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Eloreen Moon & Adan DePiaz

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

COIL ME UP

By Eloreen Moon & Adan DePiaz

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

Two half-snake men, one a green anaconda and one a brown python, sit coiled together on rocks with their eyes half-lidded. The anaconda is sitting higher than the python. The python man is holding the anaconda man at the waist, and one hand lower on the scaly lower half. He has a tattoo on his upper right arm. The anaconda man is holding the python man's face, while he looks down with tenderness. He has a tattoo on his left shoulder.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

That dark-headed man, who is looking up at his lover, is me. We have been through a lot of heartache and trials, but we have finally made our relationship permanent. As two different types of snake shifters, we had to overcome some major obstacles. Our families put us through a lot of headaches trying to keep us part, but we overcame it all. Can you tell us how we managed to overcome those differences and our families to get us to where we are now, happy and so deeply in love?

Triggers: rape, incest

Sincerely,

Ashley

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: snake shifters, shifters non-wolf-cat, angels/demons/gods, mythology, magic, corporate espionage, reunited, soulmates/bonded

Word Count: 25,592

Dedication

From Eloreen–

Thanks to Ingela, the fellow reviewers over at Rainbow Gold Reviews, and the LOR Authors group forum for the 1st/beta reading, encouragement, and belief in the story. A big shout out to Dana for the brainstorming help.

A special thank you to the M/M Romance Group volunteers whom helped put this event together and tirelessly helped us authors have something to be proud of, especially this author who had to take extra time to get this story finished. And to Adan DePiaz for helping me finish it. 😊

From Adan–

Thanks to Eloreen Moon for allowing me to be a part of this awesome story.

COIL ME UP

By Eloreen Moon & Adan DePiaz

Prologue

Ancient Athens, around the height of Sparta's reign.

“Enough!” Zeus bellowed. Everyone in the room stopped. The angry shouts and accusations ceased instantly. When the ruler of the Olympians commanded, you listened.

He glared at the tableau before him. Petty humans, demigods, and their political, greedy squabbles. He was disgusted with the lot of them. He was as much for the humans killing each other as he was for the young women they provided. However, he mused, the current scene playing out before him took it all to another level. It was enough for him to want to rain lightning down upon the lot of them. If it weren't his throne room, he would seriously consider it despite the damage he would have to clean up afterward. He sighed. The tribulations of a god.

Zeus continued to ponder the two kneeling, prostrated, and bloody men before him, children of a god and a human—demigods in their own right. One was the son of Demeter and a Spartan warrior prince, and the other, the son of Python and a widow of a fairly high-up citizen from the same city-state. One had dark hair, the other more of a sandy blond. Both were muscular, bare chested, and wore only minimal clothing, as befit their warrior status and upbringing.

He wondered if their demigod status contributed to their natural prowess with swords, war, and nearly golden physiques. Potentially all at the same time. *It is a harsh life these days.* Not uncommon in the occupations of the men before him, considering the whip scars slightly visible under the blood both men bore. Based on their depth and coverage displayed, their demigod status had probably saved their lives up to this point.

Will it continue to save them? Gods were a fickle lot. He would know; he was the son of Cronus, after all.

He continued to contemplate the families of the men brought before him. On one side, their immortal ancestors; Python and his mother Gaia and Zeus's own sister Demeter, pled to him to save these men. For Gaia to ask, as she never asked him for *anything*, surprised him—especially with the whole Cronus situation before his reign. Considering her status as the mother of all of Earth, in addition to being the mother of Python, her pleas for mercy astounded him

enough that he took notice. Demeter, too, pleaded privately to prevent both men's deaths from the mortal halves of their families.

The men had done the unthinkable and fallen in love with each other instead of a woman. They were caught in the act, but that wasn't the worst of it. The Spartan families, in their horror from the men pledging themselves to each other, had captured, tortured, and mangled them right at the foot of his temple. Not his daughter Athena's temple, where men were whipped as a rite of passage, but *his* temple. That was unacceptable.

Zeus shook his head and came to a decision.

"Xander and Bathier, rise and come forth." He was heard everywhere in the spacious room. Silence reigned, for his anger was palpable. Everyone held their breath as they waited for him to pass sentence. Defiling a temple in any way was unheard of for the very reason that you did not want to anger a god who could kill you with only a command of lightning.

Slowly, the two men in question rose and walked—mostly stumbled—to the foot of the dais that held Zeus's throne. Their lives rested on what Zeus would say. The Fates were also behind Zeus's throne, awaiting the judgment, as they were the ones that would manifest the sentence. With their heads bowed and arms wrapped around each other, supporting each other through the punishment they would receive, it struck Zeus that, on the verge of punishment, and possible death, they still touched each other lovingly. He was curious—he had never been attracted to anyone but the fair sex—what had brought about their willingness to be with each other. Demeter was one of his favorite sisters, and he was curious about her son, Bathier.

When they were well away from both sides of their families, Zeus threw a soft white ball of magical energy around them, pulling Demeter and Python in at the same time. No one else could see or hear what was to happen until he let it. His gaze lingered on Bathier lightly and then looked at them both.

"Why?" Zeus asked the mortal demigods, curiosity forefront. "I am baffled as to why you would wish to live this half-life of hatred, accepting the harsh treatment you have received without a fight? You are warriors!"

Bathier and Xander looked at each other and communicated on a level that displayed intimate knowledge of the other, like a husband and a wife. Zeus nearly raised an eyebrow but didn't want to give away his wonder. He waited.

"Because love is worth it," Xander answered, low and gravelly, his throat bruised and raw from someone holding him at the neck. Looking at the way

Bathier was attempting to comfort the slightly smaller man with only the use of one arm confounded Zeus, despite his jaded nature.

“Python and Demeter, I need you to heal them the quickest way possible. With both of you having affinities for snakes, they need to be well enough to survive the next part, and have help, learning to live anew.”

Python and Demeter looked at each other and then looked back to Zeus suspiciously, but acquiesced to his command. Both called forth their talismans. Python became a rather large and long brown, black, and yellow-spotted snake, and coiled around the two men, flicking his tongue out at them. Demeter pulled two green snakes out of the ether, and they wrapped around her arms as she prepared the magic. The gods looked at each other, and a pale-yellow glow emanated from Demeter to Python, gained a white component, and wrapped around the men, enclosing them all. The white and yellow blended into a blanket of protection and change.

Outside the magical glow surrounding the four, Zeus heard the Fates—or Moirai—intone in one voice their part in this magical deed. Using his own incredible powers, he bound the souls of the snakes to the men. Xander was bound to the python, after his father, and Bathier was bound to the snake that would be known as the green anaconda, from his mother. Both carried the colors of their respective parents and were soul bound to their respective snake sides for all of eternity. Of course, they would have their quirks. What new species didn't?

With all parts in play, he released his magic, the Fates released theirs, and Demeter and Python finalized the healing itself. After the intense glow faded, Zeus beheld the two men now shifted into snake form. Bathier and Xander were wrapped around each other, as they had been in human form.

Xander was a beautiful giant python, with dark-brown mottled skin and various light-brown to tan, irregular—almost paisley-like—spots. The spots had dark-brown centers and a slight white border surrounding the tan color. He had a large diamond-shaped head, and his big eyes looked out everywhere with obvious confusion.

Bathier was thicker than Xander, a dark green graduating to a lighter sage green underneath. On top, he had solid dark-brown irregular spots. On the bottom of his snake body, he had regularly spaced, light-yellow-green circular spots surrounded by irregular dark-brown rings. His head was similar to a diamond shape, but more rounded and slightly shorter than Xander's. Brown,

yellow, white, and green—all the colors of protection, health, sacrifice, and redemption.

Satisfied that the transformation was complete, Zeus pinned the snakes' eyes with his own.

A collective gasp sounded as Zeus dropped the white shielding that had prevented the rest of the room from seeing—and stopping—what had been done.

A cacophony of sound erupted from the families of Xander and Bathier, shock, surprise, and disgust among the many mutterings.

“Silence!” Zeus roared.

The room went quiet.

Zeus soothed the snakes when they became agitated by the sound of their families, speaking to them directly within their minds.

You are safe, and harm will not befall you. I understand you are confused and uncertain, but hear me out before you depart.

They settled down.

Zeus turned to the families. “Behold! You see that Xander and Bathier are now snakes, soul bound with two of the largest snake species that will be known to man. However, they will not be permanently bound to their snake form; they will henceforth be known as snake shifters and will join the ranks of other shifters on this planet, Earth.”

There were mutterings among the people as the families tried to understand what was happening. “Shifters? Will be known? Earth?”

“Their only crime is love. Love for each other. While I do not understand it, I respect that it is there. They will live their full lives, longer than mortal or even demigod, but not as long as a god. However, their minds, and yours”—Zeus pointed to each family member in turn—“will have the memory of your deeds and their lives removed, and your familial ties cut. Perhaps in their new life, or another life, they will have their mating without interference from their families. It is now up to their bond, their destiny”—he nodded to the Moirai—“and the Fates whether they will survive.”

The Moirai nodded back to Zeus in unison and chanted their own magic for the future these new beings held. Like butterfly wings, a ripple now would have far-reaching consequences.

Before the final word was said from the magic spell the Moirai chanted around them, Zeus turned to the snakes and their immortal parents. Speaking to everyone's mind, Zeus directed his words to the two men and gave them hope.

As I said, you will not be harmed. I will send you to your own compounds—nests, if you will—but you will be separated. Your fate is now in your hands. Learn well, love often, and good luck. Know this: You have a bond. It will transcend time and space. You will be able to find each other again. I have bequeathed parting gifts to you, but you will have to discover them on your own.

With a nod to Demeter and Python, they each held their sons one last time, for their sons would soon forget. Since they were gods themselves, they were not affected by the spell, and hoped one day to see them again.

The snakes looked toward each other one last time, looked at their respective parent, and then looked to Zeus. They nodded once in acknowledgment of their fate and touched heads, seeking contact one last time.

Zeus nodded back, and the Moirai finished their chant.

The moment their voices died, the snakes were gone.

So were the mortal families, with their memories removed and new ones replaced. All who were left in the room were Zeus, Gaia, Demeter, Python, and the Moirai.

Python spoke for the first time since this incident came to pass. "Zeus, may I watch over Xander? Directly?"

Zeus raised an eyebrow, thought for a moment, then turned toward the Moirai.

"It can be done, as time is but a web. Heed our warning, Python. Do not directly interfere with their journey. There will be consequences across the ages should you not follow this warning." The Moirai intoned the answer for Zeus.

Zeus returned his gaze back to Demeter and Python, silently contemplating them.

Demeter immediately answered his unasked question. "I will be in the background, but I, too, will probably watch over Bathier."

Python acknowledged the Moirai's warning with a bow toward them. "I will not give away the secrets, but there will be a time where I will reveal myself. I see that he will need me physically there."

Zeus thought of Python's relationship with the Oracle and nodded his consent. Demeter and Python bowed to him and were gone as well.

Zeus turned back to the Moirai.

"Do I even want to know how you sent everyone away? I am a god, but even that was a very large feat for the Fates."

"Love has its own power, my Zeus; you should know this," the Maiden aspect chided.

"When they accepted their fate, they provided the will," the Mother aspect continued.

The Crone aspect ended, "And it's up to Xander and Bathier's new lives as Lysander and Basil to discover each other again in a time more accepting of their love."

Zeus shook his head, still not understanding this love thing.

"Because love *is* worth it, Zeus. Your uncle knows this, and that is why he wanted to be involved."

Zeus turned toward his grandmother Gaia, who provided that tidbit of wisdom.

"I still—" Zeus started to say.

"Watch, and learn," Gaia replied.

Chapter I

Modern-day Brazil, somewhere in the middle of the jungle.

A whipcrack sounded.

San cringed. He thought *Oh no*, and was instantly curled up into his snake form with no recourse. Since he had such an inherent fear of loud noises and instinctively became a ball of snake when startled, he sat there for a moment, figuring out what happened, and tried to catch his breath in his new form.

God damn it, Neil! San thought to his second as he peeked out from said ball and looked balefully at his right-hand man. *I told you not to practice your whip exercises around me!*

An amused grunt came through their t’link. *Yes, boss. Sorry, forgot you were around. After the last bout of security checks around the world, I thought you would be sleeping inside.* Neil looked over at the lean, twenty-two-foot-long rock python, commonly known as a ball python. He chuckled a bit at the situation Commander Lysander—San to his friends—found himself wrapped up in, literally, and snorted. *If you were a Medusa snake, I would be dead now.*

San mentally snorted at the reference and sighed. It was more of a hiss, but it was a snake version he perfected over his long life. *No, I needed to wear myself out after I returned from the last place. I’m still vibrating from that disaster. Some billionaires should not do their own security. Even though it’s over, I feel... something is coming. Something big.*

Neil coiled his weapon of choice as he moved away from San’s position, heading toward the main building in the center of the compound for the nest. Think Indiana Jones in the movies, but a longer tail and barbs, and you’ve got about the right idea. And he was good, whether he was in full human shift or half, on par with his snake’s deadliness in constricting.

Mentally shrugging since he couldn’t while he was shifted, Lysander contemplated his life now that he was stuck in this form until his snake calmed down enough to let him shift. It usually took around thirty minutes, sooner if he had been relatively calm in the first place. Today was not a calm day. He grudgingly thought that he might have to wait longer than usual. Too bad he couldn’t go to his half form instead. Then he could actually do stuff with his hands, even if he would be snake from the lower half down.

At least it was done at the nest and not in the outside world. That would be bad for the humans these days. They didn't like anything they didn't understand. A six-foot-tall man shifting into twenty-two feet of ball python at a moment's notice when startled would not endear San to anyone, shifter or otherwise. The Gods must be crazy to have multiple species in the same place. At least his nest in modern-day Brazil was relatively remote. Thank the Gods for small favors.

He frequently went on these trips working as a security consultant, so he locked his snake shifts down with will and mental exercises he learned long ago when he was a snakelet. He had unlocked his psychic locks as soon as he set foot in his home, not thinking there could be anything that would startle him. Jeez, he needed to get laid. Sex always relaxed him, but there had been too few opportunities to partake.

Sander, dear, would you come up to the community room when you are ready? There is someone I would like you to meet.

San and his snake tensed as the mental command, couched as a request, entered his mind from his mother. He would rather ignore it.

Why didn't you call me on the phone? San hissed back, ignoring the name she called him. Only *she* called him that. *Even in snake form, I can answer a call.*

Or not.

All python shifters could talk to each other mentally in their human bodies as well as their half- and full-snake forms. Some, like him, could change parts, including their tongues, at will. While difficult, he could talk while in snake form. He might be able to shift his vocal cords enough. Maybe.

San didn't know if there were other shifters besides snake—he hadn't met any. Then again, it was easy to hide as a human in human form. There wasn't a visual cue or any immediately apparent factors indicate the differences—a snake shifter would have to do something very odd for someone to realize their inhuman qualities. While snake shifters could tell apart other snakes by smell, regardless of form, having a forked tongue flicking out of a human mouth would not go over well in the presence of humans. There were rumors of shifters who could tell by other means, but they were rare indeed.

Because I knew you were shifted and more likely to ignore my calls, Adel thought smugly.

San rolled his eyes mentally, flicking his tongue rapidly to determine if his mom was near. Yes. He could sense her faintly in the house. He had a pretty good sense of smell for a shifter. He'd rather not deal with her, as he knew what awaited him when he got to the main house.

I do not want to meet another female, Mother, San emphatically t'linked back. You know I don't want a female for a mate.

It is unnatural for snakes to not procreate.

This was the same argument they'd had for years. Shifters lived a long time. In fact, he was into his second century. He looked about thirty, only aging slowly after he hit puberty, when he shifted for the first time. He always had a nagging feeling he was forgetting something. Whenever he thought about mating, he felt... not whole, like he was missing his other half. Female snakes made him shudder, and human females... well, suffice it to say having to explain to a human about shifters in general, and snakes in specific, usually didn't go over well at all. There were a few human mates around, but that didn't happen often. It would take a special kind of human to accept the paranormal.

San shivered mentally and started to slither toward the main building, feeling both parts of him calm enough that shifting was possible. The building was basically central to most everywhere and housed the cafeteria, the armory, and several meeting rooms. San was sure one of the meeting rooms was occupied by his mother's choice of mate for him. Halfway there, he tingled and shifted to his human form while moving. The transition was almost seamless, and his shift was the fastest he knew. His clothes stayed with him. *Thank the gods.* He didn't know what he would do if a shift ended with him naked. He shuddered at that thought as he walked determinedly toward the location of his mother, a scowl on his face as he contemplated his life.

He was nothing to write home about: short, dark-brown hair, and average brown eyes. He had a militarist bearing from a couple of stints in the various armies of different countries over the centuries. As a result, his physique was pretty decent, even he could admit without sounding conceited. Similar to Roman or Greek statues he had seen in his travels into Italy. When he had visited Greece, he felt déjà vu looking at some of the artwork, and he felt like he should know them. It was kind of weird so he didn't stick around for long. He took care of his body as best he could in this day and age. Not as many wars to tone his body, so it was hard to be physical and still kick someone's ass. Having fun while keeping in shape and getting paid as a security consultant was just a bonus.

San arrived at the double doors and walked in. His mother had told him where to meet her when he had started toward the building. Sometimes he wondered how she knew what he was doing without him telling her. It was uncanny. As far as he knew, she was just a regular snake shifter with the standard telepathic links—t’links—they all had. He tingled a bit and wondered if he should research that. He had honed his instincts over the years and trusted them with his life. He had wondered, and now it seemed he needed to find out. After he got rid of this latest problem.

Chapter II

Adel watched her son stride into the meeting room with his typical neutral face, which irked her to no end, but his body language said he was pissed.

Good. He needed to be pissed.

She supposed that his wide shoulders, strong, square face with piercing brown eyes, and short, dark-brown military crew cut made him a handsome man any man or woman would want. Too bad he hadn't wanted the women she tried to introduce him over the years. She supposed she should concede on this endeavor. Two hundred years of this—give or take a decade—and it was getting old, even for her.

Adel internally sighed, mentally girded herself, and prepared her speech.

"You're late," she intoned, with her snooty air in place as always.

"Mother—" Lysander started.

"We have a guest, Sander," Adel interrupted, smiling graciously at him with a warning in her eyes. "Miss Annabel Delcorte wanted to meet you after the lunch earlier today when I told her all about you."

Adel put a little emphasis on that last part, playing her role to the hilt. She had to admit, she did enjoy a good part, especially since he continued to deny her. Patience.

She looked toward the young woman sitting next to her. She was a cute blue-eyed blonde with a heart-shaped button nose; a little bit of an airhead, but they would have made beautiful hatchlings together. She acknowledged that she had a tendency to typecast, but Adel was committed now and needed to see how this would play out, considering she had done it in one form or another for many years now. The die was cast, and the major players had their parts to play.

"Annabel, this is my son, Sander." She introduced them together and then sat back to watch the fireworks. She had no doubt that Sander was about to explode with frustration. Keeping her amusement to herself, she watched the scene unfold.

Annabel stood to her full five-foot four-inch height with confidence and ease, extending her hand out to shake with Sander. Sander pushed his lips to a tight, thin line, the manners Adel had drilled into him kicking in. He picked up her hand, turned it slightly, and kissed the back of her hand gallantly.

“Nice to meet you, Annabel, but there has been a misunderstanding,” Sander said politely.

He went the direct route this time, Adel thought.

“While I appreciate you wanted to meet the man my mother told you about, he, in fact, doesn’t exist.” Sander not only went the direct route, he aimed right for the jugular. *Even better*, thought Adel, her amusement well hidden.

Annabel startled. Opened her mouth to say something. Stopped. Tried again. Couldn’t start and just waited, shock plainly written on her face.

“I am, in fact, g-a-y, gay, as in I. Date. Men. Have been all my life, and my mother”—Sander turned to Adel and glared before turning back to the woman, softening his features—“neglected to tell you that little detail, didn’t she?”

Annabel just nodded slowly, agreeing with him blankly. The full impact hadn’t hit her yet. Adel sighed internally. *Too ditzzy. She’s not going to get it. Back to the drawing board.*

Then Annabel seemed to snap out of the trancelike state she was in and looked directly into Sander’s eyes. She removed her hand from his instantly when she realized he still held it.

“Wait—You mean you are not looking for a female mate, but a male one?” Annabel rallied back, almost shrieking the last part. *Not as flighty as I thought*, Adel pondered. *This is getting interesting.*

“That’s correct,” Sander agreed, amusement starting to color his words. The amusement broke through the shrieking, thank the gods. Adel didn’t know if she could have taken much more of that herself.

Oh my, he’s getting over the anger faster than usual. That’s good. Adel continued to keep quiet, curious as to how this scene would finish. *Something is different with him this round.* She wondered about it for a few seconds, but made a mental note to ask when they were alone. She was never one to beat about the bush.

“But, but... I *knew* it was too good to be true!” Anger entered Annabel’s words and she pivoted toward Adel and stalked right up to her sitting ladylike on the couch. “This is *your* fault! Why did you set me up if you knew he wasn’t going to ask me on a date?”

Interesting, Adel thought, reevaluating her initial impression of the shifter as she stood to her own five-foot-nine height, looking down at her new protégé.

“Because, my dear, I was testing you to determine how you would react to certain information presented to you before offering an internship with me.”

Adel held out her hand to shake Annabel’s, and she took it automatically, face showing signs of shock again. More quickly than before, she recovered, looked over toward Sander, and then slid her gaze back to her new mentor, questions on the tip of her tongue.

“How? What? *Why*? Do I even want to know why?”

Sander answered for Adel.

“Probably not.” He sighed. “Would you like to know anyway?”

“Yes, very much so.” Annabel, after getting over the anger, started to see the reason behind it. “So this was for the R and D programmer position with FANG I applied for last week, wasn’t it?”

“Very good.” Sander smiled genially now. Adel was thankful he didn’t blow his top this time. A large python wrapped around someone would be detrimental to one’s health, even if they were another snake shifter, and his mother.

“Mother has been doing this for a long time. At first, she really was trying to set me up with female snake shifters so that I would mate and set up a house. After the first twenty-five years of going through these kinds of meetings, and realizing I wasn’t going to procreate like she wanted me to, she finally gave up on that aspect. However, it did make a great way to recruit programmers so she could weed out those that would fit from those that wouldn’t. FANG has had a rash of programmers being recruited away in the last several months, usually to our rival, Boa Ballistics. Normally there is a longer, drawn out interaction, but I just didn’t have it in me to continue the charade today, so I went the most expedient way.”

“That’s... an interesting way of interviewing people.” Annabel wasn’t quite with the program, but she was getting there. Then she looked at Sander. “How are *you* involved in FANG? Isn’t FANG a weapons research and development company?” *Excellent question. We need more recruits like this,* Adel thought to herself.

“A very good question,” Sander answered with a brilliant smile. “I’m the co-owner of Fast Action Neutralization Guard with Adel. She manages the weapons side, specifically R and D, and I manage the private security side. Most don’t know that we created it together. An excellent leap, indeed.”

Adel made a few more mental notes, considered her options on her own secrets, and then spoke to her son.

“Sander, dear, would you join me in the cafeteria? I wanted to talk to you about something,” Adel said, while t’linking to him, *It’s important. I know you don’t like it when I call you Sander, and someday, I will tell you why, but, please, for me, wait outside while I give her some instructions?*

Sander startled a bit but recovered from the dual communication. Then he looked suspiciously at her. Adel thought to herself, *Oh dear. He’s starting to realize something is up. She mentally sighed. I guess it’s time to tell him. We’ll see how long it takes before he asks.*

He nodded to Adel and bowed slightly to Annabel. “It’s good to meet you, Annabel Delcorte. I’m sure we will meet again soon. Congratulations. Mother needs someone sharp like you in the organization. Maybe then, we won’t have to recruit more people so often.”

He stood up from the bow and pondered his mother briefly, shooting her his own meaningful gaze before turning on his heel. He was out the door within two strides. The door clicked closed.

Adel pondered a moment, knowing she had to come clean with her son, and turned to Annabel and stated, “Well, that went better than I hoped.”

Smiling brightly, Adel continued detailing Annabel’s new duties and responsibilities.

Chapter III

San quietly closed the door behind him as he left.

He was going to ask. It had been a burning question since his teens, since he had been found in his full-snake form. Python snake shifters grew rapidly and appeared older than they were when very young. He had always felt older than his age. Even now in his two hundreds, he felt thousands of years old. Humans had this thing about reincarnation in some cultures, and he had felt an affinity to that concept. Assuming you had an affinity to a concept, which was weird all on its own. But, it felt right. That was the beginning of his trust in his instincts, and they had never steered him wrong. Since he couldn't remember anything before his teens, he really didn't know what had happened then. Adel had taken him in when he appeared near her compound, no memory, no idea how he got there, and no clothes. He had asked once when he had settled, some twenty years later, and she didn't speak to him again for a month. He didn't ask again. Perhaps she would finally clue him in. It seemed to be the time for it.

He walked to the cafeteria, contemplating his mother. She had always called him Sander, even though his full name was Lysander Smith. He never knew his parents, nor did he have a last name, despite the generic one assigned to him when they started FANG. Modern-day Brazil frowned upon paperwork without a last name. Since Adel didn't have one, she picked Smith when she was forced to have one. The current Brazilian government required official paperwork to own land and businesses in order to play nice with them. She was just Adel, he was just Lysander, and Neil was just Neil Brandt, but his story was altogether different and wasn't Sander's to tell.

San smiled at the thought of his friend. He would be happy to know that mother got a new apprentice programmer so quickly. Neil hated working on the weapons side of FANG when she didn't have help. He much preferred coordinating his security requests and being in the background, despite knowing everything there was to know about the weapons they made.

Returning back to the present issues, San hurried the last few steps and opened the glass double doors that housed the compound's cafeteria. Indeed, it was a setup very similar to a Piccadilly or a Morrison's in the States, except bigger and operated more like a military mess hall. It was a little more efficient, but not by much. Considering he had worked in, started up, and maintained both types of food operations, he knew the workings of the food industry very

well. His first love was cooking. He was a premier chef in his early hundreds, but he got disenchanted with the times and left the cooking business. Now, he just cooked for fun.

He walked into the refrigerator room and contemplated the snack he wanted. It was midafternoon and nobody was around. He probably didn't have much time before someone would be back, starting the next round of meals for the compound. In fact, there were three cooks that rotated shifts depending upon what was going on. Someone should be here.

San frowned. *Where's Sil? He's usually getting ready for the evening meal by now.* He grabbed the nearest fruit and cheese, and turned around.

Just in time to see the massive doors to the room close and lock.

Oh shit! He t'linked to his mother since she was in the building.

Mother! Someone just locked the gods-be-damned refrigerator door in the cafeteria! He tried to calm down a bit before continuing, but the panic was setting in. And Sil is missing! I knew something was up when I didn't see him. Fucking Christ on a pogo stick! Some security person I am!

A feeling of warmth and love came to him. *Lysander, calm down. I'll be there in less than a minute. I was heading your way anyway. You don't have to yell, you know. I can hear you just fine without the yelling.*

He started to calm down as soothing, calm feelings comforted him in waves. *I'm sorry, Adel. You know cold and I don't get along.*

That was the understatement of the decade. Snake shifters, like their reptilian brethren, were susceptible to cold and would succumb to a torpid state the longer they stayed in the cold. It didn't matter if they were human or not; the snake inside would come out to protect their human counterpart.

And then it hit him. *You called me Lysander. And you are all warm and fuzzy...*

I did. I needed you to snap out of it. Since I don't call you that, I figured it would work. I've t'linked Neil to find Sil. And I love you. I always have.

Thanks, he acknowledged. I love you, too. As he calmed down, he could feel his snake trying to get out to protect him from the cold. *Hurry, Mom. My snake is about to come out, and then you will have a two-hundred-pound sluggish Python to deal with.*

You haven't called me mom in a century. She smiled through their connection, and he felt the love his adopted mother had for him. It had been a long time since she had let her guard down enough that he could feel her. It helped to keep him warm enough that his snake settled, sensing help was coming and he didn't need to come out just yet. *Might need him later,* San contemplated, depending upon what he found on the other side of this door.

San looked down and realized he still had the food he procured. Still hungry, he thought to distract himself by eating while he waited for Adel to open the door.

Adel was slithering to the cafeteria as fast as her python could take her as she t'linked Neil. *Any luck? Have you found Sil?* She hated when others were hurt in her compound. She was not happy to have to change into her python while others were around. She was larger in her snake form than any snake shifter had a right to be. The time would be right to tell him soon. She could see it coming. *Not yet, but soon.*

He's fine. Neil interrupted her thoughts. *I found him just waking up, holding his head, in his office off his residential suite. He was a little groggy and wanted to know what truck hit him.* His smirk came through the t'link a little at the last comment. *I filled him in with what we knew and sent him on to the infirmary.*

Good. Meet me at the cafeteria. I have a feeling the person in question is still around.

Roger. On my way, Neil acknowledged. *I need to stop in my room for my whip.*

Come in human form, Adel requested. It might be good for one of them to be on two feet.

Adel continued toward the door to the cafeteria just as a figure exited and ran off to the right toward the residential buildings. He, or she, was surefooted and running like they knew the layout of the compound. She immediately gave chase but soon discovered that the two-legged intruder was faster than her snake, which was a monumental feat, as she was one of the faster ones at her size. The intruder leaped over the fencing around the compound, past the residential areas, and took off into the woods. Just as Adel arrived at the fence, Neil stopped beside her, his whip held loosely in his hand and ready to strike.

“I can give chase,” Neil offered out loud. “Smelled like a shifter, but I have no idea what kind. Not a snake. Fast little booger, too.”

Did you see any identifying marks? I would like to get the intruder, but later. Sander is more important, Adel t’linked to Neil.

“Dressed in all black, face covered, a little on the short side, and a runner’s build. That’s about all I got before they hopped the ten-foot fence. That’s a pretty decent achievement, since it’s electrified.”

They knew the compound and the security. Not good, Neil, not good. If you have their scent, would you be able to find them again?

“Yes,” Neil said simply.

Good. Let’s go get Sander before we have a pissed-off python to deal with, Adel answered, turning her snake around and slithering at a fast pace back to the central building and the cafeteria doors.

Neil looked toward the woods a final moment, frowned for a second, then turned around to follow Adel’s snake.

Chapter IV

San just finished licking the peanut butter from his fingers when the refrigerator door creaked open. Adel's snake poked through, slithered in and turned into her human form.

He froze, guilty.

"You are in the peanut butter again," She said, resigned.

"Yes," San answered. He finished licking his fingers, put the lid on, and tucked it into his pocket for later. "I think eating was the only thing distracting me from changing to my python."

Neil came in behind Adel.

"We almost caught him or her." Neil started the conversation. He gave the description and waited for additional orders. "I'm fairly certain he—or she—is a shifter. I just don't recognize the kind. Not snake, that's for sure."

"Not a snake?" San answered. "There are other shifters?"

"There are, actually, just not a lot of interaction between the species," Adel replied.

"That's a new one on me, and I've traveled all over. Surely, I would have run into them before."

"Not necessarily, San. Remember, in human form, even if we change our tongues, we can't smell as well as we do when we take our snake form. It would be hard to 'look' for them without giving ourselves away." Adel looked at him sternly.

"Why didn't you tell me there were other kinds?" San asked Adel in turn.

"Didn't seem important. I figured if you came to me with a question about a new smell you couldn't place, I would tell you then. You never did. There are a lot of things I need to talk to you about. But first"—Adel turned to Neil—"would you go and find out everything you can on the Department of Defense's contract for security consultancy they published a few days ago?" She turned to San and continued, "I think you should bid on it."

"Do you mind if I ask why?"

"No, but it's a conversation you and I need to have without anybody around." She turned back to Neil. "Give us about thirty minutes, maybe an

hour.” She rubbed her forehead like she was getting a headache. “I’m not sure how this conversation is going to go.” Neil nodded and left.

“I’m not going to like this explanation, am I?” San said, resigned, walking out of the fridge.

“Unfortunately, you won’t,” Adel said as she followed.

San opened his private office door, thinking this would be the best place to have this conversation. It was inviting and cozy with its warm wood tones and sleek, slightly modern desk and chair. The computer on the desk helped too. Adel followed him in and sat in the leather wingback chair San kept for guests. He walked around to his seat, also leather but an ergonomic computer chair since he spent most of his time on the computer when he wasn’t doing a consult. He looked at his mother.

“Well?”

Adel sighed.

“I fear that the employee turnovers we have been having lately are because of espionage on the corporate level. I’ve been developing a brand new high-tech weapon assembly for the Department of Defense in the US for the last several years. I’m almost done, and the problems started when I got to the final testing stage. I suspect that we might have a mole here, because ever since then, an assistant joins, spends a few weeks learning the lay of the land, and then leaves for ‘a better offer.’ That ‘better offer’ has been suspiciously linked to Boa Ballistics, at a time when the employee in question ‘conveniently’ needs it.” Adel led the discussion, disgusted with what she had to tell Sander.

“I thought we had them sign a non-compete and confidentiality agreement. How do you know this? Why didn’t you come to me sooner? I would have helped out. You know that.”

“I know, son. I didn’t want to burden you, and you’ve been away most of the last several months on these contracts. And yes, they signed them, but that doesn’t mean enough money wouldn’t change their mind.” Adel sighed again and slumped into the chair a little. “I have ways to find out things, and I can’t tell you how I know. I need you to trust me, and know that I wouldn’t steer you wrong. I will answer any questions when the time is right.”

San ran his hands through his short hair. “I do trust you. I’d just like to be informed, especially when it’s related to FANG.” He took a deep breath and did

a few breathing exercises to stop the adrenaline from the incident and this revelation.

“What about the DOD you mentioned earlier?”

“I suspect that Boa is also going to bid on that contract, and I don’t want to lose anything else to them. I think you would do a great job with it, and it will be a little payback to Boa if we can get it. It’s not set in stone, but I think you have a good chance at it.”

“I just got back from a lengthy consult.”

“I know.” Adel pleaded with her eyes.

Sander let out a sigh of his own and changed topics slightly. “Will you tell me about where I come from, how I got here, what happened in my early years? I’ve wanted to know for a long time. I feel like it’s time to find out.”

Adel sucked in a sharp breath. She looked shocked, fearful, then resigned—and a little hopeful? *Nah, that can’t be right*, San thought to himself.

“Soon I will answer your questions, as there are a lot of things I can’t reveal right now, but I will when the time is right. Speaking of that, I noticed earlier that you seemed to have changed as well. What is up with that?” Adel smiled a little at the last question.

Sander looked troubled for a moment, then answered, “I feel like something is coming. Something big. I said as much to Neil earlier today, too.”

He thought he heard his mother mutter something about “not far from the tree,” but chalked it up as something he misheard. He was tired, to say the least. “I will go because I trust your instincts more than I trust mine,” he continued.

Adel smiled big. “Thank you.”

Chapter V

USA, the office of the Secretary of Defense.

After a few days of research and proposal writing, San was here at the Department of Defense waiting on his appointment to present. It was a rather nice place for a waiting room. Relatively comfy chairs in a modern style. Not exactly his cup of tea, but he guessed it worked. He was a little nervous, considering the information Adel gave him before he left, but it was up to the gods now.

A door opened from the office he was waiting for, and the masculine beauty that walked out struck San. He looked to be a similar height, maybe a little taller, with military-cut, sandy-brown hair, and was just his type. He started to sweat, beads breaking out on his forehead. He felt flushed and wanted to loosen the necktie he was wearing for this meeting so he could get a little air. The air in the room felt about one hundred degrees as attraction skyrocketed through him. Proposal completely forgotten, their gazes locked, and something passed between them. He noticed the lovely shade of sage green as the man's eyes pierced through his soul and settled there. They broke contact only when the mystery man exited the waiting room, taking away San's elevated body temperature, the strange connection, and the feeling of home.

Whoa, San thought to himself. That was weird. What just happened? It was so sudden, and then it was gone. It made no sense, that strange feeling of completeness. I must have imagined it. But it felt so real...

"Doctor Smith. Doctor Lysander Smith?" A voice broke his reverie, calling his name.

"Yes, that's me." San stood up and walked in to sell his proposal.

At the end of the hour-and-a-half bid for the consultancy work the Defense Department wanted, he got the "don't call us, we'll call you" line. It was clear that they would contact him if they chose his company. He left the office and headed to the front of the building to hail a taxi.

Out of sorts, and at loose ends now that this part was over, he finally let himself remember the man that wasn't ever really far from his thoughts the entire time since seeing him earlier. He resolved to get back to the hotel room, change out of this monkey suit, and go to the bar he saw at the hotel when he

checked in earlier in the day. He needed a drink. What he wanted to do was contemplate the man he just saw at the DOD, and the strange feelings and heat he invoked.

San hailed a taxi, got in, provided the hotel's name, and looked out the window. As he watched the streets and people swiftly sped past on the way from the Pentagon, he contemplated the feeling of impending change he had been having. He now knew it had something to do with the man he just saw in passing a few hours ago. The feeling he had sensed at the compound returned tenfold, and he was sure his life was about to change. Whether for better or worse would be a question for later.

The taxi arrived at the historic hotel across the Potomac River from the Pentagon and right on Pennsylvania Avenue. It amused him to view the White House when he was in the States, so he stayed in viewing distance whenever he could. He quickly headed to his room, changed into more comfortable clothing, dressing in a polo shirt and slacks, and headed to the rooftop bar.

He walked in and immediately noticed the man he saw earlier was near the maître d' stand. The man was staring at him as he entered. Their eyes locked again, and he felt his soul settle, felt the heat rise, and felt this inexplicable knowledge that he should know him that he couldn't explain. San noticed the man was sweating too.

Maybe he feels the same way. Only one way to find out.

Without acknowledgement to the man at the podium asking if he had reservations, he walked over to the mystery man, pulled to him in a way he couldn't explain, along with the other feelings he had. As he approached, the man stood and extended his hand like he was expecting San.

“Hello, my name is Bas, Basil Jones. Do we know each other?”

San grasped his hand in a firm grip. “Lysander Smith, but please call me San. May I call you Bas? I don't think we've met, but I feel like I know you.”

Without invitation and not breaking eye contact with Bas, San sat down in the chair next to him like they were more intimate than two men meeting for the first time. The attraction between them pinged through him, and he had no doubt that the man was gay. It didn't need confirmation, he just knew. Still looking into Bas's eyes, San saw the knowledge of himself there as well. Nothing was said, but they knew this detail instinctively about the other.

They ordered drinks, and while they waited, Bas started the conversation.

“So... Do you feel this attraction I feel for you as much as I do?”

That was refreshingly direct, San thought to himself.

“Yes, I do. Is it as hot in here as it feels like?”

“It was comfortable until you walked in and the temperature rose. Very similar to the office at the DOD when we locked eyes. I could hardly make myself leave the room. I actually contemplated stopping to get your number before I left, to not have to hunt you down in this big city. And here you are. I am desperately trying to not bend you over this table and take you right here. Very inappropriate thoughts and feelings, but that is how I feel.”

“Same here. I desperately want you to bend me over.” San smirked. “I feel this connection to you that I can’t explain. And I haven’t felt this kind of instant attraction in a long time, if ever. I feel like what I would think a teenage boy would feel like in the first flush of youthful hormones.”

“Were you not a hormonal teenager?” Bas inquired.

San confessed what few memories he knew, comfortable with this near stranger. “I don’t remember my teenage years. I was found in the middle of a jungle in Brazil near my adopted mother’s home. She took me in but didn’t really tell me much about what happened before.” *He doesn’t need to know that I’m a shifter yet. Too bad I can’t check to see if he is one right now.*

“This is too weird. The same thing happened to me. I don’t really remember growing up. I was found as a young man near Congo, in Africa, without memory or a stitch of clothing.” Bas smirked. The room, if it was possible, got warmer.

“I don’t normally do this,” San commented, squirming at the idea of Bas sans clothing. “But, I feel like I need to be close to you... intimately.” *Good thing I’m direct too.*

Bas’s eyes flared with heat. “I don’t normally go to bed with men from bars myself, but I feel I must have you. You are right. I feel a connection, too. Are you staying in this hotel?”

“Yes, tenth floor.”

“I’m two floors down from here.”

“You’re closer. Let’s go.”

Their drinks were left untouched. Bas threw some money on the table to more than cover the drinks and a hefty tip, and they left the bar. Bypassing the

elevators, they took the stairs down to Bas's floor. Bas led the way, with San following close behind.

San stared at Bas's fine ass. Even through the charcoal gray slacks Bas wore, he wanted to touch and feel what must be toned glutes that were just the right size for San to grip. He almost salivated at the thought of possibly rimming the guy. He grew hard instantly at the thought. He always loved the feel of a tongue in his ass—enjoyed tasting that sweet, puckered hole, too. It hadn't happened in a long time, and he didn't know what made him feel safe with this guy. But, he knew his instincts, and he knew to trust them. This guy would be it for him. Scary thought. He pushed it aside to think about later. In the meantime, he had an ass to worship.

He caught up with Bas right when they got to the hotel door. He scanned the hallway and noticed nobody was around. San plastered himself against the other man, who was unlocking the door, and used his right hand to grope that toned ass, as he nipped at Bas's earlobe. "Please tell me you like ass licking. I want to rim you so bad," San whispered in his ear.

Bas moaned softly, trying to keep quiet as he leaned against the door, pushing his backside into San's erection. He moaned even more when San nipped at his lobe again, and had to take a minute to use his words.

"Not my—" Bas's voice hitched as San's other hand started on his left nipple over the shirt, and he found his voice again to continue, "—usual thing, but I might..." San thrust firmly against Bas, wordlessly asking permission to reverse the roles they had discussed at the bar. "I might be persuaded on both counts." Bas's voice got rough and gravelly as pleasure escaped his lips loudly and longly. He caught his breath, not caring about volume anymore. "Oh yeah... right there. Yes, please fuck me. I need to feel you."

San tamped his desire down enough to think. He loathed stopping, but he needed to get into Bas's room right then. He stepped away from Bas, grabbed the key card, and slid it home to unlock the door. Gripping him with his shifter strength, praying Bas was too far-gone to notice the shorter guy manhandling him like he was nothing, San gently moved him over. Although he was pretty solidly built, Bas let him move them away from the door to get inside. San pushed Bas inside, pulled the door closed with a solid click, and proceeded to bury himself in Bas again. Nibbling here and there, touching everywhere he could get his hands on, he pressed him into the door, not quite ready to move to the bed yet. Soon, Bas was groaning again, still in that somewhat stunned state he had been in since San had plastered him against the outside of the door.

“You okay with this?” San paused long enough to confirm Bas was still into this as much as he was. While he was being this aggressive—a little out of the norm for him—he didn’t want this to be about satisfying his own needs. He wanted to make sure Bas was good, too, which definitely meant something. He had no idea what, though.

“Yes,” Bas said in a drawn-out groan as San continued to play his body like a violin. He looked San in the eye, need and desire plain to see. “I want you. Take me to that bed over there and fuck me into the mattress.”

“Yes, sir!” San said hastily and pulled him toward the bed. He sat down, drawing Bas to him between his legs. He proceeded to unbutton Bas’s shirt, then his pants, and found no underwear—his naked dick proudly saluting him and at attention. *Thank the gods.* And he sucked down Bas’s respectable nine inches to the back of his throat in one motion.

“God,” Bas grunted out. San looked up and saw the bliss on Bas’s handsome face. He could get used to looking at him all the time.

San closed his eyes and proceeded to give Bas the best blowjob of his life. Bas started to thrust his hips, gripping San’s head to have some kind of purchase. “That feels too good, I’m going to fall over.” Instead of pulling back, San squeezed Bas’s butt cheeks while holding him up. That only made Bas thrust harder. He lost himself in the sensations of Bas taking his mouth so thoroughly, his own dick hard as granite. Saliva gathered, paving the way for him to pick up speed, and he got into a rhythm that had him humming slightly. Gods, he was in heaven. Absolute heaven.

Surprisingly, he wasn’t trying to race to his own climax, unlike the few times when he had picked up tricks—the few times when he had to fuck something rather than be fucked.

San hummed more, focused so much on tipping Bas over the edge, he failed to realize his own rapid approach. Bas started to stutter like he was close, and San heard a faint, “Oh! Oh!” and a gurgle of a very intense peak as he felt the cock he was sucking pulse in his mouth. He swallowed everything he got and smiled as much as he could with a dick in his mouth, the pleasure so good and right, his own release pulsing in his pants. *Wow.* That had not happened in a long time.

He slowed down, to draw out Bas’s pleasure, and Bas’s grip loosened slightly. Despite both of them reaching a climax, he wanted to draw the ecstasy out, right into round two. His desire to fuck Bas was high, and he had to have

him. Soon, Bas was moaning again, his dick never really going soft from his orgasm. San's own erection returned rapidly, and he knew he had to have Bas's ass, starting with a taste.

San pulled off Bas's dick, looked up, and met his opened eyes.

"Can I rim you?"

Still looking a little dazed, it took a good half a minute for Bas to respond, satisfaction predominantly visible on his face, with hints of desire still showing. "Yes." He gazed down at San, raising an eyebrow. "A little overdressed? Stand up."

San stood up, a wet spot on his pants and his erection pressing into his zipper. He might have to figure out how to remove zipper imprints if he got any harder. With that thought, he finished undressing Bas, his own satisfaction and desire running abundant throughout his body. So much so, his inner snake was starting to sit up and take notice. *Later*, he thought, and the serpentine side settled back down. Not sure what he had just promised his snake, he let go of Bas to start on his own clothing. Bas stopped him, pulled him close, and proceeded to kiss him near senseless.

"Goddamn! I want you bad." The words burst out of San without thought as he dueled with Bas's tongue, giving him a taste of himself. Bas must not have minded, because he thoroughly ravished San's mouth. With a nip on the lips, San moved away from him enough to turn him around. San proceeded to push him onto the bed, Bas slightly bouncing on the firm mattress.

Bas rose onto his elbows. "You gonna get over here and rim me?" Heat was apparent in his eyes, as if he couldn't wait to feel San's tongue in his ass, erection prominently pointing to San.

"Flip over and I'll give it to you right now." San growled the words as he took off his clothing so fast he almost forgot to grab the small packages in his pocket. Dropping his clothing to the floor where he stood, he crawled onto the bed. Bas flipped over to his stomach, and San settled between his legs. Throwing the supplies next to Bas, he just stared for a few minutes, appreciating the view. Bas looked over his shoulder at him, a question in his eyes, hot desire causing them to almost glow.

"What are you waiting for?"

"I'm appreciating the view. I enjoy this too much to rush. Unless you have somewhere to be, we've got all night." At his words, Bas's eyes did glow, and

he wondered at that for a moment before diving into the clenching star that winked at him as he separated the muscular cheeks. Closing his eyes in bliss, San worked the hole loose, slipping his tongue in and out, and driving Bas crazy, if the wiggling and whimpering were any indication.

Using touch and sound, San worked Bas into a frenzy. When he started humping the bed and was reduced to a garbled “more,” said over and over, San figured his lover was ready. He pulled out, nipping at a cheek on the way, and proceeded to suit up. He had to pause for a moment, as the very act of rolling on the condom almost set him off. Rimming just did it for him, and sometimes he could get off untouched just from the intimacy. He didn’t want that right now. He had leaked so much, he almost didn’t need the lube. Not wanting to hurt Bas in any way, he finished his prep, quickly coating his covered dick with all of the lube in the package.

“You ready for the fuck of your life?” San smirked as he lined up his stiff dick against the pretty little hole, pulling Bas onto his knees.

“Take me. I want to feel it,” Bas growled at him.

Inarticulate noises, moans, and thrashing greeted San as he thrust home. *Home. Oh gods, it does feel like home.* At that thought, he was lost to the sensations as he rammed into Bas, over and over, taking him roughly as he had asked. Holding on to his sanity with a thread, he tried to make sure Bas was good and not hurting from the pounding sex. Considering how much bliss he saw on the man’s face through slit eyes, San figured he was good to go. He let go of his restraint and went at it with all his strength. Usually with humans, he didn’t let go like this, but he felt he could with Bas.

The tingling of impending orgasm started at the base of his nuts and spread through him as heat and desire. To make sure he wasn’t alone in his release, San let go of the right side of Bas’s hips to reach around and grip his throbbing cock. As soon as his hand enclosed him, Bas thrust back once forcefully, and San’s hand was creamed. That tipped him over. He grabbed Bas’s hips again—spunk and all—thrust two more times, and San was coming so hard in the tight body that he saw stars.

When he regained his senses, he withdrew, grabbed the condom, tied it off, and tossed it to the trash can nearby. Not even waiting for it to land, he collapsed on Bas, rolled to the right, and faced him so as not to crush him completely.

“Wow,” San muttered. When he didn’t hear a response, but got a loud snore instead, he opened his eyes and looked at his lover’s face. A peaceful expression on the sleeping man’s face confirmed that San had, indeed, fucked Bas into unconsciousness. Smiling, he decided to take a few minutes to recover himself, and found himself escaping into oblivion, relaxed for the first time in months.

San awoke suddenly, the dream he was having slipping away as a new dawn peeked through the window. He looked blearily around and smiled, remembering what had happened last night. He looked beside him, where Bas was still sleeping soundly. He must have been very tired.

He looks relaxed.

As much as his morning wood wanted another round, and as much as he wanted to watch Bas sleep, San had an early flight back home. He glanced regretfully at the clock next to the bed and saw it was barely six a.m. His flight left in two hours. Good thing he flew first class, but he still needed to hustle. Luckily, he could take a fast shower, throw his stuff into his carry-on, and be out the door in under fifteen minutes. He gave Bas a gentle kiss, making sure not to wake him, and slowly slipped out of the bed.

San looked around the dimly lit room as dawn was peeking through the closed curtains. He saw a standard hotel desk across the bed with what looked like a brown leather wallet, some change, and a few business cards. Scanning around, he saw the hotel imprinted notepad most high-end rooms had, and went over to find a pen and pick up the paper to write a quick note. As he was looking for the pen, a logo caught his eye. He had seen it before.

“Sonofabitch,” San exclaimed softly, not wanting to wake Bas as he picked up a card for a closer look. He closed his eyes, praying to all the gods, and to any he didn’t know about. *Please, please, tell me I’m wrong.* He looked down and saw what he feared.

Basil Jones

President

Boa Ballistics

He stopped at the “Boa Ballistics” and collapsed, still naked, into the chair next to the desk. There was other information; a website, an address in Congo,

Africa. Africa? He's a long way away like I am. Who would have thunk it? And then the anger hit, along with the guilt.

“Oh gods. I've slept with the enemy.”

San stewed, got dressed, and stewed some more. Finally, he gave up catching his flight, his anger running hot enough that it turned ice cold. He settled into the chair and waited for the sleeping bastard to wake up. He wasn't quite sure why he waited instead of kicking Bas's ass out of bed and demanding answers immediately. The mind-blowing sex must have made him soft. He just couldn't bring himself to interrupt the peaceful expression on the other man's face.

Chapter VI

Basil was bone tired. He had been on the road for most of the last nine months. Boa Ballistics was thriving, and they had even had to take on a bunch of new employees. That was what his foster mother had told him when he signed his approval on all of the new hire applications.

He had formed the weapons and security company many decades before. The conflict and lawlessness in the jungle inspired him to create a business that would protect those who couldn't protect themselves. He hired on any family members interested in working with him. So many times he questioned that move. Working with family could be hazardous to personal relationships. Then again, family and personal relationships didn't exactly go hand in hand in his world.

The only reason he opened his company up to his brother, mother, and cousin was because they once opened their home to him. When he was found wandering and alone, a young snake shifter with no memory, the elders placed him with his family. Though there was never any love or even warmth shown to him, he was kept fed and clothed. He had a roof over his head and a tentative sense of safety. He couldn't forget that, despite the fact he had never even been hugged.

So Bas hired on the three family members interested in working for his company, but they were as personable with the clients as they had been with him. Which was to say, not at all. Bas found himself on the road all the time. His mother had been scheduling him for so many appointments that he wasn't even sure what his house looked like anymore. He should just sell the thing, but he longed to one day be home, with a partner he loved, maybe kids too. Only, the Anaconda shifter community looked down on homosexuality. They tolerated him because of his successful business that brought funds to the area. He doubted any of the females would surrogate for him. Or that he'd even find another shifter to live his very long life with.

It would be nice if San was a shifter. Bas became aware of his thoughts through the haze of sleep. He realized he must be near waking if his thought process was so clear. An image arose in his mind of the sexy man he let plow his ass the night before. Though he was slightly shorter than Bas, San gave as good as he got. Though to be technical, the man had only given before they passed out cold. Bas hoped he could remedy that fact when he woke fully. He

wanted to feel the muscular body under his writhing in pleasure as he plunged his length into San's hot channel.

He knew a smile formed on his face, and he reached to the other side of the bed to make contact with San. When he felt only rumpled sheets beneath his hand, his smile faded and he opened his eyes. Instead of in bed next to him, San was sitting in the lone chair in the room, glaring at Bas. Their night had been magical, the sex intense. Bas had felt an almost gravitational pull on his heart and his dick toward the other man. San had made it sound like he was feeling the same attraction. So why was his gaze filled with ice now?

Bas sat up, preferring to be on an even level with the other man. "What?" he asked when the man continued staring in anger as Bas slipped on his pants.

"I found your business card. Boa Ballistics?" San's voice dripped with venom.

Bas failed to see why his business card or company would cause that kind of disdain in San. "That's my company. So?"

"I own FANG, Fast Action Neutralization Guard."

So that was the problem. Bas had heard of FANG, a competitor in the weapons and security field. Obviously, San had been in the DOD office for the same reason he had. He supposed it was a conflict of interest to sleep with the competition, but it didn't seem as detrimental to Bas. They were both adults, and what had happened was consensual. If he wouldn't let it bother him if San won the contract, it shouldn't bother the other man if the reverse happened. "I've heard of your business, but I don't see what the problem is. We can be civil, I'm sure. If you get the contract, I'm not going to give you a hard time. Unless you want me to..." Bas gave San a lascivious grin.

San didn't react the way he hoped. If anything, his face grew stonier. "Did you know who I was before we talked in the bar?"

"I thought we established that we never met. There is a freaky connection; it feels like I've known you forever. But I didn't even know your name until you told me."

"You know what I think?" San asked. "I think you're lying to me. You seduced me after seeing me in the waiting room. You hoped in a haze of passion, I would reveal my company's secrets."

"Hey, now! I have been nothing but honest with you. You approached me, remember? I don't run my business that way. Everything I have, I earned. I

worked hard for it.” Basil could feel anger starting to course through his body now.

“Like all the employees you’ve poached from us? They stay just long enough to learn about our business and then leave for greener pastures. Tell me, do you send them in to spy on us straight from the beginning? Or do you just make an offer better than ours once you feel one of our employees has been with us long enough to have learned any of our trade secrets?”

“I have no idea what you are talking about. You’re sounding more than a little paranoid, but if you can’t trust me, maybe you should leave.”

“I have no intention of staying in your room longer than I have to. I just want to know what your end goal is. Do you plan on taking down my whole business?” San asked.

“Just go.” Bas was starting to feel a shift coming on. His eyes felt hot, and he hoped they weren’t glowing the way they did when passion or anger took over. They were always the first part of his body to reflect the change. San’s challenge that Bas wasn’t who he said he was infuriated him. He had never been anything but honest his whole life. All that he could remember, anyway.

Quicker than a mere human could act, San thrust his forearm against Bas’s chest and pinned him against the wall. Unlike the night before, it had nothing to do with lust and everything to do with mistrust. San’s eyes narrowed into slits, and to Bas’s surprise, a serpentine forked tongue slipped from San’s lips, and Bas knew he was scenting the air around them.

“An anaconda? Shit! I should have figured it out before. Only such an untrustworthy breed would attempt the subterfuge you have,” San spat out in disgust, his tongue returning to normal.

In a flash, Bas used his larger size to reverse their positions. San was pressed against the opposite wall, his chest heaving, Bas’s large hands gripping his biceps. Mimicking San’s earlier action, Bas flicked out his tongue, long and forked, to discover who and what he was dealing with.

Chapter VII

Python. San was a python shifter. Bas felt revulsion at learning San's species. He hadn't had any encounters with pythons from the time he could remember, so this feeling of extreme dislike didn't make any sense to him, just as his extreme attraction to San had baffled him. Things didn't add up, but the familiarity and contempt was very much real. Add in the fact that both of them had been found wandering with no memories, and Bas had to question if something had occurred between them, between their species, during the time he couldn't recall. He stopped his thought process there, realizing how ridiculous his thoughts were. Next, he'd be wearing aluminum foil over his head.

Bas let go of San's arms and sat on the bed. He waited for the other man to take his leave, but San sat down in the chair again. "I missed my flight," San grumbled.

"Are you going to blame me for deliberately keeping you from going home now?" Basil asked.

San glowered at him and then rolled his eyes. After too many minutes of silence passed, San spoke up. "What are you thinking?"

Bas had been quiet. He didn't know what to say. He had already defended himself, and San didn't believe him. He couldn't tell him that he felt like the two of them had been through this before. The warring families, the strong feelings they had for each other that somehow seemed forbidden. He knew without a doubt his family would hate San if he brought him back home. "Why did you say anacondas are untrustworthy? Have you had many bad interactions with us?"

San looked as if he was racking his memory for some recollection, but ended up shaking his head. "I don't think so. Yet it is what I felt bone deep when I smelled it on you. Someone must have told me about something your kind did."

"My kind? Am I really so distasteful? The anaconda den I come from has managed to live peacefully with the natives in an area known for the various militant groups that harm others. I donate portions of my profits to conflict resolution. Do I sound untrustworthy?"

San shook his head again. “*You* don’t. I know this sounds crazy. It’s as inexplicable as my feeling of knowing you, but when I recognized your scent as anaconda, which I’ve never even smelled before, my stomach turned over. I knew an intense hate for the species, and I don’t know why. I do know that it doesn’t change the feelings I have for you. I want you again. My cock is about to explode from my pants.” He rubbed the bulge Bas could see tenting his trousers.

Bas looked down and saw he sported an erection as well. He didn’t even notice it with the thoughts whirling in his mind. “I feel the same way about the python species as you do about anacondas. I want to hate you, but I can’t. What I feel is so... not hate.”

“Do you feel like this has all transpired before, like we are reliving a moment in history?” San asked quietly.

Fuck. That was exactly what it felt like, but Bas didn’t believe in past lives or déjà vu. He nodded, not wanting to voice his thoughts. He didn’t believe in fate, or any higher power, but how could he explain his intimate knowledge of the other man at first sight? This feeling of—No. He would not use the L word.

San moved from the chair to the bed and caressed Bas’s arm with the back of his hand. It took all of Bas’s willpower, but he jerked away from the touch. “I need some space. I can’t think clearly now. I want nothing more than to pound into you and cry your name as I release. But you think I am spying on you. You think ‘my kind’ is revolting.”

“Not you, though,” San insisted.

“You know it can’t work between us. I’m not going to give up my business to make you feel secure, and you will never trust me. I think we should part ways now.” Bas couldn’t keep the crack from his voice. This was ridiculous. He had known the man for less than twenty-four hours, but he felt an ache in his chest. He wanted to punch the offending area to make the hurt disappear. If that didn’t work, maybe he could schedule a lobotomy; he was clearly fucked in the head.

San made no move to leave, all the anger from earlier gone, evaporated into the air around them. Bas stood up and walked over to the door. He held it open and looked pointedly at San. “Please go.”

San rose slowly and walked over. Before he walked out the door, he grasped Bas’s arm. “I’ll go, for now. It’s been a helluva morning. I’m going to see if I can book the room for another night, and we need to talk about this. My

mother was the one who approached me with her concerns over the employee turnover. Every one of those who quit ended up at Boa Ballistics. There are other things she has come across that have caused her concern that she didn't have time to get into. So... yeah. Tonight, let's meet for dinner and talk things over. Please?"

Bas shrugged noncommittally. He closed the door behind San, who had kissed his cheek before walking out. As tempted as he was to throw himself on the bed and try to sleep again, he didn't. Bas threw on gym shorts and a tank top, and laced up his sneakers. He did his best thinking while running, and he had nothing but time to consider all the crazy feelings he had been having while his feet pounded the pavement. He left the hotel hoping to have some sort of resolution before dinner. He didn't owe San anything, but he knew he couldn't deny his request to talk over dinner.

When Bas returned to his room, he had jogged five miles and was beat. He had already been tired, and the run hadn't even helped him make any decisions about whether he could forgive San for all his accusations, or whether they were unfounded. Sure, Bas had approved multiple new hires in the past few months, but they couldn't *all* have come from the same place. He hadn't really looked at their work history. His mother had interviewed them and approved them, and he didn't believe she would hire people who couldn't do the job.

However, he wouldn't put it past her to steal employees from a competitor. Along with a dour personality, she was cunning and conniving. She didn't pull her punches, which was just another reason he didn't send her to bid on contracts. She might just try to take out the competition through physical harm. Regardless of her faults, though, Bas didn't want to believe he had been completely unaware of unethical business practices going on under his nose.

Pulling out his laptop, he accessed his company's database. He looked through the employee files but suspiciously found the new hire résumé missing. He worked his way through financial records and product development before confirming that everything seemed above board. Not that it was impossible for his mother or even his brother to be hiding things from him. It just pissed him off that his company was being called into question. He vowed to look into the situation even closer once he returned home.

Bas looked at the clock and saw he still had a few hours before it could be properly considered dinnertime. He hadn't had lunch or breakfast, and was

hungry, but the pillow calling his name was more urgent. He lay on top of the bed without removing his shoes and promptly fell asleep.

His dream started out more vivid than any he could recall. Two men were fighting with swords. The blades were about two feet long, and they looked heavy. They carried circular shields and wore togas and bronze helmets. Their bodies looked young, muscle just beginning to define their forms. They didn't look like they were trying to hurt each other, rather just fighting for sport.

When the taller of the two forms was disarmed, the shorter man dropped his own. He pulled his helmet from his head and tossed it next to the fallen blade. Shaking out his shoulder-length hair, his face was instantly recognizable to Bas. It was San. Younger and lankier, but still San. The taller man removed his helmet and Bas saw himself. Also younger, more youthful than he was when he had been found in the Congo.

Bas felt like he was visiting a past version of himself, just like Ebenezer did in *The Christmas Carol*. His younger self leaned toward the younger San and placed a chaste kiss on his lips.

"Why did you do that?" asked younger San.

The younger Bas blushed. "I'm sorry." He turned away from San, walking to where he had discarded his armor.

"Don't be. I liked it," San said, touching his own lips at the memory of their first kiss.

"I shouldn't have. We're both men. If that's not enough, there is the problem of our families."

"They really don't get along well," San agreed.

"No. I shouldn't h—" Young Bas's words were cut off as San took his lips, this time using his own to pry them open and thrust his tongue in. Young Bas attempted to move back, but San wrapped his arms around him, drawing him closer.

Bas kept watching until the young men parted, their breaths coming out heavy. "We could run away together," San said.

"You want to be with me?" young Bas asked incredulously.

"Yes. I think I've loved you forever, Bathier."

Bas startled at the name. It felt familiar to him. Perhaps it was just the similarity to his own name.

“I have loved you my whole life, Xander. I was too afraid I’d lose you if I admitted it. My parents would lock me up if they knew.”

“We don’t have to tell them,” Xander said. “We’ll just leave. Hide out in Persia, maybe.”

The two boys kissed again, confirming their plans for a future together.

“Is that really how you see us?” a new voice whispered in Bas’s ear. He jumped and turned to see San as he looked in the present day. San didn’t seem weirded out that they were watching themselves. What a strange dream. “Tell me then, are you playing the part of Juliet? Because I look awful in a dress.”

Bas watched San watch their younger selves. A grin spread across San’s face.

“I take that back. I’ve got pretty nice legs, if I do say so myself.” Bas rolled his eyes and extended his middle finger. San chuckled at his annoyance. “No? Perhaps you see us more like Maria and Tony?” San started singing about being a “jet.”

Bas looked at him blankly, wondering if San was crazy. He had no idea to what he was referring, but he looked ridiculous dancing around in Bas’s dream. “Don’t tell me you don’t recognize a *West Side Story* reference? A Broadway musical made into a movie? What kind of gay man are you?”

“Are you seriously stereotyping me? I like classic literature, sometimes sci-fi and mystery. Besides, you hardly look like the musical type.”

“Well, I am. Okay, if this isn’t *Romeo and Juliet* or *West Side Story*, I’ve got one more guess. *Grease*.”

Bas had heard of that musical. He would’ve had to have lived under a rock since 1978 to miss that phenomenon. He rolled his eyes at San but cracked a smile.

“Get it? Greece?” The joke wasn’t lost on Bas.

Both Bas and San returned their gazes to their dream selves. The young men had lost their togas, tossed them aside, and were writhing on the ground. They tangled their slick tongues and rubbed their erections against one another’s. San grasped his own hard-on and looked at Bas. “How is this happening?” he asked. “Am I in your dream?”

“Maybe I’m in yours?” Bas replied.

“Nope. Because I wasn’t sleeping.”

Chapter VIII

After going to the reservation desk and extending his stay, San had to reschedule his flight home as well. He kept playing over the fight he had with Bas, feeling as if that wasn't the first time they had argued about their families. He also felt sure that it wouldn't be their last. He decided to go to the hotel gym to burn off some of the stress of the morning. An hour later, San's muscles were like jelly. He lowered himself gently into the hot tub to soak.

With the jet against his back and the bubbles tickling his chest, San rolled his head and stretched his neck. Suddenly San's body jerked as if he had been electrocuted. His eyes rolled back in his head, and he found himself in a garden area. A tall man, dressed in ancient Roman or Greek clothing, was disarmed by a shorter man, both of their heads covered by bronze helmets. He had the sense of being in a dream though he knew he wasn't sleeping.

San looked around and saw Basil standing to his right. His intense gaze was fixed on the couple, and San watched him. When San was younger, he had a lot of questions about shifters and how he had become one. With no memory to tell him where he had come from, his curiosity made perfect sense. Adel had told him of several mythologies that might have been the start of snake shifters. Greek gods and curses. She also told San a story of shared dreams between soul mates. It was all hypothetical; she finished the story with her idea that they just evolved that way. Her words haunted him now, though. Was San sharing a dream right now? And did this mean that Bas was his soul mate?

Bas's mouth dropped open and San followed his stare. The two men were unmasked and kissing. That was surprising in itself, but what shocked San was the two men were versions of Bas and San. They were younger, less built, and both had hair to their shoulders, but they were undoubtedly *them*. The sight caused a feeling of familiarity in San, almost a memory. San shook his head to clear the odd thought and did what he did best. Putting on his most rueful smile, he approached the older version of Bas and gave him hell for dreaming about young versions of themselves clad in togas.

When the teasing was through, San was left with only his curiosity again. "How is this happening?" he asked Bas. Their younger versions were naked and writhing, and San wished he and Bas were doing the same in reality. "Am I in your dream?"

Bas couldn't supply San with any more knowledge than he had before he had asked the question. Both men stopped conversing as the younger Bas plunged his erection into the younger San's mouth. San rubbed his own growing bulge through the swim trunks he was wearing. Moans escaped all four of the men's mouths. "I want to get out of here," Bas told San. "I need you."

"You need to wake up, then."

"I don't know how. This feels too real." In response to Bas's confusion, San reached over and pinched Bas. Bas let out a curse and scowled at San, but they remained observers to the past lovers.

"I don't know either, Basil. But if they keep going at it, I'm going to bust a nut in your dream." San paused in thought. "Hey, if I come in your dream, will I come in real life, too?"

Bas reached out with the hand that wasn't squeezing his cock, and shoved San. San let out a laugh. "All I'm sayin' is that maintenance is going to be pissed when they have to clean out the hot tub because you dragged me into your dream."

Just then, a man dressed in fine robes walked in on the two young lovers. San thought he bore a striking resemblance to Adel, and he wondered if it was his dream after all. Bas wouldn't know what she looked like. "You need to get out of here," the man told the other Basil and Sander. "Someone is coming."

San would have made a joke that a lot of people were "coming," but his humor didn't feel appropriate in this situation. He stopped stroking himself when another figure interrupted the entwined couple. "Father!" the younger Basil gasped.

They two young men stood up, unconcerned with their nudity. "I can explain," young San said. The man young Bas called father sneered at the younger San and glanced with disgust at young Bas. "Go home, Bathier. This perversion ends now. This abomination is your enemy, and he is male. There is no end to the atrocities you have committed by lying with him this night. You will never see him again!" He grabbed his son's arm and ordered some men San hadn't noticed to "take care of him." He jerked his head to the younger San before dragging young Bas—Bathier—away. San noticed Basil had disappeared, too. It appeared he was trapped in Bas's dream by himself.

Two men grabbed young San and tied his hands with rope. Then they used the excess length to wrap around his neck. He struggled, and the robed man

spoke, promising young San he would get help. He disappeared into thin air, and all San could see was his past self being hog-tied. A whip cracked, and the guard hit young San's legs with a stick, knocking him to the ground. The guard lifted the stick and brought it down to strike young San's head. Time moved in slow motion for the older San, and then he was gasping for air as he jerked awake, half-submerged under the hot tub's foamy bubbles.

San escaped from his near-death experience and dried off. He would have to worry every time he wanted to swim, or even take a shower, if he would be sucked into another person's consciousness, like he had with Bas. After throwing on shorts and a T-shirt, he found himself stalking down the hall to Bas's room. He had to know if they had both really been together in that dream or if he was just losing his mind.

He rapped sharply on the hotel door. Bas threw open the door and engulfed San in a hug. "I thought I'd never see you again."

Despite San's frustration over the situation, he returned Bas's embrace. "You know it was just a dream, right?"

Bas pulled back from San and looked at him with surprise. "You really were there, weren't you?"

"Yes. It is nearly impossible to believe that we shared that dream, but Adel did mention something to me briefly about the stories before. Shared thoughts and dreams between soul mates."

Bas grew quiet, and San worried he had spooked him with the talk of magic and soul mates. Was it really that hard to believe in when you already knew of the existence of shifters? To San, it didn't seem out of the realms of possibility. "Is it too soon to talk about this?" he asked Bas.

"No," Bas replied. "I have wondered about our strange connection since we met. I'm not a believer in fate or destiny, but the way I feel when I'm around you makes me reconsider everything I know."

"We are bonded." San spoke his thoughts. "Connected." He touched Bas's chest over his heart. "I feel it here." He then touched his own chest. He looked into Bas's eyes before touching his temple. "And here." San's hand moved to his own temple. "I feel you mentally and emotionally as if we are one."

Bas looked at San and then nodded his agreement. "I don't know how any of this is possible, but I'm in love with you, San."

San felt the completeness and knew instinctively what had to happen next. “I need you to fuck me, Bas. I need to feel you inside me physically.”

“I want to be inside you San. More than you know. But, I think I need to talk to your mother about the shady business dealings she thinks my company is doing. That needs to be resolved before we can be together completely. I know this sounds stupid—it shouldn’t affect us—but I feel like we need to be completely unencumbered before we are together. Like it could make things worse if we don’t.” Bas shook his head as if confused why he needed to do what he was talking about.

“Are you thinking about your dream? Did that scare you?” San asked, trying to figure out where Bas was coming from.

“I shouldn’t care about a figment of my imagination, but it felt like a warning.”

“Okay, then. We’ll try to get you a ticket on my plane. Let’s settle this so we can be together in every way possible.”

Chapter IX

On a plane to Brazil

Bas found himself sitting across the aisle from San. It was the best they could get with less than twenty-four-hours notice. Even though he had placed a moratorium on intercourse, he wished San could be next to him. The lightest contact would generate a peaceful feeling inside him. San had stayed in his room again, though he had booked his own room for another night. In his arms, Bas had slept soundly. If he had dreamed, he didn't remember it, and he hadn't dragged San into it.

Landing in Brazil didn't seem much different from the Congo to Basil. There were many forests, but it didn't seem quite as dangerous. Not that he had ever worried, given his shape-shifting ability. His nervousness now was different. It was the worry that San's family and friends wouldn't like him, that they would have the same prejudices against him that San had. It took a couple of hours to drive to the compound where San ran his business. By the time they arrived, Bas's shirt was damp with perspiration and his hands were clammy.

A knock sounded on Bas's window, and he looked up to see San. "Are you getting out?" Bas hadn't even realized they had stopped and San had exited the vehicle.

He opened the door and got out. When San reached for his hand, Bas wiped his palms on his shorts first. As if San knew what he was doing, he grinned wryly at Bas. "A little nervous?"

Bas gave San a death glare. "I'd like to see how you'd feel if you were meeting my family for the first time."

"I'm pretty sure anger would overtake any nerves," San explained.

Bas rolled his eyes, but he couldn't find it in himself to defend his family members. "Yeah, well, let's see what your mom has on them first. And don't forget that you can't judge all anaconda shifters by them."

San stopped walking and faced Bas. Putting both of his hands on Bas's shoulders, he looked into his eyes. "I know one anaconda shifter who is pretty amazing, so I promise not to make any more assumptions."

Bas noticed quite a few questioning stares when they entered the building marked as R&D. A few employees began to whisper to each other, and he

suspected they knew who he was by their resulting glares. He did his best to ignore the both the curiosity and animosity directed his way, but when they reached a tall man wearing a whip on his belt, Bas felt real fear. The whip uncoiled and Bas felt the need to shift in defense. San's breathing grew agitated next to him, but he greeted the man with a hug. "Neil."

Neil looked at his boss and returned the whip to his belt and secured it in place. "Sorry, San. Gut reaction." The man sniffed the air and sneered at Bas. "Anaconda, boss? What's he doing here?"

"He's a friend, Neil. He's here to investigate some suspicious activity and hopefully help." Neil looked like he doubted San's declaration and chilled Bas with his narrowed gaze.

Bas decided not to be the quiet third party any longer and held his hand out to San's friend. "I'm Basil Jones."

Neil declined to take Bas's hand but introduced himself. "Neil Brandt."

Basil lowered his hand, and San glared at Neil. "I didn't think I'd have to be so blunt, Neil, but Bas is more than just a friend. He's also my lover and soul mate. I expect you to treat him with as much respect as you give me."

"You don't believe in soul mates, San. And I've done my research. He works for Boa Ballistics. Our competitor."

"I own Boa Ballistics," Bas clarified. "I might be a competitor, but it was never my intent to cause trouble for your company. I'm going to do my best to figure out who is and deal with them."

San nodded. "I know all this, and I still love him, Neil. So, please?"

Neil nodded briskly and moved out of the way. "I'll just tag along, though. Okay? I told you I had your back, and I'm not going to walk away until I'm positive he holds no threat."

"That's fine," San said. Bas nodded in agreement, and the three men made their way to Adel's office.

Adel looked up as San entered the room after rapping on the door twice. "It's nice to see you, Sander. How was your trip?"

"Enlightening," he answered. He looked toward the door and motioned for another man to come in, with Neil following.

Adel's mouth formed a surprised O. "What do we have here?"

"This is Basil Jones of Boa Ballistics. After some crazy reactions to being in his presence, we fought, fell for each other, and then shared a dream."

Adel's eyes widened and she startled. "Is that right?" Always careful of not showing her snake side, San seemed surprised when her serpentine tongue whipped out and flicked the air for the scent of the newcomer. When her forked appendage retracted, Bas expected to see the same anger that San had displayed. Instead, there was resigned happiness, followed by apprehension.

"Can I talk to Basil alone, San?" Adel asked. San looked confused, but he nodded and walked to the door. "You too, Neil."

"But Adel, you shouldn't be alone with him. We don't know his intentions," he protested.

"I'm perfectly able to take care of myself," she said, and Neil relented. He stalked down the hallway, and San threw Bas a wistful glance before he walked out.

With both his supporter and detractor gone, Bas faced his lover's mother.

"Can I be frank with you?" she asked.

Surprised at her abrupt conversation starter, Bas merely nodded.

"I want nothing more than to see San happy, whether it's with a woman or a man. I'm just not sure that you are the one who can help him achieve that."

Bas shook his head in disbelief at her gall. "I'm happy to hear that you want the best for San, but I think it's up to him to decide what he wants. I love your son, and if that's enough for him, it should be enough for you."

Adel grimaced. "If only love was always enough." Bas could see the compassion in her eyes, but melancholy as well.

"You'll have to let us see if it is. On our own."

Adel nodded. "Okay. I'll mind my own business, but we should try to work out the problems we've been having between the two companies and families. I can tell you for sure that with the poisonous rivalry that's been occurring, your chances of making it work are nil."

"I agree," Bas replied. "I have to tell you, if my company has been guilty of the crimes San accused it of, I have been completely unaware. I realize that I should know what my employees have been doing, but I've been on the road

more than in the office. I wish I could say none of them would be capable of it, but I know that some of my family suffers from hubris and greed. If your proof shows that underhanded business dealings have occurred, I promise to deal with them accordingly.”

“Okay then, let me show you what I’ve noticed and the evidence I’ve acquired,” Adel told him. She showed Bas her employee records and the reference requests she received from Boa Ballistics on their new employees.

“It does seem odd that all the turnover went to one place, but it can hardly be proof.”

“There’ve been some attempts to hack into our systems as well,” Adel offered.

Bas grimaced. “Show me.” He knew his cousin Lola’s boyfriend used to be a hacker. Bas had hired on Marcus Rafferty—or Raff, as they had called him—as a systems security specialist to protect his own online presence. He really hoped Raff wasn’t attempting to hack San’s company; though, it might mean the rest of his family was in the clear.

Adel pulled up a screen on her computer, and Bas leaned in to look at it. “I have a program running to record all attempts made to break through our firewall. It shows here for the last 6 months, at least two attempts have been made daily.”

“This is some pretty sophisticated software,” Bas said in admiration.

“It’s definitely not one of those free virus protectors. You can never be too careful,” Adel said. “After a couple of false bounces and screens, we determined the source originated from an IP address registered to a computer in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.”

“That can’t be good,” Bas admitted, sighing. “I’m sure there are other hackers in the country, but with everything else, it does put a lot of suspicion on Boa Ballistics.”

“I am almost positive that someone in your company is trying to steal trade secrets, possibly the design for a new weapon we are creating.”

“I’m going to have to go home and confront—” Bas’s words were cut off by a voice in his head.

Bas! Help me!

Bas recognized the tone and looked at Adel. “San needs our help!” he exclaimed.

“How do you know this?” she asked with curiosity

“I heard him call for me. I didn’t hear it with my ears though. It was in my mind.”

“He t’linked with you? That’s unheard of among different species. Add to that the shared dream he told me about, and it seems as if there are some powers looking out for you two.”

Bas, can you hear me?

“We need to go now,” Bas told Adel. The two left the office in search of San. *I’m coming*, he thought and hoped San could hear his thoughts, too.

Chapter X

When San left Adel's office, he had no worry for his mother. Not just because he trusted Bas with his own life, but also because Adel was the toughest woman he had ever known. She played things cool and rarely let her temper get the best of her. She preferred to be calm and in control of her life. If anything, he had to worry about her chewing up Bas and spitting him out. He just needed to believe she wouldn't do that to Bas after the way he introduced him.

San realized that he hadn't eaten all day, except for a few bags of airline peanuts. He found himself, once again, heading to raid the kitchen. He pulled some cold, sliced chicken from the small refrigerator and bread from the cupboard. The last thing he needed to make his sandwich was some mayonnaise, but he needed to get it from the walk-in cooler. He hesitated for a moment, remembering when he was almost locked in. He quickly grabbed the mayo and stepped from the cold enclosure into the barrel of a shotgun.

San dropped the sandwich fixings and put his hands up in the air. He wanted to coil up and intimidate the stranger, but he knew it wouldn't stop the man in front of him. His eyes were cold and calculating. San didn't doubt he would follow through with whatever threats he posed. "What do you want?" he asked.

"That's easy. I want it all," he sneered. "Money. Power. Respect. But for now, I'll start with taking the top-secret plans for building the special weapon."

San was out of the loop when it came to the work Adel did in her sector of the building. "If you are aware of what this item does, don't you think it would be more rewarding to build one yourself?" He knew his sanctimonious tone would annoy the gunman, but it could also shame him into letting San go.

"You can get the plans for me, or you can get into the refrigerator. I won't run off like my associate did."

The last few times San had had his back against the wall like this, he had t'linked to Adel for help. However, when he felt his mind reaching out this time, he came into contact with Bas. He felt a little flare of surprise, but with everything else that had occurred between them, he didn't dwell. He had to accept that anything was possible at this point, so he called to Bas for help.

“So, what’s it going to be?” the gunman asked.

San reached out once more, before striking out at the man, using his fists and feet to attack. He thought he might have been able to take him, but seeing Bas, Adel, and Neil enter the room distracted him for the few precious seconds it took for the other man to grab him. San’s back was pressed into the man’s chest, and his forearm was pressed against San’s windpipe, cutting off air. If that wasn’t enough of a threat, the gun was pressed to his temple. San cursed at how easily he lost his focus. Look, a squirrel!

Bas’s eyes widened with recognition at San’s captor. “Tommy,” he said.

San knew Bas had a brother named Thomas who worked for Boa Ballistics. It seemed that Adel was right in her accusations. “Let him go, Tommy. If you need money, you know you can always come to me.”

“You’re not even my real brother, Basil! We took you in only because the council made us. Then you had to hire us on at your company so you could lord your success over us.”

“That’s not what I was trying to do! Believe me, I know your family didn’t want me. However, I was given a home and security. I only wanted to return the favor by giving you solid work.”

San kept his eyes on Bas, hoping he would be careful with his brother, who didn’t seem to be very sane. Then he heard his mother speak. “Let him go, Thomas Jones. If you hurt him, I can guarantee you’ll never get your hands on the plans you want, much less leave the compound in one piece.”

“I’m not scared of a woman!”

“Those were the wrong words to say, buddy,” San told Tommy.

Everyone seemed to go into motion at once. Tommy cocked the hammer of the gun. Adel moved closer, her hands raised—to do what, San had no idea. Neil reached to grab his whip, but Bas had moved faster and taken it from him. With one crack, the gun was no longer against San’s head, but across the room. The second crack caused the whip to wind around Tommy’s throat, and as strong as San had been trying to be, his instincts took over.

Shit! Now I’m stuck like this for at least a half hour!

Bas approached and tied Tommy’s hands behind his back. Neil grabbed Tommy and his whip with a harrumph, before he and Adel escorted the man from the room. Bas reached out and touched San’s scaly skin with affection.

It turned me on, seeing you use that whip. I didn't know you had that in you, San t'linked to Bas.

“Yeah, well, we still have a lot to learn about each other,” Bas replied. “Why don't you transform and we can see about releasing any remaining aggression?”

I thought you didn't want to have sex until everything was settled?

“I can make an exception.” Bas grinned lecherously.

San grimaced internally, cursing the mouth that didn't work the same as it did in his human form. *I'm stuck.*

“Let me see if I can fix that.” San felt Bas's mind touch his. Calm radiated through him. He could feel his body changing without his conscious will to do so. Moments later, he stood before Bas as a man.

“How did you do that?”

“I followed my instincts,” Bas said, shrugging. “I have a feeling that we can accomplish many things together, San. Especially in the bedroom. So whattaya waiting for?”

San grabbed his hand and dragged him to his room. It was about time to feel Bas pressed against him, pushing into him.

Reaching San's room, the two men began to tear their own clothing off, both unable to wait another moment. Their mouths met in lusty kisses; their hands ran over each other's body.

“I was so scared when I saw him put the gun to your head, San. I thought, what if I never get to touch him again? Never get to tell him I love him? It was stupid for me to put restrictions on our time together.”

“You were trying to do what you thought was best, baby. Just so long as I get to see you and talk to you whenever I want, I can live without the sex.”

Bas pulled back and raised an eyebrow at San. “Should I stop?”

“Fuck you. You know what I meant,” San growled.

Bas cracked up, and San stopped him by kneeling and swallowing Bas's cock until it hit the back of his throat. Within a minute, Bas was feeling the tingle of impending orgasm, and he pulled San's hair, yanking his tempting mouth away. “I want to be inside you. Now.”

San jumped onto the bed and positioned himself on his hands and knees, ass in the air. Bas smacked one tanned cheek for good measure. “On your back. I want to see you when I come inside your hole.” It was gruff, sexy talk, and San loved it.

“Yes, Bas. Fuck me hard,” San said as he rolled on to his back and raised his legs up, exposing his clenching pucker.

Bas had never rimmed anyone before. He never felt comfortable sticking his mouth near a stranger’s backside. Not that he refused it being done to him, but with San, it was different. He had an unquenchable need to taste the base essence of the man he loved. His tongue made first contact, and Bas groaned in appreciation for the all-male taste of San. They had never talked about enemas or douching; they hardly had time to. Bas knew he would never want it any different than this. Pure and dirty, sweet and sexy.

When San started whimpering for mercy and a puddle of precum pooled in his navel, Bas gave him relief. Grabbing the bottle of lube San had removed from his bedside drawer, Bas coated his cock in the slick fluid. Using the excess amount on his fingers, he drilled his digits into San’s channel.

“Oh gods! I’m going to come, Bas!” San shouted.

“Not yet!” Bas hissed, his eyes glowing with passion. He grabbed the base of San’s cock and applied enough pressure to keep him from exploding then and there.

When the danger seemed to have passed, Bas lined his slick member up with the winking hole in San’s crack. He pushed in with one thrust, and buried himself to the hilt. “I’m going to fuck you now, San. I’m going to make love to you until you can’t walk.”

San came with those words, but Bas kept sliding in and out of him until he experienced an unusually speedy revival. San’s cock was hard again, red and veiny. Bas leaned forward, pressing San’s knees to his sides, and kissed his lover. His stamina was awe-inspiring, and both men were drenched in sweat before the rumblings of orgasm began. San leaned forward and licked a drop of salty fluid from Bas neck, and the other man groaned.

“I can’t hold off anymore,” Bas said.

“Come inside me,” San said, taking his own cock in hand, knowing only a few strokes were necessary for him to come a second time.

Bas's eyes rolled back in his head, and he jerked stiltedly into San's ass and released his load of sperm into the dark space. "Oh gods, that was so good!" he yelled as San began to spout his second batch of cum.

"Yes, yes, yes!! I love you, Bathier!" San shouted. His mind went blank, and he flew into some other state of being while he orgasmed.

He was standing naked in a temple. Bas stood next to him, his expression sort of dazed, but he looked for an explanation for why they were there. It reminded San of the shared dream—like they had been there before.

A man appeared before them. He was large in stature, and electricity seemed to emanate from his skin. Though everything felt surreal, San knew who stood before them. He knew, even if it was taking place in a dream state, what was happening was real. "Xander. Bathier. I am glad to see you again. In much better circumstances than the last time, too," Zeus's voice boomed.

San could now remember standing with Bathier before Zeus, whipped and bloodied by his own kinsmen. They had been punished for not only loving within their same sex, but also because their families had been enemies for some time before. When they were discovered in an intimate situation, Bathier had been taken away from him, and he was attacked until his father, Python, rescued him. That had only been the beginning. The family feud had expanded until the whole region was at war with itself. Zeus had called a halt and separated them. San wanted to rage at the time lost, at his life being removed from his control and played with like a board game for the gods.

"It was necessary at the time, Xander."

San bit back a curse, knowing deep down the god was right. Ancient Greece hadn't been their time. In the future, after years apart, the tides were changing. Homosexuality wasn't as reviled. Except in a few other countries, of course. There was still a long way to go for global acceptance, but San didn't fear loving Bas.

"Why now? Why give us our memories back and remind us of the travesties in our past?" Bas asked.

"You did this. It took some time, but your fated bond finally led you to one another. You can't keep soul mates apart forever. Trust me, I took that into account before playing with your lives," Zeus snarked, as if he *had* been reading San's mind.

San had the decency to blush at the god's sarcasm. "What happens now?"

"That's also up to you," Zeus explained. "If you do things right, you should be able to live happily ever after, 'til death do you part."

Bas and San looked at each other with relief. This meeting with Zeus was going a hell of a lot better than the first one. San smiled at Bas, and he returned it tenfold.

"Of course, you could screw it all up," Zeus said. "You need to get the family rivalry under control. It's a much different time, but humans can be a volatile mix."

"Can we make it this time?" Bas asked San in earnest.

"I won't let us fall apart. Unless the gods divide us once again, I promise not to leave your side," San told him. Bas rushed into his arms and kissed him. With their memories intact, they felt as if they were once again whole, more complete as individuals and stronger as a couple. But there was also a melancholic feeling for the time they lost and the lessons their past selves had learned. San couldn't say that he felt peaceful, even if he was happy to have Bas.

"How do we get back?" he asked Zeus.

"Wake up," he replied, and San's eyes opened to see the ceiling in his room.

Bas sat up on the bed next to him. "Holy shit!"

"Yeah, that about covers it," San agreed.

Chapter XI

Dressed and showered, Bas and San left the residential area of the compound and returned to Adel's office. Inside, San's mother and Neil sat across the conference table from a tied-up Tommy.

"Hello San, Basil," Adel greeted them. "We've just been having a chat with your brother."

Bas glanced at Tommy, whose face held a surly expression. There were marks around his neck from when Bas used the whip to disarm and threaten him. His eye was also black, which Bas knew hadn't come from him. It didn't bother him knowing that Neil had probably become physical with the man he had called brother. They weren't related, and Bas was relieved at that.

"You'll never guess what happened, Mother," San said in response.

Adel turned around, and Bas could see her knuckles were bloody on her right hand. Perhaps it hadn't been Neil who marked up Tommy. "I'm sure I won't, so just tell me."

Bas listened to San explain the experience they just shared, minus the mind-blowing sex part. After explaining to her how Zeus told them to wake up, San told her he remembered everything that happened before she found him wandering in the rainforest. "You know what the strangest thing is?" he asked her.

She looked abashed, like she knew what he was going to say and felt bad about it.

"I saw you there in my past. Not you, but Python, my sire. I know he's a guy and you're a woman, but I know it was you."

"I wanted to tell you—" Adel started to explain.

"Don't. Don't make excuses; I deserve to be annoyed. I got to relive the destruction of my first relationship with Bas through my returned memories. But, I appreciate you having my back when the rest of my family and the gods themselves turned their backs on us."

"I may not be your mother, San, but you've always been my son. I take care of what's mine."

"How touching! Can I go now?" Tommy sneered.

Bas stepped in, then, to deal with his brother. “Tell me if anyone was in it with you, Tommy. Otherwise, you’ll be tried in the Congo by the government there.”

“Fuck that! Rena, Lola, and Raff were part of it, too.”

“Nice. You were really quick to throw them under the bus.”

“I’m looking out for number one,” Tommy explained. “They’d do the same.”

“I’m going to have to go back to Africa and handle the rest of my family.” Bas sighed, looking to his lover. He had just gotten him back in his life, and now he had to leave him again. “I don’t want to leave you again.”

“Did you already forget the promise I made you in front of Zeus? I’m not leaving you unless they separate us against our will. Again.”

“I can help you settle this quickly,” Adel said, her voice turned deeper and rough. Bas and San turned around to see a man in Adel’s place. Bas remembered him from their shared dream at the hotel. Though now he knew that it was a memory instead.

“Python?”

“Yes, San. I am your father.” Python made a few mechanical breathing sounds, and San and Bas looked at him like he was crazy before they burst out laughing.

“I cannot believe you just tried to make a Star Wars joke,” San groaned.

“Tried?” Python repeated. “It was a funny joke. Appropriate, too.” At San’s incredulous look, his face grew serious. “Perhaps I spent too many years assimilating into this culture.”

“I’m sorry. I was just teasing you,” San apologized.

“It’s okay. As I was saying before, I can solve your problems in just a few moments,” Python said and disappeared into thin air.

He returned with Bas’s mother, cousin, and his cousin’s hacker boyfriend, the employees Tommy had confessed he was working with.

Bas, San, Python, and Neil questioned them individually. Lola and Rena reacted to the situation in the same way that Tommy had. They felt they deserved more and saw nothing wrong with going about it in the way they had.

As punishment, Python took them to perform heavy labor in the service of the gods for the next few decades.

Raff was the wild card. Bas was a little surprised that, while he had no qualms handing over his family members to Python for punishment, this nonrelative was raising his protective instincts.

“You!” San and Neil hissed simultaneously.

“You tried to kill me,” San said.

“You broke into the property,” Neil said angrily.

“I’m sorry,” Raff said, his voice wavering. “I didn’t want to hurt you, I swear. Tommy was threatening to tell the police about my past hacking jobs if I didn’t help. Lola promised me she’d suck me if I did. You gotta understand. I really liked her, and I really like blow jobs.” Neil snorted, and Raff looked him up and down appraisingly. “I’m sure you know what I mean, Mister Big, Tall, and Handsome.”

Neil’s mouth dropped open in surprise. “I thought you liked women.”

“I do. I also like men. Call me an equal opportunity lover.”

“What do you want to happen from here?” Bas asked, jumping in before the two men decided to take their flirting to a new level. “I can let you go, and you can find work elsewhere. Or you can keep working for me, but under heavy probation.”

“I’d like to keep working for you. You’re a fair boss, and I like the work.”

“How can we trust you?” Neil butted in.

“What does it matter? You’re not my boss,” Raff informed him.

“If it’s okay with you, Bas, I’d like to watch over him when you’re not at your facility,” Neil suggested.

Bas looked to San, who shrugged. “I’ve been thinking about our situation. We could keep both businesses and split our time between the two of them. Neil could be head of security at your company when we’re at FANG, and he can return here when we spend time at Boa Ballistics,” San suggested.

Bas and Neil both affirmed that it was a good idea. Python nodded his approval.

Raff gave Neil a salacious grin. “I look forward to working under you... Or behind, or on top. I really am versatile.”

Neil groaned and adjusted his pants. “I’ll show him to his room,” he huffed. Raff jumped up to follow him from the room.

Python looked at Bas and San then. “Right. Glad we got that all settled, because we have something very important to discuss. Plans for your mating dance.”

Chapter XII

The mating dance was two weeks away. San was both excited and dreading it at the same time. Adel had talked about Zeus, Demeter, and all of the other gods in his family, including those that had sort of adopted Bas despite him not really following a particular god or pantheon. What he knew came from books, but he had lived long enough that once he was open to it, they started chiming in. Sometimes gods did that.

San smiled a bit at that because he had always known, in little ways, about the Greek gods because of Adel's stories. He contemplated the information he had discovered about his past and about Adel in particular. She was a he. A god. Python. His father... er, mother. That kind of blew his mind a bit. It did make sense, in a back-assward kind of way.

A pair of hands slipped behind him and gave him a squeeze. He grasped them to his chest as he felt Bas nuzzle his left ear and rest his head on his shoulder.

"Stop thinking so loud," Bas whispered into San's ear.

"I'm still kind of shocked how fast things are moving"

"Yeah, I'm both ready and not ready for this 'mating dance' Python talked about."

"Me too. I'm also still reeling from his revelations."

"I know, baby. I'm a little surprised with everything myself. Still recovering from my adopted family's and our original families' betrayals." Bas shook his head at that thought. "I'm glad I found you again. It is fast, but it was meant to be."

"You aren't going to talk about 'fated mate' things, are you?" San growled in distaste.

"No, my love," Bas teased playfully, trying to pull off being innocent. "I would never do that."

San sighed, letting it go. "I love you. Thank you for being here with me while I wrap my head around this."

"You are welcome. You told me you wouldn't leave. Well, I'm not going to leave either."

They snuggled some more and continued to gaze out across the land that made up the Python compound. After a few more minutes of each of them in their own thoughts, they turned around and walked back into Bas's rooms, hand in hand.

Republic of Congo, somewhere in the middle of the basin.

The day of the mating dance dawned like any other typical day. Bas was glad it was here. The whirlwind known as Adel/Python got everything prepped for the big day. And boy was he nervous.

He changed into his formal wear, which consisted of a nice white button-down shirt, copper tie to match San's eyes, dark pants, and no jacket. He knew that San was dressing next door in similar quiet finery, except for a green tie to match Bas's eyes. That was the only thing they insisted on for this mating; they didn't need anything special. When they went to their hybrid forms for the dance, the clothes would be gone anyway. Adel and Demeter let them have their way since that was all they asked for. Once finished, Bas walked out of his temporary changing room and found San waiting for him outside.

Bas stopped short when he saw how good San looked.

"You look good enough to eat."

"You are always wanting to eat," San replied playfully, and his eyes started glowing.

Bas knew his own eyes were too. He adjusted his pants a bit. "I wish we could do something about this now, but if we don't get this show on the road, we'll have disappointed gods. That might be a fate worse than death."

San groaned at the pun, but laughed and adjusted himself as well. Bas loved making him laugh. San had a great laugh, and Bas was glad he would get to keep hearing it now. Bas reached for San's hand to lead him outside, where the ceremony would begin as soon as they arrived.

Chapter XIII

Bas

We looked into each other's eyes as we danced the mating dance. We were one now in every way but one: the final mating bond that will seal our lives together for the rest of eternity, reincarnations, and perhaps beyond. Both of us were in our hybrid forms, our human halves bare and our snake halves haphazardly lying around the rocks as we rocked and swayed to a beat only lovers could hear. We were compelled to gaze into each other's eyes, mesmerized by the love we felt within, and the urge to bind ourselves to each other rose higher as we slithered through and around the rocks of our temporary temple in my compound in Africa.

Our trial was over. We had succeeded. We found each other through time and space. Memories returned, and we knew our origins once again. While the pain of betrayal still lingered, my heart swelled with love for San and our family members who stuck with us through thick and thin.

Our true family was outside the rocky plateau we had found to be the backdrop for our mating—gods and goddesses from my mother's and San's father's side, and our adopted families and friends from the present—all here to witness this ancient rite blessed by the gods themselves. Even Zeus himself showed—just thinking about being related to him made my head hurt. I quickly shut that thought down, because I really didn't want to think about this now.

Sensuality exuded from San as he danced, and we began to hear a rhythmic and tribal beat, not just in our minds but aloud as well. I quickly glanced over and saw some of the minor Greek deities playing a variety of instruments, along with lots of big African drums played by the Ifa spirits from my adopted lands. My heart sped up, and I looked at San, smiling at the incongruity of different pantheons working together.

San

We had been dancing in and around the rocks as the beat of our mating dance took on reality. I glanced over and caught Bas peeking at the musicians creating the music. I slid a quick look over there myself and boggled a bit as the Greek and the Ifa beings worked together to create the music that Bas and I danced to before them as witnesses to our mating.

Demeter and Python were there. It still surprised me that Python and Adel were one and the same; my actual mother was one of people who condemned me back in Sparta.

I quickly stopped that train of thought and returned to the present. Thankfully, my body had followed my instincts, and the sensual dance I was weaving around him had continued. While it was a little difficult to navigate these rocks, they were large flat-topped ones and so were not too difficult for my python and his anaconda to dance upon.

He was looking at me now, smiling, the light in his eyes glowing yellow as his snake peeked through. Knowing that my own eyes were probably glowing as well, I danced closer to him, just as he danced closer to me. And dance we did. Time seemed to have slowed as we locked gazes and let our emotions strengthen our bond.

In my mind's eye, I could almost see a glowing golden cord hanging above us. Some unknown and primal instinct said to reach for it and offer it to Bas. So, I mentally grasped it and gave it to him. The words I needed flowed from me, and I t'linked with him.

Take my heart, my soul, and spirit.

Bond with me for all time.

I give my body, my love, and writ.

This I avow through this rhyme.

We clasped both of our hands with each other, swaying to the music, and I could "see" him take the golden cord and, in turn, offer it to me.

This I avow through this rhyme.

I give my body, my love, and writ.

Bond with me for all time.

Take my heart, my soul, and spirit.

The cord formed a circle in our minds' eye as we created a circle physically with our arms.

Both of us gasped as we "watched" the gold cord twist into an infinity symbol, split in the middle, shrink to the size of rings, and slip onto our mental fingers. Our bond was complete, and I felt it snap into place between us spiritually, psychically, and physically.

When I felt something tighten on my right ring finger, I opened the eyes I hadn't realized I had closed and looked at my hand. A beautiful, flat, three-

banded gold ring—the smaller, brilliantly polished gold flanking the wider green, brown, and yellow pattern that matched Bas’s anaconda snake—fit perfectly around my finger. I looked at Bas and saw he was looking at his left hand, still entwined with my right, emotions swimming in his eyes just like mine. He tilted his hand toward me and I saw the same gold band, but with my python’s pattern of dark brown, tan, and white.

No words were necessary, and as one, we mentally thanked the gods for making the bands for us.

Demeter and Python answered together, “You are welcome, sons.”

They were standing together just outside the rocky enclosure, Python in his Adel aspect and Demeter standing next to him, close enough for us to hear them speak.

Adel... Python... I wasn’t sure how I was going to reconcile myself with a gender fluid/bigendered shifter god, let alone with all of the knowledge that was revealed. I’d have to figure that out on a day-by-day basis. And maybe ask her/him what she/he wanted to be called. Yeah, that was a good plan.

Adel interrupted my thoughts.

“You should finish the mating and then we’ll celebrate. Don’t human weddings end the ceremony with a kiss?” She smiled knowingly.

I returned her smile. “We aren’t exactly human. Hell, we’re not exactly shifters either, Mom. Dad. Oh hell, what do you I call you?”

She laughed outright, nearly chortling with amusement.

“Bitch... Asshole... *Ugh!*” I floundered.

She laughed harder, hanging on Demeter, who was rolling her eyes at Adel.

“Since Adel is having fits about this, I’ll answer.” A little smirk formed on Demeter’s own lips. “In whatever aspect she is in, you can use the gender reference for that aspect. Since she is a woman right now, you can relate to her as a woman. When she is in her male aspect, you can treat her as a man. Makes it simpler that way. Especially when she changes on a dime.” Demeter glared at her relative.

Adel managed to stop the hysterics in time to catch the glare.

“What? What did I do?” Adel tried to look innocent but failed. Still trying to catch her breath, she managed to calm down enough to finish Demeter’s explanation. “I will basically answer to my male aspect, Python, regardless of

the form I'm in. Since you spent most of your life with me as the snake shifter Adel, you can still treat me as you would if I didn't change genders. So, yes, you can call me Mom or Dad, or both. I don't mind. Just don't do the gender neutral thing they have nowadays." She shuddered a bit. "I'm perfectly happy being both genders, so I don't need a generic reference."

Adel grasped both boys in a quick hug and then pulled Demeter away from them.

"Finish. You should kiss." She winked as she walked away.

Adel walked over with Demeter toward the rest of the Greek gods and goddesses, turned around, and then everyone waited. Even the music stopped while we had been talking. You could almost hear the anticipation from everyone present as they waited for our first mated kiss.

I turned back toward Bas, who waited with an amused expression on his face. He had kept silent throughout the exchange with my mother and—cousin, I guessed—Demeter.

"Yes," he said. "It makes my brain hurt, too. It's why I'm waiting to think on all of this later... much later."

A lustful gleam arose in his eyes, and it triggered my own arousal. He reached for my head with his hands as I reached for him. Our mouths came together almost violently, and I could feel his emotions, and he could feel me, and I knew Adel had given us another gift. We were as one as we could be with two bodies—truly together.

I opened my mouth and let him in further. Our chests mashed together, and he took over my mouth as he devoured me. My hands dropped to his hips, where man met snake, and I held on. I closed my eyes, as his were already closed from the beginning of the kiss. I was so excited, one of my snake's hemipenes started to unsheathe itself from my tail section. Luckily, it was hidden. Not so lucky was that it was pressing into rock where the tail rested, and I winced a bit. I moved it slightly so it could grow or retract without hitting anything.

I have that problem too, my love, Bas t'linked to me.

Good, I'm glad I'm not the only one.

I pulled back slightly, nipping at his lips, and slid down his scaly half, resting on him and coiling my snake half below the rock he was perched on. I felt the slight vibrations as he moved his own snake coils atop the rock formation we were settled upon.

I love you, Bas. Always.

As I will always love you, San. Or should I call you Xan?

No, I'm not Xander any more than you are Bathier. I think we should keep our current names. Don't you agree?

Bas mentally chuckled. *I agree, wholeheartedly.*

I mentally smiled back. *Shall we celebrate with our families, my mate?*

We should, but in a few minutes. I just want to sit here for a little bit and connect with you. I figured out Adel gave us one last gift. I can feel you.

Yes, she did. I figured something was up when she winked and kept insisting on us kissing.

We mentally smiled to each other and continued talking for a few more minutes, unbeknownst to us that a picture of our post-mating kiss was captured.

Adel

With my digital camera, I snapped the stunning picture of San and Bas mentally talking to each other after their kiss, capturing the moment for them. I had taken a video of the mating dance as well. Thank the gods I had a large enough SD card for it. A forty-five minute dance required a large amount of memory. Demeter peeked over my shoulder to see the preview of the photo.

“Do you think we should mention the new tattoos they have?” she asked.

I looked closely at the picture, and sure enough, my double-coiled snake symbol was wrapped around San's right bicep, halfway between his elbow and the top of his shoulder.

“Looks like your symbol is on Bas's left shoulder, at the top of his arm, too,” I pointed out to Demeter.

“Sure is.” She smiled widely after looking at her handiwork.

“Stylized serpent with a... Is that a chicken?”

“Basically. I am the goddess of agriculture. Chickens and farming are part of agriculture...” She trailed off a bit. “He's going to hate it, isn't he? I figured he wouldn't want a wheat stalk, which is my usual symbol.”

“Yeah, I'm not sure that's much better. We'll figure it out. We have to see if they want to be marked as ours.”

“I think they will be fine with it. Give them time. They’ve been through a lot.”

“True.” I sighed, turned off the camera, and just stood and watched them as they continued to be in their own little bubble. “What a day.”

Demeter responded, “What a life.”

I felt an arm around me and turned to see that Zeus had materialized between us and now had his arms on our shoulders.

“I think I have begun to see what this whole male love thing is about,” Zeus mused.

“Reaalllly, brother dear,” Demeter said with a hint of sarcasm and amusement. “I don’t think so. Don’t lie to me, your favorite sister.”

“You are not my only sister, Demeter darling,” Zeus shot back.

“None of that, children. We have a party to attend.” I threw in my two cents and waited for the fallout.

Zeus sputtered, turning toward me, and the lightning rose with a promise of instant death in his eyes. Demeter glared at me, huffed, and crossed her arms.

I raised my right eyebrow, waiting for them to get it.

Zeus got it first. “I hate you, Python. I’m the head of this pantheon; you don’t get to pull family rank on me.”

“Yes I do.” I grinned. “You were about to start bickering, and we really don’t have time for it.” I nodded toward the couple. “They are about done talking. And you love me, your favorite uncle.” I grinned widely. Zeus hated having his familial relationships pointed out to him almost as much as Demeter did. In fact, I didn’t think any of the gods and goddesses really wanted to think about it, ever.

But it was amusing to poke people with, especially to get their attention.

Zeus sighed. “Yeah, I do love you. You’re right. We have a celebration to start.” He looked serious for a moment. “But, I do actually see how love is love, regardless of gender or genders.”

He winked at me with that last nod. I sighed.

“Yes, yes. Try not to be too much of a bear to them, ok? For Demeter and I, please? They are our children.” Demeter nodded in agreement.

“I will try not to be,” Zeus answered.

“Thank you,” Demeter replied.

Demeter relaxed into Zeus’s one-armed embrace, and I relaxed into his other arm as he gave us a hug. I went so far as to lay my head on his chest. We looked over to San and Bas and saw their expressions. A mix of awe, happiness, and what looked like fear in varying stages cycled through.

I smiled at them to let them know everything was right in the world, without using words or t’links. They relaxed, having never really been comfortable around Zeus. His acting like family was a little out of character, but that was because no one really knew what made him tick. Gaia might have—she was his grandmother, after all—but even the goddess of all of Earth didn’t really know everything.

Yes, I do. I started a bit at her speaking to me. She hadn’t in several hundred years because of the situation.

Hello, Mother.

Hello, my son. He really does love everyone in the family. He just buries it deep. And I didn’t want to interrupt you while you were on this quest.

Thank you; I appreciate it. I smiled mentally to her. *Are you coming to the party?*

I’m already here. I’ve been here the whole time. Who do you think protected them while they were dancing?

Oh. I forgot how much you can expand your self-awareness when needed. Will you manifest to human form?

Perhaps. I will see how it goes.

Thank you for protecting them. I bowed slightly with my thanks.

They are my grandsons; of course I will protect them. And she left my mind as fast as she had arrived.

I focused on San and Bas again, and once more, awe flittered across their expressions.

I waved and then blew them a kiss. I tugged at Zeus and Demeter, suggesting physically that we head over to where the refreshments were stationed.

Bas

Mind still processing everything, and reeling at seeing what had to be Gaia manifesting slightly while she spoke with Python—Adel—and at Zeus being playful with Adel and Demeter, I looked down at San. I kissed him briefly on the mouth, and spoke.

“Let’s get this party started, my love. I’m hungry.”

“You are always hungry, baby.” He looked over toward the refreshment pavilion. “Let’s go. I’m hungry too. This mate bonding is a lot of work.” He turned and leered back at me.

“At least we only had to do that dance once.” I shifted to my full-human form, complete with my mating finery from before the dance. San shifted as well. We walked off the rocks toward the flat of the plateau and the food. Before we reached the pavilion, I stopped him, turned him around, pulled him close, and gave him a big kiss on the mouth. He melted into the embrace, and everything settled. Things would work out, cleanup would begin, and the ache of betrayal would fade in time.

We had all the time in the world to coil ourselves up once the celebration was over, and our lives together began.

The End

Author Bio

Eloreen Moon is a pen name for a writer, reviewer, beta reader/editor, and reader of all things romance, including alternative lifestyle (LGBT) stories and novels. Her debut story was in the 2014 Love's Landscape event with Goodreads M/M Romance Group. Inspiration is all around, and life will not limit her to one particular topic. She likes to read and write a blend of science fiction, fantasy, historical, paranormal, and sometimes more than one together, especially if romance is involved. However, cowboys, lawmen, and contemporary times are fun, too.

In Real Life, she works full-time, has a blended family with children, and enjoys gardening, computer games, and nature.

Adan DePiaz lives in Illinois and loves to read books about love, human perseverance, and loves a happy ending for the main characters. Writing wasn't Adan's dream, but after dabbling in fan fiction, Adan is working on a m/m romance novel.

Adan loves variety puzzles, playing cards, and guilty-pleasure reality shows like Dancing with the Stars and The Voice.

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