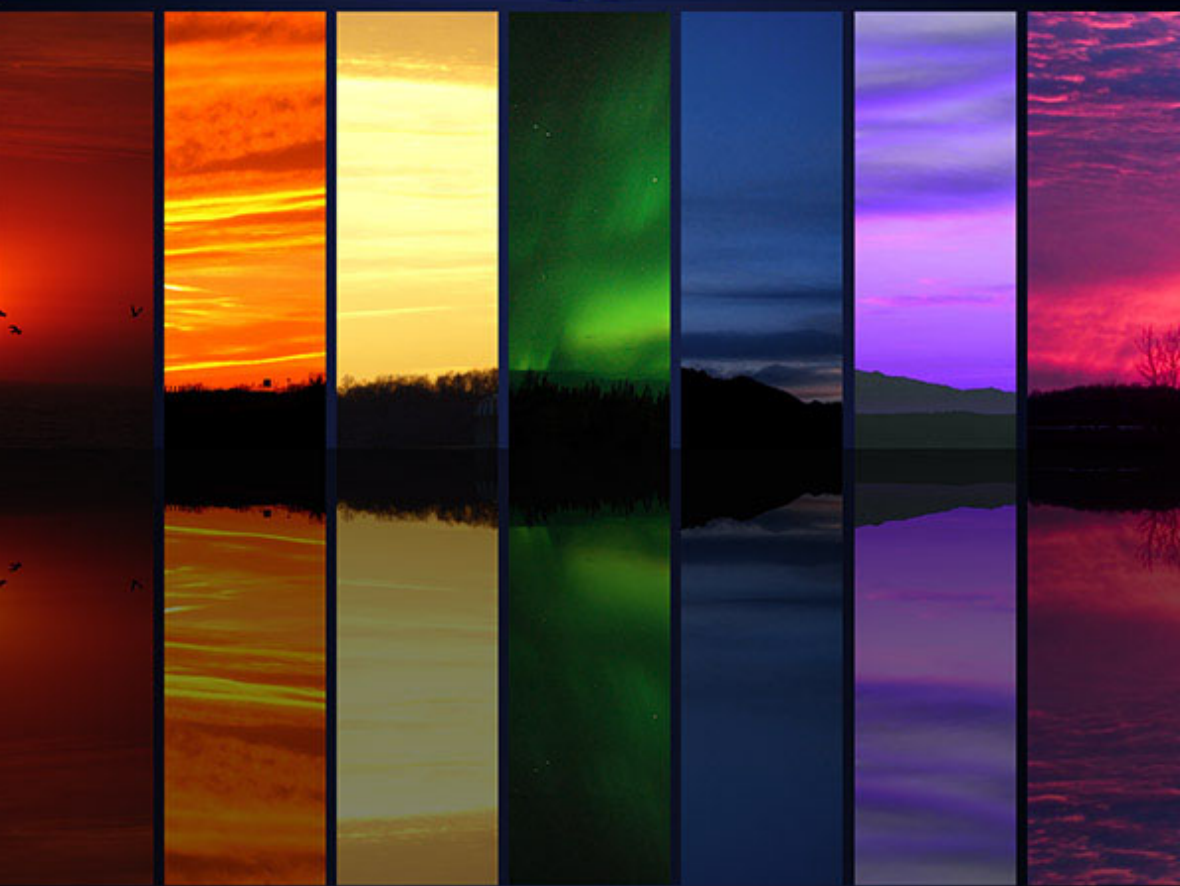


LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

BROKEN PHOENIX

Edmond Manning

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

BROKEN PHOENIX

By Edmond Manning

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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BROKEN PHOENIX

By Edmond Manning

Photo Description

Photo 1: A shirtless, slender man with hard-taut muscles gazes thoughtfully ahead. Around him, singed and burned feathers waft to the ground. His short red hair either burns with orange-dancing flames or perhaps catches the raw yellow sunlight, giving him a fire-roasted appearance. His raw sensuality simmers, as if the air around him is charged with electricity and yet refuses to ignite into passion.

Photo 2: A tranquil, lavender-shirted man holds a book in his right hand and a lantern in his left. He's young, mid-twenties, a thin man. His tight black pants and elegant dress shirt convey a sense of timeless style. Pages seem to leave the book and fly away, as if magically lifted by the wind. Despite the floating pages and the bruised blues and greens in the dangerous sky before him, the man with raven hair and a dark purple streak remains calm, absorbed. Around him, delicate flowers blossom with long, curled petals, as delicate and strong as this man himself.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm a phoenix (pic 1). Unfortunately, I'm a pretty terrible phoenix. I can't seem to control my fire. I lose my feathers (I could give you my father's lecture on that word for word, I've heard it so many times). And worst of all, my tears don't heal. I've pretty much been a hermit since my clan kicked me out ten years ago.

The other day this man came to my cave claiming he needed a phoenix to help him with his quest. I was so startled I lit half my clothes on fire and scared him away. I can see him climbing the trail towards my cave again. What in the world does he want?

Pic 2 is the third undersecretary to the royal historian (or some similar underling position within the royal court) and discovered something he shouldn't have. He can't tell anyone or he will be killed so he has to fix it all on his own...except maybe for the help of one hermit phoenix.

I prefer plot to sex (rather have no sex than be overwhelmed by it) and I'm pretty vanilla when it comes to that sex. I absolutely hate stories where the

major conflict is a “Big Misunderstanding” between the MC’s or stories where the MC’s just can’t be together for some “Big Reason.” Other than that have fun. Feel free to alter the basic appearance of the MC’s—it is more the feel of the pics that I care about than hair color/eye color/build/etc.

Thanks!

Kathleen

Story Info

Genre: science fiction, fantasy

Tags: phoenix, magic, quest, fairy tale, humor, adventure, HEA, shifter

Word Count: 33,765

BROKEN PHOENIX

By Edmond Manning

Chapter 1

The Chittering Truth

I am eternal.

I am fire incarnate.

Hear me, oh great blackness boasting six trillion stars, hear my devastating, all-consuming screech, tearing asunder the trembling universe. The scalding magma of a thousand suns rages within me, whistling over each cell, gasoline-filled cells, the molten orange powering my veins, flowing like magma from a thousand—

Dammit.

Flowing like magma from a thousand—

Damn. Nothing.

Not even a spark.

I shake my arms but they don't even feel warm.

Sniff the air. Nothing. Not even the smell of burnt hair or feathers.

Damn it. I guess I should try again.

I am eternal. I am fire incarnate. Hear me, oh great blackness—

You know what? Forget it. I've been meditating for an hour and a half. Nothing. Fanaqua this. I want a Diet Mountain Dew. Well, I'm down to my last two. I should save them for a special occasion. Another damn it.

I untangle myself from the lotus position and rise, shaking out my legs and stretching from side to side. I peer out my mountain cave's nearest portico, a carved opening large enough to jump through. Though tempted to leap, I lean against a marble pillar, watching the clear lavender sky, the orangine hues coming from the east horizon, suggesting another day without Amber's mountain rains. The second sun's ascendancy was rapid this past spring, which always means less rain. But less rain has its advantages, like dtandiart bushes sprawling tentacles which don't grow as far and the introod trees are not nearly as invasive, both of which make the earth more passable. Although it's impressive when one hundred introods spring up overnight, after a big storm six feet tall and attempting to lure prey near with their seductive leaf-song. I miss hearing packs of introods singing this summer.

I gaze out, seeing the greenish-blue hue of other tree varieties, the rich yellow-greens of the dtandiart bushes, their thick tentacle-like arms stretched upright, braying in the wind or crawling over the kelly green soil. The lavender sky and green cheer me despite my failure to blaze. Meditating was a longshot. Who am I kidding? I will never blaze. I am Gio, the phoenix who does not burn. As far as anyone in the phoenix clan knows, the only one on record.

They call me the Broken Phoenix.

Shame burns. Disappointment burns. Exile burns.

But Gio does not.

Stop. This feels hollow. I'm so *over* feeling sorry for myself that I cannot even shame myself properly. I was ashamed for many years. But I am determined to not feel that anymore. I am who I am. Broken Phoenix or not, I actually like my life.

I will spend the afternoon coasting in phoenix form, gloasting the breezes with my wings stretched wide, eyes turned inward, turning and falling, feeling the coarse textures on the air guiding me, revealing the vague stories of kingdoms far below. I will gloast stories that interest me in the air, find an intriguing strand and trace the story. Later, I will gather mosses for cooking and rip the flesh from a marrok tree for my dinner. Maybe whip up a casserole.

Tyarano, ma'jegere as Father would say. This life is wings.

This life I've created for myself is totally wings, except I cannot blaze.

But yesterday, *yesterday*, I spontaneously combusted. When the fire ripped through me I almost peed myself for joy. That was something, right? A fire which begins the blazing? A breakthrough I had hoped meditation would somehow allow me to repeat today, bring on the fire. Last time I caught fire was more than six years ago when an introod tree almost killed me. Before that, five years? Yes, my math is right. I know I spontaneously combusted the year before the banishment. That half blaze bought me an extra year's reprieve, the council believing I was a late bloomer. Of course, they had been saying I was a late bloomer for several years by then, but this renewed their faith. But as more time passed, and those phoenix six years my junior blazed, it was harder to believe I was just a "late bloomer". They administered science tests, blood tests, even tried magical uncovering spells. Father put me on a flaxseed-based diet and once we cooked an introod, hoping that would somehow cause a chemical reaction inside me, but I threw it up an hour later. Disgusting. No one could explain why that hopeful flame never came for me.

With Father's sad permission, they performed the banishment ceremony and I danced out of the circle. I played my role, the happy banishee, and danced into the darkness, right out of my home on the Mackwell Plains. Clan custom insisted I leave in human form rather than fly away. I couldn't blaze but I could still assume bird form and fly but noooooooo, they really want you to feel impotent when they banish you, I guess. I can't believe I participated in the dance, agreed to my "happy banishment". I was young and stupid. I should have told them off, told them they were fire bigots—

No. No, that's not productive either. Not shame. Not blame. They did what they had to do. If I had blazed at the appropriate age, I might have been one of those phoenix in the crowd saying, "It's not right...it's not right...banish him."

I get it. If fates were different, I could have been one of them. *Siearto me siearto* as the poets say.

I remember my last minutes among them, trying to recall details of the feast, the smells, who came to say good riddance and those who came to whisper, "We're sorry." Father warned me that if I did not find the cosmos it would never burn its version of eternity inside me. What a shitty thing to say as you're banishing your son. I know he was sad and I know he cried but the *best* advice he could give me, his youngest son, was to not give up looking? Yeah, well, I searched for the cosmos, Father. Searched hard. Tried every quack medical and paranormal attempt to blaze and you know what?

Fanaqua the cosmos.

And fanaqua you, Father. Fanaqua *you*.

I don't even know why I care.

I like the life I built for myself. I like the human form I sculpted, made strong by running through the woods, dodging the dtandiart bushes as they grasped for my legs. Leaping and twisting away from vegetational pursuits. On any forest trip I could have assumed phoenix form and flown to easy escape, but I preferred the challenge, the woods with their chlorophyll traps and trees that could squeeze the life out of you. I am strong as a human. The fire may not burn through me, but I am ripped. I like the curve of my human muscle. Assuming the human form pleases my sensuality.

Although what good is sensuality when you never get laid?

I was strong when they banished me from the tribe and I grew stronger on my own. I do not miss them anymore, the cries of garnichula at night, the lazy

sway of a thousand phoenix catching the winding night breezes so that sky creatures can sleep while aloft. Okay, I do miss that. I do.

But why did I burn yesterday? What happened? Granted it was not a blaze but the first step to blazing, so ordinary for a phoenix remains a big deal to me. I *spontaneously combusted*.

It could not have been the visitor, the under man.

I am vexed to remember his role in this, how I spontaneously burst into flames while he spoke to me.

Was he magic? Did he bring magic with him? I did not smell it, I could not see its hovering influence before my naked eye. I didn't think so. He shrugged, and I burst into flames. Had I not been so thrilled, so surprised, so utterly confounded to find myself engulfed, I'm sure I would have felt mortified he witnessed such an intimate encounter. As embarrassing as that may be, still I would do it again. I would never discourage the fire, could not, considering so many years had passed since the last one.

He shrugged and I burst into flames.

I must remember all that he said or did not say. Perhaps there is a clue as to why I blazed.

He approached my skyward dwelling appropriately, which couldn't have been easy. I'm three hours from the nearest town, and even that's not exactly city-sized. Up a mountain thick with forests. Not everybody can handle the forest. When he arrived, he showed the proper respect by not looking into my home, but rather sat cross-legged a good three hundred feet away from my carved out cave, sitting amidst gossiping bluebells, a safe distance from the long-necked tulips. But we both knew he had come to see me. No human makes that trip by accident.

Our social customs feel even more important at higher elevations, especially as those who soar the highest often have the sketchiest reputations. If a human treats you poorly on your first encounter, it reveals much about who they will be with you. I observed him in his sitting, watched him, and tested him by going about my business. When he demonstrated the patience of three hours, I decided to grant him audience. I approached him without word, stood before him, and led him to my home for food.

Though I tried to hide my first impression, my heart circled itself twice when I looked at him up close and saw he was a flirrant. Absolutely glazing

was he, he of slender build and strong arms. He was soft like newborn hannieanae, so sweet and pure, but he possessed strength in his body. I thought to myself, 'He is known to work. He is known to running the forest.' His powerful legs. I could see their muscles ripple under the strange half-pants he wore. But his face was soft and welcoming. I had not seen a flirrant in many years. A cute one, too.

He sat beside me on my dwelling's floor, observing the custom of eating the first course before broaching words. He sat without staring. Glanced around. Waited patiently. It was my obligation to silently invite him to my home and offer him the first course. His obligation to keep his quiet. We shared a twinar melon, a richness of wet, sloppy fruit that made both of us grin despite our lack of words. We laughed at each other, the juices running down our chins and I felt at ease, at ease with this delicate flirrant, a slender and sensual flirrant. The scent of him was blackberries.

He wore a canvas-brown shirt, the dress of a peasant when they wish to draw attention to their social situation. Usually worn to make a political statement or ask for an extension on loans. But it's considered a statement, a brown shirt like that, to indicate subservient relationship. For such an obvious political garment, he really made it sexy, the top draw string untied and his hard biceps visible under the sleeves.

I tried not to stare at his coal-black hair but I do love the human hair, hair without feathers. His was short in some places, spiky and pointing outward with longer locks strategically placed as is the current fashion. I know the fashions. I do not live among humans but I smell their fashions when I fly low. The air sings.

Custom dictates host and guest remain silent until after first course. The exceptional guest waits until after the host has spoken. Only those schooled in the highest culture of manners do not speak until specifically *invited* to speak. He stayed silent until I invited him to speak. I was impressed by his manners, the long spikes in his human hair, his shimmering shirt. But I did not understand the half-pants he wore. He perplexed and fascinated me.

And then he asked me to accompany him on a quest.

I barely heard the details, only that *a phoenix was needed*. I had never been invited to quest, not by anyone, and asking a phoenix is pretty standard fare if you're crossing borders traveling to seascapes beyond the carnivorous woods. Back in the clan, Old Gravatar has been said to be *invited* on twenty-three

quests in his long life. He only turned down eight requests. He was adventurous. *To be invited on a quest.* A dream I could never know.

I tried to enjoy the moment, feel the quest energy come through me but I couldn't. As noble as his manners, as attractive as this flirrant was to me, I could not accompany him, not me. I would not deceive him and honestly, every person we encountered would know I was a false guide. I wanted to feel happy but my shame overpowered me. I had to interrupt him.

I said, "Stop. You're asking the wrong phoenix. I cannot blaze. I cannot even ignite myself."

I felt embarrassed to say the words aloud. I had not spoken of it for years.

He shrugged.

"I am Gio, the broken phoenix."

He said, "Yes, I know."

I did not understand his reaction as if it did not matter to him, my failings.

I said, "You do not understand. I am broken. My tears do not heal. No blazing."

He shrugged again.

I burst into flames in front of him, like an uncontrollable teenage boy discovering orgasm and I reveled in the intensity, the heat that does not burn, the fire of a thousand suns coursing through me, knowing me. I ruined my shirt. Singed the feathers down the back of my neck. Then, I threw myself out the nearest carved portico, fleeing him on the wind. I had hoped my phoenix bird form would turn the fire into a blaze but the fire disappeared.

I coasted in phoenix form, wings spread and waiting for further incendiary. Although the lavender sky welcomed me, I did not blaze. I did not blaze.

He was gone when I finally returned, the flirrant, which was just as well. For a phoenix to blaze in front of another—human or any other species—without provocation or need is, well, an intimacy like that is not for a stranger's eyes, especially a handsome flirrant who says he does not mind your faulty powers.

I do not believe my blazing yesterday had anything to do with his presence. He shrugged. Would I have myself believe I blazed because he *shrugged* at me? No.

Perhaps it was something I ate.

But yesterday, did I not eat what I always do? Did I not dine on ripe raspberry leaves and the curry made from stems of bankoo? I am confident I did not poison myself. Curry's easier to make than spaghetti. Did I eat a trunkle berry and forget it? Did I, *I don't know*, breathe differently yesterday? I've been guessing possibilities for the spontaneous fire for the past twenty hours, the dog moon is almost halfway cleared through its two-day cycle. If I didn't eat anything different and my routine was close to every day's routine, could it possibly have been the well-mannered guest and his shrugging at me? The under man from the government?

No, I don't think so. He shrugged at me and I caught fire. That's not reasonable. That makes no sense.

I will never know.

He was gone when I flew back home. I checked every room but he left no trace of his presence.

Probably just coincidence anyway.

Shaking myself from this reverie, I look around to see if there's any required housekeeping. My pantry is stocked full, full as I keep it anyway. House looks clean, clean enough at least though I should scrub the lilyflowers again in the next few days so they don't bloom prematurely. I smile with satisfaction. My mountain cave is cozy, five full-sized rooms carved and polished out of Mount Amber marble. Marble-carving is an excellent hobby if you're banished and trying to cope with the world while simultaneously spending thousands of hours alone. I'm proud of the home I created in this mountain. Every luxury I could imagine I have, a flowing stream near the kitchen and a natural springs hot tub. I am happy here.

But I'm also exhausted from my meditation attempt to blaze and decide to reward myself with a fly around Mount Amber. I cross my living quarters, enjoying the polished marble against my bare feet and head to the terrace, standing naked before the afternoon suns. The peach sun glows brightly, the yellow sun less so, a dimming burnt yellow. I take a moment to stare at its beauty, the rawness, the dying star which is not dead. I say the prayer of our people, gratitude for the light from one sun, the heat from the other and we praise the dog moon for its intercession. The words are rote to me, a children's prayer but I like to express gratitude before jumping off a mountain cliff.

I spread my arms, look to admire my naked human form, my sinewy muscles, the bulges of my arms and legs from working myself in the forest below, and I leap.

I leap.

To gloast is to taste the air not the physical taste but the weight of it, the history of it. To gloast is to taste the world below, the heat and emotions and dramas rising from the planet surface and the currents brought into their lives. To gloast is to hear the dangerous forests and comfortably elude their siren songs, calling crawling animal life to come closer, closer, to be snatched up and devoured. The air is gourmet, a chunky stew of smells and history and things stirring. To pick a single story strand and follow it for fifty miles, well, is anything better? To sleep on the air, to catch the spiraling drifts is to know the news in a hundred miles each direction, the shared news of the world.

Gloasting is smell and choice and research and abandon, flying is—

Empty.

The taste is empty. There's nothing to the taste of this air, no thickness. Even the vegetation is silent. Something is very wrong. I assume wrong with me, something is broken in me, my ability to sense the world, to scream through the world by reading the air. What's wrong? Have I broken even further? What's next, my beak falls off?

I fly farther, beyond my comfortable routes, soaring lower to the point where hungry introod trees smell me as potential food. I'm too high for a dtandiant bush to snag me but I can usually hear their soft hum, their contented humming as they wait for food. Nothing. Why not?

My wings feel fine and I sense no dimming consciousness in me. What if it's not me?

What is wrong with the world?

Where is the story of our days, the stories of mountains and rivers and weather, stories I barely hear anymore so regular and constant are they, the songs of the planet's history? I forget to listen to them, old stories, because of so many new delicacies appearing every day. I fondly remember the time I took a vacation to follow the story of a meteor crash from three thousand years ago, following the story on the wind for hundreds of miles. That was a great gloasting vacation. Good story.

Where are the stories? The air has no taste.

My sight is not fantastic in the sky, eyes turn inward, but I can make out enough shapes and distance to fly low and not get snagged. This is true for other winged creatures, the ones I speak with. They can flirt with introod trees. The chlorophyll traps in forests pose little threat.

So why do I sense a chittering truth trapped below me?

I circle down, still confused by my inability to read air, not trusting this sensation but it's true, a chittering truth lay trapped on the earth below. These little yellow birds dart the sky more cheerfully than other wingeds. They flip around nimbly on foot unless injured. They're never food for hungry forests. How can this be?

I circle the airspace a few times, trying to read any waves coming from the ground, a sense of panic from the chittering truth. But there is none.

I croak out an inquisitive scraw, curious to know if my fellow winged requests help. The reply comes almost immediately.

"No, thank you, thank you, Broken Phoenix, I'm fine, I'll die here and that's fine did you read the wind today or rather lack of read can you believe there's nothing to read no future or present I was interested in the happenings of a village a few miles from here, some problems they were having with sanitation of water they intended to fix with magic rather than labor which means there's always a curious fight between humans and their dusty understanding of magicks but there's no news from them, no news on the wind nothing is happening and what is the point of flight when there is no future because Broken Phoenix, there's no future."

It's not surprising that chittering truths fly alone. This one is exhausting, like all the others, and it's hard to know what truth they're revealing in the incessant warbling. Even now, it won't stop, well, *chittering*. I find myself confused, trying to understand its message about the nearby villages, the stories it was following and how they're all irrelevant. But it's good to know I'm not the only one who cannot read air today.

It's not just me who is broken.

But this isn't exactly good news. In fact, the reality now terrifies me, this confirmation that something's wrong with the very air around me. I need to get home and contemplate this. Start asking other wingeds if the air is wrong. Or rather, *not there*. Where is our air? Gloasting is for gathering data. I prefer my human form to digest it, uncover what it means. I should get home. Ironically,

not much data to digest today. What could possibly be happening? Who can steal the very air itself?

I'd like to rescue this chittering truth, this little winged brethren who inexplicably landed on the earth near a number of forest dangers, most notably a dtandiart with its tentacles inches away from the birdie. I caw, a piercing warning screech but it's too late and the chittering truth is seized.

It cries out in a shrill voice. "I don't mind dying there's no point to flying, no living with no future but you will regret eating me I don't think a dtandiart's digestion can handle a creature of my—"

And that was the last truth it told.

I am greatly disarmed by this unnatural scene, the chittering truth who refused to live because it could not gloast the air as all winged creatures do. I dart up to get my bearings. I fly farther than I realize, which is no problem I guess, because it gives me time to study the landscape. I see another chittering dead on the ground, presumably spit up by a dtandiart bush, picky eaters whose grasp for food exceeds their taste buds. They are killers without discernment, sometimes camouflaged in their surroundings by the rotting piles of food they killed and refused to eat. The air reveals nothing, no stories from the purple forest, the neighboring treeless forest, and when I glide, I sense no temperatures, no hot and cold stories in the air. This is some serious fanaquing shit.

By the time I reach Mount Amber, I am full of sensations, or lack of sensations. Full of data or lack of data from the empty currents. I remember layers of air I had long forgotten, the geological story of Amber Mountain always in the background, a low rumbling in the air. I am eager to collapse in human form, eat some leftovers, and perhaps head into the forest myself on foot, for exercise and to learn of any other changes.

If I were civilized, living among my kind, I would land majestically, perch with dignity or flap myself silly, hovering until my legs reached down and touched the polished mountain floor.

Fanaqua that. I'm a bachelor.

I zip right through my center window, the best entrance from this angle and I stretch into my human form, face down and collapse the final three feet onto the bed, sprawled naked. Just the way I like. What happened out there? Why couldn't I read the world?

I hear an unexpected noise behind me, a clearing of a throat.

A creamy voice I recognize from yesterday says, "That's quite an entrance."

I leap up, shocked. What? Who? I face him, the under man from the government, the one from yesterday. The flirrant with the spiky black hair and the beautiful lips. He does not wear his peasant garb today.

Oh. Did I know he had beautiful lips? Did I think that yesterday?

"I didn't realize phoenix were hung," he says, nodding toward my nudity.

I look down and see its thickness. "Not all phoenix. I am, I guess."

What an odd flirrant, so direct and nonplussed. And why the hell is he in my home?

"Strange under man, why are you back in my home?"

"The quest," he says. "The one we discussed yesterday."

I study him as I did yesterday while we ate and did not speak. He is handsome and I am attracted to him, I know that now. I know that. Could—could that be the source of my fire, this attraction? His eyes are different from most humans, a gentle curve upon them. I've never seen curved eyes. I enjoy his slender frame. He dresses as a man who understands fashion as well, nicer clothes than mine, a shimmery anterixal blue, almost the pale shade of a winged's egg. I love anterixal, a shade that almost floats off the color itself. He wears longer pants today. I cannot see his leg muscles. These are sturdy pants, a fabric unknown to me.

I say, "Today you do not wear half-pants."

He glances down. "Today I wore pants for traveling. These are called jeans."

"I do not know them. What tailor made them?"

He smiles. "These are from Eddie Bauer."

"I do not know Eddie Bauer."

"I imagine not. Do you spend most of your time in human form naked?"

"Yes."

"Ah," he says. I see him look at my sex again. "Well, *that* shouldn't be too distracting."

His tone is hard for me to read, serious or not, I do not know. There is a slight twist to his meanings that is confusing. I like it. None of which matters or answers why he's here.

I say, "Why are you in my home?"

"Yesterday, I approached you about a journey to be made with me. A quest. We didn't finish the conversation."

He hesitates.

I blush, remembering. "I apologize. It was far too intimate an expression—"

"No," he says. "Don't apologize. I loved it."

Now he blushes.

He says, "You were beautiful and calm and then suddenly your entire body was engulfed in these stunning, orange flames, twisting in a way I've never seen fire do. I loved it. I mean, my cock got hard."

He stutters a laugh and I can tell he did not mean to share that.

I fear I cannot tell who is more embarrassed at this point, me for my overly-intimate beginning of a blaze or him for having gushed as its witness.

"This is awkward," he says sheepishly.

"Actually, I'm glad you witnessed what you did," I say, trying to sound sure of myself. "I told you I could not blaze and my tears do not heal. You witnessed it first-hand."

"But you *did* blaze."

"No, I did not. I burst into fire, that's not the blaze."

"What is a blaze? What happens?"

"To be consumed by fire is the same as getting wet when submerging in a pond. *Getting wet* is not swimming. Fire is only the first part of blazing."

"Okay, well, what happens when you really blaze?"

I have no problem answering the truth. "I do not know. I have never blazed."

"But surely the other phoenix told you—"

"Never. It is forbidden to discuss how the blaze works with those who have never done so. Doing so may interfere with their natural self-discovery of the

first blaze. To tell details to one who cannot blaze is to curse him for life. This is equivalent to the heinous human crime of murder times twelve. With an axe. And making them into sausage afterwards.”

“That’s unbelievably disgusting.”

“Good. I am trying to dissuade you from this notion I can somehow help you. I know nothing about blazing.”

I pause, embarrassed. Why did I just say so much? I cannot seem to stop talking. He makes me nervous.

“There is speculation among my people that when I was young an older phoenix must have accidentally described the process to me which is why I never blazed myself. It’s not true, but a cloud of suspicion falls over my father to this day. My brother, former friends who could blaze. All were impacted. This has never happened to a phoenix before, and it drove the community apart, the suspicion that someone told me how to blaze which is why I can’t.”

Great Vantaros, I cannot quit talking.

“But nobody told you anything.”

“No. Yesterday was the third time in my life and that was just the beginning of a blaze. To the ironical gods, yesterday after your arrival in my front yard I wore clothes. I never wear clothes. Then, I set my best shirt on fire. A true phoenix doesn’t burn off his clothes and singe his feathers. He is consumed. Those phoenix in the Daisy class can reassemble their original clothes. It is whispered they can command the molecules themselves to reassemble. Now, *that’s* a blaze. Of course, nobody really talks about it. There’s less prohibition around class talk than blaze talk so sometimes you’ll catch an old phoenix sharing her suspicions about what makes tulip class. Tulip class are the true phoenix.”

“A true phoenix,” he says and smiles. “I don’t believe you even know what that means. Do you know where the blazing comes from or why your tears allegedly have healing properties? And do you even know why your clan assigns ridiculous class rankings named after flowers?”

I’m afraid I’m a little defensive in my reply. “I know everything my people know. I was taught in all ways of my ancestors, the shared knowledge. I can read the winds.”

The memory of this afternoon’s unsuccessful flight soars through me again. I do not have time to dissuade this flirrant from my home.

"I require time alone," I say, leaving the bed and crossing the floor. "I apologize I cannot be the phoenix you need for your quest, your adventure. A phoenix is only as good as his abilities to guide and protect you. I advise you travel to the Mackwell Plains to gain audience with the phoenix clan and be paired with the one who is best suited."

"I did. None of them were suited to me."

He surprises me. Few actually venture to Mackwell Plains. And while it unlikely he saw anyone I knew, I wish him to speak more of his adventures there. Always love news from home.

"What did you find? Which phoenix gave you audience?"

"None. They refused to hear my quest. I was unworthy."

This shocks me. "Wait, did you say you were *not* worthy or unworthy."

"Unworthy," he says. "They wouldn't hear my quest request because I am unworthy."

The phoenix are fair. Phoenix can see beyond a man's sins to assess the golden heart within. Very few are turned away for being unworthy. In fact, it is considered a disgrace to the phoenix to label someone *unworthy*, which means he must have done something incalculably evil. Or he's an outsider. Maybe just an outsider. He doesn't look super evil. He's cute.

And unworthy or not, I am rude not to offer him a beverage in my home, especially after his adherence to proper ritual yesterday.

I say, "I offer you sweet beverages or sour."

He responds with the appropriate etiquette. "As you wish and feel are plentiful."

I head into the kitchen area. "Your manners are excellent. You cool with sour?"

He says, "Yeah, great. Atremia if you have any. And I've studied your customs for many years. Are you curious why I was unworthy?"

"Yes, of course. But I wish to discern for myself before I ask you questions. I'm guessing you're an outsider. You just used the phrase *your customs*, which suggests these customs are not native to you. Outsiders are awfully rare but do sometimes show up. Usually they come to the Mackwell Plains for a 'take me home' quest. Very infrequently, like once a generation. They are always refused as unworthy. In that unique situation, it's nothing personal."

He bows his head which means he intends to contradict me. "You do not speak truth, Broken Phoenix. Once, a millennia ago, an unworthy was granted a phoenix for a quest. I know it's true. I read it in a book."

"Stop." I hold up my hand. "I cannot hear this filth."

The flirrant smiles. "To know if I speak true, could you not assume your phoenix form and circle your mountain-top home to read me on the wind? To gloast my story?"

"Normally, yes. But my abilities seem to be broken. Something is wrong with the air. Yet that cannot be. I mean, you can't *not have* air one day. It doesn't just go away. The only reasonable explanation is that something else is broken in me. But I met a chittering truth who couldn't read the air either. Little guy just stood there and waited for a dtandiart bush to twist its head off."

"Yeah," the handsome flirrant says sadly. "Chittering truths do not handle bad news well. But the problem is not your abilities. The problem is this world will die in three days. There's no future left to read. The planet has begun shutting down."

I stop pouring atremia into small bowls.

I frown. "This cannot be. You are wrong. Who did you say you represented? I know you are an under man."

"Yes," he says. "I am. I am an under-under-undersecretary to the royal historian, Lorgan Smirothing. I work in the royal library of Tibbits, throne land to King Nestar and Queen Llywell—"

"Yes," I say, cutting him off. "Many kings and queens below. They all have kingdoms. Very important, I'm sure. And they have *books*, I take it?"

"Yes."

This is odd. He has no power. An under-under-undersecretary is no use to anyone. You wouldn't send someone of his rank to initiate a quest. So, who sent him? Why is he here?

I say, "Usually, only the lowest of the low are sent to work in libraries. The criminals. Those with no future."

"Yes, that's true," he says in a tone that is cheerful.

I finish pouring his atremia into our bowls and sprinkle crushed radish on top. Always nice to add a garnish.

“And if I’m not mistaken, the relative court power of an under-under-*under*...” I say, letting my voice trail off.

“Yes, I have no power,” he says with the same brightness. “It’s a terrible position. No hope for advancement, minimal financial incentive or opportunity to attend court graces. Just read books. My job is to read many, many books.”

“I am sorry,” I say, and I do feel sorrow for his predicament. He must have killed many to be punished so mercilessly.

“Thank you for your empathy,” he says.

Again, he is hard to read. He does not seem sorrowful.

He might be insane. A horrible judgment placed upon him as heavy as this, *book reader*, can sometimes break a man. I have spent time wandering through kingdoms during my banishment. I know what humans value and who they do not. A book reader, three-times an under has no reason to feel pride. But he does not seem distressed, so insanity is on the table.

I set the bowl in front of him and say, “You seem to not mind your cruel fate. Book readers I have seen are often the most miserable of wretches.”

“I shall tell you a secret,” he says. “The first of many. I love what I do. I *love* reading books.”

Great Vantaros, he is insane.

He astonishes me again, this odd flirrant with his creamy skin and slight slope to his eyes. I find myself liking him more for his reckless confession, even if the confession itself sickens me. He nods to the left of him, nods to the right, the appropriate expression of gratitude before he takes a deep sip.

“This is delicious,” he says.

“*Pinalto ad yiirmatano*,” I say.

“Yes, thank you,” he says, “Honor to honor. Though I never get why that response is appropriate to a compliment.”

I shrug. “I dunno. Just something people say.”

“No, I get it. It’s a saying. But in every other context, *honor to honor* means something different, to exchange a piece of your private soul with another’s soul—”

“Is this why you’re here? To argue empty phrases people say to be polite?”

“The quest,” he says. “Thank you for getting us back on track. From these books, I discovered the world will end in roughly three days. I’m not a scientist, but my translation of ancient Sarini is better than the average bear. I tried to discuss it with two other readers but they refused to hear me out. One threatened to extinguish himself if I explained further and when I did explain further, he threw himself out a window. He did not die, but he broke a leg. And a dtandiart tried to suck his brain out of his ear while he lay there. It took four minutes for a medical technician to arrive.”

“Medical technician,” I say. “It’s an odd word. I basically get your meaning. A healant.”

“Yes. Sorry. Your language is the third one I’ve learned since arriving,” he says. “I don’t know the words for everything.”

He smiles bashfully, yet his command of the language is spectacular. I knew a few phoenix he could teach in the ways of words and their polite construction.

I *like* this flirrant. I do.

I smile and say, “Your language skills are impressive. Good grasp of manners. I’ve decided you’re a foreigner. Outsider. Most people around here are never that respectful. Obviously, that’s why you’re unworthy. But outsiders are really, really rare.”

He smirks at me. “Not that rare. We try to keep a low profile because you guys don’t like to hear about us. But trust me, there’s a number of us outsiders here in your land. We tend to avoid each other to better blend in, but we sometimes need to see each other, to feel less foreign for a little while. We call what you’d describe as secret meetings, but we’re not planning an uprising. Sometimes we just get together for an old-fashioned game night.”

I did not know this thing about foreigners, that they are here and more numerous than we thought. I guess I’ve never really thought of the foreign land they come from. There are many parts of the world unknown to me. Some of them must have foreign lands. I do not read their stories in the air. If I did, perhaps I would know what is a *game night*. Maybe sex games?

“I did not know,” I say, feeling a little ashamed. Disdain for foreigners is one of the oldest prejudices and while it is fading, it is not gone. Especially among the phoenix. We hold a real grudge about that for some reason.

He says, “I would have never revealed this truth about our secret game nights but with the world ending in three days, it hardly seems worth hiding.”

Can this be real? Three days?

He sips and then speaks again. "The whole thing was pretty terrible. I had never tried to talk directly to an under-undersecretary before. There's an intense hierarchy of submitting news to the wind, which is complicated by direct communication, so we avoid it. But this seemed important, so I tried and he threw himself out a window. When I attempted to explain myself to the royal historian, he threatened to have me killed. I didn't realize the consequences were so severe."

"I'm not surprised he jumped out a window," I say. "Doomed to a life of reading books."

"I will never understand why you people think it's a fate worse than death," he says. "Where I am from, people read all the time. They read books for pleasure."

"Pleasure? What kind of twisted mind convinces them reading is pleasure?"

"No one," he says. "They read because they enjoy making meaning from the words and images on the page."

This alarms me more than I can say, that he would take pleasure from such diabolical tortures. Perhaps I should feel threatened by him. Only a perverse man could smile at the cruelty of reading books. I no longer feel charitable, whether I am attracted to him or not.

"Who are you? Why have you returned to my dwelling?"

"My name is Edgar Kohn. Although here, I am known as Kohntali. I told you yesterday my reason for intruding into your private life. I need your guidance. I need you to accompany me on a quest."

"You need a broken phoenix on a quest to save the world which ends in three days?"

"Something like that, sure. It's a quest where we find things and go to mysterious places. Questing type stuff."

Is this why I can't read the air? The world is ending? Can this be true?

He finishes drinking the atremia and says, "That radish is a great touch. Very nice finish."

He is funny so I laugh. He has disarmed me again. "Thank you. You are very calm for a man who knows the world will end in three days. And what kind of assistance would you like from a phoenix who cannot blaze?"

He stands and looks at me with an odd expression. He says, "You really don't understand much about the phoenix abilities, do you?"

He makes me nervous inside. I feel like a damn chattering truth around him.

Instead of answering, I ask, "What do you know of the phoenix? What abilities?"

He walks closer to me. "If you come with me, I'll explain secrets long forgotten."

"No," I say, stepping backward. "The phoenix would never tell you the clan tales."

He's so near me and so warm. His smile is so beautiful.

"You're right," he says smiling at me, a beguiling, powerful smile. "They did not reveal secrets to me. I learned these secrets on my own."

His presence near me makes me feel warm.

He puts one hand on my arm. "Secrets revealed in *books*."

I burst into flames.

Chapter 2

The Mountain Dew Quest

I'm going on a quest.

As my flames extinguish, my mind is instantly made up. *I almost blazed!*

I examine my stomach, my nuts, the fire is gone and only the smell of singed chest hair remains. At least I wasn't wearing clothes that time. I don't want to show him the insane joy I feel at having *almost* blazed twice in two days. This is amazing, but I've got to play it cool.

"So," I say, brushing the ash off my shoulders. "We're going on a quest."

He looks at me with mild concern. "Your head's still on fire."

"Oh. Yeah."

My god, how embarrassing.

I say, "Unless I switch to phoenix form it just sort of burns itself out eventually. Sorry for the smell of burnt feathers."

I'm trying to impress him but goddamn it, *I caught fire again*—second time in two fanaquing days! Not a full blaze, but twelve-year-old phoenix have this same sensation in the middle of the night and when his or her head catches on fire, everyone nods knowingly and says, "The time is coming." This is the most promising omen for me in *years*, a fact that is now tempered only by the realization the world ends in three days.

Shit.

I say, "Will you excuse me for a moment?"

He smiles and nods. I walk to my terrace, plunging over the western ledge, falling at increasing speed and since today I have no time to play, I switch to phoenix form immediately and circle the mountain top to taste what I can. Nothing. Fanaqua. I spread my wings as far as tips will go to take a moment to celebrate the fire, the glorious fire. *Twice in two days*. That means something.

It fizzles out, but I'm too optimistic to be saddened by this detail. Twice in two days.

And I'm going on a quest.

“You go where you go,” as my older brother would tell me when I complained about his night drifting. He would wake up miles further from the clan than was prudent. I would chase him down, chastise him and accompany his flight back toward the plains. I worried about him playing the bad boy, and to the ironic gods, he’s now a respected Tulip class phoenix and I’m the banished one.

‘You go where you go.’ Good advice for me.

I don’t want to be a bad host, so I return quickly, making sure to flap frantically to stabilize myself and angle toward the terrace. No need to fly in through the window like a savage. Poor guy has seen enough today.

And he’s a foreigner. I forgot to ask which shore or plain.

I stroll across the terrace to greet him again. “Still nothing in the air. As in, *there’s no air* outside.”

He shrugs. “Planet’s shutting down.”

“Okay,” I say. “Let’s do this quest thing to save the world. I’m in. But before we go, if the world really is ending in three days, I would like to drink an elixir. You might enjoy this. It’s a rare luxury, something my brother brought me secretly a few years ago. Its name is Diet Mountain Dew.”

“Mountain Dew?” he says, eyes widening.

“*Diet Mountain Dew*,” I say, repeating the words as it was taught to me.

“May I see it?” he says, his face still surprised.

I present the final two bottles. The bottles are naked and the neon green liquid glows through the strange material. He holds it up and examines it. He could not have ever seen this particular treasure. My brother assured me it was rarer than a Tharlanian egg child. Darwin wouldn’t lie. He’s the only one in the clan who secretly visits me every few years.

“Holy shit,” the under man says. “It’s Diet Mountain Dew.”

I am proud he is impressed. “If you like, you may consume—”

Before I can explain the painstaking ritual to crack the delicate seal, how it’s a good idea to roll the bottle on its side slowly, back and forth, to ease in opening the difficult top, he twists the cap in one quick stroke and chugs the bottle.

My god. He’s going to kill himself.

He continues to chug it, gulp it down and I am awash in equal parts horror and rich admiration.

I can't even drink two capfuls without getting completely drunk.

He finishes half the bottle in one pull. I am convinced I will clean up his vomit momentarily. But instead, his face finally turns to greet mine with the most astonished delight.

"My god," he says. "I never thought I'd taste this again."

He immediately guzzles the second half of the bottle, and I think I might pass out from a drunken contact.

Who is this insane warrior? Who would dare death by guzzling the green elixir this way?

The bottle is empty.

My god.

He will now die. How can he *not* die?

"This quest is gonna be great," he yells and shakes the bottle over his head. "*I just sucked down a Dew.*"

He has now caught my attention, this warrior flirrant. "What is your name, again?"

"I am Edgar. Actually, I'd like it if you called me Edgar. Nobody around here does. They put on *tali* at the end of my last name to make sure everyone knows I am lowly in station."

"Yes, they do that."

He says, "And your name is Gio, right?"

"I am Gio, the Broken Phoenix."

"How about we just go with Gio for now? I'm not convinced you're broken."

I don't know what to say to this. He is insane and knows secrets and drinks a Diet Mountain Dew in two massive gulps. He's not real, this one. I've never seen anything like this. He's the third person to visit me here in the past six years, so it's not like I know a lot of full-humans for comparison, but this guy is a fanaquing nut job.

My preparations for departure are few. In fact, all I need is good shoes. That's important. Maybe a cape for warmth, depending on how plentiful the

warming rocks are. I feel a bit foolish, headed out on a quest with the handsome flirrant who I must now admit, makes me want sex. I want him for sex. I had sex many years ago. But long has it been since I quivered for sex. I am sure quivering now.

“Hey, wanna wrap that sausage?” he says. “I like looking at it, trust me. But it’s a distraction. I can’t be checking you out while we’re crossing the purple forest trying to avoid killer plants. At least put on a jockstrap.”

“I can wear a jockstrap,” I say. “I have those. I was hoping you would notice my quivering. My hardness that was growing.”

I am done feeling nervous around him. I have made my decision.

“Trust me. I noticed.”

“So are we of the sex? I am a flirrant, too, Edgar, and I invite you to sexual relations. Yes?”

“Yikes, buy a guy dinner first, will ya?” Edgar says, smiling and admiring my nakedness.

I enjoy his look of affection. “We are direct, the phoenix. I make no apology. When we decide, it’s decided. When we want something, we want it.”

“Don’t worry,” Edgar says. “I’m interested. I want it. Just not now. World ending? Remember that part?”

“Yes, about that. I have questions.”

“Pack your stuff,” Edgar says. “We can talk as we head down the mountain and into the forest.”

I grab my red cloak instead of the green one. I like the green one better but if I accidentally blaze again, I’d rather not destroy my good cloak. Oh wait, it doesn’t matter anymore. World is ending. I honor his wishes and wear a jockstrap, the red one to match my cloak. Hey, I know a little about fashion, too.

“I’m ready,” I say. “Let’s go.”

He licks his lips and I think he finds my appearance favorable. Through his rough-fabric pants I can sense he is quivering too. Maybe the drunken elixir helps his quivering.

His eyes find my remaining bottle. “Maybe we should bring the Diet Mountain Dew.”

My suspicions are that Diet Mountain Dew makes him horny. We're bringing the bottle.

I am so surprised by his guzzling I forget to drink a capful of mine. I pick up the bottle and toss it to him. He catches it and puts it inside his satchel, which had been sitting in the corner of my room. I hadn't even noticed. He wraps the satchel over both shoulders so the weight is at his back. Makes sense. Easier to dodge trees that way.

We take the trail down my front yard and into the forest. We concentrate on our navigation, staying on the winding stone paths. We are safe while we are on them, free from common crawling forest attackers. But these paths are hundreds of years old and stones get dislodged. Old roads require maintenance, which doesn't always happen, especially in small hamlets with a limited budget for roads and transportation. Not enough come this way to make it worth it to repair these paths.

When vines throw themselves at him, he extracts a blade and cuts them. They retreat.

An introod tree here and there impedes our progress and a bermolyte attacks, which he dispatches before I can aid him. Impressive. Bermolytes have four eyes per branch. They can usually anticipate counter-attacks.

Our concentration is rewarded. After an hour's work navigating, we merge with a more direct forest path, the wide section of the trail where we can walk side by side and speak. The further we are from the trail edges, the safer we are.

"You fight the forest well," I say. "Your agility impresses me."

"Thank you," he says. "*Pinalto ad yiirmatano.*"

I nod and say, "Honor to honor. I would ask how you trained and got so good. Some locals never get used to the forests and avoid them as much as possible. If they travel it's only underground. But first, I think we should discuss bigger issues."

He shrugs. "Okay. Shoot."

I like his nonchalance. I say, "Why is the world ending?"

"The dying sun. It's about to go supernova."

"But it's been about to go supernova for centuries. A thousand years they say."

“Well, okay, but *now* it’s time to go. You guys knew it was dying. You have a million songs about the dying sun. So guess what? It’s *dying*.”

“But so suddenly?”

He drops his head indicating disagreement. “No, not suddenly. Books have been written calculating the dying sun—”

“Do not speak to me of books unless you want me to throw myself out a window.”

He chuckles. “If you jumped out a window, wouldn’t you just turn into your phoenix form?”

“Yeah, but symbolically, it’s still a pretty big gesture.”

I don’t know why I am so silly with him, so ridiculous and pleased to earn his chuckle

He says, “Four hundred years ago, the people of this planet created a mechanical system to regulate the dog moon’s orbit.”

“Yes, but that had nothing to do with the dying sun. The dog moon’s orbit was breaking up.”

“Actually, your dying star was slowly drawing it out of orbit. I’m saying, your books discuss the dying sun a lot. But then you guys got into this hate relationship with your books and basically forgot you’re supposed to be preparing for this event. It’s all right there. Your sun has been dying for centuries. The final days are here, Gio. Three days.”

“The sun will explode?”

“I guess. All I know is that the yellow sun’s influence—similar to its influence on the dog moon—reaches your planet in a few days. So whether the star blows before the weekend or three years from now, or four hundred years from now, I can’t really say. I’m not a scientist. Either way, there’s enough radiation or an actual explosion that means life on this planet is over. In three days.”

“That seems impossible.”

“I don’t want you to jump out a window on me, but I have confirmed in certain source material that it’s coming. Signs are aligning. Hey, look ahead—a griiknar patch. They shouldn’t be blooming right now but they can grow across the stones and dim the heat or—”

"I know that," I say, with a little edge. "I lived here my whole life, not like you, outsider."

I'm not really mad at him. But I am rather attached to this world and he's convincing me it's over.

Now I feel shame. I say, "I do not feel the sharpness I felt a moment ago."

He says, "Cape."

His response indicates we can move forward without discussing my sharpness any further. A gesture of kindness in honoring my privacy. I soften to him further. He is a good one.

I say, "What signs? How sure are you?"

He says, "The air stops being air. The planet starts shutting down. Haven't the introod trees seemed sluggish to you? I fought off a bermolyte a few minutes ago and its attack was slow. Those things strike fast."

"Maybe. But a bermolyte's sluggishness can depend on time of day, the suns' combined heat, how recently they fed. The hot and cold stones. Could be anything. What else?"

"How about the air being gone? Doesn't *that* seem significant?"

He's right. Water cannot not be wet. Soil cannot not be green. You can't separate that out. The air is...well, the air. It's not possible to take away its weights and sounds and stories. The texture. The strands. No gloasting? That can only be bad on a global level.

I say, "There appears to be an introod grove ahead which may cause us a slight workout. But answer me this. Why did no one listen to you?"

"I'm an under-under-undersecretary," he says, and points to the introods. "Plus, I am a foreigner. Plus I tried to talk books with someone which is an offense punishable by death. And I'm a flirrnt."

I scoff. "Flirrnt? You may have mistakenly used the wrong word. Being a flirrnt is almost a preferred life condition. That should have raised your credibility."

"It did," he sighs. "You're right. I just said that because I was feeling sorry for myself and some leftover homophobia from my old world crept up. Surprised me. Sorry. Here, flirrnts of all variety are honored. But the fact that I love books—"

“Stop talking,” I say. “Seriously. I don’t want to hear this.”

“Nobody does,” he says and his voice sounds lonely.

I was too harsh on him. It’s a strange, disgusting habit, but there are worse vices. Not many, but a few. It must be a hard life for him, to love something so many of us despise.

I say, “I have been rude about your book loving. I apologize. What do your books say of phoenix abilities.”

“Let’s handle these introods first,” he says and stretches his arms.

We fight the trees by letting their weight and slow bulky movements do the work. We race between them nimbly, letting them punch each other with futile attempts to make us their late lunch. People get killed by introods all the time, usually from accidentally wandering too close or attempting to taunt the introod into action. But Edgar possesses style and grace leaping over their trunks and sidestepping harsh branch blows, making this dangerous exercise look like a dancer’s warm-up routine. He looks so supple and sexy.

“I would have sex with you,” I cry out, midway through the grove.

“I would have sex with you too,” Edgar yells in reply. “Just not right...now.”

Another twenty minutes later, we clear the dtandiart bushes just beyond the introod grove, a grove which seemed much longer and thicker than it first appeared. We walk side by side for another few minutes, scanning for threats.

I like his voice and hearing his odd ways of answering, so I start another conversation.

“Where do we head? What’s the first step in our quest?”

“We need juice from a crocodile’s eye,” he says.

I frown. “I have no fanaquing idea what you mean.”

He says, “No, no, not crocodile. It’s like that word. *Cronocodille*.”

“Oh, well, why didn’t you just say that?”

“I tried.”

That should be easy to retrieve. Cronocodille Eye is the wetness in a cliff’s rock flowers, the baked wet sunlight in its delicate pink folds. I can fly to those. Easy.

I say, "What else?"

Edgar says, "Oh, well, there's a spell. But we can't do the spell from just anywhere. We have to find the castle that's secluded in the purple forest. It's called the purple castle but it's not really purple in color. More like grey stone and bluish-indigo mortar."

I say, "Must be an old stone construction, like a thousand years. Dark blue suggests the sap of the indigenous trees. People stopped using that sap for construction hundreds of years ago."

"Yes, it's old. Ancient power. It will strengthen the spell I'm attempting. But the path to get to it may take a full day. There are a couple curses along the way we have to temporarily unjinx."

"Unjinxing magic?" I say, raising my eyebrow. "I thought an under-under-under—"

"Yeah, well, just little magicks. Spells of convenience. I can't do serious magic, not like people magic. More like parlor tricks."

"I do not know parlor tricks," I say. "But you seem awfully modest about this. Tell me, Edgar Kohntali—"

"Edgar is fine," he says.

"—what's the mightiest spell you ever did."

"Oh," he says, blushing, and I find him adorable. "Well, there was a time when I had a mouse in my dwelling, a stubborn mouse—"

"We're beginning a quest together," I say, "Probably not a great idea to lie to a phoenix, minutes after surviving our first minor battle together."

He scowls. "Fine. I enchanted myself to be able to translate ancient Sarini."

"Whoa," I say. "People magic. That's...that's advanced."

"I didn't use people magic," he says, "I used language translation magic. It's a lower order. I created an invisible reading cloak around me and used a blending spell to splice it to me permanently. It's less risky than people magic and accomplishes the same thing for about half the spell power."

He is clever. I would not have thought that kind of magic would work.

I say, "Yes, and a binding spell is less trouble if you get caught. People magic is only to be practiced by mages. Not under-under-undersecretaries. I

must say, from what little I know, it's extremely hard to accomplish language translation spells. A bold claim."

He buzzes his lips into a strange three-part sound, the low tone conveying emotion, the middle message his words and the highest frequency conveying the vulnerability of the message, the heart of the conflict and fear that lingers.

"No need to show off," I say. "I get it. You speak ancient Sarini."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to brag. I just wanted you to know I told the truth."

I chuckle. "I was teasing you. Well, mostly. Yesterday when you were at my home, I did not sense magic around you. No lingering trace of spells."

"Yeah, well, people get nervous when a foreigner practices magic, so I created a scrubbing spell that auto-executes after each spell. Essentially it clears my magical browser history immediately."

"I do not understand."

"I wrote a spell that eliminates traces of magic. It runs after every spell."

"You are clever with magic."

"Not really. It's just the lower-tier spells."

"You are too modest. I've never heard of someone accomplishing people magic outcome with a lower level magic. And spells that automatically execute sounds tricky. But honestly, I would rather talk about a sexual relationship. Is it okay to discuss our sex at this point?"

"Save it," he says. "And trust me, I am not being a cock tease. I will put out because you're fucking hot, Gio. And I like you."

I say, "There are things I want you to know about sucking my penis."

"Buddy, I am sorry but sex talk is over for now," he says. "Or I will drop to my knees. And we don't have time."

After a moment he says, "Though I am curious, so let's talk about your dick later. For now, we should think about the purple forest. I know a path so maybe by tomorrow morning—"

"Sooner," I say.

Edgar says, "Sooner than what?"

"We will arrive sooner than tomorrow morning. I now remember the castle of which you speak. I see it when I fly."

I stare at the paving stones, looking for a special combination. I believe they were on this path. Isn't this where I've seen them? I'm pretty sure. The forest is full of shortcuts, available only to those who align the right combination of stones. Humans have a hard time reading stones. It's not like the shortcuts are secret but people rarely figure out how to take advantage. I can see the energy of many things, including rocks. When I visit town for supplies, I get so focused on running my errands I forget to explore the many paths like these. I should stop and take a shortcut sometime. Explore somewhere different. Maybe next week—

Oh wait. World's ending.

"Here it is," I say, moving two stones toward each other and a third adjacent and touching at the right angle. It's interesting the makers of this shortcut chose two hot stones and one cold. Usually it's the other way around.

The gateway opens and though we must pass a few trees to reach the front gates, within a long minute we're standing in the purple castle's courtyard.

"There it is," I say, and he looks astonished.

For the first time since I met him, he looks unable to speak.

"I know where to find some good Cronocodille Eye around here," I say. "There are cliff walls not far."

Edgar looks alarmed by this news. I can't fathom him.

He says, "Those cliffs are four hours away. We could go tomorrow."

"That's flying southernty. Northernty is only ten minutes."

"Nobody goes north," he says.

"*Northernty*." I hate to correct his pronunciation but he's a smart guy. I'm sure he appreciates the feedback. "And you're right, nobody travels *Northernty* by foot. Or by mountain travel. Not worth it. But by flight, it's only a few minutes."

"Shit," he says, "we could be doing this spell within the hour."

Why doesn't he seem happy about this?

"Yup," I say, "I'll go get the Cronocodille Eye and you get the spell set up inside the castle. I sense prevention access spells nearby but I know you can get inside because you volunteered you had seen the interior walls."

"I sure did, didn't I," Edgar says and he winces.

“Are you in pain?”

He looks at me and smiles. “No. Not at all. This is just happening faster than I expected it to. A *lot* faster.”

I say, “You have a carrying vessel for Croncodile Eye, I assume?”

“Yes,” he says.

He takes his time unpacking the small cassilar so I look around, appreciating the rich privacy and scenery. A lake separates us from the castle, okay, a pond. But maybe somewhere between a pond and a lake for its size boasts duffer fish and they melt in your mouth like butterlangho, sweet and creamy. I could eat duffer fish all day. After the world is saved I should cook some up for us. That might impress him. I like the idea of impressing him.

The castle itself is shiny grey stone and rich blue seams, almost glowing in this odd light, the two suns partially veiled by the gilliglack trees, their wide palm branches providing a decent cover. Gilliglacks are benign, almost indifferent to people. You only get a rash if you touch them. I like this space. I should look into this as a summer cottage.

As he fumbles in his bag, I admire the lake, the shaded yard area, the glowing sunworm spots making the southern side warm and rich in luxury. I strip off my jockstrap and unseal the clasp holding my cape in place.

He hands me the cassilar and I put it in my mouth. Hard to say good-bye this way but I'm only gone for ten minutes, no need to make a scene.

“Got naked I see,” he says with a sexy smirk.

I wink.

He watches me as I take off, a light jog away, and maybe I'm showing off, just a little, as I pick up speed, really start into a full run, right toward three introod trees who lazily rouse from what must be a deep sleep. They probably don't see much food around here. But they rise to the occasion, beginning to pull themselves into full crushing weight and I could have been gone by now but my imminent danger is more glamorous this way. The introods wind up to blast me and I transform into the phoenix bird, soaring beyond their power in seconds.

That was fun.

The cliffs aren't far. The flight isn't challenging. Boy, this is the easiest quest I think I could imagine. I should be back home before dinner. A castle. A

spell. Some Cronocodille Eye. He wasn't kidding about practicing low level magic. But how can a spell this weak save the planet?

What if the planet really ends? What if the spell is not successful?

I think about my father, my brother, two sister-cousins, and a father brood of four other phoenix who helped raise me and Darwin. My big brother, Darwin, a Tulip class phoenix. Who would have expected that big idiot to grow into a man so gallant and strong, such a friend to collective phoenix life? He is the best phoenix I know. I miss the shit out of him. I will miss him even more if the world explodes. And his brood. He carried wind of them to me so I might know their stories from the Mackwell Plains. We swam the sky together so I might learn of his joyful life there. Happily married. Loves his kids. And I learned my big brother misses me every day of my banishment. It makes me sad to think I have nieces and nephots who have not smelled my wind.

And Father. I love him too.

My banishment was as painful for him as it was for me. Nobody spent more time trying to train me to blaze than him. Although I see him in a kinder light most days, I still alternate between loving him for not giving up on me all those years and hating him for failing me. I focus on his terrible parting advice but I honestly don't hate him. But I wish he hadn't failed me. Or I hadn't failed him. One of the two. Our fires should dance as a father and son on the northernty Mackwell winds.

I miss my dad. I miss his shitty lectures and constantly avoiding my questions about what it takes to actually blaze. I think I hated him for protecting me, keeping that hope alive I might one day figure it out. I blamed him for my banishment though I knew how much it cost him. I miss him now.

I want to say, "Sorry Dad. It was never your fault. Your son is the broken phoenix."

I circle the Cronocodille's natural trellising along the cliff walls, seeking vine holds where I can regain human form and harvest the golden liquid. It's not hard to spot a dozen handhold possibilities. I've got to consider a sound trajectory when I push myself off the cliff and fall into my phoenix bird form. This isn't hard as long as I'm not stupid about it. Keep my focus clear.

I transform and remove the cassilar from my mouth.

With my fingertips, I chase each wet rivulet around its pink petal palace until it quivers and surrenders, slithering into the cassilar. Golden and thick, the

liquid spills around its container until I have half-filled the bottle. I have heard this substance intensifies spells. Where did I hear that? Did I hear that in the air once when gloasting this way? Maybe it is so. I don't usually read magic in the air. Boring. Would that I could search the air right now for confirmation, but I flew to this destination blind of any news.

I hate this lack of air. It's unnerving.

It was almost a relief to switch forms and be human. As a human I do not notice the air except as something to breathe. But today in phoenix form, the world tastes dead. The foreigner named Edgar can't possibly be wrong in his assessment. It's happening. I now know with my gut he is right, this handsome flirrant.

But we'll have sex before we die, which is nice. I miss sex.

By the time the cassilar is full and I am ready to fly back to Edgar, I am quivering again and it feels good, so good to anticipate upcoming sex. After putting the bottle in my mouth, I throw myself off the cliff and let myself fall a goodly distance because I almost dread assuming the phoenix and tasting dead air.

The air. Where did it go?

I return to the purple castle, eager to be at his side. I circle the perimeter and he's not outside, which is what I expected. If the air would tell me which room, I would go to him but I apparently must assume human form and walk around looking for him, like a calf at market. So uncivilized. But this is the world now, an airless world until it ends in a few days.

I assume human form, drop to my feet with no problem and take the cassilar from my mouth. Filled to the top. And this is the good stuff. It's glowing.

I am going to assume the spell must be performed in the biggest, most powerful spell chamber in the castle, so I will look there first. The bedroom.

The castle is gorgeous this late afternoon, the walls cool and illuminated by two suns, the peach glow giving a sultry, surreal quality to the indigo. The temperature feels normal, the walls are cool and well lit from rocks in the walls, fat polished crystal that glows softly from within. I have these rocks installed in my own place. Their light is soft and romantic unless you tap them to get them to go brighter for a while.

As I approach the main staircase, the curling majestic beams carpeted with lush white fabrics, I stop dead in my tracks. A horror is there on the floor, two horrors, stacked one on top of each other.

Books.

I walk around them, giving them wide berth, trying to pretend that they're not signs of the end times. He must be near. I'm surprised to think he carried both books here because they were almost larger than his satchel it would seem.

I turn the corner and find a staircase to the upstairs, a winding, curving thing, thick marble slabs with a vein of purple and polished steps—more books? My god, it's like a plague of them. Two more on the steps a few above the first one. Obviously, he didn't carry all these books today. What's happening? Was this castle abandoned because of this plague of books?

I avoid them, contemplate turning to phoenix form to avoid them altogether but I don't want to taste the dead air. It's too depressing.

He's upstairs, I know, I feel him. As my chosen mate, my vibration knows where he is. And he is near. He is supple and naked and ready.

I throw open the main doors of the bedroom, the rich carvings illustrating a history from long ago. The images are dead to me because I would never learn to read them. Why would I, when the air contains the story but in richer senses? But their stories are not carried in the air any longer. I can't think of anything worse.

"Hi," he says, smiling as if bashful and nervous.

He is naked.

His body is slender, which I like. But his muscles are lean and strong. His cock pouts over his balls the way I like, a thick black bush, rough and untamed, so unlike his glamorous hair, which I think he has fixed up to be extra spiky and the long winding tail that comes in front of his ear, which is meant to be seductive.

I know it is meant to be seductive because it worked and I am seduced.

"The sex," I say, and let him see my quivering.

"Yeah, about that," Edgar says and walks toward me, so only a few feet separate us. "We should talk first. I think I might be forced to explain a few things to you. This quest didn't exactly go as I had planned."

"This I do not understand. Have you already performed the spell? And more importantly, are we having sex?"

"I hope so," he says, "I hope we have sex. But I have to explain some things, some small fibs I may have told regarding the end of the world and this, um, quest."

“A fib,” I say, “Like the soft part of the goat children fight over at holiday time?”

“No,” he says, “not that. A fib is a lie that you don’t want to call a lie because calling it a lie sounds worse and I like you and I don’t want you to hate me.”

He is crazy with his words. I love his strange demeanor and bashfulness while also admitting he is a liar.

I say, “You should kiss me before you tell me this fib. Because if I hate you afterward we will not have sex. But I can still masturbate later thinking about this kiss, and how we kissed while we still liked each other.”

“Can’t fault your logic,” he says and steps into my arms.

Our kiss is exactly what I would want a kiss to be, firm lips, soft ass in my left hand, and an arm around his strong back. I like the scent of him, the up close smell that is sometimes hard to inhale with so many stories in the air. But without air, I smell the animal scent of him, sweaty from our exertion getting here. The kiss lasts and then lasts *longer* and I love the squirming as we kiss, different from any other human I have kissed.

When we break he says, “Damn.”

“We should kiss again if what you’re going to tell me is very bad,” I say because I want to kiss him and kiss him now.

We spend the next quarter turn of the dog sun making out in the bedroom of the purple castle.

“My lips are pleasantly sore,” I say after we break our last embrace.

We now lie horizontal on the king’s bed with surprisingly soft bedding. This room is not dusty or worn. Fresh flowers snap at us from the corner, silently, almost swaying. The room is...decorated.

“Where are we?” I say, finally allowing my attention to these details to formulate. “What is this place? Why isn’t it dusty and old?”

Edgar looks sheepish, panting slightly from our last kiss.

I ask, “Do you live here?”

“Sometimes,” he says. He grins at me.

After a moment of my staring at him he says, “It’s kind of a getaway cabin for me. I don’t get here too often, usually only with vacation time. It takes me

roughly fourteen hours to reach the castle, depending on the season and rains. How the hell did you do it with stones? How did you create that shortcut path?"

"The purple forest is full of shortcuts created generations ago. Most forests are. You have to know which stones open the combination. I could feel them pulsing differently, enough to recognize a hidden message. I would assume there are many shortcut paths to this castle. You happen to take the longest path to get here. Why did this shortcut displease you?"

"I love the cardio of running through forests," he says, "But fourteen hours is a little excessive. I thought we would have arrived here mid-day tomorrow and be exhausted. I was counting on that. And yes, did a little interior decorating."

"Well, you couldn't have much decorating instinct if you left books lying around. Are you trying to keep people *away*?"

"Yes," he says.

"Oh," I say, surprised by his ingenuity. "Well, it almost worked with me. But I wanted to see you."

We sit up on the bed and kiss a little more.

He sighs. "I have to tell you something. It's probably going to make you mad."

"Okay," I say.

But I am not okay. I do not want to hear news that will make me like him less.

"The world is ending," he says glumly.

I wait to see if he wishes to explain more but he does not.

I say, "I feel like we covered that."

"No, I mean it. There is no spell that will save the world. It's a dying star. It's science. You can't un-supernova a supernova. The world ends."

"I don't understand. What is our quest?"

"There's not really a quest," he says and looks away from me. "The quest was more for you and I to spend time together. I figured it was slightly possible your blaze could be triggered by the end of the world or maybe your survival instinct. Or maybe not. Who knows? Maybe we just die together. If you didn't

want to go on a quest with me, I'd just go die in town. Get drunk on rabblegots."

I frown. "How would a rabblegot get you drunk exactly?"

"I dunno," he says, "but I get drunk on them."

He fascinates me, this odd one. So far, I don't hate him.

He looks at me earnestly and says, "I stole a few glances yesterday while you walked around your yard ignoring me ignoring you. I thought you were smoking hot. And then I thought, okay, even if he doesn't blaze at the end of the world at least we'll be spending time together. Maybe even, you know, fananguing."

"I wish to fanaqua," I say. "I still do."

"Really? Even after I lied about there being a quest?"

I shrug. "The world's ending. If you say there's nothing we can do, I believe you. I'm flattered you thought I could blaze. I don't think I will, but thanks. Nobody's had that kind of faith in me for a long time. It's comforting. To be believed and loved at the end of the world."

"Well," he says, "Love is a strong word. I do like you a lot."

"I am in love with you," I say. "I don't understand why you wouldn't just say it when you feel it. We phoenix know when we cross paths with a mate. Edgar, it's *you*. When I say I want sex with you, I don't mean sex in the next ten minutes, I mean *for our lives*. Although the next ten minutes works too."

He looks at me and I look at him with a surprising tenderness in both of our eyes.

"I am afraid to say 'I love you,'" he says, taking both of my hands. "It's hard for humans to just say it and mean it and let it be what it is, just hanging there as a verb."

I pull him into me. "I love the way you talk funny. You have a beautiful accent. I understood very little of it, though."

"I have some commitment issues, I guess," he says. "Given I was ripped from my home world against my will, I'm a little slow to make attachments. But I have done some work on this. And I promise when the moment is right, I will say the words, 'I love you.' When I'm ready."

This I understand.

He continues. "It's not easy for me to *say* it. But I want you to know I have strong feelings for you and I'm trying to figure them out before the world ends."

"I love you, beautiful flirrant," I say. "And I can wait until you are ready to speak words as such."

We kiss again, a shorter kiss, less seductive than the others but this kiss confirms we still like each other and more kisses will follow.

The castle walls glow a darker blue, the dog moon blocking peach's evening glow. The room is darker now, slightly darker than when I entered.

I ask, "Are there any magic spells that would save the world?"

"None that I found," he says.

He climbs into my lap. I crave him now with a savage hunger I have not known in many years. I suppressed that desire, sure I would never have need of this hunger again. But he sits in my lap and our bodies touch and I feel warmer, my whole body warmer.

Edgar says, "I read...um...I looked many places for spells or possibilities. But I did not find anything, even in forbidden magic books."

I look at him in a knowing way when I hear him say, *forbidden*.

"I know, I know," he says, rubbing against me. "An under-under-undersecretary should not have access to such books."

My penis is thick and rubbing against him, his backside, the pleasure which I crave is to be inside of him.

The ogular-shaped cassilar brushes against my thigh and I remember its presence as we break from an intensifying kiss.

"What of the Cronocodille Eye?" I ask. "Why did you send me for this?"

I dig out the bottle from half-buried in covers and puzzle over it between us, looking at the thick and oily, glowing gold liquid slowly stir itself.

He takes the cassilar from my hands and opens the top. He pours it into his own hand. "It makes really good lube."

He uses his soaked hand to stroke my hard cock and I am shocked by the sensation, his hand, the warm liquid, and the feeling of him stroking me to the base. The Cronocodille Eye oozes down my hard vibration and then swirls around, heading back up, like fingertips along my hardness.

I gasp.

I've never considered using it this way!

He raises himself, positions himself to let me engorge him, fill him, and I think I may explode from the contemplation of being inside him. His dark quirky hair, the long shard that hangs in front of him, his smooth and supple body, the richness and amplexness of his ass cheeks as they separate for me.

"Are you ready?" I say, half-huffing as well as speaking.

"It's the end of the world," he says, and the tip of me slips inside him. "I left home prepared."

"I don't want to hurt you."

He laughs. "Don't worry. When I find a smaller-sized branch from an introod tree, I use it as a dildo. No splinters and it vibrates. I'm ready for you, big Gio."

He slowly slides down me—all of me—and I swear, it's the Cronocodille juice we're using for lube but he glows for me, power and light and life and he moans, he moans, he tilts his head back. He took me all at once, *all at once*, a huge fantasy for me I never dreamed would come true.

My god—the fire!

Life explodes out of me, prematurely, I was not ready for this, and everything screams with the magma, the fire of life, my cells burn in agony and relief, their true function awake and aware. In a searing white light that swallows me full, I blaze and scream, the air of life ripped from me—

—and just as quickly returned.

I gasp, clutching him, holding him, falling backwards into hard crunchy needles and I can't help but buck my hips upward, the throes of orgasm demanding I obey my body's will.

I think he was pleased as well because I see his juice fly past my face and he screams, hands clutching my chest, which makes me love him, this golden flirrant who does not hide his love for sex, his passion for our union—in...the...

"Where the hell are we?" I ask, looking around.

Everything's wrong. The orange-tinted planet glow is absent yet we're outside. The sun is powerful bright, I can feel it without seeing it. Bright

yellow. The prickly green all around us is not a king's bed, nor are we inside the purple castle. We're surrounded by people and more people and a little stone bridge over a river or water way, people standing on the bridge.

They're staring at us.

"Where are we?" I ask again, truly scared.

The air smells of life again, jarring, loud, screechy and too many undecipherable strands. I have not studied this air, not ever. My senses are overwhelmed. I cannot breathe.

Edgar gasps, still riding me, and looks around with elation. He throws his arms over his head and screams loudly, as if self-pleasuring himself a second time, the scream is that joyful. He can drink an entire bottle of Diet Mountain Dew and self-pleasure himself a second time that quickly? Is there nothing he can't do?

He screams again and laughs. He yells, "*Where are we? Central Park! We're in Central Park in New York City.*"

People gather to stare at us. Some turn away in disgust and fear.

Did he say park? I look around and finally see the horror everywhere. The peoples' disgust and fear makes sense.

The slaughter will begin at any second.

"*Great Vantaros,*" I say, sitting up best I can. "*Edgar, look at the size of these trees.*"

Chapter 3

Home

I sip my sewer-tasting beverage, hoping as little goes into my mouth as possible. I try to make my face seem it tastes delicious. Edgar coached me on my faking enjoyment. But I hate coffee. If I am to sit among them and blend in, I must pretend I love it. Edgar suggested I try something else on the menu but I insisted I keep drinking coffee. I want to fit in with my new home. Gah, this tastes like garbage.

Edgar's coming. I feel him.

He's not far, just outside this shop of coffees. One of the hundreds of disturbing establishments around the city. I try to pretend they don't bother me, all the people reading books around me. I've given up counting how many we pass on benches or waiting for transportation. *Readers*. I am trying very hard to remain calm. Edgar is near and that is comfort enough.

He and thirty other people come in, well, maybe not thirty but there is always a rush to come in and a rush to get out and people rush when they sit here. He smiles and from the entrance way offers me a small hand wave.

He approaches and kisses me on the lips. "Seriously, just order tea or a soda or something. Nobody *cares*."

"Don't give me away," I say in a soft growl. "I don't think anyone suspects anything. I have drunk almost a quarter of this mug."

"It's not the coffee that's going to give you away, Gio. It's constantly staring at everyone to see if they *notice anything*. That's what's creepy. The only thing they notice is you staring."

He is teasing me. I'm getting better at knowing this.

I say, "How are your parents?"

"Good, good," he says. "Funny how being missing for almost twenty years changes your attitude about homosexuality. It's still shocking to me how they've aged."

"Your parents are elderly. It seems they are weak."

"They're just in the 70's, which is how people are in their 70's. Gio, on this planet we get old."

“We get old on our planet too.”

“Not as fast as here. Trust me. I think more than twenty years passed on your planet and I’ve only aged about six years. I’m not trying to be snippy. I’m just sad about my folks and how many years we lost.”

I wonder if I spoke too frankly again. The world of New York City remains alien to me, even after almost a month. I don’t understand the very most basic aspects of living. Is this how it was for Edgar when he came to my world? I don’t like it here.

But it is home.

My world blew up a few weeks ago, I guess. I never thought I’d miss chattering truths and introod trees. The trees on this world are ridiculous. They don’t even attack. Though I hold suspicious of oak trees. It seems to me they are only biding their time.

I try not to repeat our discussions, the decision not to go back. We were so lucky to escape it didn’t even dawn on us until a week later to worry about getting back. I guess we panicked.

He brought things. I nod at the bag near his feet. “What’s with the duff?”

“It’s called a *duffel bag*.”

“Yes, I know. I was attempting to show off I knew the word so well that it I could pronounce only half of it and be cool. This is what cool is, right? We talked about this for hours. I am trying to be cool.”

“It worked. You are very cool. And are you going to finish your coffee?”

He takes mine and sips it.

“Gross, this is ice cold. How long have you been sitting here?”

“All afternoon.”

He says, “I can’t drink that. I’ll be back in a minute. And the duffel bag is a surprise. I will show you what’s inside later.”

He kisses me on the lips as he leaves for the counter, which is a custom I like and do not have back in our home. Well, former home. My home.

Which is gone.

The surprise of it punches me in the stomach again. This is the worst part of drinking coffee. When I taste it I remember all the things back home that I miss.

I miss the most ridiculous things from my home, my green cloak and the smell of the night rose wafting in from the terrace. I miss my bankoo curry, though Edgar introduced me to Thai curries. They're okay. Bland. I miss collapsing on my bed, planning my next carving project, a thousand smells I've gloasted so well. I miss my family.

Unfortunately, the more I miss my family, the more I do not like his parents. They were kind to me. But they were mean to him for many years and while he forgives them for that, I'm not sure I do. I will try. They were embedded within a culture that inexplicably denies flirants. And they do seem to want him to be happy which softens them to me. They all were very sad at the first reunion with their son. Though I had resolved to hate them for as long as we live on this planet, their happy anguish to see him alive and well broke my heart.

I do not want to think about them. Or my father. Or my brother.

Edgar returns soon. "I got mine in a to-go cup. Wanna get out of here and walk around?"

"Yes. How were your parents?"

"Good," he says vaguely. "It was emotional."

He does not wish to discuss more. I can sense this. I will say something to please him. "Your parents were kind to give us money to live in this city until we get our own cave."

"Yes," he says. "They were very generous. Beautiful place for us to live in. They really wanted to make up for past hurts."

He picks up the duffel bag and says, "Let's walk. You cool?"

"I am definitely cool, Duff."

He laughs and leads the way. We navigate around tables and *oh no, book reader*. Do not show fear.

Once we are outside, I maneuver around two book readers at one table and breathe easier when we make it to the sidewalk.

"I liked your cave," Edgar says. "Spacious. I walked around while I waited for you to return. Hot tub. Beautiful pantry, everything carved out by your own hand. It's absolutely gorgeous. I love the room with the pillows and silky fabrics draped around, the round room."

"Yes," I say and feel beautiful sadness because I miss that room most of all.

And somehow Edgar understands.

I love him. I love my Edgar. He is my light. He is unselfish with me and he understands my strange adjustments. When I first arrived, I attacked two trees before they could attack us. He waited with patience until I tested these trees, unclear why they did not move toward us with a malicious nature. He does not mind my eccentricities. When people point at the feathers that sometimes protrude from the back of my head, he looks at them and says, "It's cool, isn't it?" I thought he made this small talk chatter to cover his shame for my unusual appearance. But I saw his glow and knew that he liked it when people thought I was sexy the way *he* thought I was sexy. He loves me. And the sex. I like the sex with Edgar. Very much. I chose well in choosing a mate.

But I'm not crazy about this world.

The air is undecipherable, so much chaos and screaming, crying and lunging, the air lunges in this kingdom of New York City. The air is aggressive toward wingeds and the song it sings is a loud, gloating affair. I find unlimited strands of quiet sophistication, lives of dignity which exist inside this monster, but those strands are harder to find in the skyscraper air. In short, this air sucks for gloating.

It is difficult to live here, requiring documents and people numbers. Magic is duller in this world. Very few traces of magic. This sucks. Fanaqua you, New York. But it is home now and I must be grateful we're not trembling in each other's arms as our dying sun goes supernova. That's a plus.

Another downside is that I cannot blaze. Not without risking going back to my planet, or what used to be my planet. If I go back, I may never be able to make it here again and though he has not said I love you, I know neither of us could bear to be apart. To the ironical gods, I now know how to trigger the blaze. *I can blaze*. Only, I can never do it again or risk our union.

I say, "Babe, I thought of something else I wanted to further discuss while you were with your parents. Why are there no phoenix here? Why just me?"

"I don't know," he says. "I don't know how this works. Not the science or magic behind this or anything. I read a theory in the book about phoenixes. Don't cringe. I saw you cringe when I said *books*."

"I cringed because you called us *phoenixes*."

He laughs. "Quit correcting my grammar. But the book hinted at how when a phoenix blazes you have the capacity to travel between physical space. The

book theorized a phoenix blaze creates controlled chaos. On one level, it's a physical explosion within a limited blast range. On another level, it's exploding molecules of time and space. The walls of physical realities, or dimensions, or whatever, are weaker between explosions, because all those electrons are vibrating so fast and matter somehow slips through. So when you appear to disappear on your planet, you actually blink into existence here."

We have discussed this. This was the theory we discussed.

I say, "Yes, but why are there no other phoenix *here*. Why did not others escape the dying planet? Why haven't I felt any phoenix in the air?"

"I don't know," he says and he looks at me. "But I'm pretty sure your older brother Darwin was here at some point. Picked up some Diet Mountain Dew on his last visit, perhaps?"

"Yes, it would seem so. I would ask him."

It cheers me to think of Darwin popping into this world one day. We could fly—

Oh wait. That will never happen.

Our planet exploded in the supernova.

The sorrows fall into me again. I know now I will simply feel this grief for all my days. I must compose phoenix songs for a race that no longer exists. They may have banished me, but I will never banish them from my heart. I will miss them all my days.

"I have a guess as to why he would bring you Diet Mountain Dew every couple of years," Edgar says. "It's just a guess."

"Yes?"

"I think he was trying to get you to think about or somehow remember this world. Like maybe drinking something from this world would spark a biological memory in you. My guess is he brought you these because it was the closest thing he could give as a hint."

My heart breaks twice, once for Edgar believing the best in my brother. And also for Darwin, my older brother who never gave up on me. Even after banishment.

"I'm guessing other phoenix besides your brother were here," Edgar says. "We have images of phoenix in our mythology, in our stories throughout history. No one has ever documented seeing a real phoenix but what if you're a

visiting species, like you're here for a while and pop out again? I'm fairly confident others of your kind were here. I believe I came to your world when a visiting phoenix blazed in the bank where I worked as a teller."

I frown. "I didn't understand the bank part."

"We haven't discussed the world of banking yet," he says. "We're still working on language and government."

I nod. "I have more questions about government. I think I must be understanding it all wrong."

"Can we discuss it later? The bank is only a few blocks from here. That's why I wanted to have coffee at this place today, so we could walk by there. I want to see it."

"Yes," I say, "I would see it too. If a phoenix blazed there, I will know. The story will be written on the wind."

"It was a long time ago," he says. "You may not be able to read the story after so many years."

"Bitch, *please*," I say, "A phoenix as cool as me can gloast the story long after it was written."

He chuckles. "As I."

I say, "Did I use it the right way? I said the *please* much slower, like you suggested."

"You did good, sweetie."

He kisses me and I am happy. I have chosen a mate well. This pleases me.

"I will carry the duffel bag for you," I say. "For a while."

"Sure, thanks. But no peeking."

"I will try," I say in a voice which is meant to use sarcasm. I dislike sarcasm. But I am in this world now and this is how they often communicate. I must learn to appreciate this place and see beyond its grubby, unmagical sidewalks. Ugh. Sidewalk. I'd rather fight three dozen introod trees at once than transform into phoenix above a New York sidewalk covered in black gum and thousands of footprints. I made that mistake once. The stories were disgusting.

In the street, I smell the foul air, try to resist choking.

Now we can hold hands and we do so, walking down the unmagical sidewalks, the sunlight from the creepy single sun waving to us through the green, non-killing trees.

“Gorgeous day,” he says.

“Yes,” I say.

I can see the appeal, I guess. In a way.

He says, “I can’t believe how much the world changed while I was away. You would not believe how much more open it is for gays now. I mean, I’ve been reading articles on the interweb. We did not have much of an interweb in 1997. Some but not like today.”

“Gays?”

“Flirrantants.”

I nod. I knew that word. I just forgot it. *Gays*.

I see the horror ahead and on our right, so I switch sides with him. It’s not chivalrous, I know, but he doesn’t mind walking closer to it. Hell, he might want to go inside.

“It’s a book store,” he says. “You’re going to have to get used to them. They’re a lot less of them around than I remember, but still. You can’t always turn and go around the block the other way just because of a book store.”

“I can. I will.”

He points at someone walking toward us and says, “Oh look, a book.”

“Not funny.”

He teases me, pretending to drag me toward it and I pretend to be scared for a second. I break away and jog a few feet forward, which dislodges a feather. It wafts to the muddy ground near the gutter.

Ugh. The garbage in this city.

We hold hands again and continue up the street, walking in silence. He is quiet, being back here in New York, his former home before our land.

“Here it is,” he says. “This is where the bank is. Or was. I guess they tore it down after the explosion and built something else.”

I set down his duffel.

The space is another type of commerce and I honestly can’t tell what it is, they all seem to do such strange and different things. We stand in the shade and I can’t help but glance up nervously at the tall trees around us. I still do not trust them.

"I'm going to change form," I say, "to confirm the other phoenix presence. It may take a few minutes to isolate the story in the air. So many stories. Everything is thick and loud."

He looks up and down the street. "Is that a good idea right here?"

"I'll jog down into that down steps, those cement ones. No one can see from the sidewalk. Don't worry," I say, kissing his forehead. "I'm only gone for a minute."

I strip off my tee shirt and drop out of my half-pants, the shorts as he describes them. Kick off my shoes. I'm naked now.

"I never get tired of this," he says and kisses me on the lips.

"Careful," I say in a slight warning. "I've recovered my energy since this morning."

"Yeah," he says, "That was hot, naked man. Now hurry. There's a good lull in pedestrian traffic."

I break into a slight jog, not because I need to but I'd like a little momentum to work with when transform so I can swing out of the entryway. Seconds later I race down the concrete steps, two at a time and flash into phoenix only a foot away from the iron grill in front of the door, circling upward, out to the street level, up around the building and then gliding back to him, falling to the ground.

I transform back to human behind a parked van. There are people on the sidewalk, but I think they were too far away to see much.

I scramble to put on my clothes. As soon as I am decent, we step back onto the sidewalk. We look at the building again.

I say, "Yup. A phoenix blazed here. You said it's many years ago, right? Well, this guy targaroots this place. His blaze feels like yesterday. No question. What the hell happened?"

"Targaroots?"

"It's like...stink but without the negativity of smelling bad. A strong mark. Think of it as the smell of 10,000 turgles."

"I love turgle soup," he says, excited.

"I used to make a really good turgle soup. I would make you some."

I wish I could have cooked for him back home. That hits me again. World is dead. Shit.

"I can live without turgle soup," he says.

I am grateful for his implication, that he could not live without me. We kiss. Once we stop, he takes my hand and we look at the building.

He says, "I had just showed up for work about ten minutes earlier. Half hour before the bank opened. Me and another lady, Deidre. I remember she was really funny. Anyway, she was down in the vault area, turning on lights and turning off security measures. I had begun unlocking my drawer, getting it ready and wondering where my other coworker was. She was late."

I wait for him to continue.

"A chandelier in the lobby exploded. I didn't see it, but when I looked up, a second one exploded. But it wasn't a chandelier. I think, I mean, I'm *sure* it was a phoenix. And when it returned to your world, it somehow dragged me with it. Could have even been your brother, for all I know. I never saw the phoenix again. I woke up on a stone path, a wide one, which was incredibly lucky because there were two dtandiant tentacles testing the stones trying to get to me. Fanaquing bastards."

"Fucking bastards," I say correcting him. "This is our world now. You should say *fucking*."

He says, "Anyway, that's when I started living in your world. I met other foreigners and we shared our stories but nobody was sure. Until I started reading the book I mentioned, *The Phoenix Tail Feather*."

I say, "I am trying to get used to loving a *book lover*, I am. But if you keep—"

He says, "It's a book about the best sexual positions with phoenixes."

"Phoenix," I say, correcting him. "There's no plural. We are one. *Sexual positions*?"

He smiles at me. "Yup."

I say, "Perhaps I can get used to books."

This makes him laugh, though I can't imagine why.

"Was his dick inside you?" I ask. "This other phoenix?"

He searches my face for what I do not know.

"No," he says. "I was across the room. I looked up at the last second and saw the chandelier explode and everything went white, like though a white hole."

I saw that whiteness when I blazed. *A real blaze*. A month has passed and I'm still thrilled about the event what brought us here. I should get drunk around my people to celebrate. But of course, I can't.

"You rode his blaze," I say, "As you rode mine. But you were across the room. You were not near him?"

"Not even close. Basically, the distance between this tree right here and those front steps."

I ponder this. Most phoenix have a two foot range, the all-consuming fire. My mother knew a female phoenix, Tulip level just like Darwin, who used to blaze seven feet in perimeter. Well so she said. Mom said she was a bit of a drama queen. Never actually saw the blaze extend seven feet. We used to laugh about it when I was small. Seven feet. But if Edgar stood across the room, this one, this anonymous phoenix blazed a lot more than seven feet. More like, twenty feet. That's unheard of.

"His blaze was twenty feet," I say, "It was an enormous blaze."

Edgar squeezes my hand. "Don't worry, babe. I'm just as happy with yours. I'm not a size queen."

"I don't understand *size queen*, though I can think of a half-dozen interpretations, all related to underground tunnels."

"*Underground tunnels?*" he says and laughs. "That's perfect. I will explain this to you later but let me enjoy this joke on my own today."

He leans in closer and we kiss, the warmth and love pouring from him, richness on the air between us, the only story I will indulge while our lips are pressed together. We break and he looks into my eyes with a great sadness.

He looks across the street at the former business where the phoenix blazed twenty feet. He turns back to me.

"I want to go home," he says. "I want to go back to our world."

I crinkle my brow. "We are home."

"This isn't home. I don't belong in New York anymore. Life's not much fun without a couple introod trees trying to kill you a few times a week. I love it there."

"Go home? The planet was dying. Actually dead now, for almost four weeks."

“It was. It is. I realize we’d be going home to die, but c’mon, we can think of something when we get there, right? Some last minute plan to save the planet? Time travel is a possibility, right? We could show up before the planet explodes.”

“How’s your magic in New York?” I ask and cross my arms.

“Not great, not great,” he says. “I enchanted myself to read Spanish, another translation spell. It didn’t work quite right. I can’t get verb tenses correct. I had to use rosemary as a substitute ingredient since there’s no flabma on earth. Well, there might be but I don’t know its earth name.”

“Okay, so between your faulty, low-level magic and the one-and-only broken phoenix, what do you think we can do to save the dying sun?”

“I don’t know,” he says and looks into my eyes. “But this isn’t home.”

I love him. I *love* him. I chose my mate well.

“Look,” he says, “You can blaze. You’re not broken anymore. And maybe you never were. You said this phoenix who can blaze twenty feet wide right?”

“Yes, but that can’t be right.”

“Or maybe it can. Do you know where the phoenix class system comes from? Tulip? Daisy? Petunias?”

Every phoenix in school knows this. “They named our classes after flowers to make us seem fierce. You can slice open arteries with a tulip.”

“Yes, but before the class names. Before classes. There were different division among the phoenix. I only found this in one paragraph so I can’t verify it against anything else, but there were phoenix with different abilities.”

“What abilities?”

“The book was vague. It hints at time traveling powers but then in the next paragraph goes on to discuss anal pleasures. It’s a *sex* book. But it’s the only book I’ve seen about your clan. Maybe you could, I dunno, time travel to the past and find me a book about phoenixes and then time travel a few years to the future to get it to me so I can read it and be ready by the time you and I meet for the first time—”

“Stop. This is making my head hurt. Also, I don’t know how to time travel.”

“Honestly, I don’t know what I’m talking about,” he says. “I know only vague clues from this book. What if you were never broken? What if you were

always just differently-abled? Maybe not all phoenix can make it to other worlds. I don't know. We know of one phoenix with a giant blaze, possibly your brother. But there are other powers. Do you know what *icy fire* is?"

"No."

"Neither do I. It was only mentioned once. It's either super important or it's a way of pleasuring phoenix balls. Not sure."

"Let's talk more about pleasuring the balls."

"I'm serious," he says, "the sex is linked to the abilities, it's all interconnected. I don't know if time travel is real. I don't know if you can do anything. But don't you want to be with your family when you go? Don't you want to fly the Mackwell Plains once more before they disappear forever? Show them you can blaze?"

"Yes," I say softly. "I want to go home. But what about here? After your long absence, you are finally here in New York City. Your parents accept you at last."

"I love New York," Edgar says and looks at me with his almond-shaped eyes I love so well. "But my home is with you. This morning, I told my parents we're going back. We're starting a new quest."

The same feelings rush over me as when we are naked and I am inside him, the heat, the fire, the possibility of blazing. I have blazed. *I blazed*. We kiss a sensual extension of our love for each other, this strange and wondrous person in my life. I am a flirrant in love.

He pulls away from me, grinning, touching my chest and feeling the heat under his hand. We smile sexy smiles.

"I want to sex you," I say.

"I want to sex you back," he says.

He holds up the duffel bag. "This is full of stuff to take home. That chocolate you like. A good pair of shoes for me. Souvenirs for your nieces and nephots."

"I approve," I say. "But they might be dead. We must face that. Everyone is likely to be dead. The planet gone. We will show up and die in space dust."

"They're alive. Believe it. We'll find them."

His hope is infectious. We're going home!

“My nephott will smell my wind,” I say proudly.

Edgar laughs at this puts his hand over his mouth to cover it up.

I love to watch him laugh.

I pick up the duffel bag and we walk to the corner. He balances his empty paper cup with coffee residue atop an overflowing garbage can. I am so glad we're fucking leaving New York.

I say, “When do you want to do this?”

“Today. I say the sooner the better. I'll carry the duffel for a while, babe.”

We transfer the bag to his hand and we take each other's free hand again. He says, “I have an idea about how to go home and trying to get back on the exact same day. Maybe even earlier. I know a spell.”

We're going back home! I feel more charitable toward New York City as we walk together, forgiveness at the air which stinks of rotted, un-lived lives, the unsafe chemical stories told boldly alongside the screaming strands. I could get used to the noise, the texture of this air. New York may not be a terrible place to visit. But I wouldn't want to live here.

“Here's what I've been thinking,” Edgar says, and we shake our heads politely at a street man who wishes to sell us food items from the metal box. “We don't know how this works exactly. If you could talk to other phoenix, you'd know if you show up in the same spot you left at the same time or if you can choose your destination. But we don't know that, right? After all our conversations during the past month, neither of us understand it. So maybe we ought to recreate the same conditions as the first time. I think you should blaze at the same location where we arrived in Central Park.”

“Yes. This makes sense. At least until I can ask other phoenix for better understanding.”

He explains the logic again but I do not need to hear it. He needs to say it, to rehearse why he thinks it works the way it does but I already trust and believe him.

We wind our way toward the park, which is still a long walk away. I can smell its distance, the story of the park, a place with centuries of untold stories. So many buried corpses in that earth, underground, it's a wonder there is any room for trees.

He squeezes my hand and we walk in sunlight.

“What about your parents? Are they happy with this?”

He seems sad. “No, not at all. But they tried to understand. They know we’re together but they are worried you brainwashed me or I’m in love with the wrong world. It’s difficult. But we hugged and cried. I tried to explain why I love it there.”

We do not speak for a few moments. I know what it’s like to miss family.

This makes me think of his parents again. “I would ask you this. Many years ago, why did they have a problem with you’re being a flirrant?”

“*Because* I was a flirrant.”

“Yes, but why? Had you done murders as a flirrant or somehow disgraced them?”

“No. I was a flirrant. That was enough.”

“Yes, but *why* was that a disgrace?”

“I don’t know,” he says and he is thoughtful. “In this world, being flirrant is hard for many. My parents’ hearts changed in my years of absence. They forgave me.”

“Forgave you for being a *flirrant*?”

He sighs and says, “Yup.”

I am incredulous.

I must understand the words wrong. He keeps insisting it was because he was a flirrant but that can’t be right. Flirrancy is a badge of honor at home. My father’s pride at learning my own flirrant nature was celebrated with a feast on the Mackwell Plains. A flirrant phoenix is an incredible omen. Of course, he had reason to grow ashamed when I refused to blaze. A *flirrant* phoenix who cannot blaze was probably even more humiliating for him, all that wasted promise.

“We said our good-byes,” Edgar says. “And they love me again. I can live with this.”

He is quiet, my Edgar, my mate. My chosen mate.

Our Central Park destination draws near. I smell a store of books two blocks ahead so I suggest a detour, something that will not put us in its direct path. Edgar agrees and we amble under the leafy streets as I attempt to cover my nervousness among so many trees. Edgar points out the cement caves he likes,

and I like some of them too, their architecture intriguing enough for me to get some ideas for future marble carvings. Okay, so parts of New York City are beautiful.

We reach an entrance of Central Park a few moments later. I have to wonder about his commitment to leave his world behind. I stop before we cross the gate into this wondrous park, the land where vegetation and humanity cohabitate. Truly, I do not give this city enough credit for its many delights.

I say, "Are you sure?"

He says, "I'm sure. I love New York in the spring, but this isn't home. I miss too many things. Like turgle soup with cheenas and the roasted bankoo stems. I love my crappy apartment with windows that don't have screens or glass panes or even *locks* on the front door because there are no bugs and no concept of personal crime. I mean, I *love* it there. Except for the lack of Mountain Dew."

He nudges me and we laugh quietly, crossing under the gate.

"*Diet* Mountain Dew," I say, playing along.

We stand in Central Park. He tugs me in the direction of a path and I follow.

He says, "I wanted to visit the bank where I disappeared, where I was accidentally abducted. I thought if I looked at that location and felt relief at being in New York, maybe I was not meant to live in your world. But the feeling that emerged was a longing, a happy remembering of how I came to be. Not all outsiders love your world the way I do, but I prefer it."

"And our foreigners, our unworthy—"

"Probably, yeah, some came back with a phoenix. Two *maybes* I know of, one for sure. Our games night group considers me a *maybe* because I didn't actually see a phoenix when I woke up. It was long gone."

I say, "You wish to return to a world where you are a foreigner who is not respected and made to read *books* as an under-under-under—"

"There's no place like home," Edgar says. "Besides, you can blaze now. I figure we can come back and visit my parents every once in a while. Maybe visit the Met and catch a show. My mom told me I should see *Wicked*."

He tells me of other New York landmarks he wishes to see, tempting me to encourage him to stay but I cannot. Our life is together. Our home is my home. Plus, the sex.

I say, "One more time. I must ask you, are you sure? Our world may not exist. We may blaze into nothingness."

"You know I went to the dentist a few days ago," he says. "I hadn't been in dozens of years. You guys don't have teeth problems on your planet."

"Why would we have problems with our teeth?"

"That's not the point. My point was while my mouth was open and he was filling my two cavities, I thought to myself 'This is so we can go home.' That's how ready I am to leave."

Okay, he's sure.

"We should celebrate," I say, nodding toward a vendor. "With a giant premel."

"Pretzel," he says. "And I agree."

We take turns biting it, sharing it, him laughing at my method of chewing and I am tempted to run away with the premel, turn into phoenix and taunt him by flying away with it, but he has cautioned me about turning too often in public, how it is simply not done. I don't see many other New Yorkers demonstrating the sophisticated good manners he thinks we should follow, but he's probably right. We shouldn't draw attention to any of our differences. Not in this world where you can be banished for being a flirrant.

We linger together, enjoying this afternoon, our last afternoon in New York, both of us gradually growing distracted as we grow near to the spot where our New York story began.

"How faithful do you think we must be to recreate the circumstances?" I make sure he sees my hungry leer. "Do we recreate the sex? I am quivering already. Premels make me horny."

He laughs. "It was quite a scene when we first arrived, remember? Let's just stand close and kiss. We will see if that's enough. But if nothing happens...maybe."

I like the way he teases me.

During the days after our arrival, Edgar worried we could not have sex or I would automatically blaze. I assured him that I could perform sex and not blaze. Now that I understood how to call all my cells to action, I knew how *not* to. It would not come unbidden as it did the first time we made love. Of course, there was only one way to prove this was true and I smile at the memory of those intense few days.

“Maybe we should sex again on the spot,” I say, “to increase the odds.”

He laughs and squeezes my hand.

We are not near the spot, or rather, it's barely come into view but is still a great striding distance. But soon I will blaze and while I am confident now in my abilities to do so, our blaze could mean both of our deaths. Our world, the one we're so eager to return to, most likely is gone. I do not know how to time travel.

A screeching reaches my ears and I'm *sure* it's a tree attack for I do not trust these alleged pacifists, I do not trust them. My keen eyes jump from tree top to tree top, but I see no attack formation, just Edgar covering his ears with his hands. He swears.

“It's them,” I hear someone yell and humans emerge, jump into action, a woman in an exercise suit who appeared to be stretching now runs toward us, two men who I noticed arguing over a book, drop it and pull out black cylinders from behind them, running in the same cautious manner. At first I thought they were running from the book, a sensible decision.

“*Run*,” Edgar cries, and jerks my hand, dragging until I match his pace.

I run with him at my side. We run straight for the spot where we appeared in New York.

I say, “What is happening?”

He runs faster so I run faster.

They will catch us, it seems, and if not the woman in jogging clothes who also holds a black cylinder now, there are others running toward us from the opposite direction. We will not reach our clearing.

“Phoenix form,” Edgar says, yelling.

He lets go of my hand and I need no further prompting.

I soar into the sky, gloast the air and instantly these peoples' story is clear—a story so aggressive that I barely need to count seconds before I grasp their intention. They mean us harm. Our arrival in this world a month ago was noted and studied with machines. Geiger counters, too, though I do not know what a Geiger means. If I had time I would search the air for this explanation. These people work for a body of regulation, Edgar's explanation of *government*, actually though I am sure I did not understand his explanation correctly. The way he had described it sounded impossible for anything to get accomplished.

The air tells me two different government organizations work together with the same intention, to stop the phoenix presence in this world. I am not the first phoenix they have tracked, the texture of this story leading to another strand of air with *that* explanation, but I have no time for that now. Just enough to know I'm not the first they put down.

They're here to kill me.

"He's getting away," someone cries and it's harder to hear words in this form, non-winged words so I do not understand the garbled instructions that come next. I have enough information and soar back toward Edgar so I may join him in flight. Or rather, in blaze. I can get us out of here. I do not know if proximity to our original location is important or the consequences of blazing from a different location. I don't understand how any of this works. *I wish I could speak with Darwin.* But fuck it, we're doing it now.

"Stop them," another voice cries out and there is garbled yelling on mechanical devices, too.

I soar over Edgar's head, racing to human form thirty feet in front of him so he can run into me like crossing a finish line. When he collides with me in fifteen seconds, I will blaze. I face him, arms open.

I'm ready for you, Edgar.

Loud bangs change the look on his face. The bangs result in Edgar leaping forward immediately, falling hard into earth five feet in front of me and he throws the duffel bag with his souvenirs into the dirt.

I leap forward and drop down beside him, terrified what this means, the bangs and the redness growing from his midsection. I turn him over, my fear doubling over to see his beautiful face so unnaturally distorted.

"Oh my god," he says when his eyes open, "I had no idea how much this would hurt."

"Edgar," I say, shaking him gently, like I do when I wish to wake him for middle of the night sex. "Edgar, what is this?"

"I've been shot," he says and he seems just as surprised as me. "This really fucking hurts. Oh my god."

I may not know what getting shot is, but I know it's bad when the blood comes out, so yeah, this must be pretty fucking bad. The red is spreading. The fleeting thought races through me, *he loves me!*

“Secure them,” says a voice.

All the running people grow nearer, hard clomping feet just a dozen feet away.

I throw up a perimeter of phoenix fire, which I did not even know I could do but I need time with Edgar to discuss our next steps. The fire will dissuade them, but probably only temporarily if they don't already know how to cross it. How did I do that? Can't think about that now.

“Go home,” he says and already his face is paler.

I do not like this. Now, I am scared.

“Edgar,” I say, my voice softer, “Edgar.”

“Go home to your family,” he says, “break wind for your nephott.”

He tries to smile but winces. “On television, getting shot looks like no big deal.”

“Edgar,” I say and it seems that's all I'm able to do, is repeat his name.

“You are so beautiful,” he says, his eyes glazing over. “I love your singed feathers.”

“Pinalto ad yiirmatano,” I say more out of instinct than a true desire to follow appropriate social norms.

“Yes,” he says and I see the light in his eyes fading. “Honor to honor.”

I scream, scream into the city, my cry rising, my tears flowing because I know what's happening now. He's dying. I scream and the world becomes nothing but flames, the whiteness, the trembling universe.

I am fire incarnate.

I am eternal.

And I love him.

Life explodes out of me and everything screams with the magma, the fire of life, my cells burn in agony and relief, their true function awake and aware.

If Edgar dies, this world will burn.

The searing white light swallows me.

Chapter 4

The Mackwell Plains

I wake up and turn my head to see the tentacle of a dtandiant, fuzzy to my eyes until it grows into a more solid shape. It's not attacking me, which is odd. It's not even snaking along the earth toward me.

My head hurts.

"Hey," says a voice connected to head leaning over me. "We have a good news-bad news situation here. Which do you want first? The good news?"

I recognize the spiky hair, the one strand before his ear and the blackberry smell of him, the sweat of his recent exertion. I love his scent when he sweats.

It's Edgar.

I shake my head and scramble to my feet, needing to feel his arms around me to assure me he's okay. I wrap myself around him and start crying.

He speaks into my ear, "It's okay. I'm *okay*, Gio."

I cry into him and I am both proud and ashamed of this cry, its intimacy is embarrassing but I am proud to have his love and my tears will show him that. He kisses me, his lips reassure me, he is here and he is mine and we are together as we will always be. We break and yet position our mouths close together, so we may resume kissing at any second.

"I'm okay. My boyfriend has healing tears," he whispers into my mouth. "And they're great for my complexion."

He makes me laugh. I squeeze him.

"Remember the little blemish I had," he says, pointing at his forehead to the spot.

"Yes, I told you about it."

"Yes," Edgar says and chuckles. "Gotta love that phoenix honesty. It was probably from eating New York street vendor food. But you'll notice it's gone now. You're good for my complexion."

We kiss more until I feel sure he's not dying, until I feel his body living and strong and completely dressed for this world. How did I not notice his dress, his durable jeans and tight-fitting shirt, his version of workout clothes?

I am naked.

I don't mind. I like naked. But I did like those jeans Edgar purchased for me in New York. I did love their incredible softness against my muscle, worn out before even purchased. I did not understand how they made jeans magic.

Lightning strikes behind us.

"Okay," he says, pulling away. "I think we should hear my good news-bad news scenario. There's more good news than bad news, so let's try to focus on the positive."

"Let's hear it."

"I think we're back the same day. We're on the shortcut path to the purple castle. You time traveled."

I look around. I think he's right. The dog moon is only an hour or two later from when I blazed inside him and wow, that was *fantastic* fucking sex. I think I like the word fuck better than fanaqua. I like it. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Maybe," I say. "We don't know if I time traveled or all phoenix come back to our world soon after they left it. I only know that's what happened to me this one time."

Edgar says, "Good point. Also good news, the world didn't end yet. And I think you probably noticed we're not being attacked by dtandiart, which basically should be considered good news."

I do not like the hopeful quality in his voice which suggests perhaps the bad news is worse than he let on.

"You do not look happy. What is the bad news."

Edgar nods. "Bad news is I think it means all plant life is dying. Quickly. Also under the bad news heading, is my calculation about when the world ends. That may have been off by a day. Or two."

"Off by two days?"

"Hey, I was calculating the *exact* day for a dying sun in a language where I am not a native speaker, so I think a two day variable sounds like an awfully tight margin. Considering nobody else on this damn planet was paying attention."

I laugh and he laughs next because we are fun together. So what if the world ends in a few days or hours? We are in love with each other, right now, this

second. And we love being in love, hands joined together standing before a dying sun.

I say, "So the world ends *today*."

Edgar flinches. "Maybe. I'm not a scientist. But I'd say a dtandiart not trying to eat your head is a pretty bad sign. Those dudes would eat their own tentacles."

I nod. "Yes, someone wrote a song about that twenty years ago. It was humorous and also a metaphor. Very popular song."

"Your music here sucks," Edgar says, shaking his head. "I'm not trying to start a fight. I'm just saying—"

"Well, if you're not trying to start a fight, lover, quit saying our music sucks. I listened to your Madonna. I do not find her favorable."

"Bitch, pleeeeeeease," he says. "You do not want to *dis* Madonna."

"I understand now why you stretch out the please," I say. "This makes more sense."

He nods. "It's more effective. But talking about music from my world reminds me I brought you a welcome home gift."

He turns around and presents me with the jeans I love. "Welcome home to our dying world, babe."

I love these jeans. I hold out my hands and say, "I love you."

He blushes and says, "We have to get you to the Mackwell Plains. I have a plan."

"Is that the good news?" I say, hopeful.

"No, the good news is we should make pretty good time getting there without the forest trying to kill us. And if you know some shortcuts with paving stones we could be there in three hours. The bad news is that it might be too late."

I slip on the jeans, loving the raw fabric under my balls, caressing my ass. I have discovered on our visit to his world that soft, comfy jeans is the equivalent of having sex with your clothes.

He picks up the duffel bag and says, "We should leave right now. We can't waste time."

We start running the forest, and immediately I contemplate flying, which would be faster. But he's at my side, *alive*, and I love him, so I don't care if the world's ending, I want to be by his side. We race in a way we normally cannot run through a forest, even running on the narrower paths and I suddenly understand the appeal of this New York hobby called jogging. It's actually kind of pretty around here when the trees and shrubs aren't out to kill you.

We jog through what might be considered our Central Park. I must admit I liked the park with the non-murdering trees. And the premels. And the many clothes.

Is it possible that I will actually miss New York?

"Do you know where you go when you blaze?" he asks, his voice irregular.

"I do now," I say. "I go to your world. Or a world. We don't know if it's consistently the same one. I don't know if it's in our universe or another dimension or one of the other possibilities we talked about. I would have to blaze more to know for sure. Or talk to other phoenix."

This excites me, the idea of finally being able to discuss the blaze with my own people, to be part of the greater community in a way I never was before. I am an equal again. Possibly *unbanished!*

I feel the stones pulsing underfoot but their light is faint. I don't understand why.

"There's a shortcut in about a mile," I say.

"Great," he says. "Let's take it. But where do you *go* between our planet and my birth planet. What happens in between?"

"Between what?"

"That's what I'm asking. Is there a between, a *space* in between."

"I don't understand what you're asking, sweetie."

Edgar slows his pace so we are still jogging but not sprinting now, conserving ourselves to keep the pace steady. He says, "Let me catch my breath for a second."

We keep at a steady pace, and I pay attention to the rocks. They're flickering, their presence their coolness and heat are flickering. That's never happened as far as I know. Not ever. Not even in clan stories.

"When you blaze," he says, "first you are consumed by fire. It's beautiful. It's like your face is sculpted and washed by these flames. The fire gets hotter,

almost unbearable, and then you're not *you*, and then you're you again. Once again, your face sculpted in flames and then it dies down a little and your eyes glow red and orange, then liquid yellow, and it dials down, the fire. You become human again. Or phoenix bird, whichever form you took before you blazed."

"I'm not sure where this is going."

"There's a split second where you're not you, not human. Not phoenix form. You're nothing but white fire. Where are you when that happens? What is that place? I've only experienced this twice with you but I memorized every detail."

"Memorized every detail?"

Edgar laughs. "Yeah, I memorized how it felt. I jacked off to it twice. It's incredibly sexy."

"Well that's kind of weird," I say. "I didn't know you were into *kink*."

He laughs. "I'm pretty vanilla. But that space in between when you're nothing but white fire. What is that? *Where* is that?"

I guess I know what he's talking about. I feel that space in me but it's hard to describe or define, it's like roller skating on marbles, everything falling over and racing too fast, fire and oxygen in competition with each other.

"That space," he says. "Think about it."

It must be connected to his big plan. I will contemplate this. I will also ask Darwin. *Darwin!* I get to see my big brother again.

We reach the shortcut while I am puzzling his riddle and I count five stones necessary to activate this shortcut. It must be a longer road through the shortcut. The stones flicker to not-alive for a long enough time I have to rub my eyes. Did I just see that correctly? They light up again, not *light* exactly, but the light within them reveals the truth of the heat. The truth of their chill. I've never seen them *not* have light from within. We studied dying stones in school, in biology, but I've never seen a whole section of path just blink out.

This world is dying quickly.

The path opens again. Some instinct tells me we must run fast.

"Full speed," I say. "The stones are flickering their glow-light. They are not supposed to do that."

He breaks into a run.

We race the path and I don't know why because stones aren't flickering right at this second. But they could and what happens to the shortcut if we're on it? Do we flicker out of existence?

The phoenix clan sings about everything that happens on this world and there are no songs of flickering stones. This is not good. This is really bad. I see the shortcut's end and yet it feels far to me, maybe because rock light flickers and my feet don't touch anything. I stagger but recapture myself and Edgar bursts into a faster speed.

"What the fuck was that?" he says and then focuses on running.

"Keep running," I scream.

The end is near, the shortcut end. Maybe the *end* end, too. We race in competition and the rock flickers slightly, and Edgar stumbles until I catch him.

We race as fast as we can.

I could assume phoenix form if the rocks fade but I don't know where I'd be, how many hundreds of miles away from the destination and what about Edgar? Could I carry him? He's slender but I wouldn't even try to carry my *groceries* in phoenix form, so I dunno if I could save him. Well, other than to cry over him, I guess. I guess that works now. Barely had a chance to celebrate my tears can heal.

We leap across the final stones like diving into a pool and the shortcut path doesn't close behind us. We roll to our feet, scramble to the middle of the path though there is no need. No vegetation attacks us but our instincts took over. Maybe I worried us over nothing. The rock lights seems to be stable.

"See?" I say, "The planet may have more time—"

The path closes and the rocks flicker dead. They do not come back on and somehow I know they're not coming back on. Not ever again.

While he's panting on his knees, I say, "Babe, not to alarm you but the whole planet's rock system is dead."

"Okay," he says, catching his breath, and standing. He breathes heavily before attempting to speak. "We can handle this. We can do this. Rocks are dead."

He looks at me. "You have to fly. We don't have time for running."

"But you haven't told me the plan."

"I know. No time. You go there first and convince them to put you in charge. I'll show up and explain the plan."

"Show up how?"

Edgar says, "Travel spells. I think it's time for people magic. I think I'm going to graduate myself to that level right now. I'll get there in like, three or four jumps. And without being attacked by the forest the jumps will be less dangerous. Go. See you there."

I lean in to kiss him and he pushes me away with a playful grin. "I'll carry your jeans. If you save the world, I'll give them back. Go."

"Promises," I say and shoot him a look, reminding him of a former conversation, a playful time last week when we sparred with our words over New York pizza. We played together. We had what he called a *date*.

I am a broken phoenix in love.

I slip out of my jeans, and I know he will bring them to me because we are in love and this is what you do when you love someone else, you pick up after them and care for them. I have that with him.

I burst straight up into phoenix form and sail fast on the dead air.

The air smells deader, worse than before, as if before were emptiness and the emptiness has been replaced with the smell of decay. This world is not long. Lightning strikes the countryside with an alarming regularity, planting an introod tree with each strike. But the trees are dead, so I guess a lightning strike is somewhat of a hollow gesture right now.

It's odd navigating toward the Mackwell Plains with no air in the sky. For a split second I worry I won't be able to find my way back there, so long ago was my banishment. Normally, I'd pick up threads in the sky and read the stories of my destination, see who and what has influenced the story of Mackwell Plains recently. Get caught up on the news from home. But with no stories, I just fly hard, fast, and then angle at the appropriate times. I guess you never forget the way home after all. But this is an absurd way to fly, doing nothing but flapping your wings. What's the point of that?

I don't know how much time passes because I keep worrying about Edgar but to the left of me I see a yellow puff of smoke rise from above the tree tops and I breathe with relief. Yellow magic is the cheapest. It's the most unreliable, but probably as much as an under-under-undersecretary can afford. He's smart, Edgar. I bet he figured out ways to use magic from books that nobody else has

discovered. *He's coming*. That smoke means my mate is coming with me to the Mackwell Plains.

It's hard not to feel a little giddy because I'm coming home with a plan to save our planet and unless someone has another plan, I could really be the hero here. No, don't think like that. I don't want to be a hero. I want to be unbanished. I want to feel loved and welcome by the clan of my people.

Now that the cause for my banishment no longer exists, I wonder if they will still think I'm diseased and broken now. Am I still tainted or am I accepted now that I can blaze? Will I be welcome? Of course I will. Right?

There it is—the Mackwell Plains!

My heart swells and a thousand small memories rush back into me, hundreds of nights sleeping on the currents, hearing the cries of garnichula at night. I miss Aarnos Lake and the forest of perches. Our plains extend for hundreds of miles but I see the center of activity is right where I'd expect it. From this distance I can already see the black multitudes on the horizon, the enormous phoenix tornado raging over the Mackwell Plains dead ahead, a mile thick of swirling currents and always rising, swirling, touching the earth and the funnel swerving to the next unpredictable destination. God, I missed home.

They are in deep conference, thousands upon thousands of phoenix riding the swirling currents to create a black tornado of conference activity. It strikes me odd they still create a tornado for conferencing when there's no air to read, no data to stream through its vortex. What exactly are they reading? I'm not going there. That's a waste of time.

I want to fly to farther inland but I am still of the banished and it would be great dishonor to land near Father's home. Even on the day the world ends, I'm still tip-toeing around my father. Figures.

I need a crowd.

I will create the crowd in my brother's home area. The stories he brought me on the wind fed me his location and though the story is not in the air, my memory of it will guide me. Maybe Father will be with him. The world is ending. Time to gather.

I blaze, which is no big deal because everyone here blazes, but not like this, not in the pattern I blaze, a start stop combination of turning up intensity but not crossing over, funny how I know that phrase, *crossing over*, though I have not given much thought about Edgar's question. Crossing over into *where*?

My blaze attracts attention, the right attention—strangers and hopefully some from my brother's clan will get him word—since I looped around his airspace twice before landing near a perch fountain. I accept a visitor's perch and transform as others come to me. Some naked, some clothed. A few circle me in phoenix form, giving me a wide berth.

Wow, his perch town remains gorgeous, the half-buildings and towering black perch poles for clans to congregate. I see small fires, dinners cooking perhaps, and the great expanse of open space phoenix use for school. This place looks even better than before I left. Better than his stories. My brother is doing well for himself.

I spread my wings so all can see who I am and hear my name circulate over and over.

“Gio!”

“Gio returned!”

“It's *Gio*.”

Others draw to me first, already angry and jabbering, demanding why I distract with my return when so many important things are transpiring. As they get closer, they also get quiet, not brave enough to confront me directly, but enough bravery to bitch about me openly when they thought I might not hear. I resist answering them or acknowledging, poking my head over theirs, peering around them to see if—there. There's Darwin!

I see him running toward me, running full speed and I worry he will attack me.

As he reaches me I say feebly, “The world is ending.”

He tackles me, hugging me, squeezing me until I must transform into phoenix to escape his impossibly-tight grasp.

“Brother,” he says, pulling away from me and I see the silver-lined tears in his eyes.

I wonder what his tears would heal if they fell upon me?

“Brother,” he says again this time with true jubilation.

I feel raw ecstasy just to see him, too. It's been several years.

We hug and laugh. He says, “You're *really* here!”

“He is the broken phoenix,” says a voice in the small crowd near us.

“He was banished.”

“He is not unbanished because the air is dead.”

The noises in the crowd escalate, complaints of my presence and discussion of what is to be done. Why is it always the biggest complainers who show up in crowds first?

“Quiet,” my brother says and they somewhat obey.

He puts one arm around my shoulder and turns me toward them. He says, “My brother is home.”

The pride in his voice is obvious.

Darwin says, “He’s home because—”

He turns to me expectantly.

I blush and say, “Because the world is ending.”

He turns and yells to everyone, “Because the world is—wait, what? Are you sure?”

The crowd stirs. I can sense fear, not from any phoenix indicators or its presence in the dead air but just by their faces and their resistance. I think living in New York helped attune me to reading peoples’ reactions. Huh. I think I might actually *miss* New York City.

He says with surprise, “When?”

I feel bad telling him this but I suppose I have to. “Later today. Or now. Maybe, you know, *right now*. It’s a little hard to predict within a few days accuracy. Don’t worry, I’ll handle this.”

I step forward.

“Phoenix of the Mackwell Plains,” I say loudly, making my voice boom.

I hear someone in the crowd near me, not-too-quietly-mutter, “Drama queen.”

I hold up my hand. “Bitch, please. I know of which I speak. The dying sun is...dying. You know this. The air is dead.”

A great deal of scratchy noise reacts to this observation, some of it angry, some of it directed at me as if I killed the air.

“The forests are dead. I just came from one and a dtandiart did not try to eat my brains or rip off my arms. The stones no longer pulse hot and cold. You

know these changes. And you can feel what they mean. After all, how can the air not be air?"

"It's being debated," says one, a young one near the front. "The great swirl considers these temporary changes. A council of thousands."

"Not temporary changes," I say loudly. "The planet is dying. We have to save the planet. It's up to us. You have to follow my lead."

A slight ripple of laughter passes through the crowd.

My brother's arm is still around my shoulder, though I suspect he may have wished he didn't align himself so closely with me. I don't think this will help his popularity, and he seems pretty popular.

"Are you fanaquing with us?" cries an older phoenix and her voice carries. "Are you fanaquing shitting me?"

Another phoenix says, "No one will follow you, Broken."

"The world is not even ending," someone says but this remark doesn't get much support as I would think.

Our planetary situation is grim right now and everyone knows it. They don't need me explaining a planet shutting down to draw that conclusion themselves.

The same phoenix says, "No one will follow you, Broken Phoenix."

"I will follow him," my brother says, squeezing my shoulder. "I will follow Gio."

An anonymous voice says, "Gio the *broken* phoenix."

"I will follow him," Darwin says and the love I read around him makes me feel sad and love him more.

Darwin breaks away. "He respected the banishment placed upon him. He danced out of here like a champ although Father and I withdrew to cry like a pair of fawnlings who missed their egg. He was stronger than us. He lives an amazing life on his own, one without hatred for what we did. He is beautiful. He's a goddamn flirrant, which says something to me. A *flirrant*, people. And he stayed away ten years respecting the banishment. Since Gio left, we banished two other phoenix for horrible, miserable crimes. Those two came sniveling back, crying and begging for unbanishment. Not Gio. Gio *lived*."

They seem chastised by my brother's speech. I don't care if the world is ending right now because my big brother loves me so well. He always did.

"If he's back in the Mackwell Plains today," Darwin says, "it's because we're all in danger. And he wouldn't have come back unless it was to save us because he's better than all of us combined. And it doesn't fanaquaing matter that he can't blaze."

Oh. I assumed my brother saw me in the sky. He doesn't know I can blaze?

I should explain that. "Uh, Darwin?"

"*We will follow him,*" my brother screams and allows himself to catch on fire, only to make his point stronger. "We will execute his plan."

The crowd is stunned into silence and my brother's fire diminishes, a few burnt feathers wafting to the ground, another subtle way of making a point with our people.

Someone yells, "Are you out of your mind, Darwin?"

After this first comment, many jeers follow, laughing at Darwin, laughing at me, maybe just laughing to experience some relief from worrying about the world-ending signs all around us. Maybe they just need a break. I hear a few random comments.

"Like we'd follow a banished."

"This is insane."

A shrill voice says, "It's not Darwin's fault. Gio is family and you're always biased with family."

Darwin argues with one or two, tries to convince them one-on-one and even his close friends seem to back away. He comes to someone his own age, someone who I vaguely recognize from before my banishment. Might have been a classmate of his. Darwin puts his arm on this man's shoulder and says, "Friend."

The man shifts uncomfortably and glances at me. "He's *banished*, Dar."

Darwin backs up and yells loudly to cover the din, "Wait, wait. Let us hear his plan. We haven't heard the plan."

He repeats this, over and over, and a few people pay attention, listening to him yelling about the plan, the *plan*. Nervously, I glance at the crowd as it grows denser, packing more phoenix together. They're not exactly a fun and friendly bunch. They might need a scapegoat right now. Another deflection of the crushing reality of imminent extinction.

At that moment, a yellow flash of smoke catches my eye near homes, private homes, a quarter mile away. Maybe closer. Edgar?

"Tell them the plan, buddy," my brother says, clasping me on the back. "Tell them why you came back and what you think we should do."

He steps in front of me and yells again, "*Listen to the plan, then decide. Gio returned to us in troubled times, a flirrant phoenix who dares to speak the truth we know in our hearts. The planet is dying.*"

Wow, talk about drama queen. I know where I get it now.

"Okay, brother," he says, stepping back. "Tell them."

Well, this is awkward.

"I don't have a plan," I say, whispering to him. But whispering isn't whispering because there's so much crowd noise I have to almost yell it to be heard at all. "*There's no plan.*"

Okay, that was definitely heard. That definitely got caught on the wind. The story will circulate. Why does a crowd always get silent that split second before you say something you don't want anyone to hear?

Darwin stares at me in alarm.

Even the crowd appears surprised, no one speaking for a moment.

"Shocker," says a voice, one who has spoken before. "The broken phoenix has no plan but wants us to follow him."

"No wonder he was banished."

"I should be home making dinner," says another voice. "Not listening to this horseshit."

Voices grow louder.

My brother turns to me, "Gio, seriously. There's no plan? Did you see me stick my neck out?"

"I did. And I'm grateful. I love you, Darwin. I'm traveling with someone, my life mate who has designed the plan."

He eyes me warily. "Dude, you really shouldn't gather a crowd without first having a *plan.*"

He's right and I'm embarrassed, so I change the topic. "How's Dad?"

Darwin jerks his head at me again. "Did you just say you were *married?*"

At that moment, a small crowd pushes through our dense crowd, phoenix traveling single-file or two side by side, forcing someone through them. I'm happy to see who it is.

The phoenix at the head of this little procession says, "Make way. Make way. An unworthy just crashed into the interior of a phoenix home."

The crowd groans with outraged disgust and part to let the unworthy through. His hands are bound with twine and someone else carries his New York duffel bag. I don't even think I stopped to consider how it blazed with us from New York. It was a good six feet away when I exploded. Was my blaze that wide? Impossible. Yet here it is. I must present Darwin with my gift for him. But right now, I'm just thrilled to see Edgar.

I grin. "Hi, babe."

Edgar smiles back at me and says, "Well, I got here."

I want to kiss him. I move toward him in the crowd.

"*You got here?*" says a large phoenix, broad of chest who hasn't spoken up until now. But I've watched him grow angrier and angrier. "Great Vantaros, Unworthy One, why didn't you just go shit in our temple? I mean, c'mon, man. That's how disrespectful your '*I got here*' was."

Edgar says, "I am very full of houses. I'm *sorry*."

No one responds to the *full of houses* comment, rejecting his attempt at diplomacy.

Other phoenix grumble, I don't think they're going to forgive him for this. Not an unworthy. He makes his way through the crowd toward me. They jostle him, make it harder for him to get around, not actively stopping him, but nobody makes his crossing to me any easier. I'm ashamed of them in this moment, ashamed how they treat my true love. If this is what it means to belong, suddenly I feel lucky to be banished.

My brother says, "Who is this, Gio?"

I say, "This is Edgar Kohn, my mate."

"We have something for you," Edgar says as he draws near indicates the bag should be brought to him. There is no question someone will bring it. Because I have vouched for him, even though I am banished, they will not harm him. They'll just banish him like they did me. I pull apart his twined hand constraints with fire droplets, a small bit of heat that nobody sees but him. I wish to savor the joy and surprise on my brother's face.

Edgar unzips the bag and digs around inside.

Darwin wrinkles his nose. "He's unworthy. Why on earth are you mated with an *unworthy*."

"That's prejudiced," I say, "and we're going to work on that after we get done rescuing this dying sun. And it's damn rude of you to say that to him, Darwin, considering you might have been the one who brought him to our world."

Edgar produces our surprise gift and hands it to me. I turn and hand the eight-pack to my brother, proudly displaying proof of my blazing. I put up my knuckles for punching.

I say, "Do the Dew, bro."

Darwin scrunches up his face. "What the fanaqua? What—"

I turn to Edgar. "Did I say it right? Did I say the word *bro* in the appropriate way?"

Edgar gives me two thumbs up. "Perfect. It was epic."

Darwin is at a loss for words. He looks at me with naked hope and joy. "You blazed?"

"I blazed."

We both burst into flames at that moment, hugging and sobbing, because this means we can be family again.

The crowd around us makes noises but I see nothing but my older brother.

"Get my father," Darwin roars when his flames stop.

I command mine to stop, too.

Edgar leans in and says, "Your head's still on fire."

Oh, right. I douse it. I might always be a little broken. That might just be who I am.

"So many questions," Darwin says. "So many."

I blush. "Enjoy your Diet Mountain Dew."

"This stuff," Darwin says, "I hate it. I can't stand it. I only brought it to you because it's such a peculiar taste from that world, so wretched that I thought it might awaken something in you."

“Edgar figured out why you were doing that. Because you loved me.”

Darwin's eyes fill with tears and we burst into happy flames again, hugging each other.

Edgar pokes his head into our mutual fire. He says, “Brothers, I feel like a tool interrupting your reunion. But the world's ending. Pretty quick.”

I have strong desire to sex Edgar right now, in front of everyone, this man whom I love.

I grab Edgar and kiss him, let them see me love him all of him and he kisses me back.

I hear phoenix groan in disgust. “Gio, you're a *flirrant* and he's *unworthy*. Have some self-respect and make out with a dtandiart instead.”

Other complain in unison, throwing jeers at us.

When we break from the kiss, Edgar glances over the crowd that despises him. “Did you convince them to follow you?”

“No,” I say. “Not one bit. They're not interested.”

“Oh,” he says with alarm. “Oh shit.”

Darwin confirms with a quick summary for Edgar.

I say, “Maybe *you* could try to convince them.”

He looks around us at the unfriendly faces. “I don't see them as particularly open to a cheerleading speech from an unworthy who magicked into a private home. I guess I could try.”

“Maybe,” I say. “What's your plan. Tell me your plan for saving the planet.”

Darwin turns and yells to the crowd. “*He has a plan*. The unworthy has a plan to save us all. Give us your attention. *The unworthy has a plan*.”

The crowd grumbles loudly but settles down.

Edgar nods nervously. “I'm going to do a magic spell. If I'm right, it's going to confirm what I think you should do. Stand back.”

Darwin yells to the gathered phoenix, “*His plan involves magic*.”

Someone in the crowd yells, “There's no magical residue on him. He can't do magic.”

I step back and put an arm across Darwin so he steps back as well.

Edgar says, "Twenty-two Fargo."

A small puff of smoke appears near our feet, a green one, and a green arrow is outlined. It chugs straight up. Up, up, up. As spells go, it's fairly unimpressive.

In silence, everyone watches the green pointing arrow jerk upward. Up, up, up. There it goes.

Darwin says, "Okay, we're ready. Do the spell."

Edgar says, "I just did."

The green arrow, now above our heads, continues its trajectory.

"No," Darwin says, "The *real* spell."

Edgar says, "That was it. It's a next step spell."

Darwin says, "I *know* it's a next step spell. Every boy phoenix who wishes to kiss a girl learns that spell, asking the arrow to point at the object of his affections."

The crowd grumbling grows louder.

"Was that it?" someone yells. "A playground spell?"

Edgar seems uncomfortable. "It literally suggests the next step you should take. And I think it just told us what to do."

"Guys," says Darwin, looking nervously around the crowd. "You know, I hate to sound critical, but you two are really breaking my balls today. I look like an idiot."

"That couldn't have been magic," someone yells from the crowd. "There's not a trace of magic around him. Anywhere on him."

Edgar says loudly, "I can explain that."

"What's *Fargo*?"

Edgar says, "I name and number my spells to keep them organized. And I use trigger words unlikely to be spoken aloud in this world."

"He's not magic," someone says. "That wasn't magic. Read the air around him."

"I have a plan," Edgar says loudly, temporarily silencing them.

He looks at me. "The short version is this: fly up."

I say, "I don't understand."

"Well, the arrow pointed up. Straight up. I think when you blaze, you might go into outer space. But not *normal* outer space. It's white, right? I think it might be outer space or inside a star or...I dunno. Off-planet at least. I think your power comes from out there."

Lightning strikes closer, inside the Mackwell Plains. That doesn't happen. It's not supposed to happen *ever*. The tornado of phoenix swing dangerously to the right, erratically. They're not accomplishing anything out there and they know it.

I say, "Edgar, I think I missed part of your plan. I was thinking about the lightning. What was your plan after 'fly up.'"

Edgar grimaces. "No, that was the plan. Fly straight up as far as you can go. Maybe go into space."

"*That's* the plan? Fly up?"

I know I'm speaking louder than I intend to but I think we're in the final moments. It may not matter who hears what for much longer. Muttering resumes around me and the phoenix move in closer. One is so indignant he ignites on fire. Everyone observes his flames and then turns away while he sorts it out. The rumor circulates the crowd that the big plan is to 'fly up.' There's some grumbling.

"Fly up," someone shouts. "*Fly up*. Someone get me a brick of dung to throw."

Edgar notices the intensifying anger around us. He says in a loud voice, "The book implied you phoenix have power over time and space. Other ancient powers were hinted at. What if the phoenix abilities are more than you know and blazing is just a side effect? You could stop what's happening."

"Is he somehow blaming *us* for this situation? We didn't do enough?" says one voice.

"He read a book?" someone says. "The lying-about-magic unworthy is also a *book reader*?"

"Fanaqua *that*."

The word *book* travels through the crowd, being repeated until a familiar voice yells out, "Well, that's shit number two in our homeland today. The

unworthy who landed in a private phoenix home is also a book reader. This visit keeps getting better.”

“Would you like to meet my elderly father clan,” someone shouts, “So you can shit on them?”

The phoenix around us twitter, laugh nervously while glancing around the darkening landscape.

“What’s the name of the book?” someone yells in a jeering tone.

Edgar stares into my eyes. Loudly he says, “*The Phoenix Tail Feather*. It’s a book about making love to phoenixes.”

This revelation leaves the crowd stunned into silence. Three burst into flames and appear to pass out.

The noise starts all at once, yelling random comments.

“Aw, c’mon!”

“Book reader!”

“*Filth*.”

“Did he call us phoenixes? *Learn the language, asshole.*”

“Fly up,” I say, looking into his eyes.

He says, “Fly up.”

He smiles and I smile. I love him.

He says, “Before the world ends, I want to tell you something.”

I wrap my arms around him.

The phoenix around us yell and make noise, probably just as much out of fear for what’s coming as outrage at the unworthy. Darwin steps to the crowd and tries to argue for patience, tries to argue no offense was meant, giving us a short break from their hostility.

Edgar says, “I wanted to say it when we were a pretzel in Central Park.”

“That was a good premel.”

He says, “Yeah, I know. I didn’t want to ruin the moment by bringing it up, but after getting shot, I regretted I hadn’t said it. The pretzel moment was perfect. Just like this one.”

“Yes?”

My mouth finds his. Phoenix in the area groan in horror and disgust.

"The broken phoenix is making out with an unworthy," someone cries and a ripple of disgusted laughter spreads nearby.

"This is unbelievable," cries the same outraged phoenix, standing on a perch to make himself seen. "He's like the *worst* unworthy ever."

I jerk my head toward him. "Ignore that idiot."

"I only see you," he says smiling. "The thing I wanted to tell you..."

He leans in closer and I hear a vague scream in response to more lightening and loud noises, an impressive cracking noise close enough to seriously alarm everyone but I refuse to look over my shoulder. If this is the end, I want to die staring into his eyes.

Edgar says, "Gio, I have no regrets. This is the best world ending I've ever been to. After I arrived, I was all alone. For years. And while I came to like this world better than my own, I would never forget losing everything and everyone I had loved back there. Better to never love than lose it all again. I never wanted to feel that lonely and lost again. But we are meant to love, even people on a planet with a dying star. I can't deny it. I love you. Now and forever, I *love* you, Broken Phoenix."

Our lips almost touch when the flames spiral out of me, exploding like a bomb igniting all of the phoenix near us, dozens, then hundreds, the fire burning hard but not yet blazing us to the other side. We're still here. The racing fire streaks from phoenix to phoenix across the plains until I see the tornado catch fire, pushing them off course, and the blackness of all those phoenix in the sky far away instantly transforms into a funnel of light.

I am beyond shocked.

Clan custom dictates no more than three phoenix ignite at any one time. It's considered rude. But now thousands burn across the Mackwell Plains. I can't see them with my eyes. I see them with my fire.

I feel Edgar's fingers tap the underside of my elbows and I rocket straight up, spiraling faster and higher than I have ever flown before and I would perhaps feel dizzy by this if I didn't love it, embrace it, fall into it as the earth disappears below me, so far already, so far, and nothing but sky, lavender, then mist, then the twarling clouds which circle the planet, debris from the dog moon's friction with our peach sun. I see the curve of the planet at this height and only seconds passed since he kissed me and told me to fly up.

There it is. I see the black space and the trillions of stars.

My fire fights for oxygen this high where there is none, the flame still pounding off me and I find myself still rocketing toward the black, higher, then higher, and then...

Then not higher.

I stop accelerating. The lack of oxygen has an impact, as in *I'm not burning*, I'm not burning, the blaze can't burn without fire. I reach the peak, the tip, the highest arc, because I start slipping back, back toward the planet, the planet curve so amazingly far away, me stuck in this thin layer of atmospheric crud. A moon rock spins near me, sails by me actually, at a remarkable speed. And I start falling.

Outer space is so close—I'm touching it, really.

But I'm not going into space, Edgar.

I want to tell him about this, how confident I was he was right about this and the fire felt right, this intensity that was enough to fuel me this high. *It was the right decision*, I want to tell him, because I don't want him to feel bad when I am crushed falling from the sky. My human form is involuntarily restored and there's so little oxygen this high I gasp fruitlessly. I feel the pressure of space working against me, beginning to crush me, daring me to come closer and feel the final squeeze.

It was the right call, Edgar.

I start to fall, fall to the planet surface. Slowly. A tiny pebble whizzes through my leg and due to its rocketing velocity, it rips through my flesh as if I were made of water. Drops of blood appear out the other side of my calf, the liquid hovering in the air as if not sure whether to orbit the planet or burn up in re-entry. I think this must have hurt but I can't tell because I'm falling and not breathing, falling and gasping and I realize I'm going to be pulverized by moon rocks long before I hit the earth unconscious. So that's how I die.

I'm falling but my descent hasn't picked up full speed yet, the air's too light. I am starting to move so the last thing I see at this height is another phoenix pop into an almost full stop near where I did, the same general coordinates, and I see the surprise on my older brother's face as we make eye contact for our final few seconds alive.

My descent picks up speed. I feel my legs burning into nothing, the atmospheric fire rising to meet me.

I guess the broken phoenix won't be saving the world. I wasn't good enough.

The last thing I will see is my older brother dying, the one who gave me green elixir from another planet, hoping its exotic taste would somehow trigger my blaze. I never even got to ask him how blazing work. Do all phoenix go to that world? Just me and him? Dad? I'll never know.

He's dying.

I'm going to die first, picking up speed, my body limp and scorched. Oblivion seems like a good idea, preferable to watching my brother die, thinking of his children hating me from the ground in their final minutes alive, everyone hating me the last few seconds for I gave false hope and killed—oh no! Two more pops as other phoenix emerge, following my brother's lead and in doing so discover this deadly limitation.

Turns out oxygen doesn't burn in space. Who knew? Well, I guess everyone. I knew that. But I guess I got caught up in the idea of saving the world and forgot. Well, fuck.

I pick up greater speed. The heat becomes more intense as I begin to burn in reentry. My arms will burn away in seconds and I will blink out of existence. Right before I die I spread my arms as if to fly because the best thing I have ever done is to fly, to gloast the stories of the world.

I spread my arms and almost flap them, a silly gesture in human form, and fire consumes them, a slick burn, wetter, like fire is a liquid, thick and oily, not oily, but maybe luscious like a cream, which makes me think of using golden Cronocodille as lube.

This fire is creamy, it's golden, it's slicker than normal. This fire is richer, deeper, it's a different texture than oxygen fire and oh, *oh*. What's happening? I swoop up, no longer falling because I'm in burning phoenix form again, the fire like liquid, creamy and soothing. The fire is...it's icy.

The icy fire.

I'm not dying.

More important, I can read the air again. I'm flying into no-air, beyond the atmosphere. I don't even have to flap my fire wings to move, I just glide with intention.

I'm hearing stories, feeling and tasting the air, gloasting its history but it's not the *air*. It's space.

I'm gloasting outer space.

Space has stories. I can read space. I had no idea.

Space is packed with them actually, the stories of planets and far-away travelers who passed this way in big ships, stories of things witnessed: geological, astrophysics, and otherwise. The stories are bigger. We are part of this galaxy's story, the story of the dying sun and our planet's anguish.

I cannot see Darwin but he dies near me and returns as this delicious icy fire. I feel his death but I do not fear it. This feels right. The icy fire.

What happens when I flap these—I skid hundreds, then thousands of miles across the darkness, smearing the blackness boasting six trillion stars. The fire streaks behind me, trailing me and I see Darwin's cosmos fire blazing, his wider than mine, scouring the cosmos, rocking hundreds and thousands of miles in an instance. Where did he go?

Wow. We can really move out here.

This fire is so different, so searing and so creamy, I slide a thousand more miles before deciding which direction to take. Space is not...it's not space, it's different than I expected.

I am eternal.

I am fire incarnate.

I explode into forty directions at once. My brother's blaze is now a speck that may as well be a distant star's explosion and I instantly know he discovered this latest ability, to travel multiple directions at once. I hear other pops behind me, phoenix exploding into the atmosphere, dying, and finding the creamy, icy fire in deep space.

More popping.

Screaming into the vacant universe we rise, a handful, then hundreds and soon thousands of phoenix, maybe *every* phoenix as soon as word gets out that it's a different fire out here, but it's still fire and we remain fire's deliriously intoxicated servants. I know how we save our planet.

I know now.

We explode in every direction seeping through galaxies, flying as one unit while simultaneously our awareness spreads like dtandiart tentacles, like the slippery wind blowing across this tiny universe, all of us light and fire. It's intoxicating. I wish I could tell Edgar. I will soon enough.

Faster and faster until stars are a blur, a trail of white light, always light and the streaks come together until I am flying through nothing but white light. The whiteness between all worlds.

I feel my love for Edgar and explode even further, touching worlds I am destined never to see again.

The first response comes from someone, I don't know where she is, somewhere a billion miles from me and she vibrates her message through all of us, asking, "Here?"

It's not the right place, there's another planet too near her location, potential for life in 40,000 years. That planet may not ever evolve under the right conditions, but we cannot know. Which means we cannot crowd their meager opportunity for life in this universe. Life is too precious.

"Here?" suggests another phoenix. This location would work but our planet would forever be twenty degrees colder year round. Species would die. The majority would live but we can't be sure of the impact. The suggestion came from five galaxies away. Don't know that phoenix either.

Though I am nowhere near our dying sun, millions of physical miles away from me, I feel it, I feel our sun breaking apart. It's happening now. A wave of radiation blows through our galaxy, destroying everything in its path.

You'd think with so many of us racing through space, bending time, many voices would yell out potential opportunities but the universe isn't as big as I thought and there are too many opportunities for life we have no right to extinguish.

My brother's confident voice says, "Here."

The idea of Darwin is a concept, a feeling that's far away but I feel his flame on my chest, nuzzling me, visiting me in my banishment yet none of that matters because he found the perfect spot.

They wait for my command.

With a whisper, I say, "Do it. Move the planet."

The universe explodes because we're rewriting the symphony, the celestial song of life unbroken describing worlds unseen, life unknowable. The Great Musician planned sad underscores to mourn our extinction and while saving ourselves is not a crime, it is to be *celebrated*, the Great Musician must rewrite the universe's song to balance these new notes with something unanticipated. I

don't even know what all that means but we rewrote the fabric of all things big and small.

It's over.

We're safe.

Chapter 5

Cherry Sunsets

I would collapse because I'm tired as shit right now. But Edgar's back home and I really do want a Diet Mountain Dew. Of course, if my brother won't drink them, it seems a shame to let them go to waste.

The unspooling of our vast network across the universe happens very quickly, almost instantly, all of us skating through stars toward the new home, the home we love but also looking with curiosity at these cosmos because our neighborhood just got a lot bigger. We phoenix might be more than we realized. We might be more.

The furthest away will take minutes to reach our planet, and those only a few million miles away will get there in seconds. Time is different out here, hard to define or describe. There is less time, but no exact time. I don't understand. There is much I don't understand.

When I reach our planet, I observe those entering the upper atmosphere and see them return to human form in the oxygen-poor environment, just beyond the moon debris. We left the dog moon behind, but kept the orbiting rocks. Interesting. Once in human form, I see them burning up in re-entry, the icy fire replaced gradually with oxygen fire. Instinctively I know this is what those who now burn saw happen moments ago with those who reached the planet before them and I plan to follow suit.

I witness thousands of phoenix drifting into the atmosphere before me, besides me, feet pointing down and letting go. The transition is graceful and oxygen-based fire feels like an old sweater, the one article of clothing I love to wear for sheer pleasure. I can't believe I could never enjoy the blazing until now. It feels so right and so natural.

Hundreds of us rejoin the planet, a shower of comets racing across the atmosphere. Thousands.

I would hurry to tell Edgar his master plan to save the planet, *fly up*, worked. He saved us all. But he knows. All of creation knows. The phoenix in the sky swing around dazed and confused by joy, already creating dances to commemorate what happened out there. I float leisurely, relaxing into this, this air, this amazing fresh air the new songs already beginning, the new sun filling us with new tales, this one a different color from our old sun.

It's red-tinged, this new sun. Stunning. Odd.

More spontaneous dancing begins hundreds of feet over the Mackwell Plains, everyone participating as everyone returns. Every phoenix that could blaze was there, I can see immediately there are no phoenix who did not participate. We *all* did it. We moved the goddamn planet. Who knew we could do that?

I spiral down, happy to see the rocks lit, though dimmer than I am used to. The colors are different, pinker, everything a different hue. I wonder how this will impact our world, having a different sun so many billions of miles away from our old home. Tyarano, ma'jegere as Father would say. *This life is wings.*

Not hard to find Edgar as he's the only one I see on the Mackwell Pains. Everyone's in the sky. Even pre-blazing phoenix fly and dance around with joy for reasons they don't quite understand. I wish for my jeans, the soft and faded ones. I command them to form around me and they do. How nice.

The patterns above me break open and one phoenix swirls lower, performing a dance expressing deliriousness, insanity, the 'holy fucking shit' of dancing, and I see that I know this blaze, it is similar to my own.

My father.

The reunion between a father and son is scripted and full of social customs to allow each to confirm the other's intention, the humility and the willingness to accept each other as is. It could take an hour before we actually hug. I look forward to the hour-long ritual, the anticipation of seeing my father up close.

I drop to the planet and transition into human form so we may begin. Edgar is not terribly far, as was my intention. I put a hand up and he nods, smiling. Edgar and I have time for our reunion. Delaying it only proves we both knew it was inevitable. He grins at me and my heart leaps around itself twice.

My love!

Father drops into his form. He seems much older than I remember him.

I drop to one knee and spread my arms apart, ready to begin. I am surprised to look up and see him running, running to me and his face as broken as mine when I was banished. I stand. He throws himself into my arms.

"The ritual," I say.

He says, "Be quiet."

We stand like this for a very long time, me shocked and learning his smell again, the smell of my beloved father. I cannot tell if he cries or not because he is buried against me and will not move. He feels different. Maybe the bones of his back are sharper. He is older.

Finally, I say, "Dad, this is getting weird."

He laughs and pulls back away from me, wiping his eyes.

He stares at me and I stare at him, looking to see something in him.

He says, "The banishment. Go."

I transform immediately and he bursts into flame. The story screams in the air around him, defining him, defining the last ten years of him, his son, the broken phoenix, alone in the world. I gloat his deep sorrow, reviewing the experiments he did in my absence he thought might promote my blaze, his secret conversations with Darwin before Darwin visited me. Father attempted to persuade the phoenix to undo the banishment. He has lived as a pariah among his own people, just as banished as I was.

I jump back into human form.

"You told me to search the cosmos," I say to my father as I approach him. "That was your parting advice. What did you mean?"

"Was it?" he says. "I was dead inside that day, the idea of no Gio in my life. It was a funeral day and I don't remember anything that came out of my mouth. I am sorry, my son, I did not have wisdom for you. I was dying inside."

We hug each other again and cry, then catch fire, then stop, preventing a blaze. Today's pretty emotionally draining and although the joy of our reunion will last for the next year, I am sure, we both could use a break.

"Father, I have so many questions. I do not understand how the blazing works."

"Questions will be answered. But look at the celebration in the sky. Questions can wait."

Another burst in the sky shows phoenix all around one, swirling, welcoming, making space. My father looks up. We both begin to laugh.

"I need to greet my other son," he says. He looks into my eyes. He puts his hand on my shoulder. "Both my sons saved the universe today. *Both*. What a day for a father. What a day."

“Go get Darwin,” I said.

“Join me,” he says. “Fly with us.”

“Maybe later. I must reunite with my life mate.”

My father's grin grows wider and tears come out of his eyes. “You're married?”

We hug again. He wants to meet Edgar but I insist Edgar and I must have a moment to reunite ourselves. Father agrees. He takes off into the sky to greet Darwin. Other phoenix dance around Darwin, retelling how he found this destination, how he exploded and showed them the way to icy fire.

“Welcome home, bro,” I say, looking up.

Darwin is the hero. He found the new location. He will lead them now.

I'm so happy for him and I'm even happier for *me* that this does not fall to my responsibility. I did not like how they treated Edgar, whose only goal was to save us all. I can't live with these phoenix. I need a private home with my sweetie. I guess I will self-banish myself with occasional visits.

I walk to close the thirty foot distance between us. We stand before each other near the perch fountain in my brother's area, rich in admiration and joy and love, almost a physical presence between us. I take his hand.

I say, “By the way, I was in such a hurry a few minutes ago, I forgot to tell you something.”

“What's that?” he says, allowing himself to move closer.

“I love you, too.”

We kiss.

Above us, the phoenix recreate the experience, immortalizing the story of our people in dance and complicated swoops. I hope they do not fail to include the unworthy who saved our world. Edgar and I break our kiss and we both scan the skies. Ah, I see they include his name and describe his strange hidden magicks, revealing their own hubris in ignoring him. I am touched by their honesty. We can be idiots but we phoenix are first to admit when we are wrong. Already, I recognize the meaning of the pattern I see above me, broadcasting the words “Fly up.”

We touch our heads together.

“They are dancing the words, *fly up*,” I say. “You are a hero.”

“You are my hero, Gio.”

God, I wish to get drunk with him on Diet Mountain Dew.

We look to the sky again, watching the dance.

“What’s the symbol over there?” he asks, pointing.

“Oh, that? It’s old. Dead language. It’s used rarely except to signify the importance of a story. It’s impact. Your story is a big one, hon. You saved the world with that tiny next step spell revealing an arrow pointing up.”

“I’ve seen that symbol before,” Edgar says, “Inside the temple under the purple castle.”

“The purple castle? There’s a *temple* under that?”

He says, “A temple with a prophecy.”

He smiles at me in a crooked way causing me to realize my life with him is going to be very interesting. We will have more adventures together.

“The new sun is pretty,” he says, shading his eyes. “I think we’re gonna like having cherry sunsets.”

I do not understand why he does not sound happy.

“What’s wrong?”

“Well, look at it,” he says, throwing his arm in its direction, as if I could not see it. “None of my outfits look good now. I picked out my clothes for best effect under a peach-colored sun. Not cherry. I *literally* have nothing to wear under this sun.”

I like his silliness and laugh. I glow from the inside because he is happy and he my mate and I am his. I am going to suggest we share some Diet Mountain Dew. But first, I hold him in my arms.

I say, “Next, we must decide which one of us gets pregnant.”

“We can do that?” Edgar asks, his eyes wide.

I wrap my arms around him. “Baby, we’re flirrant. We can do anything.”

“I’m glad you’re feeling open to new possibilities,” Edgar says, smiling mysteriously. “Because I like your mountain top cave and am happy to move in with you but we’ve got to put in a library.”

I frown. “What is a library?”

“A room dedicated to holding books.”

I gasp in horror.

His lips dive for mine as I burst into flame.

The End

Author Bio

Edmond Manning has always been fascinated by fiction: how ordinary words could be sculpted into heartfelt emotions, how heartfelt emotions could leave an imprint inside you stronger than the real world. Mr. Manning never felt worthy to seek publication until recently, when he accidentally stumbled into his own writer's voice that fit perfectly, like his favorite skull-print, fuzzy jammies. He finally realized that he didn't have to write like Charles Dickens or Armistead Maupin, two author heroes, and that perhaps his own fiction was juuuuuuuust right, because it was his true voice, so he looked around the scrappy word kingdom that he created for himself and shouted, "I'M HOME!" He is now a writer.

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Links to my three (3) books:

[King Perry](#) | [King Mai](#) | [I Probably Shouldn't Have Done That](#)