawling with disappointment, Caden got off the bed and went for his clothes. Behind him he could hear Bailey move, sounds of fabric on fabric filling his mind with excruciating details. It felt like a slideshow of everything he and Bailey had ever done was going on fast-forward right in front of his eyes, only there was no pause button for him to still the picture and enjoy the sweet frames. He would've liked to skip the painful ones altogether.

"I wasn't expecting that." Confused and quiet, Bailey sounded nothing like himself. "I don't know what to say."

Caden snorted dryly, fingers fighting with the zipper of his jeans. "That's a first."

"Don't be like that."

"Like what?" Whirling around, Caden faced Bailey who still sat on the bed with the sheets pulled all the way up to his chin. "Disappointed? Frustrated? Why should I, right? I should just settle for being your little secret."

"Caden... I thought we agreed—"

"*You* agreed." It was wrong to blame it all on Bailey, but a lot of things were wrong right now. "You made the rules. You wanted to keep it a secret."

"You said it was just casual—"

"Yeah, weeks ago!" Without thinking about it, Caden raised his voice. "I changed my mind, okay? I have a right to do that, don't I? It's not casual anymore, and I don't want it to be."

Caden's voice was much too hard and definitely too loud, and still he wanted to shout it out louder. Bailey remained on the bed, hands squeezed together in his lap. "It's not fair of you to ask me for this." He sounded so reasonable, like he wasn't talking about anything more meaningful than yesterday's dinner. "*We* agreed that this would not leave the bedroom and—"

"Wake the fuck up, Bailey! It left the bedroom two months ago."

"Please don't yell at me."

Caden stared towards the bed, impossibly angry and hurt by the bland look on Bailey's face. "I want you to go out with me. On a date. A proper date, Bailey."

"What's wrong with what we do now?" There was an urgent tone in Bailey's voice as he tried to reason. "I like this. Why does this have to change?"

"Because this isn't enough for me." Caden grabbed his shirt from the floor, but it hung limply in his fingers. "I don't wanna sneak around and pretend there's nothing going on, all the while having to listen to Cam come up with guys you should go out with, and you just let her go on. You think *that's* fair?"

"Well, what do you want me to do? I can't stop her from talking."

"You can tell her you're already seeing someone."



Bailey looked back, mouth open in mid-sentence. The look on his face, first confusion and then discomfort, made his soft voice sound ridiculously sharp. "But I'm not." He said it kindly, like you would speak to a child when you told them mommy and daddy were actually the ones who bought the Christmas presents, and the milk and cookies were just for the show. Caden was pretty sure this was exactly how it felt to wake up from a lie.

"Right." He nodded slowly and started pulling on the shirt. It hit him that Bailey had worn the piece too at some point during the night, and now it smelled like some tacky, sweet body lotion. It smelled just like Bailey.

"Come on, Caden..." Bailey rose up to his knees, the sheets dragged along when he slid to the edge of the bed. "We can't even agree on what to watch on TV. Why spoil this with something that would never work?" His short, blond hair was frizzy, and it looked soft, and every single word coming out of Bailey's mouth sounded more and more acidic in Caden's ears. "You said it yourself; I'm not your type. Maybe you think that has changed, but it—"

"I never said it changed." Looking toward the bed where Bailey's freckled face was twisted with misery, Caden thought back to weeks before when one odd evening had turned everything upside down. "You're not my type, but my type never stuck around, and I never wanted it to. I never wanted to see any of them every single day or walk on the street with them and hold their hand if I felt like it without worrying that someone might see us."

"But we don't do that, Caden."

"Why not?" Caden wanted to pull his hair out. Trying to explain simple things to Bailey was like hitting his head against a wall when the man simply refused to understand. It didn't help that Bailey looked scared and confused and weak, that his hands were fisted around the sheet, or that the longer the conversation went on the less strength his words seemed to have. It didn't help, and it didn't matter, because his eyes still said no. Brown and green ponds still said no and begged Caden to agree. And he just couldn't. "Can't you just give in this one time? It won't kill you, Bailey. You act like none of this matters to you, like you don't give a shit what happens, but I know you do, because you would not come to me every day if you didn't want this as much as I do."

"What we have now, yes. That's it." Straightening his posture, the man looked up. "That's all."

Back to calm and collected, the only thing giving away what was happening inside Bailey was the glistering gaze in his eyes. Caden knew that look. "Liar." He nodded at Bailey's blink. "What are you really scared of?"

"Nothing."

"Bullshit," Caden spat. "You cling on to me in your sleep like you'll die if I leave, and then you wake up, and it's like I can't even touch you without breaking some goddamn rule." The confused frown on Bailey's face only fueled Caden's fury. "You pretend you don't care, that nothing can touch you, but that's not true, now is it? Is that what you're so scared of? That someone sees it, and then you can't hide behind that perfect front anymore?"

Bailey looked away, head bowed while he cradled the sheets tighter over his lap. "Shut up, Caden," he said calmly, eyes held low. Caden didn't. He couldn't. Unless someone stuffed a sock in his mouth and taped it with duct tape, there was nothing that would stop him from speaking. "It's like you hand out these small bits of yourself, and everything else stays locked away, and if someone asks for more, you just give up because you don't think it'll last. Why is that? Is it because you just expect people to fuck up and once they do, you don't bother trying to work things out? It's easier to just give up, right?"

Bailey shot a glare at Caden, speaking so quietly, it was almost ridiculous how cold his tone was. "Really, stop talking right now."

"Why? Am I wrong? You won't go out with me because you don't think it'll work out. Did it work out with Liam? No. How about the guy before him? It never works out, because no one can live up to your expectations, even when they really try to. Everybody fucks up," Caden spoke slowly. "You deal with it, and then you move on. But you..." Shaking his head, Caden was transfixed by the expectant look on Bailey's face. "You already made up your mind and I haven't even fucked up yet. That's gonna make you lonely, Bailey. You'll never find anyone who sticks around if you keep doing this, because it is virtually impossible for anyone to love a person who's incapable of loving them back." His voice rang out loud, so loud it was nearly deafening, and all Caden could do was stare at Bailey's wide-eyed face, sheer shock reflected in his eyes. For a split second, just long enough for Caden to notice, something pushed through the curtain of surprise and showed the most vulnerable parts of the man still sitting on the bed. It looked broken and sore and ugly. And then Bailey looked away, hands squeezed so tightly around the sheets, his knuckles turned white.

Guilt had never rushed to Caden like it did now, breaking through every inch of him while he saw his words hit their target. "Bailey..."

"Can I be alone for a minute? I need to get dressed."

Taking a step towards the bed, Caden tried to find his way back to that spot where he'd seen more than the carefully placed front, but Bailey pulled away. "Just one minute."

"Bay—"

"Can you just leave?" It was the closest to a shout Caden had ever heard from Bailey. Hazel eyes flicked up, anger and hurt blending flawlessly. "At least let me get dressed before you continue."

"I won't do that. I'm sorry, I—"

Bailey jerked back, the sheets pulled tightly around him. "Just get out." Jaw set tight, he stared at the floor, looking like he was inches away from shaking. Something tight and burning tangled inside Caden's throat, preventing any words from coming out. He took a step back, then another, soon standing outside the bedroom. He closed the door behind him and stared at the door handle, desperate to grab it and go back inside. Instead his hand pressed flat against the door, his forehead inches above his fingertips. "I'm sorry, Bailey. I didn't mean it." He closed his eyes and listened, hoping to hear even one word from the other side of the door, but all he heard was silence.

"Can we please just talk about this?" he asked, pleaded, lost for whatever words would make it better. "You don't have to leave. I don't want you to. I just want to talk this through." A shallow thump from the other side of the door was all he heard, and it only multiplied the quietness in his home. "Please say something."

The door was yanked open so abruptly Caden didn't have time to step back, and Bailey stormed out of the bedroom, knocking Caden to the side. By the look of it he didn't plan on staying and talking about things.

Helplessly, Caden stood by the door for a few unforgivable seconds as Bailey crossed the living room and headed for the door. By the time Caden's feet started working, Bailey had already reached the hall.

"Don't leave like this."

"It's better that I go." Bailey grabbed his bag from the floor by the coat rack, every movement sharp and angry. "It's safer this way... before you say anything else offensive and completely unnecessary."

Caden opened his mouth to perhaps defend himself—not that he hadn't done wrong, but Bailey turned to him, one look from his eyes managing to quiet Caden. "This ends right here." He nodded quickly when Caden shook his head. "It was fun while it lasted, et cetera, et cetera..." Turning for the door, Bailey waved his hand and left Caden stunned and silent by the couch. The man was gone before Caden managed to utter a word, like a human tornado sweeping through Caden's home and life, and then he was gone just like that. Minutes went by before Kitty stepped onto the scene. She looked pleased and comfortable, climbing onto the couch and looking up at Caden. To him, her expression looked malicious.

"What are you staring at?" He realized he was being snappy at a cat but who cared. Who else was he going to be snappy at?

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After going home, shaking so badly he feared his bones would collapse, Bailey calmed down, drank a cup of tea, and made a list of all the things he hated about Caden. The list turned out to be very long. Maybe it was a way of coping, but Bailey didn't care what excuses he had to use to get over the blunt outrage he was feeling.

How dare Caden? Who gave him the right to judge Bailey, like he himself was so magnificent, he'd never made a mistake in his life? Their latest conversation only convinced Bailey further of the fact that they simply would not blend well. He no longer cared if he at times felt some silly happiness in Caden's presence; it was just his hormones overruling logical thinking. He would never fall for a man who could slaughter someone the way Caden had. There was no need to get personal, not even if Caden felt his feelings were hurt.

Bailey didn't even try to avoid Caden; why should he? He had every right to feel the way he did, and if Caden had an issue with that—as he seemed to have—that was his problem. Bailey was perfectly fine going back a few months and returning to mutual dislike. Actually, it was one-sided, since Caden still tried to make things better. He still called, though Bailey had told him not to. He still tried to make conversation when they met at Cam's, but Bailey ignored him and wouldn't listen to a word. He wasn't interested in anything Caden had to say. He'd heard enough. This, of course, caused a few raised eyebrows, and the others seemed to tiptoe around Bailey, like he might accidentally explode. That was just ridiculous. He, for one, knew how to handle his temper. They should all just worry whether or not Caden could do the same.

It gave Bailey some type of satisfaction to see Caden's efforts meet with no success. Their blossoming yet destined-to-fail relationship would've died eventually, so it was only better that it happened quickly. Bailey would've hated for it to drag on and on, with him ending up being the one who'd get his heart broken. It was better this way. Caden would realize it eventually as well. So Bailey believed. Nine days after their last actual conversation, he realized he was wrong.

It was a bad day right from the start. It was hot and sunny and sweaty, and Bailey's eyes were sore since he forgot to get his eye drops from the pharmacist. His eyes weren't the only things that suffered from the allergy; his skin was itching, and he kept sneezing like the flu had taken over his system again. On top of feeling like his face was swollen and his nose was clogged, his washing machine broke down and leaked water on the floor, which meant he had to mop the floors and try to save his clothes. This ultimately meant he was nearly two hours late, by the time he finally got to Cam's. Her bubbly mood of the day didn't help his sour state of mind one bit, and neither did the conniving look on Caden's face, once the man caught sight of Bailey.

He'd seen that look before, so he should've known something was going to happen. Stupid Bailey for thinking he was off the hook.

Bailey was just getting ready to head upstairs and finish the paint job he'd started in the guestroom the day before, when Caden literally blocked his exit from the living room. "We need to talk."

Bailey tossed his head. "No, we don't." He stepped past Caden, but the man moved along with him, standing directly in Bailey's path. "We can either be civilized, or we can turn this into a shouting match. Whichever you prefer." The man had the audacity to stick his face up-close and personal to Bailey's. "One way or another, you and I will talk."

From the corner of his eye, Bailey saw Jenny dally by the backdoor. She pretended to be busy with the label of the fertilizer bottle dangling from her fingers, but those not-so-discreet glances she kept casting in Bailey's direction convinced him she had heard every word.

"You couldn't think of a better place to do this?" Bailey asked calmly, keeping his voice so low, Jenny hopefully couldn't hear him. Too bad Caden didn't do the same.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I've been trying to do it for the past week, and it looks to me like you're leaving me with no other choice." Caden smelled

of paint and thinner and saltiness of summer-warmed skin, and Bailey hated how easily his body recognized the combination.

Traitorous, traitorous hormones.

Cocking his chin, he met Caden's eyes. "I have nothing to say to you."

"And I have plenty to say to you."

"And I don't want to hear it."

Leaning closer still, Caden got right inside Bailey's personal space. "Tough." There was no grin, no dimple on his left cheek, no annoying smirks or chuckles or any of those million things Bailey had written down on his list. Caden looked like he would follow Bailey around until he'd actually get a say. It just sucked he chose this place, because their audience of one had now multiplied. Jeff and Ethan were now standing next to Jenny who no longer bothered to pretend she was reading through the label. She was shamelessly, openly goggling at Bailey and Caden. Caden, who apparently got sick of waiting, decided to take the lead.

Glancing over to the door, a devious little smile crept up to his lips. Right that second, Bailey knew he was in trouble. "Don't you dare," he hissed.

Caden cocked his brow. "My dear Bailey... you know very well, I do in fact dare." He stepped back, that cunning expression planted on his face. "You've never complained."

"What's going on?" Cam stood by the door, just like the rest of them, but instead of looking entertained, she just looked confused. Bailey shook his head. "Nothing."

Caden waved his hand dismissively. "We're just having a lovers' tiff."

"Caden..."

"See, I said something Bailey didn't like, and now he's really making me work to get back on his good side." Looking pleased with himself, Caden turned to their expectant audience. "I thought about wooing him with my charms, but I doubt it's going to work. He's a little funny like that."

Feeling five pairs of eyes on him, Bailey could easily imagine how his face changed color. "Trust me... you've seen the last of my good side." Oh yes... from now on Caden would only see the terrible, vindictive side of Bailey, the one where he'd dedicate his life to destroying Caden bit by bit. Of course Caden didn't see it that way. "You're so cute when you get mad."

“Shut up, Caden.”

Cam shook her head, confused. “What the hell is going on here?”

“Nothing,” Bailey repeated, but for some reason everybody was looking at Caden. Probably because he was the one willing to give out all the dirty details. “Bailey and I have been joining forces for a good few months now. Ever since Jenny’s birthday, actually.” He flashed a bright smile in her direction. “It was one helluva party, by the way.”

Jenny blinked. “Joining forces...?”

“Sleeping together.”

“Caden...” Warning growls did nothing to Caden’s verbal diarrhea. “Casual sex with a little bit of breakfast in bed on the side.” He turned to Bailey, unbothered by the horrified glare on Bailey’s face. “Then I fell in love. Imagine that. And Bailey doesn’t believe me. So here we are, among friends, working through these stupid issues, just because you’re so stubborn you can’t see anything right in something you didn’t plan from the start.”

“It isn’t stubbornness.” All Bailey could see was Caden’s annoying I-got-it-right grin. “You didn’t fall in love. God... you admitted yourself you don’t even know what love is.”

“Oh, and you do?”

“I know it better than you do. At least I’ve had a meaningful relationship. Do you think I want to be your crash test dummy, so that you can just conveniently get rid of me when you get bored, and you realize a committed relationship isn’t what you want after all?”

“Is that what this is about?” Caden shook his head laughing, *laughing*, like there was something funny about this. “When did you get so insecure?”

“This has nothing to do with insecurity, Caden. It’s common sense.” Bailey poked his finger against Caden’s chest, nose stuck up. “You would just end up breaking my heart, so why the hell would I sign up for that?” The first thing he realized was that he’d just cursed. The second thing he realized was that he’d sort of just admitted feeling something more than hormonal dependency on Caden. The third thing he realized? Cam huffing by the door. One look at her and Bailey knew it wasn’t just annoyed panting or her choking on her own laughter. The way her hand was pressed against the side of her belly while her other hand clung to the doorframe spoke volumes.

She shook her head, eyes pleading at Bailey. "Go on."

"Cam..."

"I'm fine. Just go on with the conversation!" Immediately after her eyes pressed shut, and she doubled over as far as she could. Next to her Rudy had gone white, his eyes bouncing around the room. "It's coming. The baby's coming."

"It is not." Cam shook her head. "Not for another two weeks." Her protests were pointless. By the time another cramp took over, Rudy started rushing her towards the door while the rest of them hunted for everything they needed to take along. Who knew there was so much stuff?

For a moment Bailey forgot about being mad at Caden. He was too busy being worried and thrilled for Cam. The resentment returned when they were all packed in the cars, Ethan and Jeff being the unfortunate ones who ended up in the same car with Caden and Bailey.

"I told you, you're scared," Caden said victoriously while steering the car into motion.

On the passenger's seat, Bailey huffed. "And I told you, you're delusional."

"No wonder your relationships never work if you're this hardheaded. I'm starting to sympathize with Liam."

"Well I'm sure you two can have all sorts of nice talks about my impossible expectations." Bailey stared out of the window, appalled by his own weakness. Caden's words still hit home though Bailey had tried to convince himself he didn't care. And why was he even surprised? It was just like Caden to kick him while he was already down.

"All I want is for you to give me a chance."

"After what you just did?" Bailey looked at Caden, shocked. "Are you kidding me?"

"You left me no other choice," Caden persisted. "I know I broke the rules, but didn't I already do that when I fell in—"

"You did not fall in love with me!" Jeff's agonized wail from the backseat forced Bailey to tone it down. "That's the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard in my life. You don't even like me, you can't stand it when I fuss over order, you *hate* my 'nitpicky' ways. If the sex wasn't so good, you wouldn't



even think of anything more committed than quick penetration over the bathroom sink.”

It was Ethan's turn to whine. “Way too much information.” Too bad neither Caden nor Bailey heard him.

“That was not quick,” Caden retorted. “And just because I hate something you do, doesn't mean I can't love you.”

“Stop saying that word.”

“Why? Does it start sounding real?”

“No. It gets more and more preposterous the more you say it.”

“Well, you better get used to it, because I'm not stopping.” Caden pouted like a little kid, and Bailey was perfectly capable of doing the same.

“Just drive the damn car,” he snarled. The atmosphere in the car was as toxic as one could expect, and it didn't get any better by the time they got to the hospital. Ethan and Jeff quickly rushed inside while Bailey was left in Caden's dazzling company. They didn't speak to one another, not while they walked inside or stood in the elevator or reached the right floor. They were like two strangers with absolutely nothing to say to one another. Except that there was a lot that needed to be said.

Eventually it turned out to be a false alarm, but the doctors wanted to keep Cam in the hospital after her blood pressure went ballistic. They all wanted to stay with her, but she insisted that everybody go home. She gave Bailey a few extremely sharp instructions, all of which consisted of him getting his head out of his ass and working things out with Caden, so that she could be convinced her baby girl would get the best godparents anyone could ever think of. Bailey didn't know whether he was happy that she'd trust him with something like that or concerned that he'd have to take on the job with Caden.

Prepared to take a cab, Bailey's annoyance skyrocketed when Caden literally dragged him across the parking lot. “You're coming with me.” And still, a tiny, tiny part of Bailey was overjoyed by the harsh command, like it somehow made everything alright.

It did not.

Absolutely not.

Angry, anxious, and tired, Caden expected Bailey to follow him right inside, but instead the man remained in the hall, looking like he had no intention of taking a step further.

“Just get over here.”

Bailey crossed his arms over his chest and leaned his shoulder against the wall. “I’ll stay right here, thank you very much.”

“I’ll carry you inside if I have to.”

“Hah.” Bailey’s mocking smirk vanished when Caden took a step towards him. The man sneaked inside quickly and took a seat on the armchair, looking displeased. “I have no idea what I’m doing here.”

“We’re going to finish the talk.”

“It’s finished. You say one thing, I disagree.” Smiling pleasantly, Bailey managed to rile up Caden’s temper. “Just like the good old days.”

“Will you stop that?” Just looking at Bailey’s cold scowling took the last of Caden’s strength away. “Do you have to argue about everything? I don’t want to fight with you. Why can’t you see that?” He stared at Bailey, his eyes meeting nothing but resistance. Rubbing a hand across his face, Caden dropped into the armchair closest to the window. He leaned his elbows on his knees, suddenly so exhausted he wondered whether there was any point in this. “Just tell me what I have to do to make you understand that I’m serious about this.”

Bailey remained relentless, eyes held somewhere on the floor. “You *think* you are.”

“No, I *know* I am.”

“You don’t—”

Caden stood up so quickly Bailey went quiet. He sat on the edge of the table in front of Bailey’s chair, grabbed a hold of the armrests and yanked the chair closer. “I know what I feel.” Bailey stared back with wide eyes, pulled back as far as possible while Caden’s hands framed his face and held him. Just held him. “You are impossible, and I don’t understand half of the things you do, but I don’t care. I don’t need to understand everything. It’s enough for me that I understand what it means when you get snappy in the morning, or when you don’t want to be left alone, though you always act like you don’t care if I stay or not.” Gently he wiped his thumbs across Bailey’s cheeks, searching for something in Bailey’s eyes he could hold on to. “I understand that you’re

scared though you say you're not, and I even understand why, and it's okay because everybody gets scared. Just don't push me away because of that."

The resentment was gone. Looking startled, Bailey brought up his hands and locked them around Caden's wrists. Slowly he pulled Caden's hands away, the loss of his skin against Caden's resembling the feeling in Caden's chest.

Bailey stared down at his lap where he held Caden's hands, fingers loosely wrapped around Caden's wrists before they let go. Head bowed, he shook his head and pulled back. Caden didn't need to see his eyes to know what he'd find there; it was all reflected in the motionless withdrawal happening right before his eyes.

"Bailey..." Even he could hear the wordless plea in his voice, and he wanted to ask "please", wanted to beg and maybe make some sense, but Bailey shook his head again and squirmed out of the couch. Caden's hand reached for him, but Bailey had already stepped away. He wiped his palms on the side of his denims, fingers flexing nervously once his arms settled by his sides.

"Is this because of what I said?" Caden tried, but Bailey shook his head again. He looked harried, eyes scanning the room like he was unsure which way to turn.

"It would never work."

Standing up, Caden turned to Bailey. "Why?"

With a sigh, Bailey shook his head, eyes finally meeting Caden's. "It just wouldn't."

Caden persisted. "Tell me why." He ignored the frustrated sigh from Bailey. "You have a reason for everything, so tell me why."

"Because you're not that kind of a guy." Bailey stared at him, smiling sadly. "Why love anyone else when there's so much to love about you. Do you remember that?"

"*That's* your reason?" Caden laughed, amused and angered at the same time. "Something I said as a joke weeks ago?"

"It wasn't a joke. Nothing we talked about that night was a joke, but you just won't take it seriously." Irritation literally beamed from Bailey's eyes. "I asked you not to tell anyone, and you still did."

"Who gives a shit? They don't care if—"

“But I do!” Bailey looked at him like he was looking at a stranger. “I care, Caden. You’re probably used to people knowing who you hook up with, and you don’t care whether everybody knows what happens in your personal life, but I like to keep things private. Do you think that’s possible now? Do you really think no one’s going to ask questions?”

“You don’t need to answer them, Bailey. Let them talk.”

“You just don’t get it.” Sighing heavily, Bailey shook his head. “My life is my life, and I don’t want people to know everything about it. They know it now. They know that we’ve been ‘joining forces’ like you so kindly put it. It might not be a big deal to you, but it’s a huge deal to me. What we had should be between you and me, not between you, me, and a group of people I happen to have on my speed-dial. That’s not possible anymore. You forced me into this, and I can’t believe you don’t see that it’s wrong.”

Caden was starting to understand the true measure of the shit they were in. Never mind breaking a couple of rules. He’d broken *the* rule, the one Bailey apparently couldn’t let go of.

“So that’s it, huh? You’re not even giving me a chance?”

“It wouldn’t help. We obviously won’t see eye to eye on this.” Bailey readjusted the zipper of his jacket, the strap of his bag running across his chest. “This is why it would never work. We’re too different and some things just can’t be changed. Believe me, in a little while you’ll realize this wasn’t what you really wanted after all.”

Glued to the floor, Caden just stood there and watched Bailey leave. He watched the door close behind Bailey, watched the empty space blend into a monochromatic shade of colors until it looked like no one had ever even stood there.

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Cam was a glowing mother. Bailey understood that much though his mind wasn’t quite up to processing any stimulation. It still amazed him how Caden could bounce up seconds after he woke up and look like he was having the time of his life, while getting up was an everyday battle for Bailey. He was definitely not a morning person, and since baby Molly decided to come into the world at four fifty-three in the morning, Bailey’s endurance for rushed morning rituals was put to the test. But it was worth it. It was so worth it. It was even worth every glance and wondering look when he and Caden arrived seconds apart and wouldn’t even look at each other.

In the morning, when the ordeals of the night were bygone, and both baby and mother were checked and cleared, Bailey sneaked into Cam's room. He found her on the bed with the baby cradled to her chest, Rudy napping in the chair next to the bed.

"Hi," Bailey whispered and quietly came closer. Cam looked up, a smile spreading over her face. "Hey... are you alone?"

Gesturing towards the door, Bailey eased his weight onto the edge of the bed. "Everybody's outside." Inside a pink blanket was a wrinkly, red, and tiny little thing. "They're all waiting to see you guys." He'd always thought newborns weren't really beautiful though everybody said they were, but this one was perfect.

Looking up at Cam, Bailey saw tears dangling on her lashes. She chuckled shortly. "I can't stop crying." Her eyes dropped on her baby, that small little bundle sleeping soundlessly in her arms. "Isn't she gorgeous?"

"She's perfect."

"Do you want to hold her?" Without waiting for Bailey's answer, Cam lifted Molly and guided her into Bailey's arms. It wasn't the first time he'd held a baby, but somehow she seemed so fragile and tiny, he was afraid he might break her. She weighed nothing at all, like air inside of a blanket.

Gently wiping the tips of his fingers across round, puffy cheeks, Bailey pretended not to see Cam's expectant glare. Couldn't she at least wait for the festivities to be over before she started interrogating him?

Cam laced her fingers over her stomach. "Well?" she drawled, batting her eyes at Bailey. "Anything you want to tell me?"

Bailey shrugged and repositioned the baby in his arms. "Not really."

Huffing indignantly, Cam glared at Bailey. "If I hadn't just gone through labor, and if you weren't holding my daughter, I'd slap you." She ogled Bailey. "You and Caden?"

"Yes."

"Really?" She threw her hands up. "Really?!"

Rudy jerked in his chair, eyes wide and gaze bouncing around the room. "What?"

"Nothing, honey." Cam smiled tenderly. "I'm just making sure Bailey here hasn't lost his mind."

Rudy eased back into the chair, rubbing a hand across his face. "Oh... we're back on that now?"

"Yes, we are." Cam's hawk's eyes turned back on Bailey. "When exactly did you plan on telling me?"

Why avoid the truth? "Never."

"Oh, oh... is this what things have come to? We stopped sharing, all of a sudden?" Cam crossed her arms over her chest and stared ahead. It might've passed as another one of her attempts to force others into guilt trips, but when her blue, glimmering eyes remained focused on anything but Bailey, he knew she wasn't just acting out.

"I didn't tell anybody," he said, split between wanting to see her and wanting to watch the tiny creature in his arms. "I didn't want him to tell anyone either. It's not personal, Cam, I just didn't want anyone to know."

Now her eyes sparked up towards him, brows furrowed. "Why not?"

"Because I never meant for it to last." Just as he said it, he realized how true it was. Throughout the past few months, he'd waited for the end, as if it was somehow inevitable. *It was, it was*, something in him said, but he heard it through a tunnel, not as a crystal clear sound singing in his head.

Confused, Bailey opened his mouth to say something, maybe add something that would calm the unnerving heaviness in his chest. His eyes met Cam's, her clear blue gaze softening a little as if she knew Bailey had just been thrown off his game.

"Honey..." Cam's eyes left Bailey and focused on Rudy, who looked like he was trying to stay quiet and immobile, so that no one would draw him into the conversation which had just turned a notch too deep and meaningful. "Why don't you go and show off our baby girl?"

Bouncing on his feet, Rudy nodded. "Yes." He circled the bed, smiling awkwardly at Bailey while he took the baby from his outstretched arms. "I'll go do that."

Bailey watched him go, watched the white hospital walls peek through the open door before it closed behind Rudy and the room was left in humming quietness. Still staring at the door, Bailey felt Cam's hand circle his, gently pulling his thoughts back together. "Why don't you start from the beginning?"

Bailey did. He started from the night, months ago, when they'd all been to the restaurant, and Jenny had been the queen of the evening, and somewhere during the night Bailey had found himself by the bar with Caden, bickering about something so meaningless he could no longer even remember what it was. He told her about the drinks and the shots and waking up in Caden's bed in the morning and *hating* himself for falling into the same trap every other guy had fallen into. From there on, his speech meandered as single moments and small things came to mind, and he had to spit them out the second he thought of them. Small signs of thoughtfulness, like the documentary marathon in the middle of the night or fried eggs in the morning or that single time Caden had brought him breakfast in bed when no one else had ever done that. He didn't tell Cam about the way Caden used to sneak out of bed quietly, so that he wouldn't wake Bailey, but he always did, or about those few times he'd been awake while Caden thought he was asleep, and the man had kissed his temple and forehead and closed eyelids. It was mushy and a treacly cliché, but it was his. He didn't want to share that with anyone.

Cam listened, seemingly entertained and pleased by the secrets shared with her. She didn't interrupt, didn't comment though Bailey could see she wanted to, and for once Bailey could say without a shred of disappointment that he'd been wrong. Cam didn't look at him any differently. She didn't cringe at the thought of Bailey's actions, she didn't look at him like he'd gone insane. She didn't laugh and judge him, and Bailey felt so bad that he'd ever thought she might. She just sat there, hand still held around Bailey's, while he vomited up roughly ninety percent of what had happened during the past few months.

"Oh... and it was Caden who decorated my head with popcorn." He nodded when Cam looked at him with surprise. "He made some for himself and then he... yeah, it was him."

A clever grin formed on Cam's lips. "Kinky."

"Oh, shut up." Bailey sighed deeply and leaned into her, as he'd managed to fit himself next to Cam on the narrow hospital bed. "That was the time I was sick," he said thoughtfully.

"I remember."

Nodding again, Bailey turned their hands around and held Cam's in his. "He brought me tea and oranges and watched TV with me. I don't know how long he stayed. I fell asleep at some point, and by the time I woke up, he was gone."

Running his fingers along Cam's knuckles, Bailey smiled. "He'd cleaned up before he left. You know... the dishes and stuff like that."

"He probably knew you'd do it yourself, even if you had to crawl to get to the kitchen."

"Yeah."

"Okay... so let's review." Cam patted Bailey's hand and sat up straight, suddenly looking all business. "The drunkenness and regrets of the first time aside... you two just happened to bond over a mutually satisfactory sexual relationship. There's nothing wrong with that."

Bailey looked at her like she was crazy. "This is Caden we're talking about."

"Yeah. So?" She stared back and sighed after a moment. "Okay... you and Caden? Ew. But on a larger scale; job well done." She patted Bailey's hand again and smiled approvingly. Bailey was baffled.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about you, diving headfirst into a relationship that had nothing to do with compatibility or being with someone because they look good on paper." Cam cocked her eyebrow when Bailey went to protest. "Don't *even* start telling me you were with Liam because the guy had an awesome personality. He was exactly the type of guy you always go for; mellow, bland, and boring. You could control and manipulate all you wanted, because either he didn't care, or he didn't have the balls to stand up to you."

Startled, Bailey stared at his best friend. "I have never..." Clearing his throat, he went on, "...controlled or manipulated."

"You have a square little world, Bailey, where you keep a tight ship. It's not bad, really it isn't, but if you're with someone, shouldn't they convince you to make at least some compromises? Liam never did. And I bet you would never have changed a single thing just to make him happy."

This was not the kind of conversation Bailey had expected. First of all, he hadn't thought Cam would pick this particular moment to scrutinize Bailey's flaws in relationships, and he especially hadn't thought Cam would root for Caden. Because it seemed awfully a lot like that's what she was doing.

"You know how he is," he mumbled defensively.



“Who? Liam?”

“No, *Caden*. He’s fickle and conceited and careless. I honestly cannot count all the times I’ve wanted to break something because of something he said or did.”

“Yes, and I suppose the sex was just so great, you dragged it on for this long.”

“No, that’s not why...” Bailey sighed tiredly. “I am not going to give you details no matter how much you push me.”

Shrugging, Cam folded her hands over her lap. “It was worth the shot.” She grinned softly. “But the sex was good, right?”

“No comments.”

Regardless of his silence, the heat spreading across his face told its own tale. Cam chuckled wickedly. “Dear lord... he made you blush... hats off to Caden.”

“Trust me, he does not need you complimenting his...” Bailey frowned, evading Cam’s eyes. “Assets.”

She burst out laughing.

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A group of five entered the quiet, almost finished house. Caden eyed the room, the empty moving boxes and full paint canisters sprinkled around. No doubt they were all in need of sleep, but as if by mutual agreement they’d all come to Rudy’s house, perhaps to prepare for damage control.

“When’s the furniture coming?” Jeff asked as he picked up a paint brush from the floor. Absently Caden glanced over his shoulder, only partly concentrating on Ethan’s answer. He felt tired and defeated, which was ridiculous since he wasn’t the one who’d been up all night, delivering a baby. Still, seeing the bare walls and the few pieces of furniture still waiting to be assembled squeezed against the walls was like a slap in the face.

By the kitchen island, he stilled and picked up the tool belt he’d left there. “I promised the house would be ready for the baby.” He said it more to himself than to anyone else, but Jenny heard him, her steps slowing by the backdoor. “What?”

Glancing at her sideways, Caden shrugged. "Cam was worried they'd make their baby homeless, and I said we'd get the house ready by the time the baby was here."

Jenny smiled kindly. "I think we all said that to her at one point or the other."

Caden watched her for a moment, then glanced down at the belt and nodded. "Yeah." But he'd really meant it. Like, really, *really* meant it.

Jenny's eyes drifted to the door, and from the silence that quickly spread around them, Caden could tell Bailey had entered the room. He told his brain to work properly, to start going through things they should finish here, now, before going home, but it didn't take long for his heart to overrule his head. He had to see, just to get a glimpse, but once his eyes sought out Bailey, it was impossible to look away.

Bailey put two paint brushes on the upside-down plastic crate someone had placed next to the wall, then stepped back. He pushed his hands into the back pockets of his jeans, the long-sleeved tee tightening around his shoulders and chest, and Caden hated knowing that the body underneath that shirt wasn't bony and sharp to the touch, but lithe and soft in all the right places. His eyes lingered on the shallow valley between Bailey's collarbones, his mind whipping up memories of all the times he'd touched that spot and kissed it, and how Bailey had gasped or laughed, arched his neck and wordlessly asked Caden to do it again.

Well... that was no more.

Swallowing the annoying knot of anguish tangled inside his throat, Caden turned back towards the island. He grabbed the tool belt, held it in his hands and fiddled with the clasps and loops, forcing his thoughts onto something other than how he could *not* destroy this any further.

"How many rooms need to be painted?" he asked, slowly raising his gaze from the belt. "Four, right?"

Ethan sighed and looked up at the staircase. "The nursery. Then the master bedroom. The hallway needs a second coating."

"The guestroom needs one, too," Bailey pitched in. He glanced at Caden warily, then looked away. Caden pushed aside the hollow pain that came with the avoidance. "Okay, so four rooms. That's doable, right?"

Four pair of eyes turned to him, Jenny's holding the most doubt. "What is?"

"We finish the rooms by the time they come home."

Four pair of eyes exchanged glances. Ethan was the first to speak. "And then what? All of their stuff is still at their flat."

"So we'll move it here."

Nodding slowly, Jeff gestured towards the staircase. "The furniture for the nursery doesn't get here until Tuesday. I doubt they'll keep Cam and the baby at the hospital for that long."

Sighing, Caden dropped the tool belt on the island. "I'm loving the enthusiasm here."

"So we get their stuff here, but the baby has nothing?"

"Okay... how about we call the store and ask if we can get the furniture quicker if we take care of the transportation ourselves? I could probably get a car from work for the weekend."

Jenny frowned. "Probably?"

"Definitely." Caden nodded, certain that he would have to grovel to get his boss to lend him a van, but that wasn't an issue. The fact that the other four still looked at him like he was out of his mind was the issue. "Four rooms, their stuff, and the furniture for the nursery. We've got three days. It's totally doable."

Again the others exchanged glances, but this time it was Bailey who spoke. "I could take care of the packing," he said, shrugging. "I know they've packed most of it already, but there's still all the kitchenware and stuff like that. Clothes. Some books."

Caden clasped his hands together. "That's the spirit!" His exuberant shout earned him a few raised brows, all of which did nothing to smother his ascending optimism. "Bay takes care of packing, okay... I take care of the car."

"It has to be a truck. A van's too small for all of their stuff."

"That's cool. I've got the license. So what else?" Little by little the doubtful spirit evaporated, and eventually Caden wasn't the only one seeing the potential in the situation. Unfortunately, the more high-spirited everybody got, the more things started piling on the list of things to do. The painting, the moving, the packing, furniture and assembling, and the logistics. After a while of staying

back from the conversation, Bailey waved his hands, looking distraught. "Stop!"

And they all did.

The freckle-faced, strawberry-blond keeper of Caden's heart rummaged through the messenger bag still strapped across his shoulder. He pulled out a pad and pushed past Ethan. "This needs to be planned out in detail." He dropped the pad on the island and withdrew his calendar from the bag. "Okay... today is Thursday."

Caden watched Bailey search for the correct date from the calendar, read through everything he'd written and then write something down on the pad. "Cam was supposed to call the vendor about the furniture today," Bailey said, tapping a pen on the open calendar page. Why he had all this stuff written down on his personal calendar, Caden didn't know, but right now he was just glad Bailey was so... Bailey.

"I'll call them and ask about the delivery and all that." Bailey glanced up, as if to ask if that was okay. Caden nodded, unable to keep himself from smiling. *That's my Bay*, he wanted to say, but luckily he was still sane enough to shut up.

Jenny came to stand next to Bailey, pointing at something in the calendar. "We need to call Cam's parents and see when we can pick up everything from the apartment. I could take care of that."

One by one they all gathered around the island, and Bailey wrote down everything. Everything. He wrote down dates and specific times. Caden was half-expecting the man to tell them to calibrate their watches. But that was cool. It was all cool, because Bailey stood less than two feet from him without being forced to. He stood so close, Caden could feel the warmth of his body and smell the distinctive scent floating around Bailey. He stood so close, all Caden had to do was reach out his hand, and he could easily reach all the way around Bailey. But then Bailey looked at him, as if the man had guessed Caden's thoughts, and it was obvious things were still the same. Bailey still didn't want it. He still didn't believe. He still didn't trust. He still would not give Caden half a chance to show how good they could be if Bailey only let them.

It hurt. It really did. Caden wondered if this was what people called a broken heart.

Later, when Jenny and Jeff had left for Cam's parents', and Bailey was in the backyard with his pad and calendar and making a call to the vendor, Ethan

sneaked up on Caden who was shamelessly spying on Bailey through the upstairs window.

Standing next to Caden, Ethan clasped his hands behind his back and gazed out of the window. "So..." he drawled. "Bay, huh? You've advanced onto pet names?"

Caden stepped back and glared at Ethan. "And that's your business how, exactly?"

"Oh, it isn't. I was just wondering if you two made up already."

"Does it look like we made up?"

Shaking his head, Ethan turned away from the window. "I suppose not." The usual glint of a smile in his eyes was gone when he looked at Caden. There was worry there instead. Maybe sympathy. Hopefully not pity, though. "Give him time. Maybe he just needs to figure things out for himself."

Caden shook his head and looked out on the backyard where Bailey sat under a large maple tree, phone still held between his ear and shoulder while he wrote something in his calendar. Soon he ended the call, quickly scribbled something on the pad before standing up and gathering his belongings from the ground. He wiped grass from his jeans and happened to look up, his movements in slow motion when he saw Caden watching. A smile would've made Caden's life so much better. Even one of those snarky grins would've been better than the blank look. Like there was nothing.

Bailey looked away and quickly walked inside. Caden stood there watching, the sense of helplessness making itself known once again.

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It was an impossible task to get everything done in time. Still, they tried.

Caden managed to get a truck for the weekend, and Bailey used all of his charming skills to woo the sales-woman at the store, so they could get the furniture two days early. He and Jenny went to Cam and Rudy's apartment and packed everything that wasn't assembled or nailed to the walls. Then he stood back and watched Caden, Jeff, and Ethan carry everything to the truck. No, he would not break his back when there were men much stronger than him to do the heavy lifting. He did give advice, which seemed to annoy the ever-living poo out of the guys. Except for Caden. Caden didn't seem annoyed. He seemed ecstatic. He smiled when the others grimaced. He chuckled when the others

cursed. He was starting to get to a point of delirium where Bailey was afraid to say a word in case Caden choked on his own laughter.

During the next few days, Bailey learned that he had been wrong thinking he could move on as if nothing had ever happened between him and Caden. Bailey acknowledged the fact that at times his hormones ruled over common sense, but how was he supposed to know that Caden handling a gigantic truck with no problem whatsoever would be so sexy. In Bailey's book it gave a whole new definition to sexiness. Bulging biceps and flexing shoulders as Caden moved the boxes around didn't exactly hurt his accelerating sex appeal, and more than once Bailey was forced to look elsewhere and take a few deep breaths to calm his racing body.

Sexiness aside, Bailey couldn't help but to be drawn closer when the passion which Caden worked with came to the front time after time. It was obvious he would get things done by himself if he had to, and Bailey had never seen anyone work as hard as Caden worked during those few short days. He never once complained, never snapped at anyone though their brilliant plans didn't always go the way they'd thought. He just went on, determinedly and stubbornly, always being the last to leave and the first to arrive. A few times, Bailey wondered if Caden went home at all. On Sunday he got his answer.

He expected it to be a rather easy day, since they'd already moved everything and were now left with assembling the furniture and putting everything in the correct places. Bailey got up early, went through his morning rituals quickly and left for the house. Out of a whim, he asked the cabdriver to take a different route, and he wasn't surprised to see that Caden's car wasn't parked on the street in front of his apartment.

Glancing at the clock on his phone, Bailey cringed at the idea of getting up at the crack of dawn.

After another quick detour Bailey arrived at the house a little before nine. Caden's car was parked on the driveway, and the downstairs windows were pushed open. Bailey walked up to the door and pushed it open, listening for any possible sounds, but it took a few seconds and several steps further inside to hear anyone's presence.

Mumbling something to himself, Caden sat on the floor in the living room, a half-assembled drawer turned on its side in front of him. Bailey halted by the arched doorway, not sure how to make his presence known, but seconds later Caden reached for a screwdriver from the floor next to him and turned his head

just enough to notice Bailey. It was as if time froze; another cliché, but that's how Bailey felt. He didn't move, couldn't, and Caden was still as well, hand still stretched towards the screwdriver.

Eventually Bailey's limbs cooperated again, and he stepped away from the door. "I brought coffee," he said, holding up the large take-away cup he carried along.

Caden's brows rose slightly. "For me?"

Bailey nodded and held the cup out to Caden when he reached the man. "I figured you get up so early, your caffeine level lacks by nine a.m." He wouldn't call it a peace offering, since they weren't fighting, but he could see something shift in Caden's eyes when the man took the cup. Stepping back, Bailey headed into the open kitchen. "I brought some snacks too."

Seconds later Caden had followed him into the kitchen where Bailey had emptied his bag. He hadn't hesitated at the shop, but now he felt a little exposed when Caden fiddled with the packet of cookies. Everything else he'd bought could be meant for anyone, but the cookies were meant for Caden. Why Bailey still cared was a mystery. And then again it wasn't.

"Have you been here all night?" he asked and looked up, only to find Caden staring down at the unopened packet. Caden shook his head and glanced around. "I got here a little after four."

"And when did you leave?"

"Somewhere around midnight."

Bailey nodded, tempted to say Caden should get some rest too, but it wasn't his place to give advice. Instead he put his bag on the island and gestured towards the boxes by the wall. "I was thinking I'd empty the boxes before everybody else gets here." It was only kitchenware, and everything else was carried to the correct rooms. All they needed now was to assemble the shelves and drawers where they'd hide everything.

Caden nodded, grabbed the package of cookies and his coffee and nodded towards the backyard. "I'm gonna have a cig before I finish with the drawer." He took a step, gaze held low, before he glanced at Bailey, gesturing with his hands. "Thanks for these."

"You're welcome." Bailey aimed for a smile, but his lips felt numb, and he didn't know what actually transformed on his face. Caden didn't smile. He

simply looked back, something hollow and grave dwelling in his eyes, and Bailey hated thinking he'd put it there.

The words were right on the tip of his tongue, burning to get out. If he could speak, he would. He'd say he was sorry, say he'd been wrong. He'd tell about the herd of butterfly wings fluttering in the bottom of his stomach every time Caden had wrapped his arms around Bailey and held him close. He'd confess that he had been scared, that he still was—whisper it so quietly it had no chance to grow and cover everything that was safe. He'd ask if maybe Caden still wanted to have something that would meander out of the bedroom and conquer every inch of space. He'd ask if maybe Caden still wanted to walk on the street with him and hold his hand. He would. Except that he never did.

Caden turned around and reached the door with a few long steps. He was out on the porch so quickly, Bailey didn't get a word out. He stood by the island and watched Caden skip down the stairs, his steps light and effortless. His shoulders, strong and solid beneath the worn blue of his shirt, tensed as he lit a cigarette, and Bailey watched as the smoke clouded in the air. He remembered that smell, the scent of freshly smoked cigarette, and how it had tasted in Caden's kisses. He remembered so many things he'd never even thought about before, and each of those things reminded him of how much he really missed Caden.

Bailey had emptied the first of the seven boxes on the counter when Caden came back inside. The man didn't say a word, just went back to the drawer. Bailey held his tongue as well. He stared down at the piled plates and squeezed the edge of the box. He listened to Caden's steps, found comfort in those sounds. Then they stopped. It was quiet again.

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"There's the park." Cam pointed a finger towards the park they'd just passed, giving details of the layout. Too bad her daughter wasn't listening. The baby was fast asleep in the seat next to Cam, but that didn't stop her mother from continuing to explain their surroundings.

Caden yawned and stretched his neck, flexing his fingers around the steering wheel. He would most definitely go to bed early tonight.

A sigh from the backseat caught Caden's attention. "I don't know if this is a good idea," Cam said, frowning while she gazed outside. "Maybe it would be better if she saw the house once it was actually done. I don't want her to have bad memories."



From the passenger's seat Rudy glanced at Caden, smirking slightly. "Don't worry, honey." He glanced over his shoulder. "There will be no bad memories in that house." Caden had no idea how Rudy had managed to keep the last burst of activity a secret, but Cam was still blissfully unaware of the surprise waiting at the end of their drive.

"Let's hope so."

Ten minutes later Rudy carried the baby up the driveway while Cam looked around, sighing dreamily while she looked at the flowerbeds she'd planted weeks ago. "Did you guys water these? They look great."

Caden nodded, following her to the door. "We thought we'd keep things in check while you were taking care of the kid."

Smiling tenderly, Cam wrapped her arm around Caden's waist and squeezed against his side. "Thank you. You guys have helped us so much."

*You have no idea.*

Caden wrapped his arm around Cam's shoulders. "That's what friends are for."

"When the house is ready, and we've settled in, I'll cook you guys a dinner and wine and dine you all night long." Cam nodded firmly, the awful tinge of sadness vanishing from her eyes. She smiled at Rudy when he pushed the door open. Three steps later, her smile turned into rounded lips and wide eyes as she took in the painted walls and the furnished rooms.

"What...?" Frowning confusedly, Cam turned around. Her eyes bounced from one wall to the next, up to the staircase and back to the door. "This... what... I..."

Rudy walked up to her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, kissing her gently on the forehead. "Welcome home, Mami." He led her into the living room where they could see Ethan and Jeff busying themselves out on the porch with the barbeque, and Bailey and Jenny working in the kitchen. If the blinking and stuttering was anything to go by, Cam was still in shock. She kept opening and closing her mouth, a million things catching her attention as her gaze wouldn't settle for a single second.

"How did you...?" She shook her head, helplessly looking at Caden. "Did you do this?"

"We all did."

Looking at Rudy, she frowned. "Did you know about this?" She slapped him halfheartedly when he nodded. "And you didn't tell me!" And then came the waterworks. It started so suddenly, Caden was worried for a second, but by the time Rudy hugged his wife and held her and their baby to his chest, Cam's cries started sounding like giggling.

Jeff appeared at the door. "Is she laughing or crying?"

"A little bit of both, I think." Rudy kissed her on the top of her head, murmuring something so quietly even Caden couldn't hear, though he stood right next to them. Cam looked up, tears still glistening in her eyes, and she reached up and kissed Rudy. They kissed all the time, even in public, in ways that should definitely be left behind closed doors, but they were all used to it by now, and it never once bothered anyone. It bothered Caden now.

Burning with envy, he turned away and reminded himself how other people's happiness took nothing away from him. Still, wanting what he couldn't have gave common sense a run for its money. Maybe that was why he was relieved when Cam finally stepped back and swirled around the room. She hugged them all, squeezed incredibly hard and wouldn't stop thanking everybody. Tears still ran down her cheeks, but at least they all knew they were tears of joy.

"I want a tour!" she announced and dragged Caden along. She seemed to see everything with new eyes, like she had never seen the house before. The tour was a continuous chant of "oh my gods" and "awws", and Caden was sure there wasn't a female in this world who'd kissed him as much as Cam had by the time they returned to the living room. On the cheek, of course. Otherwise Rudy might've smacked him harder than anyone on the whole planet.

It was a bittersweet evening. Caden loved his friends, every single one of them, and he loved those evenings when they'd get together and do nothing but talk and eat and laugh. To him, there was an inkling of good-bye in the air that night. As the sun set, and the sky darkened, the newest addition to their group was passed from one set of arms to the next, but it wasn't until Bailey folded his arms beneath her and held her close that Caden's thoughts splintered and broke.

Watching Bailey sit there, surrounded by their friends, with that tiny bundle of joy in his arms, and the most gorgeous smile on his face, made Caden want so many things he could not have. He could easily imagine himself building a home of good memories and happy thoughts, side by side with Bailey.

Watching Bailey now made Caden realize he had imagined that, planned ahead and thought of times and dates. He'd thought about what to get Bailey for his birthday, about holidays and vacations. He'd thought about it all because he'd thought he would get it. He'd thought he could have it. Have it and keep it. How easily had that happened?

Seconds ticked by so quickly Caden couldn't memorize everything he wanted. Caden could see Bailey was stalling, but he couldn't tell why. Caden prolonged the evening, knowing well it would only add to the torture later, but he couldn't make himself leave. There would be no more gatherings around paint canisters or garden planning. He wouldn't get to see Bailey every day any longer, because he no longer had a reason to. So he drank in Bailey's presence now, his laughs and smiles and gentle voice. He wished he could steal a second and bottle it, store it somewhere and go back to it whenever he wanted. He wished for the right words now when he still had the chance, but not a single one came out. So he watched and listened, hating the moment Bailey stood up and said he had to go.

A few weeks ago Caden would've come up with an excuse and offered a ride. And Bailey would've tossed his head and accepted. And a little while later they would've been twined together from head to toe. But no more. Now Caden stood back and watched Bailey leave. He watched Bailey hug everybody good-bye, everybody but him. Still by the couch, Caden watched Bailey reach the door and glance over his shoulder. The man gave a lifeless wave and a fraction of a smile, saying "goodnight", and Caden nodded, surely speaking though later he couldn't remember if he actually had. And then Bailey was gone. He closed the door, and Caden no longer saw him. Just like that.

The house which had radiated happiness only moments ago was quiet now. Caden could feel cautious glances and looks of "I'm sorry" aimed at him, but he didn't meet a single one. Turning on his heels, he walked over to the porch and skipped down the stairs, like a coward running from the attention. It wasn't that he couldn't take it. He just didn't want to.

Minutes later he sat on the lowest step on the stairs when Cam joined him. She didn't ask if he wanted company, didn't ask if maybe Caden wanted to be alone. She just sat next to him and wrapped her arm around his shoulders, squeezing tightly. "It'll get better. I promise. Just give him a little time."

Caden nodded.

He just couldn't believe it.

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Bailey had thought it would be easier now that he didn't have to see Caden. He'd been wrong.

Sometimes he woke up in the middle of the night, hand outstretched across the sheets, and it always took him a few seconds to remember that there was no one there. Then he lay awake and stared up at the ceiling or hugged his pillow, mind in spasms over the million things he could've done for things to be different now. He wondered if any of the men Caden had been with had felt like Bailey felt now, like a piece had been taken away, and a part of his life was now empty.

Days became monotonous and bland. Suddenly he had too much time on his hands, and he didn't know what to do with it. He couldn't tell for sure whether he still did everything he'd done before the house-project had begun, because back then he'd always had something to do, whereas now it felt like time stood still, and he had nothing to do. Cam enjoyed her new home so much, she came up with all sorts of reasons to invite people over, and Bailey loved going, loved spending time with her and their friends. The downside of things was seeing Caden. Seeing Caden was painful as hell.

Bailey didn't know what he'd hoped would happen, but as time went by, he started missing something. Something he wasn't getting. Going back to the way things had been was out of the question, but Bailey hadn't expected things to change like this. Caden had gone from hot-tempered to polite in a matter of days, and nothing confused Bailey more than the lack of fire in Caden's presence. Caden was calm and collected while Bailey was on the verge of a temper tantrum every other minute. He felt like no one else noticed Caden's weirdness while they all walked on eggshells around Bailey.

Nearly two months passed with bleak, empty days and hours Bailey was sure he wouldn't miss later. He found his rhythm, the routines he'd lost and then missed, and life finally settled into a normality he was genuinely grateful for. He rarely woke up feeling lonely anymore. Just sometimes, maybe once or twice a week. He stopped sporting the old, dark blue T-shirt Caden had forgotten once; now Bailey only slept in it sometimes, but that was just because it was loose and soft, comfortable. Comforting, if it was one of those bad days.

All in all, his life was starting to look a little like the life he'd had before Caden. And then, one night, everything just changed.

It didn't come as a surprise, not really. Bailey had been feeling moody all week, and he'd even been told to stop menstruating—another one of Cam's

funny little jokes. It was the upcoming party on Saturday that left him nervous. The party was supposed to be a secret, though Bailey was convinced everybody knew. Even Caden, who was the only person who absolutely shouldn't have known. After all, what were surprise birthday parties without the surprise? The fact that Caden's birthday was actually on Friday didn't change the way things would play out. Cam just thought he wouldn't figure out the surprise if the party was held on Saturday.

Bailey made a list, yet again, of all the things he could possibly buy Caden for his birthday. A year ago this hadn't been a problem, but now, with everything that had happened, Bailey just didn't know. Impersonal presents really wouldn't do once you knew someone very personally, but everything even remotely decent felt too intimate, like a reminder of small things Bailey knew, but no one else did. To be honest, he didn't want to go. He didn't want to sit there and offer congratulations, act nice and friendly while all he really wanted to do was walk up to Caden, hug him and just stay there.

It had been nearly two months without those hugs. It was torture.

On Friday, after doing his laundry and planning next week's grocery list, Bailey fixed a quick dinner and ate it while still fiddling with his list. It bothered him that he didn't know what Caden actually wanted. If they'd been friends, he could've asked, but as they were now, there was no such thing as asking for anything. The only thing Caden had ever mentioned wanting was a date, but it was safe to say that ship had sailed. Besides, how conceited was it to offer yourself up on a date as a present? It was something Caden might've done, but not Bailey. *Never* Bailey.

Bailey sketched random patterns on the side of his notepad while emptying his plate, the number "29" appearing in different shapes and forms around and over the carefully written list, he'd made during the week. Caden's name still peeked out from under the letters and numbers, but it was nearly impossible to make sense of the list. Bailey stared down at the page, smoothing his fingers over the number, then over Caden's name, suddenly saddened by how complicated everything was now.

His square little world was filled with mazes now.

On a whim he wrote "happy birthday" on top of the mess he'd managed to create on the page, took a picture and hit 'send' before he had a chance to change his mind. Then he stared down at his phone, shocked and oddly chipper. The cheer faded when there was no answer within the next twenty minutes.

Half an hour later, Bailey regretted acting so juvenile. At nine in the evening, he'd reorganized his cleaned, folded clothes in his closet and decided he would get Caden a pair of socks.

At ten-o-seven Bailey's heart fell to his stomach when his phone buzzed on the side of his nightstand, a new message creating an absurdly loud sound in the otherwise quiet apartment. It took him a moment to actually gather up enough courage to check his phone, and even if he was ninety-nine point nine percent sure it was from Caden, he still feared it wasn't.

It was.

It was Caden saying thank you and mentioning that Bailey's text was on the top three of the things that salvaged Caden's evening from being a total let-down.

Staring down at his phone, Bailey was itching to ask what the other two were. He didn't ask. For a long time he didn't do anything, because he didn't know if there was a code for this type of messaging. Usually Bailey would've either ignored answering altogether or simply texted something back about hoping the night would end on a good note. Texting was not Bailey's forte. Had it been anyone else, Bailey would've called. Now he cradled his phone in his hands and sat on the bed, thinking hard about what to write back.

Eventually he just commented that, being the birthday boy, Caden could just chuck off whatever didn't entertain him and go do something else. As soon as he sent it, he realized how lame it was and wished he would've come up with something wittier.

At ten-twenty-three Caden texted back, saying he didn't know how to chuck off Ethan, and that he was currently beating Jeff's ass at pool, so he'd at least have to see that through.

The tone of the messages was light and mellow, and Bailey didn't feel forced to write anything back, but still he clung on to his phone, hoping he could come up with something to say. He couldn't. There were a million things he wanted to say, but none of those fit into text messages. He would've needed hours and face-to-face contact and a chance to explain all those places where he'd done wrong.

A new message at ten-fifty.

*Should've checked out. I lost.*

Bailey smiled, chuckled even. Quickly he typed back, then stared at the screen once he'd sent the message.

*There's always next time. Ever heard of trying again?*

It had no hidden message. Absolutely not. Still, Bailey's heart threatened to rampage through his chest when another message came through merely seconds later.

*How many chances does a guy get?*

Okay, so they were definitely no longer talking about pool.

Bailey placed his phone on the nightstand and left the bedroom. Putting distance between him and the device didn't exactly help, but he could easily imagine being away from the danger zone once he no longer saw his phone. Too bad he could still hear it.

A continuous, uneven buzzing told him messages were a thing of the past, and someone was seriously trying to reach him this time. Cautiously, he returned to the bedroom, fiddling with the hem of his flannel pajama top. Caden's name flashed on the screen, over and over and over again, and it was only the fear of missing the call that forced Bailey to answer.

"Hello?"

"Hey." The smile was so evident in Caden's voice, Bailey had to bite his lip not to sigh. "So I took your advice."

"You chuckled off Ethan?"

"Yep. Way to spoil the mood."

Lowering himself to the corner of the bed, Bailey searched for clever words. "He'll survive." That was definitely not clever.

"What were the other two things?" Bailey asked quickly.

"Oh... a call from my sister. She's coming over next week. And Cam sent a picture of Molly. I swear, she's the only person in the world who can make drool bubbles look good."

Humming his agreement, Bailey scooted further back on the bed. "She's cute."

"A ten out of ten."

"Mmm."

And then it was quiet.

It was so quiet, all Bailey could hear were the sounds of traffic surrounding Caden, puncturing the quietness. From the corner of his eye he saw the faded blue shirt peek from under his pillow. He had worn it twice this week, unable to even get it out of the bed.

Wasn't that some sort of form of co-dependency or something?

Caden cleared his throat, the sound yanking Bailey back to reality. "So how's your day been?"

"Laundry." Bailey wanted to kick himself in the head, but Caden's throaty chuckle made the desire lessen. "Right... it's Friday." Why did it warm Bailey's heart that Caden still remembered?

"How's everything? I haven't seen you in a while."

"Everything's... the same, I guess." Again Bailey's eyes were diverted to the shirt. "You?"

"The same, yeah. Kitty sneaked out a couple of weeks ago, but we found her pretty quickly. No harm done."

Bailey grimaced. "Bummer."

Caden's laughter burrowed right through Bailey's chest. "I don't know how you can *not* like her."

"Told you it's the other way around."

"Yeah... so you did."

Cue silence.

The shirt might as well have been neon green with the power it held over Bailey. He couldn't get his eyes off of it, like it was a dirty secret he hadn't told anyone, and now it was time. Go cold turkey. That's what he should've done a long time ago.

Caden coughed awkwardly. "So..."

"You forgot a shirt." Bailey screwed his eyes shut and bit his tongue, freaking out and liberated at the same time.

"What shirt?"

"Just a T-shirt. Blue. It's got some weird red print on the front."



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“Oh... Yeah, I’ve been wondering where I left it.”

“Now you know.”

“Yeah.” Traffic and steps and people, but no sound from Caden. Not until he laughed briefly. “You could’ve just left it at Cam’s.”

“Yeah, I could’ve.” Needless to say he never had. Now the shirt was in his hands, the softness of the old fabric so comforting against his aching skin. “I still sleep in it sometimes,” he said quietly, pained by the confession.

Caden didn’t say a word. Maybe he hadn’t heard Bailey. Or maybe he had, and he thought Bailey was insane. Like, stalker-material insane.

Bailey heard a door close, then heavy thumps before the line went quiet. And then Caden’s quietly spoken voice, such heaviness blending into one single word. “Bailey.”

“Yeah?”

“Open the door.”

Bailey’s eyes bounced to the door visible through his dark apartment. He grasped on to the shirt, afraid to move.

Caden breathed deep. “Please, let me in.”

Bailey imagined Caden on the other side of the door, his hand maybe pressed against the door like he was begging to get inside.

Every step seemed seconds long, and Bailey still hesitated when he got to the door. He pulled it open, immediately bathed in warmth when he saw Caden standing there. Stepping back, he let Caden inside and finally disconnected the call and closed the door, unable to say a word, while his heart beat so loudly Caden had to hear it too.

“Hold on...” Caden remained in the hall while Bailey fetched the shirt from where he’d left it lying on the bed. Looking up at Caden was still hard, but Bailey managed as he passed the shirt over to the man.

“I should’ve washed it,” he said, as soon as he remembered he hadn’t. Caden fisted his hand around the shirt, watching Bailey peculiarly under his dark brows before he brought the shirt up to his face and breathed deep. It wasn’t a sniff, not like he was making sure it wasn’t just a dirty rag. He breathed in, like he was trying to capture even the faintest whiffs of whatever scents were attached to the fabric, and all the while his gaze was hooked on Bailey.

The look in his eyes, intensity and something Bailey couldn't quite name, went straight to Bailey's knees, forcing him to lean his side against the wall as he hugged his arms around his body.

Caden lowered his hand, eyes still on Bailey when he took a step. "I'm glad you didn't." He moved forward like he had every right to, like someone had just given him a permission to come closer and move into Bailey's personal space. He didn't. He had *no* right, and still Bailey couldn't tell him not to.

Intensely and hard, Caden's mouth crashed on Bailey's and easily stole the surprised breath gushing from Bailey's mouth. In his stomach those butterfly wings danced frantically but higher, much, much higher, dizziness took over and took away any chance of doing anything else than holding on and surviving. That's what it felt like; like fighting for each stolen breath in between the attacks against his lips. It wasn't even passionate in a sense that left Bailey wobbly and dizzy. It was simply infuriated and frantic, painful at times where teeth scratched lips, and no one cared enough to ease off. And then it ended. Just like that.

Caden stepped back, leaving Bailey heaving shaky breaths, still by the wall. "You still sleep in it?" Caden asked, as if he couldn't understand. He shook his head, glanced down to the shirt still clutched in his hand. "You still *sleep in it*!?"

"Just sometimes." Bailey exhaled slowly and stood up straight. He wanted to smooth his hand along Caden's cheek, wipe away the confusion and hurt and maybe replace it with understanding and joy. He didn't, though. He just stood there and watched. "Just sometimes, when I miss you really badly." Where did all this boldness come from?

Caden watched him as if in awe, mouth left open and a ridiculous little chuckle escaping his throat. "Just sometimes when..." He shook his head and stepped back. "I'm not gonna do this."

"What do you mean?"

"You're the one who didn't want anything more than a casual fuck a couple of times a week." Caden thrust the wrinkled shirt at Bailey. "You're the one who didn't believe in this enough to actually give it a chance. You're the one who didn't trust in *me*. And now you're telling me that *you* sleep in my shirt sometimes?!"

Bailey shrugged awkwardly. "Yeah."

Caden chuckled, bewildered. "You're unbelievable." He shook his head and ran a hand through his short hair, the shirt still hanging from his fingers.

Bailey wetted his dry lips, searching for words. "I was wrong." He shook his head. "No, I wasn't wrong... I lied. Okay? I... I was scared, just like you said, and I lied. And I'm sorry."

Watching Caden's downcast face, the tired disbelief in every shake of his head, compelled Bailey to bridge the distance. With each hesitant step he got a little closer, still not sure where all this would end. "I never meant to hurt you. I just didn't want to get myself hurt either."

"And you were so sure that's what would happen, is that it?"

"Caden... I wasn't even enough for Liam. How could I ever be enough for you?" He shook his head when Caden went to protest. "I'm not that much fun, you know. I whine and nag about everything, and I don't think I can ever really stop doing that. I will drive you insane, and I didn't want that to happen when we were together, because I couldn't stand the idea of losing you."

"I have known you for years. You think I don't know you nag? Bailey, I *know* you."

Nodding, Bailey shuffled in front of Caden. "I know. I just didn't realize it until... until it was too late." Still hesitant, he brought up his hand and gave into the urge to touch. Gently, he wiped the tips of his fingers along the side of Caden's face, trying to mend every crease of discomfort he'd put there before. "I thought I couldn't keep you, so I'd rather not have you at all. It's not that I didn't trust you. I just didn't trust myself." Inching closer, he leaned up and placed a single kiss on Caden's lips. "Please forgive me."

Searching through Caden's face, Bailey waited with his heart drumming in his chest as it took seconds before Caden finally looked at him. Behind the hurt was something so much stronger; Bailey wondered how he hadn't noticed it there before.

"I don't wanna hide this anymore. I don't want to do that."

"You don't have to. I promise." Yes, it still scared him, but it was okay now. Being scared was suddenly the easiest thing in the world when Caden looked at him like he was something magnificent.

Hands stroking his sides, Caden's forehead leaned against his. It felt good. It felt like coming home. Smiling tentatively, Bailey leaned both of his hands against Caden's chest. "So... how many chances does a guy get?"

Caden narrowed his eyes, hands creeping to the sides of Bailey's hips. "Maybe we should go one chance at a time. How about that?"

"Yeah... I think we should do that."

Turned out people did actually stand in embraces for minutes on end, but Bailey didn't mind. Caden didn't seem to mind either. A small laugh resonated beneath Bailey's palms. "You still wear it sometimes?"

"Okay... can we move past that, please?"

"No, see, that's a perfect example of how badly you really need me."

Bailey pulled back, cocking his eyebrow. "Don't get cocky."

"Me? Never." Caden smiled, for the first time in weeks showing off that brilliant smile of his that Bailey had once hated, but which he now adored. "You know me; humility is my middle name." Caden brought up his hand, cupped it under Bailey's chin and kissed him. Kissed him with all he had. Hard and sweet and demanding and gentle. A kiss like that could turn Bailey's knees into jelly. A kiss like that often enough did.

"What is it with you?" Caden murmured. "You rock both cotton and flannel." He tugged on the hem of Bailey's pajama. "Sexy as hell."

"You're weird." Secretly pleased... oh who was he kidding? Pleased, period, Bailey smiled into another kiss.

"Weird and charming." Caden nodded knowingly. "Just admit it. You *did* think I was charming."

Bailey cocked his chin, tossing his head. "My lips are sealed."

Smirking smugly, Caden played with the waistband of Bailey's flannel bottoms. "We'll see about that."

Later that night Bailey received a private lesson on all things related to love. He learned that making love doesn't mean sappy words and cuddly kisses, that it can be the simplicity of fingertips running over bare shoulders or shaky lips. He learned that declarations don't always need words, that a caress over his cheek with a shaky hand can say "I love you" just as much as any words can. He learned that getting his hands bound to the bedpost with joking comments and throaty commands wasn't weird, or anything he should feel ashamed of. Just like being pulled off the bed and making a mess of the floor like they'd done on the bed didn't degrade who he was. It was just an extension of the way

they were. Just another form of love only between the two of them, never between anyone else.

Much later, when night had become day, he was taught how love does not mean compatibility or perfect track records. He now knew that even the most inexperienced could be the greatest master, and how anyone could find safety in the most absurd places. That he learned, when his breathing finally settled and the black bindings were still wrapped around him where Caden had put them hours earlier. It wasn't black nylon that anchored him; it was Caden's warmth and solid arms around him. The breath against his shoulder and the few random, tired kisses against his skin were the best kind of love he could think of. The only right kind for him.

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### *Epilogue*

The mellow feel of weightlessness beneath him gave Caden a sense of being underwater or way up high where gravity no longer applied. Still, he kept his head together and his focus on more important things than whether or not he really was in outer space. "Are you comfortable?"

Next to him Bailey hummed contently, eyes closed and face turned upwards, where branches and leaves filtered out most of the sunrays. His sunglasses were on the grass by the tree, their shoes kicked away on the ground next to the hammock, and somewhere not so far away was Bailey's glass of ice water. It was probably warm by now, but Caden didn't think he'd need to worry about getting the man another one anytime soon. Bailey seemed content being where he was without anything to drink.

A month had passed. One month. It was a relatively short amount of time, but Caden liked the speed with which they'd progressed. He could now kiss Bailey in public without causing chaos, and he never had to worry whether he could take Bailey's hand and hold it in his own. There were still things Bailey didn't say out loud, but he had ways of showing what he couldn't vocalize. They now lounged in a giant hammock in Rudy and Cam's backyard, their whole group present after one of their Sunday dinners.

It had been a good summer. Caden's favorite.

Bailey shifted, rocking the hammock gently while he nudged his face against Caden's chest. It was a common trait of his, one Caden loved and would never get enough of. He liked to think that Bailey wanted to rub Caden's scent

all over him, but Bailey said he did it because Caden's chest hair felt nice through the shirt. Caden called it bull. It had to be the scent.

Ethan walked by, rolling his eyes at the tangle of limbs in the hammock. "You two are disgusting."

"Don't be jealous," Caden teased and closed his eyes while nuzzling his nose against Bailey's hair. It smelled sweet and soft and sugary, like what all the candy in a candy shop would taste like. "We just got lucky."

"Very lucky." Cam's voice was colored with joy, and she stayed on the porch, Rudy still inside with the baby. "And cute."

"Oh, so cute," Jenny said teasingly.

Bailey grunted, his brows drawn into a frown. "You people are so juvenile." The furrow between his brows smoothed when Caden stroked his thumb over it. Discontent on Bailey's face was not what Caden liked to see, therefore he did his best to make it go away. He succeeded ninety percent of the time. Sometimes it took a little more work than expected, but Caden never complained. They'd found balance in how to keep both parties happy; both had their ways to please and to serve. Caden did it by making sure Bailey's days were as trouble-free as possible, and Bailey did it by... night. Enough said. Beneath that holier-than-thou front was a firecracker. Another thing Caden loved about his man.

"So how about that movie?" Cam asked. Sounds of chairs scratching the porch's floor filled the air, but the two men on the hammock didn't move. "We'll be right there," Caden said, arms still wrapped around Bailey's shoulders.

"Okay, people." Jenny rushed the others indoors. "Let's give these lovebirds some privacy."

Bailey grimaced at the comment but didn't say anything. With his eyes closed, he remained in Caden's embrace and didn't seem to be in a hurry to follow the others inside. Caden sensed reluctance, like Bailey was staying behind on purpose.

Caden brought up his hand and stroked his fingers through Bailey's hair. "Is something wrong?" he asked quietly. He'd sensed something was off for days, but he hadn't dared to ask about it. Now, he felt it was time to face the problem, whatever it was. "You've been really quiet for a while now."

Bailey sighed. "I talked with my mother a couple of days ago." His fingers fiddled with the front of Caden's shirt. "I told her about you."

Joy bloomed in Caden's chest, until he heard the hesitance in Bailey's voice. "Is that not a good thing?"

Bailey pulled away, rocking the hammock from side to side while he settled on the very edge. "I never told her about Liam." He glanced up, smiling awkwardly. "Don't look so shocked."

Caden frowned. "You were with him for nearly two years, and you didn't tell your own mother about him? Why?"

Shrugging, Bailey looked away. "My family's happy for me when good things happen, and they support me. We're just not close like you are with your family." He looked up, squinting against the sunlight. Dozens and dozens of freckles danced on his skin, blending into a blur of honeyed whiteness and light brown dots, and even as ease was far from his features, he still bathed in the sun. "I don't tell them things unless it's really important."

"Being in a relationship for nineteen months isn't really important?" Caden could hear the astonishment in his voice, but hell... he hadn't known Bailey was *this* secretive.

"It didn't last, so it doesn't really matter now, does it?" Bailey sighed uncomfortably, looking troubled. "We're one of those dysfunctional families you always hear about, but never believe really exist. I just like to keep my personal life separate from my family life." Turning his face away from the sun, Bailey slid a little closer. His hand returned to Caden's chest, fingers smoothing the cotton shirt. "If they knew I was seeing someone, they'd want details, and they'd want to meet the guy, and it would just get messy. And..." He frowned, licking his lips. To Caden it seemed as if Bailey was just stalling, like this wasn't what he really wanted to say.

"Why would it get messy?" he asked, arms pulling Bailey closer. Bailey's scent encircled him, a warm body against his filled his mind.

"Because they get sad when I'm left behind." Speaking quietly, Bailey went on, "Liam left because I was too difficult... because I was too much of something and not enough of something else. You said it too; I'm too high-maintenance."

"Hey... I didn't really mean that."

“Yes, you did.” Bailey looked up, smiling softly. “It’s okay. You don’t say things you don’t mean. I like that about you. I like that you’re honest.” With a sigh, his smile trailed off. “I’ve always liked that about you, even when I didn’t like *you*.”

Caden gaped at Bailey, pretending to be shocked. “What?” he gasped. “There was a time when you didn’t *like* me?”

Bailey raised his brows, unimpressed. “Didn’t my detestation come across clear enough?”

“No. See, I think you were just in denial.” Caden nodded thoughtfully. “You just couldn’t digest my awesomeness.”

Rolling his eyes, Bailey slid closer still, muttering sourly. “Your ego really is enormous.”

“My ego’s perfectly proportioned with the rest of me.” Something gigantic and heavy bloomed in Caden’s chest when Bailey laughed, all worry swept away. Many times Caden had sat and watched Bailey laugh with their friends, but not once had Bailey aimed those beautiful eyes of his at Caden and given him that look of happiness. Not until a few short weeks ago. Now Caden got it daily. And still he remembered the time when scorn and taunting were the only things shared between him and Bailey.

“Seriously, though...” Searching Bailey’s face, Caden stroked his fingers along Bailey’s cheek. “I know I’m a jerk sometimes, but I never meant to hurt you. And I guess I never realized that I did.” He rubbed his thumb against the tender spot just beneath Bailey’s ear. “I’m sorry. But it wasn’t your fault it never worked out before. They just didn’t know how to treat you right.”

“Oh yeah? And I suppose you do?”

“I think I’m getting pretty good at it.” Might be just Caden’s enormous ego translating things favorably, but that was definitely a glint of content in Bailey’s eyes. So, yeah... Caden was pretty confident he had things under control.

“So that’s your reason?” he asked after a moment of silence. “You wanted to keep things a secret, because it’ll save you the trouble of family interference?”

“That was a part of it, I guess.”

“What’s the other part?”



Bailey stared back for a few seconds, a level of sharpness returning to his gaze. "I didn't want people to know that I was as easy as everybody else. And... I don't know..." He glanced at Caden. "I guess I feared they would know what we do."

"What we do?" The happy buzz had vanished, and Caden crashed right back to reality.

Bailey tilted his head up, gazing towards the branches. "Yeah... the kinky stuff."

"Kinky stuff?" Caden studied Bailey's profile carefully. The snappiness was back, and whether or not it had been Caden's ego making assumptions, there was absolutely nothing content about Bailey's current mood. He was all dislike and uncertainty.

Silly Bailey.

"Kinky stuff, huh?" Caden spoke nonchalantly, not bothered by the lack of response. "You mean like when I like to tie your hands to those nice little knobs on your bedpost and then eat dessert in bed?" Looking displeased, Bailey frowned but didn't say a word. That was cool; Caden could work with that. "Or that one time when I kept you tied up all night long and didn't even let you come until it was like... what... five in the morning? You mean that kind of kinky—?"

Bailey muttered sourly. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah." Caden nudged his knuckles under Bailey's chin. "If you don't talk about it, and if I don't talk about it, how could anyone know?" Bailey looked down when Caden tilted the man's face up towards him. "It's private, Bay." Like Caden would ever let anyone know how Bailey fell apart and dragged Caden with him. "And if you think I would tell someone, then I must say; you don't really know me."

Bailey worried his lip, still refusing to meet Caden's eyes. "I know. I know you wouldn't." He knitted his fingers in Caden's shirt. "I'm just not used to this, I guess."

"What? Being in love with the most fabulous guy in the world?"

Snorting, Bailey finally looked up. "You're impossible, you know that?"

"Yes. And you love me for it." Caden ignored Bailey's mocking glare and went on to smooth the front of his shirt, capturing Bailey's hand in his. "All is

well, my dear,” he said. “I love you, too.” He kissed Bailey’s knuckles, loving how Bailey was unable to hide his joy over such simple words. His smile was a little reluctant, but it was still there, and the way his freckled skin turned soft pink from the tip of his chin to the roots of his hair made Caden smile too.

“Contrary to what I may have said in the past, it’s actually pretty easy.” Nodding, Caden nudged his lips against Bailey’s. “A must, really. Like a basic need. Loving you is right next to breathing. I just can’t stop.”

Bailey chuckled. “Now you’re just overdoing it.”

“No, no. Watch.” Caden clasped a hand over his mouth and pinched his nose, a smile tugging on his lips when he saw Bailey bite his lip to keep himself from laughing. After several seconds, Caden let go of his nose and inhaled deeply. “See? Just can’t do it.”

Barely inches away, Bailey nestled against Caden’s chest. “Should I expect these demonstrations on a daily basis?” he asked with a smile. Caden shrugged. “If that’s what it takes.” He wasn’t fooled by the easy smile on Bailey’s face; the man still had his doubts. Admittedly, Caden had close to zero experience on how to maintain a happy relationship, but he was a quick learner. And he was not going to fail Bailey.

“I love you, Bailey,” Caden said with conviction, his arms once again wrapped around Bailey’s shoulders. Sliding his palm to the nape of Bailey’s neck, Caden pulled the man closer still. “I won’t ever stop telling you that.”

Bailey watched him in silence, fingers sliding gently along Caden’s face. “Okay,” the man whispered, gently, so incredibly gently Caden could almost feel him speak. Tenderly, the touch feathered along Caden’s cheek, from his temple to his jaw. “So... yeah... I told my mother.” Bailey shrugged absently, his gaze following the movements of his hand. “I guess that makes this really important.” Finally, his hand stopped, cupped against Caden’s cheek. Hazel eyes settled on Caden’s brown ones, not a hint of fear in that solid gaze. “Because I really want this to last.” There was a little bit of fear in his voice, but it wasn’t fear of losing something he wanted to keep; it was fear of speaking out loud, what he’d always kept hidden before. That was his weak spot, and Caden loved being the one Bailey showed it to.

Caden sighed casually. “Guess you’re stuck with me, then.” Bailey smiled and nodded, trust so evident in his eyes, it nearly broke Caden’s heart.

Bailey crossed those last few inches and kissed Caden, gently stroking his lips against Caden’s, while his hand slid from Caden’s cheek to the side of his

neck. Eyes closed, Caden pulled Bailey closer, loving the taste and feel of the man. It felt unlike anything Caden had felt before; each kiss from Bailey felt new and wonderful and rare, like it was the very first time he touched the man, though there had been hundreds of times prior to this one. But Caden took it, took it and treasured it, inching closer until their legs were entwined and not a breath could've passed between their bodies.

Steps thumped against the porch's floor, but Caden didn't care enough to detach himself from Bailey.

"Hey!" It was Ethan. "Are you two done sucking face, or should we just start the flick without you guys?"

Bailey pulled away, snarling. "I just love the eloquence."

Tilting his head back, Caden saw Ethan standing by the door. "We'll be right there."

They got off the hammock, moving carefully as if unwilling to step too far from the other. Bailey picked up their shoes from the grass, while Caden took the water glass, before they headed inside. The whoops and playful whistles welcoming them into the living room made Bailey cringe, and for once Caden could agree that these people really were juvenile sometimes.

After taking the glass into the kitchen, Caden returned to the living room and found Bailey looking around, hands patting the sides of his pockets. "I think I left my sunglasses outside."

"I'll get them."

Bailey's "thank you" came in a form of a small smile, and he settled on the couch, while Caden went to get the glasses. The movie was playing by the time he got back inside, and everybody had settled on the couch and chairs. Bailey scooted to the side to give Caden room to sit next to him. The sunglasses ended up on the coffee table, and Caden took his seat next to Bailey. Maybe there weren't many public displays of affection initiated by Bailey, but he didn't shy away from the closeness. Knowing glances were exchanged across the room, but for once Bailey didn't react. He turned slightly towards Caden and tilted his bent knees over Caden's lap, smiling contently when Caden wrapped his arm over Bailey's shoulders and pulled him closer.

Yeah... all was good.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*C.C. Jaz writes for the same reason that she reads; for fun, for drama, for amusement, and for entertainment. She has a thing for clichés and hopes she can find at least one or two in every book she reads. She likes her characters flawed, seeing how no one's perfect. Still, she is a firm believer that a right someone will turn anyone's flaws into victories. Guess that makes her a romantic.*

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# DANCE OF MEMORY

By R.L. Robinson

## Photo Description

Two men, one young, the other older, are standing in a drawing room wearing period dress (18<sup>th</sup> century most likely). The older is handsome, while the younger appears to be contemplating something. Behind them, a painting on the wall is out of focus; suggestive of a person in bed, whether healthy or ill is a matter of interpretation.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*My name is Frederick, this picture isn't of me or someone I know, but this made me think. What if this would be what Hans and I would look like if we managed to escape together, or at least, managed to be together even with my hateful father breathing down on our necks? Would we have loved each other until the end of our lives? Would our bond be as strong that not even marriage to others would keep us apart? I do hope, dear author, that you would show me an alternate reality where we would have been happy, loving and as one.*

*(I was writing this thinking of Frederick the Great of Prussia and Hans Hermann von Katte. I am not sure if this request is allowed or not, but I would really love to see their happy ending, when they were separated by death, I felt it deep in my heart, so yes, I do hope for an alternate universe where they managed to be together. But please, no alternate universe where homosexuality can be expressed freely, since I want this universe to be as close as it is to ours. If this request is too much for you—being based on two real people, and one a king nonetheless—a story set in their time with a man named Frederick and Hans, but please, let Fritz be strawberry blond and Hans blond, that's their hair colour, with Fritz's eyes silverish-blue, for me. Sorry for that, I really just want an accurate one, if you may call them that.)*

Sincerely,

Terra T

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** historical, fantasy

**Tags:** royalty, sweet/no sex, homophobia, second chances, magic

**Word Count:** 4,145

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## DANCE OF MEMORY

**By R.L. Robinson**

I write this at the end of my life, when my summer and even my autumn are long behind me. In truth, I have lived longer than I should have. Far longer than the person of whom I have not spoken since he was taken from me.

I will speak of him here and now because I must, because it was what I was told to do, but more on the reasons later.

As I look back on the span of my life, both when I sat the throne and the time before, I can think of few things which I regret. I made many mistakes. At the time their aspect did not reveal them as errors or lapses in judgment.

I am not my father; I moved from his shadow long ago. My achievements outshine his, and they call me The Great because of it. Still, I was not so great that I could stand against him when it mattered most.

The day I speak of, at Kustrin fortress, was, in many ways, the defining moment of my life. I lost a measure of my happiness and compassion that day. Though I did not mean to, I took it out on those I conquered.

My wife Elisabeth; what of her? I will not lie and say I loved her. I did my duty, but only as far as I was prepared or expected to. Being an emperor, I have a degree of leeway in such things.

Still, it was not her fault.

Now things are different, but for you to understand why I write this, you must first understand of what and whom it is I speak.

His name was Hans: Hans Hermann von Katte. We were friends and more than friends, if it be told truthfully.

I do not write here of base lust and desire. You might think me naïve in my old age, but I am not. I was under no illusions about how I felt towards him.

This is not a place for ideals about love, but that is what I think you may see. We cared for each other in the time we had, brief though it was.

\*\*\*\*\*

What to say of our first meeting? Anything I write will seem mediocre or anticlimactic compared to what you perhaps would wish to think.

All I can say is that we discovered each other through our mutual interests and private loves.

We appreciated poetry and the flute; both of us were young men. We learned the sword and how to ride; we were officers and cultured, as befitted men of our standing.

Such education for young men is something I fear will be lost in time. Already, I can see the age coming when technical skill will be held above appreciation of art and the subtleties it can reveal about life.

It would be a cliché to say our friendship grew from the first moment. Our acquaintance was, however, rapid. Spending days in each other's company has a way of helping such things.

He was older by eight years, and that was part of the attraction. He was different from those people I'd known before; growing up in Berlin shaped his attitude.

Long into the night, we would talk about that which interested us. His opinions always seemed, somehow, heightened, more refined compared to my own, and I was the son of an emperor.

With him, I could leave the orthodoxy of the court behind and see other possibilities from what my father taught me.

My father... I cannot write of this without writing of him.

History will judge him more than I ever could.

He was, and is, a bastard, as hard-nosed a puritan as any man I knew in my life. He was possessed of a unique vulgarity and singular temper. But, these were not the worst aspects of his character.

He scorned education and was so deeply pious he held theatres to be dens of iniquity.

At times, I question the right of some to rule simply because of birth. Accident doesn't come into it in my mind.

I endured him. There is no other way to describe my childhood and adolescence.



What bearing did his reforms have on me? Very little, for I would've traded every change he made in our country for a man who could love me, instead of the tyrant I suffered.

Perhaps I sought this in Hans. An older man who could appreciate me, and in whom I could confide and trust and share the things I held most dear. I am no student of the mind nor would ever claim to make sense of the thoughts which daily beset us.

In truth, it seems debased to think I would supplant my father. He and Hans cannot be compared.

Our first night together was spent lying in the stables. There were few enough places we could find true privacy.

I can imagine what might be going through your mind, but there was nothing sordid between us. We simply rested in each other's arms and listened to the rain pattering on the wooden tiles.

"What are you thinking?" It was often how Hans started a conversation.

In the beginning, I would say "nothing" until he pointed out that there was no such thing as nothing. Our minds are incapable of comprehending an empty room. To do so requires that we place ourselves inside it.

"Only that I am content. I don't have to think about anything when I am with you."

I think that was what he truly gave to me, and the one thing I have never been able to find since... not truly at least.

In such moments we would talk about everything and, sometimes, nothing at all.

At other times, I could feel the shadows pressing in against us, with the certain knowledge that we were walking the finest of lines. Which is not to say I thought our time together would ever end. When you are young, tomorrow can seem very far away.

\*\*\*\*

"Still learning well enough from those fucking prigs?" My father was in a good mood, evidenced by only a single vulgarity.

"Well enough, Father."

We were alone together at dinner; the last servant dismissed with barely a wave from the old man.

“What about that young fellow... what’s his name?”

“Hans.”

“Von Katte?”

I nodded and forked a piece of undercooked beef into my mouth. “Just show it the flame,” was my father’s usual order to the cooks.

“Prancer from Berlin.” My father had the same opinion of city folk as he did those who attended the theatre. To him, they were in the same class of potential deviants and practitioners of immorality. “Spending a lot of time with him, I hear.”

“He’s schooling me.” Best to cloak a lie in truth. “He’s older by some years, and we have much in common.”

There was a heavy silence, which usually presaged one of my father’s vulgarity-laced tirades. Instead, when I looked up from my plate, I found him staring at me. His gaze fixed me in place, as well as if I were a piece of meat on his plate.

“Remember what you are.” His voice was ice, cutting through the warmth of the room. “He is not your equal. He never can be.”

I didn’t need reminding.

I do not claim to be a brave man, but I was raised to rule and held a sword from a young age, as befits all boys of noble birth. Raised to rule by a man who took pains to break me down whenever he got the chance.

I forgot my courage.

I wanted to tell him the truth, or rather the irrational part of my mind did. To do so would’ve meant death for Hans, perhaps worse, for there are worse ways of dying. My father was not a forgiving man.

I wanted to walk away from the table, for whatever show of defiance it would’ve been.

Of course, I did neither of these things.

“Yes, Father.”

He offered a grunt by way of acknowledgment, and we passed the rest of the meal in silence. I remember the fire did nothing to heat the room afterwards.

\*\*\*\*\*

That night I slept badly. My father's presence seemed to weigh heavily in the palace. Every creak and groan of a beam, every distant voice, which was likely only servants, brought him to my mind.

In my memory, he still looms large. A figure of fear and loathing I have never succeeded in casting off.

When we remember, we dance with phantoms and things half forgotten or only partly remembered in our mind. Yet my father is no shade, though dead these many years he may be.

Like a wolf prowling at the edge of a darkened clearing, he waits for me. Ready to come forward when I am weary enough to drop my guard.

Truly, you see now that emperors are no different from commoners. Fear is something we both share, leveling us in standing more than most realize.

Fear is also a great motivator, both for actions all too rational and actions most ill-conceived.

Lying in bed that night, my chest tight and my breathing labored, I believe, was when I took my first true step towards all that was to follow. Be under no illusion; it was my doing, though at the time it made perfect sense.

I have striven every day of my life to right the wrong I committed, and while the time when I may set it right is fast approaching, I must first tell you how it came to pass. Likely, you know the story, but indulge an old man.

\*\*\*\*\*

"You can't mean it!" Hans held my forearm harder than I expected. I thought he meant to pull me off my feet or else strike me. "We swore an oath! You're heir to the bloody throne!"

"Keep your damned voice down," I hissed, leveraging myself against his grip to move closer. I could smell him. Both fresh from a day in the saddle, we smelled of horse, leather, and oil. Somehow, he was sweeter to my nostrils.

"You know what this will mean." There was no question here, only a statement. "You can't mean it, you can't."

He was loyal, more so than I. Where I was loyal to him, he was loyal to my father, but not in the way you might think.

Hans was loyal to the idea of the crown and emperor. For him, it didn't matter if there was a tyrant or a benefactor on that fucking chair.

It's something in Prussian character I respect and despise. Our greatest strength and weakness, and I fear it will haunt us down the ages.

"Do you want to continue like this?" I slipped free of his grasp and spread my arms. "Hiding in this way? Being careful of what we say, and how we act?"

"You think it will change if we flee?"

I was being naïve to think it would. But, as exiles, I wanted to believe we would be afforded a degree of understanding. Male companionship, after all, is not something to think strange. In London, it would be our mask. Likely, the English would turn a blind eye, as they were wont to do when it came to men of note.

It helped that the English king was my uncle.

"Otherwise, he will always hover over us," I said, taking his hands in mine. "It won't change when I take the throne."

"As emperor, you can do what you want. Who would raise a question against you?"

"That's not the point... it's not what I want."

We continued in this way for the best part of the evening and night. Each time, Hans came back again and again to notions of loyalty and honor and duty. Just the kind of puritan ideals my father would cling to.

Finally, I turned to him.

"You are what I want... Would that my line crumble to dust on my death, and our nation fall into ruin. So long as I was with you, none of it would matter." I meant every word, as conceited and dramatic as it sounds decades later.

I was younger then, and what man doesn't mean every word he says when they are said through the heady wine of love and affection. History is full of such young fools, and I was no different.

Something, something worn brittle by hours of arguing broke behind his eyes.

There is loyalty to an idea and then there is loyalty to a person. The two can be, but often are not, one and the same.

Hans knew I meant what I said, and, I think, this kind of personal loyalty wasn't something he'd encountered.

It was the sort you might find on a battlefield or between a husband and wife. The sort that ought to exist between a father and son or any of a host of other examples one would care to name.

“How?”

I smiled and pressed my forehead to his.

“The retinue will go to Mannheim soon, within the fortnight. I should have a chance then to slip away.” We both knew he would be in Potsdam, a separation neither of us looked forward to. “I have servants I can trust to carry letters to you.”

I find it a curious thing how men of honor and supposed courage can believe they may take on the force of a crown and throne and somehow hope to prevail. The fairytales are full of examples of men triumphing against impossible odds. Fostered by notions of strength of arms and martial courage, men may believe any scheme so conceived is winnable.

Life is not like fairytales. It is a far darker thing than most people would care to admit, and I would walk in stranger, and mayhap darker, places before this story was done.

Soon, soon you will see and understand.

\*\*\*\*\*

What to say of what followed?

It is written that I was caught at Mannheim. What is not written is how they took the letter which implicated Hans.

When they showed it to me, the blood on the paper was still wet in places. I want to think the man I sent with it tried to fight, but, like as not, he had no chance at all.

We were delivered to Kustrin. An imposing enough fortress to hold two young men accused of treason.

My father leveled the charge from afar, unwilling, I am told, to even look upon me.

Treason, a shameful word in any light, and even love cannot totally wash it out.

They took Hans's head; that was it.

My father spared me. I am sure for a number of reasons, not the least of which was me living where my lover was dead. There are, you see, far worse things than dying.

\*\*\*\*\*

I shed tears when my father died, but only because it was expected of me.

Most of my reign has been taken up by war; that use of energy best directed for something good siphoned into the service of something destructive. I make no apologies for it, but it is here where I stepped into strange company indeed.

In so doing, I was given a chance, but only a single chance, to regain what I lost. What I sacrificed.

\*\*\*\*\*

At Kunersdorf, I almost fell in with a band of Cossacks intent on my capture or death. In the moment, either possibility seemed likely.

Riding hard, I threw off their pursuit and found myself alone in a quiet part of the countryside.

It has often struck me that even in the midst of a war there are places in the world where absolutely nothing is happening. Such was the place I found myself, a field stilled, as though in the eye of a storm.

Cresting its small slope, I saw a hut of the kind a shepherd might use to tend his flock. No animals were present, likely swallowed by the war, but faint smoke drifted from the chimney.

Borrowing from Charlemagne, I walked my horse towards it, deciding that playing to a disguise was safer than bargaining in and demanding of whoever was inside. Emperor or not, I was alone here for the time being, and, without followers, I am simply a man and nothing more.

Hitching my horse to the ragged stump of a tree, I doffed my hat and went inside.

The figure hunched over the small fire pit was swathed in rags, which hid its face. I could not tell if it was a man or a woman, and it did not stir at the sound of my approach.

“Your pardon, would you mind if I shared your fire and rested a while?”

“You are welcome,” he said. His voice was gravelly, as though he’d smoked his fill a long time ago. “It’s not often I have royalty as guests.” He pulled back his hood exposing a face which was immediately forgettable. “You’ll have to excuse the state of my affairs.”

I stayed where I was, unwilling, or unable, to back out the way I came.

“You have nothing to fear from me.”

“You’ll excuse me if I have another opinion, since I didn’t announce who I was.”

“Few things are hidden to me.” He gestured to an empty space near the fire. “Please, I haven’t much time.”

I did as I was bid and came forward, going to my haunches as I approached the fire. Curiosity overtook me, and I decided, if this was some trick or ploy, I would see it for what it was.

“You have not spoken his name in many years, have you?”

I knew he meant Hans, and it was the first time his name reached as far as my throat, though the shock of what he said stilled it there.

“Who are you?”

“Someone you have been looking for, though you, perhaps, never knew it.”

“That’s no kind of answer.”

“It’s the only one I feel able to give.” He dug into the folds of his rags and produced a small leather pouch. “What if I told you there was a way you could go back; change things, and have them as they were, mayhap, meant to be?”

“I’d say you were a liar and a charlatan.”

He shrugged. “I’ve been called worse in my time.” He tossed the bag at my feet. “In there is the key to what you want, but there are limits.”

“You take me for a fool, Sir?”

“On the contrary, I take you for a rational man.”

“There’s nothing rational in what you’re babbling about.” In such rare moments, I can hear my father’s voice in my own. “I’ve half a mind to have you flogged for such presumption.”

“Do you accept that there are things in this world you cannot explain, things which defy easy logic?”

“Of course.”

“Then you are a rational man, after all.”

My hand lifted the pouch of its own volition, and, even today, I cannot say why, because I still do not know if I believed him.

“Take all three when the time is right, and you will have what you want.”

“More like to poison me.”

He offered another shrug. “Do as you will, I only show you the door. You are the one who must walk through it.”

I took my leave soon thereafter and returned to the vanguard of the army.

When next we passed by the field, the hut was empty, and the fire pit long since cold.

\*\*\*\*

That same man stands before me now, and I still do not know if I believe him. He has not changed in all the years from then to now, and his face is still forgettable.

He tells me I must take them now, and I cannot say if he is real or simply illusion.

I never told you about the grief I felt the day Hans died, because it went beyond simple feeling.

I did not cry or wail or beat my fists bloody against the walls of my cell. Instead, something broke inside me. I felt it in my chest, and the wound has remained there ever since, more painful than any dealt on the battlefield.

It is in my mind too, this pain; a secondary result from such an injury.

If I am to do it, he says it must be now.

I fear the three dark oblongs in front of me and what they represent. The man, the Seer, has explained as best he can.

He speaks about time and how there is never enough, except what we are given and even this is not suitable.

I hold them in the palm of my hand.



It is time.

\*\*\*\*

*My Dear Sir,*

*It does pain me to be the bearer of most unhappy news. Our Emperor, Frederick the Second, has come to the end of his life, which, as you know, was a long and fruitful one. Truly, I feel his like will seldom be seen again.*

*As you were His Majesty's personal friend on your, now famous, flight to England, which led to the deposition of his unkind and malicious father, and, thereafter, did remain his most loyal and close friend, it is only right that you should be informed.*

*I know His Majesty would want you, Sir, above all others to be present at his funeral ceremony. In accordance with your standing among his circle of friends, a place of utmost honor has been set aside for you. I am sure you will be able to bring some measure of happy remembrance to so sad an occasion with memories of the happy years you spent in each other's company from your time as young men until today.*

*Truly, your friendship with our late Emperor was a thing of sublime beauty, and the happiness you brought to each other through the span of your lives was often a source of great comfort to those of us who served him.*

*I remain your most obedient servant...*

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*R.L. Robinson was born in the north-east of Scotland and found he enjoyed writing from an early age. After studying English and Linguistics at university, he sold his first story and in the same year embarked on a career as a language teacher.*

*He currently divides his time between teaching in Eastern Europe and his home on the Scottish coast.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# DANCE WITH ME

By Suzanne Simon

## Photo Description

Two dark-haired, slimly built men are dancing close to each other in the middle of a black-and-white, checkered dance floor. They are wearing dark dress pants with suspenders, white dress shirts, and both are barefoot.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*It all started with a brochure from a local dance studio left in my mailbox...  
Please give us a happy ending, and you won't go wrong!*

*Note: I'd like a story that revolves around Argentine tango. Bonus points for featuring men of short stature.*

*Sincerely,*

*Natālija*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** sweet/no sex, friends to lovers, secret admirer, dancing, teachers

**Word Count:** 2,339

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## DANCE WITH ME

By Suzanne Simon

This was it.

Noah Walker took a deep breath and touched the pocket of his black dress pants, the crinkle of the letter that rested there reassuring him as he waited to learn the identity of the man who had written him such beautiful letters, whose faceless figure had slowly started haunting his dreams.

It had all started when a brochure had been left in his mailbox, a glossy tri-fold page that had featured the most beautiful man Noah had ever seen, accompanied by a letter written on plain cream-colored paper. The man had been facing the camera, holding out one hand towards it as if he were beckoning a faraway lover. The words “*Come dance with me*”—*Viva Dance Studio* spilled across the bottom of the photo in large block letters. Noah had gotten goose bumps when he had first seen the brochure; it had felt as if the man in the photo had been staring right at Noah, encouraging him to join the man on the black and white checkered dance floor.

The letter that accompanied it had been short and to the point:

*The tango is a beautiful dance if you are paired with the right partner. I don't know if I am the right partner for you but I think you deserve the chance to find someone for yourself— whoever he will turn out to be. I have arranged lessons for you at the Viva Dance Studio so that you can begin to live again.*

At first, Noah had put the brochure and the letter aside intending to forget all about it. It was too unusual, letting someone that he didn't even know pay for lessons at a dance studio near his apartment. And who even did that, buying something that extravagant for a complete stranger?

Then the thought occurred to him that just because he didn't know who had sent the letter didn't mean that the person did not know him. It could be someone that he saw every day; perhaps the man who he saw when he bought his morning latte on the way to work. He never failed to give Noah a nod as he sat at one of the tables near the front, working on his laptop.

Or it could be one of the men who lived in his apartment complex. There wasn't any one man that stuck out in his mind since Noah lived in a large complex and wasn't particularly close with any of his neighbors, other than an occasional "hello" as they passed in the hallway.

Hell, it could even be the parent of one of his students. Noah taught English to ninth and tenth graders, and was an advisor for both the Adams High newspaper and the Yearbook committee. For that matter, it could even be a fellow teacher. Noah's mind immediately focused onto Marco Olivares, his best friend and fellow coworker. He just as quickly forced that thought out of his mind.

It wasn't that he thought Marco was unattractive; it was just that Noah couldn't think of his best friend of five years that way. He had been so great to Noah, both when he first started working at Adams High, and later, when living with Sam had turned out to be such a horrible mistake. Marco had been there for him through it all, and the last thing that he deserved was to have his best friend lusting after him.

Besides, Noah had taken note of the type of men Marco had dated over the years. Every last one of them had been tall, muscular blonds. There had not been one short, dark-haired, dark-eyed man in the bunch. Noah knew because he had carefully scrutinized every man that Marco had brought around, trying to see whatever it was that his friend saw in them. It wasn't until Sam had betrayed Noah's trust so spectacularly, and Marco had worked so hard to try to console him, that he finally realized why the other man's obvious type had bothered him so much.

It was because Noah was so obviously *not* Marco's type.

Noah took a deep breath. The brochure had burned at him until he had taken the plunge and started taking those dance lessons. And he had become more and more aware of Marco's attractiveness as the last month of lessons had progressed; when he was twirling around the studio's dance floor twice a week with various partners, it was Marco's arms that he pictured around him. He had also watched carefully over that month for any sign that Marco might return even a little of the attraction that he felt towards his friend, all without success. His friend was warm, attentive... and treated him like any other man would treat a buddy.

It was time to put this foolish crush behind him and move on. He had given Marco a hundred different openings over the last month, secretly hoping that

there might be even a hint of jealousy at the possibility that another man might be interested in him, but there hadn't been even a tiny spark of green envy from his friend. Though there had been... something in his eyes when Noah had received the last letter; the one that currently resided in his pocket.

His mystery man would remain a mystery no longer. The letter praised him for his willingness to follow through with the dance lessons, two a week for a month, and the letter stated that his prize would be the opportunity to meet his benefactor face-to-face. To add to the mystery, a beautiful black suit, complete with suspenders and a blue silk tie, had been delivered to his apartment. Like the envelope that had contained the brochure, there was no return address, nor any other indication of who had sent it to him. Noah had put the suit on, but since he had never been a fan of getting dressed up, he had left off the jacket and the tie.

*Time to move on*, he thought to himself, but he was no longer sure of who he was trying to convince. He no longer believed that Marco was just a friend to him, and there was no one else in his head to listen to his little white lie.

Noah took a deep breath and opened the door to the dance studio. A shadowy figure hovered just outside the doorway. He held his breath in anticipation when he saw that the man was short in stature and had dark hair. Until that moment, Noah had not realized how much he had hoped that his mystery man would turn out to be Marco.

The man stepped out of the shadows into the brightly lit hallway, and Noah's heart seemed to stop for just a second, as brown eyes met his own blue eyes. His heart began to beat rapidly and thick disappointment settled into his stomach. The mystery man had brown eyes, but they were dark brown instead of the lighter brown shade of Marco's eyes. *It wasn't him.*

"Why so down, *cariño*?" Diego smirked in amusement. "You were maybe expecting someone else?"

Noah shook his head in denial and hoped that he could keep the bitter regret from showing on his face. Yes, he had been expecting someone else to be standing in front of him. He shouldn't be this upset at having his mystery man turn out to be the owner of the dance studio; the man that had spent the last four weeks teaching him how to dance. Diego was a sweet, handsome, successful man... but he wasn't Marco. *Damn it.*

Noah opened his mouth to say something, anything to try to make this situation less awkward when a voice came from behind him. "Were you expecting me?"

Diego suddenly ceased to exist in his mind, as Noah turned to find Marco standing in the doorway to the studio. He was wearing a pair of dark dress pants, black suspenders, and a white dress shirt opened a few buttons to show off a vee of dark, tan skin. In his hand was a single red rose, which he held out to Noah as he stepped closer to him. "Am I late?"

"Better late than never," Noah quipped nervously through lips that were suddenly dry. He hardly noticed when Diego turned to leave.

Marco's lips quirked up into a smirk as he acknowledged the clichéd saying with a slight nod. "I was stuck in traffic." He reached Noah in a few long strides and pressed the rose into Noah's hand as he slid past him and into the dance studio. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

Noah's grip tightened around the rose as he followed Marco out onto the middle of the black and white checkered dance floor. Marco held his hand out to Noah, an almost exact duplicate of the brochure photo that had enthralled Noah so much the first time he had seen it. Now, the pose affected Noah even more because it was Marco's hand being held out to him; Marco's warm eyes staring into his own. "Dance with me."

Noah laughed breathlessly up at him before glancing down at his shiny black dress shoes. "I know it's hardly a romantic thought but I'd fall right on my ass if I tried. I know I've had a few lessons over the last month, but I think navigating this slick floor with these on will take more skill than I possess at the moment."

Marco shrugged his shoulders and Noah swallowed his disappointment that the other man was going to give up that easily, though he had not been kidding about sliding and falling on the highly polished tile floor. Then he held his breath as Marco leaned over and began to untie his shoelaces. "Not much chance of falling if you're not wearing your shoes." His eyes held Noah's as he began to slip the shoes and socks off of his feet. It only took Noah's brain a few seconds to catch up to what Marco was suggesting, and then he too was removing his shoes and socks with one hand.

When his feet were finally bare, Marco straightened up and again held a hand out to Noah. Noah reached to take it with his right hand, the hand that still

held the red rose, and stopped in confusion as he realized that he couldn't hold the rose and Marco's hand at the same time. "You might have to let go of that for a few minutes, *mi amor*." The endearment that Diego had used to refer to Noah had had no effect on him, but being called Marco's love in that husky, lightly accented voice was a different story.

"What should I do with it?" He teasingly held it up to his mouth as if he intended to clench it between his teeth. Marco's amused laugh sent goose bumps traveling along his arms. How had he managed to deny his attraction to this wonderful man for so long?

Marco shook his head with a smile. "Though I would like us to tango, I'm not sure I can dance with you while you have a flower between your teeth."

"I guess I'll just have to improvise." Noah walked to the edge of the dance floor and gently set the flower onto a black lacquered counter, before rejoining his best friend in the center of the floor. When Marco held his hand out to him again, Noah grasped it firmly and let out a shaky breath as that hand was used to pull him tightly to Noah's chest.

Noah began to follow Marco's lead competently, though he was lacking the careless grace that Marco's dancing seemed to possess. "This isn't the way that Diego taught us to tango. I seem to remember more... personal space."

"Complaining?"

Noah shook his head as they danced across the floor. "Just curious."

"This is Argentine tango, rather than the traditional tango that you might have seen in movies." Marco lowered Noah into a dip towards the floor, before slowly pulling him back up, sliding his body against Noah's. "I prefer it to the traditional style."

Noah smiled against Marco's cheek. "I could be persuaded to see your point of view."

"I knew it," he whispered softly into Noah's ear as he guided him around the dance floor. "Tell me, what was the deciding factor? Was it my flawless dancing technique?"

Noah abruptly stopped dancing and pulled away from Marco so that he could look him in the eyes. "I think it was realizing how perfectly we fit together when you hold me close like this."



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“A beautiful dance when you find the right partner. And am I?” Marco asked softly.

“There’s no one else that I would rather tango with,” Noah responded as he pulled his best friend in for a kiss.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Suzanne Simon decided to try her hand at writing when she realized that the stories in her head were taking over her real life and discovered that the voices in her head are much more manageable when on paper.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# DANCING FOR DIAMOND

By K-lee Klein

## Photo Description

A Spanish or Latino man with wavy hair to his shoulders. He's wearing eyeliner, has well-shaped eyebrows and is bare-chested with his arms crossed. His head is cocked to the side and he has a serious but sensual look on his face.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I'm still dancing to the beat of the cumbia while returning to the dressing room. It has been a great night, the rest of the dancers are out taking advantage of the momentum that I always leave in the stage—and making extra bucks out of it. My business partner follows me with that smile I know could lead to trouble, as I kick my high heels, he tells me all about the offers we have for private lap dances. We, is too many people, I remark, because I'm the one they're requesting. Night after night it's the same thing; some patrons are willing to pay for getting close to me. Being older than me, my friend manages part of the club and we let most people think, he owns it too. But I call the shots and run the business. While my performances are the main attraction, I don't do striptease or lap dancing. Tonight's offer is extraordinary, my associate reminds me of the pending bills. Yes, the offered amount is that high. I don't remove the makeup just in case I decide to accept. Who is paying that much? Somehow, I know before I got the answer. My enigmatic devotee is behind the tempting offer. I've been waiting for months for this person to show more of himself, but he simply seats on his table at a side of the stage, alone in the semidarkness, and he seldom smiles or applauds. But when he does, he inspires me to perform wilder nearly driving me nut. And when I dance near him, he undresses me with a single look. Now, I'm excited, intrigued and scared. Who is this mystery man?*

Sincerely,

Naaju Rorrete

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** performance arts, sweet, non-explicit, slow burn, personal growth, overcoming the past, disabilities

**Word Count:** 16,827

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*Dedication*

Dedicated to Naaju for being patient and understanding when the prompt took a little different turn. And to Karrie for her awesome work on the cover, as well as having so much love for this story and Max that she had one of the lines tattooed on her arm. <3

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## DANCING FOR DIAMOND

By K-lee Klein

The club was hopping, the music loud in between sets, and the noisy crowd was restless. Fernando Diaz tugged the silky, black shirt over his head, smoothing it down the sides as he checked himself in the mirror. The other dancers were huddled in the corner, waiting to go on after his intro. They tended to leave him alone before his performance, something about him being a bossy bitch when he was nervous.

Nando's long hair was pulled back and up into a classic man-bun at the nape of his neck. His boots were polished and shiny, the deep V of his clingy shirt pointed exactly over the center of his waistband while his signature and namesake bellybutton stud peeked perfectly out the bottom. He nodded at his reflection, drawing in a big breath to settle his nerves. He was the first to admit he still had pangs of performance anxiety even after so many years of dancing, just not the kind that was usually associated with that phrase. But then again, since that particular *activity* hadn't been performed for quite some time except by his own hand, how did he really know if he was good to go or not?

Dating, relationships, even sex for the sake of sex weren't things he was interested in—been there, done that, and he had the scars and bruises to prove it. His life was nice now, calm, relaxed, quiet, and he rarely needed anyone outside the people who worked for him, and even then in the smallest ways.

The only exception was Domingo Martinez, but seeing how Dom had a man of his own now, Nando rarely saw him outside of club hours. They'd been through thick and thin together, inseparable cousins who'd escaped the unforgiving streets of Madrid—kids to adults, tricks to careers, poverty to comfort, so it was good that Dom had found that perfect someone to spend his life with.

There were times when Nando was jealous of Dom's ability to trust so completely that he had not only fallen in love but pledged his entire being to Bruce. And that wasn't to say that either Nando or Dom had been down an easy road, rocky and treacherous were more accurate terms. But they'd gotten through it with only each other to lean on, and stable happiness was a good

thing. At least Nando assumed it was. He was happy to dance, entertain, make people dizzy with his long-practiced skill, and make a living while he was at it.

“Nando! Are you scaring the other dancers again, *hermano*?”

Dom walked into the dressing room like he owned it, and in truth, he did—forty-nine percent at least—but backstage was Nando’s area of expertise. They were partners, but while Dom was the public face of the club when it came to management, Nando was the real attraction. He was the one who drew the people in. Dom dealt with the daily grind of the business: customers, orders, advertising. In addition to headlining, Nando handled the money and accounting. He liked numbers. They soothed his reeling mind when his body was at rest, and he was content to let people think Dom was in charge of everything. He preferred to stay in the background, to simply be the face and body of the place.

“Didn’t I ban you from backstage? Does your husband know you spend so much time with half-naked boys?” Nando slipped elegantly into his make-up chair, gently thumbing some concealer under his eyes as he tried to smother his half-grin. Too many late nights spent with his nose in a book, plus not taking any days off, definitely showed on his face.

“*Carajo*, Nando! Well-played threat or should I say attempt at a threat. Too bad Bruce’s bouncer role affords him the same half-clothed views. In other words, um... your point’s not valid.”

Dom chuckled, and Nando joined in. He looked at his cousin hovering above him in the mirror. Admiration and respect washed over him. Dom was one of a kind. Even though he was never the most attractive man in any room, he exuded a confidence that Nando only found when he was on stage. Despite how much the two of them had been through together and their familial ties, they were as different as night and day.

Dom’s husband, Bruce, was one of the sweetest and most passionate men Nando had ever met—all big muscled, granite-jawed, extroverted lug with an equal-sized heart to match. He also came with baggage, but the loveliest baggage possible in the form of a red-headed imp of a little girl he had part-time custody of. Nando adored her and melted just a little when she called him *Uncle Nando*.

Dom had made a nice life for himself.

“Cat got your tongue? Your silence is almost frightening.”

But he was also annoying. It was the same, night after night, the little dance between him and Dom. Sometimes it was before the show, or often times after, or even both. It was bitchy banter and sarcastic teasing that settled some of the pre-performance twitching Nando suffered. He was sure Dom also knew the snark covered up the loneliness Nando felt, the loneliness he took home to his apartment above the club every night.

And it wasn't as if he couldn't find company, he just didn't require an abundance of attention. At least, not unless the bite of loneliness turned to something more urgent—meaning he was too horny to take care of it himself. He preferred to spend time on his own, or as Dom liked to put it, brood like some dark-souled vampire. His cousin was a barrel of laughs.

Nando had never tried relationships, never suffered any sort of *feelings* for the faceless bodies he'd been with over the years. He just might envy Dom every so often, but only in the tiniest of ways, and only on the nights he would allow such recriminating thoughts to seep into his quiet time. He had a lot of quiet time, a lot of time to think, which wasn't necessarily a bad thing unless his brooding had reached maximum proportions.

That's when he would seek out a release of the most slutty kind—the cheaper the thrill, the less chance of wanting to do it again. It was partly a trust issue, but mostly a personal vendetta against his own heart. He'd relied on others before, mostly out of need and no other option, but he'd not do that again.

"I'm on in five minutes. Do you have a reason for interrupting my prep time?"

"Your friend is back."

"My what?" Nando reached for his kohl liner as he pondered his own question. "*Dios mío*. Why do you insist on keeping me apprised of this man's whereabouts?"

He knew exactly who Dom was talking about—close-cropped blond hair, gray or brown suits, and a sweet smile that Nando wanted no part of. He was handsome, not too big but not too small either, never clapped too hard or too loud, never heckled or drew any unnecessary attention to himself. He was a regular to Nando's shows, and completely forgettable. Except for some unknown reason, he stuck out in Nando's mind.

"I only keep you informed because he asks about you every time he comes in."



Nando blew on the end of the eyeliner, then carefully framed his eyes. He smudged it in a little, just enough to give him a less polished look and more of a bad boy style. "Which has developed into stalker proportions," he continued Dom's sentence.

"No, he's not that type."

"And you think this why? Because he wears suits instead of T-shirts, loafers instead of sneakers, parts his hair to the side?"

Dom snorted out a chuckle. "I've met your stalkers before. This man is too classy for that. He asks how you are, not how big your dick is or whether you like to top or bottom."

"I think that would be less weird."

"Bullshit! He just wants to buy you a cup of coffee." He tapped Nando's arm as he adjusted the laces on the sides of his soft leather pants.

"You and I know that's the oldest pickup line in the book."

His cousin leaned against the wall beside Nando's dressing table. "I don't think so. The slutty guys want to buy you a dozen drinks to get you hammered, not coffee."

"And you told him..." Nando fluttered his eyes dramatically. "No, right?"

"I said I'd pass along the message, nothing more and nothing less. Just because he's not your type—"

Nando laughed out loud, almost poking himself in the eye with the eyeliner. "Type? I think type implies I have any sort of sex at all."

"And whose fault is that? Bruce and I have tried to help you with that."

"I keep telling you, I don't need to be set up." Nando waved his hand towards the door, but his grin remained. "*Vamos muevéte*. You're throwing shade on my preparation."

Dom ruffled the top of Nando's head, but dodged away before he could do anything more than gasp.

"You sure you don't want to take a chance on the guy? He looks normal."

"And why would I want normal?"

"Drama queen."

"*Pendejo*."

Nando took the stage with his usual flare, chest puffed out, muscles taut and ready to impress. He started the show with his back to the audience, both arms raised over his head, fingers pointing to the ceiling as his backup dancers fanned out to reveal him. He stiffened his spine before jutting out one hip, slowly rolling his belly while he turned to face the front of the stage.

Cocking his head to the side, he narrowed his eyes then took one purposeful step forward. He slid his hands over his hips seductively, letting the beat take over. His body moved to the music—unencumbered, lost, fabulous.

Dancing had always been his freedom. Even when it had been the only enjoyable part of his life, when he'd done it for a mere pittance just to keep himself fed and clothed. It hadn't been flamenco then, but the choreographed movement of his body in the sexiest way to make the *customers* happy. He'd learned bits and pieces of the dance through the years until he'd perfected it with his own twist.

It had been the only thing he'd had control of back in the day—the way he strutted, pranced, writhed, and wiggled his way across the stage. He'd been the one calling the shots, the only one in charge of his body, and what he could do with it. No one could grab or grope him, force him to gyrate on their lap or fall to his knees at their feet, at least not until his performance was done. And the things he'd been forced to do after the show became just wisps of discomfort as he threw everything he had into his dancing. It was his first love, the only thing he looked forward to in starting another day in the life of a boy for hire.

But thankfully, those days were in the past, gone and buried. He and Dom never spoke of those times, the pain and regret too painful to dredge up with the only other person who could relate. The present was a better place all around, and Nando was doing exactly what he'd always dreamed of doing. There was no time for regrets or dwelling, and that's not what the new part of Nando's life was all about.

It was about controlling his own destiny, having the power to do what he pleased and not letting anyone push him into anything he didn't want to do. He'd spent the better part of his life fighting off the advances of men who only wanted to use him—struggling against them or giving in because he had to. That would never be the case again.

Once he was halfway through his second number, he made a point of looking in the direction of the man Dom called his *friend* as he glided across the stage. His steps started out feather-soft, but increased to pounding and

tapping out the perfect rhythm to the flamenco beat. He stopped abruptly, his hips gyrating as his body rotated. Clapping his hands, he focused on the table to the side.

*Mr. Businessman* looked to be in his late thirties, though that was always a tough call when he himself was often mistaken for a man in his twenties. At thirty-three, Nando was ten years older than most people thought, youthful in face and body, blessed with Spanish genes carrying the fountain of youth.

The man appeared to have pride in his body, to take care of himself, even though Nando had never seen him doing anything but sitting at the same table at the side of the stage three nights a week. If he didn't look so normal, it might have been creepy. Or maybe that was a good indication that he *was* creepy—the regularity of an average Joe in a suit hanging out in a gay-oriented Latin club without doing anything inappropriate or untoward.

Nando purposely moved to the right when his predetermined steps had him centered on the stage. He arched backward as he twisted in a slow circle, his body fluid, sensual, as he went through the motions. And that's what he was doing—simply performing, his curiosity getting the best of him as he failed to lose himself in his dancing as he usually did. Instead, he remained distracted by his growing interest.

It wasn't as if *Mr. Businessman* was doing anything out of the ordinary, at least for him. His eyes never strayed from Nando's performance, the familiar soft smile curling the corners of his mouth, recognizable and awkwardly comfortable. Nando wasn't sure when the man's face had become *familiar* at all, and he certainly didn't know why he was so drawn to him. But there was so much that roused his curiosity—the history behind the gentle grin, the nervous tap of his fingers on the table, the whiskey he sipped. His eyes sparkled bright blue-green under the spotlights in the club, or perhaps that was simply a trick of illumination behind the wire-rimmed glasses he wore.

The enigma surrounding him could have stemmed from the fact he hadn't tried to pick Nando up since his coffee invitation the week before, sending no cryptic messages through Dom at all. Yet, he had continued to come to the club in his regular pattern. Strangely enough, he hadn't propositioned any of the other dancers, at least to Nando's knowledge.

Nando was accustomed to followers and fans. Many seemed to believe that because he danced in a club and put his sensual nature on display, that also meant he was available for purchase or for whatever other whims they saw fit.

He wasn't, never would be again, and though he tried not to take it personally, not to be offended, he still struggled with the darkness of his past and the things he'd had to do in the old days.

During his third routine, when the lights dimmed for effect, he approached the right side of the stage again, squinting to see if Mr. Businessman was still there. He was, the same sweet look on his face, presumably the same amber-colored drink in front of him. His expression never changed as Nando lingered in one spot. The man was truly a mystery, and Nando had no idea why he wanted to solve it.

Nando raised his hands to the sky again, and with a sharp toss of his head, a clump of his long hair came loose from the tail and whipped across his face, then over his shoulder. He fanned out his fingers while he tapped his heels harder against the floor. Five stutter-steps took him back to the center of the stage, his focus regained once the spotlights drowned out the crowd. Three claps had him to the rear. The music heightened until the thundering beat abruptly stopped and Nando with it.

He hesitated before leaving the stage, accepting the applause with a sweep of his arms to the sides and a gentle bow of his head. After that he didn't linger, just turned on his heel and strutted backstage.

\*\*\*\*

"You all right?"

Nando twisted around at the sound of Dom's voice, pausing his fingers on the laces of his pants. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You were a little disjointed out there."

"Coming from someone with absolutely no rhythm, that's not really an insult."

Dom dropped into the chair at Nando's vanity. "It wasn't meant as one. Just wondering if something's on your mind."

"It's payday. I'm always distracted when I have to give away money."

"Why do you have to be so difficult?"

"What's that Lady Gaga song called? 'Born This Way'?"

"I've known you since you were born, and you're definitely a lot snarkier now." Dom sighed as he looked down at his clasped hands. "He wants to buy you dinner."

*Dios mío.* “Are we back to that again? Now it’s dinner instead of coffee? That’s called escalating, you know? I do watch Law & Order.”

“Oh spare me, *pendejo*. Just say hello to him. He’s a fan or follower or whatever you’re calling them these days. That’s called being friendly, Nan.”

“What’s up with you and this guy?” Nando eyed Dom curiously. “Is he paying you to be a nuisance to me?”

“Stop being paranoid. Even Bruce says he’s a nice guy and he’s talked to him more than I have. Admit it, you’re curious.”

“How do you know he isn’t a serial killer or a deranged psychopath?”

“I don’t.” Dom paused, cocking his head to the side, one eye squinting down at Nando. “Okay, I get it. I’m pushing too hard. I’m sorry. He just seems different than the guys who usually want to get with you. How about we forget I said anything and I shut up about it from now on?”

“Deal.”

“Cool. Okay, Bruce and I are heading out for a late dinner. Theo will lock up when everyone’s gone. And you, my workaholic cousin, don’t stay up all night balancing the books.”

“You know I like balancing.”

“Yeah. See you tomorrow.”

Nando watched him saunter out the door then continued to undress. He peeled the sweaty shirt over his head and tossed it in the basket in the corner before going to work on the laces of his leather pants again. He loved the damn things, but they were more high maintenance than anything else he owned.

He crossed to the sink in the corner, leaning over as he let his hair spring loose, then removed his makeup. His thoughts floated to what Dom had said. Nando did have an unnatural obsession with knowing more about Mr. Businessman, so maybe taking a moment to make things clear about his advances would quiet his curiosity.

He dressed quickly, leaving his dirty clothes until later since he had no plans to leave until payroll was finished. The music was still blaring in the bar, but the majority of the patrons had cleared out. The regulars knew the one a.m. closing time was carved in stone and generally abided by Dom’s wishes, with a little help from Bruce if necessary.

As Nando tugged his ball cap more snugly over his out-of-control curls, he scouted the room for Mr. Businessman. It was late, and he had no idea how long the guy usually hung around after the show, and maybe that disappointed him just a little. When he rounded the corner toward the stage, his disappointment turned to anxiety, and he considered turning back around since the man was still sitting at his usual table. He'd drained his drink, and his wallet lay in front of him. He yawned wide as Nando neared, but didn't seem to notice his stealthy appearance.

"Still wanna buy me dinner?" Nando asked as he slid into the chair opposite him. "Because this is how I really look."

He was, of course, referring to his lack of make-up, the frizzed-out state of his long hair, and the threadbare retro rock T-shirt and ragged jeans he'd thrown on. He was anything but stylish and glamorous in his street wear, and totally expected the guy to run in the opposite direction. Nando had always been worshipped for his body and looks, and surely the smattering of blackheads, uneven skin tone and added scruff weren't finely etched to match his stage name.

Mr. Businessman looked up, surprised, but smiling softly. "Diamond. Wow, you finally decided to make an appearance after all these months of me hounding you?"

He was upfront. Nando had to give him that. "I'm not sure you can consider it hounding if you've never done it in person."

The guy's smirk was refreshing. Not sly or sleazy like Nando was accustomed to, but amused and casual. Nando slumped farther into his chair as the man reached across the table, his hand outstretched in front of him.

"I'm Max. Nice to meet you, Diamond."

It took a few moments for Nando to register just what he was supposed to do, but eventually he did shake Max's hand. The name suited him, and Nando liked the hint of accent in his words. "You can call me, Nando. Diamond's only for the stage."

"Matches your belly button though." Max grinned again, his voice carrying deeply over the loud music.

Nando involuntarily slipped his hand over his stomach, his fingers ghosting over the piercing beneath the thin material. It was the ultimate reminder of

where he'd come from and how he'd managed to turn his life around for the better. The first thing he'd ever bought himself with untarnished money.

"Fernando?"

"What?" Nando leaned forward, wondering if he'd missed something important.

"Nando is short for Fernando?" Max repeated.

"Yeah, but that name is a lifetime ago."

Max simply nodded, his eyes holding Nando's in a steady soft gaze. "I enjoyed the show tonight."

"Um... thanks."

"I mean you're great every time I see you but—"

"Dom said I was off a little."

Max shrugged in a non-committed way. "Well, I'm not an expert, but maybe you seemed a little disconnected in a few parts. I just thought you were tired."

Heavy silence suddenly engulfed the room between the time the music cut-off and Theo announced closing time over the loud speaker. Nando wasn't even aware that he was still holding Max's hand until his own was squeezed.

"Did I say something wrong?"

Nando pulled away, tucking his fingers beneath his bottom as he forced a smile. "You're not what I expected."

Max arched an unkempt eyebrow. His eyes were really blue-green—Nando's favorite color. "What did you expect?"

"Pushy. Loud. Obnoxious."

With a frown, Max dipped his head. "*Cachu*. Is that what your friend thought I was? I swear I never meant any disrespect."

"No. Dom never said that, but when you're in this business, it's a common thing." Nando searched Max's face, the slight reddening of his cheeks amusing him. "Did you just say *cachu*?"

"Did I?" Max chuckled, his long fingers wrapping around his empty glass. "Sorry. Old habits are hard to break sometimes."

“Welsh habits?” Nando had experienced the displeasure of knowing a Welshman once... not such a nice man but one nonetheless.

“At one time, yes. I lived in Wales until I was eighteen, then came here.” Nando nodded, unsure why he was still sitting there hanging on Max’s every word. “So I guess you came to tell me your answer is no?”

“What?”

“Coffee? Walk in the park? Dinner?”

“I never heard about the park.”

“I just thought of it. Would it have changed your mind if I’d asked that instead?”

“No.” Nando pondered his answer for a moment, peering past Max at Theo, who was trying to subtly get his attention. Nando nodded at him. “I came over here to tell you that you were wasting your time.”

“Okay?”

Did the guy accept a little too quickly, or was it a question? “But... I’ve had a change of heart.”

“Okay?” Same answer, but Max seemed to immediately shine with nervousness, or perhaps it was the lights that suddenly lit up the club. “Care to elaborate?”

“I’m quick to jump to conclusions, so I thought I’d give you the benefit of the doubt. I’m off on Wednesday. Care to join me for coffee?” He actually had Tuesday off as well, but somehow Wednesday seemed safer, or at least it gave him more time to chicken out if he chose to do so.

“How about I cook you dinner instead?”

Nando tried to force his voice to not squeak but failed. “Did you say cook? You want to actually cook for me?”

Max’s laugh was genuine. “I spend too much time eating take-out because I can’t be bothered to do it just for myself. You could come to my place, or if you’re more comfortable, I could come to yours.”

“I don’t have much of a kitchen per se.” He wasn’t completely comfortable with accepting Max’s dinner invitation at his home, but he was also a big boy and could take care of himself... he hoped. “What do you do for a living?”



"I'm in sales. Does that have some bearing on my cooking?"

"Not really. I'm just trying to get a line on you and whether I can trust you or not."

"Ask me anything." Max's expression was almost comical in its honesty. "I'm an open book, and you can bring your friend and his bouncer boyfriend if that makes me seem less intimidating."

Nando unsuccessfully hid a smile. "Husband actually, and no, I think I can handle you."

"If it's any consolation, I'm probably a little soft because I don't workout, so you'd have no problem beating the crap out of me if you chose to. Of course, that doesn't make me sound all that appealing as a date, does it?"

"It makes you sound just fine. Seven o'clock? Eight, Wednesday night?"

"Seven's better because Thursdays are early meeting days." He stuttered a few chuckles as he paused. "Wow, I just get better and better, don't I?"

"Why don't I give you my number? You promise you're not a stalker or serial killer?"

"I can just call you here, if you'd rather."

"You're a nice guy, Max, but that was the number I was giving you anyhow. Well, my personal office number. I'm not so used to that—the nice part I mean. Grab your phone and I'll program it in."

Max nodded as he dug in his pants pocket. His iPhone lit up with a picture of a very pretty woman and adorable blond-haired boy. All arrows now pointed to the guy being married, something Nando had been duped about before.

"My sister and nephew, if you're wondering."

"I was."

There was a pause as Nando dipped his head to work the buttons on the phone. "Have you had a lot of not nice?"

The question was a tad personal, but he wasn't put off by it. It sounded sincere coming from Max's lips, and not like there was some cheesy pickup line to follow. "I seem to attract it." As he handed the phone back, Nando was confused by the soft look of concern in Max's eyes. "Did I say something weird?"

Max shook his head slowly, more-teal-than-blue eyes lowering behind his glasses. "I was just thinking how wrong... I'm sorry. Never mind."

"No, go ahead. You were thinking what?"

Nando waited as Max licked his lips. "How wrong it would be to take advantage of a man like you."

Nando leaned back in his chair, his fingers automatically rubbing over his belly again. It was a nervous habit he'd picked up so many years ago, and had tried almost as long to break. Sometimes he didn't recognize his anxiety until the action began—like now. "Man like me?"

With a sigh, Max tried to tuck some invisible strands of hair behind his ear. The gesture failed, and his face appeared to flush under the bad lighting of the club. "I didn't mean it that way."

Now Nando was curious, or more curious, if he was honest with himself. "Go on."

"I don't want to sound cliché or like I'm trying to sway you." Max grunted and leaned forward, elbows resting on the table. "You're just beautiful, Diamond. I mean, Nando."

"You can't possibly think I'm beautiful right now?" Nando swept a hand through the air, motioning to his natty shirt and ball cap.

"Why not? You came to talk to me when you didn't have to. You told me your real name, gave me a number where I could reach you."

"Don't get that a lot then?"

"I don't ask a lot." Max seemed to battle some unknown force inside him when the silence between them thickened. "Can I be upfront? Would that make you uncomfortable?"

Nando didn't answer right away. Instead, he took the time to concentrate on the irritating hangnail on his thumb. Did he want that—someone to be honest rather than play games? Maybe. Yes. He nodded his acceptance, peering at Max beneath the brim of his cap.

"Okay. If I pass out from the pressure, call me a cab, yeah?" Max joked but there was still tension wavering in his tone as he continued. "Truth is, I don't go out much. This is really the only place I go to. I found the club strictly by accident when I moved to town, almost four months ago, and I just can't seem to keep myself away."

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“Because of me?”

“Mostly, yes, but it’s more than that. Your club feels familiar and kind of comforting to me. Like an old pair of shoes that fit perfectly.”

“Is that meant to be a compliment?”

“Yes, oh *cachu*! I did it again.”

Nando surprised himself by laying a hand on Max’s arm. “I’m just kidding. But you said you were in sales, right? Doesn’t that mean computers and stuff?”

“Yeah, but I haven’t been doing it long.”

“Then why—?”

Max cut him off, the hand that Nando wasn’t holding against the table moving to lightly brush over his. “Come to dinner and I swear I’ll reveal my whole life to you.”

“I’m not sure I want that in-depth of an analysis.” They wore matching grins as Nando continued. “You sure you’re not a serial killer?”

“Swear on my nephew.”

“That’s big guns in the swearing department.”

A sturdy nod preceded his reply. “Because I mean it. Dinner, a glass of wine if you drink it, sparkling water if you don’t. I promise to get you home in one piece, and I won’t lay a hand on you.”

“You sound like Rhett Butler.”

“I love that movie.”

It could have been a line, but something inside Nando didn’t think so. “Funny, so do I.”

“Second date maybe?”

“How about we get through the first *first*.”

“Then I haven’t scared you away.”

Amusement quirked Nando’s lips. “Not yet. Seven o’clock Wednesday?”

“Want me to program my address in your phone?”

“I don’t have a cell phone actually.”

Max just shrugged, the information completely indifferent as opposed to the reaction some people had to—gasp—a cell-less man in 2014. He reached for

his jacket, neatly folded on the chair beside him, and pulled out a pen. The unused cocktail napkin in front of him became the perfect writing surface as he scribbled on it.

Nando sat quietly, watching. Observing and studying were better words, because this man definitely intrigued him. Even after talking to him for an unbelievable fifteen minutes, he still hadn't gotten a handle on him.

Usually it took far less time, and nowhere near as much enjoyment, to tag the guy in question as fuckable or not fuckable. But Max was different. Nando would never openly admit it, but he was attracted to the quiet calm Max seemed to radiate, and the normality he portrayed. Nando was by no means past being cautious, but he had a good feeling about Max. A good feeling and an unusual excitement bubbling inside about spending a little more time with him.

"There you go. Do you want me to give you directions?" Max handed over the ink-covered napkin, stuffing the pen in the front pocket of his white dress shirt. "Or if you want, I can pick you up? Of course, I don't have a car."

Nando laughed out loud, and it felt good, comfortable, relieving actually. Max was surely one of a kind, and so far, that was working out just fine for Nando. He wasn't exactly sure why it had been so funny, but once he'd regained his control, tears burned his eyes from his possibly inappropriate belly laugh. He flashed an amused grin at Max. "I'm pretty good at navigating, but for now, I have a date with a mound of books and payroll."

"Fair enough." Max rose from his chair in sync with Nando's movements. He flung his jacket over his shoulders then looked at Nando. "Is there anything you're allergic to or don't like?"

"Not really."

"All right. I'll see you Wednesday or, well, probably sooner than that, right here in the same spot."

Nando couldn't believe his ears. "You're still going to come watch me dance?"

"Of course. Is that strange?"

"I guess not." He cocked his head to the side. "Maybe we could have a drink tomorrow night, if you're still around when I'm done?"

"What do you drink?"

"Passion punch. Theo knows how I like it."

"It'll be waiting for you. Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. You might have a horrible time."

"I didn't know you were funny, too."

Nando snickered silently. He had no words, for the first time he could recall in recent memory. He chose the coward's way out. "Um... good night then."

He hesitated, a sudden urge to kiss Max sweeping through him. Not a passionate kiss either, just a tender press on the cheek. Instead, he turned on his heel, tugging his ball cap farther down on his forehead.

"Hey, Diamond?"

He spun back around, not five feet from where Max had stopped by the door. "Yeah?"

"Thanks. I'll see you."

"Yeah. You already said that." Max turned away, but then it was Nando's sudden urge that made him call out, "Hey, Max."

"Yeah?"

"Are you lonely?"

"Yeah."

"I guess Rhett isn't all we have in common then."

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He did have a drink with Max, and it was fine. It wasn't horrible or over-the-top awesome, but it also wasn't awkward as Nando had feared it would be. It only lasted thirty-five minutes, but it was the best part of Nando's day. To break any underlying tension, they agreed to reveal three random facts about themselves. He found out Max had been living in the U.S. for over a year, he was new at his job but didn't particularly like it, and he had been literally born in a barn.

"I've heard a lot of random facts in my life, but you've won the prize for *what the fuck*. What does that even mean?"

Max bit the inside of his cheek, stifling a laugh. "We lived in the country, just me, my parents, and seven sisters—"

Nando gaped at him. "You had seven sisters." Max nodded with a smug twist of his lips. "And let me guess, you were the youngest."

"I was. Dad wanted a boy to carry on the family line. It didn't work out so good for him." Max held the smile, no apparent disappointment or angst on his face. "But after seven babies, my mother figured she had time to milk the cows before I decided to spring into the world. She was wrong."

Nando's laugh was full-bodied and would have rattled the rafters had they been in a barn. Max snickered along with him, taking tiny sips in between chuckles. "Your turn."

It took a moment and a gulp of his drink sliding down the wrong pipe for him to answer. "Dom is my only living relative. I don't like any kind of green vegetable, and um... I'm originally from Madrid."

"I've never been to Madrid. Is it nice?"

"Not for me."

Nando hadn't meant to be so terse, but the look on Max's face and the way he quickly changed the subject was proof enough that his reply had come out sounding harsh. But Max was a gem at putting their conversation back to carefree again.

"Did I mention that the only thing I know how to cook is a broccoli casserole with brussels sprouts and a spinach salad on the side?"

Nando nearly spit out his drink. He certainly wasn't showing any delicate personal hygiene habits, but the tension had been broken nonetheless. The rest of the time, they casually discussed the weather, old films and what sorts of things Max actually did cook. It was easy and unobtrusive, the first conversation Nando had had with a man that didn't involve topping or bottoming, his dick, or the quickest way to get him off.

The urge to kiss Max's full, sultry lips had again invaded his thoughts when they parted, but *again*, he'd smothered the desire. He didn't know why, and by the time he reminded himself he was a grown man who could kiss anyone at any time that he pleased, Max was gone.

He'd even talked briefly to Dom about the *date*. And even though his cousin had been the one to encourage him to talk to Max in the first place, he hadn't been happy about Nando going to Max's place.

"Are you out of your mind? You told me you weren't interested at all, but now you're going to some stranger's apartment?"

“He said you could come along.” The joke soared like a lead balloon. “Look, Bruce liked him. You said it yourself.”

“That doesn’t mean you should—” Dom huffed out a frustrated breath, and Nando couldn’t help being just a tad amused. His unflappable cousin was, well, flapping. “Fine. You’re taking my cell phone with you though.”

“How can I call you if I’m being murdered?”

Dom’s expression instantly switched to horrified. “Not funny, Nando.”

“Fine, I’ll take it and call Bruce’s phone if there’s an issue. Is that what you want?”

“Call me when you get there and when you’re leaving. Bruce could pick you up—”

“Relax. *Mierda!* I thought I was the paranoid one. It’s just a date. Don’t you remember dating before you met your Prince Charming?”

Dom snorted comically. “You don’t date. What’s changed?”

“He’s... different. I think I like him a little.” Nando was surprised at his own words, but he quickly covered his tracks. “You’re always telling me I should get out.”

“Just be careful and call me if you need—”

“I know and I will.”

“Bruce and I actually have no plans that night. When did you say it was again?”

“You’re being so lame, man.”

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Nando thought the two short conversations with Max led to the bits of confidence that tingled inside him when he knocked on condo number twelve of Westmount Place. It was a simple complex, slightly worse for wear, but well kept and clean despite its obvious age. In truth, he’d never been on a date before, let alone had someone actually cook for him. He was still skeptical, unsure of the implications of what he was walking into, yet there was a thread of excitement that he couldn’t quiet. It was foreign, but almost fun.

Max opened the door as if he’d been waiting with his hand on the knob. Nando didn’t even try to smother the grin that cracked his face when he saw the

blue, ruffled apron Max wore over his black dress pants. The top three buttons of his white long-sleeved shirt were undone, and a burgundy tie hung loose around his neck. There was even a smattering of light hair peeking out from underneath.

“Hey,” Max said with an identical grin. “Right on time. Come on in.”

“Thanks.” Nando stepped past him, handing over the bottle of wine he’d grabbed from the club. “I wasn’t sure what you were serving so I brought red. Not that I know much about wine anyhow.” The last part was added as an afterthought, mostly out of self-recrimination. It was true, wine wasn’t his thing, but he’d asked Theo to pick out a good bottle.

“It’s fine. You didn’t have to bring anything. It’s only pasta, but red will go perfectly with it.”

Nando nodded as he eased into the small kitchen. It smelled delicious—tomatoes, garlic, maybe a hint of lemon. It was homey, warm, just like the feeling Nando had about Max. “Nice apron. You didn’t have to dress up for me though.”

Max set the wine on the counter, then returned to stirring something on the stove. He chuckled under his breath but there was no hint of embarrassment on his face. Nando liked that. He rarely met a man who could laugh at himself. It was refreshing.

“I got home late. Didn’t want to stain my best shirt, did I? Have a seat or feel free to snoop around.” Max waved his arm toward the short hallway. “Some things are still in boxes, but you can get a good sense of me in the junk I’ve already unpacked.”

“You’re a strange man,” Nando said with a smirk.

“Is that good or bad?”

Nando shrugged as he turned his back. “I’m not sure yet.”

“Well, let me know when you figure it out.”

“I’ll do that.”

“Hey, Diamond... I mean, Nando.” Nando twisted his head to look at Max again. “You look nice. You should wear your hair down more often.”

“Um... thanks.” Nando reached up to finger his long curls, suddenly self-conscious.



It was a random comment, especially after Nando's about Max's apron. This time he stifled a smug grin, or at least hoped he'd turned away in time. He rarely wore his hair down, feeling like it called too much attention to him. But it had still been damp when he'd left for Max's, so he hadn't put on a hat. He didn't like the feeling of wet hair plastered to his head.

The living room was bright, considering the time of day, and two cream-shaded lamps also burned needlessly in each corner. Max had been right, there were a number of sealed boxes by the window along with a scattering of pictures posed haphazardly around the room.

Nando peeked over his shoulder before slipping nearer to the framed photos. Max had said to go ahead and *snoop*, but it still felt strange—as if he were prying into Max's private business. Things like that didn't usually bother Nando, but his heart pounded a little harder as he studied a black and white shot of a male dancer. The man's back was bowed, his arms stretched long and toned over his head, his shoulder-length, light hair swept back like it was being blown by the wind.

A closer look revealed Max's face—a younger version, but Max nonetheless.

"Discovered my secret, did you?"

Nando startled, his body automatically straightening from its leaned-over position. He stuttered out his response. "I-I- was just, just—You dance?"

"Danced is more like it." When Nando looked down at the picture again, Max moved to stand beside him. He grabbed a different photograph from the side table. "This was the last time I really performed."

"Great form." Nando was dumbfounded as he held the photo. He took in the beauty of Max's sleek figure. The body was the same, the face a little older, and the hair only falling to below his ears. "Latin?"

"Yep."

"When was this taken?" He slid a thumb over the glass, enchanted.

"Almost two years ago."

Nando handed it back then crossed his arms over his chest. "How old *are* you?"

"I never tell on the first date."

"I'm thirty-three. Your turn."

"Thirty-four."

"I thought you were—"

"Older?" Max snorted, and it was kind of adorable. "I get that a lot. I think it's the suit."

"Not saying that's a bad thing." Nando rested his backside against the arm of the green recliner by the door. *More and more curious.* "Why'd you stop? Or did you? You said you were working in sales, right?"

Max quirked his head to the side, motioning Nando back to the kitchen. That was when he noticed the limp, very prominent on the left side, Max's whole body seeming to shudder and give him pain as he hobbled away.

"Dinner's ready. You mind if we sit here? My fancy dining room is indisposed."

It wasn't the right time to ask, so Nando played it cool. "Indisposed?"

"Meaning I don't have one." Max laughed, and it was musical inside Nando's head. He tried not to glance at Max's lower body as he shuffled past, flopping into the chair at the far end of the table. "You can ask, you know? It's not a secret."

Nando disregarded the remark as he settled into the hard wooden chair. "We've got time. Smells good. You like cooking?"

Max nodded, setting a big pot of spaghetti in the center of the table as the sauce continued to bubble on the stove. He added a green salad and plate of garlic toast before he responded. "My grandmother owned a little Italian place when I was growing up. I liked to help her."

"Italian?"

"On my mother's side. Welsh on my father's."

"Interesting combination. Guess that explains the *cachu*."

"Haven't lived there in a long time, but my dad's still there. He must rub off on me when we talk."

Max turned back to the stove, switching off the burner and giving the red sauce one last stir. "You want the sauce on the side or..." He motioned to the pot then the spaghetti.

“Pour away.” Nando couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a home-cooked anything, because toaster ovens and microwaves certainly didn’t count. “You know, I’m not really sure why I’m here.”

With a look of surprise, Max stopped what he was doing. “Dinner?”

Nando smirked, easing forward so he could tuck one leg beneath him. “No. I mean being here period. I don’t do *this*.”

“Are you uncomfortable?”

“No.” Nando reached for Max’s hand, just a light brushing of fingers over the soft skin of his wrist. “Just the opposite, which makes me a little suspicious.” He pulled his hand back, fingering the fork beside his plate.

Max sat across from Nando. “Anything I can do to help?”

“A glass of that wine would be a start.”

Once they were both equipped with wine and heaping plates of steaming pasta, Nando returned Max’s smile, and they settled into a relaxed meal. There was a little small talk but nothing more substantial than the neighborhood, musicals and new movies that were out but neither of them had seen. They had a lot in common under their opposing exteriors, mostly quiet evenings spent at home when they both weren’t at the club for different reasons.

Nando had never shared just how much of a homebody he was with anyone but Dom. Never invited anyone to his place above the club either, so his special stash of romance novels and historical fiction had always remained safe. His little buddy was also still a secret. No one really needed to know that his second best friend was a Siamese fighting fish anyhow.

“When I was young, we used to play a game at the dinner table. Wanna try?”

“Should I be scared? It’s not one of those weird Italian initiation things, is it?”

Max sputtered, then coughed when he started choking on his mouthful of wine. Nando had the urge to throw himself across the table to help, but the noise quickly settled.

“Sorry about that. Didn’t know you were beautiful and witty.”

Nando shook his head. He eased back in his chair, gnawing on his bottom lip. “I’m not sure why you say things like that.”

A slight flush crept into Max's cheeks. "I don't mean to make things awkward."

"It's not that. Well, maybe a little." Nando paused to get his thoughts together. He was aware that the compliment made him feel warm inside, but that wasn't always a good thing. "Most times I've only heard it when someone wanted something from me."

"What's your favorite color?"

With the cock of his head, Nando narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"The game. Tell me your favorite color."

*Worst question ever.* He was tempted to lie, but Max's eyes were his favorite color. "Turquoise."

"Okay." One side of Max's mouth curled up as he leaned back in his chair, leisurely sipping his wine. Nando would have sworn he fluttered his eyelashes behind his glasses. "Your turn."

Nando hesitated, to search Max's face, but there was nothing but honest curiosity in his light eyes. "Favorite color?"

"Purple. Dark, like amethyst."

"Interesting. Do you always wear suits to work?"

"Yes. Do you have any pets?"

"No." Nando fidgeted in his chair, circling his finger around the rim of his wine glass. "You?"

"A Siamese fighting fish."

Nando automatically shifted to the edge of his chair. "No way. What color?"

"Turquoise."

"To match your eyes."

Max laughed. "He has more pink highlights than me. Why do you seem so surprised?"

He considered it a moment. "Mine's bright green. Yours have a name?"

"No kidding? You have a—his name's Charlie. Yours?"

Nando bit down on his lip before answering. "I'd prefer not to say."

With another chuckle, Max reached for the half-empty bottle of wine. "That bad?" He tipped the bottle in Nando's direction. "More?"

"Sure. Promise not to laugh?"

Max quirked an eyebrow as he filled the two glasses. "I can promise to try, but if it's called Baby or Honeydew—"

"Rhett."

"That's so ador—"

"Don't say it."

"—able." There was a forced silence where Nando drained his glass then reached for the bottle, not taking his gaze from Max's the entire time. Max smiled sweetly at him before finally breaking the deadlock. "Okay, my turn. Have you ever done any other kind of dancing?"

"Sort of." Nando left his answer purposely vague and moved on quickly. "My turn. Tell me about your dancing."

"All right. You've shown fabulous restraint. That question must have been bugging the crap out of you." Max looked sheepishly smug when he pushed his chair away from the table. "Why don't we sit somewhere more comfortable?"

Nando followed Max from the kitchen and down the hall. He reminded himself to help clean up later as he concentrated on not looking at Max's leg. He sat down at the other end of the cushy green couch from him, folding his leg underneath again.

"That other photo was taken in New York. I toured with a Latin dance company for five years. That was after my partner and I won the World Salsa Championship."

"Are you serious?" Nando knew his mouth had dropped open with awe. "That's incredible. You danced with a female partner?"

A nod from Max, then, "I don't think the world recognizes two men dancing together, yet."

Nando considered the explanation. Some of his employees danced together, but he'd never checked to see if there were such partnerships in the outside world. "I've never danced with a partner."

"You don't need to. You're perfect on your own." Nando's cheeks heated up, but Max continued before he could be called on it again. "Everyone thought we were together in other ways. Karrie was my best friend."

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“And now?”

“We lost touch after she got married. I started dancing solo then, she moved... and, you know, things change. I haven’t really talked to her since I was in the hospital...” The sentence trailed off, the words softer as Max averted his gaze.

“Does it make you uncomfortable talking about it?”

Max smiled sadly, meeting Nando’s gaze again. His eyes matched his expression perfectly. “It’s just a fact now. You don’t want me to go into the whole sad story, do you?”

“How about the condensed version?”

After a deep breath, Max shifted so he faced Nando on the couch. “I was driving home from rehearsal late one night. I was tired, so maybe I wasn’t as alert as I should have been.” There was a heavy pause, Max’s bright eyes turning dark as he gazed out the window behind Nando’s head and nibbled on his bottom lip. “The guy in the other car was twice the legal limit. They don’t know if he fell asleep at the wheel or he just swerved into my lane for no reason.”

“Jesus. He hit you dead-on? Oh, fuck that wasn’t the right word—”

“Relax, Diamond.” Max moved closer on the couch then slid a hand over Nando’s knee.

Nando didn’t call him on the name slip. In truth, he kind of liked it, and he tried to relay that fact by covering Max’s hand. It didn’t seem right, Max comforting him instead of the other way around. “We don’t have to—”

“The driver of the other car was in critical care for a few days and then he died. At least I only ended up with a limp.” He smiled, but it was melancholy again.

Nando didn’t know how to phrase the question he wanted to ask, so he just blurted it out. “Can they do anything to, you know, fix your leg?”

“They did. They saved it, at least, except now I’ve got more metal than skin and bone in my hip, thigh and calf.” Max dipped his head, eyelashes flitting against pale skin. “Losing my dancing is nothing compared to not walking, right?”

Before his brain caught up with his body, Nando had leaned over and kissed Max. It lasted for only a moment of sweet tenderness before Max pulled away.

“You don’t have to do that,” Max said. “I’m not... I don’t need you to feel sorry for me.”

“What if I’m doing it because I want to?”

Max wound his hand behind Nando’s neck, tugging gently until they were knee to knee. “Then I won’t stop you.”

Nando gripped the sides of Max’s shirt as he closed the distance even more. He pressed his mouth to Max’s, tasting sharp bites of tomato and wine and garlic on his tongue. It was gentle at first, but quickly became desperate and needy. How long had it been since Nando had kissed someone and felt it all the way to his toes? Or maybe he never had.

They pulled and tugged at each other—tasting, touching, wanting—before Max pulled back one more time. He licked his lips before he spoke. “You—this isn’t what I intended.”

“Some things are better unplanned,” Nando replied. His lips quirked up in an amused grin, his heart doing the samba against his ribs as he leaned in again. But Max splayed his palm over Nando’s chest.

“I just...” Max seemed upset. He sighed before continuing. “It’s not what I want.”

Nando eased away, all contact lost as he tensed from head to toe. How had he gotten it so wrong? “I don’t understand. How can you say that when you invited me here?”

Max released his grasp on Nando’s T-shirt, threading his fingers through his short hair. “I’m not saying I don’t want to. I feel like I know you, at least a little. But I really want you to get to know me before things move too fast.”

“What?” Nando felt the urge to leave, despite the happy dance his body had been doing only moments before. He restrained himself. “Because you’ve watched me dance?”

“It’s not just that, more like what you said that first night.”

Nando searched his memory, but too much blood had been lost to his groin. “What?”

“You said we had more in common than just Rhett. The real one, not the fish.” Nando didn’t react to Max’s tease. “Loneliness, right? Can’t we take a little time to see if that’s true?”

Seemed like a load of crap, just another line Nando had heard in one form or another more times than he cared to remember. But considering it had come with rejection rather than sexual innuendoes, Nando found himself taking the offer seriously. He rubbed a hand over his face, shoving curls out of his eyes, his other hand fidgeting with his belly button stud.

“You know how weird this is?”

“Slow is unusual for you?” Max stroked across Nando’s leg, but his touch didn’t linger.

“I told you. I’ve never dated anyone. Isn’t that what dating is? Slow.”

“Why?” Nando wrinkled up his nose in confusion, so Max continued. “Why don’t you date?”

“Never been asked.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

Nando leaned to the side, resting his shoulder against the couch. “I know you’re more intelligent than that, Max. Sex isn’t dating, right?”

“Is that all you want, Diamond? Meaningless sex and loneliness, with only a fish to keep you company every night?”

“Well, the sex isn’t often, and Rhett is... familiar and comfortable.” He wavered before finishing his reply, his mind wanting one thing but his heart thudding in the other direction. “But this was nice, too. I guess I could try it again.”

Max’s smile was brilliant, and Nando was quite pleased with himself.

“Want me to cook for you again?” Max asked.

“What I’d like is to kiss you again, maybe feel you up a little. That allowed?”

“I’m persistent, not crazy.”

He moved quickly, grabbing Nando by both arms and pulling him closer. Nando was careful when he straddled Max’s lap, worried that he’d cause some damage or pain. But since the hardness that brushed against the inside of his thigh definitely wasn’t Max’s left knee, he went with Max’s wishes.

Their kisses fell back into the previous pattern, slow at first, tentative, and close-mouthed. But heat pooled quickly in Nando’s groin, and he finally



pushed Max against the back of the couch, deepening the kiss, prodding the seam of Max's lips until they willingly parted. Max groaned into his mouth, firm hands gliding up Nando's thighs, over his hips then resting on his backside. He wrapped his strong fingers around Nando's buttocks, and it was his own whimper that tore their mouths apart.

"Am I hurting your leg?"

"Nothing I can't handle. I'm of sound body and mind, I assure you."

Max's deep chuckle vibrated through Nando's insides. He thought he might just start vibrating all on his own. "Think we should move somewhere comfortable?"

Max nipped at Nando's lower lip then licked over the sting. "I'd like nothing more." Another quick nibble followed as he clutched Nando's butt. "But, I think it would be wiser to stay here. That okay with you?"

Nando edged backwards on Max's lap. "You're lucky you're hot."

"I am?" Max scrunched up his nose, and Nando had a strong urge to lick it. Fortunately, or unfortunately, he wasn't that far gone.

"Sexy man in a suit. What's not to love? I mean, you're an attractive guy, and you have a great personality."

Max groaned and clutched his chest. "Ouch. I was batting a thousand until you said that."

"You want me to be blunt? Basically, I'd just like to jump your bones."

"You're halfway there. At least you're on top of the situation."

"That wasn't witty at all. So you want to talk or make out like teenagers?"

"Do you play Scrabble?"

"You're kidding, right?"

Nando was home at the respectable hour of midnight. He was in a perpetual state of arousal, but full to the brim with chocolate ice cream and warm fuzzy feelings, *and* he would have to practice extra hard the following day to get rid of all the extra calories. Max had also kicked his ass twice in Scrabble, but Nando was pretty sure he'd cheated.

He hadn't disliked the almost chaste intimacy as much as he would have imagined, and even though there hadn't been any actual fireworks going off,

Nando had ended up having a very nice time. *Plus*, he'd managed to get a hand up Max's shirt and do a little fondling of his own. He'd particularly enjoyed that part.

It may have been the strangest evening, but it was also the most satisfying he'd experienced in longer than he could remember. He fed Rhett, briefly described the events of the night, then slid into bed with a light heart and a steady thread of warmth trickling through him.

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Nando didn't see Max again until Friday night. He nodded in his direction when he took the stage but danced as he usually did. Well, perhaps he put a little extra effort into the performance—a little more stretch of his arms, a little harder clap with his hands, a little louder pound in his feet. And he definitely undressed faster afterwards.

"Fabulous," Max said, rising from his chair when Nando had joined him at his table. "You were on fire, Diamond... I mean, Nando."

"You can call me that if you want. I don't mind." He sipped the drink Theo had immediately placed in front of him. "I'm kind of hungry. Do you have an early day again tomorrow?"

"Nothing important." Max's grin was infectious. "I'm not sure I have anything in the fridge to cook."

Nando almost snorted his Passion Punch. "No. I meant we should go out, or are you some kind of food snob?"

"Anything open this late? I'm not exactly a connoisseur when it comes to late night dining."

"Nothing good, but the company should be."

Max slung back the rest of his amber drink. "That was almost romantic."

"Yeah, right. Is that a yes?"

"Drink up. I'm starving."

It was little more than a diner that provided their evening meal, but it was a place Nando had often been to with Dom. They ordered quickly, sipping from icy glasses of water as they chatted about their days. A ball of heat settled inside Nando just as it had the last time they were alone together. He'd restrained himself from grabbing Max on the walk over but the urge had been there, and he made no promises to himself about the return trip.

Nando wondered if he had become de-sexed—if that was even a word—by Max's unassuming presence, or perhaps he'd suddenly developed a romantic side as Max had commented back at the club. As if to prove himself right, he reached across the table, circling Max's fingers between his own.

"I think you've damaged me in some way."

Max looked up in surprise, his eyes wide behind his glasses. He entwined their hands before he spoke. "I'm not sure how to take that?"

Nando tilted his head, averting his gaze. "I'm not really sure either. You've caused a lot of firsts for me." Max raised an eyebrow, encouraging Nando to continue. "First customer I've seen outside of work. First date. First time I've ever, and I do mean *ever*, held a man's hand in public or anywhere else."

"Ever been kissed in public?"

"Does Dom count?" He teased and chuckled. His amusement was short lived when Max reared up out of his chair and leaned towards him.

Nando accepted the kiss, though it could have been much longer and deeper in its intent. By the time Max pulled away, they were both smiling like idiots.

They ate mostly in silence, the quiet comforting and already very familiar. Their pasts weren't areas of conversation, and Nando might have been responsible for the lack of both subjects. He didn't like to talk about things he'd rather forget, and he still wasn't sure just how much to ask Max about what had happened to him.

The night Max had cooked dinner for Nando, he'd grasped Max's knee in their passionate make-out session on the couch, but besides being a little firmer than he'd expected, nothing had seemed out of the ordinary. The limp itself didn't phase Nando when they walked alongside one another, but it still concerned him that Max might be in pain. But just from their brief time together, Nando suspected Max would admit if he was, so rather than dwell on it, he steered the conversation to something else.

"You asked me if I'd ever done any other kind of dance, right?" Nando said. "What about you? Done anything else?"

"I danced ballroom for a long time—Mambo, Tango, Samba, even the Paso Doble. But the Flamenco was always my favorite."

Nando bit down on his bottom lip as he pushed his plate away. "I um... I've thought about trying something different."

After setting his fork alongside his unfinished meal, Max bent forward in his chair, giving Nando all his attention. He took Nando's hand again. "So why don't you?"

"I dunno. Fear I guess. That probably sounds silly considering what happened to you."

"No." Max's tone was harsh, the single word forced out and louder than necessary. Nando tried to ease his hand away, but Max squeezed his fingers instead. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to shout."

"Did I say something wrong?"

"No, but do you mind if I make a suggestion?" When Nando nodded, Max went on, "I was afraid of a lot of things before the accident and I didn't take chances. I've learned that fear is only an excuse for failure, and fear of failing isn't as important as doing what you want to do." He brushed his thumb over Nando's knuckles, lowering his head to peer under Nando's curls. "What are you scared of?"

"I don't know if there's any one thing." Nando relaxed his hand in Max's. He was really starting to like this whole public display of affection thing. "Responsibility I suppose."

"For the club?"

He nodded but still didn't meet Max's eyes. "Dom and I have worked hard for what we have and, egotistical or not, I'm the big draw, at least for now."

They slid back in their chairs when the waitress suddenly appeared at their table, their hands slipping apart. They assured her they were done, asked for the check, then waited until she disappeared again. Max reached for Nando's hand again. "I don't disagree. But you're crazy if you think one night of something new will make anyone stop coming to see you."

Nando shrugged, his mind of two parts—one half believing and the other thinking things could still go terribly wrong if he attempted what he'd been planning. "I dunno."

"Does it involve taking your clothes off?"

"What? No." Nando chuckled. "No more than usual."

"Then do it."

"You seem so sure about everything." That surety gave Nando strength though, regardless of whether he felt it himself. It was odd how someone who

was almost a complete stranger could put his mind so at ease. He liked the feeling—liked it a lot.

“I’m a good actor then. Do you know why I can’t *not* come and watch you?”

“Why?”

Max voice changed from determined to whimsical, his tone lighter and filled with sighing pauses. “Watching you on that stage feels like I’m the one dancing. I may want you to get to know me better before we take any big steps, but your dancing makes me feel like we’ve already gone all the way.”

Nando struggled *not* to jump across the table and attack Max. Instead he opted for a humorous reply to one of the kindest things anyone had ever said to him. “Frankly my dear... you say the sweetest things.”

After the bill was paid, they walked back to the club hand-in-hand. Nando was twitchy with anticipation. He figured he would have been less anxious if he’d agreed to get sucked off in some dark alley than having Max chastely walking beside him. It was definitely another first, the sudden feeling that he could do anything he set his mind to. He didn’t know how Max accomplished it or where his positive attitude came from, but it gave Nando huge respect for him. And of course, made him want to take things further.

He intended on inviting Max upstairs—luring him upstairs—the first person to ever set foot in his cozy apartment besides Dom and Bruce. Part of his anxiety stemmed from being so damn horny and seemingly hard that he could have hung a hat on his dick. It wasn’t the best analogy but it worked, and made him feel even more pent up.

His plan was thwarted when, before they reached the club, Max halted their slow but steady progress. “There’s still a bus running down the street and if I hurry I can take it instead of paying for a cab.”

“I’ll pay for your cab.” Nando was hasty in his reply, heated disappointment surging through him.

“You already paid for dinner, but I do appreciate the offer.”

“I thought you could, you know... come home with me tonight.” As an afterthought, Nando again interjected some humor into the situation. “You’re not a terrified virgin, are you?”

Max chuckled, then kissed him, wrapping him tight in his arms under the misty glow of the streetlight. Their heights were compatible. That was only one of the things Nando tried to occupy his mind with as his hormones threatened to rage out of control right there in the middle of the street.

When Max tugged his mouth away, he beat Nando to the punch. "I guess I sort of am. I haven't been... intimate with anyone since the accident."

"Oh fuck, I'm sorry. I didn't even think."

Max knocked their foreheads together, winding his right hand in Nando's hair while the other held him close to his body. "It's not a physical thing. All my other parts work just fine. It's a modesty thing I guess."

"Fear? Not taking your own advice?"

"I nipped that puppy in the bud when I asked you out didn't I? Look, maybe it is an excuse—"

"I'm pretty sure I won't like you any less because you have some scars."

"I appreciate that." Max tugged gently in Nando's hair. "How about we make a deal?"

Nando kissed him again before breathlessly answering. "I'm listening."

"You step out of your comfort zone first then I will."

"That's a big order on my part."

"Feels pretty big on my part, too."

Nando ignored the sexual nature that could be derived from Max's answer. Surprisingly, he took the grown-up route. "But you don't know what I'm even thinking about."

"I don't have to know. I can tell it's something you want, something you think you can't have, and that's good enough for me. I feel like that about you, too, you know? From the first time I came to the club, I thought 'he's so far above me I'm underground.' But here we are, right?"

What could Nando say to that? It was sweet and brave and brutally honest. And it was wrong, at least the part about Max being below him. "Can we compromise? The pants stay on, but I can still touch you." Max groaned into Nando's mouth when he was dragged back into his space. Nando leaned into him, deepening the kiss right there in the middle of the sidewalk. He rubbed

unabashedly against Max, not feeling the least bit awkward or ashamed. He was trying to understand Max's reasoning and would play by his rules, but that didn't mean he couldn't let him know he wanted him.

"You're making this very hard."

"That's my intention."

"I'm going to catch my bus. I'll see you tomorrow night?"

"You know where to find me."

Another tight embrace then Max stepped back. Nando watched as he visibly took a deep breath of calm, then turned his back. "Hey, Diamond?" he said over his shoulder. He spoke in a formal accent, "You are no gentleman, sir."

Nando smiled so hard his cheeks hurt. "And you, Miss, are no lady."

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"Extend, Nando. Farther. Now drop. Tighter. Up. Flex your feet. Nando! You're not flexing. No, no, no."

Nando sighed, falling into a crouch in the middle of the wooden practice floor. He sucked in big bursts of air as he watched Andreas flick off the CD player. His instructor was right, just as he'd been right in his entire criticism for the past half hour. It wasn't a good day to be practicing.

"Here." Andreas spoke abruptly, but his tone was kind, his steel-gray eyes focused completely on Nando as he tossed him a water bottle. He dropped down beside Nando, his spryness always a bit of a wonder considering his age. "Are we going to continue with this time-wasting flight of fancy? Or will you tell me the reason for your inattention."

After taking a large drink, Nando swiped the back of his hand across his sweaty brow. "Maybe we should pick this up next time?"

"And *next time* will be another excuse or perhaps lack of excuse as is the case today."

Nando slid so he was flat on his backside, legs stretched out long and lean in front of him. He reached down to grab his toes, drawing in a deep calming breath as he blinked the sweat from his lashes. "Do you think I'm ready?"

Andreas tugged on the back of Nando's sweaty tank top. "You're talking to your toes. Perhaps they'll give you the answer you seek."

Some days Nando felt like he had his own personal Yoda. Other days he didn't know why he bothered Andreas and his treasured time, and certainly not when he couldn't focus or do anything right. His mentor was the best in the city, and Nando had selfishly pursued him until he agreed to take him on as a special student. There weren't many mixed-form instructors in the city, especially those who also specialized in flamenco. He dipped his chin to his chest, a silent plea for courage to broach the subject that he hadn't thought about for months.

"Do you think I'm ready to try?"

Andreas lay a gentle on Nando's lower back. "Look at me, Darling. How many times a week do you come to me?"

"Three."

"And how long have we been practicing the same dance?"

"Seven months."

Andreas pursed his lips as he nodded. "Yes, you have a good memory but poor skills of concentration this week. Is it simply the dance that shakes your steps or something else?"

"I'm just thinking it might be time."

"And the heavens rained down joyous light over the gray day!" Andreas tilted his face to the ceiling, long salt and pepper hair streaming over his shoulders. He was so dramatic. Nando adored him. "Of course, you're ready, but why now?"

"You're so dramatic, sensei." Andreas hated being called that. "I might have had a, um, a date."

Faking a gasp, Andreas lifted one palm to the ceiling and clutched the other to his chest. "The truth appears in the golden sun."

Nando snorted. "Oh, stop it. Do you want to know or not?"

"I know you do not date. Please, my dear, enlighten me about this fabulous creature."

"He's very ordinary but also extraordinary, and he used to dance."

"But no longer?"

"There was an accident. His leg was damaged."



“And your grand sexual connection has sparked your courage to rear its bashful head?”

“You’re too much sometimes.” Nando spread his legs, then leaned over to stretch. “I’ve only seen him outside the club twice, but he said something that stuck.”

“Go on.”

“He said watching Diamond dance was like being on the stage himself.”

“Seems like a lovely sentiment. Do you believe him?”

Nando pursed his lips then continued. “He also said being afraid is only an excuse not to try.”

“Sounds like you have a connection, and you want to dance for him?”

“No, I want to dance for *Diamond*.”

Andreas tugged a loose curl away from Nando’s face. “You often speak of *Diamond* as another person.”

It took Nando a moment to gather his thoughts. It wasn’t so much that Diamond was someone else, but since he’d used the name even before escaping from his old life, it was an important part of him. The diamond in his belly button had been a reward to them both for turning things around. But Nando didn’t feel such an intense need to hide behind Diamond anymore, or at least not rein him in quite so hard.

“I think it’s time he was allowed to show what else he can do.”

There was a heavy silence before Andreas suddenly slapped Nando on the back before spryly jumping to his feet. “Then we have work to do, my brilliant gem.”

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Nando saw Max four times in the next week—coffee, dinner and even their pre-mentioned walk in the park that ended up being a visit to the zoo. That was another day of firsts for Nando. First time actually going for a walk during the day. First time seeing a man on a friendly basis during the day, and first time eating ice cream on a bench in the sunshine outside the gorilla pen. Of course, he’d also never been to the zoo or seen a real-life gorilla before.

He seriously felt like he’d been dropped into some old-fashioned love story where chastity and gentlemanly qualities still existed.

Despite his love of old movies and especially the over-the-top romantic classics, he'd never suspected he'd actually like to be wooed. His days as a rent-boy on the streets of Madrid had taught him to be wary and suspicious of any type of kindness. But Max... Max was seemingly from another world altogether.

He wasn't perfect by any means, and he wasn't shy about talking of his days as lead dancer with his old company. He described a pompous, egocentric jerk who drank and tossed men aside like soiled tissues after a dirty movie. Nando couldn't see the man of the past in the one who held his hand, presented him with a single red rose after one of his performances, and didn't even try to cop a feel when they were lost in the heat of a passionate clinch.

"I'm surprised you ordered vanilla."

Nando flashed Max a numb-feeling grin. "Why? I don't even wanna know what's in that double fudge mint bubble gum rocky-road concoction you've got."

Max bumped his shoulder to Nando's, before leaning to the side and pressing cold lips to Nando's exposed collarbone. "One scoop rocky road, one scoop bubble gum, and one double chocolate. I never let myself have anything sweet, or good, when I was dancing. It was all about control and commitment, but now it's about enjoying the life I have."

"That's all very sweet, literally, but how do you not weigh five hundred pounds?"

"Maybe I do? Would that bother you?"

"I'd need my eyes tested and would congratulate you on wearing it very well."

"I think the gorillas pull it off pretty well, yeah?"

"They're definitely buff boys." Nando crossed his ankles and eased farther back against the hard bench. He'd never been an outdoors kind of person but damn, the sunshine, the furry people in front of him, and the company were excellent. "I think they're ogling your monstrous cone though."

"My monstrous cone, huh? Wanna taste?"

With a groan, Nando stopped mid-lick, his tongue rolling slowly back between his lips. "Are you being a cock-tease on purpose?"

Max's snorted and choked on a rolling chuckle, a dribble of bright blue ice cream sliding across his bottom lip. Nando couldn't help leaning over to kiss it away.

"Does taste pretty good. Thanks for sharing."

Nando flinched a little when Max slipped an arm around his shoulders, long fingers rubbing tiny circles over his skin. He snuck a peek at Max's relaxed body. It was the first time he'd seen him with anything but a long-sleeved dress shirt on, with the exception of that one time he'd managed to get all the buttons undone before Bruce had discovered them in a serious make-out session in the parking lot of the club. It had been both embarrassing and exhilarating—especially considering Nando's apartment was barely a dozen steps away.

What he'd managed to see and touch on a few occasions had been taut, defined pecs and toned, smooth-as-silk abs. Max still had a dancer's body whether he thought so or not. It bothered Nando a little that his *boyfriend*—*damn, that was the word Dom had used*—was shy about Nando seeing his legs, or more specifically one leg. He didn't push it, but he hoped Max would soon become comfortable enough to take their relationship to the next level even if that only meant taking off his pants.

There hadn't been any actual hand jobs yet, but they'd both managed to come in their pants one night from simply rubbing and kissing. They'd been in Nando's office, and he was certain he'd never had that happen before, not even when he'd been young and inexperienced. So apparently, it had been yet another first in a long line of them.

"They really are like real people, aren't they? When I was young, my grandmother took me to the zoo in London. She used to tell me the apes and gorillas had better manners than the men who came into the restaurant."

"Is she still around?"

Max's shook his head, his expression indifferent, but a far-away look shadowed his light eyes. "I lost her five months after the accident. Didn't get to go to the funeral because I was too laid up."

Nando reached for Max's free hand, squeezing gently as he struggled for what to say. "I'm sorry." Obviously what he'd managed was lame. "Are you coming to the club tonight?"

"It's not my usual night."

He fidgeted with Max's fingers. Nerves rolled through him in waves of insecurity. What the fuck was his problem that even asking Max to come to the club made him as nervous as a new bride?

"Do you have um... other plans?"

Max smiled softly, thumbing over Nando's trembling fingers. "No. I just didn't want to seem too *stalkerish* by showing up more than three times."

"Never took you for a stalker."

Another laugh and he twisted to look in Nando's eyes. "Really?"

Nando returned as straight a face as he could, his eyelashes fluttering in a failed attempt at innocence. "No." Max grunted like a gorilla. "Okay, maybe a little at first. But I'd really... I'd really like you to come tonight. And every night after that."

Max kissed him again, wrapping his hand around the side of Nando's neck and tugging him closer. It felt like the most intimate of their kisses—soft, slow, and close-mouthed, but sweet and lingering. He eased back enough to speak. "Then I wouldn't miss it. Wanna give me a hint about your plan?"

Nando let the rest of the world fade away, ice cream dripping over his knuckles and onto his new shorts, the gorillas frolicking happily in their confinement, the people walking by and craning their heads to look at them. He forgot everything but kissing Max, feeling the coolness of his ice-creamed mouth, the sweetness of sugar on his tongue, the feel of Max moving their hands so they rested on his left leg.

"I'm dancing for Diamond."

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Anxiety was a regular part of Nando's daily routine, at least pre-performance, but tonight he felt none. His stomach was calm, his nerves settled and controlled beneath his skin. He'd told Dom what he was planning but only in the vaguest sense. His backup dancers had been given their own time slot after him, and his dressing room was quiet and empty.

As he sat in front of the mirror, he contemplated his lack of uneasiness and the excitement that threaded through him like zaps of electric current. His hair was long and loose around his shoulders, just the way Max said he liked it, and the pants he'd had specially-made months before were soft and flowing against his skin. His body was ready, his mind clear and focused, and his heart encapsulated in a bubble of joy.

He'd invited Andreas, even asked Bruce to seat him with Max to ensure they both were in one spot when he took the stage. He felt confidence and brilliance course through him like never before. This was Diamond's time to shine and there was nothing that could take that away from him.

"We have something special for you tonight. Please welcome our own fabulous gem to the stage. It's Diamond time!"

Nando took his place behind the curtain, Andreas' words and instruction thrumming through him as he crouched and bowed his head. When the stage opened up to light and applause, he remained low, crawling, stalking with cat-like elegance to the center. The clapping stopped when he lifted his head, glancing to the side at the wall of mirrors. He tossed his mane of hair off his shoulder, his heavily kohl-lined eyes flashing intensive and aggressive in the spotlight. He was ready.

He danced like he'd never danced before—with abandon and freedom in his soul, in his floating and flying body, in his heart of hearts. He was a feral cat marking his territory, a wounded animal seeking his revenge, a rejected soul searching for peace and contentment. He jumped and twirled, his bare feet slapping against the wooden floor, his body writhing and interpreting exactly what he'd practiced—exactly how he'd always dreamed.

He never lost his focus, never even searched the crowd for the familiar table with the loving faces he knew were there. He caught a glimpse of Dom and Bruce at the side of the stage, partially hidden behind the curtain, their faces palettes of teary-eyed awe. The sensual music pumped through the club, echoing in the eerie quiet of the rows of tables, all conversation hushed as he shared his overflowing energy and passion with the crowd.

His steps were sure-footed, his torso stretching and twisting to perfection, his eyes sharp and focused as he dipped and exerted. His body buzzed with adrenaline, the sweat of hard work and fulfilled dreams sliding and dripping from his brow. He wasn't a Flamenco boy. He wasn't a one-trick pony who couldn't expand his horizons, or a man stuck in a life that ruled him instead of him being in control of his own destiny.

He danced like it was his last dance, his first dance, his only dance that would ever matter. He danced for the boy tossed on the street for being gay, for the cousin who followed him and protected him as best he could with what they had. He danced to prove he wasn't that helpless child taken advantage of by the cold streets and by faceless men who treated him as nothing more than a place to get off.

Dom was the first one to get to him after he left the stage breathless and grinning like a fool. His cousin wrapped him tight to his chest, seemingly unconcerned about the sweat soaking through his expensive shirt. He cupped the back of Nando's head, pressing nose to cheek as he whispered against his ear.

"When did you... what was... where did that come from?"

Nando smiled hard against Dom's shoulder, but even the steely sense of accomplishment and happiness couldn't keep his exhausted body vertical. His knees buckled and he slid to the floor, slowly taking Dom down with him.

"I'm so proud of you." Dom kissed Nando's cheek as he kneeled beside him. "There's no one else in the world I'd sit on the damn floor for, you know?"

After catching his breath, Nando tipped his head back. "How was I?" It was a redundant question considering how excited Dom seemed to be, but it was Bruce who answered.

"Outstanding. Standing ovation if you hadn't noticed."

"Don't think I was even conscious by the end." He let Bruce ruffle the top of his head, something he normally hated. "*Mierda!* I think I'm going to explode. I never thought I could—"

"But we all did."

The hushed words spoken by Max's warm, velvety voice, made Nando turn his head. Andreas was at Max's side, practically glowing, and their faces red and bright. Max held out his hand, a teary-eyed smile curling his lips as his spoke softly. "I'm not going to get on the floor with you but I can offer a hand up."

Nando wound his fingers around Max's forearm, willing his body to work again if only for a few minutes. Max dragged him off the floor and straight into his arms. His strength was impressive and there might have been an unmanly squeak of surprise on Nando's part.

"I've never seen anything like that," he cooed beside Nando's hair. A soft kiss was pressed to his ear then Max shifted so their lips touched.

Heat pooled in Nando's groin, his unashamed dick coming to life, and he was suddenly aware of just how thin and inappropriate his pants were for such an occurrence. Max pulled back but kept their bodies snug together. Nando groaned and glared back at his amused face.

“If I can interrupt this display of passion for a moment, I will congratulate you on a job well done with a dramatic side of *I told you so*.”

Nando smirked before he even caught sight of Andreas' wide grin. His mentor reached to stroke his cheek, his own streaked with tiny trails of emotion. “Very proud. Student has surely surpassed teacher.”

Max relinquished his hold so Nando could give Andreas a sweaty embrace. “Definitely not. I have more work to do, sensei. This is a new beginning.”

The rest of the congratulations and conversations were nothing but a blur for Nando. The only thing he was aware of was Max glued to his side, his body hard and steady, supportive, against him. It wasn't until he pulled Nando closer, sealing a perfect evening with a perfect kiss before whispering, “Let's go upstairs, Diamond.”

He became immediately hyperaware of his surroundings. Max smiled angelically at him while his mind backpedaled for excuses to make themselves scarce. Dom saved him, not for the first time in Nando's life.

“You look exhausted. I'll take care of things down here. Why don't you get some rest?” He bussed Nando's cheek, winked, then fled the scene. After a rough hug, Andreas followed Dom, leaving Nando and Max alone.

“Comfort zone eliminated,” Max said as he twined their fingers together. “Think Rhett would like a guest tonight?”

Nando finally found his words, wasting no time in dragging Max down the hallway that led to the private staircase. “No doubt in my mind.” His heart pounded like Flamenco shoes on wood, heat rising and falling in waves, as anticipation took over his internal organs.

He turned back to Max after only one step up to his room. “Stairs are okay for you, right?”

“Stop fretting and get up there.”

Nando flipped on the light to his little kitchen, then reached into the mini-fridge for a bottle of water. He offered one to an exploring Max but was turned down.

“I don't have any pictures for you to snoop at,” Nando said before emptying the bottle in one long pull.

“Quite the collection of books. I had you pegged at being a hopeless romantic, didn't I?”

"I might be guilty."

Nando tried to step in front of the poster of *Gone with the Wind*, but Max was already chuckling at his attempt. "I've always wanted one of these. Where's your roommate hiding?"

It took a moment of mind-swirling confusion for Nando to get the joke. "In the bedroom. You want to see him?"

"And you. I want to see you."

Max took Nando's hand again, tugging him gently until he took the reins and led him into the only room he'd bothered to make comfortable and homey. "We have a guest, Rhett-darling. On your best behavior please."

"I'm sure he's just as well-behaved as Charlie." Max leaned down so his face was close to the tank. "He's stunning. I don't think I've ever seen one quite that color."

The sight was too much for Nando to bear. He rested his chest against Max's back, wrapping tired arms around his waist and burying his nose in the collar of Max's shirt. "You smell good. I should shower. Promise you'll be here when I get out."

Max covered Nando's hands on his belly. He straightened up, moving Nando right along with him. "I can't promise that."

Nando tried to stifle the hearty rejection that suddenly pierced his heart. He was pushing again. He'd promised himself he wouldn't do that. "Do you want a drink before you go—?"

"I suggest you take me in with you if you want to be sure I stay."

"Take you—you feeling a little dirty, Max?"

"I'm hoping you'll help me with that." Max eased away from Nando's arms, but turned to face him. His expression was soft, one corner of his mouth quirked up in a grin while his eyes said things Nando really wanted to hear.

Max's fingers slid down to unfasten his dress pants. He kept his gaze on Nando as he slid them over his thighs and off his legs. He used Nando for balance when he stepped out of them before flicking them to the side with his foot.

Nando was afraid to move. He stood statue still and silent until Max circled his wrist. He suppressed a whimper when Max glided Nando's fingers down his clothed hip, pressing harder when his fingertips touched bare skin.



The feel of raised, battered skin didn't disgust or frighten Nando as he knew Max had feared. The scars were rough, puckered under his touch, but rather than being afraid of them, he needed to see the extent of what Max had endured.

He pressed a tender kiss to Max's lips then slowly dropped to his knees, gliding his free hand down Max's torso until it came to rest on his other thigh. The lines of incisions were red and sore-looking, but Max didn't so much as flinch when Nando touched them again. He moved closer, running his lips over the marks as Max buried one hand in his hair.

"Do they hurt?" he asked as he continued to track the scars. He huffed tiny bursts of hot breath against them when he noticed it made Max tug tighter in his hair.

"Haven't for a while, and most certainly not when you touch them."

"Should I keep going?"

"If they don't... bother you."

Max's voice was strained so Nando pulled his face away just enough to peer up at him. His efforts were rewarded with the gentle gaze of dampened light eyes, bright and beaming through the wetness of tears. He reached for Max's hand, then dipped his head again, trailing his lips down the jagged lines, pressing tiny kisses along the outside of Max's thigh all the way to his knee. Warmth and life surged beneath the ragged flesh but there was nothing ugly or unattractive about the scars.

How could something that was part of Max bother him when all he wanted to do was explore more, to know everything about Max, everything that made him happy and sad, insecure and contented? They both had scars, whether they were visible or not. They had imperfections and flaws, frailties, and hardships, but being with Max made all those things and everything else just slip away.

As he slowly rose to his feet, Nando saw an unusual wariness in Max's face, a sadness that he wanted to chase away for good. He kissed the tears from Max's eyes, licked teasingly at his nose and drew his bottom lip between his teeth for barely a heartbeat.

"Shower with me and I'll show you just how much they don't. Stay the night and I'll show you again in the morning. If somehow I haven't made that abundantly clear, I'll say it so there's no room for error. I want you, Max. I

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want you like I've never wanted anything else in my life, even more than what I did on that stage tonight. The bigger question is do you want me?"

The sweet smile returned to Max's lips, curling up the corners as a few extra tears slipped down his cheeks. "Yes, you know I do."

"Then stay?"

Max grinned and dragged Nando hard against him. They kissed until they had to fight to breathe, then eased away just enough to share their much-needed air.

When Max ghosted his fingers down Nando's back, hooking his thumbs in the waistband of his pants, he murmured close to his ear, "But what will the neighbors say?"

"Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*K-lee Klein has lived in one part of Western Canada or another for her entire life. She's a doting mother of three now-grown kids, and has had characters and plots running around her head for as long as she can remember. Her days consist of fighting off an abundance of fabulous gay men, large and small, bouncing off the walls of her skull, competing for their turns to tell their stories.*

*Among her favorite sub-genres to read and write are rock stars, cowboys, shifters, and opposites-attract relationships. But to be honest, she's open to almost anything if it involves messing around in the heads of her characters. She's also big on series—because she has a hard time letting her characters go—and is usually working on a handful of stories in various stages of completion all at the same time.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# DARE

By Matthias Williamson

## Photo Description

One man is licking another man's face. The one being licked does not look like he approves.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

Guy #1 on left

*"What is he DOING?! Just coz I'm the only gay guy on the team doesn't mean I want just ANYONE slobbering over me. Please. I have standards."*

Guy #2:

*"I know it was a dare, but I couldn't help myself. I can't get him out of my head. He's just so damn... edible. I've never wanted to touch another guy. Ever. I think I'm going mad."*

*I'd like a bit of conflict between these two, perhaps with Guy #2 harbouring a secret crush on the known gay, Guy #1. Our gay guy picks up the signs, but remains unconvinced that his admirer is anything other than a complete douchebag. It takes a lot of persuasion before he will accept that Mr. Closet is serious—and the man of his dreams.*

*I'd love an enemies-to-lovers theme on this. Lots of tension, pining and delicious lust that slowly simmers, then explodes in a spectacular fashion. No paranormal, historical or shifters please—and a HEA or HFN. Thank you!*

*Smoochies :)*

Anna

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** college, rugby, rivals to lovers, asexual, drug use, first time, homophobia, HFN

**Content Warnings:** rape, watersports/non-consensual

**Word Count:** 14,992

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# **DARE**

**By Matthias Williamson**

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## Prologue

### ***CAL BEARS, Getting Ready to Lick the Competition.***

A stupid headline, since the picture under it showed Theo licking me, his own fucking teammate. Not that I wanted or expected his tongue anywhere near my face. I've rewound that moment over and over in my brain, and I get the same reaction that the stupid picture shows. Something akin to *WTF* and *EW*! And at the end, when he whispered in my ear, I just turned and looked at him.

"What? You serious?"

His eyes had this mesmerized look to them.

His fingers curled tightly around my own as I got up, exasperated. What is it with straight guys thinking that just because I'm gay means I want every man that walks the earth? And then it dawned on me—I'm pretty much an open book. I walk around like the men of the Renaissance who strutted with their cod pieces out for everyone to see. Talking about this guy I was with or that guy.

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## Part One – High School

Wyatt

School had never been tough for me really; I mean, it was acting, dancing, costumes and shows, shows, shows. I wasn't the best actor in the class, but I could sew a mean costume, or dance my heart out. I always got the lead in the dream sequence, or they'd do this crazy thing with the lights, because it was Hollywood High after all, and the funds that went into that theater department blew most sports programs out of the water. So, the actor with two left feet would have me as their understudy, but I'd do the dance sequence that the director always needed to include. Or there were the summer recitals where we'd take a modern song and turn it into some classical revision.

There was the time when my best friend, Eddie, and I had caught Hiram's Sauce-Box at a convention. They were fucking awesome, and I wanted to fuck the violinist, even if he didn't go for me. It didn't really matter, because we got this fucking awesome video of them performing "*Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*". Eddie and I relooped the old song with the new song, and I created a steampunk dance for my senior performance. Of course, we both got A's and when I sent our home video to Hiram's Sauce-Box, they offered to play for the school.

The problem with schools like Hollywood High is that not everyone on campus likes the same music. Hell, at the time, no one had heard of Hiram's Sauce-Box, so they ended up not being able to come, but my buddy and I were invited to be special guests at their LA concert. It was awesome; even though the closest I got to bang-banging anyone was lying on the floor beneath the violinist's kilt.

"So, what are you wearing under your kilt?" I hoped he'd say that he was regimental.

He smirked and said, "Nothing. If I had something, it'd be called a skirt."

We laughed, and I don't think he expected me to crawl on the floor between his legs. He just smiled and continued to kiss the chick on his arm, even as I slid my hand up his thigh and cupped his balls. I think he was into it, but got embarrassed. My buddy came in the room looking for me, saw me on the floor and pulled my legs to take me out from my discovery. The balls slid from my hand, and I grinned as I was pulled away. The violinist chuckled and went back to kissing his girl.



Becky, Uzbekistan, Beckers, Eddie and Edward were all the things I usually called my best friend. This time, when I stood up to look into his eyes, I said, "Fucker... I was so close to being in a three-way with my conquest. What the fuck are you doing pulling me out?"

He looked at me and sighed. "The cops are outside and you're not of age, my friend. I'm saving you... and him." He motioned to the kilt wearer, who had moved to the sofa against the wall. As we turned to leave, my mouth salivated just thinking of his thick cock gagging the back of my throat. I waved slowly, sighed and turned to follow Eddie out the door. We walked down the block to catch a cab back home to the hills. I paid to send Eddie back to his place, and I went in the kitchen and pulled out a wine cooler that Sally had left in the fridge.

I dropped my clothes along the way to the hot tub overlooking the Hollywood Hills. After placing the wine cooler on the planter's edge, I dove into the infinity pool first, swam the length, got to the end, climbed out, picked up the bottle and slipped into the hot tub. The 'rents weren't home tonight; I'd been informed that they were attending one of Sally James' book readings. My stepmother is a romance writer, she's very wealthy, and, in fact, this is her home. She lets the three of us live here. Braden and Sasha are her spawn from a previous, and I'm Wyatt's from a previous. My real mom died in a plane crash, we try to remember, at least Wyatt, Sr. does. I'd been with her for ten years and I can't remember what she looked like.

My stepbrother, Braden, was a year older than me, living at home but working in the film industry. As I lay in the Jacuzzi sipping the horrible wine cooler, I was filled with thoughts about the rave we were going to on the weekend. I was secretly hoping to hook up with Braden or one of his friends; after all, we had goofed-off a couple of times after I realized we were both gay.

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Eddie wasn't with us; in fact if he had been, I probably wouldn't have taken as many drugs as were offered me. Braden told me to suck on the candy diamond he'd handed to Caleb, Nicky and I. He also wrote on the top of our hands, "*Don't Worry UR ON DRUGS!*" We danced for hours, and I swear I lost all the weight I'd gained over the summer eating at the fucked-up corn dog stand in the mall. I never wanted to work in a mall again.

Well, I haven't been a virgin since I was about fifteen. I always looked a little old for my age. So, when I woke up on my stomach, naked, I wasn't very

surprised. I looked at my hand and saw that I'd been on drugs. I still felt a little groggy, and my eyes were hazy since I had slept with my contacts in. I blinked a few times, turning my eyes in circles to get them wet again. Slowly, everything came into view.

I looked around the room, scanning everything around me, trying to figure out where I was. The covers were piled on the floor behind me, and there were clothes everywhere. A brown leather belt on the bed beside me, and on the left, under the window, I saw Braden passed out with Nicky, his best buddy, lying in a puddle of vomit. "Oh... shit..."

I pushed my hands into the mattress, felt a leg, thought it was Caleb and moved to help them out. I nearly got out of the bed, when I felt a thick hand grasp my wrist and yank me back. I fell against a body; he was naked, lying on his back—not Caleb. He looked into my eyes, and I just froze. He pulled me closer and then pressed down on the back of my head as I was shoved down the length of his erection.

I didn't know what to do. I choked as the head slammed against the back of my throat. My eyes bulged out as I slapped his thighs. I was freaking out. I started gagging, barely able to breathe and screaming through the saliva. It went on for so long and then *oh, fuck*, he was coming... I had two options. I could hold this huge amount of cum in my mouth to spit in his face, or swallow, because I couldn't think of breathing at the same time. So, in my panic, I swallowed. He still didn't let me up, though. I risked looking to my left and saw his grin as he began pissing down my throat. I thrashed more wildly, kicking my feet and scratching at his legs. I heard him chuckle.

"Yeah... this is the best toilet boy ever, you'll take anything from me, won't you?" Tears splashed against his thighs as I learned how to breathe spiked to his cock. Then, I felt warm hands on the back of my legs, and the man who had molested me slumped to the side, his eyes closed. His dick was still rigid, but his hand had fallen away from me, and I was pulled, from behind, into the arms of Caleb. The youngest, sweetest of Braden's friends, Caleb wiped the corners of my mouth with his fingertips. He held me as I cried.

"I want to pummel that asshole." He squeezed me tighter, like holding on to me to keep me safe protected him from having to beat up the man.

I lifted my head and saw that Braden was throwing the brass table lamp, that he had used to clobber the guy, to the floor, reaching his hand out for the telephone cord that Nicky had pulled out of the wall, and using it to tie the

man's hands up. Nicky jumped on the bed, straddled the guy and pulled the permanent marker that he'd used to write on our wrists from his pocket, and wrote RAPER on the man's forehead.

Up till that moment, there was silence in the room and then Nicky snarled, "Let's piss on the fucker."

Braden put up his hand and said, "It'd only be more trace of us in the room."

We dressed quickly and stumbled out of the room into the bright Sunday morning sunlight. I was shaking and my head still throbbed with the beats of the night before. I remembered feeling the beads on my wrists and the kisses of all the boys, even Braden... of his tongue down my throat, of our cocks out, of bracelets being placed everywhere.

It took us a long time to realize we'd only been in the room upstairs from ours. Caleb drew a bath for me, but Braden was worried I'd drown, so he took the bath with me. Holding my head on his chest, I slid into his arms and I kissed his nipple before falling asleep. I'm glad he was there with me, because I could have died.

Wrinkled, I rose from the tub just as Caleb came out of the shower, the room steamy from the hot water, and I thanked him the only way I knew how. I lowered to my knees. He pulled me up and led me to the closest bed in the room. "Not now, Wyatt. Let's just sleep." He pulled back the blankets and we held each other as we fell fast asleep.

It was close to midnight when we all woke. I had finals at noon, Braden had to be on set at eight, and Nicky had to open the store at seven. Caleb was the only one without a job, so he drove us all night back to Hollywood. We'd been in Palm-Fucking-Dale. Wide-awake, my mind kept replaying what had happened in that hotel room. I didn't want to think about it. I just wanted to shut it out, so, sitting in the front seat, I pulled out my Chemistry 4 book and tried to go over the tables, as Nicky and Braden slept another sleep-of-death in the back.

"So, you think you'll get into Berkeley?" Caleb asked as he drove steadily.

"I hope so; I don't have many other options. I want out of this city, though. It's so fake."

Caleb laughed. "Yeah. I'm impressed that you brought your schoolwork to a rave."

“Well, I have to keep up my GPA. The steampunk dance recital isn’t going to get me in—it’ll help, but I’ve got to pass the classes...” I started crying, slowly at first, but then I was blubbering like a fool, sniffing and then snot, and I couldn’t stop.

Caleb pulled the car to the side of the road and turned to me, pulling me as close as he could. “Hey... let it out, don’t hold it in.”

“Why couldn’t I fight back? I could have just bit off his cock, but no, I swa... swallowed. I swallowed his cum, swallowed his piss. If Braden hadn’t hit him with that lamp, I don’t know what else he would have done. Slapped... his legs, didn’t even scratch... I deserved it, I deserve whatever happens to m... me.”

“No... no, don’t say that, you didn’t deserve any of that. The prick took advantage.” He got out of the car, came around to my side and after opening the door, pulled me into his arms, gently holding me.

“Thank you Caleb, for everything.”

In a moment of silence that stretched out far too long, Caleb slowly let me go and walked back to the driver’s side. Once we were on the road again, he stretched his hand out to my knee. “You would have done it for me. We should have been more prepared for that shit.”

I placed my hand on top of his and then brought it to my lips. “Anything you need, friend... just ask.” I looked over my shoulder to the two in the back. Nicky was lying with his head on Braden’s chest, like I had been earlier. The only difference was that they were spooning and Braden was the big spoon, with his cock pressed against Nicky’s ass.

Caleb dropped Nicky off at the store with an assurance that he’d be back later to pick him up. We all agreed that we weren’t sure where our cars were. I was dropped off at Hollywood High next, tucking Caleb’s cell number in my pocket and waving good-bye to them. Braden said he’d see me later at home and to call him if anything happened. I shrugged as I wondered what he thought would happen at school.

I went through my school day in a fog. It wasn’t until I was sitting at the grated table outside with Eddie, that it all caught up to me. I started crying, bursting into tears. He waited for me to settle down, and then he came and sat closer to me and handed me a handkerchief from inside his coat. I loved his hipster look, he was always in a jacket—plaid some days, leather or linen other

days. Today he looked like my English professor, with the suede patches on the elbows. I wiped my eyes and whispered, "I was ra—raped."

"Braden?" Eddie's eyes widened.

"No... no, none of his friends, either. We ended the rave in the hotel room of some guy. He woke up and... raped me. Braden and his friend, Caleb, rescued me I—I can't do this shit anymore." After the tears were wiped from my face, I took a big breath and asked the scary question, "Will you go to the center with me after school? I need to get tested." And then the tears started over again. "Leave it to me to fuck up my life..."

"Wyatt... it's not fucked-up... I'll go with you. Let's just wait for results." Eddie pulled me into his arms, letting me rest my head on his shoulder.

Five classes later, my backpack slung over my shoulder, Eddie and I walked down Highland to Sunset Boulevard, where we hopped on the 232 bus that would take us to the testing center. I'd been familiar with it, ever since I got the fake ID. Scotty insisted that if I were going to be sexually active, I needed to make sure I took any and all tests on a monthly basis. Condom or not, he insisted.

I can hear my adopted Uncle Scotty whispering to me, "If you intend to be a slut, like me... you must protect and be aware of everything going on with your body."

Still in tears, I sat in the office waiting for my blood to be drawn. Sitting down with the nurse who was taking the blood, I admitted to having gone to a rave and waking up naked beside a man who raped my mouth.

Eddie sat beside me through most of it and held my hand. I know it hurt Eddie to hear what I said, because he squeezed my hand, and I saw a tear slide down his cheek. He'd been my best friend for longer than I could remember. We had staged plays in his garage. My mom and his would sew the costumes, and all the neighborhood kids would have small parts. When my mom, Laura, died, the entire world mourned her death. She'd been in one of the planes that hit the World Trade Center. She'd managed to leave a voice mail on the phone, and it took a new marriage for Wyatt, Sr. to erase the message.

She'd said, "*I love my two Wyatts... I'm sorry I can't be there for your birthday, Bub. Your gift is in the...*" and then there was silence. For weeks, I searched high and low for where the gift was. I played and replayed the message to see if I could hear more of it.

Quietly, whispering, "I owe it to her memory to not be like this anymore." I turned to Eddie and then to the nurse. "I want to be tested for everything, all the STDs and HIV. I need to know."

They told me the results would be ready in seven to ten days. Eddie spoke up as we sat at the bus bench. "I sent in my application to Berkeley."

I turned, brightened up, and asked, "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Well, we had more pressing things on our minds. I'm not sure I'll get in. My parents don't make nearly what yours do, but I've applied for scholarships."

"You'll get in buddy. We'll be producing our own shows before long." We laughed, and I pitched in for a cab ride to his place. "I'll call Caleb to give me a ride."

For two weeks, I was killing myself repeatedly, giving myself every STD imaginable. I died of AIDS in my dreams, weak, alone and lost. One night, I sat with Sasha in the hot tub, and we talked about school and boys and sex. I gave her the Uncle Scotty speech: "Wear protection, and bring protection. Take care of yourself."

She laughed. "Wyatt, I'm not a whore; I haven't even played with *myself* yet."

Sasha's name was sexier than she was. My little stepsister was even smarter than me and obviously had her dad's face—not that Bruce wasn't handsome, but he wasn't gorgeous either. He was just a guy. She was cute, but she still needed to grow into her face.

The next day I got my acceptance letter from Berkeley, and before I could call him, Eddie called to say he'd gotten in too. We'd be able to drive up together and plans were made. However, smart guy that I am, or not, I suggested that we not room together as freshmen, since that would force us to make new friends in the dorms where it was kind of a controlled environment. Then, in our sophomore year, we'd get a place off campus together. Hell, we'd be together anyways as we both got accepted into the theater department. Eddie agreed.

Turned out that I not only got the thick envelope with the acceptance, but the thin envelope from the LGBT Center that told me I was clear of everything, almost everything. I didn't have AIDS, I had gonorrhea, and there was also a

scheduled appointment to meet with one of the nurses to find out what to do. A few weeks before I left for Berkeley with Eddie, I had my appointment.

“Wyatt, it’s not the end of the world. Just follow the directions on the paper and here’s a prescription.” The nurse handed me a pink envelope. “You just have to be a little more careful.”

I laughed, and said. “Careful? Right. I don’t know how to be careful.” I opened the envelope and pulled out the prescription and the paper, my hands shaking.

She smiled. “Yes, I hear that a lot. At least the cure has gotten better over time. Do you know the reason it’s called ‘the clap’?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“It’s because doctors believed you cured it by slamming something heavy on the penis.”

I smiled and laughed a little as I pulled a pen out of my pocket, and took down phone numbers, statistics and addresses for LGBT resources in Berkeley.

“Wyatt, please believe me when I say it isn’t the end of the world. You’ll stumble—most of our patients have—and maybe you’ll have a crisis or two. I can’t promise it’ll be easy.”

I stood up, extended my hand and said, “Thank you. I understand, it’s better knowing, than not.” I swallowed and made my way out the door.

We left for Berkeley and everything changed. I changed, Eddie changed, and we met new people like we knew we would.

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### *Theo*

My mom did it all alone, not much else she could do. By the time Mr. Gaines, otherwise known as dear old dad, left us, we were living in a tiny one-bedroom apartment in Glendale. None of her family wanted anything to do with us. They hadn’t for years. The Vakians had tried to convince their only daughter not to marry her white boss, and when she did they didn’t want her back when he left her for a younger woman. Yeghisabet, my mom, who prefers to go by Elizabeth, had to marry Mr. Gaines because Samuel, my older brother, was on the way. Mr. Gaines was an attorney, and from what we gathered early on, got mother to sign a prenuptial agreement. She expected to be with him

forever, so she had no problem leaving the tight restrictions of her family for him. I'd been told they were blissfully happy before I was born. Markus came next, and still there was happiness. He loved her, he loved his boys, and he loved everything about us.

Then, I came along, and I was told that I was a difficult birth, mostly because she had to do it all alone. Mr. Gaines wasn't at the hospital for any of it. She got a coworker, Alice, to help her with the breathing classes. Alice was called when Elizabeth's water broke, and Alice drove the menagerie to the hospital.

As I grew up, I watched as Mr. Gaines would come home and yell at her for not having everything ready for him. He'd pull out the paper from his breast pocket and wave it in her face, and tell her she had nothing when he found her, and she'd have nothing when he'd leave her. She'd sit in a heap on the couch, crying.

It was never fine again. We moved into a small apartment, and Mamu had to work three jobs to keep us in that place. Mamu, who always had such fine fingers—long pink nails that I remembered when I was very young, were now cut into sensible nails. I only saw her in the morning when she'd make me breakfast and shoo me off to school. Samuel had a job after school, and Markus did odd jobs for the landlord in the building. I grew up watching everyone in the house work. I even started helping the landlord when I turned thirteen so that Markus could take some extra tests. Samuel, as soon as he could, applied to college and then law school. On full scholarship, he got into UCLA and excelled. Markus was packing great scores on tests too, and I followed suit. The only difference between Markus and me was that I got into football. I had stupid dreams of becoming a professional ball player.

When I was in school, it's all I thought about. I noticed early on that I was different. Everyone else talked about girls or guys they were into. I didn't feel anything for anyone. When I looked at a body, at any person, I couldn't imagine doing anything with them. But, the first time Lisa slid her hand into my hand, I felt the tingling sensation of our skin meeting, joining. Still, I got the same feeling when Peter would place his hand on my shoulder, the curve of his index finger meeting with my neck. Sensations... I reacted to the sensations I experienced, but not the people. I always wondered if I'd explode if I felt other parts of people. The way a tongue felt—the exploration was too much for me to fathom. I cried at night thinking of this; I didn't want to be this way.



Samuel was getting married soon. Markus had a string of girlfriends, and all I could think of was schoolwork, sports and how overwhelmed my body would feel if I had sex with Lisa. For the longest time, I chose to just say I was saving myself.

Lisa, my longtime girlfriend, was on the cheer squad. She'd cheer for me when I was on the field, and then come home with me and jump all over me—always wanting to have sex. She was so hot for me; she'd tell me that, that she wanted me to be the one. I didn't feel like I was the one. Matter of fact, I was pretty sure Peter Cunningham had been the one—he told me as much in the locker room. He also told me how happy he was to be rid of her.

In the locker room the guys were really honest with each other. Because we played as a team, we were family. We teased and joked around in the showers, and we all laughed when Jimmy got a hard-on as we all showered after one game. Peter told him to suck it, pointing to his own dick. We laughed even harder when Jimmy pretended to kneel, and then from out of nowhere, whipped a towel out and snapped Peter in the ribcage.

As we were changing, I admitted to Peter that I wasn't really that interested in Lisa. Peter looked around his locker at me and asked, "Jimmy more your type, buddy?" He grinned. "It's okay, my uncle is that way too. Doesn't make you any worse of a guy."

I laughed and held up my hands. "Oh, no... I'm not a fag." I sat on the bench between the lockers, my towel draped over my legs. "Hell, it'd be better if I knew. I think I just want to be celibate, don't want the shit that happened between my parents to be what makes me who I am. But I'm not sure how much longer I can hold off on Lisa. She's not buying that I'm a virgin-for-god anymore, since we don't even go to church." I laughed and slowly got dressed.

Before that, Peter and I had been teammates and friendly, but from that day forward Peter was my best friend. We both applied to many of the same colleges. I lived vicariously through his sexual adventures. He'd taken me along with him as he met up with some college chicks that he worked with, always saying, *Oh don't mind him. He kisses great, though.* He'd grin at me where I'd be sitting in the back with one of the girls. The girl with him would inevitably ask how he knew I kissed well. Peter would smile at me in the rearview mirror. "We goofed-off once, we're teammates, man."

Truth is, Peter wasn't sure if I was or wasn't gay, and decided he'd come-on to me after a major win before graduation. As we sat on the hood of the car

overlooking this big house in the Hollywood hills, leaning back against the windshield, he placed a hand on my thigh and asked, "Are you sure you aren't? I mean, I could be your first. I've always wanted to know what it'd be like."

I laughed at him and shook my head. "Peter, is this one of those hidden camera fuck-with-your-buddy type shows? No, I'm just not interested in anyone sexually; nothing even really turns me on. I'm so shut down." I leaned back, resting my head on the roof of the car.

It happened so fast. Peter turned, slid his hand behind my head and kissed me. It was slow, it was soft, and it was sensual. And just like with Lisa, nothing. I loved kissing, loved sucking on lips, pulling them in. The nibbling that ensued; the tongue shoved too far back, the retracing of the tongue, the moments where we hung there, little saliva strips between our mouths. We gazed into each other's eyes, because we were enjoying it. And then, back to kissing. When it was done, Peter laughed quietly, placed my hand on his crotch, and he lowered his tentatively to mine. Both of us were flaccid.

We laughed, loudly, and opened beers to celebrate—well everything. The only time we ever talked about it was on those dates, to spice up the girls' imaginations. We found that girls love adventure in their guys. When I got into Berkeley and he got into USC, we knew the friendship wasn't going to last. It was like long-distance dating, not worth the work to hang onto.

The first two years of college, I never let the sex thing become an issue; it just wasn't something I was interested in. Maybe it was my mom, maybe it was Mr. Gaines, or maybe it was Lisa all over my body. There were times I had just let her feel all over me, let her hands grope my body, her fingers or tongue exploring. I cringed on the inside, like there was this terrible film of slime rotating over my skin. I didn't want to experience it. It was better when I was kissing—I was taken to another place, my arms felt stronger, my body felt more energized, and it didn't matter if it was some unnamed sorority girl, Peter, or someone I met in a dark room. Kissing felt good. But the rest of me shut down from another person's touch.

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## Part Two – College: Pre-Dare

### Wyatt – *Gatsby*

Freshman year, my best buddy in the entire world, Eddie Bec, and I still saw each other on campus. He was there when I needed to bounce ideas off him, and I found that Eddie listened better when he was in the middle of something; it was like he could separate what he's doing with what's coming out of my mouth. So, I found him in the flies, hanging lights as usual. I shouted up to him, "So, I'm thinking of doing this dance recital using music from *The Great Gatsby*—you know, the new version with all the hip-hop '30s mash-up songs?"

"Okay... I can see that." He adjusted a light and slipped an orange film over it. "I can see the light cues, lots of glitter, lots of streamers, watery lights... Yeah, that could be wonderful."

I stood on the stage, looking up into the orange light. "But I think I'd like to use normal people, not all the professional dancers here on campus."

He slid out the orange film and replaced it with a green one. "Isn't it their recital as much as it's yours?"

"Yeah... Well, then I need to meet some of the sporty types, I want to give it a sports feel. Maybe I'll teach the dancers some sports moves."

Eddie turned off the light and then leaned down. "Wyatt... what are you dancing around saying?"

"Ok, fine. I found out I need to have some sort of physical education for graduation, and dancing isn't going to cut it. So, I'm going out for the rugby team." I looked at my feet and did some toe points.

He started laughing again. "I don't think they'll like your kind there."

I flounced, placed my hands on my hips, and spoke in my most queeny voice, "What forever do you mean? Should I not show up in capris and a halter?"

We both laughed, and he went back to working in the flies, adjusting the lights for the current show specs. I hadn't been lying though; I needed something athletic for graduation, so I figured rugby would be a great way to meet guys.

I'd been a lot more careful about my promiscuity, especially since the scare in the summer. I really hadn't been looking for a relationship in any shape or form, just looking for friends. It's a hard thing at school, being alone.

Anyway, when Coach Dean met with me, he asked, "What sorts of sports experience do you have?"

"Well, not much. I was in Little League when I was ten, mostly because my dad wanted it. And I was going to go out for football in high school, but there was way too much padding. I'm a dancer, and I read somewhere that there is a lot of footwork in rugby."

Coach Dean laughed. "Son... I'm not sure this is the game for you."

I leaned in, whispered, "It's okay... I've seen you on the field. You do have some fancy footwork of your own, in the Fog." I was referring to the gay rugby team out of San Francisco.

Coach Dean leaned back in his chair. "Son, I don't do well with blackmail. Besides, the campus knows I'm gay. The Dean was invited to my wedding three years ago."

I felt my face get hot, and I stuttered out, "Uh... no, no, no, not what I was... doing, agh... saying."

I hung my head as the coach continued talking. "Look, if you want to try out, I'll let you. But I won't give you any special treatment. Rugby is tough, not just on the field, but in the locker room."

Over the next couple days of tryouts, Coach Dean spent a lot of time shaking his head as he saw me weave around his best players; I took to the moves like I'd been doing them all my life. And in those moments when I never thought I'd survive the pile-up of guys, I just thought back to my crazy, promiscuous nights and I'd always laugh when I was finally released.

"Wyatt, it's not going to be easy, I've told you, but I think you'll be a great asset to the team. Welcome to Cal Bears!" Coach Dean shook my hand, gave me a locker combination, a stack of shorts, and a towel.

I should have listened then. But, after that first workout, running up and down the field, moving between the ball, from line to line, I had a million ideas for the dance recital. I'd started sketching costumes and casting the principle dancers in my head. The workout had been a flurry of movement; just like the dance steps I'd started plotting out on the paper with my locker combination on it.

The team had been pretty cool with me at first; no one treated me differently. That changed after the recital took place, and there was an article written about it in *The Daily Californian*. There was a blurb about me and my future plans, and under that, a picture of me in a Cal Bears rugby uniform.

Most of the guys on the team were no longer cool. Some of them felt that because I was on the team, people would assume that everyone on the team was gay. No one wanted to be on my scrum team, or wanted to tackle me, or hell, even throw me the ball. One morning, Coach Dean noticed and told the guys to cut it out. We were a team; we'd already won a few games and were shoo-ins for the championship again, as long as we remained focused. About half of the team started to accept me, after I had been a pivotal player in the game against Santa Clara University. The others that didn't like me, really showed me how.

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### *Theo – Gray*

At Berkeley, I didn't have to be anything other than who I wanted the world to see. I worked out more often than not, feeling my skin grow taut and my muscles move. I never got too close to anyone, and I could ink it up to needing to graduate.

I discovered there was a name for what was going on with me in the sexuality course I took last semester. I'm not crazy like I had thought; I'm just asexual. And there are even different types of asexuality. I'm what they call gray A... I think. There are some that fall in love and never want sex, and some that only seek sex, but not love. Some only want sex once they've made that special connection, and some have that sexual attraction, but not often. I had thought I was just a plain old celibate.

And then I saw Wyatt Laird.

One afternoon, I found myself sitting under a tree, thinking about everything and nothing. I noticed Wyatt a little ways away, dancing with some other people. Suddenly, I was thinking about moves on the rugby field, of grabbing onto the guys, my hands grasping waists and yanking down to have them fall on top of me. This wasn't who I had been; I was pretty sure this was very, very new.

At practice, I stared at him from across the field. The way he moved used to make me sick, but after a while I couldn't take my eyes off of him. I kept hoping to be on the opposing practice team so I could pull him down on top of me. I didn't know what to think. I'd never felt anything for anyone before.

I emailed Peter to tell him that I thought I might be gay after all, but hoped he still liked me. He sent an email back that said he fucking knew it. I'm glad we're still friends.

I don't know why, but I just knew Wyatt would be into me. I mean, I'm a pretty hot guy—my mother is Armenian and Mr. Gaines was Swedish. It's a hot look: icy blue eyes, curly dark black hair, and a taut washboard stomach. I work out. I'm strong. Hell, I've bench pressed the weight of Wyatt.

I couldn't wait to wrap my arms around his waist, to hold him and kiss him. So, I thought up a way to get that.

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### *Wyatt – Pink*

My car was a cute, little black Mini Cooper. It was given to me by the 'rents for getting into Berkeley, graduating with honors and, well, not killing myself. My stepmom was more aware of my promiscuous ways than my father ever would be. Mostly because she was friends with some of the men I had been seeing on the weekends. She never told them to stop; I loved her for keeping her nose out of my personal affairs. I also loved her for the boxes of condoms she'd leave around the house. She just wanted all of her kids to be safe, no matter who or what they were doing.

When I walked to my car that Monday morning, seeing the three large pink letters across the driver's side door made me upset at first, and then I couldn't help the laughter escaping my mouth. They were painted in such perfect strokes: **FAG**. At least the painter had used a coordinating color. I shrugged as I got in the car, ignoring the looks and shaking my head as I drove to campus security to fill out a report and request video proof from the building. The student manning the desk was Michael Simpson, a buck-toothed kid with glasses and pimples. He was quiet as he followed behind me with the camera. Michael took a picture of the graffiti, and one of the license plate before I followed him back inside.

"We'll get the video evidence from Bowles Hall, that's where you said your car was parked, correct?" He placed the pen behind his ear as he quickly typed everything into the computer. "We'll do our best at catching the painter, but it's not a guarantee. You should check the auto shop to see if they can buff the paint off."

"Actually, I was thinking of keeping it. I remember a few years back, the Fag Bug, where the same thing happened and the bug drove around the country

shaming the painters into realizing their crimes. Or some shit. I really don't care. Oh, hey... I'm a fag. Deal with it."

"Yeah? I've got lots of gay friends—what the fuck does it matter really?" The buck-toothed kid laughed and agreed with me. "Anything we find out, we'll contact you."

"Thanks."

I drove around town, never trying to get rid of the paint, letting it saturate into the car. When I pulled up in front of the gym, a couple of the guys who hadn't had any problems with me walked up to the car, whistling. One guy, Elliot Greenway, came up and put his arm around my shoulder. "Buddy, there are a lot more subtle ways to let people know you're gay." He laughed.

I hit him and laughed. "I know, right? Only, this wasn't me. I would have chosen a nicer shade of pink." The four of us walked into the gym. The atmosphere in the locker room was getting better after our having won a few games, and the guys seemed to be getting used to the fact that I was on the team. I think for most of them, it was seeing me hop in the shower, get clean, and then rush to my locker for my next class, instead of spending my time showering, staring at their naked asses.

That day, as we all ran on the field, I noticed the three guys who made up my personal trio-of-hate kept looking my way, laughing. I shrugged and ignored them like usual. The vandalism could have been any of them, but I wouldn't know for sure until the video tapes showed up.

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### *Wyatt – Walls*

I heard my phone ring as I stepped into the shower, let it go to voice mail as I soaped up and dried off. It rang again, and yet again, twenty minutes after I left the building to head to the fag car. I finally looked at the phone and noticed that two of the three calls had left messages. All three were different numbers.

One was from a gravelly, older voiced gentleman. "Sir, just calling to let you know that we found your number on the bathroom stall in the library this afternoon. If this is a real phone number, please do not leave graffiti like this on the walls again. If this is a wrong number, we are sorry." The man didn't hang up right away—I could hear light breathing on the line as though he were trying to figure out what to do. There was the screech of a chair and the rustle of

clothing. About ten seconds after the call had begun, the gravelly voice said, "If it's real. You can reach me at..."

I clicked on the next number. "Hey... wanna get together in the stall? Like, we can meet at the hour. I don't have classes on Thursday, the twenty-third, so I'll be waiting outside the bathroom, at the top of each hour."

It was odd—I couldn't figure out what it meant. Then, I got six more calls over the next four hours. Each was different. The gravelly voiced man called back three of those six times. After I finished with rehearsal, I answered the phone when I recognized it was the same number again. "Hey..." With maybe a little too much anger in my voice.

"Oh... your voice sounds nicer than your words."

I couldn't help looking at the phone, confused. "What? Where'd you get my number?"

"I told you, we found it written on the wall in the library bathroom," the man responded. "It was really the best graffiti I'd seen in a long time, you know, with the nice drawing and all. And though I don't match the dimensions you'd drawn, I'd be more than happy to reciprocate."

If only to get my number off the wall, I decided to hit the library on Thursday. "Look, if I show up, can you show me which stall had the number?"

Probably the worst mistake I could make, but I was tired of getting phone calls. The guy sounded creepy, but I pictured him as some weak librarian.

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*Wyatt – 6225*

The voice and I met outside of the library. It was closed, and he was sitting on a planter. He wore dark sunglasses, even though dusk was creeping across campus. His leather jacket covered a blue and white plaid shirt, and his jeans were worn out at the knees. He had a leash in one hand and a full beard. I could see the hair on his chest peeking out of the shirt that was unbuttoned to about three buttons down—as though at any moment he'd just rip everything open. He didn't appear weak at all, not in the least. In fact, he was a burly man, one that could probably lift all 175 pounds of me.

"8754?" I moved a step closer. I wasn't sure why he held a black leather leash, so I looked around for a dog. The overhead lights came on; it was a Wednesday night, not much action going on tonight. As I got closer, he looked



sort of familiar, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I just stood there with my hands in the back pockets of my jeans.

He looked at me and grinned. "Right... 6225?" He rose from the planter and moved quicker than I expected. "Interesting note you placed on the wall. Too bad my boss made me paint it over today."

"Would you believe I didn't write it?" I shook my head with a nervous chuckle. Still, I extended my hand. "Thanks for painting over it."

He pulled the unleashed hand from his front pocket, and I could swear he'd been grasping something in the pants. We shook hands as he said, "Roger... wanna suck me off?"

My mouth had gone from a smirk to a capital O, followed by a lick of my lips.

"I'm not looking for dates. I just wanted to make sure that the number had been covered up."

The man quickly slid his hand down along my arm to grab my elbow and yank me down to the ground. My face was inches from his crotch. It happened so fast that I didn't have a second to protest. He wrapped the leash around my head, attached one end to his belt loop and the other clicked in place. No one came to my defense—the area was deserted.

"You want this, explains why you'd put your number on a bathroom wall." I could hear the zipper slide down, and I remembered a move I'd learned from Caleb. I head butted him in the crotch, and he fell to his knees. I couldn't get up fast enough... I thought I heard the guy gag and cuss at me, but I didn't wait to find out. I ran as fast as I could to my car, and right back to the security office.

I sat in my car for a good forty-five minutes before I realized it wouldn't look good. They probably wouldn't even believe me, or maybe they'd think I wrote the number down myself.

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*Wyatt – Rip*

On Tuesday at practice, I ran out on the field, feeling down but determined. During one play, Elliot lifted me up to catch the ball that Brent was kicking down the field, which wouldn't have normally been an issue, but when I was put down, I felt a coolness that had not been there before. My shorts had ripped

as I barreled down the field, and David grabbed me to pull me to the ground, my shorts ripping off in his hands.

There was much laughter, mostly from the guys on my side, guys who didn't give a fuck that I was gay. David's face was red with anger. "Dude, do you gotta show us that shit?" With my jock on, I ran back to my locker to get another pair of shorts.

When I got to the field, coach looked at his watch and shook his head. "Practice is only another ten, just sit there."

On Wednesday, everything was fine till the very end. I'd just placed the ball into the scrum, and as the scrum-half, I was watching the ball kick towards the back, so I bent to grab it and ran down the field. I was moving so fast, dancing past Brent and David, and was close to Theo, when he reached out and grabbed at my shorts, right at the middle of my back, and they ripped off. I fell forward into the grass.

"What the fuck?" I couldn't help but scream. I stood up and kicked the ball, ran back to the lockers, got another pair of shorts, and Coach Dean made me sit out again.

"Wyatt, this doesn't look good. What's going on with your shorts? You aren't moving any faster than normal, and that's two pair in one week." Coach went back to watching, and I sat on the bench.

Usually this wasn't an issue, but my shorts were starting to run low. So I asked my costuming buddies at the theater to reinforce all of them.

That was when Christine spoke up, "These shorts aren't old, see right here?" She pointed to just above where my blue CAL Bears shorts had ripped. "That's a little hole that looks like it's from a pocket knife, or something small. I don't think this was an accident. It feels more purposeful." She grinned. "You trying to show off your ass again, Wyatt?"

"No, it's not me... damn it, it's gotta be someone on the team, but I'm the only gay one. Everyone else is getting along with... fuck."

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*Theo – Dare*

We'd just won against UCLA and had been laughing and drinking in Brent's dorm room and talking about all the pranks that had been pulled since Wyatt first showed up on the team. Sure, he was an asset, but some of the guys

thought he was just too much of a fag to be on the team. They agreed it was going to give the team a bad name. No one brought up the fact that Coach Dean was gay and married, because he was older and didn't flaunt his lifestyle. Not that Wyatt did much more than admit to being gay and a dancer.

Brent opened another beer and started speaking. "So, I bought the prettiest color pink, actually had Ashley pick it out for me, and she watched as I ran over to his gay clown car and painted the letters thick, so that it could be seen from a distance. I even sent Ashley a text to make sure she could see it from across the lot. I ran back to get her, and threw the paint can in the trash next to the chemistry building."

David laughed and pointed to the box of sharpies and the team roster, taking a swig of his Miceys. "I stole the roster from Coach Dean's desk and found Wyatt's cell number. Then, I went to the three bathrooms I'd seen the most graffiti in, and drew a huge cock with an open mouth. I wrote, *For a great time, call me. I'm available anytime after practice.*" He laughed so hard, he coughed beer through his nostrils.

I sat down between them, getting the last beer from the box. "Remember all week when his shorts were ripping? That was me, I put holes in his shorts, shoved my knife into the fabric so that when anyone pulled him down, his shorts would rip apart." *Of course, I was killing two birds with one stone—I got to see his hot ass and he was embarrassed. I kinda feel like a prick for doing it. But, I'm glad I'm not the only one pulling shit on him.*

"Oh fuck man, we should totally do something big. I don't know, like, someone kiss him or come-on to him, and then drop him or..." I suggested as the guys all laughed. "Like, I had a friend in elementary school that dared someone to be friends with a boring girl. He spent all the lunch breaks with her and said at the end of the month, 'I don't even like you.'" *This could be the perfect way to tell him I want him, if only the guys went along with it.*

I thought they'd forgotten about my suggestion, but the guys brought it up again as we opened the third six-pack. Brent said he'd shake his phone dice, and we'd all pick numbers. I didn't like that idea—what if I didn't get to be the one to kiss him—but I had to go along with it. I picked three, Brent seven, and David picked ten. His phone was set to a twelve-sided die, and he shook it. I passed out the Mickey's bottles, and we closed our eyes and slammed the bottles down. I opened my eyes and saw that the number was two. I sighed, putting on a show, but smiling inside. Truthfully, I wanted to do it. I really,

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*really* did. For the first time in my life, I wanted to kiss someone. Someone I picked out, even if it was because of a dare I put on the table.

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## Part Three – College: Post-Dare

### *Theo – Him*

So, when I plopped beside Wyatt on the sofa outside of the coach's office, I just turned to look into his cute brown eyes. I sighed and went for it. Instead of kissing him, I started down at his chin, my fingers grasped onto his as I licked up his cheek. When I got to his ear, I whispered, "I really want to fuck your..." I tried to leave a kiss on his ear, but he pulled away.

"What? You serious?" Wyatt looked at me so oddly, jumped off the sofa and smacked Brent in the chest as he walked to the bathroom. "What the hell?"

The guys that were there laughed, and more guys came in to see what happened. Brent passed his phone around. "I got a pic, Theo, for you to remember." He was such an ass.

"It was a joke, guys. Why'd you take a picture?"

Brent laughed. "Well, we didn't think you'd go through with it. Then you went and *licked* his face. Gross, man. What's that girlfriend of yours..."

David chimed in, "Wait, you know we've never actually met her. Maybe you licked him because you're a fag too?"

As soon as *fag* came out of his mouth, Coach Dean stuck his head out. "Come on guys, get on the field. We've got a big game coming up against BYU."

Brent walked out to the field with David. "I'm gonna text this to Ashley and see if she can get it in the paper. Get them both out there." They laughed and left.

It took me as long as it took Wyatt to get out on the field. We were on the same side for practice, so there wouldn't be any tackles in my future. There were a couple of scrums where I got to hold onto his waist as he tried to take over the ball, but that was it. For the most part, it was just us trying to not get angry at each other. Three hours later, when the coach told us to hit the showers, Wyatt was one of the last to enter. He stalked to the back lockers, and I slowly made my way over, still able to taste him on my tongue.

"Look..." was all I could get out before Wyatt cut me off.

“No, you look. Just because I’m gay doesn’t mean I suck on every cock I see. You don’t just lick some guy on the face and expect him to reciprocate. You’ve been such an ass to me, such a douche, and you think I’ll just forget because you’re waving your cock in my face?” Wyatt wrapped his towel around his waist before he pulled off his shorts, underwear, and protective cup. It was all I could do to not follow suit.

Once he walked away, I sat on the bench and leaned down to pick up his discarded clothing. Slowly, thinking, I folded his shorts and underwear, and then I picked up the cup. I couldn’t help myself. A quick look showed none of the guys were around. I held it against my heart for a brief second before I leaned down to leave a kiss on it. If I couldn’t kiss him, I’d kiss something of his. Man, I was seriously losing it. I folded my own shorts and black briefs and put them on the bench before placing my cup next to his. I pulled the towel around my waist and went to the shower stall next to his.

“Let me explain...” I placed my towel on the hook and tried not to look at his hot body, but my own body ignored anything my eyes tried not to see. For the first time in my entire life, I became erect at the sight of another person’s body. I turned the water to cold and stepped under it. “Look, I’m sorry.”

I didn’t hear anything, and out of the corner of my eye noticed that he’d stepped away from the shower and was walking back down to the lockers. I stayed where I was, the hard-on not releasing. Hiding in the corner as much as I could, I started jacking off, thinking of his taut body wrapped around my own.

“Goddamn it!” Wyatt yelled.

The yell took me out of my reverie, and I raced out of the showers to look into his aisle. He’d kicked the folded clothes everywhere. “Hey... what’s wrong?”

“Why you gotta mess with my shit?” Wyatt dried off quickly and got dressed without saying another word.

When I got back to my locker, I looked down and noticed that he’d taken my black briefs instead of his. I hesitated a little, but then pulled his on. *Nice, we wear the same size.* When I walked out of the locker room, I had a smile on my face, knowing that the cotton that rubbed against my dick, had rubbed against him earlier. Now, how to get him out of my briefs and convince him to take my virginity.

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*Wyatt – Newspaper*

The next day, I waited for Theo outside the gym, leaning against the wall. I looked at the picture in the sports section again and sighed. I rolled the paper up—it would work just fine for what I had planned, smacking him upside the head. He'd usually show up with his two goons on either side of him, like they were his soldiers and only did what he told them to do, but I'd seen Brent and David enter the gym alone, both of them snickering at me. David grabbed Brent's shoulders and fake licked his face. I laughed when Brent shoved him away, and they both ran through the door. They couldn't get the gay away fast enough, I guess.

About fifteen minutes later, I saw Theo walking slowly towards the gym, his eyes focusing on his toes and the ground three inches ahead of him. I didn't have it in me to smack him.

"Hey, Theo," I shouted to get his attention.

When he lifted his head, what had been a smirk, probably prepared for a comeback, fell away into a goofy smile. And when he spoke, his voice literally squeaked as though it was changing, but I was pretty sure the guy was about twenty-three, like me. "Oh... Hi, Wyatt."

"Look, Theo, I don't know what you want."

"You..." He looked down, bashful.

"I'm confused, dude. You're straight. This..." I held up the paper so he could see the picture. "This, whatever this is, is not a come-on. This is a practical joke. A lick on the face and a whisper of *I wanna fuck you*, does not a gay man make. It makes *this* gay man uncomfortable." I turned to walk away. "Just stick to your girlfriend, she'll give you what you want."

He was still standing there when I walked into the gym. I walked past Coach Dean in his office, and I wanted to talk to him, but he waved me on, so I picked up a couple of towels and headed to my locker in the back. No one ever took any of the lockers around me. Here we were, grown men in a world where gay marriage and equal rights abounded, but they were still afraid my sweat would turn them gay. I'd never gone for the straight ones—there was always too much baggage—and wasn't about to now.

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*Theo – Beer*

There was this song that I'd swear was basically written with me in mind, "Do I Wanna Know" by The Arctic Monkeys. I thought of Wyatt that night, wearing his briefs like I could feel him against me. I didn't know why it was causing me so much trouble, why I couldn't get him out of my head, but I just wanted to know... What would it be like to lie next to him, to actually enjoy the feel of his hands on my body?

I started drinking when I woke up Saturday afternoon, right after I found texts from both David and Brent that said, *WHATS UP FAG?* After I finished the first six-pack, I walked around the dorms looking for a party. I tried every one and got a couple of drinks, but nothing that would help me forget stuff.

I took a cab to Folsom, got out and started walking around the area. Each bar I stopped at, I ordered a drink or two and just stood there, watching everyone and no one, looking at their bodies and wondering why I wasn't getting excited, why I couldn't feel anything. Why I had to be asexual. It was like those times with Lisa. But then, a man pressed up against me, and my stomach was pushed against the bar. I could feel his muscled legs pressed against the backs of my own. I tried to turn around, but was pinned there. Then, the sensation disappeared, and the body that had been holding me in place was gone. I was lost in the old feelings and frustrated. Idly, my fingertip traced the wrinkles on the Budweiser label, and I got this odd thought out of nowhere—that the bottle reminded me of my own cock.

I downed my beer, left one place and entered another. Having never been to any of them before, I didn't know if I fit their clientele. But I did notice that other than the thick man that pressed up against me earlier, I didn't have one single guy try to pick me up. By the time I'd made it to Truck, the last place I found, and I was beginning to feel the effects of all the beers. My hands slid over the wood walls as I entered to the smell of hot food and hot sweat. There were dark lights, pounding beats and so many faces. Large, small, bearded and not. Seemed like a very seedy place. I pulled out a bar stool and half sat on the edge, half stood, like I was more confident standing than sitting. I ordered another Budweiser, slid my ten bucks across the oiled-down counter and closed my eyes, licked my lips, and waited. In no time, my body was moving to the music.

I felt a rough hand slide beside my own, and I slowly opened my eyes to see that a bear of a man had taken up the stool beside me.



“Your drink?” His gravelly voice was a little louder than my sensation-saturated body could handle. I nodded groggily and reached for my cold beer. Again, my finger traced the wrinkles on the label. “Ever notice how the wet wrinkles on a beer bottle feel like the veins of a cock?” I laughed and took a swig of the familiar brew.

The man beside me pressed his hand to my leg. Even as drunk as I was, I could feel his roughness over my jeans, feel the grid of my pants under his thick-callused hand. Through heavy-lidded eyes, I saw his bearded face. His bald head reflected the light in the room, and I spread my legs a little wider for his hand, curious. His grin was kind of cute, with the way his upper lip had an overhang of hair from his mustache. A thought flashed through my head—*the fur should be interesting*. I tried to stand, but his hand pushed me down, his fingers sliding closer to my crotch. I thought of Wyatt, how I wished it was him, and I couldn’t help it, I began to grow in my pants.

He leaned in, his rough voice grating in my ear. “You gonna be my boy tonight?” He shrugged his shoulder towards the back room. I shrugged, thinking I’d never know what it’d be like if I didn’t try, and nodded my head. We both stood and the guy maneuvered me in front of him, leading me to the back room.

That’s when I saw him, Wyatt, sitting on a stool at the back of the bar. I bit my bottom lip as we moved passed him, and I wasn’t sure if he saw me. I thought about going over to try to talk to him, to tell him that the dare had been a stupid idea and that I was sorry, but he probably hated me.

Instead, I followed the man, and then we were in a dark room, lit only by old beer signs. I was confused and stumbled. Then, I heard a click sound and felt a tug on my belt loop. I brought my hand up to push him away, but he wrapped a length of leather around my wrist. There was another click, and my eyes focused on the leather wound round my wrist to see that it was connected to my belt loop. I was shoved against the wall, and his rough, sweaty hand slammed over my face as he grouped my body. He pulled the zipper down on my pants and pulled out my dick. *What the hell?*

My eyes burned, and I started to cry. This was stupid—why was I here? I didn’t want my first time to be with this man. I wanted Wyatt so bad, but I couldn’t even scream for him. The man pulled his cock out and shoved me to the ground so I was right in front of him. I only had seconds, and I started to say, “Wy...”

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The man answered, "Because I need a toilet boy to take care of me."

Up till the moment those words were uttered, I hadn't seen Wyatt there, but he jumped from the shadows and shoved the man away from me. "I knew you looked familiar."

My attacker came back swinging, smacking Wyatt in the stomach, which caused him to stumble back into me. Wyatt took a deep breath and ran towards the bald man, his fists swinging left to right, catching the attacker in the face. There was a solid hit that caused the man to fall in a heap.

Wyatt turned back to me, zipped up my pants and pulled me to my feet. "Come on, lets get you back to campus."

"I can't go back, the guys hate me. Think I'm a fag... I'm sorry, I... I just want to hug you." I half-chuckled, maybe from happiness at seeing Wyatt, maybe just from hysteria. Wyatt didn't hug me, but he led me outside. I undid the leather belt from around my wrist, clipped it to my belt loop, and wrapped my arm around Wyatt's shoulder as we waited outside for a cab to take us back to my dorm.

"You saw me walk back there?" I sat on a bench close by.

"Yeah, I thought the guy looked familiar. We had a run-in at the library a couple of days ago." He'd brought out his phone.

"Why'd you rescue me? I've been such an asshole." I had the leather belt wrapped around my wrists again.

"Because I heard what he said to you." He used his phone. "It was the same guy who raped me a year ago."

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### *Wyatt – Sleep*

I sent a text to my roommate, Daniel, to let him know I was bringing a friend to crash at the dorm so that when we arrived he wouldn't be too freaked out. But as with every other time I brought someone over, Daniel stood at the door, a look of derision on his face.

"Your buddy, hmm?" Daniel stood with his arms crossed.

"Well, my teammate. I wouldn't say that Theo and I are exactly buddies." Theo was really drunk and near the pass-out stage; I stumbled into the room nearly falling to the floor with him in tow. "Can I have a hand getting him to the bed?" I pointed to my bed in the corner by the window.

Daniel, still a nice guy, even angry like he was, helped me lower Theo to the bed. I started to take off his shoes and socks. "Look, he can't go back to his dorm room, his buddies are vicious assholes."

"Right, and you're planning on just going to sleep?" Daniel laughed. "I remember the last time you said that, but no, you and your friend fucked like bunnies all night, and I had to wake up Benji to let me into his room."

I placed Theo's socks in his shoes and pulled his stained shirt over his head. It looked as though at one point, he'd spilled quite a lot of alcohol on himself.

"Daniel, I have no desire to fuck him. Okay? He's straight. I'm just going to let him crash in my bed, and I'll sleep on the sofa."

Daniel sighed loudly and walked to his desk, shaking his head. "I'll just call Benji and we'll go out on a date, which means I'll just stay at his place." He gathered his backpack, shoved a T-shirt and shorts in the back and left, smiling.

I followed him to the door. "Seriously, Daniel? I was just being a good teammate. I'm not going to take advantage of him."

Without turning back, Daniel waved his hand. "It's fine. Just in case."

I slowly shut the door, leaning against it, and looked at Theo lying half on and half off the bed. He'd rolled over onto his stomach, and I could see down the backside of his jeans. I thought about all the stupid things I'd done in the past, and knew that it would be the absolutely most insane if I took advantage of him in this state. I moved to the bed, lifted his leg up and sat beside him.

He flipped over once more and tried to sit up against the wall, his hands going to the buttons on his jeans. "I have ten thumbs, can you help me?" He laughed. "It's not a come-on. I don't know what came over me the other day, buddy. I just need to pass out and don't want to be dressed."

I leaned over and unbuttoned the top and the second. Then he just ripped the pants away from the rest of the buttons, and I got off the bed to tug on the bottoms of his pant legs and help. He sat there for a second, and then pulled his knees up to his chest.

Theo closed his eyes, bit his bottom lip and lowered his head. His voice was barely a whisper. "I'm really sorry. I really wanted to kiss you... I don't know what came over me. I'd only planned on a quick kiss, and I guess I just got caught up in the moment, and I didn't expect the photo, the newspaper article. I just... I'm sorry." He lowered to his side, stretched out and fell asleep. I lifted

the bedspread over him and slowly got undressed. I lay on top of Daniel's bed, pulling my mother's afghan off the couch to wrap myself in the warmth.

*I don't know if I believe him... I want to, but if I were in his shoes... He is really hot, totally the kind of guy I'd go for. I... I mean, fuck. He's not gay, Wyatt. Just let it be.*

I shook my head and blinked my eyes a couple of times and fell asleep thinking about holding onto Theo and kissing those succulent lips.

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### *Theo – Stumbled*

"Where the fuck am I?" I was caught in a blanket and fell out of the bed. I was frantically searching around the room, wondering what was going on, confused and still feeling a little drunk. I couldn't see much, with just a little light coming through the window, like it was early yet.

"My dorm room," a voice I recognized said from the other bed. "I rescued you from the clutches of some asshole." Wyatt jumped out of his bed and met me on the floor, sliding his arm under my own to try and help me up.

"Theo, just come on... the bed." He pointed in the direction of the bed I'd just fallen out of. We stopped—he seemed to be pulling the sheets back—but I lost my balance. We both fell on the bed, me half on top of him, and I passed back out.

I woke a while later—I'm not sure how long—and I saw that Wyatt had fallen asleep next to me. My gaze followed his face, down to his shoulder and to the arm that was pinned under my body. I slid over and placed his arm on his chest, pressing my back against the wall, and just lay there staring at him, his beautiful lips, those lashes that fluttered when he laughed. I had never wanted to kiss him more than I did at that moment. I moved slowly so as not to wake him, and placed a gentle kiss on his lips.

I lowered my head and closed my eyes, no longer trapping him to the bed, and fell back asleep.

When I eventually woke up, he was pressed against me, his back to my chest, my arm resting upon his arm, and when I breathed in, I could smell a mixture of leather, sweat and grass. It smelled of rugby; it smelled of Wyatt. This time, when I kissed the back of his neck, he woke up and his body jerked. "Sorry," he mumbled.

“No, I’m sorry.” I lifted my arm from his. “It’s just that... this feels... right. I’ve never wanted to be with anyone. Ever.” I yawned. “Before I met you, I thought I was... uhm, content not ever having or wanting to have sex.” I closed my eyes, and the words just rolled out of my mouth. “And now, I want to be pressed against you like how we woke up. I want to feel you on me, inside me, with me.”

Wyatt didn’t turn away; he just lay there, not moving. “Are you absolutely certain you want this, Theo?”

“Yes... I won’t know if I don’t try. But I’m nervous.” My hand hovered over his shoulder, and I leaned down, whispering, “I didn’t mean to be so foul when I licked your face. It started as a silly dare, I was supposed to kiss you.” I felt him stiffen against me, so I explained, “I mean, I didn’t do it *because* of the dare. I wanted to kiss you, so I made up the dare as an excuse.” I laughed and kissed his neck.

He rolled over and gently pressed his lips to mine, and it was like that moment on the hood of Peter’s car. Only this time, my briefs became tight and my stomach got all tingly. Our tongues collided, and Wyatt’s hands cupped my face. It felt like he was as into the kiss as I was. He sucked on my bottom lip, and then I took my turn.

I was floating in the moment. I didn’t want to pull away from him, but I did want him out of his shirt, so I pulled up the bottom edges. His arms got tangled in the sleeves—I don’t think he wanted to pull away either.

Once the shirt was off, I kissed a trail down his chest, my tongue circled his nipples, and the light growth of hair dappling his chest only made me go wilder. His body had become more defined since he’d started on the team, and I enjoyed it. I rolled on top of him, our bodies grinding into each other. Feeling him grow beneath me was just as exciting as feeling myself react, finally. It was such a new experience for me, never before had I felt this way. I’d watch sex on the Internet, trying to figure out what was exciting or would excite me. When I was a teenager, I’d hold my cock in my hand when I showered and wonder if it was defective. But the day I entered the shower behind Wyatt, I knew it wasn’t.

I continued licking and kissing until Wyatt rolled to his side and came down to my level again. His warm tongue licked along my neck, all the way up to my face. He licked me the way I had done to him a couple of days ago. He smiled and moved to suck my ear. Sucking on my earlobe, his hands lowered to slide along the thickness in my briefs.

I tossed my head back and breathed in deeply; his smell was everywhere in the room, and I sighed as his tongue reached my nipple. His teeth nibbled at my nub, making me tremble, and tugged on it before he moved to the next one. Wyatt's hand continued to massage me through my briefs, making me pant and shake. I couldn't take it any longer. I reached down and pulled the fabric off. His mouth suctioned to my left nipple, and I felt the underwear slide the rest of the way down my legs with his help. I was rigid.

His tongue traveled to my belly button, where he lapped and licked, before moving down to circle it around the tip of my cock.

He looked up towards me, his heavy-lidded brown eyes glistening as he whispered, "Are you sure, Theo?"

I bit my bottom lip, blinked a couple of times and quickly nodded. "Yes... please." My pulse was beating in a quick fashion.

He continued licking at the head and down the shaft, his hands cupping my balls so perfectly. Then, I watched my dick disappear down his throat. He pulled back up and looked at me, uncertainty in his eyes. As he was working my body, I writhed with pleasure I'd never known before. Then... there was nothing, I looked down to him. "Why'd you stop?"

He smiled, so I returned it as he said, "I just wanted to make sure..."

I nodded my head again, and licked my bottom lip before biting it. "Yes... yes, I'm sure..." I pulled him up to me, and we rested, nestled in each others' arms. I pulled down his briefs and our bodies connected, fitting perfectly together.

His soft lips brushed around my neck, and I could feel the wetness of his tongue and the heat of his breath as he moved. I followed suit and greeted every press of his lips with a duplicate from my own.

He whispered, "Do you want me to go first?" Then he rolled over so that I could press what I hoped were lips as soft as his against his shoulder blade. I thought back to those sessions with Lisa, and I followed the path her lips had taken down my back. I heard something scrape along the floor and then saw the condom package in Wyatt's hand. "Do you know how to use this?"

*As much as I wish I could say yes.* "I'm pretty sure it just rolls down, right?" I laughed shakily. It's a good thing I was looking at the back of his head, because my eyes were blurring and I was pretty certain I was going to cry. I

held the packet in my hand and continued licking a trail down his back until I slid my tongue over his ass. He jerked and sighed as the tip darted around the dark hole, my thumb pressing and gauging the surrounding flesh.

I leaned back on my ankles and noticed that my cock had not gone down. In fact, I was bursting... my body riding the waves of ecstasy that were flowing throughout. I rolled the condom down—it was pink, and it was latex.

“This is pink.” I couldn’t help but laugh. “Wyatt.”

“What? It works—it feels good. Trust me. If you don’t mind, lick me there again, and then slowly slide in.”

My first lesson was to lean down and slowly slide in. There was such friction, my body moved uncontrollably—it felt so warm and tight. I lay on top of him, pushing in further, and I started to shake, and as I was shaking, so was Wyatt. We both were pumping, him back and me forward. I lay on his back, exhausted, sweating, and it was like playing rugby all over again. Still hard, I rolled off and kissed him. “I want you inside me.”

“Are you sure, Theo?”

I nodded my head. “Yes. Please?”

“All right, I’m going to do this so I can look into your eyes, and walk you through all of it.” He reached into the metal box beside his bed again, and pulled out a bottle of lube and another condom. “I’m going to get you ready, okay?”

I heard the cap pop and felt little cold drops on my balls, and just before I closed my eyes, I saw him spurt some onto his fingers. It was cold, but not for long, as his fingertips massaged, and he slowly made his way down to my ass. So much sensation: the warmed-up gel, the moisture, the sweat, the nerves. And then, the tip of his finger pressed against my hole.

My eyes opened and he was right there, those beautiful dark brown eyes, looking into my soul. “You all right?”

I nodded my head, slowly, and took a deep breath. “Yes... I’m...” Another breath, as he slowly slid in the finger... “Yes... I’m good.”

His finger was sliding in and then slowly out, and I had this uncomfortable feeling that apparently showed up on my face.

“Theo? What’s wrong?”

“I’m embarrassed to say... I worried I’m going to shit all over you.”

Wyatt suppressed a giggle, and then his face turned serious. “Well, do you feel like you need to right now?”

I thought about it for a second, shook my head and grinned. “No.”

“Then don’t worry about it, it probably won’t happen, and if it does, I have other sheets.”

We got back into a rhythm, and I felt another finger slide in, more cool gel was added, and I opened my eyes to see Wyatt smiling. As I took another deep breath, he slid in a third finger. We smiled at the same time, and he lowered down to kiss me as he pumped in and out.

“Are you ready for me?” Wyatt asked.

All I could do was nod my head as he pulled away. I pulled his head down to me, once more, and left a madly passionate kiss. I spoke into the kiss, “Yes... yes.”

We separated, and I heard the package crinkle as the condom was pulled out and then the pop of the cap. I felt a couple of drops on my ass, and then I was filled with all of him. It was so amazing, so fulfilling. He lifted my legs and went gently, slowly, and then I was sweating, panting, having sensations I’d never felt before. Oh, God, my heart was racing...

He looked down at me with a soft smile. We were both sweating, and it reminded me of that last game against Santa Barbara with the dirt, the sweat, the grass. Next thing I knew, I was exploding all over the place, lost in the moment. Wyatt pulled out, took off the condom and started pumping his cock. He exploded in a shower between us.

We lay there for what felt like hours, the time slipping away peacefully. I had no desire to be anywhere else than in his arms. He pulled the sheet over us again, and we dozed, only waking when his roommate entered.

We laughed as Daniel pranced around the room, impersonating Wyatt. “Oh, no... I don’t want to sleep with him. He’s straight. I’m just gonna sleep on the sofa.” All of this was done as he packed another shirt, underwear, and shorts into his backpack. “For fuck’s sake, Wyatt—have fun, but don’t lie to me next time.” He walked out, and we heard the door lock behind him.

Wyatt looked into my eyes. “I don’t think there’ll be a next time.”

“What do you mean? Just this time?” I frowned.



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He kissed my nose, my lips, and my eyes. “No... Daniel was talking about one-night stands, and I don't think I want any more of those.”

I stared at him, not understanding, and then slowly it made sense. I smiled and pulled him into my arms, kissing his face madly.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Matthias Williamson has always had characters in his head. There were times when he was little when he couldn't go to sleep because there was too much talking going on. He finally stopped one day and started writing what the characters were saying, and stories emerged. He began writing on the Internet as Santino for an Anne Rice game, then went on to his own vampires, followed by LARP and SCA. Granted, his persona in the SCA isn't a vampire, but a plague carrier, which essentially is the same thing. Finally, he's finishing the stories and working on a bigger piece to submit to a publisher. The day has come where he's gained confidence as a writer. This event gave him the nudge he needed last year, and propelled him into the thick of things this year, by allowing him to write two stories. He writes when he's not working his day job or sucked into online games. If you see him around, nudge him and ask him what he's writing now.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#)

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# A DARK LOVE STORY

By Jonathan Treadway

## Photo Description

Attractive man with short grey hair and grey stubble leans against a chain-link fence on the steps, a lit cigarette between his full lips, and his legs spread. His white button down is totally open to his manscaped chest and sixpack, the sleeves rolled up. The olive and red suspenders look classy with his partially opened tan slacks. His head leans back with his eyes half-closed, and the blood from the cut over his right eye has slowed.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*This song is the story of me and my husband.*

[“Love Interruption”](#)

*Our love story is not a typically romantic one. It was anything but usual. It wasn't BDSM but it was definitely twisted with a slight delirium added to it. We do love each other dearly but that did not stop us from being dysfunctional, both with each other and people around us. Almost everybody says we should not stay together. That was not a choice either of us wants to make. So we stayed together, loving one another, despite how it twisted us like jumbled cords.*

*Please make this a dark love story but not BDSM or D/s, that would be too easy for what I intended. Please make it about two people whose love drives people around them crazy not with prejudice or bigotry. Just that they did not think it was good for either of them to stay together. They mean well but that was not more important than the couple's love for each other. This couple do drive each other crazy as well but the alternative, of being with other people, was something that neither of them wanted. So they stayed together, no matter what happened, what is happening and what will happen.*

*Sincerely,*

*Pete*

*P.S. Please use this [Live Performance](#) to set the tone of the story.*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** law enforcement, homophobia, established couple, dark, 2 alpha males

**Content Warnings:** graphic violence; past child abuse

**Word Count:** 10,758

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## **A DARK LOVE STORY**

**By Jonathan Treadway**

“You’re late! Hurry up and change,” Joe Callahan heard his husband, Doug Hart, yell from the bedroom as he shut the door to their apartment. “We gotta leave in like, five minutes, to get there reasonably on time.”

“Shit,” he muttered to himself, his heart sinking. “Late for what?” he yelled back. He shrugged out of his jacket, draping it over the chair next to the hall table, then took off his gun and locked it into his storage box in the hall closet, holster and all. He dropped his keys into the basket on the table so he would know where they were if he had to rush out for a call. All he wanted to do tonight was drown his frustration in a few beers and crash on the couch while watching mindless TV. He definitely did not want to do whatever it was they were supposed to.

It had been a particularly shitty day at work, with the kid dying this morning at the hospital. He and Bud McKinney, his partner at the LAPD and his best friend, had answered a call yesterday where a man had beaten up his thirteen-year-old stepchild, apparently spewing antigay slogans from the Bible at the top of his lungs as he hit and kicked the frail, somewhat effeminate boy. Timmy, his name had been. Timmy’s stepfather had made so much noise that a neighbor had called it in, and even though the two cops had raced over to the dilapidated apartment building with sirens blaring, they had been too late. Timmy was unconscious when they found him, just lying there with his limbs at awkward angles and blood pooling on the floor under his head. Frankly, Joe was amazed the kid had made it to this morning.

Days like this made him wonder whether he was going to make it to retirement without cracking. While he loved his job, it was slowly grinding him down as people continued to do awful things to their loved ones, or even just someone who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

By this time, Doug had entered the living room, dressed in a nice yellow cashmere V-neck sweater. He was wearing some fancy designer jeans that Joe didn’t know anything about, except that they hugged Doug’s ass perfectly and emphasized the nice size of his package. When that view didn’t provide even a

ping of interest in his own, he knew staying home was the right thing to do. He was tired and pissed at the world right now. Dinner out with Doug's friends, who were probably artsy-fartsy, bitchy, and so not Joe's idea of fun, was going to be tediously long and full of snarky pokes at all their mutual friends. Well, at least Doug's friends. Joe's friends were into sports, beer and cars, and couldn't care less about the current art scene, who was with who, who was recently dropped, who made more money, who had the best/worst/most eclectic/most boring taste in clothes/interior design/shoes/boyfriends, etc. It was going to be God-awful, Joe knew, and definitely not his thing.

"Hon, we're meeting Will and Manuel in forty-five minutes at Hinoki & the Bird. I reminded you about dinner this morning as you were rushing out the door." Doug sounded exasperated.

"Fuck, sweetie, do I have to go? I'm bushed and it's been a really lousy day." He headed over to Doug and tried to kiss him hello, but Doug stepped back. *Uh oh*, Joe thought. *It was going to be one of those arguments.*

Doug's face flushed, his eyes glaring at his partner. "Yes, Joe, you fucking have to. They're coming in from San Diego to meet us for dinner, and you didn't make the last one because of that Chinese guy's case."

"Well, it's not my fucking fault that he got whacked when we were supposed to have dinner with them. You know I can't control my schedule." Joe tried to tamp down his temper, but it flared anyway, both because he had no interest in meeting these guys, and because the job was often a bone of contention between them.

"Yeah, I know that. But sometimes you use it as an excuse to get out of doing something that you don't want to do."

"I do not!" Okay, he did but he was not going to let Doug win that point.

"Yes, you fucking do. And tonight is a perfect example! You know I've been planning this dinner with Will and Manuel for months. They really want to meet you, and I want them to meet you."

"Doug, I am not in the mood to make nice tonight with some people I don't know just because you like them and think I will too. It's been a fucking bad day and I just need to veg on the couch. Preferably with you but that's not critical. Can't you postpone it for a week or two? Or better yet, just go without me?"

“No, it’s too late to do that, damn it! They’re probably nearly at the restaurant by now and we’re going to be late. Again. So go get dressed; I put some clothes out for you.”

“Oh, great, not only do I have to make nice at some frou-frou restaurant, but you’re now dressing me up like a mannequin? What’s wrong with what I have on?” Joe could feel his own flush of anger rising up his neck, which was not a good sign. But fuck it all, Joe did *not* want to go out tonight and meet these people. Why couldn’t Doug give in once in a while? It wasn’t like he wouldn’t have fun without Joe, for fuck’s sake.

“It’s wrinkled after being worn all day and you need to freshen up. Hurry up, Joe. I don’t want to be too late and we’re pushing it now. Just wash your face, put some deodorant on, and get into those clothes. Don’t take longer than five minutes!”

Realizing Doug wasn’t going to budge on this, and frustrated as hell that Joe couldn’t get Doug to listen to him, he sighed and headed slowly toward the bedroom while unbuttoning his shirt front and sleeves. Jesus, Doug put out clothes for him? Wasn’t he a little old to be told what to wear? It was just one more thing that reminded Joe of how much he was not going to like these guys. That decided him; he knew he would be a bastard tonight and if pushed, he could even turn a bit cruel, and that was not the impression he thought Doug wanted to give. He walked into the bedroom even as he continued their argument.

“Why can’t you take no for an answer, Doug? I do not want to go and chat with guys who are just going to make fun of all these people I don’t know, drink until they’re so nasty I’m embarrassed to be with them, and then get all kissy kissy while they claim, ‘just kidding!’ I mean, you’re even afraid to let me pick out my own clothes. You think I’m going to embarrass you? That just makes me so sure I’m gonna like these guys if they’re so superficial they’ll judge me by what I wear.” Joe glanced at the clothes on the bed, realizing he’d never seen either of the items before. “Wait! What the fuck are these clothes anyway? I’ve never seen these before,” he yelled.

“I got you some new jeans; they’re Hugo Boss. You don’t like them?” Doug had followed him into the room and sat on the bed.

“Shit, Doug. You really are embarrassed by me, aren’t you?” Joe stared at the clothes on the bed, recognizing that the shirt was silk. While he admitted it was his favorite color—a nice, dark maroon—it pushed another one of his

buttons. "And a silk shirt? What's wrong with fucking Levi's and a plain ol' cotton button down?"

"Nothing. I just thought you might like to be a little more fashionable, that's all." Doug shrugged and tried to look innocent. It wasn't working.

"Yeah, right. You never buy me clothes because you know I hate all that designer crap. It's a fucking waste of money. So why the hell are you trying to make me dress like this? Who are these people that you feel I have to impress them?"

"They're friends who I met at an AIDS benefit about five years ago. We kind of lost touch but reconnected about a year ago. I told you about them. They're really wealthy and have a mansion on the water in San Diego, a boat, a fancy car, etcetera."

"Well, I don't remember. Sorry. I can tell they're just my type of people. NOT. I sure as hell don't want to meet them if I have to dress like a clone of all the other gay guys out tonight just to make you comfortable to be seen with me. Shit, Doug. Way to go, buddy."

Joe shook his head in disbelief, hanging up his tie in the closet. Knowing he would regret it later but not particularly caring at this point, he unequivocally realized it was right to stop Doug right now and not yield to his demands. Again. It felt like he was always the one who gave in because it was just plain easier to live with Doug when he got his way. Nope, this was going to be the day where he stood firm and got what he wanted for once. He knew he would be really shitty company tonight, and the designer clothes were the icing on the cake.

"This is bullshit, Doug. I'm not going. Just go without me. Come back afterwards with them and I can meet them over a drink or something."

"No, I am not going to show up alone again. The whole point of this dinner is to get you to meet them, and I'd be too embarrassed to see them without you. They're beginning to think you're just a figment of my imagination. I want them to see that you really exist, and that I'm not making you up. Besides, you'll like them. I promise."

"That's ridiculous, Doug. They're your friends. You've known them for years. It's just plain stupid that you're embarrassed to see them alone. And what makes you think I'm going to like them if you have to buy me new clothes so that you don't look bad?"



“Look, I admit I want you to look nice and that’s why I bought you some stuff, but it’s not that different from what you normally wear. You’ve had the same clothes for years! I thought you would appreciate a bit of an upgrade, that’s all. You don’t embarrass me, okay?” Doug glanced at his watch and frowned. “Come on and hurry up, Joe! We’re really going to be late and you could have already changed by now instead of just arguing and being an ass about everything.”

“An ass? Really? Shit Doug, you’re the one being an ass. At this rate, I’m not going to like *anyone* tonight, and if you make me go, I will be really pissed off. I mean REALLY pissed off.” Joe glared at his husband, determined not to back down. “I am not going. Period.”

“Why? What is so fucking shitty today that makes it worse than any other day? Huh? You’re always bitching and complaining when I try to get you to do anything social, especially with any of *my* friends. But you’re always ready to head out when it’s *your* friends.”

“Bullshit. You’re always out with your friends, mostly without me. And I always invite you to meet us after work but you rarely do because you hate my friends. Why can’t you just go tonight without me and I can meet them later when I’m relaxed and in a better mood?”

“Because tonight you’re going to come with me and be nice to *my* friends, and I won’t take no for an answer. This has been planned for months! So get your fucking ass in gear and put on those clothes and let’s get out of here.”

“I told you, I’m not going, Doug. Tonight is not the night to push me.” Joe glared at Doug, put his clenched fists on his hips, and waited.

“Oh, really?” Doug’s temper tipped over the edge, and he jumped to his feet, shoving Joe back against the wall with his momentum. “There, I pushed you.”

“Fuck that.” Joe pushed back, his anger bubbling over, uncontrolled. “I am *not* going out to fucking dinner, so just make my excuses like a good boy,” he yelled. He grabbed the drinking glass on the bedside table next to him and threw it against the far wall, reveling in the feeling as it smashed into pieces.

“Fuck you! I’m not your fucking boy!” Doug lunged at him and in no time at all, the two men were shoving, hitting, pushing, and grappling with each other. Joe kept yelling about how he did not want to eat out tonight of all nights and that Doug was an asshole trying to dress him up like a snob, and Doug

shouted about how Joe never wanted to go out with any of Doug's friends, and how Joe's job consumed him and left no room for them being together. It was always the same old arguments...

"I'm a fucking cop! You knew that when we started dating eleven years ago, Doug. Nothing's changed except that now I'm a detective and have even worse hours," Joe said as he tried to twist Doug's arm behind his back to stop Doug from hitting him.

"And that means that I never see you anymore. Why do you have to be married to your job? It keeps getting worse and worse." Doug wiggled out of Joe's hold and punched him in the shoulder, narrowly missing Joe's chin because of a well-placed block by Joe's arm.

"It's my fucking job to figure out who, what, when, where, and why a murder happens, and the more we can get done immediately after the deed, the better chance we have of solving it. You know that! I tell you that all the time. Maybe this time you'll listen." Joe had grabbed Doug again and pushed his back against the bedroom wall with an arm against his chest. Doug kicked out at Joe's groin, and Joe had to shift quickly to avoid his knee, loosening his hold on the other man. Doug ducked out of the way, twisting his body so that he faced Joe.

"Oh, fuck you, Joe. Why do you have to be in homicide? Can't you do something else so that we can do stuff together? I barely saw you last weekend, and now you'll be all tied up again in this new case."

Joe saw the fist coming toward him too late, and he had barely moved when it hit him just above the eye. Doug's ring caught his skin, and he felt it rip. He raised his hand to stop the blood he could feel welling up in the cut, and cupped his eye. "Shit!"

Having had enough, he turned and left his husband in the bedroom, stomped out into the hall and through their front door, and ran down the stairs two at a time. Sometimes, leaving was the only way to stop the fighting, and he was too tired and frustrated to do anything but escape.

He headed to the small stone landing outside, lucky he hadn't tripped on the stairs when using only one eye. He sat down on the left side of the cement stairs after moving down a few steps, taking his hand away from his face to see how badly it was bleeding. Pulling down his suspenders, he slipped off his button down and whipped off the T-shirt underneath, shivering a little in the cooling

air. He wiped his bloody hand on the undershirt, and pulled the button down back on, leaving it open and slipping his suspenders back over his shoulders just to get them out of the way. Joe wadded up the cotton T-shirt and pressed it against his cut. After a few minutes, he looked at the blood, and decided it wasn't too bad. It seemed to be slowing down. He could feel the swelling starting at the corner of his eye, and hoped it wasn't going to turn black. He needed ice, but there was no way in hell he was going back up until Doug cooled off. Feeling around his eye socket, he decided that nothing was broken and he would live to fight another day.

Joe sighed at that thought. As usual, the fight had solved nothing at all, but just brought up all the same old arguments. And wasn't it fucking ironic that he was cut with the ring he himself had given Doug last year to celebrate their tenth anniversary? Just peachy. The ups and downs of his and Doug's relationship over the years never seemed to even out. Wasn't that supposed to have happened in the "nesting" stage, back when they were still fairly new and trying to find themselves as a couple?

He sighed, shaking his head, thinking he should probably go upstairs and if not apologize, at least check out the situation since they were now really late for this f-ing dinner, but he just couldn't seem to find the energy to move. He leaned his head back against the wrought-iron railing and closed his eyes, wrung out. It wasn't his fucking fault that he'd forgotten they were supposed to meet two of Doug's rich friends from out of town tonight; he'd been a little preoccupied at work.

After sitting through an interview for three hours with the God-fearing fuck who'd killed his stepson, and listening to all his shit, Joe knew he'd end up being a prick over something tonight at dinner and scaring these friends of Doug's off. So screw them; there wasn't any reason he could think of that he *had* to go out. Doug could have just met them and made his apologies. But *nooooo*. Doug was all set on introducing him in his fancy duds and wouldn't listen to reason. They lived in fucking LA, for god's sake. There were murders every minute of every day, and it was not his fault that murders had happened during both visits. It was just a normal day in LA. Doug knew how stressed he'd been lately, but it obviously didn't matter when he wanted something. Joe tried not to talk about his cases at home but sometimes he just had to let some steam off when it was really bad. Like tonight.

On top of it all, hearing the murderer rant and rave this afternoon had brought back some unwanted memories of his own childhood. Joe got his

temper from his father, who was an unforgiving homophobe and overall bigot, convinced the world was against him. Being a fundamentalist Baptist minister did not help matters either, and his father had taken out his anger and frustration with life on his son and wife in the privacy of their home. Once Joe grew tall and strong enough to take on his father, he'd done so at every opportunity to protect his mom. Joe's father hadn't appreciated being stood up to, and it had gotten even worse as Joe kept growing. Joe's mother died of breast cancer when he was seventeen, and from then on it was war between the two men because his mom wasn't there to step in and mediate.

In a fit of rage over hearing his father's tirade about how the homos had taken over his favorite bar and turned it into a frou-frou, pansy place, Joe had told him to be careful how he spoke about gay men, because he was one of them. That had been the last straw, and after a falling-down, no holds barred fight with his father, Joe was told to grab his stuff and get out. Joe did it fast, too, before his father changed his mind and prevented him from taking his computer or car. They hadn't spoken since. At least he'd been out of high school and mostly packed for the police academy, so it was quick work to pack up and leave. Joe had stayed with a good friend for the last month of summer vacation until he started school, and never regretted leaving. He had not been back nor did he ever plan to see his father again.

Hearing footsteps coming down the stairs, Joe opened his eyes and saw his lover eyeing him uneasily as he slowed on top of the landing.

"You okay, Joe?"

Joe watched Doug for any signs of what he was thinking, but didn't see anything. Even through his concern, Doug was using his 'everything's fine and I don't want to talk about it' face. Joe hated it, because it meant there was no use trying to talk any further until Doug processed what happened, analyzing it to death. Joe was the sort who got angry in a flash, but once the poison had been spilled and they fought it out, it was over and done until the next one. Doug could hold onto the argument for days, but they never seemed to talk about it when it was done. He hated it. Hated the way their relationship had disintegrated into calm periods between fights. Hated the distance that had been growing between them over the last eight months or so. And hated that they had once again resorted to physical violence to resolve a stupid disagreement.

Shrugging his shoulders and realizing he had not yet answered, he muttered, "I guess," as he looked at the bloody T-shirt in his lap.

“Why don’t you come upstairs and I’ll fix that cut. It looks like it stopped bleeding.”

Joe gathered what little energy he could muster and rose from the steps. He followed Doug up to the second-floor apartment, unable to stop himself from admiring Doug’s tight backside and broad back. Joe was pretty built because he loved lifting weights and pushing himself at the gym to decrease some of the frustration at his job, but Doug was a runner, all lean and rangy. He loved the son of a gun to death, but these days it just didn’t seem as though that was enough.

“So what’s happening tonight?” Joe asked quietly, knowing that they were really late.

“Nothing. I told them something came up at the last minute and we couldn’t meet them.”

“How’d they take it?”

“Well, they were annoyed but decided to go to the restaurant anyway. I’ll call them tomorrow and apologize again, and see if we can maybe go down there to see them next time.”

“Fine. Thanks.”

Doug sat Joe down on the closed toilet, and opened the medicine cabinet to grab the stuff he needed. After wetting a washcloth with warm water, he wiped the blood away from Joe’s face. Doug sighed in relief, and the look Joe hated was gone, replaced by the regretful face that was becoming more commonplace. He was starting to dislike that one too.

“It’s not deep, Joe. I’m sorry my ring did this to you. You just need some antibiotic stuff and a small Band-Aid. You’ll have a bit of a black eye, though.”

Joe nodded but kept quiet. He was going to get shit yet again from Bud tomorrow. He could hear it now.

*“Oh, shit, Joe. Not again. Why do you stay with the fucker if he keeps hitting you?”*

*“Why do you think? It was a misunderstanding.”*

*“A misunderstanding? I just don’t get why you still hang with the fucker when you beat each other up all the time. It’s getting fucking old, Joe.”*

*“Jesus fucking Christ, Bud. It’s none of your goddamned business.”*

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*"It is my goddamned business when you come to work with a black eye. Just leave the bastard and get your life back into something approaching sane."*

*"No, I won't leave him, no matter what you or anyone else thinks. Yeah, it's kind of fucked now, but it'll get better. It always does."*

But Joe wondered deep down if that was really true. He loved Doug like he had loved no other and it was tearing him apart that things seemed to be escalating. He couldn't seem to stop jumping to anger over any little thing, and because Doug also had a quick trigger, it inevitably ended up being physical. It was what he was used to growing up, and he couldn't seem to control it. He was sick and tired of being hurt, both mentally and physically, and having to defend his lover all the time when his friends thought he was a fool to hang onto someone who beat him. Joe was pretty sure Doug felt the same way and was as frustrated as he was, but neither seemed to know what to do about it, and therefore just ignored it.

The feeling of a Band-Aid being pressed to his temple brought Joe back from his musing. He watched Doug quietly and efficiently clean up and wondered what to do next. Joe glanced down at his still-opened shirt and decided to finish changing into more relaxed clothing.

"Thanks."

Doug nodded but didn't say anything, so Joe stood and went into their bedroom. The glass from the bedside that he'd smashed into the wall was cleaned up and the new clothes were gone from the bed. At least the glass had been a cheap one and not one from their set of crystal goblets like the last time. He looked up after slipping off his shirt and tossing it into the hamper, and saw Doug leaning against the door frame of the bedroom.

"What are we going to do, Joe?"

"About what?" Joe thought he would play dumb. He didn't think he had it in him to get into a deep, dark discussion tonight.

At Joe's answer, Doug sighed, looking defeated. "Us. It's... we're getting worse, Joe, and I can't stand it much longer." Joe saw the deep sadness in Doug's eyes, and it caused him to raise the white flag, at least figuratively. It so reflected his own frustrations with their life; there was no way to ignore the issues any more. The relationship was beginning its death spiral and that was the absolute last thing that Joe wanted.

“Me either. It’s been a really shitty day, Doug, and I just didn’t need this on top of everything else.”

“I’m sorry.” Doug sighed and moved over to Joe, taking his hand and leading them to the bed so they could sit. “You keep saying that but I haven’t exactly given you a chance to explain why it’s been so shitty. Tell me about it?” Joe accepted the peace offering and sat beside his lover, keeping Doug’s hand tightly in his, hoping it would lend him some strength.

“I’m sorry too. Remember me telling you about that kid yesterday?”

“Timmy? The gay kid who was beaten by his dad?”

“Stepdad. Yeah. He died this morning.”

Doug shut his eyes and shook his head in sympathy. “Oh, shit.” When he opened them and looked at his husband again, Joe could see in his eyes the acknowledgement of what that would do to him, with his own father troubles and beatings.

“Yeah. So Bud and I picked the fucker up and spent the afternoon listening to him talking shit about fags and cocksuckers, and how the Bible was the law, and God hated ‘the gays’. And what a fucking fairy Timmy had been and how he still liked My Little Pony, which was for little girls, not teenaged boys. He was trying to beat some ‘man’ into Timmy and make him ‘grow up’.” Joe’s eyes started burning at the waste. “It’s so fucking unfair to cut someone’s life off like that over fucking religion. God, I hate that shit. I had enough of it growing up. That poor kid was just so goddamned young.”

Doug pulled Joe into his arms and held him as Joe burrowed into his neck, fighting the tears in a moment of weakness and hugging his lover back. He was not going to shed tears; it would break him and he’d start crying at every fucking homicide and never stop. He was a cop, for fuck’s sake. He saw shit that most people wouldn’t be able to handle every goddamned day. Why was this one different? It seemed to be hitting him like nothing else had in a long time.

He pulled back after a few minutes, mostly back in control. He was glad Doug didn’t say anything since his husband knew from experience that Joe hated losing even that small amount of control. The walls were rising once again and they seemed to be back in limbo, living in this little valley of uneasy peace until the next blowout.

Joe stood, knowing they hadn't solved anything but not willing to talk 'feelings'. "You wanna beer? I desperately need one."

"Sure. What do you want for supper?" Doug asked, also standing. He seemed to accept the moment of closeness was done and gone.

"Don't care, as long as it's quick. I'm starving," Joe said, forcing a grin onto his face. He figured it probably looked like a death mask but at least he tried.

"Pizza? I can run over and get it so we don't have to wait." Doug cocked his head at Joe, one eyebrow raised.

"Shit yeah, Doug; that'd be perfect." Doug nodded and left the bedroom, heading downstairs, presumably to get the beers.

Joe quickly finished changing into a T-shirt and cutoff sweats, took a piss, and headed down to the kitchen to grab his beer. Doug wasn't there so he must have gone to the pizza place. Opening the beer, Joe chugged it down, threw the bottle into recycling, and grabbed two more. He opened one and left the other on the counter for his husband.

Wandering into the living room, Joe grabbed the remote and turned on the news.

"In other news, young Timothy Vernon died early this morning at General Hospital from the beating he allegedly received from his stepfather, Bernard Kawalski. With his mother by his side, Timothy never woke up from his coma. Kawalski has been picked up and charged with first-degree murder, which could carry a death penalty. He will be arraigned tomorrow. His lawyer, Guinevere Vanderbilt, read a short statement but did not allow any questions..."

Joe switched channels until he found a rerun of "Law and Order," deciding he needed a good ending to a police story and not anything more about poor Timmy. He vegged, feeling himself finally relaxing. When Doug arrived with the pizza, they both dug in and inhaled it.

"Another beer, Joe?" Doug asked as the last rerun ended.

"No thanks. Not if I want to get up and actually work tomorrow." Nodding, Doug grabbed the trash and took it into the kitchen where he got another beer for himself. It had ended up being a quiet evening, but the two men had decided that it was necessary after the past few days and the ruckus earlier this evening.



“Ready for bed?” Doug asked as he headed back into the living room.

“I’m not really tired yet,” Joe said, looking over at Doug in confusion. It was only about 9:30, pretty early for bed.

Doug winked. “Who said anything about sleeping?”

“Oh, shit yeah.” Joe was up and off the sofa, peeling his T-shirt over his head and dropping it somewhere as he headed to the stairwell. “First one on the bed gets his cock sucked!”

“Hey, that’s cheating!” Joe could hear Doug racing up behind him, and tried to put on more speed before Doug could grab him and shove him aside, but he wasn’t fast enough. Doug snagged his jeans and prevented Joe from taking the next step, which of course made him trip. He had to grab the banister to prevent himself from tumbling down the stairs, and Doug pushed past him and shouted in triumph. “Hah, I win. Get those lips up here.”

Shaking his head, wondering what the hell he’d been thinking challenging Doug when he knew the man would do anything to win, he walked up, thankful he hadn’t fallen ass over heels down the stairs. One black eye was enough; he didn’t need any more bruises tonight, thank you very much. He found his husband stepping out of his jeans and briefs while pulling the sweater over his head. Seeing his perfect revenge, Joe stepped over to prevent Doug from getting his sweater off. He grabbed the garment and wrapped the sleeves around his arms, tying them together, knowing it wouldn’t take Doug long to wiggle out of them but giving him a slight advantage for a minute while Doug’s head was covered.

“Hey, what are you doing? Where’s my blow job?”

Chuckling, Joe quickly stripped while keeping one hand on the sweater so that Doug couldn’t escape. “I said first one on the bed, not first one in the bedroom.” He gently pushed Doug away and jumped onto the bed, watching in amusement as Doug flailed his arms around, trying to get the garment off. When he finally dropped it to the floor, he growled at Joe and plopped down on top of him.

“You fucker. I’m gonna remember this.” He leaned down and kissed Joe, then bit his bottom lip.

“Ow. Yeah, I know. But I won. So where’s my blow job, huh?” Doug kissed Joe again, this time with meaning, and Joe closed his eyes in relief. Shit,

it had been a long time since they had both fooled around like this. He hadn't realized how much he had missed their joking and playfulness, not to mention the sex. He opened his mouth immediately and the kiss became wet and sloppy, both trying to take control. They rolled all over the bed, messing up the bedspread until it finally fell off. Landing on the bottom with Doug over him, Joe gave up and sank into loving his partner. Between breaths, Joe and Doug kissed, nuzzled and licked each other until they were both panting in desperation, rubbing their cocks together. Joe could feel the pre-cum ooze from his prick, making the whole area slick between the two of them. Joe grabbed Doug's shoulders and tried to push him down to his aching cock.

"Come on, Doug. Blow me. Now."

Doug cocked an eyebrow, but obediently moved down Joe's body, biting then licking his nipples, and nibbling down his abs. Joe moaned in appreciation, his skin sensitive to Doug's touches and his nipples sending zings down to his penis, which twitched in anticipation. Every once in a while, Doug would stop and suck up a spot on his skin. Joe knew that he'd have to watch where he changed tomorrow so that no one would see the hickeys all over his chest and stomach. Not that he really minded, but the guys at the precinct would give him hell if they saw the results of Doug's attentions. As good as this all felt, Doug was everywhere but where Joe needed him most, and he finally yelled, "Doug! Goddamn it, suck my cock!"

His husband must have heard his desperation because he lifted his head, grabbed Joe's cock at the base, and shoved his mouth all the way down in one move. He stopped when he could go no further and sucked hard while his tongue moved up and down his cock. Doug then pulled up slowly, not releasing the pressure one iota. Joe couldn't help groaning, it felt so good. "This is going to be fast, hon," he warned Doug, who nodded in agreement but didn't stop moving up and down Joe's dick. He kept up the strong suction and moving his tongue in ways that had Joe writhing. Doug started humming, grinning as well as he could with a big dick in his mouth as he looked up at his lover, knowing it would push Joe over the edge.

"Oh, crap!" Joe shouted as he felt his balls harden into little marbles and tighten into his body. The cum roiled in his balls and shot out of his penis, drowning Joe in ecstasy as waves of pleasure rolled over him. Doug swallowed it all down and pulled off when Joe finally started softening. He licked all around Joe's groin to be sure it was clean, teasing Joe with little flicks that

eventually started to get annoying. Pulling Doug off with one arm, he tried to pat his head with the other but missed, hitting his shoulder instead. He was too blissed out to worry about it, though.

"I'll get you in a minute," he groaned when he could think again.

"No need, I came when you did." Looking sated and very self-satisfied, Doug smiled at his husband.

"Shit, without touching?"

"No, I used my other hand. I was as desperate as you." Doug moved up the bed and Joe opened his arms to welcome his lover home.

"I owe you one."

"Don't worry. I won't forget."

Joe nodded, knowing that was true, but he couldn't seem to care. He could sense himself starting to drift asleep. Kissing Doug on the forehead as he pulled him even closer, Joe murmured that he loved him.

"Love you too, Joe." It was the best Joe had felt for weeks, and he reveled in the feeling of peace. He remembered no more.

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The scene at work the next morning went just like Joe imagined, with both Bud and his captain giving him grief for the slightly swollen blackened eye and Band-Aid. At least the eye hadn't turned nasty black, just purplish blue. Joe just shrugged their comments off, knowing that no one would understand their relationship and not feeling like yet another argument with Bud.

The partners spent the day interviewing people in Timmy's apartment building to develop a rock-solid case against Mr. Kawalski. Timmy's mother was no help at all; even when separated from her husband, she would not talk. Of course, she hadn't been there when Timmy was beaten, but she wouldn't even tell them anything about previous problems between the two.

"Mrs. Kowalksi, Timmy was your only son. You're going to let your husband get away with killing him?" Joe asked in disbelief.

"He's my husband." The woman just sat there and stared at the two men, sullen and mostly non-responsive. Her lawyer made sure she stayed quiet as well. Bud and Joe finally gave up in disgust, knowing that many women would stick with their husband no matter how bad their home life was, afraid of being alone and penniless.

“God, what a fucked up family,” Bud commented later as he shook his head in disbelief. “Her only son is dead and she’s still protecting her husband.”

They were eating lunch at a diner, comparing notes from their interviews with the building tenants. After Joe and Bud had talked to Mrs. Kowalski at the station, they had driven to the apartment building, split up and taken different sides of the Kowalski’s floor, which has five other apartments on it. Once they finished there, Joe moved up one floor and Bud had moved down.

“At least the neighbors ratted them out, so there are a couple of good witnesses who the ADA can put on the stand,” Joe said before taking another huge bite of his Reuben sandwich. He was starving and the food was fantastic—greasy, huge and very filling.

“Assuming they agree to do it. It’s easy to say yes now, but some will chicken out, I bet.” Bud took a sip of his soda. “When they find out that their own background will be delved into when the defense lawyer tries to discredit them, some will probably disappear. I mean, who wants their skeletons revealed when trying to help someone else? I sure as hell don’t.”

“Like you have so many skeletons.” Joe shook his head in disbelief. Bud was squeaky clean as far as he was concerned. A sweet wife, two almost perfect children, a nice home, amazing parents; it was all totally opposite to his own upbringing.

“Hah, you think you know me. I might have a few skeletons deep in my closet.” Bud wriggled his eyebrows, trying to look like he had deep, dark secrets but failing miserably.

“Yeah, like you forgot to return a library book when you were twelve.”

“Well, that’s stealing. Stealing’s bad.” The two men snorted in laughter, and finished up their last few bites before getting up to go back to work. Heading back into the apartment building around two, the men split up and continued knocking on doors and asking questions. They finished in the late afternoon, not getting much more, and headed back to the precinct to write up reports.

It was almost eight by the time Joe walked in his own apartment door, but he had the next two days off.

Hearing Doug’s voice in the bedroom, he walked over to the door after putting away his gun. Seeing that Doug was on the phone, he stopped and listened.

"I don't know if I can do it, Will. Sure, it's pretty shitty right now because we argue all the time and end up hurting each other, but I don't want to leave him. I love him too much. He's it for me." There was quiet and then Doug said, "Maybe, but not yet. We need to talk this weekend and see if we can do something to fix things. I will try anything and everything before I do something that drastic." More silence. "No, I told you I wasn't going to come down until Joe and I talked. Quit pushing me, Will. I know what I'm doing."

Joe closed his eyes in despair, wondering if it was going to come down to one of them walking out. He agreed that it couldn't go on much longer like this, but Doug leaving was the last thing he wanted to happen. That would be ten times worse than living the way they were now.

Doug turned and looked startled to see Joe standing there, leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed and muscles bulging. "I need to go, Will. Joe's home. I'll call next week, okay?" He signed off and threw the phone down on the bed.

"Hey," Doug said.

"Hey. You wouldn't really leave me, would you?" Joe walked over to the bed and sat down next to his husband.

"I don't want to, Joe, but we have got to figure out what's going on because I can't stand living like this anymore. We're fighting all the time and I'm tired of not only fighting you but also my friends, who don't understand why I stay. They think I'm being abused, Joe."

"Yeah, I get the same stuff from Bud and the guys. I hate this spiral we're in but I have no clue how to stop it. The least little thing seems to set one of us off and then it's all downhill from there." He sighed. "Have you eaten? I'm starving."

"Not really. I had some cheese and crackers around six. Let's go out." Joe changed out of his suit and they headed to their favorite steak place. After a filling dinner and splitting a bottle of wine, the two lovers held hands walking back to their car. They weren't talking much, content just being together, so Joe picked up on the footsteps behind them pretty quickly. He started walking faster, pulling Doug by the hand, but they didn't get far.

A man jumped out of the alley right in front of them, a knife in his hand, and Doug and Joe were forced to stop. Joe tried to pull Doug off the sidewalk and onto the street, but the two men behind them moved to block them. All

three men were wearing dark hoodies, with the hoods up and black knit masks on. Joe pulled Doug close and a little behind him, turning them so that their backs were to the wall. As they pushed up against the brick, the three attackers moved into a semi-circle around them to prevent them from running away. Joe could feel Doug trembling against him, and his left hand moving to the middle of Joe's lower back. He pressed against Doug, hoping that his closeness would somewhat reassure him. This was bad, but he didn't want Doug to know quite how bad. And he had stupidly left his backup weapon in his car, which was still several blocks away.

"Look what we got here, boys. A coupla fags," the guy in the middle was saying, snickering. All three of the guys were armed, two with knives and the third with a pipe. Shit, Joe thought, where are the police when you need them? He felt Doug's hand moving slowly into his left front pocket to grab Joe's phone, and Joe shifted slightly so that he blocked the thugs' view of what was going on. The three jeered at the two lovers and laughed at their own jokes. So far, Joe hadn't said anything, but decided it was time to talk and try to distract them when he knew that Doug had the phone.

"Look, we don't want any trouble. Just take what you want and leave us alone." Joe reached behind and pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. "I've got about a hundred bucks. Doug, give me your wallet too." Joe could feel Doug reaching for his own, which he eventually placed it in the same hand holding Joe's. Getting a better grip on both wallets, Joe held them out to the guy in the middle, figuring he was the leader, making sure to keep them far enough away that the thug would have to take a step toward him to grab it. Joe could feel his phone falling back into his pocket and figured Doug had called 9-1-1 and just left it in silent mode. "That's pretty much all we've got."

"We don't want no money. We just wanna hurt the fags, right, Rambo?" The smaller guy on the right looked over to Rambo in approval while moving his knife menacingly.

"Fuck, you asshole. No names, remember? You're so fucking stupid." Rambo shook his head and took a step closer to the wallets. Joe thrust them out further to the right, trying to entice the guy. In a flash, Rambo drew his knife across Joe's inner forearm, making Joe drop the wallets as he pulled his arm back against his chest. Shit, he thought. The guy was smarter than he figured.

"Hah, think you're so smart, fag. Who's bleeding now, huh? Just like a queer to try to protect his honey. You both afraid to fight? Little girly men

hiding against the wall..." Rambo was taunting them both, and the other two were laughing hard at Joe's predicament.

Joe glanced quickly at the cut, which was bleeding profusely, then pressed it back against his torso. It looked pretty deep, and Joe knew that he might be in trouble. Meanwhile, Joe tried to keep Doug from moving anywhere, but Doug couldn't keep quiet.

"Girly men? Shit, look at us. We're both bigger than any of you." Pushing back against his husband, he tried to warn Doug against speaking any further.

"Shut it, Doug," he tried to whisper quickly. Glancing at Doug, he glared at him to shut up. He then turned toward the three men, still talking shit but fortunately not doing anything else.

"You might want to rethink attacking me, Rambo. I'm a cop."

"Bullshit, fag. You ain't no cop. So, how you feeling now, huh?" The smaller Asshole on the right tried to move closer to Doug, but Joe shifted further to the right, trying to block his lover from coming out and attacking. He and Doug were at a distinct disadvantage without any weapons, and he was trying to kill time so that the police could get there.

"Got something against queers? What, couldn't get your cock sucked by these other homos?" Doug asked as he finally gently but firmly pushed Joe aside and moved up to stand next to him. Shit, shit, shit, Doug. What the hell are you trying to do? Joe wondered. He knew Doug had the capability to defend himself, but he was trying to prevent any bloodshed or further injuries to either of them. Challenging them wasn't going to exactly help their situation. But it was too late and both Joe and Doug moved into more defensive stances.

"Fuck you, fag. Why don't you come over here and suck my dick for me," Rambo was saying as he grabbed his cock and squeezed it through his pants with his free hand while pointing the knife at Doug.

"Don't think so, Rambo," his husband said, trying to keep an eye on Asshole. All three guys were closing in toward Joe and Doug. The quieter guy on the other side of Rambo suddenly moved toward Joe, lifting the pipe, and Asshole slid even closer to Doug. Rambo stayed in place, fortunately, spilling hate and obviously enjoying himself while his cohorts did the dirty work.

"Hey, I'm not kidding about being a cop. You might want to look in my wallet," Joe said to Rambo as he turned to face the guy with the pipe. He barely

had time to move before the pipe landed hard on his shoulder. Joe hissed at the pain, knowing something was probably broken, but at least the guy had missed his head. He heard a knife clattering on the sidewalk and knew that Doug had kicked it away. Asshole landed with a thud after Doug kicked him in the head, but Joe was barely aware of that fact. He was suddenly fighting for his life against both of the other thugs, trying to keep his hold on the arm with the knife while dodging the pipe, all while protecting his injured shoulder.

Quiet Guy saw his chance and raised the pipe again, but Doug was yelling and screaming and crashed into him, knocking them both down. Doug landed on top and was trying to grab the pipe but the guy under him had at least twenty pounds on Doug and was strong.

Joe's sliced arm wasn't strong enough to stop the knife and his other arm was hanging uselessly. While Joe looked into the guy's black eyes, trying to shift the angle of the knife, Rambo grinned as he thrust it into Joe's side. Joe moaned in agony, trying to keep upright against the wall. He swung his leg out and smacked Rambo in the nuts, hard. The man leaned over to protect his crotch, groaning, and Joe punched him as hard as he could in the head with his knee. Rambo went flying backward, landing hard on the cement and cracking his head. He didn't move again, fortunately, so Joe quickly turned to check on Doug.

Or at least tried to. He could feel himself starting to black out from the pain those last few moves had created, but he tried to fight it as he slipped down the wall and landed on his ass. He was relieved to hear sirens in the distance and he watched Quiet Guy flip Doug over and sit on top of him, both still grappling for the pipe. Joe, frightened for Doug, tried to move to help, but the thug stilled when the sirens grew louder. Checking the other two guys, and seeing that they were out cold, Quiet Guy decided to cut his losses. He stood, kicked Doug in the ribs for good measure and to prevent Doug from getting up and chasing him, and ran off down the alley with his pipe.

Gripping his ribs and grimacing in pain, Doug slowly rose to his knees and crawled over to Joe with one arm. Joe was losing consciousness as he heard Doug calling his name. "Joe, don't leave me. Joe, answer me! Joe!" But everything turned black and Joe heard nothing more.

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It was the continuous beeping in the background creeping into Joe's mind that woke him, and he slowly became aware that he was in the hospital. There



was no forgetting those smells and sounds, as he knew from previous visits. He felt someone check his pulse and he opened his eyes, wincing a little at the brightness.

“Welcome back, Joe,” the nurse said. “You’re in the recovery room after your surgery. How are you feeling?” The woman continued to check the instruments hooked up to him and take notes while she waited for Joe to answer. Joe’s mouth felt like cotton.

“Can I have some water?” he croaked. His throat hurt and he felt like shit. The nurse nodded and reached over for a cup.

“Here are some ice chips. As soon as you wake up a little more, you can have some water. Does anything hurt?” she asked as she tipped a few into his mouth. Joe accepted the chips and sucked in relief, opening up for more.

He took inventory of his body, noting that he pretty much hurt all over. “Yeah, it all hurts. Where’s Doug? My husband, Doug Hart? How is he?”

“I believe he’s upstairs in the surgical waiting room, so he’s out of the ER. That’s all I know. Sorry. We’ll be taking you up to a room as soon as you’re fully awake, and you can see him then. Your surgeon will be by shortly to talk to you about everything he fixed, but you came through surgery with flying colors and you’ll be just fine.”

“Great, thanks.” It was hard to pay any attention between the pain and his worry over Doug.

The nurse gave him some pain medicine in his IV, and he relaxed as the pain level lowered, immediately falling back to sleep. The next time he awoke, he was a little more comfortable and within an hour, he was moved up to a room out of the recovery area. The surgeon told him that his collarbone was cracked, and they had stitched up his arm and side.

“You were very lucky in that the knife didn’t hit anything major, although it nicked a rib. You’ll need some physical therapy for your arm and shoulder, but you should recover fully.”

Joe tried to take it all in, but he just wanted to sleep some more after he saw Doug. He didn’t ask how his husband was since he figured that they wouldn’t tell him. He’d wait until he was in his room then raise hell until he either had Doug in the same room with him or knew where and how he was.

Fortunately, both Doug and Bud were waiting for him when he arrived.

Doug walked over next to the hospital bed on the other side from where Joe was being moved. He waited impatiently until Joe was moved over from the gurney, then leaned over and kissed him gently on the lips. He rested his hand on Joe's thigh and squeezed before the nurse shooed him away until she could get Joe settled. She finally left the three of them alone after warning Bud and Doug not to tire Joe out. As much as Joe wanted them there, he was fading fast but needed to know how Doug was.

"Joe, damn I'm glad to see you. How are you doing?" Doug asked, relieved he could actually touch and see his husband.

Joe tried to shrug, then remembered why that wasn't such a good idea. "Oh shit, that hurts. I'm a little out of it but feeling pretty good," he commented, wiggling his eyebrows at Doug. Bud had lifted a chair and brought it over to the other side of the bed, pushing Doug around the bed by both shoulders and then into the chair.

"Watch it, Bud," Doug warned as he winced after landing on the hard seat.

"Oh, damn. Sorry, Doug. You okay?" Doug nodded as he grabbed Joe's hand, squeezing it gently then twining their fingers together.

"How are you, Doug?" Joe asked. "What happened after I blacked out?"

"I'm okay. Two cracked ribs and some scrapes, but that's it. You got the brunt of it. The cops arrived right after you lost consciousness, and called a couple of ambulances. They took Rambo in one, but the guy I hit was put into the back of the squad car since he wasn't as badly injured. Bud showed up about five minutes later as they were working on you, and he brought me here to wait for you."

"Yeah, I got a call when they figured out it was you and Doug, so I rushed over to see what was going on," Bud said. "They said you were badly hurt and on the way to the hospital, so I brought Doug to the ER and made him get checked while we waited."

"Thanks, Bud," Joe said quietly, sharing a look with his partner. They both knew that Doug wouldn't have had himself checked until he knew what was going on with Joe.

"No problem. That's what partners do. I'm gonna head out now that I know you'll live, but I'll come back tomorrow, okay?"

"Sure. Give my love to Kayla and the kids."

“You bet. Take care of yourself, Joe.” Bud patted Joe’s leg and left the room. Doug squeezed Joe’s hand again, lifting it carefully to kiss the knuckles.

“Hey, honey. How are you really? Are you in any pain?” Doug asked as he leaned over to nuzzle Joe’s hand and land another kiss.

“Naw, my drugs are good. Are you really okay, Doug?” Doug nodded as he sat back up, wincing at the movement. He let go of Joe’s hand and Joe immediately missed the connection.

“Yes, especially compared to you. I’m going to be sore for a few weeks, but nothing was broken. Do you know what happened to you?” Doug asked, making sure that Joe knew what was what.

“Mostly. Stitches in my arm and side, nothing badly damaged, and a cracked collarbone. I’m gonna have to have physical therapy, I guess.”

“We were lucky, Joe. So damned lucky.” Doug held his hand over his eyes, but Joe could see the tears running down his cheeks.

“Oh, baby, don’t cry. We came out okay, and they’ll catch the one who got away. Thanks for taking out the guy with the pipe. I think you saved my life.”

Doug leaned over, putting his face on the mattress while wrapping his free arm around his body. He was being quiet, but Joe knew that he was still upset. Joe slowly lifted his cut arm, flinching as he put his hand on top of Doug’s head. He rested his hand there, wishing he could pull Doug into his arms. He was frustrated with both arms out of commission, needing to feel Doug next to him, alive and well. That may not happen soon, though, since his left arm was in a sling and bound to his body, and his right one was pretty sore and on the same side as his knife wound.

“God, I love you, Doug. I love you so fucking much.” Doug lifted his head up, making Joe’s arm slide off. “Aaaahhhh,” Joe couldn’t help groaning, feeling the sharp pain as it hit the bed.

“Shit, Joe. I’m so sorry. You okay?”

Joe nodded, smiling weakly at his lover. His arm ached like hell and it had jarred his collarbone and his side, but he wasn’t going to make Doug feel even worse.

“I love you too, Joe,” Doug said. He stood and carefully leaned over to kiss Joe, softly at first. Joe ran his tongue over Doug’s lips, feeling where his man had been gnawing at the bottom one. Doug opened and welcomed Joe in,

leaning on his arms to keep himself at the right level and to relieve some pressure off his sore ribs. "Shit, I can't do it. It hurts too much," Doug said in disgust.

"Sit down, baby. Relax. We've got lots of time together over the next few weeks while we heal. We can talk and figure things out. Right now I just want to rejoice in the fact that we're both safe and together."

Doug nodded in agreement. "We are. I almost lost you tonight. I'm not leaving you, Joe, ever. We'll work this out together, and even get professional help if we need to. I'll do anything, Joe." Doug wiped his face and blew his nose with a tissue from Joe's bedside table.

"So will I, Doug." Joe smiled at his husband, and drifted off to sleep holding Doug's hand, content to be with him. Joe knew he would do anything in his power to fix this marriage. Life without Doug would not be any kind of life, and tonight had re-enforced that fact. In spades. Love *would* conquer all.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Jonathan Treadway is the pseudonym of Jennifer Swanson, who lives with her husband in northern Massachusetts. Her daughter is in college way too far away from home. Jen has a professional job doing market analysis (and commuting, it seems like) during the day, and writes in the evenings and on weekends when the spirit takes her. Her stories focus on the romance and relationship between two men, and all the trials gay men have to survive in order to have a healthy, happily-ever-after (or for now) relationship. To her there's nothing sexier than two men exploring each other physically and emotionally as they fall in love. When Jen's not writing or reading the embarrassingly large number of ebooks she buys every month to support her Kindle habit, she's quilting, dancing at gay bars, or playing with her bunny Annabelle.*

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# DISPLACED

By Sofia Grey

## Photo Description

A young man, naked from the waist up, lies on his side in water, face half-hidden. The colour of his eyes is mirrored in the indigo blue of the water and the sky. He has a watchful expression, as though he waits for something... or someone.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*This is my life... by day I walk on land and I am as human as the man standing next to me... but by night... the water calls to me and I must return to it... all I have ever wanted is a man who would love me for who I am... both day and night...*

*I would only ask for a story... as beautiful as this photo*

Sincerely,

Donna

## Story Info

**Genre:** paranormal

**Tags:** exile, family issues, guardian, homophobia, immortal, loneliness, tattoos, tour guide

**Word Count:** 14,590

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# **DISPLACED**

**By Sofia Grey**

**dis·placed** *adjective*

1. lacking a home, country, etc.
2. moved or put out of the usual or proper place.



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## Prologue

I ran my fingers across the plaque and traced the letters etched into the wood.

The Taniwha (*pron. Tanifa*) was believed to be a fearsome sea monster that acted as a guardian for the New Zealand coastline.

They got the monster part right, and the guardian. They didn't say anything about the loneliness though.

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## Chapter 1

I hated the summer. Long days meant more time on land, pretending to be a man. I lived for the hours of darkness, when I would return to the sea and take my native form, only to return again at sunrise. I'd wait impatiently for the winter months, but in truth, I didn't like those much either. I fooled myself that I was happier in the water, but I'd just become a master at lying to myself.

Sitting on my usual piece of driftwood, I surveyed the quiet stretch of coastline. A pair of joggers way in the distance. A lone dog walker in the opposite direction. And me. Even the seagulls gave me a wide berth. Even though I looked like a normal human, they could sense that I was different, and whether they stayed away out of fear or respect didn't matter.

I closed my eyes against the bright sunlight, but the rays continued to kiss my pale skin. I wouldn't burn, or tan, or freckle. I'd never wrinkle or age, and I could never die. My life would continue, alone, for eternity.

*Immortality sucks.*

A muffled *woof* and a splash dragged me from my pity party and I opened my eyes to glare at the dog walker. He'd obviously not picked up on the keep-the-fuck-away-from-me vibe. The dog, a shaggy mongrel, felt it. He skittered behind his master's legs and as far from me as the leash would allow. At least he had some sense.

The guy nodded to me as he drew near. "Afternoon." He paused as though he expected me to answer. That was a novelty. I stared at him, expecting him to walk away again, but he stayed. He was young, mid-twenties at most, and still had that innocent naivety of someone who's enjoyed their life. Thick dark hair, almost as black as mine, flopped onto a lightly tanned face, stubble raking his cheeks.

The way he cocked his head to one side reminded me fleetingly of Matiu. He shifted and the resemblance was gone.

"Great weather." White teeth flashed in a friendly smile. With the afternoon sun behind him, I couldn't tell what colour his eyes were, but they were light.

Conversation? Why the hell not. It might distract me for a few minutes. "Afternoon," I muttered, expecting him to walk away, but he didn't. He

extended the dog leash to let the beast move further away, and it ran into the shallows. As far from me as it could go. Sensible.

"I saw you here yesterday." His smile was undimmed by my sullen attitude. "You've a great spot to watch the sea from."

I knew every inch of this coastline. I could walk it blindfolded and still tell exactly where I was at any given moment, but I hadn't noticed him before. Was I so wrapped up in my misery that I'd stopped paying attention?

I looked at the stranger properly. Took in the bare feet, faded denims and sun-bleached once-black T-shirt. He held the dog leash firmly in one hand, but the other held a small green twig, fresh leaves along its length.

He waited, presumably for me to reply, and for no reason other than I was bored, I spoke to him. "That stick looks a bit small for your dog."

The smile burst into a grin that lit up his face. "This?" He lifted the twig. "This isn't for Butch, it's for the *Taniwha*."

For a ridiculously long moment, I thought he was going to offer it to me. *Don't be so stupid, Henare. "Taniwha?"* I queried, liking the fact that he pronounced it correctly.

His eyebrows disappeared into the floppy hair. "You know, the sea dragon. There's a monument at the other end of the beach." He must have taken my intentionally blank face for misunderstanding. "Wow. I thought it was something we all learned at school. The legend of the *Taniwha*. My sister was terrified of it and my grandma used it as an excuse for everything." He chuckled. "If you don't do your homework, the *Taniwha* will catch you. That sort of thing."

Despite myself, I was amused. Interested. "And did she? Do her homework?"

"Christ, yes. Highest achiever in the school. She's studying hard numbers at Cambridge now."

The dog yanked at the leash, and the man tightened his grip. He had long fingers with clean, tidy nails, and that was another painful reminder of Matiu. Or maybe I was just seeing him everywhere right now. Another midsummer had come and gone, with no sign of him.

"Wait for me," he'd said. "*I'll come and find you.*"

Three hundred years had passed. How much longer did I have to wait?

The guy watched me, a cute smile on his face, and I tried to recall what he'd been saying. The twig drew my attention, and I gestured to it with my hand. "So what are you doing with that?"

He tapped it gently against his thigh, his gaze scanning the incoming tide. "It's an offering. Like I said, I grew up with the legend, and my grandma taught us that it's polite to leave gifts for the monster if we want to venture into his territory. First crop or new growth." He shrugged broad shoulders. "Whenever I go out on the boat, I always do this first."

My heart warmed for the first time in forever, and it wasn't just because he was attractive. It was good to see the old practices observed. "You, uh, going fishing?"

"Nah, I'm going across to Kapiti Island. I'm leading a tour group there."

I followed his gaze to the hulking great island in the distance. "Nice and calm. You should have a good trip."

"Thanks." He frowned at the dog, currently tugging on the lead. "Stupid hound. I daren't let him loose, I'd never catch him." He flashed another smile at me, and I felt my lips tilting in reply.

How long was it since I'd been attracted to anyone? Sex was an itch I scratched occasionally, more out of defiance than anything. I sought out guys to fuck, because I wanted—for the briefest moment—to feel needed. They were never more than a tight ass, or a wet mouth, the faces forgotten within minutes, the names never known. Since Matiu, I'd never let *anyone* get close.

"Nice talking to you." The guy scratched at his chin with the back of his hand, but didn't move.

"Yeah," I mumbled. This was enough, it seemed. He turned and walked to the water's edge, where he shortened the dog leash to bring the hound to his ankles, and then crouched on the damp sand. Entranced, I watched as he held the twig to the sea rushing in, and laid it gently in the water, to wash back out again.

Good manners. I approved. And he had a nice, firm ass.

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## Chapter 2

As the first rays of the sun broke the sky, I took human form again. Lifting my head from the waves, I took a gulping first breath and waited for my lungs to reinflate. The water was warm and soothing, and I floated face up, trying to subdue the voices in my head while I drifted into the shallows.

I could still hear my family, the echoes of them rippling on the currents. They laughed and talked, the young ones playing noisy games while I listened from a distance. At night I lurked on the outer fringes of their realm, hoping for someone to notice me, but wasn't that the whole point of exile? I could never return.

I rolled over in the water and closed my eyes, feeling the sun's warmth stroke my back. I'd need to get out soon, and retrieve some clothes. Humans took a dim view of nudity these days, and there were more of them around in the summer.

Matiu had loved this stretch of coastline. If he ever came to look for me, he'd come here. This was where we'd kissed for the first time. After that, we'd fucked here more times than I could count, well away from spying eyes.

Thundering, splashing footsteps broke into my memories. Before I could react, hands grabbed me, tugging on my hair and dragging my face out of the water. What the fuck?

*"Jesus. Are you okay? Please don't be dead."* Panic threaded his voice, and I recognised him immediately. The dog walker with the nice smile. My brain finally woke up, and I felt like smacking myself on the forehead. He'd thought I was drowning, an impossibility. How fucking funny was that?

There was a bizarre moment where he tried to haul me out of the water and I resisted, before he saw that I was actually conscious. "I'm fine, you can let go."

"You were face down. I thought..." He swallowed, and stared at me, his eyes wide and scared. "Christ on a bike, I was freaking out." He swayed, as though his knees were shaking, the water continuing to swirl around his thighs. "I came early to walk Butch, and then I saw you."

His eyes widened further when I stood up. "You're, um." His gaze darted to my crotch and then up again, to fix on my face. "You've lost your shorts." Colour splashed his cheeks, and I felt sorry for his embarrassment.

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“I swim naked. I prefer it.”

He nodded, water droplets sliding down his face, over the now coarse stubble. His T-shirt stuck to his chest, highlighting perfectly sculptured muscles, and for a heartbeat, I was tempted to touch him.

Shaking the thought away, I folded my arms before I had any more random ideas. “Thanks, though. Even though I was in no difficulty, I appreciate it.”

This drew a smile. “Yeah, no, it’s all good.”

The familiar Kiwi phrase struck me as funny, or maybe it was just the situation. It felt like the start of a bad joke: a sea monster and a tour guide were standing in the ocean... And the tour guide was shivering. His jeans looked black, they were so full of water. I knew I’d regret it, but I couldn’t walk away and leave him. “You’re soaked. I live close by if you want a towel and to borrow a change of clothes.” I jerked my chin toward the simple wooden beach house that nestled against the dunes.

A smile lit up his face again. “Thanks.” He turned and splashed through the last few yards by my side. “I’m TJ, by the way.”

“Henare,” I replied, before I thought about it. *Whoa*. We didn’t need conversation; I didn’t want to know his name. I was going to lend him a change of clothes, that was all.

The mutt was obviously torn between hiding from me, and rushing toward its master. It growled as we approached, and bared its teeth. The fangs were tiny compared to mine in my native form, but his bravery amused me.

“I don’t know what’s up with him.” TJ sounded puzzled.

“Dogs don’t like me.” Nor did anyone else, and that was the way I wanted it. I’d no intention of making friends with TJ, so it didn’t matter if I ignored his dog. All the same, with a little sigh, I bent down and showed it my bare hands. This drew a sniff, and a tentative lick across my palm, and then he rolled onto his back and assumed the belly-up-you’ve-beaten-me position. I had to smile.

TJ’s teeth were chattering by now, and I hastened to lead the way across the sand to my cottage, Butch following closely at my heels.

I’d learned early on that to fit into society, I had to follow certain norms. A home. An income, from intricately carved pieces of driftwood. I had no need for food or drink, and I didn’t need to sleep, but the little cottage I rented had come fully furnished. This was the first time I’d invited anyone back. What if

he got the wrong idea? He might want to become friends, or come back uninvited.

“Wait here.” I left him dripping in the doorway, while I went to fetch him a towel. He’d need some clothes too, and so I dug out a T-shirt and a pair of board shorts—another concession I made to “fit in”. If they were too big, that was too bad. I was done helping. I dragged a pair of denims over my already dry legs and hurried back to find him.

TJ hadn’t moved. Another tick in his favour. Butch sat by his feet, tongue lolling and perfectly relaxed, and his thick tail thumped when I approached.

“Here.” I handed him the bundle and then realised he needed some privacy. “You can get changed in there.” I gestured toward the bathroom with my fingers and tried not to watch as he padded across the wooden floor, the jeans hugging his perfect ass. I turned my focus to the dog instead. Butch gazed up at me, the fear gone. “What are you staring at, hound?”

He made a whining noise and flopped to the floor, the huge brown eyes tracking my every movement. Maybe he was thirsty? Against my better judgement, I went to fetch a bowl of water, and as I placed it on the floor, TJ emerged from the bathroom.

My clothes were loose on him, but not by much. In the bright light of morning, I could finally see his eyes properly and they took my breath away. Green with gold flecks, they reminded me of the inside of a mussel shell, and they danced with amusement.

“I thought you said dogs didn’t like you?”

I had no smart answer for that, so I said nothing and tried to scowl at him. He was invading my space. Wearing my clothes. Smiling at me as though he liked what he saw.

Falling back on rudeness seemed the only safe option. “You need to leave.”

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## Chapter 3

The sun began its slow glide down the sky and the afternoon drifted into early evening. I watched the families packing up for the day, the fishermen clustering together, and the joggers materialising now the temperature had dropped. The sea had been as placid as an inland lake, and I wondered how TJ's tour had gone, and then wondered why the hell I cared.

As though he heard me thinking about him, he appeared in the distance, Butch trotting on the end of a long leash. I didn't move from my driftwood seat. *He might not see me.*

I was wrong. He lifted his hand in a cheery wave, and I had to acknowledge him. I'd have looked stupid otherwise. His stride lengthened, and before I knew it, TJ stood in front of me, a now familiar grin dancing on his face. "Henare. I'm glad I caught you." He tugged on the dog lead and then, with a graceful twisting move, released a small backpack from his shoulder.

"I've brought your gear back. Thanks." He dug into the pack and produced my clothes, neatly folded.

"Umm, thanks." I set them on the bleached log next to me and stared at the sea while I waited for him to leave.

He didn't take the hint. Instead, he rummaged in the bag again and produced something with a flourish. I gazed at the four bottles of beer in his hand.

"I brought you a proper thank you." His smile was too enticing. Jesus, what had I started? Instinct told me to refuse the gift, but curiosity made me hesitate. I couldn't get drunk, and I'd never tasted beer. Today was a day of firsts. Maybe it would also be the day I put Matiu behind me? The idea made my chest ache, and I tried to push past it.

"Beer. Thanks. Do you want to, uh, join me?"

"Love to." TJ sank onto the golden sand, and Butch settled down between us. "I just grabbed the first I came to, do you like this one?" He snapped off the metal cap and handed me the cold bottle, moisture clinging to the glass.

I took it cautiously, and pretended to examine the label. "Not tried it." *Not tried any.* "I'm sure it'll be good."



“Cool.” He opened his own drink, and lifted the bottle to tap gently against mine. “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” I muttered. The scent reminded me of fresh green hedgerows, almost floral. Unusual. I copied TJ when he took a drink, tipping the bottle to my mouth and gulping the liquid. Cold, sharp and yet sweet, a fizz of bubbles filled my mouth and came down my nose, making me cough. What the hell?

TJ raised his eyebrows, but I recovered and took a smaller sip, holding the beer in my mouth for a second before swallowing. Flavours cascaded onto my tongue and exploded on the roof of my mouth. This was good. I drank some more. Really good. Why had I never tried beer before?

The bottle was already half-empty and I stared at it, feeling TJ watching me. “I like it.” What could I give him in return for this experience? I could talk to him. “How was the tour?”

He leaned back against the driftwood and wriggled his shoulders, as though getting comfortable. His dark, silky hair lay just inches away. “It was good. Mostly rich Americans, but they were all fit enough for the climb.” He tilted his head to look up at me, in the way Matiu used to. “You’ve been to Kapiti Island, yeah?” A flood of memories hit me and I was unable to speak, so I nodded. “We took the shortest route to the summit and it only took a couple of hours. The views were awesome today. As clear as I’d seen it.”

The island was designated a nature reserve, and there were only limited numbers of people allowed to visit. Matiu and I had spent time there hundreds of years ago, before the native Maori settlers had even set foot there. *Stop thinking about him, Henare.* With an effort, I listened to TJ’s chatter, and the ache eased a little. I could do this again. Spend an undemanding hour with a handsome guy, even if he did seem determined to become a friend.

TJ opened and held out another bottle, swapping it for my empty one. “Yeah, it was a good day,” he concluded, and closed his eyes against the low sun. “I won’t come running into the sea tomorrow morning, now I know you don’t need rescuing.” His chuckle loosened something tight inside me.

“No, you really don’t need to.”

“You know what?” He didn’t wait for me to answer. “If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t be sitting here now. It’s all good.”

He reached down and fondled Butch’s ear, and the dog grunted. I watched his fingers slide back and forward in the thick fur, gentle and graceful. There

wasn't anything ugly about this man. I took the opportunity to examine his face, noting the long, thick eyelashes and the bruise blooming on his cheek.

"What happened? To your face? The bruise."

"Some jerk decked me this afternoon. Thought I was ogling his chick." He didn't sound upset.

"Were you?"

"Nah." He opened his eyes and pinned me with the blast from his stare. "I'm not into chicks."

My mouth instantly dried, and I took another gulp of beer. He was perfect for me. Young, hot and interested. Lust pooled in my gut, and all the blood in my body shot to my dick.

Even as my brain processed his words and my body reacted, I felt another pull, one that could not be ignored. The tattoo on my arm heated, a warning of my imminent change, and I dragged my gaze up to see the sun minutes from setting.

Fuck. How long had we sat here? I needed to go.

TJ closed his eyes again, his shoulders sagging. "Don't be offended, Henare. If you want to punch out my lights as well, feel free. Every other fucker does."

The tattoo started to burn. I had two minutes at most.

"I have to go," I blurted. Before I could change my mind—or consider the implications—I leaned down and cupped TJ's cheek. His skin was smooth, he must have shaved before coming to see me.

It was the swiftest of kisses. No more than a featherlight touch, my lips brushing over his. "I'm not offended," I whispered. "But I still have to go."

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## Chapter 4

For the first time since I'd been cast out of my realm, I looked forward to the sun rising. When I drew breath, I swam through the waves to the shore and splashed through the shallows, anticipation bubbling through my veins. Would TJ be there?

Memories of the kiss-that-wasn't-a-kiss surged. In truth, they'd not been far from my thoughts all night. The way his eyes had snapped open. The desire that had flashed between us. The disappointment on his face when I hurried away, darting behind him into the cover of the dune, just a couple of strides away.

There hadn't even been time to strip before my human form dissolved into a cloud of moisture particles and arrowed back to the sea, to merge with the ocean. I'd heard TJ call my name, and then I'd submerged beneath the waves. What must he have thought?

I saw Butch first, trotting along the shoreline, a stick in his mouth. *Not* on his leash. As soon as he saw me, he bounded across and tossed the stick at my feet with a playful *woof*. If the dog was here, TJ would not be far away.

Throwing the stick seemed to be what the hound wanted, and he raced after it while I padded across the sand. Where was TJ? Apart from Butch and myself, there was nobody... and then I saw him. He sat on the dry sand close to my cottage. Watching me.

I blew out a breath, tension leaking from my shoulders, and I fought to hide my smile. He was here. An unusual emotion settled in my chest, one I'd never imagined feeling again. *Pleasure*. His wide smile suggested he felt the same.

I paused, a few steps from him and reined in my first thoughts before they became words. I sought something neutral. "You've let Butch run free?"

"There's nobody about for him to run after." His gaze darted down my nakedness to my half-hard cock, before rising slowly to my face. "You must have gone out early." His cheeks coloured, and he shrugged. "I mean, I've been here a while and didn't see you go out. Do you swim far?"

*Hundreds of miles*. "Yes, I like to swim." I tried to contain my delight, wanting to hold onto the emotion. He'd been waiting for me. *Unlike Matiu*. I clenched my fists at the memory of my lover, and TJ noticed.

“Hey, I’m sorry. I’m not trying to stalk you or anything.” He tensed, and I could sense his uncertainty.

“I’m glad you came back,” I replied.

He scrambled to his feet, a hopeful look in his eyes. “The way you disappeared last night. I thought, well, yeah. I couldn’t be sure.” He gave an awkward one-shouldered shrug.

He’d come back, that was what mattered, and I didn’t want him to doubt that. “Be sure of this.” I curled one hand gently in his T-shirt—so soft—and tugged him toward me. He moved fluidly to stand close, our mouths just inches apart. I could smell something sweet on his breath. “I don’t like girls either.”

His answering smile was a thing of beauty.

It felt like the most natural thing to lean into TJ, and claim his lips, even while alarm bells shrieked inside my head. I never kissed. That implied more than physical lust, more of a connection, just *more*. I wanted to fuck him, that was all. I was about to pull back and say something, when he made a broken sound in his throat and opened up to me. His tongue flicked over mine, and I was scorched in a blast of heat.

Sweet, hot and enticing, I wanted more. My cock pulsed with need, and I flexed my hips to brush against his denims. A shockwave of sensation flooded me and I knew in that moment, I had to have him.

TJ lifted his head. “We should move,” he whispered, his eyes bright and pupils dilated. *Move?*

My brain caught up with his words, and I sucked in a harsh breath. “Come.” I stepped behind him and pushed open the door. Another first. I’d never fucked here before. He followed, the dog bounding alongside, and then he leaned against the door to close it. The cottage was dim inside. The morning sun wouldn’t reach the windows for some time, but I didn’t need light for this.

“I want you.” I planted my palms on the door, either side of TJ’s head. “Now.”

His response was to slide one hand onto my neck and tug down my head. “Fuck, yeah.” The kiss this time was harder, almost rough. I nipped at the full lips, my teeth grazing at his skin, and my tongue soothing the sting away. Heat flashed between us, and when I dropped one hand to cup him, he moaned at my touch, his hard-on jerking beneath my fingers.

“Take me, *please*.” TJ’s voice was strained, as though he surfed the edge of control too. It would take very little for me to turn him, drag down his jeans and take him right here, against the door. He moved, fumbled with his jeans, and then with a clink of a belt buckle, and a rustle of heavy fabric, they were gone, pooling around our feet.

He wore no underwear. His cock bumped up against mine and I heard his breath hitch. Gods, that felt good. I sent a mental thank you to mighty Tangaroa, God of the Sea, for sending TJ to me. I hadn’t fucked in an age.

“Here.” He shoved a foil packet in my hand. “I can’t wait.” Humans insisted on condoms, and usually lube. I only carried them when I went looking for sex, and I wondered if TJ was the same, or if he was always prepared. It didn’t matter. Within moments my dick was covered, and straining inside the thin latex.

I couldn’t see his eyes clearly in the near darkness, but I found his mouth easily for another kiss. He was addictive.

As if he’d read my thoughts, TJ turned to face the door and bent slightly. “Now. *Please*, Henare.”

By Tangaroa, his ass was as perfect as I’d guessed, the skin smooth and unblemished to my touch. His whimper made me smile, and I took my time, teasing with one finger between his clenched cheeks. “Lube?”

“Just do it.”

I didn’t want to hurt him, and the thought made me pause. Why was I bothered? I sucked on my fingers anyway, and teased some more, before sliding one wet digit inside his ass. His groan of pleasure reverberated through my aching cock. I could wait no longer.

The first push into his tight hole made my head spin. Heat enveloped me and I plunged deeper, filling him, taking everything.

The world around me ceased to exist. I pumped steadily in and out, each thrust dragging a moan from the man I pinned to the door, every movement hauling me closer to a dizzying climax, held at bay by sheer force of will. His T-shirt was soft under my hand, and I pressed my fingers into his shoulder. Such contrast. Firm, strong muscles and bones, all hidden from view. I’d admire them later.

Reaching around his front, I took his cock in my fist and squeezed.

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*“Henare.”* He cried my name and I lost it. I dug my teeth into the soft flesh at the base of his neck and let the orgasm roll over me, coming in waves until I was spent. I sagged over him, my knees strangely weak, and the breath tight in my lungs. What the fuck just happened? *He called out my name.* Another reminder of Matiu.

My worlds collided for the briefest moment. The man I yearned for, and the man panting beside me. I could pretend they were one and the same. His cock like granite in my hand, I wanted to pleasure him. With care, I eased out of his ass, earning another whimper. His turn now. Pre-cum was sticky on his cockhead, and I used it to slick my fingers, before gliding along his length.

“Jesus, that’s good.” No, he mustn’t speak. I couldn’t pretend otherwise. I released his shoulder and stuffed two fingers into his mouth, to keep him quiet. He sucked them, eager and intent, and I continued to jack him off, fast and hard, until he came over my hand.

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## Chapter 5

We'd fucked. It was time for TJ to leave, only... I didn't want him to go just yet. He wriggled within the confines of my arms, and turned to face me. "I don't... it's never..." He swallowed, as though the words had stuck in his throat.

Had I misread him? Anxiety speared my temples, and I stroked an unsteady finger down his stubbled cheek. "Did I hurt you?"

His soft huff of laughter warmed my chest. "Fuck, no." He gazed back at me, holding the connection. "It was amazing."

Leaning into him, claiming those full, soft lips again, felt right. Instinctive. As did tossing aside the condom, taking TJ's hand and leading him into the previously unused bedroom. I was acting so far outside my normal behaviour that I didn't recognise myself.

Knowing that still wasn't enough to stop me.

I wanted to go slow this time, to savour the experience. TJ stripped the T-shirt over his head leaving him as blissfully naked as me. The only thing he wore was a chunky watch, and a smile.

"Let me taste you." He sank gracefully to his knees and gazed up at me, an impish grin on his face. I nodded, unable to speak, and helpless with longing. My dick was hard and ready to go again, and it thickened even further when TJ closed his sweet lips around it.

*Holy Tangaroa.* This was more than I expected. Moist heat enveloped my cockhead, sparking so many sensations that my knees were buckling under the onslaught. I had to grab the decorative chest of drawers for balance. Bit by bit, TJ took my cock. It must have been uncomfortable, but he swallowed, glanced up at me, and then took the last inch, leaving his nose pressing into my groin.

How could he breathe? The myriad of anonymous fucks had never matched this, or even come close. Millions of nerve endings sang in pleasure, and that was before he started to move. Long slow glides to almost leave his mouth, before he sucked again, back and forth, in and out. My chest tightened, the air constricting in my lungs.

I, the dreaded *Taniwha*, was reduced to helplessness by this man on his knees. He'd almost made me human.

His tongue laved the underside, swirled over the head, and caused stars to flash before my eyes. “*TJ.*” I dug for control, to wrestle back some power, but he ignored me. My balls ached with the need to come, but I feared he’d choke. “*Stop,*” I managed to gasp, before coherent thought disappeared altogether.

Worry flitted across his beautiful eyes, but he let my cock slide from his mouth. His lips were dark and swollen. Edible. “Did I do something you don’t like?”

“No.” I sucked in a ragged breath, my heart pounding. “It was too good.”

TJ’s smile was sweet. “There’s no such thing. Will you come in my mouth? Please?”

He offered freely what I’d only ever taken before. As easily as he took my cock into his mouth, he slipped under my defences, and chipped away at another piece of my armour. I wanted him too much. I couldn’t refuse.

This time, he stroked my super-sensitive balls while he sucked, and I couldn’t stop. I erupted into his throat, fierce spasms that seemed to last forever, each spurt robbing me of my sanity.

I stared, open-mouthed, when TJ licked me clean. His dick jutted forward, hard and flushed, and it cried for my attention.

*I don’t do this.*

I only touched him earlier because I pretended he was Matiu.

I don’t give.

Sinking onto the bed, I held out my hand to him. “Come here.” My voice was little more than a rasp. TJ scrambled to his feet, and then perched on the edge of the bed. “I want to touch you.” The words were unfamiliar when I spoke. I’m not sure I’d ever used them.

A smile to rival the sun lit his face, and he wriggled back, to sprawl against the pillows. “I want that too, Henare.”

Not sure where to start, I lay on my side next to him, and slowly stroked his dick with my fingertips. Root to tip, I mapped the veins and listened to the sounds he made, learning what he liked. Over the head, I slicked through the gleaming pearl of pre-cum, and then used that to lubricate my fist. Watching him, seeing the signs of his arousal, and feeling him, satisfied me in a way I’d never known possible. How could it be that I was getting turned on, by pleasuring him?



It made no sense, but judging by the pink flush on his cheeks, and the way his eyes glazed, he was enjoying it. I pumped his shaft, the way I like to touch myself, and his whimpers turned to groans. Desire unfurled again in my belly, and my cock stirred. I could do this all day. Touch him, and then fuck him. I squeezed harder and found a faster rhythm, his erection hot and sticky within my hand.

"Henare," he whispered, and tugged at my head. Our lips met a second before he came, the hot streams splashing over his stomach. Beautiful.

"Christ," he muttered, his head dropping back onto the pillow. "I don't think I can move. Do you have any tissues?"

No. I dug into one of the nearby drawers and produced a T-shirt. "Use this."

TJ's eyes flicked open, his surprise tangible. "I can't use your shirt. I'll get some toilet paper." He wouldn't find any, but he didn't know that. I forestalled his argument by wiping him clean, and then dropping the shirt onto the floor.

The first fingers of daylight peeped through the window, and strayed across the bed. I wanted to look at TJ some more, see his face illuminated by the sun, and wonder at what he was doing to me.

I slid my finger over the purple stain on TJ's cheek. "Who else has hurt you? The 'other fuckers'?"

He gave that awkward one-shouldered shrug that I already associated with him. "Does it matter?"

Something heated inside my chest. "Yes. It does."

"Fuck." TJ dragged a hand through his hair, before meeting my eyes. "My dad. My stepfather. My brother."

"Your *family*?" Why would they do this?

"Because I'm gay, that's why. Families suck. Mostly. My Gran was lovely, and my sister is awesome, but the rest of them can go to hell."

Yes, we had something in common there. "I don't see my family anymore." *They disowned me.* "They caught me with my lover and..." *Exiled me.* "Couldn't accept it." My heart banged painfully against my ribs, and the words dried in my mouth. I'd never spoken of this before.

"*Henare.*" TJ stroked my neck, his fingers caressing the fine hairs, soothing me. "That's awful. What happened to him? Your lover?"

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*He abandoned me. Walked away as though I meant nothing.* My skin prickled and felt too hot. I couldn't talk about this. TJ's fingers continued to whisper over my neck, his gaze holding mine. *He* didn't judge me. "Matiu was my oldest friend and he told me he'd come back one day. I'm still waiting." I shook my head.

I'd said too much.

The beautiful young man by my side said nothing, but his eyes spoke volumes. When he kissed me, his lips were gentle.

I could have stayed there all day, lying next to TJ, skin to skin, feeling his heart beating beneath my palm, his soft breath as he slept. I would watch over him. My family wanted to pretend I'd never existed, but they'd never physically hurt me. Which was the easier to bear?

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## Chapter 6

The sun was fully through the windows when TJ stirred. Stretching, he yawned and scratched at his chin, then opened his eyes and saw me. Surprise flickered across his face, and then desire and he reached up to claim a kiss. “Shit,” he mumbled, “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“I didn’t mind.” I meant it. I didn’t want him to leave, but wasn’t sure how to say it. As I sought the words, he glanced at his watch and groaned.

“Hell. I need to get moving, I don’t want to be late.”

Disappointment surged, but I swallowed it down. I was being foolish if I thought he wanted to spend more time with me.

“Hey, are you free today? Maybe you could come? If you wanted to.” TJ messed with his hair some more and met my gaze. “I just thought, you know.”

“Yes.” I couldn’t contain my smile. “I would like to come with you.”

“That’s great.” He climbed out of bed and picked up his T-shirt. “You might not be so keen when I tell you what I’m doing.”

His body was so perfect, it was a shame to cover it with clothing. I stared at his ass when he walked into the bathroom. He would be mine again soon.

TJ paused on the way out, and gestured to my carvings, the works in progress that covered the table. “You make these?” I nodded, and his eyes opened wide. “Wow. They’re amazing. I’ve seen them for sale but didn’t know they were yours.”

I shrugged, uncomfortable with the attention. “Should we go?”

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TJ gestured toward the sprawling house at the end of the track. “This used to be my gran’s place. She’s been gone a few years now, but her friend lives here still.” TJ flashed me a smile. “I do odd jobs for her, and today I’m bringing in her firewood.”

It was the middle of summer, and had been hot for weeks. “Odd time of year to need firewood?”

“Yeah, about that.” TJ stopped walking, shoved his hands in his pockets and stared into the distance. “I’m not going to be here this winter.”

I paused beside him. "Oh?"

"I'm going overseas. You know how us Kiwis always want to fly the nest." The shimmering sea in the distance held his attention.

I processed his words. "You're going far?"

"Uh huh. England. About as far as you can get."

"Your sister," I murmured.

"Yeah." He gave me a hint of a smile. "She's got a year left at Cambridge, and has a room free in her house. I miss her, you know." *I knew*. I understood that only too well. TJ rubbed the back of his neck. "It's been my goal for years, and I've saved every cent I can lay my hands on. And yeah. My flight's already booked."

"How soon?"

"Next week."

My turn to stare at the sea, the sensation of loss painfully familiar. Why did I care? As Butch darted up to me and licked my hand, I clung to the truth. TJ was just another anonymous fuck. I'd have forgotten him by tomorrow.

TJ's friend was a bright-eyed, plump lady with weather-beaten skin and a mop of tangled grey curls. She could have been anywhere between fifty and eighty, and moved slowly to greet us, leaning heavily on a wooden stick. Butch was visibly delighted to see her and bounded up, his tail wagging fit to burst. She hugged TJ hard and then turned to me. "I'm Elizabeth. And who might you be?"

TJ wriggled from her embrace. "This is Henare," he announced, a curious note of pride in his voice.

I shook her hand, surprised by the firm grip. "I'm honoured to meet you." My manners were rusty, but she smiled and tilted her head to one side, as though looking for something.

"You too," she murmured. "Now are you both ready to work? I have a mountain of logs just waiting for your attention."

There was something solid and mindless about heavy labour, and I lost myself in an afternoon of chopping, hauling, and stacking. TJ threw himself into the task and there was no need for conversation, but he bantered with me, teasing and playful. He treated me like a friend. *A lover*.

As for laughing, my sides ached and my stomach hurt more and more as the day passed. I had never been so amused by anything, as by the sight of Butch galloping after a stray seagull, with no hope of catching it. The gull squawked rudely and then returned to taunt the hound some more.

Elizabeth brought us drinks and snacks, and after refusing the first time, I acquiesced and sampled her food. Little sticky pastries, fragrant with spice and drenched in sugar, they melted on my tongue. It would almost be worth being human if I could eat these every day. For once, I didn't gaze blindly to the ocean and brood over what I had lost; instead I sat with TJ in the late afternoon sunshine, and just enjoyed the moment.

Did he have any idea of how delectable he looked? He sat in the doorway to Elizabeth's woodshed, dust and woodchips clinging to his clothes, and a twig tangled in his hair. Dirt smudged both cheeks, but his smile was bright and happy.

"Thanks, Henare." He squinted at me in the sunshine. "I've got it done in half the time with your help."

I inclined my head, unsure how to answer. I enjoyed it too? You made me forget for a few hours? The realisation that he too would be leaving soon, left a bitter taste in my mouth, one that not even Elizabeth's baking could shift.

Walking back, I contemplated how to ask TJ to return to my cottage with me, when he nudged my arm with his elbow. "Hey, my housemate is away for a couple of days. We could go to my place if you like."

His place, a tidy clapboard house, was a short walk from the beach and by my reckoning, we had four hours before the sun set. We could do a lot in that time. We'd barely made it through the door before he was in my arms, and we were kissing the fuck out of each other. Desire, on a slow simmer all day, ratcheted up to fever pitch in the blink of an eye.

TJ smelled of wood and green leaves, and his lips tasted of sugary spice. The combination would always remind me of this man, and take me back to this moment in time. I hungered for him with an urgency I'd long forgotten.

With our clothes making a trail across the floor, we fell onto his bed in a tangle of limbs. TJ lay beneath me, his cock grasped in one firm fist, while he ground onto my belly. Every movement made me harder, and he paused his teasing to kiss me, sucking on my bottom lip for a second.

“I’ve got lube and condoms in the drawer.” He didn’t take his eyes off me, the shimmering green lighting up his face. Moments later, he dropped a foil packet and a small bottle onto the bed, and I hastened to fit the rubber. I was close already. It wouldn’t take long before I came, and this thought made me pause. It was no longer just about me. TJ had gifted me a perfect day, and I wanted to give him something back.

Instead of flipping him onto his front, I nudged at his legs, encouraging him to let me reach his asshole. Excitement flickered in his eyes, and he tucked up his knees, watching eagerly as I poured lube into my palm and slicked my fingers.

Slowly, with the utmost care, I stroked his tight pucker, making him moan before I slipped a finger inside. A second followed, and then a third, to pump in and out. Watching his obvious pleasure, and listening to the little sounds he made, somehow heightened everything for me. I’d never forget him. He was already way more than a casual fuck, and now, my chest ached at the thought of losing this intimacy.

“Now, Henare.” He sounded breathless. I knew how he felt.

Removing my fingers, I guided my cock inside him slowly, prolonging the sensation, feeling every inch of my erection being squeezed. So tight, so intense. From this position I could kiss him, stroke his own hardness, and then gaze into his eyes as I fucked him. Every slap of flesh, every moan, made me harder, but this time I didn’t rush. I was already saying good-bye to him.

His hair fell limp onto his perspiration-slicked forehead and framed his beautiful eyes. I wanted to remember every moment of this. Every thrust. Every heartbeat.

“Oh, *God*. Henare, I’m going to come.” I fisted his cock and watched it erupt, and felt my own orgasm draw closer. It would be unstoppable. A tsunami that threatened to destroy me with its intensity. I hovered on a knife-edge, unable to hold back, and gave in to a climax unlike anything I’d ever experienced.

This had been perfection. Nothing could come close.

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TJ lay with his head on my shoulder, his fingers drawing loose circles on my chest. “I’m going to a party tonight, do you want to come with me?” I

tensed immediately, and he sighed, warm breath drifting over my skin. "It doesn't have to be as my partner, just a friend. It's at the boating club, the guy who runs the Kapiti Island tours." He peeped up at me, his eyes hopeful. "D'you think you might? And then maybe," he smiled but it looked nervous. "Maybe, you could stay the night. If you want to."

The stark difference between us was highlighted yet again. My night, as every night, would be spent in the ocean, guarding this stretch of coastline. There would be no parties, no easy gatherings with his friends. No long nights curled up together, warm and sheltered from the elements.

"No. I can't." My voice was gruff, and his gaze fell.

"Yeah, okay." His finger continued its soothing motion. "Was that no to the party or spending the night? Or both?"

"Both." His hand stilled. I needed to tell him something, but what? "I have to be somewhere else." It wasn't a lie, but it was the closest I would ever come to the truth. He waited, as though expecting me to say more. The silence stretched between us, growing cooler and more uncomfortable by the second.

He spoke first. "I didn't mean to put you on the spot. It's short notice, I get that."

"I'm sorry," I said. That wasn't a lie either.

I held him close, spooned around him. From here I could kiss his neck and pretend I didn't have to leave, that he wouldn't be leaving either. I couldn't do this again. He'd made me feel, made me *want*. Dangerous emotions. Ones I could not afford.

When I left here tonight, it would be good-bye forever.

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## Chapter 7

When the sun rose, I stayed in the water for longer, watching from a safe distance to see if TJ came to my cottage. He did, and waited for an age, just sitting there on the sand, looking out to the ocean.

Emotions churned and dragged at my stomach, reminding me how I felt when Matiu walked away from me. This was completely different, I scoffed to myself. Matiu and I had been together for hundreds of years. I'd spent one day with TJ. *One perfect day.* And he was leaving soon. Better that he thought I didn't care, than to wait for me, hoping I'd come back.

Was that what Matiu had thought too? Had he wanted to stop me from pining for him? I couldn't decide how I felt about this.

I feasted my eyes on TJ, from my obscured position in the waves. He would get over me. With those sparkling eyes and bright smile, he'd make new friends and lovers easily. My chest heated at the thought of another man touching him, and I pushed the emotion away.

He was not mine. He never could be.

Eventually, TJ walked to the water's edge and dropped to a crouch. He was making another offering. He must be going to Kapiti Island again today. The sea was calm as a millpond, and it would be a beautiful day for his trip. I'd collect some clothes when he left, and go sit on another beach today, just in case he came back. In fact, I'd stay away until I was sure he'd left the country next week.

I couldn't risk seeing him.

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I watched the little boat speeding away toward Kapiti Island and wondered if TJ was aboard. Wondered if he was thinking about me. Did I need to maintain this separation? Surely I could just enjoy what he offered while he was here?

I'd never been a coward before, but I'd never felt such an intense connection before. Not even with Matiu. I had to stick with my decision.

I spent the day staring out to sea as usual, but further up the coastline, in a position where I'd see TJ's boat when it returned. He wouldn't see me, but I'd know he was safely back.



The afternoon crawled. Sitting on a rock, waiting for the time to pass, I noticed a disturbance in the water near the island. I squinted to see more clearly. In the space of a few minutes, clouds thickened and a strong wind whipped up from nowhere, creating white foam horses on the waves. Heavy rain lashed the island and moved toward the shore, sending holidaymakers scattering for cover.

This was not normal. This had the mark of the Sea Gods.

Logic battled with fear. TJ was out there on a tiny boat, at the mercy of the elements.

Maybe he wasn't on the boat after all, hadn't made the trip today? I ran to the boathouse, heedless of the other people darting for cover from the rain, and I barged through the doors. Skidding to a stop on the tiled floor, I spun around. There must be somebody here that would know.

A young woman stood behind a counter, her eyes wide as she stared at me. I sucked in a quick breath and strode toward her. "TJ. Was he on the Kapiti Island trip today?"

"TJ Morgan? Yes, he's the guide." She hugged a clipboard to her chest, as though it was a shield. "And you are...?"

"A friend. Are they in difficulties?"

She frowned, and pushed her blonde hair back from her face. "Not as such. They've just had to delay their return trip with the weather."

Relief flooded my chest, and I acknowledged how fiercely my heart was pounding. "They're not on the water at the moment?"

"No. They'll wait until it clears. What did you say your name was?"

I just nodded to her, turned around and left. TJ was safe on the island. My knees sagged, and I dropped onto a nearby bench, unable to walk any further. *Think, Henare.* Why would the Sea Gods be angry? All had been quiet in the ocean the night before. And more to the point, why were they targeting Kapiti Island, at exactly the time that my lover was there?

Mighty Tangaroa, had I put TJ at risk? I couldn't breathe past the ice that filled my lungs. Was this down to Matiu? Was he jealous?

Ignoring the wind and the stinging shards of hail, I sat on the beach and watched the island, and waited for the storm to pass. The rain made visibility

difficult, and cut down on available light, but shortly before sundown the storm broke.

Whatever had been happening, it must be over now. The skies cleared, evening stars slid from behind the dense cloud, and the sea calmed back to its earlier gentle undulation. The only thing remaining was an eerie purple cast to the sunset. I leaned forward, searching for the dancing lights that would signal TJ's boat setting off.

The tattoo heated on my arm, and I huffed a sigh of relief. Ducking under the nearby trees, I shed my clothes and dissolved into a cloud of water droplets, before heading straight for the ocean.

I felt the chaos immediately. All the creatures that lived in this stretch of water had taken cover, hiding from the unnatural storm that had raged above. *Taniwha* essence was everywhere, the sparkling residue we left behind. There had been a battle beneath the waves, but I couldn't sense if it had been a fight between a *Taniwha* and another monster, or two of my kind. There was no external threat now, of that I was confident. After guarding this place for all my adult life, I would know if an enemy was here. So was the battle nothing to do with me after all? My spirits lifted.

I surfaced, still in elemental form, close to the island. A small boat rocked gently next to the loading platform, and as I watched, a stream of passengers climbed aboard. Eight bright yellow lifejackets settled into the craft, but TJ was not among them. A flash of yellow on the pebbled beach caught my attention and I waited, just a swirling cloud of water vapour hugging the waves.

Yes. It was TJ. He scrambled in at the back and checked on all the passengers. "My cell phone is still dead, and so's the radio."

The captain of the vessel was busy with his engine. "Keep the flares handy. Just in case. It's only a short hop back, but you never know with these storms."

I would go with them. Make sure they returned safely.

The engine roared and then dropped to a steady, throbbing purr, and the craft eased away from the dock. TJ held the rail with one hand, his attention fixed on Kapiti Island in the growing darkness.

I was so focused on watching my lover, I failed to see the other *Taniwha* until it rose from the water. Right in front of the boat.

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## Chapter 8

Matiu emerged from the ocean with a low growl, water cascading from his scales, all teeth and flashing claws. For a second, I was frozen. In his native form he was lethal, the most deadly of monsters, and the most feared creature of the deep. He was also magnificent.

I'd dreamed of meeting him again, longed to see him with every fibre of my being, but not like this.

His powerful tail crashed down, close to TJ's boat, sending a massive wave that rocked the small craft. Water poured over the edges and soaked the people huddled inside. The weather changed. A jagged bolt of lightning ripped the sky apart and hail clattered down, as though poured from a giant bucket.

Not like this.

Screams rang out as the boat tossed, helpless, the yellow jackets tangling together and separating again. The backwash from Matiu's tail threw the boat on its side and several yellow jackets dropped into the churning ocean.

Never like this.

It had happened faster than I could react. A heartbeat later, I assumed my native form and rose up, the waves parting in my wake. I stood between Matiu and the sinking boat. I would *not* let him harm them.

"We are guardians, not aggressors. Why are you doing this, Matiu?"

"Stand aside, Henare."

My old lover before me, my new lover behind. Could I be more torn? "You should not be doing this. They are innocent."

I heard screams. Sobbing. Pitiful cries for help that rang out over the noise of the storm. I couldn't hear TJ's voice, and fear gripped my heart like an icy fist.

Matiu snarled and flicked his spiny tail again. It snapped around like a whip, and caused another wild surge of water to smash into the helpless passengers. Into TJ. "He knows about the *Taniwha*. You told him. I am here to deliver judgement."

"Don't do this, Matiu. There is no need for judgement."

"I spoke to him." Matiu spat the words out. "Your *boyfriend*. He told me he has rituals for the *Taniwha*."

The cries were subsiding, but I daren't look, couldn't risk taking my eyes off Matiu. "He leaves offerings. You are casting judgement on someone for observing the ancient ways?" I advanced. Fury filled me, and I spoke through gritted teeth. "You are mistaken."

"I told you, Henare. Stand aside."

The wind intensified and the waves flew higher, whipped by the gale. More deadly by the second. I stood my ground and gazed into Matiu's coal black eyes. "I will not." The longer I could hold him back, the more chance TJ—and his passengers—had to escape.

"It's too late." There was a note of triumph in his growl. "They will have seen us now. They cannot be allowed to speak of this."

"It's dark. They will be confused by the water." I tightened my muscles and flexed my claws. "I will *not* allow you to do this." I hurled myself at Matiu, and lashed out with razor-sharp talons, swiping a hairsbreadth from his chest. *Taniwha* were created for fighting, but I didn't want to damage Matiu, just to drive him back.

He roared his anger, and the sea trembled. He didn't scare me, but I was afraid for TJ. I charged into Matiu's body again. Over and over, we crashed and hammered into each other, dodging the flailing claws and vicious teeth, both of us trying to achieve dominance. There was nothing I could do for TJ. I had to concentrate my entire focus on Matiu, and wait for the moment I could take him down.

I pushed him back, a step at a time, until his tail could do no further damage. His fury grew, and I knew he would make a mistake. I just had to be patient. With every second counting, putting the innocent people in more danger, patience was far from my mind. I had never been so angry. I had to hone that anger, focus it precisely and use it as a weapon.

There were just faint cries behind me now, and I had to act quickly. I hesitated, took my eyes off Matiu for the briefest moment, and half-turned to look over my shoulder.

He shrieked, and ploughed into me, in a move that would have knocked me over had I not been waiting for it. Twisting out of his reach, I used the momentum to wrap my tail around his legs and pull him to his knees.

His shock was visible, especially when I pinned him down, with my claws to the vulnerable skin on his throat. "Yield, Matiu. Let them go." He resisted. As I'd expected. I squeezed tighter with my tail, immobilising him while I dug my claws in deeper.

"You would choose that weak human over me?" His choked words cut me to my core.

"This is wrong, Matiu. Don't make it even worse."

He struggled, and I dug deeper with my tail, the barbs scraping under his scales. He'd been my lover, my closest friend. The last creature I would ever hurt. "Yield," I hissed to him.

His defiance was absolute. With a strength that surprised me, he twisted and almost pulled free, but I clung on, my talons shifting into a death grip under his chin. Our one vulnerability. "You are mistaken, Matiu." There was only silence now from the stricken boat. I swallowed down my fear for TJ, the despair flooding my veins. This had to be finished.

I squeezed hard. Cut off his breath.

I couldn't do it. Not even for TJ. I would never be able to live with myself.

Kicking Matiu hard, I pushed him under the waves. He'd be conscious within seconds, but that was all the time I needed. I turned back to the yellow jackets bobbing in the churning water and counted only two. Holy Tangaroa, where were the rest? Not TJ. *Please*.

As gently as I could, I used my tail to sweep the terrified passengers toward the shore and into calmer water. Toward the others that had already made it to the shingle beach. And there, was TJ.

My knees shook, but it was relief making me dizzy. He carried a woman out of the water, placed her on the ground near the others, and then turned and ran back to the waves, heedless of his own safety. I did a rapid count of yellow jackets. All there. The last two swept into the shallows and splashed with weak movements, to stand upright with TJ's help.

I stepped back, hiding behind the storm, and went to face Matiu.

He surfaced, water pouring from his scales, his teeth bared and deadly. If I'd thought him furious before, that was nothing compared to the rage flashing in his eyes.

"I spared you." My voice was frigid. "You will spare TJ in return."

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The fury left him, replaced by uncertainty. "They may have seen us."

"Then punish me. Let me pay."

"You've been paying already. For my mistake." He sounded broken. "We can't talk here, Henare, and I need to speak with you. I've found a way for you to return. To be reinstated."

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## Chapter 9

Could it be possible? Could I return to my realm, my family, and my life? My lover? Thoughts tossed and danced in my brain, sparking like fireflies on a warm evening. What of TJ? And why was I even thinking about him? He was leaving in a matter of days anyway.

I shoved aside the strangely empty feeling in my chest, and sought my voice. "I would like to see you in your human form again. I'll wait on the other side of the island for you." The part where no humans ever set foot. The enormity of this threatened to overwhelm me, and I struggled to retain control. "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," he echoed. We stared at each other for a long moment, and then he slid beneath the waves and was gone. As though he'd flicked a switch, the sea calmed, the rain stopped and the wind eased. The passengers would put it down to a freak storm. After all, as far as they were concerned, the *Taniwha* were the stuff of legends.

Behind me, a whooshing noise heralded a brilliant crimson flare being fired into the sky. Now the sea was quiet, a rescue party would be here soon enough and TJ would be able to leave.

I might never see him again.

Fear cramped in my guts. I relived the never-ending moment when I thought he'd drowned, before I'd seen him on the land. What was it about TJ Morgan that had me tied up in knots? I was just lonely, but that would soon end. Until then, I would continue to watch over him, to make sure he returned safely to the mainland.

Blowing out a calming breath, I shifted to my elemental form and hovered, as a spray of water droplets, close to the shingle. I watched as TJ applied first aid skills, and I wondered where he left Butch when he came to the island. Dogs would not be allowed here. Perhaps he stayed with Elizabeth.

TJ limped away from the others, visibly in pain. He'd saved those people, while injured himself, and my heart swelled with pride. He sank onto the sun-bleached remains of a tree trunk, and gazed into the darkness, before sinking his head into his hands. Unable to keep my distance, I drifted closer. He'd never see me in the dark, never wonder why a cloud of water vapour hung in

the air. The darkness was no barrier to my vision, and I feasted on his beauty. The soft, silky hair. The sharp, determined chin. Those sultry lips. My lover had been perfect.

I longed to comfort him, to hold his hand, and take his mouth in a punishing kiss. I would miss him. He'd brought a light into the darkness of my cursed life, and he would always hold a piece of my heart. As though he knew I was there, he lifted his head and gazed in my direction. Exhaustion drew lines on his face that I ached to smooth away, but it was the despair in his eyes that tore at me.

The rescue vessel was swift to arrive, and efficient at loading all the passengers. TJ was the last to climb aboard, after one last look behind him. Maybe he was saying good-bye to the island?

I knew the crossing would be quick and safe, but I accompanied them to make sure. My last sight of TJ was as he hobbled into the boathouse.

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The tiny beach was inaccessible either on foot, or by boat, and made a perfect place to meet Matiu, well away from any spying eyes. I waited on the ribbon of sand, impatient and anxious at the same time. His words rang in my head on a constant loop: *I've found a way for you to return*. What had happened to change things? Were the old rules relaxing? Or had he found a loophole?

It didn't explain why he'd been trying to kill TJ.

No matter how much I burned for this chance to return, I needed to understand what Matiu had been thinking when he attacked my lover. I stared at my feet. *Not* my lover any more.

I felt his presence before I saw him. Turning slowly, I gazed on Matiu's human form for the first time in three hundred long, pain-filled years. Shaggy blond hair, so bright it was the colour of sunlight, eyes of the deepest green, and a smile that lit up the world. How had I survived so long without seeing him? Like me, he was beautifully, hungrily naked, his muscles toned and skin a pale gold. Soft hair adorned his chest, and I stared, greedy at the sight before me.

Matiu strode across the sand and clasped my arms in his warm hands. I blinked, as his scent filled my nose, wet sand and sea spray mingling in an irresistible combination. Slowly, with all the time in the world, our lips met and then slid apart again. A nervous kiss, both of us unsure about its reception. He tasted the same as I remembered. I knew he would feel the same too, if we came together. *If?* Surely I meant *when?*



Standing there, our hands on each other's shoulders, the years rolled away. There was nothing to say. I just wanted to enjoy this moment.

Matiu broke the silence. "I cannot stay long. I have petitioned mighty Tangaroa on your behalf and he is willing to grant clemency, if you plead your case. Things are different now."

Clemency? My heart swelled to bursting. Matiu must have worked hard for this opportunity, probably waited for many years. Excitement bubbled in my veins and I almost forgot how to breathe.

"When?" It came out as a whisper.

"Full moon." Matiu's smile was sweet. "Two weeks. You must stay here and in isolation until I come to fetch you." His fingers dug into my bare skin, reminding me of the thousands of times we'd touched each other. "You will be with us again soon, Henare."

Another thought of TJ broke through. There would be no chance to bid him good-bye. Isolation and reflection were essential parts of the ritual before seeing Tangaroa, a way of cleansing the spirit, and if I didn't take this opportunity it may never come again.

"Two weeks." I nodded. "I will wait here for you." After three hundred years, a couple of weeks would be nothing.

I'd imagined that if Matiu and I ever reconciled, we'd be starving for each other, unable to restrain ourselves. It was only after he left—a quick press of the lips later—that I realised I'd not been hard for him. He'd been soft too.

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My nights were spent circling Kapiti Island, and the days faded into a blur of sunshine, as I waited for the two weeks to pass. I couldn't keep TJ from my thoughts. Every time I thought I'd achieved a state of calm meditation, I'd remember his smile, and the raw hunger in his eyes. Even when I was restored to my full status, I'd not know what happened to him. *Taniwha* were not supposed to interact with mortals, and I guessed that's why Matiu had been so concerned.

My last—and only—meeting with Tangaroa had been when he declared my exile. When Matiu turned his back on me and refused to stand by my side. I wondered how long it had taken him to engineer this meeting, what price he'd had to pay? And if we could ever truly go back to those days of innocence?

It was the night of the full moon, and I was ready. In the final seconds before the sun disappeared, Matiu appeared on the sand. *At last*. I couldn't hold back my anticipation and I clasped his arms, eager and focused. "What happens now?"

His smile warmed me inside. "I will escort you. The court is in session and you will get your chance to petition for reinstatement." I thought he would kiss me, but no. He probably didn't want to disturb my already shaky composure. I followed his lead and took elemental form, arrowing into the sea and heading for the depths, for my realm. My home.

I was permitted to take robed human form in the Sea God's lair, and I gazed at the myriad of similarly attired *Taniwha* that bustled around the courtrooms. Tears pressed at the back of my eyes. Soon, I would see my family again. This would be my life once more.

Standing to one side, Matiu and I waited for my name to be called. I had so many things to ask him, I didn't know where to start. One question pulled at me, and could wait no longer. "Matiu, why did you think I'd revealed our secrets to TJ? You said you'd spoken to him?"

My lover flicked me a curious glance. "Yes. I met him at a gathering, and he commented on my tattoo." Like all of us, Matiu wore a *Taniwha* design inked into his skin. "He talked openly about you, Henare. It worried me that he knew too much."

"He didn't deserve to die. You should have spoken to me first."

He huffed in annoyance, a gesture once familiar to me. "There was no time. He told me he'd be leaving soon."

The reminder dug into me like a sharp knife. "What were you doing there anyway? Have the rules relaxed to allow *Taniwha* to mix with mortals?"

"By the Gods, no." His voice was shocked. "Nothing's changed like that."

"So what *has* changed? You said things are different now."

"My status." He sounded surprised at the question. "I occupy one of the senior positions in the circle now." He paused. "That's how I was able to petition for you. It took a long time, Henare. I worked hard for this." It was a subtle rebuke, and I hastened to reassure him.

"I cannot express my gratitude. The years have been long without you. To know that I can return is an honour, but to be able to be with you again is a gift beyond measure."

“Ah, about that.” Matiu’s attention was fixed upon the wall opposite. “I have a mate now. And young of my own.” He glanced at me, and then his gaze skittered away again. “There are some beautiful females here, and all eager to meet you.”

I had the strange sensation that I was holding one conversation while Matiu was engaged in a completely different one. Holding up my hand, I stalled his words while I sought my tongue. “I thought we would be together? You said things had changed.”

“Not like that.”

A chill descended upon me. “Explain.” I had to force the word out.

“We’ll have to be discreet this time.” Matiu kept his voice low. “Not get caught.”

Bitterness filled my throat, choking me. “So when I plead for clemency, I have to take a female mate?”

“You don’t *have* to. But it would make things easier. Smooth it over.”

It felt like a slap in the face. I stared at Matiu and put the jigsaw pieces together again, but making a different picture this time. “You brought me back, but I have to pretend. Live a lie.”

“You would still be here. We could see each other. By the Gods, Henare, haven’t you missed me?”

I had. Yes. But not any more.

“Tell me again about TJ. You just *happened* to meet him? What are the odds of that?”

“*Shhh.*” He flashed me a warning glare.

I had no intention of staying quiet. “And if *Taniwha* are not supposed to mix with humans, how many rules did you break to talk with him?”

A new story was building up in my head. One I didn’t like at all. “You saw TJ with me and sought him out. Am I right?” The dark flush on Matiu’s cheeks made my stomach clench. “How long had you been watching me?” His lips pursed, and he wouldn’t meet my eyes. “You were jealous? That’s the only reason you wanted me back?”

“If I can’t have you, I don’t want...” His hot retort foundered.

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I had to get out of there. I couldn't go through with this. "I *loved* you, Matiu."

A soft bell sounded, and then a voice boomed my name.

"Stay, Henare." Matiu grabbed my arm, and then released it equally quickly. "I'll make time for you."

"Not like this."

"If you don't plead to mighty Tangaroa now, you won't ever have the chance. You will be exiled forever."

"I thought I already was."

My name rang out again, and I knew what I had to do. This was my one opportunity to change my life. I'd be a fool to waste it.

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## Chapter 10

I floated face down in warm water, the sun burning the skin on my back. My mouth and nose were clogged, and my lungs had difficulty pulling in air. With an effort, I lifted my head and gazed at the shore. Not far now. My limbs felt like dead weights, but I swam a few more strokes and then floated again.

Letting my legs drop, I finally touched sand with the tips of my toes. Thank the Gods. I splashed on a little further, stretched beneath me once more, and this time could stand upright with my chin above the gentle waves. I was exhausted. Could I even make it to the beach?

Only just. My knees gave way, and I collapsed onto warm, damp sand. I had no idea where I was, and when I forced my tired brain to think, I realised I'd no idea *who* I was either. These things had to be connected.

Bright lights flashed in my eyes, and voices boomed above me, asking questions I couldn't answer. Drifting in and out of consciousness, I was aware of being lifted and carried, of people in white coats examining me, and then a soft, cool bed.

Time passed. People came and went. I lay silent in the bed, and stared at a small window and a tiny patch of blue sky beyond. Food arrived on trays and I picked at it, but even that felt unfamiliar. Who was I? And how had I ended up here? It felt as though I had a giant door inside my head, and no matter what I did, it refused to open.

I knew I waited for something. Or someone.

The door clicked, and an old woman entered the room. Like everyone else, she was a stranger, but she seemed to know me. "*Henare.*" Her voice was shocked. Standing in the open doorway, she leaned heavily on a wooden stick, but she moved to my side and reached out to touch my hand.

Something jangled in my brain, but nothing emerged. *Henare.* Finally, someone who might have some answers. "You know me?"

"Yes." A smile lit up her tanned face. "I'm Elizabeth. What happened to you?"

"I don't know." I pushed at the door in my head, but it wouldn't budge. "I woke up on the beach and they brought me here."

“The doctor says you’re suffering from amnesia, possibly brought on by head trauma.” I touched my head. Nothing hurt. “You’ve been here nearly two weeks and not reacted to anything yet. He said you might respond to familiar places and things.” She dug into a shoulder bag and produced a white plastic box. I watched, curious.

Prying the lid free, she passed the container to me and I peered inside. The scent hit me first. Spice. Sugar. A crisp, still warm pastry nestled on a bed of crumpled paper. I knew this tasted good, I could remember the flavour, a thousand tastebuds dancing in glee. I inhaled deeply and held the delicious fragrance in my lungs. “For me?”

“Of course.” She laughed, her eyes crinkling in the corners. “You loved my baking that day you came with TJ.”

*TJ.* A tide of emotion flooded my brain, short circuiting my thinking processes. Why did that name sound so familiar?

The pastry melted on my tongue, and I closed my eyes in bliss. “Thank you. *Thank you.* What else can you tell me?”

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Elizabeth’s home was somewhere I recognised. The huge, shaggy dog that leapt up, also knew me, and I fussed his ears, and felt an echo of a memory. Elizabeth chattered. She told me about the sharp-suited lawyer that had arrived and told her where to find me. How he’d left valuable papers including the ownership deeds to a cottage on the beach that I’d inherited. His name had been Matiu Kaipara, but it meant nothing.

The only name that sang out was TJ. He was important, I felt it in my bones. Elizabeth showed me a picture of him, but as with everyone, I couldn’t recall seeing him before. She looked disappointed, but shrugged it away, and prepared to drive me to the beach.

I knew the cottage instantly. Recognised the wooden carvings inside and out. I picked up a half-finished piece of bleached driftwood and ran my fingers over the smooth surface. I’d worked on this. I could see myself sitting outside, a small knife in my hand, as I carved intricate patterns into the wood. Little pieces of my life crept back in.

Something was still missing though. *Someone.* I knew I waited for him to appear, and it felt as though I’d been doing that for a long time. Forever.

I might never get my memories back, according to the people in white coats, but I was healthy and strong, and grateful to be alive. Everything else would fall into place eventually.

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A week later I sat in the sunshine, breathing in the sea air, and scraping at a piece of driftwood with a sharp knife. Elizabeth would be calling round later, but for the moment I was alone, and that felt normal. I pushed continuously at the door in my head, but it was as though my memories had been wiped clean.

The sound of frenzied barking heralded her arrival, and I sat up, stretching my back and rolling my shoulders. Sure enough, Butch bounded up to me, to nudge at my hands and slobber on my feet. This time though, she wasn't alone. This must be TJ.

I recognised him from his picture. Dark, silky hair tumbled over sparkling eyes, above a smile that hit me in my gut. The knife fell from my hand, and I surged to my feet, a swarm of memories punching through the locked door in my head.

His lips. The sound of his laughter. Touching a bruise on his face. Staring into his eyes while we made love. Oh Gods. He was my lover.

“TJ?”

I reached out with shaking hands and he caught them. The flood of memories intensified, a myriad of images. Handing him a towel. Watching him tug on Butch's lead. Losing myself in his kiss.

“Do you know me, Henare?”

I saw concern in his beautiful eyes, but I could reassure him. At last, I knew something.

“Yes,” I said, unable to hold back my answering smile. “I've been waiting for you.”

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## Epilogue

It was a typical winter day when I lit the fire for the first time in Henare's cottage. An icy southerly wind swept up the beach and whipped the waves into a frenzy, making me glad I sat in the warmth. Henare was still out there, collecting driftwood, and probably throwing sticks for Butch to chase. He'd be frozen when they came back.

Sure enough, when they clattered through the door a few minutes later, they were both soaked from the sea spray, and Henare was shivering. I tossed a hand towel to him. "For your hair, and you can give Butch a rub down too." He nodded, and after depositing some new pieces of wood on the floor, he turned his attention to my dog, while I returned to the kitchen.

I'd made a rich chicken curry for dinner tonight, something else to tempt my lover's appetite with. In the six months we'd been together, he ate everything I put in front of him, and claimed to have never tried it before. Whatever had happened to him, it had messed up his memories. Even basic things, like shaving, seemed alien to him. I'd had to teach him, as though he'd never done it before.

His memory dated back precisely to the day we met on the beach. He must have had a life before then, before *me*, but it had been swept away as completely as the *Taniwha* offerings that drifted into the sea. He'd asked me eagerly what he'd been like before, but I didn't know. All I could say was that his rough edges had softened, and that he smiled more now. He was more relaxed, and I liked to think I might be responsible.

Henare snuck up behind me as I stirred the curry, and rubbed his knuckles down my cheek. "How was work?" he asked, and I shrugged.

"Chilly." I worked in a local nature reserve, and had spent much of the day repairing fences that had blown down in a spate of bad weather.

"I can warm you." He wrapped himself around me, and burrowed his hands into my pockets. "Thank you for lighting the fire. Butch has claimed the hearthrug."

"Are you surprised?" I leaned back against him and smiled when he pressed a hot, open-mouthed kiss on my neck. "Don't let me forget, we've got a Skype session with Jools later." I chatted weekly with my sister, and I'd persuaded Henare to join the last few.



“Do you think she’ll come back to New Zealand? When she’s finished at university?”

“I hope so. I hated it there.” Too many people, houses and cars, and I’d been too far from the sea. I’d also been thousands of miles from Henare. The memory of Elizabeth’s desperate phone call was still raw, as was my urgent change of plans and my panicked flight back home. I closed my hands over his arms and breathed deeply, his familiar scent chasing away the remembered fear.

“How long until we eat?”

I gazed at the pan on the stove. “Half an hour. Why?”

“There’s something new I want to do.” His deft fingers unfastened the button on my jeans. “You and me, on a rug in front of the fire.” He nibbled my earlobe and a shiver ran down my spine. Everything felt new to Henare, and I loved the delighted smile on his face when he found he liked something. Ice cream. Bacon sandwiches. Long showers together.

One day he might recover his memories, but in the meantime, we were busy making new ones, and I’d never been happier. Judging by the heat in his eyes, and the love in his smile, he felt the same.

**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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# DOGWATCH

By Kiernan Kelly

## Photo Description

A black-and-white photo of four seamen lounging on a ship. Two of the sailors are looking off into the distance, while the other two are looking at each other. The photo was taken in what looks like the early fifties, perhaps during the Korean Conflict.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*That's me in the middle, I'm a city kid tossed on a boat in the 50's. I got the one job everyone hated, cooking. I started out low man on the totem pole, till they saw what I could do. Then I got fans and now I'm the happiest seaman on the ocean.*

*Tell me how I got there and what I did that made them like me so much, and which of us didn't make it home.*

*Light D/s is ok, but please no major BDSM. Wanting a romance but I'm not sure which one. Probably the guy behind him.*

*Sincerely,*

*Joe*

## Story Info

**Genre:** historical

**Tags:** action/adventure, sailors, Korean conflict, navy men, masturbation

**Content Warnings:** there is some violence (the aftermath of an explosion at sea), but it's not overly graphic.

**Word Count:** 7,007

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# **DOGWATCH**

**By Kiernan Kelly**

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## Prologue

I felt the explosion before I heard it. At least, that's how it seemed. One minute I was hoisting a fifty-pound bag of potatoes up onto my shoulder, struggling under its weight and bemoaning the fact that if the other guys assigned to KP didn't show up soon, I'd have to peel the fuckers myself, and the next, I was thrown across the galley, banging my head against the giant mixing machine's stainless steel bowl. The bag split open, spuds flying free from the burlap, rolling across the galley floor every which way.

My ears were ringing with thunderous metallic screams that seemed to come from deep in the ship's belly, but I couldn't understand what was causing them. I must've banged my head pretty damn hard, because nothing made sense to me. What was making that God-awful noise? Why was I on the floor, and who had tossed all the fucking spuds out of the bag? There was no one else in the galley but me. The other four sailors assigned KP duty hadn't shown up yet. They were probably catching a few winks before reporting for duty. Believe you me, if the lieutenant found out they were late, there'd be hell to pay. Not that I'd rat on them, but still, I couldn't feed the whole fucking crew by myself, and I was sure there was a line waiting in the mess for my fried chicken and garlic smashed potatoes.

I brought a hand up to gingerly touch my scalp, and my fingers came away bloody. Well, fuck. I'd split my head open on the damn mixer. Who was going to peel the potatoes if I was stuck in sickbay getting my head sewn up? Maybe I could just bandage it with one of the kitchen towels. I'd promised the boys garlic smashed potatoes on the menu tonight. Nobody made 'em like me, and the boys would be spitting like housecats if I didn't come through.

Still didn't explain what knocked me off my feet, though.

I was still trying to make sense of it all when the sirens went off, and the call for all hands on deck sounded. What the fuck was going on? Struggling to my feet, my hand clamped over the cut on my forehead, I tried to make sense of it all.

Potatoes began rolling again, all going in a single direction, thumping and bumping across the metal-plated floor, careening off the ovens and sinks toward the far right corner of the galley. The floor under my feet slanted in that direction too, throwing me off balance. I nearly fell again, and had to grab the edge of the mixing bowl to steady myself.

That's when I realized the entire ship had tilted in that direction, and I finally began to understand what had likely happened. We'd been hit! Were we going down?

What did it then? A torpedo? Nah. We hadn't seen an enemy ship anywhere in the nearby area. It was more likely we'd hit a mine. After all, that was our job. The *Magpie* was a minesweeper, and we were operating off the east coast of Korea with our sister ship *Merganser*.

Understanding what happened didn't make the situation any less dire. I had to get up to the top deck before the whole damn ship sank and took me down with it!

Black, oily smoke began to billow in from the air vents and doorway. I heard several more explosions, and shouting. The floor beneath my feet tipped to a steeper angle, and I had to fight to get to the door and stairs leading up to the top deck and not slide backwards.

The smoke made it difficult to breathe as well as to see, and I choked and gasped for air as I made my way up the steep, narrow stairs. I was nearly to the top when the ship lurched under me, knocking me off my feet again. I clung to the banister to keep from falling down the stairs, as the ship's bow rose at a sharp angle. In order to reach the deck, I had to scale the stairs like a rock climber, feeling for hand- and footholds through the thick smoke.

Metal screamed and the ship lurched yet again as I finally reached the deck. The incline was so steep I could barely stand upright, and nearly fell back into the stairwell. A strong hand grasping my wrist saved me. I looked into the ruggedly handsome face of Seaman First Class Vernon Thompson, who was one of my closest friends aboard ship, along with Seamen Glenn Altridge and Billy Ray Weaver (called "Bubba" by everyone but the brass). We spent almost all our off-duty time together, both aboard ship and on leave.

"Vernon! What's happened?" I clung to his hand, using him to pull myself back to my feet. The deck was nearly vertical, making it almost impossible to keep from sliding backward toward the stern, which I could see was already underwater.

"We hit a mine. We're going down!"

"Where's Bubba and Glenn?"

"Don't know. Come on!" He tugged on my arm, pulling me toward the starboard side of the ship.

I pulled back. “No, wait! We have to find them!” The thought of leaving them behind, especially Bubba, turned my guts to ice.

“They’ll be okay. We don’t have any more time, Joe. The ship’s going down any minute!”

As if to punctuate his words, the ship shuddered violently as another explosion ripped through her, and the belly of the ship belched up a cloud of fresh, black smoke. I could see fire crackling in the stairway I’d just climbed, and heard its angry hiss as the rapidly rising water extinguished the flames.

I had no choice but to let Vern pull me toward the starboard railing. We clung to it as the bow rose higher yet, the ship standing nearly perpendicular in the water.

“Jump!” Vern yelled at me. He motioned toward the water and began to climb over the railing.

As much as I wanted to go back and search for Bubba and Glenn, I knew jumping was our only option; indeed, our only hope at that point. The ship was sinking, and if we didn’t get off her right then, she’d take us down with her. I said a silent prayer that they’d gotten off the ship already.

It was a struggle getting over the railing, but I did it, and with an effort, I shoved off the ship’s side, trying to clear as much space between the ship and myself as I could. When she went down, I didn’t want to be close enough for her wake to suck me down into the depths.

The black water was bitterly cold, and when I hit it feet first, it enveloped me like a hard, icy fist, squeezing the breath from my lungs. For a moment, I felt paralyzed as I plunged far below the surface, but then I supposed my training and survival instincts kicked in, and I pushed up toward the light flickering on the waves far above my head.

My arms and legs already felt like frozen blocks of stone even though I’d only been submerged for seconds, partly because of the shock of hitting the icy water, and partly because of the terror of the sinking. It seemed to take forever, my lungs burning without air, but I finally broke the surface, gasping and sputtering.

To my left, great waves roared and sloshed over one another as the sea finished swallowing the *Magpie*. All around me, debris floated—bits of machinery, broken pieces of furniture, boxes, articles of clothing, and papers—

some of it still burning. A broken piece of what looked as if it might once have been a table floated nearby. I grabbed at it and clung to it, using it as a makeshift raft.

Numbness seeped into my bones from the cold, but I tried to ignore it as I frantically scanned the water around me. "Vern? Glenn? Oh, God... Bubba! Where are you? Bubba!" All I could see were pieces of debris bobbing in the dark water.

Fatigue began to drag my eyelids closed, and I fought harder than I ever had before to stay awake. To keep myself focused, I began to kick, trying to steer my improvised raft through the debris, searching for my friends and for one face in particular.

Bubba. Where was he? He had gotten off the ship, I was sure of it. He *had* to have gotten off in time. The alternative was too horrifying for me to contemplate.

I found two men floating in the water, both of them dead. Poor guys. I knew them both, although not well, but it still hurt like a bitch to see them floating in the water beyond mine or anyone's help. Guilt colored my sorrow, too, weighing me down, because I also felt relieved neither of them were Bubba, Vern, or Glenn. Moving away from them, I continued to search, all the time hollering for Bubba and the others until my voice grew hoarse.

I found more bodies; my friends were not among them, although each new death chipped away at what little energy I still possessed. My limbs felt heavier than ever; my heart, heavier still.

One thought alone kept me afloat and moving, despite the cold and pain wracking me and the horror I saw all around me. I had to find my friends. I had to find Bubba.

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## May 1950

### *Apra Harbor, Guam*

“Shine, you got those potatoes peeled yet? Shit, son, the men ain’t gonna want to wait until you’re good and ready to finish peeling those spuds. We got hungry sailors to feed. Get a move on!”

I made sure Cookie wasn’t looking, then rolled my eyes. “I’ve got ’em almost naked.”

“Almost don’t count except in horseshoes and hand grenades. Get ’em done!”

It was only my third month aboard the U.S.S. *Magpie*, a minesweeper. I was assigned to her fresh out of boot camp, and I admit as a sailor, I was raw and as green as a granny smith apple. I was hardworking and eager to learn, but a man sure could get tired of peeling spuds.

I’d been peeling potatoes since 0500 that morning. My hands were dry and dusty from the skins, my fingers cramping from holding the knife. At my feet lay knee-deep piles of peels, all cut in long spirals.

If there was one thing I could do right and quick, it was peel a fucking potato. I’d been doing it since I was old enough to hold a knife without cutting my own wrist. My pop owned a deli in Brooklyn, Shine’s Deli. “Best pastrami in the five boroughs,” was what the sign said out front. Me and my six brothers and sisters all worked there after school and weekends. Between you and me, I think the reason Pop and Mama *had* so many kids was for the cheap labor.

I hated working in the Deli. Hated the smell of cheese and dill that was soaked into the walls and floors; hated the splattering hot grease near the cook top, the constant yammering of the customers, and most of all, the never-ending mounds of potatoes that needed peeling.

When I turned seventeen, I’d had enough. I got mouthy, was what my pop said. Started dodging work, skipping school. Then, last summer, I started hanging out with the “wrong crowd”. Leather jacket guys, slicked hair and chains on their pockets. Got into some trouble joyriding. Pop knew the cops at the precinct and got me out of it, but my freedom came at a price. Pop gave me a choice—go to jail, or into the service. “It’ll make a man out of you,” he said.

I thought, “Sure. What the hell? It’s peacetime. The Big One was over for a half a decade already. I go in, serve my term, and see the world, right? Piece of cake, and beat all the shit out of going to prison. As soon as I turned eighteen, I took the oath.

What a load of malarkey.

So far, the only place I’ve been to is Guam, which is a pretty enough island, I guess, but it’s usually hot and humid, and it sits right in the middle of fucking Typhoon Alley. We had one hit soon after we arrived. The rain came in sideways, and the wind was strong enough to blow me overboard if I wasn’t careful. The raindrops hit my skin like beestings, and the lightning was so close it made the hair on my arms stand on end.

Oh, and my job assignment aboard ship? KP. Guess what I get to do every day. You got it... peel fucking potatoes. Pounds and pounds of them. Every. Fucking. Day. Guess nobody thought I was suited to anything else. After six months aboard ship, you’d think I’d be used to it.

I sliced the last bit of skin from the final potato, tossing it atop the others in the giant, stainless steel pot. “There you go, Cookie.” God knew what slop he would make out of them today. Cookie was a good enough guy for a salty, old seadog, but his smashed potatoes tasted like bland crap, and sat in a man’s stomach like a rock.

Cook sniffed at me, and turned to lift the pot up to the cook top. His face suddenly turned as white as his apron, and he grabbed his stomach. The pot fell to the floor with a clang, water sloshing over the sides.

“Cookie? You okay? What’s wrong?”

Whatever it was, it robbed him of his voice. The lines on his face were strained, and his eyes filled with tears. He turned away, obviously embarrassed more by his wet eyes than his pain.

I took his elbow, but he shook me off. “Knock it off, Cookie. I’m taking you up to sick bay. The doc will have a look at you.” I hooked my arm through his again.

He didn’t argue with me this time, but let me lead him up the narrow metal stairs to the next deck, and down the corridor to the sick bay. We got there just in time. I left him there, puking up into a bedpan.

“You got the galley, son?” The lieutenant, our Commanding Officer, had been in the hallway and spotted me half-dragging Cookie into sick bay.

I stood rigidly at attention. "Yes, sir." I didn't really know if I could handle it, but I wasn't about to tell the lieutenant that.

"Get to it then, sailor."

I snapped off a salute, and headed back down to the galley. *Well*, I thought, *whatever I do, it can't be as bad as the slop Cookie dishes up.*

I'd just gotten down to the galley, when Bubba poked his head in. "Hey. Heard about Cookie. I'm off duty... can you use an extra hand?" Bubba's real name was Billy Ray Weaver. He was from South Carolina, and spoke with a thick southern drawl. At six foot four, he was a half foot taller than me, broad shouldered, and had an ass I could watch all day and night. Not that I did. Folks like Bubba and me, and our two other close friends, Vern and Glenn, we had to be real careful. Couldn't let anybody know we felt anything but friendship for each other. Not unless we wanted to end up in the brig waiting on a court-martial, or worse. There were stories of men tossed overboard for being found lovin' on each other. Don't know if those stories were true, but sure as hell, none of us were gonna risk it.

Bubba asked again, "Joe? You need help?"

I blinked, and nodded. "Sure could, thanks." I scanned the kitchen, opening the refrigeration unit, checking the shelves, and making a mental list of the ingredients I had available. "Looks like Cookie was going to make something with chipped beef." I turned and grinned at Bubba. "Shit on a shingle it is."

"Oh, man. I hate that stuff."

"Not the way *I* make it. I learned from my pop at the deli. It's actually really good. You want to help? You can take those potatoes and slice 'em up. I'll fry us up some home fries that'll have the boys coming in their pants."

Bubba snickered, and looked around. When he saw no one else in the galley, he swooped in for a quick kiss, his hand cupping my ass, giving it a good, hard squeeze.

I felt my cock respond, and pulled away before things got out of hand. "Are you crazy? Knock it off and get to work." I tried to sound stern, but couldn't help the smile on my face as I swatted him with a kitchen towel.

"You and me, later. We'll meet in the head, huh?" He was grinning as he went to wash the potatoes. I watched his ass hitch under his navy bell bottoms, firm and round and perfect.

“Maybe.” Shaking my head, I gathered the ingredients to make creamed chipped beef on toast and home fried potatoes. I had to stop thinking about Bubba’s ass. It was too dangerous.

It was also too damned tempting. I kept sneaking peeks the whole morning through, and knew if I could possibly make it, I’d be sneaking into the head with him later that evening for a quick fuck. Smiling, I began to heat the pan for the home fries.

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After breakfast, I got a message that the lieutenant wanted to see me. I left the cleaning to the other two men assigned KP that day and hurried to the bridge. “Sir? You wanted to see me?”

“Oh, yes. Shine, is it? Cookie will be on sick leave until further notice. Seems he has a hernia, and the Doc believes he needs an operation. He’ll be airlifted to the States as soon as possible. You did a credible job with breakfast, under the circumstances. Until further notice, you’re the new cook for the *Magpie*. Congratulations, son.”

I stared at him for a moment, flabbergasted. How is it I’d joined the Navy to get away from the kitchen in the deli, only to become the cook aboard ship, responsible for preparing three square meals a day, including dessert, for a crew of thirty-two officers and enlisted men? That settled it. God hated me.

Somehow, I managed to smile. “Thank you, sir.”

Wait until I wrote home and told Pop. I could almost hear the sumbitch laughing already.

I headed back to the galley, worrying and trying to plan out a menu for the rest of the day. Hot sandwiches for lunch, maybe, meatloaf for dinner, with garlic smashed potatoes and green beans. Easy, hearty, and with a little bit of luck (providing I could remember my mama’s recipe), tasty.

The day flew by, and at the end of it, I was exhausted, but proud of myself. The crew seemed to enjoy both meals—or at least, I didn’t hear any complaints. I left cleanup to two sailors on KP, neither of whom looked any too happy to spend their evening scouring pots and pans.

Tough titties. I deserved a treat after delivering on lunch and dinner, and I knew exactly what I wanted. Bubba’s cock—thick, hard, and fucking me six ways to Sunday.

I found him on deck having a smoke. Pointing toward the hatchway with my chin, I slipped through it and found my way to the head. Bubba followed me in a few minutes later.

The head was small, having only three stalls and four urinals along one wall, a line of shallow sinks along the opposite wall, and several shower stalls against the last. We squeezed into the stall furthest from the door, and slid the lock closed. It was a tight fit in there for two full grown men, but for what we had in mind, we didn't need much room.

It was a risk. Someone might come in at any time, and if we were caught it would've meant the end of our careers, and possibly our freedom. We kept our ears open for the sound of the door. If it opened, one of us would hop onto the toilet and duck down, while the other stood still, facing the door, so if any one looked underneath, they'd see only one set of feet, trousers down around the ankles. We'd stay that way until whoever it was left. Still, it was a dangerous undertaking, and we only rarely indulged ourselves. Usually, we'd do what everyone else did—jerk off and wait for shore leave.

Tonight, though, I needed it. I needed *him*.

"Been waiting all day." Bubba's voice was growly and deep, and I could feel it rumble in my bones. His hands, rough and rawboned, grabbed my face and pulled me into a long, deep kiss. Bubba's tongue was hot, his mouth wet, and suddenly I couldn't get enough.

My hands fisted in his shirt as I returned his kiss full force. He was rough with me, as I knew he would be. When Bubba needed, he needed *now*. He pushed me backwards, and I banged my head against the door, but I wouldn't feel the lump until much later. All I knew, all I could feel, was Bubba's tongue pushing and swirling in my mouth, his hands squeezing my face, fingers sliding back into my hair, and his cock, hard already, pushing against mine.

His mouth finally left mine, and sought the tender skin below my jaw. I moaned, tilting my head, and slid my hand under his shirt. My palms skimmed over his abdomen, chiseled like marble, to his chest.

"I wish I could fuck you," he whispered. "Fuck you hard in your tight hole, then come all over that sweet ass of yours. Then I'd make you come." His tongue licked a path along my neck to my earlobe, and I shivered. "You'd like that, huh? Want me to fuck you?"

God, yes. "Can't. Not in here. No room."

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His lip curled and he growled. "Yeah."

I could hear the disappointment in his voice. I felt the same, but onboard ship, we took what we could get when we could get it.

Pulling away, he frowned at me. "Hurry up. We need to finish before somebody comes in to take a piss."

I fumbled with my belt, lowering my pants and underwear to my ankles. The air was cool against my newly freed prick.

Bubba did likewise, although he didn't drop his drawers in case he needed to hop up on the toilet. He merely opened the fly and pulled out his cock. A beautiful dick it was, too. Thicker than mine, long, and ruddy, with a fat, round head.

When I moved forward, he stopped me. "On your fucking knees first."

I was quick to obey, crouching down for a quick taste, sucking the rounded head into my mouth. Bubba thrust his hands into my hair, pushing me down, feeding me his length. His hips began to pump, and I tasted precum on my tongue. I pulled away, and he grunted irritably again.

My smile was probably a little conceited. I liked knowing he wanted me. Made me feel warm and proud at the same time. I stood up and stepped up close to him, and rubbed my thumb over the head of his cock, smearing his precum. My own dick was beading with it as well, stiff with need.

He sighed and sought my mouth again, kissing me deeply as he rubbed his shaft against mine. His cock felt like hot velvet against mine. Then he wrapped his big hand around both our cocks and began stroking them together.

I bit back a groan, and cupped his balls in my hand. Bubba had nice balls, big and round when they were swollen with lust, dusted with dark brown hair a shade darker than the ones on his head. After giving them a squeeze, I pulled on them lightly, and was rewarded by Bubba gasping, and the feel of his hot cum as he climaxed. His cum covered my dick and stomach, and seeing it, smelling it, and feeling it sent me over the edge. I came hard, bucking into his hand.

We paused a moment to catch our breath, then kissed again before cleaning up with toilet tissue and pulling up our pants.

"See you on deck." I gave him another kiss before slipping out of the stall and then the head. I didn't really take a worry-free breath until I'd gotten on deck without anyone seeing me.

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I saw Vern and Glenn lounging near the gunwale, and joined them.

Glenn looked up and arched an eyebrow at me. "What are you smiling about?"

I shrugged, but smiled a bit wider, and dropped down to the deck to sit with them.

Vern elbowed Glenn. "Shit! Somebody got himself some," he said, keeping his voice to a whisper.

Glenn snorted and chuckled. He had a shock of dark hair that was badly in need of a cut. It bobbed over his forehead when he laughed.

I rolled my eyes and smirked at them. "Jealous?"

"Shit, yeah!" Vern smacked me on the leg. "Where's Bubba now?"

"Probably showering the cum outta his hair," Glenn said.

"I heard that." Bubba joined us. "You better hope nobody else did."

"Yeah." I moved over to make room for Bubba to squeeze in behind me, and rested my head against his flat stomach. Glenn, lazy ass that he is, lay back against me, using me for a pillow. I smacked him on top of his head. "Pipe down before somebody hears you and we end up in the brig."

Vern scooted back to sit next to Bubba. "With as much as you two get together, I'm surprised you don't rub your fucking dicks right off your bodies."

We laughed and shared a cigarette, watching the sun paint the horizon with reds and purples. I felt more content than I ever had before in my life. I had a man I loved, who couldn't keep his hands off me, two friends I adored even when they irritated the hell out of me, and a new job I thought I just might be good at.

Life was good.

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Turns out, I took to cooking like a fly to a sugar cube, and found I liked it, even though I would've rather bitten off my own tongue than admit to it. Cooking was like an art to me, and I was fucking DaVinnie, or whatever his name was—the guy who painted the broad with a goofy smile. My hands could work miracles with a little salt, pepper, onion, and garlic. Best of all, I never had to peel another fucking potato. The men assigned to KP duty did that for me.

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The crew was happy with me, too. For the first time, they looked forward to getting in the chow line. Poor Cookie was stateside recuperating from his operation, and for that I was glad. He would've been heartbroken to see how much the men favored my cooking over his. Rumor had it he was going to retire after he was released from the hospital. I wished him well.

Things were finally going my way. That is, until word came that the conflict in Korea was heating up. By the time June rolled around and I was just getting comfortable in my new position as cook, the skipper told us we were being deployed to Korea.

That's when shit got real for all of us, and peeling potatoes suddenly didn't seem like such a big fucking deal anymore.

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## September 1950

### *Sasebo, Japan*

It'd been a long, rough month.

Our orders were to sail north to Japan, meet up with our sister ship, the *Merganser*, and from there, move on to Korea. Just getting to Japan was a trial in and of itself.

We followed on the tail end of a powerful typhoon that kept the seas boiling under us. The rough water made for a piss-poor, dangerous voyage. It got so bad as we approached Iwo Jima, that the skipper decided to cut to the lee side of the island to avoid the storm.

The thing is, Iwo Jima has sulfur beds on it. I don't know what was worse: the rough tossing of the ship in the storm, or the stench of rotten eggs that wafted over the ship from the island. I think we would've been better off with the typhoon.

We finally got to Sasebo, Japan, on September 27, where we refueled and took on a full load of ammunition. We also met up with the *Merganser* and readied ourselves to sail to Korea.

War. *Real* war, the kind Pop always used to talk about. He'd been in the Big One, WWII. Sailed on the *U.S.S. Washington*, and fought in Guadalcanal. Got a Purple Heart for when he got shot in the leg. Still limped from that wound, Pop did. Said he thought he was going to die.

I didn't want to die. I didn't even want to fight, not really. I was a cook, for Chrissakes! Of course, I kept my feelings to myself. The men might think I was a coward, which I wasn't. If I had to fight, I would. And I'd win. My pop didn't raise a sissy. In boot camp, I earned a marksman medal.

*Besides, I told myself, we're gonna be fine. The Magpie is a minesweeper, not a battleship or a submarine. We'll patrol the harbor, that's all. Nothing's going to happen to us.*

We were all convinced the war would be over soon, and we'd be heading back home. Not home to Brooklyn—no, in Brooklyn it would be like Bubba and me were hiding in the head again, always afraid of being caught. No, Bubba and me, we'd go somewhere else, somewhere far from Brooklyn and

Pop's deli. Maybe California. It was supposed to be real nice out there. We could live on the beach. See movie stars. Stuff like that. Maybe Vern and Glenn would come with us. That sure would be a kick, wouldn't it? Us four, living it up out in sunny California. I smiled to myself thinking about it.

Yeah, we'd be just fine.

Famous last words.

We got to Korea on September 30. On October 1, we started sweeping the coast for mines, running in tandem with the *Merganser*. From on deck, the mines looked like giant jellyfish with tentacles trailing out from them. See, the *Magpie* had these mechanical devices called "sweeps" that we used to hook onto the mines and tow them in, where they could be defused or destroyed. That's what our job was—to sweep the mines out of the water and make a safe passage for our other ships.

Anyway, it was about 1700 hours. I was busy down in the galley, dishing up supper and getting things ready for the morning rush. Tonight it was fried chicken, done to a crispy brown in the fryers, juicy and tender on the inside. I served it with the garlic smashed potatoes the men liked, and creamed spinach. For dessert, I had apple cobbler. The savory smells drew the men like flies to cow pies, and I knew there'd be a long line of sailors waiting for their grub. The line stretched all the way out of the mess.

Before I could see to dinner, though, I needed to get the last bag of potatoes ready for the morning. I hoisted it to my shoulder, grumbling because the other two men assigned to KP that day were late getting to the galley, and that was keeping me from getting to the mess deck.

Bubba wouldn't be in the mess, but I knew that already. He'd drawn the last dogwatch, which was sentry duty from 1800 to 2000. I supposed he was topside, scanning the water for those telltale tentacles. I'd see him later on, after his watch. Glenn and Vern would be coming for chow, though. I expected to see both of them when I got up to the mess.

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Much later, I was told we'd hit a thousand pound mine. When it blew, it took out the entire bridge. The officers and personnel who were up there died instantly.

Mind you, we'd just picked up a full cargo of ammunition in Japan. Between the ammo and the mine, the explosions blew off part of the aft, as well as the main magazines. That any of us survived is a miracle.

Now, I struggled in ice-cold water, trying to keep my head above the waves while searching frantically for the man I loved and my friends. I bumped painfully into wreckage, and wept at the sight of bodies bobbing in the water.

The *Merganser* sent lifeboats over quickly, and began plucking survivors out of the water. I fought against the hands that tried to pull me up into the lifeboat. “No! I haven’t found Bubba yet. Bubba! Where are you?”

“Calm down, sailor. We’ve got you. Come on, now.”

I was weak from pain and shock; they pulled me into the boat against my protests. Still, I leaned over the side, squinting into the growing darkness, trying to find him. “Bubba!”

“Joe? Oh, thank God, Joe!” It was Glenn. He scooted next to me, hugging me. “Are you okay? Did you see Vern and Bubba?”

“No! I can’t find him. Vern got me out. I need to find Bubba!” Tears traced cold, wet paths down my cheeks, but I didn’t care. All I felt was terror.

When the lifeboat began to travel back toward the *Merganser*, I raged at the crew. “Where the fuck are you going? You can’t leave them out there! You have to go back. Bubba and Vern, and the rest of the crew... they’re still out there!”

No one would listen to me. They thought I was out of my head with shock and grief—which I was—and were determined to take me to the *Merganser* for treatment for exposure. By the time I reached the ship, weariness had taken its toll. I slumped against Glenn, a deep, black depression settling over me like a shroud.

They were gone. I was sure of it. Bubba and Vern both. I cried and didn’t care who saw me or what they thought of me. I’d lost two dear friends, one of which was the person I thought I’d spend the rest of my life loving. I didn’t want to go on. I wanted to dive into the water and let myself sink to the bottom.

I think I would’ve, too, if it wasn’t for Glenn. He kept his arm locked around my shoulders. When the men of the *Merganser* put me on a cot in their sickbay, he kept a vigil with me, refusing to leave me alone for even a second.

“They’ll find them, Joe. You’ll see. They’ll be fine. They’re probably on a lifeboat right now, Bubba and Vern both.”

I couldn’t find the energy to reply. Besides, I didn’t believe him. Bubba was gone, and he’d taken my will to live with him. What was the point of going on,

anyway? To do what? Go back to Brooklyn and work for the rest of my life in Pop's deli? Jerking off by myself at night, or maybe getting a quick lay by some faceless guy in an alley or cheap motel, a one-night stand, never loving anybody, never being loved? What kind of fucked up life was that to look forward to?

I must have dozed off, forced into sleep by misery and my ordeal, because there was light streaming in from the portal when a hand shook me awake. "Joe? Wake up. Oh, thank God! Joe, hon, are you okay?"

Blinking, I tried to focus on the voice. I thought I was still dreaming, because the deep southern drawl was as familiar to me as my own. But it couldn't be... "Bubba?"

His face swam into view, that handsome face I loved to kiss. He was pale, and his hair was sopping, dripping water onto my face, but it was Bubba, and he was grinning at me. I reached for him, and he fell into my arms. "I thought you were dead!"

"So did I. I was aft when the mine blew. It's a miracle it didn't blow me to smithereens. If I hadn't been standing just behind the hatch door, I would've been killed. The door saved my life, do you believe it? A stupid, crummy door." Tears streamed down his cheeks. "I saw men... parts of them... oh, Joe. It was awful. I floated almost all night with the fucking dead. It wasn't until almost dawn before somebody spotted me and got me out of the water."

"Thank God you're okay. What about Vern? Have you seen him?"

He shook his head, sadness bringing fresh tears to his eyes. "No. Nobody has. I've been asking. Mostly for you, but for Vern and Glenn, too. I saw Glenn when they brought me in here, but nobody's seen Vern."

"He... he must be okay. Right? He saved me, Bubba. If it wasn't for Vern, I would've died in the galley."

"I don't know, Joe. I hope he is, but I just don't know."

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When our tour finally ended, we went to Arlington National Cemetery before heading out to California. Glenn wasn't with us—he'd decided to go home to Iowa. I think he'd had enough of the ocean to suit him. I didn't blame him, either. I know losing Vern was a blow he never quite got over.

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Bubba and I stood in front of the small white stone, so much like the others, rows and rows of them, thousands, each one marking the grave of a fallen hero. This particular marker read “Vernon Thompson, U.S. Navy, Sea1, Korea, January 3, 1931 – October 1, 1950.”

He'd been only nineteen when he died. So young, just like the rest of us. He should be alive, getting ready to settle in, find a job, get drunk, eat at restaurants, fuck pretty men, and otherwise enjoy life. Such a waste. That thought alone was enough to bring tears to my eyes, although I thought I was all cried out by then.

I knelt down, and placed the palm of my hand against his tombstone. “Thank you, Vern. Thank you for being our friend, and for saving my life. I wish you could be here with us. We'll never forget you.” Bubba's hand on my shoulder gave a gentle squeeze. I heard him sniff and clear his throat.

“I owe you, Vern,” he said. “If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have Joe here with me today. You're a hero, buddy.”

We stayed a while longer, silent, each of us remembering.

Then we left, heading west, and looked toward our future together. Whatever it brought us, wherever it led us, we knew we'd see each other through. We'd already been through hell. All we had left to look forward to was heaven.

**The End**

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*Author's Note*

While the characters in *Dogwatch* are fictional and bear no purposeful resemblance to anyone living or dead, the events in the story are true. The USS *Magpie*, while doing minesweeping duty off the coast of South Korea during the height of the Korean Conflict, struck a floating mine on October 1, 1950 and sank. Twenty-one sailors were lost at sea. The remains of Ensign Robert W. Langwell were found in 2008, and he was finally laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery in 2010. The bodies of the other twenty men lost that day have never been found.

*“Hark, now hear the sailors cry,  
smell the sea, and feel the sky  
let your soul and spirit fly, into the mystic...”*

—Van Morrison

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## Author Bio

*Kiernan Kelly lives in the wilds of the alligator-infested U.S. Southeast, slathered in SPF 45, drinking tropical, hi-octane concoctions served by thong-clad cabana boys.*

*Actually, the truth is that she spends her time locked in the dark recesses of her office writing gay erotica while chained to a temperamental laptop, drinking coffee, and dreaming about thong-clad cabana boys.*

*Sigh.*

*To date, Kiernan has thirteen novels and a plethora of novellas and short stories available in both print and e-format.*

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# DON'T NAME THE PUPPY

By R.D. Hero

## Photo Description

Two young men holding kittens in their arms stand next to each other. One is shirtless and wearing a silly beanie with a pom-pom on top. They both hold the kittens gently and affectionately.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I woke up one day to find a half-naked kid with a goofy hat in my kitchen eating my cereal, but that was just the beginning. He's my roommate's fuck buddy, so why can't my roommate entertain the kid? Instead, he's imprinted on me like some overgrown duckling and now I can't get rid of him or the litter of kittens he's pawned off on me. The worst part is, suddenly I can't imagine my life without him and his stupid hat.*

Sincerely,

Ithra

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** college, barely legal, first time, twink, friends to lovers, men with pets

**Word Count:** 11,240

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# DON'T NAME THE PUPPY

By R.D. Hero

Scott had things planned for that day.

Sleeping—that was his big plan. The day before, he had handed in the rough draft of his graduate thesis, and now this morning he was shuffling down a flight of creaky stairs and pondering whether he was even going to bother taking a shower after making breakfast, or just go back upstairs, burrow under his sheets, and not emerge until Monday.

His roommates, other students attending the college a few blocks away, wouldn't even wonder where he was. None of them were that close, having found the rooms separately through Craigslist. Sometimes Scott wouldn't see a particular roommate for a week at a time, but he knew all their names, and when they did cross paths in the common areas, they would stop and talk for a moment.

But no one would be up this early. Scott loved to sleep—but he was usually up by seven-thirty because he had a barista job, and then he was pretty much shackled to the front of his desk for the rest of the day, preparing and researching. This Saturday—this beautiful Saturday, was the one day during the entire semester that Scott didn't have a shift, or something to work on.

Of course, when the rough draft came back, it would be back to the grind, but he wasn't thinking about that.

He yawned as he turned the corner into the kitchen, and then he paused. There was a boy at the table.

He was bony, pale, and he was eating Scott's cereal.

He could only belong to Paul, with those hickeys all over the back of his neck, and the way he was gingerly shifting from one butt cheek to the other. Not to mention, he was eating in the kitchen. Every roommate ate in their room after cooking their food, there just wasn't enough room during meal times, and the habit had stuck.

Scott leaned against the doorframe, and sighed.

The boy dropped his spoon at that. Blue lemur eyes, very caught-in-the-headlights, looked up at Scott. Pink lips parted, glistening with milk.

“The milk—” Scott said, “—belongs to Chelsea. The Cinnamon Toast Crunch? Belongs to me.”

The kid had some freckles on his face, and his hair was kind of curly. He was also wearing a really stupid orange beanie with earflaps and a pom-pom on the top. Maybe the hat wouldn't have looked so stupid if the kid was wearing clothes, but no, he was naked except for whatever he was hiding under the table.

Which could be nothing at all. Scott could only see the white socks with little red stripes, so at the moment, the tally was stupid hat and socks.

Also... “How old are you?”

Those pink lips crooked into a grin. “Eighteen.”

Scott had to chuckle at that. *Fucking Paul with his fucking jailbait.* Hopefully he checked baby's ID before doing anything raunchy.

Pushing from the doorframe, Scott made his way over to the other side of the table, taking a seat on the uncomfortable vinyl chair across from the kid. He leaned forward with a pointed stare and grabbed the Cinnamon Toast Crunch box. The kid watched, obviously knowing he was a little twinkie thief. He even scooped up some soggy cereal, slid the spoon past his red lips, and then started licking that fucker clean.

Scott snorted. Then, he tilted his head back and poured the cereal straight down into his mouth.

“No milk, dude?”

Scott set the box down. Crunched and chewed. Swallowed. Licked his lips. “Like I said, the milk is Chelsea's.”

“Who's Chelsea?”

Scott tilted his head and considered the kid. *Freshman.* He had that fresh-out-of-high school look, the look that said his mom was still the one buying his Axe deodorant.

“She's one of the roommates here,” Scott said finally. After tossing another handful of cereal into his mouth, he stood up and grabbed a fresh coffee filter from the cabinet. The kid was silent behind him.

“Look,” Scott said with his back to the kid. “There's no point waiting for him, he doesn't come downstairs on Saturday until three—at the earliest.”

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“That’s okay.”

Glancing over his shoulder, Scott shot the kid a dubious look. “Did he tell you to stick around?”

The kid just stuck the spoon into his mouth, his lip curling in a sly little way. “Right,” Scott said, turning back to making coffee. Even if they didn’t hang out much, Scott knew his roommate Paul did not find persistence that charming, so the kid was wasting his time. But who was Scott to break some little freshman’s heart? He wasn’t that cruel.

He clicked the coffee machine on, stretched his back out with a grunt, and then went back to the table. By that time, the kid’s bowl was empty, and he was just staring at Scott.

Scott blinked. “What?”

The kid shrugged, and Scott was about to walk out of the kitchen when he heard: “Got anything to do?”

*You’ve got to be kidding.* “Do I look like a cruise director?” Scott replied. As the words left his mouth, he winced internally. No reason to be an asshole. “Look, there’s a TV through there,” he said, pointing towards the house rec room, “but you should—seriously, you should just go home. If Paul hasn’t gotten your number by now, then it’s not going to happen.”

The kid’s face scrunched with confusion. “Who’s Paul?”

“Paul. The guy you slept with last night?”

“Oh, shit,” the kid said, lowering his voice with a laugh. “I thought his name was Ted.”

Scott raised his eyebrows. Okay, so maybe he was amused by the kid’s cheeky little grin. Also, he was looking forward to seeing the expression on Paul’s face when Scott told him that his latest hook up had completely forgotten his name. Paul prided himself on being a memorable experience.

With the coffee still dripping along, Scott figured he had some time to kill. He took a seat at the table again, resting forward on his elbows. “Did you guys meet at a club?”

“Yeah,” the kid replied. “Wanna see my fake?”

Scott snorted. “Sure.”

The kid leapt up from his chair—*ah, briefs*—and ran out of the kitchen. While he was gone, Scott chewed through another few handfuls of cereal, and

then watched with interest as the kid reappeared, hopping from one sock-covered foot to the other as he tried to pull a tight pair of jeans on.

“Ted still asleep?” Scott asked idly.

The kid smirked. “Yeah,” he said. His jeans were like a second skin on those slim hips, and Scott figured they must be the kid’s pride and joy—baby’s first club jeans.

“Here,” the kid said, stretching to slip his hand into his pocket, giving Scott a good view of the supple skin below his belly button. He pulled the fake out and slid it forward on the table. “I paid fifty bucks for it.”

*Danny Green* it read. Danny was twenty-two, born in Michigan, and had brown eyes.

Scott looked up at the blue-eyed eighteen-year-old in front of him. “They seriously don’t give a shit as long you’re cute, huh?”

The kid threaded his fingers behind his head, and bit his lip in a cocky way. *Little shit*. “So you can’t remember Paul’s name,” Scott said. “But you’re sticking around anyway.”

“I guess.” The kid slid back onto his chair. “No rush, right?”

Scott grunted. He ran his hand through his hair just as the coffee machine beeped, and he was thankful that there was something he could do, rather than just sit there with the strange kid. He got up, and pulled a cup from the cupboard, but then manners got the best of him, and he glanced over his shoulder, waving the cup around.

“Yeah, thanks,” the kid replied, his tone perky. Another phenomenon that Scott would never understand was how Paul managed to find all these early risers who would leave before he even got close to consciousness.

He grabbed a second mug and set both on the counter. “I hope you like it black,” he said, “‘cause we’re not hijacking any more of Chelsea’s milk.”

“What if I leave a five?”

*Well, whatever.* Scott yawned and scratched at the small of his back as he poured coffee into the first mug. Turning, he set it down on the table. “Fine. Sugar, too?”

The kid smiled at him, and Scott rolled his eyes, going over to his designated cabinet to pull out the small jar of sugar he kept for when his sister came to visit. By the time he got back to the table, the kid’s coffee was milky

brown and nearly spilling over. He took the sugar from Scott, and dumped in at least two tablespoons worth.

“Sweet tooth, huh?” Scott said with no real judgment.

“Yeah.” The kid gripped the mug with both hands and brought the brim to his lips.

Letting out a huff of amusement, Scott went back to the counter to pour his own cup, and then he took his seat at the table again. As soon as the bitter taste of the coffee hit his tongue, he felt his brain start to rev into gear. “That’s good,” he murmured, licking his lips.

“So, you’re one of Ted’s—Paul’s roommates?”

“Yep.” Scott took another sip of coffee.

“You ever, uh, go out with him?”

“You mean to the club?”

The kid nodded, watching him pretty closely, and Scott realized that he was being vetted for gayness. “Yeah, once or twice.”

“Oh, cool.” The kid scratched at the surface of the table. “That was actually my first time there.”

“Oh, yeah?” Scott spoke nonchalantly, trying to suppress a smirk. What if Paul had deflowered this kid and was going to wake up to an armful of clingy brat?

“Yeah, I thought I really needed the fake first, so that took a while, you know? I didn’t really know who to ask about it, but my roommate finally hooked me up. I think he did it to get me out of the room for a night, though.” The kid suddenly stopped talking, and twitched as he swiped at his nose with a sniff.

Scott cocked an eyebrow. *Self-conscious? Ok, kind of cute.* “Come on, dude,” he said coaxingly. “Can’t stop there.”

The kid’s gaze darted up to Scott, and then his lips spread into a tentative smirk. “Well, so I get there, and guys were all up on me. It was awesome.”

Sitting back, Scott crossed his arms with a laugh. “I bet. Fresh meat, tight ass. Jailbait.”

“Hey! I’m legal.”

“Mhm.” Scott tilted his head. “So, how did Paul win your fair hand?”

There was a flicker in the kid's gaze, but then he just waved his hand nonchalantly. "Well, you know. The dude was drooling over me all night. I thought I'd give him a handout."

*Uh huh.* Even if Paul had wanted this kid, he wouldn't have been desperate about it. Scott knew that much. Before he could decide whether to play along with the kid's story, he heard the *thud thud* of someone coming down the stairs and glanced over just as Paul came into the kitchen.

His eyes were bloodshot, he was wearing a pair of wrinkled boxers, and he stopped for a moment, looking from Scott to the kid.

The kid sat up a little. "Hey—"

"Nice, Buckley," Paul said with a low whistle. "Didn't think you liked them so hairless."

*Oh, shit. Seriously?* Scott's eyebrows pinched and he couldn't help glancing at the kid. And, there it was. Crestfallen.

Like the oblivious douche that he was, Paul walked past them to the counter where he grabbed a mug and started to pour from Scott's coffee. Then, he froze mid-pour, set the coffee down with a *clank*, and pressed the tips of his fingers between his eyebrows. "Shit," he groaned. "That hat."

He turned, and leaned back against the counter. "Sorry, Travis."

Wincing, Scott tried not to smile with second-hand embarrassment. Leave it to Paul to remember the name and not the face.

The kid—Travis, if Paul had even got that right, licked his lips. "No problem, dude, I was completely out of it this morning, too."

"Yeah?" Paul had affected a friendly tone, reaching back to grab the coffee he poured. He kept one hand wrapped around his middle and crossed his legs. But Scott could hear the slight twang of annoyance in his voice. "So, uh, you need a shower or something before you go?"

The smile died on Travis's face. He immediately looked down, rubbing the back of his head. "No, I'm good, uh—" He stood up, his chair clattering backwards. "I'm gonna bounce, my roommate's probably freaking."

"Okay," Paul replied. "See ya."

Hiding his face, the kid skittered out of the room, and after a moment, Scott heard the front door slam shut hard enough to shake the house's frame. He sighed. "Real cute, Paul. You are one charming motherfucker."

“No,” Paul replied, smiling a little. “The word you want is benevolent. He had a good time, now he’s learning the ways of the world.”

“He just ran out of here with no shirt.”

Paul hid his grin behind his cup, and Scott shook his head. “Heartless,” he said, standing up. “Completely heartless.”

“I have his number.”

Scott cocked an eyebrow at that. “You’re gonna play mind games with some freshman?”

“Not mind games, dude,” Paul replied lightly, “Just—you know. He was cute, so I might keep him hooked for a while.”

“You did get that he was probably a virgin, right?”

Paul just smirked at that.

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About twenty minutes later, wallet in hand, Scott stepped out onto the front porch of the house with a serious need for donuts. He had changed into a tattered pair of jeans and a plain white tee, although he had contemplated going in the sweats he had been wearing before. But he had to draw a line somewhere.

Slipping the key to his bike lock out of his back pocket, he stopped when something orange caught his eye. Orange and furry.

When he realized what he was seeing—that stupid hat—he heaved a sigh and palmed his forehead. *Not my problem. Not my problem. Not my problem.*

“Fuck.” Returning the key to his pocket along with his wallet, he jogged down the steps of the porch, and strode over to the brick wall separating the Victorian’s yard from the property next door.

Travis was there, by the wall. He was standing on top of a stone flowerbed that jutted against it, leaning forward and peering in between the narrow space between the house’s garage and the wall. He was still shirtless.

“Hey there, buddy,” Scott said, coming to a stop and stuffing his hands into his pockets as he observed Travis, who jerked upright and nearly slipped off the flowerbed. When those blue lemur eyes focused on Scott, Scott saw that they were red-rimmed. “What are you doing?”

Travis sniffed, and wiped at his nose. “Kittens.”

Too caught up with Travis actually crying over Paul, Scott blinked. "What?"

"Kittens," Travis replied with a shaky voice. "I heard them when I was leaving."

"Uh—" But then Scott heard it too, a faint mewling. Several of them.

Travis stared at him. "What do we do?"

*We?* Scott pinched the bridge of his nose. *Send the kid home, dude, just—* Scott sighed. "Okay," he said. "I'm going to run back inside for a moment, you just stay here." *There goes my day off.*

He ran back inside, clambered up the stairs to his room, and then uselessly walked in a circle for a moment, trying to gather himself. *Kittens.* What did people do when they found kittens? Stopping, he drew in a long breath, and then told himself to take one step at a time.

First, he went to his dresser and pulled a shirt out for Travis.

Then he ripped his pillowcase from the pillow, and flipped it and the shirt over his shoulder. He thought about that space between the wall and the garage with its brambles and cobwebs, and decided to bring a sweatshirt just in case.

Back outside, he found Travis kneeling against the wall making cooing sounds. When Scott approached him, he looked up. "There's a mama-kitty there."

"She won't come out?"

Travis shook his head. "I think she's feral." He bit his lip. "Should we just leave them with her?"

"I'm going to check and see how big they are," Scott replied.

"Oh."

Sighing, Scott tossed the shirt and pillowcase at Travis, who caught them with a surprised jerk, and then pulled the sweatshirt over his head.

"You're really gonna climb back there?" Travis asked.

Scott nodded, considering the mass of bramble.

"Cool, dude."

Chuckling at that, Scott stepped up on to the flowerbed, and braced himself against the brick wall as he tried to figure out a plan. There were a ton of rose



branches in the way, and now that he was up there, he could see the cat Travis had been talking about. She was crouched up on the top of the wall, staring down at Scott.

“Okay,” he said, mostly to himself. He reached back, and felt the pillowcase placed in his hand. Curling his fingers around it, he pulled his arms in close to his chest, ducked his head, and stepped forward.

The branches scratched at him only a little bit as he angled himself through them, and the cobwebs felt nasty against his skin, but he didn't have to go very far before he came to a slight clearing. There was a pile of trash at his feet—bags, old clothing. And nestled in the middle of it all were three little black, squirming puffs.

He didn't waste time, kneeling down and picking one up. He held it close, judging the size, which was just about the same as the kittens he had seen at the pound once, six weeks old at least. Old enough that they could be taken away from their mom.

Gently slipping the mewling creature into the pillowcase, he moved on to the next two until all three were safely in the bag. Standing up, he wiped at his brow, and then turned for the return trip.

Travis was earnestly shifting from one foot to the other when Scott finally broke free from the brambles. “How many?” he asked almost breathlessly.

“Three.” Cradling the pillowcase bundle in his arms, he jumped down from the flowerbed. He knelt, placing the bag on the ground, and held it open. “Take a look.”

Travis crouched too, leaning over the pillowcase. One of the kittens was trying to scramble out of the bag, perched atop the other two wriggling puffs. Reaching in, Scott carefully slid a finger over the little guy's head. He was squeaked at, and he let out an amused huff.

Travis reached in too, his fingers brushing against Scott's. “If he gets out of the pillowcase, he's gonna be christened Houdini.”

Scott looked up at Travis. “Dude, don't name them.”

“It doesn't hurt anything. We need to tell them apart.”

“Why do we need to tell them apart?”

But Travis's attention was already focused back on the kittens, and he cooed at them like a mother hen. Scott rolled his eyes, stood up, and brushed his pants off. He noticed the mom-cat curled up on the fence, still watching them avidly.

“Sorry, Mama-Kitty,” Scott said. “It’s better this way.” Still, he felt a jolt of guilt.

“What do we do now?” Travis was staring at Scott with an expectant look.

*There’s that “we” again,* Scott thought, but found that he wasn’t too annoyed at Travis’s forwardness. “We’ll have to take them to the pound,” Scott replied.

Travis pulled a face.

“Well,” Scott said, “let’s bring them inside, at least. I’ll look up the number and ask what we’re supposed to do.”

Travis nodded at that, but Scott could see the stubborn set of his shoulders as he lifted the pillowcase and stood up. He kept the kittens clutched against his chest as he took a step around Scott and headed back towards the house. With a sigh, Scott followed.

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“Hm.”

“What?”

After spreading a towel out on the living room floor, Scott had tasked Travis with keeping the kittens corralled there while he sat on the couch and scrolled through pet rescue websites on his phone. None of it looked like good news. Phrases like *best chance for survival is your ability to foster them* and *sheer amount of kittens during high kitten season means a lack of space* were making him frown with increasing intensity.

“Nothing.” Scott ran his fingers through his hair and dropped his head back against the couch. This was not what he had planned for his day off.

He slid down onto the floor next to Travis, and picked up one of the kittens. He was surprised by how sociable they were. The one in his hands mewed at him and stuck its tongue out.

“Okay,” he said firmly as he set the kitten down. “Here’s the plan.”

“Okay,” Travis replied, like a soldier reporting for duty.

“There’s a couple of numbers to call, we have to find out if there’s any foster homes willing to take them in...”

Travis must have heard the hesitation. “But?”

“But this is high kitten season, and there probably won’t be any open spots.”

“Shit.” Scott looked over at Travis to see the kid nuzzling his forehead against one of the kittens. “Can’t we keep them?”

“You live in a dorm, dude,” Scott replied.

“Oh, yeah.” Travis glanced up at him with a grin. “But they’re so small. Who would notice?”

Scott playfully shoved his face away. “You can’t keep them. I don’t have time to keep them. We have to find homes.” As the words left his mouth, Scott realized he had volunteered Travis to help without really knowing if he was down for that. It wasn’t like he was a resident.

Groaning in protest, Travis wrapped all three kittens in his arms and pulled them in close to his chest. “Fine,” he said, his lips jutting out in a pout.

“You can go home,” Scott said. “I’ll do it.”

“What?” Travis sat up suddenly, leaning in towards Scott. “No way! I found them.”

Scott could practically hear the *they’re mine* in Travis’s voice. “Okay, okay,” he said, holding up a placating hand. The thought that Travis was doing this to keep in close proximity with Paul had crossed Scott’s mind. He hadn’t forgotten that crestfallen expression when Paul had acted like an asshole.

*Well, what could it hurt?* It’s not like Scott had the time to take care of them.

Visibly relaxing, Travis stretched back out onto his side. “So who do we call first?”

Scott grabbed his phone. “The local shelter.” He dialed the number and held the phone to his ear.

The person on the other end was nice, although her voice turned a little strained when Scott said that he had taken the kittens immediately after finding them. But he was able to assure her that they were old enough, and she hummed as she went through a list of foster homes. There weren’t any available.

“Thanks,” Scott said, and hung up. He dropped the phone in his lap. “Shit.”

“Listen.” Travis had sat up again, his expression serious as he stared at Scott. “If you keep them here, I’ll take care of them, okay? Until we find homes.”

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“Travis—”

Scott's phone rang, and he looked down to see that it was the animal shelter calling him back, and quickly answered it.

The woman had a number for Scott that she had forgotten to give him. It wasn't for a foster home, but it was a guy who spent a lot of time dealing with feral cat colonies, and he would set Scott up with all the food and litter he would need. She gave Scott the number, apologized one more time for not being too helpful, and then hung up. Scott stared at his phone.

“What was it?” Travis asked.

Scott tried to picture taking care of the kittens himself, but he knew he wouldn't be able to do that alone until he found homes for them. Then, he imagined having Travis—who was pretty much still a stranger—come over every day to help.

*Fuck*

“All right,” Scott said. He licked his lips and then stared straight into Travis's eyes. “Do you swear—*fucking swear*—that you won't flake out on me for a couple of weeks?”

Travis's blue eyes widened with excitement. “Totally, dude.”

A wet tongue touched Scott's fingertip. The kittens were clumsily roaming the towel. They were pretty cute, but they would need a ton of attention. Well, Travis was easy on the eyes, in an eager sort of way, and he probably would be helpful with the kittens. Plus, Paul would flip a bitch, which was really appealing.

Scott smiled a tired smile. “Okay. Let's do it.”

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The guy looked like Santa Claus—with his giant white beard.

He drove up in a ratty old pick-up, stepped out, hitched up his coveralls, and took a wide view of the house before his eyes finally landed on Scott and Travis. “You the boys with the kittens?”

“Yes.” Scott held out his hand. “Scott Buckley.”

The man grunted, but he took Scott's hand and shook it. He had a skeptical gleam in his eyes. “I've brought two packs of wet food, a bag of kitten litter—*don't* use the normal kind, they can get stuck in it—and a kennel. You have to give back the kennel.”

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“Uh...” Scott said, slightly lost. “Okay.”

The man grunted again, and turned back towards his truck. “They can get their shots at eight weeks, or two pounds. Don’t forget about that, or tell the person who adopts them about it.”

“Okay,” Scott replied with more conviction. Travis was hanging back at his side.

“Well?” The man had pulled the back of the truck open, and stared at them. “Do you want the stuff or not?”

“Oh, right.” Scott jumped forward and took the bag of litter the man was holding out for him. He turned and jogged up to the porch where he set the bag, and then returned to the truck, Travis passing him with the packs of cat food. The man had the kennel waiting on the edge of the truck bed for Scott—it was obviously made for a large dog. “I built a shelf inside,” the man said. “In a few days, they’ll be climbing all over the damn thing.”

“Thanks,” Scott replied.

“This is a good thing you’re doing,” the man said, “but make sure you don’t fuck it up, forget to feed them or whatever. Don’t get lazy.”

“We won’t!” Travis chirped from behind Scott. He walked up, slinging an arm around Scott’s shoulder. “We’re totally dedicated to raising these kittens.”

“Mhm.” The man stepped back, leaving room for Scott and Travis to grab the kennel together. “Give me a call when you can give that back.”

“Thanks for the help,” Scott called over his shoulder, but the truck’s engine had already started and he heard the man drive off. Travis shot Scott a look, and they both chuckled. “At least we’re getting this shit for free.”

“Yeah, good point,” Travis replied.

They carried all of the stuff into the house and up the stairs where Scott had placed the kittens in his laundry hamper. He cleared his dresser and they hefted the kennel on top. Inside, there was the shelf the man was talking about, plus the bottom and one wall had squares of carpet attached, and an empty cardboard box lid that Scott guessed was for the litter.

Travis whistled. “Pretty nice set up.”

“Yeah.” Scott grabbed the box lid. “You get the kittens, and I’ll set up the litter.”

“Got it.”

They set to work making the kennel comfortable for the kittens, bumping into each other as they placed the litter, a bowl of water, and then finally the kittens themselves inside.

“So should we like, put up flyers or something?” Travis asked, one arm stretched into the kennel as he slid a finger down one of the kitten’s backs. “You know, around campus.”

“No,” Scott replied. “We should probably ask friends first, and then get them to ask other people. I don’t want some weirdo taking the cats.” He watched as all three kittens piled up together towards the back of the kennel. The excitement of something new happening must have worn off, because they were mewling pitifully and looked kind of frightened.

He grabbed the towel Travis had been using to keep them on, and covered the kennel with it. “Let’s let them sleep for a while.”

When he turned, he almost bumped into Travis. They blinked at each other.

“What now?” Travis asked, rubbing his arm as he swayed a little close to Scott. Before Scott could even reply, he then said (with a clearly leading tone), “I should probably get back to the dorm.”

Scott’s lips quirked. Glancing down, he could see Travis’s clothed toes curling into the carpet. “You want donuts?”

The wide grin was instantaneous. “Yeah, dude!” And then Scott caught the slight flicker in his eyes, Travis glancing at the bedroom door.

*Oh, right.* There was a reason Travis was so keen to stick around, and it wasn’t the kittens... or Scott. “You’ll see him again.”

To Scott’s surprise, Travis’s cheeks turned a little pink. Then he clasped the right earflap of his hat, tugging it slightly. “Whatever, man. I was ditched.”

“He told me he kept your number.”

Travis dropped his grip on the hat, his lips parting. But then he shrugged, his gaze going to the side. “He had his chance.”

“Okay, dude,” Scott said teasingly, and then laughed when Travis stuck his tongue out at him. “Let’s get going.”

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Scott let out one big content sigh, and slouched back against the plastic yellow bench seat. In front of him: one chocolate-glazed old-fashioned, and one regular-glazed old-fashioned.

In front of Travis... seven donut holes and a bear claw.

"Why seven?" Scott asked with amusement.

Travis was lining them up, three cinnamon-covered ones, two sprinkles, and two glazed. The bear claw was set to the side like an afterthought. He was bent down eye-level with the donut holes, and his gaze moved up, his lip curling into a grin. "Why not?"

Snorting, Scott just shook his head. "Yeah, why not?" He took a bite of the chocolate-glazed, and then wiped the crumbs from his mouth, watching as Travis dropped his head back and tossed a donut hole in the air. He caught it between his teeth and then looked over at Scott, his eyes twinkling. He was slow to take a bite of the donut hole, clutching the uneaten half between his fingers. "So you and Paul aren't friends?" he asked after swallowing.

Scott nodded. "Roommates, acquaintances."

Licking his finger, Travis's eyebrows knotted in concentration. "Ever fuck each other?"

"Nope," Scott replied evenly. "Haven't even seen him naked."

That got a snort out of the kid. "He's hot. And hung," he said with an authoritative smugness that had Scott smiling.

"He has his fans."

"Yeah, I bet," Travis replied wryly.

Scott considered Travis. "I, uh. I don't know what to tell you, dude. Are you like heartbroken over this? It was just a club hookup, you know?"

"I'm not heartbroken," Travis replied, his lip curling up. "I just wanted another chance to ride that dick."

Scott nodded—really, *really* trying not to laugh at Travis. Every time the kid opened his mouth and said something with all that teen boy bravado, it just made Scott want to ruffle his hair. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah." Travis's eyes were glittering mischievously as he leaned towards Scott. "Another chance to ride it. Suck it. He fucked me four times last night."

"Wow, four times?" Scott replied amiably, with only a hint of sarcasm.

Travis's lips quirked. "Could you do better?"

"Probably not."

Silent for a moment, Travis just scratched his fingernail against the surface of the table. "How old are you?"

Scott's eyebrows rose. "Twenty-two."

"And you're a graduate student, right?"

Nodding, Scott crossed his arms. "Are we getting to know each other?"

Travis laughed. "Yeah, dude. We have a family now."

"Speaking of which," Scott replied, "we should probably go back and check on them soon."

"You want me to come with you?"

There was definitely a hint of hopefulness in Travis's voice—he obviously hadn't given up on Paul quite yet. "Yeah, you got somewhere to be?"

Travis quickly shook his head.

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That day came and went.

With the rough draft of his thesis returned, Scott was back to the research-and-job grind, with only a spare moment to marvel at how much free time Travis had. Every day, the kid was at the house in Scott's room, with maybe a textbook that he skimmed for thirty minutes before pulling the kittens out and tumbling around on the floor with them.

"He is cute," Scott's friend Carrie said one day—with Travis in full earshot. Carrie was leaning back against Scott's desk, watching Travis, while Scott was scanning pages of a text she had loaned him.

"Thank you!" Travis said. Scott couldn't see him, but he could hear the coy playfulness.

"Are you gonna keep him, Scott?"

"Shut up."

Carrie *hmm'd* at him and stepped away from the desk. "How are you liking college?" Scott heard her ask Travis.

"It's awesome."

"I loved being a freshman," Carrie said with a sigh. "I met Scott my first year, too." Then, she said in a stage whisper: "Maybe he preys on them."

"Carrie..."



Both Carrie and Travis laughed, while Scott grumpily tuned them out, willing his old-ass scanner to move just a little bit faster. “Fuck it,” he groaned, pulling his phone out and taking a few snapshots of each page. He shut the book with a snap, and turned. “Ok, done.”

Carrie smiled at him. “A.K.A. get out?”

“I have four thousand words to write tonight, if I want to keep up to schedule, I can’t be distracted,” Scott replied, already ushering her towards the door.

“And what about the puppy?” Carrie giggled, leaning her weight back against Scott’s hands and dragging her feet. “He doesn’t count as a distraction?”

“He’s an exception.”

“Mhm.”

When they were downstairs, she kept Scott from closing the front door. “Look, you allotted me one meddling female friend conversation a month, so I’m enacting that now. Is he a possible boyfriend?”

Scott stared down at her. “Seriously?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, eyes glinting with amusement. “You haven’t dated anyone since the Hulk—well, and Hulk Two, but you said that wasn’t really dating.”

“I’m not dating the puppy,” Scott replied. “Pretty much, I’m babysitting him until either A, the kittens are gone, or B, Paul feels like seconds.”

“That’s just mean.”

*Is it mean?* Scott frowned. He hadn’t meant for the words to come out so... bitterly. He rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m dating my thesis.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Carrie started to step away, down the porch with a wave. “The cruel mistress. Not exactly a long-term relationship.”

“Go away.”

Carrie flipped him the bird over her shoulder, and Scott laughed as he shut the door.

Back upstairs, he found Travis lying on his bed, shirtless. Scott could see his rib cage; he definitely still had that gawky teenager thing going on, like eventually he might grow into those big feet of his. He was holding one of the

kittens aloft, and humming *The Circle of Life*. “Simba—” he said suddenly, in a deep voice.

“No naming.” Scott walked over to his desk and sank down in his chair. Despite his conversation with Carrie, he was not feeling quite so loyal to his thesis; in fact he kind of wanted to burn the whole thing in a fire.

“No naming,” he heard Travis mimic in an obnoxious voice. He turned to see the kittens were all crawling around the bed while Travis had flipped around to his stomach, his feet crisscrossing in the air. He was looking at Scott.

“What?”

Travis quirked a grin. “I like your friend,” he said.

“Because she said you were cute.”

“She can state the obvious really well.”

Scott grunted, but he was smiling. He slid his ass down a little in the chair, slumping. “Fuck, I am so tired.”

“Come here.”

Looking back up, he saw that Travis had shifted to a sitting position, and was holding his hands up while wiggling his fingers. “Back massage.”

Scott didn’t need to be told twice. He was on the bed in a second, his back to Travis. Hands gripped his shoulders, fingers searching for the knots. Scott groaned again, but this time from pleasure.

“Dude,” Travis laughed.

“What?”

“Is your massage groan the same as your sex groan?”

“Fuck off.”

“I think I popped a woody.”

“Dude—” Scott swung back, knocking Travis over on the bed. He quickly straddled him and went straight for under the armpits, tickling mercilessly. Travis shrieked, his eyes squinting shut as he tried to wiggle away from Scott.

“Okay!” he laughed. “You win. You win.”

“What do I win?”

Travis reached around and grabbed one of the kittens, pushing it against Scott’s face. It licked his nose. “Kittens.”

“I already have that.”

There was a pause, a spark of trouble in Travis's eyes, his lip curling, and then he was setting the kitten down—and before Scott knew what was happening, he suddenly found himself shoved to the side, then shoved down, Travis's weight resting on top of him. “I said I was going to give you a back massage, so you're getting a back massage.”

Immediately, Scott felt Travis sharply pinch his ass cheek. “Oh, fuck you.”

Laughter, and then hands gripped his shoulders again. It took a few minutes, but then Scott was able to relax into it, into the way Travis was kneading along his spine. Every few seconds he also felt a set of kitten paws skitter across his back.

When those fingers became less massage-y and more explore-y, Scott grunted. “Okay, get off me. I've got four thousand words to write.”

But then there was a sound at his bedroom door. “I don't know, dude,” came someone else's voice—Paul, Scott realized belatedly—“Taking a break might be worth your while. I say that from experience.”

The thing was, Scott knew Paul wasn't being malicious. He was just being him in his everyone-has-sex-with-everyone big happy family kind of way. But Travis didn't know that, and Scott felt the way he stilled above him. He pushed up, and looked over at Paul. “Did you need something?”

“Well, it's Friday and I was gonna ask if you wanted to go out—” Paul smirked, “—but I can see you're eating in.” He gave a salute. “I'll hit you up later... See ya, Travis.”

With that, the door clicked shut. And before Scott could even get a word out, he felt Travis's hot breath against his ear. “I thought you weren't friends with him?”

“I'm not.” Scott sat up, gently pushing Travis off of him. “I told you before, we go to the club together sometimes.” Travis had sat back, leaning against the wall with the kitten in his lap. Scott considered him. “Do you want me to talk to him about you?”

Travis looked up, and actually seemed surprised. “What?”

“Do you want me to ask him—” Scott was very close to rolling his eyes at how *Sex and the City* he sounded, but whatever, “—what he thinks about you?”

Of all things, he was not expecting Travis to scowl at him.

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“What?”

“Nothing.” Travis scuttled around Scott and went to the kennel, returning the kitten to its siblings. “Yeah, dude. Why don’t you ask him that?”

“Do you want me to?”

With his back to Scott, Travis’s expression was hidden. “You can if you want.”

“That’s not exactly an answer.” Scott crossed his legs, and rested his hands in his laps. “You know, after the kittens are adopted, you’re not gonna have much more of a chance.”

At that, Travis turned around suddenly. “What?”

“Well I mean, there won’t be any excuse to come here,” Scott continued, “so if you’re planning on trying to seduce him again, or whatever, you might want to get moving.”

Travis stared at him. “Are you serious?”

Eyebrows knotting, Scott nodded.

For a moment, Travis just continued to stare at him. And then he licked his lips. “I’m going,” he said suddenly. With that, he turned and shut the kennel door and locked it. “I have homework to do.”

Scott was now completely lost. “Wait, Travis—”

But Travis was already out the door, which he loudly slammed closed behind him.

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“Should we wear suits?”

Scott, who was fixing the buttons of his shirt in the mirror hanging off his closet door, glanced over at Travis. “*Why* would we need to wear suits?”

“I dunno—” Travis was sitting cross-legged on Scott’s bed, hands folded in his lap as he watched Scott. “—kinda feels like marrying our kids off, or something.”

With a long sigh that was mostly put on for show, Scott turned back to his reflection. “This dude has to impress us, Travis. Not the other way around. I’m not handing the kittens off to some guy who’s going to feed them to his pet snake.”

In the mirror, he saw Travis slide off the bed and approach him. Travis circled around until he was in front of Scott, and smiled at him as he slid his palm down Scott's chest. "You sound like a dad on prom night," he said slyly.

Scott found himself caught staring into Travis's cheeky gaze. He pushed the fingers fondling his top button away, and took one last glance in the mirror. And saw that his cheeks were slightly flushed.

It was a few days after that tense night, and Travis hadn't said anything about it. In fact, the next time he showed up at Scott's place, he was all grins and six-packs of Monster. "For you," Travis had said, "and your all-nighters."

Scott figured it was some kind of *mea culpa*, but he was still a little lost. Especially with how touchy-feely Travis continued to be.

Thankfully, his cell beeped, and he fished into his pocket for it. There was a text from the dude saying he was waiting outside. "Okay," Scott said, looking up at Travis. "I'll go let him in. You take the kittens out and keep them on my bed. Get them to act cute."

Travis shot him a dubious look, but Scott ignored him and headed downstairs to the front door, which he opened after a long inhale.

He—almost—licked his lips. Standing on the front porch was a tall, tall, *tall* dude with compact muscles and a square jaw lightly dusted with stubble. He was wearing a neon tank top and backwards hat, the kind of douchebag uniform, which always incited disdainful arousal in Scott's gut.

"Hey, man," the guy said. "I'm Mike."

"Uh, yeah." Scott backed away from the door and let Mike walk in. Scott had to tilt his head up to see the guy's face. "Kittens, huh?"

"Right?" Mike laughed, his white teeth showing.

Scott let out a chuckle of his own, and nodded up towards the stairs. "C'mon, they're in my room."

"This isn't one of those Craigslist murder scams, is it?" Mike said as they walked up.

"Yeah, man, you caught me. The Kitten Killer." Good thing Mike was behind him, as Scott grimaced at his own cheesiness. He was not a man meant for one-liners.

"Good one," Mike said, his voice full of wry humor.

They walked into Scott's bedroom to find Travis sitting very politely on the bed with one of the kittens in his lap, while the other two tussled behind him. Travis's gaze moved from Scott to up beyond Scott's shoulder. His lip curled. "This guy?"

Scott wanted to press his palm against his face, but instead he shoved Travis out of the way, and gestured down at the kittens as he said to Mike, "They're about eight weeks old, you'll have to get their shots and neuter them."

"Are they for your girlfriend?" Travis cut in.

Mike looked amused. Licking his lips, he went to the bed, scooped up a kitten, and deposited it on his rounded shoulder. "For me, little man. Finally got an apartment that allows pets." As he finished speaking, he changed the direction of his words from Travis to Scott, who was watching with amazement at how the kitten balanced itself enough to start chewing on Mike's hair.

"You go to school here?" Mike asked.

"Graduate student," Scott replied. After a second, he said, "You?"

"Senior." Mike lifted the kitten off his shoulder, and held it against his chest. *He had to lift to have a chest like that*, Scott thought. *Christ, am I drooling?*

He realized Travis was watching him watch Mike, and cleared his throat. "Anyway—uh, I'm really hoping I'm not sending this kitten to certain doom or something."

"Well—" Mike said, his tone maybe suggestive, "—you could swing by my place. Check it out, if you want." He stepped towards Scott then, stood over him and looked down at him with a clear message in his eyes.

"Can I come too?" Travis's voice piped up.

Scott blinked. Then he looked down at Travis, who was kneeling on the ground, kittens in his arms, faced cocked in a mischievous way.

Chuckling, Mike handed the kitten back over to Scott. To Travis, he said, "Sorry, little man. No plus-one on that invite."

*Ooooooh wow, okay.* Scott was being picked up. "So, I'll call you," he said.

That earned him a slow grin. Mike reached out, apparently to pet the kitten, but his fingers brushed against Scott's chest. "I really like this one."

"Great," Scott said, his voice coming out in a raspy squeak. The guy's biceps were as big as Scott's thighs. Imagining being thrown down by that set

of guns—Scott gulped a breath, and then quickly dropped the kitten down next to Travis. “I’ll show you out.”

Back downstairs, he opened the door for Mike, who paused as he was passing through. They exchanged dates for when Scott could drop by to check out where the kitten would be living, and then right when he was about to say goodbye, Scott nearly bit his tongue when Mike grabbed his arm and gave it a firm squeeze.

“I’m looking forward to it,” he said, letting go and turning to walk down the porch steps, whistling as he went.

Scott only stared at his retreating back for a moment before carefully shutting the front door and leaping back up the stairs. He burst into his room and jumped onto his bed so he could peer out the blinds of his window as, down below, Mike climbed into a humungous truck.

Glancing over his shoulder, he stared at Travis. “That guy was hitting on me, right?”

Travis was half-leaning against the dresser, more turned towards the kennel where the kittens were, his expression hidden from Scott.

“Dude,” Scott said insistently.

Travis scratched the back of his neck.

“Dude!”

Suddenly, Travis whirled around. He stalked towards Scott, slid his knee up onto the bed, and then sidled up next to Scott and looked out the window too, but Mike was already gone.

Scott stared at him, the way he had one slender finger pressing a slat of the blinds down, his gaze hooded. After a second, he sighed and settled down on his haunches to look up at Scott with his wide blue eyes. “Are you really gonna let that frat bro have one of the cats?”

“He seemed okay,” Scott replied, a little deflated that Travis had completely ignored the hitting on thing.

“Yeah, whatever.” Travis dropped the blind and flopped down on his stomach.

Scott stared at him. “What are you angry about?”

“Nothing.” And then, after a second, “Are you going to visit his apartment?”

“Well, yeah,” Scott replied, still a little confused. “I mean, if there’s trash and shit everywhere, obviously I can’t let him have the kitten.”

“Okay.”

Scott wanted to ask why Travis was acting like this. But he felt like he knew, and it was obvious, and maybe he shouldn’t play into Travis’s game. On the other hand, that could just be wishful—*wishful? Really?*—thinking and maybe Travis was just pissy about one of the kittens being adopted.

Scott sighed. He just didn’t know.

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So Mike’s apartment was fine. Scott went over there and found himself shoved against a refrigerator, tongue down his throat. He wasn’t as into it as he thought he would be, and backed out.

Mike seemed disappointed, but he still wanted the kitten. In fact, he wanted two of them so they could play together.

Scott called Travis and asked him to bring them over. When Travis showed up with the two kittens, he was sullen. He stared at Scott, stared at Scott’s lips which Scott realized might be a little swollen. *Fuck.*

But then Travis just shoved by Scott—placed two last kisses on the kittens’ heads—and then handed them off to Mike. “Get their shots done,” he said with a sour face, and then turned right back around and stomped out of the apartment. Scott stared dumbly in his wake.

“That kid really doesn’t like me,” Mike said affably.

Scott looked down at his feet. *What the fuck am I even doing?*

\*\*\*\*\*

A few days later, Travis was in Scott’s room when Scott got back from the café. He was sitting on the ground with the towel spread out, and obviously having a hard time keeping the adventurous kitten out of trouble. It had its face buried in Scott’s tennis shoe.

“Hey,” Travis said, grinning up at Scott.

Scott nodded, feeling slightly apprehensive... but Travis seemed normal, so. He carefully stepped over the two of them, and dropped his backpack on his bed. “One glorious day, I will never have to make someone else coffee again.”

“Sucky day?”



Groaning his response, Scott sank down next to Travis, and leaned back against the bed. "Not as bad as some." He looked over at Travis. "My manager thinks her cousin might want the last kitten."

"Sweet!" Travis scooped up the kitten caught in Scott's shoe, and nuzzled it close to his face. When he caught Scott looking, a sly little smile curled on his face. He set the kitten down, and slid sideways until his thigh was touching Scott's. "Are you stiff?" he said with a sweet voice. "I can give you a backrub."

Scott raised his eyebrows. *Tempting. But.*

He moved his gaze upwards. "What's with that hat, anyway?"

There was a slight flicker of frustration in Travis's eyes, but then his jaw set. "Oh, this?" he said lightly, pulling the beanie from his head. He pushed up from his sitting position, and then turned to drop a knee over Scott's legs so that Travis was straddling him. "My mom made it for me."

He held the hat right in front of his groin, which was exactly eye-level with Scott's face.

Scott looked up, making sure he had a not-impressed look on his face. "Oh yeah? How sweet."

"Definitely sweet." Travis moved down until his ass was resting on Scott's thighs. "Sweet runs in the family."

"Hold on." Scott knocked Travis to the side, and scrambled to his feet just in time to keep the kitten from sneaking into his closet. When he turned around, kitten held safely against his chest, he found Travis sitting there with a scowl. "Do I have to fucking open your fly with my teeth or something?"

Despite everything, a laugh bubbled up Scott's throat. "What?"

Travis's face was red, his eyebrows knotted. He was still on the ground, but he scrambled up, rubbing his head and knocking his hat off in the process. He tried to catch it as it was falling to the ground, but he missed, which only made him flush a deeper red. "*Fuck*," he hissed.

He wiped his face with both hands. Turning, he looked at Scott. His gaze was flat as he reached out. "Here."

Nodding, Scott handed over the kitten. First, Travis nuzzled it, and then he reached into the kennel and set it down, closing the door. With his back to Scott, he said, "Is Mike the type of guy you like?"

*Well...* "Yeah."

Travis turned around then, and Scott saw just how angry he looked. “I like you, you know? I don’t like fucking Paul, he was a douchebag and a one-night stand. I don’t know what to—” He paused, biting his lip. “But you’re all ready for me to get out, as soon as the kitten is out. You don’t care.”

Scott kind of reached out towards Travis. For a second, he thought he might comfort him. But then he realized that Travis couldn’t be comforted. He wanted something from Scott that Scott never had to give. Scott wasn’t that guy, he wasn’t the smooth, aggressive guy like Paul. He was just Scott.

“I do care, Travis,” Scott said. “I like you a lot, you’re a good kid. I can’t be what you want, but I’ll be your friend.”

Travis laughed ruefully at that. “I like you so much,” he said quietly.

Scott couldn’t meet his gaze, and just stood there in self-disgust as he heard Travis walk across the room and leave.

\*\*\*\*

Major upside to going to the club with Paul: it was too damned loud to hear whatever Paul was yammering on about. Not that Scott expected Paul to hang around him for too long, not when there were so many shirtless, sweaty boys out there on the floor.

Scott wanted to stay at the bar and brood, but it was blocked by a swarming mass of bodies too. *Why did I come?* Well, obviously he was hoping for something to happen, he had taken the effort of putting on his tightest black shirt and most flattering jeans.

Suddenly, a drink glass was pushed into his hand, Paul smirking at him. He said something like “Lighten up,” or “Get laid,” or whatever. Usually Scott would have rolled his eyes at him, but this time he brought the rim of the plastic cup to his lips and took a long swig of—well it tasted like cake, anyway.

“More?” Scott said. Paul laughed and handed over his cup as well. Scott knocked it all back within minutes.

He was yanked forward, and dropped the cups in surprise. Paul had a firm grip on his wrist, and dragged Scott deep into the crowd.

By that time, the drinks hit and Scott felt a knot of tension in his chest release.

*Hell.* He was about to earn a graduate degree, he had a few interviews lined up, and at least one employer that definitely wanted to hire him. Life was

fucking good. Life was not going to be dragged down by a bratty freshman in a stupid hat who had been avoiding Scott for weeks now.

He danced with Paul at first. Felt Paul's hands rub up his sides. Those hands had touched Travis. They were strong, and self-assured.

And then they were gone.

Paul was looking over Scott's shoulder with raised eyebrows. Scott was about to turn his head when he felt a chest press hard against his back, arms circle his waist, teeth graze along his neck.

"The fuck—" he jerked, but the arms held him steady. Scott felt whoever it was grind a hard cock against his ass.

Paul was smirking.

*Fuck this.* Scott tried to shove his elbow back, but the guy behind him caught his arm. "C'mon, puppy."

Scott knew that voice. Even if it was shouting and right close to his ear, he knew it. *Travis.* Travis with his gawky body was holding Scott tight and grinding his hard cock against Scott's ass. He was gripping Scott's arms, keeping him from moving.

He didn't want to fight it. That was for fucking sure. But he also knew this wasn't what Travis liked.

He elbowed back, and spun around to see Travis clutching his gut with an annoyed expression. The music was too loud to have a real conversation, but Scott grabbed at Travis's collar anyway, and jerked him close to yell into his ear: "I told you. I can't be what you want." *And you can't be what I want,* Scott left out, but he knew Travis would be able to glean that on his own.

But Travis grinned at him, which Scott was not expecting. Then Travis leaned forward and kissed him.

It was an all-encompassing kind of kiss. An arms wrapped around Scott's body, hands groping his ass, hard cock pressing against hard cock kind of kiss. Travis shoved his tongue right in there, bit Scott's lip. Fingers dragged up Scott's back, leaving painful streaks. But he was *so* hard. He may have whimpered.

Travis pulled back, and there was that cheeky grin. "How the fuck do you know what I want?" he yelled over the music.

Scott was reeling. The only steady thing at that moment was Travis's grip on his body.

Leaning in very close, Travis said into Scott's ear, "I want to fuck you."

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"Because guys like to stick their dicks into things."

"Yeah."

"And I haven't been able to stick my dick into anything yet."

"Yeah, I get it."

"Scott, I like you so much."

Scott smiled a little as he stumbled down the sidewalk, Travis at his side. They had already gone down seven blocks, six more to go until they reached the college's dorms. "I like you too, Travis."

Slumping his weight against Scott, Travis sighed. "Will you let me stick my dick in you?"

"I will."

Travis started giggling then. "When I first met you, you know that morning? You had this hot stubble going on and you were wearing those sweatpants. I thought, *daddy*. Like that just popped in my head."

"Dude, I'm only five years older than you."

"I know."

Scott frowned. "So you want a daddy?"

"No!" Travis's words were slurred, but adamant as he gripped Scott's chin and made Scott look at him. "Fuck off, dude. Stop trying to ruin this."

Scott grinned. He couldn't help it. Travis was so cute. Travis wanted his ass. "I can be a daddy."

"Fuck you."

"You wanna fuck daddy?"

"Seriously, fuck off."

Scott saw the dorm building looming up ahead of them. Thank God, because it was reaching two A.M. and he didn't want to be robbed or whatever.

He grabbed Travis's arm, and pulled him along. "Oh yeah," Travis said. "You're aching for it."

"Shut up."

In the next moment, a sharp swat hit his ass, and Scott yelped. Travis grinned at him from under the lamp light. "I think I'm gonna have a lot of fun learning what I like, you know?" he said playfully.

Scott scowled. *Shithead*. He kept walking, ignoring Travis.

An arm wrapped around his waist. "I think I could like what you like, Scott."

Scott's cheeks were so hot. He didn't know what to do, but he knew that he was supposed to know what to do. Instead, he found himself being herded along by an eighteen-year-old freshman. Towards the freshman dorms. "They're gonna arrest me," he said.

"Nah, you're my guest."

They had reached the doors to the dorms. Travis clumsily fished through his pockets, giggling all the while, and finally pulled out an ID card, which he slid through the scanner. The door unlocked, and he shot a triumphant grin at Scott. Then he grabbed Scott by the wrist and dragged him along.

"What about your roommate?" Scott asked feebly.

"Gone to some football conference."

They had to take an elevator up two floors, and then Travis dragged Scott down a badly lit hallway until they reached a door where Travis slid his ID again. The lock clicked, and he shoved the door open.

*Déjà vu*. Scott recognized the messy-as-fuck dorm room. The brick walls, the nothing. Just two beds, two desks, and two dressers.

Travis didn't give him time to chicken out, just dragged him forward to the left bed and shoved him down. "Hold on," Travis said, and went to the other side of the room. Scott blearily watching him fish around his roommate's dresser until he came away with condoms and a sachet of lube. He was grinning.

"Okay," he said, standing over Scott. "I'll be honest. I liked being fucked in the ass, it was a lot of fun. And I was totally on board to do that again with you. But now that I know I'm gonna be pounding into you, fucking you, you know? Like—"

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He exhaled. "I want to make you scream."

"That's ambitious," Scott replied lazily, his hands shaking. He could just *feel* the way Travis was standing over him while he lay there vulnerable.

"Take your clothes off," Travis said.

Scott was not coordinated, but somehow he managed to shimmy out of his jeans, out of his tight polo shirt. He was naked inside a freshman dorm room, had this eighteen-year-old brat standing over him, a smirk on his acne-speckled face probably because he was about to fuck a dude.

"Underwear too."

Must have realized he could just order Scott around, and Scott would be drooling for it. The briefs were kicked off, flung somewhere in the general vicinity. Travis was still staring down at him, inspecting him.

Then he was on Scott.

He had crawled onto the bed, crawled over Scott. He was still fully dressed, and he pressed his clothed body against Scott's naked skin. He kissed Scott, slid a knee in between Scott's thighs. "You don't know what the fuck I want," he said, repeating his words from earlier that night.

"You want me."

There was a laugh. "Then I guess maybe you do know what I want."

A nip at Scott's neck, fingers sliding along his ass crack, a general persistent command for him to flip over so that he was on his stomach. Travis obviously wanted him on his stomach, so Scott obeyed. He pressed his face into Travis's pillow, smelled that boy sweat. He was so hard.

Fingers breached him. "*Fuck*," he groaned. "Just fucking stick your cock in me."

"Really?"

"Yes, really." He made sure to say those words so that they were dripping with disdain, so that Travis would be egged on to slide over Scott, push his whole weight down onto Scott. There was the sound of a zipper being undone. Hopefully Travis had remembered to put on the fucking condom.

Scott felt the blunt head of Travis's cock push against his hole. And then no going slow, no waiting to adjust. Travis just shoved in there like a fucking virgin amateur—

Scott would have laughed if it hadn't hurt like such a bitch. This is what he got for drunkenly letting some brat fuck him.

And fuck Scott he did. He gripped the mattress and then just *pounded*, over and over, his hard cock reaching deep. Scott realized that Travis was too far gone in his first fucking-an-ass experience, and probably Scott's relief would have to be self-managed. He gripped his cock and started jacking.

"Fuck, Scott," Travis breathed above him. "It's so—tight. It's so—" He let out a little whimper, his hips moving erratically.

He came first. Scott felt it, the way he tensed up and cried out.

Then Scott came. Nothing earth-shattering, but somehow gratifying with the way Travis's adoring moans rang in Scott's ears.

They lay like that, all sweaty and spent. At least Scott was, but he could feel Travis getting hard again within minutes. *Hm*, he thought, *not bad*.

*Not bad.*

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"Now I don't have any name ideas."

Scott turned from the computer to look at Travis lounging on his bed with the last kitten. "What?"

"Well, you said no naming so many times... now we have a kitten without a name."

"You're gonna blame me, huh?"

And there was that cheeky grin. "I'm just saying."

"You're just saying," Scott repeated, standing up and advancing on Travis. He slid one knee onto the bed, then the other, and dropped down on his hands to crawl towards Travis. He made like he was going to kiss Travis, but then at the last second he ducked his head and laid a kiss on the kitten's nose.

A hand landed on his ass, and he winced. Then he looked up at Travis with a grin. "I'm gonna miss you this summer."

Travis's smile fell. "Let me stay with you."

"No."

"Scott!"

"No," Scott laughed, even as Travis carefully set the kitten on the ground—and then lunged at Scott, knocking him on his back.

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“You ass,” Travis whined. “Let me stay.”

“Pay rent, then,” Scott replied. Teeth nipped down on his neck, and he let out a choking laugh. Fingers danced up his sides, pinched at his nipples. He let Travis kiss him fully then, enjoyed the way Travis’s weight pressed down on him.

Enjoyed the way Travis needed him.

Enjoyed the way he needed Travis.

*Okay, then,* Scott thought. *Okay.*

**The End**



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## Author Bio

*R.D. Hero lives a life completely dedicated to m/m. When she isn't spending time sifting through multitudes of yaoi looking for the rare perfect one, she's writing slash online. Once in a while, if she has to, she goes out into the real world to do unsavory things like "college" and "socializing". Mostly though, she prefers to stay in her cave with her boxer, Brandy.*

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