



**RAVE**

**M. CASPIAN**

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## CHAR

**By M. Caspian**

### 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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# CHAR

By M. Caspian

## Photo Description

A round-faced young man stands angled toward the viewer, his vivid red hair falling around his shoulders. He looks out of the picture, to the right of the viewer, and in his left hand he cups the huge head of a gray dragon, its yellow eyes gleaming. Embers and ash drift down around them.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*With a baby face like this no one ever suspected I'd be the one. The one to burn it all down. I thought I'd feel regret, but with my dragon by my side I don't need anyone else.*

*Surely, he's not alone. Everyone deserves someone to love. Please help him.*

The rest is wide open for the author's imagination to take flight. No constraints.

*Sincerely,*

*Vivian*

## Story Info

**Genre:** urban fantasy

**Tags:** dark, sex worker, barely legal/looks younger, ginger protagonist, age gap, friends to lovers, interracial, grief, dragon shifter, fae/fey/fairies

**Content Warnings:** abuse, graphic violence, non-consensual drug use, gang rape, non-consensual, secondary character death

**Word Count:** 38,317

*Acknowledgements*

Thank you Vivian, for your wonderful prompt. Thank you to the whole team who supported me: Elizabetta, Tully Vincent, Eve, Ery, Anyta, and Raevyn: even more than usual, I couldn't have done this alone. Special thanks to Sam. I underutilized your talents horribly, but you were patient and kind, and without you there'd be no story at all. Thanks to the group mods for running the event: you all rock.

# CHAR

By M. Caspian

The papers crackled as Cian unfolded them and smoothed them out across his knee. His fingers found the box of matches in his jeans pocket. The match-head rasped against its striker with the promise of warmth and light. A tiny yellow-orange flame danced to life, eager to be free. Cian touched the flame to the bottom right corner. Time slowed as the flame flickered, caught, then danced up the pages, leaping and billowing in joy.

Cian held the paper between the tips of his thumb and forefinger, letting the sheets curl as the fire consumed them. The orange flames glowed rich and bright against the indigo soaking into the eastern sky. The fire licked against the words and phrases still legible in the twilight: insufficient credits, failure to graduate, academic counseling recommended. The flames charred them from his heart.

Cian burned the papers down to his fingertips, inhaling the aroma of ash and cinders. He dropped the remains into the shallow pit where he'd left a pile of kindling scrounged from demolition materials. He lit another match and touched it to the balled-up paper at the base of the wood. The fire hesitated, then roared into life, the kindling popping and crackling.

Sparks twirled in the updraft. Flashes of blue hid within, melding with warm reds the color of Cian's hair. He wanted to rub the flames into his skin, let them lick inside him. He clenched his fingers to stop himself from reaching out and grabbing each hot orange tongue.

Vaughan's steel-tipped work boots made the asphalt shiver as he strode across the parking lot to where Cian crouched. "You took your time, baby. Thought maybe you weren't coming." Vaughan's big hand rested on the back of Cian's neck and Cian melted against his legs, closing his eyes. Capering red light filtered through his eyelids.

Cian cleared his throat. "I had to stay back after school." Then walk around for a while, wondering how he was going to keep this from his dad. Wednesday, the health-care aide came late, and he didn't need to rush home the way he usually did.

“You coming inside, or you want me to take you right here?” said Vaughan. “You’d love that, wouldn’t you?” He pushed his groin against Cian’s shoulder, his hard length pressing into the bare skin of Cian’s arm. He probably would too. Just pull Cian’s pants down and fuck him in full view of the cars driving along North Fessenden.

The place had been a discount auto parts shop until last year, the owner not able to quite make enough to cover his overhead. A ragged “For Sale” was still plastered across the oversized sandwich board beside the driveway. Cian wasn’t sure if Vaughan was actually employed by the owner to keep an eye on the place, or if he’d just seen the possibilities in the empty office and decided to turn it into his own private fiefdom.

The last of the pages disappeared in a twist of pale smoke. Cian wiped his ashy hands on his thighs and stood. He followed Vaughan as he strode over to the office. The last streaks of light glinted off the single window that remained unboarded.

A bare forty-watt bulb lit the small office, dangling over a laminate desk and chair, the desk surface pitted and scarred. A set of shelves to the right of the door held piles of wires, a scattering of auto parts, and a thirty-two-inch television that had fallen off the back of a truck. Against the far wall, Vaughan had dragged in a stained, sagging, bare mattress. It balanced on cinder blocks, a threadbare yellow blanket puddled on top in a soft heap.

Vaughan’s fingers caressed Cian’s shoulder, playing over the thin fabric of his white tank top. “Take this off,” he whispered.

Cian grasped the hem and lifted it over his head, his hair falling onto his shoulders as he pulled free. Vaughan stepped in close behind him. He wanted those hands on him, had dreamed about it all day. Vaughan pressed a kiss to the skin between Cian’s neck and shoulder, and then ran his hands down Cian’s soft biceps. Vaughan was tall and wiry, his arms strong for all they weren’t heavily muscled.

“Pants, too.”

Cian unfastened his fly to the accompaniment of the metallic glide of the desk drawer as Vaughan retrieved the lube he’d stashed there. Cian leaned forward over the desk. One of Vaughan’s fingers, slippery and cold, clawed at his entrance and pushed inside. Cian grunted at the force of the breach and then again, seconds later, at the abrupt push of Vaughan’s blunt cockhead against his hole. Cian swayed his hips, rubbing back against him.

“Eager?” Vaughan stroked his hands down Cian’s ribs and then grabbed his hips, pulling Cian back as he thrust inside. “You feel good,” said Vaughan. “Gonna be dripping with me.”

Cian’s head jerked as Vaughan brought one hand up to his hair and grasped a handful of it, winding the long, thick, red strands around his hand. He jerked Cian’s head back as he slammed into him, pressing Cian’s hips against the front edge of the desk.

Cian laid his cheek against the cool desk surface, his mind cleared of all thought, focused on the rhythmic slide of Vaughan’s cock against his ass. It was peaceful. Reassuring. Vaughan wanted him. This was all he had to do: just relax and take it. No worrying about paying for the next prescription, no juggling medication times against school hours. Just trust in the pull of skin on skin.

Sex was over too soon, Vaughan stiffening, hissing out a breath between his teeth. He pressed his groin tight against Cian’s buttocks and grunted as he shot, jerking Cian’s head back, and rolling his hips through the aftershocks.

“Oh, fuck yeah.”

Vaughan rested for a second on Cian’s back, combing his fingers through his red hair. Any chance of an orgasm was miles away, but just being touched, being loved, that was enough.

Cian winced as Vaughan withdrew his cock. The other drawer opened, wood squeaking against wood, and soft fabric landed on Cian’s back.

“Mop yourself up,” said Vaughan.

The towel was crusty and rough as Cian wiped the sticky lube and faint traces of jizz from his thighs.

Vaughan tucked himself in, zipped up, and then sat on the desk as he watched Cian clean himself. “I wish we could just stay here and fuck all night,” he said, “but I’ve gotta meet a guy. I might have a lead on a job for you.”

“Seriously?” He threw himself into Vaughan’s arms.

“Hey, hey, it’s just an interview. You still have to get the gig.”

Cian didn’t care. He’d get it. Vaughan had come through for him. Cian knew he would. God, not having to do it all alone anymore; the relief swept through him like a ripple on a Pacific beach. “You know, I could probably go full-time, after all. I’m not going to graduate. What’s the point in going back?”

From straight A's in his junior year to flunking out. He'd try again next year. It was only temporary, right?

"It's your decision, baby. This has the potential to be lucrative. It's up to you to put the effort in." Vaughan reached over and slapped Cian's buttock and then threw himself onto the mattress, pulling out his phone. "I'll text you later with the details. You better run along home, though, yeah? Daddy will be wondering where you are."

Sure. Of course. Cian pulled his pants on. It'd be nice if Vaughan kissed him after they'd... after they'd had sex. Vaughan wasn't very demonstrative. But they were new. Cian's hands still shook when he touched Vaughan's skin; it must be the same for Vaughan, surely.

"I'll see you later, then?" Cian's fingers lingered on the edge of the office door. It was so much easier here, in the room smelling of oil and neglect and broken dreams, than at home.

"Sure will, baby." Vaughan held up one hand in a good-bye, the thumb of his other flying over the phone's keyboard.

Cian shut the door behind him.

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Cian yanked the scotch-taped envelope off the front door of their cramped duplex apartment. He didn't need to read what was inside. He'd been dodging Mr. Singh all week. He crumpled the paper and shoved it into his jeans pocket, kicking off his shoes. His toes were cramped and aching after the twenty-minute walk home. After he paid off the rent, shoes from the thrift shop were the first thing he was buying.

Cian swung open the door and called out, "Hi, Dad."

A gallery of photos lined the front hallway. His favorite was the one of his biological mother, the only one they had, the print slightly pixelated in the way of photos from the early '90s. She was unaware of the camera's gaze, turned away from it with eyes focused on the far distance. With her pale skin and bright red hair, it was like looking at a female version of himself. The next one was of Cian, his sunburned face matching his hair, at some bluegrass festival Dad had dragged him and Pop to, down in Cathedral Park in the early 2000s. Above it hung an orange-tinted 1970s candid snap of his dad in bell-bottomed jeans at a school dance. An ornate white frame surrounded a set of studio photos of Dad with Pop, the day Pop graduated with his PhD—happy, excited, and proud.

He touched his finger to the glass covering the photos. His pop, Steven, had always been away a lot during the week, even before the divorce. He'd worked in Seattle for a while, coming home every Friday night. Saturday was date night, leaving Cian with a sitter, or a neighbor, every week, but Fridays were for all of them: Jeff, Steven and Cian. They went to the movies, usually, but if there was absolutely nothing showing, Dad and Pop were working him through the classics of modern television: box sets of *The X-Files*, *Stargate*, *Farscape*, and *Battlestar Galactica*—both versions. Saturdays, Steven would spend with Cian. Sometimes they drove up to Crater Lake National Park or the fossil beds in the Blue Mountains.

Then Pop had finally gotten the job at Biokene, here in Portland. They'd headhunted him for his expertise in genome manipulation, along with his rights to several gene patents. The money had been great. There was a new bike for Cian, a truck for his dad. Pop had been so proud.

And then one Friday, Steven didn't come home. Oh, he'd phoned the next morning, full of apologies. Too much going on at the lab. He couldn't get away. He'd make up for it. But a month later it happened again. And by June he'd moved out.

They wanted different things, Pop and Dad had said. Dad had always wanted a kid, a family. He liked working seven to four on demolition sites, handling explosives and high-reach excavators. There wasn't a heavy machine made he couldn't run an obstacle course in. His party trick was stacking beer bottles with the claw of his Bobcat. He'd taken time off to stay home full-time when Cian was a baby, and it had worked out well. The late '90s recession was easing off by the time he was ready to go back to work. Residential developments were still thin on the ground, but there was plenty of commercial development going on still, and Portland was discovering the joys of gentrification. Dad just wanted a solid, reliable job, because he had Cian. And Pop. But it looked like Pop wanted more than early dinners and parent-teacher meetings. He'd never been the one driving the quest to have a child. There was a good reason Jeff's name was the one on the birth certificate. Pop wanted to focus on his career. They were making exciting strides in biotech, and he needed to step up his game if he wanted to be involved in the best projects. Saying "Sorry, I can't come in this weekend" wasn't getting him picked for anyone's first string.

People fell out of love, right? How many couples stayed together forever, the way the vows said? He'd believed for years that Pop would come back one

day. More fool Cian, for assuming two gay guys would be different. Life wasn't fanfic.

Cian smelled the urine before he even opened the living room door.

The pale plastic tubes running into his dad's nose from the oxygen concentrator stood stark against the ashen color of his skin. Gray bags drooped under his closed eyes. The drainage bag lay ruptured open on the floor, piss leaking onto the threadbare bedding that overflowed from the sofa. Fuck. Cian's own fault. He was supposed to replace it every month, but he'd been stretching it out for two, nearly three.

His dad was asleep, hair mussed, his eyes scrunched up tight in his face with the pain that never left him, even in dreams. The room was cold, the air moist. His dad didn't run the heat when Cian wasn't home. They couldn't afford the electricity bill. The concentrator just ate power.

His dad roused as Cian dropped his bag on the floor by the stairs.

"Hey. You're home late. Everything okay?" His hoarse voice rasped against Cian's ears, every word spat out with borrowed breath.

"The aide didn't come?" Shit, he should have come straight home, no matter how much he'd needed to see Vaughan. Needed to just... *be*, if only for an afternoon.

"I've been asleep. I guess not." His dad wrinkled his nose at the smell. "Did the catheter leak?" His voice caught, and then he coughed, doubling over, sucking in air through his mouth in frantic gasps despite the oxygen line in his nose. Cian sat on the arm of the sofa and rubbed his back, soothing him through the spasm.

"Nah. The bag burst again. There should have been someone here for you, though. I'll call the care service in the morning."

The spare bag was waiting in the bathroom, and Cian laid a towel under the tubing and deftly pinched and twisted until he had the new bag safely attached. He used the towel to mop up the mess on the floor.

Cian slipped back into the hall and grabbed the only remaining set of sheets out of the nearly empty linen closet. They had their routine down pat by now. Ever since making it up the stairs had become an insurmountable challenge for his dad, they'd set up the living room as a half-assed hospice.

Cian helped his dad rise and totter the few feet to a battered dining chair, enveloped by the sickly sweet smell that oozed from his pores. One of the

medications, probably, for all that they were stretching them out with half doses. Cian swiftly changed the sheets, bundling up the soiled linens in a plastic grocery bag before settling his dad back into place, the air rattling in his lungs with every breath.

His dad raised a hand, held it out to Cian. “Come ’ere.”

Cian sat beside him on the sofa, then tucked his legs up and leaned against his dad’s frail body. The oxygen hissed through the nasal tube.

His dad slung one arm around Cian’s shoulders and pulled him close. Jeff’s fingers were twigs, spindly enough to trick a witch. Cian huddled in closer to his dad, as if he could shore him up with love.

“Want me to make you something for dinner? There’s hot dogs.” The woman at the food bank had slipped him a family box for four people, giving him a wink and throwing in a Payday candy bar for good measure. Sure, there wasn’t any ketchup, but it was still hot food. And they had to eat them soon. With no fridge, processed meats wouldn’t last long, despite the lingering winter chill in the kitchen.

They used to eat hot dogs while they all watched Laker games—him and Dad and Pop. Pop would make this sweet onion stuff with brown sugar that sounded disgusting, but with mustard drizzled on it, had been the best thing Cian had ever tasted. Now, the sofa overlooked a darker patch on a blank wall where the flat-screen had been. It had paid for a week of painkillers.

“I’m not hungry. You enjoy them, though.”

“I can make you something else.”

His dad shook his head. “I still like the smell, though. You go ahead.”

“I want you to eat something. Anything.”

“Cian...”

“Something cold? Frozen yogurt? I can get some tomorrow...”

“Listen, big guy. I know you’ve read the same info packs I have. Lack of desire for food is one of the signs it’s getting close to the end for me.”

“Dad, no! Look, I’ve been reading about a new clinical trial I’m pretty sure you’d qualify for. Let’s talk to Dr. Lassiter.”

“No more drugs, Cian. No more.” He gripped Cian’s fingers. “It’s time. You won’t be alone. Steven will look after you.” He coughed, the movement

leaving his face taut and pale. “You’re staying in touch with him, right? Explained how things are?”

“Yeah. I spoke to him today.” A lie. He hadn’t talked to Pop in weeks, too full of anger and resentment that Pop got to just... drop by once in a while, look like the caring ex, and then go home to be with Julian. “You can’t simply... give in, Dad. You have to fight.”

But his dad didn’t reply, only hugged Cian tightly and placed a kiss against his hair. “Go make yourself some dinner.”

Cian didn’t want to eat in front of his dad, but how many nights together did they have left? Still, Cian felt like a museum exhibit, his dad’s eyes fixed on him, observing as he chewed each bite of processed meat and doughy white bread. When he finished, he washed the dishes and then grabbed the sheets and dirty clothes from the hamper.

“I’m going to head out, get the wash done.” He put a glass of water on the side table next to the sofa, beside the painkillers. “You need anything else before I go? Want a morphine shot?”

His dad shook his head, eyes drifting closed. “Save it. In the morning, before you go to school.”

Cian switched on the small reading light within his dad’s reach, next to a Dan Brown novel. “Seriously? This is what you’re going with? There are better options at the Laundromat.”

His dad waved him away. “I like Dan Brown. His heroines are feisty.”

“Feisty?” Cian groaned. “I forgive you because you’re sick, and that’s the only reason. I’ll be back soon, Dad. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

\*\*\*\*

Cian took the long way to the Laundromat, despite lugging the bulky plastic laundry bag. Although it was only two blocks down, the direct route along North Richmond would have taken him past the line of people resting against the chain-link fence by the empty lot, their tatty cardboard signs asking for “No \$\$ Just FOOD please.”

Outside the nail salon, a guy wrapped in a filthy blanket ate chicken and rice from a plastic take-out box. A shapeless figure in royal-blue sweats huddled against him, sandwiching a wheeled overnight case against the tiled wall. It’d

be summer soon. There'd be more homeless, maybe a new encampment down by the Willamette. As bad as things were now, trying to care for his dad without a roof over their head... Cian shivered. Once you were out you never got back in. He had to make it work. The guilt gnawed inside him like a trapped rat.

Once past Safeway, Cian could have found the Laundromat blindfolded, just from the gusts of warm air and the scent of cheap fabric softener and hot polyester. The endless thrum of the big machines was comforting: taking what was soiled and sticky and making it fresh again.

The change machine wasn't broken for once; the attendant skimmed fifteen percent off if you needed her to break a bill. Cian sacrificed a ten-dollar bill and then fed the resulting shrapnel into a couple machines. He checked his wallet. That left him with ten for food for the rest of the week. If he got a big bag of rice and stretched those hot dogs out? Surely they had another couple of nights before they went bad. God knew there were enough salt and preservatives in them.

Cian bit the ragged skin around his nails until the metallic taste of blood filled his mouth. The savings account got whittled finer with every prescription filled. Cian had grown up with his dad's staunch libertarianism: a man does a fair day's work for a fair day's pay, a man doesn't expect the state to provide for him, a man doesn't take handouts. It was only typical shitty luck that the damage caused by thirty years of inhaling cement dust and asbestos hadn't shown up until after the 2008 recession; the same recession that put a halt to new building development and lost his dad his job. Unsubsidized insurance premiums had been around six hundred a month back then, in the days before Obamacare. Going without until he got a new job had been a calculated risk, and it was only going to be for a couple of months. Well, risks didn't always pay off, did they? A lifetime of savings had paid for the pleurectomy and the radiation therapy. But four years of meds at a thousand a month, plus nursing care, oxygen, and frequent hospitalizations had quickly eaten up the rest, even after they sold the big Garthwick Tudor in Sellwood where Cian had grown up. He could never go back to the pencil marks on the doorframe measuring his height, or the gouge in the hardwood flooring at the foot of the wide wooden staircase from when he'd tried to toboggan down one Christmas morning, Dad yelling and Pop laughing. Before his family broke.

Once his clothes and sheets were in the machine, Cian flicked through the box of tattered paperbacks that formed the neighborhood's tiny fourth-rate

community library, but there was nothing new. A woman carrying a sleepy toddler on her hip unzipped an overloaded duffel. The stench of nappies spilled out. Cian walked outside. He perched himself on one of the grayed resin lawn chairs clustered on the sidewalk. A starburst of cracks marred the glass storefront behind the metal grating. Beneath the bench, cigarette butts speckled the cement. So much for nonsmoking zones.

Through the glass, Cian could watch the television without the annoying brassy tones of the Fox News hosts. A gray-haired white guy gesticulated at a smiling blonde with immaculate veneers. The screen switched to an overhead view of a beach, and then the camera zoomed in on volunteers picking cormorants out of thick, greasy sludge beside a long pier. Cian could almost hear the water gloop and burble darkly around the thick wooden supports, draping them with black streaks. A woman in her fifties stood next to a sandwich board. On it, a poorly chosen font overlaid a photo of a California sea lion—an exhortation to text and donate twenty bucks to the cleanup fund. Fuck that, he had enough of his own problems. California was all but bankrupt, and the courtroom battle with the tanker’s insurer would take years. The damage was done now: the sea lions and petrels would come back in their own time.

A tall figure blocked the light from the streetlamp. Cian tensed for a second but then realized the dark shape was Reece.

“Hey, Red Hot. How’s tricks?” Reece slid another chair over and sat beside Cian as he pulled a packet of cigarettes from his huge tan leather tote bag. “You got a light?”

“Always.”

It had been little more than an hour, but Cian was itching to feel the warmth of flame again. His fingers trembled as he pulled the matches from his pocket. They rustled against each other like pages whispering secrets. The thin wood lengths were the same pale yellow as the teeth of the guys on the street who’d used meth just a little too long to be making good decisions. Cian smiled at the bright crackling flare of light. Fire danced and flickered on the end of the match. It wanted to be. To live. In less than a second it steadied, the flame growing tall, solid, so dark at the center it was colorless/black/blue/purple. That garish yellow was a facade, hiding the real heat in its heart from people too busy to see true. Ripples of moisture forced their way out of the wood as the match shrank and contracted, like a waist under a corset, until the fire licked at it with a black tongue. The charred core arched upward as the match died, a wisp of smoke climbing to the sky.

Cian blinked. The match in his hands had burned down to his fingers, but the pain didn't register. He brushed the ash from his skin and licked the small red marks on his thumb and forefinger. They tasted bright and real. Reece was still holding his cigarette. He didn't seem to have noticed how Cian had spaced out.

"Sorry. Long day." He picked a second match out of the box, forcing himself to look away as he lit it and held the flame out. Reece caught Cian's pale hand between his strong dark ones as he steadied the flame and lit his cigarette. The thick silver cuff that skimmed above Reece's wrist bones gleamed in the flickering fluorescent light overhead, embossed runes casting shadows across the silver. Cian had once wondered why Reece never sold it. Then he'd finally got rid of his Dad's silver wedding band through the service that advertised late at night on TV. He'd been sure it would solve all of their financial problems. The check that came back by post wouldn't even cover a week of oxygen. Cian still took it.

"Can I have one?"

"Are you kidding? Cigarettes will kill you."

"What about you?"

Reece just smirked at him and drew in another mouthful of smoke.

Cian asked every time, even though the answer never changed. He fought the urge to rest his head on Reece's shoulder. Just being around Reece made him less jumpy, like something crawling under his skin was finally settling into hibernation. Cian inhaled the aroma of cigarette smoke against Reece's skin, trying to keep it subtle. On Reece it was like a bonfire on a crisp, starry evening, like autumn leaves and hot chocolate.

Reece took another mouthful of smoke and groaned with pleasure. "Fuck, I needed that." He sucked in lungfuls of smoke like it was a full-time job. "Hey, you want?" Reece dug through his tote and pulled out a foot-long sub, wrapped in printed wax paper. "Triple steak. They were doing a two-for-one thing, but I couldn't manage both."

Saliva filled Cian's mouth before he could open his mouth to politely decline. He swallowed and choked out, "You sure?"

Reece shrugged and handed it to him. "Take it."

Cian peeled back the wrapper and took a huge mouthful, the rich flavor of meat dancing on his tongue next to the crisp crunch of salad. And—oh my

god—was that ripe avocado, smooth and buttery? His whole body shuddered. He could feel the vitamins coursing through him, like electrons into a recharging phone. High-salt preserved goods definitely didn't do this.

As Cian ate, Reece sat beside him, puffing out smoke rings that floated over the mall roof. Reece was undemanding company. He could be anywhere between twenty and thirty-five, his dark skin, with undertones of blue, still unlined. He slept rough, and did odd jobs for cash. It was enough to pay for a membership at the Y where he showered and shaved every morning. Cian had seen him around ever since they moved to St. Johns, and they'd struck up a casual friendship over thrift shop finds. But just over a year ago, when things started getting real tight, Reece had begun turning up like clockwork, every Wednesday night. Laundry night. He shared his food and split his surreptitious harvest from urban gardens and supermarket dumpsters: fresh apricots, homegrown lemons, a box of dried dates, dark and sugary, like a summer nap behind wooden shutters.

Cian wiped the last of the dressing from his lips with the back of his hand and crumpled the wrapper into a ball. He wouldn't have made it through the last year without Reece.

“You got homework tonight?”

Cian wouldn't even have made it this far through school, either, if it weren't for Reece's help with his assignments and essays. He had a strangely all-encompassing knowledge of European and Middle-Eastern history, as well as a keen eye for dangling participles and errant apostrophes.

“I'm not going to graduate.” Fuck. Where the hell had the sudden impulse for sharing come from? Reece didn't want the burden of his problems. And now he couldn't stop the words that had been jostling for release for weeks. Months. “And Dad's given up. He won't go back and see the oncologist. All he does is lie on that damn sofa and try to keep breathing.”

Reece sucked in another lungful of smoke and held it until the smoke licked out of his nostrils and wafted into the evening. “That's a lot to place on your shoulders.”

“That's not the point. He has to fight. He has to want it.” Cian closed his eyes.

The constant drone of the working day was winding down. The street was nearly quiet, only a few cars passing by. Those who'd scored shelter beds for

the night were long gone. The rest of the day people disappeared in ones and twos, to find forgotten corners where they could set up their small tents, or an underpass where their blankets might be protected from spring rainstorms in the night. The rent boys and drug dealers would be out later, but for now it was like any suburban neighborhood, with leafy medians and homeward-bound workers stopping to pick up last-minute groceries at Safeway.

“He’s already lasted longer than the doctor gave him when he was diagnosed. They’re not always right.”

“There are worse endings than your dad’s will be.”

“Worse endings? The fuck—”

“Death comes to us all, Red. Choosing where it happens is a privilege few of us get.” He finished his cigarette and threw the butt into the gutter.

“How can you say that? Christ, I never knew you could be such an asshole. Maybe there’s a pill you could take for that.”

The blast of a car horn burst into the chilled, prickly space between them. A familiar Acura Integra drew up to the curb in front of the Laundromat, the black paint job slick and gleaming in the streetlights.

Vaughan rolled down his window. “Jump in.”

“But... I’ve got laundry.”

“This is important. It’s a big opportunity for you. For us.” Vaughan opened the car door, leaving the Acura idling, and walked over to Cian. “Who’s this guy, baby?”

“This is Reece. My friend.”

Cian didn’t miss the way Vaughan’s eyes narrowed. Jesus, please don’t let him get jealous. He really didn’t want to provoke a fight, not today. Cian stood, and Reece’s hand shot out, his fingers closing around Cian’s wrist, warm and firm. “You don’t have to go with him.”

Cian shook Reece off. “He’s my boyfriend. And he’s trying to actually help me. Not spout fucking platitudes about the life cycle.”

“Your boyfriend. Really? I’ve never seen you around with him. He ever give you a lift down here? Or to pick up your dad’s meds?”

Cian’s face heated. Vaughan threw an arm around Cian’s waist and drew him in close.

“I’m a busy guy... Reece, was it?”

It was true. Vaughan had a lot of irons in the fire. And it wasn’t like Vaughan’s friends would understand why he was dating a high school kid. It was a miracle Vaughan even wanted him. It felt so good, to be desired. To have worth to an older guy. A guy who could have anyone. Not that thirty-two was that old.

Cian couldn’t believe it when Vaughan drew up beside him on the street, last month, as he walked home from school. Asked him out for coffee, and *paid*. And then later, Vaughan’s strong hands stroking Cian’s skin, pulling his first non-solo orgasm from him in the passenger seat of the car. Touching him. Needing him. *Good boy. You’re so gorgeous.* God, to not be alone and on the outside of every group. First, as the funny-looking kid with two dads, then later, with only one parent, who was always sick. Vaughan didn’t care about any of that. Vaughan wanted *him*.

Vaughan stepped toward the car, tugging Cian after him.

“Wait, I have to get my clothes. They won’t be dry yet, though.”

“No time, baby.”

Reece looked up at Cian and tilted his head to one side, and sighed. “I’ll get your stuff out of the dryer.”

“Leave it with Mr. Shu, okay? I’ll pick it up later.” Cian shot an apologetic smile at him as Vaughan yanked him over to the car.

“Hey,” called Reece.

Cian paused as he opened the door.

“Play safe, Red Hot.”

Vaughan gunned the engine, and Cian slipped into the passenger seat. He looked back as they pulled away from the curb. Reece’s dark eyes met his. Even at this distance Cian could read the concern in them. His fingers itched to pull open the door handle, jump out, and run back. Maybe Reece would have some other ideas; ideas that didn’t involve... this. But the car was already turning the corner, and the Laundromat was lost behind a spindly tree and the corner of a tract house.

No. It was better this way anyway. He could do it. He had to.

Vaughan drove up North Lombard and onto the Five. Cian gazed out the window at the river slipping beneath the bridge, heading for the wide blue Pacific. They took the turnoff onto Hayden Island. Vaughan pulled into the parking lot of a warehouse right next to the river. Through a chain-link fence, tired boats lay in rows of wooden cradles, waiting for new owners and better times. The sticky scent of crude oil and marine diesel mingled with the stench of turpentine and wet cardboard wafting from a rusty dumpster.

With a rattle and screech of rusty metal on metal, a delivery door rolled up a few feet. Vaughan got out of his car and gestured for Cian to follow him. They ducked under the door and entered a large loading dock. Cans of paint and engine lubricants stood in rows on the tall shelves lining the walls.

“What the hell kept you? I told my wife I had to unpack some stock. She’ll wonder where I’ve gone if I’m more than an hour.”

The guy was in his fifties, with a large belly and thinning white hair. His ruddy face spoke of years of heavy drinking and a pending heart attack. He ran his eyes over Cian with the practiced manner of a horse trader.

“Keep your panties on, Tomas,” said Vaughan. “Was he worth waiting for, or what?”

“Cute face,” said Tomas.

His fucking face. Those fat cheeks and the freckled bridge of his nose. Pop always said he’d grow into it, that it would thin out, but he was eighteen now, and there was no sign of it happening any time soon. It wasn’t cute—it was a goddamn liability. As was the haircut he had given himself with kitchen shears in the bathroom last week.

Tomas took a step forward and reached out to grab Cian’s chin. Cian tried to take a step backward, but Vaughan grabbed his hips, pushing him forward. Tomas’s hands were sweaty and hot, and Cian squirmed in his grasp.

“I like the hair color, but the bangs will have to go.”

“You don’t think they make him look younger? Unsophisticated?”

“How old is he?”

Cian had the answer on the tip of his tongue, but when Vaughan’s fingertip dug into his sacrum he gasped in pain, his breath stolen.

“Fifteen,” said Vaughan.

Tomas turned his head from side to side. “We can bring that down a little for the clients, thanks to that baby face. Make it fourteen. Twelve would be pushing it. Shame. The market for preteens is better.” Tomas dropped his hands. “All right, strip off, kid.”

Now that the moment was here, Cian felt frozen.

“It’s okay, baby,” said Vaughan. His hands were already on the button of Cian’s jeans. “Don’t be embarrassed.”

Cian pushed against Vaughan’s side, twisting against the firm grip on his arm. “I don’t want to.”

Vaughan pulled Cian to him and whispered in his ear. “This isn’t the moment to be shy, kid. This will solve all your cash problems. This guy’s connected. You can get steady gigs.” He stroked Cian’s cheek tenderly. “I went out on a limb to get this opportunity for us. You can do this for me, can’t you? Don’t make me look bad, baby.”

Cian slumped. Vaughan’s fingers clutched the hem of Cian’s T-shirt and lifted it over his head, then tugged his zipper down. Cian’s jeans and briefs puddled around his ankles.

“That’s it. Good boy.” Vaughan pressed a kiss to Cian’s bare shoulder.

“Huh. You wax him?” asked Tomas.

“Nope. This is all natural.”

Yeah, great. A skinny, untoned body still lacking body hair. Like he didn’t have enough problems. And this man was seeing him. All of him. Cian’s cheeks burned, and he bowed his shoulders, crossing his arms in front of his narrow chest and clutching his elbows with his shaking hands. Vaughan’s hands stroked down his back, and a squadron of goose bumps spread out across Cian’s skin.

Cian jerked back at the distinct *click* of a cameraphone.

“It’s okay, baby. You’re doing so well.” Vaughan’s fingers circled Cian’s bicep.

Tomas tucked his phone into his pants pocket and then brought his hand down and palmed the bulge at his crotch. “Yeah, all right, he’s appealing enough. Can he suck dick?”

“A little. I taught him some basics, but he might do better if he seems unskilled, right? A novice?”

Grabbing Cian's skinny wrist, Tomas tugged him to one side of the loading bay and leaned against the dented steel wall. He jerked Cian down to his knees. This low to the floor, the smell of mold and rot overwhelmed him. Tomas popped open the button on his fly and unzipped, pushing his corduroy pants down to his knees. He wasn't wearing any underwear. Vaughan stepped behind Cian and rested his hands on his shoulders, fingers lightly massaging the taut muscle.

Tomas lifted his belly up with one hand so Cian could have unfettered access to his purple, veiny cock.

Cian couldn't do this. He was going to be sick. He looked down, letting his hair fall forward like a curtain. He swallowed, keeping his eyes on the oily floor.

"Hey, c'mon, kid," Tomas huffed out in annoyance. "I thought you said he knew what to do."

Vaughan's strong fingers caressed the back of Cian's head. "Aw, he's got stage fright, that's all."

Vaughan gathered Cian's hair back from his face, pulling it into a ponytail and wrapping it around his hand. He used the tail like a handle, twisting and pulling down until Cian had to turn his face up.

Fuck. He could do this. Think about the money. Cian dug his fingernails into the palm of his hand. Think about Dad on that sofa, the hum of the oxygen compressor. Just... get through this. In ten minutes it would be over.

Cian settled himself between the man's legs and leaned in to his groin.

"That's it," said Vaughan. "It's okay, baby. I'm here. You can do this."

At least the guy's cock was average, five inches, and thin. Cian easily wrapped his lips around it, spreading saliva over the shaft and head. The warm flesh of the cock sat on his tongue, alien and unfamiliar.

"Put some goddamn emotion into it, kid."

Vaughan's hand tightened in Cian's hair, and Cian whimpered. He swallowed his hesitation and mouthed at the guy's wrinkled balls where they lay between his heavy thighs. Tomas grunted—an ugly noise, instantly lost in the dank space. The cold leached into Cian's knees from the concrete beneath him.

Cian closed his eyes. He wasn't here. He wasn't. He was someplace else. Somewhere good. The stench of the loading dock faded, the pressure of

Vaughan's hand in his hair lessening. Darkness surrounded him, and Cian's nose filled with the calming scent of smoke and ash—and then sour fluid dribbled into his mouth. Cian's eyes flew open, and for a second he thought he saw the cold glitter of starlight above him, before Tomas jerked and spasmed, in the filthy gloom of the loading dock, his head thrown back as he licked his lips and grunted. “Yeah, that's it, take it.”

The scant teaspoon of liquid sat thin and sour on Cian's tongue. He pulled back, dropping Tomas's flaccid cock from his mouth. He spat Tomas's spend into his hand and coughed. Instantly Tomas's hand snapped out with a firm slap. Cian's head jerked to the side from the blow, his scalp smarting in Vaughan's grip.

“Don't ever do that again. You take what you're given and show you're damn well grateful for it.”

Tomas leaned against the wall for a few seconds more, his breathing labored, and then he heaved himself to his feet and tucked his cock back into his cords. He dug into his pocket and pulled out an envelope and handed it to Vaughan.

Vaughan released Cian's hair and stepped back.

“He's pretty fucking bad at that,” said Tomas. “Let him stay that way for a few weeks. It'll be appealing. Even that hesitation he's got. Later, we can get him trained up for a different market segment. I'll text you with a day and time. But yeah, that baby face? It's good. Nice find. I've actually got a standing order for a red-haired kid, so I can set up his first overnighiter real soon.” Tomas nudged Cian with his foot. “Hey, kid, don't cut your bangs again, right? Grow it all out one length.”

Vaughan gripped Cian's arms, pulling him to his feet and then patting him on the shoulder. Cian brushed his knees off and grimaced at the moist grit that clung to them. Vaughan passed Cian's T-shirt and pants to him. Cian kept his eyes down as he pulled his clothes on, his cheeks burning and belly gnawing at him.

“Thanks, man,” said Vaughan. “See you next time.” Vaughan sketched a wave as he took Cian's hand. They ducked back under the roller door. The vast darkness of the empty lot was a relief.

Vaughan opened the passenger door first, guiding Cian into the car. Cian kept his gaze directed out the window. He wouldn't look at Vaughan. He

couldn't. He'd sucked off a stranger, groveling on his knees in a filthy loading dock. Vaughan had watched.

With the rustle of crisp paper Vaughan pressed something into Cian's hand. Cian glanced down. A twenty. The alley trembled and wavered in his view as tears fell silently from his eyes.

Vaughan climbed into the driver's seat and rested his hand on Cian's thigh. He squeezed gently and leaned across and cupped the back of Cian's head. "I'm proud of you, baby. You did great, once you got over your shyness. This is going to be a good thing for us." He pressed his lips to Cian's jawline in a line of tiny kisses.

Cian needed a shower. And mouthwash.

"You were amazing. I love you."

Cian only half-heard Vaughan's words, as his throat filled with bitterness. He pushed open the door and vomited onto the rain-washed asphalt and then wiped the back of his mouth with his hand. Vaughan pushed a bottle of water into his hands, and Cian rinsed out his burning mouth and spat into the road.

When he closed the car door again, Vaughan started the car and drove out of the alley. He ran his hand up Cian's thigh, pushing against his flaccid cock inside his jeans. "Seeing as you were such a good boy, how 'bout we take care of this when we get home?"

Cian swallowed another mouthful of water and glanced over at Vaughan, the top of the envelope still sticking out of his shirt pocket. "What about the rest of the money he gave you?" Shit, why had he said that? Was he an idiot?

Vaughan grinned, his teeth white in the pale strobe of the streetlights they passed. "Hey, that's my finder's fee. I wish I could give you a bigger cut, baby, but I have a lot of expenses, you know?" He took his hand off Cian's crotch. "We'll have more coming in from your first job. And, you know, a blowjob on the street doesn't go for much more than small change these days. We made more in five minutes than some people do all night."

"So, what now?"

"Tomas runs a side business providing entertainment talent. Perfectly legit. Pays taxes and everything. You want a clown for your kid's birthday party? He's the man to call. Of course, you want to throw some other kind of party, he can hook you up there too. This is regular cash. Just what you asked for."

Vaughan punched Cian lightly on the top of his arm, like a guy ribbing a good friend about a shared joke.

As they turned the corner, the car's headlights illuminated shapeless figures wrapped in sleeping bags, huddled on flattened cardboard, pressed up against doorways. They had it a lot harder, for sure. Vaughan was trying to help, right?

They were back at the abandoned car parts place in ten minutes. Vaughan parked the car in the back corner of the dark lot. Vaughan wasn't taking him home? He wanted to climb into bed and pull the covers over himself and just pretend today hadn't happened. "I didn't pick up my laundry yet."

"There's no hurry, is there? It'll still be there tomorrow. You can go get it then." Vaughan squeezed Cian's ass as he pushed him toward the office.

"I should get back to my dad."

Vaughan unlocked the heavy padlock chaining the office door closed and stepped inside, flicking on the single bulb. He drew open a desk drawer. "He'll be fine. I got all hot and bothered watching your sweet mouth." He thrust a wrapped toothbrush and toothpaste into Cian's hands. "Clean yourself up, first. I've never tasted another guy's jizz, and I'm not about to start now."

Everything was working on autopilot, like Cian was in a control room somewhere far away, operating this body with an Xbox controller and a grainy screen. The tiny employee bathroom stank of piss, and worse. Cian brushed his teeth while he tried to hold his breath. The glass was smashed in the tiny barred window that opened onto the empty overgrown lot next door. From the darkness outside came a scuffle and a grunt. Two guys fighting? Or having sex? Not that that could be any less violent, sometimes.

When Cian stepped back into the office, Vaughan's pants lay in a heap on the floor. Vaughan was kneeling on the filthy mattress, T-shirt and socks still on, working his thick, cut cock with lazy movements of his right hand. He wrapped his hand around his balls, squeezing the taut, ruddy skin. Vaughan held his other hand out to Cian.

"Come on, baby. Take your clothes off, huh? Let me make you feel good."

He dropped his clothes to the floor and let Vaughan draw him onto the mattress. Vaughan's kiss was hot against Cian's chilled lips. His tongue pushed into Cian's mouth like a burglar, as he reached around and grasped Cian's ass, flicking at his hole.

“You still got my load in there from this afternoon, baby?” He pushed one finger inside, and Cian winced at the burn. “It was hot as hell watching you suck T-Man off while your guts were wet with my spunk.”

He pushed Cian facedown onto the bed and pulled open the drawer of a makeshift nightstand. Vaughan drizzled lube into Cian’s crack, wet and cold, and then, abruptly, the thick head of his cock was pushing in, filling Cian until the bristle of Vaughan’s trimmed pubic hair pressed against his ass.

“Fuck yeah, baby.”

Vaughan’s balls tapped against Cian’s perineum, and Cian bit his lip, closing his eyes. He winced when Vaughan pulled out again and then nipped at one buttock with his teeth.

“Look at your ass. Juicy as a peach.”

Vaughan entered him again with a rough thrust. He liked it hard and fast, and he pounded into Cian, mumbling inarticulate filth.

*Peaches. They’d had peaches on the drive to Manhattan Beach, Pop and Dad in the front seat, Cian in the back, glued to the window. The rhythm of the ocean had filled his whole vision, the splash of waves, that tang of salt on his tongue. It wasn’t like the lazy, slow Columbia flowing through its port, filled with laden barges and gasoline rainbows.*

*Pop’s hand, tight on his waist, teaching Cian how to bodysurf. Cian’s blubbery squeal and trembling chin as seaweed wrapped around his leg. Him flailing at Pop, trying to climb his wet skin to get away from the water. Pop laughing as he hugged him and swung Cian high into the air. Dad showing him how to bait a hook and cast a line.*

“Dad, Dad, I got one! I got one!”

*“Now loosen the reel. Let the fish take your line out. Don’t fight it. Let it tire itself out. You can’t beat it that way. You gotta be smarter than the fish. That’s it. Good boy.”*

*The hotel had been right on the beach. For breakfast Cian could ask for anything he wanted. Pop and Dad had grossed him out by kissing in the restaurant at dinner, where anyone could see. That must have been right after Pop developed his patent for the new Alcanivorax borkumensis strain. They’d been living high off the first royalties when it got rolled out to try on the big Louisiana spills after Katrina.*

*Cian lay high above the tide line, buried under bucketsful of beach, the rasping grit of sun-warmed sand against his ski—*

“Hey, you didn’t come.”

Vaughan rolled him over, Cian’s soft cock only too evident, no sign of an orgasm.

“I’ve got you.”

Vaughan pushed two fingers back inside Cian, finding his prostate with unerring accuracy. Vaughan worked the pads of his fingers in tiny circles, brushing across it in a way that made Cian’s leg twitch. Cian gripped the blanket, rubbing his thumb over the seam between the smooth satin edging and the scratch of the wool as he stared into the corner of the office where the bare metal walls didn’t quite meet the particleboard floor. A thick mat of grayed spider web blew back and forth in the night breeze. Cian’s eyes flicked back to Vaughan’s face, his gaze unfocused as his fingers incessantly shifted within Cian. The pressure against his prostate rose and peaked, and Cian didn’t try to stop it, didn’t welcome it, just let it roll over him until pulses of thick white liquid shot from the tip of his cock in an empty orgasm. Vaughan caught his come in a tissue and then balled it up and threw it into the corner of the room.

“Finally.” Vaughan rolled over and pulled the blanket up to his chest.

“I should go.” Ask me to stay. *Ask me to stay.* Hold me all night and make it all better.

“Kay.” Vaughan leaned over and kissed Cian on the shoulder. “You’re a good kid. I know tonight was rough. First times always are. It’ll get better.” He reached out and fumbled for the clothing on the floor, and tucked something into the pocket of Cian’s trousers. “There’s a little extra. Get a pizza for dinner tomorrow. Just don’t start getting spoiled.”

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Cian had only made it two blocks when the first raindrops dashed themselves on the sidewalk. His hoodie was damp when the Mercedes coupe pulled up to the curb on the other side of the road, then made a U-turn when the scant traffic cleared. Awesome. So he was being taken for a streetwalker now. He didn’t slow his pace, but the car drew up beside him anyway. The passenger door popped open.

“Get in, Cian.”

Julian. Shit. The instinct to just keep walking made his hands clench. On the other hand, if he ignored the lift it was another fifteen minutes walk in the rain to get home, and he wouldn't have dry clothes to wear tomorrow. Plus Cian's too-tight shoes were already killing him. He squared his shoulders and took a breath, before pulling open the door and sliding in. Warmth caressed his back. Huh. A heated leather seat. Rich fucking asshole.

The seatbelt fastened with a tasteful and understated *thunk*. The car pulled back into traffic with a barely audible purr.

"It's after nine o'clock at night, Cian. What are you doing?"

"Nine—Jesus, I'm eighteen years old. I'm not breaking curfew by keeping Ellie-Mae out too long after some fucking dance. What are you doing slumming it out here, anyway?" Some hipster wine bar in the city was more Julian's style, the carefully groomed older guy in Purple Label paying for everyone's drinks.

"One of my containers came in. I needed to pull out a piece I bought for Steven's birthday next month. A contact got hold of an eleventh century Goryeo water dropper for me."

Covetousness sat astride every word. It was the only time Julian sounded human, talking about his obsession. The pieces cost more than Cian would earn in his life.

"What did you get him?" asked Julian.

Yeah. Like there was money for gifts. "I thought I'd come in to the city and see him. Spending time together is the best kind of present, isn't that right?"

Julian only flexed his fingers on the leather of the steering wheel cover. "So... who's looking after Jeff tonight?"

"None of your fucking business."

"Jesus, Cian, you're caring for your dad, and you took off for some wild evening of hedonism and left him to fend for himself."

Fuck Julian. It wouldn't matter what Cian said.

"And, let me add, he should have paid for medical insurance in the first place. He worked in a high-risk industry. Steven told him this. Repeatedly."

"It wasn't like that. He was between jobs." Cian unzipped the top of his hoodie a few inches, uncomfortably hot now in the warm cocoon of the car.

“You’re right. Jeff is not my business.” Julian’s voice dripped disdain. “And it’s not my business what your recreational activities entail—if they *are* recreational. The law sees you as an adult, although you’re clearly making some pretty poor decisions for yourself. You need to learn some responsibility.”

Cian felt the blood leave his face. The worst of it was he couldn’t even deny what Julian was implying. He’d left his dad alone. Jeff didn’t even have a phone to call for help with Cian gone. And Cian had sucked cock for money. He was a whore now. The truth of Julian’s words only made Cian angrier. “Responsibility? Do you even know what I do for Dad? Emptying his bag of piss every day, holding his dick while I clean and reinsert the catheter when the hospice nurse isn’t scheduled. Wiping his ass when he has to take a shit.”

“Your language is uncalled for.”

“Your fucking attitude is uncalled for.”

“You can’t just cruise through life, Cian. You have to decide what you want and work toward it. You have to make your own future.”

Cian slumped back in his seat, picking at the jagged edges of his fingernails. It always ended up this way, sniping and rancor that twisted his stomach and left him hating himself. He should try harder, for Pop’s sake.

The car was so quiet Cian could hear the scratchy gulp as Julian swallowed back unsaid words. They sat in uncomfortable silence. Cian kept his gaze fixed firmly on the passing landscape, but he could see Julian’s cool blue-gray eyes flick across to him at each stop sign. They were back at the apartment block in minutes. Cian didn’t even wait for the car to come to a stop before he had his seatbelt undone and the door open.

Julian opened his mouth to speak, but Cian cut him off with a blurted, “Thanks for the lift.” He slammed the door shut and jogged across the parking lot.

A familiar lanky figure sat on the concrete outside Cian’s front door under the shelter of the tiny porch overhang, a large bag of laundry between his outstretched legs.

Cian threw himself down on the damp steps, pressing his body against Reece’s warm side. Fast-food bags, empty soda cups, and used condoms littered the half-assed attempt at a garden.

“Are you okay?” asked Reece.

“Yeah.” He buried his face against his knees, the denim damp and cool against his hot face. Reece reached out and took Cian’s hand where it wrapped around a leg, and laced their fingers together.

“Wanna talk about what happened?”

“We’re out of money, that’s what’s happened.”

Reece stood, held a hand out for Cian, and pulled him to his feet. How much worse would all this be without Reece to talk to? And he didn’t even know where Reece slept at night—some forgotten corner of Cathedral Park, maybe, or the back of Safeway behind the row of dumpsters? And yet he was the one always looking out for him. Cian leaned forward and pressed his lips to Reece’s. He tasted of embers, of flames in the night. Cian let his eyes flutter closed. For a moment he saw them as if from above, their skin entwined in a play of light and dark, beneath the stars.

Reece drew back and rested their foreheads together. He brought one hand up to Cian’s hip, finding the patch of warmth between trousers and hoodie, his thumb circling against Cian’s skin. His metal cuff bumped Cian’s hip bone.

“If you’re thinking you’re too old for me, you’re not,” said Cian. “Vaughan is thirty-two.”

A laugh shivered through Reece’s shoulders. “I’m a bit older than that, Red Hot.”

Reece felt... good. Right. He had from the moment Cian had first spoken to him. A gorgeous black man, rummaging through the same rack at the thrift store down on Lombard, handing over the T-shirt with a rueful smile. “This is too small for me,” he’d said, “but it might fit you. Brand new. Tags still on.” Their hands had touched, and a jolt of heat had shot through Cian, tasting like home and comfort and care.

Reece had treated him like a kid brother... no, like something else, like something he hadn’t had for a long time—a friend. But recently, he felt sometimes like there was... more. Something unformed. Tentative. Precious.

And then Reece pulled away. Cian made his hand slip reluctantly from Reece’s side. Shit, he was a slut. He had a boyfriend, and that boyfriend wasn’t Reece.

Reece took a step backward into the parking lot. “I’ll be seeing you, Red Hot.”

He turned and walked across the lot, and Cian watched until he was lost in the darkness.

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Cian lugged the bag of clean laundry into his apartment. From the hallway he could hear the whistling breath of his dad in sleep. At least he wasn't going to ask where Cian had been. He snuck into the lounge and bent over the sofa, and stroked his dad's hair back from his forehead the way his dad had done when he was little and home sick from school. The strands were so thin now, not like the thick mop Cian remembered from his childhood.

Cian climbed the stairs to the second floor and stripped off his clothes. The fabric still held the stench of the loading dock. He fished his phone out of his pants where he'd dropped them on the floor and hit the dial button before he double-guessed himself.

It only rang twice.

"Hello, Cian."

Pop sounded exactly the same as ever, calm and in control, with that slight Boston accent still hanging in there even after thirty years on the West Coast. His voice was bedtime stories, and laughter over Sunday pancakes, and a commentary to every fucking movie because he had to point out all the science mistakes. *The Core* had been the most painful two hours of Cian's young life.

"Hi, Pop."

"It's Steven. Please."

Goddammit... That clenching in his belly again, acid in the back of his throat.

"Steven." The name sat sour in his mouth. "How are you?"

"I'm good. Great. Julian's good, too. And how's Jeff?"

Like he cared. Like it wasn't just politeness. Cian fought to keep his voice level. "He's bad, Pop. Really bad. Can you come by sometime?"

"Hey, Cian, how many times do we need to go over this? It's been five years."

A couple of months after Pop had left he'd invited Cian to visit for the weekend. The corner apartment had the most amazing view, from the Columbia River all the way round to the Willamette. But Cian had tracked dirt from the

Sellwood baseball diamond in on his shoes after the game, leaving marks on the travertine. Julian pulled a sour face when he found Cian eating Cheetos on the cream leather sofa. The hallway was lined with tall display shelves holding porcelain bowls in a weird gray-green color, and when Cian had gone to run down to his bedroom to get the new *Arkham City* issue to show Pop, Julian had grabbed him by the arm to stop him, and it had hurt. God knew why he was so worried; they weren't even pretty, not like Dad's pieces of Lladró that used to belong to his grandma. Cian tried to keep his limbs close, stay quiet, to just make himself... small. But no matter how careful Cian was to put his glass on a coaster and not to drop crumbs on the carpet, Julian was always *there*. Always watching.

Cian had startled awake that night, aware in span of a single indrawn breath, of Julian sitting in the chair across from the bed, holding Cian's Little League shirt, narrowed eyes agleam in the dark. Cian had squeezed his eyelids shut and pretended to be asleep, lying rigid between the smooth cotton sheets as he counted Julian's shallow breaths, until he'd fallen asleep despite himself. The next day, he'd told Pop he didn't want Julian to stay with them any more. Pop's face had gone blank as he explained that it was Julian's apartment. Pop was with Julian. This was where he lived now. But Cian didn't want to go back, and Dad said he didn't have to. So that was the end of weekends with Pop.

Cian didn't want to be brave anymore. Didn't want to be responsible. Didn't want to have to eke out Dad's savings. He wanted to let go, have someone else take the wheel. "When you left, you told me that just because you were breaking up, that it didn't mean you wouldn't still be my father. Was that all a lie?"

"I'm not responsible for your dad. When you get older, you'll understand."

"What about me, Pop? Are you responsible for me?" His voice shook.

"I think you should call back when you're a bit less emotional."

"No—No, I can—" Cian sucked in a breath. Keep it in. Keep it under control. Shit. "I just—I wanna come and see you. Would that be okay?"

"All right, sure. Hey, maybe we could go shopping sometime. You'll be needing something a bit better than your jeans and hoodies to wear in the fall."

How had Pop never noticed? Did he think they'd already had the whole conversation about college? About applying? Did he somehow think Cian had the whole tuition situation locked down and hadn't felt the need to bother him?

Fuck him. He'd never even asked about coming to graduation, or else he'd know that Cian wouldn't be going either.

"You could come into the city one day in the summer and meet me at work. You'll love the project we're working on. I'll show you around. Then we'll head to Macy's."

"Could I come next week? There's an administration day at school."

"Well, next week's not great..."

"Please?" Fuck, he was gonna cry. It was welling up inside him. He slapped his hand over his mouth and bit the thin skin of his palm to stop the noise emerging while he waited for his pop's reply.

Steven didn't speak. His breathing muffled. "Hey, my calendar's pretty full right now. How 'bout I check my schedule and get back to you. I gotta go now, okay? Julian's home."

"Okay, Pop. I love you." But the chirrup of disconnection was already echoing in his ear.

With clumsy fingers, Cian retrieved a box of matches from the wooden crate he used as a nightstand. He leaned back against the cold cinder block wall and lit one match after another, letting each one burn down until the fire caressed his fingertips. In the black center of the flame everything was simple. He tried to catch the moment when he'd kissed Reece, that sense of peace and comfort, but it slipped through his mind like an eel. He kept trying until there were no more matches.

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In the morning, Cian was fixing himself hot toast with peanut butter when the hospice nurse arrived, surprise on her face when he opened the front door.

"No school today?" she asked.

"I decided to stay home from now on, to look after him."

She nodded. "That's good. It won't be long now."

"How many weeks?"

She shook her head. "Probably days."

"I'm going to talk to dad's oncologist next week. Don't give up on him yet."

Her lips thinned, and then she patted Cian's shoulder. "You got someone who can come and sit with you?"

Maybe Vaughan would—Nah. They weren't there yet. It was too new. "No. There's no one."

Cian cleaned and tidied while the hospice nurse changed his dad's catheter, checked his lure and then sat and talked with him, their voices too low for Cian to hear. On her way out she took Cian's hand and wrapped his fingers around something small and hard. Cian opened his hand. Four ampoules of morphine lay in his palm.

"In case things get bad."

"I think we've got the meds sorted okay."

She shook her head. "You're not listening to me. In case things get bad."

Cian thought of sunken veins lying under papery skin and the rattling breath coming from the next room. He closed his hand around the morphine.

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Cian grabbed two paperbacks from his sparsely filled bedroom bookcase and headed downstairs. His dad's eyes flickered open as Cian tiptoed into the living room. He had more color in his face today, surely? The nurse could be wrong.

"What are you still doing home? Why aren't you at school?"

"School's over now, Dad. It's summer break." The words dropped effortlessly from his tongue. Jeff was confused, what with the pain and the morphine. He'd never notice the lie.

His dad pushed a quavering smile onto his face. "Congratulations. Did you graduate? Or is that next year?"

"Next year, Dad."

His dad nodded, and his eyes flickered closed. Cian thought he'd gone to sleep, but he opened his mouth again, his voice cracked and broken.

"What are you gonna do with your summer? *World of Warcraft* marathon?"

Cian smiled. "Well, Dad, that sounds great, but I was thinking an epic sci-fi fantasy novel marathon. All the classics." He held up the two books. "Which do you want to read first? Jack L. Chalker or Ursula Le Guin?"

His dad gestured weakly at the Chalker.

“Ah, good choice. Because it’s hard ignore a cover flaunting a theropod riding a saddled ichthyosaur through an ocean of sand.”

He started to settle himself on the floor, but his dad raised his hand with a tremor, and patted the sofa next to him. Cian sat gingerly, afraid to lean against his dad’s spare body. He used to sit on Jeff’s chest while he bench-pressed three hundred pounds. But now, when Cian entwined his dad’s fingers in his, they felt like nothing but a handful of hollow bird bones Cian couldn’t grip for fear of shattering them. The rattling in his dad’s chest came in shallow gasps. Panic knocked and found the door open. Cian’s heart skipped a beat, pausing as if waiting for his dad’s next breath.

“Dad, can I call an ambulance? Please? I think you need to be in a hospital.”

His dad’s lips opened, but no sounds came out. Cian waited until his dad found the strength to try again.

“Home. Die at home.”

“Okay, Dad.” Cian lay down next to him, pulling the soft quilt over them both, careful not to press too close. He watched the thin chest rise and fall with each slow breath and matched his own breathing to the same rhythm. The quiet hiss of the oxygen concentrator provided a discordant harmony.

His dad laid a cool hand on the back of Cian’s neck, and Cian swallowed, trying to force his voice to work again before he opened the book and began to read.

The rhythm of the day was as simple as a heartbeat: medicine, water, read, sleep, repeat. Half the time Cian didn’t even know if his dad was listening. He didn’t care. The words gave him something to shape his mouth around that wasn’t a scream. But every time Vaughan’s crisp bill crackled in his pocket, the cold of cement leeches into Cian’s knees and the taste of cock filled his mouth. In the late afternoon, while Jeff slept, Cian ran down the block to Domino’s for a Deluxe Feast and a two-liter bottle of coke.

“You haven’t bought pizza in months,” said Jeff, when Cian got back. “Thought you didn’t like it any more. Hot cheese, crisp crust. Love that smell.” A real smile touched his eyes, like it hadn’t in months. Making that happen was worth anything.

The pizza was only a collection of crusts in the bottom of the box when Cian’s phone buzzed with a text.

*8 p.m. My place.*

\*\*\*\*

Cian showered while his dad slept, the water frigid against his skin. The pink overdue rent notice pinned to the wall above his bed fluttered in the draft from the ill-fitting window as he dressed. Cian gave his dad his evening morphine shot and kissed him on the forehead. The gasping rattle of his dad's breaths vibrated into Cian's skin.

"I have to go out, Dad, but I'll be back in the morning. I love you."

It took twenty minutes to walk to Vaughan's place. He wished Vaughan could have picked him up. Each step felt like a mile. Vaughan greeted him with a kiss. He'd laid out a set of clothes on the mattress: new dark-indigo jeans, Keds, and a cheap white cotton tee.

"C'mon into the bathroom. Once we've got you cleaned out, you can get into those." Vaughan held up an enema kit.

"Clean me out? What? No. Are you kidding?"

Vaughan threw the enema box at the wall. "Jesus, don't be so goddamn naive. This gig tonight pays four hundred bucks. You think someone lays that kind of money down and then wants shit on their dick?"

Cian cupped his elbows with his hands and looked down at the floor, holding himself still. Never move when Vaughan started to throw stuff; he'd learned that lesson well.

Vaughan sighed, and then his fingers trailed up the back of Cian's neck, stroking gently. "Baby, look. Just sit down for a minute, okay?" Vaughan pushed him to sit on the bed and handed him a Vitaminwater. "Here. Take a drink. Calm down for a second. Remember, this was your idea, okay, baby? You don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

The drink was cool and good. Dragonfruit. His favorite—sweet, but with an aftertaste that left him gagging.

Four hundred dollars? That would nearly take care of what was owing on the rent. One gig like that every week—hell, every couple of weeks—and he could make this work.

Vaughan knelt down in front of him, placing his hands on Cian's knees. "Look, Tomas is doing me a favor, adding you to his roster. You don't want to make me look bad, do you? You need the money. These guys need a service.

It's simple supply and demand. It's not going to be a tough gig, I promise. These guys are excited to meet you. They're not going to hurt you. They're going to treat you like a treasure."

Cian choked on his mouthful of liquid. "Wait, guys? 'Guys' as in plural? No, I can't... Not for my first time. No way."

"Shhh, baby boy. You're just nervous. Four hundred dollars."

Cian's pulse pounded in his ears.

Vaughan reached up and stroked Cian's hair. "Just think about it for a little while. Everything's cool. You don't have to do it. Let's just watch some TV together, hey? Just calm down a bit. Everything is fine."

Vaughan pulled Cian back onto the bed, wrapping him in his arms, and picked up the remote. *Star Trek: The Next Generation* had never been Cian's kind of deal, but the way Vaughan was laying kisses down his neck, that was nice, his hands stroking against Cian's arms... He liked that. His head was so heavy. He let it flop back against Vaughan's chest.

"That's it, baby. You feeling a bit calmer now, huh?"

"Yeah. I like it when you hold me, Vaughan. I like having a boyfriend."

Vaughan huffed out a laugh. "I like it too, baby. Take another drink, okay?"

The aftertaste didn't seem so bad, this time.

At the next commercial break Vaughan's hand grazed Cian's crotch, then cupped his cock. "Maybe you want to try that enema now, huh? Just for me. Just the two of us."

Cian hummed happily. Just the two of them. That'd be nice.

The bathroom was too bright, for all its filth, and Cian pulled his T-shirt over his face. Vaughan helped him lay on his side on the grimy tiled floor. Cian shivered at the caress of Vaughan's fingers over his skin. Vaughan was so strong. He liked it when Vaughan took care of things. Vaughan's fingers, cold from slick, prodded at his hole, and something intrusive pushed at him, probing until it met resistance and then—through. Cian wriggled and Vaughan pushed down on his hips, holding him in place. It was too small and not enough and—cold, too cold—touching him inside, all through him, and he cramped and moaned as he doubled over on the tiles. Vaughan must have turned the radio on—some local station with ads for two-for-one chili dogs on Tuesdays, and with four hundred dollars he could buy one and get the meds for his dad and—

Ow, more cramping, and... And he must have dozed for a while, because then Vaughan was steadying him as he sat him on the toilet, and wow, this was awful and embarrassing, and he wanted to be sick.

“Your name’s Eric, if anyone asks. And you’re fourteen.”

“No.”

“Yes, baby.”

“I can’t be Eric. M’last name’s Ericsson. N’one’s called Eric Ericsson.”  
Cian giggled.

Vaughan’s hands were comforting, brushing his hair, stroking across the back of his neck. A warm kiss brushed Cian’s shoulder.

“I like you like this, baby. You’re my good boy, aren’t you?”

“Mmmmm. Your good boy.” The room spun as the lampshade cast pretty patterns against the ceiling. Pop used to call him a good boy, too. Cian closed his eyes and let his body sink into Vaughan’s chest, warm and solid. “Promise you won’t leave me?”

Vaughan kissed him, idly stroking his fingers across Cian’s sac. “Let’s get you dressed now.”

Vaughan pushed Cian’s arms and legs through his new clothing as Cian lay back on the bed. The constellation of mold on the ceiling danced a minuet. Hands pulled him upright and slapped his cheek, gently, not like Tomas had done. Cian’s fingers closed around a can, thin and cold.

“Drink that all up, baby. Shit, you’re a cheap drunk.”

Cian pushed it away. Bed. He needed to lie down in bed and stay there. “Don’wanna.”

“It’s just a Red Bull. It’ll make you feel better.”

A hand tipped Cian’s head back, and cold bubbles filled his mouth and nose. Cian snorted and spat out a mouthful, pushing at the hands holding him down.

“Oh, geez, not on the T-shirt. Christ, kid, you can’t ever make things easy, can you?”

Cian flopped back onto the bed, pulling the pillow over his face.

A hand pressed down on Cian’s arm, and something pulled his skin tight. A sharp prick pierced the inside of his elbow. Voices. Bright headlights and the

scent of cologne. A car door slammed. Laughter and clinking glasses. Hands. Hands on his skin. And he was drinking, and someone kissed him, a tongue pushing between Cian's lips, tasting of something thick and sour underneath bright chemical mint, and he coughed.

*"I can't see him... no, wait..."*

Hands gripped his shoulders. A soft surface cushioned his hips. A weight squeezed Cian's breath out of his body, his chest pressed down into back of the seat by the heavy figure on top of him. The car turned a corner, and Cian rolled to the side before fingers tangled in his hair and pulled him to his hands and knees. Passing car lights swooped in dizzying curves. Laughter. Men. Pushing. Touching. Inside. Nononono, not there. A thick length, warm and wet, pushed into Cian's mouth.

*"I have him. Pull now. Now!"*

He gagged and coughed.

*"Got him. Now wake him up."*

Cian blinked and raised his face from the ground. Grimy paper, spotted with mildew, hung in tatters from walls that swayed and lurched in his blurred vision. He groaned and rolled onto his back. The moist air licked his skin, the touch dark with the scent of rotting leaves and stagnant water and hidden wild things.

"Cian. Cian!"

Pain. Cian's head reeled from the slap. Strong fingers gripped his arm and yanked him to his feet. Cian raised his bleary eyes up an arm the color of pale marble and splotted with freckles. The man's red hair was cropped close to his scalp, and a red scruff covered the lower half of his face. He patted Cian's face.

"Pay attention, brother. Stay with us."

The words seemed out of sync with the movement of the man's lips. Cian swayed a little as he found his footing.

In front of him, inside the room, stood an irregular ring of tall blue-gray basalt stones, roughly hewn and carrying tool marks. At their base the floorboards were splintered, as if the stones had pushed up through the floor. Within the circle, timber floorboards gave way to long grass that swayed and shivered as if in a gentle breeze. Against the walls, pale fungi glowed wetly

from the baseboards. The ceiling above him flickered as pale shapes, like clouds at dusk, scudded across the space inside the stones, skipping and jumping as in a time-lapse with missing frames.

“Welcome at last, Cian. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you.”

The woman on the inside of the circle was tall, her lean body poised as if waiting for a threat. She wore her long hair loose, and it fell forward, over her shoulder, in a vivid red swathe, fanning out against the white of her loose shift dress. Her pale skin was tight across her cheekbones, and shallow lines scored the skin around her eyes and at the corners of her rose lips. It was the face he’d seen in a photo a thousand times.

“Mom?” Cian ran the last steps separating him from the standing circle.

“Stop. Wait.”

Cian skidded to a halt at her tone, his toes almost breaching the shimmering line between here and... someplace else. A breeze cupped his cheek. Inside the circle, the shadows of unseen trees swayed.

*The air around Cian shuddered, turning icy, twisting like a blade—*

*“Yeah, I know you want it. Fuck, that’s so good.”*

*Something cold and unyielding inside him. Cian bucked, fighting for breath and choking as he thrashed and fought to push everything away. An engine, revving. The green/amber/red of traffic lights. A thick, sweet scent, the taste in his mouth cloying. His stomach flip-flopped, and he shook his head, trying to clear his blurred vision.*

*—against his skin. The circle oscillated in his—*

He blinked and raised his head. The woman stared back at him, the colors in her hair blurred across the background.

*—vision, like someone had knocked the projector and—*

“Stay with me, Cian,” she said. “Make the effort. You can go back in a few minutes. This is important. I’m not your mother, though you are blood of my blood. If you come through into the circle now, you can never go back. You have a task, Cian, that only you can carry out, and we don’t have long. You must visit your father, Cian. You have to bring me what he’s working on.”

“My father? He doesn’t work. He’s... sick.”

“Not him. Steven Drexler.”

“Are you shitting me? You want me to bring you something from Pop’s work?” Goddamn it. “This is some kind of fucked up, half-assed industrial espionage? You’re an idiot. That stuff’s patented and the rights are all sewn up, get it? If you try to sell it for commercial purposes, and someone uses it on a spill, Biokene will just sequence it, prove it’s their product, and sue your ass. Sure, you can reverse engineer it, but that’s probably gonna be just as much trouble as developing your own strain in the first place.” Industrial theft never paid off for the bagman. Companies didn’t bother playing by the book when it came to protecting what made them rich, and the big boys at the top of the food chain always had a fall guy. “You’re crazy to think I’d do it. If I got caught Pop couldn’t do anything to protect me. There’s no amount of money that’s worth it.”

“I’m not offering you money.”

“Yeah, well, women and wine won’t cut it either.”

“I’m offering you life.”

“I’ve already got one. Thanks anyway.”

“Not yours. Your other father’s.”

The air around him suddenly felt thin, and his ears popped. “What?”

“I can make everything better, Cian. I can give you a happy life. I can fix him.”

No. This was bullshit—cruel fucking bullshit. “Listen, lady. I don’t know who the fuck you are. I don’t even care if you *are* my mom. My dad has end-stage mesothelioma. There’s not one fucking thing on this earth that can fix him, so you just can just knock it the hell off.”

“Show him,” she said.

The red-haired man stepped forward, pulling a figure from the shadowed corner of the room. Where he gripped the wrists of his prisoner, his light skin was shockingly stark against the warm dark brown. Cian’s gaze met familiar dark copper eyes. “Reece? What the fuck?”

What the hell was Reece doing here? And where was here? No sound of traffic pierced the room, only a faint hum, like white noise, that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere all at once. The man forced Reece to his knees and pulled a long slender knife from a short scabbard at his belt. He raised the tip to Reece’s face as he wrapped one hand in Reece’s hair and pulled his head back.

“Which eye did we do it to last time, beast?”

“Wait, what?” said Cian. He took a step toward the pair, one hand raised. He wasn’t actually going to—

The man plunged the tip of his knife into Reece’s left eye and then drew the tip down his cheek, the swift motion splitting flesh and skin apart—in a matter-of-fact way, as if he was unblocking a drain. Reece’s mouth opened, wide, so much wider than it should have. The scream echoed through the room, loud enough it seemed to cascade through Cian’s mind independently of his ears. Clear fluid mingled with blood down Reece’s face. No. No, that hadn’t happened. Reece fell to his hands and knees, vomiting up cloudy fluid that pooled on the floor. Jesus, his eye? Like Reece counted for *nothing*. First the carrot, now the stick, right? This is what they’d do to Cian if he didn’t take Pop’s research? Christ, and Cian just might do it, too.

Reece was no longer screaming, only whimpering, though Cian hadn’t registered the moment when he stopped.

“You’re going to have to toughen up, brother,” said the man. He dragged Cian across the ground to where Reece lay, his knees drawn up against his chest and arms wrapped around his legs. The man thrust a small jar toward Cian. “Go on. Take it. And this.” He pushed a fine-tipped paintbrush into Cian’s hand.

Cian batted him away. “Are you fucking kidding me? You just put a man’s eye out, and you’re going to give me calligraphy lessons?”

“Yes,” snapped the man. “I am. And you’d better listen, too, if you’re so concerned about your thrall being in pain.”

The jar was small enough to fit in his hand. Traces of dried adhesive remained from a long-gone label. The once-gold lid was pitted and covered in dull smears the color of mottled zinc. Cian’s hands shook and liquid inside the jar sloshed. Reece’s quiet whimpers reached down into Cian’s guts and gripped him.

“I can’t—We need to get him to a hospital.”

A hand caught his chin, squeezing Cian’s face and forcing his gaze to meet the eyes of the redheaded man; they were green, like his own, with a ring of light hazel around the outside of the irises. The guy held up a piece of thick yellow parchment, a sigil drawn on it, like a lowercase *n* interlocked with an *s*.

“Make this mark. On the thrall.”

“Where’s my phone?” Cian dropped the paintbrush to pat at his pockets. Where the hell was it? The punch was so unexpected and harsh that it knocked him to the ground. Two strong hands hauled him to his feet again, and the brush was thrust back into his grip.

“Stop fucking around, we’ll be out of time in a minute. Make the damn rune. You have to do this yourself, or you’ll think it was something I did.”

With shaking hands Cian unscrewed the lid of the jar. The liquid inside had an oily, metallic sheen. It boiled and churned, circling the inside of the jar like a shark in an aquarium.

“On his face. Over the wound.”

“Oh, hell no. Who knows what you’ve put in this stuff.”

The red-haired man sighed. “If you don’t do it, I’ll hurt you until you do anyway. And I’ll take pleasure in doing it.”

Shit. “All right then. That’s all you had to say.” He dipped the brush into the liquid. Wet tendrils oozed up the bristles, scrabbling at the metal ferrule. “Christ! Is this stuff alive?” It felt heavy in his hand, as if weighted with lead.

The man grabbed Reece’s hair in one hand and tilted his face up until Cian could see his tear-streaked skin. Under his right eye, a trail of wetness ran down his face, something more than tears. Cian brought the brush tip to Reece’s face. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” said Reece in a quiet, cracked voice. “Just do it.”

Cian glanced again at the rune in front of his eyes. He brought the brush tip down in the first stroke. The silver ink sat for a moment, poised over Reece’s eyebrow, then sank into the skin, leaving a faint glitter behind in Reece’s pores. Cian completed the downstroke and then changed direction, pulling the brush upward to complete the first half of the rune.

Reece’s breathing hitched, and Cian jerked his hand away. He was hurting Reece more? Red-haired man caught his hand and forced his brush back to the jar. “Dip again.”

Cian reloaded the brush and placed the tip above Reece’s eyebrow, making the “s” in a single curved stroke. The flesh and skin below the bristles writhed, and Cian dropped the brush. As he watched, dark thread-like filaments broached the split in Reece’s face, drawing together and knitting the gash closed. A wet orb, like a trembling jewel, grew in the ruined eye socket, and in

seconds Cian was looking at Reece's unmistakable eye, twin to the original, the deep brown full of... compassion? Something else?

Reece pulled himself upright where he sat, releasing his knees. He glared over Cian's shoulder at the man. Cian threw himself forward and hugged Reece tightly with one arm, holding the jar tight in his other hand.

"Jesus, Reece, are you okay?"

"Yes," Reece gasped, a tear falling from his healed eye. "Now. Thanks to you."

"What the hell is this stuff?"

"It works. That's all you need to know." The man took the jar from Cian, screwed the lid back on it, and then tucked it into a pocket in his heavy leather coat.

Cian pressed close to Reece, kneeling half on damp earth and half on splintered floorboards. He ran his fingers softly across Reece's face, testing the new eye and the surrounding skin. Reece pushed his face into Cian's chest, sobbing silently. Where their hands met, Reece's touch left trails of heat on Cian's skin.

"That's what we'll give you in exchange."

Cian jumped. He had forgotten the woman was there. The man pulled Cian away from Reece, and his arms ached with the loss.

"You bring us what Drexler's working on, and in return you get that for your father. It will heal any ill."

Dad could be well again? All this could be over? "That's all I have to do? And you'll give me—"

"I'll give you your father back."

God, please, please, please. He'd do anything.

Cian staggered, suddenly dizzy, and he shut his eyes, clenching his fists until his nails dug into his palms. The strength of hope in his whispered words scratched his throat. "Let this be the real world. Please. Let this not be a dream."

The woman inside the stones leaned forward until she was near to breaking the circle herself, and whispered close to Cian's ear, "This is the real world, Cian. I'm as real as you are." She turned to the man. "Send him back."

Cian's eyes flickered open, and for a second, he saw the look of triumph on her face, and then she was gone, the grass inside the circle rippling in a breeze Cian couldn't feel against his own skin.

*The world tilted. Cian's ears popped.*

A hand gripped Cian's balls, grinding down as the thickness inside him grated against his skin. Cian flailed one arm around the sweaty shape in front of him. His hand hit glass, his nails scrabbling against the hard surface. Thighs behind him pressed against his skin, and knees pushed his stance wider, thrusting him forward.

Cian's fingers touched a recess in the door, and he grasped and pulled the handle toward him.

"Shit! Stop! You crazy whore, what are you—"

Cian was on a carousel, but the lights were too bright. They dazzled him, and he couldn't close his eyes. He wanted to get off. Someone slapped his face, twice, and voices muttered overhead. Reece. Where was Reece? He scratched his face and something crusty flaked under his fingernails. He sat up and set the world spinning. Cian felt himself vomit, his skin suddenly clammy and too tight. The stars winked out, and the darkness was a relief.

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"Come on, kid. Move."

The ground under his cheek smelled of piss and the remnants of winter. He groaned and rolled onto his back, muscles aching.

A blue awning hung overhead. Beyond that, pale dawn light whispered into the sky. Jesus, it was morning? He'd been with Vaughan, and then... oh my god... Reece. Weren't teeth supposed to feature in nightmares, not eyes? Fuck, that was one hell of a trip. Holy hell, did he have issues.

The toe of a boot nudged him. "You can't stay here."

Cian tried to focus, his vision swimming in and out. The guy above him— young, no more than twenty—wore a bright blue apron embroidered with a coffeehouse logo.

"I'm moving, I'm moving. Give me a minute."

The young man went back inside the coffee shop, and Cian pulled himself up to sitting, leaning back against the brick wall, damp with dew. His wet hair brushed against his neck. He reached up and touched the caked, sticky strands.

A cold breeze dusted his goose-bumped skin with flecks of dirt and gravel. He was naked. No wallet. No phone. No shoes. Excellent.

The café door swung open again, and the guy came back out, hefting a huge garbage bag. He threw a bundle of cloth at Cian. “Get dressed, for God’s sake.” He carried the garbage bag to the side of the building and into the alley.

Cian caught the clothing with a jerk. He held the garments up: a pair of women’s black cotton clamdiggers and a zip-up hoodie in gaudy violet polyester.

Cian struggled to his feet and clambered into the pants, overtight and uncomfortable against his damp skin. Lucky he was on the small side. The coffee guy came back from the alley.

“Thanks, man,” said Cian.

The guy shrugged. “They’re from lost and found. No big deal.”

“Hey,” said Cian. His throat ached at the words, and he coughed. “Hey. Where is this? The address, I mean.”

“Tenth and Everett. Big night, huh?”

Everett? Then he was only about three blocks away from Pop’s lab. How the hell did he end up here? He was supposed to have met clients, right? Did they dump him here? “I think I’ve been mugged.” And drugged.

The café guy stood facing him with hands on hips, a doubtful expression on his face. “You want me to call the cops?”

What would be the point in that? He’d been turning tricks, and he’d never prove he hadn’t taken the drugs voluntarily. “No. Thanks anyway.”

“I thought not.”

“No, I mean—” Crap. “Would you bother to report a mugging? It’s not like they’ll come down here. Look at me. I can’t hang around a police station like this.” He gestured down at himself. He couldn’t walk home, not in bare feet. And it wasn’t like his dad could come and get him.

Cian pulled the hoodie on. “Can I use your bathroom? Please?”

The guy sighed. “It’s six thirty in the morning. If this is an elaborate ruse to snatch the contents of the register, then you’re gonna get about eight bucks in change. And I would give that to you willingly just to save having to pick up what you drop if you grab it. The boss took yesterday’s takings home with him

last night.” He held the door open and gestured to the right. “Do not make a mess. I’m not cleaning it again.”

The bathroom was a single unisex cubicle with a fold-down nappy changing table on one wall, and a mirror over the tiny sink. Cian looked like shit. He pulled his hair back from his face. A bruise decorated the skin in front of his ear, spreading up to his forehead. He grabbed a handful of paper towels from the wall dispenser, wadded them together under the hot water and then sponged the grime from his face, neck and chest.

Shit, what the hell had those guys given him? Meth? He’d never used; was this what it was supposed to be like? E, maybe?

Cian lowered his borrowed pants and touched his ass cautiously. Nothing seemed... damaged. He was sore, but not injured. Not there, anyway. But there was a gap in his heart that should have been filled, the pain of it lancing into his spine. It was like waking up and realizing you had a missing limb—that you’d always had a missing limb—you just never knew before that you were supposed to have two arms. He probed the blank space in his mind like a cavity, and the darkness pushed back, swollen and tender. Reece. Cian bit back tears.

He wanted Reece. Craved him. And that was ridiculous. They weren’t anything. Friends, sure, but nothing more than that. Vaughan was the one he should be wanting. He couldn’t think. Cian gripped his hair and tugged, making his eyes water, and then thumped the side of his head into the wall of the tiny bathroom.

A knock at the door made Cian stop. “Are you okay in there?”

He released his hair. His hands were sticky. He rinsed them under warm water, and pins and needles spiked through his flesh as the bone-deep cold retreated. “Yeah. Be right out.”

Maybe he could just stay here. Make coffee. Start again. Pretend he was a normal eighteen-year-old kid saving for college in the fall. As if. Cian unlocked the door and walked out to the café. A girl behind the counter peered at him with narrowed eyes, her long brown hair caught up in a shiny ponytail, four-hundred-dollar sneakers on her feet. The guy was at the big Gaggia, foaming milk. Two men in suits waited for their coffee.

Cian cleared his throat. “Hey, uh, you want me to return these some time?”

The guy waved him off. “Don’t worry about it.” He nodded at a steaming cup on the pickup counter. “That’s yours, if you want it. No charge. It’s a

caramel macchiato. Some chick insisted she asked for a white chocolate mocha.” He rolled his eyes.

“That’s really decent of you. Thanks.”

Cian grabbed the coffee and stepped back out onto the sidewalk. The city was waking up. He headed east, sipping his coffee as he dodged office workers heading in for an early start. The Biokene building was on Broadway, tall glass reflecting the sunrise. He sat on the cold concrete to one side of the entrance.

In the end, Cian nearly missed him as he dozed with his head tilted back against the shiny marble.

“Cian? Is that you?” Steven swept his disheveled hair back off his forehead with one hand. “What the hell are you doing here? Didn’t we discuss doing this next week? This is a really bad time, Cian. I could meet you after work. I’ll take you to din—Wait, not tonight... tomorrow?”

Cian clambered to his feet and threw his coffee in a nearby garbage can. “All I need is some cash, Pop. Just enough to get a bus home.”

Steven stared at him. “What the hell are you wearing? Where are your shoes?”

Cian took a deep breath. “Funny story. I just woke up in a piss-filled doorway, and I have no idea how I got here. I assume someone slipped me something. I need to get home, and I’m worried about Dad.” He was a stupid fucking kid who deserved everything he got.

“Run that by me again.”

“Yep. I woke up without my clothes. I don’t have a wallet or phone. Seriously, I have nothing.”

“Jesus.” Steven sighed. “You can’t go home like that. Come up to my office. You can wear the sneakers from my gym bag. Christ, everything Jules warned me about... Just don’t speak to anyone. And don’t tell anyone you’re my child.”

“I thought I wasn’t.”

“Shi—No. No, you are. Of course you are. It’s just... You don’t know what it’s like. There’s all these genius twenty-three years olds with postdocs and no family holding them back. It’s best people here don’t think... It’s better if I don’t call attention to my age.”

Cian patted him on the shoulder. “You don’t look a day over fifty, Pop.”

Steven looked around uneasily. “Jesus, cut it out with the ‘Pop’ crap! I’m serious.”

“Sorry. Steven. You do look good, though. You always have.”

Steven walked Cian over to the security desk that doubled as reception. “Hey Dan. This is Cian Ericsson, the son of a friend. He’s come to take a look at the labs. Future science major. We need a pass for level twelve.”

Dan took Cian’s photo and then handed him a security pass with “Visitor” in bold red letters. Cian clipped it to the neck of his hoodie.

Steven crammed them into an elevator with a handful of other staff. In the enclosed space Cian could smell himself; the unmistakable reek of sweat and cum. Steven shuffled as far away as he could while he tapped out an email on his phone. Cian met the eyes of a blonde woman and felt his face flush hot with shame. It was a relief to get out on the laboratory level.

When Cian had first visited at weekends, after Pop moved out, he thought a bioengineering lab would be exciting. It wasn’t. Sure, Pop’s lab looked like a set from *Resident Evil*: A long white corridor with observation windows set into the wall, the glass plastered with biohazard stickers. Red lights clung to the ceilings. Cian had kind of wanted them to go off. But his thirteen-year-old self had been vastly disappointed to see only the occasional figure in a lab coats meekly typing on desktop computers and pushing buttons. The cartoons taped to office doors had been the best things there.

Falling asleep on the office sofa to *Star Wars* (the original trilogy) and heading out at lunchtime to the Waffle Window had been fun, at first. But Pop was always in a teleconference, or doing “just one more thing” on his laptop. Monica, a kind woman with gray hair, had shown him how to use the robotic arms to pick up first test tubes, and then eggs. Cian broke a *lot*, but Monica only laughed. When he’d mastered that, she showed him how to play table tennis against her robot, across an empty lab. She made him swear not to tell Pop. They’d mixed agar plates, and she’d let him grow cultures from his hands, and the keyboard of his dad’s computer, and then shown him how to look at the bacteria in the big electron microscope. But Monica didn’t come in every weekend, and after the third Saturday he’d spent playing *Minesweeper* on Pop’s laptop, alone in the office cafeteria, he hadn’t been as keen any more.

And by that Christmas Pop had moved in with Julian, anyway.

Today the labs were just waking up as workers swiped security cards and flipped switches, the big overhead fluorescents plinking and flickering as they warmed up.

Steven hurried Cian down the corridor and into his office at the far end. Three desks, an overloaded bookcase, and a dead peace lily were crammed into the narrow space. The room smelled of overcommitment and unanswered emails.

Cian slumped into the executive chair behind the desk. Cian gripped the arms and bent his head. If he weren't going to grovel back at Vaughan's feet, he'd need help. He just needed to tell Pop.

Steven fished under his desk and pulled out a black and red gym bag, unzipped it, and grabbed a pair of ASICS sneakers. "Here. Put these on. I'll drive you home. I'll just go brief the team for today. I'll be back in five minutes. Ten, tops. Don't move."

And then Steven was gone. Cian slipped on the sneakers. He twirled himself around in Steven's big office chair, before stopping to run his finger along the spines of the heavy books piled in uneven stacks on Pop's bookcase. He pulled one off the shelf and leafed through it. Eukaryotic biosynthesis. This was what he'd always wanted to do; be like Pop and save the world. God, if only life was like the clean crispness of empirical research—where results were replicable and proteins always folded the same way. He wouldn't get anywhere without a high school diploma, though. He threw the book back onto the pile.

The *Time* magazine cover from two years back hung in a stark black frame on the back wall above the books: Pop in his lab coat, with arms folded, the red cover text asking "Is this the man who will make landfills extinct?" Dad had been so proud, for all they weren't together any more. Pop was proud too, for all he complained how media interviews took him away from the lab.

It had been five minutes already, surely? He flipped open Steven's laptop. The password was still Overlanders57, and Cian smiled despite himself. Steven didn't have a single game installed on his laptop. Typical. On the desktop, a shortcut to a video file labeled *Investor Presentation* took center stage. Cian hit play.

Footage of the Catalina spill was intercut with the Exxon Valdez accident, and the BP oil rig disaster. A tender piano melody entwined with a single mournful viola played over images of cormorants and herons slathered in black slimy goo. A map of the North Pacific Gyre dissolved into an underwater shot of plastic soup and then came a swipe cut to a shot of a dead bird on a rocky beach, the space between its desiccated ribs filled with a rainbow of sun-bleached plastic. That scene dissolved into a greasy gray river crowded with

floating trash. Then, with a swell of operatic voices, the Biokene logo faded in, and a pulsing electronica track dived and swooped around the melody as actors in white Tyvek jumpsuits, full-face respirators, and booties made slow and deliberate movements in clean, white rooms. And then, to a rising crescendo of triumphant French horns and circling stanzas of soprano voices, clear ocean waves crashed on a white-sand shore. Two grinning, ruddy-cheeked fishermen in shiny yellow sou'westers slapped each other on the back in delight as they pulled in a bounteous catch of suspiciously photogenic fish.

Jesus, all they were missing was a leaping dolphin.

A siren shrieked, and above Cian the red plastic light in the ceiling panel flashed urgently. Outside the door, running feet slapped the linoleum. Cian froze, waiting for Pop to come and get him. It took a good ten minutes to realize that wouldn't happen. In between squeals of the siren, voices shouted. Cian flipped the visitor tag inside his hoodie. He opened the door to the corridor and slipped through, to a tumult of noise.

A half-dozen staff stood in the corridor staring through the thick observation window at the figures inside the lab. A woman in a Tyvek jumpsuit stood by the closed safety door, speaking into a handset, her voice lost in the babble of voices and that harsh scream of the siren.

A hand grabbed Cian's hoodie and nearly yanked him off his feet. He twisted his head. Steven's furious face glared back at him.

"What's going on?" asked Cian. The panic in the faces around him was making his heart beat faster.

"Nothing."

Cian snorted.

"A small containment issue. This is no place for you right now. Come on. Let's get you home."

As Steven led Cian back down the corridor, the siren cut off, the sudden silence an assault on Cian's ears. As they got to the security door, a man in navy overalls slammed through the door holding a caulking gun, thick gobs of yellow sealant dripping from the tip.

Steven paused, gripping Cian's shoulder to halt him. "That's pure latex, right? Not polyurethane?"

"Yes sir, Dr. Drexler."

“Okay.” Steven breathed out. “Okay. It’s fine. It’s just a precaution anyway.” He wrapped his arm around Cian’s shoulders. “Let’s go.”

Steven shepherded Cian down the lift and out onto the street, returning his security tag to the desk on the way. Steven hailed a cab and then pulled his wallet from his inside jacket pocket. He peeled a fifty off the roll of bills to give to the driver, along with Jeff’s address in St. Johns. He held the back door open for Cian.

Cian hesitated. “Pop. Steven. I need to talk to you. Please?”

“Goddammit, Cian.” Steven sighed. “You can see what a bad day this is for me. Julian’s right. You don’t think about other people.”

A bright bubble of iridescent anger rose in Cian’s chest. “Pop, it’s not about Jeff. I need you too.” He dug his nails into his palms. “I’m scared.” Suddenly he was a boy again, wanting his pop to check the wardrobe every night and make sure it was closed all the way. When he was six, he’d been afraid there were bad things in the dark. Now he knew there were.

Steven clapped him on the shoulder. “Come visit during the summer break, okay?” He narrowed his eyes. “You haven’t talked about college. Where did you decide on?”

A horn honked from the traffic behind the waiting cab.

“Okay, gotta go. Here.” Steven thrust some bills into Cian’s hand. “That should keep you in movies and popcorn for a couple of weeks. We’ll talk next time.”

“Pop?” God, just say it, just fucking say it. I’m not graduating. I have to repeat a year. There’s no money. I’m selling my ass for groceries and the electric bill now. Everything is not okay. Please notice. I’m not just struggling to swim, Pop. I’m four foot under and sinking fast.

The words were right there, between Cian’s teeth, but Steven was brushing imaginary lint from the hand-stitched lapel of his elegant taupe linen jacket, and frowning at the line of impatient cars behind them. Cian let Steven ease him into the backseat and close the door behind him. And then Steven was walking away, and somehow none of the words had made it out. Cian could only watch Steven stride back into building as the cab pulled away from the curb.

At the taxi accelerated, Cian saw a tall, pale man in leathers leaning against the front of the Biokene building, his cropped red hair and short beard startling

amongst the office workers shielding their morning coffee from the wind that whipped down the city block. His eyes met Cian's and he raised one hand in a salute. For a second Cian's nose filled with the scents of earth and rot.

*"You're going to have to toughen up, brother."*

Cian shook his head as pain lanced behind his eyes.

*"This is the real world, Cian. I'm as real as you are."*

He turned away from the Biokene building and stared unseeingly through the front windscreen. As they drove beside Forest Park, he uncrumpled the bills Steven had pushed into his hand. Four twenties. Yeah. Movie money. Sure.

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The golden morning light had morphed to the bright white of full day when Cian finally slid through his front door, toeing off his shoes and trying to be stealthy. The place usually stank without Cian or a caregiver to air the place out, but underneath the bitter antiseptic lay the fragrance of sweet wood smoke.

His dad was noticeably thinner, face drawn, lead-yellow undertones seeping into the gray skin. Cian knelt by the sofa and lifted his dad's hand gently from the sheets. The quilt smelled fresh, like lemongrass and white tea. His dad had been bathed, his skin soft and clean. A fresh glass of water sat beside the bed, right next to the meds that were already popped from the packaging—for hands too weak to break the foil. A small white bowl of out-of-season satsumas perched on his table.

Cian's heart flipped in his chest, and he exhaled like a daemon was leaving him. He leaned forward and pressed his head gently against his dad's side, feeling the rise and fall of his chest and the slow, gentle thump of his heartbeat.

Shaking fingers brushed through Cian's hair.

"Hey. You're back."

"I'm so sorry, Dad. I'm so sorry I wasn't here."

"Shhh. It's fine. Your friend just left. He came by to check on me."

"My—my friend?"

"Reece."

Oh, thank fuck. Everything was okay. It would be all right. It had only been a drug-addled dream, but part of him had still wondered... "Reece was here?"

“You should be mad.” His dad’s voice was nothing more than a whisper. “I finished Chalker without you. Reece brought over a couple of McCaffreys I haven’t read. Real ones. Not those half-assed posthumous efforts.” He gestured to the table. “I hope I have time to get through them.”

“Dad. Don’t talk like that!”

“Shhh. Don’t fuss. Is Reece your boyfriend?” Jeff squeezed Cian’s hand. “Why haven’t you ever brought him home? Of all dads, you should know I’d be okay with you being gay.”

Cian flushed and dropped his head again. “Dad! No, okay? He’s a friend, not my boyfriend. I just know him from... around.”

“Well, you have good friends.”

“I have to take a shower, okay?” And put on some clothes that belong to me. “I’ll be right back down.” He couldn’t stop himself shaking. Hot water would have helped, but there was none.

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His dad fell asleep just after noon. Cian’s bed was calling him, but he jogged the two miles over to North Fessenden. And didn’t that suck. He had to find a way to afford another phone. When he banged on the door of the auto parts office there wasn’t any reply, but Vaughan’s car was parked in the lot, so he was there. Cian just kept knocking as the dark sky started spitting drops of rain. At last, faint sounds issued from inside, and the door cracked open.

“Hey, Cian. Good to see you, baby. Where you been?” Vaughan ran a hand over his face, blotchy and wrinkled from bed sheets.

“What the hell did you give me?” Cian’s face and hands throbbed. His hunger had fled, and his body was so filled with anger there wasn’t any room. Fire swirled under his skin, and he clenched his fists.

“Just vodka, baby. Nothing more, I swear. It was only supposed to be a little, just to loosen you up. I didn’t expect it to hit you so hard.”

“That was not just vodka, you *asshole*. What else?”

“Only a little something to pep you up. Honestly, you were like the walking dead.”

“Your goddamn clients dumped me outside some coffee shop downtown this morning with no wallet, no phone, and no clothes.”

“Aw, baby, I’m so sorry. I’ll talk to Tomas and get him to straighten them out. You okay?” He stepped into Cian’s space and wrapped him in his arms.

Dammit, why did Vaughan have to be kind? He needed a fight, and now the tears were leaking out from under his eyelids. “Yeah, I guess.” He wasn’t actually injured, right? He was so tired. He needed someone, anyone, to help him. He couldn’t do it alone. And Vaughan was all he had.

Vaughan coughed and spat a wad of phlegm into the tiny hard-packed patch of bare earth under the window. “It’s too early for this shit. I’m sorry it went badly. First gigs are tough. It’ll get easier.” He lifted a hand to Cian’s face and stroked his cheek. “Come inside. I’ll make you feel better.”

“I can’t. I gotta go home. But I need my money. Mr. Singh will be asking for it.”

“No problem, baby.” Vaughan reached into his back pocket and pulled out a thin roll of bills, then pressed them into Cian’s hand.

Cian counted. “This is a hundred and thirty bucks.”

“Not bad, huh?”

“You said four hundred.”

“Yeah, sure, the gig paid four hundred, but that’s gross, not net. This is your cut. Thirty percent.”

Cian’s gut lurched, like he’d been dropped from a height. “Are you shitting me?” That wouldn’t even begin to cover the back rent. The fluttering edges of panic were right there, paper thin, slipping under his determination to stay calm. Okay, it was cash, at least... Along with the eighty from Pop and the left over cash from the blow job... Would that buy enough time to get the rest together? Give them breathing space for another week?

“I’ve got another job for you tonight, okay? It’s gonna pay real well. Clear your debts. Let me help you, okay, baby?”

Cian went rigid. Fuck. Tonight? “No. I’m done.”

“Okay, baby. No problem. You know, morphine sells for a good price on the street. I’d be happy to hook you up with a buyer.”

Shit. What *were* his other options? Begging Steven? And listening to Julian’s sanctimonious shit in return? Taking a thirty-hour-a-week shift at a burger joint? Yeah, like that’d pay the rent.

He was eighteen years old. An adult. He could work this out. He had to take responsibility for himself, right? That's what adults did. "Fine. But I've got rules."

Vaughan wrapped his arms around Cian and pulled him into an embrace. "Whatever you need."

"You don't leave. You stay there and make sure I'm okay. And no more cars. It has to be an apartment... or a motel."

"I've got a place booked already. A hotel. Nice place. Class all the way. Let's just get you back into the black, okay? Get a little salted away for a rainy day, and then you won't have to do it again."

Cian squeezed his eyes closed. "No alcohol."

"You're the boss. I'll look after you. You gotta get back on the horse, right?" Vaughan slid an arm down Cian's back and gripped his ass in a tight handhold. Cian forced himself to relax into his touch. He could do this. A couple of months, that was all. He needed to catch up, get on top of things. But trusting Vaughan too much? That was probably a bad idea. He had to watch out for himself.

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It was just Cian's luck Mr. Singh spotted him on the way back into the apartment.

"You got that rent for me, Cian?"

Cian pulled out his meager fold of bills. "I'll get you the rest tomorrow, I promise."

"I know your dad's sick, so I've given you a break so far. But I need you to pay your arrears within twenty-four hours. There's a lot of people waiting for decent, clean, affordable accommodation."

"I know. I'm sorry. Just a little longer, please? I've got a job now. I swear. I'm good for it."

"Twenty-four hours, Cian."

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Cian was carrying the garbage bag down to the shared dumpster when he saw the figure sitting on the steps leading back to the alley, his sweatshirt hood pulled up against the drizzle. Cigarette smoke drifted above his head.

A dark, long-fingered hand held up a phone. “Look familiar?”

Cian reached out and took his phone from Reece. A crack ran down the casing, but the screen was undamaged. He turned it on, swiping across the wallpaper of him and Reece, heads pressed together as they smiled at the camera in some shared moment of ordinary joy. Six texts and three missed calls: all from Vaughan. He scrolled down. The level of concern escalated with each one Cian hadn’t replied to. The clench in his gut eased a little. Vaughan did care.

“Where was it?”

“One of the guys found it on the side of North Columbia. Recognized me, I guess. I bought it off him for a bag of pecans.”

“Thanks.” Cian tucked it into his pocket. “And thank you for looking after my dad. Thank you doesn’t really cover it, actually.”

“You all right?”

“Yeah.” He was so tired. “No.” Not enough sleep. No food. Crazy dreams. His dad. He didn’t know which was hurting him the most, right now. “I had a fucked up dream. Goddamn Vaughan.”

Reece flicked away his cigarette butt and got to his feet. Cian breathed in the smoke that clung to him, and felt his pulse slow for the first time all day. “I’d rather be back in my dream, actually. Then Dad could get better. Get fixed. Shit, I am so fucked up.” He rested his forehead against Reece’s shoulder. “You were in it too. It’s good to see you, actually. I was half-worried it was real. It *felt* real.”

“Maybe it wasn’t a dream.”

Cian’s head jerked up.

“I’ve never lied to you, Red Hot, and I’m not going to start now. The truth isn’t much, but it’s all I’ve got to give you. In your dream I lost an eye, and you fixed it. With magic. And the fae made you an offer. Your Pop’s research for the cure to all ills.”

Cian lurched away from Reece. “That shit was real? Fae? What the fuck?”

“The fair folk. The Lords and Ladies. You have to have realized you’re one of them. Well, half-fae. Look at you.”

“I’m... I’m nothing, okay?” Shit. Fae were real? Or had Reece just finally given in to the lure of cheap street drugs. But if there was a chance... “They took your *eye*. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Thanks to you.” Reece grabbed Cian’s hand. “Listen, you don’t have to give them what they want. Sometimes you have to acknowledge the price is too high. This is one of those times.”

“Too high? Are you kidding me? You think I have some kind of loyalty to Steven? Jesus, I’d trade *him* for that stuff.” Cian reached out a hand and touched the soft skin under Reece’s eye. “That really happened? I can’t believe it... healed you. That must have hurt like a bastard.”

Reece thinned his lips in a humorless smile. “After a few thousand years, you get used to pain. At least it means your hearts are still beating.”

Cian dropped his hand. “They called you a ‘thrall.’ *My* thrall. What does that mean?”

Reece stood and brushed off the seat of his jeans, the silver bracelet on his wrist slipping out from under his gray sweatshirt. “I’m kind of... in service to you, Red Hot. Tied to you. Irrevocably.”

“So... what? You have to do what I say?”

“Pretty much. There’s some wiggle room.”

“Then you can help me get a sample from Steven’s lab. Jesus, I have to get it now. Today. Dad doesn’t have much time.”

“Cian, you can’t do it. You’re going to get through this, Red.”

“Get through this? Get through my dad dying? When there’s even the smallest chance he doesn’t have to?”

“You don’t need that kind of bargain. You don’t understand what you’re giving them.”

Cian was already backing away. How could Reece not get this? It was *his* dad. “I understand, all right. I understand that you’re not going to help me.” It hurt. Just when he’d started to think he could count on Reece. The big man was the one person who was always there, with food, and help, like those new winter boots last year he’d “found” in a thrift store. He’d thought it was because they were friends, because Reece liked him. *Him*. And not because Cian had a hot ass and a ready mouth. And it was all some obligation?

“Fuck you, Reece. I’ll handle it without you. So you’re my thrall? Then *fuck off*. And stay away from Dad. If you don’t wanna help, then we don’t need you to look after us. I can do this by myself.”

“No, Red Hot, stop. Let me show you—”

Cian didn't want to hear it. He wasn't going to be shown anything. He'd have to take the bus downtown. If he hadn't already given Mr. Singh the cash, he could have caught a taxi. If his dad could be cured, they wouldn't need that shitty apartment. They wouldn't need anyone except each other.

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The phone in his pocket vibrated as he got off the bus, but it was only Vaughan, not Steven returning one of his calls, so he ignored it. The drizzle was clearing by the time he pushed his way through the heavy glass door to the Biokene lobby.

“Can I help you?”

Cian padded over to the security desk. “It's Dan, right? Do you remember me? I was here this morning.” He tried to smile reassuringly, but his mouth seemed to have forgotten how. “With Steven Drexler.”

He didn't miss the guard looking him up and down. “He expecting you now?”

“Yeah, but he's not answering his cell. Can you call his office for me? Please?”

The doorman hurrumphed as he picked up a handset.

“Mr. Drexler, the young man from this morning is here to see you again.”

Whatever Steven said must have reassured Dan. When Steven hadn't appeared after ten minutes, he brought Cian back a Red Bull from the vending machine next to the lifts when he got one for himself. Suddenly Cian realized how hungry he was. He hadn't had anything since the coffee this morning.

Cian waited another twenty minutes. No other workers entered or left the lifts, and the phone on the security desk didn't ring.

“It's kinda quiet today,” he said to Dan.

“They sent most of the staff home first thing this morning. Phoned the rest and told them not to come in. Makes me wonder if there's layoffs coming. Restructuring, maybe.”

When Steven finally stepped out of the elevator he looked furious. “Jesus, Cian, what the hell are you doing back here?” Steven ran one hand through his hair, leaving it standing on end in clumps. Tight lines creased the corners of his

mouth. “You already know what a bad time this is. You would decide you want some family bonding time *now*. Go home.”

Cian crossed his arms. “We can talk here or in your office. You pick.”

Cian could feel the fury the whole way up in the elevator. The corridor was empty now, and the empty lab looked a little different than it had this morning. The observation window was smeared and pitted, and a gray dust lay on the inside of the window frames. A couple of lab stools were tipped over on their side. Charcoal smudges covered the once-white walls. Paper ash lay inside a burned ring binder that was covered in drips of plastic from a charred and melted hard drive tower. A wide strip of linoleum was missing from the floor, showing the concrete beneath, the edges of the patch ragged and dusty. Fire-suppressant foam swathed every horizontal surface.

“Holy fuck,” breathed Cian. “What happened?”

“You saw what happened. Right before I was to head out to Jakarta for the investor meeting, too. Christ, this could sink us if news gets out.” Pop sounded tired, like a man of seventy.

Steven opened the door to his office and gestured to a chair. “So what did you want?”

He wanted Pop’s security card, that’s what he wanted. That and five minutes alone. But something Reece had said... “I—Am I not Jeff’s kid? Biologically, I mean?”

Steven’s face went gray. “I knew we should have told you before now.”

Cian felt as if he’d been dunked in ice water, his extremities numb. “It’s true?”

“Your mom turned up on our doorstep, wearing clothes right out of Burning Man, with you wrapped in a scrap of leather. She couldn’t have been on the streets long. She was healthy enough. I doubted for a while if she’d even given birth, but you’re the spitting image of her.” Steven sighed and his eyes glazed over as if looking at a scene from long ago. “Jeff wanted a kid so much. We’d been to the adoption agencies, but nineteen, twenty years ago things were different. A gay couple was not on the top of the list for a baby. We looked into adoption from overseas, but places like Russia, China, Myanmar—Two men wouldn’t even get on the list. And there you were. Needing love and a home. Jeff couldn’t have loved you any more if you were his own genes.”

“And my mom?”

“She wasn’t American. She didn’t have a green card, no job, no place to live. No family or friends, far as we could tell. She didn’t stay long. So, Jeff registered your birth as if he was the father.”

“He lied for me?”

“Yep. On a statutory declaration, in front of a notary.”

“He didn’t even lie to me about the tooth fairy.”

“I know. Or Santa. Drove me crazy. But he just wanted you so much.”

“But you didn’t.”

“It’s... complicated. I wanted Jeff to be happy. But we didn’t know anything about you. You didn’t have DNA from either of us. Who knew how you’d turn out?” He didn’t meet Cian’s eyes.

“And then my mom left?”

“She stayed less than forty-eight hours. Slept most of those. It seemed like she’d traveled a long way.”

“She didn’t leave an email address? A number?”

“Nothing. I’m so sorry you found out this way,” Steven said. “Look, I’ve got a meeting. But I’ll be done in thirty minutes. An hour, tops. Don’t move. I don’t want to leave things like this.” Steven stood and headed for the door.

Perfect. “Steven?”

“What?”

“I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Jesus, Cian, if you knew how important—” Steven unclipped his security tag and threw it to Cian. “Come straight back here. Don’t talk to anyone. And wait for me. We aren’t done here.”

Cian gave Steven five minutes and then opened the door to the corridor. He listened for voices, but there was only silence. He swiped Steven’s keycard on the main lab door and slipped inside. A small fridge stood on the bench that ran the length of the far wall. Yellow latex had been smeared around the seal, holding the door closed. Shit. Cian pulled open drawers until he found a set of scalpels and then carved at the latex until he could open the fridge. The shelves held piles of petri dishes, filled with agar and a creamy, white growth. Milky paraffin wax coated the edges of each dish, sealing them closed. Neat lettering labeled them: *T. oleivorans* strain 260. Cian pulled one out and shoved it in his

jacket pocket. He replaced the scalpel, but couldn't do anything about the latex. He patted it back into place as best he could, slipped back out, and headed for the lifts.

He left Steven's keycard at the security desk. Too bad if Steven got in trouble. Fuck him. Fuck him twice.

He stepped out onto the footpath and turned north. Now what? Would Reece know how to contact the... the fae? It was ludicrous. This couldn't be real. But Cian's fingers drummed out a restless beat on the lid of the petri dish to the rhythm of his hope.

A tall figure with close-cropped red hair fell into step beside him.

"You look nervous as all hell. You got something for me, brother?"

"Why do you call me that?"

"Just hand it over."

Cian slid the petri dish out of his pocket. "Show me the stuff, first."

The man pulled the tiny jar out of the pocket of his leather coat. "Trade you."

"And the brush."

"You don't even need it. Just your finger will do the job." He smirked at Cian.

"The brush. And the rune."

Redhair pulled the scrap of parchment and the brush from another pocket. Cian snatched them, and the jar, and then handed over his petri dish. Should he tell the guy how to look after a culture? No, that was their problem. He'd done his part. He gripped the jar in shaking fingers. The liquid inside swirled in melding patterns of dark and light.

He lifted his head, to say good-bye. Redhair picked at the wax coating. Pale flecks dusted his coat and fell around his feet.

"What are you doing? It needs to be kept contained."

Redhair lifted the lid off the petri dish and raised his head to smile at Cian. "Not your problem, right?" He nodded at the jar in Cian's hand. "Shouldn't you be getting somewhere with that?"

Home. He had to get home. Cian clutched the jar in his hand and then tucked it into his jeans pocket. God, wouldn't that be great—if he dropped it on

the way home. He broke into a jog. It had to work. It had to. His phone vibrated again. It was a relief, this time, to see it was Vaughan.

“You haven’t been answering your phone, baby.”

“Sorry, sorry, I know. I’m downtown.” Cian glanced up at the street signs. “On West Burnside and Twelfth. Can you come and get me?”

“I’ll be there in fifteen.” Waiting seemed to take hours; the streetlights were flicking on in the gathering dusk. Staying in one place was a slow agony. Cian needed to move, to run home, but Vaughan would be quicker.

The shiny black car finally pulled up beside him, and the passenger window rolled down.

“Hop in.”

Cian buckled himself in, his fingers playing on the jar safe in his pocket. “You gotta take me home, okay? Quick as you can.”

“You forgotten you have a job tonight, baby?”

He didn’t need it. He’d never need it again. He wasn’t stupid enough to tell Vaughan that, though. “Yeah, but take me home first.” Okay, so they’d get evicted, but with his dad well, they’d cope with that. Together.

“You’ll be late for the client.”

“Fuck the client.”

Vaughan grinned at him with that shit-slick smile. “I think that’s kind of the idea, baby. We’re meeting him at a hotel across the river. It’s a good thing you were already down here.”

Fuck. He glanced out the window, but they were moving too fast to risk jumping out. And what if the jar broke? He hoped for a red light, but they hit greens at every block. Just his luck.

Fine. It was one guy. He could do it and get it over with, then get back to his dad. “You’re not leaving, though, right?”

“I promise I’ll be right there the whole time.”

“And you’ll take me home after.”

“Cross my heart.”

They headed up Burnside and over the bridge across the Willamette, then turned north, and parked in a big lot close by the MAX station. When Cian

climbed out of the car, Vaughan took his hand and kissed his fingers. “You’ll be okay, baby.”

The hotel was just another soulless chain, the lobby full of black tile and tasteful fake leather ottomans. The events board welcomed attendees from the local Business Alliance. Cian glimpsed the door to a cocktail bar to his left, a chalkboard sign announcing happy hour. Vaughan tapped his foot while they waited for the lift. Cian leaned against the wall, wrapping his arms around himself to stop his limbs from shaking. The place was nice enough. Some middle-class businessman wanting to get his rocks off with a boy before he went back to the office for an all-nighter. He’d be all right. Then Vaughan would take him home. His fingers skated over the jar in his jeans pocket. Would it even work? Was he a fool for wanting it to be real?

Vaughan jabbed at the buttons until the lift door opened. When the doors closed behind them Cian stumbled when it jolted down, instead of going up. Cian glanced at Vaughan. “You sure this is right?”

“Don’t worry about it, baby,” said Vaughan as he tapped out a text on his phone. He smoothed a hand down Cian’s back.

The lift doors opened on a dim, windowless corridor lined with scuffed tan linoleum. The hum of heavy machinery came from behind closed doors bearing engraved signs saying, “High Voltage” and “Staff Only”. Cian’s heart sank. So much for a mid-rate hotel room, then.

At the end of the corridor Vaughan ushered Cian through a heavy fire door, closing it behind them and leading Cian down a flight of stairs into a narrow, cinder block stairwell, to a simple wooden door at the bottom.

Vaughan caught Cian’s puzzled glance. “It used to be the maintenance manager’s office. He rents it out now, by the hour. Friends only. It’s nice enough for its purpose. And best of all, it’s practically soundproof.” He pushed the door open and tugged Cian into the room.

Two strips of fluorescent overhead lighting cast stark shadows on the walls of the small room. The floor was bare concrete. Against the far wall, a grimy comforter lay on a tattered California king. Next to it stood a battered armchair.

An older man rose from the chair, the silver at his temples stark in the light overhead, his blue-gray eyes creased in a smile.

“Hello, Cian. I’ve been looking forward to this since Tomas sent me your photo.”

Oh, fuck no.

Julian.

Cian's mouth filled with the taste of bile. He turned to Vaughan.

"I can't do this." Cian pushed past Vaughan, reaching for the door handle. "I have to get out of here."

Vaughan pressed his hand against the door, shooting the bolt closed. "Think of the money, baby."

"You don't—You don't understand. That's—" Cian bent over double, his belly convulsing. He was going to be sick any second now.

Vaughan knelt down beside him, one hand on Cian's shoulder.

"That's my stepfather," whispered Cian. "He asked for me? There's no way."

Julian chuckled. "In my defense, it's not actually incest if there's no blood relationship."

Vaughan kissed Cian on the cheek. "Come on, baby. Just think of it like a Nifty story. Hot stepdad, naughty barely legal teen. Maybe you'll remember next time. You don't ever talk back to me. Not to *me*. We could have done this the easy way, but oh, no, you had to act like a prissy bitch. Well, I put in too much time on you to walk away." He pushed Cian against the wall. "Now just stay put, and this will go a lot easier." Vaughan lowered his head to Cian's ear. "I might even pay you." Vaughan pulled a zip tie from his pocket and gripped Cian's wrists, forcing them together in front of him. Cian pulled his eyes up to meet Vaughan's gaze.

"No—Please, don't do this. Not him. Someone else. I'll do whatever you want, as long as it's someone else."

"He's paying a lot, baby. More than your ass is worth."

Vaughan pulled the zip tie closed, the plastic biting into Cian's wrists.

Cian forced himself to stand, swallowing convulsively. "You're as fucked up as he is."

Julian coughed. "I think that's enough of the introductions. Now get onto your knees and crawl over here. If you're nice to me, I think you'll find I can be a very generous man, Cian."

Cian turned to face him. "You're sick in the head. And I'm telling Steven."

Julian's arm snapped out, and he backhanded Cian. Cian's head snapped to the side, and his mouth filled with coppery liquid. He froze, half-turned away from Julian, his eyes glued to the floor. From the corner of his eye, he saw Vaughan lean against the door, folding his arms.

"Now get on your knees like I told you."

Cian hunched his shoulders, keeping his head lowered and his hands up by his chin. His hair swung forward, hiding his face. "Just let me out, okay? I'm sorry. I won't tell anyone."

"Don't be so shy, baby," said Vaughan. "You've done it for me plenty of times before. And he's paying good money for this. You got that rent to pay, after all."

The punch to Cian's gut pushed all the oxygen from his lungs. He fell to the floor, bringing his bound hands to his belly and gasping. He coughed and tried to sit up, but Vaughan knelt on his neck. Cian pressed against Vaughan's thighs in panic, barely feeling Julian's hands pulling his sneakers off. Cian heard the clink of his belt as Julian unfastened the buckle and a soft slide as he pulled the worn leather all the way out through the belt loops. Then Julian's hands were on Cian's crotch, unfastening his jeans, tugging them down to his knees and then over his feet. *No! The stuff.* Julian tossed the pants away, the fabric crumpling into a pile in the corner of the room.

"Careful, please," Cian sobbed out. "You have to be careful. There's a jar. In my jeans. I'll be good. Just take care of it."

"No underwear," said Julian. "Nice." A hand grasped Cian's balls, and he gasped. "You want me to be careful? I'm going to take your ass, and you're going to give it to me. Eagerly. You're going to make me believe I'm the best you've ever had, and then you're going to beg me for more like a good little boy."

Vaughan flipped Cian around until he was lying on his back on the gritty concrete floor. He forced Cian's bound hands over his head then gripped them there. Julian dropped to his knees, straddling Cian's body. He unzipped his suit pants and pulled out his cock, dark purple and wet at the tip. Julian pushed it against Cian's lips, and Cian turned his head away.

Julian's hand met Cian's cheek in another slap. His skin burned.

"Please. Do that again," said Julian. "I love how easily you mark."

Cian tilted his head back, looking up. "Don't do th—"

“Cian, I’m only going to say this once. The only words I want coming out of your mouth are ‘thank-you’ and ‘please.’ Now suck me.”

Julian reached one hand back behind him and gripped Cian’s testicles again, squeezing tightly. Cian yipped in pain, and Julian forced his cock into Cian’s mouth.

The taste was acrid, and Cian gagged, pushing against the hard flesh with his tongue.

“I’m sure you’ve been taught better than that,” said Julian. “Get it right.”

Cian spat out Julian’s cock and turned his head away.

Julian huffed out a breath and sat back in exasperation. “Now, I don’t like getting my hands dirty, so open your mouth properly and show some enthusiasm, because if you don’t, I’m going to send your pimp out for some pliers, and I’m going pull out every one of your teeth. And then I’m going to see if my fist will fit up your ass.”

Cian’s heart sank. He was going to have to do this. Get through, survive, get out. Get home. What really mattered? Dad. That’s all. He’d go to the cops after.

Cian opened his mouth, and Julian pushed forward, forcing his cock between Cian’s lips. Cian sucked, and a burst of pre-cum landed on his tongue. He pushed it out of his mouth with his tongue, smearing the fluid over the base of Julian’s cock and then lapped at the frenulum.

“Better.” said Julian, “Hold still now, and keep your throat open. I’ve always wondered about the term ‘skullfuck’.”

Julian’s hands wrapped in Cian’s hair, jerking his head forward until Julian’s cock bumped the back of his throat. Shit, he couldn’t do this, had never been able to, no matter how Vaughan nagged at him. Cian belched. He was gonna be sick. He struggled against Julian’s grip as Vaughan’s fingers dug into his wrists.

“Oh, that’s nice. The eagerness is still lacking, but just look at the panic in his eyes. That’s better than a little blue pill. All right, let’s put him on the desk.”

Their hands working together, Julian and Vaughan lifted Cian, placing him belly down on the grimy surface. His soft cock lay caught between his groin and the hard, pitted edge, and he grunted, tears forced out of his eyes.

Vaughan held his wrists, pulling them across the desk. Cian blinked his vision clear. Julian’s crotch pressed against Cian’s ass, his trousers sagging against his thin thighs, his cock hard and wet with Cian’s saliva.

The hot blunt head of Julian's cock prodded against Cian's asshole. Cian slumped forward, laying his cheek on the desk and closing his eyes. Struggling would only make it hurt more. Julian spat, and moisture ran down Cian's crack. The cock against his hole pushed forward, and Cian's vision blurred as it split him open.

He just had to get through this. That was all. He didn't matter. None of this mattered. Get through. Get home.

\*\*\*\*\*

Julian sat on the mattress next to Cian, carding one hand through Cian's hair while he checked his cellphone. Pinpricks of moisture ran out of Cian's eyes and mingled with the cum spread across his face, dripping onto the pillow. Julian's fingers tangled in the clumps of semen in Cian's hair, carefully pulling the strands free.

"You're a very special boy, Cian. I've wanted to do this since the first moment Steven brought you home to meet me. I couldn't believe my luck when Tomas sent me the photo of his latest addition. Once we got going you were perfect. Just as good as I hoped. And every time I look at you, I'll remember you like this."

Cian rose up on his arms and spat into Julian's face, then wiped his mouth with his hand. Red streaked across his fist. "You've had your fucking fun, you asshole. I hope it was worth it."

Julian grabbed Cian's hair and yanked his head back onto the bed. He ran the fingers of his other hand over Cian's buttock and brought them to rest at his throbbing rim.

"What a sweet little fuckhole you have. I don't think I'll ever get enough of it. I think I might need to come back and visit you again this week."

"The second I get out of here—" Cian snapped his mouth closed.

Julian released Cian's hair and unzipped his own pants. "Look at that. Hard again." He chuckled. "The things you do to me."

Julian wrapped his arm around Cian's chest and heaved Cian's sagging body onto his lap, pushing him down onto his cock. He propped Cian's back against his chest in a parody of a tender embrace. "Now I'm kinda tired, and I don't feel like doing any work. So I want you to squeeze me with your asshole, understand?"

His long fingers reached down and pulled at the tip of Cian's cock, idly tugging at the foreskin and working it back and forth over the head.

"I bet I know what you're thinking," Julian whispered into Cian's ear. "You're thinking that the second you get out of here, you're going to the cops." He dug his nails into Cian's foreskin, and Cian shrieked, clenching down and twisting in Julian's grasp.

Julian moaned. "I do so love it when you do that, baby boy. You squeeze me just like the pro you will soon be." Julian brought his hands up to Cian's nipples, tugging them in short jerks. "Look how puffy these are. I love how pink your nips are against your baby tits." He licked up the side of Cian's face, the saliva cooling quickly against his skin. "I'm not entirely stupid, you know. I learned something very interesting from Steven a few years back. DNA is such a great tool in law enforcement. But if three or four people, or hell, even more, donate DNA, then there will be so many alleles in a mixture that no one can be excluded as potential contributors." Julian gripped Cian around the hips and lifted him up and down on his cock, humming happily. "Do you know what that means?"

"It doesn't mean shit," Cian spat out. "It's you and Vaughan."

Julian groaned, and hot cum filled Cian's hole again. "Oh, that was nice. A sweet little digestive. It really is time I got home. Steven's working late tonight, some emergency. But he texted to say he's leaving the labs soon." He pushed Cian off his cock, trails of cum dribbling down Cian's thighs.

Cian dropped his head onto the filthy pillow. Thank fuck. He'd made it. And he was going to get out of here, and they were going to pay.

Julian tousled Cian's hair. "You've been a good boy." He leaned down and kissed Cian on the cheek, brushing his hair back from his face. "By the time we're through with you, there won't be a single man in the city they could eliminate from the jizz they're going to pull out of your sloppy cunt. You're a whore now. You might as well face it. Perhaps when this is over, we can come to a regular arrangement. You still need rent money, after all. You have to take advantage of the opportunities that come your way. Make your own future, Cian."

The door swung open.

"And oh, look who's back. With the new party guests. Too bad I can't stay and watch. I do so like to meet new people." He patted Cian's shoulder. "I'll be seeing you."

“Can I beat him, first?”

The voice was thin, high, nasal. No one he knew.

“Sure. That’s extra, though.”

“How much extra?”

“Another fifty.”

There was the *clink* of a buckle and then the harsh *thwack* of leather against Cian’s back. Cian sucked in great gulps of air, choking on his own breath.

“Not the spine, idiot,” said Vaughan. “Just the ass, or he won’t be able to move tomorrow.”

Cian whimpered under the blows, the snot and tears blocking his nose. When he finally heard the belt hit the floor he tried to crawl forward, up the bed and away from the unseen man who pressed in against him.

Hands pulled his ass cheeks apart.

“Aw, fuck yeah. Fag’s already wet. He wants it.”

“You reckon he can take us both?” Another new voice. Shit, no.

“If he can’t now, he sure will be able to by tomorrow,” said Vaughan.

Pain pierced him, and Cian screamed.

“That’s just a bit too loud, I think, baby. This is a public building, after all. Don’t want to take any chances.” Vaughan knelt on the bed next to Cian’s head. Cian froze as Vaughan brandished a roll of duct tape and ripped off a jagged length. He shuddered as Vaughan’s fingers trailed across his face as he pressed the tape against Cian’s lips, his touch greasy. “Shhh, now. That’s a good boy.”

Fingers punched into his hole, splitting him open, scoring his flesh with jagged nails. He screamed behind his gag, then tried to slow his breathing. The air he sucked in through the stuffing and cotton of the damp pillow reeked of cheap aftershave and cum. Reece. Why hadn’t he asked Reece to come with him? To watch his back?

He glanced up. Vaughan’s tight smile was a gash across the man’s face. The man behind Cian pumped into him, the thickness of his cock pressing against Cian’s tender flesh. Something warm and wet trickled down the inside of his thigh. Please let that not be blood. He rubbed his face against the mattress, trying to work off the corner of the duct tape. One nostril was blocked, and he couldn’t get enough oxygen. Cian tried to suck in air, tried to free his hands,

panicking at the bite of the zip tie... Not enough air... Strands of blackness closed around him, before the world hit him in the side of the head. His body arched, and he thrust one hand up, pain locking his jaws rigid, teeth grinding together.

“None of that. I thought you knew better by now.” A bright light drilled into his retinas. He flinched at the sting on the inside of his forearm, the skin tender and itchy.

Reece.

Dad.

*God.*

So thirsty.

Darkness. Drifting.

Pain, mostly. No pain times, occasionally. Those were better. But soon there wasn't any difference.

“Come on, kid.”

Something was covering his face, but he couldn't raise his arms to remove it. He struggled to break free. God, his head was killing him.

“He's back in V-fib.”

White. So much white. Blurry figures above him. Electronic beeps, and the squeak of rubber shoes on linoleum.

“Yes, that's it. Good job.”

No more. Please. Cian thrashed from side to side on the bed.

A man's hand, smooth and calm, stroked the inside of his arm. “Stop fighting, all right, kid? You're in the ER at Oregon Health and Science University. You're going to be fine. Just let us do our jobs. I'm giving you something to help you sleep.”

The hand on his forehead was smooth, the taste of oxygen cool in his mouth. He lifted his head. A plastic tube joined the lure attached to his arm, and a nurse was injecting something into the line where it descended from the saline bag on the stand above him. And then nothing.

When he woke up, he was alone. A tray covered in plastic wrap sat on his hospital table—slices of anemic pear and virulent-yellow tinned peaches in a small plastic bowl and a cup of fake-strawberry yogurt.

A nurse entered, her Crocs squeaking on the linoleum floor. “Nice to see you’re awake.” Cian turned his head away while she checked his blood pressure and patted his hand reassuringly. “You’re gonna be fine,” she said. “I’ll let the doctor know you’re up.”

Cian forced himself out of bed. Everything hurt. He pulled open the tiny closet and the drawers in the stand on wheels next to the hospital bed. No clothes. Nothing that belonged to him.

Cian wheeled his drip along in front of him as he stumbled to the bathroom. The five-foot trip exhausted him. When he pissed it stung. In the mirror, bruises and scrapes vied for position on his face. He pulled up his hospital gown to see the damage. Grazes marked the length of his chest and belly. Cian ran his fingertips over a crusty red scab. Three gashes ran down his legs, a line of metal staples holding them closed. Cian raised a hand and tenderly touched the back of his head. A patch of hair had been shaved off, close to the skull. He hissed as he pressed the swollen skin surrounding spiky stitches. His ass ached, and he reluctantly checked the soft skin around his hole. No stitches there, at least. The terror in his chest receded a little, and Cian leaned against the mirror, trying to catch his breath.

When he came back out, a man and a woman, both in their thirties, were standing next to his bed.

The woman held out a business card, but Cian didn’t take it. “Mr. Ericsson, I’m Detective Lawson, and this is Detective Woods. May we speak with you?”

Cian shrugged and pushed past her to climb back into bed. “Aren’t you supposed to wait ’til I’ve seen the doctor?”

“Is that what you want? You can have someone here to support you. Family? We can call Mr. Drexler for you. Do this later.”

Cian shook his head and pulled the wrap off his lunch tray. He peeled the paper back from the yogurt. The artificial smell made his stomach turn.

“Do you understand what happened to you?”

Cian dipped the plastic spoon into the yogurt and touched it to his tongue, gagging a little at the chemical taste. He dropped it back on the table.

“I’m not... completely sure.”

“We were contacted by a sex worker. She heard from one of her regulars that some kid was being rented out on the cheap in a basement downtown, too

hopped up on meth to say a word about it. Apparently this guy went to use your ass and didn't like what he saw. Said you were completely out of it. He also thought you were about fourteen. That sat kinda uneasy with him. Which, considering he's the kind of man who's happy to pay to fuck a teenager, tells me you were in a pretty bad way. He didn't want to go to the cops, for obvious reasons, so he told the woman he usually goes to for, uh, personal services, over in Vancouver. She called the sex trafficking task force here in Portland. Told us rumor was you'd been there for days. When they picked you up you were alone, and high, in a restricted part of the building. You still had your ID on you, and you're over eighteen. No one reported you missing, and you're a local. So the case got thrown to us. You a regular on the street, Cian?"

There wasn't anything in his stomach, but Cian wanted to throw up anyway. He sat silently in the narrow hospital bed, picking at a frayed hole in the sheet.

"Look, we're not interested in charging you with anything. We've collected a rape kit, but I'm pretty sure you can tell us more than the DNA will. Are the guys who did this to you clients? Or ex-clients? Or a pimp you pissed off?"

"Can you tell me something?"

"Sure."

"They—they said that in cases of gang rape there's no point doing a DNA analysis. That you can't use it to identify any particular person."

The woman glanced back at her partner. "That's true. But DNA evidence isn't everything. We don't need it to get a conviction. Not if you cooperate."

"I don't remember anything."

"Nothing?"

The male cop shook his head. "Jesus, kid, why are you lying?"

Cian met his eyes. "You're never going to get a conviction for this, no matter how much I remember or don't. I know you know this, so this fucking pretense that the justice system is ready and willing to dispense ass-kicking and is only waiting on my say-so? Just... don't. Okay? I'm not that dumb. Just write down that you interviewed me, and I don't remember anything. I'm sure one of these doctors will back me up." Going through court? No thanks. He and Dad were gonna blow this town. Start over fresh.

The woman sighed and placed her card on the table next to Cian's discarded yogurt.

“I understand you’re still in a lot of pain. It’s only been two days since you were brought in, and you’re still recuperating. We’re going to come back tomorrow, after you’ve had a chance to recover. Think about things. But you can call me any time.”

“I need my clothes back. My stuff.” The jar. The rune. He had to get home. Christ, Vaughan had him there days?

“It’s in processing. You’ll get it back eventually.”

Shit. Panic spilled over inside him. The heart rate monitor blared an alarm. No, it would be okay. It would be fine. Reece would know where to find the fae, right? He could get another batch, surely?

The cops turned to leave, the man holding the door open for his partner.

“Detectives?”

They turned back.

“Please, just don’t... don’t tell my dad, okay? About me—about me working?”

“Your dad? That would be Jeff Ericsson?”

Cian nodded.

*Jeff treasured the collectible porcelain his mom had left him. Tacky cute stuff, bought from the back covers of patchwork magazines and made to order on “limited firing days.” But amongst the baby centaurs, Grecian nymphs, and angels holding glass crosses, there was one piece Cian loved—a vase, painted with the Celtic fairy tale character of Lugh the Mighty, with his Sword of Light, and his invincible spear, so fierce it fought without a hand wielding it. Cian wasn’t allowed to touch it, that’s what Dad said. Not ’til he was older. It was too valuable. Too fragile. But when he looked at it he could imagine sorcery was real, and there were valiant deeds still left to be performed. Whenever he got the chance, he’d make Dad get it down from the top shelf of the big cabinet in the living room, and then he’d draw stories where he was the High King, and people danced around bonfires in his name.*

*One day—Pop must have been working—Dad had gone out to grab the burger buns for dinner they’d forgotten when they did the grocery run. He shouldn’t have left Cian alone, but Cian swore he’d be good, that he could trust him just this once. And he’d got the vase down from the glass cabinet, and he’d been looking at it when he heard the rumble of his dad’s big Chevy truck*

*pulling back into the garage. He'd reached for the vase, to put it away, and before he'd even touched it, he knew what he'd done. He had to watch himself as his hand knocked the side of the vase and overbalanced it, and he saw his flailing attempts to catch it, and in that very second he knew...*

“Jesus, kid. Has nobody told you yet?”

*...he goddamn knew exactly what it was going to look like when it hit the tiled floor...*

“He died Tuesday.”

*...and broke into pieces, like rock candy under a hammer.*

\*\*\*\*

They ended up sedating him. He thought Reece might have come by at one stage, a soothing voice in the whiteness that kept jabbing into his brain. Cian just curled up in the bed. He didn't even care any more.

\*\*\*\*

The hospital social worker kept flicking her long hair out of her face until Cian wanted to physically restrain her. Her dark hands reminded him of Reece, but they were delicate and smooth and impersonal, not rough and calloused with a touch that sent shivers down Cian's spine.

Cian pulled on the socks the nurse had brought in for him, along with a complete change of clothes, even down to underwear. Cian had nothing. The nurse told him they were clothes her son had grown out of, but even without the tags, he knew the feel of brand-new big-box store clothing, stiff from formaldehyde.

“There's no problem with your bill. Your father's insurance is highly comprehensive.”

“My father?”

“Steven Drexler? You were carrying your insurance card in your wallet. The police brought it in with you. Made things very smooth. You'll need outpatient care to follow up on your stitches and staples. And to retake your STD tests at regular intervals. If you test positive for HIV, you'll need to start on antivirals immediately, so it's important you don't skip your test appointments. You're aware you can't have unprotected sex until you test clear for a minimum of three months?”

“Yeah, I read the leaflet.”

The woman's voice dropped, quiet and tentative. "I recommend you speak to someone. About... what happened."

Cian's face heated, the pain stabbing behind his eyes.

"We can refer you to a counselor specializing in sexual assault recovery."

"No."

The woman opened her mouth, but Cian spoke first.

"I read that talking about trauma isn't helpful for everyone, isn't that right? Sometimes you just want to... move on."

"If it's about the money, your insurance covers ten sessions, with further sessions available under the direction of a medical professional."

"Thank you. You've been very kind. But I don't want to talk about it."

He wasn't ever going to talk about it. Because it wouldn't help. Nothing would help.

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Cian was lacing up his shoes, his eyes closed against the harsh lights, when a firm rap on the door interrupted him.

"Hey, kid."

Tomas. Holding a bunch of flowers wrapped in cellophane and wax paper.

"You look like crap."

"Yeah, well I feel like crap, so that's fair. Did you seriously come down to see me, or are you here to screw up someone else's life?"

"Nope, just to see you. These are for you, actually." He thrust out the bouquet.

Cian raised his arms in reflex and then hissed at the jagged bite into his soft codeine-induced haze. He tilted his head at the tiny bedside table. "Just put them there. I'll find someone to give them who doesn't know what a piece of shit you are."

"Listen, what I really came down to give you was this." Tomas held out an envelope. Cian didn't take it. Tomas bent forward uncertainly and tucked it into the plastic bag Cian was taking his meds home in.

Cian forced out a laugh. "What's this? A pink slip? Too fucking late, man. I so quit."

“Yeah, well I heard through the grapevine that you could have been dead, so anything short of that seems like a miracle to me. Untreated wounds and random guys fucking you in a filthy basement for a week. That’s fucked up.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Tomas. There wasn’t any shortage of johns from what I’ve heard. I’m sure you contacted a few eager clients.”

“Hey! Hey, no.” Tomas seemed genuinely perturbed. “No. Shit, I run a business, kid. I match demand with supply. Whoever did this to you is a monster.”

“Vaughan did this to me. Vaughan, and a guy called Julian Chambers. He’s a client, right? The one who asked for a redhead?”

“Look, Vaughan’s a small-time nothing. He contacted me. Said you wanted into the business.” Tomas rubbed a hand across his face. “But Chambers, yeah. He’s a client. Long-term. Look, he’s gone from my book, right? I’ll pass the word. Seriously.”

“So, what’s this then?” asked Cian. He nodded down at the envelope.

“I owe you a big apology, actually. Those guys from the other weekend. The ones who got you high and dumped you in the middle of downtown. They ’fessed up. You were right. They fucked you over, gave you what they thought was E, but was LSD. Old school. You took a bad trip, and they got scared. They dumped you and hoped you wouldn’t remember anything. After they fucked you.” Tomas grimaced. “I swear to god, kid, I’m so fucking sorry. They’ve been steady, reliable clients. Anyway, they paid you a bonus. They thought you might have needed medical treatment. They were a little worried they’d done some damage.”

A bad trip? None of it had been real? No. No, Reece had known. He’d said exactly what happened. Cian gripped the corner of the envelope, feeling the wad of bills through the thin paper.

“How much did they pay?”

“Two thousand for the night, for both of them. But in there, that’s just the bonus. I already paid Vaughan your cut of the gig. But these guys want to book you again. Apparently you were fairly, ah, enthusiastic, under the influence. You begged for anything they could fit inside you, even tried a few things that wouldn’t.”

Two thousand? How much had Vaughan made off him? So he hadn’t even needed to do that last job? “Out.”

“I know you’re not ready yet, but when you are—”

“Get out.”

“I can see you’re upset. You’re still recovering. I understand. Text me direct. No middle man.” Tomas dropped a phone on the bed. “You’re banged up, but I have clients who like scars. Or you could work while wearing latex fetish gear. Or a corset. A lot of guys are into lingerie now, and with your long hair—”

“Get out!” Cian’s words were a howl, filled with anger and fear, and they bruised his heart with their force.

Cian slumped back onto the bed. The tears came unbidden, and he closed his hands, pressing his fists to his eyes. The scratches pulled his healing skin, threads of pain wrapping around him. He needed the cool burn of flame. He needed his Dad. And he wasn’t going to get them.

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Cian had expected to find his shit out on the street when he got home, but Mr. Singh was surprisingly nice, all things considered. The lease had been in Jeff’s name, but he was willing to let Cian transfer it to his own if he could pay the three weeks’ back rent now owing.

He checked the envelope Tomas had given him. Six hundred dollars cash. It was enough—just—but next week? And after that? Well, he wasn’t trying hooking again. Best to cut his losses. Let Mr. Singh sue him if he wanted to. Better to pay for a week at the Y, where at least he could get a hot shower. Maybe he’d see Reece there. Cian missed him like breathing.

He listed the oxygen concentrator on Craigslist. It sold before the day was out. That pulled in another two hundred. There wasn’t anything else left worth selling.

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Cian sat alone on a hard plastic chair as some celebrant he’d never met muttered platitudes about Jeff’s life.

Two wreaths sat atop the casket. The first was the overpriced carnations in cellophane Cian had picked up at the hospital gift shop that morning when he was there for his outpatient visit to get his staples out. The other was an elaborate arrangement—florist’s foam studded with dozens of lilies entwined with leafy greenery. The card simply read “From Julian and Steven.”

They wouldn't let Cian watch his dad go through the door into the flames. It didn't matter. He picked the lily wreath to go with the casket. It wasn't because he thought it was beautiful or appreciated the sentiment.

It was because he wanted it to burn.

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It was evening by the time he got back to the apartment to clear out his stuff. The few things he kept didn't even fill his backpack. He had more than enough to get by on for a while if he slept rough. It didn't matter. He had something more important to think about. He didn't bother to shut the front door behind him. Other people could take what was left. While he walked he watched the stars come out, and his thumb played on the serrated edge of the steak knife he'd taken from the kitchen drawer.

The front door of the old auto parts place was bolted from the inside. He knocked, hand poised and ready, his grasp sure.

When Vaughan opened the door Cian thrust the blade at his chest, every ounce of anger he had behind the blow. Vaughan twisted and dodged, bringing his fist down on Cian's arm. Cian dropped the knife with a cry, and Vaughan laughed.

"What the hell was that? You tryin' to hurt me, baby? You'll have to do a damn sight better than that." He dragged Cian into the office and pushed him toward the desk. Cian stumbled, unbalanced, as Vaughan closed the door behind him and stalked into the room. "And what the fuck did you say to Tomas? He's cut me off."

"I told him what you did."

"What I did? Hey, you came with me of your own free will. You knew what you were getting into. You only tried to back out because of some fucked up notion of middle-class morality."

"Middle-class morality? I was gang raped. You complete shit. I just got out of the hospital." He kept his back to Vaughan. He didn't want to see his face. His anger was a solid thing, ready to wield, and he didn't want to dilute it with the memory of pain and weakness.

Vaughan trailed one finger down Cian's spine, then hooked his arm around Cian's neck, pulling him back against his body. "You didn't tell the cops, did you, baby? Because I didn't do anything you didn't agree to. You wanted it,

you know you did. I know how you like it rough. Jules told me how you've looked at him. Flirted with him. You don't have to worry. Your dad doesn't need to find out. Not if you co-operate." His pulse thudded in his neck as Vaughan tightened his hold, and tucked something into Cian's back pocket. "Go prep yourself." He loosened his hold on Cian's neck.

"You think I'm going to have sex with you? You're out of your mind." Cian wriggled free and drew his hand back to punch, but Vaughan only sidestepped and laughed before coming close and planting a wet kiss on Cian's mouth.

"Listen, you're a hot property right now. Your share is already thousands. Tomas has had guys from the east coast calling to see if you're available for private shows. You tell him everything's copacetic again, and I'll work it all out with him. You know I can deliver the big markets for you."

"Guys calling? What the fuck do you mean?"

"We should take advantage of the demand while it's there. You won't look like this forever. We can do a range of teasers, episodic, you know. Start our own site. Subscription only. Cam sessions and private chats. And of course, callouts for the main event."

"Wait, are you—are you telling me you taped it? You taped *me*?" How many men had seen Julian rape him, seen Cian's ass bleeding and raw? Seen his face? Would they recognize him, walking down the street?

"You know as well as I do that whoring is still wage labor. You can't get ahead in this world unless you have something to sell that makes you money even while you're sitting on your ass. You have to be a product, not a service. We can make bank, sweetheart."

Cian reeled. Under his skin, his flesh burned, and the taste of ash filled his mouth. "How much?"

"Don't worry about the money—"

Cian raised his voice in a shout. "How much am I worth to you?"

"Ha, I get you. You want a bigger cut. You've got a good head on your shoulders. Businesslike. I can respect that." Vaughan placed his hand on Cian's cheek. "I mean, we'll have overhead. Rent a studio, maybe. Better lighting for sure. We could even hire a real videographer. But I can see you realize you've got me over a barrel, here. I could go forty percent. Hey, I know you've got it tough at home. Maybe forty-five. But for that, I want full cooperation and some damn good acting."

Cian flung both arms out in front of him to push Vaughan away. To wipe that fucking smirk off his face.

He'd like to have said it wasn't on purpose. He wanted to believe that. But in his mind's eye Vaughan groveled and begged, and oh, how Cian needed that. He burned for that. And it was *right there*, under his skin, inside the bone. It always had been.

Fire bloomed along his forearms.

"What the fuck!" cried Vaughan. He staggered back, knocking over the office chair. Cian followed him step for step. He unclenched his fists, and the flames spilled between his fingers. The touch was a cold kiss, nothing like the burning pain logic told him would be there. Cian laughed aloud, throwing his right arm out. A stream of fire flowed out, curving through the air in a twisting, glowing braid of flames. Toward Vaughan.

The skin on Vaughan's arms darkened, the tissue splitting apart, and a cloud of pink heat issued from a thousand pinpricks in his flesh. The hiss and squeal of boiling liquid filled the small office, pitched higher than Vaughan's scream.

"You feel that, Vaughan? That's the blood in your veins heating up, bubbles of nitrogen and oxygen forming and bursting against your arterial walls."

Cian called the flames out from his sinews, his flesh. He wanted to clasp them to him, inhale the fire, but he sent each tongue shooting outward, to wrap around Vaughan's body where it lay on the floor. Vaughan's scream cut off. The metal walls charred, rivets dripping in a stream of embers from the joints. From beneath the desk cockroaches skittered, smoldering and bursting into flames even as they ran.

The fire wanted to break free, head outward, but Cian called it in, and the flames danced to his song. The loose papers caught alight, and the mattress, where Cian had lain, unloved, so many times. Fire surrounded him, licking his skin, and he laughed in delight.

Two hands gripped Cian's shoulders and yanked him away from the body on the floor, outside into the empty parking lot.

Flames were leaping into the sky from the abandoned office, lighting up the vacant lot next door. A window smashed in the heat, and glowing flecks of ash soared into the air on the thermals.

The flames still licked Cian's hands as he grabbed at the strong limbs that pulled at him. He fell backward, looking up into Reece's brown eyes. "I'm not sorry," he blurted out.

“I don’t want you to be,” said Reece.

He looked down at the fire that wreathed his arms. “I don’t know how to put the flames out.” It was ridiculous.

“Just... stop. Like you stop talking and keep the words inside.”

“I don’t know how—” And then he did. Tiny yellow and blue embers danced on his skin and then withdrew, waiting beneath his mind, feeding and biding their time until Cian spoke them to life.

“Are you okay?” asked Reece.

Cian looked down. He’d never felt better. The pain that had lanced through his body since he’d woken in the hospital was gone. His clothes weren’t even singed. He could hardly feel the heat on his skin from the fire that roared heavenward ten feet away.

“I’m fine. What about you? How did you get me out of there? You must be hurt.” He ran his hands along Reece’s skin, searching for burned flesh under his touch.

“You think flame can wound a dragon? Or the one who wields the dragon’s pyre? From half way across the city I felt you call the fire.” Reece brushed ash from Cian’s face. “It felt good, when you used our flame. I could feel where you were. I could feel *you*. And I wasn’t there. Getting to you, protecting you, overrode you telling me to stay away.”

Cian gripped Reece’s wrists. “What do you mean?”

“We share this. My flame is yours. It always has been. They bound me to you at your birth, gave you my magic. My true form is sealed with this.” Reece shook his wrist. The thick silver cuff glowed red in the flames. “Only dragon fire will melt it, and I have none. But now, finally, you do.”

Cian laid both his hands on Reece’s wrist cuff, thumbs touching and fingers linked. From under his palms, flickering blue tongues, nearly invisible, grazed the surface, and the metal softened, wavering before Cian’s eyes. The carved runes dissolved and ran like fondant under a blowtorch. Cian’s fingers breached the skin of the bracelet’s surface. Silver dripped in shiny rivulets to the ground, glowing in the darkness. Cian laughed and pulled his hands away from Reece, the silver dancing in a liquid stream as it followed his fingers, trailing out from Reece’s wrist like a flight of bees. Cian flicked his fingers, and a thousand droplets of silver splattered to the sidewalk, catching the glint of streetlights as they pooled, hissing and spitting, on the concrete.

As the last gobbet of metal cleared Reece's wrist, the big man raised his hands over his head and roared, his arms spreading into huge, impossible shapes that blocked out the stars. A huge... beast—vast, dark—rose up into the sky. Wind buffeted Cian as the wings pushed the long, serpentine body through the sky. That... that wasn't a thing that could be happening.

Cian scrambled to his feet and fled toward the road and the lights of passing cars. His epinephrine system remembered when mammals were tiny things and death came from above, and it wanted Cian to *not be here*. There was no question of going to, only away from.

The curb was invisible in the darkness until he was on it. His right ankle twisted. Cian thrust out his arms and gravel scratched his palms. Cian skidded forward on hands and knees, bumping his forehead as he sprawled out into the road. Tires squealed, and Cian looked up to the looming glare of headlights. Suddenly a shadow covered him, and abruptly he was in the air, a car beneath him swerving into the next lane, to the accompanying blare of a car horn.

The steady beat of a heart throbbed in syncopated counterpoint to his own, slow and sure. Strong arms cradled him.

*Safety. Warmth. Love.*

Oh, this was right. This was what had always been missing.

They landed in rear of the parking lot and the safety of the shadows. Big hands set him on his feet, and Cian stumbled back a foot. No. Not hands. Claws. Glossy and dark, with the glassine quality of obsidian, the edges so sharp they were translucent.

*You freed me. I would have waited a lifetime. I'm here. I'm here now, and they can't keep us apart again.*

Cian's head throbbed, and as he raised a hand to his temple, a lick of pain wormed down the side of his neck. His fingers touched sticky fluid.

*Wait. I'll take care of it.*

Gentle wetness lapped his face, his ear—a raspy texture that stroked him from chin to hairline. The pain relaxed its grip and faded into warmth. The sky held that glow it always did, from streetlights and neon signs and a hundred all-night convenience stores. But the huge shape that surrounded him blocked out the light, and the darkness felt like home.

*Can you move? Are you hurt?*

Reece's huge, comforting form bowed protectively around him. His head was wedge-shaped, bigger than his torso. White teeth thrust out of his mouth, snicking into grooves along the upper and lower jaws. A ridge of spikes ran the length of his head, running back to a neck rippling with muscle. Horns marked the places where ears would be on a horse. Smaller horns pointed upward from the tip of the snout. And his eyes—the color of welling magma—were shimmering facets of ruby and amber and copper, inset beneath deep eye-ridges.

“You're a dragon.”

Reece turned his huge head to the side, the vertical iris narrowing until it all but disappeared, and then it widened into a slit of perfect blackness. *Togetherness. Love. Trust.* Flickering memories from someone else's life—coldness on his hands, fire against blue sky, gray dust, wood and stone, leather and soft grass.

“Oh, you're mine.”

Reece's skin swirled in whirlpools, blooms of darkness clouding up through shifting patterns, spreading out in soft smudges, coiling and reforming with every one of his breaths. Where Cian and Reece's skin touched the smoke-patterns eddied, dancing and spinning around their joining.

*We're together now, the way we were supposed to be.*

Reece's dragon-form dissipated, the long smoky shape stretching thin, before shrinking and coalescing, and then he was a man again, standing naked and tall in the night, his skin highlighted red in the blaze behind them.

Cian hugged him. “You ass. You *love* me. I can feel it now, don't deny it. Why did you always turn me down?”

“Because I wasn't free. While I was bound to you by silver, I could never choose. I tried to serve you the best I could. But now, I choose you. Always and forever.”

Cian knew it was true. They couldn't lie to each other. Reece was in his heart, filling all the cracks that threatened to shake him apart. “I choose you back.”

Reece looked down, noticing his nakedness. “I guess I need clothes.”

Down the street the lights of fire engines flashed red. Reece and Cian hurried along the street, keeping to the shadows, until they reached a cut-price

clothing store without a security grill. Reece threw a garbage can into the glass window.

“What the hell are you doing?” asked Cian.

Reece pulled out the clothes in the display, measuring them against himself and then slipping them on as fast as he could. “You did the deal. You gave it to them. To the fae.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Jesus, Cian! Why would you give them that kind of power?” Reece’s eyes filled with anguish. He wiped a hand over his face.

“My dad. I couldn’t not do it. So what? Fucking Steven loses a few million from his company? I genuinely couldn’t care less. It was all for nothing anyway. My dad is *dead*.” His voice cracked. “He died alone, in the cold, probably out of his mind with worry.” His fault. All of it.

*Concern. Comfort. Care.*

“He wasn’t alone.”

“What?”

“I sat with him.”

“I told you—I *ordered* you to stay away from him.”

“Like I said. Wiggle room.” Reece twined his fingers with Cian’s. “He wasn’t scared. He wasn’t in pain. We talked about you. He loved you more than anything, and there wasn’t one day he regretted. He considered his a life well spent. I read Anne McCaffrey to him, and he just... fell asleep.”

“Oh, Jesus.”

Reece held him while he cried. While he let it go. Years of false hope and desperate sick fear. Years of waiting. Of waking up at two a.m. and creeping in to check his dad’s chest still rose and fell. Reece held him through it, his hands strong and sure.

He’d been right all along. There were worse endings.

At last Cian sat up and wiped his face with the bottom of his T-shirt.

“I’m sorry, but you can’t rest yet, Cian. I tried to explain. You’ll have to see for yourself.” Reece flexed his fingers, extending a single gleaming claw. He held it poised for a second over his forearm, before slicing into the flesh. Liquid welled out sluggishly, purple-blue and thick.

Cian grabbed Reece's hand. "What's wrong with you? Why is your blood that color?"

"Dragon blood uses hemocyanin, not hemoglobin. Copper-based, not iron-based." Reece held his arm up to Cian's face.

"Only invertebrates have hemocyanin. You're a vertebrate."

"No, I'm magic." Reece rolled his eyes. "Just lick it."

"What the hell?"

"Lick it. Dragon blood lets you see the future."

"No, I'm not going to lick your *blood*. What do you think—"

Reece cupped his hand behind Cian's neck, the touch of his thumb hot against Cian's skin. He pulled Cian's head forward, forcing his mouth toward the slash of blood. Cian shivered. It could be Reece pulling him down for something else, something warm and intimate and desired. He opened his mouth to protest, but his tongue brushed the rivulet of blood dribbling down Reece's arm. Just one drop, but the taste filled his mouth. Vertigo struck him. He closed his eyes against dizzying patterns that wove themselves from light. When he opened them—

*The aroma of sap filled his nose, astringent on his tongue. A delicate fern frond tickled Cian's nose where he lay with his face pressed against a sinewy tree root. Cian groaned and lifted his head, blinking soil from his eyes. He grasped a fallen log and pulled himself to his feet.*

*Misty light filtered down from the sky. Vivid emerald ground cover hugged the soil beneath the thin saplings. New-growth forest, then. Shit. Somewhere out of town, that's for sure. It wasn't a featureless mass of trees, though. The occasional upright slab of concrete broke through the soil, almost lost in the greenery, and at regular intervals the saplings sheltered large shapes coated in thick, tangled undergrowth. Trees bent and curled around their lumpy and strangely familiar bulk.*

*Cars.*

*What the hell? The trunk of a young aspen, already bigger around than Cian's hands could span, pushed up through a chassis, pressing the hood to one side. Peeling paint exposed rust the color of dark autumn leaves. Lichen speckled the metal around the gape of a missing headlight. The left half of the windscreen was gone—an unorthodox entry for wildlife, going by the scrapes and claw marks across the hood and roof.*

*Behind it, the wheels of a Japanese compact were lost in the mulch and leaf litter. The lower side panels bowed outward where they pressed into the earth. Cian walked over and peered through the shattered passenger window. Soil and cobwebs filled the interior, and rusty springs protruded from a dark, matted seat back that was pocked with holes where birds had pulled the felt apart for generations of nests.*

*Cian knelt and scrabbled with his hands through the rich, dark loam. Two inches down, he hit a solid mass. Blackened, bubbled asphalt lay beneath the soil, frozen forever in a half-melted state.*

*Cian stood, and slowly turned his head. There were dozens, no, hundreds of cars, lurking in tangles of thin branches and beneath sprawling creepers. Here, one with headlights still intact lay slantwise in a shaft of sunlight, its doors standing open like gull wings. Over there, a hint of chrome gleamed from the darkness of a thicket.*

*To his left he spied a long low wall, covered in ivy and trumpet vine. A short flight of cracked concrete steps broke the sweep of the wall, coated in a thick cushion of moss. Two saplings had colonized the stairs. Cian ducked past them as he climbed. At the top, rectangular shapes lay thickly coated in English ivy, the outlines crumbling and blurred under lush foliage. Square cobwebbed gaps loomed in the walls. Inside layers of paint crumbled and peeled like a fungus. A startled flock of pigeons burst from the cavernous interior. Cian staggered backward and tripped over a tangle of metal lying on the ground, hidden under strands of creeper that had broken through the wall. Pallid leaves spilled down into the darkened space where vast cobwebs of entwined tree roots pushed through crazed cement.*

*In the middle distance, a cool midmorning sun silhouetted tall green spires hundreds of feet high. Tiny flecks circled them as birds swooped to their roosts. Were those... buildings? Multistoried skyscrapers?*

Holy fuck. This was Portland? This is what would happen?

Abruptly, Cian was on his hands and knees on the edge of the sidewalk, the hot roar of passing cars buffeting him.

“Jesus. Reece. Are you saying I did that?” He looked up, blinking grit and dirt from his eyes. Reece knelt beside him, his face as kind as ever.

“Iron stops their power. Iron and electricity and the concrete that separates them from the earth. It’s held them in check for a thousand years. Whatever you gave them, it’s out now.”

“Bacteria. I gave them bacteria.”

“I can feel it. Like a splinter in the skin of the world. It’s all across downtown, spreading like a flood. Soon it will be across the city. In thousands of homes.”

Cian choked out a laugh. “Oh, Jesus, I’ve destroyed the world. This is my fault. I thought I was being so clever. Taking care of everything.” Fuck. He’d done this. All by himself. No one to blame. He scabbled at the concrete in panic, and his heart faltered, each irregular beat like a bullet in his chest. Cian’s throat closed. Blackness swallowed him, no air in his lungs. The sidewalk beneath his feet grayed out.

Reece stroked the back of Cian’s neck, the touch burning. “Cian. Just breathe. In and out. Come back to me.”

How did lungs work, again? His shaky groan grated in his ears as he sucked in a breath, then forced it out again.

“This isn’t your fault. They’ve been in it for the long game. There was no way you could know. Just remember for next time, you can’t make a bargain with the fae. They always win. *Always.*”

“There’ll be a next time?”

“You’re half-fae. That makes you useful. You can function in the world of humans. They’ll want you to join them. They’ll find what you want. What you need.”

“I only need you. We’re a package deal, right?”

Reece nodded. “Please don’t let them—I had to wait for you. It’s been so long. I couldn’t even feel you. Couldn’t feel my flame. They brought you forward, after you were born, but I had to live it. Every day of it. Four thousand years. With them.” Anguish laced Reece’s voice. “A contingency plan, they called it. Then, when we finally caught up to you, they wouldn’t let me near you for years. They didn’t want to risk changing things. Changing what would happen. Everything that would bring us to here.” Reece grabbed Cian’s hand. “But you can change it, now. You can’t undo what has already been done, but what you saw, that isn’t inevitable.”

“I don’t know what to do.” Cian looked up at Reece, anguish gripping his tongue. “Maybe we can destroy it. Antibiotics. Acids. Maybe there’s a bacteriophage. Steven would know.” By his feet, green algae edged a trickle of

oily water in the gutter, but in his mind, black gaps in ivy-covered walls gazed back at him as pigeons fluttered in their roosts.

In his pocket, his phone vibrated with a call. Steven. Cian answered without thinking.

“Cian, thank God. Can you meet me? Right away? At that café next to Biokene. It’s important. Take a taxi. I’ll pay for it when you get here.”

Oh, now it was important. Because it was about work. But Steven might have the answer. He needed to talk to him anyway. “Okay.” He leaned forward and kissed Reece. *Love*. That was real. Reece was real. He could hold onto that. “Come on. Maybe there’s a way.”

They had to walk half a mile before they found a cab that would stop for them. By the time they reached downtown Steven was pacing outside the café. He paid off the cab driver while Cian pulled Reece to the side. “Keep watch outside?” asked Cian. “I’ll feel it if you see them. I feel everything from you, now.” And he didn’t want Reece to hear what Julian had done. He wanted to stay unspoiled, just for once. Their fingers lingered as they separated their hands.

Steven held the door for Cian. Dark circles ringed his eyes like bruises, and his skin looked clammy. “What do you want to drink? I’ve got a macchiato coming.”

“I don’t care.”

Steven ordered him the same, fidgeting while they waited by the counter. “What are your plans now? Where are you going to college?”

So this was the moment, huh? When none of it mattered any more. “I’m not going to college, Pop.”

“I know things will be tight, financially, but it’ll be good for you to stand on your own two feet. We all had to do it. I did, when I was your age. Julian did. His parents threw him out for being gay. He had to take a night job at a gas station to pay for college. You can do it too. You’ll qualify for financial aid.”

“It’s not—It’s not the same! Julian is fifty-five years old. He has no idea what it’s like now! A part-time job does not pay for college. It doesn’t matter anyway. I’m not going to graduate from high school. I have to repeat senior year.”

“You have to—You’ve failed senior year? How is that even possible?”

“I’ve had a lot on my fucking plate, if you haven’t noticed.”

“Hey, remember I’m picking up the co-pay on your medical bills, and they are not small, let me tell you. I don’t want to get into what happened to you, but, you know, whatever you were doing to end up... assaulted... when you should have been at home with your dad—Well, you’re making pretty poor fucking choices, Cian. You let Jeff die alone. Everything Julian is saying about you you’re only proving to be true. I can’t say I’m not disappointed.”

The barista placed their orders up with an apologetic smile. He looked embarrassed to be overhearing. Cian didn’t give a fuck. “I thought you’d be at the funeral.”

“Julian felt it wasn’t appropriate.”

Cian laughed. He’d never heard such a dead sound come out of his own throat. “Yeah, I bet he did.”

“Look, I paid for the service. That’s about all I can do.”

“I also thought you’d come and see me in the hospital.”

Steven sighed, sorrow in his voice. “I am truly sorry about that. I was out of town.” He grabbed their coffees and led Cian to a pair of armchairs by the window. “We’re trying to raise more funds. The whole project has gone to shit. I had that Jakarta trip. I only got back in yesterday. Look, that’s not important now.” Steven gripped his hands together and sat back in his chair. He lowered his voice with a visible effort. “Listen, this isn’t why I phoned you. A sample is gone from the lab. There’s no one else it could be. I’m sorry to ask this, but when you visited last week, did you take anything?”

“You mean your bacteria, Pop?”

Steven rubbed the back of his neck, his shoulder rigid. “Jesus, so it was you? You took the petri dish? Well, at least I found it. Thank God it didn’t fall into the wrong hands. Where is it? Maybe if I get it back today I can make up something about poor record keeping.”

“What does it do, Pop? You worked your own version of magic, right?”

“Spliced some genomes on *Thalassolituus oleivorans* with my *Alcanivorax borkumensis*. Stirred in some *Shigella* and a little bit of *Pyrolobus fumarii*.” Steven sounded proud.

“Until you got something that could finally tackle large oil spills on a commercial basis, fast and efficient, right?”

“More than just oil spills,” said Steven. “Plastics. All those plastics in the oceans. Bottles. Microbeads from facial cleansers. All that goddamn squishy foam sculpting stuff kids use unthinkingly. Pointless crap from dollar stores. We can do real good. The problem is it doesn’t stop. It eats and it eats and it *never stops*. It’s antibiotic resistant, acid resistant.” Steven barked out a cold laugh. “We did that on purpose. So we could use it in chemical spills. Just didn’t think ahead, I guess. Thought the biological limitations we built in would make it die out by itself after a short time.”

Steven grabbed Cian’s hand. “Do you understand what I’m saying? What you took? It eats hydrocarbons. All of them. Can you imagine a world with no oil? No gas. No pop bottles. Look around you...” Steven snorted, and gestured around the coffee shop. “Do you see how much is made of plastic? Damn near everything. The world wouldn’t function. If it got loose it would take years to spread across the whole country—decades maybe—but it would spread. There’d be some places you could keep it out of. Labs. The CDC. Antarctica, maybe. It doesn’t like the cold much. Works real slow there. But not hospitals. God, hospitals! How do you treat people without pill bottles, stents, grommets, equipment housings, syringes, tubes of medication? Even plastic coatings on bandages for wounds. How would electricity work with no plastic to insulate the wiring? No keyboards, no mice. Look in your goddamn fridge at home. How do we transport food without plastic bottles and tubs, or plastic bags for bread? How do we get it to the store with no trucks? How do you get it home to your nice suburban house with no car? No nylon, no polyester. Shoes, for god’s sake, there would be hardly any shoes. Even leather shoes are sewn together with polyester thread. There’d be no planes, either, but that won’t stop it spreading across the globe. Think about farming. No irrigation tubing, no fertilizers, no polypropylene wraps for hay and silage, no bulk pesticides or food preservatives. Shit. I spent my life on this, and it was all for nothing. It nearly got out last week. That spill at the lab? Contaminated two workers. All the money we spent developing it—My whole career! Years wasted.” Steven scrubbed at his face with his hands.

“How did you stop it spreading?”

“Fire. It’s the only way. The only thing that kills it.”

“But what did you do for the workers? Are they still in isolation?”

Steven leveled a long look at Cian. “Don’t tell me you’re that naïve.”

Cian stood from his seat, knocking over Steven’s mug, spilling coffee across the table. “You killed them?”

“Keep your goddamn voice down,” Steven hissed. “Sit down and don’t make a fuss.”

“They were real people! With families.”

“Officially they were suicides linked to overwork. It’s a tough field, after all. But too many people on the inside know the truth. There won’t be any Nobel Prize. We’ll keep trying, but the investors are furious. We promised them results by last quarter.”

“You literally just described the end of the world, and you’re worried about your investors?”

“A lot of them are Julian’s friends. Colleagues. He persuaded them to invest in me. It will be humiliating for him. My stock options won’t be worth squat. Hell, I could lose my job. I need you to hand it back. As your father, I’ll try to keep you out of legal trouble. Plead for leniency.”

Humiliating for Julian? The back of Cian’s throat burned. He was gonna be sick.

“As my father? I needed you, Steven. I needed you for the last three years. I watched the man who had been your husband dying, and I held his hand and told him it would be okay, while we both knew I was lying through my teeth. A father is someone who is there, Steven. You don’t get to pick and choose it when you want it. You’re not a father. You’ve proven that to everyone.” The rage was building in Cian again, stoked by empty cupboards and cold nights without heating. He should feel... something, right? Regret? Forgiveness? But all he found was anger, fizzing under his skin like pop rocks. Along with the waiting flames.

With an incongruously cheery jangle the door opened, and Julian entered the café.

Cian’s skin crawled at the sight of him, his words catching in his throat. He turned his face to the floor and kept his eyes on the black-and-white tiles. Anything but to see the face of that man.

“Ah, the whole family together. How charming.” Julian walked over to Steven and kissed him on the cheek. “Did you tell your boy the good news?”

Steven cleared his throat. “Cian, when we get the... situation sorted, Julian says you can come and live with us. We’ll find somewhere bigger. More suitable for a family.”

Julian gripped Steven's shoulder and smiled broadly at Cian. "I'm looking forward to it. Steven's away so often now, busy raising cash for his research. We can keep each other company. House rules, of course. We can't have you running wild around Portland any more. I understand the last few years have been challenging for you, what with no supervision. You'll have to get used to some good old-fashioned discipline again. I'm sure we can make it work, though. We're looking forward to it, aren't we, Steven?"

The flames were inside him, waiting impatiently. They wanted out, but Cian sent words leaping from his tongue instead.

"Julian raped me. I know what his cum tastes like."

Steven was on his feet instantly. "Jesus, Cian. Don't say things like that just because you're angry with me. This is serious. Tough love is difficult, but I do love you."

The words dug like hooks into Cian's skin. "He paid a pimp to use me, and then he raped me over and over again. Then he gave me to others." He gave a harsh, grating laugh. "I don't even know how many."

Steven punched with his right hand, the blow striking Cian's jaw. The shock shivered through Cian's frame. His chair rocked over backward and Cian fell, his phone clattering across the floor. The back of his head slammed into the floor tiles with a flat sound. A blur of stars filled his vision and then blinked out, leaving Cian in darkness.

The flames weren't intentional, merely a reflex, like a sneeze you can't stop. Fire surged from Cian's fingertips, creeping along the floor to Steven's feet, and then climbing his body, before reaching out and embracing Julian in their tendrils. It wrapped them in a fiesta of red and orange. Steven whimpered, and Julian let out a tight, throat-clenching whinny, the white of his business shirt blossoming with black charcoal as the fire licked up his chest.

Steven fell to his knees and then toppled forward, grasping Julian's trouser leg and bringing him down on top of him. Julian writhed and squirmed on the floor, his arms and legs twisting as the fire licked his body in a slow embrace. The barista hugged the walls as he ran from the café, his echoing screams abruptly cut off as the door closed behind him. Steven and Julian's desperate shrieks rose in volume. Steven reached out a charred, clawed hand to Cian, and then lay still.

Cian let the flames dribble to a stop, clenching his fists to let his nails bite into the palms of his hands. He slid to his knees.

The building shook. The glass panel in the front door cracked, and then shards of glass exploded outward as the wall twisted. Plaster dust pattered down from the ceiling onto Cian's hair. The wall cracked, a zigzag arcing down from the ceiling. The lights flickered, and steel rebar groaned inside the walls.

Obsidian claws ripped out a window frame, and a section of wall fell away, the cool outside air rushing in. Reece's great dragon head filled the empty space where the wall had been. His irises shone amber in the dark room, the slit pupils a pool of nothingness.

The smoke under Reece's skin swirled darkly as he used his claws to rend the walls of the building apart.

"Pop said there's no biological control. No antibiotics. There's only one way to stop it." He looked up into Reece's eyes. "We have to burn it out. Today. Now. Before the bacteria can spread further. Yes, okay, we lose the city. But we save the world."

*Then we go.*

Reece raised a strong leg in invitation. It didn't budge under Cian's foot, and when he had his weight on it, Reece raised his leg higher until Cian could get a knee onto the thick wing joint. He levered himself onto Reece's back, nestling in place between the neck spikes.

The dragon's huge chest muscles flexed under Cian's calves as Reece beat his wings in vast downstrokes, raising a wind that blew dust and grit into Cian's eyes. They circled into the air.

Cian leaned forward, pressing his chest to Reece's neck, and trailing his arms down each side. He didn't need to hold tight; Reece would never drop him. He'd always be there. Cian knew it like he knew the rain, like he knew fire, like his own heartbeat. Every huge thrust of Reece's wings gained them another dragon-length of altitude.

And then his heart was in his mouth as Reece swooped, diving for the forest of buildings. The dragon veered sharply to the left in a bank that left Cian sitting up straight, his arms above his head, and a triumphant cry bellowing from his lungs. He learned forward as Reece caught a thermal, circling and rising again.

For a second Cian wanted to leap from Reece's back, to spread his arms and join him in flight.

*We are one. You don't need to fly alone.*

It was truth. Reece was entwined in every thought. He tasted Reece on his lips, heard his breath in his own lungs. Cian closed his eyes and listened to his skin, the patterns of the air currents, and the waves of the magnetic poles. Fuck, how had he ever lived without this?

“We do Pop’s lab first. Make sure no more of the bacteria is left.”

Reece banked and soared and then turned back to face the Biokene building. Cian’s hands and forearms burned with cold as the dragonfire billowed from him. Biokene’s big glass door melted like a sugar flower in water. Cian sent the flames running along the planter boxes and stubby, malnourished trees in the lobby. From there, they leaped with glee toward the walls, climbing them like a vine, twining through gaps and cracks until they reached the steel-beam heart of the building.

Cian leaned forward as Reece’s wings caught the updraft, and he skimmed up the side of the building. All the things Steven had never done, the days he’d never been there, Cian’s empty belly grinding his school days down into a paste of misery, his dad pissing himself on the sofa because there was no one else there to help; he drew it all to him. And then he let it go, trailing fire behind them.

Cian felt the pull of the fire as heat danced along the internal girders. The cement blackened and cracked loudly as it fractured where the fire touched it. Slabs of concrete fell from the building, tumbling eighty feet down to the sidewalk and spraying white dust into the streets. Cian pressed his hand to Reece’s neck.

*I’m with you. We are together.*

Was that him speaking, or Reece? He couldn’t tell anymore.

*There isn’t any difference. I am you, and you are me.*

Reece climbed until he reached the level of the roof. Cian poured fire down into the building. When the smoke cleared, the internal floors were gone, the insides of the building a twelve-story crater, the base filled with smoldering rubble and white-hot girders.

Cian let the flames flicker out, pulling them back into himself. He could do that any time. He’d had it inside himself all along. He shivered at the sensation—half fear, half pleasure.

*I feel it still, stretching along the streets, inside the stores.*

If only they could evacuate everyone. How would they even do it? Call up a radio station and announce a terrorist threat? Post it on Facebook? But the people leaving would just carry it with them, spreading it further. Polyester T-shirts. Polythene sneakers. Car upholstery. This was the only way.

*Understanding. Love.*

Reece circled high over the downtown skyline. Glass windows vibrated in their setting from the strength of his wing beats until Cian sent a thousand tongues of fire toward them. They melted, dripping down the facades to gather in molten pools on the pavers, vaporizing the cigarette butts and discarded fast-food wrappers that had collected in corners. Patches of dull gray stained the ground where coke cans melted and hissed at the touch of the liquid glass.

Cian let fire spurt from his fingers with no hint of aim, letting the red drip past Reece's wings and, as they flew over, along the edges of apartment buildings and rooftop cooling towers. Cian raised his hands and let the stream of fire turn clumpy, spitting like a wrecking ball at the buildings lining the street.

Reece zigzagged up the road. A man sat in an Alfa Romeo at a stoplight, clutching the steering wheel with taut knuckles and staring up at Reece through the windscreen. The white of the guy's eyes showed as he peered through the glass.

"I wish it didn't have to be like this. I'm sorry."

Flame streamed through the air and engulfed the car. And then they were past. Cian looked back over his shoulder, to where a puddle of steel swirled in the wake of Reece's wings. The best he could do was make it fast. The road surface bubbled and ran, churning darkly around the tires of cars parked at the side of the road. Thick smoke leaked from under their hoods as Cian threw fireballs at each one. The aroma of melted asphalt filled his nostrils.

He called the sparks and embers to him, glowing petals drifting down from the shadow of Reece's wings, to wink out one by one.

At the other end of a city block, headlights reversed and made a U-turn, fleeing before them as Cian sent blasts of power into each building. Below them a few tiny figures scurried, fleeing their buildings as debris fell around them. Cian kept his flame steady.

They circled the highways that hemmed in downtown. Red lights blinked against dark outer city streets as emergency vehicles halted, unable to proceed

past the flames. Cian and Reece barreled through narrow alleyways, incinerating dumpsters and spindly metal fire escapes. They burned apartments and stores. Mannequins melted in dresses of flame.

At length, they reached the far side of downtown where the river lapped against the docks. Cian torched the waiting K Line containers, then the ships moored to the jetty. As the steel hawsers melted, they floated slowly out into the current, collecting small boats on the way. The river twinkled with a fiery flotilla.

They circled back to the center of the fire, aiming for the tallest building: a huge monolith of glass and concrete. Fire licked around its base. Reece landed on the roof, in the open space next to the air conditioning tower, and Cian slid off his back.

“Did we get it all?” asked Cian. He should be exhausted, surely, but the flames still bloomed under his skin. He touched one finger to Reece’s flank and a tongue of fire snaked out, wrapping around Reece’s huge body. Reece tilted the wedge of his head and hummed in pleasure.

*Yes. I think so. I can’t—I can’t feel it any more.*

“We have to be vigilant. Keep watch for it. For any sign.” Tiny tornados of flame swirled around them, and Cian inhaled. The burning air tasted of sugar and mint in his lungs, the touch of it a caress along his spine.

Reece lowered his chin until his eyes were level with Cian’s, and Cian stroked his eye ridges.

*It had to be done. It’s losing a limb to save a life.*

“I know,” said Cian. “Shit, I don’t even have a home any more.”

Reece shook his head and neck, and the smoke roiled under his skin. Reece’s dragon form wavered, and then he stood there as a man again. He pressed a kiss to the hollow of Cian’s neck, between his collarbones. “You have me. I’ll be your home. You’ve always been mine.”

He wrapped Cian in his arms, his dark skin shiny with sweat and speckled with charcoal smears. Cian buried his nose against Reece’s chest, inhaling the smell of smoke and flame in his hair and skin and the scent of the city burning around them. Fire licked up the building. Reece pulled Cian down to the rooftop, his cock hard.

How long did they have? The fae would try again. He and Reece would have to stand against them. Who knew what they could do together?

Reece lay poised above him, resting on one arm. He brought his hand up to Cian's face. "Just let me look at you a second," said Reece. "You're so gorgeous."

A laugh burst out of Cian despite himself. "Are you kidding? You're the gorgeous one." The smooth perfection of Reece's dark-brown skin, the symmetry of his face: he could look at it forever. Overhead, fire-blown clouds of smoke blocked the moonlight, casting Rorschach blots onto the rooftop beneath them, hot under Cian's back.

Cian dug his hand into his pants pocket. "Look, I have lube." He laughed, breaking the tension that stretched between them. "No condom though."

"You can't catch anything now," said Reece. He nuzzled Cian's face as he slowly dragged his hand down to Cian's groin.

Cian was hard, aching. "God," he said, his voice shaky and uncertain. "Your hand. It's like I've never been touched before."

Reece undressed Cian slowly, tenderly, like he was a gift. He spread the clothes out beneath them.

The tendon in Reece's neck tensed as he swallowed, and then he leaned forward and pressed their foreheads together. Cian tilted his head and traced the seam of Reece's lips. Gentle fingers stroked Cian's hair.

His fingers fluttered against Reece's skin, touching, caressing, cupping Reece's elbow and then drawing his hand up his bicep to trace the long lines of his bare neck. Reece closed his eyes, nipping softly at Cian's lower lip then pulling away.

Sex had never been like this before.

Reece brought his hand back to Cian's cock, their skin slipping together, the touch wet and warm and more than enough to make Cian's breath catch in his throat. He played with Cian's foreskin and then slid his thumb up over the slit. The precum leaking from Cian's cock mixed with the slick on Reece's hand. The groan was pulled out of Cian against his will, his neck unable to support his head, and he slumped back against the hard rooftop.

"Let me take care of you," said Reece. He touched Cian's cock and balls as if they were unfamiliar territory he was planning to claim. Cian moaned, his fingers working in tiny spasms. The flames were rising around them now, reaching up above the level of the rooftop.

“So beautiful,” said Reece. His voice was pitched low, nearly a whisper, and yet it seemed impossible such words were meant for Cian.

Reece pressed his leg between Cian’s, pushing his thighs apart, and then knelt between Cian’s legs. Cian ran his hands down the hot skin of Reece’s chest and belly, learning the ridges of muscle and the hard planes of his hips. The back of his hand brushed Reece’s cock, and he closed his fingers, gently working the foreskin back. The faint wiry brush of hair was a delicious counterpoint to the smooth, sleek skin at his own groin.

Reece raised Cian’s legs onto his shoulders, gently, carefully, and Cian let him. He’d never been the recipient of so much attention before, never had anyone looked at him with such a gaze—one that drank him in as though he were precious.

Reece flicked his wrist around the head of Cian’s cock, and Cian arched his back. Reece’s mouth set in a smug line, as if he were taking pride in reducing Cian to wordlessness. Then Cian knew it was so, for Reece did it again, his grip easing, moving by slow degrees back and forth on Cian’s thick erection until Cian could only feel. Reece trailed the fingers of his other hand down Cian’s throat, and a smile crept into his eyes with each of Cian’s wordless gasps.

“I want to touch you all over. I just can’t decide where I want to put my hands.” He stroked two fingers teasingly over Cian’s hole. Fire flickered underneath Cian’s skin.

Cian gulped air, swallowed, and then forced himself to speak. “Right there is good.”

Reece smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners, and Cian smiled back in reflex. This was new, unfamiliar, this idea that sex could be fun and part of a friendship, something that wasn’t a harsh promise grunted in his ear.

Reece’s hand trailed further then, brushing over Cian’s perineum as tenderly as a whisper. Cian groaned, squirming into Reece’s touch.

“More. Please.”

“I want to open you here,” said Reece, caressing Cian’s hole again. “I want to stroke the soft flesh of you and make you cry out for more.” He cupped Cian’s balls in his hand, hefting them as if measuring the weight. He pressed a kiss to Cian’s cheek. “And I want to watch your face while you do.”

Cian spread his fingers wide on Reece’s chest, pale over dark, and touched the beat of Reece’s heart. The flames painted his skin with red. Cian didn’t

want to miss a moment of this awareness of how... cherished he felt. He arched upward against Reece, the warmth of his body seeping into his skin, becoming one with the fire that surrounded them, that billowed above them into the sky, licking their bodies clean. "Yes."

Another drizzle of liquid, and Reece's fingers were playing with Cian's entrance, nudging inward, pressing then releasing. He moved his fingers inside Cian, stroking his soft walls.

There was too much input. Even when he closed his eyes, the softness of Reece's teasing fingertips—the drag of skin against skin, the slick sounds of Reece's hand as it moved in and out, and over the top of it all, charcoal and hot metal and the bliss of fire—overwhelmed Cian's senses. He could only cling to Reece's shoulders and wait for the wave to crash over him.

The flames were pulsing, fluttering both above and beneath Cian's skin now, and he needed Reece, needed his cock, needed it now. He overflowed with longing and heat and...

Reece pushed into Cian, keeping his movements shallow and slow. Cian grimaced at the burn, and his hole pulsed around Reece's thick cock.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah... hang on a minute." Cian caught his breath and then nodded to Reece. Cian closed his eyes, reaching for Reece and opening himself to the press of Reece's thick length. Reece held him, encompassed him. Cian was made for this. Reece pushed in deeper, and then—"Oh, shit!"

"Is that good?" asked Reece.

"Do that again," Cian gasped. "Oh my god."

Reece thrust and retreated in a dance that left Cian's every nerve alive and tingling. Cian grabbed his knees and pulled them back toward his chest, tilting his hips and adjusting the angle so Reece's next thrust could... Oh yes. That.

Reece threw his head back, the lines of his long neck catching the firelight that danced across their skin, the flames that licked at them where their bodies joined each other. This was so much, so good. It was like nothing he'd ever felt before. Cian was... unanchored, all expectations cast adrift. And Reece met him, caught him, as he floated.

*I never knew it could be like this.*

*Only with you. Only together.*

Reece licked a line up to Cian's flat nipple, bluish red against the pale skin of his chest.

*We'll never be separated. No one will take me from you again.*

The city faded and the dark of the smoke-filled sky dissolved into the milky-bright explosion of the universe that streamed beyond the sky. Cian was weightless; he was flying, circling with Reece into the ether, wing beats in time to the drag and pull of Reece's movements. Somewhere, Reece's balls were slapping against his ass, Reece's teeth biting down into the skin of Cian's collarbone. Cian arched his back, and they spiraled weightless, a billion suns beckoning them through the darkness. Reece's skin slid against Cian's, sweat-slick and hot, and they rocked together in the rhythm of burning hydrogen and helium, moving to the whirling song of distant galaxies. Dimly, Cian registered that he was coming, and spurts of hot liquid landed on his chin and chest and belly. But it was an afterthought to the joy and beauty of his mind welded to Reece's.

Then Reece grunted, and his hips jerked as hot cum filled Cian. He must have partly shifted, then, as the delicate tips of sharp claws drew tracers on Cian's skin and made him shiver. Reece stuttered through his orgasm, pulling them back down into the starlight and the flames and the rooftop. Cian sought out Reece's lips, nibbling and pulling before licking into his mouth. Swirls of fire leaked from Cian's lips, dripping onto Reece's skin and tracing the shadow of every rib. They kissed for long minutes as sparks rained down on the city below them.

Reece lay back on the burning roof beside Cian, their hands gripped together.

"You need clothes again," said Cian.

"I'll borrow some more. I wish there had been another way. So many lives, destroyed."

"We did it so the rest of the world will survive."

They lay entwined as the fires caught across the city, sidling from building to building along each street. Sheets of paper pirouetted in spirals, rising into the sky to consort with distant stars. Reece curled in against Cian. The flames covered them like a quilt.

“How do we mourn them all? Remember them?” Reece asked.

“We live,” said Cian. “We make our own future. Together.”

**Fin**

## **Author Bio**

*M. Caspian is human, and sadly, does not have a dragon. Or even a cat.*

## **Contact & Media Info**

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