STRANDED by LIES
Finn Marlowe

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Love’s Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

STRANDED BY LIES

By Finn Marlowe

Introduction

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

What Is Love’s Landscapes?

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

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’s Landscapes*.

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

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.

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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M/M Romance Group Publication

STRANDED BY LIES

By Finn Marlowe

Photo Description

A young man lies on the floor, his only clothing a shirt, unbuttoned to reveal his lean frame. His dark hair lays in wisps upon his shoulders. His wrists are loosely bound by a silken red ribbon, but he’s peaceful, his pose suggesting he has bound himself. Perhaps he has offered his submission to the man towering above him, straddling his waist? The scene is set for a dark seduction, but who is seducing whom?

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I’d been running from him for so many months, it had begun to feel like a reflex, no different than the instinct to fight for breath when you’re underwater or rip back your hand from a red-hot forge. By the time I got to the market town, I could feel my time running out. I don’t know why—an instinct maybe? Or maybe I was just so tired of running. I thought I could outlast him, I thought he would give up. I’d not counted on how much the predator in him would love the chase. There were times, while I huddled in my nightly hiding place, when I could almost feel his glee at the challenge, his satisfaction as he went about closing off every avenue of escape—seducing my family to his side, convincing my friends that I was mad, that he just wanted to protect me. There were times, usually on the coldest nights, when I wondered if he’s right—maybe I am mad. Maybe I do belong to him. Maybe I should surrender. Maybe I should stop running. At least then I could just rest.

Please some sort of fantasy or paranormal setting.

Good luck.

Sincerely,

Lilia Ford

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, alternate universe

Tags: fetish/toys, light BDSM, D/s relationship, friends to lovers, aliens, soulmates/bonded, HFN

Word Count: 45,866

STRANDED BY LIES

By Finn Marlowe

Part 1

~ Jason ~

Blood from my split lip was making a mess of the dove grey duvet, the crimson smears staining the silken cover where my face was being shoved into the fabric. I struggled uselessly, and when I tried to curse at my assailant, I got a mouthful of down-filled comforter instead. My nose might have been bleeding as well, but I didn't register the sting of either injury—I had more pressing problems on my mind. Like not being able to breathe. Or the fingers on the back of my head ripping out what felt like handfuls of my hair, and more fingers yanking open the buttons on my Levi's.

"Get the fuck off me!" I finally spat out while kicking backwards. My heel connected with something bony. Good. A shin. I hoped to fuck it hurt.

The man behind me grunted softly, then brutally kneed me in the back of my thigh. "Son of a—!" I wheezed, shocked by the pain. Oh, goddamn, that hurt. My leg collapsed under me, but as I was already bent over the bed, I didn't really fall so much as slump deeper into the mattress. Pain radiated up to my hip and down to my knee. Jesus. The bastard sure knew how to hurt a guy. But then, that's what he did. Hurt people. Not for kicks—but because he was a soldier. Of sorts.

"Wasn't that you agreeing to my terms all those months ago, Jase?" the brute asked rather menacingly in my ear. "And wasn't that you promising me you'd obey me just three short days ago? I remember it quite clearly, you on your knees, begging for all you were worth. And didn't I grant you mercy?" The faded and worn denim ripped loudly as he yanked my jeans, and my boxers, down over my ass. "Or have you changed your mind?"

I contemplated another kick. Then thought better of it. I had begged, and he had been merciful. Besides, my leg was still slightly numb. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

"Well?" he asked.

I twisted my arm up and tried to free my head from his tight grasp before an embarrassing cry of pain escaped my lips. No luck. I concentrated on answering his question as I caught his wrist and dug my thumb into a soft spot. Evidently he was impervious to pain. I hadn't changed my mind, because, well, only a fool would. He gave my head a hard shove that almost broke my neck and then finally released my hair. Christ, now it hurt worse, a flaming pinprick of heat

for each and every strand where it had been torn from my scalp. "I haven't changed my mind!"

"Then shut the fuck up and quit kicking me!"

There were more ripping sounds as what was left of my jeans were shoved down to my knees. Cold air assaulted my newly bared ass. Since I knew what was good for me, I shut up. Aiden wasn't one for losing his cool, and I'd really pissed him off. Why in the hell had I punched him? I even started it. That wasn't like me—I wasn't usually that stupid. And he *had* been merciful—beyond merciful.

"Move up on the bed."

My ribs, where he had given me a good jab, complained as I struggled to comply. When I got one knee up on the mattress, he gave my butt a shove, and I landed fully on the bed, face down, where I could bleed on the fancy pillows. Aiden pulled off my Levi's and gave my ass cheek a squeeze hard enough to bruise.

You agreed to this, I reminded myself. Over the months of running, I had steadfastly refused to admit that he scared me—everything scared me. Almost as steadfastly as I was, right now, refusing to admit I was more than a little turned on. How fucked up was that? Some crushes never died, I guess.

Aiden's thumb invaded the crack of my ass. I jerked a little—he startled me, that's all.

"You've a sweet ass, Jase." The big thumb dug in and pulled my cheek back, exposing my hole. "Looks hardly broken-in. You been fucked before?"

Maybe if I was truthful, he'd go a little easier on me. "Twice," I answered. I wiped my nose on a flowery pillow. The bleeding had almost stopped.

"Did you like it?" he asked. His voice had softened somewhat, not that I expected him to be merciful twice in one lifetime.

I decided to stick with the truth. "Not the first time." It had hurt like hell, the guy I'd been dating and fooling around with for two months had been a real asshole, and I'd gone home aching, and without even getting off for my pains. I never spoke to him again—he knew I'd been a virgin and had treated me like a conquest instead. I'd been so naïve.

"And the second time?" he asked, moving his thumb to press against my hole. Jesus.

Second time. Uh? Fuck. I couldn't remember with that thumb touching me so intimately, and making those wiggly motions. "Ah—" I sucked in a breath. "Better." It had been with a cute guy who'd picked me up in a bar, and he'd been a total top. I didn't manage to come while he was fucking me, but after a while I'd begun to like it, begun to understand that pleasure could be had with the right guy. After he'd had his way with me, he'd jacked me off. But I never saw him again, either. "It was a little better."

"Did you come?" Aiden asked.

Aiden showing mercy even once was a miracle. Angels probably sang. As humiliated as I was, I didn't want to get more on his bad side by lying. "Um… no," I admitted, reluctantly. Hell.

"You're going to come for me."

He said it so matter-of-factly, I almost believed him. My dick sure as hell believed him.

"But I'm going to have to loosen this tight knot a bit first."

Aiden pressed the very tip of his thumb into me and I jerked, startled again. He didn't laugh, but I was pretty sure he had that sarcastic smile of his all over his lips. For a second, I was tempted to try for another kick. My chances of success would likely be zero, so, yeah. No.

"Take off your shirt."

I sighed deeply as his invading thumb disappeared. Then I heard the bedside table drawer open. Shit. *You should be thankful he's gonna lube you up first.* Yes. I would be thankful. Various body parts ached as I pushed myself up and fumbled out of my ratty button-down and the T-shirt underneath. I wiped at my face with the cotton tee and dabbed at my swollen lip. Aiden had only slapped me around a bit to put me in my place. If he'd meant to hurt me, I'd be in a world of pain right now.

Still. I'd never picked a fight before, and I'd never been smacked around before. I was just mad—mad at my grandfather for what he'd done that caused all this, mad at my estranged aunt, who represented the last of my family, and every friend I thought I had for being a bunch of traitorous shits. And I was mad at Aiden because he was a grade-A sadistic asshole, and I had a hard-on for him. I would have called it a *fuck my life* moment, but I hated all that emo teenager talk that my college mates wouldn't quit using.

"Rollover, sweet thing of mine, and show me what you got," Aiden said, flinging all the fancy designer pillows on the floor and leaving only the ones for sleeping behind.

I rolled over fast, and sat up. "Don't be such a prick!" I snarled. And glared. I didn't have one of those faces that did a glare justice. Something about the play of the light on my cheekbones and the tilt of my mouth made me always look mischievous, like I was up to no good. My mom used to tease me about it. My friends tell everyone that's what makes me one of those ridiculously photogenic people. Right. I hated my face.

"But you know I'm always a prick, don't you, Jase?" Aiden tossed a disturbingly big bottle of lube onto the blood-smeared silk and started to undress. My breath hitched. I couldn't take my eyes off him. I suspected no one else could either. He had the most glorious red-gold hair I'd ever seen, and he'd grown it out so it now hung well past his shoulders. Instead of blue eyes, his were yellowish-green, like a cat's, and slanted like a cat's, too. For a moment, I forgot to hate him.

Even though Aiden was slightly shorter than me, he made me feel small and… well, wimpy. I worked out at a gym, but he had that type of muscle definition that toned up fast, the kind only the lucky are born with—he'd won the genetic lottery as far as muscles went. Nothing big and bulky, just lean and powerful grace. His abdomen was ripped. My eyes slid down along with his pants.

Jesus. Even his uncut cock was beautiful. And really long. Or did it just look extra-long because he'd trimmed his pubic hair and I could see every inch?

"Want to suck it?" he asked me.

I did. But this time I lied. "No."

"Another time."

"I bite."

He laughed. "Then I guess I'll just have to fuck you all the time instead." He grinned, and damn, if it didn't make his whole face even more beautiful. "Hard, and fast," he smirked, "repeatedly."

The coppery-flavored spit dried up in my mouth. I swallowed. My dick pulsed.

"Spread your legs."

Hell, no. It wasn’t modesty so much as I didn’t want him to see how hard I was.

“Are we going to go for round two?”

Round one had been more than enough for me, thank you very much, and my nose had just quit bleeding. My heart thudded a little erratically as I dug my fingers into the bedding and slowly spread my legs. My glare probably looked like an invitation to him.

“You’re pretty all over, aren’t you?” He looked me over thoroughly. My skin was several shades darker than his, but I’m sure my blush was quite obvious. I was twenty-four, a first-year med student and here I was flushing like I was sixteen and never been kissed. A warm thread of pre-cum drooled between my slit and a spot near my hip where the other end had glued itself. “*Very* pretty,” Aiden added.

Naked, and fully erect, Aiden climbed on the bed and settled between my shaky legs. He skimmed his hands up both my thighs. “A shame about your lip,” he said, smiling.

Sure it was a shame. The bastard was altogether too pleased with himself.

“I’ve been dying for a taste of your mouth, and now I’ll have to wait some more.”

I wanted to kiss him, regardless. What was another sting when I was dying to share tongues? I licked the split in my lip, and the tang of metal filled my mouth. Damn. Aiden probably didn’t want to taste my blood. Or maybe he did—he kept staring at my mouth. His cat eyes narrowed, and he leaned in slowly, stuck his tongue out, and gently licked my bottom lip, a slow, hot swipe that made me gasp.

“Tasty.”

But he only gave me that single lick. Then he pushed me back into the remaining pillows and ran his calloused hands all over me. Minute tremors shook my body, and not all of it was from delayed shock. I was unbelievably horny. Without warning, he pinched my nipples, and I gasped louder. My hips jerked. My dick leaked. It had never oozed non-stop like that with any other guy I’d played around with. How humiliating.

“I’m glad you want to get fucked.”

“I don’t!” I lied—again.

Aiden’s true laugh was as beautiful as the rest of him. I hated him some more.

“You do. Your body knows how thoroughly I’m going to fuck it, how hard you’re going to come. How many times you’re going to come and how good it’s going to feel.”

Things wouldn’t be so difficult if only he’d quit talking. “You’re an arrogant son of a bitch, you know that?”

He smiled. “Probably,” he agreed. He reached for the lube, popped the top open, and slicked up his fingers. “But what I said is true. Now let your legs fall open all the way.”

My legs complied, with no input from my brain whatsoever. Without preamble, Aiden’s slippery, hot fingers encircled my shaft, and squeezed. Some humiliating noise escaped my throat and my back arched, my spine as traitorous as my dick.

“Feels good, doesn’t it?”

My throat made another incomprehensible sound.

Aiden clamped his fingers together and pumped, slowly, almost leisurely. My hips thrust up into that hot, slick hand—Aiden’s hand. After all those cold, lonely, scary nights, he’d finally caught me, and now he was going to fuck me. And I wanted him to, god help me, I wanted it.

Another set of slick fingers began working magic on my balls. Aiden wasn’t particularly gentle, and I was shocked to realize I didn’t want him to be. His strength excited me, and the knowledge that he could kill me in seconds if he wanted, added a dark undercurrent to that excitement. I’d always been attracted to that danger, to Aiden’s ruthlessness.

Shamelessly, I rocked into the sleeve made from his hand. Slick fingers glided down my taint, and slipped into my crack. The wetness of the lube and the fingertip on my hole shocked me all over again, and yes, thrilled me. I couldn’t wait for that finger to breach me. But it didn’t. I must have made some kind of frustrated sound.

“Eager for it?”

Yes. No! I felt humiliated and on fire. “I…” *What? Hate it? Hate that I want it?*

“You like it. And you like it because it’s me. My fingers. Not some other guy whose name you won’t remember the next morning.”

"What?" I sputtered. "That's not true!" Oh, but deep inside, I knew it was.

"Don't think I didn't used to notice you watching me all the time. That I wasn't aware of your eyes on me, or the way you tried to hide your arousal."

"I didn't!"

Aiden's slippery fingertip finally breached my entrance. I jerked, gasped and clenched, all at the same time. "I noticed. You were so cute, blushing and trying to adjust your pants when you thought I wasn't looking."

God. I wished I'd chosen death instead of this. My cheeks burned. My ass burned as Aiden's big finger plowed deeper.

"After a few years," he said, leaning down to whisper in my ear, "it wasn't cute anymore. It was damned irritating."

I bit my lip as a wave of embarrassment crawled over my skin. Fresh blood trickled between my teeth.

Aiden licked my ear. "It was irritating because I'd started wanting you back. Wanting you in my bed. And you're just a baby."

My whole body convulsed, and my dick pumped out so much pre-cum it was like I was coming. I whimpered and tried to make my tongue form words.

"Don't say anything," he ordered. "It's true and we both know it. I don't give a fuck how young you are, and I'm not going to fight it anymore. You're mine now, and I'm going to *own* you. I'm going to fuck you until you can't walk, until you're so sore you'll be begging to suck my cock so I'll leave you alone for five minutes."

I almost sobbed something.

"No! No talking. No smart words—I've had enough of your snotty comments. I only want to hear your cries."

Fucking… fuck! Aiden popped his finger out, and I gulped in a ragged breath.

"Roll your ass over."

I would have—once I could function, but Aiden grabbed me by the hip and thigh and flipped me himself. My lube-slick dick slid along the nubby silk and I pushed into it. No good. Too smooth, when I ached for friction.

The lube cap snapped open again, and seconds later, cold gel oozed into my crack. I shuddered, and shuddered harder still when Aiden directed it to my

hole with a push of his fingertips. The tight ring of my anus already ached a bit from just one of his thick fingers. I dreaded more fingers, the ones I knew would come, and yet craved them at the same time. My mind reeled in confusion. *Come on brain, don't fail me now.* My brains were all I had going for me.

My hole gave in to the prodding finger easier this time. "So tight," he commented. "I'm sorry I wasn't your first," he added. "It should have been me."

"What!" I sputtered into the pillow.

"If it had been me, you would have liked it the first time."

His head was so fucking fat. "Think pretty highly of yourself, don't you?"

"Shut up. I'm doing the talking here." Only he went silent as he began to fuck me with that one finger. Holding still took every ounce of willpower I had, and I had a lot. I wanted to push back on that finger, and I yearned to rub my dick against the duvet at the same time. It burned a little, but Aiden had been generous with the lube. "I'm in love with your ass. I can't wait to have it."

I still wasn't humiliated enough to stop being turned on. As Aiden fingered me in the ass, he squeezed my buttock, quite hard, marking me, and pulling me open to give him better access. I moaned into the duvet and the sheet below. "I'm a real finger man. I'm going to be sticking my hand in your pants all the time, and my tongue in your mouth. I'm going to make you squirm—and then come in your shorts."

I knew he meant it. He always meant what he said. To think, I used to admire that. Instead of words, I grunted an unwilling acknowledgment. *Why the hell am I agreeing with him?*

"Later, after I've had you over and over and loosened you up with lots of fucking, I'm going to fist you."

Fist? My mind processed that for a split second. "The hell you will!"

Aiden chose my moment of indignant refusal to begin working a second finger into my newly accommodating opening. I tried pulling my ass away, but he put a knee on my thigh—the one he hadn't numbed—and held me down. "Hold still."

I squirmed, but didn't get far, I was pinned *and* skewered. And unbelievably aroused by that.

"It won't be soon, you're far too tight. And too new at this," he continued, as he skillfully worked that second digit in me. "But when you're ready, I'll have you completely."

"Never," I said on a gasp. Two fingers were in me now. Thrusting. The thickness was slightly uncomfortable, and more than slightly pleasurable.

He gave his fingers a deep, rough thrust. "It will happen." He squeezed my already bruised buttock. "I'm going to play with this ass a great deal." He bent down and bit my cheek. I bit the down comforter and groaned. "And not just my fingers are going in here."

Huh?

"I'm going to buy some sweet toys for you. A nice plug. Yes. Most definitely going to plug this ass. Going to come in it first, and then plug that cum inside you to keep for me all night long."

Plug? Butt plug! Not in this lifetime. I tried to jerk away, but he obviously expected me to try it, and pressed harder with his knee.

"And a dildo—a really fat one, for when I feel like stretching you, seeing how much you can take. You will give me all your cries then, Jase."

I couldn't keep silent any longer. "You're horrible!"

He laughed and smacked my ass while he drilled me with his fingers. "You're going to love both. You don't think so now, but you will. You'll be my little slut and eager for whatever I want to do to you."

Since I was now writhing around on the fingers busy violating my ass and trying to rut with the duvet, I thought there might be some truth in his words. Maybe I could stand the plug part—I had, more than once, wondered what one would feel like.

"That's it. Relax your ass. Don't clench. I want to stretch your little pucker some more before I fuck you."

I just wanted him to fuck me. But no way was I going to say so.

Aiden kneed my legs further apart and then pushed one of my legs under me. "Raise your ass up so I can get at it better."

At least he didn't mince words. I hated when people did that. I arched, and tilted my ass up. Aiden slowly worked another finger in. I groaned loudly, and stuffed my face into the crook of my arm. I could really feel it now. The stretch burned, and yet my dick throbbed eagerly.

“That’s it, baby,” Aiden cooed. “Relax and let me fill you.”

Sure. Relax? He had half his fucking hand crammed in there. In my ass! It hurt a little.

“Almost ready for me,” he whispered.

He finger-fucked me in earnest then, twisting his fingers, pressing them as deep as they would go. The nerves inside my ass and around my uncomfortably stretched hole were as confused as I was. I think I started whimpering.

“Don’t worry, I’ll give you what you need,” Aiden said.

The brute would undoubtedly give me *more* than I needed. When he finally pulled his fingers out, I sucked in a shuddery breath. My heart thudded madly. My butthole stung. But I still ached to be filled. Fucked.

The snick of the lube cap startled me. Then something smooth and fat prodded at my entrance.

“Let it happen. Take my cock—don’t fight it. Bear down and push back against me.”

That’s what the last guy told me—the cutie from the bar. But I’d been a hell of a lot more relaxed then. I’d had a couple of drinks and an enjoyable game of tonsil hockey first. With Aiden, I was stone cold sober and nursing a fat lip. And I had no choice. I was his to do with as he pleased.

As the blunt head of Aiden’s penis teased my entrance, he rubbed my shoulder—which shocked the hell out of me. Comforted me—calmed me, somehow. I was still hard, and smearing a fluid other than my blood all over the ruined duvet, but I was also scared. Aiden was about to fuck me. I couldn’t wrap my head around that.

Aiden.

The blunt pressure increased.

“It’s going to feel so good. Promise.”

God, I hoped so. Aiden moved his hand from my shoulder to my hip. And pushed in.

I clenched—I couldn’t help it. Aiden smacked my hip. “While I may like that, it’s going to make you sore. Stop it.”

Make me sore? Fuck that shit. It already hurt like hell, a slow, relentless burn. I think Aiden was quite a bit bigger than the bar cutie. Was something

tearing? Aiden held himself motionless, and rubbed my flank, and my lower back. The burn eased. I felt stuffed full—and really stretched. And he was barely in me! "Please," I mumbled into the corner of the pillow.

"Please… *more?*" Aiden asked.

He was asking my opinion? "Please… *gentle*," I begged.

"Of course, baby."

Keeping his word, he sank in slowly, carefully, rocking his cock into me while his hands caressed me all over. I couldn't tell if I was still hard—all my focus was on the thick cock claiming my ass. Jesus, how long was it?

"Almost in," Aiden whispered.

As he filled me, the meatiest part of his shaft stretched me so wide I was sure I would tear. "Aiden! I can't—"

"Shh," he hushed. Not so much of a command as assurance. "You'll take it all."

I disagreed. I had the shakes all over, but then Aiden's thighs pressed against my backside, and the prickly short hairs stabbed into the sensitive skin on my thighs, and my creamy, never-seen-sunshine butt.

"Such a sweet ass, Jase. You feel amazing."

I panted and sucked in gulps of air. My mind short-circuited, synapses firing all over the place. Aiden was inside me. The thought revived my arousal, and my flagging erection sparked back to full and throbbing life. Aiden noticed my renewed excitement, and smoothed a hand over my back. His hips moved, and his cock slid out a little—then back in. I was stretched open, and my sphincters had finally relaxed. The burn and hurt eased—I was ready and he knew it.

"Time to get done properly, sweet Jase."

The slow, gentle rocking turned into more determined thrusts. I cried out with each one. My body suddenly no longer felt like my own—it belonged to Aiden. The pain mellowed to a deep ache as his thrusts grew more forceful. Despite the lingering burn, and my shaky legs, the surging pleasure intensified. My skin felt electrically charged, and produced a spark everywhere Aiden touched me.

"Jase," Aiden called to me from far away. "Pull your knees up. Get them under you. I don't want to pull out—it'll only hurt when I enter you again."

I couldn't move. Really. I tried. All my limbs shook and were oddly uncoordinated. Aiden's fingers dug into my hips, and he lifted me up, while keeping his cock buried deep inside me. Clutching handfuls of bedding as my anchor, I dragged my legs under me and squirmed, with Aiden's assistance, until I had both knees under me, my ass in the air, and my forearms sinking into the mattress. The first thrust in the new position went impossibly deep, jerked me violently forward, and tore a startled yelp from my throat.

It felt exquisite.

Aiden wanted my cries? I gave them to him. Freely.

With my face getting repeatedly shoved back and forth into the bedding, and my ass getting ruthlessly pounded by a ruthless man, I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience. Some of Aiden's thrusts slid across my gland—nothing else could feel like that—and I whimpered and cried so much I couldn't hear the words Aiden whispered to me. Endearments? Like maybe he thought me beautiful and not a nuisance. I couldn't concentrate because the bastard was right—I was going to come for him. I was already close.

"Come on, Jase," Aiden said, closer to my ear so I could hear, "give it up! Come for me."

If so many sensations weren't tearing me apart, I might have right then, just from his voice ordering me to. But I was overwhelmed. By everything.

Aiden slowed his powerful thrusts enough to yank my chest up off the bed. My quivering thighs spread wide, falling outside of his. He dragged me back against his hot, sweaty chest and crushed me to him as I sat on his thighs, his long cock seated so deeply inside me I thought it might come out my mouth. He made me ride him. Like a piston, his cock drove up at the same time he shoved me down on it.

"Aiden!" I cried. "For the love of—"

His hand found my slick, dripping dick and pumped. Too slowly. I was dying—he was killing me.

"Are you going to run on me again?" Aiden asked me before slamming me back down on his iron-hard shaft.

"No!" I yelled—I'd surrendered completely. Days ago.

"I meant to punish you for it," he added, panting.

I could barely form words. "I'm s-sorry!" I wailed, "I was scared. P-please, Aiden."

"Will you tell me the truth from now on?"

I was falling apart, and he was fucking talking. "I will! I d-did!"

Aiden's words were harder to take than his stiff cock pounding the life out of me. I thrashed wildly, speared on the weapon between his legs, and unable to escape. His powerful thighs drove his cock into me relentlessly. Finally, when I thought I couldn't take any more, Aiden jacked me so perfectly I saw stars.

"Come now, Jason. Give it to me," he growled and shoved me down on his cock as he leaned back. The fat, swollen head of his cock stroked over my gland. My body convulsed, and I came—and I hollered, probably loudly, but everything sounded muted with my ears ringing and my blood rushing. Hot jets of my own cum splattered on my legs and the bloodied covers. I came so hard it hurt—like he said I would.

Aiden fucked me through my orgasm, but loosened his grip on my dick—it didn't matter, I kept coming. It was torture. Aiden almost pulled out with each thrust and on his way back in, the head of his cock kept hitting my prostate.

I knew then Aiden was in full command of my body, not me.

When Aiden climaxed, he didn't scream, he went still and silent. His thrusts stuttered. A hot wetness flooded my ass. His fingers dug into my hips. As he slowed, he bit me, little nips across my shoulder. Under me, his powerful thighs trembled. He pressed his face into my back, then with me cradled against his chest, he let us fall forward to land in a sweaty, cum-smeared heap.

Aiden's full weight crushed me, and made me gasp for air, in ragged, noisy, half sobbing breaths I couldn't control. Although softened somewhat, his cock remained parked in my ass.

After a moment of panting all over me, Aiden said, "I'm sorry for this." Then he slid his dick from my ass.

What was left of the ruined shell of my body shuddered violently. My fingers twitched. The sharp, burning pain returned for several long, stuttering heartbeats and then morphed into a throbbing, dull ache deep inside. I chewed on the tangled blankets crammed into my face and waited for it to pass.

When Aiden finally slid to the side of my sweat-slicked back, I realized I was trembling. My emotions were firing wildly, but mostly I was… scared. But as mad at me as Aiden was, he wasn't a total sadistic pig and he stroked my back, my hip and even my arms until the horrible shaking gave way to exhaustion. I hurt. Everywhere.

As I started to slide unwillingly into a semi-unconscious state, Aiden turned me on my side and ignited a fresh burst of agony. Wetness oozed from my abused ass and my legs slid together with cum—his, mine. Ours. I couldn't even force myself to be disgusted.

"It'll be okay. It's safe to go to sleep now," Aiden whispered in my ear. I slumped into the duvet, wanting so desperately to believe him. I wanted everything to be okay, but I'd learned not to trust. Not to let people in.

Tucked against Aiden's warm body, I dozed fitfully. Not for long stretches—I felt anxious about something I couldn't put my finger on. As I drifted, it hit me, and I jerked awake, sending a sharp bolt of pain up my ass and across my injured ribs.

Sounding sleepy behind me, Aiden said, "What is it?"

"Condom," I rasped. "You didn't wear a condom." Fresh horror started my body trembling all over again.

"Be quiet and go to sleep. You worry too much about everything."

True—but this was important. "But we…" I guess it was kind of late now, wasn't it?

"As if I would catch any of your disgusting human diseases. Quit worrying and go to sleep."

Aiden yanked up some of the disordered coverings and tucked them around me, making a warm cocoon. Human diseases? I wanted to ponder his comment, but abruptly crashed into oblivion.

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When I woke, I was alone in the messy bed. And disoriented. Where the hell was I? I cracked open a bleary eye and blinked. Milky light peeked through the curtain edges—and I knew this room. I was at Aiden's house. And I was in Aiden's bed. Somehow, I'd made it under the covers—I couldn't remember when. A delightful pocket of warmth enveloped me, and I sighed in thanks because I hurt everywhere. In fact, I was somewhat afraid to move and inflame some protesting body part.

My ribs were tender. My lip smarted when I tried to lick the dryness away. *Big deal.* They were minor irritations compared to the way my ass felt. Raw, and thoroughly used and abused. Goddamn Aiden. I ached inside, deep under my tailbone. Even though he'd been making a point, he didn't have to fuck me

so hard. I was honest-to-god afraid to move. Sticky substances had practically glued my legs together. Cum had dried and crusted on my thighs. Cuddling myself in my misery, I tucked my arms under my chin and winced as I stretched my legs out.

Jesus. *What do I do now?* I sorted through the confused mess that was my head. Time. I needed some serious time to think things over.

Unfortunately, I wasn't going to get it. Aiden was in the shower—I could hear the spray through the open door. I scowled into the pillow, hating him all over again. Hating New York State all over again. And missing the freedom that had once been mine. That I had relinquished, by choice.

Except… Aiden would have found me sooner or later anyway, I didn't kid myself. Giving up was not a concept he understood. Despite Aiden's completely human appearance, he was only half-human, and his alien half possessed a far more predatory nature. Why had I thought I could outlast him? Or outwit him? It was ridiculous. The T'El Vish'En, the Vish, lived a hell of a lot longer than us lowly humans, and Aiden, who looked to be maybe thirty-five—a very healthy thirty-five—had once told me a sad tale of what it was like in America during the Great Depression. So yeah, I would never outlast him.

At night, huddled in whatever hidey-hole I'd stumbled on in my travels, I knew that. But…

The problem with running is that once you start, it's really difficult to stop. Fear gets to you. Loneliness gets to you. I knew he was closing in on me, yet I kept going, kept hiding. After my grandfather's death—the event that started all of this—I didn't have much family left. My aunt, my dad's ding-a-ling sister who'd never had anything to do with me, refused to help me when I called her in desperation, hoping she'd wire me some money when all my bank cards and my credit cards had been cancelled. Nope. Denied. *Aiden just wants to protect you, Jason—come home. You're being stubborn and ridiculous. I'll buy you a plane ticket, but that's all you'll get from me.* The bastard! Turning my one and only family member against me so easily.

Aiden didn't want to protect me. He wanted to wring my scrawny human neck. Would probably get right on that when he got out of the shower. I shifted uncomfortably, trying to find a position that made both my sore ass and my ribs happy. When I found it, my arm bitched at me—Aiden had twisted it up behind my back as he wrestled me up into his bedroom.

I can't believe I punched him.

And why didn't he have a fat lip like me? I didn't hold back with that first punch.

Long before I finally gave up on the running and hiding, I spent a few wretched, water-logged days wondering if I was indeed going mad—or loco as they called it down there. Aiden had gotten to my best friend as well—Dusty. Told him I was having a depressive episode, was not myself and needed help. The lying fucker. Okay—maybe I was a little depressed. But Dusty only wired me a hundred bucks, probably behind Aiden's back, and told me to get my ass home before I failed out completely and ruined my permanent record. The college would only buy my bereavement leave for so long—two months was pushing it.

Over those two months, I'd traveled from my home near UCLA, down into Mexico and then, when I could practically feel Aiden breathing down my neck, I slipped into Guatemala, thinking to lose him there. Aiden excels at technology, and I thought taking that from him would even the score. Ha-ha.

My Spanish is passable, but I stuck out like a sore thumb. Guatemalans are a short, squat sort for the most part and I, at well over six feet, towered over most of them. Plus, I just look American, right down to the blue eyes and big white smile courtesy of regular dental care. My wavy brown hair is nothing like theirs either. And I have freckles.

The only thing that saved me from being murdered and dumped in a watery jungle ditch somewhere was that I was obviously poorer than the lowliest of beggars. They were the ones who were charitable, occasionally feeding the poor, starving, wandering village idiot. I'd felt guilty taking their food.

Three days ago—I blinked at the window—*four* days ago, I finally admitted defeat. I had eight dollars left of Dusty's hundred dollar emergency gift and sore feet from walking aimlessly. Sunday is market day in the city of Chichicastenango, Chichi for short, and I'd made my way there with visions of squash, corn and beans in my, by then, empty head. I was so tired that day—Christ, was it only four days ago? I'd almost fallen asleep in church. I was so lonely and pathetic, the only place of comfort was a Catholic church. Knowing what I know, that we are not alone, I'm not all that big on religion. I would love to believe… I just can't.

So while I was being my bedraggled self, curled into the corner of the pew and trying to keep up with the sermon—or whatever you call it—I had an epiphany. I was done. In exchange for my life, I'd given myself to Aiden

O'Rourke—his human father was Irish—in partial restitution for my grandfather's unspeakably malicious crime.

The Vish have virtually no crime, and the reason they don't is because they have very barbaric punishments. Even by human standards. They do not murder each other. They are quite capable of raining destruction down on their enemies if required, but they are terribly civilized. Except when it comes to justice.

My grandfather—and I still cannot fathom this—committed such a heinous and cruel series of acts, that he was sentenced to their harshest judgment. The death penalty. I was not surprised. I had been summoned to the trial, the need for which boggled me up the very end, because I couldn't figure out why they'd hold a trial for a dead man. Ah, but that's the Vish for you. Always got something up their sleeves.

Even before the verdict came down, everyone had stared at me with unconcealed hostility, like I was somehow guilty by default. It wasn't until they cuffed me that I panicked. One of their Chief Justices had to explain it to me. Twice. The first time I'd almost fainted. Their death penalty stretches over three generations. My parents are deceased so that left me next in line for the burning knife—I'm the third generation. I can't get past the horror of that. They do not care if you are innocent or if you had nothing to do with the crime. They wouldn't have cared if I was a baby.

Their rationale behind their reprehensible law is that they are a long-lived people, and if you don't cut the seed of criminality from the family line, the convicted's descendants could eventually rise up in vengeance. Barbaric. And effective, or so I imagine.

I'd be dead meat right now if it weren't for Aiden.

Even though I hate him.

Want him…

Want to suck it?

Hot fingertips on my cheek startled me, and I jolted, the sudden movement reminding me of all the places I hurt. I'd actually fallen back asleep.

"Wake up, sleepyhead."

My lips were glued together again, so I untucked a hand from under my chin—the knuckles were scraped from Aiden's face—and gave him my middle finger.

"Ah, the Jason I know and love," he replied. "There's lots of hot water left." He gave me a lazy smile. "I imagine you'll need it."

My mouth tasted like utter shit. I poked my tongue forward and managed to unstick my blood-crusted lips. "Prick," I rasped. I had no intention of moving. Even if I could.

"I'll make you some coffee," he offered, most decently.

I've never been much of a morning person. He could cram his decency. I don't imagine I scowl any better than I glare, but I gave it a try. Felt vaguely… satisfying.

"If you aren't out of that bed and on your way to the shower in five minutes, I'm going to rip those blankets off your bruised and battered body and fuck you again."

My ass was already on fire. I took him at his word. I rolled over onto my stomach, uncomfortably, because I had a little morning wood—proof that the little head is really, really stupid—and pushed myself up. Every muscle I had protested. I slid a leg down to the floor. Jesus—the inside of my thighs felt like they'd been beaten with a stick. I collapsed back down on my face, and my dick, and groaned.

Aiden sauntered back over and yanked the covers off me. "Hey!" I croaked.

He ran his index finger down my spine to the crack of my ass. "A few war wounds, but you'll live."

A few? "You're a bastard." Because, really, he was.

He slid his finger in the sticky goo between my butt cheeks. I flinched. "Sore?"

Lying would get me nowhere. Or, it would get me fucked, and I wasn't enduring that again no matter what the little head wanted. "Yes."

"Have a hot bath, then. Soak your muscles. But don't be all day about it."

I was thinking up a smartass comeback when he stepped closer and grabbed my ass with both hands. "I'm going!" I hastened to reply.

"Glad to hear it," he said, as he gently pried my cheeks apart.

I tried to squirm away—fuck! Who did that? My whole face burned with humiliation. I swatted at him, ineffectually, arm backwards, as I was face down.

"Looks tender," he said, conversationally. "You're going to know I was here. *All* day."

Aiden’s finger drifted across my very sore hole, and I winced.

“I want you again though,” he added, softly.

Again? Now? “Aiden, I—” My voice cracked.

“I know. And I’m not that much of a bastard.”

But he was, because he eased his finger in. I groaned. Felt like a barbed spike. But even so, my dick perked up enough to be uncomfortable, squashed under me.

“Hurry up, and get out of that bed before I remember I really am that much of a bastard.” He popped his finger back out.

Just the motivation I needed. My legs were hellishly shaky when I got to my feet. I wobbled, and Aiden settled me with a possessive hand to my hip. I wanted to get to the bathroom—I was starting to worry something disgusting might trickle out of my ass. But Aiden waylaid me by nuzzling behind my ear. Then he nipped the lobe. I shuddered.

“Can I go?” I asked.

“Not just yet.”

Oh, hell. He nipped my jaw. My stubble, I hadn’t touched a razor since Chichi, was probably prickly as hell. He cupped my ass. Maybe I wasn’t going to escape a painful morning fuck after all. But instead of a fuck, I got a warning.

“Don’t make me hit you again, Jase.”

I sighed. I wasn’t proud of myself. “I’m sorry, Aiden,” I finally said. “I was an asshole.” Apologizing to someone when you’re still mad at them is not an easy thing. But I felt better already.

“Accepted.” He gave my semi-hard dick a nice, long, sliding squeeze from the balls up.

“I can’t fuck you, and with that lip you can’t suck me off—but there’s nothing wrong with your hands, is there?”

“No, but…”

Aiden snickered, and released my dick with a slow drag that handily dragged a whimper from me. I felt so gross and disgusting. Dried blood had caked in the creases of my hands. Opening my palm, I showed him.

He grinned at me. "That's not really a deterrent to me, you know." He swatted my backside. "But go on. I'll give your hands a workout later. Meet me downstairs when you're done."

Thank god! Before he changed his mind, I hobbled in the direction of the bathroom and shut myself inside.

****

The smell of coffee filled the kitchen. That had to be the most delightful aroma known to mankind. My mouth watered. The awful, lukewarm cup of airport coffee I'd chugged on the way home had been the only cup I'd had in over a month. I craved a fresh cuppa like a junkie craved a hit. And Aiden made damned good coffee. In fact, I could blame him for my addiction. He'd gotten me hooked in my late teens, before I tried escaping my life for a new one in which alien species didn't exist, and Aiden fucking O'Rourke didn't rule my every damned fantasy.

Aiden hadn't forgotten how I liked it. One sugar, two cream, and hot enough to scald. I folded my leg under me as I sat, uncomfortably, on the kitchen chair. I'd discovered sitting would not be happening today when I'd plopped down on Aiden's bed to dress. It's not easy to put socks on while lying down. At least jerk-face had bought me some things to wear—he'd set a change of clothes on the chair in the bedroom for me. I found them after I'd crawled out of the tub, feeling quite a bit better.

"Bless the gods of the almighty bean," I groaned, as I slurped a drink from the side of my mouth that wasn't swollen. "Thank you," I told Aiden. I pretty much meant it. The bastard.

He rewarded me with one of his real smiles.

"Don't think you're gonna win me over," I muttered. "You're still a sadistic bastard."

"Wouldn't dream of trying. And I know."

Cuddling my coffee, I hunched over the table to ease the pressure on a certain sore spot. Aiden had the wisdom not to tease me too badly, he only chuckled softly at my distress. I sat quietly and had a bad case of the stares. There were cool things to stare at. Once upon a time, I had loved Aiden's house. The Vish had a lot of money and the Bridgehampton house, while renovated to a modern standard, had retained every last bit of its heritage charm. They'd probably had it built in the first place—not Aiden, he was too young, but one of the others.

The microwave beeped me out of my stupor, and a moment later, Aiden slid a plate of scrambled eggs with cheese and bacon bits in front of me, along with a side plate of toast. I hadn't realized I was starving until just that moment, and I wolfed it all down before Aiden had eaten half of his. He said nothing, just silently slid the fruit bowl my way and finished his own breakfast. Since when had apples tasted so frigging delicious? Kiwis still sucked though. Slimy.

After two cups of coffee and gorging myself on half the contents of the fruit bowl, I felt ready to deal with whatever Aiden planned to dish out. He had a gleam in his eye that I knew from times past—well, one time. The look said, *you will tell me everything*. Yeah, like I wanted to do that.

Aiden took my hand, and I limped along behind him to his study—I had no idea how painful it could be, getting hit in the back of the thigh. At least there weren't any stairs. And there was a leather couch. Aiden let me fall on it while he retrieved his laptop from his desk. Yay, files to focus on. Pulling my feet up, I rested most of my weight on my hip and tried to not to get worked up over what I knew was coming.

Before I ditched Aiden and ran home to California, then skedaddled down Mexico way, I'd told the Vish Inquisition everything I knew. Which was absolutely nothing. Numb with shock, I'd spilled my guts. The shock of finding out about my grandfather's crimes hadn't really gone away for me, and my heart was still in denial.

My father disappeared under mysterious circumstances—yeah, right—when I was just a babe, and my mom never got over it. Years later, when I was eleven, she'd accidently-on-purpose offed herself. I've forgiven her—she was really messed up, and I loved her. I kind of understood her, too, even then. Our family business, working for the Vish, is hard on the soul, which is why I tried to escape it. Only it's like the mafia, and once you're in, you can never get out. Gramps finished raising me after that.

Gramps hated the Vish. I'm pretty sure they knew he did, but since they can't very well go out and about in public, they have human retainers who look after things—we're their face to the world, and they ignored his animosity. Vish wrangling is a hereditary position. Like royalty. Gramps looked at it as a form of slavery.

And on that point, we agreed.

Once you know something, you can never *not* know it. Which is why it was so easy to forgive my mother—she came from outside the family. Spiritual and

devout growing up, losing everything she had believed in had slowly killed her. I'd been born to it. The Vish had always been part of my life. The older I get, the more I understand how big that loss was for her.

Aiden joined me on the couch. Really close on the couch. I didn't mind; he smelled clean, faintly spicy and wonderful. I sort of melted against him. He let me. My emotions were still sparking crazy all over the place. I felt jittery. My dick wasn't hard, but I was mentally horny. Maybe I was sick, or something. Some weird jungle disease had eaten parts of my brain…

The screen loaded up a familiar face. Morgan Kelly, my grandpa, was not what you'd call a nice man. He had rough edges. A gruff personality. But I had loved him, and he had loved me from the day I was born. He'd been gone for three months now, and it felt weird, knowing I could no longer just phone him up for a chat. All that force of will… just gone. I would never have any closure. I could never ask the burning *why*.

"Jase," Aiden asked.

My attention snapped back to the picture, one taken from a video feed. "Yeah?"

"You okay?"

Hell, no. "Yeah." I shrugged. "But I still can't believe it." I think Aiden had liked Gramps, once. After all, he'd known my grandfather for Gramps's entire life. That long-lived thing can sure fuck with your head. But Aiden had suffered most by what Morgan had done, and was still suffering. The Vish, for all their supposed civility, had a real class divide thing going on, and Aiden had three strikes against him.

First, and foremost, he was a half-breed. Prejudice is not just a human thing.

Second, his mother's family is from one of the northern clans, and I have no idea why this matters, I don't get their politics, and this freaks out the rest of the clans. The northern clans are self-reliant and mean as stepped-on snakes, even Aiden admits this; he calls them honorary Texans, and their main occupation is war. The Vish have a terrible enemy. Guess who lives closest to the gate that lets them in?

Sure as hell isn't the snooty clans from the south.

Like Gramps, I don't really like most of the Vish, either. Mostly snobs. Except the northern born ones. I could get on good with them.

Thirdly, most of the Earth-trapped Vish are scared of him. He has, to them, what is a sacred gift, an affinity for the gate and weapons made from the same stuff, and for that talent to surface in a half-breed northern bastard of questionable loyalty… yeah, Aiden gets a lot of shit from every direction.

"Are you lonely, Aiden?" I had a sudden need to know.

He heard me, but stared at his laptop for a moment. That was probably a rude question. "Not anymore," he answered.

Like he'd admit to it if he was.

Aiden cranked up the volume on the video of what was my grandfather's deathbed confession. I made myself watch it. I knew it was real, and had not been tampered with. He'd been streaming it live to multiple, and opposing, parties, so no one could manipulate it. Gramps wanted me to get out, and, true to his ornery disposition, had hid his cancer diagnosis from me so I wouldn't leave school. No closure again—I never got to say that last goodbye.

Morgan had practised his little speech. I didn't understand a word of it, as I didn't speak the Vish high-tongue. Not many humans did. Aiden, presumably, had added the subtitles.

I, Morgan David Kelly, hereby confess to thirty counts of premeditated murder…

That was just a guess actually, since nobody knew how many people were in transit inside the gate when he killed the two guards and stole the Shalash glyph key and sentenced them all to death. The Vish had been expecting twenty-eight travelers. Eight arrivals had been in the final stages, and they'd been horribly mutilated—whatever body part was Earth-side stayed, and whatever part was on the T'El side, stayed there. Random body parts had arrived through the gate. Two Vish had been completely bisected down the middle, cut by an invisible knife. Aiden's beloved uncle had been one of those two.

I'd never seen the gate, but I'd been treated to pictures of the autopsies during the trial. Bits of hands—lots of swinging hands had made it through to our side—and a few feet had tumbled onto the arrival pad in a bloody, (and other bodily fluid) flood. Faces and noses. Not even the Vish had a brain-bleach that could scrub those images from my memory.

Gramps had timed it well. He'd waited for a transfer with lots of Vish—it had been some holiday or other. And, from his confession, not just any Vish

would do. He'd specifically targeted a certain southern clan with an unpronounceable name, and wanted to get as many of them as he could. Gramps sure knew how to hold a grudge. In the video he went on to explain his hatred for the Vish and their superiority complex, and how he wanted them off our planet. It was quite the rant.

But in the end, it all boiled down to love.

Once upon a time, before he met my grandmother, Gramps had wanted to marry one of them. Ha-ha, as if they'd go for that. The scandal must have been of epic proportions. I saw her picture once. If I liked women, I would have agreed she was… sexy? Drop-dead gorgeous at any rate. Delicate and fragile looking with that porcelain skin they have, stunning lavender eyes, and a little pointy chin.

I had this unpopular opinion that the Vish spawned the mythology of the Elven race. They did not flat-out deny it, either. When I first saw the Lord of the Rings trilogy, I almost had heart failure. Take one of those actors all done up in make-up, narrow the face, enlarge the eyes, add some scaly ridges along the hairline and a thicker ridge up the spine, and you'd be pretty damn close.

You'd also have to be some kind of moron not to realize we had a common genetic ancestor. The Vish lived in full denial on that subject. How could you maintain your superiority ideology otherwise? My curiosity on the subject never waned.

As things finally came out at the trial, I learned she scorned his offer of marriage, or rather, her family did. I think she might have been game, from the rumors. Morgan was movie-star idol handsome and charming when he wanted to be. But her family didn't want to sully their name or bloodline—which, believe me, is everything to them.

So yeah, thirty counts of first-degree murder over a spurned proposal made from the heart.

But that wasn't the horrible part.

Gramps proceeded to pocket the Shalash glyph key that operates the gate, and their only ticket home. So, in the cruellest twist imaginable, since August 8, 1968, every Vish on planet Earth has been stranded here. They are not a happy lot.

Resisting the urge to gnaw on my nails, I watched the rest of the video, until almost the end. I didn't read his final words, but I knew them by heart.

I hate you all… I've watched your suffering year after year, decade after decade, and you never had a clue, did you? And you thought you were so smart, but you never suspected, not once. I wish I could stick around another twenty years just to watch you suffer some more. But my time here is up.

I'll leave you a few clues. If it's meant to be, you'll find it. If not, I hope you all rot. And if you do find it, leave. Get off our planet. Go home. I hope the G'Reth eat all of you!

Things got noisy after that. Alarms sounded. A violent explosion shook the house. Paintings fell from the walls and a lamp crashed to the floor. I closed my eyes at the next part, knowing what would follow. Looking almost unconcerned, my grandfather turned, glanced back at the door, looked back at the camera, pulled a handgun from inside his wheelchair, smiled coldly, and shot himself in the head.

Wish I hadn't seen that the first time, but of course, nobody warned me.

The video ended shortly thereafter when the power went out. The identity of the intruders remains a mystery.

Yeah, right. A mystery.

I gave Aiden a dirty look. "You gonna tell me who raided the house?"

"You going to tell me where the key is?"

Because Aiden was pretty much a pariah here on Earth, and dangerous to boot, I suspected he wanted to go back to T'El more than anyone else. The northern clans respected him. He was welcome there. Maybe I hated him, maybe not, but I wanted to send him home. "I have no idea where it is, Aiden. I would give it to you if I knew."

"Would you?"

That pissed me off again. "I can't believe you'd even ask me that." I thought he knew me better.

Aiden's shoulders slumped, surprising me. I'd never known him to show even a hint of weakness. "Then why'd you run?"

"Because they'll kill me anyway." And torture me first. *And I'm scared of you and the power you have over me, whether you know it, or not.*

I liked how he didn't argue.

"Whoever was in that house, they're going to want to watch me suffer. They hate you for pulling rank and stopping my execution. They want their

pound of flesh." Kind of like those pounds of body parts splattered about on the arrival pad.

"Over my dead body."

Aiden meant it. But I wanted him to live. "Don't say that. Please."

Maybe I surprised Aiden for a switch. He twisted, gave me a strange look, leaned in, hesitated for a moment, and then kissed me. It was wonderful, swollen lip and all. Our mouths fit together perfectly. He tasted heavenly. The real thing was better than any fantasy I'd ever had. He did a thorough job of rendering me senseless, and for a minute, I forgot my own name. When he pulled away, I chased after his mouth. So many years I'd waited for that kiss, never thinking I'd ever get it.

I didn't think there was much I could do to save myself, despite Aiden's stated desire to protect me—he was just one man. But maybe I could save him. If I was going to die, I'd make sure Aiden benefitted from it. "I'll help you find it."

His slouch disappeared. "Thank you."

I shrugged. "Welcome." Least I could do.

He set the laptop aside and smiled, that sarcastic smile that made me want to punch him in the face all over again. "But you're still mine."

As if I didn't know. Or want it any other way.

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My non-stop yawning had nothing to do with the subject matter. All my running over the past couple months had simply worn me out. I had jet lag, bad. And pain in places I didn't know there were pain receptors—you'd think I would, being in med school, but apparently not.

At first, my escape had felt more like a vacation. An extended holiday. I had money. Vish retainers are well paid, and I'd inherited a hefty pile of bucks. My grief didn't slow me down, it just made me act strangely, and one of those actions precipitated my getting most of my stuff stolen in some puny little Mexican town whose name I forget—plus they'd all started to look the same. By that point, my paranoia was in full swing. I had suspicions of being watched, that I'd turn a corner, and Aiden would be standing there, smirking at me. I slept in dangerous and unlikely places. Took huge risks.

How in the hell had I managed to survive?

Fear led me into Central America. Aiden had gotten tired of my shit around then and hacked my credit, cancelling my cards and leaving me with only the cash on my person. I shudder to think how much it had been—really, I'd practically begged to have my throat slit. But money goes fast, no matter where you are—especially when I kept giving it away. There's lots of hungry kids down there. And sick babies.

The persistent loneliness finally did me in. Guess I'm far more social than I thought.

Holding the pack of photos Aiden had given me to look at against my chest, I closed my eyes. Yeah, needed this. Leather couches are cold, so I crammed my head into the corner, tucked up my legs, and pressed my back against the expanse of dead cowhide. Five minutes. Then I'd get back at it—Aiden was yammering on the phone and it lulled me, that low, sexy voice of his. I let my mind drift, searching for answers.

No one knew what clues Morgan had been referring to in the video. Obviously, he'd thought he'd have more time. Maybe he planned to explain it before the alarms and the intruders and his brief date with a bullet cut things short. A collection of maps and postcards littered his desk. And photos. Of me.

No wonder the Vish thought I was dirty. *Thanks, Gramps.*

I pillaged my memories. The key would not be hidden in New York. So where, then? I contemplated all those days of sunshine and road trips eating up my spring breaks and summer vacations.

Or was I just remembering the summer heat because I felt cold?

It rains a lot in Guatemala…

But… something picked at me. Morgan probably wanted me to know, without knowing I knew.

Why had we gone to Nevada that second time? And later, crossing all those states, stopping most in Arizona and New Mexico? *I get my kicks on Route 66…*

Morgan's 1965 Mustang was the coolest ride ever invented. I loved that car.

I recalled all those miles with Credence Clearwater Revival blasting out of the speakers. *Bad Moon Rising* had stuck in my head for days—goddamn *days.* Morgan had corrupted my youthful innocence, the dog. I actually *liked* that sixties and early seventies shit. Half asleep, I started humming *Lookin' out My Back Door* and dug up dusty lyrics from the past.

Huh. They must have been really stoned when they wrote that one.

A deliciously warm hand slid up the back of my shirt. Aiden pried the photos from my hands before I bent the crap out of them. I wanted to complain—they were the only thing keeping me warm.

"Saw them in concert once," Aiden said, as he rucked up my shirt.

How unfair was that? "You suck."

"Sometimes," he said, with a chuckle.

Now, what did that mean? "What are you doing?" I asked, as he hovered.

"I want to touch your skin."

"Okay," I breathed. Because, yeah. The last inches of available space on the couch disappeared as Aiden lay down beside me. He insinuated his knee between mine. Hooking an arm on the back of the couch, he pulled himself closer and turned me into the filling of a couch-Aiden sandwich. My dick perked up, and I snapped instantly back awake.

"Such a pretty mouth," he said, then proceeded to kiss the hell out of me. His tongue invaded my mouth, not that I put up a fight. I tongued him back. We took turns with the tongues. It was wet and sloppy and hot. The faint sting of my healing lip only made every lick and suck more intense.

As Aiden kissed me, he worked his hands all over me. My nipple eventually fell victim to a merciless assault from his calloused thumb. He rubbed it and flicked it—tormented it. Made me hornier than hell. My dick wanted some of the action and strained against my new jeans. Apparently Aiden's cock had the same idea, and after rubbing our respective boners against each other, we started into a slow grind.

"Unzip," he ordered.

Didn't have to ask me twice. I unzipped and shoved my underwear down. Aiden snagged a back pocket and yanked down the waist, exposing the top of my ass. As my dick sprung out, he caught it. Swirled the slippery fluid on the tip with his thumb. If he wanted to plow my ass again, I'd bend over willingly. He made me so hot. Always had. And yeah, I did used to watch him.

Wiggling in the tight space, I boldly unzipped Aiden. His thick slab burst out and thudded into mine. "Commando, eh?" I teased, a little breathlessly.

"I like to be prepared," he teased back. Then he grabbed both our cocks in his fist and pumped, rubbing them together.

Jesus. At least I'd done this before. Frottage is such an ugly sounding word for such a delightful activity. It had never been this good though, because it had never been with Aiden. He watched me, eyes half-shuttered and unreadable. I fed off his intensity. I made all the noise, moaning and rudely shoving my dick into his hand, seeking more than my share. To settle me down, he slowed his hand movements and fucked my mouth with his tongue. I controlled myself—barely. My leaking dick provided most of the lube, and we slid together again, finally finding the perfect rhythm.

"Aiden…" I moaned, when he moved from savaging my mouth to nipping my jaw and the tip of my chin.

"Gonna come?" he panted in reply. "Better ask for my permission."

Permission? I groaned loudly and jerked as he bit my neck. His knee between my legs started rocking up and down, jostling my painfully hard balls and pressing the seam of my jeans into my perineum and my sore asshole—ouch, tender. I hissed in a noisy breath. It still felt kind of amazing.

"Ask me."

I have no shame. I started riding his leg and making incoherent noises, part bliss and part suffering. Even the uncomfortable tugging of my not-down-far-enough jeans failed to dampen my enthusiasm. "*Aiden*…" I groaned—I wasn't whining, exactly. Since Chichi, when I pleaded for his forgiveness, down on my knees, begging Aiden for an orgasm seemed easy as pie. "Wanna come…" My balls were tightening and tingling, with Aiden's knee spurring them on. "May I? Please?"

"Yes," he answered. His voice sounded a little shaky. "Then you're going to suck me off."

Fuck. I'd suck anything—just give it to me! Aiden gave my crotch a good root with his knee, pumped our tangled cocks deliciously fast and furious, and sent me spiralling into the orgasm I begged for. I cried out in time with the first hot spurt and whimpered through the rest, the jets landing mostly on my naked belly. My face hit his jaw as I collapsed against Aiden's shoulder and panted, trying to catch my breath.

Aiden didn't permit me more than those precious few gulps of air. He most impolitely pushed down on my shoulder. "Get sucking," he ordered.

My hips gave a convulsive jerk. I slid down the couch as he moved up on it. My jeans, fallen to my thighs, hampered my effort, but I pushed my butt up and

found his shaft, and the ripe, red glans with my mouth. Ugh. Tasted like my jizz… and under that… *Aiden*.

"Like the taste of your cum, Jase? Suck it off my cock."

My mind was still reeling from my own orgasm, and I was flying—I gobbled him down in one greedy gulp.

"Son of a…" he groaned.

I wanted to pleasure him as much as he pleasured me. I gave him the best blow job I had it in me to give. My body felt loose and my mind peaceful. My throat muscles relaxed easily, and I took him deep. His hands went in my hair, guiding me—not shoving, I already had all I could take—and he fucked my mouth, my throat, my *soul*. When he came, his cock was so far down the back of my throat that he barely choked me. But the supply seemed limitless. My gag reflex activated. My throat protested. Aiden, feeling generous, pulled back and finished coming in my mouth. Then aimed one last, thick spurt on my face.

I lowered my forehead onto his rock hard abdomen. I had spunk on my face, clogging my throat and tasting bitter on my tongue. My pants were hanging off, and as I moved, my wet dick slimed my leg. I felt thoroughly debauched. And blissed out. I sniffled, swallowed and smugly enjoyed Aiden's meltdown. I think I pleased him.

Once I caught my breath, I smiled up at him. "Did you get enough skin?"

He gave me my favorite, lazy smile, the one I'd hardly seen the past few years. God, I loved that smile. "No. I'll never get enough."

He ruffled my hair and ran a thumb through the sticky slime on my cheek and the corner of my mouth. "I have a few calls to make. Why don't you go crawl in bed for an hour and have a nap?" He picked a strand of hair out of a cum smear. "Then we'll talk."

I was set to argue until a huge yawn cracked my jaw, making one eye water. I was wiped. All those lousy sleeps and two and a half months of non-stop fear had caught up to me. Not to mention… *Aiden*. I'd let my idea percolate for an hour while I napped. Besides, nobody liked a cranky Jason. Not even Jason.

The bed was already stained and filthy, so I dropped my pants and underwear and fell onto it without even washing the crud from my stomach. I wiped my face on the pillow, haphazardly covered my naked ass, and instantly fell asleep.

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Chicago!

I woke with a start. Jesus. I scrubbed at my face and wiped away a bit of drool on my chin. Must have been snoring my head off. The light coming in through the curtains looked surprisingly dim. Damn it, Aiden had let me sleep a hell of a lot more than an hour. Although groggy, I felt good. Rested. Guess I'd needed to crash for a while.

I shoved the pile of covers down to my waist, feeling prickly and overheated. Fuck, yeah—warm at last. My legs were just the right temperature, but I still had my shirt on. No wonder I was cooking. I yanked it off and sent it sailing. My chest wasn't the only thing hot and irritated. Once again, I had a hard-on. When had I turned into such a randy bastard? I scratched myself in a few secret places and tried to remember what I had been dreaming about.

I was a lucid dreamer. My brain often solved my hardest dilemmas in that strange land between awake and asleep. One time, I suddenly remembered the names of all the bones in the hand with no effort whatsoever. Chemistry questions that had stumped me all term came together in those few minutes before I fully awakened. Biology, Physics—I rocked them all when I first stirred. I'd taught myself to take full advantage of that listless, dreamy state.

So… Chicago. Fast car. Old time rock 'n roll. Route 66. I'd been fourteen on that trip, and tall, gawky, geeky, and harboring the sneaking suspicion I was more than a little queer. Gramps had been having an aging crisis of his own and harboring a serious case of nostalgia. Too caught up in my own problems, I didn't pay much attention to his odd behavior, or the funny absences from the hotel room at night, or that one time he split for an entire day. I thought he was out gettin' some.

Maybe he was, and maybe he wasn't.

Maybe he'd been checking on his hiding spot.

I grew up a lot on that trip. Got plastered for the first time on that trip—really, Gramps was a bad influence. I even drove the car a few times. By the time we got home, I accepted the fact I was totally gay, that Morgan had questionable ethics, that it was fucking hot in the desert, and that I loved the open road.

Excited and awake, I leapt out of bed, immediately tripped over, first, the sheet, and second, my discarded jeans, then fell, almost landing on my face. Ever graceful, is me. I scrambled forward and kicked at my jeans, freeing myself, only to be confronted by Aiden's bare feet. Fuck.

“On your knees, at my feet. Again.” He sounded smug. “I’m really beginning to like that.”

“Don’t get used to it,” I snapped, and got up, giving my dick a surreptitious wack before Aiden noticed.

“Are you hard? *Again?*”

“No,” I muttered.

“Liar.”

Aiden reached between my legs and found me half-hard and three-quarters wanting. After the earlier hand-job, my dick felt a little worse for wear, the skin chafed. Aiden fondled me for a few moments, until my erection poked him in the hip. I stifled the moan.

“I’ll fuck you tonight.”

“The hell you will!”

“If I want some lip out of you, Jase, I’ll wiggle my zipper.”

“That line is even older than you.”

“And yet, so profound.”

Hardly. “Profoundly lame.”

My dick bounced against my abdomen when he released it. I couldn’t believe I’d gotten that hard. He worked his hand between my legs. “If I want to have you later, I will. It’s not open for discussion.”

Well, shit.

“But you’ll wash that dried cum off your face first, and then we’ll have dinner, and you can tell me all about what you were muttering in your sleep. Sounded interesting.”

What? “I mutter?” Since when?

“More like speak whole sentences.”

Jesus—how come no one ever told me?

“’65 Mustang, eh? Good choice.”

“I said that?”

“You want Morgan’s blue one.”

“Goddamn.”

Aiden shoved me towards the bathroom. *I talk in my sleep?* Charming. Good thing I never slept with anyone. I did not hookup. Or date much. Mostly, I studied. Shit. What about school? I was going to have to write off the semester. Hell, I'd probably get kicked out of med school to make room for a student who would be there instead of slinking about Mexico being chased by packs of stray dogs.

My future looked bleak.

My *present* looked bleak. When I saw myself in the mirror, I cringed. The stray dogs had got me in my sleep—or at least my hair. Is that really what I looked like? And Aiden still wanted me? I'd never had hair this long, and the waves had started spiralling into ringlets. I hadn't really looked at myself this morning, just enough to shave without slicing open an artery. I also had a black eye, just in the corner by my nose, not a big shiner, but yeah. *Embrace your inner thug, Jase.* My lip looked good—blowing Aiden earlier hadn't done any harm. But how had I not noticed I was covered in bruises? Seriously. And finger-shaped, purple smudges.

Aiden's fingerprints. That was kind of… *fucking hot.* Yeah.

Jesus. What the hell was wrong with me? No way did I have an inner submissive dying to get out—and if I did, I was going to kill him. With fire.

I looked so disreputable, I had another shower. Shaved my chest. Stole a really expensive shirt from Aiden and scrambled downstairs to look for food, and that stack of photos and maps. Something spicy cooked on the stove while Aiden paced, phone in hand. Hard-ass soldier, my foot. More like Mr. Congeniality.

I spread out the map on the table and generally ignored him as he prattled on in one of their languages that sounded like two snakes hissing. When I was a kid, I used to jokingly call it Vichyssoise. I smiled. Still funny.

Chicago to L.A—over two thousand miles. Talk about finding a needle in a haystack.

Impossible odds.

And Route 66 doesn't exist anymore, at least not officially. It didn't when we went on our trip. I knew it was still a big thing for history buffs to drive it anyway, and Morgan had been one. His sweet Mustang had made the trip when it was brand-spanking new, and he'd said it was due for a repeat performance. Did Gramps have an ulterior motive, a sinister one, for taking me along with

him? Did he mean to confide in me and changed his mind? Or was I nuts, like Aiden told everyone, and just jumping at the first weird dream to pop into my head?

What were those damned clues?

After stirring the pot contents, and hissing an abrupt snaky adieu to his phone contact, Aiden joined me at the table.

"I assume you searched his house? All his stuff?" I asked.

"About five times."

"What about his car? The Mustang?"

"Just one damn fine automobile."

The car seemed a stretch, even for me. "And this was everything from the room in the video? Whoever broke in might have taken some of the clues."

Aiden gave me the evil eye. "Trust me, they didn't. This is everything."

Uh—yeah. Best not ponder that *trust me*. "Safe deposit box?"

"One. The deed to his house, and some jewelry and a watch that belonged to your parents. I have them here for you."

My mom's stuff? Dad's? Fuck. Didn't need to think about that right now. I shuffled through the stack, avoiding Aiden's gaze.

Their wedding rings? And that brooch with the pretty emeralds—is that where they went?

"I'm sorry, Jason. About Morgan."

Dad, Mom, Grandma, and now Grandpa. Gone. How could Gramps be… gone? And a cold-blooded killer of thirty people? And a liar? I would have labeled him a psychopath, but he had some feelings—I knew he loved me. *He did!*

My eyes suddenly felt hot. Stinging. That pot on the stove must be full of cayenne peppers and jalapenos mixed with hot sauce.

My throat tightened. My irrational anger barged back into my head, feet stomping. And I never did know when to shut up. "Sorry? What the fuck are you sorry for?" I snapped, still unable to look at Aiden. "That the last person I had left in the world who gave two shits about me turned out to be a mass murderer? That I'm related to him and now you're stuck with me? How can

you even stand to touch me when you know I come from his tainted bloodline? Or are you sorry you never figured out the great fucking mystery? That it was him all along, laughing at you? Or maybe you're sorry the bullet got to him before you did?"

I plucked an antique postcard from the pile. Why was I being a shit to Aiden? None of this was his fault. But I couldn't seem to stop myself, or the bitter words that tumbled out next, the second I thought them: "You don't need to fuck me to get me to tell you where the key is. You can quit pretending because I don't fucking know! I don't even know what the damned thing looks like."

My chest ached fiercely. It hadn't occurred to me until just now that Aiden might… that he would… use my stupid, childish infatuation as a weapon against me.

I couldn't breathe.

Of course he would.

Why else would he save me, if not for information? And what better revenge than to fuck the grandson of the man who fucked you over?

Must have been satisfying.

All the excitement I had for solving the great mystery evaporated. I wasn't hungry anymore. I wanted to curl into a tiny ball and die.

"Jason."

Yes, I was stupid, naïve and gullible for thinking, even for a second, that Aiden had saved me for *me*, but I didn't deserve this level of cruelty. My heart broke and all the little pieces cut me from the inside. Why did I ever think we were friends?

Because I wanted us to be?

But the Vish think we're lesser beings, and Aiden, despite his human skin, is Vish. You're making the exact same mistake Gramps made—thinking you're good enough for one of them.

Maybe I was, and maybe I wasn't. But I sure as hell wasn't Morgan. I would show them I was better than that, better than my grandfather. I wouldn't turn Aiden's cruelty back on him. Aiden couldn't take my compassion from me, couldn't beat it out of me, or fuck it out of me. I knew what it was to be lonely, to miss your family with an ache that never left. Like the Vish, I knew

how it felt to lose everyone I loved. If I could help the stranded Vish, and even Aiden, the manipulative bastard, go home, I would.

"Jason Kelly, *look at me!*"

Fuck you, Aiden. I couldn't face him. Seeing his proud, satisfied smirk would kill me. "I said I would help you, and I will." The old-fashioned cars in the photo on the postcard blurred. "So you can give it a rest. You don't need to shame me anymore."

Something wooden splintered—a chair—breaking the silence in the kitchen. I flinched and jumped backwards, avoiding the broken bits of the chair Aiden had kicked. He came flying around the table so fast, I almost tripped. I was operating on autopilot only. The crushing pain of Aiden's betrayal numbed the fear I should have felt. I backed up until the window sill jabbed into my lower back.

I did look up then, only to see that Aiden was furious, and not smirking.

Reflexively, I curled in on myself and raised my forearm to protect my face.

"Don't you dare cower from me!" he yelled. "Like I'm the bad guy. I can't believe you just said that. Accused me of that!" Aiden grabbed my wrist and yanked my hand down. I looked through the blur from my wet lashes and into the cold gleam of his troubled eyes. "Now that you're looking me in the eye, tell me you believe that. Tell me that you think that little of me."

I couldn't speak.

"C'mon, Jase. Say it! Say it to my face!"

My tongue wouldn't do it.

"Say it!" he yelled. His shoulders trembled with something other than anger.

You either believe it, or you don't… "It only m-makes s-sense," I stuttered.

Aiden glared at me for the longest moment in history. "Makes sense?" he sneered. "You don't make any fucking sense!"

Keeping the crushing grip on my wrist, Aiden dragged me off the window and back over to the table. He kicked out a chair and shoved me down on it. My legs couldn't hold me anyway, so I didn't resist. Aiden booted the remnants of the broken chair across the kitchen floor, grabbed an intact one, and placed it directly in front of me. He sat down so close to me, our knees touched.

Fuck. Another Vish inquisition.

Aiden would only get the same answers. "I don't know where it is," I blubbered. If he didn't let me go curl up alone in my misery somewhere soon, I was going to have a nervous breakdown. A person can only take so much.

"Shut up about the fucking key! Jesus, Jase. I know you don't know where it is. You think I don't know you? Better than you know yourself?"

"Then why…?" *Did you fuck me?*

"Because I wanted you."

That wasn't possible. I reminded myself this was a Vish mind-fuck, nothing more. "Aiden, please, you had no interest in me—"

"I was waiting for you to grow up."

"What?"

"For fuck sake, Jase. I'm more than eighty years older than you. I've known you all your life. And I'm a piece of shit, half-breed soldier not good for much, except killing. You honestly think it would have been right for me to show even a hint of interest?"

It's just a mind-fuck—don't believe him. Just a mind-fuck, Vish style—Aiden style. But my defective brain-mouth filter let me down again. "Yeah, well, I'm all grown up now, and you never said anything. Not once. Not even this past Christmas. I was here for a week—you had lots of time." And we spent most of those days alone together—Gramps had been… sick with the flu… of the cancer variety. He'd had plenty of chances. "You're full of shit."

My hands must have been icy because when Aiden grabbed then between his, they almost burned me. "I didn't because… I promised Morgan. Back when we were friends."

I slid sideways on my chair. Would have fallen to the floor, but for Aiden's hands on mine. "You what?" My ears were kind of ringing. What was that a symptom of, again? "You… promised him what, exactly?"

"That I'd give you time to grow up—become a man. Be sure of what you wanted. He wanted me to…" Aiden looked uncharacteristically puzzled. "He wanted me to back off. He thought I would… well, he wanted you to have the opportunity to date other men, get taken out for a few test drives, I believe is how he put it, before I…"

"Before you *what?*"

"Nailed your queer, lovesick ass to the wall."

That sounded exactly like something Gramps would say. "Asshole," I muttered, sniffling up a bunch of snot.

"He was right, Jase. How would you know if you even liked me for me, if you never had the chance to compare me to someone else?"

They were all assholes—Aiden included, scheming like that, behind my back. Talking about me—was I that oblivious? "I knew what I wanted."

"Did you?"

He didn't mean it sarcastically. Perhaps he was curious. Yeah, it was true I thought Aiden was gorgeous, and he turned my crank like nobody else I'd ever met, but my infatuation went deeper than his pretty skin. "You are the only person on this earth who knows what it's like to have a foot in both worlds."

"Oh, Jase," Aiden looked horrified. "I'm so sorry."

"I could always talk to you, you know—I never had to hide anything, never had to keep the big secret when I was around you. I could be me. Geeky, dorky, lonely me. But it was honest. Not for show."

"You sound just like your mom. She hated the big lie just as much."

I didn't need to hear that—right now, my wounds were still too raw. "So how am I supposed to move on, huh?"

One of the main reasons I got into pre-med, and then applied to medical school was because the courses were hard as hell. I wouldn't have time to think. I picked the hardest subject I could think of—medicine—that I thought I could enjoy and be good at. I knew I'd have only empty years ahead of me. I needed something to make up for what I could never have, which was Aiden. Or any man of my own.

There are other Vish retainer families, but what were the odds of one of them having a gay son around my age who wouldn't think I was a helpless dork? And no Vish would ever touch me. True, there are lots of human men out there, and nobody had beaten me with an ugly stick, but after what my mom went through? No way would I bring another outsider in.

How could I explain it to Aiden so he'd understand?

"How can I have a proper relationship knowing what I know? How can I live with someone knowing this whole other world exists—these other *worlds* exist—and can never talk about it? Never share it? Can never talk about the people from that other world? I could never mention you." I doubt Aiden would get it. "How can I live a life of lies?"

Besides, if I was with any man but Aiden, it would all be lies anyway.

Aiden sighed deeply. His shoulders shook. "No wonder Morgan hated us."

I sniffled. "No hate is greater than the hate you feel for someone you once loved." Or so I suspected. I'd never hated anyone. Not really.

"Come here, Jase."

What was he talking about? I was *here*. Knee to knee. I glanced at Aiden, but sideways. I couldn't look him full in the eye yet. He patted his thigh and then yanked my hand forward.

"F-fuck off!"

I struggled weakly as Aiden tugged me off my chair and forward to straddle his lap. Maybe to him I was a baby, but I was twenty-four fucking years old and therefore old enough to know better than to be a willing participant in my own mind-fuck. I wouldn't hand a torturer his weapon of choice and I sure as hell wasn't handing Aiden fucking O'Rourke the knife to finish hacking my heart to bits.

Regardless of my wants, Aiden persisted—he never takes no for an answer—and in seconds I was mashed against his chest, his arms around my lower back. Damn him to hell.

Since I was trapped there anyway, I hunched my back and twisted my neck awkwardly so my head could rest on his shoulder and the back of the chair. "Please don't mind-fuck me," I pleaded.

Aiden smoothed his hand up and down my back. Petted me, for fuck's sake. "I like your mind just the way it is. Even if it's not working worth shit, right now. So, body-fucks only. Zero mind-fucks will be given."

I snuffled into Aiden's neck for a minute and tried to catch my breath. My legs were too long for this. I didn't want Aiden to keep me on his lap, hands absently stroking my back like he felt he had to comfort me. So why couldn't I move?

"It's okay to grieve him, Jase," Aiden said as some of the tension left my body.

"I loved him," I admitted, then, unexpectedly, burst into tears. Big, wet, snotty, humiliating tears. All over Aiden's shirt, neck, hair, and my own hand where I was gripping the chair back. Aiden let me soak him. And he never stopped stroking me with his hands. I fucking hated him, the bastard.

But I didn't move. I couldn't remember the last time anyone held me.

I don't know how long I blubbered on him. I felt horrible. Drained, embarrassed, and lost. Sick to my stomach. My eyes hurt. "I'm sorry," I choked out. "For that." I wasn't quite ready to trust him again, either.

"I'm not," he replied. "You needed to let go." His lips brushed over my temple.

That almost made me start up again with the ridiculous waterworks. Then he gently kissed my mouth. My chest heaved with one of those shuddery sighs.

"Jason?" he said softly.

"What?"

"Just so you know, you're the only person I have who knows what it's like to have a foot in both worlds, too."

Fuck. I was such an asshole. Worse, I didn't know what to say or how to fix the rift I made between us. I slid off his lap and back onto my own chair.

I needed some time to sort things out—five minutes. Instead of saying something that would make my mess even bigger, I said the only other thought in my head. "You're gonna burn your pot of hot peppers."

****

After Aiden turned off the stove, he steered me back into his study, laid us down on the couch, and made a sandwich filling of me again. No sexual acts this time though, just a long, soothing cuddle—I don't know why he thought I needed one. He didn't talk and didn't make me talk.

Eventually I warmed up—Aiden kicked out heat like a furnace. Everything seemed so damned confusing. I wasn't ready to talk about us, about our new relationship dynamic. Nor did I have the words for the apology I owed for that vile accusation. My head was messed up. Whenever I felt like this, I usually kept busy while I sorted myself out. Probably what I needed right now.

"I have an idea. About the key."

"Jase…"

"I'm ready." Shit. I probably couldn't be vaguer if I tried.

"What you're ready for is a week of lying around the house and sleeping until noon, and eating more than once a day."

"I can still do all those things, it just wouldn't be here. We'd be—"

“No.”

“Aiden…” I sighed. I’d eaten more than once a day. Sometimes.

Freeing me from the uncomfortably hot crack in the couch, Aiden flipped me onto his chest. “Tell me what’s been rolling around in that head of yours. But don’t think for a minute we’ll be doing anything about it soon.”

“Don’t you want to find the key?”

Aiden snorted a laugh. “Nice try.”

Damn. I slumped back down across his chest. “We need to go on a road trip.”

“I figured. Where we going?”

“Chicago to L.A.”

For a second Aiden tensed, and then relaxed. “Okay.”

Was he worried about being stuck in a car with me for that long? “Morgan and I went on this road trip once—when I was fourteen. Gramps wanted to hop in the Mustang and take the old Route 66 all the way to L.A. So that’s what we did. We packed up our stuff and went.”

“I remember you going.”

“I… we had a good time, Morgan and me. Except he kind of… acted weird on that trip. Wasn’t really himself, you know? Like he had something big on his mind.”

Aiden made a contemptuous sound in his throat.

I couldn’t blame him for that. “Anyway, I think maybe… the real reason we went was so he could check on it. Make sure nothing had happened to it. And it would seem perfectly natural for him to take me on a trip—it was summer holidays. If anyone was watching him, they’d think nothing of him taking off for a few weeks because I was with him.”

Aiden raised one of his perfect, strawberry-blond brows. “True.”

“It felt like a holiday to me. I mean, we didn’t rush it. We stopped when we felt like stopping, we ate when we wanted, and if we saw a cool road, we went down it. We stayed a couple nights in a few places, did all the touristy things. It was nice to get away, just the two of us.”

“So what happened?”

"Huh?"

"Well something must have gone down at some point. Something interesting enough that it stuck in your head so that ten years later, when you had five minutes to think it over, you instantly remember that trip and connect it to this pile of stuff?"

Fucking Aiden. Always had to point out the obvious. "He was just… I dunno—weird. Secretive. Preoccupied. Three times, he left our hotel room at night and didn't come back until almost dawn." Which was not like Gramps, at all. "At the time, I thought maybe he was out boning some waitress or other, and I didn't think much of it."

"He did like the ladies," Aiden agreed.

"But he wouldn't have left me alone like that for some easy waitress. He left the room for hours, and more than once." Gramps was a little overprotective. Now I knew why. "And then one night he checks us in at this really crappy motel and tells me he has some business to attend to in the morning, and I'd have to amuse myself for the day."

Since I was splayed all over him, I felt Aiden's muscles tense. "That does sound… odd."

That had been the most boring day from hell. I finished the book series I'd been reading and then had a good wank session thinking about what it might be like sucking cock—Aiden's cock in particular. Yeah, I still remembered that. And later, I got sunburned hanging too long in the motel's disgusting, over-chlorinated excuse for a pool. The water had left my skin feeling slimy afterward. I remembered that, too. "He was gone all day. Got back around seven, I think. He seemed… depressed. Down." Gramps wasn't the kind to show his emotions. *Probably because he was a psychopath*, my brain chimed in. "Shut up," I muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just talking to the little devil on my shoulder."

My arms and legs went flying—and I suddenly found myself underneath Aiden instead of on top of him. "And what did the devil just whisper in your ear, Jason?"

I swatted some of his long hair out of my face. "Nothing important. Private thought."

"Until you're yourself again, nothing is private. You will tell me everything."

I gave him a shove. "You expect me to tell you every thought I have?" Aiden wouldn't be able to take five minutes of listening to what went on in my head. And what did he mean, be myself again?

"No. Just the ones where you have to tell yourself, out loud, to shut up."

No more frigging muttering, Jase. I had to quit a habit I didn't know I had, and fast. "Fine," I huffed. "I wondered if Morgan was one of those high-functioning psychopaths."

"Obviously. All those years—and he never batted an eyelash. Talked to me and everyone else, smooth as you please. He was… my friend. At least I was his friend. I had no clue he hated me."

Did Aiden feel some of the betrayal I felt? I pushed the thought aside. I really didn't want to start bawling again—my eyes ached enough for one day. "After dinner, we stopped at a liquor store and stocked up."

"*Morgan?*"

"I told you he was acting weird." Morgan didn't drink. *Yeah, very well couldn't, could he? Couldn't risk blabbing about what he'd done in a drunken rant…* "Then we went back to the room, cranked up the air-conditioner and started drinking."

"He did this in front of you?"

"Hell, no. I joined him. He wanted me to. You wouldn't believe how incredibly fucking drunk I got—absolutely wasted."

"Jesus Christ."

"After I had a few, I told him flat-out I liked guys. I'm pretty sure he knew by then… but, yeah." I probably grossed the poor man out—I'd just been wanking myself to heaven that morning thinking about cock, and Lord knows what I said. "I think I had a touch of heatstroke." I'd gagged on the first sip. "Never drink wine coolers when you've had too much sun. I spent half the night and most of the next day puking. We had to stop every five miles so I could open the door, lean out, and puke some more."

"Idiot."

Well, I was just fourteen. "I spent the night listening to Gramps bitch about everything. The Vish. The shitty economy. Women. When I came back from

puking in the gross bathroom, he'd start all over again. Mostly about the Vish." I snorted at one memory that stood out. "Gramps finally told me maybe it was a good thing I was a fag—that way I wouldn't have to deal with getting screwed over by lying, faithless women."

Neither of us said anything for a while. In hindsight, the signs that Morgan had big problems were becoming more and more obvious.

Aiden broke the uneasy silence first. "You remember where you spent that night of drunken debauchery?"

"Not a clue. I wasn't paying much attention. One of the hotter states. New Mexico or Arizona, probably."

"Not much to go on."

"I know and I'm sorry. But maybe if we go, if we stop at the same places, something will come to me. I might remember things if I have some visual clues to tweak my memory." I felt like a failure and we hadn't even left yet. "Best I can do, Aiden."

He grunted. "I'll take your worst over most other people's bests."

Yeah? "I'll do some research."

"No, you'll rest."

"I will—"

"Do as you're told."

I wrestled with the urge to stick out my tongue.

"Can you eat now?"

"No."

"Try, anyway."

My stomach was still tied in one big knot. "You never used to be so bossy before."

"You were never mine before."

"Oh." What could I say? It was true. I'd even agreed.

Instead of dragging me to the kitchen for dinner, Aiden paused to run his finger along my cheek, and then my jaw. I closed my sore, puffy eyes. "This is never going to get old," he said.

With my eyes closed, I relaxed, almost smiling at the rumble of his voice in his chest, pressed against mine. Maybe he felt a little something for me? "What isn't?"

"Being able to touch you."

He kissed me then, long and slow and sweet. I couldn't help it—I'd wanted him forever—and I kissed him back. Then he dragged me to the kitchen to feed me the dinner I didn't want.

The hot pepper thing threatening to dissolve his pot turned out to be tasty, and not kill-you-quick spicy. Just hot and sour soup, with tofu, chunks of meat, and curious bits of… mushrooms? I chewed them with suspicion. Passably edible. The vinegar made the hot sauce he'd added smell stronger than it really was. As we'd cuddled on the couch, the fumes had had time to mellow.

Now that I had a clearer head, I picked through the pile of what might be the infamous clues. The postcards fascinated me. Some were old enough they should be in a museum. I started laying them out on the map, above their respective states.

"Finish your dinner. That can wait," Aiden said.

"I will. I just like to read while I eat." Especially cereal boxes.

Aiden mumbled something that sounded suspiciously uncomplimentary. The postcards had been tied together with a cheap silver chain with an even cheaper, clunky, but very pretty, turquoise pendant. I picked at the knots with the tine of my unused fork. Where did this come from? New Mexico or Arizona?

"That doesn't look like eating to me," Aiden commented.

"Shut up, I'm thinking."

What Indian tribe was famous for their turquoise? The Anasazi? The Pueblo? Or was the important thing the silver that held it all together? I tapped my foot and worked the tine until I freed the big center tangle.

"You're not thinking, you're fidgeting."

So? "That's how I think." To shut Aiden up, I dipped a huge chunk of bread in my soup and shoved it in my mouth. I didn't want to eat. I was mortified. Firstly, by what I said to Aiden, whose motives I still wasn't sure about, and secondly, for sobbing uncontrollably all over him like an idiot. A post-cry ache throbbed behind my eyes. I finished the bread and ate the tofu. Tasted okay, but the texture…

The last knot in the chain untangled with a jiggle of the fork. I spread it out on the table. Now that I could see it in its entirety, I wondered if it was as cheap as I thought. It looked… weathered. Worn. *Hand-tooled.* "Jesus," I muttered. I'd been assaulting an antique with a fork.

Aiden's chair scraped slightly as he leaned forward. "Find something?"

Yeah, he was keen, the bastard, and faking his disinterest all through dinner. If I had a brain, and an evil streak, I'd spin a tale for him. "I think this is really old."

"Oh? As in, what? Late twenties when they built the highway? The fifties? You could buy that touristy stuff along the entire route for decades."

I flipped it over. No secret code and no *X marks the spot*. Just small, blackened grooves made a very long time ago. I'd have to google the subject later, when I could get my hands on Aiden's laptop. "No. I mean really old, as in this might be an archeological relic, rather than just an antique. Except the chain—that's obviously newer."

Aiden gave up his could-care-less pretense and joined me on my side of the table. He examined it and ran the lace of connected stones through his fingers. "Maybe Morgan found it."

Gramps, you sly dog. "Maybe he did. When he was looking for something else."

Aiden shook his head and smiled. "You still like mystery novels, don't you?"

Who didn't? "That's beside the point."

"You think it's connected to the postcards? That it's a clue?"

"Possibly." I moved the dishes out of the way—getting a glare from Aiden for not finishing my soup—and smoothed out a wrinkle on the map. Pondering the necklace's significance, I finished sorting the cards into their respective rows.

Illinois only had one card, a tattered black and white one with an ancient typeface identifying the photo as being from the *Chicago World Fair*. That one kind of stumped me—it wasn't directly related to Route 66.

Missouri had only one card as well, of the ubiquitous Gateway Arch. The blatant coincidence of the name, *Gateway*, and the massive shape meant to pass through, had possibilities. Nah. Too easy. "Red herring?" I mumbled. "Or fact?"

Oklahoma had two, one of those motels with the cute old-fashioned signs with arrows showing you the way in, where I'd secretly like to stay, and a place called Quapaw, which held the oldest pow-wow in the States, every Fourth of July. Aiden and I would be too early for the pow-wow this year, and Gramps and I hadn't been traveling on the fourth that year, we'd gone after.

Kansas had a photo of one of those state Historic Route road signs with the 66 designation written on it, and an arrow pointing the way. Go left? Right? Yeah, that card was helpful. The postcard said *Greetings from Kansas* and showed a tractor on an expanse of wheat field. Or something yellow, anyway.

When Aiden and I reached Amarillo, Texas, we'd have to see if either of the two motels or the cool fifties diner still existed. And what the hell was with the last card—a bunch of cars half buried in the ground? Cadillacs? Were we going to have to check each and every car?

New Mexico and Arizona had the most, and varied, cards and photos. Motels, restaurants, stops of interest, endless stretches of desert landscapes, silver mines, ghost towns, and a bunch of gas-guzzling cars from the fifties chugging along the open road.

California was pretty much the same. Motels, cars, bridges and dusty towns that time forgot. And here I thought every square inch of California was full of swimming pools and Kardashians. There was a yellowed, quaint, thing called a *Travel Mat* beseeching me to *take it with me!* So I wouldn't miss the *Recommended Places to Stop!*

Jesus. I flopped back down on my chair and didn't bother to smother my dejected sigh. "California alone would take a lifetime to search." I glanced over at Aiden who had the nerve to adjust my postcard rows. "A Vish lifetime," I added. Then, "You know anything I don't?"

"Nope. If Morgan hadn't made that video, we never would have known. The secret would have died with him." Aiden put his arm around my shoulder. No need, I had no tears left. "I honestly didn't think you'd make anything of all this stuff." He snorted softly. "You'd think I'd know better by now than to underestimate that brain of yours."

I slid out from under his arm. "What does that mean?" Over the years, my few friends had teased me for having some kind of attention deficit disorder. I don't—I just hate not having something to think about—and I've grown sensitive about the subject. "There's nothing wrong with my brain."

His arm went back around my shoulder and dragged me back. "I know. You're just smart as hell, that's all."

No I wasn't. But better that than Aiden thinking I was dumb. "I could be wrong. About everything."

"But you could be right. And we don't have anything else to go on." He rubbed the back of my neck under my hair, and I shivered. "Go up to bed. I'll grab the laptop, and we can plan how we're going to do this, and see if anything online seems familiar to you. You'll find fresh sheets and a new duvet cover in the hall closet."

I gave him a cross look.

"Your blood."

I had no problem with doing maid duty—later—right now I just wanted to mope at the table nursing all my sore body parts and sorting postcards until I couldn't think anymore. "I'm not tired."

Aiden looked at me, his expression one of slight surprise. "That was one of those direct orders you promised to obey."

He had to be kidding. Yeah, I promised, but… I had to obey all the time? What the fuck? I expected any applicable orders to only include the big stuff, stuff concerning the Vish, not every aspect of my life. Guess Aiden was still angry about having to go to Chichi and get me. And for running away in the first place.

"Don't think. Do."

Several good comebacks popped into my head, but I took one look at Aiden and his narrowed eyes and shutting up suddenly seemed the wisest option. He meant it. And obeying Aiden, as much as it chafed, was a hell of a lot better than being dead.

Didn't mean I had to like it. As I stewed and dealt with the impossible task of getting the comforter into the new duvet cover by myself, all the implications behind the word *obey* rolled about in my head.

My dick approved of some of those implications and swelled with unwanted interest.

That had to be the biggest mind-fuck of all—the one you perpetrated on yourself.

****

Sexual fantasies invaded my dreams. One of the advantages of a lucid dream is you can sort of direct them, and I sure as hell knew which way I wanted my current dream to go. Aching and hard, I shoved my dick into the warm hand surrounding it in a firm grip. It felt so real, not to mention good, that I must be almost awake—I took the opportunity to thrust into the squeezing fist again before I woke fully and the dream dissolved. My dick slid easily, as if lubed.

Lubed?

What the…? I startled, suddenly fully awake. Not dreaming… There was a calloused hand on my dick, expertly doing very naughty things to it. "Aiden… what are you doing?" I groaned. Yeah, okay I knew… I just wasn't used to waking up to an amazing hand-job. But I *could* get used to it. Seeking a faster pace, I planted my foot flat on the mattress and jerked my hips up.

"We have something important to do today. I want your mind on the job, not on how horny you are."

I wasn't horny—well, right now I was, but… oh, my god. To hell with arguing—I couldn't think straight. I reopened my eyes to find Aiden above me, not in bed beside me. He had one knee propped on the bed while he jacked me. His lazy, arrogant smile seemed to be all for me. Sunlight sparked the red highlights in his hair. *Why'd he have to be so beautiful?*

In response to the bucking of my hips, Aiden tightened his grip. Pumped at the perfect speed. His thumb did something amazing just under the head of my cock, and I gasped. Aiden occupied his other hand with my balls, tugging them upward, and rolling them between his fingers. They slid easily in his lube-slicked fingers. Holding the moans in only made them fiercer, and I clawed at my pillow and tried to suppress them. My orgasm built fast. As I writhed around on the bed and dug my heel into the mattress, the fingers on my balls moved lower, slipping down my perineum toward my anus.

"I want you to come with my finger in your ass."

My hips jerked wildly. "Jesus, Aiden," I gasped. "Don't say shit like that."

All the soreness from Aiden's previous attentions had disappeared, but I was still tight. My ass accepted his thick digit with reluctance. When it did, my balls tightened immediately. The tingle of my approaching climax spread rapidly until I felt the warning prickle all over my body.

"Give it to me," Aiden urged, reaching deep.

"Aiden!" I cried, and with a single thrust of that finger inside me, I came.

Hot cum splattered on my belly and up my chest. Aiden stopped jacking me before he made me over-sensitized—thank god, because I was buzzing. After he eased his finger out of me, I slumped back into the mattress, legs sprawled. I'd lost my shyness damned fast, hadn't I?

"Don't get cum all over the sheets."

I had just enough energy to fold my fingers into a rude gesture.

He chuckled, and when I forced my eyes open, he smiled at me.

"You're dressed?" I said, stating the obvious. "You don't want me to…?" I nodded at his crotch and the thick bulge there.

"Later. I just wanted to watch you come with the sunlight shining on your face."

There could be worse reasons to give someone an orgasm. "Um… thanks?"

"You're welcome. Now grab a shower and come down for breakfast." He smiled hugely. "I'm taking you to see the gate."

Cum-smeared or not, I bolted upright. *Holy shit*. "The gate? I get to see the gate? You mean it?"

"Yes, I mean it. I promised you no mind-fucks." Still smiling, he walked into the bathroom to wash. "Hurry up and get in the shower, I really didn't want to wake you, but I'm starving."

"You could've eaten without me." I rolled off the bed as carefully as I could and followed after him.

"That's not a habit we're going to get into."

"What? Eating?"

"Eating alone."

Aiden dried his hands, and passing me, paused to deliver a surprisingly brutal kiss, at once both quick and dirty. My lips stung when he was done. Leaving me to stare after him, mouth open, he departed for the kitchen.

I'm going to see the gate! I stood naked on the chilly floor, utterly stunned. The gate! Morgan's attack had been the Vish's wake-up call, their 9-11, and since then, they guarded it religiously and relentlessly. How the hell had Aiden managed it? I felt almost giddy as I showered and shaved, intending to look my

best and show the Vish what I thought of their death penalty. My bruise collection looked even worse than it had yesterday—hopefully my shirt would cover most of it.

My pile of clothing was missing from the chair. I didn't think Aiden expected me to walk around naked. Or did he? I kept remembering the joy he took in taunting me with that scary word, *obey*. Where would he have put them? With no closet in the bedroom, two very large, antique armoires and a lovely maple dresser held all of Aiden's clothes and personal items.

I checked the first one—all Aiden's stuff—and stopped to admire the few ceremonial Vish tunics hanging there. They hung to the knee and were usually worn with leggings. Or a long skirt. They looked good on any Vish, and on Aiden? Sexy as hell. No wonder I crushed on him as a teen. He also had tailored suits. A hot man, well-dressed for a night out, did it for me. I like me some good suit porn, that's all I can say. But no clothes for me.

I peeked in the second armoire, catching a faint whiff of cedar. My few things were neatly put away on one side, the rest of the space empty. A single white dress shirt hung on the lone hanger, and I plucked it off and put it on. Perfect fit. The dress slacks hanging below were plainly tailored, and a deep grey. I dressed quickly—my stomach was now wide awake and growling. Why did Aiden empty out the entire armoire?

For you, idiot.

Why did I need the whole space, though? It wasn't like I'd be staying—

Oh, no.

No, no, *no.*

The bastard! I lived in California. Not here. I'd escaped from here.

You promised…

For once, my overactive mind went blank. My running off had been unusual for me to say the least. Maybe I had been in shock? If I didn't think I could keep a promise, I didn't make one. I'd agreed, and promised and… damn it, I would keep it. School could wait a few months. This was important, and for once, I was important, and Aiden was important to me.

"Jase?"

I startled at Aiden's words. I hadn't heard him on the stairs, and that one creaky riser hadn't given him away. "Yeah?"

"You okay?"

So what if my life wasn't exactly perfect at the moment? I still had one. From now on, anything was possible. "Yes."

Not convinced, Aiden stared at me for a moment, his face unreadable. Probably just checking my sanity meter. Then his blank mask shattered, and he broke out a in a really stupid, toothy grin—the mind-reading fuck. He also held out his hand—as if—but I simply sneered and gave him a wide berth as I angled toward the door. He grabbed for my ass. I did what any sane man would do. I ran.

My longer legs saved the day, and I reached the kitchen first, with enough seconds to spare that I was able to snatch up the spatula and threaten him with it. "Back off, O'Rourke, or I'll flip you!"

"You think so?" he teased. Then proceeded to disarm me in about three seconds. But that was only because I didn't want to get grease on my only nice shirt.

He shoveled a heap of some revolting substance onto a plate and handed it to me. "What the hell is this?" Were those potatoes?

"Hash."

I sniffed it. Might be edible. "Hash? Well good, because I'd need to be stoned to eat this."

"I said hash, not hashish. Now shut up and get us forks."

Nobody ever got my sense of humor. Still eyeing the mixture with suspicion, I grabbed two forks and set my plate down by my map. By the time I found two glasses, and got the orange juice from the fridge, Aiden was at the table with a sizzling pan, sliding a raw egg onto the mush. Hash. Whatever. "I don't know why you went through all the trouble to piss off every single Vish on the planet and save me from their wrath, if you're just going to poison me."

"It's an egg, and that's homemade corned beef hash, you ungrateful, picky shit."

I shoved the salmonella-delivery-device to one side and dug my fork into the hash. Eggs were only edible if scrambled and cooked to a nice rubbery texture. Yes, I had heard of hash, and actually, it smelled pretty damned good. I ate a forkful. Huh. Delicious. The huge mound disappeared in minutes, as I organized and reorganized the postcards and photos. Aiden kept touching them. Reading them. The nerve.

Between us, we finished every bite—I traded Aiden my runny chicken embryo for more hash—and were out the door and on the road by… whatever time it was. I hadn't seen my phone since Chichi, not that it had been working by then. Begging the favor of a nun, I'd called Aiden from the church. "You stole my phone."

"Stole is such an ugly word, Jase." Aiden gave me a cheeky smile. "I prefer confiscated."

"I need it back."

Aiden drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. For a minute, I wondered if he wouldn't give it back. I also wondered if I needed to kill him.

"It's in that bag on the back seat. Small zipper at the front."

"Did you charge it?"

"Yes." More finger drumming. "Don't make me regret it."

Asshole. "I have a life, Aiden. There are people who might be worried about me." Thankfully, he didn't say anything to that, like my life was now his, otherwise I might have been tempted to yank the wheel until we drove into a ditch. I reached back, plucked the bag by the strap and dug out my baby. My first call was to my academic advisor. I'd been worrying myself crazy over my standing with the school. For no reason, it seemed. We chatted, discussed the future, and when I hung up, I fully intended to murder Aiden at the first opportunity.

"You told them I was in rehab? *Rehab?* You fucker!"

"For grief counselling, Jase, not a raging drug habit."

Same difference. But she'd been pleased by the proactive stance I'd taken. Idiot. If she only knew where I'd really been. My permanent record was salvaged, but I would have to reapply to get back in. I refused to ponder just where I would be reapplying. That would have to wait.

I also checked in with Dusty, who'd been worried sick and wondering who the hell this Aiden person was. I texted all my study buddies and told them I would be back at some point and wished them well.

Unwinding my life disheartened me, as if I had a terminal illness and was busy making final preparations. It really hit home when I called my upstairs neighbors, Bruce and Linda, to let them know I hadn't died. They'd been saving my mail for me. After the last call, I slumped down in my seat and

stared morosely out the window and pointedly ignored Aiden's comforting hand on my thigh.

For once, I didn't blame Aiden. I blamed Gramps.

How could you do this to me?

How could you? Why did you…?

I must have drifted off, because next thing I knew, we were in Queens, and my neck was killing me from being bent at a bad angle. I wished I could go back to sleep because the traffic instantly drove me nuts, and I wasn't even the one driving. Slouched in my seat, I concentrated on the cityscape. "Must look a lot different nowadays, huh?" I finally ventured. Ignoring Aiden wouldn't get me anywhere. Besides, I liked his company.

Aiden glanced over at me. "I don't know about that," he said. He cocked his head. "I guess because I've watched it evolve, the changes don't seem all that startling. I like seeing the same old buildings when I come here, and I hate when they tear down something with character to build something modern and uninteresting—it's like losing an old friend. I will say the place is more colorful now. Even though there's a hell of a lot more people getting in my way, it's always been a busy place. That hasn't changed at all. The vibrancy."

Interesting. "Any changes you like?"

"Cars. Can't tell you how glad I am you finally invented them." Aiden paused for a moment to pass a few trucks. "Horses are such contrary beasts. They never seem to like me."

"You have cars back home?" Funny, I'd never thought to ask before.

"Not like this, but yeah. In the cities we have public transit—only it's automated and picks you up where you tell it, and it drops you off where you want to go. Nobody has a vehicle in a city."

"No hover cars?" Sometimes I had the mind of a twelve year-old. Sue me.

"They're all hover cars—well, hover shuttles."

"Get out."

"I'm serious. And by hover, I don't mean fly. They follow an underground grid and the magnetic propulsion system pushes them off the ground a few feet. It's also used for forward thrust."

I was suddenly ready to ditch med school and take engineering. "So, nothing gas-powered?"

“Not a one. And when you guys burn off all your fossil fuels and have no choice but to get creative, you’ll invent it, too.”

For the next half hour, I tried prying more information from Aiden, without much success. The Vish would not reveal their technology to humans—and humans were not allowed on T’El for the same reason. On that front, they were united, curse them. “How come you told me about the shuttles, then?” I needled.

Aiden flicked my ear. “Because if you suddenly opened a company for the express purpose of making mag-lev cars, nobody’d look twice. In fact, you’d probably have investors lining up at your door. You already have the technology. Rudimentary, compared to ours, but you have the basic knowledge. I’m not telling you anything that isn’t already known.”

“Damn you.”

His lip twitched with mirth. “We’re here.”

“What?” I gaped out the window at the… plain, old, stone apartment building. A big, posh, and architecturally interesting building… but, yeah. It fit right in. “The gate’s in there?” I tried not to sound unimpressed. Guess you really could find anything in Manhattan. The only thing odd about the building was the garage door which promptly opened for us. Good thing—there was absolutely no parking on the street.

Hard to believe a gate to another world was right in there. How was such a thing possible? I’d been expecting… I don’t know what the hell I’d been expecting, but it wasn’t this.

If it had been me driving, I would have hit three pedestrians, a dog, the tree, and the curb—both sides—backing in. Not Aiden, he piloted the Audi like a pro. Someone had parked a Mercedes in the spot behind ours, but that was it for cars in the tiny garage. Aiden retrieved his small bag from the back, and I took a few seconds to stretch my muscles. He set the bag down beside me and dug something out of the main pocket.

“Jase,” he said, standing back up.

“Yeah?” I replied, instantly suspicious at his stern tone.

“Turn around and put your hands behind your back.”

My suspicion turned to disbelief. “Oh, come on, Aiden!”

“This is another one of those orders to be obeyed. Immediately.”

I looked into his cat-green eyes. My stomach tightened into a knot. Ruthless Aiden scared me. Shuffling my feet, I turned. Nice of him to warn me.

"Hands."

Goddamn it. The handcuffs came out of a small cloth bag—and weren't what I expected. They were leather, not metal, and suspiciously like bondage cuffs. A long clasp dangled from one, and would soon join them together, locked with a tiny padlock. I craned my neck and tried to get a better look at this newest indignity.

Over my shoulder, Aiden whispered in my ear. "We're going to have so much fun with these later."

Aiden had to wait a few seconds before fastening the first one around my wrist—I shuddered so violently, my back rippled and my limbs twitched. Including the one between my legs. My dick hardened and my breath hitched. I trembled as he reached for my wrist.

No. I could not do this.

Not only was I afraid of being cuffed, there was a distinct possibility I might actually come in my pants—no wonder he gave me that hand-job this morning. I snuck my hand back around to my chest, out of Aiden's reach.

"Obey me," he growled in my ear.

My knees went weak. Shaking, and praying to god my dick wouldn't leak madly and soak through the dark pants, I twisted my arm back behind me. "Please," I begged. "Not this. What am I going to do? Huh?" Alas, no mercy for me today. The second cuff went on, the buckle cinched up tight, and then he linked and locked my wrists together. Aiden spun me back around and leaned in close, as if to disguise the fact he was speaking to me.

"I promise I'll fuck you later, with these on. As soon as we get home."

"No," I said, voice trembling. "I don't want… *fuck*." I did.

"Until then… behave, and keep your mouth shut. As hard as that is for you." Shielding me from what was obviously a camera at the one and only door, Aiden reached between my legs and skimmed a hand down to the base of my cock. He squeezed my shaft painfully, until my erection deflated. I hissed in a pained breath. "You won't be welcome here, but it's important you see what the gate material looks like so you'll recognize it if you see it. We won't hang long—it's safer if we get out of here as soon as possible. Keep your head up

and back straight, Jase. You didn't do anything wrong. Just think of them as mean dogs. Don't show them any fear."

"I'm not afraid of them!" I snarled under my breath. Now, Aiden was another matter altogether. I was afraid he might resort to one of those ruthless acts in my defense.

"Good."

"Don't do anything stupid!" I said into his ear.

"Don't you! You're far more acquainted with doing stupid things than I am."

With a hand around my waist, Aiden led me to the door and keyed in a code on the pad. The door slid open, but it only led into a small antechamber with two more doors. The Vish have gotten paranoid. Can't say I blame them. The second set of doors had teeth where they closed in the middle. Yes. Very paranoid.

Through the second door, there were guards. Of the Vish variety. It'd been over two months since I'd laid eyes on one of them, and for the first time in my life, their unusual appearance startled me. They looked… *alien*. And, yeah, their expressions told me I definitely wasn't welcome.

Aiden had a hissing Vichyssoise argument with them—one full of fury on their part and patient intractability on Aiden's part. Aiden, of course, won. Anything remotely connected to the gate fell under military jurisdiction, and by pure happenstance, on account of that big holiday after the key theft, Aiden became the highest ranking Vish military officer on Earth. I returned the Vish guards' joint glares. *And that trumps any opinion you might have, assholes*.

A new set of four guards arrived to follow us—I think they trusted Aiden less than me. But nobody argued with him, and after a confounding journey of halls, rooms, and more locked doors we arrived in a dim room with a concave wall. Something on the other side must be round. The air seemed to come alive, as if charged, like the moments before a violent summer thunderstorm. I trembled, and this time it wasn't with fear or arousal.

Excitement and curiosity hummed in my very bones. The marble floor suddenly moved, and I jerked, feeling off-balance with my hands tied behind my back. Aiden grabbed my waist and held me in place. The floor wasn't moving, it was that rounded wall. A crack appeared at the top and the wall continued to rotate while lowering, and eventually disappeared into the floor.

I stared. What the… hell!

Four columns of dull black, twisted… *something*—metal?—rose from the floor and created a partial archway over a floor made of similar material. The space underneath the arch had to measure several hundred square feet. I shuffled closer, baffled by… an apparent optical illusion.

My brain knew the floor was solid, but my eyes kept insisting it was liquid, and ever so subtly rippling. The four columns shimmered as if a thin layer of water flowed down them, but if I looked from the corner of my eye, the effect disappeared. I'd never seen anything like it.

"Jesus," I muttered. In unison, the four Vish guards scowled at me.

I balked when Aiden applied pressure on my lower back, urging me forward.

"It's not active and perfectly safe," Aiden said.

"But I… don't want to… fall in!"

"You can see that?" Aiden asked in surprise.

"It's… solid, but not solid. What the hell is it?"

Now the guards looked at me suspiciously. I preferred the hateful glares. They congregated closer to each other and whispered among themselves.

"You won't fall in—you can't. Not even when in transit."

"It's liquid, then?"

"Well, I'm not a scientist, but I understand it's more like an artificial superfluid that shifts between both states. The posts both contain it and keep it in that altered state. When it's charged, from the Earth's energy itself, it does amazing things. You'd need to talk to a Vish physicist about it. I think it acts as some kind of coolant."

I was vaguely—then not so vaguely—horrified. My only interest in chemistry was as it pertained to biology, so this was my weakest area, but I was quite sure only liquids and gasses could become superfluids, and then only if very cold, as in cold on the Kelvin scale. My brain whispered *Bose-Einstein Condensate*, but supplied nothing more. "And what if it does? Escape? Is it dangerous?"

"If it escapes, it will soon return to, and join with, the posts. It's artificially compelled to bond with it." He leaned closer and said in my ear, "Or it can be manipulated. By people like me."

"You don't seriously touch that!" I gasped.

"Let's just say… we're friends."

He nudged me to the nearest post. As we drew closer, the dark substance pulsed. Was it breathing? "It's… it's…"

"It's just reacting to my presence. Don't get your boxers in a twist."

The chill in the room made my skin clammy as I broke into a sweat. This thing—the gate—and that strange substance, did not belong here on Earth. The Vish had to know the heights of our stupidity. We couldn't even handle nuclear energy, and were irresponsible enough to build reactors in seismically-active areas. This? My brain simply could not process it—I would never sleep soundly again. "W-where does the key go?"

"If you'll come over here, I'll show you."

Get closer? Uh, no. But Aiden wasn't concerned about the impossible-to-exist alien substance. Neither were the guards. I shuffled forward, my eyes glued to the undulating surface. I didn't trust it. I blinked, and for a second, it appeared solid. Fuck! I had a hard time dragging my eyes up from the floor. "Can you… will you untie me?" That way I could possibly save myself from falling in.

"No." But he slid his arm through mine and walked with me.

Slightly better. Now that I was in front of it, and not eyeballing the freak-show that was the gate's arrival pad, I noticed the post wasn't smooth. It seemed to be comprised of separate pieces almost seamlessly welded together. I marvelled at the construction, for it surely was a manufactured thing and not natural—how had the Vish made it? They didn't seem quite smart enough, despite what they thought. As I stared in amazement, I spotted an irregularity. A hole. Roughly a foot long, four inches wide and a half inch deep—smaller than all the other sections. "How did he get it out?" I asked.

"Like this," Aiden said, then walked me over to the next closest post. This movement alarmed the guards, and Aiden scolded them with a few nasty hisses. Ignoring them, Aiden tapped a matching square embedded in the post, and the substance changed shape and retracted along the sides, until Aiden could fit his fingers in the crack and pull it out.

"Oh, my fucking god," I muttered.

Finally, with a key from his pocket, Aiden unlocked the annoying cuffs. "Touch it."

"The hell I will!" I shouted.

"You should also know how it feels, Jase."

"No, I think I'll pass."

The guards closed in. Aiden had another argument with them—they were on edge, ready and able to tear me into itty-bitty pieces if I made even one suspicious move on that piece of… whatever the fuck it was. Aiden held the… *key* in his hand. Nothing happened. He seemed fine. Morgan had been fine. Damn it!

My knees were weak, but my promise was not. Tentatively, and prepared to yank my digits away fast, I raised my newly freed hand. Then dropped it—hell if I was going to sacrifice my dominant right hand. I used my left. And only the tip of one finger.

The unearthly material felt like oily stone, rather than metal. And cold as hell. Wet, although dry. Underneath those ordinary sensations, an alien one prickled my skin. A pulse, a hum, a vibration—I felt it, yet couldn't explain it or even attempt to understand it. I snatched my hand away. Unaware of my distress, Aiden replaced the key in its crevice, and it instantly reformed to fit, creating the same, perfect seam, as if it had never been removed.

"Are we done?" I asked, my voice shaky.

"Almost. One last thing to do."

Aiden reclosed the clasp on my cuffs and locked it—all it took was one stony glance, and I had my hands behind my back—much to the relief of the guards, who wanted me away from the gate. I concurred, but utterly mesmerized, I couldn't take my eyes off that strange floor. *Stop it! It's not going to chase you.*

Yeah, but how did I know that? For sure?

Digging inside the small bag, Aiden retrieved two metal pieces, steel and entirely man-machined. The guards shifted uneasily. One of them—from the south, judging by all that fair skin and hair—threatened Aiden in a few short hisses. Despite the alien words, his body spoke the universal language of aggression. Aiden's posture warned them to stand down.

Only they weren't going to this time.

And Aiden knew it, also. Before any of the four decided on their next move, Aiden stepped backward, closer to the pulsing gate and tossed the metal

fragments in the air. They fell—my eyes followed the sudden movement even though I'd been trying to watch both Aiden and the guard pack at the same time—but they didn't hit the marble. Something slithered along the floor and caught them.

My legs unfroze. Shocked and startled, I stumbled to the side, and away from the gas—liquid, whatever the fuck it was, now flowing over the floor. The fluid swarmed the metal pieces and then shot upward to spin around Aiden, the substance swirling under and around his clothing and disturbing his hair. The guards all drew their guns—but too late. The fluid had fused with the metal bits and turned solid, and then abruptly became a shape in Aiden's hand.

A weapon.

Although armed, and four to one, the guards froze.

"Put them away!" Aiden snarled, in English.

One set of eyes flicked my way.

"Don't be stupid and think you'll ever be fast enough."

Apparently, the guard agreed. Begrudgingly, they all slowly returned their weapons—simple human guns—to their holsters. "You can't take that with you!" the Vish said. "We won't allow it."

"I can and I will."

"The Council has forbidden it!"

"This is a military operation and completely within my jurisdiction, not theirs." The strange substance continued to swirl around Aiden as he stepped closer to me—and effectively placed himself between me and the guards' hostility. "Let's go, Mr. Kelly."

My heart thudded somewhere in the vicinity of my throat. Fear shackled my legs. I didn't want Aiden to touch me, not covered in that… alien whatever, so I moved, body stiff with terror. The door loomed an impossible distance ahead. When I arrived within a few feet of the door, it opened automatically for us, enticing me with safety. But I halted. No! I must refuse to step through. Not with that… alien fluid stuff on the loose. Some of it was already flowing up the walls…

"Jason! Move it."

"I can't!" I sputtered. "It's following us!"

"Fine. I'll put it back." Ignoring my terror, Aiden turned on his heel, faced the four guards and levelled his strange, gun-shaped weapon at them. He spoke a few words in his Vish tongue to the guards, and then the flowing liquid began to retract. Not that it stopped my heart from racing. The creepy stuff had begun flowing along the ceiling, totally defying the laws of physics as I knew them, and it looked just as wrong when it flowed back down, like smoke. In seconds, the last tendrils returned to the gate floor, rippled, and finally settled.

Aiden gently shoved me through the door. Once in the hall, he hooked an arm through mine. My feet weren't cooperating—what the hell happened to my flight reflex? Or at least my fight one? Aiden's arm, where it touched mine, chilled me to the bone. I didn't look back. I'm sure the four guards followed, keeping their distance. When we found our way back to the original two guards, I expected a confrontation.

Turned out I was wrong. Mostly. I would have preferred a firefight over coming face-to-face with Aiden's remaining Vish uncle, T'Loren. I stopped short. There were probably many people, aside from Aiden and I, who would have preferred that T'Loren had been the one to be chopped in half while coming through the gate instead of the other uncle, the nice one, and the one I'd never get to meet. T'Loren and I shared a mutual, lifelong dislike. He looked upon me with disgust. As rattled as I was, I couldn't summon my usual sneer in reply.

But it soon came back to me.

That bastard probably signed off on my death penalty—he sat on their interim ruling council. The way the last half hour had gone, maybe Aiden would find cause to shoot him.

T'Loren had a cold, ethereal beauty. His big eyes were almost black. Like his heart. His glossy brown hair reached almost to the hem of his austere, black ceremonial tunic. "Aiden," he said, voice dripping disapproval.

"Uncle."

"Is this necessary?" he asked Aiden, speaking English, presumably for my benefit. He inclined his head at the weapon, and its strangely long barrel.

"You know it is."

I waited for T'Loren's cold admonition. Huh. No argument? But why did Aiden feel he needed a Vish weapon?

"Why did you bring… *him*?"

Anger has a way of instantly subjugating fear—and my temper was on a short fuse these days. "Because I'm helping him!" I snapped. How I hated T'Loren. Sanctimonious prick.

"Are you, now?" T'Loren asked, finally condescending to look at me. That's who I should have saved my one and only punch for, instead of Aiden.

"Yes," I snapped. "The sooner we find the key, the sooner you can get your pompous ass back to T'El. I'm sure you haven't been missed, but it's their turn to have the pleasure of your company for the next fifty years."

"Jase, shut up." Both T'Loren and Aiden frowned at me.

Instead of the usual scowl, T'Loren looked at me with a calculating glint to his alien eyes. "I abstained from voting for your execution. Perhaps that decision may prove fortuitous after all." After that comment, he dismissed me from his existence and turned his attention to Aiden. "Contact me if you need assistance. Anything at all. If you need it, it will be yours."

Surprise, surprise… Then again, he *was* family to Aiden, and those northern clans were fiercely loyal to one another.

"Thank you, but as I told you, we have nothing definitive to go on. We're going to follow a hunch of Jason's. Morgan wasn't specific, as you know." They had a silent conversation with just their eyes. "I have hope, uncle."

"Then I shall wish you the speed and grace of the rising suns and their bountiful light to guide your way."

I rolled my eyes. But that had to be the kindest string of words that had ever come out of his mouth. "I will try my best to find your key, T'Loren. Morgan did a horrible thing to you, and if I can fix it, I will."

T'Loren looked at me curiously. "Then, as they say here on Earth, Jason Kelly, Godspeed."

I think I preferred their saying better.

"Come," he said to Aiden, "I shall walk you to your automobile."

Having T'Loren and all his political power on our side suited me just fine. If the guards decided not to let us leave after all, I'd be happy to let the man take a bullet for me. As false as my bravado was, it helped me make it to the car on my shaky legs. All these shocks were definitely taking their toll.

At the car, and once the security door shut behind us, Aiden freed my hands again—just removing the clasp, not the cuffs—and stowed his unnaturally

crafted weapon somewhere in the trunk. Even though the thing was far too close to me in just the trunk, I sighed deeply in relief and yanked open my door. I practically felt T'Loren's big Vish eyes slide over me before he looked back at Aiden.

"At least he's a comely lad," T'Loren said, back to his dismissive tone. "I trust you find it makes up for his willful nature?"

Aiden squinted at me, undecided. The bastard! I narrowed my eyes and glared back at him.

"He has much of his mother in him," T'Loren said, then, without so much as a final goodbye, turned away and strode back to, and then through, the outer door.

Restless twitches plagued my legs. I couldn't wait to leave. My nerves were shot. I had seen things I couldn't explain, Aiden now scared the crap out of me, and I felt a panic attack waiting for an excuse to drive me to my knees. I had my butt in the seat and my seatbelt on before Aiden made it behind the wheel.

"Your uncle's losing it," I told Aiden. "He knows I look nothing like my mother." And I didn't—more than once I secretly wondered if I hadn't been adopted. Or found on a fairy hill. Bought cheap from gypsies. Except I did have something of my father in me, my unruly hair and ability to carry a tune, if nothing else.

"That was rather strange," Aiden agreed. "But T'Loren is an ally, Jase. You can always trust him—remember that. I wish you wouldn't go out of your way to piss him off."

I made no promises I knew I wouldn't keep.

Aiden seemed pensive as he drove. Maybe he was as afraid to hope as I was. "Aiden?"

He glanced over at me where I sat huddled against the window. "I'm not going to like whatever this newest bug up your butt is, am I?"

Probably not. "Why do you have that… *weapon*? It is a gun, isn't it?"

We stopped at a red light. Aiden leaned toward me and stroked my cheek with his thumb. Partly from fear, and partly from thrill, I shivered. "Yes, it's a gun. A rail gun. And I made it because there are some people who'd just as soon we never found that key."

****

Part 2

~ Aiden ~

Simply because I could, I watched Jason sleep.

Hopefully, he would continue to sleep soundly instead of having another episode of that weird muttering he did just before waking, not that it wasn't fascinating getting a rare glimpse into the workings of his mind. The funeral, the trial, and two months of being on the run had exhausted him and he needed rest.

But leaving him alone to sleep meant I couldn't kiss him…

Jase had the most sensual mouth I'd ever seen. Those beautiful, full, pouty lips didn't match the rest of his face whatsoever. Jase wasn't handsome in a classic sense, or beautiful, he was… cute. There really wasn't any other word for him, but that plain, silly word failed to do him justice. When he smiled that crooked, disarming smile of his, his whole face lit up. Over the years, I'd heard that expression many times, but until Jase came along, I'd always considered it a bunch of crap. When he smiled or laughed, strangers on the street stopped and stared, chatted him up, or gave him their phone number.

He had the same effect on me.

What in the hell was I going to do with him?

How could I possibly keep him safe?

The situation was deteriorating, and fast. I hated politics, human and Vish—especially Vish. I'd foolishly ignored the squabbling and infighting for far too long. T'Loren had tried to warn me in that oblique way of his, but I'd been busy hunting missing people and traitors and didn't want to hear his latest updates.

I'd also been busy hiding the fact that Jase no longer lived in New York State. Morgan had been my co-conspirator, and together we'd kept his whereabouts vague. Jase was always just away taking a course, a seminar. Something. Now that he was an adult, it was expected he'd assume certain duties for the Vish—that he'd be *retained.*

Every morning, I woke up wondering if that day would be the day I received the order to kill him. So every day I lied. Not that I would have laid a finger on him. Hell, I still felt guilty for smacking him. When he'd slugged me

in the face, I'd acted instinctively and struck back, landing four or five blows before I realized what I was doing.

I didn't, however, regret fucking him afterward. The tension between us had been building for years. I always knew when we reached the limit, the explosion would be spectacular.

Jason's barb earlier had been true. I should have said something—done something—at Christmas when he'd been here, but I'd still been… waiting. Making sure. Hell, I'd held him and marvelled over his perfection when he'd been only two months old—Anna had kept her pregnancy a secret from me, probably fearing she'd lose another one if she tempted fate by talking about it. Changing the nature of our relationship after so many years scared the ever-loving shit out of me.

Took me almost losing him to realize what he meant to me. Which was everything.

After the trial, I'd argued my ass off to save his life. The Judiciary couldn't see past the horror of Morgan's crimes to realize Jase's military significance. That's what I hated most about the Vish and appreciated most about humans. No respectable, or hell, disreputable, human military would have considered executing him if there was even the slightest chance he could lead them to the key. Doing what I had to do—I hated pulling rank—I declared him a military asset and thus spared his life.

But not his freedom.

For that, I'd also had to make him mine. Declared him T'Eth. A bond stronger than marriage. It meant he could now travel to T'El, once we found the key. Unfortunately, he'd be required to join me in battle, so no way in hell would I be taking him back with me. I couldn't picture Jase with a weapon in his hand, or dying at the hands of our enemy, the G'Reth, who really did eat our fallen.

Declaring someone T'Eth wasn't without a big caveat, which is why it was rarely done. You had to trust your partner implicitly. If Jase dishonored our bond, my clan, or the Vish, I'd share the same punishment. Even unto death. Needless to say, the Vish had a great many things they considered dishonorable.

Regardless of possible consequences, I hadn't hesitated.

T'Loren had thought up the whole scheme, not me. Ancient customs and rites had always interested him. Perhaps my uncle had an ulterior motive,

perhaps he figured at some point he could be rid of both of us for the price of one—he really was a cold-hearted bastard—or perhaps he thought I'd be miserable, shackled to Jason for life. Hardly. *I'll have the last laugh, Uncle*. T'Loren didn't understand that I already had Jase for life—and that he was already shackled to *me*.

Best thing that ever happened to me.

Stranded by lies here on planet Earth, with no family other than T'Loren, who basically shunned me, Morgan, his wife Louise, and Anna and Marvin, Jase's parents, had become my surrogate family. When Jase finally came along—Anna had had numerous miscarriages—my family seemed complete, although I knew better than to get too close. So what if I had to appreciate them from a distance? I still had something to care about.

I really wasn't looking forward to Jase finding out what I'd done, why I extracted his promise to obey me. I should probably tell him. Sooner, rather than later. Springing things on Jase never worked out well.

"Aiden…" Jase whispered, disturbing my mental ramblings.

I brushed an unruly strand of hair from his eye. Still asleep. But he called my name! I hated how ridiculously happy that made me.

"Please… touch me," he muttered.

Oh, yeah? Sounded awake enough to me. I slid down off the headboard and dragged his warm body against mine. Surely, he'd awaken any second now. Our cocks were both already hard and seeking each other out.

I'd wanted to make love to him last night, but Jase hadn't wanted me anywhere near him for most of yesterday. I'd frightened him. The gate had frightened him. That, I hadn't expected. Actually, I thought he'd be thrilled.

Most humans, and more than a few Vish, didn't usually contemplate the gate enough to be afraid, most tended to be mesmerized by what it could do, and were taken by the romance of traveling between worlds.

Not Jase. His first thought had been *what the hell is that?* He wanted to know what it was, how it was made and whether or not it was safe—for others, not just himself. And T'Loren wondered what I saw in him, aside from his comely face.

Jase's pliant warmth pressed against me made me horny. Jase was sexy as hell. I cupped his ass and dragged him toward me until no space remained. I

tucked his head under my chin and inhaled his scent. Kissed the top of his head. With a jerky start, he woke.

“Aiden?”

“Morning sleepyhead.”

“Time’s it?” he groggily asked me.

“Just after eight. You can go back to sleep if you want.”

If his cock had its way, there’d be no more sleeping. Wriggling slightly, he tried escaping my embrace. Since his legs were tangled with mine, and I had him by the lower back, he didn’t get far. “Hot,” he complained.

“Yeah? Now that you mention it, I do feel a certain heat.” I ground my cock against his. “Right there.” When I told Jase that touching him would never get old, I meant it. I loved having him in my bed. Or threatening me with a spatula. Hell, I loved fucking up his orderly rows of postcards and photos just so I could watch him get flustered and glare at me.

“You’re roasting me!” He wriggled and tried to shove me away. As I’d planned, all his squirming simply rubbed our cocks together in a very pleasurable way. Freeing an arm, he shoved the covers down. I moved my hand to his ass. He had a great ass.

A few more sweaty rubs later, and he was mine. I got a hand between us. Jason’s hand joined mine. I really wanted to fuck him, but I was too impatient this morning to do it right. How only two men had made their way into Jase’s ass was a mystery. Didn’t mean I didn’t want to kill both of them—I only needed their names. But that same inexperience meant no quickie morning fucks. At least until he got used to me.

I swirled my thumb around Jason’s slit, collecting the slippery fluid, and Jason did the same to me as my foreskin retracted. I groaned and thrust up against his palm. Since I was uncircumcised, I was really sensitive. It wasn’t enough. I wanted more. I jacked him slowly a few times until he started moaning, then I pushed myself back up toward the headboard.

“Blow me,” I demanded. Sort of politely. While shoving my aching cock at his lips.

“I don’t think I like you anymore.”

I grunted. “Take a number.” We were going to have a bumpy road ahead of us, but I didn’t think sexual compatibility would be one of our problems.

My cock was so hard he had trouble getting his mouth on it. Fresh from sleep, and overheated, his mouth felt incredible, all hot and wet. Despite my impatience, I didn't shove my cock down his throat. Instead, I directed his hand with mine as he pumped my shaft, tongued the head, and dipped his tongue into both my slit and under my foreskin. "That's so good," I moaned. "Now I know why only two men have had you."

His big, dark-blue eyes popped open.

"They never need to make it farther than your mouth to find heaven."

Closing his eyes again, he hummed some sort of reply, and the vibration went straight to my balls. In seconds, I was coming and making a lot more noise than was my custom. I rode the pleasurable waves of my climax and let Jason suck and lick me until I softened in his hand. I shuddered through several aftershocks before I could open my eyes.

Why was sex with Jase so amazing? *Because no sex is better than sex with someone you love*.

Jason's lips were swollen, shiny, and dark-red. His eyes looked slightly glazed, as if he enjoyed that as much as I did. Smiling, I slid down and yanked him towards me, intent on kissing those lips before I sucked him off. Toppy bastard I may be, but I loved giving head as much as getting it. When I slid my tongue into his mouth, I tasted myself. I sucked on his tongue and his bottom lip. When I had him gasping for breath and his cock leaking all over me, I flipped him underneath me.

We were a tangle of elbows and knees until I settled between his long legs. On my way down, I scraped my bottom teeth against his small nipple.

"Aiden!" he gasped.

"What do you want?" I asked. But knowing, I kissed and licked my way down, finding, and then following the dark treasure trail to the base of his cock. Breathing hotly on his shaft, I licked my way to the crown.

"I want… please. Just… please!"

I liked the sound of his whimpers. And the taste of him as I sucked the slippery wet head into my mouth. A few hard sucks, and he'd probably come for me. I wanted to get him to suck on my fingers until they were good and wet, and then I wanted to work them into his ass. But, too impatient even for that, I fondled his balls, stroked him with my tongue, and swallowed him down until he burst. I swallowed that, too, and exalted in the sound of his cries.

Yes. He should be noisier than me. I had an image to maintain.

His body trembled as I pushed myself up and wiped the back of my hand across my wet mouth. What a great way to start the morning. And for five whole minutes, I'd prevented Jase from thinking about anything at all. I was rather proud of myself.

I kissed the smattering of bruises on his skin as I climbed back on top of him. He grunted a complaint which I soothed with a kiss.

Simply because I could, I held him close to my heart.

Then he got to thinking again—funny how I could tell the second his brain reengaged. I sighed. "What's on your mind, Jase?"

"We should get going. Soon."

Ah, that argument, again. The same one he fell asleep arguing last night. Jase had a knack for debating—he had a tongue as keen as his mind. Knowing he was right, I gave it up. "Yeah."

He seemed surprised, like he'd never won an argument with me. Not so. I remembered losing to him more than once, and one time in particular had involved a chartered boat, far more fishing tackle than ever needed to be invented by mankind, and a fish that had taken me an hour to get to the boat and in the net. That had been one of those perfect days I'd remember for life, but also one of the last, because after that, Jase decided the west coast had more to offer than me.

Although it stung, I'd let him go.

I sighed again and shifted so that Jase's head rested on my chest. I should've made my move on him then, during that boat ride or afterwards, when he kindled a fire on the beach and barbecued me that bloody fish. Having his spectacular smiles all to myself that day had only cemented how much I wanted him. But I'd wanted to do right by him.

No matter what anyone thought of me, and most of it simply wasn't true, I was a decent man.

"What are you thinking?" he asked me when I didn't say anything more.

The smile crept up on my lips. "That time you rented the boat and made me go fishing."

For a brief moment, Jason's fingers twitched on my waist. "That was fun." He chuckled softly against my skin. "I mean, after you got your sea legs, and your face wasn't that putrid green color anymore."

Ringlets had formed on a few strands of his long hair. I tugged on one. "Laugh all you want. My fish was bigger than yours."

"Oh? Are we comparing sizes now?" Jase laughed as he teased, and the rumble traveled through my ribs.

My heart lurched a little. The real Jason Kelly was finally making a reappearance. "Mine is bigger," I teased. So was my fish.

Jase snorted. "Sure felt like it."

God, I'd missed him. "So what's the plan, then?"

Jase tilted his head and looked at me with sleepy eyes. "You're going to trust me?"

I ran my fingers through his hair. We both needed a shower. "I've always trusted you. I got on that boat with you, didn't I?"

He smiled and kissed a spot just above my nipple. "I'm almost certain we can exclude all the states except Arizona and New Mexico. We could fly to, say, Albuquerque, rent a car, and go from there."

That made perfect sense. It did. But I wanted to be greedy for once in my damned life. If we drove, I could have Jason Kelly all to myself for a few weeks. The time together could be like a… honeymoon. We could spend hours just talking. Listening to music. Making love. Or me just bending Jase over every available surface. The key could wait. After all, it had been hidden for fifty years, give or take, whereas I wouldn't have Jason forever.

"No. Let's drive it." I smiled at Jason's surprised expression. "What do you say? Should we gas up your Mustang and hit the road?"

Jase grinned. Fuck. It was *that* smile. My heart did that crazy lurch again. "You sure you want to be stuck in a car with me that long?"

Jason didn't get it. We were stuck together for life. "Positive. We have lots to talk about. It'll be fun." I started to disengage our tangled limbs. "And if we find the key before we hit the end of the road, I won't even have to look at the fucking ocean once."

"Dude," Jase said, sliding over the edge until his feet hit the floor. "You live on an island."

"Exactly my point."

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Greetings from St. Louis.

Or so said my new postcard, based on the old design. Mimicking Morgan, I decided to create my own stash of Route 66 memorabilia.

Jason flipped through a handful of brochures while I contemplated the Gateway Arch. Even from this distance, I could probably feel the pull of the key if I tuned out the commotion around me and concentrated on its unique hum. The sight of three school buses nearby filled me with dread. I had a deep and abiding fear of gangs of kids. Their presence meant I could forget concentrating on anything at the moment, but at least they were leaving. *Please be leaving and not arriving…*

Waving a brochure, Jase gave me a wicked grin from across the car hood. "You sure you don't want to take the river cruise?"

Rivers didn't bother me. If it didn't have tides or swells that rose higher than the roof of the boat I was stuck on, then no problem. But I felt like teasing Jason. "Only if you're prepared to ride in the trunk the next few hundred miles." The devil seemed to have gotten into Jase somewhere between Chicago and the parking lot full of screaming, irritating kids. Either that, or he'd caught up on his sleep.

"There's no way I'd fit in the trunk."

"Oh, I'm sure I could make you fit. Just need some rope, which, as it happens, I have. Right here in the trunk. Why don't you come over here, and I'll show you?"

He had the audacity to waggle his brows at me. Now I'd have to make him pay. Oh, yes. I smiled back at him while mentally measuring how much rope I'd need for the job.

"Come on, Aiden. I'll bet the view is amazing from the observation deck." I joined him, and we walked toward the monument. "Plus, we'll be inside it. Will that be close enough?"

"Close enough? What do you think I am? Some sort of sniffer dog?"

"Nah. More like a really expensive tool everyone tries to swipe the second you put it down."

Was that supposed to be an insult? "I've got a tool for you, Jase. When we get to the hotel, I'll show you the secret spot where I like to hide it."

I chuckled as he almost tripped over his own big feet. After two full days of driving, Jason had been too tired for me to nail his queer, lovesick ass to the

wall, or any convenient surface for that matter. Once we were done here, I planned to remedy that. I let him get a few steps ahead of me so I could watch his ass and those nice long legs. Yeah, he'd grown up nicely.

On T'El, I lived with my mother's family in the Shalash Mountains, the vast mountain range that had given the missing key its name. As such, I had no fear of heights, and I was looking forward to the view from the top. My love of the mountains probably explained my instinctual dislike of wide-open seas.

Acting the part of tourists, Jase and I read every sign and piece of literature. We stopped at the dedication plaque. May 25, 1968—several months before Morgan stranded us here. If the theft had occurred during any stage of the Arch's construction, I'd have been far more interested in the Missouri clue. Instead, I just enjoyed myself.

Didn't mean we couldn't be thorough. Besides, Jase could make just about anything seem interesting. His enthusiasm was infectious. Didn't people work, though? They crowded their way onto every inch of the observation deck. Worse, they were all bent over with their asses sticking out. Way too much inadvertent ass touching going on for my liking.

Except one. When Jase assumed the same posture to gaze out over the city, my cock got all excited. I peered over his shoulder and secretly groped him. He kicked my shin with the heel of his size thirteen shoe. Didn't hurt.

The Mississippi looked different than the last time I'd been here, just as the war broke out. Sad times, those days. And not just for my human brothers. Jase seemed to think the Vish were cold and unfeeling, but that simply wasn't true. Watching the world be torn apart by war and having to refrain from interfering broke our collective hearts.

Plus, we had problems of our own.

New York had boomed. There'd been talk about moving the gate to a more remote location, but with war looming, we couldn't—everyone had gotten suspicious. Moving the gate was a massive undertaking. After the war, the Vish had dithered and argued over how to handle it until it was too late. As much as I wanted to find the key, I also lived in terror of the day we did.

Human technology had become so advanced, we wouldn't be able to hide the powerful thrum it made when activated, nor could we pass it off with one of our usual excuses. People had also gotten too damned smart. I smiled to myself. How the Vish hated that.

But that was a worry for another day.

We wandered around, confirming to ourselves that the key was not in St. Louis. Or at least not within the Arch. I'd reconfigured the rail gun I'd made from the gate material, so now it appeared to be part of the trunk lining of Morgan's—Jason's—Mustang. I felt its secret pulse in my chest with every beat of my heart. It tugged at the edge of my conscience every second of every day. Not that I minded. It comforted me. If the key had been here, I'd know it.

Unless Morgan encased it in lead or buried it deep inside a mountain of solid granite. But even then…

"Something wrong?" Jason asked, as we returned to the car.

If our new relationship stood any kind of chance, I couldn't lie to Jase, or constantly keep him at a distance. His deep-blue eyes were filled with concern. Then it hit me. I didn't have to lie to Jase. Like me, he had a foot in both worlds. "Nothing's wrong. Just reminiscing."

"Yeah?" He didn't look entirely convinced.

"And worrying."

"About what?"

I fumbled the car keys from my pocket and manually unlocked the door. Seemed odd to me now, after driving my new Audi. "Hop in, and I'll tell you when we get to our room. Then we'll find one of those hole-in-the-wall rib places for dinner."

"Yes!" Jase crowed in triumph.

What must it be like to be so easy to please? I'd only pretended to dislike ribs to rile him up. Flustering Jase had rapidly become my new favorite hobby. Actually, I'd always enjoyed that hobby. Since I'd made a reservation for us at the Hyatt right beside the Arch, we had time to check in and relax, and for Jase to google the shit out of suitable restaurants. A storm rolled in just as we made it to our room. Our timing couldn't have been more perfect.

I left my laptop to Jason's mercy and unpacked the few items we'd need before leaving in the morning—like our toothbrushes, shampoo and… lube. Definitely needed that. I toed off my shoes and went to stand behind Jase at the desk, to see what he'd come up with.

Which turned out to be… nothing to do with rib shacks. "You're not addicted to that game are you?"

He glanced my way and gifted me with his all-time best, mischievous smile. "Certainly not. I can quit anytime I want."

"They all say that."

"I can! Right after I—"

Cutting him off mid-sentence, I yanked him from his chair and pushed him over to the king-size bed. When he fell across the ugly hotel quilt, I crawled on top of him and smothered his complaints with my mouth. If he was a good boy, I'd let him play later. We rolled around on the bed, and I wrestled Jason's long arms and legs into submission. The few inches height he had on me didn't work to his advantage lying down, and I quickly had his wrists pinned with one hand.

And oh, how he liked that.

So did I.

That first night, when he'd punched me, I'd retaliated, and we'd finally settled the matter in my bed, I'd threatened him with several dubious sexual acts. I'd been mad as hell. So fisting? No. But I'd been serious about having my hands down his pants all the time. And the plug. There were things I liked. Jason would probably like them too—he had an untapped well of passion burning away underneath his cute exterior.

Squeezing a hand between us, I yanked open his jeans and tugged down the zipper.

"Hey!" he gasped. "Aiden…"

I loved the sound of my named moaned from between his kiss-roughened lips. "Yes, Jason?" I breathed against the curve of his jaw. I slid my hip down onto the bed and rolled us so we were both lying on our sides.

"I was… doing… something… you know."

His voice came out sounding desperate and breathless. He struggled against my grip. I had a feeling those cuffs were going to feature prominently in our lovemaking. "Yeah? And now you're going to be doing something different. Me." I stuffed my hand down the back of his pants and grabbed a handful of sweet flesh. "Actually, I'll be doing you. And I definitely won't send you to rehab if you get addicted to me." Asserting my intention, I squeezed his wrists tightly.

His hips jerked wildly, and he bucked against me, his shocked gasp going right in my ear. I wiggled my hand in the tight space until my index finger fit

into the crack of his ass. Without lube, or even spit, I didn't push my finger inside him when I found what I was looking for; I just rhythmically nudged his tight pucker, hoping to make him squirm. When he shifted his legs to better accommodate my explorations, I knew I could have him.

"Get naked," I said. I'm sure he would've agreed, but I undressed him before he got the chance. I kissed every freckle on his shoulder as I uncovered it. I kissed every bruise, unhappily knowing I put them there.

When I started to shuck my own clothes, Jase caught my wrist. "I want to."

Who was I to argue? "Help yourself." Famous last words. His hands drove me crazy, as did the almost shy way he unzipped me and peeled me out of my pants. When my cock sprang free, eager for his touch, his eyes darkened. This trip was not just about finding the key, but about discovering each other—as lovers.

We had all afternoon. No need to rush. As much I wanted to pounce on him, I didn't. I let him explore. I even spread my legs for his questing fingers. Restraint wasn't a familiar concept to me and keeping my hands to myself proved impossible after about two minutes. I touched him back. Groped him. Roughed up his nipples. Eventually I flung him flat on his back, tackled him, and raped his mouth with my tongue.

I really didn't do restraint well. "I'm going to fuck you," I growled.

"And they say romance is dead."

Ooh. Sassy Jase. "It's not dead. I'm taking you out to dinner. I'll even let you slide all your vegetables onto my plate. And anything you don't recognize or hate on sight."

"Aren't you supposed to do that first? The dinner thing? Dessert? False promises?"

Uh…?

Jason's entire body shook with laughter. Damn him. "Let me start over," I said, keeping my voice to a growl. It came easy. I still wanted to pound the fuck out of him. "I want to make love to you." Sounded weird—I can honestly say I've never made love to anyone, except Jase, even if our first time had been violent and angry. "But first, I want to suck your cock for a minute or two. Run my tongue up and down your shaft, taste you, maybe suck your balls into my mouth. Not too much sucking though—I don't want you to come right away. And while I'm going down on you, I'm going to pinch your nipples until they

hurt." His breath hitched. "Then, when I release them, and the blood flows back, they'll be so sensitive, every time I breathe on them, you're going to shudder and whimper and beg me to do something about it."

"Oh?" he breathed.

"They'll be red, tender, and aching. You're going to want me to suckle them, and I will. It'll burn, but you won't care—you're going to be desperate for me to put out the flames with my wet mouth. And just when you start to come, I'm going to flick them with my thumbs. I'm betting you'll scream. What do you think? Will I have to stuff your shirt in your mouth, so the guests beside us don't freak out and call security?"

"N-no." He didn't sound very sure.

"And later, all through dinner, every time your shirt brushes against those hot little buds, you're going to remember exactly what I just did to you."

Jason opened his mouth slightly, but no words came out. Would it be possible to dirty-talk him to orgasm? Fuck, I had to try that.

"But long before you get to climax, I'm going to finger your ass." Closing his mouth, Jason swallowed. "If I wanted, I could make you come from that alone."

"Y-yeah?" he stuttered, almost choking on the word.

"Oh, yeah. You'll find that out soon enough. But not tonight. Tonight you're going to come from just my cock up your ass. Might take a little effort on my part, but I'm willing to go the extra mile for you, Jase."

"You have such a fat head."

I laughed at that. "I know. And that fat head is going to find your sweet spot and drive you out of your mind. I'm going to work my cock inside you until I find just the right angle, and when I do…" Jason's eyes were so big and shiny, he reminded me of a Vish for a second. "I'm going to pound the ever-loving fuck out of you until you explode and splatter us both with cum."

"Uh…"

"But I'm not going to stop, even then. I'm going to keep going, rubbing that sweet spot until you're shaking and whimpering and begging me to take my pleasure and release you." I sucked his bottom lip into my mouth, bit gently, and released it. "And then… I will take my pleasure. I'm going to pump your ass so full of my cum that when you can finally get your legs under you and stand, it's going to trickle down the backs of your thighs."

"No… you wouldn't…"

"But you know I will. And you want me to."

Maybe I was hopelessly unromantic?

He didn't seem to mind.

As I carried out each and every threat, rain pelted the windows, and the black clouds darkened the room. A peculiar fluttery feeling took up residence in my chest, at once both wonderful and frightening. We kissed endlessly. When I entered him this time, it was slow and easy, face-to-face, with our tongues tangled. Once I'd seated myself fully in his tight channel, I entwined his fingers with mine and trapped him—trapped us both. Murmuring a string of half-formed pleas, he wrapped his long legs around my back and urged me to move.

I took my time.

"Faster," he begged, a few thrusts later.

I'm not really an asshole—I gave him what he wanted. I shifted my hips, looking for that perfect angle. When he cried out, I knew I'd found it. "There?" I asked, as his cries grew more desperate.

"Yes!"

I clawed at his hips, adding more bruises, and nailed his gland with a few short, sharp thrusts. He turned frantic, almost shouting out and grabbing at the blankets, his back arching off the mattress. As promised, his nipples were red, inflamed points jutting out from his flushed and sweating chest.

He was the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen. That fluttery feeling in my chest spread all over my body, and I knew then what it was. Joy.

"Are you lonely, Aiden?" I'd told him not anymore—and I wasn't. He was with me. *I love you, Jason Kelly.*

"Aiden," he panted, "I need—please let me…"

"Give it to me, Jase," I demanded, but really, I was the one begging. My legs trembled as I thrust into him, controlling the angle so that the head of my cock rubbed his prostate with every stroke. Leaning down, I panted in his ear, released my hands from his abused hips and brushed my thumbs across his red nubs. "Give it to me!"

With a strangled cry, he gave it up, his muscles clenching tight around me, the pleasure exquisite, almost painful, as his body milked me. What was left of

me came undone. I'd promised him I wouldn't stop, but surrounded by his pulsing, squeezing heat, I did. I gave myself up to him.

I wanted to give him everything.

I'd been lonely so long.

****

The Mustang guzzled gas like a fiend. Maybe seventeen miles per gallon. I didn't care—the car had won me over. Or maybe Jason's love for the damn thing had. Morgan would rather have cut off a limb than do anything to alter its pristine condition, and as such, Jason had purchased a transmitter device that allowed him to play songs from his phone on the old radio. We'd been listening to the Rolling Stones and discussing our upcoming stop in Galena.

"Did you know Kansas was the first state to pave their entire section of Route 66?"

I couldn't help but smile. In fact, I did know. Read that same piece of information just that morning. "Must've broke the state coffers paving all thirteen of those miles."

Jase smacked me with the piece of paper he'd been reading. "Asshole."

"I'd say *I try*, but truthfully, it just comes naturally."

I didn't deserve it, but Jase gave me one of his magic smiles, the one with the power to stop traffic. His fingers were tapping a beat to the song on his thigh, and I admired his leg for a second before putting my eyes back on the road where they belonged. If he sat closer to me, I could have my hand on that thigh. But that wasn't Jase. And it wasn't his fault he was like a drug to me, and I couldn't get enough.

We had plans to stop at both the power plant and the museum. I couldn't imagine Morgan hiding the key to another world in either place. Jason didn't think so, either.

"Morgan, he…" I paused. I hesitated to bring up his name when Jase was finally acting normally, but I couldn't keep dancing around the subject.

"Yeah?" The happy spark died from Jason's eyes.

Curse my foolish tongue. But what the hell—I had to know. "He wasn't a very imaginative guy, was he?"

Jason looked at the papers in his hands and began to sort them. I noticed he did things like that when stressed, but I'd hesitate to call it a tic. "No. He was…

a doer, rather than a thinker. He'd rather be fixing something or doing some Vish chore or other than sit around daydreaming. He told me once he had no use for idle time." Jason finally looked up, and over at me. "And he only ever read non-fiction."

Oh, the horror. I kept my smile to myself. But reading fiction demanded a certain level of imagination to get anything from it…

Jason continued with, "Or maybe he didn't like having time on his hands because it might force him to think about what he'd done."

I cursed under my breath. Jase shouldn't have to live with this. *Damn you, Morgan.* "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring it up. I just wondered—"

"What kind of place a psychopath would choose to hide the most valuable thing in the world, where he could be certain no one would ever find it, unless he wanted them to?"

Sometimes Jase could be painfully blunt. "Right."

To keep track of the clues and things picked up on our trip, Jase had organized everything in a binder-like contraption complete with zipper. He returned everything he'd taken out to its proper place. "It would have to be someplace… secluded."

"You don't think he'd hide it in plain sight?"

"Not in a million years. He'd put it someplace no one would ever think to look. Where no *Vish* would think to look."

I snorted. "Not many places I wouldn't search."

"Yeah, but you think like a human."

Of course I did. I'd now spent more time on Earth than I had on T'El. I almost always thought in English. Even considered it my mother tongue, although I spoke Shalash'En like a native. For all intents and purposes, I was American. "So how does a Vish think, smarty-pants?" As soon as I said it, I regretted it.

"That we are lesser beings."

Hell. Blunt Jase had a sharp tongue. "And you think that blinds them to certain things?" Shit—I just did it again. Referred to the Vish as *them*, and not *we*. I shook my head. *Are you so surprised? They've shunned you your entire life—no wonder you think of yourself as more human than Vish.*

Jase occupied himself with picking imaginary lint from his jeans. "They wouldn't concern themselves with the mundane, day-to-day existence of their… staff."

The word he meant to use was *retainers*. Or, as Morgan had said once, bitterly, *slaves*.

"So… somewhere personal?"

"Yeah," Jason agreed. "Some place *his*. Totally his."

Son of a bitch. Jason was right, as usual. "Some place he had total control over."

"A place he owns. Owned."

Could be anywhere. "But where, damn it?"

"You know where I think."

I did. "And how many square miles are New Mexico and Arizona combined?"

"But couldn't we—I mean, all we have to do is search for deeds in Morgan's name in the state records, right? Or wherever they're kept."

Ah, Jason. Definitely more than a comely face. Excitement rushed to a spot deep in my belly. "I think I know just the anal-retentive man for the job."

Jason gave me a sour look. "T'Loren."

"He said *anything*. All I have to do is call."

The volume on the radio was low, but Jase turned off the music. "Do it. Although he'll probably just arrange for us to drive off a cliff in the middle of nowhere."

My cheek twitched with the effort not to laugh. T'Loren wouldn't do that. Not until *after* we found the key.

We'd been making good time from St. Louis; the Mustang had a lot of horsepower, and we were already coming up on Joplin. We had no plans to stop there, despite Jase having made a comment about a local natural wonder. "Didn't you say something about some big waterfall, near here? Why don't we head there, and I'll call T'Loren. You're officially in charge of giving directions."

"Ooh, I get to be in charge?" he taunted.

"I just changed my mind."

"Too late!" he said gleefully. I hadn't seen Jase's playful side since that horrid boat ride. I liked it. Seizing on his new task, he rummaged inside a flap in his binder and pulled out a paper map.

"Really? I finally let you be in charge, and you're going to rely on a fifty year old paper map?" I glanced over at him and gave him a narrow-eyed squint. "Don't think I don't know where Mexico is, Mr. Kelly. You can't fool me."

Jase flumped his head back on the seat. "God, Mexico." He sat back up. "Some of those dogs are probably still looking for me."

"Dogs?" *Goddamn it.* "Were you chased by dogs?"

"Don't ask." He smoothed out a non-existent wrinkle on the map. At this rate, he was going to rub away all the ink. "Turn's coming up soon."

I couldn't grill him. He'd apologized, I'd accepted it, and that was that. But now, I hated dogs. And Mexico.

As a result of Jason's excellent navigating, we arrived at Grand Falls without a single wrong turn. They were worth the detour. Before I settled my mind to call T'Loren—his favors were never without cost—I did the touristy thing with Jase. I held his hand. Who said I was unromantic? Funny enough, no one has ever called me a fag to my face. Mind you, I'd never held another man's hand in public before. We got a few looks, but fuck 'em, they could leave if they didn't like it.

I left Jase to his picture-taking endeavours while I called my uncle. Our conversation lasted less than ten minutes, and in that time, and public displays of gay affection notwithstanding, I found Jase already deep in conversation with two young women. Lovely young women with short-shorts and even shorter tops. It was that smile of his. Damn him.

They extended their appreciation of the male sex to me when I walked up beside Jase. I smiled politely, told them, "Mine," and, taking Jase by the bicep, dragged him to where we could talk in private. I could hear them laughing as we walked away.

"That was rude."

"What was rude was them pouncing on you the second my back was turned."

"They were nice."

“I’m sure they were.” Everyone was nice to Jase.

“What did T’Loren say?”

“He’s on it. I think I might have given him a brain orgasm. I never ask him for help.” Since we’d already shocked the other sightseers by holding hands, I leaned in and gave Jase a kiss. His eyes went big with shock. “He’ll call as soon as he has any information. He said two days, but I bet he’ll have an address to us by tomorrow, if Morgan does indeed own anything. Hell, he’ll probably have a list of every owner going back to the confederation, the GPS coordinates, a topographical survey of the area, and the name of the neighbor’s cat, by noon tomorrow.”

Jason just stared at me.

“What? Did you even hear a word of what I just said?”

“You kissed me.”

What? He was stuck on that? And with that idiot grin on his face? “I did. And look, the Earth is still turning.” I grabbed the front of his shirt and sidled closer. “Want me to do it again?”

“N-no…”

“You sure?” I closed the remaining distance and kissed him again. I even slipped him a little tongue before pulling away.

Not too far away, the girls giggled. Jase smiled. *That* smile.

I took his hand again. I wasn’t being spiteful to the girls, not at all. “Let’s pick up a souvenir for your wee book and hit the road. I’m starving. You think you might resort to Google for a place that makes a good burger?”

Jase switched his grin to the wicked one. “I dunno—there were some restaurants listed on the side of the map. We should see if any are still open.”

My father, rest his kind soul, always told me to pick my battles. His advice had kept me sane while tap-dancing between two worlds. “Whatever you want, Jase.” I handed him the car keys. “Try not to get a speeding ticket.”

Jase smirked, and gave me the middle finger.

Was it any wonder I hadn’t yet summoned up the courage to tell him about the T’Eth bond?

****

After Joplin, we stopped at every spot with a clue, all the way to Oklahoma City, where Jase told me to stop being a fucking sadist and check us into a hotel already. I had road hum buzzing in my head. Jason had run out of things to fold, organize, or read. We were both tired and hungry. Bad combination.

After dinner, we checked into a nice hotel we didn't enjoy, because we both fell asleep without so much as a grope. I must be getting old. Ancient or not, I slept curled around Jase all night, the sheet our only covering because, god forbid, I should overheat him.

A strange sense of urgency had us out the door at an obscenely early hour, without even a good morning snuggle. Or grope. While I took first turn at the wheel, I formulated plans for later, ones that would take place under a warm Texas sun and involve a pricey set of leather cuffs and Jase at his horniest.

A large storm front darkened the Oklahoma sky, as far as I could see. Like Earth, T'El has its own tornado alley, and I didn't like twisters in either world. Keeping an eye on the sky for funnel clouds, I let my lead foot have its way, and we hit the highway.

A few miles out, Jase, back to his good-natured self, turned on the radio and his phone, and the first strains of *Bridge over Troubled Water* began playing on the speaker. Memories rushed in and for a moment, time stood still. Back then, I'd known some good times. "You're cheating, you know."

"What?" he asked, perplexed.

"I thought we were only going to listen to music from the sixties on this trip?"

"But… this isn't?"

"1970."

"You have their entire discography memorized, or something?"

Only because I'd lost a good friend that year—to old age—and I think of him every time I hear that song, which had been all over the radio at the time. "I'm kind of a fan. Saw them in concert." Jason scowled at me. "Twice."

"Oh, come on!"

"We could take in some concerts, if you're interested. As soon as we… are back home." I was going to say, *find the key*, but I didn't want to jinx anything.

"It's not the same. Everyone sucks these days. All they do is lip-sync."

One of the few constants in my life has been my love of music. On Earth, or T'El, I loved it all. My father could play just about any instrument and after only three notes of his singing, could have you in tears, weeping for your lost love, even if you didn't have one. "Lots of bands play live. You'll find us some good ones."

"Maybe."

"And you can make up these little pie charts showing their level of suckability so we know who to avoid."

"Fuck you, Aiden O'Rourke! Fuck you."

We talked, bickered, and stopped to take an occasional picture until we reached Amarillo. Jase loved the flat, barren land. I loathed it. No mountains. And nowhere to bend Jase over the car, hands cuffed behind his back, and properly salute the great Lone Star State.

"Do you want to check out the Cadillac graveyard and carry on, instead of staying the night?" I asked him. "Or did you want to explore that canyon you mentioned?"

The weather had turned hot, and we both had our windows rolled down. "Would you be mad if I wanted to keep going? You seem to be having a good time. I don't want to ruin this for you. I just…"

"Want to find it."

"Yeah." He slouched into the corner between the door and seat. "I can't get my mind off it, knowing it's out there somewhere. But we haven't heard from T'Loren, and I don't know what we should do. Maybe we should've got him to check Texas while he was at it."

"Don't worry. I'm sure he will anyway. Once he gets something in his head he doesn't let it go." Jase's long leg was within grabbing distance, and I caressed his thigh. "Let's drive to Albuquerque, then. We'll have to make a left turn there, just to make sure we don't regret not doing it later."

"What?"

Kids these days. "Never mind." Jase probably didn't have a clue who Bugs Bunny was. "Pull out your map. I want you to find a secluded road that leads to nowhere." Puzzling that one out would likely drive Jase nuts.

"Um… why?"

"You'll see." I left him to stew over that as we drove, checked the Cadillac Ranch, and found nothing but Caddies and graffiti, and chowed down on a late lunch. After we crossed into New Mexico, Jason quite noticeably became more excited by our surroundings. His eyes grew animated. Uh-oh. That was usually when he got into trouble.

"Look familiar?"

"Yes," he replied. "Nothing in particular, but I have this," he rubbed the back of his neck, "I dunno—prickle. Here. Down my spine."

That meant we were close to whatever memory was trying to surface in Jason's amazing brain. I drove, and he searched out the window, fingertips silently tapping on his leg. I watched for a second—was that Morse code?

A few minutes later, he bolted upright in his seat. "There!" he exclaimed.

We passed a road sign. "Tucumcari?"

"Maybe… I think so. Take the bypass."

I exited the highway onto the bypass and watched Jason's face light up as he sorted through some of Morgan's postcards he'd secured in Mylar sleeves in the binder. "Tell me where to go from here."

"Tucumcari Boulevard."

I turned where he pointed, and history did this weird unfolding. I'd spent most of the fifties in T'El fighting the G'Reth, but this place, coupled with the old-fashioned dashboard of the Mustang before me, had me wondering for a second if I'd suffered a head injury and only imagined the last fifty years. Then the image snapped, and we were back to the future.

"There!" Jason said, pointing. "That's it! That's the motel we stayed at."

"Let's take a look." I slowed, and pulled into the motel driveway. "This isn't too bad. I thought you said it was a dive."

"It was! They've obviously renovated the place. It definitely wasn't this nice."

"Wanna stay?"

Eyes twinkling mischievously, he grinned hugely. "Hell, yeah." His smile settled, and he looked at me almost shyly. "You inspired one of my first self-made orgasms, right here."

"I did?"

Looking a bit nervous, he added, "Maybe we can… re-enact it?"

This was the first time he'd come on to me. I liked it. A lot. "You could convince me." My cock stirred in my tight jeans. Even if it meant bottoming, I'd do it for Jase. Mind you, he'd be tied up, and I'd be riding him the way I wanted to, but I could suffer through it.

I parked and Jase flew out of the car and across the lot on his long legs before I got my seatbelt off. He pointed at a room, I noted the number, got out, stretched, and went inside to book us in. It must be fate. The room was vacant.

We didn't have much stuff to carry into the musty room, nicely redone in mid-century style. Our meager pile of belongings disappointed me. I'd wanted to have the trunk half-filled with touristy junk and T-shirts by now. Morgan's desk, where the clues had been in the video—and which I'd rather violently had to steal back—had been home to many photos of Jase, several from that Route 66 trip. God, that kid had been photogenic. Still was. He'd had a T-shirt on in one of them—from that place right across the street. We'd have to go there after we settled in and see if they still sold them.

I checked for messages from T'Loren while Jase stripped. Stripped? I dropped my phone onto the desk. "And to what do I owe this pleasure?"

Hand on his sock, he paused. "I thought I'd take a quick shower. I feel like I'm covered in grit from having the windows down."

"Don't get dressed when you're finished." That plan I had for Texas could still be salvaged, and we probably had enough time before T'Loren interrupted us with about eight hundred reports.

"Don't… huh?"

Might as well get him into the right mind-set right now. "That's an order to be obeyed."

Several expressions flitted across his face before he sorted himself out and dropped his pants. I looked. Semi-hard. We were so perfectly matched. Why had I waited so long? With a last confused glance over his shoulder, he disappeared into the bathroom for his shower.

I felt… strangely nervous. I wanted to explore Jase's submissive side, but what if I ruined things? Scared him? My aggression didn't always work in my favor. But I had remarkable self-control. I'd keep it simple.

While Jase showered, I filled the ice bucket, stuffed a couple water bottles down into the ice to cool for later, and after peeling the blankets down, slipped

the lube under the pillow. I'd brought a small dildo from home—I'd found it in the bottom drawer of my bedside table, still in its box, unopened, whoever I'd bought it for long forgotten. What the hell—I opened it and tucked it under the other pillow. Didn't mean I had to use it.

Just as I finished shucking my socks and tucking the leather cuffs in my waistband at the back, hidden for now, the pipes rattled, and the shower cut off.

A few minutes later Jase emerged from the bathroom, damp and naked, as ordered. Saliva instantly pooled in my mouth. His long, lean body was beautiful. He'd never be muscular, but what muscles he did have were nicely sculpted and toned. Water dripped from the ends of his hair, down his chest, and over those tiny nubs I'd taken so much pleasure in tormenting that afternoon in St. Louis. A few drips rolled down over his flat belly and into the dark arrow of hair leading into the thicker patch surrounding his cock. My eyes lingered on his erection.

Yes, this could work.

Unsure of what I wanted from him, he moved shyly forward, eyes wide with anticipation.

"C'mere," I told him.

When he got close enough, I went straight for his mouth, kissing him until his hands curled around my face, and he pulled me closer. His tongue thrusting into my mouth heated my already overheated flesh. My fingers twitched restlessly, but I kept my hands above his waist. Jason's kiss felt, and tasted, so wonderful I was reluctant to pull away. But I managed.

"So," I began, caressing his hip bones, "tell me about this fantasy you want to re-enact."

His cheeks pinked up. His tongue darted out to lick his red lips. "I was… it wasn't that big of a deal."

The pretty cheek-blush slid down his throat to flush his upper chest. A drop of water trickled down his sternum, and before it escaped, I licked it up with the tip of my tongue. "No need to be shy. Tell me what you were doing in this not-very-big fantasy that made you come, thinking of me?"

"I was… sucking your cock."

Naughty boy. Thinking about sucking my cock when he was but fourteen? Glad I didn't know about that, then. "Just sucking my cock?"

He nodded. "I couldn't imagine much beyond that—at the time."

Well, he'd only been fourteen. Anything more than that would be kind of disturbing. But the answer he gave for my next question would reveal many truths. "And where were you when you were sucking my cock?"

He blushed furiously. Swallowed convulsively. "On my knees."

Exactly what I'd hoped to hear. Even my earliest sexual fantasies had involved someone sucking *my* cock—not the other way around. I'd never gotten off fantasizing about being the one on his knees. I got off thinking about men on their knees for me. Jase and I were perfect for each other. "Turn around."

Just like he had at the garage, Jase shivered hard enough that his shoulders shook. Seeking one last confirmation, I glanced down. Fully erect. Once the shiver passed, he turned and offered me his long, damp back, and, without twitching, both hands. The smooth, lightly freckled skin on his back rippled and then broke out in goose bumps as I buckled my cuffs snugly around his wrists and joined the rings with a simple spring-loaded clasp. No lock this time. But Jase didn't need to know that, did he?

The carpet looked newer, and clean. Good enough. I turned his lithe, trembling body to face mine. His eyes were glassy with excitement, and his mouth hung open slightly. Quickened breaths escaped from between those lips of a thousand different smiles. A possessive smile tugged at mine.

"You said you were on your knees. So get going," I ordered. With the barest hesitation, he eased down to the floor. The awkward position he assumed, legs together and feet crossed underneath his butt, confirmed what I'd hoped, that he'd never submitted to anyone on his knees, before. "Spread your legs." He inched his long legs apart and looked up at me with trusting eyes. That rare feeling of joy suffused my body with a wonderful warmth. With the backs of my fingers, I caressed his cheek.

Did he know I loved him back?

Keeping my eyes on his, I moved my hand to the button on my jeans.

"Show me how you sucked my cock, Jason."

****

Part 3

~ Jason ~

Aiden slowly lowered his zipper, pushed his jeans and Calvin Klein's part way down his hips and presented me with his stiff dick.

Nothing I'd ever fantasized about prepared me for this. My thighs quivered, and my mouth filled with spit. The smooth, leather bindings, and the lock holding my wrists together occupied most of my consciousness. I should've known Aiden wouldn't have forgotten my embarrassing reaction the first time he'd put me in the cuffs. Between the thudding of my heart and the excitement racing like wildfire in my veins, I felt lightheaded. Drunk. High. Something.

The ripe, purplish head of Aiden's cock butted against my bottom lip. With the foreskin completely retracted, the glans was visible in all its silken glory. His scent, musky, male, and promising sex, made my mouth water anew. I'd wanted this—asked for it, yet fear gripped me as tightly as Aiden's shackles. Kneeling subservient at Aiden's feet, hands tied, and body completely at his mercy, forced me to confront certain facts about myself and desires I wasn't quite ready to admit.

But if not now, when?

"No," Aiden snapped. I flicked my eyes up to meet his striking, cat-slanted ones. Nothing sinister lurked in their green depths. "Don't think. Do."

Did I trust the man, or not? Did I truly believe that hateful accusation I'd hurled at him in his kitchen? That I thought my body and my heart were only a path he'd tread upon to get to the key?

Or did I believe in the man who stared down an entire room of vengeful Vish, and told them they couldn't have me? That same man who sprung me from my cold Vish jail cell by invoking an ancient custom that bonded him to me for life, thus relinquishing his own freedom until I drew my last breath?

The answer came swiftly. I'd pick the second Aiden—the man who chose to save me at great cost to himself.

Are you lonely, Aiden? I'd asked. *Not anymore…* he'd answered.

I wasn't lonely anymore, either.

Letting go of my insecurities and fears freed me to give my trust to Aiden. I closed my eyes and opened my mouth.

The salty, bitter taste of pre-cum exploded on my taste buds as his weeping slit crossed my tongue. Arousal made me greedy, and I hollowed my cheeks and sucked him in. Without the use of my hands, my lips, tongue, and throat were forced to service him. Being Aiden, he worked me to the limit.

"Is this how you imagined it, Jase? All those years ago, lying right there on that bed with your hand in your pants, is this how you saw yourself sucking my cock?"

Aiden popped his cock from my mouth to allow me to answer him, and a thread of drool went with his saliva-coated organ, dangling from the tip. "No," I answered, truthfully. "This is… much better than any fantasy."

His length re-entered my mouth with a forceful thrust that rocked me back on my knees. Jesus. I shouldn't have admitted that; he already had such a fat head. And knew how to play me. His thumbs skimmed along my cheeks, and his fingers tangled knots in my hair. Holding my head in place, he proceeded to fuck my mouth until I couldn't breathe, and my eyes watered. As I sucked his shaft and took his inches into my throat, my dick bobbed and bounced, painfully hard and neglected. Slippery fluid from my slit slimed everything it touched as he dragged my face forward to fuck deeper into my throat.

Desperate for more than just air, I fought him. I struggled against his hold, just like I had the first time he fucked me. I was so turned on. Grabbing a handful of hair, he yanked my head back and pulled his dripping-with-saliva dick from my mouth. Choking on my own slobber and gasping for air, I finally coughed out, "Bastard!"

"Yeah, but I'm your bastard."

He didn't bother to disguise his smug tone. That arrogance reminded me why I hated him. Twisting my shoulders, I tried to free my head from his unyielding grasp.

"Don't think so, baby. I'm not done with you."

Keeping one hand on my hair and catching me under my arm with the other, he jerked me to my feet. My knees almost buckled. Overtaxed muscles burned as the blood rushed back into my legs. Unaccustomed as I was to kneeling with my legs spread wide, my thighs ached. But not as badly as my mistreated jaw. Despite those sparks of agony, my dick remained at full attention, thudding painfully into Aiden's jean-clad hip as he pulled me roughly against him.

Almost as brutally as he'd fucked my face, he kissed me. He scraped his teeth along my jaw, sucked up red marks on my skin and bit my neck. "Fuck!" I hissed, and kicked his shin, hurting only my toe. He didn't take kindly to that kick and kneed me back. Not hard, but, yeah. That was a warning. His tongue invaded my mouth. I couldn't help myself—I'd wanted him forever and would never get enough—and I kissed him back. The combination of anger and lust made me wild. Kisses suddenly weren't enough; I needed to sink my teeth in to flesh. I tried to bite him.

"Nice try, darling," he growled after he tore his lips away from the reach of my teeth. Then he spun me around, aimed me at the bed, and gave me a shove. "You're not going to win round three, either, Mr. Kelly."

"You prick!" I cursed, after bouncing once or twice on the firm motel mattress.

"Yeah, yeah, you told me that already." Holding me down by the clasp between my bound hands, Aiden used his knees to push on the backs of mine which helped me get my legs up onto the bed. Once there, he held me in a most undignified position: Arms chained up behind my back, face down, ass in the air, knees spread wide, and balanced precariously at the edge of the mattress.

He could do anything to me. Anything at all. The bastard.

After letting go of the clasp between the cuffs, his big, rough hands landed on my ass. Then pulled my cheeks apart. As I tried to squirm away, he dug his fingers in and split me open. "Hold still!"

I stilled. I knew what was good for me. The ache of unrelieved arousal spread out from my groin to the pit of my stomach. *Please fuck me*, I prayed. *Please shove your fingers in me, and open me up for your long cock…*

Not so long ago, he promised to have his hands in my pants all the time. Granted, there hadn't been much time since then, but I'd wanted that. I craved the rough penetration of his thick, calloused fingers. Arching my back like a wanton, I did my best to encourage him. Instead of fingering me, Aiden pushed my ass higher and licked from my balls up to my crack, his tongue gliding right across my hole.

"Holy Jesus, fuck!" I shouted.

"Like my tongue licking your ass, Jase?"

I might have squeaked out a string of incomprehensible gibberish. Then his tongue returned, warm and wet on my hole—then *in* my hole—and I couldn't

even sputter gibberish. *Fuck, fuck, fuck!* It felt amazing. So filthy dirty. His tongue, pointy, soft and wet, dipped into me repeatedly. Oh, my god. Whimpers and moans escaped with every stab of insane pleasure. No one had ever rimmed me before. Jesus.

Aiden ate me out thoroughly, but his tongue, as incredible as it was, wasn't enough to bring me to completion. The need to come, to empty my balls, made my head throb as well as my dick. "Aiden…" I moaned.

"You need something more? A tongue is never quite enough, is it?"

How the hell would I know? Lying wouldn't get me what I needed—that I did know. "Yes," I mumbled into the sheet.

The wonderful, stabbing tongue disappeared, along with the hands, but I could hear Aiden undressing behind me. The mattress dipped as he climbed up behind me. Taking me by the hips, he moved me so I lay bowed down lengthwise on the bed instead of across it. I had no idea what he would do to me next. Anticipation curled deliciously in my gut. I admired his forearm, the corded muscles covered with that golden skin and pale, reddish hair as he reached under the pillow and pulled out the lube.

Thank god.

After my first two tries at anal sex, especially the disastrous cherry-popping one, I never thought I'd ever like getting done up the ass. My desire for it now embarrassed me. Aiden had only fucked me a couple times, but already he could easily make me grovel for it.

Aiden's hand snuck under the other pillow. I followed the movement in confusion. A dark purple object came into my line of vision. For a second, my heart stopped. That was a… what *was* that? *A dildo, you nob—what do you think it is?* A powerful wave of arousal tightened my abdominal muscles, and my dick jerked.

Was he going to stick that thing in me?

Apparently not. He spread me open again and melted my brain with another hard lick, tongue spearing into my eager hole. Even while shuddering with pleasure, I couldn't take my eyes off the silicone toy in front of me.

"I know you see it, Jase. Tell me you want it. Tell me you want me to fuck you with it. Tell me you want it buried in your ass."

Not in this lifetime! His tongue dipped in again, and then swirled around and around, driving me insane. I don't know how long I hovered on the edge of

orgasm. My eyes focused and then unfocused. It didn't look all that big. Smaller than Aiden's cock, for sure. *Did I want it in me?*

Did Aiden want to cram it in me?

Reading my mind, Aiden answered my unspoken question. "I would love to stick that inside you. I want to watch it slide in and out, and then in and out, again. I want to fuck you with it."

"Oh, god."

"Tell me you want me to fuck you with it."

The evil bastard. And why was I hesitating? There was no need to feel embarrassed. Aiden sure as hell didn't. Working on convincing me, he sent a flurry of little tongue jabs into my aching hole. It begged to be filled. I ground my forehead into the mattress. Yes, I wanted it. His tongue had loosened me, and it would slide right in. "Please?" I asked, scrunching my eyes tightly shut.

"Say it."

Holy Jesus. He was going to make me beg for it? Of course he was. Aiden rolled a ball of spit onto his tongue and worked it into me, making me even looser and wetter. My body began to shake. "Please," I moaned. "Fuck me with the… the d-dildo."

"Anything for you." His tongue thrust into me again. "I love how you taste."

I'd forgotten the cuffs while he tongued me. Totally forgot I had hands. Now that I remembered, I twisted my fingers together until they hurt.

Reaching a hand on either side of me, Aiden retrieved both the lube and the dildo. A second later the cool, slippery tip of the toy prodded my entrance, and coated me with cool lube. The dildo disappeared only to return a moment later, but lengthwise, pressed into my crack and against my hole and perineum. Aiden leaned over me, squashed me into the mattress, and swivelled his hips so that the dildo pressed into several places at once. My arms and wrists complained, the weight uncomfortable, but all my nerves lower down flared to life.

As I groaned, he reached between us and removed the long, hard shape.

"Kiss me," he demanded.

I craned my neck as he leaned in and we shared a wet, dirty kiss full of tongues. The tongue that had been in my ass. Some med student I was. I didn't care. I only cared about getting more.

The kiss ended abruptly, and on Aiden's terms. He then pushed on my thigh until I tucked one leg underneath me. The tip of the dildo, hard and unmistakable, wiggled, and pressed into my unresisting entrance. "Tuck your other leg up."

As I did, Aiden nudged the lube-slicked silicone harder, working the inflexible material into me. It was warmer than I expected.

"Oh, yeah," Aiden said. "I love you all trussed up and spread open for me to do with as I please." I noticed his breath hitched a little. Possessive bugger. But it only made me hornier, knowing he was getting off shoving that thing into me. Twisting and pushing, he worked the length of the dildo into me, and I rode the burn as I strained around it. "Look at your tight hole stretching to take it."

His words shocked my fingers apart, and they smarted where I'd crushed them. I moaned into the sheet. Aiden levered himself up behind me and began rocking the object in and out, slowly fucking me with it. I bore down against the intrusion and my clenching muscles finally relaxed.

"That's it," Aiden whispered. "Take it."

As if I had a choice. It didn't feel as good as Aiden's cock, despite being smaller. It was colder. Impersonal. But I was desperate and rocked back against it, forcing it deeper.

"Yes… Fuck yourself on it, Jase. C'mon, do it."

I'd never been so horny. Or perverted. Using my shoulders and knees, I rocked, helping the dildo fuck in and out and making myself crazy. As good as it was, it wasn't enough. Not even when Aiden worked against my momentum to drive it deeper and thrust it faster.

"Aiden!" I cried, barely holding on to my sanity. "Please! More—need more. Need you to fuck me."

"You want my cock?"

"God, yes. Before I—I can't take this. You're killing me!"

"You beg so pretty."

After the next thrust, Aiden pulled out the dildo, leaving me empty and bereft. Missing it, I whimpered. A second later, he sheathed himself inside me to the root in one, brutal thrust. Shocked, I cried out at the fusion of pain and pleasure and jerked violently. The added stretch of his wider width both hurt and felt incredible. He didn't give me time to get used to him. He simply

proceeded to fuck me with long, powerful strokes that battered me body and soul. Taking me by the hips, he pounded relentlessly as I cried my pleasure with each fiery drag of his cockhead across my prostate.

My secret desire was no longer secret. I was his. Tied, dominated, and used. My body wasn't mine anymore, it was Aiden's.

This time, he didn't command me to give it up to him. After a few breathless seconds, I climaxed explosively, shooting ropes of cum to soak the sheets as he pounded my ass, and kept on pounding me until finally, as my overstimulated body shook and trembled, he came, yelling my name and dripping sweat onto my back.

In my blissed-out head, there was no room for embarrassment. Tremors wracked my fucked-out body. No fantasy could touch this. I loved everything he did to me.

Before collapsing on me, he released the thing that held my wrists together behind my back. My arms thudded uselessly to my sides, limp and aching. Aiden fell on me, panting hot breaths across my sweat-dampened back. The breaths were followed by kisses. Squeezed inside my channel, his cock remained half-hard and defiant. On powerful arms, he levered himself up, and I braced myself for the burn I'd feel when he pulled out.

Instead of pulling out, he thrust into me a few more times until his dick finally softened. Then, without warning or apology, he pulled out. Bastard! I gasped and winced, but the kisses traveling down my spine took the sting from the sharp edge of our pleasure.

"You're so fucking sexy," Aiden whispered against my tailbone.

I startled when Aiden worked his thumbs back between my cheeks. "What are you doing?" I sputtered.

"Having one last taste of you." He pushed up on my thighs with his shoulder, raising my ass up slightly, and then, prying me open, swiped his tongue across my sore, gaping, cum-soaked hole.

A violent aftershock rocked me, and I collapsed, unable to move my arms or even hold my head up. "Jesus," I moaned.

Forcing sharper moans, Aiden worked two of his fingers into my slick hole and pushed himself along the length of my back. He firmly thrust into my fucked-loose channel a few times before sliding his digits back out and wiping his sticky ejaculate on my buttock. Unable to coordinate my limbs enough to

move, I slid in the puddle of my jizz coating the sheet, while his groin slid in the juices leaking from my rear.

The bastard had totally undone me. I was so physically sated and mentally delirious, that, with Aiden nuzzled protectively behind me, I sank into sleep without thinking a single negative thought.

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For once, I woke first. We'd unglued our sticky bodies from each other in our sleep and my waking hadn't disturbed Aiden. Sunlight still shone through the middle crack in the curtains. I hadn't slept long, just enough to make up for our early start. A stray beam of light glimmered on the red in Aiden's hair and eyebrows—I'd always been partial to gingers. *Wonder why?* A few silky strands lay across the pillow, and I gently ran them between my thumb and fingertip.

Me and Aiden. Together. Unbelievable, really.

Especially some of that… togetherness.

I should be embarrassed. Well, more than I was. The things he'd done to me! Raising my hand into the sunbeam, I eyed the thick leather cuff and steel ring with a secret rush of thrill. The way my ass felt, raw and filled with Aiden's cum, definitely demanded a cool soak. Did I need permission to take the cuffs off? Was there a protocol for this? Rules to be followed?

"They look good on you," Aiden mumbled beside me.

Damn. I'd hoped for more than a minute of quiet contemplation. "Can I take them off?"

"No. Never."

"But—"

"I put them on, I take them off."

"Oh." He rolled to his side and covered my legs with his heavy thigh.

"Make with some cuddles, and I might release you."

My lip twitched. "Big, bad Aiden wants to cuddle?"

"Yes. Get over here."

I liked how he was man enough to ask for what he wanted. "Okay." *Such hardships were best endured with grace, right?* Ignoring the painful twinge in

my ass, I rolled to face him and met his lips for a sweet, lingering kiss. After the kiss, he freed me from my bondage.

While kissing the inside of my wrist, he examined me for damage. A faint red smudge remained; a pleasant reminder. "Were you scared?"

"A little."

"And now?"

"I…" *What was I?* "Not sure. Tell you later?"

Smiling, he kissed my nose. "Okay, but don't stress yourself over it—talk to me."

I wasn't stressed—confused maybe. A bit alarmed by my reaction. Nothing a little time and contemplation wouldn't sort out.

Of course, I didn't get that time right then, I had to make with more of the promised cuddles and a few kisses before Aiden dragged me into the shower instead of letting me hog the tub. For the first time in my adult life, hands other than mine washed me. Thoroughly, and with no regard to private body cavities. "You have no shame," I complained.

"None whatsoever."

His soapy hands lathering up my dick had me hard in seconds. He jacked me for a minute, teasing me, then left me hanging when he moved on to wash my hair. He graciously permitted me to wash his back, but nothing else, the lout. Before he nudged me out from under the spray to rinse off, I snuck in a few hasty gropes. Aiden had a very fine ass.

Would he let me, one day…?

Sharing the bathroom, drying each other's backs, seemed casual, yet intimate, like we'd been lovers forever. Falling in love with Aiden would be dangerous. Already loving him as a person, as a friend, wasn't the same as loving him as a man. And what about Aiden? Being stuck with me wasn't the same as wanting to be with me.

Was it too late to guard my heart?

Ruining the easy intimacy of showering together and dressing together, Aiden's phone pinged, announcing the arrival of a text message. I froze.

Aiden snatched up his phone and read the message, a frown creasing his brows.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. T'Loren wants me to check my secure email." He set his phone down. "Where's my laptop?"

I handed it to him from where it lay on the unused bed. Catching the motel's WiFi and logging in only took a moment, and when he was done, I peeked over his shoulder. For a second I thought the message was coded; I'd never seen written Vichyssoise—Shalash'En—before. Looked as snaky as it sounded.

"What does he say?"

"You were right—I'm going to be saying that all the time, aren't I? Morgan owns a rather large chunk of New Mexico scrubland—including mineral rights for both silver and turquoise. T'Loren says he doesn't know how Morgan managed it. There's some sort of state trust the land should be part of, but isn't."

That was Gramps for you. Always wheeling and dealing. Bribing. "Nearby?"

"Couple hours in a fast car. Just outside of Santa Fe on the outskirts of a place called the Cerrillos Mining District. He's attached some files and links for the area. Apparently a mountain there is the site of the largest known prehistoric mining operation and the largest single deposit of turquoise ever found in North America."

A tingle of presentment ran along my spine. "That would explain the necklace."

"Sure would." Aiden contemplated the screen and shook his head. "GPS coordinates. Didn't I tell you he'd dig those up?"

"Yeah, but anyone can find that out. What I really want to know is the name of the neighbor's cat." I refused to be impressed by T'Loren's obviously thorough job. "I have a GPS app on my phone. We could go right now."

Aiden opened and skimmed through an attachment. A scan of a legal document complete with stamps and seals. "Let's wait until first light. We shouldn't go anywhere unprepared—I have no idea what this country looks like. Tonight we can see about finding some hiking boots, backpacks, and maybe a Garmin so we don't get lost. We could be ready to head out early."

Leaving in the morning was probably the smarter idea. Didn't mean I wasn't dying of excitement. "Why don't you go out and hunt up your Garmin

thingy and find a place that sells boots, and I'll read all the stuff he sent you?" My curiosity was piqued, to say the least. Hopefully, he'd agree. My fingers twitched, eager for the keyboard.

He turned on the swivel chair. "You'd like that? Reading all that stuff? By the looks of it, he was very thorough."

"Hell, yeah."

He gave me the eyeball inquisition as he thought it over. "If I find a place with some decent Chinese, do you want to eat in? Or go out?"

Sure, ask the bookworm if he'd rather stuff his face with take-out and read up on a very interesting subject, or drive around aimlessly looking for a restaurant that would only be full of strangers? Gee, let me think about that. "Read every word, eat dinner in bed with you, and watch a really bad movie." Would that bother Aiden, staying in? Would he find me boring? More boring? "Unless you'd rather go out?"

"Are you kidding? You're my perfect date." He vacated the chair of power and grabbed the car keys. "I'll try not to be gone too long. Any food items on the banned for life list?"

Only too many to count. But Chinese was pretty safe. "No dumplings. Does anyone know what's really in them?"

"Pork? Shrimp?"

"Cats. Executed political dissidents…"

Aiden sighed and shook his head in disgust. "You'd starve to death on T'El."

From what I'd gleaned from my childhood pestering of any available Vish, they were mostly vegetarian. They did favor a large chicken-like bird they raised, but otherwise ate disgusting things, like huge grub worms they farmed *on purpose*. No wonder I turned out to be a picky eater—it was all their fault, grossing me out like that. "I am never eating those worms. Never."

"You don't know what you're missing. They're tasty." He made a slurping sound. "Especially raw. You ever had sashimi?"

I almost threw up in my mouth. Now I didn't even want Chinese. "Fuck off. Seriously. Don't you have things to go find?"

After he finished putting his shoes on, he kissed me. Not just a peck goodbye, either, but a real one, slow and dirty, and I forgot all about wriggling,

puppy-sized alien worms. For a bad-ass, half-alien, rail-gun-making soldier of ill repute, Aiden was awfully touchy-feely and affectionate. At the door, he paused to check the size of my shoe before opening it. "Lock this behind me and make sure you don't open it for anyone but me."

In the car, out on the open highway, it had been easy to ignore Aiden's comment that day when he'd taken me to see the gate. Here, and now, with T'Loren sending coded messages to Aiden in an alien language, I realized, again, that hiding from the truth never made anything better. Mexico and Guatemala had reinforced that lesson. Reaching behind Aiden, I pushed the door shut.

No more prevaricating. "Just who are these Vish that would be just as happy if we didn't find the key?"

For a moment, I thought Aiden might try darting out the door to escape my question. Then his shoulders relaxed. "Do you remember every damned thing?"

"Pretty much."

Tossing the keys back onto the desk, Aiden sat back down in the swivel chair. "Things have… really gone to shit the past few years."

"Troubles between the North and South?"

"As always. And I'll tell you, there's a hell of a lot more of them, than us."

"What's with them, anyway? They should shut the hell up. It's not like they're the first line of defense. Not like they're gonna be the next dinner course for the G'Reth." Other than being somewhat reptilian in appearance and twice the size of a Vish, I had no idea what their horrible enemy looked like. And I didn't want to.

Distress clouded Aiden's features, and I sat down, uncomfortably, on the edge of the bed. "I'm… afraid, Jason."

What? Aiden afraid? "Of…?"

"It's been almost fifty years since I set foot on T'El. Even for the Vish, that's a long time. I'm afraid of… what I might find on the other side of the gate, if we should actually find the key. I'm afraid I'll find there's nothing to go home to."

"But how can that be? Don't you have… weapons and technology and stuff? You're so advanced—"

"We may be advanced, but so are they. Maybe more so. They have weapons like you couldn't imagine, not to mention their bodies are like weapons in themselves. And they—" he sucked in a breath. "They're… *evil.* I don't know how else to put it."

Had Morgan known this? I sure as hell didn't. "Evil?"

"Not in the biblical sense. But remorseless and conscienceless. You know there are other gates on other worlds, right?"

"Yes." Not how many, but T'El wasn't the only one, obviously. The G'Reth had to live somewhere.

"You saw the keys. You know they're meant to come out." I nodded. "So what do you think happens if you switch the keys around in the posts?"

Oh, hell. "You go to other places?"

"Exactly. And the reason we're here, the reason we've always been here, secret visitors to Earth, is so we can make sure that doesn't happen."

I had a sick feeling in my stomach. Like I'd eaten grub worms. "Because…?"

"You might open a gate to a place you wouldn't much like."

Letting myself go limp, I fell backwards on the bed. "Such as the G'Reth home world?"

"Yes. Or other places not particularly hospitable to delicate human anatomy. With life forms and pathogens that could destroy your world, because you don't know how to deal with them. Humans don't appreciate the Earth. You have no idea how blessed you are—you have this amazing fucking planet, nicer than T'El, and you treat it like shit. There are beings who would just love to take over the job of appreciating your pretty, fertile, water-world if you're not going to."

Ashamed of humans as a whole, I covered my face with my arm. "Like the G'Reth."

"Oh, no. Not like the G'Reth. They don't want your planet. What they don't want is *you*."

Once you know something, you can't not know it… If I were as smart as my IQ test claimed, I'd plug my ears. But curiosity killed the cat, and more than a few humans, and likely me, one day. "So what do the G'Reth want?"

"Best we can tell? They want to be alone in the universe. Or universes—we're not sure we even share the same one."

"You mean—"

"Their goal is extermination, Jase. They have no quarrel with us. We have never done anything to them, other than try to negotiate with them, which is impossible. We don't even know if we've successfully communicated our peaceful intentions to them. Some scholars, and not just on T'El, speculate that they have some sort of belief, or religion, that demands they be the only ones to exist—they really are that single-minded."

"Jesus."

"They have destroyed other worlds—killed every sentient being on them. Destroyed the environment down to the dust that coats the bones of the dead. They want to destroy T'El. And as soon as they discover Earth exists, that there's another world infested with insignificant mites, they're going to do everything they can to get here."

As I lay there feeling sicker by the second, the information sank in. If they could defeat the Vish, then yes, we'd be like… *mites* to them. "Why don't you destroy the gates, then?"

A harsh, merciless sound came from Aiden's throat. "Because we don't want to be cut off from everyone else who is not G'Reth. Because if we isolate ourselves, we also isolate any other world that might need help or could offer us help. And mostly, because we don't really know how, not without destroying the world it's on."

Forgetting my achy backside, I sat up. "You don't know how?" Had I heard that right? "If you made them, how could you not know how to dismantle them?"

Aiden stared at me. "What makes you think we made them?"

My head throbbed. "You didn't make them."

"No. We know how to operate the gates better than the G'Reth, and have *evolved* the ability to use the gate as a weapon, which are the only two reasons we're still standing. But we are deathly afraid they will, one day, figure it all out, before us. Or one of the other civilized planets. We have never opened the gate to the G'Reth home world, but they keep breaking through to our side—somehow."

The next logical step to that reasoning almost made me stop breathing. "Then they could, maybe, break through to… *here*, right?" Now Aiden's

comment in the garage made sense. "So that's why… *whoever*… doesn't want us to find the key."

And maybe they're right?

Did I agree with that? Because if I did…

"Don't fall into that same false sense of security, Jase, like they have. The G'Reth have managed to come through to T'El when *all four* of the keys have been removed from our gate. They will eventually find you." Aiden looked unbearably sad, head hanging down. "Find *us.*" He looked me in the eye. "And when they do, we want you to be ready."

"But if we figured out how to destroy the gate…"

"We haven't managed that. We barely know how to move one, and it takes an extraordinary effort—we're talking hundreds of Vish with my talent. No other world that we know of has ever moved one… *successfully.*"

"So removing the keys, hiding them…?"

"Only cuts you off from those who would help you. And I believe you're ready now—you humans, *us* humans—to access all the worlds full of knowledge."

"The knowledge Morgan locked away on the other side of the gate."

"They're fools, Jase. They've never fought the G'Reth, never seen the worlds they've killed for no reason other than that they exist. It's easy to believe an ideology when you've never seen the reality of it. The Vish radicals think that by hiding their heads in the sand, Earth will remain safe. But you won't. You just won't be prepared when they find you. And they *will* find you."

We stared at each other, Aiden and I. He waited for me to pick a side and I waited for my brain to catch up on processing the big bundle of information it had just been given. What did I believe? Strangely, I didn't have to think about it for more than a minute or two—I simply couldn't imagine not learning new things and trying to hide my head in the sand.

Suppressing knowledge had never served us well. Never. Just think of all those great minds that had been put to death for blasphemy just for saying the Earth revolved around the Sun. With a jerk of my head at the chair I wanted for myself, I stood. This time I kissed Aiden goodbye. "Then we better get busy if we're going to find it before them."

****

The old mining road had washed out in several places. Deep gorges and gullies of loose rock left behind from decades of flash floods made our hike slow and precarious. We'd left the Mustang behind what felt like miles ago. We'd been plodding along since the crack of dawn, with backpacks full of water and lunches and wearing new hiking boots that looked and felt more like heavy-duty running shoes. Mine fit so well, I didn't think I'd get a single blister.

Aiden reveled in his foul mood. So he couldn't sneak off without me, I'd hid the car key. Good thing too, or I'd be fuming in the motel room right now and plotting ways to kill Mr. O'Rourke the next time I saw him. With all the walking I'd done in the past two months, I was in pretty good shape. Still had to hustle to keep up with Aiden, though, and my legs were going to pay for it later.

"You should have stayed at the motel," he griped at me, as I slid on a patch of loose scree.

"Sorry, no. We're in this together."

"Jesus, Jase. How am I going to keep you safe out here? Couldn't you just do what I asked?"

Out here, was rocky, exposed, and secluded. Nobody'd ever find our corpses. T'Loren had called Aiden at about three in the morning to warn him to expect company, hence his attempt to leave me behind, sleeping in ignorant bliss. Since I'd barely slept before T'Loren's call, and not at all after, my cranky bomb was primed to explode at the slightest provocation.

Right now, it was ticking fast and leaking steam.

When his sneaky plan to leave me behind at the hotel failed, Aiden tried to convince me to hide in an old, abandoned gas station from the heyday of Route 66, but I wouldn't have it. In the midst of our blistering argument, I told him I knew about the T'Eth bond—how could I not? I'd had to agree, even if I didn't quite get the full import of it. I'd been in shock. That asshole Vish Chief Justice took particular joy in telling me all about it from the outside of my jail cell. That's why I'd run. Mostly.

Gramps's moral compass may have been shot to hell, but mine wasn't. The Vish weren't the only ones who valued their family name. Restoring the honor to mine meant a lot to me. I wanted to be the one to return the stolen key and right at least one of Morgan's wrongs.

So I'd told Aiden that we'd go into battle for the key together, on the rocky mountains of New Mexico, and if he didn't like it, too damned bad, he should've thought twice before making such a life-altering vow. He was still livid. I wondered if his shiny red hair could spontaneously combust into open flame.

Stopping to take a drink from my water bottle, I pulled out the tiny, folding binoculars Aiden had bought me last night. The topographical survey and the Google Earth picture didn't show up well on my phone, but I'd seen evidence of buildings when I'd looked at them on the bigger screen of Aiden's laptop. An abandoned silver mine—how perfect was that for hiding the key?

Aiden spotted the mine camp at the same time as I did, through his own binoculars. We were quite high up, and after examining the mine, Aiden reversed the binoculars to check back the way we'd come. I didn't see anyone following us, and we had a bird's-eye view.

"I don't suppose I can convince you to stay here? Hidden?"

"Nope."

"Jason—"

Returning my water to the side pouch of my pack, I stomped past him. "We're wasting time." Although truthfully, I was nervous and on edge. Would this *company* T'Loren spoke of be armed with good old human guns? Or those creepy gate weapons made from strange alien substances like Aiden's, presently humming a secret tune inside his pack? When I stood right next to Aiden, I could *feel* it.

I wasn't sure how I felt about that. I sighed deeply. Some days I wished I'd been born into a normal family.

No you don't…

By the time we reached the old mine buildings, my legs felt like over-done spaghetti. Being a prick, Aiden didn't speak to me the entire way. Granted, he was always close by to lend a hand, help me over rough spots, but he was clearly sulking. Probably worrying as well, because that's what Aiden did—worry. Took this joyful hike for me to realize that.

"You will stay *right here* while I look around."

Seemed a safe place. My back was up against a massive bolder in a pile of huge rocks, with a handy crevice to duck into, if needed. Plus, I had shade.

Aiden wouldn't ditch me now, not here, so I dug out a granola bar to restore some of my flagging energy, and one for Aiden to have later. *Looking around* was actually Aiden-speak for *wander around trying to detect alien relics with my secret Vishy superpowers*. Since I wouldn't be of any use to him, I leaned on the rock in a tired daze and ate my snack.

He returned a few minutes later, a frown creasing his brows.

"Anything?"

"I'm not… sure."

Which meant *maybe*. Could it really be here? After all these years? Almost instantly, I felt reinvigorated. I handed Aiden his granola bar. "What did you feel? Is it here?"

"I can't tell if I felt something, or if I'm imagining I did, because I want it so desperately."

"Can you show me where you felt it?"

"Over here." He glanced around, checking the area, before leading me from my safe spot. Really, the Vish did paranoia like no one else. He ate the bar in two bites and led me to a flat area beside the largest of the sagging buildings.

Broken boards, bits of rusted metal and old chains littered the ground as far as I could see. Did they just drop everything and leave when the silver played out? The wooden silo-shaped building looked ready to fall down on us at the first sharp breeze. The ragged mountainside was dotted with mining holes. The ground could also have holes anywhere and everywhere—the Bureau of Land Management said people fell in them and died from time to time. We'd need to watch our step.

Slipping off his heavy pack, Aiden got down on his hands and knees and actually put his ear to the ground. Trying not to make a sound, I held my breath until he got back to his feet. "I could almost swear…" he said, letting his words trail off.

"Well, this is a mine. If it's here, it would be underground."

"Fuck."

"Isn't that why you bought those headlamp things?" We each had two. "So we could go in the mine?"

"Yeah. But these tunnels could go on forever. We could easily get lost down there."

Aiden didn't normally sound so defeated. "Should we—is there anyone we can call to help us?"

He shook his head. Of course not—they were aliens. Sort of. How could I call them aliens when they'd been here almost as long as we had?

There had to be a logical way to solve this problem. "Then let's make a map, a grid, and search them one at a time. We can mark our way inside with that roll of duct tape if we need to."

He stared at the mountainside, at the endless holes dug everywhere for a moment, then looked back at me. "Is that something you could do—make this grid?"

"Sure," I said with a shrug. "I have my binder."

"You packed that heavy thing all the way up here?"

Duh. "We might have needed it." And no way in hell was I going to let anyone else take it—it was *mine*. I unslung my pack from my aching shoulders. "Let's find some shade." It wasn't overly hot yet, being only spring, but neither of us were used to the sun and Aiden, well, he was a redhead. We sat on a rusty piece of equipment of some sort in the lee of the mountain, near what I speculated was the mine's main entrance. That, at least, had been boarded up, unlike the series of death traps dug all over the place. I unzipped my binder across my knees and flipped to the tab for New Mexico.

There, pinned to a piece of cardboard, safe inside its clear sleeve, lay the necklace. The turquoise, in the bright light, was stunning, the silver just enough to hold the stones together. My heart did a little flip. My toe tapped a steady beat into the dirt. Morgan wanted me to know, I was sure of it. Forget the postcards, had the pendant really been the clue all along?

"You're brain's going a mile a minute, isn't it?"

"What?" I answered Aiden absently, and pulled the cardboard from the sleeve. The stones were beautiful, shot through with threadlike seams of other sparkly minerals, perhaps even gold. I untwisted the ties that held it down and once free, handed it to Aiden. "We're looking in the wrong place."

Dangling it by the chain, Aiden looked at the… artifact. Because that's what it was, an artifact. Then he looked at me.

"Put it on me."

Giving me a little shiver as his fingers ghosted on the back of my neck, Aiden clasped the chain and the solid weight of silver and turquoise settled against my upper chest.

"Suits you," he said.

"Once we're done here, it's going where it belongs. In a museum." Feeling almost shaky with excitement, I returned my binder to my pack and zipped up the pouch.

"If this is the wrong place, where's the right place?" Lost in my own excitement, I hadn't noticed Aiden's. His fingers were twitching, and his eyes were bright.

"The caves."

"There are caves here?"

"I think so." T'Loren, bless his cold, alien heart, had documented the subject to death. There were maps upon maps, including some from the Bureau of Land Management. Since they were all gleaned from public records, Aiden let me email them to myself, and I'd saved a folder of goodies on my phone.

I flipped through the images until I found the one I wanted. It was hard to see, but at least I could make out the general direction. The reason I'd even noticed it, was because some long-ago inquisitive person had scribbled notes on it. *Indian village? Caves. Dig here.* That's what I think the scribbles said, because they'd been written with a splotchy pen and old-fashioned ink by someone with poor penmanship.

Passing Aiden my phone, I said, "There—I think."

He stood up, studied the scanned image, oriented himself to the map and handed me back my phone. It would be a long walk, but my mom had always said, *if you can see it, Jase, it's not too far to walk to.* She said it did not apply to the moon. Boy, had I been one disappointed kid.

When we set out this time, Aiden talked to me. About everything and nothing in particular, but it was nice. Who cared if we were avoiding all the big issues? We ate our lunch, and afterward, Aiden used the binoculars to pick out the best route, all the while consulting the map.

By the time we stumbled upon the long neglected path, I almost didn't see it. My legs ached. My back and shoulders ached. I didn't mention it, but my ass ached. No more letting Aiden fuck the hell out of me before undertaking any form of strenuous exercise. Ever.

Unlike the mine, the place looked devoid of recent human interest, as in the last century. No rusty metal bits laying around, no broken glass, no tire marks. Once again, my interest perked up.

"Look at this," Aiden said, standing by a pile of rocks.

Only it wasn't a pile. It was too orderly. Like all the other piles nearby. And there were crumbling, handmade bricks mixed in with the rocks. "I'm getting a bad feeling about this."

Shaking his head, Aiden bent down to take a closer look. "They destroyed, or at the very least hid, the existence of an entire archaeological site so it wouldn't interfere with any mining rights."

Coming up behind him, I touched his shoulder. "We'll report this as soon as we get back with the key."

We didn't linger, which was fortunate, because it took us an hour to find the cave, it was that well hidden. Not by man, but by nature. The cave, a long, narrow slit, went down into the mountain at a sharp grade, and unless you wound your way through the labyrinth of the small canyon, you'd never see it. Without the map, we never would have found it.

We did linger outside the cave, to catch our breath and rehydrate. Aiden, once again, grew quiet. His ear listened for something only he could hear. I left him to it. Every muscle I had burned from exertion—and here I thought I'd been in good shape. Aiden slid his pack from his shoulders and lowered it to the ground. I expected him to dig out the fancy headlight gear, but he strode over to me instead, grabbed the sides of my face and kissed me.

Okay. I went with it. What can I say? My mouth was a little dry, but the kiss still felt amazing. When he pulled back, his grin spread from ear to ear. "It's here."

My smile grew to match his. "Yeah?"

"Oh, yeah."

Even now, I was reluctant to leave my pack—okay, my binder—behind. The entrance looked too narrow for the bulk, and I'd be clumsy with it sticking out, always in my way.

"Leave it here. We'll take mine and only carry stuff we might need."

We spent a few minutes reorganizing Aiden's pack and drinking some of our lukewarm water. Rope, the extra headlamps, a small first-aid kit, and the

two water bottles went into Aiden's pack, along with a lovely wooden box just the right size for a certain key.

"Where'd you get that?"

Aiden tucked the box in last. "A gift from T'Loren. It's Heartwood."

"He made that?"

"Don't be so surprised. He's not an ogre."

That was still debatable, but Aiden's uncle had a real talent. "Ready?"

"Forty-odd years ready, baby." Grinning madly, he adjusted my headlamp and switched both lights on. Shoulder to shoulder, we both peered down into the depths of the dark slit in the rock.

Great. A wooden ladder.

"Big, bad Aiden can go first."

"You chicken-shit."

So? Sue me. "We come across any packs of stray dogs, I'm your man. That," I pointed, "is all yours."

The rope came back out of the pack, and Aiden knotted a harness at one end and slipped it over his shoulders. "Think you can hold me if the ladder breaks? Or do you want me to brace it around that rock first?"

"Do the rock thing." Not that I didn't think I could hold him, which I could, but because if he fell, I worried I'd get jerked forward, fall on my face, and lose him.

A few adjustments later, and I had the rope secured around my shoulders, and Aiden was shimmying down the ancient Pueblo ladder. I braced myself, expecting to hear the sounds of splintering wood and a frightened scream at any second.

"You can let go," came Aiden's voice from not too far away. "It's only about ten feet down."

"Should I leave the rope tied up here somehow, just in case?"

"No, just come on down. You can always climb up on my shoulders if we can't get back out using the ladder."

I turned around, knelt, and placed my foot on the first rung.

"Jesus, Jase. You gotta see this."

I quickly scooted half-way down the ladder. Then sucked in a surprised breath. Aiden hadn't been kidding. Only a few rungs later, I was on the hard packed, long-dead animal bone-littered floor, letting my eyes adjust to the low light. When they did, wonder set my heart to thudding in awe. "Oh, my god."

"Archaeologists are going to have kittens when they see this."

There were Petroglyphs. Everywhere. In pristine condition, the pigments as bright as the day they were painted. Deer, lots of deer—running everywhere. And a big cat with freakishly large feet. Funny-shaped heads with no bodies. Spirals and snakes and a collection of symbols whose meaning, I had no idea. "Hey—that's Kokopelli!" This was better than finding an untouched tomb in Egypt. "He sure has a big dick." Yes, I had the mind of a twelve year old, but really, he did have a huge schlong—even for a fertility deity.

"This is amazing," Aiden said, voice filled with wonder. "Look at them all."

There were a great many images of men with spears and axes, out hunting. I wandered along the walls, aiming my headlight from painting to painting. A few big-eyed aliens with long dresses showed up in a few pictures. "Now, you can't tell me that those people aren't Vish. I mean, come on. Look at their faces."

Aiden walked over to look in the direction I'd aimed my head, and the light on top of it. He put his arm around my shoulder. It was nice. "Could be."

"Could be? You suck, you know that?"

"Why yes, Jase, I do know I suck. I think I've proven that. More than once."

Despite knowing the key was here—right here, Aiden took his time. We explored the cave together. I snapped a few photos, but they came out dark and grainy. In the farthest corner, the roof shrank, leaving an opening that would require crawling. The walls back in this part were covered with the strangest petroglyphs of all. The humanoid shapes, with their weird eyes, were upside down. All the animals were distorted, too, with extra-long limbs.

"This must be where they came after they got into the peyote," Aiden said, chuckling.

"The peyote den. I like it."

We both faced the narrow opening. I reached over and squeezed his hand. "Go get the damned thing before your head explodes. Or mine."

He squeezed my hand back, released it, and lowered himself down to peer inside. "Looks roomy on the other side. It's a whole other cave. Wanna join me?"

No, Aiden, I don't, my inner voice answered sarcastically. "Right behind you." Being skinnier than Aiden, I fit under easier. No natural light reached here at all, and Aiden had turned on the other two headlamps to use as flashlights.

I thought I'd seen wondrous things in the previous cave.

This one blew me away.

****

The petroglyphs were extensive, vibrant, and the work of true artisans. Shelves had been carved in the stone, crudely, but they were all decorated with an astonishing collection of pottery bowls. More pottery made treasure trails over the floor, and there were baskets too, dusty, but mostly undamaged. A few nearer the entrance had been gnawed by rodents, or perhaps had just unwound with time.

Unbelievable. An entire museum worth of treasures in this one small room.

I gazed in wonder, as did Aiden. We were careful as we moved, fearful of damaging anything, especially the body.

Resting for eternity in a shallow depression, he lay in a fetal position, virtually undisturbed. His withered skin clung tightly to his bones and his hair, dried, fading with time and white-grey, lay draped across his shoulder in a long braid. His clothing, made from leather and something woven, had not stood the test of time as well, but the thicker items, like the pouch beaded with turquoise and other beautiful stones, remained whole.

Reverently, and mindful of our feet, we inched closer and aimed our collective lights on him—I was sure it was a him—and crouched down to look upon his shrunken face. Time and death had not dimmed his beauty. It was as if, sensing his impending death, he'd come here, prayed to whatever gods he worshipped, and simply laid down and died. The journey had been a solo one. No one had remained behind to bury him.

"Be careful!" I urged, as Aiden reached his hand down to the dark stone sheltered between the bones of hand and chest.

"I will," he replied. Wriggling the rectangular object back and forth, Aiden slowly, and with infinite patience, withdrew the key from the withered hands.

With some reverence of his own, Aiden clutched it to his own chest and closed his eyes. "I will see Shalash again, Jase. And my mother, all my cousins—the neighbor lady who never believed my red hair was real. And the twin suns rising over the snowy peaks just in time to shine in my bedroom window and wake me for a cup of Kef before it turns bitter."

The longing and heartbreak in Aiden's voice caused an unexpected tear to tickle down the corner of my eye. I cried for him, since I knew he wouldn't. Aiden could, at last, go home.

Sniffling, I wiped the wetness on my sleeve. I hooked my extra headlamp over my forearm, unclasped the necklace and removed the pendant from the cheap chain. I knew who it belonged to.

Still clutching the key to his chest, Aiden watched me. "What are you doing?"

"Trading."

"Trading?"

"Of course. Morgan traded the key for the necklace and now I'll trade him back the beautiful, finely-made turquoise pendant for one creepy key to another world."

"Hardly sounds fair."

"Well, I don't think he'll mind. It's a good trade. Especially if we let him barter us into promising to quit disturbing his peace, in addition to the offer of the necklace."

A soft, sweet smile curled Aiden's lips. "He drives a hard bargain." The key fit perfectly in T'Loren's handmade box, naturally, this was T'Loren we were talking about, and Aiden slipped it back into his pack. "C'mon, Jase. Let's make good on our promise and get out of here."

Picking our way through the pottery maze, we left the way we came. At the ladder, Aiden tugged on my sleeve. I turned, and he pulled me into a rib-crushing hug that squeezed the air from my chest. Big, bad Aiden—such a softy. I wrapped my arms around him and he pressed his face into my hair, my neck. "Thank you," he whispered into my ear.

"As you always say, anything for you."

In the silence of the key keeper's tomb, we held each other, not letting go until my overtaxed arms grew numb, and Aiden finally pulled away. "Come

with me, Jase," he said, as the last of the late afternoon sun began to wane, darkening the cave entrance. "Come home with me."

Go with him? "To T'El, you mean?"

"Yes."

The offer was so very tempting. I loved Aiden. Always had, always would. But I loved him enough to set him free. I shook my head. "You go. Be happy. You deserve to be free to love who you want, Aiden, not be shackled to me for life." My throat tightened alarmingly. God, I wasn't going to start sobbing and blubbering like a fool again, was I?

We hadn't moved far apart after the hug, and Aiden was close enough to reach up and caress my cheek. "Shackled to you for life?" I braced myself for an outburst of anger, but a slow, sly grin spread across Aiden's face, instead. "Couldn't have planned that better if I tried."

"What? You—what?" I stumbled over my own tongue.

"You're mine now, Jason Kelly, and I'm not letting you go."

My brain sputtered, dazed and confused. "But you—I—why? Why do you want me?"

"Because I love you." I suddenly found myself squashed back in his arms. "I was so lonely waiting for you."

Aiden O'Rourke loved me. I must've misheard that. "You waited for me?"

"To grow up. Like I promised." In the last light of the dying day, he kissed me. Sweetly. Then roughly—ah, that was better. "And I'm nowhere near done nailing your queer, lovesick ass to the wall."

What can I say? I'd loved him forever. Why not admit it? "I love you too, Aiden."

Aiden kissed me so thoroughly I had difficulty climbing up the ladder with my stiff dick getting in the way. At the last rung, Aiden reached down and helped me to my feet. Walking took a concerted effort. *Aiden loves me.* I couldn't get over that.

"You give me your answer when you're ready," Aiden said, opening his pack.

"Answer?" My brain had turned to mush.

“About T’El. I know it’s a big decision. I’d be just as happy to stay here with you,” he wagged his brows, “but wouldn’t you like to see it?”

The bastard. Dangling a whole new world in front of me like that. “Can I have five minutes?”

He laughed, low and rumbly.

Would that always give me that fluttery feeling in my chest?

“As I said, when you’re ready.”

Five minutes would probably do it. I smiled—I really should tease him while the opportunity presented itself. But a moment later, the smile died on my lips. While I was processing *because I love you*, Aiden had retrieved his alien rail gun from inside the pack.

Oh, yeah. I’d forgotten, lost in my wonder of this place, and in Aiden’s words and my own love-swollen heart, that the Vish always have something up their sleeve.

Company was coming.

And we now had the key.

The End

Author Bio

Finn Marlowe is a paralegal by day and erotic (M/M) romance novelist by night. She believes daydreaming is a vastly underrated pastime and probably spends way too much time at it. Her kids no longer ask what's wrong when they spy her staring off into space—they just assume she's writing a scene from her next novel, and they're probably right. Paranormal romance is her favorite genre to write, and the story's usually on the dark side because she still believes in things that go bump in the night.

Finn calls British Columbia home and when she's not enjoying the beautiful outdoors, she's inside reading or resenting the fact her kids are better video game players than she is. If there were more hours in the day, she'd like to become a better artist, a greener gardener and learn to speak Spanish. Since she believes all dreams are possible if you don't give up on them, she expects to regain her video game hi-scores, naturally vanquish all garden pests, and finally paint what lives inside her imagination. As for speaking Spanish, well, she'll settle for learning to pronounce all the good curse words.

Contact & Media Info

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