



# SCAR

DEE ADITYA

INDELIBLE #1

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## SCAR

**By Dee Aditya**

### Introduction

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

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

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

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

### Words of Caution

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

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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

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## Photo Description

A lithely muscular man straddles a man with a forest tattoo on his bicep. The man on top has his hands placed on the other man's shoulders, and their lips are locked together. The tattooed man holds on to his partner's bottom as he enters him, and his grip is harsh, but the kiss they share is intimate and tender.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*Please take inspiration from Yelawolf's [Till It's Gone](#) [Lyrics].*

*I'd love something dark and gritty that will make me an emotional wreck, maybe even angry at times. In essence, something that makes me feel. My dream would be for a modern prison setting (though I'm fine with dystopian or historical, as well), but if something else speaks to you, please feel free.*

*My only other requests is that it's not PWP and that the main "romance"/love is between just two characters. Give me something that builds and twists and makes me hurt. If you can do that, I'm forever yours.*

*Sincerely,*

*Samantha*

## Story Info

**Genre:** dystopian, alternate universe

**Tags:** illegal fighting, violence, hurt/comfort, judgmental eyebrows, emotional

**Content Warnings:** death of secondary character, forced consent

**Word Count:** 38,484

*Acknowledgements*

A big thank you to my beta reader Trace for putting up with me and giving me wonderful suggestions without which this story would have had many Plot Fails.

Many thanks to my prompter Samantha for the brilliant prompt, and the brilliant picture that came with it. I hope you like what I've done with it.

I must also offer thanks to my college textbooks—every time I sat down to study, I got inspired to write.

Finally, my eternal gratitude to the DRitC team for putting this whole thing together.

*Author's Note*

I had Eminem's "Beautiful Pain" (ft. Sia) from the album *Marshall Mathers LP 2* on repeat basically the entire time I wrote the later chapters. If Russ had a "character song," this would be it.



# **SCAR**

## **By Dee Aditya**

## Chapter 1

The sky was gloomy, and it was hot inside the public information-access booth, even though the hum of the air-con was loud inside the plasti-glass walls.

Gabriel looked away from the screen of the computer, feeling irritated and cramped inside the tiny space. “I’m not coming home. You know that, so please, let’s not make this any more difficult than it has to be.”

Michael’s silence on the other end of the phone told Gabriel that his words had been acknowledged, but not appreciated. Gabriel sighed audibly, but chose not to say anything else. His words wouldn’t have made anything better, and seeing the sadness and disappointment on his cousin’s face just aggravated his temper further. He huffed and decided to end the conversation when he knew his cousin wasn’t going to say any more.

“Well, thanks for everything, anyway. I’ll let you know when I’ve settled in. Bye, Michael.”

Michael nodded and murmured a sad good-bye before he disconnected the call, still frowning. He didn’t meet Gabriel’s eyes.

Gabriel fumbled for a minute before he finally found the swipe pattern that would log him out of the network. He ran his hands through his hair. Almost immediately after he got out of prison, he’d cut it close enough to be called a buzz cut. The bristly feeling on his palm served to calm and distract him from thoughts on how all the technology had changed since nine years ago.

Once again making sure that he’d properly ended the call, he held the side of his right hand up to the sensor, so his chip could be processed, and the points for the call could be deducted from his account. He slung his plastic bag over his shoulder. His shirt and his notebook rustled inside, and he was thankful that he had so few possessions with him. The walk down to the lower districts would be easier without having to carry a heap of things.

\*\*\*\*

He’d asked Michael for a favor, and Michael had come through, despite the fact that he had wanted Gabriel to come back home, not go and live alone. *Especially* not in the lower districts.

But Gabriel had insisted and argued, and his cousin had found him a place exactly according to his specifications: small, clean, cheap.

*"You have to promise to visit,"* Michael had ordered. Gabriel had promised him, of course, but since he hadn't specified when, he would take his time.

The house was compact and well kept. The paint wasn't peeling, and there didn't seem to be any mold growing anywhere. There was an old but neat sofa in the living room, and a closet with a sliding mirror for a door in the bedroom.

The rest of what he needed, he would have to buy tomorrow.

Right now though, he was going to crash on his couch and get his first night of sleep as a free man.

\*\*\*\*\*

Russ was half an hour late to his appointment. He couldn't be bothered to even pretend that he was anxious. It wasn't like they'd make a special allowance for him just because he showed remorse.

As he waited in the plushly upholstered private room, he let his mind wander. He wondered if any of the upper society people would praise their law makers and civil protectors if they knew what their so-called pillars of society were really like. That the "Projects," the attempts at "modernizing the lower districts to aid its economic progress and social development" (ha!) were nothing but a sham to exploit people who were in trouble for money and use them in prostitution, drug, and fight rings.

He couldn't see how much time had passed since he'd arrived, because there wasn't a clock in here, and he had surrendered all his clothes and his watch at the door before he entered. He wouldn't be able to see a clock in the dim amber lights anyway. It was cold, and the air-con circulated a synthetic floral scent around the room, as if it was trying to mask the scent of all the previous indiscretions that had occurred there. Like it would mask what would occur to him too.

He settled into a corner of the velvet bench that wrapped around three walls of the room, so that he wouldn't be the first thing in sight when someone entered. He was also as far away as possible from the large circular bed in the middle of the room. He curled up to try and keep his body heat, his heartbeat pounding in his ears like he was about to fight.

*It was a fight. But in a very different sense.*

Just when Russ wanted to rip the stuffing out of the couches to distract himself from the awful wait, the door opened and bright light spilled into the room. A man in an expensive suit entered. The lights flickered once before they turned brighter, the dull amber turning a warm, muted gold. A pathetic attempt

at a sexy ambiance, he guessed. The light made the royal-blue wallpaper look black and made the polished-metal and plastic sex toys gleam where they were displayed on the fourth wall.

The man looked first to the right, then to the left, and Russ was spotted. He fought to stay still as the man came closer. He placed a solid collar around Russ's neck and clicked it into place, before clipping a leash to the collar.

"Come along now, Raptor." The man leered and pulled on him hard enough that he tumbled off the seat. The cold metal of the collar bit into his skin, and he hissed.

"The masters are really pissed off with you now, bitch," the man continued as he yanked on the leash again, and Russ quickly got up on his feet before he could be dragged. The man simply laughed and led him out of the room. He was within strangling distance as they walked through a short hallway lit with the same golden light. Russ was sorely tempted to reach out and squeeze, but he kept his hands clasped obediently at his back.

The man stopped at a nondescript door and knocked twice before entering. Once inside, Russ immediately dropped to his hands and knees, and the man folded the leather leash and unceremoniously pushed the folds into Russ's mouth before he left the room.

"At last, our beloved Raptor has decided to grace us with his mighty presence."

Russ felt a chill run down his spine at that voice.

"Come on here, darling. It has been a while since I saw you, hasn't it? Did you miss me, my little one?"

Russ kept his eyes lowered as he slowly crawled toward the man who was sitting on the bed. This room, just like all the other rooms in this godforsaken "leisure lounge," was decked out with a circular bed and wall to wall couches, except the color scheme in this one was red and black with accents of gold. It looked expensive. It was also probably supposed to look sensual. It didn't.

The black silk sheets on the bed had deep red patterns woven into it, looking like artistically spilled blood.

Russ shut that thought down faster than he could blink.

He focused on taking deep breaths, but the floral scent of the room freshener made his nose itch, so he held his breath in the hopes of preventing a sneeze.

When he was close enough to reach out and grab, the man did so, gripping him by his jaw and yanking upward. Russ remained impassive, and the man, who he now recognized as the warden of the Ninth District, smiled at him in the same way he smiled when he gave speeches, looking like a kind grandfather, a respectable and loving family man. It was sickening.

“My precious little fighter. How is your time in the ring? Are you being an obedient boy?” The warden let his jaw go and gently removed the leash from his mouth.

Russ flexed his jaw and twisted his tongue to get some of the stiffness out. The warden caught the base of his jaw and pressed.

Russ’s mouth popped open, and he consciously swallowed a pained yelp.

“Such a pretty boy, but such a brat. I suppose I’ll just have to teach you again...”

The warden used his grip on Russ’s jaw to yank him up and onto the bed. Russ went without protest. The warden tugged his hands behind him and cuffed his wrists together with a plastic cord before he roughly yanked his feet apart and cuffed them to the posts attached to the bed.

Russ was open and vulnerable and already numb to everything that was happening to him.

The warden whispered filthy words into his ear, calling him a worthless whore, good for nothing but taking cock and looking pretty. He took a crop to his ass and the backs of his thighs, leaving behind red-hot lines of bruised skin and burning helplessness. Something big and dry nudged his entrance, and Russ heard his own voice scream in agony, felt his spine arch in searing pain, but everything felt like it was happening to someone else. It was like a virtual reality sim, but his body would not escape unscathed from whatever was happening to him now.

By the time the warden was done, Russ’s voice was nonexistent. He barely had the strength to turn his face away from the pillow when the warden released his grip on his hair. He sucked in big gulps of air as best as he could, but everything still swam in his head.

A wad of papers hit his face and scattered around his head. He blinked rapidly and coughed as he slowly started taking stock of his situation. On his next inhale, he registered the comforting scent of old paper and the pungent tang of sweat, semen, and something metallic. His throat was raw, his eyes

burned, and his ass throbbed viciously. His hands had been freed and were probably bleeding by now, and it hurt like insanity when he tried to move them.

The warden smoothed his hair back gently, like he'd seen him do whenever the man interacted with the lower district children in front of the camera. Russ tasted bile at the back of his throat.

"I will see you again, my brat," the man murmured, still petting his hair. When Russ didn't answer, he continued, "I do hope your mother and sister are doing well. Your sister is studying for the collegiate entrance tests, isn't she?"

Russ gritted his teeth against the ice in his body, recognizing the threat for what it was. "Yes, sir. You'll see me again, sir."

"Good boy." The warden sounded satisfied, and he left with a final pat on Russ's hair.

It was a long time before Russ could gather his cash and head home.

\*\*\*\*

Russ made sure he was as covered up as possible before he slipped into the apartment silently. The money was a solid weight inside the inner pocket of his coat. He didn't even want to think about all the injuries he'd sustained on top of the mother of all headaches that was currently pounding at his skull.

"Russ?"

Russ looked up from unzipping his coat to find his sister in the hallway. He ducked his chin to hide the bruises on his neck and hoped she wouldn't turn on the lights. "Hey, Sheila." He smiled at her, even though his whole face hurt. "Aren't you supposed to be sleeping?"

Sheila rolled her eyes at him, though there was a smile on her face. "I have a test tomorrow. I'm studying."

"At three in the morning? Are you dumb?" He reached out and pulled the pencil that was sticking out of her hair and poked her in the side with its rubber end. "Go to sleep, little girl, or the bogeyman will get you for staying up past your bedtime."

Sheila yelped and snatched the pencil away from him before giving him a nasty look. Russ smiled and stuck his tongue out. She shook her head and turned back to go to her room; the pencil once again taking up residence in her messy updo.

“Sheila, wait.” Russ reached into his coat and pulled out a wad of bills. “How much did you say you needed for that textbook?”

His sister hesitated, and her eyes flickered to the floor before she looked back up at him. “I don’t need that book, bro. I’ll just look up stuff at the library, like always.”

“How much?” He insisted, counting out notes. “Fifty points? A hundred?”

“Russ—”

“Well?” Russ gave her his trademark Big Brother look.

She looked right back at him, but finally sighed. “Two hundred and twenty points.”

Russ had the notes pressed into her palms before she could object. He shushed her when she tried to speak. “Money is my responsibility. You only have to worry about school and cute boys. Nothing else.”

She gave him a quavering smile. “What about cute girls?”

“I guess I can allow that.”

Sheila chuckled and caught him up in a fierce hug, one he returned with just as much emotion. She gave him a playful salute and scampered off to her room.

Russ smiled to himself and turned to go to the bathroom.

The first thing he did was scrub the kohl off of his eyelids. It was a small wonder Sheila hadn’t called him out on wearing makeup. Sure, it made his eyes look pretty, but he hated what it stood for.

After ensuring that he was as clean as he could be, scrubbing away the scent of perfume and sex that clung to him, he applied some ointment on the injuries that needed it and assured himself that he’d be fine, even if he couldn’t sit properly for a while. He chose an old shirt that used to be blue at one point, but was now white. It was comfy and soft, and the long sleeves and high collar covered up his whole upper body, and that was all that mattered.

Donning a surgical mask and rubber gloves, he walked to his mother’s room.

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## Chapter 2

Gabriel stood at the checkout dock, scanning his groceries and putting them in a bioplastic bag. He ignored the stare of the woman who was standing at the next dock, until he glanced her way just to see what she'd do. She quickly looked away and pulled her toddler closer to her.

He quickly scanned his chip and walked out of the store while the woman was still counting out her points.

It was almost midsummer, but despite the shining sun, the lower districts looked gray and colorless. He remembered it being the same way in the other countries he'd visited.

The observation managed to pull a sardonic quirk from his lips. Apparently outcasts were outcasts no matter where they lived, and even the sun was hesitant to share its bounties with them.

He fucking hated the sun anyway. Always gave him nasty burns. The rain though. The rain was nice. The smell, the feeling of cool wetness on his skin, in his hair, the way it tasted when he licked it off Pearce's lips...

The rain was definitely better than the sun.

He set a brisk pace, and his long strides ate up the distance between his apartment and the store. He had the bag slung over his shoulder, and his other hand was in his coat pocket, fiddling with his keycard. It would take him only a short while to get home, and he just wanted to settle down with the new book he'd picked up at the store.

Some people gave him a wide berth as they scurried past.

Some people looked at him with a calculating gleam in their eyes.

Gabriel ignored everyone like he'd gotten used to doing for the past nine years, but he kept all his senses on alert. This district wasn't classified as "lower" for the outdated architecture and broken pavement, after all.

He ducked into a side alley on purpose, just to see if any one of those vulture-eyed people wanted to take a chance on him. There were always a few who were the right combination of cocky and dumb, who thought they could take him in a fight and win.

He loved those. They gave him a good workout. Punching bags that tried to punch back were more entertaining than the ones who just took whatever he



dished out without protest. The noises the latter made weren't as satisfying, either.

A few steps into the dark alley, he heard the snick of a butterfly knife opening.

He placed his groceries on the corner and turned, a smug grin on his face.

\*\*\*\*

Gabriel rotated his arm to work the kinks out after that little bout of exercise. Seriously, couldn't people tell when they were outmatched? And knives, really?

He sighed and stretched his legs where he sat, and the old metal bench creaked with the shift in his weight. He stilled, but the bench creaked again.

An older man had taken up the other end of the bench. His beard, like his hair, was a silver gray, and his skin was dark. His eyes were calculating, and he smiled like he knew something he wasn't supposed to know.

Gabriel frowned, but otherwise he didn't react. The man smiled wider, and he scowled deeper in response.

"That was pretty impressive," the man started, and his voice was measured, smooth. "I have a gym, and I have a few men who train regularly. Would you like to come spar sometime?"

Gabriel gave the man a considering look. "All combat sports were outlawed ten years ago. What are you playing at?"

The man laughed, but there wasn't any real humor in it. It made Gabriel's ears itch.

"It's only illegal when found out." The man smirked. "And I'm not playing at anything." He handed Gabriel a folded slip of paper. "That's the place. Come after eight. I'll see you this weekend."

Gabriel opened the paper to find an address for a place near the old warehouses on the outer fringes of the district. He looked up to see the man smiling slyly.

He tucked the note in his pocket anyway. Perhaps it would prove to be more interesting than sitting at home with only the information network for company.

\*\*\*\*

“Russ, you’re up next.”

A mousy looking man hurried over to Russ and made sure that all his wraps were in place and that he had a guard in his mouth. Once the assistant gave him the all clear, Russ turned to his coach and tipped his chin toward the door. “Well?”

Coach Sean gave him a grim smile and a loaded look. “Do your best, kiddo. We’ve got a lot riding on this.”

Russ nodded, but internally he winced. Shit. They wanted him to throw the match. Of course they weren’t going to just say it plainly because it would cause a riot if people knew the matches were rigged. It was beyond him, though, that anyone could think that the illegal matches would be fair fights.

He remembered being appalled the first time his coach had asked him to lose. It seemed like so long ago now.

Hell, six years *was* long ago, wasn’t it?

He supposed he should be thankful that he had this job, even if it didn’t let him fight at his full potential, even if it was rather humiliating to lose to someone who was obviously beneath him in skill.

But it paid the hospital and school bills and reduced the number of appointments he needed to take, so he didn’t complain.

The light of the arena beckoned him through the open door, as did the rowdy shouts of people who wanted to see some violence. He let the roar of the crowd consume him as he swaggered over to the stage and hopped up onto it.

As the bell sounded, he slipped into his stance and smirked at his opponent for the night, then actually looked at the man.

His opponent was striking, with bulging muscles and broad shoulders covered up by a black tank top and dark-blue shorts. He had wraps on his fists and his feet, and a wrap on his left arm too. Russ didn’t find it particularly intriguing because a lot of people did that: Sometimes it was to brace a healing arm, sometimes it was a fashion statement. He wondered what this dude’s reason was.

The man had closely cropped black hair and intense green eyes that betrayed no emotion. He had a wicked stubble, and Russ wanted to rub his face against it. Oh yeah, that’d feel *good*.

What really drew his interest, though, was the scar that lay directly beneath the man's left eye, a slash of repaired tissue that ran from the top of his cheek to the bridge of his nose. Any higher, and that gorgeous eye would have been a goner. That would have been a shame.

While Russ contemplated how to move so his defeat would be believable, the announcer started his spiel. Russ didn't pay any attention to the man's grating voice, but when the announcer pointed to his corner and called his name, he obligingly raised both his hands and waved at the crowd, making sure his cocky grin was in place and confidence was oozing out of his pores.

The crowd ate it all up, of course. They didn't know that he was going to be losing tonight, after all. Sometimes, he felt sorry for them.

When the announcer introduced his opponent, the reception dimmed a little, probably because he was a first-time fighter, or maybe because they were trying to figure out his name.

*Azrael.*

What sort of a weird name was that?

Azrael looked entirely unimpressed with the display. He raised a single eyebrow at the crowd, as if he'd been expecting better. He didn't wave or acknowledge his patrons in any other way.

Russ stepped forward to shake hands with Azrael when the referee asked him to, clasping the man's broad, wrapped hand in his own. On closer inspection, he saw that Azrael had crow's feet near his eyes and a few gray hairs near his temples.

Russ couldn't resist throwing a wink at him.

Azrael simply rolled his eyes, and his deadpan expression shifted into one of mild annoyance.

Pretentious asshole, wasn't he?

Russ wished he could beat the other man to a pulp. He hated the way Azrael looked at him. Just because he was young didn't mean he wasn't a good fighter. He was a fucking fantastic fighter, and he'd prove it to the older man by handing him his ass.

Not tonight, though. Tonight he'd have to lose, no matter how badly he wanted to win.

“Russ, how have you been, dude?”

Russ was prepared for the tackle, and he answered AJ’s enthusiastic bear hug with a crushing one of his own, only wincing slightly when his bruised side was squeezed. “Just been busy with stuff. You know me.” He laughed, pulling away and rustling AJ’s spiky red hair. “What have I missed?”

“There’s a newbie. He’s been here a few days over the past couple of weeks, and I still don’t know his name. Seems like the strong, silent type, but you’ll like him, he’s fuckin’ *hawt*. He had his first fight a week ago, I think. You should’ve seen coach’s face. He was fucking ecstatic. Think about it. Coach Sean. *Ecstatic*.”

Russ laughed, before he was reminded of something. “Wait. A week ago was my fight. We only have one of us scheduled to fight in a day, don’t we?”

AJ shrugged and went back to his weights. “Screw me if I know what’s going on around here, dude. The head honchos don’t give a shit about schedules as long as they can make their money. They sure as fuck don’t tell us any of their plans beyond who we’re fighting and how we’re gonna finish.”

Russ hummed out a distracted noise. “Hey. Is the newbie in today?”

“Yup, beating the stuffing out of the one good bag we have left.”

“I better go stop him then, eh?”

AJ chuckled and gave him a teasing glance. “Yeah, you go and... save the bag.”

Russ tossed a winning smile over his shoulder and walked further into the gym till he reached the basement. The newbie was punching the bag like it had personally insulted his entire bloodline.

And then Russ noticed the scar on the left cheek. Was that Azrael?

Azrael was in *his* gym?

Russ wondered why he’d been made to fight his own teammate, but he didn’t think about it too long. Like AJ said, no one knew what the higher-ups were really thinking, and no one gave a damn anyway.

He leaned against the doorjamb and watched the way the bigger man moved. He was transported to that night back in the ring, when Azrael had taken him down without even breaking into a sweat. The strength in his tightly muscled body, the piercing green gaze... AJ was right. The man was fucking sexy.

Last week had been pretty awful, though. He'd underestimated Azrael. He'd underestimated him so badly, he felt ashamed that his instincts were so out of whack.

He thought he'd have to pretend to be weaker than Azrael. Only there was no pretending; the man had plenty of skill and tactical ability, and he would have given Russ a run for his money if that hadn't been a closed match.

A part of him was also in awe of the man's skill. His movements were graceful and economical, and each maneuver was confident and almost beautiful to look at in its restraint and precision.

The only thing that he could process after he took the final blow was that he was happy that Coach Sean had wanted him to lose this one, or else he'd be in a hell of a lot of trouble with the man.

Shaking away his thoughts, he pushed away from the door and put a little extra swagger in his step. At least his bruises had faded by now, so he wouldn't look too bad.

"Welcome to the club, newbie." He grinned and turned on his charm. "How are you liking it so far?"

Azrael glanced at him out of the corner of his eyes before he turned his focus back on his punching bag.

Russ was mildly impressed, because no one so far had been able to just dismiss his crooked grin and boyish good nature so casually. It only made him want to work harder at it though, because anything worth having was worth working for. "You're really good at this, you know. Where did you learn to fight like that?"

"None of your business," came the low, rumbling answer, and Russ was surprised, because he didn't actually expect the man to talk.

"Ah, so you *can* speak." He laughed, casually sidling closer to where Azrael was in the center of the ring. He watched the man's form curiously. Something about the way he fought was different from how the others at matches fought. "Seriously, man. You've got some good moves."

Azrael didn't bother to respond to that, so Russ was content to simply stare at the man's hands and feet as they punched and kicked. Apparently the other man found that creepy or something, because he stopped and turned to face him.

“Can you not stand there and stare? It’s rude and it’s annoying me.”

“I’m one of the star members of this club, dude. I practically own this place, and if I want to stare, I’ll fucking stare as long as I please.” He grinned and stuck his tongue out at him.

Azrael gave him his raised eyebrow look again, the one that said he was unimpressed as fuck. Russ grinned back, suffusing cockiness and sex into his eyes. He walked forward confidently, right into Azrael’s personal space.

“I’m Russ,” he drawled, holding his hand out. “When I compete, I’m Raptor. I’m your go-to guy if you ever need anything.” Azrael dismissed his hand with a roll of his eyes, but it was pretty clear he was annoyed.

Russ placed his ignored hand right on the center of the man’s broad chest. “I know your stage name is Azrael,” he purred, moving even closer. “But what is your name, really?”

“I’ll spell it out for you, since you seem to be a little thick,” Azrael returned, his voice low and even as he calmly pulled Russ’s hand away from his chest and, in a quick twist, had him restrained. Russ gasped as his wrist was squeezed, and gritted his teeth as his arm was bent unnaturally behind him.

Azrael breathed in his ear, and a chill shot down Russ’s spine. “Fuck. Off.”

Russ found himself released abruptly, and he straightened, massaging his wrist with his other hand. He stared after Azrael’s back as the man walked out of the room.

Yeah, he was totally getting into this one’s pants, even if he had to suffer a bruised ego now and then.

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“So, what, you’re like a masochist now?”

Russ tch-ed. “Shut up and punch, Neil.”

“Boy, you should have seen how that dude turned him down. It *burrned*.”

Russ sighed and mentally listed out all the different bills he had to pay, taking his mind off how annoyed he was feeling. It was just his luck that Neil had caught the tail end of his chat with the newbie. Now pretty much everyone in the gym knew of how Russ had been unceremoniously turned down.

It grated on his nerves. It wouldn’t have been so bad if it had happened privately. It had happened in front of his friends, and that left him feeling humiliated.

It was not a feeling Russ enjoyed. Ever.

Keiser at least had the good sense to stop the other two morons before Russ stormed off or said something he'd regret. "Guys, you're just being dicks now. Stop before the coach comes back and gets on our asses for wasting time."

"Aww Keis, you're no fun," AJ whined, getting up halfway through his crunches to stand with Keiser and watch as Neil sparred with Russ.

It was silent after that, except for the sound of panting and the impact of taped feet on the rubber of the ring. Out of the corner of his eyes, Russ saw AJ trying to put an arm around Keiser's shoulders and failing miserably, because Keiser was six feet five, and AJ was a whole foot shorter.

Russ smiled to himself and noted that Neil was smiling too, probably at the same thing. They practiced both offensive and defensive moves, punching, kicking, and sidestepping in a practiced dance. Neil's movements were predictable after three years of fighting together, and Russ couldn't help but think of Azrael with his unique fighting style.

He mentally compared Neil's movements with Azrael's, noting subtle differences in form. The more he watched Neil, the more differences he could think up.

Neil smirked at him and went in for the finishing move, a roundhouse kick to his side. Russ effortlessly blocked and used Neil's momentum to flip him on the ground and restrain him, a horizontal version of what Azrael had done to him earlier.

"And Raptor wins again, while Snake eats rubber! The audience is not surprised!"

Russ laughed and got off Neil before he offered him a hand up. "AJ, you flatter me."

Neil grumbled under his breath and flexed his arm, making sure that there was no damage. "Can it, AJ, or I swear to god I will make you regret it."

"Don't be a sore loser, Snake." AJ laughed, but he didn't say any more because Keiser was pinning him with a disapproving look.

"So whipped," Neil taunted, and AJ blushed hard enough to rival a tomato.

Russ was wondering if AJ would spontaneously combust from blushing when Keiser's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Say, Russ, isn't it time for you to get Sheila from her friend's place?"

“Fucking hell, I forgot!” What kind of brother was he, forgetting his promises to his sister? Knowing Sheila, she’d probably started walking back on her own already. Sheila never asked him for favors, and the on rare occasion that she did, he completely fucked it up. Perfect. He hurriedly pulled on his worn-out sneakers and his jacket from the bench he’d discarded them on. “I’m off. Tell Coach I’ve got things to do tomorrow.”

Keiser nodded, tossing him a smile even as he stepped in to separate AJ and Neil from what had turned into a wrestling match. “Sure thing. Be safe!”

Russ jogged out of the warehouse that was serving as their gym, and flipped up his hood. He turned to the left and picked up his pace, hoping to catch his sister before she walked too far by herself.

“It’s really all right. My brother will be here any moment...”

His heart hammered in his chest as Sheila’s voice carried over from the corner of the next street, sounding hesitant and a little nervous. Shit. Shit. Shitshitshitfuck. He broke into a run.

“You should have waited for your brother to come get you then.”

He couldn’t identify the male voice properly over the pounding of his feet, but it sounded familiar, and that made him panic further. He tried hard to keep his sister away from certain parts of his life, and for good reason. She was innocent, and he had to keep it that way.

He’d do *anything* to keep it that way.

He rounded the corner so fast he skidded, and breathed a huge sigh of relief to see Sheila standing under the light of a flickering lamp. The relief did nothing to tamp down his anger though. “For god’s sake, you moron, I told you to wait till I came to get you!” He tugged her to his chest in a forceful hug before pulling back and checking her over, making sure that yes, she really was unharmed and safe.

“You let your sister walk alone in the night to come get you?”

Now that he was standing so close, Russ figured out why the voice was familiar. He looked over his shoulder to see Azrael standing behind him. Azrael, who was giving him the raised eyebrow look coupled with evenly tamped down anger and a sort of exasperation, as if this was something he expected Russ to do. Like he thought Russ was an idiot who couldn’t take care of his sister.



Russ let indignation boil in his veins. "I told her to stay put at her friend's place till I picked her up," he bit back, removing his jacket and manhandling it onto Sheila, who squeaked at the harsh treatment. He ignored her glare. "Nothing would have happened to her anyway. Everyone from around here knows her. And they know me. She's safe."

"I'm not from around here," Azrael returned, cool as he pleased, his eyes narrowed. That eyebrow had gone down, thank fuck, but he still looked imperious and in total disagreement with Russ's words. "And I sure as hell didn't know her. And I'm still in this area." He shrugged, letting the silence speak.

Russ paused, repeating his words in his head, and cursed himself for that stupid argument. That had been a dumb thing to say. He was going to have a long talk with his sister, and probably bring his mother into it too.

"Really, it's not my brother's fault," Sheila piped up from behind him, pulling his arm over her shoulders and sticking close. She wrapped an arm around his waist and squeezed in a show of silent support. "He told me to wait at my friend's place till he got there, but I got impatient. And besides, it's not like I'm completely helpless. I know self-defense. And I have a shock pod!" She grinned and pulled out a small metallic cylinder from her front pocket and held it out to Azrael, who merely looked at the implement without saying anything. Sheila tucked the pod back into her pocket and smiled. "See, I can take care of myself. And it isn't Russ's fault that I'm no good at listening to instructions."

Azrael quirked a half smile at Sheila, and Russ felt something curling his stomach.

"Maybe next time you should wait when he tells you to. It's nice that you know how to defend yourself, but you shouldn't allow things to come to that if you can help it." Azrael shifted his eyes to look at Russ, and the half smile vanished. He turned and walked away without another word.

Russ curled his hands into fists. Sheila gave him a sideways hug, and he calmed down and hugged her back.

"I'm sorry," he said, tucking her head under his chin. "I'm so sorry. I said I'd be there by ten and I forgot."

"I thought it was something like that." Sheila pulled away, and they both started walking home. Russ hadn't lied about that; they only lived three blocks away from the gym, in a more residential area. If Sheila had a problem

anywhere along the way, she could easily duck into the supermarket, or Neil's girlfriend's house, or even the small diner where Russ sometimes helped out.

Which brought Russ to a question he hadn't thought of before. "Why the hell did you come to the warehouses anyway? This place is nowhere near your route to Maggie's house!"

"I just wanted to surprise you," she mumbled. "I realize now what a dumb idea that was. Walking alone near the warehouses? Jeez, what was I thinking?"

"Obviously not very much," Russ grouched. They walked in silence for a while until Russ spoke. "What did Azrael say to you?"

"Azrael? That's his name?"

"It's his stage name. I don't know what his real name is."

"Strange name." Sheila hummed. "He didn't say much. He asked me if I was lost, and I said no, that I was coming to the gym. And he went all 'it's not safe to be walking alone' and 'kids these days,' which was when you popped up."

"We're going to have a long talk about speaking to strangers and walking alone in the middle of the night when we get back home, you know." He sighed, catching hold of her ear and twisting lightly. "Just wait till Mom hears about this."

She groaned and trudged after him

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### Chapter 3

Gabriel was in the gym, loading weights onto the bench press. He'd gotten home later than usual last night after running into Russ and his sister, but he'd still woken up early. Halfway through the morning, he'd gotten bored and decided the gym was as good a place as any to pass the time. He found his thoughts turning back to yesterday night. The girl reminded him of his own little brother when he was in high school.

He smiled absently to himself, remembering evenings spent poring over geometry and calculus and history with Zach, and the endless whines of "This is all useless!" or "No one cares about this stuff!" and Pearce's gentle chiding. His brother had been so smart though, so ambitious, even if he'd been a bit of a brat. He was probably the boss of his own company now. Gabriel hadn't spoken to him since he went to prison.

Speaking of impulsive, insolent youngsters...

A quick glance over the room yielded no blond-haired, annoying pretty boys. He couldn't hear sounds of sparring from the next room either, so maybe the little pest hadn't come in today. Or maybe he only came in the evenings. Gabriel was astonished at how quickly Russ had been able to get under his skin and irritate the life out of him.

The clearing of a throat behind him roused him from his musings.

"Would you like me to spot you?"

The man was younger than him, probably in his late twenties or early thirties. He was tall, taller than Gabriel, even, with a buff physique, shiny blond hair, and the most startlingly blue eyes he'd ever seen.

Something about the man's calm smile and demeanor immediately put him at ease. He knew this type: they were rational and generally low-key, and they didn't blabber unnecessarily. They were the kind of people Gabriel preferred.

"Sure." He shrugged, and the man smiled wider and moved into position next to the bench.

"I'm Keiser Bergmann." A pause. "On stage I'm called the Tank, and I'm sure you can see why," he added wryly, and Gabriel smirked.

"I'm Gabriel. I think you know my stage name already."

Keiser laughed softly. “Of course. Azrael. You’re quite popular, you know that?”

“Am I, now?”

“Yeah. Apparently you told Russ to fuck off yesterday?”

Gabriel huffed an annoyed breath. He just couldn’t get away from the pest, could he? “So? What about it?”

“It’s everywhere. Russ rarely comes on to people, and when he does, he isn’t usually turned down. Brought him down a peg, I think. And everyone has been ribbing him about it too, poor guy.”

Gabriel didn’t comment, and Keiser seemed content to not say anything else. They stopped to add more weights and continued in a companionable silence.

“When’s your next fight?”

Gabriel had to think for a moment before he replied. “It’s this Friday. Against someone called the Demon.”

“The Demon, huh. He’s pretty good, though he’s not opposed to landing low blows whenever he can.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Keiser didn’t speak after that, though it was a little obvious that he wanted to. Gabriel didn’t try to coax it out of him.

They switched after Gabriel was done. Keiser continued to thoughtfully nibble his bottom lip as he lifted the weights.

Gabriel sighed. “Just spit it out already.”

“We were wondering about your fighting style. It’s different from ours. What is it?”

Gabriel smirked. “It’s a secret.”

Keiser laughed and rolled his eyes.

Gabriel helped Keiser replace the weights when he was done, and they walked to the showers together.

After they had changed into clean clothes, Keiser spoke again. “Wanna get lunch with me? I know a good place that’s about two blocks away. Cheap but tasty fare.”

Gabriel shook his head. “No, thank you. I’m just going to head home and sleep a while.”

Keiser smiled in understanding, and Gabriel saw someone who he could actually be friends with.

“Maybe some other time then.”

“Sure.”

With a wink and a pat on his shoulder, Keiser was gone, and Gabriel took his duffel bag and walked out of the gym. A nice nap sounded good. Maybe he’d come back in the evening and practice with the bag.

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Gabriel didn’t go back in the evening after all, instead he spent it curled up in bed with another book. The prison library did have a good collection, but they were all mostly educational texts or extremely somber subjects, and it had been some time since he enjoyed a lighthearted story.

He didn’t go to the gym until the next evening, feeling light at the thought of his newly finished book and at the prospect of maybe sparring with Keiser.

Of course, his rare good spirit vanished at the sight of Russ occupying the lone bench press and Keiser nowhere to be found.

And naturally, the minute the kid set eyes on him, he hopped off the bench and came trotting over.

The smug, infuriating smirk was missing, and *that* was a surprise.

Russ stopped a few feet away, hands tucked into the pockets of his board shorts. “Thanks, for, you know, for that night,” he mumbled, looking at a spot that was behind Gabriel, sounding subdued. “My sister appreciated it.”

Gabriel considered him with a blank expression, and Russ stood still for barely a minute before he spoke again. “Well? Aren’t you gonna say anything?”

Gabriel quirked an eyebrow. “What did you want me to say?”

Russ gaped at him, his mouth hanging a little open. “You could say something like, ‘Okay, it’s not a problem, dude’ or ‘You’re welcome’ or pretty much anything else.” He waited for a response and rolled his eyes when he saw none was forthcoming. “And for god’s sake, can you just cut it out with the eyebrow thing already? It’s fucking annoying when you stare at me like I’m sort of mental case, or I’m gum stuck to your boot!”

Gabriel let a small smirk pull at his lips. The man was actually pretty entertaining, even if he did get on his nerves. He supposed he might even come to like him if Russ had an attitude adjustment.

But as things were, Gabriel enjoyed watching the youngster radiating nerves and irritation, even as he avoided his eyes and cursed savagely under his breath. Gabriel was reminded of a sulky kitten that had been refused a saucer of milk. It was, in a word, amusing, especially considering that Russ was so easy to rile up.

“First of all, I don’t say ‘dude,’” he smirked, interrupting Russ’s irritated mumbling. “And secondly, you don’t have to thank me. You should tell your sister to be more careful and not wander alone in the night.”

“You think I don’t tell her that?” Russ spat out, finally looking him in the eyes. Gabriel noted they were a hazel brown, and there were remnants of kohl on his eyelids.

“Maybe you don’t tell her enough.” He shrugged and walked over to the hooks where a few jump ropes hung. He wasn’t all that surprised when Russ followed behind him.

They each picked out a rope and started a light warm-up. Twenty jumps in, and Russ started speaking. “So. Gabriel. When’s your next fight?”

“Why are you asking me? Did Keiser forget to mention it?” He smirked. He wasn’t really upset that Keiser had given him away. He had actually wanted to see what kind of effort Russ would make to sate his curiosity.

The brat didn’t even feign remorse. In fact, he looked rather smug. Gabriel wasn’t surprised. “I could have asked, but it cost me three weeks of breakfasts just for your name. Anything else and I wouldn’t have the money to pay my rent.”

“You’re spending so much just for my name? I’m flattered. Still doesn’t mean I’m going to entertain you and your poor attitude though.” Not enough money to pay rent? What did he do with all the money he earned in the fights then? Granted, none of them were rolling around in money, but breakfast was a pretty cheap affair, wasn’t it?

Russ tripped on the rope and managed to stop himself before he fell. “Me?! *I’m* the one with the poor attitude? *You’re* the one that’s been acting all high and mighty with me whenever I tried to talk to you!”

He had to stop himself from laughing. Russ’s nostrils flared when he got angry, and his ears went red. Smirking widely, he wondered how he would

react next. “So coming on to me like a desperate whore is your idea of talking? Next time make sure you include me in the memo when it goes out, and I’ll be sure to work on it.”

Russ gaped at him with an incredulous air before he turned his nose up. “Jeez, you’re an asshole,” he decreed, sitting cross-legged on the floor and looking up at him with a sour expression. Gabriel was honestly surprised he didn’t blow it up into a shouting match. “I don’t know why I even bothered to try and make you feel welcome.”

Gabriel simply decided not to answer, knowing that Russ could only be silent for so long before the need to talk/flirt/blurber overcame him. Russ looked like he was ignoring Gabriel, but he didn’t miss the way the brat’s eyes roamed over his body, or how it lingered on his bandage-covered arms or the front of his shorts.

Just as he expected, Russ started up again at the hundredth skip. “What does ‘Azrael’ mean?”

Gabriel reached for his ever-present store of annoyance, but could only come up with mild amusement. He supposed that after he’d spent a few moments comparing Russ to a kitten, he couldn’t be completely annoyed at him. “Do you ever keep quiet for more than a few minutes at a time?”

“I can, but it crushes me on a spiritual level, so I try not to do it too much.”

Gabriel had to laugh at that. “All right then. You can keep asking questions, but you won’t necessarily get any answers.”

“You’re fucking awful.” Russ grinned and hopped up onto his feet to replace the rope, not even pretending to train anymore. “I’ve been fighting for a while, yet I’ve never seen anyone fight the way you do. It’s different. You didn’t pick it up on the streets, did you?”

Gabriel hung his rope back up and went to the treadmill, and Russ followed right at his heels. He took his time to set the speed, watching out of the corner of his eyes and waiting until Russ started to fidget again. “Define ‘different.’”

“Your stance is wider and higher than the rest of us. Your footwork is lighter, and you cover more distance. You didn’t use any grappling moves, didn’t try to use a takedown, and your strike combos were pretty damn impressive too, and really aggressive. I could point out more differences if I saw you fight again, for sure.”

Gabriel was quite impressed with Russ’s knowledge, and he let it show. “You’re very observant.”

“Course I am,” Russ smirked, crossing his arms over his chest and cocking his hip. “I’ve been doing this since I was eighteen! I know pretty much all there is to know about fighting!”

“Except my kind of fighting,” Gabriel snarked, just to burst the brat’s bubble.

He laughed when Russ stuck a tongue out at him, and surprised himself by rustling Russ’s carefully styled hair so that the blond strands were sticking up all over the place.

And just as expected, Russ squawked in outrage and pulled away to fix his hair. Gabriel didn’t tell him that there was one errant strand sticking jauntily upward instead of being slicked back like the others.

“If you’re so interested, I could teach you some moves when I’m at the gym. You up for it?”

Russ stared, a little slack-jawed. “Seriously?”

Gabriel smirked and messed up his hair again. “Be here tomorrow evening.”

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Russ couldn’t believe that Gabriel had actually agreed to not only explain his style, but actually teach him some new stuff the next evening.

Russ hadn’t wanted to leave after that, but the death glare he got when he tried to stick around convinced him to.

It had been really difficult for him to walk away.

He dodged a neat roundhouse kick and sidestepped a right hook, and Keiser nimbly danced away from his own punch-punch-jab combo.

Gabriel had called him observant, and the man had actually *smiled* at him. Perhaps it was more of a smirk than a smile, but finally it looked like he was doing something right in the other man’s eyes. It gave him a rush, and it distracted him from what was coming in the next few hours. It gave him something to think about.

Keiser tried to land an uppercut, and he blocked it without conscious thought. His eyes flicked toward the large clock that hung right above the door, and quickly moved back just in time to see Keiser try to grapple him. He let himself go down.

Keiser pulled back immediately and looked at the clock before turning back to him. “You should have asked to stop a while ago. You’re going to be late now.”



Russ shrugged while he was still on the floor, his breathing long and even. “Doesn’t matter either way.”

Keiser sighed and held out his hand. Russ accepted and didn’t protest when he was pulled up and into the bigger man’s arms for a tight hug. “You shouldn’t try to make it worse than it already is.”

Since his hands were trapped at his sides, he couldn’t hug back, not that he felt like it. He simply nodded against Keiser’s broad shoulder before resting his head there.

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning at the diner?”

Another nod.

Keiser rubbed a hand down his back before he let him go, trying for a teasing smile. It came out more like a grimace. “You promised me free breakfast you know. You aren’t getting out of it.”

Russ managed to dredge up a faint smile. “I know.” He paused a moment. “Thanks,” he said, though he didn’t say what exactly he was thanking Keiser for.

The bigger man nodded, and Russ turned and headed for the showers.

It was just going to be business as usual for him.

The thought made him laugh. That fucking warden was right. He really was nothing but a whore, selling his body to get money. He should have listened to Keiser and picked up the security job, but he never could do anything the easy way, could he?

Now he was stuck with a contract from hell with the devil himself, and no means of escaping.

He laughed again, because he didn’t want to cry.

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## Chapter 4

“Don’t put so much force into the jab!”

“Any less force and I’d be fucking caressing the bag! Do you also want me to kiss it and murmur sweet nothings while I’m at it?”

“Smartass.” Gabriel smirked, and Russ tossed him the middle finger between two punches.

Keiser laughed from where he was spotting Neil on the bench press. Gabriel suspected Neil would have laughed too if he hadn’t been so focused on his weights.

“Listen to the bigger man, Russ,” Keiser said, raising his voice a little to be heard over the noise of taped hands hitting the punching bag.

“Yeah yeah,” Russ muttered, but he relaxed his posture and eased up on the jabs anyway. Then he shot a sour look at Gabriel, in an are-you-happy-now expression.

Gabriel responded with a quirk of his eyebrow and a satisfied smile. He couldn’t really comprehend the fact that he and Russ were actually getting along. He expected frayed tempers, shouting matches, and bruises, not this almost-friendship with the strange snarking. He also expected that the pest would drive him into a homicidal rage with his constant come-ons, but he’d managed to not strangle, shoot, or stab him. Yet.

Of course, it had only been a week.

He supposed he had to thank Keiser for stepping in whenever things became a bit too intense, both on the mat and off. Gabriel’s temper wasn’t very easy to test these days after years of therapy, but Russ managed to come very close to it without much effort. He took solace in the fact that he wasn’t the only one subjected to the brat’s brand of “friendly teasing.” It seemed like Russ found great joy in irritating everyone in the club, except Keiser maybe, because even Russ knew a lost cause when he saw one.

Perhaps it was about time he got Keiser to tell him about how he managed to be so calm all the time. Considering Keiser expected repayment in the form of breakfasts, it wouldn’t even be too much trouble.

After a few more minutes holding the bag and scrutinizing his moves, Gabriel indicated for Russ to stop. “I think that’s enough for today.” He let the

bag go when Russ stepped back, and turned to walk off the mat. “I’m going to hit the showers and head home.”

“Is that an invitation?” Russ piped up, bounding forward to sling an arm around Gabriel’s shoulders.

Gabriel ducked away and kept moving forward. “Nothing I say will ever be an invitation.” He paused in his tracks and shot an appreciative glance at Keiser. “Though I think I can make an exception for Tank.”

Keiser tossed him a wink before he had to help Neil with his weights when the man’s elbows gave out in shock.

“Did you just *flirt*? With *Keiser*?!”

It was Neil’s voice that had spoken, but Gabriel tossed a look over his shoulder and confirmed that Russ was indeed gaping at him with wide eyes and an open mouth. Keiser’s laughter was loud in the background, covering up Neil’s sputtering.

Gabriel simply wagged a single eyebrow at the boy on the mat before walking out.

Gabriel allowed himself a smile and basked in the knowledge that he’d left the brat speechless for once. It was a very good feeling.

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A week after Gabriel started training with Russ, he had his third match. Russ had turned up along with AJ and Keiser to watch him neatly pummel his opponent into the mat. Gabriel had pulled out some of his fancier moves, even when he could have achieved the same results with basic legwork and more force. Knowing that he was being watched made him want to show off.

Which in retrospect was the dumbest thing he could have done. The brat had been more outraged than impressed, hurling accusations about Gabriel being a “selfish old man” and “keeping all the good stuff to himself,” after which he’d tried to hang off Gabriel’s back and whine incessantly right into his ear. The tirade had only stopped because AJ’s match had been about to start and Russ needed to focus on that.

Gabriel made a note to never show off again. Ever. Especially not in front of Russ. For someone who looked so compact and streamlined, the goddamn pest was heavy.

After AJ won, all four of them headed to a rundown bar for celebratory drinks. The drunker Russ got, the more handsy he got, poking and groping as

he pleased. There was also the added pleasure of having his crotch crushed by the brat's bony ass every time he shifted or fidgeted, because Gabriel had been buzzed enough to let him use his lap as a bar seat.

Until Gabriel had become hard, and Russ had just been grinding into him in a drunken haze. And Gabriel, for one awful moment, had contemplated grinding back. At this point, he stood and left the bar just to get away from the horny man who was too persistent for his own good.

He was still feeling the effects of Russ's choke hold around his neck the next day, as well as a phantom warmth on his groin area. Sure, it had been a long time since he'd fucked anyone, especially someone as sexy as Russ, but his body's response yesterday had been quite disturbing. He had more control than that.

As if to mock him and remind him of yesterday, his neck ached as he bent to get a box of cereal from a low shelf in the supermarket, and a muscle in his shoulder twitched when he placed a large jug of milk into his basket.

Sighing in annoyance, he walked over to the produce section and picked up some fruit. He needed to follow a strict diet to maintain his physique, especially now that he was participating in fights. And to be honest, he was enjoying grocery shopping and cooking for himself. After a long time of being unable to even select what he felt like eating, just the simple act of picking up a carton of eggs while running through recipes in his head filled him with a warm rush.

He'd always been interested in cooking, much to his brother's delight. He'd had a short stint in the military, which was where he'd honed his basic fighting skills into something deadlier. He'd enjoyed it there, even if he often felt annoyed with the senior officers and their ceaseless orders. Back then, his temper had been volatile, and he often got into trouble with his superiors, so he'd decided to quit before he managed to get into real hot water. After living his life as he pleased, prison, with its strict routines and the constant supervision, had been hell.

The girl currently at the checkout dock was holding up the line, frantically searching her pockets for something. It took him a moment to recognize the blonde hair and the similar features, but it was definitely Russ's sister.

Gabriel moved toward her, cutting in front of a woman and a teenager. When the teenager opened his mouth, Gabriel raised an eyebrow at him. It had been his default response in prison, and it had served him well. If someone challenged him, he'd challenge them right back. He probably needed to train

himself out of it now that he was back in the real world, but he couldn't deny it was effective. As expected, the teenager shut his mouth. Gabriel turned and tapped the girl's shoulder. "Hey, is everything all right?"

She jumped in shock, apparently too preoccupied with her search to be aware of her surroundings. Gabriel frowned. She looked panicked and on the verge of tears.

"Is something wrong?" He tried again, keeping his voice low and soothing. It still came out sounding like a growl.

"It's—" she started, before swallowing and pulling out her pockets. They were empty. The tears welled up and trailed down her face. "My points. I can't find them. I had two hundred points, and they're missing!"

She looked absolutely distraught. Two hundred points wasn't really that big of a deal to him, but obviously it was an awful lot of money to the girl. He found himself wondering what Russ's home situation was like. Was he the only earning member? How many people did he support?

"It's gone! Oh my god, I lost the money! Crap, crap!" The girl started tugging at her hair in a panic, and Gabriel didn't have to think twice before he used his own chip to make her payment, one hundred and fifty-five points.

She looked at him with wide eyes, as if she couldn't believe he'd actually done it. As a matter of fact, quite a few of the other people in the shop were looking at him too, as if they'd never seen anyone make a payment for someone else.

Then he realized they probably hadn't.

"You didn't have to do that!" The girl followed behind him, hurriedly hauling her shopping bag as he took his place back in line after the teenager and the woman.

"You obviously needed those groceries. It's not a big deal. You should be more careful with your money in the future."

"But I *am* always careful," she mumbled, rubbing her face with her sleeve to get rid of the tear tracks. She cleared her throat and looked up at him. "Thank you so much for helping me out. I just—Thank you. I don't know what I'd have done otherwise."

Gabriel just nodded. In the lighting of the store, he could clearly see her features, and he marveled at how similar she looked to the brat.

They stepped up to the checkout bay when it was Gabriel's turn. Once he was done paying, they stepped out of the store together.

"What's your name?" Gabriel asked, just because it was a little awkward referring to her as "Russ's sister" in his head.

"Sheila." She smiled. "Sheila Andrews. You're Gabriel, right? My brother says you're very good at fighting."

Gabriel raised an eyebrow and smirked slightly. "Does he now?"

"Yeah! He also told me that you were teaching him some stuff, and that your stage name is Azrael, and that you've won all three of your fights so far."

Gabriel hummed.

"He thinks you're hot."

Because he obviously couldn't say "I know, I could tell by the way he keeps trying to get in my pants," Gabriel kept quiet.

"So... where do you live? I live two blocks away, in the apartment building close to the diner. Russ works there sometimes, if they need help. I wanted to get a job too, but Russ keeps telling me to focus on my studies."

Apparently both siblings couldn't tolerate silence.

"That's because you *should* focus on studying right now," he said.

She gave him an expectant look, as if she wanted him to continue.

"What are you studying?"

"I'm in the final year of higher secondary eds." She beamed. "I'm preparing for my collegiate entrances. I'm going to study medicine!"

"Medicine, huh. That's a very good choice. You'll need to work hard for it."

"I will." She sounded pleased. "I have it all planned out. I'm going to ace the exams with the highest marks, so I can choose where I want to go. I'm aiming for a full scholarship at the Hensley Institute, because it's a pioneer in medical research. Once I'm done with basic medicine, I'm going to work under Dr. Nichols in the Immune Systems lab and, hopefully, make a groundbreaking discovery in XDR bacteria."

"XDR?"

"Extremely Drug Resistant," she elaborated. "The diseases they cause are almost always fatal. The best drugs in the market right now can only help to

suppress the symptoms, but ultimately they can't do anything to counteract the effects of the disease."

"You're passionate about this," he said.

"Yeah." Sheila ducked her head and her voice sounded sad. "My mother has a really rare form of TB. She's taking meds for it, and the doctors at the clinic said there's a new trial drug that's going to be available soon that might help her get better, so we're hoping things will turn out okay."

Gabriel remained silent for a while before he said, "I'm sure your mother will be fine."

They walked together in silence after that.

Sheila stopped in front of a building that looked old and gray, with two boarded-up windows. A diner stood at the corner of the street.

"This is it." She pointed at a window on the second floor that had yellow curtains. "Do you want to come up? Russ'll be home, and I'm sure he'd be happy to see you. You can meet our mom too."

Gabriel shook his head. "Thank you, but no. Perhaps some other time."

Sheila smiled. "That'd be nice. Thanks again, for the groceries. We're tight for money right now, and... Yeah." She rubbed the back of her neck as her face colored in embarrassment. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it." He smiled faintly. "Bye."

She waved at him before she turned and walked into the building. Gabriel turned and started walking back to his house, wondering once again about Russ and his family. Medicines were expensive, and doctors even more so. Russ may have had fights regularly, and apparently he also worked at the diner, but that wouldn't have been enough to cover the medical bills and Sheila's education and Russ's own health expenses for treatment after fights. Was there another family member helping him out? Somehow, he didn't think so.

He wondered for the first time if he'd mistakenly judged Russ without knowing him at all.

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Russ didn't know if this was the house, but he sure as hell hoped it was.

He'd been pretty surprised when Sheila told him Gabriel had paid for their groceries. He didn't even know how he recognized her in the first place, since

when he'd seen her that night it had been in the near dark. But by the time he'd run downstairs to thank the man in person, Gabriel was nowhere to be found.

He snooped around for a bit the next day and called in some favors, and it was almost night by the time he managed to locate the man's house. It was on the second floor of a two-story building, with a metal staircase leading up to the front door.

Russ pushed his hood down and tugged on the bottom of his coat when a cold wind blew past. The skies were overcast, and he wondered if he should have brought an umbrella. He could probably borrow one from Gabriel, or better, he could wheedle the man into letting him stay till the rain let off.

Pleased with his plan, he knocked twice on the unmarked door.

The door opened. Russ gave Gabriel a sweet smile.

The door closed.

The fuck?! "Oi! Open up!" He banged on the door. "I swear to god, Gabriel, open the door, you fucker!"

"What do you want?"

Russ leaned his forehead on the door. "I came to return the money for the food. Open up."

"How did you find my address?"

"I asked around. Now come out so I can give you the money."

"I don't want any money."

"You want some other type of repayment? Handjob, blowjob, maybe a rimjob? Or maybe all three? I'm up for fucking too. I'll even let you choose the position."

"Shut up and go away. I don't want any kind of repayment. *Especially* not the sexual kind."

"Are you sure? I've been told I'm really good at it."

"Right. I'm sure."

A flash of lightning snaked across the sky, followed by a low, ominous rumbling. Not even a few seconds later, it started pouring.

Russ made his move. "Come on, Gabriel. It's pouring rain and I really can't afford to get sick. I have a fight tomorrow. Let me in."



Since he was practically plastered to the door, he stumbled a little when it opened without warning. Gabriel pulled him out of the way and closed the door.

Russ let out a whistle at the house. It was neat and uncluttered. A long couch and a low coffee table were the only furniture in the living room. But what really surprised him was the sleek information console that was mounted on the wall opposite the sofa. It wasn't as big as the ones he'd seen in a few magazines, but it looked brand new.

"Dude, is that a TV?!"

Gabriel gave him the Raised Eyebrow which roughly translated to "Are you kidding me?" "Yes. I thought the term for it these days was 'information console'?"

Russ wondered what Gabriel meant by "these days." He was hardly old enough to be speaking like an old fart. Come to think of it, how old was he anyway? He looked older than Keiser, but he was probably still in his thirties.

Russ quickly cataloged everything he could see. The space was small, but spacious enough for a single man. There were two doors and an open arch leading out of the living room. Probably the bedrooms and the kitchen.

When he was done with checking out everything he could from his spot in the living room, he turned to see Gabriel leaning against the door, arms crossed over his chest. He looked pissed.

Russ smiled back at him, letting his eyes fall half-closed. "The rain doesn't look like it's gonna stop soon, so..." He carefully sidled closer and pressed a finger to an arm bulging with muscles. "Wanna have sex?"

Gabriel pinched the knuckle of the finger that was touching him. Russ yelped and pulled his hand away. "I only let you in here because I didn't want you to get sick in the rain. Now behave, or I'll throw you out and pray that you get pneumonia."

Russ sulked and plopped himself on the sofa. Gabriel had been turning down his advances for well over a month now. Was Gabriel interested in men at all? Or was it just that he found Russ completely unattractive?

But Russ had seen the man ogle his ass twice already in the gym, and he definitely hadn't been imagining the hard-on at the bar.

He really needed to pay the man back for the groceries though, either with money or in sexual favors. He didn't care which. He hated owing anyone, and

even though he knew that Gabriel wasn't the sort to hold things against people, he had no intention of giving the man a chance to do so.

He sat still for a while before he felt the silence stifle him.

"So... can I switch it on?" Russ asked, turning to Gabriel, who was still leaning against the wall.

Gabriel gave him another Raised Eyebrow, but he nodded anyway.

"Great. Where's the controller?"

Gabriel simply raised his hand and snapped his fingers, and the screen blinked on.

Russ was fascinated by the technology. Shit like this was way too expensive to buy, so many people in the lower districts didn't even know most of the gadgets that were in the market. They had more pressing concerns, like food and rent. Which made him wonder: How was Gabriel able to afford all this?

"What do you want to watch?" Gabriel asked, and Russ snapped his mouth shut when he recognized he'd been staring at the information console like a dumbass.

"What's available?"

Gabriel considered his question for a moment. "I have movies, music, science, and travel programs. I could order sports or cartoons if you want. And then there's the info network."

Russ blinked, because seriously, how was the man able to afford this? "Uh, it's been a really long time since I watched a movie. Can I see that?"

Gabriel used a couple of voice commands to pull up the movies menu.

Russ read five or so blurbs before he found the perfect one. "Dude, there's a movie about dog spies! And cats wanting world domination! How cool is that!? Can we watch it?"

Gabriel sighed, but he selected the movie anyway. He went to the kitchen right after the opening credits. Halfway through the movie, Russ wished Sheila were with him, because he knew she would have loved it. If he had the money, he would have bought a low-end TV, or at least a phone with access to the info network, because it would have made things so much easier for her to study.

He was knocked out of his gloomy thoughts when Gabriel tapped him on the shoulder and handed him a bowl of pasta. It looked yummy. He nodded his thanks before enthusiastically digging in.

“Wow, this is really good!” He stuck another forkful inside his mouth and moaned exaggeratedly. “So fucking tasty.”

“Chew with your mouth closed, and swallow before you speak.”

“Uh huh. Sure.” He ate another bite, chewing noisily. “You should give me the recipe for this. I’m sure Sheila will love it.”

Gabriel kept quiet, but his face was set in a scowl and he pointedly did not look at Russ.

Russ smiled to himself and went back to eating like a civilized human.

It was so much fun to wind Gabriel up, it was unfair.

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Russ woke up to the smell of coffee and toast, a crick in his neck, and clanging drums in his head.

It took him a moment to reorient himself as he struggled with his blanket. Judging by the light coming in from the small window, it was probably midmorning. He was sleeping on a sofa, and he had on only his underwear and a T-shirt that wasn’t his, because the collar was hanging off his shoulder.

What had happened last night?

He remembered coming to Gabriel’s house, watching a movie, and eating some amazing food. Then... Gabriel had offered him a beer.

And they’d sat and watched another old movie together. Something about giant lizards.

Russ had trouble believing that a single beer would have wreaked havoc on his memory like this. He shifted around on the sofa a little more when he felt something blunt poke him in the side.

Digging in the cushions revealed an empty bottle of vodka.

Oh. Of course. When Gabriel had relegated him to the sofa with a pillow and a blanket to his face and the words “Stay out of my bedroom,” he’d pitched a silent tantrum. He’d gone to rummage in the kitchen for some milk or something sweet to eat (he didn’t find anything), when his eyes had landed on the bottle of liquor that had been standing forlornly on the counter.

It had been three-quarters full, and Russ had managed to take care of the rest, apparently.

“Fucking hell,” he moaned. Because this was just what he needed on the morning of a fight.

And he hadn’t even gotten laid. Pity, because sex always helped him clear his head and get in a good state of mind. It was surprising he still managed to like sex after the treatment he got at the hands of the warden. Or maybe it was *because* of the rough experiences that he enjoyed fun sex with cute guys he met at bars, like the happy memories could cover up the bad ones? Well. He was always up for happy sex. Maybe he could ask AJ or someone else for a quickie before he had to head to the arena.

Sighing, he got up and stretched. He also needed to apologize to his host for finishing his alcohol.

“Go wash your mouth.”

Russ jumped and almost tripped over his feet. “FUCK!”

Gabriel stood at the entrance of the kitchen, looking entirely too pleased with himself. He managed to keep his lips from twitching, but the raised eyebrow gave it away.

Russ grumbled, and he went to the bathroom, though only because he had to get the dead-animal feeling out of his mouth.

When he went into the kitchen, he was shirtless and shoeless. He’d picked up his pants from the floor, in case Gabriel got pissed about him wandering around half-naked. The man in question was standing against the counter with a coffee mug in his hand. His hair was a little mussed, and his face was blank.

“You drank my vodka,” he said.

Russ smiled. “Only ’cuz I couldn’t find any sweet stuff. I’ll buy you another bottle.”

“That was good stuff, not the shit you get in the bars here.”

“I know. I drank the whole thing, remember?”

Gabriel just sighed instead of snarling or growling or doing any of the things he typically did. “Here’s coffee, and here’s toast,” he said, placing a mug and a plate of toast on the counter near Russ. “And here’s marmalade, if you want.” He thunked a small jar next to the toast without even looking. “Breakfast is served.” He lazily scratched his stubble and yawned.

Russ gawped, because this shit was surreal. Was he still dreaming? “Mornings make you really mellow, huh?”

Gabriel yawned again. “Shut up.”

“Uh-huh.” Russ pulled himself on top of the L- shaped counter, right in front of Gabriel. He sat with his knees wide apart, one of them touching the bigger man’s hip. Gabriel made no move to push it away.

Russ smiled slyly and picked up his mug. He took a sip and licked his lips after.

He didn’t miss the way Gabriel’s green eyes tracked the movement.

“I was serious about paying you back you know,” he murmured, looking up through his lashes. “I have the money right now. Or, if you prefer another method of payment...”

“Don’t,” Gabriel murmured. It was the softest Russ had ever heard him. “I’m not that kind of guy. Don’t offer sex as repayment for anything.”

“What if I offered sex just ’cuz I want to fuck you?” He reached out and took Gabriel’s mug from his hand. Gabriel let him.

Feeling emboldened, he leaned in closer till his knee was pressed against the larger man’s crotch. He licked his lips again, and Gabriel’s breath hitched.

“Fuck me,” he purred, placing a hand on Gabriel’s bicep.

“Why?” Gabriel growled, though it didn’t sound angry.

“’Cuz you’re different. I like you. And you’re...” Russ felt the hardened flesh rub against his knee. “Seriously hung. Fuck.”

Gabriel hissed when Russ moved his knee away.

“Gabriel,” Russ moaned, touching himself with his other hand. “Gabriel...”

“Fuck!” Gabriel moved suddenly, slipping between his parted knees and pulling him into a demanding kiss.

Russ moaned into the kiss, tasting coffee. He locked his ankles around the bigger man’s hips, pulling him closer and grinding into him. “Ah, hell... So good...”

Gabriel kissed Russ with lips that were plump and slightly chapped. He framed Russ’s face with his large hands, rubbing his jaw with a callused thumb. Russ was helpless with arousal, and his hands scrambled for purchase against Gabriel’s arms, scratching slightly against the well-formed muscles through the sleeves of his shirt.

Gabriel roughly pulled off Russ's pants and yanked him closer, pressing his clothed chest to Russ's pale, bare skin. He slid his hands into the younger man's waistband and pulled out his cock. Russ cursed when he gave it a rough squeeze and stroke.

"Damn, Gabe, more!"

Gabriel raised an eyebrow at the nickname, but he pulled Russ in to suck gently on his lower lip before giving it a nip and worked his reddened shaft with cruelly slow strokes.

Russ pulled away and hissed. "Fuck you, Gabe! Faster!"

Gabriel simply laughed and continued at the same pace, bending his head to nibble at Russ's jaw and neck, scraping the pale skin with his prickly stubble. It felt better than good.

Russ bit out a few more curses, his head thrown back in pleasure. Gabriel's hand on his cock was tortuous, and the hand rubbing his nipple wasn't any better either. He pried his hands from their death grip around the man's bicep and shoulder, and pulled at Gabriel's pajamas till his shaft sprang free, hard and leaking already. He got a firm grip around it and stroked, using his other hand to fondle the man's heavy balls. Gabriel muttered a string of obscenities in his ear, and Russ purred in delight, because he was the one who'd done that. He was the one who'd reduced the mighty Azrael to a mess of sputtered curses and broken moans, and the knowledge soothed his heart.

"Please, almost there..."

"Say my name," Gabriel growled, thrusting against Russ and taking both of them in his large hand.

"Gabriel," Russ panted, hips bucking, hands scratching furrows in the green-eyed man's back. "Fuck, Gabriel!"

"Yeah," Gabriel grunted, his scratchy facial hair adding a layer of faint pain to the unbelievable pleasure.

"Motherfucker, so fuckin'—so good!"

Russ felt the gradual buildup of pleasure reach the tipping point, higher and higher till his spine arched and his toes curled, and he was coming, hoarsely screaming Gabriel's name. It took a few more strokes, with Russ's cum slicking the way, and then Gabriel crested too, grunting an animal sound. His hand kept moving on their spent cocks, and Russ shuddered at the overstimulation.

It took him a few minutes to come down from the fog of orgasm, and by the time he did, Gabriel already had him wiped down and neatly tucked away. He looked a little surprised, as if he couldn't believe he actually did that.

It made Russ hesitate too. "Um, is everything okay?"

Gabriel furrowed his brows, but he nodded. "Yeah. You should probably get going, shouldn't you?"

Russ frowned. The dismissal in the words was clear. They were done screwing around, and now Gabriel wanted him gone. "I'll see you at tonight's fight?"

Gabriel made a noncommittal noise and turned away from him, reaching for his coffee cup. "We'll see."

As much as it was irrational, Russ couldn't help the little pang of hurt that lingered in his chest.

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## Chapter 5

Gabriel had spent the better part of the morning in a state of horrified disbelief that he'd allowed himself to give in like that.

First of all, he didn't do casual sex. It was not in his nature. Sex was something to be enjoyed with someone he adored. Physical release was something he could get with his right hand and his imagination. Sure, Russ was entertaining, gorgeous, and funny, and maybe Gabriel was actually starting to really like the little pest, but still. And second, he'd made promises to himself: that he'd never become interested in another person beyond simple acquaintances, and that he'd never get involved with anyone again. Being involved with someone meant keeping them safe and protecting them, and he didn't believe himself capable of that anymore.

He'd broken the first promise the night he'd offered to coach Russ, and he'd smashed through the second one spectacularly just that morning.

A trip to the shower later, Gabriel still couldn't stop beating himself up about what had happened with Russ. And he didn't even have any liquor to try and numb his thoughts after Russ had finished his last bottle.

He resigned himself to a day of brooding silence on his couch when the information console switched itself on and beeped, indicating an incoming call. From Michael.

Just what he needed to make this day better.

"Receive," he told the console.

Michael blinked into view on the screen, in his office by the look of things. "Gabriel. It's been more than a month. You promised to visit," he said, looking reproachful.

"I was busy with a few things."

"You can't possibly be having fights every day of the damn week, Bree," Michael huffed. He got out of his chair and began pacing. "You know I don't have a problem with anything you do. It's your life. But don't you think you could at least come visit? We haven't seen you in so long. Zach's been talking my ear off, asking about you. He misses you like crazy, and you haven't even given him a phone call. I know you're a right bastard, Bree, but this is going too far."



Gabriel tensed, and it wasn't just because of the hated nickname. "You know why I'm staying away from Zach, Michael," he warned. "I can't risk speaking to him and giving away my location. I don't want him anywhere near me—"

"He's your brother!"

"I'm a murderer!"

The energy seemed to drain from both of them at the same time, and they sank into their seats, not looking at each other.

"Don't say that." Michael rubbed his palms into his eyes. "Just... Don't. What happened that night was unfortunate—"

"Unfortunate? Pearce *died* and all you can say is *unfortunate*?"

"You know that's not how I meant it!"

"Fine! Fine."

The silence seemed to sully the atmosphere, like a cloud of miasma. Gabriel didn't know how to make it go away.

Michael let out a long breath and sipped from a water bottle. "I'll keep Zach from trying to find you on his own. But you're being a cruel bastard, and I hope you can sleep at night knowing that."

The call disconnected, and Gabriel was left with no one to take his anger out on.

In a fit of rage, he picked up the liquor bottle sitting next to the sofa and hurled it against the wall. It missed the console by a scant few inches, and it gave him no comfort to see it shatter. His therapist had often insisted on releasing his anger in safe, nondestructive methods, but sometimes it felt good to just break something. Now he just felt more frustrated.

Michael had always been good at guilting people into doing things, but he'd never been cruel about it before. Then again, Gabriel deserved everything he said, because it was the truth. Zach was his baby brother, the one he'd sworn to protect with his life after both their parents had died. Zach had been very little then and wary of everyone. Even when they'd moved in with Michael's family, Zach had always clung to him, looking up at him with the adoration only a five-year-old could muster for their big brother. After he'd failed Pearce so terribly, the only thing he was concerned about was keeping Zach safe and happy.

Michael's words brought back memories of that dreaded night nine years and one month ago, of blood smears on Pearce's favorite blue couch, screaming and tears and begging in Pearce's voice, *please Gabriel, stop it, let's call the police*, and the sound of a metal vase impacting on a human skull.

Memories of how Pearce had smiled even with tears running down his face, offering him comfort till the very end. How he said, *"I love you, Gabriel, this isn't your fault, I love you, take care of yourself."* While looking at him with his teeth bloodied and his right eye bruised, the blue of his irises startlingly bright in contrast. How the blood stain on his stomach kept growing bigger and bigger, no matter how Gabriel tried to staunch the flow. How his breathing had become progressively strained until it completely stopped, and it was only then that Gabriel could hear the banging on the door, the sound of people yelling and sirens wailing in the distance.

He remembered the sight of Zach's confused and terrified face standing in the front door, his eyes darting between the mangled body slumped against the wall and Pearce lying on the floor next to the couch with his head pillowed on Gabriel's lap.

The scene had given Zach nightmares often, Michael told him. Gabriel could never forgive himself for doing that to him.

With another roar of fury, Gabriel punched the wall where the bottle had crashed. A shot of pain zinged through his arm. The plaster remained unscathed, except for a few small dots of blood that looked like irregularities in the paint.

He stood there for a moment, cradling his injured hand and processing the pain, both physical and emotional. It made his head hurt.

Needing something to distract him, but not knowing how to get it, he headed to the bathroom. He found the bottle of pain pills in the cabinet, and he popped out four of them.

He swallowed all four as he flung himself onto his bed, and that was the end of that.

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Gabriel was woken from his stupor when his muddled brain registered that he really needed to piss. It was when he was in the bathroom that he registered the loud and frenzied banging coming from the direction of the front door.

He shuffled across his living room to get to the door and opened it only to get a frigid blast of rain and wind in his face.

“You said you’d come to the match!”

Gabriel glared down at the figure on his doorstep, blearily wiping the water out of his eyes with his palm. Judging by the soggy blond hair, the figure looked like a dripping, shivering, angry, disappointed Russ. He simply shrugged and headed inside, leaving Russ to follow after him and lock the door.

“Well?”

“I never told you I’d come.”

“So it’s my fault that I was disappointed? ’Cuz I hoped you might be less of a dick after this morning?”

Gabriel settled heavily on the couch. “That would be correct.”

Russ made a noise of disbelief and started toeing off his shoes.

In no mood to tolerate whatever bullshit he was going to come up with, Gabriel turned and fixed him with a sleepy glare. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Russ snorted. “I’m soaked and shivering my balls off. I’m getting warm.”

“Why do you have to do it at my house? Why are you here in the first place?”

Russ had peeled off his soggy shirt by now and was working on undoing the buttons on his pants. “I came to see you, of course. You know, since you didn’t come to see me.”

“You don’t think that might have been because I didn’t want to see you?”

“But I want to see you, so it all works out.” Russ stood in his underwear now, his hands sluicing his hair back from his face. His eyes landed on the mess of glass on the wall next to the console. “Whoa. What happened here?”

“None of your business,” Gabriel grumbled and sank into the couch, pressing his head against the back.

“Are you okay?”

“None of your business.”

“Right. I don’t think you’re okay. What happened to you?”

“Why do you think I’m not okay?” Gabriel asked, opening one eye to look at Russ. He was standing next to the couch, looking down at him. Russ was clad in red boxers that were wet and clinging obscenely to his body. Droplets of water ran down his pale skin.

Russ bent forward a little to take a better look at Gabriel’s face. “Well, you’re actually giving me verbal answers, instead of just doing that eyebrow thing you do all the time,” he said, smirking. Gabriel looked at him blankly. “And you also look ill. Did you drink too much?”

“There was nothing left to drink. You finished my last bottle.”

“Then why do you look like this?”

“I had some pain pills. They knocked me out for a while. I just woke up because I had to use the bathroom.”

“Yikes. We better get you back in bed then.”

Gabriel simply got to his feet, too tired to bother arguing. Russ plastered himself to his side despite Gabriel’s protests that he didn’t need any support. When they got to the bedroom, Russ helped Gabriel get on the bed and tugged the covers over him before he went to the bathroom.

Gabriel was woken from his light doze when he felt someone get under the covers next to him, smelling like his soap. He vaguely registered that he was supposed to be kicking the pest out, but his warm body felt so good and solid in his arms that he found himself telling his conscience to piss off for the second time in one day.

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Russ opened his eyes to darkness and the sensation of being unable to breathe. He wriggled in an effort to dislodge whatever was crushing his ribs, and finally managed a proper inhale.

“Sorry.”

He barely managed to keep from yelping, but it felt like his heart had tried to evacuate his chest through his mouth. He ran both his hands through his hair and turned to see his bedmate. It was still dark, so he couldn’t see much, but the voice made it very easy to identify just who had been trying to suffocate him to death. “You’re not going to kick me out, then?”

He felt Gabriel shrug and shift his legs, the soft material of his pants rubbing pleasantly against Russ’s skin. “There’s no point in that now, is there?”

Russ lay back down and snuggled against his shoulder. He wasn't pushed away or pulled closer. "Wow, that makes me feel so special."

Gabriel didn't say anything. Russ didn't say anything either. He looked around and spotted a small digital clock on the bed side table. The red letters blinked 5:20 a.m.

"Did you tell your family you wouldn't be coming back for the night?"

"I called Sheila and told her, yeah." Russ pushed the blankets away, careful to not move his legs. The bigger man's leg was hooked over one of his own, keeping him pinned in place, and he didn't want to dislodge it. He traced the line of a well-muscled arm from the shoulder he was resting his head on, and followed it all the way till he reached a large hand with little scabs on the knuckles. He rubbed his index finger over them absently. "How're you feeling now?"

"Better. I usually know better than to abuse medicine like that."

"What happened yesterday, then?" He snatched his hand away when he felt Gabriel's curl into a fist. It was a while before he ventured to run his fingers over the knuckles again. "Was it what we did in the morning?"

The fist relaxed and opened up again, this time lying palm up on the bed. Russ had to settle for feeling the calluses instead. "Partly, yes." He paused. "But it wasn't about that, not really. I received some bad news."

"Oh."

Gabriel curled his fingers around Russ's own. "Tell me about your family."

Russ blinked at the sudden change of topic. "It's just me, Sheila, and my mum. Dad died when I was sixteen or so. Sheila was ten."

He felt Gabriel nod.

"My mom used to work as a nurse at the hospital in the Sixth District before she got sick. My dad was a construction worker. Sometimes he used to buy us toys from the upper districts he went to. And Mom too. There was this cake shop near the train station, and they used to make these chocolate cupcakes with icing dolls on it. She always got me the ones with robots on them, and Sheila got flowers or cats. We looked forward to payday even more than Mom or Dad did, 'cuz payday meant cake, and sometimes new toys. Dad bought us fancy shaped erasers and silly things like that if he didn't have money for anything bigger. And birthdays always meant milkshakes at the diner."

“When did your mother get sick?”

Russ used the hand that wasn't being held captive to brush some hair out of his face. “Around four years ago? The day they told her to stop coming to work was on a Monday, Sheila's first day at higher sec. But she started coughing and feeling sick a month or so before that. Sheila was telling me all about her new math teacher as we fixed macaroni for dinner. Mom came in looking tired and upset, worse than when Dad died. She went straight to her room without eating dinner. The next morning, she told us that her blood tests had come back, and that she couldn't continue working at the hospital 'cuz she had TB. She thought she could go back after treatment, but then she found out the little bugs in her body were some sort of mutated fuckers and weren't going to go away any time soon.”

He wasn't aware of the hand stroking his stomach till the stroking stopped. He twisted a little and got beard burn on his forehead for the effort. “You weren't trying to comfort me or anything, right?”

“Of course not.”

Russ snorted, because that was exactly what he'd expected. He liked this Gabriel, the one who let him speak without subjecting him to his judgmental eyebrows. Heck, the man was even letting him snuggle closer. “I guess that's enough depressing shit early in the morning. So tell me something,” he said, turning on his side a little and angling himself to face Gabriel. “What the hell does ‘Azrael’ mean? I asked Keiser but he didn't know either.”

“Are you familiar with Christianity?”

“That's the name of a religion, right?”

There was a pause before Gabriel answered in a voice more awake. “You know they banned religion back while the reforms were going on, right? That was before even I was born. They changed all the educational materials too, turned all the old religious lore into fairytales and stories, though I think that happened a little later.” He stopped and shifted a little to get more comfortable. “My mother was involved in it, because she was a professor of mythology and folklore. Eastern religion was her specialty, but Christianity was one of her areas of interest, so she had a lot of books about it. She always used to read them to me, like bedtime stories, or just to pass the time on Saturday mornings. I started reading the books on my own when my mother died, because I felt like those books helped me feel connected to her. They were really interesting, too.”

Russ nodded, surprised that Gabriel had opened up like that.

“Anyway, back to your question. The Christian God was said to have a whole legion of angels working under him. Azrael was one of them. So was Gabriel.”

Russ considered the words. “Angels, huh? So what kind was Azrael?”

Gabriel took a deep breath, and his voice sounded subdued. “The angel of death.”

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That morning had been considerably less sexy than the previous morning and, as the weeks went by, became somewhat of a norm. Not that Russ minded. There was something to be said about waking up in a cocoon of warmth, tucked securely against a gorgeous man. Russ enjoyed touching and being touched—it was one of the reasons why he found it so difficult to keep his hands to himself when Gabriel was around. So when he was allowed to do so to his heart’s content, it was heaven.

Russ went to Gabriel’s house after his matches, even if the man didn’t come to watch him fight. He’d bang on the door two times and wait for him to come out with an annoyed glare and a raised brow. He’d grin and show off his bruises and his prize money, and Gabriel would mutter curses under his breath before he opened the door to let him inside. While Russ powered on the console and picked a movie, Gabriel would take a look at his injuries and patch him up before he went to make dinner, usually pasta.

When Gabriel fought, he’d tag along, and when the match ended, he’d go back to the house with him. Gabriel preferred not to talk much, so Russ filled in the silences: with stories from his past, about Sheila’s studies, how he met Neil and AJ, his first fight and feeling thrilled about how he could properly provide for his family now that he made enough money.

Sometimes they went to the bar with Keiser, and sometimes they went grocery shopping together. When Russ saw Gabriel use his chip for the first time, he’d been blown away. People in the Ninth District didn’t have chips. Hell, half the people in the Ninth didn’t even exist in the databases. He’d asked Gabriel about it and wasn’t surprised when he didn’t receive an answer.

He shook himself out of his thoughts as he stepped up to the wooden door that was becoming very familiar to him. Two knocks, a pause, and then Gabriel was opening the door with his raised eyebrow. Only now he smirked and didn’t glare.

“Come to eat me out of my house?”

Russ laughed and walked inside, playfully bumping shoulders as he went. “You know, if you don’t like me eating your food, then you shouldn’t cook me stuff.”

“You’ll just eat everything raw, then, or cook it yourself.”

“That’s true.” He laughed, and handed over the bottles of liquor he’d bought. “The good stuff. I got Keis to bring me these.”

The minute the bottles were safely in the kitchen cabinet, Russ pounced on Gabriel.

Gabriel put up a token protest: a glare, an eye roll, a fearsome eyebrow furrow, and a few muttered curses combined with an exasperated “Why are you always so horny?” drawn out between kisses. He didn’t protest at all when Russ dropped to his knees and yanked his pants down.

A few minutes later found Russ on his back on the sofa with Gabriel on top of him, fucking him with slow, sensuous thrusts. He scrambled to haul the man closer, straining his neck upward to catch a kiss. He loved Gabriel’s lips: they were pillowy and warm and a pleasure to nibble on. When he finally managed to get to them, Gabriel teased him with little nipping kisses that were the opposite of what he wanted.

“Stop that and give me a real kiss!” he demanded, shoving a hand into Gabriel’s thick, black hair to pull him down and keep him there.

Gabriel chuckled and indulged him, bending close so Russ didn’t strain his neck. He made an appreciative noise when Russ’s tongue nudged his lips in a request. When Gabriel parted his lips, Russ sucked on his upper lip before sealing their lips together.

They pulled away to get some breaths into their burning lungs, and Russ placed a quick kiss on Gabriel’s nose. Gabriel looked stunned for a moment before he smiled, wrapping a big, callused palm around Russ’s shaft and pumping.

Russ flexed his hips as well as he could with Gabriel pinning them down. “Oh yeah, faster!”

Gabriel chuckled and began moving his hand faster, his own rhythm relentless as he took the both of them toward orgasm. “Always so demanding.”



Russ grinned and reached out to hold the back of Gabriel's neck. Their breaths became ragged and their hips stilled against each other as Russ came with a hoarse moan, and Gabriel followed with a curse he muffled in Russ's shoulder.

Russ shifted a little, and Gabriel got the hint to move. As he settled next to him, Russ turned and snuggled into his chest.

He was silent as he contemplated the night ahead of him. As much as he would have loved to spend the night right where he was, he had another appointment to keep at ten o'clock. He'd had two hours to soak up all the good things about being with Gabriel before he had to go back to that hellhole. Maybe when he retreated to that little box in his head, he could take a piece of this memory along with him.

"Say," he began, drawing random patterns on the broad, clothed chest below him. "How come you never take off your shirt when we screw? Even in the fights, you always have a shirt on, or you have bandages covering up your arm. Why is that?"

"It's something I'd rather not let anyone see," Gabriel said. The vibrations rumbled pleasantly along Russ's naked skin.

"Show me," he said, sitting up a little so he could look down and see the eyebrows react to his demand.

As expected, they furrowed deeply above a pair of brilliant green eyes. Russ was reminded of caterpillars. "I just told you I don't like people seeing it."

"But I'm not 'people,' am I? Come on. Show me. I can keep a secret." Russ smiled.

There was a great sigh, and then Gabriel was shifting so he could remove his T-shirt. Russ gawped as bronzed skin and sculpted chest muscles were revealed, along with a pair of bulging arms, detailed ink work on the left bicep.

"Wow," he breathed, running his hand over the edge of the black ink. At first glance, it simply looked like a line of trees that went all the way around his arm growing on what vaguely looked like the cemeteries that used to exist before the reforms. But when he actually *looked* at it, it was clear that the canopy of the trees were made from a series of small squares instead of leaves. Almost like the quick identifier codes on groceries and ID cards.

The realization had him looking to Gabriel for an explanation.

“Yeah, it’s an ID tattoo.”

“But you already have a chip. Then why would you... Oh.”

Gabriel huffed, pulling his shirt back on now that Russ’s curiosity had been satisfied. “Yeah. I was in prison for a while. Got out only a few months ago.”

Russ still stared at the sleeve-covered arm and wished he could see through the cloth. “That whole thing was your ID?”

Gabriel settled back down. “No. It’s actually only a two-by-two inch square. I got the rest put around it so that it wouldn’t be obvious.”

Russ hummed. “I spent a couple nights in the lockup when I got caught trying to nick a purse.” He smirked. “Is it like they say in the stories? Prison?”

“Depends on what *they* say. I mostly thought it was monotonous and irritating.”

Russ cast a surprised glance at Gabriel.

Gabriel shrugged. “It’s true. The same things day after day: the routine, the awful goop they call food, the politics between the inmates. All of it is just really annoying. But I guess it was good for me, in a way.”

“Good how?”

“I wasn’t like this back then,” Gabriel said very softly. “I had a vicious temper, which was why I was in there in the first place. I was... it was a really horrible time. I was volatile and furious at the whole world.”

Russ tentatively tucked his head under Gabriel’s chin, and Gabriel’s big hand immediately rose to play with the shell of Russ’s ear. Russ remained silent as Gabriel fiddled with his earlobe and gathered his thoughts.

“There used to be a few volunteers who visited and taught classes each week, so I had some stuff to keep me busy and out of fights. There was even a therapist who came once a week, and we worked on my anger. I had the time to sort through my thoughts and come to terms with things. I trained every day, and I read a lot, especially toward the end of my sentence. It helped calm me down. It was... all right, I guess.”

“Oh. That actually sounds pretty comfy, you know. Regular meals, the opportunity to learn, all the time in the world with nothing to worry about...”

“You wouldn’t say that if you actually had to be there. Convicts aren’t exactly a friendly bunch, and they’re not above taking what they want by force.”

It's a man-eat-man world in there, and a pretty face like yours would be done for the moment you set foot inside."

"You think I'm pretty?" Russ asked, leaning over the other man with a flirty smile on his face.

Both eyebrows rose in wonder. "Unbelievable."

Russ laughed and lay back down. "You know it! So when are you serving dinner?"

Gabriel huffed but he got up anyway. "In a hurry today, aren't you?"

"I have some place to be later on."

"Oh?"

"Yeah." Russ stood and followed the man to the kitchen, intent on being underfoot at all times. He liked the way Gabriel bitched at him. It was obvious to him that the man didn't really mind it, but he protested just because it had become a habit by now. And he felt disappointed whenever he had to spend a day without translating eyebrow-code or hearing that rough voice go "*For god's sake, you ingrate, stop drinking all my liquor!*"

As he poked around in the kitchen and stole tastes from the pot of curry on the stove—and got rapped on the knuckles with a wooden spatula—he contemplated skipping out on his appointment and just staying with Gabriel in his comfy bed.

It wasn't like those people knew he was staying with Gabriel. They couldn't come after him. If they didn't know where he lived, he could get both his sister and his mother out of the country in one night, if he'd made preparations before. Sheila might have to take her exams again, but it would be a small sacrifice if it meant that she would be safe from people like the warden. He would be safe too; he wouldn't have to put up with shit just because he didn't have a choice. He had some money saved up, and with a fresh start, he could even start doing respectable, legal work to support his family. He could handle his finances without feeling the shudder of disgust that ran through him every time he touched the money he got in the clubs.

He could earn his money without completely degrading himself to the level of pond scum. He had to say that sounded pretty damn tempting.

But like all temptations, it was out of his reach. For one, his mother was too fragile for such a move. And two, the minute he began asking around, preparing

passports and documents, they'd be onto him. Even if he managed to get away, he'd be living the life of a hunted man. That automatically meant his family would be hunted too. And what could he say when his mother or Sheila asked him just *why* they had to run?

It was hopeless.

Gabriel handed him two plates with generous helpings of curry and rice. "Go sit and choose a movie. I'll bring the beer."

"No beer."

A solitary eyebrow raised itself in question.

"I just don't want any."

Gabriel shrugged and picked up a beer and a water.

Russ found himself checking the time every few minutes. As the time passed, he found himself getting more and more jittery. His earlier thoughts left him frustrated and angry. He could fantasize all he wanted, but he was never getting free. Even if he got around to confessing his mess-up to his mother, the warden would definitely not let him get away. And when he was caught—because he would be caught; it was inevitable—he'd be lucky to get away with his life.

The realization hit him like a sledgehammer. He was well and truly fucked.

"Oi, brat, at least finish your food before you freak out."

"Don't call me that!" The plate clattered on the coffee table, and some of the rice spilled. The curry looked like blood. "Don't fucking call me that!"

Gabriel put down his own plate carefully, a concerned look in his eyes. It was the first time Russ had seen that expression. "Russ. Calm down."

"I'm not a brat!" he railed, pacing across the small living room, tugging on his hair. "Stop calling me that!"

This was defeating the entire purpose of his visit. He was supposed to be leaving here calm and collected, so he could face whatever the warden had for him. It always worked better for him when he was apathetic to whatever happened. If the warden spotted his terror, his sheer hopelessness, he would exploit it till there was nothing left to torture.

Gabriel rose and tried to pull him closer, but he slipped out of the man's reach. "Russ, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—Look, just sit down, all right? Come

here.” Gabriel opened his arms, inviting him closer. It was so un-Gabriel-like that it was jarring.

“I have to go.”

“Russ, what—”

“I should go. Good-bye.”

Russ fled from the house before he could do anything completely stupid like accepting the invitation and forgetting his appointment.

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## Chapter 6

It was a while before Gabriel saw Russ again. The man didn't even come to the gym, and he didn't know if Russ was actively trying to avoid him or had been caught up with something at home.

He thought of how he'd called Russ a brat that night, and the unexpected reaction he'd gotten. It wasn't the worst thing to be called as far as nicknames or insults went. Some people even considered it a term of endearment. Over the past few weeks, that was how *he* was beginning to consider it. The word encompassed Russ so neatly—he was mouthy, impulsive, and had problems with authority—and while those traits drove everyone crazy, it was also somewhat endearing. At least, to him it was.

A spoiled kitten, he mused. Zach had fostered a kitten for a while, till someone adopted it. It had wreaked havoc on the carpets and the furniture, and even his homework at one point, but Zach had adored the furry terrorist in spite of it. It was difficult to be upset at something that looked so adorable.

That probably said way too much about how he felt about Russ.

And this was why he never mixed alcohol and thinking. He was stupid for forgetting that. At least this time he hadn't dredged up any other memories. It was a small consolation.

As he put away the tumbler and the bottle of whiskey, he wondered about Zach. Russ's near constant presence had pushed thoughts of his family to the back of his mind, but now that he wasn't there, everything came back. He had been contemplating calling Zach up to talk to him, to hear his voice again after his self-imposed penance. He had to apologize for the deliberate radio silence. He had to apologize for a lot of things, but the nine years of avoidance was a good place to start.

He settled himself on his bed and pulled the covers over his head. It was nice not having to fight for the covers, and it was nicer to not have bony elbows poking at his ribs, even if he missed the funny little snuffling noises Russ made whenever he shifted in his sleep. The minute he closed his eyes, he was fast asleep.

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After a solid ten hours of alcohol-fueled sleep, Gabriel woke up only slightly groggy. He figured he'd get his shopping done before he headed to the gym for his workout.

He had to buy a little more than what he used to, since the two of them went through their food faster. He also brought a larger variety of ingredients so he could make something apart from the pasta he usually prepared.

He was in the dairy section contemplating what kind of cheese to buy when someone tapped on his shoulder.

He turned with his scowl in place, only to smile slightly when he saw Sheila, basket in hand.

“Hi!” She smiled. “Can you get me a bottle of milk, please?”

He handed it to her. “Here. You need anything else?”

“Nope, that’s it, thanks.” She fell into place beside him as he walked toward the produce section, silent.

She looked tired and had dark rings under her eyes. She was smiling, but it looked like it took her a lot of effort.

“Studying hard for your exams, I see.”

It took her a second to process that he was talking to her. “Yeah, but it’s not just that. Things are really difficult at home right now, and I guess it’s just too much stress to handle at one time.”

He nodded. “How is your brother? I haven’t seen him around in a while.” And the last time he’d seen him had been an almighty fuckup.

“Russ likes to pretend that he’s okay.” She sighed. “And I pretend like I believe him. But he isn’t okay at all. He ended up getting pretty badly hurt in his last fight, so he can’t even participate in any fights till his shoulder and his other injuries heal properly. We have some money saved up, but without what he gets in the fights, we can’t get the meds Mom needs. And it looks like she’s getting worse all the time...” She rubbed the back of her neck. “Sorry. You don’t want to know all our family drama and stuff. I just don’t know when to stop sometimes.”

“No apologies necessary,” he murmured, his mind focused on the “injuries” the girl had mentioned. Russ hadn’t had a fight in the past week. He knew that for a fact. He also knew that in Russ’s last fight, nine days ago, the only injury he’d sustained was a busted lip. “What happened to his shoulder?”

“Dislocated. Keiser made him see a doctor before he came home, thank god. Knowing my brother, he would have tried to pass it off and take care of it himself to save money.”

Nothing added up. Keiser would have mentioned such a thing to him when he'd asked about Russ, wouldn't he? Unless Russ had asked him not to. It was a possibility. "This happened last Wednesday, did it?"

"Yeah. Keiser brought him home early Thursday morning, half-delirious on pain meds. I was so worried."

"If you need money, I can help. There's no need for Russ to overwork himself."

Sheila shook her head. "That's very kind of you, but I have to refuse. We'll get through it somehow. We always manage."

At the checkout, Sheila managed to make the payment before he could offer to. He bagged and paid for his own things silently.

When he was done, they walked together, the girl filling up the air with chatter about how her test preparations were coming along.

"This is where I head off," he interrupted her, cocking his chin to a side street.

She nodded. "Oh. I'll see you around, I guess?"

"Yes." He paused. "I meant it, Sheila. If you have need for anything, anything at all, just ask. I'll help any way I can. All right? And tell Russ that he's an idiot for getting hurt."

She giggled and gave him a playful salute. "Will do. Bye!"

When he finally reached his house, he was surprised to see a hoverbike on the pavement in front of the house. It was a thing of beauty: gleaming chrome and lines of dull green which would glow brightly when the machine was powered on. Leaving it out like this was asking for something bad to happen to it.

There was a man sitting at the top of the stairs, face hidden by a mop of jet-black hair, a neon green helmet next to him. Gabriel stood at the landing, trying to place why he looked so familiar.

The man raised his head then, pinning him in place with eyes as green as his own. In what felt like the first time in years, he felt a tidal wave of apprehension and shock.

The man stood and smiled down at him. "Hey hey, big bro."



Russ was getting sick and tired of staying cooped up in the house when he should have been training for his next fight. Even after a week his shoulder throbbed, and his back felt like someone had used it for a trampoline. At least the bruises around his wrists and ankles had faded so he wouldn't have to wear those awful sweat bands to cover them up.

He stood at the stove, preparing pasta sauce the way Gabriel made it. Hopefully it would come out well.

He was itching to see the man again. Keiser had dropped by two days ago to check up on him and make sure that he was resting his shoulder like he was supposed to. He also let it slip that Gabriel had been asking about him. He hadn't been worried, apparently, just curious.

He'd totally flipped his shit about the whole "brat" thing. It was something he was not going to apologize about, because there was nothing in the world he hated more than that word. Hearing Gabriel call him that had torn him apart, even if he knew that the man hadn't meant anything by it. Anyway, he needed to go and explain that it was not okay for anyone to call him that.

Plating up the food, he set it on the counter before he slipped into the bathroom to disinfect his hands and wear a mask and gloves. Once that was done, he retrieved the plate and a fork and headed to his mother's room.

She was lying on the bed with her eyes closed, her breathing soft. The mask she wore moved slightly with every breath. She looked like she was made of spun glass. He made his own breathing softer, genuinely scared that if he breathed the wrong way, she would break.

"Hey, Mom," he murmured, tiptoeing across the room to sit down on the chair next to the bed. "I brought lunch. Wake up," he whispered, lightly pressing his index finger on her shoulder.

She blinked twice before she turned to face him, her light brown eyes crinkling at the corners, giving away the smile that the mask covered, before coughing lightly.

He frowned at that. "I made pasta," he whispered, holding the plate higher and closer. "It's Gabriel's recipe."

"That's nice," she whispered, and in the same tone, continued: "Why are we whispering?"

Both of them chuckled at that, Russ a little louder than his mother. "Ha, sorry. Sometimes I feel scared to make any noise in this room, you know." He hadn't meant for it to come out so emotional, but it did.

Her face crumpled and she raised a frail hand to cup his cheek. “Oh, sweetie. I’m sorry.”

“Hey, why are you apologizing?” He grinned, even if she couldn’t see it. He hated the fact that he had to wear a mask, he really did.

His mother just shook her head sadly before she reached for her plate. He handed it over obediently.

“How is your shoulder?” she asked, looking at him with a critical eye. “Should you be cooking and doing chores when you aren’t fully recovered?”

“It’s fiine, Mom. You think handling a crummy spatula will sprain it? Some nurse you are,” he scoffed playfully. “And besides,” he continued before his mother could start off on a lecture, “Sheila needs every minute she can get to prep for the test. The scores she needs to get for the scholarship are impossible.”

“She’ll get it.” She smiled. “I’m so proud of her. And you, too. Even if you’re both stubborn as mules, just like your father.”

“It’s not being stubborn. It’s just determination, willfulness, you know. Anyway, isn’t this a case of the pot calling the kettle black?” Russ laughed softly, walking around the room and straightening things as much as his shoulder allowed him to. Thank god for the emergency medic the club employed, or he would have been in serious shit that night.

She coughed again. “So when are you planning on letting me meet this Gabriel boy you’re spending all your time with?” she asked.

He turned and made a face at her. “Mom, he’s older than I am, and it’s super weird to refer to him as ‘boy.’ Why are you asking anyway?”

“I just wanted to meet the person you’re so hung up on.” She grinned. “And besides, I want to make sure you’ll be in good hands after I’m gone. The way this cough is getting...”

“Mom! You take that back right now!”

“Russ...”

He shook his head vehemently, hands curled into fists. “You’re gonna be alive a long time. We’re going to get that trial drug and it will work, and the only hands I’ll be in will be yours. You got that?”

She held her hand out for him to take, so he did, in both of his. He squeezed carefully, bringing it to his neck so she could stroke his jaw with her thumb, just like when he was smaller and upset with something.

They stayed like that for a while until she started coughing again; horrible, hacking coughs that shook her so hard the plate slipped from her lap. He quickly caught it and the fork before they could hit the floor. Moving closer, he started rubbing her back, muttering soothing words. By the time the coughing passed, she was breathing heavily and completely exhausted.

He helped her lay back down and pulled the covers over her, fussing over little details. Her eyes crinkled at the edges, but Russ could tell it was from the pain and not because she was smiling. It looked so out of place on her that he felt it like a slap to his face.

“Good night, sweetie,” she murmured, her voice scratchy from the coughing.

“Night, Mom,” he said softly and hightailed it out of the room before he started sobbing right there.

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Russ’d been very subdued the rest of the day, sitting on their worn, comfy sofa with his mother’s hospital records, a notepad, and a half-chewed pen. He had to take her to the hospital again, soon. The episode she had earlier had been pretty intense, worse than it had been yesterday. He had an ominous feeling that it would only go downhill from there.

Since he couldn’t return to the gym for another week at least, he thought it would be best to use his downtime to get some things sorted out. First, his mother’s trip to the hospital. He could take her tomorrow. Weekdays were always less rushed than the weekends at the hospital. Since Sheila had study holidays, she would be able to make it too, which was a good thing. She was much better at understanding all the detailed explanations and asking the questions that wouldn’t even have occurred to him.

He called up the hovercab service they usually used and arranged their ride to and from the hospital. After that, he sorted out their finances: the rent, the electricity, the water, the meds. Thankfully, the cab fare didn’t damage his budget too much. He would have to be a bit stingier with the groceries, but he figured it was a better alternative to dipping into his savings.

He was puttering about the kitchen when Sheila came back from her grocery run.

“Guess who I ran into at the store again!”

He rolled his eyes at her enthusiasm. It was nice to know that some things remained constant, even if nothing else did. “Was it the mayor of the city? Did he introduce you to his cute daughter as well?”

“Ha, as if those upper district elites would even come all the way down here,” she scoffed. “I met your boyfriend, of course.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” he protested. “I just go to his place all the time for food and movies. Though sometimes the cuddles are nice too, and the sex is—”

“Whoaa okay, I did not need to know that, thank you very much.” She made a show of shuddering in disgust before she started putting things away. “Seriously, big bro, I love that you’re so open and everything, but there are some things you just don’t discuss with your baby sister.”

He snorted at her. “Right. You were saying something about Gabriel?”

“Hm? Oh yeah, he asked about you. He didn’t seem to know you got hurt in a fight, though.”

He froze in place.

She continued, not noticing his increasing panic. “So I told him that you were pretty banged up, and that you’re recovering well. He also said that we could ask him if we ever needed help, but I said no.” She grinned at him. “He also said that you were an idiot for getting hurt, with a really scowly face. His eyebrows were all scrunched up together. You were right. They do look like fuzzy caterpillars.”

He laughed at that, and the tension drained away. His sister hadn’t found out that he’d lied about the fight. And Gabriel was worried about him. That was always nice to hear. “You didn’t let him pay for the stuff again, did you?”

“Nope. It makes me wonder though; he’s got to be pretty loaded, right? I mean, he’s got a chip and everything. And he always buys the most expensive brand of coffee and cereal. And he even has a console with an info-net connection?” She turned to him, and he saw the question in her eyes. “If he has so much money, why is he here, in the Ninth? And in the fights, too. I mean, I don’t think he needs the money.”

“Who knows? He probably has reasons,” he said, thinking back to the ID tattoo on his arm and the scar underneath Gabriel’s eye. “It’s not our business to judge anyone for their choices. And being nosy isn’t nice.”

Sheila seemed chastised at that and slunk away to her studying. But she had raised a lot of questions in his mind.

Gabriel didn't fit in District Nine: It was in the way he spoke, it was in the way he carried himself. He was... posh was a good way of saying it. The man didn't even say "fuck" unless he was half-gone on lust! He'd probably been someone important in the upper districts, or at least he had been before he went to prison. He didn't know what he went to prison for, but he had a feeling it wasn't pretty. At least, it had made him want to choose a name like Azrael for himself.

He wondered what the man thought of the people, the life in the lower districts, and his offers to help Russ out. He hadn't said it out loud, but it was clear what was being implied: If you want money, I can give it to you.

And boy, it was tempting to give in. He wouldn't have to go into the godforsaken lounge anymore. He'd be able to rip that contract into tiny bits and throw it at their faces. He'd retaliate the next time the warden hit him, show him he was a docile little plaything only because he chose to be. He'd let the man get a taste of his own medicine, see how he liked to be left bleeding and incoherent with pain.

But he couldn't, could he? If he asked Gabriel, he'd be indebted to him. It was a position that left him open to be exploited. Even if he knew that Gabriel wouldn't have any sinister motivations for offering to help, he had it hammered into his head early in life that, except for family, everything came at a price. Charity was a concept that existed only as a cover.

Never owe anyone anything. It was his mantra, and he planned on following it to his dying breath.

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## Chapter 7

Gabriel felt like he'd been stomped on the chest. There was no other way to describe it. It took him effort to move his feet, and he released the breath he was holding only when he had joined his brother in front of the door.

Zach had gotten taller, a little more muscular, and his hair was a little longer than how he used to wear it. But his face was still the same as it always had been, with green eyes and high cheekbones just like his own, but rounder, a little softer than his. Elegant, like their mother.

"Zach," he croaked, fingers digging into the bag he was holding. His little brother was here, in the flesh, and he felt like he was going to throw up.

"Yup, that's right." Zach grinned, though it was tight, and the hurt in his eyes was clearly visible. "You remembered, yay."

That stung. "Of course I remembered, Zach. Why would you even—? Look, let's go inside, alright?"

Zach bent to retrieve his helmet and followed him inside. He paused for a moment, taking it in. Gabriel dumped the bags in the kitchen.

When he came back, Zach was standing in front of the door, looking lost.

"Why, Bree?"

Gabriel sighed, not even able to muster up a "Don't call me that" in response to the awful shortening of his name. He thought he could put off the questions until later, but it looked like Zach had other plans. "Come here," he said instead, patting the space beside him on the couch.

The boy hesitated for a moment before he moved to sit all the way at the other end of the couch. "Do you hate me? Is that why you didn't want to have anything to do with me?"

Each moment twisted him up more. "Of course not, Zach. You think I'm capable of hating my only baby brother?"

"Well, you sure were capable of ignoring me like I didn't exist!" Zach snapped, his hands fisted on his lap. "I know it's my fault Pearce died, but I thought you'd at least talk to me, and give me a chance to apologize for it! But no, you completely refused to even let me look at your face!"

"Zach, it wasn't your fault at all—"

“Then *why?*” he cried, launching himself off the couch to pace tightly in front of it. “*Nine* years, Gabriel! *Nine* years, and not a single word. I know Michael told you I wanted to see you. I also know you turned down every visit I requested. If it wasn’t my fault, why the fuck did you avoid me like that? Like I had the plague, like—”

“*I was ashamed, okay?*” he yelled, rising to his feet so he towered over Zach, the tail end of his words echoing in the sudden silence.

Zach lurched to a stop, horror on his features. “Wh—huh?”

“When Mom and Dad died, I made a promise to myself, that I’d always protect you no matter what. When Pearce entered the picture, you adored him like he was a second big brother, and I realized I was actually in love with him, and he became just as important to me as you were. I was so crazy about him.” He chuckled humorlessly, scrubbing a hand over his face. “When the alarm went off that day, you called me first, even before you called the emergency services. You trusted that I would take care of everything, be calm and rational, and make everything okay just like I always did, like I was supposed to. Except I wasn’t calm, and I wasn’t rational, and nothing was okay, only because I fucked up. I fucked up, and I let you down, and we lost Pearce because I was too busy punching that guy’s face in instead of calling the ambulance. And I was ashamed. I was ashamed that I’d let my temper get in the way of things, so fucking scared that you’d lose all the respect you had for me, and that you’d hate me for losing Pearce, and for making our lives a public spectacle, and I didn’t want to see it, even if I knew I deserved it.”

Zach looked pained. “You think you fucked up? I was the one who called Pearce over! He wouldn’t have been there at all if it wasn’t for me!”

“It wasn’t your fault! Nothing about that night was your fault, Zach. Don’t ever think that. I’m just glad you were safe. If he’d gotten to you too...” He left it off, not even wanting to think about what would have happened. Losing one person had been hard enough. Losing both of them at the same time would have driven him insane.

“But you could have at least said something,” Zach said, his voice small and brittle. “I lost Pearce, and when they took you away, I lost you too. Michael was always kind to me, but he wasn’t you. I missed you so much, and you didn’t care about me at all. It hurt.”

Gabriel stepped forward to sweep his brother into a hug, and before long, he could feel the front of his shirt getting wet as Zach clung to him, afraid to let

go, and it was like he was fifteen again, with a five-year-old brother who didn't understand why his mom and dad were sleeping in boxes. "It's all right, Zach. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. You're my baby brother, and nothing will ever change that. Everything will be okay."

He kept repeating the words as he rubbed his hands over Zach's back, up and down in the way that always got him calm as a child. He was a lot bigger now, but it still had the same effect.

Zach sniffled one last time and pulled away, wiping his face on the back of his sleeve. Gabriel smiled. "That's disgusting."

"Shut up," he grumbled, but he was smiling too.

They sat a while in silence, Zach tucked under his arm, thinking back on the past and the third person that should have been there but wasn't.

"What happened to your face?" Zach asked after a while, pointing at the scar that ran just under his eye.

"Got it in prison," he shrugged, smirking when Zach's eyes widened. "It was the first and the last mark they managed to put on me."

"Show-off," Zach muttered, before he got up and began pulling at him too. "Give me food. I'm hungry."

"When are you not?" Gabriel laughed, before he let himself be pulled to his feet. Everything was okay.

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"So when are you coming back home?"

Gabriel turned to Zach with the spoon still in his mouth. He looked away before he pulled it out, chewed his mouthful of eggs, and swallowed. "What?"

"What 'what'? You gotta come back, you know. You can't stay here forever."

"What's stopping me?" he asked, coolly.

Zach gaped. "What's that supposed to mean? Your home is back where our place is, in the Second District. That's where you belong, with the rest of our family."

Gabriel looked at Zach, really looked at him, trying to be gentle yet firm. "I don't think that would be a good idea, Zach."

Just as expected, Zach's face crumpled. "Why not?"



“I went to prison for manslaughter, kiddo,” he said, using Pearce’s nickname for Zach. “I don’t think I’d be able to go back there, not without dragging up the past and starting the gossip mills again. And besides,” he spoke in the same soft tone, “I like it here. No one bothers me and I have a routine established. No one knows anything about me, and I like it that way.”

“You can’t *possibly* like it here! This is the Ninth freaking District! This place is a dump!”

The door opened in the middle of that sentence, and Gabriel tensed, ready to take on any intruder.

Russ stepped inside, a brace over one shoulder, closing the door behind him. “Hey, don’t mind me. Just wanted to tell you that there’s a hoverbike parked in the front that’s going to be stolen any moment now.” He looked right at Zach. “‘Cuz that’s how stuff happens in the lowest district. Robbers and whores and drugs everywhere.”

They both stared at the newcomer, Gabriel with confusion, and Zach with embarrassment.

“I really wasn’t kidding about the bike, you know,” Russ pressed, still deadpan. “You might want to park it somewhere it isn’t so obvious.”

Zach snapped out of it with a few low curses, rushing out of the house with his keys already in hand.

“How did you get in?” Gabriel asked, trying to see if Russ was injured anywhere besides his shoulder. The long-sleeved hoodie and the jeans didn’t reveal much.

“You didn’t lock your door.” He shrugged, then rubbed his shoulder, and then plopped down on the couch. “I’m guessing that’s your brother?”

Gabriel nodded. “Zachariel.”

“Another angel name?” Russ smirked at him, reaching for the plate he still had in his hand. He handed it over.

“Like I said. My mother and my aunt were crazy about the stuff.”

Russ stuck a spoonful of eggs in his mouth and smirked around the spoon as he sucked on it. “Yeah? Anyway, I came to talk to you about last week,” he said, his voice becoming more serious by the word.

“Good. I wanted to talk to you about last week too.”

Russ ignored it. "I don't like that name. Don't call me that ever again. I know you weren't trying to insult me, but just don't do it again."

He nodded. "I wasn't planning on it," he said. "How did you injure your shoulder?"

Russ tensed. "Sheila told you. It was at a fight."

"It wasn't a fight. You would have nagged me to come and watch if it had been one."

"It was a fight. Just not the one any of us usually go to."

"But Keiser does?"

Russ leveled him with a look, and he retaliated with a raised eyebrow.

"So you're going 'home' now?"

"This is home," Gabriel said, indicating the space around him.

"Your kid brother sure as hell doesn't seem to think so."

"That's right, I don't." Zach stepped into the room, arms crossed in front of his chest.

Russ got up and straightened his clothes with one hand. He and Zach stared at each other, sizing each other up.

Gabriel knew he should have ushered Russ out before he started speaking. Well, no use thinking about it now.

"Why? The lower districts too dirty for you and your upper-class sensibilities?"

"My brother is better than this. He doesn't need to be stuck in this hellhole, participating in stupid, illegal fights!"

"We participate in the fights because we enjoy it!" Russ shot back, his eyes flashing in fury for the first time since Gabriel had known him.

"Don't fucking lump my brother with people like you! You lower district scum are all the same! You don't care if it's murder or sex, as long as you get paid, you'd happily whore yourself out to—"

*"Enough!"*

Gabriel's voice ripped across the room, but it was already too late. Russ was striding toward the door, his jaw working as he yanked the door open and saw

himself out. Gabriel went after him, catching his uninjured shoulder before he could slam the door. “Russ—”

“Forget it!” Russ yelled, his voice rough, a sneer on his face. “You don’t want to waste your time with *lower district scum* like me. Go back home to your fucking higher district, with all the other high-class jerks. I never should have come here in the first place!” He wrenched himself out of his hold and flipped Gabriel the finger before turning and walking away, head held high.

And Gabriel let him, even if he knew he shouldn’t have.

He turned to Zach when he couldn’t see Russ any more, and Zach flinched. Gabriel didn’t feel sorry.

“The hell was that, Zach?”

Zach had the gall to look ashamed after what he’d said. “I...”

“How could you even speak like that? Is that the way you were raised? To judge people based on where they lived and how much money they had?”

“I work with the police, Gabriel,” Zach said, his voice small. “Every day I see reports on the violence, the drugs, everything. And I know a lot of it isn’t even reported. I’ve come across cases where people were murdered to get access to their bio-chips. People kidnapped for money and never seen again. Most of the crimes are committed by their hired help, most of whom are from District Seven and below.” He paused, and took a deep breath. “I just found you now. I didn’t want to lose you so soon. I was angry because you said you weren’t coming back, but... I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have said any of that.”

“Damn right.” Gabriel glared across the room at his brother, pissed beyond belief. “I understand why you did it, but that’s not going to keep me from being mad. You insulted him when you said those cruel things. I know that man, and let me tell you this, Zach, it was only because you’re my family that he left like that. Anyone else, he would have knocked their teeth out, and I might have let him.”

Zach nodded, his eyes downcast. Gabriel sighed. It was his own fault too. He should have defended Russ, denied the accusation that everyone in this place was the same. Sure, there were criminals, but there were also people like Sheila, and Keiser, and Russ, who took care of his family better than most rich people did.

“The reasons you mentioned before, about not coming home,” Zach murmured, “he’s one of them, isn’t he?”

“He is.” He said it with conviction, as if he’d known for a long time, but the realization had only struck him the minute Zach had asked.

Russ made this place feel like home.

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Russ had taken his mother to the doctor. They told him things he didn’t want to hear. She was getting worse. At this rate, she’d die before they got a chance to get her the trial drug.

The only thing they could do was shift her to the hospital so she could receive full-time care in a special ward.

He made all the arrangements with the hospital, so they could admit her right then. After they’d gotten their mother settled in, they got back, taking the hovercab instead of the train. Russ wasn’t in the mood to tolerate the crowds. Sheila couldn’t see past the tears in her eyes.

The driver gave them a sympathetic glance in the rearview mirror. Russ looked away. He didn’t need pity. He didn’t need anyone to look at him like that.

He paid the driver and quickly pulled Sheila upstairs, so the people in the diner couldn’t see her crying and come after him. He would probably explode if anyone talked to him now.

“Go pack Mom’s stuff,” he told her, nudging her into their mom’s bedroom. She went without protest.

He went to his bedroom, tore through all the places where he’d hidden money: The sock that was buried under his boxers, the tin of tobacco that had belonged to his father that stood next to a picture of him on the table, the envelope he’d shoved into a rip on the underside of his mattress. He dumped it all on his bed before he went to the kitchen and retrieved the cookie box he’d hidden in the corner of the topmost cabinet, behind all the plates and mugs. He added the contents of the box into the pile of notes on his bed.

He started counting. This was all the money he’d saved since his mom got sick four years ago. This was for Sheila to buy all the things she’d need that the scholarship didn’t cover, like clothes and books and other little knick-knacks that others would have, so she could be just like all those rich kids and no one would insult her for being a poor kid from the Ninth.

Thinking about rich kids made his blood boil. He thought about Zachariel, with his fancy hoverbike and his leather jacket, his perfectly manicured nails

and fashion model face. That jacket alone could have taken care of their grocery expenses for months. And that hoverbike? He could sell both his kidneys and still not have enough to buy it.

Where the fuck did he get off, talking about the Ninth like that? Sure, the crime was high, but that was only because the laws were unfair to anyone who didn't have the money. The rich exploited the poor, took away their options, so they could beat them down and make them stay there.

That asshole had been right on one part, though. He was a whore. Sure, he'd done it so he could keep his family in relative comfort, but that didn't change the fact that he'd sold sex for money and often used sex to curry favor.

The one thing that had stung the most was what he'd heard before he made his entrance. He'd been standing at the door a few minutes, listening to Gabriel telling his brother that the only reason he was staying in the Ninth was because he was ashamed of going back to the Second. He was afraid of what other people would think, afraid of their judgment. He might not behave like he hated the lower districts or like he thought all poor people were criminals, but in the end, he was just as upper-class as his brother.

He'd said he liked it here only because no one bothered him. Not because he had friends now, or not because...

Well, it wasn't his problem anyway. He'd probably be going back to the Second District anyway, to be closer to his family and shit. It wasn't like it was his problem.

Sure, maybe he'd miss those caterpillar eyebrows and the food and the conversations and the sex, but it wasn't like it could have lasted anyway, with Russ's contract with the devil himself.

He shook off his anger and started counting, making neat piles of money and putting them away in the cookie box. At the end of counting, he discovered that he had enough to keep his mother in the hospital for three weeks, including the medicine and everything else she'd need.

But the trial drug would arrive only after a month. What would he do for the extra week, and the time she needed to be in the hospital for the actual treatment?

He'd just had his appointment a week ago. He wouldn't be able to get more money until next month. He could always go and schedule one off contract, but he didn't want to. He didn't want to be at the lounge any more than he absolutely had to.

He'd have to pick up more fights, then. And he'd also have to do something about next month's rent and expenses after he wiped out all the money in the house.

He crumpled the notes in his hand and resisted the urge to scream. He put away everything neatly and shoved it under his bed, before collapsing on the mattress.

He woke up in the middle of the night when he felt his sister curl up beside him. He gathered her to his chest, petting her hair, and it wasn't long before she started crying again.

"I'm scared, Russ," she whimpered, and he choked, because he wanted to say "me too," but he couldn't.

He had to be the strong one, the one that took care of his family. Admitting his fears would make him weak, and a weak man could never protect what was precious to him.

"Don't cry, sweetie. Don't cry," he murmured, hugging her tight. "We'll get through this somehow. We always do."

She nodded, and she eventually dozed off right where she was. Russ stayed up longer, running her long blonde hair through his fingers, thinking.

They would get through this.

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"Boss, I need you to give me as many fights as you can."

Coach Sean looked at him with his calculating eyes, and Russ had to make an effort to not fidget. "Why is that, Raptor?"

He gritted his teeth, contemplating how to pull it off. If he came off as too desperate, the coach would demand a percentage of his earnings as referral fees. If he came off as too nonchalant, Sean wouldn't bother about it at all.

In the end, he decided to fuck it and tell the truth. "My mom is sick. I need the funds to pay her bills. I don't mind if you need a referral fee."

The coach shook his head. "The usual cuts are fine; I don't need extra. How much do you want? And by when?"

He rattled off a round figure that would cover the hospital expenses and their utility bills. "It would be great if I could get it by the end of next week?"

He could almost hear the man doing the math in his head. “You’ll need to get at least seven fights to get that, if they’re all predetermined ones. Less if it’s an open match and you win. Which do you prefer?”

“I don’t care,” he replied, because it was true. “Anything is fine.”

“You’ll have to borrow a few matches from the others.”

Keiser had told him he could have his, but AJ and Neil had need of money right now, and he wasn’t even going to ask the upper-class prick. “Keiser said he’d give me his. AJ and Neil can’t, and I don’t want Azrael’s.”

The coach gave him a quizzical look when he referred to Gabriel by his stage name. “That’s only five matches, including yours. And you won’t be earning enough to cover the amount you wanted. Azrael has three matches in the upcoming week. All of them open, and I know you can take them on easy. Why don’t you ask him?”

While Russ was surprised that *Coach Sean* was actually doing something without thinking of his own gain, he could not actually accept his well-meaning suggestion. “No, I don’t want to ask him for it.”

“I could ask if you want,” the coach pressed. “He wouldn’t mind. It’s not like he really needs the money anyway.”

Russ tried not to grimace. “Yeah, I’m sure. But no. Thanks.”

Coach Sean shrugged. “Your call. I thought you’d take the easier route to making money.”

He did that once. Never doing it again, thanks.

When he got out of the office, rolling his bad shoulder which he’d kept immobilized for almost a week, Gabriel was standing against the wall, complete with crossed arms, intense green eyes, and judgy eyebrows.

“What are you doing here, slumming it with us Ninth boys? Don’t you have a fancy Second District house and rich brother to get to?” He should have left things well alone and gone back home. His temper was shot to shit, and he really had to stop before he did something bad. And Gabriel standing there silently with his arm muscles bulging through his shirt and his broad shoulders wasn’t any help.

“Zach left this morning,” Gabriel said, taking a step closer to him. He stepped back. “And I don’t have anywhere to get to. This is where I live now.”

Another step forward, matched by another step back. “That would make you lower district scum too,” he said, not able to resist a little tug at the corner of his mouth.

“No.” Gabriel shook his head and took two more steps until Russ was boxed against the wall with the bigger man’s hands on either side of his head, caging him in. “Zach’s lived a very sheltered life. He really doesn’t know much about life outside the affluent districts. He doesn’t know anything about this place except what he sees in his work with the police, and none of it is good. And he sure as hell doesn’t know anything about life here. Sure, there are some people who deserve to be called scum, but not everyone. It’s unfair to lump everyone here in the same category.” He bent closer. “It’s unfair to put you in that category.”

Russ gave in to how the man always made him feel, putting his arms around those stupid shoulders and pulling Gabriel closer so he could hide his face in the man’s neck. Gabriel always smelled like coffee and the remnants of cologne. “Fuck, Gabe.”

“What were you talking to Sean about?”

Russ snorted humorlessly. Gabe had been pissed with the man ever since he’d been asked to throw a fight. He’d said no and had stormed off, saying something about it being beneath his dignity. The coach had always given him open fights since.

Dignity. Russ liked to think he still had it, but he wasn’t fooling himself. “I talked to him about giving me more fights.”

Gabe grumbled something unintelligible under his breath. “It’s your mother, isn’t it?”

Russ sighed. “Yeah. She’s in the hospital now. It’s getting worse.”

Some more grumbling, then silence, as if Gabriel was reaching a decision. “Take my fights.”

Russ pulled away, vehement. “No.”

The taller man pinned him to the wall by his shoulders. “Then I’ll get you the money.”

He shook his head. “No. I’m not accepting any charity from you. I don’t want your fights, or your damn money.”

Gabriel gritted his teeth like he was keeping in a roar. “It’s not charity. For god’s sake, you need the money. Your pride isn’t more important—”



Russ pushed him away, wild. “What? My pride is not important? You won’t deliberately lose because it’s beneath you, but if I refuse to accept your money, I’m being too fucking proud? You can have your dignity, but us poor lower-class people can’t? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth!”

“Fuck you!”

They just stood in the hallway, breathing heavily and glaring at each other. Russ scrubbed his hands over his face, not wanting to be the one who gave in, but still feeling too frustrated to keep up the staring contest.

“That wasn’t what I meant at all,” Gabriel said, reaching out and pulling his hands away. “I didn’t mean to offend. I simply wanted to let you know you had options if you want them.”

“Were you? ’Cuz it sure didn’t sound like that to me.”

“Doesn’t matter anyway. Wanna head to my place? There’s cake in my fridge.”

The mention of cake made his mouth water. It had been really long since he’d had any. But he couldn’t. “I thought you didn’t like sweets?”

Gabe shrugged. “I don’t.”

He said it so nonchalantly, as if he’d no idea he’d rocked Russ’s world. “You got it for me?”

The caterpillar brows scrunched together. “That’s what I implied, yes.”

His chest actually gave a little twinge. “Wow. That’s—Thanks. I really appreciate it.” He laughed nervously. He wanted to show the man just how much he appreciated it. Preferably on the bed, or in the shower. “But I can’t. Sheila’s alone at home.”

“Bring her to my place, then,” Gabe offered easily. “You guys can use my bedroom. I can take the couch. Or you can give her the bedroom and we can take the couch. I don’t mind.”

“That’s way too generous. I can’t.”

Gabriel cocked an eyebrow at him, smirking slightly. “Are you actually turning down an offer to live in my house and have round-the-clock access to the movies?”

Russ chuckled. “I’d be stuck with you all the time without being able to fuck you, and then I’d either go insane or end up doing something that might scar my sister for life. No thanks.”

Sex had always been about stress relief and casual intimacy. He loved the feeling of connecting with another person, even if it was only for physical release. But sex with Gabriel was a whole different experience. It wasn’t just physical. It was something... more. The man understood him and accommodated him in a way none of his previous lovers ever had, and never failed to completely wipe every worry he had from his brain. Even if it was only a few hours, it gave him some time where he didn’t have to think about anything, and just let someone else take care of it. He trusted that Gabriel would take care of him.

He wanted to have that right now, even if it made him an asshole because he wanted to forget that his mother was probably dying and his sister needed him to be there for her.

He pulled the bigger man to him and reached up for a kiss. Gabriel easily opened his mouth and let him take what he needed. The rough stubble rubbed against his smooth chin, and he smiled.

“Take that shit out of my gym!”

Gabriel pulled back to level a glare so venomous that the coach actually stepped back into his room without another word.

Turning back to Russ with a smug expression, Gabriel ignored the badly suppressed laughter that was threatening to explode any moment from his mouth, and bent to kiss him again.

Then Russ had to push him away after all, laughing so hard he was crying by the end of it.

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## Chapter 8

Russ was back in the gym, training for the first of his five matches. He needed two more, and Gabriel was working on convincing Russ to accept two of his. Gabriel sparred with him, putting him through his paces and making sure he didn't injure his shoulder again by accident.

Keiser and AJ were with them too. Keiser was telling them who the opponents would be, and their stats. The first fight was a closed one, which Russ was supposed to win.

They discussed different moves and roughly choreographed how the fight would go, how Russ could fight efficiently so he could conserve himself to get through all seven fights without burning out, or hurting himself too much.

"We should go get some drinks after we're done," AJ suggested. "Loosen up and relax before your fight tomorrow."

Gabriel was refusing before AJ could even finish. "No. He needs proper rest. Alcohol makes him horny, and he'll never get his sleep."

Russ shot him a lascivious grin. "You'd know all about that, wouldn't you? Anyway—" He sauntered up to Gabriel and fiddled with the collar of his shirt. "—I know a *lot* of other ways to relax without alcohol..."

Gabriel sighed and pushed him away with a hand on his head. His longer arms meant that Russ couldn't effectively retaliate in any way. "No. Go home and get some sleep."

"But whyyyyyy?" Russ whined, trying to pry his hand away from his head.

Before Gabriel could tell him exactly why, Sean stepped into the room.

"Raptor, there's a new fight scheduled. Fighter from the next city. It's closed, but if you take it, then you only need your own slots and one of Tank's."

It was AJ who spoke first. "That'd mean this one fight would pay more than four combined?"

Russ looked thoughtful. "When is it?"

"Saturday, next week."

Russ nodded. "I'll take it."

Gabriel felt something off about the whole thing. Who would pay four times the usual amount for one fight? “What’s so special about this one?”

Sean regarded him with no small amount of contempt. “The fighter is the best in his city. It’s his debut fight in our circle, so it’s an exhibition. The crowd will be big, since he’ll be bringing in traffic from his home arena as well. And Russ has his own fans. The bets will be big.”

It was Keiser who asked the most important question. “Who’s coming?”

Sean flicked his eyes between them. Something about his whole demeanor seemed off to Gabriel. “Juggernaut.”

AJ blanched, and Keiser frowned. “Impossible. He was banned a few months ago.”

Sean shrugged. “Well, he’s not banned now. Look, you have till the evening to give me an answer.”

Russ stepped forward. “I gave you my answer, Coach. I’m fighting.”

Sean simply turned and walked out of the room, tossing a “Give it more thought, and let me know” over his shoulder.

The minute he was out of the room, Keiser and AJ descended on Russ, but it was Gabriel who spoke first. “I don’t think you should take this fight.”

Russ whirled on him, expression severe. “I need the money. I’m taking it.”

“Don’t be an idiot, Russ. There’s obviously something Sean’s not telling you. Think about it. Why would they offer you so much for one fight? And a closed one at that?”

AJ stepped between the both of them before Russ could start arguing, his hands up, tone placating. “You can’t accept this fight, dude. Juggernaut’s a certified madman. You don’t want to fight him, trust me.”

Russ sighed and dropped his aggressive stance. “I’m taking the fight, guys. If I fight all the slots I have now, and take this one too, I’ll have some money left over for Sheila after the hospital is taken care of. I know you’re worried about me, but seriously, I can handle it.”

Keiser grabbed Russ by the shoulders and shook him once, the most perturbed Gabriel had ever seen him. “No you can’t, Russ. I know that guy. I’ve seen him fight. AJ’s right, he’s bloodthirsty and insane. He doesn’t fight up there; he fucking slaughters. That’s why he’s being brought to our circle, because he can’t fight in his home turf anymore.”

“Fucking hell, you guys! It’s a fucking closed match, not like I’ll have to keep fighting till I can’t. I’ll just take a few hits and throw in the towel. No harm done. Why the fuck are you freaking out about this, huh?”

“You know he fucking killed a guy in the ring, dude! That’s why he was banned. You should know this; it was all over the place when it happened!” AJ railed. “We aren’t ‘freaking out’ about this, man—we’re telling you to not be an idiot!”

Gabriel spoke up. “You’re agreeing to something dangerous, Russ. Listen to what Keiser and AJ are telling you. And I’m pretty sure Sean isn’t telling you everything there is to it. Think carefully before you make a foolish decision.”

“I know what I’m getting into.” Russ ran a hand through his hair and paced. “I know that I’m taking a risk. But guys, this is my choice. Thank you for your concern, you know I appreciate it, but I think I’m fine.”

Gabriel frowned, his protective instincts flaring. He’d ignored those instincts once. He’d never do it again. “It’s called being sensible, Russ. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I’ve been taking care of myself for a long time, Gabe. I didn’t need anyone to look after me then, and I don’t need it now. I need the money. This will get me the money. So I will take this fight. End of discussion. And don’t fucking offer me your matches, or your money, Gabe, ’cuz I won’t take them.” With that, Russ stalked out of the training room.

Keiser pinched the bridge of his nose. “He’s going to get himself killed.”

Gabriel forced himself to take deep breaths. “If they’re bringing this fighter back, it can’t be for anything good. And I’m pretty sure Sean knows it. How is his fighting style?”

“Violent, and messy. People who fight him once often don’t fight him again, or fight at all after he’s done with them.”

“I’m guessing this garnered huge crowds?”

AJ nodded again.

Gabriel considered the information. “Sean was lying about the bets, wasn’t he?”

Keiser shook his head, looking grim. “Everyone knows the outcome anyway. There would be no point in betting. They’re paying just to see the carnage.”

Gabriel had watched all five of the fights Russ had lined up in the past week and a half. Three were open fights, and Russ won all of them. He'd sustained injuries, mostly bruises, nothing major, but his shoulder was giving him trouble again.

Russ stood against the wall next to him, head down, massaging his shoulder. Gabriel gently pulled his hand away and replaced it with his own.

Something had changed in the last week. Russ had gotten quieter, hadn't smiled as much. News from the hospital hadn't been very promising. He trained every minute he could, swallowed whatever Gabriel or Keiser gave him to eat, and didn't sleep much.

Gabriel missed his old Russ, the one that laughed and chattered and poked him in his sleep with bony elbows and erections. "Please don't do this," he said, a last ditch effort.

"I'm doing it." Russ looked at him with steely determination in his eyes.

Gabriel sighed, but he gave the hurt shoulder one last pat before he withdrew. "Take it easy. Don't let him get you on the floor, and try to end this as soon as possible."

Russ nodded. Keiser and AJ came in, carrying water bottles and towels. Russ grabbed a bottle and drank a little.

"Russ, just let him get a couple of shots in, and don't get back up if you go down. Do you hear me? Don't make this longer than it must be." Keiser pulled Russ into a hug. "Be careful out there, all right?"

Russ pulled away and gave them a thumbs up and a cocky smile. AJ thumped him on the back and repeated what Keiser said, only with more force. He checked Russ's wrapped hands before he let him go.

The door to the ring opened, and they heard the announcer call out Juggernaut. The crowd was going wild.

Russ turned to Gabriel and caught him in a tight hug. "Gabe. Will you buy me cake after the fight?"

Gabriel squeezed him back. "Anything you want, sweetheart."

Russ looked surprised at the endearment, but the smile he gave him was brilliant.

"Open," Gabriel said, and Russ obediently parted his lips. Gabriel fitted his mouthguard in place and patted his cheek.

When the announcer called Raptor's name, Russ gave him a bright smile and turned to swagger his way to the ring, confident and sexy as if he were the king of the world. Gabriel wanted to pull him back and get him out of here.

Juggernaut was a mountain of a man, just a few inches short of seven feet. He had muscles on top of muscles and an evil sneer.

In the opposite corner, Russ looked fragile by comparison.

Gabriel was reminded of a story he'd read in one of his mother's books. About a giant named Goliath and a boy called David.

Except it wasn't Goliath who was going down in this version of the tale.

He only hoped that his David would be in one piece by the end of his ordeal.

When the referee asked the fighters to shake hands, Russ winced. That was the first sign that things weren't going to go well at all.

Gabriel could only guess, but it looked like the big asshole had done something to Russ's hand. When Russ took up a fighting stance, his right fist was loose, as if he couldn't close his hand properly. His left was fine.

When the bell went off, Juggernaut was all over Russ within minutes. A well-placed sweep had Russ off balance, and he was tackled to the ground. Gabriel felt his breath stop, and only start again when Russ managed to get away from being crushed underneath the bigger man. But he was limping. His specialty was speed and agility. With his shoulder giving him trouble and one leg out of commission, he was going to suffer.

"The fuck did he get back up? I told him to stay down! God damn it!" Keiser bellowed next to Gabriel.

All Gabriel could do was watch with growing horror as Russ was tackled to the ground again and flipped onto his stomach, his arm twisted awkwardly behind him. He itched to grab Russ, to get him safe and away from the pain. He was bleeding from his nose and looked disoriented. The count passed five, and no one did anything to stop the fight.

A hard yank, and Russ screamed as his arm popped right out of its socket. AJ whimpered next to him, and Keiser groaned. Gabriel thought he was going to be sick. Russ had tears running down his face, and Gabriel felt his heart constrict. The cries of the crowd had gotten louder, rowdier. He couldn't believe that they were actually cheering on as another human being got tortured in front of them.

He had to do something. Anything. He felt impotent, standing there and doing nothing while Russ was in the ring with a bloodthirsty madman. He should have tried harder to keep him from taking the fight. He should have tied the man up to his bed and faced Juggernaut himself.

He looked around for the referee and found him passively standing by the ring. He moved, vaguely aware of Keiser and AJ following him. All he could hear was the animal sound that tore out of Russ's mouth when his shoulder was dislocated. He yanked the referee around. "Stop the fight."

"Are you crazy? That psycho will rip me apart if I go up there!"

Russ had been flipped onto his back now and was being laid into. His cries of pain were drowned out by the crowd's screaming. Gabriel felt his blood start to boil, acute fury tearing through his veins. It was a siren's song, calling to him to forget his therapy and give himself to his rage.

A hard punch sent Russ's mouthguard flying, and the next punch made him cough up blood. The call became stronger, louder.

He hadn't made any promises to Russ, or himself. But he wanted to. He wanted to keep Russ safe and happy. Russ was his to protect. His little pest. *His.*

He'd failed before, but he wouldn't now.

"AJ, get the medic. Now!" he yelled over the noise of the crowd, and AJ was off before he could even finish.

He gave in to his wrath, let it fuel him and give him the strength to protect what was his.

With a roar, he jumped into the ring.

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Russ woke up feeling groggy and hurting everywhere. He could only see out of one eye.

Gabriel was at his side, gently stroking his hair. A cursory glance around the room told him that this was Gabriel's bedroom. How did he end up here? The last thing he remembered was fighting that psycho and... Oh. That's why he was here.

"Go back to sleep," Gabriel said.

Russ wanted to shake his head, but he had a feeling that he shouldn't. He opened his mouth to speak instead. "What happened?"



His words came out mangled and slurred, and he sounded hoarse. He tried to say something again, but Gabriel pressed a straw to his mouth.

“Drink. Don’t worry, I’ll tell you everything.”

Russ managed a slight nod and sucked down what was in the glass. It was cool water. He wanted to make a show of licking the straw, but he was just too tired for that shit.

*Who’d have thunk?*

He laid his head back on the pillow and looked expectantly at Gabriel. Gabriel placed the glass on the bedside table and sighed. “You remember being in the ring?”

Russ couldn’t stop himself from nodding. He hissed when it felt like an explosion in his head.

Gabriel placed his hand over Russ’s eyes. It was cool and soothing. Russ sighed in pleasure.

“You were down. I jumped in, and Keiser followed me. Sean and two others joined us, people we’ve fought before, I think. We got you out so the medic could patch you up, and we got you to the hospital. Brought you back here yesterday night, when they said you were okay to go. Neil’s girlfriend—”

“Jess?”

“Yes, her. She came by to check up on you this morning, and she says you’ll be fine with lots of rest and some medication. You’re apparently healing well.”

Russ blinked, and Gabriel moved his hand away, to cup his cheek instead. “Hospital?”

Gabriel nodded. “You were in bad shape. We got you to the one in District Seven because Jess is a nurse there. We told them you got mugged and we didn’t know who the assailants were. We also told them we didn’t want to lodge a complaint, though I think we should have. That bastard needs to be locked up.”

Russ managed a faint smile and leaned into Gabriel’s hand before he realized something. “How long have I been out?”

“Three days. And before you panic, Sheila’s at Jess’s place. She’s fine. She visited you yesterday at the hospital, but you were doped up on pain

medication. She's going to rip you a new one when she sees you again, I'm sure."

Russ frowned. "Did you pay for my treatment?"

"I did. You can pay me back later, or not at all."

Russ hummed. "I'll pay you back, of course. When can I start fighting again?"

Gabriel raised both eyebrows at him. "Definitely not anytime soon. Your shoulder's busted, your eye is bruised and swollen shut, you have a cracked rib and a twisted ankle, and you're bruised from head to toe. I'll tie you down if you try to get out of bed before the week is up."

"I don't like being restrained in bed, but if that's your kink..."

"Russ," Gabriel growled in warning.

"Okay, okay, I won't kid." Russ smiled placatingly before he turned serious. "So... Thanks a lot."

"What for?" Gabriel asked, confused.

"For jumping in and saving me. I really would have been a goner if you hadn't been there."

Gabriel waved it away. "There's nothing you have to thank me for. Just get better."

"So, you aren't going to give me that 'I told you so' crap? That's it? I'm not being lectured or anything?"

Gabriel smirked. "If you want a lecture, I'm sure I can give you one." Then his expression softened into something fonder. "I'm not going to say anything. It wasn't your fault—Sean didn't tell you anything about it. Apparently they told him Juggernaut had been reformed—and he believed them. He swore to me that he would never have let you go in otherwise." He scoffed. "It was a near thing that I didn't rip him to pieces right then and there when he told me."

Russ smiled. "I'm sure the coach was telling the truth. And anyway, did Keiser go and see my mother? He was supposed to go and make arrangements in case I couldn't."

Gabriel looked away.

"Gabe?" He tried again, feeling little tendrils of confusion crawling into his head.

Gabriel reached into a drawer on the bedside table and pulled out a huge wad of cash. He placed it on the bed, still not meeting his eyes.

Russ couldn't speak past the lump in his throat. He swallowed twice and tried again. "Why... Why are you giving me this?"

"It's your money, Russ. From the last fight."

Nothing made sense. Maybe Keiser had been unable to go? "I don't get it. Why are you giving this to me? Did you pay for my mom's treatment yourself?"

Gabriel shook his head, finally meeting his gaze. "They lost your mom the day before, Russ. We didn't need to make any payments."

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They lost his mom. *They lost his mom.*

Like she was some toy or some inanimate thing they'd misplaced and then forgotten. What the hell, lost? At least say she *died*.

Russ didn't know he was crying until he felt Gabriel's hands on his face, wiping away his tears.

His body shuddered, and pain racked through him, his rib protesting vehemently at being disturbed. Gabriel was right beside him, holding him gently and making shushing sounds, trying to get him to calm down. It wasn't working. At least he wasn't sobbing, or anything like that. He was just leaking water from his eyes. And the water wouldn't stop no matter how hard he squeezed his eyes shut. His nose hurt. His throat too.

"But—What about the trial drug? They were supposed to keep her alive till she got it! She was supposed to survive!"

It was frustrating to be in so much pain that he couldn't even reach out and punch something, or rip his hair out, or even sit up. He couldn't even take a deep breath.

It was so unfair. He'd tried so hard, but it hadn't been enough. And he'd left her to die alone in the hospital, only because he'd been so caught up in keeping his pride that he didn't want to borrow the money off Gabriel.

He hadn't even been able to say good-bye in the end. He hadn't been able to do anything, because he'd been unconscious and floating in a haze of drugs, while she'd probably coughed and coughed and struggled with the pain until her body couldn't take it anymore.

He closed his eyes and tried to turn his face away from Gabriel, needing to be alone. “Does... does Sheila know?”

Gabriel moved before Russ could hurt himself by jostling his body. “She does. She cried a lot, and then she just went silent. I thought I’d bring her here once you woke up—”

“Not today,” Russ bit out. “Maybe tomorrow or the day after, but not... not today.” He was so tired. So damn, *damn* tired.

“Okay.”

Even if he felt like his tongue wasn’t working, he managed to wrangle it to ask another question. “Funeral arrangements?”

“Keiser is taking care of it.”

He mumbled, not entirely satisfied, but not able to do anything else either. “M gonna sleep now.”

“All right.”

“I wanna be alone.”

Russ expected Gabriel to make some wisecrack about it being a first or something about kicking him out of his own bed, but he said nothing. Gabriel just adjusted his blankets, tucking him in like a little child. It made him feel wretched and useless. The worst was when Gabriel bent down and actually gave him a kiss on his head.

“Good night, Russ,” Gabriel said. Russ could feel his gaze lingering on him, and he wanted to curl into a little ball. But he couldn’t, because his body was a dozen kinds of fucked up and everything hurt.

Even when he heard the bedroom door close, he didn’t open his eyes. He just lay there in silence, mourning for his mother, his sister, his father, all their dreams of a happy future together, and all the things they wanted but could never have.

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## Chapter 9

Gabriel watched as Russ retreated away from the world, worse than how he'd been in the week before the fight. It seemed like with his mom's death, Russ didn't have a reason to do anything anymore.

The past week had been surreal. Russ had simply lain on his bed all the time, only making an effort to sit up during the times Sheila came by with Jess. After Jess fussed over Russ and changed his bandages, she left for work. Sheila stayed, and the siblings just sat together in silence, hands entwined. Sometimes Gabriel could hear Sheila crying through the closed bedroom door, but Russ was always silent.

The funeral had taken place in a crematorium in the Seventh District, once Russ had been well enough to stand without too much pain. It was still too early for him to be exerting himself, but he'd insisted, and no one had the heart to refuse. Especially not Gabriel.

It was a very small gathering. Russ and Sheila had stood together, Sheila hugging her brother's uninjured side and crying into his jacket while Russ simply stood there, staring as they placed his mother's body into the incinerator. Keiser, AJ, Neil, Jess, and even Sean had come, along with three middle-aged women and an old man.

Neighbors, Jess had told him. The women squeezed Sheila and spoke to her softly. Gabriel suspected they'd have done the same thing to Russ if he hadn't been injured. The old man patted Russ on his back gently before he left with the women.

They left the premises after Sheila picked out an urn and Gabriel paid for it.

Neil offered to take Jess and Sheila to Jess's apartment, since Gabriel didn't really have the space for her at his place.

Sean, Keiser, and AJ went their separate ways, and Russ and Gabriel took a cab back to Gabriel's house.

The minute they got inside, Russ went straight to the bedroom.

Gabriel helped him get out of the jacket and the shirt, and Russ shucked off his pants. He slipped into bed without a word.

As usual, Gabriel pulled the sheets over him and gave him a kiss on his head. But before he could leave, Russ reached out and caught his wrist.

“Back then, in the arena. You called me ‘sweetheart.’”

Gabriel nodded. “You don’t want me to say it?”

“No. It felt nice. I liked it.” He gazed up at him with soulful brown eyes. “No one’s ever called me stuff like that before. Except my mom, but she’s not around to do it anymore right? So maybe, you could call me stuff like that, occasionally?”

“Of course. You don’t need to ask me that.”

Russ nodded. Then he nodded again, as if he was convincing himself of something. “Sit with me. Let’s talk.”

Gabriel was quick to take the opportunity. “I’m here. Start talking.”

Russ squirmed and looked up at him. “What, like this? I can’t even see your face. Come closer.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes, but he moved anyway, stretching out and turning onto his side with his head propped up on his hand. Russ’s side neatly aligned to Gabriel’s front. “This better?”

He got a wan smile in response, but it was a start. “Tell me. When we work hard for something, and then in the end we don’t get what we wanted, it’s unfair, right?”

“It is. It’s not fair at all. But ultimately it isn’t about our lives being fair, or unfair. Things happen, no matter how much we try to change them. They may be good things, or bad. The only thing we can do is live with the aftereffects.”

Russ made a noise of protest. “But then what’s the point? If you never get what you want at all, no matter how hard you fight for it, then what’s the use in working for it? What’s the point in getting up every day, working, fighting, saving like a miser, and building elaborate castles in the sky, when you know that you’ll never get to live your dreams? What’s the point of struggling when you know it’s a wasted effort?”

Gabriel reached out and gently smoothed away the wrinkles that formed on Russ’s brow. “It’s called hope, sweetheart. We get up every day, and we struggle, because we’re hoping that today will be the day we get what we want. And when we don’t we just try again next time. There’s always something else to look forward to. If you don’t have anything like that, then find something that makes you want to put the past behind you and try again.”

Russ frowned, looking unsatisfied with what he heard. “What if the second thing fails to pay off too? What then?”

“You find a third thing, and you move on.”

Russ grabbed his hand and yanked it away from his face so he could glare at Gabriel. “That’s a fucking waste. Then you’ll be spending your whole life moving from one failure to another, and then you die. What sort of a pathetic existence is that?”

“At least the people you left behind will remember you as a fighter, and not as someone who gave up.”

That seemed to drain Russ’s temper for the moment. “Does it work?”

Gabriel furrowed his eyebrows. “Does what work?”

Russ sighed. “You know, the moving on thing. Can you really just find something else and start working for it from scratch?”

“It does work,” he said, putting every ounce of conviction he had into the words.

“How do you know?” Russ looked torn and weary, the need for reassurance shimmering in his eyes.

“Because that’s how I got through prison.” Gabriel gently combed out the slightly longer hair on the crown of Russ’s head, using the silence that passed between them to gather his thoughts, wondering if it was a good time to reveal why he’d gone to prison in the first place.

Russ caught his wrist again and squeezed gently. “Will you tell me?”

Gabriel nodded, amused at how Russ seemed to be able to read his mind. When Russ let go of his hand, he resumed his combing. “When Zach got to his third year of his higher secondaries, he got himself tangled up with the wrong sort, and because of that, his grades were affected. At this point, I was around twenty-seven, or so, and I’d quit the military after serving for five years—”

“That’s where you picked up your fighting style, isn’t it?”

Gabriel chuckled at Russ’s pleased expression. “That’s correct. Anyway, I had enough money to buy my own apartment a few blocks away from my aunt’s family, and Zach was living with me. I wasn’t very good at most school things, so I decided to get him a tutor to help him out with his studies. His name was Pearce.” A wistful smile tugged at his lips at the memory. “He was a wonderful person: kind, gentle, gorgeous. And a total brainiac too—he was doing his master’s program in a university in the Second. He was patient, and firm, but way too gullible, and he brought out every protective instinct I had.

Before I knew it, I was head over heels in love with him. Things were going great. I was going to ask him to marry me once he finished his education.”

Russ’s breath hitched. Gabriel smiled at him sadly and dropped his hand to toy with Russ’s earlobe instead. “Like I told you before, I had a really bad temper back then. There was this guy—he used to hang out with his buddies at the bus stop near my place. He didn’t do anything usually, but one day he tried to harass Pearce. Pearce usually took the bus back to his dorm after he was done tutoring, and that day he’d forgotten his notebook in my house so I went after him. I saw that bastard grab Pearce by his wrist and I lost it. I went a little wild there, and the police quickly arrived to break it up. That guy was arrested. And when he got back out, he wanted revenge.

“I didn’t even know he was after me, and I have no idea how he even managed to find my house, really. But when he did, it was Pearce he found. Zach had gone for a grocery run, and I was at my aunt’s place. Pearce usually didn’t come by on Tuesdays, but came that day because Zach had wanted to go over some things before his test. It was only when Zach called me about an intruder alert that I realized something was wrong. I drove over like a madman, but by the time I got there, it was too late.

“It was like I couldn’t even think straight, all that mattered to me was that Pearce had been hurt, and I’d failed to keep him safe. It just... It tipped me off into a murderous rage. By the time I came out of it, I’d killed the bastard who had hurt what was mine. Pearce died in my arms before the ambulance could get there.”

Gabriel blinked, a little surprised at how easily all of that had come out. Russ listened with wide eyes, eager to hear the rest.

“It destroyed me. When they charged me with manslaughter and put me in prison, I thought I was going to go insane. My world had ended. Pearce was gone, and Zach would live with our aunt. There was no reason for me to even survive, and there was nothing else left for me to do except self-destruct. One day a fight broke out. I thought it was the perfect opportunity to get myself killed, but the only thing it got me was this scar and a month’s worth of solitary confinement.” He pointed at the healed knife wound that ran under his eye. “It also got me a special appointment with a therapist, who managed to nag some sense into my head. It took a lot of effort, but I finally got there in the end.”

Russ was silent for a long time after he was done.

Gabriel turned to lie on his back, and for the first time since the fight, Russ cuddled into his side.



“You should probably go to sleep, Russ. It’s been a long day.”

Russ nodded, before he looked straight into Gabriel’s eyes. “Your new thing. I mean, you know, your new reason. It’s me right?”

Gabriel stared dumbfounded, until his amazement turned into laughter. “Unbelievable. Un-fucking-believable. Good god.”

“Gaaabe!”

Gabriel smothered the last of his laughter into his hands. “Yeah, it’s you. You happy? I don’t think you’d have let anyone else have that role anyway.”

“Damn right.” Russ huffed and snuggled closer until he was almost on top of him. “Now tell me some happy stuff.”

“You’re a pest,” Gabriel grouched, but he couldn’t stop his smile if he tried.

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After yesterday’s heartfelt talking, Russ was feeling more like himself. He had a good amount of money to last him and Sheila for a while, plus extra to put away in savings. It was strange to plan budgets without a section for “Meds.” When he put down a small amount of money under the “Mom’s birthday present” fund by habit, he thought he would shut down again, like he had in the first week after her death. But he didn’t.

He found himself planning for new things, all of them surrounding Sheila’s upcoming college career. He didn’t have any plans for himself, except that he’d probably move in with Gabriel and start looking for work elsewhere instead of fighting.

The only thing that really worried him were his appointments. He couldn’t explain vanishing one night of the month and returning with bruises and whip marks to Gabriel. He didn’t know how he could stay away without consequence, either.

“What a surprise! You’re actually sitting in front of the console without turning it on?”

Russ turned to see Gabriel step inside the house with a bag of groceries. “The console was tired.”

Gabriel simply shook his head and placed the bag in the kitchen before he joined him on the sofa. “You’re budgeting?”

Russ arranged the papers on the coffee table into a neat pile. “Yeah. It makes me feel like I don’t have to worry if I know exactly how the money is being managed.”

Gabriel nodded, smiling slightly.

He moved closer to cuddle against Gabriel’s side, thinking. His next appointment was next weekend. What was he going to do? What would Gabriel think if he told him that Zach had been right after all, that Russ sold himself out for money?

“Tell me what you’re thinking about.”

Russ hummed before he figured he’d just get on with it and deal with the fallout later. “When my dad died, he left a lot of debts to be paid. Mom paid them back as long as she worked, but after she got sick...”

“It was up to you to repay them.” Gabriel finished for him.

“Yeah. Except I barely made enough to support my family with fighting, and I didn’t have any money to pay the guy by the end of the month. So he offered me an alternative.” Russ took a deep breath. “He made an arrangement with me. I went to the pleasure lounge once a month, and they used a portion of my earnings to pay the debt, and I got the rest to take home.”

Gabriel growled under his breath.

Russ tried to hide the hurt in his voice by being louder than usual. “What, thinking you shoulda just gone back to the Second when you had a chance? Disappointed that I’m a whore after all?”

Gabriel snatched his chin around to face him. “You were cornered and forced into accepting whatever terms he gave you. Don’t you dare speak about yourself like that again.”

“So you’re not... you’re not mad at me, or ashamed of me?”

Gabriel must have seen the insecurity in his eyes, because all of a sudden he was hugging Russ like he was the most precious thing ever. “Russ, you did what you thought you had to do to take care of your family. How the hell could I be ashamed of you for that?”

“I could have done something else. I could have taken another job, to pay the money back. I didn’t have to accept what he said. I had a choice.”

“You probably had an illusion of choice, Russ. He would have had you by one way or the other, eventually.”

Russ considered that. “Yeah, I guess you’re right...”

Gabriel smiled at him. “So how much do you owe this douche bag? Once we pay him back he won’t have anything on you, right?”

The “we” set off a pleased warmth in Russ’s chest, but he couldn’t smile. “I wish. There’s a contract.”

The eyebrows furrowed severely. “A legal one?”

“It looked like it yeah. It says I’m supposed to work there for eight years. I’ve already finished four.”

“Eight years? That’s outrageous!”

Russ shrugged. “Probably ’cuz of the astronomical amounts of interest. I don’t know. I’m only telling you this ’cuz I’m going to meet that guy today. I’m going to tell him to keep all the money I earn—”

“No.” Gabriel glared. “No more. You’re not going anywhere near there.”

He chuckled. “That’s all great to fantasize about, but really, I have to go.”

“We can get that contract looked at. It’s illegal to force you to work there—it’s almost the same as keeping a slave. I won’t let you be abused like that.”

“And who’s gonna look at the damn contract, Gabe? Lawyers aren’t exactly sprouting like weeds in the lower districts, you know?”

Gabriel smirked. “You know the aunt I told you about? She has a son. Guess what he does.”

Russ groaned. “Another Second District family member? Gabe, they’ll hate me on sight! Zachy boy probably told them all about me already, they’re not even going to want to help me. Just let me do things my way—”

“The last time I let you do that, a psychotic ape nearly killed you in the ring.”

Russ sighed and sunk into the sofa. “Gabriel, you can’t use that to force me to do things your way. I got myself into this whole mess. I shouldn’t need anyone’s help to get out.”

Gabriel gently tucked a finger under his chin. Russ raised his head to look into solemn, dark green eyes. “I lost Pearce because it was too late by the time I got there. But it isn’t that way with you. I can help you out, Russ. I want to help because I *need* to keep you safe. You don’t have to handle everything on your own anymore.”

“You sure about this? You won’t regret it afterwards?”

“Never.”

“I’m used to fending for myself and my family. Ever since Dad died, nothing I’ve ever done is for myself, except you. I dropped out of school, I got a job, I got into fights, I got the goddamn contract. I tried so fucking hard, all of it, for Mom, Gabe. I tried so fucking hard, and still I got kicked in the fucking teeth. I gave it everything I had to keep Mom alive and she still died. I’m fucking tired of doing things all by myself, but I’ll keep being that way ’cuz that’s the only thing I know. I’m a really stubborn little shit, Gabe. I’ll fight you every step of the way. I’m only agreeing to this because I trust you, but you gotta promise me that things will work out, that you won’t give up on me halfway ’cuz of it. I don’t want to hope so I can be shot down again.”

“I promise. Everything will be fine. I’ll make sure of it.”

Russ tackled Gabriel in a tight hug, needing physical comfort after sharing all that. He also needed the confirmation that Gabriel meant it when he said that he wasn’t ashamed of him for doing what he did.

He tangled his fingers in Gabriel’s short hair and pulled him down for a kiss. Gabriel let him have what he wanted, responding to his urgent kisses with gentle ones, cupping his neck and his jaw and holding him in place.

He pulled back, panting slightly. “I’m so tired of all my crap, Gabe. I feel like I have no control over anything in my life. I just...”

Gabriel nodded. “Tell me what you need.”

Russ sat back and settled sideways onto the couch. “Turn around. Face me.” Gabriel sat how he wanted, on the opposite end of the couch. “Now take off your shirt.”

Gabriel hesitated, because he still hated anyone seeing the tattoo, but he took the shirt off without complaint.

“Your pants too. I want you naked.”

When Gabriel moved to stand, Russ stopped him. “Nu-uh. Stay on the couch. I wanna see you squirm.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes at that, but got out of his pants and underwear with a minimal amount of squirming.

It sent a thrill of power through him to be fully clothed when Gabriel was completely bare. It also pleased him that Gabriel would give him that. It meant

a lot to him, to have the security of knowing that he had control over what happened to him, and he was pretty sure Gabriel knew that too.

“You’re really hot,” he said softly, reaching out to run a hand down the valley between Gabriel’s pectorals. There was a thin sheen of sweat there, and he rubbed it around, trailing his hand over to a nipple and pinching it softly. Gabriel’s breath hitched. “Sometimes I think I dreamed you up. You’re perfect for me.”

Gabriel didn’t say anything. He just caught the wandering hand and pressed a kiss to the tips of his fingers. “Come closer?” he said, making it a request, letting him know that Russ was still in control.

Russ went, kneeling between his lover’s spread knees. His eyes kept moving to the tattoo on his arm. “Can I touch it?”

When he got a nod, Russ trailed his fingers over the black ink, tracing the tops of the trees with his fingers before he did it with his lips.

“Can I touch you, or...?”

Russ smiled at that. “Nope. Keep your hands to yourself.” Then he paused, getting an idea. “You know what, I’d like to see you jerk yourself off.”

Gabriel smirked at the challenge, and moved his hand to his dick. It was already hard and red, rising from a thatch of wiry black hair with precum beading at the tip. He curled his hand around it, stroking it up and down before playing with the slit, smearing the wetness around, making the head glisten. He kept the pace even and slow, his movements hypnotic.

Russ caught him by the wrist, gently pulling his hand away. He licked his lips before bending forward and taking the head into his mouth, savoring the salt-bitter tang of the skin. He sucked gently before he withdrew and licked a stripe up his shaft.

Gabriel’s hands formed fists.

He looked up from his prize. “Put your hands in my hair. Don’t tug on it or hold me in place or anything though.”

A large hand immediately snaked itself into his hair on the back of his head. Just as instructed, Gabriel just held it there, except for stroking his hair with his thumb. Russ figured he could excuse that because it felt amazing.

He continued his leisurely exploration of Gabriel’s dick, his balls, the junction where his thighs met his hip, and the flat, muscular ridges of his

stomach. Gabriel's dick looked almost purple now, and his own felt like it was going to burst.

Gabriel was content to lie still as Russ had his way with him, only breaking the silence with soft moans and mumbled praises.

Russ worked his way up Gabriel's stomach, his chest, his shoulders, and his neck till he finally reached his lips. Gabriel looked at him with green eyes dark with desire, his face a mask of composure despite his fast breaths. Only the very faint furrow between his eyebrows gave away the strain in his body.

"Open your mouth," he said softly. Gabriel obeyed. Russ gently sucked a plump bottom lip into his mouth, before releasing it and bestowing it with a little kiss. He subjected the upper lip to the same treatment before he slotted their lips together for a slow, sizzling kiss. He could feel gentle puffs of air on his face from Gabriel's breaths, could taste a flavor that was completely *Gabriel*. They kissed for what seemed like an eternity before Russ pulled away, his hand coming up to trace the scar that sat on the crest of a stubbled cheek. He first pressed his lips and then his cheek to it. He could feel the difference between the scar tissue and the rest of his skin, a ridge that felt pleasant to be rubbed against. "I really like this scar. It gives you personality."

Gabriel snorted, used to his random comments by now. "Whatever you say, sweetheart."

"You've learned that arguing with me is pointless. Very good!" he announced, pulling back and removing his pants. Gabriel reached to help him with his shirt before he could ask for it, doing a poor job of hiding his amusement. "Why're you smiling like that?"

"You," Gabriel said, tossing his hoodie over his shoulder. "You're one of a kind. I'm glad I let you seduce me that day in the kitchen."

"Ha! You were the one who—holy shit!"

Russ nearly bit off his tongue when Gabriel's lips squeezed around the head of his cock without warning.

"You were saying?" Gabriel pulled back to smirk at him, and Russ made a sort of garbled noise before he found his words again.

"Dude. Shut up. Suck," Russ finally managed to say, sliding both his hands into Gabriel's hair, pushing him down to where he was supposed to be.

Gabriel kissed his slit before he opened his mouth to swallow him down to the root.

“Gabe!” He nearly whined, moving his hips to thrust in and out of his lover’s mouth. Gabriel reached up to where his hand was probably pulling too hard at his hair, and Russ eased his grip. He yelped when Gabriel pulled away completely and rubbed his chin against the sensitive head of his cock. “Gah! Crazy bastard cheater!”

Gabriel sat back with a smug grin, and Russ had to kiss him again, moving to grind their hips together, their saliva and precum making the friction slippery.

“Lube,” Gabriel said, pulling away and holding Russ at arm’s length. “We need lube.”

Russ reached underneath the sofa covers and pulled out a little bottle. He had those little fuckers stashed all around the house. “Got it!”

It was a testament to how far gone Gabriel was that he didn’t even blink at that. When he reached for the bottle, Russ batted his hands away.

“I’m the one calling the shots. You keep your hands to yourself.”

“How the hell am I supposed to prepare you then... Oh.”

Russ smiled a victorious smile as Gabriel stared breathlessly at him, eyes wide. Russ had leaned back a little, one leg hooked over the back of the sofa so he could give his lover the best view as he rubbed himself with lubed fingers before inserting one finger and fucking himself with it. “Hot, yeah?”

He had to resist the urge to crow his satisfaction when all Gabriel could manage in response was a “Fuck, yeah,” his grip on the sofa white-knuckled.

One finger became two, and then three as he rocked his hips onto his fingers. He arched off the sofa with a loud moan when he found his prostate.

“Russ, I’m dying here.” Gabriel’s voice was more growl than words.

Russ scrambled to get closer. He couldn’t wait anymore, even if it was his idea in the first place. He knelt on the sofa with his knees on either side of Gabriel’s hips as he quickly worked some lube on Gabriel’s straining cock. He bent down for a kiss, and Gabriel gave him one.

Large hands clamped onto his hips when he tried to lower himself down in one stroke. “Easy,” Gabriel murmured, letting him sink slowly onto his throbbing shaft, letting Russ’s body adjust to the stretch.

Russ moaned and wrapped his arms around Gabriel’s broad shoulders, burying his face in the man’s strong neck as he bottomed out. “Gabriel. ’M so full, so hot, I can’t—can’t—”

“I’ve got you.” Gabriel shushed him, one hand on the back of his head and the other one wrapped around his ribs, resting on his spine. “I have you. You’re going to be alright.”

He felt the sting of heat in his eyes, and he squeezed them closed, but a drop managed to spill, and he could feel its heat as it trailed down his cheek before it landed on Gabriel’s shoulder.

“I have you,” Gabriel repeated, and Russ pressed their lips together in a desperate, seeking kiss.

Gabriel kissed back just as fervently, his hands kneading Russ’s ass. Russ rolled his hips, and Gabriel groaned into his mouth.

Russ felt a moan tear out of his throat when Gabriel began thrusting, gently at first, and then with increasing force, rubbing his prostate deliciously with every stroke. He found himself bouncing in Gabriel’s lap, trying to take his cock as far as it could go, wanting to keep Gabriel buried in him, anchored. Tethered.

Together, like two pieces of a puzzle.

There was static in his mind, though he was vaguely aware of a long litany of “fuck” and “oh god” and assorted words spilling out of his mouth. His entire existence was centered around Gabriel’s lips on his, and his cock connecting them together in a way that was raw and primal and absolutely right.

“Gabriel, touch me,” he pleaded, and shuddered when he was obliged, the sensations on his cock overloading his brain.

“Let go, sweetheart. Let go,” Gabriel murmured in his ear, so Russ did, his orgasm hurtling through him as he slumped forward into his lover’s warm chest. Gabriel followed him right after, pressing himself as close as he could as he came inside him.

They sat there for a while, and for once, Russ didn’t feel the need to fill the silence with words. He nuzzled Gabriel’s chest, his throat, his scratchy, stubbled jaw, and he felt content. Gabriel was playing with the ear that wasn’t pressed to his shoulder, running his fingers over the shell and pulling at the earlobe. His other arm was wrapped around Russ’s middle, his hand gently squeezing the rib that had stopped hurting only a few days ago.

It was Gabriel who spoke first. “It’s unusual for you to be so quiet. What are you thinking about?”

Russ ignored him and sucked a hickey into Gabriel’s shoulder. “Mine.”



He couldn't see it, but Russ was sure some exasperated eye rolling had taken place. "Yours."

Russ smiled. "Good."

He felt Gabriel press a kiss to his hair before gently squeezing him again.

Sure, they had a long way to go yet, before they could have their happy ending. Sheila had to get into college and discover a terrific new drug. He had to get his life in order, probably with the help of Gabriel's family. Gabriel had to learn to survive with Russ constantly underfoot, which was no small feat.

Maybe one day he'd even work on finishing his higher secondary certificate, and go on to enroll in college, support himself with money that wasn't illegally earned.

He could get his own damn console.

It was a great thought to have, especially when it was bolstered with the knowledge that he'd have it, one day. He'd found his reason to try again, and this time, he wasn't going to let anything stop him.

But first: "Say, Gabe, you wanna go get that cake you promised me two weeks ago?"

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## Epilogue

Almost two months had passed since his mother died, and Russ found himself adjusting to a life where he wasn't constantly worrying about the rent or the grocery bills. He still missed his mom like crazy, and he occasionally found himself sitting with her favorite comb in his hand, running over the etchings in the silver. It was a delicate thing—something his dad had gifted her when she had been pregnant with Sheila. She didn't wear it much, but he'd often seen her simply holding it and smiling.

He was sorting through all the stuff they had at his house, deciding what to take with him to Gabriel's place so he could give away the rest. Sheila had already cleared out whatever she had needed—she'd already moved into her dorm room at the university.

Thinking about it still made him giddy with joy. She'd been a nervous mess after she'd taken the exam. Russ had been nervous too—with their mom's death and being bumped around from Jess's place to Gabriel's, he was afraid she hadn't been able to focus well. When the results came through, both of them had been exhilarated to find out that Sheila's marks had been in the top five percent in the whole goddamned city.

Just like she'd dreamed, universities were practically throwing themselves at her, asking her to join. She joined the Hensley Institute, and they'd given her not only an all-expenses-paid scholarship, but they'd also invited her to a research program directly under her idol. She'd nearly swooned in the university dean's office when she found out.

And that was why she was already on campus two months before everyone else. He was so damn proud. He knew Mom and Dad would be proud too.

With all the running around and buying things, Russ had allowed himself to forget about his contract. He'd already missed his appointment last month. Keiser had played the excuse that he had been injured, and lucky for him, the warden had accepted it. They'd rescheduled it, though, so now he had two appointments in one month. He could already feel the dread build up in his stomach.

But that wasn't the only reason.

He clutched at the comb, wincing when the metal bit into his palm. He noticed Gabriel only when the man pried the comb away from his death grip.

“Ready to go?” he asked. Russ nodded and got up.

They caught a train to go to the Second District, to meet Gabriel’s lawyer cousin, Michael. He looked out of the window as the trains zoomed high above the city, the gloomy buildings of the Ninth giving way to more cheerful, well maintained establishments that got bigger and newer as they headed to the Second.

Russ couldn’t believe how neat everything was and how many policemen he’d seen since getting off at the station. Seeing *one* policeman in the Ninth was a rarity.

It only made him even more determined to bring down the warden, and every other corrupt official that had exploited him and god knew how many others for their own gain.

They took a hovercab to reach the office, which was located in the thirtieth floor of a skyscraper smack dab in the middle of the commercial plaza. It was all shiny metal, sparkling glass, and people walking around wearing clothes that would have cost more than his house.

He looked positively grubby even in his best pair of jeans and the new shirt he bought just for this occasion. Gabriel was wearing plain jeans and a T-shirt too, but he didn’t seem fazed by some of the looks people gave them as they waited in the lobby.

They went up in an elevator that was just as shiny as everything else, and before long, they were standing in a huge office with a spectacular view of the city.

Two men were in the room. The man that was perched on the table was Zachariel, Gabe’s sibling. That meant the man sitting in the big chair behind the large wooden table was Michael.

Russ had decided to not only get away from the monster, but to put an end to it once and for all. With his mother gone and Sheila safely in college, he had nothing to worry about, nothing stopping him from exposing everything he knew and bringing the warden down. He was done letting the warden control his life, and he was done with the bastard exploiting other people for his personal gain.

Michael and Zach rose when he and Gabe stepped in the room. Zach reached Gabe first and gave him an enthusiastic hug before he held out his hand for Russ to take. His handshake was warm, and he smiled in a way that seemed to be saying “Forgive me for being an ass?” so Russ smiled back.

Michael just thumped Gabriel on the back before he turned to Russ and caught his hand up in a firm grip and pumped once. “Michael Lamb. Pleased to meet you.”

“Yeah, likewise,” Russ said, and Michael gave him a warm smile.

“Have a seat,” Michael said, indicating for Gabriel and Russ to sit on the chairs while he sat on the table and Zach got out glasses and poured water.

Michael got down to business immediately, no small talk, no beating around the bush. “Russ, you say you have information on all the illegal dealings that the warden of the Ninth has been involved with?”

Russ nodded. “Yes, I do.”

“How do you know that this information is true?”

Russ raised his chin and stared Michael dead in the eyes. “‘Cuz I’m one of the boys he visits in the pleasure lounge in the Ninth. I have been for four years now. And also ‘cuz I’ve been participating in the illegal fights for just as long.”

There was absolute silence in the room until Zach slammed his glass on the table. “I knew it! I knew that rat bastard was up to no good. This could be the perfect opportunity to take him down once and for all. He’s hurt far too many people to be allowed to roam free.”

Michael looked at Russ, then at Gabriel, before he turned back to Russ, a predatory gleam in his green eyes. “Tell me everything.”

And so Russ did. He told them about how he had been recruited into the fights when he was eighteen, and how he’d often been singled out from the others to participate in private fights for the warden and a bunch of other corrupt politicians. He told them about his mom getting sick, and the loan shark drawing up a contract that effectively left him with no other option except to obey, because they’d go after his sister if he didn’t. He told them about the sadism and the torture devices and the nights where the warden would bring his “friends” along to enjoy him.

He also told them about all the other boys and girls who were in the lounge because they had no other choice. He told them about Keiser, about the fact that he’d been made security instead of a sex slave only because he’d been way too tall and broad to look like a beaten-down sex toy, and AJ, who’d been forced to push drugs to pay off his brother’s debts. He told them about the drugs that they sometimes injected into the boys to keep them docile, and how woozy and nauseous it’d make him after a few hours.

He told them so many things: about all the people who visited the pleasure lounge, the people who oversaw the fights, the people who handled drugs. He knew there were gambling rings, but he didn't have any information about that.

By the time he was done, he was exhausted and emotionally raw, holding on to Gabriel's knee with a white-knuckled grip. Gabriel had placed a gentle hand on top of his trembling one, but his stress levels were visible in the deep furrows of his eyebrows. Zach had been taking notes diligently, looking just as angry as Gabriel. The metal stylus he'd been using was bent with how tightly he'd been gripping it.

Michael was the only one who seemed unaffected as he silently turned the empty glass around and around in his hands.

Finally, he looked up. "Will your friends be willing to testify in court along with you?"

Russ nodded. "Definitely."

"Then I'd say we're set. That bastard has gotten away with too much for too long. It's about time someone takes him down."

"Will you really be able to do that? I mean, with just what I know?"

Zach looked up from his tablet and smiled, looking like Gabriel did when he was especially pleased with something. "We've been after him for a long time now, but he just uses his clout and money to either buy loyalties or force it. We've just been waiting for someone to step up and testify, and we'll have that monster by his balls."

Ah. That was encouraging to know.

"How about we get going, then? Russ must be starving," Gabriel said, standing up. Russ got to his feet too.

"Is that it? We're done?"

Michael nodded. "We're done."

Michael shook hands with Russ again, but Zach surprised him by giving him a tight hug and then letting go just as quickly.

"I'll see you soon." Zach smiled and walked them to the door.

Russ was about dead on his feet—who'd have known just talking would be enough to drain someone like that?

As they rode the elevator back down, Russ leaned heavily on Gabriel, quite content to just stand there and not move at all. When the elevator door opened, he wanted to whine.

“Come on,” Gabriel coaxed, tugging him along with an arm around his shoulders.

They walked around on Russ’s insistence. He was tired, but he wanted the exercise to help clear his brain, and he also wanted to look around a little.

They were at the train station before long.

Russ looked at Gabriel. “Aren’t you going home?”

Gabriel’s eyebrows screwed up in an “are you high” kind of shape. “Where else would we be going?”

“I mean—” Russ shut his mouth as he processed the words. Home. They were going home to their place in the Ninth. Of course. “Never mind. Let’s go home.”

**The End**

## Author Bio

*Dee Aditya is a college student by day and romance writer by night (and sometimes during college hours as well, when no one is looking). When she's not scrambling to finish assignments, or feverishly reading gay fanfiction/manga/ebooks on her phone, she's busy writing fiction, often involving two guys being idiots before eventually falling for each other (and being cheesy). She is a night owl and craves coffee at all hours of the day. Like most college students, she is broke almost all the time and will never turn down free food or free books.*

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