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LOVE'S LANDSCAPES
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 2

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance Anthology

Volume 2

Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate 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 these anthologies are 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.

Over 210 stories were submitted and have now been published as a seventeen volume set with five additional bonus volumes, titled *Love's Landscapes*; this edition is Volume 2.

Words of Caution

These stories may contain sexually explicit content and are **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.

Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating over 210 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in e-print involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Over the course of seven months, nearly forty members chipped in to help at various times; the *M/M Romance Group* would like to extend a special thanks to the volunteers of the event team for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm.

Ebook Layout and Navigation

This ebook can be navigated through the Table of Contents which lists the authors, their story title and its overall genre or theme. Any time you see the words [\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#), you can click on the link and be transported back to the TOC.

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view these photos, 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.

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[Morning mist background 6](#);

[Blue sunset and boat](#); [Sunset](#); [Sunset 15](#)

These stories are works of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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ASHES OF LIFE

By Andrew Q. Gordon

Photo Description

A bird, the size of an eagle with feathers the color of fire is about to land on the leather glove of a warrior. Flames drip from his tail and the bearded, brown-haired man stares straight ahead. His eyes show his amusement, or is it more? Dressed in the armor of his profession, the man is a professional soldier, or royal guard.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I never knew the day I rescued the injured phoenix that it would create such a large change in my normal run of the mill guardsman's life. After all how was I supposed to know he was a mage shifter and I was to become his warrior to own.

Sincerely,

Ilona

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: swords and sorcery, shifter non-wolf/cat, mythical creatures, mage, bonded

Word Count: 26,938

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Dedication

As always – to Mike and 'lil q. Forever will never be long enough.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Tali for the great beta comments, to Julie and Lorraine for your editing skills, and to Lily for the awesome cover art.

Special thanks to the M/M Romance moderators and volunteers. This is an amazing event and I'm still in awe at the work you've done to make this so happen.

ASHES OF LIFE

By Andrew Q. Gordon

“This is great, Thane,” Brill said as he pulled his mount next to mine. “I don’t know how you managed to order the great weather for our day off, but you’re amazing.”

“Don’t thank me, thank Genznor.” I invoked the warrior god, hoping it would give me the courage to do what needed to be done.

Our horses matched their owners, in color and personality. Rain had Brill’s tawny hair, and while sleek and fit, she liked her sweets and was shameless in her pursuit of them. My stallion, Thunder, was a deep, rich brown, strong, muscular, and edgy when left idle for too long.

“I’ll let you say the prayers. The gods long ago gave up on a rogue like me.” Brill nudged his horse and the mare trotted happily along.

Thunder chafed that I held him back, but if I gave him his head, he’d run until he was too tired to carry me home. Besides, Rain would never keep up, even *if* she felt like running. More likely she’d stop after a few strides and sniff around for something to eat. And Brill would let her.

I wouldn’t say Brill was lazy, and he certainly wasn’t fat, but lately he seemed to get more exercise at the warehouses than on the practice field. It was that conduct that prompted the ride. Arranging for us both to be free had taken some effort, but I think the captain appreciated I wasn’t going to let my best friend compromise my unit.

“Brill, we need to talk.”

“I know what you’re going to say. I need to stop visiting the brothels.”

“Not exactly.” It wasn’t, at least not entirely. “I doubt anyone would care if you spent more time at weapons practice and less screwing the... the...”

“You can say whores, Thane. They aren’t ashamed of what they do.”

“This isn’t about morals. No one cares if you’re chaste or not. But I expect you to train hard—*every* day. I brought you with me after my promotion because I wanted someone I could trust as my corporal. You’re supposed to

lead by example. The men need to see you putting forth an effort at weapons practice to show them it matters.”

“What I do at the brothel *is* very good exercise. You’d understand if you’d accept some of the offers you get. There’s nothing wrong with saying yes to a man who puts a bit of steel in your sword. And don’t even try to say no one wants you because of the scar. I’ve heard so many women say how sexy it makes you look that I’m seriously thinking of getting one myself.”

Brill’s humor endeared him to our men. I had their respect—at least I thought I did—but Brill was their friend, the guy who made them laugh, who understood them. Those weren’t bad virtues, but he could be all those things and still get them to train hard.

“Who I sleep with is my concern, but that type of exercise is not going to help you swing a sword if you’re called on to defend the king or his family. Every time you brush off practice, or give it less than your all, the men become a tiny bit less interested in their conditioning and skill. Being a royal guard is an honor and a privilege. Selecting you required I put my ass on the line and—”

“I know one sergeant, two corporals, and at least half a dozen soldiers who would enjoy seeing your ass. If you’d let me fix—”

“Corporal Brill!” I rarely yelled, but when I did, Brill knew to be afraid. “My personal life is not the reason for this conversation. What you do on your off hours is not my concern. But as my corporal and second-in-command, I expect more from you than any other soldier. If you can’t promise me you’re willing to try, I’ll accept your resignation and do my best to see you transferred to a unit of your liking.”

“Thane...” The expression on his face tugged at my emotions.

When we were kids, Brill’s father was an abusive, drunken arse. His mother used to send him to our house to hide when his father was on a rampage. Suddenly I saw that scared kid again. I didn’t enjoy reining him in, but I needed to stop making allowances for things I shouldn’t.

“I don’t mean to be harsh, but I have a responsibility to the king and the other soldiers in our unit.”

“I’m sorry.” He looked contrite, even for him. “I guess I’ve been enjoying my good fortune so much I forgot being a royal guard isn’t as exciting and desirable as we imagined as kids.”

“Yes it is.” I smiled, hoping it would lighten his mood. “How is guarding the king and his family *not* exciting and desirable? The training and work might not be as easy as we thought, but I can’t think of a better job for a commoner.”

I could see him trying to think of another job he’d rather have. The fact he couldn’t come up with one on the spot should have been proof enough I was right, but Brill could be stubborn. Right then, however, I needed him to agree, not be pigheaded.

“My point is I need your help. I don’t want to break your spirit because your ability to relate to our men is a strength I value. But you’re part of the command now. You need to carry yourself like a corporal and show the men you’re not asking them to do anything you won’t do yourself.”

“That’s fair.” He flashed me the rakish smile he used to such effect with the women. It might have had the same effect on me if he wasn’t my best friend.

“Excellent.” I rubbed Thunder’s shoulder. “Now that we’ve settled that, how about we enjoy the weather?”

I didn’t wait for Brill’s answer to give Thunder his head. Free of my control, my mount did what he’d been itching to do since we left the castle—run. I leaned forward and held on as Thunder raced the wind. The feel of his powerful muscles tensing and contracting as he stretched out his gait always gave me a thrill.

It reminded me of that brief time when I was little. Too young for obligations and free to play all day. Thunder ran for the pleasure of the effort and made no apologies. I admired his pluck and laughed to show my support.

When he’d run long enough, I tried to slow him. My heart skipped with a twist of fear when Thunder ignored my attempts. I pulled harder, but he continued to run like the Hounds of Delmor chased us. I’d seen him spooked before, but this wasn’t a panicked, all-out dash. Determined, for sure, but Thunder wasn’t running scared.

I, on the other hand, felt more than a moment of terror. I’d watched men thrown and trampled when they couldn’t control their horses. Thunder had never given me even a hint of disobedience, which left me baffled. More, I had no idea how to stop him.

My alarm grew as we approached a tree line. I yanked on the reins with as much force as I dared to prevent us from galloping headlong through the

woods. Getting thrown at this speed would hurt, but I had more chance of surviving a fall than a mad dash through the forest.

The trees drew steadily closer. My mind raced for a solution that didn't end with me injured or dead. A hundred yards from the woods, Thunder slowed to an easy canter. Breathing hard, he came to a stop and his ears flattened. He started to look around, slightly skittish. Fear gripped me. He looked as confused as I felt.

I set my hand on my sword, more to calm myself. Whatever had taken control of Thunder wouldn't fear a bit of steel.

Turning in the saddle, I hoped to see Brill but found only open fields behind us. Unless he'd pushed Rain, she'd be happy trotting along. Thunder and I were alone, and I didn't like the odds.

My superiors had cited my ability to remain calm under stress. That meant I owed my position to my skills as an actor because I was one loud noise away from soiling my britches. As I scanned our surroundings, the heavy blanket of silence that shrouded the area threatened to suffocate me. The absence of the normal buzz and song from the forest proved as unnerving as any unexplained sounds.

I nudged Thunder to the left, hoping to leave before trouble found us. Another mad dash would kill him. I braced myself for the expected struggle to control his instinct to flee. Instead, he refused to leave. He stared at the trees and resisted all attempts to draw him away.

Rather than risk injuring him, I jumped down, hoping to lead him back. The forest gave me the creeps, especially since it had such a grip on Thunder.

"Help me."

My sword practically drew itself, I had it out so fast. Standing protectively in front of Thunder, I twisted, trying to locate the source of the cry.

"Help me, Thane, son of Margret and Jelcob."

I suddenly wished for the silence that merely unnerved me. When I looked at Thunder, he stared at me, as if waiting for me to act.

"Great Genznor, what's going on?"

"Prayers to the warrior god are unnecessary. I mean you no harm."

"Right. You possess my horse to bring me here, you remain unseen, and the forest itself is afraid of you, but I'm supposed to draw comfort from your words

that your intentions are peaceful.” I let out a nervous laugh. “Now I’m arguing with a voice in my head.”

Thunder used his nose to nudge me forward.

“Stop that!” I don’t know whom I meant it for, Thunder or the voice.

“Your friend knows my words are honest. I need your help.”

I scanned the trees again, hoping to catch a glimpse of whatever was there. “If you possess the ability to bring me here against my will, it eludes me why you need the help of a mere guard.”

“Please, help me.” The calm voice now contained a hint of desperation. *“I’ve spent the last of my energy to bring you here. Please, do not abandon me.”*

The plea tugged at my heart. Thunder pushed me again, this time with more force, and my legs started to move. I tried to stop, but Thunder prodded me onward.

“Please, Thane.” The voice sounded thin, tired, and desperate.

Cursing myself for a fool, I stepped forward. Thunder clearly trusted this... this... whatever it was. Not that he couldn’t be fooled, but he believed I needed to help.

“How? I don’t even know where to go... or who to look for.” I couldn’t believe I was agreeing to help.

“Let your friend guide you.”

He sounded relieved, almost excited. I remained cautious, but I sheathed my sword and mounted. I considered the wisdom of doing anything an unseen being who could talk to me over a distance—there was nothing wise about it, I decided. And yet, after another futile search of the trees, I let Thunder carry me into the unknown.

Thunder picked his way between the trees without a path to guide us. For his part, it didn’t slow his progress. I wanted to be surprised, but I remembered what brought us here and shook my head. If I survived, I was going to speak to the king’s mage about how to prevent this from happening in the future.

It didn’t take long for me to realize we’d never find our way out. If whatever guided Thunder abandoned us, it might be a while before we made it home. I tried to get some bearing. Finding north would have helped, but the trees had become denser as we walked.

The place felt old. While on campaigns I'd heard about "ancient" forests from the mages who travelled with us, but always thought that was just wizard's gibberish. Now I understood and knew to be afraid.

Usually the mages' stories involved fighting a spirit or sentinel. Granted, the embattled wizards usually wanted to take something from the forest, but what if whomever I was helping had a guard?

Lost in my thoughts, it took me a moment to realize we'd stopped. I couldn't locate anything specific that marked we'd arrived, but Thunder didn't act confused; we were here.

"Hello?"

"I am here."

I spun in a circle. "Where?"

Thunder started to paw the dirt in the space between two trees. Upon further inspection, I noticed something odd. Everywhere I looked the ground was covered by trees, leaves, bushes, weeds, something. Everywhere except that space. It was a six-by-six foot square of bare earth.

"There?" The question wasn't meant for anyone, but Thunder nodded his head.

"Yes."

I took a step back. "What are you?"

"I can't tell you."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't."

I put another pace between the barren patch and myself. Though far from a scholar, I'd read enough to know that the list of beings that could survive being buried for any length of time was short—and generally not friendly. Faeries, imps, demons, powerful spirits, and maybe a dragon—though the affected area appeared too small to house a dragon.

"Why are you here?"

"I can't answer that either."

No surprise. My brain told me to mount up and leave. Find my way out—somehow—and warn the king. But Thunder kept pulling away clumps of dirt.

“How do I know you’re not something foul and dangerous that’s been locked away to protect the world?”

“You don’t.”

If the stakes weren’t so dire, I’d have laughed at his honesty. He didn’t *feel* evil. But what if I released a demon of Delmor or an evil spirit? I’d be responsible for untold suffering.

On the other hand, if I walked away, I could be leaving an innocent faerie or benevolent spirit trapped.

The decision should have been easy. As an officer, my duty was to kingdom first. The interests of an individual, other than the king, could never be placed above that of the kingdom. Yet I hadn’t left.

“I need more information.” I stepped closer to Thunder. “I will tell the king’s mage of your plight and lead him here.”

“I understand.” His voice sounded sad, not angry. *“But save your efforts. Once you leave, you will not be able to find me again.”*

“Why not?” I might not be a skilled tracker, but I was reasonably sure I could mark my path well enough to retrace.

“I... suffice it to say, when you leave, even if you find your way back to this exact spot, I will not be here any longer.”

I didn’t understand, but I recognized the hand of magic. Whatever fate brought me to this place left to me the decision of whether to free him or not. Unfortunately for him, duty outweighed compassion.

“I’m sorry.” A cold chill turned my flesh bumpy under my armor. “Were the peril to myself only, I’d take the chance and free you. But as a king’s soldier, I can’t risk the entire kingdom for one person’s life. I’m truly sorry.”

“Wisdom, duty, compassion. I hope your king values you as much as you deserve.” The response confused me. I expected a desperate plea or at least some attempt to sway me, not resignation.

When I felt my resolve weaken, I realized his answer might be part of the deception. Knowing there was no good way to resolve the problem, I decided to leave before I did something foolish.

Thunder moved as I tried to mount and then he pawed at the dirt again. I tried again, and he nearly pushed me over and then trotted around the trees to

stand on the other side of the dirt patch. Using a hoof to pull more dirt away, he looked up at me expectantly.

I'd had Thunder since I joined the cavalry, and in the six years we'd been partners, he'd never done this before. His prior owner, an ex-cavalry officer who retired and raised horses for the king's horsemen, gave me a good price for Thunder because he couldn't find another buyer. I was the first—and only—interested buyer Thunder would let mount him. Most of the others he'd either tried to bite or had bitten. He and I, however, formed a bond almost immediately.

Since that time, Thunder had saved my life several times, once at great risk to himself. To say I owed him wasn't a stretch.

“Okay, Thunder, what's going on?”

Pulling another couple piles of dirt back, he bobbed his head up and down. He'd clearly made his decision but that only stiffened my resolve.

“I have done nothing to control your horse.”

“Forgive me if I don't believe you.”

“I realize you have no reason to trust me, but it is still the truth.”

My indecision continued so I stepped onto the dirt, keeping my gaze on Thunder. Call it hubris, but if something possessed him, I'd know it.

Thunder met my stare without blinking, like he knew it was a test and was determined to pass. I put my hands on both sides of his head. When he licked me, I knew.

“I told you I didn't lie.”

“So why not tell me who and what you are and why you're there?” I didn't like mysteries like this, but I knew I'd have to walk home unless I freed “him.” “You're rather selective in what you share.”

“It's not by choice.”

Thunder snorted and kicked up some more dirt.

“Fine.” I said it as much for myself as for Thunder. Shaking my head, I pulled off my forearm guard and knelt. Using the curved metal, I scooped as much soil as I could and pushed it to the side.

Contact with the ground cleared up one mystery. The dirt was bone dry and brittle. It felt like scorched earth. Fire had killed everything in this patch but not any of the surrounding area. Another mystery I couldn't solve.

I dug with a fury. The longer I remained, the less safe I felt. I ignored my misgivings. Having decided on my course, I worked to complete the task. Thunder helped by pulling the dirt back to make my digging easier.

Even with his help, however, I didn't know how I'd clear the entire area. Using a shovel would have taken some time, and I didn't have even that.

"Move to your left and forward." He sounded tired yet excited. *"There is a door in the center of the box. You need only clear enough to pull it open."*

I moved where he suggested and renewed my efforts. "Are you going to be okay?"

"I'll be fine once I'm free."

Perhaps he'd been entombed for so long and there had been other failed attempts to free him, but I expected a bit more enthusiasm. "How long have you been imprisoned?"

"When I'm free, I'll answer all your questions."

The way he said it rekindled my fears. If freeing him were a mistake, I wouldn't live long enough to regret my decision. I sent a silent prayer to Genznor to strike me dead rather than let me release something evil. The fact I was allowed to keep digging didn't calm me. Our gods rarely answered our prayers directly.

I'd made it about a forearm's length down when I struck something hard. Another two shovelfuls revealed the top of a metal vault. I shifted my efforts to the left, and within a couple minutes, I'd found a handle. Clearing the door took substantially longer.

Despite the cool weather, I was sweating heavily by the time I pulled on the handle. It didn't move. Silently cursing my stupidity, I reached into my saddlebag for the length of rope I always carried.

Tightening the knot around the pommel of my saddle, my heart beat faster. In a few moments I'd find out what had been trapped inside. I'd probably be dead before I realized my mistake, but I tried to squash such thoughts. If I had any doubts, I needed to leave the door closed.

My fingers wrapped around the dirty metal hook. I planted my feet wide enough to give me a sound base and urged Thunder forward. The rope pulled taut. I worried it would snap when the door didn't budge.

I pulled harder and was rewarded by the sound of metal grating on metal. The door inched upward until finally the vault opened with a whoosh. Foul air, thick with the smell of sulfur and acrid smoke, rushed from the tomb as fresh air filled the now exposed room. I stood frozen as a dread filled me that I'd unleashed an imprisoned demon.

Covered in feathers the color of fire, a bird cleared the gap. Its body resembled a large eagle, except he had long tail feathers that dripped fire. The meager sunlight that slipped through the trees reflected off the creature in a rainbow of colors. His eyes, however, held my attention. Surrounding the pupils, a rich yellow iris seemed to shift hues like pools of molten amber. The white around the edges was slightly bloodshot and appeared more human than avian.

“A phoenix.”

My fear changed to awe when he stared at me. *“I claim you, Thane, of the house of Jelcob.”*

The voice was faint, barely a whisper, and the words seemed to take everything he had left. Without warning, the phoenix burst into flames and his ashes rained into the hole.

I sat backward and nearly fell over. Only Thunder's impatient movements prevented me from rushing to the side of the vault to peer inside. I quickly untied the rope and pushed him. Satisfied he could flee if necessary, I cautiously moved to the open crypt.

Of all the magical creatures I'd read about, phoenixes were the most rare. Wise and powerful, the legends held they taught the first wizards and healers. Whether that was true, phoenixes were sought after and revered, even by kings and queens. Despite their lofty status, I'd never read anything to suggest they claimed humans.

A flash of light from below forced me to cover my eyes. When I opened them, he hovered over the opening again. This time his movements were fluid and graceful. His feathers shimmered now, bathing the forest floor in a faint red-orange glow. When our gazes met, I noticed his eyes had not changed.

“I am Eraq and I have waited centuries for you, Thane.”

Thunder cleared the tree line, and Eraq peered skyward. For a moment, I thought he'd launch himself from my arm, but he flexed his claws into the thick leather glove he had magically provided and remained still.

"It has been centuries since I've seen the sky."

I'd avoided asking too much because I still hadn't wrapped my mind around what he meant when he claimed me. The inequity of our respective powers left me uneasy. But I needed to know more before I could assess my position.

"What happened that you ended up imprisoned?"

"I was defeated. And since my enemy could not kill me, he confined me to that cage."

"Great Genznor! That's... that's..."

"The price of my failure."

I tried not to react visibly and kept my eyes focused on the fields in front of us. Eraq's terse answer reminded me of how the nobility treated soldiers, even royal guards, when they addressed their "betters."

"Your friend approaches."

I didn't realize I'd gotten so lost in thought, but when I looked up, I saw Brill riding hard. Suddenly he sat up, and I knew he'd seen Eraq. Rain used his distraction to slow down.

"Poor Brill, he's going to have to fight with her all the way home." I smiled at the image.

"The two are well-suited."

I glanced over. Eraq shifted his attention from Brill back to me. His eyes twinkled, and I thought he winked. While it amused me to see his expression, I also began to wonder how much he knew about my life.

Eraq cocked his head to the side. Had he read my thoughts, or was my card face really as bad as Brill claimed?

Rain trotted up to our position, ending my speculation. "Genznor's gonads, Thane, where did you find a phoenix?"

"Colorfully irreverent friend you have."

"His name is Eraq and I... um..."

"Thane rescued me."

Brill wasn't often at a loss for words, but when he was, he made the most ridiculous faces. "Close your mouth, Brill, it's not your best look."

He shut his mouth, but the usual twisted grin didn't appear. Whatever else he might be thinking, he took the situation seriously. "This is incredible. How—"

"Let's get moving. I'll explain as we ride." I should have said, "...explain as much as I *can*," but I decided it was best to leave out how few details I had prior to opening the vault.

"Are we taking him to the palace? I mean, he doesn't need us to get somewhere so I assume he wants to come with us."

There were times when Brill surprised me. His live-for-the-fun-of-it mentality often masked his intelligence. I knew better, but I still bought into the masquerade, only to be smacked on the nose with the truth.

"I um... well, that is..."

"Thane and I never discussed my plans, other than to leave the forest."

"What forest?"

"That one." I twisted in the saddle as I pointed behind me and nearly dropped Eraq. The tree line we'd just passed was gone. All of it. No ancient forest, no dense leaf cover blocking the sky, no unnaturally quiet woods. None of it was where it should have been, only a few minutes walk behind us. When I swept my gaze back, Eraq was staring forward. "How's that possible?"

He never took his focus from the open fields in front of us. *"I'll explain when we get to the king's mage."*

Brill slapped both hands on his thighs. "Guess that answers my question. Shall we get started?"

From the way he looked at me, I knew Brill hadn't missed my discomfort. Maybe he'd suggested we leave so he could get home, but more likely he was trying to get back so we could speak to Mage Nalor. Assuming the king's mage would speak to a mere guardsman.

Rain followed Thunder without incident, not that I'd have noticed if she stopped. I deserved answers, but Eraq refused all my attempts to start a conversation. His recalcitrance stood fast even in the face of Brill's gregarious nature. The lack of answers caused me to brood, and finally we all stopped talking.

Even though Eraq was leagues above me and didn't owe me an explanation, he had promised me answers. Moreover, the closer to the palace we rode, the more I started to worry. Sure, Eraq appeared to be a phoenix, a race considered friendly, even protective of men, but what if I was wrong? What if he'd deceived me?

My position would gain me admittance inside the palace walls, and no one would challenge a royal guardsman bearing a phoenix. If anything, they'd clear a path right to the king. History would remember me as a fool, if Eraq had deceived me.

The outskirts of Caliphid ended the time for debate. I decided at a minimum I'd take Eraq to Mage Nalor first. He would know if deception was involved. And if *he* couldn't tell, then it didn't matter what I did.

Eraq's presence caused a stir among the people. We'd barely cleared the outer ring of homes and already a crowd began lining our route. I didn't blame them for wanting to see something as rare and beautiful as Eraq, but the growing crowd made the journey more difficult. Fortunately, before Thunder got spooked, I heard someone tell the crowd to make way.

Twice more, I heard the command before I saw Sergeant Kemp and a squad of my fellow guards riding our way. Natural curiosity to get closer to a phoenix quickly gave way in the face of a dozen mounted soldiers.

"Sergeant Thane," Kemp called out, smiling as he neared. "Aren't you content being the youngest sergeant in the guard? Do you have plans to make captain before your next birthday?"

"Captain?" Brill moved up to my side. "You're thinking too low, first sergeant. Thane has his sights set on a barony, at least."

Kemp's jovial mood evaporated. "Guard your tongue, corporal."

The rebuke caused Brill to recoil and drained the smile from his lips. "What?"

"Thane riding into the city with a phoenix on his arm has upset the king."

I didn't know what I'd done to draw the ire of the king. "Am I under arrest?"

"No, but tread carefully lest you give him reason. Something has him on edge. When he received word of your return, it required Nalor's words to calm him."

“Foolish king.”

I nearly laughed as my friend searched the area for the man who dared insult the king. Holding my arm out, I motioned toward Eraq. “He said it.”

Kemp was a king’s man. He’d take an arrow for him or the prince without a second thought. But he closed his mouth without commenting.

“Why is the king vexed with me for bringing Eraq to the palace?” It made no sense. Not when history was full of examples of phoenixes helping humans.

“As often as not, the arrival of a phoenix portends the ascension of a new royal house.” Kemp nodded at the explanation. *“You may assure your king I am not here to replace him or his heirs.”*

“Do you vouch that he and his family are safe?”

“No. I simply state that I am not an instrument of dynastic change. At least not for his line.”

“Now you understand why the king is agitated.” Kemp turned and motioned to his men.

The troops formed around us, and for a moment it felt like more than merely an escort. I reminded myself that this was how I’d been trained to guard people entering the palace. Unsettling to me or not, the king showed Eraq the courtesy he deserved. The extra horses, however, kept people back, letting us make better time to the palace.

We rode up to Nalor’s tower. I never understood why wizards liked towers, but the stories usually involved the mages living in one. Nalor was no exception.

The turret was easily the tallest part of the palace, soaring over two hundred feet above ground. Legends said a mighty wizard raised the tower overnight, but having seen it up close, the granite blocks and mortar looked the same as the ones that made up the rest of the palace.

Six guards standing outside the tower door meant King Lethral was inside. As the junior sergeant, my assignments generally involved other members of the royal house. I’d only been in Lethral’s presence twice. Once when I swore my oath to him and his family, and the other when he went to visit his uncle’s estate. The duke lived two days ride south and west, and since I’d come from the cavalry, I’d been assigned the advance patrol. On that trip, I learned the king was intelligent, practical, cared about the people, and didn’t like soldiers

or nobles who mistreated his subjects. He also had a temper and didn't suffer fools in his presence.

Thunder came to a stop, and I wished I could have kept riding back to the barracks. The king had come to meet Eraq, so unless he flew in on his own, I knew I had to stay.

"Corporal Brill," Kemp said as he dismounted. "Take Sergeant Thane's horse, and see that he's properly groomed."

Brill's mouth opened, but thankfully he didn't speak right away. Instead, his gaze shifted to me. Technically, Kemp didn't outrank me, and couldn't order my junior officer around in my presence. But even a fool knew he acted upon orders of our captain. Barely noticeable, my nod served to make Kemp's orders mine. Brill snapped to attention, saluted his superior, and reached for my reins.

Eraq chose that moment to push off my arm and take flight.

"You must attend the king with me."

With my fleeting hope I could leave dashed, I dismounted. The cool day turned out not cold enough as I felt my pulse race and I started to sweat. I'd done nothing wrong, but I didn't want to face my king.

"You have nothing to fear. I will not let anyone harm you."

The sound of fluttering wings alerted me that Eraq was coming back. I held out the glove and he resumed his perch. Kemp's squad formed up around me, and he led the way into the tower. My duties had never required I go beyond ground level, so I raised an eyebrow when Kemp walked toward the stairs.

"You men stay here." He pointed toward either side of the opening and then looked at me. "You two follow me."

When my foot made the first step, I realized something. "Kemp, how did you know where I was?"

"Nalor alerted the king that someone released the phoenix. King Lethral ordered me to find the pho—Eraq and bring him here."

I tried to make sense of the explanation, but I was missing some key piece of information. Nalor had to have known about Eraq, but if he did, why did he leave him there? We reached the second story, and Kemp stepped into the room first.

Nalor and Lethral stood over the only piece of furniture in the room, a large oak table. The king pointed to a spot, and they spoke in muted voices. Nalor put his hand to his lips, paused a moment, and then nodded.

Neither Kemp nor I made a sound, but they turned as if expecting us. Lethral's gaze went immediately to Eraq, and I couldn't tell if I saw anger or awe in his eyes. At forty-two, the weight of ruling had turned some of his chestnut hair gray and added more than a wrinkle or two to his face. The king's left hand rested on the pommel of his sword, and his armor sparkled as if it had recently been shined.

He walked toward us, his back straight from his years as a soldier, followed closely by Nalor. I attempted to kneel without dislodging Eraq and resembled a drunken courtesan instead of a soldier.

"Stop with that foolishness, Sergeant." The king waved his hand as he spoke. "You're a royal guard. If I made you genuflect every time I entered a room, your knees would give out in a season."

"As you wish, Your Majesty." I stared straight ahead, as we'd been trained. It didn't matter; the king had already turned his attention to Eraq.

"I wish the circumstances of our meeting were different, but I welcome you to Galth." Lethral surprised me by bowing his head slightly.

"Unfortunately there could be no other set of events under which we could meet, Your Majesty."

"He didn't have to meet you at all," Nalor said. Anyone else and the king would have rebuked them for speaking out of turn, but the mage had served Galth since before Lethral's great-grandfather.

I'd never seen Nalor wear the robes traditionally associated with his craft until today. In truth, when first I met the mage, I thought him a minor nobleman—a handsome, *young* noble—working in the palace. His golden hair, with no hint of gray, and youthful face masked his true age.

Dressed in a gray robe cinched at the waist by a silver cord, he looked like the powerful wizard his reputation suggested. The plain white pendant on Nalor's chest changed colors whenever it focused on Eraq.

"So he's who you thought he would be?" Lethral sounded relieved, though still cautious.

The wizard nodded and kept staring at Eraq. I felt an urge to protect him, as ridiculous as my efforts would prove. Eraq didn't appear fazed by the attention, so I tried to relax.

Eventually Nalor blinked and shifted his attention to me. After a brief moment of scrutiny, the wizard's eyes went wide. "Is this...?"

"I claimed him."

"Does he know what that means?" Nalor's expression made plain he knew the answer.

"Not yet. I came here first lest you send the army to find me."

The king's mage frowned and shook his head. "Will you ever change?"

Eraq ruffled his feathers and flexed his wings. A squawk, the first audible sound I'd heard from his mouth, filled the room. *"Do not presume to judge me. Would you have preferred I left you waiting and guessing?"*

Nalor squinted, and my defensive instincts returned. Before he spoke, the king laid a hand on the older man's shoulder.

"No, you did right to come here without delay." He turned toward Nalor and waited until the mage met his gaze. "The uncertainty would only have created needless tension."

I wanted to ask what they were talking about, but a guard didn't speak in the king's presence unless spoken to first. My situation, however, threatened my conditioning.

"Sergeant?" The king glanced toward Kemp.

"Thane, Your Majesty."

"My apologies, Sergeant Thane. I should remember your name, but I fear it escaped me." He didn't let me tell him it was of no matter. "I know you have many questions, but I must impose on you a bit further and ask you to retire to your quarters while Nalor, Eraq, and I discuss matters of national security."

What could I say? I didn't want to leave, and I certainly didn't want to put off finding out my role, but I couldn't refuse.

"Of course, Your Majesty."

"I require him to stay." Eraq's statement drew everyone's attention to him. *"I'm not yours to command, Lethral. Either he stays, or we both go."*

The king's face turned red, but he controlled his outburst. Nalor, however, looked ready to attack.

"I'll go." The words came out before I could think, but it de-escalated the tension. When Eraq turned to me, I tried to smile. "He is my king, and I've sworn an oath to obey him with my life, if necessary. There is no further need to discuss this."

Lethral put his hand on my shoulder in a gesture too familiar for my station. I stole a quick glance at Kemp and saw the same stunned expression I knew I wore.

"Thank you, Sergeant Thane. You have my word that when we finish, someone will explain things to your satisfaction, even if that person is me." He motioned toward the doorway, and Kemp bowed quickly. "Sergeant Kemp will escort you home."

I bowed deeper than required to show my respect for his kindness and followed my mentor down the stairs. Neither of us spoke until we were outside. Kemp sent his soldiers back to the barracks and informed the guards on duty he'd see to their relief in a while. Without a word to me, he turned on his heel and headed toward the small house Brill and I shared.

The five-minute walk to my home proved awkward. I wanted to ask him something, anything, but Kemp didn't give me a chance. He stopped in front of my door, blocking my way inside. "Be careful, Thane."

Kemp turned around but still didn't step aside. His lips were tight and his forehead furrowed. "Nalor sent the king an urgent summons, and I led the king to the tower. I couldn't hear much, but I know they were discussing Arbutis."

My eyes opened wide at the mention of our northern neighbor.

Kemp nodded. "From what little I gleaned, the spell that confines the dragon to Arbutis's borders is gone. It appears your phoenix is somehow tied to the disappearance of our protection."

"How's that—"

"I don't know, but if Eraq has drawn you into this, I fear for your safety." He placed both hands on my shoulders. "I'm sure King Lethral asked you to leave so you didn't hear about your role in an offhand manner."

The older veterans always spoke of their respect for the king in ways that went beyond duty. I never fully understood what they meant until today.

“If you report back to the king, please tell him I appreciate what he did for me.”

Kemp nodded and squeezed my shoulders before marching back to the tower. Alone, I stared at the door, trying to make sense of things. That I hadn't released a demon that would destroy Galth was the only positive thing I could find.

I entered the house and went straight to my small bedroom. Brill said we lived like the nobility, each having our own room, but then he spent most of his money as soon as he got paid. If not for the quartermaster withholding enough to pay his rent, he'd probably spend that before he paid me.

Staring at the leather glove Eraq gave me, I experienced a moment of panic. What if it wouldn't come off? A small tug on the end dispelled my fear, and I set the glove on the floor.

Without thinking, I started to remove my armor and placed it on the stand my father built for me. His chest nearly burst when I had gotten my commission. He was so proud that he spent two weeks working on it nonstop. He also told anyone who'd listen about my promotion.

Drawing on his twenty plus years as a soldier, my father created my stand to resemble a person. Each piece had its own place, which made it easy to store and retrieve. After others saw mine, my father had orders for several more, and soon had enough work to hire my brother's oldest son as an assistant. With each order he made small improvements, but I turned down the offer for a newer one. This one would always be special.

“Thane?” Brill's anxious voice announced his arrival before he opened the door.

“In here.” The door slammed shut as I answered, so I said it again. “In my room.”

Brill appeared in my doorway as I pulled out an oilcloth to clean my dirty forearm bracer. “I stopped by the tower, but the guards said you'd left. Then Sergeant Kemp suggested I come back and check on you.”

“I'm fine.” I let habit take over and started to clean in earnest.

I didn't take my attention from my work as Brill walked into the room and leaned against the wall opposite me.

“You only focus like that when you're upset.”

“That’s not true.” I fussed at a speck of dirt in a seam until it came out. “This helps me think.”

“You must think a lot because you’ve got the cleanest armor in the guard.”

He meant it to be funny, but that comment summed up a big part of our differences, I’d grown up and he was still a kid. “Sometimes.”

“I’d ask if you want to talk about it, but I know you’ll say no, so I’m going to stand here until you tell me what happened.”

I glanced up from my work and smiled. Maybe he had grown up, and I’d never noticed. “I don’t really know. King Lethral sent me home before I could find out anything.”

“So Kemp sent me to find you for nothing?”

Placing the piece in its slot, I unstrapped the left guard from my arm. “No, he thinks I might be in danger.”

“This would be a lot easier if you’d stop talking in riddles.”

The cloth left a thin sheen as it moved across the metal. Rubbing it around, I almost forgot to answer. “If I knew why, I’d tell you, but Kemp was rather vague on the details.”

Brill kept quiet as I finished. After I put the guard and the rag down, I looked at him and shrugged. “As I contemplated freeing whomever was trapped, I thought: if only the danger was to me and not the entire kingdom. Genznor apparently decided to take me up on my offer.”

“You know I’ll stand with you no matter what.”

“I know you would, but I won’t let you.” No one else would pay for my mistake.

Brill pushed off the wall and stood in front of me. “I’m not asking for permission, I’m telling you what’s going to happen. Whatever happens, we’re in it together.”

I knew I couldn’t change his mind, but it also didn’t need to be decided today. “Thank you.”

“Good.” He tapped his fist on the table a couple of times. “No one’s beaten us yet when we stand together, and I don’t see this being the first time.”

I laughed at the absurdity of the statement. As kids, we’d stood back to back and did battle against the imaginary hordes of Delmor numerous times, armed with nothing more than sticks. Every time we proved victorious. “Exactly.”

“Glad that’s settled.” He winked at me and made for the door. “How about once I get out of my armor, we go to the baths? I need to wash away the dirt from that ride.”

Normally I’d not think anything of the question—we usually went there after practice or a hard day—but Brill was a terrible liar.

“What’s going on?” I turned to my left and watched him squirm.

“Nothing.” He stared at his boots until the lingering silence proved too much and he met my gaze. “What?”

His reaction confirmed something was up. I also knew he’d tell me the truth if I just kept quiet.

“Seriously, nothing’s going on, it’s just I saw Jahvon heading over, and... well you know... he, um... well... he likes you *that* way. I didn’t say anything to him, I swear to Genznor I didn’t, but... you know.”

He shrugged and seemed to shrink into himself. After the way I blew up this morning, I suppose he expected me to get mad. “Thanks for thinking of me, Brill, but—”

“Before you say, ‘no,’ I’m not suggesting you do anything more than come with me. You’re probably at least as dirty as I am, so a bath won’t kill you.”

He was right. I could use a bath, and the hot water pool always helped me relax. When I didn’t answer, Brill continued trying to convince me.

“I wasn’t suggesting you disappear into a dark corner. Believe me when I say I speak for everyone else, we don’t want to see you two doing whatever you two would do right there in the baths.”

“There will be at least a few who might enjoy the show.” Brill opened his mouth, but nothing intelligent came out. I stood up and put my arm around his shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’m just coming to wash up.”

Clean and refreshed, I enjoyed the walk back to the house. Brill was a bit disappointed when we left that nothing had come of his matchmaking attempt. I’m not sure what he expected. Jahvon was a guard in another company. For anything more than a romp in the bed, I needed permission from his sergeant *and* our captain. Pleasant as it might be to spend the time alone with him, I wanted something a bit more permanent, and that required time and patience.

My experience had been sex first rarely led to anything more in the future. If he wanted the same as I did, there would be time.

Half-listening to Brill's latest story as we turned onto our street, I stopped when I saw a tall man in a deep blue robe standing near our front door. It took a moment for Brill to realize I wasn't by his side. He turned toward me and then spun back toward where I was staring.

"Who's that?"

"I don't know." I had an idea who sent him, however, so I started walking again.

Brill's body tensed, and he assumed the point. I wanted to tell him not to worry, but he started walking faster.

"Can we help you?" Brill sounded about as friendly as an angry dog.

Our "guest" never looked at Brill, keeping his focus on me. The attention set my pulse racing. If my scarred face bothered him, it didn't register in his expression. A handsome face alone rarely had me this interested, but I couldn't deny my attraction. "I'm here to speak to Thane."

Sexy, yet manly, the voice suited him. It also reminded me of something I couldn't place. "Do I know you?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. My name is Plym." He nodded his head slightly, and then motioned toward the door. "May we speak in private?"

Brill and I glanced at each other. Inside the palace grounds, Plym likely presented no threat to me, but his appearance took me by surprise.

"Did you want me to leave?" Brill really wanted to know if I felt safe.

"You may stay if you like, Corporal Brill." Plym reached into a pocket and pulled out two gold crowns. "Or I can give you some coins and you can go have a drink."

Even Brill could read between the lines. That much gold would buy drinks for an entire squad for two nights.

"I'll be fine." I tried to say it like I believed my words. Brill might not have believed me, but he accepted my decision.

The wizard held out the coins and placed them in Brill's hand. "Let me put my bag down, and I'll leave you two alone."

Plym and I stood outside as Brill practically ran in and out of the house. He mumbled something I didn't catch as he passed. From the corner of my eye, I saw him turn once before he disappeared into the crowd.

"I guess we should go inside." I pushed the door back so he could go first.

Plym entered and scanned the small living area. The room didn't have much in the way of furniture with an oak table and four chairs, a couple of smaller tables, and a shelf for our crockery. It had always been a source of pride that I owned this home. It was my palace. Under the wizard's scrutiny, however, it felt small and simple. Hardly fit for someone like him.

Finally, he turned toward me. Instead of the look of disdain I expected, he seemed to approve. "Clean and tidy. Not at all what I expected from two soldiers."

"We pay Brill's cousin a few coppers each week, and she cleans up and does our laundry."

"Money well spent." His lips pulled back further and I could see his perfect, white teeth.

I'd heard men talk about a woman making them weak in the knees, but until that moment I'd never experienced it myself. Not that I was in danger of collapsing, but the rush of excitement made even my legs tingle.

Resisting the urge to pull out a chair for him, I kept my distance and pointed. "Have a seat, please. I need to put my things away."

I didn't wait for an answer, but I heard the chair being pulled back as I disappeared into my room. Tossing the small bag with my dirty clothes by the bed, I looked around for something to check my appearance. Brill and I shared a small mirror, hung in the space between our doors, but given my guest's location that wasn't an option. I gave up after a moment and made sure my tunic was on straight and pants were tucked properly into my boots.

Plym sat with his back to me, facing the door. His arm rested over the back of the chair, his legs stretched out. He turned his head when I entered, and his hair caught the light so that for an instant his hair seemed on fire. When I blinked, the effect was gone.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, but I wasn't expecting company." He didn't seem upset, so I continued. "Did Nalor send you?"

"Not exactly. I told him I'd come speak to you."

“You told him?” Who other than the king could tell Nalor what to do?

“It would probably be better if you sat down, Thane.” He moved two long slender fingers, and the chair closest to him slid out enough for me to sit.

Had I selected a seat, it would have been one farther away. Plym’s effect on me, while not unpleasant, still made me uncomfortable. Choosing a different chair, however, was no longer possible. Settling in, I sat straight and tried to dance between not staring at him and still looking at him when he spoke.

“I realize today has been a bit unsettling, and I’m going to apologize now because I’m going to add to the upheaval in your life.” He sucked his bottom lip before the tip of his tongue brushed against the top one. “I know that isn’t very helpful. Perhaps the best way to start is to show you something.”

He stood up, and before I could react, a flash of light blinded me. When I opened my eyes, Plym was gone, replaced by a fiery presence I recognized.

“Eraq!”

I thought he winked at me, but a second flash blurred my vision. Plym stood looking down at me, a worried expression on his face.

“I’m sorry to deceive you, but there wasn’t really a chance to explain.”

He hadn’t been lying when he said my life was going to get more complicated. “I don’t understand.”

“I know, so let me explain.” Sitting again, he still looked concerned. “The gods gave my kind two shapes. A human one, so we could walk among you, and the phoenix, so we could teach and guide you.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Yes it does, just think about it.” He smiled. “Would your king have rushed to meet me if I were just a wizard trying to get his attention?”

I thought to debate him, but the answer was obvious.

“My walk to your home did not require a squad of mounted men to clear a path. People stared at me while I waited, but can you imagine what would have happened if Eraq hovered by your door?”

I’d have never made it to my door, but he didn’t need me to answer him. “Which form do you prefer?”

He laughed but didn’t sound amused. “Depending on when you ask, you will get a different answer. There was a time when I would’ve said, without a

moment's hesitation, my phoenix side, but here and now? I was forced to spend two centuries in that cage confined in my phoenix form. I'd like to spend a few decades like this before I change back again, if I could."

Neither of us spoke right away. I wanted to ask the obvious, but his last answer told me how he felt about his imprisonment. Not that I blamed him. Had it been me, I'd not want to discuss it either.

"Which brings us to what you really want to know—how I ended up trapped in that cage."

"I'd be lying if I said I don't want to press you for answers, but I'll understand if you don't want to talk about it right now."

"That's kind of you, but you have a right to answers."

Kemp's warning replayed in my head, but I remained silent. That question could wait until I had more information.

"I assume you are familiar with the situation in Arbutis?"

I nodded. Who in Galth wasn't?

"About two hundred years ago, I was the court mage to the king of Arbutis. The kingdom was well-run and prosperous, far more so than Galth or any of your other neighbors. It wasn't because we had better merchants and craftsmen, or more fertile fields, but rather, Arbutis was rich in precious metals and gems.

"Almost from its founding as a kingdom, the kings of Arbutis held title to the vast stretches of land where most of the gold, silver, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and other valuable items were found. They used their wealth wisely, hiring the best soldiers and advisors. But more importantly, they didn't waste their wealth or manpower on useless wars. For generation after generation, Arbutis's kings were content with their reach and diverted their energies to defending the borders."

"My history books taught that Arbutis had conquered several smaller kingdoms to create their current boundaries." I realized after I spoke that Plym had lived during that time and knew them better than any tome I'd read.

"Certainly in the early years there was conflict, but that was centuries before I arrived. The kingdom I knew was a model of good government and wise rulers."

Plym's eyes didn't seem focused on anything in the room. I could hear his admiration for our conquered neighbor to the north.

“Did you know dragons were created by the gods to teach and guide humans?”

He punctuated his question by raising a blond eyebrow. I almost laughed at the absurdity of such an idea. “Dragons? The only ones I’ve ever heard about are never kindly disposed toward us.”

“Yes, that is true now, but at first they were your guardians. There are some dragons that remember their true calling.”

“I can’t say I’ve met or even heard of a benevolent dragon.”

“I’d be surprised if you had. Well before my time, the benevolent ones, as you called them, had taken to hiding themselves in order to survive. In addition to fighting their own kind who’d turned from the role set by the gods, the good dragons were painted with the same brush as the evil ones. Humans hunted all dragons because they couldn’t tell the difference.”

“Are there many left? Good dragons, I mean.”

“Some, but it’s hard to say how many.” Plym shrugged. “They’re able to hide, even from other dragons, so we only know the ones who choose to reveal themselves.”

“What about... you know, the bad ones?”

“There are a few left, and they’re among the strongest, most deadly of their kind.” Plym stood and moved to the window. He stared out, his hands behind his back. “The dragon wars are too long and complicated for me to recount in full, but they were a brutal affair. First the traitors turned on those who tried to protect humans. Some of the good ones changed sides, and that’s when humans began to kill any dragon they could find.

“The evil ones banded together to resist the human wizards and armies, but that alliance proved short-lived. After a few successes, the dragons turned on each other, unwilling to share power. Finally, all that remained were the strongest, most powerful of their kind. Zuran was one of those survivors.”

“Zuran? Is that the dragon that rules Arbutis now?”

“Yes.” He turned to face me. “Zuran isn’t just powerful and evil, he’s cunning and devious. Unlike most of the other dragons that viewed humans with nothing but contempt, Zuran raised an army of men to help him.”

“I thought he conquered Arbutis alone.” No one ever spoke of anyone other than the dragon living in Arbutis anymore.

“Oh no, he had help. Brigands, bandits, criminals for sure, but his real strength came from within. There were more than a few noblemen who believed the king held Arbutis back from its true destiny—to conquer and rule the continent.”

I don't think I could have spoken if it meant my life. Plym's story challenged a number of truths that everyone knew.

“Your king was equally surprised when I told him the truth. The reason so little is known is because Zuran's plan was decades in the making. He and the human wizards he'd recruited spent years planning this attack. They traveled the borders of Arbutis, placing markers along the boundaries of the kingdom. On the day he attacked, a barrier went up around the kingdom. No one could get in to aid Arbutis, and no one could get out.

“Zuran attacked the palace while his army scoured the land, killing any who stood with the king. While the king's mages fought Zuran's, I took my true form and fought Zuran. I lost, and with my defeat, Arbutis quickly fell.”

A tear slowly made its way down Plym's cheek. I wanted to leap up and wipe it away and tell Plym it wasn't his fault, but I held back. Would he appreciate my efforts or find them insulting? Failing to see a clear sign either way, I opted to remain seated.

“Somehow, Zuran learned my true nature. When I rose to meet him, he didn't seem surprised as I'd expected. Instead of taking a moment to reassess the situation, I attacked. Arbutis paid dearly for my folly.”

“What else could you have done if there was no way in or out?”

“I could have taken the king and his family into hiding and protected them. Eventually, help would have arrived.”

“Everyone can be a brilliant general if they view the battle after it's over.”

“And damned is the general who falls into the trap laid by his enemy to the ruin of his kingdom.”

The way Plym looked away and slowly shook his head told me nothing I said would ease his guilt. I decided to try anyway. “Your intentions were honorable, and none could question your bravery.”

“My sin was pride, not cowardice. When Zuran engaged his spell, I had time to call for help. Instead, I wanted to show everyone that I was powerful—powerful enough to deal with one dragon.”

“Still, everyone makes mistakes.”

“This is not the same!” Plym turned toward me. “Name one other person whose mistake destroyed an entire kingdom.”

Pushing the seat back, I rose and went to the window. “In my studies, I once read something I think you need to hear. ‘The past is gone and we cannot change it. Dwell on it overmuch and not only won’t you learn from it, you doom yourself to worse mistakes in the future.’ Those words have helped me on more than one occasion. Maybe they will help you as well.”

Plym didn’t answer me, and I feared I’d offended him. Who was I—a mere guard—to lecture one of his kind?

Finally, he smiled. “You are a man of many surprises, Sergeant Thane. I met Mage Kuhn many centuries after he wrote that passage. Clearly you learned his lesson better than I.”

He took my left hand in his and a tingle spread throughout my body. I quickly turned to avoid embarrassing myself. Any thought of him and me together needed to be stamped out before it could take seed.

“You’re wrong, Thane.” He squeezed my hand once. “I haven’t read your thoughts, but you wear your emotions proudly. It is I who am not worthy of you.”

Plym raised his hand and brought my fingers to his lips and kissed them gently. A rush of heat radiated from my hand. When he let go, I felt empty again.

“There’s more to my crime than just overconfidence and hubris.” He took a deep breath but didn’t turn away this time. “There was someone, a prince, the youngest son of the king. He was handsome, smart, athletic, and charming when he wanted. Prince Telicon was also all that his father was not—prideful, uncaring of those beneath him, and arrogant. Despite his character flaws, I saw only the superficial. When he learned of my interest, he would flirt with me in private and ask for favors that I was eager to provide. But he was the prince of Arbutis and required someone of equal stature. To him, I was barely more than a servant.

“Two hundred years have given me time to reflect on much. My two greatest sins that day were trying to impress someone not worthy of my affections, and forgetting those I was supposed to protect couldn’t rise from the ashes of their death.”

There were many questions I wanted to ask, but none more than about this man who captured Plym's interest. That, however, was the one question I couldn't ask. The silence dragged on until I couldn't hold my tongue any longer.

"How did you end up in a prison in a forest in central Galth?"

The corners of his lips curved upward enough to be noticeable. "I didn't, but you knew there was something strange about the forest."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I couldn't tell if I'd irritated an old wound or helped him find closure. I'd hoped the latter, but his emotions were hard to read.

"As I mentioned, Zuran learned my true nature before the war. Since a phoenix is nearly impossible to kill permanently, he needed to find a way to stop me from rising from my ashes and resuming the fight.

"Not that this excuses my actions, but dragons were not known for their planning. Typically, they used brute force to achieve their goals. I had no inkling that he'd put such thought into his preparation that he'd planned to deal with my rebirth."

Words of reassurance weren't going to help, so I tentatively reached for his hand. When he didn't pull away, I rubbed the top slowly with my thumb. He rewarded me with a small smile.

"My death was painful, but quick. He gathered my ashes and put them in the vault his followers had prepared. Part of Zuran's preparation included digging a hole just outside his magical barrier. Once my remains were sealed inside, he sent my crypt to the waiting grave. By the time I returned from the dead, I was buried and alone."

"How could that be? I found you in the middle of Galth, not near the border with Arbutis."

Plym didn't try to break our contact. If anything, his grip tightened when I shifted my fingers.

"The vault resisted all my efforts to escape. Each attempt to break the spell only strengthened my restraints. But I quickly learned I could do certain things to affect my surroundings. My first endeavor was to wrestle control of his barrier. Unfortunately, I couldn't bring it down, so I did the next best thing—I made it permanent."

“But that trapped everyone inside as well.”

“Yes and no. In theory, my actions could have sentenced everyone inside Arbutis to a desolate existence, but in practice I did not. Immediately following his attack, other dragons, phoenixes, and wizards spent years trying to pierce the shield without success. Ironically, Zuran didn't realize *he* was trapped for decades.”

“In time, I made contact with Oleard, an ancient dragon, who tried to help me. Together we learned much about my prison, but he couldn't free me.”

“How was I able to free you? I'm no wizard.”

“And that was the key.” Plym placed his free hand over mine and let his long fingers trace an invisible pattern over and over. “Remember, I said Zuran was cunning. Only a non-wizard human could open the hatch and break the spell. It had to be someone who asked for nothing in return, who knew nothing about me, or why I was imprisoned.”

“Basically, you needed to find a fool.”

“No, just a very special person.” He squeezed my hand and stared at me. “I needed someone who was compassionate, yet cautious, and willing to trust. That's why I used Thunder to reach you. He trusted me because he knew who and what I was. No phoenix has ever willingly harmed an innocent creature, human or animal. Once he believed in my rescue, he convinced you to do what I could not.”

“That explains why me, but not how. You said your crypt was located at the border of Galth and Arbutis. That's almost two hundred and fifty miles north of here.”

“With Oleard's help, I learned how to bring people to me. It was very draining, and I could only keep them there for short periods of time. That part, however, proved to be the easier half of the task. You were the first person who agreed to try to free me.”

Again Kemp's warning came to mind. “And because of that, I'm now yours to command?”

“Command you?” He looked confused and worried. “No. Why would you think that?”

“You said you claimed me.”

“Ah, that.” The confusion disappeared, but the thin smile did nothing to dispel his concern. “No, I am not your master. I claimed you so no one else could.”

Dusk had settled around the city when I heard Brill's voice. I continued the inspection of my armor as I waited for him to come inside.

The door swung open with a thud, followed quickly by a curse. “Thane!”

True to his routine, the door slammed shut just as I was about to answer.

“Thane!”

“I'm in my room.” I'm not sure why I bothered; the first place he always checked when he returned home was my room.

“What're you doing?”

I glanced over at my doorway. He looked remarkably sober for someone who had two gold crowns to spend on ale and whiskey.

“Making sure my armor doesn't need mending.”

“Why? So you heard already?”

“That the king intends to take the army north?” When Brill nodded, I shook my head and returned to my inspection. “Not exactly, but I assumed that's what he would do.”

“He is.” Brill sounded excited. I didn't share his feelings. “Word spread that all units are being called up. I even heard that he's put out a call for mercs from as far south as Harben.”

“I'd not put much faith in rumors, Brill.” I tugged at a loose leather strap and worked the knot a bit tighter. “I think we're on our own for this fight.”

“That wizard must have told you more than you're letting on.”

“He told me a lot, but he didn't share any of the king's plans.” Plym didn't need to spell it out. Zuran needed to be confronted before he had time to attack.

Pulling the chair from the wall, Brill spun it around and sat with his arms on the seat back. “Are you going to share or do I have to beg?”

A smile I didn't want forced its way onto my lips. Brill begging for something was the stuff of epic tales. But he deserved to know what to expect.

“His name is Plym, and he was the King’s Mage of Arbutis.”

Brill listened to my story like I had the talent of a bard. Remarkably, he only interrupted me once and that was to clarify a word. If he noticed I left out huge pieces—like the fact Plym was really Eraq—he didn’t question me.

“Plym said he’d return tonight after he finished with the king.”

“Why?” Brill played the fool often enough that when he turned serious, it set me back.

“Why what?”

“Why is he coming here? Shouldn’t he be staying with Nalor or something?”

“Um... well, I... um...” I could feel my cheeks get hot, and Brill opened his eyes wide.

“Are you serious? Him?”

I tried to meet his gaze but quickly turned away. My thumb worried a ding in my forearm bracer, and I decided to own my decision. Looking up, I stared at my friend and nodded. “Yes, him. Before you say anything else, I can’t totally explain why. Can anyone say why they find someone else attractive?”

“No, no, it’s not that. I mean, I get you like smart men and he’s very good-looking.” I raised an eyebrow and he scowled at me. “Please, I don’t need to be attracted to men to know which ones are good-looking. I need to know my competition for the ladies when I’m out, don’t I?”

His earnest expression that accompanied his explanation made me laugh. Not a begrudged little chuckle, but a deep, full-belly laugh that erased some of my worries. “I have to admit, I’ve never thought of it like that, but it makes sense.”

“Good, because I’ve had to listen to your opinion on women more than enough times.”

He smiled, but his eyes dared me to make a comment. I chose to be quiet—this time.

“Anyway, I’m just a bit surprised. I mean today you were flirting with Jahvon—”

“I wasn’t flirting with him!”

“And now you’re all doe-eyed over a wizard you’ve just met.”

“What happened to my needing to say yes to a man who puts a bit of steel in my sword?”

He stared at me, smiled, and then laughed. “Are you suggesting you listened to me?”

“Of course not, but the result is the same.” I stood and put the guard in its place. I kept my back to him and tested some of the joints on my shoulder guard. “It seemed right.”

“I assume that he is interested *that way*?”

“He said yes when I asked him to spend the night.”

“Right, but does he know...” Brill rolled his hand over.

“He kissed me good-bye before he left. I’m confident we’re thinking the same.”

“Did you want me to find somewhere to sleep tonight?”

“What?” I turned as I realized what he meant. “Of course not. This is your home. I’d never ask you to leave.”

“I know you wouldn’t. That’s why I’m asking.” The loopy grin returned. “If what people say is true, I’m going to need my sleep. I don’t need you two keeping me awake.”

I laughed before I plucked my helmet from the round top. Retaking my seat, I continued with my review. “I can’t promise you that *won’t* happen, but my expectations are that we’ll probably just fall asleep together.”

Brill raised an eyebrow. “Is that what you think?”

“It’s all I want.” I couldn’t afford to make too much of a connection.

Neither of us spoke, and when I finished with my armor, I pulled a key from inside my tunic. I could feel Brill watching as I moved to the small chest at the foot of my bed. In the waning light, I found the small packet of papers.

Taking a deep breath, I exhaled slowly and held out the folded sheets. “Here.”

Brill reached out and tentatively accepted what I offered. “What’s this?”

“My father taught me early on that a soldier’s life is unpredictable, so I should make plans for the worst. I had a barrister draw up a will. If I die, I left any money to my parents and I left you the house.”

“Why are you telling me this now? We’ve been to battle before.”

Rather than meet his questioning gaze, I focused on the other contents of the chest. “I should take these things to my parents’ house at first light.”

“Thane, stop it.” He grabbed my arm, but I shook my head and refused to turn around. “What’s going on? You’ve never done this before. Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“Yes, there are things I’ve not told you and I won’t. I can’t. But they don’t concern me.” I licked my lips slowly and swallowed. “Kemp was right. I’m caught up in whatever Eraq started. I don’t know how or why—other than I opened his cage and let him out. Something big is going to happen in Arbutis. Something the bards will sing about for centuries. And I’m going to be at the center of it.”

“Horse dung!” He grabbed my hand and slapped the papers in my palm. “I don’t want your house, your money, or anything else except for my friend to come home. We’ve been through worse, we’ll get through this too.”

“When we joined the army, our first sergeant told me that real soldiers could tell on the eve of battle if they were going to survive or not. He said he’d never thought his time was up and he’d never died. I laughed and told him he was crazy. The night before the battle of Selandis, when he promoted me to corporal, he told me to make sure the men got home. He died that day from an arrow that slipped through the shield wall.”

“That’s an old wives’ tale. No one can tell.”

“I used to think that way too. But I never thought I was going to die, not even when I got this.” I touched the rough skin on my cheek and followed the scar up and over my right eye. “I feel my fate, Brill. I’m going to die in this war.”

“Stop it, Thane! Just stop it!” He pushed me with both hands, and I thought he was going to punch me. I stared at him, resigned to take whatever he wanted to give me. “Why are you doing this?”

The beginnings of tears formed at the corner of his eyes. “Because I have to. Eraq claimed me when I freed him.”

“What in the unholy depths of Delmor does that mean?”

Even mad, his colorful vocabulary made me smile. “If you invoke Omora, you’ll have completed the board.”

“Stop trying to divert me.” Despite his attempts, he couldn’t hold back a small grin. “Besides, you know I never swear by the mother goddess. I’m too afraid of her.”

“I don’t know what it means.” I paused to make sure I didn’t give away Plym’s secret by mistake. “The only clear statements I got from Plym were that I’m not Eraq’s servant, but I have to be there when Eraq challenges the dragon.”

“They expect you to fight a dragon?”

Shaking my head, I picked up Eraq’s leather glove and put it on. “No. I need to take him to the fight.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Someone has to do it.” I flexed my fingers and listened to the leather creak. “And don’t ask why me. When I freed him, that act removed the barrier. If anyone has to go, it should be me.”

Brill clenched his hands and moved closer. He grabbed my shoulders and pulled me into a bear hug. Shocked, it took me a moment before I wrapped my arms around his back.

“Don’t be scared, Brill. You’re a good man and a damn good soldier. You don’t need me anymore.”

I heard him sniff and when he stepped back, he turned and brought his hand to his eyes. “I refuse to accept you aren’t coming back. Do you understand? I won’t hear anymore talk like that.”

“Fair enough.” I still planned to take the chest to my parents in the morning.

The soft tap on my shoulder caused me to sit up in bed. Out of instinct, I reached for a weapon I didn’t have.

Plym stepped back a pace, holding his hands up. “I’m sorry, Thane. The meeting went longer than I expected. Your king had many questions.”

I’d gone to bed when he never arrived. “I assumed you’d been held up. It’s hard to compete with the king.”

“Trust me, this is where I wanted to be. Lethral must’ve noticed, because he asked if I had somewhere to go.”

“I hope you didn’t tell him where you were going.” I don’t know why it bothered me that the king might know.

“Of course I did.” Plym untied the rope around his waist. “But before you get upset, remember I was in phoenix form. They’ve never met Plym—yet. I told them I was responsible for protecting you since you freed me.”

“Protect me?” I sat up and the blankets slid down. The cool air on my skin caused me to shiver. “From what?”

“Your king is protective of you. He asked the same question.” He chuckled as he coiled the cord and set it on the table. “There is no danger, but it was a good excuse to let me leave.”

“However you managed it, I’m glad you made it.” I stretched and remembered I bolted the door before going to bed. “Did Brill let you inside?”

“No.” He sat on the chair closest to the bed to pull off his boots. “It’s been so long since I’ve had to do this, I missed it.”

After a brief struggle, the left boot came free. “Almost. As to how I got here, unless a place is magically sealed, I can come and go as I wish.”

When the right boot rested beside the left, Plym stood up and looked around. “I hope this isn’t too forward to ask, but are you wearing anything under those blankets?”

In the dim light coming from one of the two moons, I couldn’t see his face, but from his voice, he seemed embarrassed. “No, I didn’t expect you when it got late so I went to bed like I always do. I’ll put something on.”

I started to pull the sheets back but stopped as he pulled the robe over his head.

“You can if you like, but don’t do it on my account. I only asked so I’d know if I need to fetch something to sleep in. The robe is a bother.”

Even in the faint light, I could see his flawless skin and whipcord-tight body. If I pulled the blanket back, my arousal would be impossible to miss. “Maybe I ought to find something. I...”

Plym stepped closer, lifted the corner of the covers and slid next to me. “I’m in the same state as you, Thane. Wearing clothing won’t hide that.”

He put a hand on my chest and I nearly jumped out of the bed. “Sorry. I’m... I didn’t expect that.”

“Are you sure this is what you want?” I could hear a note of uncertainty in his voice. “I can easily revert to my other form and sleep on the stand.”

“No, please don’t. I’m sure this is what I want, but I just want to sleep next to you. I know how that makes me sound, but—”

He put a finger against my lip. “Shhh. That sounds perfect.”

We both settled back against my pillow, and he tentatively placed his hand on my chest again. This time I didn’t pull away, but I shook at the feel of his warm fingers against my skin. I reached over to touch him and felt clumsy as my calloused hand landed on his shoulder. He stopped me from pulling back by grabbing my wrist.

“Would you hold me, please?”

My voice failed me. This amazing man—beautiful, smart, and beyond powerful—was asking me to hold him. In the absence of words, I raised my arm to invite him closer.

The warmth of his body felt good against me. I wrapped my arm around his torso and pulled gently. When he snuggled closer, my erection pressed against the cleft of his buttocks.

“Sorry.” I tried to move back but he moved with me.

“It’s okay, Thane. If we switched positions, you’d feel me just as excited.” He guided my hand down to his groin and laid the flat of my hand against his hard penis. “Being the vain sort that I am, if I didn’t excite you I’d be disappointed.”

“How could anyone not desire to be where I am right now? With all that you are, I don’t know why you’d want to be with me.”

“There are many kinds of beauty, Thane.” Together, we moved my arm back to his chest and I pulled us closer. “Not only are you handsome and strong, you have the most beautiful soul of any man who has ever desired me. You offer me your comfort and ask nothing in return. You could ask for the stars and I’d try to give them to you, but instead you question your worth to be near me.”

“I question my position because other than the strength of my sword arm and my skill with weapons, what more do I have to offer you? And in truth, you have no need of those services.”

“You are correct, I don’t need your sword or shield to protect me.” Before I could stop him, he rolled over and faced me. “May I kiss you?”

Again I lost the ability to speak, but I managed a nod. He brought his lips against mine and softly kissed me. Not a lust-filled, lip-crushing kiss, but a calm and passionate one.

I felt his hand cup the side of my face as his tongue touched my lips, seeking entrance. Opening my mouth, I let him in. His tongue felt hot against mine and he tasted like honey mead and sweet fruit. When he inched back, I felt the loss acutely.

“That was wonderful.” He smiled and placed his head against mine. “You pour yourself into your kiss.”

Unsure where to put my free hand, I placed it on his hip and slowly began to knead the tight muscles beneath the smooth skin. His body felt like warm ivory, if such a thing existed. I wanted to kiss him again but feared I couldn’t control myself.

“You offer me that which I desire most—someone who sees me, not what I can do for them. That is a rare and precious gift. One I do not have the power to repay.”

Plym angled his head to bring his lips against mine. Our second kiss was as wonderful as the first. After what he’d said, my self-doubt shriveled and disappeared into the background of my thoughts.

The kiss continued until we both needed air. Plym playfully nipped at my nose and turned around to snuggle next to me again. I understood his need better and happily pulled him tight. Wrapped together, even our breathing was in sync. I felt at peace. My desire for him remained, visible and undeniable against him, but it didn’t overwhelm my control. I hadn’t the experience that many men had, but I knew Plym wouldn’t disappear at first light, never to come back. That thought satisfied me more than any physical act could have. I kissed the back of his head and hugged a little tighter, feeling giddy for my good fortune.

Lost in thought, the rhythmic beat of his heart under my hand began to lull me into sleep. The first time he moved, it didn’t register, but I didn’t miss it when Plym continued to wiggle his taut butt against my hard cock.

“Thane?” His voice was so faint, I wasn’t sure he meant for me to hear it.

“Yes?”

“Would you think less of me if I said I want to feel you inside me right now?”

My dick twitched, answering for me before I could find the words. When Plym pressed himself tighter still, I thrust up just enough to acknowledge his movement.

“No, never. But you don't need to do this for me.”

“I wish I could say I was being selfless and offering myself to repay your kindness, but I can't.” He guided my hand to his large, very hard penis. Pulling back his foreskin gently, my hand came away wet and sticky from the fluid he'd leaked already. “This close is not enough, I need more. I want to feel your heat inside and out.”

The entire time he spoke, he ground himself against me, catching my erection between his cheeks and then releasing it. I could feel the pre-cum seeping from under my foreskin, leaving little trails on his smooth skin. I wanted him as much as he seemed to want me.

Having had no expectations, I had nothing close by to lubricate Plym for my entry. The closest oil was in the kitchen, and I didn't want to break contact to retrieve it.

For a moment, I considered using just the natural fluid I'd already created but quickly dismissed that notion. I wasn't the largest man I knew, but I was substantial enough that I feared hurting Plym.

“I need to—”

Plym's hand rose over his body and held a small vial. “Magic has its uses in situations like this.”

My hand shook as I accepted the small ceramic bottle. It took an effort to remove the stopper without spilling the contents on us. I stuck my finger in the opening and tilted the bottle. Running my finger slowly between his cheeks, I gently inserted the tip of my finger inside his trembling body.

I quickly removed it and reapplied more oil. This time, once I found his entrance, I inched my finger forward until I couldn't go any farther. Plym's sudden intake of breath when I withdrew my finger left little doubt what he wanted. Another dip into the vial and I added a second finger. His body clamped tight around my fingers and I kept still.

“Are you sure you want to continue?” I whispered in his ear. I didn’t want to stop, but I didn’t want to hurt him either. “I’m bigger than two fingers.”

“Never more sure of anything, Thane.” He reached across our bodies, put his hand on my butt and pulled gently. “Just go slow and I’ll be fine.”

“I promise, but if you need me to slow down, just say so.”

I dribbled a small amount of the slippery substance in my palm and grabbed my cock. I’d rarely felt myself this hard before. Recapping the vial, I passed it to Plym. I wrapped my hand around Plym’s equally rigid cock and started to grind slowly against his small, but muscular ass.

Plym pressed back against me and moaned softly. It sounded like my name, which made my heart skip a beat. Sliding my hips down, I positioned myself and gently pressed forward. After wiggling around, I lodged myself at his opening and pushed the tiniest bit inside.

Fighting the desire to bury myself deep inside him, I took a deep breath and gently stroked him. When I felt him move back, I slowly pushed upward. When both of us moved at the same time, it caused more of me to enter than I intended. The head of my cock slipped past his ring and I heard the sharp intake of breath.

“If I said it’s been a couple hundred years since I’ve done this, would you think I was lying?” he whispered.

I started to laugh, but with every chuckle my body moved and I heard Plym grunt. “I’m sorry. Do you want me to pull out?”

“No, don’t.” He clenched his muscles tighter for emphasis.

“I won’t.” I moved my oily hand slowly up and down his hardness and nibbled his earlobe. “But I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You aren’t.”

Before I could answer, he arched his back, forcing himself down my entire length. A soft groan escaped his lips as he inched his body as tightly as he could against mine. “Don’t move for a moment. Let my body adjust to you.”

I stayed as still as I could. I’d even stopped stroking his cock as I waited. “You feel so good.” I kissed the tip of his ear and smelled the lavender and spice scent in his hair.

The heat from being held tight inside Plym radiated outward until my body was covered in a thin sheen of sweat. Although he was slim and lean, his muscles moving around me felt anything but weak.

I remained still until he moved his body. Taking that as a sign to take things to the next level, I pulled back a fraction and thrust forward. Instead of a grunt, my act evoked a moan that spurred me on. With each movement, I lengthened my strokes until I was almost pulling out entirely before plunging all the way back in.

Plym moved with me, pushing back to meet my thrusts, urging me on in a husky voice. I slid my arms under his and put my hands on his shoulders to pull him down as I pushed up. Sweat matted the hair on my chest, and I could feel the moisture on his body.

The friction, heat, and sexual tension between us brought me to the edge of climax too soon. "I'm so close."

"Don't stop, Thane. Give me all of you. Please don't stop." He squeezed his muscles around my cock, and I felt myself tip over the edge. His calls to keep going encouraged me, and I increased my tempo until I feared I might hurt him. Instead of a cry to stop, he begged me to go harder still.

The end came in an explosive and consuming final thrust. I muffled my cry by kissing Plym's damp blond hair as I continued to drive in and out of his amazing body. Plym could have burst into flames in my arms, and I wouldn't have been able to stop. All my senses protested from the overload of feelings, but I kept going. The last contraction left me spent, but happy. He wrapped his hands over mine and kept us pressed together.

It took several deep breaths to recover, and even then my heart was pounding hard enough that Plym must have felt it. In my hypersensitive state, I tried not to move, and each time either of us did, I jumped.

"Sensitive?" Plym wiggled and laughed when I twitched. "Sorry, but that was amazing, and I'm still a bit giddy."

I tried to move my hand, but his grip felt like a vice. "I need to take care of you."

"Not right now. I'm happy just lying here like this. We can take care of me later."

That didn't sound fair. "I don't feel right leaving you like this."

“By ‘like this’ do you mean unbelievably happy and content?”

The way Plym held onto my arms matched the sincerity I heard in his words, but it felt wrong. “It makes me feel so selfish.”

He raised my hand to his lips. “Believe me when I say you gave me exactly what I wanted. And now, more than finding release, I *need* to be held just like this. Connected and together.”

I thought back to the men I’d been with, and how most got up and left after they’d ejaculated. Being used like that always tasted bitter and left me feeling cheap and undesirable. “I understand.”

Plym twisted his head enough that I could see his smile. I raised my head and kissed him before he lay back on my pillow. “Thank you.”

Knowing I’d made him happy more than eased the guilt I felt for not helping him finish; it made my heart skip a beat. It also scared me.

To my knowledge, Plym—*Eraq*—was one of the most powerful wizards alive. Yet he had exposed his weakness and vulnerability, and if I failed him, I feared what might happen. Not to me, but to him and those who would come to depend on him. I had no intentions of using him or turning him away, but I didn’t know that I could be what he needed. I could only be myself, and I worried that wouldn’t be enough.

Plym flexed his butt muscles and squeezed my still hard cock inside him. “You’ve gotten quiet. Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I lied. He needed my strength, not my insecurities. “I’m just not sure I can stay inside you all night.”

His laugh made me smile. “I don’t need all night, Thane. Ideally, I’d love to fall asleep like this, but even a little longer would be wonderful.”

“If I stay here too much longer, I can’t promise to just stay still.”

“Unless there’s some reason I should be afraid of that, it sounds rather nice to me. Wake me if I fall asleep. I don’t want to miss even a little bit.”

He snuggled back and let out a content sigh. My hopes of not getting attached seemed a fantasy, but I wasn’t unhappy. Instead, I kissed his head and closed my eyes. He was too special to let go, and I was prepared to see it as far as we could go together. Even if it broke my heart.

We crested the ridge, and the desolation of Arbutis stretched before us. The land leading up to the border had been burned away for a hundred yards or more in all directions. The king, his generals, and advisors decided to camp here and wait.

With Eraq perched on my hand, the king and other important people were frequent companions the entire ride. Not that anyone included me in the discussions, but I still listened. Based on information collected from the scouts, we knew Zuran and his army marched toward us. The king decided to use the empty wasteland to meet the enemy.

I rested my hand on my knee, and Eraq landed on the leather glove. We sat quietly under a tree while soldiers worked feverishly to set up camp. Having campaigned enough, I knew all hands were needed, so I chafed at being ordered to the side.

Before we started north, I was relieved of my command and given a new assignment: guard Eraq. The futility of trying to protect one as powerful as a phoenix seemed lost on everyone except myself. Even Eraq approved.

I'd been daydreaming when two soldiers, both of whom had to be teenagers, approached and saluted me.

"Sir," the shorter of the two said. "We've been assigned to set up your tent. Where would you like it?"

His smile was too friendly, and I noticed Eraq's feathers stand up.

"You have nothing to worry about, Eraq." My words had no effect.

He squawked loudly and our tent appeared, fully erect, in the space to our right. A pop of flames jumped from his head, and he finally settled down. "*You two are not needed. You may go now.*"

The young soldiers stared wide-eyed at me, stealing furtive glances at the angry phoenix. I stood and felt Eraq's talon's dig into the glove. Bringing my right hand up, I saluted the pair.

"You two are dismissed." I waited until they walked off before I turned to Eraq. "Was that necessary?"

The fiery feathers lay flat on his back again, and I noted a twinkle in his eye when he turned to meet my gaze. "*It irritated me, so why prolong my discomfort?*"

I chuckled and opened the flap. "That has a certain logic to it."

"*So glad you agree.*" He leapt from my arm and flew into our tent. There had been grumbling among the senior officers that the quartermaster assigned me a tent larger than all but the lord marshal of his majesty's army. Eraq stared a hole in a few commanders and reminded them the tent was for him, not me.

I entered behind him and was greeted by a pair of arms pulling me into a kiss. My initial surprise made for an awkward moment, but I quickly recovered. The frustration of riding all day with him inches from me evaporated the instant his tongue touched my lips, forcing them apart.

"What was that for?" Not that I minded, but he hadn't surprised me like that before.

"Just making sure I still had your interest." He winked and kissed me again.

When we broke for air, he waved at the door. I'd learned the first night that was how he sealed our tent from unwanted guests. He took my hand and led us to the back of the tent.

"I know you miss your command, and I'm sorry I made the king assign you to me. I just wanted the chance to spend time with you, even if it is in that other form."

"I do miss it, but I want to be with you. There will be other commands."

Plym guided me to the bed he magically created every night, and I sat on the edge to take off my boots. While I struggled with my footwear, he filled an oversized basin with a pitcher that shouldn't have had a tenth of the water needed for the job. He carried it over and began to wash my feet.

"You shouldn't do that." My protest didn't stop him.

"Why? Because you're not good enough?" He kept his gaze down, focused on his work. "Or are you going to say I'm too important?"

I'd learned the first night we were together in my house how much Plym valued me. "No. But it's something I can easily do myself."

"I could do it with a wave of my hand, but this feels more intimate." His fingers massaged the ball of my foot. "I like feeling your body react to my touch. To know it's my fingers that make you shiver, my body that makes you hard, and my soul that makes you want me."

He ran his hands up my britches, and the fabric strained under my state of arousal. Our gazes met, and I saw in his eyes the mirror to my own emotions. I

wanted to taste his flesh, smell his scent, and plunge into him until we were so close we could be one person.

But more than take him physically, I wanted to hold him and keep him safe. An impossible wish given what awaited us.

Plym placed his hands on my knees and started to move his fingers up my legs. My plan to pull him up for a kiss died when I heard a voice from the front of the tent.

“Lord Eraq? The king commands your presence.”

Rolling his eyes, Plym gently squeezed my thighs. “Oh bother.”

I didn't recognize the voice, but I knew the type. “Excuse his choice of words. I'm certain Lethral never commanded your presence.”

Laughing, Plym stood and stroked my face. “Lethral has been a most gracious ruler in our meetings. I do not hold the zealotry of his pages against him.”

“Lord Eraq! The king—”

“I'll be there in a moment, child. Cease your yammering, or I'll see you never speak again!” Plym shrugged. “I didn't say I had to put up with zealots.”

“Be kind. If he's able to grow a beard, I'd be surprised.” I reached for my boots. “Give me a moment and I'll be ready.”

“No, that's not necessary.” Plym waved his hand lazily over the basin and it elongated into an oversized tub full of steaming water. “I had plans to join you, but please enjoy a bath. I'll be back in time for dinner.”

Before I could answer, he changed forms with a small flash and flew toward the front. “*The tent is sealed to all but me. No one will disturb you.*”

I debated following him but decided it would not be a good impression to chase after my charge. Eraq would make up some excuse that he ordered me to stay here, or something similar, wherein I couldn't be faulted.

Feeling dusty and tired, I stripped off my remaining clothes and stepped into the enormous copper tub. The water felt warm, but not hot. Perfect for washing and relaxing. The morning after our first night together, Plym created this same tub so we could clean up from the night's activities. That water stayed the same temperature our entire, protracted bath. I'd no doubt this would do the same.

A twinge of guilt stung me as I sank to my neck in the relaxing water. No one, not even the king, would enjoy such a treat while on campaign. I couldn't even salve my conscience by saying my task earned me such a reward. Guarding Eraq was anything but a chore. Every day since we'd left Caliphid, Eraq had pampered me: bath, the best food in camp, and a soft bed.

Each night Plym would share my bed, his warm body pressed tight against me. He always offered himself to me, asking me, as if there was any doubt I would desire to be inside him again.

Sitting up, I applied the soap he left to the coarse cloth and quietly washed myself. I wanted to make the night special for Plym. Especially since it would likely be our last. Getting clean would be the first step.

A light feathery touch running down my cheek woke me. After almost two weeks of Plym's presence, I no longer jumped out of my skin at the contact.

"Done already?" I asked lazily.

Laughter greeted my question. *"I've been gone nearly three hours. It's a good thing I put a spell on the water or else you'd look like a walking wrinkle."*

I twisted my head just in time to see him revert to his human form. He was beautiful as a phoenix, but I still found his human half more desirable. I never tired of staring at his lithe body and the graceful, yet powerful, way he moved.

"Move forward, please," he said as he walked toward me.

I raised an eyebrow but did as he asked. Plym had always positioned himself in such a way that I held him, never the reverse. He stepped into the warm water, slid his long legs around me, and wrapped his arms across my midsection.

"I love how your body feels. I wanted to experience it from this position." He began to rub soap across my back. "The way your muscles move under my hands makes me want to... well, you know what it does to me."

"Mhmm. I do. But your touch does the same to me." I closed my eyes and let his hands move back and forth. When he stopped, he scooped water with his hands and poured it over my body. Clean, I stood up. "Change positions with me."

"Why? I was happy this way." Despite his protest, he let me pull him to his feet. We stepped closer so we could switch places, and I stole a kiss before we settled down.

“I want to return the favor.” Picking up the cloth, I held my hand out for the soap he still held. I started with his back, and when I gently raised an arm, he laughed.

“You know I don’t require a bath, right? Whenever I shift to my phoenix form, dirt, grit, odor, everything is burned away.”

“Humor me.” I continued my ministrations. “You’re not the only one who likes running his hands over skin and muscle.”

Plym let me finish, then swiveled so we faced each other. “I brought food back with me. It’s on the table up front if you’re hungry.”

“You waited ’til now to tell me that?”

“I was distracted.” His apology didn’t sound remorseful in the least. “But I made sure it stayed warm.”

The little things he did for me with his magic only added to my deepening attachment. I felt like the center of his world. That his waking time was devoted to making me happy—which he did. A dopey smile spread across my face.

“You treat me like the king.”

“Oh no.” He maintained a serious expression for less than a heartbeat. “He doesn’t warrant anything close to this.”

I almost asked, “why,” but I knew better. “I don’t want to be a king, anyway. I prefer being your guard.”

My deprecating humor didn’t get a smile like I’d hoped. Instead, Plym’s expression turned serious and his eyes focused on something far away. “Did I say something wrong?”

“What? No, of course not, Thane. I’m glad you’re my guard. There’s no one who could make me feel safer than you.” Despite his smile, he still looked pensive. He didn’t give me a chance to comment. “Come, let’s eat. Eraq might not need food, but I do.”

Water evaporated from his skin when he stepped out of the tub. A towel and his dark blue robe were resting on the chair. Neither had been there when he joined me, but nothing that happened in his presence surprised me anymore. He handed me the towel before he pulled on his robe. The way he walked away while I got dressed told me something just happened. Did he know about my premonition?

I lingered by the tub, taking extra time to dry off. Our night was meant to be special, not ruined by discontent. Still trying to find the right words, I put on my pants and then stepped into my boots.

My shod foot hit the ground harder than I expected, and I glanced at the front of our tent. Plym never reacted to the noise. He merely sat at the table, slowly putting items on our plates. The deep breath I took to settle myself did nothing to help, so I let it out. My gut told me not to say anything, but I was still his guard and I had a duty to perform. Blood rushed to my head and I could feel the disquiet throughout my body.

Stopping before the table, I bowed my head and avoided his eyes. "Have I offended you?"

"What?" He looked up, almost surprised to see me. "Thane, what are you talking about? No, you've not offended me. Why would you ask that?"

The urgent note in his voice only confused me more. "I... it just seems I did something while we were in the bath to upset you. We were joking and suddenly you got very distant."

From the confused look on his face, I realized how pathetic I must have sounded. In the middle of a war, one that nearly claimed his life two centuries ago, I questioned his feelings for me.

I decided to leave, but he left his seat and stood in front of me faster than I thought possible. "Thane, no, no, no. You've done nothing wrong. I'm so sorry. It was something you said that... oh!"

He grabbed my hands and gently tugged me closer. "Please, sit with me. You haven't eaten since lunch. I promise nothing has changed between us."

Although he didn't say it, I heard the word "yet" at the end of his sentence. He guided me to a seat and then moved a chair closer.

"I'm so sorry for my reaction. Will you let me explain?"

I nodded because I didn't trust my voice. Plym slid one of the two plates he'd prepared closer to me.

"Tomorrow Zuran and his forces should be here. If not tomorrow, then the next day for sure." He handed me a wedge of cheese and motioned for me to eat. It might have been a piece of tree bark for all I noticed the taste. "This is more than a bit personal for me. Not only did he imprison me for two centuries, he destroyed Arbutis.

“But none of that explains my reaction moments ago.” Poking at his food with his fork, he appeared as interested in eating as I felt. Plym exhaled and shook his head. “I fear my selfish nature has needlessly put you in the path of danger. When you said you preferred to be my guard, I realized what I’d done. Had I said nothing, another would have been assigned to protect me, and you would be protecting the king.”

“Who better to guard you than me?” I tried to make a joke, but his explanation touched a little too close to the truth.

“Someone I don’t have feelings for.” Plym met my gaze for the barest instant. The sadness in his eyes tugged at my heart as he turned away. “I came to you at your house the night after being freed because I was so lonely for human contact, I wanted to burn away and never be reborn. Not the crass physical coupling that feels good in the moment but leaves you empty when it’s over, but true meaningful contact. I wanted to be held, to feel the warmth of someone’s body next to mine. And when it was over, I’d planned to return to my old life.

“I didn’t expect more than a night from you, but you were so kind and gentle, yet strong and masculine, that I needed more. You gave all of yourself to me without asking for anything in return. I repaid that generosity by taking you for myself with no regard for the consequences. Being with the king will be far safer than being at my side when the battle begins.”

“Plym.” I twisted in my seat and took his hands in mine. Any thought of telling him my expectations for the coming battle was pushed aside. “I’m a soldier, it’s what I’ve always been. Fighting for my king and my country is all I know. With you or with the king, my life is always in danger. The difference is, being with you allowed me to see what it’s like to be cherished.

“You say you took from me and gave nothing in return, but that isn’t true. You’ve given me more than any man I’ve known. I don’t want gold or riches or even power. You want me above anything else. What more can you give me than everything you are?”

A tear rolled down my cheek, and I struggled not to turn away. My desire to ease his conscience might have succeeded, but at what cost? When the battle ended, and he was alone again, he would blame himself all the more for my death. Plym reached up and wiped it away. His smile consumed his entire face and his eyes radiated his true feelings.

The whispered words of thanks made my hypocrisy complete. He leaned closer and kissed me briefly on the lips. I wondered if he knew I was saying my good-bye.

He pulled me to my feet, and without a word, led me to our bed. Still without speaking, he took off his robe. He pulled my shirt over my head and continued undressing me until I was naked. I closed my eyes as he used his hands and tongue to breathe fire into my body.

He stopped, and I felt his presence over me. I found his face inches above mine when I opened my eyes.

“I want to be inside you, Thane.” He kissed me gently and pulled back. “Will you let me?”

The question surprised me. Every night he came to me, he'd only asked for me to penetrate him. I'd asked several times if he wanted to reverse roles, and he always rejected the suggestion without a thought.

“Thane?” I saw concern etched in his face. “You don't have to if you don't want to.”

“Of course I want you.” I pulled him down, pressing our bodies together. I nuzzled his neck, using my beard to make him squirm. Moving my lips to his ear, I added, “Are you sure it's what you want?”

“Very much so.” He raised his head. “I've taken so much already, I didn't want to ask you to give me more until I was sure you knew my true feelings.”

“I know,” I whispered. “Whatever I have that you desire, I give you freely and with all that I am.”

I nearly said all my heart, but such a declaration seemed unfair given what the future held.

Plym kissed me again, but this time with the passion and intensity that made my body tingle. No man's lips ever affected me so deeply or left me so satisfied. If we did nothing more than explore each other's mouths, I'd not complain. But knowing what he wanted made fulfilling that need my only thought.

“You will be my first,” Plym whispered when we broke our kiss. My eyes opened wider. Looking amused, he smiled and nodded. “Indeed.”

“I'm... I don't know what to say.”

“You said enough when you said yes.” He rolled to the side, and I could hear him uncap the vial of lubricant. I nearly jumped when I felt the cool substance applied to my body as he gradually worked his finger inside me. “You’re so tense. Have you let another man inside you before?”

I wished I could have said no but I answered honestly. “Yes.”

“Good,” he said as he removed his finger to get more oil. “I want you to enjoy this, and knowing how good it will feel should help you relax.”

A low growl emanated from my mouth as he worked to prepare me. It might not be my first, but it could have been the way it felt. My reaction seemed to feed his movements, and soon I was begging for him to use more than fingers. I tried to roll over, but he stopped me.

“I want to see your face, Thane. Watch you react to me. Be able to kiss you as I move inside you.”

The intimacy he suggested gave me pause. I wanted it, craved it really, but it scared me to leave that as his last memory of us. When I saw my indecision reflected back to me from Plym’s face, it made my decision easy.

“Take me.” I adjusted my position to give him what he asked. “I want to look in your eyes as I become your first.”

“My only,” he whispered.

I felt him nudge himself into my body. He felt hot, not a painful burning hot, but a fiery warmth that made my toes curl. Little by little, he eased himself deeper until I felt his body press against mine. His eyes rolled back slightly as he pushed the last bit of himself forward.

Plym opened his eyes, and when I met his gaze, I’d never felt more desired in my life. I’d become his focus, his need, and one with his being. Though I knew the consequences, I didn’t try to stop him.

“You feel so amazing, Thane.” He crushed his lips to mine, and his tongue forced its way inside my mouth.

Slowly he stirred, and the heat inside me grew. I’d never been as connected to anyone the way he and I were at that moment. Each movement caused my senses to scream, and I gripped the bedding in both hands. My voice deserted me, replaced by guttural sounds that were swallowed by Plym’s greedy mouth.

Time ceased to register as I lost myself in the moment. Plym’s body aroused a cascading rush of feelings from places inside me I didn’t know existed.

Following a spurt of hard, fast thrusts, Plym slowed and devoured my tongue with his. Another couple of strokes and he stopped.

“Thane, I’m so close.”

“Don’t stop, please.” The idea he would stop caused me to clamp hard on the rock-hard cock buried inside me. “I want it, want all of you.”

“If you let me, I will truly claim you.” Whatever he meant to convey with his words never registered. My desire drowned out all ability to think.

“Claim me,” I snarled, wrapping my legs around his narrow waist. “Make me yours.”

My need propelled him back into motion, and he began to pound me with renewed vigor. A hedonistic shout that would alert the camp began to build inside me. Plym covered my mouth with his, and with three more thrusts, I felt him ejaculate.

From the first squirt, it felt like liquid metal coursed into my body. I thought I might burst into flames and my ashes scatter in the winds.

We screamed into our kiss, keeping our passion from the rest of the camp. Spasms wracked Plym’s body, and when they stopped, he collapsed onto me. As our bodies met, I realized that at some point, I’d covered us both in my seed.

Our lips met for a brief kiss. He raised his head slightly so I could see his face, and I repeated a word that I heard in my head. “Mine.”

An hour after dawn, trumpets announced Zuran’s arrival. Some on their side had seemed surprised to find our troops in formation and ready to meet them, but that quickly faded when Zuran arrived.

The lone roar that filled the air caused my heart to skip a beat. When three other distinct voices answered it, the dread from our side could be felt in waves.

Zuran emerged from the forest, felling trees by the dozen as he moved. The dark green, almost black, scales on his body reflected odd bits of the rising sun. A row of horns rose and fell from his forehead and down his back. Three large spikes, each longer than me, twitched on the end of his tail. He called out a second time, revealing a mouthful of curved teeth.

Following on his heels, three smaller forms emerged in his wake. Not as dark as Zuran, the trio of dragons arrayed themselves on either side of their

master. When Zuran's third scream filled the morning air, they joined him. How in Genznor's name could someone as small as Eraq fight even the least of them, let alone Zuran?

Eraq looked unfazed and answered the call with a cry that sounded like a victory horn. "*Steady, warriors of Galth! We are not alone this day!*"

In response to his call, the ground shook and a deafening rumble erupted on either side of our army. To my left, an enormous golden dragon, easily bigger than Zuran, appeared from nowhere and thumped his tail on the ground. A second dragon, this one pinkish red, pounded the ground to my right.

Eraq cried out again, and his allies did the same.

"*Zuran won't have the advantage this time.*" I knew Eraq spoke only to me.

These new additions stiffened the resolve of our side. And why not? If size mattered, the gold dragon was enormous. "Who are they?"

"*On the left is Oleard. He might be the oldest living dragon left. Even Zuran fears him.*"

I watched Oleard glare across the wasteland. To my eye, it felt personal.

"*The red dragon is Belar.*" I followed his gaze toward my right. Belar was smaller than Zuran but significantly bigger than the other three. "*He's been one of the fiercest foes of those who turned their back on the gods.*"

Despite the addition of our new allies, my sense of finality never changed. If anything, I felt my end more clearly than ever. When I woke that morning, I tried to convince myself it was the normal fear all soldiers feel on the eve of battle. Especially given the fight ahead. But it wasn't.

I'd known fear. In fact, I'd felt it standing on the hill, holding Eraq. This was different. It didn't grip me like fear. My palms didn't sweat. I didn't wonder what we'd face. Strangely, it gave me a sense of peace. I'd made arrangements and said my goodbyes. All but one.

"Eraq?" The intense focus I saw when he turned to face me changed my plans. I couldn't tell him. "Thank you for last night. It was wonderful."

His expression changed, but it was still intense. "*You're welcome, Thane. I... you are the most amazing man I've ever met. I hope we'll see more of each other after today.*"

My resolve nearly vanished. I chose my words carefully, so I didn't lie to him. "I'd like that very much."

He extended his wing and let it brush my face. *"You're allowed to be scared. We all are."*

"I know." As a corporal, I used to drill it into new recruits that fear was normal and acceptable. Letting it control you wasn't. "It is a part of me, but it doesn't rule me. I will do whatever is needed."

"I'm not overconfident this time, Thane. Our plans are sound and well thought out. We'll get through this. Trust me."

I tried to agree, but I'd lied too much already. "I trust you, Eraq."

We fell into the easy silence of two people who knew each other well enough that words weren't needed.

Zuran's hyperaggressive posture faded once Oleard and Belar revealed themselves, but he hadn't retreated. I wasn't privy to the counsel of our leaders, but even I knew Zuran plotted something.

My skin prickled, and Eraq's feathers stood on edge. He squawked, and the dragons roared. A pair of wizards nearby fainted, and others groaned. A moment later the feeling passed—all but Eraq's ruffled feathers.

A shout went up and Zuran's army surged across the divide. Zuran remained still, but the other three took to the air and hovered above the soldiers charging toward Galth.

Oleard and Belar launched skyward, heading toward the trio of smaller dragons. I noticed two packs of our wizards break off from the main group.

I'd studied enough history to know mages targeted each other at the start of a battle. They would fight until one side prevailed or the battle ended. Typically the main battle was decided before the wizards finished, making it doubly dangerous for the wizards on the losing side.

Although I watched the battle unfold, I couldn't follow much of it. The dragons soared across the sky, chasing each other with magic and fire. To my untrained eye, nothing happened, but whenever a dragon reacted, the wizards on either side started to work feverishly. Much like the wizards' duel, this fight seemed a draw.

Zuran seemed like he waited for something. Eraq flexed his talons several times, and I expected him to leap skyward at any time. Despite his focus on Zuran, Eraq continually scanned the area, as if he expected something or someone.

The sound of steel on steel drew my attention to the fight below. Against just the soldiers in Zuran's forces, our side had a big advantage that quickly became evident. Like a wave against a brick wall, the enemy broke against our position.

My heart beat faster watching the superior tactics of our side. Two reserve elements from Galth moved around the flanks to box in our enemy even as the centerline held firm.

With my focus on the battle, I let out a yelp of surprise when Eraq pushed off from my arm. I looked up to see Zuran had joined the battle. Eraq flew directly toward his foe, and the two screamed their hatred at each other. Before they could engage, my attention was diverted by Belar's scream of pain.

I turned in time to see him hurl a motionless dragon toward the rear of Zuran's forces. He wobbled and started to plummet. Oleard roared and swatted the two dragons he'd been fighting, knocking one to the ground and sending the other off in the other direction. He snapped his wings wide, and moving faster than I'd have believed, he settled under his fallen friend.

The body of the red dragon hit Oleard with enough force that I could hear a grunt. He managed to slow his descent, but he hit the ground hard. The impact left him dazed and exposed. Taking full advantage of the moment, the dragon Oleard had knocked down hobbled closer and belched a huge blast of fire at him and the injured Belar.

Oleard staggered again but kept his feet. He engaged the fire-spewing dragon with an even bigger, hotter blast. The smaller dragon shrieked in agony as his body burned into a pile of ashes.

With a final puff of flames, Oleard tore his focus from his dead foe and scanned the horizon for the last of Zuran's minions. I searched the sky as well and screamed a warning when I saw the last of the three dragons in a power dive toward Oleard's head. I wanted to close my eyes to avoid seeing his death, but I refused to let him die without a witness.

An instant before impact, Eraq soared across like a fiery missile. His body struck the dragon with such force that he pushed the creature a dozen yards past Oleard. When he emerged on the other side of the dragon, I realized he'd used his body like a blade. The dead dragon fell to the ground as Eraq made a wobbly turn.

Zuran suddenly appeared above the injured Belar and Oleard. When Zuran extended his claws to squeeze the golden dragon's head, Oleard disappeared in

a flash of light. When I could see again, Nalor stood in place of the huge dragon. On the ground, well out of Zuran's reach, Nalor laid a hand on Belar's unconscious form. Zuran overshot the pair, and Belar shifted into a young red-haired man.

Having landed behind enemy lines, Nalor began an elaborate dance. The air shimmered around him and Belar, stopping a company of Zuran's soldiers from reaching them. I heard the king's trumpet and saw Lethral's guard leading a push to reach the downed dragons. Kemp led the charge, and my chest swelled with pride to see Brill on his left flank, keeping the men in formation.

Watching my best friend lead our men, I lost track of other aspects of the battle until I heard my death approach. Zuran had pulled out of his dive and flapped furiously toward me.

"I might not be able to kill that irksome phoenix, but I can easily kill his friend." He banked his wings, and the wind buffeted me. Small eddies of wind whipped dirt and debris that momentarily blinded me.

Knowing my death would come, I didn't back down. Instead, I drew my sword. A meaningless gesture, given the dragon hovered well beyond my reach.

"You're a fool, Zuran. Your dragons are dead, and the king will soon rescue Belar, freeing Olearn to kill you. If Eraq doesn't get you first."

"If it is my fate to die, I will be sure to take you with me, little man."

"I don't fear you, dragon." I watched him draw a breath and knew I'd run out of time. Shifting my feet, I held my sword ready. No one would say I died as anything but a king's soldier.

Staring into the maw of death, I saw a tiny spark ignite the gas coming from inside the dragon. My teachers were wrong; dragon fire had nothing to do with magic.

Flames rushed toward me, expanding as they consumed the air between us. I closed my eyes and recited the last prayer to Genznor. Hopefully, he'd find me worthy of his blessings.

The heat struck an instant before the flames. Like being stabbed a thousand times all at once, my body seized with pain. A healer once said you could only feel pain in one area at a time. He was wrong—I felt pain everywhere. The scream of agony that would have sent shivers down the spine of even the most hardened veteran didn't have time to leave my throat before the fire consumed me.

Genznor was merciful, however, and my end came swiftly. White light filled my mind, and I let death take me to my next life. As I died, I let my last thought be of the one I loved.

“Good-bye, Plym. I’m sorry.”

“*Thane?*”

I searched for the voice, but found nothing—only white. The priests who taught that a paradise awaited us after death were wrong. No paradise and no burning fires of Delmor. There was nothing.

Then again, maybe it was just my afterlife. Genznor must have found me unworthy.

“*Thane!*”

The voice belonged to someone in pain. Dead and unworthy, I doubted I could do anything for him, but I resolved to try.

“Are you hurt?”

“*Thane! Do you hear me?*”

“I can hear you, but I can’t see you. Do you need help?”

“*Thane, open your eyes, please.*” I felt something wet land on my cheek. I raised my hand, and to my shock, my face felt real. “*Thane!*”

A pair of warm hands squeezed my fingers, and I felt someone’s head on my chest. The scent of lavender and spice filled my nose. “Plym?”

“Yes, Thane. I’m here.” This time he spoke out loud.

“Are you dead, too?”

The weight lifted from my chest. “We’re not dead. I’ve come to take you home.”

The truth struck me like a slap. I tried to pull away, but the grip held firm. “That’s impossible.”

I didn’t expect Genznor would welcome me, but I didn’t expect to be cast into the pits of Delmor. I tried again to move away, but my tormentor wouldn’t let go.

“Thane, you’re not dead. Please believe me. But time is short. I need you to look at me, so I can guide you.”

“I died. Zuran burned me to hurt the one I love. Now you torment me by claiming to be him? Do your worst, but I’ll not give you the satisfaction of doing what you want.”

“Thane, you stupid, pigheaded man.” I felt someone press their mouth to mine, and a tongue seek to part my lips. I resisted for a moment, until the taste of honey and apples pried my eyes open.

Plym pulled back, laughing hysterically for a heartbeat, before he rushed back to kiss me again. This time, my tongue met his and I knew beyond a doubt who I kissed.

Too soon, he pulled away. “Time is so short. Do you trust me?”

“With my life. But I don’t understand.”

“I’ll explain all once I bring you back, but you must do as I say and not ask any more questions. Can you do that?”

I wasn’t sure I could, but I nodded.

“I am about to be reborn, and you are coming with me. Take my hands and think only of yourself as you were before Zuran burned you.”

“How?”

“No questions. Remember that moment. Please!”

The pain in his voice compelled my obedience. I pictured myself standing on the barren hill, sword raised, daring Zuran to kill me to buy Eraq and Oleard time. The dragon fire flared around me again. I shut my eyes and tried to scream. Plym placed his lips over mine and pulled me into an embrace as the flames consumed me again.

In my mind I saw the two of us, our arms wrapped around each other, trying to get closer than close. I dared not open my eyes for fear Plym would be gone, replaced by some demon from Delmor sent to torment me.

A cool breeze touched my cheek and I heard someone clear his throat.

“I am loath to interrupt, but I fear I must.” Nalor’s voice sounded strained and weak. “Quentin is close to death and beyond my skills to heal. He needs Eraq, or I fear he might not survive.”

I finally opened my eyes, and we were back on the hill where I'd died. I realized now that whatever else happened, I had died. The young mage with fiery red hair I saw Belar transform into lay still on the ground by Nalor's feet. His pale skin shouted death loudly enough, even before I saw the burns and wounds on his chest.

"I don't wish to let you go for a second, but Quentin..." Plym stepped back but still held me by the arms.

"Go, I'll be here. I promise."

Eraq appeared in the space where Plym had stood before I blinked. He floated over and lay atop Quentin's bare chest. A jealous rage filled me, and I felt my hands clench.

"Easy, child." Nalor put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "My son's wounds are grievous, and he is close to death. Only the healing fire of a phoenix can save him. Eraq loves only you. You know this in your heart. He does only what he must and no more."

I heard the words and repeated them without speaking. He did? Did I know it? I wanted that, but it wasn't possible, despite his words. He couldn't love a mere man.

"You own my heart already, beloved. Be at peace a moment longer. Quentin's wounds are grave, but he is strong and his will to live is great. Once I'm finished, I promise to answer every question."

Eraq's flames engulfed the beautiful man beneath him. I knew Eraq loved only me, but it took an effort to stave off the feelings of inadequacy. Unable to watch, I went to survey the battlefield. Nalor accompanied me to the edge of the hill.

Glancing below, I saw the forces of Galth routing our enemy across a field littered with dead. The two unburned dragon carcasses lay where I remembered they'd fallen. Peering down, I found Zuran.

"Your goal of distracting him worked." He squeezed my shoulder again, and I wondered at the familiarity of the gesture. "The king's men reached Quentin and myself just before Zuran belched his fire at you. When he tried to flee, he turned into my waiting grasp."

Zuran's head lay yards away from his massive body. I looked to Nalor for an answer.

“I severed his head from his neck with my bite.” Nalor spit over the hilltop. “He killed my wife, she who gave birth to Quentin. I swore to avenge her and I have. I made Eraq promise not to kill him in exchange for my help.”

“How is it I lived? I should be dead.”

“You should, but you are not.” Nalor smiled. “They will sing of you for centuries to come, Thane the Dragon’s bane. Standing up to the mighty Zuran with only a piece of cold steel.”

“I died. I felt it.”

“Clearly not.” Nalor arched an eyebrow. “I’ll say no more. That is for you and Plym to discuss. Suffice it to say, I’m pleased you made it and thank you for your help. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must find the king and see to his needs.”

Nalor bowed deeply, and his robe swept the ground as he spun on his heel. Left alone, I returned my gaze to the remains of the battle. For an instant, I felt the urge to fly down from my perch and search for Brill.

“You can, you know.” Plym slid his arms around my waist and pulled me tight.

“Find Brill?”

“Well, yes, but I meant fly down.”

I felt a moment of panic. “I thought you couldn’t read my thoughts?”

“I can now.” He kissed the back of my neck. “At least, until I teach you to control your thoughts.”

“Is Brill okay?”

“Close your eyes, beloved.” He took my hand, and I did as he asked.

An image of the field below formed in my mind, and the land whizzed past. The dying and wounded called out, tugging at my heart.

“That, too, will need to be controlled.”

An instant later, I saw Brill cleaning a wound on Rain’s left shoulder. It was shallow, and it was mostly the smell of her blood that spooked the mare. He looked exhausted but appeared uninjured.

“Open your eyes.”

When I did, we were a dozen yards from my friend. Still holding hands, we approached Brill and the others in his group. When people noticed us, a cheer began that soon grew as soldiers flocked to our position.

I disengaged my hand as Brill ran up and pulled me into a huge hug that swept me off the ground. Another cheer, louder than the first, swept across the field.

“You stupid, incredibly brave, fool of a man.” Brill buried his head against my neck and squeezed. I felt Plym’s emotions, and they mirrored mine when I saw him hugging Quentin.

“Only you have my heart like that, Plym. No one else will. I swear.”

“The mind can tell, but it requires the heart to listen.” The anger drained away. *“But don’t hold on too long, or even my mind won’t understand.”*

Laughing, I stepped back. “You did well. I saw you lead the charge to free Nalor and his son.”

“I turned just in time to watch you taunt the dragon with your sword. Are you mad? You could... I thought you were dead.”

“I did, too.” I reached for Plym’s hand and squeezed it tight when he laced our fingers together. “But clearly I’m not.”

Soldiers erected our tent while Plym spent the rest of the day with Nalor and the others trying to heal those injured who could be saved. I now thought of it as our tent. How could I do otherwise? Set next to the king’s, ours looked almost identical, except it flew the flag of ancient Arbutis. Despite my confusion, I retired to the tent when Nalor insisted.

Without Plym, I had no tub and no bath, so I made do with washing my face in the basin the soldiers provided. The soldiers and servants who brought me things bowed when they entered and acted like I was important.

Alone, I had time to reflect on what had happened. By all that I knew to be true, I shouldn’t have been standing in that tent. Zuran killed me, and yet, I was alive. At least, I thought I was.

I struggled to understand the impossible until my head ached. Nothing made sense, except that Kemp had been right; Eraq had drawn me into his fight.

That reminded me of what Nalor said. Eraq loved only me. I'd thought he had feelings for me before I died, but after he saved me, I knew the depths of those feelings. He did love me. And I loved him, but that scared me worse. He was eternal, and I would die in a blink of his eye. Was it right to stay, knowing the longer we were together, the greater his pain when I left? Or should I leave now while it was still new?

I'd managed to convince myself I needed to tell him good-bye. It might hurt at first, but staying would only be worse. Before I could gather my things, Plym walked into our tent.

The subtle droop in his shoulders and the way his feet shuffled convinced me to delay my departure. After what he'd been through, my decision could wait until the morning. Plym picked up a pewter goblet, filled it with watered wine, and drained it. He repeated the procedure again before he set the cup and pitcher back on the table.

"I owe you an explanation." His smile only partially masked a hint of fear. "I hope you can forgive me."

"Forgive you?" I shook my head. "I don't understand."

"I know you don't." He grabbed my hand in his and squeezed. "And that's my fault."

Plym guided us to a set of chairs. The battle between wanting to kiss him versus leaving before I became more attached threatened to make my head explode. Seeing his angst when our gazes met, I remembered that he could read my thoughts somehow.

"I can't help it. You're shouting them into my head."

"How do I stop it?"

"I'll teach you." He leaned in and gave me a gentle kiss. "But first I need to explain some things, I just don't know where to start."

"Start with what happened to me. I should... I died today."

"Yes, you did." He paused, and if I didn't know better, he seemed to blush. "Last night I left a part of myself inside you."

It took a moment, but when I realized what he meant, I laughed. "I know, but what does *that* have to do with my not dying?"

“The part of me inside you connected us so that when Zuran killed you, I burst into flames and died as well. It was out of cycle for me, which is usually very disorienting, but this time I’d been prepared for the possibility. That enabled me to be clear-headed enough to guide you back.”

“Back from where? You said I died.”

“And you did.” Plym sucked his bottom lip and stared at the canvas wall of our tent. “Some things are difficult to put into words. The place you found yourself is where all phoenixes go before they are reborn.”

“Are you telling me I’m a... I’m like you?”

“No, you are not a phoenix, but you’re not entirely human any longer, either.”

The urge to stand and pace the tent would have overpowered me but for Plym’s presence. “Then what am I?”

“I told you last night, I’d never penetrated another man.” He waited until I nodded before he continued. “That’s because, much like today, it connects us to the one we share ourselves with. It is also how we begin the process of bonding ourselves to the one we want to spend our lives with.”

“Does bonded mean what I think it does?”

Plym’s lips tightened and he nodded once. “Yes.”

I tried to gauge if what he’d just told me had changed my feelings toward him. Apart from a bit of angst over the general idea, I decided it had no effect. I loved him before and that hadn’t changed. But being bonded to him, that wasn’t something I’d worked through yet. “Are we...?”

“Bonded?” He sought my answer with his eyes, and I nodded. “No, not yet. We’ve only begun the process. We can abandon it with no ill effects to either of us.”

A wave of angst struck, and I realized it came from Plym. “Plym, understand something, I love you, but being bonded is a big step. It’s... it’s...”

“It’s forever.” He smiled and stood up, pulling me with him. “As much as I want this to happen, I love you too much to ask you to agree to this until you’re ready. You never make me wonder how you feel towards me, and my feelings toward you will not change. When you’re ready, you’ll tell me.”

That he was willing to put my needs first, despite waiting centuries for the right person, nearly caused my emotions to overrule what I understood to be right. I knew my place in his heart. Time couldn't change that if we were truly meant for each other.

“Since nothing's changed, can we take a bath and then go to sleep? I'm tired and want nothing more than to be clean and feel you in my arms.”

Plym winked at me and gestured toward an open space. The copper tub reappeared, as did the pitcher with an endless amount of water. I began to fill the tub, while he got undressed. By the time he was naked, I already strained the fabric of my loose-fitting britches.

He took the pitcher and continued to fill the tub while I quickly shucked my clothes. Once I was naked, we both climbed into the soothing water.

“There is one thing that is going to change.” Plym sighed as he leaned back against me. “I'll be moving back to Arbutis to serve the new king.”

I turned over the simple platinum band Nalor had given me and wondered if I was doing this the wrong way. Not *what* I was about to do, but *how*. Then again, I'd had that feeling more times than I could count in the last six months.

The sound of footsteps alerted me that I had company. I didn't need to look up to recognize Brill's tread. Studying the ring a moment longer, I wrapped my fingers around the band, looked up, and wished I hadn't.

Smirking, but dressed for the occasion, Brill led two royal guards, one male and one female, in his wake. The move to Arbutis had tamed his free spirit somewhat, but Brill threw himself into his new duties. In the process, he finally accepted what I'd known for twenty years—he was a natural leader. Pulling up a few steps away from me, he and his detail snapped to attention and they all saluted.

“Reporting as directed, *sir*.” He wore a burnished ceremonial breastplate, inlaid with gold and silver in the insignia of Arbutis. The epaulettes that marked his new rank melded perfectly with his only slightly less unruly hair. Brill had even more women, and quite a few men, fawning whenever he walked past.

I acknowledged the trio and pointed to the other guards. “Can I ask you two to wait outside, please?”

Trained well, the pair snapped to attention again, bowed, spun on their heels, and walked out.

“Why do you do that?” I turned and motioned for him to follow me to the window. Below, I could see workers from all across the continent helping to repair two hundred years of Zuran’s neglect. At least the dragon left a bulging treasury to pay for the rebuilding.

“It’s my duty.” Brill stood a pace behind me, and I shook my head.

“Brill, we’ve known each other since before we could talk. I’m still Thane.

“Except when you’re in the presence of anyone else. Then you are the king and I must address you accordingly. Even though Eraq had you appointed king against your will, your chamberlain has been very persistent in reminding us of the proper decorum.” He moved closer and put his hand on the sill. “Nothing you say can change that. *Thane*.”

“He’s been reminding you of my tendency to be too informal, has he?”

“Every day, old friend.”

We stood, quietly staring out the window. With all the changes of the last six months, having Brill by my side kept me sane. I needed him to remain himself or else I might lose myself.

“How is recruitment for the guard coming, *Captain Brill*?” He balked at the appointment at first, but he agreed when I asked him to name who else I could trust more.

“Slowly. Plym screens every recruit before I can take them on.”

I heard his frustration but could only shrug. “He’s as protective as you.”

“Point taken.” Brill pointed toward the horizon at a familiar red form flying toward us. “They’re back.”

My smile gave me away. “I received word that their mission was a success and they’d be home today.”

“They’re making good headway rooting out Zuran’s supporters.” He paused as Belar landed in the courtyard. “Between those two, I’m surprised your enemies haven’t all fled into Galth, over the mountains, or across the sea.”

I chuckled. “Many have, but those that went south found a very angry Olearn waiting for them.”

Plym hopped off his back, looked up at our window, and waved. I opened my hand instinctively to look at the ring. My attention returned to him, even as my pulse quickened. I followed him until he reached the archway leading to my wing of the palace.

“So...” Brill’s voice forced me to turn in his direction. “Is everything set?”

“Yes.” I showed him the ring. “Nalor brought it this afternoon.”

He reached for the platinum band and gently lifted it from my palm. After he examined it from several angles, he handed it back. “Are *you* ready?”

I shook my head and smiled. “I don’t know that I’ll ever be totally ready, but I’m completely sure it’s the right decision.”

“It is.” He winked just as the door opened, and Plym entered the suite.

Without needing to see, I knew my smile was as wide as his. It had only been three days, but seeing him now reminded me how much I missed him.

“I’ll be outside.” Brill’s voice tore my focus from Plym long enough for me to nod.

They paused to shake hands before Brill left the room. Seeing them together and friendly, I thanked Genznor again. My hand flexed around the ring as Plym stopped barely an inch from me.

“Hi.” The playful lilt to his voice extended my smile.

“Hi.” While not original, it worked at the time. Especially when I inched closer and brought our lips together. The kiss might have lingered, or perhaps led to more, but I had other plans before the palace erupted with activity.

Squeezing the ring one last time, I sank to one knee.

Plym rolled his eyes and asked, “What are you doing?”

“You said you’d wait until I was ready.” I held up the ring, mindful of Nalor’s warning not to put it on Plym until he accepted. “I’m ready, Plym.”

“Is that...” He stared at the ring for a moment before he opened his eyes wider. “Where did you get that?”

My hand started to shake, but I kept it out, along with my offering. “Nalor made it for me with the requisite drops of blood forged into the metal.”

He carefully took it from my palm but didn't slip it on his finger. After a brief examination, he looked at me and smiled. "Are you sure this is what you want? I can wait if you need time."

Taking his hands in mine, careful not to make him drop the ring, I looked him in the eye and nodded. "I'm sure. When you first asked, I almost said yes because I knew I wanted it more than anything. But we'd only just met, and I was worried it was infatuation or hero worship. So soon after you saved me, I feared it might also be gratitude. For me to be your mate, I needed time to sort out some things."

"I understood." He gently tugged on my hand and I stood. Leaning closer, he brushed his lips against my forehead. "Bonding with your mate is forever, and in our case forever really means forever. With all that happened, you were right to take time to be sure."

"I'm glad you understood. I feared making you unhappy or disappointed."

"Had you left me to find your answers, that would have hurt me, but you did not. All I want is to be with you, and for that we don't need a formal bond."

Six months prior, I'd have wondered why we needed to be bonded at all, but I'd learned much in that time. "You're better at keeping your feelings in check."

"I've had a bit more time to work on my control." Plym winked and dipped his fingers into his right pocket. He removed his closed hand and held it out. Pulling back his fingers one at a time, he revealed a gold and silver ring. "But in truth, I merely hid my desire from you. If you knew how many times I've wanted to ask if you were ready."

I examined his ring closely. It was mostly silver with gold overlay. I turned the band side to side and noticed the gold had been woven in the image of a phoenix. "How long have you been carrying this?"

Plym's cheeks started to flush and he looked down. "Since the day we moved into the palace."

I almost laughed, but it made sense. "Thank you for giving me the time to reach my own decision. It's part of what I love about you."

"I'll confess it hasn't been easy, but I wanted you to be sure."

I gave him back his ring and picked up the one Nalor made for me. "What now?"

“Shouldn’t we have a public ceremony?” He didn’t sound happy with the idea. “You are the king; the people will want to share in your major events.”

Plym’s words reminded me of my duty, but I didn’t care. “We can do something public, a wedding or ceremony, after we do this in private. It’s not that I don’t want everyone to know, but I don’t want to share this moment with people I don’t know.”

The goofy grin on his face told me he agreed. “Are you saying you want to do it *this* moment?”

“Um...” I hadn’t meant that, in fact I didn’t have *any* plans beyond telling him I was ready. “Can we?”

“As I mentioned before, the process began that day on the battlefield. Today is easy by comparison.”

“So I don’t have to die again?”

Laughter echoed around our suite. “No, my love, not today.”

Stepping to the side, Plym repositioned us so we stood directly in front of each other. “The process is simple. Beyond simple, really. The true magic of a bond comes from our hearts, not any spell or magecraft.”

Positioning his ring between his thumb and first two fingers, Plym held it up. I took the hint and held mine the same.

“We just exchange rings and then we kiss. That’s it.”

“Kiss?” I raised an eyebrow and smirked. “Is that really a part of the ceremony, or did you add it because you want to kiss me?”

“We need to be touching for the bond to be created. I suppose there are other ways to do that, but this seems the most appropriate. But.” He pulled back the hand with his ring. “Once complete, there will be fire involved. It is part of my essence, and it will engulf us both. I promise you it will not harm you in the least.”

“I’m not worried.” I gave him a small kiss. “You’d never suggest this if it would hurt me.”

“Never.” Plym extended his left hand, palm down. “You place your ring on my hand first.”

I noticed his hand shook as much as mine as the ring neared his finger. Using my left hand, I steadied his and slid the band over the second knuckle and into place.

Plym's pale skin flushed, and his hand suddenly felt warmer. I worried he might burst into flames before we finished the ceremony. His smile never faded as he guided his ring onto my finger. A tingling feeling started in my hand and spread rapidly throughout my body.

"Almost done, my love." Plym took my hands in his and squeezed. "I knew the moment I laid eyes on you, I would be here one day. You complete me, Thane, son of Margret and Jelcob."

My response was cut off when he pressed his lips to mine. They felt like liquid fire, but instead of pain, it felt comforting. The rush of heat spread outward and intensified when my mouth opened slightly.

Flames erupted around us the moment his tongue touched mine, and I felt our bodies become one. We flared once, and the fire slowly died away. We continued the kiss well beyond what the ceremony required. It didn't matter. I didn't want to kiss him because of the ceremony.

The air felt cool and refreshing when we stepped apart. "Are all bonds that intense?"

"I can't say for all, but fire is required when two phoenix bond."

The words took a moment to register. "But you said—"

"When you asked before, you weren't, but for us to bond, there was no other way."

"And if I never bonded with you?"

"You would have remained as you were, more than human." He kissed me again. Hot, passionate, fiery even, but no flames. "There are no more changes in store, I promise. This was the last."

"Is there anything else that *could* be changed?"

He untangled our hands and slipped his arms around me. Burying his head against my neck, he whispered, "Nothing I would ever wish to see happen."

Closing my eyes, I hugged him tighter. "Neither would I."

The End

Author Bio

Andrew Q. Gordon wrote his first story back when yellow legal pads and ballpoint pens were common and a Smith Corona correctable typewriter was considered high tech. Adapting to the times, he now writes with a shiny new MacBook that he sets on the same desk as his manual typewriter and vintage adding machine.

Long a fan of superheroes, wizards and sports, Andrew's works include high fantasy, paranormal spirits, magic as well as contemporary fiction. He is still trying to find the perfect story that will include all his favorites under one cover.

He currently lives in the Washington, D.C. area with his husband, their young daughter and dog. In addition to dodging some very self-important D.C. 'insiders', Andrew uses his commute to catch up on his reading. When not working or writing, he enjoys soccer, high fantasy, baseball and occasionally sleeping.

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THE ASSASSIN OF LAURENTIUM

By Clodia Metelli

Photo Descriptions

Photo 1: The first photo shows a beautiful young man with long blond hair reclining in an opulent bedchamber. Naked but for a few folds of light fabric, he wears heavy gold jewellery and has striking scarlet eyes. Beside him are a bunch of grapes and a silver jug.

Photo 2: The second picture shows a muscular man with shoulder-length dark hair reclining on a simple bed with only a blanket covering his loins.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm among the most sought-after male courtesans in the land (picture 1). With the body and skill of a dancer, I've been extensively trained in the art of seducing and pleasing men. But known only to a select few, I'm equally skilled in the art of espionage and assassination. You'd be surprised how easily powerful men spill secrets in the bedroom.

I like to think that my assignments have always been on the side of right, but it's still a soul-killing and solitary existence. I was given to the king's spymaster as a youth on the verge of manhood so my parents could feed and clothe my brothers and sisters. I left behind my best friend and first love who occupies my dreams even after all these years. I have yet to find that man who makes me feel as secure and safe.

I'm being given a new guard as I prepare to travel to my next assignment (picture 2). When he comes to my quarters, I'm struck by his physical presence but why does he seem so familiar?

Author requests: I love how rich and detailed the world building can be in fantasy—I'd like to see a little of that here. I'm always a sucker for (a long lost) childhood friends to lovers story—the more UST the better. Please give it a HEA or HFN ending but other than that, just run with it.

Sincerely,

Karl

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: bodyguard, assassin, spy, courtesan, BDSM, slow burn/UST, friends to lovers

Content Warning: HFN

Word Count: 15,885

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THE ASSASSIN OF LAURENTIUM

By Clodia Metelli

List of Characters

Prince Aethelius – a twenty-six-year-old nobleman. Handsome and popular, he is cousin to Ptolemaius, Emperor of Laurentium

Artor – a twenty-four-year-old slave, owned by the Laurentine Emperor and under the direct control of the Clarissimus Florianus, the Emperor's Vizier and spymaster. He has been educated to the highest standard and trained as an assassin and courtesan in the Empire's service. He is originally from Thorium, a place of deep forest and small village communities.

Lady Brynne – a woman of sixty-one years. Chief advisor to Fortingern, Dux of Meringo.

Clarissimus Florianus – a man of fifty years. Vizier and spymaster to the Emperor Ptolemaius of Laurentium.

Fortingern, Dux of Meringo – a man of forty-five years. Ruler of the Laurentine Empire's second city, Meringo.

Gaheris – a man of twenty-seven years. Slave of the Emperor Ptolemaius, appointed by Florianus as personal bodyguard to Artor. To his Laurentine masters he answers to the name of Troilius, not wanting to give them his real name. Formerly of Thorium.

Iason – a man of thirty-four years. Slave of the Emperor Ptolemaius and employed as personal servant to Artor.

Pomona – a woman of forty years. Slave of the Emperor Ptolemaius and employed as personal maid to Artor.

Stephanus Ptolemaius, Emperor of Laurentium – a boy of fourteen years. (Does not appear directly in the story) A ruler mostly in name, he is a shy, unconfident boy, not particularly popular as Emperor. He loyally hero-worships his older, more glamorous cousin Aethelius.

1

Artor was swimming; it was a blazing summer day and he was striking out for the centre of a shady pool that nestled in the overgrown meadow that bordered his village, before the forest began in earnest. The sun shone dappled through the willow branches on his bare wet skin. Sprawled on a sun-baked stone rising from the water's depth, someone was waiting for him, laughing.

There was someone in his chamber. Instantly, Artor left his watery dreamworld far behind, was aware only of his straining senses, of the jewelled dagger that lay under his pillow, of the precise sequence of movements necessary for him to be upright, dagger in hand in the time it took for an arrow to find its mark.

“Good morning, sir. I've brought your breakfast.”

It was Iason, his servant, standing in the doorway holding a tray, his figure greily delineated by the dull light of early morning seeping through the shutters.

“Why have you disturbed me so early?” Even to his own ears, Artor's voice sounded shrill, petulant. He'd been getting up after noon over the past month, generally passing the remainder of the day moping in his opulent quarters.

“You have a summons from His Clarissimus Florianus. He wishes to see you directly after you've breakfasted.”

Artor bit his lip at this and took the tray in silence. A bunch of blushing grapes, a silver goblet of sweet wine and a platter of soft, hot cakes, sweetened with melting honey made up his dainty repast. He had known it would only be a matter of time before his period of respite came to an end.

A jealous, crazy nobleman, evidently misunderstanding the nature of a courtesan's calling, had broken into his apartments in a distant palace, enraged by the rumour that Artor had taken on a new lover in preference to him. Taken utterly by surprise, Hercle, his guard, had been stabbed in the stomach by the killer as he slept before his door. Nonetheless, Hercle had grabbed his weapon and, despite his injury, managed to fight his attacker to the death in defence of his charge. It was hours later that Hercle died, his agonies barely soothed by the powerful draughts Artor had concocted for him.

Over and over, during the past month, Artor had replayed the event in his mind, thinking of how Hercle had lost his life defending him. At least the nobleman had acted from foolish jealousy, nothing more. If his attack had been motivated by the discovery that Artor was not merely a faithless lover, but had been sent to spy on him, was smuggling regular detailed dossiers of his words and actions back to Florianus in Laurentium, Artor's guilt and self-recriminations would have been that much sharper. As it was, he could comfort himself that he had not failed in performing his duties, had merely been subject to ill-fortune and the hazards of the courtesan's trade.

Artor sighed, and got to his feet, pulling a silken robe around himself and heading for the bathing chamber that adjoined his bedroom. A conflicted expression crossed the servant's face; Iason would not venture to remonstrate with the young master, yet he was very conscious that his orders from the Clarissimus were that Artor should be brought before him without the delay occasioned by a courtesan's leisurely bath.

The bathing chamber was a round, vaulted room, faced with glittering mosaics of gold and green. The bath itself was a sunken hollow at the centre. At a word from Artor, a loinclothed slave, standing by, cranked a wheel that turned with a grating sound. The faucets, ringing the pool from on high and shaped in the forms of gods and nymphs, fish and sea serpents, began to gush forth, steaming hot water gradually filling the sunken bath.

When the water was at waist height, Artor shrugged off his robe and, naked, descended the marble steps into the bath. Throughout his days of withdrawal from the world he had taken comfort in this heated pool, floating for what seemed like hours in reflective silence, until the sunlight dimmed in the green glass panels above his head and the servants came to light the sconces which cast their uneasy swaying lights over the surface of the water. Now, Artor called briskly for Iason to come and cleanse his limbs and body with scented oils and unguents, to rinse his blond tresses in apple vinegar and honey, massage and scrape until his skin felt alive and glowing, his blood pumping through him with new vigour.

From behind his desk, Florianus looked unamused at having been kept waiting. A tall, greybearded, somewhat emaciated man of around fifty years, he was clad in a thick robe of black velvet. Silently, Artor went to his knees before him, his eyes cast down to the dizzying configurations of the floor tiles. He

remembered the dread and shame he had felt when he was first required to perform this act of obeisance, when he was brought before Florianus nine years ago as a boy of fifteen. Now, he felt only a distanced acceptance at complying with the ancient protocol of the Laurentine court.

“It is good to see you in the land of the living again, boy. The death of Hercle shook you badly.”

“Yes, Clarissimus. He was a loyal protector and a friend.”

“He did what he had sworn to do; to die in your service if need be. We all have our duties to perform, Artor, from the Emperor down to the lowest slave who empties the chamber pots. It is essential to the survival of our great Empire that we all perform those duties, large or small to the best of our ability.”

“Yes, Clarissimus.”

“You have grieved long enough. The time has come for you to resume your service to the Empire.”

Artor nodded his bowed head in acquiescence.

“We have need of your talents once again Artor, a new mission. I will outline the details for you presently, but first I must introduce you to your new bodyguard.” Florianus clapped his hands.

A curtained door, opposite the one by which Artor had entered, opened as though someone had been waiting just on the other side of it.

Two servants entered, wearing tunics dyed in the crimson and gold of the Empire. They escorted a man who towered over them in his brief shirt of undyed cloth; a man of impressive build, yet with a sinewy tautness of muscle which hinted at quickness and agility as much as sheer strength. This feline sense of power was augmented by the mane of dark hair that tumbled down his shoulders in a tangle of ungroomed curls.

Artor had already risen to his feet; the balance of hierarchies in the room had shifted.

“Troilius, this is your new master, Artor. Make your obeisance to him.”

Without hesitation, the man moved forward and knelt in fealty to his slender fellow slave. As he did so, Artor caught his eye and a shock of confused recognition shot through him. Only a momentary flicker in the bodyguard's glance suggested that it had been reciprocated.

“Are you ready to take the oath?”

“Yes, Clarissimus.”

The man's voice was deep, throaty, the accent achingly familiar, bringing back to Artor haunting images of the few dozen round, thatched huts, the strips of cultivated land and vegetable patches surrounded by a high wicker barricade, beyond which lay the immense forest, the edges of which might be foraged and hunted, while the interior contained unknown, mythical terrors that stalked by night. This had been the breadth and extent of his world for the first fifteen years of his life.

“Artor, I dedicate myself body, soul and heart to your safety and protection, in the name of Corwidiane, Patroness of Warriors and Triumpatus, the Laurentine Hero God. I swear that I will put no thought of personal advantage or safety over your preservation, and will gladly sacrifice life and limb if called upon to do so in your service. I vow myself to obedience to you in all things, save only if I believe that obedience would place you in unacceptable danger or would constitute treachery to the Laurentine Empire.”

“Troilius, I accept your oath of fealty and trust you to serve me well and faithfully.”

A strong, callused hand took Artor's fair one. The bodyguard pressed it to his lips, the closing gesture of the rite of consecration, and Artor had to repress his shudder at the hot breath, the graze of stubble on his skin. Again, there was that painful, incredible flicker of familiarity.

“You may both be seated.” Florianus gestured to a couple of wooden chairs. “I need your full attention for what follows.”

When they had taken their seats opposite him, Florianus drew out a large piece of parchment, tilting a polished, carved gem above it to magnify the words for his ease of reading.

“Artor, what can you tell me about the land of Meringo?”

Unconsciously, Artor folded his hands neatly in his lap. He had come to Laurentium knowing only the lore of his people; a wealth of practical skills and the dark tales of the forests. Laurentium had been but a name to him, conjuring up vague images of shiny stone, bright clothing, swords and power. He had heard of writing, but did not really understand how it worked.

Since then, some of the brightest luminaries of the Laurentine court had tutored Artor in literature, mathematics, philosophy, history, geography,

rhetoric, high etiquette, and religion, along with all the other graces and accomplishments that made up the Laurentine man of culture, and some which were very specific to his vocation. He had been thoroughly, ineradicably steeped and dyed in Laurentine culture, taught to forget all that was deemed fit only for forest-dwelling barbarians.

It was readily then that he answered his master's enquiry.

"Meringo, Clarissimus, is a Dukedom that lies beyond the water. It is one of the first and foremost cities of the Laurentine Empire, having been pacified four hundred and ten years before the start of his current Imperial Majesty's reign. The modern city is second in size and wealth only to Laurentium itself, having expanded rapidly in the past century. Meringo's main exports are wine, wheat, slaves, hunting dogs and woven cloth."

"Very good, Artor, and what can you tell me of its governance?"

"Meringo is governed by a Dux, an hereditary appointment ratified by His Imperial Majesty. The present incumbent is one Fortingern, the descendent of Laurentine nobles on his father's side and of the native Meringan Royal House on his mother's. He has ruled for seventeen years, with his Dukedom marked by peace, prosperity and good governance.

"Fortingern was widowed three years ago. His two sons both died as young men fighting in His Imperial Majesty's armies. His daughter, the Lady Clothilde is married to the Clarissimus Pericleon and is resident in Laurentium. Fortingern is generally accounted a loyal subject of His Imperial Majesty."

"Excellent, Artor. I'm glad to see you've kept yourself up to date. All that you say is accurate according to current knowledge. However, disturbing reports have come to me by those who have travelled to Meringo and have had access to the Ducal Court; suggestions that Fortingern may not be as loyal as his record would lead us to believe. They say he boasts inordinately of the greatness of his new city, disparaging the ancient greatness of Laurentium and hinting that the time has come for the balance of power to be shifted, for the ancient to make way for the new—in short, that Meringo should be the first city of the Empire, with himself at its head. He is rumoured to declare that Laurentium's day is done and even to comment upon His Imperial Majesty's youth and character."

Florianus kept his tone carefully neutral as he said this last. It was well known both to him and his protégé that Imperator Stephanus Ptolemaius was

not merely but a child of fourteen, but was an awkward, pudgy and ungifted youth, sadly lacking in either the grace or confidence that befitted the sole ruler of the vast and ancient Laurentine Imperium. The boy lived permanently in the shadow of his handsome older cousin, Prince Aethelius, whom Ptolemaius kept ever at his side.

“Since his wife’s death, Fortingern has openly taken beautiful young men as his favourites though he has no particular pet at this time.

“Your mission, Artor, will be to travel to Meringo, gain Fortingern as your lover and find out whether these rumours have any basis. Should you discover that Fortingern intends any actual treachery to Laurentium, beyond mere boasting of his own fine city, your task will be to see that Fortingern dies in a believably accidental manner. This is very important. If we are to install Clothilde and the Clarissimus Pericleon as his successors, it is vital that the lady has no reason to believe Laurentium had any hand in her father’s death. War with Meringo is absolutely to be avoided.”

Again, there was the unspoken understanding that it was far from certain that the forces of the Laurentine Imperium could still stand up against the barbarian vigour of Meringo.

“I understand my mission, Clarissimus. I will fulfil it without fail.”

“Laurentium expects no less from you. Artor, you will take ship for Meringo in three days time. That will allow you to get acquainted with your new bodyguard and make preparations. You will, of course, be issued with monies and accommodation required to set yourself up as a courtesan of the highest degree once you get to Meringo. Place orders for any new silks, perfumes and what have you, with the supplies department by noon tomorrow and they will procure them before your departure. Any questions?”

“No, Clarissimus. I will send to you if I think of anything.”

“Splendid.” Florianus treated Artor to a rare, thin smile that came and went almost upon the instant. “You may show Troilius back to your quarters.”

It was in silence and with barely a glance exchanged that the two men walked together down the many long corridors and several flights of stairs, until they got to the courtesan’s opulent quarters in one of the older parts of the vast palace structure that was still in use.

Once they were alone together in Artor’s elegant little reception hall, they stood face to face and eyed each other in silence, taking each other in.

“*Gaheris?*” It was Artor who finally broke the silence.

“You remember me then?” The voice was gruff. Gaheris answered in Thori, Artor’s native tongue, which he had scarcely heard for almost a decade. It came back to him in an instant.

“Of course I remember you. You—you’ve changed though.”

The Gaheris he remembered had been a lithe and slender huntsman. Now, he was filled out with hard muscle, his skin, once pale from his life of night expeditions to the forest, now darkly tanned. Faint lines crossed his forehead and radiated from the corners of his eyes. Although he was only a year or so older than Artor he seemed to have sustained a great deal more wear and tear.

Gaheris looked Artor up and down as he stood in his silken raiment. “So have you.”

Artor blushed hotly like the awkward boy he’d been when they last saw each other. A son of peasants, he’d worn a rough brown smock and hide breeches, his startlingly fair locks a tangled crop, his milky skin burned and blotchy from long hours working in the fields.

“How comes it that you’re here? You, you told me you’d rather die than be a slave.”

Artor remembered Gaheris’ look of contempt when he’d stepped on to the slavers’ cart without protest, as soon as the sacks of grain were handed over to his gaunt parents, who couldn’t look at him. His youngest sibling, a girl, Rowena, had perished the night before.

“I was captured raiding cattle from a Laurentine magnate. They sentenced me to die in the arena, but after my first fight, when I’d killed the champion expected to make short work of me, I was brought before the Clarissimus. He took the measure of me with those cold eyes of his, then, when he’d made up his mind, he told me I could either go back and die in the arena or swear myself to his service, have an honourable career.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t prefer an honourable death to treating with Laurentines, accepting slavery.”

Gaheris looked almost ashamed. “I never wanted to give an inch to those greedy, murderous bastards, but to throw my life away seemed wrong too. I felt the will of Corwidiane in it, and you don’t despise the gifts of the Gods. I agreed, then, to whatever it was, as long as it wasn’t to hurt the innocent or

guard one of their hellish prisons. I'd rather die than be the bastard who throws someone else to the beasts. The Clarissimus gave his word it would be nothing like that, but I never guessed it would be," he waved his hand at Artor in wonderment, "you."

"My bodyguard Hercle died just over a month ago. I knew they would find me another, but of course I didn't expect..."

"So, is this true what they tell me, that you're a hired killer, a *prostitute*?"

Artor drew himself up, "I am trained in the arts of the assassin and the courtesan in the service of the Laurentine Empire, yes."

"In the service of the Laurentine Empire." Gaheris shook his head, "You've really taken to this enslavement, haven't you? Don't you remember who you are? Where you come from?"

"I do remember. I remember an ugly, muddy place where poor, ignorant people lived in wretched huts and scratched at the soil every day of their short, miserable lives. I remember knowing nothing of books, of philosophy, poetry, the cultivation of the body and the mind.

"I know all too well that Laurentium has had to make hard choices over the centuries to flourish, but that's the price of civilisation. Laurentium has taught me the arts of civilisation and those are the values I live my life by. When I remember Thorium, I remember why I dedicated my life to uphold the chance of something better."

"So you're grateful that slavers came to our village in the midst of famine and took you from your starving parents for a few bags of grain?"

Artor shrugged, "They'd have starved otherwise and so would I. Instead I got the chance to make something of myself."

"If you'd had the balls for it, you could have joined with me and we'd have taken what we needed from those rich landowners, sitting on their vast acres, feeding the best corn to their thoroughbreds while children perish from hunger. I raided cattle and grain stores so that our village might eat, but buying a starving child for profit? It takes civilisation to come up with that."

Bruised by the rebuke, Artor's face froze, then he shrugged. "Your fine plan of action brought you in chains to the arena. Forgive me if I didn't jump at it as a solution."

There was a silence, then there was a short, harsh laugh, rusty, as though it were seldom used. “True enough, I suppose. Your way got you this.” His gesture took in Artor’s marble floored apartment, the divans with their silken cushions, the walls painted with bright frescoes, the ornate fittings. There was more acceptance than contempt in his tone.

“Why do they call you Troilius?” asked Artor, as peace seemed established for now. “I kept my name.”

“I didn’t want mine sullied on their lips so I didn’t give it to them. Troilius was the name they picked for me when they sent me into the arena, dressed in a skin loincloth to fight a fully armoured warrior with a club in my hand. Some kind of Laurentine joke. I turned the joke on them though, so I decided to stick with the name.”

“Troilus is the name of one of our—” Gaheris raised his eyebrows, “of the *Laurentine* heroes, who fought with a club, so they were complimenting you in a way.”

“The kind of compliment I can well do without. Artor, would it be too uncouth of me in these exalted surroundings to point out that I haven’t eaten since early this morning? The Clarissimus had been expecting you sooner.”

“Of course.” Mortified, Artor realised that they were still standing in the hall, staring at each other. “Come into my sitting room.”

Artor had to hide his smile at the look of caution with which Gaheris lowered himself on the divan, as though he feared to be buried alive by the softness of the deep cushions. Settling himself cross-legged beside his bodyguard, Artor clapped his hands in an habitual gesture and almost immediately a servant appeared, bowing low before him. Catching Gaheris’ stare, Artor flushed and tried to recall when it had ceased to be strange that he could summon others to do his bidding with a clap of the hands.

Despite his raised eyebrows, Gaheris was glad enough to avail himself of the luncheon that was put before him: round, fresh-baked loaves of bread, cheese, olives, roast kid and fruit, along with jugs of wine and water. In his turn, Artor tried not to stare when Gaheris took his wine neat.

When evening came, Artor showed Gaheris to his bedchamber: a woven carpet of intricate design on the marble floor, a high, ornate couch spread with coverlets of silk and wool, while tapestries showing scenes of city life depicted in minute detail hung from the walls. The air was redolent with the heady scent

of the fresh flowers standing in great vases on occasional tables carved of rare wood and inlaid with gold.

“That’s where Hercle used to sleep.” Artor indicated a truckle bed close by the door. In contrast to the elegantly bedecked couch on which Artor slept, this was equipped simply with a thick, yet evidently well-worn sheepskin and a straw-filled sacking pillow.

“That will suit me fine.” Without removing his shirt, Gaheris made himself comfortable on the bed with a grunt and pulled the sheepskin up round his shoulders.

Artor’s preparations took rather longer. As he peeled off his silken garments and, naked in the lamplight, massaged cream into his face and combed through his golden tresses, he studiously avoided looking in the direction of the truckle bed, refusing to satisfy his fiery curiosity as to whether Gaheris was peeking. Well, if he was, he may as well get used to the sight.

Once the lamps were out and Artor was lying under his silken sheets on the high couch, he could hear Gaheris’ deep, steady breathing. A memory came back to him of how one hot afternoon they had stolen away together to a barn; it had smelled of animal dung, hay. Sprawled and hidden amongst high bales of straw, the goats snuffling and calling below in their pens, they had kissed clumsily and put hands inside each other’s smocks and skin breeches. After he had spent, Gaheris had fallen quickly asleep, his arm slung around Artor, his head turned towards him, smiling as the sunlight falling through the wooden boards kissed his face.

Artor chided himself for dwelling on such memories. Gaheris surely would have long put it from his mind; they had just been boys messing about.

2

Three days later, they stood on the quayside, preparing to board ship for Meringo. Along with Gaheris, Artor was also accompanied by a small retinue of servants bearing several large trunks of his clothing and other necessities. An agent of Florianus had already secured luxurious apartments for the courtesan and his staff in the most fashionable district of Meringo, from whence Artor would conduct his campaign to seduce the Dux.

Gaheris was now wearing a smart dark red wool tunic in place of his rough homespun. He wore a travelling cloak of black wool and a sheathed sword hung from his new leather belt. The bodyguard had never been so well-dressed before, yet he was decked out essentially as a sign of his service. This gave him mixed feelings.

The harbourside was crowded. Travellers queued to board the passenger ships, milling around and tripping over each other's luggage. Dockers were loading and unloading cargo from massive freight vessels, while goods were auctioned off for market in the great warehouses. The air rang with the cry of seagulls and the shouts of sailors as they readied their vessels.

It was Gaheris' first opportunity to take in the city at relative leisure. Previously, he had only viewed it as a prisoner under guard, being hustled from one location to another.

The island city rose up above the harbourside, the great palaces and temples of white marble and coloured stone reflecting the harsh sunlight. Now though, Gaheris could see that while the centre of the city with the great Imperial Palace, the administration buildings, the elegant parks and museums, was busy and flourishing, further out the city was looking more than a little unkempt and neglected. The buildings were still magnificent, but it was a magnificence of centuries past.

Creepers protruded through the windows of some of the buildings; there were gaping blank patches in the glittering cupola'd roofs of dead palaces. Grand villas appeared to have been deserted and become the makeshift shelters of hundreds of poor families who tacked mismatched, colourful cloths over ornate windows, and sent their ragged children out to play on the stone steps outside. The city showed signs of withering from the outside in.

Eventually, the ship was ready for embarkation. For a handful of bronze coins, sweating porters hoisted up Artor's half dozen travelling boxes and stowed them in the hold, while the queue of passengers inched its way towards the gangplank.

Once the ship had set sail and the harbour of Laurentium had grown small in the distance, Gaheris, standing on deck, turned his face towards their mainland destination, craning his neck for a first glimpse of the bare rocky cliffs of Meringo. His home of Thorium lay hundreds of miles to the north of Meringo, but it was only when Gaheris had been taken across this short stretch of sea that he'd felt irrevocably torn from his home and his freedom.

Gaheris was aware that Artor, on the other hand, found little about the short voyage to stir his emotions or interest. His retinue had spread rugs and cushions for him on one of the benches and he was sprawled, reading some dense-looking codex with an air of absorption. Of course, Artor must have made this voyage back and forth many times.

By late morning, the bright sunlight glinting off the waves of the sea, the mainland was well in sight. Soon the ship was sailing down the broad River Tamur towards the city of Meringo.

Once again, Gaheris took advantage of his freedom to gaze at leisure. The contrast between Laurentium and Meringo was striking.

Meringo altogether lacked the grandeur and elegance of Laurentium; there were no exquisite domed palaces or stately pillared temples in this landscape. Only the massive stone castle, towering above the town, offered any reminder that this was a city with centuries of history behind it. Everything else seemed shockingly, brashly, new.

Rows of two- and three-storey houses of honey-coloured stone or newly planed wood were arranged on a grid pattern, an alien orderliness after the grand boulevards and impenetrable alleys of Laurentium. Mechanical cranes broke up the skyline, indicating that the expansion of the city was continuing.

The port of Meringo was at least as busy as that of Laurentium. Barques from all over the known world crammed the docks, their goods being unloaded with shouts into the great lines of warehouses, stretching out beyond the harbour.

As soon as they disembarked, Iason summoned porters to take their baggage and conduct them to Artor's apartments. As they made their way through the

bustling streets, Gaheris kept his hand close to his sword hilt, alert to any possible threat to the man he'd sworn to protect.

3

The apartments pleased Artor well enough. Situated in one of the oldest and most fashionable districts, close to the castle, his rooms were on the second floor of a fairly grand building, perhaps a century old, whose various suites of rooms were tenanted by wealthy merchants in Meringo on business, foreign dignitaries and the like. Here, Artor would be close to the centre of Meringan society.

Though it was not far off noon, Artor still lounged in his bed, propped on cushions and nibbling at the fruit that had been placed before him in a silver bowl. Iason had opened the shutters, and Artor was watching the comings and goings in the streets surrounding the castle.

“So what’s the plan?” Gaheris was evidently unable to contain himself any longer. He had been up since dawn, his restless pacing around the apartment occasionally jolting Artor from his slumbers.

Now he stood by the window, looking out. Artor noted that his bodyguard assiduously avoided turning his gaze upon him, as he lay sprawled naked in the bed, the coverlet leaving him exposed from the stomach upwards.

“The plan is that we shall be attending the theatre this evening, where I have secured a box that will place me directly in the Dux’s line of sight. At some point in the course of the evening, he will essay to make my acquaintance and the game will have commenced.”

“How can you be so sure he will want to meet you?” There was as much genuine curiosity as challenge in Gaheris’ tone.

“Because, Gaheris, I am very good at my job.”

Gaheris snorted.

Unperturbed, Artor selected a small peach and bit into it, wiping the juicy sweetness from his lips. Soon it would be time for the serious matter of his bath.

The performance turned out to be quite unlike anything Artor would have expected to see in Laurentium.

At the ancient theatres of his beloved city, with their endless circular tiers of stone seating, the fare was almost exclusively composed of the tragedies and comedies composed in the high days of Laurentine civilisation, almost a thousand years in the past. Only those of advanced education were able to follow the archaic language. The connoisseur went to the theatre in Laurentium knowing the play word for word, prepared to form a judgement on what made the present performance stand out for good or ill, from the fifty versions seen before.

Ordinary people went to cockfights or boxing matches for amusement, or else to the crude farces and song and dance routines put on by the city's brothels.

This play, by contrast, was in contemporary Lauren, the universal language of the Imperium, though peppered with Meringo colloquialisms. A drama set in the present time about the love lives of ordinary people, it was funny, sad, wry and quite absorbing.

Artor, however, could only give the play a fraction of the attention it deserved; his focus was all upon the Grand Box positioned almost directly opposite him, in which sat the Dux with his entourage.

The man was undoubtedly handsome, in a barbarian sort of way. His full beard and long, braided hair were a defiant contravention of Laurentine social norms. Interesting, Artor reflected, that the representative of the second city of the Empire, a place imbued with centuries of Laurentine culture and civilisation, should choose to present himself in public like some outland chieftain.

Beside the Dux sat an older woman, wearing a Laurentine wig of tiered curls. Occasionally, they exchanged brief remarks. From his detailed dossier, Artor identified the woman as Brynne, Fortingern's chief advisor. That was another old-style barbarian trait, having women in positions of power.

The merest flicker of an eye in his direction told Artor that the Dux had noted him, was intrigued. Resplendent in the sheerest of violet silk tunics, equipped with a cloak of rich mauve velvet that fell back to expose his white shoulders and much of his chest, Artor would have been severely surprised and disappointed if he had not. A pendant of twisted gold, inset with glittering jewels circled his neck, and thin gold bracelets jangled round his wrists. Pomona, his handmaid, had teased his blond mane into loose ringlets, infused them with a delicate perfume.

At one point in the play, Artor found himself laughing wholeheartedly; raising his head, he caught the eye of the Dux who had also given way to amusement. The two exchanged a quick smile of complicity.

At the interval, Artor, in all his finery and accompanied by his smartly dressed bodyguard, was admitted without question into the select refreshment room reserved for the more distinguished among the audience. Securing a small table with a good view of the room and its occupants, he accepted a cup of wine from an attentive slave and sipped pensively. Gaheris stood silently behind him as he had throughout the performance.

The presence of this new and ravishing young courtesan did not go unnoticed. Before Artor had drunk a third of a cup, a richly attired gentleman in his fifties had presented himself with a courtly bow. He introduced himself as Berengeris, a prominent wine merchant of the city, and attempted to engage Artor in flirtatious conversation that rapidly became a blunt attempt to negotiate terms.

Keeping an eye always on the corner of the room occupied by the Dux and his entourage, Artor responded graciously with smiles, not discouraging and yet determinedly non-committal. He had only just arrived in the city, was not yet certain of his plans. Soon, the merchant grew importunate, pressing for an assignation, his meaty hand grasping the courtesan's forearm. Artor's response was to broadcast a polite dismay, averting his eyes and withdrawing further back into his chair.

"I do wish you would leave me be." Though his voice was low pitched, it somehow carried across the room.

"You heard him..."

Before Gaheris could react further, someone else was striding across the floor of the salon, a grave looking older man dressed in the livery of the Dux. Coming up to the merchant, he inclined his head and murmured carefully into his ear. The merchant blanched, nodded, then got quickly to his feet and hurried off.

The official gave Artor a brief bow and prepared to depart.

"Many thanks to you, sir, and to your master. My brave bodyguard was here to offer me every protection, should it have become necessary, nonetheless when one is a stranger to a city it is best to avoid being implicated in any unpleasantness. I should be honoured if the noble lord would condescend to take a cup of wine with me that I might offer him my thanks."

The flunkey bowed again, then left.

Artor called for a jug of the best wine. A few moments after it arrived, the Dux announced himself at his table with a polite cough. He had come without his attendants.

A tall man, he wore an embroidered tunic of silk and velvet that would have graced the highest in the Imperial court at Laurentium, save for the fact that it ended just below the buttocks and was worn with a pair of matching breeches. While breeches had become an increasingly common sight in Laurentium amongst working people or for riding, it would have been unthinkable for a respectable Laurentine to be seen at a public function with their legs on display in that barbaric fashion. Artor, of course, was too perfectly bred in Laurentine graces to stare.

At the Dux's arrival, Artor immediately got to his feet and, with a bow and a sweeping gesture, implored him to be seated and to take some wine. The Dux did so and sat regarding the courtesan with an air of friendly curiosity that was far from the slack-jawed leer of the over-eager merchant.

"So what brings you to our fair city?" he asked Artor, once he had taken a sip from his goblet.

Artor smiled. "I had heard many fair reports of Meringo, what a great and flourishing city it is, and I decided to visit and see for myself."

The Dux raised his eyebrows. "Oh! And what are your impressions thus far?"

"Why, that the reports did the place poor justice. Meringo is magnificent, second only one might say, to the splendour of the august capital itself."

The ghost of a moue might have pinched the Dux's mouth for the briefest moment. "You are a Laurentine, I take it?"

"Indeed, I owe to it my education and good fortune; I have a great love of the place."

"Would I be right in guessing that Laurentium is not where you had your birth?"

"You conjecture this from my fair looks, I presume? Yet there are many, fair as I who have lived long generations in Laurentium. It is a citizenry, not a clan."

“Your fair looks, lovely as they are, were not what offered the clue, rather it is the grace and precision with which you pronounce the Lauren tongue that tells me you studied hard to acquire it rather than imbibed it with your mother’s milk. Indulge my impertinent curiosity if you would; is my surmise far off the mark?”

This man is sharp. Artor did not allow his smile to falter. “Your surmise, my Lord, is correct. I was born in the forests of distant Thorium, but my parents, poor as they were, sent me as a youth to those who could provide me with the prospects they could not. I was thus brought to the city and given an education that has permitted me to make my way in the world.”

“Forgive me, I believe I have stirred up matters that are painful for you to recall. The interval bell is about to go. I would be honoured if you would attend upon me at my castle at the sixth hour tomorrow morning, if you have no other pressing engagement. There are many fine artworks and other treasures I should like you to see to further your good impression of Meringo and perhaps atone for my clumsiness.”

At that moment, the bell did indeed sound the close of the interval. With a nod, the Dux turned and made his way back to his entourage who escorted him to his box.

4

“I liked him.” Gaheris sat on his truckle bed, polishing his sword while Artor sat at his dressing table with Pomona busying herself with arranging his hair and delicately outlining his eyes with kohl. She had been summoned the previous evening for an emergency meeting to help Artor decide on his attire for this all-important visit, and the gorgeous flimsy clothes had been laid out, freshly scented, on the bed for him to put on.

“I do wish you would try to speak Lauren, Gaheris. How do you expect to learn if you won’t practise?”

Gaheris grinned. “It would take me more than a lifetime, I reckon, to speak it with the necessary ‘grace and precision’.” He had answered in the Thori tongue except for the last phrase with which he had tried to mimic the refined speech of the Dux but with his own heavily accented Lauren.

Venturing to look up from his blade, Gaheris saw Artor smiling at the incongruity. Artor met his gaze. Absurdly flustered by his master’s state of undress, Gaheris hurriedly lowered his eyes once again to his task.

“You didn’t like that the Dux could tell you weren’t really a Laurentine,” he commented after a pause, his eye firmly on his sword, now gleaming silver. “You’re ashamed of where you come from.”

“I am really a Laurentine and where I come from is irrelevant.”

“I don’t know how you can say that. At least this Dux seems to have some pride in remembering the old ways.”

“Indeed, and part of my job here is to ascertain whether this is mere antiquarian eccentricity on his part or a symptom of a deeper disaffection with our Empire.”

“And if it is, your next job is to murder the man in cold blood?”

“I shall be acting in the service of his Imperial Majesty. I would hardly call that murder. It is a matter of duty and professionalism.”

“It won’t keep you awake at night? Do none of those whose lives you stole under orders ever haunt your dreams?”

There was a silence before the assassin answered, “If they ever do, that is merely one of the hazards of my profession. It is something for me to deal with.

Anyway, how dare you judge me, Gaheris? Are you telling me that in your career as cattle rustler, you never took the life of a herdsman who was defending his master's property?"

"If I did, it was face to face and in fair fight. If any turned and ran, or fell wounded, I spared their lives gladly. I fought only for my own survival."

"So the fact you were fighting for yourself makes it better that you killed people than if you had been serving a greater purpose?"

When his bodyguard remained silent, Artor continued. "Gaheris, imagine I didn't do this work and the Dux was a threat to the Empire—would it be better that there should be a great war in which thousands of ordinary people lost their lives or had their homes and farms destroyed, that mighty cities should be laid in the dust, rather than one man who had proved himself a traitor and oathbreaker should die discreetly at my hand?"

Gaheris grunted, uncomfortable; he had no ready answer but felt that there must be one. Meanwhile, the boy was all but naked as he held forth, standing in front of a mirror, holding a succession of silks and satin tunics against his body as they were handed to him in turn by the seemingly insensate Pomona, who fastened torcs and gleaming jewelled neckpieces round the courtesan's marble neck as though he were indeed no more than a statue. Gaheris bent his head even lower over his, by now, immaculate blade as if he hoped to escape the heady scent of the perfumed oils that had been massaged into the boy's skin.

"To me, I'm saving lives, Gaheris. Yes, at times I am haunted by what I've done. I must become intimate with each one of these people, sometimes get to know their families, the people who love them. There's no anonymity, like striking down a helmeted enemy on a battlefield.

"There are nights when I feel I have glimpsed the abyss, but that is a sacrifice that I make, for the greater good of the Empire, for the sake of peace. I believe that I'm doing what is right. I face nightmares so that the citizens of Laurentium can sleep safe in their beds."

"Hmm, well, I see you do live by your own honour, of a sort. I am sorry if I ever seemed to doubt your courage. I, of course, have sworn to kill and die in your defence and will do so, whatever the rights and wrongs involved, so I too have a compromised sort of honour to uphold."

"What do you think?" Abruptly, Artor turned to stand poised mere inches from Gaheris' knees, giving his bodyguard little option but to lean back and take him in.

Pomona and Iason before her in the baths had done their work well. Artor was attired in a tunic of shimmering blue reaching to his knees. He wore high-fastening Laurentine sandals, the intricate leatherwork drawing attention to his taut calves. A simple gold torc fitted close round his neck, while a golden serpent with sapphires for eyes coiled the length of his left arm. The front of his hair was plaited and fastened back from his face with delicate jade pins, while the rest of his hair fanned out in profuse and gleaming locks scented with cinnamon leaf. His toned limbs and bare shoulders shone with the rare oils with which he had been anointed, while his eyes were lightly kohled, his face otherwise untouched.

This is the boy who exchanged hot clumsy kisses with me in a barn, smelling of clean straw and the roughly tanned leather of his breeches. As his remembered desire for the Artor of long ago collided with his response to the outrageously beautiful man who stood before him, Gaheris felt quite undone.

“I think the Dux is a very lucky man,” he blurted out.

Immediately, Gaheris was overcome with agonies of mortification, both because he had let himself reveal his attraction, unguarded, and because of the crassness of the comparison with the Dux in the light of the preceding conversation.

He would have essayed an apology, but Artor responded with a brief, sharp laugh as though he thought Gaheris had been deliberately indulging in dark humour and appreciated the tenor of his wit.

Pomona helped Artor into his magnificent cloak, and then it was time for them to go to the hired sedan chair that awaited them outside. Gaheris would walk behind it, his impeccably polished sword close at hand.

5

When Artor announced himself at the ancient castle gate, he was quickly received by servants who anticipated his arrival and courteously conducted to the Dux's private apartments, where it was suggested to Gaheris that he could accompany the guards on their patrol of the castle walls by way of an unofficial guided tour. Artor had warned him that they were likely to be separated at that stage and asked him to keep his eyes and ears open.

Artor himself was shown into an elegantly informal sitting room, where the Dux got to his feet to receive him, kissed him on both cheeks and invited him to sit opposite him on a comfortable couch. The Dux wore a long loose robe of fine woven wool of a rich dark purple. He busied himself calling for wine and cakes, seeming keen to put Artor at his ease.

Before coming into the Dux's presence, Artor had experienced the usual flutter of nerves before he began an assignment, but now it had settled to a calm focus as he contemplated the man sitting opposite him, the man for whom he would in all probability be required to play the role of lover and would very possibly be required to kill.

While Artor refreshed himself with a cup of wine, the Dux kept up an undemanding conversation, asking about other cities Artor had visited and the sights he had seen, while being carefully unintrusive about who he had visited them with or the reason for his visits. The visits were alluded to as though they were the aimless sightseeing expeditions of a gentleman of leisure; it was a matter of gracefully unspoken understanding between the two of them that Artor was a courtesan who moved from city to city offering his services to the local elite.

When Artor had finished his wine, the Dux offered to conduct him round some of the more interesting apartments within the castle.

As he was led through suites of rooms, Artor was struck by the contrast between the external structure of the castle with its ancient walls constructed of hewn blocks of stone, many feet thick, the arrow slit windows, and vaulted ceilings, the apparently complete disregard for comfort or elegance, and the interior, refitted with painted plaster walls, tiled floors and low false ceilings which kept in the heat. Wrought-iron braziers full of glowing coals stood demurely and a little absurdly in the middle of great, old fire pits.

Despite all the comforts of Laurentian civilisation imposed on this barbarian stronghold, the Dux had managed to keep the flavour very definitely Meringan. In the place of frescos depicting the legends of the Laurentine gods and heroes, the centre of Meringan public cult for several hundred years, there hung vivid tapestries depicting the old lore of Meringo, the wild gods that were worshipped in the homes of the ordinary folk. Women with impossible flying coils of blood-red hair and bright gowns brandished spears. Crows wheeled ominously under crescent moons, and an old man in a crown with one great staring blue eye looked out at the beholder. The tapestries were bordered with intricate knotwork patterns of writhing serpents and mysterious sigils.

For Artor, the imagery was uncomfortably alien and familiar, their bright colours and wild aspect evoking the painted wooden figures in the shrines of his village, yet in this civilised setting the designs seemed out of place, offensively other to his classically trained ideas of art and beauty.

“These are newly woven?”

“Yes.” The Dux smiled, obviously pleased to be asked about them. “The last of them were finished only five years ago, but they are copied from designs and motifs hundreds of years old. My more recent forbears had devalued the ancient castle tapestries as unfashionable and they were left to fade and become moth-eaten. I had a guild of craftswomen trained and commissioned to create these copies and when they were done, I had the originals packed away in specially sealed boxes, where I am assured they will be preserved for posterity. The Guild continues to thrive, using their knowledge of the old designs to create new artworks based on our ancient traditions. It has provided a respectable livelihood for many widows and paupers of the city who would otherwise be reliant on charity.”

“Upholding tradition is important to you.”

“Absolutely. I think it is very important for the people of Meringo to maintain a sense of their identity as people with an art, language and culture of its own that is worth preserving and keeping alive.”

Artor met the Dux's eyes and nodded with an air of sympathetic interest. “You think the people are in danger of forgetting their old ways?”

“I think that for many years there was a kind of shame in remembering our heritage. We were taught to see ourselves, in a sense, almost as *barbarians*,” he spat the word out as though it were an insult that greatly pained him. “We were so keen to become more Laurentine than the Laurentines.”

“Yet before the Laurentines, this castle would have been a draughty shell, strewn with dirty rushes instead of paved with marble tiles, and thick with smoke from the fire pits.”

The Dux crooked his brows in a manner that suggested he was amused rather than offended by Artor's challenge, as though he had addressed this point many times before. “No one is denying that Laurentine civilisation has benefited us over the centuries. I've no wish to dwell in the past. What I strongly object to is the slavish mentality of seeing ourselves as no more than a little satellite of Laurentium with nothing worth contributing of our own. I think the time is coming for Meringo to emerge from Laurentium's shadow.”

Very interesting. Before Artor could probe further, the Dux laughed easily. “That's enough of me speechifying at you—I forget that I'm not always in the council chamber. Come, let me show you some of the rest of my collections.”

Artor uttered appropriate expressions of polite appreciation as he was conducted round several rooms containing glass cases showing examples of brightly painted Meringan pottery, embroidered cloaks of fine workmanship, torcs and other adornments of cunningly twisted gold and gemwork, and a collection of battered bronze swords and dented helms that framed the face of the wearer with the snarl of a lion or a dragon, relics of long-dead Meringan chieftains.

Despite his enthusiasm, the Dux seemed careful not to drag out the tour too long and soon conducted Artor back to his parlour where he poured them both another cup of wine, not waiting for the hovering servant to perform the office.

“May I speak to the point with you, Artor?” the Dux set his wine back on the table.

“Please do, Clarissimus.”

“Call me Fortingern, if you would. Artor, I am wondering whether during your sojourn in Meringo it would suit you to gratify me with your delightful companionship? I would of course be very glad to remunerate the expenses of your stay as well as other tokens of appreciation.”

Artor permitted himself a smile while holding the Dux's gaze. “My Lord—Fortingern, if my company would afford you any pleasure, I should be honoured to attend upon you.”

The Dux appeared to relax a little, as though relieved in gaining his object. “You are very kind. Now, as I believe reticence would do either of us little

good, let me tell you something of what I might hope from this association and you may let me know if it would be agreeable to you.”

“That seems very sensible.”

“Some years ago my wife died and since then I have frequently been lonely, Artor. Here and there very charming young men such as yourself have been kind enough to offer me solace, yet for all their wit and beauty I still felt alone. Pleasure and amusement are not all I seek. I certainly do not wish you to feign any affection for me, yet if you could be open to such kindness developing between us in the natural way of things, our association might do very well.”

Barely audibly, Artor cleared his throat. “I would certainly hope to develop a liking for a gentleman with whom I had formed a companionship, or my time should be spent badly indeed. Please be assured I know better than to offer false blandishments other than to those who have shown themselves ready to be satisfied with them. I will be always kind, Fortingern, and yet not false.”

Fortingern nodded. “I can ask for no more than that as regards your personal feelings. As to the matter of your being always kind, I have some rather *particular* requests that might challenge your definition of kindness.”

Ah. Artor leant forward, his expression open, attentive and carefully neutral. “I’m listening.”

6

“So how did you get on, Gaheris?”

It was a warm afternoon, so Artor had dismissed his chair and wandered back through the city in company with his bodyguard. They had stopped in one of the many small ornamental parks that graced the city and sat together on a bench watching the activities of the exotic water fowl that populated the small lily-logged pond.

Gaheris grinned. “I had a great time. Nice blokes, the guards. They showed me all round the length of the walls, the defences, told me the history of the place. You know that castle is over a thousand years old and has never once been taken by siege?”

“I didn’t know.”

“They’ve got an old shrine to Corwidiane in the armoury and they let me pay my respects. That’s ancient as well, but they still tend her altar. Corwine, they call her here, but she’s just the same.”

“What else did you see in the armoury? Was it well supplied?”

Gaheris hesitated, and then he spoke with the air of having to speak an unpleasant truth. “It was very well supplied. They were only keen on showing me the antique stuff, big old swords and axes, rusty breastplates and the like, but I told them I needed to piss, and on my way back I had a quick poke round without them, put my eye to a few grilled doors. It looks like they’re stockpiling, Artor. There were storerooms full to the rafters with short swords, iron javelins, slings and bows. There was nothing quaintly Meringan about any of them. They looked fresh forged.”

“Thank you, Gaheris. You’ve learnt more than I have today. The Laurentine Empire has fought no major war for over a century. Why then, is our loyal vassal readying himself for major conflict?”

“Not everyone loves the Laurentine Empire, Artor.”

Artor sighed. “So it would appear.”

7

The following evening, Artor had an invitation to supper at Fortingern's private apartments. Gaheris raised his eyebrows when he saw how he was dressed for the occasion. In place of the shimmering silks he had come to expect, Artor wore a sombre tunic of heavy dark cloth, though cut with narrow fastenings that left his shoulders and much of his back and chest exposed, and tight-fitting leather breeches. Gaheris failed to prevent his eyes from lingering on Artor's delineated posterior before he cloaked himself decently in swirling velvet.

The supper was served in a narrow candlelit dining room, an array of light and delicious dishes: fish cooked in a wine sauce, leeks dressed in vinegar, eggs, olives, cheeses, baked apples and cream. Musicians played from behind a screen, the lyre and the flute a background sweetness.

The Dux was all charm and urbanity, keen to set Artor at his ease, make him smile. Beneath this outward cheer, however, Artor could sense his nervousness. Outside the apartment, Gaheris waited weaponless.

Halfway through the meal, a servant entered and spoke quietly into the Dux's ear. Straining, Artor caught, "The Lady Brynne requests an urgent meeting."

The Dux murmured his apologies to Artor, bowed and left the room. As he heard footsteps fading away down the tiled floors, Artor regretted that there was no way of eavesdropping on the exchange.

When Fortingern returned, there was a new tension about him, a grim set to his jaw.

Artor waited a little for him to resettle himself before speaking. "Is all well, my Lord Fortingern?"

"All would be rather better if so much didn't hang on the dubious mental processes of a fourteen-year-old idiot!"

"A fourteen-year-old idiot?"

"Yes, that marvellous young Emperor of yours, back in Laurentium. We would all be a bit more secure if only—but forgive me, I'm ranting at you. Enough of such tedious matters. I—I have prepared a chamber, if you are ready, Artor?"

He's really on edge. "I am ready if you are, Fortingern."

Standing, the Dux conducted Artor to an antechamber. Though well lit by torches placed in sconces high in the walls, the place seemed dark. In contrast to the rest of the Dux's inner apartments, this room retained the feel of the old castle. The walls were unplastered stone and the floor was paved with flagstones. Exposed beams ran across the length of the chamber. At various points along the walls, solid iron rings had been riveted into the stone and chains hung through them. Chains descended from the beams.

One side of the room was dominated by a great table of old and blackened oak, on which were displayed an array of items. Opposite was a draped couch, the only element of comfort in this unforgiving chamber.

Once the heavy wooden door had closed behind them, the Dux turned to Artor, looked him up and down as though taking in his appearance for the first time that evening.

"You look magnificent," he murmured. "You have dressed exactly right for the occasion."

Reaching out a tentative hand, he traced the line of Artor's tunic from the top of his shoulder, down to his chest. Artor caught the hand, grasped it firmly, heard the Dux's breath catch, then deepen in response.

"Come with me." He led the Dux over to the couch, then putting his arms round his neck he took his mouth in a kiss that was sensual and passionate, but with an edge of aggression. Artor felt Fortingern's body yield against his own and drew him to sit beside him on the couch where he continued firmly kissing and embracing him. The man was too tense; he needed to get him relaxed and aroused if this was to work.

Presently, he released the Dux and sat back, looking him in the eyes. "Let me hear you say exactly what it is you want."

The older man looked down for a moment before meeting his gaze. "I want you to chain me to the wall and flog me with as little mercy as the town executioner would show to a petty thief or other scoundrel."

"Take off your robe."

Fortingern's breath hissed inwards and Artor saw him bite his lip, yet he stood and did as he was told. His body was well muscled and hairy, with sprinklings of silver among the dark fur. A pale shiny line ran across his chest, evidently an old battle wound.

“Sit down again and turn your back to me.”

When the Dux obeyed, Artor paused briefly, letting him feel his breath on his neck, then he ran the flat of his hand down the length of Fortingern's back, the pressure of his palm firm yet calming.

“I don't think you really do want me to flog you as though I were the town executioner or indeed a castle torturer and, judging by the lack of scar tissue here, it is not something you have ever previously experienced. If what you're after is a flogging that will feel convincingly like a judicial punishment inflicted on a common rogue, I can certainly arrange that for you. Is that what you want?”

“Yes.” The Dux's voice was low. He seemed somewhat taken aback at having his request challenged. Artor wondered how his previous playmates had handled him.

“Give me a word that you will use if you need this to stop, a code word so that I know you mean it. I pay little heed to generalised screams for mercy.”

The Dux stiffened, evidently offended by the assumption that screaming would be involved. “I don't intend to request mercy. I expect you to continue until either your arm is too tired to lift the whip, or you honestly believe I couldn't take another blow.”

“I require such a word from you before I raise any whip. Look at it from my point of view—do you think I want to risk facing the public executioner for real for daring to lay hands on the august Dux of Meringo? I need the assurance that I am doing this with your continuing permission.”

The Dux considered this. “If I say ‘Elderflower’, you may take that as a request to stop, but I won't use it.”

Artor smiled slightly at his bullheadedness. “I don't intend that you should have to. Are you ready?”

Fortingern nodded. “Yes, Master.”

“Get up.” Artor spoke sternly, and once they were both on their feet, he hustled and herded the Dux towards one of the rings embedded in the wall.

“The cuffs are on the table.”

Without acknowledging the Dux's helpful interjection, Artor left him standing with his back to the room and wandered over to the table to familiarise

himself with its contents at his leisure. When he was ready, Artor came back to where the Dux stood silently.

Taking Fortingern's arms in turn, he fastened his wrists in the heavy leather cuffs, using the attached clasps to affix them to the chains, drawing up his arms till they were above his head, yet with enough give that he could bend them more comfortably at the elbows, rather than pulled rigidly upright. The stance opened up his back more, and did not waste stamina on mere discomfort. Artor handled the Dux firmly and decisively, but without gratuitous roughness.

Moving so that he stood close behind the Dux, Artor briefly brushed his chest against the Dux's bare back, then he stepped away and raised the first whip he had selected from the table, a fairly light implement. Fortingern had requested a brutal beating and Artor was prepared to give it to him, but the courtesan knew well that even the most cherished fantasies could turn out to be not at all what was wished for in reality.

The Dux remained stubbornly still and silent as Artor reddened his shoulders with the first lashes, warming him up. Seeing his level of endurance, Artor presently changed to a heavier implement and laid on with more vigour. Soon the Dux was roaring, not plaintively, but as though it were a great release to have the cries wrested from him. Artor pressed on, always watchful for signs of damage or distress.

Memories came back to Artor of this part of his training, of being required to endure a series of floggings from sensual to severe, delivered by experts. He had greeted each session with a degree of trepidation, but had found the real challenge had come when the whip was finally placed in his own hand. He had adapted however, approached the new skills he was required to learn with the same conscientious Dedication he brought to international politics, Lauren elegiac poetry and toxicology.

The Dux's bellowings held a note of defiance, his stance was firm, his shoulders flexed; no sign of a request for mercy so Artor gave him none. When Fortingern started to sob in great heaving pants, Artor paused to ask him if he remembered the code word they had agreed on.

“Fuck you and fuck your stupid code word.”

Artor took the hint, exchanged the heavy flogger for a slender switch and belaboured Fortingern's shoulders until the Dux sagged at the knees, reduced to hoarse, inarticulate moans.

Putting the switch down, Artor placed a hand on the back of Fortingern's neck in a sustaining, steadying gesture while talking to him in a low voice, "It's over. I'm going to get these cuffs off you now. Keep still for me."

As quickly and calmly as he could, Artor loosed Fortingern's arms from the chains, moving swiftly to clasp the Dux under his arms, offering him support. Slowly, with soothing murmurs, he walked Fortingern back to the couch, his muscles protesting as he bore much of the heavier man's weight.

Once Fortingern had been lowered on to the couch, Artor saw that he was shaky, unfocused, his breath still coming hard. Grabbing a rug, Artor curled his body close against that of Fortingern, pulling the cover over both of them, trying to warm him. When Artor curled his arms round his neck, Fortingern placed his head on Artor's chest. For what felt to Artor like a long time, they lay together like that, Fortingern's breathing slowly returning to normal, the shuddering subsiding.

"Thank you." Fortingern had half-sat up, wincing a little as he did so.

"My pleasure." Artor raised his own head and kissed Fortingern on the lips, lightly but with a lingering tenderness.

"No one has ever dared do more than tap me before."

"I wouldn't have dared disappoint you."

The Dux smiled at this, still too overcome by the intensity of his experience to converse at any length.

Realising that the cathartic effect of the beating was enough for Fortingern and that he was not in a condition to enjoy further sensual stimulation, Artor let the Dux rest beside him for a while. When he showed signs of drifting off, Artor gently roused him and asked him if he wanted to be taken to bed.

"Just take me back to the dining room and ring for a servant. I'll be fine."

"Very well. Fortingern, you do have some minor grazes, but mostly there'll be quite a bit of bruising which will start to show up in a day or so. You're liable to be quite sore and stiff for the better part of the week. You might want to apply compresses which will bring the bruising down quicker. If you like, I can come in and do that, so that you won't need to involve a servant."

Fortingern smiled. "You're very thoughtful. Don't worry, I choose my servants for their trustworthiness and discretion. I don't bother to conceal too much that concerns me personally."

Artor nodded and helped Fortingern to his feet. Fortingern caught his breath raspingly as though suppressing a groan, and refused the arm Artor offered him for support, walking slowly but unaided through the door Artor held open for him.

“Thank you again, my dear.” Fortingern leant forward to brush his lips against Artor’s once again. “You were all I could have asked for. I shall be in touch very soon.”

The Dux rang a gong which hung from the wall and sank into a chair. Taking the hint, Artor bade him good night and left the dining room.

Hardly had he closed the door behind him, when Gaheris came rushing up from down the corridor where he had evidently been pacing. His eyes darted rapidly over Artor from top to toe and he clasped him by the arms, evidently in some agitation. “Are you alright? Has he hurt you?”

“Shh, no, no one’s hurt me. Come, let’s go home, we can talk properly there.”

Lamplight from the prosperous streets and squares that surrounded the palace shone brightly into Artor’s sedan, where he sprawled at rest on rugs and cushions. It illuminated the dark silhouette of Gaheris, marching alongside the chair, maintaining the bearers’ slow, steady pace.

8

Once they were back at Artor's apartment, Gaheris accompanied Artor to his bedchamber, not troubling to lower his eyes as Artor cast off his dark tunic and leathern breeches, leaving them tangled on the floor for Pomona to pick up.

Artor caught his gaze. "See, no injuries." He turned himself round slowly so Gaheris could verify for himself. Gaheris finally reddened and looked away.

"What made you think I was injured anyway? Also, why, if you thought I was in any danger, did you not come to my rescue?"

"I heard noises through the door, sounds of a whip and groaning. I burst into the dining room and found it empty and the other door locked. I listened at the door and realised it didn't sound like you groaning, but I couldn't think what was happening.

"While I stood there, dithering, one of the Dux's guards came and found me by the door. I asked him what was going on and he sneered at me, saying the Dux is amusing himself as he always does with handsome boys, but not to worry, he was sure you'd be in one piece by the end of it. I nearly flattened him, but I knew that if I misjudged this, I'd risk ruining everything."

"Your instincts were the right ones, Gaheris. That guard was just trying to wind you up and I'm very glad you didn't rise to the bait. You heard me flogging the Dux, at his own request."

"But why?" There was such total bafflement in Gaheris' tone that Artor burst into the high, strained laughter of the overtired.

"It pleases some people, Gaheris, quite a lot of people in fact, which is why delivering an expert flogging was an important part of my training."

Gaheris looked curious, perhaps a little repelled. "And did you enjoy flogging him?"

Artor considered. "Up to a point, yes. There is always the satisfaction of displaying excellence in exercising skills one worked hard to acquire. It pleased me to give him what he wanted. I'm a courtesan to the bone, Gaheris, and giving the client what he wants is instinctive to me. I simply entered into the energy and spirit of it. You have to if you're going to be any good. A fake satisfies no one."

Gaheris digested this. “And will it give you pleasure and satisfaction when you exercise your skills by murdering him?”

“No!” Artor was flooded with the recent memory of Fortingern’s body curled into his, of how he had squared his shoulders during the heaviest part of the flogging to take more from him, in total trust if not surrender, and of his soft, grateful kiss after. Turning away from Gaheris, he buried his face in his hands.

“I’m sorry.” Gaheris had not intended his words to have such effect. “I thought...”

“Of course, I *will* do it, if it turns out he is a threat to the Empire, but if you imagine I would get any pleasure from it...”

“Hey, it’s alright.” Without thinking about what he was doing, Gaheris moved forwards and drew Artor’s unclothed body into a close embrace. Artor returned it, putting his arms round Gaheris’ neck and burying his face in his shoulder. Gaheris stroked Artor’s back, finding himself marvelling at the softness of his skin, the suppleness of muscle and sinew beneath.

Artor seemed to relax deeply into the embrace, sighing, his body going limp. Gaheris continued the soft stroking. “I’ve got you. Whatever you have to do, I’ll be here. If you wake up with bad dreams, I’ll be here. You’re not facing any of this alone any more.”

Artor took a deep, shuddering breath. “You were the centre of my world once, Gaheris, when we were boys together. When we would go out hunting at night, further into the forest than anyone else dared to go, I felt fearless, invincible because I was with you. I always felt safe with you, Gaheris. When they took me, and for long nights after, I would think of you when I tried to sleep at night, imagine you close, holding, protecting me. I was so afraid and alone then, you can’t imagine. But then I would imagine how you must despise me for letting myself be taken, that you didn’t care about me any more, and then I knew I had to forget all about home if I was to survive.”

“Artor, I never stopped missing you, never stopped grieving. From the moment they carried you away, I vowed I would wage war on the Laurentines to my dying breath. Every raid, every triumph, whenever we brought back bags of grain to the village, robbed from a Laurentine granary. I exulted in your name. I became a warrior to avenge you.”

Artor lifted his head, brushed his mouth against Gaheris’ lips. There was an intake of breath and then Gaheris returned the kiss with passion.

A moment later Gaheris drew back, looking at Artor with slightly raised eyebrows. "Should we do this?"

"Yes." Artor's breath was coming in quick pants. "I need this—I need *you*."

Gaheris needed no further encouragement; pulling off his own tunic, he drew Artor back into his arms. Without breaking their kiss, they negotiated the few steps back to the bed and then they were falling back on to it, Gaheris lying atop Artor's slender, naked body.

He caressed the boy's beautiful chest, his hands stroking and circling, delicately rubbing and pinching at Artor's hard, dusky-pink nipples. Even as Artor moaned and arched his back in response, his substantial cock straining against his belly, Gaheris strove to put from his mind the thought that he was lying with a man for whom lovemaking was a matter of professional expertise, just like his own skill at arms.

Artor paused from kissing and nibbling the side of Gaheris' neck to crane his neck and whisper hoarsely in his ear, "Do you remember that hot afternoon when we stole away to the haybarn?"

His words transported them both back to that day, to the boys who had grown up together, been everything to each other, before events had interposed to send their lives down such divergent paths. With fevered passion they kissed and moved together, Artor grasping Gaheris' muscular buttocks with both hands and kneading. Their kissing was fierce and clumsy.

"Gods, I want to fuck you!"

"You'll find unguent in the little blue pot on my dressing table, there, by the box of kohl."

Groaning with frustration at the necessary delay, Gaheris got up and went over to the dressing table. He hurried the stoppered glass vial back to the bed, smiling a little at the dainty thing.

"Give it here." Deftly, Artor popped the stopper and poured a little pool of oil on to his palm. Gaheris clutched at the bedclothes and drew in his breath as Artor's firm hand massaged his prick, daubing it thoroughly, before slipping down to wantonly cup and play with his balls.

"Oh Gods," he sighed once again.

Artor presently handed the vial back to Gaheris and rolled on to his stomach, his legs spread and knees slightly bent. For a few breathless moments,

Gaheris could only sit back and admire. Then, starting at the nape of Artor's neck, brushing aside his bright gold locks, Gaheris stroked his way down, appreciating the deceptive strength of his slender back, the narrow and graceful waist and hips, before finally indulging touch and sight in the sheer beauty of his rounded arse. He took his time caressing, then massaging more deeply so that Artor groaned with pleasure. Finally, he gently drew the firm cheeks apart and breathed hotly on the exposed opening, delighted when Artor whimpered softly in response. Lowering his head, Gaheris teased Artor with rapid flicks of his tongue over the tight entrance, so that he squirmed and moaned.

He hitched his breath when Gaheris dripped the oil, letting it trickle between his buttocks before working it in with careful fingers, feeling the muscles quickly relax and loosen in response to the touches.

Artor turned over on to his back and when Gaheris knelt above him, wrapped his long legs around his waist. Gaheris eased the head of his cock inside him, then, grasping Artor's hips, thrust in slow and deep, his pace quickening as Artor pushed back, his breath coming in short pants, his eyes bright. Gaheris leant forward so that they could kiss and embrace as they fucked, looking into each other's eyes as they recovered the intimacy of their past, remembered themselves to each other. Their gaze broke the thin but palpable web of tension they had lived under since they were reunited, a tension of averted looks and words unspoken.

As they moved close to climax, Artor stroked Gaheris' chest, thumbing and tweaking his hardened nipples. Towards the end, Artor reached down and brought himself off, just as Gaheris reached completion inside him with a cry.

Afterwards, the two of them lay together in a sweaty, tangled heap, limbs intertwined. Gaheris nuzzled Artor's neck in a final kiss before they both drifted into deep sleep.

They were awakened early next morning by Iason knocking on the door of the bedchamber. If the servant was surprised to see Gaheris in bed with his master, he betrayed no outward sign beyond perhaps a widening of the eyes. In his arms was a great bouquet of lilies, pink and white and deep purple with long stamens, their powerful scent already filling the room. "A messenger delivered them from the palace just now, along with boxes of gifts in the hallway for you to inspect when you're ready, sir. There is also a note, and the messenger awaits your reply."

Artor took the scroll, cracked the seal and read.

Artor,

I fear I indulged myself rather selfishly in your company last night. If you would care to come to luncheon at noon on the morrow, I should be delighted to endeavour to make it up to you.

Fortingern

“Tell the messenger I would be delighted to attend.”

After Iason had closed the bedroom door behind him, Artor turned to Gaheris. “This will be my opportunity.”

9

Next day dawned bright and sunny, and when Artor arrived at the castle in a light tunic and thin cloak, he was shown not to the Dux's private apartments as before, but through the keep and into a courtyard garden. The garden was enclosed on all sides by the castle's ancient ivy-covered walls. A turreted annexe overlooked the paved walkways, and the neat clipped hedges bordering beds of flowers and fragrant herbs. The paths converged on a square of mosaic paving where couches and a table were arrayed and the Dux reclined, waiting to greet Artor.

Approaching the Dux, Artor leant down to kiss and embrace him, feeling a spontaneous rush of affection at the contact. Fortingern clasped him warmly before Artor took his seat on the adjoining couch.

"How have you been?"

The Dux smiled. "Quite unreasonably cheerful, as it happens. You were right about the bruising and the stiffness, but in twenty-odd years of warfare, sport and hunting, I have certainly suffered worse. Hot baths can do wonders, I find."

"Indeed they can."

At the Dux's urging, Artor filled his plate from the dainty serving bowls of ripe summer fruit, soft cheese, watercress, grilled fish and other light dishes. An attendant filled his cup with wine before the Dux signalled to the staff to leave them. Hardly had the retreating servants closed the door behind them, however, than it was opened once again as another attendant came out into the garden, his garb and demeanour suggesting that he occupied some higher rank than server in the palace hierarchy.

"Apologies for intruding, my Lord, but Counsellor Brynne requires to speak with you on a matter of some urgency."

The Dux cursed. "Forgive me, Artor, I may be detained at this meeting for some time. Will you be content to enjoy the garden until my return? Ask to be shown to my sitting room if the weather should turn inclement."

"I shall be fine out here."

Once he was left alone, Artor got to his feet and moved closer to the castle, wondering if there was some way of getting into the building unobserved and

seeking evidence that the Dux intended any treachery. He cast his mind back to the tour of the castle's interior on which the Dux had conducted him a few days ago. There had been several rooms with closed doors which the Dux had described as "only offices" and not invited him to view. Could Artor find his way back to them, gain entry and search for incriminating documentation?

As he turned the possibilities over in his mind, Artor caught a movement from the upper window of the turret. Taking a few steps back and angling his neck, Artor glimpsed the outlines of the Dux and his advisor Brynne with her distinctive tiers of curls, sitting opposite one another, apparently deep in confabulation.

His heart beating a little faster, Artor assessed the possibilities. There were no servants around, but of course one might appear at any moment to see if he needed anything. The Dux and his advisor were sitting at some distance from the window with only a limited perspective on the outside. The thickly growing ivy that entwined the small tower was testament to Meringo's long years of peace and stability. No castle at risk from enemy attack would allow such convenient means to gain entry.

Having made his decision, Artor cast off his cloak and darted forwards, his nimble hands and feet soon gaining purchase on the sturdy creeper which bore his weight well. The crevices in the crumbling wall offered additional hand and toe holds.

Artor climbed until he was about fifteen feet from the ground, just below the narrow arched window through which he had espied his quarry. He stilled himself, quieted his breathing and opened his ears. The voices of those in the chamber above reached him, low, but capable of decipherment.

"These letters which we intercepted today confirm everything, my Lord. There is little doubt that a coup is imminent."

"And what is our state of preparations?"

"We now have fifty thousand fully trained and armed warriors ready to be deployed at a moment's notice."

The ghost of the Dux's sigh reached even Artor, below. "So much potential waste of life and resources and all because of a witless boy scarce fit to be blackboard monitor, never mind rule a great Empire. If anything were more symbolic than the sad state of old, decaying Laurentium..."

Brynne cleared her throat determinedly, cutting short the Dux's tirade. "Quite, my Lord, but the question remains of how we propose to meet this emergency."

"Ptolemaius still forbids all questioning of Aethelius' loyalty. My daughter Clothilde has attempted to raise our concerns with Florianus for months now, our suspicions that Aethelius is plotting a coup, but the Clarissimus only sighs and says that, lacking incontrovertible proof of his treachery, he dare not bring an accusation against him before the Emperor. Ptolemaius has had several minor courtiers sent to the dungeons for venturing to speak against him."

"But these letters remove all possibility of doubt; they make it clear that Aethelius plans to act decisively; the Empire is in danger of disintegrating into civil war." The exasperation in Brynne's voice was close to despair.

"Unfortunately, Aethelius' many acolytes in the city are equally zealous at intercepting any missives to the Palace which might persuade even the Emperor that his favourite companion in hawking and dice, could possibly mean him harm. There is little chance of our getting the letters safely into the hands of Florianus."

Artor had heard enough. Hand over hand, he scrambled back down the tower, almost losing his footing for one heart-stopping moment in his distractedness. Once his feet touched solid ground, Artor began pacing up and down the paths as he digested the implications of what he had just heard.

Florianus had deceived him as to the nature of his mission. Artor was not there to spy on the Dux at all, but to stumble upon the evidence of Aethelius' treachery that the Emperor's partiality, and Aethelius' numerous spies and supporters, made it all but impossible to obtain or safely bring to light in Laurentium. Even Aethelius' watchers couldn't detect that someone was on their trail if the person, himself, were unaware of it. Artor sighed; he admired Florianus' ingenuity, but he knew now what his true mission was, and that the real danger would come upon his return to the land he called home.

Aethelius he knew well. Scion of one of Laurentium's oldest and noblest families, wearers of the Imperial Crown only a couple of centuries ago, he had been brought up at the palace, close to the Imperial Family.

Ten years older than the young emperor, brilliant, handsome and athletic, Ptolemaius hero-worshipped Aethelius; the rather awkward child was never happier than when his glamorous cousin condescended to play at dice with him,

or go out hunting with hounds or hawks, or tell him lurid and boastful tales of his exploits with war and women.

Artor had always mistrusted Aethelius and sensed that Florianus did too. The proud young man had made himself the darling of the populace, parading around outside the Palace on a magnificently caparisoned white charger, an obvious contrast to the pale, pudgy boy who trotted alongside him on his pony. Who would cut a better dash as Emperor? The question hung in the air unspoken.

Having got his thoughts in order, Artor stopped his restless pacing and returned quietly back to his couch where he poured himself a cup of wine, and tried to settle into the peaceable air of one who has been sunning himself in contented solitude.

Not long after, the Dux returned; his agitation of mind showed in a slight flush to the face and abruptness in his movements, but once he had taken his place on the couch, it was as though his troubles were banished by sheer effort of will. He turned his eyes and smile upon Artor as though no one else could possibly have claims on his attention. In response, Artor felt a rush of warmth and affection for him, strongly intermingled with relief. He would not have to murder this man; he was no traitor, despite his quaint and provocative vaunting of his barbarian heritage.

“I am so sorry for abandoning you for this length of time. You must have been dreadfully bored.”

Artor smiled. “On the contrary, I enjoyed a rather pleasant little doze, but I am very glad you are back.”

Within moments, they were pressed in each other's arms on Artor's couch, kissing with a tender intensity.

“I have ordered all the servants to stay away from the garden the rest of the afternoon, no matter what the emergency,” Fortingern murmured as he raised Artor's silk tunic above his thighs and applied his mouth attentively to his hard cock. Artor lay back on the cushions, eyes closed, and enjoyed the sensations, his mind empty with relief. Later the Dux knelt above him as he reclined, and Artor took him in his mouth, using all his courtesan's art to bring him wave after wave of pleasure as Fortingern moaned and tangled his hands in Artor's curls.

Afterwards, they lay companionably together, the Dux chatting about his future plans for his beloved Meringo, including dramatic festivals and the restoration of ancient Meringan temples, long neglected over centuries of Laurentian cultural hegemony. He spoke, too, of his daughter Clothilde and how he missed her, since she had moved to Laurentium. Artor enjoyed the embrace and the chatter, and tried not to let his mind stray to the little locked casket that sat casually on his dressing table amongst boxes of jewellery, ribbons, combs and cosmetics.

Inside that box were about a dozen tiny little vials, some of blue and some of clear glass, each containing a little liquid or powder. Had he heard other words beneath that arched window, Artor, on his next visit to the Dux, would have had one of those little bottles inserted into a tiny pouch inside his shirtsleeve. A few drops adroitly scattered in soup or a wine glass and it wouldn't be till some time the next day that the Dux would suddenly keel over, clutching at his chest. Not too rapidly after, Artor would discreetly melt away.

10

Artor waited until he got home that evening before he shared his discoveries with Gaheris, sitting in his lap on the couch, each with a cup of wine. Even then, fearful of possible eavesdroppers, he did not name Prince Aethelius. He told him only that he had discovered all he needed to, that Fortingern was no traitor and there was to be no assassination.

Tomorrow, Artor must face the Dux and confess to him that he was, in fact, a spy sent by Florianus. Somehow, he must then persuade Fortingern to entrust him with those letters to smuggle back to Laurentium.

Artor would be the bearer of documents that would prove treason against one of the most powerful and popular persons in the Empire. Even with Gaheris at his side, even with Artor's dexterity with the tiny jewelled knives that would be suddenly in each hand if he were attacked, Artor's life would be in grave peril.

All this was for the future. Just for this evening, Artor could put it all out of his mind, enjoy the relief that no one was to die just yet, and luxuriate in the embrace of his lover who would be there with him to face whatever lay ahead.

The End

Author Bio

Clodia Metelli grew up in London, spending a childhood largely immersed in books and her own world of make-believe, fuelled by a kaleidoscope of literary and historical obsessions. This has mostly set the pattern for her life so far, inspiring her to spend years studying Greco-Roman society, gaining an MA and a PhD in the process. She now lives by the sea with her boyfriend and a black cat called Achilles, working part-time as a support worker, which leaves her scope to pursue and share her obsessions through reading and writing.

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ASSASSIN'S LOVE

By Sammy Goode

Photo Description

A gray mist shrouds the scene behind him, as he seems to emerge from its depths, a bloody dagger clasped in his right hand and a gold signet ring in the other. He wears the clothing of a man who would be welcomed at the court of King Henry VIII. His black leather breastplate covers a midnight blue shirt and his black cape billows about him, the hood drawn over his head, exposing only his face. His eyes speak of weariness that is shrouded in sorrow. He lives in smoke and shadow and his is a deadly occupation.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I don't know who I am. I was abandoned when I was a child; they used to call me a freak and beat me because I couldn't speak. I'm mute but I survived.

Then my master, the old Earl, who is a diplomat but who is also a familiar figure at King Henry VIII's court, took me in his household and trained me: I'm an Assassin!

I'm a shadow, working in the shadows; I do what I'm told to do. I have no friends. Sometimes I feel lonely and I dream about something different, something more...

Tell me, is there any hope for me, can you help me!?

Thank you,

Misty.

P.S. Please no BDSM, no D/s, no poly, no incest, no paranormal, no fantasy.

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: assassin, mute main character, nobility, set during the time of King Henry VIII's rule

Word Count: 11,470

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ASSASSIN'S LOVE

By Sammy Goode

The boy crouched behind the rough-hewn bed that smelled of death. He could hear distant wailing and long, low moans filtering through, despite cupping his ears in his dirty hands, and rasping out ragged puffs of air between his torn and bloody lips. Anything to keep from hearing... from seeing what lay on the bed above him. He rocked gently on his feet and tried to remember the poem his mother always read to him.

*And wilt thou leave me thus?
Say nay, say nay, for shame,
To save thee from the blame
Of all my grief and grame,
And wilt thou leave me thus?
Say nay, say nay!*

Miles could hear his mother's soft whisper in his ear. He remembered her sweet breath washing over him as she recited the sad verses and held him close, wooing him to sleep. Soft and gentle was his mam, until the strange sickness. How many hours had he watched as she lay retching, her back seizing as the sweat poured from her? He had tried to soothe her, petting her hair and holding her around the waist, as her body shook and she raved about death.

But he was too small, too young, and the sweating sickness had too firm a hold on his mam. The few coins he begged whilst hiding from the guards was not enough to feed them both. Every time, she would push away the few chunks of hard dark bread and mouldy cheese he had managed to find, telling him in her soft rasping voice to *eat it, to grow strong, to be her good boy*. As he tried not to gulp down the meagre supper, she would pull the flask from beneath her pillow and take long pulls from its mouth, the strong spirits finally soothing her so that she could sleep for an hour or two.

He didn't know how she came by the elixir and the sharp, dismissive tone when he looked at her questioningly quelled any further inquiries on the subject. She rarely spoke to him that way and he felt shamed that she had been so angry with him. He needn't have wondered really, since he actually knew

who brought it to her. He'd seen the fancy gentleman deliver it just a few nights before. He recalled how the two of them had tussled over the bottle, his mam speaking in a teasing voice that he'd never heard before and hoped to never hear again as it made him uneasy, like he was eavesdropping on a conversation that he was too young to understand.

She and the gentleman with the loud, hard voice and the luxurious clothing didn't know he was there, hiding in the gloom. He had snuck into their small shack earlier, when a soft rain had begun to fall. He was supposed to have been begging on the street until the evening fires were lit. That was the rule—he was not to come home till then, for his mother was often occupied, and those who came to give her their washing did not like to have little children about, or so he was told. He was not to leave his place, but he had been cold and wet and wanted the tiny bit of comfort their home provided. So that night he was there and heard those noises she made, soft and pleading, interrupted by an occasional slap or gruff request to spread herself wider. Miles had some idea what went on with these “customers” and it made his skin crawl to hear them. As quickly as he came, the man was gone. After, his mother stood by the wash bucket and scrubbed at her body muttering, “no more, no more.” Then she would drink the medicine and fall into a deep sleep that always frightened him, for she took on the appearance of one already dead.

A sharp sound of scuffling feet broke through the boy's memories, causing him to scramble and press further into the shadows beneath the bed. He was tiny for his nine years and could still fit into little cubbies where few rarely looked. It would not do to be seen, for there were always rumours about young boys who had been snatched from their families and pressed into the service of the king, to tend his soldier's horses and even warm a bed or two. However, it was not that fate which made Miles so fearful. Instead it was what might happen when those same men discovered he was unable to speak. Mute since birth, never making a sound or cry, Miles had found other ways to make his needs known. He had also learned to disappear at a moment's notice when danger was near. His mam had often been startled when he would suddenly appear from a darkened corner. Even at his young age, Miles was already able to go unnoticed and be as silent as a mouse.

He listened as the feet entered the room and then held his breath as he heard the sheeting that separated the bedstead from the rest of the hut rustle and tear.

“Good God. It's the sweats as took her!”

“Shut up, you fool. We’re here for the boy. Just don’t get too close to the whore and we’ll be fine. Now spread out and find the little bastard or His Lordship will have your head.”

Miles pulled back, curling in on himself, determined not to be found. As long as they steered clear of his mam’s deathbed, he would never be found. The soldiers tore the little shack apart, smashing the few pieces of furniture. Then as suddenly as the noise had erupted, the night went silent. Miles tensed, straining to hear any sign of what had happened to the men who had just been destroying whatever had lain in their path. He held his breath, waiting.

“Damn the boy to Hell. He must have run off when he saw his whore of a mother dead and gone. Let’s go then, we’ll check his other haunts and ask about to see if any have seen hide or hair of him.”

Miles remained in his spot beneath the bed and waited until the scrape of the boots faded into the distance. And still he paused, almost sniffing the air as a dog would when seeking to discover if there were any intruders about. It was that intake of air that would be his undoing. The bed was shoved back against the wall, and a dagger appeared right before his eyes.

“Don’t move, you little bastard.”

Rough hands grabbed at his tunic and pulled him from his hiding place. A swift cuff to the head and a fist in his gut, and Miles doubled over in pain as his arms were yanked behind him and bound with a piece of hemp. When he struggled to get loose, he was hit again on the side of his head, and he felt the blood begin to trickle down his temple.

“Jesus, be careful. His Lordship wants it in one piece. And bind his damned mouth before he sets to screaming this filthy shack down around our ears.”

The soldier who held Miles responded with a deep, guttural laugh and a truth that set Miles’ face burning with shame.

“He won’t be doing anything of the sort, I can tell you that. This little piece of filth is silent as the tomb. That’s right—a bastard with no voice.”

“A mute you say? Then why all the fuss about bringing him in?”

“That’s not for us to know. Now get the horses.”

The other man made no movement, instead belligerently sticking out his chest and setting his jaw with a stubborn look.

“Are you fixing for him to ride behind one of us? 'Cause I can tell you I don't want the likes of him anywhere near me.”

“This piece of shite? Ride?”

Again the soldier chuckled, and Miles swore he could feel his blood run cold at the sound.

“No, this little whoreson can run along behind. Fetch the longer rope, I'll tie his leash to my mount.”

With a flurry of movement, a noose was fashioned to go around his slender neck, and Miles began the long journey to the home of the Earl of Wessex. The soldiers spared him no pain as they moved along the sodden dirt path toward the castle. Miles stumbled often and fell even more, leaving his knees a bloodied mess and a gash above his eye that bled copiously down the side of his face. After two long miles, the group halted inside the gate, and Miles stood before the main hall door. Trembling with fear and desperate for breath, Miles was pulled along. Before he could get his bearings, he was unceremoniously dumped before a blazing fire.

“As Your Lordship requested, here is the bastard of the washer woman known as Irene.”

“Was it really necessary to drag him through every puddle of mud between here and that hovel he calls a home, Wentworth?”

The soldier shuffled uneasily as he knew the calm demeanour and tone of His Lordship belied the nasty underbelly of a snake about to strike. He chose his words carefully, hoping to get off with just a reprimand and avoid a few days in the stocks.

“He put up a good fight, he did. We had to tie him, or he would have escaped.”

The Earl of Wessex looked up sharply at his guard, and quick as an adder, reached out and struck him on the ear, drawing blood.

“You bloody fool. Nearly brought down by a slip of a boy? I suppose next you'll be telling me he almost bested you before you could even lash his wrists. Get out of my sight and send Bremen to me. Tell her to bring water and a fresh tunic for the boy.”

The guard turned and made a smart retreat. Miles remained by the fire, shivering, and tried to make sense of why he had been brought before the earl.

He flinched as the powerful man knelt beside him and placed two fingers beneath his chin.

“Look at me, boy. Come, raise your eyes to mine. There’s no need to fear me.”

Miles cautiously raised his eyes, their azure depths glancing surreptitiously toward the face of the man who now ruled over whether Miles lived, died, or endured some half-life in between. He was shocked to see a flicker of kindness in the older man’s eyes, but also took note of a cunning hardness that lay behind the soft glance. Without any forethought as to the folly of his actions, Miles returned the hard stare with one of his own. He would show this man. Miles was no simpleton to be ill-used. The countless beatings and endless mockery he bore on the streets due to his inability to speak had toughened his young heart. He would not be broken, not again. He raised himself to his feet and stared down at the Earl of Wessex, daring him to do his worst. Slowly the earl rose, a fleeting smile passing his lips. He placed his two hands on Miles’ shoulders and gripped him tightly, applying just enough pressure to make the boy blanch in pain.

“A bit of fire in you, isn’t there, boy? That’s good, very good. You’ll need every bit of that burning in your belly before I am through with you. After all, if you are to train to one day be my private assassin, you will need all the strength you can muster and then some. Would you like that, boy? Would you like to help me mete out some justice to those who have kept you and yours under their iron fist for so long? I can see by the anger in your eyes you would. Well, don’t you worry, you’ll get your chance to bring them to heel.”

Miles was transfixed by the hatred he saw in the earl’s eyes. Grateful that it was not directed at him, he began to wonder exactly what plans the earl had for him and exactly what he meant by “private assassin”. All in good time, he supposed, for now there came such a smell that his mouth began to water and his stomach grumble. He looked past His Lordship to see a wizened old woman carrying a tray of food in her hands. Behind her was a young serving girl laden down with fresh clothing and a flagon of water.

“Ah, Bremen, good. Here is the boy I discussed with you. Make sure he’s scrubbed clean and fed well. Tomorrow he can begin to serve in the kitchen with you. I need him fattened up if he is to begin his training next month. See to it, Bremen.”

The old woman nodded and dipped her head. Then, with a calculating eye, she turned to Miles and began to strip him of his muddied clothes. He made to struggle, but with a slap to his cheek and a harsh glare of warning, he stilled quickly enough. Bremen continued to remove his clothing. He heard the earl chuckle while at the same time his voice washed over him, shocking Miles once more with his remarks.

“You’ll like Bremen, boy. You’ll find you have something in common. You see, her former master cut out her tongue to punish her insolence. Silent as the tomb she is, just like you.”

Miles started, shocked to hear that the earl knew of his affliction. When he caught the sly look of triumph on the man’s face, Miles quickly lowered his eyes, his cheeks flaming in embarrassment for being caught out.

“Ahh, you didn’t know I knew your little secret, did you? Well, my boy, that mother of yours didn’t keep many secrets when she was spreading her thighs to be filled. That I know, first hand. Off with you then. Bremen, see he’s bedded down for the night.”

The old woman paused and raised her eyes to the earl. She stood and directed a pointed look toward the boy, and then held her hands out in a questioning way. The earl turned on her, exasperation and anger evident in his voice.

“What is it now, Bremen? I can’t read your mind, you know.”

Once more Bremen looked at the boy and then at the earl. This time she pointed to her ear and then her mouth.

“His name? Is that what you’re asking, you old hag? Well, the filthy little thing was called Miles by that whore he called mother. But I’ve a mind to change that.”

The earl paused and looked at the boy. What name to give his latest acquisition? The damnable boy had nearly eluded his guard, hiding in the shadows like the rats that plagued the town. What name to give such a clever boy? Then it struck the earl, causing him to laugh aloud.

“Shadow. His name is Shadow.”

Miles closed his eyes and shuddered at the cold laughter that echoed around the hall. Defeated for the moment, he submitted to this new life and the journey that lay ahead.

Nine years later...

Miles melted into the shadows behind the hanging tapestries and watched the crowd. Beneath his hooded cape lay the dagger he had been given earlier that night. It was Twelfth Night and, as was the custom for the close of the feast, the Lord of Misrule or the “King” of the twelve days of Christmas was now to be overturned and all power returned to Henry, the true king. It was a silly festival and one Miles did not care for in the least. The idea that for twelve days the true king would allow someone else to have authority over the days’ events was unthinkable to him. Of course, his opinion hardly mattered, being nothing more than a servant in the Earl of Wessex’s keep. At least that was what the earl told everyone he was. For nine years, Miles had actually been systematically honed and trained into what he now was—an assassin, one of the finest and most deadly. Miles had lost count of the many times he had been sent out to dispatch some traitor to the crown. Tonight he would once again spill a man’s blood with the silent rasp of his steel blade.

It mattered little to Miles who the intended victim was; he was merely a deadly shadow, to be used and then allowed to fade back into his life in the kitchen, where he still assisted the old woman, Bremen. Miles felt a twinge of guilt and something akin to a flash of pain roll in his gut as he remembered her face earlier, when he had returned from his time with the earl. She wore that troubled look that told him how much she feared for him and the mission he was to carry out for His Lordship. Miles thought her worries would lessen as time wore on, after all this was not his first, nor would it be his last kill.

As he stood in the gloomy alcove, watching the evening’s festivities, Miles recalled the very first time he had returned to the warmth of Bremen’s kitchen and how she had petted and soothed his trembling. For one brief second, he closed his eyes and allowed the memory of that first time to roll over him.

The Fifth Earl of Dembry was a cold and calculating man who supposedly had aspirations for the crown. Disguised as one of the earl’s stable boys, Miles waited for five long hours along the trail that the man took as his daily exercise. Stepping from behind the tree where he hid, the then fourteen-year-old Miles startled the earl’s horse, causing it to rear madly and the earl to lose his seat and fall to the hard, packed earth below. Quick as lightning, Miles struck, grabbing the man’s head and pulling it back to deliver the killing blow. Leaving the body to spill its blood on that narrow trail, Miles ran, with tears streaming down his face, to the guard who had escorted him from His

Lordship's castle. Tossing him a fresh tunic and admonishing him to leave off his girlish tears and bury the bloody tunic in some leaves and dirt alongside the pathway, the guard then pulled Miles onto the back of his horse and returned him to his keeper: the Earl of Wessex.

Miles recalled the Earl of Dembry's shocked visage as he'd stepped from behind that tree and quietly slit the man's throat. He did so with an air of cold detachment, belying the fear and horror that lay just beneath the surface. Each time he wielded the knife, the very marrow of his soul seemed to shrivel and close off, making him more beast than man.

Bremen often tried to show him he was much more than what the earl had fashioned, using her gentle hands to communicate her affection for him. Each time he returned to her warm kitchen, trembling with the realization that another man's blood still clung to his blade, he would sit and allow her to pet him, soothing his shaking limbs and bringing him back from the shadows of death. They would rest there, two beings wrapped in their world of silence, yet so attuned to what the other thought and felt. Bremen was the closest thing to a mother he would ever claim, and while he often chafed at her annoying ability to dress him down without uttering a word, he loved her more than the woman he had left behind all those years ago, in that filthy hovel he had once called home.

Miles shook himself ever so slightly to dispel the memory and focus on his task at hand. For eleven long nights, he had come to this dimly lit hiding place to watch the "Lord of Misrule"—one James Rothman, Duke of Wellingham. A high-standing and favoured member of King Henry's court, the duke was known for his good humour. However, underneath the mask of utter contentment and loyalty to the crown lay a viper who had insinuated himself so closely to the king that it was rare to see one without the other. Rumours abounded about Rothman's insatiable thirst to have the crown for himself, and there was good evidence that he would use this, the twelfth and final night of the celebration, to make his move.

While watching Rothman over the course of the celebration, Miles had also noted his salacious proclivities toward bedding young boys. Many of the nights when he hid, watching the man's evening routine, it had been Miles himself and his ability to create a noisy diversion before evaporating into the night that had saved the young boys that were brought to the duke's bed. By disrupting his filthy lusting and planting the fear that he was being observed, Miles was

able to save the boys from the duke's foul caresses. Having so easily foiled his plans before, Miles had no doubt he would be able to gain access to the bedroom chamber again, dispatch him and save one more boy from losing his innocence.

The roar of the crowd drew Miles' attention to the raised dais, where the king and Rothman stood, exchanging bawdy comments and ending the night's festivities. As the two men warmly embraced, and the king made off to retire to an upstairs chamber, Rothman watched his departure with obvious affection. No one would suspect that the duke was plotting to kill King Henry later that same night, but not before he sated himself on a piece of young flesh. It would take some time for the revellers to settle for the night and thereby allow Rothman to slip into the king's chambers unseen to carry out his foul deed. In the meantime, the man would satisfy his disgusting proclivities to while away the time. As Henry made his exit, Miles watched Rothman give a slight nod of his head and direct his gaze to a young boy, not much beyond ten years of age, who would be his next victim. Standing next to the lad was his older brother. Suddenly, as if detecting he was being watched, the man turned and his glance hit upon the very spot where Miles remained hidden.

For just a moment, Miles was lost staring into the depths of eyes so commanding he could scarcely breathe. Fair as the sun and casting a long, lean shadow, Miles watched as Sir Anthony, Duke of Wales bent down to whisper in his younger brother's ear. Miles felt an unusual heat stir in him, as he watched those lips press close to the boy's ear. For just a moment, he allowed himself to think about how it would be to feel the caress of that warm breath against his own neck. Then, just as quickly, Miles felt the shame of his own poor upbringing and despicable profession douse any dreams of that sort.

As it was customary for young boys to squire older aristocracy, the young lad now left his brother's care and made his way to Rothman's side. With clenched fists and nausea filling his gut, Miles watched the boy be led away, presumably to Rothman's bedchamber, where the young lad's duties should only be to fetch wine for the duke and tend to his side till bedtime. Never should there be any other use of the boy, yet Miles knew that would not be the case this night.

Stepping carefully from his hiding place, the Shadow crept from the hall and made his way swiftly to the still empty bedchamber. There, he hid himself behind the curtained window and waited for the right moment to spring the trap

that would snuff out the life of the vile debaucher. With one quick slice of his blade, Miles would relieve the world of not only an assassin set on killing the king, but a despoiler of young boys. He did not have to wait long. Rothman led his victim into the darkened room, staying the boy's hand as he reached out to light the bedside candle with the one he carried. Plucking the candle from his fingers, Rothman placed it down and turned on the boy, grabbing him roughly and tearing at his leggings while trying to free his own cock from its bindings. As the boy made to cry out for help, Miles watched as Rothman cuffed the boy on the head, knocking him senseless for a brief enough time to divest him of his coverings and expose his tender backside.

Soundlessly, Miles crept from his hiding place and grabbed the man, wrenching back his head and slicing the soft skin at his neck. As the knife cut through flesh, the door to the chamber flew open, and the boy's brother entered the room with his sword drawn. Sir Anthony seemed to freeze midstride, as he watched the fountain of blood arc from Rothman's neck. Miles saw Sir Anthony blanch momentarily as he watched the now still body slump to the floor. Their eyes met, and each took the measure of the other. Slowly, Sir Anthony sheathed his sword and began to approach Miles, his hands extended outward as if trying to soothe a startled animal. The look of wary compassion in the man's eyes was nearly Miles' undoing. Recovering with a snap of his head, Miles pulled his hood down over his eyes, casting his face in shadow once more.

Sir Anthony paused, uncertain how to proceed, yet clearly longing to touch Miles and keep him from leaving. Miles allowed himself to be halted momentarily, his eyes glued to the other man's face. For just a second, Miles wished he could truly speak and assure Sir Anthony that he was not the evil man others believed him to be. He wanted this man to understand that all he had been commanded to do was done in defence of the king, and not for bloodthirsty gain. For his part, Anthony greatly desired to thank Miles for saving his brother, and even more, to assure him that he would never forget the debt he now owed him.

The two men stood, each filled with an odd sense of longing. Anthony took a step closer, shocked by the sudden and sharp need that rose up in him to touch Miles. Then the silence was shattered by the frantic sobs of the half-naked boy clinging to the foot of the bed, diverting Anthony's attention to the needs of his younger brother, which should have allowed Miles to make his escape through the bedchamber window, to safety.

But the picture of Anthony sweeping his brother into his arms and rocking him gently to soothe him captured Miles, causing him to stand a moment longer before finally turning to flee. As he made his way to the opening, he heard Sir Anthony crooning to his sobbing brother. The softly uttered words seemed so familiar. When had Miles heard them before? He stood still, trying to make sense of what he was hearing, and then it struck him. He nearly doubled over, the sharp pain of remembrance tearing at him as the soothing words became clear:

*And wilt thou leave me thus?
Say nay, say nay, for shame,
To save thee from the blame
Of all my grief and grame;
And wilt thou leave me thus?
Say nay, say nay!*

Miles closed his eyes and felt the touch of a long lost hand upon his brow, as it tenderly stroked his hair and carried him off to sleep. For just a moment, the assassin known as Shadow was back in his mother's arms, safe and loved. Miles felt the trickle of a single tear fall soft upon his cheek and opened his eyes to see Anthony gently clothing his brother with a tender touch. Once again their gazes locked, and this time Miles saw the gratitude in the nobleman's look. The hazel eyes seemed to burn right through his hooded disguise and take his measure, not finding it wanting or lacking in the least. Before that assessment could waver, Miles turned and clambered out the window, grabbing at weathered vines to ease his passage to the ground. Once more, the Shadow melted back into the night that was his home.

One year later...

Anthony stood looking over the latest missive from the king. He shook his head and felt the old familiar tension creep up his shoulders, as he read that the current queen was to be disposed of to make room for another. Apparently, this one promised to be a better breeder and more likely to produce the all-elusive male heir Henry panted after these days. Tossing the parchment onto the desk, he rubbed his eyes and thanked the heavens once more that he had a younger brother who could inherit, should the need arise. And, as always, thoughts about his brother led him back to that night and his own stupidity. Even now, he still cringed inwardly at the idea that he'd allowed his brother to play the

part of servant boy. Worse than that, he had, in fact, encouraged it. All this so that he could curry favour with Rothman, who had, in turn, carried the favour of the king—that favour which Anthony himself was once desperate to have. But at what cost? His brother's virtue? Had it not been for the Shadow, the night would have taken a much more desperate turn.

For just a moment, Anthony closed his eyes, recalling the man who had saved his brother that night. So quiet and still. But those eyes, the blue so true and gaze so fierce—yet lurking beneath, one could detect a strange sort of melancholy. Anthony shuddered as he recalled that flushed cheek and plump lip. Despite the bulky clothing, there was a hint of a lean and muscled body, coiled and ready to spring at a moment's notice.

Anthony sat, leaning back in his chair, and let his hand drift down to stroke his hardening cock. Licking his lips, he once again pulled the picture of the cloaked man to the forefront of his mind. The Shadow. He idly wondered what it would feel like to be in the embrace of such a dangerous and exciting villain. As forbidden as the assignation would be, the idea of falling into the arms of the mysterious Shadow made Anthony's cock pulse and grow. Stroking with a firmer hand, Anthony began to fumble at his hosen in order to feel the heat of his flesh in his hand. If he allowed himself to dream, he could pretend it was another man's hand sliding against his dripping shaft. Those eyes... the firm jaw and sweet lips... Shadow...

Anthony groaned and shook as he spilled, his cock jerking in his hand. The only sound echoing in the duke's library was his own harsh, unsteady breaths, as he felt the old mixture of shame and sweet release flood his senses. There was no doubt in his mind that he wanted the man known as the Shadow. Given the opportunity, he would surely invite him to share his bed, without any hesitation. Reaching for a cloth he kept hidden in a lower drawer, Anthony chuckled at himself.

Look at me, all moon-eyed over a common criminal. His hand stilled, the cleaning rag clenched in his fist, his thoughts slowly coalesced. *No, that's not right. The Shadow isn't common. He's much more.* Anthony tried to reach back in his memory and recall that night when he stood face-to-face with the man. He remembered thinking there was something fragile about him. Such an air of sadness around him. *Hardly an emotion one attributes to a cold-blooded murderer. I do wonder if the rumours are true and he's nothing more than a pawn in the hands of a conniving manipulator who may very well be the true threat to the crown.*

It wasn't lost on Anthony or his trusted inner circle that the victims of every assassination that had been carried out in the last several years was someone who was close to the crown. But was there something more? Where did this Shadow come from? Who controlled him? Who sent him out on his bloody missions?

Anthony rubbed his brow and picked up the note concerning the king once more. Was it treason to think that the king should not be allowed to summarily kill a wife that did not produce an heir post haste? Well, if it was, then Anthony was in opposition to the crown for the first time in his twenty-eight years walking the earth. And wasn't that a thought to bring one up short? Nonetheless, something had to be done about this egotistical king who ran the throne with his cock in his hand.

With a resigned air, Anthony realised it was time to call the others together and figure out how to rein in the man who was swiftly destroying the monarchy. Perhaps between the six of them, they could figure out some way to appeal to the king. If not, then they would have to move to somehow limit his power, or even destroy Henry completely. Treason. That is what he was contemplating. The word churned in his gut. The meeting must take place soon, and with great caution so as not to attract any unwanted attention. Invitations should be delivered today, if at all possible. Anthony sat and began to write.

Miles paced the narrow confines of his room. He had been summoned to the earl's chambers and knew he needed to move immediately to obey or suffer the consequences. Even now, the memories of the training he received flashed in his mind. The numerous times he was told he had disappointed His Lordship, and the beatings he received as a reminder to try harder, move faster. And for what? To become a weapon in the hands of an old man who one day hoped to see his own progeny on the throne. Oh yes, Miles was no fool. He may be mute, but his ears and eyes were sharp and aware. He'd heard the ramblings of His Lordship when he least suspected anyone could overhear. He knew that each time he was dispatched, it was to save the king from potential harm. But Miles also knew that the earl took much pleasure in seeing his peers cut down, for each one brought his own son that much closer to the throne.

Miles stopped and rubbed his face with his hands. There was nothing for it, really. This was all he was good for in the end. It was all he knew and he never faltered. Not once. Except for that one night, when he was discovered by Sir

Anthony. For just an instant, he felt the weight of all the blood he had spilled. He could smell it; all the death he had delivered. He could see the horror of it reflected in that face. Those eyes that looked upon him with pity and something more. Affection. Yes, that was what he swore he saw, gratitude and affection. Miles closed his eyes at the memory. He remembered how, later that night as he lay in his bed, he conjured that face and shamefully stroked himself off while contemplating that mouth kissing his, those hands caressing him.

Miles opened his eyes. He was a fool to think that anyone, much less a man of noble birth, would want the likes of him. He turned and snatched up his dagger, sheathing it in his boot, and drew his hood down over his head. He felt the cold hard lump settle in his stomach and the carefully blank expression steal over his face. Without further delay, he left his room and silently made his way to the earl's chambers and his next assignment.

Thirty minutes later, the man known as the Shadow looked down at the piece of parchment in his hand. He could feel the weight of His Lordship's stare as his own mind whirled, trying to take in all he had been told. If the earl was to be believed, then there was a plot by six trusted advisors of the king to either "persuade" Henry to change his ways or lose his position of power. It seemed a king who made a habit of beheading his wives was not someone these men cared to pledge allegiance to anymore. On the paper in his hand was the name of the first of the six men to be dispatched. Miles opened the folded sheet and felt the blood leave his face as he read the name on the parchment. Lord Anthony, Duke of Wales. The paper fluttered to the floor, glancing off Miles' boot, where his dagger lay sheathed and ready to strike.

He looked up and caught sight of the gleeful expression on the earl's face. Here was the only man whom he had ever dared to trust, and for the first time Miles felt something akin to doubt stir in his belly. Wasn't the earl just a bit too happy with this turn of events? Surely there must be some sadness that a man such as Sir Anthony, a person held in such high regard by so many, should be employed in the business of bringing down the crown?

Miles puzzled over the earl's reaction for a minute, a new thought emerging. Perhaps His Lordship had lost sight of his mission. Maybe now he was more consumed with positioning his own son to the throne than protecting the king. Miles pondered the man before him, and it slowly dawned on him that he had always taken everything he'd been told as truth. He had never questioned his orders from the earl. He had never hesitated to carry out any task he was given. Rather, he had blithely gone out as an assassin to murder

whomever the man designated as dangerous to the monarchy. A building sense of horror emerged at his own gullibility and blind trust.

Miles watched as the earl's eyes narrowed like that of a hawk spying his prey. Quickly, he dropped his eyes and, bending to retrieve the paper, he folded it slowly, giving himself a second to catch his breath. With steady hands that belied his growing unease, Miles handed the missive back to the earl and bowed his head in acknowledgement of the work set out for him. Turning toward the door, Miles forced himself to move slowly so as not to reveal his sudden and intense mistrust of the man who stood behind him. Just as he reached for doorknob, he heard the earl clear his throat.

“Take extra care with this one, Shadow. It would not do to leave even a trace of who we are behind. I fear this Sir Anthony is a clever dog who must be quickly brought to heel.”

Miles froze and felt the white hot blaze of anger fill him at the callous words. How dare he call Sir Anthony a dog? The earl was not fit to wipe the feet of such a noble man. Drawing in a shuddering breath, Miles once again nodded his head and moved to take his leave.

“Oh, and Shadow?”

Miles stopped, knowing he must acknowledge the request in the earl's tone. He looked back over his shoulder, the movement causing the hood to hide most of his face from view.

“See that you come in and move directly to your cell tonight. No going to Bremen for kitchen scraps, or whatever it is you do when you return from your missions. I will be entertaining a guest tonight—one of the king's closest advisors. He and I must not be disturbed for any reason, particularly by the likes of you.”

Once more Miles felt the slow burn of rage rise up in his gut. Nodding briefly, he turned and made for the stables and the horse that awaited him. Taking the reins from the young boy who had readied his mount, Miles vaulted into the saddle and kicked the horse into a fast trot. Once on the main road, he pushed the animal to lengthen its stride and flew through the night toward the home of Sir Anthony, Duke of Wales; his next victim.

Anthony swirled the amber liquid round the goblet and took a sip, letting the wine slide down his throat, warming him as it descended. The fire was

banked for the night, darkening the room. He had allowed his man to undress him only so far, keeping his shirt and hosen on for the time being. To any observer, he appeared relaxed, possibly even deep in his cups and wholly unaware of his surroundings. In actuality, Anthony's free hand lay quite close to the hidden dagger beneath the seat cushion, and he was attuned to every noise and movement that broke the silence of the night.

He was waiting for the Shadow.

Anthony knew he would come. After meeting with the others, there had been a flurry of very careful inquiries made to determine just who or what the Shadow was and if he was a pawn for someone much more powerful and dangerous. It had taken some time, but finally information had been obtained that the assassin was actually under the thumb of the Earl of Wessex. All that had to be done after that was to let slip the names of all the men in his group to someone who was a known spy for Wessex. As the leader, he knew that his name would be the first handed to the Shadow. And so he waited for the assassin to arrive, aware his life may very well hang in the balance. Hence, the dagger hidden by his side.

However, he was hoping that he had read that tiny spark within the Shadow's eyes correctly on that night so long ago now. Surely he was not the only one who had felt that fleeting sense of longing and need. There had to be more than just a cold-blooded killer there, and it was that which Anthony was relying on to save him from this night.

A breeze stirred at the window and the distant bay of a hound in distress broke the calm. Anthony stirred slightly in his chair and then fell back into his brooding. If the Shadow chose to strike before allowing Anthony to speak, there would be little for him to do except defend himself and hope to escape mortal injury. While Anthony himself was well versed in swordplay, a dagger was not his normal weapon of choice. Still, he was quick and agile, and hopefully that would serve him well. But Anthony also possessed one more element of surprise that he was sure would knock the Shadow off his stride. He knew the assassin's name, his real name, and even now called it to mind. *Miles*. The man with the remarkable eyes was called Miles.

As if just thinking the name had conjured the man himself, Anthony caught the slightest of movements in the corner of his eye and listened as the barest of footfalls indicated the Shadow was drawing near. As the heavy hand descended to grasp his forehead, thereby allowing the assassin to pull back his head, Anthony grabbed his arm and felt the man behind him still. Quietly, he spoke:

“You are safe here, Miles. You don’t have to fulfil this mission tonight. You can come here, next to me, and sit. We can converse as equals, you and I, and make our peace with each another.”

The silence was deafening. Anthony tensed as the arm he was holding went slack. Why didn’t the man speak? At the very least he could acknowledge Anthony’s offer with one of his own.

“Come now, Miles, surely you can speak freely now? I’ve called you out. You need no longer hide behind that silly name others call you by. Please, sit with me so that I can explain how you came to be here and how I knew that Wessex would send you.”

Slowly, Anthony felt the arm he was holding slip from his grip and then listened as Miles came round before him and stood by the empty chair across from his own. Nodding his head, and indicating for Miles to sit, Anthony took a deep breath and leaned forward to pour another goblet of wine for his infamous guest. Reaching out, he proffered the wine to Miles, who grasped it in his hand and without breaking off his stare, took a long pull. Anthony raised his own in a mock salute and drank deeply, then settled back, determined to wait for the other man to speak first. Miles mirrored his host and rested the goblet on his thigh. After a moment, he reached up and pushed back the hood that hid his face from view and relaxed in the chair to await his fate.

Miles had always known this day would come. Sooner or later he knew he would be found out, and the consequences had always allowed for a swing on the gallows. Perhaps Anthony would be lenient and let him simply disappear into the shadows permanently. While Miles had little idea where he could run to, he had no doubt that he could find some foreign clime in which to hide.

Time ticked by slowly as each man contemplated the other. With not one word spoken, they seemed to take the measure of one another. Finally, frustrated at the reticence of the man who was both his captive and, in an odd way, his captor, Anthony stirred and muttered a curse.

“God’s teeth, man, surely you have something to say to me? Aren’t you the least bit curious as to how I knew you would be coming for me this night and had not been dispatched to one of the others? I daresay you’d at least want to hear how I came to know your movements. Aren’t you even wondering who spies on you and Wessex? Don’t you want the name of the one who lives and works beside you in the earl’s keep but is *my* eyes and ears?”

Anthony stopped to draw a breath. He could feel the anger rising to the surface now, and the resigned look on Miles' face did nothing to ease it. His fury at the Earl of Wessex and the countless ways he had obviously beaten his assassin into submission had no bounds. Anthony felt his hands clench into fists, the desire to throttle Miles until he broke the cursed silence coursing through him. If only he could have gleaned more about the man from his equally reticent spy. Other than his name and that he was seemingly loyal to the earl, his inquiries had fallen on deaf ears.

Unbeknownst to Anthony, the idea of a spy in the earl's keep had indeed rattled Miles much more than he dared show. Upon hearing there was a spy, he struggled to keep his countenance placid and unaffected. But, if Sir Anthony knew so much about Miles, how was it he did not understand that there was no earthly way Miles could respond to his questions? Hadn't his source informed him that Miles was bereft of speech? A mute with little way to communicate? Or could it be that he was being toyed with? Mocked and ridiculed, as he had been in his youth? Miles looked closely at Anthony and felt his hope for something more crumble. He had been such a fool to even dream that this man could ever feel any sort of affection for someone like him. Miles felt a grim resolve take hold as he reached back to pull his hood over his face once more. He would not give this man one more moment to see the shattered dreams that now occupied his thoughts.

"Oh no you don't, my dear Shadow. I want to see those pretty eyes when we speak about this intrigue we've got ourselves embroiled in."

Anthony crouched forward to stay Miles' hand, and the touch sent a jolt through both men. Lifting his eyes in shock, Miles locked gazes with Sir Anthony and watched as the man licked his lips and heaved a soft sigh. Leaning closer, Anthony raised a hand and let it caress the bristly cheek. He saw the soft blue eyes register shock and then an unbearable look of longing and need, before Miles closed his eyes.

The kiss was soft, tentative, and hinted of more. Miles felt himself push into the brush of Anthony's lips, responding as best he could. This was the first time he had ever kissed another, much less a man, and the feelings that rolled through him seemed to go straight to his cock, making it begin to fill with desire. He felt Sir Anthony's hand slip around his neck and pull him forward. The kiss deepened. Miles fought to keep his own fingers from fisting

Anthony's shirt. He could feel the tongue pushing against his lips, demanding entrance, and then opened, allowing it to slip inside. Miles felt as though his body was aflame with need, his cock growing rapidly and his senses heady with arousal. Too soon, Sir Anthony broke off the kiss, but did not let go of his hold on Miles. Instead, he pressed their foreheads together and exhaled a shaky breath.

“I’ve wanted to do that ever since the night you rescued my little brother. What is it about you that causes my blood to rise up and boil so? Can you feel it? Do I affect the same response in you, my sweet assassin? No, you are no assassin, are you? Merely a man who has been unjustly forced into a life he would never choose for himself. You are a good man, aren’t you, Miles? A man who deserves so much more than life has handed him thus far. Someone who deserves a destiny better than the one another has mapped out for him. Someone who deserves to be loved. Would you like that, Miles? Would you like to be loved... by me?”

Anthony drew back then and looked at Miles for his response. There had been other times when Miles had felt frustration over his inability to utter his feelings aloud but never before was it this intense. Shoving away his exasperation with himself, he nodded, hoping that it would be enough to let Sir Anthony know how deeply his words and touch had affected him. When he saw the smile glance across Anthony’s face, Miles allowed himself to relax once more and enjoy the presence of the other man.

“I thought so. I felt it in the way your mouth tangled with mine. But I had to be sure. But perhaps we should check again—just to be certain, eh?”

With a low chuckle, Sir Anthony swept in again and took command of Miles, wrapping one arm around his shoulder and placing the other at his waist. This time the kiss was more demanding, startling the breath from Miles and causing him to wrap his own hands around Anthony’s head. Hearing a low moan escape from the other man, Miles pressed his body against him, trying to feel the hard flesh against his own. With a muffled curse, Anthony drew back and began tearing at Miles’ hood, drawing it off and flinging it to the floor, to be followed almost immediately by the leather breastplate Miles wore. Anthony tore at the midnight blue shirt that kept his hands from feeling the warm flesh of the man that had just been in his arms. When he felt two rough hands do the same with his shirt, he laughed aloud and swept first Miles’ and then his own shirt off and sent them sailing across the room.

Swooping back in, Anthony pushed his chest into the hard wall of muscle before him and sighed upon the soft lips that bewitched him so. His senses completely overwhelmed, Miles reached out tentatively and smoothed his hand down over the soft skin of Sir Anthony's back. Once again, Anthony broke off the kiss, and their breath came in short, shallow bursts. But this time he reached down and let his hand glide across the hard cock that now hid beneath the dark hosen Miles wore. The solid piece of flesh jerked under his caress and Anthony smiled.

“Tell me you want this, Miles? Tell me you will let me taste what lies beneath this coarse cloth.”

Miles leaned his head back and felt a wave of remorse flood his mind. He could never utter the words of affection Anthony so obviously needed to hear. How could he submit to this noble man when he was so broken and ill-used? As if aware of his torment, Anthony quietly shushed away the fears that threatened to consume Miles. Stroking back the hair from his lover's face, Anthony eased away to look at Miles, and it occurred to him that he had never heard Miles utter a word; not one. Every time he had attempted to draw him out tonight, Miles had met him with stubborn silence, refusing to answer. Was it refusal? *What if...* The vision of the old woman frantically gesturing and grunting out gibberish to him as he plied her with question after question as to which of his men the earl would target first rose before him. She had been mute, unable to speak, and yet more expressive than many who had their full faculties about them ever would be.

Anthony looked at Miles once more, and what he saw in the depths of his eyes and the defeated bearing of his body affirmed his conclusions. He would never hear his lover sigh or gasp in delight. There would never be quiet conversations or intimate moments whispering words of affection together. And yet... the stories those eyes held, the way those hands so softly caressed, the way those soft lips submitted to Anthony's urging; perhaps words were not necessary after all. Couldn't they create a language that was all theirs and learn to understand one another without the need to speak at all?

Anthony leaned in and brushed his lips against that lush mouth once more. He felt Miles relax slightly. Once again hands began to touch and stroke. Before long, both men were trembling from a deep need to feel only flesh against flesh.

“Come, help me. Help me draw away this damned cloth that keeps you hidden from my eyes.”

Miles stood and looked bewilderingly at Anthony, uncertain as to what he should do next. With a gentle tug, Anthony began to draw down the hosen from the long, muscular thighs that caused his cock to twitch and fill once more. When he succeeded in removing them completely, he stepped back to admire the gorgeous shape of the man before him. A long, thin cock curved upward from a dark tangle of curled hair. There was a small wet splatter on the trim, tight belly that merged into a broad chest, strong and well muscled. The head of Miles' cock glistened and called out to be tasted. Anthony knelt at his lover's feet and responded with his wet and willing mouth.

Miles watched as Anthony stripped him bare and fought against turning away to hide his form from those insistent eyes. His breath left him when he saw the appreciative glances and the lusty glimmer rise in the other man's expression. And then, to his horror, he watched the young duke drop to his knees and reach for his aching cock. Miles scrambled backward, his face bearing an expression of shock. Anthony nearly fell to the floor and pushed himself up in surprise. When he saw the look on his lover's face, he quickly stood and went to him, once again stretching out a gentling hand.

“What is it, Miles? Why do you turn away from my touch? Do you not relish this as much as I do?”

Miles opened his mouth, only to close it again in despair. How to tell this man that he should never be brought so low as to kneel to someone like him? Never before had his lack of ability to speak been so frustrating. He ran a hand through his hair and then scrubbed it over his face. How could he make Anthony understand that he wanted those same caresses, but that he could not yet accept such low behaviour from the man for whom he felt such affection? Miles stepped forward and mimicked Anthony's behaviour, falling to his knees and reaching for the half-hard cock that lay against the slender thigh. He felt a hand fall on his head, forcing his face back.

“Are you sure this is what you want, Miles?”

Miles nodded and tried to move back down to capture the long, fat cock between his lips. The desire to have this man, to feel his tongue touch and taste, was fast becoming an overwhelming need. However, the hand tangled in his hair held him fast, and those demanding eyes raked over his face once more,

looking for any signs of distress or remorse. One finger reached out to slide across his mouth, and Miles shuddered from the excitement that this simple touch wrought inside him.

“You are the most beautiful man I have ever seen. Do you know that? Without uttering a word, your eyes and touch still speak volumes to me. You and I will learn each other’s ways. We will take delight in finding each place that gives pleasure and builds to release. You are mine now, as I am yours. Wessex will never touch you again, Miles, believe it. You are safe with me here. Safe to love and be loved. Do you understand what I am telling you? That I want you here with me, for as long as you desire?”

Miles tried to blink away the tears that threatened to spill down his cheeks. No one had ever wanted him, not like this, not like Anthony. He nodded slowly and moved his mouth. Anthony leaned forward to see what it was Miles was trying to say.

“Yours.”

As clearly as if the word had been uttered aloud, Anthony read the silent declaration and smiled. Reaching down, he drew Miles to his feet and kissed him with a passion that pulled them both under its spell. Their mouths locked, hips shoved in toward one another and ground flesh against flesh. A moan broke loose from Anthony’s trembling mouth as the excitement built. Once more, Miles dropped to his knees, determined not to be thwarted again, and surrounded Anthony’s cock with his lips.

Now it was Anthony’s turn to throw back his head and groan in pleasure at the warm, wet sucking motion engulfing his shaft. Anthony wrapped his fingers in the dark, lustrous hair and guided Miles on and off his cock, revelling in the glory of his touch. For endless minutes, the two men posed thusly, each one worshipping the other in their own way, the silence broken only by the guttural moans and sighs of pleasure. The taste of Anthony exploded in Miles’ mouth, flooding it with a bitter flow that he scrambled to swallow. He felt his own cock pulse and spend, painting the floor white beneath him.

Shattered, the two men slumped in a loose embrace on the bedroom floor, allowing their soft caresses to signify their growing affection for each other. No more would one half of this pair need to lurk in the dark, for this night found the Shadow fading for good, and in its place a man was born; one who would be forever cherished by a noble duke.

Epilogue

The Earl of Wessex raised his goblet to his guest. He felt a sense of smug satisfaction that he was finally being afforded the attention he so richly deserved after years of service to the crown. Of course, each time a threat to the king had been dispatched, the earl took the credit, leading king and nobility alike to believe that it was his hand that wielded the blade striking down each nobleman that showed any move to usurp the throne. Hence, the true identity of the elusive Shadow remained unknown to all. Thus, the king and his trusted advisors understood the assassin to be the Earl of Wessex himself.

Now with dinner complete, he hoped the king's man would get around to the purpose of his visit. Earlier, the earl had taken note of a long, flat box that his enigmatic dinner guest held close to his side throughout their meal. Could it hold some trinket or gift to show the king's gratitude for all he'd accomplished on his behalf? Near bursting with curiosity, the earl was about to question the contents of the box when Bremen appeared at the entrance to the hall. Motioning for the earl to attend her, she slipped back into the shadowy hall. A flash of anger coursed through him. The old hag had certainly forgotten her place in recent months. Why, she seemed almost delighted whenever she received her daily orders, as if she had some secret that only she knew and held dear. Well, she would receive the sting of his lash this night, for interrupting such an important moment as this.

Begrudgingly, the earl excused himself and rose to leave the hall. No sooner had he reached the alcove that led to the kitchens than he felt a tingling at his back. Looking over his shoulder, he felt a slight breeze caress his cheek, but saw nothing else amiss. When he got to the kitchen, the old hag was nowhere to be found, and her disappearance affirmed her pending punishment all the more. Shrugging off his impatience, the earl returned to the hall and his waiting guest. Once more, he lifted the wine to his mouth, taking a long draught and wincing at the slightly bitter aftertaste. One more strike against Bremen for serving a cheaper wine on such an important night.

As the effects of the wine began to take hold, the earl felt a flush of excitement course through him, as the other man placed the well-oiled box on the table and made to open it. He opened his mouth to speak and found that his tongue had grown numb. He attempted to raise his hand to his mouth and found he could not. His limbs refused to obey him. They had been struck with such lassitude that he was barely able to move, much less speak.

“Are you having some difficulty, Milord? Finding it hard to muster the strength to move, perhaps? Do not fear, that is just the poison slowly wending its way through your body. It shan't be long now, before you drift off to sleep and your heart ceases to move as well. But before you do, the king had something specially made for you. Look here, isn't it a beauty?”

The man pulled a cunning dagger from the box. When the earl was able to see it entirely, his eyes widened in recognition. He tried in vain to protest that he could not accept the weapon, for it bore such a keen resemblance to the one wielded by his own pet assassin, the Shadow. He desperately tried to move, to escape the vision of death that swam before his drooping eyelids. He heard the man stand and move behind him, and then felt the press of the cold blade at his throat.

“Never fear, Milord. I do not intend to slit your vile throat. No, that would not do, you see, for the king wishes the world to know that it was he who discovered the despicable assassin named the Shadow and removed that blight from the earth. You, Sir, will be found by your servants tomorrow morn, poisoned by your own hand, your deadly blade held tight in your rigoured fist.”

Wessex watched in horror as the handle of the dagger was pressed into his palm and his fingers moved to wrap it up tight. The emissary from the king took one last sip from his own wine glass and gathered his box, tucking it under his arm. Before he stepped away from the table, he withdrew a sealed letter from his pocket and placed it next to the earl. Then he moved toward the entrance to the courtyard, where his horse awaited him.

The earl sat at the empty table and felt his heart slow its already sluggish pace.

In just a few minutes, the Earl of Wessex breathed his last breath. He would be found in the morning light, sitting as if transfixed, his eyes staring sightlessly at the dagger in his hand. The note, which lay on the table beside him and bore his own seal, would be discovered and later delivered to the king. It bore a confession of his crimes and his regret that he could no longer live as the foul murderer he had become. The bloody reign of the assassin known only as the Shadow had ended.

There was only one witness to the evening's activities, and she would bear the secret of the earl's murder to her tomb. She could be trusted to do so, for she was just an old woman, made mute at the hands of another many years before. She would be overlooked and found to be lacking as a credible witness.

Bremen stood in the shadows, her job complete. The boy she took into her kitchen so long ago was finally safe. The foul beast that had nearly broken him was dead. Her turn as spy to a golden-haired duke was finished. She turned back to her kitchen and began to ready it for the day ahead.

The End

And Wilt Thou Leave Me Thus?

*And wilt thou leave me thus?
Say nay, say nay, for shame,
To save thee from the blame
Of all my grief and grame;
And wilt thou leave me thus?
Say nay, say nay!*

*And wilt thou leave me thus,
That hath loved thee so long
In wealth and woe among?
And is thy heart so strong
As for to leave me thus?
Say nay, say nay!*

*And wilt thou leave me thus,
That hath given thee my heart
Never for to depart,
Nother for pain nor smart;
And wilt thou leave me thus?
Say nay, say nay!*

*And wilt thou leave me thus
And have no more pity
Of him that loveth thee?
Hélas, thy cruelty!
And wilt thou leave me thus?
Say nay, say nay!*

—Sir Thomas Wyatt

Author Bio

*Sammy Goode is a playwright /director by choice and a teacher by day.
This is her third time writing for the M/M Goodreads Group.*

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AWAKENINGS

By Jayson James

Photo Description

The photo is of a muscular guy in his early 20s with smooth tan skin and dark brown hair that is combed back to spike up. He is standing behind a vacuum cleaner in a pair of blue boxer briefs with a grin on his face in what appears to be a bedroom and the picture seems to be candid.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'd always considered myself sort of asexual up until now. In high school no one interested me and I was too busy with schoolwork to date anyway. I figured I didn't have a big sex drive or I just hadn't met the right girl. However, the more time I spend with my roommate, Ben, the more I'm reconsidering everything.

The more he walks around half dressed the more I keep noticing him. Even if I am attracted to him, which I'm not sure that I am, I don't think he would be into me. He seems like the type of guy that girls flock to. He couldn't be interested in me, could he?

Requests: Clearly I'm angling for a gay-for-you here, folks! It can be a double or single GFY, lots of sexual tension (please!), slow build romance, lots of heat. I would rather no BDSM but some light stuff wouldn't bother me.

Sincerely,

Heather K ;)

Story Info

Genre: new adult, contemporary

Tags: college, masturbation, first time, coming of age, gay for you

Word Count: 17,049

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AWAKENINGS

By Jayson James

Winter break from school had been nice. Just enough time to catch up with family and friends, but still ending before boredom could set in. Since it was expensive to fly me home and back, my parents wanted me to come home as soon as possible and go back late. This was fine by me. In actuality, I was feeling slightly homesick by the end of the fall quarter and looked forward to the visit. What I had not thought about, prior to agreeing to this arrangement, was registering for my winter classes.

Apparently, I was not the only freshman student to have forgotten about it either. The registration office was lined up out the door with students in the same situation as me, hoping they would be able to get into the classes they wanted to take this quarter. Two hours later I emerged, tired of carrying a bag that felt as if I were carrying a ton of bricks, but in reality was gifts and assorted items I'd wanted to take back to campus with me.

In my boredom, while waiting in line, I'd been sending text messages to various people to occupy the time. One of them was my roommate Ben who immediately replied, "That bitch Melody and I are no more. I broke up with her before leaving. Nice present, huh?" This made me laugh out loud. Melody had been Ben's girlfriend since they met at a campus Halloween party. I'd let it slip one night that I thought she was a bitch, and Ben, rather than getting mad, basically agreed with me, saying, "I can see why you would think that." For several weeks I wondered why Ben had not broken up with her, since all I could see that she'd brought to his life was drama.

My arm was too sore to hold my bag any longer, even if it was to pick it up and move it along. Ben had offered to come and grab it from me early on in the conversation. I was feeling optimistic that it would not take me long to register and told him I would be fine. By the time both of my arms were sore from picking it up and moving forward a couple of feet, I was ready to take him up on the offer, but I felt a little humiliated at the idea of having him come grab it when I saw plenty of other people doing fine with their own bags. Instead, I started scooting the bag along, shoving it with my foot and in the process scuffing it up.

When I returned to our dorm room, Ben was lying on his made-up bed, wearing only a pair of black boxer briefs and black low cut socks, reading a book. The socks were an addition to what Ben typically wore around our room. I figured he must be cold. I was irritated and tossed my bag down on my bed, thinking I was too tired to unpack it right now.

Ben put down his book beside him. "Hey, Solo!"

"Hi, Ben." I responded. Solo was the name Ben had given me at the beginning of the year, when we moved in together. It used to bug me, however over break I discovered I disliked Soli, what my friends called me, more. My family, teachers, doctors and such were the only ones to call me by my given name, Solomon. Solomon J. Anderson, from Ravenswood, a small town in northern California.

"You okay?" Ben snapped me out of my own head.

"Yeah, just tired. I cannot believe how long it took to get my classes." I noted that the position he was lying in, on his side, made him look like an underwear model. This might seem odd to you, this reference, but I have always been one to appreciate the beauty of either sex.

He rubbed his hand up and down his chest as he talked. "Did you get the classes you wanted?"

"Surprisingly, yes." I pulled my schedule out of my pocket and held it out to him.

He sat up, grabbing his own off his nightstand, handing it to me as he took mine. "That's good! You should have come back yesterday. There was hardly anybody down there."

"Figures." I took his schedule and looked it over, starting at the top with his name, which I thought was much cooler than my own, Benjamin A. Pratt. He was from Seattle and decided to stay in Washington State for college. Myself, I decided on Western Washington University because they awarded me a scholarship before any other school had.

"I had Altrez last quarter. You are welcome to use my notes and papers from her class. Unfortunately, I sold my books." Then he offered up, "I got a B+ from her."

"Cool! Thanks!"

We made some more small talk about our schedules, each of us sitting and eventually lying on our own beds. My bag was occupying space on my bed and I knew I was going to have to unpack it eventually. For at least the next seventy-two hours, I had no studying to do, classes to attend, laundry to catch up on or anything else that occupied any and all free time I had during the quarter. It felt nice to just sit and be.

Ben got up out of bed, unkinked his neck and stretched out his arms, pushing his package out into plain view in the process. As if this was not enough, he let out an exaggerated yawn. I thought he might be doing this to draw my attention. However, he did not appear to look at me.

Ben was not the least bit self-conscious. If anything, he was over confident. He spent most of his time in our room in various states of undress. The first time we met, within minutes Ben had taken his shirt off stating, "I'm hot! Don't you think?"

"You bet!" I responded without thinking, and a feeling of concern came over me that he'd take me the wrong way.

He winked at me and smiled back. "The feeling's mutual."

This had had us both laughing. Though others may not always get us, we shared a warped sense of humor. It was one of many ways, we would soon discover that we were alike. There was this magnetism about Ben, where I immediately felt at ease around him, as if I'd known him my whole life. When I brought it up to him later, when I was in one of my sentimental moods, he agreed he felt the same about me. We connected and got along instantaneously. I'd had friends before, but they never seemed to get me as Ben did.

Over the next couple of days, Ben confessed to me that he was proud of his body and kind of got off on people checking him out. For me, it did not matter much either way if he was clothed or not.

"I think I am going to take a shower," Ben grinned and jacked a fist in front of his crotch. "After I work this out, I am thinking about taking a nap."

"A nap sounds like a good idea." I didn't feel like moving. It was an effort to kick off my shoes.

Ben pulled on a pair of shorts. While he put on his T-shirt, he slid his feet into some flip-flops. "You want to go out and get something to eat?"

I was confused. "I thought you were going to take a nap?"

“I’m going to jerk off in the shower first,” he reiterated in case I was not able to figure out his gesture. He was in the process of gathering his towel and other items he would need, when he held out this bottle. “This stuff feels so good. I get good and clean and, man, it feels so good! You are welcome to try it if you want.”

“I’m going to take a nap.” I considered his suggestion, surprised that I was slightly curious about what he was talking about. “I’ll go with you in a couple of hours though.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He gathered his stuff. “If you change your mind, you know where you can find me.” Although he made comments like this all the time, I was still unsure how to take them. I gave him a funny look. He said, “I’m tired. I’ll be back in a bit, Solo.” He was out of the room with the door closed behind him before I could respond.

I smiled and thought to myself that I was glad to have Ben in my life. It was good to be back at school with him. As I drifted off to sleep, my mind wandered to a few weeks into school. I had found myself feeling sad and alone. By the time Ben had come back to our room, I had my knees pulled up to my chin and my arms holding tightly onto my legs. I was breathing deeply, trying not to cry, which became extremely difficult when Ben entered the room.

He did not even ask me what was wrong. He came over, sat down beside me on my bed, and put an arm around me. Neither of us spoke. Ben let me cry and I even think that he cried a bit himself, although I was not completely sure. We were both homesick. Sure, I still missed home, yet now I knew that I was not alone.

Ben and I decided to leave campus to get some pizza. It was not all that often we left campus for a meal. We either ate at the cafeteria or creatively prepared something in our room. Ben insisted on treating me, after spending a majority of the time, we’d been back in our room watching movies on the flat screen television and Blu-ray player he’d gotten for Christmas. He appeared happier than I was to see the hot water pot I’d gotten. This meant no more guessing how long to cook our Cup Noodles, one of our mainstay meals, in the microwave. We were also able to make coffee and cocoa (and tea, only because it was in the basket that came with the pot).

We had everything we needed to stay shut in, avoiding the freezing temperatures outside. I joined Ben in hanging out in our room in my underwear,

although I wore a T-shirt and boxers, which covered my body better. He commented on being cold himself, which prompted him to put on a shirt and even a sweatshirt. I could not resist remarking on this after he put on the sweatshirt. "Look at that! Benji can dress himself now!"

"Pretty cool, huh?" We were watching our third or fourth movie. He took his attention away from the television screen. "Benji, Solo? Is that what you are going to call me now?"

I thought about it briefly. "Only if you want it to be. I like Ben better." I felt cold, so I rubbed my hands on my arms and thought about putting on a sweatshirt myself.

"As do I. I suppose if you want to give me a little pet name, like when we are alone, that would be fine by me." Ben pulled his sweatshirt off. "Now I'm cooking." He tossed it over to me. "Here you look like you need it."

"Thanks!" I caught it and put it on. It smelled like Ben, a good smell, and I felt all warm and fuzzy. "A little pet name?"

It was then that Ben suggested going out for pizza. It sounded good, but I was reluctant to spend the money. Although, between Christmas and the scholarship money, I didn't have to count every penny. I wanted to go though, because I rarely treated myself.

Before I could agree, Ben was insisting, "My treat!"

"You don't have to buy."

"I want to." He smiled. "Let me treat you!"

It was that smile. Sure, I'd seen it before, with his bright white, perfectly aligned teeth. Ben was smiling all the time. Now that I was really taking notice of it, I felt myself charmed by it. As he talked about where we would go and what kind of pizza we would get, I was entranced with his every word.

"You game?" Ben asked.

I snapped out of my trance. "Sounds great!"

Although it was raining, the temperature was warmer outside than it had been the previous days. I do not know what it is, but for some reason guys in Washington do not use umbrellas in the rain. Ben told me to keep his sweatshirt on and suggested I put on my coat over it. Two blocks away from campus, I was glad I'd taken his advice.

Ben and I walked quickly and chitchatted the whole way. Our focus was on what other movies we wanted to watch and the books we'd read while we were off. It made me happy to hear that he'd read the one book I'd hoped that he would have. A car drove past with its windows opened part way and the stereo blasting a song. We started singing it to amuse ourselves for the remainder of the walk.

The pizza place was crowded. Ben pointed out a booth. "You go grab us a place to sit and I'll go order."

I agreed and made my way over to the only open place for us to sit. I was glad we did not have to sit at a table. A lady stopped in front of the booth when I was a few feet away and I thought about telling her it was taken by me. To my relief she was only grabbing the Parmesan cheese container to sprinkle some on her slices of pizza. I sat down, looking around the pizzeria, occasionally seeing how far Ben had gotten in the line. As I waited, I found myself reflecting on life back home.

In my family, I am the younger of the middle two kids out of four altogether. My parents had a boy, then a girl, another boy (me) and another girl, with each of us spaced roughly two years apart, each of us born on even numbered months. What can I say; my parents have a thing for even numbers. We were not poor, but the reality was my parents could not afford to send any of us to college. This meant that if we wanted to go, we needed to find a way to pay for it. My older brother worked and went to school, while my older sister got a softball scholarship. For me, sports never interested me at all, so I kept my grades up, which paid off in the form of an academic scholarship.

My older siblings and I were watching a movie, back when I was in middle school. One of the characters commented, "That's you, odd as a cod." That phrase stuck with me. The reason being that it echoed how I felt, odd. Unlike everybody else my age, male or female, who all seemed consumed with sex, sex was not that big of a deal for me. Sure I could appreciate qualities and traits of an individual, but nothing ever, well, got me all that worked up. My sexual desires seemed mild compared to those of my peers. Initially I chalked this up to being a late bloomer.

I was not concerned about my lack of interest in sex until one day some friends of mine were talking to me about how often they jerked off. For the most part, they claimed to do it twice a day or more every day. I pretended that it was the same for me. The truth was I never much felt like it. In my desire to

not be different, I made an effort a few times a day. Sure, if I touched myself, I would get hard. That was the easy part.

Then there were one of two outcomes, I would rub myself raw without “getting there” or I would become flaccid. My brother had dirty magazines he did not know I knew about. One had people in various sexual positions, and this material helped. However, it felt more like an obligation and I eventually concluded that only I knew the real number of times I got off. I would repeat things my buddies would say and I was no longer concerned about my lack of sexual desire.

My friends were all into dating girls, so there was always pressure from them to date this girl or that girl. Then there were the girls that would literally throw themselves at me. None of them interested me in the least. I figured it was because I had never found the right girl.

Achieving good grades was at the forefront of my mind. My guidance counselor helped me with applying for academic scholarships, frequently reiterating that I would need to keep my grades up in order to be awarded one. Going to college was important to me. I always liked school and the idea of it continuing past high school was fine by me.

In the small town of Ravenswood, California, where I grew up, men only fell in love with women, and if you were not dating then people automatically assumed you were gay. I knew well enough that I did not want people to assume that I was gay, but the problem was that there were no girls who interested me.

I love dancing and music. This prompted me to attend the occasional dance. Part of this routine was asking a girl to go with me. I would make it clear we were going only as friends. Nevertheless, each girl I asked was thrilled to go along with me. At the dance, the majority of the time everyone danced together and hung out. There was no pressure. It was enough to keep anyone from talking behind my back or questioning me. I quickly learned that if a girl went with me twice, I should give her a hug when I thanked her.

One time when I'd gone with a group, I even gave the girl a kiss on the lips. It was nothing big to me. The pat on the back and being acclaimed and envied by my friends was a bigger pleasure. It was simply what I did to avoid scrutiny. I believed that everyone put on an act at some time or another, such as the way you talk with your friends is never the way you talk with your mother.

I was happy. Or at least I thought I was. Going home and coming back, something occurred to me. Had I been living a lie? I pushed the thought from my head as Ben walked up carrying a tray with a pitcher of soda, glasses and plates.

During our return to campus the rain was coming down heavier than when we'd left. Ben and I ran most of the way, stopping now and then under covered areas to catch our breath and shake water off us. By the time we reached the dorm, Ben's sweatshirt, which I was wearing under my zipped up coat, was completely saturated.

In our room, we both stripped off our wet clothes, throwing them in the middle of the floor. My teeth were chattering as I was down to my boxers that were also soaked. Ben was down to his blue boxer briefs, which were also wet. He grabbed a blanket off the end of his bed, opened it up around himself and walked towards me.

I cringed as he wrapped his blanketed arms around me. "This should heat us up." I'd never been this close to somebody wearing so little. The warmth felt good as I was shivering. Ben pulled me close to him, his cold body pressed against mine. "We need to get warm."

Ben stopped shivering immediately. As I stood there with Ben's arms wrapped around me beneath the blanket, I felt myself warm up from the inside, warmth working outward. He kept his arms around me. My eyes roamed around our room, as I wondered if anyone who saw us would think this was strange. I was glad to no longer be freezing. When I looked at Ben, his eyes were closed and he appeared to be content. Appreciating the warmth, I remained beside him.

Shifting my legs, I moved my hand and accidentally brushed it across the front of Ben's wet boxer briefs. Ben tensed up slightly. I nervously tensed myself. "Sorry about that."

"No worries."

I was relieved. I moved again and I could not believe it when I brushed my hand against him again, definitely feeling his penis this time. "Shit! I swear that was an accident."

"Sure!" Ben smiled. He brushed his hand against my own penis. "Now we're even."

I shrugged indifferently. It made sense to me. Yet, Ben was looking at me intently. I stared back at him briefly, unsure why he was looking at me as he was. "What?"

He smiled at me and rubbed his crotch on me. I moved my hand out of the way, in order not to touch him again. His penis bumped mine. I was not sure what he was doing. He must have read the confusion on my face. "I guess the close proximity has me worked up."

"I get it." The thing was I did not. I was warm and didn't mind being next to him, it was different, but I was indifferent.

Ben took one of his hands and ran it down my back. It made me shake. "That tickles." I pulled back. "I'm good now." He pulled the blanket around, covering himself. I grabbed my robe and put it on. "I'm going to take a warm shower."

"Okay." He sat down on his bed. As I gathered up my clothes and shower stuff, he sat and watched me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him grabbing his crotch. "You should put on some dry underwear."

"I will." He pulled off his underwear beneath the blanket and kicked them over to the pile of our wet clothes.

He was giving me that funny look again when I left the room. I shrugged it off. Maybe it was all in my head I thought. By the time I was in the shower, Ben was out of my head.

It was most unusual to find Ben wearing anything more than his boxer briefs. A majority of the time he was in our room, and then sometimes he would walk down the hall with nothing but them on. He'd been told that he could not walk around naked, which the university considered included being in his underwear. This did not stop him from walking to the end of the hall or going to the showers in nothing but his underwear. I even knew of one time he walked downstairs to get the mail.

Most of the time, Ben spent his time half dressed. He would wear shorts or pants for a bit. This would not last though. He never seemed uncomfortable in his clothes, which consisted of short sleeve shirts and jeans. When he was home though, the shirt would come off within minutes. The pants he would keep on

for a little while longer. I knew that he was going to be this way, because when we moved in together, he warned me about it.

Ben did not care if anyone checked him out. He knew he was attractive, but was not vain about it. He'd noted to me a few times that there were quite a few girls and a couple of guys that "enjoyed the view" as he put it.

I'd never thought anything of it. That was, until the day before classes started up again and we'd decided to clean up the garbage we'd accumulated in our room for a fresh start to the quarter. Ben had agreed to vacuum the room, if I ran the trash bags out. I was glad to, because I hated the sound of the vacuum cleaner as well as vacuuming.

Coming back from taking the garbage out, I was distracted with the book exchange table briefly, more so that I would miss the sound of the vacuum cleaner being used than any interest in finding a book.

Ben had finished up and was standing still behind the vacuum cleaner grinning proudly. I was confused until the flash blinded me. "What are you doing? Creating an advertisement for naked house boys?"

"I'm not naked." This was always his defense about being in his underwear. "No, masturbation material for me later, so I do not have to use a mirror."

"Nice!"

Ben winked. "No, I want my mom to see that I am keeping my room clean here."

"We just now cleaned the room." I sat down on my bed and took notice of how much nicer the room looked.

He waved a hand at me. "She doesn't have to know that."

"So you are sending her a picture of you standing in your underwear with the vacuum cleaner?"

Ben grew concerned. "Oh shit! I didn't think about that. I suppose I'd better put on some clothes. Will you take the picture? I don't think the angle was right either." He pulled on a pair of shorts, leaving them unzipped. "How's this?"

"Only if you put a finger in your mouth." I put my pointer finger on my bottom lip to demonstrate. Ben held up his middle finger and put the top of it in his mouth, leaving the rest, clearly showing he was flipping the camera off. I could not resist and snapped a photo.

“Solo, you ass!” He came over and wrestled me for the camera. I fought to keep a hold of it. In the end, he got it away from me. He pointed it at me. “Your turn for a picture.” I gave him a sneer. He insisted, “Come on!”

I stood up and as I did, I pulled off my shirt. Ben grinned and snapped a shot. I held up my pointer finger. “Not yet.” Then I undid my pants. Ben’s eyes got big. I instructed, “You better take the picture before I lose my nerve.”

Ben took the picture. Then we set the timer and took one together with our flies undone, another one with shirts off with our pants fastened and the waistband of our underwear sticking out. Ben put on a shirt and I took the picture for him to send to his mom. I put my shirt back on as Ben instructed me how to pose while he snapped a few shots for me to send to my family. It was not until the family photos that I became concerned with the previous photos I’d taken. It was a fleeting concern since we were having fun.

We put on socks and shoes, making our way outside for a few pictures. The sun was out, but it was too damn cold, as we kept remarking, to be outside for any length of time. Back in our room, we decided to trade clothes and take a picture of Ben in my clothes and I in his, most of which were done together. Then we managed to convince each other to put on various clothes and do countless poses. We got to laughing so hard, in a few pictures we appeared as if we’d been bawling our eyes out.

As we goofed off, Ben stripped back down to his blue boxer briefs. Now that he was back down to his underwear, I caught myself literally checking Ben out. This was when I realized how good-looking I thought Ben was. I’d admired the beauty of others from time to time. With Ben it was different. I found myself, well, attracted to him.

When I awoke the next morning, Ben was gone. He’d left me a text on my phone, which I’d been too deeply asleep to hear come through. “Not ready to be back to class today. Lucky me. Text if you want to do breakfast.” He’d sent the message at 9:06 a.m. It was 11:20 now, almost lunch hour. I imagined that Ben had eaten breakfast already. I knew that I would have. I thought about sending him a text to see if he wanted to do lunch, but since there was nowhere I had to be today, I was in no rush.

I spotted a box of cookies from the previous night that Ben had wanted me to try. Since I had already brushed my teeth, I hadn’t been in the mood for a

snack, and had not tried them then. I picked up the box and the cookies soon became my breakfast. Ben and I had been up until 3:00 a.m. last night. This had become the routine we'd fallen into returning to the freedom of living on our own without the burden of classes.

Consuming one cookie after another, my mouth dried out and I searched for the soda bottle I'd opened and taken only a few drinks out of before bed. It was not on my nightstand, where I was sure I'd put it. Nor was it on my desk. I looked around the room, my eye catching a glimpse of it on the floor, by Ben's nightstand next to the pair of underwear I guessed he'd worn yesterday. I walked over and picked up the soda and Ben was on my mind.

It was more than seeing my roommate and the closest friend I had away from home in his skivvies. I'd always liked Ben's personality. He was witty, charming and sweet. Most guys I knew were not all that nurturing. Ben did not seem to care what anyone thought. Then there was, as I'd mentioned before, his sense of humor, as warped as my own.

That was it! All of the sudden I thought I had everything all figured out. I shared a bond and closeness with Ben that I'd never shared with anyone else before. Sure, I'd had friends before, good ones, but then again I didn't have the connection with them I had with Ben. I was pleased with myself as I popped another cookie into my mouth.

My sureness lasted as long as it took me to chew and swallow that cookie. Ben was right about the cookies, they were delicious! I was about to finish what was left in the box. I was looking for any distraction not to deal with my situation. I'd never been one to stuff my feelings, and as tasty as the cookies were I needed something with more substance. I decided to take a shower and go out to get something to eat, even if I only went to the cafeteria.

When I returned to the room, Ben was waiting for me. He was messing around on his computer. "Solo! There you are sleepyhead! I thought you might still be asleep when I didn't get a response to either of my messages."

"Either message?" I grabbed my phone. He had in fact sent me another message. I clicked to read it, "You wanna do me?" There were a couple blank lines. "Or at least have lunch." I glanced in his direction and he was grinning, obviously proud of himself. "I'd love to do you! But I will settle for lunch."

Ben was dividing his attention between his computer and joking around with me. "Nice! I didn't even have to buy to get you to put out!"

I toweled off and slid on my boxers. “Don’t be spreading around that I’m easy.”

“I won’t tell that you are, if you don’t tell that I am.” Ben beamed.

There was that smile again. So cute, I thought. Then I tried to push the idea out of my head. I sneered, disappointed with whatever my problem was. Ben and I had always talked like this with each other. It was just goofing around. It was our thing. There was nothing behind it. I tried my hardest to shove any analytical notions or questioning of myself from my head as I finished getting dressed.

When I was putting on my socks and shoes, Ben lifted his shirt to rub his hand on his bare stomach. I watched intently as he rubbed his six-pack. My attention became so focused on Ben that I stopped getting dressed all together.

“Solo, you ready yet?” Ben shot up out of his chair and walked over to the door. “I’m starving!”

“Me too.” I hustled to finish getting dressed, grabbing my wallet and keys and darted out the door behind him.

The campus cafeteria was still rather quiet with students filtering back in from break. Ben was part of the select few who had to start back on Monday. Most students, like me were starting back on Wednesday. Today was also Viking Day. Vikings were Western Washington University’s mascot, at Mount Baker, so most of the students on campus, headed there for the day. It was a big deal going up on Mount Baker and playing in the snow. Since I’d been in Washington State, I’d experienced four snow days, which were also the only snow days I’d ever experienced in my life. It was beautiful, I will admit, but I was cold enough most days on campus so the idea of seeking out somewhere cold didn’t make much sense to me.

Ben liked the snow, but also agreed with me that he was not going to seek it out. I learned this when these girls were trying to dry hump him while in the process of inviting us to a party prior to winter break. Melody had seen the girls talking to Ben and me, which caused Melody to go off on him about flirting with other girls. Although I thought Melody was a bitch and never cared much for her, I had to admit that she was for the most part nice to me. She’d seen the way Ben and I talked with each other, which was way flirtier than we’d talked with those girls and she never had a problem with it. Listening to Melody bitch and throw accusations at Ben, not even taking him to talk in private was how

my strong opinion about her had grown. So far, since we'd been back, I'd not seen her. If Ben had seen her, he hadn't said anything. I was fine with her being out of our lives.

We had lunch in the cafeteria. Only six other people total were there and four of them were workers. I'd never seen the place so sparsely occupied while it was open. Most of the time when we went through the lines to get food, it was grab before someone else took what you wanted and go so you could get through the line. Even with the process of a variety of food to choose from and simply swiping your campus ID card, I'd learned the hard way that I needed to keep track of my expenditures somewhat. As long as I did not go over sixteen dollars a day on three meals, I would be all right as far as money went for food.

With so few students around, the woman who was in charge of the lunchroom told us to take whatever we wanted and it was on the house. Ben and I piled up our trays with more food than we would ever consume. I'd begun with the items I never got because they were expensive and would not stick with me in the long run. Ben had the idea of grabbing wrapped items, such as the baked goods of Rice Krispy treats, various cookies and brownies. When the lady in charge saw us grabbing them, she came out with a bag and dumped the contents of the basket in it. Handing it to us she said, "You boys could definitely use these more than I can."

We both thanked her profusely for her generosity. She appeared delighted in making us happy. This momentarily made me think of life back home, because she reminded me of my mom.

This feeling did not last long. Ben was all jazzed about, "Our plentiful source of food!" He kept on talking about how great it was to be here and how we could stuff ourselves to the gills.

His idea sounded like a good one to me. After all, we had all this food. If we did not eat it, it was going to go into the trash. We began with eating various things and commented on them. Then we worked our way into trying items that the other person had not grabbed. Each of us would give the other one the other half and say something like, "You gotta try this!"

Then I had the dumbest fucking idea in the world. "Let's see who can eat the most chicken strips in a minute."

Ben, being as wise as me, was sure to shoot down my offer. "Great idea! Solo, you're going down!"

We watched the clock and agreed to begin as soon as the big hand passed twelve. It was only a few seconds away. Those few seconds seemed to take an eternity. Ben and I put on our game faces, both giving the other serious glances and some trash talking about how the other was going down.

“Go!” Ben said, as if I’d not been watching the clock along with him to know when to start.

We were off on our eating race. I had chewed and swallowed two whole chicken strips while Ben was just a little over half way through with one. My fifth strip in, my mouth was dry and I could feel chewed chicken strip in my throat. I grabbed my soda and took a drink to keep from choking. This move was all that Ben needed to take the lead. I quickly shoved another strip in my mouth. Then another, immediately followed by another and another. I was a chicken strip chewing machine. Before I knew it, we were both down to our last strip. Frantically I chewed away seeing Ben doing the same as we were eye-to-eye.

“Done!” we both said at the same time. This caused the both of us to laugh. This was when I noticed we’d gone two minutes past our proposed time limit.

Ben was suggesting another challenge as I was discovering just how full I was. I felt as if I was going to burst. I was about to express this thought when Ben suddenly grabbed his stomach. “I need to go use the bathroom.”

“Me too!” I knew what he was talking about as my own stomach cramped. Leaving behind our trays of food and bag of baked goods, we both darted for the closest bathroom.

Winter quarter was in full swing and the workload was easy so far—mostly reading for classes and a couple of assignments. Ben and I had one class each that were pretty much the same. Although they were under different names, the instructors were assigning the same work and presenting identical lectures. We decided to share the book since we had class at different times. The second day in, we decided to share the answers for our homework too. Our justification was, if the teachers were not going to make an effort on the content for their classes, we were going to put out the minimal effort on the work. Neither class was going to have quizzes or tests. The only thing we would be missing was the learning. This was doubtful since Ben and I discussed the class regularly as we shared answers and tweaked a few words and phrases not to have every response the same.

We fell into a routine, or at least I did. Ben would come into the room and off would come his shirt. I would busy myself, making sure that I could see him take it off. This was when I noticed something I never had until I'd developed an interest in Ben. When Ben's clothes came off, he had my undivided interest. In order to check him out, I was being particularly careful on his undressing sessions so that Ben would not see me watching him. When Ben did not think I was watching him, he would flex and check himself out in the mirror. Maybe that's all it was, me being a friend to Ben and giving him what he needed, someone to notice his body.

I tried to convince myself of this as I eagerly waited for him to take off his jeans and strut around the room in nothing but his underwear. On this particular day, he was distracted with various stuff. Something on his computer, looking for a movie that he never watched, hanging up his laundry, which was never a priority, back to his computer again. Then his phone rang and I knew from experience his clothes always came off when he was on the phone. I was thrilled since he would be distracted and probably not even notice me. The call was short and he was back to messing around at the computer again.

I'd gotten so eager to see his pants come off that I almost asked if he was going to take them off. I had reading I needed to complete so that I could write a response paper. Rather than finishing what I needed to do, I'd become obsessed with waiting for the unveiling. I wasn't about to miss the view, which I knew was silly since seeing Ben strip down was a regular occurrence.

I am sure the wait was what prompted me to make the comment that I did. That, or I am just a total freak of nature. Ben finally took off his pants. I expressed a thought that I should have kept in my head. "You really do have a nice body."

"Thanks," Ben seemed uncomfortable.

I was shocked I'd just blurted that out to him. In an effort to cover up my error, I attempted to joke. "I can see why you strut around as you do. A fine thing like you. If you've got it, you might as well flaunt it."

"Sure," he frowned.

I was only making it worse. I could feel my face start to redden. I buried myself in my reading and from there worked on my paper. Ben had his own work to do that night. Beyond some casual conversation, mostly academically related, we each kept to ourselves throughout the evening.

My comment marked the start of a change. I thought for sure I would never see Ben's body scantily clothed ever again. I would soon discover how wrong I was.

The next night, Ben caught me checking him out. My plan for saving face with Ben was to appear disinterested in him, which meant no looking. I'd tossed and turned throughout most of the night as I formulated this plan and then again when I'd come back to our room to take a nap. Instead, I ended up searching the internet, my focus was on women in underwear, with no luck. Then I decided to look at men in their underwear. All this accomplished was putting my mind back on Ben. Discouraged and beat, I crashed for a few hours, never getting into a deep sleep.

I woke up when Ben returned to our room. He was friendly and we were exchanging jokes as we typically did. He made a reference that put me at ease about the incident the night before once and for all. "I was thinking we stay in tonight, find something to eat here and stay in bed cuddling."

I retorted, "Only if we're naked."

"A must."

"Sounds like a plan."

Ben took his shirt off, tossing it onto his bed on the way over to sit at his desk chair. In the chair, he undid his jeans and slid out of them only slightly lifting up his butt, otherwise staying in his chair.

In my defense, I was tired and my eyes had wandered for a while over Ben's body. I worked my eyes from his feet up his muscular built legs with little hair on them, his well-defined package, firm stomach, muscular pecs and that face, with those eyes. Those eyes were watching me, as I'd been watching him. By the time I noticed Ben was watching me watching him, the damage was done.

Ben did not seem the least bit bothered. I thought he would be a little uncomfortable. Even though Ben played it cool with people checking him out, I'd noticed a few times he had some level of discomfort, with a few select people. I expected to find him fully clothed the next time I came into the room.

When I walked in and found Ben fully clothed, I thought the days of eyeing his near naked body were over. He was sitting at his desk, doing something on his computer. I walked over and put my stuff down on my own desk, debating whether or not to get to work on my homework while the class was still fresh in my head.

Even though Ben had said hello to me when I walked in, he kept his attention on the book he was reading. He appeared to be into it, so I did not want to interrupt him. I wanted to talk to him about what had happened the previous night, but I was not sure what to say.

Soon my worries over Ben were out of my mind and I was into reading and working on my homework at my desk. Ben kept his clothes on, a true rarity. I did not concern myself with his state of dress, only focusing on what I needed to get done.

I finished up with work from my class earlier that day and decided to get to work on the questions from the class where Ben and I shared our work. My idea was that if I got most of the work done, I would be in Ben's good graces again.

I was in the middle of the page of questions when Ben climbed off his bed and walked over to me. "You're doing the work on your own?"

"Yeah, I thought I would get a jump on it. You seemed busy."

Ben pulled off the polo shirt he was wearing. He fumbled with getting it over his head, wiggling in front of me, and came close to brushing his body against mine a few times. I didn't think that it was as difficult to remove as Ben was making it out to be. "What have you done so far?"

I struggled to remember what I'd been reading before his removing his shirt distracted me. It seemed easier for me to read the questions and the answers I'd found and written down. I started with question one, reading the question and what I'd answered.

"Good!" Ben said. He moved in close looking at the paper to read along with me. His lips were close enough to my ear, that I could feel his breath. I stopped reading aloud then, because I thought he was reading it to himself, but then he told me, "Go on. Read the rest to me."

It was difficult to read with him in such close proximity to me. I kept on stumbling over words. Ben took no notice.

When I finished sharing what I'd written, Ben moved away from me. "It all sounds good so far. You want to work on it together?"

I turned toward him. “Sure.” That was when Ben undid his pants and slid them down, running his hands along his legs. He turned around to bend over and pick them up, shoving his butt towards me.

I speculated that he might be trying to give me a show. When he turned around to fold up his jeans with a smirk on his face, I knew he was messing around. I stuck my tongue out at him. To this, he nodded his head in agreement. I shook my head to disagree.

With the cat out of the bag, so to speak, my own feelings of guilt and questioning myself were gone. For the first time in my life I was experiencing the sexual tension I'd heard my friends talk about. In me, a sexual desire was blooming. I took comfort in the idea that I felt sexually frustrated. On a trip to one of the libraries on campus, I found plenty of information about what I was experiencing. One of the theories was I was going through a phase. Another was about a sexual awakening. I only read far enough to develop an understanding of what I was experiencing. When it came to reading something that was not about me, such as homosexual inclinations, I'd put the book aside. I was not gay. If I were, I would have found other guys attractive. I neglected to note my lack of finding any female the least bit attractive. Eventually, checking out some guy would get me back to thinking about Ben.

Ben started going out with a group of guys who'd asked him a few times to come hang with them. He'd gone from referring to them as “the pretty boys” to “the guys”. Twice now, Ben had invited me to come out with him and the guys, I was simply not into going out. This time he was insistent and practically begged me. If it was not for my head killing me and my needing to get some rest, I would have caved in and gone with him.

My head hurt so much that I did not pay any attention to Ben when he returned from the shower and was trying to figure out what he wanted to wear. With the production he made of putting something on and commenting about it, I knew he was trying to draw me in. I quickly gave him any response and drifted off to sleep.

As I slept, I dreamt Ben was lying next to me cuddled up and putting an arm around me with his hand resting on my chest. I liked having him next to me and even with my head still pounding, I felt better having him there. After a bit of cuddling, he whispered that he had to get going and wanted to know if I wanted him to back out on going out. All I did was look at him, but I could not move to

say or suggest that I did not want him to go. Ben kissed me on the forehead. I thought I heard him whisper, "I never expected this to happen. I'm glad that it is." On the other hand, was it "I'm glad that it did"? I tried to recall which, but that was all I could remember of the dream.

I woke up a little after midnight, my headache was gone and I was feeling better than I had in days. Ben was still out. I was torn between reading for a bit and going back to sleep. I ended up deciding to read and kind of wait for Ben to return.

When Ben walked in he was wearing a red, white and blue plaid print buttoned-down shirt, short sleeved. It showed off his bulging muscles and his pecs. The smile on his face told me that the shirt, or better so the body underneath, had been drawing attention all night. We'd greeted each other and I was attempting to get back into the book I had been reading before he entered.

Ben was not having this. "You should have come out with me tonight. The guys left after an hour. I ended up hanging out with some girls. This one, I had a blast hanging with."

"So you hit it off with a girl?" I tried to mask my disappointment.

Ben shot back, "Not for a relationship though."

I glanced over at him curiously. Once we'd made eye contact, he put his hand up and wiped under his eye, as if brushing something off. Then he moved his hand to rub his chin, making sure my eyes were following it. His hand lowered to the top button of his shirt, which he undid with one hand, his eyes still on me watching him.

Without thinking, I wet my lips. He moved down to the next button and undid it. Then the next. With my mouth closed, I breathed anxiously through my nose. With his shirt halfway unbuttoned, Ben shoved his hand inside of his shirt and caressed one of his pecs, slowly moving his hand to the center of his chest where he massaged it with his fingers for a moment.

Still breathing hard through my nose, I sat still watching him intently. He slowly pulled his hand from his shirt, undoing one more button, reaching his hand inside his shirt to caress the top of his abs briefly before pulling his hand out. He repeated this, working through the remaining two buttons on his shirt. I was feeling light-headed as I was literally holding my breath.

Grabbing each side of his now completely unfastened shirt, he held it closed with tight fists. Holding tight to his shirt, he rubbed his fists on his abs. Slowly rotating them in a circular motion, as he gradually revealed the upper torso I'd seen so many times before. He suddenly snapped his arms back exposing his chest, letting his shirt drop down behind him.

Next, he undid the button on his jeans as he wiggled his hips from side to side, occasionally pushing his package forward. Once the zipper was down, the jeans slid to his ankles revealing his boxer briefs, which were gray tonight. Still moving his hips, he pulled one foot out and with the other kicked the jeans off to the side. I'd never been so tantalized.

He turned around and shook his butt at me, turning his head to look at me. Then he bent over and bounced his butt in my face, again turning to look at me. His balls swung back and forth freely within the confines of the gray boxer briefs. He continued to shake as he stood up again and faced me.

Taking his pointer fingers, he slid them into the side of band on his boxer briefs. Slowly he pushed them down revealing parts that I was not usually privy to seeing. The band of his underwear slid down past his pubic hair.

Thump! My book fell to the floor and made us both jump. Ben slid his fingers around the waistband of his briefs, and pulled them back up. Then he slid them around to the front, pulled the waistband away, briefly, and allowed it to snap as he slid his fingers out. If I'd been closer, I was sure that I would have been able to glance down and see his penis. As if Ben could read my mind, he took two steps closer, slid his fingers into the waistband of his boxer briefs, pulled them forward and pushed his package towards me. I saw only a glimpse of Ben's penis before the band snapped back against his hips.

Ben grinned. "I'm going to go brush my teeth and get to bed. I'll be back in about fifteen minutes. Unless you need longer?"

It took me a second to figure out what he was getting at. I was turned on. Once Ben was out of the room I reached down to pleasure myself. This act of stimulation that was supposed to make me feel so good was quickly interrupted by feelings of guilt. I felt like a freak being sexually worked up over my friend. It did not make sense to me. As I shuffled my hand up and down, my feeling of pleasure dissipated as I went flaccid within my fist.

I continued to pump away, convinced that I was going to "get there" for a few more minutes. I finally gave in to the idea it wasn't going to happen. I

sighed in defeat as I took my hand away. I was quite frustrated as I waited for Ben to come back into the room. I was not sure why I was waiting for Ben. It was not as if I was going to talk to him about what was on my mind. Eventually I grabbed my book and went back to reading. This was a good idea, because it took Ben over thirty minutes to “brush his teeth”.

Ben returned, told me he was tired and climbed right into bed. I thought for sure he was going to ask me if everything was all right or if I wanted to talk. I played out in my head what I would say if he did and how I thought our conversation would go. As the scenarios rolled through my mind, I was undecided. Although I was tired and on the verge of falling asleep, it would take me another two hours to stop thinking and wind down to be able to get some sleep.

In the end, Ben helped me get to sleep. He'd tossed his comforter off him while he was asleep with his legs spread. I eyed his muscular body, smooth skin... his package. I thought about the show that he'd put on for me and I was ready. I “brushed my teeth” and was asleep soon after.

Over the next few days, I discovered that the blue were my favorite and red were my least favorite of all of Ben's boxer briefs. Another thing I realized was that when I came in and found Ben clothed, I was more interested in him when he stripped down to his underwear. I had this sneaking suspicion that he knew this. More often than not when I came back to our room he would be wearing clothes. Not for long though. The shirt would come off and the pants moments later. My own feelings of guilt and weirdness soon went away as it became clear he was okay with this.

It appeared that we were complementary to one another. In him knowing I was checking him out and me poorly hiding that I was doing so. As strange as I supposed this was, what happened next gave me comfort and I no longer gave my checking Ben out any further thought.

When I showered in the morning, I would often wear my robe down to the bathroom and come back to the room to dry off and dress. Ben had been up earlier than I had on this particular day, and I was under the impression he would be heading out while I was in the shower. When I'd wished him a good day, he reciprocated the sentiment.

Returning to our room, I found Ben dressed and sitting on his bed reading. Or perhaps he only wanted it to appear that way. People's eyes can give them

away. I could read Ben better than that. Wearing the towel around my neck to dry off with, I could have kept my back to him and most likely not even noticed his gaze. Perhaps it was out of my own curiosity that I did not.

Taking off my robe I hung it up leaving me standing completely naked. I saw, out of the corner of my eye, Ben's eyes following my naked body. I was not the least bit self-conscious. Possibly because of all the times that I'd eyed Ben myself, I felt I owed him a chance to gaze upon me in all my glory. I knew it was because I liked the idea of him taking notice of me, even if it was out of plain curiosity. I toweled off, taking a while to dry my hair, leaving my privates out in the open for Ben to admire all he wanted. Then I went over and took my time deciding what boxers to wear. Ben kept his eyes on me the entire time.

The performance I put on for Ben was liberating. He grinned all the way throughout it. I was glad that I'd put on my boxers, followed shortly thereafter by my jeans, because although it was Ben doing the watching, I'd gotten myself quite worked up. Walking to class, I wondered if Ben could tell that I was getting hard as I danced into my clothes for him. I was not too concerned, because by the time I was fully dressed, Ben was giving me a standing ovation for the show.

I ended up grabbing Ben's package, by accident of course. When I was heading out the door, Ben had grabbed hold of me, wrapping one arm around me. I think he was trying to give me a hug. I spun around and in the process of trying not to fall, my hand ended up catching his crotch. I could not believe that I'd groped him again, which accelerated my partial boner to a full-on one. Feeling relieved that Ben did not return the grab, I darted for the door. "I need to get to class."

Ben was right behind me. "Me too!"

I tried to avert my eyes from looking at Ben since I knew that his penis was firm to my touch. Ben and I talked about meeting for lunch and that was about all there was time for us to discuss. Once we were downstairs, Ben and I parted ways towards opposite ends of campus.

I suppose it was my fault. I'd told Ben that I was going to be meeting with my study group until at least ten pm. It was not as if we answered to each other, but it was more so a combination of common courtesy as well as someone knowing where you were. This had been Ben's idea and it provided me with a

feeling of comfort early on, being far away from home and now out on my own. Ben was from the city and even though he'd never admitted so, I think he was a little homesick. Or perhaps it could simply be his outgoing personality and need for connection.

People liked Ben. I liked Ben. He was confident, outgoing and an all-around fun personality. Don't get me wrong, I am not some sort of an introvert. Perhaps the number one thing Ben and I had in common was a sense of humor. Our jokes have no boundaries. The shock factor has always been a thrill for both of us. I'd always been like this.

After all, when you are a guy my age, nobody gets when you are not interested in sex. Humor provides the perfect facade. Joking about sex, no one gets concerned about your lack of interest in sex. The jokes themselves have gotten me into trouble. Fortunately, for me, the more graphic I was when talking with guys the more they were amused by me. Ben was very much the same.

The major difference between Ben and me is that he has a hearty sex drive. This was something I guess I was oblivious to until we came back from our winter break.

So getting back to what was my fault. I was supposed to be out until about ten pm. Due to the lack of work that was needed for my class and other factors, getting together to study was deemed unnecessary by all the group participants. I decided I would head back to my dorm room and get to bed early. The last couple of days I hadn't been feeling up to par, yet again. I hoped it was only a cold and I was not getting the flu, which was running rampant around campus. I could not remember what Ben said he had going on tonight, but I was sure he would be out. I was formulating the note I would leave for him.

Bursting through the door, I found Ben with his hands full. Well, one of them anyways. I froze, as did he. I was not sure what to do. As much as I tried, I could not take my eyes off Ben's hard penis. Sure, I'd seen Ben in his underwear often. I'd never seen what was below the various colors of boxer briefs he wore.

In my own defense, Ben was not circumcised, unlike myself. Here was a penis different than my own and frankly, it was fascinating. I closed the door. As if my staring at Ben was not weird enough, he sat with his hand gripping his erection. We both remained frozen for what seemed like a long time.

I was the first to speak. "Sorry."

"It's all right." Ben moved his hand over his erection slightly. "I didn't expect you back so soon."

"Well, I was so exhausted. I planned on heading to bed early. I had no idea you'd be... Well."

Ben giggled. "Speaking of which, do you mind if I finish up? I am so fucking horny. I feel as if I am going to explode if I don't cum soon. You don't have to leave. I don't even care if you watch. I just need to finish up."

"Thanks, but I am beat." I stripped down to my boxers and T-shirt before climbing into bed. I felt as if I was going to pass out. I lay down on my side, facing the wall. Involuntarily I listened to not only Ben slapping the salami, but also his occasional groans. These noises together had me feeling all hot and horny.

Eventually, though I wasn't sure why, my curiosity got the better of me. I'd seen in plain sight what Ben was doing and it wasn't as if I hadn't seen enough to paint the picture in my head. I slowly turned over, hoping my bed would not creak or Ben would notice. I inched little by little going from facing the wall to the room. My heart began to race.

I finally turned enough that I could see Ben. It was then I realized that when he was at the computer, his back was to me. I eyed him up and down, enough to see him bucking his hips with his underwear still around one ankle.

"Uuugh! Oooo! Oooo! Uugh! Oooo! Ugh! Ooo!" He was done.

I closed my eyes and tried to drift off to sleep even though I was now erect myself.

The next morning I awoke with my penis as hard as a rock. I'd only experienced this a few times in my life and only knew of two ways to get rid of it. Take a piss or masturbate. As solid as my erection was, I knew that a piss was not going to get rid of it. I glanced over and Ben was motionless and appeared asleep. I reached my hand down into my boxers and gripped my penis, noticing it seemed to be larger than normal. As I tugged away at it, my feeling of intense pleasure was interrupted intermittently by wondering if I had stayed hard all night.

With my motion limited, I decided to poke my erection through the hole in my boxers. There, much better, I thought as I did the five-knuckle shuffle. I came quickly and subsequently it landed all over the front of the shirt I'd worn to bed. Cumming felt so good I let out a groan. I pulled off my shirt and balled it up before tossing it on the floor beside my bed. I was feeling good.

I heard a snicker coming from Ben in his bed. He turned over and gave me an "I knew what you were doing" smirk.

I grinned. "That felt wonderful!"

"Yes, it does." Ben reached his hand below his covers. Although he'd tried to tuck it away, I could tell he was sporting some wood. I was going to make a joke, but before I could, he caught my eyes wandering. "I just need to pee. I'm going to take a shower too." He gathered up his stuff, pulled on some shorts and his flip-flops and went out the door leaving me with, "Good thing you finally got off before you burst."

Ben was out the door before I could come up with a remark. I was bugged by the slammed door. This didn't bother me as much after he'd left the room and a thought entered my head. I knew Ben had been looking at porn the night before. What I hadn't noticed was what type of porn it was he had been looking at. I'd been so wrapped up in trying to see him getting off. I'd not paid any attention to what was on his monitor.

I was now to the point where I didn't have a problem with finding Ben attractive. Not until I found myself missing out on an entire class lecture because I was daydreaming about him. Numerous thoughts were flooding my head and with all of the conflicting ideas, I was getting frustrated at my inability to sort them out. College was supposed to be the place where I grew smarter and all I was accomplishing was feeling more confused than ever.

I decided to go for a walk in an effort to clear my head. I wasn't alone for very long even though I went along a different path than the one I normally took. I intended to steer clear of my room and especially of Ben.

I was so wrapped up in my own head thinking, contemplating and wondering what was going on with me that I didn't even notice Ben come up to me until he said something. "Hey, Solo! What's up?"

When I jumped, he giggled, amused with himself. Those bright shiny teeth and his laugh made me smile. It was almost like there was a magnetic pull that

brought us together. I was about to say that I was thinking about him, and not in the friend sort of concept. “Just going for a little walk. I wanted to clear my head. Class today was pretty deep.”

“Huh?” he questioned. The way he was looking at me, I could tell that he was waiting for further clarification on what was bothering me.

“I don’t know.” In many ways, I was admitting the truth. “I guess I’m just feeling conflicted and I want to work some things out in my head.”

“Over a class?” He caught himself, “Sorry about that. It must have been pretty deep.” I was not the least bit surprised by what came next from him. “Do you want to talk to me about it? I know when something is bothering me, it helps to bounce it off of someone else.”

“Nah! I think I need to clear my head.”

As I continued to walk, Ben kept walking beside me. I considered telling him that I wanted to be alone. On the other hand, it was nice to have him there in case I changed my mind and wanted to talk. Not that I was about to admit to him what was bothering me. It was awkward enough that I’d developed a crush on my roommate. I was barely admitting it to myself, so there was no way I was going to confess this to Ben.

We made our way to the edge of campus and an area I’d never explored before. Typically, we’d only left campus for the grocery stores and restaurants. For the most part, Ben was quiet, except to comment on the sights or point something out. I’d shrug, eventually I’d respond with one word, then a brief sentence. I knew what he was trying to do. As I was getting set to put a stop to his talk, I suddenly felt weighed down by a thought I could not get out of my head.

Ben was pointing out a house that he said was similar to his in Seattle. I liked to hear about where he was from and getting to know him better. Ben could tell that I was interested and kept on talking. Listening to him freed me from the burden of my own troubling thoughts. I started telling him about my own home. We started asking questions, sharing and comparing Seattle to Ravenswood.

Walking and talking put me at ease. I found myself suddenly asking, “Do you think that I’m odd?”

“Yes,” Ben answered without any hesitation and my stomach immediately knotted. He followed up with, “Aren’t we both odd? I mean everybody is odd in some way. It’s those odd things that make us unique individuals.”

With his comment, I developed the courage to push the envelope. “Have you ever been attracted to someone who you know you shouldn’t be?” Ben was quiet for a bit, as he thought this over. I became nervous and I had the need to fill the silence. “I bet you’ve always had girls attracted to you.”

Ben frowned. “I suppose I have. I’ve pretty much been able to get any girl to go out with me that I’ve shown an interest in. In answer to your question, there was one girl though. She was dating a buddy of mine in high school. The majority of the time she acted as if I didn’t exist. I can remember going to great lengths to try and get her to like me.”

“Did she ever?” I had a feeling I knew the answer.

Ben sighed. “No, she never did. My buddy and I eventually quit being friends. Let’s just say I made a real ass of myself and in the end they were meant to be.”

“That sucks.” I felt bad for Ben.

“It does. That’s how life is sometimes. You want something so badly that you don’t realize what you have until it is gone.” Ben shook his head as he let out a sigh.

I took a deep breath. There it was, Ben telling me plain as day that a relationship was not going to happen with us. Part of me wanted to run away from Ben. The other part was glad that he was honest with me.

Our conversation descended into awkward silence and we were back to pointing out and focusing on the scenery. I took to heart what Ben had said and thought deeply about what we had. I didn’t want to lose him as a friend. In reality, he’d been quite cool with not freaking out when he’d caught me checking him out and he even put on a show to be my eye candy. I knew not many guys would be willing to do that.

Ben suggested, “You want to start heading back towards campus?”

“Sure.” I imagined he needed some space himself before I ended up discussing he and I being an us.

Ben put an arm around me. “Good! Because it is too hard to make out with you with all this walking.”

I snorted out a laugh having been caught off guard by his remark. Like that, I was fine again. “That doesn’t mean we cannot hold hands.”

Ben smiled. "Such a great idea!" He took his arm off my shoulder and grabbed my hand.

Although it felt very strange, I kept hold of Ben's hand as we walked. When we came along a pair of women out power walking, I tried to pull my hand away. Ben held on tightly to it. As the women walked past, Ben said, "Come on honey, you need to face your fears. You know how worked up this gets me!"

The women scowled, obviously taking offense, which was the response Ben was looking for. We both tried not to laugh as we distanced ourselves from them. Ben and I held hands most of the way back to campus. I liked it. We did not encounter any further prudes.

Our weekends were free, with the exception of a couple of hours of homework. I'd fallen into the habit of playing catch up on Sunday night, often leading to being up most of the night and tired the next day. I found myself increasingly distracted. I was not alone with the distraction. My concerns about Ben being uncomfortable with my sudden increased interest in him were unfounded. We were now hanging out practically all of the time.

We were watching a movie again, some foreign flick with English subtitles. I don't think either one of us knew the name or found the story interesting. There had been a sex scene early on in the film and we were watching as a story unfolded. This was what kept Ben from shutting off the movie. Now farther into the movie, the two male main characters were with this one girl. We had a pretty good idea of what was going to happen as the movie led up to a threesome. As we watched, I kept finding myself distracted by how fascinated I was with watching Ben's reactions. By the end of the scene, I was feeling pretty worked up. I would soon discover that I was not the only one.

Ben paused the movie and looked over to me. "You wanna jerk off together?"

It seemed to be rare that I ever felt like this. I casually agreed, "Sure."

Ben got up from his own bed, walked over and lay down beside me on my bed. We propped ourselves up on the pillows. This made it easier to see each other.

As Ben pulled his erect penis and balls out and letting them rest on top of the waistband of his underwear, he said, "This always makes me cum faster." I

mimicked him and did the same with my own stiff penis, resting my nuts on the waistband of my boxers.

We sat there for a moment exposed to one another. We looked at each other's faces and our eyes moved to each other's hard penises. My head felt light, as I grew more and more excited. The head of my own penis throbbed. Ben pulled his foreskin tightly back, exposing the head of his penis. I was curious if pulling the skin back hurt.

Ben let go long enough to wrap his hand around the length. He moved his hand up and down slowly, as if he was signaling to me. I grabbed my own hardness tightly and began to move my hand. I thought I was going to cum quickly, so I stopped and loosened my grip. It still felt good. As Ben picked up his rhythm, I increased my own. I could see the head of Ben's penis poke out a little and slide back in a rapid rhythm. The sight of this made me grow harder.

I watched as Ben moved his hand up and down, his balls bouncing up and down. I could feel my own doing the same. Each time I felt close to cumming, Ben would slow down. I wondered if he was trying to make it last. Never in my life had masturbating felt so pleasurable. I did not want it to end.

A tingling went up my back and I pulled my shirt over my head, exposing my stomach. I came earlier than Ben, with a huge load of cum splattering across my belly. Unlike when I had pleased myself alone, the feeling of guilt did not encompass me. Instead, I felt satisfied. I kept hold of my penis as I watched Ben continue jerking away. I could feel myself grow hard again and I decided to take advantage of the moment. Ben seemed to like this, since I saw a smile grow on his face.

As Ben came, he held his foreskin back tight. The amount of cum he expelled was less than my own. It shot up and landed right above his belly button. He let go of his penis and it fell to his belly.

I stopped jerking and took my hand away. Ben grabbed me by the wrist and guided my hand back to my erection. "Keep going. I'll get going in a moment."

I'd never cum twice in a row, and felt anxious and concerned about whether I would be able to. Just as Ben said he would, he started back up again. It seemed to take me longer this time, but I eventually got there. Ben grunted, thrust and tensed up.

At last Ben stopped. "Okay, now it's just hurting."

"That's not good."

He got up with his privates still hanging out in front of his underwear, walked over and grabbed a towel. He paused with it in his hand, as if trying to decide whether to wipe up my mess, or to admire the amount that had come out. Then he handed me the towel. I cleaned up. My penis was shrinking down as I tucked it away. Ben took back the towel and wiped himself off.

He pulled back his foreskin. "I have to make sure I get it all cleaned up." Once he had his entire penis and the surrounding area wiped down, he tucked it back into his underwear.

I know Ben said something to me. His words were not clear though. I drifted off to sleep before I could ask him to repeat himself. I was happy we'd just done what we had together. No analyzing or thinking about it. It was a good time. I felt awesome.

The next morning Ben woke me asking me if I'd like to join him for breakfast. A few months ago, Ben heard about a restaurant near campus that offered all-you-could-eat pancakes. Ever since then, he'd talked about us going to have breakfast there one morning. The problem was that as late as we were up on the weekends, by the time we got up and going breakfast was over.

We joked around as we always had. In many ways, I felt as if we were closer than ever. The pancakes were delicious and we were into our second plate of them when our conversation got deep.

I made a sort of joke. "You know you are the first person I've ever done anything like that with."

"You were for me too." Ben smiled.

I looked him in the eye. "I mean I've... Well..." My stomach knotted and I wondered why I even brought this up.

Ben smiled. "You always remember your first. It's not like we had sex, but I get what you are saying."

"Thank you!" I was relieved. "I just did not want things to get strange between us."

"That won't happen until we have sex together. I mean where we touch each other more than ourselves." Ben shoved a bite of pancake into his mouth. I nearly choked on my own bite, and Ben almost spit his out laughing so hard. "Lighten up, Solo! We're fine."

I attempted to chuckle, feeling silly. "So sex is still an option for us."

"You bet!" he agreed heartily.

Although I knew it was the weird humor we shared, I found myself wishing for some truth in it. I shook the thought from my head. What Ben and I were doing was normal experimental behavior. It was just two normal guys having a tiny bit of fun.

A reality check came to me suddenly during a dorm party. All week long, each time Ben or I were in the hall, somebody would stop us to make sure that we were attending the dorm party on Friday night. Neither Ben nor I had ever been into partying. However, we did attend them now and then. This weekend we were resolved to take part. This was because everyone in the building seemed to be going and with the pressure of not wanting to be antisocial outcasts we needed to participate.

I'd convinced myself that the party was a good idea because ever since we'd returned from break Ben and I had spent most of our free time together, either out with others or shut up in our room. I thought it would be good to meet some other people and perhaps meet someone else that I could develop a romantic interest in besides Ben.

A few of the girls that discussed the party with me seemed nice enough and I thought it was worth getting a chance to get to know them better, even if it was to become friends.

The evening of the party, Ben and I were welcomed by a pair of guys who lived down the hall from us. Their names were Derrick and Justin. They were sitting together on one of these great big chairs I'd often seen people reading or hanging out at. As soon as the other chair opened, Ben flopped down, grabbing me by the arm to join him. It was snug, yet comfortable.

Justin and Ben started gabbing away as if they were long lost friends. That was something else about Ben, I noted. He could easily start up a conversation with anyone. I'd always had to warm up to people before I could reach his level of comfort.

We soon learned that Derrick and Justin had known each other since they were kids and came up to go to school together. Derrick was the quieter of the two and seemed to let Justin do most of the talking. The way they acted

reminded me of how my mom and dad were together when they were talking with people.

I don't know if it was the way Justin talked and maybe the way he constantly moved his hands as he spoke. Something struck me as odd about him at first, but I was unable to put my finger on it.

Ben must have thought something was different about the pair as well. "You two seem very close."

"We are!" Justin was enthusiastic. "Derrick is my world."

Derrick smiled. He must have seen the confusion that I knew was registering on both our faces. Derrick put his arm around Justin. "What Justin is trying to say is that we are a couple."

"A couple?" I blurted out as if given the answer to a question, I should have been able to clue into.

"Yeah!" Justin seemed so proud. "We'd been best friends for years and, well, one thing led to another and here we are, boyfriends."

"You make a good couple." Ben stated. I was glad that he said something nice because I was sure my jaw dropped. "Does anybody need a drink? I have cotton mouth."

Justin shot up out of the chair. "I'll go with you." He glanced back at Derrick, "Finish that up so you can start on your next one." Justin pointed somewhere across the room and led the way with Ben following him.

"Someone is trying to get me drunk," Derrick admitted.

"Ah!" I'd never talked with anyone who was gay to my knowledge. I was not sure what to talk to him about.

"Sorry if we freaked you out." Derrick took a drink. "Justin thought that you and Ben might be a couple. I guess not."

"How did you know you were gay?"

"Ah! The ultimate question. I didn't. Something always seemed missing from my life. I knew that I liked being around Justin more than anyone, including my girlfriend. Then, one night, one thing led to another and soon after Justin and I put the pieces together." Derrick appeared so happy with the recollection.

There was an urgency to my need to know a few things before Ben returned with Justin. “So if you and Justin never got together, you’d be straight?”

“Doubtful. I think I would have eventually figured it out.” Derrick took a moment and grinned. “Justin and I were destined to fall in love at one point. We’ve always been close and when it came to getting to this level, everything felt so right.” Derrick took another drink and continued, “We’ve had our share of ups and downs. Such as my parents freaking out about what my narrow-minded mom called ‘choosing to be gay’. She and my dad are coming around. They’ve both always liked Justin, which I think makes it easier.”

I felt dizzy. I’d never even contemplated what me getting involved with Ben would do to my family. This cinched it. I needed to find a girl. Derrick was a nice guy though. I did not want to go away from him. I’d never been able to talk with anyone about stuff like this.

As Derrick gulped down his drink, I saw Ben and Justin returning. Justin was built and I could see what Derrick would find visually appealing about him. Then I looked at Derrick and could see what Justin would find great about him. Ben smiled at me and I thought again how great he looked tonight.

Ben handed me a cup and I took a sip. I did not know why I was surprised there was no alcohol in it. Ben and I had discussed right before leaving our room whether or not we were going to drink. We’d decided that we were going to wait and see. The previous parties we’d gone to together, neither of us drank. Although my head was spinning, I contemplated drinking.

I took Ben’s cup from his hand, in hopes that he had alcohol in his. Taking a drink, I soon discovered that it was only soda, as mine was. Ben smiled at me. “You okay?”

“I thought mine tasted flat.” I covered as I handed him my cup so he could taste it for himself.

He took a drink. “I don’t think either taste flat. You can have either one you want though.”

I took my cup back and handed Ben his. Taking another drink I smiled. “You’re right.”

“If you wanted a kiss, all you had to do was ask.” Ben pointed at the lip of his cup and took another drink before handing it back to me.

“That’s no kiss!” Justin was loud enough to get a few people to glance our direction. Then he planted a kiss on Derrick’s mouth.

Ben explained, "I was telling Justin about our flirtatious moments together."

Ben and I spent most of the night with Derrick and Justin. They were fun to hang out with. I discovered that gay guys were not that much different from the other guys I'd hung out with over the years. Ben and Justin both ended up with their shirts off in the warmth of the evening. I knew Derrick at least caught me checking out not only Ben, but also Justin throughout the night.

I'm not sure what it was, but something jarred me awake. My eyes opened briefly, as I glanced over at the clock, to find that it was two in the morning. As I was closing my eyes, I discovered Ben's covers were off him. There was enough light in the room that I could easily see that Ben was sporting wood and was maxing out the front of his boxer briefs. From across the room I watched him for a while. It appeared to me that he was slowly gyrating his hips and his lips were moving like he was kissing somebody invisible. My heart raced as I watched him curiously wondering what his length would feel like to hold on to.

As I observed Ben, I became more and more excited. Not only did I want to touch for myself, I wanted to help him get off. I closed my eyes ever so briefly and reached my hands down and grabbed my own now-throbbing cock. Holding on to it tightly, I thought that maybe I would jerk off and then go back to sleep. After all, I could watch Ben without him knowing that I was staring at him.

I'm not sure what came over me but I tossed off my own covers and slowly crept across the room. Ben was still asleep, gyrating away in his bed. Reaching out my hand, I could see it was shaking. For a moment I thought about going back to bed and keeping with my original idea of getting myself off and then going back to sleep. I willed myself to reach out my hand towards Ben's hard-on. I got it less than an inch away and then I pulled my hand back.

A fear came over me as I thought about the boundary that I would be crossing if I literally violated my roommate while he was asleep. With my hand in close proximity as Ben continued to thrust harder and harder, Ben eventually brushed his hard penis against my hand. I figured the damage had already been done and this was what let me to do what I did next. As my hand stayed outside of Ben's boxer briefs, I slowly closed it around his penis.

Ben let out a moan that startled me and I pulled my hand back. Only slightly though. My heart was racing and I froze, thinking Ben was waking up. When I

realized that Ben was still dreaming and thrusting away, I replaced my hand on Ben's penis and this time I squeezed it. He must have liked this because he continued to moan and he thrust way harder.

Suddenly I stopped and he pulled down his boxer briefs so fast that my hand went from touching the outside of his boxer briefs to direct contact. I looked up. Ben opened his eyes briefly, and smiled at me, nodding his head as if giving his approval. Before I could grow scared I closed my eyes, grabbed his penis and began to tug on it again. He went back to gyrating his hips and moaning. I was so excited I couldn't believe that this was actually happening. It felt like it was a dream.

Then my alarm clock startled me awake. I opened my eyes and looked over to see Ben covered and asleep in his bed. I was the only one hard right now. I was disappointed that it was only a dream. So much so, that I got up, threw on some clothes and went for a long walk to clear my head.

We were having lunch in the cafeteria with the group we ate with a few days a week, when one of the girls pointed out something that seemed to be plainly obvious to everyone else. Ben had gotten up to go get an ice cream, asking me if I wanted one. This was not unusual, because he always asked me if I wanted dessert when he was going to get it. Sometimes, even if I would tell him that I did not want it, he would bring it back to me anyways. I would do the same for him.

"He's flirting with you," she stated and the others nodded in agreement.

"He is?" I played dumb.

"Come on! You like it!" one of the guys stated. He was not buying it.

"What's the deal with you two?" another guy asked. Neither was he.

A different girl spoke up, "I think it's cute." Her friend quickly agreed.

"Whatever!" I got up from my seat. "You're all crazy. I need to get to class."

I darted away, feeling their eyes on me as they continued the discussion. I assumed speculating about Ben and me. It was ridiculous. Ben and I were only friends. I could not get out of the cafeteria fast enough.

Once outside, I felt dumb darting out as I had. I walked as quickly as I could to distance myself from the cafeteria. With some time to think, I wished that I

had either played it down or argued with them. How was I going to live this down? I would end up running into each of them at some point, since we all lived in the same building.

“Solo!” I heard Ben shout. I kept on moving as if I did not hear him.

“Solo!” This time he was closer.

I stopped and turned around. He was running, carrying an ice cream sandwich in each hand.

He was only a few feet away from me when he asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I snapped, immediately regretting not sounding more convincing.

Ben held out a hand with one of the ice cream sandwiches. “Here, this is for you.” When I did not reach out my hand, he pleaded, “Please take it.” I took it from him. “What happened back there in the cafeteria?” I shrugged. Ben opened up his ice cream sandwich and took a bite, chewed and swallowed. “Come on man. What happened?”

I opened my own ice cream sandwich and took a bite as I tried to think about what I was going to say. There was no way around it. I was going to have to tell him. “When you got up, everyone was saying how you were flirting with me.” Ben was chewing another bite he’d taken and looking intently at me. I continued, “I didn’t know what to say. I panicked and left.”

Ben’s response threw me off guard. “I was flirting with you. So what? We do that kind of crap all the time. It’s no big deal.”

“Well, now that I left like some little bitch, people are going to assume something is going on between us.”

Ben had taken another bite and spoke with his mouth full. “Let them.”

“Let them?” I was flabbergasted.

“I don’t care what they think. Something *is* going on between us.” He emphasized the word “is”.

“What do you mean?”

He put his hands on my shoulders, to make sure we were face-to-face. “Come on, Solo.” He kept his eyes on me. “You mean nothing is going on between us?” I shrugged. He said, “I like what is happening with us.”

I insisted, “We are just playing around.”

“It might have started out that way. Come on, Solo. We’ve been doing quite a bit more than goofing around.” His face was serious.

I gave his comment some thought. He was right. There was no way of denying that. Not that I wanted to. Deep down, I think I knew all along. It was obvious that we were both enjoying doing stuff together that went well beyond friendship. Sure we started out joking around, when we were alone and then at times to get a reaction out of others. I analyzed the moment in the cafeteria in my head. When Ben had asked me if he could get me anything, I told him that I was good, but honestly, I was hoping he would come back with something. He always asked me if I wanted anything.

I did not need to say a word. My face must have given Ben the response he was looking for. He grinned. He took his hands from my shoulders and put them under my arms, holding me.

I asked, “What is going on with us?”

“I’m not sure.” He did not break eye contact. Ben smiled sheepishly. “I like you, Solomon. I’ve never felt this way about a guy before. I mean, I really like you, a lot.”

I was so glad to hear Ben say that. I sputtered over my own words. “I have never felt this way about anybody before. I mean ever.” I took a deep breath. “Ben, I like you a lot too.”

We each moved our faces closer together until our lips touched and we kissed.

The End

Author Bio

Author of novels and short stories. Jayson James graduated from Western Washington University with a bachelor's degree in education. He was born and raised in Washington State, where he currently lives and teaches. Jayson's interests beyond writing include reading a variety of books, watching movies and drawing.

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BECAUSE OF YOU

By Penny Brandon

Photo Description

Black and white gif that depicts two naked men in bed together. One is on his back, and he's looking up at the man who is making love to him. They seem to want to connect on more than a physical level, and the emotion between them is clearly visible on their faces.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Everything changed in those heady moments as he stroked my innermost parts, somehow baring more and more of my soul with each thrust. Our eyes met and I knew we would never be the same.

prefer no BDSM and please have an HEA

Thank you and happy writing!

Sincerely,

Hunter

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: gay for you, first time, friends to lovers, oral sex, office romance, architect, engineer, coming out

Word Count: 8,783

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BECAUSE OF YOU

By Penny Brandon

Dean sipped on his bottle of cold beer, and glanced around the bar. It was dimly lit, which wasn't surprising considering the late hour and the premises. Soft strains of some song he'd never heard filtered through the low voices of the men around him. He'd never been here before, and to be honest he'd probably never come again. It was most definitely a pickup joint, but the men that dotted the stools at the bar, or the infrequent tables scattered haphazardly within the small room, were not his type. They were all older than him for a start—most in their mid-forties and upward, but that wasn't the only reason. From what he could tell, they were business men—office types in suits—and he never went for anyone who wore a suit.

He was just about to pick up his phone to check the time when he heard a voice behind him.

“Hey.”

Assuming unwanted attention—again—Dean turned to give whoever it was a quick refusal, but Ben stood there, a smile on his face.

“You're late,” Dean accused, unintentionally sounding more aggrieved than he felt. Ben was only a few minutes late, so it wasn't really that which had Dean annoyed. What pissed him off was having to rebuff several attempts at being picked up.

“Sorry, got caught up at work.” Ben sat down opposite, beer already in hand. “I saw you already had one,” he said, indicating the half-empty bottle in Dean's hand.

Dean tipped his bottle back to his mouth. He'd been nursing it for over fifteen minutes because he wouldn't have another. He didn't drink much, and anyway he was driving home. When he placed it back on the table, Ben was staring at him. His scrutiny was a little unusual, but so was his asking to meet Dean here. Normally they went out to their local near work, and it generally suited them both. This, though, this was so off the wall it started a niggling worry. Was Ben trying to hook him up with someone? No, he couldn't be, because Ben knew he didn't do casual.

“And how is work?” Dean asked.

“You should know. We both work for the same company.”

“Yeah, but you’re at the office every day. I only need to be there once a week—which is how I prefer it.”

“Well, it’s good. We signed up that new client you did the specs for.”

Dean smiled. As resident architect, Ben did the drawings and ultimately got the contracts. Dean only did the quantity surveying and oversaw the building projects once a job was under contract.

He casually leaned both arms on the table. “So, why are we here?”

Ben glanced around the bar, and then shrugged. “How long have we known each other?”

Caught off guard by the question, Dean frowned. “A little over a year. Why?”

“And how long have we been friends?”

“The same amount of time. Why?” he asked again.

Ben picked up his bottle, took a sip, then put it down, wrapping his fingers tightly around it. He fiddled with the label before catching Dean’s gaze. “Do you trust me?” he asked.

“Yes, of course I do, but why are you asking? What’s this about, Ben?” Something was off. Ben wasn’t acting his usual self. “You’re worrying me.”

“Don’t. Don’t worry. It’s nothing tragic. Well, that depends on your attitude, and ultimately your decision, but, I want you to think long and hard before giving me an answer, okay?”

“An answer to what?”

Ben lifted his hand, palm out. “Just give me a second to formulate the words properly.”

Seriously? Since when did Ben have a problem formulating words? The man had a mind like an encyclopedia. He was eerily smart, analytical, and decisive when it came to dealing with clients. Dean wasn’t stupid; his engineering degree proved that. However, there were times when he wondered why Ben had picked him to be his friend, especially as Ben knew Dean was gay, and Ben wasn’t.

He waited though, simply because whatever Ben was going to ask him to do would have been meticulously thought out, and was going to be well worth hearing. However, Ben seemed to have a real issue with getting out what he wanted to say. His normally focused blue eyes were filled with uncertainty. He looked pale too, even in the dark lighting of the room. He sat back, played with his bottle a little more, then bit his lip.

“This is going to sound unusual. Actually, it’s going to sound like I’m out of my mind, but I’m not. I’ve had a lot of time to think this through. You can say no, so there’s no pressure—but I hope you don’t. I really want it to be you.”

“Ben, you’re making no sense. What do you want me to do?” What the hell was going on? Ben never acted this mysteriously, or hesitantly. It was so out of character. Then again, the last few times Dean had seen Ben he’d been acting weird.

Ben shifted a little uncomfortably in his seat, then he lifted his chin—his light blue eyes clear once again. “I want you to fuck me.”

Dean knew he hadn’t heard right, but when he half lifted his mouth in an attempt at a smile he noticed the grim line of Ben’s. The man meant it. Holy fuck, Ben meant it. Dean stood abruptly, shaking his head emphatically.

“No!”

Several stares were turned their way, but Dean hardly noticed. He pointed at Ben, both shock and dismay flooding his body. “Are you fucking crazy? I’m not fucking you.”

Ben grabbed his arm and pulled him back down. He also slid in close to Dean on the bench seat. “You don’t have to shout, you know. I can hear you.”

“Then you know my answer,” Dean replied, dropping his voice down to a hiss as he noticed the attention they were getting.

“You didn’t think about it.”

“I didn’t have to. I’ve never heard of anything so ridiculous. You’re straight, Ben, or have you forgotten that? You fuck women, not men.”

“I haven’t forgotten, but—”

“No, there are no buts.”

“Of course there are. I’m curious.”

“Curious? Teenagers are curious. Not grown men of twenty-nine.”

“Look, I know this is a little... unorthodox, but I want you to really think about this. It would be easier with you, but if you say no—if you honestly don't want to do this with me—then I'm going to ask someone else.”

“What?” Now Ben had gone too far. “You can't do that. Who?”

“I don't know who. You're the only gay man I know, but that's why I came here.” Ben slowly looked around the room, his gaze resting on a few single men seated at the bar. “I checked out gay bars on the internet. This place seemed like a good choice because the men here are supposed to be experienced, and I thought one of them might be glad to help.”

“Glad to... Ben, you can't be serious. You don't know the first thing about gay sex. You could get into trouble. They might not take care and hurt you.” Why was he even saying all this? He should be dragging Ben out of here and beating this nonsense out of his head.

“I've done research. I know what I'm getting myself into. And that's why I asked you. I trust you, and I know you wouldn't hurt me.”

“Research? Jesus, Ben. What kind of research? Do not tell me you've already started experimenting with someone.” Dean felt his stomach clench at the thought of Ben on his knees in a dark alley somewhere while some asshole shoved his cock down his throat.

“Like I said, I've checked out the internet. Watched some movies. Got some toys.” Ben made an expressive gesture with his hands. “I'm not going in blind, Dean.”

Dean pulled in a deep breath. How was he supposed to convince Ben that if he went through with something like this he'd regret it? Maybe not immediately, but one month down the road, six months, a year, he was going to hate the person who hadn't talked him out of it, or had done it to him. Dean didn't want to be that person.

“Yes, you are. You obviously haven't thought this through.” As soon as he said it, Dean knew it was the wrong thing to say. Ben bristled.

“I'm not rushing into this. I've thought about it long and hard.” Disappointment clouded Ben's face, and uncertainty once more engulfed his eyes. “I really want it to be you. Please.”

At a loss, completely shaken by Ben's request, Dean stared at his friend. He knew arguing with him wasn't going to work, but maybe if he pretended to

consider it, Ben might change his mind on his own—when he realized how stupid an idea this was. “Can you give me a couple of days to think about it?”

Ben smiled, though it didn't take the darkness out of his eyes. “Okay. I'll give you till Friday.” He stood, looking as awkward as Dean felt, and then he slowly walked away, leaving Dean with a hard knot forming in the pit of his stomach.

Friday came, and Dean was still no closer to saying yes than he'd been on Wednesday. He'd forgone their usual Thursday night game of squash, simply because he needed time to think, and time away from Ben. He'd quickly realized Ben was serious; the man never did anything without going through all the pros and cons first. But sex with a man? Why? What had prompted it? Ben had never mentioned he was curious before, and God knows he would have had plenty of chances to raise the subject in the past. So why now?

Dean's private fantasies of fucking Ben were just that—fantasies. He'd never voiced them, never even hinted at them. Had Ben somehow picked up on what sometimes went through Dean's mind? Wondering if that was why Ben was doing this, Dean groaned. Jesus, if that was what this was about, Dean definitely had to say no. But what if it wasn't? What if Ben really was just curious and Dean's refusal sent him into another man's arms? Dean shook his head. He couldn't let that happen. He hadn't been kidding when he'd pointed out the danger to Ben. Not many men would care that he was a virgin or take the time to introduce him to gay sex properly. Ben needed someone who would do it right. Someone who would take care of him, take it slowly, and treat him gently—the way he deserved. Dean knew he was that man, but what of the consequences?

The building site he was visiting didn't need much of his attention, which was good, because he hardly gave it any. By the end of the day, a headache had begun to form behind his eyes, and he wondered what he was going to do when Ben asked for his answer. He considered requesting an extension of time, but wasn't sure if Ben would give him one. That opportunity slipped by when he received a text message on his phone.

Meet me at Danny's.

Danny's was their local, and it was neutral ground. Dean supposed it was as good a place as any, and he hoped there was less chance of either one of them

causing a scene that way. Still, it took a lot more courage than he'd thought it would to walk through the door and into the noisy bar.

Ben was waiting for him. He was sitting calmly at one of the small tables tucked into a corner. There were two bottles of beer on the table.

"Hi." Ben stood slightly then sat back down. It looked like he'd been on the verge of hugging Dean, which, though they did on occasion, didn't seem appropriate now. Dean pulled out a chair, but hesitated. He knew this wasn't going to go well, and someone was seriously going to get hurt because of it. However, with no other choice, Dean sat, faced Ben and, after taking a deep breath, said the only thing he could.

"Okay."

Ben's delighted smile lit his face. "Yes? Really? You'll do it?"

"I said I would, didn't I?" Dean couldn't put a smile on his face. This was all kinds of wrong, not least because of the simmering desire that was starting beneath the surface of his skin. He had to push that aside, however, because it could easily jeopardize the way he had to approach this. He didn't want Ben knowing how much he'd thought about being with him. It wasn't exactly something a friend would do, but now the opportunity had arisen, Dean couldn't help but feel a tingling of awareness and need.

"Thank you. I knew you'd come through for me." Ben stood and extended his hand. "Come on," he said.

"Where?"

"We're going back to my place. I've already got it set up."

"What? Now?"

"I can't wait." Ben slipped his hand through Dean's, his firm grip both surprising and odd. He pulled Dean to his feet. Dean followed, a little dizzy with shock. Ben wanted to do it now?

Ben only lived a few streets away, but Dean insisted on driving, though he kind of wished he hadn't when his hands slipped on the steering wheel more than once. He wasn't going to deny he was nervous, and he didn't like the roll of his stomach as he parked the car in Ben's driveway and got out.

Ben was animated. He climbed out of the passenger side and strode up to his front door with the air of a man who'd been told he'd just won the lottery or

something. Dean dragged his heels. Ben glanced over his shoulder, and Dean had a feeling he was making sure Dean was still following him and hadn't decided to bail.

Once inside, Ben headed toward the kitchen. He didn't hesitate to bring down two glasses and a bottle of scotch from a glass-fronted cupboard. "Want one?"

Dean almost said yes, but shook his head instead. "No, thanks. I need to keep a clear head."

"Do you think *I* should keep a clear head?"

"Bit late for that, isn't it? What you're doing, what you want me to do, is not the action of a man who knows his mind."

"You're not changing yours, are you?"

"I should be trying to change yours, but I know you too well, and I can't, can I?"

"Nope." Ben grinned, looking far happier than Dean had ever seen him, whereas Dean guessed his own face conveyed grim dread.

He stood in the middle of the kitchen, not knowing what the hell to do. Normally he would be kissing the guy who brought him home, or getting him to strip, but here, he hadn't a clue. He supposed the ball was in Ben's court, and he would have to wait until Ben was ready to play. When Ben turned to put his back to the counter, however, he suddenly looked nervous, and Dean guessed Ben wouldn't be making the first move.

Not sure if getting this over and done with was the best ploy, he felt it was better than dragging it out. He stood in front of Ben then took his glass from him, taking a sip. "Where do you want to start?" he asked.

"I, um, I don't know. I've never seduced a man."

"I damn well hope not." It still didn't sit well—Ben wanting to do this, but at least Dean could breathe easy that Ben hadn't tried this with someone else. *Jealous much?*

No, not jealous, just worried. Once this was over... Dean didn't want to think about that. Didn't want to think of a future without Ben in it.

"I don't know about you, but I like to start slow, and work my way up to hot and fast." Dean watched Ben's face, gauging his reaction. Ben wasn't all that

easy to read, which was why this had come as such a surprise. Now though, he wasn't hiding anything, and his eyes showed both need and trepidation.

“Slow? Like kissing?”

Dean nodded. How many times had he thought about kissing Ben? “And touching.”

“So we do that first?”

“If you want.” Dean crowded close to Ben, then stretched past him to put the glass on the counter. “Of course, I'd prefer it if you didn't want to do anything.” Now who was he kidding? This chance with Ben was going to be the only one he'd ever get. What gay man wouldn't want this?

Ignoring Dean's last remark, Ben slid his arms around Dean's waist. Dean stiffened just slightly, and then gave in, moving closer. Ben's shoulders were as broad as his own, his chest as wide. They were both the same height, and their hips aligned perfectly. So did their mouths. Dean dropped his gaze to Ben's lips. The man licked them, and Dean instantly reacted to the unvoiced invitation. He leaned in, and, ignoring everything that told him this was a bad idea, he joined their mouths together.

Ben gasped, and Dean instantly pulled back.

“No, don't stop.” Ben's plea hit a chord with Dean. That's what he usually wanted the men he was fucking to say, and hearing it from Ben was no different. He pushed up against Ben's body, capturing his lips again. This time Ben moaned, and Dean had to seriously rein in his instinct to grip the back of Ben's head and plunder his mouth.

Need began to override reason. He wasn't doing this for himself. He was supposed to be giving Ben an experience he wouldn't forget, but Dean couldn't help savor the feel of Ben's lips on his and notice how soft yet firm they were. He tried to be gentle, giving Ben a chance to pull back if he wanted to, but Ben tightened his grip around Dean's waist before moving his arms up to link around Dean's neck.

Impulse caused Dean to trace Ben's bottom lip with his tongue. Ben opened his mouth, and Dean instantly entered. The heated wetness, along with the silky slide of Ben's tongue, had Dean slanting his head, getting a better angle. The whiskey flavor was a sharp contrast to the sweetness that lay beyond it—the sweetness of Ben.

Changing direction, he nibbled against Ben's hard jaw, then dragged his mouth down Ben's neck, licking the slightly rough skin, relishing in the fact that Ben hadn't shaved. Ben twisted his head to give Dean better access, and the unconscious submissive gesture had Dean's body tightening in arousal.

Dean fought to take it slow, but the way Ben was reacting, the way he seemed to be giving himself over to Dean, just pushed all of Dean's buttons. Needing to change the pace, he pulled back and dropped his hands, but immediately missed the contact of Ben's skin.

"Should we get undressed now?" Ben's question was too close to Dean's own thoughts, but he shook his head. Seeing Ben naked... Dean inwardly groaned. Shit, how was he seriously supposed to do this without Ben finding out how much he couldn't wait to get in his ass?

"No. I mean... Why don't you have a shower, and I'll, um..." What? Wait in bed for him, stay in the kitchen, run away and never come back? The surrealism of what was going to happen was throwing Dean for a loop. What if he fucked this up?

"Come in with me?" The hopeful glint in Ben's eyes was Dean's undoing. He hadn't been able to say no to Ben when it counted. Would giving in and having a shower with him make any difference? He lifted both arms in a gesture of *whatever*, and then allowed himself to be led toward the bathroom.

He honestly tried not to watch as Ben started pulling at his tie and undoing it. He'd never thought of ties as sexy before, nor a plain white shirt, and certainly not suit pants, but as Ben took off each item of clothing, Dean started to change his mind. Yeah, Ben was a guy who wore suits, but Dean suddenly didn't care. The body beneath the clothes didn't look like it belonged to a man who sat behind a desk all day. He knew Ben exercised—he played squash with him once a week, but looking at Ben's well-toned and nicely muscled frame had Dean wondering why he hadn't taken more notice. Oh right, because Ben was his friend and Dean wasn't supposed to be lusting after him.

When Ben stopped at his tight black briefs, Dean almost thought Ben had changed his mind. He felt a little smidgen of relief, but unexpectedly, more disappointment.

"Dean?"

Realizing he was staring, Dean started pulling off his T-shirt and jeans. He knew he didn't need to be self-conscious, because if anything he was in better

shape than Ben. However, he'd never had a straight guy looking at him the way Ben was, and it was a little disconcerting. Down to his boxers, Dean hesitated, wondering if it would be better if Ben got naked first. He glanced up, then sucked in a sharp breath when he noticed the front of Ben's briefs begin to stretch and fill out.

For some odd reason, Dean hadn't expected Ben to get aroused, which was stupid now that he thought about it. Ben wanted to get fucked. He'd no doubt want to come. Why else would he do something like this?

He swallowed, fascinated with the way Ben was hardening under his gaze. His own body's response was immediate, but Dean ignored it. "You may want to get out of those before you strangle something," he said, hoping to keep the mood light so Ben wouldn't start freaking out on him.

Ben smirked, his posture relaxed. He hooked his thumbs under the waistband of his briefs and slowly—very slowly—eased them over his erection and down his hips. Dean openly stared. Fuck, Ben was big. Thick and long, he nearly put Dean's to shame. Nearly. Dean suddenly wanted to compare. He pulled off his boxer briefs ridiculously fast, and moved to stand closer to Ben. It was only as he was about to reach out and grasp Ben's cock did Dean realize what he was doing. He stopped, and felt his face turn red.

"I was going to compare dick sizes," he said by way of explanation when Ben frowned at him.

"Do gay men do that?"

"Not just gay men, but yeah." Dean eyed Ben's cock again. "I didn't realize you were so big."

"Good thing I'm not fucking you then, isn't it?"

Dean quirked an eyebrow, surprised at Ben's humor. *If* Ben was trying to be funny that was. "What makes you think I'd let you top?"

Ben's blue eyes locked onto Dean's brown ones. Ben's were serious once more. "Would you?"

"I might." Dean had no idea what made him say that, but as soon as he had, he knew he meant it. If Ben was gay and things were different... But Ben wasn't, and they weren't.

"Are we going to have that shower now?" he asked, pushing past Ben and turning on the hot water. When he glanced back over his shoulder to see what Ben was doing, he was disturbed by the look of satisfaction on Ben's face.

Disturbed and annoyed by it.

The water was too hot when Dean stepped under it, and he had to quickly add some cold. He grabbed the first bottle he saw on the shelf and squeezed some onto the puffy thing hooked over the tap. Just as he was about to start rubbing it vigorously over his body, it was taken from him. He blinked as Ben stepped into the shower and crowded him into the corner.

“You don’t want to do this, do you?” Ben asked.

Knowing he had to be honest, because Ben wouldn’t accept anything else from him, Dean said what was in his heart. “I do want to do this, but I don’t want to lose our friendship over it. Things might get awkward and...”

“It won’t get awkward. You’re my best friend, Dean, and I have no intention of losing you. You’re the reason I’m doing this.”

He was the reason? On the verge of asking Ben what he meant, Dean got sidetracked as Ben moved in closer and brushed his lips softly against Dean’s. His silky wet skin was a complete distraction, and Dean forgot about everything else as he opened up for Ben’s kiss and allowed the other man to start massaging suds onto his chest. He grabbed Ben’s hips and aligned them together, moaning slightly at the contact. Best friend or not, having a man’s hard cock sliding alongside his was not something Dean could deny himself.

Bubbles slithered down his stomach and pooled at the mat of dark curls at his and Ben’s groins. Dean noticed how the bubbles made Ben’s skin glisten, and how they made grinding against him so much better. He closed his eyes, and Ben skimmed his fingers across Dean’s shoulders, his caress amazingly electric.

Before he forgot why he was there, Dean took the sudsy sponge from Ben and dropped it to the tiled floor, then he brought his hands to Ben’s cock and carefully encircled his thick length.

Ben’s low grunt of surprise had Dean smiling. “Want a blowjob?” he asked, feeling a little more in control. As long as he was calling the shots, directing how things went, he guessed he could do this.

“Yes.” Ben’s eyes had widened, and as he looked down to where Dean was holding him, Ben licked his lips.

Getting on his knees, and uncaring of the water pouring over his head, Dean curved one hand around Ben’s thigh, and used the other to draw Ben’s cock to his mouth.

“Fuck, Dean!”

Ignoring Ben's cry, Dean concentrated on the taste of Ben's cock. As Dean licked around the swollen head, he detected the faint salty flavor of precum leaking onto his tongue. He dipped his head lower, taking more between his lips. Ben started shaking. Dean grinned around his mouthful then began to suck in earnest. Ben's knees buckled and he began sliding toward the floor.

Grabbing Ben so he didn't hit his head on the tiled wall, Dean helped him sit down. “Are you all right?” he asked.

Ben nodded. “Yeah. I didn't think it would feel like that.”

“I barely got started,” Dean said, confused. “You have had blowjobs before, right?”

With his breathing barely steady, and his hands clutched around his knees, Ben stared at Dean. “Of course I have, but this was different.”

“How?”

Mumbling something Dean didn't catch, Ben got to his feet and turned off the water. He grabbed a towel and passed it to Dean before wrapping another one around himself. His face was controlled, but his eyes seemed wild.

“You honestly don't know, do you?”

“Know what?” Feeling like he was missing something, Dean shook his head. He knew he shouldn't have started this with Ben, but as Ben seized his arm and began dragging him toward the bedroom, he knew he wasn't going to be able to stop it.

He'd only been in Ben's bedroom once before when Ben had been sick and Dean had put him to bed. Ben hadn't been feeling well, but hadn't wanted to go home. One look at him, however, and Dean had insisted. The fact that none of their other colleagues had been able to convince Ben had been a matter of pride to Dean. At least his friend listened to him. Well, most of the time he did.

The room hadn't changed. The bed was neatly made, there was still a pile of books on the side table, and, as before, there were no clothes scattered on the floor or the club chair located in the corner. However, it looked... different. It wasn't until Dean noticed the box of condoms and the bottle of lube next to the bed that he realized why.

This wasn't the place where he'd tucked Ben in and told him he'd be okay while holding a cold compress to his forehead; this was the place where he was going to fuck his best friend.

Pulling in a deep breath, Dean counted to ten before letting it out slowly. He needed to take back some control, so before Ben could say anything, or do anything, Dean pulled off his towel and crawled onto the middle of the bed.

“Ready?” he asked.

Ben nodded, dropped his towel to the floor, and edged right next to Dean. Ben's heat immediately seeped into Dean's skin, chasing away the chill sitting in his stomach. While contemplating what his next move should be, Dean reached for Ben, kind of wanting to get this over with, but also unable to stop the need spreading into his bones. Whether Ben knew it or not, he was a sexy man, and Dean could only hold back his arousal for so long.

Pushing Ben onto his back, Dean settled between his thighs. “Let's try that blowjob again, shall we?” he suggested, getting comfortable. Still hard, Ben's cock stretched toward his navel, so Dean simply leaned in and put it into his mouth. Ben's low groan gave Dean a sense of delight, and for a while he pretended this wasn't his straight best friend he was sucking off.

“Dean?” Ben clutched at Dean's head, his fingers digging in. Dean glanced up. Ben was staring at him, his mouth open. “I'm going to come.”

Dean grinned around his mouthful. That had been his intention. He didn't bother telling Ben however; he just continued to enjoy the feel and taste of Ben filling him while using his skill to bring Ben closer and closer to the edge. Just as Ben tensed and his deep groans became panted whimpers, Dean gently cupped Ben's balls and slid a finger against the sensitive area beneath.

“Fuck! Fuck!”

Hot cum spurted into the back of Dean's throat. Expecting it, he swallowed, but as the last pulse hit, he drew back a little and caught some on his tongue. Holding it, he waited until Ben had relaxed, then he crawled up Ben's body and kissed him.

Ben opened up, and Dean passed the leftover cum into Ben's mouth. Ben grimaced, which was pretty much as Dean expected.

“Just wanted you to know what it tastes like,” he said.

“I know what my cum tastes like,” Ben muttered.

Astonished, Dean gaped. “You do?”

“Yes, I do. And I don't like it.”

Though knowing he shouldn't have presumed a blowjob in return, Dean couldn't help but feel another surprising bout of disappointment. He steeled his emotions—which had no place in what he was doing anyway—and grabbed the box of condoms and the lube off the bedside table. He was about to suggest getting Ben stretched, when Ben grinned.

“Doesn't mean I won't like yours though.”

Before Dean had a chance to reply, Ben rolled over and trapped him on the mattress. “I want to taste you,” he said.

Pinned down, Dean stared up at Ben. “Are you sure?”

“I wouldn't ask you to do this without repaying the favor. I assume you like having a man's mouth on your cock?”

“Well yes, but you've never—”

“No time like the present to learn.”

Dean knew he should be asking why again, but the thought of Ben's tongue licking him, Ben's lips wrapped around him, and Dean couldn't say no. He nodded his assent then watched as Ben got himself in position. Ben seemed to take stock, and then he gripped Dean's hard length and sank his mouth onto it.

Dean shuddered at the first contact, but was careful not to do anything that would hurt Ben, or make him want to stop. Warm lips, soft and pliant, enveloped his cock while a tentative yet effective tongue swiped over the head. Ben moaned, the little hum sending vibrations through Dean's shaft. Dean stared down at him. Ben's eyes were closed, but the way he was devouring Dean's cock made it look like he was enjoying himself. Mesmerized, Dean held back on a groan, but clutched at the quilt beneath him as he felt his balls begin to tighten. Struggling against the need building inside and the control he knew he needed to keep, Dean transferred his grasp from the bedspread to Ben's hair. He pulled him up, nearly laughing at the look on Ben's face.

“What?” Ben asked. “Wasn't I doing it right?”

“Yes, you were doing it right. Much better than I expected.” *Way better.*

“So why'd you stop me?” Ben asked, his voice tense.

Dean didn't want to admit he had no intention of coming in Ben's mouth. It wasn't as if he wouldn't be able to come twice, it was just that he didn't want the memories of spurting down Ben's throat to haunt him for the rest of his life.

“Turn over and I’ll show you,” he said, not sure why he was still agreeing to this.

Ben sat up and shook his head, though it wasn’t in absolute refusal. “I don’t want you to do it from behind. I want us to be face to face.”

Something inside Dean twisted. In every fantasy he’d ever had about making love to Ben, he always had Ben on his back so he could stare into his deep blue eyes. Seeing his fantasy come true, knowing it was what Ben wanted, Dean nodded.

He gently helped put Ben into position. “Grip the backs of your knees and pull your legs up.”

Ben did as asked, exposing himself to Dean’s gaze. Dean’s mouth went dry. Jesus, Ben had a beautiful pink hole, just begging to be breached. He reached for it, gently stroking the puckered skin. Ben twitched and sucked in a sharp breath.

“Relax,” Dean said instinctively. “It won’t hurt so much.”

“You’d better not hurt me.” Ben’s growl released some of Dean’s tension, and he grinned.

“It’s gonna burn a little, but I’ll be careful.” He wasn’t going to pretty this up this for Ben, but he was going to try and make it as good as he could. “Now relax,” he said again.

The lube was of good quality, the same brand Dean used, so he knew how much to put on his fingers. Inching a little closer, Dean had to remind himself Ben wanted this. Then before he could change his mind, Dean slowly inserted the tip of his middle finger into Ben.

Heat and tightness welcomed him, so did Ben’s low moan. He pushed in deeper, almost closing his eyes as the sight of Ben accepting him became close to unbearable. God, and he hadn’t even started pushing his cock in there yet.

“Okay?” he asked, just to make sure.

“More.”

Ben’s plea sent shivers across Dean’s skin. He ignored it. This wasn’t supposed to be about his enjoyment. It was about Ben’s curiosity getting slaked. So he gave him more, smearing the lube inside before adding another finger to test Ben’s endurance.

“Dean.”

Dean paused, glancing up at Ben's face. He'd tried not to look at him, but he should have known that wouldn't have been possible for long. “Yes?”

“I want you in me.”

“I am in you.”

“I want more of you.” Ben let go of one of his legs and grabbed Dean's hand. The movement caused Dean's fingers to brush against Ben's prostate, and he groaned. “Oh God, that's...”

Knowing how good it would have felt, Dean did it again. Ben visibly shook, and his grip on Dean's hand tightened. Fascinated with Ben's response, Dean gently added a third finger, truly stretching Ben and getting him ready.

Ben was panting by the time Dean thought he'd be able to take his thick and hard cock. He pulled his fingers free then picked up the box of condoms. Ben avidly watched him, drawing in his bottom lip as Dean ripped open a foil packet.

There was no point in asking Ben if he was still sure, so Dean rolled the condom on and aligned himself with Ben's waiting hole. He prayed though. Prayed with all his heart this wasn't going to end up with him getting hurt.

Just before he pushed in, Dean gave the inside of Ben's knee a small kiss. Ben's gaze never left his, and it was the trust Dean could see in those dark blue depths that gave him the courage to continue.

“Remember to relax,” he said. Then, with gritted teeth, he penetrated Ben's virgin ass.

The feel of being inside Ben was far more intense than Dean expected. It wasn't so much the physical sensation, but the emotion behind it that made Dean groan. He gripped Ben's thighs to hold himself steady, using all his experience to not push in too fast, too deep. He knew Ben would need time to adjust, and he paid close attention to the nuances of Ben's body to indicate when and how much to move.

“So good, Dean.”

Ben's soft words were like a balm, easing the concern tightening Dean's chest. He nodded before slowly pushing all the way in, then he waited.

“Okay?” he asked again.

“You have no idea.” Ben reached up and curved his hand around the back of Dean’s neck and pulled him down. A gentle caress of lips teased Dean before Ben tightened his grip and opened his mouth to deepen the kiss. Dean lowered his weight and felt Ben’s erection pressing against his stomach. A shot of pleasure raced down Dean’s spine, igniting a need he thought he’d buried.

“Ben.”

“Want this. Want you.” Ben shifted slightly to accommodate him, and Dean automatically started to thrust.

He began slowly, each lift of his hips measured and controlled. Ben moved with him, wrapping his legs around Dean’s waist. Muffled moans accompanied each thrust, and it took a while for Dean to realize they were coming from him. He buried his face in the crook of Ben’s neck, tasting his skin, smelling his sweat—and knowing those two things would remain with him forever.

Ben’s arms tightened around him, holding him, while his soft murmurs encouraged Dean to thrust harder, faster. Dean was becoming lost in the pleasure. He could feel Ben’s muscles surrounding him, squeezing him, embracing him. He rocked his hips, pumping with more force, more need. Ben groaned and arched his back. Dean sought his mouth again, sliding his tongue alongside Ben’s.

His heart was racing, but it had nothing to do with how close he was to coming. This was Ben, and he was kissing him, fucking him, and he didn’t want to stop.

Everything changed in that heady moment. As Dean stroked Ben’s innermost parts he somehow felt his soul being filled, taken, and held, by Ben. Dean lifted up and met Ben’s beautiful eyes, and knew he would never be the same. *They* would never be the same.

“Coming. I’m coming.” Ben looked almost astonished, but Dean was too far gone to think it funny. His body tightened with the familiar tingle at the base of his spine.

“For me, Ben,” he said. “Come for me.”

Ben’s cry sounded loud in the room, but it echoed inside Dean’s heart. Wet heat splashed against his stomach the same instant Dean’s orgasm took him to a place he would have sworn he’d never been.

“Fuck! Fuck, Ben!”

Strength deserted him, and as the last pulse of intensity died, Dean collapsed. He only had enough wits about him to hold onto the condom as he carefully pulled out. Ben's small whimper had Dean instantly pulling Ben into his arms.

"It's okay. It's over now." It *was* over. Damn it. He knew this would happen. He knew making love to Ben would ruin things. He'd hoped it wouldn't; had hoped he could do this and walk away without his heart being crushed. But every time he looked at Ben again, he was going to remember this, and know he wasn't going to have this ever again.

Pain replaced the remnants of bliss still lingering in Dean's limbs, but he continued to hold Ben, soothing him and hoping it would be enough to get them through the next few awkward minutes. He waited until Ben pulled free, then steeled himself for the judgment in Ben's eyes.

Ben, however, smiled at him. "Thank you."

Dean nodded, not prepared to say *you're welcome* or to offer any other inane reply. He inched away, needing some space, some room to breathe.

"Hey. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just..." Dean shrugged. "I think I'd better go."

Ben frowned and reached out to grip Dean's arm. "Why?"

"Because we never should have done this," Dean argued. "You're going to wake up tomorrow and wish you'd never asked me, and I'm going to wish I never agreed."

Ben's face paled. "You hated it."

"Yes. No. Shit, Ben. What I felt about it doesn't matter. It's how you're going to feel."

"And how will I feel?" Ben sat up, anger seeming to ripple through his muscles.

"Like I let you down," Dean said against the constriction in his throat. Damn, it wasn't fair. He'd just had amazing, mind-blowing sex, and instead of reveling in it, he was pushing away the man who had given it to him. It didn't matter though. Ben wouldn't do this again.

“You haven’t let me down. Just the opposite. You’ve given me what I wanted.”

“If getting your ass fucked was what you wanted, then yes, I have, but at what cost? What did you gain from this, Ben? Seriously, I want to know.”

Ben closed the distance between them. His breath ghosted along Dean’s shoulder, making him shiver. “I thought I’d gained you.”

“You’ve always had me. Fucking your ass wouldn’t have made any difference.”

“It does to me. I wanted to know what it was like. I wanted to know what being with you was like.”

“Why?”

Ben shook his head, as if Dean should already have known. “Because I love you.”

Dean’s heart gave a little jolt. “Love me? You’re straight, Ben. You can’t love a gay man.”

“Of course I can. I do. I’ve loved you for months.” Ben was beginning to get agitated, which wasn’t helping matters.

“No, you’ve been my friend for months. There’s a big difference, and friends don’t do this to each other.” Dean got up off the bed and started pacing. “You do realize you gave me no choice. It was either me or someone else, and I couldn’t let anyone else near you.”

“That was what I was banking on. Look, I know it sounds strange, but I started noticing things about you, things that attracted me. Your smile, the way you laugh, the way your eyes light up when you’re telling a stupid joke... I’ve never felt that way before and...” Ben took a deep breath, his hands held out. “It was you or no one, Dean. I wouldn’t have let anyone else near me either. Don’t you see that? I don’t want anyone else. I only want you.”

Somehow, somewhere, Dean thought he’d dropped into *The Twilight Zone*. Was Ben insane? Dean couldn’t accept what Ben was telling him, because it wasn’t real. Ben had just wanted to experiment, and he’d mistaken lust for love. If Ben really wanted him, as a lover, it would have to be long term, and Dean didn’t think Ben truly understood the ramifications of that.

“I can’t do this right now,” he said as confusion and doubt started wreaking havoc in his chest. He headed toward the bedroom door, intending to get his clothes from the bathroom.

“Where are you going?” Ben was right behind him.

“Home.”

“Dean—”

Dean turned to face Ben. “I think we both need some time apart. You’re feeling vulnerable right now, and I’ve already taken advantage of you. Please. Just give me some time to sort this out, okay?” Dean hurried to pull on his jeans and T-shirt. His wallet and keys were still in his pocket, but he would have walked out without them if necessary. Ben hovered by the door, but Dean didn’t know if he could cope with looking at him again.

“Can I call you tomorrow?” Ben’s tentative question caused Dean to pause. He shook his head.

“Give me a few days.” He knew he wasn’t being fair, but Ben hadn’t been fair either. How could he have thought Dean would have been fine with Ben’s declaration? Love him? Ben had no idea what he was talking about. Yet, as Dean slammed the front door behind him and marched toward his car, he was remembering the way Ben had clung to him and the way Ben had moaned Dean’s name as he was coming.

Monday morning came way too fast for Dean. His nerves were shot after three sleepless nights, and for the second time within a week he found himself worried about facing Ben. However, the thing about not sleeping was it had given Dean the chance to re-think and re-evaluate what Ben had told him.

Dean knew he’d reacted badly, and he regretted running out on his friend, but he didn’t know what to make of Ben’s sudden change in character. Dean had no warning Ben had been thinking of sleeping with a man. No, sleeping with *him*. Only him, Ben had said. Consequently, Dean also had no idea that Ben’s feelings toward him had morphed into something other than friendship.

Could Ben love him, as a man? If Dean gave his heart to Ben, would he cherish it, look after it?

After forcing himself to confront that possibility, Dean still hadn’t had the balls to contact Ben and talk to him about it, and now he’d run out of time; he was going to have to face Ben today whether he was ready to or not.

Unsure of how strong Ben’s affections really were, Dean entered the office building. Their Monday meeting still had to go ahead, despite how they

personally felt about each other. With his stomach cramping and his limbs feeling like lead, Dean slid through the boardroom door to see Ben and four others already sitting at the table.

Dean nodded and smiled at the others as he usually did. But then he saw Ben's face, and Dean's smile fell away.

Ben looked like his world was falling apart.

Dean instantly went to him. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Ben's normally bright blue eyes appeared dull and haunted. He shrugged; his broad shoulders barely moving beneath his suit jacket. "I don't know. Am I?"

Knowing he was to blame for the way Ben looked, Dean sat on the chair next to Ben and, ignoring the curious glances from around the table, turned Ben to face him. First and foremost, Ben was his friend, and Dean couldn't allow the other man to believe Dean had forsaken him. "You look like you've slept the same amount of hours I have," he whispered so the others couldn't hear.

"I was waiting for you to call me. When you didn't..." Ben shook his head slightly. "I guess I got my answer."

"Shows how much you know me, doesn't it?"

Dean glanced at their spectators. A few of them looked intrigued, but not wanting to make his declaration public, he grabbed a startled Ben by the wrist and dragged him to the empty office next door.

"What are you doing?" Ben protested.

Dean sighed, feeling guilty for not having done this earlier. "For the past five days I've gone from feeling shocked, to euphoric, to completely uncertain. I have never had such a range of emotions before. Not in such a short time span, and I'll admit, I haven't handled it very well. But you're my best friend, Ben, and if you honestly think you love me—"

Dean didn't get a chance to say anything else. Ben's mouth was on his, cutting off the ability to do anything else other than kiss the man back. Dean automatically opened for him, and he moaned under the onslaught of Ben's tongue.

Wrapping his arms around Ben's waist, Dean hauled the man up against him. Ben went willingly, cupping Dean's face to keep their kiss going.

Shockwaves skittered across Dean's skin, and he tightened his hold on Ben, reluctant to let the man go now that he realized he could have him.

Dean only pulled back a little when he remembered the office they were in had a glass panel in the door and wasn't really private. Ben tried to drag him back, but Dean shook his head. "I don't think this is the right time or place to continue our discussion," he said, hoping his tone sounded reasonable.

"We're not discussing anything. I don't think I love you, I know I do. Granted, it was difficult for me to understand and accept that at first, but I know how I feel. It's not going to change, Dean, if that's what you're worried about. I may have been straight, or the gay in me had been dormant simply because I hadn't met the right man to love, but don't think I don't know what I'm doing. Well, I may not have known what I was doing by asking you to fuck me instead of telling you I loved you. In hindsight I should have probably done it the other way around, but if the sex wasn't good, if I didn't like it, then at least I wouldn't have felt guilty if things didn't work out."

"So you like the sex?"

"I fucking love it. The way you make me feel when you're inside me..." Ben shivered. "I love you, Dean. You've made me love you, just by being you. You're smart, you're sexy, you don't care that I'm a stubborn workaholic bully, or that I snore—"

"You snore? No, sorry, that's a deal breaker," Dean said, but he was smiling, and Ben's answering grin set fire to Dean's nerve endings.

"So, can you love me back?" Ben asked.

"I've always loved you, but can I fall *in* love with you?" Dean thought about the way Ben felt in his arms, the way Ben was always there for him, and the way Ben was looking at him now, as if the world revolved around Dean's answer. Things *had* changed between them, but Dean reckoned they'd changed for the better. He nodded. "Yes, I can."

The End

Author Bio

Author of: Blind Passion, Bringing Him Home, Choices, Murphy's Law, Behind Every Cloud, First Kiss. Penny has been a lover of books since before she could read and a maker of stories before she knew how to talk properly, so it was only natural that she started writing when she could hold a pen. From fairytales to teenage romances to the hot, erotic stories she writes now, she's always held the same belief; to love what she puts down on paper. Which means she doesn't love cooking, cleaning or weeding the garden. She does, however, love to travel and has lived in England and Ireland and now resides in Australia, where she intends to stay and discover all that she can of this beautiful country.

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You can purchase Penny's books at [Loose Id](#) (and other great selling sites).

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BEFORE YOU GO

By Vicktor Alexander

Photo Description

A video of two, slim, toned Korean men, one with tattoos on his side. One is singing to the other and grips the back of his head and tugs on his hair as his handcuffs swing, one connected to his wrist, the other not connected to anything. The second man looks at the first man, slightly bent over, completely submissive even as his hair is tugged, his face awash in what appears to be a drunken pleasure.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two K-pop stars are performing at a concert with the 3 other members of their group, but they clearly have some special chemistry between them. If this sexy display is what their audience is treated to, what more goes on behind closed doors? I want to know more about their relationship!

I'd like to see some D/s (he needs to make use of those handcuffs!) and a HFN.

No endearments (baby, sweetheart, darling, etc.) and no calling the submissive "boy" please! Nicknames are fine :)

Sincerely,

Jenna

Story Letter

Genre: contemporary

Tags: Asian characters, BDSM, crazy stalker fan, D/s, first time, friends to lovers, hurt/comfort, K-pop

Content Warnings: double penetration, edgeplay, edging, hardcore BDSM

Word Count: 9,118

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Thank You

To Lynn Tyler and my sister Shi for giving me a crash course on K-Pop and telling me that if I get any detail of the culture wrong I would be lynched. It takes a lot to scare this Army soldier and Dom, but you two ladies did a GREAT job.

To Taylor Law who encouraged me the entire time. Even listening to K-Pop with me and gasping over the stories of the fans when I did. See? My obsession with John Barrowman and Shemar Moore is tame!

To Jerome who took the time all those years ago and trained me from being GD to The Dom.

To Raevyn and the Love's Landscapes moderators who came and asked me to write this story even though I'd already written two other stories. I was extremely, extremely, *extremely* honored that you all thought of me for this. I would have moved a number of things around to do this for you just for that reason. Thank you for believing in me.

To Jenna, the creator of this prompt, I hope I gave you something that you can enjoy. It's not often that I have characters who so often thumb their noses at me, but Jin and Won did it repeatedly, but I hope that you enjoy them. In the end, I wrote this story for *you*.

Author's Note

This story is written by a trained Dom. I have been in the BDSM Lifestyle for twelve, almost thirteen, years. I was trained for one year before being considered a Dom. The Dom character in this story has also been trained in the Lifestyle. DO NOT engage in the activities in this story without having a trained member of the BDSM community present or without a member of the Lifestyle. While it is fun and enjoyable to read about these things, aspects of the BDSM Lifestyle, especially edgeplay and RACK practices are extremely dangerous and should only be handled by trained members of the community. If you have any questions or you would like to know more, there are many members of the BDSM community out there who are more than willing to communicate with you. [Fet-Life](#) is one source. You may also [contact me](#) if you have any questions.

BEFORE YOU GO

By Viktor Alexander

Prologue

Won Sang Heo's breath stuttered out of his lungs, his body trembling as the soft leather strips from the cat o' nine tails brushed against his naked genitals. The hard press of teeth to the side of his neck made his mouth fall open on a silent cry of painful pleasure, and his body jerked from where it was restrained against the St. Andrew's cross. A pair of handcuffs hung from his nipple clamps, pulling them tighter against the hardened nubs. The clank of the metal against the cross echoed loudly in the room, a mellifluous harmony with his own harsh breathing.

"Mm. I love how responsive you are, Sang." His Dom's voice was low and guttural in his ear. "Will you still be this way years from now? When you've grown used to my touch?"

"Y-yes, Sir," Won panted out.

His Dom chuckled. "I'll just have to help you make sure of that, won't I?"

"Y-yes, Sir." Won groaned as his testicles were taken in a strong grip and tugged.

"Aren't you happy you finally gave in to me, Sang?" The swipe of a tongue on the side of his neck up to his ear was followed by a nip to his earlobe. His balls were released and his cock taken in his Dom's hand.

"Y-yes, Sir."

One stroke. Two strokes. Three.

Whack!

The sting of the cat o' nine tails against his back made him release a harsh cry. He wanted to beg, to plead, to whimper for his Dom to let him come. They'd been in the dungeon for a long time and still his orgasm was denied him. He felt as if he were going to fly apart at the seams.

Whack!

Pain and pleasure collided in his body, swirling together in a kaleidoscope of brilliant colors and sounds. A delightful, melodic hum playing in his mind, his body floating feet above him as he sank deeper and deeper into subspace. His every cell was focused on the man standing behind him, as it had been for months, for years. Now, finally, *finally*, he was being taken by this man. Owned. Claimed. Dominated.

Oh fuck yes.

Whack!

“You ran from me, Sang. That really upset me. It hurt. But, you are here now. Where you belong. And you will come back to the band. Do you understand?” That tone, that voice, brooked no argument, and Won was already nodding his head before the question was even asked. He wanted to be wherever his Dom was. His man.

Jin Woon Gwon. His best friend. His Sir.

The man who'd introduced him to the band: Song Sun Fin.

Chapter One

Jin narrowed his eyes at his best friend Won's back as the slender man laughed with Hyeong Yeong Seon, one of the bandmates of their group, Song Sun Fin. He wanted to march over there and demand that Won stop smiling at another man that way. His dark-brown eyes shining with soft happiness, his pale-pink lips stretched wide, his white teeth reflecting the lights overhead, and his mouth open as joyful, melodious giggles escaped from his throat, but Jin couldn't do that. Not only because it would expose his jealous, possessive, dark, and almost animalistic feelings for someone who was so innocent and naïve it was borderline ridiculous, but also because of the fact that Won was a man.

And they were in a band.

In Korea.

And he did not have a death wish.

Not at all.

There was also the fact that while he was watching Won and Hyeong laugh and horse around on the edge of the stage during the sound check, he was preparing for yet another interview with yet another magazine reporter who would ask him yet another series of questions about how the group got started, what his favorite foods were, what his favorite songs were from the new album, what songs the next album was going to feature, if he had a girlfriend, what his favorite color was, what side of the bed he slept on, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Jin rolled his eyes and huffed. What he wouldn't give for just a moment of solitude. Or maybe a really good fuck. He couldn't remember the last time he'd sunk his dick inside a nice, tight ass.

His eyes drifted of their own accord back to Won with that thought, and he found himself imagining his cock plunging deep within the recesses of the slender man's rear while Won was handcuffed, bent over the footboard of his bed. His skin would have red lashes on it, the marks lovingly placed there from Jin's single-tail whip. The flesh still warm to the touch.

"Mmmmm," Jin moaned, his shaft growing hard behind the zipper of his leather pants. He pressed down on the front of his groin to relieve some of the

pressure and cleared his throat. It wouldn't do for him to be sporting wood when the interview started.

“Grandma’s chin hair. Grandma’s chin hair,” he chanted, in an effort to rid himself of the erection. When his dick was once again soft, he breathed a sigh of relief and rolled his neck to release the tension.

“Jin!” The harsh bark of the group’s manager’s voice was like nails on a chalkboard, and Jin clenched his teeth. He had an extremely hard time having the man talk to him in such a way. Not for the first time, he regretted being under the thumb of *The Company*. His naturally dominant personality clashed with constantly being told what to wear, where to live, where to go, what to say, not to date, et cetera. Were it not for the group of guys that he loved performing with and the fans he so enjoyed singing for, he would have left long ago.

There was also that fucking contract.

Five more goddamn years they were stuck under *The Company*’s thumb. It wasn’t as bad as it could have been of course. They had heard the horror of groups like DBSK who had been locked into fifteen-year “slave contracts.” He shuddered internally as he turned to face Yun Eun Yu, pasting a smile on his face.

“*Anyonghaseyo.*”

Yun waved his hand. “We have no time for small talk, Jin. We must go. Reporter is here. Now, you remember what you are to say?”

Jin clenched his right fist tightly even as he nodded his head. “Yes, Yun. I remember.”

“Good. Then, we go.”

Jin took one last glance over his shoulder at Won, desperately wishing that he could whisk his friend away to a secret place for some *adult* activities. Perhaps even to the room in the basement of his home that he’d spent the last three years having built piece by piece so as not to be outed.

His dungeon.

Chapter Two

As soon as Jin walked away Won released a sigh of relief, tension draining from his muscles. Hyeong let out a chuckle. “He’s not going to eat you, you know?”

Won snapped his eyes up to Hyeong’s face. “What?”

“Jin.” Hyeong jerked his head in the direction of their departing lead singer. “He’s not going to boil you and spread you over some rice and eat you if you talk to him or anything. You guys are best friends. Why are you all tense around him?”

“I’m not tense around him!” Won protested. An image rose unbidden to his mind, however, of Jin eating him, but in a completely different way than Hyeong intended and Won was spread all right. Spread eagle. Chained to the table. Unable to move. While Jin made a feast of his body. And pinched his skin with clamps, making him cry out with the most painful pleasure he’d ever experienced in his life.

And now he was tense again. But for a totally different reason.

Won’s face grew hot, and he lifted his hands to place them against his cheeks.

“Won? You okay, man? Are you coming down with something?” Hyeong asked.

“Maybe he’s got a flu from that American he was talking to at the party last night,” Myung Iseul Lee, another group member said, laughing from behind them.

Won rolled his eyes and turned to face Myung. “You say all Americans get people sick.”

Myung shrugged. “Because they do.”

“He means all of the women who turn him down for a date get people sick,” Gi Ji Kim, the group’s resident rapper said as he walked onto the stage, looking bored as always.

“Isn’t that what I just said? The Americans get people sick. It’s the same thing.” Myung looked around, confused.

Won laughed with the rest of the guys, trying to keep his mind off Jin and how his interview was going with the magazine. Did he need water? His throat always got really dry after one of those interviews. What about fruit? Did they have his fruit salad waiting for him to eat as soon as he was finished? Jin could never eat before he was about to be questioned, because he felt as if he was losing control. It was something he didn't handle well, so as soon as he was done, he was always starving. Maybe Won could just pop backstage and make sure he had the water and the fruit salad waiting for him. It didn't have to *mean* anything. It just meant he was being a good friend. Right?

“Won!”

Won jumped, with a squeak, and blinked. Looking around, he noticed the smirks of the rest of his band members.

“What?” he asked, putting his hands on his hips.

“You didn't hear a word we said, did you?”

Won opened his mouth, ready to deny everything, but he couldn't even lie about it, so he shrugged and shook his head. “Not a word.”

“We said that we should start off with ‘Feel You’ first tonight, and then go into ‘Lost My Mind,’ ‘Goodbye,’ ‘Your Body,’ ‘His Girl,’ ‘Tonight,’ ‘Love Letter,’ and end the night with ‘Endless.’ What do you think?” Myeong asked.

Won went through the different transitions in his head quickly, his head bobbing slightly, humming the songs softly. “Switch ‘Love Letter’ and ‘Tonight’ if you're determined to end the night with ‘Endless,’” he said.

“Are you sure?” Gi asked.

“Won is always right,” Jin's voice was deep and commanding as he walked from backstage.

Won turned to watch him, his gaze moving over the slim, toned and sinewy muscles that pressed against the tight, black material of Jin's black, V-neck shirt and his low-slung black leather pants. He barely resisted the fierce, aching *need* burning within him to kneel before his friend, hands folded behind his back, head and eyes lowered, as he waited for instructions.

What the hell is wrong with me?

“The only time Won is wrong is when he disagrees with me, and then I set him straight. Don't I, Won?” Jin asked with a smirk.

Won gazed up at Jin who stood over him, his dark brown eyes gleaming with amusement but containing a dark and almost dangerous intent within them that made Won want to whimper. He swallowed nervously and merely nodded. Jin grinned at him and reached out towards him. The feeling of Jin's fingers in his hair, tugging on the black strands, purposefully sending shards of blissful pain from his head throughout his body to settle in the base of his groin caused Won's eyes to close. He moaned low in his throat.

His head jerked forward when Jin released him from his grasp, and Won barely refrained from pleading for the other man to pull his hair again or to maybe do something else to him. He didn't understand the dark desires that seemed to be thrumming through him or why Jin seemed to be the catalyst to them, but he *did* know that he couldn't be gay in Korea.

His eyes flew open with a gasp, and he looked around to see if the other members of the group had noticed his and Jin's rather intimate interlude. When he noticed them preparing for rehearsal, he breathed a sigh of relief. If they had noticed anything, they apparently didn't care.

"It's time to practice, Won," Jin's voice was in his ear, and Won jumped slightly. He turned to his friend and nodded. Jin sounded disappointed in him for some reason, and Won swallowed the lump in his throat, blinking back tears. He hated disappointing Jin. It was the worst feeling in the world. He would rather make Jin angry, because he knew he could make it up to him, but having Jin be disappointed in him was like a persistent dagger in his heart.

"Okay, Jin."

"No mistakes, Won," Jin said firmly.

"No, s-Jin." Won shook his head. He headed toward the microphone stand he always stood behind, confused. Had he almost called Jin, sir? Why?

Chapter Three

“Tonight, you’re gonna be mine, girl,” Jin sang into the mic, his vocal chords vibrating as he moved from one note to the next. He cut his gaze towards Won who stood next to him and noticed the younger man keeping up with the dance steps perfectly. He nodded his head, he was very proud of Won. Usually Won had a problem keeping up with the choreography, but he was in time with the music and still managing to sing and hit his mark every time. Jin was proud.

And so fucking hard he could pound nails.

That wasn’t anything new, however. He was always hard when he listened to Won sing. It had been that way since the first time they sang together eight years before when Won was sixteen and he was seventeen. They’d met six years before that when Won was ten years old, and Jin was eleven and had come across Won trying to balance all of his school books in his arms and cross the street at the same time. Jin had run up and taken half of them, shoving them in his bag and walked Won home. They hadn’t spoken one word to each other besides their names and who their teachers were, but the next day Jin had approached Won with a bag of his very own, so he wouldn’t have to worry about carrying all of those books every day.

They’d been best friends ever since.

Jin had always known he wanted to grow up and be a singer. For that reason, he was always singing. In school, on the way home from school, at home, in the park, on the way to Won’s house, everywhere. He’d shared his dream of one day being a famous singer with Won mere days into their friendship; Won smiled excitedly, and asked if he could be his manager. Jin nodded and said of course.

It wasn’t until they were sixteen that he discovered his best friend’s secret. They’d been on their way to the market for Won’s mother when Jin heard the clearest, most beautiful sound coming from the street. He’d frozen, and Won stopped as well. He’d asked Jin what was wrong, and Jin realized that when Won started talking the music stopped. Narrowing his eyes, Jin demanded that Won sing. And as he always did, Won obeyed Jin whenever he gave him an order. Jin was floored, listening to the pure tones coming from his friend’s mouth. He joined in with Won, their voices making a beautiful harmony, effortlessly.

It wasn't long before they not only had an appreciative audience, but Jin had an erection that was so hard he was actually afraid to touch any area around his groin for fear that it would immediately cause him to have an orgasm. He and Won finished singing, bowed to the crowd, who applauded them, and after a few hours of cajoling and blackmailing, Jin finally persuaded Won to start a group and thus Song Sun Fin was born.

"Jin?" Won's voice penetrated the haze of memory surrounding him, and Jin blinked away the image of a much younger Won and turned to look into the concerned gaze of the older one.

"Yeah?"

"Did you want to go ahead and finish, or did you want to run through it again?" Won asked.

Jin swallowed and looked around. How in the world had he gone through the entire set list on auto-pilot? He grimaced. Because it was starting to get boring, repetitive. Unremarkable.

Predictable.

"No. We're good. Everyone go home. See you guys tonight," Jin said with a wave. Even though he was telling them to go home, he knew the final decision came from *The Company*. If they didn't want the group to leave, they wouldn't be going anywhere. Regardless.

Won turned away, and Jin reached out to grab his friend's wrist.

"Hey." Won looked at him with a quirked eyebrow. "Got a minute?"

"Umm. Actually I need to get back home and feed the dog, but yeah."

"I wanted to..." *Good job, genius. You stopped him, but you have no idea what you were going to say. You probably should have planned this out before you grabbed his arm.* "I just wanted to tell you that you did a good job today. Good job, Sang."

Won grinned broadly, bouncing slightly on his toes. "Really?"

Jin nodded, feeling his lips spread into a tiny smile. "Yeah. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks, Jin!"

Jin inclined his head and released Won's arm and watched as Won hesitated as if unsure of what to do. Chuckling, Jin pointed. "Go home, Sang."

“Okay, Jin. See you later?”

“Absolutely.”

He watched Won leave, the notes of a new song spinning in his head, the words floating among them and knowing that this was his one and only time for some true solitude on stage before the concert that night, Jin walked over to the keyboard, sat down, and started to play.

Chapter Four

Won tilted the water bottle up to his lips and took another sip, nervousness coiling in the pit of his stomach. He was going to be sick.

“Where is he?” Myung hissed at Won as his clothes were adjusted for the fourth time. Myung was definitely the “pretty” one of the group. Due to that fact, when he stepped out onto the stage his clothes had to be perfect, his long, black hair which hung to his shoulders was always brushed and gleamed to perfection. His thin, svelte body screamed sex and naughtiness, and with his full, pink lips and arched brows he looked like a debauched angel.

“I don’t know,” Won growled. “Why are you asking me?”

“Because you two are usually joined at the effing hip, Won.” Myung rolled his eyes. “If you were a woman, because we know that Jin would be the man in your relationship with his dominant personality, you guys would be an old married couple.”

Fear streaked through Won at Myung’s words. Was his attraction and fascination with his best friend so obvious to everyone, then? He’d been so sure that he’d been hiding it well. He’d known there was something inherently wrong with him when at fourteen he realized he wasn’t daydreaming about the girls in school like his male classmates; he was daydreaming about Jin. That had never stopped. He still dreamed about Jin. Now, however, the dreams had shifted. Instead of dreaming about Jin kissing him and holding his hand, he dreamed about Jin tying him up, holding him down, fucking his ass, running the edge of a knife along his skin.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

“We’re not a married couple, and I am not the woman!” Won practically shouted. The commotion backstage came to a screeching halt as everyone looked at him. Myung looked at him and blinked. He reached out to touch Won’s arm.

“I know that, Won. I was just talking about how close you two are. Calm down,” Myung told him, looking at him in concern.

Won nodded. “Sorry. I’m just worried about Jin. It’s not like him to be late.”

“You never have to worry about me, Sang. I’m here. You know I like to make an entrance.” Jin’s deep voice sent shivers down his spine, and Won grew angry as his body betrayed him by growing hard.

“Sorry I’m late, guys, I was working on a song and lost track of time,” Jin said.

The makeup and costume assistants rushed over to Jin and set about dressing and preparing Jin for the concert. Won allowed himself a brief moment to caress Jin’s form from the top of his black hair over his tight muscled body to his feet, his gaze lingering on the bulge in his boxer briefs. Saliva pooled in his mouth at the thought of taking Jin’s cock in his throat, and he quickly jerked his head away.

“You wrote a new song? Are we doing it tonight?” Gi asked.

Jin nodded. “Yeah. I already practiced it with the Hyeong and the rest of the band. It doesn’t have any rap in it though, Gi.” He shrugged. “Sorry man. It’s a love song.”

Gi grinned. “That’s all right man. But you wrote a love song? Really?”

“I know. I don’t really understand it myself, but let’s just say, I was inspired.” Jin laughed, his gaze intense on Won’s face.

Won blushed and looked down, suddenly finding the tips of his shoes fascinating.

“Two minutes, guys. Time to take your places.” The stage manager shouted.

Won followed the rest of the group toward the stage, acutely aware of Jin’s presence at his back, a looming force offering him protection, dominance, seduction, control... fear.

“By the way, Jin, what’s the name of the song?” Myung asked.

“‘Before You Go’.”

Won moved fluidly through the choreography of “Love Letter”, his hands stroking down his torso before snapping to the side. He caught Jin’s eye and grinned before moving up to the microphone to sing his verse, adrenaline pumping through him.

“~eh su boo tu na eui shim jang dang shin gut. The words on this page. Come and be mine. Na eui sa lang pyun ji ik da.”

“Sing with us!” Jin yelled into his microphone.

“*LO-VE LE-TT-ER!*” The crowd sang along with them, and Won closed his eyes, his arms outspread as the music flowed through his bloodstream, the energy of the crowd pouring over him like water. Anticipation pulsed through him like an impending orgasm. Hyeong was building up to it, and Won couldn't wait. He started to bounce on his toes, pumping his arms up and down as he felt the surge rising higher and higher and then...

BAM!

With a crash of the cymbals, Jin effortlessly slid into “Endless”, easily their most recognized song, because it was the first one they'd ever written. It was the one Won loved the most, because it was the one he and Jin sang together.

He gripped his own microphone tight in his fist and started to sing along with the man who haunted his every waking moment. And just like the first time they sang together, their voices blended together perfectly. Joining together as if they had been made for each other. Two puzzle pieces desperately seeking the other half.

Much too soon for Won, the song was over, and Jin was walking center stage.

With a pair of handcuffs swinging from his wrist.

Chapter Five

Jin was trembling with fear inside, and it wasn't really an emotion he was comfortable with. Even when he'd spent a year and a half being trained by a Dom, who also had to keep his identity secret, Jin had been nervous about being caught engaging in homosexual and "obscene" sexual acts, but not fearful. But right now? Getting ready to sing a song that he wrote? He was shaking in his boots. And singing in front of crowds was something that he did for a living. How fucked up was that?

Perhaps it was because this time he was singing a song not just for the crowd of adoring fans, but for Won? Oh, who was he kidding? Every song he sang, he sang for Won. It had been that way since he was seventeen. Every note was for his best friend, every interview was about him. But this time he would finally let Won *know* it.

Pulling off his sweaty shirt, Jin tossed it into the audience, cringing as a group of girls started fighting over the article of fabric. When one girl held up the shirt, hair mussed, and with a bloody lip, he smiled and waved at her.

"This is a new song," he said. "It's called 'Before You Go'. I wrote it about a very special person. I hope you all like it."

The opening strains of the song began on the keyboard, the pyrotechnics igniting, and Jin gripped the microphone in his fist as he began humming.

"Watching you hurts my soul. Because I want to hold you. But I can't touch you. Because you're not mine. If I could be so bold. And have you do as I want you to. I'd make you stay with me forever. But tonight I have to say what's in my heart."

Jin turned to where Won stood on the stage, and with dominance and possession riding him hard like a snarling dragon, with its talons digging in his skin, and its breath on his neck, he gripped Won's hair and jerked his head back. The handcuffs he had clipped to his wrist before the song signifying how he was bound to Won just as much as he wanted to chain Won to him swung freely behind Won's head. He looked down into Won's face and saw the drunken pleasure there and wanted to howl in delight. He knew he was responsible for that. Instead, he kept singing.

“Before you go. I want you to know. That you own every part of me. Before you leave. Know that you take every piece of my heart. So stay with me. So I can be complete.”

He caressed the side of Won’s face furtively, before turning to walk away, continuing the song, the crowd going crazy. While homosexuality wasn’t illegal, the stigma attached to it was so damning he’d had many “brothers” and “sisters” in the community commit suicide. Even though many Koreans had no issue with men walking down the street holding hands. It made no sense to him. But he would do nothing to hurt Won... without his consent.

He grinned. With Won’s consent, he’d bring him all measure of pleasurable pain.

Kneeling before the crowd, Jin concluded the song, stretching out his hand as if he were reaching out for one of them. His ears rang with their deafening screams. He stood and stepped back quickly before they could pull him from the stage. *I won’t let that happen again.* He waved with everyone else and hurried off the stage, determined to talk to Won.

Jin scanned the area but couldn’t see Won anywhere. There was no way he could have moved that fast. Not with everyone backstage. Not unless...

He’s running.

“Fuck!” Jin yelled out.

“What the fuck happened, Jin?” Gi asked as he headed towards his dressing room.

“Have you seen Sang?” Jin asked as he rushed down the hallway.

“Yeah, he was running down the hallway, said something about getting home. He said he had to leave the group. I told him to wait for the rest of us, so we could talk about it, but he wouldn’t wait.” Gi pointed to the exit door.

Jin raised a hand in thanks and took off running. *Goddammit, Won!* Why the fuck would he run? Why would he leave the band? Did Jin’s feelings really freak him out *that* much? Didn’t he know how dangerous it was for them to be out there without their guards or without each other?

Jin slammed open the door and stepped out. Looking left, then right, he tried to figure out which way Won went. The sound of a cry alerted him, and he

turned right and took off in a dead run. His breath rushed from his lungs. Their fans were great, but there were a few who took obsession to a whole new level. And as Jin turned the corner he realized that was what Won was dealing with.

Won was lying on the ground with a young girl standing over him with a pair of scissors in one hand, a pair of soiled panties in her other hand, ranting and raving at him. Jin slid to a stop and very casually walked up behind the young lady and, without her being aware, jabbed his fingers at the pressure points behind her collarbone at her shoulder. As she crumpled to the ground, knocked out, Jin caught her and lifted her up in his arms.

He glared down at Won.

“I’m going to deliver her to Ki Yong, so she can get help. You are to be at my car when I get back, do you understand? You are going home with me tonight.”

Won’s eyes widened, and he nodded his head.

“Yes, Jin.”

Chapter Six

Won was beyond nervous as he followed Jin through his house. It wasn't that he hadn't been here before. He had been. Plenty of times. But this was the first time he'd been here under these circumstances. He wasn't stupid. He knew what was going to happen tonight.

Jin was going to fuck him.

Hard.

He wasn't sure at what point he knew that Jin was like him. Maybe a part of him had always known. But tonight at the concert, listening to Jin sing "Before You Go" had clinched it for him, and he had freaked out. He didn't think he was strong enough to handle the backlash from coming out. No. He *knew* he wasn't strong enough to handle it. Not even for Jin, whom he was pretty sure he loved more than life itself.

But coming out in Korea was a death sentence waiting to happen, and unless they were prepared to leave Asia and try to find asylum or move somewhere else, then there was no way Won could come out.

Was there?

He'd also thought there was no way he could be a famous musician, but with Jin by his side, pushing him, giving him the strength, he'd done it. He'd not only done it, he'd exceeded his own dreams. Maybe he had been underestimating Jin and what they could possibly have this whole time.

He hadn't had faith in his best friend.

"I'm sorry, Jin," he apologized.

"Don't speak, Won," Jin growled back without stopping. "We are going to go downstairs and talk there. We will work out a negotiation, and then there will be rules and you will follow those rules if the negotiation works out to both our benefit. *Only* if it works to benefit *both* of us. And after the rules have been established..." Jin stopped and turned around, grabbing Won and slamming him into the wall. Won grunted, the air leaving his lungs in a rush.

Lust raced to his cock, and he whimpered at the aggression he could feel radiating from Jin. He looked into Jin's eyes and panted with desire, his knees growing weak, the need to sink to them before his friend, before his... *fuck*

what did he call Jin now? He wasn't just Jin any more. He was something so much more now. He needed to show him his submission. He yearned to be on his knees before him. To show him that he could obey. To give him his faith. His control. His power. To give all of himself to Jin and to receive all of Jin in return.

“...I'm going to turn your creamy skin red with my marks so you know who you belong to.”

Won moaned and nodded. Jin's fingers stroked his throat before wrapping around it and pressing tightly. Won gagged, his air cut off for just a moment, before Jin released his neck. Adrenaline pumped through Won, his body trembling. His gaze growing hazy and his fingers shaking.

He looked at Jin, who was nodding. “That's what I thought. You are perfect for me. But I apologize. I shouldn't have done that. Not before doing the negotiation. Regardless of how close we are or how well I know you, we have no agreement.” Jin sighed. “Come.”

Won was confused but followed Jin on shaky legs down into Jin's basement, his cock heavy between his legs. He was startled by the cross, the padded bench, the hook hanging from the ceiling, and the plethora of paddles, whips, floggers, and other items that filled the room. Jin led him to the table in the corner that sat next to a bed and directed Won to sit down in one of the chairs. He reached into the nightstand next to the bed and pulled out two packets of paper.

“I'm going to ask you questions, and you should ask me questions as well. I've been trained in the BDSM Lifestyle, but you haven't, so you should have a lot more questions. Okay?”

And with that, Won's eyes were opened to an entirely new world. He discovered that the things he enjoyed weren't perverse or *wrong*. There was, in fact, an entire community. There were rules, guidelines, websites, support, contracts, clothing, and ceremonies. By the time they were finished with the negotiation, hours had passed, and Won would have been sure that the mood would have been killed, but instead of it being dead, Jin rose and Won saw that his friend... no, his *Dom* was extremely turned on.

“Stand up, Sang. I want you to take off your clothes and fold them up neatly and place them on the table. When you have finished with that, I want you to go and stand on the X in the middle of the room,” Jin ordered, his voice low.

“Yes, Sir,” Won answered immediately, peace settling on his shoulders as he rose and began to immediately set about doing as he had been commanded.

When he stood on the X, he realized that he was beneath the hook he'd noticed earlier. Anticipation coursed through him as he listened to Jin's footsteps move around the room behind him. When Jin walked in front of him, Won's eyes trailed over the tattoos along his side. Jin had the group's name tattooed on his side along with the words “power,” “dominance,” and “care.” Won had never understood why he'd had those particular words imprinted on his flesh, but now he did.

“Hold out your wrists.”

Won stuck out his arms and shivered when he felt Jin strap a blue wrist cuff onto each of them. Jin then walked over to the wall and cranked a lever that lowered the hook. Walking back over to Won he grinned at him.

“Hands up, Sang.”

Thinking of the game of “Cops and Robbers” they used to play as kids, Won lifted his hands in a sign of surrender. Jin slid the D-ring of one wrist cuff over the hook, then did the same with the other before walking back to the wall and cranking the lever. Won felt his body slowly begin to leave the floor until his toes barely touched it, and then he watched as Jin prowled towards him like an animal.

Jin stroked his hands down Won's body, causing him to tremble. He reached out and pinched Won's nipples, twisting the buds hard. Won's body jerked from the pain, and he hissed.

“So beautiful, the way your body responds to me, Sang. I always knew it would,” Jin said.

He walked around to Won's back and ran his hands down Won's body, first with his fingertips, then with his nails. The first smack to Won's ass surprised him, and Won let out a gasp. The tingle spreading throughout his body.

“I've wanted you for a very long time. Did you know that?” Jin asked.

“N-no, Sir,” Won answered.

“Well, I have.” Jin's voice was low, seductive. He smacked Won's ass again and again with his hand, the flesh growing warm. Won felt himself sinking into a state of blissful unawareness. A state of euphoria starting to overtake his mind. His limbs grew heavy, even as his spirit floated above him.

“Did you want me this whole time, Sang?” Jin asked.

“Yes, Sir,” Won answered without hesitation.

“You should have told me,” Jin told him.

“Yes, Sir.”

Won heard Jin walk away, and when he returned, he felt Jin's body press extremely close to his own.

“Do you trust me, Sang?” Jin asked.

“Yes, Sir.”

“A relationship between a sub and a Dom is all about trust and faith, so you must have extreme trust and faith. Especially for what we are about to do. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good.”

With those words, Won felt the sharp edge of a knife pressed against his skin. He knew that Jin wouldn't draw blood. Neither of them were into blood play. That had been established during the negotiation, but they were both into edgeplay. *R.A.C.K. - Risk Awareness Consensual Kink* is what Jin had called it.

As Jin stroked different parts of his skin with the knife, Won grew harder, his cock leaking pre-cum onto the floor beneath him.

Jin gripped his throat and tightened his fingers, growling in his ear, “Don't. You. Dare. Come. Until. I. Say. So.”

He released Won's neck, and Won swallowed, lubricating his dry throat, not responding. He knew that hadn't been a question. His heart pounded in his chest, passion and desire collided within him as he struggled to stave off his orgasm. His Dom told him that he couldn't come so he couldn't come. He bit his lower lip. Even as he felt Jin drag the knife over each cheek of his ass as he ran his fingers in the crease, toying with the hole.

After what felt like an hour, Jin walked away to put the knife in its place and then back to the wall to let Won down from the hook. Thinking the scene was over, Won almost threw his arms around Jin's neck, until he realized Jin was leading him over to the cross.

Won trembled as he walked towards it. Jin stopped him before the structure and grabbed a pair of nipple clamps. Leaning down he flicked his tongue over

Won's nipples until they pebbled tightly, Won moaning and shaking from the pleasure swamping him. Jin pinched one nipple and affixed the clamp onto it before turning to do the other.

After the clamps were attached, Jin removed the handcuffs he'd been wearing earlier from his pocket and attached them to the clamps, and then positioned Won onto the cross, restraining him, tightly. Won squirmed. Pain warred with pleasure, his mind floating in the stratosphere of bliss, and his sphincter clenching with a desire to be filled, though it had only ever been filled by his own fingers before.

He listened to Jin moving around the room behind him and tracked him. He was always in tune with the man, no matter where they were, and tonight was no different. Though knowing that Jin was getting something that would bring him pain and pleasure simultaneously had Won's senses a little hyperaware.

He heard the sound of rustling fabric as Jin's boots moved across the floor back towards him and stopped directly behind him. "This is a cat o' nine tails," Jin said.

Won's breath stuttered out of his lungs, his body trembling as the soft leather strips from the cat o' nine tails brushed against his naked genitals. The hard press of Jin's teeth to the side of his neck made his mouth fall open on a silent cry of painful pleasure, and his body jerked from where it was restrained against the St. Andrew's cross. The handcuffs hanging from his nipple clamps pulled them tighter against the hardened nubs, the clank of the metal against the cross echoed loudly in the room, a mellifluous harmony with his own harsh breathing.

"Mm. I love how responsive you are Sang," Jin's voice was low and guttural in his ear. "Will you still be this way years from now? When you've grown used to my touch?"

"Y-yes, Sir," Won panted out.

Jin chuckled. "I'll just have to help you make sure of that, won't I?"

"Y-yes, Sir," Won groaned as his testicles were taken in a strong grip and tugged.

"Aren't you happy you finally gave in to me, Sang?" The swipe of a tongue on the side of his neck up to his ear was followed by a nip to his earlobe. His balls were released and his cock taken in Jin's hand.

“Y-yes, Sir.”

One stroke. Two strokes. Three.

Whack!

The sting of the cat o' nine tails against his back made him release a harsh cry. He wanted to beg, to plead, to whimper for Jin to let him come. They'd been in the dungeon for a long time and still his orgasm was denied him. He felt as if he were going to fly apart at the seams.

Whack!

Pain and pleasure collided in his body, swirling together in a kaleidoscope of brilliant colors and sounds. A delightful, melodic hum playing in his mind, his body floating feet above him as he sank deeper and deeper into subspace. His every cell was focused on the man standing behind him, as it had been for months, for years. Now, finally, *finally*, he was being taken by this man. Owned. Claimed. Dominated.

Oh, fuck yes.

Whack!

“You ran from me, Sang. That really upset me. It hurt. But, you are here now. Where you belong. And you will come back to the band. Do you understand?” That tone, that voice, brooked no argument, and Won was already nodding his head before the question was even asked. He wanted to be wherever his Dom was. His man.

“Good. I'm glad we understand each other, Sang.” Jin sounded satisfied and happy, which made pleasure fill Won. He had made his Sir happy and that was all he really wanted.

“Mmmm. You should see my marks on you, Sang,” Jin moaned. “They are so beautiful.” Won trembled as he felt Jin's tongue trail over his back and the curve of his ass, groaning as Jin sank his teeth into his rear and bit down hard. When Jin spread his cheeks apart and ran the flat of his tongue up and down the crease of his ass, Won didn't know if he wanted to get away from the sensation or press himself down onto the protruding member. He had never experienced such a thing before.

Jin chuckled darkly and took away the choice from him by forcing his tongue into Won's hole. Won let out a keening cry, his hand grasping for

something, his body experiencing tiny explosions. Won let out a shout when Jin reached up and wrapped his fist around Won's cock and balls, staving off the orgasm that had been dangerously close.

“Uh-uh. Bad, Sang,” Jin's voice sounded amused.

Jin released Won from the cross and walked him over to the bed. Seeing the handcuffs there Won knew the scene wasn't finished, before Jin said a word.

“Spread your arms out to the sides, but I want you up on your knees with your ass in the air, Sang.”

Getting into position, Won knew that it was finally time for him to be fucked, and he was so looking forward to it. He may have run from Jin before, but he wasn't running now. He needed Jin. He was *aching* for it.

After his wrists were restrained to a new pair of handcuffs attached to the bed, he turned his head and watched Jin open the drawer next to it. When Jin pulled out a blindfold, Won bit his lower lip, even as the tip of his cock released another spurt of pre-cum. Jin lowered the blindfold over Won's head, and everything went black. Knowing he wouldn't be able to see anything else, Won lowered his head back to the bed and waited. The chains attached to the handcuffs gave him just enough give to get up onto his hands and knees and to fall back to his chest, with arms outspread, in his original position. He whimpered inside, anticipation thrumming through him.

He listened to Jin grab things out of the drawer and place them on the bed.

He hissed at the first pinch of pain on the back of his wrist. He groaned at the pinch of pain on his forearm. By the time the pinches had reached his shoulders, Won was trembling with the need to come. Jin had decorated his skin with clothespins, or clamps of some kind. *Fuck. That's hot.*

Won felt Jin move behind him and pour lube down the crease of his ass, smearing it until it coated the area. Won whimpered at the feeling of Jin's first finger sinking into his hole. He was thankful when Jin waited and let him get adjusted to the feeling of being penetrated before he moved on. But, rather than move on to two fingers, Won could feel what seemed like three fingers pressing and probing at his back entrance. He wanted to tell Jin that there was no way they would fit back there, but with the bliss flowing through him from the scene earlier, the subspace he currently floated in, his body was so relaxed that Jin was able to get the fingers in.

Jin pounded his fingers in and out of Won's body, and Won whined at the pleasure exploding through him. Before long, Jin pulled his fingers free, and Won listened to the sound of Jin's zipper being lowered, heard the snap of the condom being rolled down over his shaft and him groaning as he coated his cock with lube before lining up the head of his dick with Won's hole and pressing in deep.

“Oh!” Won gasped as Jin's shaft slid into him.

“Fuck, yes.”

Jin set up a maddeningly slow pace, speeding up and pulling out whenever Won's voice grew to a fever pitch, keeping him on the edge of an orgasm. He reached over after the second time of pulling out and, one after another, unclipped the clamps or clothespins from Won's body. The blood rushed to each area, and Won cried out as adrenaline and passion collided in those areas as well.

Jin thrust his dick back into Won's ass and held still. Won almost asked him what was wrong until he felt Jin spreading more lube around the rim of his hole.

Won gasped and clenched the bed sheets as what felt like a second cock pressed its way into his entrance alongside Jin's cock. Won's ass felt so full his mouth fell open, but no sound could come out. Jin's hips started moving again, and the second cock moved slower, but the pleasure was overwhelming.

After long moments, the second cock was removed, and Jin rammed his cock in and out of Won's passage, the sound of his groin slapping against the curve of Won's ass reverberating loudly in the room. Their harsh breathing in perfect harmony just like their singing.

“Come.”

Won's arms flew out to the side, and he collapsed as his entire body shook with an orgasm of epic proportions rocking through him. He screamed Jin's name until he went hoarse and heard Jin shout his name as he pumped his own orgasm in the condom covering his dick. Jin's hands gripped Won's hips tightly, but Won didn't care, barely aware of what was going on around him. He felt as if he were floating in a bubble, high above any troubles or worries. Pain and pleasure had coalesced into one bright, beautiful cloud that he was riding on in his bubble.

Long moments later, he came back to himself. Jin's hands were stroking Won's skin, massaging his limbs, and he was cradling him in his arms as he spoke to him softly, bringing Won down gently from his high into a soft landing back on Earth.

"Hey." Jin smiled.

"Hey." Won blushed.

"Welcome back."

"Thanks."

"So... about the song..."

Won shook his head and lifted his hand to Jin's lips. That song may have freaked him out when he first heard it. It was a song filled with possession, dominance, emotion, love, and commitment, but though he hadn't wanted to admit it to himself, he had always belonged to Jin. Ever since the day Jin had told Won to give him half of his books and *told* him that he was going to walk him home.

He was Jin's. And Jin was his. They belonged to each other. Always had and always would.

"It was a beautiful song, Jin. Thank you."

Jin swallowed and nodded. "I'm glad you liked it."

"I did. Do you think maybe we could write a song together?"

Jin tilted his head. "Sure. Do you have one in mind?"

Won shrugged and grinned. "Just the title."

"What is it?"

"Owned."

The End

Author Bio

Vicktor Alexander (everyone calls him “Vic”) is a southern gentleman by day, and a writer and purveyor of steamy, sticky, hot man on man (sometimes on man on man on man on man on man) sex by night. He started out writing about his sister destroying the world with her breath, went on to writing steamy, erotic interracial historical romances in the middle of his classes but noticed the guys seemed to enjoy each other’s company much more than being with the women. He now enjoys writing about shifters, humanoids, cowboys, firemen, rent boys, fairies, elves, dancers, doctors, Doms, subs, and anything else that catches his fancy, all sexy men falling in love with each other and having lots of naughty, dirty, man-on-man sex. He is a huge fan of the “happily-ever-after” ending, but while all his characters ride off into the proverbial sunset, all sexually satisfied and in love (because it’s the least he can do), they all bear the scars of fighting for that love, just like in real life. Out and proud, he doesn’t believe that love only comes in one form, one race, one gender and that not only is gender fluid, but sexuality as well. He loves to make people laugh (and guys hot) and when he’s not writing, or rather, procrastinating in writing, he’s reading, playing Sims 3, talking to his adopted daughter whom he calls Chipmunk, seeking the man or men who can handle his crazy, stressful, soap opera-esque life and being distracted from said writing by pictures of John Barrowman, Charlie David and Shemar Moore. All interested men in the role of “Future Husband(s)” may apply, auditions are being held every night... multiple times.

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BETTER THAN NEW

By Charley Descoteaux

Photo Description

Extreme close-up of a handsome young man with beautiful blue eyes and a sexy bit of scruff. He's exhaling a drag from a cigarette, the smoke curls around his face, framing his jaw and pouty mouth. His expression leaves no doubt he's looking at something—or someone—he'd like to get close to.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Please use this excerpt as a prompt:

*O' God it's wonderful
to get out of bed
and drink too much coffee
and smoke too many cigarettes
and love you so much*

—from “Steps” by Frank O’Hara

Any setting or time period. A slice-of-life story would suit me fine. No BDSM, violence, mpreg, or shifters, please.

Thank you,

Jenna

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, disabilities, college, barista, slow burn

Word Count: 7,940

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BETTER THAN NEW

By Charley Descoteaux

kintsukuroi: “to repair with gold”; the art of repairing pottery with gold or silver lacquer and the understanding that the piece is more beautiful for having been broken.

Stood up again. It's worse to be stood up on a second date than on a first or a blind date. In those cases, he's standing up the idea of you and not the real you.

This time it wasn't the *idea* getting stood up, it was the real me. He could've texted.

So then I had the whole open mic night ahead of me with nobody to talk to, and the whole coffeehouse chock full of couples. I sat on the couch near the stage, the one covered in blue-ticking fabric, on the overstuffed arm. Every few minutes Ben's laughter floated up from behind the counter and across the room, above the music and the conversations. Ben laughed like he'd never been sad a day in his life.

The *real me* ended up doing something jerky, something I wouldn't want anyone to know I'd done. I flirted with a guy who hadn't been stood up. A guy who came in with someone and had spent a good hour just gazing at him. Everyone in the room could see they were in love, but I couldn't help it. I told myself I only wanted to flirt a little, to boost my crushed ego, but that wasn't it. I wanted to break something.

“Hey, Theo, what're you doing with that?”

I looked where Ben was looking, at the ceramic mug in my right hand, and shrugged. I didn't even remember going over to the counter.

“If you want to break something, trade me for this one first.” Ben held out a plain white coffee cup, and when I grabbed it, he didn't let go. “Come back here.”

His grin almost made me want to smile myself so I checked for coffee drips on my Vans. Sometimes you really don't want to be charmed by clear blue eyes and a *friendly* smile.

Ben used the white coffee cup to pull me around the end of the counter and back behind it. He sat me on the stool he kept there for when it was slow. Stashed under the register, his abandoned paperback splayed open like an accordion.

“Now, let go of the first one.”

My right arm jiggled and I looked up. My face and ears burned. I'd almost broken my favorite mug, the one Ben's little sister had hand painted to look like a snow leopard, and all because some asshole didn't want to date someone with only one foot. I let Ben take it.

“Okay, now break it. Throw it over there.” He pointed to the dip in the tiled floor where a grate covered a hole. The building used to be some kind of factory or warehouse, so the coffeehouse had all kinds of odd little details like that. “Come on. Do it.”

“It'll make a mess.”

“May I direct your attention to the sign above the door? It doesn't say *The Broken Cup* for nothing. Whose place is this?”

“Yours.”

“So throw the cup onto the grate as hard as you can.” He pushed my shoulder gently and nodded toward the grate. “Stop thinking about it and do it.”

He goaded me on, bouncing on the balls of his feet like a dancer. The chains around his neck caught the light and flashed in my eyes. I bounced the cup in the palm of my hand a few times. That seemed to make him happier, so I gathered all my disappointment, pictured it filling up the cup, and threw the cup onto the grate.

Everyone stopped what they were doing and turned to look—even the guy on the tiny stage stopped reading his excruciatingly beautiful poetry about how much it hurts to be in love. Ben raised his hand to high-five me, but I stared at the broken, useless shards scattered around the grate. He bent to put his face in front of mine, and his smile let me breathe normally again.

He ruffled my hair and turned to the counter to help a customer.

Every morning I remind myself it's a good day. Better than yesterday and so much better than last year or the one before. Even the difficult ones seem

okay with that little bit of perspective. Even if I still don't know what degree I'm working toward. Everyone says not to stress it—teachers, advisors, BFF Sharon—get the first two years out of the way and choose something once I get to Portland State.

Easy for them to say. They're not two years behind with no idea where they're going.

I'm not very good at not stressing things, which is one reason I still went to the counselor on campus twice a month. Her office was right outside the building where they teach welding, which makes a strange kind of sense. Most of the welding students were guys, but none of them saw me. They only saw the black rod between the bottom of my jeans and my right shoe. I was always late, and the day after the coffee cup incident was no exception. The guy who fell into step beside me was, though. He had to slow down to my pace, but that didn't seem to bother him.

“Say, Red. What's up with your leg?” The guy was in my math class. Bone-head geometry. If I was any good at angles and trajectories, a lot more than my class schedule would be different.

“Surfing accident. A shark bit off my foot.”

He looked me up and down, no doubt noting my pale and bony qualities, none of which screamed *surfer dude*.

“Seriously?”

“No. Someone pushed me off a MAX platform and the train rolled over my leg.”

He shot me a strange look and then ducked into the building faster than I could've kept up. Not that I wanted to.

I stopped. I wasn't in the mood to bare my soul to someone who got paid to dissect my *feelings*, so I went to the cafeteria. And almost turned right back around and left, but she saw me so I couldn't. Probably wouldn't have left anyway.

“Hi, Theo.” Sharon might've been the only other person on campus who got how it felt to be starting from scratch. While I was learning how to walk again, she was celebrating her fortieth birthday and sleeping on her sister's couch while her soon-to-be ex got settled in a brand new Southern California home. With her new wife. “How's it going?”

“Okay.”

She pulled her backpack off the table and onto the chair beside her. I dropped awkwardly into the chair across from her.

“How’d you do on the math quiz?”

“Okay.”

When I didn’t elaborate she pulled a plastic bag out of her backpack and offered me a cookie—chocolate chip, my favorite.

“How was your date?”

I groaned.

“That bad, huh?” She crossed her legs and settled in. “Tell me about it, sweetie.”

“Thanks for the cookie.”

“You can have the whole batch if you tell me about your date.”

“He never showed. I’m lonely.” *Whoa. Where did that come from?*

“Lonely as in you miss your family, or lonely as in it’s been a long time since you got laid?”

Are the cookies that good?

She set the bag of cookies on the table between us, took one, and then gestured for me to help myself.

“Look, Theo, you don’t have to tell me anything, but if you want to talk about it I’m here.” She studied me as I ate her cookies. “Somehow, I don’t think it’s a family thing.”

I shook my head. I’d stopped missing them before I got back on my foot. We’d never been close, and they never believed I hadn’t been trying to kill myself. Maybe it should’ve bothered me more than it did, but I’d always been independent, and they had two more kids to keep them busy. Once I started school and found a little circle of friends and the coffeehouse... “It’s not. There’s this guy.”

She smiled and waited, shifting in her chair like a kid waiting for birthday cake. She’d heard me talk about Ben—she’d been to *The Broken Cup* for volunteer meetings—so I wasn’t sure why I didn’t just say it was him.

“He has these amazing blue eyes”—and kissable lips, and all his limbs—“but there’s so much more. He’s kind, and smart... He has his own business.”

“How old is this guy?”

I helped myself to another cookie. “Not sure. I heard one of his friends talking about a high school reunion next year. The first one is at ten years, right?”

“Be careful.”

“No, it’s not like that. He’s not interested. That’s the problem. I keep sabotaging my feeble attempts at a love life, even though I know he’s not interested.”

“Says you.” She snorted and then choked on a bite of cookie. I was about to get up and do something when she started breathing again and sipped her Diet Coke.

“Yeah, says me.” I reached across the table and ruffled her hair, like Ben does to me all the time. “He does that. Ruffles my hair like I’m a little kid.”

Sharon frowned and patted her hair, trying to figure out how badly I’d messed it up. Like I’d do that to her. I shook my head and she stopped.

“He touches you. He wants to touch you, and that’s the only safe way he can think of.”

Don’t ask what she means by safe. “He could have anyone he wanted.”

She stared at me without blinking for a long time. My eyes got a little dry in sympathy. “What’d you tell the no-show this time?”

“That I lost my leg to bone cancer.”

She glared at me for a second, and then rolled her eyes.

“I may’ve let him think I was still sick.”

“Does he have a boyfriend?”

“Why do I care?”

“No, not *no-show*, the guy you like.”

“Not that I know of.”

“He can see, right? Don’t look at me like that—I didn’t mean anything against blind people. But, honey, if he could see you, he’d be interested enough to find out why he should feel lucky you want him.”

That only deserved an eye-roll, so that's all she got.

"I'm serious. I don't even like guys all that much and I wouldn't kick you out of bed for getting crumbs in the sheets. Wavy auburn hair, hazel eyes, flawless porcelain skin—*low on the asshole scale*—what's not to like? You're laughing, but I'm serious."

Tuesday afternoon. I thought I'd limp in after class, get coffee and something to eat, and if I also ended up talking with Ben and not getting any studying done, then so be it. In other words, it would be just like every other Tuesday afternoon for the past nine months. Only it was First Tuesday and I'd forgotten all about it. When I got there the coffeehouse was full of people, all talking at once. The place was in full meeting mode—the little stage folded up so all the tables could be pushed together along the window wall. What little floor space was left over held the soft furniture, two couches and two chairs. Ben stood beside the cash register, leaning both forearms on the counter and watching. He lifted his chin and smiled, but before I could make it across the room the chorus around the table shouted my name.

I turned to look, and the usual suspects raised their oversized, cat-print mugs in salute.

"You're late!" Hil stood at his place at the head of the table, hands on his hips. You could almost think he was upset. "Well, come on. We saved your mug for you—looks like you really need it today, Princess."

One of the high school guys gave up his seat at the table for me and leaned his ass against the windowsill not quite behind the chair. Cute, but way too young. I could get in trouble for *looking* at him, so it was a good thing I didn't want to.

I stashed my backpack under the chair and grabbed the coffee carafe. "This is light. I'll go fill it up."

Hil, Volunteer Coordinator Extraordinaire and the most flamboyant guy who ever lived in denim and flannel, rested the back of his hand on my forehead. "You don't *feel* like you have a fever. Be careful, darling, you don't want to overtax your system on your first-ever coffee run."

Ben met me at the counter with a replacement carafe. The huge one that sits on the table and you pump the top. "I would've come around and filled up this one."

“Nah, take the big one. Then you won’t have to come back in twenty minutes for another refill.” Ben’s blue eyes sparkled, and he looked like he was about to laugh. Which almost made up for the pre-emptive strike against my return to the counter in twenty minutes.

“Are you yanking my chain?”

“A little. But the way you suck down the java, it’s a valid concern.” Ben winked and pushed the heavy carafe to the edge of the counter. After a second’s hesitation, he grabbed a white rag and started cleaning the espresso machine.

The natives were getting restless—and who could blame them when their lifeblood was all the way across the room—so I made my way back to the table. The huge carafe messed with my balance so I took a little extra care with where I stepped. I set the monster down on the table next to Sharon before walking around to the empty chair with my name on it.

I looked up, and the high school guy, whose name I tried not to remember, was watching. He watched as I lurched around behind Hil and to the chair he’d given up for me. He watched like we were alone in the room, so it was a relief when I could turn my back on him without being rude.

“Okay, now that we’re all here,” Hil grinned and patted my shoulder, “nobody’s leaving until all shifts are covered. And I mean nobody.”

“I’ll take one during the parade.” I pumped coffee into the heavy snow leopard mug. Sharon sat opposite me; she slid the cinnamon-sugar shaker across the table. It stopped right in front of me and she grinned. Her grin said either she’d figured out Ben was the guy I liked, or she noticed how *high-schooler* looked at me. Maybe both. “Thanks.”

“Okay, one down, three of the nasty slots left to fill before—”

A chorus of snickers rose around the table.

“You guys are horrible!”

We talked about who was going to be stuck inside the fences manning booths with me during the Pride Parade. Everyone had an excuse, so it took the next two hours to cut through all the crap. *High-schooler’s* mom arrived about an hour into it, and she grabbed a coffee and a muffin and sat down with her e-reader to wait. Nobody messed with Hil’s meetings—some people get what they want because they want it.

I'd done my part, but wasn't in any hurry to try and get out of there. If enough people had the evening free, we might even end up going in on dinner and playing board games until Ben kicked us out. That would be worth sitting through a meeting of any length, especially since I missed the check in. Hil, aside from being fabulous and the darling of every nonprofit serving the rainbow in the Portland Metro Area, was the proud owner of a wild and overactive imagination. At the beginning of every meeting we all had to introduce ourselves, state our orientation and preferred pronoun, and then answer a question. The orientation and pronoun were optional but the questions, never, and even though I haven't figured out how, they reveal far too much about what's going on inside my head on any given first Tuesday of the month. The last one was, "What texture are you today?"

Hil was either a genius or a few cookies shy of a whole batch.

Not long after *high-schooler's* mom showed up, a guy came in. Someone I'd never seen before. For a newcomer, he sure knew his way around. He didn't even seem to notice us as he strode from the door to the counter. Ben had returned to his meeting pose, which was one reason I had a hard time paying attention, and didn't straighten into his serving customers pose when the guy approached. The guy was obviously not an average customer.

The stranger was everything I wasn't—tall, tan, blond, athletic. As if that wasn't more than enough, he captured Ben's attention, down to the last brain cell. It's against my nature to despise someone on sight but there's an exception to prove every rule.

Before long Ben and *strange-guy* had settled in all nice and cozy, whispering and giggling. I had my hands full pretending I didn't notice. That's why it scared the crap out of me when *high-schooler* reached past me to refill his mug. Someone probably thought it was funny to give him the calico mug. I jumped, and he jerked his arm back so fast the mug shot behind him and right into the frame of the window. He yelped and then shouted *shit* louder than his mom had probably ever heard him say anything. *High-schooler* kept his back to the room for a long time, and when he turned around his face was so red I could feel the heat radiating off him.

"Sorry."

Ben was already on his way with a broom, dustpan, and damp rag in hand, but nothing had hit the floor.

“No worries, Jay. Are you okay?” Ben stopped and held out a hand, and *high-schooler* nodded as he handed over two large chunks of ceramic that only a few moments ago had been a mug. “This is eminently fixable. It’ll be better than new in no time.”

Ben checked Jay’s hands for cuts, and then took the pieces and disappeared behind the counter. *Strange-guy* leaned across to watch whatever it was Ben was doing. He seemed far too flirty to just be a friend or, better yet, family. Ben only ever talked about the sister who painted the mugs—but I never had a brother or cousin who looked at me like that guy was looking at Ben.

Strange-guy hung around the whole time we debated our strategies for covering two booths during Pride weekend so that everyone would still have some time for fun. If he so much as glanced toward us, I missed it. The whole time, I sucked down the java like there was no tomorrow.

I’d arrived hoping I’d have a reason to stay up half the night, but left with a bad case of the jitters and a sour stomach.

I picked the perfect day to decide to make my move.

I took some time away from *The Broken Cup*. To see if I could. Or because I didn’t want to see whether *strange-guy* would become a regular fixture. That lasted all of three days, so it was Saturday before I saw Ben again. The place was hopping so I stood in line behind a dozen or so smiling customers while he ran back and forth behind the counter, serving up a big helping of charm along with every cup of coffee and bag of goodies.

When it was my turn, Ben greeted me with my snow leopard mug and asked if I wanted something to eat.

“You need help back there?”

“Nah, I’m good. Thanks, though.” He grabbed a tall glass latte mug while I checked out the goodies. Probably for someone behind me.

“I’ll take a couple of petit fours and—Hey, this is the broken cup.” My ears heated so fast it felt like they’d burn right off my head. It sounded like I just realized where I was standing. *Stupid*.

Ben slid the goodie case open, grabbed a small handful of tiny pastel cakes with flowers on top, and bumped the door closed with his elbow as I studied the repaired calico mug.

“Yeah, what do you think? I’m using it as a tip jar until it sets. A few coats of sealer and she’ll be ready for Jay. Better than new.” Ben winked and asked if I needed anything else. Instead of answering truthfully, I said I was good. He wouldn’t have rushed me, though. He never rushed anyone, even with a line snaking out the door.

I paid and let the next person have their face time with Ben, but couldn’t stop thinking about the mug. Instead of fixing it so the breakage didn’t show Ben had painted the crack with glittering purple paint. Impossible to miss against the white, orange, and black of the mug. Ben’s favorite gray tabby-striped mug had a glittery lightning bolt too.

The afternoon passed in barely-controlled pandemonium, so I actually got some studying done while Ben kept busy making a living. By the time I had a handle on History 103, I also had the jitters and the beginnings of a nicotine fit. I left my backpack in the corner and went outside for a smoke. Behind *The Broken Cup* was something like an alley. It used to be for deliveries, but I’d never seen a truck try to squeeze in. The door leading to the upstairs apartments was back there, along with a few trash cans and a bucket of sand. I paced a little and tried not to pass under the dripping awning, but mostly I thought about Ben.

And about *strange-guy*. He had come in while I was studying and didn’t get any special treatment. In fact, Ben might’ve even been a little cool to him. I decided, again, to go for it.

Back when I had all my limbs I would’ve done it without thinking—like, nine months ago. But even if I had to think about it, that was okay. This was bigger than stealing kisses and hand jobs before someone’s parents got home from work. I wanted more than that with Ben. Everything I knew about him said Ben would be worth every second of the waiting, hoping, and planning.

“Hey, what’re you doing standing out here on the street?”

“Smoking.” *Excellent recovery. No one would ever know you were thinking about him naked.*

“I can see that. You shouldn’t, you know. It’s bad for your health.”

Ben pulled a crumpled pack of smokes from his apron and grinned from the side of his mouth as he lit one.

He exhaled in that sexy way he has. Smoke curled from his nose and mouth, cupped his scruffy jaw like I wished I could, before it drifted up to form a lazy

circle around his head. Directors of noir movies had the femme fatales do it all the time. It might even have a name—if it doesn't, it really should. *Does that mean he's flirting with me, or could he really be that effortlessly sexy?* If I tried to do that it wouldn't be sexy, I'd get smoke in my eye.

Okay, when I tried to do that I got smoke in my eye.

"You shouldn't do *that* either. It's bad for *my* health."

"I'm not doing anything."

"Yes, you are. You're flirting with me. I've seen you look up through your lashes like that at all the cute queer boys."

He stepped away and leaned against the side of the building. He even looked up the street, the nearly empty street, like it was the most interesting thing he'd ever seen.

"But that's different."

"How?"

"Because you're different. Different than all of them."

He took a deep drag on his smoke and maybe shivered a little on the exhale. "I could get arrested for what I'm thinking right now."

"What?" Slowly it came to me, what he meant. "Only if you're thinking about killing me. I'm twenty years old."

Ben's whole body jerked and he whipped his head around. At first I thought he was winking, but then he cursed and palmed his face: smoke in his eye.

"No way. You look like you're, like, sixteen."

"I don't know what to say to that. I think I know how old I am." Suddenly I didn't know what to do with my hands, though. "In two months I can get into bars. Legally."

I shuffled my foot but was barely balanced as it was, so I stopped. Two and a half years ago I would've kissed him and unzipped him at the same time. Since that wasn't going to happen I was, as Sharon would say, at a loss as to how to proceed. A few uneven steps that I called pacing took me past Ben. He made a sound of protest, and then reached out and caught my arm.

"Where're you going?"

"I'm pacing. Can't you tell?"

He didn't seem to have heard me. His eyes had the slightly glazed look of someone who's looking at something they really like. I knew how it felt from the other side well enough. I'd been looking at him like that for almost a whole academic year. I remembered I still had a cigarette in my hand and took a long drag. I closed my eyes and exhaled slowly, trying to figure out if I should make a move or let him. It didn't help with anything but did kill some time, until Ben made up his mind.

Ben propped one foot against the wall behind him and slowly drew me closer. He flicked his cigarette into the gutter and framed my shoulders with both hands.

"You come in with a backpack... you're always trying to study."

"PCC. You know, Portland Community College?" I flicked my smoke behind me, hoping I'd need both hands free. Soon. "You never thought I went to PSU?"

He squeezed my shoulders and I rested my hand on his thigh. His jeans were warm, almost like he'd been in the sun, but since it had hardly peeked out in a week maybe that was his normal heat.

"I thought a lot of things. Mostly, about what I'd do once you said the magic word: graduation."

"Yeah?" I shuffled closer. His chest rose and fell faster and his cheeks flushed a light pink. "What were you going to do?"

"Throw you a party."

I must've looked disappointed, because he leaned forward as he said, "A private party," and then his lips touched mine.

If I wasn't afraid of doing something clumsy, I would've leaned against him but I couldn't trust my body, especially not right then. The zinging and tingling shooting through me were hard enough to manage without negotiating that whole "balance" thing. I'd never been kissed like that—like something out of a movie, soft and sweet, like a kiss was something to be savored. In high school, we'd always been in a hurry, all of us, to get to the good part before someone walked in and found out what we were up to. But this, this felt like it *was* the good part. The soft pressure of Ben's lips on mine, the tip of his tongue barely brushing my lips—the perfection of the moment and the promise of more.

He leaned his head back against the wall, holding my shoulders so I couldn't lean with him. It took a while before I looked up from Ben's lips—red

and delicious—to his eyes, soft and sparkling, his breathing loud between us—or maybe that was his and mine together.

“I have to go back inside. What’re you doing tonight?”

“Going upstairs with you.”

Slowly, a smile crept across Ben’s face. He laughed softly. “Yeah, you are.”

About a half hour before *The Broken Cup* was scheduled to close, a warm hand on my shoulder pulled my attention away from my daydream about what would happen later.

“Earth to Theo.”

Before I could even look up, a plate landed on the counter in front of me. “What’s this?”

“Crustless quiche.” Ben used his best *duh* voice, but it wasn’t all that great. It’s hard to yank someone’s chain when you’re thinking about yanking their crank.

My grin disappeared when he slid his hand across my shoulders and pulled me against his side. I considered it a minor miracle that I didn’t moan out loud. Not that it would’ve been scandalous, but there were a few customers using the Wi-Fi and finishing off their coffees.

“You need to keep up your strength.” He smiled and dropped a quick kiss on my forehead. He dragged the rag across the counter as he walked away, his backward glance making me shiver. He had a point, so I polished off the little circle of eggs, spinach and cheese, checking the clock between each bite like maybe time could stop if I wasn’t paying close enough attention.

We’d barely made it inside Ben’s apartment when he pulled me into his arms. He held my jaw in the palm of his hand and smiled as he tilted my head so he could kiss me. He walked backward into his bedroom, running one hand down my back onto my ass, the other holding my body tightly against his. I would’ve groped his gorgeous ass right back, but I held on to his waist to keep balanced. Ben stopped before he hit the bed and took his time exploring my mouth. Slowly, he kissed a path across my cheek and down to my neck. He kneaded my ass with both hands, and I grabbed the waistband of his jeans pulling him close so I could do the same. Ben’s ass—I should’ve been a poet

because I could've written a series of sonnets about that ass—firm and round but little and cute...

Oh my God, Ben's ass.

“What do you like?”

His words vibrated across my neck and I shivered.

I slid my palms around to Ben's stomach and up under his shirt. His skin was a little sweaty from working, and maybe from what we were doing too, but he smelled like coffee and vanilla. I pushed his shirt up, and he lifted his arms to let me slip it off. I ran both hands over his shoulders, down across his chest. His body was perfect—a man's body. Lean, but defined in all the right places. So different from the boys I'd messed around with in high school, I couldn't keep a soft moan from escaping.

Ben took my shirt off and let it drop to the floor. His hands felt strong and sure as he caressed me and pulled me close. His heart raced against my chest.

I hadn't thought it through, because when he popped the button on my jeans I realized Ben expected me to take my pants off. I expected me to take my pants off. Nobody had seen me naked since before. Ben moved his hands away from my zipper and I'd hardly tensed-up at all.

“You okay, Theo?” He held my cheek in the palm of his hand and looked deep into my eyes.

“Yeah. It's—It's just been a long time.” I took a deep breath, unzipped my pants, and pushed them down. Before I got too far, Ben wrapped his arms around me and lowered me onto his bed. His hand was hot where he gripped my ass and his mouth felt warm and soft, and nothing else really mattered all that much anymore.

Ben pulled away and waited until I looked him in the eyes before he asked again, “What do you like to do in bed?”

How to answer that without sounding like a dumb kid? Everything. Anything. Do something to me and I'm sure I'll like it? I'd never had to think about it before, I'd taken what I wanted—a kiss, a guy's dick out of his pants...

“Is it okay if I kiss you here?” Ben kissed my neck and rested his body on top of me. All I could do was murmur something I hoped he'd interpret as yes.

Ben kissed my chest, flicked his tongue across a nipple, and kept going.

“How about here?” He poked his tongue into my belly button, and I giggled. He kept moving lower. Ben nibbled the skin over my hip bone as he pushed my underwear out of the way.

“How about here?” Ben rested his hand on my dick and rubbed softly. “Okay if I kiss you here?”

I was panting so hard I started to feel a little spacy, my lips had that numbingly feeling that made it hard to talk. “Y-yeah.”

He slipped off the bed and all I could see were his head, shoulders, and his hands. He trained those clear blue eyes on me and his expression made me think he was drinking me in. He smiled—a little quirk at the corner of his mouth, like he was a little surprised he was about to nom on my dick, or that it was true how you can tell a real redhead—and then he bowed his head and kissed it. He kissed a line down and down until his nose was buried in my hair, his chin tight against my balls.

I moaned and tried to lift my head higher to get a better view. His tongue—Ben’s tongue—trailed back up the length of me, slowly, like it was his favorite flavor of ice cream. His lips, still swollen from kissing me, closed over the head. I groaned. My arms shook so bad I could hardly stay up. “Oh, God, Ben. That feels so good.”

I watched as long as I could, watched Ben sucking me. He looked so happy—his eyes closed as his head bobbed faster and faster—as happy as I felt. I didn’t think anything could feel better than Ben sucking my dick but then he held my balls in his hand and spread the other across my stomach, like he wanted to have as much of me in his hands as he could. He moaned, and I arched my back, shouting his name as I came.

Maybe a little time passed, maybe a lot, but it didn’t matter. Everything was wonderful... perfect. I realized someone was nuzzling my hair, a strong hand roaming across my skin.

That was Ben’s breath ruffling my curls, Ben’s hand on my chest. Nothing had ever felt so good, so right. A laugh squeezed out before I could stop it. But knowing Ben, he’d understand.

“I could watch you do that all night.”

Another laugh forced its way out, but I kept my eyes closed. “So you *are* planning to kill me.”

Ben draped his naked self across my body and laughed, face against my throat. “No.” He lifted his head and kissed me, soft and sweet. “I’ll only pleasure you half to death.”

He kissed a line down my neck, and I shivered because that’s exactly what he’d done to my dick. Ben barely moved his mouth far enough away from my chest to talk. “I love how you said my name when you came. What else do you like, Theo?”

I’d never been with anyone who wanted to talk about it so much. But maybe high school guys wouldn’t know what to say anyway. I wouldn’t have known. I wrapped my arms around Ben and rolled so we traded places. Seeing how he has about six inches on me, I was a little surprised it went so smoothly.

“I like sucking cock.” I scooted down and Ben pulled himself up at the same time, so he was almost sitting against the pillows. His eagerness made me feel a lot taller.

He was ready—hard and ready—so I dove onto his cock, and the sounds he made had me hard again. Ben’s voice quavered as he moaned, and it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever heard. I didn’t even care if he’d made that sound before, because he sounded exactly the way I’d felt when our places were reversed. It made me a little crazy and I deep-throated him like a porn star. He even tasted a little like coffee.

Before long I started to worry about Ben’s neighbors. He moaned so loud, it wouldn’t have surprised me if someone knocked on the door to make sure he wasn’t being attacked. I was about to empty my mouth and ask him if I should be worried about the cops kicking in the door when he buried both hands in my hair, made that quavering-moan sound again, and shot against the back of my throat.

By the time he’d finished coming, Ben was asleep. He even made soft snoring sounds. He’d earned it, so I leaned over to pull the sheet up. Ben reached out and when his hand found my curls he mumbled, “Stay over?”

I said I would, but he’d started snoring again so I don’t think he heard me. I sat up and looked around for my smokes. Beside the bed stood a table that looked older than dirt. It held a ceramic cheetah-print ashtray and a candle, so at least it would probably be okay to light up. I wasn’t so stupid as to smoke in bed, though. All the coffee I’d had that afternoon probably would’ve kept us

safe, but still. I lit the candle, turned off the bedroom light, and watched Ben sleep while I smoked—both feet on the floor.

Ben came out of the bathroom and stopped beside the bed. I'd shed my pants, shoes, and leg right there—pretty much the same way I did every night before I went to bed. He hunkered down and took a look at it—the torsion and shock-absorbing miracle that should someday let me walk like someone who'd been born with a natural feeling for their own center of gravity. I hadn't been so great at that when I had two good legs, but everyone on my treatment team insisted it would happen.

“This is an impressive piece of technology you have here.”

“My dad drives a bus. He has good insurance.”

Looking at it with Ben didn't feel the same as when I was alone. I didn't mind walking around with a black rod showing between my shoe and pants, but I was always aware of being different. Damaged. Through Ben's eyes, though, it didn't look like something strange from a sci-fi movie; it looked like something cool, maybe from a superhero movie.

He climbed over me and slipped back under the sheet. Ben snuggled up against my side and rested his head on my shoulder.

“You never asked what happened to my leg.”

“No. I never did.”

Cuddling with Ben was something I could get used to fast. “Aren't you curious?”

He shrugged. “Do you want me to ask?”

I'd started it, I knew that, but I wished I hadn't.

“I've heard the stories you tell people who ask.”

“What?” *Eloquent.*

“Are you going to tell me you *did* lose it racing Formula One while on safari?” Ben turned his face up to look at me, and traced a fingertip from my lower lip over my chin and down my neck. “After jumping out of an airplane behind enemy lines right into a bear trap?” His finger glided over my collarbone and up to trace the outline of my shoulder.

“Nothing like that. I was stupid.”

He smiled. “That’s hard to believe.”

“It’s true.” I rolled my head on the pillow, close enough to press my lips to his. Before the kiss could get any deeper I rolled back away. “Aren’t I supposed to tell you the truth now?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do? Tell the other person the worst thing you’ve ever done so you both know if they—” I realized what I was about to say and clamped my mouth shut. I think my whole body must’ve been blushing.

“Love you, even though you’re not perfect?” He ran his hand down my arm. When he reached my hand, he pulled it against his chest. His heart beat hard and fast. “No worries there. I don’t care what you did that you think was so stupid—I mean, it won’t change the way I feel about you, not that I don’t *care*. Besides, if you told me your stupidest moment, I’d have to tell you mine. And I don’t want to.”

“Now I’m curious. Forget to carry the one on a math test?”

“Hmmm...” His smile grew, until he flopped onto his back and laughed up at the ceiling. “I’ll have to think of a new one. Turns out, the thing I thought was stupid ended up not being so dumb after all.” Ben pulled me into his arms and then rolled onto his back. “I used to think—”

“You don’t have to.”

“It’s okay. I won’t make you go next.” Ben was as good as his word, but it still made me nervous. “But this is good. If you want to hear it.”

He wiggled under me until I looked up into his face. His grin softened into his sex-face. *How could I say no to that?*

“My parents had it all planned out, I’d graduate from high school, go right to U of O and not come up for air until I had my MBA. I wanted to go run around Europe for the summer first. They thought it was all about screwing around—”

“Really, you don’t have to—” I rested my cheek on his chest. My forehead touched the stubble on his chin and I moved so I could feel it, prickly against my skin.

“Hang on. It gets better.” He rubbed his face in my hair and I bit his shoulder. He shivered and laughed. “I said it wasn’t about screwing around overseas, but for some reason they didn’t believe me. So my dad said what I needed was some *real-world, practical experience*, and if I wanted to go to Europe, I had to run a business for two months first—or as long as it was profitable. Only, my great idea to run it into the ground in a week didn’t pan out. So here I still am.”

“That’s because almost nobody comes in for the coffee. They come back because of you.” Ben went very still. I crossed my arms on his chest and rested my chin on them. Our noses were almost touching—my eyes were a sigh away from crossing. “Walking into *The Broken Cup* is like coming in out of the rain. You made a happy place, and—why did you think that was stupid?”

“Because I’ve still never been to Europe. And I don’t own my own home or anything else my parents think is important.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t look like that. It hasn’t felt stupid for the past nine months. I only realized it today.”

I really needed a cigarette, but when I reached toward the wobbly little table, Ben rolled us over and pinned me under him. He kissed my temple and then nuzzled my cheek. His lips brushed my ear when he spoke. “Tell me?”

I took a deep breath, tamped down all the bullshit that threatened to burst out whenever I opened my mouth, and closed my eyes. I was very aware that his right thigh rested on my left thigh, that his right foot hooked over my left shin, and how impossible that position was on the other side.

“So, this guy I was... messing around with... his older brother had this little crotch rocket. It was way too fast and we weren’t even allowed to look at it. But then he got grounded, and their dad chained it up in the garage.”

When I paused, Ben kissed my ear, my neck. Softly, to let me know it was okay.

“We picked the lock and took turns riding it. I’d never ridden a motorcycle before. It was easier than I thought it would be, so I raced all over the neighborhood. I was going too fast to stop and thought I had enough time to make the turn before the train got there. But I was wrong.”

For a long time we didn't move. Well, I didn't move. Ben rubbed his face in my hair, kissed the side of my forehead and my cheek, ran his hands up and down my arms. Slowly, in a soothing way, not in a sexual way.

"That was a real train, like a locomotive? Not the MAX?"

"Yeah. It just grazed the rear tire..." I almost said I'd been lucky, but stopped short the one time it would've sounded sincere.

"I didn't know the trains still ran through Hillsboro." He shuddered and slipped both arms around me, hugging me tight.

"What?"

"You said you grew up in Hillsboro."

"Yeah. Like, the day we met."

"Yeah."

"You want to hear what I thought about *you* the day we met?"

Ben propped himself up on one elbow and looked down at me. His smile grew, slowly, until it seemed to go even beyond his mouth and eyes—it's crazy, but it felt like his whole body smiled. "Yeah."

I ran both hands down his sides and cupped his ass. "I'm going to fuck him."

"So, what're you waiting for?"

I took a second to appreciate everything—last night, the look in Ben's eyes as he waited for me to get to it already. But only a second, because I'd been waiting for nine months and that was long enough.

The End

Author Bio

Charley Descoteaux has always heard voices. She was relieved to learn they were fictional characters, and started writing when they insisted daydreaming just wasn't good enough. In exchange, they let her sleep once in a while. Home is Portland, Oregon, where the weather is like your favorite hard-case writing buddy who won't let you get away with taking too many days off, and in some places you can be as weird as you are without fear. As an out and proud bisexual and life-long weird-o, she thinks that last part is pretty cool.

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THE BIGGER THEY ARE

By Kim Alan

Photo Description

A young, very nicely built man is sprawled on his back, legs held open by the man beneath him—the man whose large (too large) cock is bulging as they attempt to make it fit into the first man's smaller (too small) opening. Though the man on top is wincing, he's clearly determined to take it. His lover takes care though, strong enough to support the smaller man's weight and control their rate of impact.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This is the man I love above all others. I want him to be happy; if not with me than with someone—anyone else.

He doesn't believe he's worthy of love so he engages in reckless behaviors. I want most of all for him to find peace so that he'll find that love.

I want this story to be a contemporary with a definite HEA. Other than that as long as it's sexy & hot, I'm happy. Thanks!

Sincerely,

Lisa

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: BDSM, spanking, discipline, Daddy kink, age difference, size difference, first time, multiple partners, multiple orgasms, rimming, cum play

Word Count: 33,903

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THE BIGGER THEY ARE

By Kim Alan

Chapter 1

“Hello, boys,” Wren purred in the seductive yet innocent come-to-me voice that he’d perfected. Well, he assumed it was perfected. It had a one hundred percent success rate. Wren sidled into the middle of the men, knowing exactly how he appeared: dirty blond, average height with above average pretty-boy genes that all combined to make him one damned fine-looking twink.

He had no illusions of what men saw when they looked at him. Sure, he sometimes felt like a walking stereotype, but he liked to think that his doe-brown eyes and full, naturally pink lips—not to mention the devastating flash of dimples in his cheeks—kept him from complete anonymity. And, to be honest, one couldn’t argue with his results.

He hummed low in his throat, very pleased with his chosen rugged specimens of manhood. He’d selected them from the masses based on two things: their size, which was impressive, and the fact that they were fucking gorgeous and oozed strength right through their flannel shirts. Not to mention a threesome was next on his to-do list.

Both were dark-haired and scruffy, like they’d put in their full week of work and had no intentions of grooming again until Monday rolled around. Cropped hair indicated that grooming was part of their usual grind, though, making the laid-back look all the more effective, as far as Wren was concerned.

The taller of the two—an eyebrow raised and a grin licking at his lips—looked over Wren’s head to his companion before pinning Wren with ice-blue eyes. “Be careful who you call boys... boy.”

Heart racing with the thrill of imminent success, Wren dropped his eyes shyly and peeked towards the opposite man to get a feel for his reactions. A shot of apprehension threatened to stiffen his spine, but he pushed through it. It was his own fault for having targeted the most hardened-looking men in the joint, but he just couldn’t help himself. He had a type, and it was very imperative that he stick with it. To say these guys looked tough was like saying, “Hey, that fire looks kinda warm.” That the bar was far from anything resembling reputable didn’t help his nerves, but it sure as hell contributed to the excitement.

Wren offered a hesitant smile to the dark-haired, dark-eyed man who, on second glance, wasn’t shorter but was seated while the other stood. But that

didn't matter, because he was currently studying Wren with a combination of lust and suspicion, and only one of those would do.

Wren sighed with exaggerated humility. "I'm sorry, sirs. I'm afraid I've found myself completely without... discipline tonight."

Two hands from either side grabbed his ass simultaneously, and his gasp was the first thing of the night that wasn't part of the act. The hot, hard hands squeezed while the men moved in closer. A long, rangy body pressed against his side from the left, the unmistakable rod of the man's erection pressing high on Wren's hip. The air was thick with arousal, making Wren's groin tighten in expectation.

"I'm Wren," he purred, right before his eyes rolled back, and he moaned, pushing himself against the fingers digging into his crack all the way to the back of his balls.

An arrogant chuckle left the one on his right. "I'm Joe, and the man about to penetrate your ass through your jeans is Ace."

Ace dipped his head to Wren's ear. "But you will call us Sir."

"Yes, Sir," Wren complied happily, unable to resist brushing his cheek against the stubble-rough jaw nuzzling him. Ace made an approving sound at the action and took a deep inhale from Wren's neck. Goose bumps popped up at the source and spread outward, making Wren shiver and the men smile wickedly.

Joe slid to the edge of his stool and tugged them both towards him. Wren was thrilled and a little overwhelmed to find himself trapped between two hard bodies sporting steely shafts. His breathing became something more like panting, much to the delight of his companions.

"What exactly are you looking for tonight, boy?" Ace definitely had the harder edge, his voice gruff and sexy as sin.

Their other hands joined the fray, making Wren jump when his nipple was tweaked, then moan when it was held tight. He thought it was Joe's hand making its way across his twitching abs to the low-slung waistband of his jeans. When he was boldly squeezed through his jeans, all ability to reason flew south.

Ace chuckled hotly against Wren's neck and brushed Joe's hand away, releasing Wren's nipple in order to do so. "Stop, baby. The kid can't talk if we keep touching him."

Joe's wicked laugh barely registered as Wren gulped a mouthful of air in relief, immediately followed by disappointment. He probably could have come from the stimulation of four tough-as-nails man-hands on his body. A different work-roughened set of hands big enough to swallow Wren's entire ass came to mind, but Wren forced his attention instead to the men who were actually real and willing right in front of him. Or beside him. Surrounding him. Engulfing him. Whatever.

He smiled a bright smile, knowing it revealed exactly how turned on he was. "What was the question, Sir?"

Joe trailed his finger along Wren's jeans as if waiting for the "go" signal from his partner. His voice, while softer, had an equally seductive effect. "We need to know what you want, boy."

Wren licked his lips. This is where it got tricky. "Discipline. No drawing blood, no bodily fluids, no... penetration."

Ace frowned. "No penetration of your ass, or anywhere?"

Wren smiled his most alluring smile, knowing it was working when both sets of eyes focused on his lightly glossed lips. "Oh, I can hardly wait to suck you both off. But no cocks in my ass." The last time he'd thought he could handle anal from a stranger had not been pleasant.

Joe appeared somewhat disappointed, and his hand squeezed almost painfully where it still held his half of Wren's ass, but he looked up at Ace and smiled wickedly. "We can take turns whipping him and fucking his mouth," he suggested with the same tone Wren might have used to suggest ordering two entrees and sharing them.

"That could work." Ace bent and bit at Wren's neck with a hum. He must have really liked that spot with all the attention he was giving it. He leaned back and stared hard at Wren's parted lips, his eyes heating when Joe grabbed Wren's chin and roughly dragged a calloused thumb over his slick bottom lip. Wren darting his tongue out to taste the digit was apparently the deciding factor. "That could definitely work."

Wren's shiver brought out a feral gleam in Joe's eyes, and the man returned to his fondling while angling in close to get friction on his own cock. Wren breathed in the scent of them, different, but melding into a delicious combination of leather, whiskey, spice and... man. Yum.

“Hey.” The bartender, who looked as hard-assed as one would expect in a clichéd biker bar, glared at Wren’s companions. He disregarded Wren entirely. “Take it to the back or outside. You’re making the natives restless.”

Wren peeked around Joe’s shoulder to see that they were drawing the greedy attention of almost every man in the bar. His skin might have crawled at another time from the looks of some of the patrons, but he was safely surrounded by his own scary-enough guys. From the way they moved in even closer, Wren had a feeling that even though they shared a third between them, they didn’t share well with anyone else.

With very deliberate grinds of their cocks against Wren, Joe and Ace stood back from the bar and led him to the red door at the back. That they were watched with all those lustful eyes made Wren even hotter. He was wrapped in arms from both sides. Joe and Ace stayed close and possessive. Wren’s head spun, and his entire body throbbed in anticipation.

“He’s *where?*”

“You heard me,” the sly, annoyingly sexy—though thankfully familiar—voice taunted him. “I’d come quick if I were you. He’s proving way too much of a temptation.”

Charlie tapped the screen to end the call and squeezed the phone in his fist rather than throwing it at the wall. Again. He was already on his way to the garage. He cursed when he entered it, seeing every one of the six bays occupied with Wren’s various toys, meaning he’d either been picked up or he’d called a taxi. Regardless of the method, the little brat had managed to sneak out again.

Selecting the innocuous SUV with the extra dark window tint, Charlie kept a tight grip on his anger. It wasn’t like they could lock the boy... man... down. He was twenty-one. Barely. But he was supposed to be keeping a low profile after the tabloids had caught him exiting that high-profile (thank you, *Fifty Shades*) BDSM club the month before. Charlie snorted as he thought about Devin—Wren’s brother and Charlie’s employer—hoping that the threat of exposure would rein Wren in.

There was no need to set his GPS. Charlie knew exactly where he was going. And the closer he got, the more livid he became. Wren had ditched the nice, clean, safe clubs and was now working his way through some of the seedier gay bars. They were just far enough off the beaten path to be dangerous, but close enough to be in the book, so to speak.

Of course, it was the dangerous part of that description that Charlie focused on. That, and his knowledge of this particular club's back room. It had taken a couple weeks at "regular" gay bars, but Wren had eventually found his way back to another BDSM club. Well, pub with a play room in the back, Charlie corrected bitterly.

And with Wren's ability to sniff out trouble like a trained bloodhound, Charlie had no doubt a simple retrieval of the boss's baby brother was far from likely.

"Fuck, boy. What have you gotten yourself into this time?"

Charlie combed his fingers over his closely shorn hair and fought back the frustration. He'd done everything he could think of to stay detached, but he'd been too close to the kid for too long to attempt claiming that he didn't care. He'd taken his promise to watch over Wren seriously. He still did, even if he wasn't directly involved anymore. Wren's escalating behavior felt like a smack down to Charlie in more ways than one.

They had all had quite the eye-opener a few months ago—Wren's twenty-first birthday to be specific—when they awoke to see Wren splashed all over the tabloids, half-dressed and draped over the arm of a leather daddy twice his age. And size. Making no apologies for his actions, Wren had laughed off his concerned brother's warnings and thrown his chin up in clear defiance to Charlie once Devin had stormed out of the room.

It wasn't a surprise that Devin had no control over the boy. Orphaned at twenty-two, Devin had inherited the family business—a billion dollar corporation with holdings all over the country. The tragic events had immediately thrown the two boys into the spotlight while simultaneously bringing Charlie into the fold. Devin had needed someone he could trust, and Charlie, his closest friend, was happy to help. Wren, a mere fifteen at the time, had not only lost his parents, but had found himself the ward of an older brother who spent sixteen hours a day struggling to keep the family business flourishing.

Not surprisingly, given the media attention, Wren caught the eye of a television producer. It was a bit more of a shock when they discovered he actually had a talent for acting. By sixteen, he was recognizable in his own right, and Charlie's job as driver had morphed into Wren's personal bodyguard who happened to drive him places.

Charlie sighed, remembering the first time he'd picked Wren up from the studio. He'd bounced out the door with the innocent energy of youth. Charlie had assumed the fame would spoil Wren, but it never did. He'd maintained his friendly, outgoing nature in spite of it all. His puppy-dog, brown eyes and soft curls, combined with his slight build, had accentuated a waifish innocence that had kept Wren in business playing a much younger teenager until he'd hit twenty.

Then the show had aired its last episode, and Wren had decided he'd had enough. Charlie had been shocked, thinking Wren had really loved it, but when he'd asked Wren about it, he'd gotten a look from the boy that had instantly revealed an inner turmoil and a flash of sadness that had floored Charlie. Worse, it had been through the eyes of a grown man, and the child-adult barrier that Charlie had clung to suddenly disintegrated into dust, and he was seeing Wren, the real, adult Wren, for the first time.

That night was also the first time Wren called him, drunk and needing a ride. When Charlie had arrived, ready to deliver the boy handily over to his brother, Wren had shocked him by sliding right into Charlie's personal space. A newfound sensuality oozed from the lithe body that Wren pressed into Charlie. The beguiling doe-eyes and pouting lips might have been too much to resist, if not for the overpowering smell of booze pouring off the boy.

The drive home had been an exercise in torture. Wren had thrown himself into the front seat, and short of removing him bodily—and Charlie wasn't about to go there—Charlie hadn't had much choice but to drive them home, dodging Wren's groping hands and increasingly sexual proposals. When he'd finally dragged the boy upstairs to his room, Wren had thankfully been near passing out. But just as Charlie laid him on his bed, Wren had grabbed his hand and apologized.

"I'm sorry, Charlie," he'd slurred, "I know you could never want someone like me."

He'd tried to deny the longing he'd heard in Wren's voice, blaming it on Wren's sorrow over his show ending. Or the drinking. Anything he could until he'd finally realized that the reason didn't matter; he'd missed the boy's suffering right under his nose.

Charlie groaned like he always did while thinking about it. He felt like he'd never failed so spectacularly. Shortly after that fateful night, Charlie had been promoted to manage all of the staff and security at the estate. While he still

lived on the property, he was no longer a driver unless he was pinch hitting. He'd missed the ever-exuberant, exhausting boy immediately, but he'd told himself—kept telling himself—it was safer all the way around for them to have some separation.

He hadn't been able to resist the phone, though. He'd given it to Wren on his last day as his driver. A private phone—small enough to slip into skinny jeans, or Wren would have never carried it—that had a GPS tracker and direct line to Charlie's personal phone. He couldn't stand the idea of Wren calling anyone but Charlie when he needed help.

Charlie arrived at the bar before he could really get a good steam going on the self-flagellation. He searched the small lot for a place to park but ended up screeching to a halt in the middle of it, stopped dead in his tracks by the scene before him.

Wren was hanging drunkenly between two men, both frighteningly larger than him. But they were holding him protectively, Charlie noted with the barest relief. They were faced off against a marginally smaller man who looked ten times more terrifying thanks to the lust-filled, slightly manic gleam in his eyes. What made Charlie's blood run cold, though, was the cluster of men behind the scary one, obviously his backup, judging by the varying degrees of leering on their faces.

Launching himself from the vehicle the second it stopped, Charlie surveyed the scene, taking in every man and their potential threat before he could let himself focus on Wren. The boy looked out of it—no doubt drunk again—but otherwise unharmed. Straightening and snarling, Charlie stepped in front of Wren and addressed the ugly man and his misfit posse.

“What's going on here?” he demanded, his voice low and deceptively calm. Everyone around him suddenly shrank in contrast to the sheer mass that Charlie brought to the game. Somehow he always forgot about that—what Wren had teasingly called “The Charlie Effect”—until he experienced it in tense situations.

“Who the fuck are you?” Ugly talked first, sneering and eyeing Charlie's considerable bulk as if he was nothing more than a scrawny punk kid.

Charlie's eyebrow rose at the challenge. “I'm here for the kid.”

Another sneer. “I don't think so.” Ugly had the balls to eye Wren up and down with a sleazy cockiness that made Charlie's skin prickle in warning.

Charlie tensed and glowered, red glittering around the edges of his vision. "You need to go back inside, pal. He's with me."

Something in the icy calm of his voice must have penetrated, because Ugly started babbling. "Listen, man, I just followed these guys out here to check on the kid! He was fine ten minutes ago. Look at him now! Who knows what those bastards slipped him!"

Charlie didn't turn, choosing instead to watch the man's face. He was a terrible liar, and the fact that he'd just thrown out the probability of drugs made Charlie's stomach revolt. "Who are you?"

"Name's Butch. I own the place. I was working the bar when these guys came out of the back room and got the kid a drink. Next thing I know he's pawing all over 'em and sliding down the side of the bar."

Charlie felt one of the men step up beside him. Charlie spared him a quick glance, and they exchanged nods. "Ace."

"Hey, man. Good to see ya." Ace clapped him on the shoulder, and they both watched as it registered on Butch's face. His face flushed an alarming red as it filled with rage.

"What the fuck, Ace!" Butch stepped forward, fists raised aggressively.

Ace whipped out his badge from his back pocket. "Might want to rethink that, buddy."

Butch's mouth worked, and he stepped back as if burned. His face turned three more shades of red. He eyed Ace, then Joe, then Charlie. He squinted with malice and hissed, "You're cops."

"Very good," Joe drawled. "Now how 'bout you dismiss your little gang of merry men back there, and we'll cuff you real nice and gentle-like."

Butch made a strangled noise before regaining some of his composure. "You're arresting me? On what grounds?"

Charlie stayed silent during the exchange, arms crossed over his chest, doing his best to visually burn holes directly into Butch's brain. It took every ounce of his restraint to keep his back toward Wren and focus on eliminating the threats before he took care of the boy.

"What'd you give him?" Charlie growled, voice dripping with disgust.

Butch attempted outrage, but he was clearly too shaken to pull it off. Charlie repeated himself, adding a step in Butch's direction. Sweating, Butch stepped back and raised his hands.

"Nothing, man," He coughed and divided his pleading between Ace and Joe. "He tipped back a couple shots while you guys were cleaning up in back."

Ace barked a laugh. "And?"

Butch shook his head adamantly. "That's all it could be, I swe—I'm sure of it. Unless, I mean, maybe he got his hands on some E. I've heard that's been floating around lately."

Charlie looked behind him. Wren was sort of upright, wrapped around Joe with a blissed out look on his face. His hips ground against the cop; Charlie's jaw clenched so tight his teeth hurt. Charlie faced Butch again. "Maybe?"

"Um," Butch hemmed, looking anywhere but at Charlie. "I'm pretty sure that's what he, uh, took."

Joe cursed and tightened his grip on Wren. Charlie watched Wren's eyes as he stared dreamily up at Joe. The boy was clearly more concerned with rubbing off on Joe's hard body than with any conversation going on around them. Charlie clamped his mouth shut and avoided the curious eyes.

He'd suddenly had enough. "Get out of my sight. Now!" he barked at Butch. "Take your bitches with you."

Making probably his first wise decision of the night, Butch grumbled and left them standing in the dark lot. Charlie watched until the door closed on the last of them before he turned to the trio. They all knew there was likely no pinning anything on the slippery bar owner. If Wren's drink had been spiked, it could have been anybody, and there was no one in that group who'd point a finger at any of the others. At this point, though, Charlie was content to leave the details to the detectives. His only concern was making sure Wren was safe and unharmed.

Ace watched Charlie and smiled knowingly. "Uh, so is this your boy, Charlie?" He rubbed the back of his neck and eyed Charlie sheepishly. "Wish we'd known that earlier."

Joe snorted and snuggled Wren. "I don't." He laughed, and Ace grinned.

Charlie sighed and scrubbed his head. "I'm just the driver."

“You didn’t drive him here,” Joe stated the obvious. His eyes were still gleaming with wicked intent, but damn it all, Charlie could see the concern and genuine affection in Joe’s eyes when he looked down on Wren. Worse, Charlie could see warm desire in Wren’s eyes when he gazed up into Joe’s. Charlie looked away from the sight of them.

“Daddy.”

They all froze and turned towards the source of the breathy voice. Charlie choked upon finding the glossy, wanton gaze zeroed in on him. That Wren had just called him Daddy made his cock flare to life and stiffen so quickly it hurt. He mentally shook himself. He could deal with that later. Wren needed him now.

“Wren.” It was a plea. A choked, pathetic plea. He wanted to yell, to let his rage and fear and frustration out on the boy, but there was no way he could look at that innocently oblivious face and do that right now. Maybe not ever.

Wren smiled adoringly and disengaged himself from a reluctant Joe. Charlie narrowed his eyes when Joe’s hands lingered before releasing the boy. Joe was no more apologetic than he’d been at any other time tonight. But then Wren was in his arms, his supple body pressed against Charlie’s, and Charlie couldn’t find it in him to hold onto his annoyance.

Charlie banded his arms around Wren without a second thought. He couldn’t get a secure enough hold to satisfy himself. Wren was warm and soft, his muscles lax and sinuous as he squirmed into Charlie’s hold. Struggling to keep his touch from becoming *touching*, he reminded himself it wasn’t really Wren. He was under the influence of... something. Still, Charlie almost moaned out loud when Wren pressed his erection into Charlie’s thigh.

“Thanks for calling me, guys.” Charlie hated looking away from Wren almost as much as he despised saying the words. Hated knowing he was taking Wren home after a night he’d spent—doing explicit things that he couldn’t think about right now—with Charlie’s own friends. There’s no way Wren would have known the connection, but still. Charlie had to admit they were both lucky Wren had been picked up by these two, given the alternatives.

“It wasn’t us, actually,” Ace confessed. “He pulled his phone out, and we realized immediately that something was wrong. He couldn’t hold onto it, but yours was the only number in it, so we figured his intentions were to call you.”

Ace cursed, looking apologetic. “We’d left him for five minutes—not even that—with a bottle of water while we stepped away to talk privately. When we came back out, he was three sheets to the wind and fading fast.”

Joe spoke up. “There’ve been a couple victims who named this place as the last thing they remembered. It’s not our case, but we started hanging out in our off time just to see what we could see, since we’re close.” He watched Wren’s grinding hips. “It was pure coincidence that we were here. Tonight could have had an entirely different outcome for your boy.”

Ace nodded, and tugged Joe into his side. He, too, watched Wren and Charlie closely. “Better rein him in, man. He’s needing... something, and if you don’t get a hold of him soon, you’re going to lose your chance.”

Charlie tightened his grip on Wren, and Wren groaned in apparent ecstasy. He looked down to see Wren staring up at him. He wondered if Wren even saw who it was he was pawing and masturbating on.

“Charlie,” Wren sighed. He closed his eyes and rubbed his cheek against Charlie’s hard chest like a cat. “Missed you, Daddy.”

Charlie’s breath caught so fast that he coughed. He was already so hard the jock he wore was crushing him painfully.

Joe and Ace chuckled, but then Joe shook his head. “He’s acting out, man. Can’t you see that?”

“Joe,” Ace warned.

Joe shrugged him off, and his chin went up. “We’d be happy to take him, Charlie, if you can’t handle him.”

Charlie growled, but Ace was nodding. At least *he* had the decency to appear apologetic about it. “We would.” Ace squeezed Joe. “We were talking about bringing him home as a third—hell, the only reason we left him alone was to have that conversation—but he’s obviously hung up on you.”

Joe looked wistful. “He’d be perfect—”

“Enough!” Charlie snapped. “I get it.”

He turned to go, but Joe stepped forward, and combed his fingers into Wren’s hair as he bent to brush a kiss across Wren’s cheek. “G’night, my sweet boy.”

Charlie held his breath, half expecting Wren to launch himself out of Charlie's arms into Joe's, but Wren burrowed deeper into him and smiled brightly over his shoulder at Joe. "Night."

Ace stepped forward and did the same thing. He then tucked his card into Wren's jeans' back pocket with a quick squeeze. Wren hissed in pain and thrust his groin into Charlie; whether he was seeking friction on his cock or escaping a stinging ass, Charlie couldn't say.

He scowled at Ace and pulled Wren away from them. Ace just smiled and slid a finger down Wren's bare neck, making Wren shiver. "He's not yours, yet, man."

Charlie's frown deepened. Damned if he wasn't painfully aware of that fact.

Chapter 2

Wren's ass hurt. And his head throbbed. And his mouth tasted like he'd blown an entire naval fleet of condom-covered cocks. But he smiled. If he ever went back for seconds, he'd definitely track down Joe and Ace again. A pleased blush warmed his cheeks when he remembered how they'd gone from gruff, hard-assed Doms to gentle, affectionate lovers. It'd been on the tip of Joe's tongue to invite him to stay for more, Wren could tell.

They'd taken one look at his ass and decided an impersonal whipping would never do. A more hands on approach in the form of a relentless spanking first by them both, then by one while Wren sucked the other off... twice. Amazingly, he'd come the first time from the spanking alone. Forcing his cheeks open so the swats could land all around his crack and his hole and down to the back of his sac, Wren had overloaded and came the second a hand had cupped his abused balls. Wren shivered, growing hard just thinking about it.

Joe was first to take Wren's mouth—hard and fast—with a fierceness that was so fucking hot. By the time he'd taken his turn spanking Wren into his second orgasm and Wren had sucked Ace to a loud, hip-bucking orgasm, Joe had been ready to go again. After two such rounds, they'd collapsed on the sofa—that Wren still chose not to think too much about—and the two brutal punishers immediately became cooing, soothing caregivers. Ace brought wet cloths and Wren had sprawled over their laps while they cleaned him and petted him and soothed his burning ass.

He squirmed, blushing furiously, remembering Joe gently spreading him open and placing the sweetest kiss right on his spanked-red hole.

“You're looking mighty pleased with yourself.”

Wren yelped and bolted upright in bed, automatically checking that he was covered. He was. In fact he was fully clothed, but he doubted the light sheets blanketing his skinny jeans had done much to conceal his raging hard-on that he'd been seconds away from seeking out and stroking.

“What the Hell?” Wren rasped, his throat protesting after the glorious abuse it had taken last night. Blinking bleary eyes, he gaped at Charlie. God, he was beautiful, all muscular and dark and brooding, with those golden-brown eyes. And he was standing in the doorway staring at Wren, and suddenly Wren

wanted to give back every amazing minute of last night—if only it would get him just one minute of genuine affection from the impervious bastard.

Belatedly, he looked around and realized he wasn't in his own bed. "Where am I?"

Wren avoided looking directly at the gorgeous, giant man who'd been his only real companion for more years than he liked to think about. He knew Charlie had no idea. He'd driven Wren to event after event, school, prom... none of which were with anyone "real". Taking a deep breath, Wren ditched that line of thought and, instead, struggled to remember anything beyond reluctantly dressing himself with Joe and Ace's help and settling at the bar for a drink or two until he was composed enough to call for a cab.

"My place." Wren jumped. If the abrupt response hadn't made Wren's inner submissive cower, the guarded, detached look in Charlie's caramel-colored eyes would have. But that was on the inside, and he wasn't Charlie's sub. On the outside, he forced himself to meet Charlie's eyes boldly.

"Really?" Wren pretended not to notice the distinct chill in the air and scoped out the place with interest. To look somewhere besides at the impassive expression on Charlie's face.

Wren was on one side of a gigantic bed that felt too high off the ground. The room was outfitted simply, with only the necessities, as befitted a bachelor. A large dresser, nightstands on either side of the bed, and a chair in the corner that had a pair of sweats thrown over the back were the only furniture besides the bed.

"I've never been here," he remarked, surprised, as he realized the truth of it. Charlie lived on their property, in the three-bedroom cottage behind the garages that used to house "the help". He continued to look anywhere but directly at Charlie, searching his mind for something brilliantly flippant to say.

The silence got to him. So did the scent of coffee. He eyed the oversized mug in Charlie's hands and threw him an imploring smile. "Is there any more of that?"

He got a short nod before Charlie turned towards the door. "Bathroom is on the right. Get cleaned up, and I'll make more."

Wren laughed, helplessly desperate for Charlie to return his attention to him. "Already polished off a pot, huh?"

Charlie threw him an indiscernible glance over his shoulder. "I've been up a while."

Wren bolted out of bed the second he was gone. He spotted the clock and was surprised to see it wasn't even eight yet. He rarely crawled out of bed before ten unless he was forced to take an early class. He decided he could shower at home and settled for a quick rinse with Charlie's mouthwash and a splash of water on his face.

A guilt-inducing peek into the medicine cabinet was completely worth it when he found a bottle of ibuprofen. Swallowing two with a handful of water, Wren eyed his morning-after appearance and shrugged. Could've been worse. It *had* been worse.

He knew something had to have gone down last night for him to be in Charlie's care.

Wren only used the private phone Charlie had given him when he'd drunk so much that his common sense eluded him. Since his first thoughts were of Charlie once alcohol kicked in, he'd probably used the phone an embarrassing number of times. Charlie probably thought he had a drinking problem.

Wren sighed. He always felt childish and petty the morning after, but Charlie never said a word. Wren worried the inside of his cheek. Charlie had never brought him home before, though. He shook it off. Time to get his game face on and quit fumbling around here like Charlie was some stranger. He wasn't. He was Charlie. *His* Charlie. He should be making the most of this. Surely the fact that Charlie brought him home, instead of depositing him on the door of that monstrosity of a mansion he and Devin lived in, must mean something, right?

Charlie was in the kitchen as promised, the scent of freshly-brewed coffee making Wren's mouth water almost as much as the man himself. Charlie's beautiful ass was encased in worn-thin, loose-fit jeans that hung on his hips. Bare feet and a snug white T-shirt offered Wren a vision of Charlie that he would take home and study in detail later.

"Hi," Wren said softly to announce himself, feeling like he was intruding on a personal moment or something. He smiled brightly. "I don't think I've ever seen you quite so *not* buttoned-up," he teased.

A glance over a muscled shoulder was all he got. Charlie's lack of reaction told Wren he'd known he was there. Wren shrugged and decided to make

himself at home, moving to the coffee pot and digging out one of the mismatched coffee mugs from the cupboard above it.

He couldn't stop the groan with his first sip. Closing his eyes, he savored another few tastes before he blinked and met Charlie's stare. There was that unnerving look again. Wren coughed lightly and focused on his coffee. He kept wracking his brain for clues about last night but couldn't remember a thing.

"Did I call you last night?" He finally ventured. Wren gave a quick chuckle. "Guess I must have had a few too many to not remember anything."

A sardonic eyebrow rose. Charlie didn't seem impressed. Or amused. Or anything at all, actually. He'd gone completely unreadable. Wren's discomfort notched up to a sense of foreboding.

"Damn," Wren pressed on. "I didn't intend to call you."

"Do you ever?" Charlie asked softly.

"I guess not." Stung, Wren looked away and decided to shelve any further efforts. His head hurt too much and he couldn't focus and this whole change in Charlie's demeanor was upsetting him enough that he was afraid he wouldn't have the control to keep his usual pretense in place.

"Well, uh... thanks, I guess, for... whatever." Wren couldn't help the tinge of hurt that colored his words. If he'd pissed Charlie off, at least he'd rant and scold and be done with it. This... this nothingness made Wren feel like he wasn't even worth Charlie's anger.

Wren suddenly needed to be anywhere but within sight of those all-knowing eyes. He simply would not be able to handle the loss of Charlie's affection. Sure, he was uber-professional and rarely revealed much of himself, but Wren had always been able to get under his skin in one way or another. He'd flirt with him until he got a reluctant snort or a twitch of those firm lips or even a lecture on breaking away from his guards or endangering himself by crossing the street unattended, for fuck's sake. On a really good day, Wren could surprise a laugh out of the man. Wren would glow inside for hours on those days.

Charlie was about a head taller than Wren. A height Wren had deemed ideal because it put his face level with that massive chest that only seemed to get bigger as time passed. So when Wren moved to brush past Charlie on his way out, a mere step by Charlie had Wren landing with an *oomph* against the solid block of muscle.

Wren froze. His overwhelming instinct was to nuzzle in. Fighting that urge while in this weakened condition proved difficult enough that he swallowed a whimper. Finally stepping back, he kept his eyes on the T-shirt where it stretched the tightest. He swallowed dryly, realizing he could see the shadow of hair and the clear outline of dark nipples right through the material.

He forced a laugh. "Oops! Excuse me, big guy. You kind of take up the whole room, don't you?" Wren moved to one side, waiting for Charlie to step aside. But he didn't. He crossed his arms over his chest and settled into the space, leaving no question about whether Wren was leaving or not.

"Okay, this isn't funny anymore, Charlie." Wren hated the tinge of petulance in his voice. "What the hell is going on?" He didn't stomp his foot, but he sure as hell wanted to.

Charlie stared for another indescribable minute before suddenly ducking his head and turning sideways so Wren could pass. The sudden capitulation made Wren indecisive. *This* Charlie he wanted to touch, to soothe. He looked so lost.

Wren took a shaky breath and held it, then gathered his wits and did the only logical thing he could think of. He ran.

Charlie remained motionless for so long his legs started tingling. He cursed and ran his hand over his hair, digging his fingers into his scalp.

Damn it. He'd frozen. He'd been so utterly overwhelmed after the night before. He hadn't been able to find the words to tell Wren about the call to their private family physician, the emergency meeting with him at his clinic, so that he could draw blood and examine Wren. It paid to be wealthy at times like these, Charlie had to admit.

And yes, Wren had been fine. The levels of drugs in his system weren't high enough to be life-threatening or cause any other damage, but as far as Charlie was concerned, damage had indeed been done. Wren's failure to remember most of it was enough for Charlie.

They'd arrived home, but Charlie didn't dare leave Wren alone, despite the assurances that he'd be fine once he'd slept it off, so he'd brought him here. He'd tucked him into his bed, fighting off Wren's groping arms turned tentacles and berating himself for his inappropriate level of arousal.

Then, when Wren had finally fallen asleep with a pout on his luscious lips, Charlie had sat in the chair in the corner of his room and struggled to hold

himself together while horror scenes of what could have happened ran through his mind and tremors of adrenaline withdrawal shook him. He'd watched Wren all night, instantly alert to any twitch or sound of potential discomfort.

Charlie sighed. He'd known his behavior was upsetting Wren this morning, but he'd still been... dealing. He'd come to terms with his feelings for Wren, sometime in the night, but he wasn't in any condition to confront the boy yet. He was still too raw. He was afraid he'd lose control and either tackle Wren to the ground and take him in every way he could until they were both broken, or he'd rant and yell and scare him away with the intensity of his anger over what Wren had been doing to himself.

Two days later, Charlie was still at a loss. He'd thought of going to Wren hundreds of times, but he couldn't come up with a single scenario that didn't end with him getting out of hand. His control over his temper was tenuous at best. The thoughts of all the ways Wren kept placing himself in danger just drove him right back to the beginning.

He was leaning heavily over the counter, poking at the bowl of cereal that had long since been edible, when his door started shaking in its hinges from the violence of the pounding it was suffering. Charlie rose reluctantly. Nothing good could possibly be coming from the other side of that door, after all of that.

Why he was surprised to see Wren, Charlie couldn't say. He stared at the boy, gorgeous with his cheeks flushed and his big brown eyes flashing murderous intent. In spite of the fact that he was clearly not here for a social visit, Charlie's gut tightened in anticipation of the sparks that were imminent. Charlie shook his head. He was a twisted monkey—that was for damn sure.

Wren shoved his way past Charlie. Or, he probably thought he did. Charlie saw him coming and moved out of the way, so the kid didn't hurt himself running into him. As it was, Wren only entered a few feet before spinning so fast he slammed into Charlie anyway.

"Umph." Wren snapped back, "What the hell! A little space, please?"

Charlie cocked an eyebrow and crossed his arms over his chest. "I thought you were actually entering the house, so I followed. I didn't expect the drama-queen twirl you threw in front of me."

Wren's eyes narrowed and his cheeks flushed even more. "I am not a drama queen!" He stomped a foot, then looked even more furious when he realized he'd done it.

“Fine,” Charlie agreed without conviction.

Wren’s fists clenched. “You had me tested!”

Charlie frowned in confusion. “What are you talking about, little bird?”

“Don’t ‘little bird’ me, Charlie!” He waved a piece of paper that Charlie hadn’t noticed in his hand. “Doc stopped by to personally deliver my blood test results!”

Charlie groaned and scrubbed his hands over his hair. He’d known that he’d have to tell Wren everything that happened the other night, but he still couldn’t think about it without the vein bulging in his temple.

“He was already testing you to see what they’d spiked your drink with.” Charlie forced a calm tone into his voice. “It occurred to me that it might be a good idea to run those tests at the same time.”

Wren just stared at him like he’d lost his mind. “It *occurred* to you?” he screeched. Charlie must not have successfully masked his wince because Wren snarled at him.

“What?” Charlie didn’t get what the big deal was. “It’s not like I asked him for the results. No doctor-patient confidentiality breached, no harm done.”

“Why’d you do it?” Wren demanded. All Charlie could think about was how stunning Wren was in his anger.

Charlie closed his eyes and tried to focus. “Do what?”

“Have me tested!” Wren yelled. “You figured I was out whoring around and thought for sure I must have picked something up by now, huh?”

“What? No. I—” Charlie pinched the bridge of his nose. “Wren, I don’t understand what the fuck your problem is!”

Wren’s eyes went wide, and Charlie realized that this was the first time he had ever cursed at him.

“My problem, genius, is that *you* decided without *my* consent. That it was entirely likely that I’d been so unsafe in my hedonistic ways that I’d contracted something. What—did you figure probabilities? If Wren fucks around with X-number of men, and the likelihood of contracting an STD is Y, multiplied exponentially by the degree of whoreishness—”

“Stop!” Charlie grabbed Wren’s shoulders and got in his face. He was not only dumbfounded, but getting more and more pissed at hearing Wren talk about himself like that.

“I have never once thought of you as a whore or a slut or... or anything like that!” He was so pissed he was shaking. “After what happened the other night, I worried that it wasn’t the first time and—”

“First time for what?” Wren tried wrenching himself out of Charlie’s hold, but he wasn’t letting go now.

“Exactly.” Charlie took a breath. “You had no idea what was going on when I picked you up, and you still don’t remember. You had no idea how you ended up in my house. I could have done anything I wanted to you that night, Wren, and you’d have let me. And now I know you wouldn’t have remembered that, either!”

He was shouting by the time he finished. He could see by Wren’s expression that he didn’t want to believe him, but he was scared, too. Wren sneered. “Did you do something to me you were hoping I’d remember, big guy?”

Charlie saw red despite knowing that Wren was just lashing out and he shouldn’t let it get to him. He set Wren deliberately away from him and turned his back. He headed for the kitchen, finding himself disparately grossed out by the bowl of disintegrating cereal he’d left on the counter. Absently, he set it in the sink, then stood staring out the window at nothing.

He knew Wren was behind him. The scene was much too reminiscent of the other morning for Charlie’s comfort, so he rounded the island and pushed through the sliding glass door onto the small stone patio in back.

“Look.” Wren stepped just outside the door, keeping his distance. “I didn’t actually think you’d done anything, Charlie.”

Charlie sighed. “I know.”

“It freaked me out a little, waking up here and not remembering anything,” Wren confessed. Charlie almost made a crack about how fucking hard that must have been to spit out, but he bit his tongue.

“It also freaked me out that I was examined, had blood drawn, and was brought here and tucked into bed like a child with absolutely no say in any of it.” Charlie could hear the panic in Wren’s voice, and it broke him down almost immediately.

“I only did what I would have done for myself,” Charlie insisted. “If I’d been giving blood for one kind of test, I’d have told them to run the health tests, too. It’s economical and efficient.”

Wren snorted softly. Maybe because he didn't buy it, or maybe because of Charlie's practical take on it.

Charlie turned around and crossed his arms again. "I had no ulterior motives. There was no thought at all about what you do or who you see or how many guys you fuck."

Wren ducked his head, and Charlie knew he'd stung him again, but damn it. He didn't appreciate being accused of being the kind of person who thought that way about people, either.

"I brought it up to Doc, and he said it couldn't hurt, so that was that."

Wren mimicked Charlie's arm crossing, and raised him a nonchalant lean against the door frame. "Why do you keep coming every time I call, Charlie?"

Charlie snorted and threw Wren a look that should have melted him where he stood. "What the fuck kind of question is that, boy?"

Wren sucked in a breath, but Charlie turned away quickly, allowing no indication that he realized what he'd just called Wren.

"I will always come for you," Charlie stated, without turning around.

"You don't have to do it yourself," Wren pointed out. His voice was a little shaky, though. "You could send someone else."

Charlie thought about Hank, who'd taught him only too well the fault of trusting strangers, but he just said, "Don't trust anyone else for that kind of pick-up."

Wren was silent. "I'm not stupid, you know. And I'm not a child. I made one mistake!"

"One!" Charlie turned, incredulous. "You trust everyone."

"I do not."

"You turned your back on your drink in an unknown environment, surrounded by strangers, in a notably unsafe part of town."

Wren stared at him. "You don't get it."

"No, Wren!" Charlie threw his hands in the air. "I *don't* fucking get it! You're careless and reckless, and you don't seem to give a fuck that you getting hurt will hurt others!"

Wren scoffed. "Don't be so dramatic." He rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to get hurt, and I'm sure as hell not bothering anybody else."

Charlie raised an eyebrow. "I'll remind you of that during the next three a.m. pickup."

"I won't call you anymore." Wren raised his hands in surrender. "Okay? Will that chill you the fuck out? Not having to worry about me fucking up anymore?"

"Shut up, Wren," Charlie snapped. "You need to shut the hell up and quit arguing like a child."

"I am *not* a child, Charlie!"

Charlie gave Wren a deliberate, blistering once-over, stopping with a look that froze Wren where he stood. "Trust me, boy. I am aware of that."

He stalked over to the speechless boy until they were toe to toe. Wren's eyes opened wide in surprise, maybe a little fear, and damn it, more than a little excitement.

Charlie stared down at the face that he knew more intimately than his own. Of their own volition, his hands lifted to cup each side of Wren's face. Wren's breath hitched audibly, coming in short, hot bursts that were sexy as hell. His eyes dropped to Charlie's lips. Charlie watched Wren's lips part, so soft and inviting, and he couldn't contain a groan.

The next thing he knew, their mouths were fused. His lips pressed insistently against Wren's, not gently, not asking. Taking. He nudged Wren's mouth open with pressure from his own, plunging in with a demanding sweep of his tongue. He thrust his tongue back in for more, all thoughts of caution—of self-preservation—gone. He had to have more. He had to taste this mouth. Had to devour it and possess it and—

Charlie backed off abruptly, gasping for air. He closed his eyes and cursed. He never should have done that, and he should have done it years ago. Wren was off limits, and Wren belonged to him and only him. In every sense of the word. The problem was he'd stayed away from temptation because it was the best thing for Wren. But more and more, Charlie was thinking that *he* was the best thing for Wren.

"You need to go." Charlie ducked his head and reluctantly released Wren's silky hair that had tangled in his fingers. And his baby-soft skin that Charlie's calloused hands had no doubt chafed.

Wren blinked rapidly, his lips parted and flushed and tempting. He was staring at Charlie in disbelief. Whether it was because Charlie had kissed him, or because he'd kissed him then told him to leave, really made no difference. In the end, he went. And Charlie told himself he'd imagined the little squeak of distress he heard.

He needed help. There was only one man he could trust with this. Charlie picked up his phone from the kitchen counter, realizing with a start that he'd trailed Wren through the house without conscious thought.

His hand shook as he scrolled through his contacts to the Ps. He found Paul and hit dial.

Wren stomped across the drive back to the main house, barely seeing where he was going, he was so confused. Still steaming mad about the blood tests, confusion and uncertainty shrouded his every thought of Charlie, and damned if the man couldn't kiss the socks right off him.

Sighing as he approached the house, Wren couldn't make himself go inside. He detoured to the side, dropping into the old porch swing that had hung there for as long as he could remember. It creaked ominously when he kicked off the half-wall that surrounded the porch. The chains squeaked loudly as it swung, making Wren realize he couldn't remember the last time he'd used it.

Great. He kicked off the wall harder, annoyed. Now he had a case of nostalgia to go with his angst. Could he get any more fucked up?

Naturally, at that very moment, Wren caught the telltale sound of the gate opening. He couldn't see it from where he sat, but seconds later the quiet purr of his brother's town car preceded the sight of it coming around the turn and parking in front of the house. Wren groaned and dropped his head back against the swing, watching through the opening at the top of the steps.

He studied his brother through his lashes. Devin never waited for drivers to open his door. He'd bolt out of the vehicle before they could put it in park, let alone make their way around to Devin's door. Today was no exception. Wren smirked at the look of exasperation on Lance's face when he opened the driver door only to find Devin already long gone from his seat.

The sheer purpose with which his brother moved proved Wren's groan of dismay was perfectly warranted. Devin was a leader of industry. Taking the

world by storm and still a couple years shy of thirty. Everything about him screamed success and control and competence. Wren loved him—had adored him as only a baby brother could for most of his childhood—but damned if he didn't suffer a hit to his ego whenever Devin showed up in his power suit and shined shoes and perfectly-groomed hair.

It didn't help that in addition to being the grown-up kind of man Wren would never strive to be, Devin was physically everything Wren could never hope to become. The opposite of each other in almost every way, Devin topped six feet and still had the wide shoulders and flat stomach of the running back he'd once been. He had gleaming, chestnut hair that bordered on black and showed absolutely no intention of thinning or receding, ever. Brilliant-blue eyes pierced hearts and minds with equal ruthlessness.

Wren glared at what he called Devin's disarming smile. Partly because he didn't trust it, but mostly because on top of everything else, his big brother had blindingly bright, white teeth that had simply grown in perfectly straight without a single minute spent strapped in braces. Not like Wren, who had suffered three years of ortho visits and head gear and retainers. Yes, of all things envy-worthy on Devin Frances, it was his teeth that chafed Wren the most.

"What are you doing home?" He didn't bother getting up, or even lifting his head.

Devin's perfectly arched black eyebrow rose, but he didn't comment. He leaned against the railing, practically able to sit on it where it would have dug painfully into the top of Wren's ass.

"I came to see you." Meaning Charlie had called him and told him all about Wren's latest adventure. And it had taken two days for Devin to bother coming around.

Wren closed his eyes. "You're a little late, aren't you? That's old news, old man."

Devin stayed quiet for so long, Wren finally peeked through one eye. "What? Are you just going to stand there and fix me with your mind powers?"

Devin snorted, crossing his arms over his chest, which should have looked cumbersome or at least uncomfortable when he was still in his suit, but not on Devin. He could have been photographed right there as he stood, and they'd have plastered his image over any men's magazine.

“I’m trying to decide where to start,” Devin finally admitted, studying Wren like he was a complicated puzzle and if he just dicked around with him enough, he’d finally get him pieced together the right way.

“How ’bout we just skip it?” Wren crossed his own arms, which no doubt looked more like he was hugging himself defensively than anything remotely assertive. “It’s over. It won’t happen again. I promise I will never go back to that place,” he vowed mechanically.

“Ah, if only you actually meant that.” Devin shook his head. Disappointment in his little brother, his eternal cross to bear.

Wren pouted. “Did he tell you about the blood tests?”

“Of course.” Devin shrugged. “I approved them. Why?”

A feral growl was building in Wren’s throat. Could it actually be true that they were both really that obtuse?

“What?” Devin asked. “What are you so upset about?”

Wren glared and said nothing. Devin gasped. “Did the tests come back—?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Dev,” Wren snapped. He could feel his face starting to burn as his anger built. “They’re fine. Believe it or not, I’m not running around offering up my ass for any ol’ naked cock that wants in. Nor am I stabbing dirty needles—*any* needles—in my veins.”

Devin had the grace to wince. “I didn’t mean—”

“Maybe not, but... fuck!” Wren looked away, wanting to cling to the anger, not the hurt. “You obviously assumed the worst. You both did. At best, you assumed I’m not responsible enough to be getting tested regularly. At worst, you considered me careless enough to have unsafe sex at least once, but probably, in your minds, frequently.”

Devin opened his mouth to argue, but snapped it shut. He gave in with a sigh. “All right. I’m sorry. It probably wasn’t fair—”

“*Probably?*” Wren shrieked. It was a cringe-worthy sound, Wren knew, but it still infuriated him when Devin grimaced. Then he looked in the direction of Charlie’s house, as if he could save him. Wren snarled. “You know what? Fuck you both!”

“I’m sorry, Wren,” Devin finally insisted. “I honestly just thought it was a logical thing to do.”

Wren stared at his brother, in absolute awe of the sincerely perplexed expression on the bastard's face. Wren rolled his shoulders and sighed loudly. He really was wasting his breath on these two dense, stubborn men. God help him but he loved them anyway.

“You're an idiot.”

Devin's eyebrows rose. “You know I'm worth like a billion dollars, right? Generally speaking, idiots don't luck out quite that spectacularly.”

Wren's lips twitched. Damn Devin and his damn likeability. Wren closed his eyes and tried returning to his place of rest against the back of the swing. He kicked it into motion again and took several deep, calming breaths.

“I think I've ruined things with Charlie.” He regretted it the second he blurted the words out. Devin did *not* need to be privy to this information. Not to mention that he'd just offered up the real source of Wren's emotional wreckage.

Surprisingly, Devin just chuckled knowingly, which made Wren narrow his eyes suspiciously.

“I don't think that's possible, baby brother.” Devin shoved his way onto the swing, messing up the rhythm and making it squeal loudly in protest. Once it quieted, Wren relaxed under the arm Devin threw over his shoulder. Not until he was draped in it did Wren realize how much he'd craved the comfort of simple touch.

“You don't know how he's been since—” he stopped, not wanting to think about that night anymore. “And—wait, why aren't you surprised?” Wren demanded.

Devin stared ahead, no doubt actually able to see over the wall, the ass. Devin shrugged. “I've been friends with Charlie for a long time, Wren.”

“I know.”

“I know what Charlie is. I know that he's a Dominant to his bones.” Devin took a deep breath. “I didn't want that for you.”

Wren's breath caught. “Are you saying...? What *are* you saying, Dev?”

“Charlie would never have exposed you to that environment, Wren. Because he cared about you and considered you his responsibility, but also because he respected my wishes.”

“You told him to stay away from me?” Wren’s throat closed.

“Not in so many words. But I was clear on my feelings on the subject. Clear enough that I may as well have warned him away from you.”

“But—”

“I’ve seen him change over time.” Devin paused for a long time, finally turning to meet Wren’s eyes. “Do you know how long it’s been since he’s gone to the club? The one you followed him to that night, what, about a year ago?”

Wren shook his head in silence. His brother knew about that? Did Charlie? He couldn’t ask. Devin gave him a small smile. “It’s been about a year.”

Wren’s heart pounded so loudly in his chest he couldn’t quite hear Devin when he spoke again. “He had a commitment there that night, some kind of demonstration he’d agreed to do, but I’m pretty sure he’d been abstaining since right around the time of your drunken frat party.”

Wren groaned and covered his face with his hands. “Not the frat party where I got wasted and called Charlie to come get me, only when he did, I promptly made a complete ass out of myself trying to hit on him? And shit, I think I even groped him.”

Devin snorted. “That’s the one. And I wouldn’t doubt it.”

He squeezed Wren’s shoulder and pulled him in so he could rest his chin on Wren’s head.

“It was right after that that he came to me and resigned.”

“*What?*” Wren’s head shot up.

Devin whipped his chin out of the way. “Jesus, Wren! You could’ve broken my jaw!”

Wren ignored him. “Charlie *quit?*”

“I wouldn’t let him.” Devin inched cautiously away from him. “You didn’t need *him* driving you, but *I* needed him working for me. So I transferred him. And it was a brilliant decision. He’s really thrived, and the house and staff have never been run more smoothly.”

Wren’s heart was breaking, and Devin was casually talking good business sense. Wren shook him, which basically did nothing, but at least he had his brother’s attention.

“He quit because of me?”

Devin stared at him. “What? Oh! No, Wren. Not really. I think you made it too hard for him to keep his distance after that night. You made it impossible for him to keep seeing you as a kid.”

“Oh.” Wren sat back and stared blankly at nothing. “I don’t know what that means, though, Dev.”

Wren sighed. So Charlie had been affected by him that night, as unlikely as that seemed to Wren even in hindsight, and he could only guess at how sloppy drunk and clumsy his passes had seemed to the ever-controlled, ever-mature Charlie. But he obviously hadn’t been affected in a positive way, or he wouldn’t have tried to leave.

Devin sighed. “Charlie is figuring out that your own actions have completely negated my concerns, so his respecting my wishes, at this point, is really a moot effort. It’s taken me a while to come to that conclusion myself, regardless of how inevitable it was.”

Wren blinked and stared at his brother as he realized how hard it was for Devin to admit that. Wren wanted to hug him, but instead, he rolled his eyes dramatically. “Good God, Dev. Do you always have to talk like such a fucking grown-up?”

“I understand what you’re trying to do, Wren,” Devin continued, ignoring the familiar jab from Wren. Probably recognizing it for the deflection that it was. “I know you figured out what he is, and you set out to become something he wants.”

Wren felt the words like a physical blow. He blushed furiously, and was horrified to feel the sting of tears in his eyes. “What’s your point, Devin?”

“My point, Wren, is that if your singularly unobservant brother can figure it out, it’s only going to be a matter of time before Charlie figures it out.”

Wren buried his face in his hands again. “Oh, no no no no. That is not the way it’s supposed to work.”

Devin laughed. “Oh, how was it supposed to go, Wren? You pushing his buttons and trying his temper until he finally snapped and insisted on coming back so he could take care of you again?”

“No!” Wren started struggling out of Devin’s hold but gave in and hid against his chest instead. “Maybe. At first, the plan was to get a little

experience in the scene, you know? But guess I never stopped expecting him to, like, come barging in and..."

"Rescue you?" Devin asked bluntly.

Wren squirmed. He'd come to terms with his weird fetish, but he was embarrassed having it acknowledged out loud. And by his brother, of all people. But damn, he loved being saved. Especially if the person saving him—Charlie—had to get physical.

"I can't help it! After that asshole came after me when I was seventeen, and Charlie just... took him out like a giant, fucking ninja..." He shivered like he always did when he remembered that day. Hell, the only thing keeping him from throwing wood right then and there was the fact that he was presently cuddling with his brother.

"He didn't even break a sweat. Wasn't even breathing hard, and that dude was a broken puddle on the pavement."

Devin snorted. "Yeah, I've heard." He hugged Wren's shoulder. "But...?"

"But then, I just wanted him to see me," Wren confessed, looking longingly in the direction of Charlie's house. "It seemed like the more I called him to come for me, the less he reacted. After that tabloid picture hit, he was furious. So, like every time I went out, I'd have to outdo the time before, you know? The more dangerous the place, the more he'd react."

"So he'd get mad." Devin shook his head.

"That's the only thing I could get out of him!" Wren cried.

But now, all Wren could think about was how it had all been for nothing. Especially if Charlie managed to figure him out as simply as Devin had. "All I succeeded in doing is going too far. He pushed me away. Made me leave."

Devin's eyebrows rose. "Really?"

"He kissed me." He couldn't keep the breathlessness out of his voice for anything.

Wren cast a sideways glance at Devin, but his brother remained silent.

"Right before he told me to leave." Wren shrugged; a small, ineffectual action, in light of the throbbing in his head and the ache in his chest. "I guess it was goodbye."

“Nah.” Devin hugged him tightly. “I don’t believe that, baby brother. I think you’re just getting started.”

Chapter 3

Charlie was disappointed, but not in the least bit surprised, when he watched Wren stroll casually as could be around the block from the perfectly ordinary bar where he was supposedly meeting his friends, to a taxi already waiting. He huffed. The kid didn't even look around. He could have twelve stalkers and he wouldn't know a damn thing.

Easing out into traffic, Charlie didn't bother trying to be inconspicuous. His flighty bird had his head so far in the clouds Charlie probably could have been driving the cab for all he would notice.

Slowing at their point of destination, Charlie continued on after seeing Wren enter the club. Quickly navigating to the private underground parking, Charlie hurried to catch up.

The entrance from the private parking area was opposite the general public access. Charlie scanned the room quickly, not surprised to find Wren at the bar drawing the attention of more than one Dom. His breath caught when he spotted Jake—devastatingly handsome and always on the make—moving in close to Wren, his interest more than clear.

“Why, thank you, gentlemen.” Charlie could hear Wren's soft voice only because he was so attuned to it. He hadn't realized until this moment how he was always listening for it.

“Let me get you a drink,” Jake offered, a glare to the surrounding men making them reluctantly scatter. Charlie dodged a couple on his way towards the pair. Jake met his eyes, an eyebrow cocked in challenge, but giving no other acknowledgment of him.

“Um, okay.” Wren turned his attention to Jake, eyeing him up as clearly as Jake had just done to him. “Just a soda, though. I'm playing tonight.”

Charlie ground his teeth together. The boy had been drugged just a week ago, and here he was giving zero indication of being any more cautious than he'd been before.

Jake turned the full wattage of his wolfish grin onto Wren, and Charlie almost turned around right there, seeing Wren return it with a shyly hesitant smile of his own.

Charlie slid up to the bar on the opposite side of Wren. The little bird glanced over his shoulder and actually jumped in surprise. His mouth fell open, and he stared at Charlie with shock and a touch of fear in his eyes before—unless Charlie's Dom senses were completely fucked—a flicker of desire flared in them.

He held still while Wren studied every inch of him. Charlie didn't have much of a "look" in comparison to other Doms. He couldn't fit his thighs—or his junk—in tight leather, so his loose-fit jeans and a leather harness across his chest was pretty much it. It was gratifying to see that it seemed appealing enough to Wren, if his extended perusal was any indication.

"See something you like, little bird?" Charlie purred.

Wren licked his lips—just a quick, subtle flick of his tongue that was far more sensual than a full-on show—and nodded absently. He blinked as if startled by his own reaction. "Wh—what are you doing here?"

Jake interrupted before Charlie could answer. "Yeah, man. What are you doing here?" He moved closer to Wren as if he had some kind of dibs on him. "Haven't seen you around in a long time."

Charlie pinned him with a proprietary glare. "I'm here for my boy, Jake. He's here, so that means I'm here."

Wren was gaping at him, seeming to have completely forgotten Jake, much to Charlie's inner-alpha's pleasure.

Jake looked like he was about to argue, but one look at Wren was all it took. A shake of his head and a nod to Charlie in concession, and Jake rose to leave.

"Why?" Wren blinked and Charlie swam deep into the hidden longing in those big, brown eyes. "Seriously, why are you here?"

"You're here," Charlie repeated simply. He gently brushed a knuckle over Wren's cheek. "So this is where I belong."

Wren looked around the room, taking deep breaths. Suddenly, he froze and glared at Charlie.

"You're babysitting!" He hissed. Wren started to stand, but Charlie held him in his seat with a hand on his shoulder. Damn, but his giant paw about swallowed Wren's whole shoulder and it was as arousing as hell.

Distracted, he didn't see the poke to the chest coming. He growled, "What the—"

Wren was steaming mad. “Pay attention, Charlie. I’m not your business. You can clock out now because I’m not leaving, I am not letting you scare off every guy in the place, and I am not going to sit here under your watch.”

He looked around frantically, and Charlie caught on the second Wren’s eyes landed on Jake. And damned if the man wasn’t lounging in his seat, his hips all thrust forward and showing off his package.

“No!” Charlie barked before Wren could do anything to call Jake’s attention to him. Wren jumped and turned surprised eyes on him before clamping his mouth shut stubbornly and turning his back on Charlie again.

Charlie leaned forward, mouth at Wren’s ear and growled, “I said, *no*.”

He watched in satisfaction as goose bumps rose across Wren’s skin. Charlie wrapped his arm around Wren’s shoulders. When Wren leaned so subtly back against him, he tucked him under his chin. Charlie nuzzled his jaw against Wren’s head, feeling the silky curls of hair against his skin. His little bird’s heart fluttered under his arm where it pressed against Wren’s hard chest.

“It’s not like that, Wren.” Charlie held him tighter when he would have pulled away. “I’m not letting anything else happen to you. I’m... I’m just here, okay? Let me be here.”

Capitulation came in the form of a lithe, warm body relaxing into Charlie’s arms. He tightened them, finally relaxing when Wren sighed and burrowed even further into him.

“I see you two started without me.” Paul’s voice came from behind Charlie, but he wasn’t letting go of Wren long enough to turn around. His tension ratcheted back up with the reminder of tonight’s plans. He waited impatiently for Paul to come around in front of Wren.

“Charlie.” Paul slapped a hand over Charlie’s shoulder and shook it in greeting. Charlie barely moved under the onslaught.

“Paul.” Charlie returned the gesture and smiled when Paul jostled under his hand. “Good to see you. It’s been a long time.”

Wren pulled away, and Charlie let him go. For now. He was a little envious of the warm greeting Wren had for Paul, though. It took all of his willpower to keep from snatching Wren out of their tight hug.

“You two know each other?” Charlie asked, though it came out much more like a jealous demand. “I mean—” Of course. He’d agreed to let Paul take care of getting Wren to the club. He’d obviously known the boy already.

Paul smiled and raised an eyebrow at Wren. Charlie frowned, recognizing that Wren had just been given an unspoken directive.

“I met Paul a while back,” Wren admitted. “He, uh, was going to train me.”

Charlie’s heart stopped. Jealousy rushed through him, and he had to close his eyes and take a couple deep breaths before he could talk. “Was? He didn’t?”

Wren blushed deeply and ducked his head. “He figured out I was underage, getting in with a fake ID.”

It wasn’t often Charlie was taken by surprise. He didn’t like it one bit.

“A damn good one, too,” Paul grouched, ignoring Charlie’s distress. “Got past my best bouncers more than once.”

Charlie’s head was reeling. “When did you—” He scrubbed his hand over his hair and stared at Wren. “How long have you been doing this?”

“Um,” Wren hedged, uncharacteristically embarrassed. “A year or so?”

“A year!” Charlie’s raised voice drew too much attention. “How did you—”

“Get away with it?” Luminous brown eyes peered at him with false innocence.

“Yes,” he ground out.

“Hank.”

Charlie blinked. “What?”

“Hank,” Wren repeated. “The driver who initially replaced you? I’m pretty sure you hired him yourself. Probably because he was all hard-assed looking,” he tacked on peevishly.

Oh, Charlie knew who Hank was. He *had* hired him because he’d seemed like a hard-ass. He’d trusted that he wouldn’t let Wren out of his sight. And the bastard sure as hell hadn’t. Charlie had overheard the man talking about Wren to another staff person, going on about what a cock tease Wren was. Then he’d discovered the pervert had a phone full of pictures of Wren in distinctly private moments.

He closed his eyes again and prayed for patience. Hank was currently on probation, and could count himself lucky that he’d walked away with nothing but a broken phone and a broken nose. He’d never said a word to Wren, though. He couldn’t stand the thought of how it would make Wren feel, so he’d just sent a new driver without any explanation.

Charlie pinched the bridge of his nose. "Let me guess. He got you the fake IDs, too." His mind was still spinning with the fact that Wren had been part of the scene for a good year before anyone knew anything about it. He clenched his fists. He desperately wished he could break Hank's face all over again.

Wren rolled his eyes, for the first time in two days showing a glimpse of the real Wren. "Actually, I have way better connections than he had. It costs a lot of money to get an ID that can fake out the best of the best." He had a smirk on his face that Charlie desperately wanted to wipe off. With a kiss.

Paul turned back to them from a conversation he'd been pulled into with his bartender. He stared at one, then the other, until he had the full attention of both of them. "Shall we get started, then?"

Wren tensed. "Wait... what?" His eyes went back and forth between the two Doms, piecing together the fact that Charlie was in on this, too. Charlie did his best to stay relaxed, not wanting to convey his nerves and project any additional tension onto the boy.

A tiny lift of Paul's chin had a young, dark-haired man hurrying gracefully to Paul's side. He smiled fondly at the boy, whose eyes were lowered in submission.

"This is Quinn," he said, lifting Quinn's chin so he could receive Paul's affectionate smile. Quinn's skin was a lovely bronze, and it flushed beautifully. He couldn't help imagining the contrast of the dark, smooth skin against Wren's lightly-golden coloring. Charlie had always been visual, what could he say?

Paul looked back and forth between Wren and Charlie. Charlie couldn't see Wren's face, but it must have had something worrisome on it.

"Oh! No, Wren." Paul shook his head with a smile. "He's not with me. Quinn is a member here. He belongs to someone, but Master Ben kindly allowed Quinn to give me a hand setting you boys up. He won't be staying."

Charlie took in Quinn's lovely skin and his perfect manners. He was a lovely boy. Quinn raised his head, "May I interrupt, Sir?"

Paul nodded his okay. Charlie could see what had every other sub in the place falling over themselves for Paul's attention. He was singularly focused on Quinn in a way that had the boy aroused and eager to please. Hell, more than once, Charlie himself had half wanted to submit to the overpowering Dom.

“Master said I was to offer you... myself in any capacity you might need me, Sir.” Quinn was blushing by the time he was finished, but his lips held a soft smile and his dark eyes were eager.

Wren spoke up. “What if that meant Paul or Charlie wanted to fuck you?” he asked bluntly.

“Any capacity,” Quinn repeated. He met Wren’s eyes a bit more boldly, offering a tentative smile. Maybe hopeful of a friendship.

Quinn addressed Paul again. “Master would like to observe, if possible. But barring that, um...” Quinn leaned towards Wren, sharing between subs like they were brothers. “He’ll very much enjoy hearing a play-by-play from me later,” he finished, cheeks flaming.

Charlie and Paul chuckled and Wren gave a surprised hoot, grabbing Quinn’s arm while he laughed. “That’s awesome.”

Quinn leaned closer to Wren. “And hot,” he added with a wag of his eyebrows.

They were still smiling when Paul raised his hand for their attention. “It’s up to you, Charlie, Wren, but I have to admit, what we’re about to do is a first for me. I understand Master Ben’s curiosity. I have no problem allowing him behind the glass if you don’t.”

Charlie rested a hand on Wren’s shoulder, feeling his slight trembling. He smiled. He’d suspected Wren had a bit of exhibitionist in him. He turned Wren towards him to see his eyes already starting to glaze over. “You like that, don’t you, baby?”

Wren ducked his head with a blush. “Yes.”

Charlie pulled him under his arm, possessively tucking him to his side. Wren was his, but he wasn’t above showing him off. His submission belonged to Charlie, just as Quinn’s submission belonged to his Master, even as he stood here offering himself to them.

Paul nodded. “Run, get your Master situated in the observation room, then hurry back to join us. You know which room we’re in.”

Wren was in danger of vibrating right out of his skin. He was overwhelmed. He was so confused that Charlie was here, suddenly claiming rights to him,

when only days ago the man hadn't even been able to speak to him. A very small part of Wren wanted to balk at the whole alpha-male thing Charlie was pulling. It should have pissed him off. But it didn't.

It never had. Wren was fully aware that he *should* be stronger. He *should* be a lot of things. But the fact was that he loved it. He loved being dwarfed by the massive bulk of a much larger man. He loved being held down by someone who could crush him. He loved it. With the strangers, it was the added threat that contributed to the thrill. But with Charlie, it was being protected and possessed and for some reason, knowing the amount of control and restraint that it took for a beast-sized man to be gentle... Wren sighed. He was lost.

Charlie had said he wasn't going to let anything happen to Wren. How one simple statement could thrill Wren to the core while simultaneously chilling it, he didn't know. Of course it touched him when Charlie got all protective. He couldn't help wishing for more than that, was all.

He snapped out of his musings when he felt Charlie's hand on his back, gently but firmly directing him. Wren's stomach fluttered wildly. He had no idea what was going on, but if Charlie was going to be a part of it, he'd ask questions later.

Wren's cock had been hard since he'd first taken in the sight of Charlie in Dom mode. He didn't look any different than usual, aside from the sexy as fuck leather harness that he obviously didn't sport on a daily basis. But it was there. That undercurrent of power and control, and all the blood in Wren's body rushed to his genitals. He swore he could feel his balls churning up extra semen just for Charlie.

Wren snorted, drawing Charlie's attention. At the curious look, Wren flushed, but he couldn't lose the stupid grin.

"Are you okay?" Charlie stopped them and pulled Wren to the side of the door out of earshot.

Wren's attempt at a light laugh sounded slightly hysterical even to him. Charlie looked that much more concerned.

"I'm fine, Charlie." Wren forced himself to rein it in. He patted Charlie's chest, which naturally distracted him by its warm, silky texture and surprisingly soft curls of hair. He gave it a lingering pet, taking what he could, when he could.

Charlie studied him a few more seconds before he nodded. He gave a light tug on the errant curl at Wren's temple, melting Wren just a little bit more. Damn it, but he was going to lose the rest of himself to this man tonight, he just knew it. Nerves fluttered again, but he breathed through it and moved towards the door without any guidance from Charlie.

He didn't stop until he spotted Paul waiting for them in front of an open door at the end of what felt like a very long hall. Wren followed him inside and scanned the room. It was surprisingly... ordinary. Wren was almost disappointed until he spotted the chains with heavy O-rings hanging from the ceiling in pairs. Two pair above the empty floor area and a pair hanging over a bed. There were rings bolted to the floor as well, where chains or cuffs or any number of restraints could be attached.

Wren's mouth went dry when he noticed a pair had a set of padded cuffs attached. They looked high, but he supposed if his hands were over his head... Wren choked back more of that hysterical laughter that kept threatening and forced himself to check out the rest of the room.

A heavy, solid-wood chair sat near the wall. It looked strangely out of place with the "normal" décor. It was bolted to the floor, but held none of the other instruments of torture that it appeared to be made for.

Reflecting it all was the large mirror on one wall that was actually one-way glass for members to watch. Knowing it was currently in use made Wren self-conscious, but it was also undeniably exciting.

Nerves singing, Wren finally turned his attention to Paul, who was standing there looking maddeningly calm and centered and gorgeous. Slightly taller than Charlie, Paul wasn't as wide in the shoulders and chest, but he was still an imposing size and he'd appealed to Wren since he'd first spotted the man—fully decked out in his kilt and boots and cuffs. The fact that even Charlie deferred to him made him that much more impressive in Wren's mind.

Paul was waiting patiently, saying nothing until Wren's eyes finally finished their appraisal and settled on his. Wren grinned sheepishly, having obviously been caught checking the Dom out. Paul's eyes gleamed with humor for just a second before he straightened and was all business.

Paul focused on him so intently Wren struggled not to squirm. A light touch on the small of his back from Charlie calmed him, but it was removed abruptly with a sharp glance from Paul to Charlie. Wren heard Charlie take a slow, deep breath.

“What’s your safe word, Wren?” Paul asked. Wren jumped, but after meeting Paul’s steady gaze for a long moment, he settled into an “at ease” stance, the internal rhythm of submission soothing him as he handed himself over to Paul’s hands.

“Limo, Sir.” Wren lowered his eyes and waited for direction.

“You can look at me, Wren,” Paul said gently. “I prefer it.”

Wren couldn’t stop his breath of relief. “Yes, Sir.”

“Good.” Paul turned his attention to Charlie. “Safe word?”

Wren stiffened and started turning to Charlie, but he remembered himself just in time. He had permission to watch Paul. Not Charlie. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Quinn standing quietly by the door. He’d apparently also been given the okay to watch Paul, because he was doing so intently, waiting.

“Stop,” Charlie answered bluntly. Silence fell for so long that Wren started to tense back up.

“Very well,” Paul allowed after a long stare-off with Charlie.

Paul nodded at Quinn and gave a jerk of his chin towards Charlie. He silently met Charlie’s eyes and pointed him towards the big wooden chair. Wren’s curiosity spiked while he watched Charlie stalk to the chair and sit without any hesitation.

Wren’s eyebrows rose when Quinn pulled handcuffs from seemingly nowhere and gently directed Charlie’s arms behind the chair.

“Wren,” Paul barked, making Wren jump. Immediately, he instinctively lowered his eyes. “Eyes on me,” Paul reminded him firmly.

“Yes, Sir,” Wren said. He could hear the cuffs snapping into place on Charlie and it was distracting him.

“Wren!”

Wren jumped. “Sorry, Sir.”

Paul sighed as if greatly put upon. It was discomfiting to Wren, knowing he was already exasperating his Dom.

“Strip.” Paul’s eyes flicked to the wall behind them, reminding Wren that they were watched.

“You too Quinn,” Paul added.

Wren didn't react immediately, blinking at the abrupt command. Paul's eyebrow rose expectantly, and Wren flew into action. He wasn't wearing much, so it didn't take more than a minute for him to strip, fold his clothes neatly and hand them to Quinn, who was suddenly and silently at his side to take them. Quinn set them aside on a chair by the door before quickly removing his own clothing. He turned to face them, just as hard as Wren.

Paul held out his hand and Wren took it, allowing himself to be led to the hanging cuffs. While Paul strapped the heavily padded leather around Wren's wrists, Quinn knelt at his feet and gave a light touch to Wren's ankle, directing him to widen his stance. He was quickly secured much like a St. Andrew's cross. Without the cross.

Raising his eyes from the tempting sight of pretty Quinn kneeling before him, Wren finally let himself look straight ahead to where Charlie was restrained maybe six feet away from him. Wren's heart slammed in his chest painfully, and his mouth went dry seeing the scorching heat in those caramel eyes. He could barely see the brown, Charlie's pupils were blown so wide.

Wren dropped his eyes, unable to meet such intensity. His cock was achingly hard, flushed deep red and shiny with fluid that slowly and continuously escaped. It flexed against his tight stomach just from Wren thinking about Charlie restrained and watching him.

"Quinn, kneel next to Charlie until we need you," Paul directed. Quinn moved fluidly and dropped to his knees next to Charlie's chair, facing Wren.

Paul came around to the side where he could address both Charlie and Wren. Wren made sure to keep his eyes only on Paul. Pacing as if deep in thought, Paul worked his way from Wren's side to Charlie's and back before he spoke.

"Have you figured out what we're doing here, yet, Wren?" Paul pierced him with steely eyes.

Wren shook his head. "No, Sir."

Another trip back and forth. "Charlie called me a couple days ago and explained what's been happening lately."

Wren wanted desperately to squirm. "Yes, Sir," he whispered.

"You've been taking unsafe risks with yourself," Paul stated as fact. "And that was after you'd already lied and manipulated people who trusted you. You're going to be punished for each indiscretion."

“Yes, Sir,” his voice was barely audible through his tightened throat as shame overcame him. He was trembling visibly.

“Charlie also enlisted my help addressing his own poor decisions involving you.”

Wren turned to Charlie, surprised and confused.

“Eyes on me,” Paul snapped, before Wren and Charlie could make eye contact.

“Yes, Sir.”

“As you can imagine,” Paul continued conversationally, “Charlie’s request is quite unorthodox, and created a bit of a conundrum for me.”

Another circuit of pacing. “Charlie is in no way submissive, so to punish him in that way would only create discomfort and humiliation all the way around. Neither Charlie nor I are interested in humiliation as a punishment measure.”

Paul stopped and appeared deep in thought for a long time. Finally, he raised his head and addressed Charlie.

“You know,” he stated.

“Yes,” Charlie answered.

Paul didn’t say anything at Charlie’s lack of “Sir”, but Wren didn’t know if it had been expected in the first place. Paul made another nerve-wracking circuit in silence.

“Good,” he said. “You are going to tell Wren.”

Wren held his breath and reluctantly met Charlie’s eyes. God, he was terrified of what he was going to hear. Plus, he didn’t know if he could look at all that raw sex being confined right in front of him, without blowing his load spectacularly all over everyone.

Charlie looked like he’d been sentenced. He took a deep breath and looked at Paul. “Look at Wren, not me,” Paul commanded.

Charlie straightened in his seat determinedly. “I’m being punished for letting you go.”

Wren’s mouth fell open in shock. Eyes wide with disbelief, he shook his head.

“Yes, little bird.” Charlie sighed. “My decisions made it possible for others to touch you. To have you.” His voice cracked. Wren thought he might die from the misery in Charlie’s eyes. “You learned at the knees of others what should have been mine to teach.”

“Oh, my God.” Wren felt like his whole body had gone numb. “I—”

“It’s not your turn to speak.” Paul’s voice was like a whip. He turned to Charlie. “Finish it.”

“I failed,” Charlie snapped, when he saw Wren shaking his head.

“So my punishment is to watch,” Charlie met Wren’s eyes. “I’ve allowed others to touch you when everything in me screamed you were mine. I’ll be forced to watch what I should be doing myself. Your punishment and your subsequent... pleasure.”

Wren’s cock twitched in spite of his numbness. Charlie’s eyes flicked down to Wren’s unflagging erection and back. The heat in his expression told Wren that he was as aroused—though possibly unwillingly—as Wren.

Looking between the two of them again, Paul added, “Your forgiveness—both of you—ultimately comes from yourself. As for each other, do you both agree that once we’re done here, these transgressions will be forgiven and will not be dwelled upon or used against each other ever again? Do you agree to move forward from here and each accept the forgiveness of the other?”

Wren and Charlie both opened their mouths to answer but were cut off by Paul holding a hand up. “Think hard about your answer, gentlemen.”

Only because he’d been told to, Wren closed his eyes and made himself consider what Paul was offering them. A closure on the past and a free ticket into the future. The only strings being their own capacities for forgiveness and their willingness to forget. Immediately, Wren realized that it would be harder than he’d first thought, but he could do it. He *would* do it for this chance to move forward with Charlie.

Charlie met Wren’s eyes. They answered simultaneously. “Yes.”

Charlie watched with mounting anxiety as Paul unbuckled his belt and pulled it off. Normally wrapped in a kilt, today Paul’s hips were snugly encased in the ever-popular leather pants. Paul’s erection was unmistakable, and Charlie struggled not to safe word and lunge at Wren to cover him.

Deliberately unclenching his fists behind his back, Charlie reminded himself that he trusted Paul implicitly. No gay man with blood still pumping could look at the sight of Wren bound and spread open—all that smooth, creamy skin on display—and not get turned on. Wren's own hard cock bobbed with every muscle clench, leaving a wet spot on his belly that Charlie wanted badly to taste.

Charlie's own cock was trapped awkwardly and agonizingly in his jeans. He tried not to squirm. He didn't want any distractions for Paul when he was focused on Wren. But before Paul could start, a quiet, "Sir," from Quinn and a discrete nod towards Charlie's lap had Paul cursing.

"Go ahead and open him up, there, Quinn," Paul told Quinn before meeting Charlie's gaze.

"Sorry 'bout that, my friend." Paul bowed his head respectfully. "How I could have forgotten to release the beast, I have no idea."

Charlie nodded his acceptance, shifting to lift up as much as he could when Quinn reached for the button at the top of his jeans. He hissed through his teeth when cool, slender fingers gently eased his engorged cock out of the open fly. Together they worked his pants down just far enough that his balls could be released as well.

Closing his eyes, Charlie tipped his head back with a deep sigh of relief. When he opened his eyes, he met Wren's and instantly wanted to cover himself.

Wren was staring, slack-jawed, at Charlie's considerable thickness. Hell, they all stared. Charlie was used to that. What he didn't like was the nervousness—almost fear—in Wren's eyes. He could swear he just saw Wren's ass clench.

Charlie ground his teeth together. So, yeah. He had a big fucking cock. Fat, yes, quite thick, actually, but thankfully not more than eight or so inches, so at least he didn't have to worry about causing damage. He wasn't freakishly large—at least he didn't think so—but he was proportionate to his build. Considering his build, well, then...

Paul wasn't even trying to conceal his smirk. Charlie just rolled his eyes.

A snap of the belt made Wren and Quinn both jump. Not surprisingly, since they'd been unable to tear their attention away from Charlie's cock.

“Wren,” Paul started, waiting until he had Wren’s full attention. “Five lashings with the belt for every time you illegally entered my club.”

Wren swallowed audibly, staring wide-eyed at the belt. Charlie knew it would be a soft enough leather to not cut into Wren’s skin, but still firm enough to leave a good burn.

“How many times did you enter using your fake ID?”

“Five,” Wren croaked, “not counting the time you caught me.”

Paul cocked an eyebrow. “So, six.”

“Yes, Sir.” Wren nodded, eyes on the floor.

“Look at me,” Paul barked. He waited for Wren to raise his head.

“How many times have you called Charlie to come get you when you’ve had too much to drink?”

Wren shot a glance in Charlie’s direction. He licked his lips nervously. “I don’t know... maybe eight?”

Paul looked to Charlie for confirmation. He could only shrug, but it sounded close enough.

Paul let it go. “Five more for each of those.”

Holy fuck! That was... thirty, plus forty... seventy! “That’s too many,” Charlie blurted, trying to stand but caught suddenly by the restraints he’d forgotten about.

“No,” Wren interrupted and glared at Charlie. “You don’t get to decide.”

Charlie glared back. Paul ended it. “I know how to administer belt lashings without damage, Charlie. Either safe word or stay quiet.”

Charlie glared, but clamped his teeth shut and nodded. Paul turned his icy-blue death stare on him. “Don’t question me again or I will consider it safewording.”

Wren was looking at him with such pleading that Charlie couldn’t sustain his indignation. Wren was into it now, and Charlie knew he wouldn’t feel the full effect if punches were pulled in order to coddle him.

Paul turned his back on Charlie to face Wren. He made sure never to completely block their view of each other. “We’re going to do ten at a time,

Wren. In between, I'll be asking you questions. Your answers and your truthfulness will determine how this ends."

Paul reached down and gave Wren's cock a rough stroke. Charlie felt every muscle in his body strain to break his bindings. But Wren's eyes rolled back, and the bliss on his face was too enticing for him to look away. Wren opened his eyes and looked right at Charlie. Sharing it with him. Charlie's cock throbbed and he could swear he actually *felt* the boy's pleasure, both from Paul's touch and from the sharing of it with Charlie.

When he had Wren's attention again, Paul gently grasped his face. "Remember who your master is, Wren. I'm just the tool he's wielding."

Wren blinked and frowned, meeting Charlie's eyes. Charlie held his gaze steadily, trying to send him his strength, his encouragement.

"Yes, Sir."

"Let's get started then." Paul snapped the belt. Charlie suspected it amused him to see the subs jump from the sound.

Paul stood back and to the side of Wren, arm ready for his first strike. "Charlie, you count," he ordered, not taking his eyes off Wren's backside.

Crack!

Wren gasped, instinctively trying to move away from the first lash. His eyes flew open wide with shock, and they tore right through Charlie's defenses.

"One," Charlie croaked.

Crack!

"Two." Charlie held Wren's gaze as calmly as he could. If the boy saw how devastated Charlie was, he'd never make it through ten, let alone seventy lashes.

Crack!

Wren cried out, but Charlie knew the stinging burn of the belt was more shocking to his system at first than truly painful. He reminded himself, yet again, that Paul knew what he was doing.

"Three." Charlie pushed every encouragement he could towards Wren as if he could mind-meld it into him. It was essential to Charlie that his boy felt the approval of his master.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Three rapid strikes had Wren gasping for breath. “Holy fuck,” he breathed, letting himself hang from his cuffs and dropping his head.

“Four, five, six.”

Paul paused and stroked his hand over Wren’s ass. Charlie could imagine the hot skin, stripes raising and turning pink. He licked his lips, eyes glued to Paul’s actions.

Paul soothed one cheek of Wren’s backside, then the other. By the time he returned to the first side, Wren had his head thrown back and was moaning, squirming into the touch. Charlie’s momentarily forgotten and softening cock was back to fighting form in seconds. The sounds Wren was making were like strokes to his skin.

Paul stepped back and readied himself again. Charlie was relieved—and turned on—to see that Wren’s cock had returned to full mast, as well.

Crack!

“Seven,” Charlie counted, steadier now. Wren had still jumped and gasped, but he’d turned the corner now. He was sinking into sensation, and it was a beautiful sight.

Crack!

“Eight.”

Crack!

“Nine.”

Crack!

“Ten,” Charlie exhaled the word. He was winded as if he’d been running. Or the one getting whipped with a belt.

Wren’s head flew back the second Paul’s hand smoothed over his ass. Jealous that Paul was the one soothing his boy, Charlie looked away. Glancing down at himself, he saw his chest was slick with sweat. His shoulders suddenly screamed at him and he realized he’d been fighting the restraints the whole time.

Charlie forced himself to lean back in the chair. He couldn’t stop it, he could see that clearly enough. Wren was responding beautifully, though Charlie

had no doubt he'd be crying for mercy by the time they hit fifty lashes. Still, he could see Paul was right and this was exactly what Wren needed. Rolling his aching shoulders as much as the cuffs allowed, Charlie resolved to be stronger. He could do this for Wren.

Paul squeezed Wren's ass, making him gasp, then moan deep in his throat.

"Wren." Paul popped a light slap on his butt when he didn't answer. Charlie didn't know what Paul was up to.

Wren's head came forward and glassy-eyes focused immediately on Charlie. "Yes, Sir?"

"Tell us why you started going to BDSM clubs." Paul moved in close behind Wren, the breath on his neck making goose bumps break out. Charlie would be sure to remember that spot.

"Suh—" He licked his lips. "Submissive, Sir."

Paul gave him a small smile. "Yes, I know you're submissive, boy." He smoothed a hand from Wren's shoulder to his hip. "How did you know that about yourself?"

Wren stared at Charlie, his gaze indecipherable. He didn't answer.

"All right." Paul stepped back. "I don't want to give you too much time between sets, so we'll revisit that in a few minutes."

Crack!

Even Charlie jumped, Paul had started up again without warning.

"Eleven!" Charlie hurried to catch up. "Twelve!"

Eight more strikes hit with no break in between. The swift, rhythmic application had them all panting by the time it was done.

"Oh, God!" Wren cried, at the first touch of Paul's hand on his abused skin. His breath came in harsh gulps.

"Okay, boy," Paul soothed. "Open your eyes, Wren, and see your master."

Wren's eyes were glassy. Paul had yanked him out of subspace before he could sink too far into it, which grated on Charlie, but he reminded himself that they weren't here to make Wren fly. This was punishment. Charlie watched Wren's unfocused gaze until those gorgeous eyes slowly became aware. Charlie let the full extent of his desire for Wren show as blatantly as he knew how.

Wren sagged, and his eyes glistened with sudden tears. Charlie forced himself to stay silent.

“What is it, Wren?” Paul asked, his Dom-edge only mildly tempered.

Wren shook his head and blinked back the tears. “I’m ready for the next ones,” he rasped. His voice was already failing from his cries.

“Telling me my job, boy?” Paul’s hand squeezed the meat of Wren’s ass, making the boy whimper and push into the touch. Charlie bit back a groan and looked away. Damned if he didn’t feel like he was intruding on a private moment.

“No, Sir,” Wren breathed. Charlie’s gut wrenched at the arousal in Wren’s voice, but he couldn’t make himself look. He couldn’t see that beautiful body—strung taut and shining with sweat—and not ache.

Quinn looked up from his spot and gave Charlie a quick, small smile. Charlie couldn’t help noticing the boy’s own rapid breathing and the sheen of perspiration covering his lean chest.

“Charlie.” Paul’s voice cut through Charlie’s misery, but when he raised his head, it was Wren’s eyes he met, not Paul’s.

Paul leaned into Wren again and whispered in his ear. Wren squirmed and licked his lips, but nodded, tacking on a soft, “Yes, Sir.”

“Wren, what did you find the first time you came to my club?”

Charlie waited, puzzled by Wren’s reluctance to answer.

After an eternity of holding Wren’s tortured gaze, he finally whispered, “Charlie.”

Charlie blinked and almost asked, “What, baby?” before he realized that *he* was the answer to the question. His confusion was immediately chased away by panic.

He wanted to ask a million questions. What had he been doing? What had Wren witnessed? Why hadn’t he said anything? But Paul once again took the lead.

“Wren,” Paul chastised, “is that what you call Charlie when we’re here?”

“Sir?” Wren offered tentatively.

Paul growled his displeasure. Suddenly, so did Charlie. He did *not* like that answer.

“Um... Master?” his voice was rising. Charlie and Paul remained silent, their disappointment heavy in the air.

Wren squirmed, and Charlie had had enough. “Tell me, Wren,” he ordered. “Tell me what you call me when you close your eyes at night and picture us together.”

Wren’s head shot up in surprise, and his breath sucked in audibly. His eyes heated as he slowly grasped that Charlie *wanted* it.

“Who am I when you’re coming into your fist from imagining submitting to me? After you’ve masturbated to the thoughts of taking my fat cock in your tight little ass until you fucking come all over yourself!”

Wren’s chest heaved and his cock bobbed up tight to his belly. He opened his mouth, but didn’t say anything.

“Say it, damn it!” Charlie yelled. He was breathing just as hard as Wren. He was on the verge of coming, he was so aroused by the confrontation. He was so focused on Wren that he missed the nod Paul gave Quinn until it was too late. The boy’s gentle, slender fingers wrapped around his cock again.

“Wren!” Charlie demanded, his hips lifting into the grip on his shaft. His eyes threatened to roll back in his head, and he was desperate to hear the word from Wren’s lips before that happened.

Wren was fixated on what was happening to Charlie’s cock, even as Wren pushed back into Paul’s kneading hands.

Quinn’s gentle hand became two, Charlie’s shaft easily having enough room for both of Quinn’s smaller hands. Charlie’s abs clenched, fighting for control when he felt all ten of those long, thin fingers wrapping around him like milking tentacles.

“Wren,” Charlie begged, “baby... please!”

Wren couldn’t fucking think. Watching Quinn jacking Charlie was gut-wrenching, right up until Wren looked up and realized Charlie was completely, singularly focused on Wren. He was aroused because of him. Them. This head-on collision of their most secret desires barreling down on them. Wren’s own cock was throbbing, drooling precum in obscene quantities. Paul’s hands on his stinging hot ass were just about enough to put him over the edge.

He was frozen with fear, though. Shame filled him. What if Charlie thought he was nothing but a Freudian hot mess with unresolved father issues, when that wasn't even close to what he felt when he thought of Charlie. When he called him Daddy.

In his mind. He'd never said it out loud to another soul.

But then, there was that vague memory that he'd thought was a dream. It kept haunting him, teasing him with an empty hope. Until now. Now, suddenly, he was getting a niggling feeling that he was remembering, not dreaming of Charlie coming to his rescue—again—and he'd cried out, "Daddy!"

And Charlie had opened his arms and held him close and kept him safe.

"Baby, please!"

Wren blinked and was struck by the desperation in Charlie's voice. The man was in agony, and in that moment, Wren realized Charlie *needed* this from him. And he couldn't stand to see him needing.

"Daddy," Wren choked out, throat closing on the depth of emotion that came rushing through him.

"Oh, fuck, yeah!" Charlie cried, throwing his head back. "Oh, God!" He thrashed and bucked against the restraints, thrusting into Quinn's grip while spunk shot out of him in arcs.

Wren gasped. He felt his balls pull up tight, and he thrust at the empty air. A whine escaped his throat as he realized he was about to come himself. He was just giving into it when a painful grip squeezed down on the base of his cock.

"Ow, fuck!" he yelled, staring down at the hand pinching him off. His body bucked against the hold as it fought to reject the brutal denial.

"Uh, uh, uh," Paul chided. "No coming for you, boy."

Wren gulped deep draws of air, shaking with need. It wasn't made easy, since he couldn't stop watching as Quinn's hands milked and squeezed Charlie's semi-soft cock until Charlie was twitching and jerking away from his touch. Raising his head with a guttural moan, Charlie opened his eyes and met Wren's with an intensity that threatened to break through even Paul's iron grip on Wren's cock.

"Shit," Paul muttered, feeling Wren pulsing in his hand. "Quinn, I put a ring up in that cupboard over there, just in case." He eyed Wren with a wry look. "Put it on our boy, here, would you?"

Wren watched, nearly losing it again when Paul released him and Quinn's gentle touch worked the cock ring into place. He could smell Charlie's spunk on Quinn's hands, and he groaned. A peek in Charlie's direction told him Charlie also liked the idea of Quinn's hands being on Wren when they'd just seconds ago brought Charlie off.

Paul stood back and Wren caught sight of him in his peripheral vision, adjusting a massive bulge in his leathers. But Wren was only interested in Charlie, whose burning, possessive eyes bore into him, holding him hostage.

Quinn was trailing his fingers up and down the length of Wren's cock. Every time he reached the crown, Wren's belly clenched, and he held his breath. Soon, having been allowed to touch unchecked, Quinn's touch started expanding, brushing teasingly over Wren's balls, tickling the sensitive skin of his groin, even drifting upwards to play with his nipples until Wren whimpered.

Wren was startled when he felt Paul releasing his arms. Stiffening, Wren looked at Paul, ready to ask why but halted by the look he received.

Seeking out Charlie as his second wrist was released, Wren saw surprise in Charlie's eyes, as well. Wren wasn't sure if it was comforting to know Charlie wasn't in on this part of Paul's plan or not.

"Kneel," Paul ordered.

Wren's ankles were still bound, feet placed wide apart, but there was just enough slack to maneuver his feet around so that he could kneel. He blushed; the position opened his legs so far he could feel that he was completely exposed. Why he was shy about it now when only days ago two men he hadn't known from Adam had spread him open and spanked his hole until he screamed, Wren couldn't say. But he felt his cheeks flame, and he dropped his eyes.

"Eyes up." Wren jumped. Paul's voice was so compelling; Wren wondered that he didn't have an entire club of subs on their knees waiting to do his bidding.

"You keep your eyes on your Daddy, boy."

Wren raised his head, seeing Quinn first, kneeling quietly in front of Wren while he awaited direction. Quinn was still hard, glistening with his own sweat and precum. He was beautiful, the perfect, composed submissive that Wren would never be. Quinn quietly backed away until he was once again kneeling next to Charlie.

And then there was Charlie, and he wasn't looking for a Quinn. The way he stared at Wren made him blush, but he couldn't help preen just a little under the immediate, proud lift of Charlie's chin. It didn't hurt Wren's ego any, either, that Charlie was already hard, his cock flushed an angry red that commanded Wren's attention. The monster was an imposing force of its own.

"Hands and knees, Wren," Paul directed.

Wren did as he was told, licking his lips when Charlie's eyes drank in every inch of him.

Paul explained as he worked his way around Wren, stroking him from shoulder to thigh. "Your skin is too sensitive for the belt, Wren. I don't want to leave marks on you that aren't mine to leave, so we're switching to a good, hard spanking."

Wren waited.

"Say 'yes, Sir,' Wren."

"Oh!" Wren felt his cheeks flame again. "Yes, Sir."

"Charlie?" Paul waited until he had Charlie's attention. "Do we continue?"

Wren's heart slammed in his chest. He wasn't done. He *needed* to see this through to the end. For Charlie. For himself. He shamelessly pleaded with his eyes when Charlie turned back to him, not breathing again until he received the faintest nod from him.

"Yes." Charlie's voice was hoarse and raw and sexy as fuck. "Continue."

He had no time to prepare before Paul's hard hand fell on his ass. He was relentless, shifting from one side to the other, first higher and then low enough to brush his sac, but never with a discernable pattern or rhythm that Wren could fall into.

Within ten strikes, Wren was whimpering. By twenty, he was shaking, his cries growing louder, sweat breaking out and pooling in the valley of his spine. By thirty, he was desperate to escape, his ass burning, a hot, penetrating pain that only flared hotter and deeper with every strike of Paul's hand.

Charlie's face was all he could see. He focused on those eyes, so proud of him. Pushing him and feeding him strength just from the approval and pride shining in the golden depths.

Still, by forty, Paul had to restrain him with an unbreakable hold around Wren's waist, and the begging started. Then the crying, and by fifty, Wren was a wrung out, sobbing mess finally allowed to collapse onto his elbows.

It took a long time for Wren to realize the spanking had stopped. He swore phantom hands kept beating his burning ass, but then Paul was stroking his skin, soothing even as he tortured with his touch. Wren squirmed and sniffed, trying to ease away from him, but finding himself pinned by a massive paw in the middle of his back.

"There, now." Paul was comforting him. Murmuring nonsense words that only now began to penetrate Wren's fog of agony. He realized more by visual confirmation than anything else, that he was, for the first time since he'd seen Paul's gorgeous, arrogant face, as close to flaccid as one could be while still bound in a cock ring.

Wren gulped a few more calming breaths and finally lifted his head and sought out Charlie. Stunned, Wren's mouth fell open, seeing Charlie's muscles gleaming and bulging as if he'd just busted out a hard-ass workout. He was breathing hard, and veins were still distended in his shoulders and neck.

Charlie was staring at him, searching his eyes for something that he must have found, because only then did he relax against the chair. He looked away for a brief second before snapping his attention back to Wren. The relief in his eyes brought a gentle smile to Wren's lips.

"Quinn," Paul interrupted the silent reuniting.

"Yes, Sir?"

Wren's head came around when he heard the breathless sound of Quinn's voice. Still kneeling like the superior sub he was, Quinn's erection looked painful. Screaming-red, Wren thought the thing looked like it was trying to escape its own skin.

"Come here and let Wren take care of you."

"Yes, Sir." Paul held his hand out. Quinn reached for it, his hungry gaze lingering on Wren's upturned ass. Quinn settled himself on his knees in front of Wren. His cock was diving distance away from Wren's mouth.

"Pardon, Sir." Quinn licked his lips before he met Paul's eyes. "Um... may I?" He tipped his head at Wren, the want in his demeanor making Wren's cock surge painfully the rest of the way back to life. Wren groaned, which must have

been answer enough for both Paul and Charlie, because Charlie let out a moan of his own, adding a twist of his hips that begged Wren's attention.

Paul ruffled Quinn's hair. "I think that's a yes."

Wren pushed up to his knees. With a fluid grace, Quinn turned to lie on his back with his head between Wren's knees. Understanding the plan, Wren bent over him until he was facing Quinn's groin. His own cock hung above Quinn's mouth. He looked down his body and watched the precum cling to his aching length before dripping onto Quinn's neck.

"Condoms!" Charlie blurted. Everyone stopped and stared.

"I can assure you we've all tested clean, if you want to—" Paul started, but he was cut off by a sharp shake of Charlie's head.

"No! Wren's cum enters no one but me."

Wren gaped. His heart swelled as if Charlie had just showered him with praise.

"He takes no one's but mine," Charlie growled, his possessiveness turning Wren on so much that it took him a second to completely process the words. Words that implied more than bare blow-jobs. Wren shuddered, wanting to come all over the place just from the thought.

Condoms were produced. Nice ones, Wren noticed, thankful that they'd get the most sensation with only moderately bad taste. More or less trapped on his hand and knees, lest he collapse on the young Quinn, Wren watched Charlie's face while the man avidly watched Quinn's deft hands sliding a condom on Wren, then on himself. The lust in Charlie's gaze was more than enough encouragement for Wren to put on a good show.

Before Quinn released his own cock, Wren dove for it, swallowing it whole. Quinn's loud cry made Wren's belly clench, and his hips thrust towards Quinn's waiting mouth. He groaned when heat and a kneading tongue engulfed him, his limbs immediately losing strength. He dropped shakily to his elbows, his face buried in Quinn's balls that were pulled up tight. He had a feeling neither of them were going to last long.

He thrust mindlessly into Quinn's mouth, too far gone to worry about gentleness. The moan that vibrated on Wren's cock told him he needn't have worried. Quinn took his full cock eagerly, his soft grip on Wren's hips encouraging him to let go.

Wren looked up at Charlie, lips tight around Quinn's cock as he worked it deep into his throat before pulling slowly up, then swallowing him down again. Charlie was watching closely, his chest and face flushed with arousal. Wren had never seen him look sexier.

Feeling those maddeningly gentle fingers around his balls and the base of his cock, Wren knew he was about to be released from the ring. Anticipation filled him, and he thrust deep, closing his eyes and driving his hips into Quinn's face relentlessly until he was suddenly free, and the rush of his orgasm engulfed his cock, and his rhythm became wild.

Seconds later, his grip on Quinn's hips tightened and encouraged the increased tempo and brutal plunging of Quinn's shaft deep into his throat. Just as he peaked, Wren pinned Quinn's hips to the ground and deep-throated him, swallowing again and again around the pulsing cock in his mouth until Quinn's loud cries became quiet whimpers.

Wren became aware that he was being quietly suckled, still nestled in Quinn's talented mouth. Holding the base of the condom, Wren slowly released Quinn and lifted his head for his daddy's reaction. And found Charlie's semi-soft cock resting against his hip, coated in spunk. Drops of it scattered over his rapidly rising and falling torso. Wren's eyes went even wider when he saw Charlie's head was still thrown back, the same muscles and veins bulging, but this time from the intensity of his release.

Wren swallowed, his throat completely raw. "Daddy."

Charlie's head snapped up, and his eyes burned into Wren's. "Yeah, baby?"

"Let's go home?"

"Anything, little bird," Charlie croaked.

Wren looked down and stroked a tender hand over the long, smooth thigh still trembling under him before lifting up on his arms so Quinn could scoot out from under him. When they were face to face, Quinn stopped, shyly smiling at Wren.

With a chuckle, Wren nuzzled into Quinn's throat affectionately, earning him a soft giggle. Wren smiled, filled with tenderness for the boy. He dropped a soft kiss against Quinn's flushed and swollen lips, and Quinn rose.

Quick and efficient, Quinn removed and disposed of both condoms and paused briefly in front of Charlie. Given the nod from Paul, Quinn released Charlie from his cuffs while Paul released Wren's ankles.

Wren sat back on his feet and caught Paul's attention before the Dom could move away. Saying nothing, Paul cupped Wren's neck and pulled him into his shoulder in a move that made Wren's heart ache. A quick kiss to Wren's forehead, and Paul was up, moving to Charlie. Still silent, the two Doms shared an affectionate handshake, and Charlie got a clap on the shoulder from Paul.

Paul held out his hand to Quinn, shooting a knowing look towards the dark window. "Let's go, little one," Paul said, smiling warmly at Quinn's sudden shyness. Charlie and Wren watched them leave.

Charlie heard the door click shut and took a deep breath to calm his racing heart. He was suddenly nervous without the buffer of the two other men. But he was done being a coward; it was time for him to be the Dom—the man—Wren deserved.

Wren was still kneeling, knees spread wide, skin still glowing. His smooth, toned chest rose and fell with his rapid breathing. Charlie released a low, guttural moan when he caught sight of his boy's cock, shining and pink and quickly filling... for *him*.

Wren smiled shyly, and Charlie felt his chest swell with love and pride. As he watched, Wren licked his bottom lip and leaned forward, slowly, sensually crawling to him until he knelt at Charlie's feet. Trembling hands rested on his knees—pausing as if expecting to be denied—before smoothing upward and framing his still exposed genitals.

Charlie's cock flexed, wanting more despite being completely wrung out. Wren's lashes fluttered and lowered as he moved between Charlie's spread thighs. The hot, moist lick of Wren's tongue on his sac was the last thing he was expecting. His breath caught and held, as he watched Wren lap up the spunk from his cock and balls, then his pelvis and stomach, cleaning every drop from his skin.

When he licked, then sucked hard on Charlie's nipple, Charlie jolted and finally snapped out of his stupor. Groaning, he buried his hands in Wren's hair and held him there. Wren hummed and sucked harder, making Charlie twist his hips, looking for friction on his cock. Wren's hand fell on the valiantly swelling flesh, squeezing gently, and Charlie's eyes rolled.

"God, baby," Charlie moaned, "the way you make me feel."

Wren lifted his head and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand; his cheeks flushed adorably. “Good, huh?”

“You have no idea.” Charlie pulled Wren tight against him, their heated bodies finally coming together, pulling groans from both of them. Charlie’s hypersensitive genitals were trapped between them, and his abs contracted in reaction. Wren squirmed, burrowing in closer, and melted against him with a sigh of such contentment Charlie chuckled.

Charlie kissed the top of Wren’s head and brushed his cheek over the soft curls of hair, breathing in the scent of him. Now that he could, Charlie touched. He petted his boy, starting at his shoulders, gently feeling every inch he could reach until he finally cupped Wren’s ass. It was still hot. Charlie groaned and squeezed, making Wren stiffen and hiss.

Charlie let up immediately. “Damn. Sorry, baby. You’re just so damn sexy.” He lightly touched their lips together, but he pulled back and tried to see Wren’s expression through clearer eyes.

“Was it too much, Wren?” Charlie’s heart pounded. “You have to tell me the truth.”

Wren stared at him for the longest time, which was unnerving, but at least he was dutifully thinking about it before he answered.

“I thought at first that it might be,” Wren confessed, dropping his eyes and blushing, which was freaking adorable after everything they’d just done. “When I saw Quinn with his hands on you, I didn’t know if I could do it.”

Charlie winced and nodded. “I felt the same when Paul touched you.”

That made Wren smile with obvious pleasure before he focused his attention on Charlie’s chest. He circled a distracting finger in the still damp chest hair until Charlie grabbed his fingers and brushed his lips over them.

Wren’s fingers curled over Charlie’s and he finally continued. “When you looked up at me, though, and—” his breath caught and he dropped his forehead to Charlie’s sternum with a thump.

Shy Wren was enticing in a far different way than the seductive Wren who’d just prowled up to him and licked him clean. Charlie wasn’t sure which one made him harder.

“Look at me, baby,” Charlie commanded gently, with a touch of his fingers under Wren’s chin. “We have to talk about this, love.”

“I know.” Wren licked his lips nervously. “I just... when you looked at me it felt... I felt like it was just us in the room. Like Quinn’s touch was an extension of me, in some way. It was... It was *me* touching you.” He tipped his head. “Does that make sense?”

Charlie smiled, and relief bloomed in his chest. He hadn’t realized how tight it had gotten. “It makes perfect sense. I’d given my permission to Paul to act on my behalf. On our behalf. So yes, his touch was an extension of me—it was me—as well.”

“I know,” Wren whispered. “I could tell.”

He took a deep breath and squeezed Wren tight, hips flexing in response to the hot slide of his smooth, firm skin. He could feel the rapid flutter of Wren’s heart against his chest. “God, baby. It means so much to me that you felt it. Felt me.”

“Me too.” Wren’s lips curved. “It probably wouldn’t have worked out this way otherwise, huh?”

“No,” Charlie admitted. “And it was hard for me, Wren, painfully so. But it was safest for the both of us this way.”

Wren tipped his head. “Why safer?”

“Oh, hell, baby,” Charlie groaned. He hadn’t meant to admit that. But as reluctant as he was to confess the rest of it, he had to be honest. “I was so... *angry* inside; riddled with built up... regret and pain and... God help me... jealousy. *God*. I was so damn jealous! And I felt so ugly for it. I just... I didn’t trust myself to lay a hand on you until we’d worked it out.”

He wasn’t surprised to see Wren drop his head, but it still twisted him up inside.

“I’m so sorry, Charlie.” He glanced up through his lashes, whispering tentatively, “But that’s over, now, right? I mean... you still want to be my—?”

Charlie snarled and crushed Wren to him. “Damn right, I’m your Daddy,” he growled. “Paul was right, baby. We only move forward from here, got it?”

Wren raised his head. “Yes, Daddy,” he vowed solemnly.

“And it’s just us, baby,” Charlie insisted, giving Wren a little shake. “I don’t share, Wren.”

“Oh?” A wicked gleam lit Wren’s eyes, “Not even together, Daddy? Watching me with Quinn seemed to get you pretty hot.”

The visual flashed through his mind, and a deep, guttural moan built in Charlie's chest. His cock suddenly screamed for release. "We'll, uh, leave that subject on the table... to discuss later."

"Yes, Daddy," Wren agreed, with a sensuous rub of his belly against Charlie's shaft.

"I can't even tell you what it does to me when you say that." Charlie cupped Wren's face and kissed the soft smile on his lips before wrapping his arms around his boy. He took a few calming breaths, but he couldn't remain still. He slid his hands up and down the silky skin of Wren's back, carefully slowing at the small of his back.

"Your skin is so soft, and still so hot." With Wren leaning against him, he could see past his shoulder and he watched his hands brush over the tops of the bright pink globes. "I can just see the edge of the pink on your ass."

Wren squirmed and arched, and Charlie was overcome with desire. "I need to see you, my little bird," Charlie declared. "Stand up and let me see what you gave me tonight."

Wren dropped his eyes, but Charlie had caught the emotion in them. He pushed up, his flat stomach and rigid cock coming slowly into view. Charlie's mouth watered while his hands grasped Wren's hips to turn him.

He'd known, of course, that Wren's ass was a work of art, but seeing it flaming red with the heat of a well-deserved punishment nearly put Charlie over the edge. In awe, Charlie brushed his fingers across the tender skin, over and over, losing himself in the sight and feel of this precious offering.

"Beautiful," he murmured, pulling Wren closer so he could taste him. A lick, a small kiss to the boy's unmarred hip wasn't nearly enough. With the groan of a starving man presented with his first bite of sustenance, Charlie savored it all. He mouthed his way over the same heated skin he'd just held in his hands, licking, tasting, and gently sucking. The last one caused Wren to gasp and sway, so Charlie banded a tight arm around his waist to hold him while he relentlessly continued his assault.

"Daddy." It was a whimper of need from his boy, and it nearly snapped his control. Wren's hands had wrapped around Charlie's forearm for stability, and they squeezed and flexed with Wren's sighs and moans.

Charlie slid his arm between Wren's thighs, urging him to widen his stance. Then he pushed between Wren's shoulder blades to bend him over. Wren's

breath caught audibly. But his back arched, and his hands fell to his knees for balance, though Charlie's arm around him was a steel band that would never let his boy fall. Charlie could feel Wren's erection pressing up against the underside of his forearm, and it only made him hungrier.

Inflamed by the sounds coming from Wren, Charlie rested his hand on the small of his back, and slowly traced his fingers down the crevice of Wren's backside. He lingered at Wren's entrance, gently rubbing against him without penetrating until Wren was squirming and pushing back for more.

He had to taste. A single, long swipe of his tongue from Wren's sac to his tailbone only whetted his appetite, though, and Charlie couldn't stop himself from going back for more, again and again. He lapped at the salty skin, bathed it, all the while reveling in Wren's uninhibited reactions.

He growled his approval when Wren spread his legs further and bent over as far as he could, his hands on the floor by his feet as he bent himself nearly in half. Charlie had never been so grateful that he'd driven the boy to daily yoga classes for years.

Charlie lifted his head and almost came; Wren's tightly-closed hole blushed pink and gleamed with Charlie's saliva. His fingers trembled when he touched, trailing them through the liquid, spreading it all the way down to coat Wren's sac. Wren moaned loudly and continuously, as Charlie alternated teasing strokes of his fingers with wet, sloppy licks and thrusts of his tongue.

Wren was starting to shake. He rocked against the assault, the most erotic sounds coming from him as he moved, pushing back into Charlie for more. When he was to the point of cursing and begging and crying out with every touch, Charlie forced him to hold still. A gentle circling of his hole was the only warning he gave before Charlie plunged two fingers deep into him. He grinned with satisfaction when he unerringly pegged Wren's prostate.

Wren screamed and froze for a split second before thrashing wildly in Charlie's hold, slamming himself onto Charlie's fingers while jet after jet of semen shot from his cock.

Charlie groaned roughly, taking it all in: the hot press of Wren's ass against his face while his fingers were crushed in the iron grip of scorching silken walls; the pulse of Wren's erupting cock against Charlie's arm, which was now the only thing holding Wren and keeping him from collapsing to the floor.

And Wren screaming, "Daddy!" Charlie knew would forever have the power to induce an immediate erection from memory alone.

Wren sagged weakly in Charlie's hold, panting as tremors continued to wrack his body. Charlie's arm was burning and starting to cramp, so he carefully slid his fingers from Wren's clenching hole and settled his boy on his lap, carefully arranging him so his weight rested on his thighs instead of his sore backside.

He rocked them, lovingly petting Wren's back and nuzzling into his hair. Charlie was still painfully hard, trapped between his own hip and Wren's thigh.

"What about you?" Wren asked sleepily, pressing his leg against Charlie's erection.

"I'm fine, baby," Charlie assured him, his voice quiet and soothing. He pulled Wren in tighter. "I can wait."

"Are you sure?" Wren tried lifting himself up, but Charlie stopped him with a squeeze.

"I'll wait until I have you in my bed." His cock pulsed, eager for that very thing. "The next time we come I'll be inside you."

Wren lifted his head and gazed at him with eyes full of adoration and awe and exhaustion. "Then let's go home, Daddy."

Charlie couldn't look away from the luminous eyes that were so full of everything he'd ever wanted. Charlie dipped in and brushed their lips together. Their eyes drifted shut as their mouths meshed. Overcome with a wave of tenderness, Charlie pressed closer, loving the soft give of Wren's lips against his. They didn't deepen the kiss but kept it a gentle exploration until Charlie was completely lost and Wren was a puddle on his lap.

With a last, reluctant nip at Wren's tempting bottom lip, Charlie raised his head and smiled at the look of utter bliss on that angelic face—a shamefully debauched fallen angel—but angelic nonetheless.

"Okay, my little bird. Let's go home."

Chapter 4

Wren's ass hurt. Again. He pouted. He had never been more serious about *not* wanting to wake up, but the throbbing of his ass wasn't going away. He started to roll onto his stomach to escape the ache, but he realized his entire back, from head to ankle, was pressed against a solid warmth, and he was instantly unconvinced that he should move at all. Ever.

Charlie's body felt amazing against him. The light furring of hair scratched imperceptibly against him, and he loved it. His own body he kept smooth, so he was sensitive to every hair that touched it. Of course, what he was experiencing from Charlie right now was far from simple touch. Wren was engulfed by his giant bear who evidently had a thing for cuddling.

Charlie's chin rested against Wren's head—a favorite resting place of his, if Wren was catching on correctly. A massive arm didn't merely drape over Wren. It surrounded him, holding his arms against his torso before tucking under his side in an almost completed band of immovable muscle. Charlie's other arm bent considerably under Wren's head to pillow it perfectly.

Wren couldn't deny that this totally did it for him. He relaxed completely, submitting to Charlie's unconscious bondage. He sighed deeply, ecstatic and safe and content to hibernate in his bear trap. Wren snickered. Bear trap.

“What's so funny, little bird?” Charlie's voice was rough with sleep, deep and seductively intimate. That fast, Wren was erect. As if on a trigger mechanism, Charlie's cock grew long and hard in the crack of Wren's ass. He squirmed deeper into Charlie's embrace and squeaked when he was squeezed too tight.

“Oops,” Charlie chuckled. “Sorry.”

“Sure you are,” Wren answered dryly, noting Charlie had only marginally loosened his hold.

“What were you giggling about, baby?” Charlie asked, his face once again buried in Wren's hair.

Wren gasped in outrage. “I do *not* giggle! Six-year-old girls giggle.”

Charlie snorted. “Okay,” he drawled.

Wren rolled his eyes.

“Since you asked, I was thinking about how you had me trapped in your giant bear parts, which I subsequently coined *the bear trap*.”

He smiled when Charlie’s loud laugh burst out. “See? Funny.”

“Yes, baby,” Charlie agreed politely. “You’re hilarious.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Wren was grinning like a fool. This was so very different than the last time he’d found himself in Charlie’s bed. He settled contentedly into Charlie’s arms, drifting.

When they’d finally arrived home last night, Wren had been dead on his feet. Charlie had made them both shower before bed, though Wren had merely stood passively in the shower while Charlie washed him, then dried him, and finally carried him to bed.

Wren’s stomach fluttered as he remembered the intimacy of Charlie spreading him out on the bed and gently applying a soothing gel to his sore bottom. Soft, careful strokes had soon graduated to slightly more pressure, becoming a sensual kneading when Wren started arching into the warm, hard hands. It had been loving and tender and so freaking hot.

But Charlie had slowly soothed him and calmed his arousal until he was utterly boneless. The last thing he remembered was the soft kiss on the base of his spine, and the order to sleep.

“I can hear you thinking,” Charlie mumbled. He was clearly not a morning person.

“I was remembering you taking care of me last night,” Wren admitted, and his stomach did the same flip all over again just saying it.

“Mm,” Charlie purred. “That was rather enjoyable, if I remember right.”

“Mm,” Wren mimicked. “I thought so, too.”

He squirmed until Charlie finally lifted his arm from around Wren’s chest, but not without protest. Wren grinned and turned in his arms, about to ask what they should do today, but he was caught, instead, by the unguarded affection in Charlie’s eyes. Wren simply fell into them. He hadn’t realized how much Charlie’s usual stoic disposition had been masking.

“Um.” Wren stared until Charlie’s lips twitched and his eyebrow rose in amusement. “What should we do today?”

Charlie rolled them so fast Wren gasped and found himself pinned and staring up into gorgeous caramel eyes that had the power to melt him.

“I cleared my calendar so I could spend all day tending to your tanned hide.” Charlie grinned, laughing outright when Wren slugged him in the arm.

“Is that so?” Wren replied archly. “Well, then I think you’d best get to it, don’t you?”

“I do,” Charlie growled, burying his face in Wren’s neck. Wren gave a surprised squeal and lifted his chin to give the man more room. Whiskers scraped and teeth bit; Wren’s body broke out in goose bumps and his nipples beaded, making him arch and moan.

“Ah, there’s the spot,” Charlie said, then dove back, mumbling something about loving that spot.

Wren panted and squirmed, pushing against immovable shoulders. Damn, but that turned him on. It shouldn’t have. Anyone in their right mind would have panicked at least a little, but Wren just moaned and gave in, shivering with the next wave of goose bumps. Charlie’s gravelly purr of approval triggered even more of them until Wren’s thoughts of escape were nothing but fleeting memories, and the drive to get off prevailed.

Wren’s hips bucked against the thick, hair-roughened leg that Charlie possessively wedged between his thighs. He gasped and whimpered. The hands that had pushed against Charlie now clutched his neck and pulled him even closer. The bear paw cradling Wren’s head tightened and held him still so Charlie could take his mouth.

Plunder. That was the word that flashed in Wren’s mind. Charlie’s gentle kisses of last night were nowhere in sight now. He smashed their lips together, forcing Wren’s mouth to open and receive his incursion. His tongue tangled with Wren’s, commanding both participation and compliance, and Wren was helpless to give it.

He clung to Charlie, opening fully to him, inviting him in and granting him the full, unlimited use of his mouth. He bit and sucked at Charlie’s invading tongue, and his reward was the thrill of feeling Charlie’s solid hips thrusting, driving his steely erection into Wren’s hip. The action pushed his thigh—the

one Wren was already humping wantonly—harder against his aching cock, and suddenly Wren was barreling towards orgasm at an alarming rate.

And then it all stopped. Wren wailed in protest, clinging and dragging Charlie back to him. Charlie relented only enough to press a couple of quick, hard kisses to his mouth, then, infuriatingly, to his forehead.

“What?” Wren panted. “What the hell, Charlie?”

Charlie grunted and threw him a look at the use of his name. He pushed away and flopped onto his back, his massive chest heaving with his labored breathing. Wren sat up and immediately reached for Charlie’s engorged cock. Intercepted by an iron grip on his wrist, Wren glared in disbelief. He blinked hard, trying to settle himself. It wasn’t easy, what with Charlie’s gleaming, muscled body and gloriously turgid shaft just splayed out there for him to *not* touch.

Wren grabbed his own cock, throwing his head back and groaning at the touch.

“Don’t you dare,” Charlie growled.

Wren scoffed. “I don’t know what kind of sick orgasm denial fetish you’re into, but that’s not one of mine.” He dragged his fist up and down his erection, clenching his jaw against the urge to scream.

He heard what sounded like a feral animal, and then he was on his back, both hands pinned to the bed above his head. Wren fought, bucking his body and snarling at his captor.

“Damn it, Charlie!”

Charlie raised one imperial eyebrow, and Wren narrowed his eyes in a defiant glare. Though his Daddy didn’t move or say a single word, Wren still found himself wanting to look away and fighting the urge to squirm.

“Fine!” He spat. “Damn it, *Daddy!*”

Charlie smiled brightly, and Wren blinked, dazed by the sight.

“Good boy,” Charlie murmured, tapping Wren’s pouting lip before sitting up on his knees and pulling Wren with him.

“Now.” Charlie cupped his face, his smile softening to something adoring that Wren had absolutely no hope of resisting. “I stopped because I promised

both of us last night that the next time we come it will be with me buried in your ass.”

Wren's mouth fell open. If it had been possible, his cock would have hardened even more. “I don't remember that,” he finally whispered, his throat suddenly too dry.

“I'm not surprised,” Charlie said, moving off the bed and holding his hand out to Wren. “But I should have thought of it sooner. You were pretty out of it when it came up.”

Wren stepped into Charlie's space, deliberately brushing against Charlie's angry looking erection. “Was I getting my ass tended to at the time?”

Charlie swallowed. “In a sense,” he croaked. “Reminding me isn't going to make this any easier.”

“Good,” Wren smirked, turning away and searching for his clothes. “That's fair, after what you just did to me.”

He spotted his clothes from last night folded neatly on the chair in the corner. He slipped them on, wincing when they slid over his ass. He was achingly aware of Charlie's heated eyes following his every move. Wren couldn't be mad. Sexually frustrated, maybe, but Charlie's reasoning was too romantic and way too enticing to argue.

His mind already fast-forwarding to the “buried in your ass” part of the day, Wren paused. “Wait, did you actually *say* ‘buried in your ass’ last night? Because I'm pretty sure I'd remember you saying the words ‘buried in your ass.’”

Charlie laughed from within his closet. Wren hadn't even heard him move. “Maybe not those exact words.”

“You definitely should have used those exact words.”

“I'll remember next time.” Charlie promised.

“I'm going to run up to the house to shower and change.” Wren finished dressing and faced Charlie. He sucked his breath in when he saw him sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at Wren again with that look. Wren wondered if he'd ever get used to that.

He walked right up to him and stood between his knees. Charlie had to look up to make eye contact, which made Wren smile.

“I love it when you look at me like that, Daddy,” he confessed, voice soft. He touched his fingers to the scruff on Charlie’s cheek.

“Like what?”

Wren kissed him. It was the first kiss he’d initiated, and his throat tightened when Charlie lifted his face to receive it.

“Like I’m the most valuable possession you own.” Wren ducked his head, embarrassed that he’d said that. How presumptuous.

Charlie lifted Wren’s chin with his knuckle. “Do I own you, little bird?”

Wren’s smile spread slowly, and he nodded. “Oh, yeah.”

“Then that makes you the most valuable possession I own,” Charlie stated simply, pulling Wren in for another kiss. A firm, unmistakable stamp of ownership. Wren wrapped his arms around Charlie’s neck and hugged him fiercely.

Charlie chuckled and returned the hug before setting Wren away from him. “Go. Get what you need and come right back. I’ll make coffee and breakfast.”

“Okay.”

Wren felt so light and free and happy that he reached the main house wondering if he’d skipped all the way there. He snorted as he let himself in the door. He smelled coffee and headed towards the kitchen.

Devin was at the island with a cup of coffee and his tablet, no doubt scrolling through the news sites. He didn’t look up when Wren entered.

“Hi,” Wren chirped.

Devin jumped, sloshing coffee. Wren gave a surprised laugh. “Wow. Not very often I can get the jump on you, Dev.”

He moved into the room and poured himself half a cup, mindful of the coffee Charlie was making for them. Wren leaned against the counter and faced his brother.

“What’s up with you?” Wren grinned, because he couldn’t seem to stop.

Devin was still wiping up coffee, checking his tablet for any drops. He pinned Wren with his damn laser vision, but there was a glint of humor in his eyes. “Forget about me, slut. Where have you been?”

Wren just shrugged.

“You look like you’re about to burp up canary feathers.”

“Gross.”

“Uh huh.” Devin kept staring at him, looking for what, Wren didn’t know.

“What?” Wren demanded, but kept grinning. “Do I have something in my teeth?”

Devin snorted. “You look pretty happy, baby brother.” He leaned his elbow on the countertop. “So you and Charlie...?”

“Yes, Devin,” Wren teased, “me and Charlie.”

“So? What’s the scoop?”

“We’re together.” He made a show of slurping loudly from his cup.

Devin arched his perfect eyebrow. “Thank you for that detailed dissertation.”

“No problem.” Wren smirked.

“Listen,” Devin started again. His manner was serious enough that Wren made an attempt to pay closer attention. “I’m happy for you, baby brother.”

Wren tipped his head. “Really? ‘Cause you don’t really look it, big brother.”

Devin stood and gave Wren a small smile. “It’s a little difficult for me, I’ll admit. But all I really want is for you to be happy. I’ve... come to terms with what that means for you.”

“Aw.” Wren walked into Devin’s chest and wrapped his arms around him. He sniffed dramatically. “You’re growing up so fast.”

“Very funny.” Devin hugged Wren tightly. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted, you know. Although... I’ve recently been informed that my methods of achieving that end were somewhat questionable.”

“Jesus Christ, Dev.” Wren looked up and cocked his head. “You know, a normal person would have just said, ‘I fucked up’.”

Devin laughed loudly. He stepped back and ruffled Wren’s hair before putting his cup in the sink and grabbing his tablet. At the door, he turned and winked. “Normal is overrated.”

They spent the day doing normal, everyday things. They went to the grocery store and shopped for dinner, and Charlie made sure they had bags full of Wren's favorite things. And the whole time, Wren teased him. It wasn't Wren's fault, really. He was a naturally sensual creature. The way he moved, his innocent touches throughout the day—as if he had to have tactile proof of Charlie's existence—combined to drive a man crazy. Wren's eyes hid nothing; Charlie knew how badly Wren wanted him, because he *saw* it all day, every time he made eye contact.

He was starting to regret not allowing them to rub off on each other that morning. He'd been semi to fully erect all day. Every place they went, Charlie had to imagine bending Wren over the produce, or the checkout counter, or the hood of the car. Worse, it was as if Wren knew what he was thinking because he would look at Charlie every time, and the longing and the heat and the lust were right there in his eyes.

At dinner, a simple meal of grilled steaks and potatoes and salad, Wren was so carefree and witty, Charlie couldn't believe how much they laughed. This was his Wren—he laughed and teased and cared, and he made people feel good about themselves.

And Charlie realized how *this* Wren—the one with the inner glow that drew people to him with such guileless appeal—had been missing for so long. He'd been buried under hurt and confusion, and it was all Charlie's fault.

“What's wrong, Daddy?” Wren's eyes met his, so innocent and genuine.

Charlie grabbed his hand and traced Wren's long, almost delicate fingers with his own big, hard, calloused ones. It was a contrast that never failed to arouse him.

“You were waiting for me that whole time, weren't you?” Charlie asked with a wince. “There I was, thinking you were out sowing your oats and telling myself you needed it—”

“Don't.” Wren interrupted, his hand squeezing Charlie's. “It was a stupid, juvenile way to go about getting your attention. In the end, all I did was hurt both of us.”

“It wouldn't have gotten that far if I'd been... better.”

Wren tipped his head. “Better? At what?”

Charlie shrugged. “Everything. Listening, observing... admitting my own feelings.”

Wren went completely still. "Which are?"

"Come with me."

They were finished eating. Charlie took a deep breath and stood, drawing Wren up with him. He led him to the living room, which was largely dominated by a cream-colored sectional sofa and the big square coffee table that fit in front of it. Charlie ignored everything else and directed Wren to sit on the sofa.

"I'll be right back."

In his bedroom, Charlie found the folder and the box that he'd stored in his top drawer almost two years ago. He sighed, lamenting the lost time, but then he shook his head, determined not to lose any more.

Sitting next to Wren, Charlie leaned forward and pulled the contract from the folder and placed it on the table. He placed the box next to it.

"Wren," he drew him forward and smiled, watching Wren scoot to the edge of the deep sofa. Then his breathing stopped when Wren held his eyes and slid to the floor, kneeling next to Charlie, facing the table.

Charlie swallowed and bent forward to kiss Wren's head, taking a second to breathe him in and feel the softness of those curls against his face.

"You can see that's a contract," Charlie started. "It is something that we *will* go over line by line for our D/s agreement."

Wren nodded, but otherwise didn't move. Charlie combed his fingers through Wren's hair, tugging it until he looked up.

"Know this, though, little bird." Charlie held him possessively at the back of his neck. "Those papers will help guide us in that aspect. But our relationship is not dependent on what you agree to on that contract. In fact, if you chose not to sign it, we will still be together... If that's what you want. Do you understand?"

Wren swallowed, his brown eyes luminous and nearly black in the low light. "You would want me even if we never did another scene?"

Charlie nodded. "I'm dominant by nature in bed, but not necessarily a Dom. I don't need the title. And you're naturally submissive, so... I think we're good there, right?"

Wren blushed, nodding. He was hiding a smile, though.

"I'm confident we will always find a way to be compatible, baby. With or without scenes or props or titles. Because it's you I want. *You*. Okay?"

Wren nodded again and met his eyes shyly. "But—we *are* going to do those things, right, Daddy?"

Charlie chuckled and leaned forward to growl in his ear. "I will always gratefully accept your submission, Wren. And it will be cherished for the beautiful gift that it is. But tonight... tonight we're just us, okay?"

Wren threw himself into Charlie's arms so suddenly that he almost took them both to the floor. Charlie grinned and patted his back. "Okay, baby?"

Wren sniffed and clung to him for another minute before answering. He slid back to his place on the floor. "I just..." he shrugged. "I'm good."

Charlie combed Wren's hair, smiling when Wren closed his eyes and leaned into the touch. "You can open the box now," he whispered in Wren's ear.

Wren's hands were shaking when he reached slowly for the box. He almost dropped it when he finally worked the lid off.

He smiled when Wren's breath sucked in. He blinked back the sting in his eyes when he watched Wren's slender fingers shake as they brushed reverently over the quarter-sized medallion nestled in the box. But he was starting to get nervous when his boy just kept touching and staring at it, until Charlie saw him swallow several times.

"Wren," Charlie finally croaked. "You have to say something."

"It's beautiful," Wren whispered without looking up. "It's our initials."

"Yes." Charlie's palms were sweating from his nerves. He almost bit his tongue, but finally confessed, "I designed it."

"Oh." It was more squeak than anything else.

"Baby, you don't have to wear it." Charlie couldn't stand it anymore. He reached for it. "Here, I'll—"

"No!" Wren clutched it to his chest. "Don't you dare take it back!"

"Oh, my little bird." Charlie cupped Wren's chin and forced him to look at him. "I will never take it away. I will never take it back, unless you make me."

Wren shook his head rapidly, eyes fierce. "I won't. Not ever."

"Will you let me put it on you?" Charlie reached for the box like he was afraid for his fingers, making Wren laugh.

"Yes." He handed the box over.

Charlie studied the collar he'd designed only a few months after Wren had thrown himself at him after that damn party, inadvertently setting in motion this long chain of events.

As if he'd been in Charlie's head, Wren gasped. "When did you have that made?"

Charlie smiled ruefully. "Busted." He sighed and couldn't believe it when he felt his cheeks heating. "I designed it a couple months after you called me to get you at that stupid frat party."

Wren looked like he couldn't decide if he should smile or cry. "But that was so long ago! And I made such a fool out of myself!"

Charlie chuckled. "Didn't matter. You rubbed your sexy self all over me, and I was hard for days afterwards. I was officially a goner."

"Really?" Wren squealed, a huge smile on his face.

"Really, brat." Charlie laughed. "Now, do you want this collar or not?"

Wren sobered immediately. "I really, really do, Daddy."

Eyes on the open trust on Wren's face, Charlie hesitated again, reluctantly sighing. "We should wait until we've gone over the contract—"

"No!" Wren's shout startled him.

"But—"

"Do they only go together? What if we don't have a contract and are just... together? Does that mean I can't have the symbol—the commitment—of a collar?" His boy sounded truly hurt and afraid.

"Of course not." Charlie cursed under his breath. "I want you to wear it. To belong to me, no matter what."

Wren gave a shaky sigh. "Then please, Daddy. I want it."

Charlie clumsily dug the collar out of the box, remembering each sketch-after-discarded-sketch until he'd gotten it just right. The charm was an intricate silver swirl of their initials. They entwined with a certain sensuality that Charlie had struggled to achieve, contained within a perfect circle. It was held on either side by a simple chain, with a clasp at the back that would be locked with a small silver padlock.

Charlie lifted the insert and pulled out a small key attached to a matching silver chain that was much longer in order to fit around Charlie's neck. He laid

them both out on the table and turned to find Wren watching him with rapt attention.

He smiled and lifted Wren's chin so he could kiss him. As soon as he tasted his boy, Charlie closed his eyes and moaned, pressing into the kiss, sliding his tongue against Wren's and nibbling his lips before reluctantly pulling away. Wren's eyes opened languidly, snaring Charlie in their depths. Charlie's chest filled, his ego and his cock both equally delighted with causing that dreamy expression on Wren's face.

“Strip.”

Wren blinked. “Um, excuse me?”

“A man doesn't collar his boy while he's in blue jeans, baby. I want you naked... until you're wearing nothing but my collar.”

“Oh.” Wren blushed, but stood quickly. He started to move away, but Charlie stopped him with a hand on his hip.

Wren removed his shirt first, tossing it to the other end of the sofa. His jeans were sexy with Wren's bare feet. They were even sexier when they fell around his ankles. Boxer briefs were dispatched with efficiency and joined the shirt and jeans in a pile. It was an economical and purposeful removal of clothing, with not a single movement meant to entice, yet Charlie's body reacted as if Wren had just performed a thirty-minute erotic strip tease.

His hand returned to Wren's hip and he couldn't resist stroking the satiny skin. He pressed a kiss there, inhaling deeply because he needed to. Charlie reluctantly lifted his head and stood, turning Wren gently by the shoulders. He trailed one finger down each of the bumps and divots of Wren's spine before he settled the chain around his neck. Wren was tense and quivering; Charlie kissed his neck, right at the vertebrae his lock would rest against. Wren shivered, and Charlie smiled when the goose bumps broke out on cue.

Finally, he had the collar latched and locked. With a suddenly shaky hand, Charlie traced the chain around Wren's neck and tugged once to make sure it held. He grasped Wren's shoulders in each of his hands, leaning close.

“You're mine now, little bird.”

The nod and the little choking sound were enough of a response for Charlie. He reached for the chain holding his key, intending to slip it over his head, but Wren spun around suddenly and grabbed his arms. Wren slid his hand down to

Charlie's where it hovered over the little padlock. He linked their fingers together.

"Let me?"

Charlie straightened and brushed a knuckle over Wren's cheek. "Of course, baby. I would love that."

"Will you get naked, too?" Wren implored. "I want to see you with nothing on but my key hanging from your neck."

Charlie stripped his shirt off, while Wren picked up the chain. He stopped dead, though, as if transfixed by the gradual reveal of Charlie's body. He finally stood naked, basking in Wren's blatant arousal. Wren was breathing hard and seemed unable to take his eyes off a certain part of Charlie's anatomy. His cock liked the attention and stood proudly erect, possibly growing even harder.

"Um, Wren?" Charlie smiled when Wren's attention slowly traveled upwards until their eyes finally locked. Wren took a shaky breath and slid the chain over Charlie's head. His hands followed it down as it draped over Charlie's collarbones and settled in the valley of his chest.

"You're mine now, Daddy," Wren whispered, kissing Charlie so sweetly. Charlie had been to many collaring ceremonies in his life as a Dom, but not one of them compared to this moment right now.

"Only yours," Charlie agreed. He brushed a finger across Wren's cheek. "I want to be with you, baby... without anything between us. Bare. I mean, I'm tested and clean, and it's been a really long time since I've—"

Wren stopped Charlie with his fingers on his mouth, "Me too. All of that." He smiled. "I've never done anything without protection, even blowjobs."

He closed his eyes and kissed the fingers still covering his lips. "I never have either. I've only ever wanted to with you."

Charlie flicked his tongue out when Wren's fingers delicately traced his lips. He tipped Wren's chin up so he could brush their lips together. He smiled at Wren's soft sigh, then licked his bottom lip, nipping it gently. Wren groaned and pressed closer as their kiss deepened, but Charlie pulled back, held him by the arms and dropped to his knees.

Wren visibly trembled, and he stared longingly down into Charlie's eyes. Wren's hands rested on his shoulders, while he smoothed his own hands over

every inch of his boy's body. He cupped the tender globes of Wren's ass in his hands and squeezed gently, thrilled when Wren's eyes rolled up and a guttural moan escaped his throat.

With Wren trapped in his hold, he mouthed the smooth skin of his belly and rubbed his cheek against his ribs as if marking him with his scent. Then, in a sudden moment of inspiration, he pulled him in close and pressed his chest against Wren's cock and balls.

"Ohmygod!" Wren screamed; his whole body convulsed. "Fuck yeah, Daddy!" He instantly wrapped around Charlie's neck and began thrusting, his rigid cock slamming hard into Charlie's sternum, his balls slapping obscenely against him.

"Fuck me," Charlie grunted in surprise. His heart raced as he accepted the pounding. "Take what you need, baby." He nearly lost his mind. He knew Wren had a thing for his thickly muscled chest, but he was a little stunned—and a lot turned on—by the immediate, wild reaction.

Wren released a throaty roar and roughly pressed Charlie's face tight against his clenching abs. He slammed his hips into Charlie's ridged valley of muscles, rubbing himself back and forth across Charlie's chest, fucking hard into the deep crevice of his pecs and moaning a steady stream of *oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck* like nothing had ever felt so good.

Charlie just held on and let his boy use him until his chest was slick with sweat and precum and Wren's cries turned to nonsense. Stopping him wasn't easy. Charlie had to grab his arms and break his hold, which was so fucking hot he almost let Wren come all over him for the sheer eroticism of it all. But he had bigger plans for that load.

"No! Please!" Wren begged so beautifully when they separated, but his protest cut off in the next breath when Charlie took his shaft deep into his throat and swallowed. Wren groaned and plunged into his mouth. Charlie let him, loving that his boy was aggressive, taking what he needed unless he was told otherwise. He relaxed his throat and let Wren have his mouth, sucking hard and savoring his first taste of his boy.

"Oh, God, Daddy!" Wren cried. His thrusting became erratic, and his cock swelled impossibly bigger in Charlie's mouth. And then it expanded and pulsed, christening Charlie's tongue with its semen. Wren bucked furiously into his throat, screaming and shaking as he came. Charlie sucked gently on his

softening member until nothing more could be extracted from it, and Wren was curling over him. Wren panted, gulping air with his hands still clenched around Charlie's neck.

"Wren." His voice was raw, rough from his boy's cock ramming into his throat. "Are you okay?"

"That was..." Wren stood on unsteady legs, his expression dazed. "I can't... my God, Daddy... that was... fucking amazing."

"*You* are amazing, baby." He could almost come from the vision of debauchery standing before him. Wren was flushed, unsteady and dazed and thoroughly undone. And it was hands down the sexiest thing Charlie had ever seen.

"Oh, my God," Wren groaned. "I was so... *loud*."

"Yeah." Charlie concurred in a gravely purr. He smirked. "That was hot."

Charlie placed random kisses over Wren's belly and hips, licking at the slick, salty skin. He was painfully aware of his own throbbing cock.

"Wren."

"Yes, Daddy?" Wren breathed.

Charlie smiled. It would never stop turning him on, hearing those words from his little bird.

"Come here, baby." Charlie moved from the floor to the sofa, keeping Wren close and arranging him between his knees.

Wren leaned into Charlie, hands on his shoulders, holding eye contact with his sexy Daddy while he took a few more gulps of air. The smile on Charlie's face was entirely too smug, but Wren couldn't deny that it was justified.

"I want you to bend over for me again, baby," Charlie commanded, his voice thick with the same lust that clouded his eyes. He leaned past Wren and pulled the coffee table closer, patting it. "All day, I've been dying to get another taste of you."

Wren drank in the sight of his Daddy in his full-on state of arousal, then slowly turned his back. Charlie worked his feet between Wren's and kicked them apart. Wren felt himself blush, overcome with the vulnerability of his

position. But the tremor of excitement was there, too. He licked his lips and bent at the waist, arching and opening himself to Charlie's eyes and mouth and hands. He lowered his chest until his elbows hit the table.

He was already trembling. His cock flexed, determined to revive itself, when he felt Charlie's fingers on his backside. Gentle, considerate strokes soothed and slowly built his pleasure. The way Charlie's hands shook when he touched him made Wren's stomach tighten.

"God, Wren," Charlie's voice was so deep and hoarse. "I'll never get enough of you."

Wren blushed. "Oh," he squeaked.

Without warning, Charlie locked his hands tight on Wren's hips and dove in, the flat of his searing hot tongue a sinful massage of Wren's sensitive tissues. Wren jerked in surprise but immediately yielded, his supplication complete. Charlie repeated the licks again and again before invading fully. Charlie reared back, growled hungrily, then struck, sucking hard on the sensitive wrinkles of Wren's hole; Wren screamed something unintelligible and almost bucked himself right out of Charlie's hold.

Thankfully, his man had an iron grip on Wren's hip, because he was relentless—sucking and licking and fingering him until he was a mindless, quivering mass of raw nerves. Wren's throat ached and dry sobs tore from him as he begged for mercy.

"Please, Daddy," Wren begged, shoving himself against Charlie's mouth. God, he needed more. Or he needed to stop. He wasn't sure anymore. "Please, please, please."

"What do you want, baby?" Charlie panted. They were both covered in sweat, their breathing labored and their cocks leaking profusely. "Tell me and I'll give it to you."

Wren lifted up on his hands, gasping when the movement forced Charlie's fingers deep inside him. Charlie withdrew and cupped Wren's ass with both hands.

Wren sagged and dropped his head, gulping in air and trying to control his shaking. But he looked behind him and saw Charlie's huge erection, slick with running precum and flushed an angry red, and he lost what tiny thread of control he'd gained.

Wren turned and dropped to his knees between Charlie's widespread thighs. "I want you in me, Daddy."

He reached for Charlie's cock, grabbing it with both hands and held on tight while he sucked the fat head into his mouth and groaned loudly. Latched on tight, the pop when he pulled off was loud and wet.

"Ohmygod, you taste amazing, Daddy," he breathed, licking and mouthing the precum from Charlie's crown before sucking him down again.

"Oh, fuck!" Charlie gasped and twisted in Wren's hold. "Wait, baby!"

Charlie's hands plowed painfully into Wren's hair and pulled him off forcefully. But Wren could feel him trembling, his palms scorching hot and slick with sweat on Wren's skin, and he knew he was weakening.

"I need you, Daddy," Wren begged, imploring with his eyes. "Please, I need you inside me."

Charlie abruptly released Wren's hair and put his hands on his own head, scrubbing roughly at his scalp. "Are you sure you're ready? I—"

Wren released his hold on Charlie's cock and pushed him back into the cushions. With single-minded determination, he climbed him, sliding his chest and belly against Charlie's raging erection until their heated cocks met.

"Oh, God, yes," Wren hissed, grinding their groins together with a fervor that hurt. "I'm so fucking ready, just take me already!"

Charlie chuckled breathlessly. "God damn, baby. You have no idea how hard I'm trying to control myself here." He groaned, and Wren felt his cock flex against his.

"I feel how hard you are," Wren purred, reaching for Charlie's cock. He was intercepted. "C'mon, Daddy. Give it to me."

"Fuck." Charlie's teeth were grinding together, making his jaw muscles work, which was one of Wren's hot buttons.

"Please."

"Okay, baby." He took a deep breath and exhaled. "But we're taking it slow. I don't want to hurt you." He gave Wren a warning glare as if he didn't trust him not to break free and impale himself on Charlie's unsuspecting dick.

Charlie lifted Wren and slid his fingers behind his balls, testing the wetness coating his hole. He lowered Wren until the thick, hot head of his cock pressed

against him insistently. Wren bent his head and watched Charlie rub his shaft around his opening, combining his leaking precum with the slick of saliva.

Wren held his breath, and pushed. Meeting resistance, he pressed down harder and groaned; fresh sweat broke out and his muscles quivered. His hole burned and he felt it tighten against the intrusion, but he kept trying. Nothing happened. Charlie's cock stayed stubbornly outside of him as if no opening even existed.

Wren whimpered and raised his head, pleading with his eyes. "Daddy?"

"Shh. It's okay." Charlie rubbed his hip and then lifted Wren so he could spread more of his fluids over his opening. Wren wanted to scream in frustration. He was so well lubricated he could feel it running down his ball sac. That wasn't the problem.

"Try again, baby." Charlie's voice was so pained; Wren was instantly wracked with guilt for making him suffer. Charlie saw his look and shook his head firmly. "Stop, Wren. You need to relax. Take a deep breath, then exhale and push out."

Wren nodded his head and did exactly what Charlie instructed, but still, he was barely penetrated. Wren pushed out and forced himself down and felt the very tip squeeze through the tight ring of his hole, but that was it.

Wren dropped his head, a whine escaping his throat. His whole body shook, and he fought the rush of panic.

"Help me!" he cried, choking back a sob before he completely lost his shit. "I need you so bad!"

"I know, little bird. Be patient." Charlie lifted him up again and this time slid his middle finger inside. Wren gasped at the intrusion, then relaxed and let Charlie work him open. He added another finger and pressed against his prostate. Wren was stretched, but now he was squirming and whimpering with need again.

"Lay on me." Charlie slowly hugged Wren to him until he was resting against his chest. "Okay?"

Wren nodded, burying his face in Charlie's neck and breathing him in.

"One more time, baby," Charlie's voice was tight with restrained need. Wren desperately wanted to satisfy that need.

Charlie held Wren by the thighs, spread wide, gradually letting Wren's weight guide the pressure on his cock. Wren felt his ring open, barely letting Charlie's cock breach him. Wren's hole was on fire, but he pressed on, frustration bringing stinging tears to his eyes. He gave a sudden, desperate lunge and cried out from the pain.

"Ow, ow ow ow!" It hurt. It hurt so bad, Wren was shivering from a cold sweat and goose bumps spread over his body. Charlie froze.

"Oh, fuck," he swore. Wren cringed. Charlie lifted him and set him gently on his lap, tucking him under his chin like a child. Wren was stunned at how slippery with sweat Charlie was. His muscles quivered under Wren's and his chest rose and fell with his loud, harsh breathing.

"Jesus Christ, Wren. I'm so sorry." Charlie's voice shook, as did the hand he buried in Wren's hair.

"What?" Wren shook his head, still reeling and confused as to how he'd ended up cuddling in Charlie's lap, instead of riding his cock. He could feel Charlie's erection—scorching hot and sticky with its own fluids—pressing against his own.

"Are you giving up?" Seriously, he would cry like an infant if Charlie gave up on him now.

"No, baby." Charlie rubbed his back in long, soothing strokes. "I'd never give up on you."

It didn't calm him, though. Wren was desperately needing Charlie inside him more than ever, but now he was afraid he was fucking it up beyond repair.

"Then, what?" He raised his head and pleaded with Charlie. "Why are we stopping? I can do it, I swear I can. I just need—"

Charlie cupped his face and silenced him with his lips. The kiss was gentle, comforting at first, but Wren pressed into it, opening his mouth in invitation. Charlie surrendered with a moan, thrusting his tongue inside to tangle with Wren's. The kiss heated quickly, becoming a desperate, carnal coupling that had them both panting.

"Christ, Wren!" Charlie wrenched himself away, holding Wren back from diving after him. Wren frowned and would have stomped his foot in frustration if he'd been standing. Charlie took a deep, deliberate breath and dropped his forehead against Wren's.

“Baby?”

“Daddy?”

Charlie’s lips twitched, but he just shook his head. “Wren, have you ever been... penetrated?”

Wren froze and felt his cheeks sting painfully. “Do you mean to ask if I’ve ever been fucked?”

“Have you?” Charlie’s voice hardened, but Wren didn’t know if it was impatience with him, or his dislike of the idea that he’d been fucked by someone else.

“I heard that you don’t do virgins,” Wren blurted. His cheeks could not burn any hotter. “I asked a couple of the subs about you at the club, and that’s what they all said...”

Charlie groaned and leaned his head back against the sofa, squeezing his eyes shut. Like he was in pain. “Wren—”

“So I tried,” Wren rushed to get it all out, anxiety and embarrassment fueling him. “It... didn’t really work. I couldn’t even let him finger me because it wasn’t you! All right? It wasn’t *you*, you... you fucker! You didn’t even want me, and I still couldn’t—”

“Wren!” Charlie barked.

Wren snapped his mouth shut and buried his face in Charlie’s chest, moaning miserably. “God, I’m such a fucking, prissy boy. I fucking saved myself for you, okay! And you don’t fucking do fucking virgins, so I couldn’t fucking tell you—”

“Wren!” Charlie raised his voice, and Wren realized he’d been trying to butt in, but Wren had been too busy ranting like a lunatic.

“What?” He pouted, painfully embarrassed and refusing to make eye contact.

Of course, Charlie made him. Holding Wren’s face in those huge, warm paws, he lifted it until Wren looked at him.

“It’s true, little bird, that I wouldn’t have taken a virgin in a BDSM club.” He stared forcefully into Wren’s eyes as if he could make him understand if he just looked at him harder. “I’m big, Wren. Um, really big, as you’ve seen. I wouldn’t inflict that on someone new to the scene, one who’s possibly too scared to safe word.”

Wren nodded. He could understand that. He'd initially had the thought that to safe word was to fail, or worse, disappoint his Dom. It wasn't until he'd actually used it and had actually received understanding and compassion, instead of anger and disappointment, that he'd learned. But he still didn't know where that left him right now.

"I would *never* have tried your first time like this, had I known." Charlie brought their foreheads together again. "I should have made it special and gentle not..."

Charlie sighed heavily and closed his eyes, and the remorse on his face broke Wren's heart. "Forgive me, baby?"

"There's nothing to forgive, Daddy." Wren ducked his head. "It's not like I didn't give you plenty of reasons to think I'd been ridden hard."

"Stop," Charlie growled.

"If you don't want me—" Wren started, but was cut off immediately when Charlie grabbed his shoulders roughly and gave him a little shake.

"You're mine!" Charlie declared. "God, Wren! You have no idea what you do to me!"

Wren shook his head.

Charlie's hands circled his neck; his thumbs under Wren's chin forced him to look at him. "It fills me with a—a shameful amount of selfish, inappropriate, chauvinistic, caveman-level pride—and way too much smugness to be attractive—knowing that you've never had, and will never have, anyone else inside you but me."

Wren felt the pleasure bloom. The tightness left his chest, and his stomach fluttered happily, instead of clenching painfully. A smile grew on his face that he couldn't contain.

Charlie laughed.

Wren threw himself at his daddy. His arms locked around Charlie's neck and squeezed, and he laughed right along with him.

"Take me to bed, Daddy?" Wren begged, squirming deliberately against Charlie's still raging hard-on. "I need you now more than ever."

Every time he begged, Wren grew more confident. Because every time, Charlie groaned or twitched or even shuddered in reaction. Wren bit Charlie's

neck and grinned when he shivered. Breathing into Charlie's ear, he whispered, "Please... take me, Daddy."

Charlie stood with Wren in his arms. He had no resistance to his boy's begging. He realized he was seriously going to have to work on that, but he'd start later.

He took them to the shower. Wren blinked at him in confusion, but Charlie was determined to do this right. He stood Wren on his feet while he set the water temperature and let it run until it warmed enough.

"We're going to start again, okay, baby?" Charlie cupped his face, stroking the smooth skin because he couldn't *not* touch his boy. "We'll have a nice hot shower and get you good and relaxed."

Wren nodded trustingly, closing his eyes and leaning into Charlie's touch. "Then I'll take you to bed, and if it takes all night we're going to ready you to take me with the minimum amount of pain I can manage."

"Okay," Wren whispered, but his whole body had reacted visibly. Charlie ground his teeth against the rush of arousal and prayed for patience. He'd never been this far gone. He could have come multiple times by now, he was sure of it. His balls felt like they held enough seed to fertilize an entire colony.

The shower was a lesson in torture. Wren visibly relaxed under the spray, and his muscles became languid from Charlie's soothing cleansing. He massaged Wren's head when he washed his hair and stroked his boy's cock slowly, letting arousal build and simmer, but not flame into a frenzy. The more he soothed Wren, the more Charlie needed release. Wren completely submitted to him, freely handing over his pleasure and his body into Charlie's possession, and the sheer eroticism that followed was pure torture.

Eventually, the water ran cool, and Charlie dried them both. He pulled back the comforter and Wren spread himself like an offering in the middle of the bed. Smoldering eyes, almost black with desire, watched Charlie closely while he found lube and joined Wren on the bed.

Lying down next to Wren, Charlie propped himself up on his elbow and leaned in for a kiss. He lingered, gently urging Wren to open, sweeping his mouth greedily with his tongue. He would never get enough. Charlie moved closer as the kiss deepened, their breaths came faster as their tongues dueled.

His cock pressing into Wren's hip seemed to trigger something in Wren. His hips lifted, and he arched off the bed. Charlie left Wren's mouth and moved to his neck. Biting and sucking, he made his way to the nipple closest to him. He met Wren's eyes as he extended his tongue to the tightened flesh, smiling at Wren's quick inhalation. Charlie closed his eyes and sucked, moaning when Wren bucked against him.

While his tongue and teeth tortured that nipple, Charlie's hand reached for the other. He brushed over it with his thumb a few times before he pinched it, holding it and rolling the swelling nipple between his finger and thumb. Wren cried out and squirmed.

"Daddy, please!" Wren quivered beneath him. "I'm going to come if you keep doing that!"

Charlie lifted his head with a smirk. "Really? You think I could get you off just from nipple play?"

Wren blushed and growled. "Who cares? You're killing me!"

With one last lick—mostly so he could hear the gasp from Wren—Charlie moved on, kissing and licking the short distance to Wren's cock.

"You're leaking for me, baby," Charlie purred. Then he sucked the tip of Wren's shaft into his mouth and tongued as much precum out of it as he could get.

Wren's moans and whimpers were making Charlie unbelievably hot. The boy had no filter. His responses were visceral, and Charlie felt every one of them deep in his balls.

"Suck me, Daddy!" Wren thrust into Charlie's mouth when he finally opened to let him all the way in. But only for a few seconds. Wren was too close to the edge. Charlie released him and thoroughly enjoyed the vocal cries and begging he received in response.

Moving to his knees, Charlie positioned himself between Wren's knees and grabbed him high on his inner thighs. Wren gasped, and his eyes flew open. Charlie met his eyes and held them while he pressed outward, spreading Wren as wide as he could.

Charlie gave him a wicked grin. "Damn, boy. Remind me to never complain again about driving you to yoga."

Wren laughed breathlessly. He was breathing too hard, and a sheen of nervous sweat had broken out on his skin.

“Relax, baby,” Charlie soothed. He ran his hands up and down Wren’s inner thighs, brushing his thumbs closer and closer to Wren’s perineum with every pass, finally reaching the sensitive stretch of skin. His thumbs massaged from Wren’s entrance to his balls. Wren’s head fell back against the bed, and he moaned, long and deep.

Charlie opened the lube with one hand, drizzling it right onto Wren’s perineum and watching as it ran down. His left hand still held Wren tightly by the inner thigh, and now his thumb dipped into the liquid and massaged it into his skin.

With his right hand, Charlie went to work, opening Wren for his cock. With shaking hands, he managed to add lube to his fingers one-handed, then he placed them over Wren’s hole. He rubbed his fingers over him, just pressing against him without penetrating, until Wren’s head snapped up.

“Do something, Daddy!” Wren demanded. “I want you inside me and it’s going to be Tuesday by the time that happens if you don’t do something!”

Charlie chuckled. “You’re right, baby. After all, we already know you can take two of my fingers pretty easily, don’t we?”

“Yes!” Wren snapped.

Charlie slammed two fingers into him, all the way to his knuckles.

“Yes!” Wren cried, humping down onto Charlie’s hand. Wren was instantly frantic, pounding against the invasion with a desperation that nearly unglued him.

“Hold on, baby,” Charlie warned, adding a third finger.

Wren stopped and hissed. Charlie felt his ring contract, trying to reject the added thickness. “Just take a breath, Wren. Hold still until the burn passes.”

Wren nodded, inhaling and exhaling, his eyes closed tightly against the pain.

“Look at me, baby,” Charlie commanded. When he had Wren’s attention, he gently moved deeper within him until he reached his prostate. He grabbed Wren’s cock with his other hand and squeezed.

Wren gasped and his eyes widened. “Oh, that helps.” He smiled weakly.

“I thought it might.” Charlie grinned, milking Wren’s hot shaft, quickly working it to a fully-erect state. “Move when you’re ready, baby. I’ll wait for you.”

Wren nodded, and his hips gave a tentative twist. He moaned loudly when it increased the pressure on his gland. Breathlessly, he cried, “Oh God, that’s good, Daddy.”

Charlie grunted in agreement. He was working up his own sweat, hanging onto his control by a thread while he watched three of his big fingers get swallowed inside that tight virgin opening. Then Wren was moving, pushing down on his fingers and moaning while Charlie watched and wiped the sweat from his eyes. Every time his fingers disappeared into Wren’s tight-as-sin hole, Charlie swore he could feel his own cock burying itself inside that silky heat.

Lost in the sensual act of his boy masturbating himself on him, he almost realized too late how close Wren was. Snapping out of it, Charlie clamped down hard on the base of Wren’s cock.

“Ow!” Wren yelled. He lifted his head and glared at Charlie, blinking his eyes into focus. Oh yes, he’d been quite far gone. Charlie smiled apologetically.

“Sorry, baby. I got too caught up in you.” He released Wren’s cock completely, his moan washing over him like a sensual massage. “Damn, you’re sexy, baby.”

Wren’s hips moved, and Charlie stopped him. “I’m going to add another finger, Wren.”

Wren’s eyes went wide. “Don’t you think I’m ready?”

Charlie eyed his fat cock, cursing its size for the hundredth time.

“I don’t think so,” Charlie sighed. “One more, okay? Then I have to have you.” Charlie’s voice was so thick by the last sentence that Wren’s eyebrows rose. He looked down and Charlie knew he was just now noticing what a mess Charlie was.

“You’re the sexy one, Daddy,” Wren breathed. “Look at you, muscles all pumped up and glistening, and your cock looks like I could make it blow if I breathed on it.”

Charlie gave a rough laugh. “You definitely could, baby. I’m sure of that.”

He quickly added more lube and slid a fourth finger into Wren. This time he didn’t stop until he was pressed against his gland. Wren’s eyes rolled back, and his hips immediately ground down on his fingers.

“Oh, fuck, Daddy. So good.” Wren’s movements increased quickly and he was soon writhing sinuously, slamming himself down on Charlie’s hand until he was pushing against the knuckles.

That was it for Charlie. He raised up on his knees and bent over Wren. “Now, baby. I need you now.”

Wren nodded, reaching for Charlie’s shoulders and pulling him down until Charlie was on top of him. Charlie reached between them and steadied his cock, finding Wren’s opening easily despite his unsteady hand.

He pushed. At first there was no give, and Charlie nearly broke. He couldn’t hide the desperation on his face or in his voice.

“Relax, baby. Oh, God,” he panted, his arm shaking under his weight. “Let me in,” he begged.

Wren took a deep breath and exhaled, bearing down on Charlie’s cock at the same time. Charlie pushed just a little bit more... and slid inside with a shout of relief.

“Ah!” Wren cried, breathing loudly and holding perfectly still. “Don’t move yet. Goddamn. How can it still hurt when you just had four fingers stuffed in me?”

Charlie couldn’t answer. He ground his teeth together and tried not to focus on how tight and hot Wren was around him. Wren’s muscles clenched, squeezing Charlie even tighter. “Oh, fuck, baby. I gotta move!”

Charlie’s fists clenched handfuls of bedding, and Wren gave him the nod to proceed. Slowly, he pressed forward, then eased back before sliding in a little bit more. He could feel Wren opening to him with every back-and-forth of his cock, and it almost brought tears to his eyes. In just a couple more short thrusts, he’d be seated all the way inside his boy. If he could keep his orgasm in check for that long. Charlie had never denied orgasm to this extent. He was just a hair-trigger away from losing control.

Wren whined deep in his throat. Charlie’s head whipped up and he locked eyes with him. “Almost there, baby.” His hips curled a final time, and he realized he couldn’t go any further. He groaned and clamped his jaw shut, trying to take deep, calming breaths.

“Don’t move,” he managed to grind out between his clenched teeth. His cock was encased in the most exquisite torture device; he could barely breathe for fear that even that tiny movement would set him off.

Wren shook his head, his fists tearing at Charlie's shoulders. "I can't." He panted loudly through his mouth and Charlie felt the slightest fluttering around him.

"Wait, baby," he begged.

"Oh, God! Oh God oh God!" He looked right at Charlie, neck already arching as he was overcome. "I'm going to—"

"No!" Charlie cried, but Wren was already moving. A single, sinuous turn of his hips that squeezed Charlie and stroked him just enough.

"Oh, fuck." The rush slammed into him like a dam breaking. He gave in and thrust hard, a quick punch of his hips—once, twice—and he was coming. And coming and coming.

Wren was bucking and screaming beneath him, his cock erupting stream after stream of spunk between them, the only touch on it the press of their bodies.

Charlie's balls throbbed, feeling like they actually contracted, he ejaculated so much. But the pleasure. The wave after wave of pleasure that coursed through him was incredible.

Slowly, they stopped shuddering from the endless aftershocks. Their breathing slowed, and the sweat started to dry on their skin.

Charlie chuckled. "Good Lord, Wren." He kissed his boy hard, again and again. "What you do to me."

Wren smiled shyly. The contrast in him—of wild and uninhibited when aroused, to shy and sweet in the aftermath—was something that Charlie continued to find fascinating.

"I love the feel of you inside me, Daddy." Wren squeezed Charlie's cock with his internal muscles, and Charlie groaned.

"I love being inside you, baby," he gave him one more kiss before lifting up, "but I should get off and get you cleaned up."

"No," Wren pouted, wrapping his long arms and legs around him like he'd suddenly grown tentacles. And there were way more of them than there'd been arms and legs.

Charlie chuckled. "Really?"

Wren huffed. "Fine." He released Charlie but gasped as soon as he started pulling out.

Charlie froze. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Wren shook his head. "Nothing. Just didn't really expect it to feel like... um... that."

Charlie's lips twitched. "I'll go slow, okay?"

Receiving the nod, he slid out, carefully. He groaned at the tight grip that suddenly clamped down on him. "Wren, my God! You can't do that!"

"Why not?"

Charlie just grunted and finally prevailed over the crush of death. He chuckled as he went to the bathroom for a wet towel. He returned to the bedroom to find Wren lying in the same spot, his legs bent so his feet were damn near under his butt. His knees were clenched together, and he had a pained look on his face.

He hurried over and sat next to him. "Baby? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Wren croaked, looking anywhere but at Charlie.

"Are you hurt?" Panic rose.

"No."

Charlie frowned, but started wiping Wren's chest and stomach clean, looking him over for injuries or any outward explanation for the weird behavior. Finding nothing, Charlie nudged Wren's legs so he could get to the rest of him.

Wren didn't move. He firmly refused to move his legs even after Charlie gave him a second shove.

Charlie frowned. "All right, little bird, enough of this. Tell me what's wrong right now."

Wren winced, and Charlie cursed. "I'm sorry, baby. But I can't help if you won't tell me."

"I don't know what to do," Wren finally blurted. His cheeks flamed brilliant pink. Charlie's eyebrows rose.

"Um... about what?"

Wren slapped his hands over his face, and Charlie had to lean in to hear him. "I can't move!"

Charlie was more confused than ever. "What do you mean you can't—"

"What am I supposed to do with all of this... stuff in my ass?" he cried. "If I move, it feels like it's going to—"

Wren slammed his mouth shut and peeked through his fingers at Charlie. He was looking away from him and he was—

"Are you laughing at me?" Wren screeched. "You're *laughing* at me?"

He threw a pillow at Charlie's head, but it only made him laugh harder.

"Well, fuck you very much, Charlie!" Wren yelled. "See if I ever let you put me in this position again!"

That shut Charlie up for about six seconds before he chuckled and crawled closer. "Baby, you are too adorable for words."

"Shut up!" Wren snapped. He crossed his arms over his chest defiantly.

Charlie went into the bathroom and returned with what he assumed was a fresh towel. He knelt next to Wren's hip and tapped his knee, "Open."

"No." Wren shook his head.

"Yes." Charlie was looking too intense and, upon closer inspection, Wren realized he was more than a little bit turned on.

"No!" Wren glared, but Charlie just stared placidly back. He didn't engage in a petty argument, he just waited long enough for Wren to realize it.

"Fine." Wren made himself unclench. Charlie spread Wren's knees and crawled between them. Then he tipped them back with his huge paws on Wren's inner thighs, so he was completely exposed.

"Just look at you," Charlie breathed, touching his fingertip to Wren's tight hole while Wren held his breath. "All closed up tight like my fat cock never even stretched you open."

Wren just stared. He whimpered and trembled, but Charlie's eyes met his, and this time there was not a touch of humor anywhere in them. Wren had absolutely no doubt Charlie was beyond aroused by this. Dropping his eyes, he

saw that Charlie's cock was rapidly thickening. And damned if that didn't turn Wren on, even in the face of his stinging embarrassment.

Holding Wren's knees back, Charlie gently ran the warm cloth around his groin, over his sac and finally down the length of his crack. Wren wanted to cover his face again, but he felt outside of himself, like he was watching someone else. Wren's heart slammed in his chest, and his breath came faster and faster. He was starting to think he might hyperventilate, when Charlie stopped and held the cloth beneath his hole.

Charlie was breathing pretty hard now himself. His pupil-blown eyes were utterly fixated on Wren's ass. Wren was quivering, made only that much worse when he felt his body responding, his cock filling while Charlie watched.

Charlie's eyes flicked upward and locked with Wren's for just a second. Long enough for Wren to register the dominant gleam in them.

"Let go."

"Wh—what?" Wren's mind went blank. He couldn't. He couldn't really mean it. But Charlie's eyes were burning into him. They held him captive. They demanded his submission, and his damn body kept reacting.

Wren licked his lips nervously. "You mean—"

"Let go, Wren." Charlie growled. He sounded feral. He looked it. "Let me see what I left in you."

"No." He could barely hear himself over the blood rushing in his ears. Wren shook his head again, but damn it, he was wavering. He was way more turned on than not, mostly from the desire in those penetrating eyes as they fixated on Wren's clenched hole.

"Yes!" It was a demand.

Wren wavered. "Please," he begged, barely a whisper escaping. But Charlie just waited, his eyes burning into Wren's.

Finally, Wren could withstand him no more. With a whimper, he slapped his hands over his face again and relented. He let it go, pushing just enough to open, to expel the remains of their first coupling for Charlie to see.

Wren pressed his fingers against his stinging eyes when he felt the semen trickling out of him. Expecting to be wiped clean with the cloth, he jumped when he felt Charlie's bare fingers touching, catching the ejaculate and

smoothing it around Wren's hole. And then he heard Charlie's breath rasping in and out, and Wren knew he needed to see his Daddy in such a state, so he finally lifted his hands and looked.

Charlie was blatantly, visibly, unbelievably aroused, and the sight of it was too much. Wren gasped, stunned, as his body instantly reacted with animalistic need. Around, inside, Charlie touched and played until Wren was squirming and panting and as hard as if he hadn't just come.

"More," Wren begged, arching and trying to bury Charlie's fingers deeper inside him. It burned, but it was so damn good; he needed more. "Another, Daddy. Please, I need more."

"Wren... God." Charlie choked on his words. He was still watching his fingers, seemingly transfixed by the sight of them entering Wren's body, stretching him, over and over. He was flushed and trembling and so obviously in need.

"I don't want to hurt you." Charlie rasped. "I want to be inside you so bad, but we just—"

"Do it." Wren demanded, his head rocking on the pillow, his pelvis slamming down on Charlie's fingers in abandon. "Damn it, Daddy. You did this to me, and now I need you in me again!"

Charlie shook his head, but rose to his knees. Another finger joined in the play, purposefully stretching him to take Charlie's cock now. Wren pulled his knees up tight to his shoulders, opening himself up as much as possible. It earned Wren one of those pained groans from Charlie that meant he'd just lost another layer of control.

But then Charlie was over him, against him, demanding entry again, and Wren tried to stay focused on relaxing his muscles and pushing out so Charlie could get in. And then suddenly he was in him again where he belonged, and Wren's entire world became the burning stretch and the fullness in his ass and the aching of his cock.

Their mouths met in a hot, rough kiss that shook Wren to his core. Charlie pulled out, and the long drag over Wren's prostate made him moan. But then he slammed back in and they both cried out. Wren's hips rose to meet Charlie's short, deep thrusts, each one a singular exploration of sensuality.

Charlie buried his face in Wren's neck. His rhythm became more and more driving until he pounded ruthlessly against Wren's gland. Wren was overcome

with sensation, clinging desperately to him. And then he felt one of Charlie's hands stroke him from his hip to his chest. A sudden rough squeeze of his nipple forced him over the edge.

Screaming, Wren came hard, gasping breathlessly with every thrust that demanded more and more out of his over-sensitized cock. Wren held tight to Charlie when he groaned, and his hips hammered frantically into Wren until he was finally shaking with the force of his release. Charlie kept thrusting long after the last drop had been squeezed from either of them, and Wren held him tight all the way through it.

"My God, Wren. That was... amazing," Charlie panted, eons later. He raised his head to look into Wren's eyes. "Are you okay?"

Wren nodded drunkenly. "I had no idea."

"Me neither." Charlie's hips ground into him, making them both moan. "Sorry," he chuckled, "can't help myself."

Wren touched Charlie's face. Charlie sobered and kissed him gently. His eyes lowered and Wren knew he was looking at his collar. He touched it, and slowly raised his eyes to Wren again, the look in them making Wren's throat close.

"I've loved you for so long, little bird," Charlie whispered.

Wren's heart pounded.

"I know." Wren hooked his finger on the chain dangling from Charlie's neck. "I think I've always known. And I love you back."

Charlie nuzzled into Wren's neck, and Wren wrapped around him, touched by the intensity of Charlie's emotions. He'd known Charlie cared, known he probably loved him. But he hadn't really realized how hard Charlie had fallen. Until now. He supposed it was true then. The bigger they are...

The End

Author Bio

Kim Alan began writing for publication approximately thirty years after first making the declaration, “I’m going to be a writer when I grow up.” It’s fairly representative of the severity of her procrastination disorder. This is her third contribution to the M/M Romance Group’s annual writing event.

Contact & Media Info

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BILLIE JEAN

By Al Stewart and Claire Davis

Photo Descriptions

There are two photographs.

Photo 1: In the first photograph a young, attractive man is dancing. He wears only panties, bra and a hat. His face is hidden, perhaps suggesting secrecy.

Photo 2: In the other photograph a man stands with his hands in his pockets, baring his toned chest. He wears sunglasses and has a surly expression.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

My boyfriend and I have decided to take the next step in our relationship and exchange keys. He works odd hours as he's a (cop, FBI, commando, doesn't matter as long as it's cool and dangerous). I have a secret that I haven't told him yet, I like to dress in women's underwear. I'm not ashamed of this at all; I just haven't found the right way to tell him, it doesn't go over well with everyone. I don't think he'll have a problem with it, but you have to take your time with these things.

I don't have too many things I'm picky on, it can BDSM, contemporary, paranormal or whatever as long as it's not apocalyptic. I'd like for MC2 to catch MC1 dancing in his underwear (maybe to Michael Jackson or something like that) as to how he finds out about the cross-dressing. Also something from MC2's job will cause some danger to MC1.

Sincerely,

Shantel

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: performance arts, law enforcement, cross-dressing, hurt/comfort, outdoor sex

Content Warnings: abduction, references to past abuse

Word Count: 18,508

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Dedication

If you have ever felt that you cannot find your place in this world—then this book is dedicated to you.

BILLIE JEAN

By Al Stewart and Claire Davis

Why is he always, *always* late...?

I manage, by a careful process of squeeze and slithers, to get my legs up on the car dashboard and arrange them rather elegantly against Dan's window—right leg sprawled outwards and the other leaning on the window. Appearance is everything after all, especially when your boyfriend has apparently abandoned you in favour of piles and piles of crucial paperwork again. I'm not usually so petulant (honestly), but it's the third time this week he's late and I really wanted to get home so I can...

There he is! Descending like a cloud of attitude and masculinity. He even walks fiercely, with a slight swagger as if to dare someone to stop him—*make my day, punk*. God, he's hot. Oh, he's hurrying too... a bit... could it be he knows he's in the dog house? A smile is sneaking through my pout though, damn it! Just watching him thundering across the car park glaring like a baddie from a TV soap opera reminds me of our "naughty cop" last night, and, before I know it I'm bloody beaming and my whole body is welcoming him like a sunflower facing the sun.

Dan does nothing quietly or with grace. He's a big, strong, silent lug, with feet like concrete blocks and hands the size of dinner plates. Gentle fingers though, despite his impressive strength... It's a wonder the car door doesn't fall off as he wrenches it open, sticks his head and impressive shoulders in, lifts his eyebrows, and blows me a mock kiss.

"Sorry, sorry, I know I'm late! Got grabbed just as I was about to leave."

"Hmm. Did you?"

The car shakes as he cheerfully hurls his bag onto the back seat and wriggles in his seat until he's happy he's made as much noise and commotion as is "Danly" possible. I don't feel ready to give up my "I am the victim here" stance just yet though. No need to take my legs down just yet—plenty of time for me to admire my new double-shade Vans with pursed lips and a sniff. Dan smiles at me pointedly and inclines his head towards the feet.

“Nice, aren’t they?” I ask innocently, lifting my jeans up to my knees so he can see the whole shoe show extravaganza. I open my legs a little more for maximum appeal and effect, and even lick my bottom lip. Just a little. He smirks and leans right over me, staring into my face and narrowing his eyes. Then he quickly checks the car park—can’t be seen having a *gay moment*—and swoops in for a quick, sweet kiss.

“You are a filthy tease. Get your lovely legs off my dashboard NOW or I’ll—” and he leans forward and whispers for this last bit “—smack your arse!”

What can any self-respecting guy say to that?

I stick my tongue out, slide my legs off with an enormous *scissor kick* and sigh as if the world’s shoe production has come to an end. Oh yeah, I showed him... We smile at each other; Dan blows me another kiss, and yes. Yes! There’s definitely some mutual meaningful eye contact.

We’ve been together now for about six months. At first, I thought he was Mister Arse with a capital A—looking over his shoulder all the time to make sure there’s no evidence of him acknowledging my gay existence. Oh, he explained it all (about a million times, perhaps) about his job... it was just him being careful, not wanting to put me in any danger... yeah, right!

He works for the *powlice*. I’m not even sure what he does really—he might have to kill me if I know too much... *snigger*—but apparently people are after him. *Bad* people, he says. Whatever!

When we go to his place, he always checks outside the house before he lets me out the car—pisses me off and makes me feel all hot and turned on at the same time! He’s not an arse really, just a bit overprotective. I once asked him as a joke if he could please carry me in, as it was raining, and I really didn’t want to ruin my shoes. I thought I’d gone too far—he stared at me with his hands on his hips, all broody and mean, but then he laughed, dragged me out of the car and without further ado dumped me over his shoulder, hand across my arse. I’d like to say I was humiliated and degraded, and maybe I was, but only in a good way.

He carried me all the way to his bedroom, giving me the silent treatment the whole time, which was hotter than it sounds. Just his hand kneading my buttocks—I must admit I rubbed off a little on the way. By the time I ended up

on the bed I was pretty much over any feelings of resentment or shame. Very much so.

“Mustn’t ruin these pretty shoes,” he muttered earnestly.

“Don’t you even think about it,” I sang dramatically, and watched as he slowly took all my clothes off, staring at me in between the zips and laces, then kissed me all the way from my ear to my big toe, which I wiggled suggestively—you missed that bit. He finished with a long, lingering suck and a lick between my toes, as if I was luxury food—“delicious”—leaving a tiny kiss between each word—“salty”—gentle nibbles round my ankles—“sweet”—trailing his chin up my calves, and leaving visible, biting trails up to my thighs as he pushed my legs apart and scrutinised me. I just lay there, completely helpless and admiring, wanting to whimper. Oh, and hard. I started slowly stroking my cock and watched him back, just to see what he would do next. I know I looked good, lying there, naked and hard. I’m slim and fit from hours of dancing at college; and judging from the way he feverishly ran his eyes over me, I would say he thought I looked good too.

“What does that taste like?” I asked in my best innocent voice.

Rough hands started at my knees and rolled up to stroke at my inner thighs lazily. “Well. Let’s see.” His lips kissed and lapped at my thighs, making little circles, and then a scrape of teeth. “Tastes of... cheeky boy.” He casually lay down next to me and watched me jerk off, then started stroking my stomach with his magic fingers, creating tantalising and complex neurological messages.

Rocks off! Rocks off!

I tried to tease him but, like always, I was the one with no control, arching my neck and whining.

His hand lightly moved down to my balls and thighs and, as he started working my nipples with his tongue, I sped up and felt the climax approaching, urgent and uncontrollable as an imminent volcano. *Got to come!* And just as my gasps turn into unrehearsed theatrical moans, Dan pushed my hand away and gripped my cock, tight. He brushed the hair away from my eyes and unhurriedly kissed me. “Slow down, beautiful,” he smirked, then released my cock and pumped me hard. My grip on his shoulders must have been painful as I jerked like a puppet in his hand, bucking and writhing. I felt my heartbeat increasing as I got ready to come but, no surprise there, he stopped me again. My little teasing ended with me naked, needy, and begging. Nothing new about that.

Anyway, to cut a long and very sweaty story short, he fucked me into heaven (I am sure I saw clouds) *and* saved my shoes—all in one afternoon. What's not to like?

I'm brought back to the present by Dan's joke (which was awful, let's face it), but luckily I am blessed with a full range of creative abilities and can laugh both attractively and convincingly—"Fantastic, babe,"—I love his awful jokes. We pull up to his house, and I prepare myself for being protected from potential criminal elements—hiding in bushes and dark corners. *A blade of grass out of place there, Dan, better check it out!* I scrutinise my man (his backside) as he checks the house over moodily, with his badass walk, then beckons me in.

"I think it's okay. The locks seem secure."

"What are you looking for?" I ask waspishly, but get no answer, just a smack to my eager butt. He seems a little serious though, and I'm glad when he pulls me into his arms and kisses me thoroughly.

Man, the guy can kiss! I wind my arms around his neck, so he can bring me closer and envelop me with his hards and softs. The tiresome frustrations of the day roll away like so much old rubbish as his tongue greets mine, caressing my mouth. He continues to kiss me possessively and passionately—pushing and probing with his tongue. I could kiss him, watch him all day. Very quickly, my body once again starts to tingle with anticipation. I hope it's going to be one of those nights, where I am led screaming into the joys, perils and bruises of kitchen-and-gadget sex. But no...

"Niall, I've got to talk to you." He sounds rough and petulant.

Now, aren't those just the words to freeze any man's heart? I'm about to assure him that he really doesn't have to, I'd be just as happy with an hour of bedroom antics, when he sucks my bottom lip in such a soft, lingering, serious way that I know being dumped isn't what's on his mind. Dan doesn't play games with me. Not those sort, anyway.

"Work stuff," he murmurs, as he kisses all the way over my jaw and neck. That's just not fair! "Important work things. Mmm." Nothing I can do to resist neck seduction—I am quivering hair gel in his capable paws, as he pulls my shirt from my jeans and strokes up my sides and over my ribs, creating sensual dominoes, which all inevitably lead to my cock. Jesus! My body arches towards

him, as he catches me by the hips and rubs his nose against mine, probably marking me with his toppy, musky scent.

“What do you do to me?” he says seriously, leading me off to the bedroom. A fair question. I suppose the best answer I can give is... *anything I bloody well can!* “Okay, after dinner then. We talk.” And I know I’ve won. This round.

After an intense and joyful hour of noisy bed gymnastics, Dan gets up to answer a call, while I attempt to impress him with my culinary abilities. Standing at the counter, I’m cheerfully stirring and chopping vegetables, when warm hands slide around my waist and I ready myself for *the talk*. Such a pity I can’t insist on Darth Vader doom music as he begins... A slight stiffening across my shoulders and a careful blank expression are the best defence tools I am able to muster. Wonder which it will be? I really like you but... I won the lottery and... or... I’m growing another...?

He looks tired, drained, leaning against the counter, arms crossed like he stepped off a “Wanted Gangster” poster. Like he has a secret. A huge sigh moves up through his chest as his shoulders slump. Uh-oh. It doesn’t look good.

“Remember I told you about how you’ve got to be more careful? When you come to my house, when I meet you in the car, any time we’re out in public. Yes?” I nod dutifully. Just how many armed get-the-gay terrorists are there in this city? He sounds anxious though, and I know it’s worrying him—whatever it is—so I squeeze his arm and listen properly. “I’m trying not to go over the top or frighten you, Niall.” He strokes my face. “But I want you to be safe. Someone at work was... followed by a perp we know from long ago. He didn’t hurt her, but—” he stops to curl hair behind my ears “—but he scared her. Next time he might go further. I don’t want that next time to be you.”

I swear his eyes actually glimmer. He looks predatory and lethal. The rest of the words, about associates and risks, they float past me in a haze. Obviously some of it’s above my head—a diva like me—but I get the gist.

Some bastard is after my man! Seeking revenge for banging up his feckless brother. That’s all I need to understand. “Let the fucker come here! I’ll strangle him with my bare, manicured hands!”

He tries unsuccessfully not to smile. “Niall! Are you listening?”

But seriously, I have to watch myself when I'm near his work, in case I am spotted and associated with Desperate Dan... and... lots of words of vital, dreary importance. All I can see is those precious little words, lit up with fireworks...

Not dumped!

I didn't really think it was over, but it's nice to hear it, just the same. I promise I will pay special attention to my surroundings, and then I get on with dinner (beaming) because I'm starving.

Next morning, he sees me off with a lingering grope 'n' kiss, and I end up with a close to fifteen-inch hard-on. Normally I leave when Dan does, but now I've got my own set of keys (mega *shitfuck* moment), so there's no rush. Time, privacy and Dan's spare room tease at my already shaky determination... Might as well...?

The black package is still there in my bag, unopened and sealed, like a Christmas present to self. The first glimpse is always so exciting! A pair of red silky panties and bra. "Firemen's Blaze", to be exact—very nice. Almost like water through my hands. They smell clean, as I inhale, new, and fresh and... I need to put them on. Right this minute!

No need to hurry this part—I want to savour this ritual of stepping into the panties. Pity Dan's not behind me watching. No one, I'm sure, could resist a view like that—sheer artistic luminescence. I slide them up my legs slowly, watching the hairs slip over the waistband, as the panties continue their journey upwards. They fit snugly over my hips, soft and smooth as I run my hands over my arse. They are clingy, but a perfect fit; made for me and my elegant behind. I cup my cock and balls, loving the red silk against my dark hair and its softness against my skin. Wearing these I feel valuable, mysterious, and unique.

There's a lot of badness in this world. Cruelty and darkness and suffering. I like to keep them out with blocks of colour and passion, like lighting a torch the only way I can. When I dance, I feel the music touching my limbs and igniting me, burning away the strains and stains of living. It's the same with the panties. Just little things, pretty little innocent things that prevent me from being engulfed by blandness and mediocrity.

They do look sexy. Oh, they do! Flamenco dancers and bull-fighting red, which brings out my own natural tone and colouring. I'm not as dark as Dan;

I'm more a warm olive all over with brown hair and eyes. But hot damn, do I look fine in "Firemen's Blaze". Something missing though... the bra. It's an expensive one, handmade with tiny stitches and intricate lace. Such a pretty thing. I like to look at it, touch it; stroke and admire the lightness of the fabric.

The act of putting it on makes me hard, my cock bulging out of the panties... but I'm not giving in to it yet—I like to draw it out, enjoy the coming together of music, dance and me, in my glam underwear. Dan's music collection (all in alphabetical order) makes me draw breath—with raised eyebrows and pursed lips, not a lot I can use (head-banging heavy metal). Likely there's some classical music that will do. Obviously now I'll be staying over more (own key) I'd better bring some decent stuff. I shake my head at his lack of musical taste—that man so needs me.

His spare room is empty, cool and quiet, with soft carpet under my bare feet, so I drift in there and begin going through my stretching routine. I concentrate on my breathing and body, feeling every muscle and limb stretch then relax until I am ready to begin. The music fills me and commands my arms and legs. I get lost in it as I move around the room dancing and jumping, swaying and crouching.

Sometimes I dance for an imaginary audience, sometimes not. Today I dance for me and for the sheer joy of moving and feeling and just... being. Dancing makes me calm and focused—helps me to channel all that itchy energy and restlessness. It makes my senses tingle and sing—my light sparkling against the greyness of life.

When the song ends, I dance back into Dan's bedroom (ours?) and look at myself in the mirror. If I'm going to be bringing clothes and stuff here, I'll have to tell him. Yep. What's worse? That he finds the lingerie and thinks I'm having an affair with a girl, or that I tell him the simple truth. I like wearing women's lingerie. Really like it. I like wearing it when I'm dancing. I like cooking in it, cleaning, watching TV. When I'm in my own house I sometimes wear nothing but lingerie all day.

What I'd really love is to be fucked in it up against the wall. Somewhere public, where there is a possibility of being seen, men peering through curtains and windows, maybe fumbling with their own zippers. Watched by strangers...

I have to tell him. Maybe he won't mind after all. He's usually cool about things, very tolerant and open minded. We've talked about all sorts of stuff—

he's dabbled in a few things I liked the sound of. We've watched porn together (plenty) and although he's mostly a top, we've both had a go at aiming the drill.

Truth be told, I really like him. I don't want to mess it up. I'll tell him later. Honest, I will.

Owkay. Here I am, waiting in Dan's car again on a Friday night. He's at least half an hour late, and the cold and resentment have sneaked into my bones and good spirits, until I'm forced out of the car pacing and shivering. *Where the fuck is he?* I nearly jump out of my double-shaded Vans as a hand lands on my shoulder, but it's just some bloke wanting a light.

We strike up a conversation and talk about the city, where we live and the new stadium they're building. He's quite funny. He bolts just before Dan appears, looking all sheepish, rueful, and irresistible. He must be feeling really guilty, because he takes my hand in his paws. I count ten seconds, waiting for the bender police, but they must be busy elsewhere because it doesn't happen...

"I'm sorry, you must be so cold and pissed at me." And there—right there—how does he know those were the very words I was about to throw at him?

"I was close to developing hyperthermia, yes." But my voice still sounds ridiculously sulky, and he really does work hard on giving me the "puppy eyes", looking all apologetic. My anger quickly fades and, suddenly, all I want is to go home with my man. So that's exactly what we end up doing.

There's nothing better than returning back home with your boyfriend, pleasant butterflies in your stomach and the gleeful knowledge that sex is in the cards. Dan catches me watching him—his hairy, muscled arms on the wheel, and long legs tapping to the music. All that pure power, wrapped in a pair of black jeans! He winks at me, crinkling his face, sending seductive messages my way.

Then he strokes my thigh and squeezes it, right at the top, suggesting what is, hopefully, about to happen. As we near the house, he starts rubbing my cock until I squirm in my seat, pushing up against him and amusing him immensely with my eagerness.

Not even ten minutes later, my legs are in the air and I'm holding them back so Dan can fuck me slowly, looking down at me as I squirm and writhe at the arousing sensations.

“Yeah, that’s it, champagne and caviar, babe.” He puts my ankles on his shoulders, smiling, and I’m as stretched as far as I can go, an elastic band waiting to snap straight into ecstasy. Inside me, I feel him rubbing on my most sensitive spot, see him carefully watching my reactions and responding to them. The sight of him on top of me, pushing and rocking, makes me pant and push back at him. “That’s it, Dan, that’s it. Bang that drum!”

He has amazing self-control—he’s a silent lover, but the deadpan expression on his face starts to disintegrate, giving up that tight hold of his emotions. All those muscles and strength concentrated on me and my pleasure. Dan is the most attentive boyfriend I’ve ever had in bed (or out, I have to admit) and as I reach intense climax, I howl his name and clutch his arms. He stills as he comes. His beautiful moody face contorts, and agony, pleasure and lust illuminate across his features. Everything else is lost to him. What’s left is pure bliss, and me.

Even when he comes, he’s still thinking of me—holding my hand, stroking my hips, kissing my legs. From time to time, I manage to blurt sappy things out to him, but I don’t want to kill the moment, so I try to hold back. The sex I had before I met Dan just doesn’t compare; the sex, or anything else for that matter. With him, it leaves me shaky and terrified but happy. He overloads me in the most perfect of ways.

Afterwards, he likes to hug and pet, and who am I to complain about it? It’s one of those rare times he seems relaxed and at ease, so I savour it, breathing in his warmth and musky male scent, welcoming his squeezes and attentions right through to my squidgy inner core. He holds my head close to his chest, and though I know I’ll move away in the night, at that moment it feels perfect and makes my chest hurt. Just me and my guy.

Next morning he wakes me at four a.m. “Niall, love, you’re gorgeous, but I’ve got to go. Something unexpected at work.”

Sleepy fog prevents me from making any kind of sensible response, and I push out an *urgh* as he leaves the house in a flurry of determined masculine panic. I am not happy. At all. *Really?* Work gets him *all* week—his time, focus, energy, even his hairy toes and Oliver Reed glare. It’s *my* time now! I do my best impression of having a breakdown, until I am interrupted by my phone bleeping. Text from Dan. It’s embarrassing how quickly I snatch it up, so I make myself wait, counting to ten in case Dan’s timing me. Hah. Not like I’m desperate or something.

Dan: *I may not go down in history but I'll go down on you.
Meet me for lunch?*

I consider saying no, but what would be the point? If I get taken out to lunch, I get to dress up. Also, damn right I intend to take him up (or down) on his offer of a BJ with trimmings. I can be business savvy like that, you know. I answer with one revelatory word, which I think sums up nicely my firm opinion on being left so early in the morning *without a shag*, as well as hinting at magnanimous forgiveness.

Niall: *Kay.*

The morning is dedicated to exercises and a long run. I take the lifelong exploration and pursuit of physical perfection quite seriously. That also applies to my dancing and college courses. The years I worked in a tedious call centre have made me ferocious about becoming a dance teacher. I'm not good enough to be a professional dancer, but I love it just the same. Dan hasn't seen me dance on stage yet, but he's seen me doing street dance with the youth workers. It's where I first met him—I could see him across the street, watching me. Too far away to really tell, but I think he had a boner. Obviously I put on a bit of a show for him—rolling my hips and wiggling my arse... It's a wonder I wasn't arrested for indecent and excessive sexiness.

The same guy is waiting in the car park, so we share another chat, without cig this time. "I work in the offices next to the police. Over there," he explains and points to one of the nearby buildings.

"No way! My... partner works for the police."

The guy seems very interested in law enforcement—says he's thinking about doing volunteer work with offenders.

He disappears just before I see Dan, who thunders up to me and squeezes my hand.

"Good afternoon, Officer. I've been very antisocial and deserve to be locked up and handcuffed to a wall."

"Old ones always the best, Niall." I get a quick peck on the cheek and a wink, not before checking for gay spies first, of course... I asked him once if I could visit him at work and have a look, maybe say hello to his co-workers. He looked at me like I'd suggested shoving a bomb up his arse, so I let it drop. It doesn't bother me, not really. Guess I'm not everybody's cup of tea... Sniff.

Lunch though—double shitfuck and then some.

He only takes me on a canal barge. A boat on the water! Now, I'm not into water sports, not even from a distance, all I can manage is a bath soak. So I stand there, doing my best "damsel in distress" impression. There's not much that shuts me up, but this most definitely does. An enormous barge, with flowers on top and fancy lettering, simply floating there in the sun. Like it's waiting for a king... and a queen!

"Come on then, naughty boy," he says, and I am led *by the hand* (people watching alert) across some little steps on board. All the time I say nothing (I am speechless, I can't pretend otherwise); I've had cologne, chocolates and even underwear bought for me before. But I have never, ever, had a Venice gondola sort of thing hired just for me!

Just for me!

It chokes me up a bit. Last week: keys; this week: a water chariot! An extremely attentive man in a nice dark suit takes our coats, and gestures to a beautiful room good enough for royalty. There's a table with glasses, napkins, candles, and flowers. Absolutely spectacular.

All that for me.

Hope I use the right fork, I think to myself and chuckle. Then it's just him and me. Impatiently, he pulls me to him and runs his hands up my arms to my shoulders and gently cups my face. He covers it with soft kisses, which for a moment seem to slip through the pores of my skin and go straight to my now rapidly beating heart. The fact that this utterly gorgeous man holds me in his arms makes me feel like I am about to lift off the ground with wonder.

"I'm sorry I'm always late, and I know I don't say much, but you know." He kisses me all along my jaw and down my neck, whispers, "You know," and I find that I do indeed know. Without hesitation, I wrap my arms around his waist and kiss him until he has to stop for air. "Is there a bedroom?" I murmur, and for a minute we just stand there in silence, all emotional and turned on.

Polite man returns and we are offered an enormous amount of delicious food. I drink *champagne*, while Dan tells me some funny stuff about when he was a kid. *How did I get this lucky?* I repeatedly ask myself. He looks so tough. You wouldn't want to cross him in a dark alley—or any other place, truth be told. He has this look about him suggesting interrogation (preferably in a dark, private corner). But he's smiling now and that combination of *cross me and*

you'll die, with those crinkles at the corners of his beautiful navy-blue eyes and that little dimple is... brutally handsome. He's a man of opposites, I've always thought—tough but kind, strong but gentle, quiet but annoyingly noisy. Especially, when he's trying not to wake me up in the morning!

Polite man is currently taking some pictures of us on my phone, and after we are done, we saunter off along the canal back to the car, me pleasantly buzzed and full of bubbling warmth “Dan. I can't believe you did that—I don't know what to say.”

He links my arm through his and nudges me with his shoulder. “You don't know what to say? *Niall* is stuck for words?” He narrows his eyes at me teasingly, and I try to think of a witty comeback. The best I can come up with is pushing him against a tree and kissing him. The possessiveness of his hand cupping my jaw is just too much to handle. I don't know if I'm aroused or about to cry. His thumb moves in slow circles on my neck and jaw, teasing, confident and strong. “Just wanted to do something nice for you, *Niall*. I might do something even better when we get home.” He runs his tongue across my teeth and the roof of my mouth. It makes my toes curl. I don't know if I can wait until we get home.

As we approach the town centre, I notice he gets cautious, scanning the street and frowning. I step a pace away. I understand, I really do. Some people (idiots) are just not comfortable with seeing men holding hands. They prefer to see us as friends or acquaintances, rather than two guys heading off home for some hot and earnest shagging.

“Strip.”

We don't even get to the bedroom.

“These.” A sneer. “These clothes? They don't need to be on you, *Niall*. Off.” I can only watch, hypnotised, as he unpeels me like a banana, breathing a little too fast. “Much better—nice.”

Although he's seen me naked a million times. I love his praise, and so does my cock. Luckily, I left some lube in the living room (it's always good to be prepared), and pretty soon I'm about to straddle him on the sofa. Dan's desperate, running his hands all over my chest and stomach, as I lower onto him gingerly, paying for yesterday's workout session.

I rest on him, just rocking slowly and stroking his pecs and neck. I'm full with him, but I still want more—an overpowering tantalising itch. Dan massages my arse, and the power of those large hands on my buttocks and hips makes me moan, my head flung back. I need him to look at me, see through me, and find me. Shivers run down my body, as he watches me slowly start to lose it. “So beautiful,” he whispers, holding my hips more firmly and rocking back up to me, holding my gaze. I love his attention, the way he's guiding my pleasure. The pressure building in my balls is becoming too much, so I kiss down his neck and roll my arse and stomach muscles in a way that drives him fucking wild—leaning slightly back onto his hands so he can see my cock jutting up there for him. Suddenly, pleasing him seems more important than anything else, and I speed up until he's sweating and grimacing, then flick a nipple hard—just the way he likes it.

For all his iron control and discipline, I can make Dan pant with need in bed. He's told me he loves my body and now my inner control freak is grunting and moaning, beside himself. No words in the dictionary can describe the exquisiteness of it. He grips my waist and pumps up into me, hard and desperate, and I all I can do is smilecry into his face, understanding his emotion and vulnerability. I fist myself furiously, pushing, pushing, and come all over his chest and chin before collapsing onto him. My body and heart cling to my guy, my rock. His muscular arms wrap around me, and he strokes my neck as we catch our breath. “So good,” I manage to whisper into his skin, wishing I was able to say more.

My ultimate aim is to make him scream as he comes; to completely forget about his usual worries, like hapless criminals, or being gay, or some unpaid bills. To give him that. Hopefully. My wishful thinking does not stop there. One day soon, he'll fuck me outdoors, up a wall, tearing my lacy underwear. Then, of course, I plan to win a million bucks from the lottery and get a top dancing job. But for now I'll take the screaming. I don't tell him this though—don't want him being overwhelmed by my confession during our sexathon. I'll tell him tonight, or maybe tomorrow, about the undies...

The rest of the day is relaxed—just watching television and doing chores together. He keeps glancing at his phone though, when he thinks I'm not watching, which is really not like him. “What's up?” I ask, but he just shakes his head—too important for little me to know. I understand that he has a difficult and demanding job, and he has no need to feel guilty if it occasionally (all the bloody time) takes him away from me. I'm not unreasonable (moi?),

only sulky sometimes. Why don't they fuck off and leave him alone? Unreasonable selfish bastards.

A bleeping phone in the middle of the night and urgent whispers and he's gone from the bedroom. *What the fuck is he doing?*

"Dan?"

He's standing in the living room, bollock naked, with his phone in one hand, pulling out his hair with the other. That is not normal behaviour.

"Dan."

He sees me and ends the conversation abruptly, snapping his phone shut then hurling it across the room, where it clatters into the wall. It's been years, but still my body responds immediately, arms coming up to protect my head, trying to look as small as I can.

"Oh, no, no. Niall! Come here." He's with me in two strides, and I'm wrapped up in his arms. "I'm not angry with you. It's okay. Okay?" and he peers into my face and I know I'm all right.

"Sorry," I whisper, after a minute. "What's going on? I know it's bad. Can't you tell me?"

He shakes his head gently against mine. "I can't. It's just work. Something bad going down, like I told you." I nod. I know how it is. The perils of being a policeman's wife—if you can't do the time, don't do the crime. No way I'm giving up this crime, so I'll just have to put up with the not knowing.

Dan retrieves his phone, and we get back into bed. He pulls me onto his shoulder and I wait. Sometimes I can tell when he wants to talk. It's like coaxing a stray cat—you have to give it some time then offer it scraps. So I wait a bit, then kiss his neck and lean up on one elbow to look at him. It's dark anyway, but at least he'll know I'm listening. He kisses me and looks back. I think. For all I know, he could be sticking out his tongue and going cross-eyed.

"You thought I was going to hit you. Didn't you?"

Oh shit. I don't want to go into that. I already told him the basics, and anyway it was years ago. I draw breath. "No. I didn't think. That's the point—it's just a reaction—like if your knee gets hit, your leg flies up." He strokes my back and thinks about it so hard I can sense the burning.

"Anyone ever hits your knee, I'll rip their head off. Got it?"

I nod and smile, relieved. Heart-to-heart over. Thank God. There's a lot that goes unsaid with me and my man, but none of it's important.

When I get back to my own flat on Sunday morning, I feel deflated. More and more I don't want to come home after being with Dan, but that's just how things are. Dan never stays here—the first time he ever came in he looked around in horror. “You live here?” he'd asked incredulously. “If you can call it living!” I brushed it off with a pretty-yet-manly (offended) laugh and we never talked about it again, though he helped me change all the locks and reinforce the safety bolts.

The next few days pass with the usual humdrum of life—college, working the bar, sleeping—until Dan calls to ask if I want to meet him at his place Wednesday night, as long as I call him, then check around the house before going in—calling him of course if I notice anything weird. I so do. “Niall? Bring some stuff, like we said. No need for you to go home every night.” I smile stupidly into the phone at him as if he can see. “I might be late, so just cook for yourself.” My lips brush the receiver, and he chuckles darkly. “Later, gorgeous.”

I take my suitcase to his house and unpack my few things. I'm unsure where to put my clothes—don't want to be presumptuous. There's lots of room in Dan's cupboards though, he's a man of few garments, so in the end I just put mine with his stuff. Can't help ruffling up his corners a bit. They look strange and smug there, cuddled up together with Dan's clothes, or maybe I'm just in a sentimental mood?

What to do with the undies.

What shall I do with them? I've got to talk to him before mingling them in with his boxers, though I smirk at the thought of Dan coming across Cheeky Chappies and Velvet Vampire one morning as he shimmies into his all-whites. He's not going to be home for hours yet and I feel a little restless, so...?

What is it about bras—the eighth wonder of the world? The pull of the fabric stretching across my body? The way that it makes me push my chest out and arch my back? The restricting sensations as I raise my arms when dancing? I ponder this profound question—up there with the Third World water supplies and how to maintain the ozone layer—and decide I need more research. Much, much more.

I lovingly select my favourites—“Sir Lee”—and strip in front of the mirror. Sometimes I like to dance naked too. Not much room for it in my wardrobe of a room, but Dan has a large and empty spare room and I've had many fantasies about performing for him there.

Dan watching in the doorway, possibly naked too. Jerking off, tweaking his nipple, grunting... I need to tell him, I really do.

I carefully put on my panties and bra and remember I brought some CDs! It's a Michael day, so I also need my trilby hat. Finally, I'm ready. Black panties and bra, hat, and a whole lot of energy oozing, set to pour out into my limbs. Da Jackson music does that to me. Stretching routine first: muscles and skin pushing back against the undies creating delicious ripples and waves. It helps me focus and concentrate, ensuring my mind and body are ready.

The CD starts, the music enters me and the world slips away.

There is nothing better than this.

My body answers to the music, nothing I can do to keep still once I hear a good tune. I'm working hard today and am really in my stride when I see him.

Dan.

In the window reflection, just a glimpse as I swirl around the room. Just standing there in the doorway to the bedroom, probably doesn't realise I've seen him. He must have seen my entire frilly range of smalls spread out there on the bed. Holy shit. A million thoughts.

Should I stop?

What if he...?

I nearly trip as my concentration wavers, but the music and the dancing answer for me and I give him the performance of a lifetime. If I'm going down in flames it might as well be to Michael. *Don't look at him.* I'm not sure if he caught me as I saw him. I didn't get a chance to really see his face, which is maybe a good thing.

“Billie Jean” starts with its firm beat, and the muscles across my shoulders roll like wheels in time to the disco synthesiser. Every time I turn I see his face, watching. I'm already tired and slightly sweaty but I pull out all the stops, push away all the badness of the world—hold it at bay with my dancing and a silly pair of panties, like waving a flag at an army marching across the skyline—probably foolish but it's all I've got.

Oh Jesus.

Every move and turn I ever did, every leap and bound and twist.

Dan!

My body remembers them all like fond old memories. I go from slow and fluid to sexy and strutting, undulating with the tune, letting it caress me with its allure. It's the best dance I ever did, if a little desperate. A dance to the death.

Dan.

When I was sixteen, my social worker came in to find me standing there in a pair of girls' knickers, masturbating. Jesus! From her reaction you would think I was tossing off over a picture of Mother Theresa. I had to go through bloody hours of them telling me I *must* have been abused by my dad, despite my protests. He was a bastard, but he never did that. They let it drop in the end, but I was much more careful after that. Why is it wrong? I didn't know then and I don't know now. It is no one else's business if I want to wear beautiful underwear. I've never told anyone since though. Not a guilty secret—more like a treasured friend I don't want to see insulted.

Inevitably the song comes to an end, just like things do in real life.

Fuck.

Everything comes to an end. I am exhausted and shaky, and I finish my dance and maybe my relationship with Dan, on the floor. Usually I'm relaxed and languid after dancing, but today my muscles start to tense up and cramp and I shiver. I could easily cry. Suddenly I'm sixteen again, ashamed and confused. The underwear feels spoiled, cheap. I can always take my suitcase back home later. There's a bus at ten. He doesn't have to explain. The silence after the music is excruciating and painful, the carpet rough against my cheek...

Footsteps thudding down as he rushes out, then the front door being slammed. The house shakes then everything is still.

"No!"

My face crumples, and I throw the hat across the room. "I fucking knew it!" Hot tears course down my cheeks and onto the carpet. *Nothing's lost, nothing's lost! I've still got my course, I'll still get to dance—to teach. I'm not homeless. Probably wouldn't have worked anyway, might as well get it over with.*

“Dan!”

And all the pretty bright panties and dancing in the world are not enough to fight this badness, this wave of grey despair. An ugly horrible noise rips from me, it's too much. I can't lose him. The misery is too intense to be contained, and my body rocks from the onslaught, the disappointment and shock. I need him! I have to get a hold of myself, I can't give in to this. Get a grip! My shoulders are shaking, my legs have cramps, and it's so cold I'm shivering all over. I want to lie there and admit defeat, ask for another chance... I should have run after him, tried to explain... but, I can't stand him looking at me now; things to be done. I want to hold him so badly my arms hurt; everything hurts. Get a grip.

My suitcase is still open on the floor, the various panties still on the bed. I scoop up the underwear spitefully and sling them in the suitcase. I open Dan's cupboards and drag out my things, my breathing ragged and harsh. That door banging, I can still hear its final thump. I can't lose him. I need to shut it all out. I can do that.

God knows, I can do that.

I rush, but there's no need—no way Dan will be back until I've gone, fucking perverted dickhead that I am. I heard the car screeching off down the road as if Lucifer himself was breathing fire up his exhaust. He won't want to speak with me again.

I pull off the panties so roughly they rip, and then I can't stop. I pull them apart, ripping off the edging violently until they look like bits of rag. Noises erupt from me like eerie night animals and for a moment I lose control.

But only for a moment.

I stand in the shower for ages, just letting the water run down my body. It's soothing, familiar. Might as well start my new life clean. Salvage what I can, not like I haven't done it before. I don't look too bad in the mirror—blotchy from the tears and scorching water—but okay for someone whose life is in tatters along with his knickers...

What?

The suitcase is gone from the bed, but the underclothes are there—all lying there neatly, arranged in pretty lines.

Along with the flowers. Flowers!

So many flowers—carnations and lilies, roses and exotic orange things with long spikes and silky petals. Looks like Rio de Janeiro and Hawaii at carnival time. Every colour known to man, all mingled in there with my knickers and bras. I can't take it in. What does it mean?

Dan appears next to me and almost knocks me over, carrying two glasses and what looks like a huge bottle of champagne. He looks worried and shy, like he did when we first met. My hand itches to touch him, to hold him, but I can't meet his eye. Silence and words and awkwardness in the small space between us. I can't stand it, let's just get it out the way. The clock ticks like a bomb about to go off. Maybe it is.

“What?” I gesture at the bed, and I'm trembling, but when I look up I can see the kindness and longing in that shy smile as he nods at me to go on, but I can't. He is trembling too, the glasses wobbling slightly.

“Put them back on,” he whispers. It's the quietest I've ever heard Dan's voice; tentative, uncertain. “The yellow ones. Put them on?”

I hear him, but I don't feel or question what he says—it just is. I do what he asks so tentatively; I slip them on silently and carefully, not like I imagined in my fantasies. Yellow, tiny things—“Morning Glory”—too small to dance in, but gorgeous across the buttocks, slipping into the crack and leaving nothing to the imagination. I know I look good from the back, because I looked with two mirrors the other day. I turn to face him and my future, but I can't quite look in his eyes. I feel shy and embarrassed, really silly. *I should be packing! What the fuck am I doing?*

I like being on stage, but this is horrible. I don't feel sexy and I don't feel like looking up. It's as if he found my diary and read all the nasty bits I'm ashamed of. I don't remember now why I even wear this stuff. I'm a grown man with responsibilities and bills to pay.

He puts the glasses on his bedside table noisily and moves so close that I can feel the warmth from his body, smell his lemon shampoo. Strong hands move all the way up from my wrists to my shoulders, squeezing and caressing, affirming. Such dark blue eyes. His stare captures me. I know I'm searching for judgement and disgust, but that's not what I see.

His voice is uncertain, trembling. “I wanted to clap and shout. You deserve flowers and applause and reviews in the newspaper. I didn't know you could dance like that.” A smile breaks over his brooding face and everything is

lifted—his eyes and mouth, even his hands as they move to cup my face. I still feel an idiot, but his sudden joy is contagious and difficult to resist. His kiss is hesitant, like he doesn't know if he is allowed, and I can't have that. I know my lip wobbles against his, and I'm a little shaky as I pull him so close against me I probably cause bruises.

I didn't think I'd get to hold him again. Solid and good and right. A sigh escapes me and maybe half a laugh. He kisses me tenderly and runs his hands over my sides and chest, my stomach and nipples, and eventually down to my panties. Each kiss soothes away the trembling and worry. He looks down and turns me, as his hands glide over my arse, fingers just teasing under the edge, his eyes slightly crinkled, frowning, puzzled and wondering, like he is touching expensive and treasured art.

I can't be the one to speak first. He just stares at me hungrily, almost with reverence, as he continues his study, covering every inch of my arse with his big fingers. Ten minutes ago my life was over, but somehow this only makes my cock want the attention even more.

I can't sort it out in my head. He seems to like them.

Dan kneels down and gently turns me back to face him. His fascinated smile and worshipping hands thaw the solid lump in my throat, and I can think clearly again. I'm also rock hard by now, as he takes me by the hips and kisses all along the waistband and over the fabric covering my cock. Sizzling tingles shiver all over my body from his touch, his hands and his attention. This wasn't what I expected.

"You don't mind?" I manage, and my voice sounds strange, as if it belongs to someone else.

He smiles and laughs a bit as he kisses my cock and kneads my buttocks. "Mind?" He pulls down the waistband so my cock springs free, and he laps at the head and swirls his tongue over me. *He doesn't mind!* I buck forward and moan and grasp his head as a finger teases at my hole, making me burn and ache and need. *Jesus!* I open my legs further as he takes my cock right down to the root. I need to feel like I am his. I try to move into his mouth, but he pulls back and kisses all the way up my cock to my stomach. I need to feel him so badly. I need to feel sexy and wanted, for him to still look at me like I am precious.

Strong hands guide me towards the bed. "Wait! The flowers! Don't crush them—I never got flowers before." I start to gather them up. So many flowers! "Did you buy out the shop?"

Dan grins wickedly. “You’re right, let’s not bother with the bed then!” He pushes me against the wall, legs and arms spread. “Niall, I can’t wait! I almost came in my jeans watching you dance. So fucking hot,” and he finds the lube and fingers me until I’m moaning and pushing back at him.

“Now Dan, do it.” I need him inside me, I just do. He starts to pull the yellow panties down, but I show him that’s not necessary due to their flimsy nature. I long ago worked out that, theoretically, you can fuck in ladies’ panties. I’m about to find out.

He enters me with a loud groan—not quite a scream—but more vocal than I’ve ever heard him. One steely hand grips mine as he rocks into me, the ebb and flow like waves on a beach, and I swear I feel the badness leaving me. His other hand slips into the front of the yellow panties, and he strokes me firmly. I am encased and filled with him and his warmth, his kindness, his care. *He doesn’t mind!* I look down at his hand in those panties and thrust into his fist, giving myself to him.

All the stress of the last hour, and perhaps much longer, is pushed from me by Dan’s firm grip and sure, tight hug.

I brace my arms against the wall and pant. His cock is relentless—opening me and filling me with raw, rushing passion. He is moaning and yelling, or it could be me. I come first and he pulls me close to him, as he follows with a yell. We sink to the floor half sobbing, covered in cum and sweat. *He doesn’t mind.* Dan is laughing, gasping and kissing me as I settle on his shoulder.

“You really don’t mind?” The air has cleared, my voice is back to normal and now it seems almost irrelevant—*just a man wearing panties; nothing to get upset about.*

He kisses my hair, my nose, my eyelids, and tilts my face up to look at him.

“Why were you leaving? I just went to get the flowers and champagne. You’ve got to have champagne for your debut, Niall.”

“The flowers—they’re beautiful. No one ever bought me flowers before. Thought you... you know.” Articulate as ever, me.

“You thought I was shocked?” He studies me with a slight frown. “Disgusted?” How does he read my mind? I nod and murmur affirmation, then realise how insulting this must be to him. Why did I think that? Dan is the best guy in the entire world. He’s never let me down. Why did I think he would about this?

“Sorry,” I whisper, but he just pulls me closer and rubs my nose with his. “I was surprised, yes. I did a double take! It didn’t make sense—I could see you and I got the hard-on but…” He stops to kiss me deeply, making gentle noises and stroking my jaw. “But I don’t care, Niall. I don’t care if you want to wear a horsetail butt plug and reins. As long as I get to ride you. Okay?”

I nod, so relieved I only realised now how much I’d worried about telling him. What a way to find out.

“And for the record? You look fucking gorgeous in that stuff. I’d like to see you in it a lot more. I’d really like to know what else you’re into.”

How did I get so lucky?

We spend the rest of the day in bed, me trying on all my various sexy underwear for him, and drinking the champagne together. He tells me how he came to be standing there watching me dance in that doorway, unable to move. “You looked brave and cheeky, made me want to look after you and fuck you and… I never met anyone like you before, Niall.”

…How turned on he was, aroused by my body and my moving and the black “Sir Lee” ensemble.

…How he wanted to speak, but didn’t know what to say and was afraid of getting it wrong.

“There was nothing I could say, Niall, that would be good enough.”

…So he’d rushed out for flowers and champagne, not even realising I’d seen him. Noisy bastard had no idea he’d banged the door loud enough to rouse the dead. I tell him my fantasies about fucking outside in the panties, maybe even wearing them when we go out. He laughs and listens and tells me some of his own fantasies, and what was I worried about? This man is fantastic! He tells me about this work party he has coming up and asks will I go with him? Of course I bloody will! Especially if I can wear my panties!

It’s the first time we’ve ever really talked, and guess what? It’s nowhere near as bad as I always thought. He even tries on a pair of panties and we crawl back in the bed together and look on his laptop at the site I shop at.

“Nah, they look much better on you, they were made for you, gorgeous.” He buys the black pair I ripped. “What did you do that for! Huh?”

I shrug, too embarrassed to tell him. “Don’t know.”

But he does know, and buys some more to boost the country's economy—a blue transparent tanga called “Lip Gloss”, and a striking purple corset called “Dracula's Bride”, as well as a few extra pairs he thinks I don't notice. I keep waiting for the *why* question, but it never comes, only the *when* and the *how often*. He's gleeful and playful, pleased to share this secret with me. He can't stop kissing and touching me, and there is no doubt. This guy likes me.

I don't know if it upset him, me thinking he was outraged. Maybe I was the silent one? I'll try harder to talk properly to him. I will.

I don't get to see him for a few days after this, and I start to miss him. His smile, his silence, his hands and his teasing.

His hands.

His company. And his hands. I've never done this before, but I decide to surprise him after college by waiting in his car for him. An impromptu visit—it's only a mile or so from college so I can easily walk. I had promised to always let Dan know when I'm coming, but surprises are good—right? I even consider waiting in just my underwear, but it's a public car park and even I'm not that brave. I just wear them under my clothes along with a little special surprise—slightly abrasive, but fucking hot. Just knowing about them, secret and silky, is enough to give me a hard-on all the way there. I'm just settling in, sitting gingerly on one buttock, when someone bangs on the glass. Makes me start, but it's just the guy I've seen here a few times—he always seems to be here when I am.

“Hi, mate, how are you doing?” I get out chatting with him. He's really friendly, and I end up showing him the pictures on my phone of me and Dan when we had dinner on the barge. He's very interested and peers at the phone and then at me, appraisingly. He tells me he's here to be picked up—he can't find his keys and is out of cash for a bus.

“Oh, that's shit! I'm always losing my keys! Here—I've got some cash.” I hand him a note, enough for the bus home.

He starts and looks at me, eyebrows raised. “No, no, that's nice of you, but it's no problem. My mate is coming to get me. Thanks though. I better go, he's meeting me at the corner,” and he shoots off, looking back at me.

I'm awoken by soft lips on mine. “Niall! What are you doing here? You should have text me! Remember? Can't have you sitting here all on your own.”

My man is here! I pull him in for a proper kiss, and despite all his protestations about danger blah blah blah, he can't resist and soon we're tonguing in earnest.

"Guess what I'm wearing?" I whisper, licking his ear and sucking on his lobe. "Bright blue, chosen by you—'Aqua Marine Shiver'—not much to them. Can you guess?" And, cheeky sod that I am, I squeeze his bulge.

He pulls back to stare at me, and I can see the arousal and horror. "Wanna see?" I shock myself sometimes, I really do. Shameless. I unzip my jeans, slowly and noisily, then show him.

"Not here. Niall! Seatbelt." His voice is husky, and he clears his throat. He starts the car and we drive off, me with my jeans pulled down my hips and my cock poking out the top of the blue panties, unable to stop the snortgiggles.

Dan looks sideways at me. "Outside, huh?" He takes us—via some 007 type driving—to an alleyway around the back of some shops. It's nearly dark, but there are people about. Voices and actual people.

"Dan... I don't know. What if someone sees us and calls the police?"

"I am the police, Niall. I want you to call me. Just before you come." His fingers stroke along my neck and under my chin; he looks radiant and dangerous. I could never resist a challenge, so fuck it.

"Okay, let's do it." I sound breathless and throaty, as he manhandles me back into my jeans.

"We'll just pull these back up while we get out. Lift your hips." He shakes his head as I start to help, then we have a furtive look at the street. Bins and the back of shops, lots of doors that could potentially open and windows above us of the residential flats; a slight breeze on my skin and just starting to get dark. Dan is grinning, shaking his head at us. "You ready?" he asks breathlessly, looking like a naughty boy up to mischief.

I nod, unable to stop the guffaws. He's rough with me, just as we discussed and agreed. He yanks my jeans and panties right down, bends me over a low wall and notices the pink-jewel plug in my arse. He lifts my arse even higher, so my feet are up on toes, and spreads me further.

He gasps, softly grunts and laughs all at once then strokes my arse gently. "Niall. That's—fuck!" Clearly the pink diamond has affected his power of speech, because all he can do is stare and stroke. I am completely on show for

anyone that might appear, with my arse high in the air and a pink diamond glittering from my hole.

“Come on Dan! Quick, before we’re seen.”

My heart starts pounding from the nerves and fear and arousal. I can taste blood where I’ve bitten my tongue a little. A heady mix of anticipation and horror engulf me. *What was I thinking?*

My balls are tingling from the exposure and excitement, and I’m hard and leaking. There could be people seeing me right now, at windows or doorways. Watching. I whine a little, as Dan strokes my inner thighs and balls, then gently removes the plug, laughing quietly. A tickling moist kiss teases my hole, which is shocking and hot. He adds lube from the glove box emergency pack, lingering there and fucking me slowly with his fingers. I shuffle out of my clothes completely so I’m naked from the waist down, except my canvas shoes.

I feel that word *exposed* in every pore, every hair and every inch of skin. Exposed, on show, naked. Maybe it’s the mixture of all the sensations, but I can hear every sound around us, every window and voice.

Fresh air and slight breeze flutters over my arse and balls. *Jesus!* I can hear a couple talking in the next street, not twenty yards from here. I quieten my grunts (not at all pretty) and turn to ask if it’s all right. He picks up the panties, shoves them in my mouth, and I’m pushed back over the wall, my cheeks parted as he breaches me, grips my hips and fucks me.

Not like I thought. Dan’s grunting is raw and ugly and my hands are sore and dirty as my body is rammed forward against the wall. Dan is totally getting off on it, rutting me like an animal. It’s fantastic and horrible; I don’t know if I like it, but it feels fucking amazing.

People. Watching Dan take out the butt plug and fuck me. Their eyes staring and appraising and judging. My T-shirt is high up to my neck, I’m almost naked. Completely on show. I’ve never felt so slutty or so aroused in my life.

I feel nasty. NESSTIE.

It’s messy and my hands scrape on the wall from the pummelling Dan’s giving my arse, but it’s so good. I want to scream, but my mouth’s full of blue lace. The friction and fullness in my arse become an unbearable pressure, and I feel my balls tighten up, ready to shoot. The panties land on the ground as I spit them out. The voices get louder and louder and Dan just loses it. He pistons into me, all control lost as I work my cock—watchers maybe jerking off too—

until I come with loud moans and wails and collapse against the wall. He shouts my name, desperate and primal, and the voices stop suddenly and go the other way.

My knees and hands are full of grit, my throat is hoarse, and Dan's cum leaks down my leg. *Oh shit!*

Dan produces tissues and cleans me up as we laugh helplessly, tears rolling down my face. "What would my chief say?" he splutters, and sets me off again. A window high above bangs shut, filling me with horror... and pride. He brushes us both off and gives my stomach a kiss, as he pulls up my jeans and hugs me tight. He carefully wipes the blue panties and plug with a smirk and a wink.

"I thought those people were gonna see us!"

He nods and we get back in the car. He looks dishevelled and hot, slightly swollen lips and cum on his hands. A badass—completely delectable. "Was that okay, Niall?" And there's my guy, not so sure and worried about me.

"Fucking hell, Dan! You were wild!" Does he need to ask me that! My whole body is suffused with abrasive cuts and grit, and warmth, as we smile at each other and drive home. "I didn't think I'd be able to do it, Niall—didn't think I'd get hard. I don't know if I should feel ashamed or proud."

"Yeah, it was the pink diamond that set you off."

I get a little talking-to, though, about waiting for him in the car without telling him: "It's not forever—only a few weeks, until the underground car park is operational again. Probably just me being paranoid, Niall. I know the car park is streets away from the station, but still... just text me next time. You never know who's hanging round. Okay?"

I agree. Let's face it, I'd agree to a lot more than half my kingdom for this guy.

When we get home he helps me to clean up my scrapes and bruises. "Aw. That one needs a kiss. And that one!" It turns me on again actually, his care and attention. He catches me watching him and soon we're necking like horny teenagers, me sitting on the sink with my legs wrapped round his waist. I love all this—doing the normal, everyday things with someone else. He surprises me. Later on, I've got my head on his shoulder, eating pizza feeling warm and cosy. "Niall? Remember we talked about spanking?" *Well. Well! Fuck me with a banana and call me Marilyn.*

“Spanking? Mm. Yes please. Like to get my hands on that gorgeous butt of yours, Dan.” He frowns at me, perplexed and amused as I smile back at him brightly. He narrows his eyes, and I giggle.

“Be my guest.” He starts undoing his jeans, and I stop him by kissing him hard and forcing a mouthful of pizza into his mouth. He gags slightly then swallows and pulls me onto his lap. “Love to spank this cheeky gorgeous arse,” he says seriously, forcing down the chewed pizza. “How would you like this? I’d start with you in those black panties. Maybe three hard smacks, just to get you tingling. Then, I’d slip the panties off and rub and massage your arse, maybe lick your crack and tongue-fuck you. When you’re desperate, Niall, *desperate*—” He pauses here to suck my tongue out and encircle it with his own, playing with the tip in such a way that can only be described as cock tease. “Then I’ll position you so your butt is sticking right up here in the air, so I can see *everything*. All on show for me—just for me. Blow some air on you—” He stops, leans forward and blows. “—then, spank you.” He draws the word spank out slowly, tasting each letter. “Slow at first, then hard. Harder! Faster! Until you come.”

I blink at him in a most intelligent and telling manner, watching him stare at me, all possessive and challenging. I swear my arse tingles in readiness!

Jesus!

“Nothing to say, Niall? Not like you.” He strokes my hair behind my ear, and my cheek rubs into his hand.

“Yes?” I squeak, pushing my face at his hand as he caresses my jaw and face. “Yes, I’d like that!” *Now! I’d like it now, please!*

“Yes what?”

Is he serious?

I sit up straight to look at him, pouting with my head to one side. He’s smiling though. “Yes, oh great Cockzilla?” I ask innocently, and we both laugh and have a cuddle.

“You’re naughty.” He licks and sucks my earlobe, making me wriggle.

“And you’re grumpy.” I pay him back with a well-trained and perfectly aimed tickle, straight to the ribs. He shrieks and we end up on the floor, rolling in pizza. I do like him. A lot...

After that, Dan has a mad spell at work and I hardly see him for about a week. I'm quite busy myself, with college and work and stabilising the economy of the UK, as well as ensuring at all times a healthy shoe collection. Come Friday night though, and I've just got to see him. Enough is enough. A tiger needs meat, a bird needs a worm, and I need my man. The rain is dripping down my neck, and there are so many puddles my shoes are just sopping messes. I intend to tell him I'm on my way to his car, really I do, but it's pouring and... So, I don't get around to it! What's he going to do? Bang me in handcuffs and hurl me into the cells? Now you're talking.

I've thought a lot about what he said about spanking (mainly with my hand round my cock), and really, I am not disinclined to the idea. My arse spasms like it's agreeing with me. Maybe we can start tonight? I'm not proper sub material, but thinking about being all exposed like that on Dan's lap, while he whacks my arse and maybe says humiliating stuff, has me popping yet *another* boner. And, and I could be *very* naughty...

A delicious memory pops into my mind of Dan last week—he laid me on my stomach, put a pillow under my hips and started off by just spreading me as wide as I could go. Then he just stared at my arse hole. Now, that doesn't sound like much, but fuck me backwards with a spoon—it was hot as hell. I felt dirty, cheap and hot, as he spread my butt cheeks and just... looked, then circled my hole with his thumbs—so arousing I tried to grab my own cock, but he stopped me by putting my hands behind my back and holding them together. Honest to God, I nearly came just from that. There is no doubt—me and Dan still have a lot of exciting, unfinished, kinky business to explore!

Dan always leaves his car in the same place, so my feet know which way to go, even though my hood's up from the rain. I see the car and head for it. There are two men crouching down by the side of Dan's car. At first I just think they've dropped something but then they see me and even I can tell they've slashed the tyres.

“What are you doing?” Not my best ever question, and before I know it they're up and have me shoved down the side of the car against a van so that no one could see, even if there was anyone out there. “What do you want? Get the fuck off me.”

There's no real fear, I recognise one of the men—the guy I've chatted with. His face is screwed up, nasty and sneering. “You little prick! You had to come here today, didn't you. Revised plan. We beat the crap out of this pretty boy—

he's the cop's girlfriend. Pay the cop back, eh, Craig?" Stupidly, I feel betrayed—I offered this guy bus fare! He sees my stricken face as I recoil and pats my arm. "Oh don't worry. You're not my type."

"Don't be daft. I won't say anything—I didn't see nothing." I start to back away, but vicious hands drag me back.

"Shut the fuck up." Then they drag me over to a black van. It all happens so fast. I struggle a bit, but they're big men and I'm not really built for resistance. It's only when they try to shove me in the back of the van that I fight—really fight. "Stop that, you little fucker!"

I feel the impact on my face but not any pain, not even when they grab me by the hair and pull me into the van. I thrash my legs and arms and I panic and scream—it's dark and there are no windows; I can't go in there. I am stopped by the feel of the blade against my throat. Icy and hot and *if he pushes that I'm a goner*.

"Wanna feel that, sunshine? No? Then keep still and shut up."

Oh Jesus. Can I run for it? The van starts and I try frantically to guess which direction they are heading, but it's too dark to tell. It swerves and roars, nausea and sobs push up my throat as I wrap my arms around my shaking knees. I don't know when the shaking started, but I'm freezing and wet and bewildered. *Are they going to hurt me?* My heart is hammering away. I'm sure he can hear it. "Where are you taking me?"

The guy I don't know sits facing me, muttering and swearing. *Is he crazy?* I try to make myself as small as possible, and I don't look at him. If I look down and keep quiet and still, maybe he'll forget about me. *Don't move, don't breathe*.

It's been years since I lived with my dad; eight actually. All that time, but I still remember how to avoid a kicking. How to be invisible. When to speak and when not to speak (most of the time). How to try and keep clean for school so no one notices my shame when I have no PE kit and no uniform. How to get by on nothing to eat, but feel the big fucking growl of emptiness and loneliness. How to not hope, and how to not ever start with the crying and the *why* questions.

I'm as alone now as I was then. Doesn't matter how hard you try to get away, that misery and being on your own will get you one day. I don't know

why I'm thinking of this now when I've spent so many years avoiding thinking of it—must be the shock.

I don't know how long I've been crying, or even how loud, but the van has stopped and both thugs are crouching down peering at me muttering at each other.

"I'm not hitting him!"

"Fuck's sake! It was your idea!"

"I don't care—he's just a kid. Just... gimme a minute to think."

I hug my knees closer and wipe my face on the wet sleeve of my coat. My face feels taut and aches after the punch, not that there's much to smile at anyway. How long have we been in the van? It could have been hours or minutes, but probably less than an hour.

"Hey, kid, calm down. We're not going to hurt you—I promise. Just give your boyfriend a scare. Teach him a lesson. No call to get upset, trust me." He pats my arm and smiles at me encouragingly, like I'm stupid enough to believe anything he tells me. Why the fuck didn't I listen to Dan? I miss him so badly at that moment I feel sick. More muttering and cursing.

"Just get rid of him! We'll get serious time for this."

"All right, all right. I've got an idea." Nicer thug crouches down next to me and beams brightly. "Okay, so this is what you're going to do. You're going to get that nice phone out and I'm going to take a picture. Then I'm going to send it to lover boy. Nothing heavy. Hand over the phone."

I find it and hand it over wearily. The crying has worn me out. I can't win by fighting, I never could.

"Good boy. Now, I'm going to just take a couple of pictures to send to lover boy, then you can go. I'd tell you to look miserable but you already do," he wheezes.

I can't think about Dan getting that picture, my lovely Dan. He'll never want me now. So I shut my eyes and lean against the van wall and try to stop the tears sliding down my stupid, hurting face.

I feel his hand on my arm. "Hey, come on, kid. It's okay." His voice is a mixture of worry and frustration, but no longer anger. He squeezes my arm then wipes my nose and this tiny act of kindness or whatever it is finishes me off. I'm sobbing and wailing, and can't stop.

“Take me back! I’m nothing to do with this.”

The nasty guy drags him away. “Take the fucking picture! This was a stupid idea.”

He takes the pictures, comes up really close, so he can see just how utterly shitty I must look. I close my eyes and look away. They fiddle with my phone, but not like I’ve got any tricky locks or codes on it. They easily work out how to send the pictures to Dan with, I presume, nasty text messages.

“There you go, not so bad was it?” No way to explain it even to myself. That they’ve made me look weak and pathetic and showed this to Dan, who thinks I’m exotic and beautiful and exciting. How can he ever think those things again after seeing me with snot on my face huddling in a van? He can’t. They’ve outed me for the imposter that I am; not good enough for Dan.

“I need to pee.” As if being photographed with snot isn’t degradation enough! I remember with terrible clarity that I’m wearing the new pink transparent panties. The nicer thug takes me out of the van and points at some woods. I don’t know where we are, but it’s in the middle of nowhere, in pitch darkness.

“Go! Get lost!” he hisses, pointing aggressively.

I get as far as the trees, listening to the thugs argue, then I do it. I just run. Don’t know where I am, but no way I’m getting back in that van.

After a few minutes of desperate sprinting, I look back and no one is following. They don’t care that I’ve gone. Waves of dizziness and nausea engulf me, until I am doubled over and throwing up. I smell and look like shit, which seems worse to me at that moment than being abandoned in the middle of nowhere. I walk for ages, until finally coming out on a road. I recognise it—a few miles from the town centre, but not that far.

I rationalise what just happened. Some thugs shoved me in a van and drove me off to scare Dan. I’m hot and cold with shame, and I feel like such a fool—this was what he’s been warning me about! These idiots are the nasties out for revenge. He’s going to be so mad at me. Maybe I can get back before he even realises? Can I get away with not telling him?

There doesn’t seem to be any buses, so I just trudge, and trudge and trudge. It takes me ages and my feet are tired and sore, blisters and cuts. I don’t know if

it's the shock, but I find myself reciting some lines from the production I'm in at college, over and over again. My tongue feels enormous, stuck in my mouth all swollen and sandy. Things start to look weird—blurry and swaying, have to lean on a wall for a bit.

Be home soon. Just one foot in front of the other... if I think about it I can't do it... gone a bit numb... everything blurs and sways. The pavement is cool against my face—just for a minute—can't let myself stop... Have to tell Dan about the panties—where is everyone? I'm so tired, I could just sleep, but I've got to get home before Dan. Reciting stretching exercises, I haul myself back up and lurch off. Every muscle aches; I'll go through them one by one, listing their names.

As I get near town, I decide to go to Dan's work. Even if he's gone home, maybe I can ask them to call him for me? I need to see him so badly, but I don't know if he'll want to see me after this. I've let him down, probably showed him up in front of his copper mates. My tongue feels like it's stuck to the roof of my mouth with thirst. When did I last drink?

There seems to be a football match or maybe a concert, because there are police everywhere. I am covered in vomit and probably look like a zombie. I can't face these people like this, so I choose the back streets. I'm kind of spacey and dazed, and I have to keep stopping and catching my breath. "Come on, Niall, you can do this—keep going." I haven't eaten since...? I realise I didn't actually eat at all since yesterday—I was planning on a nice Chinese takeaway with Dan tonight, and I didn't have any cash at lunch time. That's probably why I'm so dizzy.

There are police in uniform outside Dan's building, which is unusual. Dan told me they don't like to have uniforms outside, because of the clients going in to probation. Maybe they won't let me in looking like this anyway? I don't want to bring attention to myself, but I can't stand straight. "Can you help me, please?" They stop me and peer at me. I'm having trouble speaking and feel myself start to slide as they grab me and everything fades.

I hear before I can see. Dan's voice. He is shouting, urgent. What's he mad about? My vision clears and... *what's he thinking?* I'm sitting on his lap inside his work. There are police, and a small crowd around us. He has me in his arms and all I can think is that these people will see us! These police will know he's gay! He sees I'm awake and strokes my face and kisses me again and again. I start to tell him! *Don't—I'm covered in sick and I taste awful and, and...* but I

can't speak, and it's Dan. He's here, my guy. He is not making much sense, and all these people can see us. *What's he thinking?* I clutch his shirt and turn into his chest. My man, I'm with my man.

An ambulance screeches up, and there's a lot of clattering and fuss. I am lifted onto a bed and wheeled into the ambulance. I don't let Dan go though. I can apologise later for holding his hand in public.

He looks terrible, white and pinched and drained. *What has happened?* I start to ask him, but he shushes me and strokes my face and then the paramedics push him away. They give me this gloopy stuff to suck and after it I feel a bit more normal. I smile at Dan and his face dissolves and he draws me to him. "Fucking bastards, Niall, I thought they'd kill you. Did they hurt you?"

And I realise that all this fuss is for me. For me! "No, they didn't. Punched me when they pushed me in the van, that's all. I'm okay. Did—" I stop. I can't ask—those pictures.

Dan answers for me: "Those pictures, Niall. You looked so broken and hurt. All tied up and..." but he can't go on. His voice breaks and he holds me so close we're like one person.

"Dan?" He peers at me, stroking my face. "I... I'm filthy." I gesture down at myself, ashamed.

"Niall. Niall! You're safe, baby, you're safe." He clutches me to him, and maybe the vomit doesn't matter after all.

I can see that of the two of us, he is in the worst state by far. The paramedics speak soothingly to us and make Dan sit apart from me. I try to follow what everyone is saying, but I am just so tired and warm that I doze off.

Sometime later, I open my eyes and Dan is growling at the nurses, until they leave the cubicle, and he swishes the curtains behind them crossly. I'm half undressed in what looks like a hospital.

"No one's taking your jeans off but me." He leans over me and whispers, "Especially since I know what's likely under them." He gently helps me take my jeans and the pink transparent panties off, making sure no one comes in. "Very pretty." Dan smiles and pockets them with raised eyebrows for safe keeping. He tenderly covers me over with a blanket and holds my hand as the nurses and doctor are allowed back in. It seems I am dehydrated with low blood sugar, but otherwise fine. They want me to stay for a few hours, but then I am free to go.

I wait for the almighty bollocking that's bound to be coming my way.

Two detectives come in, and I tell them everything—the guy at Dan's car, the van and the pictures. They already know the identities of the men and are searching for the van. They ask if I have somewhere safe to hide out for a few days, and I falter, not wanting to embarrass Dan. I needn't have bothered! He shakes his head at them and butts in rudely, "Niall's coming to stay with me, of course. He's my boyfriend—I'll look after him." He glares at them as if expecting them to argue but they just nod, smile and leave.

I remember the crowd outside his work, Dan outing himself and I feel terrible. "I'm sorry Dan. I'm such a—"

He crushes his lips to mine and kisses me all over my mouth, my nose, and face. "You've got nothing to be sorry about—I brought these fucking scumbags to you, Niall. I should have been more careful." My shoulders sag as the breath I must have been holding is released. I'm not in trouble with Dan.

"You did try." I remind him of all his warnings and reminders, but he just looks at me so seriously that I trail off.

"I thought they'd hurt you, Niall. Really hurt you. Leave you raped and stabbed in some woods, just to spite me. That was the worst few hours of my life," and he is unable to go on. I tell him about my pee in the woods, having to hide the panties, and he attempts a smile, indulgent and exasperated.

Apparently I walked six miles to the station—not a marathon but it explains the blisters and dizziness. Dan promises me a feast when we get home, and the doctors eventually let us go. Dan has a very intense phone conversation with his commandant, or whatever it is, and he goes tight-lipped and agrees to allow police to watch his house.

On the walk through the hospital, he holds my shoulders tightly, like he can't bear to let me go.

I am so relieved when we get home! I feel like it's been years since I got pushed into that fucking van. Was it really only tonight? I soak in Dan's extra massive bath, while he persuades one of the police to get us Chinese takeaway.

He keeps asking me how I feel. The dreaded question. I don't know! I feel okay. Hungry, knackered, but mainly relieved. I don't like fuss; it makes me feel prickly, like pins and needles along my spine. I never know what people want me to say. I try to look for clues in their faces but...

“You want your back scrubbed?” Dan appears and rolls up his shirt sleeves. He soaps my shoulders and back, and I groan—he gives a lovely massage, firm and slow and... oh, Jesus. He slips his hands around my waist and stomach and kisses my neck then hugs me tight. “Dan! Your shirt,” I protest, but it’s too late. He gets in behind me, clothes and all, and pulls me back to lean on him. Water sloshes over the edge of the bath. “You’re mad,” I giggle as he soaps my chest and kisses my head.

It’s like he can’t be away from me for even a few minutes. It must have been shit-awful for him, just waiting and thinking of me dead. I twist about so I’m facing him and slip my arms around him. It’s not easy—but I wiggle in somehow. Water floods the bathroom, but Dan is oblivious, cradling me so carefully the bathroom crackles with all that emotion. “I’m okay, you know. Really. It was all surreal and I was so scared, but it’s over now.” The words resonate in the room, sounding odd and heavy. *I was kidnapped!*

The sobs erupt from somewhere deep. *Oh shit! This is not going to make Dan feel better, is it?* I can’t stop, though, and it’s one of those deep, painful cries that you only ever have about twice every hundred years. I end up telling him how it made me think of my dad and the fear I lived with after. I gasp out my utter shame and loneliness when they took those pictures, imagining Dan looking at them. Seeing me. Looking at that kid at school with no uniform and socks with holes in them. I go on and on, all my miserable secrets that never came out before bubble and burst out like vomit. Too much information? Oh, I think so. Way, way too much.

Once it’s all out, I just collapse on him—my face shoved into his neck and the water gone cold. Dan is holding me very tightly, and I think I can feel his tears on my head. We’re clutching each other like the Titanic’s going down around us. Probably we would stay here for all eternity if one of us doesn’t break the spell. “Come on, let’s get out. Where’s that Chinese?” I say, brightly and dimly all at the same time. We get out, him dripping and his jeans stuck to him, both looking away the minute our eyes meet, talking about rubbish.

It’s a bit awkward—how can it not be, after all that shit I just said? But we get through the meal with no more soul-deep revelations, which is good, because I’m drained and Dan looks bruised. I’m so grateful for the droning of the radio, forcing back some normality into the kitchen. I am so tired that I go to bed after that, and fall asleep almost straight away. Dan gets in some time in the night and spoons behind me. I love waking up like that, both his arms around me and his cock nudging my back.

When I open my eyes again, it's light and I can tell he's already awake. We get a call a couple of hours later in the day to say they've apprehended the two thugs and taken them into custody. Neither of us is in danger now that they're caught. Dan grunts into the phone, telling the commandant he's taking the rest of the week off. "Niall needs me. He's still very shaken up." I'm not going to argue if it means I get him all to myself for a whole week.

We go back to bed after this and snuggle. He tells me about the thugs and why they were after him, wanting to teach him a lesson, blaming Dan for their brother going to prison and then hanging himself. He can't say too much, but I get the gist.

"Niall, if I had really thought you were in danger—I'm so sorry." I hug him to me and kiss him, and we talk, and I think it will be okay.

"Hey," he whispers some time later and nudges my hair with his nose. "How you doing? Really?"

I consider this. I really do feel fine—warm and close to Dan, his hands wrapped round mine. The skin on my face is tight from the punch, but I know it could all have been much worse. Relief and a Saturday morning feeling slide over me, and I want to feel him, really feel him. "Horny?" I answer, turning so we're facing each other, and kiss him deeply, tongues, sucks, even a little bite. I'm always gagging for it in the morning, and armies of lust soldiers run up and down my body, as he languidly strokes my cock and balls. I move into his hand and reach for him. We thrust and stroke together, until he moves me back on my side.

"Are you ready for this, Niall? We don't have to. We can just cuddle and be close." I hand him the lube and silently lift my knees higher so he has easy access.

There's no words to explain it; I just want him. I just need the feelings to be normal, for yesterday to be gone. It's crazy, but my body is screaming for him—his touch, and his cock. I need to see that he still wants me, and maybe he needs that too, because emotion is all over his face and in his gentle, loving touch.

He kisses all round my neck, his rocking causing tantalising itches of lust and tenderness. The powerful urge to cry merges with the compulsion to move into his touch, get as close to him as I can. We reach for each other and finally I can look properly in his eyes. There is sorrow there, and uncertainty; he is open

for me to read. He feels sorry for what happened—sees *victim*, and I will never be that.

Maybe I assume too much, but some determination wells up; I can make this right. Sex has always been our strong haven, and there's no way the thugs are ruining that for me. I grab the lube—it's cold as I warm it on my hands then push Dan's leg up.

Soft noises escape him as I finger-fuck him carefully, making sure it feels good, watching him come undone from my hands and my heart. I make love to him slowly, holding his legs up, me on my knees, his hands gripping my legs. My power is different to his, but it's there all the same, merging with his as we toil together in such sweet agony.

He gives it all to me, loses all that command of his face and body, as he jerks and thrashes and moans beneath me. It's overwhelming. My own pleasure is difficult to hold back, burning through me, pushing, pushing. Just as I can't take any more, Dan grabs his cock and begins to come. The orgasm roars through me, stronger than the tears and the worries and doubt.

I'm crying a little—we're both crying. Dan scoots up to me and cuddles me close. Our bodies know what to say even when there are no words.

For ages we just lie there, as close as two men can be, little kisses and strokes and petting. "I always want to slow down, just look at your lovely body, but I can't, Niall. I want you so badly," he whispers then leans into my ear. "I love you."

I freeze, then try to cover it up by coughing and then biting my lip ferociously. *Way to go, Niall!* There's a million things to say, all welling up and threatening to leak out my eyes, but instead I just look at him blankly.

But he only crinkles those eyes knowingly and nudges my nose.

"Have done for ages. Yesterday, I just... I thought the worst. I want you to know, Niall. Don't know why I didn't tell you before—didn't want to scare you off, I guess. You're so out of my league, Niall."

What's he telling me? He's out of *my* league? I don't even *have* a league.

"And Niall, baby? You've got to stop all this shit—thinking you're not good enough for me."

How does he *know* I think that? He goes on to tell me I kept apologising about outing him in public when I was woozy in the ambulance.

“And stop hiding things from me. If you want a spank, tell me. If you want me to paddle your arse then fuck you dressed as Superman—tell me! We’ll talk about it.” He traces along my forehead and nose with one finger. “I don’t care who knows I’m gay. I’m *proud* to be your boyfriend, Niall. You get that? Proud.”

All this from my silent guy! There’s so much about Dan I don’t know. I wrap my arms around his head, lean in and count to twenty. I can do this, I can. “I love you too.”

And he nods at me and licks my ear. “I know.” *Arrogant bastard!*

It’s the Hag’s Ball! *You shall go to the dance, Niallerella.*

Hag’s Ball is the annual police celebration of... not sure. All that is right and good and just? It’s a formal event—suits and ties, socks, comb of the hair. A sit-down meal and then... dancing! I don’t know if Dan wants me to strut my funky stuff, but I shall be happy to oblige, if he doesn’t mind.

We agree to meet in the car park for the police formal night out so I don’t have to go in alone—don’t want all those people staring at me, wondering who I am. I scrub up well in my suit, I must say. My arse looks particularly fine—my trousers are tight around the thighs and butt, none of this shaggy-arsed bad boy image for me. I want to look sexy for my man! Even if I do have to pretend he’s not my man, though Dan says I don’t. You can’t break the habits of a lifetime overnight, after all.

The taxi arrives and dark streets rush past from the back seat. The nag of worry starts in my lower abdomen, and my lip finds its way between my teeth. I haven’t been very good around crowds, or people at all, since the thugs. It’s not that I think I’m in danger—not with my very own stormtrooper Dan nearby—just that I feel exposed and visible. The thugs are safely locked away and hopefully that’s it. But, after years of being able to move through and past people without flinching, I’m suddenly aware that I’m not after all invisible. I feel vulnerable and porous. Transparent. Dan keeps asking me about it, and I do try but... no one wants to live with a wreck, do they? So I change the subject, sideline him into sex, anything to change the subject. He runs his hands through

his hair and grimaces, and I know he wants me to talk about it, but he doesn't push.

It's not even what the thugs did—not much after all; could have been a lot worse. All kinds of obsessive thoughts drip through my brain—replaying what happened and how I might have acted differently. Some kind of delayed shock, I guess. Or maybe I'm finally coming out of the protective shell I've been in since I was fourteen?

As promised, Dan is waiting for me in the car park, leaning on his car with arms crossed, looking like he's just walked straight out of an advert for Calvin Klein.

“You waiting for me, big boy?” I ask suggestively with a wink. He smirks and tugs me in for a quick kiss. Something is shoved into my hand at the same time as his tongue enters my ear, and I don't know whether to protest or laugh. In my hand there's a pair of Sheriff Joe's finest panties. Red and frilly. Small. I'm astonished.

“Put them on,” he whispers urgently, with a ferocious grin. “Under your suit, so I know about them but no one else does.”

I huff at him as he goes back to sucking on my earlobe (why is that so good?), stuff the panties in my pocket and nod.

Yes that's right. I'm going to be wearing my slinky panties—Sheriff Joe's—under my suit in a room full of straight, serious, police people, all watching me as I dance or move around. Not knowing what's under my boring suit. Red lace rubbing over my arse and cock. Waiting to be unwrapped like an expensive chocolate... by the time we get to the building I'm hard.

He takes me to a small room with a photocopier and loads of files and cupboards, then shuts the door and looks at me with crossed arms. Mr. Moody with an indecent leer. “Put them on,” he says gruffly. “Cavities need searching, sir.”

“Oh yes, Officer. Anything else I can do for you?” I do a little strip for him, taking off everything except my shirt and socks. Dan's eyes roam over me, my cock reacting from his invisible remote control. Him watching me so intently in that office—with hundreds of people outside—is both scary and exciting. I hand him the panties—“hold these”—then I step into them. Dan slides them up over my legs and hips and smooths his hands over my arse and sides.

There's a small podium in there; I expect they use it for meetings and presentations. I grab the coat stand and place it in the middle, then give Dan a little pole dance. I hold the pole with both hands and arch my back. "What do you like, Officer?" Dan can't stop laughing and comes up to undulate with me. We grind together around the pole, until the door rattles furiously and the coat stand clatters off the stage in a deafening crash and clang.

But Dan has locked it! "Ten minutes!" he shouts, laughing.

He ends our burst of dirty dancing by going down on his knees and pushing a note into my panties. "Very good, sir, but I don't think that's going to be enough. I'm going to need—" he pauses to run his face along my erection "—more, much more, sir."

I arch into him. He groans and slips his hands inside the panties, then crushes his mouth to mine, squeezing my arse and running his fingers down my crack. My whole body is buzzing with arousal, and I grip his hair on both sides, hard, and kiss him. His hands lift me by the arse and my legs wrap around his back. My cock grinds into his as his finger circles my hole, nudging into me teasingly.

"We can't do it here!" I breathe. *Or can we?*

"No. Definitely not." He shakes his head to emphasise the no-ness, then grins wolfishly and plonks me down on the photo copier. "But here? Don't see why not." And he starts unbuttoning my shirt, then flings it across the room—amazing how quickly Dan can de-frock me! He strokes my stomach and chest and watches me intently as my fingers fumble at his shirt and trousers. I'm sure manhandling such nice clothes cannot be good for them, but the world will not come to an end, so fuck it.

Dan fishes out his emergency lube from a pocket (did he plan this?) and snaps it open. He strokes his lovely cock for a few minutes with his head on one side. "How do you want it? Your turn to choose." I consider this carefully, then turn and bend over the photocopier—be a nice reminder for Dan every time he uses it. The image of all the people copying important documents, not knowing we fucked here, flashes through my mind and I laugh. He pulls me up straight and wraps his arms around me, kissing my neck and shoulders. I can feel his cock hard against me as his hands roam my body.

"You're so gorgeous, Niall. I could fuck you all day." He runs his nose and face along my shoulders and murmurs sweet, precious words to me. This turns

me on so much. We've got so much better at speaking—not all soul searching, but treasured and meaningful to me. He bends me over the photocopier and caresses me from the shoulders to the arse, as he lines his cock up and enters me.

I love to feel him holding me as we fuck. On the hips or round the waist, knowing he's there keeping me steady with those enormous hands. He breathes and groans down my neck as he rocks and rolls his hips, sending delicious tingles through my body.

The photocopier clatters as we push against it, and I wonder belatedly if it will ever work again. I fist my own cock as the pleasure builds and spikes.

We collapse over the poor machine then slide to the floor and kiss. We never seem to get tired of each other, Dan and me. I could have his hands over me and in me all day. He smiles at me with glazed eyes as he helps me clean up and put the rest of my clothes back on. "We're going to be late!" He cups my cheek and pats me down, his hands lingering over my arse.

They play some nice songs—dance music and eighties stuff—and Dan goes up and speaks to the DJ. He looks so hot—his shirt sleeves rolled up always ticks the boxes for me. What's he doing? He's standing in the middle of the dance floor beckoning me. His eyebrows are raised and he's doing that half smile that ends in a dimple—no ignoring that. It better not be any of *his shake your head and give yourself brain damage* type songs!

I meet him on the dance floor as the beat starts and he laughs—it's "Billie Jean", of course. "Our song, Niall," he whispers, holding out his arm with a wry smile. I accept all that he is offering—has already given—by grasping his hand and meeting him on that stage in front of hundreds of people.

Just me and my guy.

The End

Author Bio

Al Stewart lives in the U.K and was never picked for the school sports teams. Al is addicted to words and often finds real life a hindrance.

Claire Davis was not selected for the sports either, but she enjoyed watching the football team.

Contact & Media Info

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BIRD MEETS CAGE

By Anyta Sunday

Photo Description

A man stares into the camera, a glint of magic in his dark eyes as he inhales his cigar making it sparkle like golden starlight.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He called himself Stardust, but one of my friends told me his name was Jean. I met him during the summer I worked at the cotton candy stand when the circus came through town.

He was made of big dreams, sunshine, and raw sense of being that I'd never known existed before him. His eyes were black as mud, his lips were the same color as the cotton candy I sold, and his smile could put a solar eclipse to shame.

He was everything I wasn't. He was the first man I ever loved, and he left without me ever telling him that the way he looked at me broke my heart.

I'm older now, and even if that circus never comes through town again, I'll still call him Stardust.

Sincerely,

Natasha

Story Info

Genre: historical (set in the late 40s and early 60s)

Tags: age gap, circus, reunited, musician, acrobatics, clown, trick riding, first love, big top, outdoor sex

Word Count: 15,957

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BIRD MEETS CAGE

By Anyta Sunday

Part One: Then

MOST OF THE stalls were run by circus folk.

Thanks to a nasty round of influenza, I'd been hired on as casual staff.

I wiped my hands, sticky from cotton candy I'd been trying to save from a sudden rain shower, on my apron.

The food and game stalls studding the fringes of the fairgrounds sat quietly, in lonely striped silence, awaiting the next wave of visitors. The peacock colors and vibrant life that had minutes ago rustled all around me, flirting with smiles and sparkling silver coins, had been lured on by a clown playing the flute. With oversized crimson shoes, he'd clomped over sun-browned grass, piped his merry tune, and the crowd had giggled and followed. To the crown of the circus. The tent.

The magic.

The rest of the place was left drained of color. Empty. Just like our town would be, when the circus left.

"Damn you, you bunch of fat-heads," came a hard voice followed by a throaty growl. "I was meant for piper today."

A high-pitched honk sounded, and a clown stumbled out from behind a roasted nut stall, trying to attach a red rubber blob to his nose. Getting his nose on seemed the least of his worries. Rain had dribbled through his greasepaint; his eyes were ringed with black, and his smile looked like it was melting. Soil dusted his red polka-dot pants and blue vest like he'd been rolling in one of the fields.

He touched his head. "Great. They took my damn hat as well."

He looked up; I glanced to my rescued cotton candy, and then to my trumpet case under the counter.

"You!"

Me.

Begrudgingly, I looked up at the clown. He was younger than the others I'd seen passing through; he had all his hair, and his greasepaint didn't get lodged in the cracked skin around his eyes. "Cotton candy?" I asked with a wan smile.

He snorted. “Cotton candy!” he said, as if that were the vilest filth in the world. And then he stopped, gave up fiddling with his nose, and plunked it on the stall ledge with a sigh. His pitch sweetened. “Actually that would help.”

He pinched a stick and procured a quarter from behind my ear. “There you go. So, kid”—he munched on the raspberry cloud—“did you see the bastard clown that stole my flute?”

“There was one leading the crowds to the show,” I said, looking over the tops of stalls to the tip of the red-and-gold-striped tent beyond.

“Yeah? What did he look like?”

I blinked. He was kidding, right? “Ah. Like you.”

He munched more of the cotton candy. “What, confident and swoon-worthy?” His melting smile quirked as his lips curved. “I’m kidding with you. Jesus, kid, you’ve gone white as me. Like I told you I want to go all the way with you or something. That’d be the joke of the day. Crack me right up.” He winked. “Now, what color were his shoes?”

I stammered out an answer, staring at the candied apples lined up on the adjacent counter. His words trumpeted in my head, but I didn’t have control over the sound, like I usually did when I played my instrument.

When I lifted my gaze again, readying myself for whatever else this clown might have to say, he was halfway toward the tent.

~*~

THE CLOWN HAD left his nose behind.

I ducked out of my apron, took the honking rubber nose, and dashed down the rows of stalls, searching for him.

The laughter of a five-hundred-plus crowd roared, and for a moment the gold and red stripes of the circus tent glowed brighter. I headed towards it, drawn by the sound, the color, the warmth it emanated.

Clipping around one side of the tent, I caught sight of my clown and followed after him, veering around tent pegs until his figure blinked out of sight. The tent door flapped in a breeze and I moved to it, sneaking closer and closer until water dripped from the slanted roof onto the back of my neck, sluicing a path under my cotton shirt. Through a narrow gap in the door, I peeked inside the tented arena.

There was so much vibrancy, it should have been difficult to know what to focus on first. I could have looked at the hundreds of cheering people curved around the ring, or the lively band as it played “The Circus Bee”. Perhaps I should have been drawn by my love of the trumpet, and honed my gaze on the glittering brass instruments. My clown might only have been yards away, a tiger lurking in the shadows even closer than that.

And I was drawn to the ring.

To him.

He danced on a cantering horse, arms stretched above his head, fingertips inches from a million glittering constellations suspended above the ring. His costume played from dark to light blue, shimmering in the light. He leaned back, as if he wanted to give his body to the stars and have them embrace him; then, in a sassy change of mind, he flipped backward, landing easily on the horse’s back.

The horse cantered on, mane and tail whipping in a steady rhythm, following the lively beat of the music. Again the man somersaulted, sleek, and graceful. As he rounded the ring, I saw his face. He smiled as if lost in the moment, as if the crowd didn’t exist and he was simply living in the music and the rush of straw-scented air breezing over him. He and his horse were one, both with eyes as dark as night and hair to match. They left a shimmering dust trail, where the horse’s hooves dug into the finely-shaved wood that laced the earth, like cosmic dust. *Stardust.*

A second horse entered the ring, and the rider’s next somersault had my heart lurching into my throat. He twisted in the air, light and free, and for a moment I was looking at a soaring bird.

I wished his back wasn’t to me, wished I too was privy to the moment he landed on the second horse and the crowd let out the collective breath they’d all been holding.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?”

I was hauled backwards by my shirt. Magic and color morphed into a muscular man with painted eyebrows and a glare to cut stone.

“Sorry, I was just—”

He marched me away from the tent. “You’re not meant to be here,” he said, and shoved me toward the stalls that paved a way through the fields. “Off you go.”

I slunk back to my stall. Fiddling with the clown's nose, I stared through another rain-shower toward the crown of the circus. The tent; the magic.

Him.

~*~

IT FLUTTERED ON a wooden post outside the fortuneteller's tent.

I ducked out, past Johnny working the stall next to mine. I ripped off the wet circus poster, folded it, and jammed it into my pocket.

Ignoring Johnny's arched brows, I ducked back to my stall. I blocked out the murmur of his voice and the splashing pearls of rainwater against the canvas roof. Sitting on an upturned bucket, I pulled out the poster and studied it

The Circus Ring

The Grandest Show In The World

Here for a Never-Before Two-Week Stint!

Featuring:

The Topsy-Turvy Twins

Willy the Whip Master

Beatle the Tiger

Moon the Balloon Horse

And Blue, the Acrobatic Trick Rider

Blue curved over the silhouette of a horse. This was him. Blue was Stardust.

The name I'd given him shadowed me through the arduous heat of the next three days.

Stardust.

~*~

SWEAT MIXED WITH the sweet smell of cotton candy, and I wiped my arm over my beading brow.

What wouldn't I give for the rain showers of the days before?

Amongst the chatter of a light crowd trickling in from a show came a sharp cry.

“Get off me!”

I jerked toward the familiar female voice.

Uptight and prim, with a warmth only my mom and I could detect. Without a doubt my sister, Rosa. And she was pinned to the grass in front of the nut stall by a...

Clown.

“Sorry, Ma’am,” the clown said, struggling to unhitch a button from his shirt that was lodged in the belt of my sister’s dress. “I fell over my shoes.”

Rosa swatted at his hands. “Off me. I’m a married woman!”

The clown gave up fiddling to untangle them and yanked the button off. “Well that there is a mighty pity,” he said, leaping elegantly to his feet and offering her a hand.

She refused his offer of assistance and he plucked up his fallen hat, tipping it to her, before clomping around a corner.

I finished swirling cotton candy and darted over. She was on her feet now, pulling up her dirt-stained gloves.

“Ridiculous. Circus. What are you thinking working here?”

I tugged her into a quick embrace. “How was the honeymoon?”

She nodded curtly and followed me to my stall. “It was all right, I suppose.”

She might have said more. Might have elaborated on her new husband and their plans for the future: white picket fence, four children... I didn’t hear any of it.

Standing at the counter—with a casual lean, shadowed eyes, and rosy lips—was Stardust.

I blinked and took in his black shirt and the smattering of dark chest hair peeking out the top. Heat that had nothing to do with the sun wormed its way to my cheeks—and my johnson.

Stardust chuckled and I snapped my gaze from his tapering torso to his face. “Sorry,” I murmured. “Cotton candy?”

“They call it candyfloss where I was last.” His voice was smooth and accented. But I couldn’t place it. Like it had been watered down by time spent

in foreign lands. Or was an amalgamated mix of everything. Whatever it was, it was exotic.

Perhaps it was Circus.

On automatic, I picked up a stick and went through the routine of making him a fresh batch. I kept glancing over at him. I wanted to say something. Keep talking to him. Keep him there.

But how? What could I say?

I glanced from my sister to the stalls around us and back to him, searching for inspiration.

“I saw you ride,” I blurted. “You were... good.”

“You’re only ever as good as your horse,” he said, his eyes twinkling in amusement as he glanced toward the cotton candy machine.

I couldn’t look away from him. “Your horse must be the best, then.”

He laughed, and a web of cotton candy wrapped around my hand. I looked down. The whole stick, my hand, and part of my arm were overloaded with a cloud of sweet cotton.

I pulled back and offered a small, embarrassed smile. “I’ll make you a new one.”

Stardust crooked his finger at me; as if I was attached to strings and he was my puppet master, I moved forward. “It’s a little like you’re star struck,” he said quietly as he peeled off the cotton candy from around my hand.

His fingers grazed over mine and sent a tickle of goose bumps up my arm.

“You don’t have to be, you know,” Stardust said. “I’m just a guy. One who’ll even eat the candyfloss that’s been wrapped around your hand. We’ll call it the thirty-second rule.”

He slipped some candy into his mouth and licked his lips, making the bottom one glisten in the sunlight.

“How do you fly like that?” I said, though it came out breathy.

Stardust carefully plucked the cotton candy stick from my tightly pinched fingers. “You think I fly? That might be the best compliment I’ve ever had.”

My throat tightened. At a loss for words, I clamped my mouth shut on a strange-sounding gurgle.

Stardust twirled his tongue on the top of the cloud I'd made. "I've been doing it since I was a kid," he said; the way he said it made it seem as if he was old. He couldn't have been more than my sister's age. Twenty or so.

"You grew up in the circus?"

"I grew up in the world. Never stayed more than a summer in the same place."

"Oh." Wow.

Clearly Stardust was everything I was not. Elegant and graceful where I was clumsy; a man of the world where I was a seventeen-year-old kid from a small Pennsylvanian town. A town I'd never left, and likely never would.

"Thanks for this," Stardust said, dropping a coin on the counter.

I could see him retreating already, and panic made me lurch forward, banging into the counter. Candied apples rocked. "Wait," I said. Stardust paused. "I play the trumpet."

He raised a brow.

"I... I wanted to know who I'd talk to about performing a little."

"You want to join the circus, Floss?"

"N-no. I just thought if there was any spot to showcase local talent, that maybe... It was just a thought." More than a thought, it was a dream; it was why every day I'd trugged my instrument into work with me. I hoped that I might be able to play. Show off. Shine for a few minutes. The circus brought in a big crowd too, a crowd I could never have when they left.

Stardust smiled again. "Everyone deserves a little magic. Let's see if I can't find some for you."

And with that, he twisted and left.

Rosa cleared her throat. "He's a bit strange, isn't he?"

Strange? No. Unique. Yes. "What do you mean?"

"Eating candy from your hand like that. You'd think he was starving. Or..."

"Or, what?"

She lowered her voice. "You know. Fruity."

FRUITY OR NOT, the rest of the day my hand still tingled with Stardust.

I didn't think he'd eaten the candy because he was desperate for all the food he could get. I thought he'd done it as a message. Like he was telling me he knew what I really was, and that was okay. Like the handshake for a secret club.

Like maybe a “your golden hair and green eyes and blushing cheeks make me shiver too.”

Discreetly, I dug that hand into my pocket and rearranged my aching cock with it. Even through the cotton of my pants, I felt that tingle travel and caress.

~*~

LUST STIRRED, in every thought of him. Like that night, in my single bed, staring up at the attic ceiling.

A train rumbled past my house, making it shake. Just like it did every night at ten on the dot. Unlike every night, I closed my eyes and imagined I was riding on a horse with Stardust. I could almost feel the rise and fall of cantering beneath me.

He pushed me down against the horse so I lay flat, looking up at a sky full of stars. He leaped to his feet, standing close to my crotch. A playful smile touched his lips as he lifted one foot and massaged my cock with it.

My hand was under the sheets now, inside my briefs, stroking. I was so hard, aching; it felt like I would never release the rapidly building tension.

I increased my stroke. No, not my stroke—it was his foot working me as we cantered. I moaned, pushed down my pants to give him more access. Air kissed my cock, and Stardust groaned, throwing his head back toward the stars as he gripped himself through his tights.

Yes. More.

He heard my plea and his hooded gaze met mine. *Stay right where you are. No sudden movements.*

He turned around, his back to me. Slowly, his hands came down either side of the horse, his firm ass jutting out...

The rumbling stopped; the train had passed. I fumbled for the tin of Vaseline I kept under my bed, slicked some on my fingers and shut my eyes tightly once more.

Stardust lifted himself into a handstand, all sleek lines and taut muscle. *I promised you magic, here it is.* Then he scissored his legs and rolled down until he was straddling me. He moved his hands to my thighs and pushed his ass back, sliding up to my chest.

Then his mouth came down on my cock, slick and wet. He had me all the way down his throat and was lifting off again. On and off, on and off, his cock rubbing against my chest. He worked me effortlessly. I wanted to buck, I wanted to stretch myself all the way down his throat, but his words rang in my ears. *No sudden movements.* And so I lay, rigid, flying with pleasure that bordered a painful need to release—

I quickened my stroke, panting, my Vaseline-covered fingers sliding effortlessly. Firmly.

Stardust was swallowing. His throat clamping and pulsing around me—
I came.

~*~

I WAS GLAD of the sun the next day.

Glad the heat could be used as an excuse, to mask my embarrassment.

I wished and hoped to see him again.

I wished and hoped he'd never show up.

He didn't show up.

I went home disappointed.

And relieved.

~*~

I BLINKED. Stardust was at my stall again.

“Floss!” Stardust smiled and gestured to the muscled man with the painted eyebrows who had caught me gawking at the show. Thankfully, he didn't seem to remember me. “This is the man you want to talk to about playing your trumpet.”

I wiped my candy-gloved fingers on my apron. I was just wrapping up for the day.

The large man spoke, his voice kinder than the last time. “Play something for me, kid. We'll see what you've got.”

“Really?” I grinned. “Now?”

“Well I haven’t got all day, have I?”

I nodded. And nodded some more. “Sure. Absolutely. I just”—I lifted my hands—“need to wash up.”

“You do that and come to my sleeping car. Blue, show him where to go.”

“Yes, Topyy.”

Topyy left, and suddenly I was face to face with Stardust. A smile played at the corner of his lips, and for a second I thought he could see into me. That he knew all my thoughts. Every dream. Every stroke.

I jerked out of my apron, took my trumpet case and marched to the fountain. Stardust was close behind me, warm, smelling of molasses. I twisted sharply and pushed my case into his hands. “H-hold that.”

He took it and I swiveled back to the fountain to wash my hands. “Thank you,” I said to him, staring at the water as it flowed over my hands, his reflection distorted in the silver bowl. Still, I could see he smiled. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“Sure thing, Floss.”

I looked over my shoulder, and there it was in full force: his smile could have lit the circus.

I followed him to the train of sleeping cars, in a smaller field on the side furthest from town. “Just relax,” Stardust said, flinging an arm around my shoulders. It was a casual fling—something a buddy might do—but for me the heat of his arm seared down my middle, making it simmer inside until I laughed, giddy and lightheaded.

“You all right?” he asked.

Just bubbling, thank you. “Nervous.”

His fingers squeezed the curve of my shoulder; he may as well have had his hand on my cock, the way it stiffened. “Think of something that makes you happy, and put your soul into it.”

Happy? Soul. He was looking at that, in its purest form, right now. “Will you be here? Listening?”

Stardust shrugged. “I have to take care of Willow. Would it help if I stayed?”

I nodded. Perhaps a little too eagerly. "It's just," I said, fighting off an urgent need to lean further into his warmth, feel his body pressed close to mine, "Topy seems a little intimidating."

"A strapping lad like you, intimidated?"

That bubbling reached boiling point, and I tensed, like that moment before climax.

He seemed to sense it too and dropped his arm. Passing me my trumpet case, he asked how old I was.

"Seventeen," I said.

"Oh." *Young*, I heard, though it went unsaid.

I added hurriedly, "Almost eighteen." And because I wanted so badly to know: "You?"

"Twenty-five."

Topy swung open his door and chucked a cigar at Stardust. He caught it and wedged one end into his mouth.

"Get on with it, then," Topy said to me, and I crouched down, opened my case and set up my instrument.

I brought the trumpet to my lips and began. My lips tightened as they locked into the notes; sound cut and sliced and ripped and tore through the air around me. Bright. Lively. High and low, fast and slow. Rough and sharp. Alive, like a million bees buzzing in harmony.

It mightn't have been the magic of the circus tent, of Stardust somersaulting on a horse, but it was my slice of something.

When I finished, out of breath and high on life, Topy flicked his cigar and nodded. "Not shabby, kid. But you've got a bit of cooking to do."

Not shabby? Cooking? I faltered, my high dropping to my toes. I didn't dare to look over at Stardust. Disappointment was more bearable without an audience. Especially one so talented. So beautiful.

"Oh. Right. Well, thanks for listening." I crouched, sealing my focus on packing my trumpet into its case.

A tendril of cigar smoke hit my nose. I followed its trail to Stardust, who'd moved to crouch before me. "Topy's pretty picky," he said. "You're actually pretty good."

Pretty good. Coming from *him* it hurt more than Toppo's "not shabby".

"Uh-huh. Yeah. It's fine."

I snapped the buckles of my case, stood up, and without even an acknowledging nod, hiked out of there.

~*~

A FEW DAYS passed.

Miserable days; they should have been gray and overcast.

I hated that they weren't. That the sun was brilliant, birds tweeted, a fresh breeze made the heat bearable; that every person around me was bright and cheery, flashing their thousand-dollar smiles and brightly colored costumes.

They all seemed to live in a cotton candy cloud.

~*~

THEN HE GIFTED me magic.

I was quite sick of moping, and even sicker of accidentally honking the nose the clown had left behind. I had it tucked next to the cash register in case I saw him emerging from behind the nut stall again, but that was a trick he didn't seem to be performing anymore.

It was late at night, and Johnny working the stall next to me had already packed up and left.

A rap came at the front of my stall, above where I crouched to pick up a bunch of cent pieces I'd dropped. "Sorry, we're closed," I said, standing—

Stardust.

Smiling. With a dark horse behind him that would have merged into the night had it not been for the colorful strings of lights outlining the circus tent.

The coins slipped out of my grip a second time.

Stardust leaned against the counter. "Floss. I know it's late."

His creamy voice, combined with the thrill that came with the night, had a shiver scuttling over me.

"Late. Yes." I bent and grabbed the coins again, setting them down next to the register. "What are you doing—"

HONK!

The horse merely twitched, and Stardust burst into a laugh. "You're unexpected. I like it."

"Why are you here, Stardust?"

"Stardust?" He looked startled for a moment.

I stammered, "Blue, I mean."

His smile stretched, like it had when he'd performed, and I bathed in its warmth. "Stardust," he murmured. "I like that." He leaned against the counter, glancing back to his horse. "I've been wanting to see you for a few days. I felt bad, about Topyy not giving you a shot." He shrugged and looked at me. "I promised you a bit of magic and never delivered. But I have tonight off from chores and I wanted to make up for it."

Just him standing there, a small grin dimpling his cheek, made up for it already. "Make up for it how?"

"There's nothing like a nighttime ride on a full moon." He patted his horse. "Would you like to come with Willow and me?"

I locked up, and Stardust led me toward a small picket gate that led to large, empty fields.

"You know how to ride a horse?" he asked, linking his fingers together to help me jump astride.

"The basics," I said. I'd never ridden bareback though. Not that I was going to admit that to Stardust. I didn't want him changing his mind.

"Up you go then," he gave me a leg up and I swung onto Willow's back, clutching at the horse's mane.

A second later, Stardust was there behind me, chuckling lightly. "You can sit up, I've got you."

I released my hugging hold of the horse, and eased upright. Stardust pressed himself tightly behind me, gripping my waist. He shifted slightly, and whatever he'd done, it made Willow move. She walked, following the fence line into the darkness ahead. The circus lights blinked, bit by bit, out of sight.

"Do you feel it?" Stardust asked. "Every step in the darkness is exhilarating. I love it and fear it and want more of it."

Yes. I felt it. Like being tickled with feathers until there was nothing but sensation.

“You could have forgotten about me,” I said. “You didn’t have to do this.”

We moved into another field. “I was seventeen once too,” he said. “I remember how it feels. I thought I was the best, then. Thought I could do anything. But Topsy didn’t let me star that year. Or the year after. I was nineteen when I was good enough to attract an audience.”

“You’re trying to make me feel better because you see yourself in me?”

No answer. Just the wisp of his breath in my hair.

And then:

“I just wouldn’t want you giving up, is all. Keep practicing. One day you’ll play for the crowd of your dreams.” Stardust brought the horse to a halt. “The sky is so clear out here.”

I looked up, the back of my hair brushing over Stardust’s face. I hesitated for a second, and then gave in to it; I let my head rest back on his shoulder. The stars gleamed brightly, so vast that they made me, in this moment, seem so small. I closed my eyes and shivered as a soft gust of wind blew over us. His hard, warm body shifted behind me, and I peeked out from under my eyelids. His neck was so close. If I twisted just a bit, my lips could kiss him. I could breathe in his scent and taste him. A memory I could hold on to for a long time.

But Stardust was looking toward the night sky. And I was just a weight on his shoulder. Perhaps he felt the spark I had for him, but he did not reciprocate it. Not the way I wanted. Not with the intensity I wanted it.

“What about you?” I asked. “Are you living all your dreams?”

He looked at me then, and his breath hitched against my forehead. “I want to keep flying. I want all the world to see me, know me.”

And that was beautiful and sad all at once.

Soon summer would end, the circus would leave. He’d go with them, flying closer to his dreams, and there’d be nothing left of him in my town except stardust.

~*~

WE SPENT A lot of time together, after that.

We met every day and talked as he took care of his horse or mucked out the elephant enclosure.

He told me of all the places he'd been, the people he'd seen, the adventures he'd had. How he was passed around the circus for raising when his parents died, and how he'd been given his first horse at four, and taught if he fell off to get right back on again.

He laughed as he told me how Camilla the Camel had once decided to run away, and he'd had to ride after her, jump on her back and steer her back to the circus; or when a bad chicken stew had the entire circus crew sick on their opening night. *Between acts, we were all throwing up into troughs outside.*

But for all his stories, for all his jokes, for all his color, glitz, and sparkle, the thing I learned most being with Stardust was how lonely he was.

It came with a sharp edge, that realization.

He had his cigars after work, poker games aplenty. But then he went back to his section of the sleeping car. Alone. And what was the point in seeing every color of the rainbow, if you could never share it with anyone else?

His stories collected dust. Were eventually forgotten. Just another day.

Then there was me. His duster, polishing his memories and making them shine.

I wanted to be whatever he needed me to be.

So I was.

~*~

I TOOK A stick of cotton candy and met Stardust in the horse car.

He combed his hand through Willow's mane, murmuring appreciative words. He glanced over his shoulder at me.

"Thought I felt you there," he said.

It was getting too much, all these days so close together. I trembled with it: I wanted to touch him. Feel his skin against mine. Taste him. Have his silky voice in my ear.

Again, just like every time, he gave me that look. The one that said he liked me there. Needed me there. But he was sorry: he felt my yearning, but no, he couldn't give it back.

Stardust patted his horse and moved over to me in the shadows, near the door connecting the cars. He stopped in front of me, his boots touching my shoes.

“You’re too young, Floss,” he said.

“I’m taller,” I said. Because I was at a loss at what to say, and that seemed to make some sort of sense.

A soft chuckle. “Yeah, that’s very true. Suits you too.” He peeled the stick of cotton candy from my hand. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t. Please. I need... something.”

Stardust stared at the candy and then his gaze flickered up to mine. “Close your eyes.”

Cotton candy touched my brow with a soft scratch, then skated down my nose, across my cheek and over my neck to the edge of my shirt. Fingers lightly brushed the tips of my hair back, and then breath, feather light over my top lip. A whisper of a kiss caressed my skin, and it lingered, even when he drew back.

“Thank you,” I said. “That’s... enough.” It wasn’t. Not nearly. But for now—for today—it would do.

~*~

HE GAVE ME a ticket to watch his show.

I stared at him until everything else blurred but the beat of the band—or perhaps it was the thumping of my heart against my chest. Stardust leaped, twisted and turned. I gripped the bench as he swung off the side of his horse to hang, upside down, as Willow cantered around the ring. One foot pointed to the canvas roof; his arms stretched out, as if he was soaring.

The audience cheered, drowning out my yells and claps. So I clapped harder, yelled louder. But still, I would not be heard over them. I was just one amongst thousands. Stardust would never be mine; he belonged to everyone.

When the show was over, I stood near the back of the tent, waiting, until everyone had left.

Wiping the sheen of sweat off his brow, Stardust walked across the ring toward me. My tongue clacked against the roof of my mouth as I tried to say a hello. He wore his costume still; all navy, and all very tight. He stepped over the small fence of the ring in light leather shoes.

“What did you think?” he asked, his gaze darting over my plain slacks and mud-brown shirt.

“Your performance was...” I had no words good enough to describe it. Except: “Stardust.”

He laughed and drew closer, touching my sleeve, fingers bumping against my elbow. “It’s an incredible feeling being out there. So... high. I feel so high.”

He shifted and I wanted to shift with him, but my feet were glued to a soggy spot of ground. Air drifted between us—

And then he came close again. So close his lips were almost touching my ear. “I have an idea. It’s not the real thing, but... tomorrow, after we’re done performing, bring your trumpet. Stand in the ring and play.”

Tomorrow? It was my birthday tomorrow. After work, I’d planned to spend it with my mom and my sister.

But Stardust wanted me here.

So here I’d be.

~*~

THE NEXT DAY, my eighteenth birthday, I met Stardust with my trumpet in tow.

“To the Big Top,” Stardust called across the fairgrounds, waving me nearer. Gray clouds above us snapped into a sudden rainstorm. I jerked open my umbrella and we huddled under it as we hurried to the circus tent. Vast and empty and full of potential.

He perched himself on a chair and lit a cigar. It sparked and glittered. But of course it did; it was magic in here.

“Go on then, Floss. It’s your cue.”

I moved to the middle of the ring, pulled out my trumpet, and played. The vibrations tickled my skin as I watched him, and they became his touch, his kisses. Him.

When I’d finished my piece, I continued staring, the brass instrument hanging in my limp hand. He held my gaze, and then walked over to me; when he was close, he moved around me, slowly. His sigh hit the back of my head.

“You look comfortable in here. Confident. Do you wish you were part of the circus?”

There might have been the tiniest tang of hope in his voice; I couldn’t be sure, and I didn’t want to encourage it. Well, I did, but I couldn’t.

I stared toward my trumpet. "I love playing. But the circus is not for me."

"Why not?"

"Because my mom's here. She's sick." I left out that Dad had died in the last months of the war. A lot of dads had died in the war.

"I'm sorry."

I brushed it off. My sister and I looked after her. We did all right. "And besides, I wouldn't want to be so lonely."

He stopped moving. "Lonely?"

I hurried on. "I know this town like the back of my hand. As much as the circus is you, this town is me."

He was quiet as he finished walking around me, just his footsteps over packed earth and our breaths. I touched his sleeve when he didn't look up at me. I felt bolder around him now to do it.

Glancing up, he stopped and then smiled. "It's beautiful, the way you like me. You know that?"

Like? *Like?*

No. This was something infinitely more.

I pulled him close. My courage ended there though, and I could only hope my gaze said everything I couldn't.

Stardust swallowed, his Adam's apple jutting hard.

"Today's my birthday," I said quietly. "Eighteenth."

"Happy birthday, Floss."

I leaned in, and for the first time I told him my name. "Nathan. My name's Nathan."

"And what do you wish for your birthday?"

"One night. Next to you."

His breath caught. Eyes widened. Nervous, like I hadn't seen from him. He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and pulled out a second cigar. He failed to light it. Cupped his palm around the end, and tried again. But it wouldn't catch.

I took it from his lips; it felt dry and papery against my fingers. I didn't smoke. Never had. I placed the end of the cigar between my lips, took his lighter and held it to the tip. I breathed in too hard and my eyes stung against the repressed need to cough. Smoke twisted out the sides of my mouth, and through its wispy tendrils: Stardust grinning.

“Give me that back,” he said, and pinched it from me.

My mouth felt curiously empty, and I submitted to a cough.

Stardust laughed and took my hand, pulling me toward the exit. “One night,” he said. “*Next* to me.”

We rode Willow back to the train cars, and set her up for the night. And then, with a nervous smile, Stardust took my hand and led me back through throngs of conversing circus folk to his sleeping car.

He had one nook of it—at the far end—curtained off by thick oriental drapes.

We stood close and Stardust's breath shuddered as he leaned closer. I held my breath, awaiting the kiss, but he tugged on the drapes behind us, curtaining us from view.

He hovered there for a moment and then spun his back to me and began peeling off his clothes. I did the same, but when we were both tucked up in his small bunk in nothing more than our briefs, staring at the wedges of moonlight printed on the car ceiling and the drapes, I made up my mind to ask him.

It was my birthday after all. If I could get anything more from him, it would be today.

I shifted in the cool sheets, turning on my side to face him. Our legs bumped together, the hairs conducting jolts of electricity from him to me. Half of his chest was free of sheets. If I touched the fine hair there, would it jolt me too?

God above, I wanted to jolt and be jolted. Jolting with Stardust.

As if reading my thoughts, he turned his head toward me. He spoke low, barely a whisper, in case we were overheard. “I'm scared to touch you, Floss.”

“Why?”

His look saddened. “It really means something to you.”

“And it wouldn't to you?”

“Don’t you see? I’m just a moment. One quick magic trick, and then I’m gone. It... it wouldn’t be right.”

Boldly, I slid my hand down my briefs and stroked myself. I met his suddenly heated gaze. “Would it be so wrong?”

He reached over and wrapped his fingers around mine, halting me. “This is a shared sleeping car.”

“And the rest of the crew are all outside drinking. No one’s in here.”

He closed his eyes but didn’t pull his hand away from mine. “You’ll regret this one day.”

“No. I won’t.”

His fingers slipped to my cock, and I hissed in a breath as he rubbed a thumb over the slit at the head. I let myself go, rolled onto my back and grabbed the sheets. “Yes,” I whispered. “More.”

He moved onto his side, one arm pillowed under his head, his fingers playing in my hair. He wrapped his other hand around my cock and stroked, smooth and slow. I whimpered, relieved he was finally touching me. Happy, like it was me who could fly, who had the world at his fingertips.

Stardust whispered in my ear, but the words were lost to the sensation of all those jolts. They were there with every jerk of my cock, with every brush of my hair, with every warm breath at my neck.

I couldn’t have held still if he’d asked me to. I bucked into the sensation, toes curling to points and stretching the pleasure. I felt like the sweetest trumpet vibration I’d ever played.

I glanced at Stardust, at the lust quivering in his cotton candy lips and the need in his deep gaze. And then—

Then he squirmed down, nose bumping over my side and hip and the curve of my ass. His hand stopped pumping and his smile touched the tip of my cock.

It was his smile. His lips. His mouth. And I needed it. My hands flew to his head, gripping his hair; I stole as much of that smile as I could, thrusting into his mouth, the head of my cock meeting immediate suction, wet and warm—

In and out, once, twice, and thrice, and like I’d delivered the last note of an overture I stilled, all the jolts and vibrations coming to a sharp and sudden end. “Stardust!”

He let me go and rolled his weight on me, jamming my release between our stomachs. I let out a shuddering breath, and stared at his shadowed face above me. I could feel his hard length digging against my thigh.

“What about you? Can I...?”

Stardust kissed me. Soft. Slow. Almost tentatively, as if he'd never really done it before. So in contrast to the confident way he'd pumped my cock. He drew back slowly. Lethargically. Whispered, “Happy birthday, Nathan.”

~*~

THE NEXT MORNING, he was gone.

Though I sought to, I didn't find him the rest of the week. He was evading me, and I grew impatient, restless to see him once more.

He'd liked what we'd done. He had, I was sure of it.

We could do it some more. We could... we could...

I found him brushing down Willow in the horse car. He saw me and glanced away.

“Why are you avoiding me?” I said, coming closer. I wanted to grab him and drag him into the shadowed corner, where I could feel him against me again.

“Sorry, Floss.”

Back to Floss, were we? “What happened to Nathan? That was short-lived.”

He rested his forehead against Willow's long, sturdy head. She nibbled at his neck.

“At the very least, you could answer me that.”

His shoulders rose and fell, but he said nothing.

I swallowed. Moved closer. Maybe if I told him how I felt... “Stardust,” I said quietly, closing the distance.

He twisted sharply. “You're quite something special, but I can't.”

I opened my mouth, and he reached out and pinched my lips shut. Just to have him touch me, I was grateful. Relieved. Maybe these last few days were just a hiccup. Nothing that couldn't be fixed—

“I'm a bird.”

Yes, he was. And so beautiful when he flew.

“Stop looking at me like that. I’m the bird, and you... you’re the cage.”

~*~

I’D BEEN PAID.

Knew it would happen.

But still. It felt like *abracadabra*, and the circus was gone.

That early sun-mocking morning, I trudged through the muddy fields. Tire grooves marked the ground, and I followed them to the spot where his sleeping car had been.

I sat on the flattened grass that might have been under his bed.

A movement in the long grass across the field startled me. I hauled my heavy limbs upright and dragged myself nearer.

I caught a flash of orange and black. Stripes.

I froze.

They couldn’t have. Surely they hadn’t left the—

It moved again, and I scratched my head trying to remember a time I’d seen the tiger without its handler. Would it be tame? Or would it rejoice in its newfound sense of freedom and... eat me?

I stepped slowly backwards.

Another orange flash.

I stumbled back, falling on my ass, and then the tiger spoke.

“Where the hell am I?” He sat up and rubbed his head. A man after all—a clown. *The* clown.

He blinked in the morning sun, his make-up not as smeared as the first time I’d seen him. He looked like he was made of porcelain, with a dark red smile and black stripes above and below his eyes. His tiger-striped suit billowed in a light breeze. He looked around slowly, the truth soaking in. But still, even though his lips didn’t curve, he was smiling. “Ah, Christ.” He spotted me sprawled on my ass a few yards away. Loosely, he hugged his knees. “They left us here, huh, kid?”

My voice came out croaky, but I wasn’t surprised. I’d been holding back a cry. “Yeah.”

He sighed and searched the grass around him, eventually pulling a dark case onto his lap. "At least they left my flute."

"Didn't leave me anything," I murmured.

He shrugged. "'Cept me, it seems."

I laughed. "What can I do with a clown?"

He wagged his painted brows. "Laughing already. I seem to be proving my worth."

He tilted his face to the sky and soaked in the sun.

"Why'd they leave you here?"

"Bunch of bastard clowns," he said. "They hate me."

"Why?"

"They're all chrome-domes, aren't they?" He pulled his hair. "I have all of this."

I held back a laugh.

"I'm too much competition," he continued. "Pulled all the ladies."

I slipped on a chuckle. It was just... No, sorry. Maybe without the greasepaint. But with... It was a joke—

I stopped smirking. *It was a joke!* "You're good."

He winked back at me. "I know." Then he fished inside his clown suit and pulled out a packet of cigarettes. He lit one up and breathed out the smoke in rings. "It was Spotty. He must have drugged me, the bastard. If I ever see him and his crimson shoes again..." He growled. "Gonna punch him in his fat red nose."

Cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, he picked himself up off the ground. "Right then, kid." He beckoned me to follow. "One door closes..." He shrugged and sized me up. "Well, you'll do."

He clomped his way across the field, yelling over his shoulder, "What're you waiting for?"

I started and moved after him.

DANNY.

His name was Danny, and he was twenty-four years old. I took him home, and my sister froze. “Who’s that, and what’s he doing in our house?”

“This is...” I glanced from the clown to my sister and shook my head. “This is my door,” I said and led him toward the kitchen.

“He said it,” Danny said. “And I make a fine one.” He winked at her as we passed. “You feel free to come a-knocking any time, Ma’am.”

I yanked on his sleeve, pulling him out of harm’s reach.

There came a laugh—one I hadn’t heard for a long time. I swooped my gaze to my mom, in her armchair in the corner of the room, knitting. She purled a few more stitches, studying Danny. “Are you as cute without the greasepaint?” she asked.

“Mother!” my sister said.

Danny placed a thoughtful finger to his chin and tapped a moment. “Some might even say cuter.” There was a furtive glance toward Rosa, who couldn’t make her mind up whether to blush or frown. She settled on sharply twisting out of view.

“If you’re going to be hanging around my Nathan,” Mom said, “you’d best wash up and join us for breakfast. Nathan, show him to the bathroom.”

I led him to it and handed him a fresh towel. “You wouldn’t have some cold cream, would you? This paint takes that, a whole lot of elbow grease, and the sacrifice of a towel to get off.”

I pointed to the cabinet next to the sink. “I’m sure Rosa has something in there.”

Danny grinned, took the towel, and leaned on the open doorframe. The mirror in the bathroom reflected us: a bright orange tiger-clown, and me—a not-quite-grown-into-my-broad-frame eighteen-year old with golden hair and skin. I almost looked gilded. Like one of those canary cages they sold at the antique store.

Stardust had been right about me, in so many ways.

“Stardust?” Danny said, raising a brow.

Had I spoken his name aloud? “Blue.”

He cocked his head. "Blue. You and Jean close, then?"

"Jean." I tried out the name. It didn't glitter like Stardust, but it was softer, more real. I only wished he'd been the one to tell it to me.

My gaze focused sharply on Danny. And I could see he knew. Knew what I was, what I wanted. I shifted from foot to foot, swallowing hard.

Danny's permanent smile encased a real one. Calming. He lowered his voice. "Me, I'm a liberal man. Just saying."

"So you... don't mind?" *Won't say anything?*

Danny slunk into the bathroom. "Course not. And Nathan? The rest of the world might not be there yet. But times are gonna change, my friend. Just you wait. Times are gonna change."

I slouched my way back to the lounge. Rosa took me aside as soon as she saw me.

"Oh, Nathan," she said, "Your... *door* has to go."

I looked over my shoulder, to our mom and back. "It'll just be a while," I said. Until another one opened.

~*~

Part Two: And Then

TEN YEARS LATER, Danny was still my door.

He suffered through my first love's woes, and then we teamed up and earned our lettuce by performing duets, organizing children's parties, and running music lessons.

~*~

HE SWORE LIKE a sailor, smoked like a chimney, but boy could he make my mom smile.

We finished Mozart's 12th Allegro trumpet and flute duet and bowed to the small audience in the living room. Mom and my sister's oldest girl clapped loudly, hooting, "Encore!"

Danny—dressed up in blue and pink polka-dots—pretended to drop his flute and fumble after it, making Rosa's youngest boy giggle.

"Shall we then?" I said, lifting my trumpet to my lips.

My sister edged into the room. Our babysitting for the day was close to ending, and I wished it would last longer. Give Rosa a little more time for herself. Another bruise blossomed under her eye, and I blew my trumpet with anger. The kids liked the music, jumping and dancing once more around us. Little Tommy tugged at my pants, and in a bout of giggles, my mother leaned forward and yanked them up again.

"Nathan?" Holly said once we were done.

I knelt next to her. In the corner of my eye, I caught Danny motioning for my sister to follow him into the kitchen.

"Yeah, Holly?" I asked.

"Why does Danny dress up as a clown?"

"Because he loves it when you pull faces at him."

"Can I be a clown when I grow up?"

I ruffled her hair. "Sure, kid."

I went to the kitchen after Danny and Rosa. My sister sat in the chair, in her blue frock cinched at the waist with a wide red belt. Her hair fell in curls around her face, curtaining her from me.

Danny was crouched at her level. He lifted her chin. "That ain't right, love."

Her lip wobbled and she glanced away. "How'd you know anything, Danny? You're just a clown."

Danny stood, nodded. "You and I both know that's not all I am." He moved away from her, pausing when he caught me standing there. Though his smile was painted on brightly, his gaze sheened, and this time his mask couldn't hide his hurt.

He moved past me; I glanced to my sister and then over my shoulder to the door—

I went after Danny, catching him in the bathroom, his fingers sinking into a tub of cream, a sacrificial towel hanging from his shoulder. He looked up at my reflection in the mirror. Ten years had passed, but for a second it was that first day again, and I felt his pain. *My* pain, when Stardust left.

"Don't," I said, glancing toward the running water. "Never wipe off a clown's smile when you're sad, remember?"

He dropped the cloth in the sink, sighed, and swiped at something on his cheek. "Sometimes the laughs need to be for me, too."

At twenty-nine, I was taller and broader than him and I easily swooped him against my chest. "Let's go out tonight. Hit the town."

"As long as you don't leave me so you can rock 'n' roll with some guy behind a hydrangea bush again, you're on."

"Only happened twice."

And there it was. The slightest quirk at the edge of his mouth.

"Now you can wash up."

~*~

A YEAR LATER, when my sister divorced, we celebrated.

"Do you wonder where you might have been if you were still in the circus?"

Danny blew out his smoke in rings, tapped his cigarette, and took a gulp of beer. "Yeah, sometimes. But between you and me, those clowns drugging me and leaving me behind? Best thing that could have happened."

I smiled and drank the rest of my whiskey. "It must be hard doing what you do all the time. Looks tiring, trying to be funny."

“Trying?”

I motioned for a fresh drink and smirked.

Danny sucked in some more smoke. “Not all smiles are because something is funny,” he said.

My freshened drink came, and I sipped some more as he continued.

“If that were the case, I’d be fast out of a job. Sometimes it’s just about being there. A spot of color for people to gawk at, to brighten their day. A little chat they could have about with their neighbor. Even if it’s just to say how weird they think it is that a grown man should dress so—job accomplished. They get their conversation, a leg down and off the lonely horse. Sometimes, standing next to me makes ’em feel better about themselves—we all like to smile like that on the inside every now and then. And I like to give it. Feels like I have magic.”

Magic.

Just the mention, and all these years later, I thought of him. Jean. Blue. *Stardust*.

Danny’s barstool creaked as he swiveled around. “You wonder where he is?”

“You a mind reader now?”

“His name is practically written on your face.”

“Less and less over the years, but yeah.” *He was the first man I ever loved.* “I wonder.”

“And if you could see him again? If you could say one thing?”

I’d tell him the way he looked at me that day—when he called me a cage—broke my heart. I twisted my tumbler, picked it up, and sipped the golden, fiery liquid. Even my drink was a reminder of him. “I’d tell him I have a good life here.”

“Liar.”

“Hey, Danny?”

He let the smoke tendrils out of his mouth this time. “Yeah?”

I looked at him. “I have a good life here.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah.”

We lifted our drinks and clinked the glasses together. At the same time, we said: “To Rosa.”

~*~

THE DAY OF my mom’s funeral, the circus came back to town.

It fluttered on a lamppost outside the church. I darted toward it, passing Danny—dressed as a clown as my mom had wished—and my sister tucked next to him, crying into his polka dots.

I ripped off the circus poster, folded it, and jammed it into my suit pocket. Then I slipped next to my niece and nephew, and we entered the church to say our final goodbyes.

At the end, alone in the church, sitting on a hard pew with tears rimming my eyes, I pulled out the poster and studied it.

The Circus Ring

The Grandest Show In The World

Want to be a wonder of the world?

Acrobatic Auditions

Will the Amazing Blue Approve You?

I glossed over the address; I didn’t need to read it really. I knew where they’d be. Since a strike in the mid ’50s, the Big Top wasn’t allowed anymore, and all the big events had to be performed in arenas. Not more than a half hour away, they’d erected one to be used by all the local towns.

A clomping echoed down the aisle and I glanced back. Danny shook his head. “They’re back, aren’t they? Those damn bastard clowns have the nerve to show their mugs back around here.” He had a ripped poster in his grip and he was scrunching what life was left from it. “Well. We’ve got some accounts to settle, you and I.”

I glanced down at the trick rider on the poster. “I don’t think I’m going to see him.”

Danny stopped. Looked around. Frowned. “Sorry, did you hear that?” he said. He jerked around toward the doors at the back.

I listened. “Don’t hear anything.”

Danny’s brow creased and he craned his head. “It sounds like... like...”—he faced me—“a stupid, fucking mistake.”

He clapped me over the back of the head.

“Ouch.”

“Just trying to knock some sense into you, Nate. Working yet?”

He clipped me again.

“Stop. Stop. I get it.” I stood up, straightened the lapels of my suit jacket, and sidled out of the pew.

“You better get it. I was the one that saw every crack in that heart after he left. I was the one who put it together. I’m the one still searching for the missing piece. You understand? You need to face him; tell him what you wished you had, so you can move on. For real.”

HONK. I yanked off Danny’s red rubber nose, the same one from all those years ago. The one he’d told me he’d made himself, from a mini car horn and a rubber plunger. He hadn’t worn it in forever, but for Mom—for today—he had.

“What was that for? Gimme back.”

I honked it again; it echoed loudly in the church. Mom would be laughing. “Why do you always have to be right?”

He looked at his one-piece suit of sunshine. “How could I be wrong?”

~*~

I WAITED THREE days before I went there. Danny too.

I slipped on a pair of jeans, a shirt, my well-beaten leather jacket, and studded boots. Running a hand through my blond hair, I stared back at myself in the mirror. Older, taller, broader, with a permanent five o’clock shadow and the first sign of crow’s feet.

Danny clomped into the bathroom in his signature yellow and blue shoes and applied his greasepaint.

“Thought you were going there to punch what’s-his-face.”

“Spotty.”

“Yeah, Spotty. What’s with the costume?”

“This fight is clown to clown, Nate. Clown to damn clown.”

~*~

I WATCHED FROM behind a pillar.

The arena was set up almost the same as the Big Top—it had the large round ring at the center, only with permanent seating around it, rising higher than it had in the tent.

Record music played, the beat fast, setting the tempo for the horse in the ring to canter.

A woman rode, twisting and jumping gracefully around the ring. She was talented, but I wasn't compelled to watch her. Or the lad who tricked next.

They just didn't stretch as high, fly as smooth, smile as bright.

Among the small, huddled crowds around the ring, I looked for him.

The music stopped. And then—his voice. Smooth and rich as I remembered it, with an accent I still couldn't place.

“...will be in contact.”

Their smiles bright, cheeks brighter, and voices close to chirps, the crowd slowly emptied out of the arena, disappearing behind a plush red curtain at the back of the ring.

Their voices dwindled in the distance, leaving an unsettling quiet behind. I should have slunk down the aisle toward him, but I was rooted to the spot, evening sun soaking into my clothes and kissing the back of my neck.

Stardust stood on the far side, at the edge of the ring. He shuffled over packed dirt. A new song came on, fast and rhythmic.

And just like that, he swung up on his horse and urged it into a canter. Around the ring they rode, moving as one, and I was watching a bird taking off into flight once more. Stardust climbed gracefully onto all fours, and then stood.

He was just as breathtaking as he had been twelve summers ago. He stretched his arms above his head and then out to the sides as he lifted his leg. Higher, higher. Bending over, he braced his hands and lifted the other leg.

That's when it happened. He was coming out of his handstand, his legs scissoring as he curled to a sitting position. He let out a sharp cry and his right arm gave sharply, throwing him off balance.

He tumbled off the horse.

I jerked out from behind the pillar and raced down—

Stardust broke his fall, twisting neatly into a roll. But instead of standing up and getting out of the ring, he just sat there, staring at the ground. Or maybe the triangular pattern fencing the ring.

The horse slowed to a walk, crossed the ring and nudged his shoulder. Stardust absently patted its nose, and then leaned against it.

I was already halfway toward him; I wasn't going to retreat. But I slowed my steps. What was I to say? How the hell was I going to say it?

He spotted me. I knew the second he had, the way he straightened abruptly and pushed to his feet. His tightly fitting costume clung to him just the way it had back then; he looked just the same. Like it was summer of '49 and I was crossing to chat with him after one of his practices.

Only his smile was gone, and his eyes seemed darker than the dark they'd been. Back then, there'd been a swirl of something more. Hope and aspiration. The exhilaration of the next show. Yes, there'd been a shade of victory in his gaze, of having a plan that would help him conquer the world.

"Floss," he said, stepping to the edge of the ring.

I stopped on the other side of the low fence. "Stardust." He was smaller than I remembered, maybe by a foot. But otherwise, still the same.

Music buffered us. Made it easier not to talk right away. But the song was winding down, and I couldn't take the intensity of his stare anymore. I glanced from him to his horse.

"Willow's looking good," I said.

"You remember Willow?"

When it came to him? Everything.

Stardust twisted toward his horse, petting it. "It's not her, though. She passed on."

"Oh. I'm... sorry."

A flutter of awkwardness pulled between us. "It was a while ago now, '55."

A while ago now. Just like we were once a while ago. It was an "a while ago" I finally wanted to put to rest, bury. Leave behind me for good. That was why I was here.

I straightened. Sucked in a deep breath, and faltered when he rubbed his shoulder with a wince. “That was quite a fall you took...”

He shrugged with his good shoulder. “I’m used to falling now.”

The way he said “now” had me wincing too. “What happened?”

He laughed, but it was hollow. “Sometimes big dreams have a way of turning into nightmares.” He focused on rubbing his horse’s neck under the mane. “Why’d you come?” he asked. “Curiosity? Or... something else?” His hands stilled.

You broke my heart seemed impossible to say. Besides, I wasn’t that Stardust-struck kid anymore. My twenties had given me a few things. Confidence among them.

I stepped over the fence, came up behind him, and rested a hand on his shoulder. His tremble carried through my arm. It’d been... well, it’d been a long time since I’d felt such a jolt. I leaned toward him and spoke in his ear. Another little something sparked between us. “Curiosity is definitely a part of it.”

He twisted, resting his head back against the horse. Holding my gaze, he said, “You’ve really grown up, Floss.”

“It’s Nathan.”

His lashes closed briefly as he drew in a breath. “What else do you want, Nathan?”

My name on his lips sent the largest jolt through me, sparking sense-memories of *then*. His voice in my ear. His kiss tingling my bottom lip. His fingers in my hair, nose down my side, mouth locked around my cock.

I steeled myself against the memories. “To tell you I’m more than a cage,” I said. “I’m a home. I hope you are as happy in yours as I am in mine.” I leaned forward, bumping my nose against his, and kissed his lips—sweet, as if he’d recently eaten candy. “I’m here to say goodbye, Stardust.”

I kissed him once more, and left.

~*~

HE FOLLOWED AFTER me.

He kept calling my name; I kept ignoring it. Outside, in the adjacent arena grounds, I waltzed down an aisle of stalls so much brighter than they had been back then.

Breezes hit my back, bringing my name closer.

I turned a corner—

And jerked to a halt.

I blinked, not sure quite where to look first. Down the way, flanked by candy and toy stalls, were two rolling clowns. Stripes versus spots. A small number of people stood, backs pressed against the stalls, watching the ruckus.

And then... there—tingling awareness of Stardust at my side.

HONK!

My clown rolled again, pinning Spotty beneath him and landing a punch to his nose. *Whoosh*—

Danny was thrown off him by a third clown who appeared suddenly from behind a cotton candy stall. Their yells were indecipherable, save the odd curse and Danny's "Bastard!" when a rainbow-colored clown kicked him in the side with his elephant-sized shoes. Spotty lunged at him, his smile dazzlingly bright in the last stretches of evening sun. Danny jerked back and yanked at his fake nose. It stretched and pinged back into his face.

"Drugged ya!" Spotty cried. "I shoulda *ended* ya!"

Spotty crashed into the cotton candy stand, and a pegged stack lining one side toppled over and joined the chaos.

Cotton candy flew in all directions, and the crowds didn't know whether to stop them or laugh. I knew better than to get in the way. This business was strictly theirs.

They rumbled and tumbled, and Stardust edged closer to my side, until I was just as much watching him out the corner of my eye as I was the fight.

A loud horn blasted and circus security were about to enter the fray. The clowns broke apart.

Spotty scrambled up, hooked an arm around Rainbow and dragged him off, giving Danny the finger.

On his knees, Danny yanked at the hair on his head. "I still got mine."

He wiped the blood off his lip and straightened his dirt-and-candy-covered suit. Glaring at Spotty retreating through the crowds, he muttered, "I got more important confrontations than this, anyway."

Danny stormed off, and I moved after him.

Stardust caught my hand. "Wait."

I faced him, but I didn't think there was anything he could say that would change what had happened. It simply was, and now we could move on. "What we had was a wonder of the world. Let's leave it at that."

He opened his mouth and clamped it shut again. And I stood too long, staring at the way the light picked out the red strands in his dark hair, the way his eye-shadow glittered.

I stepped back, and he spoke. "Jean. My name's Jean."

That one word had me frozen. How many times had I imagined him sharing his name with me? How many times had I murmured *Jean* alone at night?

"Jean."

And he smiled. It cracked the skin at the edges of his eyes and that made his smile shine brighter. I zipped up my leather jacket as high as it would go and forced myself to step further away. "Bye, Jean."

~*~

HE FOUND ME in an ad in the Yellow Pages. *Music Lessons with Danny and Nate*. He hired us.

We went to perform. I knew the moment I saw the sleeping cars. Still, I moved forward. The door opened, and Stardust came out, hiding behind a sparkling cigar.

Danny looked from him to me and back again. "I'll just wait outside for a few."

When he left, I stepped up onto the lowest rung leading into the car. Stardust didn't move. I took the cigar from him and butted the end against the metal car. It hissed and I chucked it over my shoulder, walking up another step. We were level now, and Stardust was swallowing.

"What do you want?" I said.

He stepped back into his car, and I followed him to his tiny area screened by heavy drapes. No one else seemed to be around.

"To apologize," he said. "I never wanted to hurt you, but I did. I'm sorry."

I dropped my trumpet case on his bunk, and sat at the end, my fingers caressing the patchwork quilt. The same one as then. “What were the last twelve years like for you?” I said quietly.

He paced the short length of the bunk before me. “The circus wasn’t as strong-going there these last few years. I think we have television to thank for that.” He glanced at me, swallowed, and continued, “Competition is getting stiffer too. Crowds want more acrobatics. The Russians really have something there. It’s going to be a big thing.”

I rested my elbows on my thighs and clasped my hands together. “You know that wasn’t what I meant.”

He stopped pacing and plunked himself on his trunk. “I thought I could fly anywhere, and for a moment, I really could.”

I looked at his arm, the one he’d cradled in the ring. “What happened?”

“Someone set off a firecracker during my act. My horse is used to a lot of sounds, but that one came too close. Spooked him out. I was in mid-somersault, and my ride wasn’t there when I landed. Broke my shoulder.” He massaged it as he spoke.

“Must’ve been tough.”

He dropped his hand and rubbed his thighs. “What about you?”

“I’m fine. It’s been a tough few years with my mom getting worse, but she’s in a better place now. We buried her last week.”

“Oh, Nathan.” He rose, as if to come over and embrace me, and then changed his mind. “I’m sorry.”

A short silence followed, and then he glanced pointedly at my trumpet case. “How about your dream?”

“Well cooked, I’d say.”

“Would you”—he cleared his throat—“play for me?”

“Why?”

“Curiosity. Among other reasons.”

I opened my case and assembled my trumpet. The sound exploded around us, alive, full of energy; a reminder of what we once were. I played the piece through, my gaze on him the entire time, until the last note ended.

He let out a breath, as if he'd been holding it. "You're quite excellent."

"Curiosity satisfied," I said, packing the instrument away again. "What were your other reasons?"

Stardust had changed too, in the last years, from dreaming large to something more focused. He spoke plainly. "I wanted to see if you'd look at me the same way you did when you played back then."

I slunk out from behind his drapes, and moved toward the car door. Stardust followed and when he was close enough behind me that his breath stirred my hair, I twisted, grabbed him by the waist, and pressed him hard against me. My mouth met his in an urgent kiss. A surprised moan, and then Stardust wrapped his legs around me. I twisted him around and shoved him up against the door. His cock hardened, nudging mine, just as stiff.

I pulled back an inch. "I looked at you the same way." I cupped his cheeks and kissed him again. Hard and deep, until we were both in need of catching our breath. Stardust rested the side of his face against my neck, his eyelashes tickling my skin.

I unwrapped his legs from my waist, and carefully set him down. "When it comes to wanting you, Jean, that never was nor ever will be the problem." I pushed back his hair, and brushed my thumb over his cheek.

"Problem," he said softly, gaze unfocused.

"Yeah," I said, and his attention sharpened on me, a twitch in his jaw telling me he heard. "You're still a bird. I'm still the cage."

~*~

A WEEK LATER, during a jamming session in my basement.

"He wants to see you again," Danny said.

I blew in the trumpet, the note off-key. The vibration stretched from where I played under the stairs to where Danny lounged on the orange couch in front of me. Lowering my instrument to the back of the couch near his head, I cleared my throat. "I don't know who you're talking about."

He blew a bubbly little vignette into his flute. "Of course you do."

Of course I did.

"You met him?"

“Bumped into him in town, outside Smith’s Antiques.”

In town? I’d never seen him outside of the circus before; how would he have looked, strolling across the main square? Just as graceful as on a horse? Did his smile shine, did he merge comfortably with the townsfolk? I wanted to know what he wore, what he looked like. Were his eyes darkly shadowed? Did he smoke his sparkling cigar? “Oh. Right.”

Danny rested his head on the back of the couch and looked at me. There were a few seconds where we didn’t speak. And then Danny sighed. “Written on your face,” he mumbled. “Is this going to be a repeat of ’49?”

The doorbell rang, saving me from having to answer. Danny raced upstairs and answered the door; I followed behind, slowly.

If I met Stardust again, I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from touching him. I knew that.

Which was why I was avoiding the circus. I might have been older, might have been more in control of my emotions, but Stardust held a special part of my heart. He always would, and I didn’t want to risk him having more of it.

Or did I?

Rosa stood at the door, crowned in morning light. She looked younger than she had in years, hair pinned up, and maybe, maybe the beginnings of a smile on her lips. She folded her arms and then dropped them to her sides again. Glancing down, she shook her head. “The other day, when you came by...”

I paused at the end of the hall. Danny had visited her the other day? I inched back, but my curiosity was too great to keep me out of earshot.

“Rosa...” Danny said. My sister raised a hand, stopping him.

Her voice broke. “Please, don’t say it again.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ll cry.” She sniffed. “I... Danny, I don’t deserve you. You’ve only ever offered me smiles and I’ve only ever shaken my head at them. I’m so sorry.”

“Please, Rosa, may I speak?”

Again, she shook her head. “Is... what you said, is that what you really want?”

“I’d give up my smile for you, if that’s what it took.”

“No,” she said firmly, and then again, softly. “No. I need to make up for the past, Danny. I need to find a way of showing you how wonderful you’ve been. My kids light up when you’re around, and... it’s been a long time where I’ve felt the same way.”

“What are you saying, Rosa?” The hopefulness in Danny’s voice froze me to the spot; how much I wished for this. How much I wanted to hear my sister say it. How much I wanted Danny happy.

“I’m saying... just give me a little time to prove I’m worthy.”

That’s when she glanced over Danny’s shoulder and spotted me, down at the other end of the hall. “I’m going now. But soon, okay?”

She twisted on her raised heel and left.

Danny ran a hand through his hair and leaned against the doorjamb, watching her go.

When he turned around, he said, “I know you’re there, Nate. The house was too quiet.”

I moved toward him and took up the other side of the doorway. Danny pulled out a cigarette from his pocket and lit it up. His hand was shaking, and his gaze was shiny, full of dreams—like Stardust’s once had been.

“What if it is a repeat of ’49?” I said.

Smoke stretched down the path my sister had taken. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

We stared at the way the breezes played with the smoke, making it dance over lavender and the rosebush by the picket fence.

“When did you fall for my sister?”

He laughed. “You won’t believe me.”

“When?”

“The first moment I saw her. She held herself so confidently, dressed so proper.” His grin twisted naughtily. “I just had to make myself fall over her.”

All the way back then? I shook my head. So he’d fallen for her quite literally.

“What can I say?” He shrugged. “It was love at first sight.”

I believed him. Because that magic had been there from the first moment I'd seen Stardust, and now, twelve years later, the spark still remained. “I believe you.”

He blew out another breath of smoke. “You're going to see him again, aren't you?”

I nabbed his cigarette and sucked in deeply. “Let's get ready. We have a party to get to.”

~*~

THAT NIGHT I knocked on Stardust's sleeping car.

Topsy opened, with his painted eyebrows and bowler cap. He didn't seem to recognize me.

“I'm looking for Jean,” I said.

A chorused rumble of laughter came from the car, along with the heady scent of alcohol and smoke.

“He's off with his horse somewhere,” he said, and snapped the door shut.

Jamming my hands in my pockets, I trudged down a line of cars toward the smell and chatter of animals. I kept to the shadows, out of sight of the circus folk. The night was navy blue, a silvery moonshine glittering on the tops of the cars and the train tracks in the distance.

I found Stardust outside a car with his horse. I slowed my step, watching him comb his fingers through the animal's mane. He murmured something, and then as graceful as a dance, he mounted.

I stopped suddenly, the abruptness of it catching his attention. He glanced through the night.

And then it was his turn to still. “Nathan?”

Composing myself, I moved out from the shadows toward him.

His stare penetrated me. Made my skin pebble with goose bumps. A molasses-scented breeze ruffled his hair and the horse's mane.

And then he steered a few steps until he was looking down on me. He reached out a hand, his good one. “Come.”

I did. Though, granted, with much less elegance.

My body slid behind his, jammed close enough for me to feel him through my clothes, against my chest, my thighs, my crotch.

I slipped my hands to his thighs as he moved us forward. His breath whistled and I bathed in his shiver.

We said nothing as we moved into a vast field. Said nothing as we continued to the next one after that. The trickling of water and clomping of the horse's hooves were loud enough. And the little jolts between us as we moved, my cock rubbing against his backside, louder.

He stopped his horse in the middle of a field and looked up at the night sky. This time it was his head coming down on my shoulder. I drifted my hands from his thighs to his chest and held him closer to me.

"I'm a broken bird," he said. "I've nothing much left to dazzle you with anymore."

I pressed my nose against the side of his head. "Turn around, Jean. Look at me."

He swung a leg over until he sat sideways on the horse; then, with a glance at me, he slowly lifted the other leg, pointing it straight like he would in an act, arching it between us. I held my breath, my cock throbbing at the sight. The back of my hand brushed against his thigh, and he stopped. He bent his knee and settled his calf on my shoulder.

"You don't have to do that to dazzle me," I said.

He curled his leg around my neck, urging me closer. "I want to though. I want that heat in your eyes. I want you to want me so badly, you'd just take me."

I grabbed him by the waist and something in my enthusiasm had the horse moving forward. Stardust's leg slipped over my shoulder until we faced one another. He laughed, bringing his hands to the sides of the horse. "Whoa, there, Floss. Whoa."

"I'm confused," I said after a laugh. "Are you talking to me? Because it sounded like you meant it for the horse?"

We stopped moving again. Stardust blinked down at the diamond of horseback between us. "I missed you," he said.

It was enough. I understood.

I cupped the back of his neck and drew him into a long kiss. “Shuffle down a bit,” he murmured. I did, and he moved with me; he kissed me again, slowly leaning back against Floss, pulling me with him.

“I don’t have balance like you do,” I murmured at his throat and bit lightly, making my way to the curve of his bad shoulder. His cock pressed hard against my stomach, and mine desperately wanted to be nearer to it.

His words stirred my hair. “It would need a lot of practice, too.”

I shuffled down the horse, carefully, breathing hard through the light material of his clothes as I got to the top of his tights. He was firm and the fabric clung to him. God, I just wanted to taste—

“You know all that training you do?” I said. “Now you’re really going to have to use it. No sudden movements.”

“Nathan—”

I peeled back his tights, exposing the head of his cock; gently bent down and touched my tongue to him.

He hissed, and I locked my lips around him and sucked. He moaned, hands finding my head and gripping the ends of my hair. I pulled back and let the night air kiss him too. “Would this work? If I’m careful—”

He answered with the firm press of his fingers and the slight arch of his body, lifting his cock to my mouth once more. His tights were difficult to pull down, giving only an inch more. My fingers skated over the thin material, tracing the crease of his ass.

I swallowed him as far as I could and he carefully flexed his ass, bucking in and out no more than an inch. His back, abdominals and thighs supported him so his thrusts didn’t set Floss off into a trot.

Stardust moaned again. “Not enough support.” He urged me off his cock and sat up, locking me into a kiss. “And I want more.” He slid off the horse, and then beckoned me with his finger as he pumped himself with his other hand. I slipped off Floss and moved after him, to a patch of thick grass close to the stream.

“The horse—”

“He knows not to leave without me.” Stardust shoved off his clothes, one piece at a time. I ripped mine off after him.

Breezes drifted warmly over us, and the grass massaged underfoot and tickled at our calves. Stardust stretched himself out in the grass. He crooked one knee, spat onto his finger and reached to fondle his entrance. His gaze held mine, and he bit his lip as he breached himself. “You like to watch,” he said.

I sank to my knees between his legs. “You like to give a show.”

I removed his hand, laced my own finger with spit and drew it over his balls and right to his ring. When my finger entered him, he arched, pushing down further. Wanting more. It was clear he was experienced—as much as I was—and for a moment that fact came with a little melancholy.

As if he read my mind, he curled a finger. *Closer*. Our chests met, hairs tangling in a kiss of their own as I swept my tongue against his. “I don’t... kiss, Nathan.”

“You’re kissing me.”

“Yeah. You.”

I lifted his ass, positioned myself at his entrance and pushed into him. His body gripped my cock, pulsing around me. I groaned and stilled a moment, and Stardust jerked his cock and clenched around me.

“That’s good,” he said, then lightly scratched his fingers up my arm and dug into my shoulder. “You can move. I like it.”

I gripped handfuls of grass on either side of him as I pulled my hips back and thrust forward. The jolts between us intensified each time I slid back into him and Stardust gave a soft moan.

“To the left a bit,” he bit out on a groan. I swiveled my hips and angled where he asked. “Yes!”

The overwhelming urge to move harder and faster came over me, and I plunged in and out of him, deep, deeper—

I took hold of his cock. Stray bits of grass, stuck against my hand, tickled at his head every time I pumped him. He curled his legs around me, intensifying the pressure on my cock. His legs pressed against my back, urging for more.

He arched hard, stretching his arms above his head and lengthening his body. A heady cry ripped out of him as his release hit my chest.

His grip around me tightened with his orgasm and milked me to a bright edge.

My toes curled in the grass as I thrust forward one more time. I released hard and it kept coming and coming. I shuddered with the last of it and collapsed onto him.

He laughed and urged me closer, his kiss soft against my chin. "I've been dreaming of that since '49."

My cock slowly slipped out of him, hitting cool grass and the inside of his thigh. I murmured and tasted his lips. "So have I."

~*~

I CAME BACK the next day.

We made love in the fields, over and over, exploring our bodies; jolting until we couldn't possibly jolt anymore. But it lingered between us, a giant ticking clock. Eventually the circus would leave.

And then what?

~*~

IN THE GRASS, after a long and languid union...

"I once promised you magic, and this Sunday I'm going to deliver."

He told me what it was. "It was a child's dream," I said, twisting on my side to look at him. "I've moved on."

"Moved on," he murmured, staring up at the sky. "I get it."

He sat up and I sat with him. I traced over the creases the grass had left on his skin. "Actually, I changed my mind. I want this." I wanted it because he wished to give it so much, and who said no to magic? "But... not without Danny."

He looked up at me, leaned in and teased our raw lips together. "Then him too."

I fell back to the grass, and Stardust came too, rolling his naked body on top of me.

"Just one thing," I said as he pressed his feet against the top of mine.

He raised an inquisitive brow.

"You'll have to perform a small miracle first."

"What's that?" he asked against my lips.

“Make Spotty apologize.”

~*~

SPOTTY APOLOGIZED—reluctantly—and Sunday starred our performance.

What I didn't know until I arrived was the day's performance was dedicated to Stardust. That this was his farewell act.

I wanted to find him and demand answers. Why hadn't he told me? But Danny and I were ushered into the ring. We were on.

At least a thousand people sat in the stands curving around the ring. I swallowed a nervous laugh and nodded to Danny. Let the act begin.

I played the lonely trumpet player on a park bench, he the energetic clown doing everything he could to cheer me up. He stood on his head, pulled out a never-ending rainbow from his sleeve, tried to lift the bench and me up even, but still I was sad. And the sadness vibrated around me.

Danny shook his head, shrugged, and then stretched the waistband of his pants. To the roar of a shocked crowd, he drew out a long, fine flute. He fumbled, nearly dropping it—at the last moment, snatching it up. I blew more sadness into the trumpet and he copied me on his flute. Music became a conversation.

Why are you standing there, looking so sadly at the stars?

—Because I want one to fall, to make a wish.

Make a wish? Oh, how I should like to make a wish. Maybe we could wait and stare up at the sky together?

I moved to the side and shared my bench with him. We both played toward the sky, still conversing.

You play so nicely.

—Thank you. You're... well, you're not shabby yourself. Rather lively, in fact.

It's quite a tricky melody. Dare you to try it?

And so I copied him, our music morphing into something sweet and happy. By the end of it, I was playing my own fun tunes, twisting cheerfully with Danny's.

So what will you wish for when a star falls?

—Something that would make me happy.

Happy? You mean, like a friend.

—Yes, I'd wish for a friend.

Danny lowered his flute, frowning at it. He looked from me to him and back again. Then he blew in his instrument again.

I don't know what your definition of friend is. But if a star falls, I shall wish it to knock some sense into you.

Then he mimed knocking me over the head with his flute instead. The crowd laughed.

And when I finished my last bit, a clear “*Oh!*” ringing out around us, I jumped off the bench—all bounce and excitement—and gestured him to follow me.

Cheers filled the arena, and I clapped Danny on the shoulder as we reentered the ring to take a bow.

His gaze skated over the crowd, and I followed it to my sister sitting in the front with her kids.

Still clapping, she stood up and marched forward. And then with a leap over the ring fence, she flung her arms around Danny. In front of a full house, she kissed him. Greasepaint smudged over her face and still she kept kissing him. “Never get rid of that smile.”

Danny lifted her and swung her around, stopping only to look at the crowd, shrug, and mouth “Who is this?” and smooched her again.

I looked past them, searching for Stardust. He was clapping the hardest, cheering the loudest. *Thank you for this high. For the magic. But why didn't you tell me it was your last show?*

~*~

AFTERWARDS, I found Stardust in the horse car.

He brushed Floss, telling him it was better they didn't go for a ride tonight. That the skies were cloudy and the sharp wind promised a storm. I leaned against the doorframe and smiled.

Glancing over his shoulder, he winked at me. “Thought I felt you there.”

Hearing the tenderness in his voice ached. I wanted this. Wanted this all the time, not just another summer to remember.

Again, just like the other days, he bit his lip and quickly turned away. It was like he knew what I wanted, but didn't know how to acknowledge it—how to tell me not to get my hopes up.

“It was a farewell show for you,” I said. “You never told me...”

Stardust continued brushing his horse.

“It's... hard for me to say goodbye,” he said quietly, and a lump in my throat made it hard to swallow. “But I'm broken.” He touched the horse brush to his bad shoulder. “It hurts. I can't keep... flying like this.”

I didn't move, didn't breathe but to ask, “What are you saying?”

He didn't meet my gaze. He stroked Floss again, rested his forehead against the horse's neck. “I want a home.”

“A cage,” I said, because I was caught on a need to grab him—turn him and kiss him—and I wasn't thinking clearly. Somehow *cage* seemed to make sense. Because it was me. And I wanted to be the one that protected him; I wanted to be his home.

Stardust sighed. “I've known for a while now that this summer would see my last act. I held out until now because I might see you here again. And it seems the stars are lined for me right, because”—he turned his head and looked at me—“here you are.”

I stepped to his side, patting Floss as I drew nearer. “Here I am.”

He smiled; and it was the smile of twelve years ago. Full of hope and new dreams. “You don't have to say anything now,” he said.

And I didn't.

I showed him.

~*~

I RENTED A stable for Floss, and took Stardust home.

His life slung in a pack over his shoulder, he stopped at the threshold, a bird at the door of a cage.

“Will you come in, Stardust?”

He looked up slowly. "I don't have any magic left. I'm just Jean now."

I reached out and touched his chest with the tips of my fingers. He swallowed as I traced a path up his neck to his lips. I kissed them.

"Will you come in, Stardust?"

His lips curved; with a smile, he kissed me and stepped inside.

The End

Author Bio

A born and raised New Zealander, Anyta Sunday has been exploring the literary world since she started reading Roald Dahl as a kid. Inspired, stories have been piling up in her head ever since. Fast forward to her mid-twenties and jump a few countries (Germany, America, and back again), and she started putting pen to paper. When she's not writing or chasing her kid around, she's reading, hiking, watching a Joss Whedon series, attempting pilates, or curling up with her two cats. Updates on her projects can be found at Anyta's website.

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BLAZE OF GLORY

By Jeff Erno

Photo Description

A shirtless man lies on a rumpled bed, his head and arms cuddle around his Staffordshire terrier. A look of sadness creases his face.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

You see this guy? I met him through the Pets for Vets program that provides a second chance for shelter pets by rescuing, training and pairing them with veterans with PTSD who need a companion. (Am I a shelter volunteer? A veterinarian? Or something else entirely?)

And boy, does this guy need his companion. But can we make it work when he obviously has so much to work through? What happened to him? And how can I possibly fit into their lives?

(I'd like an HEA for both humans and dog. Preferably no paranormal.)

Sincerely,

Astrid

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: soldier, Marine, PTSD, mental illness, canine, pets, service dogs, forgiveness, healing

Word Count: 15,380

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BLAZE OF GLORY

By Jeff Erno

Two more months in the sandbox, and then the tour would be over. Sergeant Jason Bradley counted down the remaining days until freedom, hopeful this tour would be his last. At twenty-three, he yearned for an end of the war so he could begin his life back home in Michigan.

He and the members of his platoon waited in the blistering sun at the border checkpoint, bored out their minds. Same shit, different day—day in and day out. He should be thankful for the monotony. The alternative, of course, could be far worse. But sitting there hours on end became a matter of endurance, and though Marines were trained to handle any situation, doing nothing at times seemed a fate worse than death.

“Shut up, Briggs.” The voice of his closest friend, Corporal Todd Dunham, caught Jason’s attention. Jason spun around to see his Marine brother pointing a finger at the chest of one of the shit-for-brains jawas. “That Kevlar Vest ain’t gonna do shit to protect you if you dive on a fuckin’ pineapple. They be scraping you up in pieces and sendin’ you home in a Glad bag.”

The private shook his head defiantly. “Not if I held the grenade in my hands and pinned it under my chest. The Kevlar in the vest would absorb the blast. Yeah, it’d suck ’cause I’d lose my arms, but I’d rather lose my arms than my fuckin’ life.”

“That fuckin’ hillbilly armor ain’t gonna save you. If you get your ass that close to a live grenade, your only hope is to run as fast as you fuckin’ can.”

Jason rolled his eyes as he stepped between them. “Shut up, both of you. Who fuckin’ cares? We’re all double-digit midgets here. In sixty days we’re fuckin’ outta here, and then its FUBIS—fuck you buddy, I’m shipping.”

“I hear that,” Todd said, high-fiving him. “But still, you know I’m right. Those vests ain’t gonna absorb the blast of no pineapple.”

“A helmet, maybe,” Jason opined. “If you fell on the grenade with your helmet underneath you, then you could use the helmet and your vest. Still, I wouldn’t wanna be the one to test that theory. I’ve seen the aftereffects of a grenade explosion.”

Before the others had a chance to respond, a radio call interrupted them. Jason stepped quickly over to his vehicle and picked up the handset. A convoy in the area was under attack, and as Jason received the details, a surge of adrenaline shot through his veins.

“Let’s move!” he shouted, as the Marines in his platoon scurried into position, boarding their vehicles and quickly arming themselves. They were only six kilometers from the convoy and would have to serve as backup.

In moments like this, Jason’s training took over and he functioned primarily on autopilot. There wasn’t time for fear or cowardice. You just moved, and you moved fast. Still, the whole scene seemed to transpire in slow motion, and the six kilometers felt more like sixty.

Jason and his two comrades were the first to arrive on the scene, which didn’t appear at all like a firefight. The convoy of military trucks had been halted, blocked by a squad of enemy Jeeps. Two Iraqi vehicles had approached from behind, one a civilian truck with Arabic lettering printed along the side.

Jason drew his weapon and exited his vehicle, then dashed quickly to the rear of the truck. Dunham and Briggs immediately followed. They inched their way along the back of the truck, crouching low, then Jason peered around the side. He saw movement in the side-view mirror. The driver was still inside.

With a movement of his head, he indicated they’d storm the driver, then without hesitation, leapt to his feet and raced around the side of the truck, weapon drawn. His fellow Marines flanked him, Todd on his right, when the driver’s door flew open.

The driver jumped out and quickly crumpled to his knees, hands raised above his head, babbling something in Arabic Jason didn’t understand.

“Grenade!” Briggs shouted, pointing to the explosive in the combatant’s hand. The pin had already been removed.

They immediately opened fire, as the soldier hurled the grenade in their direction. There was nowhere to go. They couldn’t get far enough away to avoid the blast, and before Jason could respond, Todd lunged toward the already-triggered explosive. He pulled off his helmet and dove atop the grenade, pinning it beneath him, and not even a second later, it detonated.

“Todd, no!” Jason screamed, rushing toward him. He was too late, as he held his arms up to shield himself from the debris, flesh and metal spraying around him. “Fuck! Fuck!” he screamed, sliding to his knees beside his friend.

Grabbing Todd by the shoulders, he flipped him onto his back, and the sight he observed revolted him. His best friend's torso was now hamburger, horrendously mangled beyond recognition, and his arms—they were no more!

“Medic!” Jason screamed. He turned to Briggs. “Call for a fucking medic!”

He grabbed hold of Todd and pulled his bloody body against his own, cradling it, then stared down into his best friend's face. His eyes were wide, glassy, and the corners of his mouth curled up just slightly.

“See,” he whispered, “you were right, as usual.”

Jason felt the life of his friend drain from his body as he held him, rocking him back and forth, and then he began to scream. Every fiber of his being ached with unspeakable grief and anguish as he cried out.

“No! Todd, you stupid motherfucker! You can't leave me!”

The fire had erupted around them, but Jason didn't move. Still kneeling, he held his comrade in his arms and cradled his bloody body. “No! No! No!” he screamed.

Startled and disoriented, he felt an oddly warm sensation on his face. Opening his eyes, he looked up into the eyes of another face. Blaze, his Staffordshire terrier, was atop him, nudging him with her nose, lapping at his cheek.

“Blaze,” he cried, reaching up to her. His hands trembled as he began to pet her. She'd done her job, had awakened him from his dream—the recurring nightmare that played in his head like a video. Jason's body was now drenched with sweat, and as he sat up in the bed, Blaze laid her head in his lap.

“Thank you, Blaze,” he whispered. “Good girl.” He affectionately petted her head as he tried clearing his own.

When Jason returned from Iraq, he was determined not to be one of those vets who succumbed to post-traumatic stress. He wanted to put the horrors of the war behind him and simply get on with his life. The things he'd witnessed, the losses he'd suffered, had been horrendous, but war was hell. He'd known going in that it would be no picnic. He'd known, as every Marine knows, that service included placing your life on the line for your country. They'd all faced the same risks, and Jason knew it could have easily been his body blown to bits on the battlefield.

He'd made it through his tour; he'd done his duty. Now it was time to honor his Marine brothers by getting on with his own life and living it to the fullest. Sadly, his determination proved insufficient. His resolve to man-up and press onward wasn't enough for him to overcome the demons that haunted him.

The symptoms of PTSD did not immediately rear their ugly heads. The process had been gradual, and at first, he didn't allow them to interfere with his daily life. In the beginning, he noticed an edginess sometimes when he was home alone. Little things like entering a dark room triggered a sense of dread and fear, but he quickly brushed those feelings aside and dismissed them as childish. He was a fucking Marine, for God's sake, and Marines were not afraid of the dark.

But when the dread and fear started to paralyze him, Jason decided that maybe it wouldn't hurt for him to see a counselor. He contacted the Veteran's Administration and added his name to their waiting list. Upon discharge from service, he'd been promised access to mental health services if he needed them, but he'd never anticipated they'd be necessary. After putting off the inevitable as long as possible, he finally made the call, but was then told it would be at least four months before they could get him in. The receptionist he spoke with asked if it was an emergency.

"No, I guess not," he said. He wasn't having a complete meltdown or anything. He wasn't suicidal or homicidal, and he was still able to make it into work every day. He'd just have to wait.

Then the nightmares started.

Reliving the horrors of war in his dreams did not at first cripple Jason, but the dreams proved to have a cumulative effect. When the night terrors became so commonplace that he began to fear falling asleep, he found himself staying awake all night. Then when he did at last drift into REM sleep, the nightmares were even worse than before, and their aftereffects traumatized him for hours afterward.

His boss, Rick, had eagerly rehired him when he returned from the war. Jason had worked at the garage before joining the Marines and served as a sort of apprentice to Rick. But after 9/11, when Jason had watched his country brought to its knees by terrorist attacks, he knew he had to serve. He knew it in his core—his gut—and it became like a calling to him. Rick had supported Jason's decision to enlist and promised that when he returned, his job would be waiting.

But three months after his homecoming, Jason started missing work. His absences weren't on purpose. It was just that he'd sit up all night, afraid of falling asleep and facing another nightmare. Often just before dawn he'd finally doze off, and sure enough, the dreams would seize his mind. He awakened soaked in sweat, shaking, and terrorized. How could he explain this? How could he call his boss and tell him he wasn't feeling brave enough to step outside the front door of his apartment?

Rick was an upstanding guy, a pretty decent boss. The first two call-ins he took in stride, disappointed but not pissed. By the third incident, his patience had grown thin. He called Jason into the office to discuss the situation.

"Man, I'm sorry," Jason said as he leaned forward in his chair. "I just had a bug or something. The flu, maybe."

"Jason," Rick said, clasping his hands together on the desk in front of him, "you gotta be straight with me, man. I don't wanna let you go over something like this. You're one of my best workers, but even the best mechanic in the world does me no good if he don't show up for work."

"I know," Jason said, nodding. "It won't happen again. I promise."

"Jason, what's going on? Were you out partying? Hungover?"

He shook his head. "No, man. You know I wouldn't do you like that. If I'm gonna play, you know I always pay the piper. I wouldn't call off because of a hangover."

"Then what is it? I know you didn't have the flu."

Jason shrugged. Rick had always been able to see right through him. He'd known Jason's family since Jason was in grade school.

"You know you can tell me anything, right? Remember when you told me about yourself... about your being... ya know?"

"Gay," Jason said, raising the corners of his mouth slightly. "Yeah, I remember. You said it was no big deal; it didn't matter."

"And it don't. I don't give a rat's ass about that sort of thing. Like I said, you're one of my best mechanics. The point is you can trust me. If you're goin' through some shit, I wanna help."

Jason looked at him, then quickly diverted his gaze, staring down at his own lap. He hated this feeling, this emotionalism that seemed to constantly grip him.

He blinked several times and tried to fend off the tears before raising his head to look into his friend's face.

“Something ain't right, Rick. Since I came back, something just ain't right at all.”

“What is it, man?” Rick said, pushing his chair back and rising to his feet. He stepped around the desk to stand directly in front of Jason, leaning back against the desk. “Please, trust me.”

“I been having dreams and shit. Flashbacks, I think. And I don't know... I can't shake 'em.”

“Dude, you're having post-traumatic stress. It's normal. I've watched shows about it on TV. You gotta see a doctor.”

“I... uh... I can't. I mean, I know you give us insurance, but I really wanted to see someone at VA.”

“Fuck VA,” Rick said. “No offense, man, but you can't wait for them. They can take months, sometimes years. I'm gonna call a doctor for you myself, and you're going.”

“Rick, please...”

“Jason, I care too much about you, and like I said, you gotta trust me. I'm going to make the appointment, and I'll drive you there myself. Now I want you to take the next couple days off...”

“I'd rather work,” Jason said. “I can't just sit at home.”

Rick took a deep breath. “Okay, but listen to me. You can't just call off sick. You need to communicate with me. If you're too stressed to work, fine. I get that, but if you lie to me and say you got the flu when you don't...”

“I know, man. I shouldn't have lied. It's just embarrassing.”

Rick leaned forward and placed his hand on Jason's shoulder. “Don't be embarrassed, man. You have every right to be proud, and what you're going through is some nasty shit. Let us help you through it.”

That had been the start of Jason's recovery. What Jason didn't realize was that things were going to get much worse before they got better. He started to become paranoid, freaked out when entering rooms, fearful the enemy was lurking around the corner. One day at work, someone approached him from behind. He hadn't heard them coming and when they spoke, Jason snapped and

lunged at the unsuspecting coworker—scared the hell out of him. It scared Jason as well.

He began to see a therapist, a psychologist and psychiatrist named Jeanine Frazier, who specialized in post-traumatic stress disorder. She prescribed Effexor, an antidepressant commonly used in the treatment of PTSD but insisted that the drugs would not cure him. She recommended long-term cognitive behavioral therapy and began weekly counseling sessions.

Jason, who thought life would be a cakewalk when he returned stateside, suddenly found himself in the middle of another battle. The war he waged with the disorder at times seemed far more daunting than his actual field service. Going to the therapy every week did seem to help, at least somewhat, but his progress was slow. He'd take two steps forward, followed by three steps back. The nightmares continued in spite of the drugs, and he became so paranoid he didn't want to leave his house.

Jason's mom, Carrie, lived not far from his apartment, and at first, he didn't tell her about his problems. He couldn't worry her needlessly. He'd work through it on his own, but when she showed up one day at one o'clock in the afternoon and found him sitting alone in the middle of his filthy apartment wearing only his underwear, she grew instantly concerned.

"Jason, what the hell? I stopped at the garage, and Rick told me you were sick."

Fuck, that probably wasn't all his boss had said. "I'm fine," he lied.

"You're not fine," she said, pushing past him into the living room. "And look at this place. It looks like a tornado blew through. Jason, this isn't like you."

"Mom, would you please stop?" Jason never raised his voice to his mother, but he found himself right on the edge, and he could barely rein in his temper. "Can you just give me some fucking space!" He raised his hands in the air above his head, clenching his fists, then turned away and stormed over to his recliner where he plopped down, still infuriated.

"Honey," she said, her voice cracking. "Please tell me what's wrong. Please let me help."

He raised his head to look at her, tears now streaming down his cheeks. "You can't help me, Mom. No one can. I think... I think I'm losing my mind."

She closed the distance between them and dropped to her knees beside his chair, wrapping an arm around his shoulder. She pulled his head against her chest and lovingly stroked the side of his face. “Baby, you’re not going crazy. You have a disorder, and it can be treated.”

“That’s what they say,” he whispered. “But the drugs...”

“They don’t always work,” she said. “There are a lot of different medicines, and some work better than others on different clients.”

Apparently Rick *had* talked to her. She obviously knew about his situation. “Honey, why don’t you come back home for a while? Let me help you.”

“Mom, I can’t do that. I can’t give up my apartment... that would really kill me.”

“Not permanently. We’ll still keep the apartment, and when you’re ready, you can move back. You can just stay with me for a few days or weeks, however long you need.”

Reluctantly, Jason agreed. He packed a few of his things and followed his mother home, and surprisingly, her company did seem to help, at least for a while. Over the course of the weeks that followed, Doctor Frazier tried a different medication, this time Paxil. It had worked extremely well for some patients, she explained, but for others it had adverse effects. Some patients became suicidal while on the drug, so she insisted that they carefully monitor his progress.

“Jason’s been in therapy for months now,” his mother said. He’d allowed her to accompany him to his appointment because she wanted to talk to the doctor. “Why isn’t he getting better?”

“It takes time,” the doctor said. “And not all patients respond well to therapy or the drugs. A lot of it is trial and error.”

“Look,” Carrie said, angrily pointing at the doctor, “this is my son you’re talking about. There is no room for error!”

“Mom, it’s okay,” Jason said.

“It’s *not* okay,” she spat. “Jason served our country! He laid his life on the line, and now he’s suffering.”

“Mrs. Bradley—”

“Ms. Murphy,” she corrected the doctor. “Bradley was my ex-husband’s last name.”

“Ms. Murphy, you have every right to be angry. I hear what you’re saying, and believe me, I understand your frustration. There is another type of therapy we haven’t yet discussed, something I think might very well benefit Jason.”

“What is it?” His mom leaned forward in her chair. “Anything... just tell us.”

The doctor placed her hands together, making a steeple with her fingertips. “Well, I think Jason may well benefit from having a service dog.”

“A service dog?” Jason asked. “You mean like a Seeing Eye dog? I’m not blind.”

“There’s an organization that specifically trains dogs to work with patients who have PTSD.”

“I don’t understand,” Carrie said. “What could a dog possibly do?”

“Well, these dogs are trained to monitor the mood of the patient. They help the patient with anxiety. They are also trained to perform specific tasks. They monitor the patient while they sleep, and awaken them during nightmares. They are trained to survey rooms for the patient, check them for safety when the patient is too frightened to enter a room alone.”

His mom looked over at the doctor, raising her eyebrows skeptically. “I don’t know.”

“I’ve got some literature,” the doctor said. “And there is a lot of information on the internet. Why don’t you look it over and see what you think? If Jason is interested, I can put him in touch with the organization.”

“But what about the cost?”

“Well, that certainly is a consideration. The training is not cheap. Most patients do fund-raisers.”

“I don’t want a fund-raiser,” Jason said, shaking his head. “I’m not a charity case.”

“Baby, we’ll do a fund-raiser if we need to. That isn’t charity. It’s patriotism!”

Jason looked at his mom and released a frustrated sigh. Arguing with the woman was pointless. He wasn’t sure any of this was even worth his effort. The medicine and the therapy weren’t helping, and he didn’t see how the fuck a dog

would make his life any better. But what the hell? He'd go along with it if it was what his mom wanted, if for no other reason than to appease her.

Jason didn't choose Blaze. As the dog trainers explained it, a human never chooses their own service dog. The dog always has to choose their own human. The trainers did their best to match dogs up with specific humans, selecting animals that had been trained to work with the issues of that particular human, but they had no way of knowing if the dog would accept the human as a partner.

The decision would be made at a special meeting called a "bump". Jason would go to the training facility and meet with some of the dogs. If one of the dogs chose him, he'd then have to make a decision on whether or not to proceed.

Carrie, true to her word, had quickly rallied support for her son, conducting most of her fundraising efforts online. Within a few weeks, she raised over fifteen thousand dollars, more than enough to proceed with the process of acquiring a service dog.

"How will I know?" Jason asked the trainer as they entered the gymnasium-like training center.

"Oh, the dog will let you know," Ben, the twenty-something, blond-haired trainer answered. "And once a dog chooses you, providing you agree to the match, we proceed with the training, customizing the services to meet your specific needs."

What if none of the dogs picked him? Jason wondered. All of a sudden, he felt vulnerable, and the uncomfortable feeling seemed silly. He shouldn't be worried about whether or not a dog liked him, but for some reason, he was.

"If a dog does choose me, how soon until he... or she goes home with me?"

"That depends. Each of the dogs you'll meet with today have already had extensive training. It has taken them anywhere from six months to a year of intense training to get to where they are now. Once they've been matched up with a human, it can be anywhere from two to six months more before they're ready to go home with a client."

"Oh wow."

“Of course, you’ll come back here to the facility to work with the dog at least a couple times a week, maybe more. That’ll be your choice, depending on how well you’ve bonded with the dog.”

Jason looked across the room to see a door opening on the other side of the floor. A group of trainers entered, each escorting a dog, walking them around the perimeter of the gymnasium floor. Jason marveled at the dogs’ postures, how obediently they heeled alongside their trainers. He stood there as the parade of dogs passed, examining each one.

“Wow, they’re beautiful,” he whispered.

“German shepherds and Staffordshire terriers are the most common breeds we train. Both are traditionally bred as service animals. They’re workers,” Ben explained. “But truthfully, just about any breed can be trained.”

“That one looks like a pit bull,” Jason said.

“That’s Blaze, and she’s a Staffordshire terrier. The breed is a type of pit bull.”

“Really? I always thought...”

“That pit bulls were dangerous? It’s all about how they’re raised,” Ben said. “They are one of the most loving, family-oriented breeds. The horror stories you hear are usually cases of animal cruelty, where the dogs have been trained to fight to the death, or where they’ve been neglected or abused.”

“Well, I’ve got to say, I’d feel safe with a dog like that.”

Ben waved to the trainer, motioning for her to bring Blaze over. “Why don’t we step over here and have a seat, see how Blaze takes to you.”

“Really?” Jason said, somewhat excited. God, she was beautiful.

The trainer walked toward Jason as he took a seat at one of the benches. She leaned down and unhooked the leash from the dog’s collar, and Blaze looked up at Jason. Instantly, he was taken by her big brown eyes. He smiled as he held out his hand. She inched closer, sniffed his hand, and allowed him to pet her.

“You’re such a beautiful girl,” Jason said. She sat beside him and leaned forward, resting her chin against Jason’s knee.

“She likes you,” Ben said, enthused. He held his hand out to the trainer and retrieved the leash, which he offered to Jason. “Why don’t you take her for a walk?”

Jason attached the leash and stood, and the trainer moved to the other side of the dog, walking alongside them as they made their way around the gymnasium floor. The trainer provided specific instructions to Jason, teaching him the basic commands and signals they used during training, but honestly, Jason didn't need much help. Blaze already knew what was expected.

When they got back to the bench where they'd started, Ben suggested they move into one of the training rooms and try some basic scenarios in which Jason and the dog could interact with each other. Jason followed Ben and the trainer down a hallway, Blaze still leashed and walking beside him. When they stepped into the room, Jason was surprised. It looked like an apartment very similar to his own.

"Wow," he observed. "This is quite a setup."

"This is all part of the training," Ben explained. "We place the dog in a setting that resembles an actual home."

"You know, I absolutely love these dogs... especially Blaze. But I've gotta be honest. I'm not sure what services she'll be able to provide me other than companionship."

Ben smiled. "Have a seat," he motioned toward the sofa. Jason sat down, and was surprised when Blaze climbed onto the couch beside him, then placed her head in his lap.

"Is she supposed to do that?" He thought perhaps the dogs would be trained not to climb onto furniture.

"Oh yes," Ben said, smiling. "This kind of service dog is trained to bond with its partner emotionally. She'll learn your behaviors and will sense when you're stressed. She'll steer you away from destructive, repetitive behaviors."

"You mean like pacing the floor or something?"

Ben nodded. "Or any number of other nervous habits that patients with PTSD often exhibit. Even something as benign as nail biting can be detected and interrupted by the service dog. And when you're stressed, she will provide you affection and companionship."

"Won't any dog do that?"

"To a degree," Ben said, taking a seat in a chair opposite them. "Blaze will also be trained for environmental assessment. If you suffer from anxiety when

entering new environments, walking into rooms alone, etcetera, she will go ahead of you and let you know all is safe... or not."

"Really?"

"She'll remind you when it's time to take your medications."

"Seriously?"

"If you suffer from dreams or hallucinations, she will interrupt you, wake you from your dream, or steer you to safety during a hallucinogenic episode."

Mouth agape, Jason looked down at the dog. "That's absolutely amazing. But how do I know if she's going to pick me?"

Ben smiled. "Oh, she already has."

Just knowing Blaze was going to be his partner lifted Jason's spirits. When he left the training center that afternoon and headed back to his mother's house, the excitement bubbled up inside him. He couldn't wait to get back to his own apartment and start living life again.

"You need to slow down," his mom said as she entered his bedroom. He had a suitcase on the bed and was stuffing it with his clothes.

"Mom, I'm fine, and it'll be great once I have Blaze."

"That might not be for another two or three months... or longer," she reminded him. "I think you should just stay here until they've completed the training."

"I don't need a babysitter," he said, turning away from her.

"Jason, please..."

"Mom, I can't live here forever. I have to get on with my own life."

"I know, baby, but two or three months isn't forever. You're still having the nightmares, and last night..."

He knew what she was going to say. He'd awakened after another nightmare and was so shaken that he consumed nearly an entire fifth of whiskey. Finally, he passed out on the porch where she found him in the morning. Then he crashed so hard, he almost didn't wake up in time for his appointment at the training center.

“I’ve gotta get back to a normal life, Mom. I haven’t worked a full week in so long I can’t even remember. It’s a miracle Rick hasn’t fired me.”

“And going back to that apartment by yourself is *not* going to help.”

Discouraged, he sighed. “This isn’t a life. This is a fucking prison!” He picked up one of the belts he’d stuffed into the suitcase and hurled it angrily across the room. Frustrated even more, he grabbed the entire suitcase and flung it off the bed, clothes flying in all directions.

“Jason!” his mom shouted, moving toward him. She grabbed hold of his shoulders.

“I want it to stop!” he cried. “I can’t take it anymore!”

“I know, honey. I know.” She pulled him into her arms and held him tight. He clutched her, wrapping his arms around her delicate frame.

“I’m sorry,” he cried. “I’m so sorry...”

“It’s okay, baby.” She steered him toward the bed where they sat together on the edge of the mattress. “Please, don’t push too hard. I know you don’t see it yet, but you *are* making progress. And once you get Blaze, things will be a lot better.”

“I can’t even go out to the clubs or anything,” he said. “I get too freaked out in the crowds. It don’t make sense. How come I’m brave enough to go off and fight in a war, but I’m too scared to leave my own house?”

“It’s part of the condition, honey. And we’ll work on it, one step at a time.”

“Who’s ever gonna wanna be with someone like me?”

“A big strong Marine with a gorgeous smile and muscular body?” she said. “I can’t imagine anyone wanting someone like that.” She had a way with sarcasm.

“But I’m batshit crazy.”

Her pleasant expression instantly morphed into one far more serious. She stared at him angrily, then raised her hand to point her finger toward his chest. “You listen here, mister. I don’t *ever* wanna hear those words come from your mouth again. You are *not* crazy! You’re a hero! You almost died fighting for this country, and now you’re suffering as a result of it. You better never be ashamed of yourself for what you’ve done.”

“But I didn’t die! Todd did!”

As he said the words, powerful emotion flooded his entire being and an anguished sob erupted. She grabbed hold of him again and pulled him into herself.

“Honey, he did exactly what you would have done, and you know it.”

“I just don’t know why,” Jason said. “Why him and not me?”

So far, they’d tried Effexor and Paxil, and most recently Zoloft. Jason didn’t feel any of the drugs were actually helping, and in fact, his condition had begun to worsen. He remained at his mother’s house, and it became more and more difficult for him to even go out in public. He had to take a leave of absence from his job, and his mom insisted he apply for disability. As much as he hated the idea of living off government handouts, he had no choice. He had no other source of income.

“Honey, we can’t afford to keep paying rent on that apartment,” his mom said.

“I... uh... I have to force myself to go back to work then.”

“You know you can’t do that, Jason. That’s not even an option, and Rick’s not going to allow you to come back until you’re better.”

They sat across from one another at the kitchen table. “This whole disability thing, it’s like admitting defeat. How can I tell myself I’m going back to work some day and then accept a label that I’m ‘disabled’?”

“Don’t think of it that way.” She reached across the table to take hold of his hand. “You *have* a disability right now. It doesn’t have to be permanent.”

It felt permanent. Very permanent, and with every day that passed, it seemed to get worse. Jason couldn’t stand being around people. At first, it was crowds, but his anxiety worsened, and it got to a point that he felt panicked interacting with just a few people. His doctor prescribed another medication, Xanax.

Although his mother’s basement still contained all of Jason’s weightlifting equipment, he hardly ever had the energy to work out anymore. He felt like his body was going soft, which seemed appropriate. His brain certainly had softened. His emotions had softened. He’d turned into the kind of weak person

he'd always loathed. When he looked into the mirror, he hated his own reflection.

"Once the disability is approved, we can get you back into your own apartment," his mom said, placating him. "There are those units a few blocks from here that are subsidized. They're nice, and the rent is based on income."

"I don't wanna be like this the rest of my life," he mumbled.

"You've got to have faith," she said. "Things will get better. I know they will."

The single thing that did seem to help was the training with Blaze. Jason looked forward to the sessions, and the more time he spent with her, the stronger their bond grew. Most recently, they began dealing with Jason's panic attacks. They taught Blaze to recognize the symptoms and to clear an area of other people when Jason began to panic. She steered people away from him, creating a safe zone.

"How will this work in public?" he asked. "What if people misunderstand?"

"They'll back off," Ben said. "And that's really all you need to be concerned with. She'll clear the way for you to have the space you need until you're calm, on the other side of your panic episode."

Jason shook his head, then smiled. Ben seemed so knowledgeable, and he was really good at his job. "You're really good at this," Jason said.

He shrugged. "Thanks." As he looked into Jason's face and smiled, Jason felt a tug at his heartstrings. He had the most adorable dimples. Ben was about three inches shorter than Jason's six-foot-two inch frame, but he had a nice body—what Jason would call a swimmer's build. And he was blond. Jason had always been partial to blond guys with blue eyes, perhaps because they were his opposite.

Realizing how ridiculous he was being, Jason brushed off the feeling. A guy like Ben would never be interested in someone like him. And for all Jason knew, he was straight. Before Jason could even think about entering the dating world, he had to pull himself together and conquer the demons that plagued him. Undoubtedly a guy who was as "together" as Ben would see Jason as damaged goods. A nutcase. Jason didn't need that kind of condescension and judgment in his life. He'd best keep things strictly professional.

Ben placed his hand on Jason's arm as he continued to gaze into his eyes. "Bud, are you all right?"

“Uh, yeah.”

“Hey, I wanted to ask you something,” Ben said, “but I’m not sure this is even appropriate.”

Jason gulped. “Um, sure. Ask me anything.”

Ben reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card, then held it out to Jason. “I’m starting a new business, and I’d appreciate if you’d keep me in mind.”

“Oh.” Jason looked down at the card and a wave of disappointment washed over him. For a second, he thought Ben was about to proposition him. “Groombulance? What’s that?”

Ben laughed. “That’s the name of my business. I’m a dog groomer.”

“You are? I thought *this* was your job,” Jason said, referring to the position at the training center.

“Nah. All this is volunteer. I do it as kind of a community service, ya know? A chance to give back, show my appreciation.”

“Your appreciation?”

“Yeah, to guys like you—the vets. Men and women who fought for our country.”

“Really? I always thought you got paid.”

“There are some paid positions here, but mine isn’t one of them. I’ve had my own pet grooming business for the past three years, and I’ve operated inside one of the local pet stores. But now I’m branching out and going mobile. I bought an ambulance and converted it to a pet grooming vehicle.”

“Seriously?” Jason laughed. “I can’t picture it.”

“I’ll have to show you. I had an inverter installed that allows me to operate all my electric equipment—shavers, blow dryers, fans, etcetera. And it has a big tub and shower, and a grooming table with all my equipment. It’s really cool, everything I need all in one spot. And the customers love it. They don’t have to bring their pets out. I just come right to their house.”

“Wow, that’d be perfect, especially for people like me...”

“Who sometimes struggle with leaving their homes. Yes! So anyway, if you’ll just consider me, I’d appreciate it. I’m not sure I should be soliciting business this way, though.”

“Oh my God, I’d be kind of hurt if you didn’t. I mean... well... uh, I don’t know *what* I mean, actually.”

Ben laughed. “No, I get what you’re saying. I feel like we’ve sort of bonded too. This whole process is really intense, and I feel like we’ve developed a friendship.”

“Yeah, me too. And I’ll definitely hire you to do all of Blaze’s grooming. But what exactly is she gonna need?”

“Well, she’ll need to be bathed regularly, and a dog with a coat like hers requires a double bath. And she’ll need her nails trimmed and her paws will need to be moisturized.”

Jason cracked up. “No way.”

“Way!” Ben said. “Well, I guess the moisturizing is optional.”

“Well, I think it’ll be nice to pamper her. It’ll be like her spa day.”

“Exactly!” Ben said enthusiastically. “And it’ll give me an excuse to see her handler.”

“Her handler?”

Ben placed a hand on his hip and stepped back, shaking his head. “*You*, silly. It’ll give me a chance to see *you*.”

Jason placed the barbell back into the rack above his head and sat up on the bench. His doctor had been right about the exercise. It seemed to help. He stood up and walked over to the full-length mirror, flexing his bicep. Nothing soft about *that*. He smiled, then thought of Ben.

He hoped Ben would be the one to deliver Blaze to his new apartment. They’d finished with the training, and Jason had signed the lease on his new place. Fortunately, his disability would be going through quickly, thanks to his mother’s persistence. She’d hounded their congressman’s office, urging them to fast track the application. It could be several months before he started getting checks, but he would eventually get them, along with VA benefits.

This was Jason’s chance at a new life, and he didn’t want to blow it. With Blaze’s help, he’d learn to adapt and hopefully overcome some of the symptoms of his disability. He wondered if he’d ever again be “normal”. The doctor had cautioned him not to think in those terms. Take each day one at a time, she said, and gradually he’d improve.

He turned from the mirror and rushed upstairs to hit the shower. Then he'd head over to his new apartment with his mom and wait for Blaze.

"Honey, stop pacing," Carrie said as she sat at the dining room table.

"They should've been here by now."

"They said eleven thirty, and it's only twenty after," she said. "Sit down and I'll get you some tea."

He rolled his eyes. "I don't want tea," he said.

The sudden knock on the door caused Jason to jump, startling him. He froze in his tracks and looked over at his mother.

"That's probably them," she said cheerfully, and rose to her feet.

"Mom, wait!" he said, holding out both hands. "What if it's someone else?"

"Just let me check, okay? I'll look through the peephole."

Jason took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. He had to remind himself the apprehension was part of his disorder, but that knowledge alone did not lessen his anxiety. He watched as his mom stepped over to the door and peered through the peephole. "It's them," she said, then smiled. She stepped back and opened the door.

The fear that had gripped Jason instantly dissipated when he saw Ben standing on the threshold, Blaze at his side.

"Blaze!" Jason said, moving closer. He lowered himself to a crouching position as Ben unhooked the dog's leash. She rushed over to him, wagging her tail, as Jason hugged and petted her.

He raised his head to look up at Ben's smiling face. "Sorry, we're a few minutes early."

"You're fine," Jason said. "Better early than late."

He glanced at his mom who was smiling broadly. "Come on in," she said to Ben. "Would you like some iced tea?"

"That'd be awesome," he said, "but first I think we should give Blaze the grand tour."

Jason led Blaze through each room of the apartment, and when he got to the bedroom, plopped down on the bed and sprawled out. He called for Blaze to

join him on the bed, and she eagerly leapt up onto the mattress. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, snuggling with her. As he looked up, Ben stood in the doorway, smiling.

“She’ll be just perfect for you,” he said, taking a step closer.

“I can’t thank you enough,” Jason said, propping himself up with one arm. He stared up into Ben’s smiling face. “This is a new beginning for both of us—Blaze and me.”

Ben nodded.

His first few nights in the new apartment went well. Having Blaze at his side provided Jason a sense of security and companionship, and it eased the anxiety that had for so long overwhelmed him. But as he began to settle into his daily routine, the novelty wore off and reality began to sink in.

His life was a failure. *He* was a failure. At twenty-four years old, he couldn’t hold down a job or even leave his own apartment. He wasn’t a man anymore. This disorder had crippled him, stolen every shred of his dignity. The depression engulfed him, and though Blaze’s presence empowered him enough to function, he couldn’t shake the funk that seized his very being.

Once a day, Jason and Blaze went for a long walk, usually ending at his mother’s house. He continued with his workouts in the basement gym, hoping the exercise would help lift his spirits. And his mom frequently checked on him, took him grocery shopping, and sometimes brought him food she’d prepared.

The myriad friendships Jason had back in high school had all fallen away. Even the few gay guys he knew from the clubs, back before he’d gotten sick, no longer bothered to call. The only people he interacted with were a few acquaintances online, avatars who posed no real threat. He could shut them down with the click of a mouse when he needed to.

Blaze did her job. She reminded Jason when it was time for his meds. She sensed his anxiety and stayed close when he needed her security. When he cried out in the dead of night, seized once more by another horrible flashback, she was there for him. She even walked from room to room, assessing them for Jason’s safety when he felt too panicked to move.

They became best friends, and Blaze knew him better than any human ever could. She sensed everything Jason felt, and unlike people, she didn't try to fix him. She accepted him as he was and loved him all the more. And Jason loved her. God, how he loved her.

But the hole within his heart, the aching sense of grief and despair, just wouldn't go away. As much as he loved his mom and appreciated all she'd done for him, he couldn't stand to continue using her. He couldn't bear the thought he'd become a burden, and worst of all, he couldn't understand why he'd been the one to survive when so many other brave Marines had lost their lives.

He followed Blaze to the kitchen and retrieved a tall glass of water. "Yeah, I know," he told her. "Time for meds." He removed the pill bottles from the window ledge above the sink and carried them back to the living room along with his water, then took a seat in the recliner. Blaze sat at his feet.

"I'm sorry, Blaze. You know how much I love you." He twisted off the childproof cap from the bottle of Xanax and poured the pills out onto the end table beside his chair. Then he did the same with the Zoloft, creating a pile of medication. He added the leftover Paxil, reasoning every little bit would help. He'd create for himself a drug cocktail that would finally make all the horror go away. The guilt, the sadness, the shame. He just wanted it all to end, once and for all, because he wasn't strong enough to go on like this anymore.

Tears streamed down his cheeks as he reached over to the stand. Placing one hand palm-up level with the tabletop, he used his other to scoop the big pile of medication into his palm. He then took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair, finally raising his clenched hand to his mouth. He closed his eyes as his mouth opened, but before he could pour the pills onto his tongue, something stopped him.

Blaze's jaw clamped securely around his wrist, not hard enough to break the skin, but firmly enough to prevent him from continuing. "Blaze, what're you doing?" She jerked backward, snapping her neck back and tugging Jason's arm away from his body. "Dammit!" he cried as his fist unclenched and the pills flew across the room, all over the carpeting.

Blaze released his hand and lunged onto his lap. "God dammit! Blaze, oh Blaze! Why'd the fuck you do *that*?" Tears streamed down his cheeks as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tightly to his chest.

He leaned back in the recliner, raising the footrest so he could stretch out, and fell asleep with Blaze snuggled in his arms. She'd stopped him, saved his life, just as Todd had done on the battlefield.

When he heard the ringtone of his cell phone, he almost didn't bother to answer. The only person who ever called was his mother, and he wasn't sure he wanted to talk. He sighed and picked up the phone. It was Ben! He'd added his number to his contacts weeks ago when Ben had given Jason his card, and now he was calling.

"Blaze, it's Ben!" he said, holding up the phone.

She looked up at him, cocking her head to the side as if to say, *Then answer it, stupid.*

He laughed and pressed the button. "Hello?"

"Someone's in a good mood," Ben said in response to Jason's laughter.

"Sorry, Blaze was being silly."

"That's why I'm calling," Ben said. "Wanted to check on her, see how she was doing. You think she's ready for some grooming?"

Jason looked down at her as she stared up at him expectantly. "Oh, I think so. I know she'll love seeing you."

"Good, 'cause I'm outside in the parking lot."

"You are?"

"Yeah, so get your ass down here." He paused before adding, "Or I could come up and get her."

"No, no. We'll come down. Just give me a sec."

"Okay, see you in a minute."

Jason stepped over to the door and removed Blaze's leash from the hook on the wall. "You wanna go see Ben?" he asked. "He's gonna give you a bath."

Blaze looked up, wagging her tail, as she waited by the door.

Jason had to smile when he pushed through the exit door of the apartment building and spotted the Groombulance. It was so cool, a full-sized ambulance that looked exactly like any other functioning emergency vehicle. The only

difference was that it bore the logo of Ben's business on the side panels and had paw print decals.

"This is awesome," Jason said as they approached. "Do the lights and sirens work?"

Ben stepped toward them, smiling. "The siren does, but I've never used it... while driving."

Jason laughed. "This is pretty wild. How'd you come up with the idea?"

He shrugged. "I didn't at first envision an ambulance, but I had the idea of some sort of mobile grooming vehicle. When I started looking at vans and trucks, I came across this baby and said *why not?* I got it used for six thousand bucks. Come on, let me show you."

He walked Jason and Blaze around to the passenger side of the vehicle and opened the side door, then led the way inside. Blaze followed, leading the way for Jason. "Wow, this is cool." Just as Ben had described, the interior contained everything a dog groomer would need. "It's much roomier inside than I expected," he said.

"You know, I started with twenty-three customers, and now I have over two hundred."

"That's amazing. If you keep up at that rate, you'll have to expand."

"I know, but there's just one of me." He stepped to the rear of the vehicle and began to gather supplies as Jason took a seat in a chair by the door. Jason watched Ben, his pulse quickening as Ben bent over in front of him. Wow, he looked incredible in those khakis, the way the fabric stretched across his bubble butt.

"So, how's everything going with Blaze?" he asked.

"Oh, she's doing great. Aren't ya, girl?" Jason reached down to pet his dog. "She's everything I'd hoped she'd be and more. She's..." he stared into her big brown eyes... "my best friend."

"What about you?" Ben said, turning around to face him. "How're you doing?"

"Good," he lied. "I'm doing super."

Ben moved closer and took a seat beside him. "Are you sure?"

Jason suddenly felt uncomfortable, exposed perhaps. "Uh, yeah."

“Well, if you ever need to talk, you can always call me.” He reached down and placed his hand on Jason’s knee. “I’m a pretty good listener.”

The touch ignited something within Jason, and he suddenly felt all tingly. He looked into Ben’s eyes and smiled, and oddly enough, he believed him to be sincere. “Thank you,” Jason said, his voice barely a whisper.

“Okay, down to business! Wanna help me get Blaze up in the tub?”

Blaze, as well-trained as she was, fully cooperated as they lifted her into the metal tub. Ben used a hand-held showerhead to hose her down, then lathered her up with shampoo.

“I’ll first give her a normal bath with shampoo, then bathe her a second time with conditioner.”

“How’d you learn how to do all this?” Jason asked.

“I took training courses and became certified. They’re offered at the community college.”

“So you don’t have a degree or anything?”

Ben smiled. “Nope.”

His question must’ve sounded pretentious, and Jason could have kicked himself for blurting it out. “I mean, that’s cool. I just wondered. I don’t have a degree either. I went right into the Marines out of high school.”

“You gonna go back to school? You could probably use your GI Bill, right?”

“Yeah, I could, but I don’t know. I’m not sure I’m ready.”

“Maybe online classes?”

“Well, I had a pretty good job as a mechanic. I’d like to someday go back to that.”

“Wow,” Ben said. “How manly.”

Jason laughed.

“Well, to be honest, it doesn’t surprise me. Everything about you is manly.”

Jason stared at him, wide-eyed, unsure how to respond.

“Did I just say that out loud?” Ben said.

"It's cool," Jason said. "I had to be in the closet when I was in the Corps. Don't Ask, Don't Tell, ya know? But I'm free now."

Ben smiled broadly as he turned to look Jason directly in the face. "Really?"

"Have you been... um..."

"Flirting?"

Jason nodded.

"Not on purpose, but sometimes I can't help myself."

Jason shifted in his seat then took a deep breath. "I haven't dated or anything since... uh..."

"Since the onset of your symptoms." Ben's expression sobered.

Jason looked down at the floor and nodded. "Kinda hard to date someone when you never leave the house."

"Well, maybe you need to look for someone who's willing to come to you," Ben suggested.

Jason laughed. "What kind of relationship would that be, and who'd want that?"

"I don't know," Ben said as he picked up the spray nozzle again and began rinsing Blaze. "Maybe someone who sees what an awesome guy you are and is willing to accept your challenges."

"Challenges," Jason repeated. "That's a nice way of saying I'm crazy."

"Dude, you're not crazy." He stopped spraying and turned again to face Jason. "Don't say shit like that about yourself."

"You sound like my mother."

"Good, 'cause she seems like an awesome lady," he said, then resumed the bathing.

When he finished rinsing Blaze, he laid out a blanket-sized towel on the floor and lifted her from the tub. "Oh yeah, her's a big girl," he said, straining.

Jason grinned. "Don't hurt yourself," he cautioned. "I could've helped, ya know."

"Oh, I'm used to doing all this by myself. And believe me, Blaze is not the biggest dog I have. You should see me handle a Great Dane."

“Oh my God, I can't imagine.”

“I usually put the dogs in a cage and then turn on the dryers, but Blaze is so well trained, I think she'll be okay sitting right here. I can do her nails while she dries.”

He then shifted some things around and set up two large fans on either side of the dog. “They look like fans,” he said, “but they're heaters. I just put them on low because, believe me, they get pretty warm.”

Ben then took a seat on the floor in front of Blaze, crossing his legs in front of himself. The childlike position in which he was seated seemed cute, and Jason smiled.

“Why don't you come over for dinner sometime?” he blurted out, then instantly regretted it. He had no idea where that even came from, how he'd mustered the courage, but he'd said it. Before he could take back the invitation, Ben responded.

“I'd love it!” He looked up and smiled.

“Really?”

“Of course,” he said. “I thought you'd never ask.”

“Blaze, I'm not a good enough cook to have a guy like Ben over for dinner.” He paced back and forth across the kitchen, running his hands over the top of his crew cut. “What am I gonna do?” He looked down at Blaze, as if she could answer.

“Right! Of course, why didn't I think of that? I'll do steaks on the grill! But you know what that means? We've gotta go shopping.”

Blaze continued to stare up at him, mouth slightly open with her tongue hanging out just slightly.

“Just you and me. Think we can do it?”

The expression on her face said yes, so Jason took a deep breath, then headed for the bedroom to grab his wallet.

He'd gone shopping several times with his mom, and they usually went late in the evening when the store wasn't crowded. If he started to feel panic, he'd go outside. He wouldn't be able to do that this time. He couldn't just abandon a shopping cart in the middle of the aisle.

He fitted Blaze with her service harness and attached the leash. “You ready, girl?” he asked, and they headed out the door. Driving wasn’t particularly a challenge, as long as he stayed calm, and the grocery store wasn’t far away.

When they got to the store, he walked through the entrance door, Blaze at his side, and immediately felt the eyes of multiple strangers. Of course they’d stare. They weren’t used to seeing a dog inside a place of business, and they probably wondered why he needed a service dog when he wasn’t blind. He squared his shoulders and took a deep breath. “We’re gonna ignore them,” he whispered to Blaze.

He made his way up and down each aisle, looking for the items he knew he’d need for the barbeque. “Marinade,” he said to himself. “What aisle?”

He looked overhead at the signs, hoping to find some help in his search. “Maybe it’s in the ketchup aisle,” he said to Blaze.

Just then a lady and two children rounded the corner of the aisle and one of the kids, a boy about the age of four or five began to shout, “Look at the doggie!”

The children rushed up, immediately followed by their mother who’d abandoned her cart. “Can we pet her?” she said.

Before Jason could answer, another customer approached from behind. “She’s so beautiful. Are you her trainer? Is she a Seeing Eye dog?”

Then another customer came toward them, head on.

Blaze immediately moved into action as she began to circle Jason, moving back and forth, avoiding the outstretched hands of the small children. She rapidly paced back and forth, making it impossible for the onlookers to get any closer as Jason felt his entire body stiffen. He took deep breaths and closed his eyes, willing them to just back off—just go away!

When he heard the commotion die down, he opened his eyes and realized he and Blaze were alone in the aisle. All the people had moved on, a couple now down a ways from him at the other end of the aisle. They looked up to glance in his direction, obviously confused by what had happened, but Jason didn’t care. Blaze had done her job, and he hadn’t gone into a complete panic.

“Good girl!” he said, crouching down to pet her on the head. “Thank you, baby.”

When Jason heard the knock on his apartment door, he panicked, but it wasn't due to the PTSD. It was an entirely different kind of panic.

"He's here!" he said to Blaze in a stage whisper. "It's Ben!"

He rushed over to the mirror and checked his appearance one last time as Blaze moved to the front door, turning to stare at him expectantly. "I'm coming," he said, annoyed, then shook his head.

After one more deep breath, he flung the door open to see Ben's smiling face.

"Right on time," Jason said, smiling. Ben held out a box, and Jason looked down to see it was chocolates. "You brought me chocolate?"

"Well, I was gonna bring a bottle of wine, but I wasn't sure about alcohol."

"Oh, right. Yeah, with the meds... but a glass of wine would've probably been cool."

He placed his hand on Ben's shoulder and guided him inside. "I'm not much of a cook, so I'm grilling steaks. They're already out on the barbeque." He motioned toward the patio.

"Oh cool. You're a meat eater."

Jason laughed. "Do I really look like a vegetarian?" Then it suddenly occurred to him he hadn't checked with Ben to see if he might be. "Um... do *you* eat meat?"

"As much as I can get," he said, laughing.

"Um... awesome. 'Cause I got a big piece of meat for you." He felt his cheeks grow warm as he realized what he'd said. Ben laughed.

Jason motioned for Ben to have a seat at the dining room table. "Everything should be about ready. There's soda and water in the fridge if you wanna help yourself while I go get the... uh... meat."

"Cool," Ben said.

Jason had made a salad, baked potatoes, and rib eye steaks. As he brought the platter back into the dining room, Ben took a seat at the table, which had already been set.

"Wow, this is killer," Ben said. "And you said you weren't a good cook."

“Well, you might wanna wait till you taste it before you start complimenting me.” He placed the platter on the table and took his seat across from Ben. “Most of what I cook comes from a box or the freezer.”

“Then you’ve definitely outdone yourself.” Ben began to dish up the salad and handed a bowl to Jason.

“Did you have a lot of customers today?” Jason said, trying to make small talk.

“I had six,” Ben said. “Supposed to be seven, but I had to reschedule one.”

“I hope not on my account.”

He shook his head. “Nah, on account of the ambulance. The engine started smoking, and I was afraid...”

“It started smoking?”

“Yeah. I’m not sure what the problem was, but the gauges didn’t indicate it was overheated.”

“Did you smell anything? Like, did it seem like burnt rubber?”

“Yeah, actually, it did.”

“A belt, it sounds like.”

“Oh. Well, I let it cool off, and when it stopped smoking, I drove it straight home. I’m gonna try to get it into the garage in the morning.”

Jason raised his eyebrows. “Well, I’m a mechanic, ya know. Maybe I could...” And then he realized he’d probably overstepped his bounds. Of course, Ben would not entrust him with something like working on his vehicle. Jason wasn’t stable enough, and Ben probably thought he’d freak out or something, totally fuck everything up.

“Really?” Ben said. “You could look at it for me?”

“Uh... I mean, if you want...”

“I don’t want to take advantage—”

“Take advantage? You mean like I did of you when you groomed Blaze and you wouldn’t let me pay you?”

“No... um, that was different.”

“How?” He stabbed his fork into a big piece of lettuce.

“Um... give me a minute to think.”

Jason laughed. “So after we eat, we’ll go over to your place and I’ll look at the Groombulance for you.”

“This is supposed to be our date,” Ben protested.

“How come our date can’t include fixing your ambulance?”

Ben shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess you’re right. As long as we’re together, it’s still a date. And this steak is awesome!”

“You’re supposed to eat the salad first,” Jason said, then winked.

“Yup, here’s your problem,” Jason said. “You’re gonna need a new belt.”

“Wow,” Ben said, craning his neck to look down into the engine where Jason was pointing. “Is that serious?”

Jason grinned. “We’ll get ya fixed up. We’ve gotta go to the auto parts store, though.”

“Oh, I don’t think they’re open.”

“Not this time of night, but instead of taking it to the garage in the morning, we’ll go get the parts and I’ll fix it.”

“Jason, that’s too much.”

“You’re always doing nice things for other people, but you won’t let anyone return the favor.”

“I didn’t do much,” Ben protested. “I just gave Blaze a bath. Big deal.”

“And you donate all your time at the training center. And you’ve checked on me.”

“But that’s because...” His voice trailed off.

“Why?” Standing in front of the ambulance with the hood open, he turned to Ben and looked him in the eye. “Because why?”

“Because I had ulterior motives,” he said. “I... uh... I...”

“I wanna kiss you,” Jason blurted out, then grabbed hold of Ben’s shoulders and pulled him closer. “I wanna kiss you so fucking bad.”

“Then what are you fucking waiting for?”

“I don’t fucking know!”

Ben reached up and grabbed hold of the sides of Jason’s face and pulled him downward, planting a searing kiss on his lips. Jason responded by wrapping his arms around the smaller man and pulling him tight, passionately kissing him back.

When they pulled apart, Ben looked up at him seriously. “That’s why,” he said. “That’s why I’ve been so nice to you.”

Jason smiled. “Dog grooming ain’t the only thing you’re an expert at.”

Blaze, who was standing beside them, looked up and barked her approval.

Jason turned to her and smiled. “Yeah, he *is* a pretty good kisser.”

They held hands on the drive back to Jason’s apartment as a plethora of thoughts and fears flooded Jason’s mind. What was he doing? Why was he letting himself get involved with this guy when he knew there could be no future?

Just a kiss. Just a first date, he told himself.

But what if it could be more? He and Ben had shared a connection, and Jason knew this a long time ago. Yet he’d been too frightened to act. Just like with everything else in his life, he felt paralyzed.

“You okay?” Ben said. He sat in the driver’s seat, steering one-handed. “I didn’t come on too strong?”

“This is so crazy,” Jason said, turning to stare out the window. “When I was younger, back before... ya know... the war, I was always the more aggressive one. I wasn’t shy about asking someone out, making the first move. But now...”

“You know, it’s human nature to fear rejection,” Ben said. “If you only knew how much courage it took for me to give you my card.”

“I don’t know if I can be the kind of guy you’d want.”

“How do you know what kind of guy I want?” Ben said, a defensive edge in his voice. “I happen to think you’re exactly the kind I want. You’re smart and brave and strong. And you’re a nice person, a generous person.”

“What if I never get over this? What if I’m a prisoner in my own house the rest of my life?”

“You’re already getting over it, Jason! Look at you. Look where you’re at right now. You’re in a car with me on our first date. You’re not locked up inside your apartment, and you’re not having a panic attack.”

“I thought I was going to, though.”

“So? That’s all the more reason to be proud of your accomplishment. You faced your fear. And you told me at dinner you’d gone shopping alone. Jason, this journey is not made in huge leaps but much more in baby steps. Sometimes you’ll find yourself just barely inching along. You can’t get discouraged. You just have to keep moving forward, no matter how slow or how difficult it seems.”

Jason’s heartbeat quickened as Ben squeezed his hand. Everything about the guy made Jason feel better. Just being with him sent a shiver of excitement through Jason’s body. He was a wonderful person with an amazing personality, but he also was very attractive. When they’d kissed, Jason had become instantly aroused, and now sitting beside him, holding his hand, Jason again was turned on.

When Ben pulled into the parking lot, Jason wondered if he’d just drop him off or stay a little while longer. He parked the car and killed the engine, and Jason heaved a sigh of relief. “You’re coming in, right?”

Ben smiled. “Sure.”

“How about we have that glass of wine?” Jason offered, once inside.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I bought a bottle when I got groceries—just in case.”

Ben entered the living room and sat down on the loveseat while Jason got them drinks from the kitchen. When he returned, Blaze was sitting beside Ben with her head in his lap.

“Hey, you stole my seat,” Jason scolded her. She looked up, then somewhat reluctantly climbed down from the cushion onto the floor. Jason slid in beside Ben and handed him his glass.

Jason took a sip of his wine, then placed the glass on the stand beside him. He felt his heart pound rapidly in his chest as he inhaled the nutty scent of Ben’s cologne. He slid his hand down onto Ben’s thigh and felt a tightening in his own groin.

“You’re not the only one who was trying to muster the courage to ask me out,” he said.

“There’s someone else?” Ben leaned back as he turned to look at Jason.

“No, no! I mean... no, I mean I was also trying to muster the courage to ask *you* out.”

“Oh,” Ben smiled.

Jason leaned a little closer. Their lips seemed to move together as if drawn by magnetic force, and soon Jason was enveloped once more in a passionate, earth-shattering kiss. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to be swept away as Ben reached up to press his fingertips against Jason’s chest.

Jason ran his hand through Ben’s hair as he continued to devour him, darting his tongue into Ben’s welcoming mouth. Ben slid his hand downward, slowly crossing Jason’s abdomen and finding his lap. He moaned when Ben pressed against his steel-hard erection.

“Can we go to the bedroom?” Jason asked. Ben nodded.

Jason stood and took Ben by the hand, leading the way down the hallway to the bedroom while Blaze followed. Once inside, Jason guided Ben to the bed and sat with him on the edge of the mattress. Their lips found each other’s again, and they once more kissed as Jason reached for the tail of Ben’s shirt. They parted long enough for Jason to pull the shirt over Ben’s head, after which Jason immediately brushed his fingertips across the golden skin of Ben’s smooth chest.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered, burying his face into the crook of Ben’s neck while simultaneously tweaking one of his nipples. Ben moaned and tossed his head back. Jason steered him downward on the bed, then slid off the mattress to position himself between Ben’s outstretched legs. He reached for the button of Ben’s pants, unfastened them, and tugged the khakis downward, over Ben’s thighs.

Jason’s heart beat a little faster as he stared down at the obvious bulge in front of him. Ben wore tight-fitting boxer briefs, and the outline of his throbbing cock enticed Jason to continue. He leaned forward and pressed his lips against the stretched fabric, breathing warm air onto the already steaming hot hard-on.

Unable to wait a second longer, Jason took hold of the waistband of the shorts and pulled them down, discarding them behind him on the floor, then

grabbed hold of the beautiful erection. As he pulled it toward his mouth, a pearl of precum oozed from the slit, and he darted his tongue out to lap it up. He looked up at Ben, smiling.

“Oh my God,” Ben whispered.

Jason wrapped his lips around the bulbous head and slid his mouth around Ben's cock, pressing his tongue against the sensitive frenulum. Ben elicited a barely audible whimper as Jason slid all the way down the shaft, taking the entirety of his cock down to the root.

The feel of Ben's soft touch, when he raked his fingers over the top of Jason's short hair, encouraged him to continue. He slid back up the shaft, then back down, slowly starting to bob. Ben moaned as Jason continued, excited himself and fully aroused.

“Oh God, you're gonna make me come,” Ben warned.

Jason pulled back and looked up at him, smiling broadly.

“I want you to make love to me,” Ben pleaded.

Jason wanted it too, but was it too soon?

“Please,” Ben said. “I've wanted it for so long.”

Jason pushed himself up from the mattress and stepped closer. Ben reached out with both hands and took hold of the waistband of his jeans. He unbuttoned them and pulled open the fly, reaching inside to find Jason's arousal. Jason's breath caught in his throat as Ben pumped his shaft.

“Nice,” Ben whispered, staring at Jason's impressive package.

He took hold of the tail of his shirt and pulled it over his head, exposing his muscled chest, and Ben stared up at him, awestruck. Ben pulled down Jason's pants and underwear, then assisted him as Jason stepped out of them. Now completely naked before his lover, Jason moved in closer once more, pressing his body against Ben's as they began to passionately kiss.

They repositioned themselves on the mattress, rolling around, all the while caressing each other. Jason explored Ben's body with his fingertips and mouth, worshiping it, bathing it with tender kisses.

When at last Ben was beneath him with his head on one of the pillows, Jason looked down into his big blue eyes. “Do you want me inside you?”

“Yes,” Ben pleaded.

Jason leaned off the bed and opened a drawer in the bedside stand. He removed a condom packet and lube and set them on the mattress. He slid back on his knees between Ben's legs and picked up the lube. Ben spread his legs wide as Jason applied the gel to his fingers. He slid one finger into the tight hole and began rotating his digit. Ben moaned as Jason's finger slid deeper inside him. He then added a second lubed digit, but did not proceed further until Ben felt relaxed.

Ben picked up the condom pack and tore it open, leaning forward between his own legs to position it onto the tip of Jason's cock. He rolled it down as Jason watched, smiling. Jason applied lube and pumped his shaft a couple times, then slid closer on the mattress. He used his biceps to press against Ben's ankles as he raised his legs into the air. Aligning his cock with Ben's hole, he eased into the pucker. The warm sensation surrounded his cockhead as he watched Ben's face.

Ben bit his bottom lip and grabbed hold of the bedding beneath them.

"Baby, you okay?"

Ben took a deep breath and nodded. "Yes. Keep going."

Jason slid in further, and the warmth turned to heat. Ben's tightness felt amazing around his throbbing shaft, and he smiled. Ben let go of the bed sheets and grabbed hold of Jason's waist, urging him on.

Jason began to thrust, slowly at first, but then increasing in speed.

"Fuck me," Ben encouraged. "Please... make love to me."

As Jason rocked his pelvis, pumping his cock in and out, Ben matched his thrusts by grabbing hold of Jason's ass cheeks and pulling him inward. Jason leaned forward, pressing his lips against Ben's mouth, kissing passionately as he remained inside his lover.

Jason felt the throb of Ben's raging hard-on against his abs as he continued to thrust in and out, until at last Ben tossed his head back and moaned, "I'm gonna come! Oh God! Yes!"

A warm spray erupted from his cock, splashing against Jason's abdomen and chest as he continued to stab his cock deep inside him, literally fucking the cum right out of him. "Oh yeah," Jason said, his voice breathy. "So close. Oh God! Yeah!"

He at last felt himself cross the precipice, that incomparable point of no return. He cried out, squinting his eyes tightly shut while lightning coursed through him, causing him to convulse. The orgasm ripped through his body and his load erupted deep inside Ben's body. His sphincter tightened around Jason's steel-hard cock, milking out every last drop of hot cum.

Gasping he collapsed on top of Ben, kissing him again, even more passionately. He pulled his arms back to allow Ben to lower his legs and wrap them tightly around Jason's waist. They rolled onto their sides, still kissing as Jason slowly slid out of his lover.

"Spend the night," he whispered.

Ben looked into his eyes and nodded. "I don't ever want to leave."

"Oh yeah, that's a nice tight fit," Jason said.

"That's because you're so huge," Ben replied.

Jason turned to him and smiled. "I'm talking about the fan belt."

"Oh," Ben said, grinning. "That too."

"Why don't you and Blaze ride with me today?" Ben suggested. "You can wait in the cab while I'm dealing with the customers, then join me in the back while I do the grooming."

"I don't know," Jason said, thinking about it. "I'm not sure how the other dogs will react to Blaze."

"If there's a problem, she can stay in the cab. It's air conditioned."

The cab was roomy, and there was actually plenty of space for Blaze to lie on the floor between the seats. But to be honest, Jason wasn't really all that worried about Blaze. He was more concerned about himself and how he'd do in public for an entire day.

"It won't even be like being in public," Ben said, as if reading his mind. "You won't have to interact with anyone unless you want to."

"And I'll get to spend the whole day with you."

"Exactly, and we'll have the entire back of the ambulance to do whatever we want in."

Jason raised his eyebrows. "*Whatever* we want?"

“Whatever we want.” Ben winked.

“Okay,” Jason said.

The night before had been wonderful, and Ben had stayed the whole time, sleeping with Jason and Blaze in his bed. They’d snuggled together, and Jason hadn’t even had any nightmares.

But he wasn’t naïve enough to believe that would always be the case. Although Ben knew about all Jason’s symptoms, he’d yet to witness him actually having a panic attack or recovering from a horrific nightmare.

How would Ben cope with it when it happened? Christ, how would he cope himself? His fear of freaking Ben out was almost worse than the fear which gripped him during a panic episode.

Yet he’d allowed himself to trust Ben the night before. He’d gone out on a limb and had done something that really terrified him, and look how it had turned out. If he hadn’t allowed Ben into his home and into his life, he wouldn’t even be here now. He’d still be in his prison—alone and frightened.

The first client of the day was a poodle named Misty. Jason instructed Blaze to remain inside the cab of the truck, which was completely separate from the rear compartment, although a small window separated the sections.

The grooming process was different than it had been with Blaze. Jason took a seat and watched as Ben placed the small dog on a table in the center of the cabin. He used canvas straps to secure the dog in place. They served as a harness, restricting her mobility. She didn’t fuss much, to Jason’s surprise, but just stood there while Ben trimmed her hair. He used both scissors and clippers, and Jason marveled at how quickly and skillfully he groomed her. After the haircut was complete, he bathed her, dried her, then trimmed her nails. At the very end, he placed a bow in her hair.

“Wow,” Jason said, “you did all that in less than forty minutes.”

“Good,” Ben said with a satisfactory nod. “That means we’re still on schedule.”

After the third dog, Ben suggested that they get some lunch. “Why don’t we just get takeout somewhere and go down to the park? There’s a dog run where we can walk Blaze.”

“Cool,” Jason said. It sounded perfect.

They stopped and got burgers at a drive through, and the attendant who took their order was exceptionally friendly. "I get that a lot," Ben explained. "People don't see the company logo on the side, and they think I'm an actual ambulance."

Jason laughed. "Well, you can give me CPR if you want."

When they got to the park, they climbed out of the cab and made their way to a nearby picnic table. "Let me walk Blaze real quick," Jason said. He headed off down the trail, certain Blaze was more than ready to relieve herself.

As they walked along the trail, they rounded a corner, and the picnic area was no longer in sight. Jason looked up, and just ahead of them stood a group of people. It looked to be about five guys, all college-aged, huddled together talking. Jason froze in his tracks.

Two of the guys broke from the group and stepped toward him. Jason felt his heart rate quicken. He took a deep breath.

"Hey, man, this is a private party," one of them said.

Jason opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

"Dude, you deaf or something? Get lost!" The guy speaking was about Jason's height, also muscular with multiple tattoos on his arms. He wore dark sunglasses and a bandana on his head.

Blaze immediately stepped between them.

The man stopped and looked down at the dog. "Call off your mutt," he said.

Blaze peeled back her lips, baring her teeth, and growled. The man took a step back.

Another guy from the group stepped forward, pulling something from his back pocket. He flicked his wrist and a switchblade opened. Jason stared at it as the sun glinted off the blade. The drumbeat of his heart echoed in his head.

"Grenade!"

It all came back to him, flooding his memory and overtaking every one of his senses. He wasn't alone. The enemy surrounded him, and Briggs was to his left screaming that horrible, fateful warning.

"Grenade!"

He began to tremble as the world faded around him. All he could see was desert sand and bursts of gunfire. "Todd, no! No! Please Todd!"

Jason crumpled to his knees, releasing Blaze's leash as he covered his face with both hands, sobbing.

Seconds later, he heard footsteps—someone running toward him. He raised his arms defensively to fend them off, but arms surrounded him, pulling him tightly into an embrace.

“Jason, it's me. It's Ben! You're okay. You're okay. You're right here with me.”

Jason gasped for air and clutched his friend, pulling Ben's body against his own. “You didn't have to do it, man! You didn't have to sacrifice yourself. It should have been me. It should have fucking been me!”

Eventually his heartbeat slowed and he opened his eyes to discover he wasn't in Iraq. He wasn't in the middle of the fucking desert but was here in the park with Ben and Blaze. She nuzzled herself next to him, licking his face and he reached out for her.

“Blaze scared them off,” Ben said. “I don't know who they were. Maybe it was a drug deal or something, but one of 'em had a knife.”

Jason's hands still trembled as he looked up at Ben.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered.

“You're sorry? Oh baby, don't be sorry. I'm the one who's sorry. I'm the one who brought you here.”

Ben helped Jason to his feet and led him back down the trail toward the picnic table.

“Just take me home,” Jason said.

“Okay, yes. Of course,” Ben said.

“Just take me home... NOW!”

Jason had turned the ringer off on his phone, but he still noticed when it lit up as a call came through. Ben had called at least a dozen times in the previous three days. Jason had listened to his first few messages but then stopped.

The whole thing had been an awful mistake, and it wasn't fair to Ben. Jason should have never put him in a situation where he'd have to deal with one of his freak-outs. Though Ben repeatedly told him it didn't matter, that it was just

another attack he'd made it through, Jason would never be the same around him. Now Ben knew for certain—he'd seen in living color—what a basket case Jason really was.

He'd just move on with his life, him and Blaze. He now had everything he needed. He had his security and his comfortable space. He didn't need a boyfriend. He definitely didn't need love.

Love?

He laughed aloud as he thought about it. How could he even pose the L word at this juncture? Yeah, he and Ben had known each other several months now, but they'd only gone on one date. And they'd only spent one night together. Why would he even consider the word love at this stage?

It didn't matter. It was over, and Jason wouldn't make that same mistake again. He wouldn't allow himself to open up to someone, to trust someone when he knew what the end result would be. He was damaged goods. Period.

The knock on his door startled him, but did not trigger any sort of PTSD response. He knew exactly who it had to be. Since his mom was at work, the only other person who might show up was Ben. He just wouldn't answer. He'd ignore the pounding until he gave up and went away.

At the second knock, Blaze was on her feet, pacing back and forth in front of the door. "No, Blaze," Jason whispered. "Just be quiet, and he'll go away."

Blaze took a step toward him and barked. It wasn't an ordinary bark, either. It was loud, ear-piercing.

"Blaze!" he scolded.

She barked again, three more times, each as loud as the first.

"Dammit!" he said, and pushed himself up from the chair. He took a deep breath and walked over to the door, opening it just slightly.

"Let me in," Ben said. "Please."

Jason sighed and stepped back. "Ben..."

"Please, let me talk. Just listen to what I have to say."

Reluctantly, Jason led him into the living room and took a seat in his recliner. Ben sat a few feet from him on the loveseat while Blaze curled up at Ben's feet, allowing him to reach down and pet her.

“I want to show you something,” he said.

Jason watched as Ben reached into his jacket pocket and removed two pill bottles. “These are my medications,” he said.

Jason stared at him quizzically. “You take meds?”

Ben nodded. “I have bipolar disorder, and at one point in my life, I was on full disability.”

“Really?”

“Yes. My mood swings were so bad, I could barely function, and it took a long time to find the right medicine. I’m still not cured. I’ll never be cured, but I can now function.”

“Ben, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it doesn’t matter.” Tears welled in his eyes. “Just like it doesn’t matter you have PTSD. They’re conditions! They’re illnesses just like anything else. Would you think any less of me if I had diabetes or cancer or asthma?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Then why would it be any different with a mental illness?”

“I don’t know,” Jason said, “and you’re right, it doesn’t matter to me. I don’t think less of you.”

“Then why the fuck do you think I care less about you because of your illness?”

A wave of emotion swept over Jason and the tears began to flow. “I don’t know, but people just do. They see me as some sort of freak, some sort of lunatic.”

“You know how I see you, don’t you? I told you. You’re my hero, man! You almost sacrificed your life for our country. You’re the bravest fucking man I know. Look, I’m so sorry about the other day. I never should have let you head down that trail alone. I knew better. That’s *my* fault, not yours!”

“I don’t blame you. Ben, it’s not your fault.”

“Please give me another chance. Please give *us* another chance.” He slid off the sofa onto his knees and crawled over to Jason, stopping right in front of him. “I love you, and I don’t want to lose you.”

Through his tears, Jason smiled. He reached out and placed his hands on each side of Ben's tear-streaked face. Slowly he nodded. "I think I love you, too. Now more than ever."

Ben lunged toward him, wrapping him in a fierce hug. They embraced for several moments and then pulled apart. "Let's try this again," Jason whispered, and kissed him.

Five Years Later

"We have a busy day today," Jason complained. "When I finish up with the transmission on the third truck, I have to install brake pads on number two."

They now had five Groombulances and six full-time employees. Ben and Jason had expanded the business together, and Jason's primary job was to maintain the vehicles. Of course, that wasn't all he did. He also ran errands, manned the phone, and kept Ben organized.

Over the previous five years, he'd learned a lot about Ben's disorder, and in so doing, he'd learned more about himself. He wasn't crazy. He wasn't damaged. He had a chronic, treatable condition. And he'd made tremendous strides in his recovery.

Jason and Ben made strides together, along with Blaze. As Jason's condition improved, Blaze became more like a pet to them than a service dog, but she still was a worker, and they both loved her with all their hearts.

"*You* have a busy day? You should see my schedule!" Ben retorted.

"I'm the one who wrote your schedule," Jason said, laughing. "You have six customers. Big deal."

"Why don't you take the day off and do the transmission tomorrow?"

"You know I can't."

"I'll blow you in the back of the Groombulance."

"You do that anyway... all the time."

"But I'm gonna miss you."

Jason laughed. "Yeah, and absence makes the heart grow fonder."

"Can I at least have a kiss?"

“Right here? Right out on the sidewalk in front of all these cars that are passing by?”

“Right here,” Ben said.

Jason grabbed hold of him and delivered a swoon-inducing kiss, complete with a dip. When he set Ben back on his feet, he looked into his eyes and smiled. “I love you, baby.”

“I love you, too.”

Blaze stood beside them, barking her approval.

The End

Author Bio

Jeff Erno began writing LGBT fiction in the late 1990s. Although an avid reader and amateur writer from a very young age, Jeff pursued a career as a retail store manager in Northern Michigan. When his first gay-themed novel was published, he was shocked that anyone would even want to read it. Four years later, he writes full time and has published fifteen novels. Jeff now lives in Southern Michigan, where he resides with his pure-white cat, Gandalf.

Jeff's writing credits include a variety of themes and sub-genres including male romance, Young Adult, Science Fiction, erotica, and BDSM. He is the winner of a 2012 Rainbow Award and an Honorable Mention in 2011. His style is unpretentious and focused upon emotionally-driven, character-based stories that touch the heart. Jeff is especially passionate about young adult literature and combating teen bullying and youth suicide.

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BLOOD IN THE WATER

By Tami Veldura

Photo Description

Two pirates sit together in the lower deck of a ship enjoying each other. One of them, blond, is shirtless and smiling. He has a snake tattoo on his left shoulder. He leans forward to lick the nipple of his lover. The second pirate has black hair down to his chest. He straddles a leg of the blond and arches toward him. He appears more reserved. The blond restrains the black-haired pirate by one wrist.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Being a pirate is one of the most dangerous and exciting jobs ever. What people don't know is that what makes it even more thrilling is to intercept another pirate's mission, especially when you'll get to see the other pirate's bewildered expression. When will he notice that I always do it on purpose, but not because I hate him? They do say there's a thin line between love and hate...

I hope you'll be able to write our story and make it into one of the most exciting journeys ever, even if it means that many battles will have to be fought.

Sincerely,

Jane A

Story Info

Genre: historical fantasy, paranormal

Tags: treasure hunt, slow burn/UST, sea battles, pirates, demons/spirits, spirit possession, tattoos, HFN

Content Warnings: extreme graphic violence

Word Count: 27,557

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BLOOD IN THE WATER

By Tami Veldura

Chapter I

January

Kyros sipped his slurry of a drink and held up his other hand to stop the spill of words. The ragged man across the table bit his tongue. Kyros grunted at him. "I don't need your life story. I need your sworn word, on your honor, that you will fight."

"You have it, sir."

"Who brought you in tonight?"

"Rodrigo and Hugo, sir."

Kyros stared for several heartbeats, but the man didn't try to slide away from his scrutiny. "I'll check with them, you realize?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Register your name with my quartermaster." Kyros leaned his head slightly to the left and watched his new recruit's expression tighten. "You'll be on three-quarters share for a period, make sure you don't cause any trouble." The man flashed a hard look at Kyros and with obvious discontent slid himself down the bench to sit across from Araceli.

They always reacted the same. Disbelief, anger, haughty self-importance, reluctant tolerance. Sometimes they made it past tolerance and worked well before the mast. Sometimes they didn't. Araceli didn't suffer fools. She calmly slid a knife against the edge of a whetstone, coloring the tavern chatter with the familiar slide of metal. It was more than a show, she'd already used the weapon twice in the few hours they sat here.

"Quartermaster." The new recruit spat on the bench. He lifted his chin. "Don't get too comfortable."

"Name, please." Araceli asked with no apparent interest.

"You can call me God, if you like."

Araceli continued to sharpen her knife and the utter lack of response deflated the recruit's ego a bit. He glanced at Kyros who didn't even offer a raised eyebrow of acknowledgement.

His bravado slid a bit more. "Antony Louis."

Araceli set the whetstone to one side of her ledger and the knife down on the other. She inked her quill and scratched his name onto the list. Kyros watched the recruit lean across the table and sniff at her. She hummed. “Captain says you get three-quarter share, understand?”

“Sure, darlin’.”

Kyros saw Araceli’s shoulders twitch a hair tighter. Antony couldn’t handle a woman in charge, or perhaps he didn’t like a negro telling him what to do. It was just a matter of time; he’d show his true colors. Araceli continued, “We sail after merchant vessels and will track down any legitimate treasure hoard. Any news you collect on that front you bring to me or the Captain—” Araceli paused at the blatant lust on Antony’s face. “Repeat that so I know you’re listening.”

Antony reached forward to stroke a finger across Araceli’s wrist on the ledger. “I’ll listen to your voice all ni—”

Araceli swept his hand to the side, dropped the quill for her knife. She stabbed Antony’s hand to the table. Her expression remained idly disinterested. Antony jerked to his feet with a shriek. He tried to punch her and missed. The whetstone skittered toward Kyros. Araceli pinned Antony’s head to the table. His rapid breath ruffled the pages of her ledger. He whined, the fingers of his impaled hand white with stress. Blood seeped between the cracks of the table.

Araceli continued, the interruption not worth the effort, “Merchants and treasure hoards. You’ll start in the rigging. Do you have any experience with line repairs?”

Antony’s free hand scratched at the table, and his face took a more pasty shade. Araceli waited. “Yes.”

A barmaid knocked into Kyros’ arm with her hip, her hands full of drinks. She nodded at Araceli. “Keep scarring that table and you’ll be paying for a new one.”

“These benches have seen worse than a few knives.”

“Your knives’ll be the last. This ain’t the Seal, we won’t be seeing any brawls from you or yours in this place.” She frowned at him and turned away to deliver her orders.

Kyros collected the whetstone. Araceli made a final note in her ledger and allowed Antony to lift his head from the table. She pressed the quill into his

free hand and turned the book toward him. "Make your mark." Antony marked a shaky cross of lines. Araceli yanked her knife out of the table and their new recruit's hand. He gladly put more space between them.

"You'll find the Hawk left of the bay," Araceli said, moving the knife in a flat gesture that Antony backed away from. "Move your things aboard. The coxswain will show you your hammock. We go with the tide in two days, understood?"

"Yes, Quartermaster." Antony cradled his hand and made his escape from the tavern.

Araceli measured her beer over the blood he left behind, filtering it through the wood and down to the stone floor. Kyros watched her wipe the knife. He handed her the whetstone. "What does that bring us up to?"

"Three score, even."

"Ought to be enough." Kyros sipped his drink. "Last minute concerns?"

"Going after this trade ship from Africa... that's another target Midnight Sun tracked down, isn't it?"

"So what if it is?"

She frowned at him, expressing multitudes of discontent. "You gamble with all of our lives. What happens when the Sun's Captain elevates you from annoyance to threat? I wouldn't take that ship with two hundred men."

"Have you bought into the stories, then? A cursed man that slaughters souls by the dozens?"

"No. If he were manic he wouldn't be able to run the kind of business he does." She closed the ledger and tapped her quill free of ink. "Their six-pounders match ours, and they have a pair of long nines out the front." She shook her head. "Frankly, she might match us for speed. It isn't wise to antagonize him."

"I'm not trying to get us all killed—"

"Then what are you doing?"

Kyros drained his mug and tapped it on the table, pensive. "I just need the distraction. And a spice ship is a good challenge for us. There's a lot of profit in it."

"Sure. So why are we taking on the Sun, too?"

Kyros wiped his hand down his face and pushed the mug away with one finger. "I need a treasure to chase."

"Don't avoid my question." Araceli sheathed her knife on the back of her forearm.

"I didn't." Kyros signaled the barmaid for another beer.

"You just refuse to accept that some things should be avoided, don't you?"

"I don't take 'no' for an answer, girl. It's not in my nature."

Araceli snorted at him, a deep sound in her broad lungs.

January

That Night

Eric touched the shirt over his chest on the way up to tuck his hair back. He knew the shirt covered him. He'd put it on himself. It was not going to disappear. He tied several locks together at the back of his head, brass rings clinked on the strands. The Midnight Sun listed to port over a wave and moonlight blinked through the sails.

"Closing in to starboard, sir! Looks like an English boat."

"Guns?"

A pause while the crew counted. Then, "Thirty, sir. And she rides low."

"Tacking starboard! Full sail." Eric swung the wheel before him, pulling the Sun to port, then turning to starboard on a direct approach. The boom of the mains'l drifted to port and the fabric stretched taut. "All hands. Ready the guns."

"All hands!"

"All hands!"

The cry echoed over the ship, and men jumped to obey. Below him, Eric felt two score men load and roll out a full complement of cannon. The deck swarmed with men readied at sail and line. The Sun breached a wave, on the hunt. "Load the long nines, chain shot."

"Load the nines with chain!"

"Ready!"

Two larger cannon out the fore rumbled into place, and Eric listened to the distance countdown. The crow called estimates every few seconds and as the numbers dropped, the tension on deck spiraled up.

“A hundred yards. Seventy. Fifty. Thirty—”

“Fire the nines.” Eric called to his men. And shortly: BOOM! Moonlight danced in the smoke. The Midnight Sun sailed right through it.

“Hit! The mains’l and rigging. She’s tacking port, Captain—they’re gonna fight.”

“Let them try.” Eric touched his course to keep the Sun as perpendicular to their target as he could, presenting a small target to their more numerous guns. Eventually, the tangent slid too far. Eric let the Sun angle behind their target instead. “Ho, the sails!”

Men dropped from on high, knots of rope in their hands to yank every sail up and out of the wind, using the fall of gravity for speed. The Sun slowed in the water, scraping behind the English ship without striking her. The seamen bristled at each other over the short distance. Wood groaned. Water sucked against the ships. Eric watched... “Starboard, fire centers.”

The middle four cannon exploded. Twenty-four pounds of iron burst into the back of the English ship, throwing wood in every direction. The crew cheered. Eric hauled his wheel around to port as fast as he could. “All sail! Full speed! Any man not on a rope or sail, get down on the sweeps.” Bodies scrambled. In seconds, Eric heard the deep pound of the coxswain’s drum and the dark rhythm of his voice. The Sun jumped forward through the water. She accelerated faster than wind, carving through the sea. The predictable splash of oars pulled them forward.

The crow announced, “English are tacking port, sir. Halfway. Two-thirds. They’re chasing, sir, forty yards. Fifty.”

With forty men pulling the boat by hand, the Sun couldn’t be caught. At a hundred yards, Eric called the turn, “Tacking starboard. Hands on deck. Prepare to board. Ready guns.”

“Ready!”

“Ho, the sail.” The zip of lines filtered through crashing waves. Starboard oars rattled as the men pulled them in. The Sun listed hard in the water, turning as close as her speed would allow. By the time they completed the about-face, their English target had reached them.

The boats slowed beside each other, men screaming across decks and between guns. Eric gripped the wheel. “Starboard, fire all!” Both ships rattled with impact. Tangy gunpowder clouded the air. Men swung or jumped to the English vessel, screaming their fear or excitement equally.

A rail-mounted hand cannon fired on the Sun, bursting through rigging and bouncing off a metal grate on the deck. It flew through a man, taking parts of him with it. Eric jumped up onto a rail and followed his men to their prize. Blood already shone in the moonlight, painting the deck in abstract directions. Eric landed hard. He put a hand down for balance and inked his palm with blood. His chest stretched beneath the shirt. Eric swallowed hard; he forced himself to breathe.

An Englishman rushed him, sword up, screaming about something. Eric couldn't hear him over the rush of sound in his ears. Not everything came from battle around him. He thrust his blade up and blocked, jerked his elbow into the Englishman's face as he stood. Eric cut into neck and chest on the downstroke, then plunged his blade between ribs.

The Englishman drowned in his own blood. Eric pushed him back with his boot heel and swallowed again, keeping more than nausea at bay.

He considered the fight from his place aft of the wheel. Things didn't appear to be in his favor. He knew a thirty-gun ship was risky. He rubbed his chest on the right, running his palm over a ring in his nipple. He breathed hard. The moon set his odds in sharp relief.

He thrust himself into the fray, half-sliding down the stair rail to the main deck where he jabbed and sliced at every English coat he saw, more to annoy than kill. “Everyone back to the Sun!” He bellowed.

Men disengaged and fled, running for their lives back to the ship. Eric distracted Englishmen left and right, catching their attention so they wouldn't catch his crew. In a heartbeat, twenty swords surrounded him and twenty more formed another ring. He dropped his weapon.

“Kill him!”

“No, don't touch him!”

“He's cursed.”

“The whole crew is cursed.”

“That ship is what’s cursed, kill him!” Someone jabbed him in the back. Eric hissed.

“No!”

“Everyone, shut up!” The captain, bound in bright British blue, muscled between his men. He tapped the flat edge of his sword against Eric’s cheek, a bloody stripe that made his chest tighten. “Deumont, I presume?”

“Who’s asking?” He put his hands down to his hips and fingered the edge of his shirt.

“No one you need to know.” The captain put his sword to the top of Eric’s chest, slicing the shirt.

“You don’t want to do that.”

“Poke a hole in you?”

“Your crew’s right. I’m cursed. The moon will bring it out.” He kicked his chin up to the light, and several men glanced up with him.

The Captain just smirked. “No such thing.” He yanked his sword down, cutting into the shirt and Eric both.

Blood flowed down his chest, between his fingers where he held the skin closed. His shirt fell open down the center and hung off one shoulder. Moonlight illuminated him. It focused on his ink tattoo: not a man, not a beast, but something between. His nipple ring pierced through one eye.

“See, gentlemen? Just a drawing—”

The spirit exploded from Eric’s chest, tearing flesh and blood with it. Eyeless, it closed a wide palm over the Captain’s head and crushed his skull without effort.

Men screamed.

They fled from the creature, warded themselves with crosses or stars, prayed to their gods when it was far beyond too late for salvation. Eric fell to his knees. Blood ran from a thousand holes where Ghalil tore free of him, wetting his trousers. He blinked at the bright puddle of blood where the captain lay and saw the creature lick its fingers.

Ghalil didn’t move so much as will itself forward, catching a screaming man and turning his head around the wrong way. Another, it stripped of his skin. A fourth, it crushed every large bone and left him shrieking on the deck.

Methodical destruction. One by one. Patient. Ghalil made its way from man to man, running their heart's blood across the deck in more creative ways than men with swords.

Eric pressed his hands to the line down his torso and tried not to think about the burn. He couldn't take a deep enough breath. Every instinct screamed at him to run, but the thought of moving made him light-headed. He bent down to rest his forehead on the deck, not strong enough to care about blood flowing like the sea.

He listened to Ghalil's progress across the ship. Heard each crunch of bone over the waves. Each scream. Eric's eyes closed without his permission. He fought to stay conscious and only won the battle half the time.

That had to be enough. Eric fumbled at his belt, picking through the hanging leather straps until he recognized a small pouch. He pulled the drawstring open, and between waves of black vision, he poured the contents into his palm. The last he had. The sharp scent of spice reached his nose and woke him up a bit.

Eric gritted his teeth. Then he slammed the handful of spice against the hole in his chest where Ghalil used to be. He screamed the incantation, spice burning through his veins, poisoning him but calling the spirit home. His eyes burned; his skin curled like a roast over fire. He hallucinated the ghost voice of his mother.

Ghalil slammed back into him, burning back into his skin in the same way it had torn itself out. Vengeful power rippled across Eric's body, knitting wounds together, filling him.

Eric vomited blood—not his own.

He stood. Blood-covered but whole. He stank of spice. Anything was better than blood. The deck lay like a slaughterhouse. His crew watched from the Midnight Sun, deadly silent. They had won the ship, but if anyone doubted the rumors surrounding their captain... Eric stumbled toward the stairs of their prize, his entire chest throbbing. He made his way down to the gun deck, the crew deck, the hold. Six men huddled in a corner. One screamed at the sight of him, but there was nowhere else to run.

“You—” Eric coughed and spat something more solid than he cared to consider.

“You can join me, or you can die.”

“Stay away from us.”

“You’re cursed.”

“I won’t go near that thing.”

Eric nodded. “Do you carry any cinnamon?”

“I’m not helping you.”

“Stay away!”

Eric grunted and turned away. He struggled back up the stairs and found a plank bridging the ships. He crossed it. Men eased away from him like small fish from a shark. “Clear the hold. Mister Riviere... Boatswain, where are you?”

To his right. “Here, sir.”

“Register everything in the ledger. See that any cinnamon comes directly to me.”

A cabin boy resisted the hands that pushed him forward. When he found Eric looking down at him, he thrust both hands out and looked away. Eric accepted the bucket of seawater and upended it over his head. Cold. But the salt prickled his unblemished skin, and Eric relished being whole. He swished and spat. He traded bucket for shirt, and the cabin boy finally escaped his presence.

Eric covered himself and felt Ghalil settle down in his skin. Without the moonlight to get it excited, the spirit remained content with the blood it spilled. He rubbed his right pectoral as if it would help. It didn’t. Eric felt his crew take a collective breath. More subdued than before, they filed back onto the English ship to clear the goods.

Claude Riviere nodded down at Eric from six foot nine. “Is it satisfied, Captain?”

“For tonight.” Eric rubbed his chest again.

“Good. What do we do with survivors?”

“There are no survivors. Throw the bodies to the sea. Lash the two ships together and set Misters Bernard and Morel to the masts. We repair as we sail.”

“Yes, sir.” Claude rumbled. He barked at the crew to get moving.

Eric sighed on his way down to the gun deck. Men hauled cannon back from the edge of the ship, cleaned out their barrels and re-stacked the monkeys.

He heard the clattering sound of broken wood swept out to sea. Eric closed himself in the aft cabin.

Everything felt muffled, here. More illusion than reality. Eric sat on his bed, breathing through a wave of nausea. Something bumped his elbow. Pressed and rubbed. Eric lifted his arm for Orthos. The tabby bumped his head against Eric's chest and Ghalil squirmed to get away. Eric scratched Orthos under the chin until he purred like rolling thunder. Ghalil stopped protesting. The nausea subsided. Eric finally took a full breath of air.

This time when his eyes started to droop, it was from exhaustion, not blood loss.

February

A month later

The Nomad Hawk stalled in the wind, her sails crossed against each other to stabilize the craft. Kyros dropped his spyglass and handed it to Araceli. He pointed. "There, on the edge of the inlet."

"I see them." She took her time assessing the distance and sucked her teeth.

"What?"

"Shallows of some kind between us, looks like they run back around... I'm not sure."

Kyros pointed at a man on deck. "Gregory, get up in the nest and tell me what you see."

"Sir!" Gregory scaled the mainmast, all long limbs and swinging. He pulled himself up to the top and set his hand against his brow to block the falling sun.

Araceli shook her head. "They shouldn't berth here. Something must have gone wrong."

"Let's hope it's not with the cargo."

"Looks like a reef, sir! Connects to the mainland there, or close enough, anyway."

Araceli snapped the spyglass smaller. "We'd best go around."

"After nightfall, then." Kyros nodded at her. "Bring us back behind the island until after sunset. No lanterns. We'll move once the sun isn't lighting us up from behind."

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell everyone to get some rest. We won’t need but a few for sneaking around. We attack in the early morning.” Kyros left the helm in her capable hands and took the steep stairs to the gun deck. He pushed the handle of his sword down to avoid knocking it against every step.

Antony sat to one side, working a fig into braided line. His right hand, bandaged from his encounter with the quartermaster, hindered his progress. Kyros jerked his chin in Antony’s direction, curt greeting. “You’ll get a chance to fight tonight, Louis. I’d like to see what you’re made of.”

“Captain.”

Not a hearty “yes”, but Kyros didn’t think Antony was here for the fighting. More like ready to sneak off with the loot. Both Rodrigo and Hugo had vouched for him, but Kyros had a feeling that support might waver if he pressed hard enough.

“Javier.” Kyros caught his coxswain by the shoulder on the way by. “Keep an extra eye on one of our new ones—Antony. He’s fore on this deck doing some line repair.”

“Sí, I don’t trust any of them.” A scar across Javier’s nose wrinkled with his rolling r’s.

“And good that you don’t.” Kyros slapped his shoulder and moved on. They only had an hour or so until full dark. He shut himself in his cabin.

Kyros sighed as he looked over the map spread on his table. The heading was clear, they had found the spice ship—and before the Midnight Sun, no less. As far as most of the crew knew, it was just another fight to win, but Kyros was after larger prey: an infatuation he failed to hide from Araceli.

He picked up a small, crimped, brass ring and sat heavily in his chair. Eric Deumont, pirate and treasure-seeker, captain of the Sun. Kyros knew what it felt like to be on the wrong side of Eric’s sword (the edged one) but that just egged him on. What secrets did the cursed captain keep? Kyros turned the ring in his fingers, remembering the feel of black locks in his hand.

After a year of shadowing the man, Kyros only knew one thing for sure. Eric cleaved to a specific hunt that occupied his full attention. Even to the point of neglect for all other pleasures. Kyros didn’t consider himself a treat, but to be dismissed out of hand? That wasn’t an offense he intended to accept at face value.

Kyros needed to know what kind of prize could capture a cursed man's entire focus. And why.

Someone pounded on the door. Kyros jumped and slapped the ring down on his map with more haste than he intended. He pulled the door open to an expectant quartermaster and a silent gun deck.

"Skeleton crew for the move, Captain. Ready when you are."

"Now is good," Kyros said. He grabbed a jacket and yanked his door closed. "Any sign of movement?" He shouldered the abused leather and twitched one end free of his sword.

"None."

"If you want to catch some sleep, you're relieved."

"Sir." Araceli inclined her head, but the light in her dark eyes told him it wasn't going to happen. Still, she knew to take a break when offered and headed below decks, regardless.

Kyros stomped up the stairs to shake the memory of Deumont from his skin and surveyed his ship from the wheel. Only nine or ten men worked, scattered around the deck and rigging. No lanterns, as he had ordered, but the darkness was her own kind of comfort.

Sail flapped with nowhere to go, and lines groaned against the ship. Only the wind greeted them when Kyros announced, low, "All sail."

Men pulled lines in sequence and silence, aligning the canvas to the perfect angle. The sails bulged and pulled the Hawk forward steadily. Nothing greeted their movement but the slap of sleepy water. The inlet came into view, just a low smudge of dark with a sudden spike of masts at the end. Lanterns lit the ship top to rudder, a lighthouse beacon in the night. Kyros watched their distance grow, following the line of reef between them. He checked through his spyglass, but no movement on deck signaled they'd been spotted.

For hours the Hawk glided against the waves, farther and farther from the inlet until it dwindled to a dot, then around in a huge arc to dodge the reef. Kyros tracked their progress and that of the time. At the proper location, he called for crossed sails and a change of the skeleton crew. The Hawk had a clear approach, and with their target anchored so close to shore, she was a sitting duck.

Just before dawn, Kyros went below deck to rouse the crew himself. He started with his quartermaster, and she opened her eyes at his touch, awake and ready. Kyros shook his coxswain's hammock. "All hands. Ready the guns. Man the oars."

Javier wrangled his thirty-odd men down one more deck, and Kyros heard wood sliding against wood. Kyros watched the gun deck for a heartbeat, proud of his men for their practiced mastery of battle.

A hand on the hilt of his sword, Kyros jogged up the stairs and took the helm. Beside him, Araceli shifted her weight with the list of the boat and peered through the spyglass. "Still sitting there, sir. We're never going to get another shot like this."

"I agree." Kyros felt the drum of the coxswain echo through the ship. The splash of oars. "All sail," Kyros directed. "Full speed for ramming."

The Hawk accelerated slowly, but once moving nothing could stop her. At the front, a reinforced ram cut through the water and bore down on their target. The Spanish trade ship bobbed in the waves, unaware. Kyros twitched the wheel, adjusting for current drift on the approach. Below decks, Javier led his men in a rhythmic song. Each pull of the oars yanked the ship faster. By the time they breached the reef, the Hawk flew through the water.

Too late, the watch on the trade ship spotted them incoming. Kyros yelled as they approached, "Brace for impact!"

The Hawk shuddered through iron and wood, crashing with supreme force into the broadside of the trade ship. Spanish sailors fell through the scar the Hawk had torn, and the entire ship heaved up, against her anchor. Kyros held the wheel as his ship twisted in the water, momentum carrying the two against each other. The Hawk's port side slammed against the trade ship, throwing men, including Kyros, to the deck. He gasped.

Araceli bellowed, "PORT, FIRE ALL!"

A tight delay, where all Kyros could hear was the awesome splinter of wood. Then the Hawk jumped again, exploding from the left as each cannon fired asynchronously.

Kyros regained his feet. His men from the oars came flooding onto the deck, sword and mace in hand, ready for battle. There wasn't much of one to be had. The trade ship listed to starboard, taking on heavy water and shedding Spanish

sailors in equal measure. Kyros swept his arm over his men. “All hands to the Spanish. Kill anyone you find, and recover that cargo before we lose the ship.” Men swarmed to his command.

He continued to point. “Gregory, Antony. Grab two men each and tether lines fore and aft to hold it up. Jav—” Araceli yanked Kyros forward off his feet and thrust her sword into the gut of a Spaniard behind him.

Kyros rolled up and drew his sword to engage another yellow-coated man in the dark. They had climbed up the back of his ship. Kyros parried a thrust and lunged. His sword pierced the man’s chest, sending him coughing to the deck. Kyros kicked his sword away and engaged the next.

Two, three, four men in a row. Kyros heard Araceli handling her own stream of offense with quick, brutal efficiency. Kyros kicked a man on the rail back down to the water. He and Araceli leaned over the back of the ship. A final man climbed a line from water level, hand over hand. Araceli pulled out her pistol, but Kyros put his hand on her fist. “Hold fire. I believe that’s our Spanish captain.”

She made an impatient face but lowered the weapon. The captain climbed to the deck under the point of two swords. He made a show of holding his hands up, away from the sword and pistol on his belt. “*Has destruido mi barco y llevado mis bienes. No tome mi pueblo también.*”

Kyros touched the point of his sword under the captain’s chin, and he looked up to avoid it, wary. His eyes flicked from Kyros to Araceli and back. Kyros said, “Ask if he speaks Portuguese. I don’t want to waste time finding Javier.”

“*Você fala esta língua?*”

The captain squinted at Araceli, half-confused, then decided to nod and toggle one hand. Sort of.

“Good enough,” Kyros said. “Tell him to abandon his ship and collect his men on shore. If anyone fights us, we’ll kill them. When we’re done, he can salvage what’s left.”

Araceli delivered the ultimatum rapidly, and the captain’s progressive squint indicated he didn’t quite follow. She scowled and repeated in shorter words. “*Deixa o barco. Leve os seu homens. Não volte.*”

“Sí.” He nodded. “Sí.” Kyros pulled his sword back an inch or two, and the Spanish captain backed himself into the rail of the Hawk. He glanced between Araceli and Kyros one last time, then turned and heaved himself over the edge.

Kyros turned back to the body of his ship and stepped over a sprawled Spaniard. The trade ship listed beside them, resisting the pull of a dozen lines holding it afloat. A gangplank dropped from the Hawk into the jagged hole of the trade vessel, a steady stream of men coming and going to empty her goods.

“Very good,” Kyros said, to no one in particular. He wiped his sword on a Spaniard coat and used a bit of cloth from his own shirt to clean the blood from the corners. Kyros slid it into the scabbard at his waist and left Araceli to delegate cleanup on deck. He trotted down the gangplank to the Spanish ship.

It looked worse on the inside than it did from the Hawk. Lanterns swung from exposed beams. Wood and metal were bent and broken in every direction. Twisted cannon lay some half a ship-length from their proper holds. Cannon balls collected in low corners like iron water. The Hawk’s ram had cut in far enough to warp the stairs center of the ship. Kyros navigated men and debris on his way to the captain’s cabin.

African trinkets and fetishes littered the place. All, bright reds and greens. Kyros picked through sheets of fabric and handfuls of carved things. A statue of a long-necked beast with stubbed horns towered in one corner, a deadly creature no doubt. Kyros had no intention of finding his fortunes in Africa. The place swarmed with monsters.

He dug through every cabinet, every drawer, every corner where something of more value might be hidden. He found something wrapped in plain linen. Kyros unrolled it over the table, but what he discovered didn’t look like anything he knew. It appeared to be gold, but weighed much more than that. It was a complete ring about the size of his two fists together, tapered a bit at the bottom (or was that the top?) and with no smooth edges. Pieces of it lifted off the face and could spin in any direction, interlocking with each other.

Weird. And exactly the kind of treasure hunt Kyros could use as bait. He didn’t recognize this piece, but the form reminded him of a jar he’d once stolen from the captain of the Sun. He rolled the item back up and wedged it into his belt. Another several minutes spent rummaging turned up nothing else interesting. He left.

Kyros stopped two of his men on their way down to the hold. “Are there empty barrels or bags down below?”

“A few, yes, sir.”

“Bring them up here. Empty out the cabin.” Kyros pointed behind him. “There are a thousand small fetishes and some nice-looking fabrics we can sell. Wrap it all up good, I don’t want to see these things rolling around the deck.”

“Yes, sir.”

“There’s also a tall, square-patterned statue of a beast in one corner. Be careful with that. It’ll be worth more in one piece.” Kyros took a step up the gangplank and reconsidered, a hand on the shoulder of his man. “On second thought, bring the statue to my cabin. I’ll find a spot for it.”

He let them go and relieved one of his men of their burden, a big bag packed with fabrics. Kyros hefted it over one shoulder and joined the line back to the Hawk.

That afternoon, with Javier watching over the salvage operation, Kyros sat down in his cabin with Bram. The bosun unfolded a pair of delicate spectacles and opened his ledger. “A decent collection, Captain. Salted meats, garlic, ginger, onion... something called an a-vo-ca-do? We have half a dozen things I’ve never seen listed in the Spaniard ledger. It’ll take me some time to match them up.” Bram glanced up over his glasses. “I don’t have a good count of the little statues you found in the cabin, yet.”

Kyros nodded, “I don’t know if they’re worth anything. If not, I’ll let everyone pick out a favorite, but until then I don’t want to see them in anyone’s hands.

“Yes, sir. I’ve directed Tristan to craft new barrels, one for the trin—”

“Captain!” Araceli’s voice shouted through the door. She yanked it open but didn’t cross the threshold. “Sir, the Sun’s been spotted on approach.”

Kyros stood. “We’ll finish later, Bram.” He took the stairs two at a time, leaping to the helm and accepted the spyglass from Araceli. She pointed. He aimed the glass.

Sure enough, the dark hull and light sails of the Midnight Sun billowed in their direction. At speed.

“We should run.”

“No.” Kyros leaned over the rail to the deck and shouted, “Pull up the green for parlay.”

Araceli grabbed his shoulder and hissed, “Are you mad? They’re after this ship’s goods.”

“And I’m chasing a treasure on that one.”

A single cannon fired in the distance. Kyros and Araceli ducked. The iron ball flew over the deck and tore right through the fores’l. Kyros scowled and spied through the glass again. From the fore of his ship, Eric Deumont extended one middle finger.

Kyros muttered, “What’s the flag signal for ‘That was childish and unnecessary’?”

Araceli shook her head and stomped off the helm, her weight resounding each step through the deck.

Chapter II

February

Hours Later

The dawn cracked between a crowd of ship masts. A gangplank slapped between their decks, and Eric marched across, pointing at the cocky Hawk captain with one square finger. “You son of a bitch—”

A woman’s wide black hand landed square on his covered chest, and Eric twitched back, scowling. Ghalil rolled under his skin. “Your sword and pistol,” she said, her palm now up to receive them. “Or back where you came.”

“Who the hell are you?”

One elegant eyebrow went up her tall forehead in an expression Eric read without help. No, it didn’t matter. He unclipped the frog for his sword and threw it back to Claude on deck. The pistol holster followed. He put his arms out. “Anything else?”

She stepped aside with an ironic arm out toward her captain. “Welcome aboard.”

Eric pointed again, but some of the bluster fell from his sails with the interruption. Still, he had a bone or two to pick. “You should have stayed in the drink when I threw you over in Nassau.”

“And miss seeing your face again? Tell me you didn’t put too much effort into that jar—”

“That was you?” Eric bristled and clenched his fist. He felt Ghalil churn in his chest and the discomfort fueled his rage. He paused, nose to nose with the captain, and thought he saw a smile flicker across his expression. Eric stood taller than him by inches, and tilting his head down brought his dreadlocks forward, around his face. He dropped his voice. “That jar was more than a payday, you motherfucker. I—”

“You didn’t want that jar. It was already cursed.”

“Cursed, how?”

“There was some kind of ghost locked up inside. I sold it to a witch in south Florida.”

In an instant, Eric's ferocity blew away. Eric felt his breath rush out, and even Ghalil's disturbing turn couldn't diminish the hope that blossomed in his chest. It was true, then. They could be caught. Captured. Eric brushed his left hand over his right pec. He could be free. He just needed all the pieces. Eric eased himself back half a step and said, "You need to tell me everything you know about that jar."

The captain smiled in a slow spread of lips and inclined his head toward the stairs. "Why don't we take this into the cabin."

Eric got the distinct feeling he was being set up for something, but if this man knew anything at all about that jar... well, he didn't have a choice, did he? "Lead on."

"Captain!" Claude, from the deck of the Sun.

Eric put up a hand to prevent him from storming the Hawk. "If he'd wanted to kill me, he wouldn't have run up the parlay. Stay on the Sun."

The Hawk's captain addressed the black woman as they walked past, "Quartermaster, start repairs on the fores'l and speak with the bosun about salvage of the trade ship. If we're done, cut it loose. Let the Spaniards have the rest."

"Yes, sir."

He led Eric down the steps. "Your quartermaster is a slave? A woman? How do your crew stay in line?"

He shot a look over his shoulder, something assessing. "She's a free woman and put in her position the same way yours was. By popular vote. My men respect her."

"You don't have to keep them in line?"

Now it was a full smile, sinister. He opened the door and gestured Eric in. "She does that all by herself." He shut the door behind him. "What is it you'd like to know?" The captain passed by closer than necessary and draped a stretch of unfolded linen back over an item on the table.

Eric propped up the wall beside the door and crossed his arms. "That jar. Do you know how the spirit got inside?"

"A spell of some kind, I imagine. I didn't try opening it, but the witch I consulted said it sealed from the inside."

“With what?”

“Magic. It was meant to last ten years, after that it would have weakened enough for the ghost to get out.”

“You’re sure it was a ghost? Not a spirit?” Ghalil twisted under his skin, and not for the first time, Eric wondered if it could hear him while confined.

The Hawk’s captain slid him another considering smile. “Why does it matter?”

“Just wondering.” He deflected, “Have you ever seen other jars like that one?”

The smile slid away, and for a heartbeat, the captain stared. Then he scoffed and kicked a trunk on his way toward Eric. “Naw, and I wasn’t interested in that one except that you were.” Shrug. “Sold it for a nice profit, though. Seems the ghost trade is a popular one.”

“I can’t imagine.”

“That so?” He paused a few inches away and leaned his hands on the wall beside Eric’s shoulders. His eyes shone bright amber, almost red in the center. “Then why is it you’re so interested in a jar for holding one?”

“It doesn’t concern you.” Eric felt a little silly holding his arms crossed between them when the Hawk captain seemed intent on hovering as close as he could.

“Everything you do concerns me.”

Eric narrowed his eyes. “Why did you run up the parlay?”

The captain leaned closer, their noses almost touched, and Eric witnessed a sense of pleasure flicker across his face. “You smell divine. What is that?”

Reality kicked Eric in the chest when Ghalil surged against him. Eric rubbed his pectoral and cleared his throat. “It’s called cinnamon. It’s the reason I’m here. The Spanish ship you took was carrying some. I need it.”

“Why?”

“It’s not your concern.”

“I’m making it my concern”—his eyes slid up, like one might consider a woman in a short skirt—“Eric.”

“It’s Deumont, to you.”

He grunted.

“Why did you run up the parlay?”

Disappointment twisted the Hawk captain's brows for a flash, then he shrugged again. “Need it beaten into you, do you?” Then he pressed their bodies together. Hips, chest, lips: a slow writhe.

Eric stiffened, his arms popped up to the captain's shoulders in shock, but he didn't push away. In fact, it felt... rather nice. Eric opened his mouth to accept the man's tongue and kiss. He dragged one hand up a strong neck to short blond hair. He groaned.

Heat flooded his skin in a way he had forgotten. Sex hadn't crossed Eric's mind in years, yet it ground against him, now, with demanding force, a hard plane of body against his, pressing him into the wall. Eric tore his lips away to gasp for air. A hot tongue licked his chin, his neck, and teeth bit into his shoulder. Hands across his chest. Fingers fiddled with the ring in his right nipple, through the shirt. Ghalil shifted. Eric slapped his hand away and grabbed it so it wouldn't return.

“What's the point of a nipple ring if it's not to play with?”

Far more than Eric cared to get into right now. He pulled on blond hair to put those swollen lips at the right angle for kissing. They rutted in quick, chaotic strokes until the captain tried to pull Eric's shirt up.

Eric tumbled them across the wall. He pinned the captain's hands with his own, lacing their fingers above their heads.

“Modesty does not become you.”

“There's more than modesty under this shirt.” And Eric wasn't about to tell all. He bit at the captain's lips and chin. Nipped his neck. He drove his hips up in long synchronous strokes, relishing the flash of fire in his gut. His captive arched and moaned.

“Eric. Oh, yeah. Just like that.”

Eric had to agree. The captain jerked against him, biting his own lip to stay silent, like the jangle of clips and metal on their belts didn't give everything away. Eric chased the cliff edge, regardless, squeezing their fingers together as his body curled close. He came with a fierceness that stunned him.

The bliss of a much-delayed climax cracked in a heartbeat as Eric realized the mess he'd just made. He let his head thump to the wall and sighed.

The captain laughed heartily. He unwound their fingers. "Yeah, not the brightest idea I've ever had. But still, we're making progress!" He ambushed Eric with a peck on his lips and pushed off the wall. He threw the cabin door open, "Oi! Antony! Fetch the bosun. I want to know how much cinnamon we have on board."

Eric slid his shoulder to the wall and hit his back there to face the room. "What the hell is your name, anyway?"

Another bark of laughter. This guy was far too cheerful. "Kyros Vindex. Of the Grecian isles." He made an elaborate greeting gesture.

"Far from home."

"The boat's home enough." Someone jogged down the stairs. Kyros greeted him. "Ah, Bram. What have you got?"

The short man at the threshold pushed a pair of spectacles up his nose. "Cinnamon you said, sir? Three ounces." Eric closed his eyes and let his breath out, careful to avoid any outward sign of disappointment.

"Not much." Kyros grunted.

"It's very rare, sir."

Kyros leaned his head in toward Eric. "That going to work for you?"

"It will do." Two, maybe three times if he conserved. It would have to do. Ghalil shifted under his skin.

"Wrap it up, Bram, and meet us top-side."

"Yes, sir."

"So." Kyros turned on Eric and startled him away from the wall. Backed him into the desk at the center of the space until they were chest to chest. "Are you going to make me chase you around for another year?" Eric's fingers ran into linen on the table, and he pulled it off the thing Kyros had tried so casually to hide. "Or have I done enough to convince you we should coordinate shore leave?"

Eric split his attention between his fingers scrambling over a heavy piece of something and the intense question Kyros delivered. "We're taking a long way around to Nassau. If you're going in that direction..." Eric's finger tripped over a piece of the object that lifted and rotated. This had to be the fourth piece of the jar. Kyros had taken it from the Spanish ship. If he didn't know what it was,

and their conversation indicated he didn't, then why was he here, attacking this particular ship?

"We can be," Kyros said, with a smile crawling wider.

Eric nodded. He worked a pouch at the back of his belt open and stuffed the thing inside. "I'll see you there, then."

February

Minutes Later

Kyros smiled and let Eric lead the way out of the cabin. He touched the table littered with linen and noticed the too-heavy puzzle thing had walked. Good. Kyros followed Eric across the gun deck and back up the steps. The largest pouch on the back of Eric's belt swung like it was full.

Bram caught up as they breached the top deck, his spectacles folded on the front of his shirt. "Captain."

Kyros accepted the small pouch and sniffed it. The visceral memory of Eric's body pressed into his surprised him. This was the stuff. "Here."

He tossed it to Eric. The Sun's captain hefted it in his hand, then dropped it into a pouch on his belt, already rust-red with spice dust.

Kyros crossed his arms and kicked his chin toward the gangplank. "Don't be a stranger, now."

Eric watched him for a heartbeat, then turned away. Kyros didn't watch him go, but it was a tough thing. Instead, he dove back below decks. He needed a change of pants and a drink. Araceli found him there pacing the length of his cabin.

"We're just letting them go?"

Kyros looked up at her scowl. "I thought you didn't want to engage?"

"No..." She crossed her meaty arms. "But I don't like that you let him saunter around, either."

Kyros laughed. "Collect all the leads for a meeting, we have a new heading. Also, send someone up to the nest to keep any eye on the Sun. I want to know when they're clear of the reef and under way." He tossed the last sip of rum down his throat and set the tankard back on his belt. The bottle he left on the

table. By the time he'd tidied up the linen and shoved his scattered messes into a corner, the cabin had filled with men.

"Pass the rum around," he said.

Bram reached for his tankard. "Good news, Captain?"

"Yes." He did a quick headcount. "Where's Theo?"

"Here." The big blacksmith squeezed through the door last. "Sorry, sir. I've got iron in the fire. Want to take advantage of being still."

"I won't keep you long." Kyros nodded. "Most of you know, the captain of the Midnight Sun just paid us a visit. He's onto something magical. Ghosts or spirits. Maug, what can you tell us?"

Maug rubbed his forehead and hummed. "Well, is it ghosts or is it spirits?"

"What's the difference?"

"Ghosts walk, talk, and reason. Spirits are a... like a single emotion given form."

"He asked me the same question. I'm guessing he's dealing with a spirit."

Maug shifted his weight and hooked both thumbs in his belt. "Well, you've never had an emotion like a spirit does. They only have one overwhelming thought, so I guess you could call them predictable. Pure love, pure hate, purely mischievous—just one thing."

"Can they be controlled?"

"Not like you can train a dog, no."

Kyros rubbed his hands together. "Okay. When I dug around in the captain's cabin on the Spanish ship, I found an item, maybe this big around." He held a circle shape with his hands. "Looked like gold, but too heavy. Definitely a puzzle piece of a larger item. Deumont took it."

His crew bristled and Kyros held up his hand. "Relax, I left it out on purpose." He nodded at Araceli. "We knew he was going after this trade ship, but we just happened to get here first. The piece he took looks a lot like the jar I stole from him some time ago, and I don't believe in coincidence. Deumont is seeking out a puzzle jar to capture a spirit."

Maug snorted. "What for?"

“I don’t know yet, but that jar I sold set us up for months. Whatever he needs it for, the trade is hot, and we stand to make a nice profit from it. But even if we don’t find Deumont’s jar, I want to look into others.” Agreeable nods from the crew. “Maug, between meals, can you sit down with Bram and dictate everything you can remember?”

Bram cleared his throat of rum. “I’ll need a new book, Captain.”

Kyros found his small library in a drawer. He touched a row of mismatched leather-bound books of scattered size. He pulled one out and flipped through the uneven pages. Full of the boatswain’s passable handwriting. The next one was empty. “Last one I have. I’ll get another next time we make land.”

Bram passed it back to Theo. “Can I get a buckle and a clip on it?”

“Ya. No problem.”

A hand pounded on the door but there wasn’t room in the cabin for another body. “Sorry, sir! Midnight Sun is out of the bay.”

Kyros clapped once for attention. “I propose a heading. We follow Deumont at distance. I suspect he’s aiming for landfall at Nassau. Now that he has his jar piece, he’ll need to reconnect with the rumors for his next step.” He lifted his right hand. “All in favor?” Hands went up and he counted. Then lifted his left hand. “All opposed?” Only two hands in the air.

Kyros passed his looking glass through the crowd. “Get back up on the nest and keep the Sun’s heading in sight. Report in to the quartermaster.”

The voice from the back said, “Yes, sir!”

“You’re all dismissed. Sam and Christoph, you two stay. I’ll hear your thoughts.”

April

Two months later

A loud mix of high-scale extravagance and bottom-feeding degeneration: Nassau. Eric found it horrific and invaluable by turns. Where else could men rape each other of pride and money, and each come out of it claiming they got the better end of the deal? Eric avoided the well-traveled main road and let himself into an unassuming side yard.

An old dog sighed in his direction. Chickens clucked at him, pecking near his feet for corn or seed. Pigeons cooed from a coop at the end of the yard. One of them scratched for seed on top of the coop, a letter bound to its leg.

Eric took the letter and guided the pigeon into the coop with its fellows. He spied another message waiting for him on an interior shelf. Eric tipped his sword to the side and rested on a trunk placed against the wall. He unrolled the first message.

*Mister Deumont, I was surprised to receive your letter—blah, blah, introductions. Puzzle jars are something of a curious specialty—blah, blah, nothing Eric didn't already know. Ahha: However, it is with regret I return to you no knowledge of this specific jar piece you seek—*Eric tsked and tore the note to shreds for the chickens to scratch into their afternoon nests.

Drunk laughter scratched across the gateway and adobe wall of his hideaway. “The bloody Sun, can you believe it? Like any tosser would sign up for that gig?”

“It’s a death wish. Every one of ’em is tempting the fates.”

“But you know, they’re the best paid slobs in town, I’ll give you that.”

“I’d rather stick my hat with the hooligans on the Lola’s Embrace. Or even the Hawk!”

“HA! The Hawk? Bunch of superstitious louts.”

Eric pursed his lips and slid his second letter inside the breast of his jacket. Vindex was a spontaneous man, but Eric had seen too many things to think superstition played a part. He rubbed his chest. The voices drifted farther down the alley and turned, so he scaled the courtyard adobe wall and pulled himself up to the roof.

“—ing in the tavern tonight. Said there’s a line out the door for signing up.”

Eric overheard and followed the voice, mindful of his footing on the thatch. The two men below staggered against each other, half-arguing. One held a bottle of rum and watered the dirt more than his own palate.

“Don’t tell me you’re considering this?”

“Fuck—” Hic. “Why not? Maybe get to see more of the bloody planet than this rock. Hey!” A poke in the chest that nearly sent them both into the dirt. “You ottercomewith.”

“Sign up with the Embrace?”

“No, the fuckin’ Hawk—” A mutter of something Eric didn’t catch. He hopped to another thatched roof and slid himself down the back side.

The Hawk was in town signing men up to sail. Eric took a deep breath, surprised to find his heart racing for something other than the spirit in his skin. Vindex said he wanted to meet, but... well, Eric never put any faith in it. Yet, he was here. It was so strange to have someone outside of his crew expecting to see him. Ghalil did a good job of isolating him either by rumor or slaughter, and Eric had focused so hard for so long on getting the spirit out that he let personal pleasures slip away unnoticed.

Eric arrested at the doorway to Gullwing Tavern, startled by his own ambition. He wanted to see Vindex. Touch him. Taste him. As reported, a line of men reached to the door, jostling and rousing each other. Cocking eyes and whistles at the black quartermaster.

He didn’t know how to seduce a man, he didn’t remember the steps of the dance for flirting. He was staring. Eric committed to a table inside the tavern and asked for a beer so he could pretend he wasn’t watching the Hawk’s captain go about his business. He remembered his second letter and pulled it out to read.

April

Minutes Before

Kyros scowled at the fence seated across his table. “You came to me, so don’t start thinking you have any bargaining power. You happen to be in a place of convenience for me, so stay convenient.”

“Sir, I’ve sold to every merchant on this island, I don’t think a review of the books is necessary to begin—”

Kyros leaned back and said, “You don’t think it’s necessary?” He looked at Araceli. “He doesn’t think it’s necessary.”

Araceli sipped her beer. “I don’t think he’s worth your time, sir.”

Kyros flicked his eyes across the man. “Are you wasting my time?”

“No, sir! I’m here—”

“Then listen. Because this is how it works,” Kyros spoke over him. In that moment, Eric prowled through the tavern, eyes locked on Kyros and burning hot. Kyros completely lost his train of thought watching him declare ownership of a small, corner table.

Araceli cleared her throat.

Kyros did not want to look away. When he did, his scowl deepened, and the fence sat straighter. “You will turn over your ledger to my boatswain this evening, and he will review both it and your stores. If anything does not match up, we will not do business. We will provide you a trial volume of goods which you will pay for in full. Once sold, you come to me or the quartermaster.” Kyros jerked his thumb at Araceli. “Then, my boatswain checks your ledger again.”

Kyros glanced up, covering his look with a lift of his empty mug to a barmaid. Eric wasn't paying him any attention. Instead, he was reading something intently. Kyros tried not to feel upstaged by the note. Eric's earlier stare had set a fire in his blood, and Kyros couldn't wait to stoke it higher.

“I don't run my business for you to correct, Captain.”

These interruptions to his daydreaming were pissing him off. “Look, you ignorant swine. If you want to act in this position, your business becomes my business. I'm not going to hand over my riches for some land flea to tear out the profit. You're starting to become inconvenient.”

The fence scowled. “I don't expect to search your ship, why should you invade my storehouse?”

Kyros growled, “Because that's how I run things. Now, you can present yourself at the docks for my boatswain, with books in hand or not, that is up to you, but get out of this building. We're done.” Kyros stared at him until he tsked and removed himself from the table. Then Kyros chugged his fresh beer just for something to focus his anger on.

When he set the mug down, Eric was gone. His half-empty drink still warming on the table. Kyros jerked to his feet. “Dammit, where'd he go?”

“Just left.” Araceli crossed her arms over her broad chest and gave him a turn of her lips. “In a hurry, too.”

The first of a line of men wanting to join his crew approached the table, beer already in hand.

Araceli flipped her ledger open to a new page. "I've got this."

Kyros didn't insult her by double checking. He left a handful of coin on the table to cover their drinks and ran after Deumont. He jogged down the main street, weaving through merchants and shoppers. There was no sign of him outside the tavern, and Kyros' curiosity spiked alongside the heat in his veins. What could have been in that note to set him off?

He wasn't going to find out wandering the city like a drunk. Kyros detoured to a pile of crates and scrambled up to a store rooftop, then out on the limb of a tree. It offered him a view down the hill all the way to the bay, and there: in a faded blue jacket, ran his pirate, down to the dock and back to the Sun.

Kyros swung down from his tree and landed on the thatched roof of the store. A baker, by the smell of it. His boots slipped on the waxy reeds. A cat hissed at him and jumped to the roof of the next merchant. Kyros followed, running on the peak where the thatch layered under a beam just wide enough for his steps. Not a conventional path, but he didn't need to deal with the crowds.

The road turned and his house-path with it. Kyros jumped to the dirt and sprinted across. He scrambled up an adobe wall and through a fluster of chickens, cutting into yards and wild wood to catch up. He half-slid down the final slope of rocky hillside and cut Deumont off just before the docks.

The man slid in the dirt to avoid him, his cords of dark hair flying about. "Come with me if you want but don't slow me down."

Was that even a choice? Kyros matched Eric's jog to the long dock and they stepped into a dinghy at the end, together. Eric counted out their first few strokes, but once they had rhythm, Kyros interrupted, "What's your big hurry?"

Eric fell silent, and Kyros let the splash of their oars count out the beats. It became clear Eric had no intention of sharing. Kyros felt himself bristle. "So you prowl into my day all hot and heavy, sex on two legs, and now I get the cold shoulder?" Kyros had no right in the world to be indignant, but he refused to let go of the feeling.

That message had to be about the jar Eric remained so focused on—nothing else had occupied the man's attention for as long as Kyros had been chasing him around.

But why?

They tied up at the Sun, and Kyros followed Eric up the ladder then down into the gun deck of the ship, only to be left at the threshold of the captain's cabin like a good dog. Eric kicked the door closed in his face. Kyros immediately pounded on it. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

But Eric didn't answer, and Kyros didn't know how to argue with silence. He growled and paced the width of the ship in front of the door, pausing to greet a silver tomcat that vocalized at him from the top of a gun.

Eventually the pacing stopped entertaining him and he sat against the door, arms crossed, stewing in his mix of attraction and irritation. He hit his head on the door. He had it bad for a man who could turn enemy and royally fuck up his day. What the hell was he doing here?

April

Minutes Later

Eric had to put a wall between them. That man set his skin on fire without touching it. Just the glower he gave while sliding down the rocks, the confident way he landed on the path before him—Eric wanted to tear off Kyros' jacket and press them both skin to skin, bite what he could reach and grab the rest close.

He couldn't look at him without seeing a perfect triangle from shoulders to waist. Couldn't talk to him without holding back a command to strip naked and bend over. The short ride here on the dinghy, just watching those arms pull the boat in perfect rhythm, gave him a hard-on so tight standing up caused tunnel vision.

Eric pressed his hands to the top of his table and forced himself to focus on the map. It took him longer than it should have to locate Havana. He thought he heard Vindex stomping back and forth just outside his door, and the idea of that deadly panther—coiled and waiting for him—shattered his concentration.

He rolled up the map and stored it in a tube for safekeeping. The letter he stashed in his trunk with the incomplete jar. One more piece. Ghalil rolled under his skin. Eric snapped the lid shut and locked it. The sooner this spirit took up residence in something other than his body, the better.

Eric yanked his door open. Vindex caught himself with admirable reaction time, hardly falling into the threshold at all. Then they were nose to nose, and

the blond disregarded all the rules of personal space. Kyros grabbed his head and crushed their mouths together for gasping, desperate kisses. Eric closed the door and pushed him against it head to toe. He breathed in Kyros. He wanted to devour him. Then Kyros pulled his tunic up, out of his belt, and a thread of fear jolted him back. “The shirt stays on.”

“I’m not coming in my pants again.”

“Then take them off.” Eric unthreaded his belt and dropped all twenty pounds of hardware and leather on the table with a clank. Kyros’ personal collection hit the floor.

They crashed together, hard angles and sharp teeth. Kyros yanked at Eric’s laces. Eric stripped Kyros of his jacket, holster, and shirt. Then Kyros got his hands in Eric’s pants and squeezed. Eric had to lean on him or fall to his knees. Another hand on his cock—so foreign it made him shake. Eric bit at Kyros’ neck and fucked his hand, groaning.

“That’s right, big boy. Slam it. Show me how I’m going to take your ass.”

Eric yanked him off the wall and forced him face down, on to the table. He snarled in Kyros’ ear, “Pants on the floor. It’s your ass getting slammed.”

Kyros didn’t complain. While he dealt with clothing, Eric found the grease. He slicked himself, then twisted a finger deep into Kyros. Two. He finger fucked that hole until Kyros pulled his own cheeks apart, and Eric could see his red erection pointed down against the edge of the table. He grabbed it, pushing in and pulling down in alternating strokes. Kyros begged him.

Eric replaced fingers with cock and groaned. Halfway in, Kyros came, his ass squeezing with each pulse. His voice, a confusion of “God, yes!” Eric fucked him while he shuddered. He dug his fingers into each hip, his thumbs pulling Kyros’ cheeks wide. He watched the hole clench around him, and panted, “Your ass feels so good.” Climax struck like a shallow reef and he hissed, arching closer. “You’re not leaving until I’ve fucked you raw.”

Beneath him, Kyros gasped for air. “Believe me, the feeling is mutual.”

April

An Hour Later

Kyros rolled to one side and flung an arm over his eyes. The bed was a mess. They were a mess. His body buzzed from top to toes.

Eric threw an arm over Kyros' stomach. "Wake me up for dinner."

Sleep. An attractive thought after a carnal indulgence like that. Kyros slid to the edge of the bed and fished underneath for the chamberpot. Relieved, he sighed. Behind him Eric snored. Out already? Kyros waved a hand over his nose. Snapped his fingers a few times. No response.

He ached to stay in the bed, both in heart and in body, but he had more than one reason for being here. Kyros investigated every corner of the cabin with methodical patience. He slid open each drawer, catalogued every cabinet, and replaced everything where he found it. He wasn't interested in stripping Eric dry of his goods, just one treasure in particular.

It had to be in the chest. Kyros jangled the keys as he picked them up off the table, watching Eric for any sign of anger. The pirate remained resolutely asleep. Kyros unlocked the chest and investigated its contents. He lifted the puzzle jar and turned it in his hands. It wasn't large, maybe two fists tall but tapered down to one fist wide at the base. The circlet Kyros found on the Spanish ship fit, interlocked between two others. Four total, if Kyros had to guess. He couldn't make out the seams of each ring with confidence. It needed a seal on top.

Kyros fished out a rolled message from the trunk and spotted a rubbing in the middle of the letter. A sketch beside it. It was the top Eric sought to complete his jar. This had to be the letter he'd read at the tavern, the reason for his rush to get back here.

But the question remained: why did he need a jar for a spirit?

Kyros skimmed the letter, but it said nothing about trapping a spirit in the jar. Yet, it did give the location of the merchant who had the top.

With some regret, Kyros dressed and slid the jar into a leather pouch on his belt. He kept the letter inside. He repacked the trunk and locked it, tossing the keys to the table where, hopefully, they looked unmoved.

Eric snored.

Kyros didn't look back.

On the Hawk, Kyros closed his cabin door. He had to move the African beast statue to get to his maps. He unrolled one, well-traveled. His own course lines littered the spaces between islands, measured and timed from previous treks. Ocean current markers and seasonal notations littered the entire archipelago.

Kyros slid a rule across the map to line up Nassau and Havana. The Bahamas fell between them. Going north proved to be a shorter distance, but a strong current poured out of the gulf and pushed eastward. The faster route was likely to the south, then up the Cuban coast with the wind. Kyros marked his route, then calculated the times twice to make sure he'd done the math correctly.

Someone pounded on his door.

“Enter.”

Araceli leaned in, her coat over one arm. “Everyone’s aboard.”

“Thank you. Any trouble with the new men?”

“Nothing abnormal.”

Which meant a few of them got themselves cut but no one pressed the issue. “Alright. Take us out eastward and head south when we’ve cleared the island.”

“You have a heading.” She leaned on the doorjamb. “What did you find?”

Kyros waved her in and pushed the letter across his table. “It looks like the top to Deumont’s jar.”

“This isn’t addressed to you.” She gave him a bitter sneer. “You’re asking for trouble, stealing his letters.”

“Stole more than that, I have the jar.”

“Dammit, Kyros. Do not make us his enemy.” She slapped the letter down on the table. “We don’t have anything to gain by this.”

“There’s a market for ghosts and spirits, which means there’s a market for the jars that hold them.” Kyros pulled the container from his pouch and set it on the map. “This isn’t just something your local kiln throws on a wheel. It’s like the clockwork inside my pocket watch. Even if it weren’t used for something metaphysical, it would still be worth a small fortune to some plantation owner. And I know where the top is.”

“When Deumont chases you down, I’m going to escort him right to you.” She frowned and strode away from the table.

“East and south, Quartermaster.”

“Yes, Captain.” She slammed the door closed behind her.

Kyros turned the jar over in his hands, rotating the interlocked gears and arms around themselves. His reasoning felt hollow even to him, but he couldn't explain the truth and expect his crew to go along with it. Araceli was his oldest friend, and she knew how to call bullshit when she saw it.

And the truth was, Kyros was afraid one night was all he'd get with Eric if he had stayed. Maybe they would chat over dinner and rut like bunnies through the night, but it was obvious the Sun's captain wasn't the asexual stick-in-the-mud Kyros had expected. He was just so obsessed with his treasure hunt that everything else came second. So they would part ways in the morning, and unless Kyros tried to run him over with his ship, Eric wouldn't give him another thought.

Kyros selected a fabric from the haul of the Spanish ship and wrapped up the jar. He found space in a drawer. It was time for Deumont to do the chasing for a while.

Chapter III

April

The Next Morning

Eric stretched as he woke, pleased with both his performance and the depth of his short nap. He rolled up on one side and found his cabin empty. His belt and its riches remained on the table, but Vindex and his clothes were gone. Eric's buzz of happy pulled out like a low tide, gently leaving disappointment behind. Vindex proved persistent. Eric thought he would at least stick around for dinner.

He found pants and threaded his belt into place. Eric stepped out to the crew deck and frowned. The light was off. One of his men grunted from a hammock. "Mornin' Cap."

Morning? Eric's cheer snapped in half. He lunged into his cabin and threw open the rear hatch. Nassau's morning breeze spilled into his room. Early sunlight glanced off the bay surface. Eric let the hatch bang closed.

Fuck and run. Not even a good-bye. He should have guessed, but the slight still burned.

Eric grabbed a change of clothes and grumbled up the stairs. The few crewmen aboard gave him space. On deck, he swept the sky for any sign of his jailer. He didn't spot it. "Morel, you watched overnight?"

"Yes, sir."

"The moon?"

His crewman pointed one square finger out to sea. "Set early this morning. You're clear."

Eric nodded. Small miracles. He dropped his belt and pants. Eric threw a bucket over the side and pulled it back up full of seawater. He dumped it over his head and scrubbed Vindex' scent and the evidence of their tryst to the deck. He used the old pants to dry himself off, scrubbed the clothes in another bucket of water, and dressed.

He tossed his clothes on a line to dry and squeezed seawater from his dreadlocks. The chilly rinse woke him up. Put the whole thing in perspective.

Vindex never said he was going to stay. Even with an invite, he already had what he wanted.

Eric panned his attention across the bay and didn't see the Hawk. Still, the disappointment wouldn't wash away so easily and Eric let himself down to the dingy trying to focus on other things.

He spent the morning reviewing sales with his fence at an out-of-the-way encampment on the edge of the jungle. Refined sugar and raw cane still outsold everything else—rum production on Nassau wasn't matched—but the heavier metal didn't move. Eric collected his share of the sales and arranged for someone to cart the metal back to the boat. Havana had a much more robust economy for shipbuilding. It would sell there.

Then to the harbormaster where he located a fast ship on its way to Havana, arriving before him, and wrote a letter to the merchant there. Yes, he was interested in the top of that jar and would he kindly hold it for Deumont's arrival?

He bought rabbit goulash at a tavern for lunch and caught himself watching the door for Vindex. Eric drained his beer and pushed it to the edge for the barmaid. This was getting out of hand—

“Captain Deumont?”

Eric grunted.

“Of the Midnight Sun?”

“Yes. Talk.”

A slim man worrying a flat cap in his hands sat across the table. He wore a merchant's vest and puffed trousers, playing at landowner. “Sir, I'm here on behalf of Philippe Lamar—you have met?”

Eric sucked a piece of meat from his teeth and wondered what else could go wrong. Lamar was a tick on a nameless plantation island in the South. “I've heard of him.”

“It's come to Philippe's attention that you're seeking pieces of a puzzle jar. He kindly requests you cease this project and turn your attentions elsewhere.”

Eric raised a thick eyebrow and took another spoonful of goulash. “Oh? Why?”

The messenger turned his flat cap along the edge. "It's not known to me, Captain, but I must insist. Philippe was quite clear you're not to continue."

Eric sucked on a small leg bone and dropped it back into his bowl. "Philippe is an over-large beached whale, and his opinion means little to me. We did meet once, I stole something from him. Does he want it back?"

"No, Captain."

"No, I imagine not." Eric rubbed his chest and lost the appetite for his meal. "There's no message to bring back to Mister Lamar, I'm afraid." He left several coins on the table and stood.

"But, Captain. Will you stop?"

"No." Eric walked out of the tavern. The messenger didn't follow him.

Disturbed, Eric returned to the Sun in a pensive, sour mood. He locked his cabin door and grabbed the keys to his chest off the table. Ghalil twisted when he crouched beside it; only the ring through Eric's nipple kept the spirit from swimming around to his back or down one leg. An uncomfortable tug.

Eric swept his hand over the wood. An innocent looking box that used to hold a vengeful creature hidden in the depths of Philippe Lamar's plantation hideaway. More than once, Eric cursed the day he had ever set foot there.

He jammed the key into the lock and popped the lid. Even Ghalil stilled under Eric's shock.

His chest was empty. The jar: gone. The letter from Havana with it. Small wonder Vindex didn't stay for dinner. With his hands full of Lamar's bidding, it was too risky to form any attachments.

Eric felt his skin cool with the force of his anger. He pressed his lips into a thin line. He latched the chest and strode out to the crew deck. Two sailors and his quartermaster fell silent before the oppression of his still gaze. "Mister Muller, recall all hands to the mast immediately."

Sven stood straighter in acknowledgement. "Problem, sir?"

"I've been robbed." He turned to the stairs, hand spasming around the handle of his sword. "I've been betrayed."

April

Two Weeks Later

Kyros stepped onto the long dock in Havana and smiled. He had a week before Eric showed up on his heels demanding retribution, and the thought of a healthy fight followed by a healthy fuck had him tightening in all the right places. Maybe he could even tear that damn shirt off and get to know him from head to toe.

But that meant he had a few days to kill. Kyros spent the afternoon with Araceli, visiting their local fence to offload all the Spanish goods. The fabrics would sell well over time. The thousand-plus trinkets were even better. Small and exotic, he could sell them in bulk for a hefty profit. The statue, he didn't want to try and move. Kyros settled for keeping it in the cabin until they passed through another town.

In the evening, she left him to his own devices. Kyros checked the letter he'd stolen from Eric and browsed around the merchants. He picked up a book to replace the blank one in his library. The merchant shook his hand over the transaction, a marked difference from the debauchery of Nassau. He shoved the binding into a pouch on his belt and unfolded Eric's letter. "Do you know where I can find a merchant by the name of Martin?"

"Weber or Lang?" The man asked, chewing on a thumb of tobacco.

"I'm not sure. I'm after a jar, do either sell containers?"

"Lang does." He pointed. "Down there, left at the red banner, right at the one that used to be white, has a black serpent symbol on it. Third or fourth one down. You can't miss it, big blue drapes."

"Thank you." The directions proved accurate. Merchant stalls evolved from temporary structures to wooden ones as he went along. Then wooden to stone further down the street as it wandered closer to the heart of the city. Martin Lang occupied a wooden one-room building overflowing with pottery and the like.

"Good day, sir! I have a new shipment direct from Africa. Best glazes you've ever seen."

"No doubt." Kyros smiled. "But I'm here for something rather specific." He handed Eric's note to the man. "You're Martin?" He walked farther into the building, squeezing around stacks of pottery. He picked up a pitcher and turned it over in his hands.

“Yes, Mister Deumont but...” The man pursed his lips. “Well, I’m afraid I’ve changed my mind about the part in question. I don’t intend to sell it.”

“I’m sorry, Martin. I don’t think that’s going to work out. See, I’ve come all the way out here from Nassau. Think I could at least take a look at it?”

Martin folded the letter and tried to hand it back, but Kyros ignored him, pressing deeper into the shop. He opened lids and poked his nose around a nested row of bowls.

“I’m not going to part with it.”

Kyros hummed. “I can make it worth your time. Let me see it.”

Martin wavered

“It might not even be the piece I need.” Kyros shrugged.

That seemed to be enough. Martin left the letter on a plate and worked his way into the back of the store. He returned with a box and held it out for Kyros to open. “I’m not giving it to you, even if it is the one you’re looking for.”

“Why is that, I wonder?” Kyros flipped the box’s latch and opened the top.

A beast roared out of the box, two dozen horns around his head and red-red eyes, bigger than the box. Bigger than the room. Kyros stumbled back, knocking pottery and plates to the ground. The beast crushed what he stepped on and roared again, “GHALIL!”

Kyros backed into billowing blue drapes. He tore them away and collapsed into the street.

The beast spun in the store and a long spiked tail obliterated the bowls. Fragments of clay spun about like confetti. “You promised me Ghalil!” It roared at the merchant. “Where is it?”

Martin cowered and pointed at Kyros. The beast roared and bit Martin’s hand off. “Where is Ghalil?” Martin just screamed.

Kyros watched in stunned disbelief. People peered into the building. Some shrieked and ran, others couldn’t turn away from the wreck. The beast swung at Martin, slicing him in three, then slicing again. It destroyed the entire booth, wrecking like a bull and screaming for something named Ghalil. Wood splintered under the force of its tail, and when the stall collapsed inward, it threw a beam into the street.

Kyros rolled to the side. Something caught the drapes. The beast stepped on them and arched over him, sharp teeth and red eyes dripping fire. “Ghalil,” it snarled. Kyros fought an arm free and pointed, he didn’t know where, he didn’t give a damn as long as it wasn’t here.

The beast hacked, a sound in its throat like something got caught. Then it vomited tacky fire onto Kyros’ chest and stomped away. Kyros screamed, rolling in the dust and tearing himself free of molten cotton. His arms and hands burned. His chest burned. His metal buckles melted into his hip. He stumbled away from the heat and immediately crashed into unconsciousness.

May

One Week Later

Eric directed the Midnight Sun imperiously into Havana’s main bay, steaming at the thought of Kyros beating him here. He didn’t see the Hawk on approach or in the bay proper and it cooled his temper a bit. He pushed his crew hard to cut time on this trip, maybe the effort paid off. He was tired, the men were tired. He didn’t have time to indulge it.

Eric led the first boat to shore and relied on his sketchy memory of the merchants. He needed the jar guy—he couldn’t remember the name on the letter. Confused inquiries with a potter and tanner had him jogging circles around the main street until he realized a stretch of the road showed signs of recent fire damage. He ducked into the closest merchant stall, a baker, and pointed down the way. “What happened here?”

“Ohh,” The man said, shaking his head. “Saw the whole thing. A demon came out of that shop and tore it to the ground. Set fire to the whole row and then ran down to the docks.”

Eric put a hand on his chest and rubbed it. “A demon?”

“Oh, yes. Seven foot. Eight, maybe. Horns all around. Tail like a lizard and teeth like a cat. It spat fire like... liquid fire.”

“What stall did it destroy?” Eric asked with a sinking gut.

“Martin’s, three buildings down. Tore him to shreds and broke every pot in the place. People are scavenging but there isn’t much to rescue.”

It couldn’t be a coincidence. Kyros had already been here. Though what he thought he was doing with spirits and demons, Eric couldn’t begin to guess. He

thanked the baker and jogged to the epicenter of the fire scars. The street itself was clear of litter, but the former building hunched wood over clay, a mess on top of a wreck. People crawled over the leftovers, hauling wood away for other purposes.

A big black woman grunted as she toppled a beam too large for most men to shift. Eric pointed at her. "Oi! You!" He scrambled up a cascading hill of fired clay, suddenly hot with anger now that he had somewhere to point it. "Woman! Quartermaster. You're Vindex' quartermaster, aren't you?" He stooped and picked up a shard of pottery. "Answer me!" He chucked it at her when she sneered.

She dodged the piece and put her foot on a fallen beam. She shoved it forward into Eric's knee. He crashed to the pile, hands first and cursed. Eric rolled to one side. The quartermaster sat on his stomach, stepped on one of his hands, and held a knife up to his throat. He wheezed, "Fuck, woman, you are not light."

"I knew you'd come after us."

"Tell me where Vindex is."

"Why?"

"TELL ME WHERE THAT SON OF A BITCH IS HIDIN—" He choked off the words when the knife dug in.

The quartermaster leaned closer, voice calm. "I asked why?"

Eric gasped for air. "He stole what's mine. I want it back."

"Is that all?"

"I haven't decided yet."

She pulled the knife away and wiped it on Eric's heaving chest. "He's on the Hawk. Trying not to die."

Eric just lay there puzzling out what that meant. The quartermaster stood, and he gasped several full breaths. She walked away down the pile. Eric had to scramble to catch up. "What happened?"

She made a vague gesture at the fallen merchant stall. "Someone intended this for you."

"Kyros was here," he said. She led him to a pile of black on the ground, harder than rock with exploded spikes out of the top.

She leaned her boot heel on one of the spikes and heaved. The spike tip snapped into the dirt. "People are saying a demon vomited fire on top of him."

"He survived this?" Eric turned the shard of stone over in his hands, sharper than any knife he owned.

"You could call it that. He made it about two feet away." She pointed. "Collapsed on his face. He's been unconscious since then."

Eric rubbed his chest, and for once Ghalil had nothing to do with it. There was a tightness there he couldn't explain. He needed to see Kyros, and he wasn't sure yelling at him was even on the table anymore. "Take me to him?" he asked. "Please?"

She gave him a once-over. Then nodded. "Don't make me have to kill you."

Araceli, she said her name was, and she didn't let him row the boat. As they jumped across the bay, Eric realized that might be a good thing. Her broad arms heaved with a force he wasn't sure he could match. And she maintained that speed all the way out of the bay, around to the Northwest, and down the coast to a much smaller cove where the Hawk bobbed out of sight. The ship sat with her sails furled, anchored close on shore.

They climbed to the top deck, and Eric felt the stares like points of heat. Without Araceli leading the way he wouldn't have made it to the stairs.

Two decks down, the quartermaster stopped him at the door. "If you start any shit, I will put a knife through your eye." The quiet desperation in her voice made Eric's stomach flip. She opened the door.

A man at the table sat up, pushing glasses up his nose. The boatswain? If he said anything, Eric missed it. Kyros lay unmoving on the bed, body red and bloated, skin missing more than it was there, blisters from head to toe. Black. Chunks of roasted flesh. Eric knelt at the bedside and covered his mouth. His fingers shook. "He's dead."

"Not yet," Araceli snapped at him. She urged the other man out and closed the door, leaving Eric alone.

Chapter IV

May

Two Weeks Later

The groaning wouldn't stop. Kyros struggled to breathe, to move, to speak. He felt heavy, and too hot. Everything twitched like it was too tight. And the groaning kept going on and on.

Someone brushed his hair back and whispered in his ear. Kyros opened his eyes and realized the moans came from his own chest. His mouth snapped, dry. Why was breathing so difficult?

“Easy, easy, don't move. That isn't a good idea, I promise.”

He recognized that voice but couldn't place it. The head petting stopped. He missed it. Something dripped on his lips. He licked at it. Beer. What on earth happened?

He tried to speak and just managed a croak. Then exhaustion swept over him and he only knew black.

The next time Kyros woke he screamed in pain, which only caused more. Everything burned. His hip seared, as if Theo had jabbed him with still-molten metal. He blacked out.

Kyros woke to words in his ear, whispers about nothing and a hand stroking his forehead. It was the only place that didn't hurt. He managed a grunt. Beer appeared and Kyros thought he remembered doing this already. The liquid cooled things, though, and he lapped at it until he was too tired to swallow anymore. He slept.

He didn't know how long he wavered between the two states. Everything was pain. Sometimes there was sleep. Usually he dreamed about pain.

His arm itched. Kyros reached with his other hand to fix that. As soon as he made contact, fire spiked through his body. He hissed and didn't try again. Eric appeared over him. “I told you not to move. It's still not a good idea.”

“What—” He didn't have any spit to work with. Eric held his head up and nursed a mug of grog between his lips. That helped. He tried again, “What are you doing here?”

Eric crossed his arms. "You took something of mine, which I found by the way, thanks."

"I mean... why am I here... with you?" What did he mean, anyway?

"You tried to get your fool self melted."

Kyros didn't know how to process that. His blank expression must have conveyed such, because Eric sat down on a chair beside the bed and sighed. "People are saying a demon vomited liquid fire right onto your chest. By the looks of things, I'd say your leather fetish saved your life. You've got a permanent belt loop though." Eric touched something on his hip that was attached to him but not in any way flesh. He didn't feel the contact so much as the pressure which... he just couldn't explain.

He lifted his hand and started when it came into vision, red and swollen. Too red. Peeling. "I don't understand?"

"What's the last thing you remember?"

"The jar..." Kyros turned his head to look at the bottom drawer across the room and the motion pulled things that weren't supposed to be tight. "I spoke with a man about the top to your jar. He said he didn't want to sell it."

"Why?"

"Dunno. Said he changed his mind. I asked to see it." Kyros looked up at Eric and squinted, trying to remember. "I was going to steal it from him if I needed to."

"How did you plan to steal it?"

"I asked to see it. I had to press him about it." Kyros put his hands up in a shape over his stomach. "He brought out a box. Said I could see it. I opened it..." Roar. Horns. Red eyes. Claws. Fangs. Kyros remembered fear. Stumbling back and away. Not fast enough. Too stupid to run. "Who is Ghalil?" Eric jerked against the bed and Kyros saw him rub his chest. "Someone you know?"

"Where did you hear that name?"

He wanted to sit up. He tested his stomach and it didn't try to eviscerate him. He managed to scoot back a bit and sit against the headboard. He could see Eric properly now, and the man looked ragged. "How long have you been here?"

"Ghalil." Eric insisted. "Where did you hear the name Ghalil?"

Oh, right, he was telling a story. “I opened the box and this... monster came out. Huge. Horns. Like... I don’t know. It demanded to know where Ghalil was. It tore Martin into pieces when he couldn’t produce. Almost tore me apart. Spat... slag from a forge or something, straight on my chest—blue drapes.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I tangled up in blue drapes. I think that’s why I didn’t just... melt on contact. I got out of there. I ran... I... I don’t know where I ran to?”

Eric shook his head. “You fell over where you stood. You should be dead.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Three weeks. I arrived a few days after your... accident.”

Kyros pressed his lips together. “It wasn’t an accident. They thought I was you. Who is Ghalil?”

Eric stood. He lit a lantern in the far corner of the room, and Kyros tensed. Visceral memory screamed through his body. His heart raced. He clenched his teeth. Eric closed and locked the window. He barred the door.

He took off his shirt.

A black tattoo crossed his chest and ribs. The flickering light of the lantern made it look alive, moving across his skin. Eric stepped closer. It *was* moving, writhing in place, held to one spot by a nipple ring that also pierced the socket of its eye. Kyros whispered, “What is that?”

Eric passed a hand between them. “Kyros, meet Ghalil. Ghalil, Kyros.”

“What?” Kyros glanced up at Eric’s face but had to look at the not-a-tattoo again.

“It’s a spirit, bound to my body. The full moon lets it tear out, which is exactly as painful as that sounds. It slaughters everyone in sight. It might come back on its own. I use cinnamon to call it back in if it doesn’t.”

“That’s why you need the jar.”

“I’ve been trapped with this thing for six years. I need it out.”

The door shook, someone trying to enter. Then they pounded on it. Araceli shouted, “Eric, you quit whatever it is you’re doing and open this door!”

“What if I’m taking a shit?” He yelled back, yanking his shirt back on.

“I’ve seen worse! Open up.”

He slid the bar up and let her in. "He's awake," he said without malice.

Araceli came straight to the bed, her hands full of something charred. "How are you feeling?"

"Chewed up and spit out," Kyros admitted. "I'm surprised you let him on board."

"I told you I would escort him here." She held the charred thing up to Eric. "Found that today in the wreckage. No sign of the top, but if he did sell it, it should be listed."

"This whole thing is a damn goose chase," he said, flipping through the back of the ledger. "Even if it is listed, there's no way to know—" Eric pressed his lips together, and Kyros saw his fingers clench.

"What is it?"

"Phillipe Lamar."

Araceli looked at Kyros. He shrugged, then regretted it with a wince.

"Do you know him?" Eric asked, staring hard.

"No, should I?"

"Don't feed me any shit, Vindex. Do you know him?" He snapped the book closed with one hand.

Kyros scowled. "No. I don't."

Eric stared for another heartbeat then let his breath out. He handed the book back to Araceli. "On one of the last pages you'll find an entry for the sale of several pieces to a Phillipe Lamar, and the purchase of one box, about this big." He held his hands up in the same shape Kyros used to describe the demon box.

"This guy wants you dead," Kyros said. "Or your..." He gestured with one hand, "...guest."

Eric wiped his hand down his face. "I got word of a treasure cache on a plantation island. Lamar's island. Good source of info. Good proof. Great results. We broke in. Stole everything. Including a chest carved with a rune on the top that I thought would sell."

"The one in your cabin?" Kyros asked.

Eric nodded. "I opened that chest and freed Ghalil. I don't know how long it stayed locked in there, but it preferred to take a host"—Eric gestured at himself—"than wander free and risk being locked away again. We fled."

Eric took a seat. "When we were in Nassau, a man claiming Phillipe sent him found me at one of the taverns. Insisted that I stop collecting pieces to the puzzle jar. Later, when I realized you had taken the jar I assumed you were working for him, too."

"Thanks," Kyros said indignantly.

Eric just gave him a flat-eyed look. "Phillipe, or someone claiming to be him, is listed in that book as purchasing the jar top and selling the box to the vendor. He intended it to kill me, and when you walked in with my name and my letter..." Eric lifted an eyebrow at Kyros.

"Hey, tell me you'd rather be in this bed. We can switch."

Eric's haughty expression dropped. "No," he said. "And I'm sorry. I just wanted..." Eric slid a glance at Araceli who tactfully peered at the ledger instead. "I'm glad you're going to be okay," Eric said. "I need to pay Lamar a visit. Maybe after I've taken care of this I'll drop in on you again. Make sure you're healing up okay."

A pause breathed between them.

"That's it?" Kyros asked. "You're just leaving?"

"Yes." Eric turned and walked away.

Kyros blinked at the door. "Follow him," he said to Araceli. "Get this ship unmoored and in the wind. If he is going after some revenge trip on a plantation, we're going to back him up."

"Okay." Araceli closed the ledger and set it on the table.

Kyros blinked again. "Really? No argument?"

"This Lamar guy. He tried to kill you. Well, he tried to kill Deumont but he got you instead. Point is, no one messes with what's mine. This deserves some retribution, and the guys need a place to point their fingers and blame. Lamar sounds like as good a target as any."

"Oh... well, okay, then." Kyros nodded at the door. "Hop-to."

She smiled. "I'll send food over."

"Can... can you blow out the lantern?"

She looked at him funny but did as he asked. Darkness slashed through the room. With the window still closed, only light from the deck spilled into his doorway. But the fire was out and that unknotted his gut.

He'd never had an issue with flames before. Then, he'd never been burned to a crisp, either.

June

Two Weeks Later

Eric crouched in a tangle of ferns, fingers twitching to draw his sword. He heard Araceli shift in the tree branches above him. "See anything?"

"Guys are patrolling in pairs. Swords for sure. Maybe pistols too. There's a lookout tower near the warehouse—man up there has a rifle."

"Slaves?"

"None that I can see, everyone must have bunked up for the night." She swung down from the branch and landed, crouched, beside Eric. A move more subtle than he thought she could manage.

Eric said, "The warehouse is where we'll make our profit. The estate is probably where he's keeping the jar top."

"Divide and conquer?"

"That's what I'm thinking. I'll take Lamar."

"Why do you get to kill the guy?"

He glanced at her. "Why, you want to kill him?"

"I'd like to poke a few holes, at least."

He grunted. "Your guys know how to pillage and burn?"

She slid a sarcastic look at him. "This isn't our first plantation."

"Some of mine are new at this, I have a high turnover rate." He didn't miss the glance she flicked at his shirt. "So who's your lead man?"

"Javier," she said. "Can your men follow a stranger?"

"They don't have a choice."

The two of them scrambled back to the overgrown jungle where a group of ten pirates waited in utter silence.

"There are six patrols of guards, two each, and one man on a watchtower with a rifle." Araceli drew a crude map in the dirt. "The warehouse is to the right of the estate."

“That’s where you all will focus,” Eric said. “Javier, you’ll lead the group. Take everything worth taking and hoof it back to the boats. Leave one for the quartermaster and me.”

Javier gave Araceli a long look. He didn’t like taking orders from Eric. “This your plan?”

“Strip the warehouse clean,” she confirmed. “We’ll take care of Lamar.”

Eric saw Claude’s lip curl up and he shook his head at his man. This wasn’t a time for arguments or democratic votes. “We’ll see you back at the ship.”

Javier pressed his hands together and grunted. “*Escucha*, we pair off. You two, you together, you...” Javier took control of the group and his gestures demanded their attention.

Eric and Araceli slid back into the jungle. He pointed down the hill. “A guard at the back door.”

“None on the second-floor balcony.”

“Don’t tell me you’re climbing up?” Eric slid a suspicious glance at her.

“Why not? He might be in an office or library. Second floor.”

“But... you’re...” he swallowed his words at the look she sliced his way.

“Fat?” She asked, with no discernible intonation. It sent a shiver down his spine in the way yelling couldn’t. “You think I could get this big sitting around on a boat eating pancakes?”

Eric refocused on the back door guard and didn’t reply.

“Just hope I never have cause to sit on you again, Deumont. I’ll break your matchstick ribs.”

He cleared his throat. “So, ah... you’ll take the balcony, then?”

“That’s right.”

“Good.” And a heartbeat later, he heard her move deeper into the jungle for a better approach. Like a leopard, big and deadly.

Eric shook himself of the feeling Araceli watched him. The guard at the estate shifted his weight. In the light of the setting moon, Eric saw him yawn. The jungle gave him cover for yards. Eric crawled around trees and slid low under ferns. He untangled his sword from a vine. Circling leftward gave him the closest approach without leaving jungle cover. Eric maneuvered to his feet,

a crouched position only yards away. He paused there and drew his blade. The next time he saw the guard shift his weight, Eric lunged.

The guard got half a shout out. Then Eric plunged his sword into the man's chest and smothered his cries with one hand. He tackled the man, dragging him down to the ground just as he saw Araceli slide out of the jungle, jump up for the balcony railing, and pull herself bodily over the edge.

The man below his hands died. Eric jerked his sword free and dragged the body back to the ferns. It wouldn't fool a search, but it might delay the alarm. He yanked the door handle. Locked. Eric aimed a kick right next to the doorknob. The lock and jam splintered. He kicked again. The door slammed open. The house appeared to be empty.

Then he heard a scuffle upstairs. Eric sprinted for the stairway at the front of the house, sliding around the corner on a rug. He stormed the second floor only to find Araceli browsing the library shelves. In the center of the room, the Havana messenger with the flat cap lay hogtied and gagged.

Eric wiped the blood off his sword on a silk settee beside the door. He slid it home and crouched next to the messenger. The man huffed through his nose and continued to struggle but Araceli's bindings didn't budge. Eric put a finger to his lips until the man lay on the floor heaving, but still. Hopefully, he wouldn't scream. Eric pulled the gag down with one finger. The messenger took a big breath. Eric slapped his hand down and they struggled again, wiggling on the floor while the messenger shot loathing intent through his eyes.

Eventually he had to breathe again, and that's when Eric pulled the gag down his chin. "Where's Lamar?"

"Not here," the man gasped. "And you better leave before the guards swarm this place."

"We've taken care of them." The messenger blanched and Eric smiled. "So what are you doing here?" Araceli pulled a drawer from the desk and upended it onto the study carpet. She pushed papers around with the toe of her boot.

"I live here!" the messenger squeaked.

"With Lamar? Is he teaching you to submit to the spirits?" Eric leaned forward. "Are you liking it?"

"He's my father!"

Araceli dumped another drawer of paperwork and trinkets to the floor.

“Well, that’s boring,” Eric said. “I like my theory better.” He pulled his cotton shirt free of his belt. “Have you ever seen a spirit in person?”

“Wait. Stop.” The man’s struggles renewed.

Araceli threw the curtain over the window and emptied another drawer.

Eric pulled his shirt up. “I took a chest from your father once. A chest with a spirit in it. Are you sure you don’t want to see it?”

“Stop! He’s in Saint Lucia!”

Eric paused. “Where’s the top for the puzzle jar?”

“He took it with him?” Lamar Junior’s eyes widened.

Araceli tsked from the desk side of the room, “Saint Lucia is a two month trip if you sail straight. You want to answer that question again?”

“He has it, I swear.”

“Why?” Eric shoved up to his feet.

“I don’t know!”

Araceli sighed. Eric just drew his sword and pointed the tip at Junior’s crotch. “Stop wasting my time.”

“Shit! He’s doing something with spirits, okay? I don’t understand it. He’s not letting me help with any of the good stuff. All I do is study the damn books!”

“Which books?”

“This one.” Araceli held up a leather doorstop of a reference book one handed. It bristled with bookmarks and notes.

“Please don’t take that.”

Araceli rolled her eyes and tucked it under her arm. “We’re done here.”

Eric sheathed his sword and led the way out. Araceli closed the study door behind them.

Junior screamed through the door, “Wait! ... Wait, you can’t leave me tied up like this! ... Come back here, you fuckers!”

June

Hours Later

“We’re not going after Lamar—you can barely move.”

“It’ll take two months to get there. I’ll be fine. Give me sewing repairs to do, or something.” Kyros knew his glower’s effect fell flat. It was hard to be in charge from flat on his back with new skin and scars making him pink.

Eric’s snort from the table didn’t help, either.

Araceli folded her arms and Kyros winced. There wasn’t much could budge the woman when she stood her ground. “You have a belt buckle fused to your hip and—”

“What are we doing, then? Sitting around?”

“You’re sitting around.” Eric closed the huge tome in front of him. “I need to off-load this sugar.”

“So that’s it, then? You’re just leaving?”

“Like you just left Nassau,” Eric agreed. He grunted and rose from the table to open the bottom drawer against the wall.

Even without a malicious look, Kyros winced hard. He couldn’t demand anything of this man. He was going to anyway.

“Vindex,” Eric said, bent over the empty drawer. “Where’s my jar?”

Araceli shot Kyros a hard look and huffed. If he got her any more riled up he was going to regret it.

“You’ll find it in Saint Lucia.”

Eric slammed the drawer shut so hard it warped in the space and jammed at an angle. He turned on Kyros with hot fury, pointing. “I’m going to tear this ship down to ribs looking for it—”

Kyros had to use both hands for his fingers to cooperate but he showed Eric his middle finger, then laughed when the pirate stormed toward the door. “It’s not on the boat, Deumont!”

Araceli’s eyes widened. “You sent it ahead?”

“I’m not a complete invalid—”

“Good Lord.” She spun out of the room. “Deumont!” He heard her echoing boots stomp across the crew deck. Kyros closed his eyes and tried not to laugh—that still hurt.

A half hour later Araceli growled back into the room. “He’s headed for Saint Lucia. We’re still not going.”

Kyros grunted and kept his eyes closed. All the excitement had him tired already. She left him alone.

A week after the plantation visit, Kyros sat up in his bed to take stock of himself. The demon fire had struck his chest and arms, with some additional splatters down his stomach, and the notable splash on his left hip where the buckle now resided as a part of him. His chest and arms were so much swirl of scar, awkward and tight in every direction. But he was alive.

His palms shined pinkish with new skin, sensitive to touch, so it took him a while to work open the hidden compartment in the wall beside his bed.

Araceli knocked once and entered mid-sentence, “—elling him the cost isn’t worth it, but he insists.” Bram followed her in with a log book open in his hands. “Do we have anything else that will work?”

“He’s the blacksmith, Quartermaster. If he says he needs it, he probably does. I don’t know the first thing about smithing.”

“Kyros, have... you...” She trailed off.

Kyros turned Eric’s puzzle jar over and over in his hands. The space in the wall was just large enough to hold it, and for a week, he heard it rocking against the wood, reminding him.

“Bram, leave us.”

The bosun didn’t question her order. He snapped his book closed and shut the door behind him.

Araceli stood beside his bed. “Kyros, look at me.”

He looked up.

She backhanded him. Her knuckles caught his teeth and nose. The force of her entire body snapped his head to the side. Kyros felt his teeth clip the inside of his cheek and the edge of his tongue. Blood. He saw spots.

At least she wore no rings.

Kyros held the jar up for her to take. “Set course, south by southeast,” he said. He pointed to the charts on the table that she’d refused to look at for a week. “Bring us to Saint Lucia.”

She left, taking the jar with her. Kyros tried to sleep.

Chapter V

August

Two months later

Eric leaned his ass against the aft railing, beside a flickering lantern. He watched Sven and the crew work like an oiled machine, singing rhythm to a new shanty song someone had picked up in the tavern. In another week they'd land in Saint Lucia. Then he could put an end to this.

The crow called down from above, and Eric rubbed his chest to calm Ghalil. "White sails on the horizon! Forward port!"

Sven half-turned to hand Eric a spyglass. He accepted it, scanning the barely discernible line of ocean and sky in the night. White sails. Riding low. Ghalil wouldn't stay calmed. Too bad Vindex wasn't here to gang up on the vessel. Fifty guns at least.

Then Eric remembered he was in this mess because of Vindex, and he snapped the spyglass closed to hand it back.

"Bring us in line behind them, Sven. Full sail."

"Aye, sir." Sven called the tack and turned his wheel. The Midnight Sun cut through the waves on her new heading.

Eric found his men below decks. He shook Otto's heavy shoulder. "Coxswain, get your men up." Otto grunted. "We've found a big merchant vessel, heavy. I need everyone on deck, guns loaded."

"Yes, sir." Otto pulled himself out of the hammock and shook himself awake. He barked, "Wake up!" and suddenly the crew deck swarmed with activity. Eric left him to it.

On the top deck, Eric spotted the merchant without the spyglass. They closed in, silent in the night but for an occasional creak of line on wood and the slap of water. The deck rumbled. Eric heard gun doors snap open on either side.

Ghalil twisted on his chest. Eric swung his head around and found the moon just rising behind low marine clouds. He tugged the shirt tighter under his belt. He'd had good luck with the spirit for a while now. He didn't want to ruin that record.

The crow called five hundred yards when a lantern lit up the aft deck of their target. Then a second light. A third. The crow shouted, “They’ve spotted us, sir!”

“Keep your heading,” Eric told Sven, then he yelled across the deck, “Load the long nines with chain!”

Men echoed the order to the gun deck and the response relayed back, guns ready.

“Turning to port, three hundred yards,” the crow reported.

Eric touched Sven’s shoulder and took the wheel. He turned the Sun on a shallow port angle, not quite committing to the tack. Then he saw the port anchor drop and realized, too late, that the merchant wasn’t turning to run, they turned to fight. The anchor hit seafloor and pivoted the heavy vessel. Suddenly the Sun was there, too close to disengage.

“Fire forward guns!” Eric spun his wheel away to starboard just as the two cannon fired. “Starboard tack,” he called out, heart tight, “ready port guns!”

The merchant fired first, all twenty-five port cannon on two decks lighting up the night. The Sun shuddered and slowed, nose digging into water rather than slicing through. Eric shared a tight glance with Sven. A fifty gun ship prepared to run, they could take, but a ship willing to stand was another matter.

“All men to the oars. Give us speed!” He had to take advantage of their anchor. Men scrambled below decks. Ghalil rolled under Eric’s skin, and he smacked his own chest to keep the spirit in line. Then he heard a telltale clatter of chain. The merchant pulled up their anchor, six men around a spoked wheel in the deck running it back up.

Eric considered using the oars to run instead of fight. Then, two concussive blasts rocked the merchant. Eric ducked on instinct but nothing hit the Sun. Oars finally stroked the water but they didn’t move far.

Then, two thirty-six-inch iron balls dropped from the sky and ended the fight. They fell through Eric’s rigging and sails. One punched a hole beside the mainmast, offsetting the structure enough for the Sun to list port side. The second clipped his aft rail, tore through the captain’s cabin, and disabled the rudder.

Merchant soldiers hooked the Sun, and Eric just stood at the wheel, watching. No rudder, no mainsail, extensive damage to port side—he’d never

lost a fight so completely or so fast. He wondered if Vindex would pick up the puzzle jar in Saint Lucia and try to finish it himself.

Soldiers swarmed the boat, and Eric felt the whole thing in slow motion. He didn't fight when two men grabbed his arms and marched him across his own wrecked deck. They tangled with Orthos, smart enough to abandon ship with the crew. There was a brief argument about what to do with Eric, then the big merchant captain pointed to his own mainmast, and Eric hung his head. They strung him up facing aft so he could watch the merchant captain sail. Arms stretched out, feet tied down, heavy line wrapped, again and again, around his chest.

The Captain tilted Eric's head up by a finger under his chin. His hat sat tight on his broad head. Eric saw his own crew filed past behind him, down into the hold at the bottom of the larger vessel. "The feared Captain Deumont, if I'm not mistaken?"

Eric pulled his head away from the man's hand, but his eyes landed on the Sun, listing heavy, now, in the waves. His ship was sinking. "What were those last two shots?"

"Ah, did you like that? They're called smashers, we just installed them this season. Heaviest thing we've ever tried. A real bitch to load up, but they tend to cut down on the retaliation."

"Yeah..." Three tons of iron per shot would do that.

The Captain patted his cheek. "Don't worry. We'll bring you to land in one piece. You can learn all about them in the meantime."

August

One Week Later

Kyros leaned on the rail of his ship and looked over Saint Lucia's bay. He needed the support more than he wanted to admit. Scar tissue curled across his chest and arms, distorting what had once been tanned, weather-beaten skin into tough, still-pink, ripples. Proof he'd come through something horrific and survived. He was still weak, walking laps around the deck could wind him in an hour. Kyros tried to remind himself how much worse it could have been— infection, gangrene, he was lucky.

Kyros didn't see the Sun. He couldn't imagine they'd beaten Eric here, behind by a week, but he saw no sign of the ship in any of Saint Lucia's coves, and he didn't want to waste time scouting the nearby islands. If Eric had been here already, they needed to pick up his trail and catch up.

Araceli stepped next to him. "I still think you should stay aboard."

"I need to get off the boat. Even if we don't find anything." Kyros rolled his shoulders. "So let's go."

Araceli skimmed down a rope and landed on the dingy below. Kyros took the slower ladder built into the hull of the ship. She insisted on rowing. Kyros didn't argue with her. People started staring the second he stepped onto the pier. Knots of them whispered. A few pointed. Some couldn't let him go by without trying to touch him. The pier only stretched thirty yards and by the time they made land Kyros was ready to turn around and hide on the ship.

His quartermaster put a broad hand on his shoulder and pushed him up the main street. "Come on. Let's check out this craftsman first. I'll take care of the resupply, later, while you wait in a tavern."

"I'm not going to drool at a bar while my woman goes shopping—"

"Tell me that again when we're done with this guy and you can barely stand up." She handed him a folded and refolded piece of paper. "Now, where are we headed?"

Kyros flipped the map right side up and oriented himself with a bakery shop. "That way." He pointed. His paper described a metalworker in the hills of Saint Lucia who Lamar intended to commission puzzle jars from.

A quarter mile wasn't supposed to wind him but Kyros grossly underestimated the toll rolling hills could take. By the time they located the building, Kyros felt his legs shake with fatigue. Araceli pounded on the door and Kyros tried to make himself stand straight.

A young man answered the door, no more than mid-twenties, rubbing his dirty hands on a rag. "Hullo."

Kyros checked the map. "We're looking for Master Gerard?"

"Yes."

Kyros and Araceli traded a look, and she lifted an eyebrow. "You're his apprentice?"

The young man tossed his rag to the side somewhere beyond the doorway. “No, ma’am, I’m him. What can I do for you?”

Araceli made a face at the honorific but didn’t correct him. “Have you had any dealings with a Frenchman by the name of Phillippe Lamar, recently?”

His friendly face became less inviting. “So what if I have?”

Kyros leaned his shoulder on the wall and tried to make it look casual. “What about Eric Deumont?”

“Not that I recall, what is it that you want?”

Kyros traded another look with Araceli. “You haven’t spoken with Eric? Captain of the Midnight Sun?”

Master Gerard crossed his arms. “I’m not answering any more questions until you tell me what it is you want.”

Araceli produced the puzzle jar from a pouch around her waist and held it up. The craftsman uncrossed his arms and reached for it.

“Oh my god, is this the jar?” He turned it over in his hands, spinning interlocking pieces and making the device click. “It is. Lamar gave me drawings for this. He asked me to make one. And here you are with it...” He looked up. “What do you want for this?”

“Not for sale,” Kyros said. “But if you can make a top for it, we’ll commission you.”

“Of course I can.” He frowned at them. “What kind of question is that?”

Araceli plucked the jar from his grip. “Don’t get cocky.”

“I’m gonna need that if you want a matching top.”

Kyros levered himself up off the wall. “I thought you had drawings.”

Gerard turned into his shop and called over his shoulder, “Come look.” He spread several papers out over a drafting desk by the wall and weighted the ends so they stayed flat. “These are okay but there’s a lot of information missing. I told Lamar I might be able to put something together in a few months but without all these dimensions...” he pointed out several spots, “...I’ll be guessing until I get it right.” Gerard gestured to the jar in Araceli’s hands. “If I had the jar, itself, I could copy more precise drawings. It’ll cut my production time by two-thirds.”

“How long for you to make a top?”

He shrugged, “Two weeks?”

Kyros leaned his hip on the desk and addressed Araceli, “I think we beat Deumont here. No way he’d let these sit around.”

“Agreed.”

“Okay,” Kyros said. “We give you the jar for drawings and a top, and you keep your mouth shut if Lamar comes by. If he never knows, you can charge him through the nose for all the work we’re saving you.”

Gerard accepted the jar and set it on the drafting desk. “You cover my materials for your top.”

“Deal.” They shook hands.

“What’s your problem with Lamar?”

Kyros put a hand on his chest to draw attention to the twisted, pink scarring. “He tried to kill me over the jar. We’re not fond of each other.”

Gerard winced.

Araceli suggested, “Best keep that out of sight.”

They left Gerard a little wide-eyed at the mess they’d handed over to him. Kyros used Araceli’s shoulder for support during the last leg of their trip back into town. She steered them both toward a tavern and Kyros didn’t complain. “What if he turns around and sells the jar to Lamar?”

Kyros shook his head, “Did you see the way he lit up when you showed it to him? He’s a craftsman. He wants to make them himself.”

“He could still sell it.”

Kyros slid to a bench and put his head down, just breathing for a while. “I don’t think he will,” he said. “If he’s not in it for making things, he’s in it for profit and scamming Lamar out of his money is much more profitable.”

Araceli hummed. “I’m going to check in with the dockmaster.”

Kyros waved her away. “Tell the guys they have shore leave for at least two weeks. Keep an eye and ear out for Lamar. He may still be in the area.”

“Got it. Anything else?”

“Yeah...” Kyros pulled several coins from a pouch. “Get me a shirt, would you? I’m tired of the staring.”

Chapter VI

August

Days Later

A week tied to the mast. Sun, wind, salt exposure. Eric didn't try to lift his head anymore. Someone fed him a gruel-like paste every few hours. He pissed where he stood. Jeers, rotten food in his hair and face, spit, vomit—he was a target for anything. Every now and then someone threw a bucket of seawater over his head.

His sword and knives were long gone. His belt still hung slack around his waist, held up more by the lines around the mainmast than tied. His shirt sported several new holes but still clung to his torso.

Kyros filled his fever-dreams with laughter. He remembered the night they'd spent together, relived it over and over because even the man's stubborn betrayal was better than this. It made waking up to hell so much worse.

Eric screamed at the first touch of a whip against his skin. The sound broke. His voice went out after four days and only occasionally worked. The bullwhip brought it back with every strike. Leather bit his chest, wrapped in his shirt, shredded the fabric and exposed him to the wind of high noon.

Ghalil ripped itself free, tearing through muscle and skin, leaving a demon-shaped hole in Eric's chest. He passed out to the sound of a man being skinned alive.

When he came to, everything was different. He lay horizontally, for one, and Orthos lay on his chest (whole, unscarred, tattooed) purring away. He entertained the idea that it was all a wretched dream. Kyros hadn't sent the puzzle jar to a craftsman beyond his reach. A merchant ship hadn't owned him in twenty minutes or less.

But the beams overhead crossed in the wrong pattern, the smell of the cabin wasn't his own, and the ship rocked... differently.

Someone opened the door. "Stephano," Eric croaked. "Oh, thank god."

"You've been asleep for two days, Captain. I scrubbed you up best I could." The blacksmith took a stool beside the bed. "What do you remember?"

"How long was I tied to the mast?"

“Almost a week.”

“I remember the whipping.” He saw Stephano nod and closed his eyes, trying to remember. “My shirt tore. Ghalil got out and... screaming... I don't remember anything after that. How did I get here? Where is here?”

“You're in the captain's cabin of the merchant vessel. Her name's Trovita. When the creature got out it caused chaos. Several people ran down to us, locked up in the brig. They wanted to know how to stop it. We convinced them to lock themselves in with us, that it couldn't pass iron bars. When they did, we killed them and waited it out.”

“It didn't come down?”

“It was satisfied by the time it cleared the second gun deck. We were never in any danger. When we started hearing word it was gone again, we let ourselves out and took over the ship. I washed you off and brought you in here.”

Eric struggled to sit up. Orthos complained about the move but settled in, again, on Eric's lap. “How many of us survived?”

“A majority. Sven is directing us toward Saint Lucia. Otto keeps us in line. We lost Claude.”

Eric pinched his nose. “Who has been voted to replace him?”

“We haven't, yet. Rutger's taken on the role for now, until we have a chance to figure it out.”

“Okay.” Eric took a deep breath. “Okay,” he said again. “Get me up.”

The blacksmith kicked his stool back to the table and gave Eric a hand to his feet. “I'll let the others know you're up.”

“I need something to eat. Real food.”

“I'll look into it.” Stephano let himself out.

Eric rolled his head around, stretched, and otherwise checked himself out. Other than the sorry state of his pants, Ghalil's return left him in remarkably good health. He gave Orthos a pat on the head, found ill-fitting clothing in one of the drawers, and let himself out into the sunlight.

He checked on every single one of his crew. Ninety-six men in total. He shook their hands, checked their spirits, and was surprised to find morale higher

than a hijacking and mutiny warranted. Rutger provided a hearty meal that Eric devoured.

His check-in with Sven at the helm assured him the crew was not in bad shape. "What do you remember?"

"Enough to know we're lucky."

"We lost the Sun." Sven never did pull his punches.

Eric looked at open ocean off the port railing and remembered the black wood of his ship sinking there. "I know." He shook his head. "How does Trovita sail?"

"A little heavy on the port rear from the hole we punched in her. Otherwise smooth."

"I think I'll keep her."

"Fifty gun plus the carronade, you'll need a bigger crew."

The crew shouted, "LAND! Land to forward port!"

Men abandoned their posts for the port side of the ship. She tilted in the water. Sven scanned the horizon with a spyglass that didn't belong to him. "Finally." He handed the device to Eric who waved it off.

"I heard you're taking us in to Saint Lucia."

"That's right. Figure this won't be over until you get that thing out of your chest."

Eric squeezed Sven's shoulder, unable to articulate the relief he felt. He owed the crew and the damn demon in his skin his life.

August

Hours Later

"The reinforcement is looking good," Bram said, pushing his glasses up. "I still recommend plating along the ribs we have exposed. It's a good opportunity."

Kyros grunted. "Should we plate inside or outside?" He stirred his goulash.

"If we're attacked, the damage is the same. I'd do it inside. Gives us some surprising resilience."

Kyros nodded to Araceli and she made a note in her book. "I'll speak with the dockmaster this after—"

"Captain!" A runner slammed the tavern door open, breathless. "Captain, Deumont just made land at the pier."

Kyros dropped his spoon and ran out the door, shoving a barmaid to the side in his haste. He hurdled a low wall and cut through someone's side yard. The ship in the bay was not the Sun. He ran down to the dock anyway, searching the faces streaming off the big merchant vessel.

He gasped for air where he was, not quite ready for such a rush on his lungs. "Deumont!" People turned to look at him. "Where's Eric Deumont?"

Someone pointed back to the ship. A familiar knot of dark hair looked in his direction.

"Oh, thank god." Kyros pushed himself against the tide of sailors. He ran up the gangplank. Eric shoved someone aside with one hand. Kyros crashed into him, all biting, crushed lips and out of breath. "Where the fuck have you been?"

Eric squeezed the life out of him, lifting him up off his feet with no effort at all. They kissed again, and Kyros felt himself drowning. He sank his hands into tangles of dreadlocks, balanced on a desperate edge.

"I need you," Eric snarled between their teeth, equally raw.

They moved, half-running, down into the ship. Kyros squeezed Eric's hand, unwilling to let him go now that he'd come back. The second gun deck was wrong. The cabin was wrong. Hell, the whole ship was wrong. But the way Eric pinned him to the wall and devoured him, the way their hands pulled clothing into piles and dropped leather to the side felt right.

They didn't make another step toward the bed. Eric pushed him to the wood floor, slicked himself, and staked his claim. Kyros clawed and scratched him closer, faster, harder. He bit what he could reach and cursed what he couldn't. He didn't know how to express the blinding relief flooding his veins with adrenaline.

They came with groans; first Eric, then Kyros, too fast to catch up with themselves, and even that release didn't bring them close enough together. They devoured each other's kisses and gasped shared air for several minutes.

When Kyros finally felt his heart calm down and Eric lay on top of him, still kissing the skin under his lips, he formed a full sentence. "We have a top to the jar."

“You found it?” Eric pushed up off his chest. “You found Lamar?”

“No, we missed him by several days, but the craftsman he came here to meet was quite helpful. He has drawings of it, he can make as many as you’re willing to pay for.”

“You had him make a top?”

“Yeah. It’s back on the Hawk.”

Eric smiled, an open-mouthed, full-of-teeth grin. “Ha,” he said, then laughed and laughed until tears fell down his cheeks. “Oh, my god,” he dropped his head to Kyros’ chest and sighed. “Oh my god, it’s almost over.”

Kyros wiped the tears away. “Come on, the bed’s right there.”

Eric pulled him up by the hand with a yank. Kyros hissed, “Easy, I don’t stretch much anymore.” He rubbed the swirl of discolored scars across his chest.

“Sorry.” Eric followed the veiny edges of the scar where the color had darkened most. “Have you been to a barber-surgeon?”

“No. I’m fine.” Kyros lifted his left arm until the scarring arrested it. “I’ve lost some range here, but that’s all.”

Eric touched the buckle protruding from Kyros’ hip. “And this?”

“Best we can figure, it’s fused to my bone. It doesn’t bother me.”

Eric looped his finger through the iron and used it to pull Kyros close. They both snorted, then kissed again. Kyros tugged them toward the bed so he had something soft to fall back on.

Late that night, Eric told him about the ill-fated battle with Trovita. The sinking of the Sun pained him more than he expected. It wasn’t his ship... but Eric was its captain, and he felt the loss acutely. Eric described being held to the mast, the whipping that released Ghalil, the days he spent unconscious.

By comparison, their casual traverse to Saint Lucia was downright dull.

Eric kissed Kyros’ forehead and breathed another deep breath. “I want to take care of this tonight. The moon’s out, ship is empty.”

“Right now?”

“We can’t do it soon enough.”

August

Minutes Later

Eric tugged his belt tight over his hips, checking the contents of each pouch and sling. He missed the familiar weight of his sword. Tomorrow he planned to pick up a new one.

He heard Kyros' voice on the dock. And someone else. Araceli? Eric pushed a hatch open in the cabin to listen.

“—tting you do this alone.”

“Yes, you are. You've been right there for every step of this. Hell, you captained the damn Hawk yourself for months, following me around on this obsession.”

“You need me here.”

“No. I need you to make sure the men on the Hawk have a captain to follow.”

“...what are you saying?”

A pause, a single pair of steps walked closer to the ship. Then Kyros said, clear as day, “You weren't there, Araceli, you didn't see that demon... There was no handling it. If this one is anything like it... Go back to the Hawk, girl. And if you see this ship in flames, don't come looking.”

“I'm not just leaving you to—”

“YES, YOU ARE.”

Eric let the hatch snap shut and ran the length of the boat for the stairs. By the time he reached the top deck, though, Araceli was gone and Kyros stood at the aft rail, looking out to sea. He turned when Eric came up behind him and rubbed his chest in a gesture Eric recognized, himself. “Let's get this done.” He held the jar in his hands. The top fit. The only hint it wasn't an original piece was its bright, new color.

Eric shook his head. “You hold onto that. I won't be much help when it comes out.”

“How do we do this?”

“Carefully.” Eric gestured for Kyros to stand at the starboard side of the helm. He backed up to the port side and heard water slap the edge of the boat.

“I’m going to take off my shirt. It’ll pop out. Make sure that jar is open.” He fingered his shirt and felt his gut turn over. He wasn’t in danger, there was no reason to release the thing. This was such a bad idea.

He grit his teeth. Kyros widened his stance and held the open jar at the ready. Eric’s heart thumped. Or maybe Ghalil did.

Eric whipped his shirt over his head. The moon reflected on his skin so everything glowed silver. Ghalil rent itself free, tearing skin and muscle, bleeding him dry like it knew this was its last chance to work destruction.

It stood on the deck and Eric thought maybe the sparse offering of just one man surprised it. Eric collapsed to his knees. Blood ran down his chest and hips, dripped in lines to the deck. He thought he saw the wood warp beneath him but when he put his hand down to steady himself it snapped back into place.

He heard Kyros yell. An angry, aggressive thing. He looked up and saw Ghalil surge first to one side, then the other. Kyros kept the jar between them, teeth bared and eyes wide. Ghalil lunged. The spirit’s clawed hand slipped into the jar and then it seemed like it couldn’t pull back out. Kyros surged forward, pressing the jar close.

For the first time in his life, Eric heard Ghalil scream, a sound like nails scratching bone. The spirit slipped into the jar, and Kyros slammed the lid on top.

Eric fell forward, gasping for air and at a complete loss to stop the bleeding. He felt a hand on his shoulder, pushing him to the side. Onto his back. Kyros stood over him, hysterical and high on adrenaline. Eric reached up to touch his face. He was free of the monster. At last.

He turned his head down to see the jar. It sat innocuously on the deck, moonlight shining off the new cap. A new jail for the beast. He heard Kyros screaming at him like a distant crash of waves but there were more important things to handle first. Like this almost empty pouch of red dust.

Eric pulled his last small handful of cinnamon from the leather pocket on his belt. Bloodstained. He saw dust run through his fingers and thought it would be fitting to throw this final handful out to sea. An end to an era of terror. Just as he considered trying to get up again, the jar clicked.

He rolled his head back in that direction and felt himself go cold inside. Pieces of the jar lifted off the surface and rotated by themselves. They clicked

and clacked like the gearing in a pocket watch. They spun into an interlocking knot. All at once the pieces snapped back to the surface of the jar.

Ghalil exploded from the top with an infuriated roar. Red and violent, it swiped at Kyros. Eric screamed. He shoved Kyros to the side and took four claws to the neck and face, himself. He slammed his final fistful of cinnamon to his chest and gasped the incantation. Ghalil slurped back into his chest like a rose vine, all sharp thorns and crooked angles. Eric felt his flesh knot back together, his blood flush full again, his body heal to perfection.

He felt Ghalil rail against the cage of his ribs. He vomited blood.

Eric wept.

Kyros held onto this edge of panic. "Oh, my god. Oh, my holy fucking shit. Eric. Eric, please look at me? Eric? DEUMONT!" Kyros shook him and wouldn't go away.

He needed to go away. Eric opened his eyes and saw a finger stripe of blood on Kyros' cheek. A stripe he'd put there. "Go away," he croaked.

"Like hell. We got it in the jar. It went in. Did you see that? We just need to figure out how to keep it there."

Eric ripped himself away from Kyros and rolled onto his hands and knees. He felt Ghalil beat against his chest and knew he had to leave. There was nothing that could hold a monster like this. He swiped his hand and grabbed the jar. Kyros scrambled to get the top. They still fit together.

Kyros knelt beside him. "We can make this work. I know a witch we can talk to."

And all of a sudden the answer was obvious. Eric pressed the jar into Kyros' hands. "Go," he said. "Talk to your witch."

"You can come with me."

"No!" Eric winced, his desperation too raw. He clenched his fists. He needed a reason to keep Kyros away, something obvious. He saw red dust on his hand and rubbed his fingers together. "I need more cinnamon." He latched onto that explanation, praying the man would buy it. "There's an African trade merchant sailing by in three months. I'm going to take it."

"The man-o'-war?" Kyros pushed his shoulder but Eric refused to look up.

"Trovita has the firepower to mow one down. Them and the escorts. I need the cinnamon if we're going to try this again."

Kyros turned the jar in his hand. “Okay... okay, I’ll talk to the witch, and you have a chat with the merchant captain. We’ll get together and try again in a few months.”

Eric nodded. He sat back on his heels. Kyros bent and kissed him, bloodstained and all. Eric closed his eyes so he wouldn’t have to watch him walk away.

No witch in the seas would deal with Ghalil, he’d already tried that. And if a puzzle jar couldn’t hold him, nothing could. Eric stood on his feet and fetched a bucket of seawater from the bay. He dumped it over his head and shook with cold. Nothing could hold Ghalil but his own ribcage. So he would track down the trade caravan and send that cage to the bottom of the sea.

He needed a crew.

Chapter VII

September

One Month Later

Kyros turned the jar over and over in his hands. He didn't understand how the creature had gotten out. But then, he didn't understand much about spirits and ghosts. They traveled a realm humanity wasn't supposed to touch. And Eric made himself a bridge between those two.

He slid the jar into a pouch and stood. Araceli licked her fingers, polishing a fruit they found during the hike. They continued their trek upward. On the top of a mountain half-eaten by the sea, on an island unmarked on any map Kyros had ever seen, in a corner of the ocean no one bothered to visit... lived two unaging witch twins with dark skin and white eyes. Kyros led the way up a used trail with a stick in one hand to help with the climb.

Their ascent led them out of the jungle, and he spotted a sturdy shack at the peak. Crows circled the building. A few soared down to check them out and call back to the group.

Kyros picked up the pace. Ever since leaving Eric to his new ship, a sense of foreboding settled around Kyros' shoulders. He didn't like the idea of separating again. Hell, he was almost willing to hand direction of the Hawk over to Araceli and take up the mast under Eric just so they wouldn't have to sail different paths.

But Eric was right. If they were going to do this again, he needed the spice if something went wrong. Divide and conquer. Still, Kyros didn't want to delay any more than necessary.

He grunted as he crested the last pile of rocks to the top of the cliffs. A crone of a woman eased the cabin door open and invited them in.

She stooped lower than Kyros' chest. Her head was bald of hair but painted or tattooed with feathers. Her clothing fluttered with feathers as well, black and grey from the flock of birds that called this mountaintop home. She walked without a cane.

Another woman sat inside the cabin, her fingernails, pointed like bird claws, tap-tap-tapped on the arm of her chair. She rivaled her sister in age, but neither seemed gray with it. Their dark skin almost shone in the sparse candlelight.

The first woman snuffed a candle between two fingers as she walked by and gestured for Kyros to sit on the tree stump there. He didn't ask if she knew he now feared fire. He didn't want to know if the answer was yes.

Araceli was not offered a seat. She stood beside Kyros in silence.

The woman who guided them in sat at a long wooden table littered with small white bones, little dice, and a scattered collection of pictorial cards. He didn't need his fortune told. He didn't want to know the future. Kyros pulled the jar out of his pouch and birds screamed outside. The flock took wing in a noise like wind.

Kyros didn't know how to read omens but even he knew this couldn't be good. He set the jar on the table. Both witches leaned toward it, murmuring. They didn't touch it. Araceli shifted beside him. Kyros felt the same—a pressure in the air, like static or an incoming storm.

Then the witches leaned away and it was gone. The twin with pointed nails spoke in raspy sentences, “A horror has been inside this jar. Why do you bring it here?”

“We trapped a spirit of violence inside. It broke out.”

“What spirit?”

“Ghalil—”

Birds screamed again and thunder crashed against the mountain. Araceli ducked. Kyros just stood from his tree stump and growled, “Enough theatrics, both of you!”

“Ooh, the little chick is impatient!” They cackled like the crows and their feathers fluttered. “We enjoy our theatrics; we don't get many visitors.” But the bird flock settled down.

Kyros twitched his lip, irritated but needing their expertise. “Ghalil—” he spoke over the thunder crack and their laughter, “was locked inside for a moment. We want to know how to keep it there.”

The twin with the painted feathers on her head just hummed a negative. “Why are you playing with such a strong spirit?”

“It is using a friend of mine. It lives in his chest—we need it out.”

“It comes out for the moon.” Fingernails tapped her chin.

“We want it out so it will never come back. Can we trap it in the jar?”

“Of course you can.”

“Do you know where he is now?”

“Sailing to intercept a man-o’-war caravan from Africa.”

Painted feathers spread several cards over her table, and Kyros looked away from the pictures. “You don’t want to know his fate?”

“No.”

“He means this much to you?”

“Yes.” He heard the clatter of bones across wood and kept his head turned away.

“You’ve done many things for him. Suffered for him. What else would you do, little chick?”

“Anything.” Kyros closed his eyes and knew it was true.

“And what would you give up to save him from this fate?”

“Everything.”

Thunder crashed and Araceli grabbed his arm. They both jumped when the twins appeared inches in front of them, black skin glowing as if it had been oiled.

“Wait,” Kyros said, holding his hand out. “Wait, that was hasty. I misspoke.”

The twin with painted feathers handed him the jar. “It is done, little chick. No going back.” She pointed to the jar. “When Ghalil is inside, align the pins in this manner. It will lock, but not forever.”

“How long?”

“A year, maybe two. Then it will break free and kill you both.”

He gripped the jar and memorized the interlocking rings. A year or two. They could figure this out by then. They had to.

The twin with long nails took Araceli’s hand and placed something small into her palm. “Find the beast with this. Hold it to the sky during the day and it will show you the path.”

Then the crows screamed again, and Kyros felt a bolt of fear in his chest. He’d made a deal with the witch twins and it would cost him greatly. They

needed to find Eric before he had to pay that debt. He pushed Araceli toward the door. "Run," he said. "We are cursed." And when the twins didn't laugh at his words, he knew they were true.

November

Two Months Later...

"This is foolhardy, even for you, Captain." Sven tacked Trovita toward the trailing escort of the man-o'-war's caravan.

"I've noted your concern," Eric said. He knew his purpose out here. Surviving the encounter was not on his list today. Sven would take Trovita. The men would follow him. Eric didn't bother to consider the details after this fight. "Load all guns," he shouted to the deck, "and prep the smashers!"

Ghalil shifted and Eric smirked. Here was the beast's last opportunity to enjoy itself. Could it feel the end coming?

The crow called distances. They descended with speed faster than the Midnight Sun could reach, even with full oars in the water. Trovita didn't slice through the waves, she crushed them under her bow.

The rear escort tacked to face them broadside. Spotted. "Tack to starboard, Sven."

"Tacking starboard," Sven replied.

"Ready port guns."

The call came back, "Ready!"

Eric watched a sailor posted to the foredeck. Trovita was longer than the Midnight Sun by half a length. It made estimating their angles of attack a learning curve Eric didn't have time for. His sailor raised a hand. Eric shouted, "Port, fire all!"

The escort ship fired six cannon. Trovita fired twenty-five. The shot passed each other in the air, a few of the balls striking and falling, inert, into the sea. Two impacts shuddered Trovita's port side. The escort ship crumbled, fell in on itself, and the powder magazine ignited. It listed aft and the nose fell into the sea.

With seventy guns on three decks plus several specialty cannon fore and aft, the man-o'-war was the largest ship Eric ever had the pleasure of encountering

on open sea. The escorts were smaller—twelve or twenty-four cannon each. Faster in the water, but not as sturdy. Two carronade armed the Trovita, though. How many other ships could claim a sixty-eight pound cannon ball in their armory?

The man-o'-war and three remaining escorts turned to engage.

Eric prepared himself. "Load the guns."

November

An Hour Later

Kyros measured their time and marked his map with a shake of his head. They were off his expected course, way off, and there was nothing around but open ocean. He made a note of the current time, then met Araceli back at the helm.

"It's still working?"

She held up the sunstone and light refracted to a line straight off their bow. "How far off are we?"

"Days." Kyros shook his head. "I don't like the feeling of this."

"Do you not trust it?"

"I trust it better than my own measurements. Never doubt a witch, especially not the twins."

Araceli shrugged her shoulders as if ridding herself of a bug. "They creeped me out. All the birds, the claws on that one..."

Kyros couldn't get the worry out of his head that he had traded something he couldn't live without. *What would you give up to save him from this fate?* He didn't even know what fate he was saving Eric from—he never looked at the cards or the bones the witch threw.

But if he sacrificed their future together for survival now... Kyros wasn't sure that was a trade he was willing to make.

He watched Araceli hold the stone up and correct their course. The trade was made, their future already set. He had to find a way to accept the path. He didn't trust the twins to plot a future he wanted.

The crow yelled, "Sails on the horizon! Cannon fire!"

Kyros didn't even ask for the spyglass. He screamed at his men, "All hands to the oars, full sail. Monkeys ready the cannon."

Javier organized the sailors with his drum and rhythmic chant. The Hawk jumped forward and Kyros' heart with it. He gripped the rail and watched the horizon. "Araceli, if anything happens to me, you take this boat and make something of it."

"Nothing is happening to you, boy. You've sailed halfway across the Atlantic for this man, and I'm still right beside you."

He looked down, then back at her. "I wouldn't be here if not for you."

"I know." She settled on one hip. "Unless you still think a dingy and one oar counts as a fleet."

Kyros smiled and shook his head. "I'm serious, though—"

"You're not going to die, stop being so melodramatic."

What else could count for giving up everything in exchange for saving Eric from his fate? "Alright, but still. If we make it through this, you deserve your own craft. I want you to have the Hawk."

"You planning on picking one up while we're here?" She spread a hand out over the water.

The crow's distance calls dropped under a thousand yards, and Kyros just laughed. "Quartermaster, keep us on target for the closest escort." He yelled at the crew, "Ramming speed!"

The distance shrank before them. The Nomad Hawk flew like her namesake, a dive across the surface of the water. The escort tried to turn, but she was already hobbled by several cannon holes in her aft starboard side.

"Brace for impact!"

The Hawk plowed into the escort ship, crumpling the smaller vessel like paper. Wood splintered in every direction. The new reinforcement on the Hawk's hull deflected most of the impact. They crushed the escort below them and kept going. It rolled into two pieces and sank.

"Hard to port!" Kyros called the tack. "All hands to the guns." He waved his hand over the crew. "Douse all but main." The Hawk stalled in the water, her back end swung out and they drifted around. Kyros saw the man-o'-war and Eric's new vessel lashed together. Men swung from ship to ship, doing battle by hand. The final escort ship sailed into the Hawk's line of fire.

“Guns ready!”

“Starboard, fire all!”

The cannon burst, rocking the Hawk in the water. Their target fired back, but only a few shots hit the air and all fell short. The escort stalled in the water.

“White flag!” The crow shouted, “White flag, they surrender.”

Only the escort backed down, the larger man-o'-war continued to swarm with conflict. Then Kyros spotted Ghalil on the target ship's top deck. It grabbed a man by the arm and eviscerated him. It took the time to shake the insides out.

“Get us next to the escort.” Kyros said, checking his belt pouch for the jar. “It'll be faster to run.”

The escort bobbed in the sea beside the man-o'-war. The Hawk slid up beside, and Kyros used a line to swing from one to the next. Men on the escort didn't try to engage. Between the Hawk and whatever horror terrorized the man-o'-war, they were done.

Kyros climbed rigging until he found a loose line. “Dammit, Kyros.” He heard Araceli below him and kept moving anyway. He let the sea dip him closer to rigging on the man-o'-war and leapt. Waves rocked each boat. For a second, he saw the entire slaughter on the man-o'-war deck.

Then he caught rigging and half-slid down to the blood-painted wood. Eric knelt by the mainmast, bloody and fading fast. A repeat of the vision Kyros faced back in Saint Lucia. He ripped the jar from his pouch and screamed at Ghalil.

November

Seconds Before

Eric coughed, on his knees for the last time. The sight of his chest torn open so familiar to him that he could admire the design of blood splatter decorating his pants. His fingers felt cold, and he didn't seek out the pouch of cinnamon at his waist. It was empty.

He closed his eyes and hallucinated the sound of Vindex' screaming rage. Eric wondered if any single sound could more accurately represent his life for the past six years. He squeezed tears down his cheeks and decided he wanted to

die watching Ghalil realize its host would not survive this time. He needed to see the demon know this was its last hurrah.

Eric opened his eyes, ready to heave to his feet one last time. Kyros stood before him, facing off against Ghalil with jar in hand.

Again.

“Don’t...” Eric didn’t have the strength, or perhaps the will, to finish. He turned his head. Something punched through his back; a single point of blunt pain. A knife. Eric slid down to perch on his ankles and one hip. He turned and saw the Spaniard behind him fall under Araceli’s precise blades.

Everything happened too fast. He couldn’t track. Araceli put a hand on his shoulder and said something. Her lips moved faster than her voice and it got jumbled up in his head. Why were they here? He was supposed to drown today—they couldn’t be here for this.

He didn’t want them to see... how was he supposed to explain it? It was just inconvenient.

Ghalil appeared to Eric’s left. Araceli lunged away from it. The spirit didn’t slide into him, though. For the first time, Eric watched it watch him and saw his own nipple ring hooked on the creature’s empty eye socket. It had the form of a man with no skin, no eyes, no ears. It had fingers like bone with claws of black. It didn’t seem to breathe.

“Leave him alone!” Kyros advanced with the jar, and Ghalil willed itself away an equal distance, wary of the device. It circled the three of them.

Then it pointed to Kyros. Eric struggled to his feet, blood-light and cold. Ghalil would not take a new host.

Chapter VIII

November

Seconds Later

Kyros held the jar out in front of him but had no confidence in his ability to catch the demon. Already it had moved past him twice with speed like a blur of red, and he had no way to keep track of it.

And now it saw how Eric suffered and turned its attention on Kyros. He didn't know how to catch a spirit, how to use one, what it wanted or why. He couldn't begin to guess at its thoughts, but Eric fought to his feet beside him just as the thing blurred again, too fast to see.

It dodged the jar. Kyros felt the demon's clawed hand pass through his own chest, then Araceli tackled him from the side and took the brunt of its attack.

The deck quieted. Eric collapsed, again, to his knees and held his hands against the open holes in his chest, gasping. Kyros scrambled back to his feet, slipping in blood. Ghalil disappeared.

Araceli lay motionless on the deck. Wait, not motionless. A ghost of Ghalil pressed against the skin of her face, deforming her dark skin into a featureless skull. Then it was gone.

"Oh, my god. Araceli." Kyros hit the deck on hands and knees. He put the jar down, top open, and put his hand against her cheek. "Araceli, wake up. Girl, come on, wake up!" He wiggled her chin and thumped her chest.

Ghalil came back, deforming her face again into its own plain countenance. Kyros shrieked at it, wordless rage.

Something bright burned in one of Araceli's pouches. Kyros shook Araceli and it bounced free. The sunstone flashed on the deck, and Ghalil seemed to separate from Araceli in an attempt to get away from the light.

Kyros grabbed the sunstone and held it close to his oldest friend. "Get out of her! GET OUT!" He pressed the stone to Araceli's cheek, and it horrified him to see her skin burn on contact. A ghost of Araceli also divided from her body. The spirit screamed and tried to get away.

Someone slammed the jar down on both apparitions. Eric, coughing blood and half unconscious, trapped both Ghalil and Araceli's spirit. Kyros shook as he heard her scream and scream and scream.

“No. No, get her out.”

Eric dragged the jar toward him, fumbled with the top.

Kyros lunged over Araceli's body and tried to grab the jar. “Get her out, Deumont. Don't lock her in. Not with that thing.”

They clawed for ownership until the interlocking pieces of the jar began to turn by themselves. Eric thrust the jar into Kyros' hands. “Close it, man. End this.”

“No, Araceli—”

“Saved your damn life from a fate that was mine!”

And what would you give up to save him from this fate?

Everything.

“No.” Kyros barely saw the interlocking pieces through his sudden tears. “I'm so sorry, girl. I'm sorry. I'll figure this out, I swear.” He pressed the top into place and twisted the line of pieces into place to lock the jar. He felt the device shudder and he hugged it close while he wept. He remembered the exact pitch of her screams.

November

Seconds Later

Eric closed his eyes for a single brief moment. It was over. The spirit was finally locked away in a place other than himself. He rolled from his knees to his side on the deck and coughed. He had been ready to die just moments ago, but Kyros wasn't supposed to be here. Araceli wasn't supposed to be in that jar with a monster. They weren't supposed to come to his rescue like that.

Eric sighed. Then hard hands grabbed his shoulder and arm, supported his hip.

“Whoa, there, Captain. You're not in good shape. Don't be going to sleep just yet.”

He grunted. Sven took the small knife out of his back and made him roll down onto a net of rope. “Kyros...” But they were hauling him away already, tearing off the last of his tunic and putting pressure on the holes in his body.

Eric had not felt pain like this for so long. Ghalil always healed him up after every slaughter. Then he realized he hadn't vomited someone else's blood, either, and the pain became easier to manage.

He rolled his head back in the netting and saw Kyros curled on the deck with the jar. Then they hauled him over the plank to his own ship and the pirate was out of sight.

Chapter IX

December

Several Weeks Later

Kyros arched under Eric's hands as the Hawk rolled through black seas. The motion just added to their fervor, driving them closer into each other. Kyros reached his peak and clenched, knotting his fingers in the netting overhead. Eric followed him down into the depths.

They surfaced for breath, both gasping. Sweaty. Eric lay on the bed and Kyros curled up next to him. He played with a dreadlock.

The ship heaved, and they both braced against a corner post of the bed. Something rattled on a shelf.

Kyros stilled. Except for a shaft of moonlight cutting into the room, it soaked in inky black. No fire to light the space. The ray fell across a puzzle jar on one of the shelves, wrapped in cloth and weighted down with chains of iron. It shook, testing the restraints.

Eric startled him with a thumb against his cheek, stroking. Kyros squeezed his eyes shut. He heard Araceli scream and kissed Eric to drown it out.

He found the sunstone in Eric's hair. Yet another trinket from his adventures. One year. Maybe two. Kyros watched Orthos hop up the shelves and pick his way between the heavy chain. He curled around the jar and began to purr. The shaking settled.

They needed to find an expert dealing in spirits. A man who could trap one without grabbing Araceli as collateral. He refused to leave her tortured in that chamber. He refused to take "no" for an answer.

The End

Author Bio

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